

Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* demonstrates the difficulty of following the development of Asian American racial formations. It does so through the skilful use of its medium, comics, prompting readers to consider how much the meaning of race has changed, in what ways, and where this change might lead.

## **“How Good It Is to Be a Monkey”: Comics, Racial Formation, and *American Born Chinese***

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**M**ore than any other racial minority in the United States, Asian Americans have found their status as a racial minority complicated by claims of their many apparent economic successes. At the same time, they remain battered by perceptions that they are somehow alien to the nation. This tension between success and alienation has become especially acute since 1965, when passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act began to alter the Asian American population dramatically by, among other things, bifurcating it between a professional-managerial class and a class of largely blue-collar service workers. While many contemporary literary works by and about Asian Americans wrestle unsurprisingly with how such changes have made the stories of race and racism in their characters' lives more difficult to tell, Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese* stands out as particularly focused on this problem. In this work, past and present ways of thinking about Asian Americans collapse into each other. As a result, readers are encouraged to ponder how much race thinking has

changed, in what ways, and where this change might be leading. *American Born Chinese* prompts such a response by employing the unique qualities of its medium, comics, to reflect back to the reader the difficulty of following the development of Asian American racial formations.

By invoking the term *racial formation*, I am obviously drawing on one of the most established approaches to the study of race and racism in ethnic studies in the United States. This approach does not, however, enjoy this position without controversy. Most recently, for example, critics of racial formation have found trouble with what Michael Omi and Howard Winant's analysis insists: that race not be thought of as either *essence* or *illusion* (54). In response to these requirements, Walter Benn Michaels argues that the pair is unreasonably attached to the concept of race as "a central and even desirable factor in American life" (*Trouble* 48). According to this critique, rather than seek to undermine the concept of race and the racism it enables, Omi and Winant, and by extension the many scholars in ethnic studies in the United States who rely on their foundational work, strive to maintain race at the centre of their thinking. This is also—Michaels reasons—occurring at a time when race's importance is clearly on the wane, and when class inequality has never been so stark, in part because focusing on the former allows one to ignore the latter: "we love race—we love identity—because we don't love class" (6).<sup>1</sup>

What seems to motivate Michaels in making this critique is less a desire to return to the hoary debate about the relationship between race and class (although such a return is where his critique leads), and more the sense that current thinking about race fails to keep up with the present. This is similar to the point that Paul Gilroy makes in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, but with an important difference. While Michaels joins Gilroy in considering the ways in which the process of racial formation has become more difficult to comprehend as we move closer to the present, Gilroy does not see this as a reason to turn attention away from race and racism all together. Instead, Gilroy argues that the problem of racism has become more acute because "simpler *hatreds*" must now co-exist with more complex patterns of group membership and contention that may only be respected if "marked out in warm blood" (37). In short, the more that familiar boundaries of racial difference and superiority are crossed, the more new boundaries are frantically, and even violently, erected in their place.

If so, remaining focused on racial formation requires us to consider how race thinking can prosper even as it may appear to give way in some instances. Yang's *American Born Chinese* helps us to consider this apparent conundrum through its careful exploration of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ways of looking at Asians and Asian Americans. In what follows, I support these claims by exploring the medium of

comics and the increasingly important role this medium is playing in a variety of critical discussions. An understanding of the unique properties of this medium is important as literary criticism belatedly turns to comics as a rich source of meaning, if only to show deference to the richness of the creative and critical discourses that have already sprung up around it. I then go on to think more specifically about how *American Born Chinese* is unique among its peers, before exploring at length how its visual qualities and narrative structure work together to direct readers to consider how much racial formation provides a shifting, but necessary, ground upon which Asian Americans must tread.

Comics have emerged in recent years as an important topic within literary criticism. This is compactly exemplified by two special issues of prominent literary critical journals devoted specifically to this subject, published almost within one year of each other—the first by *Modern Fiction Studies* and the second by *MELUS*. As Hilary Shute and Marianne DeKoven write in their introduction to the *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue, “The explosion of creative practice in the field of graphic narrative—which we may define as narrative work in the medium of comics—is one with which the academy is just catching up. We are only beginning to learn to pay attention in a sophisticated way to graphic narrative” (767). What is obviously foremost in Shute and DeKoven’s minds is the need to pay attention to a form of literature that has for too long been relegated to the far margins of critical attention, even as its authors have pushed it into formally complex and creatively rewarding directions. Unfortunately, as Derek Parker Royal points out in his introduction to the *MELUS* special issue, this otherwise welcome focus on “graphic narrative” reduces the range of examples worthy of such critical attention to a handful of titles by authors “whose work is nowhere near the mainstream of comics, underground and ‘alternative’ artists who define their work against conventional comic genres and modes” (16). The works discussed in the *Modern Fiction Studies* special issue are, in other words, predominantly about “serious” subject matters in a recognizable social present, while the mainstream of comics rarely operate within such constraints.

