



Representation and the Need for Asian American Graphic Novels in Today's Classrooms

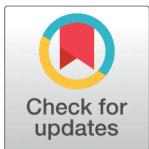
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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I am Associate Professor of Literacy and Program Director of Literacy, ESL, and Instructional Technology at Lewis University outside of Chicago, IL. Fueled by my interests in issues of equity, race, and literacy—and the intersections of these three areas—my ultimate goal is to help prepare literacy educators that are reflective of/work to act upon issues of equity and justice in their classrooms. A former high school English teacher and literacy coach in Chicago Public Schools, I also currently serve as the president of my local school board. When not bingeing YA literature or Korean dramas, I am also a spouse who avoids cooking (thankfully married to an engineer who does like cooking), an ultrarunner, and mother to two children that have taken to trolling her regularly (the long distance running and trolling children may be related...maybe). A 1.5 generation Korean American, she also happens to share the same name as the leader of North Korea so gets to hear her name regularly mispronounced on national media.



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INTRODUCTION

The 2020-2021 year has brought forth the #StopAsianHate movement as people of Asian descent have been taunted, ridiculed, and even assaulted—with over 9000 incidents reported (Stop AAPI Hate, 2021). While some will point to the racially-charged comments of the 45th President of the United States as the catalyst, these sentiments and feelings have been just under the surface of our society for a long time. It is a culmination of decades of the erasure of Asian Americans from our history books and classrooms, as well



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as the prolonged stereotyping of Asian Americans as “model minorities” and “perpetual foreigners”; in other words, it has been easy to see Asian Americans as less than human and as open for critique or even assault because we are not “real.” Because the impact of American empire and colonialism, the transnational forces that have shaped and continue to shape Asian immigration, and the long history of Asians on this continent—and their many contributions—have been erased, it is easier to see Asian Americans as foreigners, invaders, and unwanted.

THE RESEARCH

This article brings together two seemingly divergent areas of my work: 1) my forthcoming book with Dr. Betina Hsieh ([Kim and Hsieh](#), in press), on the experiences of Asian American teachers in the classroom and 2) my previous books on teaching with graphic novels ([Boerman-Cornell & Kim, 2020](#); [Boerman-Cornell et al., 2017](#)). In this article I argue for the incorporation of Asian American graphic novels into social studies classrooms to address the erasure and marginalization of Asian Americans in the curriculum and bring their stories, struggles, and contributions into classrooms.

My forthcoming book on Asian American teachers is based on a qualitative study that draws upon several dozen interviews with Asian American teachers across the country about their experiences in pK-12 classrooms, both as teachers and students. We draw upon the seven tenets of an AsianCrit framework as defined by Iftikar and Museus (2018)—Asianization; transnational contexts; (re)constructive history; strategic (anti)essentialism; intersectionality; commitment to social justice; and story, theory, and praxis—to analyze and understand how teachers’ Asian American identities have shaped and continue to shape their experiences both in and out of the classroom.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

One of the strongest themes that emerged from this work was how deeply many Asian American teachers felt impacted by not seeing themselves in classrooms, not in front of the classroom nor in the curriculum they studied. There is not only a disproportionate scarcity of Asian American teachers in this country, but their absence from history textbooks further obscures the many ways Asian Americans have been part of the fabric of this country for centuries. This kind of erasure allows the stereotypical media images that are perpetuated in our society to continue unchecked. The inclusion of more Asian American history would begin the process of breaking down this cycle.

One notable exception to this general exclusion of Asian Americans is their growing appearance in children’s and young adult literature, especially graphic novels. While not Graphic novels are book-length works of fiction or non-fiction that use the conventions of a comic book to tell a story or convey information. They harness the multimodal power and synergy of words and pictures combined to create enhanced meaning for readers. There has been a virtual explosion of graphic novels in the last two decades and an accompanying



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respect for their power. As a result, they are finally becoming more accepted in mainstream classrooms and curriculum as teachers recognize the power they have for their students—not just for struggling readers and English language learners as sometimes assumed, but for all readers.

My two books on teaching with graphic novels addresses the power of graphic novels to teach for disciplinary literacy and for English Language Arts. Most germane to the readers of this journal is the power of graphic novels to expand upon and develop historical literacy practices including contextualization, corroboration, sourcing, and historical agency. Disciplinary literacy is built upon the idea that students can begin acquiring the ways of knowing, habits of mind, and habits of practice of various disciplines. A few scholars (Boerman-Cornell, 2015; Park, 2016) have even investigated how this emerges in research with graphic novels and student learning in social studies. To further assist educators in incorporating graphic novel teaching, we formulated a framework (GRAPHIC) for teaching disciplinary literacy with graphic novels:

Goals that graphic novels can help readers meet.

