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Comic book realism: sincerity, ethics, and the superhero in contemporary American literature

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COMIC BOOK REALISM: SINCERITY, ETHICS, AND THE SUPERHERO
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LITERATURE

by

Zachary Harrison King

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy
degree in English in the
Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

May 2016

Thesis Supervisor: Professor Brooks Landon

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Graduate College
The University of Iowa
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

PH.D. THESIS

This is to certify that the Ph.D. thesis of

Zachary Harrison King

has been approved by the Examining Committee for
the thesis requirement for the Doctor of Philosophy degree
in English at the May 2016 graduation.

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Brooks Landon, Thesis Supervisor

Bluford Adams

Linda Bolton

Corey Creekmur

Loren Glass

To Jerry and Joe, to Stan and Jack, and all the others
who convinced kids like me that, yes, a man can fly.

Comics, moral when they wish, immoral when
they wanted--that was the only way to do anything
head-on nowadays.

Jay Cantor
Great Neck

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After meeting death at the hands of the literal god of evil, Darkseid, in Grant Morrison's *Final Crisis*, Batman returned to life. (Of course he did.) In *Batman: The Return of Bruce Wayne*, readers discovered that Batman had not been disintegrated by the Omega Beams which issued from Darkseid's eyes; instead, the superhero had been propelled through time itself. While fighting his way back to the present day, Batman found himself at odds with his friends and allies, who struggled to help Batman against his own inclination to go it alone. After the strain of traveling through human history from the days of the cavemen until the present moment, Batman discovered "the first truth of Batman... the saving grace. I was never alone. I had help."

I had help, too. My thanks to my dissertation committee – Brooks Landon, Bluford Adams, Linda Bolton, Corey Creekmur, and Loren Glass – whose generosity with their time, resources, and wisdom proved invaluable on a project like this, which pulled in multiple directions at once. My director, Brooks Landon, tirelessly read each chapter and offered copious suggestions and directions, driving me to look at my topic from unanticipated angles and reminding me that, eventually, someone else would read this dissertation. My special thanks to Linda Bolton, who has been an amazing mentor where my writing is concerned. For as long as we have been working together, Linda has never been afraid to call out my vacillations or to wade into new territory with me. Shortly after my prospectus meeting, Linda – in her characteristic good humor – remarked to me, "How do we keep working together? We don't do any of the same things!" While I can't say I have the answer for how we followed the road from our

seminar on ethics and poetry six years ago to a dissertation on superhero comics in contemporary novels, it has been my good fortune to have her in my camp.

Though I hesitate to call it the hand of fate, it seems that this project has been the complete opposite of coincidence. I can look back as far as my earliest home videos, in which my mother carried me around the room in the Superman pajamas of my infancy, to see the earliest seeds of this project being planted. More recently, I thank two professors from my time at Valparaiso University who introduced me to the field of comics studies: David Morgan, who showed me the depth possible in reading an image, and Elizabeth Burow-Flak, who introduced me to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* and convinced me that, yes, one could study comics academically. In my final year at Valparaiso, I was encouraged by Colleen Seguin to take my growing scholarly interest in comics into my senior thesis, on the rise of superhero comics concurrent with World War II; Dr. Seguin shaped my research path in valuable ways by inviting me to see this project not as my last undergraduate work but as the beginning of my graduate study. More than a few footnotes and lines of thought in this work began their life in Dr. Seguin's senior seminar, and for her guidance through that work I am grateful.

I have been fortunate, for the past three years, to teach with great autonomy in the General Education Literature department at the University of Iowa. I am grateful for the funding that this teaching appointment has provided (in tandem with a Post Comprehensive Examination award from the English Department), as well as for the liberties I have been afforded in creating my syllabi. In the spring semester of 2015, I had the great honor of teaching an elective course on the superhero genre, and the minds I encountered in that room were among the brightest it has been my privilege to call "my

students.” They taught me as much as I taught them, introducing me to new avenues and texts and forcing me to rethink some of my prejudices and biases about the genre. (In my first chapter, I discuss briefly one such encounter, the question of whether Buzz Lightyear is a superhero.) Throughout my three years in GEL, I’ve been introduced to many sharp minds who read with me *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*; though individual names may have been lost to the ether of my memory, their contributions to my understanding of these novels will never be forgotten.

A special thank-you goes to Patricia Storms, who shared with me work which was no longer available on her website. “The Amazing Adventures of Lethem & Chabon,” an astonishingly insightful but no less hysterically funny satire of comic book realism’s masculinity hang-up, proved useful in rethinking the different approaches of men and women writers within the genre, and my concluding pages of Chapter Four draw on her work in ways that would not have been possible without her generosity and quick attention to what turned out to be the first successful “long shot” research question of my dissertation.

Batman’s recognition that he had never been alone is balanced by the weight of his traumatic origin story, the night he pledged his life to justice after witnessing his parents murdered in an alley. In this respect, I am much closer to Superman, whose parents remain available to him; his Kryptonian parents live on as holograms in the Fortress of Solitude, while his adoptive parents reside in Smallville, Kansas. My own parents, Jeff and Nancy King, have been through it all my personal fortress of solitude, believing in me when I myself did not and playing along even if they had their doubts. In

a way, it started with them and that fateful choice of pajamas, but my continued flight is due also to their encouragement and support. And to Amanda Bellis, who stood by me at my most insecure, most neurotic, and most overworked: we met when I recognized the cover of a comic book she was reading (*Batman, Vol. 2: The City of Owls*), giving lie to the myth of a loveless nerd whose comics kept him from companionship. Amanda, through weekly pilgrimages to Daydreams Comics and perfect attendance at any television or film event so much as resembling a superhero, never once questioned my assertion that it all counted as research. I could not have done it without her presence as a confidante, a sounding board, and a friend.

ABSTRACT

Comic Book Realism: Sincerity, Ethics, and the Superhero in Contemporary American Literature reads a trio of recent American novels in the context of superhero comics, the influence of which looms large over these texts but has for one reason or another been largely neglected by critics. Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* feature protagonists whose immersion in their comic book collections translates into their lives by allowing them to comprehend and interact with the world in the language of the superhero metaphor.

I argue that these texts should be studied because of, and not despite, their affiliation with superhero comics, against what seems to be a latent critical bias which has led many to overlook or disregard the superheroic elements of these texts. Understanding how Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz engage with the superhero genre is essential to understanding their engagement with issues of identity, ethical responsibility, and masculinity. Daniel Bautista has read Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as a work not of magical realism but of something new, "comic book realism," which blends a realist approach to literature with popular culture citations in order to represent with accuracy the myriad cultural influences coming to bear on his characters' lives. I suggest that Bautista's label should be extended to Chabon, Lethem, and a variety of other authors who are engaging with the genre as Díaz does; in so doing, I connect a variety of novels which have either seldom been studied before or have never been studied in connection with each other.

I begin by examining comic book realism's affinity with emerging theories about the literary movement following postmodernism, which some have dubbed "post-postmodernism." I argue that comic book realism's approach to questions of identity, as informed by the dynamic between superhero and alter ego, aligns with Adam Kelly's sense of a post-postmodern New Sincerity, which rejects any ironic valence between identity and mass culture; consequently, the novels of comic book realism unironically engage with superhero comics as tools for identity formation. I then turn to Levinasian ethics in order to address the charge that superhero comics are solely escapist; instead, I argue that escapism in these novels necessitates an act of memory, an ethical awareness of the absence from which these characters are attempting to escape. These texts, then, are not unethical in their attempts to escape historical atrocities like the Holocaust. Rather, they constitute an ethical act of remembrance in foregrounding this absence.

In my fourth chapter, I take up the question of masculinity, so central to the gendered space of superhero comics, arguing that the novels of comic book realism reject the hypermasculine standard of the superhero in favor of what I call an ideal of "mild-mannered masculinity," after the superhero's alter ego. Compared to the virile and confident Superman identity, Clark Kent represents a model of masculinity that is weak and timid, a model valorized by Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz. In my fifth chapter, I take stock of the contributions of women writers to the genre of comic book realism, whose work is overlooked by the presupposition that superhero comics are a boy's domain. Here I find that the women writers evince a need to create their own space in the superhero genre, while I suggest that recent trends in the genre suggest that the next generation of women writers may engage with the genre in a different, somewhat unpredictable way.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

With a slate of big-budget, top-grossing superhero films at the box office, and the prevalence of superhero comics nearly everywhere else in contemporary culture, this dissertation analyzes a group of novels which wear their allegiance to the superhero genre on their sleeve. I argue that the work of Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, and Junot Díaz, among others, should be studied because of, and not despite, its affiliation with the superhero genre. These novels feature protagonists whose immersion in their comic book collections translates into their lives by allowing them to comprehend and interact with the world in the language of the superhero metaphor.

In this dissertation I examine a collection of novels under the umbrella of “comic book realism,” which blends a realist approach to literature with popular culture references in order to represent with accuracy the myriad cultural influences coming to bear on contemporary American life. I analyze how comic book realism treats questions of identity, ethical responsibility, and masculinity before considering the contributions of women writers, who have been largely overlooked by critics who focus solely on the work of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz.

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CHAPTER ONE:

INTRODUCTION

Although the discipline is still fairly new, the field of comics studies (with which my study has many affinities) has already taken on a few stylistic tropes. For one, any academic study of comics always begins or ends with a confessional note, in which the critic admits – sometimes with a knowing wink, sometimes not – that his or her childhood included comics in some way, falling away from them before a moment of rediscovery in a university setting. Having said that, I admit that I too fall into this clichéd confessional pattern. I’ve never forgotten my first comic book, *The Batman Adventures* #2 (cover date November 1992), whose now-tattered cover still bears the striking image of Batman swooping to apprehend Catwoman, who plans to steal the Crown Jewels of England.

Like most other critics, comics and I parted ways around the time I turned twelve, not coincidentally the same year I discovered James Bond. My exodus reversed itself around 2006 or 2007, a period in which two important things happened to me: a university professor put into my hands copies of Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*, and the superhero film renaissance was well underway with blockbusters like *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* just entering production. There were also, at the same time, comics which introduced Damian, the long-lost son of Bruce Wayne, the final straw that propelled me into a comics shop for the first time in years. Comics, it seemed, were everywhere, and as I joked to my colleagues that my dissertation – then a far-off mirage of a thing – would focus on comics, the supposed joke became less absurd and more possible.

But it was at the 2014 Iowa State Fair, amid my more serious dissertation research, that something crystallized. I had never been to a state fair before then, and the whole experience was frankly bewildering. Countless people, attractions, and food all clamored for my attention, but what caught my eye was the sea of superhero T-shirts and baseball caps. Fredric Wertham, eat your heart out: if the pop psychologist who had in 1954 decried superhero comics as a contributing factor to juvenile delinquency could see them now, he'd have to change his tune. "We've arrived," I realized, noting almost instantly that I had formed "us" into a community by dint of our wardrobes. Not to be excluded, I was wearing a shirt which bore the emblem of Captain America, which no small number of passers-by recognized, with calls of "Hey Cap!" or the quiet voice who walked past me and said, with an "inside voice" to accompany what she might have thought was an inside joke, "On your left," quoting the opening lines of that summer's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*.

The Superhero Renaissance

The staggering ubiquity of superheroes in contemporary culture has, fortunately, not gone unnoticed. Each year we can add to our shelves an impressive set of new monographs speculating about the power of superhero comics, what their messages tell us about the culture that produced them. Richard Reynolds and Peter Coogan have offered landmark works of definition, tracing out the contours of the genre. Other critics, like Charles Hatfield, have focused their scholarship on significant creators who shaped the genre, as Jack Kirby did with Captain America in the 1940s and then again as the co-creator of many of Marvel's most prominent characters in the 1960s. In recent years, we have also seen the publication of "biographies" for fictional characters like Superman and

Wonder Woman. And while there seems to exist some degree of latent bias with critics who still dismiss superheroes as “kids’ stuff,” as we will see shortly, valuable work is being done in anthologies which give small spotlights on specific creators, texts, and characters within the genre.

What’s more, our students no longer bat an eye when we assign something like *Watchmen*, or if they do their doubts about the book’s depth are quickly assuaged. And major contemporary writers like Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, and Junot Díaz (about whom, more soon) have all made superhero comics a significant feature of their novels. Though superhero comics no longer sell in the quantities they did when Superman debuted in 1938,¹ superhero films take in record numbers at the box office; of the top ten highest-grossing films of all time, three feature superheroes, each grossing in excess of one billion dollars worldwide; more specifically, all three – *The Avengers* (#4), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (#6), and *Iron Man 3* (#9) – star Robert Downey, Jr., as Marvel’s Iron Man. Something, it seems, has changed.

Superheroes, we may have noticed, are everywhere, from our physical bodies to the cinematic imagination. They’re on television nearly every night of the week – something 1966’s *Batman* was never able to accomplish, with its biweekly schedule restricting it to the “same Bat-time, same Bat-channel” – with no fewer than thirteen

¹ In the first year of his existence, Superman starred in two monthly comics, *Action Comics* and *Superman*. By December of 1938, the end of Superman’s first calendar year in print, *Action Comics* was selling more than 500,000 copies per month. The following year, when *Superman* began circulation, its publisher declared a circulation of 900,000 for *Action Comics* and 1,300,000 for *Superman*. Paul Lopes speculates that the Superman franchise was worth \$950,000 annually – an astounding \$16 million by today’s standards. For comparison, the average monthly bestselling comic of 2015 hovers around 100,000 copies. For more on the sales of Superman, see Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 9; and Paul Lopes, *Demanding Respect: The Evolution of the American Comic Book* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 20.

ongoing programs² as of the 2015 fall schedule. In 2015, the Collaborative Summer Library Program, an organization which proposes the theme for summer reading programs nationwide, designated superheroes as that year's central icon, under the slogan "Every Hero Has a Story." If nothing else, this inclusion of superheroes in a summer reading program refutes Wertham's fears that comic books were "an invitation to illiteracy" (118) and "death on reading" (121). Wertham aside, however, the apparent omnipresence of superheroes in nearly every facet of contemporary culture speaks to a kind of power they hold over us – a superpower, if the pun may be indulged, for no other figure outside of organized religion seems to be on the minds of so many people. We want – we need – something from these superheroes, something deeper than the snappy one-liners and extravagant special effects that dominate their motion pictures. Only now we don't have to look "up in the sky" or to the far corners of newsstands; superheroes have even escaped the specialty shops to which they were relegated after the rise of the direct market.

But the primary focus of this study will be the growing presence of superheroes in literature, as some critics have already begun to note. In this dissertation, I argue for the existence of an emerging genre in contemporary American literature, which I will call (after Daniel Bautista) "comic book realism." Where Bautista (whose work I discuss below) reads comic book realism as a lens through which we can understand one text, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, I suggest that the term be expanded to include a range of texts which juxtapose a realist approach to fiction with an inflection from the

² In alphabetical order: *Agents of SHIELD* (ABC), *Arrow* (CW), *The Flash* (CW), *Gotham* (Fox), and *Supergirl* (CBS); miniseries *Agent Carter* (ABC), *Heroes Reborn* (NBC), and *Legends of Tomorrow* (CW); and the five announced Marvel/Netflix programs, of which one (*Daredevil*) has already been renewed for a second season.

world of superhero comics. Though critics have largely neglected to discuss the superheroic aspects of the novels in question, these texts should be studied because of, and not despite, their allegiance to superhero comics, for the writers of comic book realism use the superhero in earnest as a metaphor to engage with questions of identity, ethical responsibility, and masculinity – issues that are already at stake, albeit on a magnified scale in superhero comics. We readers may wonder, for example, what it means to be a man, but for Superman the question is magnified by virtue of being a super-*man*, whose physicality and ideals become identified with a lofty ideal of manhood.

We might position at the vanguard of this movement the aforementioned Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz, but the growing literary attention to superheroes encompasses a wide assortment of writers from James Patterson to Rainbow Rowell, from Jodi Picoult to Rick Moody. T.S. Miller seems to be one of the only critics agreeing, as I do, that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* need not be treated in isolation from compatible texts. “Díaz,” Miller writes, “is hardly the first ‘serious’ writer to indulge in a panoply of popular-culture references, nor is he the first to cast a nerdboy as his hero” (94). Miller suggests comparing *Oscar Wao* to Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (2000) but does not push the comparison. Andrew Hoberek offers a wider collection of texts, twenty-first century novels which “embrace the superhero story and other popular genres while still aspiring toward literary seriousness” (Hoberek, *Considering* 162); he adds Lethem, Rowell, and Aimee Bender to the comparison between Chabon and Díaz, but his treatment of these texts is brief because of its inclusion in a coda in a longer work whose focus is elsewhere, on the literary significance of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’s seminal *Watchmen*. And for every writer who acknowledges

the importance of superheroes to contemporary literature, a very large contingent still sniff at the very mention of a comic book.

Cultural Respect: Kryptonite for Comics

We can see this dismissive trend in a few representative writings about Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*. In a *New Republic* review of *Fortress*, James Wood devotes only three sentences to rejecting comics as "pornography for prepubescents" (40). In the service of labeling *Fortress* a rock novel, Florence Dore wants to reject even a surface-level comparison between *Fortress* and the superhero comics read by its main characters (and, in the case of *Omega the Unknown*, written by Lethem himself): "Lethem's novel is not called *Fortress of Solitude* because it is about comics, then, although certainly Lethem presents Dylan Ebdus's discovery of comics as seminal in his personal development. Lethem chooses this title because in the now of the Anthropocene solitude as the coherent subject's fullest expression is also hyperbolic, a cartoonish parody of the potent subject: the superhero." It seems unfathomable to me, however, to suggest that Lethem is not sincere in his invocation of Superman's Antarctic "Fortress of Solitude"; I see no trace of the "cartoonish parody" Dore mentions, though an argument could be made for Linda Hutcheon's "doubly-coded" parody.

No review of *Fortress* was more damning, however, than the one published in *The New York Review of Books*, which appeared to ossify, not amend, the high/low cultural divisions Lethem was working to elide. In a review entitled "Welcome to New Dork," John Leonard describes his frustration with Lethem's fascination with comics. "I am sorry that none of us can fly," Leonard writes, "besides which we're opaque. But it is time this gifted writer closed his comic books for good" (34). He goes on to accuse the

novel of “copping out” when it broaches the subject of race and concludes, “[A]ll of it makes me itch. Welcome to New Dork! We have been airpopped and multimediated unto inanity and pastiche” (34).

These swift rejections of superhero comics strike me as old-fashioned in a kneejerk sort of way, echoing the earlier debates about comics as catalogued by Paul Lopes in *Demanding Respect*. Lopes argues, “The core of the early debate was on the general effect of comic books on young children’s physical, mental, and moral well-being” (31). Provoked in large part by Sterling North’s May 8, 1940, editorial for the *Chicago Daily News*, entitled “A National Disgrace (And a Challenge to American Parents),” the argument against comics depicted them as “of a nature no respectable newspaper would think of accepting,” with “Superman heroics” at the top of a catalog of offensive content; North called for censorship of the medium because of its unmonitored accessibility for children, charging parents with “criminal negligence” if they did not block comics from their children (21). But after 1955, when the comics industry began its own self-governed Comics Code, which regulated and restricted obscene and violent content, the critique of comics turned away from moral issues and toward matters of taste. Lopes quotes Roy Lichtenstein, an artist known for appropriating images from comics: “I was drawn to the bland stupidity of their appearance . . . I deliberately wanted to take something tasteless and lowbrow and organize it into art” (66-67). This elitist perception of comics to some degree persists to this day, though the volume of newspaper and magazine articles beginning with some variation of “Pow! Biff! Bam! Comics aren’t for kids anymore” suggests at least a small shift in popular perception of the medium. (When these articles no longer begin with tongue-in-cheek invocations of the

onomatopoeia which peppered Lichtenstein's work and the comics it appropriated, that twinge of irony can be said to have faded.)

Bradford Wright, author of the first-rate history *Comic Book Nation*, agrees with Lopes in positing a kind of struggle over comics after World War II, though Wright sees the debate less about content and more about the idea of "cultural power in postwar America," with the minds of young readers a fertile battleground, "highly contested terrain" (87). Wright reads postwar America as trending conservative in popular culture across the board, and no sources were more popular than comics, most of which still featured superheroes on a monthly basis. As the "most visible, least censored, and most popular expression of youth entertainment," Wright positions comics as simultaneously "the most bewildering and alien medium to adult sensibilities" (88). When rising numbers of juvenile delinquents were discovered to be comic book readers in their leisure time, cultural critics (willfully or otherwise) mistook correlation for causation and mounted a nationwide campaign against comics. 1955's Comics Code Authority arose out of the industry's attempt to stave off federal censorship – a fear made all too imminent by the previous year's Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings, in which chair Estes Kefauver led an inquiry into the possible dangers posed by comic books to their young and presumably impressionable readers.

These Subcommittee hearings were in part spurred by the publication of Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, which challenged the public decency of comics by laying down in print the fears of juvenile delinquency and the conservative concern about the widespread availability of these unregulated texts. Citing a high degree of brutal violence and the apparent promotion of a lifestyle of crime through comics, Wertham

concludes, “[T]his chronic stimulation, temptation and seduction by comic books . . . are contributing factors to many children’s maladjustment”; though he quickly notes in the book that “not every comic book is bad for children’s minds and emotions [but] the trouble is that the ‘good’ comic books are snowed under,” Wertham’s anecdotal method of citation and the broader headlines derived from this issue subsumed all comics under the umbrella of “dangerous” (10). Wertham was likely targeting the gruesome horror and crime comics as published by EC Comics at the time, though he occasionally singles out Batman and Wonder Woman as subtly promoting “deviant” sexual practices like homosexuality and bondage. Since 1954, Wertham’s allegations have taken on a contentious legacy. Some uncritical opinions blame Wertham singlehandedly for the collapse of the comic book industry, while more measured approaches attempt to situate Wertham as a well-intentioned crusader at the vanguard of a movement making hasty conclusions. More recently, though, Carol Tilley’s work on Wertham’s papers at the Library of Congress has begun to suggest that Wertham may have exaggerated or fabricated much of his evidence.³ In the wake of the campaign against comics and William M. Gaines’s admission before Congress that he felt his horror comics were “in good taste,” the industry moved toward self-regulation via a Comics Code, which demanded the triumph of good over evil and advocated a more restrained approach to issues of sex and violence.

³ For more on Wertham and the campaigns against comics, see Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); Bart Beaty, *Fredric Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); and David Hajdu, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008). Tilley’s work is introduced in Tilley, “Seducing the Innocent: Fredric Wertham and the Falsifications That Helped Condemn Comics,” *Information & Culture: A Journal of History* 47.4 (2012): 383-413.

Amy Kiste Nyberg, like Lopes but more than Wright, places Wertham's work and the crusade against comics in the context of cultural elitism, particular of the Frankfurt School to which Wertham might be said to have belonged. It would not be accurate, as Nyberg and others have proven, to demonize Wertham, for his position was more nuanced than his less-than-scientific method of social psychology would suggest. Wertham raised valid claims about the representation of race and gender in comics, and his work at Harlem's Lafargue Clinic offered psychiatric help to underprivileged residents who would otherwise have been deprived of it. But she also notes that Wertham's cultural elitism, inherited from the Frankfurt School, led him to view comics as "a form of children's culture that could be likened to fairy tales . . . prevent[ing] children from developing an appreciation for good literature" (94). I would suggest that this strain of elitism in Wertham's arguments, which Nyberg traces back quite far, still persists to some degree to this day. Perhaps this is one reason the writers of comic book realism have not been fully studied under that light.

The authors in question take the acceptance of comics almost for granted, refusing to argue their merits but rather presupposing them by inclusion. There is no note of disdain in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* when Sammy Clay and Joe Kavalier enter into the business of creating superhero comics, and though his peers shun him, Oscar Wao has the sympathy of the reader when he retreats into his comics and fantasy literature. These novelists, then, reflect a wide change in American culture, an openness to and acceptance of superheroes and the power their stories can have. In an essay on the rise of what he calls the "comic-book novel," Marc Singer attributes the rise of the comic-book novel to the coinciding "financial success" of comics adaptations and

to “a generational shift” of novelists who grew up reading comics (273), noting the common themes of, among others, “adolescence and nostalgia” (274). Singer is right to observe the trend of writers from a certain generation to turn to comics, a move extended by Hoberek when he imagines a “generational cohort” of novelists interested in comics (Hoberek, *Considering* 181). Yet as I have suggested, the fascination with superheroes extends beyond any number of novelists cited below. Superheroes are, and I cannot stress this enough, everywhere. I am continually reminded of the words of Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, who argued in the December 1944 edition of the *Journal of Educational Sociology* (an issue devoted to defending the significance of comics, amid the response to North’s editorial), “The comics deserve the serious consideration of statesmen and educators, politicians and publicists, psychologists and sociologists, for they reflect what millions are thinking about, what they want, what they fear, and how they feel about matters of social significance” (213).

What Comes “After” Postmodernism?

In addition to the change in perception comics have experienced, this study comes on the eve of a second change, a shift in the contemporary American literary field from high postmodernism to something else entirely, or perhaps to something not so far removed. If postmodern literature’s engagement with comics can be understood in the larger context of ludic parody or ironic celebration, the work of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz does not fit so neatly into that understanding of the relationship between the literary mainstream and its relegation of comics to the literary equivalent of a children’s table. We need, then, a new label that would not exclude novels about comics from the literary mainstream, something “comic book realism” does quite well. This need for a new term

beyond “postmodernism” comes concurrently with a larger discussion about trends in American literature at large, a recognition that we might no longer be postmodern, if indeed postmodernism can be said to have ended at all. Perhaps no declaration of the state of postmodernism has been more succinct than that of Linda Hutcheon, who declares simply in her epilogue to the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, “Let’s just say: it’s over” (166). Others have taken a more nuanced approach; Brian McHale posits that we are in an interregnum, a between period too far gone from postmodernism but not far enough to identify the new terrain (McHale, “Break”), while others like Mark McGurl and Amy Hungerford argue that the present literary climate more closely resembles the glory days of modernist literature.

Still other critics have gathered under the tent of post-postmodernism, a term seductive for its apparent sequential simplicity – if postmodernism has ended, what follows must be *post-* – yet that selfsame simplicity carries with it a nebulous ambiguity. In what sense of the prefix is post-postmodern truly post-? Are we, as Hutcheon’s provocative claim suggests, living in a world where postmodernism is dead and buried?⁴ Hutcheon closes her epilogue with a challenge to its readers: “Post-postmodernism needs a new label of its own” (181). Situated firmly as a twenty-first century phenomenon, Hutcheon’s vision of post-postmodernism suggests a kind of theory-infant, newborn and in need of a name from its critic-parents. The rush to name this new movement has given us a proliferation of nomenclature, including, to name just a few:

⁴ There is a counterpoint, put forth by Peter Zima, which postulates that the postmodern era is only just beginning and that only a not-imminent “ecological disaster” would be able to “disrupt the postmodern market society” (27). More than a decade after Zima’s essay appeared, however, his voice seems to be very much in the minority regarding postmodernism’s longevity, a voice for continuity where nearly every other voice concedes some shift, change, or outright cancellation.

- **Tragic realism**, which Jonathan Franzen declares, “preserves the recognition that improvement always comes at a cost; that nothing lasts forever; that if the good in the world outweighs the bad, it’s by the slimmest of margins” (91-92);
- **New Sincerity**, derived from Adam Kelly’s reading of David Foster Wallace as being conscious of the inherent performativity of sincerity. “In Wallace’s terms,” Kelly writes, “sincerity must involve ‘intent’ but cannot involve ‘motive’” (140) because an artistic “gift” is also an economic one;
- **Critical realism**, the “struggle for clarity and simplicity” as offered by Garry Potter and José López (5);
- and **Cosmodernism**, Christian Moraru’s move toward identity as a global relationality, arguing against an insular postmodernism in favor of a literary scene which recognizes the interconnected qualities of the contemporary world, and the effect of that interconnectedness on the individual subject’s identity formation.

For all their differences, these terms all suggest an insufficiency of postmodernism to account for the current state of the world, largely through its insularity and emphasis on irony over sincerity. In pursuit of sincerity, we find that these post-postmodernists are largely invested in a return to realism over the experimentalism of literary postmodernism (think Franzen, not Pynchon). Furthermore, these critical terms offer a broadening of the critical discourse, accepting the world stage as a truly global one, including a host of voices and paradigms beyond the postmodern narrative written largely by a small subsection of the western hemisphere.

Post-postmodernism, very conscious of its own existence as being for lack of a better term, has offered a host of theoretical and critical models, but it does so with the

presupposition that postmodernism has passed on. Or is literary postmodernism moving into its late stage, one dominated by equal measures of anxiety and hope, as Jeremy Green and others have suggested? The discourse surrounding late postmodernism seeks a more nuanced understanding than that of a break, finding instead continuities with and shifts from the postmodern project without taking the death of postmodernism as a starting place. Green concedes, with all the irony of postmodernism fully intact, that postmodernism was always already in a state of belatedness, but that late postmodernism signifies that “we are no longer postmodern in quite the same way as when the concept was first set loose” (1). Instead, the literature of late postmodernism, as part of this “phase of decadence and decline” (1), wrestles with the notion of obsolescence, as the place of the physical book and indeed literature as a whole is placed in competition with a world of screens and new media amid a shift to an information and service economy. In fact, we might consider a novelist’s turn toward comics as a response to the new media of screens in favor of an old media of comics panels, which might then be seen as kinds of screens. (And when those novelists themselves write comics, as Chabon and Lethem have done, the more the better.)

Like Green, Ihab Hassan has opted not to retire the label “postmodern” but instead claims that the poles of the movement have shifted toward “a postmodernism not of suspicion but of trust” (199). Like the post-postmodernists, Hassan identifies a shift toward realist representation; “Beauty is back,” he reports (207), but where postmodernism had renounced realism, “literary realism . . . remains indispensable” (208). Also like Green, Madhu Dubey sees the novel as anxious about its own existence, and she concurs with Hassan that there exists “a stronger drive toward referentiality”

(365), identifying the return of social realism as one flavored by postmodern tropes like the high/low code switching – something she sees specifically in Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. “What breathed new life into the novel,” Dubey writes, “was its ability to recapture and preserve, in the aesthetic sphere, the distinctive racial cultures and communities that were felt to be at risk in the post-1960s decades” (367).

If we understand contemporary literature as being one of late postmodernism, we accept the lasting presence of postmodernism in a way that the post-postmodernists might be disinclined to do, but a third option presents itself, in which the prefix *post-* may imply a sidestepping altogether of postmodernism as it had been constructed in favor of something else entirely. Let us not forget Homi Bhabha’s crucial denial of *post-* as a mere measure of sequence, opting instead for the space of that which is “beyond,” a movement into the future which cannot transpire “without a return to the ‘present’” (4). Instead of a sequential *post-*, Bhabha argues, “the boundary becomes the place from which *something begins its presencing* in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond” (emphasis maintained from 5). McGurl has offered something similar in his assessment of “the blank indifference of geological nature” (McGurl, “Geology”). Rather than seeking continuity or rupture with the literary movements which came before, McGurl’s exomodernism is “a projection of posthumanist thinking into the cultural realm,” situated “*outside of* rather than *after* the modern and postmodern, displacing postmodernism’s notorious pillaging of past historical styles by trying to imagine what lies beyond or alongside style” (emphasis maintained from 381). What McGurl suggests here is nothing less than a radical recontextualization of that which follows postmodernism, “a projection of posthumanist thinking into the cultural realm”

and subsequently a kind of literary geological time (381). Exomodernism reads the present as “perforce a long now, a now whose duration is hard to measure but which is unquestionably eventful” (381).

American Literary Globalism

I am not ready to go as far as McGurl in displacing postmodernism altogether in favor of the exomodern; perhaps I am too ensconced in his “long now” to part fully from extant periodization. More likely, I see the texts under examination as much more interested in the superhuman than the posthuman, though I concede that one can quite easily be read as the other.⁵ I take the point of the post-postmodernists who identify a shift in contemporary literature, but I am not ready to pronounce the wholesale death of postmodernism – at least not so long as Thomas Pynchon still lives. Of the various labels offered as descriptive identifiers, and with no small measure of uncertainty about the *post-* in post-postmodernism, I think that the most useful descriptor offered to date is “American literary globalism.” Rachel Adams defines American literary globalism as an “afterword” to literary postmodernism, comprised of “a constellation of authors who are reacting against the stylistic and conceptual premises of high postmodernism and responding to the intensification of global processes that were emergent during, but muted by, the phenomenon of Cold War” (250). More accessible than high postmodernism (emblemized by Pynchon), American literary globalism broadens the scope by “providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and

⁵ Iron Man, for one, has strong ties with the posthuman, with his technological suit and cyborg heart. The 2013 film *Man of Steel* imagined that “posthuman” and “Kryptonian” might be synonymous, with the villainous General Zod believing that he and Superman might rebuild their doomed homeworld Krypton by overwriting humanity – “A foundation has to be built on something,” he tells Superman.

temporal referents” (251). In this way, Adams finds that American literature more generally is expanding itself to include other Americas beyond the national boundary.

Consider, for example, the polyvocality and global historiography at work in the opening lines of Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*:

They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú Americanus*, or more colloquially, *fukú* – generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and Doom of the New World. Also called the *fukú* of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its great European victims; despite “discovering” the New World the Admiral died miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. (1)

From its opening, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* attempts to reframe North American history as inextricably relational. Díaz, through his eclectic narrator Yunior, begins with “the screams of the enslaved,” calling to mind the worst chapters of the Atlantic triangular slave trade. Yunior quickly revises the start date for his narrative from the 16th century, when the triangular trade began, to 1492, the year when Christopher Columbus (here, the Admiral – the renaming of historical villains is a recurring theme in *Oscar Wao*)⁶ arrived in the western hemisphere. Yet *Oscar Wao* is not the typical story of the New World, the one that usually begins in 1492 with Columbus sailing (as the mnemonic rhyme teaches) “the ocean blue.” Instead of a utopian narrative of divine destiny, Yunior undercuts an idealistic reading of the birth of the New World by reminding us that for the New World to begin, “one world perished” – that of the Native

⁶ Dixa Ramírez discusses Columbus as “the Admiral” in her account of Dominican President Joaquín Balaguer’s quinqucentennial commemoration of Columbus’s 1492 voyage. Balaguer’s costly and ill-advised project involved the construction of a massive lighthouse in which Columbus’s remains are purportedly entombed (though a 2006 scientific inquiry determined that Columbus was actually interred in Seville). Here Ramírez states, “Dominican lore dictates that the taboo around the sailor’s name means that pseudonyms like ‘The Admiral’ must be used” (392).

Tainos. Compounding this alternate reading of western history, Yunió's version is heavily inflected with biblical overtones; "a demon drawn into Creation" suggests an Edenic setting infiltrated by a serpent-like temptor. This Eden, however, is not populated by "divine voices," as Columbus might have thought; the Dominican slang word "dique" roughly translates to "supposedly," casting doubts on the divinity of what might have been simply auditory hallucinations. Díaz's project, then, is to revise the scale of western history, both by locating its beginning as elsewhere than Columbus's petition to Ferdinand and Isabella of Portugal and by distending its temporality with an epic/biblical allusive dimension. (As I discuss in the beginning of my second chapter, Díaz seems also to be channeling the apocalyptic comics of Jack Kirby, invoking Kirby's baroque prose to decenter 1492 by way of a comic book Ragnarok.)

In her definition of American literary globalism, Rachel Adams argues that the movement utilizes the technique of polyvocality not as postmodernism did, "as a sign of authorial mastery," but rather "to channel the voices of those who have been silenced from the historical record" (264). She adds, "If postmodernism is governed by a sense of paranoia, which suggests that these connections may be figments of an individual imagination, the literature of globalization represents them as a shared perception of community whereby, for better or worse, populations in one part of the world are inevitably affected by events in another" (268) – not too far removed, then, from Hassan's "postmodernism not of suspicion but of trust" (199). Díaz's polyvocality takes many forms, appropriately enough. In addition to the freeform bounce between English and Spanish, the passage quoted above quite literally invokes "the voices of those who have been silenced from the historical record"; we have the "screams" of the African

slaves, the “death bane of the Tainos” at the moment of their passing, and the “(dique) divine voices” heard by Columbus upon *his* death. Then we have Yuniór’s own narrative voice, which controls a majority of the narrative until the chapters when Yuniór surrenders the floor to Lola, Oscar’s sister and Yuniór’s sometime-lover.

Compare the opening of *Oscar Wao* to that of Pynchon’s ur-postmodern text, *Gravity’s Rainbow*: “A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now” (3). Both texts begin with a scream, though Pynchon’s is more opaque; where Díaz leaves no question about to whom the screams belong, Pynchon’s “screaming” could be attributed to the V-2 rocket or to its victims or, as fragmented as the text is, to any number of figures who appear in the body of the novel’s seven hundred dense pages. What is perhaps more important to Pynchon, though, is the way that this screaming immediately disconnects itself from its own history. “It has happened before,” which lends strength to the V-2 reading, and yet “there is nothing to compare it to now.” As soon as Pynchon’s screaming enters the world, it is beyond comparison, suggesting the apparent break from the past and, further, from modernism in the same way that the screams which begin *Oscar Wao* can be read as another moment of change in American literature.

We can read Díaz, then, and his fellow American literary globalists as addressing that break, acknowledging the silences of “nothing to compare” by extending his historical gaze back hundreds of years. There is nothing to compare it to *now*, Díaz might say, emphasizing our presentist blinders, but if we look back to the arrival of Columbus and the inception of the slave trade, our present begins to make sense. In fact, the opening of *Oscar Wao* proclaims, our present can *only* make sense through an accounting with

our past, a past *not* (as postmodernism might have argued) inaccessible after the break but an always-already present past. Díaz's "It came first" ("It" being the curse of the new world) relocates our beginnings not as a moment of rupture but of memory.

I am partial to the term "American literary globalism" for a second reason, one which requires a slight manipulation of Adams's definition. While American literature has been made more global in the sense of an increased awareness of relationality, a global perspective in the geographic connotation of the word, there seems also to be an indication of the way that American literature has been globalized, or pluralized, with respect to genre narratives. In this sense, American literary globalism continues the postmodern project of dissolving the division between high and low culture, a project begun with the modernist experiments of Eliot, Joyce, and Dos Passos and continued by the postmodernists Pynchon and Doctorow, among others. In other words, the narrowing gap between high and low culture globalizes the field of contemporary literature by extending our understanding of what may be included in the term "literature" in the first place. Hoberek has said as much: "postmodern fiction's openness to mass culture begets the culturalist turn in criticism which begets not only the opening of the canon but also the expansion of what counts as literature in the present" (Hoberek, "Introduction" 239).

Charles Jencks coined the term "double-coding" in his observation of a similar trend in postmodern architecture, though McHale succinctly notes the concept's utility in the realm of literature: "Jencks's notion of double-coding resonates especially with theories of postmodernist literature, where the layering of popular appeal and avant-garde experimentation has all along been recognized as characteristic of postmodernism. It is double-coding in Jencks's sense, or even more radically, the collapse or telescoping of

the hierarchy of high and low culture” (McHale, “What”). This process of double-coding has continued into American literary globalism, allowing us to think of “globalism” in the sense of cultural pluralism. That is, where postmodernism’s double-coding seemed nevertheless to maintain a kind of separation between high and low cultures (as I will demonstrate below), many novelists who could be considered late postmodernists or American literary globalists largely erase that divide with a growing openness to genre narratives.

One instantiation of American literary globalism’s receptiveness to mass culture can be found in Daniel Bautista’s reading of *Oscar Wao*, in which he situates Díaz as a post-magical realist novel, saying that *Oscar Wao* is “a work of fiction that takes superstitions about the fantastic dimensions of Dominican history seriously at the same time that it slyly questions and pokes fun at that very perspective” (52). For Bautista, the difference seems to be the degree to which Díaz/Yunior believes in the fantastic elements of the text, like the fukú or the mongoose; instead of espousing them, the narrator remains “significantly ambiguous and coy about whether magic like this really exists” (48). Yunior’s skepticism nuances a conventional understanding of magical realism, which, according to Maggie Ann Bowers, “relies most of all upon the matter-of-fact, realist tone of its narrative when presenting magical happenings” (3). In fact, I would argue that it is Díaz’s ambiguity that prevents *Oscar Wao* from participating in the magical realist mode. Recall that the novel begins by parenthesizing its contents with “They say,” and furthermore each subsequent moment of magic is tempered with a reminder that they are but stories. Though Oscar’s mother Belicia is ostensibly saved by the prayers of La Inca, narrator Yunior reminds us both that he is telling the story – “Let

me tell you, True Believers” – and that the story exists “in the annals of Dominican piety” (144). There is even a third reminder of storytelling, in which Yuniór quotes Marvel Comics figurehead and chief scribe Stan Lee, whose garrulous addresses to his readers often labeled them “True Believers.” Magical realism would take for granted the existence of Oscar’s guardian angel, the golden mongoose, but Díaz leaves the mongoose and other magical details on “his páginas en blanco” (149), blank pages and moments of inexplicability which seem incongruous with the straight realism of a magical realist text.

Rather than identify Díaz as participating in the genre of magical realism, Bautista argues that *Oscar Wao* represents the debut of “a new kind of genre, which I am calling ‘comic book realism,’ that irreverently mixes realism and popular culture in an attempt to capture the bewildering variety of cultural influences that define the lives of Díaz’s Dominican-American protagonists” (42). Strikingly, Bautista identifies Yuniór’s selective use of works like Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, from which Yuniór only borrows the darker elements while neglecting the heroic, optimistic aspects of these texts: “Yuniór’s sf and fantasy allusions mostly serve to reveal a fallen world where the marvelous either no longer exists or where what remains of it has been forced into the service of evil” (46). Bautista concludes by arguing that Díaz is less interested in the “marvelous” (magical) quality of Dominican reality and is instead “more interested in exploring the way that this ‘reality’ is filtered through and shaped by the particular traditions, cultures, and fantasies that define the identities and actions of his characters” (50). For Yuniór and for Oscar both, “reality” comes through the lens of mass culture, especially (as the epigraph suggests) superhero comics. It is no wonder, then, that Yuniór borrows Stan Lee’s “True Believers” appellation, for Yuniór has himself chosen “The

Watcher” in place of his own name as the narrator of the story. Elena Machado Sáez rightly notes, “In calling himself the Watcher, a character from Jack Kirby and Stan Lee’s comic *The Fantastic Four* who acts as Historian to the Universe, the narrator claims to be an objective witness to History, purportedly serving as our expert on the Truth” (538).

The term “comic book realism” is a useful tool for understanding Bautista’s reading of *Oscar Wao*, but I believe that Bautista’s focus on one text should be expanded to encompass a wider archive of (mostly 21st century) fiction which engages with the world of superhero comics in approaches largely compatible with Díaz’s embrace of the genre. Recall Miller’s invitation to compare *Oscar Wao* to *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* on the grounds that both star “a nerdboy” (94), but I believe the significance runs much deeper than a choice of protagonist.

Barthelme, Mayer, and Pynchon: A Comic Book Realist Prehistory

Under the umbrella of comic book realism, that comparison between the realist domain of contemporary literature and its intersection with superhero comics is precisely what I will explore in this examination. Like magical realism, I argue that comic book realism is comprised of a juxtaposition, here between a realist narrative approach and the “matter-of-fact” presentation of events drawn from and understood through the lens of the world of comic books – almost exclusively, superhero comics.⁷ In one sense, a comic book realist novel is very easy to spot, because its characters are frequently comic book readers or creators (and often both), but comic book realism ventures further when

⁷ One notable exception might be Jay Cantor’s *Krazy Kat* (1987), which uses the characters and world of George Herriman’s *Krazy Kat* comic strip in a postmodern parody of psychology and the atomic age. It might be better, though, to think of *Krazy Kat* as a precursor to comic *strip* realism, which does not seem to have caught on in the same way that comic *book* realism has – that is, aside from Tom De Haven’s *Funny Papers* trilogy, which tells the story of a newspaper cartoonist’s most famous creation, Derby Dugan, across the Gilded Age, the Great Depression, and the age of underground comics.

characters model their identities on their reading material and become superheroes themselves. Comic book realism owes something to magical realism's collision of the fantastic and the quotidian, but it also resonates with postmodernism's high/low culture elision. Comic book realism is not, however, the postmodern pastiche described by Jameson:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse, devoid of laughter and of any conviction that [. . .] some healthy linguistic normality still exists. Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs [. . .] (17)

If comic book realism *were* mere pastiche, we would see it reproduce the forms of superhero comics, mimicking their four-color aesthetics with an eye on derision. Indeed, we have something much like that in the form of what I take to be the precursor texts to comic book realism, beginning with Donald Barthelme's 1964 short story "The Joker's Greatest Triumph." Cribbing its title, a few plot points, and several lines of dialogue from an issue of *Batman* (#148, from June 1962), "The Joker's Greatest Triumph" is an exceedingly droll burlesque of Batman comics in which Batman and his friend Fredric Brown (named after the humorous science fiction writer, if it is not meant to be Brown himself) follow a series of clues to apprehend The Joker. But where the original comic sees Batman devise an elaborate scheme to prevent The Joker from learning his true identity, Barthelme's Joker *does* unmask Batman, to which the caped crusader shrugs, "Well, it's a problem" (156) before an extensive (and plagiarized) psychoanalysis of the Joker. (I say "plagiarized," for Batman is apparently paraphrasing Mark Schorer's biography of Sinclair Lewis in his monologue about The Joker.)

Barthelme's story is precisely the kind of "blank parody" Jameson sees as representative of the mode of pastiche. There is little in the way of laughter to be had in the story, for Barthelme's project is a cynical appraisal of superhero comics, one which takes the genre to task for its thin plots – Barthelme's Batman brushes off being unmasked, where the original story found Batman using a decoy robot and the blinding lights of an airplane to conceal his identity – and its admittedly stilted dialogue; "You foiled my plans Batman, but before the police get here I'm going to lift that mask of yours and find out who you *really are*" appears in both stories, though its inclusion in straight prose strips it of any vivacity lent by placement in a speech bubble over the leering face of a grotesque clown. Barthelme's original dialogue is deliberately clunky, particularly the rambling monologue that concludes it, and the story concludes with a jab at what Umberto Eco called the "oneiric climate" of superhero comics, "where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said" (17). At the close of Barthelme's story, Fredric Brown promises Batman, "I'll see you next Tuesday night probably unless something comes up" (158), a humorless reworking of the original story's ending, in which The Joker's plan has been foiled with the ever-present promise that he might one day escape to menace the city again.

Comic book realism, then, is not pastiche, nor is it accurate to link it to the tradition of parody. Hutcheon attempts to recover the notion of parody from Jameson's reading; where Jameson sees pastiche as empty and apolitical, unable to critique a totalizing system from within, Hutcheon views parody as "doubly coded in political

terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies” (97). Postmodern parody is similar to modernist parody in that both “at once inscribed convention and history and yet distanced itself from both” (95). The key difference, however, is that “postmodernism’s irony is one that rejects the resolving urge of modernism toward closure or at least distance. Complicity always attends its critique. Unacknowledged modernist assumptions about closure, distance, artistic autonomy, and the apolitical nature of representation are what postmodernism sets out to uncover and deconstruct” (95). In comic book parody, we would expect to see both participation and subversion, a double movement of both embrace and rejection.

Indeed, where postmodernism has been celebrated for its code switching between high and low culture, in the case of superhero comics critics have mistaken their presence for an embrace. Put another way, the postmodern texts cited as entrances for comics into high culture are in actuality quite dismissive of superhero comics, holding them at arm’s length as subjects for satirical derision. We have seen in “The Joker’s Greatest Triumph” the all but outright contempt for the repetitive banality of a Batman comic, but the case for parody can be made quite easily with Robert Mayer’s 1977 novel *Superfolks*, a novel which Andrew Hoberek has succinctly described as “a postmodern burlesque of seventies culture that combines references to the Golden Age of superhero comics with cameos from both real-life celebrities and fictional characters” (Hoberek, *Considering* 159). In *Superfolks*, we meet David Brinkley, rocketed by his parents Archie and Edith (presumably Bunker, late of *All in the Family*) as a baby from the doomed planet Cronk (also home to his weakness, the radioactive ore Cronkite), after which he was discovered by Franklin and Eleanor of Littletown – even someone who has never read a Superman

comic in his or her life can understand the allusion. In middle age, however, Brinkley has retired his superhero identity Indigo, though he is drawn out of retirement by a plot to kill him. Though *Superfolks* begins as a satire on the superhero genre, summarily killing off everyone from Superman to Snoopy in its first chapter, Mayer is slightly more reverent than Barthelme. When Brinkley visits Billy Button, the former Captain Mantra (who, with his forgotten magic word, is a thinly veiled Captain Marvel, also known as Billy Batson), Button tells him that they are both “over the hill. Comic book heroes. But it’s not a comic book world anymore” (65). We must not mistake Button’s dismissal for Mayer’s, however, for once he uncovers a conspiracy to kill him Brinkley becomes Indigo once more, and the novel becomes a fairly traditional superhero narrative. After visiting his tailor Max and reclaiming his superhero costume, Brinkley reflects, “He felt in some obscure way as if he had come home” (129). By the novel’s end, after Indigo has sacrificed his superpowers to save the planet from his enemies one last time, Mayer allows Brinkley the twentieth-century equivalent of riding into the sunset; Brinkley, riding the train to his day job, reflects on the birth of his son and observes a father “tossing a football to his son. Teaching him how to catch it” (231). After a fairly traditional superhero battle of good against evil with the fate of the world in the balance, Indigo’s vision of paternal bliss is accompanied by “a box of uniforms in his lap” and the implication that his son possesses superpowers, having sprained the doctor’s finger upon delivery (231, 230). Mayer’s postmodern parody cannot help but end with one of the oldest tropes of superhero narratives – the “to be continued...” ending.

Mayer’s eventual embrace of superhero comics seems to have been reciprocated by the producers of those comics. Beginning in October 2012, Pádraig Ó Méalóid

published three articles for the comics culture news blog *The Beat* in which he assessed the apparent influence of *Superfolks* on comics writer Alan Moore. One could easily make a similar claim about the relationship between *Superfolks* and the 2004 Disney/Pixar film *The Incredibles*, with its plot of a retired superhero pulled back into his too-tight tights by a plot to kill him. The recent reprints of *Superfolks*, which likely exist to capitalize on these newfound connections, bear adulation from comics giants like Stan Lee and Grant Morrison, speaking to the way that *Superfolks* is more than just a pastiche of the superhero genre. While parodying some of its excesses, *Superfolks* simultaneously plays along with the genre without the dismissive “unless something comes up” of Barthelme’s ending.

To see further the shift from high postmodernism to comic book realism, we turn back to Pynchon and to *Gravity’s Rainbow*, published four years before *Superfolks*. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is, of course, an immense novel, and its density cannot be served by analysis of only two of its numerous episodes. Thomas Moore has described the peculiar relationship between Pynchon and his explicators, saying that *Gravity’s Rainbow* “seems purposely, wryly enough built to invite and absorb an industry” because “we sense not only Pynchon’s scorn for the critics but also his cheerfully paradoxical dependence on them” (7). That is, the invitation – or, perhaps more accurately, the demand – to make meaning out of a Pynchon novel is precisely the location of meaning *in* a Pynchon novel. We are, each of us, Maxine Tarnow at the end of Pynchon’s latest novel *Bleeding Edge*, clicking through a constellation of pixels until we find the one which will connect the dots. One such pixel of meaning in *Gravity’s Rainbow* might be Pynchon’s invocation of superhero comics, something which is the focus of fewer than ten essays, as reported by

the MLA International Bibliography. But comics are important enough to *Gravity's Rainbow* that Moore describes the novel's prose as being written in a "comic-book-surrealist style" (6). Moore does not elaborate on this term, but it would seem to juxtapose popular cultural elements with a *surrealist* style, an apt description for the way that Pynchon's prose brings so many disparate elements into dream-like collision.⁸

The net effect of the collisions in *Gravity's Rainbow*, if one may be permitted such a sweeping statement, is one of dispersal, dissolution, a chaotic novel reflecting the chaos of war and its literary inheritor, postmodernism. Amid the chaos, the novel is littered with references to and imitations of superhero comics; Pynchon tips his hand quite early when Captain Geoffrey "Pirate" Prentice is driven across Vauxhall Bridge by "his batman, a Corporal Wayne" (11).⁹ H. Brenton Stevens has pointed to this moment as evidence that comics "provide a momentary respite from the barrage of Pynchon's artillery, a chance to have a laugh and catch one's breath" (38) in the same way that comics gave readers a break from the war, and this allusion certainly gives Pynchon's explicators a "momentary respite" with a fairly obvious allusion to Batman's alter ego, Bruce Wayne. But that supposition tells us something of Pynchon's intentions, too; he predicts his readers will know the reference and plants this "respite" in anticipation of the need for it.

⁸ As is often the case with Pynchon, I can think of no comparable novel to enroll in the genre of comic book surrealism alongside *Gravity's Rainbow*. Salvador Dalí does, however, make a cameo in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, saved from suffocation when Joe Kavalier rescues him from his malfunctioning formal wear, "a deep-sea diving costume, complete with rubberized canvas coverall and globular brass helmet" (232).

⁹ Though I am aware that it is a repaginated edition, all references to the novel are drawn from Penguin's 2006 edition of *Gravity's Rainbow* (which preserves the 2000 edition's pagination), in part because this edition resonates nicely with a project on the intersection of American literature and superhero comics – the 2006 edition bears cover artwork by comics writer/artist Frank Miller, whose 1986 work *The Dark Knight Returns* often sits beside *Watchmen* in conversations of influential comics. (1986 was a banner year for comics; in addition to *Dark Knight* and *Watchmen*, the first collected edition of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* also debuted in 1986.)

Not all references to comics are as obvious. Like the protagonists of comic book realism, Tyrone Slothrop is a reader of superhero comics, particularly the adventures of rubbery shape-changer Plastic Man (whose name Pynchon renders as one word, “Plasticman”), and his distracted comic book reading collides into the prose when “Four-color Plasticman goes oozing out of a keyhole,” leaving the reader to wonder whether this is a moment of ekphrasis or whether Plastic Man has actually slipped the boundaries of his comic book existence (209). It would seem to be the former, for Slothrop ignores the approaching linguist Sir Stephen Dodson-Truck because his “first impulse is to get back to what that Plas is into” (209-210). But Thomas Moore is right to point to the way that Plastic Man and Sundial, a comic book character Slothrop reads later in the novel,¹⁰ are “flexible and can escape all frames simply by bending and flowing around them,” including “the panels themselves, the very structures by which they are actualized” (34). Pynchon writes of Sundial, “The frames never enclosed him – or it – for long” (480), much as the elastic superpowers of Plastic Man allow him to “ooz[e] out of a keyhole” or out of a comic book panel.

Near the middle of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Slothrop, already in possession of a tenuous grasp on reality, is dressed by a pair of German women who “have spent the day looting a stash of Wagnerian opera costumes” (371). Trudi and Magda break the horns from a Viking helmet, modify the boots of a Soviet spy, and affix a capital R to the back of a cape. Thus is born *Raketemensch*.¹¹ Rocketman is not, however, a superhero in the

¹⁰ Though Plastic Man is an actual comic book character, created by Jack Cole in 1941 and eventually acquired by DC Comics, I have found nothing on Sundial. Steven Weisenburger’s *A Gravity’s Rainbow Companion*, invaluable on nearly every other glossed reference, has no entry for Sundial, and a Google search yields only similarly inquiring minds. It is quite possible that Sundial is a Pynchon creation, though the text’s mention that the comic “was virtually uncirculated” (480) leaves the question open.

