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Genre and Truth-Telling in David Wong's *Escape to Gold Mountain*

Abstract
This essay explores how historiography and the formal characteristics of the graphic narrative genre reveal the potential of historical "truth" as separate from historical "fact." In *Escape to Gold Mountain*, David H.T. Wong leverages the formal characteristics of the genre to create stronger empathy with the perspective character, allowing readers to bridge the truth-telling functions of both history and fiction. Four primary features illustrate Wong's method: historical apparatus, a controlling symbol, focalization, and central sequence. Through these techniques, the graphic narrative addresses legacies of systemic racism against Chinese immigrants in the United States and Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although it also problematically reproduces the stereotype of the model minority in the process.

Most of us recognize that the dividing lines between "history" and "literature" are not as distinct as they may appear to be to the general public browsing the shelves of the local bookstore. In "Interpretation in History," historian Hayden White established nearly 50 years ago that there is no such thing as "objective" or "scientific" history despite an explanatory impulse in historiography. Historical narrative, akin to literary storytelling, is a definitional, interpretive, meaning-making feature of writing history. Historical philosopher Frank Ankersmit elaborates upon the truth-telling function of historical narrative, arguing that the relationship is "chiastic" in that both are "entwined" so that "the components of the historical narrative are true, but at the same time historiography also contains an element of 'fiction' that is so difficult to deal with.... History makes truth trivial; the novel makes it mysterious. And in both cases the situation is unsatisfactory precisely where the essence of the two genres is concerned. It is as if each of them needs the heart of the other

in order to perfect itself" (1999, 9). Ankersmit's argument derives from an ongoing discussion of narrative and how historians construct, reconstruct, and interpret history. He uses European historical novels to illustrate the extent to which various literary artists have engaged with historical truths. These novels use historical detail while historians use techniques of fictional storytelling to interpenetrate genres in order to tell truths.

Historians are not alone in their concern about how narrative technique and history intertwine. E.M. Forster, in a 1927 collection of lectures delivered at Cambridge, entitled *Aspects of the Novel*, notes the interconnectedness of history and literature. His perspective as a novelist sheds more light on how the techniques of fiction reveal and penetrate the interior life. He says:

> The historian deals with actions, and with the characters of men only so far as he can deduce them from their actions… The hidden life is, by definition, hidden. The hidden life that appears in external signs is hidden no longer, has entered the realm of action. And it is the function of the novelist to reveal the hidden life at its source: to tell us more about Queen Victoria than could be known, and thus to produce a character who is not the Queen Victoria of history. (1927, 45)

Importantly, he argues that the fiction writer reveals "more […] than could be known" by simply describing the "external signs." A fiction-writer, according to Forster, provides deeper knowledge than historical explanation or interpretation can foster. Obviously, neither Forster nor Ankersmit apply their ideas to the genre of graphic narrative, yet both historiography and fiction-writing are relevant to the problems of representation and interpretation and to the genre, which self-consciously explodes the possibility of rigidly drawn genre boundaries.

Graphic narratives, so self-conscious of form, often cut across genre lines more obviously than a traditional novel might, inviting more admixtures of history, literary and visual art, and thereby interrogating these forms themselves. Hillary Chute argues in "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative" that non-fiction graphic narratives encounter and render history self-consciously. Regarding *Maus'* strategy, for instance, she says: "We see that as historical enunciation weaves jaggedly through paradoxical spaces and shifting temporalities, comics – as a form that relies on space to represent time – becomes structurally equipped to challenge dominant modes of storytelling and history writing" (2008, 456). *Maus* illustrates the opportunity

of self-reflexive graphic narrative storytelling that both comments upon and participates in the construction of historical truths.

David H.T. Wong's 2012 *Escape to Gold Mountain* occupies this generically hybrid space between fiction/non-fiction and history/literature. The subtitle, "A Graphic History of the Chinese in North America" indicates its non-fiction status, yet Wong himself in the Preface says that it is a "fictional story…based on facts, on [his] own family's experiences" (2012, 11). Thus, the book's generic definition remains murky. Is it history? Fiction? Autobiography? As he describes his process of writing in the Foreword, he reveals that the genre necessarily shifted from his original conception: "Initially, this book was going to explore the history of the Chinese in Canada, but it soon became apparent that sharing only part of the story gave an incomplete picture of the Chinese experience in Gam Saan (Gold Mountain)" (Ibid.: 11). Determining the genre of the text matters insofar as it affects the truth-telling function of the narrative and, thereby, how readers process important truths about racism and Chinese history in North America. Not knowing the genre that the text inhabits blurs the factual and the fictional. If an event or fact is verifiably inaccurate and the reader can perceive this disjuncture as a function of genre, then the truth-telling function of the narrative, as a whole, may be undermined. *Self-consciously* remixing the genres, however, may mitigate the perception of not telling the truth.