Resources that can help meet those goals.

Approaches that can focus learning (for example: disciplinary thinking and practices, inquiry strategies, and so on).

Picture/text Hybridity: ways that images and text intersect and inform each other.

Inquiry: tasks and strategies that support student inquiry, comprehension, and understanding.

Critical Response: What are the opportunities students have to critically interrogate the text and its ideas?

The GRAPHIC Framework is a recursive process rather than a linear set of steps to follow in order. *Graphic Novels in High School and Middle School Classrooms: A Disciplinary Literacies Approach* is built, chapter by chapter, around each aspect of this framework with examples and resources throughout.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

While *Using Graphic Novels in the English Language Arts Classroom* is geared for English Language Arts teachers, we do address—in both books—examples of Asian American graphic novels that could be used to teach a variety of concepts, from characterization to contextualization. Some of the featured texts are *The Best We Could Do* (Bui, 2017), *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), and *Boxers and Saints* (Yang, 2013). Part memoir and part historical ethnography, Thi Bui's *The Best We Could Do* would be a challenging but powerful text for high school students. The book interweaves the personal story of Thi Bui over time, as well as her explorations into the experiences of her parents both in Vietnam before the war and in coming to America as refugees.

The Best We Could Do provides a context for the history of colonization and empire that existed in Vietnam, the actual individuals caught up in the conflicts in that country, and the very real long-term consequences this had for people. The text illustrates the trauma people



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endured through these times and humanizes a group that is sometimes seen as the nameless, faceless enemy or victim. Rather than provide a third-hand interpretation of events as we see in traditional textbooks, we see firsthand how this war impacted people's lives—from both a Vietnamese and American angle. One particularly poignant page shows Bui's father as an old man retelling his experiences in one panel and then in the next panel shows him in the same scene but as a child—alluding to that broken child in him. It connects how history continues to impact us long past the actual events.

Another graphic novel that draws on historic recurrence and connectivity is *Displacement* (Hughes, 2020). This is a newer graphic novel that could be used as part of a text set of graphic novels about Japanese incarceration, along with *They Called Us Enemy* and *Citizen 13660*. Japanese incarceration during WWII is one of the few Asian American historical events that may actually get taught in pK-12 schools, along with Chinese railroad workers (An, 2016; Rodríguez, 2018, 2019), but generally receives little attention.

Displacement riffs on a different book, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which follows the story of a young Black woman in the 1970s who find herself inexplicably pulled back in time to protect one of her ancestors during slavery in the American South. *Displacement* follows Kiku, a biracial Japanese-White American girl, who keeps getting pulled back or "displaced" in time to her grandmother's experiences in the 1940's and Japanese incarceration. Even while Kiku knew her grandmother had been in the camps, she felt disconnected from it and there were many silences around it. Her experiences, and the reader's vicarious experiences through the book, bring forward the very real people and experiences that populate our history texts. We also see the ways in which the "victims" of such experiences had agency and tried to advocate for themselves and were not just passive victims (An, 2017).

Furthermore, *Displacement* reinforces the cyclical nature of history. We hear, too often, the phrase "never again," while we see history repeat itself over and over. In the backdrop of the present-day scenes in the book, we see news reports about families being separated and detained at the U.S.'s southern border. The book is clearly drawing parallels between these different forms of governmental detention. Earlier in Trump's presidency, when he spoke about possibly detaining Muslim Americans in this country, survivors of Japanese incarceration spoke out against this idea and shared their own experiences in such camps. Texts like *Displacement* humanize and personalize history and the Asian Americans who were part of it, while drawing contemporary connections as well.

There is a growing list of graphic novels that address the Asian American experience, both historically and in contemporary times, that draw upon both the transnational and domestic experiences of their presence in the United States. Other titles to consider are:

- Almost American Girl (Ha, 2020)
- Green Lantern: Legacy (Lê, 2020)
- The Magic Fish (Le Nguyen, 2020)
- The Magical Life of Long Tack Sam (Fleming, 2007)
- Pashmina (Chanani, 2017)
- Stargazing (Wang, 2019)



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The inclusion of Asian Americans, and all minoritized groups, into U.S. classrooms and curriculum is an important first step towards an educational system that is more just and equitable, but also a society that recognize the histories and contributions of all its membership.

Q & A WITH JUNG KIM

Question #1

Teacher's Question:

How can teachers best help students tend carefully to the power of illustrations in graphic novels?

