



## **Liminality in Immigration-Adjacent Stories: A Critical Content Analysis of Identity Negotiation in Intercultural Graphic Novels**

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### **Abstract**

As educators and researchers with experiences related to historically marginalized students, we endeavored to provide a space to reveal their underrepresented stories, and we propose that intercultural graphic novels can serve as an emergent and transformative liminal space to help them navigate multiple identities. As a foundational step in the application of graphic novels in multilingual education, and under the tenets of Identity Negotiation Theory and Multimodality, we conducted a critical content analysis to examine six intercultural graphic novels. This study finds that the characters' identity negotiation process- containing identity insecurity, identity inclusion, identity transformation, and "satisfactory" identity negotiation- forms a dynamic liminal space, and characters navigate in this in-between status. Also, we found that multiple modes contribute to revealing characters' different identities and revealing their stories. Our findings will be helpful to inform additional studies on the use of graphic novels to embrace intercultural, immigrant, and immigrant-adjacent students' voices in multilingual education.

**Keywords:** identity negotiation, graphic novels, critical content analysis, multimodality, liminality, multilingual education

## Introduction

After saying goodbye to the undergraduate teacher education students, my first teaching section as a Graduate Assistant Instructor was over. I (Author 1) locked the door, walked back to the office, and sighed, “What a disaster!” I was silent when students mentioned that Jimmy O. Yang would come to the university because I did not know that he is a well-known Asian American comedian. It was an overwhelming moment for me as I realized I was no longer a teacher working in a middle school in my native China. Instead, I was a Ph.D. student, studying abroad in an American research university and working as a teaching assistant. Without a familiar cultural and language environment, I have struggled with an identity transition process, that has involved emotional vulnerability and identity insecurity.

Then, when I read the graphic novel *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006) for my Teaching Children’s Literature class, I was drawn to the story of protagonist Jin Wang struggling with his dual ethnic identities, American and Chinese. I related to the Chinese culture, especially the story of the Monkey King depicted in it. When I talked with Author 2 about my identity negotiation experiences in reading and teaching *American Born Chinese*, it sparked a conversation about identity and interculturality in graphic novels. As a lifelong reader of comics, Author 2 had recently served on the Lynd Ward Graphic Novel Prize jury as well as publishing several columns on comics and education (Griffith, 2019, 2021, 2022), so he strongly believes in the power of comics and other visual literature in the classroom. As a White American male, he provided a different perspective, relating to identity negotiation from a distanced and relatively normative coming-of-age experience. Author 2’s role in this research became that of a “critical friend” (Costa & Kallick, 1993), recommending graphic novels and scholarly readings, helping to select texts and refine methods, and providing feedback.

Without a unified definition for the genre of intercultural graphic novels, we refer to the term *intercultural* in our paper as “the communication process between members of different cultural communities” (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 16). Due to their multiple identities, characters in graphic novels can encounter intercultural processes in various contexts. In the intercultural process, instead of belonging to one community or identity, characters are floating in what Land et al. (2014) call a “tunnel” (p. 204): a fluid and dynamic liminal space. Liminality is characterized as “a liquid space, simultaneously transforming and being transformed by the learner as he or she moves through it” (Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 380). What we argue is that characters in intercultural graphic novels exist within this creative, emergent, and provisional space, where they experience tensions, confusion, and transformation.

In intercultural graphic novels where characters negotiate their multiple identities and struggle within this emergent tunnel, characters may enter a liminal or in-between space where “people struggle to find equilibrium between the outer expression of change and their inner relationships with it” (Tuana & Scott, 2020, p.122). Characters may move back and forth in the identity negotiation process, walk through insecurity and security, and create their liminal spaces, but we wonder how characters interact with their liminal spaces and how these spaces are constructed in multimodal graphic novels.

The term “identity” has been widely studied in social science, and researchers from various fields have proposed identity theories that draw from nuanced directions. However, to align with our research interest in the exploration of identity negotiation within intercultural graphic novels, we identified identity negotiation theory (INT) (Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2005, 2015) to be the overarching framework that guided our study. “Identity” in INT refers to “our reflective views of ourselves and other perceptions of our self-images—at both the social identity and the personal identity level” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 212). Social identity includes cultural or ethnic memberships, and personal identities

cover unique attributes related to individuals. The theory consists of ten core assumptions of identity negotiation, which clarify the process and outcome components in intercultural contexts. For instance, Ting-Toomey explains the contexts of identity emotional security and identity emotional vulnerability in assumption 3 and identity differentiation in stigmatized membership identity in assumption 4. To grapple with the identity negotiation process, we discuss the negotiation of sociocultural and personal identities based on these ten core assumptions.

Furthermore, considering how characters' identities were presented in multiple modes in graphic novels, we additionally utilized the theory of multimodality as a secondary framework to describe potentials and affordances in visual sociocultural contexts in which characters are embedded. Multimodality considers how information is delivered through complementary modes including visual images, design elements, and written language (Jewitt & Kress, 2003, as cited in Serafini, 2010, p. 87). Each mode can express divergent meanings, and choices extend and overlap in multimodal texts, offering the expanded potential for meanings (Kress & Selander, 2012, p. 267). Because multiple modes, including linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, tactile, and spatial, contribute to making meanings (Cope & Kalantzis, 2013, p. 10), we drew from these resources to interrogate how multimodality represents the identity negotiation process and how mankind produce signs, symbols, and narratives-as producers and interpreters, and as learners (Kress & Selander, 2012, p. 267).

