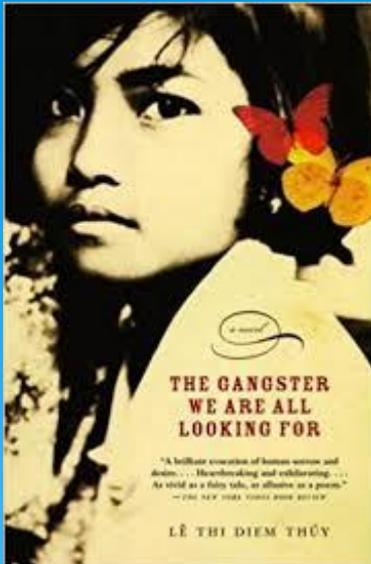
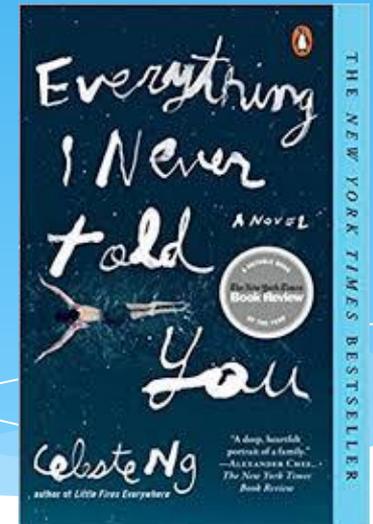


READING YELLOW POWER: TEACHING CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN VOICES TO REVOLUTIONIZE YOUR CLASSROOM

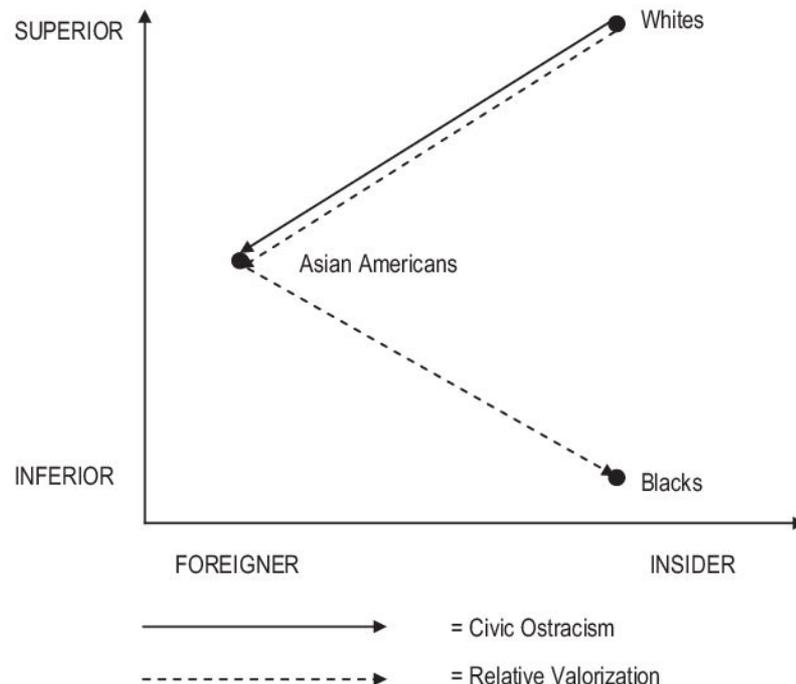


Deborah Koto Katz, PhD
Georgetown Day School
AsEA 2018



Why is it important to complicate the racial binary for our students and offer more expansive representations of racial identity?

White supremacy depends on a construction of race as two-sided: white as the oppressor, black as the oppressed. In reality, the hierarchy of race in this country is much more complex.



“The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans,”
Claire Jean Kim (1999)

Understanding the experiences of those whom the binary erases— in particular, Asian Americans—helps to reveal how and why that hierarchy perpetuates itself.

