

## 8

## SAME DIFFERENCE

*Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang,  
Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim*

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ALTHOUGH ASIAN AMERICANS have been working at the highest levels in writing and drawing mainstream superhero comics for some time now, Asian American characters have remained largely invisible in the pages of these comics. And yet, the past decade or so has seen the emergence of independent and alternative Asian American comics creators interested in exploring what happens when an Asian American—long the target of virulent racist cartoon stereotypes—is the hero of a comic book. In what follows, I want to examine the work of three Asian American comics creators, Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim, in undertaking these experiments—experiments that seem in many ways to make about as much sense as trying to put out a fire with gasoline. Yang has most recently had to confront these challenges when a character, Chin-Kee, from his book *American Born Chinese* (2006) was featured on MySpace, resulting in a torrent of hurt and confusion from readers who felt betrayed by Chin-Kee's concentration of generations of Asian stereotypes. An example is a panel in which Chin-Kee is eating at the school cafeteria with his cousin Danny (114) (Figure 8.1).

On MySpace, images such as these were greeted with horror by readers who had not yet read the book. Out of context, as a single panel, on a MySpace page, how could Chin-Kee be read otherwise? And yet, as Yang reminded his readers on his publisher's website, he had “yanked [Chin-Kee], every last detail about him, straight out of American pop culture.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, the image is a direct quotation from an editorial cartoon by Pat Oliphant, where Uncle Sam is served

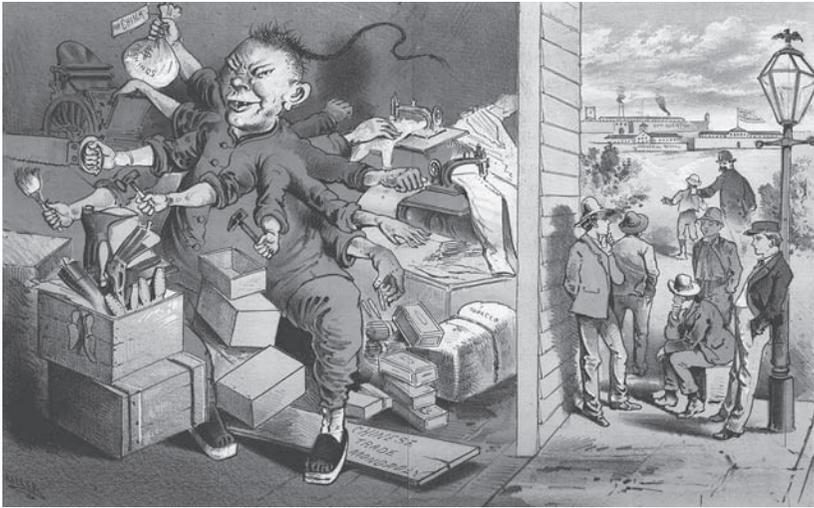


8.1. From Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese*

“crispy fried cat gizzards with noodles” by a Chinese waiter. Yang’s question, then, was whether one can deploy a racial stereotype without empowering it, reinforcing it. And if Asian faces are always read as Chin-Kee, can the Asian American comics creator tell stories of Asian Americans without him?

LIKE ALL PEOPLE OF COLOR, Asian Americans have historically been read through the lens of contradictory stereotypes and presumptions. In the postwar years, especially, these have often been framed (as contemporary racism often is) as “compliments,” in this case regarding Asian Americans as the “model minority” (insisting, in the same breath, on a racial homogeneity among an incredibly diverse population of immigrants and their descendants). These “flattering” portrayals emerged in the early 1960s as a way of scolding the “problem minorities” and the civil rights movement. The devastating consequences of this stereotype have been spelled out in numerous studies, most recently in a report by the National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (*Facts, Not Fiction: Setting the Record Straight*, 2008).

