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From Canon to Conversation: The Democratization of American Literature

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Interdisciplinary Humanities

By

Michael G. Barba

Committee in charge:

Professor Gregg Camfield, Chair
Professor Jan Goggans
Professor Ignacio López-Calvo
Professor Nella Van Dyke

2019

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The Dissertation of Michael Gilbert Barba is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Jan Goggans

Ignacio López-Calvo

Nella Van Dyke

Gregg Camfield, Chair

University of California Merced

2019

I dedicate this dissertation to Nicholas and Anastasia, my loves and my future.

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Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION

2007-2019	University of California, Merced, PhD- Interdisciplinary Humanities, emphasis American Literature, Film and Cultural Studies
1996-1997	University of Massachusetts, Amherst, MA, M.Ed.-English Education
1992-1996	Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA, B.A.-English, Literature and Composition
1994-1995	University of Sheffield, Sheffield, England, CSU Year Abroad Program-Literature and Film
1988-1991	Modesto Junior College, Modesto, CA, A.A.-Theatre Arts

WORK EXPERIENCE

2001- 2019 Instructor (Full-time) Merced College, Merced, CA

Taught developmental and university transfer-level composition and reading courses (ENGL 41, 82, 84, A, 1A, 1B), as well as Oral Interpretation, Creative Writing, Introduction to Film, African American Literature American Literature: Post-Civil War to Present and Film and Humanities (ENGL 2, 12, 14, 18, 11, and HUM 21); Co-coordinator of Merced College Puente Program; Taught in Inmate Education Program (2 years); Senator (5 years) on the Academic Senate; Representative on Instructional Master Planning Committee; co-author 2004 Program review; English Department chair (2 years); Trained in and implemented Academic Literacy program (Reading apprenticeship); MCFA, faculty organization Vice-President (one year)

2007-2011 Graduate Assistant University of California, Merced

Teaching assistant for LIT 30: Introduction to American Literature I and LIT 31: Introduction to American Literature II. Regularly attended lectures, graded essay assignments and exams as needed and led discussion groups relevant to topics of the course. Assistant for the Center for Research in the Humanities and Arts (CRHA); Maintained CRHA website; Helped to promote CRHA events

2000-2001 Instructor (Part-Time) Merced College, Merced, CA

Taught English 83, 87, A, and 1A; staffed writing lab; helped to develop and pilot student success program for under-represented students (GOAL)

1999-2006 Instructor (Part-time/Full-time temporary) Modesto Junior College, Modesto, CA

Taught developmental and university transfer-level composition courses (ENGL 50, 101, 102, 103); designed and taught "Hollywood Today" film class; taught Chicano Literature (ENGL 172); Co-coordinated Puente Program (1999-2000); member of Learning Communities and Latino Studies committees (1999-2000)

2000-2001 Visiting Lecturer California State University, Stanislaus, Turlock, CA

Taught upper division writing course that focused on issues and ideologies of successful teaching, such as assessment, management, cultural diversity, and instruction

1998-1999 English/Speech Teacher Davis High School, Modesto, CA

Taught Freshman English; coached the Davis High School Speech team and Mock Trial Team; Served on several committees including English District Standards, and Assessment and Accountability

1997-1998 English Teacher, Dennis-Yarmouth Regional High School, S. Yarmouth, MA

Taught Freshman English; taught a pilot performance based assessment course; participated in several committees including Curriculum and Cultural Diversity.

1996-1997 Intern English Teacher- Springfield Central High School, Springfield, MA

Taught at-risk adolescents (EXCEL- 10th grade) and college-prep 12th grade English

TEACHING AND RESEARCH INTERESTS

Canon Studies
19th and 20th Century American Literature
Cultural Studies- Film, Television and Graphic Novels

PUBLICATIONS

2011 — "Undoing Masculinity: *The Full Monty.*" Hawaii University International Conference on Arts and Humanities Conference Proceedings. 2011.

2010 — "Somewhere out beyond the Stars: Orientalism and *Star Trek Deep Space Nine*." *One World Periphery Reads the Other: Knowing the "Oriental" in the Americas and the Iberian Peninsula*. Ed. Ignacio López-Calvo. Newcastle, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010.

CONFERENCES

2012 — Paper- Popular Culture and Caves- "The Light in the Darkness: The Use of Caves in the *Star Trek* Television and Film Series"- Caves and Cognition Exploring the Cave Experience from Multidisciplinary Perspectives, UC Merced; Merced, CA, Oct 2012.

2012 — Paper- Popular Culture and Gender- "Undoing Masculinity: *The Full Monty*" 2012 Hawaii University International Conference on Arts and Humanities; Honolulu, HI, January, 2012

2011 — Presenter- "Chicano Literature: a Timeline," Puente Regional Instructor Summit; Pleasanton, CA, Oct. 2011.

2011 — Paper- Social Memory- "Social Memory and the film *La Bamba*" PCA/ACA National Conference; San Antonio, TX, April 2011.

2010 — Paper- Popular Culture- "The History of *Star Trek* Studies" 3rd Annual Comics and Popular Culture Conference; Atlanta GA, September 2010.

2010 — Commentator- Popular Culture- "Studies in *Watchmen*" 3rd Annual Comics and Popular Culture Conference; Atlanta GA, September 2010.

2009 — Paper- Filmographic Orientalism- "'Far Beyond the Stars'- Orientalism and *Star Trek Deep Space Nine*" Second International Conference on Orientalisms- EAST READS WEST; WEST READS EAST: The Near and Far East in the Western World, UC Merced; Merced, CA, April, 2009

2009 — Panel Chair- Cultural Production By and About Asians In Peru- Second International Conference on Orientalisms- EAST READS WEST; WEST READS EAST: The Near and Far East in the Western World, UC Merced; Merced, CA, April, 2009

2009 — Presenter- "Developing Critical Reading Skills in Phase II," Puente Statewide Instructor Summit; San Diego, CA, March 2009.

2008 — Paper- Reading Ruiz de Burton in the 21st Century- "The Complexity of Post Civil War Race and Identity: Twain's *Puddin'head Wilson*, Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line,* and Ruiz de Burton's *Who Would Have Thought It?*" Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage Conference, Houston, TX, Nov. 2008.

2007 — Panelist- Plenary session, NACCS Regional Conference, UC Merced, Nov. 2007

2006 — Panelist- "Making Learning Visible", Strengthening Student Success Conference; San Diego, California, April 2006

2006	Presenter- "The Reading/Writing Connection", with Prof. Vincent Piro, Puente Regional Training; San Francisco, California, October 2006.

INVITED CLASSROOM PRESENTATIONS

2009	"Chicano Literature: Context and a Timeline" UC Merced, Lit 031 American Literature II, 16 April 2009, Merced, CA
2009	"Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton, the Mexican American War, and The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo", UC Merced, Lit 031 American Literature II, 5 Feb. 2009, Merced, CA
2008	"El Teatro Campesino and Luis Valdez" UC Merced, Lit 135 Literature and History of the 60's, 6 March 2008, Merced, CA

RELATED EXPERIENCE

2018	Actor, *Stand and Deliver*, Gallo Center Repertory Company, Modesto, CA
2018	Actor, *Beer for Breakfast*, Prospect Theater Project, Modesto, CA
2016	Actor, *Oleanna*, Merced College Theater Society, Merced, CA
2016	Actor, *The Orchard*, Prospect Theater Project, Modesto, CA
2005	Attended National Institute in Reading Apprenticeship, Oakland,CA
1999-2019	Puente Program- training and annual instructor/team conferences
1994, 1996	Editorial Staff- *Toyan* Humboldt State Literary Magazine
1994-1995	Tutor for English as a Foreign Language Students, University of Sheffield
1994-1995	Chairperson, Film Unit (film society and student operated cinema), University of Sheffield, England

AWARDS, HONORS, and AFFILIATIONS

2008-Present	Member, Modern Language Association
2008-Present	Member, American Literature Association
2008-Present	Member, Popular Culture Association
2008-2010	Eugene Cota-Robles Fellowship recipient
2000-Present	California Teachers Association, member
1997-2002	National Council of Teachers of English
1996	Selected as 1 of 16 to participate in "180 Days in Springfield"' pilot Master's Degree Program, University of Massachusetts
1995	Presidential Scholar, Humboldt State University
1994	Selected to study abroad, California State University
1989-1991	Alpha Gamma Sigma Honor Society, Modesto Junior College
1989-1991	Dean's List, Modesto Junior College

Abstract

Canon is a construct that has been under scrutiny since the 1960s. And while the general consensus is that canon must be more inclusive and open up, a plausible solution to this dilemma has not been suggested yet. This dissertation proposes to do away with the metaphor of canon as a way of measuring literature's merits, and replace it with another metaphor. For the sake of this study, the metaphor of conversation is a proposed metaphor. By looking at how canonical structure has impacted certain writers, this study looks at the way in which "conversation" can open up the study of literature and how it may democratize that same study.

Introduction

A Tale of Two (or More) Canons

Pragmatically, "the expansion of the Canon" has meant the destruction of the Canon, since what is being taught includes by no means the best writers who happen to be women, African, Hispanic, or Asian, but rather the writers who offer little but resentment they have developed as part of their sense of identity (7).

Harold Bloom

The issue is, then, what of human knowledge a particular set of narratives, a canon, or an historical construct, encodes, makes accessible- or obscures (57).

Paul Lauter

But they confuse freedom with the maintenance of the status quo (36).

Paulo Freire

Just Another Day in Paradise

Recently, I was at an event at my university to listen to noted humanities scholar Anthony Appiah discuss the place of the humanities in a twenty-first-century university. I was asked to come early and set up chairs for the event. Upon my arrival, I was met by an undergraduate who also had agreed to help with the event. I introduced myself as a graduate student, and his next question was one to which I have become accustomed: "What do you study?" When I informed him that my research interests include American literature, cultural studies, and canon formation, he proceeded to then ask, "Oh, American

literature? Perhaps you can tell me: Why doesn't America produce any good literature? I mean, there are a few good American books, but as a literature, don't you find it sorely lacking when compared to the other great works of Western civilization?" I was taken aback. Even though I have engaged in a study of American literature and canon, I was pretty sure that my ideas were obvious and passé to modern audiences. In fact, I have, on more than one occasion, questioned whether I should even continue my pursuit and analysis of canon. I thought that surely in a contemporary classroom there would be no need for a discussion of canon and its place in the academy. Apparently I was wrong.

I share this anecdote to illustrate that the canon is still to some degree securely rooted in the American university, and while my questioner's views of American literature might seem quaint, the reality is that they had to come from somewhere, and as such, I begin my study of canon.

Loaded Canon

So why canon? Why American literature? Because, despite all the advances of inclusion of women and minority writers that have been made over the last fifty years, the canon is still in dispute. Works considered to have literary merit are essentially the same as they were almost a century ago. And the United States, a nation that has dealt with multiculturalism since its inception, and not always successfully, has a canon that is for the most part still relatively homogenous. American identity is based on diversity and the richness diversity brings to a society. While some may argue that this is a myth, the truth is that diversity is part of our national ethos. The reality is that our society and our canon,

however, have remained extremely singular in their visions and values. For this reason, I choose American literature to begin my examination of canon.

The concept of a canon comes from the dogma of the Catholic Church:

> The Canon, a word religious in its origins, has become a choice among texts struggling with one another for survival, whether you interpret the choice as being made by dominant social groups, institutions of education, traditions of criticism, or as I do, by late-coming authors who feel themselves chosen by particular ancestral figures (Bloom 19).

But this is where the complexity of the argument begins. Canon has amassed many definitions, and its functions are not always agreed upon. In any case, as Bloom indicates, canon is a metaphor that defines "great literature."[1] A canon, like the American literature canon (or any other canon for that matter), is a collection of texts by which we derive our knowledge, but it also represents rules, implied mechanisms, and regulations: like its religious counterpart, the American literature canon has dictated rules we must follow in terms of defining great literature. These rules, ironically, tend to be in constant flux and up for revision. I say ironically because the purported purpose of the religious canon, or really any canon, is to establish and distinguish rules and texts that are stable, or "set in stone," so to speak, and as such, when we think of the American literary canon, we think of a set of texts that will reveal some truth about America and the American spirit. To view canon as merely a list of texts that illustrate a great body of literature is to

[1] And conversely, the process and rules of canonization labeled literature not worthy of canonization as less than great.

undervalue the second function of canon drastically, which in many ways has historically been the most intellectually violent and damaging aspect of canon: the notion that it does lay out rules and regulations for literature. In 1985, Jane Tomkins observed, "[L]iterary works that now make up the canon do so because the groups that have an investment in them are culturally the most influential" (5). The chief perpetrator of defining, or making up, the canon has been the academy; that is, scholars at institutions of higher learning who have, through their scholarship and publications, defined the greatness of certain works of literature.[2] As such, this dissertation's primary concern is with canon as created by scholars.[3]

Scholar and canon-critic, Paul Lauter asserted that the canon is one way a culture validates social power. And as such, the hegemonic power structures of a society are reflected in the formation of its literary canon: "Since those with cultural power tend to be members of socially, economically and politically established classes (or to serve them and identify their own interests with theirs), the texts that survive tend to be those that reflect and reinforce establishment ideologies" (Barbara Herrnstein Smith qtd. in Lerner

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[2] I am aware of popular canons that take the form of various commercial "must-read" lists, but for this study, I am concerned with academic canons and their influences.

[3] While I am emphasizing the contribution to the canon that academia plays on the formation of canon, I am aware of other avenues of cultural production also responsible for the formation of canon, not the least of which is textbook manufacturers. However, most contemporary academic literary textbooks are edited by scholars who do their part to influence, defy, or reinforce canonical texts.

350). The literary canon of America is no different. The idea of American character was very much at the heart of what F.O. Mathiessen and other twentieth century canon builders were addressing when creating the modern canon. In doing so, they created a body of literature that, while in flux, still is representative of the American character.

The problem with this approach is that the diversity of an ever-changing American character is not accurately represented. As the demographics of America continue to shift, should not our canon and our understanding of an American character also shift? Furthermore, the small representation of diversity in our culture within the canon has served to marginalize and tokenize groups not traditionally represented. Furthermore, to understand the contemporary American literature canon, aside from the religious origins of canon, we must also understand why there is a canon. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in 1992, defined a literary canon:

> The Western literary tradition, after all, and the canonical texts that comprise this splendid tradition, has been defined since Eliot as a more-or-less closed set of works that somehow speak to, or respond to, the "human condition" and to each other in formal patterns of repetition and revision. (44)

Even though Gates wrote these words almost thirty years ago, I contend that his argument is still relevant today. In the case of American literature, not only do canonical texts respond to the "human condition," but also to the notion of what it means to be an American. And here is one area where canon falls apart: in a constantly shifting American society, what does it mean to be an American? Certainly the answer is not the same for everyone, and herein we see the beginnings of one of the problems with a canon: the American literature canon, for the most part, presupposes a mostly

homogeneous group of literature. This is due in part to the modernist scholars who established the canon in the 1920s, oftentimes routed through European scholars and literary establishment first. To be fair, these men were forming a canon that built upon and expanded a literary tradition that began in Europe and grew in America. This tradition was mostly monochromatic. Furthermore, the idea of cultural diversity and multiculturalism was far from the concerns of these early American scholars, whose primary interests were to establish American literature within a larger literary tradition. Much of what I have explained in regards to the American literary canon has been completed before by critics and scholars like Paul Lauter and Joseph Csicsila. And a comprehensive history of canon in America would really not advance my discussion of canon. I will, however, quickly summarize the relevant events of literary studies in the United States, followed by an examination of the discussion of canon. Then, I will show how, even in the context of opening a canon, the notion of canon fails us with regards to a study of literature.

Paul Lauter, in his critique of the American literature canon, *Canons and Contexts*, reminds us, "The map of American Literature which most of us have used was drawn [in the 1920s]" (23). This is not to say that there was not a canon in place before, but, ironically, the pre-1920s canon was more open. Since the American literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was not seen as a legitimate literature, on the same level as the study of British or world literature, this canon was comprised of the

bestselling American literature.[4] Many early figures of the canon have fallen out of favor since then.[5] Early canon-makers were publishers and editors of anthologies, who really intended a more general readership, but as university programs began to feature American literature as a legitimate area of literary studies, college professors began to edit and collect anthologies, not so much for general readership, but for use in the classroom. Academically speaking, American literature was, until the late nineteenth century, viewed as an extension, or offshoot, of British literature, and as such the masterworks of Western civilization populated the American classrooms, and this is why many early works of American literature into the first half of the twentieth century also found its place into the canon via European literary critics. Once the academy began to

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[4] I say ironically because many of the top-selling authors of the nineteenth century were female writers who bore little resemblance to the canonical literature we now read from the nineteenth century.

[5] Many are still canonized in the sense in that we know of them and their works, like James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. While these authors' works are not widely read, they are still included in anthologies and discussed as part of the history of the American literary tradition. This phenomenon begs the question of what it means to fall out of a canon. Since these authors are not as widely read as they once were, but they are still recognized, are they still canonized in a way? Does one ever really fall out of the canon? And if not, how has inclusion of more women and minority writers altered the canon as we know it? I will not probably answer all of these questions here, but I hope that these observations allow us to engage in a discussion regarding the usefulness of a canonical metaphor for the discussion of literature.

recognize American literature, the formation of a canon was already underway, and many American scholars took the reins for the formation and perpetuation of this canon.

Here we see the true beginnings of the canon that occupies this dissertation: "that set of authors and works generally included in the basic American Literature college courses and textbooks, and those ordinarily discussed in standard volumes of literary history, bibliography, or criticism" (Lauter 23). These books are also often considered "classics" or "must-read" books. As the academy took the reins of editing literary anthologies for academic studies, the idea of what was considered quality American literature was the purview of the academics who taught American literature courses, as well as those who collected works for publication in anthologies.[6] In the American university classroom, the work of scholars tends to drive the content of approved anthologies, and in turn, these works become the basis for canon in America. The problem with anthologies as criteria for canon is that there are only so many works that can fit into either a course syllabus or an anthology. As such, our canon, while presupposing a static literary tradition, has been, paradoxically, both stable and in flux since the beginning. The canon as we now recognize it was, as Lauter has indicated,

[6] This is not meant to belittle literary studies; I am attempting to contextualize the foundation and formation of the contemporary American literature canon. Certainly, the scholars who have been responsible for the formation and perpetuation of the canon were not maliciously excluding voices from it. The canon was constructed from a larger Western literary tradition, which had a limited view of diversity.

forged in the 1920s, and has, for the most part, remained intact.[7] Laurence Levine reiterates this point, and exposes the problem with a canon, when he writes:

> The "traditional" curriculum that prevailed so widely in the decades between the World Wars, and those whose decline is lamented with such fervor by the conservative critics, ignored most of the groups that compose the American population whether they were from Africa, Europe, Asia, Central America and South America or from indigenous North American people. (*The Opening of the American Mind* 20)

A lack of representation of many of these groups, as well as women, has been the impetus for demanding an opening of the canon.[8] And while any American literature anthology or course outline is probably going to reflect some modest changes, the fact is that the metaphor of canon, both in structure and in rules, has failed both defenders and detractors of a canon.

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[7] While many writers of the 1920s canon have fallen out of favor, and many have been added to the canon, mostly in an attempt to diversify it, its core still remains intact. Writers such as Hawthorne, Melville, or Emerson, who were canonized in the 1920s (or earlier) are still viewed as canonical, embodying the essence of American literature.

[8] Ironically, women were featured quite fairly in pre-1920s American literature anthologies, as many anthologies prior to the 1920s featured works that were best sellers in America. It was not until the 1920s that scholars who collected and edited anthologies sacrificed women's places for more works by now-canonized men like Melville, Hawthorne, and James.

The canon has long been used as a means of maintaining an intellectual and literary caste system: "The literary canon is, in short, a means by which culture validates social power" (Lauter 23). As many of the key principles of the American literature canon have remained in place, there have been changes to literary studies in the United States, which have succeeded in accomplishing two things: first, they created a myriad of alternate canons, which in turn have their own canonized texts and rules for canonization; second, these alternate canons have served to be as exclusionary as the canons they challenge. Taking this into consideration, it should be clear that canon, as a metaphor for discussing literature, has both failed in its own purported purpose and served to stratify literatures of non-represented groups further, with many of the key players from the 1920s still firmly intact.[9]

Lauter also observed of the canon: "The problem we face is that the model is fundamentally misleading" (48). Not only has change occurred throughout the existence of an American Literature canon, it still occurs. Furthermore, Laurence Levine notes that our canon has never truly been a canon, as it has been subject to change throughout its existence:

> The canon and the curriculum that were supposedly governed by Matthew Arnold's dictum of, "the best that has been thought or known in the world…the

[9] This is not to imply that these works and authors are not worthy of study, only to say that with the changing demographics of American society and the American university, the canon is ineffectual in addressing these changes. A bit repetitive—suggest changing to "only to say that the canon is ineffectual in addressing the changes demographics of American society and the American university."

> study and pursuit of perfection," were in truth never static and were constantly in the process of revision with irate defenders insisting, as they still do, that change would bring with it instant decline. (Levine *The Opening of the American Mind Canons, Culture and History* 15)

This further reinforces Lauter's notion that the paradigm we use for literature is not an entirely accurate one. The question now remains: If the canon is ever-shifting, why have so many figures, like Twain, Melville, Emerson, and Hawthorne, remained atop for so long?[10] Is it that there is something intrinsically magical or great about the works of such writers? Perhaps they are also subject to the poetical and political whims of academia.

Jane Tomkins, in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, discusses why this may occur. She acknowledges this to be the case with the long-canonized work *The Scarlet Letter*:

> I propose here to question the accepted view that a classic work does not depend for its status on the circumstances in which it is read and will argue exactly the reverse: that a literary classic is a product of all those circumstances of which it has traditionally been supposed to be independent. (3-4)

And this is apparently the case with many works of literature; literature's greatness is determined by what we—the reader, the critic, the scholar—bring to the reading.

---

[10] I must point out that some canonized figures did not start out as such. As mentioned before, scholars like F.O. Matthiessen, in the early- to mid-twentieth century introduced into the canon some figures who previously had not been recognized, the most notable of whom was Herman Melville.

