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*The Usage of a Fable in Gene Luen Yang's  
Graphic Novel*

*(Bachelor Thesis)*

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto bakalářskou práci vypracovala samostatně a uvedla jsem veškeré použité podklady a literaturu.

V Olomouci dne:

Podpis.....

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***The Usage of a Fable in Gene Luen Yang's Graphic Novel  
(Bachelor Thesis)***

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## **Abstract**

This thesis addresses the way in which Gene Luen Yang formats the position of ethnically different characters with special attention to the usage of the fable of Sun WuKong, the Monkey King, which is used in his graphic novel, *American Born Chinese*. Specifically, it will be looking at the parallels between two characters, Jin Wang and the Monkey King. These parallels, along with their individual stories, will be analysed through the lens of postcolonial theory, through which lens I will be analysing the way Yang's characters react to various moments of discrimination, and how it affects the evolution of their identities. The concepts this thesis will use for that will be the notion of ambivalence, syndrome of 'mimicry,' politics of Location, hybridity, neurosis, and violence. In this way, this thesis is aiming to show how ancient mythology can be used in contemporary media to help and portray issues that are present in today's society.

**Key words:** American Born Chinese, Gene Luen Yang, graphic novel, postcolonial theory, ambivalence, the Monkey King, identity.

## **Abstrakt**

Bakalářská práce se zabývá způsobem, kterým Gene Luen Yang formátuje pozici etnicky odlišných postav, se speciálním zaměřením na použití bajky o Sun WuKongovi, Opičím králi, která je použita v Yangově grafickém románu, *Američan čínského původu*. Práce se bude především zabývat podobnostmi mezi dvěma postavami, Ťinem Wangem a Opičím králem. Tyto podobnosti spolu s jejich individuálními příběhy budou analyzovány optikou postkoloniální teorie, skrz kterou budu analyzovat způsob, jakým Yangovy postavy reagují na různé momenty diskriminace a jak to ovlivňuje vývoj jejich identit. Koncepty, které k tomu tato práce použije, budou především ambivalence, syndrom napodobování, důležitost lokality ve formování identity, hybridita, neuróza a násilí. Tímto způsobem si bakalářská práce klade za cíl ukázat, jak lze starověkou mytologii využít v současných médiích k pomoci a zobrazení problémů, které jsou přítomné v dnešní společnosti.

**Klíčová slova:** *Američan čínského původu*, Gene Luen Yang, grafický román, postkoloniální teorie, ambivalentnost, Opičí Král, identita.

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## Introduction

Diverse representation in media is increasing in importance nowadays, and many scholars have been studying the way in which characters portray the struggles in the lives of minorities or oppressed groups of people. The subject of this thesis will be directed towards the same thing, and it will focus on the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* written by Gene Luen Yang. Not only will it study the portrayal of ethnically different character living in predominantly White surroundings, but it will also aim to observe the way in which a fable is used within the said graphic novel. It is a very famous, ancient Chinese fable which has as its main character the legendary Sun WuKong<sup>1</sup>, also known as the Monkey King.

The purpose of this thesis is to show how an ancient fable can be used in contemporary media and still be relevant, despite its origin reaching thousands of years ago. It will study how its alternations from the original might change some key aspects of the fable and yet still picture its main character in a light that is known by many. It will showcase how the usage of the fable may make the story of Jin Wang more understandable to the reader, and in how many different ways may identity be depicted in media.

The first section will deal with the theoretical framework which will later be used in the *Results* section. Here, it will contextualize the key information necessary about comics and graphic novels with a focus on the importance of perceiving them as complex pieces of literature, provide an introduction to the author of the graphic novel and his work, and it will dive into the information which is necessary to know when working with the postcolonial theory. It will shed light upon the key concepts used in the thesis, which are the syndrome of ‘mimicry’, ambivalence, hybridity, politics of Location, neurosis, and violence.

The second section will introduce the three important characters of the graphic novel, Sun WuKong, Jin Wang, and Danny. Then, it will continue to show the alternations which have been done between the original myth and the Monkey King used in Yang’s novel, the points in the Monkey King’s story which are coded with racial prejudice which leads him to recreate his entire identity and its later acceptance. His story will be studied with the key concepts which have already been mentioned, and then these concepts will be applied to Jin Wang’s part of the story as well. In the last part of the second section, the reader will be provided with

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<sup>1</sup> Some sources transcribe the Monkey King’s name as Sun WuKong, others as Sun Wu Kung. For consistency, this work will use Sun WuKong throughout the thesis.

the parallels between the two characters. The last part of the thesis will summarise the findings of the thesis.

## Comics and Graphic Novels

To start off the discussion of *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang, this paper will firstly introduce key information with regards to graphic novels and postcolonial theory, which will be applied in the second part of the thesis, to familiarise the reader with the issues with which the paper will deal.

In some cases, there might be slight confusion when it comes to the difference between the terms *comic* and *graphic novel*. The definition Dallacqua proposes is that comics, or comic books, “use a deliberate sequence of art and text to express a storyline.”<sup>2</sup> Graphic novels do the same thing, therefore, they are classified as comics with the addition of having a greater length and containing storylines that are distinct in complexity. There is a high chance of them being constructed of more chapters or having more than one volume.<sup>3</sup> What is important is that “the pictures in graphic novels are as integral to the story as the words themselves.”<sup>4</sup> What this means is that the pictures are not used solely to accompany the text, the way they are used in picture books. They are, however, a very vital part of the work, and the reader must pay close attention to them so as to not lose track of what they are being told or shown. To sum up, every graphic novel is also a comic, but not every comic can be labelled as a graphic novel.

Nevertheless, there are some scholars who are against this classification. Labio, for example, argues that the term “graphic novel” should not be used as an “umbrella term” for the whole genre, since it diminishes the literary aspect of the work as a whole.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that some academics deem this term to be unsatisfactory, though, this thesis will continue to use it, since it does not consider it to be decreasing the literary side of those works.

Now that the fundamental definitions of the terms have been provided, I will move on to briefly introduce the history of comics and graphic novels. Even though they are perceived as late phenomena, the truth is that they have been present for centuries – their roots are dated back to the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> They became more present at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though, and a much wider distribution of comics started in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a number of comics

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<sup>2</sup> Ashley K. Dallacqua, “Exploring Literary Devices in Graphic Novels,” *Language Arts* 89, No. 6 (July 2012), 366.

<sup>3</sup> Dallacqua, “Exploring Literary Devices,” 366.

<sup>4</sup> Dallacqua, “Exploring Literary Devices,” 366.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Labio, “What’s in a Name? The Academic Study of Comics and the “Graphic Novel.” *Cinema Journal* 50, No. 3 (Spring 2011): 123.

<sup>6</sup> Dallacqua, “Exploring Literary Devices,” 365.

and graphic novels became published, predominantly centred around the characters of superheroes. As a matter of fact, in the 1960s and 1970s, a great number of underground comics got published.<sup>7</sup> During the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, graphic novels had been blamed for corrupting their readers by depicting harmful actions, and stigma was created around them since it was believed that they appease only children or the audience of lower intellect.<sup>8</sup>

However, this approach has been proven to be wrong by various academics. As Stein writes, they are “aesthetically complex, historically rich, and substantial American medium,”<sup>9</sup> and as Dallacqua states, graphic novels are, in fact, “complex literature that mirrors a reader’s world.”<sup>10</sup> This suggests that it is possible to depict complex issues which are present in our society, such as racism, queerphobia, xenophobia, climate change, etc., through the lens of comics. The fact that they might contain less text than any other literature and that pictures are a crucial part of the work as a whole does not degrade them in any way. Actually, as Gluibizzi writes, “Graphic novels and comics push beyond the boundaries of illustrated books to the point where illustrations and text are equivalent, each driving the other, rather than the illustrations supporting or attempting to explain the text.”<sup>11</sup> This argument supports the previous statement, which claims that the complexity of graphic novels is not lacking due to their characteristic trait of containing both pictures and words because the reader must pay close attention to both in order to understand the events of the story.

To say that graphic novels lack in complexity would be, therefore, unreasonable, since we have works of great importance to prove this statement to be wrong. As an example, *Maus* by Art Spiegelman could be used. *Maus* was the first graphic novel that received the Pulitzer Prize. This caused a breakthrough for graphic novels<sup>12</sup> – not only was it proven by obtaining such a prize that graphic novels were capable of dealing with heavy subjects, but it also brought more attention to those parts of the general, mainstream public which hadn’t been interested in reading the genre before.

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Stein, Christina Meyer, and Micha Edlich, “Introduction: American Comic Books and Graphic Novels,” *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 56, No. 4 (2011), 512.