Jung Kim's Response:

One trap that teachers fall into sometimes is thinking that students automatically know how to read a graphic novel. Pictures are assumed to be self-explanatory and there is not a need to teach students how to “read” an illustration. However, many students tend to skim quickly through the pictures and miss many of the textured, multimodal layers that make graphic novels so powerful. It would be a great benefit for students if teachers helped show them how to slow down and really examine the choices authors and illustrators make in creating graphic novels. Why are certain color choices made? How are the frames laid out in the page? How does that impact how quickly or slowly you read the page? What are the characters feeling and how do you know? Tran LeNguyen’s *The Magic Fish* has three interwoven storylines, which can be confusing for readers. However, if one looks closely, they will realize that those three stories are also told using three different colors. If a student didn’t realize this, it may take them half the book—or perhaps never—to understand how these three distinct stories work together. And if they are frustrated enough, they may not finish the book. A great resource for teachers who are interested in learning more about how to read the comics format is Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*.

Question #2

Teacher's Question:

What advice do you have for teachers on how to be successful in teaching with graphic novels? Are there any particular do’s and don’ts?

Jung Kim's Response:

Good teachers think about what students need to succeed. As indicated in the answer to the previous question, sometimes teachers presume students know how to read graphic novels—and read them well. It is important to gauge how familiar and skilled students are with the format and then help prepare them as needed. Re-reading should also be highly



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encouraged as students can pick out and appreciate more nuanced understandings of the text with each reading.

People often presume that because there are pictures, that a graphic novel will automatically be “easier.” In fact, the level of vocabulary in graphic novels can actually be higher than traditional grade level texts. This is because with the limited words that can be worked into a frame, authors must use the best word that fits, even if it is a more advanced word. Teachers should be aware of the kinds of vocabulary that are in the text or the background knowledge that is presumed.

Finally, one activity that seems particularly alluring for teachers is to assign students a culminating activity where they create their own graphic novel. Avoid jumping on this idea without deep planning and thought. This is akin to asking students to write sentences using a vocabulary word they just learned. There is not enough exposure and deep understanding. Graphic novel writing and illustrating are difficult tasks, and many graphic novels are produced by separate writers and illustrators (and even the illustrators are broken down to the main illustrator, inkers, and color!). It can be a frustrating task to ask students to complete a project that even professionals might struggle with. This is not to deter teachers from possibly considering such a project, but it should not be one taken lightly. With that said, there are various apps and platforms online with pre-produced figures and panels. It could be interesting to have students create a short comic strip or play with pieces of the graphic novel process, but assigning a full graphic novel project is probably too challenging for a regular classroom project.

Question #3

Teacher's Question:

What would you say is the biggest challenge/obstacle for teachers in using graphic novels in the social studies classroom? for students?

Jung Kim's Response:

Depending on the district, I would think the biggest challenge is just getting graphic novels into the curriculum. This is because sometimes school get caught up in the “mile wide, inch deep” philosophy of teaching—where coverage or quantity trumps depth of understanding. This may be a result of standardized testing and the demands placed upon teachers to cover a certain amount of material. Making room for any trade book, graphic novel or not, can be a difficult negotiation in a jampacked curriculum. Because the inclusion of graphic novels in classrooms is a relatively new phenomenon, many schools may need to make a financial investment as well.

In addition, because many people, including teachers and administrators, may underestimate the power of graphic novels, there may be resistance from within the school and community as well. Teachers may need to “prove” that graphic novels are not watering down the curriculum but are actually powerful vehicles for teaching.



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As indicated earlier, students may also be under-prepared for reading graphic novels in deep and meaningful ways. Some students who are newer to graphic novels may struggle with the unfamiliar format and need additional assistance as well.

Question #4

Teacher's Question:

Do you have suggestions and/or resources for teachers to build our own content knowledge—since many of us have not been taught Asian American history?

Jung Kim's Response:

There are some excellent resources for learning about Asian American history. The most recent and readily accessible one may be the recent PBS series *Asian Americans*. However, that only scratches the surface. There are fantastic historical compendiums, such as Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America: A History*, Ronald Takaki's classic *Strangers from a Different Shore*, Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts*, and Helen Zia's book *Asian American Dreams*.

Question #5

Teacher's Question:

How might a teacher explain to administration, parents, other teachers, or even to students the necessity of teaching hard history?

Jung Kim's Response:

All history was hard for someone. It is only recently that we are grappling with this fact and acknowledging this complicated truth. The sanitized, diluted version of history we have been teaching in schools often fails to compel students who don't see themselves or their communities represented in history texts. History is a dead thing taught as rote facts and dates. The opportunity to present history as living, as something that was made through struggle and resistance and passion, can be empowering and enlightening for all students. Critical educator Paulo Freire talks about oppression as diminishing the humanity of both the oppressor and the oppressed. It does not take away from learning to deal with difficult topics, it adds to our increasing understanding and humanization.

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