While the apparatus of history and historiography structures *Escape to Gold Mountain*, Wong's controlling symbol and focalization techniques animate the narrative. The historical apparatus of the text and the central sequence in the chapters devoted to California history encapsulate Wong's approach to telling a fictionalized history (or a historicized fiction) in a quest for truth. Although Wong's truth reveals his purpose, an attempt to heal a legacy of racism against Chinese in the United States and Canada, the book also reiterates the model minority myth, a specter that continues to haunt representations of Chinese in Asian-American literature.

1. Historical Apparatus

Wong's awareness of the truth-telling function of history is clear because he uses the apparatus of historiography explicitly in the text. To establish his historical ethos, besides the Foreword, he creates an "Introductions" section

of the book, along with a dialect key, a timeline, a travel map, a prologue, in-text citations, an afterword, a "Notes & References" section, an explanatory section about an important machine, "The Iron Chink," a listing of multiple historical societies and historians in his acknowledgments section, and inclusion of dates at the beginning and within most chapters. His treatment of the subject matter within the graphic narrative itself also helps to establish historical authority, of course, but the apparatus demonstrates a desire to comply with historiographical genre expectations.

Those genre expectations are different, however, in part because of the visual art used to express them. For example, the timeline section is interesting because it makes parallel North American and Chinese historical events, along with a generational timeline of the author's family. The visual connection illustrates the deeper connection between the people affected by the events and policies of history on both sides of the Pacific beginning from about 1790 to 2000. His representation of personal and political histories in parallel space implies causal connections. The Taiping Rebellion, for instance, is connected to the Central Pacific Railroad and Chinese Expulsion, which directly affects the two characters/family members with which those historical events are aligned. Without reading more extensively, the reader will not know precisely how, of course. Nevertheless, Wong illustrates a connection between the personal and the historical. Obviously, this narrative will not take an objectivist stance in favor of Forster's novelistic impulse to expose the "hidden" truth.

Wong's incorporation of "Introductions" of important authorities of Chinese history and activism also demonstrates attention to historical apparatus and ethos, as well as personal connection. (Wong himself is a community activist in Vancouver, Canada, in addition to his primary occupation as an architect and urban ecologist. *Escape to Gold Mountain* is his only novel, although it is the culmination of a childhood dream to become a cartoonist.) Such testimonies have been typical of both histories and novels, particularly in the early nineteenth century when genre boundaries were not strictly established and were more permeable. Writers of historical fiction often used authenticity markers so that readers would regard their books as authoritative, legitimizing the truth-telling function of fictional texts, particularly if they were trying to make a political, social, or moral (aka "activist") point. The function of Wong's "Introductions" is similar in that it provides historical authority for a fictional, activist text.

Yet his first "authority" does much more than legitimize the historical references Wong uses in the narrative itself. After an opening that invokes the stereotypical comic book genre elements – "BAM! POWW!! ZAP! KA-BOOOM!!! KLUGNK!" – and after paragraphs that describe the over 150-year history of the Chinese in North America, Dr. Imogene Lim's commentary authorizes the genre itself: "The graphic novel is a way to make such history accessible to people who might find the subject 'dry,' or who don't like reading or find it difficult" (Ibid.: 14). Perhaps the artists of the genre would find this reasoning reductionist; nevertheless, it is a method for legitimizing the genre. Her primary authorization, however, is as a historian and activist who provides explanation for what is fictionalized in the coming narrative, concluding: "As a history and as a graphic novel, this book is unique in providing parallel stories of the Chinese in [Canada and the United States]" (Ibid.: 13). The historian sees this book as belonging to two genres, and she authorizes both at the same time. In a thick black frame, Wong portrays Dr. Lim and his other two experts, by means of stately realistic portraitures, akin to an academic employee photo, and textual credentials. Wong has inserted their static portraits alongside their commentary; thus, these two elements work together, mutually reinforcing the authority Dr. Lim grants the narrative.

