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Dissertation Prospectus

Vigilante Legacies:
Postwar American Literature from Batman to Bateman

"*Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted*"
- Martin Luther King, Jr.

"*Vigilante tantrum*"
- Wu-Tang Clan

The object of my dissertation is to trace the systematic appropriation of the vigilante figure in postwar American literature. I address the mythic and ideological formulations that constitute the legacy of vigilantism in fiction, offering a critical assessment of its power in shaping the dynamism, thought, and politics of America. Born of revolt and Puritanism, appropriation and entitlement, principles and violence, the United States of America are a natural site for vigilantism, and where the term originated in 1855. We can trace the emergence of vigilantism back to the nation's very birth in revolution and massacres that were aimed at protecting 'higher' interests. However, my project is less interested in the genealogy of American vigilantism than in how American literature has continued to refigure this vigilante heritage through fiction. Keeping this anachronistic tradition of vigilantism alive, I posit, has inspired the emergence of a new form of American postwar novel. I argue that these novels—namely, *Invisible Man*, *The Outsider*, *Beautiful Losers*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, and *American Psycho*—are the formal products of the confrontation between the vigilante ideal with the recognition of its atavism, hypocrisy, and limits.

If there's something American culture seems particularly good at, it is surely its ability to keep believing in violence as a viable—and perhaps ideal—means to an end. "I should have used my knife to protect the higher interests of society," declares Invisible Man in the prologue to Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel. In the narrative's context, using his knife would have meant murdering a racist who "bumped" him in the streets of New York. And the escaped convict

known as the "Misfit" in Flannery O'Connor's story "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) similarly concludes, after gunning down the eldest remaining member of an entire family, that "She would of been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." These two utterances plucked out of postwar American literature capture two aspects of the underlying (ill)logic of vigilante justice. Ellison's implies that it may be best to eradicate "undesirables" from the polis in order to better "protect" the ideals for which it stands. O'Connor's, equally murderous in this context, suggests that deadly violence can steer certain people on the righteous path, in other words, potentially serving as a policing deterrent. The contradictions involved in both forms of vigilante justification—breaking the law to better uphold it, murder as a means to the moral good—are staggering and both are given voice by outlaws, albeit two very different kinds of criminals.

The literature I address directly engages with the combination of psychic wreckage and idealistic vitality that the vigilante model offers democratic citizens. As a citizen who oversteps the boundaries of national legislature, the vigilante symbolically rejects the state and suggest the failure of governmental policies. Quite like today's republican Tea Party, the vigilante wants less government and more power over private affairs, "the right to bear arms," and to correct perceived social injustices with them. While in some ways a national pathology, vigilantism has also provided American literature with a poignant and dynamic form of expression for the human condition. Importantly, a renewed interest in vigilantism as an American way of life coincides with the embrace of "lower" or popular forms in the postwar era. Among these, the comic book industry elevates the vigilante to mythic, industrial status, a cultural phenomenon that has had a direct impact on every postwar author I address. Framing vigilantism as the perverted American

fantasy of "a world of infinite possibilities" (576), I will show an evolution of vigilante poetics as a dialectic between possibility and escapism, both at the level of content and form.

My literary research complements Richard Slotkin's cultural history in *Gunfighter Nation* (1998), where he reassesses the significance of the Frontier myth in twentieth-century America. In my introduction, I will offer a genealogy of the vigilante ideal in American literature through "representative anecdotes" found in the works of Owen Wister and William Faulkner. As Faulkner suggests in his last novel *The Reivers*, the American vigilante is often a sorrowful observer of the unavoidable evil in the world: "There are things, circumstances, conditions in the world which should not be there but are, and you cant escape them" (155). It is in the face of such a sad reality that the vigilante is prompted to act as a corrective. Such a compulsion reflects a core contradiction within the vigilante figure, one fundamental to what Albert Camus calls the "rebel," who "rejects the world as it is, without accepting the necessity of escaping it" (326). Taking the law into your own hands suggests a leap into individual sovereignty despite one's democratic surroundings. Yet when the word "vigilante" was first coined, it was used to indicate membership in a vigilance committee, which implies not individualism but community. Owen Wister's romantic depiction of Frontier life, *The Virginian* (1902), serves as an introductory point for my inquiry, creating as it does the representative archetype for the individualized vigilante ideal in twentieth-century American literature, and crystallizing the template for the modern American hero. Wister's novel stresses the crucial difference between acts that can be "not *wrong* but merely *illegal*," such as the lynching of cattle rustlers in the narrative's context. Lynching, of course, is one of the most prominent and disturbing manifestations of the 19th century vigilante impulse, constituting the kernel of America's fraught relation to vigilante justice. Wister's character Judge Henry, paraphrasing President Andrew Jackson, justifies that