¹¹ Weisenburger notes that Rocketman was, like Plastic Man, created in 1941, published by Chesler and revived by Ajas/Farrell. Rocketman, alias Cal Martin, and his fiancée Rocketgirl (Doris Dalton) “used

traditional sense; rather than fight the forces of evil, Rocketman is drafted, very much against his will, to steal hashish and forged currency from Potsdam. “But I wasn’t Rocketman,” Slothrop attempts to protest, “until just a couple hours ago” (377). Tellingly, this entire episode occurs, as Pynchon tells us, “Later in Berlin, down in the cellar among fever-dreams” (370). There is nothing affirmative about Slothrop’s involuntary transformation into Rocketman; “Grandiose Slothrop limps along” (373), assuming just one more in a long line of identities.

Stevens asks why comics are not a larger focus of *Gravity’s Rainbow* scholarship, acknowledging that they fit into Pynchon’s “stone soup approach” of compiling anything and everything from both high and popular culture (37). Perhaps critics have repressed Rocketman, in the same way that Mickey Rooney “will repress the fact that he ever saw Slothrop” at Potsdam (388). Or perhaps scholars believe, as Pynchon does, that the superhero comics of *Gravity’s Rainbow* are altogether impotent, unable to do the work readers like Slothrop expect of them. Eric Bulson has written about the ways that *Gravity’s Rainbow* frustrates the efforts of a modernist flaneur to understand a bombed-out city, arguing that the narrator’s inability to grasp Rocketman comes from the ravages of war: “It is immediately noticeable that the narrator isn’t sure how to trace Slothrop’s movements; instead of laying out street signs or place-names, the narrator drops placeholders, temporary landmarks, some natural, others manmade, that provide a route through the rubble [...] the narrative works like a vacuum that sucks up everything in its

Cal’s rocket pack to zoom around fighting crime” (216). Rocketman was eventually retooled into Dave Stevens’s *Rocketeer*, the subject of a 1991 Disney film. Weisenburger does not note, however, the similarities between Pynchon’s Rocketman and Bulletman, first published by Fawcett Comics in 1940. In “Rooney and the Rocketman,” Donald Larsson identifies the similarities in costumes but suggests the resemblance is circumstantial. For my money, Bulletman’s cone-headed costume is much closer to Rocketman’s sleeker design.

path, leaving no trace to follow back” (53). Even Slothrop himself is unable to trace his own movements; near the novel’s end, Slothrop encounters a wall of graffiti on which he finds the message “ROCKETMAN WAS HERE.” “His first thought was that he’d written it himself and forgot. Odd that that should’ve been his first thought, but it was” (636).

The final word on superheroes in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is one of impotence. Upon the death of Gottfried, a litany of superheroes – including Superman, Plasticman, Namor the Submariner, and The Lone Ranger – arrive too late to save him. “‘Too late’ was never in their programming,” Pynchon tells us, but for the superheroes in denial about their failure, “There’ll be a thousand ways to forget” (767). As for Rocketman, an identity dispersed into graffiti without an author, the novel never mentions him again. I will explore in greater depth in my second chapter the place of adopting superhero identities in comic book realism, but in *Gravity’s Rainbow* it is apparent that Tyrone Slothrop loses his own sense of self by donning the Rocketman costume. The novel never fails to remind us that it is such, after all – Slothrop is “still in Rocketman garb” on page 398 before he “strips off the rig” on page 468, only to be asked on page 521, “What are you doing in a Fascist uniform like that?” Slothrop’s Rocketman identity is prescribed for him by the contexts of the war and both high and low culture; his largely unwilling participation in the Rocketman missions demonstrates his loss of agency in a world gone mad, or at least postmodern. Stevens notes, however, that the script Slothrop follows is not that of a superhero comic; “[Rocketman’s] first thoughts are not to battle evil” (41), for Rocketman fails to live up to the credo of responsibility that most superheroes follow. There is nothing of Spider-Man’s “With great power comes great responsibility” here,

though his fragmentation into the Floundering Four connects him with Marvel Comics' Fantastic Four, for both teams are "gifted while at the same time flawed by his gift – unfit by it for human living" (689). No, Slothrop's heroic journey takes him to one alternate identity (Rocketman), then four, then ten thousand (one of whom presumably scrawled the "ROCKETMAN WAS HERE" graffiti).

It may be that the writers of comic book realism are less cynical than Barthelme, Mayer, and Pynchon, or it may be a generational shift as Singer suggests. I am less inclined to attribute the rise of what Singer calls the comic-book novel to the financial success of big-budget comics adaptations, in large part because the two movements arose almost concurrently; both *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and Fox's first *X-Men* movie debuted in 2000,¹² though I would certainly agree that the Hollywood blockbusters are significantly responsible for the rise of the popular embrace of superheroes. One could even look back to Rick Moody's 1994 *The Ice Storm*, which has much in common with the comic book realist novels under consideration. Though he never himself becomes a superhero in the way that Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz's protagonists do, Moody's narrator Paul Hood is a devout reader of comic books, particularly the adventures of The Fantastic Four, which, he laments with all the knowledge of one of Stan Lee's "True Believers," "would never equal its first eighty issues, when its creators, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, were at the helm" (79). In his time at college, away from his family, Paul develops an understanding of his experiences in the

¹² I think it is safe to assign 2000 as the opening of the ongoing renaissance of superhero cinema. The 1997 film *Batman & Robin* opened to dismal critical reviews and prompted the perception of a death knell for superhero adaptations. *X-Men* opened in 2000 with little of the camp that made the last Batman film a failure, with Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* debuting in 2002. *Batman Begins*, the first in Christopher Nolan's trilogy, revamped the image of Batman for moviegoers, and the 2008 arrival of both its sequel, *The Dark Knight*, and Marvel Studios' *Iron Man*, cemented the permanent presence of superheroes at the cinema with critical approval and unprecedented box office receipts.

1970s by reading them alongside his Marvel comics. Assigning his family members to identities from the comics (his father Benjamin becomes The Thing, alias Ben Grimm, the team's monstrous orange golem), Paul reads his life concurrently with the monthly releases of comic books, superimposing the continuity of Marvel Comics onto his own life and perceiving, "Paul's own destiny was entrapped in the monthly serializations of these kitschy superheroes" (194). But rather than adopt the identity of The Human Torch, whose catchphrase "Flame on!" is shared by Paul, Paul only becomes a metaphorical Torch, "the flame, the torch, burnt out. Burnt at both ends" (274). Though he seems to have abandoned superhero comics by the novel's end, relating to his daughter the closing moments of "that *annus mirabilis* where comic books were indistinguishable from the truth" (279), Paul has retained one last lesson from his comics – "Comic books never ended. There was always more character development" (276). By collapsing his experience of 1973 with the continuity between issues of *Fantastic Four*, Paul retains some sense of optimism, a hope that things will improve and that his story remains to be continued.

Defining the Superhero

Before turning to the novels themselves, I should define more precisely what I mean by the term "superhero," for the term is more pliable than it seems. To paraphrase Justice Potter Stewart, we know a superhero when we see it, but when I first taught a course on the superhero genre I was reminded how slippery the term can be. We know, of course, that Superman is a superhero by virtue of the shared prefix, and we can presumably extrapolate from him as the progenitor of the superhero genre. But what about Luke Skywalker, one student asked? Is being a Jedi the same as being a superhero?

Both Superman and Luke Skywalker have remarkable abilities and a costume, after all. Another wondered if police officers, often described as “real-world superheroes,” actually fit the bill. Still others puzzled over whether Sherlock Holmes, Buzz Lightyear, or Sailor Moon could be enrolled in the genre. For this reason alone, it is worth weighing some of the proposed definitional boundaries, with full awareness that the project of defining the superhero is a discursive move that primarily draws a boundary around the issues one wants to consider. (Though to my awareness none exists, I cannot imagine that I would have included in this study a novel whose protagonist wishes to emulate Buzz Lightyear.)

Because the dominant genre in American comics since 1938 has been that of the superhero, several critics have attempted to delineate the genre’s boundaries in order to then study the comics that contain superheroes.¹³ One of the earliest such efforts was Richard Reynolds’s *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*, which sketched out “a first-stage working definition” based on a close reading of *Action Comics* #1, which introduced Superman (16). His seven definitional attributes are:

1. The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents.
2. At least some of the superheroes will be like earthbound gods in their level of powers. Other superheroes of lesser powers will consort easily with these earthbound deities.
3. The hero’s devotion to justice overrides even his devotion to the law.
4. The extraordinary nature of the superhero will be contrasted with the ordinariness of his surroundings.
5. Likewise, the extraordinary nature of the hero will be contrasted with the mundane nature of his alter-ego. Certain taboos will govern the actions of these alter-egos.

¹³ In addition to the three sources discussed above, the project of defining the superhero has been a central concern of Marco Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. Jamie Richards (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); *Our Superheroes, Ourselves*, ed. Robin S. Rosenberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and *What Is a Superhero?*, eds. Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6. Although ultimately above the law, superheroes can be capable of considerable patriotism and moral loyalty to the state, though not necessarily to the letter of its laws.
7. The stories are mythical and use science and myth indiscriminately to create a sense of wonder. (16)

In his second chapter, Reynolds adds the importance of a costume, which “functions as the crucial sign of super-heroism” (26), though one might view a costume as consistent with aspects of Reynolds’s fourth and fifth headings.

Approximately a decade later, in his 2006 monograph *Superhero* Peter Coogan revised Reynolds’s seven definitional attributes by drawing on Judge Learned Hand’s 1939 ruling that the Fox Publications character Wonder Man infringed on the copyright held by Superman’s owner Detective Comics. Both Hand and Coogan ground their arguments in three words: mission, powers, and identity (MPI), with “costume” as a subdivision of a hero’s identity (30). Like Reynolds, Coogan agrees that a superhero needs to possess a selfless mission to help others, and what Reynolds called “earthbound deities” Coogan refines by emphasizing the level of “exaggeration inherent in the superhero genre” (31), distinguishing between the powers of science-fiction/pulp characters and the *super*powers of Superman. But where Coogan and Reynolds largely agree on the core attributes of the superhero himself, Coogan adds a fourth element, generic distinction. He writes, “If a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero” (40). His key example here is The Incredible Hulk, who often wanders the earth without a selfless prosocial mission; his chief goal at any time is to remain alive, undetected by the United States military forces that hunt him. But his existence in a

superhero universe, his membership in the superhero team The Avengers, and his other affinities with tropes of the superhero genre classify him as a superhero. Conversely, Coogan excludes characters like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, who would seem to fit the MPI definition but who exists more clearly in the context of horror than in a superhero universe. (So too, to continue the earlier line of questioning, would Coogan exclude Buzz Lightyear, more science-fiction hero than superhero.)

Though Coogan does a stronger job rooting the superhero in its pulp origins, both he and Reynolds are aware of the fact that the superhero is primarily an American concern. For all its antecedents, the superhero was by and large the creation of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, two young men from Cleveland, and it remains largely a concern of only the American publishing and film industries. That is, though superheroes have since been created in other countries, none seem to have caught on with the fervor or longevity of their American counterparts. John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett ask this question in their seminal *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Lawrence and Jewett situate the superhero genre in a broader “American monomyth,” which they find standing in opposition to many of the communitarian aspects of Joseph Campbell’s more classical monomyth as advanced in his *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In lieu of the classic monomyth, Lawrence and Jewett define the American monomyth thusly:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (6)

The superhero is just one instantiation of the American monomyth, which encompasses Westerns, science fiction, action films, and even the stable of Disney animated films. But

the superhero caught the public attention, Lawrence and Jewett argue, because of the way it distills the American monomyth into something morally unambiguous: “It gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them” (48).

This moral clarity is the central issue of Tom King’s novel *A Once Crowded Sky*, in which all but one of a team of superheroes have long since given up their remarkable abilities in order to save the planet from a mysterious force known as The Blue. At the novel’s climax, when PenUltimate (the sole remaining superhero) flies into The Blue in order to restore the superpowers of his peers, he muses on the “adolescent fantasy. . . . the reduction of all colors to black and white and beyond that to just blue. But it is in the purity of the distillation that beauty flourished; it is in the tearing away of the cluttered bullshit that some amount of veracity was revealed, a truth put forth” (295). This “veracity,” which will be the focus of my second chapter, arises from the pliability of the superhero as a metaphor. The superhero can stand in for any number of issues, can wear (pardon the pun) any number of disguises, and still maintain its narrative efficacy. There is something very mutable, for example, about a character like Batman, who has maintained popularity for most of his nearly 80 years of existence, across a variety of storytelling platforms and narrative modes, crossing fluidly between genres (in any given month, Batman may be fighting crime in Gotham City, collaborating with international crimefighters, or attending Justice League meetings in their lunar Watchtower). Just about the only thing our superheroes can’t do is kill, but even that rule is open for discussion.

Chapter Previews

It is the pliability of the superhero as a metaphor which will be a central issue in the following chapters, each of which examines the ways that comic book realist writers have used the superhero to address a particular contemporary concern. At the risk of appearing too cute by half, I have divided my analysis roughly along the lines of Superman's mantra, as introduced in a 1942 episode of his radio serial – "truth, justice, and the American way." In terms of academic attention, the three most prominent texts are Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude*, and Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. (As I have said, it is my belief that Díaz merits a place in conversation with Chabon and Lethem, even though he is not often afforded that place.) Where appropriate, I will reference earlier or later texts of comic book realism, but each chapter will focus largely on these three texts, recognizing the important status of the books in the careers of their creators and in the genre.¹⁴ I proceed in chronological order mostly for the sake of consistency; while it may suggest a tacit endorsement of *Kavalier & Clay* as an originary text for the genre, I do not wish to intimate that Chabon created the genre, though he does seem to have made the first big superheroic splash in the literary world. Others have speculated that Chabon somehow legitimized comics with *Kavalier & Clay* through the sheer force of his own literary reputation, though this statement seems to conflate Chabon's abilities with those of a superhero.

My second chapter, "Truth – Comic Book Realism and the New Sincerity," picks up this chapter's discussion of post-postmodernism. Rather than reveling in the

¹⁴ Both *Kavalier & Clay* and *Fortress* have the distinction of being their respective writers' first "long novel," where *Oscar Wao* is Díaz's first novel.

referentiality of postmodernism, the novels of comic book realism engage with the superhero as a metaphor for the resolution of a character's struggle with his or her own identity. In the figure of the superhero, this issue is foregrounded by the difference between the superheroic identity and the alter ego; Superman is at once an immensely powerful hero and the journalist Clark Kent, a dual identity which often leads to questions of which persona is the genuine one. In a similar way, the novels of comic book realism feature protagonists who adopt identities scripted from comic books; while this "scripting" is a postmodern trope, reading comic book realism through a post-postmodern lens helps us to see that these novels engage with superhero comics sincerely, not ironically. This "New Sincerity," at the heart of many theories of a literary movement after postmodernism, prioritizes an unironic though self-aware truth to the self. Where postmodern novels might view scripting with suspicion, suggesting that such behavior occludes one's ability to understand oneself, the writers of comic book realism present protagonists who understand themselves better after adopting and eventually setting aside their scripted identities.

Adam Kelly's definition of New Sincerity is predicated on Lionel Trilling's original conception of sincerity as "truth to the self . . . as a means of ensuring truth to the other" (132). My third chapter, then, entitled "Justice – Ethics and the Other in Comic Book Realism," looks at the genre's sense of ethical responsibility to its others. Drawing on the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Primo Levi, and Giorgio Agamben, I argue that comic book realism does not constitute escapism in the sense of an evasion of ethics; rather, a closer understanding of the ethical philosophy of Levinas reveals that these texts use the superhero as a metaphor for the immense weight of one's ethical responsibility

not to forget historical atrocities like the Holocaust. The project of memory advocated by *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* can also be seen in contemporaneous Superman and Captain America comics, which reimagine the characters' World War II-era origins with sobering reminders of what fictional superheroes are not able to do in the face of real atrocity.

The final movement of Superman's slogan, "The American Way," is divided in two for my project in recognition of the fact that comic book realism is beginning to redress the stereotype that superhero stories are oppressively masculine turf. At the heart of this examination are Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, and Junot Díaz, three men born within five years of each other, with novels published between 2000 and 2007. While many of the other novels in my analysis of comic book realism share themes and concerns with these three, many more do not, and most of those dissenting novels are written by women. My fourth chapter, "Mild-Mannered Masculinity," looks at a case of the former, the shared theme of masculinity which preoccupies most comic book realist writers. Here we see that the novelists inherit from comics a set of idealized masculine characteristics – in short, those ideals that make Superman a super man. Ultimately, though, these writers reject the Superman ideal in favor of something more closely resembling Clark Kent, a masculine ideal I have dubbed "mild-mannered masculinity" for its deference to the more passive attributes (and, perhaps not coincidentally, writerly profession) of the superhero's alter ego.

At the risk of making an essentialist argument, I treat the women writers of comic book realism separately in my fifth chapter, "The American Way, Part II – The Women Writers of Comic Book Realism." What is striking about these authors is that they defy

categorization in a way that their male counterparts do not; that is, where we can easily see Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz working through similar issues in their comic book realist novels, the authors profiled in Chapter Five cannot be said to fit neatly into a single thematic trend. I argue instead that these writers represent possible avenues for women struggling to find their place in a genre which has historically been less than friendly to women readers. Rather than work with preexisting characters as Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz do, these women create their own superheroic icons and pursue those, maintaining a baseline faith in the power of the genre while rejecting the hypermasculine valence of comics as they stand today. I suggest in this chapter that recent changes in superhero narratives on film and television might foster the kind of women readers who will go on to write their own comic book realist works, which might resemble preexisting works as writers embrace figures like Supergirl or Jessica Jones, but which might also appear as something entirely unique and unexpected.

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CHAPTER TWO:
TRUTH – COMIC BOOK REALISM
AND THE NEW SINCERITY

Let us return for a moment to the opening sentence of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*: “They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles” (1). I have shown in my first chapter the ways that this beginning aligns Junot Díaz with the project of American literary globalism, comparing it to a similar moment in Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, but there is one more comparison to be made, one which grounds *Oscar Wao* firmly in the realm of comic book realism. After an infamous falling out with Marvel Comics and a much-publicized move to its chief competitor DC Comics, writer/artist Jack Kirby – who had co-created Captain America, The Fantastic Four, Thor, Hulk, and a litany of others – introduced a host of new characters in a series of four interlocking titles¹⁵ that collectively became known as “the Fourth World Saga.” In these highly imaginative if narrative sprawling issues, Kirby presented a race of “New Gods,” caught in a Manichean struggle between the peaceful planet of New Genesis and its dark twin Apokolips. Kirby’s comic series *The New Gods* began in 1971 with these words: “Epilogue – ***There came a time when the old gods died!*** The brave died with the cunning! The noble perished, locked in battle with unleashed evil! It was the ***last*** day for them! An ancient era was ***passing*** in ***fiery*** holocaust! The ***final*** moment came with the ***fatal*** release of ***indescribable*** power -- which ***tore*** the home of the old gods asunder -- ***split*** it in great halves -- and filled the universe with the

¹⁵ *Superman’s Friend, Jimmy Olsen; The New Gods; The Forever People; and Mister Miracle.*

blinding death-flash of its **destruction!**” (1).¹⁶ Kirby’s prose is accompanied by images of worlds in turmoil, torn asunder by the sheer awesome power of a violent conflict between two warring factions.

That Díaz’s prose, which introduces *Oscar Wao* by way of a vast conflagration and collapse of civilizations, bears some resemblance to Kirby’s should come as little surprise. *Oscar Wao*’s ostensible antagonist, the dictator Rafael Trujillo, is compared on the very next page to Darkseid, the Apokoliptian god of evil who serves as the primary villain of *The New Gods* – “He was our Sauron, our Arawn, our Darkseid, our Once and Future Dictator, a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up” (2). Furthermore, nearly every critic and reader of *Oscar Wao* has had to contend with the twin epigraphs that precede the novel’s first chapter. The second, a poem by Derek Walcott, performs the conventional function of an epigraph by teasing the novel’s main themes (migration and multiculturalism among them) through a reference to a source conventionally accepted to be of high literary status. Of greater interest, though, is the quotation from *Fantastic Four* #49: “Of what import are brief, nameless lives... to **Galactus?**” A reference to this comic book, whose authorship has always been contested by those who argue that Kirby wrote more of *Fantastic Four* than Stan Lee gave him credit, suggests a host of associations and opens up the text to the postmodern dissolution of the high/low culture divide. Both Richard Patten and Pamela Rader have suggested that the novel itself functions as a response to Galactus, with the title positing the brief life of the not-nameless Oscar Wao as being not unimportant but wondrous. But it also enrolls the text in the emerging tradition of comic

¹⁶ I have standardized the capitalization, but otherwise I have done my best to preserve typographically Kirby’s trademark prose style.

book realism, presupposing the literary merit of the text (in other words, its suitability for use as an epigraph) and inviting the reader to find meaning in a comic book in the same way that the novel's protagonists do.

This inclusion of mass culture in the realm of more conventionally "literary" culture is one example of the way that American literature has become globalized, open to multiple vocalities. Rachel Adams describes postmodernism's polyvocality "as a sign of authorial mastery" (264) – in other words, cacophonous, clouding perceptions of its characters and readers to demonstrate the inaccessibility of truth in the postmodern world (while simultaneously baffling more than a generation of undergraduate students). So much of the cottage industry surrounding *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, takes the form of pure explication, attempting to make sense of the novel's intensely referential quality under the assumption that perhaps one more footnote will make sense of the text. The polyvocal literature of American literary globalism, however, seeks to access some truth about existence; in the case of comic book realism, the inclusion of superhero comics as one more voice in the text suggests that the superhero genre can help its characters and readers in pursuit of that truth. In the way that all literature – all good literature, at any rate – communicates something to its readers, some "truth" about the world and the way it works (or ought to work), comic book realism permits its protagonists to understand truths about their own existence and identities through their experiences as comic book readers. (Adams's claim that polyvocality allows writers "to channel the voices of those who have been silenced from the historical record" [264] will be the focus of my third chapter, on "Justice" in comic book realism.)

New Sincerity: Post-Postmodern Identity Politics

Recall from my introduction Tom King's assessment that superhero comics permit their readers to see "some amount of veracity . . . a truth put forth" (295). I maintain that this truth is communicated by virtue of the superhero's mutability as a metaphor, a claim also posited by psychologist Lawrence Rubin, who argues from a clinical perspective that the superhero genre "carries with it the seeds for self-understanding, problem resolution, identity formation, resiliency, and growth" (39). In his account of a young Honduran boy named Roberto, Rubin demonstrates how Roberto's habit of reading Superman stories allowed him to develop his literacy skills and also come to terms with his own status as an adopted immigrant; where Superman was rocketed from the doomed planet of Krypton and adopted by the Kansas couple in whose fields his spacecraft had landed, Roberto had come from Honduras to New York, adopted by a Puerto Rican immigrant.

Postmodern literature has something similar to Roberto's experience in the form of scripting, in which characters learn and imitate behavior from their media consumption. We have already seen the way that Tyrone Slothrop learned his Rocketman persona from the Plasticman comics he read, though Slothrop's experience with scripting was one in which a proliferation of media voices proved more confusing than liberating. In the genre of comic book realism, as this chapter will demonstrate, the exact opposite is true; comic book realist novels depict characters who learn and perform scripted behaviors from superhero comics, accessing in the process some truth about themselves and the world in which they live.

Comic book realism's use of superhero comics to approach truth has some affinity with another phenomenon in contemporary literature, an important element of most definitions of post-postmodernism – the rise of the New Sincerity, as proposed by Adam Kelly. Kelly positions David Foster Wallace as a post-postmodern author invested in a return to sincerity, obsolete since modernism, though Wallace insists on sincerity being informed by postmodernism “in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media” (134). Wallace's sincerity, a reaction against the pervasiveness of irony in American literature, marks a point of departure from Lionel Trilling's definition of sincerity, “a congruence between avowal and actual feeling” (2). Where Trilling's sincerity was constituted by “the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self” (5), Kelly sees Wallace's New Sincerity as more self-aware of the nature of sincerity as both perceived and performed; the New Sincerity “asks what happens when the anticipation of others' reception of one's outward behavior begins to take priority for the acting self, so that inner states lost their originating causal status and instead become an effect of that anticipatory logic” (136). In this way, we would expect the scripting of superhero identity to come with some awareness of how others would expect that superhero to behave, and indeed in *The Fortress of Solitude* we see it when the flying Aeroman is first introduced. The narrator asks accusingly, “Who does this flying man think he is anyway—Batman?” (45) Though the tongue-in-cheek narrator mistakes Batman for having the power of flight, both Aeroman and his observers expect him to act a certain way, to follow a script derived from the printed adventures of Batman or, perhaps, the 1966 television show (set in the 1970s, *Fortress of Solitude* predates the media proliferation of Batman films, cartoons, and video games).

Kelly notes that the term “New Sincerity”¹⁷ had already been claimed in an earlier essay on genre film by Jim Collins, but where Kelly argues that his New Sincerity and Collins’s have little in common (positing that Collins’s sincerity is closer to Trilling’s authenticity, in that both constitute a rejection of irony) I wish to suggest that the two can find common ground under the umbrella of comic book realism. For Collins, new sincerity is found in a narrative that “rejects any form of irony in its sanctimonious pursuit of lost purity” (243). His examples of such a film include *Dances with Wolves*, *Hook*, and *Field of Dreams*, all of which “fix this recoverable purity in an impossible past . . . not just before the advent of media corruption . . . [but in] a never-never land of pure wish-fulfillment” (257). Like Wallace, who argued that the pervasiveness of television had a corrupting influence, Collins’s new sincerity seeks purity in a past before media saturation. In a compelling analysis of *Dances with Wolves*, Collins offers four central issues in new sincerity, which I have broken into a bulleted list for the ease of the reader:

- [T]he move back in time away from the corrupt sophistication of media culture toward a lost authenticity defined simultaneously as a yet-to-be-contaminated folk culture of elemental purity, and as the site of successful narcissistic projection, the hero’s magic mirror;
- the foregrounding not only of the intertextual, but of the “Ur-textual,” in which an originary genre text takes on a quasi-sacred function as the guarantee of authenticity;
- the fetishizing of “belief” rather than irony as the only way to resolve conflict;
- the introduction of a new generic imaginary that becomes the only site where unresolvable conflicts can be successfully resolved. (259)

Each of the four guidelines Collins presents for new sincerity can be found in the novels of comic book realism: the comics referenced always emerge from a purer past (relative to the present, 1986’s *Watchmen* seems to be the most contemporary point of reference),

¹⁷ I will try to distinguish between the two by capitalizing the literary New Sincerity, as Kelly does throughout his essay, and maintaining the lowercase letters of Collins’s new sincerity.

the superhero genre at large becomes an “ur-text” when particular works are not invoked, and the texts of comic book realism always foreground the way that comics foster a community, a kind of new folk culture, between their readers.

Where Kelly wants to keep his New Sincerity distinct from Collins’s, I believe the two can work together in the genre of comic book realism, which evidences both New Sincerity’s centrality of the self as inevitably inflected by postmodernism and the unironic faith in genres Collins observes. In other words, in order to be sincere after postmodernism, the writers of comic book realism have to (or are least are free to) turn to the superhero genre to explain their stories. We will see a blend of Kelly’s performative New Sincerity and Collins’s four guidelines in the three major novels of comic book realism, but we can also observe them at work in Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park*, which draws on comic books but does not find its protagonists themselves becoming superheroes. In the novel, both the full-figured redhead Eleanor and the half-Korean Park are immediately marked by their physical bodies as outsiders. Though the two share a seat on the school bus, they never speak to each other until Park realizes Eleanor has been reading his comic books over his shoulder. Once this bond is discovered, their union is realized both narratively and textually; while previous chapters had alternated between Eleanor and Park’s perspectives, the chapter in which she first reads “with” him contains both their narrative voices, a small indication of the conflict resolution central to Collins’s new sincerity. As the two fall in love, they think of each other first as analogues for superheroes, projecting each other and then themselves onto what Collins calls a genre’s “magic mirror.” Park observes that Eleanor’s intense concentration on his books makes her look “the way artists draw Jean Grey sometimes when she’s using her

telepathy” where Eleanor, less steeped in the genre, simply imagines Park “dressed in white, like a superhero” (68). (Her referential skills grow over the course of the novel, envisioning her and Park as numerous superheroes.) Their bond is deepened as Park loans Eleanor more comics – the serialized issues of *Watchmen*, *The Dark Knight Returns*, *Swamp Thing*, and *X-Men* – which she treats as fetishized objects which must be returned in pristine condition.

At the novel’s conclusion, it may be that Eleanor has fully internalized the importance of superhero comics; a postcard to Park, mailed from regions unknown after Eleanor runs away to Minneapolis, is “Just three words long” (325). Of course, the obvious choice for these three words is “I love you” or perhaps some version of “I’m coming home,” but Andrew Hoberek has speculated that the words might be derived from the final issue of *Watchmen*, which Park wonders whether Eleanor has read – “Nothing ever ends,” words spoken by *Watchmen*’s god-like Dr. Manhattan on the occasion of the end of the Cold War.¹⁸ For Hoberek, this reading signals “a refusal both of falsely happy endings and of despair in the face of present circumstances” (Hoberek, *Considering* 182). To my eyes, this reading also suggests yet another possibility for the three words – “To be continued,” the oldest tradition in the superhero genre, for *Action Comics* #1 concludes with Superman dangling a saboteur from a telephone wire.¹⁹

¹⁸ This moment seems to have a hold on writers of comic book realism. In *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Yunior tells us, “Oscar—who never defaced a book in his life—circled one panel three times” in his copy of *Watchmen* – this exact moment (331). *Oscar Wao* has its own enigmatic three words, rendered typographically as lined blanks; spoken by the Mongoose to Oscar (301) and not spoken by Yunior, who describes them as “words that could have saved us” (327), these words too might be “I love you” or “Nothing ever ends.”

¹⁹ In a speaking appearance in Cedar Rapids, IA, on June 19, 2015, Rowell refused to pin down the three words, as she also does on her website. She expressed surprise when I mentioned Hoberek’s suggestion of “Nothing ever ends,” saying ruefully, “Gosh, I wish I’d thought of that.”

We have then a new New Sincerity, at least where comic book realism is concerned, a New Sincerity through new sincerity, a truth to the self and others through an unironic embrace of the superhero genre. One can imagine a New Sincerity which embraces a different genre – Eleanor and Park, for example, also compare their romantic relationship to the rivalry between space pirate Han Solo and his bounty hunter foe Boba Fett from *Star Wars*, in that Park (like Fett) would “cross the sky for you” (251) – but this study of the New Sincerity will focus only on its bearing on comic book realism.

Wallace and Kelly’s awareness of sincerity as performative allows comic book readers to adopt those identities and the accompanying script, a trend that lost its ironic edge in Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm*. Recall that Paul Hood found himself at first drawn to the Fantastic Four as a rubric to lay over his family with himself at the center as a Human Torch “burnt out. Burnt at both ends” (274). Although Paul experiences some difficulty in identifying his family members one-to-one with his comics – “These models never worked exactly” – he nevertheless comes to understand his world better by reading it as he would read a comic book, for “the F.F., with all their mistakes and allegiances, their in-fighting and dependability, told some true tale about family” (80). When Paul fashions himself as a superhero (albeit in a more passive way than Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz’s protagonists will, as will be seen below), he still attains the truth sought by the New Sincerity, a photograph of unity in his family which he remembers as “A flaming figure four” in the sky, a reference to the signal flare used to call the Fantastic Four to action (278). For Paul, who narrates the novel from the third person, his efforts to tell the story fall back on the imagery of Fantastic Four comics to explain this moment in his life. The very act of storytelling becomes superheroic, a superpower expressed through the

language of Marvel Comics. Pure realism might try to communicate the moment of unity in the Hood family car, but the invocation of the Fantastic Four's signal flare makes the image more potent by abstracting it from reality, congruent with Scott McCloud's understanding of comics themselves as reliant upon "amplification through simplification" – a kind of abstraction which relays meaning more directly than realistic representation (30).

The opportunity for sincerity invested in comics by Rowell, Moody, and the other novelists operating in comic book realism aligns with most of the prevailing theories of post-postmodernism in its awareness of the mediating effect language has on contemporary existence. I do not mean to suggest that comic book realism is entirely synonymous with post-postmodernism, for I agree with Hoberek that postmodern aesthetics still remain an option available to contemporary writers in the way that comic book realism is another option ("Introduction" 236). But I do believe that comic book realism has several important points of contact with theorizations of the state of contemporary American literature, some of which have gathered under the moniker of "post-postmodernism." Even ten years ago, Robert McLaughlin identified a shift away from what he saw as "the perceived dead end of postmodernism" caused by "postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language" (55) – a kind of navelgazing postmodernism which lacks relevance in the current moment. Rather than language which emphasizes the difficulty or impossibility of reference, McLaughlin concludes that the focus of post-postmodernism is "less on self-conscious wordplay and the violation of narrative conventions and more on representing the world we all more or less share. . . . a world

that we know through language and layers of representation” (66-67). Unlike postmodernism, post-postmodernism does not want to “reify” or “escape” the pervading cynicism but rather “to make us newly aware of the reality that has been made for us and to remind us – because we live in a culture where we’re encouraged to forget – that other realities are possible” (67). In the case of Paul Hood, his use of the Fantastic Four to narrate his own story demonstrates a keen awareness of the way his existence is filtered through the media he consumes. Even though he insinuates that he has stopped reading comic books in the intervening twenty years, the language of the Fantastic Four is still an inextricable part of his memory of that time: “Paul’s own destiny was entrapped in the monthly serializations of these kitschy superheroes” (194).

Like McLaughlin and many of the other theorists of post-postmodernism, Rachel Greenwald Smith finds a reversal of postmodernism’s language games and an “erasure of postmodernist experimentalism” in favor of “a general return to realism” (424). In short, for Smith, post-postmodernism is that literary movement in which “contemporary experimental work increasingly seeks to engage with material realities rather than merely its own language play” (439). Smith’s essay is grounded in the affective turn, though she does not advocate the humanism that Nicoline Timmer sees as central to post-postmodernism. Both Smith and Timmer agree, however, on the importance of relationality in the affective turn, though where Smith locates that relation between individual emotions and their social/systemic causes, Timmer places it between subjects themselves. Timmer’s relational self is presented as a kind of medical patient, with three distinct symptoms of “the post-postmodern syndrome”:

1. “a perceived *lack of decision making tools*,” in which “the individual feels unequipped to deal with this existential freedom and almost seems to *crave* for some guidance” (302);
2. Taken from *Infinite Jest*’s Hal, “it hurts, I can’t feel anything” – an affective vacuum in which “the selves in these contemporary novels are overwhelmed by feelings they can hardly make sense of” (302);
3. And once more from Hal, “a structural need for a we” (305) – a kind of painful solipsism from which the characters want desperately to escape; put another way, “a curious form of solipsism . . . one without a solipsist present” (352)

Briefly put, I believe that all three of Timmer’s “symptoms” can be adequately “treated” by comic book realism. In the texts under consideration, superhero comics provide decision-making tools by providing readers with scripted identities. Their affective vacuums can be filled by the “great responsibility” that accompanies a superhero script, and the painful solipsism of post-postmodernity is often alleviated by the kind of community formation we saw in *Eleanor & Park* and which will be seen in the longer case studies below.

What is at stake in considering superhero comics as sites for sincerity is the redefinition (and perhaps redemption) of mass culture and “entertainment,” which Michael Chabon has described as a kind of a dirty word. “Entertainment has a bad name,” he writes in an essay on the demise of genre in the short story; “Serious people learn to mistrust and even to revile it. The word wears spandex,” conjuring images of the cape and tights worn by the superheroes his characters create (Chabon, *Maps* 13). One

senses that Chabon is responding to reviewers like John Leonard, who decried the place of comics in Lethem's *Fortress of Solitude*. Hoberek has argued that our notion of the canon has been expanded by postmodernism's inclusion of low culture alongside high culture, noting that the graphic novel has since been "elevated to the status of literature" ("Introduction" 238). Indeed, Chabon declares, "The battle [for the legitimacy of comics] has now, in fact been won" (*Maps* 89). But I think the novels of comic book realism depict that the battle was never just for the respectability of comics or the inclusion in "the canon" (though something like *Watchmen* demonstrates both). The battle actually won was actually the struggle to become a site for sincerity, without the stigma of being solely an adolescent fantasy. If entertainment has improved its reputation, its capacity to connect positively with its consumers must also necessarily have been rehabilitated.

"Wishful figments": Superhero Identity as Escape

Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* begins with two cousins in New York in the late 1930s. After discovering the immense profit possible in superhero comics upon the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* #1, Sammy and Joe create their own comic book character, The Escapist.²⁰ The Escapist becomes a phenomenal success and a funnel for Sammy and Joe's anxieties as the novel sprawls its way through historical fiction, Melvillean digressions into the nature of comic book publishing circa 1939, and the complex relationship that develops between Sammy, Joe, and Rosa Saks, the woman they both love, albeit in different ways.

From its opening pages, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* establishes itself as a novel about identity and the way mass culture allows its consumers to create

²⁰ The character makes his debut in the fictional comic book *Amazing Midget Radio Comics*. For the sake of clarity, I refer to the character as The Escapist but will reference his comic book, television, and radio programs as the italicized *The Escapist*.

and refashion their own identities. After his cousin Josef Kavalier arrives in New York from Prague, Samuel Klayman introduces himself as “Not Samuel. Sammy. No, call me Sam” (8). In a moment of naturalization, the Jewish Samuel Klayman becomes the American Sam Clay. It takes Josef a little while longer to Americanize himself, but when the two enter into a business arrangement as print artists, the pair shake hands, and Josef, in “what he must have thought was an American accent,” instructs his new partner, “Call me Joe” (71). Joe’s is a double Americanization, entering into both a new identity and the capitalist economy of 1939 New York.

Appropriately, then, the first thing Sammy and Joe discover is that their efforts to create their own comic book superhero will reward them handsomely if they can create a compelling character. During their brainstorming sessions, Sammy warns Joe, “Every little skinny guy like me in New York who believes there’s life on Alpha Centauri and got the shit kicked out of him in school and can smell a dollar is out there right this minute trying to jump onto it” (94). Joe quickly realizes that the key to a superhero is not a superpowered gimmick or a flamboyant costume. “The question is why,” he declares, locating the importance of the superhero in the hero’s secret identity, a fundamental aspect of the genre for both Reynolds and Coogan. For Reynolds, the key to the secret identity is the way it provides a mundane counterpart to the fantastic exploits of the hero, but Coogan argues that the secret identity component allows the alter ego to express itself in a literal manner on the figure of the superhero. That is, what is intrinsically true about Clark Kent is literalized as Superman. “Superman is a super man who represents the best humanity can hope to achieve,” Coogan writes; “his codename expresses his inner character” (33). No wonder, then, that Sammy and Joe’s creation Tom Mayflower brands

himself The Escapist; rescued by the magician Misterioso the Great from “an orphanage in central Europe,” narrowly escaping Nazi Germany, Tom becomes The Escapist.

It is Davy O’Dowd, a fellow artist in Sammy and Joe’s newly formed Palooka Studios, who pronounces the truth of the relationship between superhero and secret identity, suggesting something crucial about the appeal of these costumed characters. As the entire novel does, Davy foregrounds the place of the creator (thumbing his nose decades before Barthes pronounced the death of the author), who creates superheroes in order to embody a kind of wish fulfillment, or as Davy misunderstands the term, “wishful figments.” He tells Sammy, “It’s all what some little kid *wishes* he could do. Like for you, hey, you don’t want to have a gimpy leg no more. So, boom, you give your guy a magic key and he can walk” (145).

The relationship between mass culture and its consumers, between fiction and reality, has unsurprisingly been a focal point for much of the criticism on *Kavalier & Clay*. It is worth repeating that one of the novel’s main themes is escapism, the subject of surprisingly little serious writing. It seems that either the value or failing of escapist fiction is often taken for granted, though a few relevant essays before Chabon stand out in defense of escapist fiction. Chabon, of course, has a place of prominence in the redemption of escapist literature, embodied quite literally in the figure of Sammy and Joe’s creation The Escapist, who represents, as his mission statement tells us, “the liberation of all who toil in chains” (134). Before Chabon’s argument for entertainment against its status as a “dirty word,” J. R. R. Tolkien mounted a defense of escapist literature in the form of “fairy-stories,” which he defines as “one which touches on or uses Faërie . . . translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the

furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician” (43). In the same way that Collins’s new sincerity embraces genre in earnest, and like comic book realism does not repudiate its characters for reveling in superhero comics, Tolkien rejects a self-critical fairy-story with his “one proviso: if there is any satire present in the tale, one thing must not be made fun of, the magic itself” (43).²¹ Furthermore, Tolkien argues for the merits of fairy-stories to adult readers as well as to children and suggests that fairy-stories have in common with other literary forms basic human values and aesthetic functions, among which is the opportunity for Escape, closely connected to Consolation. To refute the counterargument that escapist literature constitutes an abnegation of reality, Tolkien positions escapism as a response to the weariness of modernity when he writes, “Many stories out of the past have only become ‘escapist’ in their appeal through surviving from a time when men were as a rule delighted with the work of their hands into our time when many men feel disgust with man-made things” (79). The final gift of Escape, Tolkien offers, is the “Consolation of the Happy Ending,” which positions the fairy-story as the polar opposite of classical tragedy (81). Where Tolkien’s fairy-story ends happily through a “eucatastrophe” (the happy reversal of fortune in which crisis is averted), I believe comic book realism offers its own happy ending by way of the superhero genre’s “to be continued” trope; if conflict is not outright resolved, as Collins’s new sincerity would afford, we shall see that comic book realism defers that happy ending but leaves it for an imagined next installment, as is the case with *Eleanor & Park*’s mysterious three words.

²¹ For comparison with the central texts of comic book realism, consider Robert Rodi’s *What They Did to Princess Paragon*, in which fanboy Jerome T. Kornacker is made the subject of satirical derision for his inability to separate reality from the *Wonder Woman*-esque comics he reads.

Where Tolkien addressed the belief that escapism was too juvenile for adult readers, Ursula K. Le Guin begins from the suggestion that escapism is dangerous for children. In her essay “Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?” Le Guin interprets the aversion to escapism as a product of the Puritan work ethic, the capitalist drive for profit, and the gendering of imagination as feminine and childish. The latter in particular she rejects directly by arguing that imagination and therefore the drive for escapism cannot be wholly suppressed; the same impulse that spurs imagination, she claims, instead finds expression through “bloody detective thrillers,” “hack Westerns or sport stories,” or even pornography “from *Playboy* on down” (37). These outlets are the consequences of a war on imagination, to which Le Guin answers simply, “The use of [imagination] is to give you pleasure and delight” (38). What ultimately motivates an aversion to escapist literature, Le Guin suggests, is a deep-rooted fear; “They are afraid of dragons,” she concludes, “because they are afraid of freedom” (40). And at the end of her essay, Le Guin offers a claim that aligns her quite strongly with the advocates of the New Sincerity, offering that “it is by such beautiful non-facts [as escapist literature offers] that we fantastic human beings may arrive, in our peculiar fashion, at the truth” (40). Whether it wears a dragon’s wings or a superhero’s cape, Le Guin and the writers of comic book realism seem to agree that truth can be accessed through escapism.

The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, meanwhile, has agreed that escapism is a basic and “inescapable” human impulse, offering it as a much-needed panacea to “the literature of despair” (xvi-xvii). Considering the concept of escape both literally and metaphorically, Tuan, as a geographer, begins from the connection of escape to space and ultimately positions “[human] culture as escape from nature, and escape into ‘nature’ itself as escape

into culture” (81). Tuan’s conclusion, that the human impulse to escape leads one inevitably to discovery of what he repeatedly calls “the real and the good,” brings the discussion of escapism once more to the field of New Sincerity. He uses the analogy of Thales of Miletus, who fell down a well while stargazing; though he was teased by a servant girl, “Thales tasted both the heights and the depths, while the Thracian girl moved along the safe, horizontal plane” (203). We might argue then, that the safe ground on which the servant girl treads represents an adherence to strict realism, which offers a weaker possibility for escape than does an earnest investment in genre literature. If we embrace that drive for escape, Tuan suggests, we open ourselves to “the heights and depths” of universal truth.

In the years since the novel’s publication, critics have focused on several significant themes in the novel: its affinities with Jewish culture (particularly in light of Chabon’s Jewish background and his subsequent novel *The Yiddish Policeman’s Union*, which imagines a settlement of Jews in Sitka, Alaska), its allegiance to the world of comics as an art form, and its attention to questions of escapism. Much of the critical conversation on escapism in *Kavalier & Clay* focuses on the degree to which Chabon endorses or rejects the value of escapism in the lives of his protagonists,²² with many

²² While the following section traces the various ways that critics have reacted to the novel’s portrayal of the relationship between art and escape, others have written about the way the novel posits other opportunities for escape. The critic Daniel Punday has described the novel as an “economic bildungsroman” in which *The Escapist* allows Sammy and Joe to reap residuals and fund their new projects, like Joe’s long graphic novel *The Golem*. Emily Taber, meanwhile, has compared Joe’s more imaginative escape through his art to Sammy’s attempt to escape his homosexuality by domesticating himself in the suburbs with his wife Rosa Saks. In a similar vein, Louise Colbran’s essay “The Grand Illusion” argues that the novel finds both Sammy and Joe attempting to escape the strictures of hegemonic masculinity through performing it, though surprisingly she leaves superheroes out of that conversation (something I will attempt to restore in my fourth chapter). Finally, the scholar Huei-ju Wang suggests that the novel functions as a rebuttal to and attempt to escape Fredric Wertham’s infamous claim that Batman and Robin represented a homosexual couple, an escape she argues is unsuccessful because Chabon mistakes the superhero’s inherent homosociality for Wertham’s heteronormative reading of homosexuality.

critics taking that opportunity to situate Chabon as a post-postmodernist. Richard Landon has argued that Chabon's portrayal of superhero comics navigates the line between the "junk culture" and "transformative" qualities of the genre, ultimately celebrating both. He writes, "Comics are something to embrace *because of*—rather than in spite of—their lowly status," with Chabon demonstrating the way that, per Davy O'Dowd, superhero comics "can transfigure insecurities into art" (emphasis maintained from 205). Landon's argument focuses largely on the relationship between the famous Charles Atlas advertisements and Grant Morrison's deconstructive superhero comic *Flex Mentallo*, though he rightly notes that the physical body of Sammy Clay bears some resemblance to Atlas's 98-pound weakling; in this way, Sammy funnels his physical insecurities about his body into the creation of The Escapist, transfiguring them into art.

In much the same vein, Marc Singer explores the way that Sammy and Joe create characters who "literally embody their own subtexts, divining in this common comic-book storytelling device a trope of unmediated, undeferred meaning" (282). Where Landon described this process as a transfiguration, Singer positions it as a hypostasis, a "somatization of abstract concepts and desires into human figures" (275) in which The Escapist does not only represent Sammy and Joe's desires and insecurities but also the very Platonic notion of freedom and escapism. After reading Superman as "a hypostasis of certain Jewish and immigrant experiences" (284), Singer reads the figure of The Escapist as a hypostasis of Sammy and Joe's experiences before turning to the pair's "exhaustion with purely symbolic representation and a desire to create something more direct and real" (285). Indeed, Singer finds Chabon invested in "the impulse that, he believes, motivates the creation of all art: the attempt to make the unreal real" (285).

Singer concludes that Chabon's investment in hypostasis is due to "the limitations of metaphor and metonymy" (287). Metaphors made visual and then embodied in a comic are more potent than conventional representation or even direct realism, as we see with the examples of Sammy's abandoned prose narrative *American Disillusionment* or Joe's wordless 2,256-page comic *The Golem*,²³ which operates purely on the level of visual signification. These projects never attain the success of the *Escapist* comics, in large part because they remain unfinished by novel's end.

Linking Chabon more explicitly to the project of departing postmodernism, Windy Petrie suggests that Chabon's attitude toward the place of art enrolls him in what I take to be a kind of new realism, a 21st century attitude which "not only refuse[s] aesthetic restriction but also tr[ies] to regenerate a faith in fiction which does not privilege historical fact" (103). Her stance is grounded by Hassan's new postmodernism of trust; Hassan's shifting postmodernism from suspicion to trust evidences greater attention to truth, which Hassan opposes to "pretence" in the way that "falsity" is the opposite of "truth" (Hassan, "Realism" 12). Per Hassan, whose theory of contemporary postmodern literature sees a return of realism, Petrie finds an "enlightened nostalgia" (104) in Chabon and Jonathan Safran Foer, one that seeks to restore the reader's trust in literary realism but in a "more self-reflexive way" (104). Petrie's new realism has some affinities with Kelly's New Sincerity, in that both involve a self-conscious self-reflexivity

²³ Joe's long comic *The Golem*, an apparent anticipation of the graphic novel format popularized by Will Eisner's *A Contract With God*, remains unpublished by the end of the novel; Sammy's suggestion that he would like to write a script for Joe's images is unlikely to be fulfilled because of Sammy's flight from New York in the final chapter. Hillary Chute has posited that *The Golem* represents "an intervention in popular culture" (287), a reinvention of comics as "a serious art form . . . whose politics resides in its aesthetic choices and stances but is yet inclusive of popular conventions and genres" (285). In my reading, the novel suggests that the world is not quite ready for *The Golem* (the final chapter, set in 1954, precedes *A Contract With God* by more than two decades), which perhaps explains why *The Golem* is never published – in Chabon's eyes, the work which might have legitimized comics had yet to be born.

in anticipation of the reader's perception, but where Kelly locates the sincerity between writer and reader, Petrie places the question of trust between the reader and the work of art itself, or more broadly between readers and all art. Like Landon and Singer, Petrie reads Chabon's approach to escapism as an affirmative one; furthermore, *Kavalier & Clay* and Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated* "restore to readers a good-faith in art's regenerative power to relieve suffering and move us toward a greater understanding: not through rigidity or determinism, but through the use of the 'well-made fiction' as Escape," rather than a vehicle for escape (107). That is, the escape is not located in Sammy and Joe's act of creation; rather, the fiction is itself the escape. Art by its very nature can relieve suffering, Petrie suggests, and I will offer that comic book realism suggests that the relief comes in the form of a script; as I will demonstrate below, Sammy and Joe turn to their superhero comics in those moments of suffering, enacting them when their path seems unclear.

Lee Behlman, however, is more critical of the place of escapism in *Kavalier & Clay*. Behlman suggests that Chabon is somewhat unique among contemporary Jewish-American writers in positing that fantasy is "a potentially valid means of escape from the past" and that escapism "is itself a valid response" (101). This escape from the past does, however, run the risk of "the admittedly problematic, quintessentially American phenomenon of forgetting" (102). Though I will argue in Chapter Three that *Kavalier & Clay* ultimately stands as a novel which cannot help but remember, which demonstrates the impossibility of forgetting, Behlman ultimately concludes that escapism is "a turn away from history" and toward safety from memory, "a holding action against the damages of the past" (108). Behlman's skepticism about the value of escapism is met by

Joseph Dewey's outright dismissal of it. Making the plausible claim that Chabon's chief theme is in fact "the defining theme of American literature . . . namely, the scope, breadth, and scale of the imagination" (4), Dewey writes that *Kavalier & Clay* "test[s] the implications of his master theme—the imagination and its confrontation with bruising reality" (74). Where Behlman conceded at least a temporary (if ethically dangerous) pleasure in escapism, Dewey rejects it altogether when he claims that "Chabon argues that art cannot console, cannot protect with happy endings and tidy resolutions" (87).

Like Petrie, however, Dewey allows the place of trust in Chabon's fiction; Chabon tells Dewey in an interview, "Literature to me—pre-and post-Pynchon—is a partnership between reader and writer, a game played by equals" (2). Where Hassan would describe this as a reorientation of postmodernism toward trust, Dewey moves a step further to identify Chabon as a post-postmodernist, a writer who "perceive[s] the reader not as a shadowy antagonist in some elaborate chess match but as a friend, indeed a necessary element of the storytelling dynamic" (2). Dewey and Chabon's longing for a less combative approach to literature recalls McLaughlin's frustration with the language games of postmodernism, and the collective reading of a return to realism can also be found most recently in Irmtraud Huber's analysis of the post-postmodern moment. Taking the stance that postmodernism's prevalence will ultimately be its undoing and placing Franzen as being at the forefront of the movement away from literary postmodernism, Huber claims that the plethora of new terms being offered for the post-postmodern moment all emphasize the real, but she argues (in accord with Hassan, McHale, and others) that what we have is something closer to a shift from than a break with postmodernism. In the novels she analyzes, Huber finds a return not just to realism

but also to the fantastic – which she places between “the mimetic and the marvellous” (8). Reading post-postmodern fiction as maintaining a distance between fantastic narratives and the framing realist narrative, Huber highlights in particular the three chapters of *Kavalier & Clay* that translate Sammy and Joe’s comics into prose passages, noting the way “the different levels of reality gradually intermingle” (162), something that bleeds out into the “comic-book aesthetics” (163) of the novel. Huber reads Chabon as foregrounding realist mimesis and ignoring postmodern questions of representation, opting instead to presuppose the primacy of mimesis in defense of treating art *as* escapism. And where Singer locates referentiality in the terrain of hypostasis, Huber claims that the novel’s “main mode of engagement with history is nostalgia” (167), which “offers a means of imaginative escape” (168). She suggests that Chabon might be nostalgic for a world unbroken by “postmodernist philosophy’s eternal scepticism, endless deferral and missing centres” (169). But Huber does argue that Chabon is not naïve about the problematic qualities of using superhero comics as a form of escapism, fully aware of the futility of violence and defending escapism primarily for its “therapeutic value” (175).

Many of these critics have explored the way that Sammy and Joe create The Escapist in response to aspects of their lives, to address some flaw they perceive in themselves or in the world at large. Dewey aside, most writers agree that Chabon comes down on the side of escapism, optimistic about its powers and generally approving of superhero comics with an appreciation for, if nothing else, the boundless enthusiasm contained in their pages. Indeed, it is difficult to read passages like the one I am about to

quote without sensing authorial approbation; though the narrator is speaking of Joe, Chabon's own voice can clearly be heard:

[H]e loved them [his hundred-some boxes of comic books] for the pictures and stories they contained, the inspirations and lucubrations of five hundred aging boys dreaming as hard as they could . . . transfiguring their insecurities and delusions, their wishes and their doubts, their public educations and their sexual perversions, into something that only the most purblind of societies would have denied the status of art. (575)

The narrator goes on to deliver what might be a very succinct summary of the novel's attitude toward comics on the whole: "the usual charge leveled against comic books, that they offered *merely an easy escape from reality*, seemed to Joe actually to be a powerful argument on their behalf" (emphasis maintained from 575). Beginning from Chabon, we can see the way that comic book realism's sincerity links to Collins's new sincerity in genre film; in the same way that Collins located conflict resolution within an earnest investment in genre, Sammy and Joe all find some degree of comfort (whether temporary or all-encompassing) in their comic books – which, to be fair, Chabon does not limit to superhero comics. Joe's boxes of comics include *Action Comics* and *Captain America*, but they also contain *Classics Illustrated* and several different crime comics from EC Comics; furthermore, one of his fondest memories includes a *Betty and Veronica* comic which "he would remember for the rest of his life" (574-575). This memory harkens back to Chabon's stated intention to redeem the word "entertainment," to reject the sundry connotation the word has in favor of finishing the work of postmodernism's high/low culture collision.

