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The Textual Gutter: How Gene Luen Yang Redefines the Gutter in Boxers & Saints to Tell a Transnational Tale

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The Textual Gutter: How Gene Luen Yang Redefines the Gutter in *Boxers & Saints* to Tell a Transnational Tale

Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgments: Dr. Laura Beadling

The Textual Gutter: How Gene Luen Yang Redefines the Gutter in *Boxers & Saints* to Tell a Transnational Tale

Gene Luen Yang's career is marked by tales of transnationalism and how they shape identity. His stories epitomize what it means to live in a global community where cultural lines blur, and identity becomes the axis on which his stories so often turn. As an Asian-American cartoonist and writer whose parents are from China and Taiwan, most of Yang's narratives follow characters whose transnational identity is experienced through the juxtaposition of parables that highlight the nuanced differences and similarities between eastern and western culture. This conflict of identity, in its many forms, is the central theme in most of Yang's writings, like his graphic novels *American Born Chinese* and *Shadow Hero*, both an exploration of being Chinese and American. Yang's characters often grapple with their otherness, not feeling at home in either of the juxtaposed cultural experiences. Unsurprisingly, in *The "Asian Invasion": An Interview With Gene Luen Yang*, Yang states that the medium of comics is a home for multiculturalism because of its perception as an "outsider" medium, and comics attract those who feel voiceless. (125) Yang continues exploring otherness and identity with his 2013 epic, *Boxers & Saints* by evoking the liminality of a new kind of stylistic gutter, (the space between panels on a page)—the *textual gutter*.

Yang's historical fiction redefines how we look at the gutter by separating *Boxers & Saints* into two volumes, creating the *textual gutter* a cross-textual technique of using multiple volumes of graphic narrative to amplify the liminal (the internally disruptive and transformative) elements of a story. The *textual gutter*, as this paper defines it, represents a new kind of gutter that is both the physical, and metaphysical space between two or more physical books that evoke and amplifies the power of liminality, or liminal space, "the in-between moments... It is often a

period of discomfort, of waiting, and of transformation.” (Bunting, para. 1) which ultimately serves to focus in on the transnational themes of the tale. In *Boxers & Saints*, Yang incorporates a variety of stylistic narrative elements on the pages, (use of color and symbolic imagery) that embody the transnational aesthetic found throughout both texts and are amplified by the use of the *textual gutter*. The *textual gutter* Yang has created amplifies the narrative and stylistic choices within the texts and asks the audience to be proactive in their reading of *Boxers & Saints* as they move backward and forward within the chronology of the narrative, inhabiting the liminal space. This gives new, individual meaning to each text, culminating in an experience that challenges the audience to move between books and across cultures. Using the textual gutter as a retroactive lens, Yang is asking the reader to take part in the production of a transnational culture by inhabiting the liminal spaces with which globalization is formed. Understanding the textual gutter in Yang’s historical fiction, we can better understand how Yang takes the recursive role of the gutter and subverts it to create a new mode of meaning in our reading of graphic narratives. This paper will attempt to demonstrate how the *textual gutter* amplifies the liminality of the narrative and stylistic choices Yang incorporates, and ultimately, magnifies our understanding of the potent cultural forces at play within *Boxers & Saints*. And, hopefully, this will bring a new understanding of how the graphic narrative can be approached by readers and creators.

Boxers & Saints is a historical fiction set within the backdrop of the Boxer Rebellion. *Boxers* follows the story of Little Bao, a boy from Shandong (spelled "Shan-tung" in the text) who becomes a leader of the Boxer Rebellion. The story follows Bao from a village boy to a war hero, tracking the rationales of someone who might be called a terrorist by today’s standards. In this text, we see the violent clash of ideologies that cannot cohesively coexist.