Hence, those works that have become lionized in the emerging American literary criticism on graphic narratives, as a specific subset of comics, have followed the model set by Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, which has been hailed by producers and critics alike (more for its riveting exploration of the tensions between history and memory, and less for its use of different animals to represent different ethnic-national groups) as the work that gave birth to a contemporary explosion of serious creative expression.<sup>2</sup> Some of the most obvious examples of this contemporary explosion are, in no particular order, Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, Joe Sacco’s *Palestine* and *Safe Area Gorazde*:

*The War in Eastern Bosnia, 1992–95*, Daniel Clowes’s *Ghost World*, Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth*, and Allison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. In putting this list together, what I most wish to emphasize is how easily these titles come to mind and how they do so because they are the ones that have been most written about and celebrated by literary critics. The disproportionate attention these works have received reinforces an implicit assumption that there are some comics that are worthy of such attention and others that are not, and inevitably these other works end up being precisely those that have always been left out of any kind of critical consideration. As a result, the term *graphic narrative* becomes a marker of distinction that elevates one group of works, tending toward realism, above another implicitly inferior group. The latter is generally referred to as “genre fiction” in order to emphasize its preoccupation with what Harvey Pekar, whose autobiographical comics are decisively in the realism camp, dismissively describes as “costumed superheroes, cute little kids, and talking animals” (qtd. in Royal 15).

For Asian American graphic artists and authors as well, this tension between realism and genre fiction has emerged as a significant issue. Frank Cho, for instance, occupies the latter half of this divide as the author of *Liberty Meadows*, which contains cuddly but sardonic talking male animals and a busty white woman who takes care of them. Lela Lee, while equally in the comics mainstream, has worked explicitly against the sexism of this mainstream, which tends to contain lurid and automatically exaggerated drawings of women. She has done so by deploying very cartoon-looking characters in her comic strip *Angry Asian Girls* (and in its more recent reincarnation as *Angry Little Girls*) to highlight the ways her central character is mistreated as a result of her sex and race. Finally, Derek Kirk Kim and Adrian Tomine have focused their work squarely on realistic explorations of everyday characters in everyday, and mostly suburban, settings. Tomine, in particular, has used this strategy most consistently, emerging as a major figure in the world of “graphic narratives” with his *Optic Nerve* series and *Summer Blonde*, most of which are populated with “Gen X or Gen Y characters who are proficient with technology, ironic/cynical, and well-versed in popular culture” (Oh 144). More recently, he has turned his attention explicitly to Asian American subject matters in his most ambitious work to date, *Shortcomings*, which is about the self-loathing that romantic failure brings to the foreground in its Asian American characters.

As impressive as the combined output of these authors are, however, Yang stands out for his willingness to bend the conventions of genre storytelling to contribute to his realist aspirations. Yang’s work is thus situated between the twin poles of realism and genre fiction that currently seem to divide creative work in this medium in the United States, resulting in narratives that appeal to, and are suitable for, both mature

and young adult readers. At the same time, because his works are longer, they have more room to tell fairly involved stories and to develop a theme at length. While *American Born Chinese* is obviously the most important instance of how ambitiously Yang bends convention to produce startling, and often delightful, results, his earlier work also deserves attention. For instance, *Gordon Yamamoto and the King of the Geeks* intentionally cleaves to the most familiar traits of popular genre fiction, including supernatural events and a secret order of techno-scientifically advanced beings focused on saving the world, and melds these traits to a more quotidian story of a high school student trying to figure out how best to behave ethically in a complex social world. It begins with Gordon, a physically large and not very bright teenager, mindlessly following the lead of a malicious friend in bullying a nerdy fellow classmate. The quotidian gives way to the extraordinary when Gordon wakes up to find a bulge in his nose. The bulge turns out to be a very small ship piloted by a very small robot who belongs to the San Peligran Order, “a secret world-wide society dedicated to the protection of the human species. As you can imagine, an organization of such magnitude needs a rather extensive data storage system” (23). This storage system is the unused portions of millions of human brains; while trying to retrieve data stored in Gordon’s particularly under-used brain, the ship malfunctioned and now requires Gordon’s assistance in being freed. This leads Gordon to the classmate he had been bullying, and in a series of events too complex to relate here, Gordon learns to empathize with the grave troubles that afflict this classmate.<sup>3</sup>

