The Effect of Fiction on Marginalized and Disenfranchised Peoples

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The Effect of Fiction

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Abstract

Fiction is proposed as an answer to how marginalized and disenfranchised people, as well as non-dominant and empowered people, can reach true emancipation and empowerment within a United States context. Works of cinema are discussed in brief while the literary works Giovanni’s Room, Americanah, Dreaming in Cuban and the musical genre of Hip-Hop are discussed at depth for their potential power to emancipate and empower the aforementioned peoples. Literary analysis and critical musical examination are combined with sociological and anthropological research to provide a foundation for the thesis. The limitations of fiction are explored in the same manner, whilst discussing why science and history cannot be the only vehicles of empowerment and emancipation available or promoted to non-dominant and/or marginalized/disenfranchised people.

Keywords: fiction, disenfranchised, marginalized, cinema, literature, music, empowerment, emancipation
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Introduction

The topic of inequity and how to diminish it has long been the focus of many activists whether they take the form of scholars, politicians, or educators. The treatment of those apart from the dominant group within a society has led to the disenfranchisement and marginalization of said non-dominant groups for millennia.

This inequity has formed four distinct fractions within a society: those who are dominant and empowered, those who are dominant and marginalized (or disenfranchised)\(^1\), those who are non-dominant and empowered, and those who are non-dominant and disenfranchised. Dominant groups are the ones within a society with a power based on race, sexual orientation, religion, or another facet of human identity that is the foundation for human behavior. Conversely, the disenfranchised/marginalized groups (or disenfranchised because they are marginalized)\(^2\), are typically the ones with little power or autonomy. These people suffer a lower living standard than the empowered. The question remains: what can be done to empower the disenfranchised and how should such a change be implemented? I argue that one answer lies in fiction because fiction has great potential to emancipate and empower disenfranchised groups. I will examine three novels and a poetic genre of music in order to effectively prove this thesis.

\(^1\) For the purposes if this essay the terms *marginalized* and *disenfranchised* are used interchangeably.

\(^2\) Disenfranchisement as the removal of one’s power. Marginalized as one being made to feel inferior for a facet of her identity.
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Fiction is, for the purposes of this argument, the result of imaginative narration. It can take the form of literature or stage plays (and other visual representations), or it can manifest in auditory works as is often observed with music and lyric poetry forms such as rap and sonnet. It is free from the confines of fact—though it may derive from factual knowledge or history. Fiction is characterized as an invention of the mind, broad reaching in scope due to its popularity. While fiction is considered an invention of the imagination, its value far exceeds its use solely in the world of entertainment.

The personal effects fiction has on those who consume it are both profound and paradoxical. Paradoxical because it is—by definition—fiction and thus supposed to be taken as a product of someone’s imagination. Fictional stories are only supposed to have a semblance of reality—their primary function is to dramatize what we already know or what we already know could happen. Aristotle has stated it is the poet’s job to convey what may happen and thus poetry (fiction) is raised above history for it gives the listener the ability to contemplate all events both personal and impersonal (Aristotle, Section I.IX.) And it is true that works of fiction have been used to teach audiences since before the biblical era.

Homer’s imaginative narration taught a generation of Greek boys how to be men. Aristotle has said humans love fiction because it helps them learn about themselves, either through imitation or likeness (Aristotle, Section I.IV). Contemporary artists and entertainers cite Saturday morning cartoons and television programs as personal catalysts for the accumulation of their goals and the pursuit of their dreams. How is it possible that fiction, an artist’s imaginative work, could spark a change in the lives of
many and eventually serve as a vehicle for the emancipation of disenfranchised and non-dominant people?

The answer lies in the treatment of disenfranchised people, both dominant and not. Historically both science and history, the leading forms of non-fiction, have served to empower already dominant and entitled groups. Science specifically has been touted as an indisputable and undeniable discipline to validate one’s argument or one’s self. Because science is able to be tested and quantified, scientific knowledge is often treated as if it was infallible. Historically, this has proven to be problematic.

Phrenology, the now debunked science of examining a human’s skull in order to determine personality characteristics, was popular throughout the nineteenth century and used by advocates of slavery to justify the egregious practice of owning another human being (Griffith, 1915). Another example of misuse of science to justify contemporary views is seen in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), psychology’s handbook for diagnosing mental disorders. This manual classified homosexuality as a treatable mental illness from its first publication in 1952, until its seventh edition in 1975 (West, 2002). Though it would be foolish to downplay science’s contributions to our global society, one must also acknowledge science is not always exact and often aligns with the interests and values of the dominant group.

History too, science’s close relation, has been subject to the politics and fallacies of human interpretation. This is because both science and history can be manipulated to validate one’s experiences or actions, and such a manipulation can be valued as concrete fact.
The Bible, which many Christians hold as truth, was used to justify the mistreatment of non-dominant people (namely low-income citizens and racial minorities) until the mid 20th century. Both slave-owners and professors in the antebellum southern United States used the Bible to validate the institution of slavery (Porterfield, 2008). Today, it is used to rationalize the bigotry of an extremely vocal minority, some of whom hold positions of power in United States politics. The withholding of women’s rights to contraception and homosexuals’ rights to marriage are both ostensibly supported by the Christian Bible. Again, this is troubling when the religious text is regarded as truth to some policy makers and thus used to justify their propositions.

Non-Religious examples of illegitimate historical revisionism (negationism)3 can be observed both in the United States and abroad. Confederate revisionism aims to rewrite American history by proclaiming the Southern United States were the defenders and not the instigators of the American Civil War. Additionally, confederates maintain that the motivation of the Southern United States was the retention of rights and limited government, rather than the preservation and expansion of the institution of slavery.

Furthermore, the problem of historical negationism is an international one. Japanese nationals continually deny Japanese acts of aggression and war crimes during World War II. Former prime minister Abe Shinzo is quoted as saying, “The fact is, there is no evidence to prove there was coercion” when asked to apologize for the millions of non-

3 I.e. reinterpretation of history in order to blatantly favor one group over the other, often overlooking or ignoring facts which damage the group one wishes to show in positive manner. Example(s): Holocaust denial, Armenian genocide denial
Japanese women who were forced into the sex trade during the second World War (Tabuchi, para 5, 2007). The former prime minister’s adamant denial of his country’s past serves to prove how much contemporary viewpoints dictate the treatment of the past. While I do not intend to discredit the need for history within societies, even historical scholars can agree that contemporary views of history are colored by the perspectives of the present and written by the dominant victors of the past.

Entertainment and art, the leading forms of fiction, have not only reflected society’s views but molded them as well. They are the leading forms of fiction because art and entertainment may be the world’s oldest addictions. The forms cause joy and delight while the spectator consumes them, while also creating a need within the spectator that can never be fulfilled, a need to always have one’s senses engaged while both suspending and enhancing one’s reality.

While both art and entertainment (as forms of fiction) could be created for and enjoyed by the dominant, empowered class—the dominant and empowered class cannot control these forms as they can with science and history. Because entertainment and art are free from academic and/or financial barriers non-dominant and disenfranchised people also have a chance to tell their own stories and have such stories be heard. And if history and science were used to keep the non-dominant class submissive and the dominant class justified in their privilege, then art and entertainment can be used to empower the non-dominant class and force the dominant to examine their beliefs.
**Explanation of Theory**

Scientific concepts which further validate the emancipating power of fiction are seen in the *parasocial contact hypothesis* and the concept of *theory of mind*. Parasocial denotes social interactions that are derivative or auxiliary to interpersonal contact (hence the “para”). Edward Schiappa describes parasocial contact as follows: “If people process mass-mediated parasocial interaction in a manner similar to interpersonal interaction, then the socially beneficial functions of intergroup contact may result from parasocial contact” (Schiappa, pg. 92, 2005). In brief, psychological studies find people begin to consider the fictional characters in their favorite television shows, films, and other types of media, as tangible people—and these parasocial interactions with said characters have the same benefit as interpersonal relations with actual people from these types of societal groups.

This and similar studies could be vital for the emancipation of disenfranchised people, for scientists have known the most effective way to rid people from dominate groups of prejudiced ideals about non-dominant people, is to have non-dominant and dominate interactions (Singh, 2015). Yet, by simply showing dominant people television shows that centered around non-dominant characters, empathy levels in dominant individuals increased. Similar outcomes have been observed within *theory of mind* research.

The method of collecting data for the concept of *theory of mind* is nearly identical to the methods researchers used to collect data for the *parasocial contact theory*. People from the dominant facet of society were given an indirect questionnaire about their
societal beliefs. Test subjects responded to questions such as “I believe homosexuals deserve the right to be married” and “I feel some types of people are inherently more lazy than others” before and after they were exposed to fictional media.

Research surrounding *theory of mind* states, “Social functioning depends on the ability to attribute and reason about the mental states of others – an ability known as theory of mind (ToM)...The findings are also consistent with studies demonstrating significant relationships among narrative transportation, ToM, and the reading of fiction. Together, the data indicate that reading fiction may be an avenue for improving ToM ability” (Dodell-Feder, pg. 1, 2013). In laymen’s terms, fiction can help people empathize with one another.

This is proven when test subjects would change their responses to the questions that were provided at the beginning of both studies to reflect a more empathic understanding of people—answering “yes” instead of “no” when asked if it is a homosexual’s right to be married, for example. A fictional work can make one person walk in the shoes of another, which can lead to greater levels of empathy and understanding between social groups. The outcomes of potential interactions between non-dominant and dominant people is categorized under *intergroup contact theory*.

Since the parasocial contact hypothesis and theory of mind are derived from intergroup contact theory—the idea that people from opposing sections of society would empathize and understand one another if they *interacted*—one could assume advocates for change could simply facilitate interactions between empowered and disenfranchised people and receive greater, or at the very least similar, outcomes of the decrease in
prejudiced or bigoted beliefs. The parasocial contact hypothesis and theory of mind could be seen as unnecessary and expendable steps to empowering the disenfranchised.

