

“FRAMING” IDENTITY:
Collective identity and Gene Yang’s
American Born Chinese

Kristen M. Powell
American University
March 15, 2010

In terms of identity construction, adolescence is perhaps the most important time in a person's life. He or she is forced to develop a collective identity in order to save social face and create a meaningful direction for his or her life. Because of this, media directed at youth carries enormous weight in terms of shaping how they develop identity and see possibilities before them. Media generally and specifically geared toward youth, like comics, have the opportunity to influence their audience in a way that can direct chosen life paths, positively or negatively, by influencing views of identity.

According to Kwame Anthony Appiah, the construction of a collective identity allows for the adoption of scripts that then can structure identifiers' lives (22). Scripting is the basis for all social interactions, from dating to workplace hierarchies to buying groceries. It allows for new settings and interactions to be navigated with some familiarity and logical basis. Scripts are mitigated constantly by improvisation in the face of unfamiliar situations, and the products of these interactions are new scripts that can be transmuted to new settings (Tilly 55 - 58).

Appiah identifies scripting as creating a narrative for the overall life of a person as well. He states:

the rites of passage that many societies associate with the identities male and female provide shape to the transition to adulthood; gay identities may

organize around the narrative of coming out; Pentecostals are born again; and black identities in America often engage in oppositional narratives of self-construction in the face of racism (23).

Furthermore, Appiah says that “only the collective identities [as opposed to personal] have scripts To say that race is socially constructed ... is, in part, to say that there are no African Americans independent of social practices associated with the label...” (23).

By adopting or accepting a collective identity, individuals are therefore, in some ways, adopting a life path and, at the very least, adopting a mode through which they will then interact with others throughout their lives. If, as Appiah says, black identities in the U.S. are constructed oppositionally to racism, then what is the narrative structure of other minority identities in the U.S.?

For Asian Americans, the narrative arc tends to follow the reconciliation of Asian (and generally, more nationally specific identity) with American. Historian Eiichiro Azuma identifies an identity for Japanese Americans outside of the double consciousness associated with American racial identity. He says:

[the first generation Japanese American's] politics of dualism did not stem from ambivalence about the singular nationality of a racist regime and a diasporic self-understanding that aspired to transcend it ... [they] spun

the meanings of racial authenticity and cultural respectability only to the extent that they did not subvert the integrity of the nation or disrupt the racial order of U.S. society (14).

The idea that these two halves of an identity can coexist but also must be accepted is a central theme in many narratives of Asian American identity. Anthropologist Andrea Louie cites the narratives of the “In Search of Roots Program” out of San Francisco when noting this. She says for many second generation and further removed Chinese Americans, “China is simultaneously an unknown entity filtered through an Orientalist lens and a place to which they are involuntarily and inextricably attached” (196).

Furthermore, she states that ethnic labels, like Asian, are used to group large masses of people who have little in common in terms of experience. The only link between these people is a supposed shared culture and without knowledge of that culture, those labeled may feel inauthentic (197).

As racial markers, like Asian American, are socially constructed and largely based on visual representations, narratives of this arc are well suited to visual media. Furthermore, this reconciliation of identity that often defines "Asian American" is only heightened by the stresses of adolescence. Therefore, visual media, like comics, geared toward youth have the ability to manipulate and define identity politics for adolescents in

a particularly powerful way.

Comics in particular is a poignant method of metaphor as it provides a literal interpretation of the idea of “framing” identity through the way in which panels are constructed and pacing is developed. The comic that perhaps has used this synergy of media and message most effectively is *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. On its surface, it seems to be a story about accepting an ontological identity and thus accepting “yourself.” However, by using the form of the graphic novel, particularly the frame, Yang inverts this simplistic message in favor of endorsing a message of flexible and empirically epistemological identity. By working with this medium, Yang offers his readers the ability to move outside of the “frames” presented to them and embrace a grouping of signifiers that is perhaps more meaningful. Instead of being trapped by the stereotypical action the story ends with, sharing bubble tea at a generically Asian café, his characters then have the possibility of becoming a dynamic part of their world where they could exercise the parts of their identities that are shown in other parts of the book. With a story so rife with fantasy, it would be easy for a reader to write its message off as just that, but by breaking up the pacing of the novel and playing with the reader’s sense of space, Yang makes the story’s message universal and penetrating.