In this narrative, Yang subtly weaves together the emphasis on the day-to-day, which is the hallmark of “serious” graphic narratives, and the fantastical, which is an aspect of mainstream comics. By doing so, he fashions a specific, and easy to grasp, moral message while revealing a keen sensitivity to the way issues of race affect a story that seems on its face to have no racial content. In *Gordon Yamamoto*, this interest in race is registered along its visual plane. The character Gordon works against racial type by being slow, large, and a bully. All of these qualities go against the usual post-1965 expectations that representations of male Asian American youth will be more Long Duk Dong than Bluto Blutarski. The reader’s resistance to such a reversal of expectations is softened by the visual presence of Gordon’s character. The drawings present him as friendly looking, with an appealing smile, spiky hair, plain tank top and shorts, clunky sneakers, and a rotund body that is both soft and powerful. When he bullies, he is not so much filled with malice as simply too dumb to consider how his actions might harm others. Because he is visually rendered on the page with such specificity and concreteness, if not also complexity of character, it is not difficult to imagine that such a person could indeed exist.

As *Gordon Yamamoto* illustrates, the complexity of the stories Yang wishes to tell is conveyed with great succinctness through his use of the visual and the textual. (Despite the density of the plot, *Gordon Yamamoto* is a very short book.) As many have pointed out, most famously Scott McCloud, this combination requires active deciphering on the part of the reader in order to follow a kind of storytelling that is at once linear and nonlinear. In relation to this general observation, it is worth re-emphasizing that comics, because of their combination of the visual and textual, are an important vehicle for exploring the very concern that organizes this essay. Race and racism are as much about visual meaning-making as they are about textual storytelling, and as such are powerfully suited to a narration that relies on both elements. In addition, because comics necessarily render the experience of time in spatial terms (McCloud 94–117), they can be used to explore the problem of change over time, which is a necessary part of any discussion of race and racism. *Gordon Yamamoto* helps illustrate some of these claims in a specific example, but it is Yang's more mature work, *American Born Chinese*, that fulfills the promise implicit in his earlier titles. *American Born Chinese* is visually more arresting, its drawings are sophisticated and detailed in a way Yang's earlier work is not, and it is simply longer, allowing more space and time to develop a story.

**A***merican Born Chinese* is divided into three distinct but interwoven parts that artfully fuse into a single narrative by the book's end. The first, a fanciful retelling of the classic sixteenth-century Ming epic *Journey to the West* by Ch'êng-ên Wu, focuses on the difficulties of the Monkey King. The second is about a Chinese American boy named Jin Wang who was born in San Francisco's Chinatown but whose family has relocated to a predominantly white, suburban town. His only friend is a recently arrived Taiwanese immigrant named Wei-Chen. This second part thus fits easily into the well-worn grooves of the ethnic *bildungsroman*. The third part is perhaps the most interesting. In it a white high-school student named Danny is revealed to have a Chinese cousin named Chin-Kee. (Yes, as in "chinky"! ) Chin-Kee, we are later told, visits Danny every time he moves to a new school and begins to make friends, and is so unpopular his unpopularity rubs off on Danny, forcing him to start over somewhere else.