Saints follows the story of "Four-Girl," a child from the same village as Bao who

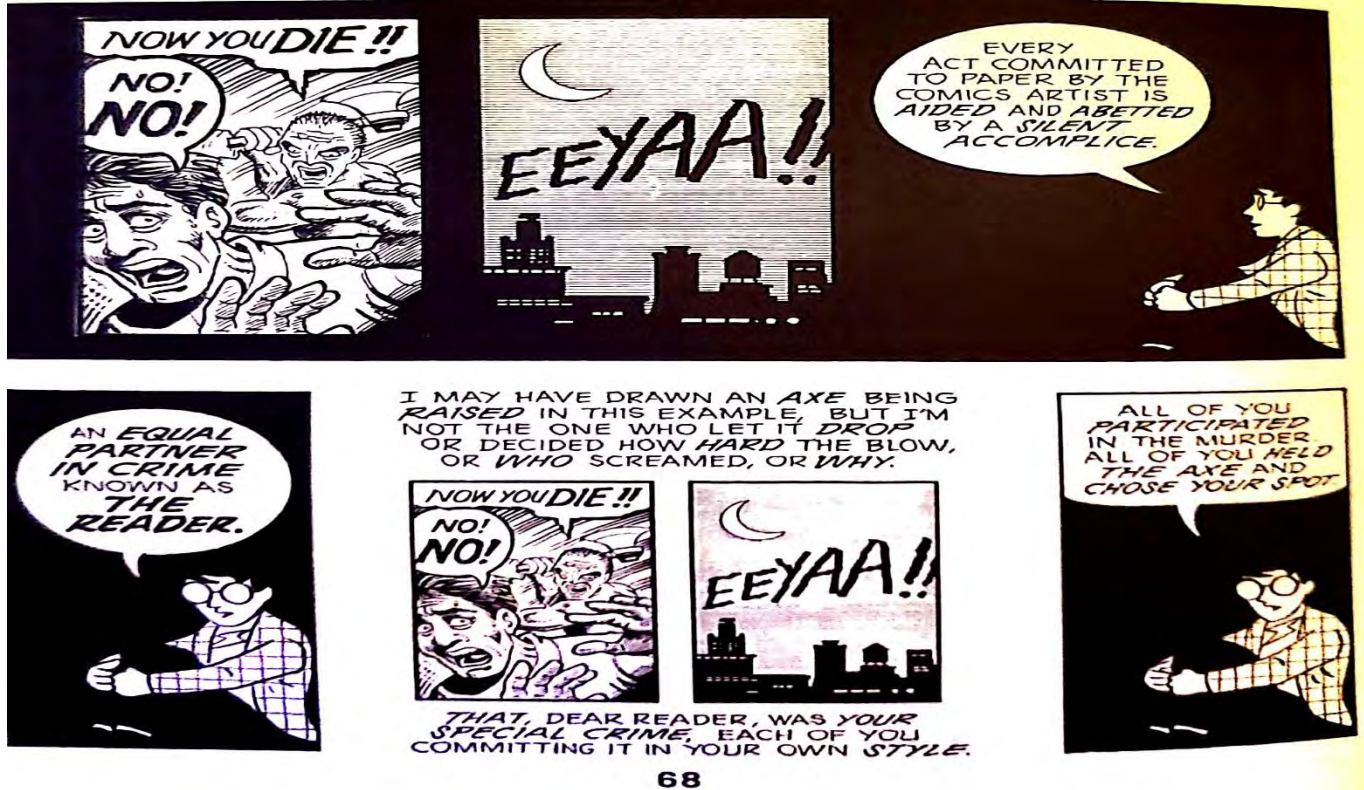
becomes a Catholic, adopts the name "Vibiana," and aspires to the glory of Joan of Arc. Throughout her story, Vibiana rejects her Chinese heritage, which has discarded her as Four-Girl, which also means Death-Girl, and embraces Christianity where her life is given meaning and purpose at the outset of the Boxer Rebellion. While each narrative is compelling in its own right, discussing and understanding the *textual gutter*, and how its presence is actively used to evoke the transformative elements of liminality, gives the reader a further depth of clarity on what is happening in this tale.

