

Comfortably Uncomfortable:
Challenging anti-Asian bias in Spain and the United States through the Graphic Essay

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Alison Posey

Division of International Studies and Languages, Pepperdine University

In the United States, the recent murders of Vicha Ratanapakdee, Yao Pan Ma, Michelle Go, GuiYing Ma, and Yan Zhiwen, along with mass killings such as the 2021 Atlanta Spa shootings, have catalyzed a growing national movement to *Stop Asian Hate* in protest of racist violence against Asians and Asian Americans during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2020, attacks on members of the AAPI community have resulted in a groundswell of public protests, demonstrations, and rallies across the United States, and supported significant research into questions of anti-Asian bias in this country; in 2021, California legislators allocated \$1.4 dollars to the national nonprofit Stop AAPI Hate to help combat discrimination (Wong, 2021). Despite these accomplishments, however, assaults on communities of color continue to surge; in California, for example, hate crimes stemming from racial bias increased so much between 2020 and 2021 that Attorney General Rob Bonta described the situation as an “epidemic of hate” (Shafer, 2022).

As a result of concerted efforts by Stop AAPI Hate and related organizations like Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March, educators are embracing social justice pedagogies that question the relationship between power, privilege, and bias (Adams, 2010) and incorporate current events into classroom discussions. Culturally relevant education is increasingly seen as a viable strategy to tackle curricular mandates that have historically been “guided by Whiteness” (Muhammad, 2020, p. 40). Pedagogies must reflect the lived experiences of a new generation of students closely connected to the world around them, who have come of age confronting “the deceptions drilled into them in school about the fundamental freedom of our nation” (Jones & Hagopian, 2020, p. 5). In the face of ongoing violence towards the AAPI community, this article examines the past use of Quan Zhou Wu’s (1989, Algeciras) 2020 graphic essay, *Gente de aquí. Gente de allí: ensayo gráfico sobre migrantes y españoles* [*People from Here. People from There. A Graphic Essay about Migrants and Spaniards*] in the college-level Spanish literature class as a strategic tool for fostering social justice dialogue while building transatlantic connections about the challenges faced by Asian diasporic communities both in the United States and Spain.¹ As a graphic essay, Zhou Wu’s *Gente* blends longform narrative and vivid, colorful imagery to examine xenophobia and anti-Asian bias in Spain through dual critical and personal lenses, interpolating contemporary research on racism and identity with the author’s own experiences as the Spanish-born daughter of Chinese immigrants. *Gente* was the first assigned text in an advanced topics curriculum that examined the intersection of politics, identity, and ethnicity in twenty-first century Spain through the contemporary Peninsular novel, theater, and film.

As Carmen Granda (2021) has shown, issues of racial diversity and racism in contemporary Spanish culture are rarely addressed in any foreign language classroom. This,

¹ All translations are my own.

coupled with the frequent tendency for undergraduates to imagine Spain as a fully white country with little to no ethnic or racial diversity, has generated the common but incorrect belief that racism just isn't a problem in Spain like it is in the United States. Even in the college classroom, this misconception tends to persist, as "in many traditional Spanish classrooms, issues of discrimination tend to focus on the experiences of Latinx immigrants... Rarely does the curriculum consider other migrants' dangerous journeys and struggles to adjust to a new country and culture" (Granda, 2021, p. 341). Indeed, undergraduate students expressed considerable surprise at learning that Spaniards of Asian descent exist, despite Chinese migrants forming the fifth-largest group of foreign-born residents in the country in 2020 with over 220,000 in residence (Observatorio permanente de la inmigración, 2020).

Despite a lack of awareness about this community, rising rates of violence—the latest government report identified racism as the root cause of the majority of hate crimes in Spain (Oficina Nacional de Lucha contra los Delitos de Odio, 2020)—have brought US-based antiracist organizing like *Stop Asian Hate* to Spanish consciousness for the first time. Facing increased instability and brutality during the ongoing COVID pandemic, a new generation of *chiñoles*, or the Spanish-born children of Chinese parents, have challenged the traditional concept of "Spanishness" in the country, forging new identities that celebrate their diverse cultural backgrounds. Crucially, young *chiñoles* like Zhou Wu take pride in identifying as both Spanish and Chinese. Since the publication of her first graphic novel, the autobiographical memoir *Gazpacho agridulce* [*Bittersweet Gazpacho*] in 2015, Quan Zhou Wu has emerged as a vocal advocate for Asian and Asian diasporic populations in Spain and as a leading antiracist activist in both the US and Europe. Her graphic essay's frank discussion of racism suffered by

Asians and other minorities in Spain reminds students that discrimination exists on both sides of the Atlantic.

