

Racism in "american born chinese"



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As much as the public is informed of the efforts to combat racism in today's world, Gene Luen Yang proves in his graphic novel *American Born Chinese* that racism exists at considerable strength today. Through three intertwining stories, Yang demonstrates the ostracization and fear alien cultures receive from a so-called "normal" society, where those who blend in are accepted. His goal remains to prove the statement that "Racism detracts ego, degrades the identity of cultures and individuals, and leads to a forced assimilation under the thumb of the so-called normal public."

The statement above represents the journey of each character in the book, as they experience racism, lose a sense of ego, and undergo a forced assimilation. The Monkey King is perhaps the most ancient protagonist represented in the book, almost a deity, his story resounds most clearly as a personification of the beginning of the theme statement. In the beginning of the story, the Monkey King is detained by a guard under the grounds of being a monkey, and is denied admission to a heavenly party: "You may be a king - you may even be a deity - but you are still a monkey... Have a good evening sir" (Yang 15). The Monkey King subsequently gives in to an animalistic nature, thrashing the gathered populace and then leaving to his mountain, the next morning giving a decree that all under his realm must wear his shoes. Primarily, this serves to emphasize a detriment to ego due to racism, the Monkey changing the fundamentals of his kingdom to better emulate the accepted culture. He feels less, debased, an ancient form of racism impacting a holy being that resounds thoroughly through his entire story. The ramifications of impacting an individual as such do not manifest only in this specific story, one sees it in the other two intertwined storylines

in the book as well as in real life. Those who are hurt often lash out and attempt to change themselves, often doing so for the worse. Human nature is to attempt to please everyone as well as yourself, and to appease a whole, one often needs to cede a part of their selves, a part that makes them who they are and defines them as an individual.

Elsewhere in the narrative, Danny is a representation of Jin's desires and wants personified, a typical white, all-American, sitcom male. However, he clearly represents the secondary part of the theme statement; how racism degrades the identity of individuals. Danny is quite literally a change in identity, Jin creating a separate persona that mirrored the expectations set by American society, namely his peers. His change is fully illuminated on page 198, where he names himself Danny. The consequences of identity change are profuse, as mentioned in the theme statement, identity change leads to a loss of culture and identity. Danny, or Jin, effectively gives up his identity, or as the herbalist's wife says, his soul. Him losing his soul is an analogy for the loss of culture; he gives up what makes him unique for that which homogenizes him. However, most prominent in his loss of identity is Chin- Kee. Chin-Kee does not just personify stereotypes, he further personifies a regret in the loss of the unique characteristics that made Jin who he was. Chin-Kee's constant presence represents a constant reversion to the characteristics Danny and Jin wish to hide, and his actions represent their inability to suppress their true nature. Jin represents the final part of the theme statement. Through the story, Jin changes himself to better match the characteristics he sees exemplified in those who antagonize him. The first example of this occurs through the depiction of Jin's lunch. On page 33, he is

seen eating dumplings, a stereotypical Chinese food. However, the next time we see him eating lunch, he is eating a sandwich, a more typical American food.

The other primary example of a true transformation based on others occurs on page 96-98, where Jin becomes increasingly jealous of Greg, to the point where he emulated the boy's hairstyle, donning a typical afro. The reader is able to delineate Jin has been impacted by racism from a young age, and therefore, this may have had an impact upon how he feels about himself in general, relating further back to the statement, where the reader easily identifies Jin has not simply changed himself, the process to the point involved a detriment to ego and a subsequent loss of identity and culture. One sees the foreshadowing in this as well, in regards to the Herbalist's Wife, who states on page 29 that one can become anything, so long as one is willing to forfeit one's soul. Jin does not explicitly forfeit his soul; however, he does, like Danny, give up what makes him Jin, a theme that can be seen in the Monkey King as well, leading any observer to note Yang's purpose in this: to highlight the death of cultures at the hands of others due to alien cultures being different. He is forced to assimilate not because he wants to, but because he is forced to by the banal and impudent rules of today's society.

Racism leads to the homogeneity of cultures and also an elimination of culture in general, those who are different forced to assimilate and live in unfriendly environments. The above theme statement and its ensuing analysis proves that the so-called accepting public of today is not at all accepting, and prioritizes homogeneity over a variation in culture. However, the importance of the novel truly stems from the depiction it promulgates of

the effects of racism. Truly, Yang's intent is clear enough, his attempts to hide racism and its effects are prolific and poignant, yet he makes no attempt to hide them. He does so because racism exists, and its existence is enough to justify any sort of outcry a solitary man can provide.