To understand the complexity of *Boxers & Saints* and the use of liminality, or liminal space, first, we'll examine the idea of the gutter from the traditional viewpoint of Scott McCloud and how Gene Luen Yang takes this concept and expands it into what this paper will refer to as the *textual gutter*. Again, the *textual gutter* is a cross-textual technique of using multiple volumes of graphic narrative to amplify the liminal (the internally disruptive and transformative) elements of a story. In comics, the gutter is the space between image panels, the nebulous zone between moments. It can be white space or a black line, but ultimately it serves to compartmentalize and organize, or disorient, the chronology of the narrative. Every time readers move from one image to the next, they cross the gutter. But the gutter does not just serve to break up the images. In fact, according to Scott McCloud in his groundbreaking work *Understanding Comics*, the gutter is the space in which the reader actively performs "closure" by interpreting the part to see the whole. (126) Others have written about the gutter outside of the context of comics. Erick Berlatsky focuses on image frames around paintings as gutters in "Lost in the Gutter: Within and Between Frames in Narrative and Narrative Theory." According to Berlatsky, the gutter is the place where the action is evoked between frames, it is a zone in which ideas are created within the reader's mind, evoking liminality. (12) But how does liminality or liminal space is the in-

between, the ever-changing, it is a subconscious and conscious place, it is the next step, and in the space of the graphic narrative, it functions entirely within the gutter.

According to Joe Bunting, “Liminality is the in-between moments... It is often a period of discomfort, of waiting, and of transformation.” (para. 1) But before metamorphosis can take place, chaos and destruction must occur. Liminality is the space in which the old and the new clash violently, jockeying for the future. Liminality exists between ideas, the axis on which change occurs; it’s the nebulous zone in which new ideas illicit transformation. The liminal zone is a space, the instance between ideas, the moment between images, it is the catalyst in which transformation, deconstruction, reformation, and realignment take place. Liminality can, and certainly does in the context of *Boxers & Saints*, facilitate and evoke a coalescence within the subconscious realm, the political (geo, identity, cultural), ideological, and narrative conflicts that manifest within the conscious mind of the reader.

McCloud examines the potency of the gutter as a place of liminality below:



From *Understanding Comics*, pg 68

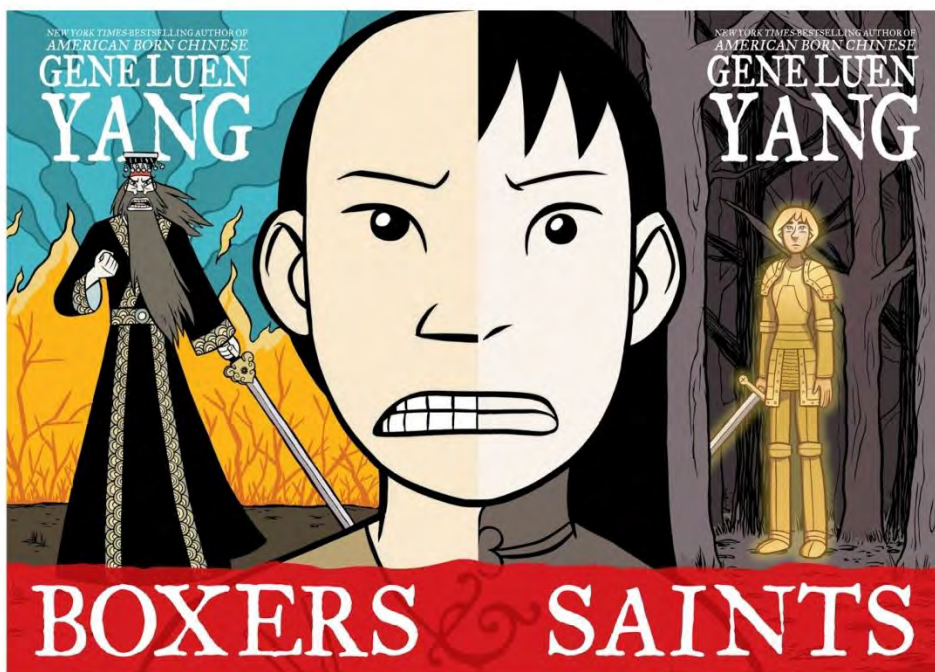
Here, McCloud demonstrates to the reader how closure is used in comics to make the reader both the passive observer *and* the active participant in creating a new moment. He does this by showing the image of the man raising his ax to kill the other man, and then cutting to the next panel with the onomatopoeia of the scream. Above, McCloud states that within this gutter we are complicit in the death of the man in so far as we actively participate in his destruction through our assumption of the result of the conflict even though we have no visual proof of this. It is here, in the gutter, we the readers become the destroyers and the creators, which makes us active in our reading. This is the gutter and in the gutter, we are also in the realm of liminal space. When readers turn the page, make an assumption, or fill in the blanks, they are becoming the agent of change and liminality. The reader is existing within the gutter. The gutter evokes

