

SECTION TWO: When Worlds Collide

Section Two of **Secret Identities** looks at the phenomenon that is arguably the **defining theme** of the Asian American experience: The **intersection** of **cultures, heritages** and **traditions**. Asian Americans are a community whose identity has been shaped by the triple forces of **immigration, globalization** and **interethnic and interracial mingling**—creating population that is defined as much by **diversity** as it is by **common ground**.

WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE OPENER, pg. 79

Story by: Keith Chow; Art by: Chi-Yun Lau

This one-pager is one of a half-dozen "interstitials" created to introduce the different sections of the book, but in many ways, its message serves as the subtext for the **book as a whole**—highlighting the parallels between the **Asian American experience** (or rather, Asian American experiences) and the mythic conventions of the comic book superhero, as epitomized by the ultimate origin story—that of Kal-El, Last Son of Krypton, better known as **Superman**. The interstitial retells Superman's origin in dialogue spoken by a varied group of **Asian American immigrants**, who collectively illustrate how, like Superman, they, too, came from a **faraway place**, to a **new world**, burdened by the expectations of their **parents** that they might become something special; they, too are **strangers** in a strange land, bearing fundamental **differences** that sometimes **isolate** them—sometimes **empower** them—and sometimes, make them wish they were the **same as everyone else**. The parallels are uncanny, and yet, unsurprising: Superman was created in 1938 by a pair of men, **Jerry Siegel** and **Joe Shuster**, who were born to immigrant families that had settled in Cleveland, Ohio and Toronto, Ontario respectively.

In fact, most of the creators of the "**Golden Age**" of comics were immigrants or the children of immigrants, making it no coincidence that themes related to **immigration**, both metaphoric and literal, are woven throughout superhero comics. Some of the events and phenomena referenced in the panels of this story include: The **fall of Saigon**; the crash of the **Golden Venture**, a boat carrying hundreds of undocumented Chinese immigrants; Asian children **transracially adopted** by non-Asian parents; the Sikh custom of **wearing turbans**; the **headscarves** of Muslim women; and the feeling many Asian American immigrants have of a "**lack of voice**."

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the ways that the "Superman" origin story is an immigrant story? Why might his story have particularly strong parallels with the stories of Asian American immigrants?
2. What are some of the things that might make an immigrant feel like an alien or outsider in the U.S.? What are some of the things that might make an immigrant feel special in a positive sense?
3. If Superman were a real undocumented alien, what are some of the political, social, economic and cultural challenges he might encounter? If Superman were a real transracial adoptee, what are some of the societal, personal and cultural challenges he might encounter?



PARALLEL WORLDS

Top to Bottom:
1. "Supernam," home of the "World's Finest" pho (Vietnamese noodles) 2. Former refugee, recalling destruction of Saigon 3. Former passenger on the Golden Venture, which sank and killed dozens of undocumented Chinese 4. Transracial adoptee 5. Sikh man 6. Pakistani American woman 7. Angry Asian man 8. The full cast



TRINITY, pg. 81

Story and Art by: Greg LaRocque

In this story, three extraordinary strangers meet, only to realize that they have more in common than they seem: They are all **children** of the same **super-powered father**, a military agent who unknowingly left offspring behind in **Japan**, the **Philippines** and the **United States**.

The story highlights the circumstances of the **Amerasian children** of American soldiers, abandoned when their G.I. fathers returned home or were restationed. From 1898, the year in which the U.S. first colonized the Philippines, until 1992, when American military bases were finally closed, over 100,000 U.S. personnel were stationed there; collectively, it is estimated that there are **over 52,000 Amerasians** still living in the Philippines, many of them impoverished, subject to discrimination and neglected by both paternal and maternal relatives. Many, themselves children of sex workers, have turned to sex work themselves to survive. A **class action lawsuit** filed in their name in 1993 demanding that the U.S. provide for the children was dismissed—ironically because the children were the product of "**illegal acts**" (e.g., prostitution).



The Amerasian population of the Philippines is the largest, but far from the only group of "left-behind" children of America: At the end of the Vietnam War, some **50,000 Vietnamese Amerasians** remained in the country—referred to by Vietnamese as "**bui doi**," the "dust of life"; 23,000 eventually were allowed to emigrate to the U.S. under the Amerasian Homecoming Act of 1988. There are, today, still an estimated **15,000 Amerasians in Okinawa, Japan**. All of these populations face disproportionate **poverty**, **racial discrimination**, and **isolation** from the social mainstream.