<sup>8</sup> Dallacqua, “Exploring Literary Devices,” 365.

<sup>9</sup> Stein, Meyer, and Edlich, “American Comic Books,” 502.

<sup>10</sup> Dallacqua, “Exploring Literary Devices,” 366.

<sup>11</sup> Amanda Gluibizzi, “The Aesthetics and Academics of Graphic Novels and Comics,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 26, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 28.

<sup>12</sup> Dallacqua, “Exploring Literary Devices,” 365; Gluibizzi, “The Aesthetics and Academics,” 28.



Moving on, to highlight the significance of graphic novels, it will shortly be discussed how advantageous they are for readers. Gene Luen Yang states that it would be beneficial to use graphic novels in classrooms on a much more regular basis and that it has been proven that it helps students with understanding topics and problems which are discussed more easily. It teaches them critical thinking in the moment where they have to choose what is true and what is not, or in instances where the pictures and words pass narrative responsibility back and forth. There are even situations where the pictures tell a completely different story than the text does, and it is the reader's job to assess what to believe. Yang is of a strong belief that comics and graphic novels can help (not only) children to become smarter especially due to these aspects of their features.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, this could be studied through the Reader Response Theory, which is based on the same thought. Readers are allowed a certain amount of freedom when interpreting the text, and when it comes to graphic novels, they "can be sophisticated and challenging texts in and of themselves, serving as tools to teach complicated concepts. When presenting comics and graphic novels as valid options among student reading choices, engagement in literacy will happen."<sup>14</sup> As we can see, this supports Yang's statement concerning how comics can help increase the intellect of students, considering comics and graphic novels are more enticing to their readers, and they will be more likely to understand the topics which are being studied.

To conclude, in this section, the thesis has named various perspectives on comics and graphic novels along with a brief history of comics, and it has taken the stance that they do not lack in complexity along with the rest of the academics and that they can actually be beneficial in the educational environment, as supported in the previous paragraph. Now, the thesis will move on to introduce the author of the *American Born Chinese* novel, which is crucial to the research.

### **Gene Luen Yang**

Gene Luen Yang is an American graphic novelist, along with being a teacher of creative writing in Hamline University's *MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults*. In 2016, he was named the National Ambassador for Young People's Literature. His literary works have received a number of awards, and his most well-known are *Boxers & Saints*, *Level Up*,

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<sup>13</sup> Gene Luen Yang, "How Comic Books Can Make Kids (and Adults) Smarter," Big Think, January 10, 2018, short lecture by Yang, 4:06. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9z\\_x8akuSv4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9z_x8akuSv4)

<sup>14</sup> Dallacqua, "Exploring Literary Devices," 367.

*Superman Smashes the Klan* and more.<sup>15</sup> As has already been established, he believes that comics carry educational values which can help pass the information necessary to his students, who might have otherwise struggled with understanding the material.

The main focus of this thesis will be on one of Yang's most known and influential graphic novels, *American Born Chinese*. It was published in 2006 by First Second Books, and it was the first graphic novel to be nominated for National Book Award. It was also the first to win the American Literary Association's Printz Award, along with the Eisner Award for Best Graphic Novel – New.<sup>16</sup> Since its first publication, the reaction towards the novel has been widely positive, and it has attracted diversified groups of readers. As Yang himself describes:

[And] it seems like kids that feel like outsiders are often drawn to the book. I hear from a lot of immigrants' kids. [...] But often this idea of negotiating between two selves really speaks to them. I also hear a lot from LGBTQ kids who feel like outsiders for different reasons. And even though I don't address those topics in the book, it seems like the emotional realities are things that they recognise.<sup>17</sup>

This proves the importance of the graphic novel, and it is one of the reasons why this thesis has chosen the graphic novel to be the subject of its study.

The graphic novel contains three storylines which, in the end, the reader finds to be inter-linked. The story revolves around Jin Wang, the legendary Sun WuKong (the Monkey King), and a boy named Danny, who is desperate due to the annual visits of his cousin Chin-Kee (who personifies the most negative Chinese stereotypes). Emma Oki has pointed out that we can see the *birth, death and rebirth cycle* present in the novel, because “

The Monkey King is born a monkey, dies to become the Great Sage, and is reborn as an emissary of Tze-Yo-Tzuh. [...] Similarly, Jin is an American-born Chinese, dies to become Danny, and is reborn as a Chinese American.<sup>18</sup>

The paper will focus on these transformations in the upcoming sections, and it will also go more into detail about the characters, but for now, it will only state that the novel takes the

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<sup>15</sup> “About,” Gene Luen Yang, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://geneyang.com/about-gene>.

<sup>16</sup> “About,” Gene Luen Yang, accessed March 23, 2023, <https://geneyang.com/about-gene>.

<sup>17</sup> Gene Luen Yang. “American Born Chinese.” Reading Rockets, November 21, 2017, Yang talking about his graphic novel, 0:37—1:07. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoR2JxiM3gg>.

<sup>18</sup> Emma Oki, “The Birth, Death, and Rebirth of (Ethnic) Identity in Gene Luen Yang’s Work” *University of Bucharest Review: Literary & Cultural Studies Series* 7, No. 1 (2017), 27.

reader on a journey of self-exploration and self-acceptance, where the characters try to find their place in the world and struggle to navigate through life.

### **The Brief History of Postcolonial Theory**

Now, the paper will move on to talk about the theory which will be applied later on. The foundational text for postcolonial theory is *The Wretched of the Earth* written by a psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon, which was published in 1961. Fanon experienced French colonialism, and he was an anti-colonial Algerian revolutionary. His text is a manifesto which deals with the relationship between the colonizers and the colonized. Ideologically, he is also met with Gandhi to a certain extent, because of their shared idea of “a radical style of total resistance to the totalising political and cultural offensive of the colonial civilising mission.”<sup>19</sup> His text served as an inspiration to many other scholars, like Edward Said, for example.

The next foundational text is *Orientalism* written by the cultural critic Edward Said, which was published in 1978. It is regarded as the first phase of the theory, and it was influenced by the ideas of Foucault and Derrida. It “directs attention to the discursive and textual production of colonial meaning and, concomitantly, to the consolidation of colonial hegemony.”<sup>20</sup> In *Orientalism*, Said claimed that in the minds of the people living in the countries which colonized others, the world was divided into the following binary: “the Orient” and “the West.” Here, “the Orient” was taken as “a playground for Western ‘desires, repressions, investments, projections.’”<sup>21</sup> The reason behind this was the general belief that the West was taken as something which was more developed, whereas the Orient was taken as something more primitive, and its habitants were considered to be “alien” or “other” due to their beliefs and different ways of life.

“The Orient” can be labelled as “the Other” as well, which is a term used more widely nowadays. “The Other” is studied based on how it was created through the hegemonic Western lenses, and the postcolonial theory aims to deconstruct it.<sup>22</sup> Under the umbrella of “the Other”

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<sup>19</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction, Second Edition* (Columbia University Press: New York, 2019), 19.

<sup>20</sup> Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 143.

<sup>22</sup> Shehla Burney, “CHAPTER TWO: Edward Said and Postcolonial Theory: Disjunctured Identity and the Subaltern Voice,” in *Counterpoints* 417, *PEDAGOGY of the Other: Edward Said, Postcolonial Theory, and Strategies for Critique* (2012), 42.

fall not only the racial and ethnic minorities, but also sexual minorities, people of different nationalities, social classes, gender, or cultural identity.

This has created a harmful binary that prevails even to this day, and the postcolonial theory—along with the feminist theory, for example—has embraced the idea created by poststructuralists that the binary shall be refused. These theories aim to “invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race,”<sup>23</sup> and they study how these prevailing hierarchies have negatively impacted the lives of those affected by the colonial or patriarchal authorities.

### **Postcolonial Theory**

There have been many ways in which postcolonial theory has been perceived, however, the general idea is that it studies the aftermath of colonial occupation. Despite the so-called “will-to-forget,” which is classified under the term “postcolonial amnesia,” where the colonized try to aim for “historical self-invention of the need to make a new start” by erasing or suppressing the painful memories of colonization, postcolonialism is “a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, postcolonialism targets the prevailing discrimination which is connected to the colonial aftermath. Gandhi nicely expresses it by stating that “If postcoloniality can be described as a condition troubled by the consequences of a self-willed historical amnesia, then the theoretical value of postcolonialism inheres, in part, in its ability to elaborate the forgotten memories of this condition.”<sup>25</sup> Postcolonialism aims to study the ways in which the aftermath still has a very strong presence in our daily lives, and how colonialism has affected the thinking and perception of many.