Wong's purpose is not simply to inform, but to educate and activate readers to work against the legacies of racism. He proposes in his afterword an idealistic goal: "I did not want to aggravate readers over historic injustices and ignite fresh diatribes based on a person's skin color. That is why the `penultimate chapter... is so important to me: it shows that old grudges need not be continued by future generations and that people from different cultures share a common desire—joy for successive generations" (Ibid.: 225). With an explicit activist ideal, the narrative needs both historical authorization and generic legitimacy to achieve its truth-telling function. Chute argues that this ethical impulse is embedded in the form of comics themselves, stating that "graphic narrative offers compelling, diverse examples that engage with different styles, methods, and modes to consider the problem of historical representation. An awareness of the limits of representation...is integrated into comics through its framed, self-conscious, bimodal form; yet it is precisely in its insistent, affective, urgent visualizing of historical circumstance that comics aspires to ethical engagement" (2008, 457). The historical apparatus Wong uses to frame his narrative is a self-conscious attempt to authorize the form and the generic hybridity of the narrative.

2. Controlling Symbol

After extensive prefatory material establishing historical features of the text, the graphic narrative itself begins with a sequence inside the Museum of Migration in Vancouver, Canada. The first chapter introduces the "Iron Chink," a machine that replaced and displaced Chinese workers who initially immigrated to the west coast to work primarily on railroad construction in the United States and Canada, but then had to find alternate work, in this case, the fish canneries in the Pacific northwest. This machine is, according to Iyko Day, "a personification of the simultaneous efficiency and disposability of the Chinese laborer [that] articulates the contradictions of settler colonial capitalism that expose the inhumanity of commodity-determined labor" (2016, 195). Chinese labor is the primary mover of this narrative, and this machine embodies economic and racial histories. Even within the imaginative narrative, material history matters; Wong's symbolic use of the machine creates a bridge between traditional historiography and imaginative narrative.

The first two-page spread establishes the importance of the historical artifact and its effects. On the left-hand page are three frames, one that takes two-thirds of the page and two others that split the last horizontal third of the page. Two thirds of the first frame feature the mechanism of the Iron Chink, which is labeled prominently; the other third of the frame in the bottom right features three characters, two Asian (one male and one female) and facing the reader and another white boy whose back is to the reader and whose shadow is within the frame, while his feet are outside the frame. The two young male teens face one another, the blond with his arm outstretched and fist balled up, the bespectacled one with a similarly aggressive stance. The female holds her hand over her mouth as if in dismay at the museum display, but also at the exclamation of "CHINK!" within the frame.

Wong thus establishes the connection between offensive language, economic history, and race, with a slightly ominous shadow cast on the floor reminiscent of the Nazi salute (fig. 1).