Therefore, drawing from identity Negotiation Theory (INT) (Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2005, 2015) and Multimodality (Kress, 2004; Serafini, 2010), we conducted a critical content analysis of six selected texts to answer the following research questions:

1. How do characters negotiate their multiple identities in intercultural contexts in graphic novels?
2. How do multimodal features of graphic novels contribute to showing identity negotiation?

## **Literature Review**

As one of the most circulated categories in libraries (MacDonald, 2013), graphic novels have been recognized for prestigious literary awards. *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* (Spiegelman, 1986) was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1992, which first legitimized and validated graphic novels as serious literature with great promise, but it would take until 2020 for a graphic novel, *New Kid* (Craft, 2019) to win the Newbery medal. Yang (2008) described the popularity of graphic novels everywhere in daily life, including classrooms, bookstores, and popular culture in his panel (as cited in Brozo et al., 2014, p. 4). Though the study of graphic novels is rapidly growing, there is a lack of consensus on the terminology around graphic novels. In our study, we adopted *graphic novel* as our primary term, which is defined as book-length comics that read as stories (Weiner & Eisner, 2012) and encompass multiple genres and highlight more topics and themes in intricate narratives and dynamic images (Brozo et al., 2014, p. 5). As we explained generally in the introduction, graphic novels embrace liminal space through their conventions, including gutters and layout. We examined more features in the following sections to reveal the role of liminality in graphic novels and unpack identity in graphic novels utilized in education.

### **Liminality in Graphic Novels**

The term liminality, which was first coined by Arnold van Gennep and defined by Victor Turner (1967) as “the state of being betwixt and between” (p. 93), is intertwined with Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) concept of a borderland, which she introduced as a “vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary...a constant state of transition” (p. 3). Jacobs (2016) noticed liminality in children's books in the gap of texts by focusing on the page break—a physical

space between pages—which signifies something unsaid and filled in by readers. Her analysis extended liminality to narratives, and centers readers in her explanation of liminal spaces as moments where “the audience is simultaneously being pushed outward by the temporal and spatial divide from one opening to the next and pulled into a more active role in the making of meaning” (Jacobs, 2016, p. 359).

Like in the reading of picture books, graphic novels’ medium opens possibilities of liminal spaces for readers because of the physical act of turning pages. Readers “fill in the natural gaps created by the page breaks to make meaning and to construct a continuous narrative by speculating on what might have happened between the pages” (Sipe & Brightman, 2009, p. 68). As Chute (2008) argued, pages in comics are a deviation from the regular intervals compared to other literature, providing space and time challenging the dominant storytelling (p. 456). Low (2012) also argued that readers must take on the role of figurative co-author to construct meanings and fill the gaps as they turn the pages (2012, p. 373).

However, unlike picture books, unique conventions, including panels and the gutter, contribute to the complex multimodal system in comics. Interpreting meaning in comics depends on linking panels and blank spaces between each panel, named the gutter, which serves as the liminal space for readers to construct meanings. McCloud (1993) emphasized the crucial role of the gutter, which “plays host to much of the magic and mystery that are at the very heart of comics” (p. 67).

Low (2012) described the communication between readers and the gutter as “gutterance” (p. 372). Readers are invited to fill the gap with their linguistic and cultural repertoires, contributing to a divergent and fluid liminal space where readers collaborate in the storytelling. In Ghiso and Low’s (2013) study on revealing students’ stories in multimodal texts, they argued that students’ detailed immigration experiences are hidden in the gutters, working as the liminal space, which opens boundless possibilities and meanings (p. 30). Sanders (2021) also emphasized gutters in comics and advocates a “Gutter Future,” in which readers “embrace fluidity, the messy ebbs and flows of un/learning and be/coming” (p. 315).

The gutters and page breaks offer the spatial and temporal space where readers can speculate and become, where readers can break the boundary of linear reading in traditional literacy texts, and where readers, especially multilingual readers, can negotiate their multiple identities and offer alternative narratives. Moreover, compared to non-visual texts, the medium of graphic novels invites readers to transit from one panel to another, “not always linearly depending on page layout” (Rodríguez-Astacio & Low, 2023, p. 640). The nonlinear and multidirectional reading approaches contribute to liminality as readers transact with the texts. Readers are invited to choose any reading paths they want and enter the texts without following the path predetermined by the authors in non-visual texts (Kress, 2004, p. 114; Jewitt, 2005, p. 329).

Other than the liminality in the gutter and the act of turning the page, we argue that liminality exists in the boundaries between written languages and images. As “flatlanders” (Sousanis, 2015), readers are trapped in boundaries and limitations of sight. However, as Sousanis (2015) commented that “borders become links” (p. 37), we argue that with multidimensional and multimodal approaches, boundaries, presented in liminal spaces, encompass connectedness. The underrepresented and hidden immigration-adjacent stories about characters’ identity negotiation in these intercultural graphic novels will emerge by moving back and forth across the boundaries between text and image.