Of course, as this report makes clear, this new stereotype of Asian Americans as “model minorities” was formulated less than a generation after the forced relocation during World War II of more than 120,000 Japanese Americans for being “enemy aliens,” only forty years after Asian Americans were explicitly targeted as undesirable aliens in the 1924 Immigration Act, and less than a century after the very Chinese immigrants who were exploited to build the



8.2. "What Shall We Do with Our Boys?" *The Wasp* (1882)

transcontinental railroad were defined as the nation's first "illegal immigrants" by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. These earlier stereotypes of the Asian American as bestial, violent, and savage seem at first glance to run in opposition to the postwar fantasies of the quiet, studious, and robotlike Asian American, but they are never far apart. For example, in his story "Thoroughbred," published in 1895, Frank Norris imagined a Chinese mob as rats bent on the destruction of the native. The dominant stereotype today of the Asian American as the inscrutable model minority has authorized a mounting hysteria on the part of today's self-proclaimed native students (and their parents) regarding a new kind of mob taking over: Asian American children programmed by their parents for the Asian Invasion, ruthlessly stealing spots in elite universities and in the halls of power from other (white) children.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the late-nineteenth-century nativist fantasies of the mob of rats single-mindedly bent on the destruction of Anglo-Saxon culture and the twenty-first-century fantasy of model minorities seeking the destruction of American opportunity are all of a piece.

And throughout the generations, comics have done yeoman's work in institutionalizing this reading of the Asian problem. In fact, the nineteenth-century cartoons addressing the Asian problem look remarkably similar to those one can find today in college papers around the country. For example, San Francisco's *The Wasp*, one of the leading pioneers in the early comics of the nineteenth century, made Chinese Americans one of its central subjects, playing up images

of the city overrun by swarming invaders, jobs stolen by monstrous—and monstrously efficient—aliens, and institutions overturned.

Contemporary images look remarkably similar and are especially prevalent in school newspapers, where editorialists and cartoonists have increasingly articulated images of Asian American students as mechanized alien robots (Stephen Davis, “The Adventures of Antman”) and even issued “satirical” calls for “war” against Asian American students (Max Karson, “If It’s War the Asians Want . . .,” *Campus Press*, February 18, 2008).

Single-panel comics especially lend themselves to the work of stereotyping. As Chris Ware says, “If you treat comics as a visual language and trace their origins, they point back, essentially, to racism” (*Dangerous Drawings*, 41). But as Ware and other contemporary graphic novelists have demonstrated, sequential comics have a unique and contrasting ability to *destabilize* racial stereotype. Indeed, it is worth noting that the cartoon stereotypes used to inscribe specific readings of racialized bodies were first formulated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when comics were almost entirely single-panel, static images. And it cannot be entirely a coincidence that at precisely the period of the greatest wave of new immigration into the United States—predominantly from Eastern Europe and Asia—the *sequential* comics form first emerged in the United States.

There are many reasons, of course, why we begin to see more nuanced and complex portrayals of racial and ethnic “Others” in mainstream American comics in the early years of the twentieth century. For one thing, many of those working in early newspaper comics, the dominant medium for comics after 1900, were themselves newer immigrants or the children of recent immigrants. Further, increased immigration both into and within the urban centers that were the publishing sites of the major newspaper comics of the day meant that both creators and their readers had daily experience with racial and ethnic difference as never before in U.S. history. But, I would argue, we should not ignore the significance of the formal properties of the medium itself in playing a significant role in the beginnings of a shift away from cartoon racism toward what we might call “graphic alterity.”

For example, Frederick Burr Opper, himself a son of a German-Jewish immigrant, created in 1900 the first celebrity of the new comic strip form in Happy Hooligan, an Irish-American tramp whose simian features and heavy dialect openly reference generations of cartoon representations of the Irish. And yet, as I have argued elsewhere, the effect for Opper’s readers of watching Happy Hooligan every day bravely attempt to do the right thing, only to be once again beaten by the police and thrown in jail for a crime he did not commit, was to forge a deep identification with Happy and inspire contempt for those

who were always ready to convict him as the hooligan his name proposes him to be.