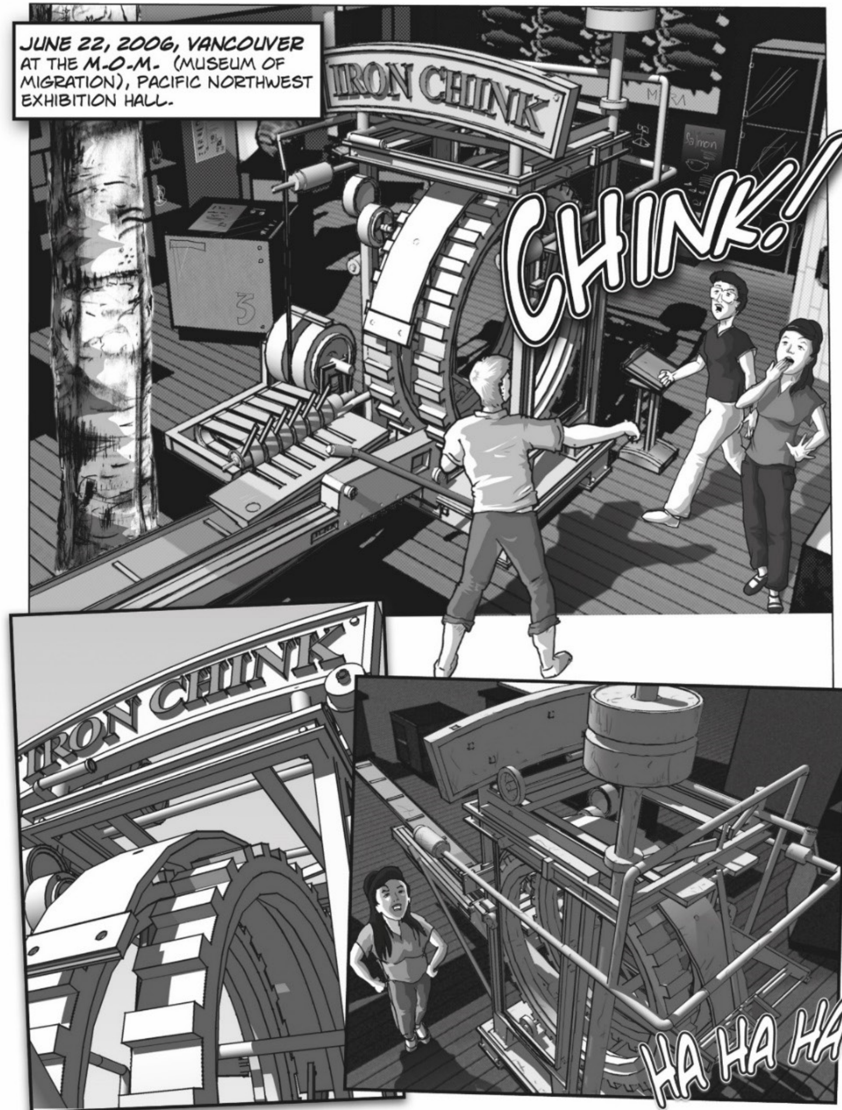

Fig. 1 The first image of the first chapter depicts the primary symbol of the text. David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 26. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

(This image reverberates within one of the final chapters focused on reconciliation between two fathers-in-law who had fought in Normandy on opposite sides). The white boy's feet outside the frame shows his essential separation from the Asian-American history that this narrative depicts, but simultaneously demonstrates his potential racist power. This white boy could be a threat. Two other frames on the page slightly overlap. The first shows a low-angle shot from the female's perspective where the primary gear of the massive machine dominates, and its racist label is a primary focus. The second shows a high angle shot of the back of the machine with her in front of it, hands on her hips, when she hears laughter from someone outside the frame. Removed from the historical context, this woman is overwhelmed and angry. Both her reaction and the boys' reactions illustrate the importance of this machine, its presence in a museum, and the graphic narrative Wong has written.

This machine stands for the psychological, physical, and economic pain that immigrant Chinese had to endure in the past, as well as its legacy on future generations. On the opposite page of the initial two-page spread, a frame depicts two front views of the white boy, who uses his fingers to slant his eyes. In a similar white outlined font to the racial slur depicted on the opposite page, are two sets of "HA HA HA." This boy's "fun" (Ibid.: 29) emphasizes why material history is important to teach culture. In "Material Culture and Cultural History," Richard Grassby argues for the importance of objects in writing history: "Whether it communicates through words or visual representation, the cultural system relies on metaphor and symbolism. When literal language fails, people express ideas through metaphorical analogies. Historians often conceptualize in metaphors to relate concrete facts to abstractions" (2005, 591). Although Grassby focuses his analysis on early modern English artifacts, his remarks about material history are salient, and they demonstrate why Wong depicts this machine and discussion about it in the opening sequence. The Iron Chink represents and provides an autobiographical bridge to the Chinese past in North America. Grandma Wong responds to the children's questions about the machine by explicitly articulating its symbolism: "I used to wish that I had not been born Chinese. We had to endure so much prejudice. The Iron Chink ... it represents a people's pain and sadness" (2012, 30). Alternating images of tears and fist waving, Wong shows the grandmother's feelings as representative of the immigrant community. The mechanism of the machine is juxtaposed with the grandmother's depth of sadness and anger: thus material

history takes on greater personal significance and resonance with those children whom both Grandmother Wong and the book itself seek to inform and influence. Her memory extends only so far because she was a baby when the machine was introduced to the canneries, annihilating jobs that supported Chinese households. Nevertheless, Wong visualizes events outside of her direct observation while using her character as a way to flashback to 1905, when the Iron Chink machine is introduced, and then again to 1835, when we begin to follow the historical perspective character of Wong Ah Gin, whom the author introduces as a dock worker and then a stowaway escaping the horrifying conditions in China during the time after the first Opium War (1839-1842).