## **Identity in Graphic Novels and Its Significance to Education**

Given the unique conventions of graphic novels, researchers have noticed students' various identities reflected in their dialogue with graphic novels. Meek (1982) assumed readers have dual identities: the teller and the told (p. 290). Readers are told stories by the author, but they also become tellers as they interpret the words to construct their own meanings. In research related to intercultural contexts in graphic novels, identity representation is prominently featured. Schwarz and Crenshaw (2011) displayed how graphic novels can touch on questions of identity. Ghiso and Low (2013) argued that valuing multimodal narratives invites multiple representations, offering students a space to produce their own stories related to their inherent immigration repertoires (p. 33). Low (2017) investigated the medium of graphic novels in a participant's reading and composing practices where a student "repositions himself as an accomplished reader and writer" (p. 41) to reflect on their identities and restore themselves. Helsel (2018) regarded the graphic novel as a vital medium for immigrant adolescents by unveiling the acculturation process (p. 138). Additionally, graphic novels give voice to minority students by presenting their alternative views of culture, history, and human life (Schwarz, 2002, p. 264).

The affordances of graphic novels to reveal stories stem from the interplay of visual narratives and written languages. McCloud (1993) wrote, "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (p. 9), and pictures in graphic novels are expressive and informative for identity and cultural representations. For example, multilingual students have been encouraged to tell their family stories in a multimodal way (Chun, 2009, p. 151), and Danzak (2011) observed that students included flags, national colors, and food in their graphic journals to express their cultural heritage and represent their cultural identities (p. 192). Even without proficiency in a written language, students can relate their immigration stories to a graphic novel through images (Kelly & Ascutto, 2022, p. 42).

As depicted, well-described research on graphic novels has affirmatively acknowledged the importance of graphic novels in representing identities, the crucial role of visual narratives in stories unveiled in education, and liminality in graphic novels. However, we identified some gaps that our study contributes to addressing. Previous research identifies liminal spaces in students' interactions with graphic novels, shaped by unique conventions such as gutters, page breaks, and layout, but the boundaries between images and written language can also create liminal spaces where characters in multimodal texts negotiate their identities in order to resonate with marginalized students' experiences. Therefore, we need to create a space to clarify the characters' identity negotiation processes within these liminal spaces. Furthermore, while researchers have recognized the power of visual representation, the nuances of the interplay in multimodal texts deserve further exploration. In this study, we detail how characters in these intercultural graphic novels navigate their identities within the liminal spaces created by the multimodal narratives. In the following sections, we not only highlight the stories revealed in their identity negotiation, but we also examine functions of multimodality.

## **Methodology**

We conducted a critical content analysis to arrive at detailed and multiple modes of description of the identity negotiation process in intercultural graphic novels. Content analysis was defined by Krippendorff (2003) as "a systematic reading of a body of texts, images, and symbolic matter" (p. 3), and we followed Short's (2017) step-by-step guidelines to examine within, through, and beyond the texts. By engaging in the multimodal content analysis within these graphic novels, we revealed characters' ethnic identity navigation represented in multiple modes. Moreover, based on our close reading of the multimodal texts, we moved beyond to unveil their immigration-adjacent stories of

marginalized identities to challenge dominant narratives, with the goal of disrupting stereotypes and bias and making space for historically marginalized identities and stories.

### Data Sources

To address our research questions, shaped by our experience and the gaps identified in the literature review, we aligned two theories for our framework: identity negotiation theory and multimodality. We then identified six intercultural graphic novels based on a specific set of criteria (See Table 1). First, given the requirement of close reading and in-depth analysis in critical content analysis, we selected a small sample of books primarily encompassing recent award-winning and popular graphic novels. Also, to describe identity negotiation in diverse contexts, we selected broadly to include various sub-genres, cultures, ethnicities, languages, and histories. Moreover, to investigate identity negotiation in multiple modes, all six graphic novels unpack stories through full and plain images.