Yet Opper was himself no progressive where anti-Irish discrimination was concerned: his earlier work for *Puck* magazine in the late nineteenth century in single-panel cartoons utilized all the conventions of the stereotype that had been deployed on both sides of the Atlantic for decades to read the Irishman as subhuman, grotesque, and comical. While it is possible that some of Opper's own attitudes changed over the course of his life, a more convincing explanation for the change in Opper's cartoon Irishman lies in his move from single-panel cartoons to the sequential comic strip. His "King of A-Shantee" (1882), after all, does not look terribly different from his later Happy Hooligan: both wear pots on their heads, smoke ratty pipes, wear tattered pants. But where the "King of A-Shantee" serves only the joke that is his title, Happy over time and between the panels transforms into something else entirely.<sup>3</sup>

The difference lies in the formal properties of sequential comics: their distilled frames of time and the spaces between them—the "gutter," as the blank space between the panels is formally known. A single-panel cartoon gag of an ethnic or racial stereotype is contained by its frame; it does the work of stereotyping as the term originally was defined: printing from a fixed mold. It is static and resists ambiguity, directing the reader to very specific ways of reading. The "King of A-Shantee" is funny because he imagines himself a "king," because he believes his miserable living conditions endow him with human dignity. The effect of the single-panel racist cartoon is to force readers to read the next Irishman they encounter in precisely these terms: to laugh at his claims to dignity or even humanity. Reading that same image in sequential comics becomes, inevitably, a more complicated and unruly enterprise.

Comics (single-panel *and* sequential) rely on stereotype and caricature—on individual characters distilled to iconic characteristics. But once two panels



8.3. Frederick Burr Opper,  
Happy Hooligan, circa 1906

## PUCK'S GALLERY OF CELEBRITIES.



THE KING OF A-SHANTEE.

8.4. Frederick Burr Opper, "The King of A-Shantee," Puck (1882)

are put together, narrative is inevitable. As visual culture theorists from Eisenstein to McCloud have demonstrated, two radically dissimilar images in different times and space juxtaposed in sequential panels require of their readers the work of imaginatively filling in the time and space that connect them. As McCloud argues, it is the gutter, or the space between the panels, that represents the empty space to be filled in by the reader in the act of closure, forging the connections required to make meaningful this highly compressed narrative

form (see McCloud, *Understanding Comics*). Indeed, of all modern narrative forms, comics are the most compressed, the most dependent on ellipses and lacunae; comics, that is, must always show and tell only a fraction of the information required to make narrative sense of the information being presented. They are, as many comics creators and theorists have pointed out, a profoundly collaborative narrative form (a fact that helps explain the highly charged relationship between comics creators and their readers). But the space between panels is not the only site where readers are required to exercise over and over again the act of closure required to make meaning: other gaps emerge that require significant conceptual and cognitive work on the part of the readers.

Arguably the most significant of these is the tension between the two primary systems of communication in graphic narrative: image and text. As we well know, image and text do not communicate information in identical ways—and as Gotthold Lessing rightly argued over two centuries ago, one can never be made equivalent to the other. For Lessing and his contemporaries, this revelation required the segregation of image and text into separate and discrete aesthetic and academic disciplines (a segregation that still largely remains in force today). But there are good reasons beyond the force of Lessing's dictates as to why text and image have been segregated into two separate but equal aesthetic categories. And there are reasons why their combination always instills a certain degree of discomfort.

In the single-panel comic this discomfort is easily managed in the service of the joke. The “King of A-Shantee” is funny because of the distance between the word “king” and the image of the Irishman. It is precisely such disjunction, for example, that Gene Luen Yang plays on in introducing Chin-Kee in a single-panel splash page (Figure 8.5). Here the joke is in Chin-Kee's assertion (in a grotesquely exaggerated dialect) that everyone loves him, even though from the start he is set out as an object not of love but of scorn and ridicule. The joke here works in precisely the same way as it does in Opper's “King of A-Shantee”: the disjunction between the character's blind self-image (a blindness figured in Chin-Kee's case by his hyperbolic squint) and the realities of how the rest of us perceive him.