Although we see in *Kavalier & Clay* Chabon's favorable treatment of comics from myriad genres, this examination of comic book realism will continue to focus on superhero comics for the genre's place of prominence in both the marketplace and in

contemporary fiction. While I agree with the majority of writers who say that Chabon is ultimately optimistic about the power of escapist fiction, I believe that we need to think more deeply about the directionality of escape in *Kavalier & Clay*. Nearly all of the critics have focused on what precisely Sammy and Joe are escaping, and the degree to which their escapes into fiction are successful or ethically responsible. What has yet to be explored, however, is the feedback loop that exists between comics and their readers, the scripting performances I see as a central theme in comic book realism. In a way, I am echoing the advice given to Joe by Bernard Kornblum, his instructor in the art of escapology, who advises him, “Never worry about what you are escaping *from* . . . Reserve your anxieties for what you are escaping *to*” (emphasis maintained from 37). Of course, Sammy and Joe’s motivations for escaping are of great importance, and the subject has been covered fairly deftly to date. For the purposes of this study, we should be more precise about what it is Sammy and Joe escape *to* – superhero comics. What remains to be discussed, then, is what happens to Sammy and Joe after they escape, upon their return from superhero comics to the real world.

In short, what happens is Sammy and Joe return from their escapes having learned the behavioral patterns of their superheroes, subsequently recreating those behaviors in their own lives. Rather than take this opportunity to demonstrate the blurred distinction between fiction and reality, Chabon both reinforces the primacy of realism while simultaneously refusing to cast suspicion on the value of fiction. I disagree with the reading that Sammy and Joe’s escapes are ultimately only of therapeutic value, for the supposed “therapy” of escape has a very pragmatic component in the form of changed behaviors. Put another way, Sammy and Joe do not simply escape into fiction; they return

from their escapes as people different from who they were before. In a sense, the superhero comics in *Kavalier & Clay* are to Sammy and Joe what gamma radiation is to Bruce Banner – the thing that turns them into their superheroic alter egos. Just as Bruce Banner is mutated into The Incredible Hulk, Sammy and Joe take their readings of superhero comics and use those texts to inform and change their own lives.

We see the value of adopting a scripted identity from superhero comics quite plainly in the character of Joe, though I will also address Sammy's use of *The Escapist* below. For Joe, his work as a comics creator is not merely an escape for himself, though he does find some temporary catharsis in the act of creation. Joe's cover to the first issue of *Amazing Midget Radio Comics*, in which *The Escapist* will make his debut, quite clearly references Jack Kirby's similar cover for *Captain America Comics* #1; both feature their superhero protagonist swinging a fist at Adolf Hitler, whose body flies across the cover after the punch presumably breaks his jaw.²⁴ Joe receives no small measure of comfort from this image, as *The Escapist* is able to do what Joe cannot; "the pleasure that Joe derived from administering this brutal beating was intense and durable and strangely redemptive" (159). Although his editors are apprehensive about satirizing the Nazi dictator, with whom America is not yet at war, Joe stands by his work, and Sammy defends it by threatening to take the comic to another publisher. A few pages later, Joe's career as *The Escapist*'s illustrator has taken off, and as the narrator tells us, Joe's cathartic linework has continued in the tradition of his first cover. "It was six

²⁴ When Dark Horse Comics published the eight-issue series, *Michael Chabon Presents the Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*, the third issue featured a cover, drawn by Mike Mignola, which brings Joe's cover to life and foregrounds the Kirby connection by borrowing Kirby's choreography, as precisely as mirroring the flailing of Hitler's red tie.

o'clock on a Monday morning in October 1940. He had just won the Second World War, and he was feeling pretty good about it" (165).

This enthusiasm for his work, though, and the relief it offers are short-lived for Joe until the moment he demonstrates that he has internalized the identity of The Escapist. After an altercation at a Dodgers game, Joe takes it upon himself to confront a local chapter of the Nazi-sympathetic Aryan-American League. Using the escapistry skills he learned from Kornblum, Joe creates a makeshift lockpick from a nearby bicycle and breaks into the League's office. Where Huber reads this scene as evidence of "a considerable lack of scruples" on the part of Joe (173), in the context of the superhero genre this act is not quite as surprising. In a combination of what he describes as the distinctly American mythic values of optimism, pragmatism, and individualism, Marco Arnaudo has posited a very compelling reading of what he terms "superethics," the code of conduct by which a preponderance of superheroes operate. First and foremost, a superhero must not kill (78); if that line is transgressed, however, the superhero must demonstrate profound remorse "for defying their most sacred rule" (90). Finally, the superhero's actions must be undertaken with the least amount of violence possible, rendering the superhero as a kind of "superpolice" (77). We see, then, that the novel finds Joe not violating the conventions of the superhero he has created; indeed, Joe rejects a more theatrical entrance of breaking down the door as "a dark fantasy" (198) in favor of entering the office with the least possible violence.

Huber is correct, however, in stating that this scene does not deny the dangers of adopting an identity from superhero comics, for we learn that the League office's occupant, Carl Ebling, is himself a devout reader of *The Escapist*. In fact, Joe observes in

himself a shame “for having produced work that appealed to such a man” (204). But Chabon is careful not to elide Joe’s reading with Ebling’s, largely because Ebling’s is a hypocritical misreading of *The Escapist*. Failing to understand that The Escapist’s archenemy The Iron Chain is a thinly veiled Nazi Germany,²⁵ Ebling’s attempts to label The Escapist’s comics as “the usual Jewish warmongering propaganda [*sic*]” are, Joe recognizes, Ebling’s justification to himself for reading and enjoying the work of Jewish cartoonists. Ebling’s escape, then, leads him to an illogical effort to deny his own reality. When Joe is attacked by Ebling, who discovers the cartoonist in his office, Joe defends himself by donning the identity of The Escapist; he identifies himself as Tom Mayflower and, after besting Ebling in a brief physical conflict, leaves a mocking autograph “To my pal Carl Ebling, . . . Lots of luck, The Escapist” (205). Moreover, Ebling’s misreading is compounded when he identifies with The Escapist’s foe The Saboteur, calling in bomb threats to the offices of Empire Comics under that name. And Ebling’s attempt at revenge on Joe, involving a plot to interrupt a birthday party with a homemade explosive, reveals that Ebling has not just fashioned himself after The Saboteur, as Joe imitated The Escapist; rather, Ebling believes himself to be The Saboteur, thinking of “Carl Ebling” as his secret identity (330).

Huber is right to note that this chapter blurs the distinction between fiction and reality, as she claims much of post-postmodernist fiction does, but there is for this reader a clear distinction between Joe breaking into the League’s office and Ebling fashioning a pipe bomb disguised as a trident at a child’s birthday party. Indeed, Chabon rejects the equivalency reading when Ebling’s sister Ruth attempts to blame her brother’s plight on a

²⁵ In the first issue of *Michael Chabon Presents the Amazing Adventures of the Escapist*, artist Eric Wight eliminates any room for doubt by rendering an image of The Iron Chain with broken chain links forming a swastika over a military figure giving a Nazi salute to a similarly dressed crowd.

single comic book she finds in his bedroom (409). This moment of blame immediately follows the narrator's mention of Fredric Wertham and "his fatal book," which made similar erroneous claims about the moral dangers of comic books. By comparing Wertham and Ruth Ebling so directly, Chabon suggests that superhero comics cannot be cited as direct causes but instead suggests the better way to read them is as an inspirational escape, as Joe does.

Joe's efforts at escape continue throughout the novel. Although the title of the novel's fifth section, "Radioman," implies a superheroic dynamic to Joe's enlisting in the military, Joe never becomes a superhero in this portion of the novel. In fact, he narrowly escapes with his life after the rest of his unit succumbs to carbon monoxide poisoning in their sleep. We might read Joe's failure to become the heroic Radioman as a consequence of his failure to live up to Arnaudo's superethics; Joe enlists in the military "to kill someone, [but] he did not know who else to kill" (453), a clear violation of the first commandment of being a superhero. Upon Joe's return to New York, however, we see him much more transparently resume the life of a superhero when he quite literally dons the clothing of *The Escapist*, impersonating Tom Mayflower in a gesture to protest the "unfair robberies and poor mistreatments of his finest artists" (482). But where these actions are clearly stunts, acts of impersonation and play-acting, and not sincere belief, Joe's final escape in the novel returns him more concretely to the world of superhero comics; in a redemptive move which proposes to reverse the "unfair robberies" *The Escapist* had protested, Joe purchases Empire Comics from Sheldon Anapol²⁶ and

²⁶ In an essay purporting to be a reprint of an article from *The Comics Journal*, Malachi B. Cohen (a known pseudonym anagrammed from the name of Michael Chabon) reports that the rights to Empire Comics' superhero characters, including *The Escapist* and *Luna Moth*, were sold to DC shortly before Anapol sold the company to Joe (28).

ultimately escapes his wanderlust by, as Kornblum would put it, escaping *into* Sammy's life. Joe reunites with Rosa and takes charge of raising their son Tommy, who, in the "to be continued" tradition, has already shown a penchant for both escapistry and superhero comics. It has taken Joe this long to become a hero, and Tommy – already posited as a Kavalier double, named as he is after Joe's late brother Thomas – may be the next Escapist.

Although Joe's partner and cousin Sammy does not display the overt markers of affiliation with the superhero that Joe possesses, we can still read Sammy as consistent with Chabon's approach to comic book realism. Andrea Levine has noted that Lee Behlman's oft-cited essay on *Kavalier & Clay* virtually ignores Sammy in favor of Joe, though I would broaden that critique to the bulk of criticism on the novel. For example, Daniel Levine has traced the numerous affinities that exist between Homer's *Odyssey* and *Kavalier & Clay*, situating Joe as the novel's ostensible Odysseus, linking the Greek hero's wandering to Joe's exiles in the novel (from Europe, from New York, from his family), though he does not find an analogy for Sammy. While Joe is linked perhaps more explicitly to many of the novel's main themes – he introduces escapistry to the superhero The Escapist, he shepherds the Golem out of Prague and eventually receives it at his home, and he dons the identity of Tom Mayflower – we must not overlook Sammy. In a way, Sammy seems to belong more to Chabon's earlier work, evidencing a sexual longing and repression that might put him more at home in *Wonder Boys* or *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh*, both of which dealt with these themes so overtly that *Newsweek* featured Chabon on a list of emerging gay writers. (Chabon later corrected the error

gently.) But lest we forget, the very title of the novel bears Sammy's name,²⁷ as do the Dark Horse Comics productions of Escapist comics.

Like Joe, Sammy registers a very profound connection with the comics characters he reads and creates. It is Sammy who takes Davy's "wishful figments" interpretation to heart, recognizing at that moment the appeal of able-bodied superheroes to a young survivor of polio. And like Joe, Sammy wrestles with the perceived inferiority of comics, claiming that such inferiority is "just built in to the material" (363). But as Chabon is careful to note, and as Sammy's lover Tracy Bacon observes, the inferiority complex more properly stems from within Sammy. Disappointed in his physical limitations and wrestling with his closeted homosexuality, Sammy's chains are the consequence of his own inability to reconcile his identity. Just as Joe comes to peace with his identity after his reading of *The Escapist*, Sammy too finds Collins's anticipated conflict resolution in his superhero comics, but where Joe becomes The Escapist in several key ways, Sammy falls in love with the superhero.

More precisely, Sammy falls in love with the actor hired to play The Escapist on the radio. Like Bud Collyer, who voiced Superman on the radio from 1940 to 1950, Tracy demonstrates the ability to change his voice when alternating between portraying The Escapist and his alter ego, Tom Mayflower. By introducing Tracy in this way, we see that he is able to navigate the line between public and private life in a way that Sammy is not, and Tracy's connection to the superhero genre as one more embodiment of The

²⁷ Even so, Stephen Hock has attempted to take even the title of the novel from Sammy. In a reading of the novel's final tableau, in which Sammy erases the name "The Clays" from an address card and replaces it with "Kavalier & Clay." Where this change might seem to be a callback to the title of the novel and a promise of a renewed partnership between the two cousins, Hock rejects that reading, saying that the card "identifies not the artistic partnership between Joe and Sam, but rather the romantic coupling of Joe and Rosa" (94).

Escapist invites us to read him in the context of a superhero's secret identity. Reynolds and Coogan have both argued for the importance of a secret identity as a definitional aspect of the superhero genre, while Scott Bukatman calls it "the obsessional center of superhero comics . . . the secret identity constitutes the body *secretly* marked" (54). But where Bukatman puts the emphasis on the muscled public body of the superhero, I am much more interested in the secret identity, in the mild-mannered alter ego, which I feel Chabon and comic book realism at large often attempt to elevate beyond what Greg Smith has called "a more stereotypically 'feminized' (passive, weak, inept) version" of the superhero (126). Where Joe might more properly represent The Escapist as a superheroic identity, Sammy stands as the novel's Clark Kent, ineffectual in his personal relationships and anxious about the power of his physical body, and always emerging unfavorably in a comparison with the strong body of the superhero, as when "Sammy wanted to inhabit the body of his cousin, not possess it . . . a longing—common enough among the inventors of heroes—to be someone else" (113).

Where Sammy sees himself as someone distinct from Joe, someone who can only dream of such a transformation – or, as in the case of his eventual marriage to Rosa Saks, impersonate him – Tracy represents the confident union of both identities. Tracy, however, remains modest about this balance; "I *am* Tom Mayflower," he tells Sammy, countering that he feels less confident portraying The Escapist (305). As Sammy falls in love with Tracy, he understands his attraction to the radio star in terms of superhero comics, thinking of Tracy and his friends as the precise images of a superhero's alter ego: "They could all play the secret identity of a guy in tights," Sammy tells Tracy, realizing that the confident balance between two identities is not something that exists only in

fiction. He continues, “A year ago, when I wanted to be around someone like you, I had to, you know, make you up” (407). In this moment, Sammy realizes that the “wishful figment” he had installed in *The Escapist* was not just a man in control of his own body, but a man in control of his own identity. And tellingly, Sammy is not able to reach this epiphany without the language of superhero comics, without sincerity of belief in the genre.

Unfortunately, Sammy soon forgets this lesson when he ends his relationship with Tracy. When Joe attempts to escape into the armed forces, Sammy marries Rosa and raises her son Tommy as if he were his own. Chabon presents Sammy’s self-denial in another way, with Sammy abandoning his work on superhero comics in favor of an “amorphous and wandering book” and industrial writing for a seed catalog (481). In one sense, Sammy’s rejection of superhero comics is historically accurate, as the period after World War II saw a general public disinterest in superheroes. Bradford Wright traces this decline in superheroes, demonstrable by sales figures and the absence of new successful superhero characters after 1944, to “a postwar public mood that had grown conservative and weary of reform” (59). But given his relationship with Tracy and his efforts to distance himself from that period in his life, we can read Sammy’s exodus from the genre much more personally, as characteristic of the malaise that hangs over him for much of the novel’s third act.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Sammy arrives at peace with himself in a moment he comes to understand in the language of the superhero comics he had tried so hard to escape. When Sammy’s sexuality is disclosed during the televised Senate Subcommittee hearings spurred on by Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*, set to

investigate “the pernicious effects of comic books” on their juvenile readers (613), Sammy is reduced to tears, quite literally weeping into an open drink at a bar, until his old editor and mentor George Deasey appears by his side to reframe the event for Sammy. “A secret is a heavy kind of chain,” he tells Sammy, “. . . But I wouldn’t be surprised if it turned out in the end that Senator C. Estes Kefauver and his pals just handed you your own golden key” (623). The Golden Key, let us recall, is the object which gives The Escapist his remarkable abilities, the superheroic emblem he wears on his chest, indicative of his great talent for escapes and his quest for ultimate liberation. It is as if the metaphorical light bulb has clicked on for Sammy; he responds with an epiphanic “My God, I think you might be right” (623) before revisiting his dream of moving to Los Angeles to become a television writer, a dream he presumably pursues when he leaves New York at the end of the novel. Andrea Levine has read the irony in Sammy’s liberation, saying “[It is, ironically, through the coercion of the state that he is able to leave his suffocating secrecy behind him” (42), though we must acknowledge that Sammy’s liberation is not complete until he understands it in the language of superhero comics. Sammy attains, finally, New Sincerity’s truth to the self at the site of Collins’s new sincerity. That is, Sammy’s chains are not completely broken until he restores the superhero genre’s tropes to his own imagination. Indeed, the novel’s opening pages tell us that Sammy will maintain his connection to The Escapist for the rest of his life, speaking about the character at numerous comic book conventions and in interviews.²⁸ In

²⁸ For all the similarities between The Escapist’s radio program and Superman’s, it would be too much to hope that The Escapist would have migrated to television under Sammy’s guidance in the way that Superman jumped from radio to television in the 1950s, with George Reeves in *The Adventures of Superman*. In fact, the Malachi B. Cohen essay “reveals” that The Escapist never appeared on television, “though rumors persist of an hour-long pilot *Escapist* TV show, shot for ABC for the fall of 1970” – incidentally, I would note, after audiences had grown weary of the campy Adam West *Batman* program on the same network (Cohen 29-30).

fact, the conflict resolution at the end of Collins's new sincerity comes in the anticipated "generic imaginary" when the narrator tells us that Sammy and Rosa remain side-by-side not in marriage but "making the con scene" (668). I would conclude by noting that Sammy and Rosa's presence at comics conventions also marks a response to Timmer's diagnosis of "a structural need for a we" as a post-postmodern symptom; a comic book convention represents a community formation suitable both to Collins's generic imaginary and Timmer's escape from solipsism.

"Aeroman be gonna proteck me forever": Superhero Identity and Race

We have seen how *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* treats the superhero genre as a viable site for sincerity, in which the novel's characters learn something about themselves by conceptualizing their world in the language of superhero comics. Joe rethinks his notion of escape by returning to the superhero comics he felt were ineffectual, donning their clothing at key moments to defend himself and his profession. Sammy, meanwhile, comes to terms with his sexuality by recognizing that the object of his desire epitomizes the same strategies of dual identities that superheroes face on a recurring basis. I have framed this unity of high and low culture as a positive one, sensing at best a happy ending and at worst the optimistic "to be continued" finale with which so many superhero comics also conclude. Where I have looked for redemptive portrayals of the superhero, Andrew Hoberek has argued that the novel's "melancholy tone" ultimately prevents it from being able to "entirely escape conventional realism's attraction to failure" (*Considering* 169); where I read Ebling as a cautionary figure, advising Chabon's readers not to collapse their own identities with those of their superheroes, Hoberek's analysis is more pessimistic, reading the would-be Saboteur as

“an avatar not of the attempt to reimagine realism using the tools of genre but of the realistic treatment of the superhero as perverse and slightly sad” (170). While I think this interpretation constitutes a slight misreading of *Kavalier & Clay* – The Saboteur is a supervillain, not a superhero, and therefore to read one as an avatar of the other strikes me as mistaken – I agree with his assessment of a melancholy and awkward depiction of superheroes in Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude*.

Tracking the “same melancholy tinge” into *Fortress*, Hoberek finds that “Lethem uses superheroics primarily as a metaphor for human awkwardness and isolation” (170, 172). Ironically, there seems in *Fortress* a more deliberate attempt to ground the superhero genre in realism while simultaneously introducing more overt genre elements. That is, where Chabon straddled but never transgressed the line between realism and fantasy, Lethem introduces a magic ring that confers upon its wearer one of two superpowers, flight or invisibility. Joe Kavalier, though he wore the clothing of The Escapist, never took flight; “you know damn well *the Escapist doesn’t fly!*” Sammy warns Joe before the latter steps over the ledge in his protest (emphasis maintained from 538), his life spared by the elastic bungee-type cord around his chest. Lethem’s Dylan Ebdus, though, soars through the sky as Aeroman, as does his friend Mingus Rude.

A kind of *bildungsroman* for its protagonist, *The Fortress of Solitude* takes place, like much of Lethem’s fiction, in a neighborhood of Brooklyn – here, Gowanus, into which Dylan Ebdus and his family (painter father Abraham and soon-to-be-absent mother Rachel) have moved as part of a larger pattern of gentrification. Coping with the exodus of his mother and the self-imposed exile of his father to his studio, Dylan befriends Mingus Rude, the son of a local musician, and Arthur Lomb, who helps introduce Dylan

to the world of superhero comics. Dylan's friendship with Mingus is strained by their racial difference – Dylan is white, Mingus black – though they are held together by shared possession of a magic ring, which allows them to share also the superheroic identity of Aeroman. The second half of the novel picks up on Dylan as an adult, now a music writer, as he struggles to understand and recover some part of his innocence lost as a childhood in Gowanus. Collecting dust at the bottom of a drawer, Dylan's magic ring reminds him of his friendship with Mingus, encountered at novel's end in prison for assorted crimes of various severity.

It is because of the inclusion of the magic ring (which is, admittedly, only one of a number of important elements in the 500-plus pages of the novel) that I am continually surprised that much of the criticism on the novel either directly dismisses the place of superheroes in the novel or indirectly kills it with silence. I cited in my introduction a few examples of reviewers casting an eye alternately suspicious and disapproving at Lethem's invocation of superhero comics. Recall Wood's "pornography for prepubescents" (40) and Leonard's prescriptive declaration, "[I]t is time this gifted writer closed his comic books for good" (34). To my eyes this reaction seems very consistent with the cultural elitism Nyberg saw as a contributing factor in Wertham's crusade against comics, particularly because of the comparably more enthusiastic response Lethem's early work received for its exploration of other genres like science fiction and hardboiled noir.

Something changed on the way to *Fortress*, and it seems to be Lethem's choice of genre.²⁹ Where critics read Lethem's earlier engagements as playful and purposeful, the

²⁹ It would be remiss not to acknowledge also the difference in length; *Fortress* is roughly as long as Lethem's debut novel, *Gun, with Occasional Music*, and *Motherless Brooklyn* combined. Critics, however, have not panned Lethem for any perceived verbosity; instead, *Fortress* is regarded as a more mature text, in part *because of* its length.

presence of superhero comics in *Fortress* has been received as intrusive, superfluous, or largely not worth comment. Ron Charles reviewed the “bits of surreal comic-book action” as both “jarring” and “incongruous,” choosing instead to focus on the way that *Fortress* fits into a larger collection of novels in which “white authors discovered black America” (emphasis maintained). Like Florence Dore, who rejected the Superman allusion in the novel’s title, Christopher González argues away from any genre-based reading of *Fortress*, saying, “As a superhero tale, it doesn’t even come close to the mark with its near-MacGuffin power ring” (216). And James Peacock singles out the ring as the “one fabulistic element” of the novel before concluding that it is “perfectly at home in a coming-of-age narrative” so that he can turn instead to his larger interest in the parallels between Dylan’s character development and Lethem’s own development as a writer growing in critical acclaim (116).

Peacock’s move is a common one, acknowledging the presence of Aeroman but shuffling him away from the novel’s center in favor of another issue (here, the connection between graffiti and authorship in a coming-of-age novel). González and Dore both favor a reading of *Fortress* as a rock novel (Carsten Schinko calls it a “pop novel”), but even then there seems a subtle move to dismiss the significance of comics to Lethem’s work. Dore offers, “Lethem construes Bob Dylan . . . as the adult version of Superman, thus drawing a clear line: rock music is the adult version of comic books.” *Fortress* is, like *Kavalier & Clay*, a long novel about many things; its setting in a gentrified Brooklyn means we must read it as a novel about race, its familiar arc gives it the same *bildungsroman* quality Chabon employed, and the presence of a (fictitious) liner note rightly situates it in a larger body of rock novels. But I do not believe that we must prize

one reading over the other, particularly because *Fortress* is a structurally integrated novel whose major themes feed into and explain each other. In fact, rather than argue, as Leonard did, that the comics in *Fortress* obscure and “cheat” the themes of race, I will demonstrate that the novel uses superhero comics in a very sophisticated way to indicate how a reader like Dylan Ebdus comes to understand and engage with his world.

Only Jacob Siegel has placed Aeroman at the center of the novel, saying that “the nexus wherein Dylan’s comic book fantasies collide with his neighborhood’s realities is a magical ring that grants its wearer superpowers that change not only with time and place, but according to its user.” On the subject of race in *Fortress*, Siegel argues, “Lethem espouses a vision of essentialist racial difference. . . . a white heart breaking when it learns that a qualitative difference in humanity separates it by an unbridgeable gap from its black love.” He traces this out by positioning yoking, a racially loaded version of mugging in which black children realize that they hold a power of white children who are afraid of them, as “the novel’s central, recurring metaphor . . . [a] distillation of the violent racial energy that powers the entire story.” Dylan’s relationship with Mingus is predicated on the lack of yoking, while his friendship with Arthur is based on shared otherness, which includes “making knowing references to comic books and pop culture.” Lest we forget, though, Siegel reminds us, “It is Mingus, . . . not Arthur, who first introduces Dylan to the hermetically cool world of comic books.”³⁰ I will say what Siegel leaves implicit; while the absence of yoking is one thing that holds Mingus and Dylan together, superhero comics are another. Siegel is therefore right to prioritize Aeroman,

³⁰ The keyword here seems to be “hermetically.” Dylan’s first experience with comics comes from Croft Vendle, a neighbor with whom Dylan’s mother Rachel elopes, but it is Mingus who introduces Dylan to the habit of reading and collecting comics. The hermetic approach most properly belongs to Arthur, who obsessively guards his comics as potential investments for the future.

the superheroic identity Dylan “allows Mingus to share just as Mingus had shared his graffiti identity [Dose] with Dylan.” Here we see also the folk culture community formation from Collins’s identification of new sincerity, a community formed with Arthur Lomb, yes, but also with Mingus Rude, across the racial lines that Dylan’s mother assumed would be “a problem for him to solve” (Lethem, *Fortress* 19). This community across racial lines is a more direct version of a similar sub-theme in *Eleanor & Park*, in which Eleanor worries (ultimately fruitlessly) that Park’s Korean family will disapprove of her.

Ray Davis, a self-professed “genre cosmopolitan” (65) who has written much about Lethem’s relationship with blurry genre divisions, has the right idea when he argues that critics like Leonard are working too hard to maintain a divide between high and low culture, a divide whose insubstantiality the postmodernists and post-postmodernists would take for granted. “What frustrates Leonard,” Davis writes, “is the dorkiness of their references. What frustrates me is the familiarity of their pathos” (63), which I take to mean that Davis is not distracted by the references Lethem makes but is instead sensing something very familiar in the emotions that the comic book realist cohort is attempting to trigger. Davis, I think, rightly recognizes the place of superhero comics in *Fortress*, as does the Canadian novelist Rivka Galchen, who offers a way to read *Fortress* even if one is not as steeped as Lethem in the obscure corners of Marvel Comics. In what is ostensibly a book review of *Chronic City*, Galchen rejects the idea that Lethem’s writing is postmodern, in part because of her dissatisfaction with the term – “the wide overuse and abuse of the term *postmodern* have left the word utterly bereft of meaning” (163) – but also because she feels the allusive qualities of his work (those

moments when “the *real* cameos in the *storied*” [170]) make his texts and by extension reality itself more real instead of, as postmodern critics have suggested, “drawing attention to the fictionality of the fictional world” (165). But she suggests that there is beauty in Lethem’s work even for those who do not recognize the allusions; “even when we miss the clues, the party is still a pretty nice place to be. It just gets better when you learn how to read it better” (170).

Where Galchen locates Lethem somewhere other than postmodernism, Schinko places him “in-between postmodern textualism that stresses contingency and mediation and a post-postmodern longing for presence that has turned to music as medial other more than once” (37). Schinko’s reading of the role of music in a post-postmodern context resonates, I believe, with Lethem’s use of comics to a similar end; Schinko’s “longing for presence,” moreover, connects his brief theory of post-postmodernism to Timmer’s “structural need for a we.” Both Timmer and Schinko position post-postmodernism as a striving for greater connectivity, but where Schinko sees Lethem’s characters filling an absence with music, I think the novel presents an equally if not more compelling case study of Dylan’s attempts to sate his longing through comics. In fact, Lethem anticipates Schinko’s precise vocabulary when discussing Dylan’s first encounter with Mingus Rude’s comics: “The comic books Mingus Rude treated *as a presence* delicately alive” (my emphasis, 64). And here the narrative takes a pause, reciting titles, characters, and events like a great wave washing over Dylan and the reader. Superhero comics, then, need to be considered in light of the “presence” Dylan perceives, and for which Schinko detects Lethem’s longing. I should remind readers that ultimately I am not wholly interested purely in matters of categorization, but the debate over the place of

Lethem's literary project suggests a larger discussion about issues at the center of contemporary American fiction. That the novels of comic book realism have become a kind of ground zero for this discussion demands closer attention to these texts and the way that they position comic books as opportune sites for sincerity in fiction.

Although quite early in *Fortress* the narrator introduces us to the flying Aeroman (initially Aaron X. Doily, who passes his ring to Dylan), it takes Dylan Ebdus a good deal longer to find his way into the world of superhero comics. Unlike Sammy Clay, who possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of comics and "a creased, well-thumbed copy of the latest issue of *Action Comics*" (74), Dylan's first encounter with comics is marked, like so much of his life, by a youthful bafflement; while his mother Rachel and Croft Vendle discuss the "psychedelic" quality of Jack Kirby's work, Dylan is sensorily overwhelmed, "his sight blurred in the sun and shadow and the figures [on the comics covers] were liquefied into blobs" (39). Here is some of the awkwardness Hoberek found in Lethem's treatment of superheroes: Dylan, at a loss for words, can only observe in stunned silence while his mother and her future lover speak in a language unintelligible to the young boy – and, if Galchen is to be believed, a good number of Lethem's readers. While Dylan puzzles over the meaning of words like "psychedelic," the reader may be similarly bewildered by Rachel's discourse on Black Bolt, king of the Inhumans, and by Croft's "obscurely" knowing invocation, "Sweet Aunt Petunia" (39).

"It's tough to recreate this stuff for a reader who's not already versed in it," Lethem wrote in a 2001 essay for *Bookforum* ("Not Brand" 36). In "Not Brand Ecch!," named for Marvel Comics' two-year satirical series (think *Mad Magazine* for superheroes), Lethem wonders why it is that novelists tend to invoke superheroes from

DC Comics with more frequency than characters from Marvel. More than a decade and a dozen Marvel Studios films later, it's perhaps difficult to see Lethem's point when he asks about Ant-Man, a character whose image now appears in licensed merchandise after a 2015 summer blockbuster film, but he is accurate in noting that there is something more easily iconic about what has come to be known as the DC Trinity – that is, Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman. Lethem begins by identifying Moody and Chabon as “evidence of a coming-to-light of a secret identity,” with superheroes as “a secret universal” for this cohort of writers (36). Lethem's sense of the superhero as a “secret universal” registers with *Fortress* even in this first conversation between Rachel and Croft. While Dylan does not understand the depth of Marvel Comics the way the adults do (a challenge, perhaps, to the notion that the medium has always been for children), Lethem wisely refrains from explicatory passages like those found in *The Ice Storm* or *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. The effect is doubly coded; readers less steeped in the genre will share Dylan's confusion, while those in the know – those whom Lethem calls “the cognoscenti . . . we Marvel boys” (“Not Brand” 37) – will recognize Croft's “Sweet Aunt Petunia” as the catchphrase of The Thing, the rock-like heavy from The Fantastic Four. By the novel's end, when we learn that Dylan has been looking for Croft in order to understand what happened to his mother, we begin to realize that Dylan's very immersion in the superhero genre might have been a part of that same project all along.

Dylan's initial confusion is a common aspect in most *bildungsromans*, as the young protagonist struggles to understand the increasingly unintelligible world into which he or she has been born. Like Paul Moody, who used issues of *Fantastic Four* to

organize his memory, Dylan uses superhero comics to understand his world in ways with which readers of any expertise will empathize. Dylan's friendship with Mingus Rude is challenged, it seems, by the difference in the boys' ages; Mingus is in the sixth grade, while Dylan is a year younger. Of course, the reader knows the racial gulf that exists between them is much wider, and much has been written about the way that Dylan idolizes and covets the black identity Mingus is seen to possess. "Mingus Rude was a world, an exploding bomb of possibilities" (55), Dylan observes, registering what Siegel very astutely describes as the novel's "exceptionally candid obsession with blackness in the white mind." Siegel is also right that very little has been written about the way Dylan idealizes black identity as personified by Mingus (very similar, I would say, to the way that Sammy Clay desired "to inhabit the body of his cousin, not possess it" [113]), and so what Lethem demonstrates through Dylan's metaphORIZING of his own life into superheroic language is precisely this idealized longing. As Dylan's friendship with Mingus grows, the narrator gives us this oft-quoted remark which many have cited only as evidence of Lethem's comics-inflected sensibilities, but we can see the way Lethem uses a superhero allusion not solely to nod to the "Marvel boys" but to communicate something much more profound:

There was no single story: for all he [Dylan] knew, Mingus might be off fighting the Mole Men at the I.S. 293 annex, where sixth graders went, while Dylan, in fifth grade, was still trapped in the Negative Zone—it didn't matter, didn't contradict, they weren't the Fantastic Four, after all, just a couple of kids. (69)

Lethem is doing something much sharper than communicating Dylan's newfound immersion in the superhero genre, his comfort in dropping references like Croft and Mingus can. Lethem tells us that Dylan registers Mingus's black "cool" in superheroic

terms. It is Mingus, not Dylan, who faces the Mole Men, just as The Fantastic Four did in their very first issue in 1961; unable to join Mingus in feats of cool, Dylan perceives himself as an exile in the Negative Zone, an alternate dimension inhabited by imprisoned enemies of the Fantastic Four, would-be conquerors, and the grotesque bug-like Annihilus.³¹ Lethem's "cognoscenti," then, recognize that Dylan perceives Mingus as a superhero, translating his racial "cool" into visions of spandex.

As he ages, Dylan steepes himself further in superhero comics, taking his new worldview beyond the small intimacy of his friendship with Mingus and coming to reinterpret his worldview along the lines of Marvel Comics. "Marvel Comics had it right," Dylan declares, "the world was all secret names, you only needed to uncover your own" (92). Most critics have focused on the relevance of this statement to the novel's description of graffiti tags, for Mingus shares his tag "DOSE" with Dylan. James Peacock notes the way that Dylan and Mingus's friendship revolves around "the desire for 'a name' and the sense of locatedness, recognition and identity it instills" (123), focusing on the way that the graffiti DOSE *is* both tag and name. Dylan, however, has no tag of his own, and therefore no identity. But Jacob Siegel, in locating the center of the novel on Aeroman, draws out the significance of that shared identity as more important than the graffiti that peppers the novel. He writes, "Aeroman is the superhero Dylan invents to use the powers of the ring, an alter-ego that he allows Mingus to share just as Mingus had shared his graffiti identity with Dylan. When they are together, their identities merged, they have only one purpose for Aeroman, but apart they put the ring

³¹ Ironically, Lethem and Dylan would have no way of knowing that in 2004, a year after *Fortress* was published, Marvel Comics proposed a modernized reimagination of the Fantastic Four in the pages of *Ultimate Fantastic Four*. In this retelling of the origin story, the team gains their powers not by being bombarded with cosmic rays, as was the case in 1961, but by an excursion into the Negative Zone (redubbed the N-Zone).

towards sharply divergent ends.” There is something very optimistic – Leonard would say naïve – in Lethem’s treatment of superhero comics as something that can reach across racial divides, even when the same cannot be true about superhero comics between Dylan and Arthur Lomb. “They were doomed to friendship,” the narrator laments (113). Where we might expect Arthur to be one more kindred soul for Dylan, the critic David Coughlan argues that Dylan’s friendship with Mingus changes when Dylan is bound to “the uncool Arthur” because of their race and shared interest in comics (199). Dylan resents Arthur’s uncool nature and also, I think, his attitude toward comics on the whole. In his reading of *Fortress* as “a sustained critique of capitalist cultures” (195), it is somewhat surprising that Coughlan does not dwell more on the fact that Arthur introduces Dylan to the collector’s approach to comics – namely, that the individual issues have no merit beyond their potential value as an investment. Where Mingus’s comics demonstrate evidence of being read with religious devotion, Arthur’s are hermetically sealed in plastic, stored on a top shelf. “You have to buy number ones, it’s an investment,” Arthur opines, adding the aesthetic critique, “And all those comics stink” (113). In a way, Arthur is *Fortress*’s Carl Ebling, a reader of superhero comics who demonstrates the “wrong way” to read them, carrying with it the irony that Lethem and his readers share – Arthur’s comics are worthless, predicated on a speculative boom that never came to pass.

Along with their shared devotion to superhero comics, Dylan and Mingus come to share the identity of Aeroman. Where Chabon was careful to keep the real and the fantastic somewhat distinct in his treatment of superheroes, Lethem embraces a greater genre sincerity (per Collins) and permits the entrance of the super into the real. In a continuity of comic book realist novels, we can see Lethem then as something of a

paradigm shift, blurring the line between real and fantastic and anticipating the unequivocal union of the two that we will see in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.³² With the inclusion of the magic ring (which suggests but never explicitly acknowledges the similarly-powered Green Lantern, who derives his special abilities from a ring which translates his willpower into whatever construct his imagination can conjure) comes a script, which in post-postmodern theory ought to help Dylan access truth. The flying man Aaron X. Doily bequeaths the ring to Dylan while lying in a hospital bed, telling him among other things, “*Fight evil!*” (emphasis maintained from 148) The script is supplemented by Dylan’s now-exhaustive absorption in the superhero genre, from which we can assume he learns that he must next “sew a costume and take to the rooftops, begin *bounding down on crime*” (emphasis maintained from 163). The superhero script might even permit Dylan to reveal his “secret identity” to summer girlfriend Heather Windle (179), recalling all the times Superman has agonized over whether or not to confide in Lois Lane the truth of his alter ego Clark Kent.

Dylan’s innovation, however, is sharing his identity with Mingus. But he does not relegate Mingus to the role of teen sidekick, in whom is often entrusted the responsibility of sharing a hero’s secret identity; Robin, for example, knows that Bruce Wayne is secretly Batman, and Rick Jones often travels with Bruce Banner, aware of the latter’s latent ability to metamorphose into The Incredible Hulk. Most recently, after seventy-

³² In fact, for all the criticism that dismisses the ring, I am mildly shocked that no one seems to have attempted to rationalize the ring as the product of a hallucinogenic or merely simple imagination. I do not espouse this reading, largely because there are too many characters who witness the ring’s unique abilities and who could attest to its supernatural qualities. Furthermore I am not convinced that it would change my reading of *Fortress* all that much. If the ring does not grant its wearer any superpowers, then the novel remains purely consistent with *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and my perceived innovation in the genre of comic book realism can be located at *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (or, outside the realm of “high” comic book realism, on Melanie Lynne Hauser’s 2005 novel *Confessions of Super Mom*, in which a suburban single mother is granted superpowers after a mysterious Swiffer accident – about which, more in Chapter Five).

some years of secrecy, *Superman* #38 found Superman divulging his secret identity to his “pal” Jimmy Olsen (Johns and Romita). No, Dylan shares his identity both in the sense of honesty *and* in alternating with Mingus the very possession and use of the magic ring – and, by extension, the Aeroman identity. Recalling the power of “secret names,” Dylan juxtaposes his own creation of Aeroman with the chaotic state of his world: “The world was unnamed, you wore disguises, were Inhumans” (205). The Inhumans, mentioned six times in the novel, are a group of genetically-altered humans who receive their superpowers from exposure to the mystical Terrigen Mist, which often marks them by altering their physical appearance (for example, Gorgon has the legs of a bull, while Triton resembles a fish). Their leader and king Black Bolt (named four times in *Fortress*) holds a special attraction for the precocious Dylan Ebdus because of his unique superpower; echoing Stan Lee’s famous invective that “with great power there must also come great responsibility,” Black Bolt is said to possess a voice which is powerful enough to destroy the world. One of Dylan’s first discoveries in superhero comics is that of Black Bolt, who, the narrator tells us, “couldn’t open his mouth because a single syllable of his speech was so powerful it might crack the world apart” (40).

We can, in fact, trace Hoberek’s “melancholy tinge” to Lethem’s choice of Black Bolt as his superhero touchstone. Indeed, Lethem ranked Black Bolt in first place on a list of the “Top-Five Depressed Superheroes,” identifying his Inhuman subjects as “all freaks, with lousy powers [and] his dog is ugly” (“Top-Five” 144). When The Inhumans made their debut in *Fantastic Four* #45 (cover date December 1965),³³ they did so as a

³³ I mention the date because it is possible that Dylan’s first exposure to Black Bolt may have been the character’s first appearance. Croft’s comic book collection seems dedicated to the work of Jack Kirby, so we can presumably eliminate any Black Bolt comics after 1971; Kirby’s last Black Bolt story appeared in January 1971’s *Amazing Adventures* #4. In the same afternoon, Dylan also reads what are likely the most

team of outcasts in a comic book whose protagonists were already marked as outsiders. Stan Lee, writer of the first 115 issues of *Fantastic Four*, has been remembered as the writer in the Silver Age most responsible for initiating an upsurge in realism within the superhero genre; unlike Clark Kent, for example, Spider-Man's secret identity, Peter Parker, often has financial difficulties that his career in journalism do not seem to ameliorate (to say nothing of his romantic woes). Another way Lee has been understood as an innovator in the genre was in his treatment of superheroes as social pariahs, cast out by a populace terrified of their great abilities and their monstrous appearances – “heroes with feet of clay,” according to Lee (Raphael and Spurgeon 102). The Inhumans, then, are doubly outsiders, rejected by society at large and set apart from The Fantastic Four, themselves outcasts.

Although Dylan ultimately never wears the Aeroman costume he created and showed to Heather Windle, “the costume was irrelevant anyway” (241). What matters to Dylan is the way the Aeroman identity binds him to Mingus, his faith in their friendship obscuring the racial divide that neighborhood bully Robert Woolfolk perceives. When Woolfolk attempts to steal the ring, he taunts Dylan, “Think Gus be gonna proteck you forever?” to which Dylan responds – like Black Bolt, silently – “No, Aeroman be gonna proteck me forever” (194). An essay by Lethem explains more directly why it is that Dylan needs protecting. The threat of yoking, which does not exist between Mingus and Dylan, is an ever-present threat between Dylan and Woolfolk; Lethem writes in “Yoked

famous three issues of *Fantastic Four*, the “Galactus Trilogy” from which Junot Díaz draws his epigraph for *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. Because the Galactus storyline was printed in issues #48-50, assuming Croft owns a copy of Black Bolt's debut in #45 does not strain credulity.

Arthur Lomb's theft of a copy of *Inhumans* #7, incidentally, places that instance close to that issue's cover date, October 1976 (173). Because comic books are often postdated, their cover dates suggesting to retailers when the issue should be removed from the stands, we can place Arthur's theft somewhere around August or September of that year.

in Gowanus,” “The shame [of being yoked] was in being such a routine victim of racial hazing, as though it would be a racist act to ever mention it—perhaps even retroactive confirmation that the difference between me and my tormenters did matter” (101). Where Lethem’s understanding of yoking is naturally more sophisticated than Dylan’s, understanding that his internalized guilt about understanding race in yoking was the consequence of his parents’ “deep liberalism” and teachings “to assertively ignore difference” (104), Woolfolk is at least able to comprehend the physical threat he poses to Dylan and, consequently, the possibility of Mingus’s retribution. It is also worth noting that Lethem himself, like Dylan, uses the vocabulary of superhero comics to understand his own experience with yoking; lamenting the image of New York as a dangerous haven for muggers, Lethem observes, “That’s how Batman’s parents lost their lives, for crying out loud” (99). Like Dylan, who perceived his own life as something out of a *Fantastic Four* comic, Lethem compares his home to Batman’s in order to understand the way New York has been (mis)perceived.

Siegel’s identification of Aeroman as the “nexus” of *Fortress* hinges on the way that the ring brings Mingus and Dylan together in a way that everything else in the novel – their race, their social class, their friends – conspires to prevent. In his brief acknowledgement of the presence of superheroes in the novel, Ron Charles went so far as to classify Aeroman as “raceless,” in recognition of the fact that both boys can wear the ring but eliding the fact that Dylan only does so in private. In spite of Dylan’s dismissal of the costume as “irrelevant,” and acknowledging that Aeroman ultimately does very little by way of fighting crime, “the classical Spider-Man mugging scenario” never fully materializing (190), how exactly is “Aeroman be gonna proteck me forever”? Again, the

importance of Aeroman is not in what he does but in what he represents, and Dylan uses Aeroman to embody (Singer would say hypostatically) his “raceless” friendship with Mingus. When it becomes apparent to Dylan that the two have irreversibly grown apart, he asks Mingus to return the ring. Both boys know, however, the unspoken truth of this action; “It was as if Dylan had asked to buy their friendship back, all their secrets with it, Aeroman and the bridge and things which had no right name” (283). Dylan’s effort to reclaim the Aeroman identity marks his refusal to admit the gulf between him and Mingus, clinging sincerely to the superhero genre even as he regards the physical comics themselves as “like making out with an ex-girlfriend at a party” (274).

Though Dylan’s journey into adulthood sees him attempt to divorce himself from comics, the shift to first-person narration in the novel’s third section allows us to see that Dylan is, to permute Kelly’s formulation of New Sincerity, true to himself even if he is not true to others. That is, though he tells the outside world that he has renounced superheroes, the opposite is true; for one, the magic ring is the only personal artifact Dylan pockets on his way to a Los Angeles hotel room, the only object he does not want his girlfriend Abby to “interrogat[e]” (356). And when Dylan dons the ring once more, discovering in the process that the ring’s power has changed from flight to invisibility, Dylan uses the ring to access Mingus’s prison file, after which the first-person narration slips into a third-person account of the life of “Dose,” Mingus’s alter ego used for tagging. On a factual level, the ring’s invisibility allows Dylan to infiltrate the prison where Mingus is incarcerated, but the prison sequence also demonstrates the way that the ring permits Dylan to understand Mingus in a way he had not previously; instead of viewing Mingus as someone else, whose inner self was inaccessible, Dylan’s

transformation into a kind of superhero allows him to approach a place of conflict resolution where he no longer sees himself as someone abandoned by Mingus. Instead, Dylan achieves a reunion with Mingus in the form of reinhabiting the Aeroman identity, the merging of their identities fulfilled when Dylan's first-person narration cedes the floor to Mingus.

Before the chapters told from Dose's perspective, however, the ring instructs Dylan once more. Having initially instructed him to "Fight evil," the oldest and noblest aspect of the superhero's vocation, the ring now gives Dylan further instruction; for all its time spent in Dylan's pocket (both literally and metaphorically), the superhero script still remains strong enough for Dylan. The ring's instruction, which will govern the novel's final movement, is "go to Mingus" (458). The narrative then goes to Mingus by listening to his perspective, and Dylan returns to Mingus by first attempting to rescue him from prison, a move Lethem suggests is actually Dylan's attempt to rescue himself from his guilt about abandoning Mingus. Siegel argues that when Dylan asks, "if they are brothers, and if so how could his brother have abandoned him to such cruelty," what the novel simultaneously asks is, "Where was Dylan when Mingus needed him?" In this way, the novel provides Timmer's "structural need for a we," refuting Dylan's intractable solipsism by having Dylan and Mingus come to a mutual understanding; invisible, Dylan spends time in Mingus's prison cell, gaining a greater empathy with him and recognizing that the ring is no longer as meaningful to Mingus as it is to Dylan. "The ring was useless to him . . . he was doing good time" (488). Mingus declines the narrative, the script, of "escapee and permanent fugitive" (488) in favor of the scripted quotidian of prison which

Dylan's offer interrupts – "it all went down as scripted . . . Except for one thing. That one day, Dylan Ebdus came and offered a ring" (486).

Just before Dylan's moment of epiphany, the moment when he transcends his limited perspective and truly understands Mingus's motivations, Dylan worries, "My heroism was used up" (488). But the ring still has one last gift for Dylan, when he gives the ring to Robert Woolfolk, also incarcerated alongside Mingus. Dylan neglects to tell Woolfolk that the ring no longer grants the power of flight, an error of omission that ultimately kills Woolfolk and briefly haunts Dylan at the close of *Fortress*:

I'd wakened Aeroman to kill Robert Woolfolk. It was a collaboration that had taken Mingus and the ring and my half-conscious hatred years to devise, though the seed of inspiration had been unmistakable . . . what goes up must come down. Aeroman was nothing if not a black body on the ground. I hadn't even played fair and told Robert of the ring's switch to invisibility. I wondered if he'd discovered it. (499)

Though Dylan is troubled by his role in Woolfolk's death, we can understand Woolfolk's position as the ostensible antagonist and the evidence that Woolfolk has not shared Mingus's reformatory experience as consistent with Arnaudo's superethics. Because a superhero ought not kill, Arnaudo writes, superhero narratives often contort into a particular formula to avoid painting the superhero as a murderer. In these stories, the villain's death is often "out of legitimate self-defense" or the result of an accident, or as is the case in *Fortress* "the bad guy commits suicide and the hero is unable to stop him. The hero is not particularly upset by the event, which in reality is depicted like some sort of divine retribution" (91-92). The ring's mysterious involvement in Woolfolk's death certainly has an aura of "divine retribution" about it, and beyond the paragraph quoted above the novel does not seem to concern itself with the morality of Dylan's somewhat unwitting role in Woolfolk's death.

Another way to understand Woolfolk's death is to think of Timmer's "perceived lack of decision making tools" as a central theme of post-postmodern fiction. In a very powerful way, as suggested above, Dylan's superhero script – inherited from the ring – provides him with these tools in order to navigate his childhood in Gowanus. He wrongly assumes that the same script still applies to Mingus in prison, and when he encounters Woolfolk in prison the ring intercedes because Dylan does not know what to do with Woolfolk. Dylan's bequeathal of the ring to Woolfolk comes at the insistence of Mingus, whose reformation in prison can now be seen to have a very superheroic aspect of forgiveness. Dylan does not quite know what to do; though he knew Woolfolk was incarcerated with Mingus, Dylan's plans did not include Woolfolk at all. Where Mingus takes the altruistic route, Dylan seems distanced from the request, saying, "I think I went a little crazy when I wandered from there" (490). Dylan seems uncertain about what to do, lacking the ability to process Mingus's request fully, but the ring seems to choose for him. Dylan is allowed to comply with Mingus's gesture of forgiveness, but the ring ensures that the villain is punished. The decision-making tools, then, come from the superhero genre, with the ring supplying a script throughout the novel and, when the characters are unable, ensuring that the script is followed. Dylan even seems to separate himself from Aeroman, who we might come to think of as the persona of the ring (remember, Aaron X. Doily was never Aeroman). As he ruminates on the death of Woolfolk, Dylan refers to himself not as Aeroman, who he had "wakened"; instead, Dylan regards himself as "a deranged *arrow-man* of pure intention" (my emphasis on 499). In reading the novel through its superhero references rather than despite them, *The Fortress of Solitude*, like *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, ultimately

separates the fantastic from the real, though it complicates Chabon's primacy of realism by permitting the entrance of an otherwise unexplainable genre artifact that ultimately alters the course of the narrative.

“Your humble Watcher”: The Superpower of Storytelling

The Fortress of Solitude ends on a slightly anxious note, as Dylan ponders the idea of “the collapsing middle,” which has haunted every aspect of his life (508). Dylan ultimately locates that middle on those moments of peace which he and everyone he knows have sought, half-remembered nostalgically from childhood. Though Dylan's anxiety about gentrification – “the scar left by a dream” (508) – invites a racial reading of this middle space, we ought to consider Dylan's search for the middle as an extension of his destabilized faith in comics. His longing for the middle, which I have also framed above as his empathy with the silence of Black Bolt, also recalls his abandonment of the superhero genre (his “ex-girlfriend”) and its host medium, comics.

Comics is a medium comprised of both images and absences, panels and “gutters” which invite the reader to identify points of connection between two panels and craft a narrative in the blank space of the gutter. “In the limbo of the gutter,” Scott McCloud posits, “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (66). This technique, which McCloud locates “at the very heart of comics,” suggests one more reason novelists – and readers at large – have been so attracted to the superhero genre. Where it was clear for Sammy Clay and Joe Kavalier that the appeal of the superhero was its ability to be invested with the creator's desires and reenact those wishes for readers who felt the same, Dylan and Mingus never create a superhero in the same way. They perform one, to be sure, and imbue Aeroman with the tropes of the

genre, but the crucial difference between *The Escapist* and *Aeroman* is the difference in gradations of reality. Though Joe wears the clothing of *The Escapist* and impersonates him on several occasions, Joe never slips into the belief that *The Escapist* is tangibly real. Dylan and Mingus, on the other hand, are never bothered by the idea that *Aeroman* is a product of their imagination, that selfsame imagination that animates the gutters of a comic book, joining the images of two panels into a single narrative and thereby animating it, bringing it to life. Chabon's superheroes live on the page and in the imagination of their readers, where Lethem's can be brought to life by an act of inspiration or by the intervention of a magical talisman. When Lethem's narrator, slipping into the voice of Mingus, explains, "Dose read between the comic-book panels, where Dylan failed to" (460), we see why it was that Dylan was unable to understand Mingus's more imaginative application of the superhero genre as opposed to his own very literal "quest" to rescue Mingus from prison (presupposing, of course, that Mingus needed rescuing in the first place). Dylan, whose father spends his life painting single frames of an abstract animated film that never reaches its full fruition, is locked within a prison of his own, its bars the frame in which the comic book panels are enclosed.

The blurring line between the fictional and the real in comic book realism reaches its crescendo in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which continues comic book realism's mash-up approach in favor of a full amalgamation of reality (and its literary counterpart, realism) with what Díaz will repeatedly call "the genres." In his 2007 Authors@Google talk, Díaz said, "I felt part of the joke [in *Oscar Wao*] was, I can't decide who's more of a genre in the book: the parts about the Dominican Republic and the parts about being a Dominican kid at Rutgers, or the parts about the science fiction

comic books?” One might be tempted to identify Díaz as the sole practitioner of a fully integrated comic book realism, joining both “comic books” and “realism” without isolating one from the other in a fictive frame or by way of an explanatory digression. But as I have demonstrated throughout this project thus far, nothing in the development of comic book realism has been a dramatic break; every movement has been a shift, a tidal change not without precedent. In fact, for all the moments in *Oscar Wao* that are peppered with references and allusions, we will see that Díaz and his narrator Yunior always leave an escape hatch for the fantastical elements of the novel, a “*página en blanco*” (blank page) on which the story must be continued by the reader’s imagination – not unlike the blank spaces between comic book panels.

Furthermore, Díaz’s steadfast refusal to explain his allusions may seem a radical departure from Chabon’s Melvillean digressions on the history of comics or Lethem’s gloss of Black Bolt’s powerful voice, but again the shift is not all that surprising after contextualizing Díaz’s textual polyvocality and his attitude toward the genres. Rachel Adams argues for a post-postmodernism of polyvocality, albeit one that permits access to the truth without occluding it as high postmodernism would have done. And Lethem rightly notes that even postmodernism’s use of allusions and the vernacular was not a break from modernism, saying “those who try to quarantine postmodernism . . . really need to subject T. S. Eliot to that test” (“Interview” 378). In removing the presentist assumption that intertextuality is something new, Lethem continues, “I get irked at the oppressive self-congratulation of the present in congratulating itself for self-reflexivity and mashup . . . Because in all sorts of folk traditions, self-reflexivity and mashup have *always* been here” (emphasis maintained from 378). Díaz’s presupposition that his

audience knows (or will have the ability to look up) the references in *Oscar Wao* also assumes the wider spread of superhero culture. And indeed this bears out in the historical record; *Oscar Wao* was published in 2007, the year before *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* opened in theaters, with the former kickstarting the immensely popular shared Marvel Cinematic Universe's road to *The Avengers*, while the latter serves as the middle act in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy (after *Batman Begins* and before *The Dark Knight Rises*).