The story of abandoned Amerasians reminds us that there is a legacy of occupation even in times of peace: A large military force inevitably alters the **social**, **cultural**, **economic** and **political** landscape of the nation in which it is based, often with tragic consequences.

Discussion Questions

1. In the story, "Armstrong" is American, born after his father retired and married his mother. "Kiju" is Japanese, raised in an orphanage. "The Tagakita" is Filipina, and was raised by her single mother. How would their childhood experiences have differed?
2. Discuss some of the potential issues an Amerasian might face growing up and upon reaching adulthood. In what ways might those problems and challenges be addressed?
3. What are some of the ways that the permanent presence of a large military force changes the nation it occupies?

NO HOMELAND

Top to Bottom:
1. The final panel from "Trinity" 2. Homeless Filipino Amerasian street children 3. Minh Ha, left, and Anh Dung in Utica, New York—two Vietnamese Amerasians whose lives are traced in Thomas Bass's VIETNAMERICA



NO EXIT, pg. 89

Story by: Naeem Mohaiemen

Art by: Glenn Urieta

"No Exit" is a fantastical reimagining of the **arrival of Islam to America**, inspired by the historical missions to the U.S. of **Indian Muslim preachers**, primarily from areas that, since the **1947 partition of India**, have become **Bangladesh** and **Pakistan**. These preachers were of the **Ahmadiyya Muslim sect**, a revivalist branch of Islam whose overseas missionary activities began as early as the 1920s; for many modern world communities, Ahmadiyya missions represented a **first encounter** with the Muslim faith. Ahmadiyya was particularly influential among **African Americans**, helping to shape beliefs shared by **early civil rights activists**, as well as later members of the **Black Power** movement. It is important to note that Ahmadiyya believers were proponents of the **peaceful nature of Islam** and **rejected violence** as a tool for its spread.

In the story, the street preachers **Enayet** and **Rahmat** have been **jailed** under suspicion of fomenting unrest, though the words of their captors makes it clear that their arrest is primarily due to **xenophobia** and fear of their **"foreign" appearance** and **ethnicity**. They are awaiting a court appearance, but differ on whether they are likely to receive justice. Enayet is younger and hotheaded; he advocates action, even if that action requires using their secret superhuman powers. In part, this is due to his overhearing a guard calling the two men by an obvious **slur**, which he relates to the term **"kaffir,"** a term the pair heard used against blacks in **South Africa**; of course, the term has a different meaning in Arabic—**infidel**—among the deadliest of insults. Rahmat, older and wiser, counsels **patience**, and forcibly restrains his partner.

Enayet and Rahmat are inspired by actual historical figures: Their **real-life counterparts** were held in jail for a year, and only released after agreeing to purge some concepts from their tracts. After their release, they found strong hostility toward their proselytizing from white Christian churches, leading them to turn their attention to the **black neighborhoods** of Chicago and other urban northeast areas—opening the way for African American **embrace of Islam**.

Discussion Questions

1. How would an unfamiliar religion like Islam have been perceived by Americans in the 1940s? What role might the idea of "foreignness" have played in the reactions of those encountering it?
2. Why would the response of African American communities have been different from those of largely white communities?
3. The story highlights a conflict between two individuals, one who advocates action (even violence), and the other who advocates patience and peaceful measures. If you were in their situation, which of these strategies would you have pursued? Which do you think would be more effective in preserving the goal of sharing their religion? Discuss rationales for both positions, and identify parallel circumstances in other movements, notably the American struggle for civil rights.

**BRINGING LIGHT**

Top to Bottom:
1. Enayet and Rahman (right and left) in **NO EXIT** 2. The man whom history has recorded as the first Muslim missionary to America, Dr. Mufti Muhammad Sadiq; an Ahmadiyya believer from India, he boarded a ship from England on January 24, 1920 to the U.S.; while traveling, he converted six Chinese fellow passengers to Ahmadiyya Islam.



SECTION TWO: Resources and Further Reading

Books

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Islam in America / by Jane I. Smith. New York : Columbia University Press, 2000.

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Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States / Ko-Lin Chin and Douglas S. Massey. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000.

Surviving Twice: Amerasian Children of the Vietnam War / Trin Yarborough. Dulles, Virginia: Potomac Books [2005].

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