At this point, it is easy to see why comics are ideal for the story *American Born Chinese* wishes to tell. Chin-Kee is exactly what his name calls forth. He is a grotesque stereotype of the Chinese as racially alien, a stereotype first cast in the nineteenth century as Western imperial countries chipped away at China's sovereignty and Chinese workers began to populate California and the rest of the American West in

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visibly large numbers. In a volume of carefully selected artwork and cartoon drawings entitled *The Coming Man: 19th Century American Perceptions of the Chinese*, Philip Choy, Lorraine Dong, and Marlon Hom graphically demonstrate that popular racial exaggerations had the effect of creating a consistent, powerful visual vocabulary for imagining the Chinese as from elsewhere and as therefore not belonging in the United States. In almost all of the images they provide, the Chinese are depicted in strikingly similar ways. For example, in the San Francisco illustrated weekly magazine *The Wasp*, edited during its heyday by Ambrose Bierce, the Chinese figure as the embodiment of unfair competition who, in league with the big manufacturers, are the enemy of struggling white labour in California. In the illustration reprinted here (see Figure 1), the classic topos of the caricatured coolie is in evidence in this figure's slant-eyes, short stature, sallow skin, predictably Chinese clothing, claw-like fingertips, and long menacing queue. One quotation from this volume of *The Wasp* stands out: "The unsophisticated Mongol, imitating, *ape-like*, his fellow of this country, attains a monopoly of the cigar and laundry business, and smiles a cunning smile of triumph at his discomfited rivals" (qtd. in Choy et al. 91, *emph. mine*).

The visual vocabulary developed in such early caricatures of the Chinese and buttressed by this kind of commentary is what causes Chin-Kee to remain such a complex, and troubling, figure in *American Born Chinese*. The very first time readers meet him, he appears in a full-page panel arranged to look like the opening title of an old television show. In big yellow lettering, the reader is told in heavily accented English, "Everyone Ruvs Chin-Kee." And immediately under and to the right of this lettering, Chin-Kee's head appears with a big grin, pronounced buckteeth, eyes so small they are never seen except as a bold black line, sickly pale yellow skin, and a queue. To emphasize further that this is an image originally formalized in newspapers and popular entertainment and later largely disseminated through the growth of popular mass media, the words "clap clap clap" line the entire bottom of the panel (43). This, and the words "ha ha ha," are likewise repeated in other panels, replicating the canned laughter and applause of television sit-coms. Within the narrative itself, Chin-Kee soon arrives at Danny's house, dressed in an outfit meant to be traditionally Chinese, shouts "Harro Amellica!," and leaves his luggage, made of over-sized Chinese-food take-out cartons, for Danny's father to handle (48; see Figure 2). Finally, just in case we do not get what is being mocked, Chin-Kee immediately proceeds to hit on Melanie, the girl that Danny has been flirting with before his arrival. Chin-Kee says, "Such pletty Amellican girl wiff bountiful Amellican bosom! Must bind feet and bear Chin-Kee's children!" (50). As he says these words, he is depicted in best Fu Manchu manner, as hunched forward, arms stretched outward, hands claw-like, and drool spitting from his mouth.



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Chin-Kee's presence, however, refuses to remain merely a satirical reference to long-dead racial conventions. The next time Yang introduces Chin-Kee, he begins to embody not only nineteenth-century stereotypes about the Chinese coolie but also late twentieth-century ideas about Asian American youths as stellar students. The day after his arrival, Chin-Kee follows Danny to each of his classes and raises his hands immediately whenever a teacher poses a question. It turns out that he knows more than any of the students at Danny's school about the three branches of the United States government, Columbus's first voyage to the New World, the names of different bones in the human arm, algebraic equations, the meaning of a story written in Spanish, chemical formulas, and lines from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. During

lunch, other students are depicted in the background pointing at him, whispering to one another, and casting furtive glances in his direction. Two students look as if they are about to throw up when they see Chin-Kee eating something with a cat's head poking out of a take-out carton. Even still, as disgusting as this is, it is not clear what upsets the students more: Chin-Kee's questionable food choices, outlandish clothing, and "r"-deficient accent or the fact that Chin-Kee consistently outshines them all in their subjects. In the very first class period, the teacher exhorts his students, "You know people—it would behoove you all to be a little more like *Chin-Kee*" (111). No wonder, then, that despite his invocation as irony, Chin-Kee's presence in *American Born Chinese* is just as likely to elicit a groan as a laugh, or perhaps both at the same time.<sup>5</sup> As Binbin Fu observes, Chin-Kee "is provocatively repulsive and hilariously funny at the same time. An intruder into the American classroom, he sings 'She Bang, She Bang' (à la well-known American Idol contestant William Hung) while dancing grotesquely in a traditional Chinese dress on a desk" (275).