**Table 1.** This chart lists our selected texts and significant information about each.  
*Selected Books*

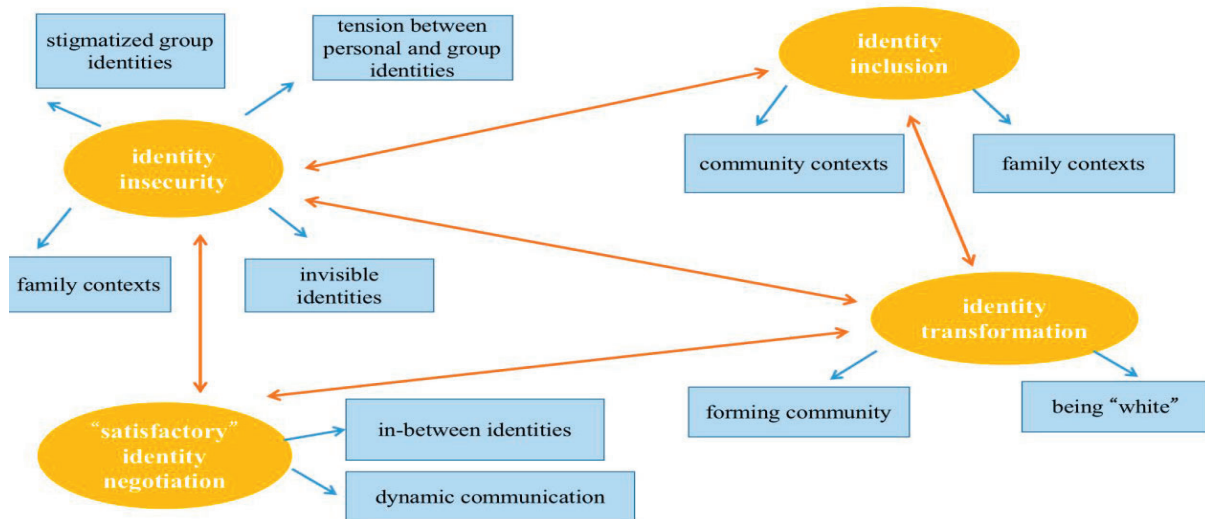
Books	Awards	Cultural Contexts	Genres
<i>American Born Chinese</i> (Yang, 2006)	2007 Michael L. Printz Award, 2007 Eisner Award for Best Graphic Album: New, <i>Publishers Weekly</i> Comics Week Best Comic of the Year, <i>San Francisco Chronicle</i> Best Book of the Year, 2006/2007 Best Book Award from The Chinese American Librarians Association	Chinese, American	Fiction
<i>They Called Us Enemy</i> (Takei et al., 2019)	Will Eisner Award for Best Reality-Based Work, Asian/Pacific American Award for Young Adult Literature, 41st Annual American Book Awards, National Cartoonists Society Award for Excellence in Graphic Novels, Dwayne McDuffie Award for Diversity in Comics	Japanese, American	Memoir
<i>The Complete Persepolis</i> (Satrapi, 2007)	French version: 2001 Angoulême Coup de Coeur Award, 2002 Angoulême Prize for Scenario English version: 'Time magazine "Best Comics of 2003", 2019 47th on The Guardian's list of the 100 best books of the 21st century	Iranian, Austrian	Memoir
<i>I Was Their American Dream</i> (Gharib, 2019)	2020 The Arab American Book Award	Filipino, Egyptian, and American	Memoir
<i>The Arrival</i> (Tan, 2007)	2008 ALA Notable Books for Children, 2008 Boston Globe-Horn Book Award Winner, 2008 ALA Best Books for Young Adults, 2008 ALA Top Ten Great Graphic Novels for Teens, 2008 ALA Great Graphic Novels for Teens, 2008 American Booksellers Award – Children's Literature Honor Book	Unclear	Fiction
<i>The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees</i> (Brown, 2018)	Sibert Honor Medalist, New York Public Library Best of 2018, The Horn Book Fanfare 2018, Kirkus Reviews Best Books of 2018, 2019 YALSA Excellence in Nonfiction Winner, 2019 Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal	Syrian, European, American	Nonfiction

## **Data Analysis**

After selecting six intercultural graphic novels, we analyzed these texts in two major phases: reading first as readers followed by reading as researchers. In the first phase, we read books to immerse ourselves in their stories and to capture our initial response. We identified the main characters and identities in each book. Then, as researchers, we read deeply with our theoretical frameworks in mind and identified a specific set of theoretical tenets that are related closely to our research questions. For example, the ten assumptions from INT provided an effective lens to help us focus on the identity negotiation process, such as identity emotional security, identity emotional vulnerability, identity transformation, and identity competence. Also, we identified crucial modes in multimodality, including linguistic, visual, auditory, gestural, and spatial elements. After identifying theoretical tenets and multiple relevant modes, we examined the visual and written narratives in a close reading to determine units to code for further analysis. Considering that “researchers usually select key illustrations based on the research purpose for close analysis rather than the entire book” (Short, 2019, p. 16), we identified scenes to align with the identity negotiation process and multimodality.

After reading, we developed an additional close examination of the identified units or visual images. First, we transcribed the multimodal scenes, including the exact words along with a description of corresponding images. Then, we worked through the twelve principles in *Picture This: How Pictures Work* (Bang, 2016) as our main approach to facilitate visual critical analysis. These principles describe the impact of visual domains, such as size, color, position, and distance. For example, Bang (2016) claimed that “diagonal shapes are dynamic because they imply motion or tension” (p. 58). Next, we detailed the characters’ identity experiences and tagged them based on the core assumptions in identity negotiation theory, such as identity insecurity and identity inclusion. See Tables 2-8 for examples of our analysis chart. Though we utilized Bang’s principles as a starting point to notice visual features, such as shapes, colors, sizes, and locations, Bang (2016) argued that, in context, each individual visual feature is combined with others (p. 73), which indicates that we cannot separate each principle. Instead, we should regard images in context. Kress (2009) also expressed a similar argument that meaning is constructed through an ensemble (p. 28). So, the interplay of visual and written languages and even visual features within one page communicate contextually. In other words, there is not just one fixed or overarching set of principles for interpreting visual and multimodal texts, since texts and interpretations of those texts are situated in ever-shifting contexts. Finally, we identified broad themes or categories by creating a thematic map (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 90) (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** This is a map of themes emerging from tags and assumption analyses.  
Thematic Map



## Findings

After conducting the analysis, we found that characters generally navigate an identity negotiation process that includes phases of identity insecurity, identity inclusion, identity transformation, and “satisfactory” identity negotiation. This journey unfolds in a circular, fluid, and diverse liminal space where characters continuously experience, traverse boundaries, and transform. For instance, when a character feels insecure about one group’s identity, that influences an emotional inclination toward another group’s identity, resulting in identity transformation. However, the transformation could lead to “satisfactory” identity negotiation, encountering renewed identity insecurity, or reaching inclusion. Thus, identity negotiation emerges as a recursive, communicative process where characters actively explore their multiple identities. During this process, the combination of written language and visual narrative is productive in depicting characters’ identities negotiation. Some of these specific findings are numbered and detailed as follows.