However, the hypothesis is as valid today as it was in 1954 when psychologist Gordon Allport discovered that in order for the intergroup contact theory to be effective, everyone in the group had to feel safe, comfortable, and respected (Allport, 1979). Such an environment is difficult to achieve when an imbalance of power has already been established and engrained in a society’s people. It is true in the United States today, that three quarters of White Americans (dominant in US society) have virtually no non-White (non-dominant) Americans in their interpersonal circle (Ingraham, 2014). The data illustrates that fiction and the parasocial contact theory should be valued, as it is more common for a White person in the United States to have interpersonal contact with a Black person through a television or movie screen than in person.

On the individual level of the non-dominant person I hypothesize fiction is equally important. Fiction allows for self-identification and self-definition, privileges that are often lost when a group’s voice is silenced by the dominant majority. Writers of fiction hold powers greater than historians for their words are allowed to equally deny and validate many, often contradictory, parts of the human experience. It is these collections of words that allow marginalized peoples to empower themselves and prohibit the theft of their personal stories, for when a group’s voice is silenced it can only watch as another group attempts to define it.
Cinematic Examples

American cinema has long been a staple of life in the United States. Cinema is one of the few industries in the United States that seems to be disaster proof—to this point, when the United States is struck with economic or international tragedy, cinemas see their profits increase (Surowiecki, 2009). It seems industries listen the most when people vote with their dollars. Not even the Great Depression could keep citizens of the United States away from movie theaters, when the demand for movies increased, so did movie production (Breznican, 2011). However, there was a source of income American cinemas did not receive as they first began to cement themselves into American life: the income of African Americans.

In the early 20th century many African Americans had less income than their Caucasian counterparts and much of the United States was segregated, meaning African Americans could not see movies even if they had wanted. But another reason for their non-participation is due to the fact that the media of that time was not made for African American audiences (Burton 2010). One researcher argues, "... media portrayals of minorities tend to reflect whites' attitudes toward minorities and, therefore, reveal more about whites themselves than about the varied and lived experiences of minorities," thus films like Birth of a Nation were a box office success while African Americans struggled to find media figures they could relate to (Bristor, pg. 48, 1995).

This changed in 1929. More than ten years after the first African American picture company was founded, the films Hearts in Dixie and Hallelujah were produced and
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distributed. These films showcased African Americans in a positive light that was free of the negative stereotypes Hollywood typically placed on Black characters. Because both films were commercial successes they helped emancipate African Americans from the negative stereotypes *Birth of a Nation* had placed upon their personhood. Additionally, these films initiated a new genre of film that would further empower African Americans to tell their own stories (Burton 2010). These racially and ethnically specific films were far reaching due to their popularity among Black Americans and serve as evidence of the profound impact fiction can have on a non-dominant population.

However, I must note that the effect of these racially specific films (or Blaxploitation as coined by Junius Griffin) was not always positive for African American communities. This is specifically seen in the 1970s United States. Though creators like Melvin Van Peebles were able to write, direct, produce, compose the soundtrack, and even star in their own creations—advocacy groups such as the NAACP would eventually join a coalition to permanently dismantle the films. For while these films showcased Black actors and had storylines pertaining to African Americans, ultimately they conformed to negative stereotypes about said African Americans.

It seems that films targeted at African Americans became less blindingly positive in the 1970s and attempted to balance their message with the realities many African Americans were facing at that time. Yet the attempts to balance stories about the importance of persistence and education failed against the need to validate the lives of African Americans who were affected by the illegal drug epidemic— seemingly
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pandemic in African American neighborhoods. This eventually lead to stories that were both cliché and predictable but were still able to strongly influence society.

Critics, such as the NAACP, protested that the movies eroded the positive role models the Black community had created and promoted White prejudices about Black culture. Worse yet, they feared the effect the movies were having on the Black community. One critic noticed Black Panthers were slowly hanging up their Berets—a symbol of their political ideals—and buying medallion necklaces (arguably, a symbol of materialism and conformity) (Julien, 2002). Addison Gayle wrote, “The best example of this kind of nihilism / irresponsibility are the Black films; here is freedom pushed to its most ridiculous limits; here are writers and actors who claim that freedom for the artist entails exploitation of the very people to whom they owe their artistic existence” (Gayle, pg. 40, 1974). Thus, the visual form of fiction was working almost too well—and in a way that further enslaved non-dominant, disenfranchised people. Because fiction is such a strong force, creators must be aware of the type of content they produce, the effects of which could be just as empowering as they are devastating.

Furthermore, fiction as a form of entertainment has long since surpassed non-fiction as a form of knowledge in terms of public accessibility. While the path to scholarship has traditionally been barred to those who lack a certain income, race, or gender—entertainment has established itself as both a pleasant addition to daily life and a necessary method of escape for individuals who find the drama or comedy of entertainment much more bearable than their own lives (Breznican, 2011). This escape implies serious societal consequences both positive and negative.
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While the forms of fiction, and the categories they may fall into, vary, there is no denying the profound effect fiction has on a non-dominant population. Positively, fiction emancipates said people by giving them permission to tell their own stories and, furthermore, allows such stories to be widely accessible. By showcasing traditionally marginalized people in a positive, or even neutrally complex, manner—disenfranchised people are able to strive above what is commonly expected or stereotyped of their ilk.

Additionally, empowered and/or dominant groups are able to have parasocial contact with these traditionally disenfranchised people in a manner in which they feel safe. This manner of contact has the potential to break down prejudices and negatively held stereotypes, which further empowers typically disenfranchised people.

While the effects of fiction are not always positive, to begin my thesis I will examine James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* to study its effects on dominant but marginalized people; the genre of *hip-hop* for its effect on every facet of society, but especially the disenfranchised within a disenfranchised group; Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah* for its effect on non-dominant and disenfranchised people; and Cristina García’s *Dreaming in Cuban* for its potential effect on the non-dominant, empowered facet of society—before acknowledging fiction’s limitations in the conclusion.
Giovanni’s Room

James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* is considered a part of the literary cannon in the LGBTQ community. It is easily one of the first novels of the 20th century to depict the complexity of human sexuality and humanize those who fall outside of the heteronormative context. *Giovanni’s Room* helped heteronormative dominant people empathize with the queer community as members of this community were commonly seen as non-human and dangerous (Abani, 2013). Currently, it is ranked second among the best works of gay and lesbian novels by the Publishing Triangle, an organization of lesbian and gay individuals in the publishing sector whose mission is to promote the publication of books and other media written/created by LGBT authors or with LGBT themes (Publishing Triangle, 2015). With the publication of his novel, James Baldwin fostered a public discussion about homosexual desire and laid the foundation for other fictional works to add to public discourse.

The foundation is especially important because although *Giovanni’s Room* facilitated a dialog about the intersectionality of class, biological sex, and sexual autonomy—it disregarded a vital discussion on the intersection of race and sexual orientation. The latter is particularly important within a United States context where people of color were often further marginalized for non-heteronormative sexual orientations, distinctly when their sex or social class did not allow them a layer (however thin) of autonomy. Baldwin’s publisher is quoted as asking the author to burn his completed novel, for fear its publication would alienate him from his African American audience and “destroy” his career (Eckman, pg. 139, 1966).
However, it is *Giovanni’s Room* that brought Baldwin mainstream success. And although even Baldwin himself, a homosexual Black man from a religious, low-income family, could not wholly identify with his protagonist—*Giovanni’s Room* brought an extremely taboo subject into the lives of traditional Americans and forced them to recognize the disenfranchised within their own dominant group.

The protagonist in the 1956 novel *Giovanni’s Room* is noteworthy, for though he is dominant he is still marginalized by global society. That is to say, the protagonist is a White, queer\textsuperscript{4} male from a high-income background. To be clear, David is marginalized because while he comes from a dominant facet of society, he is made to feel inferior due to his sexuality—this marginalization eventually would lead to his disenfranchisement\textsuperscript{5}. In this manner, the *marginalized* and *disenfranchised* are so closely related they fall in the same facet within a society.

The intersectional conflicts of *Giovanni’s Room* are as relevant today as they were when author and activist James Baldwin first published the novel. Though David is affluent and male, he suffers from societal (and parental) pressure so great, it causes him to flee the United States. In France, David attempts to discover himself and, more accurately, looks for ways to hide his homosexual urges and affirm his masculinity.

\textsuperscript{4} The protagonist, David, will be referred to as Queer as some scholars disagree as to whether he is homo or bi-sexual. Thus, the term “queer”, which categorizes people who fall outside of heterosexuality, will be applied.

\textsuperscript{5} Marginalization meaning his treatment as insignificant or peripheral. Disenfranchisement meaning his loss of rights, privileges, and power.
France offers him a cloak of anonymity to explore his sexual desires—it is a cloak he could not have had in his home country. Due to his time in the Army and the American education system, he understands the consequences that come with openly identifying as anything other than heterosexual in the United States of the early 20th century.

It is clear that United States society has given David a self-hatred that causes him to harm or sabotage his close relationships and a fear that stops him from ending his cycle of self-destructive behavior. This is seen early in the text when David describes his friend Jacques. The lines, “I understand now that the contempt I felt for him involved my self-contempt” show that by the end of the text David is aware of his own “self-contempt” and could perhaps use his knowledge to gain some control and power over his life (pg. 23).

However, through conversations between characters in the text, it is clear David has some power, in some cases significantly more than his romantic partners. Because David is male and rich he is free to travel the world in an attempt to escape from his inner feelings without arousing suspicion—unlike his female partner Hella. Because he is rich and masculinely male he is able to hang around men like Jacques and Guillaume without damage to his reputation nor the vital necessity that makes Giovanni seek their company. What remains unfortunate is the fact that David does not view his wealthy background nor his biological sex as particularly advantageous. Yet the very thing that sets David apart from his lovers is the combination of his male anatomy and his wealthy background. Giovanni, for instance, lacks a financial security similar to David’s. David may lament his financial issues yet he has an opportunity Giovanni and many other
Parisian bar boys lack—the opportunity to call his father and at least receive a homecoming.