At the same time, centering Asian American voices is an explicitly anti-racist action, as it moves these writers and texts out of invisibility and silence, allowing them to become political subjects, rather than merely apolitical objects of white supremacy.

II. Why teach American Born Chinese?

ABC focuses on how it feels to be an Asian growing up—the feeling of not being white but “almost” being there. In ABC, what I loved the most was how Jin Wang tried to fit in by transforming into a white character, Danny. When I was younger, I tried to fit in as much as possible, but I was constantly reminded that I was different; for example, once my classmates measured how far up and down I could see compared to a white student to find out if I really “saw less” because of the shape of my eyes. While I hated that at the moment, I didn’t want to make a fuss just so that I could fit in.

It was a breath of fresh air to be able to see myself in a character in an English book, which up until this point I hadn’t.

- Connor, 17

GLARE OF DISDAIN

by Gene Luen Yang

When I was in the third grade, I knew this Asian Indian kid named *Nikhil*.* He and I were among the handful of nonwhite students in our class.



*Not his real name.

I don't remember exactly how or why it started, but we *did not like each other*.



Maybe it had something to do with my complete lack of athleticism.



I heard this word every so often throughout my childhood. Nikhil was one of its most common sources.

I'm ashamed to admit that I used this word, albeit in a racially inaccurate way. Back in the '80s, nobody in third grade was really sure how to insult an Asian Indian.

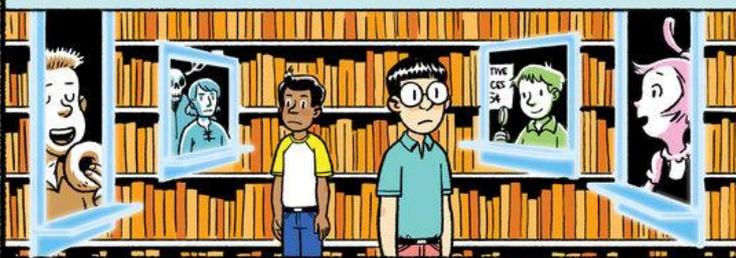
The Ohio State professor of education Rudine Sims Bishop argues that



Books can be *windows* into other people's lives and *mirrors* of our own.*

*I had to paraphrase because of space. Read Dr. Bishop's actual words in her brilliant essay *Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors*.

When our class visited the school library, Nikhil and I were surrounded by windows into the lives of our other classmates, but never each other's.



Would things have been different between us if we'd been able to find the *right windows*? If, say, Uma Krishnaswami's *Grand Plan to Fix Everything* or Mike Jung's *Geeks, Girls, and Secret Identities* had existed back then?



Who knows for sure?

But I'm a writer, and belief in the *power of story* is almost like a job requirement.

I did have one *moment of connection* with Nikhil. I remember him standing in front of the class, sharing about his weekend.

My family went to go see that "Gandhi" movie!

Gandhi did a lot for India, where my parents are from. He means a lot to them.

So to get to see a whole movie about his life...



As Nikhil talked, as he told us a story about him and his parents and this *story* they'd watched in their local theater---

...it was... I guess...

...I guess he means a lot to me, too.

--for those few moments, I couldn't maintain my *glare of disdain* no matter how hard I tried.