Díaz's textual polyvocality extends also to my slight manipulation of Adams's "American literary globalism" in the sense of a more global perspective on the state of canonicity and, as Hoberek puts it, "the expansion of what counts as literature in the present" (Hoberek, "Introduction" 239). On a textual level, Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch'ien's book *Weird English* explores the idea that writers from Nabokov to Díaz, in a "conscious appropriation of hybridity," have been engaged in the project of "weirding" the English language, purposefully destabilizing it through the integration of increasingly vernacular prose. Her larger claim about Díaz, with which I agree, is that his use of Spanish is deliberately violent, meant to reflect the reciprocal linguistic violence between Spanish and English, and "he demonstrates the inadequacy of English by substitution rather than metonymy or metaphor" (22). In her chapter on Díaz, Ch'ien expands on this possibility of language as violence, supplemented generously by an interview from Díaz. His transition between multiple forms of English is read as a deliberate subversion of the laboriously slow way words are added to English, which Díaz says is his "pushing the dates" on how quickly Spanish is incorporated (204). Díaz also states that the non-italicization of his Spanish is a deliberate move to prevent his language from being

othered by publishers (207) and preventing the danger that, as Ch'ien puts it, "translation is erasure" (209).

Ch'ien's work with Díaz is useful for this project because one of the forms of English Díaz utilizes is "nerd-speak" (203), a language shared by Yunion and the titular Oscar Wao. And when Díaz rejects his publisher's request to italicize Spanish words in his English prose, we can extend the claim about othered language to address the lack of explanatory footnotes or glosses on Díaz's nerd-speak. There is something almost Pynchon-esque, then, in Díaz's rapid-fire approach to mass culture citations, and in the way that *Gravity's Rainbow* has its parallel reference guides *Oscar Wao* has a companion website of annotations which translate the novel's Spanish and nerd-speak for readers.³⁴ Like Ch'ien, Ksenija Kondali agrees that Yunion's linguistic violence is deliberate, though Kondali argues that this violence in turn "de-mystifies the relationship between the dominant and 'minority' cultures" in an English-speaking United States (108). She alludes to a concept of cross-reference, with the novel creating a community of belonging among its bilingual readers (107), an idea which I think might be extended into the novel's language of comics. In one sense, the novel's unglossed references serve as another way to view Timmer's escape from solipsism, with the community formed not just between the characters but between readers and writers.

Sean O'Brien offers another way to view the absence of glosses in *Oscar Wao*. Where Ch'ien and Kondali view Díaz from a linguist's perspective, O'Brien posits that the novel is fleshed out by three bodies of intertextual references: genre literature, Dominican history, and the Spanish language. Addressing the imbalance between which

³⁴ See *The Annotated Oscar Wao: Notes and translations for The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz, n.p., n.d.

references are explained (mainly the historical notes) and which are not (both Spanish and genre references, the latter of which is often used to explain the historical, as though the reader should already know the references), O'Brien suggests that this discrepancy is Díaz's attempt to force readers to decide which contexts will be important to them and which they can neglect. In turn, this decision affects the meaning of the text and helps develop the novel's "theme of marginalization" (78) consistent with the same lines along which Oscar is marginalized. O'Brien then turns to the subject of erasures and blank spaces in the text, another place he sees Díaz literalizing the theme of interpretive decisions and access to information: "Why aren't readers being given all the information they need?" he asks (82). His answer is, "readers can never have *all* the information they need" and therefore must choose which erasures they will pursue (82).

I am aware, then, of the risk that my pursuit of the novel's allusions to the superhero genre necessarily precludes me from pursuing another of the novel's erasures, though I defend this decision by offering the same note I gave in my readings of Chabon and Lethem. I concede that critics have on the whole done a more thorough job with the superheroic aspects of *Oscar Wao* than in *Kavalier & Clay* and *Fortress*, but only Daniel Bautista and Anne Garland Mahler have put the superhero references at the center of the novel. Furthermore, some of the assessments of the genre in *Oscar Wao* are compromised by misreadings of the references, necessitating an accurate attention to the intersection of the novel and superhero comics. Caren Irr, for example, mistakenly identifies The Watcher as "the DC Comics alien who cannot (but yet occasionally does) venture beyond 'the Source Wall' separating him from the humanoids he observes" (16). Though Irr rightly links the novel's Golden Mongoose and its "unstable particles" to the "unstable

molecules” of which the Fantastic Four’s costumes are comprised, The Watcher is a Marvel Comics character who debuted in *Fantastic Four* #13 (cover date April 1963), making Díaz the third of our comic book realist writers drawn to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s work on the superhero team. The Watchers are a race of giants whose duty is to observe the universe in silence, never interfering. Uatu, the Watcher most frequently associated with the Fantastic Four, resides on the far side of the moon and in his first appearance breaks his vow of noninterference because of the threat posed by the Red Ghost, a Communist supervillain whose genetically modified apes “bring your conflict to the moon -- to **my** domain! I will tolerate no large-scale war here!” (13). After his introduction, Uatu the Watcher would go on to break his oath of isolationism many times,³⁵ most notably when the devourer of worlds Galactus visited Earth in *Fantastic Four* #48-50.³⁶

I belabor the point about The Watcher at such length because I do not think the importance of this reference to *Oscar Wao* can be overstated. Though readers of Díaz’s other work may assume that *Oscar Wao* shares its narrator with many of the stories in *Drown* and *This Is How You Lose Her*, Yunior conceals himself behind the identity of The Watcher for 169 pages, adopting the identity of “Historian to the Universe,” as Elena Machado Sáez has identified him (538). Most strikingly, though, Yunior’s identity as The Watcher is one of the most notable differences between *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and its short story incarnation as published in *The New Yorker*, throwing light

³⁵ By 2008, the precise number of times “he has deviated from his mandate/design” was cited as 337. See Charles Knauf, Daniel Knauf, and Daniel Acuña, “The Song of the Sleeper!,” *Eternals* #5 (December 2008), Marvel Comics, 1.

³⁶ The “Source Wall,” meanwhile, is drawn from another Kirby creation, from his *New Gods* series published by DC Comics. In those stories, the Source Wall is the name for the great barrier at the edge of the universe beyond which the inaccessible “Source” of all knowledge and life resides. Those who attempt to transgress beyond the Source Wall are subsequently entombed within it.

on the centrality of *The Watcher* in the novel. In the *New Yorker* version of the story, Yunior remains the narrator of the story, still lives with Oscar at college, and still dates his sister Lola (apparently never breaking up, as they do in the novel), but his narrative voice is never merged with *The Watcher*. With *The Watcher* as a central frame for the novel, then, Díaz foregrounds the importance of superhero comics to his project.

Recall that it was *Oscar Wao* which prompted Bautista to coin the term “comic book realism,” simplifying Hoberek’s earlier formulation of “comic-book magical realism” (“Introduction” 236). Hoberek clarifies, as I have attempted to do, that “Díaz does not invent comic book realism so much as pick up a nascent tradition and adapt it to the transnational New Jersey-Dominican Republic setting of his fiction” (*Considering* 174). As I have begun to argue in this section, Díaz fits into a larger cohort with Chabon, Lethem, and Rick Moody, but the adaptation of comic book realism traced by Hoberek conflicts with Mark McGurl’s “high cultural pluralism,” a trend he sees in postwar American fiction. High cultural pluralism, McGurl writes, is “a body of fiction that joins the high literary values of modernism with a fascination with the experience of cultural difference and the authenticity of the ethnic voice” (32). We might understand Díaz as uniting a largely realist aesthetics with the ethnic voice of Dominican-American experience, and I am aware that this claim might be somewhat controversial, for the novel includes both a mystical Golden Mongoose and the supernatural curse of the *fukú*. As noted in my introduction, though, the novel’s first words, “They say,” provide the realist possibility that the novel’s supernatural elements are only stories, not tangible facts like Lethem’s magical ring. Yunior repeats this move throughout the text; baldly acknowledging the research Yunior has done in piecing together the story of Oscar’s

family, the apparently divine prayers of La Inca are described as one more story “in the annals of Dominican piety” (144), while the appearance of the Mongoose, “the strangest part of our tale,” might only be “a figment of Beli’s wracked imagination” (149).

Although the Mongoose might also be a case of “extreme phenomena” (149) – its appearance to both Oscar and his mother would certainly suggest as much – Yuniór’s cagey narration suggests Díaz is celebrating the opportunities afforded to his narrative by an investment in the fantastic, where one might expect (as a matter of historical trajectory) a McGurl-ian surrender to the more traditional version of realism tracked in *The Program Era*.

Where high cultural pluralism “understands its self-consciously crafted and/or intellectually substantial products as importantly distinct from mass culture or genre fiction, although in practice . . . this distinction is often blurred or intentionally put at risk” (56), *Oscar Wao* seems less guarded about its affinity with mass culture, marked in part by its unannotated existence. We might understand the novel as “high cultural” if it maintained a separation from Oscar’s infatuation with the genres – remaining, as Yuniór posits, “just a memory of some nerd I once knew” (194) – were it not for the complex nature of Yuniór’s own mastery of nerd-speak, which T. S. Miller identifies as “the very model of the modern immigrant-nerd-artist” (98). Yuniór, we see, thinks of and presents himself as The Watcher, borrowing from superhero comics in the same way that Joe imagined himself The Escapist and Dylan saw himself as Black Bolt. He finds the metaphor of an all-seeing Watcher bound not to interfere (but unable to stop himself) apropos both for its pinpoint accuracy and for the immense scale it lends to his story, imagining his story on a cosmic stage by locating himself not in diaspora but residing on

the moon. Yuniór seems embarrassed by his knowledge of the genres, imploring the reader, “Please don’t ask me how I knew this. Please” (172) when he translates an Elvish phrase from *Lord of the Rings*. And for all his protestations that “this ain’t no Marvel Comics *What if?*”³⁷ (270), I disagree with Ramón Saldivar, who claims that the references in *Oscar Wao* are made “respecting our hero Oscar’s generic predilections” (587). Yuniór seems honest, if begrudgingly so, when he admits to the reader, “I liked shit like *Akira*” (172).

As the narrator, Yuniór could, of course, easily conceal all those embarrassing parts of himself from us. But the upfront nature of their presentation positions Díaz not just within comic book realism but also the New Sincerity, through his self-aware anticipation that the reader might judge him in the way that he saw Oscar belittled for his affection for the genres. Yuniór’s only anxiety about the genre aspects of his story come from how he predicts his readers will react to them. For this reason, because Díaz seems uninterested in the high/low cultural divide other than as an anticipated reaction by his reader, I am not convinced that we can place Díaz in McGurl’s high cultural pluralism. Can there be such a thing as “mass cultural pluralism”? I return to my slight manipulation of Adams’s American literary globalism, a globalism which “provides American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents” (251). To Adams’s list, I would add “generic,” as *Oscar Wao* so distinctly demonstrates, a metaphoric base with a scope commensurate with the enormity of the history Yuniór and the other characters have inherited.

³⁷ A reference to a line of comics printed by Marvel which offered hypothetical alternate takes on well-known events in the history of the Marvel Universe – for example, the first issue of *What If?* (cover date February 1977) asked, “What if Spider-Man had joined the Fantastic Four?”

The references in *Oscar Wao* are then of chief importance, and the presence of The Watcher in the novel bespeaks the significance of the superhero, positioning Díaz within comic book realism at large. In an essay on Díaz and high postmodern theory, T. S. Miller has identified *Oscar Wao*'s use of science fiction as a Lyotardian master narrative, with Oscar "ascrib[ing] 'master narrative' status to the single lens of sf" where Yunior "allows for the possibility that not everyone may find sf the appropriate metaphor to describe his or her own experience" (95). The critic Anne Garland Mahler, meanwhile, has taken a Lyotardian approach of sorts with respect to the novel's links with the superhero genre. In a first-rate essay, Garland Mahler offers a reading which frames Oscar as the protagonist in his own superhero's origin story. In the form of "a narrative of courageous martyrdom," Garland Maher sees Oscar's superhero identity as primarily grounded "in his identity as a writer" (129) – an identity which Yunior later adopts, at (she interprets) the insistence of Oscar's masked ghost (132). Her reading is sound, and it now bears turning to the moment of Oscar's death.

After a life of exclusion based on his physical appearance and obsession with all things geeky, Oscar falls in love with a "semiretired" prostitute named Ybón Pimentel (279). Ybón, however, is still in a relationship with an unnamed Dominican "capitán," who first warns Oscar away from Ybón by violently beating him in the canefields where Oscar's mother Belicia had previously been attacked. The capitán brings with him two plainclothes policemen whom the narrator names Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grod, "for simplicity's sake" (294). Mahler reads this moment as symptomatic of Oscar's entanglement in his own origin story, for the two are named after supervillains appearing in DC Comics publications; Solomon Grundy is an undead enemy of the original Green

Lantern, while Gorilla Grodd (puzzlingly, the confessed nerd Yunion omits the second “d”) is a telepathic gorilla who frequently battles against The Flash. Although Oscar does not heed the warning of the capitán and is later killed in the canefields, Garland Mahler suggests that his experience transforms him, prompting him to curse the curse of fukú, which has haunted his family, and granting him telepathic powers in the process (Yunion records “telepathic messages” which Oscar sends at the moment of his death, which Garland Mahler interprets quite literally as a superpower).

At the moment of his death, Oscar seems to embrace his identity as a superhero, all his fantasied imaginings coming to fruition in a moment when he can die for the love of a beautiful woman. Oscar’s brief speech to his killers frames him as a kind of curse on them, a ghostly hero who will await his vengeance:

He told them that it was only because of her love that he’d been able to do the thing that he had done, the thing they could no longer stop, told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn’t be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he’d be a hero, an avenger. (321-322)³⁸

As Mahler notes, the appearance of Oscar’s ghost seems to spur on Yunion to write the novel – “OK, Wao, OK. You win” (325) – and in this way we can understand that Díaz posits the very act of storytelling as superheroic. He does, after all, adopt his own superhero name to tell the story of Oscar, and the scope of the novel, requiring Yunion to take stock of five hundred years of history, seems a task better suited to the all-seeing eye

³⁸ I am also struck by the way that Díaz writes Oscar’s final monologue beyond the links to the superhero genre. It seems that Díaz might also be referencing the death of Obi-Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars*; in the 1977 science fiction film, Kenobi advises his killer, “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.” For Oscar, a “dude [who] wore his nerdiness like a Jedi wore his light saber” (21), the inspiration is not unfathomable, and it also calls to mind Leonard’s lament, “Is it so unreasonable to want to know more of what [Lethem] thinks about Julio Cortázar and less of how he feels about Obi-Wan Kenobi?” (31)

of the Watcher. But as we have already seen, the use of superheroes in *Oscar Wao* is something much more profound than just another instantiation of what Benjamin Kunkel describes as “the literary populism that we can now recognise as one of the main trends of the American novel over the past decade or so” (13).

Where many critics have pointed to the use of mass culture citations as one of many voices in Díaz’s polyvocal project, I think Díaz ranks “the genres” in a place of great importance. As I have shown, the shift from the *New Yorker* story’s narrator to the novel’s Watcher suggests that a story like Oscar’s needs to be told on a super/cosmic scale, and in some places in the novel Díaz suggests that the language of superhero comics is, surprisingly, the *only* way to tell Oscar’s story, particularly to an audience who does not have the historical frame of reference, “those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2). Though Yunior describes the Dominican dictator Trujillo as “a personaje so outlandish, so perverse, so dreadful that not even a sci-fi writer could have made his ass up,” he says so after equating Trujillo with four villains from the realms of science fiction, fantasy, and superhero comics. The first way to talk about Trujillo is on McCloud’s “amplification through simplification” scale when historical fact is insufficient to communicate scale – or, as Hoberek puts it, supervillains “provide a sadly apt metaphor for the kind of local and global abuses of power that concern [Díaz]” (*Considering* 175).

Elsewhere, Yunior speaks to the way that “the genres” could have helped Oscar at his lowest point. Just before Oscar’s suicide attempt, he is visited by the Golden Mongoose, the same spiritual entity that had saved his mother. Although Yunior describes the Mongoose as “something straight out of Ursula Le Guin,” Oscar refuses to

acknowledge the overlap between the genres and real life. “Dude had been waiting his whole life for something just like this to happen to him,” Yuniór laments, as if to say that had Oscar understood the Mongoose through the lens of his reading material – as Yuniór, *The Watcher*, does – Oscar might not have tried to kill himself, might have understood his place in a larger story (190). Here we see the genres posited as a response to Timmer’s need for decision-making tools in contemporary fiction. It is only when he finally understands his place in a larger story that Oscar is able to “do the thing that he had done” (321), strongly intimated to be the discovery of the cure for the *fukú* that plagues his family. “It’s the cure to what ails us,” he writes in a letter to Yuniór, “The Cosmo DNA” (333). Oscar’s florid prose recalls the hyperbolic language used in many superhero comics – Jack Kirby’s *New Gods*, for example – and is, incidentally, absent from the *New Yorker* story, but it tells us that Oscar has finally been able to integrate his reading material into his own identity: not as the mark of an outcast, but as the guiding script for his life. Oscar’s newfound vision of himself as a superhero, as an “avenger” (a loaded word for superhero comics, belonging as it does to the super-team of the most powerful characters published by Marvel Comics), is then linked to his status as an author, a writer of the “Cosmo DNA” book that will end the *fukú*.

Storytelling, then, is the *zafa*, Yuniór’s “very own counterspell” (7) as he works to recreate the work that Oscar had attempted before his death. Unlike *fukú*, which is a word of Díaz’s invention (whose etymology becomes clear when Oscar “rolled the word experimentally in his mouth. *Fuck you*” [emphasis maintained from 304]), *zafa* exists in the Spanish language, roughly translating to “free,” “clear,” or in a more colloquial sense “lifeboat.” Ben Railton posits that the *zafa* represents the American Dream (149), which I

think links up nicely with Yuniór's own description of the fukú as the "Great American Doom" (5). The two readings are not irreconcilable, for Railton's conception of the American dream is the power "to imagine and shape" one's own story, which I would like to extend to the ability to tell one's own story.

Indeed, the words with which *Oscar Wao* begins root the novel itself in storytelling. Lest we forget, *Oscar Wao* begins with the words "They say," indicating the healthy respect Yuniór and Díaz have for the power of storytelling. "*Anything uttered for the first time summons a demon*," Yuniór says in one of his trademark digressive footnotes (emphasis maintained from 90), while in another he writes of the comparison between "Dictators and Writers," "Dictators just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like*" (emphasis maintained from 97). And in the end, Yuniór believes that the power of story could eventually save the de León family from its curse and from the *fukú* of the new world when he introduces Lola's daughter Isis to the "four refrigerators where I store her tio's books" in the hope that "she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (330-331). Isis must understand the story of her past, but she must also herself become a superheroic storyteller – "and add her own insights" – in order to make peace more fully with her history. The way that Adams sees American literary globalism "providing American literature with a new set of genealogical, geographic, and temporal referents" (251) is here literalized by the necessity of Yuniór and Isis doing the same for their own story; Yuniór has done the genealogical and geographic research, while the story's new temporal referents come from Isis and "her own insights," but I would like to repeat my earlier suggestion that we add "generic referents" to Adams's catalog of

American literary globalism, which can then be seen to address many of the “symptoms” or theories of post-postmodern literature.

In light of the foregoing analyses, comic book realism might best be understood as a genre of shifts. First and of chief importance in the chapter above, we have seen it marks a shift from a postmodern cynicism about mass cultural polyvocality into an openness to and embrace of those sources as sites for sincerity. It stands also amid a historical shift away from lingering cultural elitism, a remnant of the crusade against comics from the 1950s. Even within what I have positioned as the trio of significant novels in the genre (four, if we consider *The Ice Storm*), we can observe a shift from a very clear distinction between reality and fiction to a much blurrier division which permits the fantastic to overwrite the real. Of the novels which might be considered comic book realist, that distinction remains largely intact, with Díaz as somewhat unique in his indistinct overlap of realism as superheroic.

I should address, if only briefly, the twenty-first century proliferation of novels which can be described as unequivocally superheroic in subject, novels which suspend the plausibility on which realism depends in favor of a more fantastic permission of superheroes to exist in prose. I understand these novels to exist at the intersection of the literary emergence of comic book realism and the superhero renaissance we can observe at movie theaters and on T-shirts worldwide. Texts like these reject Huber’s “levels of reality” approach and do not restrict their fantastic elements to layered narratives or the reading material of their characters. These texts do, however, subject the superhero genre to the kind of realist questions raised by, among others, *Watchmen*; for example, how might superheroes fit into the real world, and how might the world be changed by their

presence? (By comparison, comic book realism can be seen to ask, what is the place of a superhero narrative in the world?) Tom De Haven's 2005 novel *It's Superman!* retells the story of Superman with greater attention to its historical context than had been previously done. Where updates on Superman's origin story often relocate the character closer to the present historical moment, *It's Superman!* exuberantly embraces the 1930s, firmly entrenching Clark Kent in that era with little sense of irony.

A more deconstructionist approach is taken by Austin Grossman's *Soon I Will Be Invincible*, whose chapters are alternately narrated by the mad scientist Dr. Impossible and the cybernetic superheroine Fatale. Though Grossman revels in deconstructing the tropes of the superhero genre, juxtaposing Dr. Impossible's grand schemes with his own crippling insecurity, the novel proceeds with a fairly conventional narrative structure that would not be out of place in a traditional superhero comic. (Its cover art was designed by Chip Kidd in the US and Bryan Hitch in the UK, themselves both comics artists, lending another valence of authenticity.) Similarly, Melanie Lynne Hauser's two "Super Mom" novels, *Confessions of Super Mom* and *Super Mom Saves the World* (about which I will say more in my fifth chapter, on women writers of comic book realism), takes its title character's superpowers with a tongue planted firmly in cheek, the result of a "mysterious Swiffer accident," simultaneously teasing and deploying tropes of the superhero genre.

More common, though, has been the continued treatment of comics in a manner consistent with the Chabon and Lethem novels discussed above. In these novels, comic book readers like Joe Kavalier and Dylan Ebdus respond to Timmer's three symptoms of post-postmodernity through reading and performing their comic book identities. Jay Cantor's *Great Neck*, with which I begin my third chapter, is a novel in the vein of *The*

Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay, in that both novels feature protagonists who create comic books inspired by their own lives and in an attempt to come to terms with the world in which they live. Like *Kavalier & Clay*, *Great Neck* features chapters written in the style of the “Billy Books” created by protagonist Billy Green, eliding the distance between comics and reality by alternating between a character’s real name and the name Billy has given them in his comics (for example, Billy’s friend Beth is also “The Prophet”).

A central theme of comic book realism has been the values and dangers of performing scripted identities with great sincerity, valuing the genre of superhero comics with almost religious intensity. What happens, comic book realism asks, when a genre born out of a desire to escape becomes appropriated by and ultimately transforms its reader? Where theories of post-postmodernism have sought greater connectedness and sincerity, comic book realism posits that its source material can serve as answers to the sense of longing harbored by many contemporary novelists. Though I do not want to suggest that comic book realism is necessarily post-postmodern, for I still feel dissatisfied with the term, I argue that comic book realism aptly and thoroughly addresses the kinds of questions raised by theorists who have assembled under the term “post-postmodernism.” Having considered the relationship between comic book realism and “truth,” in the next chapter I will turn to the question of “justice” and how writers of comic book realism have wrestled with questions of connectedness and globalism in response to historical atrocities like the Holocaust and the Trujillo regime’s political executions. The third element of Superman’s mantra “Truth, Justice, and the American Way,” forms the basis of my fourth and fifth chapters, in which I take up first the

question of masculinity in comic book realism before examining the contributions of women writers to the genre.

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CHAPTER THREE:
JUSTICE – ETHICS AND THE OTHER
IN COMIC BOOK REALISM

In the preceding chapter, I examined the place of “truth” in the genre of comic book realism, identifying the way that the principal characters in three significant novels (*The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, *The Fortress of Solitude*, and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*) utilized the genre of superhero comics to inform and script their identities, in turn accessing some truth about themselves and the world in which they live. In this examination, we saw that the goals of comic book realism align in many ways with several prominent theories of the literary movement that has been called, among other names, post-postmodernism. Chief among these was Adam Kelly’s New Sincerity, a self-aware and self-reflexive honesty which seeks “truth to the self . . . as a means of ensuring truth to the other” (132).

Having explored the first half of that equation, I turn now to comic book realism’s attempts to ensure truth to the other, a goal it undertakes chiefly through the act of remembrance through silence, a concerted effort not to forget, not to omit, nor to overwrite those absences but rather to give them their due. In large part due to the emergence of the superhero genre during World War II and recognizing its comparative silence on matters of the atrocities of Nazi Germany, writers of comic book realism have attempted to redress those silences in careful and ethical ways (ethical in the sense of Levinasian ethics, which I will discuss shortly). My reading of Chabon and Díaz in this chapter focuses on the way these texts are grounded in, at the very least, implicit acts of remembering. In this chapter, I argue that the engagement with superhero comics in

comic book realism does not constitute an escape from ethical responsibility. Rather, these writers move through the superhero genre in order to facilitate and enable that ethical engagement.

“I’m still talking”: Comic Book Realism’s Obligation to History

Jay Cantor’s *Great Neck* presents the coming of age of a group of children in 1960 whose burgeoning sense of social responsibility is awakened by a class report on the Holocaust, presented by Billy Green who, later in the novel, becomes a successful comic book creator with his line of BillyBooks, which fictionalizes the lives of his social activist friends and presents them as superheroes like SheWolf, Ninja B., and OurKey. In the BillyBooks, Billy casts himself as Billy Bad Ears, “who’d gone grandly deaf weeping for the world’s pain and so gained the power to hear other men’s hearts” (12). Indeed, Billy’s grade-school report on the Holocaust reduces him to tears as he presents to the class on the horrors he has read in his father’s encyclopedia. “I know I have to stop crying!” he pleads with his classmate (30), and soon the pronouns in his report change from “them” to “us”: “they marched us to the train stations and put us in boxcars . . .” (33). When Billy is physically unable to complete his report, his teacher Mr. Hartman, himself a Holocaust survivor, continues in his stead, believing “that adults wouldn’t always be there to protect them, so they must know these secret things” (35). Mr. Hartman’s narrative ends with the death of the children in the camps, to which Billy responds, “in a sleepy small voice,” “So I’m already dead” (35). But Cantor reveals a recurring theme in comic book realism when Billy’s report is disturbed one last time:

[H]is reverie was interrupted by Jimmy Benjamin’s nasal voice: “Hey, Billy, you say you’re already dead, but you’re still talking!”

Billy just smiled, leaning against the blackboard again, and announced, “Yes, I’m still talking,” as if he, too, were surprised. (36)

Billy's epiphany in this moment is revelatory for a number of reasons. For one, it illustrates comic book realism's response to historical atrocity in Billy's announcement, "I'm still talking." Though Jimmy tries to harangue Billy for his emotional response, Billy realizes that he has *not* died, that he remains present – and, moreover, present with a voice. Billy's BillyBooks, then, become his best response to history, using his voice to remind readers of that which they may have forgotten (or chosen to forget). In this way we can see that comic book realism frames its position to historical atrocity as a relationship not purely of absence but of presence, of memory, mindful of that absence. "I'm still talking" – these issues have not and cannot be allowed to lapse into silence.

Furthermore, "I'm still talking" carries with it Billy's accompanying note of surprise, a dawning realization that he is still *capable* of speech, unlike the dead on whom he has just reported. We can understand his creation of the BillyBooks, then, as an outgrowth of this moment. Billy is "still talking" in front of his classmates, and he will continue to talk to a wider audience with his comics, which will immortalize his friends and metaphorize the traumas they and their world have endured. For Billy, this becomes a kind of calling, his superpower as Billy Bad Ears; like the protagonists of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz, Billy becomes a kind of superhero, though Cantor is careful to keep the fictional at a distance from the real. Billy Green is only Billy Bad Ears "[a]s long as he was drawing, anyway. After all, drawing a superhero didn't make him into one" (51). But drawing the BillyBooks does grant Billy a superpower, in the sense that it allows him to make the Holocaust accessible to his peers, even the non-Jewish bully Johnny Ryan: "he worried that he'd hurt Johnny Ryan's feelings with his report about Jews and France,

made him feel left out. Now he could make it up to him, make him the hero of his comic book” (54).

Billy’s “I’m still talking,” then, acknowledges the power of speech and, in the Stan Lee chorus, the knowledge that “with great power there must also come great responsibility,” a responsibility that the superpower of speech allows Billy Bad Ears to fulfill with his art. “I’m still talking” also recalls a key Levinasian refrain, quoted from Dostoevsky: “Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everything, and I more than the others” (*IR* 72).³⁹ Here Levinas identifies a key issue in his ethical philosophy, the call from the other to the I, the obligation to witness “more than the others” amid a shared guilt (alternatively translated as “responsibility”) “before everyone and for everything.” That is, all of us are responsible, but I am more responsible to the other and to myself for my unique recognition of the call from the other. Billy, who has already collapsed himself into an “us” with the dead realizes, “I’m still talking,” and here recognizes that his ability to speak carries an obligation to use his voice in a way that only he can. It may be useful to include in this constellation of Cantor, Lee, and Levinas the words of the poet Adrienne Rich, who in her 1983 poem “North American Time” includes these lines: “We move but our words stand / become responsible / and this is verbal privilege” (133). Like Rich, Billy recognizes that his words have an obligation, the privilege of speech, and he uses his privilege to address his Levinasian guilt and responsibility for the others, the dead who cannot speak for themselves.

Before I turn to the comics and novels that engage in comic book realism’s project of memory, I should first clarify two terms that I have heretofore used without

³⁹ Here and throughout the chapter, I use the standard abbreviations for Levinas’s work where *TI* denotes *Totality and Infinity*, *OB* signifies *Otherwise Than Being*, *IR* denotes *Is It Righteous To Be?*, and so on.

definition: “Holocaust” and “ethics.” On the matter of the Holocaust, I use that term to name the efforts of the National Socialist (Nazi) regime in Germany to exterminate those it deemed undesirable – chiefly European Jews, but also homosexuals, the disabled, political enemies, and Romanis, among others. I concur with many critics who point to the problematic nature of the word, from the Greek for “burnt offering.” Bruno Bettelheim, for example, a survivor of Dachau and Buchenwald, opposes the use of the word “Holocaust” for its religious valence as a “burnt offering,” which he says “robs the victims of this abominable mass murder of the only thing left to them: their uniqueness,” calling this naming “a profanation of God and man” (92). That is, to describe the event as a holocaust is to suggest that the Nazis were pious followers of the Abrahamic god, sacrificing the Jews in an imitation of the binding of Isaac in the book of Genesis, a grotesque distortion of the event, its intentions, and any semblance of what a god might expect of his followers. Giorgio Agamben, meanwhile, in *Remnants of Auschwitz* rejects both “Holocaust” and “so’ah” (or “Shoah,” from the Hebrew for “destruction”) on the grounds that both terms assign some religious purpose to the meaningless deaths. Furthermore, Agamben argues, these terms euphemize the deaths and render them indistinct; “the formation of a euphemism always involves ambiguities,” he writes, and “[i]n this case, however, the ambiguity is intolerable” (31). Ultimately, however, despite Agamben’s insistence that the term itself is anti-Semitic, I agree with Gene Plunka and others who have chosen to use “Holocaust” over other names for the event; in his monograph on Holocaust drama, Plunka writes that the term “Holocaust” “has become a term culturally etched in our consciousness, for better or for worse” (5). It would be wise, however, to remember Bettelheim’s conclusions about the term “Holocaust”; after

dismissing the term as profane, he writes, “The ultimate abyss with its unimaginable murderous terror—this is what we should name that which we have come to call the holocaust, if we wish to speak correctly of this unfathomable event” (99). No matter under which name we choose to talk about the extermination policies of Nazi Germany, we must not forget that this very event defies comprehension and resists by its horror the very attempt to name it.

Second, I use the term “ethics” in this chapter, frequently preceded by the adjective “Levinasian.” In those cases, I am using a shorthand to describe the body of philosophical writing composed by Emmanuel Levinas, a survivor of the Nazi extermination program. “Ethics,” however, is more difficult to define than “Levinasian,” because the density of the term is one of the mysteries with which readers of Levinas must wrestle. Levinas comes close to a definition of “ethics” early in *Totality and Infinity*, in which he offers the following:

We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics. (*TI* 43)

While I discuss below in greater detail the key ideas of Levinasian ethics and their applicability in the project of comic book realism, we see in his definition of ethics a fairly concise summation of Levinas’s entire ethical project: the notion that the individual (the I) must understand his or her own place in the world in relation to the presence of the Other, the very embodiment of alterity whose existence redefines mankind “as capable of living for the Other and of *being* on the basis of the Other who is exterior to him” (*TI* 149). The relationship between the Other and the I accesses infinity, as distinct from the totality of lived experience and of thought; in “welcoming the Other . . . infinity is

consummated” (TI 27). That is, when the Other is approached and welcomed rather than dismissed, the I can transcend the limitations of his own existence and reach something beyond the I’s own totality. I will explore the concepts of totality and infinity more thoroughly below, as they pertain to the ethical project of Levinas, but for now we can begin to understand *totality* as the finite aspect of human existence, one’s relationship with oneself as the “same”; *infinity*, meanwhile, Levinas defines as being “produced in the relationship of the same with the other” (TI 26), a relationship which transcends beyond the totality of the same into that which overflows thinking.

I find further clarity in the definition of “ethics” offered by Michael Morgan, author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas*, who defines the term thusly: “Let us assume that ‘ethics’ has something to do with human character and conduct, that it involves in some way our sense that there are actions that we take to be right and good and others that we take to be bad or wrong or harmful” (4). Cognizant of our existence as being already in relation with an Other who precedes us, we students of Levinas understand ethics to be the guidelines for existence in such a world. It is also useful to recall Levinas’s positioning of ethics as an “optics . . . a ‘vision’ without image” (TI 23), a way of seeing that allows the I to comprehend God indirectly, for “‘vision’ here coincides with this work of justice” (TI 78). Levinasian ethics, which I will discuss more fully below, can then be understood as a way of seeing the world through the lens of “actions that we take to be right and good” and pursuing what means to exist justly in a world in which the I is preceded by an impoverished Other.

In the preceding chapter, I compared the work of comic book realism to several formulations of contemporary literature, or post-postmodernism. Despite the

shortcomings of that term, we saw that many of the central issues in the attempts to define post-postmodernism are applicable to the concerns of comic book realism, particularly in questions of identity. In this chapter, I take a similar approach to Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* on matters of historical atrocity.⁴⁰ The ethical questions raised by Chabon and Díaz place them into conversation with Christian Moraru's model of cosmodernism, a post-1989 worldview that invites a reconsideration of the modernism/postmodernism timeline (315). Like Mark McGurl's technomodernism and Amy Hungerford, who proposes the term "long modernism" to reflect "not a departure from modernism's aesthetic but its triumph in the institution of the university and in the literary culture more generally" (418), Moraru aims to revise the modernism/postmodernism chronology to place postmodernism as a necessary interstitial between modernism and cosmodernism. Though he prefers Philip Wegner's "long Nineties" interregnum between the end of the Cold War and 9/11, Brian McHale acknowledges Moraru's cosmodernism as one important vision of contemporary literature, one which recognizes the existence of "a planetary *relationality* . . . globalization in which *the globe writes back*" (emphasis maintained from McHale, "Break" 333). In the globalized world, Moraru identifies "relation itself" as the "cosmodern lynchpin" (3), arguing that any understanding of American literature must be placed in a global context, albeit one that examines both sides of that exchange and not just the perception of America from without.

⁴⁰ Unlike in the second chapter, I am not including Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* in this discussion on the grounds that the novel does not dedicate the same attention to historical atrocity that Chabon and Díaz do. One might, however, interpret the absence of Rachel Ebdus as a presence in the way that this chapter reads historical absences as presences, though it seems beyond the scope and scale of this chapter to equate Rachel's exodus with political genocide.

Moraru defines cosmodernism as a four-pronged approach to the interconnected nature of twenty-first century culture, which I have broken into the following bulleted list for the ease of the reader. Cosmodernism is:

- “an *imaginary modality* of mapping out today’s world as a cultural geography of relationality,” emphasizing connections against a postmodern paradigm of rupture;
- “by the same token, a *protocol of subjectivity formation*” in which one formulates one’s own identity as always already connected with others;
- “an *ethical imperative* pointing to the present as much as to the future,” placing emphasis on a future founded upon a new understanding of the immediate globalized world as truly global;
- and “a *critical algorithm* for decrypting and assembling a range of post-1989 narrative and theoretical imaginings into a reasonably coherent and, again, ahead-looking model” (5-6).

In terms of contemporary/cosmodern literature, Moraru, after Levinas, identifies the practice of cosmodern “other-reading” (10), in which

the reader’s identity and identity overall arise in cosmodernism characteristically as a result of intensifying textual-cultural commerce with others around the world . . . to figure out what it means to evolve a self in the new millennium’s global context. What these authors suspect is, first, that reading acts of this sort have never been more identity-shaping no matter how ‘rooted’ this identity chooses to remain or is coerced into remaining; and second, that such an identity need not form at the expense of local ties and commitments. . . . reading the remote other creates or takes part in the creation of the self by establishing a relation that enhances extant affiliations or spawns new ones within the reader’s community. (204)

We saw in the preceding chapter that identity formation in comic book realism draws heavily on a reader's connection to the superhero genre and the practice of reenacting learned behaviors from that reading material, a literary concern consistent with Moraru's understanding of cosmodern reading as focused on the construction of identity. The relational crux of cosmodernism, the priority of the ethical, is founded for Moraru on Levinas, who understands ethics as first philosophy, for "It is in the laying down by the ego of its sovereignty (in its 'hateful' modality), that we find ethics and also probably the very spirituality of the soul, but most certainly the question of the meaning of being, that is, its appeal for justification" ("Ethics" 85). In other words, when the I is able to set aside itself as a sovereign being, when the I recognizes its existence in a relational world populated by the Other, the door is opened to the ethical relation between the Other and the I, in order that both can understand their being as both justified and in pursuit of justice.

As Moraru demonstrates, I am not alone in placing Levinas as an important figure in understanding contemporary literature as something different from postmodernism – an otherwise-than-postmodernism, if the play on Levinas's title *Otherwise Than Being* may be indulged. In the second edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon had already begun to identify Levinas as key to the shift away from postmodernism; "thanks, in part, perhaps to a reawakening of interest in the work of Emmanuel Levinas," she writes, the postmodern perspective had as early as 1995 begun to mutate, such that "a return to the notion of ethics altered the angle of vision on postmodernism's politics" (169).⁴¹ I am, however, somewhat unique in suggesting that

⁴¹ In the same way that Hutcheon cites Levinas as a turning point in postmodern critical theory, Peter Baker has positioned Levinas in a comparable spot in deconstruction, citing Levinas's compatibility with

Levinas helps us understand the novels of comic book realism and, perhaps, the desire for justice that is imported from the superhero genre into novels like *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. To my eye, only Nicola Morris has drawn on Levinas in any way to interpret *Kavalier & Clay*, suggesting that Levinas allows us to see more clearly the role of the golem in Chabon's novel, though her understanding of the Other as the created golem who "demands a relationship with the creator" is somewhat slippery (25). She is right, however, in asserting (as others have done, as well) that Chabon likens to the golem to a superhero, "bringing it to the New World and locating it in the community of American superheroes who can save, at least in the imagination" (25).

Rather than overlay a Levinasian concept as a metaphor onto the novels, as Morris does with the golem, it is more useful, I think, to understand what Levinas has to say about the ethical relation between the Other and the I, before turning to the novels and comic books which have engaged with this idea of relationality across history, using the superhero to reckon with the memory of historical atrocity. In light of the calling, identified by Levinas, from the Other to the I, the supplication and destitution of an Other to whom the I is responsible, how do writers respond when that Other has been silenced by assassination?

In order to understand the ethical questions raised by superhero comics and the novels of Chabon and Díaz, it is important to understand the central concepts of Levinasian ethics that help illuminate the ethical projects of the texts to be discussed below. What we will see by reading comic book realism through a Levinasian lens is that

Derrida's "resistance to intersubjective violence." See Peter Baker, *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1995), 5.

the reading of escapism as an unethical act is a misreading; Chabon and Díaz instead foreground the notion that escapism necessitates an ethical act of memory. The following explication of Levinas's work will demonstrate that an ethical approach requires a subject (or a self, an "I") to leave a space for its Other; in the case of the deceased, those whom Chabon and Díaz attempt to remember, that space remains vacated as a consequence of their assassination, and so the ethical act is silence. This silence, read by critics as evasion, is actually the only possible ethical response to a voice which has itself been silenced.

The Face of the Other: A Levinasian Exegesis

In this section, I provide a fairly succinct summary of the distinction between totality and infinity, from which we can begin to understand the ethical dimension of an individual's relationship and conversation with his or her Other, a being whose existence calls our own life on this earth into question. I have used the somewhat provocative term "exegesis" quite deliberately to indicate the spiritual dimension of Levinas's work; though I do not mean to equate his writing wholly with scripture, there is an aspect to Levinasian ethics that frames the individual's responsibility to the Other as one of divine justice (Levinas uses the phrase "dimension of the holy" to identify this calling). This exegesis is intended to be holistic and somewhat utilitarian in its scope; though the writing of Levinas contains a great deal more than just a schematic for ethics, the more philosophical dimensions of his work (as distinct from the ethical) are less immediately applicable to this project, and so the reader is directed elsewhere for that conversation.⁴²

⁴² Such a reader is, of course, directed first to the large corpus of Levinas's collected writings. Levinas is the subject of both a *Cambridge Introduction* (authored by Michael Morgan) and a *Cambridge Companion*, and Benajmin Hutchens's *Levinas: A Guide For the Perplexed* is a helpful and more extensive summary of Levinas's work than this present study can offer.

Instead, this précis of Levinas consists largely of salient quotations from his most significant writings (*Totality and Infinity*, *Otherwise Than Being*, and *Time and the Other*), which have been interposed with my own commentary in order to present this material to the reader through as much of Levinas's own writing as possible.

We can begin to understand Levinasian ethics as emerging from the distinction between totality and infinity. As mentioned above, totality is a finitude, all that which can be encompassed and contained within a thought; throughout his work, totality is also represented by Levinas as identity, the same, and the I. A totality begins "from an 'at home' which we inhabit" (*TI* 33), a place where the I can understand itself in isolation. To be at home with oneself allows the I to live as "the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity" (*TI* 36). Individuals first form their identities in isolation, in a kind of initial solipsism where the same would remain only the same without exposure to anything outside of the "at home." This idea of initial identity through solitude is raised also in Levinas's *Time and the Other*, in which Levinas frames the creation of a totality as one of the imposition of mastery over that which the same encounters. "The solitude of the subject results from its relationship with the existing over which it is master. This mastery over existing is the power of beginning, of starting out from itself, starting out from itself neither to act nor to think, but to be" (*TO* 67). The subject begins to be, begins to stake out an identity as an I, and in so doing converts alterity into sameness through the process of totalization.

Infinity, by contrast, is exteriority, that which exists outside of the "at home" constructed by the I as a totality. Exteriority leads to objective truth and to transcendence, both of which can be found in the face of the Other, who cannot be contained in the

totality of a thought – in other words, cannot be converted into the sameness of the I, retains its alterity in contact with the I. The I can never wholly convert the alterity of the Other into the sameness of the I, because the Other's otherness can never be mastered. Levinasian exteriority makes sense as a challenge to what could become the metaphorical house arrest of the I's existence at home; if the I never leaves the totality of the home, of all that it knows, it can never encounter anything else, let alone *anyone* else. Yet Levinas is careful not to equate an encounter with pure understanding, for "Infinity overflows the thought that thinks it," Levinas writes (*TI* 25). If one could contain infinity within a thought, the infinite would become finite, would become bounded. Moreover, the attempt to configure the Other into comprehension is impossible: "The Other cannot be contained by me: he is unthinkable—he is infinite and recognized as such. This recognition is not produced again as a thought, but is produced as morality" (*TI* 230). The Other overflows the totality of the I by his very infinity, and the recognition of that infinity, the refusal to totalize the infinite constitutes for Levinas an act of morality, which influences the realm of the ethical. For Levinas, the recognition of the infinite within the Other is an act both moral and ethical, both just and right. What Levinas suggests is that alterity exceeds the ideas of the I; it is not just that the Other cannot be contained within a thought, but his very other-ness is something which cannot be thought by the I.

Who, then, is the Other? In the earlier definition of ethics, we saw the Other described as "strange," with an "irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions" (*TI* 43). In the same way that infinity cannot be contained in a thought, the Other likewise overflows the thought of the I. In *Time and the Other*, Levinas provides a brief description of the Other: "[W]e recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to

us; the relationship with the other is a relationship with a Mystery. The other's entire being is constituted by its exteriority, or rather its alterity" (*TO* 75-76). Yet where it might be tempting to consider the Other to be every being that is not encompassed in the I, everyone who is not myself, Levinas envisions the Other as someone whose alterity is not relational:⁴³ "The alterity of the Other is in him and is not relative to me; it *reveals* itself. But I have access to it proceeding from myself and not through a comparison of myself with the other" (*TI* 121). Or, to put it another way, "The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me" (*TI* 194). We can see here that the Other may be first considered to be anything exterior to the I, but we must be careful not to assume that the Other is other by virtue of comparison with an I; rather, the Other's alterity proceeds from himself.

In the case of comic book realism, we can understand the I as the subject position held by the writers in the genre (here, chiefly Chabon and Díaz), as well as their readers. These subjects exist in the world within their own "at-homes." This subject's Others are those figures from the past who were assassinated in the Holocaust and the political killings of the Trujillo regimes. Chabon, Díaz, and their readers recognize in a moment of confrontation that they have an obligation to these Others, an ethical responsibility to them. The novels of comic book realism, then, attempt an ethical engagement with these absent Others.

Rather than attempt to understand the Other in relation to the I, we can recognize the Other by two distinctive and intertwined features of his place in Levinasian ethics: the face and the I's responsibility to the Other. The face, by which the Other is made known,

⁴³ In *Time and the Other*, Levinas clarifies that the alterity of the Other is neither relational nor reciprocal: "The Other as Other is not only an alter ego: the Other is what I myself am not" (*TO* 83).

is revealed to the I, and allows the I to recognize his ethical obligation to that Other. We have already seen that the Other and the I cannot, for a number of reasons, meet in a totality. Instead, the two are able to relate in language, which is not a totality, but rather a “face to face” (*TI* 39). This face to face of language consists of a conversation between the two, in which the Other and the I come to each other outside of the totalizing narratives of historiography. Dialogue is central in this encounter, but the face to face is in its first moment a command from the Other. “I am ordered toward the face of the other” (*OB* 11), Levinas writes, “ordered” by the fact that the Other precedes the I in this world. (I discuss this precession below, but it is first important to continue defining the face itself.) By “face” Levinas does not mean the literal face – eyes, nose, mouth – but more broadly the existence of the Other as a being capable of possessing a face and of being approached in the direct manner of a face-to-face encounter. The face is “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*” (emphasis maintained from *TI* 50). Moreover, “It *expresses itself*,” needing no totalizing interlocutor from the I; “The face brings a notion of truth which . . . is not the disclosure of an impersonal Neuter but *expression*” (emphasis maintained from *TI* 51). The face to face, in addition to being a direct encounter, is one of expression rather than suppression; that is, the face speaks rather than is spoken to, is permitted to express rather than is silenced in an act of dispossession.

When the face speaks, it tells a story of poverty, though not exclusively literally; the face expresses itself as hungry for recognition to be met in the world, something which the I is obligated to provide. Put another way, this obligation is an accusation in which the self is caught. The self can accept this responsibility “before everyone and for

everything” (*IR* 72), or the alternative is totalization, to refuse to meet the Other but rather to attempt to contain it in a thought, reduce its alterity to sameness. “The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger; but this poverty and exile which appeal to my powers, address me, do not deliver themselves over to these powers as givens, remain the expression of the face” (*TI* 213). The face’s expression, its speech, speaks something of the I’s obligation to the Other; having met the Other in a face-to-face encounter and coming into contact with the poverty of the Other, the I is presented with two options: “I can recognize the gaze . . . only in giving or in refusing; I am free to give or to refuse, but my recognition passes necessarily through the interposition of things” (*TI* 77). To refuse the gaze of the Other, to refuse to recognize him, would, in the schema of Levinasian ethics, be an unethical act.

In the face to face encounter, we achieve justice when that call is answered, when the gaze from the face of the Other is answered in the affirmative (*TI* 71). “Justice consists in recognizing in the Other my master. . . . Justice is the recognition of his privilege qua Other” (*TI* 72). What obligates the I to the Other, as I have implied, is the Other’s precession of the I. In other words, the I enters into a world where the Other already exists, and rather than totalize the Other, rather than take a piece of this world away from the already-destitute Other, the I must instead cede priority to the Other who precedes. This idea Levinas derives from Pascal, in a passage which forms one of the epigraphs for Levinas’s *Otherwise Than Being*: “‘That is my place in the sun.’ That is how the usurpation of the whole world began” (*OB* vii). From Pascal, Levinas imagines this “usurpation” as the process of the self’s formation of a totality, at the expense of the Other. Each self engages in the process of becoming an I, participating in a cycle of

destitution. This process of making oneself at home perpetuates a cycle of destitution, in which the Other is forced out of his place in the sun, taking from him whatever he had before the I formed its own identity.

Rather than continue the usurpation of the world, the taking-away from the Other, the I must instead recognize – and respect – that Other’s precession. “In the responsibility for the Other, for another freedom, . . . this refusal of the present, of appearing, of the immemorial, commands me and ordains me to the other, to the first one on the scene, and makes me approach him, makes me his neighbor” (*OB* 11). The Other is precisely “the first one on the scene,” and because the I has formed an identity in a world in which the Other has already existed in a state of destitution the I could, by an act of inattention or ignorance (or worse), perpetuate the poverty (spiritual or material) of the Other. The “usurpation of the world,” then, comes at a cost, which the I must recognize if the I is to behave ethically. “My being-in-the-world or my ‘place in the sun,’ my being at home, have not these also been the usurpation of spaces belonging to the other man whom I have already oppressed or starved, or driven out into a third world; are they not acts of repulsing, excluding, exiling, stripping, killing?” (“Ethics” 82). Rather than continue this cycle of exclusion, of *oppression*, Levinas calls for the ethical response of the permission of *expression*, of granting the justice of the face-to-face encounter.

Finally, there is something very personal and at once unique about the place of the I in this encounter. Recall Levinas’s quotation from Dostoevsky: “Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everything, and I more than the others” (*IR* 72). Though every I is responsible to every one of their others, the I is guilty more so than all the rest. And while Levinas speaks about *the* I as a kind of abstraction, he is empirically clear that each

of us is an I, and so his use of the pronoun deliberately slips between the solipsistic I of sameness and the I that is me myself. I, Levinas argues, am responsible in a way that no one else can be responsible: “In the face of the other man I am inescapably responsible and consequently the unique and chosen one. By this freedom, humanity in me – that is, humanity as me – signifies . . . the anteriority and uniqueness of the non-*interchangeable*” (emphasis maintained from “Ethics” 84). The non-interchangeability of the I indicates that I cannot shirk my ethical responsibility by imagining that another I might take my place in the face-to-face encounter; in that sense, I am unique, in possession of a unicity which no one else can exchange with me. “It is thus the being in me, the fact that I exist, my *existing*, that constitutes the absolutely intransitive element, something without intentionality or relationship. One can exchange everything between beings except existing” (emphasis maintained from *TO* 42).⁴⁴ When Levinas quotes Dostoevsky as saying that “I more than the others” am guilty, am responsible, this is the very heart of Levinasian unicity. No one but myself can prevent myself from totalizing the Other, from violently converting his alterity into my sameness. The unicity of the I, of myself, therefore carries an ethical responsibility, because I, a self, exist in a world populated by others who precede me. For that reason, “My freedom does not have the last word; I am not alone” (*TI* 101).

The authors of comic book realism, as subjects, recognize in the face of the Other an ethical responsibility to that Other. It is for this reason that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* are set in moments of

⁴⁴ For Levinas, the Other is also unique, “unique to such an extent that in speaking of the responsibility for the unique, responsibility in relation to the unique, I use the word ‘love.’ That which I call responsibility is a love, because love is the only attitude where there is encounter with the unique” (“Paradox” 174). Here again, the significance of the face-to-face encounter is clear: two unique and non-interchangeable faces encountering each other in conversation where justice can be attained.

historical atrocity; Chabon's novel begins with Joe Kavalier attempting to escape the fate of European Jews during the Holocaust, while Díaz's is pervaded with characters who encounter the legacy of Trujillo's violent campaign against his own people. The narrative voices of these novels attempt to reconcile their existence as part of a world already in progress, in which their place in the sun has come at the expense of numerous lives taken. Chabon and Díaz's characters are not themselves directly responsible for the assassinations of the Others who preceded them, but they recognize their own unicity and assume the ethical responsibility that comes with such unicity. Joe Kavalier labors under the weight of the knowledge that his survival, his escape, comes at the expense of his brother's life, while Yunior eventually comes to terms with an awareness of the great responsibility that befalls him as the surviving storyteller of the legacy of Trujillo. Joe and Yunior are, like Billy Green, still alive, "still talking," but their voice speaks of those who can no longer speak. Comic book realism's ethical project, then, seeks to stake out an ethical position in light of an Other who has been obliterated.

"Reality Has Weight": Absences and Presences

The I's unicity, a freedom as a result of being in a world where I am not alone, is not limited solely to the face-to-face encounter; that is, it is important not to view the face-to-face as a single moment, in the way that a face-to-face encounter with a friend might only take a minute or two of one's time. Rather, the I's face-to-face with the Other extends across time. "When man truly approaches the Other," Levinas writes, "he is uprooted from history" (*TI* 52) through the conversation of the face-to-face, for "Language is perhaps to be defined as the very power to break the continuity of being or of history" (*TI* 195). Recalling the enclosure within a thought that a totality permits, we

might think of the work of historiography – of reshaping time into a narrative – as containing the Other in a thought. “Totalization is accomplished only in history,” Levinas writes (*TI* 55), and to contain the Other in a thought would be akin to historicizing him, but to face the Other is to detach from the totality of historiography, toward infinity. Additionally, this containment in a thought is “possession” – “the form in which the other becomes the same, by becoming mine” (*TI* 46). Furthermore, Levinas’s invocation of the Other as “first one on the scene” implies that the I is always already responsible for the past of the Other, of existing conscious of that past. “The relationship with a past . . . is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or misfortune of others, in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another” (*OB* 10). This unique responsibility of the I reverberates beyond the time the I spends on this earth because of the idea of the Other preceding the I. It is for this reason that Levinas says, “Reality has weight when one discovers its contexts” (*IR* 160). Though the I can only experience the events that transpire during his life, the I is entering into a world already in progress, already populated by Others, and already in need of the I’s ethical response to those others. These contexts, Levinas suggests, are inescapable.

Levinas tells us, “I am ordered toward the face of the other” (*OB* 11), but the writing of Primo Levi draws us to what initially seems an important challenge to this idea. In the Holocaust was an effort at annihilation, at ensuring the complete destruction of both a people and their very story on this earth. Levi quotes a member of the SS who anticipated human doubt, “However this war may end, we have won the war against you; none of you will be left to bear witness, but even if someone were to survive, the world will not believe him” (*DS* 11). In this attempt at obliteration, Levi suggests that the

extermination camps taught of “the existence of two particularly well differentiated categories among men – the saved and the drowned” (*SA* 87). The “saved,” of course, are those who did not perish in the camps,⁴⁵ while the “drowned” are those “who finished in the gas chambers [and who] have the same story, or more exactly, have no story; they followed the slope down to the bottom, like streams that run down to the sea” (*SA* 90). One would be rightly troubled to wonder at the ethical response to such an atrocity – not just what one *ought* to do, but what *can* be done in such a case. “It poses the question,” Levinas writes, rejecting Hamlet’s existential question, “of my right to be which is already my responsibility for the death of the Other . . . how being justifies itself” (“Ethics” 86).