In addition to that, many scholars, like Said or Memmi, have focused on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, and it has been shown that the assumption that had been done by many, which revolved around the colonized becoming a completely new human the moment the wrath of the colonizers departed, was simply unrealistic. On the contrary, it has been proven that the colonized had to adjust to their newly found freedom, and only after a long time could they become the “new man” that had been expected of them.<sup>26</sup> Firstly, it was necessary to acknowledge the past and the trauma it has brought upon them, though, and only after that, the transformation of their identity could have started.

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<sup>23</sup> Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 83.

<sup>24</sup> Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 7—8.

<sup>26</sup> Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory*, 6.

With regards to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, Bhabha is a very important figure in the postcolonial theory - along with Spivak and Said, the three of them being considered to be the crucial figures of the theory. He presented ideas that aimed to describe the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, for which he had used the term 'symbiotic.' In addition, he introduced the idea of hybridity, the concept of 'ambivalence,' and the syndrome of 'mimicry,'<sup>27</sup> about which will be the following paragraphs.

The concept of Bhabha's 'ambivalence' presents the difficult relationship between the colonizer and the colonized because it is not as simple as it might seem. According to Bhabha, the relationship does not only consist of hatred and the intention to set oneself free; it also consists of a certain type of love and admiration that the two sides share for one another.<sup>28</sup> This is the reason why the colonized may mirror the characteristic traits of the colonizer, since in their eyes, the behaviour of the colonized is considered to be worthy of admiration, which brings us to the next concept, the syndrome of 'mimicry.'

The syndrome of 'mimicry' comes into the picture when it comes to ambivalence as well, since it describes the behavioural changes and adjustments of the colonized, who does so to imitate the colonizer due to the belief that the colonizer possesses the 'superior' persona. The colonized, in this way, may adapt the White mannerism with which they are met on the part of the colonizer.<sup>29</sup> With regards to hybridity, it is concerned with the subject of creating a hybrid identity. This identity is built out of mixed cultures of the colonized and the colonizer. Nowadays, it is present in society due to immigration, wars, etc., where people are, as Shehla Burney writes, "evolving hybrid identities built upon the 'back home' culture and the new styles of being learned from the adopted land."<sup>30</sup> Thanks to this, life around us is becoming diversified, and we have access to new forms of art, culture, politics, etc.

In addition to the notion of Bhabha's 'ambivalence,' Rasha El Gohary also notes that within the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer, the colonized firstly aims to associate with the colonizer and only after this stage is over do they want to replace them altogether, which, as he suggests, may lead to either *neurosis* or *violence*. When it comes to *neurosis*, El

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<sup>27</sup> Burney, "Said and Postcolonial Theory," 59.

<sup>28</sup> Burney, "Said and Postcolonial Theory," 46.

<sup>29</sup> Burney, "Said and Postcolonial Theory," 43; Rasha El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse: Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*," *Cairo Studies in English: Journal of Research in Literature, Linguistics and Translation Studies* 2017, Issue 1 (December 2017), 176.

<sup>30</sup> Burney, "Said and Postcolonial Theory," 43.

Gohary draws from Fanon, who states that the colonized become obsessed with the wish to become white. When it comes to *violence*, he also draws from Fanon, who believes that it is a required step to free oneself, even though it is perceived negatively by many.<sup>31</sup> It could be said that *neurosis* and *violence* are twin poles of one another since they are contradictory.

Another thing that is salient for postcolonial theory is the ‘politics of Location.’ Northon Frye built on the idea and differentiated between the “identity of place” and the identity of self,” where he positioned the initial above the latter.<sup>32</sup> The reason why is because the location of the subject is crucial to their being since it is not only related to culture, but also to the way one’s identity is formatted – there are instances where, in one location, there might be a cluster of cultures, and the individual is introduced to them, and eventually they are influenced by them. When it comes to identity, the next section of the thesis will provide a closer look at the definitions connected to it.

## **Identity**

Every living person has their own, unique identity. If we were to use a dictionary definition of the word, then, according to the Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, the definition of the word would be ““who or what somebody/something is,” “the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others,” and it could be broken down into “national/cultural/personal identity,” “ethnic/racial identity,” etc.<sup>33</sup> Based on these definitions, it could be said that one’s identity is constructed of things that have shaped our experiences in the everyday world and made us who we are. El Gohary also tried to define what identity is, and he wrote in his paper that it is a “wide concept that includes several dimensions such as race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, religion, profession, interests, and roles in life.”<sup>34</sup> However, what happens when our identity is being questioned or mocked? What if it is being attacked and alienated?

As Burney points out, postcolonial theory is noted for the study of identity, because of its nature of studying “the nature of cultural identity, gender, race, social class, ethnicity, and nationality in postcolonial societies.”<sup>35</sup> In the article, there is also a point made about how

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<sup>31</sup> El Gohary, “Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse,” 179.

<sup>32</sup> Burney, “Said and Postcolonial Theory,” 43.

<sup>33</sup> Oxford Learners Dictionaries, s.v. “identity (n.),” accessed March 20, 2023, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/identity>

<sup>34</sup> El Gohary, “Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse,” 175.

<sup>35</sup> Burney, “Said and Postcolonial Theory,” 42.

identity is usually politicized, which brings many issues into everyday life, since politicizing someone's identity may lead to the dehumanization of the subjects, usually in hopes of silencing them.<sup>36</sup> The dehumanization may, as a result, create many dangerous outcomes, which could lead to physical or verbal attacks on certain groups of people, or to them losing basic human rights. It can also lead to alternations of one's identity by those subjected to dehumanization.

Moving on to the next point, there are two proposals which might come to mind when it comes to identity: either full assimilation or self-alienation. However, neither of these shall work, as Jiahong Wang touches upon the issue in his article with the following question: "Facing racial judgements and bias, if neither full-assimilation nor self-alienation works, what will?"<sup>37</sup> The basis of full-assimilation, in this case, would be to give up any trace of the parts of one's identity which are regarded as the "other" by the ethnic majority. In this way, the identity of the individual would be majorly disturbed, due to the fact that they would have to reshape who they are as a person. On the other hand, self-alienation could possibly result in what is almost a complete dissociation from the ethnic majority.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, neither of these two things would work for the individual, since it would mean that they would have to surrender to the expectations of the majority, in one way or the other.

When it comes to ethnic identity, as El Gohary points out, it is much more inclusive than racial identity. The reason behind this is that ethnic identity is based on cultural heritage and traditions, whereas racial identity is based on physical features which are distinctive in certain ways. In his essay, El Gohary

uses the psychological model of Asian American Racial Identity Development created by Jean Kim, which consists of *ethnic awareness, white identification, awakening to social political consciousness, redirection to an Asian American consciousness, and incorporation*. Then, El Gohary employs the five stages of Racial/Cultural Identity Development created by Sue, which consist of the following stages: *conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness*.<sup>39</sup> These two models are used to study the characters of Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*, and the reason why this thesis is mentioning

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<sup>36</sup> Burney, "Said and Postcolonial Theory," 42.

<sup>37</sup> Jiahong Wang, "Between Realism and Genre Fiction: American Born Chinese and Strange Fruit." *The Midwest Quarterly* 58, Issue 2 (Winter, 2017), 223.

<sup>38</sup> Wang, "Realism and Genre Fiction," 223.

<sup>39</sup> El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse," 175-176.

them is because it will use them at one point to support the research that will be done in the next section.

To sum up, the postcolonial theory focuses on identity, on the things out of which identity is constructed, and on the representation of the Other in the Western hegemonical view. It concentrates on the marginalised peoples (the marginalization coming from either race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) and the way they are, even to this day, subjected to prejudice and violence.



## Results

The following part of the thesis will focus on applying the sources we have already presented on the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. Since the author has already been introduced, this section shall start with a brief introduction of the three main characters of the graphic novel. Then, it will move on to discuss the alternations that have been done in comparison with the ancient fable, study of the prejudice with which is Jin Wang faced, and naming out the parallels between the two storylines, showing how ancient mythology can be used in contemporary literature. It will focus on the study of the characters' identities, primarily focusing on them being perceived as the "Other," the ambivalence, the syndrome of 'mimicry,' politics of Location, neurosis, and violence, and hybridity.

### Who is Jin Wang?

Jin Wang is the main protagonist of the graphic novel. He is an American boy who was born to Chinese immigrants, and for the first part of his life, he lives in San Francisco's Chinatown, where he is unaware of any racial prejudice. The only thing he cares about is playing with his friends, with whom he shares love for transformers.