since “ordinary citizens…are where the law comes from…when they lynch they only take back what they once gave.” When the courts and juries, “into whose hands we have put the law, are not dealing the law,” then the true American citizen “must take justice back into his own hands where it was once at the beginning of all things.” This, he proudly declares, is “so far from being a *defiance* of the law, it is an *assertion* of it” (340-341). Whereas Wister provides this rationale for vigilantism from the experienced voice of the law itself, Faulkner ascribes an inherent moral sense, akin to innocence, to the eleven year old character of Lucius Priest in *The Rievers*. When Lucius learns that a rival young boy named Otis has been “letting grown men watch [prostitutes at work] for a dime” through a peephole, Lucius is inexplicably moved to severally punish his rival. Suddenly becoming the vigilante this experience demands, Lucius confesses that he “knew exactly what I wanted to do: not just hurt him but destroy him […] one flesh to bruise and burst, one set of nerves to wrench and anguish…” This visceral passage continues for almost a full page, extending the troubling poetry of righteous violence in that singularly American way. This notion of “one flesh to bruise and burst, one set of nerves to wrench and anguish,” is a representative formulation of how the universal good is “served” through a particular “evil.” Completing the heroic cycle, Lucius keeps the reasons for beating Otis to himself, as the code of the gentleman, the virtuous hero, demands. He altruistically fights for the disenfranchised, and as a consequence of his violent outburst, the prostitute of the narrative decides to become a “decent woman,” providing a redemptive gloss to the violence suffered by a young boy. These two literary engagements with the vigilante tradition offers a conceptual frame for the chapters to follow. This project, concentrated as it is on representative examples of radical individualism, marks an opportunity to consider the shift between vigilantism as an alternate form of

collectivity, one whose roots lie in mob mentalities, or "committees." In short, I will investigate the kind of community—both political and symbolic—these novels nevertheless imagine.

I. African-American Appropriations of Vigilantism

My first two chapters are framed around two African-American responses to the legacy of vigilantism. The history of lynching in the United States forcibly establishes an ambivalent relation to vigilantism for African-American writers, and accordingly, the authors I consider—Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright—depict vigilantism both as an ongoing symptom of American racism, and as possessing the potential to be refashioned into a political response to this legacy. In my first chapter, I read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a narrative in which vigilantism becomes the embodiment of the "antagonistic cooperation" between crime and social utility, and whose protagonist is positioned "outside the law by the incontrovertible fact of race" ("Harlem's America" 25). Archival research I've already undertaken has shown that both Ellison's and Wright's approach to vigilantism—and street violence in general—was largely influenced by their work with Dr. Fredric Wertham, the psychiatrist whose Lafargue Clinic in Harlem was the first to provide free psychiatric treatment to African-Americans, and which concentrated its efforts on juvenile delinquency. Of particular interest to my project is that Wertham later became infamous for instigating a crusade against comic books, which he claimed were the "common denominator" in every case of delinquency he had studied in Harlem. My research at the Library of Congress has revealed that in one of the earliest versions of his promotional essay on the clinic, "Harlem is Nowhere" (written 1948), Ellison shared Wertham's theory, claiming that "adolescents commit crimes learned from comic books."[1] Yet *Invisible Man*, my chapter argues, takes a more ambivalent stance toward comics and the practice of vigilantism. In a 1941 letter to Richard Wright located in the Beinecke, an emotional Ellison wonders whether "those passions

[1] Box 100. Ralph Ellison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540.