But if the single-panel comic can put the gap between word and image to work in the service of racist stereotype, this gap—once combined with the space between the panels and the vital role of individual readers in making up the difference—is precisely what makes the sequential comic so resistant to racialist work. This is not to say that there are not comics created with racist intention: obviously from the beginning there have been (and continue to be) a wide range of comics that make racist arguments, that deploy racial stereotypes in the service of an explicitly racialist logic. But because of the ellipses



8.5. From Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (2006)

and lacunae at the heart of the comics form, such arguments always are at risk of going astray—as likely happened when Opper translated his nineteenth-century “King of A-Shantee” into a twentieth-century sequential form.<sup>4</sup>

IN TRUTH, HOWEVER, Yang’s Chin-Kee would seem at first to be the counterargument to my assertion that the work of racist stereotyping is inevitably undermined by the ambiguities and collaborations between creator and reader inherent in sequential comics. After all, it is not as if Chin-Kee becomes *less* an object of ridicule once he is set in sequential motion; the fundamental nature of his initial single-panel introductory joke does not significantly change in the repetition. He remains a monstrously exaggerated concatenation of every popular cultural stereotype of Asians and Asian Americans over the last two centuries: we see him arriving at his cousin Danny’s house for his annual visit

with his luggage packed in oversized Chinese food containers (Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 48), after which he immediately begins salivating at the sight of Danny's wished-for girlfriend and her "bountiful Amellican bosom" (50). If this is an example of the many stereotypes that have been imprinted on the Asian body by U.S. popular culture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, shortly after we see Chin-Kee playing out the postwar stereotypes with equal facility. "It would behoove you all to be a little more like Chin-Kee," the teacher tells the class over their barely repressed laughter after Chin-Kee has provided the correct answer regarding the three branches of American government: "Judicial, Executive, and Regisrative!" (111). By the time Chin-Kee starts doing his William Hung impersonation, performing "She Bangs" on the library table (203), Cousin Danny has had enough, and Yang seems to invite the reader to empathize with him as he finally loses his temper and begins slapping Chin-Kee, telling him to stop "ruining my life" and "go away!"

Of course, this is a book where we have already seen the consequences of such blows. *American Born Chinese* is fragmented not only by the inherent properties of the comics form, but by the structure of its narrative. It moves back and forth between three seemingly discrete stories: the story of the Monkey King, the story of Jin Wang, and the story of Cousin Danny and Chin-Kee. The first story begins with the first blow, as the Monkey King unleashes his mighty anger after being humiliated in front of the other gods for being "still a monkey." But his beating of the other gods does not heal the wound their words have opened: the Monkey King returns home to his royal chamber and discovers there, for the first time, "the thick smell of monkey fur." He dedicates himself to transforming himself into someone the gods will at last take seriously: putting on shoes, changing his stature, mastering new powers. Despite all his efforts, he is still greeted each time with laughter by the other gods, forcing him to react once again with violence. Eventually he is confronted by Tze-yo-Tzuh (a god transplanted to the Buddhist myth from Yang's Catholic upbringing), who buries the Monkey King under a mountain of stone until he is finally willing to assume his true nature and thereby free himself.

The second tale, of Jin Wang, tells the story of a young Chinese American boy's experiences at a predominantly Anglo-American school, where he encounters all-too-familiar assumptions about his family's culinary practices, his ability at sports and other all-American activities, and his romantic prospects. When a new student, Wei-Chen, recently arrived from Taiwan, joins the class, Jin reacts with horror. An F.O.B. (fresh-off-the-boat) Asian student will only remind his classmates of all he had worked so studiously to make them forget: that he himself is foreign, not one of the guys. Yet, over the years, it is Wei-Chen who finds his way in the new school more easily, making friends and

then actually finding a girlfriend, Suzy Nakamura, while Jin continues to pine hopelessly after Amelia Harris. In many ways, of course, Jin's dilemmas are typical schoolboy stuff: a schoolboy crush and the agony of summoning the confidence to take the risk of making it public. And with Wei-Chen's help, Jin does find the confidence at last, and Amelia responds encouragingly to his tentative advances. But of course, where this typical coming-of-age story differs for Jin from his Anglo classmates is with the burden of being always, finally, a "chink" in the eyes of his peers. No sooner does he start going out with Amelia than the popular boy, Greg, asks him to stop going out with her: "I just don't know if you're right for her."