In the beginning, we see a flashback from when he had gone to an herbalist with his mother. As he is waiting, the herbalist's wife initiates a conversation with him. Jin reveals he would like to be a transformer in the future, which he immediately regards as silly, but the herbalist's wife tells him that: "It's easy to become anything you wish, so long as you're willing to forfeit your soul."<sup>40</sup> This statement foreshadows the future events of the novel, which will be revealed later on.

Once Jin becomes a middle schooler, he has to move from his home in San Francisco into a small neighbourhood where he is supposed to start school. This is the moment when, probably for the first time in his life—or so we are shown—he faces racism, because his classmates, who are predominantly white children, perceive him as someone completely different, as someone who is part of the "Other." Even worse, he is not only facing racism from his classmates but also from his uneducated and prejudiced teachers. There is only one difference between them, which is the following: the teachers do not seem to be aware of their racism, whereas some of the children *know* their words are going to hurt young Jin, and yet they direct them against him.

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<sup>40</sup> Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: First Second, 2006), 29.

## **Who is the Monkey King?**

The Monkey King, whose name is Sun WuKong, is a very crucial character whose origin goes back to an ancient Chinese myth centred around him. He is the ruler of the Flower-Fruit Mountain, where he rules over his beloved monkeys. Unlike the rest of the monkeys, though, he is a deity; he has mastered the arts of kung-fu and the four major heavenly disciplines, which are the prerequisites to immortality.

Personality-wise, Yang's Monkey King differs from the Monkey King in the myth. In the graphic novel, he is at first portrayed as a kind ruler, but once the gods deny his presence at a dinner party (to which he hadn't been invited in the first place), he grows cold. He massacres the other deities and promises himself that he would become the strongest one out of them all. From this point forward, we watch him as he tries to change himself completely, slowly losing himself in the process, and trying to deny his monkey identity.

## **Who is Danny?**

Danny is the third character, and he is everything older Jin wishes to be: a popular white boy who has no problem with making friends and asking girls he likes out on dates (even though it does not work out for him every single time). The only thing that is strange about him at first is the fact that he changes schools every single year, and the reason behind this is his cousin, Chin-Kee, who comes over to his house for annual visits all the way from China.

Danny despises Chin-Kee, and many times, he states he does not know how it is possible for them to be related. He makes sure to tell everyone that he is not like him, but Chin-Kee comes into his life, visits the school he is attending at the moment, and then he ruins Danny's reputation, leaving the boy too embarrassed to continue, which is the reason that leads him to change schools. At one point in the book, however, the stories of Jin and Danny overlap, and we can see that Danny is, in reality, Jin. He is the idealised, whitewashed version of what Jin yearns to be, and he is completely willing to drop everything to become as dissociated from his ethnicity as possible.

It is portrayed that he cannot truly run away from who he is, though, and this reality is highlighted when Chin-Kee reveals himself to be the Monkey King himself. At this point of the novel, we have already got to see the Monkey King go through rejecting whom he was, trying to rebuild himself, and finally accepting himself. He explains that through Chin-Kee, he was meaning to show Jin that there are certain things he cannot run away from, and to "serve as

your [Jin's] conscience – as a signpost to your [Jin's] soul.”<sup>41</sup> This is also the deciding moment when Jin embarks on the journey of accepting his identity and becoming a Chinese American.

### **Alternation of the Fable**

The final author of the fable is considered to be Wu Cheng'en, who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is a story of a monkey deity, born out of a stone egg, who slowly after his birth becomes the sovereign of the Flower-Fruit Mountain, ruling over the macaques and apes, with good relations with the other animals living near as well.<sup>42</sup>

Firstly, this thesis would like to focus on the various differences between the Monkey King in the original myth and Yang's Monkey King. When it comes to the core of their personalities, the Monkey in the myth is a pure menace who wants to become one of the most powerful deities that have ever existed, and he aims to be acknowledged by heaven accordingly – at one point in the fable, he admits that he wants to sit on the throne of the Jade Emperor. He thinks of himself as invincible and is not afraid to get into various wars with the other gods, for in the beginning, he wins every single fight until he meets Erlang, who is, in a way, his “kindred spirit,” as Lai points out.<sup>43</sup> However, once Erlang defeats him and brings him to heaven, the Monkey eventually meets Buddha after a series of punishments and is imprisoned under the Five-Phases Mountain for the next hundreds of years due to his egoism.

In the graphic novel, however, the Monkey King is used to mirror Jin's journey, and so his personality is altered according to that. Compared to the fable, the Monkey King has many *human* attributes, which, as Michael A. Chaney states, is because animals in graphic novels are “more generally a ludic cipher of otherness”<sup>44</sup> and the same applies to Sun WuKong, because “[...] the Monkey King operates less as an allegorical animal than as a metaphorical minority.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, Chaney finds that the Monkey King serves as a racial signifier, and Min Hyoung Song points out that through his character, the history of racial signification is reflected

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<sup>41</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 221.

<sup>42</sup> Wu Cheng'en, *Monkey King: Journey to the West*, trans. Julia Lovell (New York: Penguin Books, 2021), chap. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Whalen Lai, “From Protean Ape to Handsome Saint: The Monkey King,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 53, No. 1 (1994), 37.

<sup>44</sup> Michael A. Chaney, “Animal Subjects of the Graphic Novel” *College Literature* 38, Issue 3 (Summer 2011), 130.

<sup>45</sup> Chaney, “Animal Subjects,” 136.

because it “blurs an exact human/non-human distinction.”<sup>46</sup> Song also adds that this may bring the reader to question why comparing a human to an ape should be perceived as a pejorative aspect, taking into account the evolutionary theory,<sup>47</sup> which teaches us that we share the lineage with apes. In short, Sun WuKong’s entire story in *American Born Chinese* is more connected to identity than anything else, whereas, in the myth, it could be said his story is connected to arrogance and to the outcome one might receive when believing they are better than everyone else.

Actually, the Monkey King does not show any interest in the other gods until he is not denied the attendance of a dinner party due to the sole fact that “you [the Monkey] may be a **king**— you [the Monkey] may even be a **deity**— but you are still a **monkey**.”<sup>48</sup> Song describes this as the moment when the Monkey King gains racial knowledge<sup>49</sup> and at this moment, the character is shown to be perceived by the other deities as subaltern due to his origin, which brings not only internal but also an external battle of the Monkey against his very being, trying to change himself and not be perceived as the “Other.”

When it comes to the shift in Sun WuKong’s perception of oneself, we could apply the ‘politics of Location,’ which has been mentioned in the methods section of the thesis. When applying the “where am I?” question to the Monkey King, in the first pages of the book, he is living happily on the Flower Fruit Mountain with those like him. However, the moment he is met with the deities in Heaven and subjected to their opinions of him, his whole perception of himself changes, and he starts to question everything he had previously not thought about, as it will be shown in the following paragraphs.

With regards to the massacre the Monkey King creates, it could be said that as the first step, he decides to reach for the violence option. However, as we can see once the Monkey King returns to the Flower-Fruit Mountain, he isolates himself in his cave, where he starts to practice the four major disciplines of invulnerability to fire, cold, drowning, and wounds; then, he moves on to the four major disciplines of the bodily form (giant form, miniature form, hair-into-clones, and shapeshift). Through this, it can be seen that even though his initial choice is *violence*, he progresses to the other alternative, which is neurosis. His main motivation

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<sup>46</sup> Min Hyung Song, ““How Good Is It to Be a Monkey”: Comics, Racial Formation, and *American Born Chinese*,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 43, No. 1 (March 2010), 87.

<sup>47</sup> Song, “Comics, Racial Formation,” 87.

<sup>48</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Song, “Comics, Racial Formation,” 87.

becomes the urge to become equal to the other deities, and he is willing to go through anything to achieve that. Through acquiring the major disciplines, he is planning on gaining immortality, which is granted to those who acquire them.

This is distinctive from the fable, where Sun WuKong wishes to obtain these powers because of the realisation of his own mortality three hundred years after ruling on the Flower-Fruit Mountain. In the myth, he travels to find a master who would be able to teach him<sup>50</sup>, whereas, in the novel, he teaches himself. This might not seem like a great change at first, however, it suggests that their motives are different and that while the fable's Monkey King searches for the master in hopes of gaining eternal power and life, Yang's Monkey King does so because he is, probably for the first time in his life, fully aware of the things which distinguish him from the others, and he does everything in his power to change it. Based on this, it can be pointed out that what he is going through is the syndrome of 'mimicry', when he is trying to recreate himself to fit the character and become as similar to the deities as possible. His sadness and inner battle are very well portrayed in the panel in Figure 1, where he is sat alone, consumed by darkness, reflecting on the night's events and thinking about how to get rid of the thick smell which reminds him of who he truly is: a monkey.