liminality within the reader and asks them to be liminal, to be there and not there, to exist in all places at once, and to be a part of the story in an intimate way by inhabiting the gutter and through this, the reader can inhabit the place of the other, the outsider, someone who exists in a constant state of transition, production and deconstruction, which extends beyond borders of self-identifying realities into other realities.

For example, Paul Jay examines this notion further in *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* by suggesting that liminal space is “where cultural production takes place...in both real and imagined borders.”(1) This statement rings true in the context of transnational identity and the Boxer Rebellion. Indeed, according to David Carter in, "Nationalism And Revisionism In East Asia.", many of the conflicts between and within nations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were fought among groups who strove to develop and maintain their identities. (178) While that is a broad claim, as it pertains to many conflicts throughout the last 200 years, this potent idea is undeniably at the center of the Boxer Rebellion. Fought from November 1899 to September 1901, the Boxer Rebellion was a war between China’s Qing Dynasty, its Boxer rebels, and the Eight-Nation Alliance. The war was fought over anti-Christian and pro-nationalist sentiments in China during the late 19th, and early 20th centuries. By the war’s end, over 140,000 people had lost their lives, 100,000 of those civilians. Consequentially, Yang has stated that what drew him to write about the Boxer Rebellion was the fact that it was the first truly transnational war fought over the identity of China. In many ways, it was the precursor to World War I and World War II, as it involved Eastern and Western nations. (Yang 128) Yang has stated that although in America the conflict is mostly overshadowed by the World Wars, in China, the loss of the Boxer Rebellion is considered a part of China’s century of humiliation, which has had a lasting influence on China, and its foreign

policy and identity on the global stage. (Yang 128) This is a central element to any transnational tale, the fractured and upended identity.

Indeed, Yang taps into this notion of fractured identity and humiliation and asks the reader to engage with the liminal aspects of transformation within the narrative of *Boxers & Saints* by making use of the *textual gutter*. This is evident from the moment one sees *Boxers* and *Saints* side-by-side:



Here are both books, two halves that make a whole. These images make a statement before the reader dives into the narrative, illustrating the fracture in identity that is at the heart of *Boxers & Saints*. The texts represent the fractured nation and ultimately a fractured cultural consciousness that is splitting itself to formulate a new identity.

By having the texts exist as separate entities rather than one large text with two interwoven narratives, Yang's textual gutter is evoking Scott McCloud and Paul Jay by creating a liminal space in which a new idea, (and in the case of this conflict, a new identity) can be formed. What

the textual gutter does here is twofold: it is both the physical representation of a fractured nation, fractured consciousness, and a fractured identity; and it is also operating as a liminal space by allowing the readers to move between books and piece together the internal conflicts shared by both protagonists utilizing the transformative nature of liminal space. In "Liminalities At Work: Chinese Professionals' Immigrant Identity Negotiations." Wu and Buzzanell look at Chinese immigrant workers, and the effects of liminal space,

“...conceptualizes a position of in-betweenness. It is a state of instability and “betwixt and between” structural positions. Second, it connotes a processual dimension (Beech, 2011). It sees this in-betweenness as a prolonged period during which individuals undergo constant change and sometimes oscillate between identities.” (3)

In that context, the textual gutter is evoking McCloudian sentiments, by asking the reader to be active in mending the fractured identity, both literally (when the reader puts the two texts together) and figuratively by moving through the liminal space. If it is within the gutter that the reader connects the dots and creates a new and unified reality, then it is also there that the reader can take part in the creation of new ideas (and by extension, new identities) in a way that the gutter normally does not facilitate on a single page.