In addition to pitting nineteenth- and twentieth-century racial assumptions about Asian Americans against each other in this way, Chin-Kee's presence in this narrative thread also enlivens the question of how exactly Chin-Kee is related to Danny. This is resolved when it is revealed that the other two parts of this work—the retelling of the Monkey King's fantastic epic and Jin Wang's realist *bildungsroman*—meet in the story of Danny and Chin-Kee. In the first part, the Monkey King is shown being denied entry to a party comprised of other immortals. The guard tells him he cannot let him in because he is not wearing any shoes. Later, when pushed, the guard admits, "You may be a *king*—you may even be a *deity*—but you are still a *monkey*" (15). This insult leads the Monkey King to murder all the guests (a blood-letting that is meant to be satisfying), which in turn sets him on a violent path that lasts for several pages. In a sequence of extraordinary drawings, the Monkey King confronts several deities who can barely consider him a threat. Each of the deities and their flunkies laugh when the Monkey King insists that he is not a monkey but their equals, and are then thoroughly punished by the Monkey King for their laughter.

At the end of *American Born Chinese*, the Monkey King is revealed to be none other than Chin-Kee himself, a disguise he puts on to become Danny's "*conscience* [. . .] a *signpost* to your *soul*" (221). As such, he imparts the lesson the Monkey King himself has learned the hard way: "how *good* it is to be a *monkey*" (223). At this moment in the book, Danny is also revealed to be a disguise. In fact, Danny is Jin Wang (from the second narrative thread), who is so full of self-hatred as a result of the ways in which he has been slighted by everyone at his school that he has turned on his only

friend, Wei-Chen, first by making an impulsive pass at Suzy Nakamura, a Japanese American girl Wei-Chen is dating, and then by calling Wei-Chen an “F.O.B.” (191). The next morning, Jin wakes up to discover that he has magically turned into Danny. These dizzying revelations emphasize the ways in which *American Born Chinese* is interested in what is hidden from view. Outward identities lead inexorably to secret identities, and bodies are always capable of transforming themselves—much like the transformer robots that Jin and Wei-Chen liked to play with when they first met. As the Hasbro marketing motto puts it, there is “more than meets the eye.”

One way to interpret these transformations, which would follow Walter Benn Michaels’s lead, is to say that Danny is the person Jin could become, someone who could be socially accepted as if he were white if he so chooses. That Yang explicitly treats such a willed act of racial belonging as a lack of conscience reveals an abiding, and possibly unreasonable, attachment to the concept of race. Danny is followed by Chin-Kee only because the latter believes that what the former is doing, finding social acceptance, is somehow a betrayal of who he really is. And such race pride, in turn, feeds into a more general culture of reified-diversity talk that allows one to focus, as Michaels has argued, on “differences we can love, like those between Asian Americans and Caucasians[,] rather than differences (like the ones between smart people and stupid people or, more to the point, rich people and poor people) that are not so obviously appealing” (*Trouble* 84).<sup>6</sup> In short, the contemporary desire to insist on racial difference is a transparent form of deliberately fake consciousness that allows one to avoid talking about the more disturbing reality of economic inequality.

This reasoning seems to make a marginal amount of sense in explaining the dynamics of *American Born Chinese*’s end, where Jin learns a lesson that might appear preoccupied with race pride. But Michaels’s insistence that one can only choose between focusing on race or inequality lacks explanatory power in thinking about the transformations that Wei-Chen also undergoes. For most of the narrative, he is presented as a nerdy but fearless recent immigrant from Taiwan, but after his break with Jin he becomes an angry and despondent Asian American hipster. He is also figured ultimately as a monkey in disguise, like his father, who is revealed to be the Monkey King. More interesting still, his rage at being rejected by Jin is channelled into a specific, and highly visible, form of Asian American cultural activity: the Japanese import car scene. This scene’s sensational mix of tricked-out automobiles, dangerous street racing, and objectified female models is easily one of the most salient examples of an organic Asian American pop-cultural innovation.