**Figure 1** The Monkey King, reflecting on the events of the night. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second Books: 2006), 20.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick H. Martens and Richard Wilhelm, "The Ape Sun Wu Kung" In *Chinese Fairy Tales and Legends* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 256–258.

As the reader can see in Figure 1, Yang uses linguistic markings of identity by making the words that are connected to it in bold.<sup>51</sup> This is present throughout the whole graphic novel, just like it was shown in the citation on the previous page when the Monkey King was faced with discrimination based on what he is.

Moving on to the external changes the Monkey King undertakes, perhaps one of the clearest ones, in the beginning, is the fact that he starts to wear shoes after the encounter with the gods. This is another difference from the myth since he had been wearing them from the very beginning. In Yang's retelling, however, he starts only once he is made fun of at the dinner party, and when it is pointed out to him that he is not wearing any shoes is the first reason used to not let him in. In addition, not only does he start to wear shoes, but he makes every single inhabitant of the Flower-Fruit Mountain wear them as well.

We could argue that the shoes have strong symbolism for the Monkey King's journey. In the beginning, he does not need them, because he is comfortable with his monkey identity. He is free of any prejudice which will be placed in his way later on. However, once he is faced with the painful words, not wearing shoes becomes a symbol of him not being good enough, of him not being worthy to be on the same level as the other deities.

Along with wearing shoes, he adjusts his physical appearance as well. Sun WuKong is a shape-shifter, and therefore, he is capable of transforming his form into anything he needs—and the moment he leaves his cave after days of training, he is a changed deity who is not only taller but also carries himself as a human more than as a monkey. Of course, there are still certain features that resemble the monkey that he truly is, but they are being suppressed. This proves the argument that the Monkey King has chosen to take the path of *neurosis* and that he is fully assimilating himself to fit inside the box which would be preferable in front of the other deities, and which would make them see him as an equal.

The Monkey King's ability to transform himself foreshadows the events of Jin's story as well, because, as Song writes, "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."<sup>52</sup> The whole novel is interwoven with the act of physical transformation, even though at first, the reader might believe that the Monkey

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<sup>51</sup> Jacob Stratman, "'How good is it to be a monkey?': Conversion and spiritual formation in Gene Luen Yang's *American Born Chinese*." *Christianity and Literature* 65, No. 4 (September 2016), 495.

<sup>52</sup> Song, "Comics, Racial Formation," 83.

King is the only one capable of such a thing, considering his part of the story is the genre fiction.<sup>53</sup> As it will be revealed later, though, Jin will also go through both mental and physical transformation.

Another aspect which is important to take into consideration when reading Yang's graphic novel is that, as Stratman states, the Monkey King's journey in *American Born Chinese* is a Christian retelling of the original myth<sup>54</sup>, which also causes significant differences from the source material Yang had used.

Firstly, Buddha, who is considered by many Christians to be a pagan god, is replaced by Tze-Yo-Tzuh, whose name translates into "He Who Is," and he symbolises the Christian God.<sup>55</sup> Both Tze-Yo-Tzuh and Buddha share the same main feature, though, and that is that they are both omnipresent and that they come into the picture only when the other deities are not able to deal with the Monkey King due to his newly acquired strength and possibilities. Because just like the Monkey King in the fable causes havoc among the gods due to his nature, Yang's Monkey King causes havoc due to his mistreatment – both of them are, however, still trying to prove the point of being worthy to be perceived by the other gods as equal.

When handling the situation, Tze-Yo-Tzuh operates against Sun WuKong the same way Buddha had<sup>56</sup> – since both of them represent the universe, they prove to the Monkey King that he is always within the reach of their hand, and while Tze-Yo-Tzuh tries to show the Monkey King that he is the one who created him and that he does not make mistakes with his creations, he still imprisons him under the mountain of rock, where he has to await the arrival of his saviour for five hundred years.

### **The Prejudice Jin Faces**

As has already been stated in the *Who is Jin Wang?* section, Jin struggles from the very first moment he enters middle school because of the hateful, racist comments and actions directed towards him.

The mispronunciation of his name on the first day of school begins when the teacher introduces him as a boy who came from China, lacking or completely disregarding the fact that he might have been born in the USA and having to be corrected by little Jin. What is more, he is

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<sup>53</sup> Wang, "Realism and Genre Fiction," 221.

<sup>54</sup> Stratman, "Conversion and spiritual formation," 494.

<sup>55</sup> Stratman, "Conversion and spiritual formation," 497.

<sup>56</sup> Martens and Wilhelm, "The Ape Sun Wu Kung," 278.

immediately subjected to one of the most widely spread stereotypes, which is the question of eating dogs – one of his classmates, Timmy, who will be one of his future bullies for the majority of the novel, comments that he has the knowledge that “Chinese people eat dogs.”<sup>57</sup> This is something which is carried throughout all the encounters with the boy since he makes remarks such as “stay away from my dog”<sup>58</sup> or “[...] let’s leave bucktooth alone so he can enjoy **Lassie**”<sup>59</sup> when Jin is eating during the lunch break. Not only that, but the teacher’s reaction shows her ignorance because even though she—in a way—stands up for Jin, it is made clear that she also possesses the same ideas as Timmy does.

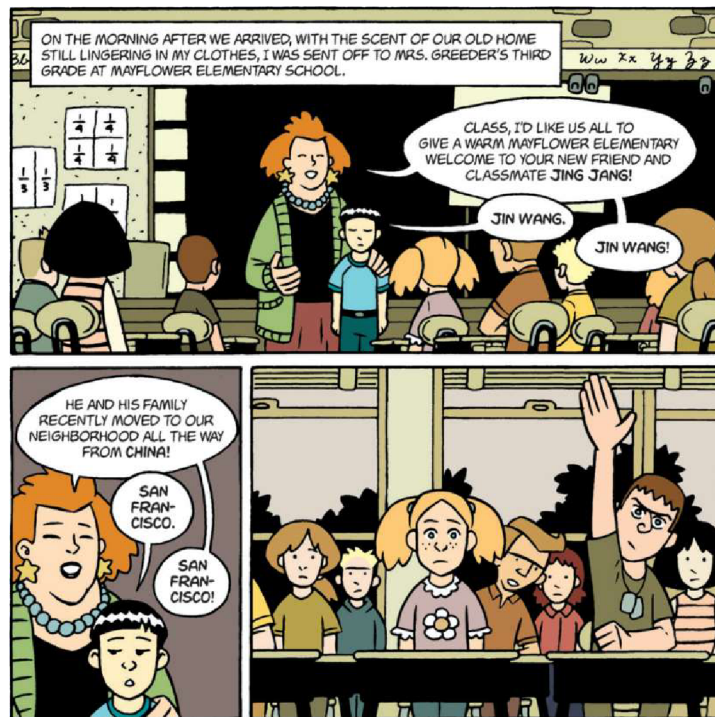


Figure 2 Jin being presented to his new classmates. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second Books: 2006), 30.

<sup>57</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 32.

<sup>59</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 33.



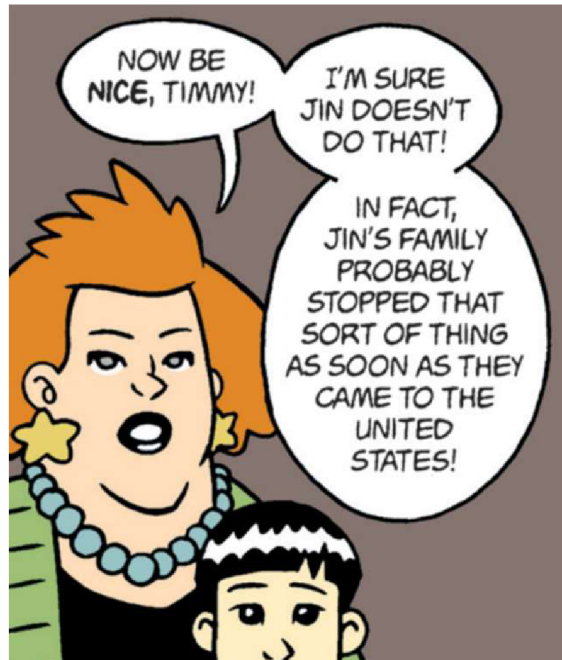


Figure 3 Jin's teacher reveals her racism. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second Books: 2006), 31.