Stunned by the request from someone he thought was his friend, Jin initially acquiesces, but soon he is fantasizing about different responses he *might* have given, including a well-deserved punch in the jaw, and his confidence (represented by subjective cracks of lightning in the background) begins to mount again as he goes to confront Amelia and stand up for his desires. But as soon as he sees Greg, lightning literally emanating from his golden curls and the unspoken word heavy in the air between them, Jin's confidence dissipates instantly. Retreating in defeat, he meets Suzy at the bus stop, and when she speaks the word out loud everything goes horribly wrong. "Today," she says, "when Timmy called me a . . . chink, I realized . . . deep down inside . . . I kind of feel like that all the time" (187). And with that articulation of what Jin could not bring himself to acknowledge about himself, the lightning returns, and in his confusion over the emotions she has inspired, Jin makes the fatal mistake of attempting to kiss Suzy, a betrayal of both of his friends. Instead of acknowledging the injury he has caused, however, Jin internalizes the racism, turning his hateful words on his best friend: "Maybe I think she can do better than an F.O.B. like you," he tells Wei-Chen. With these words and the blow that follows, Jin's transformation is complete, and he wakes up the next morning now finally wearing the face of all he aspires to be: the bland, blond-haired Cousin Danny, his new identity.

Thus, as the novel moves toward its conclusion, the fragments that make up the whole are brought together, forcing the reader to rethink everything up to that point. With the realization that Cousin Danny is in fact the older Jin, now transformed into his ideal, the character of Chin-Kee is thrown into a different kind of relief, as is his relentless embarrassment of Danny (forcing Danny to change schools every year in order to escape the stigma of being Chin-Kee's cousin). Even before we discover (with a blow that knocks Chin-Kee's head literally off) that Chin-Kee is actually the Monkey King himself, we are already prepared for the (pun intended) punch line.

Thus even this extreme case, which Yang seems to have set for himself almost as a test of his medium, demonstrates the ways in which sequential com-

ics destabilize racialist logic. Racism may share with comics some fundamental grammatical elements: caricature, stereotypes, condensation. But racism requires precisely that which sequential comics make impossible: unequivocal meanings, and a stable definition of us and them. Comics offer no such promise to their readers, as we have already addressed, and further, unlike more efficient narrative forms such as film or the novel, comics allow—and often even require—an unruly reader who can and will double back, skip to the end, flip between pages, rereading once, twice at a sitting. The Chin-Kee we read the second time, as indeed we are expected to, is a very different character than the gross spectacle we encountered (through Danny’s privileged point of view) the first time through the book—just as the Monkey King we encounter at the book’s end is very different than the angry, resentful deity we met in the book’s opening pages. “You know, Jin,” he concludes, “I would have saved myself from five hundred years’ imprisonment beneath a mountain of rock had I only realized how good it is to be a monkey” (223).

AT FIRST GLANCE, it might well appear that *American Born Chinese* is something of an exception among works by the new generation of Asian American comics creators. After all, few address issues of identity and stereotype with the kind of directness Yang brings to bear. But just as the revelations at the end of *American Born Chinese* require a rereading of the book’s three narratives, so too does Yang’s story demand of us a return to earlier works by this generation of talented younger Asian American creators in order to see the ways in which many of the same themes and strategies are deployed, albeit in more subtle ways.

For example, in “Hawaiian Getaway” (1999) by Adrian Tomine, twenty-something Hillary Chan faces many of the same issues that confront the younger Jin. But outside of the cruel confines of the schoolyard the racism she encounters takes on a more insidious and unspoken form. The word Suzy and Jin realize they have lived with every day is now a quiet, relentless hum beneath the surface of Hillary’s daily life, so quiet she cannot even begin to articulate it to herself. As the story begins, Chan has just been fired from her job as a phone operator for making the wrong kind of small talk with a celebrity customer. Her inability to master small talk is a source of constant frustration to her, and it is exacerbated by the seeming effortlessness of those around her in striking up random conversations with each other. “Sometimes I feel like there’s a sign floating above my head that says something like ‘Warning: avoid contact with this person,’” she tells us. “I was told once that I look ‘naturally stand-offish,’ which I could not understand.”<sup>5</sup> When, immediately after articulating this thought to the reader, we watch Hillary’s silent standoff with a coffeehouse cashier, when we see the (suspicious? resentful?) backward glance of the other customer whose flirta-