According to Scott McCloud, a comics artist who has devoted much time to

studying the inner workings of the medium, the first and fourth dimensions are so intimately connected in comics that they are nearly interchangeable (102). This means that panels are used to convey both time and space simultaneously, and that by changing the way a series of panels is rendered, a comics artist changes the readers' perception of both. I argue that additionally, panels create a sense of a world contained within the graphic novel. By removing the frame from a panel, an artist breaks out of the reality created by the comic. In addition, the artist breaches the world of the reader by removing the boundaries of the comic's world and letting it bleed into his or her own.

Yang uses the frame effectively to change the pacing of the story and make the reader aware that he or she is taking part in a fantasy. By setting off certain portions of the story, Yang forces the reader to understand the irony he creates. Most poignantly, he uses the frame to create a subtextual message in two instances: first when the one of the main characters, the Monkey King, breaks free from the frames (Yang 72) and then at the end of the book when the main characters in the most realistic of the book's stories, Jin and Wei-Chen, convene within the windows of a café (Yang 233).

When Yang creates the Monkey King's escape, he narrates, "He flew through the boundaries of reality itself" (72). This tongue-in-cheek statement seems to point to the difficulty of breaking out of the preconceived notions of identity thrust upon the character

by others. It would seem that this portion is straight-forward, when in the pages that follow it seems as if Yang is saying that the Monkey King chooses to attempt something impossible, breaking out of reality, and fails. The god-creator, Tze-Yo-Tzuh, proves to the Monkey King that he cannot escape the grasp of his creator who has imposed this identity on him (78). Though this could be seen as proof that it is impossible to break free from this identity, it seems that the way Yang rendered the scene offers the reader a deeper layer of meaning through his use of the medium that advocates a freer sense of self.

Should the reader choose to see the edge of the page as the beginning of his or her own world, then the Monkey King isn't breaking out of reality but into it, and he or she can see beyond the entrapment of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. Yang's self-conscious use of the comics medium in this portion of the novel intentionally makes the reader aware of its power and makes its weaknesses equally powerful. He knows that many readers may be prone to write off his story as a juvenile fantasy, and by breaking them out of the pace of the story, he is making them aware that his rendering is ironic. By removing the Monkey King from the bounded panels, Yang takes him out of the reality of the story and even explicitly states that this has happened. McCloud states that when an artist removes the edges from a panel, and especially when its contents run off the edges of the page, a penetrating

sense of timelessness is conveyed (102-103). By removing the frames in this portion, and since time and space are so intimately connected in comics, I argue Yang is creating a sense of “spacelessness” that moves the story from the plane of the book and into the real world. If the reader allows their perception to move beyond the edge of the page, it seems that the Monkey King’s escape from the rigid identity imposed on him is perhaps the most “real” moment of the book, and perhaps the position that Yang would advocate.

To enhance this effect, Yang shows the reader that the Monkey King’s entrapment when he returns to the book is unreal by making the reader aware of the restrictions of the media. McCloud would likely note the film-like strip of the Monkey King on the bottom of page 78 requires very little closure from the reader. He defines closure as the reader’s participation in completing the story of the comics, and refers to the type of transition Yang is using here as “moment-to-moment” (McCloud 68-70). This type of transition requires the least amount of closure from the reader since it renders every action being taken inside the frames and he or she has to do little or no work to make sense of the story (McCloud 70). Yang also leaves no gutters between the frames in these panels, which completely removes the element of time between them. I think that he does this in order to jar the reader back into the world of the comics, where the Monkey King’s entrapment could be real. He seems to be coddling the reader in an ironic

and somewhat intentionally condescending way that stands in contrast to the “spaceless” pages before. On the facing page, he continues the repetition of the Monkey King’s face and slowly fades the story back in, emphasizing its transience and restrictions to the confines of the novel (Yang 79).

At the end of the book, he uses frames in a way that is nearly opposite to his use in the Monkey King panels to render an equally powerful scene. Instead of breaking the characters into the world of the reader, he traps them inside a series of panels that insets them in the world of the story. When Wei-Chen and Jin meet in the "bakery café," they are not seen completely together in the same panel until the very last, on page 233. Taken literally, the two have reconciled at a site of authenticity and the last panel shows them laughing together. Wei-Chen and Jin have even made plans to meet at a later date at another place to get pearl milk tea, lulling the reader into a feeling of security about the futures of the characters with whom he or she has become so well acquainted. It seems as if both have reestablished the ontological identities imposed on them by society as well; Jin’s signified by his repeated visits to the bakery café and Wei-Chen’s by the literal removal of his sunglasses.