The import car scene, before it became popularized for mass consumption in more racially familiar ways,<sup>7</sup> was originally created by disaffected Asian American

youths in Southern California who felt actively unwelcome at white car-racing events involving Detroit muscle cars. These youths also took inspiration from the intentional oppositionality of Mexican American low-rider car culture. As a sign of defiance, then, these youths began to modify and race smaller, lighter Japanese imports, which at the time were perceived to be poorly made and cheap. By fitting the most generic imports they could find with more efficient and powerful engines and flashy exteriors that emphasized speed and a hyper-modern aesthetic, these youths helped fashion the Japanese import into a synonym for an agile East Asian capitalist style capable of outperforming the more weighted down and brutish Detroit muscle car (Rodriguez and Gonzalez 254; Kwon 3–5). What is particularly worth emphasizing is that the origins of this ostentatious display of consumerist self-reinvention, of which Wei-Chen becomes a part, is a racial one, a way of forcibly asserting value to what was widely seen as valueless, namely Asian American masculinity.

Hence, if Wei-Chen's apparent middle-class status in *American Born Chinese* signals the very kind of "economic success" that Michaels tells us is "a measure of success in America" (*Shape* 130), it seems important to wonder what it might mean for Asian Americans to be visibly perceived as economically successful and yet to remain racially different from those who are normatively thought to be American. This is a question that has grown more difficult to answer since 1965, as the majority of Asian Americans became foreign-born rather than native-born; as laws favoured Asian immigrants of professional background who have, in turn, taken much of the spotlight from the many Asian immigrants who have entered through family reunification, as refugees, or without documentation and who make up a kind of other Asian America; and as the number of ethnicities represented in the overall Asian American population has become much larger. Still, despite these often repeated caveats about the role of the state and the exercise of biopolitics in the current configuration of a heterogeneous, hybrid, and multiple Asian America (Lowe 66), it remains clear that many commentators often fail to convey any of these nuances. Michaels in particular demonstrates a culpable lack of historical understanding. (At one point in his writings, Michaels approvingly quotes Henry Ford as saying "history is bunk" [*Trouble* 18].) This wilful ignorance has allowed him to blame people of colour—and Asian Americans in particular—for being overly attached to the concept of race, without acknowledging the legacy of a white supremacy that has continually made the topic of race unforgettable, and that has facilitated the creation of alternative spheres of cultural expression like the Japanese import car scene.

The frustration caused by how easily such nuances are overlooked has led many critics to repeat that Asians in America were not always so widely known for their success. Indeed, the narrative of the Monkey King's exclusion from the party in heaven in *American Born Chinese* is effective as a fable of the devastating impact of racial "microaggression" (Sue et al. 271) exactly 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. In the earlier quotation from *The Wasp* that insisted Chinese coolies imitated their white peers in an "ape-like" fashion, it is easy to make out how the comparison to the simian makes the Chinese appear less than human. The unflattering comparison is also highlighted in Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart: A Personal History*. At one point, the narrator recalls how white police detectives entered the home of an acquaintance and harassed him for living with a white woman. While slapping him on the face, one of the detectives says, "Listen to the brown monkey talk" (136).<sup>8</sup>

As the celebrated historian John Dower has argued, such references to the simian also became a distinct and important feature of the American media's representation of the Japanese during World War II. Although the Japanese were compared to other forms of life considered less than human, the monkey or ape was the most common. For instance, "Americans learned from Ernie Pyle that Marines in the Marianas had coined the word 'Japes,' a combination of 'Japs' and 'apes'" (86). What makes Dower's analysis especially interesting, and why I recall it here, is how it stresses the *malleability* of such comparisons. After the end of the war, as Japan became domesticated and pulled into the United States' geopolitical orbit, the fearsome "Jape" had turned into a loveable, if grumpy, chimpanzee, as a cover illustration from the September 1945 *Leatherneck* (a magazine produced by and for the Marines) graphically demonstrates (see Figure 3).

The malleability of the simian as a form of racial representation highlights how empty of content racial representation itself is, and how it can therefore be circulated to mean several different things at different moments. Chinese, Filipinos, and Japanese were hardly the only groups ever to be compared to monkeys. It needs to be pointed out as well that such comparisons only work as a form of racial pejorative when one assumes monkeys, and other animals, are intrinsically beneath the human, and therefore demeaning to be confused with. As Bill Readings has pointed out, such an assumption can lead to an exact distinction between human and non-human that is itself "the first step to terror, since it renders it possible to know [. . .] what it is to which we have no responsibility, what we can freely exploit" (189). The Monkey King narrative in *American Born Chinese* is an especially interesting way to reflect on this

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history of racial signification because of the ways in which it blurs an exact human/non-human distinction. It invites readers to consider, even if inadvertently, why comparisons to simians should necessarily be understood as pejorative—why, for instance, many repudiate evolutionary theory as just a theory because they remain uncomfortable with a shared lineage with apes.