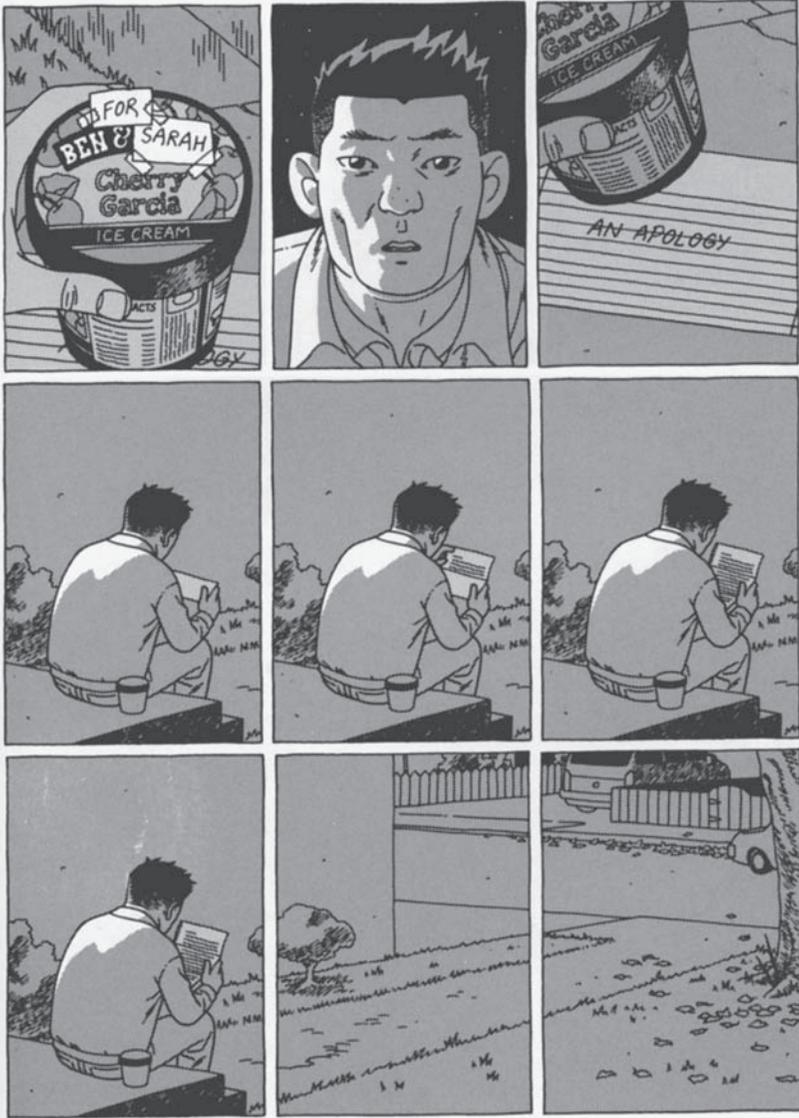
tions Hillary's presence has interrupted, we are being invited to read more into the silences she encounters than Hillary herself seems prepared to.<sup>6</sup> That she is read by others as stand-offish, as distant and unreadable, has of course everything to do with the assumptions those around her have made about her based on her name, her appearances, perhaps even the traces of the Mandarin accent of her mother, from whom she has run as far away as she possibly can. But even if she cannot acknowledge it, Hillary has nonetheless internalized this reading of her, and so finds herself increasingly isolated, angry, desperate.

Cut off from her one regular line of human interaction in her job as phone operator, Hillary regresses, holing up in her apartment and making random prank calls to strangers at the phone booth down below her window. Over time the calls get nastier, as she directs her own self-loathing at the people below, insulting them, threatening them, mocking them. The themes worked out in "Hawaiian Getaway," one of Tomine's longer stories, are familiar ones throughout his work: isolation, the need for community and contact, and the simultaneous deep distrust of community and other people—the inevitable gaps and misunderstanding in all human interaction. These themes arise also in his stories that don't feature Asian American characters, but we would be wrong to assume that those stories have nothing to say about the experience of being Asian American. One of the predominant strategies in Asian American comics, and especially in the work of Tomine, in confronting the legacy of the Asian American stereotype—as inscrutable, mysterious, and unreadable by mainstream America—is to point out the universality of this inscrutability, the impossibility of ever comprehending, truly, another person.