The fact is, though David is suffering immensely from societal pressures and his self-destructive behavior could lead to his death, he does not suffer from a stifling lack of opportunity: David can leave Paris; Giovanni cannot. It is very telling that David does not see his relative wealth as a means to free himself from his father and societal standards. His wealth does not prevent feelings of inadequacy or fear.

David describes his life in the United States as a constant motion he must always be in, in order to prevent a self-discovery, he is not yet ready to face. Yet, even his constant motion is not an infallible method to suppress his inner desires. In chapter one he states, “and there were a number of those [homosexual encounters], all drunken, all sordid, one very frightening such drop was in the army which involved a fairy who was later court-martialed out. The panic his punishment caused in me was as close as I have ever came to facing in myself the terrors I sometimes saw cloud in another man's eyes” (pg. 20). He is justified in fearing his father's, or society's, reaction to his sexual orientation. David’s prison is his attempt to unify his sexual desires with societal expectations.

The fact that he calls his homosexual encounters “sordid” and “frightening” is evidence of his internalized self-hatred. Together, the words describe an event that is immoral according to his society and terrifying for the same reason, yet still an event David desires. Because David finds his sexual encounters both sordid and frightening, it is apparent why he feels the need to be intoxicated before such events take place.
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David may be using alcohol to separate himself from his desires and excuse himself from the consequences of his actions.

The fact that he saw a man punished for the same actions he commits caused a fear in him which he sees reflected in men around him. In them he sees “terror” cloud their eyes. The word “cloud” could allude to a blindness, or a willingness to shun certain parts of one’s own identity. For these reasons, he travels to Paris to free himself of these social constraints and attempts to find a solid sense of self.

David’s loathing for his feelings yet inability to stop them, would lead dominant and empowered readers to sympathize and empathize with him according to the parasocial contact hypothesis and theory of mind theory respectively. The sympathy gained from parasocial contact is vital because openly gay men were rare in 1950s America and for this reason it may have been easy for many traditional dominant and empowered people to demonize and dehumanize those who fell outside of heteronormativity. While queer individuals may have already sympathized with David by virtue of the fact that they fall within the same facet of society for the same reasons he does, theory of mind also helps them, along with the dominant and empowered readers, empathize with David. Consequently, with the sympathy of non-queer and empathy of queer people, this text has the power to validate at least some of the non-heteronormative community. Such validation makes it impossible for discrimination to have any validity—either in the United States or abroad.

It is interesting that even in Paris, an ocean away from everyone he knew in the United States, he still longs for escape. In hindsight, what David discovers is that only
he himself can break down the walls he himself helped to create. And this escape and self-actualization is quite different from Giovanni’s. Giovanni states, “Me, I want to escape… Je veux m’evader—this dirty world, this dirty body. I wish to never make love again with anything more than this body” (pg. 24). The word “escape” is especially telling of Giovanni’s mental state and social standing.

An escape from Paris not only means an exit from the city, it signifies an emancipation from captivity. The word “escape” denotes that one is confined or imprisoned. For Giovanni the ability to leave Paris can only occur if he has also freed himself of poverty and the structural violence that forces him to rely on wealthy older men in order to survive.

However, his desire for escape does not seem possible—for he wants to escape his “dirty body” and “dirty world”. The desire to “never make love again” does not necessarily refer to the act of sex. Giovanni could mean he wishes to never make anything with love. The act of making some form of love in the world he lives, repulses him. It is clear both men want to be free of societal expectations and to build a solid sense of identity. Yet, while David’s prison is primarily emotional and self-built, Giovanni’s prison is built by the institutional injustices of a class system and a society that cannot support its poor, in addition to the walls self-hatred brings standing.

6 And it is self-built, because though David’s amorous desires are demonized by traditional society, his wealth and masculinity allow him to live with Giovanni in the queer pocket of Parisian society, if he so chose.
Giovanni’s resentment of his social standing is closely related to his distaste for women and occasional disgust with homosexual men. His escape is related to his desire to be free of social norms that state he must pick one of two equally unappealing options. His attachment to David could be interpreted as a means of escape both literally and figuratively. Financially David is much more stable than Giovanni, and as an American much more able than Giovanni to find gainful employment if he returned home to the United States.

Such opportunities do not await Giovanni in his home, Italy. In a literal sense, David could escape with Giovanni to a comparably better world—the United States, a country bustling with economic growth at the time of the novel’s setting. Figuratively, David is the option Giovanni himself had never considered, perhaps because he never knew it existed.

David differentiated himself from many of the queer men in the text. He is clearly attracted to men—but he takes pride in his masculinity, going to great lengths to make sure he does not appear homosexual (pg. 30). Thus, as a masculine man, he is a person Giovanni can respect as well as desire (unlike women whom he does not respect for he feels they are mentally inferior to men and flamboyant queer men whom he finds disgusting). Therefore, Giovanni can be attracted to him without feeling disgust or revulsion within himself. This leads Giovanni to a much stronger, and almost toxic, attraction to David which is partially fueled by the aforementioned social inequities. Because David is masculine and rich, Giovanni may feel that David is able to take care of him, both financially and emotionally, in ways women cannot.
In contrast, Hella—David’s other (and significantly less visible) lover in the novel—suffers from a lack of efficacy rather than hatred. She admits, “You know, I'm not really the emancipated girl I try to be at all. I guess I just want a man to come home to me every night… I want to start having babies. In a way it's all I'm really good for” (pg. 123). This quote sharply contrasts her relationship with David to Giovanni’s relationship with him.

Giovanni claims to love David, while Hella admits mid-way through the novel she considers it a “humiliating necessity” to have to “be at the mercy of some gross, unshaven stranger before you can begin to be yourself”—that is, she feels it is shameful that women need to be attached to men before they can reach self-actualization (pg. 125-126). The words, “a man” instead of the specific mention of David’s name show their relationship may be mutually one-sided.

Still, she is similar to Giovanni because her lack of self-efficacy stems, in part, from the social ills and gender inequality which also put her in the dominant and disenfranchised facet of society—similar to David. Hella has been taught that her self-worth within society is entirely dependent on who she can “get” to marry and care for her. Try as she might to rebel against this idea, eventually she collapses under societal constraints and agrees to marry David simply because she feels a marriage is what she should have stopped rebelling against long ago. Though she may, “love herself too much [for marriage]” as she claims, she fears growing into an incomplete person, attached to something rather than someone.
Analysis of Hella is difficult for she is not only a complex character but a secondary one. Baldwin’s novel is about Giovanni and David; the latter being so engrossed with hiding his personal identity that his personal relationships turn shallow. Arguably all of David’s relationships, with the exception of Giovanni, are one sided and shallow. This explains why David can so easily dismiss Hella’s feelings on women and marriage as “adorable”, later stating, “I don’t understand you at all” without attempting to further explore the woman who would have become his wife (pg.126).

A close analysis of the text reveals Hella’s lack of self-efficacy is due to her background as well as societal norms. The lines, “It’s funny, I’ve never felt anyplace was home before” and “...I don’t like the tourists, mainly American and English dipsomaniacs, paid, my dear, by their families to stay away. (I wish I had a family.)” demonstrate a broken—or even non-existent—family structure for David’s female lover.

Hella wishes she had a family even if it was one who paid her to stay away from them. The fact that Hella is growing older leads to conscious denial or subconscious confusion about her personal goals. The topic of marriage is polarizing for Hella. While she finds it “humiliating” that women must attach themselves to men in order to be “free”—she finds the humiliation necessary, for the alternatives, being a lecherous older woman with apparent alcoholism or becoming attached to a thing rather than a person frighten or threaten to kill her, respectively (pg. 126). The thought of living without a husband and a family seem synonymous to having failed as a woman, for Hella. This is only compounded by the fact that she does not have a family, or in essence someone to love. And this lack of love is something Hella both desires and loathes—not only
because I feel many humans find it embarrassing to admit they need someone to love and love them, but because as a woman Hella is expected to marry and a lack of marriage would likely be a sign to all she encounters that she was somehow unworthy of love.

To summarize, it is clear all major characters within the text suffer a bleakness—a marginalization they all long to escape. David is expected by his father, and the global society at large, to marry, have children, and pray. However, David is queer and thus completely unable to achieve self-actualization within the rigid confines of the above mentioned societal standards. Though he technically could reject said confines of society he chooses not too—either out of fear or a self-loathing so deep that he refuses to allow himself happiness. This is where the power of the text and its potential to empower all readers facing a similar situation lies.

David is a character marginalized men can relate to and empowered men can understand, if not wholly empathize with. Besides the obvious benefits a queer person would experience after reading the text and learning his feelings are valid and shared with a large portion of society—the change in attitude of the dominant ruling facet also brings measured progressions in social thought. Multiple times literary fiction has proved to shift people’s attitudes toward non-dominant often disenfranchised people (Vezzali, 2012). Giovanni’s death, and the death of so many other queer literary characters of this time could make a reader from any facet of society question why an openly or unapologetically queer character has to die in order for a story to receive a resolution. They could question whether life was so unfeasible or so unbearable for
many people within the queer community—and are the societal constraints that shape their lives justified?

Because the novel does not end with Giovanni and David enjoying a relationship, Baldwin seems to suggest homosexual happiness—or happiness in general—is not possible in any part of the world unless one breaks free of traditional values. Thus, marginalized people could use the text as a beacon or a guide for their own lives. They could use it to justify and validate their choices and actions. Empowered people could also better empathize with people who are marginalized due to their sexuality and perhaps change their personal interactions and thoughts with such people.

Both theory of mind and the parasocial contact theory support my conclusion: novels like Giovanni’s Room, which show disenfranchised people in a positive or even neutral manner, serve to empower disenfranchised people by dismantling the bigoted or prejudiced ideals they themselves or the dominant empowered class may have. Overall, this can lead to a human progression which is as strong as it is necessary.
Hip-Hop

Self actualization of those who identify as members of the LGBTQ community has clearly increased since the 1950s—this is seen not only in social attitudes but in state laws that make it illegal to discriminate against someone based on their sexual orientation (Oliver, 2015). The shift in social attitudes can be analyzed in two ways, in the way queer people represent themselves and in the heteronormative reaction of the dominant group. And this increase can be attributed to the various civil rights movements of the twentieth century, and the increased presence of the LGBTQ community in the media.