Since the majority of his classmates are white, he has trouble making friends due to the prejudice held against him. There is only one more Asian girl in the class, but they both make sure to stay as far away from one another as possible, to minimize the rumours which are created about them (rumours about them being related only because they are Asian, even though she, Suzy Nakamura, is Japanese; or the rumour about them having an arranged marriage, another example of how stereotypes are ruling the classroom). The first, and for a long time the only, friend that he makes is a school bully who steals his food and throws him around while they play, however, due to the fact that there is no one else willing to befriend young Jin, he settles with the bully.

As the story slowly progresses, all of these aspects of Jin's daily life bring him to create a split, hybrid identity, which starts to take shape once Wei Chen, a new classmate from Taiwan, joins his school. Jin's experience from his first day is copied to Wei Chen as well when his name is mispronounced, and he is said to have come from China, even though he is Taiwanese. Jin's reaction to his new classmate is "Something made me want to beat him up."<sup>60</sup> This part shows the internalised racism that has accumulated inside Jin, and it is reflected in the way he treats Wei Chen.

<sup>60</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 36.

However, when it comes to Wei Chen, he does not have the experience Jin does, and so he immediately gravitates towards the other boy. Assuming Jin is comfortable with his identity the way Wei Chen is, he initiates a conversation in Chinese, which is met with Jin's "You're in **America**. Speak **English**."<sup>61</sup> It can be seen that Jin has acquired a certain amount of White mannerism, which is mentioned by El Gohary as well with regards to the Monkey King, and he refuses to speak the other language.<sup>62</sup> At this point, he has assimilated to his other classmates, and he started to pick up certain behavioural tendencies.

There comes a moment, though, when Wei Chen brings out his transformer, the Robot Monkey, which indicates Monkey King's presence in Jin's story, even though at first the reader might suppose it is only symbolic, and this is what brings Jin to automatically switch to Chinese. It can be read that the toy is also a foreshadowing device, which sets the ground for the great revelation in the end when the reader finds that Wei Chen is Sun WuKong's son, or it could be read as the upcoming transformation of Jin.

From what has been described so far, we can see that the relationship Jin has with his surroundings is ambivalent. Due to the bullying, he does not particularly like his classmates, but he also wishes to be like them and to be associated with them, as we can see from his lie when he tries to make Wei Chen believe that he is, in fact, friends with Timmy and two other boys from his class. From this point of view, it could be read that he believes that if he is seen as their friend, he would be perceived as superior to the other boy.

In fact, if we compare the two characters, Wei Chen is the one who is comfortable in his identity for the majority of the graphic novel. It is not indicated that he would try to alter parts of his identity because of the racism he faces, even though it is used against him the same way it is used against Jin or Suzy. On the other hand, when it comes to Jin, he struggles to maneuver between his ethnic identity and his arising wish to become just like the rest of his white classmates. There are many instances when Jin tries to navigate and regulate certain sides of Wei Chen, which is shown during the moments when he calls him an "F.O.B.", which means "fresh off the boat."<sup>63</sup>

The breaking point arises slowly after Jin develops a crush on one of his classmates, Amelia. With romantic feelings which take hold of him, he is shown to become even more aware of

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<sup>61</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse," 176.

<sup>63</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 89.

the differences between him and his other classmates. To this, the reader sees the character that gets deeper into the process of *neurosis*, when Jin imitates his classmate's hairstyle to seem less "Other." What leads him to this is the shame, which is portrayed on page 96, when he, Suzy, and Wei Chen are made fun of by having their accents mocked, as is shown in Figure 4.

The character gets what he wishes for, and goes on a date with Amelia, however, a character named Greg approaches Jin to ask him to stop seeing Amelia, because: "It's just that she's a good friend and I want to make sure she makes good choices, you know? We're almost in high school. She has to start paying attention to who she hangs out with."<sup>64</sup> This is the deciding factor, which sets Jin on a track where he becomes obsessed with the wish to be white, even though it is revealed to the reader that Greg's remark was not directed to Jin's race or ethnicity, but because: "He's a nice guy, but he's kind of a **geek**. I mean, what's with the **hair** [which Jin copied from Greg himself]?"<sup>65</sup> However, from watching the character experience numerous remarks on his identity, it is clear why Jin would have not caught on to that. The belief that the proposal was made due to racial prejudice is strong, and that is the reason for sabotaging his friendship with Wei Chen, by doing the same thing Greg had done to him, which is telling him "Maybe I just don't think you're **right** for her, all right? Maybe I don't think you're **worthy** of her. Maybe I think she can do **better** than an **F.O.B.** like **YOU**."<sup>66</sup> After kissing Suzy Nakamura, even though in Greg's statement, this meaning was only implied and later disproved, however, in this case, it is explicit.

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<sup>64</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 179.

<sup>65</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 184.

<sup>66</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 191.

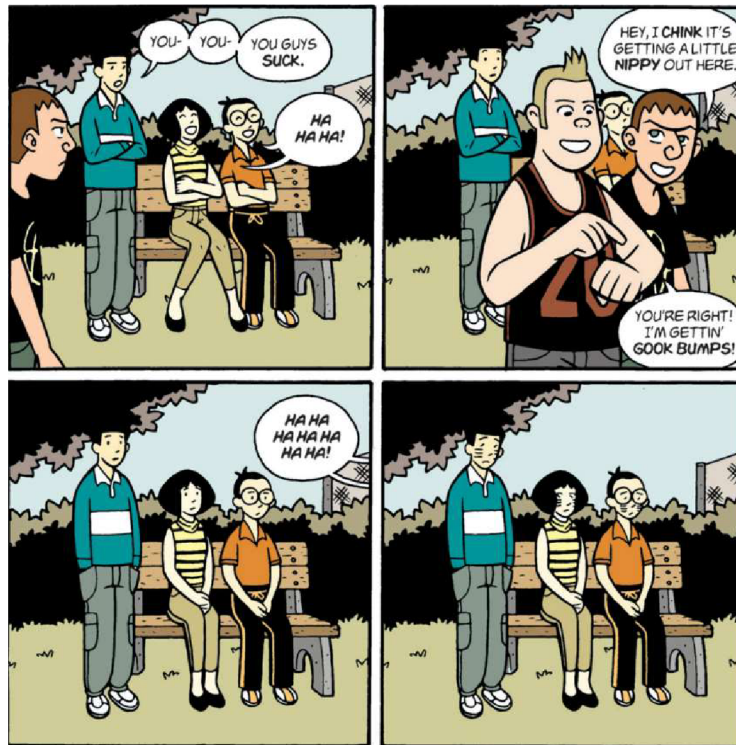


Figure 4 Jin, Suzy, and Wei Chen get their accents mocked by racist classmates. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second Books: 2006), 96.

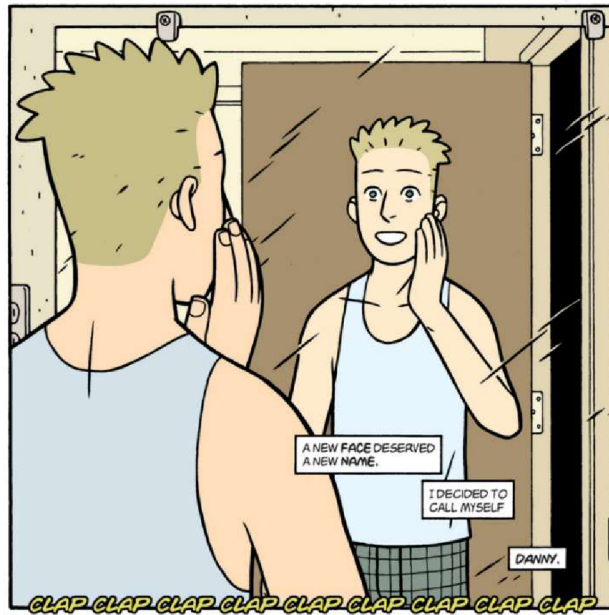
It could be argued that of Jin's loss of Wei Chen's and Suzy's friendship, there is nothing holding him back from fully assimilating into the rest of his classmates and completing his *neurosis* process. This thesis has highlighted the parts where transformers took part so far, be it the very beginning or the moment when his friendship with Wei Chen started to bloom, and that is exactly what happens to him. Through Jin's process of neurosis, he transforms himself from a Chinese American boy to a white boy, whom he names Danny, as it is shown in Figures 4 and 5.



Figure 5 Jin's transformation to Danny. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second Books: 2006), 194.

As it is shown, the author is connecting the beginning of the graphic novel to the moment of the transformation, highlighting the foreshadowing which had been done. There are also *click-clack* sounds represented, which connect the story of Jin to the sitcom-like story of Danny, which consists of Chin-Kee, the character who makes the sound regularly. This is carried throughout the following panels to the one where the boy looks into the mirror on his transformed form, which is accompanied by the depiction of clapping. This moment carries a great tension, and as Sarigianides points out, it is so because it portrays Jin's loss of cultural identity, because this is the only way in which he believes it would be possible for him to gain any sort of cultural relevance or social respect.<sup>67</sup> The clapping interlinks the two storylines since Danny's is accompanied by the clapping noise every moment of revelation or supposed joke.