Although infinitely more adept socially than Tomine's Hillary Chan, Nancy, one of the Korean American protagonists in Derek Kirk Kim's first graphic novel, *Same Difference* (2003), has found herself engaged in remarkably similar behavior. Shortly after her roommates have forced upon her painful memories of her high school self (as, for example, a member of the ping-pong team), twenty-something Nancy confesses to her best friend, Simon, a more recent, shameful secret. She has been taking on the identity of the former tenant of the apartment to answer the overwrought and vaguely disturbed love letters of one Ben Leland. The results of her game now lie spread out before them in an overflowing correspondence from Leland, who turns out to be from Simon's hometown. Simon is aghast at her for playing with an emotionally vulnerable stranger for her own fun. But he is feeling guilty himself, having just run into Irene, a blind girl, once his best friend in high school, whom he long ago unceremoniously abandoned when he found out she had romantic feelings for him. And so he allows himself to be convinced that it would be fun to go back to his hometown and spy on Ben.

The trip proves to be not nearly as fun as Nancy had imagined, however. Back in his hometown, Simon must confront his high school self, as he first meets some old classmates and then runs into his former best friend, Irene. All have gotten on with their lives in different ways, Simon realizes, while he remains stalled: “still the same pathetic loser weaving juvenile lies those 7 years ago. Am I any different now?” (79). Simon has finally come to the realization that his attraction to Irene and his abandonment of Irene both originated from the same source: her blindness. Her lack of sight made her the one person at his overwhelmingly white high school who did not see him as first and foremost Asian—and for a teenager desperate to fit in, this was a liberating gift. But her disability was also a stigma in the eyes of his peers, and in this way she represented everything he was trying to escape: the mark of difference, Otherness, inscrutability. Nancy, meanwhile, finally spies the object of her games, and to her surprise Ben Leland turns out to be a middle-aged grocery clerk, and Asian American. Seeing him, the game is no longer any fun, as Ben is a reflection of everything Nancy most fears for her own future and most fears about her own present self. The novella ends with an apology letter to Ben that we are not invited to read, and with the suggestion that maybe both Simon and Nancy have arrived at a place where they might finally begin to progress beyond their high school selves.

Problems of identity and experience in Kim’s and Tomine’s stories are not as straightforward as those Yang spells out in *American Born Chinese*. In his most recent (and longest) narrative, *Shortcomings* (2007), Tomine concludes with a similarly unreadable letter—this time from Ben Tanaka to the friend he is leaving. At the end of a long and miserable breakup, Ben (who had hitherto been unwilling to countenance anyone’s judgment or motivation that did not accord with his own) can at least say in defense of his ex, “We all have our reasons” (107). The reader, of course, is left wondering about those reasons. But in lieu of explanation, the reader receives, in conclusion, seventeen silent panels: a fragment of the Brooklyn Bridge, seemingly disconnected from the islands it binds together; an unanswered knock on the door; a letter that we are not allowed to read. The sequence culminates in a final series of panels showing Ben staring out a plane window as it slowly turns to white, a blank slate. Tomine’s minimalist realism does not have the luxury that Yang’s magic realism does of promising that one might escape from the mountain of rock simply by being true to oneself. But as with Simon and Nancy, we do have a sense that Ben had learned something—or, more appropriate, unlearned something—and become willing to accept the possibility that prejudice might be replaced by the release of judgment (“We all have our reasons”). Ben is at least willing to let go the need



8.6. From Derek Kirk Kim, *Same Difference and Other Stories* (2003)

to label everyone he meets by type and category and start over in the blank space at the end of the novel.

The blank space at the end of these novels, of course, represents precisely the interactive space opened up by the comics form: Nancy's apology, Ben's farewell note, the blank field of stars, or the empty pane of the window, all are texts for the reader to fill in, drawing from what we have learned about our characters. Reading these stories of isolation, cruelty, humiliation, and masquerade, we see common threads that run through them, shared experiences—but in the end we are asked to complete the story. The authors ask that our encounter with these characters be something like Nancy's encounter with Ben Leland—forcing us to pick up a pen and start writing ourselves into the story, taking active responsibility for the fun we have had by reading, watching, looking into other people's windows and lives (reminding us how very like Hillary and Nancy we are). Even the somewhat more didactic *American Born Chinese* ends with a similar moment: a final page in which Jin and Wei-Chen are sitting together talking once more, a conversation we are not invited to listen in on. If the comics creator must surrender a remarkable degree of authorial control in working in this medium, turning to readers at every panel to help forge the connections and fill in the blanks, these works all conclude by putting on readers the responsibility, literally, for ending the story—drawing on, and drawing in, their own lives.