When it comes to survivors, the saved, the ethical response is clear: as ever, the Levinasian command is the face-to-face encounter in which the Other is permitted to give testimony. “We see [testimony] as a duty and, at the same time, as a risk,” Levi writes: “the risk of appearing anachronistic, of not being listened to. We must be listened to” (*DS* 199). But for the I an ethical response is still possible to the drowned. Though those

⁴⁵ The word “saved” should not, however, imply some kind of divine providence, which both Levi and Levinas reject. Levi writes, “[T]he experience of the Lager with its frightful iniquity confirmed me in my non-belief. It prevented, and still prevents me from conceiving of any form of providence or transcendent justice” (*DS* 145). Furthermore, Levi’s non-belief took the form of disbelief in the efficacy of prayer and indeed the immorality of such a prayer for his own salvation over and against the salvation of others: “A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd . . . but blasphemous, obscene . . . I knew that otherwise, were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it” (*DS* 146). Though he ascribes the name “saved” to the survivors, Levi clearly wrestles with any religious valence of such salvation and indeed is bewildered by the conditions of the camp that made the distinction between life and death meaningless.

Levinas, meanwhile, struggles to find meaning *per se* in the Holocaust, for the suffering endured therein can only be described as “useless” – “gratuitous human suffering, in which evil appears in its diabolical horror” (97). The evil of the Holocaust, Levinas argues in his essay “Useless Suffering,” was precisely the meaninglessness of the killings, which exposes the impossibility of faith in any theodicy, or the defense of a benevolent God who permits the existence of evil. If there is meaning to be found after the Holocaust, it comes in the form of “the meaning that religiosity, but also the human morality of goodness, can continue to have after the end of theodicy” (“Useless” 99). Nodding to Nietzsche’s pronouncement of the death of God, Levinas argues, “The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity” (“Useless” 97), such that it becomes impossible to maintain any defense of a God who would permit those events to occur. Instead, theodicy only serves to assuage the guilt of the perpetrator or to rationalize the suffering of the other, both of which are ethically untenable.

voices have been silenced, their physical faces lost, Levinas suggests that the dead still remain an Other, with the concomitant ethical responsibility. “The solitude of death does not make the Other vanish, but remains in a consciousness of hostility, and consequently still renders possible an appeal to the Other” (*TI* 234). The “solitude of death” leaves the business of the Other unfinished, leaves a vacuum which the I must not attempt to overwrite, filling it in with the totality of the I’s lived experience. Again we go to Levi for this postmortem appeal which Levinas identifies. Levi argues that this void left by the passing of the Other is the “complete witness” to the horrors of the Holocaust. “We, the survivors, are not the true witnesses,” Levi claims (*DS* 83), for the truth of the Holocaust can only be represented by the figure of the *Muselmann*,⁴⁶ those whose internment in the death camps of Nazi Germany effectively hollowed them out, rendered them at once something inhuman and someone abjectly human. Levi describes the *Muselmann* thusly in *Survival in Auschwitz*:

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will be a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often easily loses himself. He will be a man whose life or death can be lightly decided with no sense of human affinity . . . It is in this way that one can understand the double sense of the term ‘extermination camp.’ (*SA* 27)

The *Muselmann*, a figure undertaken by Giorgio Agamben below, represents for Levi the possibility of a “complete witness” for they are “the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we [the survivors] are the exception” (*DS* 84). As those who represent the full extent of the atrocity of the Holocaust – the process of dehumanization and extermination – their testimony seems to Levi weightier because it

⁴⁶ The term *Muselmann* – literally, German for “the Muslim” – comes from Levi and is used by Giorgio Agamben, as presented in this chapter. I have standardized the spelling of this term, which is used by Levi and Agamben as, variously, Musselman or *Muselmänner*.

might speak more directly to the genocide than might the testimony of one who survived it. Their deaths, their drowning, make the *Muselmann* at once the complete witness and an impossible witness.

The ethical responsibility of art to the drowned, to those who cannot bear witness, has been a subject of immense contention in literary criticism, beginning from Adorno's claim in 1949 that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (34). While one might take Adorno at literal value or might instead respond that it is barbaric *not* to write poetry,⁴⁷ Irving Howe suggests that Adorno may have been revisiting the idea that aestheticization makes something "familiar and in some sense even tolerable" (29) – in other words, aestheticization contains an event in a thought, totalizes it into lived experience, and makes it comprehensible. Howe's conclusion, though, does seem to acknowledge a distinction between "one cannot" (*m'ken nisht*) and "one must not" (*m'tur nisht*) (36). Language may be innately unable to perform the task of rendering the Holocaust in art, but that, Howe says, does not mean we "must not" attempt to work with through the event. We must not leave the Holocaust behind, Howe implores, for "it is a grave error to make, or 'elevate,' the Holocaust into an occurrence outside of history" (27). Instead, we must probe the "abyss" opened up by the exterminations (28). He quotes Adorno's note on barbarism but suggests that what he meant was, "given the absence of usable norms through which to grasp the meaning . . . given the intolerable gap between the aesthetic conventions and the loathsome realities of the Holocaust, and given the improbability of coming up with images and symbols that might serve . . .

⁴⁷ A third option presents itself, in the form of documentary poetics such as those found in the work of Charles Reznikoff and Heimrad Bäcker, in which poetry is not written but rather discovered and re-formed from official documents of the era.

writers in the post-Holocaust era might be wise to be silent” (29). One cannot write about the Holocaust, Howe suggests, because language itself is insufficient for the task.

The insufficiency of language was raised by Lawrence Langer in a monograph on literature of the Holocaust, in which he proposed instead the “literature of atrocity,” which “is not the transfiguration of empirical reality . . . but its *disfiguration*, the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader’s sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an accompanying infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable, to such a degree that the possibility of aesthetic pleasure as Adorno conceives of it is intrinsically eliminated” (2-3). Such literature would not, then, attempt to aestheticize and impose sense on the genocide of the Holocaust but would incorporate into its very form the defiance of reason that Langer understands the Holocaust to represent. Any effort to refigure the Holocaust as something comprehensible is necessarily doomed to failure, but an art which takes as its beginning “disfiguration” might provide “a framework for responding to [the Holocaust], for making it *imaginatively* (if not literally) accessible” (12). Levi too recognizes the inadequacy of language but invites not a revision of aesthetics but an embrace of the inevitable failure of the same. “We know that we will have difficulty in being understood,” Levi writes, “and this is as it should be” (SA 27) – as it should be, Levi suggests, because the event ought to defy our attempts to configure it in such a way that we grasp it, comprehend it, and in so doing accept it as not discontinuous with the world.

Might, then, the ethical response to the drowned be akin to conversation with the Other, insofar as the I grants the drowned a place of silence? That is, if the drowned cannot speak, rather than attempt to make a presence of their absence, can their absence

not itself be a presence? Such is the central argument of Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, in which he posits, per Levi, that the true witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust is precisely the one who cannot speak:

The survivors speak in their stead, by proxy, as pseudo-witnesses; they bear witness to a missing testimony. And yet to speak here of a proxy makes no sense; the drowned have nothing to say, nor do they have instructions or memories to be transmitted. They have no "story," no "face," and even less do they have "thought." Whoever assumes the charge of bearing witness in their name knows that he or she must bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness. (34)

Like Levi and others who have written of the inevitable failure of language in speaking of the Holocaust, Agamben finds an inherent impossibility of language to serve as an adequate witness to the event. And per Levi, Agamben identifies that complete witness as the *Muselmann*, a figure whom it would be our ethical obligation not to forget, not to silence. "In Auschwitz ethics begins precisely at the point where the *Muselmann*, the 'complete witness,' makes it forever impossible to distinguish between man and non-man" (47). The ethical response to the Holocaust, Agamben suggests, is not one which configures the event into a totality or one which, per Hannah Arendt, divorces the event from any attempt at engaging by labeling it solely as "evil," outside of history and outside of confrontation.

According to Agamben, "[Levi] is the only one who consciously sets out to bear witness in place of the *Muselmänner*, the drowned, those who were demolished and who touched bottom" (59), and this is precisely what comic book realism attempts to do – to bear witness in place of those who cannot give their own testimony, not by filling in the words they might have said but by leaving the space silent for the writer and the readers to consider. "Simply to deny the *Muselmann*'s humanity would be to accept the verdict of

the SS and to repeat their gesture,” Agamben writes (63), and this is exactly what comic book realism strives *not* to do. Rather than perpetuate the Nazi attempt at obliteration, or to continue the violence done to the Dominican people by Trujillo and his cronies, we shall see that Michael Chabon and Junot Díaz neither remain silent about nor attempt to overwrite the erasures of history. Rather than speak on behalf of the drowned, Chabon and Díaz refuse to take away a place in the sun from those who have been killed, instead leaving that place vacant, permitting the reader to recognize and contemplate that absence.

Agamben and others have written that the matter of silence is critical in the ethical response to the Holocaust; despite Adorno’s pronouncement of the barbarism of poetry after the event, writers have not, as I have said, taken him at the literal meaning of his words. In his essay “The Holocaust as Literary Inspiration,” Elie Wiesel concurs with Agamben and Levi that the Holocaust resists the very act of speech. Wiesel rejects the title of his essay because “There is no such thing” as literary inspiration from or after Auschwitz. “After Auschwitz words are no longer innocent” (6) and “Auschwitz negates all systems, destroys all doctrines. They cannot but impoverish the experience” (7). Instead of turning to the literary, Wiesel argues instead that “our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony” (9). Here Wiesel posits that making art of the Holocaust is not possible but delivering testimony is. Indeed, as for Agamben, it seems to carry a moral imperative as a response to the Nazi burning of corpses: “Just as the killer was determined to erase Jewish memory, his victims fought to maintain it alive” (16).

Robert Eaglestone, too, argues for the establishment of testimony as a genre when it is consumed as fiction. In his monograph *The Holocaust and the Postmodern*,

Eaglestone argues that the Holocaust was the turning point from modernism into postmodernism (informed, perhaps, by Zygmunt Bauman's idea that the Holocaust was the product of modernity); postmodernism is, in Eaglestone's conception, itself an attempt to understand and react to the Holocaust. Working from the idea that the affective process of reading involves finding common ground with the work of literature, Eaglestone begins with the incomprehensibility of the Holocaust, noting that simultaneously testimony "seem[s] to demand us to do exactly that, to comprehend it" (19), though in the process such identification with the victims makes the event "normalized, part of experience" (22). More importantly, "Survivors do not believe that they can or should be identified with, even through their testimony" (28). In response, he argues, "This seeming aporia—the epistemological impossibility and ethical probation against identification with a prose narrative, which is textual and mediated, against the ineluctable desire to identify with it, as if it were neither textual nor mediated—is resolved by thinking through the idea of context, best understood here as genre" (37).⁴⁸ He argues that we should begin thinking about testimony as its own genre, with goals different from an encouragement of identification: "To understand testimony as a genre it is necessary to look at the radical doubt and the self-consciousness of each of these texts, to read them with an eye to gaps, shifts, breaks, and ruptures, which show how they are not, in any simple way, easily consumed. To read these texts as testimonies, to read the genre, is to refuse the identification" (40).

⁴⁸ In his assessment of testimony as genre, Eaglestone tracks six features of testimony as a genre: "the textual use of historical evidence and style, the narrative framing, a focus on moments of horror, the way the texts interrupt or disrupt their own flow [which, consistent with Langer, Eaglestone later speaks of as indicative of the way the Holocaust was itself a moment of rupture], moments of excessive over-identification, and the lack of closure in testimony" (43).

Eaglestone nuances, then, Wiesel's argument that testimony replaces art by positing the two as coexistent. Eaglestone's schematic of postmodern Holocaust literature includes fiction, which he rightly notes runs the risk of normalizing the event and committing the ethically troublesome act of permitting the reader to, via identifying it with themselves, configure it into a totality. Eaglestone steps sideways near the issue of genre by identifying Holocaust fiction as a temporal, not necessarily generic, marker, because much fiction which is not directly about the Holocaust may be said to be Holocaust fiction by suggesting its absence. In a provocative example, he suggests that George Orwell's *1984* might be considered a Holocaust narrative through the way Big brother's fascist regime might prompt readers to consider the "absent content" of the Holocaust – absent in the sense of being absent from the text on the page but present as a content in the reader's mind (105).

Eaglestone's sense of the Holocaust as "already a horizon which orients our time" (12) is quite salient, though its extension into the likes of Orwell and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* seems a stretch too far. One would be more precise to say that Orwell, Golding, and other authors enrolled in Eaglestone's "absent content" are engaged in novels about the premises of fascism rather than its particular and most horrific instantiation in the twentieth century. But Eaglestone's "absent content," roughly contiguous to Agamben's "absence as presence" in the figure of the *Muselmann*, plays a role in Katalin Orbán's analysis of postmodern literature and the Holocaust. Orbán's archive, which includes *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Maus*, problematizes the "angel's-eye view" (a phrase borrowed from Pynchon) by challenging the issue of representation on the matter of the Holocaust; like Eaglestone, she posits that texts might be considered

Holocaust stories even if they seem “Holocaust-decentered,” particularly when “the Holocaust only becomes shockingly hypervisible in its near-absence *given everything else* in the narrative” (emphasis maintained from 27). Orbán’s reading of *Gravity’s Rainbow* takes stock of the sheer enormity of Pynchon’s novel and identifies what she takes to be a jarring omission. In such a lengthy exploration of World War II, Orbán is struck by the absence of any mention of Auschwitz. “[T]he Holocaust as an event is conspicuously—even radically—missing from a text so obsessed with Western progress as a technology of death” (161-162). Orbán frames *Gravity’s Rainbow* as a kind of Borgesian riddle, the kind described in Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “The Garden of the Forking Paths,” in which the Sinologist Stephen Albert asks his would-be assassin Yu Tsun, “In a riddle whose answer is chess, what is the only word that must not be used?” (126). “To *always* omit one word,” Albert continues, “to employ awkward metaphors and obvious circumlocutions, is perhaps the most emphatic way of calling attention to that word” (emphasis maintained from 126). This is Orbán’s reading – that *Gravity’s Rainbow* is not a novel which altogether omits the Holocaust but rather attempts to draw the reader’s attention to it by its very exclusion.⁴⁹

As a kind of proto-comic book realist text, *Gravity’s Rainbow*’s treatment of the Holocaust, or lack thereof, is worth considering because of the treatment I am about to present in comic book realism proper. Ultimately, I do not agree with Orbán’s reading of Pynchon as in continuity with Agamben’s “absence as presence”; rather than understand the effect of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as one pointing to the absence of the Holocaust, I take the text to be a deliberately dizzying array moving from an overwhelming bombardment

⁴⁹ Alberto Galindo has made a similar point about *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, arguing that the novel is by virtue of being published after September 11, 2001, a thematically post-9/11 novel, despite never invoking the event itself.

of information to the gradual dispersal of reason, an aesthetic shift paralleling Pynchon's depiction of bombings and their explosive diffusion of their targets. Rather than locate the "absence as presence" in comic book realism beginning with Pynchon, I will argue beyond Orbán's reading that the work of Michael Chabon and Junot Díaz more properly depicts this ethical response to historical atrocity by providing a space for that absence to make its presence felt. That is, rather than omit the "absent content" altogether and hope its readers intuit the absence, the work of comic book realism acknowledges that absence and confronts the reader with it. We can see the ethical project of Chabon and Díaz has some affinity with superhero comics themselves. These comics exist as part of a historical trajectory in representations of the Holocaust, from outright absence to treatments with a more ethical dimension, in which the absence of the dead is acutely felt by the superheroes who are confronted by their Others. What I hope to demonstrate is that Chabon and Díaz are not breaking entirely from the world of superhero comics, but that each is committing to the same ethical project in different, medium-specific ways.

"...What about them?!": Revisionary Superhero Comics and the Holocaust

"Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!" Though introduced in the 1941 Fleischer cartoons and not the comics proper, the refrain has come to define Superman in the same way that "truth, justice, and the American way" has (the latter phrase first appeared in the 1950s George Reeves television series). Indeed, in his debut appearance in *Action Comics* #1, all three of these traits are on display: after being told "that nothing less than a bursting shell could penetrate his skin" and witnessing him outrun "an express train" in the same panel (1), the issue ends with Superman leaping across telephone poles, teasing the corrupt lobbyist

Alex Greer with the possibility of falling to his death, “Missed -- doggone it!” (13). The character of Superman has always been defined by what he can do, even so far as his debut in a series whose title boasted not his intentions but his deeds – *Action Comics* – though more recent assessments of the character have taken stock of what he cannot do, a trend common among contemporary superhero comics.

Geoff Klock takes this trend as the central feature of superhero comics since 1986, what he identifies as the “revisionary superhero narrative.” Taking a cue from Harold Bloom, Klock defines the revisionary superhero narrative as “a ‘strong misreading’ . . . a comic book whose ‘meaning’ is found in its relationship with another comic book” (25). Klock’s use of the word “revisionary,” like Bloom’s, places an emphasis on “visionary” rather than on “revision,” an important note given the necessity of visual images in the comic form. With Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, Klock identifies the revisionary superhero narrative as inaugurating an era of heightened realism, a so-called “reality principle,” in which the fictional world of the superhero is made to resemble more closely the real world of the reader: in Miller’s 1986 comics, the character of Batman has aged from his debut in 1939, Ronald Reagan is president amid the ongoing Cold War, and the Gotham City police more sensibly disapprove of Batman’s vigilante actions rather than tacitly endorse them. In short, as Klock writes, “Miller forces the world of Batman to make sense” (29).

Klock’s “reality principle” bears a kinship with Bloom’s understanding of revisionary literature; the project of the revisionist is “to *see* again, so as to *esteem* and *estimate* differently, so as to *aim* ‘correctively’” (emphasis maintained from Bloom 4). This corrective vision is on parade in contemporary superhero comics and, as I shall

demonstrate shortly, within the genre of comic book realism as well. For the superhero, born as it was in 1938 amid growing anxiety about the looming prospects of World War II, many revisionary narratives aim to place their characters in their proper historical settings with greater attention to the historical context from which they emerged. Much has already been written⁵⁰ about World War II comics as products of their time, dominated by propaganda and in many cases extreme xenophobia bordering on racism, and the extent to which early superhero comics engaged with the world beyond the page was quite limited. Beyond the moments when Superman implored his readers to purchase war bonds or Wonder Woman repelled a Japanese invasion of her home on Paradise Island, creators largely aspired to keep their characters away from the war in order to preserve the illusion of realism. If Superman were to win the war in a single issue, as his superpowers should have allowed him to do, readers might have been disappointed to see the same feat impossible in the real world; conversely, it would have been unfathomable for Superman to be proven impotent in the face of the Axis powers (his famed weakness, Kryptonite, would not be introduced until 1949).

This avoidance of weighty real-world issues like the war facilitated the movement of comics into the thought box of escapism, a contributing factor to the creation of Captain America. According to his co-creator Joe Simon, Captain America was created as a direct response to the growing threat posed by Nazi Germany. Adolf Hitler and his political machine “seemed to Americans an ocean away more like a grade ‘B’ movie than reality,” Simon wrote in his biographical history *The Comic Book Makers*; “Wouldn’t [children] love to see him lambasted in a comic book. By a soldier. . . . Wouldn’t we all!”

⁵⁰ See, for example, Bradford Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

(42). Simon's artistic collaborator Jack Kirby drew the now-iconic cover for *Captain America Comics* #1 (March 1941), on which the dynamic figure of Captain America – clad in what is essentially a spandex American flag – delivers a solid right hook to the jaw of Adolf Hitler, who falls backward with his jaw agape and his red tie fluttering feebly.

Though there is something instinctively gratifying about this image, Hitler never appears in the issue itself. Simon writes of how his publisher Martin Goodman had concerns about the timeliness of using Hitler on the cover, fearing “He could get killed—even when our book is on the presses. Then where would we be?” (qtd in 43). Instead of Hitler, Simon and Kirby created the Red Skull, a grotesque Nazi saboteur who wore a skeletal red costume, as the Captain's primary villain. Hitler would, however, appear in the second issue of *Captain America Comics* (April 1941), in a story that sees Captain America and his boy sidekick Bucky knock Hitler and Hermann Goering into a trashcan. “No matter how hard we tried to make him a threatening force,” Simon laments, “Adolf invariably wound up as a buffoon—a clown” (45). Simon then describes the threatening messages he and Timely Comics received in response to their depiction of Hitler, doubtless an inspiration for similar scenes in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*.

Where Captain America traveled to Germany and attacked the Nazis quite literally directly, Superman's absence from World War II was a conspicuous one. DC Comics chose to have Clark Kent attempt enlistment after Pearl Harbor, only to be declared 4-F; in his excitement, Clark accidentally reads the eye chart in the next room,

stupefying the examining physician.⁵¹ But he remains unfazed, comforted by his patriotism and the knowledge that “The United States Army, Navy and Marines are capable of smashing their foes without the aid of a *Superman!*” (Siegel, Shuster, and Burney). Unlike Superman, Batman never enlisted, though he was not given a declaration of 4-F like his superpowered counterpart (Gordon 146). In hindsight, however, this explanation seems unsatisfyingly transparent and somewhat hollow for the embodiment of justice to shirk his responsibility on the grounds of a failed eye test and a faith in the armed forces that belies his own extraordinary strength.

Perhaps sensing this hollowness, Siegel and Shuster did create one memorable story, which appeared in *Look* in 1940. “How Superman Would End the War” finds Superman apprehending Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin in order to present them to the League of Nations on charges of “unprovoked aggression.” Like Captain America, Superman threatens Hitler, “I’d like to land a strictly non-Aryan sock on your jaw, but there’s no time for that!” (17). He defers, however, to the wisdom of the League of Nations in punishing “the two power-mad scoundrels responsible for Europe’s present ills” (17). For all its caution and deliberate attempts not to subvert authority – recalling Reynolds’s sixth definitional genre element, in which the superhero must reckon his own immense power with that of the state – the story remains imaginary, the verb “would” telling us that Superman never *did* win the war. Indeed, as non-imaginary stories go, Superman’s only in-comic encounter with Hitler (not counting covers, since Superman was more likely to meet the dictator on the front of a comic book than within it) was by far one of the strangest World War II tales. In *Superman* #22, Hitler allies himself with

⁵¹ Poor eyesight was also the reason why *Batman* artist Dick Sprang was unable to serve in World War II. See Daniels, *DC Comics*, 64.

green Squiffles, pixie-like creatures who tamper with American planes. When the orange Gremlins, who support the Allies, fight off the Squiffles, Squiffle King Ixnayalpay possesses Hitler's body, one of only many "other demons who have taken possession of the soul of Adolf Hitler Schickelgruber, the mad tyrant who would rule the world" (Siegel and Riss).

Military engagements aside, it would be much longer until superhero comics addressed the Nazi programs of extermination. Where superhero comics of the period brushed off Germans as buffoonish bullies at best or mentally ill saboteurs at worst,⁵² comics remained almost entirely silent on the subject of the Holocaust. In his account of the creation of Captain America, Simon suggests that this silence was the product of incredulity, a refusal to believe that such reports could be true. "News dispatches of the persecutions, the concentration camps, the incredibly cruel Gestapo tactics, seemed to Americans an ocean away more like a grade 'B' movie than reality" (42). Another reason might have been concerns about sensitivity; though the Comics Code Authority was still more than ten years away, comics creators and publishers likely found this subject matter too horrifying for the four-color fantasy world of superheroes. Furthermore, it might have proved the superhero ultimately impotent, as Jason Dittmer has suggested:

It was difficult for the creative staff of a comic book like *Superman* to plot a story in which the super-strong, indestructible hero could intervene in conventional war without completely altering current events. Since World War II was clearly ongoing in the real world, if it was ended in the pages of *Superman* it would be demoralizing to the reader to return to reality afterward. (99)

⁵² In brief, the representation of World War II in contemporaneous comics was much more forgiving toward Germans than Japanese. Early superhero comics focused on German enemies, portrayed as mentally ill and inclined toward sabotage; Japanese foes (and Asian ones, more generally) were scarce in comic books until after Pearl Harbor, after which they appeared as physically deformed monsters with desires to torture Americans and steal their technology.

Dittmer's premise about Superman's intervention in military matters seems doubly applicable to representation of the Holocaust, particularly considering that comics creators and readers – like Chabon's Joe Kavalier – may have had family overseas facing assassination.

Appropriately enough, one of the earliest efforts to redress this silence came in a 1979 issue of *Captain America*. As is true for most issues of the series, the cover to #237 finds Captain America in a dramatic action pose, vaulting his motorcycle over a wall of sandbags as Nazi guards in full military dress fire pistols and machine guns at him. (Stereotypically, one Nazi officer is even seen wearing a monocle.) The cover text reads, "...It Happened at Diebenwald!," suggesting a fictional concentration camp, though the iconography of the cover more closely resembles imagery from the 1963 Steve McQueen film *The Great Escape*, in which McQueen effects his escape from a POW camp by way of a similar motorcycle stunt – suggesting, as bears out in the issue, that the focus of the story will be more on Captain America's heroism than the actual occurrences at Diebenwald. The story inside is largely predicated on restoring the public image of Captain America; having been brainwashed by Doctor Faustus in the preceding issues, Captain America throws himself on the mercy of the press. When asked if he has "outlived [his] usefulness," a triptych of panels shows the Captain looking at an image of his brainwashed self, then looking ahead with his face obscured in shadow, and finally casting his head down in shame: "To be perfectly honest..." he says, "...I don't know" (Claremont, McKenzie, and Buscema 2).

As he retreats into seclusion, debating the issue of his retirement in his secret identity as Steve Rogers, Captain America meets one of his new neighbors, Anna

Kapplebaum, whom he recognizes as a little girl whose life he saved during his one-man liberation of Diebenwald. Anna's family were interred there after *Kristallnacht* in a sequence which seems to channel the atmosphere of a 1950s horror comic, with its dramatic angles and deep shadows. Scenes of violence in this flashback are almost exclusively implied; as Anna tells Steve, "I could only watch as they very methodically beat my father to death," the panel shows only her tear-streaked face while a shadow on the wall pantomimes the violence (12). On the next page, as the camp commandant learns that the arrival of the Allies is imminent, his order to erase all evidence is implied by a panel in which a Nazi gunman readies his weapon; the barrel of the gun points to the next panel, in which Anna and a group of emaciated survivors await their execution. The visual implication is fulfilled in the third panel of the page, which depicts the only on-panel violence; the shooting of two prisoners, though, is rendered in starkly contrasted colors, simultaneously suppressing and intensifying the killings.

Harkening back to comics from the years of World War II, though, this page closes with a reprise of the cover image – Captain America riding his motorcycle into the camp amid Anna's narration, "[Patton] would never reach us in time. But **another** man would..." (13). The camp guard's face contorts into a mask of fear as he shouts, "Gott in himmel! I-It's **him**!" In the sixth and final panel on the page, Captain America's motorcycle knocks the guard over as his name appears like a banner, striped in red, white, and blue. The rest of the sequence is fairly standard superhero fare, with the Captain single-handedly taking down the camp's soldiers with his fists and his shield. The sequence, we see, begins with an emphasis on the power of Captain America and his name, and the closing panel of Anna's flashback disturbingly suggests that the incident is

more significant for Captain America than for the survivors he liberated; Anna narrates, “I doubt if anyone had escaped unscathed,” but her words are placed over a panel of Captain America’s horrified face, as an American soldier behind him verbalizes, “M-my God, Cap! Look at them! Just look at them! How... how could something like this have happened?” (16). The panel immediately preceding depicts three skeletal survivors gaping at Captain America, whose massive physical body contrasts with their own, but the scene deemphasizes the place of the survivors and focuses instead on the psychological impact on the Captain.

Even more distressing, the next page finds Anna telling Steve, “Eventually, I managed to put the war behind me,” brushing off her experience, already safely contained in a flashback, even though we know that she still bears the mark of the numbers tattooed on her forearm (17). Steve retires to his apartment, thinking about how Anna’s story helps him understand his own scars and how it inspires him *not* to retire. While this might be a step toward addressing the silence of the Golden Age of Comics on matters of the Holocaust, the issue acknowledges the Holocaust but narcissistically reframes it as a scar solely on the American psyche, choosing to portray its survivors as otherwise contented. Most horrifically, though, the story is entitled “From the Ashes...,” referencing Steve Rogers’s phoenix-like ascent from his brainwashing crisis and the eventual reacceptance into service to his country, as represented by a phone call from Colonel Nick Fury, who recruits Steve by saying, “This is duty callin’!” (18). The storytellers seem distressingly unaware of a second valence to the title, which suggests

the cremated ashes of those killed during the Holocaust. Again, the story's attempts to redress a historical silence end up misguided and unintentionally re-erasing the matter.⁵³

In short, *Captain America* #237 is ethically troubling for the way it attempts to bundle the Holocaust neatly into a historiographical narrative firmly establishing it as past, as an episode in the past of an other who clearly does not concern Captain America, himself an emblem of the nation. When Steve Rogers turns away from Anna Kapplebaum, it suggests (doubtless unintentionally) an entire nation turning away from an Other which precedes it. Moreover, the issue's attempt to seal off the Holocaust as decisively in the past runs counter to what Levi says about the impossibility of such an effort. "The memory of a trauma suffered or inflicted is itself traumatic because recalling it is painful or at least disturbing. . . . The injury cannot be healed: it extends through time" (*DS* 24). Anna shows none of that pain, distorting the reality of the event by presenting it as something whose memory can be overcome "eventually." *Captain America* #237 is, essentially, representative of what Levi describes as "the gap that exists and grows wider every year between things as they were 'down there' and things as they are represented by the current imagination fed by approximative books, films, and myths. It slides fatally toward simplification and stereotype" (*DS* 157), simplifications which superhero comics have since attempted to complicate.

⁵³ In fairness to the creators involved, I do not want to suggest any ill intent, particularly on the part of Chris Claremont, who plotted this issue. Claremont is credited with the creation of Kitty Pryde, a prominent Jewish member of the X-Men who has been featured in several very significant storylines of remembrance, including a Holocaust memorial gathering in *Uncanny X-Men* #199 (November 1985), which is moving enough to prompt the villain Magneto to surrender and face prosecution for his crimes. Claremont is also the writer most responsible for contributing to Magneto's backstory that the villain was himself interred at Auschwitz, a central feature of his appearances in the *X-Men* films since 2000. The best catalogue of Claremont's development of this storyline is collected by Rivka Jacobs, "The Magneto Is Jewish FAQ," *Alara.net*, n.p., 9 Nov. 1998.

In the way that a prose novel might choose simply to omit ethically weighty matters (as Orbán suggests *Gravity's Rainbow* does *not*, but as I have suggested that the novel *does*), the comics described above either neglect treatment of the Holocaust or, in an ethically troubling way, relocate the horrors onto the ultimately undamaged psyche of the superhero. In Chapter Two I described the medium as an exchange between panels and gutters, between images and the blank spaces between them. In light of the Levinasian reading in this chapter, we might think of comics as exchanges between absences and presences, both of which are made visible on the page – the perceptible image in a panel and the visible space between panels. But these comics can also make the absent visible by confronting the reader with an image of the absent. We see this technique in recent issues of *Superman* and *Captain America*, in which the heroes are confronted with the reality of the Holocaust, an absence made visible to readers.

In 1998, DC Comics commemorated the sixtieth anniversary of Superman's debut with four different stories about various points in Superman's history – the late 1930s, the 1950s, the 1970s, and an imagined future of 2999. In the first of those, printed in *Superman: The Man of Steel* #80-82 (June 1998 - August 1998), writer/artist Jon Bogdanove and co-writer Louise Simonson retell the events of *Action Comics* #1 before engaging one of the most literal takes on Klock's revisionary narrative, re-visioning Superman's debut with greater attention to his historical context and the Jewish upbringing of his creators. After seven pages of fairly faithful reproduction, even maintaining some of the original dialogue from 1938, *Man of Steel* #80 finds Clark Kent and Lois Lane assigned to cover a gathering of Nazi sympathizers, where Superman

repudiates those in the crowd who think he represents Hitler's Nietzschean ideal, and "**Shame** on you if you think **otherwise!**"

The next issue, #81, finds editor George Taylor sending Clark Kent and Lois Lane someplace they never went in 1938 – "to the **European front!** We need someone on the inside to get the **real** scoop on the **Nazi occupation of Poland!**" (4). Though the issue's cover is a colorful action shot of Superman carrying a little girl out of the path of an oncoming train, the story within bears very little of the primary colors that make up Superman's vibrant costume. Instead, Superman costumes himself in abandoned clothing from within a "bombed-out shtetl" (7), disguising himself as a Jew in the ghetto. There he meets Moishe and Baruch, two boys who are creating a comic book of their own, about an angel who will save them. In this sense, Simcha Weinstein has rightly argued, "Moishe and Baruch are clearly intended to remind readers of Siegel and Shuster" (31). And in many ways, this moment literalizes what Jerry Siegel claimed was a motivating factor in his creation of Superman. Though the comics of the era were never able to address fully the horrors of Nazi Germany, Danny Fingeroth quotes Siegel as saying that one of the reasons for creating Superman was "[h]earing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany . . . I had the great urge to help . . . [but] How could I help them when I could barely help myself? Superman was the answer." (41)

In these issues of *Man of Steel*, then, and beginning with #81 especially, Siegel's ambition for Superman to help the Jews under Nazi occupation is fulfilled, though the reader is constantly reminded that a fictional construct like Superman is always ultimately impotent in the act of salvation. Though he saves many from a Nazi firing

squad, Superman thinks to himself, “**Too late! Bullets already flying! Can’t stop them all!**” (13) Mourning the loss of seven lives, Superman is unable to comprehend why the Jews are being used as slave labor to build “a **camp** of some sort,” nor does he understand the “**strange plumbing**” which runs through the site. Readers in 1998 and beyond are able to interpolate, however, what Superman does not know, absent the hindsight of history, and what Lois Lane discovers after stealing Nazi documents. In this moment, Lois Lane is the sole figure in four otherwise pitch black panels, her eyes wide with horror as she reads of “a plan for total **genocide . . . so horrific**, people won’t **believe** it without this **proof!**” (18). In this way, Bogdanove and Simonson offer this issue as a kind of proof, placing Superman as a witness and imperiling Lois when Nazi officials discover her and place her on a train bound for Treblinka.

In the final of these three issues, #82, Bogdanove and Simonson complete their statement on superheroes and the Holocaust. Superman is able to rescue Lois Lane, but the scenario promised on the cover, in which Superman guides a group of Jews out of the ghetto, never comes to pass within the issue. Instead, Superman discovers that his experience in 1938 was the result of being shuffled through time by the supervillain Dominus, who delivers a brief monologue that might easily be read as castigation of the character’s absence during World War II. “You had such simplicity of **purpose**--such **purity of being**,” Dominus intones; “What a **difference** you could have made! The **millions** who would **never** have **died** in the Nazi **death camps**, the gas chambers and ovens! . . . **Superman** could have **been** there instead! But you **weren’t!**” (20). Less hollow than Captain America’s liberation of Diebenwald, these issues of *Man of Steel* foreground the absence of those “millions who would never have died” by emphasizing

the ineffectiveness of a fictional character like Superman to intervene in history. At the same time, however, one senses that Superman still carries the memory of being unable to save the Jews. “I remember,” he repeats several times after returning to the present, and his ability to remain in the present without dispersing himself across timelines is based on his ability to remember; the cosmic being Kismet, appearing in the form of the little girl Superman saved from the train, cheers him on as he remembers, telling him, “It’s all starting to **come together!** You’re **doing** it--” (19). The most appropriate response, then, is one of memory; Superman – and indeed his readers – cannot undo the Holocaust, but we (and he) are obligated to remember it.

In fact, we can understand the covers of these three issues as a kind of statement on the character and his (im)potence in the face of the Holocaust, in a revisioning of Superman’s quintessential mantra. On the cover of #80, Superman stands posed as a weightlifter, hoisting the body of a gangster over his head while three other thugs fire their guns at him. Here, Superman is “faster than a speeding bullet,” having demolished the brick wall to his left and incapacitating two criminals in the time it takes for the other men to fire their weapons; the illustrated flash on the barrels of the guns tells us something about the speed of the scene. On the next cover, #81, Superman’s strength is juxtaposed with that of the oncoming train – “more powerful than a locomotive,” Superman rescues the little girl from being killed by the power of the train. On the final of three covers, though, #82, Superman remains grounded, standing with one foot in the Warsaw ghetto and the other in the rubble of a bombed building in Metropolis (in the issue as on the cover, Superman is split between his present and the past in a time travel narrative orchestrated by Dominus). In the sequence of covers, *Man of Steel* #82 ought to

correlate to the third aspect of Superman's slogan, "able to leap tall buildings in a single bound," but Superman has not leaped, and the cover suggests that he cannot "leap" beyond this experience. Instead, it falls to the reader to remember, to see the event not as a part of distant history but as a presence beside our own existence; where Superman has one foot in 1938 and one foot in 1998, the line that divides the two timelines on the cover suggests that the two are closer than sixty years would suggest.

A similarly sobered approach to the Holocaust is taken by a recent revisioning of Captain America's origin story, written by Ed Brubaker and Marc Andreyko and illustrated by Chris Samnee. Like *Man of Steel* #80, which retold the events of *Action Comics* #1 with greater attention to historical context, these five issues of *Captain America and Bucky* (#620-624) retell the first issue of *Captain America Comics* from the point of view of the Captain's boy sidekick James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes. The first issue of this storyline ends with Bucky wearing his domino mask for the first time, grinning at his reflection in the mirror, but the caption box juxtaposes his happiness with the phrase "But, of course... that was where my troubles **really** began (22). Considering where this storyline will take Bucky, I do not think it is accidental that this issue ends with an ominous invocation of the subtitle to the second volume of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, "And Here My Troubles Began." Like the narrative of Spiegelman's father Vladek, the origin story of Bucky Barnes is about to be reshaped by the haunting presence of the Holocaust.

Much of these five issues of *Captain America and Bucky* deal with the capture of Nazi spies and saboteurs – put another way, fairly common superhero war stories – though Brubaker and Andreyko change that formula for #623. Again, the change is

perceptible from the covers to the issues themselves. Drawn by Ed McGuinness, an artist known for his expressive style and hulking cartoonish physiques, the covers to #621 and #622 depict Captain America and Bucky first in a motorcycle and sidecar, then charging into battle with Namor and The Human Torch, two other Marvel superheroes often associated with World War II.⁵⁴ McGuinness's cover to #623, however, forgoes the traditional action poses associated with superhero comics covers and instead depicts Bucky beaten in extreme close-up behind barbed wire; gaunt and shadowed figures behind him indicate that the issue will take Bucky into a death camp. In fact, the issue contains a narrative twist when Bucky, assuming he is going to liberate an American spy from a P.O.W. camp, finds out that Auschenberg is something much more unbearable. Again, as in the *Man of Steel* issues, the panels in *Captain America and Bucky* #623 are smaller, tighter, more claustrophobic, colored by Bettie Breitweiser in a dispassionate gray-green in what seems a deliberate rejection of the full sunlight depicted in *Captain America* #237. Driving to Auschenberg, Bucky notes, "It's snowing? It's not even that cold," to which his companion Toro (sidekick to The Human Torch) responds, "It's not snow. I think it's actually **ash**... weird" (5). These panels, and every subsequent panel depicting an exterior scene, carry the same overlaid gray splotches which connote the falling ash at Auschenberg, which Bucky and Toro are too young to know comes from the crematorium chimneys which loom in the background of these panels.

"Soon I'd know what hell **really** was," Bucky narrates (3), and after rescuing the American spy, Bucky and Toro discover the truth about Auschenberg, a truth that the reader has already begun to realize. "This **wasn't** just a **P.O.W. camp**," he narrates,

⁵⁴ These characters were all published contemporaneously during WWII as well, when Marvel Comics was known as Timely Comics under the editorship of Martin Goodman.

before Samnee's artwork presents a group of gaunt prisoners, one of whom wears a prominent gold Star of David. These figures stand silently before Bucky, whose horrified expression in the preceding panel is juxtaposed with their blank faces. Where #237 placed the words of a survivor over an image of Captain America, #623 puts a speech bubble from Bucky over an image of the prisoners; this point-of-view panel, showing Bucky's line of sight, forces the viewer to confront both the faces of the victims (at least four are visible) and Bucky's own incomprehension – "...I don't understand..." (9). The next page is a full-page splash panel, in which we see more than twenty of the interred standing motionless before Bucky. Rather than attempt to explain the event or configure it into the character's understanding, attempting to contain it in a thought as #237 did, the creators leave the image to speak for itself, confronting the reader without reconciling it. "...what **is** this place...?" Bucky asks in a small speech bubble that communicates his near-silence in the face of this atrocity (10). These are Levi's *Muselmann*, silent and drowned by the Nazis, all but dead yet still alive. "Other witnesses confirm this impossibility of gazing upon the *Muselmann*," Agamben writes (50), and Bucky discovers this same impossibility in the face of the inmates at Auschenberg.

On the following page, Bucky finds an uncovered mass grave, his only reaction, "Oh my God" (11). Though Bucky reacts in rage, his actions are ineffective; he is unable to liberate the camp. "...What about **them?!'**" he demands as Toro leads him away from the barbed wire fences (16). After a panel in which we see that Bucky is haunted by nightmares of Auschenberg, the issue closes with Bucky's apparent death aboard a rocket launched by Nazi scientist Baron Zemo. In the issue's final panel, as Bucky sinks into the English Channel, among his last thoughts is, "We never got to see those **death camps**

liberated” (20). The *Muselmann* remains for Bucky, as Agamben says, “the *larva* that our memory cannot succeed in burying, the unforgettable with whom we must reckon” (81). In revisioning the early issues of *Captain America* and, in a sense, addressing the problems with #237’s depiction of the Holocaust, the creative team of Brubaker, Andreyko, and Samnee opt for a strategy of direct presentation without attempting to “understand” or rationalize the Holocaust; instead, they present the event as inescapable fact, forcing Bucky and the reader to face it and to attempt to understand through Bucky’s horrified eyes the ultimate unfathomability of the event.

Finally, and most recently, this sort of silent and silencing confrontation of the Holocaust has been invoked in Grant Morrison’s nine-issue *Multiversity* miniseries. In *Multiversity*, Morrison and a rotating cast of artists explore alternate versions of recognizable DC Comics superheroes; for example, one issue explores a 1920s pulp version of the DC universe, while another features the teenaged sons of Batman and Superman. The issue in question, *Mastermen* #1,⁵⁵ begins with a fascinating what-if scenario; in 1938, Superman’s rocket lands not in Smallville, Kansas, but in the *Sudetenland* of Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia where it is discovered by Werner von Braun, not the kindly Jonathan and Martha Kent. In this world (dubbed Earth-10, to distinguish it from the other alternate earths in DC Comics continuity), the being we expect to become Superman is known as Overman, deriving his name from a translation of Nietzsche’s *übermensch* – which, of course, has also famously been translated as “superman.” Extending this what-if situation into a fully developed world-building

⁵⁵ *Multiversity* is comprised of seven loosely connected one-shots (*The Society of Super-Heroes*, *The Just*, *Pax Americana*, *Thunderworld Adventures*, *Multiversity Guidebook*, *Mastermen*, and *Ultra Comics*) and two bookend issues, *The Multiversity* #1 and #2.

exercise, Morrison imagines that Overman would have won the war for Nazi Germany, conquering the United States by 1956.

Though his forces have overrun the world, Overman remains troubled by something. Amid a revolt led by Uncle Sam and the Freedom Fighters (a team of WWII-era superheroes initially published by Quality Comics during the war, later acquired by DC Comics), Overman tells his New Reichsmen (Earth-10's version of the Justice League), "These enemies rise from the **shame** of our past" (21). Overman's sense of shame is revealed in a very poignant triptych of panels later in the issue; during a televised interview with Jurgen Olsen, Overman falls silent when asked, "What's to **regret?**" (30), prompting a black-and-white flashback in which Overman flies over the recognizable image of smoking chimneys, with two armed soldiers in the foreground. In the next panel, Overman's eyes are a solid white, the only color in the image the red of his emblem (here, not an S but a single *sig* rune associated with the twin *sigs* of the *Schutzstaffel*'s insignia); in a tight-close-up, we see in the second panel Overman's mouth agape, with speech bubbles overhead reading, "I was gone for only **three years**. What have you **done?**" (31).⁵⁶ The white color of his eyes, rimmed with a barely perceptible outline of blue, suggests that Overman is using his X-ray vision to survey the horror, or perhaps that in his rage he uses his heat vision to incinerate the soldiers. The third and final panel in this triptych shows Overman with his head bowed, standing in profile amid a mass grave of corpses who, in Jim Lee's artwork, are barely recognizable as human.

Overman never voices his shame to anyone in the issue, not even his lover Lena Luthor,

⁵⁶ Morrison, known for his dense interlocking continuity, is likely referencing Overman's appearance in the 2008-2009 comic series *Final Crisis* (also penned by Morrison), in which Overman is one of numerous Superman doppelgangers recruited to battle an interdimensional vampire of great power. Elsewhere in *Mastermen*, Overman recalls the death of his cousin Overgirl, an event also featured in *Final Crisis*.

who supposes Overman's unhappiness is the result of mourning his cousin Overgirl, but we understand that Overman remains haunted by the absent content of the drowned, those murdered by the regime he helped to create.

In a publication announcement for *Mastermen*, Morrison confirmed some of the subtext of the issue, which careful readers might have already discerned. "Not only is he a Nazi Superman," Morrison said of Overman, "he's a Nazi Superman that knows his entire society, though it looks utopian, was built on the bones of the dead. Ultimately it's wrong and it must be destroyed" (qtd in Hayner). Indeed, Leatherwing (Earth-10's Batman analogue) suspects, as does Jurgen Olsen, that someone within the New Reichsmen has been providing information to Uncle Sam in support of his insurgency against the Nazi occupation of the United States. In classic Morrison fashion, this plotline is never thoroughly resolved in the issue itself, though it is strongly implied that Overman himself has been aiding the Freedom Fighters; at the annual performance of Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, Uncle Sam attacks, crashing the New Reichsmen's orbital satellite onto the city of Metropolis. Nestled in this moment is a small piece of narration from Jurgen Olsen, who observes retrospectively, "I saw [Overman] tense-- felt the static charge of his muscles as they tightened. It was as if he knew what would happen next" (36). Overman's teammates had previously refused any connection to the atrocities the Nazi regime had perpetuated; Leatherwing brushes off Overman's shame by responding, "I'm not ashamed of **anything**. That happened **decades** ago, before I was born" (21). We have seen already, however, Levinas's anticipated response to this: "The relationship with a past . . . is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or misfortune of others, in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of

another” (*OB* 10). Though Leatherwing attempts an “I wasn’t there” defense, Levinas would say he (and, ultimately, we the readers) retains culpability, particularly because the world he inhabits is founded on the same regime that killed millions, that took away their place in the sun.

Overman, however, clearly remains affected by the memory of the Holocaust, perhaps a lingering remnant of the character’s original creation as Siegel and Shuster’s response to the persecution of European Jews, a systematic program of extinction so horrific that it seems to prompt Overman to turn on the global empire he has helped to build. Note, though, that *Mastermen* uses the same strategy that we see in *Captain America and Bucky*; rather than attempt to rationalize or explain the Holocaust, configuring it into a preexisting body of knowledge or, worse, moving it into the realm of “put the war behind me” (as we saw in *Captain America* #237), *Mastermen* acknowledges the impossibility of grasping the Holocaust and instead leaves its representation in a silent panel, forcing the reader to face it while also granting the ultimate unknowability of the event. This historical trajectory I have traced lands roughly concomitant with the two novels of comic book realism I will now explore, both of which pursue similar ethical stances to historical atrocity, by refusing to contain the past in a totalizing narrative of historiography and instead grappling with the “absent content” of the dead.

“Páginas en blanco”: Comic Book Realism’s Absences as Presences

“I write from the place I live: in exile,” Michael Chabon writes in *Maps and Legends* (169). In an essay entitled “Imaginary Homelands,” Chabon describes the relationship of his Jewish heritage to his storytelling as part of the same ever-present

sense of estrangement he feels in every aspect of his life. “What, I wondered . . . did it mean to originate from a place, from a world, from a culture that no longer existed, from a language that might die in my generation?” (181). We can understand Chabon’s fiction as emerging, then, from this perception of exile after the Holocaust, from the feeling of endangerment that persists after the genocide of European Jews. This sense of omnipresent jeopardy is consistent with what survivor Jean Améry describes as the lasting lesson of the Holocaust: “To be a Jew, that meant for me, from this moment on, to be a dead man on leave, someone to be murdered, who only by chance was not yet where he properly belonged: and so it has remained, in many variations, in various degrees of intensity, until today” (86). Here we begin to see again the imperative of memory, for as Levi wrote, “The injury cannot be healed: it extends through time” (*DS* 24), into a present where the same anti-Semitism, persecution, and fear of death persist.

In the preceding chapter’s discussion of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, I took stock of the critical debate on the novel’s use of escapism as it pertained to the individual’s attempts to escape from himself; there, I concluded that the novel ultimately supported a vision of escapism which helped an escapist to understand better his own identity. In the final section of this chapter, I take up the question of escapism once more to examine whether *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* use the superhero genre to escape an ethical responsibility to historical atrocity. I argue that in fact the opposite is true, that Chabon and Díaz draw on the superhero genre to stake out an ethical relationship to the absences created by historical atrocity, using the lofty scale of superhero narratives to communicate the weight of ethical responsibility to an Other who has been assassinated.

And like the superhero comics described above, Chabon and Díaz rely on the ethical move of silence in the face of the Other rather than attempt to totalize such events and make them aesthetically comprehensible.

Beginning with *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, two oft-cited essays by Alan Berger and Lee Behlman have oriented the critical conversation around the novel's approach to the Holocaust as being one dominated by escapism, though I disagree with their consensus that Chabon's approach to the Holocaust is one of historical irresponsibility. Berger works to situate Chabon within a larger category of a "third, non-witnessing, generation of American-born novelists" (80), a generation which he suggests are obligated to "look back" to the Holocaust (81). He notes, though, that most third-generation writers do so indirectly while also "inflected by the use of magical realism [here I would add, of course, comic book realism] and motifs from Jewish myth, folklore, and mysticism" (81). Berger is troubled by what he reads as Chabon's attempt to escape the Holocaust through escapism; he concludes on a feeling of being troubled by the novel, skeptical about the novel's "typically American embrace of the happy ending" (88), and he remains unsure whether Chabon's response to the Holocaust – escapism – occludes it from or embeds it in the reader's consciousness. Berger seems to conclude that Chabon's attitude is one which attempts to evade, not confront, the Holocaust, cautioning, "One cannot escape the Holocaust . . . [and] escapism leads to forgetting" (88), aligning Berger with those who see memory as an ethical imperative.

An earlier essay by Christopher Ribbat seems to anticipate Berger's challenge of the novel's ostensibly happy ending, in which Joe reunites with his love Rosa and their son Tommy, while Sammy seems bound for the paradisiacal California while maintaining

a long-distance professional relationship with his cousin Joe. Ribbat argues that his trio of contemporary American novelists (Chabon, James McBride, and Jonathan Safran Foer) are engaged in the work of remembering the Holocaust from the remove of “generational distance and the absence of a deep personal connection” (204). In this ending, Ribbat reads a move to “make the events [of the Holocaust] seem less apocalyptic. The atrocities do not stand alone, nor do they erase all possibilities of storytelling” (211). Instead, Chabon situates the Holocaust in a historical context focused on an American family, which suggests a way for life to go on. Here Ribbat seems to be accusing Chabon of totalizing the Holocaust, of containing it in a historiographic thought, and thereby reducing its alterity to sameness – a claim which I will dispute below in greater detail, for I contend that Chabon leaves the alterity of the drowned as purely other, admitting the impossibility of rectifying the wrongs of the past but admitting the necessity to recognize those absences.

Like Berger, Behlman situates Chabon as part of a generational cohort of recent Jewish American authors who have navigated “the seemingly unbridgeable historical divide” between an American Jewish present and the attempt of fiction to “capture the scope and intensity” of the Holocaust as “a massive collective experience” (97). As discussed in Chapter Two, Behlman paints Chabon as unique in presenting fantasy as “a potentially valid means of escape from the past” and escapism as “itself a valid response” (101). Recall also that Behlman warned this escape from the past might run the risk of “the admittedly problematic, quintessentially American phenomenon of forgetting” (102), linked to the specifically American genre of superhero comic books, which Chabon unapologetically and enthusiastically endorses. Behlman ultimately concludes that

escapism is “a turn away from history” and toward safety from memory, “a holding action against the damages of the past” (108). Behlman’s essay focuses almost exclusively on the character of Joe, though Andrea Levine enrolls Sammy in Behlman’s reading by arguing that Sammy represents American Jewishness “in large part, as a result of his own multiple and overlapping forms of embodiment, as he is raced, queered, and disabled” (36).

To put it plainly, these readings of Chabon as ethically escapist and historically irresponsible seem to me to be gross misreadings of the novel and what I take to be Chabon’s careful and continuous attempt to remind the reader from what Sammy and Joe are escaping, the absence they do not allow themselves to feel. For one, Chabon seems more than aware of the difficulties of creating imaginative fiction after the Holocaust; in an interview with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Chabon seems to answer Adorno and others who would challenge his writing about the Holocaust, particularly as someone who cannot be a direct witness. This interview came on the heels of the release of Chabon’s *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union*, which imagines a post-Holocaust Jewish settlement not in Israel but in Sitka, Alaska:

I think more than anything else the question that I’ve wrestled with in my own writing in terms of the Holocaust is how much of a right do I have to quote unquote “use” the Holocaust for fictional purposes? You know, is it okay for me to write about the Holocaust, having had no direct personal experience of it whatsoever? To what degree am I entitled to portray or represent it in my work? . . . I think in *The Yiddish Policemen’s Union* I tried to use my imagination to undo at least some of the effects of the Holocaust, and to imagine a way out of the catastrophe. And again, I suspect that part of the force that drives that novel is the consciousness that ultimately that’s a tragically futile wish. (Chabon, “Voices”)

In the case of *Kavalier & Clay*, then, we should approach the novel with the cognizance of Chabon’s own awareness of his problematized relationship to the Holocaust and his

own admission that any attempt at recuperation from the event is “a tragically futile wish.”

Any assessment of the novel’s ethical relation to the Holocaust must reckon with the importance of the Golem. Indeed, many of the novel’s central concerns orbit around the figure of the golem, who is presented as a kind of prototypical superhero, such that Joe’s first attempt at creating his own superhero is a clear-cut adaptation of the golem legend. “To me,” Joe says after being asked to create a character like Superman, “this Superman is... maybe... only an American Golem” (86). Both are superhuman figures of protection, created by Jews for the protection of their people; though somewhat mythologized, as the character was initially conceived as early as 1933, Jerry Siegel claimed that Superman was created as a response to the helpless situation of Jews in Europe. “Hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany . . . I had the great urge to help . . . How could I help them when I could barely help myself? Superman was the answer” (qtd in Fingerhuth 41).