Novels like *Giovanni’s Room* helped lay the foundation for a generation of socially conscious media in the United States. Regarding the intersectionality of race and human sexuality, hip-hop (used as an umbrella term to include Rhythm and Blues, R&B, and rap) music is especially worthy of study for it is the creation of non-dominant and disenfranchised people. Additionally, though people from all facets of society can and do enjoy the aforementioned genre; it is only in the early 21st century that hip-hop and rap have been appropriated and marketed for a larger audience (Balaji, 2012).

That is, while hip-hop had been created by and for non-dominant, disenfranchised people, as it began to grow in popularity, already dominate and empowered people began to create their own work within the genre, leading to a shift in lyrical subject matter and basic music composition. Of course, with changes in lyrics, composition, and the distributors of the genre, changes also occur with who creates the music.
Notable hip-hop artists who have risen to popularity within the past five years are Ben Haggerty (known globally as Macklemore) and Frank Ocean. Both artists speak on controversial topics typically unaddressed in hip-hop due to their taboo nature in non-dominant communities. While issues such as poverty and underage pregnancy are frequently explored in hip-hop, issues such as abortion and homosexuality are not—for the people who are affected by it chose to stay silent and make themselves invisible, while those far removed from such issues are willfully blind. While both artists tackle taboo subject matter, they differ physically. Haggerty is White and heterosexual, while Ocean is African American and self-identifies as bisexual.

The work of both artists is greatly appreciated within the world of hip-hop. The genre has been criticized as being overwhelmingly male and aggressive towards women and queer people (Balaji, 2012). However, the discourse Haggerty generates is slightly problematic due to his race and other facets of identity. To be blunt, veterans of hip-hop do not appreciate a White man criticizing or “taking over” their genre, feeling White artists are “guests” in the house of hip-hop.

Lorenzo Dechalus, a founding father of the genre (known globally as Lord Jamar), is quoted as saying,

Okay, matter of fact, you are guests in the house of Hip-Hop. Just because you have a hit record doesn’t give you the right as I feel to voice your opinion. White rappers, those of y’all who really studied the culture, that truly love Hip-Hop and all that, keep it real with yourself, you know this is a black man’s thing. We started this. This is our shit. We’ve allowed you, those of you who’ve proved your skill and all that, we’ve allowed you to come in and kick your shit, make yourself known. You know what I mean? And if you have enough respect for the culture we fuck with you. But don’t push it too far (Harling, para 3, 2013).
THE EFFECT OF FICTION

He goes on to address Haggerty’s criticism of homophobia in hip-hop,

To me when people like Macklemore come out with songs like that, I know he loves Hip-Hop and all that, but he’s trying to push an agenda that him as a White man feels is acceptable (ibid, para 6).

Dechalus’ statement is only a snippet in a larger conversation about cultural appropriation, Black American issues, and how one can be a successful ally.

While it is problematic to assert only members of a certain community have a right to criticize it, it is also true that those who wish to critique a community that is not their own, must fully understand and appreciate it. Thus, it is clear to appreciators of the genre and popular culture critics that a conversation must be had about the treatment of homosexuality in the Black community.

Such a conversation began when questions arose about the origins and meanings of *Thinkin Bout You*, arguably artist Frank Ocean’s most popular song. The song, melodically complex and subtle, was instantly popular and became a genre sensation (Sargent, 2011). The last lines, “Yes of course/ I remember how could I forget? / How you feel? / And though you were my first time/ A new feel…” generated a brief discussion. Did the lines refer to Ocean’s lost virginity or something else entirely? The discussion was brief because Frank Ocean answered the question: he is bisexual and the song was written about his first summer affair with a man.

The context of the song makes its lyrical composition more vital to the discussion of homosexuality in the hip-hop community. The first four lines: “A tornado flew around my room before you came/ Excuse the mess it made, it usually doesn't rain/ In
Southern California, much like Arizona/ My eyes don’t shed tears, but boy they pour” explains Ocean’s physical and mental state before his first male lover.

The tornado mentioned is both a reference to the 2005 hurricane that destroyed Ocean’s dormitory at the University of New Orleans before he was evacuated, as well as the mental turmoil the natural disaster had on his life. Why the word tornado was used instead of the word hurricane—when a hurricane is what actually swept through New Orleans and is more often used to describe persons of extreme and forceful behavior—could be reasoned by the sound the two words make and the overall feeling of the song. Hopeless nostalgia seems to be the underlying mood in all of Frank Ocean’s songs on his mixtape Nostalgia Ultra, on which Thinkin Bout You debuted. The mood is amplified by the slow melodic nature of a guitar and Ocean’s slow pronunciation of his lyrics.

Additionally, the image of a tornado is more readily invoked in the minds of Ocean’s audience than an image of a hurricane. This is due to popular fictional media (i.e. the movies Twister, Wizard of Oz, etc.) and the fact that persons are more familiar with the damage a hurricane brings rather than the event itself. Additionally, the beginnings of the first line sets up the surreal dream-like quality of the song because an image of a tornado flying around someone’s room is extremely surreal, though it is likely to happen in certain areas.

The second and third lines of the song, “Excuse the mess it made, it usually doesn’t rain/ In Southern California, much like Arizona”, describe Ocean’s transition from New Orleans to Southern California—his transition from struggling artist to successful
entertainer. The tornado signifies the “mess” he is in—but by saying it “usually doesn’t rain” in the place he currently resides he intends to inform the listener he is in a better place. Later he mentions, “much like Arizona, my eyes don’t shed tears but boy they pour...” which implies he is not an overtly emotional person but he does “pour” tears when he thinks of a certain aspect of his past, revealed in the next lines. Also, his reference to the state of Arizona—and its comparison to Southern California—could allude to a society in which the dominant majority holds fast to its traditions. Such traditions make him shed tears for the boy he cannot have—similar to the way David mourns for Giovanni when it is too late to change his fate. Additionally, Ocean compares natural disasters and forces of nature to himself and his past lover, which gives an intense surreal feeling to the song when compiled with the composition of the music.

The arrangement of the lyrics themselves also add to the slightly confusing, dream-like quality of the song. Instead of singing,

> A tornado flew around my room before you came.
>
> Excuse the mess it made.
>
> It usually doesn’t rain in Southern California.
>
> Much like Arizona, my eyes don’t shed tears but boy they pour,

and taking a pause where the sentence would end logically, he blends his seemingly mismatched anecdotes together and sings,

> A tornado flew around my room before you came
>
> Excuse the mess it made, it usually doesn’t rain in
>
> Southern California, much like Arizona
My eyes don't shed tears, but boy they pour.

This arrangement confuses the listener as to what “it” Ocean is referring to. Additionally, the actual arrangement of the song adds to its surreal nature and makes the listener question the sobriety of the singer/story-teller. It is only through deeper analysis that the listener can gain clarity of Ocean’s meaning.

While both arrangements of the song could surely confuse listeners, it is Ocean’s version that adds a dream-like memory-esque quality by melodically rhyming the words “California” and “Arizona”, and incorporating the use of slant rhyme with the words “came” and “made”. Overall, the first four lines of the song tell the listener they are experiencing someone’s memory (the words “came” and “made” being past tense verbs), which though pleasant (“It usually doesn’t rain in Southern California”), is tinged with melancholy (“my eyes don’t shed tears but boy they pour”). This melancholy arrangement has the power to make heteronormative listeners empathize with Ocean and men like him. And if someone with prejudices against non-heterosexual people does empathize with Ocean, then the theory of mind supports that such a person would have a more difficult time holding bigoted beliefs against heterosexuals.

The next eight lines admit to the listener and Ocean’s past lover that the memory of his lover is what makes him weep. Ocean sings, “when I’m thinking 'bout you (Oh, no, no, no)/I've been thinkin' 'bout you (You know, know, know)/ I've been thinkin' 'bout you” and latter Ocean asks his lover a question, “Do you think about me still? / Do ya, do ya?” Lyrically, Ocean conveys he wishes he did not still think of his lover with the first line’s “Oh no,no,no”. The repetition implies a firm, vigorous desire to be rid of his
thoughts that make him weep and remember unpleasant times in his life. It implies the thoughts of his ex-lover are completely involuntary.

Why Ocean would wish to be rid of his lover’s memory could stem beyond the fact that it is painful to remember a lost lover. Contextually, one could assume Ocean knows many people in his (hip-hop) community would shun him if they knew of his past love—Ocean had not “come out” until after his song gained popularity. In spite of this, Ocean still ends the chorus asking, “Do you think about me still?” and his insistent, “Do ya, Do ya” adds a layer of sadness to the song, for many people have experienced unrequited love—or the wish to be loved by someone who cannot love you.

The universal heartache Ocean explores in this song further emancipates disenfranchised people by tying homosexual love to heterosexual love. Though both types of love carry the same set of emotions for those who experience them, homosexual lovers were often marginalized in the United States due to the belief that their feelings were unnatural. Ocean’s decision to showcase his pain dismantles the idea that heterosexual love—and thus heterosxuals—is inherently superior to homosexual love. For if homosexuals are able to experience pain and longing in the same manner heterosexuals do, how can one be superior over the other? Furthermore, many listeners may feel empathy when they realize homosexual lovers are marginalized and that it is these feelings and societal constraints that make it more difficult for homosexual love to occur.

Ocean continues to question his lover, “Or do you not think so far ahead? / 'Cause I been thinkin' 'bout forever (Oooh)/ Or do you not think so far ahead?” 'Cause I been
thinkin' 'bout forever (Oooh).” The elongated “oh” once again adds a surreal, melodic, dream-like quality to the song. This part may be intended to remind the listener that, once again, this is a memory. The recurring “Oh” is being used as an enthusiastic expression, either to describe something pleasant or distasteful. Conversely, “Or do you not think so far ahead? / 'Cause I been thinkin' 'bout forever” implies Ocean is speaking about his present. He desires a long time love, but perhaps he, like David, cannot imagine life with a male partner.