“Damned Mob of Scribbling Women…”

As a model, let’s take a brief look at how women, who, while being very prolific and popular in American publishing, have occupied a very small portion of the American literature canon, and the bulk of the canon still is represented by white males: “The male experience was always painted as universal, as the most human experience, while women were always written through the eyes of men—reduced” (Pellot n.p.). This contemporary observation demonstrates that the inequity of the American canon is still very much an issue. Adalaine Morris has summarized this problem with the process of canonization and exclusion as such:

> The problem arises when the canon becomes the very cane by which we yank the soliloquist off the stage or a piece of artillery we use to hurl her or him into the outer darkness. The problem arises when, to alter the metaphor slightly, the chorus rises and says to the soliloquist something like “you’re not the best that has been thought and said,” a formula inevitably followed by the adjectives like “propagandistic,” “second-rate,” “narrow,” “partial,” “distorted,” or “subjective.” At this moment it is hard to not notice that the chorus consists almost entirely of white gentlemen of the middle or upper classes and that they’re toting signs emblazoned with the words “universal,” “timeless,” “natural,” and “self-evident.” (469)

“White gentlemen of the middle or upper class,” identifies one of the problems with our canon and process of canonization. As Emerald Pellot correctly identified, very few

female role models were available for her to read while growing up: "The more I thought about it the more I realized that female writers were basically excluded from my public school curriculum…" (n.p.). Furthermore, women were not respected outside Pellot's classroom:

> (S)o why did I think the female experience would be different or inferior to the male experience when those men were examining such general themes? The answer is simple: everything in culture tells us that women's experiences don't matter as much." (n.p.)

Which is ironic because, according to sales and library holdings, women's literature has always been popular (Wadsworth 725-726). While this analysis is not about popularity, when the majority of the best-selling writers of the nineteenth century were women, and those who forged our contemporary canon in the 1930s almost entirely ignored women's contribution to the canon, we must take note.

The omissions from the canon have historically been argued as matters of aesthetics: "The culture of modernity has been characterized by a volatile relationship between high art and mass culture" (Huyssen vii). The cultural divide in America has troubled our society and the academy. In a culture that espouses democracy and equality, ironically, there has been a divide between art of high culture and popular art. This divide has served to suppress the study of literature written by and for women and unfairly compartmentalize literature by women as trivial and unimportant: " Woman…is positioned as reader of inferior literature—subjective, emotional and passive—while man…emerges as writer of genuine authentic literature—objective, ironic, and in control of his aesthetic means" (Huyssen 46). It would seem that Hawthorne's attitude, captured

by the famous quote, "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash—and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed," speaks directly to not only his feelings about women writers, but his feelings about popular or mass appeal, and it is this attitude that is reflected by our canon (Hawthorne qtd. in Frederick 231).

To be sure, representation of women in literature in the academy has improved, but the solution has been to insert representative works of females and to open up the studies of women's literature; despite these steps, the problem is far from being solved. Neither solution truly addresses the problem at the core of canon and canonization in the American academy, which is one of possession: whose canon is it? Like the American ideal of democracy, we like to think the canon belongs to all Americans equally, but herein lies another problem with our canon. In many ways, but not entirely unlike our government, it is not truly democratic, but a representative democracy.[11] And our canon is reflective of our democratic practices rather than our ideologies. However, as our own society is fraught with inequity, so is the canon that represents it. First, the damage caused by this kind of representation in the canon serves to essentialize the role women have contributed to literature and reduce their contribution to a few representative works that may or may not be typical of literature by women. Furthermore, the texts selected are often used as representations of offshoots of the American Literature core, much like Sara Orne Jewett, Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, and Kate Chopin are often chosen as

[11] This is in no way a comment on the effectiveness of our government.

representatives of regionalist fiction within American literature (Wadsworth 717). These writers' works, while popular in the nineteenth century, are relegated to one corner of the American experience. The works of these women do fit within the criteria of regional or domestic literature, but why are they not read as representatives of the American experience? Why are the works seen within the confines of a regional discussion, only a side-note in the larger discussion of America? If these books were so popular, perhaps there is something more to the content than a canonical examination has allowed. One could make the argument that it is the very popularity of these novels that has served to undermine their canonical position. Jane Tomkins, in *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860,* wrote:

> The popularity of novels by women has been held against them as much as their preoccupation with "trivial" feminine concerns. And this led to the observation…that popular fiction, in general, at least since the middle of the nineteenth century, has been rigorously excluded from the ranks of "serious" literary works. That exclusion seems to me especially noteworthy in American literature, since the rhetoric of American criticism habitually invokes democratic values as a hallmark of greatness in American authors. (xiv)

While popularity may not be a marker of "serious literary works," it should also not be a factor that excludes literary works from studied examination. The merits of studied examination should be based upon the appropriateness of texts within the context of a course. As the course of study of literature grows and diversifies, then we must account for works of literature that speak to our present conversation, whatever that may be.

Likewise, Andreas Huyssen, in the 1980s, discussed the idea that mass culture had long been associated with the feminine while high intellectual culture had been associated with the masculine (47). Certainly in America in the nineteenth century and through the twentieth century, patterns of reading by the masses indicate that this was true. As the academy increasingly became the forger and keeper of the American literature canon, the men who established the canon may have in some respects been responding to the larger presence of women in American society. It is not merely coincidental that women secured the right to vote shortly before the academy began to establish a canon which, in many ways, was contrary to the popular reading habits of Americans of the nineteenth century. Readership in the nineteenth century was dominated by women, and, as such, the consumption of literature may have been indicative of the literature that appealed to that readership (Tomkins xiv). Rather than acknowledge gender differences, both in taste and content, intellectuals of the early twentieth century opted to favor less-popular artists like Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, Emerson, or Thoreau, as Matthiessen did in his foundational study, *American Renaissance*. I am not making an argument that these writers' works are not deserving of their canonical attention, but reiterating one of the many problems that come with utilizing the metaphor of a canon when referring to literature. As the criteria for high culture has been reactionary to mass culture, we see a problem with the canon and a specific strategy that serves to exclude women. The point I am trying to make is that works like *American Renaissance* were seemingly reactionary to popular tastes; Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,[12]

[12] To be fair, as the canon was opened, some works, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have been re-inserted into the American literature canon.

for instance, was the best-selling novel of the nineteenth century in America, and as such one would think it would merit some attention, certainly when trying to understand the American character, but sadly, it was during the early part of the twentieth century that the popular works of female writers began to fall out of favor with the American academy. The canon has always been a tool of politics and a tool used to conserve and preserve white, male-centric values.

From the text selection to canonical theory, the side effect, or perhaps major purpose, of the canon has been to insure and reinforce the notion that high culture is the domain of the white male intellectual. And as such, women's literature, as well as literature by other diverse groups, has been at a critical disadvantage, as one must acknowledge that works by non-white male writers will be different than those written by white males. Our canon is made up of great works that represent the American character. For much of the twentieth century, those great works were primarily by white male writers, and as such reflected the ideals of those group of men, "(f)or Western Literary History is overwhelmingly male—or more accurately, patriarchal" (Gilbert and Gubar 47).[13] And as such the canon has served to represent the concerns of male writers and male scholars. While the canon has opened up, it has opened up from the same perspective. As Emerald Pellot noted, "Male authors shaped how I saw women and thus, inadvertently, myself" (n.p.). The works of literature Pellot read told her who and what women should be. The notion of portraying women characters for women readers is lost

[13] While Gilbert and Gubar studied women outside of American literature, I feel their conclusions are also relevant to this discussion.

on our canon since most representations in canonical literature are those created by men. What Pellot noticed in her classroom is also very true of the canon: inclusion of marginalized groups, like women, has been in the service of not disrupting the core of the canon. We see token works by women and minorities in the canon, rather than true inclusion and integration of the thoughts and ideologies of these groups into the very fabric of our canonical conscience. And for women writers, not only are they searching for a voice and a place in a literary tradition that offers very few role models and does not value their judgments, but they are also forced to engage in intellectual debate with male writers and traditions. The concerns and values of American women are lost in the debate as the parameters of the canon's "universal" values clearly ignore those values and concerns.

Moreover, the mechanisms we use to select and value literature are sexist. This is not to say that all criticism is overtly sexist. However, consider this: if a canon is not just a list of great works, but a set of rules and regulations that both manage and are generated by that list, and the origins of the canon and the critical texts which govern that list are sexist, then might sexism be inherent in the process of canonization? Furthermore, if the canon is formed by white men, then why wouldn't its creation reflect their concerns and beliefs? Defenders of the canon will throw around words such as "universal" to defend the context by which literature has been deemed great and canon-worthy, but this defense serves to mask the greater deficiency of the canon: If one does not fit certain parameters of "universal," then exclusion is a natural outcome.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar grapple with this idea in their watershed work about women in literature, *Madwoman in the Attic*. Historically, Western literary

criticism has viewed the pen as analogous to the penis (Gilbert and Gubar 3-4). As such, male writers have been the "progenitors" of literature: It is through their use of the pen that great literature takes form. And literature is constantly measured against the great male writers of the canon. But where does this leave women writers? Gilbert and Gubar pose this question, asking, "If the pen is a metaphorical penis, with what organ can females generate texts?" (7). Ironically, a more prescient metaphor for the creation of literature would be one of birth, but use of the phallus has displaced this metaphor and through its constant evocation by male critics, it has become a standard and a given. The pen = penis has become the dominant metaphor for the creation of literature, and as such has forced women to reconsider the manner in which they create. And this just confirms the idea that the criticism by which our estimation of great literature is measured is sexist. This brief examination of women's literature illustrates for us a recurrent problem with canon and how, in America, it deals with a diverse mosaic of writers.

An Inappropriate Metaphor (part 1)

Why is any of this important? We have all heard the cliché, "If it's not broke, don't fix it." And for many, this is the case with the canon. I have even heard from colleagues and peers that without the standards the canon establishes, education will become a free-for-all. This argument reveals more about the canon defender's mindset, and it negates any critical argument of the real issue at stake: in a vastly diverse academic setting of the United States' academy, does the metaphor of a canon suit our needs anymore? Certainly, when academy of the United States was working hard to establish

itself against the backdrop of British and European literature, it was important that we establish a canon. Our demands were to legitimize a burgeoning literature, and as such, we had to play the game on the field already established. But as the social dynamics of the American post-secondary education have been transformed by ever widening diversity, is this still the perspective that occupies our minds?

I would argue no. I would argue that the metaphor is "broke." I have been immersed in post-secondary education, as a student and instructor, for almost 30 years. What has become more and more apparent to me is the same ideas that many who challenge canon have articulated: the canon, as it exists now, does not suit the needs of today's academic audience. Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* discusses how change in academia is hard coming because any major structural change is viewed as threatening. Ironically, my years in the academy have shown me that while there is a constant search for change, real change is not always what is meant by this word. To me, the changes I have seen in my years attending universities in California, Massachusetts and Great Britain, as well as teaching at community colleges in California, are more about reinforcing the status quo.[14] There is a reason that so-called "radical" change has been a repackaging of ideas from ten-plus years ago. And the idea I present is one that threatens a long established way of looking at literature. While I applaud the work done by challengers of the canon to open up our existing canon, and I fully acknowledge that the accomplishment of these scholars have succeeded in opening the canon to a certain degree, the canon is still an artifact of exclusivity that serves to tell our students what

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[14] As an aside, I have also taught in high school both in California and Massachusetts, so my educational experience is extremely diverse.

doesn't matter as much as what should matter to them. It is for this reason that this study is to make the argument that we radically alter our views of literary studies and consider a new metaphor other than "canon." For this study, I will be working with the metaphor of "conversation" as this new metaphor, a metaphor that I completely is imperfect, but the best representation of what I think represents the direction of modern education.

A New Conversation

Sadly, our practice of opening the canon has succeeded in keeping us paralyzed in a paradigm of preserving the literary canon, all the while adding to it. I propose that we move beyond this dated paradigm, thus allowing for an inclusion of literature, some considered classic or canonical by older standards, some newer. What I intend to do with this dissertation is show how, using American literature as a model, the canonical metaphor, or paradigm, has failed us, and how we can still find effective studies of literature and texts by thinking beyond traditional canonical ideologies.

My interests in this idea do, in fact, stem from my experience as an educator for almost 25 years. In that time, I have taught in urban, and suburban high schools, community colleges, university and even a prison education program. I have seen first-hand the range of students populating our education system…and I also have witnessed the way their perspectives of the world have influenced their reading of canonical literature, and, to be sure, while they may not engage in a traditional canonical reading, their perspectives are no less valid, and it is from these experiences that I began to formulate this idea of reading literature with a new metaphor in mind.

This study begins with a look at Frederick Douglass a Black writer who has been canonized by both the larger canon of American literature and the smaller canon of African American literature. Typically, in both canons, we read *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, no doubt a great work. But is it representative of the best of Douglass's writing and thoughts on racial politics in America? I would argue it is not, and that we continue to read this autobiography because it fits neatly into a box we call "slave narrative" within the American literature canon. By contrasting this work with Douglass's later work, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, we see a much more nuanced and sophisticated look at the same events covered in the first autobiography. Revealed to us in this second autobiography is a re-examination of Douglass's life in the United States, as both a slave and a free Black man, with the benefit of ten years living abroad.

In next chapter, we look at how we have created alternate and minor canons, the issues that plague the larger canon also serving to undermine these alternate canons. Utilizing the Chicano canon, specifically the works of Richard Rodriguez and a lesser-known writer, Rick P. Rivera, we will see how one writer was excluded from the Chicano literature canon because of his politics, while the second, following the same format of writing, was welcomed into Chicano literature following traditionally canonized techniques offered by his publisher, Arte Público Press.

Next, we will look at Michael Chabon's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. This is a novel that is set and primed to become part of the American literature canon, if it is not already. I am not making an argument for the inclusion or exclusion in the canon of this book, but rather how it enters and comments on the canonical conversation about literature. I maintain that Chabon is in

fact arguing for the legitimacy of a different type of literature: the superhero comic book. While it is becoming more and more acceptable to view, read and even use comics, or graphic novels, in university classes around the country, these often exclude superhero comic books, especially early comic books, as legitimate literature. Chabon not only makes this argument but illustrates it throughout the narrative of his award-winning novel.

And finally, a look at not only a different type of text, but one which was purposefully produced for the masses, thus rejecting all indicators of higher art. This chapter will reveal how the B-grade, low-budget, science fiction film *They Live* delivers a pointed critique about the American class conflict that is still relevant, maybe even more relevant, today than it was in 1988 when the film was released. By looking at this work that defies all categorization of a canonized work of literature, we can see how rejection of this canonical standard can open up our studies of literature.

In closing, this dissertation will not argue for the inclusion of more literature in the canon, as the canonical structure is debilitating our study of literature in a world that has moved beyond the highbrow, male-heteronormative, mostly mono-chromatic landscape of the existing canon. Thinking outside of this dangerous paradigm, we can find resolution to many of the issues raised by critics of our current canonical mindset.

Chapter I

Frederick Douglass: A Tale of Two Autobiographies

Slaves' (or more accurately ex-slaves') autobiographies record the process in which the ex-slave writes his or her self into an existence recognized by the dominant American Society. (91)

Kimberly Drake

A canon is commonly seen as what other people, once powerful, have made and what should now be opened up, demystified, or eliminated altogether. (1)

Robert von Hallberg

Frederick Douglass published three autobiographies, the first two of which were published in 1845 and 1855: *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *My Bondage and My Freedom*, respectively. While both are still widely published, it seems *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is the more widely read and studied of the two; in short, *Narrative* has become canonized while *My Bondage and My Freedom* stands at the threshold of the canon. Why did this happen? *My Bondage* is approximately three times the length of the previous work; length, however, is hardly a reason to account for the long exclusion from the canon of the second autobiography. One may also hypothesize that by the time Douglass published his second autobiography, the American literary marketplace was flooded with slave narratives. Yet, while this might account for its initially being overlooked, F.O. Matthiessen defends representation in a canon as not being predicated upon sales and

popularity (x).[15] Herein lies one of the key problems with the metaphor and structure of a canon; specifically, how a canon treats the various works of a writer, in this case Frederick Douglass. Why is Douglass's first work more often read and studied? Could it be that the literary identity created by Douglass in his first autobiography is more in keeping with the American literary establishment's idea of what it meant to be a freed slave in the mid-nineteenth century? As American canon is formed, by one standard, as a way to explore American identity and values, Douglass's *My Bondage* has been widely overlooked in favor of his first autobiography, partially because the identity that Douglass portrays in the first work is more palatable to American and historic sensibilities of the nineteenth century. And in many ways, it continues to be out of keeping with the former slave identity of Douglass. In this sense, David Leverenz wrote of *My Bondage*, "The revision seems arch, smug, pretentious, excessively genteel and self-conscious, even phony" (353). But this attitude is dismissive in its analysis of the two works. Furthermore, it is Douglass's understanding of American freedom in his second autobiography that calls into

[15] F.O. Matthiessen expressed this sentiment in his groundbreaking work, *American Renaissance*, and while it is true that American literature is made up of many overlapping canons, Matthiessen's work is important in that he pinpointed a five-year period in the nineteenth century, 1850 to 1855, and five writers who represented the American spirit and identity in literature. Douglass was not one of the figures he chose to represent this period, even though *My Bondage and My Freedom* was released during the prescribed timeline.

question an American identity and American values, which challenges canonical standards and expectations of Douglass.

As the introduction illustrated, the discussion of canon inclusion and exclusion is a complex subject that has been both debated and, sometimes, avoided altogether. The criteria by which a work becomes canonized is widely discussed: aesthetics, moral and ethical values, and historic relevance, to name a few. The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how criteria for canonization, particularly with regard to the area of American identity and values, apply to the first two autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and how they fail us.

While the American literary establishment had devised a means and methods to canon literature long before F.O. Matthiessen's work *American Renaissance*, it was not until the publication of this text that academics began to define and articulate the American literary canon, both including and excluding a variety of American works. Matthiessen's work focused on a five-year period and five American writers who, in his view, exemplified American identity and values: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman.[16] While Matthiessen's work has been debated, and the canon has opened up far beyond the five individuals he initially selected, his criteria for examining these writers has

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[16] It is interesting to note that the best-selling book of the nineteenth century, *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* was also released in the five-year period outlined by Matthiessen, but was a notable omission from his analysis of great American literature. Already we can see a bias and prejudice in the way in which a canon is formulated, and really it was not until fairly recently that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was brought into the canon.

remained as some of the key factors used in academia. Chief among them are the ideas of "the relation of the individual to society, and the nature of good and evil. . .all wrote literature for democracy" (xiv-xv) and the creation of heroic figures reflective of the American identity. Jane Tomkins discusses how continual inclusion of consistently canonized literary works fit into the ever-changing identities of Americans. Perhaps here we see the opposite: inclusion because the identity of an American freed slave has not changed.

But it is exactly Douglass's shifting American identity when looking at his first two autobiographical works that is the primary concern of this chapter. The complexity of his work is related to the fact that he is a Black American writer. Therefore, when we consider his identity, as with any writer of a marginalized group, do we consider a general American identity, or is the identity for such an individual dependent upon representation of said group?[17] In other words, is Douglass's narrative persona accepted in *Narrative* over *My Bondage* because his narrative identity positions him as a slave who understands the freedoms he does not have, and the implications that would come with those freedoms? The second book is written from the narrative point of view of a man who has been free for ten years, and lived abroad for two of those years, thereby allowing him a more critical eye towards

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[17] While it is clear that with regards to Douglass we are addressing the concerns of African Americans, I chose the term *marginalized groups* as one representative of the notion of alterity, which certainly includes cultural differences, but is also inclusive of gender, religion, class, etc.

American freedom. In this context, David Palumbo-Liu explains in his introduction to *The Ethnic Canon Histories, Institutions, and Interventions*, in American literary studies, diversity, which has become synonymous with "multiculturalism," has become widely accepted and embraced; "critical multiculturalism," on the contrary, is sadly absent from ethnic discourse:

> Instead of presenting the occasion for a critique of the ideological apparatuses that distribute power and resources unevenly among the different constituencies of a multicultural society, the insertion of ethnicity into the curriculum can be articulated through pedagogical discourses that ultimately defer to monocultural presumptions of "aesthetic value," "expressive force," and "character formation," and the ethnic text is reduced to a pretext for the pluralistic argument that all cultures share certain expressive values. (2)

In other words, we accept multicultural literature as representative of a group, but rarely do we engage in ethnic discourse as a way to understand, not only the work, but the context of the work. Perhaps this is where Douglass as a writer fails. He is oddly positioned as a representative of the former enslaved social class; he can be read as an advocate for abolition, but he is much harder to accept as a critic of America. This begs the question of who is the real Douglass.

To answer this question properly, it is necessary to uncover what each text was saying to its audience. It is important to remember that *Narrative* was written to validate, in the minds of naysayers, that Douglass had in fact been enslaved. In the process, Douglass was exploring the difference between being enslaved and being free: "The purported goal of the slave narrative is to reveal the 'truth' about slavery

by describing a representative personal history, one which might stand in for the experiences of all slaves" (Drake 95). Indeed, Douglass used this work to tell the story of his life as a slave. In the early biography of Douglass, we find the portrait of an individual who is continually questioning and reassessing his situation. Early on, he discusses the idea of the status of the enslaved as it applies to his or her master:

> I have been frequently asked, when a slave, if I had a kind master, and I do not remember ever to have given a negative answer; nor did I in pursuing this course, consider myself as uttering what was absolutely false; for I measured the kindness of my master by the standard of kindness set up among slaveholders around us. Moreover, slaves are like other people, and imbibe prejudices quite common to others. They think their own better than that of others. (23)

Douglass's perspectives are being formed: He constantly compares his current experiences with previous and potential future ones. For example, he desires more when his then-master prohibits him from learning to read: "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave" (34). But Douglass, as always, reflects on this activity, and realizes the importance of reading and its connection to freedom:

> It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. (34)

Douglass reveals a comparison of his life before and after reading. After he realized that a world never-before revealed to him is all around. The end result is a desire for freedom, which is, it is assumed, a shared value of those who are enslaved, if in fact we believe that a slave narrative is representative of all slaves.

As freedom is an American value, and the notion of slavery undermines that value, Douglass's first autobiography was ideal for a Northern audience whose sympathies leaned toward abolition of slavery. In fact, the freedom that Douglass seeks is found in the North. He is, at first, cautious of the North, but his attitudes quickly change. Once again, his ability to compare current situations to past ones allows him to see that his anxieties about the North are seemingly unwarranted:

> There I was in the midst of thousands, and yet a perfect stranger; without home and without friends, in the midst of thousands of my own brethren—children of a common Father, and yet I dared not to unfold to anyone of them my sad condition. I was afraid to speak to anyone for fear of speaking to the wrong one, and thereby falling into the hands of money-loving kidnappers, whose business it was to lie in wait for the panting fugitive, as the ferocious beasts of the forest lie in wait for their prey. (86)

Although these were his initial responses, he quickly reassures his audience that, "Thank Heaven, I remained but a short time in this distressed situation" (86). So the fear and anxiety he felt as a runaway slave, he insists, have passed, and he is free to make his way in a North that is much better by comparison to where he had been in the South: "Everything looked clean, new and beautiful. I saw little or no dilapidated houses, with poverty stricken inmates; no half-naked children and barefooted women,

such as I had been accustomed to see in Hillsborough, Easton, St. Michael's and Baltimore" (89). And whatever prejudice he faces in the North, he quickly disregards it in his text, as is evidenced by the blatant racism he experiences while working at a job caulking: "When I got through with that job, I went in pursuit of a job caulking; but such was the strength of prejudice against color, among the white caulkers, that they refused to work with me, and of course I could get no employment" (91). In a footnote following this description, Douglass lets the reader know that situation is different in other areas: "I am told that colored persons can now get employment at caulking in New Bedford—a result of anti-slavery effort" (91). The overall effect of Douglass's description of the North is one of promise and opportunity, due in part to the freedom afforded Blacks there. The fears of the prejudice he may face were assuaged either soon, or by the time of writing the book.