### Forming a Dynamic Liminal Space: Identity Insecurity, Identity Inclusion, Identity Transformation, and “Satisfactory” Identity Negotiation

Our data shows that characters experience a dynamic and recursive cycle of identity negotiation, with identity insecurity, inclusion, transformation, and “satisfactory” negotiation. This interaction shapes the characters’ identities, emphasizing the fluid and evolving nature within the narrative.

#### *Identity Insecurity and Inclusion Between Ingroup and Outgroup*

In Assumption 3 in INT, individuals tend to feel emotional insecurity in a culturally unfamiliar environment. Also, if their group membership identities are stigmatized, they will experience differentiation (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 5). In our data analysis, characters experience identity insecurity related to several elements, such as family contexts, stigmatized group identity, the tension between personal and group identities, and invisible identity. For example, in Table 2, though Malaka was born and raised in America, she lives with her Filipino family, and she is aware of the differences between her family and normative American families portrayed on TV. She struggles with her multiple identities:

Filipino, Egyptian, and American. Malaka draws a table to “learn” the code of negotiating these three identities. Being multicultural is not natural for her. Instead, she needs to learn how to be according to her identity. Her frustration is well-presented through her facial expressions, such as her frown and wide-open eyes, and her body language, such as scratching her hair (see Figure 2). She is stuck at finishing the chart and feels insecure because of her intersecting familial context. However, identity insecurity and identity inclusion are always intertwined. The table she draws, and the word “learned” demonstrate her efforts to include (and feel included in) all three groups.

**Table 2.** In this scene, Malaka showcases her identity negotiation among Filipino, Egyptian, and American by drawing a table. *I Was Their American Dream* (Gharib, 2019, p. 39)

Page	Written Transcription	Visual Transcription	Visual Analysis	Assumption Analysis	Tag
39	“I quickly learned the code of conduct” (Gharib, 2019, p. 39).	Malaka draws a chart of different social customs for Filipino, Egyptian and Americans.	She is checking at the table but scratches her hair with her eyes wide open. She is stuck with the checking.	According to Assumption 4, she feels identity tension as she negotiates her personal identity with three ethnic identities, as there are ingroup and outgroup boundaries in identity inclusion.	Identity insecurity (tension between personal and group identities) and identity inclusion

**Figure 2.** This scene from *I Was Their American Dream*<sup>1</sup> shows teenaged protagonist Malaka making a confused expression as she points to a chart listing social customs with various checkmarks in three columns of her intercultural identities: Filipino, Egyptian, and American.

*I Was Their American Dream* (Gharib, 2019, p.39)



<sup>1</sup> Graphic Novel Excerpt from *I WAS THEIR AMERICAN DREAM: A GRAPHIC MEMOIR* by Malaka Gharib, copyright © 2019 by Malaka Gharib. Used by permission of Clarkson Potter Publishers, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

We also found that characters' identity insecurity can be the result of a stigmatized group identity. For example, in Table 3, though the girl is not doing anything hazardous to American society, she is regarded as a member of the enemy Japanese community, which determines her identity insecurity. Even though George, the protagonist in *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei et al., 2019), survives the hostile attitudes towards Japanese Americans in World War II and moves out of the internment camps, he still feels identity insecurity due to the lasting influence of the stigmatized group identity. For example, his fourth-grade teacher ignores him whenever he raises his hand, and she calls him "little Jap boy" (Takei et al., 2019, p. 171). Similarly, in Table 4, Jin Wang, a Chinese American boy, encounters insecurity in *American Born Chinese*. When he is new to the class, the teacher introduces him as Chinese, obscuring his American identity. His insecurity is evident in his facial expression. Compared to the teacher's smile, Jin Wang squints his eyes without smiling or looking at his classmates. The teacher's stereotyped assumptions about the character's cultural identity membership influence his identity insecurity.

**Table 3.** In this scene, the girl feels identity insecurity due to her stigmatized group identity representation. *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei et al., 2019, p. 21)

Page	Written Transcription	Visual Transcription	Visual Analysis	Assumption Analysis	Tag
21	"The mayor of Los Angeles testified that 'They are Japanese and nothing else... Regardless of how many generations may have been born in America'" (Takei et al., 2019, p. 21).	The little girl looks at the label "No Japs" on the window sadly while white Americans look at the girl and her mom contemptuously and angrily.	Others glare at the girl and her mom. The girl's innocent eye looks in sharp contrast with the squint. Also, the label "No Japs" in large font is standing out.	The group membership identity is stigmatized. They are experiencing identity negotiation as a whole group.	Identity insecurity; stigmatized group identity

**Table 4.** In this scene, Jin Wang experiences identity insecurity in the communication with his teacher. *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006, p. 30)

Page	Written Transcription	Visual Transcription	Visual Analysis	Assumption Analysis	Tag
30	"He and his family recently moved to our neighborhood all the way from China" "San Francisco" "San Francisco" (Yang, 2006, p. 30)	Jin Wang closes his eyes as he corrects the teacher's pronunciation of his name and squints while his teacher introduces his hometown as China. The teacher smiles all the time.	The contrast between the teacher's and Jin Wang's facial expressions highlights Jin Wang's experience of repeatedly facing similar situations without the power to change them, while the teacher's smile suggests her unawareness of his diverse cultural identity.	In Assumption 1, the identity is formed through communication. Jin Wang constructs his understanding of his group membership identities based on the interactions with the teacher.	Identity insecurity