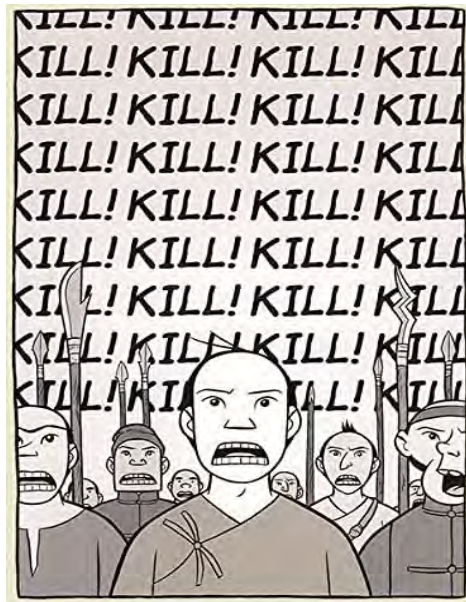
Yang's use of the *textual gutter* evokes moments of liminality and forces the audience of *Boxers & Saints* to “connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.” (McCloud 67) Yang's textual gutter creates a fissure, a divide, a new type of gutter that asks the reader to not simply read the texts but to interact with *Boxers & Saints* by physically moving from one text to the next, moving back and forth between both narratives instead of moving through them. So, if the gutter serves the purpose of making the reader a “willing and conscious collaborator,” (McCloud 67) then Yang does this with gusto by separating *Boxers &*

Saints into two individual texts.

In some respects, Gene Luen Yang redefines the gutter with his use of liminal space to make the readers collaborators in the establishment of a transnational identity. This is evident when you juxtapose two panels, one from *Boxers* and one from *Saints*:



From *Boxers* pg 224



From *Saints*, pg 159

Above, we see Bao and the Boxers, coming to Peking to destroy the Christian invaders, and in Bao's mind (pg. 224, left), he is the great spirit of the first emperor of China. His identity is no longer his own; he belongs to China. However, the image from *Saints* pg. 132 (right) illustrates what Vibiana sees atop the wall defending Peking: violent terrorists come to kill innocent people. This scene underscores how identity can be magnified by the *textual gutter* and allows the reader to exist within both places, to vacillate between the perspectives of hero and terrorist and inhabit a transformative space from one book to the other, to exist within the physicality of the *textual gutter* and the liminality of this space. This scene is made all the more potent by having them exist across the *textual gutter*, prompting the reader to pause and go back

and forth between texts. Ultimately, this forces the reader to be proactive in their understanding of this transnational conflict through the narrative. One must inhabit the liminal space of these texts, and the liminality, destructive and transformative as it is, creates tension and physical juxtaposition of conflicting internal identities. If the Boxer Rebellion was a war for the identity of China, a war that still influences China's identity and foreign policy to this day, then in many respects the Boxer Rebellion was a violent, bloody moment of liminality that Yang's 2013 epic, *Boxers & Saints* explores with precision. However, it bears discussing Yang's use of different visual (symbolic imagery and color scheme) and narrative elements within *Boxers & Saints* and how those elements work in conjunction with the textual gutter and are amplified by subconscious liminality, to engage the reader as they attempt to understand this transnational conflict.