However, Yang renders a scene rife with irony that takes this straightforward interpretation to task. Wei-Chen identifies Jin’s authentic café as wholly inauthentic

and never puts out his cigarette, a further symbol of his “corruption” (232). In fact, on page 232, in the first panel where the two sit together, a makeshift gutter of smoke floats between them and keeps them separated in both time and space. Even when they sit together they can’t find a middle ground because of this temporal boundary. Further when they do come together in the last panel on 233, they sit underneath a sign written in Chinese, doubtlessly incoherent to Yang’s average reader, since the book is written in English. Even the concept of a “bakery café” seems unreal. The combination of the Chinese characters, the incoherent English notion and the seemingly senseless number (which could point to the supposed universal language of math) create a jumble of signifiers without meaning. By creating this incoherent fantasy space for this moment and pushing an authentic meeting outside of the boundaries of time in the story at hand, Yang is trapping the message of this scene inside the pages of the story. He makes the reader aware that this moment of easy and reconciled identification is only fantasy and that the reality of unfixed identity exists outside of the pages.

Yang’s choice to inset a set of panels within the panel of last scene further embeds this false happiness in the fantasy of the story. Within this panel, the windows of the café create another set of symmetrical panels (the left bifurcated by the doors) in the center of which the two meet. This sign of collaboration ultimately seems false, though.

The composition seems to imply the discovery of a literal middle ground, but neither of the panels on either side is complete. Read as each character's point of origin, Wei-Chen's home panel is split by the doors to the café and rendered fractured. Jin doesn't fare much better, with a table with only one seat that seems to be distorted by an unreal perspective. If read this way, their "home" identities, that is, those that are the natural fit as deemed by the world of the book, are fantastic creations that ultimately are incomplete and could not represent their whole identities or experiences. Read chronologically, the panels seem equally dubious. It is as if the characters are moving from a fractured point of origin to the point of happy congress they currently occupy to an unsure, unstable and incomplete future. By placing them in this middle panel within the panel, Yang is thoroughly trapping them within the time and space of this moment of the story. He is not only creating the boundaries of the story, he is creating a restrictive time and space where this moment of happiness and ease of identity is possible. The future, represented by the panel with the ungrounded table, still lays incomplete before them. He must create this second set of panels in order to show that he is capturing only a moment even within the frames of the story where identity seems so easy.

It seems as if Yang views this moment of fixed identity as trapping as well.

Where the Monkey King escapes from the panels to express his true identity in a setting

closest to our own, Wei-Chen and Jin are further trapped inside the book. Their happiness does not merely exist within the confines of the panel; it exists in yet another inset. They are forced inside an unreal construction within an unreal construction. Again, Yang seems fully conscious of the power of his medium. Yang prepares the reader for this deliberate construction by setting up a moment-to-moment transition on page 231 prior to these scenes. Again, he uses a slowed-down and calculated sense of time to make the reader aware of the medium and the space to which it is confined. By removing him or her from the easy pacing of the story, the panel-within-a-panel scene that the story ends with seems contrived and only possible within the bounds of the narrative. By using this construction, Yang exposes the irony in Jin and Wei-Chen's happiness in the last scene and makes the reader skeptical of its possibility in his or her own world.

By carefully using the tools of his chosen medium, Gene Yang has created a story too big to fit on the pages of his graphic novel *American Born Chinese*. He lets his true message bleed into the reality of the reader's world and therefore imbue an enduring message. He is aware of the expectations of his genre, and uses his readers' preconceived notions about the medium to make them aware of its capabilities. By exploiting the construction of the frame, he creates a story that is ironic in its creation of a trapped fantasy world where a fixed identity is the natural conclusion. However, he does not

leave the reader without hope for a more meaningful existence; he opens the next panel to possibility.

WORKS CITED

Appiah, Kwame Anthony. *The Ethics of Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP. 2005.

Azuma, Eiichiro. *Between Two Empires: Race, History and Transnationalism in Japanese America*. London: Oxford UP. 2005.

Louie, Andrea. "Searching for Roots in Contemporary China and Chinese America."

Chinese America and the Politics of Race and Culture. Ed. Sucheng Chan and Madeleine

Y. Hsu. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP. 2008

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: Harper Paperbacks. 1994.

Tilly, Charles. *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley, CA: California UP. 1998.

Yang, Gene Luen. *American Born Chinese*. New York: Square Fish. 2008.