This machine is also important as a controlling symbol for the narrative because it establishes labor and racism as central to the story of the Wongs and by extension, the story of the Chinese immigrant experience in the United States and Canada. Malissa Phung, in "The Reinscription of Life, Labour, and Property in David H.T. Wong's *Escape to Gold Mountain*," recognizes Wong's "anti-racist critique," but also acknowledges that it "perpetuates labour tropes of efficiency, productivity, and sacrifice that remain central to the Gold Mountain and model minority myth" (2018, 155). The model minority myth is an idealized portrait that seems harmless, but which nevertheless sets up impossible expectations for Asians and other immigrants from any locale. In fact, many national immigration policies have been constructed to allow only the most productive "desirables" to enter the country. Wong's focus on labor through this controlling symbol, but also through the consistent reference to the ingenuity and sacrifice of Chinese immigrants in the infrastructure building of Canada and the United States, does not provide alternative avenues for construing Chinese immigrant identity.

3. Focalization

Of course, the narrative itself is not strictly history or, even, typically historiographical. Most obviously, the narrative is sequential art, not a typical medium for traditional history-writing. Beyond that, however, the narrative as a whole does not consistently strike a disinterested pose, or an objective viewpoint, and some "facts" are imagined rather than verifiable. Wong Ah Gin, for instance, the primary perspective character of the California

chapters, is portrayed as the person who first found gold at Sutter's Mill, thus starting the California Gold Rush, and as the first person to come up with the germ for the idea of the transcontinental railroad. These "facts" are imagined methods for influencing the decision-makers. How else can the descendants of the disenfranchised be influencers of history? The narrative seeks to fill gaps that histories themselves cannot address because no personal narratives from the perspective of the oppressed are extant. This is a perpetual concern of social historians, who often must interpret the absence in records because the oppressed do not have access to power or to literacy itself. Their perspectives and their stories are simply not available. Nevertheless, choosing to include unverified facts runs the risk of undermining the truth-telling function of the *historical* narrative. Perhaps it does not matter for a book that proclaims its hybridity in form and function. Forster argues that "fiction is truer than history, because it goes beyond the evidence, and each of us knows from his own experience that there is something beyond the evidence, and even if the novelist has not got it correctly—well, he has tried" (1927, 63-4). Where Wong's narrative is not strictly history, the techniques of fiction allow important license to fill in gaps in the historical record.

Here cross-genre truth telling utilizes the form of graphic narrative and specifically exploits the multiple focalization options the form offers. Kai Mikkonen in "Graphic Narratives as Challenge to Transmedia Narratology: The Question of Focalization" argues that Rick Altman's concept of "following" is important in graphic narrative. He says that

> the person or figure who is followed tends to import perceptual information and subjective vision into the image. There is a potential focalizer in every focalized person: Images reveal looks, fields of vision, and so on. This potential is similar to that of literary narratives, but images also literally reveal acts of perception from the outside, that is, from an external viewpoint (2011, 643).

Importantly, the shifts in perspective or focalization can occur in less than a page or even in a single panel.

Graphic perspective, or focalization, is a significant vector of control and creativity for a fiction writer; normally, anything other than disinterested perspective is conscientiously avoided by the traditional historiographer. Wong's focalization in the fourth chapter invites the reader to empathize with Ah Gin's perspective on history (fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Visuals and text merge to establish the power differential between Ah Gin and railroad magnate, Crocker.
David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 63. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

In the first panel of the chapter, the reader peers into the well-appointed office of Charles Crocker, one of the "big four" investors of the Central Pacific Railroad. Crocker leans an elbow against books on his desk, his body turned towards Ah Gin, whose back is turned to the reader and his face visible only in profile. All of Crocker's face is visible, although his eyes are focused on Ah Gin. The postures and the setting of the panel demonstrate the power dynamic between the characters (as representatives of each race), one borne out by the historical record. Crocker's testimony to the 1876 U.S. Congress Joint Special Committee investigating Chinese immigration indicates the racist fear of the time and Crocker himself as conflicted. Despite a generally positive disposition towards Chinese labor, he testified to the committee that he "did not prefer the Chinamen at all; I was convinced that I had to employ them in order to complete the work; I preferred white labor" (Sargent 1877, 672).