First, we'll examine how narrative functions within *Boxers & Saints* by subverting the tropes of war stories and juxtaposing them in such a way that magnifies the battle for the nation's identity. The story is told from the perspective of two Chinese nationals, and not from two vastly different cultural perspectives. It would have been easy for Yang to make this historical fiction simply about the suffering of the Chinese at the hands of their colonial oppressors - which is certainly at the center of this- but by having two Chinese nationals operating as protagonists, we can see that the battle of ideologies is symptomatic of a civil war over China's identity. Going back to Carter's earlier sentiments about wars being fought over the national identity or a cultural consciousness, we can see that the notion of identity is the centerpiece within both *Boxers* and *Saints*. This is evident in the protagonist of *Saints*, a Chinese national whose life has little meaning as Four-Girl until she accepts Catholicism and is born again as Vibiana. Her new name is a result of her Christianity, which is a manifestation of her transnational identity. Being

both a Chinese national and a member of a religious group of foreign origin is at the heart of her conflict. Indeed all of the turmoil Vibiana faces within *Saints* is not only a crisis of faith but of identity as well, culminating in her martyrdom in defense of her identity.



From *Saints*, pg 161



From *Saints*, pg 159

The above scene takes place at the end of *Saints* when Vibiana encounters Bao for the second time in the epic. Bao is asking Vibiana to renounce her faith, and in return, he will spare her life. Vibiana refuses to give up her new identity (her faith) and Bao kills her. At this moment, the ideological differences only mask the war for identity. Bao's nationalist agenda and his value for a "pure" China are about to violently clash with the identity that Vibiana has adopted from

the Christian missionaries. If the soul of China is tainted by Christian influence, then Bao is the violent reaction to that change. Indeed, the violence that Bao perpetrates in this scene harkens back to the violence and chaos that happens within the liminal space McCloud mentions. Vibiana is a martyr for her ideologies, certainly, but the reason Bao kills her is the attempt to reclaim identity. Again, Bao asks Vibiana to renounce her Christian name, to give up her newfound identity; instead, she offers him a prayer:



From *Saints*, pg 160

Yet, the audience sees nothing. There's no dialogue box, just both protagonists and the space. Their prayer is silent on page 160. It is within this silent, empty space that we come back to the liminal elements found in Yang's historical fiction. What Vibiana says isn't as relevant, nor the ideology as important as the need to hold onto her identity, the crucial component of her

story arc. This scene underpins the calamity that occurs within liminal space. By seeing the conflict between both protagonists, one sees the development of a transnational identity. Aside from seeing each other in a brief exchange as children, neither Vibiana nor Bao has had any significant interaction with the other up to this moment. Moreover, they are both situated between two walls in a nondescript place, again evoking the idea of liminality through the visual text's manifestation of a gutter.

In the scene after pg. 160, Bao kills Vibiana. But right before the violence occurs, there is an emptiness, a crossing of ideas, a moment wherein Bao is considering the implications of what would happen if he kills her. The page above demonstrates this. The silence, the hesitation, the moment of calm. Bao is offered the “gift” of Vibiana’s prayers, which are no more ideological than they are a manifestation of her new cultural identity imprinting on Bao who later converts (albeit in desperation) to Christianity as shown in the pages below.



From *Saints*, pg 167



From *Saints*, pg 168

Later in *Saints*, Bao wakes up among the dead, realizing he's just survived an assault on Peking. He climbs out of a pit of the bodies of his dead compatriots and tries to sneak away until he's accosted by two British officers. In an attempt to save his own life, Bao recites the prayer Vibiana taught him pages before. Here on pages 167 and 168, we see Bao, someone who has claimed to have been fighting the foreign devils, who killed Vibiana because she wouldn't reveal her Chinese name, converting by saying a prayer. Again, the words are unknown to the reader, but he has assumed a new identity and betrayed his ideals in the name of survival. To compound Bao's loss of identity, the reader sees this scene at the end of *Saints*, which is primarily about Vibiana, whereas the end of *Boxers*, which is mostly about Bao, ends with him seemingly dead in a pit. It's through this reading and crossing of the textual gutter that readers must juxtapose these two narratives, and inhabit the liminal space that contains all the potent elements that this

narrative explores. The effect and potency of identity as liminality becomes magnified by the *textual gutter* through the use of symbolic imagery.