In using Zhou Wu's *Gente* as the introductory text in a contemporary Peninsular literature class, undergraduates began the semester building an interpretative framework for analyzing and discussing the complex themes of race, racism, and bias in both the United States and Spain. Structured around a rich variety of key social justice topics, including stereotypes, integration, xenophobia, implicit bias, identity, and immigration, among others, and accompanied by detailed explanations and vivid illustrations, *Gente* served as an approachable introduction for many undergraduate students—and in particular white students—who reported unfamiliarity with these topics, having never directly examined them in a college classroom regardless of their year of study. Others were curious to investigate topics that their political or cultural backgrounds deemed as taboo. It is important to keep in mind that despite the international growth of movements like *Stop Asian Hate* and Black Lives Matter, the increasing polarization and politicization of curricula—since 2020, book bans in K-12 schools in the United States have risen dramatically (Shearer, 2022)—means that even in an advanced topics' classroom, most students were encountering concepts related to social justice for the first time. As a result, some expressed shock at being asked to discuss these so-called “divisive” topics in the context of contemporary literature. Yet, this is the chief goal of fostering social justice dialogue in the classroom: to create a course “in which the perspective (whatever the specific curricular content) calls into question the relations of power and privilege” in order to simultaneously expose and oppose racial injustices around the world (Adams, 2022, p. 62).

In class discussions, identifying common ground between the experiences of discrimination Zhou Wu describes in *Gente* and that from students' own lives pushed

undergraduates to develop critical awareness through which they formed crucial connections between a foreign culture and their own. For undergraduates, surprise at the existence of Asian Spaniards eventually gave way to indignation at racist discrimination in Spain, which in turn prompted reflection on the United States' own enduring struggle with anti-AAPI bias and violence towards its minorities. Zhou Wu's (2020) tongue-in-cheek discussion of whether or not she should eat her pet cat (and thus fulfill the stereotype that the Chinese eat pets) was both laughable in its artificiality *and* uncomfortably familiar to undergraduates who had heard its echoes in their own communities. Examining these stereotypes through collaborative group written responses, students were quick to identify that *Gente* engages with racial stereotype not to reproduce it, but rather to call attention to how its dissemination—especially through contemporary social media sites like Twitter, TikTok, or Instagram—harms members of racial minority communities. Asking students to debate *why* Zhou Wu would purposefully include offensive racial stereotypes in a graphic essay devoted to antiracism not only generated meaningful conversation in the target language (several wondered ¿si la autora es racista? [if the author is racist?]), but also helped undergraduates recognize the subversive role that contemporary literature plays in resisting discriminatory ideologies through satire.

The interactive nature of *Gente* played a key role in heightening awareness of the ubiquity of racist tropes in both the United States and Spain; throughout the graphic essay, Zhou Wu frequently asks for reader contribution. *Gente* features blank spaces, empty lines, and hashtags (#gentedeaquígentedeadí) that require readers to interact with the text in both a physical and virtual sphere by publishing their beliefs on social media. Readers are asked to share their thoughts on controversial topics and give their views on hot-button issues like integration, racism, and belonging, among others. During a section examining racial stereotype, for example,

alongside an offensive drawing of a Chinese man, Zhou Wu (2020) lists seven commonly-held misconceptions about her community—such as that the Chinese are kung-fu masters—but leaves three blank lines at the end of her list for readers to add their own stereotypes and share them online with the graphic essay’s hashtag. In assigning students to prepare weekly responses to the interactive sections of *Gente*, they actively engaged in the uncomfortable process of identifying and confronting widely-held racist misbeliefs about the AAPI and Asian communities that circulated within their cultures and countries. Despite initially reporting feeling uncomfortable over time, students responded positively to these weekly assignments, as reinforcing the idea of discomfort as “a natural and often necessary part of learning” (Chávez & Longerbeam, 2016, p. 51) affirmed their experiences and emotions during class discussions of these difficult topics. In using *Gente* to facilitate the critique and deconstruction of racist beliefs, students were empowered to recognize and respond to discrimination both at home and overseas, with one student concluding that “racism isn’t just an American problem, it’s an everywhere problem.”

With its critical examination of the challenges faced by Asian Spaniards and other immigrants in Spain, *Gente* serves as a point of departure for discussions about xenophobia, nationalism, and populism that could be employed in a variety of foreign language education contexts. Although used here in an advanced level course, Zhou Wu’s approachable mix of the visual and the verbal marks the graphic essay as an accessible introduction to social justice topics in the Spanish language, and brief excerpts could easily serve as resources for vocabulary or cultural learning in an intermediate to advanced Spanish language class. In *Gente*’s embrace of “a pedagogy of discomfort,” the author actively creates a radical “disjuncture that initiates critical deliberation on one’s experiences, thoughts, feelings, and assumptions” (Nolan & Molla, 2018, p. 732). Beyond contesting discriminatory ideologies through social justice dialogue,

Gente asks students to become comfortable with addressing the uncomfortable in order to question ideologies that sustain racial injustices and thus stand up for the victims of discriminatory violence across the world.

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