which could so easily be criminal might be socially useful." In Ellison's thinking, these passions are characteristic of those who, like his novel's protagonist, "shot up from the same region," those "for whom the trauma of passing from the country to the city of destruction brought no anesthesia of unconsciousness, but left our nerves peeled and quivering. We are not the numbed, but the seething. God! It makes you want to write and write and write, or murder." Although there are only two alternatives here, to write or to murder, either option "might be socially useful."[2] This is precisely the dilemma at the heart of Invisible Man's stance toward society: he "should have used [his] knife to protect the higher interests of society," yet ends up instead committing a "near murder" and writing down his story (14). Ellison's sense of writing as an alternative to murder can help explain why Invisible Man has been increasingly aligned with a kind a vigilantism, not as a "superhero" but as a writer. The two alternative reactions are not opposed. The last line of the novel—"Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (581)—still contains a kernel of vigilantism, in the sense that Invisible Man considers himself in a state of exception and takes on the task of acting on our behalf, almost as a vigilance committee of one. Like a comic book, the novel stresses the uncomfortable notion that, under certain circumstances, the individual will have to forgo the law and use violence as a means of ridding society of its evil.

My second chapter will explore the extent to which Richard Wright's little-read novel *The Outsider*, published just a year after *Invisible Man*, similarly explores the vigilante rationale that unites violence with social redemption, yet this time through four acts of "ethical murder" (301). I will frame Wright's *The Outsider* as yet another embodiment of Ellison's prediction that, beginning with *Black Boy*, Wright's work represents the "fate and promise of juvenile delinquents" (Box 203 REP). In *The Outsider*, the protagonist, Cross Damon, adopts a new,

[2] Richard Wright Papers, Box 97, "Personal Correspondence," Ralph Ellison, 1937–1953, 3 November 1941.

secret identity as Lionel Lane in order to wander the nation and test the limits of his possibilities in search for meaning. Along the way, his inner sense of morality and justice lead him to commit four murders, only to be murdered himself shortly after his imprisonment. Since Wright served on the Board of Directors of Wertham's Lafargue Clinic, comic books, psychiatry, and juvenile delinquency are also themes that hold a prominent position in Wright's oeuvre, though this relation has practically never been underscored, something my archival research will remedy. To parse this relation, I must examine the doctor's correspondence with Wright, as well as any other materials related to the Lafargue clinic. Subsequently, I will look at the Lafargue Clinic Collection itself, housed at the Schomburg Center for Black Culture. My longest stay will be in New Haven to sift through the Richard Wright Papers at the Beinecke. Carefully exploring the genesis of Wright's second novel in the multiple manuscript drafts (some of which are at Princeton) as well as his extensive correspondence will provide a novel way of assessing Wright's literary achievement, while explicating *The Outsider*'s ambivalent appropriation of vigilante violence as a viable means to an end. The initial embrace and subsequent distancing with Communism in both Ellison and Wright informs the discussion of radical individualism embodied in both these novels.

II. Experimenting with Superhuman Fantasies in the Postmodern Novel

For my third and fourth chapters, I segue into a consideration of the postmodern legacy of vigilantism, an appropriation that centers on the figure of the comic-book superhero. Chapter three brings the project into the following decade to explore the thwarting of the superhero ideal in Leonard Cohen's 1966 postmodern novel, *Beautiful Losers*. Cohen creates a dialectic between the Saint and the Superhero in his work as a means of ultimately undermining the latter as a false idol. Both categories can "achieve a remote human possibility" (101), but the superhero is

indicative of an exaggerated focus on the body and a forgetting of spiritual and moral values. The figure comes to represent a perfect, ideal body possessing ultimate sexual prowess, but is devoid of any superior spiritual or moral sense. All the characters in the novel display a wish to have the powerful bodies of superheroes (mostly for sexual purposes), through a deregulated sense of what is "possible" for the human. While "I" merely awaits to be anointed with superpowers, "F" actually trains his body and takes vigilante, terrorist, action. Meanwhile, the text is haunted by the spirit of Kateri Tekakwitha, a 17th century Mohawk mystic who was canonized by the Catholic church, thereby representing the counterpoint to the empty superhero ideal. My decision to include this Canadian novel is motivated by the necessity of tracing the legacy of American vigilantism into a transnational space, where its inspirational and nefarious influence can be assessed from without, and reflect the globalized reach of this legacy in the marketplace. As a misguided appropriation undertaken by Cohen's characters, the novel warns of the dangers of "lift[ing] that bale"[3] through transcultural borrowing. Indeed, as an American sense of vigilantism could be said to inaugurate postmodernism for Canada's literary scene, Pynchon transposes this sense into the psyche of an American soldier on European soil in the final months of World War II.