Though the United States no longer criminalizes those who are homosexual, non-heteronormativity was still incredibly taboo when Ocean wrote the lyrics in 2010. Adding the general distaste or discomfort of mainstream society to the outright disgust of many in the Hip-Hop/Black community, Ocean may have felt that as a Black man he could not chose another man to be his life partner. This song may not only have been Ocean’s attempt to come to terms with himself but also to apologize to a lover he could not be with—either due to societal norms or in addition to them.

Thus, in the second verse when Ocean says, “No/I don't like you/I just thought you were cool enough to kick it”, he is lying. He could be attempting to quell his romantic desires by denying his feelings to his lover and himself—a response to the embarrassment felt after admitting to a lover you have thought about them for a long time. Ocean bluntly lies in the next line when he claims, “Got a beach house I could sell you in Idaho,” as there are no beaches in Idaho. Perhaps Ocean is attempting to berate his lover by insulting his intelligence, or he wants his lover to know he is lying and return to him as he thinks about forever. The lines, “Since you think I don't love you/I
just thought you were cute/That's why I kissed you” echoes this sentiment. Ocean’s desire to uphold his dignity and his reputation as a person who “does not shed tears” may overpower his desire for his ex-lover who controls his thoughts. The lines, “Got a fighter jet I don't get to fly it though/ I'm lying down” reveal his actual thoughts. The fighter jet is a metaphor for all he can do now that he is financially stable and musically successful, but he does not fly his jet—meaning his fame is pointless without his lover.

By the end of the song Ocean stops his denial. The second verse leads into the pre-hook and the hook, and the final bridge: “Yes of course/ I remember, how could I forget?/ How you feel?/ You know, you were my first time/ A new feel/ It won't ever get old, not in my soul not in/ my spirit, keep it alive/ We'll go down this road/’Til it turns from color to black and white.” The first two lines of the bridge reveal it is the ex-lover, not Ocean, who broke off the engagement.

Ocean might have saved this detail until the end of his song to surprise his reader and add to the dream/memory-like quality of the song, as many people always think of the way relationships could have changed until they remember how they ended. While Ocean goes on to admit this love was his “first time” it will still never grow old with the years. The line with “’Til it goes from color to black and white” could be both a reference to the tornado in the *Wizard of Oz*\(^7\), and a hope that the debate on homosexuality will

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\(^7\) The land of OZ is a mythical place many of Ocean’s listeners would have been familiar. The primary character in the Wizard of Oz, Dorothy, takes a surreal trip to this place and can only return home when she has learned valuable lessons, mainly about her self-worth. In the same manner, perhaps Ocean
be less “colored” by people’s emotions and more straight forward, “black and white” talk on human rights and people’s right to love.

Like Giovanni’s Room, Frank Ocean’s Thinkin Bout You has the power humanize a marginalized facet of the United States. Frank Ocean specifically targets the hip-hop community and thus his song can make anti-homosexual members of the Black community more empathic to the plight of non-heterosexual Black men. This can occur because at its core Thinkin Bout You is a love song. It’s a story that chronicles the beginnings and the ultimate end of a relationship. Ocean’s melancholic remembrance of his summer romance is universal because love and regret are emotions almost all human beings experience. Thinkin Bout You is a way to tell an anti-homosexual audience that queer people feel these emotions as well, making them no different than their straight counterparts.

It is important that a discourse on homosexuality in hip-hop takes place. Because almost five percent of the U.S Black population identifies as homo- or bi-sexual, it is statistically infeasible for homosexual desires to not take place within the hip-hop community (Gates, 2012). Lorenzo Dechalus is wrong to assert there is no need for a discussion of this issue when suicide is still a leading cause of death among LGBTQ teenagers. And hip-hop, though it has grown in popularity, has not overtly grown in tolerance and acceptance (Finley, 2007, Balaji, 2012). If “we take it as a given that hip-
hop music is the music of the revolution” then it should be especially vocal on one of the final semi-acceptable forms of hatred in the United States (Miranda, 1:50, 2015).

Unfortunately, it seems once people have been marginalized they choose to discriminate against others instead of questioning the institutions that keep inequality in place. Hip-hop, as a form of fiction, has the power to dismantle this oppressive cycle because it gives people who are accustomed to being ignored a voice.

Traditionally hip-hop was used to help angry Black people vent their frustrations against White America and the inequities that seemed to stem solely from their racial history. Today hip-hop stays true to its roots, by allowing disenfranchised people, both inside and outside of its community, to tell their stories. Because of this, homosexuality has a place in hip-hop. It has the power and the potential to make the non-dominant and disenfranchised examine their own bigoted beliefs and eventually make the dominant world acknowledge the pain they are causing non-dominant people.
Americanah

*Americanah* is another text that expertly delves into the intersection of race, class, gender, and ethnicity. Its plot is worthy of discussion for it follows a lower income Nigerian woman (Ifemelu) from her life in pre-military junta Nigeria to her life in the contemporary United States, and ultimately her return to Nigeria. This means it follows her as she experiences a change in her social status—that is, her change from dominate and relatively empowered to non-dominant and disenfranchised. As the text primarily takes place in Nigeria, England, and the United States, the reader experiences a multinational representation of both empowered and disenfranchised groups within societies and how the aforementioned facets of identity intersect outside of a United States context.

In regards to the character’s identity, it is important to note the distinctions between race, ethnicity, and nationality. The separation between being Black and being African American is especially important due to the tension and misunderstandings between the two communities. Of course, not every Black person in the United States is African American and not every Black American is African American. The African diaspora is vast and comparable in number to the Jewish diaspora—such facts must be remembered when one encounters issues within the African American community. African American issues could differ from issues the Black Latino or Black African communities face. *Americanah* is a significant text because it acknowledges the

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8 For the purposes of this argument Blackness is defined as the ability to trace one’s genetic heritage to the African diaspora.
variations and similarities personal identity has on the Black experience, both on a multinational global and national inter-community scale.

This is especially important because Americanah’s author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, felt particularly misunderstood during her time in the United States (Adichie, 2009). Her interview with NPR notes, “As a black African in America, Adichie was suddenly confronted with what it meant to be a person of color in the United States. Race as an idea became something that she had to navigate and learn” (Adichie, 2013). The societal implications of this abstraction prove the boundaries within a society are not concrete. Globally, to be dominant in one society may mean being non-dominant, and even disenfranchised, in another. For Adichie, the concept of race became the cultural construct she, as a Black woman, could not escape.

As a Nigerian immigrant, she felt the disconnect and lack of communication between African-Americans and Africans who emigrate to the United States immense. Additionally, she found it strange that a larger discussion between the two communities was not occurring (Adichie, 2013). She is described by her interviewer as feeling, “...that her African-American classmate was annoyed with her because Adichie didn't share her anger — but she didn't have the context to understand why. The history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade was not taught to students in Nigeria” (ibid). Thus, the need for a multi-layered text is explained.

Americanah begins a discussion between two groups, African Americans and Africans, an unfortunately large amount of which have had surprisingly little contact and knowledge of each other outside of harmful stereotypes exacerbated by the
empowered, dominant majority. Filmmaker, Peres Owino has said the inspiration behind her film *Africans vs. African-Americans* was the prevalence of such negative stereotypes and miscommunications. Her experience echo’s Adichie’s when she describes her first encounter with African-Americans after she immigrated from her native Kenya.

> “When I was in Kenya, all I wanted to do was to connect with African-Americans,” she says. “I thought, ‘Every African-American I meet, I want to give a piece of Africa!’ But the first African I met told me, ‘I am not from Africa. I’m from North Carolina, and you people sold us!’”

> “That did it for me,” Owino continues. “I was shocked, hurt and disappointed. I felt they had bought into the stereotypes of the West. So I figured, if you aren’t interested enough to pick up a book, why should I try? When I moved to Inglewood, I didn’t want to interact with them. I didn’t want to meet anyone. (Suede, para 3, 2015)

When we have the above extract in mind, we can see how *Americanah* has a potential similar to hip-hop to dismantle the cycle of oppressions that cause non-dominant people to marginalize those within or very close to their community. The text allows both African and African American readers to observe and understand what it is like to be Black in America. Because *Americanah* showcases a facet of society traditionally ignored by mainstream media—Black women—the text has a remarkable amount of impact on both the empowered and disenfranchised sections of society, albeit for different reasons. The non-dominant and disenfranchised see the text as empowering, for they are reflected positively in a fictional work.

Likewise, the dominant and empowered are able to understand, and potentially empathize, with a character like Ifemelu—and the parasocial contact they are given with the character could enhance their theory of mind when they encounter non-dominant
and disenfranchised people in their lives, similar to what could occur with readers of *Giovanni’s Room* or listeners of hip-hop. Once again, theory of mind and parasocial contact are especially important when one considers most dominant and empowered people have little to no interpersonal relations with those outside their dominant and empowered circle (Ingraham, 2014). Regardless of which reason prompted readers to find the text impactful, its impact is indisputable because its commercial and critical reception has been overwhelmingly positive, asserting that there is an audience for this type of media in mainstream fiction.

The commercial success of the novel is a powerful tool in dismantling the idea that people of color do not buy print media. Such an idea perpetuates misleading representations of fictional characters on the covers of print media (i.e. novels, comic books, graphic novels, etc.). That is, White models disproportionately represent characters in print media, even when those characters are non-White (Schutte, 2012).