Chabon’s golem, however, does not behave like the conventional golem of mythology, for rather than save the Jews of Prague the golem itself needs saving, for fear that it may be acquired by private Nazi collectors (14). While Berger is troubled by this change, accusing the golem of “flee[ing] the enemy” (85), it seems that what Chabon is doing instead is admitting the historical truth of the Holocaust. Would Berger have rather the golem awoken, liberated Prague, and defeated the Nazis? Such a move would, no doubt, have rung exceedingly hollow, for the same reasons that Superman was never allowed to defeat Hitler as easily as he could have; if there are limits to what imaginative

fiction can be allowed to do to the memory of the Holocaust, surely there must be constraints on the degree to which an alternative history can be imagined.

Chabon's golem needs rescuing at the beginning of the novel, suggesting the need for Jews like Joe to effect the preservation of hope and imagination against the oncoming Nazi extermination campaign. The golem represents not salvation but the dream of salvation, a dream made possible by the act of imaginative creation. When Joe and Sammy begin to create *The Escapist*, Chabon's narrator makes explicit the connection between golems and art: "Every golem in the history of the world . . . was summoned into existence through language" (119). Where the golem, a being sculpted from clay, is brought to life by inscribing the word "emet" either on its forehead or on a tablet in its mouth, these superhero comics are brought to life by a combination of words and images, two distinctive artistic processes which create a kind of golem in the form of *The Escapist*, who protects Sammy and Joe from their fears and insecurities until such time as they are able to do that for themselves.

The Golem of Prague, rescued by Joe and his mentor Bernard Kornblum in the novel's opening pages, bookends the entire novel as a kind of Chekhov's gun which the reader might be forgiven for forgetting in the 500-some pages where he remains absent and unmentioned. But when the golem reenters the narrative in physical form, we see clearly Chabon's own sense of his relationship to the Holocaust, as well as the ethical moment he opens for the reader. The golem is delivered to the home of Sammy Clay and Rosa Saks, where Joe is staying after having been discovered in New York. This large box, which the reader already begins to recognize as the coffin-shaped crate in which both Joe and the golem were smuggled out of Prague, is initially mistaken by Joe's son

Tommy as containing “iron chains . . . like, padlocks and junk” (597), recalling Joe’s early days as a practicing magician, but the repudiation of Tommy’s initial theory tells us something quite important – the golem is not meant to be seen as an “iron chain” (not accidentally, the precise name of the Escapist’s chief adversary, the Iron Chain), something weighty from which one needs to be unshackled. Instead, Chabon suggests that the golem represents something which belongs with Joe. Two events occur to close out this particular chapter; Sammy arrives home in his Studebaker, and Rosa discovers the packing label from Prague. Immediately thereupon, Tommy says “He’s home” (599), and though he is nominally describing the arrival of his stepfather, this juxtaposition clearly indicates that we are to think of the golem’s delivery on Lavoisier Drive as a homecoming of sorts.

When Joe himself opens the box, his reaction to the golem reveals Chabon’s ethical move in response to the Holocaust in several ways. It is important here to examine this moment carefully for it is of supreme significance to the ethical project of the novel, though many critics who address this chapter seem to have misread the facts and import of the moment. When Joe opens the box, he finds that the Golem of Prague no longer exists in the shape of a human; rather than exist as inert sculpted clay, the golem has dissolved into mere clay:

The entire box was filled, to a depth of about seven inches, with a fine powder, pigeon-gray and opalescent, that Joe recognized at once from boyhood excursions as the silty bed of the Moldau. . . . The speculations of those who feared that the Golem, removed from the shores of the river that mothered it, might degrade had been proved correct. (611)

In attempting to escape the Holocaust, the golem has nevertheless been in a sense dehumanized, deprived of its human form, “degrade[d]” by the experience in the way that the Holocaust scars and orients our present.

The golem’s physical shape has changed, but we soon learn that the golem has also acquired a tremendous weight:

It was strange, Joe thought, that the box should weigh so much more, now, than it had when the Golem was still intact. He wondered if other dirt, extra dirt, had come to be added to the original load, but this seemed unlikely. Then he remembered how Kornblum, that night, had quoted some paradoxical wisdom about golems, something in Hebrew to the effect that it was the Golem’s unnatural soul that had given it weight; unburdened of it, the earthen Golem was light as air. (611)

In Seth Johnson’s otherwise successful essay “An American Golem,” he describes the links between the golem as Jewish myth and superheroes as American myth, but his reading of this scene seems to mistake a fundamental point which is key to my understanding of the novel. Johnson says the box of dirt “is significantly lighter than it had been all those years ago” (105), which he takes to mean that the golem’s “so-called magic cannot be reclaimed” (106). It appears Johnson has gotten lost in Chabon’s playfully voluble prose, for the golem is in fact not “light as air” as the passage concludes; the golem at Lavoisier Drive “weigh[s] so much more, now” than it otherwise would have had it been “unburdened” of its “unnatural soul.” Joseph Dewey, too, mistakes the importance of the golem’s return when he writes in *Understanding Michael Chabon*, a monograph which purports to be a definitive statement on Chabon, “[Joe] finds no Golem inside, only a soggy pile of river dirt, scum, and ashes” (87). This reading of the golem as ordinary debris leads Dewey to conclude that Chabon’s ultimate

statement in the novel is that “art cannot console, cannot protect with happy endings and tidy resolutions” (87).

I have already thoroughly rejected the idea that Chabon is anything but optimistic about the power of art, but to suggest that art *cannot* console misses the point entirely. The golem’s return to Joe is not an attempt at consolation. Rather, it is a deliberate gesture at the impossibility of resolution itself in the face of historical atrocity. The golem’s unceremonious arrival at Lavoisier Drive mirrors the way in which Chabon deposits the golem in the lap of the reader; neither Chabon nor the deliveryman have much to offer by way of explanation, and it is never clear what Joe intends to do with the box, for the golem is never mentioned again in the novel. Instead, the golem is meant to resist interpretation, opening up a space for contemplation for the absent content of the dead. Behlman suggests that “perhaps” the Golem is meant to invoke the dead (107), but I think Chabon is unequivocal when Joe looks upon the golem for the last time in the novel:

He reached in and took a handful of the pearly silt, pondering it, sifting it through his fingers, wondering at what point the soul of the Golem had reentered its body, or if possibly there could be more than one lost soul embodied in all that dust, weighing it down so heavily. (612)

If one soul would have given the golem its weight, how much more might six million souls weigh? Rosa’s comment upon opening the box – “Joe, that isn’t—those aren’t *ashes*” (emphasis maintained from 610) – plants in the reader’s mind the connection between the disintegrated golem and the crematoriums of Auschwitz.

In this moment, with the open crate in the Kavalier and Clay living room, Chabon cedes the floor to infinity and admits a dimension of the unspeakable – not, as Agamben cautions, “To say that Auschwitz is ‘unsayable’ or ‘incomprehensible’ is equivalent to

euphemein, to adoring in silence” (32), but to admit his inability as a third-generation Jew to bear complete witness while still maintaining the opportunity for Levinasian conversation with the absent face of the Other. Recall Levinas’s claim that “The solitude of death does not make the Other vanish, but remains in a consciousness of hostility, and consequently still renders possible an appeal to the Other” (*TI* 234). The return of the golem is that appeal, an appeal to Joe to remember in spite of his attempts at physical escape, which included his self-imposed decade-long exile from his family which seemed endless because “the longer I waited, the harder it became to imagine” (558).

The golem’s newly acquired heft should also remind us of Levinas’s statement that “Reality has weight when one discovers its contexts” (*IR* 160). Here Joe – and by extension the reader – discovers that his reality is weighted by the context of the Holocaust, which is, per Eaglestone, “already a horizon which orients our time” (12). Though he has been running throughout much of the novel, Joe is reminded once more by the return of the golem that he cannot run from his past, that the loss of his family and six million more will always be a part of the world he inhabits. And while he tried to save his brother by funding the doomed ship that would have carried Thomas across the Atlantic, all Joe can do now is remember. Recall once more Levinas’s quotation from Dostoevsky: “Each of us is guilty before everyone and for everything, and I more than the others” (*IR* 72). Joe, more so than all the rest, is guilty, is responsible; his passage to the United States came at the expense of his family’s salvation. They remained in Prague while he made his escape. For that reason, and because the golem is already inextricably linked to him, Joe is unique, or in the Levinasian sense “noninterchangeable. Nobody else can do what I do in my place. The knot of singularity is responsibility” (*IR* 161). It is not Joe’s

freedom that will have the last word; it is the silence of the golem, burdened by the souls of the drowned, and it is Joe's unicity as survivor, as caretaker, as an I, which commands him to answer.

We see this issue of unicity in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as well. Though Junot Díaz is not writing about the Holocaust as Chabon is, his approach to historical atrocity, particularly the forgotten massacres in the Dominican Republic, is consistent with the ethical project of comic book realism as I am tracing it. If we can return to the opening line of *Oscar Wao* once more: "They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles" (1). Halfway through the novel, however, Díaz's narrator Yunior seems to revise the opening sentence when he begins Chapter Four with, "It started with me" (167). As narrator, Yunior declares his unicity and his responsibility for the story he is telling, a story in which he is not necessarily a main character; he is instead the roommate of the title character, sometime-lover of Oscar's sister Lola. But Yunior demonstrates a keen awareness of his Levinasian guilt/responsibility in this opening line, "It started with me," extending through his feeling of obligation toward Oscar. "Point is, when her brother lapsed into that killer depression at the end of sophomore year . . . who do you think stepped up? Me" (169).

I stressed the importance of Yunior's identity as The Watcher in my second chapter, arguing that it foregrounds the importance of the superhero genre to the novel and makes the very act of storytelling superheroic in its scope; in order to tell a story as sweeping as that of Oscar's family, Yunior must become (or at least imagine himself to

be) a godlike voyeur who lives on the “Blue Area” of the moon and oversees all of existence. To this portrait I would add that the Watcher is a particularly Levinasian figure⁵⁷ for his ability to uproot himself from the totality of historiography. “When man truly approaches the Other,” Levinas writes, “he is uprooted from history” (*TI* 52), and The Watcher seems a perfect model of this detachment from the standard model of history. We have already seen the way that *Oscar Wao* rejects the way history has ghettoized Dominican culture, relegating it to “your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” (2), and we might understand Yunior’s continual tracing back of Oscar’s story as far as Africa and the Tainos as a way of uncovering those contexts which give reality its weight. “It started with me,” Yunior says, but he was far from “the first one on the scene” (*OB* 11).

In his attempt to uproot himself from history and tell a complete story that manages to weave between the erasures of official narratives of history, Yunior finds, however, that there are silences that cannot be filled. “Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco” (149). What precisely these blank pages contain or represent has been a subject of some critical debate; in a novel so obsessed with storytelling and filling in the gaps of official histories, the admission of blank pages is a significant element of Yunior’s narration. Anne Garland Mahler has argued that the *páginas en blanco* imply “the erasure of ink by violent omission” (131). Indeed, *Oscar Wao* is populated by numerous missing books; the writings of Oscar’s grandfather Abelard have mysteriously vanished (245), Oscar’s tell-all book was mailed home but

⁵⁷ In her treatment of the first mention of the Watcher, María del Pilar Blanco notes, “Kirby facilitates a reading of high theory because his character, Uatu, personifies, in Díaz’s view, the ‘Third Worlder’s’ exile outside of what Glissant calls the Western construction of History” (52). In the way that del Pilar Blanco sees Díaz enabling a reading of Glissant, I think Yunior’s invocation of The Watcher helps us to see more clearly what it means to be uprooted from history in a Levinasian encounter with the Other.

“never arrived” (334), and in a footnote Yunior tells us that actress María Montez had a “third manuscript . . . lost after her death” (88). Each of these books vanishes under a cloud of suspicion and alleged foul play, with either the dictator Trujillo, the curse of the *fukú*, or both, implied to be responsible. There is also the promise of the book that Isis, Lola’s daughter, might one day write, whose pages are, for now, blank. Similarly, Richard Patteson reads Yunior’s book as a countertext to history, with the *páginas en blanco* filled in “just enough . . . to ensure that neither Oscar Wao nor Oscar de Leon will ever be completely erased” (18). Pamela Rader, meanwhile, has come closest to a Levinasian reading of the *páginas en blanco*, which she takes to be “an alternative space and a physical site for representing the human imagination and its desires” and as sites for “counter narratives, which resist the imposed, monolithic narratives manufactured by dictators” (1-2, 2). Because so many personal stories have been overwritten by the evils of dictatorships like Trujillo’s, “Yunior understands that truths and stories have been buried with the victims of History and its singular voice” (19). In this way, Rader understands Yunior to be a kind of narrative archaeologist, unearthing forgotten, obscured, or obliterated narratives.

I agree that Yunior’s book exists as a counternarrative to the official historiography and all its erasures, but I disagree with Rader and others who read the *páginas en blanco* as opportunities for Yunior to fill in the truth with his imagination, thereby emphasizing the ways that fiction can provoke truths without the usual burden of proof. In my reading of *Oscar Wao*, I see Yunior taking great care to avoid over-writing the blank pages with his words. Instead, he pursues the more ethical path of leaving those pages blank, recognizing the totalizing effect his reinscription might have on the infinity

of the blank page. After acknowledging the silence of the blank pages, Yuniór says, “Beyond the Source Wall few have ventured” (149), referencing an element from Jack Kirby’s DC Comics series *New Gods*, in which the Source Wall is the great barrier at the edge of the universe beyond which the inaccessible “Source” of all knowledge and life resides. Those who attempt to breach the Source Wall in pursuit of that knowledge are, in a kind of Faustian bargain, imprisoned within the Wall. To overwrite the *páginas en blanco*, then, is a grave matter akin to violating the boundaries of reality itself. Instead, Yuniór pursues silence as the ethical move, acknowledging the infinity of what cannot be spoken, for those speakers have themselves been silenced; “I’ll give you what I’ve managed to unearth,” Yuniór tells the reader, “and the rest will have to wait for the day the *páginas en blanco* finally speak” (119).

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, then, posits a Levinasian understanding of Yuniór’s existence in a world already in progress, of a past to which he is not genetically connected but for which he is nevertheless responsible. “The relationship with a past . . . is included in the extraordinary and everyday event of my responsibility for the faults or misfortune of others, in my responsibility that answers for the freedom of another,” Levinas writes (*OB* 10), and Yuniór evinces this responsibility for the others with whom he has come into contact. And, just as Levinas writes the Other would command the I to be accountable, Oscar commands the irresponsible Yuniór, in a series of dreams, to create the *zafa*, the counterspell – in effect, to write the book that will undo the curse of the *fukú*. Strikingly, though Oscar appears to Yuniór behind a faceless mask, Yuniór is still able to detect the face behind the mask. “He’s standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the

eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes” (325). Even though Oscar has died, he still possesses a face that commands Yunion to answer for his own freedom. “Your reaction to the face is a response,” Levinas says. “Not just a response, but a responsibility” (“Paradox” 169), and it is this responsibility that prompts Yunion to write his book, to gather information for Isis, and to admit the presence of absences like the *páginas en blanco*. Like Chabon’s silence on the weight of the golem, Yunion here recognizes he must remain silent in the face of infinity.

Though the superhero genre began as a blatantly escapist response to the anxieties of 1930s America and the looming Second World War, we have seen that recent attempts to remedy these silences have taken a deliberately ethical stance to historical atrocities like the Holocaust. This stance, consistent with a Levinasian approach of recognizing an Other which precedes the I, have carried over into the realm of comic book realism, in which we have seen novelists like Michael Chabon, Junot Díaz, and Jay Cantor admit the impossibility of speaking over the silence of the dead while simultaneously recognizing their profound responsibility to preserve a space for those silences to reverberate. Rather than speak on behalf of the dead, these writers have pursued a course where the silence of the drowned can be acutely felt, allowing the reader to recognize that which goes unsaid.

Moving from the realms of “truth” and “justice,” from literary sincerity and ethical obligation, the next two chapters take up “the American Way,” which in this analysis is specifically gendered. In Chapter Four, I continue the examination of the works of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz in their project of redefining American masculinity as informed by readings of superhero comics as hypermasculine. Recognizing, however, that the superhero genre has been historically unfriendly to its women readers, Chapter

Five presents a selection of women writers operating in a comic book realist mode to explore how these writers have navigated the predominantly male space of superhero comics.

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CHAPTER FOUR:
THE AMERICAN WAY, PART I –
MILD-MANNERED MASCULINITY

In 2000's prestige-format graphic novella *Mann and Superman*, by writer/artist Michael T. Gilbert, average joe Marty Mann becomes caught in a cycle of overdue bills and self-loathing, taking out his anger on the figure of Superman, whom he blames for all his problems because the superhero sets an impossible standard for "guys like me" (7). Although a mystical amulet allows Marty to swap bodies with Superman, he soon finds that the hero's life is difficult in a different way; despite being born with remarkable abilities, Marty learns, Superman's life is a constant string of heroic deeds and clamoring fans, which overwhelms Marty. In the shadow of Mount Rushmore, Marty breaks down in tears and confesses to Superman that he has realized the error of his ways and wants to return to his own body – and to his son. "I thought Ricky'd be *proud* of me if I was *super*. But he didn't *need* somebody super. He just needed his *dad*" (45). After reversing the body swap that placed him in the shoes of the Man of Steel, Marty also reverses his stance on the superhero: "I used to think you had it made, but being Superman's th' *hardest job* in th' world." Superman comforts the blubbing father, reminding him solemnly, "No, Marty. Being a *man* is" (46).

This example from *Mann and Superman* foregrounds the obsession superhero comics can be said to have with the theme of masculinity, by which I mean those behaviors and attitudes that a man might be expected to possess – in other words, the facets of a man's conception of himself as such. The superhero genre's fascination with masculinity becomes important for understanding the novels of comic book realism,

which collectively refute the hypermasculine standard of the superhero in favor of a more restrained, more passive masculinity reminiscent of the superhero's alter ego (particularly as embodied by Clark Kent, as I explicate below.) As these novels show, the definition of masculinity is contested and frequently pluralized, searching not for masculinity but for masculinities. In that sense, I agree that it would be a mistake to think only of masculinity in the singular, but for clarity I refer to masculinity as the sum total of a diverse array of masculinities.

As we might expect, the novels of comic book realism inherit from superhero comics a preoccupation with masculinity and its inextricable companion, fatherhood. This chapter, then, argues that the conception of masculinity on display in the novels of Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, and Junot Díaz is informed by superhero comics in two key ways. First, comic book realism inverts the tradition of comic book masculinity by valorizing not the Superman identity and its masculine tropes, but rather by rejecting that standard and opting instead for the ideal of the Clark Kent persona, the mild-mannered alter ego who is capable of the kind of aggressive masculinity on display in Superman but possesses greater restraint and a less performative masculinity. Second, comic book realism accepts from the genre its trope of absent fathers and responds not with a mythopoeic call to arms but rather by offering the fictional superheroes themselves as surrogate fathers.

Mann and Superman is but one moment in the superhero genre where the theme of masculinity is on display, though an equally compelling example can be found in any one of the majority of superhero comics published since 1938. One could look at the creation of Superman as such as initiating the importance of masculinity to the superhero

project; even the choice of the name – *Superman* – centralizes a host of traits in the very fabric of the character. One might extend the same kind of essentialist argument to the most prominent early characters from the DC Comics stable: *Superman*, *Batman*, *Wonder Woman*. Compared to the first superheroes from Timely Comics – *Namor*, *The Human Torch*, and *Captain America* – who debuted a year after *Superman*, we might understand *Superman* as instantiating a genre-wide obsession with masculinity, for better or for worse. Moreover, five of those six first superheroes can be said to have fraught relationships with their fathers, suggesting that fatherhood plays an important role in the genre’s focus on masculinity.⁵⁸ Recall that the very first attribute in Richard Reynolds’s definition of the superhero genre is “Lost parents”: “The hero is marked out from society. He often reaches maturity without having a relationship with his parents” (16).

Reynolds’s definition is formed from a case study of *Superman*’s first appearance in *Action Comics* #1, in which Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster unwittingly laid down the template for the genre. In the first issue of *Action Comics*, *Superman* is orphaned twice, first when his unnamed home planet explodes and again when a “passing motorist” discovers his rocket and relinquishes the infant to an orphanage.⁵⁹ This apparent preoccupation with paternity, inherited by nearly every successor to *Superman*, has led

⁵⁸ *Superman*, *Batman*, and *Namor* are orphans. *Wonder Woman* originally had no father, being magically animated by the Greek gods, while the *Human Torch* is an android who himself becomes a father of sorts when his creator invents a sidekick, *Toro*. Only *Captain America*’s origin story involves no link to his parents, though later writers would include an alcoholic father in his backstory.

⁵⁹ Jonathan and Martha Kent, affectionately dubbed “Ma and Pa” in nearly all of their appearances, are nowhere to be seen in 1938’s *Action Comics* #1. Their adoption of the infant *Superman* was added to the narrative on the first page of *Superman* #1, published a year after the character’s debut. On the very next page, however, Clark Kent stands at the graves of his foster parents, his third orphaning in a year. Though Ma and Pa Kent appeared regularly in the *Superboy* comics of the 1950s, and after they were resurrected in 1986 when *Superman*’s history was rebooted, at the time of this writing they have been returned to the grave, as Grant Morrison’s tenure on *Action Comics* revealed that the Kents were killed by a drunk driver before Clark left his adopted hometown of Smallville, Kansas. Before then, however, in 2008, DC Comics published *Superman: Brainiac*, in which Pa Kent died of a heart attack when the alien invader *Brainiac* destroyed the Kent farm. Being *Superman*’s father, it seems, is dangerous work.

readers to wonder why Siegel and Shuster would have made the issue so central to the genre. Comics historians, professional and armchair alike, have long repeated the legend that Jerry Siegel's father was shot to death defending his clothing store from a robbery, prompting the young man to create a bulletproof superhero to defend citizens like his late father. "Think about it," novelist Brad Meltzer told *USA Today* in 2009. "Your father dies in a robbery, and you invent a bulletproof man who becomes the world's greatest hero. I'm sorry, but there's a story there. . . . America did not get Superman from our greatest legends, but because a boy lost his father. Superman came not out of our strength but out of our vulnerability" (Colton).

The truth is somewhat more mundane than the dramatic tale that forms the backdrop of Meltzer's novel *The Book of Lies*, a *Da Vinci Code*-esque conspiracy that connects the death of Michel Siegel all the way back to Cain's murder of Abel. We see a version of the myth in Gerard Jones's *Men of Tomorrow*, a history of the early days of comics publishing. In *Men of Tomorrow* – which is dedicated, perhaps tellingly, to Jones's own father Russell, "Who taught me what a hunk of ink-stained pulp can mean to a young man in the hardest of times" (vi)⁶⁰ – Jones delivers a Capote-esque account of young Jerry Siegel discovering his father's bullet-riddled corpse, saying "younger relatives were told that Uncle Mitchell had died of a heart attack" (38). "All his life, in all the interviews he gave, all the talks he had with editors and peers, all the autobiographical sketches he wrote, Jerry Siegel never mentioned what happened to his father" (22), Jones remarks, placing the death of Michel Siegel in a place of prominence in Superman's genesis. Brad Ricca's more recent biography of Siegel and Shuster, however, dispels the

⁶⁰ Whether the "hunk" refers to a large mass of comics or the beefcake "hunk" who appears within them is, I think, open to interpretation but ultimately proves the same point – that the masculinity inherent in the superhero genre is both of the utmost importance and inextricably linked to fatherhood.

account of Michel Siegel's murder, ossified by repetition and the sense that it is just too good a story that a bulletproof man like Superman might have been invented by a boy who lost his father to a hail of gunfire. In the closing pages of *Super Boys* – which, like Jones's monograph, is dedicated to its author's father – Ricca reproduces both a notice of Michel Siegel's death from *The Cleveland Press* and Siegel's death certificate. Ricca's conclusion is stated simply: "Michel Siegel was not murdered in a hail of gunfire. He died of a heart attack" (301).⁶¹ Michel Siegel's death has become mythologized as part of the same trope that marks the father-son relationships of superhero comics; Siegel, it would seem, has become remembered as one more Jor-El, Superman's Kryptonian father who perished when the planet exploded. One almost imagines Siegel in the place of Marlon Brando, whose face floated over his son in the form of an enormous advice-giving hologram in the 1978 *Superman* film starring Christopher Reeve.

The looming face of Marlon Brando, himself an icon of a kind of animalistic masculinity after his performance as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, recalls the titanic faces of the presidents on Mount Rushmore that form the backdrop of Marty Mann's crisis of masculinity. After providing an overview of the present state of masculinity studies and a reading of Superman in light of that corpus, I argue that comic book realism, while reconciling with a legacy of lost fathers inherited both from American masculinity and the superhero genre, engages with the superheroic standard of masculinity in order to reject it in favor of a more passive masculinity closely associated with the notion of the secret identity.

⁶¹ The death certificate lists the cause of death as "Acute dilatation of heart. Collapsed in store after two men stole suit of clothes." "Chronic myocarditis" is listed as a contributory cause. There is no mention of any gunshot wounds, though a police detective initially reported that police were notified of a gunshot in the area, which Ricca suspects may have initiated the myth that Siegel was shot (302-303).

Masculinities: Men and Superman

In any attempt to define masculinity, it is imperative that the singular noun be dismissed as the starting point. Despite earlier attempts to theorize masculinity as distinct from femininity, singular and difficult to attain, Kenneth MacKinnon observes in *Representing Men* that “Practice demands that we think of masculinities as plural” (16). Therefore, when we talk about masculinity in comic book realism, we must recognize that we are only speaking about two ideals of masculinity, as represented by Superman and Clark Kent, superhero and alter ego. The authors in question are not proposing one standard of masculinity; rather, they use the superhero/alter ego paradigm to interrogate a variety of masculinities, ultimately finding more contentment on the Clark Kent end of the spectrum. Consistent with superhero comics since 1986, which asserted that Clark Kent was the genuine identity and Superman the performance, comic book realism positions the more passive, less flamboyant standard of masculinity – what I will call “mild-mannered masculinity,” after the common description of Clark Kent – as the ideal.

In the project of defining masculinities, R. W. Connell’s monograph *Masculinities* reoriented ways of understanding masculinity away from a singular definition, rejecting earlier models of explanation⁶² in favor of what he called a “new social sciences” approach, focusing more on anthropological and ethnographic methods. “There was already a men’s history,” Connell writes, observing that the history books have been written about the achievements of men. ‘The central theme of a new men’s history, then,

⁶² These models included a Freudian psychoanalytical approach, a Jungian archetypal model, and a definition of masculinity predicated on the male sex role. Because these models are of little use to my project and because the field has largely moved away from them in the wake of Connell’s work, interested readers are instead directed to the first chapter of Connell’s *Masculinities*. See also Eric Magnuson’s *Changing Men, Transforming Culture: Inside the Men’s Movement* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007) for a comparative analysis of the Freudian, sex role, and social sciences theoretical paradigms, in which Magnuson concurs with Connell that a social sciences approach rightly acknowledges the complexity of defining masculinity.

could only be what was missing from the non-gendered history of men – the *idea* of masculinity” (28). Connell, reticent to establish a concrete singular definition of masculinity, of the masculine gender, stresses the inherently relational quality of both masculinity and femininity. Predicated on modern sociology’s understand of gender as constructed, Connell approaches the following definition of masculinity: “‘Masculinity,’ to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (71). The history of the idea of masculinity, Connell posits, focuses on the construction and performance of masculinity, recognizing the impermanent nature of such definitions.

Connell’s lasting and somewhat controversial contribution to the study of masculinity is his conception of hegemonic masculinity, “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (77) – though he notes, after Gramsci, that hegemony is a struggle and can be fluid or “historically mobile” (77). In 2005, Connell and James Messerschmidt revisited the theorization of hegemonic masculinity to emphasize the geographic quality of hegemonic masculinities, significantly pluralizing the term and arguing against interpretations that the hegemony was global, transhistorical, and static. Instead, Connell and Messerschmidt proposed a three-tiered framework for analyzing hegemonic masculinities, stressing the place-specificity of masculine models in local, regional, and global spaces, which remain to some extent interconnected; “regionally significant exemplary masculine models influence—although they do not wholly

determine—the construction of gender relations and hegemonic masculinities at the local level” (850). What remains significant for Connell, though, is the notion that there exists a model of masculinity, broadly accepted, which participates in a power struggle with those masculine ideals it subordinates or marginalizes. “Marginalization,” Connell writes in *Masculinities*, “is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group” (emphasis maintained from 80-81). I do not wish to argue that the writers of comic book realism propose the Superman ideal (about which, more below) as *the* standard of hegemonic masculinity, but Connell’s notion of a gender hierarchy, in which masculinities might attempt to subordinate other models, is certainly on display when characters who more closely hew to a hegemonic standard of masculinity attempt to oppress or demean those characters closer to Clark Kent than John Wayne.⁶³ In practice, then, we might consider the figure of the superhero as a standard-bearer for hegemonic masculinity; his physical body possesses the power, if not the inclination, for potential oppression. Superman’s first appearance, in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, identified him as “Champion of the Oppressed!” but numerous stories, including most recently the 2016 film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, have interrogated the theoretical dangers of a Superman without such a strong moral compass.

In the wake of Connell’s attempt to theorize masculinity, other scholars have drawn out the plurality of masculinities by historicizing them. For the purposes of this study, which examines contemporary American literature in light of the superhero genre (which is itself historically an almost exclusively American phenomenon), I have focused

⁶³ In an early formulation of hegemonic masculinity in *Gender and Power*, Connell stressed that “the winning of hegemony often involves the creation of models of masculinity which are quite specifically fantasy figures, such as the film characters played by Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Sylvester Stallone” (184-185).

solely on the histories of American masculinity, for they represent the kind of national conversations into which Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz are entering. Michael Kimmel's *Manhood in America* purports to be the heretofore unwritten history of men, in which Kimmel traces out "the history of the changing 'ideal' version of masculinity and the parallel and competing versions that coexist with it" (4). Where Connell and others have used the term "masculinity," Kimmel defines manhood thusly: "Manhood is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us. Throughout American history American men have been afraid that others will see us as less than manly, as weak, timid, frightened. And men have been afraid of not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man, afraid of failure" (5). His definition is predicated on a somewhat controversial claim that "American men define their masculinity, not so much in relation to women, but in relation to each other" (6). Moreover, Kimmel frames his definition, which orbits around the figure of the Self-Made Man, as a trio of common traits: "American men try to *control themselves*; they project their fears onto *others*; and when feeling too pressured, they attempt an *escape*," a trinity of "self-control, exclusion, and escape" (6).

Connell would suggest – and I am inclined to agree – that Kimmel's analysis, while making cogent definitional points about the historical dimension of masculinity, runs the risk of excluding the contributions of women. By extension, if we adopt Kimmel's definition wholesale, we lose the significance of female characters, like mothers and wives, in comic book realism's project of reorienting American masculinity around the more submissive secret identity. In their revision of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt suggest an understanding of masculinity as being in

conversation with femininity, akin to the relational model posited by Connell. “Focusing only on the activities of men occludes the practices of women in the construction of gender among men” (Connell and Messerschmidt 848), and certainly it is difficult to imagine comic book realism without the influence of its female characters. Though Dylan’s mother Rachel Ebdus is absent in *The Fortress of Solitude*, Sammy Clay’s mother Ethel Klayman is quite present, while Joe Kavalier and Sammy form their own very different masculine identities in relation to Rosa Saks; furthermore, it is impossible to imagine *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* without the forceful presences of Lola and Beli. Indeed, I will argue in the next chapter that Lola might well be the most important character in the novel.

If Kimmel’s history of masculinity excludes the role of femininity in shaping American masculinity, E. Anthony Rotundo’s conception of passionate manhood helps us understand better the historical context out of which the superhero genre emerged. Like Kimmel, Rotundo sets out in *American Manhood* to write a history of masculinity. Rotundo sees manhood as evolutionary, changing through phases across historical periods, beginning with a model of “communal manhood” in colonial New England, where “a man’s identity was inseparable from the duties he owed to his community” (2). By the late eighteenth century, communal manhood gave way to “a self-made manhood” in which “a man took his identity and his social status from his own achievements, not from the accident of his birth” (3). Finally, Rotundo finds at the close of the nineteenth century and into the modern era a shift toward “passionate manhood” (5), in which

ambition and combativeness became virtues for men; competitiveness and aggression were exalted as ends in themselves. Toughness was now admired, while tenderness was a cause for scorn. Even sexual desire, an especially worrisome male passion in the nineteenth century, slowly

gathered legitimacy. Indeed, the body itself became a vital component of manhood: strength, appearance, and athletic skill mattered more than in previous centuries. (5-6)

As part of the transition into “passionate manhood” at the close of the nineteenth century, “middle-class men began paying attention to the male body. A vogue of physical culture, beginning in the 1850s, became a mania during the century’s final third” (223). The conception of a man turned to the question of his sexual virility and “As this notion of manliness emerged, there was a growing tendency to look at men as creatures of impulse and passion, even as animals or savages” (227). Additionally, the memory of the Civil War prompted men to recognize “the courage and self-sacrifice demanded by that great struggle contrasted sharply with the soft, pampered life of the business and professional classes after the war” (233), which led William James and especially Theodore Roosevelt to extol the “martial virtues” of manliness (233).

Rotundo’s model of passionate manhood is a compelling one, and it paints an accurate picture of the kind of moment in American history when a character like Superman (and in turn the genre itself) could take root. Superman might well be understood as emblematic of the ideals of passionate manhood, the ideals which comic book realism will be seen to reject. In his debut feature in *Action Comics* #1 in 1938, Superman’s body is the center of attention. As early as the third panel, the infant Superman hoists a chair over his head, his diaper easily mistaken for a bodybuilder’s loincloth, while the orphanage attendants gape, “astounded at his feats of strength” (11). Just as easily, we can imagine Superman’s audaciously colorful costume as highlighting the contours of his muscled body, which is so tight as to appear like a painted nude. Throughout the issue, Superman’s body is rarely at peace, continually posed in dynamic

action shots; in those moments that do not imply motion, Superman poses with his fists on his hips, emphasizing the potential strength of his body as when he stands in front of a speeding car. The issue closes with the description of Superman as, “A physical marvel, a mental wonder, Superman is destined to reshape the destiny of a world!” (23) Scott Bukatman has read the genre’s obsession with costumed identities as “visually, kinetically, and even verbally performative” (114), that the “bodily performance” of the superhero has – in a classically Bukatman analogy – much in common with the liberated dancing performance of Gene Kelly in *Singin’ in the Rain*, but we can see that Superman’s physicality is a performance of an ideal of masculinity, as well.

As for Superman’s virility, so key to Rotundo’s reconception of masculinity as passionate, Superman’s sexuality is naturally, as a product of its time, the stuff of implication rather than surface, but it is apparent that Superman is presented as a desirable sexual being, both for readers imagining themselves in his blue spandex and those with more appetitive longings. In the process of exonerating a condemned woman on death row, Superman first disarms a governor’s butler, clad in sleepwear – pajamas and nightcap – that render him foppish; the butler’s gun, a classic phallic symbol, proves impotent against Superman (13). Later, in six panels that find Superman attacking a wife-beater, whose victim lies in the foreground, Superman’s physical strength again overcomes a violent phallic symbol, here a knife which “breaks upon Superman’s tough skin” (15). The wife-beater, seeing his own impotence in the face of Superman, promptly faints. Finally, after rescuing Lois Lane from a gang of kidnappers – one of whom, who goes by the painfully obvious name Butch, had previously tried to dance with Lois at a club – Superman and Lois have their first meeting. Here, the hulking figure of Superman

looms over Lois, who recoils in worry, despite Superman's protestation, "You needn't be afraid of me. I won't harm you" (20). The strap of her dress drifts seductively down her shoulder, suggesting a tableau more appropriate for the bedroom than a roadside ditch, with the vibrant splashes of black and yellow in the background conveying the explosive subtext of this encounter. Superman's sexual potency, then, is on display in the form of deeds in which he defending vulnerable women against less-than-virile men, men who falsely assume their own physical strength to be superior to Superman's.

Finally, Rotundo writes that passionate manhood contains at its core a contrast between the "courage and self-sacrifice" of masculinity and "the soft, pampered life of the business and professional classes" (233). In the figure of Superman, we have the martial strength and altruism in the body of the superhero juxtaposed with the "business class" secret identity of Clark Kent. Siegel and Shuster are very clear that the Clark Kent identity is the real disguise, as seen when Kent reads a newspaper story about Superman and whispers to himself, "Good! I'm not mentioned!" (14) What we have, then, is a case study that proves Connell's point – masculinity must be understood in the plural, with multiple ideals existing in the culture at large and potentially within the individual. With Clark Kent as an ideal of masculinity, we see two distinguishing features – his skill as a journalist and his ineptitude with women. Clark Kent's editor assigns him the story of Superman's arrival, suggesting a confidence in Kent's ability as a worker, and Kent's enthusiastic reply – "Listen, chief, if *I* can't find out anything about this *Superman* no one can!" – tells us that Kent shares this opinion without a moment's hesitation (15). In the next panel, a phone operator assigns Kent "a phoned tip" about the aforementioned wifebeater (15), and at the end of the story Kent's editor gives him yet another

assignment, to report on “a war going on in a small South American republic, ‘San Monte’” (20). Clearly, then, Kent is either skilled enough to juggle multiple stories at once – we never see him file any of these reports – or his super-speed translates to his journalistic efforts as well. By contrast, the unnamed editor is exceptionally condescending in his only interaction with Lois, dismissing her claims to have met Superman by asking, “Are you sure it wasn’t pink elephants you saw?” (20) Clark Kent, then, represents the business class of worker which Rotundo writes is contrasted in passionate manhood with a masculine body like the superhero’s; it is this “soft, pampered life” which comic book realism will embrace with protagonists who are, I suspect not accidentally, writers by vocation, just as Clark Kent is.

Where the editor appears strong and confident against Lois, even as the panel depicts her standing over him as he sits behind his desk, Kent’s “soft and pampered” side comes out in his interaction with Lois. Like many of the protagonists in comic book realism, Clark Kent’s romantic life is a constant struggle to prove his worth opposite the zenith of passionate, virile masculinity as emblemized by Superman. We will see Sammy Clay, Dylan Ebdus, and Oscar Wao with the same romantic hesitancy that plagues Clark Kent, though their romantic difficulties are genuine where Clark’s is the result of his performance of feebleness. “W-what do you say to a --er-- date tonight, Lois?” Clark asks in *Action Comics* #1, his hands sheepishly in his pockets. Lois, glancing up from her typewriter, says in what must be a sigh, “I suppose I’ll give you a break... for a change” (16). In the next panel, we learn that this timid interaction is representative of Lois and Kent’s relationship as a whole; Kent asks Lois, his hand chastely above her hip as they dance, “Why is it you always avoid me at the office?”, to

which she responds, her face turned longingly over her shoulder and away from her dancing partner, “Please Clark! I’ve been scribbling ‘sob stories’ all day long. Don’t ask me to dish out another” (16). Kent’s passivity in his relationship with Lois, a decided contrast to his physically imposing form as Superman, climaxes when the gangster Butch tries to cut in on the dance with Lois. “Reluctantly,” the narration box reads, “Kent adheres to his role of a weakling,” indicating again that the Kent identity is only a performance (17). Lois dons her coat and hat, storming into a taxi, where she scolds Kent: “You asked me earlier in the evening why I avoid you. I’ll tell you why now: because you’re a spineless, unbearable coward!” (17) Compared to the virile and confident Superman identity, Clark Kent represents a model of masculinity that is weak and timid, failing to throw a punch, leaving Lois to be her own Superman as she hits the gangster and dashes away.

Later interpretations of Clark Kent would drift away from the milquetoast persona initially created by Siegel and Shuster. His skills as a journalist were so great that in the 1970s, Clark Kent was lured away from *The Daily Planet* to become a television reporter. By 1986, writer/artist John Byrne spearheaded a revision (or, per Geoff Klock, a re-vision) of the Superman/Kent dynamic. No longer was Clark Kent performing the role of a weakling: instead, he played football in high school, grew his hair into a ponytail, and even proposed marriage to Lois Lane. Byrne describes the change a “a major philosophical inversion”:

Clark Kent had become the “real character, who posed as Superman, instead of the reverse. . . . Freed of the driving compulsion to pretend he wasn’t Superman, Clark was able to become a more dynamic character in his own right. He proudly displayed his football trophies in his metropolitan apartment, and even kept a Nautilus machine to explain his magnificent physique. (13)

The 1986 elevation of Clark Kent is, I argue, consistent with comic book realism's approach to masculinity. Maintaining Superman's power and virility as one ideal of masculinity, the novels under examination ultimately frame the Kent masculinity as a viable and admirable ideal, an opinion not shared by the antagonists of the novels.

The literary critic Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin has proposed an understanding of masculinity as essentially bifurcated, with Superman as a compelling case study. Bemoaning the overly phallic associations of masculinity, Flannigan-Saint-Aubin advances instead a *testicular* or *testerial* model, such that "an entirely different metaphoricity emerges, stemming from testicular/testerial characteristics: passive, receptive, enclosing, stable, cyclic, among others—qualities that are lost when male equals penis" (239). In support of this model Flannigan-Saint-Aubin presents Superman as phallic masculinity and Clark Kent as testicular; among other comparisons, Kent "is mild-mannered, enduring, ever present" (252). Furthermore, he says, "Clark alone is sensitive to and responds to the charm and beauty of Lois Lane because Superman, true to his Man of Steel nature, cannot allow himself to be distracted from his duty to protect Truth, Justice, and the American Way" (253). Observing Byrne's shift toward Clark Kent as the "real" identity, Flannigan-Saint-Aubin wonders if Clark Kent might herald some larger shift in the genre. "This supporting and dependent character has become the main, independent character; the emphasis and implicitly the valuation has shifted from the dynamic, extraordinary, and episodic actions of the super man to the undergirding, supporting, and ordinary qualities of the man. Clark might very well come to represent the prototypical testicular/testerial hero" (254).

Though Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's question about the future of the superhero genre itself is beyond the scope of this project, his emphasis on Clark Kent as a primary ideal of masculinity aligns perfectly with comic book realism's attraction to Clark Kent. And while a testicular model of masculinity fits well in a discussion of masculinity theory, I think the phrase "mild-mannered masculinity" better describes exactly how comic book realism engages with masculinity, drawing less on anatomical referents and more on a relationship with the superhero genre. "Mild-mannered," as we see in Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's prose, is the adjective most frequently used to describe Clark Kent. Like "Truth, Justice, and the American Way," the word "mild-mannered" was first applied to Clark Kent in the 1950s *Adventures of Superman* television show's introduction, which described him as a "mild-mannered reporter for a great metropolitan newspaper." If for no other reason than the closer link to the genre than to biology, I prefer the term mild-mannered masculinity.⁶⁴

"Unlabelable Male Relationships": *Kavalier & Clay*'s Mild-Mannered Masculinity

Where critics have read Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz as turning away from Superman after discovering his impossibility as an ideal of masculinity, understanding these texts as participating in a conversation about mild-mannered masculinity allows us to see that these authors are still participating in the dialogue of the superhero genre. Louise Colbran, for example, has argued that *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* finds Joe Kavalier attempting to escape the conventional/hegemonic masculinity represented by figures like Houdini. Colbran's definition of masculinity, derived from Houdini and *Kavalier & Clay*, focuses on "the ability to overcome the body and the subjection of the body to the will" (120), but she argues that Joe's stoicism is

⁶⁴ Its alliterative quality, long a staple of the superhero genre, is an added bonus.

unsustainable for him. Rather than conventional masculinity, Joe eventually derives strength from and is healed by the love of his son Tommy. This, then, is “the real magic of life” (123).

On the second count, Colbran is absolutely correct – fatherhood remains a central concern for comic book realism, and as we shall see Chabon equates being a father with being a superhero in a number of striking ways. On the first count, however, Colbran focuses so much on the physicality of Houdini that her essay contains almost no attention to the place of the superhero body; if we elide Houdini and Superman for the moment, we can say that Joe finds he is unable to become Superman, and I argue that he discovers the next best thing, the mild-mannered, domesticated masculinity of Clark Kent. In an interview with Powell’s Books upon publication of *Kavalier & Clay*, Chabon described the novel as comprised of “all the permutations of male relationships that are a little skewed . . . this loving relationship between two men who aren’t lovers, unlabelable male relationships.” Though we might label the relationship as that between cousins, Sammy and Joe end up forming their identities as men on the grounds of being a father to Tommy, biologically Joe’s son but raised by Sammy.

For both Sammy Clay and Joe Kavalier, their sense of themselves as men is grounded in their bodies. Sammy, we know, was afflicted with polio, which “had left him with the legs of a delicate boy” (4) – the legs of a *boy*, not of a man. This disability, we have seen, informs Sammy’s desire to create *The Escapist* by serving as a “wishful figment” for him (145). Joe, meanwhile, equates the physical heft of his body with his very existence; examining himself in a mirror, he observes his weight gain, and his lover Rosa Saks suspects that “he had been engaged in a process of transferring himself from

Czechoslovakia to America, from Prague to New York, a little at a time, and every day there was more of him on this side of the ocean” (315). His body, Rosa believes, is “evidence of his irrefutable existence here . . . as her Joe” (315). Elsewhere, Chabon equates Joe’s identity with his body two hundred pages earlier, when Sammy observes Joe ascending a fire escape: “as he watched the reckless exercise of Joe’s long, *cavalier* frame,” Sammy feels for the first time “the pang of creation . . . Sammy wanted to inhabit the body of his cousin, not possess it . . . a longing—common enough among the inventors of heroes—to be someone else” (my emphasis on 113). For Sammy, who always sees himself first from a point of weakness caused by his physical disability, he imagines Joe’s physical body to be roughly equivalent to that of a superhero, imagining Joe’s “air of competence, of faith in his own abilities” to be that which Sammy lacks (113). In short, Sammy sees Joe as the Superman to his own Clark Kent, an ideal of masculinity rooted in the physical ability and confidence of the body.

Significantly for comic book realism’s approach to masculinity, Sammy’s perception of his cousin Joe is inextricably tied to his relationship (or lack thereof) with his own father: “the stirring of passion was inevitably shadowed, or fed, or entwined by the memory of his father. . . . he felt the heartbreak of that day in 1935 when the Mighty Molecule had gone away for good” (115). The story of that one day is contained in a short chapter just before Joe’s fire escape feat. In the figure of Alter Klayman, alias Professor Alphonse von Clay, alias The Mighty Molecule, a number of Chabon’s important themes are concretized, among them superheroes, fictions, and escapes. The bevy of names owned by this character suggests the superhero/alter ego split, though Chabon’s narrator (which, in the mode of free indirect style, enters Sammy’s mind for

much of this chapter) almost exclusively opts for “the Molecule” or “his father” – an important equivalence that foreshadows Chabon’s later claim that superheroes function as surrogate fathers for their readers.

In the Molecule chapter, the idealized male body is front and center, at one moment quite literally when Sammy sees his father nude in a sauna. The Molecule, a circus strongman who abandons Sammy to be raised by his mother, has much in common with Alan Klein’s reading of the connection between the hegemonic masculinity of bodybuilding and what Klein calls “comic-book masculinity.” In *Little Big Men*, Klein’s exploration of bodybuilding culture as gender construction, Klein describes the superhero/alter ego paradigm as “Wimp and Warrior coexist[ing] in the same person” (267), the hegemonic masculinity of the superheroic identity contrasted with the mild-mannered masculinity I have been describing. Klein suggests that “acknowledgment of limitations (in the guise of ordinary alter egos such as Clark Kent) by hegemonic men” (267) might be more emotionally healthy but are often repressed by bodybuilders. “In the final analysis, the comic-book superhero is a one-dimensional depiction of masculinity, and so embodies all that is problematic with striving to be such a man. Lost is the ability to tap into a wider range of emotions, to depend on others without feeling less of a man, to be softer, wiser, and so on—all of which would, we assume, make for a less interesting story” (268). Klein suggests, then, that a focus exclusively on one half of the superhero’s identity might be unhealthy and ultimately unattainable, a conclusion Chabon seems to share.

The Molecule’s embodied physical strength is the subject of Sammy’s wandering eye during that sauna encounter; Sammy, overwhelmed by “the hirsute magnificence of

him,” contemplates his father’s muscles, body hair, and genitals in a moment that seems to anticipate the discovery of both the superheroic body and Sammy’s own homosexuality. The Molecule tells Sammy a story about how he was carried to the doctor by his strongman father, though Sammy does not remember this; whether he was too young or whether the Molecule is lying is a striking moment of ambiguity in a text so obsessed with the power of stories, lies, and fictions. What is crucial here is that the Molecule tells at least one more lie when he promises to take Sammy with him on his next vaudeville engagement. News soon arrives from Galveston that “Alter Klayman had been crushed, and with him Sammy’s fondest hope, in the act of escaping from his life, of working with a partner” (108). In a dark inversion of the cover of *Action Comics* #1, upon which Superman is seen lifting a car over his head, to the horror of a few onlookers, the Molecule’s attempt to do the same results in his death, exposing both his inadequacy as a strongman and, in abandoning his son once more, as a father.

Joe, too, longs for his father, though he suffers none of the rejection that Sammy did. Having come from Prague by himself, Joe’s desire to see his family takes the form of mirages of his father disembarking from a Dutch passenger ship (182). While both men yearn for their father for two very different reasons, Chabon presents both longings as symptoms of the same issue which the superhero genre ameliorates. After the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency accuses Sammy of “expressing or attempting to disseminate your own... psychological proclivities” in the form of creating child sidekicks as implied homosexual wish fantasies (616), Sammy concedes,

Maybe the ‘youthful wards’ that he routinely assigned to his heroes—a propensity that would, from that day forward, enter into comics lore and haunt him for the rest of his life—represented the expression not of a flaw in his nature but of a deeper and more universal wish.

Dr. Fredric Wertham was an idiot; it was obvious that Batman was not intended, consciously or unconsciously, to play Robin's corrupter: he was meant to stand in for his *father*, and by extension for the absent, indifferent, vanishing fathers of the comic-book-reading boys of America. (emphasis maintained from 631)

The place of the sidekick in the superhero genre is not, then, as Wertham heteronormatively assumed, "a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" (190).⁶⁵ Instead, we can think of the superhero as a surrogate father for fictional orphans like Robin, and for readers who feel abandoned by their own fathers. In her monograph *Stiffed*, an account of American history after World War II, Karen Faludi has argued that contemporary masculinity inherited a void from postwar fathers who were more interested in consumerism than doing the work of raising their children to be men:

In truth, despite all their wartime heroics, the fathers abandoned their sons, however inadvertently, in an image-based, commercial-ruled world that they had largely created in their postwar haste to embrace the good life. The fathers had their reasons – years of deprivation in the Depression followed by the brutal hardships of World War II – but what they bestowed was a culture where the sons could not exercise the sorts of traditional manhood that the fathers so judgmentally endorsed. Symbolically speaking, what the fathers really passed on to their sons was not the GI ethic but the GI Joe 'action figure,' a twelve-inch shrunken-man doll whose main feature was his ability to accessorize. (36)

Though he agrees with Faludi that "the historic standard is so pitifully low" for being a father (Chabon, *Manhood* 11), Chabon does not share Faludi's pessimism about the relationship of American masculinity to its cultural ideals. Lest we forget Chabon's invective on the merits of genre literature as grounds for sincerity, as seen in Chapter Two, Chabon succinctly reiterates his point in *Manhood for Amateurs*: "I proclaim for all time the splendor and goodness of crap entertainment" (83). Such "splendor and

⁶⁵ For more on Wertham's relationship to Cold War heteronormativity, see Huei-ju Wang, "'Dr. Fredric Wertham was an idiot': Reclaiming Batman and Robin in Michael Chabon's *Kavalier & Clay*." *NTU Studies in Language and Literature* 28 (December 2012): 59-86.

goodness” can be seen in the form of Sammy’s sense, doubtless shared by his readers, that the superhero presents an alternative of paternity for those Clark Kents still growing up around the country.

If “step-fathering” is one more superpower for the caped crusaders of comics, this element of the genre makes Sammy a superhero in one more respect beyond the ones discussed in Chapter Two. In the novel’s final act, Sammy has moved to the suburbs of New York after marrying Rosa Saks; there they raise their son Tommy, who we quickly learn is actually Joe’s son, conceived with Rosa just before Joe enlisted in World War II. (Joe, then, might be understood as a quite literal case study of Faludi’s generation of absent postwar fathers.) Emily Taber has written that the suburbs, “a space characterized by their potentiality” (66), allow Sammy “to facilitate his continued denial of his sexuality” while “permit[ting] him to create dedicated spaces for his alter ego and secret identity” (68). Taber’s basic premise about the suburbs, rooted in a Baudrillardian understanding of reality, is: “The promise that suburbia makes to those who live there is one of a better life, where one is independent and self-reliant enough to own a plot of land and a piece of the American Dream” (69), with the suburbs understood as “a space where fantasy, individuality, and a sense of community were used as forms of resistance against strict regulations” (71). Taber’s reading of Sammy’s sexuality as his secret identity aligns nicely with an understanding of the secret identity’s mild-mannered masculinity as a counter to the superhero’s idealization of hegemonic masculinity, and I think we can expand Taber’s sense of the suburbs to include a consideration of the suburbs as a site where Sammy can do the superheroic work of raising Tommy in Joe’s place.

Despite Sammy's anxieties about raising Tommy, coupled with the burden of living a closeted life in an asexual marriage with Rosa, Sammy is by most accounts a successful father. Although the family is described as "jury-rigged" by necessity more than by affection (552), when we first see Sammy and Tommy together, they are clad in matching red-and-blue pajamas – an image that cannot help but suggest the red and blue of Superman's costume (471). The idea of matching clothes suggests also a superhero/sidekick dynamic, linking back to Chabon's argument that superheroes are surrogate fathers to their sidekicks and their readers. Indeed, Sammy resolves to do a better job raising Tommy than his own father The Molecule did, "but that was saying very little. . . . Sammy had resolved never to let him feel abandoned, never to walk out on him" (651), largely living up to that standard. But while Sammy feels the burden of repressing his sexuality – facilitated in some ways by his afternoon luncheons in the city, which Rosa quietly condones – he seems to have a natural talent as a father, one which brings him to a kind of peace. "It felt very good to lie down beside Tommy and listen to him sleep," Sammy thinks (632). Tommy also feels a bond with Sammy that transcends his biological link with his own father; after Rosa and Joe finally tell him the truth, Tommy's reaction is, "Only what about *Dad*?" (629). It is evident, then, that Joe's biological paternity is dwarfed by Sammy's own position as Tommy's father, rendered in the novel as something of a superheroic feat.⁶⁶

The novel closes, though, with Joe taking his place as the head of the Kavalier family, a kind of mild-mannered domesticity akin to Clark Kent's eventual (and frankly

⁶⁶ Later editions of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* reprint a story by Chabon, deleted from the final draft of the novel proper, entitled "The Return of the Amazing Cavalieri." In this story, Joe performs a disappearing act for Tommy's fifth-grade class, secreting himself in the ceiling of the broom closet. Significantly for this analysis, we learn that no one else in the room knows that Sammy is not Tommy's father; instead, Mr. Landauer and the students believe Joe merely to be Tommy's cousin (661).

inevitable) marriage to Lois Lane. Although Joe does purchase Empire Comics at the close of the novel, taking ownership of The Escapist and intimating that he and Sammy may collaborate on future stories (635), Joe makes a number of moves that signal to the reader that he too is transitioning from a superheroic ideal into his Clark Kent persona. We saw in Chapter Two how Joe donned the costume of The Escapist in order to protest the “unfair robberies and poor mistreatments of his finest artists” (482), a costume he later returns to Sammy’s possession. It is key in this moment that Chabon foregrounds Joe’s body beneath the costume, emphasizing that he does not meet the hegemonic standard of masculinity that a superhero like The Escapist would be expected to represent. “The suit clung to his lanky frame,” while the pants are described as “nubbly,” “laddered,” and “stretched out at the knees”; meanwhile, “the jersey sagged badly” (530-531). Joe’s costumed leap succeeds in drawing public attention to the financial plight of Empire’s artists, but Joe’s improvised bungee cord of rubber bands snaps, leaving Joe “spread-eagled, a twisted letter K, on the projecting roof-ledge of the eighty-fourth floor” (538). This “twisted” K is a far cry from Joe’s “cavalier frame” as seen in his fire escape stunt earlier in the novel, suggesting the ways that his body is unable to perform superheroic masculinity.