Wong depicts the complicated relationship Crocker has with the Chinese, giving him credit for seeing the worth of Chinese labor, but firmly establishing the power relationship: Ah Gin is the servant, Crocker the employer. This relationship is also clear within the speech bubbles, where Crocker makes a point of establishing Ah Gin as a feminized worker by making an off-color joke about how Ah Gin would "make someone a good wife" (Wong, 2012, 63) because he cooks, cleans, and gardens. Although readers' reactions are never completely predictable, modern sensibility makes Crocker's joke off-putting, creating more reader empathy with Ah Gin. Crocker does all the talking at first, asking Ah Gin to tell him about China. In the previous chapter, the reader has "followed" Ah Gin, but in this half-page panel (each 1/3 of the remaining horizontal half of the page), readers are led to Crocker, focusing on him and his personality. In the final three panels on the page, we focus on Crocker alone and more at the mid-range level, where he and his words fill the frame. In the first two panels, Crocker's eyeline directs to the right. In the final panel, he looks directly at the reader. Readers inhabit Ah Gin's perspective by the final panel, which re-establishes a cooperative power between the perspective/focus we "follow" (Ah Gin) and the reader. Traditional historiography has no similar mechanism for such perspective shifts and cooperative meaning-making.

While Wong uses the techniques of a fiction writer, his devotion to traditional historiography sometimes intrudes, which may distance the

reader; but also helps to establish Ah Gin as an authoritative interlocutor between the reader and history. In this way, the reader is more likely to accept as truth unverified facts and recognize history as an incomplete telling by the "victors." For example, in the next sequence of panels, the shift in story-telling power continues, where Ah Gin faces the reader (although his eyeline remains with Crocker), and Crocker's back is to the audience. In the fourth and fifth panels on the page, however, we see a different technique more akin to the explicative impulse of historiography. After Crocker muses that "China built the great wall," Ah Gin confirms the construction. Wong depicts the wall in the background with Ah Gin in the right corner foreground, as if narrating a grade-school history film, and glancing back towards history (the wall) rather than at Crocker or at the reader. In the next panel, Ah Gin's ambiguous gaze dominates a panel that includes a crowd of sketchily drawn Chinese in the background of the image over which Ah Gin provides explanatory detail. In the final and smallest panel, we return to Crocker's office where Ah Gin provides a comparative opinion of the "Ching" dynasty. The narrative focal point remains Ah Gin (as narrator) in this panel, but the reader is pulled out of the narrative almost completely with an instructional detail about how to pronounce "Ching." The educational purpose of this page dominates, but the sequencing underscores the hybridity of the genres across which Wong develops the narrative.

The shift back to Crocker's perspective occurs over the next three panels, where Wong transitions from Ah Gin's explanations about the canal system to Crocker's musings about a "transportation line ... over long distances" (2012, 65). In the first horizontal panel, Ah Gin faces the audience, his eyeline focused on Crocker, who turns his back on the readers. Crocker does not speak. In the second horizontal panel, he asks "How?" when Ah Gin explains the canal system. In the final panel, Ah Gin does not appear, but an image of the Grand Canal is interrupted by a vignette of Crocker in his office, looking directly at the reader, who is inhabiting the narrative perspective of Ah Gin again. The next series of panels proceed from a two-shot similar to the first panel of the chapter to a single mid-level shot of Crocker facing the reader to four panels of a close up of Crocker's face as he talks to Ah-Gin. In the final panel, Crocker thinks of how he will use Ah Gin's insight, deciding to contact the initial

proposer of a transcontinental railroad, Theodore Judah. This sequence portrays Ah Gin as the inspiration for Crocker's investment decision and a significant influencer of history. Strictly speaking, this is an unverified detail, not a historical fact. But can we say definitively that it did not happen this way? Wong exploits a historical absence to sustain a significant truth about the importance of Chinese immigrants for the construction of the Central Pacific. While plenty of facts are available that indicate the significant sacrifice and contribution of the Chinese to that enterprise, no one has argued that a single Chinese immigrant was the source of Crocker's inspiration to invest in the endeavor. This is the power of fiction to provide additional meat for the historical bone, to insist upon a more emphatic presentation of a truth.

Wong's book leverages focalization to enhance historiography, thereby calling attention to the problem of writing history. According to Chute, "Graphic narrative accomplishes this work with its manifest handling of its own artifice, its attention to its seams. Its formal grammar rejects transparency and renders textualization conspicuous, inscribing the context in its graphic presentation" (2008, 458). Through the shifting perspective, readers come closer to character empathy or closer to traditional history from one panel to the next. How Wong manages focalization distance graphically illustrates the power of the form to bridge the truth-telling functions of both history and fiction.