Yang's use of symbolic imagery serves a dual function in *Boxers & Saints*. First, it operates as a metaphor for the protagonists living in this era of war and change. Second, it serves to tap into the liminality of the reader's subconscious by establishing a new cultural identity that is transnational at its core.



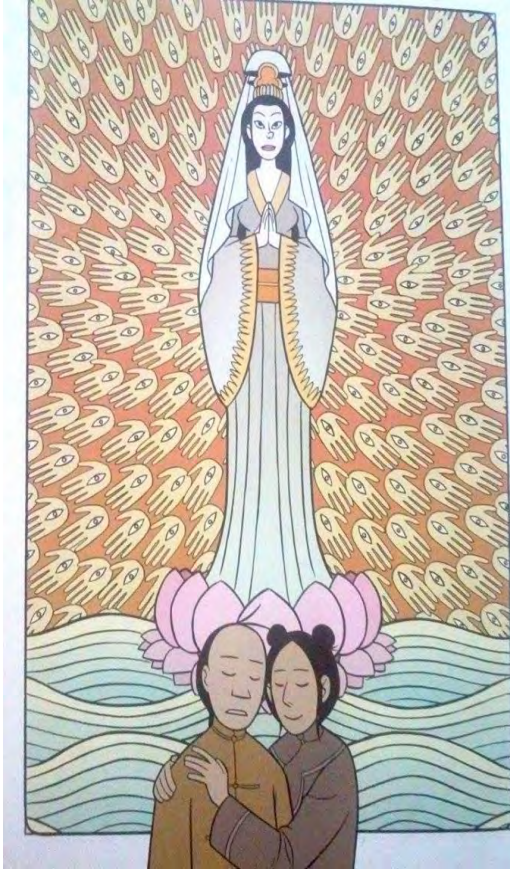
From *Saints*, pg 158

For example, above we see Christ, having just risen from the dead after being martyred, a foreshadowing of what will happen to Vibiana, who eventually dies for Bao's sins. Christ's hands and feet are pierced and bloody, but in place of empty holes are eyes representing the third eye of Taoism. Richard Rhor, a Franciscan friar ordained to priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church, states in his book *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics* that the third eye is representative of reason and non-dualistic thinking. (10)

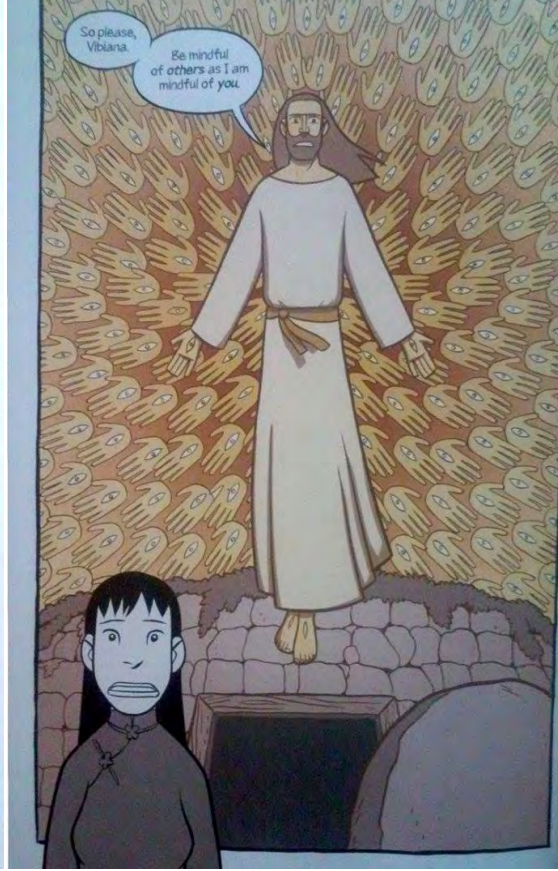


From *Saints*, pg 157

By placing the eyes within the violated spaces of Christ's body, Yang has combined recognizable symbols to represent the byproduct of a new cultural identity formed within the liminality of the empty spaces. This creates a powerful sensation within the reader that the dualism of the conflict, of the identity crisis, is pointless. Through death, the destruction of the old, and a fusion of the two conflicting ideologies/identities, a new culture can form, and Vibiana is the possibility of that. Similarly in *Boxers*, Mei-Wen tells Bao the tale of Guan-Ying, the Goddess of compassion. (below, left)