We can see how the American identity for both a former slave grateful for his freedom and the opportunities America can offer are presented in *Narrative*. For the reader, the Douglass at the end of this first autobiography has gone from slavery to being a productive citizen in Northern society: "Douglass's representation in the *Narrative* of his experience as a slave relies on several textual conventions, among them the American success story and an abolitionist rhetoric informed by the discourses of sentimentality and white evangelical Christianity" (Dorsey 438). He rose up and achieved the American identity of a self-made man. He ultimately taught himself to read, he alone stood up to his overseer, Covey, and he escaped the

treachery of slavery, eventually to be embraced by Northern society.[18] Moreover, the America presented in this autobiography is much more equitable and democratic than the reality of American society. If we go back to the foundations for the canon, those which reflect American identity and values, then democracy, as F.O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance* expressed, is one of the core ideas that American canon reflects.

Narrative sold 30,000 copies in the first five years after its release (Leverenz 354). It was a resounding success, so much so that Douglass's status as a fugitive slave forced him to leave the country from 1845 until 1847 (Edwards xii-xiii). Douglass understood the freedom of literacy compared with the ignorance of illiteracy; he realized that being free was better and that the Northern society would be kinder than the society of the South. It is reasonable to assume, then, that because Douglass was only twenty-seven when he wrote the first autobiography, he would continue to grow intellectually, and would continue to apply a comparative analysis to what he observed and experienced, thus revising his worldview.[19] Thus, Brent

[18] As expressed before, because Douglass pays little narrative time to the racial inequities of the North, the affect is that Douglass has made it to an egalitarian society. While this is far from the truth, it does, I believe, lend credence to the argument that *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is more widely accepted and canonized.

[19] This, of course, is an approximation, as Douglass's exact year of birth is unknown: "I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it" (Douglass, *Narrative* 9).

Hayes Edwards observes, "more significantly, even given the parallels in narrative, argument, and phrasing, *My Bondage* is written from an entirely different vantage point—one might almost say that it is composed by an entirely different writer" (xix). More importantly, I believe this book is equally about Douglass's bondage *and* his freedom, and it is about scrutinizing America as a freeman. This sets this book apart from the first narrative.

As Douglass was constantly reevaluating his situation, when he was almost thirty-seven years of age, he took the chance to re-examine his experience of slavery in the first two-thirds of *My Bondage*. Most striking is the inclusion of the importance of family and community. In his first work, the reader hardly gets a sense of Douglass's family.[20] By contrast, in his revision—for I see *My Bondage* as a revision rather than a different work—Douglass spends a great deal of time describing his family while he was growing up. Most notable in this second autobiographical work is the addition of his grandparents to the story, and particularly the importance of his grandmother to his early life. Douglass credits this early childhood influence with his

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Furthermore, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass states, "I suppose myself to have been born about the year 1817" (41).

[20] We learn in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* that his mother was named Harriet Bailey, and he only saw her a few times in his life, and his father was a white man of unknown identity (9-10). We learn more about his owners than about his family.

understanding of community and family, already setting him apart from many of his enslaved peers:

> Most of the children, however, in this instance, being the children of grandmother's daughters, the notions of family, and the reciprocal duties and benefits of the relation, had a better chance of being understood than where children are placed—as they often are—in the hands of strangers, who have no care for them, apart from the wishes of their masters. (42)

He even credits his ability to view a situation from different vantage points to his grandmother: "Thus early I learned that the point from which something is viewed is of some importance" (49). We can already see that Douglass is deconstructing the self-made man of the previous autobiography by crediting his grandmother's positive influence on his identity, and thus emphasizing the importance of family and community, clearly countering the "emphasis on manhood and competitive individualism" of the earlier work (Leverenz 363).

While Douglass does stress his initiation into manhood, that is, his fight with Covey, as a major event on his journey to freedom, there are subtle differences that refocus his ideas of masculinity. To begin with, in *Narrative* Douglass prefaces the fight with Covey by stating, "You have seen how a man was made a slave, you shall see how a slave was made a man" (60). While the emphasis is sharply on the idea of masculinity being a feature of liberation, in *My Bondage* Douglass does not preface his encounter with Covey in the same way: "You have, dear reader, seen me humbled, degraded, broken down, enslaved and brutalized, and you understand how it was done; now let us see the converse of all this, and how it was brought about"

(171).[21] He is not so overtly connecting the idea of liberation with his own personal masculinity.

Furthermore, he adds the slave woman Caroline to his retelling. She is another of Covey's slaves, and Douglass acknowledges that in his weakened condition she "could have mastered me very easily" (186). And although Covey beckoned her to help him, knowing that she could be punished for defiance, she chose not to help: "We were all in open rebellion, that morning" (186). The addition of Caroline, and her complicity through inaction with Douglass, continues to emphasize that Douglass was not as self-made as he portrayed himself to be in the first telling of his life.

Finally, it is important to consider a change that Douglass makes in discussing the effect of the fight upon him, subtle though it may be. Following the scuffle with Covey in *Narrative,* Douglass writes: "This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning point in my career as a slave. It rekindled the few expiring embers of freedom, and revived within me a sense of my own manhood" (64). In his revision ten years later, he alters his view slightly, but significantly: "It rekindled in my breast the smouldering embers of liberty" (*My Bondage* 187). The change in phraseology from "freedom" to "liberty" implies something about lessons of freedoms learned since the writing of the first book. He implicitly acknowledges "freedom" as a legal condition

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[21] I would be remiss if I did not inform the reader that at the end of the fight, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass does emphasize, "I WAS A MAN NOW…A FREEMAN" (187). His admission does once again equate masculinity with liberation, but by not prefacing his story as such, I argue the focus has changed from an emphasis on self-reliance to one of an understanding of his condition.

that may not insure "liberty," which is an ideal. Peter A. Dorsey expressed that this idea is further emphasized when Douglass continues to describe the feelings he has as "a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery to the heaven of freedom" (Douglass, *Narrative* 64). In his revised work, while he still employs the same metaphor of "the tomb of slavery," freedom is now a "heaven of *comparative* freedom" (Douglass, *My Bondage* 187; emphasis added). It is important to keep this in mind, especially when examining the last third of the book, entitled, "Life as a Freeman."

It seems clear that Douglass's own ideas about American freedom were undergoing major revisions during the ten years between *Narrative* and *My Bondage*. He not only chose to refocus the emphasis on self to community, he also chose to examine more closely the freedom he attained in the North.[22] Whereas in the former autobiography, he claimed his condition in the North was distressed for a very short time and excused the racism he witnessed when looking for work as a caulker, in the later book Douglass does not excuse the treatment he and other free slaves experienced in the North so easily.

The beautiful description of the North in his previous autobiography gave way to a more skeptical view. Thus, writing about New York, he stated: "Free and joyous, however, as I was, joy was not the only sensation I experienced. It was like the quick

[22] By community, I also speak of an emphasis on family, especially in his early childhood. I believe by emphasizing family and other slaves, like Caroline, he is connecting with a larger community.

blaze, beautiful at first, but which subsiding, leaves the building charred and desolate. I was soon taught I was still in an enemy's land" (*My Bondage* 252). New Bedford, which previously earned the description of "clean new and beautiful," now is a "pretty near approach to freedom on the part of colored people" (*My Bondage* 259). He makes no excuse for the fact that Blacks are treated less than equally in the North. I do not mean to intimate that Douglass wore blinders when he wrote his first description of New Bedford, but rather that, as he experienced and reflected more on his situation in the North, his views changed. In this regard, David Leverenz states:

> It would therefore seem reasonable to argue that Douglass fashions a self to please and appease [a] wider audience…Douglass's voice seems at ease with white American values of Christianity, upward mobility, elegant expression, and self reliance (354).

However, if Douglass were trying to reach a larger audience, why then would he criticize the largest readership of his first book, the Northerners? Furthermore, why are the values of "Christianity, upward mobility, elegant expression and self reliance" strictly the domain of white America? This assessment does not take into account that Douglass *is an American*, and the values of America *are his* as well as white Americans'. Perhaps this is Douglass's strongest message in his revision of his life: He stakes a claim for himself as an American.

Nowhere are the inequities of American liberty more clear than when Douglass is forced to live in Great Britain for nearly two years. Note the irony in tone as he describes his refuge: "The writing of my pamphlet, in the spring of 1845, endangered my liberty, and led me to seek refuge from *republican* slavery in

monarchical England" (*My Bondage* 272; emphasis added). He seeks refuge from a republic, where in theory everyone has a stake and representation in government, in a monarchical regime where there is considerably less representation. Moreover, he finds that the English society is more accepting of his presence than his native land: "Instead of the bright, blue sky of America, I am covered with the soft, grey fog of the Emerald Isle. I breathe and lo! The chattel becomes a man. I gaze around me in vain for one who will question my equal humanity" (277). Douglass's powerful insight serves him well, for as he lives abroad, he can see the injustices of America more clearly.

It is no surprise, then, that upon returning to the United States, Douglass begins to question the institutions that both opposed slavery and allowed slavery to exist in what purports to be a free nation. First, he re-examines the abolitionist movement and prejudice he felt when he first arrived in New England: "When I first went among the abolitionists of New England, and began to travel, I found this prejudice very strong and very annoying. . . . The children at the north had all been educated to believe that if they were bad, the old *black* man—not the old *devil*—would get them" (295). Furthermore, the idea of segregation is very much a reality in the North: "The custom of providing separate cars for the accommodation of colored travelers, was established on nearly all the railroads of New England" (297). It would seem that in reading Douglass's description of the North, we can see why in the fight with Covey, he talks about the embers of liberty. While Douglass had by this point acquired freedom, he did not have liberty. Additionally, Douglass explains the Constitution of the United States for the reader: "[T]he Constitution of the United

States not only contained no guarantees in favor of slavery, but, on the contrary, it is, in its letter and spirit, an anti-slavery instrument, demanding the abolition of slavery as a condition of its own existence, as the supreme law of the land" (294). He understands that the institutions of America are starkly contradictory to its practices; it is, therefore, not truly a democratic society. And therein, Douglass's *My Bondage* attacks those ideals, values, and institutions the American literary canon holds so dear.

To return to the question of who is the real Douglass, perhaps the answer is that Douglass is both. *My Bondage* was published ten years after *Narrative*, and the expectation that he would not grow as a person in that time is unreasonable. Douglass could not have written *My Bondage* prior to 1855, as he had not yet experienced life in the North as a supposed freeman, nor had he witnessed American society from abroad. While scholars like David Leverenz see the Douglass of 1885 as smug, pretentious, and phony, it is clear that the Douglass of 1885 gives far better insight into who Douglass really was. To understand Douglass we need look no further than the concluding paragraph of *My Bondage*:

> Believing that one of the best means of emancipating the slaves is to improve and elevate the character of the free colored people of the north I shall labor in the future, as I have labored in the past, to promote the moral, social, religious, and intellectual elevation of the free colored people; never forgetting my own humble origin, nor refusing, while Heaven lends me the ability, to use my voice, my pen, or my vote, to advocate the great and primary work of the universal and unconditional emancipation of my entire race. (300)

Not only does Douglass advocate for the improvement of his race, starting with the freemen of the North, but the example he offers is himself, having just improved the "intellectual elevation" of his own work. By his own standards, this second autobiography could be a truer representation of Frederick Douglass than *Narrative*; certainly, it is a truer representation of who he was in 1855. Arguing that the American literature canon needs to undergo a transformation is not a new assertion, as the canon has been challenged continually since its inception; however, denying the canon of *My Bondage* because it represents Douglass as a thoughtful, insightful intellectual, rather than a traditional hero of a slave narrative, is an injustice to this author, the canon, and American readership. This is exactly why the canon fails us.

While it may seem odd to choose a writer as canonized as Frederick Douglass to begin my discussion of problems with canon, it is precisely because he is canonized that he is the perfect starting point: He is a canonized writer most well-known for his autobiographies, most specifically *Narrative*. This book, while powerful and engaging, is not nearly as thoughtful or reflective of America during the nineteenth century as *My Bondage*, written ten years later. For many reasons, the former is the more popular of the two, and few of the reasons have to do with aesthetics. The reasons tend to center on simple economics (*Narrative* is fewer than 100 pages, and easy to insert into anthologies of American literature) or values. *Narrative* quite simply reflects our values regarding slavery better, and reflects, I contend, the attitudes and expectations we would expect of a freed slave: gracious recognition towards his saviors. The second of his autobiographies, *My Bondage*, is a reflection on what Douglass has seen in America during the ten years following his freedom. He

retells the same events, but his perspectives on what happened in his life have deepened as he better understands the mechanisms of race and American society. His views of his time are still grateful for the "freedom" he obtained, but are also critical, as he sees that a Black man in America does not truly have freedom. Both in content and tone (his narrative voice is far more sophisticated and reflective than in the first autobiography), this work serves to undermine popular ideas of abolition and even the identity of freed slaves. Douglass has clearly grown as a writer, and this time, his autobiography is not used by abolitionists to gain support for the cause. None of this is to say that *Narrative* is not a text worthy of reading and studying, but because of the structure of canon, we are robbed of reading the second work, which could enlighten a discussion of slavery, freedom, and nineteenth-century attitudes towards race. Had we thought of literature as a conversation rather than a canon, then it would be clear to see the conversation that Douglass has, not only with America regarding identity, but also with himself regarding his earlier autobiography.

Chapter II

A Fabricated Tradition: Contradictions of Form and Content

The recovery of the past through memories of childhood, the coming into knowledge of the person now by examination of the growing up period, and identification of social and cultural forces that shaped and influenced their lives: these are some of the forces that lie behind the series of "growing up" poems and stories or *bildungsroman* written by Chicano writers. (109)

Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo

Now it [*Hunger of Memory*] exists—a weight in my hand. Let the bookstore clerk puzzle over where it should be placed. (Rodriguez? Rodriguez?) Probably he will shelve it alongside specimens of that exotic new genre, "ethnic literature." Mistaken, the gullible reader will—in sympathy or in anger—take it that I intend to model my life as the typical Hispanic-American life. (7)

Richard Rodriguez

Currently in American literature, literary figures find their place in the canon by adding to and/or modifying the American identity. Ethnic writers, who are part of this canon, are usually included because they represent a certain identity that is perpetuated through our literature, as was the case with Fredrick Douglass. In the previous chapter, I looked at how the American literary canon has radically restricted our reading of an ethnic writer and how it can be used to limit and restrict our understanding of his writing.

While many of those concerns will also come into play here, I also wish to expand this discussion by looking at how the parameters of canon also manifest themselves in the construction of an ethnic literature, and can prove to be just as exclusionary as those of the larger canon, and in many ways serve to essentialize ethnic writers. The diversity in American literature and the study of various ethnic literatures is one of American literature's strengths; I assert that by following the mechanisms of canonization, we do not adequately provide for the diversity of viewpoints, even within an ethnic canon, because those mechanisms were created within a hegemonic structure whose purpose was to exclude some literatures from literary consideration. In this regard, Gayatri Spivak wrote of canons in the academy: "There can be no general theory of canons. Canons secure institutions as institutions secure canons" ("The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the future of Cultural Studies" 784). Canons, therefore, serve a higher purpose not beholden to the work or the context of the work, but rather the institution, and as such may distort the literature or its reception by an audience.

First, we must understand the creation and existence of ethnic canons within and against the larger American literature canon. As mentioned, the creation of the American literature canon was based on the assumption that those works that were a part of the canon spoke to the American identity or experience. And while several writers of marginalized groups have found their way into the canon, the problem remains that it has, for the most part, remained a fairly exclusionary construct. The solution has been a rise in the creation of alternate literatures, each with its own canon. Many of these other canons rose out of social movements demanding more attention be paid to marginalized groups, but this does not account for the survival of such literatures. According to Palumbo-Liu,

because of the influence of the 1960s and the shift in college demographics from a monochromatic audience to a diverse audience and the fact that with an ever-changing population, American higher education had to become inclusive of "nontraditional" students in training a new workforce. In other words, American education has had to reach out to those who were formerly marginalized. In creating the canons of these minor literatures,[23] the mechanisms of canon again infiltrate their essence. These literatures are again guided by the rules and regulations of each respective canon, which periodically has to be broken open, infiltrated and re-evaluated.

Chicanx literature has not been immune to the forces and influences of canon. While the origins of Chicanx literature date back to the 1960s and the farmworkers' movement, it has grown from these initial political roots while surprisingly remained fairly faithful to them.[24] The Chicanx literature canon grew out of a social and political movement that sought to include literature that was representative of the concerns and voices of the Chicanx movement. This is not to say that literature by Mexican American writers did not exist until the 1960s. On the contrary, some of the earliest works to be adopted by the Chicanx canon were written prior to the Chicano socio-political movement, including José Antonio Villareal's *Pocho* and Américo Paredes's *With His*

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[23] In calling these minor literatures, I am not lessening the status of the works; I have merely chosen a label coined by Deleuze and Guattari by which to illustrate their importance when compared to the American literature canon.

[24] While Chicanx literature has been traced back to 1849, and further in some cases, I am talking about the origins of the literature which found its root in the social movement of the late 1960s/early 1970s.

Pistol in his Hand. Early issues of fair labor practices and identity permeated the works of Luis Valdez and Teatro Campesino,[25] as well as the aforementioned works. Early pioneers of this literature included Paredes, Rudolfo Anaya, and Tomás Rivera, to name a few. Most notably absent from the early canon of Chicanx literature were female writers. Like in the American literature canon, eventually identity took the center stage from issues of labor. Women in the Chicanx canon also made their voices known with the inclusion of a little book titled *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros.

Since then, in an effort to "legitimize" the canon of Chicanx literature, literatures from as far back as 1848 have been studied and introduced into it. Some scholars, such as Manuel Martín Rodríguez, are looking even further back and tracing roots of Chicanx literature to Spain's exploration of the New World. But the barometer by which literature is included is still primarily based on the identity that grew from the social movement. And while this identity has expanded, mechanisms put in place via the Chicanx canon have not become all-inclusive of every Chicanx writer: There are writers whose exclusion can be attributed to everything from political views to social status to sexuality, all of them markers of identity. It is clear that the American Literature canon that has relegated works by writers of color to other minor canons shares its troubles with those canons: The metaphor is designed for exclusion and liminality. The canon's mechanisms

[25] While in recent years there has been much controversy over the writing of the *Actos* being credited to Luis Valdez, that is a debate I am not engaging in at this point, as my use of *Actos* is merely to represent the political nature of early Chicanx canon inclusions.

automatically relegate some works to the outside. Other works remain at the threshold of the canon, never quite gaining full entrée, and thereby limiting their voices in the larger fabric of the discussion of race and culture. This chapter will look at two writers and the impact that a system of canonization has had on their first works. To be clear, this is not an argument that either work should be canonized; this chapter is an illustration of how further canonization can affect writers and their works. The first, Rick P. Rivera, whose collection of short stories was repackaged into a composite novel titled *A Fabricated Mexican,* following in the tradition of canonized works *The House on Mango Street* and Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*. Rick Rivera's work was shaped ultimately by the rules and regulations of a canon, which is one intended outcome of a canon. The second, Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, is a work that for all intents and purposes follows the structural, aesthetic, and thematic principles as those other canonized works, ultimately was rejected because of the ways in which this work differs ideologically from mainstream Chicanx literature. What is revealed by these two novels is an inconstancy in one purported goal of a canon and another overall weakness in the metaphoric use of canonization.

Entry into the canonized literary world of Chicanx literature is often initiated through the novel of the *bildungsroman*, or novel of development. While there are many reasons why this could be, it is important to understand that the production of a writer, especially his or her early production, almost always happens in response to previous works by other authors. Be that as it may, there is also something to be said for childhood memories as a starting point for a writer. A first novel is a chance for a novice writer to explore his or her own development. The two aforementioned novels follow this form

and help to demonstrate the influence of canonical perceptions and contradictions of what a work represents. Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory* is a memoir about a young Mexican American man, his education, and the choices he makes regarding his future, which have not settled well with the makers and keepers of the Chicanx canon; but as will be seen, structurally and thematically, his work is in keeping with other works in the canon. On the other hand, we will see how the canon can influence the outcome of a work, as in the case of the little-known *A Fabricated Mexican* by Rick Rivera. When *A Fabricated Mexican* was released, Rivera was a PhD student at New Mexico State University studying rhetoric and composition. He had decided to investigate experiences in his life via the medium of writing, specifically short stories. Though his intention was to explore his life, he inadvertently wrote a book that, in his words, is "definitely not a novel" (Rivera personal interview). However, through Rivera's influences, the editorial process, and the expertise of the people at Arte Público Press, Rivera's creation was turned into a novel that followed the canonical Chicanx literary tradition of recalling life as a series of stories or episodes. As we will see, both Arte Público and Rivera are correct in their evaluation of his work, but what is more important is situating Rivera's work in an ever-growing collection of Chicanx literature. Conversely, Rodriguez, a skilled writer, stands apart from the Chicanx canon, even though the reasons cited by Arte Público as to why Rivera's works became a novel in the tradition of the Chicanx literature canon are in many ways deftly observed by Rodriguez's autobiography.

To begin, let's look at *A Fabricated Mexican*. Rivera grew up in the Central Valley of California in the 1950s and 1960s, the youngest of seven children (although later in life he discovered he actually had two other siblings). His father died when he

was very young, and Rivera was raised most of his life, by his mother, Consuelo. Like many Chicanos of that era, Rivera's family were poor laborers. Being the youngest and without a father, Rivera occupied his time with television and reading, mostly biographies about his baseball and football heroes. He dropped out of college at eighteen, only to reenter in his early thirties and complete both a bachelor's degree and a master's degree in English. After receiving his master's degree from Sonoma State University, Rivera worked as a part-time English instructor and at a ranch in Northern California. It was during this time that he began work on his psychological serio-comedy, *A Fabricated Mexican*.

A Fabricated Mexican is a multilayered book that is a *bildungsroman*, a psychological progression of a young man, a search for identity, a collection of short stories, and an accidental novel. After receiving his master's degree, Rivera reflected on his studies and decided he wanted to explore many questions about himself and his development: "I had…taken a Psychology and Identity class and I was interested in how personality develops and how education changed us, and in my case distanced me from my family" (Rivera personal interview). The shift in identity had interested him as he worked through his master's degree; he was interested in the identities we create, and especially the duel identity he had lived as both a factory worker and a scholar: "During the day, I was a student, but at night, I was a factory worker…two contrasting identities…two contrasts in sensibility" (Rivera personal interview). Rivera was interested in exploring what had made him who he was, and, in a larger sense, what forces alter any individual's identity.