Moreover, Joe’s creation of *The Golem*, a thousand-page graphic novel devoid of any superheroes, signals to the reader that Joe is moving into his true persona, one rooted not in the fictions he and his cousin created but in his own origins in Prague as that golem’s protector. The distinction is somewhat facile – Superman is, after all, for most intents and purposes himself a golem – but the novel ends with Joe taking Sammy’s place as the head of a suburban household, setting aside his prewar desire to kill Germans and

essentially domesticating himself. Critics have haggled over the meaning of the novel's final words, in which Sammy departs for the West Coast, to work in television as he and his lover Tracy Bacon had once suggested. This implication of the West Coast, of Hollywood, as a destination for two homosexual men whose relationship is ultimately doomed by the heteronormativity at work in New York City, suggests to us that mild-mannered masculinity need not be exclusively heterosexual.

At the novel's end, Sammy leaves behind a business card bearing the handwritten words "KAVALIER & CLAY." While this might signify the return to the business partnership that created *The Escapist*, or a reunion of two cousins, it is equally likely that the card foretells the union of Joe Kavalier and Rosa Clay (her married name) as husband and wife; moreover, we might also think of the card as suggesting the father-son relationship between Joe Kavalier and Tommy Clay.⁶⁷

Masculinity as a *Fortress of Solitude*

Jonathan Lethem's *The Fortress of Solitude* is not quite so optimistic about the possibility that a father/son relationship can be salvaged. Though the relationship between Dylan Ebdus and his father Abraham is depicted as somewhat estranged, alienated by the inability of both to discover first their own "middle spaces," Lethem has cautioned against an autobiographical reading, despite the fact that both he and Dylan had fathers who painted:

A more profound version [of autobiographical content] is the Dylan and Abraham relationship, which does describe some aspects of my own father/son relationship, yet almost none of the external circumstances resemble my childhood. Dylan and Abraham live together in a mute isolation alone in a giant house. I was surrounded by talkative siblings. We

⁶⁷ Later editions of *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, in addition to printing "outtakes" from the novel, include an epilogue by Chabon in which he intimates that a sequel, *Son of Kavalier & Clay*, might one day appear, at which point this discussion should be revisited.

lived in a semi-commune. My father is a painter whose studio was always filled with live, nude models and fellow artists. . . . it was an almost overwhelming hive of human possibilities. The loneliness in the Abraham/Dylan experience has nothing to do with a depiction of my childhood. (Lethem, *Conversations* 90-91)

Instead of drawing from his own experiences as the son of a man who painted, Lethem writes elsewhere about a different sort of artistic father. In an autobiographical sketch from *The Disappointment Artist*, Lethem writes that in creating the Marvel comic books of the 1960s, Jack Kirby “must have been a kind of ambivalent father figure to [Stan] Lee” (68). Later in the essay, Lethem, in a slightly tongue-in-cheek, “less and less credible or even charming analog[y],” suggests that “Kirby Equals . . . Father” in a series of equivalences that include John Wayne – hegemonic masculinity’s gold standard – and Black Bolt, another Kirby creation who serves as Dylan’s personal role model in *The Fortress of Solitude* (74). Lethem imagines his paternity as a constellation of competing standards of masculinity, from the quintessentially manly John Wayne and his own father to the superhero genre and one of its most prominent creators, Jack Kirby.

To think of Jack Kirby as a father figure⁶⁸ makes a certain degree of sense; after all, as Croft Vendle tells Dylan and his mother Rachel, “Jack Kirby’s a god” (38). Kirby was, in many ways, singlehandedly responsible for redefining the superhero genre in the 1960s as the site not of the stodgy Ward Cleaver-esque Superman of the 1950s (who often attempted to evade the marriage-hungry Lois Lane and Lana Lang, or who simultaneously fantasized about settling down to raise a “Super-Baby”) but as a genre populated by dynamic bodies, cosmic adventures, and dense mythological narratives.

⁶⁸ Chabon, too, feels the influence of Kirby. *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* is dedicated in part “to the deep debt I owe in this and everything else I’ve ever written to the work of the late Jack Kirby, the King of Comics” (641). Moreover, in an essay in *Manhood for Amateurs*, Chabon describes his abiding affection for Big Barda, a Kirby creation whose Amazon physique was formed in the firepits of the hellish planet Apokolips before she fell in love with Mister Miracle, an escape artist from the idyllic New Genesis.

Kirby had, of course, co-created Captain America in the 1940s, but the Kirby of interest to Lethem and his contemporaries is what Charles Hatfield has called “the mature Kirby.” In his monograph *Hand of Fire*, a study of Kirby’s career, Hatfield describes Kirby as an exemplar of “narrative drawing,” in which “storytelling, composition, and rendering, and in many cases the brainstorming and development of ideas as well, were part of a seamless graphic process . . . one long reckless improvisation” (59). One significant feature of Kirby’s art, Hatfield notes, was his depictions of the human body, which “shade toward the abstract and diagrammatic”; hence, “Kirby draws characters with their legs splayed five feet apart, not because this is how these characters are supposed to look at rest but because, clearly, they are *not* at rest. Kirby is not about rest. He treats bodies as bodies in *time* or vectors of *force*, as well as abstract design elements” (emphasis maintained from 45). We might think, then, of Kirby’s presentation of the body – particularly the male body – as having an acute influence on comic book realism’s conception of masculinity.

One particularly exemplary illustration of Kirby’s approach to the masculine body can be seen on the cover of June 1966’s *The Fantastic Four* #51, entitled “This Man... This Monster!” An iconic and oft-imitated image, this cover depicts the rocklike body of The Thing, caught in an apparent moment of contemplations as he examines his blocky orange hands. As Hatfield suggests, The Thing is posed with his feet planted broadly across the cover. The cover text gives us a clue to The Thing’s internal conflict; as he studies his hands, he cannot help but recognize that he no longer resembles his human form and feels cursed as a “monster,” a bodily alternation first presented in *The Fantastic Four* #1 as the result of a bombardment by “cosmic rays.” The Thing is flanked by a

plaintive Invisible Girl at right and the body of Mister Fantastic, being pulled into a glowing machine, at left. Clearly, though, The Thing's own internal conflict of whether he is a man or a titanic monster dwarfs the crisis in the image's background.

The story within bears out this crisis. The very first page bears the same text as the cover – “This Man... This Monster!” – but presents The Thing with his head held at eye level with the reader, posing with the same broad stance but this time outdoors and in the rain. We soon learn that The Thing's internal crisis comes from the thought, “I'll never be human again! I'll live -- and die -- just the way I **am!** . . . How do ya help an orange-skinned freak whose gal gave 'im the air?” (#) Despite his grand physical strength, The Thing longs to be human again, longs to reconnect with the Clark Kent beneath his craggy exterior. When an evil scientist, jealous of Mister Fantastic's great intellect, transfers The Thing's appearance to himself, the newly-human Ben Grimm dashes to the apartment of his girlfriend, the blind sculptor Alicia Masters. Ben, ecstatic that his restored humanity has eliminated the obstacle to their romance,⁶⁹ describes the change as “what I always **wanted** -- always **dreamed** of!” But the transition is short-lived; the death of the aforementioned scientist reverses the transition, and The Thing stands in open-mouthed horror at this change. “I-I've become the **Thing** again! . . . **Now** -- it's too **late!** I'm a walkin', livin' **monster** again! Maybe this is the **real** me! Maybe **Ben Grimm** is nothin' more than -- a **dream!**” Though Clark Kent has the benefit of appearing like an ordinary man, the same liberty is not afforded to Ben Grimm, and so

⁶⁹ In past issues, The Thing, ever a specter of body dysmorphia, had felt cuckolded by The Silver Surfer, to whom Alicia had introduced the necessity of preserving life on earth. The physical contrast between the blocky Thing and the lithe Silver Surfer should not be understated in this crisis of masculinity; The Thing must worry that his own bulky form is less appealing than a streamlined male physique, though as the narrator of *The Fortress of Solitude* rightly notes, Alicia's blindness more often allowed her to “honestly appreciate [The Thing's] hideous but monumental body” (40).

the tension of identity is visibly foregrounded in the character, who longs to be the man he once was but sees himself imprisoned in the orange stony body of The Thing.

We might understand hegemonic masculinity in the body of the superhero, then, not just as something superheroic but perhaps monstrous and difficult to attain. This proves to be the case in Lethem's novel, in which Dylan Ebdus's own slight form is contrasted with the body of neighborhood bully Robert Woolfolk. We saw in Chapter Two how Dylan Ebdus's attraction to Marvel Comics led him to empathize with outsider heroes like Black Bolt, and Dylan even invokes The Thing by name in his understanding of time: "Just *another revoltin' development*, to quote Ben Grimm, more commonly known as the Thing" (emphasis maintained from 95). Where Aeroman, the superhero identity shared between Dylan and Mingus by alternating possession of the magical ring, is a fantasy of mutable bodies, of an undisclosed form, the novel does present a Thing-like figure in the form of Woolfolk, whose brute physicality is foregrounded each time he interacts with Dylan. Comparatively, Dylan is much smaller and more vulnerable than Woolfolk, who "effortlessly corralled Dylan" by the strength of a "gestur[e] with his slanted shoulders" (69). Woolfolk, though, is presented as menacing only because of his immense body; despite his loud and vulgar dialogue, Dylan muses, "The situation minus fear was only idiotic" (239).

In their final encounter, though, Dylan has no more fear of Woolfolk, in part because he is newly empowered by the magic ring and the call that he will soon learn beckons Woolfolk to his death. In prison, Woolfolk has none of the physical power he held over Dylan; instead of the brute physical masculinity he exhibited in Gowanus, in prison his body has withered, and the state of his mind is in question. Dylan finds him in

“protective custody, [where] the rooms were Inspector Clouseau loony bins” (491). Moreover, Dylan’s study of Woolfolk’s physical appearance reminds him of “Scatman Crothers come for the garbage” (491), a reference to the gaunt form of Crothers as he appeared in the NBC sitcom *Chico and the Man* in the mid-to-late 1970s. His “limbs” remain a reminder of the violence Dylan witnessed as a child, but the “shaved head, and the long, disgust-lined sneer of his features” demonstrate the slow, self-consuming death of Woolfolk’s masculinity, completed when Woolfolk is duped into leaping to his death (491). The description of Woolfolk’s fall again emphasizes the destruction of that standard of embodied masculinity: “his arms got tangled under his body, so he sort of crumpled up and broke in half . . . Didn’t even look human by the time he came to a stop” (497).

After Woolfolk’s death, the final chapter of *The Fortress of Solitude* closes with Dylan and his father Abraham together in a car, reminding us where the novel began and signaling the significant second half of comic book realism’s approach to masculinity, the significance of the father. While we must think of the title of the novel as a reference to Superman’s Antarctic retreat, D. Quentin Miller has suggested that the title “alludes not only to Superman’s headquarters in the DC Comics graphic series, but to the production of art” in an “anechoic chamber” (245), reading many of the novel’s characters as artists who retreat into fortresses of solitude in order to produce art. “It is Dylan’s challenge, and the plot of the novel, to contemplate whether or not such private artistic pursuits are ultimately beneficial to both the artist and the populace” (246). Of the various artists in isolation, Abraham Ebdus is a striking example, and if his studio is a fortress of solitude, it would not be a great leap to think of him as a kind of Superman inhabiting it. Dylan

makes that leap for the reader: “In truth, Superman in his Fortress of Solitude reminded you all too much of Abraham in his high studio, brooding over nothing” (65). Because the first part of the novel is told largely through Dylan’s eyes, we see Abraham only obliquely, sense him more as an absence than as a presence; his fatherly duties are described perfunctorily, as “Abraham did his part” (195) or when he “did what he could . . . his miniaturist’s work. This was the level at which things could be improved” (87). If Abraham is a Superman, he is an obsessive, reclusive one, working at the smallest possible scale.

“For so long I’d thought Abraham’s legacy was mine: to retreat upstairs, unable or unwilling to sing or fly, only to compile and collect, to sculpt statues of my lost friends, life’s real actors, in my Fortress of Solitude: To see the world in a liner note” (499). In many ways, Dylan feels abandoned by his father, feels that his life has tended toward that standard of masculinity as a hermit. In short, “Abraham was the father I never had” (506). In the absence of his father, Dylan found himself unintentionally retracing Abraham’s steps, the phrase “to compile and collect” recalling Dylan’s tenure as a comic book collector. In *The Inward Gaze*, Peter Middleton has written about the place of comic book collecting in forming a masculine identity. In a chapter on comic books, Middleton writes that comic book collecting is “one of many boyhood rituals whose significance is hard to assess because it leaves so few visible traces. Boys construct a symbolic universe and its ritual actions out of a chosen set of activities and objects, which have little to do with the adult socioeconomic purposes . . . and, like some cargo cult, create an almost metaphysical negotiation with what is to them a seemingly transcendent power” (23). Middleton describes the attraction to comic book collecting as the product of an absence

in a boy's life: "One is a desire to be powerful enough to act out one's anger and satisfy it. The other is a wish to know about the man's world. . . . What boys were excluded from was the loving care of adult males" (41-42). How ironic, then, that Dylan's search for a father, for a loving masculine role model, led him into a genre which is itself so preoccupied with the same quest!

Dylan ultimately concludes that he, his father, his mother, and everyone else in Gowanus expressed the same sense of absence. "We all pined for those middle spaces," he says in the closing paragraphs of *The Fortress of Solitude* (508). I suggested in Chapter Two that the middle space might be an allusion to the gutter, the blank space between comic book panels where the imagination creates a narrative between two images. We might also understand, though, the middle space to be a midpoint between two iterations of masculinity – Robert Woolfolk's monstrous masculinity on the one hand, and Abraham's hermetic Superman on the other. He seems to have found one in the figure of Black Bolt, described by Lethem as the number-one "Depressed Superhero" in *The Ecstasy of Influence*. Kirby's King of the Inhumans, Black Bolt is, recall, endowed with a voice so powerful it could end the world if he ever spoke. As king, Black Bolt is married, domesticated in a sense like more recent portrayals of Clark Kent, but his marriage to Medusa, whose long crimson locks behave like additional limbs, is often presented as an unhappy one. As Lethem describes the domestic scene, "they are all freaks, with lousy powers. His dog is ugly" (Lethem, *Ecstasy* 144). Another midpoint might, however, be the Clark Kent ideal; James Peacock has suggested that Dylan's character development parallels Lethem's own development as a writer growing in critical acclaim, and I would suggest that Dylan's profession as a writer also aligns him

with the journalistic occupation of superhero comics' first secret identity, what Flannigan-Saint-Aubin might call the testicular cyclical occupation of a writer for a daily newspaper.

“I’m a new man”: *Oscar Wao*’s “un-Dominican” Masculinity

If Dylan Ebdus moves toward a middle space of masculinity, toward the mild-mannered ideal embodied by Clark Kent, the protagonists of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* find great peace at mastering the ability to write their own narratives and renounce their hypermasculine desires. Indeed, those attributes associated with hegemonic masculinity – physical power expressed as dominance and sexual virility – are equated with the dictator Rafael Trujillo, his cronies like The Gangster, and the unnamed capitán and his lackeys; these figures are in turn described as supervillains, with Trujillo described as “our Darkseid” (yet another Kirby creation) (2), while the capitán’s henchmen are named Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grod, named after two hulking, brutish DC Comics supervillains.

In an essay published in *Atlantic Studies* in 2013, Dixa Ramírez examines the novel’s portrayal of masculinity, particularly in the context of the Dominican Republic, from where its characters and author hail. Ramírez’s article is framed as an intervention at a crucial moment in Dominican history, the moment at which “Dominican national identity is in the midst of re-inventing itself” (388). She roots her understanding of the novel in a historical context, tracking “the ways in which Dominican popular discourses adopt the language of the supernatural to narrate and cope with the state’s hyper-masculine power” (397-398) and how that discourse is rendered quite accurately in *Oscar Wao*’s depiction of Trujillo and the trickle-down effect on Dominican masculinity. That

is, the Dominican men in the novel are forced to reckon with a performative standard of masculinity as emblemized by Trujillo, “the nation’s longer love affair with a swashbuckling masculinity to which at least Trujillo subscribed” (394). As Ramírez rightly notes, “One could argue that Díaz[’s] entire oeuvre – including his two short-story collections *Drown* (1996) and *This is How You Lose Her* (2012) – are portraits of the Dominican *tiguere* in the diaspora” (394).

This *tiguere*, or as Ramírez translates it, “the most macho of Dominican men” (394), represents an ideal of masculinity that *Oscar Wao* and its narrator Yunior feel compelled to interrogate before subjecting it to ridicule and rebuke. We have already seen several ways to understand how Yunior understands his own story, but when he begins Oscar’s story, he does so in the context of this *tiguere* masculinity. “Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody’s always going on about . . . dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him)” (emphasis maintained from 11). That italicized *very* suggests some intrinsic interconnection between Dominical self-identity and masculine performance, one tempered by Yunior’s cynical narrative voice with an over-exaggerated “*very*” as if to say that other Dominican men accept this standard uncritically. Aside from a brief time at age seven, when Oscar had two concurrent girlfriends (Maritza and Olga) – which, in the language of superhero comics, Yunior describes as a “Golden Age,” after the appellation for the years 1938-1945,⁷⁰ between the advent of Superman and the close of World War II – Oscar reverts to a “cheerless, sexless adolescence” marked by his chronic obesity, utter isolation, and

⁷⁰ Alternative articulations might posit the end of the Golden Age at 1954, with the publication of Wertham’s *Seduction of the Innocent*, or at 1956, with the introduction of the second Flash. The precipitous downfall in sales of superhero comics after 1945, however, justifies for my purposes the chronology stated above.

retreat into “the Genres” (18). Like Clark Kent petitioning Lois Lane for a date in *Action Comics* #1, Oscar finds himself entirely unsuccessful in the romantic arena.

Furthermore, like Tommy Kavalier, Oscar is strikingly described as yet another victim of the paternal abandonment to which Faludi ascribed the present crisis of masculinity. “It wasn’t just that he didn’t have no kind of father to show him the masculine ropes,” Yunior says of Oscar; “he simply lacked all aggressive and martial tendencies” (15). It is striking that violence and masculinity are so closely intertwined for Oscar and his family; his mother Beli advises him, “Dale un galletazo,”⁷¹ in order to earn the respect of Maritza and Olga, inviting him to perpetuate a cycle of violence in order to assert his own masculinity. Díaz has spoken about this link between fatherhood and violence, albeit in a less pessimistic relationship than Oscar’s case presents:

It’s hard to describe what life was like in the Díaz family, because every Sunday my father would take us to the English Town rifle range and the whole family would shoot. That would be like, ‘Yay! We’re at a family gathering.’ And a lot of guys would have loved that. I absolutely despised it. . . . so I was kind of a nerd in a family where we had a ton of what we would call this sort of symbolic capital. Which is to say that we were the family of a bunch of really tough crazy people who had twenty-something firearms in the house and that allowed me to be a nerd in my neighborhood in the ways that no one else could be. But it’s true! . . . I was permitted to be really nerdy and to be equally part of that world of my father’s that kind of muscular hypermasculine tradition. Typical kid, you want to please your father, you want their love. I mean, I would have done anything for my father’s love, so I did these things I didn’t like to do. (Díaz, “Immigrants”)

For Díaz, growing up with his father entailed the inescapable presence of violence, not as a weapon but as a spectator sport, though still connected to a standard of masculinity set by his father. In *Oscar Wao*, this violent masculinity is inherited also from Trujillo, who we see intimidating and pressuring women to sleep with him. So pervasive, so totalizing

⁷¹ Literally, “Give her a bitchslap.”

are Trujillo's sexual advances that Oscar's grandfather lamented, shortly before his own daughter caught the eye of Trujillo, "Young women have no opportunity to develop unmolested in this country" (220). This violent hypersexual hypermasculinity is one more way to interpret the curse of the *fukú* that haunts this text; we might think of the Curse and Doom of the New World as the violent legacy of Western imperialism, but the violent sexual legacy of Trujillo also haunts the Dominican characters in *Oscar Wao*.

Eventually, we see Oscar fall victim to this iteration of the *fukú* when he is murdered by the capitán, the "jealous Third World cop boyfriend" (291) who asserts his ownership of Ybón Pimentel, a Dominican woman with whom Oscar falls in love. Though Oscar is initially very timid around Ybón, never even attempting to consummate a physical relationship with her until the very last days of his life, his emotional sincerity and continual presence around her are interpreted by the capitán as a threat to his own masculinity. In contrast to Oscar's own bulbous form, the capitán is described as "tall, arrogant, acerbically handsome . . . Also one of those very bad men that not even postmodernism can explain away" (294). Postmodernism might be at a loss to account for the capitán, but comic book realism has something to say about him; his physical features suggest an affinity with the Superman ideal of masculinity, physically imposing but not unattractive, but his association with lackeys named after Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grodd casts him as a dark inversion of Superman.⁷² Connell offers that patterns of violence follow from gendered dominance in two ways, both to guarantee a continued dominance of men over women and to assert the power of hegemonic masculinity between men. "First, many members of the privileged group use violence to sustain their

⁷² The temptation to associate the capitán with Superman's mirror-image doppelganger Bizarro must be resisted, since Bizarro is almost always depicted as a figure of absurdist inversion, speaking backwards ("Me am Bizarro") and comedically bumbling his way through the cube-shaped Bizarro World.

dominance” (83), and “Second, violence becomes important in gender politics among men. . . . Violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles” (83). The capitán’s eventual murder of Oscar in the face of the latter’s refusal to abandon Ybón is an attempt to assure his own masculinity, rendered by Yuniór as tragic and, more importantly for the concerns of comic book realism, surrounded by supervillains. In short, this becomes the tragedy of the murder of Clark Kent at the hands of Solomon Grundy and Gorilla Grodd.

Yuniór, on the other hand, is the archetypal *tíguere*, womanizing his way through the novel, albeit in a very self-conscious way, aware of the destructive capacity this masculine influence has on his life and the lives around him. Like Oscar, Yuniór grows up without a father,⁷³ but unlike his corpulent roommate Yuniór is expertly successful with women, the self-professed “biggest player of them all” (187). As Ramírez states, Yuniór’s relationships form the backbone of all three of Díaz’s works, but even in *Oscar Wao* we see this tendency. Yuniór becomes involved with Lola, Oscar’s sister, but the relationship ends because she “knew exactly what kind of sucio I was” when she catches Yuniór flirting with another girl in her sorority (169). In fact, Yuniór concedes to the reader, “What I should have done was check myself into Bootie-Rehab,” but in the same breath he says that readers who agreed with that statement “don’t know Dominican men” (175).

⁷³ Yuniór’s father is the subject of “Invierno,” a story from *This Is How You Lose Her*, in which we learn that Yuniór’s father relocates the family from Santo Domingo to New Jersey but functions very much as an absentee father. The father’s absences are implied to be connected to “Otravida, Otravez,” another story from *This Is How You Lose Her*, which tells the story of a Dominican man, his mistress, and his efforts to relocate his family to New Jersey. Yuniór’s father, then, like the other Dominican men in Díaz’s work, is implied to be a womanizer – like father, like son.

The critic Juanita Heredia has framed Yunior's narration as being in "a liminal position as critic" (211), a liminality achieved by being a member of this community, an adherent to its standard of masculinity, but at the same time experiencing disillusionment with it. "My intentions were pure" (199), he confides to the reader when describing his relationship with Lola, when in truth he "couldn't keep my rabo in my pants" (311). Yunior critiques the system from within but ultimately finds his way out of it by moving closer to that occupation we have seen as emblematic of mild-mannered masculinity: just like Clark Kent, he becomes a writer. After hitting rock-bottom, the inevitable endpoint of the Trujillo standard of masculinity, Yunior finds himself ten years after Oscar's death "lost for a good long while . . . until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, 'OK Wao, OK. You win'" (325). Haunted by dreams of Oscar and a book filled with blank pages, Yunior attempts to fill in those *páginas en blanco* in the way he imagines Oscar would have wanted. Almost immediately after this decision, we learn that Yunior has renounced his womanizing ways – "I have a wife I adore and who adores me . . . I don't run around after girls anymore" (326). If the point weren't clear enough, Yunior repeats himself several times on the same page: "Learned that from Oscar. I'm a new man, you see, a new man, a new man" (326). Framing this shift in his persona as a victory for Oscar, Yunior concedes the self-destructive nature of the *tíguere* and of that standard of masculinity, a standard more closely aligned to the virile and powerful body of the superhero. Instead, Yunior appropriates the identity of The Watcher but becomes a kind of Clark Kent, a mild-mannered, domesticated writer.

We have seen the way that Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz repudiate the standard of masculinity represented by the icons of superhero comics, their muscled bodies and sexual virility proving untenable for the protagonists of comic book realism. Instead, these writers seem to espouse something closer to a mild-mannered masculinity, marked by a domesticated sexuality and, per the Clark Kent tradition, a career as a writer, considered perhaps a more passive and cerebral occupation than one requiring physical labor. We have also seen the influence on fathers, or lack thereof, within the genre of comic book realism; absent fathers pervade these texts, as they do in superhero comics and in masculinity studies more generally.

What we have not seen, however – or rather, have not heard – is a significant representation of the voices of women writers within this genre. The dominantly masculine influence of the superhero genre on comic book realism has already led to at least one satirical treatment of comic book realism’s masculinity question. In 2005, the year *The Fortress of Solitude* was published, cartoonist and illustrator Patricia Storms hosted on her blog a short webcomic entitled “The Amazing Adventures of Lethem & Chabon” (punning, of course, on Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*), in which the two authors don red capes and yellow spandex in order to revive a dying man with “the kind of fiction that will give your tepid testosterone that proverbial kick in the balls!” The treatment works; the man is revived almost instantaneously as Chabon and Lethem chuck copies of their novels at him. “Yeah, yeah!” he exclaims, “I’m re-connecting to my über manly self! Life made total sense back when I read **comics**!!” The superheroic Lethem and Chabon shrug off the advances of Jonathan Franzen, whose writing they dismiss as “too soft . . . it takes a **real** man to write for men.” The comic

ends with Lethem and Chabon confronted by Candace Bushnell, herself in a slinky superhero costume replete with a domino mask over her eyes. Bushnell calls the men to task for “writing great literary work about male self-discovery and adding fucking references to comic books and super-heros! [sic] As if the female mind is gonna relate to that!!” Bushnell hexes them with her “secret weapon – ‘Eau du Chick,’” an aerosol spray that leads Lethem and Chabon to forget everything they know about comics, don women’s clothing, and “writ[e] chick-lit from a masculine perspective . . . I did a short story collection based on ‘Cathy’ [and] the ladies ate it up!”

In an introduction to “The Amazing Adventures of Lethem & Chabon,” Storms wrote that her comic was inspired in part by John Leonard’s vituperative rebuke of Lethem’s comics obsession, the “Welcome to New Dork” review published in the *New York Review of Books*, as well as an article from the *Guardian* about, according to Storms, “these women writers bitching about the quality of women’s writing these days, and then the very angry response that came soon after” (Storms, “Art”). The central gag of Storms’s webcomic, that Chabon and Lethem are so caught up in their own boyhood retrospectives that they are unable to understand that their work might be mildly inaccessible to women readers, speaks to a larger question about the divide between men and women writers of comic book realism.⁷⁴

Aside from my attention to Rainbow Rowell in Chapter Two, the genre has heretofore been depicted as primarily the domain of men. In reality, there exists a

⁷⁴ In personal correspondence with the author, Storms wrote that both Chabon and Lethem responded positively to the cartoon. Lethem discussed the webcomic in an interview with Anne Jamison in *fic*: “You can’t protest these things. My tiny share of fame—it puts my name up for grabs. I accept that. It’s not that I feel I’m so terribly important, that anyone is obligated to have fantasies about me. But if you accept my view that intellectual property is kind of a chimera, then that includes the names and personae of we who drift into the public sphere” (383).

comparatively smaller number of women writers operating in what we can consider a comic book realist mode, though it strikes me that their goals and thematic concerns are something very different from the trio of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz and their contemporaries. In my fifth chapter, I give greater consideration to the women writers of comic book realism and their relationship to the perhaps oppressively male genre of superhero comics. Here I will suggest that where the male writers of the genre fit rather neatly into a consistent schema of themes and concerns, women writers are somewhat harder to categorize, in part because the superhero genre itself has been somewhat resistant to women readers. I present several novelists who engage with this resistance, demonstrating opportunities for women writers staking out their own space in the terrain of comic book realism.

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CHAPTER FIVE:
THE AMERICAN WAY, PART II –
THE WOMEN WRITERS OF COMIC BOOK REALISM

Over the past three chapters, we have seen the ways that the emerging genre of comic book realism allows American literature to draw on aspects of superhero comics in order to engage with questions of identity after postmodernism, a twenty-first century responsibility to historical atrocity, and a “mild-mannered” alternative to heroic standards of masculinity. Thus far, however, readers may rightly be asking themselves the same question posed to The Avengers by Maria Hill (played by Cobie Smulders) in the 2015 film *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, upon observing the team’s make-up of five men and one woman: “Where are the ladies, gentlemen?”

It’s a fair question; this project’s “holy trinity” of novels are all written by men, with many other examples drawn from comic books written and drawn by men, or from other novels in comic book realism written by men. In Chapter Two, I described the connections between Rainbow Rowell’s *Eleanor & Park* and the post-postmodern identity politics practiced in comic book realism, but that comparison was very much in service of illustrating precisely how Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, and Junot Díaz utilized the metaphor of the superhero to perform distinctly post-postmodern identity politics. In this chapter, then, I propose to take a closer look at a collection of women writers operating in the comic book realist mode. Though I am aware that it may seem somewhat essentialist to divide the women writers from the men in this fashion, I do so deliberately for the following two reasons. First, there exists virtually no scholarship on these novels and certainly no critical work that categorizes them together. The archive

presented in this chapter has been collected from snippets of reviews, fleeting references in critical articles about men, and suggested purchases from booksellers like Amazon.com based on research for this project. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it strikes me that the women writers of comic book realism are doing something quite different from the men, and not just in terms of counterpoints; women writers are more interested in mother/daughter relationships than those between father and son, but they also engage with superhero comic books in very dissimilar ways. Almost universally, these novels are written in the first person,⁷⁵ and they seldom invoke catalogues of preexisting superhero comics in the meticulous way of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz. Instead, many of these writers invent their own superheroes, drawing on some of the tropes of superhero comics but avoiding the referential tendency we have seen thus far, thereby carving out their own space in a genre which was largely constructed by, for, and about men. There are exceptions, to be fair, and so this chapter strives not to define *the* place of women writers in comic book realism but rather to offer an initial attempt at understanding the possible avenues women have taken into the genre.

Kamala Khan and the “New” Women Readers

On first glance, the numbers and prominence of women writers in comic book realism are much smaller than those of the men in the genre. While comic book realism might be traced back as far as Donald Barthelme in 1964 or Thomas Pynchon in 1973, the earliest text this chapter considers is Susan Daitch’s *The Colorist*, published in 1990, with an apparent lacuna until 2005. Within the past decade or so, we can discern fewer than ten novels written by women about superheroes, novels which evidence different

⁷⁵ Recall that *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* is densely polyvocal, while only half of *The Fortress of Solitude* is narrated from Dylan’s first-person perspective.

concerns than those that occupy the work of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz. We might reasonably ask what accounts for the distinction both in content and in number, and a recent publication by Marvel Comics, *Ms. Marvel*, offers answers to both: first, that women writers are aware of the genre's masculine influence and are instead invested in creating their own stories in that space, and that new technologies suggest that scholars of the novel may be looking in the wrong place for women's voices.

In February 2014, a new character, Kamala Khan, debuted⁷⁶ as the star of her own comic book series at Marvel Comics, entitled *Ms. Marvel*. That same month saw a number of other first issues – The Punisher, She-Hulk, Wolverine, and the Fantastic Four all premiered new volumes of their ongoing stories, while DC Comics introduced another iteration of the Batman/Superman team in its own first issue – but Kamala Khan represented something different. She was another legacy hero, adopting her superheroic identity from Carol Danvers (once Ms. Marvel herself but currently Captain Marvel), but she was also the first Muslim character to receive her own comic book. There had been Muslim superheroes before, at both DC Comics and Marvel Comics, but none had ever starred in their own book. Caught between her New Jersey high school environment and her conservative Pakistani family, Kamala shares with her readers a fondness for the superheroes of the Marvel Universe (and a penchant for writing fanfiction, occasionally starring herself), which her friends at school view as freakish and unfeminine, the perfect complement to her apparently indecipherable upbringing. “In a sense, she has a ‘dual identity’ before she even puts on a super hero costume,” her creator G. Willow Wilson,

⁷⁶ The nature of company crossovers, marketing, and cross-promotion make Kamala's debut a somewhat more complicated matter. The character had appeared in very small, near-background cameos in two issues of *Captain Marvel* in 2013, teasing her imminent arrival as a more prominent character. The month before her title series was released, Kamala also appeared in a short story within *All-New Marvel Now! Point One* #1, again intended to promote the following month's release of *Ms. Marvel* #1.

herself a Muslim-American, said of Kamala; “like a lot of children of immigrants, she feels torn between two worlds: the family she loves, but which drives her crazy, and her peers, who don't really understand what her home life is like” (Wilson and Amanat).

Sales figures for comics are notoriously difficult to assess (about which, more later), but by all accounts *Ms. Marvel* was an unprecedented success for Marvel Comics. By November 2014 – less than a year after her debut – the first collected edition of *Ms. Marvel* was second-place on the *New York Times* “Paperback Graphic Books” bestsellers list, ahead of three different *Walking Dead* books. Within a year, she had teamed up on separate occasions with Wolverine and Spider-Man, ostensibly two of Marvel’s most prominent characters. Within eighteen months, Kamala was announced as a member of the upcoming “All-New, All-Different Avengers.” The character’s visibility skyrocketed, with prominent websites like The Mary Sue and The Carol Corps expressing their devotion to the character; a year after her debut, Kamala was the centerpiece of her own online comics convention, united by a hashtag group across Tumblr: #KamalaCon.

What accounts for the runaway popularity of Kamala Khan is precisely the same impetus that motivates this chapter on the women writers of comic book realism – namely, the renewed investment in the somewhat platitudinous statement that superhero comics can be (and indeed are) for women, too.⁷⁷ Before she acquires her superpowers at the end of her first issue, we see that Kamala is the author of “epic stuff” on the Internet, Avengers fanfiction starring Kamala herself, including one story in which the superheroes defend Planet Unicorn from a horned spider (4-5). Kamala is already an admirer of the superheroes who inhabit her world; elsewhere in her bedroom, we see a

⁷⁷ After “Comics aren’t for kids anymore,” “Comics are for girls, too” is the second most tiresome newspaper headline.

poster on her wall⁷⁸ in which Captain Marvel is posed identically to the iconic “We Can Do It!” image from World War II (associated with Rosie the Riveter), eliding this quintessential symbol of female power with the empowering metaphoric value of the superhero.

At the end of her first issue, Kamala is exposed to the Terrigen Mist, the mystical gas which gives Black Bolt and the other Inhumans their remarkable abilities. For Kamala, the Mist grants her a vision of Captain Marvel, Iron Man, and Captain America speaking Urdu, cryptically foreshadowing her impending career as a superhero. In the next issue, Kamala finds that the Mist imbued her with transformative powers, allowing her to resemble the tall blonde Captain Marvel and “embiggen” or shrink her own body. Eventually, though, Kamala comes to realize that *being* another superhero is far from satisfying: “I always thought that if I had *amazing hair*, if I could pull off *great boots*, if I could *fly*-- --that would make me feel strong. That would make me happy. But the hair gets in my face, the boots pinch... ..and this leotard is giving me an epic wedgie” (12). Being Ms. Marvel, Kamala discovers, poses its own challenges, particularly being a woman. The physical discomfort of the costume Kamala had previously idolized, drawn by Adrian Alphona as provoking faces of embarrassment and distaste, call attention to the female superhero’s body and the way it was constructed for its visual appeal⁷⁹ rather than its functionality.

⁷⁸ Kamala’s poster is also the cover to *Captain Marvel* #2 (October 2012), penciled by Ed McGuinness. This poster was available in the real world, as well.

⁷⁹ Note, however, that Wilson is careful not to reduce the Ms. Marvel leotard to the product of the male gaze. Though Carol Danvers was originally created by Roy Thomas and Gene Colan, Kamala describes in her signature enthusiastically profuse dialogue her fondness for the “beautiful and awesome and butt-kicking and *less complicated* . . . classic, politically incorrect costume” with its “giant wedge heels” (17). Kamala appreciates the *image* of Captain Marvel, at the expense of her own identity.

Kamala's costume behaves consistently with the genre's approach to clothing. In a Saussurean analysis of superhero costumes as individual *paroles* operating within the *langue* of costume conventions more generally, Richard Reynolds describes the superhero costume as both disguise and "a sign for the inward process of character development" (29). The costume functions to conceal a superhero's secret identity from his or her enemies, but it also tells us something about that character's true beliefs. The red and blue of Superman and Wonder Woman's costumes, for example, ally them with the American ideals of their era, while Batman's dark, often all black costume suggests the internal dark night of the soul with which the character continually wrestles in his nocturnal quest for justice. Kamala's costume, likewise, tells us something about her character's development when, pivotally, she creates her own costume rather than continuing to masquerade as Captain Marvel. Unlike the black leotard worn by Carol Danvers, which conforms to Reynold's supposition that "Superheroines tend to reveal a lot more bare flesh than their male colleagues" (26), the costume Kamala fashions is more modest, developed from her burkini and an advanced polymer designed by her friend Bruno. This costume represents, then, an embrace of her own identity as a Muslim girl but also a devoted superhero fangirl, a reconciliation which supports her father's statement that her name is derived from *kamal*, Arabic for "perfection." "You don't have to be *someone else* to impress anybody," he tells her in her fifth issue, his enormous body enveloping her in an embrace; "You are perfect just the way you are" (8).

Although the critic Miriam Kent has written disapprovingly of reader reaction to Kamala Khan, expressing disappointment at the apparent assimilationist tendency of

reviewers who insist on Kamala's relatability to non-Muslim readers,⁸⁰ it seems that *Ms. Marvel* is in fact encouraging its readers first to identify with a preexisting figure in order to find their own voice, their own perfection. Kamala longs to be Captain Marvel, rejecting herself in favor of the blonde-haired, blue-eyed ideal presented by Carol Danvers, but her personal hero's journey begins when she accepts herself as being in need of no further perfection and creates her own space in the superhero community. She does borrow the name "Ms. Marvel" from Danvers's early career, but she does so with her own face, her own identity.⁸¹ Perhaps it is for this reason that women writers of comic book realism are less inclined than their male counterparts to write about preexisting superheroes; rather than attempt to negotiate the insular gendered space of superhero comics, seeking their own Carol Danvers or Black Bolt, women writers seem more often to leap forward to the stage of self-creation, inventing superheroes like Electra, Super Mom, and Karma Girl.

Secondly, Kamala's online participation with fan culture in the form of her "epic stuff" Avengers fanfiction suggests to us that perhaps the American novel is the wrong place to look for women engaging with superhero comics. Rather than look to the annals of prose literature, we might instead think about alternative media; it is not, then, that women writers are wholly disinterested in the superhero genre, but that they are engaging with it elsewhere – on television, in film, and online. In her monograph *Girls and Their*

⁸⁰ Kent compares Kamala's longing for a bacon sandwich, forbidden by her faith, to readers who have ever been denied something they like, criticizing this viewpoint as erasing the particular way that Kamala experiences difference. "Such reviews," she writes, "also erase individual experiences of marginalized peoples, suggesting that any reader who has ever felt marginalized should be able to relate to the book when, in reality, every individual experiences difference differently" (525).

⁸¹ Kamala's co-creator and editor Sana Amanat also noted the corporate rationale for preserving the moniker of Ms. Marvel: "Our audience is used to certain characters and they are not okay with change, so it is difficult to introduce a new character. . . . So we were lucky when we launched Kamala, as there was no Ms. Marvel then. And that name gave us a better resonance and brand recognition."

Comics, Jacqueline Danziger-Russell writes of the state of “girls’ comics” that the medium has been “validated” (172) by the advent of the graphic novel format, marketed as literature, foregrounding the importance of *Persepolis* as a text both for and about girls. Danziger-Russell then posits the digital age of comics as a kind of response/alternative to girl readers who feel uneasy in the male-dominated space of a comics shop. “Thanks to these changes, girls are being offered more comics in which they can see girls like themselves being represented” (219). If Kamala lived in a world where the Avengers existed only in the pages of a comic book, it is highly likely that she would be a consumer of digital comics. Of course, fan fiction isn’t an exclusively feminine space, though the perception of such remains gendered. In her monograph *Fic*, Anne Jamison writes, “It’s not *just* women, and I really cannot emphasize this enough: fic provides a venue for all kinds of writers who are shut out from official culture, whether by demographic or skill or taste. . . . I know many men who write fic, but I know even more men who write fic-like stories in fic-like ways. When they do it, though, they sell it, get written up in the *Times*, call it *postmodern* or *pastiche* or simply *fiction*” (emphasis maintained from 19). Jamison states, then, that fan fiction is a space for writers who feel marginalized for any reason, and the gender-exclusivity of the superhero genre leads readers like Kamala to write their own fan fiction.

I mentioned sales figures above, and the universal availability of digital comics makes such statistics virtually impossible to discern, for digital sales are not reported by comics publishers or by Comixology, the main distributor of digital comics. At least initially, there existed a negligible gap between male and female readers of comics; sociologist Harvey Zorbaugh reported in a 1944 issue of the *Journal of Educational*

Sociology that 95% of boys and 91% of girls aged 6-11 read comics regularly⁸²; between ages 12 and 17, 87% of boys and 81% of girls reported regular reading of comics. For adults 18-30, though, that number dropped off precipitously to 41% of young men and 28% of young women reading comics regularly, falling even more to 16% and 12%, respectively, for adults over the age of 31. In *Of Comics and Men*, Jean-Paul Gabilliet attributes the decline of comic book readership to the waning interests after World War II and in response to the advent of television, which “coincided with the culmination of the public opinion campaign against comic books” (201). Thus, “The retreat of comic books from the everyday life of young readers seemed obvious” (201). Furthermore, the decline in readership allowed the comic book industry to ossify demographically, catering only to an increasingly niche market. Gabilliet writes, “At the end of the 1970s, comics of all forms seemed to have receded in the daily life of children and adolescents” (205). However, Gabilliet notes that the medium had moved into the direction of being a fan-based medium, grounded in male adults aged 18-34. While citing a 1999 ALA study in which boys outnumbered girls two to one in young readers of comics (207), Gabilliet concedes the near-impossibility of assessing demographics, in part because the data simply isn’t collected in any meaningful way.

Twenty years since that ALA study, we might consider that women writers aren’t entering the conversation of comic book realism because those writers came of age at a time when the comic book industry was at its peak insularity. Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz, by virtue of being young men during the 1970s and 1980s, were the target audience for superhero comics; the industry catered to them, thus the marked influence these texts had

⁸² Zorbaugh defines “regular” thusly: “To be a regular reader means among boys and girls to read an average of 12 to 13 comic books a month, among young men and young women to read 7 to 8 a month, among older adults to read 6 a month” (198).

on these men. Women, however, felt that touch in much less pronounced ways. Though her novel *Eleanor & Park* identifies her as one of the only women writing in a comic book realist mode, Rainbow Rowell acknowledged the gap between her status as a young girl reading superhero comics and the clear gendered intentions of the creators at the time: “When I read them I was aware of all the women drawn as pinups, and I was conscious that they were created by men for boys. That’s changing now, I think, but I had that critique all ready for Eleanor” (Rowell, “Q & A”). While we might observe this change anecdotally in the form of the increased presence of women creators in superhero comics or note the growing number of titles starring female characters, ranging from multiple Wonder Woman books to the presence of Squirrel Girl as a member of the New Avengers, from the resurrection of Gwen Stacy as Spider-Gwen to the plus-size superheroine Zephyr starring in *Faith*, a female author does not necessarily presuppose a female reader. If, however, women writers are not currently responding to the superhero genre as a consequence of the market’s inattention to them as children, one wonders what the state of the field might look like in twenty years, when the girls and young women who read today’s Spider-Gwen and Squirrel Girl comics begin to write their own fiction.

We might also consider the boom in female-led superhero films and television shows; if women writers aren’t engaging with the medium in prose, we have far more than Lynda Carter’s Wonder Woman on television (though she still persists in reruns). On any given night, television viewers can find at least two women in costume drawn from the pages of superhero comics; CBS has *Supergirl*, in which Superman’s cousin (Melissa Benoist) is recast as a personal assistant to media mogul Cat Grant (Calista Flockhart); meanwhile, her super alter ego helps her sister (Chyler Leigh) and a secretive

governmental organization in tracking down alien menaces. FOX presents *Gotham*, a look at the early years of Bruce Wayne's destiny toward becoming Batman, in which Selina Kyle (Camren Bicondova), destined to become Catwoman, plays a pivotal role. When ABC isn't airing *Agent Carter*, which follows Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) as she navigates her own hero's journey without Captain America's presence, *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* stars a team of secret agents, featuring no fewer than four women as prominent cast members. Meanwhile, Marvel currently has two television programs running on Netflix, with *Jessica Jones* pitting the eponymous private detective (Krysten Ritter) against the Purple Man and his embodiment of toxic masculinity, while the second season of *Daredevil* introduces the assassin Elektra to Marvel's television universe. And on The CW, in an interlinked trio of *The Flash*, *Arrow*, and *Legends of Tomorrow*, creators have populated their universe with characters like Black Canary, Hawkgirl, and most recently Vixen. Of course, one must not forget the impending release of *Wonder Woman* in June 2017, the heroine's first standalone film in her seventy-five year existence. And although it may be a stretch to think of Jedi Knights as superheroes, the most recent *Star Wars* film, *The Force Awakens*, implied that the fate of the galaxy rested not in the cybernetic hand of Luke Skywalker or in the control of Kylo Ren, the grandson of Darth Vader. No, the film introduced instead a new protagonist, a young woman named Rey – a scavenger, cobbling together bits of legends and folklore in order to take her “first steps” on her own hero's journey.

All of this is to say that the superhero genre has only recently begun to cultivate the kind of creative space which fosters women readers who might then go on to create their own works of comic book realism. This project, then, stands at what might be a

turning point in the gendering of comic book realism, a moment when – for now – we have the prominent work of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz, but in the near future we may see greater gender parity within the genre of comic book realism.

Of Mongooses and Women: *Oscar Wao* and “Too Many Dudes”

Although this chapter is nominally about the place of women writers within the genre, it is important to consider briefly the place of Junot Díaz and *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* in the conversation of the changing gender politics of the superhero genre, particularly in light of Díaz’s description of his writing as a “‘feminist-aligned project’ achieved by ‘mapping male subjectivities’” (Vitzthum). I have suggested that the gender makeup of comic book realism may look very different in the coming years, and *Oscar Wao* posits a very similar answer to this issue, that women may be the future of this particular mode of storytelling. My previous chapter’s analysis of *Oscar Wao* focused exclusively on the novel’s rejection of the *tíguere* stereotype of masculinity, focusing largely on the sections of the book narrated by Yunior, in the guise of The Watcher. Yet strikingly, Yunior cedes the narratorial floor several times in *Oscar Wao*, twice to Oscar’s sister Lola (with whom Yunior has his own complicated relationship), once to their aunt La Inca, and once to Oscar’s lover Ybón. Though Oscar is the title character, any narration he provides is always mediated through Yunior, as in the novel’s final page when Yunior quotes but does not reproduce Oscar’s final letter.

Yunior never comments on these shifts in voice toward Lola and the other women in the novel, perhaps puzzling a reader who does not initially realize that the narrative voice has changed, but we might understand these shifts as consistent with the novel’s larger project of polyvocality. Yunior’s vantage point as The Watcher allows him to

reach across time and space to open the story up to a multitude of voices, and it is telling that those voices are all female, that his attempts to redress the silences of history result in un-silencing the women in *his* story. It seems that Díaz, like Rowell, is aware of the way that his chosen genres have traditionally silenced women; framing the issue in a quintessentially Díaz metaphor, he remarks in a telling YouTube interview, “If I had been elected to the Fellowship of the Rings [comprised of nine men], I would have been like ‘Yo, there’s way too many dudes here.’ Straight off the bat, I’d be like, ‘This is gonna fail because there’s way too many dudes.’ Without women in any organization, any group venture, you’re in a lot of trouble, because there’s a specific genius that women bring to the table that no man could begin to equal” (Díaz, “Junot”). What Díaz suggests in this interview is also the focal point of *Oscar Wao* – that women must not be silenced if the future is to be protected.

Throughout the novel, Díaz feminizes superheroism in the hope that women readers might, like Kamala Khan, recognize something of themselves in the genre and repurpose it to tell their own stories. We can see this effort in the figures of the Golden Mongoose, the mystical being that watches over the de Leon family, and Lola’s daughter Isis, with whom rests the next hope of defeating the curse that dogs the family. Richard Perez has suggested that the mongoose, the most supernatural being in the book, “the strangest part of our tale” (Díaz 149), represents a “dramatic manifestation of the Latina phallus” (Perez 101), a powerful answer to the hypermasculine fukú that haunts the text. While it would seem that identifying the mongoose as a phallus negates the inherent femininity of the creature, I do agree with Perez that the mongoose represents “an indomitable female strength . . . an extrahuman response to a symbolic order, suffused

and supported by the curse, within which there is little possibility for expressions of female power” (102). The mongoose first appears to Oscar’s mother Beli, after she is beaten in a Dominican canefield for her relationship with The Gangster (married, unbeknownst to Beli, to the sister of Trujillo). This “amiable mongoose,” Yunior tells us, possesses “golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt. This one was quite large for its species” (149). What’s more, the mongoose speaks, spurring Beli to survival with the promise of her children, and it does so in a female voice; “She (for it had a woman’s lilt) was singing!” (149-150). We can reasonably assume, then, that the “singing” voice which leads Clives to discover the bloodied Oscar, barely clinging to life in that same canefield many years later (300), is the mongoose, who later restores Oscar to health with three magic words (301), the same three blank words about which I wrote in my second and third chapters, which might be versions of “I love you” but might also suggest the way that Yunior’s text is pervaded with silences.

That the Mongoose is coded female is significant because of the way that the fukú of the family is coded male. Moments when misfortune befalls Oscar and his family are accompanied by the presence of a spectral faceless man, associated with the fukú and, by extension, with Trujillo. Moreover, Yunior’s account of the death of Trujillo includes the small detail that “De la Maza, perhaps thinking of his poor, dead, set-up brother, then took Trujillo’s .38 out of his dead hand and shot Trujillo in the face” (155). The curse of hypersexual hypermasculinity ends in violence and the creation of a faceless man, who in turn perpetuates a cycle of more violence. The Mongoose can be seen to ward off these influences, summoned by the prayers of La Inca – who, we’re told, “had a mind like a mongoose” (157) – and the other women of the town. The personification of this

feminine prayer, however, does not stop with the appearance of the Mongoose; I mentioned last chapter that Lola might be the most important character in the novel, because Díaz unmistakably equates her too with a mongoose. Early in the novel, Lola shaves her head⁸³ to spite her mother, but when she returns from her trip to the Dominican Republic, Yuniór “almost didn’t recognize her because her hair was ill long” (196-197). Not coincidentally, the growth of Lola’s hair is connected to the graying of La Inca’s, suggesting that the mongoose-like power has passed from matriarch to matriarch, for Lola is after all a mother by the novel’s end. The “absolute black” of the mongoose’s pelt suggests a kind of feminine power over and resistance to the hypermasculine fukú, which we saw in Chapter Four can be understood as an unattainable iteration of masculinity analogous to the male superhero body.

The future, however, belongs to Isis, Lola’s daughter, who might just possess the final strength to end the fukú once and for all. Isis is described as having the “Hair of Hypatía,” Lola’s mother (327); Isis has, then, hair like a mongoose and hopefully a mind like one as well, for Yuniór expects that one day “she will have a dream of the No Face Man” (330). Isis might be named for the Egyptian goddess of health and wisdom, linked to the quest for answers that Yuniór suspects will bring her to his door, but given the volume of references to superhero comics and an earlier reference to Captain Marvel comics, Isis is likely named after the fictional character who debuted in *The Shazam!/Isis Hour* television show before being imported into the *Shazam!* comics published by DC

⁸³ Ashley Kunsá has written about the significance of hair in the novel as a measure of internalized racial stereotypes. Her reading of the novel then turns to a historicized understanding of Dominican identity versus Haitian identity, with Beli’s body as a kind of battleground, a victim of “the stigma of blackness” (215) which is blamed for many of the family’s misfortunes. “Because of its association with whiteness,” she says of the novel’s depiction of Jack Pujols, “straight hair offers a means to ascend in the social sphere” (219). She revisits Beli’s internalization of her racial identity in her pride at her own hair, which sheds new light on Lola’s act of rebellion – shaving her head. For Kunsá, Lola’s rebellion against her mother carries with it the valence of rejecting “the white, European model as the pinnacle of attractiveness” (220).

Comics. (Let us not forget Lola's own affinity for comics, having dressed up as Wonder Woman "every Halloween" [57].) Like DC's Captain Marvel,⁸⁴ who uses the magical word "Shazam!" to transform from young Billy Batson into the superhero Captain Marvel, Isis becomes a superhero by interacting with a magical amulet, not unlike the three azabaches (bracelets worn to ward off bad influences like the "evil eye") worn by Lola's daughter. Yunior describes Isis as "Neither Captain Marvel nor Billy Batson, but the lightning," the strike of energy that empowers Billy after he says his magic word. In essence, *Oscar Wao's* Isis is the power itself rather than a mere embodiment of it. Furthermore, Isis represents the power of the word, on which Yunior is relying to resolve the curse of the fukú. "And maybe, just maybe, if she's as smart and as brave as I'm expecting she'll be, she'll take all we've done and all we've learned and add her own insights and she'll put an end to it" (330-331).