Since the representation of characters on print media reflects the ideas of the mostly dominant and empowered, White and male, facet of society, the representation also shapes a novel’s commercial outcome (Milliot, 2015). Thus, the idea that people of color do not buy print media is more of a self-fulfilling prophecy than a scientifically proven cultural aspect of people of color. Therefore, the novel’s external sales—at tenth place for ten weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list—and discourse outside of the fictional plot line are also extremely vital in dismantling prejudiced and preconceived notions held by the dominant and empowered majority (Best Sellers—New York Times, 2014).
Within the text, the setting of the novel and Ifemelu’s use of the internet are particularly helpful in examining prejudices and pre-conceived notions. Since Ifemelu writes a blog about her experiences as a non-American African, the reader is able to go through the process of learning to be Black in America. Taking theory of mind into account, the reader feels that Ifemelu’s experiences are his/her own. This may create a mental state which allows the reader to accept Adichie’s views more readily.

By displaying Ifemelu’s blog post within the text, Adichie almost blatantly states her (Adichie’s) views on sexism and racism in the United States. While this may be a reaffirmation and validation for her non-dominant and disenfranchised readers, which should not be discredited, the work receives a large portion of potential emancipating power when it uses this device on the dominant and empowered readers who consume the work. For if dominant and empowered readers understand, empathize, and even agree with Adichie’s views on sexism and racism, those readers are able to use their position—as empowered and dominant within United States society, for powerful social change.

The novel begins in Princeton with Ifemelu enjoying Princeton’s “affluent ease” while lamenting her need to travel to Trenton for a hair appointment (pg.1). However, Ifemelu realizes it would be unreasonable to expect a hair salon in affluent Princeton would be able to style her hair—the abundance of money and lack of diversity make such a desire futile. The opening starts with a description about Princeton lacking a smell.

The other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklynn of sun warmed garbage... she liked watching the locals who drove
with pointed courtesy and park their latest model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassu Street or outside the sushi restaurant or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavors including red pepper or outside the post office where elusive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. (Americanah, 1)

Conversely, the African hair braiding salons in Trenton are described collectively,

they were in the part of the city that has graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African hair braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer... Often, there was a baby tied to someone's back with a piece of cloth. Or toddler asleep on a wrapper spread over a battered sofa. (pg. 9)

The description of the hair braiding salon she actually visits is brief,

... a small TV mounted on the corner of the wall, the volume a little too loud, was showing a Nigerian film: a man beating his wife, the wife cowering and shouting, the poor audio quality jarring. (pg. 10)

The contrast between two cities in the same state is shocking when one considers the primary reason for their differences is the racial and ethnic makeup of the people who inhabit them.

The income of Princeton’s citizens is overtly juxtaposed with the African female population of Trenton’s citizens. The very fact that Princeton seems to lack a “smell” could be a metaphor for the citizen’s money washing the city clean. It should be noted, the cities Ifemelu compares with Princeton all have significant disenfranchised, low-income populations. Both New Haven and Princeton are college towns that host Ivy-League universities and it could be implied the author feels New Haven has willfully neglected the low income population it has, while Princeton has nothing to neglect. But
it is precisely this lack of struggle, or wealth of culture the disenfranchised bring to an
area, that leaves Princeton without a smell.

Adichie’s decision to compare the physicality of Princeton with that of a typical
African hair braiding salon, allows the author to make an assertion about places such as
Princeton, Trenton, and other large northeastern American cities. However, her
assertion is buried in her text and is open to the views and experiences of her reader.
One could infer that the words “jarring”, “poor quality”, and “dank” contrast sharply with
the phrases “pointed courtesy”, “ice cream shop”, and “elusive staff bounded out to
greet them at the entrance” and this contrast displays the author’s distaste for inequity
simply because her character, Ifemelu, must go to these “jarring” and “dank” hair
salons because even in a place as “courteous” or ideal as Princeton—it is still not a
place the character belongs.

While Princeton may be ideal in some ways, it “smells of nothing” and the
protagonist needs to travel to Trenton for a hair appointment. She calls the Black
Princeton locals “light-skinned and lank-haired” and laments why she is unable to find
even one place in the moderately sized area that could braid her hair (pg. 1). And while
the African hair braiding salon is usually uncomfortable in temperature and displays
violence both structural (the “battered” mattress on the floor and the “dankness” of the
buildings) and visual (the Nigerian movie playing could be a metaphor for the larger
West African issue of rampant domestic abuse, the characters on the film merely
mirroring what could be seen in the salon or on the face of her hairdresser), it is where
she feels comfortable. It is noteworthy that Ifemelu, and people like her, are more
comfortable with the uncomfortable low-income, African hair salons than within the ideal, wealthy neighborhoods of Princeton.

The characters in one setting do not seem to be any more or less worthy of opportunity than the characters in another, so the juxtaposition of their settings calls for the reader to examine why such common inequalities are tolerated. An answer to such a question could potentially emancipate many disenfranchised readers which again displays the power of fictional devices. If one is to answer why one set of people is allowed a greater set of privileges, based not on merit or work ethic but perceived birth-right, the result would undoubtedly lead to attempts to radically reorganize unequal infrastructures.

Throughout the text Adichie uses juxtaposition to make an abundance of points. By comparing events and subsequent blog post titles—“Not All Dreadlocked White American Guys Are Down” versus “Badly-Dressed White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You Think”—Adichie’s style of contrasting external events with internal experience provides a subtle overarching theme of the plot that the author’s experiences have shaped.

This is seen when the author displays how her characters react to the 2008 United States presidential election, noteworthy for it is the first election to name a Black man as president of the United States.

Adichie describes a dinner party as full of “fervent” Obama supporters, who were dewy-eyed with wine and victory, a balding white man said, “Obama will end racism in this country”, and a large-hipped, stylish poet from Haiti agreed, nodding, her afro bigger than Ifemelu’s, and said she had dated a white man for three years in California and race was never an issue for them.
“That’s a lie,” Ifemelu said to her.  
“What,” the woman said as though she could not have heard her properly.  
“It’s a lie,” Ifemelu repeated.  
The woman’s eyes bulged, “You’re telling me what my own experience was?” (pg. 282.)

Ifemelu goes on to say,

The only reason you say that race was not an issue is because you wish it was not. We all wish it was not. But it’s a lie. I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as black and I only became black when I came to America. When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn’t matter when you’re alone together because it’s just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don’t talk about it. We don’t even tell our white partners the small things that piss us off and the things we wish they understood better, because we’re worried they will say we’re overreacting, or we’re being too sensitive. And we don’t want them to say, Look how far we’ve come, just forty years ago it would have been illegal for us to even be a couple blah blah blah, because you know what we’re thinking when they say that? We’re thinking why the fuck should it have been illegal anyway? But we don’t say any of this stuff. We let it pile up inside our heads and we go to nice liberal dinners like this and say race doesn’t matter because that’s what we’re supposed to say, to keep our liberal friends comfortable (pg. 293).

The juxtaposition here is between the setting of the dinner party and the inner conflict of the Black guest. If one is to take Ifemelu’s words as truth, then all of the Black guests at the dinner party are wearing a mask—acting and behaving in a manner the dominant majority finds suitable, similar to the way homosexuals feel they must act around heterosexuals as observed in Giovanni’s Room. And the fact that this mask must be worn even in the presence of “liberal” allies, would mean Black people, and disenfranchised people in general, are only truly comfortable when they can be around one another or are in the exclusion of their own homes.
This implies social equity can never truly be achieved because even those who are in power who claim to want total social equity do not have the tenacity for it. The passage implies social equity and racial relations can only be mended on the surface because the actual hard and uncomfortable work of true social change cannot be achieved if people, especially dominant people, are unwilling to feel uncomfortable. Such an implication further validates the need for fictional works which explore the uncomfortable topics of racial relations and other taboo subjects. According to theory, fictional texts allow people to slowly build empathy for those affected by inequity and an empathic increase could cause a dominant person to build the tenacity and grit necessary to have uncomfortable conversations about racial relations in their interpersonal lives. Said conversations have the potential to dismantle systems of oppression invisible to the dominant majority because they could no longer ignore them.

The reaction of the textual characters to Ifemelu’s words would support the sociological idea, referenced in *Beauty Queens*, other fictional works, and personal anecdotal experience that women, and disenfranchised people in general, must phrase their discontent in a much milder, or “nicer” way than their dominant and empowered (male) counterparts (Bray, 2012). To put it mildly, women must be politely angry if they hope to have their voices heard. However, Ifemelu was not polite in her anger and thus made the other guests at the dinner party uncomfortable. Such in-person discomfort is proven to make people from all facets of society withdraw, for people are too busy internally defending themselves rather than listening to the points being made (Pettigrew, 1998). The result of her outburst was not applause or an in-depth discussion
about race in America, it was an almost total silence—followed by an apology email Ifemelu made to the host of the party two weeks later.

The reader has the privilege of being outside of Ifemelu’s world; her words can be read in the privacy of one’s own home. For the non-dominant and disenfranchised this means validation because her internal thoughts and feelings are verbalized and presented externally. The character serves to reify the thoughts and feelings many non-dominant and disenfranchised women may have had. Parasocial contact supports the idea that Ifemelu would act as a friend to the non-dominant and disenfranchised reader—someone who not only gives advice, through her own experiences, on how to deal with injustice, but also appeases the reader with her validation.

Though Ifemelu is fictional, parasocial contact theory allows the reader to feel connected to her, her experiences echo the reader’s own and the power of validation and affirmation is noted for increasing self-efficacy (Vohs, 2009). Simply put, if a reader identifies with Ifemelu and is astounded by the character’s accomplishments, said reader will believe it is possible to achieve great things herself. Again, because the character is thought of as “real” and is relatable to many non-dominant, disenfranchised women, she serves to inspire them and acts as a catalyst for them to achieve their goals.

A dominant and empowered reader is also able to read the text in her own home. Thus, under the realm of parasocial contact theory and theory of mind—the empowered reader reaps the benefits of having a non-dominant and disenfranchised friend. This means the empowered reader has the ability to acknowledge there is an issue with race
in America and even empathize with those who suffer from this issue. Such an acknowledgment is undoubtedly useful in the movement to empower the disenfranchised.