For inspiration and a model, Rivera turned to the only author of the Chicanx canon he knew at the time, Sandra Cisneros, specifically her book *The House on Mango Street*. Cisneros' novel is one of a young girl's psychological development in Chicago. In reading Cisneros, however, Rivera discovered a novel that not only told a story but, like *A Fabricated Mexican*, was a response to literature that preceded it. Cisneros has spoken of reading Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* while studying at the Iowa Writer's Workshop, and her semiotic construct of a house is a direct challenge to the construct of stability and safety that Bachelard formulates in his work (Kelley 75 and Martín-Rodríguez 80-81). Furthermore, there was something else she responded to something else at the Iowa Writer's Workshop: an entire attitude towards culture from the literary establishment: "Iowa taught me some things that perhaps they didn't mean to teach, and that is that I didn't want to be like them. I didn't want to be like my instructors" (Cisneros interview with Rivera). Furthermore , one cannot deny the connection in form between *The House on Mango Street* and Tomás Rivera's *…y no se lo tragó la tierra*. This groundbreaking work of Chicanx literature chronicles a twelve-month period in a community of Mexican Americans. Each month is represented by a short story that is preceded by even shorter vignettes. Erlinda González-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo, in their essay "Growing Up Chicano: Tomás Rivera and Sandra Cisneros," explore how the structure of the *bildungsroman* is employed by both writers, but in the case of Cisneros, she challenges the expectations for a female in that structure, where, "the young woman also undergoes trials and tribulations which teach her how she must behave in society, what she must learn in order to assume her expected position" (109-10). It is from this point of resistance that Esperanza, the protagonist in *The House*

on Mango Street, grows up and becomes independent, and in the end, creates her own space: "Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own" (Cisneros 108). Cisneros's *bildungsroman* was a direct response to the established male-dominated literary tradition of both mainstream and Chicano literature; in effect, she became a resistant writer.[26]

While Rick Rivera was inspired by this work, it is clear that, like all writers who proceed from the point of view of a reader, he was also a resistant writer. Rivera obviously admired Sandra Cisneros as a writer and an artist, as is evidenced in his 1992 interview with her;[27] yet he still, in his own way, resisted copying *The House on Mango Street*. The most obvious and marked difference to *The House on Mango Street* is in its narrative perspective: "I modeled it after [*The House on*] *Mango Street*; I wanted to write

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[26] Here I am referring to the notion of the resistant writer as outlined by Charles Paine in *The Resistant Writer Rhetoric as Immunity, 1850 to Present.* Here, of course, he writes of the rhetoric of argumentative writing, but the ideas that, "(1)…rhetorical training reacts to and strives to ameliorate the 'current' decline in popular public discourse… and (2) the idea that rhetorical training can endow students with the capacity to 'resist' (to see through, to refuse to get caught up in, or to be generally unaffected by) the unhealthy and unhealthful discourse of the public sphere" (ix). Although Paine refers to the writer of public discourse, I believe the same can be said of any resistant creative writer: that they resist what they see as unhealthful public discourse, as Cisneros did in response to a male-dominated writing tradition.

[27] As a part of the research Rivera did for his master's thesis, "Ferocity, Tenderness, and the Bilingual Prose of Sandra Cisneros," he had the opportunity to interview Sandra Cisneros, and he shared this interview with me. I would like to thank Rick Rivera for generously sharing this interview with me.

a male version of that. I had read good writers imitate and great writers steal, so I thought, I didn't want to steal, but I wanted to model it after Cisneros. I did not even read a male Chicano writer before writing it because I did not want to be influenced by a male writer" (Rivera telephone interview). Rivera became a resistant writer in two ways: First, in his resistance of the male tradition in Chicanx literature (although, as we will see later, in his resistance to the gender of *The House on Mango Street* he in fact created a work more in keeping with that male tradition). Second, he, as mentioned above, resisted the gender of *The House on Mango Street*; although we will also see that his writing, while similar to Cisneros's, is also resistant to her poetic style.

A point of resistance as simple as a gender change altered the telling of Rivera's piece; while Cisneros's protagonist, Esperanza, "narrates the lives, struggles, and concerns of her immediate family, neighbors and friends on Mango Street, her voice is clearly and consistently that of a child… we see the child as she comes to an understanding of herself, her world and her culture" (González-Berry and Rebolledo 114), Rivera's protagonist, Ricky Coronado, has a much more distanced narrative voice, as if the narrator is an adult reflecting back on events of his life. As stated before, Rivera's reading growing up was mostly of athletes' biographies and autobiographies. It is evident that the distant, mature narrator looking back on life's events that is commonly utilized in autobiographical writing greatly influenced Rivera's writing. *A Fabricated*

Mexican[28] opens with a conversation regarding Ricky's conception, held between his mother, Chelo, and an older Ricky:

> According to my mother, I was conceived in a plum orchard. How I know this bit of husbandry is due to my mother's attempt to explain to me the gap in years between myself and the rest of my many brothers and sisters. (Rivera 7)

The conversation between Ricky and his mother concludes with him explaining, "We laughed together for a few moments. Silently, we both reached back to retrieve more memories from the years when I was too young to fully remember" (Rivera 9). From the outset of the novel, Rivera has established that we are reading about an older, more mature Ricky, who, like Rivera himself, is struggling to make sense of his life. The reader is again reminded of this narrative perspective late in the novel, in chapter 36.[29] The novel has, at this point, progressed through Ricky's life; he has gone through childhood and adolescence into adulthood when the reader is suddenly confronted by a story of Ricky's youth. The distant perspective of the narrator allows Rivera's work to return to childhood before continuing through Ricky's adulthood.

Additionally, Rivera's book was influenced, stylistically, by his academic training, and we see this influence in the style of each story/chapter. In his words, "I

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[28] Rivera originally titled all of his stories, but in this paper I will refer to them by their chapter number in the final published form of *A Fabricated Mexican*, and in the endnotes, I will inform the reader of his original title. Chapter 1 was originally titled "Possum Eyes."

[29] Chapter 36 was originally titled "Language and Imagery."

thought that was my academic writing getting in the way, you know, wrapping up each chapter like a good student concludes an essay" (telephone interview). Rivera even remembers a conversation with Kevin McIlvoy, a creative writing professor at New Mexico State University and published author: "Kevin McIlvoy even noticed about *Fab Mex* [*sic*] that it was very episodic, and he thought I should use the land, but he also said, and this has to do with the nature of [the] short story, and he thought all chapters ended with a conclusion, and he felt that for a novel that was unneeded"[30] (telephone interview). In addition, *A Fabricated Mexican* is more narrative and less symbolic than Cisneros's work. Instead of poetry, Rivera infused his work with humor. *A Fabricated Mexican* was not widely reviewed, but the few available reviews I did find specifically note Rivera's use of humor. Julie Ann Vera, of the *El Paso Herald-Post*, wrote in a 1995 review, "it is extremely funny, even hysterical at points." And the *Las Cruces Bulletin*'s Cheryl Thornburg pointed out, "Rivera's style is highly readable, and his sense of humor comes through on virtually every page."[31] While Rivera's sensibility is not poetic, like that of

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[30] Once Kevin McIlvoy heard of Rivera's book, he offered to work with Rivera on his second novel, *Stars Always Shine*, and Rivera and McIlvoy workshopped this novel as an independent study while Rivera continued his studies at New Mexico State University. As a matter of fact, the inscription "Thanks Mac" in the dedication page of *Stars Always Shine* is in reference to Kevin McIlvoy.

[31] Some of the reviews cited in this paper were provided from Arte Público's archive and the page numbers were not included. I would like to thank Dr. Nicolás Kanellos and Arte Público Press for generously sharing these with me.

Cisneros, by relying on his humor he has created a work no less artistic that resists direct comparison to its inspiration.

Despite resisting much of Cisneros's poetic style, Rivera embraced her form. Cisneros chose to ignore the linear form of a traditional novel, and, as she said in an interview with Reed. W. Dasenbeck, "I wanted to write a series of stories that you could open up at any point. You didn't have to know anything before or after and you would understand each story like a little pearl, or you could look at the whole thing as a necklace…I wasn't trying to write a linear novel" (qtd. in Kelley 74). Rivera not only modeled his form after Cisneros's, he also, in the writing of his stories, adhered to the idea that he would focus on "the pearls" individually. In response to whether he produced the stories sequentially, Rivera replied, "Since they were stories, they [didn't] necessarily have to be [written sequentially]" (telephone interview). He listed subjects for each story on a legal pad, and based on this list he started to write; these subject headings ultimately became story titles that were abandoned as part of the editorial process.[32] He chose which story to work on as the mood struck him. Like Cisneros, Rivera produced a work that "is a collection of smaller texts which can be read separately but which are related to each other through the narrative speaker as well as by characters who pop in and out of stories" (González-Berry and Rebolledo 114). This is exactly, according to González-Berry and Rebolledo, what connects the stylistic narrative of Cisneros to the traditional male-dominated world of Chicano literature. However, like the mathematical theorem

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[32] See endnote 5.

dictating that two negatives equal a positive, in resisting the gender perspective of *The House on Mango Street*, Rivera effectively both resisted and created a link to previous male-produced Chicano works, specifically Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*.

Rick Rivera, after working on his series of short stories, decided to send the collection to the University of Houston for possible publication in the university's literary journal, *Americas Review*: "I just decided to send everything, thinking they might publish one or two of them. Then after, I don't know, six months or so, I got a congratulations letter from Arte Público" (personal interview). Try as he might, Rivera inadvertently and unintentionally had written what some critics call a composite novel: a work that resists the traditional narrative form of the novel and is more closely aligned with the short story, but is in fact a novel (Kelley 63). Dr. Nicolás Kanellos, Arte Público publisher, and the editorial staff at Arte Público, knew what they had was a novel in keeping with the tradition of a Chicanx *bildungsroman*. Although they accepted the then-untitled work as a collection of short stories, as indicated in a letter from Dr. Kanellos to Rivera, Arte Público's selection staff saw the book as a novel: "Indeed what he has is a novel" ("Review: Short Stories").[33] Rivera resisted classifying his work as a novel, and even today, he is uncomfortable with that label: "I don't even like it to be called a novel. I'd prefer it were called *A Fabricated Mexican and Other Short Stories*. I think it diminishes the artistic merit of the stories" (personal interview). But Arte Público was insistent on

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[33] Letters from Arte Público and Dr. Nicolás Kanellos to Rick Rivera were provided by Rick Rivera. Again, I would like to thank him for sharing these with me.

calling the book a novel. As Rivera recalls, "I remember getting a call from Nick Kanellos telling me, 'If we call it a novel, we could sell more.' So I said, 'Okay, let's talk about my novel'" (personal interview). While I am sure that there were financial reasons for the shift in genres, I am also sure Arte Público had other reasons for changing the genre of the work, and one, as mentioned before, is the established canonical tradition of the composite novel in Chicanx literature as demonstrated by both *The House on Mango Street* and *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*.

Rick Rivera's work, while it may be read as a series of short stories, does in fact outline the progression of a central character. And like the work of another Rivera, Tomás, Rick Rivera and the protagonist of *A Fabricated Mexican*, Ricky Coronado, "must first discover *what* he is before he can confirm *who* he is" (Olivares xix). Actually there is a great deal in keeping with the ideas and tradition of Tomás Rivera in Rick Rivera's work.[34] When T. Rivera submitted *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* to *Quinto Sol* for consideration in their First National Award for Best Mexican-American Literary Work, 1969-1970, he submitted it as a collection of short stories. In fact, the press release announcing his award still refers to *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* as "a collection of short

[34] For the sake of simplicity from this point on in this chapter, I will refer to Rick Rivera as R. Rivera and Tomás Rivera as T. Rivera. This is done for simplicity's sake and it should not be read as disrespect to either author.

stories," in the tradition of Juan Rulfo and Albert Camus.[35] Since then, however, T. Rivera's work has been regularly referred to as a novel in the tradition of Chicano storytelling, as evidenced by the label "novel" used by various critics. The shift in genres is not the only similarity the Riveras share. T. Rivera, in his critical essay "Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature," discusses how Chicanx literature can be a search for understanding and identity: "Literature represents man's life: it also reflects his inner and outward search" (261). T. Rivera likens the journey the writer takes to a search though a labyrinth. The labyrinth is "a vicarious notion of humanity, or man, to attempt to search for the other, 'alter ego,' in order to comprehend himself better" (261). Keeping in mind that R. Rivera started his search because he "was interested in how personality develops and how education changed us, and in my case distanced me from my family" (personal interview), we can easily see how R. Rivera's own search echoes that of T. Rivera. Although *A Fabricated Mexican* is ultimately a work of fiction, like for T. Rivera, R. Rivera's own life served as inspiration: "As I was writing, I remembered an incident and then changed it to make it more creative" (personal interview). It was this writing from his own life, his self-created labyrinth, as T. Rivera calls it, in which *A Fabricated Mexican* found its inspiration.

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[35] The Quinto Sol press release announcing the granting of the First National Award for Best Mexican-American Literary Work to Tomás Rivera and his "collection of short stories" was provided by my fellow graduate student Martha Azevedo, and I would like to thank her for generously sharing this with me.

R. Rivera's work looks, not only at growing up in the Central Valley of California, but also at the life of an individual whose bicultural influences include traditional Chicanx culture, going to church, cooking menudo, or working in the fields, as well as such American cultural influences as debating the athletic acumen of Roman Gabriel versus that of Gayle Sayers, watching The Three Stooges movies, or wishing he could be like his other friends who don't have to work in the field. The labyrinth created by R. Rivera is one that traverses and navigates through two cultures, negotiating conflicts that arise while discovering the center of this maze. One conflict that complicates matters is Ricky Coronado's seemingly non-Chicanx appearance:

> "I am a Chicano, too. I just don't look like it." I didn't have an explanation for being lighter-skinned. But I wanted to tell the paisano that my parents were born in Mexico: from Tamaulipas and Chihuahua. That I didn't have an accent probably because I watched too much television: "My Three Sons," "The Beverly Hillbillies," and "Gunsmoke." I wanted him to know that I picked grapes and even spent a winter pruning and tying vines, and that only Mexicans did that kind of work. I wanted to tell him that I knew how to cook menudo. I wanted him to hear me sing songs by Javier Solís and José Alfredo Jiménez. But somehow I couldn't say anything more. (80-81)[36]

Ricky could not say more, but Rick Rivera, in writing about his experiences, said much more. And ironically, Ricky's non-Chicanx appearance is one element he uses to help

[36] From chapter 23, originally titled "A Chicano with a Gabacho."

him solidify his feelings about who he is, culturally speaking. As luck would have it, his appearance serves to strengthen his cultural identity and isolate him. He sees in himself an isolation created from his bicultural heritage. It is this isolation that R. Rivera writes about in his work. It was an isolation that he was made to feel ashamed of at times while growing up.

R. Rivera discussed his sense of isolation with Cisneros when he interviewed her in 1992. He shared with her how isolated he felt being the only Chicanx in the room. He told her about growing up, people asking him what he was, culturally, only to have them say, "Well, you don't look Mexican." Additionally, he felt embarrassment at social habits his peers took for granted; he even told Cisneros of his embarrassment at not knowing what to do with a linen napkin:

> Well I guess that's what I like so much about your writing is because it explains a lot of things to me of how I have felt. As a student I've felt that those are the kinds of students I'm up against [in reference to Cisneros explaining that students in the Iowa Writer's Workshop were of a certain class that she did not belong]. When I read that I thought, "Yeah, and they came from homes with linen napkins." I remember the first time I ate with linen napkins. And I didn't know where it went. And the lady of the house asked me that, "Where does your linen napkin go Rick?" And I, you know, grew up eating tortillas and hardly having napkins (Cisneros interview with Rivera).[37]

[37] This would eventually become the story "Linen Napkins," which was changed to chapter 27 in *A Fabricated Mexican*.

T. Rivera, in his essay "Chicano Literature: Fiesta of the Living," discusses how the isolated events of the mind become the "external form," or the narrative, and in doing so, "we are able to perceive, create and give life to our ritual; it is from this that we derive strength, that we can recognize our existence as human beings" (279). And in turn, readers share in the experience, and thus the individual experience of Rick Rivera's protagonist becomes one of a shared community; R. Rivera the reader becomes R. Rivera the creator. R. Rivera could relate to Cisneros's writings, and in turn, he was inspired to write his own experiences, and in turn others can connect to R. Rivera's experiences. It is through the production of literature that a writer finds his way through the labyrinth, but I would argue that in the reading of canonized literature, a writer can find a roughly sketched map. R. Rivera's map, while created by Cisneros, was dependent upon a body of literature that already existed, and existed in part to help guide others. Julián Olivares notes of T. Rivera that the recognition of one's potential self in his community's collective experience completes the personal ritual of creation in writing (xiv). In other words, Cisneros writes in response to a masculine Chicanx canon tradition, and R. Rivera writes in response to Cisneros, and his writing influences and connects to other readers, who will respond to his text, and the community's collective experience grows due to this dynamic. Instructors who have used *A Fabricated Mexican* in class can attest to the connections R. Rivera makes with readers. Ann Smith, English college professor at Modesto Junior College, writes of the book, "Rarely did I see the kinds of responses that students had to *A Fabricated Mexican*…. They confess in journal responses that this is

the first book they have ever read fully and with which they have interacted and identified so completely" (n.p.) I have had similar experiences, having used the book several times in the last fourteen years with students at Merced College.[38] Students find a genuine connection to the experiences described by Rick Rivera, even though he describes events that took place thirty-five to forty-five years before they were born.

Again in "Into the Labyrinth: The Chicano in Literature," Tomás Rivera discusses the idea that the writer, specifically the Chicanx writer, invents himself, based on his own labyrinth that he must negotiate: "It is the opinion of this writer that the invention of ourselves by ourselves is in actuality an extension of our will—really an exteriorization of our will" (262). This sense of inventiveness that T. Rivera discusses is key to understanding the central theme and title of *A Fabricated Mexican*. It would be easy to dismiss this title as describing a fake or counterfeit Mexican; however, it is clear in reading the book that even though Ricky Coronado does "not even *look* Mexican!" (R. Rivera 131), he continually defends his identity. Reviewer Cheryl Thornburg notes, "It is obvious though that Ricky does not reject his heritage." Although at times he hides from his bicultural identity, it is through his education that he becomes a "new Mexican" (130), and embraces his cultural identity. As Esperanza in *The House on Mango Street* picks up the pen and invents her identity, Ricky Coronado has added a new instrument of

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[38] Since 2000, I have taught English and Developmental English for Merced College, and I have on several occasions used R. Rivera's work, in part because the students do tend to connect to the events in the life of Ricky Coronado.

creation to the toolbox, education: "As I walked to my next class, I respectfully thanked my education for not allowing me to forget my good fortune of being a proud, hard-working Mexican" (132).[39] It is probably this perspective that many students can relate to and have responded to in *A Fabricated Mexican*.

Again in *A Fabricated Mexican,* when Ricky Coronado's sister says that higher education had made him "a fabricated Mexican" (138),[40] Ricky begins to explore the concept of fabrication, and in doing so, he finds himself reconciled to the notion of inventiveness that T. Rivera wrote about: "But everybody's fabricated. And for *La Raza* the time is now" (138). Here R. Rivera reflects the idea of one finding his way through the labyrinth, but he sees this process as fabricating, or creating, or as T. Rivera sees it: inventing. R. Rivera's work reveals a danger not addressed in T. Rivera's writing: The outcome of self-exploration can be someone new, or someone who no longer fits into his community in the same way: "There was an irony in my education as it had changed me, maybe even improved me; but it also separated me from family, language and culture, making me a stranger to those with whom I had once been familiar" (138). Sometimes the shift in identity is just as drastic as the shift that occurs for Ricky; R. Rivera's work speaks to a tension derived from education that he had to negotiate: a new identity as a result of education, or inventing. This is precisely what happened to Richard Rodriguez.

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[39] From chapter 33, originally titled "A New Mexican."

[40] From chapter 34, originally titled "A Fabricated Mexican."

His self-invention, his fabrication, sits at the center, or end point, of the labyrinth, where a community of literature lies; Rodriguez is simultaneously part of and not part of the community in which he engages when he begins to find his way through the maze.

Rodriguez's autobiography, while not a novel, is fragmented and broken, but the narrative still carries a forward trajectory. What *Hunger of Memory* provides for us is a work that recounts the shaping of his identity. It may be a stretch to call this a *bildungsroman,* as Rodriguez's work is an autobiography, but certainly in many ways it serves a similar purpose, as Rodriguez goes out into the world, first to school, then to university, then into the world of intercultural politics. His journey may not take him to the same destination where other Chicanx writers have arrived, but his account is poignant, well-written, and profound in his conclusions of self-discovery. As this is his first book, it follows the tradition of Chicanx literature: first novels are often novels of self-discovery and identity, as we have seen with Cisneros, T. Rivera and R. Rivera. Certainly, it is true that Rodriguez reveals some provocative ideologies that place him outside most Chicanx literature, but his form and content are such that his work fits perfectly in within the canonized Chicanx structure. His political views, however, and later the revelation that he is homosexual, place him aside and apart from the traditionally accepted norms of Chicanx literature as dictated by its canonical works.[41] Once again, I am not making an argument that Rodriguez should be a part of the Chicanx canon, but I do want to demonstrate how a structure like canon is both rigid and random, and one that fails in its own purported goals of identifying great works. Additionally, I want to now

[41] However, sexuality is becoming less of an issue as inclusion of various LGBTQ writers is now more widely accepted in Chicanx literature.

demonstrate how a more democratic metaphor, like conversation, would be a much more effective way to talk about literature.

In many ways, structurally and thematically, Rodriguez's work does fit nicely into the established canonical literary tradition of Chicanx literature. Like many autobiographers, he plays fast and loose with his timeline, beginning in the present moving to the past, reflecting from the present on situations of the past, "I remember to start with that day in Sacramento—a California now thirty years past—when I first entered a classroom able to understand some fifty stray English words" (1). This is an adult Rodriguez looking back on his youth in Sacramento, not an uncommon structure for an autobiography. But reflecting on youth and its impact on who one becomes is one element, structurally, that is a keystone to Chicanx literature. In this sense, González-Berry and Rebolledo point out,

> The recovery of the past through memories of childhood, the coming into knowledge of the person now by examination of the growing up period, and identification of social and cultural forces that shaped and influenced their lives: these are some of the forces that lie behind the series of "growing up" poems and stories or *bildungsroman* written by Chicano writers (109).