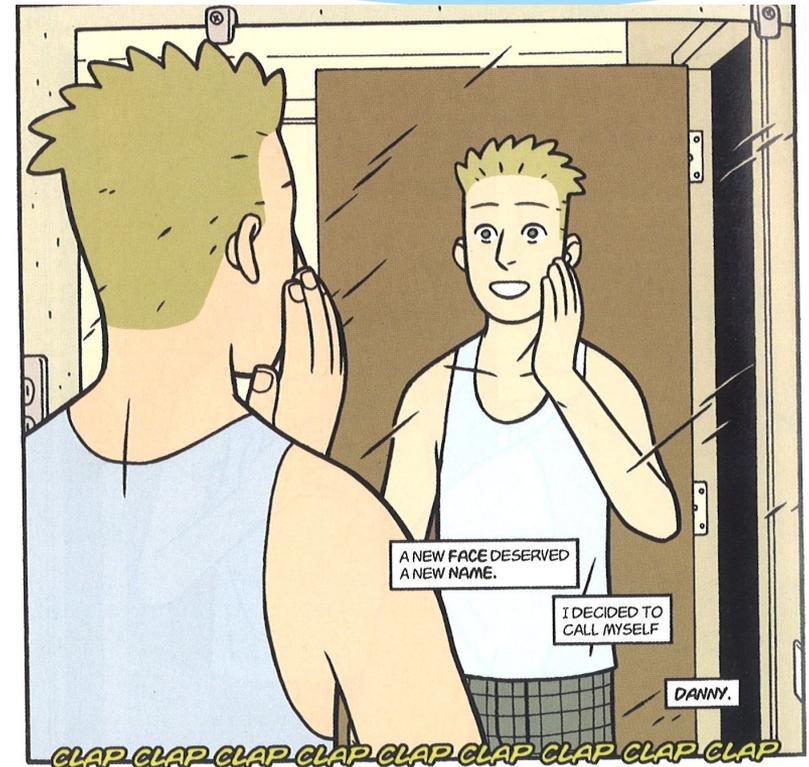
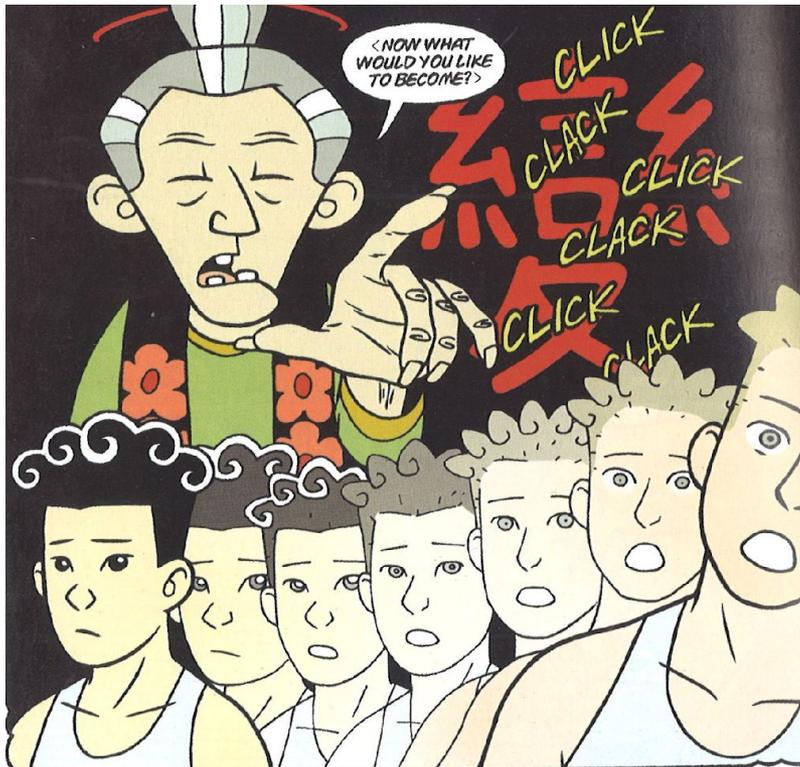
Gene Yang and ABC: Yellow Peril in the Racial Hierarchy

Political cartoons from the 1800s



American Born Chinese's Chin-Kee

Jin Wang's transformation into Danny in *American Born Chinese*



Yang and ABC questions:

- 1) Elsewhere, Yang recounts his relationship with Nikhil, the other boy in “Glare of Disdain,” this way: “We hurled racist insults at one another with a determined ferociousness, usually in front of a white audience.” Why did Gene and Nikhil have such “disdain” for each other in the presence of white students? Why do you think it’s important for Yang to tell this story about his childhood?
- 2) What are the historical references in the political cartoons from the 1800s? Why does Yang evoke them in his contemporary grotesque caricature, Chin-Kee?
- 3) What do you imagine is the connection between the yearly “visit” by Cousin Chin-Kee and Jin Wang’s wish to transform himself into a white boy, Danny?