Overall, *Americanah* is an impactful text for all facets of society. Works such as these are a clear answer to the question of why all voices should be included in fictional discourse. The voices of the disenfranchised must be heard and understood before they can be met with empathy and eventual social change.
Dreaming in Cuban

Cristina García wrote *Dreaming in Cuban* in 1992, which is noteworthy because the early to late 1990s were a time of political and economic instability in the country of Cuba. Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and economic sanctions from the United States, the communist regime had difficulty feeding its people—this meant many Cuban citizens survived on the barest of necessities (Henken, 2008). While no citizen suffered from poverty at this time, the lack of novelty and the absence of luxury items, combined with the fact that citizens had to spend hours waiting in line to receive the commodities the government did have, means overall Cuban morale began to decline.

At the height of the economic instability, with the majority of Cubans barely a step away from poverty, many chose to flee to the United States in makeshift boats and rafts (Pérez, 2010). There, they hoped to join the rich Cubans who had long since fled the country after the Batista regime fell and Fidel Castro took power.

Regardless of their economic status when they left Cuba, Cubans in the United States enjoyed a relative degree of empowerment. This empowerment is primarily political and economic. Rich Cubans who fled their country after Castro took power rallied against him in the United States and as the United States and Cuba were political enemies until very recently, these Cubans were able to shape U.S policy toward Cuba (Rusin 2015). In short, Cubans were the *perfect immigrant*, the *model minorities* of the Latino community (Hing, 2011). As "model minorities" they supposedly enjoyed lower rates of crime within their communities, higher household income than other Latino groups, and were generally assumed to have assimilated easily into American society.
Andrea Herrera writes, “As early as the 1960s, the national news media, specifically magazines such as *Life* and *Fortune*, circulated the myth of the ‘Cuban success story’ and cemented the model minority myth.” Thus Cuban migrants benefited from the empowerment the dominant society gave because they said everything the dominant portion of society wanted them to say about the Castro regime and the state of Cuba.

This form of empowerment is problematic, problematic because this type of Cuban empowerment is only derived from agreement with the dominant majority and a willingness to conform to the majority’s standards. This sort of empowerment only empowers the dominant facet of society more because they are given the ability to decree who is a “good” or “bad” type of non-dominant person. Additionally, only a small facet of Cuban society—those who left when Castro took power and those who escaped at the height of Cuban economic scarcity—was providing input to the United States government and U.S society at large, meaning the laws were skewed toward right-wing Cuban ideals. Furthermore, United States citizens who had no means of traveling to Cuba nor interpersonal contact with more representative Cuban citizens, had either a neutral or overwhelmingly negative view of the country.

It seems a way to combat this problematic and possibly temporary form of empowerment is to give a voice to the millions of Cubans, within and outside of Cuba, who have a variety of complex opinions about the Castro regime. This is why *Dreaming in Cuban* is such an impactful text, for it attempts to answer Garcia’s and a large percent of the Cuban diaspora’s question: what does it mean to be Cuban and where do Cubans belong?
Dreaming in Cuban (DIC) follows four women, all from the del Pino family. There is Celia, the matriarch, her daughters Lourdes and Felicia, and Lourdes’ daughter Pilar. Each woman represents a different section of Cuban society and the various political and apolitical viewpoints present in and outside of the country.

Celia is a staunch supporter of El Líder (Fidel Castro). As her admiration for Castro only grows, her husband, Jorge del Pino, becomes inconsolable and leaves the country under the guise of needing advanced treatments for his cancer. “I couldn’t bare to watch her” he later says, “She had fallen in love again. She thought only of the revolution” (pg. 194). While Jorge is only a supporting character, it is his fervent disapproval of Castro that fuels his daughter Lourdes’ hatred of communism and embrace of American capitalism. Similarly, Celia’s love for Castro—and thus the system of communism—leads her son Javier to embrace communism and eventually move to Russia. In this way mirroring and chiasmus is created and explored throughout the text. Celia, a principal character and woman, is highly in favor of communism and convinces her son, a secondary character, of its virtues as well. Conversely, Lourdes is a woman and principle character who is influenced by her father, a secondary character, against communism. While this clearly serves the author’s purpose of creating a multi-layered text with a variety of viewpoints and social commentary, it also serves a literary purpose. The relationships between the characters seem more a predictor of their political affiliations rather than the political decisions of their country’s government. Furthermore, the characters’ interpersonal relationships and adds depth to their ideals reifies their experiences.
Classification of relationships also becomes difficult when the reader encounters Felicia, Celia’s second daughter. Felicia is named after a woman Celia met in an insane asylum while recovering from a mental illness. The woman was placed in the asylum because she murdered her husband. And just like her namesake, the only extreme acts Felicia del Pino commits are in the name of love—she is firmly politically indifferent. However, her firm indifference varies greatly from Pilar’s confused conclusions about the country of Cuba and the general system of communism.

Pilar is the daughter of Lourdes and granddaughter of Celia. Her relationship with her mother is complex and strained. She loves her mother in a practical and detached way, the way a lion cub loves a lioness. That is, Pilar can relay on her mother for protection but should not expect empathy or warmth. Conversely, Pilar has an extremely strong relationship with her grandmother. The two are able to telepathically communicate with each other for many years after Lourdes takes Pilar and emigrates to the United States. Still, Pilar cannot depend on her grandmother for practical support. Early in her adolescence, Pilar attempts to escape to Cuba and find her grandmother—only to be thwarted by relatives when she arrives in Florida.

The story of Pilar can be read metaphorically as well as literally. Pilar maintains an emotional connection to her grandmother throughout her life, while her relationship to her own mother is heavily strained. In this manner, Pilar is able to maintain idealized notions about Cuba—notions she could not explore due to her age and status in the United States. The decision her relatives made, to send her back to her mother in New York rather than assist in her trip to Cuba, could be read as a metaphor for the United
States’ immigration policy with Americans of Cuban descent. Only American-Cubans with explicit permission from the United States government can travel to Cuba, for there is a fear among United States officials that the rights granted to American-Cubans (such as freedom of speech) will not be respected in Cuba. The irony here is that Pilar longs to venture to her grandmother in Cuba as her mother withholds all of the freedoms (of expression, speech, etc.) and privileges immigrants venture to the United States to obtain.

The relationship Pilar has with her mother allows her to internally question Cuba’s more problematic policies. Pilar is an artist, which means if she lived in Cuba she would not be allowed to criticize the regime as she criticizes the United States. She realizes the works of art which are controversial in the United States, protected not only by her mother but by the rights granted to her by the United States Constitution, would be illegal in Cuba. She, along with other Cubans, wonders how it is possible that the revolutionary leaders in Cuba ban all forms of revolutionary criticism, when it is revolutionary criticism that brought an end to the Batista regime and welcomed Castro as Cuba’s communist leader. “Art” she wishes to tell Castro, “is the ultimate revolution” (pg. 235).

Because Pilar is conflicted in her feelings about Fidel Castro’s Cuba, she serves to reify and validate the sentiments of many Cubans. Pilar, as a character, allows younger Cubans—who may not have had the chance to form their own opinions of the Castro regime and may feel stifled by the views of their parents—that it is all right to be confused and that you can only come to a concrete decision about something or
someplace after you’ve experienced it for yourself. This is sentiment is stated during a conversation with Lourdes and her deceased father. When Lourdes says she cannot go back to Cuba, her father counters with, “There are things you must do, things you will only know when you get there” (pg. 196). And it is only after Pilar has had a chance to experience Cuba herself that she realizes she belongs in New York “more” than she belongs in Cuba (pg. 236). Furthermore, Pilar’s tells the non-dominant readers that figuring out who you are and where you belong should not have to be a decision of whether to conform to the dominant majority or resist the majority’s ways and lose a part of yourself in the process—though it often is.

It is through these four women that the plot unfolds. Through various changes in lovers, careers, and locations two things remain constant: the political leadership of Cuba and the characters’ feelings toward it. And it is through such a text that the problematic nature of the “model minority” trope can be explored and eventually weakened. The text also provides a multitude of perspectives on a highly controversial regime. This will combat any notion that all people from a non-dominant group have the same perspective, take away the temporary power a non-dominant group can obtain from being a “model minority”, and replace said power with a more permeant one which stems from self-identity and community strength.

Though the characters in *Dreaming in Cuban* build their identities differently, one parallel remains constant across characters —indifference, not hate, is the opposite of love and it is against indifference, not hate that the two mothers of the text battle. Both Celia and Lourdes have daughters that indifferently oppose their mother’s political
views. Felicia is ambivalent towards Fidel Castro and though Pilar vaguely supports Castro and is critical of the capitalistic culture of the United States, she is also unaffected by her mother’s threats and punishments due to the wall of indifference she has built between herself and her mother, Lourdes.

The character Lourdes is a model minority, non-dominant because of her status as an immigrant but empowered because she rebukes her home country in favor of her new residence in the United States. She is also empowered because she is critical of other immigrants in the United States. The only workers she hires for her bakery are foreign immigrants and she pays them a criminally low wage for she believes immigrants deserve the opportunity to make a life for themselves (by having a job), but should not receive handouts. She is also extremely critical of her employees, watching them until they inevitably make a mistake or firing them for stealing fifty cents from her register. Like her father, Lourdes is extremely pro-America and when he tells her to brand her bakery so that, “[Americans] know what Cubans are up to, that we’re not all Puerto Ricans” she does as she is told (pg. 170). Her vehemently pro-American and anti-Cuban attitude alienates her from her daughter and certain members of the immigrant community in her home of Brooklyn, New York.

As mentioned, Lourdes had a habit of quickly hiring and firing the various immigrants who lived in her section of Brooklyn. Arguably, her choice of employees solidified her status as both a decent American and a “model-minority”. One such employee was Maribel Navarro, a Puerto Rican immigrant. Three years after Maribel Navarro was fired for stealing fifty cents from Lourdes’ bakery, Lourdes catches her son
selling marijuana three years later and often breaks up fights between him and a gang of Italian boys. The fact that Lourdes is not more forgiving of her Puerto Rican employee (a woman with whom she shares an ethnicity, language, and the common geography/culture of the Caribbean) and not offer her support when she sees the struggles she and her son endure, further emphasizes her need to be seen as an American and distance herself from other immigrants, particularly other Latinos, who live in her community.