Granted, they are referring to more creative works, fiction and poetry, but in many cases, such as *House on Mango Street* and *A Fabricated Mexican* (and I would venture to guess even *…y no se lo tragó la tierra*), these works of fiction are based on the lives and experiences of the writers. R. Rivera has admitted that he took events from his life, and then worked to fictionalize some of the details. Moreover, works like *The Autobiography of the Brown Buffalo* by Oscar Zeta Acosta have found a place in the Chicanx canon and

possess structural and thematic elements similar to those discussed above that dictate the shape and form of R. Rivera's novel. The point I am trying to make is that the canonical guidelines that dictate the structure and content for Chicanx literature can apply to autobiographies such as Rodriguez's. The genre of the work is of little consequence. Back to Rodriguez, he starts chapter 1, "Aria," with the above description. His work may not be a composite novel, but it clearly is, like most autobiographies, a composite narrative. It was precisely this form that the creators of the Chicanx literature canon felt the three novels discussed earlier in this chapter shared. Neither Rivera, as a matter of fact, intended to write a novel. What they both wrote were a series of short stories that take place within a given community and/or family. It was through the process of publication that the label novel, and the implication of a fractured narrative, was applied to their works. A fractured narrative might seem obvious when discussing an autobiography, but since we now see this as a touchstone for Chicanx literature, it is important to recognize that structure of Rodriguez's first autobiography.

Really beyond the structure of his work, there are other reasons that Rodriguez's work should stand in conversation with other works of Chicanx literature. Regardless of Rodriguez's inspirations, he has clearly engaged in the conversations of Chicanx literature that helped to identify *A Fabricated Mexican* as a work of Chicanx literature. First and foremost are issues of identity, specifically the invention of self. Rodriguez's novel might be considered a *bildungsroman*. González-Berry and Rebolledo point out the characteristics of this genre, which they have indicated is the initiate step for a burgeoning work in Chicanx literature:

> 1) The hero leaves home and goes to school, 2) undergoes a trial by his peers, 3) is either accepted or learns to deal with his situations, 4) overcomes adversity, 5) in some way is successful at some heroic act, 6) discovers who he is, as a man and as a person in society, and 7) at the end of the [work] has integrated his consciousness, thus achieving self definition [sic] and is ready to deal with the world on his own terms (109).

Genre aside, Rodriguez's work does fulfill the requirements of the *bildungsroman*, at least as much as *…y no se lo tragó la tierra* or *A Fabricated Mexican*.

One could argue that works, like R. Rivera's *A Fabricated Mexican*, are created in conversation with past works of Chicanx literature, but I do not think this is requisite of work within this literature. Early pioneers of this literature, like José Antonio Villarreal, Américo Paredes, Tomás Rivera, or Rudolfo Anaya, certainly wrote their works, not in conversation with preceding works of Chicanx literature, but in conversation with other established literatures, like traditions and folktales. And Cisneros has spoken about the influence of Gaston Bachelard on the construction of her novel. My point is that while, yes, Chicanx literature can be, and often is, constructed in direct conversation with Chicanx literature of the past, as R. Rivera did with his book, this is by no means the only way one may construct a relevant work of literature. Furthermore, I assert that a work can have a conversation with those established works and future works. Richard Rodriguez, while resisting a tradition of Chicanx literature, has engaged in a conversation with other works of Chicanx literature, and, as such, exclusion from Chicanx literature based on canonical standards robs us of a voice, albeit an oft-times dissenting voice, in a rich conversation about identity. Furthermore, without a conversation with other works of

Chicanx literature, one may read Rodriguez as a standard, or representative voice of a group of writers, as has happened to Rodriguez within the mainstream of American literature. My argument is not that Rodriguez's text be read as a representation of a literature, as is often done with work that is canonized, but that there is a value to reading Rodriguez as one voice in a conversation with other Chicanx writers. Specifically, it is interesting to read him against other Chicanx writers who have also struggled to sort out their identities against popular American culture, as R. Riviera has done in his work.

R. Rivera's protagonist, and in some ways Rivera himself, as this was an exploration of self through fiction, traversed the labyrinth that T. Rivera discussed to eventually find his way to an identity where he was able to combine the totality of his experiences into one identity. This is precisely what Rodriguez is doing with his autobiography. Rodriguez is both trying to justify choices he has made and search for an identity as someone who has been raised biculturally. Rodriguez finds himself isolated, much like Ricky Coronado in *A Fabricated Mexican*, but Rodriguez finds more solace in the comfort of education and books than the fictional alter-ego of R. Rivera.

Another point of similarity where Rodriguez's and R. Rivera's works intersect is with regards to appearance. Ricky finds himself isolated because of his habits and behaviors but also because he looks different than other Latinos around him. It is an issue brought up several times throughout the book: he is teased and called a *gabacho* because of his skin tone and eye color. Later in the novel another graduate student becomes jealous when Ricky receives a fellowship and comments that it's because of his ethnicity. The student ends his tirade by telling Ricky, "You don't even *look* Mexican!" (R. Rivera, *A Fabricated Mexican* 131). Richard Rodriguez also contemplates his appearance and

finds it isolating, but for entirely another reason: He is dark-skinned with black hair, and try as he might, he will always be the representation of the other. So while he works hard to go to the right school and study abroad, he feels he is never truly recognized for his accomplishments. He lives with the fear that he is always judged by his phenotype. And this continues to haunt him long after the publication of his autobiography. In a 1990s interview with Bill Moyer, he talks about his appearance and how members of an organization in England were surprised that he didn't look like an American ("An American Story with Richard Rodriguez" n.p.). He even titles his third autobiography *Brown* as a reference to his dark complexion.

Through his discussion of his journey from Sacramento to Stanford, Richard Rodriguez has acquired what other Chicanx writers have: a better sense of who he is. T. Rivera, as noted above, said that the goal of writing in isolation is to emerge with a better sense of identity and the community to which one belongs, and that is exactly what Rodriguez has done. However, in Rodriguez's case, he has found himself isolated from *la raza,* or the Chicanx community. This is another point of discussion regarding R. Rivera and Rodriguez. The subjects of both works separate themselves from their families. Also, both protagonists never really felt connected to their communities growing up. Ricky found community in American popular culture; Rodriguez found community in literature. The conversation is about the influence of American culture, whatever form that may take, on subsequent generations of immigrants. And this is not a conversation exclusive to Chicanx literature. We see in these two texts a discussion that extends beyond the scope of Chicanx literature, but certainly one that is very relevant to Chicanx literature. By removing Rodriguez from the discussion, we are removing the voice of many Chicanx

who do relate to Anglo-American culture. But there is a great irony here: many writers write in conversation with great works of American literature. As mentioned earlier, Cisneros was influenced by Bachelard; R. Rivera was influenced by Mark Twain, Eugene O'Neill, and John Steinbeck (personal interview n.p.); and Rodriguez was influenced by the great works of Western civilization he read during his education, such as William Saroyan, Charles Dickens, and Plato (*Hunger of Memory* 63). So while these, and other writers of color, are influenced by the works and issues of their respective literatures, they are also influenced by other works. The point is that both Rodriguez and R. Rivera found inspiration in cultures other than their mother culture. This is not to say that Mexican culture did not influence either writer. On the contrary, they are engaged in a conversation of culture and assimilation, and as such, they cannot deny the influence that their home culture had on them. And this is where the conversation can get interesting, for R. Rivera found strength in his home culture. Rodriguez, on the other hand, found "success" by abandoning his home culture. He opted for a public self at the expense of his home self, and here we begin to see the disassociation from the ideologies of the Chicanx canon, but, I would argue, not the end of the conversation.

While he is doing the same thing that many works of Chicanx literature have before, there is one key difference that has defined Rodriguez since the publication of *Hunger of Memory*: his views on biculturalism and affirmative action. Rodriguez's views on affirmative action—that it is unnecessary—and bilingual education—that it is harmful to the student—are not in keeping with the political leanings of most Chicanx literature. And while Rodriguez's views do not reflect those of many Chicanx, or Latinos for that matter, I am sure he is not the only one to feel this way. This is where a conversation with

literature and specific works could come in handy in illuminating the issue. In *A Fabricated Mexican*, R. Rivera grapples with the notion of affirmative action when his protagonist is the recipient of the aforementioned fellowship. R. Rivera's protagonist is, initially, embarrassed and made to feel guilty by a colleague at receiving the graduate fellowship because that colleague feels he's earning it due to his ethnicity. But ultimately he uses this to empower himself and his work. Reading R. Rivera's tale of affirmative action might help us to understand Rodriguez. Certainly, Rodriguez may too be embarrassed at the academic accolades and rewards he received, never completely convinced that his ethnicity did not play a part in that reception. While R. Rivera's protagonist is strengthened by his interaction with affirmative action, Rodriguez instead condemns the practice and goes on to state that he would have been just as successful without affirmative action, and the truth is, he may have been. But his experience does not represent that of all Chicanx or people of color. The encounters and discussion of affirmative action give us a much broader sense of its issues and controversy, and really, isn't that an important outcome when dealing with such a controversial topic?

Rodriguez's work also pushed against the notion of bilingualism. Rodriguez took an unpopular stance towards bilingualism, and this, in part, along with his views on affirmative action, have set him outside the Chicanx canon. And this is where the notion of canon is imperfect. While Rodriguez's work fits, canonically, into the structure of Chicanx literature, his political views have denied him entrée into the Chicanx canon and access to only the fringe of Chicanx literature. Ironically, the struggles of bilingualism have not only kept Rodriguez from the canon, but became an issue of tension for R. Rivera:

> I am definitely a fabricated Mexican. I'm also a fabricated student. Husband. Son-in-law. Teacher, now. A guy who drinks beer and watches football with a few other guys on Sunday. I'm all of these people, and it's language that allows me to be them. (138-39)

R. Rivera is writing about the manipulation of language. He never directly addresses the issue of bilingualism, but he does discuss the advantages of being bilingual and successful through his fictional character Ricky Coronado. For Ricky, it was the ability to navigate two lexical streams, as he said of his master's thesis and discovery of Chicanx literature: "And from this literature, I was touched with memories of my family; it was the language. And it was that bilingual, bicultural, and lyrical language that I chose to address in a very general thesis" (137-38).Since Ricky was bilingual, he found strength in his language and through his understanding of two languages; he was able, via his education, to fabricate for himself an identity. The use of language, specifically the use of two languages, was a defining feature for Ricky Coronado's identity, and also R. Rivera's, so it is no surprise that the use of language, specifically Spanish, during the editorial process became a point of contention. There is an irony here because the canonical tradition that R. Rivera has plugged into included the use of Spanish, as *...y no se lo tragó la tierra* was originally written and published in Spanish. It would seem that both canonically and in terms of marketing, Chicanx literature, at least according to Arte Público's perspective, has grown beyond Spanish-language-only. Based on my correspondence with R. Rivera, Arte Público took issue with the Spanish in *A Fabricated Mexican*, in particular the mother's use of Spanish and chapter 31, which was originally

written entirely in Spanish.[42] For R. Rivera, the use of Spanish articulated more clearly and precisely the story he wanted to tell: "I think Spanish has a different artistic sensibility" (Rivera personal interview). Arte Público's position, according to letters sent from Dr. Kanellos to R. Rivera, was one of marketability: "I am not going to publish a book that alienates the non-Spanish reader or reviewer. You still have plenty of Spanish words and phrases in the book to give it flavor" (15 Nov. 1994). But R. Rivera did not want to eliminate the Spanish, although he did make other editorial changes when it was necessary. As he modeled the form of his book after Cisneros's, he also employed her strategy of using Spanish without losing the non-Spanish reader: "I never try to put the English in there in such a way though that is going to, what I call when I'm teaching writing, 'let the seams show.' The seams should never show" (Cisneros interview with Rivera). When he wrote *A Fabricated Mexican*, R. Rivera left the flavor of Spanish in, but he tried to not "let the seams show," while offering non-Spanish readers opportunities to understand what was going on. For example, in chapter 14: " '*Ya merito, ya merito*,' he would announce, letting us know [the menudo] was almost ready, as he turned the flames down" (Rivera 48).[43] R. Rivera communicates to his non-Spanish readers the intention, if not the meaning, of the Spanish words and phrases by using the context clue "letting us

[42] Chaper 31 was originally titled "Mi Padrastro."

[43] From chapter 14, originally titled "Cooking."

know….” And throughout most of *A Fabricated Mexican*, R. Rivera employs this strategy, with one notable exception: chapter 31.

Chapter 31 was the story written entirely in Spanish. This story was intended as a tribute to his stepfather, and R. Rivera wanted it to read in Spanish. Arte Público made their position clear in a November 2, 1994 letter to R. Rivera:

> You may not use Spanish without translating it or making it otherwise understood to the English-language reader. We want your book to be reviewed by the mainstream press; if you shut out the English language readers, it will either not be reviewed or it will be panned. You, of course, may do your own translation of the Spanish words and passages.

R. Rivera believed so strongly that that chapter should be in Spanish that he decided to not translate it: “I remember Kanellos seemed almost angry that I did not want to change it, but I wrote it in Spanish….They translated it and put it in. I was pretty upset about it” (Rivera personal interview). R. Rivera might see this as a loss, but the fact the public got to read his original version was a small victory for him. According to Manuel M. Martín-Rodríguez, author of *Life in Search of Readers Reading (in) Chicano/a Literature* and professor of Chicanx literature at University of California, Merced, Arte Público gets almost two thousand submissions a year, and only a handful of those are published, even fewer in Spanish. Ultimately, most, if not all, of the Spanish R. Rivera originally wrote remained in the novel, but unfortunately, his victory is to be bittersweet, as the translation disrupts the flow and style of the book.

In Rick Rivera’s first effort at writing about his development and identity, he unknowingly created a novel in the tradition of the Chicanx canon. But his insistence on

copying a style that was already a part of a larger literary tradition shifts the genre of his work from a collection of short stories to a novel, a composite novel in the Chicanx literary tradition of such writers as Sandra Cisneros and Tomás Rivera. In the production of R. Rivera's novel, his influences and resistances, and by extension Cisneros's influences and resistances, the tensions he addresses in identity, as well as the tensions he faced in the publication of the work all fused together to create, or fabricate, his novel. Clearly we see how canonical standards affect the production of a piece. Equally, we see how the publisher can also affect canonical standards, as the use of Spanish becomes less at the behest of Chicanx publishers, like Arte Público Press. In the end, R. Rivera's work exemplifies an influence of canonical tradition, an invention of self and identity through creating a work of literature, and the contributions of the editorial process, which all meld to create and add to an ever-growing Chicanx literary tradition. But the complication of canon is that adhering to these aesthetic and structural standards does not always lead to a work becoming canonized, nor to a welcome within the walls of a certain literature, in this case, Chicanx literature and Richard Rodriguez's works. Richard Rodriguez is a talented writer, all agree, but a controversial one with regards to his position in the Chicanx canon. The complexity of his position is made even clearer when we examine canon; his first autobiographical work, *Hunger of Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, has achieved canonized status in American literature, but a questionable status in the Chicanx canon. It is precisely because of the mechanisms of canon that his position in both proves to misrepresent the intentions of his work. His second and third autobiographical works, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* and *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*, tend to push against that canonical construct of

his identity in order to reveal a complexity below the surface that has been misunderstood. To be sure, this chapter is not an apology for Rodriguez. The controversy surrounding Rodriguez's positions regarding bilingual education and affirmative action are justly argued by many critics, but these arguments have become the essence of who Rodriguez is, and what his work represents. Rather than engaging the larger issues of identity and acculturation represented in Rodriguez's work, critical attention has remained, for the most part, focused on these two issues. If we remove the paradigm of canon from the examinations of these works, we can view a richer text. The canonization of Rodriguez has limited his work to that of a poster boy for the right, in both canons. I am by no means minimizing the controversial issues that have occupied much of the criticism of Rodriguez; rather, I argue that Rodriguez's writing reveals more layered conversations that involve ethnic identity, culture, and Americanism. What we see in Rodriguez is not only how the canonical mechanisms that lauded him have restricted and defined our understanding of his work, but also how his work has engaged us in a larger conversation that moves beyond the restrictions of canon.

Chapter III

A Disruption of Canon: Michael Chabon and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*

The home does not remain the domain of domestic life, nor does the world simply become its social or historical counterpart. (141)

Homi Bhabha

We are a nation rich with legendary figures…who speak for various regional identities…. (80)

Gary Engle

As with all mongrel art forms and pidgin languages, there was, in the beginning [of comic books], a necessary, highly fertile period of genetic and grammatical confusion. (75)

Michael Chabon

In "The World and the Home," Homi Bhabha discusses the notion of the world invading the home. He examines not only how the world, social, and historical remnants of culture invade the home in such literary works as *Beloved* and *Portrait of a Lady*, but also the idea of the world invading the home that is fiction. But what if Bhabha's idea were taken a step further? What if we understood the metaphor of the home to mean the literary canon—in our conversation, the American literary canon—and the world to be any conflicts and challenges that problematize that canon? In other words, what if we

were to look at this metaphor as an analysis of those ideals of the canon that are challenged by the entrée of non-canonical, or even non-traditional, literature?

In this regard, Bhabha explains, “[i]n that displacement [the invasion of home by the world] the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (141). The line between house and world becomes blurred; as stated in the introduction, the canonical body of American literature, the canon, and the interrogations of canon all become confused. Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* delves into these ideas and examines not only how the world invades the home in this book, but also how this book forces the world upon the home of canonical literature and ultimately creates an unhomely text.[44]

In Bhabha’s analysis of the world and the home, he identifies the intrusion and its subsequent confusion into the home as the unhomely: “The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world” (141). For my purposes, I will illustrate how the unhomely invades the Klayman home in the novel, and then the unhomely as the disruption of the canon that occurs when literature, like *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, engages non-canonical literature. First of all, the theme of acculturation is prevalent in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, as two

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[44] Michael Chabon’s *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is a Pulitzer Prize winning novel from 2000. Certainly literary merits like a Pulitzer Prize could indicate the potential of this work to reach canonical status. For now the book is seminal among the world of comic book enthusiasts. As a matter of fact, it is not uncommon to see Michael Chabon at the San Diego Comic Con or San Francisco’s Wonder Con.

young Jewish boys, one from New York, Samuel Klayman, and his cousin from Prague, Josef Kavalier, pursue the American dream by producing a best-selling comic book in the late 1930s.

The geopolitical realities of Europe, specifically Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia, enter the world vis-à-vis Joseph Kavalier's entrée into the Klayman household: "The border between the home and the world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting" (Bhabha 141). The disorientation of the world entering the Klayman home is the same sensation Sammy feels when his mother wakes him late at night in the fall of 1939: "Sammy's mother *burst* into his bedroom, applied the ring and iron knuckles of her left hand to the side of his cranium, and told him to move over and make room in his bed for his cousin from Prague. Sammy sat up, *heart pounding in the hinges of his jaw*" (Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* 4, emphasis added). The bewilderment Sammy feels when suddenly wakened by his mother is that of not just his cousin entering his room and bed, but the unhomely, the world, entering the home of Sammy Klayman. Until this point, Sammy has been aware of the Nazi occupation of several European countries, but it is not a reality until Josef brings it with him into this home; furthermore, the world at large is brought into the home as Sammy discovers that

Josef's journey from Prague took him all over the world: Ukraine, Prague, Japan, San Francisco, Brooklyn, and finally the Klayman home.[45]

In another very real and very modern way, Chabon also compensates for the absence of the world in the Klayman home by illustrating how even the many New York newspapers did not inform the populace of all international events. It reflects the closed nature of the home of America to events experienced by Jews prior to the United States' entry into World War II. When Josef first arrives in New York, he apparently, purchases a copy of every regional newspaper available, eleven in all:

> "What was with all the newspapers?"
>
> "They are your New York newspapers. I bought them at the Capitol Greyhound Terminal…I was looking for something about Prague."
>
> "Did you find anything? They must have had something in the *Times*."
>
> "Something. A little. Nothing about the Jews." (9-11)

The newspaper, a staple in American households at the time, has nothing about the plight of the Jews in Europe. The unhomely did not enter the home through the newspaper media, but through Josef. Furthermore, and ironically, the desire to help the Jews of Europe will be seen metaphorically through the artistic narrative, the superhero comic book, that Kavalier and Clay will ultimately create.

[45] Josef journeyed from Prague via Japan and San Francisco, but the fact that he was born in Ukraine is what, in part, allowed him to leave Czechoslovakia, so I have included it here as part of his journey to freedom.

Structurally, the narrative also disrupts the reader initially in the text by playing with the narrative timeline. Chabon begins in the present:

> In later years, holding forth to an interviewer or to an audience of aging fans at a comic book convention, Sam Clay liked to declare, apropos of his and Joe Kavalier's greatest creation, that back when he was a boy sealed and hog-tied inside the airtight vessel known as Brooklyn, New York, he had been haunted by dreams of Harry Houdini. (3)

Clearly, this is a reference to the present. But over the next page and a half the narrative moves from Houdini though the other heroes of Sam Clay and settles back in October of 1939. The text never regains footing in the present day, as the story wraps up in the 1950s. But further disruption of the narrative is now stylistically to the expectations of the reader. It may be true that a fractured timeline is not a new device, but the idea that Chabon is once again disrupting the comfort of the reader only goes to support his underlying thesis of disruption, and in the case of this novel, a disruption of canon and literary expectations.

Before we delve further into Chabon's work, let's examine the origins of the nascent literary form that serves as the subject of the novel. The comic book, an American innovation, was aimed initially at children of the early- to mid-twentieth century. While the idea of visual narrative was not new, the contemporary form of a comic book did not come to be until the late 1930s. Early comic books in America were a way for comic strip syndications to profit yet again from collecting their daily newspaper comic strips into magazine form. Over time, this evolved into the original comic, and in 1938, the superhero comic joined the cute, fuzzy animals and detective comics that had

already flooded the market. Early superhero comics were often written and drawn by adolescent or post-adolescent Jewish males, such as Will Eisner, Stan Lee (formerly Stanley Martin Lieber), Joe Shuster, and Jerry Siegel.[46] In turn, the superhero has expanded beyond the pages of the comics and transformed into a symbol of alterity, whereby the metaphor for difference and disenfranchisement has become a staple. Most notably, *The Uncanny X-Men*, *The Amazing Spider-Man,* and *The Hulk* have explored the issue of disenfranchisement in America. Like Josef entering the home of Sammy, the superhero comic not only invaded the home of popular culture, but also of that of literature, as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* indicates.[47]

The beginning of the superhero comic can be traced back to the early 1930s; two teenagers from Cleveland, the aforementioned Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster, conceived of a superhero for a daily comic strip, and sent it to every major newspaper. They envisioned a story about a costumed crime fighter who had been driven away from his home planet as a baby, only to be taken in by a kind-hearted couple from the American Midwest. As the alien visitor grew, he realized that he had certain gifts that other children of Earth did not have: invulnerability, amazing strength, and the ability to leap tall

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[46] The abundance of young Jewish writers and artists in early superhero comics has been well chronicled: "Many of the young artists creating comic books were Jewish and liberal" (Wright 35).