4. Central Sequence

The empathy Wong engenders for Ah Gin is essential to reframing reader comprehension of systemic racism based on historical events. Much of the history is painful to look at; some of it is excruciating. It is one thing to read about mass lynching of 17 Chinese people in Los Angeles; it is quite another to see a graphic representation of lynching. How and why did this October 24, 1871, massacre occur? Once the Central Pacific was completed, the demand for Chinese labor plummeted, while more people from the eastern United States began to settle in California. Many Americans resented the Chinese, arguing a familiar refrain about the Chinese "stealing all our jobs!" (Wong 2012, 87). Combined with anti-Chinese rhetoric by American

politicians at the national and international levels, the struggle for resources and work in California heated and boiled into multiple violent incidents at the local level.

Within a two-chapter sequence, Wong depicts two of the most horrifying events, the first in Los Angeles in 1871, the second in San Francisco in 1877. These two chapters animate the arguments and figures prominent in debates about Chinese immigrants prior to the Exclusion Act of 1882, the first in a series of federal laws intended to curb Chinese immigration and later other "undesirable" groups perceived to be taking jobs away from American citizens. In these visual-essay sections, Ah Gin appears in a single panel just prior to the two violent sequences, but his presence anchors the history within the narrative. They also provide the motivation of Ah Gin as the primary perspective character and so serve a narrative purpose as well: Wong and his adopted son, Sam, emigrate farther north to British Columbia to escape the hatred and violence in California.

These chapters also further indict the racism embodied within the "Iron Chink" by using other nineteenth-century racist depictions of Chinese people. Opportunistic politicians, according to Wong, consciously exploited the volatile domestic conditions in China to make immigrants "scapegoats" (Ibid.: 88). They did this by configuring Chinese immigrants as "the yellow terror" or "the yellow peril," a sustained visual stereotype that dominated anti-Chinese political tracts during the late nineteenth century. Monica Chiu and Jeanette Roan have argued that "[a] history of racist representations, specifically those of Asians in the United States and Canada, haunts many Asian American graphic narratives" (para 5). Wong rewrites these "haunting" images in *Escape to Gold Mountain*, using the formal characteristics of the genre to contextualize them.

Specifically, Wong's approach to these static images (fig. 3) is to depict them within additional frames, thus graphically encapsulating them as objects to be studied, not simply used uncritically as propaganda or as part of an escapist narrative.

Fig. 3. A sequenced context embeds single-panel anti-Chinese images.
David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 88. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

This approach attempts to avoid a contemporary complaint about rendering race stereotypically, a conundrum for comics because the medium tends to distill representations to their most basic features and exaggerate them. Jared Gardner acknowledges this use of "stereotype and caricature" in "Same Difference: Graphic Alterity in the Work of Gene Luen Yang, Adrian Tomine, and Derek Kirk Kim." He argues that both the collaborative nature of the medium and its demands of readers to imagine the time and space between panels allow sequential comics to exploit the "tension between the two primary systems of communication in graphic narrative: image and text" (2010, 138). The "gap" between these two features "is precisely what makes the sequential comic so resistant to racialist work" (Ibid.: 138) because while "racism may share with comics some fundamental grammatical elements: caricature, stereotypes, condensation… racism requires precisely that which sequential comics makes impossible: unequivocal meanings, and a stable definition of us and them" (Ibid.: 142). Thus, while Wong's narrative may rely on the model minority myth overall, the formal features of graphic narrative and Wong's illustrations, at least, resist propagandistic racist depictions inherent in static images, especially in conjunction with an "unruly reader" who reads recursively.

In contrast to single-panel static images, Wong provides a sequence where a trio of white men, portrayed as greedy gamblers with short tempers, finally decide to attack Chinese (fig. 4).

Fig. 4. Repeated and mirrored images reflect the inward hatred that turns outward. David H.T. Wong, *Escape to Gold Mountain*, graphic narrative (paper print), 8.5 x 11 inches (21.6 x 27.9 cm), (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2012), 90. REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER.