Lourdes, who has become the first auxiliary policewoman in her precinct by “scoring one hundred percent on her written test by answering C to the multiple choice questions she wasn’t sure of or didn’t understand” and proving she was tough on crime by saying “she believed drug dealers should die in the electric chair” was patrolling her neighborhood when she sees a dark figure by a river (pg. 127). Lourdes is unaware of who this figure is, but when she sees it jump into the river she dives in after it. However she finds it difficult to swim in the thick soled patrol shoes she felt equalized her as a woman. The chapter ends with the following line: “Only one fact is important. Lourdes lived and the Navarro boy died” (pg. 133).

This passage could signify the tragedy of the perceived necessity of immigrants needing to assimilate and become “models” of American life for Lourdes was unable to save the Navarro boy both literally and figuratively. As a policewoman, her duty is to protect and serve members of her community. Literally, if it had not been for her heavy police shoes and physical obesity, the Navarro boy would have survived. Figuratively, her shoes could signify the weight and impracticality of norms the United States places
on its immigrant population. And it is because of these norms that she did not reach out to the Navarro family as a businesswoman and friend—a fact that also arguably lead to the boy’s death.

Yet, Lourdes is not a static character or even a wholly antagonistic one. Much like the characters in the television series *Mad Men* (or other works with an ensemble cast of characters)—no one character is demonized; rather, a system or a set of ideals is put on trial. Lourdes simply stands for the Cubans who dislike Castro’s regime and/or the people who chose let their personal pain manifest in their lifestyles. When Lourdes says it is “impossible” for her to return to Cuba she is not thinking about Fidel Castro or her troubled relationship with her mother. Lourdes, “…smells the brilliantined hair, feels the scraping blade, the web of scars it left on her stomach” (pg. 196). Lourdes is not thinking of Cuba—she is thinking of the sexual violence she endured there years earlier. Further examination of the sentence could suggest she also mourns for the life she had in Cuba and the troubled relationships with family members she left behind. Thus, in the same manner Lourdes is unlikeable in her ferocious disapproval of Castro’s Cuba, she is also sympathetic, for the reader knows the root of the disapproval she refuses to acknowledge.

An analysis of Lourdes leads the reader to understand how the model minority trope is ultimately damaging for those who ascribe to it and those who inflict the title upon non-dominant people. Lourdes saw herself as better than the typical immigrant, believing her character surpassed any limitations her race, gender, and nationality may have put in place. She often cites willpower as the source of her success and the lack
thereof as what causes others to fail where she has succeeded (pg.172). Her viewpoints leave no room for structural violence or discussions of inequity. Due to her preference to see the world in “black and white”, she disregards the emotional roots of her repulsion with Cuba, which is to say she disregards how her relationships with her parents and siblings have shaped her political views. Additionally, the ferocity of her views make it easy for both her daughter and the reader to dismiss the ideology she espouses as bigoted and dismissive of disenfranchised people.

Still, this is not to suggest that Lourdes’s points are invalid. When she criticizes Cuba’s government for catering to its elite she is not wrong. And while many Cuban citizens, like her mother, may truly support Castro’s government it is also true they are not allowed to disagree or criticize it publicly. Additionally, it can be argued that Castro’s overseas supporters are “armchair socialists” who have never needed coupons or to wait three hours to get “a pitiful can of crabmeat” (pg. 223). What is problematic is that the views of Lourdes and people like her are what is privileged in the United States and these views are presented as straightforward and representative of the entire Cuban population. There is little input from people like her mother, who chose to stay in Cuba, and prefers the stability of security over the “luxury of uncertainty” (pg. 117). Privileged views are problematic because they reduce an entire people to something the dominant majority can understand. While some Cubans may feel the potential benefits of capitalism are worth the risk of poverty and inequity—many find such uncertainty a luxury and would prefer to sacrifice the comforts of convenience in order to ensure their family has basic necessities. To assume all people think like the portion of United States
citizens who prefer capitalism either victimizes all Cubans who chose to live in Cuba or infantilizes them as incapable of making their own decisions about what sort of government they would like for their country.

Pilar, as a character, could easily serve as a symbol for Cubans living in the United States or the relationship Americans have with Cuba, a country withheld from them by powers they cannot control or influence. Pilar has no access to her indifferent aunt, nor any tangible access to her Castro supportive grandmother and uncle, and thus she is forced to develop an abstract relationship with the country of Cuba. Because she sees her mother as an unstable oppressor and her grandmother as a paradise just outside of her reach, a rebellion against her mother and idealization of Cuba (uninformed by practical experience since such experience is withheld from her) occurs. It is only when she is able to visit the country and see her grandmother, that she is able to make a truly informed decision about the country of Cuba and what it means to be Cuban. Again, such a decision is only possible when one has personally experienced and critically reflected on the complex nuances that make up the Cuban experience.

Universally, one cannot claim to have an informed stance on any issue unless on has critically reflected (at least) and has had the chance to experience the issue, cause, or ideal in some way. When activists and leaders who are concerned with positive social change attempt to make decisions based on stances with little critical reflection and even less experience they risk undermining their cause. Contemporary examples include dominant people who make decisions for non-dominant people and thus deny them a voice or avenue to advocate for themselves.
Because the text is complex, Pilar can agree with her grandmother that freedom is “a right to a decent life” while also coming to the conclusion that “Art is the ultimate revolution”, and as an Artist she may clash with current Cuban leadership (pg. 233, 235). Still, because she was able to experience Cuba herself and align her ideals with the country’s realities, she is able to realize she does belong in both places, Cuba and the United States, but she belongs in the United States more.

Pilar’s conclusion is one she was only able to make after she was exposed to the country of Cuba. Both the country and the voices within it were able to present the full story of her home—and it is only with this full, complete story that she, or anyone, could come to a definitive conclusion about a place like Cuba; a place one has never been but has read about and longed for. And like Pilar’s trip, Dreaming in Cuban presents a full story to its readers about the complex country of Cuba. By presenting her readers with such a story, Cristina García weakens the power of the ideal “model minority” by allowing all readers to understand that the opinions of one do not define the opinions of many. Ultimately, this weakens the overall idea that the views of some non-dominant people represent the views for all non-dominant people—leading people from all facets of society, both dominant and not, to consider each other as individuals and not as part of a distinct collective.

In this manner, Garcia’s text is not only vital for non-dominant readers, but for the dominant majority as well. The lives, decisions, and choices the characters all vary drastically and they vary in spite of their shared gender and nationality. This text proves
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to dominant and empowered readers that it is problematic to assert one person can speak for an entire group.

Using Theory of Mind as a framework, one can begin to understand the complexity and diversity within the Cuban community, both in the United States and abroad. The wide range of characters and overall complexity of the novel allows *Dreaming in Cuban* readers a glimpse into the various Cuban reactions of the Castro regime.
Conclusion

With these literary works and theories, one can start the work of dismantling systems of oppression which are not always intentional but will never cease to cause harm to the already marginalized people they affect.

Throughout this thesis I have strived to show the potential emancipating power fiction has. Historically, this power has been used, sometimes unintentionally, both positively and negatively which is why people who are passionate about rectifying issues of social inequity must understand the amount of power fiction has. Novels like *Giovanni’s Room* gave members of the queer community a foundation to say that their feelings are valid. By showcasing a complexity of experience as well as an in-depth humanizing of people who fall outside of a heteronormative context, *Giovanni’s Room* both validates the queer community and provides an avenue for the dominant and empowered portion of society to empathize with them.

*Hip-Hop* has and continues to be a voice against social inequity and a place where the disenfranchised can prosper. Though it can be an avenue to promote negative stereotypes and further disenfranchise marginalized people by reinforcing materialistic measures of success, it is ultimately a space where marginalized people can boldly state their frustrations, engage the dominant and empowered in a non-threatening manner, and celebrate their successes. While hip-hop may celebrate itself and converse with society in a manner the dominant and empowered find problematic (due to cultural differences) at its core, hip-hop is a musical genre no one is able to ignore due to its
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commercial popularity. It is for these reasons hip-hop can and should be used to emancipate non-dominant and disenfranchised people.

*Americanah* tells the story of a dominant and empowered woman who becomes a non-dominant and disenfranchised woman and makes the dominant majority acknowledge their unearned privilege and empowerment. The text serves to reify the often invisible forms of racial privilege in the United States and unify disenfranchised groups that suffered from negative perceptions of one another. The depth and complexity of Adichie’s novel allows dominant and empowered people to observe a woman’s racial disadvantage and examine their own racial privilege in a way that will not make them self-justify their actions that reinforced the racial hierarchy, perhaps unbeknownst to them.

Cristina García uses *Dreaming in Cuban* to fight the model minority trope and tell her readers, especially the non-dominant ones, it is all right to question where you come from and who you are. By adding breadth and depth to the conversation of Cuban-United States relations, the text challenges the idea that one portion of a non-dominant group can speak for all within that group. In this manner the text has the power to emancipate non-dominant groups of people who are given power only because they conform to the dominant majority’s standards and to emancipate other non-dominant groups that aren't given power because they don't conform. Such emancipation could allow said non-dominant people to find their own sources of power by looking inward at their own personal experiences and ideals.
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Thus, it is works of fiction which have the most power to emancipate non-dominant people. Because anyone can create a work of fiction it is free from the necessity of scientific validation, which is important because the academy has historically banned anyone who is not dominant and empowered within a United States context. Additionally, the lack of barriers within the fictional realm allows for a greater and deeper pool of experience to inform it, giving fictional works the potential to be both complex and well-rounded. The accessibility of fiction only gives it more potential power for it is a source people from all facets of society have access to.

To conclude, fiction is a powerful tool to combat injustice and it should have a place at the table of discussion about dismantling social inequity.
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