[47] Although since *The Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*'s publication, many acclaimed novels—for example, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Fortress of Solitude*—have woven comics and/or fantasy into their narratives.

buildings in a single bound, although later this would evolve into flight. Much to the dismay of Siegel and Schuster, their strip was refused by every major comic strip syndicate. However, they would have another opportunity to show the world their creation, as the innovation of the comic book was about to offer them a second chance. Again, comic books were originally seen as a quick and easy way for publishers to collect their daily comic strips and resell them to children at minimal expense to the publisher. The first comic books featured daily strips like "Little Orphan Annie," "Dick Tracy," and "Mutt and Jeff" (Wright 2-7 and *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* n.p.). When the publishers saw the sales figures for comic books, they realized that there might be something to this new medium. To sell more comics and increase profits, publishers looked to original creations for comics. Looking to distinguish themselves in this new genre, DC Comics[48] decided to take a chance on Siegel and Schuster's creation, and in June 1938 the first issue of *Action Comics* premiered, featuring Superman holding a car above his head, smashing it into a rock. From this point on, the comic book industry changed forever.

It was not until the creation of Superman that this new medium had its first major hit, and the Golden Age of comics began. Unsurprisingly, the success of Superman motivated every publisher to create their own costumed crime fighter, and in the process,

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[48] At this point in time, DC Comics was known as National Allied Publications. National Allied Publications would later change its name to DC Comics in honor of its longest running title, *Detective Comics*, which in 1939 introduced Batman (Wright 17). DC Comics is most well-known for publishing the *Batman*, *Wonder Woman,* and *Superman* titles.

hundreds of superheroes were created: Batman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Hawk-Man, The Sub-Mariner, The Human Torch, and Captain Marvel, among others. Since the audience for comics was primarily children (and let us not forget that many of the creators of these comics were little more than children), comic book companies throughout the 1940s and 1950s began to style comics' content and form to appeal to children. Batman, who had been a dark avenger of underworld crime, became a father figure to a boy sidekick, and he was not the only one; soon The Flash, Wonder Woman, and Captain America took on youthful sidekicks. Captain Marvel went a step further; he was essentially a Superman clone, but his alter ego was a young boy, Billy Batson. Eventually, criticism regarding the effects of these fantasies on young people came in the form of the comic book hearings of the 1950s. These were Senate hearings in which the comic book industry was attacked and accused of negatively influencing America's youth. The outcome of these hearings was the adoption of the "comics code," a self-monitoring board that made sure comics maintained the highest standards of content suitable for children. The industry has, since the late 1980s, abandoned the code, due in small part to the success of adult-oriented comics like *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, *The Sandman,* and *Watchmen,* which were released successfully without the code. No matter what content changes superheroes underwent, or how they may have varied in their abilities, origins, and audience, these costumed superheroes had a couple of commonalities, notably, a desire to right the wrongs of society and to find a place in society.

Comics did not undergo another shift in content until the 1960s, the Silver Age of comics, when Marvel Comics introduced a new host of superheroes. Unlike the heroes

who preceded them, these heroes were targeted at an older audience and reflected social and political issues of the day. In the comic books of the 1960s superheroes evolved ever so slightly to see and engage problems beyond the pages of the comics, problems which occupied the thoughts of everyday Americans; although, for a time preceding and during World War II, comic book superheroes did concern themselves with fighting Nazis and the Japanese soldiers. Unlike the superheroes of the 1930s and 1940s, super powers or abilities did not always solve these heroes' problems and in many cases, their lives were complicated due to their dual identities; Spiderman's alter-ego Peter Parker still had school problems, work problems, and girl problems. Michael Chabon describes the appeal of 1960s Marvel Comics:

> At that time in comics, the world view presented in DC comic books was much simpler, easier to understand kind of world view: Superman was good, Lex Luthor was evil. As I got older, and you know more sophisticated…. I began to look for greater degrees of ambiguities in my characters and that meant it was time to graduate to Marvel Comics. (qtd. in *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* n.p.)

Historian Bradford W. Wright adds, "There was a survey conducted by *Esquire* magazine in 1965 which revealed that self-described college radicals ranked Spiderman and The Incredible Hulk among their favorite revolutionary icons right there with Bob Dylan, and Che Guevara, and Malcolm X" (qtd. in *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* n.p.). Without exception, Marvel's 1960s superheroes were created by Stan Lee with a variety of other artists, most notably Jack Kirby. Stan Lee had been writing comics since he was a teenager, and in the 1960s he was in his forties, which might account for the shift in his

sensibilities regarding the superhero narrative. He has said that he wanted to write comics—not for kids, but for adults—that mirrored our own society (*Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* n.p.). *The Fantastic Four* reflected the apprehension and excitement of the space race; they were a group of astronauts who, after being bombarded by cosmic rays, developed super powers. *The Incredible Hulk* was a metaphor representing America's obsession with and anxiety over the atomic bomb, as physicist Dr. Bruce Banner is bombarded by radiation at a bomb testing sight and becomes the Hulk. The struggles of the civil rights movement were echoed in *The X-Men*, a comic book about a group of superheroes who are ostracized by society. Not only did the Marvel heroes signify issues of the day, many of them were tragic characters; for example, the adventures of the Hulk followed a man who wanted to rid himself of what he saw as his curse , and the X-Men, as stated above, were outcasts from society because of their unusual abilities. However, even though many of the Marvel heroes were reluctant superheroes, they all accepted and performed the duties of heroes: "With great power there must also come—great responsibility" (Lee and Ditko 15).[49] It is this "great responsibility" that motivates these pulp heroes to change their world.

However, back in 1939, comics were dismissed as "kid stuff," according to Stan Lee, who was seventeen years old when he started writing comics in the late 1930s: "I wanted to write things that were more adult for more intelligent readers and [Timely's[50]

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[49] Originally published in *Amazing Fantasy* #15, August 1962, and reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: The Amazing Spider-Man* Vol. 1.

[50] Timely was the name of an early publisher of comic books.

publisher Martin Goodman] used to say to me, 'Stan we have nobody but very young kids reading our books and a few illiterate adults'" (*Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* n.p.).[51] This is the attitude that Chabon's protagonists in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* face, as well as the attitude against which Chabon himself argues in his novel. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* is the fictional story of two young Jewish teenagers, not unlike the Superman originators, the aforementioned Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, who in 1939 create a comic book superhero, The Escapist. Inspired by the success of Superman, Sam Clay (formerly Klayman) and Josef Kavalier conceive of The Escapist as a hero who embodies and reflects the experiences and hopes of its creators.[52]

In positioning his subject within this new field of literature, Chabon exposes the invasion of comics into the world of literature. He situates the comic books of the 1930s and 1940s as legitimate literature, or at the very least a legitimate art form:

> From the beginning, there was a tendency among educators, psychologists and the general public to view the comic book as merely a debased offspring of the newspaper comic strip, then in the full flower of its since-faded glory, read by

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[51] Timely Comics would eventually change its name to Marvel Comics, and, as mentioned before, Stan Lee in the 1960s would co-create many of their most popular characters: Spider-Man, The Hulk, The X-Men, Iron Man, etc.

[52] Superman was introduced in Action Comics #1, released in June 1938 (Wright 8).

> presidents and Pullman porters, a proud American cousin, in indigenous vitality and grace, of baseball and jazz. (Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* 75)

Chabon's narrative makes the case for comic books as an art form in keeping with baseball and jazz, and as such, it transcends its simplistic style and form: "its interior illustrations was generally execrable at best" (74). It should be noted, however, that Chabon's argument for the placement of the comic book as something other than a "low" art form is an ironic one, as he presents his argument via the form of "high" literature, the novel. While the irony of form is not what primarily occupies this paper, it is of interest to note. But *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* makes an argument in keeping with Laurence Levine's view of modern folklore, or popular culture. As he explains, aesthetic value, or lack thereof, does not negate the importance of a work of popular culture: "Aesthetic worth and substantive complexity are not inexorable partners" ("The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and its Audiences" 299). In other words, we cannot judge a popular work by aesthetic criteria; additionally, perhaps the narrative and metaphor of the superhero could not have been understood by the mainstream culture of the early- to mid-twentieth century. Furthermore, comic books, while targeted and marketed toward children, were often a reflection of the creator's dreams and expectations: "What people can do and *do* do is to refashion the objects created for them to fit their own values, needs, and expectations" (295). Superheroes were refashioned by their creators, as in *Kavalier and Clay*, to fit their values, needs, and expectations. The greatness of the superhero comic in Chabon's work reflects that of the

superhero comic in the 1930s and 1940s, even though the form was largely dismissed as "kid stuff."

Gayatri Spivak, in a groundbreaking essay, asks the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?" This essay has become a cornerstone in subaltern and postcolonial studies, and while she is speaking of an oppressed third-world population truly without a voice, East Indian women, the ideas she introduces are very important for looking at any marginalized group, even if they have some limited access to power. One of the difficulties of her essay is determining what exactly Spivak means when she uses the term "subaltern." She borrowed the term from Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Marxist philosopher, and initially used it to label a group that cannot speak for itself, and is truly "unrepresentable" (Spivak 285), but as recently as 2008, she further clarified it to mean "a position without identity" (Spivak, "The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work" n.p.). I am not arguing that the young Jewish writers of the late 1930s and early 1940s are subaltern in the same way as the women of India to whom Spivak refers, but they are certainly marginalized, as they represented the hopes and dreams of a generation of teenaged and young adult Jews, who, at this historical moment, did not have access to the traditional avenues of power. While I do not want to debate the place of Jewish teenagers in the spectrum of subaltern, I do find that Spivak's theories regarding subaltern are very relevant when discussing the literary production of these Jewish teenagers of the 1930s and 1940s. Her essay pursues an answer to the question posed in its title: Can the subaltern speak? All the while, Spivak questions the methods of traditional and popular theory and criticism. The implied conclusion of her interrogation is that the subaltern cannot speak, nor can they be represented, at least not in a way Western intellectuals can

understand. When the subaltern are "represented," or "re-presented," "epistemic violence" is done to them, and in the end the represented subject is not who is truly represented (275-80).[53] Furthermore, once the subaltern gain access to the avenues of power and can speak for themselves, by Spivak's estimation, they are no longer truly subaltern.[54] Because the way in which a subaltern "speaks" cannot be understood by those with intellectual power, what the subaltern says is either ignored or misunderstood. Once again, I am not making the argument that Jewish teens were subaltern, but I do find Spivak's ideas helpful to understand the literature created by this group in the 1930s and 1940s, and from this perspective, I would like to engage Spivak's ideas, specifically with how they relate to the superhero comic, as for decades its worth and relevance have been misunderstood. This writing is not an engagement in a debate over the positionality of young Jewish writers, as they certainly, by Spivak's standards, are not subaltern, even if they did represent a marginalized group in the American culture; moreover, the Jewish people have been persecuted throughout history, especially during the 1930s and 1940s in Europe. More so, the young creators of the superhero comics are not only marginalized

[53] Spivak looks at the idea of "representation" as "(t)wo senses of representation…: representation as 'speaking for,' as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation,' as in art or philosophy" (275). One form, the subject, is spoken for, and the second is the artistic representation of a given group. As comics are a visual art, we will look at comic book superheroes as metaphoric re-presentations.

[54] This may be why we cannot truly consider Jewish teens subaltern. Even though their access to media was via the medium of comics, they did possess a voice with which to portray their experinces.

by their cultural identity but also by their age. Certainly being Jewish in the 1930s places Chabon's protagonists on the margins of society. Moreover, Spivak writes of her subject in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" "the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant…the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow" (287). Similarly, social constructs keep those who are adults in power; the fact that these protagonists are both young and Jewish keeps them doubly silent, silent to traditional avenues of expression. Many creators of comics in the 1930s were teenagers. Publishers hired them because they were typically cheaper to hire, and coincidentally, as mentioned above, many, not all, comic book writers and artists were Jewish. The young Jewish writers and artists who dominated the creative aspect of comics in their early days did not have conventional voices, nor traditional access to power, and the comic was a place for them to represent their experiences, hopes, and anxieties. However, this medium left their voices widely unheard, as comic books were relegated to pulp fiction for adolescents and pre-adolescents until relatively recently.

The first superhero, Superman, was created in response to Siegel's and Schuster's desire to help change the world, as Jerry Siegel recalls:

> Listening to President Roosevelt's "fireside chats"…being unemployed and worried during the Depression and knowing hopelessness and fear. Hearing and reading of the oppression and the slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany…seeing movies depicting the horrors of privation suffered by the downtrodden…I had the great urge to help…help the downtrodden masses, somehow…. How could I help when I could barely help myself? Superman was the answer. (qtd. in Fingeroth 41)

Will Eisner, creator of the superhero The Spirit and respected writer and artist, explains, "In American society, we believe in instant solutions, superheroes do that" (qtd. in *Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* n.p.). As the comic book industry of the 1940s was still dominated by Jewish writers and artists, many superheroes entered World War II prior to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. For example, in 1940, a year before the United States entered the war, Siegel and Schuster, in a special two-page story in *Look!* magazine, told a story wherein Superman grabs Hitler and Stalin and drops them off at the League of Nations, thereby ending the war.

In addition to Superman, in March of 1941, some nine months prior to Pearl Harbor, the superhero Captain America's "dramatic debut was a call to arms, urging the nation to unite against foreign aggression" (Wright 31). On the cover of his debut issue (see fig. 4), Captain America, in true superhero fashion, was featured punching Adolf Hitler in the face.[55]

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[55]Interestingly enough, after Captain America's cancellation in 1949, he was briefly reintroduced in the 1950s as a communist hunter. This series was not popular and lasted less than a year. He did not resurface again until the 1960s, and upon his return, he was a tortured, brooding hero who bore the guilt of the death of his sidekick, Bucky Barnes, and he began to question the nation and what it, and he, represented. In the 1970s, with an African American sidekick, The Falcon, he waged war against poverty, racism, pollution, and political corruption (Wright 244-245).

Fig. 1 *Captain America* #1 rtp. from "Captain America." *Cover Browser*. Web. 20 Dec. 2014

Superman and Captain America were not alone in their crusades against the Nazis, as several superhero characters in their respective comics would soon enter the war. Even if writers and artists could not change the world, their creations, the superheroes, could easily change and alter their fictional world through sheer force of power. Through the metaphor of the superhero narrative, Jewish teenagers could explore their hopes and dreams in the monthly pages of comics.

Not only does the superhero challenge the place for Jewish cultural production in America, it further interrogates the idea of what is acceptable literature. Richard H.

Brodhead discussed the idea that in the late nineteenth century, literature consumed by the masses, like story-papers and dime novels, was not considered literature. Notable writers like Louisa May Alcott would write for these publishers, but always under a pen name. Comic books were not only popular literature for the masses, but at this time, the masses in question were children. The idea that comics even have a place in the home of canon is a relatively new concept.[56] But Michael Chabon's novel, from the outset, with its elegant and sophisticated narrative and language, self-consciously argues that the simplicity of the comic reveals a new kind of literature. The work includes two epigraphs: one from Nathaniel Hawthorne, canonized American author of *The Scarlet Letter*, and the second from Will Eisner, noted writer and artist of the comic book *The Spirit*. The fact that he positions a master of American literature next to a master of the comic book genre indicates to us Chabon's attitude towards superhero texts.

Chabon, concerning young Jewish writers and artists of the 1930s, clearly sees superhero comics as the vehicle by which young Jewish teenagers found a voice, as he asserts that the comics created were not only wish fulfillment fantasies for young boys, but they also metaphorically represented their creators' ethnicity: "[T]hey're all Jewish… Superman, you don't think he's Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself" (*The*

[56] Recent scholarship has begun to investigate the legitimacy of comics as art. In an effort to legitimize the art form, Marvel comics in the 1980s coined the term *graphic novel* for larger prestige format books, including *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and *The Watchmen*, two titles that are the subjects of a growing body of scholarship.

Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay 585).[57] And like Superman's creators Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel, Sam Clay and Josef Kavalier create a superhero, The Escapist, not only to embody their dreams and desires, but also to comment on their realities: Josef was the only member of his family to escape a Nazi-occupied Prague, so their creation would regularly fight Nazis;[58] in turn, Clay was physically disabled as a child after contracting polio, and the Escapist's alter ego, Tom Mayflower, is disabled and walks with the aid of a crutch; before coming to America, Josef Kavalier trained as an *Ausbrecher*, or escape artist, and The Escapist is a superhero who cannot be contained by any lock.

Representation of the world in literature is certainly a trait of traditional canonical literature: "I want to suggest that the aesthetic process introduces into our reading of social reality not another reified form of mediation—the art object—but another temporality in which to signify the 'event' of history" (Bhabha 144). I am not suggesting that canonical American literature did not introduce the world into the home, but that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* introduces the social realities of the world into the canonical home. First, Chabon inserts the pulp literature of comics into the home of the canon, but at the same time, the pulp reality in the text signifies the events of history to the reading audience within the text. Just as Clay's home is disrupted by the entrance

[57] It is interesting to know that Sam Clay had also changed his name from Samuel Klayman.

[58] Like in the comic books of the late 1930s and early 1940s, The Escapist would fight Nazis long before America become actively involved in World War II.

of Josef and the politics of Europe, Chabon disrupts the home of canonical literature by making an argument for the inclusion of graphic literature as legitimate literature.

Like their creators in the 1930s and 1940s, and like their position in literature, the superhero's positionality in fictional society is as both an insider and an outsider, as superheroes often act outside the official structures of society to fight crime, but have an alter-ego, or identity within society. For example, Superman, a man imbued with almost god-like powers, is, while in the guise of Clark Kent, a part of the American mainstream. Superman, born Kal-El to Kryptonians Jor-El and Lara, is a native of the doomed planet Krypton who was, as a baby, sent to Earth to avoid certain death. His powers are derived from the fact that he is not human, but an alien. Consequently, Superman is always on the outside, set aside due in part to his abilities, innate abilities that are unique to Kryptonians: "Superman's powers—strength, mobility, X-ray vision and the like—are the comic book equivalents of ethnic characteristics . . . . The myth of *Superman* asserts with total confidence and childlike innocence the value of the immigrant in American culture" (Engle 81). Superman, like many of the superheroic creations that follow him, is both an insider and an outsider, a position not unlike that early comic book writers or artists felt. Jack Kirby, son of Jewish immigrants, changed his name from Jacob Kurtzberg because he "wanted to be an American" (qtd. in Wright 35).[59] Like the superheroes he drew, he had the outward appearance of Americanness in his new name,

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[59] Jack Kirby is credited, along with Stan Lee, as the creator of many of Marvel Comics superheroes: The Hulk, The X-Men, Iron Man, Captain America (created with Joe Simon) and the Fantastic Four.

but still had his experiences growing up as a Jew in New York to guide his creativity: "He cited experiences growing up in a tough neighborhood where good boys learned to survive by acting tough and to stand up to bullies as a primary inspiration for his comic book work and politics" (35). It is precisely this world that Chabon wishes to insert into the home of the American literature canon.

From such stories, Chabon became inspired to write about these young writers and artists: "Right around that time, I read an article about Superman—in *Smithsonian* magazine, I think—which talked about how Siegel and Shuster created the character. I had a desire to write something that would be set in this period, which had always fascinated me. That was the flash: I was going to write about comic book creators in the 1940s" (Chabon qtd. in Welch n.p.). The resulting novel, *The Amazing Adventures*, told a story common to many young artist and writers of superhero comics: "Many of them, not all, were young Jewish guys from New York with immigrant parents, a yen for success, and a love of the pulps. All of those qualities were pretty common among comic-book men at the time, almost universal, and so it was not basing Sammy on any one person, but on the archetype of the comic-book creator" (Chabon qtd. in Scott n.p.). It was this archetype that allowed Chabon to investigate the resulting metaphor for alterity that is the superhero.

The story of Kavalier and Clay makes a strong case for the examination of superhero as metaphor for alterity, specifically Jewish alterity. The superhero's otherness obviously parallels the Jewish experiences of its creators, Samuel Klayman and Josef Kavalier. The Escapist's origin is a combination of the life experiences of both Kavalier

and Clay.[60] Before Kavalier flees Czechoslovakia, he trains with *Ausbrecher* Bernard Kornblum, a renowned escape artist.[61] Kavalier narrowly escapes from Prague with his life, a feat that no one else in his family can ever repeat. Upon arrival in New York, he goes to live with his aunt and his cousin, Sam Klayman, a.k.a. Sam Clay. Clay, a teenager and avid fan of the new visual narrative creation, the comic book, convinces Josef to use his artistic skills to help him create a comic that they infuse with aspects of their own lives. They create The Escapist as not only a vaudevillian escape artist, but one who can use his powers to escape to pick any lock, thereby allowing him entry into or exit from any evildoer's lair, thus bringing freedom to those who are oppressed: "He doesn't just fight [crime]. He frees the world of it" (Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* 121). Like Josef, who uses his talents as an *Ausbrecher* to escape Nazi persecution, he hopes to free his family someday. Sammy Clay has suffered all of his life from polio and walks with a limp due to his ailment. The Escapist's alter ego, Tom Mayflower, cannot walk without the use of a crutch…that is, until he is endowed with the power of the golden key: "Armed with superb physical and mental training" (121). Both Kavalier and Clay, in one way or another, are without one or both of their parents, and

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[60] Although Chabon views Clay as the sidekick to Kavalier, in the novel they were equally responsible for the creation of the Escapist (Welch n.p.).

[61] *Ausbrecher* is the German word for an escape artist. In the early part of the twentieth century, America and Europe were amazed by the escape artistry of Harry Houdini, who also served as an inspiration for Kavalier and Clay in creating The Escapist.

The Escapist's Tom Mayflower is a Central European orphan rescued by the first Escapist, Max Mayflower. And like Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, Sam Klayman changes his name—to Sam Clay—to sound more American. Now let us consider Tom Mayflower's name.[62] Not only has it abandoned all hint of European heritage, but his surname recalls the famous ship which brought English settlers to settle the New World, and ultimately become Americans. Like the actual superhero creators of the 1930s and 1940s, it is not clear how much of themselves they intended to write into the story, but by writing their experiences into *The Escapist*, they were designing a complex metaphor for alterity that, due to its medium, was "not held in high regard at the time" (Stan Lee qtd. in Fingeroth 10). The world not only invaded the home of Sam Clayman in the form of Josef Kavalier, but in Michael Chabon's novel, the world of superhero graphic literature invaded the home of potentially canonical literature.