Thus, my fourth chapter expands on the increasingly perverse fixation on vigilante crime and heroism through Thomas Pynchon's most acclaimed novel, *Gravity's Rainbow*, first published in 1973. The deconstructive work Cohen begins in the 1960s is taken further—and in a different direction—by Pynchon. Tyrone Slothrop, the novel's protagonist, at first merely reads Plastic Man comics, but once he enters The Zone, he is transformed into Rocketman, remaining so for much of the novel, only to end up as the seemingly inept member of the Floundering Four,

[3] Cohen's epigraph to *Beautiful Losers* is "Somebody said lift that bale," indicated as a line from 'Old Man River' sung by Ray Charles. In the original lyric, however, the word is spelled "bail," not "bale."

an obvious play on the Marvel superhero group the Fantastic Four. Yet in the world Pynchon creates, even Superman—America's first and greatest—cannot stop the atomic bomb, finally proving to be vulnerable when, at ground zero, his famous curl becomes grey. The atom bomb alters the stakes of vigilantism; not only have they gone global, but its fantastic agents—such as Superman and Myrtle Mystic—are themselves powerless in the face of the rocket. Set in the final days of World War II, the novel deconstructs the vigilante ideal and further distances itself from violence as a means to social redemption, and collectively underscores the impotence of the vigilante model for modern warfare. Disillusioned as Pynchon's characters become with these American escapist fantasies of power, vigilantism is aligned with perversity and terrorism, challenging the romanticized legacy of the hero-ideal, albeit with nostalgia.

III. Psychopathic Dreams of Sovereignty Abroad and at Home

My final chapter pursues the legacy of vigilantism to its logical dead end in two of the most infamous American literary psychopaths: Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*. While Ellison's Invisible Man is able to declare that his world is one of "infinite possibilities," the last words Patrick Bateman tells the reader in Ellis' *American Psycho* are "This is not an exit," closing the door on alternatives, and on the fantasy of unfettered possibilities. The nightmare of the American impulse to take the law into your own hands is embodied in Patricia Highsmith's most famous creation, Tom Ripley, and in his literary descendant, Patrick Bateman. The vigilante-hero in both narratives is positioned as the twisted doppelganger of the homicidal, egotistical protagonist. As archival research in Highsmith's papers—located in Bern, Switzerland—should enable me to reveal, Ripley's plot structure is influenced by Highsmith's own earlier work as a writer of superhero comics. This chapter will contrast Highsmith's narrative to Ellis' more modern appropriation of the superhero as

psychopath, through his association of Batman with narrator Patrick Bateman. Through Highsmith, whose *The Talented Mr. Ripley* follows an American traveling to Europe to murder other Americans, the legacy of American vigilantism continues its transnational dominion. Ripley and Bateman are not only among the darkest manifestation of vigilantism's legacy in fiction, but fittingly they are also the most isolated from any sense of community. Now, the kind of psychopathic mindset that twists itself into a state of exception is no longer interested in protecting the "higher interests of society," but rather in eradicating any possibility of interconnectedness. Law enforcement now forms the "vigilance committee" of old, and is refigured as the enemy.

Ultimately, I posit that the legacy of vigilantism is raised to utopian, altruistic heights in the form of the superhero, and lowered to dystopian, homicidal depths in the form of the psychopath, embodying both America's dynamism and its pathology. Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *The Outsider* represent a crossroads, vacillating between the unhinged psyche of the psychopath and the idealism of the superhero. Cohen and Pynchon's narratives are invested in deconstructing the superhero's romantic mythos, while Highsmith and Ellis explore the psychopath as the darker doppelganger of this very same legacy. Through my tracing of the legacy of vigilantism, I aim to show the archive's utility in stretching the contours of what had previously been regarded as hermetic bodies of work, unearthing previously unknown conversations, collaborations, and crossings in postwar literature. Closing my investigation of the legacy of vigilantism with Ellis in 1991 stems from my conviction that this legacy is fundamentally reassessed—and more openly embraced—in America after the events of 9/11.

Tentative Schedule

Spring 2011
- Complete Chapter 1 on Ellison
- Begin work on Wright Chapter

Fall 2011-Spring 2012
- Complete Chapter on Wright.
- Complete Chapter on Cohen and begin chapter on Pynchon

Fall 2012- Spring 2013
- Complete Chapter on Pynchon
- Complete Chapter on Highsmith and Ellis

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