

Final Portfolio

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Process Letter

When I came into the UM Creative Writing MFA program I thought I knew what good writing was. I had read the work of great writers and could recognize it in their work, they made it look effortless, but somehow when I put my fingers to the keyboard all I could do was write a bunch of plot and explanation. I knew this, too. My journey would be—and continues to be—to move from the theory of “just write,” to training myself to revise and get rid of worlds I feel I have to explain, toward focusing on the moment that the character is in, to stay in that moment longer or long enough for them to develop their own story on the page.

Workshop was a critical part of closely looking at my peers’ work, seeing what they did well and what I thought wasn’t working. To really take this part of the process seriously and conscientiously is to do yourself a favor, not just to help out the other MFA students, because it helps in realizing the faults in your own work—the process of reflecting through the lens of another’s mistakes and successes. But this doesn’t always make it clearer what your mistakes are while you are writing. So, when my classmates critiqued my work, it was also the opportunity to consider their thoughts through fresh eyes.

Another part of my MFA coursework was to consider different shapes that a book can take, where we read several novels and short story collections from prominent authors. One exercise was to imagine my own work and what that shape might take as a final product, even writing the jacket description! Looking back I see how we were led to

envision our own future thesis without feeling the threat of commitment (sorry for the spoiler if you are a new MFA candidate). But, be forewarned, this may not be the ultimate form of your final work.

Although I had every intention to write a novel—I even wrote a novel, 200 pages worth—under the advice of my advisor, Professor Evelina Galang, I set my novel aside and started again from scratch. She could see that the story I was writing was based on experiences of the past and perhaps I was not so passionate about it as I once was. I had needed to purge myself of the past, but was I ready to write about what I was currently thinking and living? Was it too soon or too close? She wisely thought not.

I began the process of writing a series of short stories. I can see now that it was the best recommendation she could have given me. Working under successful authors at the UM MFA program gave me the trust in this process. Now I see the wisdom. My willingness to do this has trained me to focus on the most glaring thing that my work is lacking—microscopic vision on the moment, and the patience to stay in the moment rather than racing to reach a finish line in order to complete a story's arch. While the arch is important in a short story as well as a novel, my personal development requires the discipline of restraint, nuance, honing the art of syntax, and allowing my characters to stay in a scene to discover and reveal only the most critical and poignant elements of themselves that speak to the moment and therefore to the story.

I spent three months writing these stories, submitted and waited, holding my breath until the feedback came. The work was “good,” my advisors said, “but...” They needed more focus. It was time for revision. One of the other great opportunities of the UM program is that they host prominent writers affording the students time to pick their

brains on anything they want to know about their process. In my mind I kept hearing Edwidge Danticat say that her greatest pleasure was in revision. I wondered when that pleasure would present itself to me. I often struggled with purpose, dialogue, character desire and agency, among other things, but especially with my own patience.

The revisions made my work “better,” Evelina said, but it needed more refining. I know I still need to work on my craft. Like an athlete continues to train physically, mentally, and with skill, during a playing season and between seasons, my writing requires the same intensity and continual improvement. Maybe the pleasure that Edwidge talks about is in the struggle itself rather than the end product. One of my undergrad professors once said that as a writer you have to have both a thick skin to manage criticism, and a thin skin to sense and absorb the world around you—to convert criticism and sensitivity into visceral and well-crafted work. This was reinforced by Professor Amina Gautier, in her unique way of demonstrating how to open our pores to the stimuli, through music, food, art and sounds, as well as diversity of reading material, and to let them blend, concentrate and restructure through my own perspective. Also, Professor Jaswinder Bolina’s poetry class defused my fear of that art form and helped me to look at just words, how they are juxtaposed to create distinct images, and avoid cliché. The help and nurturing of Professors A. Manette Ansay, Patricia Engel, and Chantel Acevedo in workshop and otherwise personally have been equally generous and insightful and I can’t express enough how profoundly grateful I am to the whole UM faculty for their support and encouragement throughout my experience here.

With all of these elements loitering in my head, I continued to revise and my final MFA product has reached this point: My thesis, *Passing*, is now a series of short stories,

some drawn from personal experience, others based loosely on events or experiences I've read or heard about, and all of them somehow connected to my diffusion between both Middle-Eastern and American culture. The importance of showing the characters' perspectives, allowing the reader to consider and hopefully empathize with diverse human conditions they may or may not have insight into, in order to bring these worlds closer together has been my fundamental goal.

Creative Sample

Baghdad Daily

Majda and Naim sit cross-legged on a double layer of old newspapers spread out on the floor like a picnic blanket, printed with advertisements for businesses that are no longer there. Majda takes her brother's near empty coffee cup turning it upside down on its saucer. She leans back against a large cushion propped up against the wall, folds her long-sleeved arms around her knees hugging them to her chest and waits. She stares at the cup, just as she does every day, like it holds all the answers.