It is easy to see the connection between the experiences of young Jewish writers and their creations, both in Chabon's work and in the early comic book superheroes. However, comic book pioneer Joe Simon, who was co-creator of Captain America with Jack Kirby, insists that Jewish heritage did not influence their creativity: "[Jewish matters] had absolutely nothing to do with comics. Jack [Kirby] and I never sat around

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[62] While Kirby was upfront about changing his name as a way to enculturate himself better to mainstream America, Stan Lee contends that he changed his name, not to fit in better, but because comic books were not respected as literature, and he fancied himself a writer; he was reserving his Jewish name for his career as a novel writer, which never transpired, and "To this day, I regret that name change" (qtd. in Fingeroth 10).

and discussed Jewishness in comics. [Marvel publisher] Martin Goodman never mentioned it" (qtd in Fingeroth 24). Although it is true that one could take a critical stance that the author has little to do with the meaning of the text, it is my contention that Chabon's novel argues the exact opposite point: The Jewish culture and age of the writers and their desires to fit into the American mainstream heavily influenced their creations, and may very well have something to do with the fact that early comic books have traditionally been excluded from canon. As Will Eisner, creator of *The Spirit* and early advocate for the artistry of the comic book, explains, "Superman was the ultimate assimilationist fantasy. . . Jerry Siegel's accomplishment was to chronicle the smart Jewish boy's American Dream" (qtd. in Fingeroth 24).[63]

Nowhere is this more apparent than in comic book superheroes' reactions to the treatment of European Jews prior to America's entry into World War II: "We were fighting Hitler before the government was fighting Hitler," Stan Lee explains of comic book superheroes (*Comic Book Superheroes Unmasked* n.p.). In *The Amazing Adventures*

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[63] Will Eisner is one of the early creators of the superhero comic, having entered the field in the early 1940s. His most well-known creation is *The Spirit*. Eisner also pioneered what many consider the first graphic novel in 1978 when he created *A Contract with God*, a work of sequential art (a term he coined), about life in Brooklyn in the 1930s. In his later years, he dedicated much time to writing about the art of comic books, as he was on the forefront of arguing for the legitimacy of comics as works of art. Chabon drew heavily on Eisner while creating his novel: "Eisner brought radical technical innovations to the comics page—some borrowed from the movies, some from the theater, some from the fine arts tradition—and that was impressive and important" ("Thoughts on the Death of Will Eisner 141").

of Kavalier and Clay, Sammy tells Josef that the comic they create is going to help his family: "[W]e are going to sell a million copies of this thing and make a pile of money, and you are going to be able to take that pile of money and pay what you need to pay to get your mother and father and brother and grandfather out of [Nazi-controlled Prague] and over here, where they will be safe" (Chabon 136). Metaphorically, they do fight the Nazis, as their first year of writing features The Escapist fighting European fascist regimes:

> On the very last page, in a transcendent moment in the history of wishful figments, the Escapist had captured Adolf Hitler and dragged him before a war tribunal. Head finally bowed in defeat and shame, Hitler was sentenced to die for his crimes against humanity. The war was over; a universal era of peace was declared, the imprisoned and persecuted peoples of Europe—among them, implicitly and passionately, the Kavalier family of Prague—were free. (166)

Chabon's fictional characters harken back to the many artists and writers of the early 1940s, in particular that February 1940 *Look!* magazine that featured two pages in which Superman apprehended Hitler and Stalin and delivered them to the League of Nations. In *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, Chabon's protagonist, Josef Kavalier, and Nazi politics invade Sam Clay's home and in turn, they create a comic, whereby the politics of Europe invade the home of America. Consequently, Chabon's fictional metanarrative invades the home of canonical literature with a narrative that argues, quite elegantly, with the world of popular graphic literature.

Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* illustrates how these young Jewish writers of early comics wrote their experiences, hopes, fears, and dreams

into the story of the superhero. And in doing so, Chabon allowed the world of the superhero graphic novel to invade the world of literature. Bhabha concludes "The World and the Home" by writing, "I have attempted to show you the world forcibly entering the house of fiction in order to invade, alarm, divide, dispossess. But I have also tried to show how literature haunts history's more public face, forcing it to reflect on itself in the displacing, even distorting image of Art" (152). Similarly, non-canonical works that interrogate and interrupt the home of the canon also serve a greater purpose, as illustrated by Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*. Chabon's metanarrative invades the home of the canon on two levels: first, the construct of literature does not exclude literature for the masses or popular literature, and second, non-traditional literatures, such as superhero comics, could represent a larger world, as illustrated in *The Escapist*, and by extension other superhero comics of the 1930s and 1940s. To borrow from Bhabha, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, "is a story to pass on; to pass through the world of literature on its thither side and discover those who live in the unhomely house of [canonical] Fiction. In the House of (canonical) Fiction, there is a stirring of the unspoken, of the unhomely. . . today" (152). By treating these works as legitimate works of alterity, we only enrich the conversation of diversity in American literature. If we allow this unhomely genre a place in our conversation or discussion, we only serve to enrich our understanding of the literature of the other, as well as ourselves. As we have seen over the last two decades, superhero texts have become incredibly popular, and in many ways, they are already a part of our cultural conversation, and as such examining their origins, meanings and contexts, similar to what Chabon has done

with his work can reveal a great deal about ourselves, and that is really the point of studying literature, is it not?[64]

[64] Most apparent in the film industry. Since the late 1990s, starting with *Blade*(1998), superhero films have been incredibly successful, none more so than Marvel Studios cinematic universe, which at this writing was comprised of 22 films since 2008s *Iron Man*.

Chapter IV

They Live, We Sleep.

They have us. They control us. They are our masters! Wake up, they're all about you. All around you. (n.p.)

Blind Street Preacher in *They Live*

I was trying to, I don't know, maybe elevate science fiction and invasion movies higher than they had been. (n.p.)

John Carpenter, *They Live*
"Director's Commentary"

They Live, from 1988, is definitely one of the forgotten masterpieces of the Hollywood Left. (n.p.)

Slavoj Žižek

We have now seen how Michael Chabon introduced the world of comic books and superheroes into the home of literature. This is a rhetorical, pedagogical, and intellectual move made possible only through the dismissal of thinking, metaphorically, of literature as canon. This is not to say that the literature of Stan Lee and Will Eisner is worthy of the same considerations as other works of the American literature canon. No, the point, indeed, is that when we abandon canon as a part of our discussion of literature, then we allow for a conversation enriched by non-canonical, non-traditional narratives. My examination of Michael Chabon opened the world of genre literature into the home of fiction with *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, so let's further examine other

narratives of genre fiction in our conversation by expanding it to include science fiction narratives.[65]

Science fiction is an ideal category for our discussion as it has always relied heavily on metaphor and critical self-awareness of the world at large. The world has entered, via fantastic metaphor, the home of science fiction since its early days in the nineteenth century. The symbols of science fiction have often been used to weave a powerful narrative and to pull its readers into its reality. As such, the alien has been a popular symbol in science fiction for more than a hundred years, and the metaphor of the alien has transformed over time. In the late nineteenth century, which marks the beginning of science fiction literature, H.G. Wells's novel *War of the Worlds* represented a pointed attack on Western imperialism: He turned the tables on the British audience and portrayed Great Britain as the subject of an invading force (Davis 285). However, only a couple of decades later, the portrayal of aliens shifted from self to other, as the red and yellow aliens of Edgar Rice Burroughs's *John Carter of Mars* series clearly represented America's xenophobia through the literal use of different colored aliens, as Bill Brown points out: "*A Princess of Mars* depicts a white southern male reestablishing racial order"

[65] *Genre*, in literary studies, typically refers to the form of literature (prose, poetry, drama). Here I choose to use the popular term "genre literature," and indeed "genre fiction," to refer to those categories of fiction that are specialized based on their setting and plot (science fiction, Western, horror, etc.).

(155).[66] These are just two early examples of the rich symbolism utilized in this genre of literature.

But the rich metaphors of science fiction and the alien were not reserved for novels; other narratives also employed the genre to comment on the world, most notably film. The alien invaders in films of the 1950s clearly have been read as communist invaders. Films like *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers,* and *The Thing from Another World* have been read as either part of, or resistance to, the Red Scare in America. In these films, alien invasions disrupt the American way of life, sometimes through sheer force, and sometimes through more insidious means, as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* illustrates. In this film, aliens invade by killing and taking the place of humans, so one never really knows who or where is the enemy. The notion of a hidden enemy has been used repeatedly in the genre of science fiction, such as in John Carpenter's 1982 remake of *The Thing from Another World*, simply titled *The Thing*, in which an alien force invades an Arctic American research station by killing the inhabitants and taking their forms. Carpenter's film is less about a communist scare and more about our culture's paranoia that grew in the wake of the Cold War, then almost forty years long.

Contemporary scholars have read the other into the metaphor of the alien. Noted Latino film scholar Charles Ramirez Berg sees our current debate over immigration

[66] *A Princess of Mars* was the first in a series of John Carter of Mars books, also known as the Barsoom series.

manifesting itself in this metaphor: "I contend that these new extraterrestrial films are a culturally unconscious means of working out the whole question of immigration as it has emerged in the last several decades" (155).[67] And in fact many alien films of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century can be read in exactly this way. *Alien,* a science fiction/horror mash-up, forces us to see the horror of an encroaching and growing alien threat on a deep-space commercial spacecraft heading home to Earth. *Alien Nation* is a science fiction/crime film that follows a group of refugee alien slaves who settle on Earth, only to feed into the existing criminal elements of late twentieth-century Los Angeles. *Independence Day*, the biggest film of 1996, has been read as a film that examines the destruction some fear immigration may have on our society. And finally, *District 9*, a South African film that follows *Alien Nation*'s premise of aliens as Earth's newest residents, takes a sympathetic look at the fear and hatred hurled upon immigrants by their adopted culture.[68]

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[67] While I agree that aliens can be representative of America's fear of immigration, I think it is dangerous to correlate a fictional alien race with one particular culture, for the simple reason that America's xenophobia certainly predates current issues with Mexican immigrants. Even though the anxiety reflected over the last 30 years certainly has something to do with fear of invaders from south of the border, I believe that the issue of immigration is much larger and more complex than Berg reflects in his writing.

[68] An interesting aside: At the time of this writing, Neill Blomkamp, writer and director of *District 9*, has been selected to reboot the *Alien* franchise.

The science fiction motif of not knowing whom to trust has permeated alien and science fiction visual narratives, especially in the wake of the close of the Cold War, over the last twenty-five years. The popularity of the television show *The X-Files* in the 1990s is one of the strongest examples from popular culture from the end of the last decade of the Cold War. What *The X-Files*, with its slogans "The Truth is Out There" and "Trust No One," tapped into was the uncertainty of the future without an identifiable antagonist in the wake of the Cold War (n.p.). And as such, *The X-Files* and other narratives turned their suspicions inward. Even such stalwart science fiction as *Star Trek* joined in the trust-no-one paranoia, as evidenced by *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*'s use of alien shape-shifters who could easily infiltrate Starfleet as the series' primary protagonist for the last half of its seven-year run. It would seem the device used by *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* in 1956 to reflect the red scare and/or McCarthyism suspicion was now a popular one used to evoke fear of our own power establishments. An early film to use this technique to critique our own culture and leadership was 1988's *They Live*, written and directed by John Carpenter.[69]

Upon first look, *They Live* is probably the farthest film from high art that one can find: It is a science fiction film made in the same vein of those alien invasion films of the 1950s; the lead actor is professional wrestler, "Rowdy" Roddy Piper; the film was made on a low-even-for-1988-budget. The film is both based on, and a departure from, an

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[69] John Carpenter wrote the screenplay for *They Live* under the pseudonym Frank Armitage, the name of a character in the film, based on the Ray Nelson short story "8 O'Clock in the Morning."

illustrated short story by Ray Nelson titled "Eight O'Clock in the Morning."[70] It is the story of a man, simply named "Nada" (translated from *nothing* in Spanish), who suddenly realizes the Earth is in the midst of an alien takeover.[71] The film opens with drifter Nada coming into Los Angeles to look for work. We discover that he came from Colorado where there was no work, and at the unemployment office, we see the situation is much the same in Los Angeles. Nada ultimately does find work at a construction site, and a co-worker, Frank, takes him to a modern Hooverville. After a raid on the shanty town, Nada discovers sunglasses that allow him to see the world as it really is…a series of subliminal messages meant to keep us docile and subservient to unknown alien overseers (see Fig. 1).

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[70] Ray Nelson's short story was adapted to a short comic, "Nada," featured in *Alien Encounters* magazine in 1986, and then further adapted by John Carpenter as the film *They Live*.

[71] The film credits Piper's character as "Nada," but neither first nor last name is mentioned in the text of the film.

Fig. 2- Cityscape from *They Live*. “Matt’s Film Blog” *Sites at Penn State*. Web. 22 July 2015. http://sites.psu.edu/matthewdepanfilis/2015/04/04/different-takes-on-an-iconic-quote/.

The aliens are our own leaders and the upper class. After discovering the world is not what it appears to be, Nada becomes a revolutionary, of sorts, for change, and drafts his friend Frank into the cause with him. In the end, Nada destroys the transmitter that hides both the aliens and the subliminal messages.

“In the stirrings of the unhomely, another world becomes visible,” Homi Bhabha writes of the unhomely and its revelation in the home (141). What happens when the home is out in the world? Are there any revelations that can be made of the world? *They Live* engages this conversation from precisely this perspective. It addresses a Reagan-era

America and reveals that all was not well with our country during this decade, but we had to have the courage to look below the surface to see our country's ills. Carpenter deftly demonstrates how the world becomes the home, and the unhomely still manages to intrude; "The unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world" (Bhabha 141). The conflation of home and the world is what Carpenter deals with when he chooses to deviate from Nelson's short story (n.p.), and present to us Nada as a homeless handyman and construction worker. During a scene in which Frank and Nada are hiding out planning their next move, Nada reveals that he left home when he was thirteen years old, giving us the impression that Nada has had the world as his home for most of his adult life. Suddenly the world is not an intrusion on the home, as the world becomes the home…and even in this deviation Carpenter is able to bring the unhomely into the text. Nada's world is one inhabited by aliens disguised as humans. Furthermore, the aliens are enslaving humans and promoting docile behavior by inundating humans with subliminal messages, such as, "Sleep…Marry and Reproduce…No Independent Thought…Consume…Obey…Watch TV…Submit," and many others (n.p.). *They Live,* via the science fiction metaphor of the alien invasion, is very clearly bringing the world into the home, or reality, of the audience. And as this film, when watched today, is via television or other digital medium, Carpenter's message is literally invading our homes.

Since we are now looking at literature as a conversation, and the notion of how texts can fit into this conversation, I think it is important to bring Sigmund Freud and his discussion of the unhomely into our discussion, as I believe Bhabha's theory was a conversation with Freud. Inclusive in our conversation, as we read *They Live* we need to

investigate the idea of the *unheimlich* as defined by Freud. Let us not forget that "unhomely" is literally a translation of *unheimlich*, a concept Freud explored in his essay "The Uncanny." Freud explores the notion of that which is recognizable, but also evokes a sense of fear: "I will say it at once that both courses lead to the same result: the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (220). It is not something new that is frightening, but true terror can arise from that which we know, or think we know. And this is precisely the message John Carpenter is working to advance in his film.

In his examination of the uncanny, Freud explores how it is that the familiar or common can evoke a sense of fear. John Carpenter, in his film, takes all that is known to the protagonist (and the viewer) and turns it completely upside down. As stated above, the world and our government have been infiltrated by aliens, but we do not know when or how this happened. Everything Nada thought was true ends up being false. He believed in the possibility of making it in America. When his friend Frank complains of society working against him, Nada tells him, "I believe in a hard day's work for the money, just want a chance. It'll come. I believe in America. I follow the rules. Everybody's got their own hard times these days." At this point Nada does not realize that he, and the rest of humanity, are being manipulated by the imperialist alien forces. Even though he has seen signs of the decay on a personal level, through his unemployment, he has also witnessed a social decay. More and more people are unemployed and cannot find work. More and more people are losing their jobs and are being relegated to homeless camps like the Hooverville that takes him in. Still he does not see that anything is wrong. And his first suspicions are actually of the rebels. He

notices that there is a lot of activity at a church across the street from the homeless encampment. When he investigates, he discovers that there are no choirs, only a recording; there are no volunteers cooking food for the encampment, but there is a lab creating sunglasses; there are no church leaders, only rebellion leaders discussing how they can break through the aliens' signal and inform more people of the invasion. This is Nada's first experience with the uncanny, or unhomely, in the world, but his initial responses are incorrect; he was only just exposing the uncanny of the world as more is revealed to him as the narrative unfolds.

Nada's discovery at the church does not merit the concern that he gives it, as he later discovers. Later that night, the police raid and destroy the Hooverville, gathering up many of its inhabitants. Nada manages to escape. Looking for answers, he returns to the church. There, hidden, he finds a box with the sunglasses the rebels were making. Nada leaves with the box of sunglasses. When he puts on a pair, he is thrust into a different level of uncanny… he discovers that the world is nothing more than a series of subliminal messages, and that those in power, the wealthy, are in fact aliens. The world that seemed so familiar to Nada is nothing like he believed it to be. The uncanniness is that the so-called American Dream is not a reality, but a tool used by the aliens to keep us wanting more and distracting us from their intentions. The world Nada lives in is nothing like what he believed it to be. The familiar becomes the unfamiliar. His home in the world has definitely taken on the air of the unhomely.

We see how the familiar has become unfamiliar to Nada within the context of the plot of *They Live*, but also, the viewer's "home" of science fiction is now invaded by the powerful metaphor that John Carpenter utilizes to comment on a society that people

believed in under the leadership of the popular president, Ronald Reagan. Just as Chabon uses his narrative to introduce superhero comics into the world of fiction, Carpenter is using the science fiction film and metaphor of science fiction to introduce a strong commentary about Reagan-era America into the home of the viewer. While for many this was not the literal home, as the film was first released theatrically, it is planting ideas about society into the minds of the viewers. Carpenter is essentially invading the home with the realities of the world as he sees it.

To fully understand what Carpenter is doing with this narrative, we must fully understand the signs and symbols of *They Live*. A semiotic analysis of what we see, as mentioned earlier, is not unheard of when analyzing science fiction. As mentioned above, science fiction has long been a place to metaphorically comment on the social situations and ills of society. *They Live* is no different. To understand fully what Carpenter is saying to us, we must understand how he uses the uncanny, the unhomely, to transmit his message. Carpenter's film is rich with metaphor. As in its science fiction predecessor, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, the protagonists exist in a world surrounded by allies, but they also are surrounded by insidious forces. But unlike that seminal work of science fiction, *They Live* turns its critical lens on our own country and society.

In that earlier work, the alien invasion was easily read as our culture's post-war, anti-communist paranoia.[72] In this film, the alien invasion is not overt. There are no pod

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[72] It is only fair to note that *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) can also be read as a cautionary film regarding the widespread hysteria of the McCarthy trials. While this is an interesting reading of the film,

people invading and taking anyone's place. No, in *They Live*, the alien invasion has already happened. The aliens are now the ruling class of America. They are the wealthy. They are the politicians who run our country and continue to help the rich at the expense of the working class. Bhabha wrote of the unhomely, "it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of historical conditions and social contradictions" (142). *They Live* disrupts the sense of calm and security that permeated Reagan-era America and reveals the contradictions in our society at the time. In spite of an increasing deficit, rising unemployment, and a stock market collapse, there was a sense of safety in America. Using the metaphor of science fiction, Carpenter, very pointedly, deconstructs that security. The ruling class is not trying to help. Instead, it is helping to disassemble and dismantle the world we know.

Furthermore, Bhabha writes of the unhomely, "The discourse of 'the social' then finds its means of representation in a kind of unconsciousness that obscures the immediacy of meaning, darkens the public event with an 'unhomely' glow" (143). As a society, we look for blame for our social ills. But we don't know where to place that blame. Carpenter is directing the audience to shift its blame not to those who don't have work or need help, but to those in power who give the appearance of helping. The morning Nada first puts on the sunglasses, he enters a small upscale market where he

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for the sake of the comparison in this discussion, I have chosen to focus on America's anti-communism paranoia.

witnesses a conversation between two executives, one an alien and the other, a human. The human, we assume, is unaware that his co-worker is an alien:

Human: I'm so depressed. I don't know what to do.

Alien: Go for it, man.

Human: That's easy for you to say, you got the promotion.

Alien: It'll come. Don't worry about it. (n.p.)

This is a conversation many Americans could have overheard at their supermarket or even have taken a part in themselves. The "unhomely glow" is that the seemingly supportive "friend" is in fact an alien. The alien urges his "friend" to work harder to get what he wants, but, in reality, the aliens get what *they* want: a hard-working slave who is chasing money and a promotion, and not questioning his situation. He is submitting to the subliminal messages that urge him to "stay asleep" (n.p.).

Another frightening aspect of the film is that not all of the antagonists are aliens. There are humans operating in collusion with the alien forces. While we see the alien forces use many humans to carry out their bidding, such as human police officers, these individuals believe they are doing their jobs; those are not the humans I am addressing now. When Frank and Nada narrowly escape alien stormtroopers, they retreat to an underground network controlled by the alien forces. While there, they stumble upon a formal dinner attended by both aliens and humans. The alien speaker talks of the gains and wealth that these "new power elite" have accumulated as allies in the efforts to exploit Earth's resources. There Frank and Nada stumble upon a drifter from the Hooverville. He is now wearing a tuxedo and part of the new power elite. His job was to undermine the efforts of the resistance within the camp. Every time the resistance would

break into television transmissions and issue warnings, he would belittle their efforts and insult them, thereby helping others to see the resistance as a group of ineffectual extremists. Another alien sympathizer is Holly. Holly's role is very important because she is a programming director at a local television station, the same television station that is transmitting the signals that conceal the subliminal messages and the aliens from the general population. She helps the aliens use the media to conceal themselves and their intentions. Both the drifter and Holly represent those who would help to continue to oppress, deceive, and exploit the working class.

As you can see, the film is populated by the uncanny…those things which seem familiar, but instead evoke dread within the characters and the audience. The sunglasses that Nada finds help him to unobscure the injustices around him. These glasses represent a means to find the truth in the world around him. While the glasses themselves are not a feature that instills fear in the viewer, what they reveal is terrifying: a world out of our control. It is an ironic symbol, as sunglasses' true purpose is to obscure; they shield our eyes from certain spectrums of light. If we think of light as truth, then the function of these sunglasses is to reveal the light…open our protagonist's eyes to truth. But the truth of Nada's world is a frightening one, just as the truth of our own world is a frightening one. There were not many who were willing to admit that at the end of the Reagan administration that the country was, in fact, in a worse state than when it began. During Reagan's administration, the rich grew richer and the poor grew poorer. The middle class began to widen and expand, further separating the ruling class from the working class. The sunglasses reveal a truth to Nada, but also to the audience watching the film.