III. Why teach *Everything I Never Told You?*

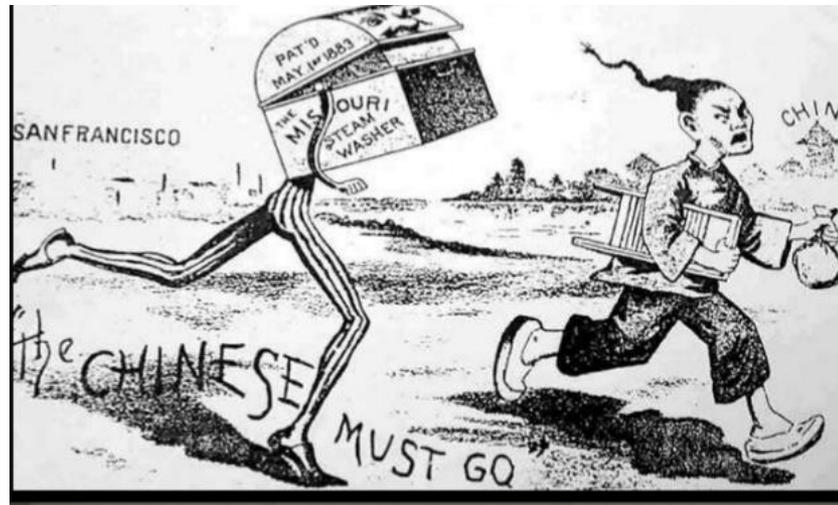
Growing up, I never saw anyone who resembled me in any type of media, be that movies, books, TV shows, etc. And it wasn't until I took this class (Literature of Outsiders) and read this book that I realized that there ARE people who look like and experience the same sort of identity complications that I did growing up.

I feel like it was important for me to see that the family hardships the Lees experienced weren't only caused by the fact that they are an interracial family, but also **because they are humans**. I soon realized that this, this was what representation looked like: being able to see yourself in media or a story and feel your humanity be validated—and it was so unbelievably refreshing.

- Mia, 19

Everything I Never Told You: Disappearing into Whiteness

“He had never felt he belonged here, even though he’d been born on American soil, even though he had never set foot anywhere else... America was a melting pot, but **Congress, terrified that the molten mixture was becoming a shade too yellow, had banned all immigrants from China...** In Chinatowns, the lives of all those *paper sons* were fragile and easily torn... Everyone clustered together so they wouldn’t stand out.”



“America was a melting pot, but Congress, terrified that the molten mixture was becoming a shade too yellow, had banned all immigrants from China.”

- * Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882: prohibited all immigration of Chinese laborers→ renewed by 1892 Geary Act and made permanent in 1902
- * Japanese were target of National Origins Act of 1924, which banned immigration from East Asia
- * CEA repealed by 1943 Magnuson Act during WWII: quota of 105 Chinese immigrants per year
- * Fully repealed by Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

“More than anything, her father had wanted to blend in.”

From *US News & World Report*, 1966:

“What you find, back of this remarkable group of Americans, is a story of adversity and prejudice that would shock those now complaining about the hardships endured by today’s Negroes.”

“Overall, what observers are finding in America’s Chinatowns are a thrifty, law-abiding, industrious people.”

“He and Hannah take after their father—once a woman stopped the two of them in the grocery store and asked, ‘Chinese?’ and when they said yes, not wanting to get into halves and wholes, she’d nodded sagely. ‘I knew it,’ she said. ‘By the eyes.’ She’d tugged the corner of each eye outward with a fingertip. But Lydia, defying genetics, somehow had her mother’s blue eyes, and they knew this is one more reason she is their mother’s favorite. And their father’s, too.”