In one page, he illustrates repeated postures in two panels separated by other individual white men angrily gathering a mob. The repetition of images suggests a transition from talk to action. The trio is first in an interior space having a heated interaction among themselves, a chair toppled and postures aggressive. In the second, parallel panel, the three men are in the repeated postures, although one is facing outward in a mirrored image, revealing the essential shift from internal to external violence. All are now holding weapons. The background is white, inferring an exterior shot, but also a more static, poster-like stereotype of "violent white men." In the sequence that follows, those men do indeed verbally abuse and physically attack and kill the Chinese. The images are gory: a full-body angle of one body that had been shot and then lynched; a two-shot of a Chinese man shot and with the top of his skull removed; a panel that depicts all the victims, most in shadow and lynched, but three bloody and mutilated; and two separate panels with close-ups of one man's queue and another with an amputated ring finger. This incident is dramatic and demands representation. To avoid sensationalism, however, Wong includes an informational panel that cites a scholarly source, the historiographical impulse intruding again upon the fictional narrative.

The reader is informed, but shocked, and forced to face a shameful reality that racism affects both white people and their victims. In the final pictorial panel of the sequence, a backdrop of fiery destruction in the background, a white child points at the "dead Chinese" beyond the frame and announces that they "sure look[s] stupid" (Wong 2012, 92). Rather than reprimand the child, the white mother says, "Child, all Chinamen look stupid" (Ibid.: 92). For Gardner's "unruly reader," this response echoes the beginning of the book when the white child slants his eyes, laughs, and says he is just joking around. What may have seemed somewhat innocent at the beginning of the narrative is much less innocent here, and the parallel behavior of these children shows little had changed from 1871 to 2006. Thus, Wong returns to the purpose of his book: to demonstrate the legacy of racism and racist acts on younger generations, ever mindful of the audience (both white and Chinese) that graphic narrative often implies.

The next chapter depicts how Ah Gin and Sam are forced to flee San Francisco in 1877. The focus remains on the economic and labor pressures that led to individuals to stir up anti-Chinese sentiment. One third of the chapter is focused on Denis Kearney, a California labor leader and powerful

orator known for long, hate-filled rallies that ended with "The Chinese Must Go" at the end of each. In one panel, Wong depicts a gang of boys throwing rocks at Chinese as they flee into the distance. A policeman encourages them with "Good hit boys!" (Ibid.: 94). On the next page, two horizontal panels dominate: the first depicts a rally with angry figures drawn abstractly and in shadow; the second shows a cityscape with even less distinct figures, a mass of rioters, drawn holding flags. Within the gutter of these two images readers imagine the causal connections, the additional meetings, the anger, hatred, and marches. These men fomented rioting for days in the city, causing four deaths and over $100,000 damage to property primarily owned by the Chinese (approximately $2.5 million in today's dollars). Wong breaks the frame of the second panel to show a close up of a gored Chinese man pierced in the chest with a stick. This stark image humanizes the hate and leads the reader back to the narrative of Ah Gin and his son. In the face of growing hatred, violence, and racist laws, they both go to Vancouver and the promise of a better life.

Unfortunately, that life is not easy, and after the California sections, the narrative continues a pattern of fictionalized history when Ah Gin encounters Sun Yat-sen in Hawaii or when Canadian artist Emily Carr encounters Wong's children outside the family's restaurant in Vancouver. While such fictional interventions could potentially undermine the truth-telling function of the narrative, Wong's admission of using "artistic license" (Ibid.: 225) in his rendering of his family's immigrant history in North America instead leverages the graphic narrative form to supply voice to the historically suppressed and the disenfranchised.

Ultimately, the trajectory of the narrative ends with a racial reconciliation fantasy that seems a little too tidy, perhaps reflecting the author's activist goals and, as Phung has argued, "a commemorative impulse [...] to memorialize" (2018, 139). The final chapters present an integrative portrait, a sort of personal truth and reconciliation commission in which two potential fathers-in-law who fought on opposite sides of World War II cry together in mutual understanding and in a shared goal "to see our children live the lives that were stolen from our youth" (Wong, 2012, 219) and put the past behind them. This sequence is followed by a return to the Iron Chink at the museum and a televised apology from the Canadian prime minister in 2006 and, in the afterword, "regret" from the U.S. Congress in 2011 and 2012. Monica Chiu notes in "Visual Realities of Race" that "a successful ethnic American story requires public sanction: the

suffering refugee who finds succor and success in America, the model minority encouraged by US opportunity, an adherence to what the majority accepts as typically ethnic American, sometimes more fiction than fact" (2014, 3). *Escape to Gold Mountain* includes suffering refugees and does indeed "re-inscribe" the model minority myth. However, it also uses the formal characteristics of the genre to provide context for those portrayals so that readers can understand and abhor Wong's truth, that is, *the* truth: the personal legacy and devastation of systemic racism and racist violence.

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