But not everyone wants to see the truth. There are people who do not want to know the truth. John Carpenter knew this. Even those individuals we assume would be primed for knowing the truth and joining the revolution, so to speak, are often resistant. Nada's only friend in the film, Frank Armitage, is skeptical about the world he lives in. Frank's rant to Nada shows us that he more than understands the social system that keeps him at a disadvantage:

> Frank: I got a wife and two kids back in Detroit. I haven't seen them in six months. The steel mills are laying people off left and right. They finally went under. We gave the steel companies a break when they needed it; you know what they gave themselves? [Nada shakes his head.] Raises! The golden rule: He who has the gold makes the rules. If they close another factory, we should take a sledge to one of their fancy fucking foreign cars.
>
> Nada: You know, you ought to have a little more patience with life.
>
> Frank: Yeah? Well, I'm all out…the whole deal is like some kind of crazy game. They put you at the starting line. The name of the game is, "Make It Through Life." Only everyone is out for themselves and they're looking to do you in at the same time. Okay, man, here we are. Here we are, and you do what you can, but remember, I'm gonna do my best to blow your ass away. (n.p.)

It would appear that Frank would be more than willing to see the truth, given his level of frustration with the system as it is. Ironically, when Nada approaches him and tells him to put on the sunglasses and see the truth, Frank resists. From a cinematic standpoint, what follows is interesting; Frank and Nada engage in a fight over the sunglasses: Nada wants Frank to put on the sunglasses, and Frank wants nothing to do with Nada or his

sunglasses. Another interesting feature of this fight is its length. Film fights usually last a minute or two, but this one lasts almost twice as long as your typical film fight. One could say this is because John Carpenter cast professional wrestling legend "Rowdy" Roddy Piper, and for Piper's fans, the director had to include a good old-fashioned mêlée, but I think there is more to Carpenter's cinematographic choice than utilization of Piper's professional wrestling ability. By this time, Carpenter had been making films for almost fifteen years, and he had already gained acclaim for works like *Assault on Precinct 13*, *Elvis*, *Halloween*, *The Thing*, *Escape from New York,* and *Starman*. Carpenter was well aware of the consequences of using five minutes of a ninety-four-minute film, approximately 5 percent of the total screen time, on a fight scene between the film's two protagonists. It could seem, and to many it does, gratuitous and self-indulgent. But when we examine this fight metaphorically, like we have other elements of the film, we discover another level of meaning to this lengthy, drawn-out donnybrook. The sunglasses represent the ability to see the truth. While Frank thinks he knows the truth about the world he lives in, he doesn't truly understand the level of corruption Nada has witnessed while wearing the glasses. The truth is, for many who complain about corruption in our world, the truth is not something they want to face. Frank does not want to face the truth, and the fight scene between Nada and Frank demonstrates the difficulty of convincing others to see the truth.

Nada's name is never mentioned in the film, positioning him as the everyman of the film, but Frank is the character who represents the audience John Carpenter is trying to reach. Carpenter's film is for the masses, the populace. Carpenter's film is not, I contend, a clever metaphor waiting to be unpacked by scholars in the academy.

Carpenter's message was constructed for the audience in the cinema. But who was…or is…that audience? First of all, let's look at the genre Carpenter uses as the vehicle of his message: science fiction. Carpenter made his name and reputation in genre fiction, but he had also successfully directed an acclaimed television drama, *Elvis*. Carpenter did not have to disguise his message in the genre of science fiction, but let us consider the audience of science fiction. This genre has appeal across social and intellectual lines: elite offerings, such as *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Solaris* (1972); mainstream offerings like *Star Wars* (1977) and *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*; and lowbrow offerings like *Battle Beyond the Stars* and *Plan Nine From Outer Space*. Typically, larger budgeted films are targeted at a mainstream audience, so as to recoup their large budgets, and low-budget science fiction films target a more "meat-and-potatoes" audience.

John Carpenter had just directed a string of hit films, and could have gone to a studio for a larger budget, but in the 1980s, a larger budget meant more control and interference from studio chiefs. Maintaining a low budget served Carpenter in two ways: it allowed him to keep control of his vision and to entice a working-class audience to view his film. Remember, this film is about how the working and middle classes are being used as puppets by the upper class. The upper class are those elite in power, and studio heads conceivably could have stepped in and asked for changes to Carpenter's vision, thus lessening his message. As far as reaching his target audience, Carpenter further insured a working-class audience by casting the relatively untested "Rowdy" Roddy Piper as his lead actor. Professional wrestling has always had a mass appeal with working class audiences. As a matter of fact, since the late 1990s, one of professional wrestling's consistent themes has been that of the wrestlers, stand-ins for working-class

Americans, feuding with the owners of their respective leagues. This wrestling storyline indicates that a large audience of professional wrestling fans are working-class individuals who are fed up with the powers that be. It is my assertion that John Carpenter knew this, and this is one reason he cast Roddy Piper. At this time, Piper was virtually unknown to movie-going audiences; his only major roles prior to *They Live* were playing second lead in the Hal Needham directed wrestling film, *Body Slam,* and the titular character, Sam Hell, in the ultra-low-budget science fiction film *Hell Comes to Frogtown* (see fig 3).

Fig 3- Body Slam theatrical poster "Body Slam." Wikipedia. Web. 27 September 2015; Hell Comes to Frogtown theatrical poster "Hell Comes to Frogtown." Wikipedia. Web. 27 September 2015

While both of these films earned cult followings, they were far from mainstream Hollywood successes. In 1988, Piper's fame was in the world of wrestling, and as such, his notoriety would bring wrestling fans to the cinema. Again, I feel this is important to

note and understand, as Carpenter's message was intended to wake up the working class to the inequities of the social structure in the United States during the administration of one of its more popular presidents, when America's image was one of success. Carpenter saw through the metaphoric sunglasses, and, like Nada, he wanted his audience to put on the glasses. Casting Piper in the lead would encourage his audience to go to the cinema to watch *They Live*. Unlike Charles Ramirez Berg, who believes that the conflict of the science fiction metaphor is worked out in the subconscious of the audience, *They Live* is a more democratic text, directed at the working class. Carpenter had faith that the sophistication of his metaphor would not be lost on the audience; nor did he believe his film was awaiting unpacking from critics and the academy. And although critics and scholars have discovered *They Live,* it was never intended to be a film for them. This was Carpenter's gift to America's working class…this was his pair of sunglasses offered to us, the audience.

Yes, this discussion began with a discussion from Freud and Bhabha, but ultimately Carpenter's film illustrates for us the idea that canon and canonical conversations can be abandoned in favor of a more general discussion. John Carpenter's film is an important film with an important message, but not one intended for only the elite.

Conclusion

That's All, Folks

In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and their selves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so. But there are times when a critic truly risks something, and that is in the discovery and the defense of the new. The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends. Last night I experienced something new, an extraordinary meal from a singularly unexpected source. To say that both the meal and the maker have challenged my preconceptions about fine cooking is a gross understatement. They have rocked me to my core. In the past, I have made no secret of my disdain for Chef Gusteau's famous motto, "Anyone can cook." But I realize only now do I truly understand what he meant. Not everyone can become a great artist, but a great artist can come from anywhere. It is difficult to imagine more humble origins than those of the genius now cooking at Gusteau's, who is, in this critic's opinion, nothing less than the finest chef in France. I will be returning to Gusteau's soon, hungry for more. (np)

Ratatouille, 2007

"...To the Last I Grapple With Thee"

When I was in high school, we were given a list of "must-read" books. These were the classics that every college-bound student should have read by the time he or she entered college. For all intents and purposes, it was a canon, a sacred list of texts that was going to indicate to a college board I was ready for college, and signal to other intellectuals that I was deserving of sitting at the metaphoric adult table in the world of scholarly thought. For a teenager back in the late twentieth century, this list only signaled more work I had to do during the summer, when the last thing I wanted to do was schoolwork. There was one notable exception to my reluctance to engage with these texts during my break: *Moby-Dick*.

However, my interest in *Moby-Dick* had less to do with the college-bound list assigned to me, and more to do with *Star Trek*. In 1982, Paramount studios released *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn* and it immediately became one of my favorite movies, having grown up with a steady diet of *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and other science fiction narratives. Anyone who knew *Star Trek* knew this was the film fans of the television series had been waiting for (with all apologies to 1979's *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*). So in the summer of 1985, I was reading a science fiction fan magazine—I don't recall which one—about *Star Trek II* and in this article it talked about how this film was really a retelling of *Moby-Dick*. After I read this I was hungry to read *Moby-Dick*, and I must admit, through most of the book, I was lost as to how the two were related. But by the end I saw the connections between the two: the themes of obsession and its self-destructive nature. Had I not read that article about *Star Trek*, I would have never had an

interest in *Moby-Dick*. This was probably what planted the idea that the non-canonical can speak to and respond to canonical texts.

An Inappropriate Metaphor (part 2)

What I have tried to demonstrate in the previous chapters is the notion that thinking in terms of the metaphor of canon has become outdated. In our day and age, when texts—and this term can now apply to anything we read, like novels, short stories, poems, movies, television, photos, or any other number of objects and items—are so abundant, the idea that we should read only from a canon, or specified group of literary texts that we in academia deem worthy, is outdated. The previous entanglements with canon have resulted in a canon that tried to be inclusive, but still, on many levels, failed, as we saw with Frederick Douglass and the preference of one of his texts over another, superior text. And while there is incredible value in the study of various ethnic and gender literatures, they too have utilized the model of canon, which, as we've seen, by its very nature is an exclusionary paradigm. Canon is a gatekeeper put into place to keep out unrepresentative works, and I would argue groups of works. It's also a mechanism by which academics and intellectuals prohibit others from sitting at the table. It is a way to keep people out of the conversation.

Some may argue that canon is also a conversation, and I will not debate that. The idea I am proposing is not one that would shut out a canonical conversation. On the contrary, a canonical conversation is a perfectly acceptable conversation…and a necessary one, especially in survey courses. However, the canon cannot be the beginning and end of the conversation, as it has been in the past. Furthermore, the conversation of

canon would not necessarily be an exclusive one. The canon, with apologies to traditionalists, is one of many conversations that may occur, and the voices of that conversation may not exclusively reflect the aesthetic tastes of an elite academy. This notion might be the most threatening to the elite establishment. But it should not: A metaphor of conversation, remember, is one that is inclusive of more voices, and as such would allow for participation by others, students as well as texts, that may not be inclusive of a canonical paradigm. This move from a canon to a conversation is one that may serve to reinvigorate our discussion of literature. Rather than education being an I-know-and-you-must-learn-from-me model, it would become a sharing of ideas that would serve to enrich our understanding of the texts we read. While I understand that has been the ultimate goal of higher education—after all, what is this dissertation but an extension and enrichment of ideas that came before?—this has been a right reserved for those who have endured the slings and arrows of higher education. But ideas and contributions to the discussion of literature and the issues that circle our study of literature should not be reserved only for graduate studies; they should be encouraged at every level. Once again, this could be misconstrued as advocating for doing away with the requirements for various degrees. That is not what this study is about. This study is about democratizing the content and discussions that go on within the academy in the twenty-first century. As such, I find the best metaphor is that of conversation.

Let's Talk about That

Conversation is a metaphor I have mentioned several times in this study. I've looked at the way in which we can use this metaphor to engage non-traditional texts. I

believe the use of the conversation model not only helps to deal with the canonical debate that has raged for more than forty years, but also adds to the importance of what we do in, not only in our literature classes, but also in any course of studies in the humanities. Our study should take a lead from John Carpenter's intent with *They Live*, in which he was not speaking to intellectuals but to the working class. The Internet is allowing an increase of availability of texts accessible to the average person. There is an implicit fear of the democratization of intellectual discourse, which in this day and age is the wrong way to approach our education. The elitist model of education that has dominated our higher education for centuries is an outdated paradigm in our contemporary society…in part because the access to education and to texts has exploded. No longer do we live in a world where only the elite have access to higher education. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, the increase in traditionally underrepresented students enrolled in college has risen significantly. And as such, the works we use to reach students should reflect this change. This is not to say that the literature that has become the canon is irrelevant. The previously canonized works can be very important, but they should neither dominate the conversation nor be the end of the conversation. While curriculum as added new material with attention to increased diversity in the academy via ethnic studies curriculums and the like, the canon of American literature has solidified and tightened to include only representative works that really serve to essentialize those groups that are represented. Furthermore, with the passage of time, the inclusion of literature into a traditional semester or quarter has not increased, and the job of fairly representing literature has become further complicated.

Additionally, I argue that we should open up our conversation to include other texts. This study has only scratched the surface of alternate texts: comics and film. Certainly as our media grows and expands, due in part to advances in computer and online technology, we need to start thinking differently about utilizing other texts. Some of the richest discussions I have had in my academic career revolved around using film in concert with literature. I am not just talking about watching an adaptation of a novel or short story, but utilizing films that engage the conversation at hand. And let us not limit ourselves to the use of film. The world is rich with alternate texts; allow for those that are appropriate to the discussion to be used: television, online e-zines or blogs, social media, music, and beyond. While these other texts may be seen as a dumbing-down of the academic curriculum, they are texts that we, as a society, use to engage the public in a discourse about the world in which we live. Even if the writer, artist, producer, director, et al. did not purposefully engage the audience in a conversation like Carpenter did with *They Live*, the mere fact that these films engage with us on a large collective level says something to us about these texts.

Do not misinterpret my motives: I am not advocating for an abolishment of the study of literature in favor of a free-for-all conversation on the Internet. It would seem the diverse nature of higher education makes the university the perfect place to indulge in the conversation. And I am not working this model backwards towards another elitist one. However, in keeping with the conversation metaphor, the more informed the participants of the conversation, the richer the conversation. We really are talking about the ethical obligation for participating in the discussion. How often have we jumped into a conversation, when we thought we understood the foundations and nuances of the

conversation, only to find out we are grossly underprepared to engage the conversation? Or how often has one entered a conversation as a knee-jerk reaction to defend one's own position? This seems to be the practice of conversation practiced in social media today. Part of our ethical obligation and the rules of engagement for this kind of study would call for "listening" as an integral part of the conversation. Without listening, we would have Hyde Park Speaker's Corner: everyone on their soapbox yelling their beliefs. This model of conversation brings us full circle to the model that created a canon, and that is not the conversation model of this study. I am talking about a model of conversation where the participants are informed and practice the ethical and polite skills of engaging only after hearing what is at stake in the discussion.

The Rules of Engagement

The same would be true of the metaphor as it relates to literature. The uninformed might read Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* as a racist text. And this is why the skill of conversation would be the new mandate of educators; not just the professors of the academy, but the educators at all levels. To constructively participate in a discussion a foundation is necessary, and the same can be said of literature. One may read this as a step in the direction of a reinstatement of canon, but this is quite to the contrary. Depending on the conversation, one may or may not require the use of our current canon. Certainly if one were having a conversation of classic aesthetics in American literature, then yes, a knowledge of our currently canonized texts would be appropriate. But if one wanted to have a conversation that involved the suppression of women's literature of the nineteenth century, only a portion of those canonical books might be appropriate, and not

used for models of perfection, but to contrast the long-forgotten works of your conversation. If we wanted to examine the political climate that has followed Chicanx of the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s, it would be vital to offer a voice of dissention and read the works of Richard Rodriguez, and not necessarily to demonize the text, but quite possibly to understand the alternate arguments that would ultimately serve to undermine the movement.

Moreover, I believe the instruction of contextual knowledge would need to displace the memorization of canonized texts and theory. Just as one can mistakenly enter a conversation and, without a grasp of the issues at stake, one could also stumble into the conversation and cause damage to the issue at hand. Because literature can be viewed so subjectively, the skills that could accompany this contextual knowledge could certainly include a strong foundation in critical thinking. The skill of critical reasoning would serve the larger public discourse that dominates the online world. Currently, much of what is online and a part of social networks is really a matter of who can, metaphorically, yell the loudest. The model of conversation affords us the opportunity to model positive and constructive discourse that could be relevant, not just to the study of literature but to all aspects of our public discourse. But of equal importance would be the skills of a polite conversationalist. What I mean by this is that when we engage in the conversation, we have a strong enough background in the issues at stake to be a crucial contributor to the discussion at hand.

Teaching the skills of a polite conversationalist would call for a paradigm shift in how we view the job of educators at every level. No longer would our job be to impart knowledge, but to encourage active participation in a civil and informed discourse. This

would require us, in the academy, to help students develop a foundation of contextual knowledge and a working knowledge of critical reasoning. These skills should not be the skill set of the intellectually elite, but a goal of our society. Due in great part to the proliferation of and access to online knowledge, furthered by the abundance of social media accessible to the public, these skills have become requisite for effectively functioning within our digital world. Right now, one of the top purposes of the Internet is social networking. And this could conceivably be the future of discourse for texts and literature.

Respect the Art?

Under a democratized structure of literary study, how does one insure the respect for literature as art will stay intact? This might be a concern of traditionalists who see a replacement of a canon as threatening. Will democratization of literary studies undervalue what it is we do and offer at the academy? Isn't a hierarchy just a "nature of the beast" in higher education? And how would one conduct a polite conversation in an age where we can elect to the presidency a man like Donald Trump, who is applauded by a large section of the masses for his "blunt honesty," or rather his overt racism and sexism?

The movement I am discussing here is not about a rejection of literature as art. On the contrary. I realize, in writing this, that it really depends on the purpose and audience of art. Is art a coded message intended only for the elite? Or is art something that speaks to the masses? Some may, in fact, believe that art is for the elite, or the trained, and that popular art for the masses is nothing more than big eyes, velvet Elvises and dogs playing

poker. But this very assessment of art is elitist, as it implies that none of these works hold any intrinsic value, which is simply not true. It may be that based on the guidelines we have deemed as art-worthy, they do not hold any value, but that discounts any value held in the art, or by the audience who values that piece of art. This is why the discussion model can be so valuable to us. Art should speak to the masses, not just the elite. By shifting our paradigm from canon to conversation, we now have a model that allows for inclusion in the conversation by all parties and allows for the enrichment of the conversation through the diversity of voices in our universities. The canon now is a representation of great literature that serves as both a model and a rubric of what we call great literature. That is not to say the literature is not great, but as critics of the canon have pointed out for generations, it's hardly reflective of the very fabric of our society and its cultures. A respect for the audiences of literature is a respect of the art of literature. It can demonstrate the universality of a text to a given audience. Furthermore, allowing a platform to previously unheard voices can only serve to enrich our conversation.

The democratization of the literary discussion allows us to recognize the value of art that has been dismissed by scholarly discourse…art like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, comic books, or John Carpenter's *They Live*. While some of these have since been included in the canon, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, or adopted by some scholars, as Slavoj Žižek has done with *They Live*, the bulk of other works, popular works, have fallen by the literary wayside. But under this new model of literary discussion, the importance of such works can emerge and can enrich discussions of given issues at stake in various works. But of greater concern is the role of the professor in the new class. To say we would act as

facilitators might underrepresent the importance of our role in the classroom. The professor is the beginning of the discussion and on many levels will guide the discussion with text selection and leading the direction of the class. This is where the expertise of the professor would find a place in the conversation. What this new model provides is a way for students to more actively participate in the discussion. I realize that even this model implies a hierarchical structure that privileges the professor, much as Socratic method privileges the teacher, mentor, or professor. But I am not sure this new model is one suggested to remove the importance of a professor. The conversation metaphor is one that shifts the paradigm of learning from I-know-and-you-don't to I-have-an-expertise-to-offer-this-discussion-but-you-too-will-also-contribute-greatly-to-the-discussion model.

But one may pinpoint the hierarchical nature of this model as proof that I have done nothing more than displace the canon model with an equally elitist and discriminatory process. Not so, I say. Yes, hierarchy will be a part of the set-up and guidance of the conversation, but this is not done to impart "the truth" to students. This is done so that the discussion does not become so unwieldy and out-of-hand that it does not bear fruit. Remember, I said earlier that this model is not a free-for-all. To that end, a professor is a valuable part of this model as the originator of the conversation. But this model will require that we, the mentors, are courteous enough to acknowledge that with which we do not agree. And we will need to teach and model a new kind of discourse.

Critical thinking, polite discourse, ethical conversation…however we choose to label it, what we are really talking about is a model for the conversation. It is very clear if you follow social media, Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, or whatever is the next evolutionary step in public discourse, that we already engage in a conversation regarding a variety of

issues. The most obvious conversation right now is the political debate. From gun control to immigration to the presidential races, we discuss and debate issues that we feel are at stake to us on a personal level. Make no mistake, I am not advocating that the kind of discourse we see in social media is the kind of discussion I am suggesting. Quite the opposite. I am suggesting that the impulse to converse is there, and our job will be to instruct our students to be polite to the topic and its participants, ethically responsible to the topic, and critical of the arguments presented in the conversation. If we look at the conversation of politics on social media, we will see that there is very little discussion. The importance of looking to literature for a conversation will serve to not only allow a democratization of literary studies, it will also allow us to teach students to be ethical, critical, polite, and responsible conversationalists, something we see very little of in the social media discussion, or even larger political debates, where the rhetoric tossed about during the latest election was the equivalent of "You're stupid!" "No, you're stupid!" And neither side is listening to the other. This model will not only allow students to practice presenting and defending their position, it will also allow them to listen. The polite nature of conversation is to listen to the opposing position before presenting your own argument. The argumentative nature of the conversation is where the skill of critical thinking will be of value.

They're Already Talking

Already we are aware of the success of novels like *50 Shades of Grey* or *The Martian,* which were first self-published and distributed via the internet. But more than an avenue for publishing, the Internet affords us the opportunity for everyone to have a

critical voice in the conversation. There are numerous online publications and blogs that constantly comment on literature and its importance or significance. The conversation has already opened and the idea of canon seems even more conservative and reactionary than before. It solidifies the exclusionary motives of a canon. Yes, this idea is threatening to the academy, as the caretakers of American intellect and taste would become less and less relevant. But let's be honest: Is this not already happening? Do we not already teach a population of students who gather as much, if not more, knowledge and information from the World Wide Web as they do from the classroom? Are they not, via Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or any number of social media present, already engaging texts and entering the literary conversation? The article, "The Importance of Reading Women Authors," by Emerald Pellot, inspired me to examine the effects of the canon on women's literature in this work's first chapter was published on a blog called *CottonCandy.com*. Furthermore, I originally found this article linked to a posting on a former student's Facebook page. It was a conversation that spoke to my student, she shared it via social media, and then it spoke to me and encouraged me to investigate the canon and women's literature for this work, which is in itself an engagement in the conversation of the canon. The point I am trying to make is that people using the Internet, blogs, and social media are already participating in a conversation with literature and other texts.

It would seem that living in a multimedia world, utilizing various media has become a mandate, especially if we are to engage in conversation with our students, literature, and the world. We already do this to some degree, but the conversations I see on the Internet and social media lack a certain civility and politeness. These digital mechanisms for discourse are already in place, and a democratization of conversation is

already happening, but as responsible educators, I believe it has become imperative that we adapt to the dominant societal discourse. It is clear to me that our canon has outlived its usefulness, and we need to adapt to the changes at hand. We need to make our goal not one of intellectual snobbery and exclusion, but one that will utilize technology and inclusive nature of that technology to responsibly carry on the conversations that will continue to propel education forward.

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