Very much along these lines of thought, the start of *American Born Chinese* retells the early chapters of *Journey to the West* as the Monkey King's fall into racial knowledge. His shame about what he is must be learned after he is forcibly rejected from a party in heaven because he is, despite all of his accomplishments, still a monkey. His violent acts cannot change his new awareness of this fact about himself—which suggests how such

racial representation can, while being empty of meaning, still attach itself tenaciously to a referent body—and so this segment concludes with a poignant comment on his changed relationship to his kingdom upon his return (see Figure 4). The narrator says, “When he entered his royal chamber, the thick smell of *monkey fur* greeted him. He’d never noticed it before. He stayed awake for the rest of the night thinking of ways to get rid of it” (20).

In subsequent instalments of this narrative thread, readers learn how the Monkey King combats this newly discovered feeling of revulsion at what he is: first, he decrees that all the monkeys in his kingdom must wear shoes, and then he studies kung fu with feverish intensity until he can make himself invulnerable and a master of his own physical form. When he exits the cave, he is depicted as tall, muscular, more angular, and of course shoe-wearing. As much as Yang’s readers might like to fantasize along with the Monkey King that they can retreat into a cave and emerge masters of their own form, it is important to keep in mind that re-articulations of racial meaning do not take place in a vacuum. Such transformations, although they can occur abruptly, are part of large and complex social processes. Although a detailed discussion of what these processes are falls outside the scope of this essay, it seems appropriate to remark that the conversion of the fearsome “Jape” to the chimpanzee on the cover of *Leatherneck* cannot simply be explained, as Dower does, by America’s changing geopolitical relationship to a defeated but still strategically important Japan. As the work of scholars like Mary Dudziak (see *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of the American Democracy*) and Penny von Eschen (see *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anti-Colonialism, 1937–1957*), among many others, have shown, social movements focused on race relations within the United States played out within a larger geopolitical context; and, vice versa, geopolitical arrangements in the United States are in turn profoundly affected by social movements within the United States (as Christina Klein, in *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961*, and Seth Jacobs, in *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam Ngo Diem Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Interventions in Southeast Asia*, have suggested). This line of reasoning has contributed greatly towards the addition of an international perspective to Omi and Winant’s point that the significance of “racially based” movements within the United States cannot be underestimated.

Such movements have, of course, largely lost their momentum in recent decades, and seem currently no longer able to muster the kind of mass support or direction of purpose that had made them once so powerful. Rather than think of such lost momentum and purpose as markers of failure, however, one could just as easily think of these movements as having achieved a significant level of altered awareness about race. *De jure* legislation discriminating against classes of persons has now largely been



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dismantled. Bold expressions of white supremacy are no longer officially acceptable, even if there are many—as in the Don Imus incident—who are eager to defend or make excuses when they are made (Brandzel and Desai 63). And while multiculturalism might not be official United States governmental policy, as it is in Canada, its ethos nevertheless reaches deeply into the regulation of many, but by no means all, of the country's major institutions. While none of these accomplishments comes close to the aspirations espoused by the various racially based movements Omi and Winant reference, and while it may even be a betrayal of such aspirations to think of these accomplishments *as* accomplishments, because it might suggest a willingness to accede to the inequalities of the current social order, they nevertheless represent the clearing

away of the most visible signs of a perhaps “simpler” (to use Gilroy’s term) form of racism. What remains, and what may be festering into even more worrisome race hatreds, is much harder to address as racism *per se* because it does not always resemble these older forms.

Yang’s *American Born Chinese* directly addresses this problem when it prompts its readers to consider how much such transformations in racial formation occur just beyond the eye’s ability to perceive. There is one image in particular that distils a moment of rare capture, when the eye sees something that is actively being disavowed and hidden from view. When Jin confronts Wei-Chen for the first time after their falling out (see Figure 5), Wei-Chen appears behind the wheel of his rice rocket, large sunglasses covering half his face and his eyes, earrings dangling from both ears, a metal necklace hanging prominently around his neck, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, and hair matted down with oil except for a two-fingered cowlick. He is far from the unassuming boy that originally befriended Jin, and the consumerist armour he has put on to fend off the dangers of such friendship leaves no place for the eye to rest. He is all surface and emotional hardness, a subject that looks but cannot be seen. Jin mentions having met his father, and the next frame shows Wei-Chen as a monkey, small, fragile, emotionally vulnerable. His eyes are large, prominent, and expressive, and the frame itself has turned black-and-white and sketch-like, in sharp contrast to the vivid color that adorns the rest of the page.