### **"Satisfactory" Identity Negotiation in the Identity Transformation**

According to Assumption 7 in INT, individuals tend to experience identity transformation once they have identity inconsistency in a new or unfamiliar cultural environment (Ting-Toomey, 2015, p. 5). In

these intercultural contexts, some characters aim to be white presenting through their transformation or to form a community while adapting to new contexts. For example, Malaka wants to be more like “them” (white students) (Gharib, 2019, p. 96); Jin Wang changes his hair color and gives himself a new, Americanized name- Danny (Yang, 2006, p. 198); Wei-Chen tries to accustom himself to American culture about romance (Yang, 2006, p. 89); Marji starts to explore her Iranian girl identity in Austria (Satrapi, 2007, p. 182); Syrian refugees shout, “Europe is life, Europe is love!” (Brown, 2018, p. 62) to demonstrate their desire to live there; and, Japanese-Americans form a community among themselves (Takei et al., 2019, p. 76).

In intercultural communication, Ting-Toomey (1999) argued that “satisfactory identity negotiation outcomes include the feeling of being understood, respected and supported” (p. 41), and she highlighted that “satisfactory” depends on the willingness to interact with dissimilar others. In the graphic novels we studied, though characters undergo identity insecurity and experience identity transformation several times, they all have achieved “satisfactory” identity negotiation. Table 5 provides an example of successful identity negotiation in graphic novels. Set against a bilingual background, where the café sign is displayed in both English (“café”) and Chinese (“餐厅”), Jin Wang and Wei-Chen’s silent communications, captured through their facial expressions and body language, reflect a joyful connection. This interaction symbolizes how both characters embrace their multifaceted identities and find a connection in their shared experience.

All characters in our data achieve “satisfactory” identity negotiation by being able to adopt various identities at will. However, as we previously argued, identity negotiation is a non-linear process situated in a transitory liminal space, where characters constantly transgress the boundaries, engaging fluidly with their multiple and evolving identities. For example, though Malaka draws the chart of rules she feels she is expected to follow, she speaks English in Egypt while speaking Tagalog at school in America. And for Takei, though the novel acknowledges American democracy as valued, a sign of “satisfactory” identity negotiation, Takei depicts that a similar problem related to a new group of immigrants begins to resurface at the end of the story. The “satisfactory” identity negotiation could be repositioned as the start of another negotiation for the contemporary group.

**Table 5.** *In the scene, both Jin Wang and Wei-Chen achieve “satisfactory” identity negotiation. American Born Chinese (Yang, 2006, p. 233)*

Page	Written Transcription	Visual Transcription	Visual Analysis	Assumption Analysis	Tag
233	No written text on this page	At last, Jin Wang and Wei-Chen talk happily in the bakery café.	The café is pictured both in Chinese and English. Though Jin Wang and Wei-Chen are sitting in the opposite direction, they are facing each other and laughing together, which symbolizes the connection in identity negotiations. Though there is tension and opposition, there is always a connection.	Jin Wang and Wei-Chen are having competent identity negotiation.	Competent identity negotiation

**Making Identities Visible: Multimodality Represents Characters’ Identity Negotiation**

Kress (2004) noted that words are relatively vague, but, by contrast, images are full and ‘plain’ with meaning (p. 112). By employing visual tools in our research, we found that multimodality embedded

through the combination of images and written languages contributes to representing characters' invisible identities.

### ***“Faces” Tell Their Stories***

McCloud (1993) explained that the abstract faces depicted in graphic novels allow readers to picture themselves because “the more cartoony a face is, the more people it could be said to describe” (p. 31), and this better allows readers to imagine themselves as the cartoon character (as opposed to hyper-realistic illustrations which cannot be mistaken for anyone else). Among six intercultural graphic novels, five are depicted in a cartoony style that aims to allow readers to resonate with the characters. McCloud (1993) also argued that “cartooning isn’t just a way of drawing, it’s a way of seeing!” (p. 31). There is an exception to cartoonish presentations in one of the books in our data, *The Arrival*. All the faces depicted are realistic (p. 1), which we argue is to “force” readers to see an Other through a window rather than to picture themselves in a “mirror” (Bishop, 1990).

Characters’ multiple identities are also illustrated in the various techniques used to portray their faces. For example, in *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei et al., 2019), people’s faces are clearly illustrated (p. 76). Though Japanese Americans are portrayed in ill-treated conditions in camps, and they suffer from identity insecurity due to their stigmatized and hostile contexts, they choose to form a community within the camp to have identity inclusion and identity transformation. By facing readers directly, their entire identities are visible to readers, along with hostile biases towards them. In contrast, people are always depicted as faceless in *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* (Brown, 2018). For example, in Table 6, powerless people in the boat are faceless and floating in the compelling water. Syrian refugees, depicted as faceless people, suffer identity insecurity about their cultural and national identities, which are hidden in the night and water. But at the end of the story, when they arrive in America, and their identities are acknowledged, their faces shift to be depicted clearly. Not only does the shift from being faceless to having faces visually indicate their immigration journey but according to McCloud’s principles, the parts of the book in which the characters are faceless allow readers to imagine themselves vicariously in place of the characters.