From *Boxers*, pg 282



From *Saints*, pg 158

When juxtaposed, the two images show similarities with the punctured hands containing the third eye. What makes these images so potent is the use of Yang's textual gutter. Each image exists within different texts. The image on the left is from *Boxers* and the image on the right is from *Saints*. These images both inhabit one full page within each text and show how it is through stories and spirituality that new modes of meaning and new identities can be formed. And by having the reader move back and forth between the texts to examine the images which outline the parallels of both protagonists' journeys, we can better understand how Yang's textual gutter forces the reader to be proactive. Yang is asking the reader to stop and go back, to move from *Boxers* to *Saints* and from *Saints* to *Boxers* while paying attention to what makes these images transformative: their meaning is powerful alone in their respective texts, but when juxtaposed

together the similarities make the ideas within the narrative transform within the liminality of the *textual gutter*. This transformative and culturally charged juxtaposition is further demonstrated with Lark Pien's use of color.

Finally, to understand how the stylistic elements make *Boxers & Saints* as much a transnational tale as it is historical fiction, we must briefly examine the way the texts are colored, how the use of color is informed by how the narratives are structured, and how those two elements are magnified by the *textual gutter*. The color of *Boxers & Saints*, done over Yang's illustrations by Lark Pien, helps magnify the transnational elements of each story's narrative style. For example, in *Boxers*, Pien's coloring is vibrant. The bombastic and exciting nature of the Opera gods is illustrated through the use of bright colors:



128

Image from *Boxers*, 128

These images contrast to the muted colors of *Saints*:



From *Saints*, pg 3

There are also influences from American comics permeating throughout these volumes. Yang stated that *Boxers* is representative of traditional American superhero comics. The colors are vibrant, the scale of the narrative is epic, and action is at the center of Bao's story. Conversely, *Saints* used dull colors and a more personal narrative style to reflect as Yang called "the bio-comic style," (129) of Vibiana's story. By creating the *textual gutter*, Yang utilized liminal space to facilitate a change in narrative and aesthetic tone that is magnified by the *textual gutter* that divides these two texts. It harkens back to the idea of dual identities and magnifies differences to ultimately subvert them to show a new identity. By making readers collaborators

rather than observers, Gene LuenYang evokes liminality within the reader by moving through the gutter. In doing so, he craftily magnifies the potent cultural forces at play within *Boxers & Saints* at a time when the identity of China was at stake.

Gene Luen Yang's *Boxers & Saints* is the culmination of transnational artistry which takes the conventions of the gutter and redefines them by splitting the narrative of *Boxers & Saints* into separate texts. Yang's textual gutter doesn't muddle the transnational nature of this story by fracturing it, but rather forces the reader to participate in the schism over China's identity by inhabiting the liminal space through the use of the *textual gutter*. This liminality forces the readers to inhabit those liminal elements of the story more intimately, by creating a tactile experience that forces readers to compare pages, juxtapose images and ideas, then go through and reread with a deeper understanding and commitment to the transformational elements of that liminal space. This can ultimately give readers a greater understanding of a conflict that is largely overshadowed in the annals of American history and forces them to be alive within the narrative, to exist within the liminal space, and to cross cultures. *Boxers & Saints* isn't just asking us to think about two protagonists. It puts us in the position of examining each subjectively with the knowledge we have of the other, rather than simply alternating, the reader is instead asked to hold both in his or her mind's eye and inhabit the liminality of it all.

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