<sup>67</sup> Sophia Tatiana Sarigianides, "Coerced Loss and Ambivalent Preservation": Racial Melancholia in *American Born Chinese*," *Educational Theory* 67, Issue 1 (February 2017), 45.



*Figure 6* Jin's story becomes connected with Danny's. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second Books: 2006), 198.

The next Figure shows Greg, and the reader can see that there are certain similarities between him and Danny, which suggests that Greg is the main example of how Jin longed to look like, which might have been because of the fact that he was the only one who stood up for him the first time he was bullied by Timmy.



*Figure 7* Greg, the boy who pushes Jin to finish his transformation. Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (First Second Books: 2006), 33.

### **The Parallels Between Jin's and Sun WuKong's Journeys**

The journey of Sun WuKong and Jin Wang has already been partially laid out to the reader, and now the paper will move on to describing the parallels between the two main characters of the novel and connecting them together, to reach the main aim of this thesis, which is the study of how mythology can be used in contemporary literature while applying the theoretical framework on both of the characters.

What is important to say at first is that the Monkey King's story is classified as the genre fiction part of the graphic novel, whereas Jin's story is on the side of realism, which, as Song points out, makes the two stories twin poles.<sup>68</sup>

This thesis has applied the politics of 'Location' to the Monkey King, and the same thing can be done to Jin Wang as well. Similarly to the Monkey King, Jin's identity is at first structured in San Francisco's Chinatown. There, he is living with those who are just like him, and his existence is not questioned nor mocked. However, the moment he has to transform schools and he comes into contact with his predominantly white classmates and teachers, it becomes to shape him into another person, one who is ashamed of his ethnicity and tries to alter his identity to mirror theirs.

Therefore, the dinner party could be said to be parallel to Jin's first day at his new school. This is the starting point of both of their journeys since they begin to dissociate themselves from their identities with the goal of not being perceived as the "Other," which is why the Monkey King starts his training and Jin Wang avoids his other Asian classmate, Suzy, and rather befriends the bully. El Gohary suggests that the dinner party has awoken in the Monkey King "an inferiority complex," which makes him want to "annihilate his identity as a monkey," and leads him to "adopt a White identity."<sup>69</sup> The same thing can be applied to Jin as well.

Moving on, both of the characters start to imitate the actions of the White majority (in the Monkey King's case, the metaphorical White majority), until they completely reshape themselves and *transform* into different beings.

At this stage, the next parallel this thesis wants to showcase is the Monkey King being confronted by Tze-Yo-Tzuh with regard to his identity. El Gohary, who applies Sue's five stages of Racial/Cultural Identity Development model to the character, describes the Monkey King's interaction with Tze-Yo-Tzuh and being buried under the Mountain for five hundred years as the "dissonance" stage, which leads him to the "introspection" stage.<sup>70</sup> This could be paralleled to Jin having the definite fall-out with Wei Chen and transforming into Danny, which

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<sup>68</sup> Song, "Comics, Racial Formation," 76.

<sup>69</sup> El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse," 182.

<sup>70</sup> El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse," 183-194.



then leads him to eventually meet Chin-Kee—the Monkey King in disguise—who brings him to the “introspection stage.”

It is important to describe the things which Chin-Kee represents as well, to show how the Monkey King’s guise as him was supposed to serve as Jin’s conscience.<sup>71</sup> As Wang points out, Yang’s research for Chin-Kee was built out of going through old political cartoons, so that he was obviously a racist portrayal of the Chinese people, and as Song says, Chin-Kee is an embodiment of the nineteenth and twentieth century racial assumptions about Asian Americans.<sup>72</sup> However, as Yang himself comments on the character, he wishes he could have made him even more plainly racist because some of his readers have missed out on his purpose and even consider him to be “cute.” Chin-Kee is supposed to bring out outrageous emotions. In regard to him, Yang states that this reaction would have been more difficult to reach if he had to only use words, and so he used the pictures to carry that message.<sup>73</sup> It is important to keep this in mind when reading the third part of the graphic novel because, by the incorrect reading of the character, the readers disregard the motive he carries.

Once the two characters reveal their true forms to one another—the Monkey King shows that Chin-Kee was him in disguise, Jin transforms himself from Danny back to himself—it is revealed that the annual visits were meant to set Jin on his journey of self-acceptance, starting with him trying to speak Chinese again when looking for his former friend, Wei Chen, or by directly showing the reader his parents.<sup>74</sup> In this way, Jin finishes the same cycle the Monkey King had gone through.

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<sup>71</sup> Yang, *American Born Chinese*, 221.

<sup>72</sup> Wang, “Realism and Genre Fiction,” 227; Song, “Comics, Racial Formation,” 81.

<sup>73</sup> Gene Luen Yang, “American Born Chinese.” Reading Rockets, November 21, 2017, Yang talking about his graphic novel, 1:29-2:51. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoR2JxiM3gg>

<sup>74</sup> El Gohary, “Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse,” 192.



## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to study how ancient mythology can be used in contemporary literature to showcase how, even to this day, it can still be relevant in the present time. To show this, the thesis has used the graphic novel written by Gene Luen Yang, which is named *American Born Chinese*, and the fable of the legendary Sun WuKong—the Monkey King—which is used in the graphic novel, while using the postcolonial theory to study how its characters reacted to the discrimination they have faced. The thesis has also laid out the differences between the original fable and the altered version, which was created by Yang since it was a Christian retelling. The way the story was retold was based on the author's own Christian beliefs, and he merged "Chinese and Christian beliefs to highlight the very composition of a balanced Asian American identity."<sup>75</sup> The Chinese beliefs were, in this case, represented by Sun WuKong, and the Christian beliefs were represented by Tze-Yo-Tzuh, who replaced Buddha, who had been part of the original story.

Jin Wang's and the Monkey King's characters are twin poles, as Song has pointed out, and while Jin's is a work of realism, the Monkey King's is a work of genre fiction.<sup>76</sup> Both take the reader on the journey of self-exploration and of changing their identity to fit into their predominantly white surroundings (in the Monkey King's case, the "white surroundings" are metaphorical, represented by the other deities who are discriminating against him for being a monkey). In this way, the Monkey King functions as a racial signifier<sup>77</sup>, and his motives for change are altered from those of wanting power to those of wanting to become equal to the other deities by fully assimilating to their ways of life.

This thesis has written out the key information about postcolonial theory in its first part, and out of that, it built on the ideas of the theorist Bhabha, namely on the issues of ambivalence, syndrome of 'mimicry', and politics of Location, which was also studied by Northon Frye, who positioned the question of "where am I?" above the question of "who am I?" The reason behind that is the fact that the location is related to culture, but also other social factors, and therefore it is an important aspect of one's formation of identity.<sup>78</sup> Ambivalence, the syndrome of 'mimicry,' and politics of Location were applied to the characters of Jin Wang and Sun WuKong as well, along with the notions of *neurosis* and *violence*, which are two possible

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<sup>75</sup> El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse," 184.

<sup>76</sup> Song, "Comics, Racial Formation," 76.

<sup>77</sup> Chaney, "Animal Subjects," 139.

<sup>78</sup> Burney, "Said and Postcolonial Theory," 43.

reactions of those who were subjected to long-lasting discrimination.<sup>79</sup> Then, the thesis used El Gohary's research which used the psychological models created by Jean Kim (Asian American Racial Identity Development), and by Sue (Racial/Cultural Identity Development).<sup>80</sup> It touched upon the issues only briefly in a way which was needed for this thesis to support certain statements, considering that El Gohary has already dived into a deeper study of how the characters fit into these models.

The thesis also made sure to point out the most important moments of the graphic novel when the characters faced any kind of prejudice, to then show how these moments made their stories parallel and how they influenced them until they reached the point where both Jin Wang and Sun WuKong met, which sent Jin on the journey of introspection and the start of self-acceptance.

The purpose of this research was to prove that the usage of the myth would be beneficial to the overall story because it would create a new perspective in which it was possible to perceive the struggles of the characters. This is also supported by the secondary literature that has been used in the thesis, and it has built on the previous findings of the academics to contribute to the research by applying terminology which had not been used before. The research has not indicated any new path for future research, however, it has supported and added to the information that has already been established. This thesis has only focused on the main characters, though, so it could be beneficial to go deeper into the story of some of the side characters, like Wei Chen, who were also very crucial to the story.