**Table 6.** *Refugees’ struggle with identity insecurity is depicted in the faceless portrait. The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees (Brown, 2018, p. 25)*

Page	Written Transcription	Visual Transcription	Visual Analysis	Assumption Analysis	Tag
25	“Later he joins seventy others and is taken to a small boat that sneaks them into nearby Greece” (Brown, 2018, p. 25).	No faces can be recognized from the boat. Only a small boat is presented against the background, the immersive water.	Principle 8 focuses on the size of objects. The tiny boat that carries over seventy refugees is floating against an overwhelming large background. Faceless people are immersed in powerful water.	Assumptions 2 and 3 assert that individuals experience emotional security regarding their identity in culturally familiar environments. Refugees are sailing to a new world to them, symbolizing insecurity, unpredictability, and exclusion.	Identity insecurity (tension between personal and group identities)

### Colors Distinguish Identities

As McCloud (1993) noted, “when used well, color in comics can—like comics itself—amount to far more than the sum of its parts” (p. 192). In our research, we examined the effect of multimodality on interpretations of identities and found that colors play a crucial part in representing identity negotiation.

Texts are colored to show the characters’ various identities. Some colors are varied in portrayals of skin, hair, objects, and backgrounds. For example, in *I Was Their American Dream* (Gharib, 2019), Makala’s and her community’s skin color is pink, while white groups are colored white. But in *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006), though characters share similar skin tones, they are differentiated by their hair colors. The colors of hair vary depending on their different identities. Most of Jin Wang’s hair is black, but the middle is white, which divides the black hair into two parts (p. 38). His black-and-white hair color symbolizes his in-between American and Chinese identities, and his hair color change reflects the challenges he faces in his interpersonal relationship. Initially, Jin Wang regards Wei-Chen, a Taiwanese boy, as his friend. However, when he struggles with challenges in navigating their relationship, Jin Wang experiences identity insecurity related to his dual identities. Following an argument with Wei-Chen, Jin undergoes an identity transformation as seen in Table 7. He has a preference toward American culture, seeks to adopt more features of being white, and is depicted changing his hair from black to blonde.

**Table 7.** In this scene, Jin Wang decides to change his hair from black to blonde. *American Born Chinese* (Yang, 2006, p. 194)

Page	Written Transcription	Visual Transcription	Visual Analysis	Assumption Analysis	Tag
194	Now what would you like to become? Click, Clack, ... 變	When the Chinese herbalist’s wife asks Jin Wang what he wishes to become, he changes his hair color from black to blonde.	The traditional Chinese script 變 is depicted as prominently as the characters’ depiction, aligning with Jin Wang’s transformation process.	According to Assumption 7, Jin Wang experiences an identity change in a new or unfamiliar cultural environment.	Identity transformation

In *The Unwanted: Stories of the Syrian Refugees* (Brown, 2018), most colors are dark, such as grey and blue; while red, yellow, and orange are used sparingly. Red is used to depict a bomb explosion (p. 24), representing danger and blood— a sign of the characters’ identity insecurity in an unfamiliar environment. However, white or light colors create a feeling of safety and warmth (Bang, 2016). So red is also depicted in the illustrations of refugees using bonfires to warm themselves (Brown, 2018, p. 76), an apple given by a policeman (Brown, 2018, p. 87), the American flag (Brown, 2018, p. 89), and of the clothing belonged to a kind woman who donates it to a child (Brown, 2018, p. 45).

In these stories, we noticed that elements in pictures, including facial expressions and colors, distinguish their identity struggles and help to tell immigrant-adjacent stories. Jin Wang’s in-between colored hair, Japanese Americans’ firm eye contact, and red bombs compared with the red flag, without textual explanation, are all examples of how multimodal features reveal characters’ invisible identities, which are hidden in the boundaries between words and images, constituting the liminal spaces which are created through multimodality.

## Discussion

Drawing from INT and Multimodality, we conducted a critical content analysis to examine multimodal texts- namely, six intercultural graphic novels- to explore the characters' identity negotiation process. Our study revealed that characters undergo interactive identity negotiation processes encompassing identity insecurity, identity inclusion, identity transformation, and "satisfactory" identity negotiation. Also, we noticed that multimodality, including languages, how faces are portrayed, and how colors are used, all contribute to representing the identity negotiation processes. Based on these findings, we further discuss the following implications for further study as well as the limitations of this research.

### Intersectionality

Though our study mainly focused on ethnic identity representation, we found that some characters experience identity negotiation not only in ethnicity but also in gender. For example, Marji goes through a complex gender identity negotiation process when she first arrives in Austria. A sharp contrast emerges between Marji's and her Austrian friend Lucy's perspectives on women's bodies. Marji is initially shocked when she sees her female friend greeting people with kisses, focusing on her appearance, and using makeup. Confronted with her insecurities as an Iranian girl with limited sex education, Marji gradually begins to notice and appreciate her own body and femininity (see Table 8). Jin Wang, Wei-Chen, and Malaka also explore their gender identity through romantic relationships. Though Takei does not explore gender too much within the plot of his story, he reveals at the end of the book that he belongs to the LGBTQ community. Crenshaw (2013) proposed the theory of intersectionality to remind us of overlapping identities and how to embrace the complexities of compoundedness, especially while considering marginalized groups. For further study, we would like to explore the intersectionality of multiple identities since identity negotiation is a complex and interactional process that engages multiple identities, such as ethnicity, gender, religion, etc. Utilizing feminist theory, Queer theory, and additional critical theories, we might continue exploring the dynamics of power in the representation of intersectionality among characters' gender and sexuality intertwined with ethnic identities as well as other frequently marginalized identities.