"Would you stop worrying about me?" says Naim.

"I need to know if it is safe for you to go out today, ya akhi," she says, not taking her eyes off the cup, ensuring no one tampers with his fortune.

"I wish you would get your nose out of every coffee cup I drink," he says. "There is no way to change the course of fate even if your superstitious antiquated fortune telling were true."

"You know it's real," she says. "You prefer to believe in the Occupiers. I've told you what will happen."

"I prefer to believe they will help bring peace," he says. "Besides, I need to work. How else can we survive?"

"We have always survived."

They have lived without electricity, without water, very little food. "Allah will send what we need one way or another." The long years of war had proven that.

Naim rises from his haunches. Majda continues to guard the cup without speaking. He unlatches a shutter and peeks out. He scans back and forth and then re-shutters the window like a storm is coming.

"The chief wants me to meet with a new agent from the Civilian Aid Organization."

He checks his cell phone for any messages. The new cell phone service is spotty, unreliable, and extremely expensive. However, Naim considers it essential, so he scrimps and saves on necessities in order to pay the exorbitant charges that the small telecommunications shop on the corner demands, one of the few prospering businesses, so that the aid agency can call him when there is a need for his services.

Majda leaves Naim's cup unturned, she sighs then rises seeing him to the door. She pecks his cheeks—first the right side: one, two, three—then the left with the same desperation.

"Return to me safely. Allah ma'ak."

"God protect you too, Majda."

Majda turns the handle for the cold water, but still nothing comes out. She has been trying for three hours now. There hasn't been electricity since last night. If it doesn't come back on by Isha time she will need to use the candles again. Candles are as hard to find as lipstick these days, so she uses them both sparingly.

The last time she had gone out was the day that her mother was taken. Mama had gone to collect the government rations of rice and flour. When they'd received the demand for ransom, they scrambled to come up with the amount the kidnappers wanted. They tried to collect anything they could from any known relative, they even begged in the streets.

But, they took too long. Her body was left on the side of a road on the outskirts of Baghdad, a buffet for the buzzards.

The few friends she had have all fled the civil strife for Turkey, or to Lebanon.

Naim is the last of her three brothers. When still in power, Saddam Hussein's henchmen had taken the other two, on charges of undermining state security—a.k.a. criticizing his government. Their father had been imprisoned in exchange for the return of their burned and mangled bodies—he had desperately negotiated the trade so that his sons could be properly buried—only to later die in jail himself after a routine torture. Majda had known it from the coffee grounds before they told her.

“Alhamdu’illah for the children,” she whispers as she stands in front of the vanity mirror combing her hair into a bun. They will come soon for their lesson. She takes a stick of kohl and lines her eyes, smudging it to soften the worry lines beginning to deepen at the outside corners. She pinches her cheeks to bring color back to her face that sorely misses the sun. Lightly, she applies a blush of lipstick and rubs her lips together. Majda has not given up on marriage, but the way they live is an obstacle to finding someone. A couple of neighbors have introduced her to their male relatives, but only those who are visitors to other apartments in the building. So far she has met one who is a taxi driver, he would be a rather handsome man but for missing a front tooth, which makes conversation difficult and attraction even more so. The other was old enough to be her father. But each day she stands in front of the mirror and gets dressed as though she is going out, even puts on her hijab and abaya. And that’s how she receives the students who come to her each day for English lessons.

She hears something tapping the door, the sound is the ticking of a secret code they have devised so she knows who it is. Majda checks the peephole just in case, sees two students, their father stands with them, then she opens slowly.

Sitting in a corner of the room on the floor, as far from the windows as possible, they read. She never sits on her mother's furniture with students, preferring to leave it for quiet, solitary moments when she can focus on her memories. Mama had the furniture made when she had married her father. It had been part of her dowry from him. Majda sometimes sits in an armchair and imagines it is Mama's embrace, or sits on the bird-patterned sofa and can see herself as a child kicking a ball around a park with Baba and her brothers. Every vase or tapestry, even the prayer rugs are sources of comfort, and sometimes pain for the longing to be within the protection of her family again.

Fatima is five and Ayesha, her sister, is ten. Fatima is more interested in the pictures. She cannot read but has memorized every word that her sister repeats each time they come. Her wide brown eyes devour the images of their favorite book. Her face is still round with baby fat, her eyelashes lush, her eyebrows so thick they nearly connect with a few sprouting hairs above the bridge of her nose. She sits in Majda's lap and she can smell the powdery scent of baby lotion. Their mother has been ill, so Majda allows the girls some extra affection she doesn't normally devote to her students. She had to admit that she loved to baby them, permitting herself to imagine having children of her own.