What Yunior hopes, and what I suspect Díaz does as well, is that Isis will contribute her own perspective to a story that has heretofore excluded female voices; the book Isis might complete is drawn from the absent books of her great-grandfather Abelard and her uncle Oscar (and perhaps from the lost book of Maria Montez), in the

⁸⁴ The Captain Marvel idolized by Oscar is an entirely different one than the figure of Kamala Khan's affection; they are, in fact, published by two different companies. Oscar's Captain Marvel was created by C. C. Beck and Bill Parker for Fawcett Comics, debuting in 1939 before being acquired by DC Comics in the 1970s. This Captain Marvel is secretly a young boy named Billy Batson, who gains the powers of six mythological heroes – Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury – upon reciting the magic word "Shazam!" (derived from the first letter in each name). On the other hand, Kamala's Captain Marvel, Carol Danvers, is a legacy hero who took her superhero name from the name of the original Captain Marvel, created by Stan Lee and Gene Colan in 1967; originally named an alien military defector from the Kree planet of Hala, Captain Mar-Vell's name was later shortened to "Marvel" to match the name of the publisher, and the moniker was held by a number of characters before Carol Danvers "graduated" from Ms. Marvel to Captain Marvel in 2012, using her cosmic strength to protect earth from alien and earthbound dangers. Legally speaking, DC Comics is forbidden from using the name "Captain Marvel" to promote their character, though the name itself of the character is not a trademark infringement – hence, "The Shazam!/Isis Hour" and not "The Captain Marvel/Isis Hour." In 2011, DC Comics dropped the name Captain Marvel altogether and now refers to the character only by the name Shazam. Sure to compound the confusion, both Shazam and Carol Danvers are set to star in their own feature films in 2019.

same way that the genre of superhero comics has been the almost exclusive province of male voices. With those poles shifting, however, Díaz seems to anticipate a change in the genre of comic book realism. Andrew Hoberek has written of this group of novels as “a generational phenomenon,” cautioning, however, that “it is also a gendered one” (177); he includes two women writers – Aimee Bender and Rainbow Rowell – in his analysis, but he considers them as younger writers in the same project as Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz. What remains to be seen, however, is the contribution of women writers as such: “Behold the girl: the beautiful muchachita,” Yunion says of Isis (329), expecting her arrival in the near future.

Though our corpuses are quite different, I find some affinity between my project and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance*, an ethnography informed by an American studies approach to the romance genre and a collection of its readers. Radway’s conception of a genre which creates and sustains a specific kind of reader is provocative, and it might help us to understand the place of women writers of comic book realism in the sense that these writers are carving out a space within an existing genre; that is, where Radway conceives of the romance genre as a genre created to address a lack in the lives of its readers, the women writers of comic book realism are addressing a lack within the preexisting genre of superhero comics. Radway’s understanding that “romance reading creates a feeling of hope, provides emotional sustenance, and produces a fully visceral sense of well-being” (12) might be extended to the project of women writers in comic book realism, who sense the somewhat hopeless and unsustaining position of women in the genre. Comics creator and historian Trina Robbins characterizes the “plight” of women in superhero comics thusly: “Often they were merely sidekicks of the more

important male hero. For the most part, when women appeared in comics they were relegated to the role of girlfriend, and their purpose was to be rescued by the hero. Girl readers could find little in the way of heroic role models in the pages of comic books” (3). Perhaps this absence in comic books has been interpreted by readers as a comparable absence in the literature of comic book realism, which might account for the absolute dearth of criticism on the novels I am about to discuss. In the way that Lisa Yaszek posited, after Joanna Russ, a “galactic suburbia” of women writers of science fiction “as a unified group with overlapping thematic concerns or narrative techniques” (21), we might imagine the likes of Susan Daitch, Jodi Picoult, and Sarah Bruni as operating in a kind of “comic book suburbia,” which, analogous to Yaszek’s galactic suburbia, “created new narrative situations that enabled readers to better recognize the impact of America’s emergent [superhero fascination] on both interpersonal and social relations” (196).

Therefore, what I propose to do for the rest of this chapter is demonstrate that, in the way we saw men writing in a comic book realist mode as early as 1964, women writers have already been contributing to comic book realism as far back as 1990. What we can see from these novels is that women writers have struggled to find a place in a genre that has, willfully or otherwise, excluded them. Like Kamala Khan, these writers struggle to find recognition and acceptance in the genre, finding it an echo chamber of masculinity, of men writing to men about men. In response, these women writers find themselves bewildered by the genre while at the same time working to find their own entry points into the narrative; rather than find ready-made role models like Dylan and Yunion do in the figures of Black Bolt and The Watcher, respectively, these women

wrestle with the inauthentic characters they see and fashion for themselves and of themselves original superheroes more suited to the project of inclusion.

Susan Daitch, *The Colorist* (1990)

Predating *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by a decade, Susan Daitch's *The Colorist* is the first entry in the genre authored by a woman (and, until 2005, the only one). An indisputably postmodern work, fascinated as it is by questions of representation and the blurred lines between art, memory, and reality, *The Colorist* has received almost negligible critical attention; Daitch was one of three authors profiled in a special edition of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993, in which an essay by Richard Katrovas appeared, but beyond that critics have tended to focus more on Daitch's first novel *L.C.* (1987). We might wonder whether this critical silence is the result of pre-Chabon bias against literature about comic books or just a silent response to the relative impenetrability of *The Colorist*; in her *New York Times* book review, Michiko Kakutani described the novel as "unstructured and improvisatory" (C33), while in an interview with Larry McCaffrey, Daitch compared the novel to "an accordion falling off a chair . . . Everything that happens in the book goes through different filters or frames, so 'plot' in the usual sense has taken a walk" (73). However, the novel merits a place in the conversation about comic book realism by virtue of being the first authored by a woman, one which evidences an uncertain relationship to the superhero genre.

Like *Kavalier & Clay*, *The Colorist* is a novel about a comics creator; Julie Greene works for Fantômes and Company, where she serves as the artist responsible for coloring in the black-and-white images of the comic book series *Electra*,⁸⁵ authored by

⁸⁵ Though Daitch toured Marvel Comics in preparation to write *The Colorist*, she rejected the connection between her *Electra* and the one published by Marvel Comics (there, spelled *Elektra*). It is possible that

Mr. Loonan and inked by Laurel Quan Liu. Julie shares an office with Martin Chatfield, the temporary letterer of *Electra*. In focusing not on the writer and penciller, those figures who might best be understood as the primary creators of a comic book, Daitch pays attention instead to the less generative roles; an inker traces over the penciller's work, a colorist fills it in, and a letterer duplicates the writer's script on the page. This focus at once baldly demonstrates her research – she told Larry McCaffrey, “I spoke with Françoise Mouly at Raw Comics and visited Marvel as well” – and also displays a very postmodern sense of humor about the comic book industry. The stars of her novel are not the primary creators of each monthly issue or even the creators of *Electra* herself, but rather the re-creators, those who reproduce rather than produce. Daitch's emphasis on the minutiae of the comic book industry may seem difficult to appreciate; though Marvel Comics had been crediting colorists on comic book covers as early as 2006, DC Comics only recently granted cover credit to colorists, effective July 1, 2014 (Ching). We can also see, however, Daitch's tongue-in-cheek sense of humor about the comic book industry in the names of her characters; Julie *Greene* is the colorist, while the letterer's surname suggests a “chat-field” of words inscribed in speech bubbles.

Perhaps Daitch's detached wit, as distinct from the guiltless admiration displayed by Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz, is a result of Daitch's sense that, like Rowell, she perceives herself as innately alienated by the source material. Unlike Yunior's self-identification with *The Watcher*, Julie says, “I identified with no character or situation. I read the stories in spite of the fact that I found them disturbing. . . . It was a style intended

Daitch was instead referencing *Electra* (Greek for “bright one”), daughter of Agamemnon and sister of Orestes. Mythological accounts differ as to the degree of *Electra*'s agency: in some versions of the story, she leads the charge for revenge against her mother Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's killer; in others, her brother Orestes executes the revenge, while in still others Orestes is enabled by his sister, who had saved his life by sending him away upon Agamemnon's murder.

for another audience, not for me” (71). In a statistic which echoes the truth of our own world of the time, the novel tells us that “85 percent of *Electra*’s readers were boys, aged eight to thirteen, a group of excitable insomniacs” (49). Julie’s erstwhile lover Eamonn, the photographer who spends long parts of the novel absent, ostensibly on assignment, shares Julie’s disdain; for Eamonn, the *Electra* comics were “just a long private joke that went on between myself and Laurel. He saw comics as an ongoing tease” (72). The only character who holds what might be read as a sincere, unironized devotion to the character is her author, Mr. Loonan, who idles in his office listening to onomatopoetic tapes of sound effects for inspiration, described in an extended reference to R. Budd Dwyer as “the kind of person who wanted to see a man commit suicide on television” (54).

Despite her inability to connect with the *Electra* comics, Julie attempts to redraft the character in search of some more authentic icon of feminine superheroism. After all, “anyone who could read, and therefore (pretend to) interpret, could also become a scripiter” (67). With the looming cancellation of *Electra*, Julie and Laurel begin to rewrite *Electra*, but where one might expect a story like this to end with their feminist revival of the character rescuing her from obscurity, Daitch is less optimistic about the opportunities available to female creators. Her new *Electra*, a more realist approach to the spacefaring warrior woman, is rejected by Loonan and Fantômes’s publications director, Mr. Regozin. Still, Julie and Laurel persist, finding some degree of freedom in the knowledge that their (re-)creation will never see print. “We could make her do whatever we wanted her to do, and the whole enterprise would amount to nothing. *Electra* was depressing and ridiculous” (34).

It is not clear whether Julie thinks of the published Electra or her own revision (thinking again of Geoff Klock's notion of "revisionary superhero narratives" as attempts to see these characters anew, to re-vision them) as "depressing and ridiculous"; early in the novel she describes her disdain for Loonan's *Electra* scripts as boring; "Her carapace of bravado scarcely covered conventional femininity. There were more male power figures in the serial than you could shake a stick at" (19). If Loonan's *Electra* is absurd for its exaggerated adherence to the masculine clichés of superhero comics, the interstitial chapters reproducing Julie's new Electra strike the far opposite end of the spectrum, resembling nothing like a superhero comic. In these sections from Julie's notebook, Electra lands on earth, loses her memory, and falls into the hands of a photographer who forces her into a life of pornography. In short, instead of the "holy martyr" Eamonn assumes they are creating (85), Julie and Laurel write an Electra who is "reduced to a sort of a breathing mannequin" (137). Daitch told *Bookworm*'s Michael Silverblatt that the juxtaposition between Electra and Julie was meant to shed light on the power of the superhero as abstracted from her existence as a corporate product:

Electra, her function, is to recontextualize Julie's life. And the word and images from Julie's life end up in the rewritten version of the comic as Electra's literal displacement from comic space to comic earth. She actually reflects Julie's life and in the process she's taken out of the consumer circuit of comic as commodity. She also, I think, Electra becomes more human through the course of the book.

Is Electra's photographer-abductor Lenny Roper, however, an analogue for Eamonn or Mr. Loonan? The novel isn't clear. Where Chabon is unambivalent in demonstrating that Joe Kavalier is inspired to create the character of Luna Moth after falling in love with Rosa Saks, Julie is reluctant to admit the influence of her life on her Electra writings. Laurel "accused me of writing about Eamonn and I wanted her to leave. They weren't

alike at all. Lenny was a sleazy caricature; there was no comparison” (137). Hamlet’s mother Gertrude might tell us that “the lady doth protest too much, methinks,” and I would be inclined to agree with her.

Richard Katrovas advises that we understand the novel as a declaration of the impossibility for women to empathize with characters like Electra, created by and for stunted male audiences; “The colorist’s phenomenology of passion should be understood in the context of a feminist allegory of empowerment, of a woman refusing to play either Isis-in-search or Electra-in-mourning, or any ‘heroic’ role necessarily in male drag” (125). Daitch lamented, however, any generalized connections her readers might make between Electra and preexisting female superheroes, like Wonder Woman or Marvel Comics’s assassin Elektra, created by Frank Miller in the pages of *Daredevil*. Speaking of the Vintage Contemporaries edition of *The Colorist*, Daitch told McCaffrey, “The figure of Wonder Woman on the cover was unfortunate and misleading since she in no way figures in *The Colorist*, nor does Electra have anything to do with her.” Still, though, Julie seems to long for the kind of superhero that the protagonists of Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz find easily. Though Julie is initially relieved that Laurel leaves the personal project of revision, she later discloses her own regrets that Electra never materialized into something more. “I can’t pretend it’s just a story . . . Was I desperate for a fairy tale to explain away these notebook entries as being nothing more than a series of oddballs made up by a woman with a lively imagination?” (148)

The novel ends with Julie regaining a job at Fantômes, having left after the cancellation of *Electra* and holding a brief, “not that different” (235) job coloring in Egyptian hieroglyphics (a precursor, Scott McCloud has suggested, to the comic book).

“Comics were going through hard times,” she muses; “they had to compete with television, video games, and illiteracy. I could see Spider-man [sic], Dazzler, and The Thing standing in line at Unemployment” (236). Eamonn, meanwhile, has vanished once again, this time absconding with every trace of himself; “Even the postcards and letters were obliterated by splatters of Prussian blue and lemon yellow” (242). For a character who had early said that “color is never an entity by itself, color is never a message without a sign” (58), Julie is left suffering under a very postmodern superfluity of meaning; if her lover has been replaced by “splatters” of specific colors, Julie is left with colors which ought to represent something, though the sign behind them has become an absence. The novel’s last line, “I have no choice, I’m forced to remember, and there are no reminders” (242), indicates just how barren Julie’s search for meaning has become. *The Colorist*, then, suggests the difficulties inherent in artistic representation, in line with postmodernism’s play between the real and the represented, extending beyond the superhero genre but nevertheless indicting it for its female-unfriendly existence.

Melanie Lynne Hauser, *The Super Mom Series* (2005-2007)

Susan Daitch’s later work hewed much closer to *L.C.* than to *The Colorist*, musing more on questions of historiography than comic book superheroes. “My first book was very serious, and in the second book more of a sense of humor came out,” she told Silverblatt; “more comic interests came out, and I don’t mean just literally comics.” Perhaps because her work never returned to anything in comic book realism, or perhaps because the novel was not well-received (Kakutani critiqued, “the novel suffers from an all-inclusiveness that causes the reader’s attention to wander” [C33]), the genre of comic book realism would not see another female writer for fifteen years. In 2005, however,

Melanie Lynne Hauser published the first of two books starring Birdie Lee, alias Super Mom.

In the first of these, *Confessions of Super Mom*, Hauser delivers the somewhat apologetic origin story of Super Mom. I say “apologetic,” for the novel begins, “Every superhero has an origin. . . . To tell the truth, it’s a little embarrassing” (1). In this origin story, Birdie Lee falls victim to a “Horrible Swiffer Accident” in which an injudicious combination of cleaning chemicals creates a vapor which causes Birdie to gain incredible – and, to be fair, somewhat ill-defined – superpowers like a Merciless Gaze (which intimidates any nearby teenager), Super Mom Sense (which allows her to detect when children are in trouble), and her ability to shoot cleaning fluid from her fingertips. Like *The Colorist* and nearly every comic book realist novel in this chapter, *Confessions of Super Mom* is narrated in the first person, and Birdie’s embarrassment at becoming a superhero stems in large part from her understanding of superheroes as filtered through her teenage son Martin,⁸⁶ an unapologetic devotee of superhero narratives. In *Confessions*, Super Mom fights a conspiracy linking the PTA to brainwashing video games and unhealthy amusement park snacks; in the sequel, *Super Mom Saves the World*, Super Mom uncovers a plot by the mayor’s assistant to sabotage the construction of a new stadium. All the while, Birdie struggles to balance raising her two children as a single mother while beginning a romantic relationship with Carl Sayers, another PTA member and the father of one of her son’s friends.

Despite being the first comic book realist novel written by a woman after Susan Daitch, *Super Mom* is something closer to Robert Mayer’s burlesque send-up *Superfolks*

⁸⁶ Hauser’s references to the superhero genre are far from discreet: Martin’s full name is Martin Stanley Lee, a clear allusion to Stan Lee (born Stanley Martin Lieber, before legally adopting his penname).

than to *The Colorist*. Birdie Lee lives in a world that satirically adheres to many of the tropes of superhero narratives. Her ex-husband is referred to as “Doctor Dan,” an alliteration that recalls Marvel Comics’s Doctor Doom; her PTA president rival is married to a wealthy industrialist named Lex, doubtless after Superman’s archnemesis Lex Luthor, while his company Moulton pharmaceuticals nods to Wonder Woman’s creator William Moulton Marston; and Super Mom is written up in the pages of the *National Enquirer* by a journalist named Jimmy Nelson, close enough to Superman’s pal Jimmy Olsen. What’s more, the novel takes place in a world where comic book superheroes truly do exist; by the end of *Confessions of Super Mom*, Birdie is a card-carrying member of the Justice League of America, friends with Superman and Wonder Woman.⁸⁷ She even has a catchphrase, borrowed from her secret identity as a supermarket cashier at Marvel Food – “Cleanup on Aisle Four!” (21).

This gently parodic approach to the superhero genre might begin to feel like something *of* the genre and not just inspired by it, but Hauser is less interested in the fantastic elements of her narrative and more in metaphorizing the herculean responsibilities of a mother.⁸⁸ In the way that Díaz compared Trujillo to Darkseid and Sauron in order to demonstrate the immense evil of the Dominican dictator, Hauser uses the language of superhero comics to render the duties of a mother as something that

⁸⁷ Unlike *Superfolks*, which satirized by developing thinly-veiled analogies, *Confessions of Super Mom* uses the actual trademarked names of these characters. The copyright page of the novel does not mention this borrowing, though, and one wonders if the lawyers at DC Comics are even aware of these novel. Perhaps their intervention cancelled the third *Super Mom* novel Hauser described in the acknowledgements section of *Super Mom Saves the World*?

⁸⁸ In Yaszek’s archive of galactic suburbia, she includes Pamela Zoline, whose short story “The Heat Death of the Universe” accomplishes a similar goal as Hauser’s, comparing the quotidian existence of a housewife to the closed thermodynamic system which will ultimately end the universe. Yaszek enrolls Zoline in “the activist tradition” of postwar feminist science fiction (202).

requires superpowers to fulfill. The “Reader’s Guide” printed in the back of *Super Mom Saves the World* contains a letter from Hauser to the reader in which she says just this:

I understood that there were many parallels between the journey that a superhero takes, and the journey that we women experience. Gaining new powers, juggling secret identities, learning to embrace our strengths—I ended up realizing that women really are the true superheroes in life. Only we don’t always take the time to rejoice in it. Until now. . . . So that’s why I don’t really think that I’m writing women’s fiction from a superhero’s perspective. I’m just writing women’s fiction. Period. . . . So what if my heroine wears a cape, Spandex and leaps over tall buildings at a single bound? Don’t we all? (306-307)

Where *The Colorist* suggested that superhero comics were not a suitable avenue for women to represent themselves, even to themselves, *Super Mom* suggests that the superhero is the *only* appropriate metaphor for motherhood. “Super Mom,” Birdie says in *Confessions*; “Well, really. Aren’t we all?” (131)

Super Mom shares with *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* a penchant for borrowing the inflection of superhero comics; we saw in the second chapter how the opening lines of *Oscar Wao* recalled the apocalyptic prose of Jack Kirby. In the *Super Mom* books, Hauser often capitalizes phrases like “Horrible Swiffer Accident,” “Peeping Tom,” and “Super Eavesdropping,” as if to hyperbolize them in naming them as though they belonged in a superhero comic.⁸⁹ Although this textual flourish might suggest *Super Mom*’s fluid entry into the world of superheroes, the novels themselves are careful to keep the domain of the superhero largely in the hands of its male characters. Birdie’s understanding of the superhero genre is filtered through her son Martin who helps her understand the genre’s need for an origin story, a set of superpowers, and a costume – in other words, precisely what Peter Coogan identified as definitional elements to the genre

⁸⁹ In *Superheroes of the Round Table*, medieval scholar Jason Tondro links the superhero genre’s penchant for capitalization, through Jack Kirby, to the “magnificent capital letters” of illuminated manuscripts (52).

in his monograph *Superhero*. Birdie first tests her powers of flight atop the garden shed, a place she didn't know she could reach until Martin shows her the ladder leaning against it. Martin comes up there often, he tells his mother, because "I kind of need a place where I can just be manly, I guess" (71). Birdie's lover Carl, too, helps her understand superheroes, and in turn she understands him a little better. "I was a boy once, you know. A skinny boy who couldn't throw a football," he reveals; "What else was I supposed to do?" (115). Martin and Carl, then, might better be understood in the context of Chapter Four's discussion of mild-mannered masculinity; Martin is an illustrator for his school newspaper, while Carl is a pharmaceutical scientist.

The *Super Mom* series is, however, careful not to make the domain of the superhero an exclusively male province. Super Mom challenges this assumption when the newspapers begin to cover her initial exploits, making false presumptions about her gender: "Why does everyone assume it was a man?" she asks (57). As depicted on the novel's cover and in the text, Super Mom's costume (initially sketched by Martin and Carl) seeks to blend the superhero genre with traditional depictions of femininity:

Clad in a green, full-skirted housedress the color of a Swiffer WetJet, with a giant apron with huge pockets tied about her waist, the cartoon me had a single strand of pearls around her neck, earrings, and high-heeled pumps. On her remarkably flat chest (a slight artistic liberty upon which I didn't comment) was a big orange "S." Her eyes were hidden behind a plain black mask, like the Lone Ranger's, only the ends turned up slightly like those cat's-eye glasses that old ladies wear. A tiny dish towel cape, the tacky kind with fringe, completed the ensemble, held in place by two giant clothespins.

"I look like June Cleaver on steroids," I said, my heart sinking. I could just imagine what Wonder Woman would say about this costume. (82-83).

The cross between the Lone Ranger and June Cleaver, between Superman's cape and a Swiffer WetJet, tells us something about a change in the gendering of comic book

realism. Though lightly satirical, never taking itself too seriously, the *Super Mom* series suggests opportunities for women to think of themselves as always-already superheroes. By the end of *Confessions*, Super Mom catches herself in the mirror, “expecting to see a superhero. But I didn’t. I just saw me . . . In other words, a mom. A super mom” (299). Put another way, the metaphor of the superhero is not useful in helping Birdie Lee understand herself, as the male writers of comic book realism found it to help them be honest to themselves, but rather the image of Super Mom helps others to understand Birdie as innately “super,” doing the heroic work of mothering that those in her life might take for granted.

Jodi Picoult, *The Tenth Circle* (2006)

Like Susan Daitch, Melanie Lynne Hauser’s later work remained distant from her comic book realist novels. In fact, her later work is published under the pen name Melanie Benjamin, as if to distance herself entirely from the *Super Mom* books; again like Daitch, Hauser/Benjamin turned to historical fiction. In particular, the Melanie Benjamin novels focus on women whose lives have been overshadowed by their famous male counterparts: Alice Liddell (who inspired Lewis Carroll), Lavinia Warren (“Mrs. Tom Thumb” in P. T. Barnum’s traveling show), and Anne Lindbergh (wife of aviator Charles Lindbergh). We might think of these novels as somewhat consistent with the project of *Super Mom* – namely, feminizing a traditionally masculine narrative.

Jodi Picoult’s *The Tenth Circle* demonstrates a different kind of anxiety about superhero comics; rather than establish a feminine perspective on a masculine genre, Picoult struggles to legitimize the medium by juxtaposing superhero comics with canonical literature – here, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. *The Tenth Circle* is the story of a

comic book illustrator, Daniel Stone, and his wife Laura, an English professor; their daughter, Trixie, accuses her ex-boyfriend of rape, which rocks the small town in which they live. In the way of nearly all of Picoult's work, *The Tenth Circle* is equal parts topical and sentimental; in 2008 it was adapted into a Lifetime Network television film. The popular element of the novel likely accounts for its critical disregard, though according to Picoult's website *The Tenth Circle* debuted in second place on the *New York Times* bestseller list and topped the *Wall Street Journal* and *Publisher's Weekly* lists.

The Tenth Circle also merits inclusion in a discussion about the genre of comic book realism because it includes comic book pages directly in the narrative.⁹⁰ Written by Picoult and illustrated by Dustin Weaver (a comic book artist who has worked on *The Avengers*, *Star Wars*, and *The X-Men*), these pages purport to be the work of Daniel Stone, an ongoing comic book series entitled "The Immortal Wildclaw," in which the werewolf-esque hero must travel to the tenth circle of hell in order to rescue his daughter. This storyline, "The Tenth Circle," serves as an overall metaphor for *The Tenth Circle*, in which Daniel feels he must repress his rage in order to rescue his daughter from a metaphoric hell. The father/daughter relationship is somewhat unique in comic book realism; we have seen father/son relationships throughout the genre, but Picoult's characterization speaks to the trajectory of a comic book genre which is more gender-inclusive. Because Daniel is a comic book artist, Trixie grows up in a house filled with comics and debates with him fannish questions of "best costume" or "best superpower" (19). Trixie's bedroom, too, is a site for her superhero adulation, painted with clouds

⁹⁰ Earlier in this dissertation, I discussed Tom King's *A Once Crowded Sky*, which uses the same technique in order to reveal the fate of the superheroes in the days before his novel begins. Another text which might be considered comic book realist is James Patterson and Chris Tebbetts's *Public School Superhero*, in which a young boy imagines himself to be the superhero Stainlezz Steel, whose make-believe exploits are depicted in comics pages between prose chapters.

“when she’d told him she wanted to fly like the men and women in his comic book drawings,” and into the present of the novel “she hadn’t outgrown the murals. They seemed to compliment [sic] her” (73). And in the way of comic book realism, Trixie is described in superheroic metaphors; eavesdropping on her classmates, “Like one of her father’s superheroes, Trixie’s senses narrowed” (23). And after her assault, Trixie finds speaking with police difficult, “wishing she were Superman” (241).

Indeed, Picoult seems astonishingly perceptive about the nascent comic book realism genre into which her novel is entering. Midway through the novel, when Picoult describes Daniel’s entrance into the world of comic book publishing, she describes this context in a way that essentially moves through the chapters of this dissertation:

Superheroes were born in the minds of people desperate to be rescued. The first, and arguably most legendary, arrived in the 1930s, care of Shuster and Siegel, two unemployed, apprehensive Jewish immigrants who couldn’t get work at a newspaper. They imagined a loser who only had to whip off his glasses and step into a phone booth to morph into a paragon of manliness, a world where the geek got the girl at the end. The public, reeling from the Depression, embraced Superman, who took them away from a bleak reality.

Daniel’s first comic book had been about leaving, too. (145-146)

Later, Picoult even uses the word “mild-mannered” to describe Daniel, who is both artist and writer on the Wildclaw comics (162).

Yet, despite the novel’s affinities with comic book realism as I have sketched its central concerns, and alongside the novel’s attempt to decenter the gender politics of superhero readership, *The Tenth Circle* persistently attempts to characterize comics as literary by juxtaposing Daniel’s work with Laura’s, by pairing superheroes with Dante Alighieri. Where comic book realism usually blurs the line between high and mass culture, Picoult makes it a central issue in her work by overlapping the metaphors of

Dante's spiraling journey through hell and the superhero Wildclaw's drive to protect his daughter. Picoult seems to be challenging, while nevertheless operating within, a cultural conversation that, according to Paul Lopes, still regards comics as suspect, "as subliterate art more appropriate for children and adolescents than adults" (xxi). Perhaps because Picoult is a popular author with a wide audience, she presupposes a reader's resistance to comics as a central metaphor, reacting to it in a direct rather than implicit way. The "tenth circle" of the novel's title is an imagined follow-up to Dante's nine circles of hell, a metaphor which consumes both Daniel's comic and Laura's teaching. Where Dante's ninth circle is comprised of traitors, Picoult imagines a tenth circle inhabited by self-deceivers: "If the worst sin of all was betraying others," Laura wonders, in response to a student's question about whether any sin is left out of the *Inferno*, "then what about people who lied to themselves?" (274) Though Daniel's journey north to find his daughter when she runs away from home mirrors on a narrative level Wildclaw's travel through hell to save his own daughter, it is this allusion to Dante which thematically governs the whole book; Daniel and Laura lie to themselves about their own strained relationship, Trixie struggles to tell the truth to herself and to others about the assault, and the lead investigator on the case persists in telling himself that he remains unaffected by this and other cases in his life.

The year after *The Tenth Circle* was published, Jodi Picoult became only the second woman in more than sixty years to write Wonder Woman in her own series.⁹¹

Picoult wrote *Wonder Woman* for five issues before her run was cut short by a startlingly

⁹¹ The first was Mindy Newell, in 1985 and then again in 1990; in 1986, Trina Robbins co-wrote and illustrated a four-issue miniseries starring Wonder Woman. In 1989, perhaps in recognition of the gender disparity involved in the publication of Wonder Woman, issued *Wonder Woman Annual* #2, in which all pages were drawn by women, and all stories were co-written by underground comix creator Lee Marrs. (George Pérez, author of the main *Wonder Woman* title at the time, remained present as co-writer.)

tone-deaf crossover called “Amazons Attack!” (story by Will Pfeifer, art by Pete Woods), in which an army of Amazon warriors invade Washington, D.C., to the chagrin of most of the male superheroes at the time. While the hiring of Picoult was fairly high profile, her name imprinted larger than Wonder Woman’s on the cover of the hardcover collection of those five issues, Picoult’s five issues are more remarkable for her presence as a writer than for the story itself. She told CNN’s Matt West, “There’s never been something that a reader could sink their teeth into and say, ‘Oh yeah, this is why I’m like her.’” Although her work on *Wonder Woman* did not reinvent the character or – as she indicates on her website she had set out to do – “get that poor girl a functional outfit,” the final issue of her run (#10, cover date August 2007) included one Amazon warrior, a red-haired woman with a suspicious resemblance to Picoult (Picoult and Diaz 18). “I wrote myself into the script,” she relates on her website, “instructing the illustrator to make an Amazon warrior look like a certain red-haired novelist moonlighting as a comic book writer. And sure enough, when the issue hit the stands, there was my alter ego... systematically beating the crap out of Batman” (Picoult, “Evolution”). Picoult’s insertion of herself into the narrative echoes a piece of dialogue from her first issue (#6, cover date May 2007), in which Wonder Woman is told, “**You** stop believing in heroes, the hero inside you dies” (Picoult and Johnson 12). Recognizing something heroic within herself, like Hauser’s always-already *Super Mom*, Picoult’s engagement with the superhero genre offers another way for women writers to create spaces for themselves within the genre, quite literally by entering and commandeering it.

Where *The Tenth Circle* constitutes a legitimizing move that seems, at least to this author, unnecessary, implicitly making a case of the literary value of comics by equating

them with canonical literature, Picoult's work on *Wonder Woman* proposes a way for women to envision themselves in the stories that Daitch and Hauser saw as masculine to the point of insularity – to take charge of the characters in the form of creating (or recreating) them in her own image. Precisely what Miriam Kent did *not* want to see with *Ms. Marvel*, Picoult allows herself to see herself in the character of Wonder Woman by creating an opportunity for the character to be more relatable.

Sarah Bruni, *The Night Gwen Stacy Died* (2013)

Rewriting a preexisting character, inhabiting that character's skin in order to revision oneself in her image, is the central conceit of *The Night Gwen Stacy Died*, the last comic book realist novel authored by a woman in this analysis.⁹² Sarah Bruni's debut novel has some affinities with Daitch, in its bemused consideration of a hypermasculine genre, but her engagement with the postmodern notion of scripting, of adopting an identity from fiction, goes a step beyond Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz's inherited identities from superhero comics. Instead of finding a ready-made role model, Bruni's novel poses the question of a character who adopts such an identity, only to find it insufficient and in need of rewriting. Bruni's protagonist is not Jodi Picoult or Kamala Khan, who want to find the superhero in themselves and vice versa; instead, Bruni displays a pessimism about scripted identities, and her characters ultimately define themselves through

⁹² I discussed at some length Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park*, published the same year as Bruni's work, in my second chapter, finding its comic book realist elements quite consistent with the way Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz use superhero comics to access sincerity in identity. It is worth noting, however, that Jennifer Estep has penned five "paranormal romance" novels, the *Bigtime* series, which began with *Karma Girl* (2007). These romance novels behave almost exactly as one might expect – in *Karma Girl*, for example, Carmen Cole, an investigative reporter with the alliterative name the superhero genre demands, publishes several stories unmasking superheroes before she falls in love with one; ultimately, Carmen receives her own powers, in the form of the ability to turn the superpowers of others against them (hence, "Karma Girl").

engaging critically with – rather than wholly coopting – the identities from the characters whose names they borrow.

The novel takes its title from what is likely the most famous Spider-Man story in more than half a century of the character's serialized publications since 1962, written by Gerry Conway and illustrated by Gil Kane. Published in *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (cover date June 1973) and #122 (July 1973), this story began with a cover on which Spider-Man stares at portraits of his friends and family, exclaiming, "My **spider sense** is never wrong! Someone **close** to me is about to **DIE!** Someone I **cannot save!** But who? **WHO?**" In #121, Spider-Man's greatest foe, the Green Goblin, returns to his criminal ways after his amnesia is cured and he remembers learning that Peter Parker is Spider-Man's secret identity. In order to strike at his enemy, the Green Goblin abducts Peter's girlfriend Gwen Stacy and throws her from the Brooklyn Bridge (13).⁹³ Though Spider-Man attempts to save Gwen, catching her leg with his spider-webbing, Gwen perishes. The cause of death, however, is notoriously unclear. Had she been killed even before the Green Goblin threw her off the bridge? Was she killed by the shock of the fall, as the Goblin claims? Or does the onomatopoetic "snap" beside her neck suggest that she was actually killed by Spider-Man's webbing abruptly stopping her body from falling?

To Spider-Man's horror, he discovers that he was unable to save Gwen. As he cradles her body in a splash page reminiscent of the *Pietà*, he shouts up at the Goblin,

⁹³ In the dialogue from #121, Spider-Man calls it the George Washington Bridge, even identifying it as "named after [the Goblin's] favorite president," though the artwork is unmistakably the Brooklyn Bridge. When the scene was restaged in the 2002 film *Spider-Man* (with Peter Parker's other great love, Mary Jane Watson, whom Spider-Man manages to save), the scene was relocated to the Queensboro Bridge. In the 2014 film *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, however, Gwen Stacy dies, but from falling from a clock tower. Ben Saunders has suggested that this confusion (and the uncertain cause of Gwen's death) is indicative of a kind of Freudian trauma suffered by the character and the reader, that "the location of the event was henceforth and forever marked by the kind of confusion associated with the traumatic disruption of memory. Usually, Peter Parker remembers Gwen being thrown off the Brooklyn Bridge, but *sometimes* he remembers it as the George Washington Bridge" (88).

“***You’re** the creep who’s going to **pay!** . . . --you **killed** the woman I love-- and for that, you’re going to **DIE!**”* (20). At the start of the next issue, Spider-Man stands atop the bridge, still cradling Gwen’s lifeless body and still swearing vengeance on the Green Goblin. At the bottom of the page, however, where the creator credits are printed, identifying the writer, artist, and the rest of the creative team, a blue arrow points at the names, reading “A tale so **powerful** only **these** men could produce it!” (1) In a very compelling chapter in *Do the Gods Wear Capes*, Ben Saunders writes about the death of Gwen Stacy as the focal point for a Freudian/Kierkegaardian repetition of trauma for Spider-Man, whose serialized adventures often revisited his intense guilt of the loss of his loved one. Saunders notes, as must we all, the way that this trauma is gendered: “In a culture where the tools of representation are by-and-large in the hands of white heterosexual males, it should be no surprise if the fantasy of a perfect partner is ‘best’ emblemized by an idealized vision of white, youthful femininity: a pretty blonde” (101). For all the narrative import the story holds, notable also for its climax in which the Green Goblin is impaled by his own glider, apparently killed for good (or at least until the 1990s, when he was revived), the story remains a powerful reminder of the masculine influence on the genre – “only these men” suggests not just the exclusivity of their artistic prowess but draws our attention to the absence of female creators in the genre.

Bruni seems to recognize that aspect of “The Night Gwen Stacy Died,” and while her protagonist adopts the identity of Gwen Stacy for a time she ultimately rejects it, deciding to control her own identity rather than allow it to be scripted only by men. *The Night Gwen Stacy Died* begins with 17-year-old Sheila Gower working at a gas station in Coralville, Iowa. Feeling a certain wanderlust as she completes her final year of high

school, and amid a puzzling proliferation of coyotes in the area, Sheila meets a man calling himself Peter Parker, a taxi driver who frequents the gas station during her late-night shifts. On one such evening, on a whim even she is unable to explain, Sheila stages her own kidnapping at gunpoint and joins Peter on a trip to Chicago. There, Sheila formally adopts the nickname Peter had taken to calling her; she changes her name to Gwen Stacy, Spider-Man's ill-fated girlfriend. But as the two run away together, their own damaged personalities come to heal each other by understanding that the bond they share is similar to the love that exists between comic book characters, even if their fates eventually differ. "Gwen Stacy made Peter Parker count for something besides the freakishness that he uses to save the city from villains each night," Peter thinks (73), coming to relinquish his delusion that Sheila is doomed because of her link to Gwen Stacy.

The novel concludes in a place very similar to *Kavalier & Clay*, in revealing that its protagonists have adopted these comic book identities to escape their own; Sheila becomes Gwen Stacy in order to escape her perceived dead end life, while Peter has begun to inhabit superhero comics as a way to stay close to the brother he lost when he was very young, the brother who gave Peter his comic book collection. Bruni's Gwen Stacy never dies, as the title promises, as her comic book counterpart did at the hands of the Green Goblin in *Amazing Spider-Man* #121 (cover date June 1973), but Peter and Sheila come to realize that nevertheless "Somewhere in this city, there was a green goblin on whose presence all of this could be blamed" (245). That "green goblin" is human agency, choices like the moment when Sheila decided to run away with Peter and stage her own kidnapping. This realization comes after a visit to a comic book shop, when

Sheila naively attempts to purchase the very expensive issue in which Gwen Stacy died. After reading the outraged letter columns, in which fans wrote to decry the writers who killed Gwen, she discovers that her life has no author: “It’s your life. You can do what you want with it” (265). By inhabiting the identity of Gwen Stacy, dyeing her hair and dressing in the mod 60s fashion as illustrated by *Spider-Man* artist John Romita, Sr., Sheila discovers her own freedom, as does Peter when he saves her from drowning (not accidentally, a fate that Spider-Man’s Gwen Stacy might have met had Spider-Man’s webbing not caught her). Both Sheila and Peter realize by the novel’s end that their identities are ultimately unscripted.

Throughout the novel, much to her consternation, Sheila finds herself brushed off by the men in her life, often on the grounds that she is not a traditional comic book reader – that is, an adolescent white male. To be fair, she isn’t a comic book reader; she confesses to a passing familiarity with the character of Peter Parker, largely through the Sam Raimi films starring Tobey Maguire. What she resents, though, is the condescending dismissal of her interest in the genre on the basis of her gender. “‘Lots of people read comic books still,’ said Sheila. She knew this to be true, and she would stand by it. There were readers everywhere; there were movies being made all the time. What right did Peter have to single-handedly commandeer the story?’” (103). At this moment, Sheila recognizes that she has lost her agency, lost control of the “green goblin” that allowed her to choose to run away with Peter. She recognizes that her life is being scripted by Peter – and, by extension, “only these men” – and rejects Gwen’s fate out of hand. “This part of the story doesn’t have anything to do with us . . . Come back to bed?” she asks Peter, who nevertheless remains slavishly devoted to what he believes to be the prescribed ending to

their relationship (134). Later in the novel, Sheila attempts to purchase a copy of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #121, only to be subjected to a humiliating interrogation by a comic book salesman, who forces Sheila to name three of Spider-Man's villains before selling her the issue. This caricature of the comic book shop as an exclusively male territory, suspicious of any female intrusion, links up with Danziger-Russell's proposal of the digital space as an alternative for women readers reticent to enter a shop like the one Bruni proposes. Bruni's own acknowledgements in the novel do, in fact, align her with Danziger-Russell's sense of the digital as the future for women readers; Bruni cites in her research a CD-ROM publication of the first forty years of Spider-Man comics (277).⁹⁴

In the end, Sheila and Peter – now living once more under his own name, Seth Novak – set aside their borrowed identities when they realize that their relationship has accessed the theme, if not the content, of Gwen and Peter's. "You were trying to steal someone else's story and pass it off as your own?" Sheila is asked by the coyotes, whose presence as anthropomorphic tricksters and guardians reminds us that comic book realism has always had at least one foot in the terrain of magical realism, the domain of speaking animals and powerful natural forces; "You were borrowing something that didn't belong to you?" (262). It is not just that Gwen's story does not belong to Sheila by virtue of being the story of another woman; the story cannot fully belong to Sheila because it was not written by her, but by "only these men."

Lest these men seem the villain in this narrative of a woman reader's reckoning with the high-profile murder of the most important woman in Peter Parker's life (at least at the time, and setting aside, of course, his dear Aunt May), the comic book version of

⁹⁴ Incidentally, the comics shop charges Sheila \$350 for the issue; a digital copy can be purchased at Comixology.com for \$1.99.

“The Night Gwen Stacy Died” has recently had an unexpectedly happy ending at the hands of Jason Latour and Robbi Rodriguez, two men who created a strikingly and immediately popular re-visioning of Gwen Stacy. While Spider-Man was engaged in his latest major crossover storyline (“Spider-Verse,” published near the end of 2014 and into 2015), the miniseries *Edge of Spider-Verse* introduced several new “alternate” Spider-Men, including an anime-inspired Spider-Man, a robot drone named SP//dr (piloted by Peni Parker), and a grotesque spider-creature who stalks his neighbor Sarah Jane (as distinct from Peter Parker’s neighbor, Mary Jane). The second issue of *Edge of Spider-Verse*, however, introduced readers to Earth-65, where the radioactive spider bit Gwen Stacy, not Peter Parker, leading her to become Spider-Woman. The character was given her own ongoing series, *Spider-Gwen* (so named to differentiate herself from the preexisting *Spider-Woman* title), embraced by readers in the way that none of the other alternate Spider-Men was. On Earth-65, Gwen is motivated by the death of Peter Parker to use her spider-powers for good, a fascinating inversion of “The Night Gwen Stacy Died.” Meanwhile, Spider-Gwen’s debut came the same year that *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* was released, in which Emma Stone co-starred as Gwen Stacy. Though the film ended with Gwen Stacy’s death at the hands of the Green Goblin, Stone’s performance in both *Amazing Spider-Man* films was well-received, sparking a new interest in the character and a reexamination of the gender-unfriendly tropes that had led to her death. In the figure of Gwen Stacy, women readers – and, as Bruni demonstrates, writers – are reassessing the character to find some redemptive value in her, some entry point into a genre which has not always been welcoming to women.

The patterns of iconographic reclamation we see in Bruni's novel and in the women writers of comic book realism have their echoes in the world outside literature, as well. In mid-2015, the technology company Axosoft sponsored the "Girls in Tech Catalyst Conference," which aimed (according to their website) to "showcase[e] women at the forefront of the technology and start-up spaces . . . [to] provide them with a platform to exchange ideas, connect with other influential women, and create lasting business relationships" ("Catalyst"). At the conference, Axosoft introduced a viral campaign aimed at reimagining the place of women in technology by equating them with superheroes. Their slogan, "It was never a dress," appeared beneath two images of a women's restroom sign; on the left, the image appeared as the traditional white silhouette of a woman wearing a dress, but on the right the image was colored in so that it appeared that the woman was wearing pants and a red cape. "This lady, well, we've been looking at her the wrong way, said Axosoft's Curator of Code Tania Katan. Like the women writers of comic book realism, Axosoft's "It was never a dress" campaign aims to revision the image of the female superhero in order to reclaim it against stereotypical depictions of femininity.

The women writers of comic book realism have proved somewhat difficult to categorize, for a number of reasons. Only some of these writers, like Rainbow Rowell, conform to the lines of post-postmodern identity politics as traced by Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz in Chapter Two, though none of them seem engaged in the project of Levinasian memory I detailed in Chapter Three. Moreover, it is not just that women writers of comic book realism are doing different things with the genre than their male counterparts, but rather that women writers cannot be said to have concerns in common

with each other; *Super Mom* might more properly belong to early second-wave feminism than the genre revisioning of *The Night Gwen Stacy Died*. What I have attempted to do in this chapter, then, is to sketch out the current prospects of women writers of comic book realism, to assess what women have done within the genre and what those attempts portend for future writers. On the one hand, Susan Daitch and Melanie Lynne Hauser offer absurdist views of the superhero genre as a male-dominated sphere, where Jodi Picoult and Sarah Bruni appear more invested in the project of revisioning, particularly envisioning oneself within preexisting superhero narratives.

However, Daitch and Hauser disagree on the source of absurdity in the superhero genre; for Daitch, it is in the emotionally stunted men who create narratives they stubbornly believe are progressive, while Hauser's farcical tone suggests a less self-serious approach that instead positions the novel as a lighthearted escape for the readers who feel they too are compelled to be a "super mom." On the other hand, Picoult as a comic book creator herself is in a very different position from Bruni, who posits a protagonist who can only project "The Night Gwen Stacy Died" onto herself, rather than actively write herself into the narrative, as Picoult has done.

What these writers do share, however, is the notion of vision, of whether or not a writer can see herself in the genre – whether, like Kamala Khan, she feels herself able to imagine herself beside the likes of The Avengers. I have suggested that the coming generation of comic book realist writers, if indeed the genre persists, are presently in the midst of a superhero renaissance which is much more female-friendly and, by extension, might foster a creative space conducive to female readers who can then go on to write their own novels. It is not just that I expect a female *Oscar Wao* to emerge, but that I

anticipate the kind of novel Yunion imagines Isis might write, the description of which bears repeating, for it sets the tone for the future of women writers in comic book realism: “And maybe, just maybe, if she’s as smart and as brave as I’m expecting she’ll be, she’ll take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it” (330-331).

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CHAPTER SIX:

TO BE CONTINUED?

In the preceding chapters, I have argued for the existence of a nascent genre in contemporary American literature which I have called (after Daniel Bautista) “comic book realism.” These texts ought to be studied because of and not despite their interest in superhero comics, for the novels of Michael Chabon, Jonathan Lethem, and Junot Díaz (and so many more) utilize the superhero in shared projects of identity politics, ethical responsibilities, and redefining American masculinity. Though critics had heretofore noticed those particular themes in Chabon and Lethem’s work and in Díaz’s – though almost never all three together – understanding those issues through the lens of superhero comics allows us to see with greater clarity just what these novelists have to say about these themes.

For one, comic book realism can be said to be a generational matter. Marc Singer and Andrew Hoberek have written about the “generational cohort” of writers referencing superhero comics, a pattern I traced in my first chapter to the trend of growing critical respect for the medium of comics at large. Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz were all born within five years of each other, their comic book realist novels published in the first decade of the twenty-first century (and within the first five years, if we consider *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*’s debut as a 2000 *New Yorker* story). We can extend the scope of comic book realism back to Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm* (1994) or, as I did in the previous chapter, to Susan Daitch’s *The Colorist* (1990); we might even enroll Chapter One’s prehistory texts, beginning with Donald Barthelme’s “The Joker’s Greatest Triumph” (1964) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973). Ultimately,

assigning a range of dates to comic book realism is, like all comparable projects, a strictly rhetorical move of delineating boundaries. While those early texts shed light on the ways that more recent literature is a shift and not a break from preexisting treatments of superhero comics in American fiction, it is my hope that demonstrating the historical scope of comic book realism invites us to reexamine the critical confinement into which Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz have been placed. That is, these authors have much in common not just with each other but also with a larger collection of literature which demands now to be reexamined.

The emergence of comic book realism can also be said to be generational in the sense that older writers have not proved to be as receptive to the genre. To my eyes, nearly all of the comic book realist writers are comparatively young, of a generation born after 1960; many of them are still in the early years of their careers as writers, with many comic book realist writers publishing their debut novel in the genre (as Díaz and Sarah Bruni have done). Certainly older critics have rejected the notion that comics can be treated with anything other than postmodern irony; John Leonard's "Welcome to New Dork" is a kind of whipping boy/straw man in this regard, but his spirited reprimand of Lethem's comics fandom is emblematic of a larger pattern of critical disinterest and disdain for this subject matter – disinterest which has come at the cost of a full understanding of these texts. In the Showtime comedy series *Happyish*, this generational gap is dramatized when Thom Payne (Steve Coogan) learns from his young assistant Lorna (Hannah Hodson) that the new owners of his advertising firm have renamed all the conference rooms in the building after significant creative figures. What should have been a simplified way to refer to conference rooms, by names instead of by numbers,

descends into confusion when Thom realizes that he and his employers belong to different generations and therefore have different creative role models:

LORNA. Gottfrid's just called a Keebler meeting.
THOM. A Keebler meeting? What's Gottfrid doing calling Keebler meetings?
LORNA. He asked that you be there. It's in Roth. [. . .] Gustaff and Gottfrid renamed all the conference rooms.
THOM. What... why?
LORNA. Because we're creative. The conference rooms on 22 are named after writers, the conference rooms on 23 are named after artists, and the conference rooms on 24 are named after film directors.
THOM. Philip or Henry?
LORNA. Philip or Henry what?
THOM. You said the Keebler meeting was in Roth. Is it Philip Roth or Henry Roth?
LORNA. There's a Henry Roth?
THOM. Just... where is the Keebler meeting?
LORNA. It's across from Miller.
THOM. Arthur or Henry?
LORNA. Frank.
THOM. There's a Frank Miller?
LORNA. He wrote "Batman."
THOM. What the fuck?

Thom's confusion over the inclusion of Frank Miller alongside more canonical choices like Philip Roth and Henry Roth, juxtaposed with Lorna's unblinking acceptance of the same, tells us something about the generational aspect of comic book realism and the larger cultural proliferation of the superhero. In a generation or so, perhaps comic book realism will not seem that bold a literary move. Perhaps, like Lorna, future readers will not think twice about seeing (for example) a novel that does for Superman's story what *Ulysses* did for Homer's *Odyssey*.

Just as we could haggle over the beginnings of comic book realism, we might debate whether comic book realism's moment has passed or whether it has only just begun. In the tradition of superhero comics from which the title of this concluding

chapter is derived, I suspect the answer to this question must remain, for now, in the realm of “To be continued...” Chabon and Lethem’s most recent works have pushed them closer to the world of rock music, maintaining the sprawling scope of their comic book realist work; after they published their comic book realist novels, though, they developed their own superhero comic books. Chabon oversaw Dark Horse Comics’ *Michael Chabon Presents The Amazing Adventures of The Escapist*, while Jonathan Lethem wrote *Omega the Unknown* with artist Farel Dalrymple. Rainbow Rowell, author of *Eleanor and Park*, announced in 2014 that she and artist Faith Erin Hicks would collaborate on a pair of graphic novels for First Second Books. Perhaps comic book realism might be said to end when its creators give up the practice of literary realism and surrender wholesale to the genre of the superhero.

I do not believe, however, that comic book realism is on its way out. Instead, like the early superhero comics from which this genre derives inspiration, it seems that comic book realism might still be in its Golden Age. In Chapter Five I described a set of circumstances that might foster a new generation of women writers invested in superhero comics in a way from which previous generations were discouraged. The superhero renaissance in film and television shows no signs of slowing, suggesting that the genre will continue to attract an audience comprised in part of the next generation of comic book realist writers. Junot Díaz seems to agree that this trend is only going to grow. In the YouTube video “Geeking Out with Junot Díaz,” Díaz takes viewers to St. Mark’s Comics in New York City, riffing on his favorite comics and what they mean to him. Near the end of the video, Díaz speaks to the value of comics in his own writing and speculates that this movement is only just beginning:

Really for a lot of kids who grew up in my generation and maybe a lot of kids who grew up afterwards, comics is a cultural touchstone. References to the *Watchmen*, references to *From Hell*, references to *X-Men* – none of this is going to seem too strange because this in some ways is our cultural commons in this generation. Comics are not only big business. They're also a way that many people kind of understand the world through a certain amount of years. I think that that's something I was trying to get through when I was writing this book [*Oscar Wao*] – in the end it's less about whether Yunion is a nerd or not and more about that it's no surprise that any kid from any background is gonna have some familiarity with this stuff. (Díaz, "Geeking")

At the very beginning of my research for this project, I reveled in jotting down every passing reference to superheroes in popular culture, every moment when a character defined their identity along scripted lines inherited from a superhero comic or measured their gender identity against a superheroic alter ego. Over the course of a year, though, I noticed that the frequency of these observances was escalating to the point where any comprehensive study would have been grotesquely unwieldy.

Certainly there exist a wide range of novels committed unambiguously to superhero novels, which might themselves have a place in a discussion of comic book realism but which have been omitted from this project for the sake of time and focus. Such texts move beyond the examples of comic book realism we have seen thus far, which allow the intrusion of the fantastic into a mimetic realist mode. In these cases, the superhero, who can be said to belong first to the world of comic books and to film second, has been translated into novels which celebrate the genre without any allegiance to realism. Such novels, like Austin Grossman's *Soon I Will Be Invincible*, Perry Moore's *Hero*, and Carrie Vaughn's *After the Golden Age* have received minimal critical attention in large part because they are unapologetic exercises in the superhero genre without the "highbrow" literary aspirations that led to Chabon and Díaz winning Pulitzer Prizes for

their comic book realist novels. It does not seem coincidental that this body of novels should arise concurrently with the novels analyzed in the foregoing chapters, yet we should not apply the label “comic book realism” indiscriminately.

Both archives are, however, borne of the same larger cultural impetus that continues to bear further investigation – the widespread fascination with the superhero. I have written throughout these chapters about the pliability of the superhero as a metaphor, allowing writers to apply this omnipotent signifier to any number of referents. It is worth considering one last time Marc Singer’s thesis that the superhero can be a hypostasis, a form of metaphor which generates meaning by concretizing it on the level of text. Singer argues that comics writer Grant Morrison, who penned the *Mastermen* comic book which in Chapter Three demonstrated an ethical approach to Holocaust memory, is particularly adept at such “hyper-literalized representations that bypass the symbolic order of language and signification to represent primal drives and fears through figures . . . seek[ing] a nonlinguistic, presymbolic referentiality through the concretization of symbolic meaning, promising mimetic representations of the abstract and the impossible” (Singer, *Grant* 17). Of course, Morrison is not alone in deploying this technique of grounding subtext at the literal level; we saw in Chapter Four the way that Jack Kirby inscribed The Thing’s physical masculinity on his craggy orange body. But with the post-postmodern investment of sincerity in an art form previously thought incapable of bearing such relevance, the possibilities for hypostatic metaphorization seem boundless.

I should like to close with one more notion on the superhero’s current appeal, one that reaches as far back as the genre’s origin story in 1938. Morrison describes in his

book *Supergods* (a text which, like Superman, has a bifurcated identity, functioning as part memoir, part genre history) an idea inherited from Pico della Mirandola and a long lineage of thinkers contemplating the value of fiction more broadly. Perhaps deliberately echoing too the words from the 1978 *Superman* film spoken by Marlon Brando's Jor-El, who told his infant son as he placed him in a rocket bound for Earth that its inhabitants "can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way," Morrison describes the superheroes as the best possible vision of humanity, a shining mirror against which readers can measure themselves, a floating symbol of a culture's highest ideals:

We love our superheroes because they refuse to give up on us. We can analyze them out of existence, kill them, ban them, mock them, and still they return, patiently reminding us of who we are and what we wish to be. They are a powerful living idea . . . Superhero stories woke me up to my own potential. They gave me the basis of a code of ethics I still live by. . . . By offering role models whose heroism and transcendent qualities would once have been haloed and clothed in floaty robes, they nurtured in me a sense of the cosmic and ineffable that turgid, dogmatically stupid 'dad' religions could never match. I had no need for faith. My gods were real, made of paper and light, and they rolled up into my pocket like a superstring dimension. (416)

This analysis of contemporary American literature has shown that superheroes can sort out questions of identity in an interconnected world, engage with questions of ethical responsibility to the silenced voices of the dead, reject their own standard of hypermasculinized male bodies, and still find room on the bench for women readers who had been traditionally shunned by the genre.

Stan Lee might look at that list and deliver one of his myriad catchphrases, "'Nuff said!" However, Chabon, Lethem, and Díaz seem to be just the surface of this emerging genre, and so I prefer, ultimately, to end on that notion of "To be continued..."

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