**Table 8.** *In this scene, Marji observes her body.*  
*The Complete Persepolis (Satrapi, 2007, p. 182)*

Page	Written Transcription	Visual Transcription	Visual Analysis	Assumption Analysis	Tag
182	I had a big behind too, and I wasn't even taking contraceptives.	Marji looks at her hip.	Compared to the black background, Marji's body is highlighted. She turns her head to observe her back and hip.	When Marji feels insecure about her identity as an Iranian girl in Austria, she becomes more aware of and appreciative of her feminine body.	Identity transformation

### Translingualism

In our data analysis, we found that mixed languages are depicted to represent characters' multiple identities. For example, in the description of the Monkey King in *American Born Chinese*, traditional Chinese scripts mix with English, such as "Giant, 大" (Yang, 2006, p. 58). In *They Called Us Enemy* (Takei et al., 2019), code-meshing between English and Japanese is also prevalent. For example,

George's father talks with his mom in Japanese, *Shikata Ga Nai* [It can't be helped] (p. 67). In *I Was Their American Dream* (Gharib, 2019), Tagalog, Arabic, and English are code-meshed with an English translation or explanation with asterisk reminders such as "Yuck! Cold Siopao\*for lunch! \*Pork buns" (p. 39).

Mixed languages employed in these intercultural graphic novels aim to represent characters' and even authors' identities and to have their voices acknowledged by the Other. Like with Ray Gwyn Smith's quote, "[w]ho is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?" (as cited in Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 53), languages cannot be divorced from identities. "Voice is not an extra for communication. It is everything in communication" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 80). Translingual phenomena in these intercultural graphic novels contribute to a liminal space that provides readers and characters with a versatile method for negotiating the meanings. The interplay of visual modes and written languages further enhances this space, allowing readers to negotiate meanings fluidly. Anzaldúa urged us to learn to dwell in liminalities (Tuana & Scott, 2020, p. 125), and we argue that, through these intercultural graphic novels, all readers could construct their interpretative meanings in a similar in-between space.

### **Multilingual Education**

Each reader is actively involved in the transaction with texts and makes sense of them based on their past experiences and specific contexts. Multilingual students may experience tensions between personal and socio-cultural identities in intercultural contexts, and they may struggle with the process of identity negotiation. Our findings indicate that characters are undergoing identity negotiation processes in these intercultural graphic novels, which can be employed in the classroom as accessible reading resources for multilingual students to reflect on their identity negotiation process and to help them articulate alternative stories.

Also, since multimodality, including written languages and visual representations, can be combined to facilitate the meaning-making around identity negotiation, we further argue that these intercultural graphic novels are valuable tools for teachers in multilingual education. Teachers could employ strategies unveiled from our research findings to help students tell their own stories in their response to the stories of the characters featured in the texts. For example, multimodality and translingualism could be employed to help multilingual students better articulate their voices and showcase the liminal spaces of their intercultural identities. Teachers can use graphic novels to value students' full repertoires and voices in this dynamic, co-constructed, and multimodal liminal space.

### **Limitations**

At this time, much of our focus has been put on graphic novels themselves. We acknowledge that a lack of students' responses to these graphic novels is one limitation of our study. However, this study can be conducive to further research on multilingual education which explores students' identity negotiation experiences as readers of graphic novels and provides liminal spaces for multilingual students who are negotiating multiple identities. Additionally, because we aimed to unpack the characters' negotiation process, it is a limitation that we did not include contextual information about the authors (biographies, interviews, etc.) of the graphic novels, though we acknowledge that authors' cultural and ethnic identities influence the writing of their books. However, this study is a foundational step. We plan to build upon it in a future study to consider how authors negotiate their identities in the liminal spaces they created by extending the analysis to the authors' backgrounds, and we look forward to engaging in a follow-up study with multilingual students to examine whether and how their

experiences with intercultural characters negotiating identity tensions in graphic novels reflect their own identity negotiation processes.

## Conclusion

Historically and currently, without equal access to a high quality of education and even suffering from microaggressions and stereotypes, historically underrepresented student identities related to cultures, languages, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations are marginalized and erased, and their stories are silenced and regarded as Other by dominant and normative identities. As educators and researchers with experiences related to students who navigated multiple identities related to cultures, languages, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations, we endeavored to provide a space to reveal their underrepresented stories, and our study demonstrated that intercultural graphic novels can serve as part of an emergent and transformative liminal space to help them narrate their experiences and navigate multiple identities.

Therefore, as a first step in applying graphic novel interpretation in multilingual education, our work explored the identity negotiation narratives in characters' immigration-adjacent stories. Through the framework of identity negotiation theory and multimodality, we conducted a critical content analysis of six graphic novels, and we found that though characters are encountering an identity negotiation process, containing identity inclusion, transformation and competent negotiation, the process is a non-linear and emergent liminal space. Characters are navigating in the in-between status. Also, multiple modes contribute to the meaning construction in revealing characters' stories and surfacing their identities. This study encourages teachers to utilize graphic novels as a tool to embrace students' voices and invite students to draw from the reading of intercultural graphic novels as mentor texts and models for narrating, authoring, and sharing their stories and identity-negotiation journeys.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interests were reported by the authors.

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