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<sup>79</sup> El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse," 179.

<sup>80</sup> El Gohary, "Identity and Post-Colonial Discourse," 175-176.

## Conclusion

This section will conclude the research that has been done by outlining the findings of the studied subject, and it will touch upon the limitations of the study in question, which will direct the reader toward the opportunities for future research.

Firstly, it is important to briefly summarise the study's aim. This bachelor thesis has used the postcolonial theory as the key theory for the study of identity in *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang. I specifically focused on the concepts of ambivalence, the syndrome of 'mimicry,' and hybridity presented by Bhabha, and it also incorporated the politics of Location, neurosis, and violence into the research.

The work focused on the storylines of Jin Wang and the Monkey King, which are parallel to one another, and to prove this parallelism, I first applied the key concepts of the thesis to the Monkey King. Then, I applied these concepts to Jin Wang's storyline, in which way I also showed how their stories are almost the exact same when it comes to their struggles with identity, caused by the prejudice which is coming from their predominantly white surroundings (when it comes to the Monkey King, the white surroundings are represented by the deities, which take any shape or form, however, they discriminate against him because they consider him to be nothing more than a monkey; when it comes to Jin, the white surroundings are no longer metaphorical – he is subjected to racism from his white classmates). This led to the last part of the thesis, where I wrote down the main parallel moments which were the deciding factors for both characters to start their process of transformation.

Through this research, the thesis came to results that suggest that the notion of ambivalence was present on both sides because Jin and the Monkey King had a certain amount of admiration for their suppressors along with the negative feelings that had been portrayed towards them. This complicated relationship set them on a journey of struggle connected to their identity, and they developed the syndrome of 'mimicry,' or neurosis, which means that they started to imitate the negative behaviour (despite the fact that the Monkey King's initial choice was violence). In addition, it has also been shown that the politics of Location have played a great role in the identity struggle as well. There are two important parts of the stories of Jin Wang and the Monkey King. The first part is when both of them lived surrounded by the same people (in the Monkey King's case, creatures) as them, and therefore there was no place for any kind of racially encoded prejudice. The second part is the one where they were introduced to new surroundings, and how they were treated in those new surroundings – the

Monkey King got belittled by the other deities for in their eyes, he was not worthy of joining the dinner party, and Jin had to face racism from the very first day of school.

The results of the paper have supported the research that has already been done by adding a little bit more information by studying the graphic novel through the lens of different parts of postcolonial theory. The terms which have been applied to the characters have, to my knowledge, not been widely used in previous research, with the exception of *neurosis* and *violence*. However, there are various limitations to the research—it has focused on the struggles the two main characters have faced, but it has not dived into the side characters, which could also provide interesting data for future research.

To conclude, the thesis has come to the conclusion that mythology can be a great tool when portraying difficult subjects in media. It has shown how even an altered fable can function well in contemporary literature, and how it can portray the problem from a different perspective. Through using the fable, Yang brought the journey of struggle and acceptance of one's identity into a new light, which made the novel relatable not only to racially or ethnically different readers but also to those who are part of different marginalised groups.

## Resumé

Tato bakalářská práce se zabývá využitím mytologie v moderní literatuře s hlavním zaměřením na to, jakým způsobem je využit mýtus legendárního Sun WuKonga v grafickém románu Gene Luen Yanga, a jak skrze daný mýtus formátuje pozici etnicky odlišné postavy. Toto téma je zkoumáno skrze postkoloniální teorii, která se zabývá studiem toho, jaké jsou přetrvávající následky koloniální okupace.

Vzhledem k tomu, že zvolené dílo, *Američan čínského původu*, je žánrově grafický román, se v první části bakalářské práce nejprve zaměřuji na tento žánr, uvádím rozdíly mezi pojmy jako jsou komiks a grafický román, udávám krátkou historii komiksů, a poukazuji na komplexnost tohoto žánru, která je v dnešní době vnímána mnohem pozitivněji než v minulosti, kdy nebyly grafické romány vnímány jako plnohodnotná díla literatury.

Po vysvětlení klíčových informací spojených s tímto žánrem bakalářská práce přibližuje teoretické směřování postkoloniální teorie, přičemž klade důraz na následující pojmy, jako jsou ambivalence, hybridita, neuróza či násilí. Ambivalence je pojem, který byl poprvé zaveden Homi K. Bhabhem. Jedná se o koncept, který poukazuje na komplikovaný vztah vybudovaný mezi kolonizátorem a kolonizovaným, neboť tyto dvě strany k sobě cítí nejen nenávisť, ale zároveň i zvláštní formu „lásky“, které je opětována. Právě toto je uváděno jako důvod, proč často dochází k tomu, že kolonizovaný se snažil po nabytí svobody napodobovat negativní chování svých utlačovatelů, protože k nim pociťovali určitou dávku obdivu. Toto chování se označuje jako tzv. syndrom napodobování, který je vyvolán důvěrou v to, že chování utlačovatele je celkově nadřazeno k čemukoli jinému. Odlišný způsob, jak dané chování můžeme označit, je neuróza, která poukazuje na to, jak se kolonizovaný pokouší co nejvíce přiblížit chování kolonizátora. Násilí je protipólem neurózy, a kolonizovaný jej využívá k tomu, aby se osvobodil od svého utlačovatele.

Další faktor, který je v tomto ohledu důležitý, je hybridita, která vzniká, když se formuje identita kolonizovaného na základě toho, že se spojí a smíchají dohromady kultury kolonizovaného a kolonizátora. V dnešní době je možné upozorovat hybriditu například při migraci, a je příčinou toho, proč dochází k diverzifikaci různých aspektů našeho každodenního života, ať se jedná o umění, politiku, edukační systém atp. Hybridita navazuje na další myšlenkový aspekt postkoloniální teorie, který tvrdí, že lokalita, kde se člověk nachází, přímo ovlivňuje to, kým jsme, a tedy udává směr, kterým se bude jeho identita formovat.

V druhé části práce je teorie aplikována v praxi, a pojmy, které byly objasněny, používá ke studiu toho, jakým způsobem reagují hlavní postavy Ťin Wang a Sun WuKong na diskriminaci. Tímto způsobem reaguje na centrální otázky výzkumu, které se soustředí na to, jakým může být čtenáři přiblížena situace postav skrze mytologické postavy, které jsou čtenáři již (většinou) známy. Rovněž se zabývá tím, jak jsou tyto postavy zasazeny do dnešního světa a jak zobrazují novodobé problémy v co nejjasnějším světle, a zkoumá paralelní situace, ve kterých se postavy nacházejí. Tímto tématem se již zabývalo několik akademiků, jejichž díla byla zmíněna či využita v této práci, a hlavním cílem bylo dodat informace a podpořit výzkum s tím, aby práce přidala i nový pohled na věc pomocí toho, že použila termíny, které jsou součástí postkoloniální teorie, ale které nebyly dříve do takové míry aplikovány.

Výsledky, kterých tato bakalářská práce dosáhla, podporují výzkum, který byl dosud veden. Když se aplikovala ambivalence na obě postavy, bylo jasně vykresleno, že jejich utlačovatelé (v Sun WuKongově případě ostatní božstva, v Ťinově případě jeho spolužáci, kteří ho šikanovali) vyvolávali v obou pocity, které tato teorie popisuje, a tedy i nenávisť, i obdiv. Toto vedlo k vytvoření hybridních identit, které postupně přerostly do syndromu napodobování a neurózy. V obou případech se ukázalo, že jejich lokalita hrála ve formování tohoto přístupu velkou roli. Sun WuKong neměl problémy se svou identitou během času stráveného s jeho milovanými poddanými až do doby, než byl zesměšněn ostatními božstvy za své odlišnosti, kvůli kterým ho označili za méněcenného, což ho vedlo na cestu ambivalence a neurózy. Stejně jako on, ani Ťin Wang neprojevoval žádnou nespokojenost se svou identitou během života v San Franciském Chinatownu až do bodu, kdy nastoupil na novou základní školu, ve které byly převážně bílé děti, které jej okamžitě zahruly rasistickými poznámkami. Ke konci však dosáhli momentu introspekce, a započali cestu k akceptování sebe samých.

V konečném důsledku tato práce dosáhla cíle, který si stanovila, což bylo prokázání faktu, že využití antické mytologie v moderní literatuře je dobrý nástroj k vykreslování složitých společenských problémů v moderních médiích. Mýtus Sun WuKonga byl sice pozměněn a ovlivněn autorovým křesťanským vyznáním, ale i přes tento fakt nabídl čtenáři pohled na danou problematiku z jiné perspektivy.

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