- *Everything I Never Told You*

“It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes... if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different....

“Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes.”

- Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

Everything I Never Told You questions:

- 1) Given the history of the Chinese in America, why does “he” – James, the Chinese American father in the novel – want “more than anything... to blend in”?
- 2) What are the assumptions and values of the white woman in the passage in the supermarket? How does that passage connect to the excerpt from *The Bluest Eye*?
- 3) What connections do you see between James’s desire to “blend in” and Yang’s images?
- 4) How might teaching this novel to older students enhance their understanding of the historical context for Asian Americans’ invisibility in our contemporary political moment?

III. Why teach *The Gangster We're All Looking For?*

To me, reading *Gangster* was like reading a love letter to Vietnamese girls—it was written by one of us, about one of us, for us. It felt like the center of gravity in the room shifted a bit—classes devoted to *Gangster* meant classes devoted to considering the experiences, relationships, and psyche of a young Asian girl. I think it gave me a glimpse into the way coming-of-age novels I've previously read in English—*The Catcher in the Rye*, *Little Women*—were supposed to have struck a chord with me.

- Madison, 17

Gangster:

Centering the Vietnamese Experience

I wanted to create a book that addressed this question of how we, as a family, came to be in America. But very specifically that we were individuals, that you, know, this is not just a story about refugees of war, but about a man who loves a woman, they have a girl, they lost a child, so these are very human questions, and in the progress of reading it, I hope that people come to understand that war is -- is something that impacts specific places and specific people, not just during the span of a war, but in the period before and after.

- interview with Lê (2011)

“Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed to shore.... Before the Red Apartment we weren’t a family like we are a family now. We were in separate places, waiting for each other. Ma was standing on a beach in Vietnam while Ba and I were in California with four men who had escaped with us on the same boat.

“Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood but by water.”

- *Gangster* opening

From a Vietnamese-American educator

I never loved [*The Things They Carried*] because I never was able to be myself while teaching it... How could I teach Tim O'Brien's version of the Vietnam War that actually has no Vietnamese people in it?....

Once I found my voice, my students found me. I still have my student evaluations of me from that year, the ones that said that *Gangster* was their favorite book we read because it wasn't like anything they had read before, and it felt real. It felt real because it *was* real — because it is real to tell the story of the Vietnam War through a Vietnamese perspective.

- Thu Nguyen - “The Things They Made Me Carry: Inheriting a White Curriculum”

Vietnamese refugees from 1978-1979, the same period lê and her narrator arrive



Gangster questions:

- 1) Think about what you learned growing up about American wars, imperialism, and foreign relations. How did those narratives center whiteness and render the stories and political identities of the non-Western people invisible?
- 2) Based on Madison and Thu's words about *Gangster*, why is it important for our students to read narratives that center APIDA experiences? Why is it important for us as educators to teach them?
- 3) How can the inclusion of voices like lê's into a literature curriculum help expand conversations about racial identity and history and revolutionize your classrooms and school communities into more radically equitable places?

Other ways to subvert our invisibility and bring fuller representations of APIDA people to our school communities

- 1) Start or deepen conversations in your departments about including APIDA texts, voices, and expertise in your curriculum
- 2) Build connections and collaborate with allies
- 3) Make sure your APIDA experiences have a central presence in interdisciplinary, extracurricular, and professional development opportunities.
- 4) Support your APIDA students and colleagues in the classroom and outside of it: create affinity spaces, advocate, and mirror.

Although race is not the only identifier in my composite identity, it does have a major impact on my own self-perception, and it was great to know that there are teenagers out there with similar experiences.

- Teddy, 15

Despite the struggles and painful realities these novels portray...

They are ultimately narratives of self-affirmation, self-acceptance, and empowerment. They are meaningful mirrors for us and our Asian American students and crucial windows for all of our students and colleagues.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at dkatz@gds.org. Let's keep the conversation going!

Happy reading!