It is worth pointing out that none of these books offers what Tomine's Ben Tanaka mockingly calls a "big 'statement' about race." They all differently confront the experience of growing up Asian American, being read always by dominant society through the lens of a century's worth of stereotypes and racist assumption. But they don't promise that cultural identity offers a safe haven or an easy answer. Instead, each of these authors similarly (and differently) turns to the sequential comics form to confront and destabilize racial stereotype, using the very tools that have been historically used to forge those molds in the first place. And they similarly (and differently) use graphic narrative's necessarily interactive nature to force the reader into a position of taking an active role in making meaning out of what can't be spoken: the conclusions, the road map as to how to move forward. In all cases, the creators are aware that the ways in which readers take up this charge will differ. They will differ, certainly based on whether or not the reader is herself Asian American. But they will also differ for a whole range of other reasons that the author cannot predict, any more than Ben Tanaka can finally know the reasons for his breakup. "We all have our reasons," and for all of us the reasons of others remain ultimately inscrutable, mysterious. The best we can hope for is to know our *own* reasons, and to begin to own them, as Nancy and Simon seem to do at the end of *Same Difference*. If we are all different, we are also the same for *being* different (as Kim's playful title

reminds us), and the inscrutable Asian becomes no longer the model minority but the universal model of the painful and beautiful alterity of other people.

If the single-panel comic is the ultimate medium of stereotyping, it could be argued that the sequential comic is the most powerful (in part because least susceptible to authorial discipline) medium for embracing the radical consequences of an alterity that disables stereotype and the easy readings of the hegemonic gaze.<sup>7</sup> The sameness of difference and the difference in sameness are what these Asian American graphic novelists all gesture toward in similar and different ways, and what we do with the blank panels with which we are left at the end is the power and the responsibility that they each pass on to us as readers.

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## NOTES

1. “Gene Yang on Stereotypes,” May 1, 2007, [http://firstsecondbooks.typepad.com/mainblog/2007/05/gene\\_yang\\_on\\_st.html](http://firstsecondbooks.typepad.com/mainblog/2007/05/gene_yang_on_st.html).

2. As with all stereotypes, the realities, of course, are very different. Despite, and indeed because of, the model minority stereotype, Asian American students increasingly find it harder to get admitted to elite universities, and once admitted they are far less likely to receive needed help and support than other students. And of immediate impact for the writers and artists we will be talking about, assumptions that Asian Americans are *always* science and engineering students lead those who pursue careers in arts and humanities to be seen as doubly alien: the model minority who doesn’t even fit the model. And no one knows this reality better than an Asian American *cartoonist*—one who has chosen one of the least profitable and least culturally respected professions.

3. In fact, Happy Hooligan became not a subject of the joke, but an object of admiration, such that his birthday became an event regularly acknowledged by national and civic leaders.

4. See Jared Gardner’s “Reading out of the Gutter: Early Comics, Film, and the Serial Pleasures of Modernity,” forthcoming.

5. Adrian Tomine, “Hawaiian Getaway,” in *Summer Blonde: Stories* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003). “Hawaiian Getaway” was originally published in Tomine’s serial comic *Optic Nerve* #6 (1999).

6. As Sandra Oh nicely reads this scene, “Given that Hilary’s [*sic*] order is unremarkable, the explanation for this attitude can be attributed to the visual, recasting Hilary’s problem not as one of language but of vision” (“Sight Unseen: Adrian Tomine’s *Optic Nerve* and the Politics of Recognition,” 137).

7. For a discussion of the ways in which the graphic narrative form’s engagement with alterity has been put to use by graphic novelists confronting issues of disability, see Susan M. Squier, “So Long as They Grow Out of It: Comics, the Discourse of Developmental Normalcy, and Disability” (2008).