At this moment, his consumerist armour has come undone, and in its absence what is revealed is a history of racial representation that remains very much a part of how Wei-Chen must continue to define himself. The fact that when this armour comes off, what is shown is that Wei-Chen is nothing more than a monkey, and that being a monkey is for him to be at his most vulnerable and lovable, points directly to the need to confront a painful visual history of racial disparagement that has equated the animal with the subhuman. This history cannot be simply forgotten, as Michaels seems to encourage, just as race cannot be understood as epiphenomenal to a story about changes in modes of production or any other kind of more fundamental principle of social organization. Race must instead be understood, as Omi and Winant have encouraged, as constitutive of our everyday lives, which are defined not only by realist narratives but also by genre conventions, like the ones that comics have excelled in refining. Such conventions, like the ones that have associated Asians with monkeys, refuse to remain bracketed as merely manifestations of popular culture and continually bleed into the everyday, informing our understanding of race and the ways in which it constructs the worlds we inhabit. Genre conventions thus fuse into our very own most intimate senses of self in such a way that they cannot simply be discarded as if they are qualities that have been forcibly ascribed to a pre-existent non-racial personhood.

## NOTES

- 1/ Similarly, Colleen Lye has argued in "Dialogue with Asian American Studies" (Introduction. *Representations* 99.1 [2007]: 1–12) that Omi and Winant render race a "transcendental signifier," which emphasizes "the foundational status of racism in U.S. society at the expense of describing its historical variability" (2).
- 2/ The status of comics is quite different in Western Europe and Japan, mainly because they are not so closely associated with childhood, and thus has not elicited the kind of terminological debates there that academic discussion in the United States has engaged in. (Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix, and Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. New York: Phaidon, 1996. 217.)
- 3/ *Loyala Chin and the San Peligran Order* picks up where *Gordon Yamamoto* ends, with equally interesting results.
- 4/ Images from *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang Copyright ©2006 by Gene Lang. Reprinted by permission of First Second, an imprint of Roaring Press, a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings Limited Partnership. All rights reserved.
- 5/ When the website MySpace chose *American Born Chinese* as a featured book, many expressed outrage at the figure of Chin-Kee. As Yang points out in a blog response to this controversy, Chin-Kee is an explicit amalgamation of racist ways of seeing Asians and Asian Americans that span more than a century. (See "Gene Yang on Stereotypes" *First Second Books – Doodles and Dailies*, 1 May 2007. 12 May 2009 <[http://www.firstsecondbooks.typepad.com/mainblog/2007/05/gene\\_yang\\_on\\_st.html](http://www.firstsecondbooks.typepad.com/mainblog/2007/05/gene_yang_on_st.html)>.) I credit one of *Mosaic's* readers of this essay for calling this incident to my attention. I also want to note that while this book is suitable for, and geared toward, young readers, the presence of Chin-Kee prevents me from recommending it for the very young. Even for older readers, Chin-Kee requires extended discussion about what he satirizes.
- 6/ Michaels has gone out of his way to scorn Asian American studies publicly, labelling it a form of "black-face" in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* column, "Why Identity Politics Distracts Us from Economic Inequalities" (15 Dec. 2006: B10).
- 7/ Inspired by the 1998 *Vibe Magazine* article "Racer X" by Kenneth Li, the original Hollywood film *The Fast and the Furious* greatly increased the popularity of the Japanese import car scene, but at the same time placed at the centre of its narrative a white male lead. As Mary Beltrán observes in "The New Hollywood Racelessness: Only the Fast, Furious (and Multiracial) Will Survive" (*Cinema Journal* 44.2 [2005]: 50–67), the film "privileges a white-centrist perspective and notions of natural white superiority. Perhaps most notably, white characters are posited as dominant within a subculture in which they are often absent or marginal" (61).
- 8/ Bulosan also recalls how a Filipino with his white wife and infant tried to gain service at a roadside diner while travelling, and was told, "You goddamn brown monkeys have your nerve, marrying our women" (144).

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