They read from a Dr. Seuss book, a relic from the school where Majda had taught before the civil war.

"In a box, with a fox?" Ayesha reads.

Majda's stomach growls. Green eggs and ham sounds good right now. Well, maybe not the ham.

She longs for the active routine of sleepy mornings, dragging herself to assembly, counting heads and marking absences. The hours counted by subject: 9am Science, 10am English, 11:30am Lunch and so on, until the exalted faces of dismissal. Majda hopes that Naim is right about the Occupiers bringing peace. She wants to go back to a normal life. Although, without her family that may never be possible.

If Majda is concerned about her own future, she is just as worried about these little girls. How long will it be before their family flees for the borders? Refugee camps are full of children their age. Rumors of young girls put to work as dancers, or being married off to old men have filtered back to Baghdad, a warning against trying to escape. But often the alternative of starving to death or being kidnapped is worse. How long will their parents wait to make the choice?

But, somehow they always have coffee. Nearly everyone in the neighborhood knows of Majda's ability to read the grounds, and they bring it from every cupboard and pantry, or steal it from their jobs at the government hotels and restaurants where there is enough that no one would notice it was gone. She tells them what the future holds, as far as the grounds will reveal. Some return often, some never. Either they have fled to the borders trying to leave, or they are dead.

Alone in the confines of the apartment, Majda waits for Naim's return. She listens to the Magreb call as the sun begins to set. She makes her way to the bathroom to perform her

ablution—finally there is water—but she has a candle ready to be lit, as soon there won't be enough light to see.

There is a tapping on the door, the secret code, which is strange at this late hour. She quickly wraps her hijab around her head and tucks it in under her chin rather than elegantly pinning it. Through the peephole she sees her students' father, Yosri, with a brown bag in his hand. She cracks the door open just enough to peek out.

“Assalmualikum,” he says, holding up the bag. “I have a gift for you.”

Majda opens the door to take the bag, but he nudges his way inside.

“Thank you,” she says reaching for the bag.

He should make some polite comment and leave, but he stands there awkwardly.

“Naim isn't back yet,” Majda says, hoping he will understand.

“Can I have a word with you?” he asks.

Maybe this is what Majda has been dreading. Were they finally going to flee? They weren't the typical family to do that, having the means to ride out the conflict, a few more years at least. They were her best paying customers and it isn't unusual for Yosri to bring her bags of rice or fruits when he brings the children for their lessons. Coffee is a special luxury, though, so perhaps he needs his fortune read.

“Wait,” she says, and then gets the candle. Lighting it she leads the way to the dusty, seldom used, salon.

“Please,” she says, offering him a seat. “Shall I prepare the coffee?” she asks, although it would take time to grind it. Gas for the stove was dear, but hospitality dictates that she should offer anything a guest requests.

“No, please, sit for a moment.”

He's gripping the arm on the chair. She sets the bag down on the table in front of him—a modest obstacle between them—and takes a seat on the settee facing him. The candlelight flickers and casts his dark shadow on the wall, which she focuses on, fearing his somber expression.

“As you know, my children's mother has been ill for quite some time now,” he begins.

“Yes, Abu Ayesha,” she says. Using his real name would be too personal. “Is there any improvement?”

“Some days are better than others, but then she regresses.” He shrugs. “This isn't a good time for her to be sick, and with Ayesha soon to go through female changes, it's not good for her to be without a woman's care.”

“Will you leave?” Majda asks. “How will your wife endure a long journey?”

She had been bedridden for two years, as her diabetes has led to the amputation of a foot.

“Dear Majda, do you see my predicament?”

Majda shifts, uncomfortable with his direct gaze and use of her name.

“Perhaps Naim could speak to the agency chief,” she says. “He should be here soon and you can speak to him.” She doesn't want to give him Naim's cellphone number. It is too expensive.

“Yes, I would like to speak to him. But first I wanted to ask you...uh...” he stutters.

His dark shadow straightens and he clears his throat with a cough into his hand.

“I'm here to ask you to marry me.”

Marriage. It is a time to be grateful for a proposal. But to Abu Ayesha? He would be able to provide for her. But to be a second wife? It is not the answer to her dreams. Does she have the luxury to dream?

“I see I have surprised you,” he says. “If you need some time to consider it, I understand.”

“Does your wife approve of this?” Majda asks.

“She has not spoken in weeks. We aren’t sure why. She stares at the girls and cries, or she watches the TV with no real focus,” he says.

“Surely you have some female relatives to help care for your daughters.”

“Consider how short our lives may be, Majda,” Yosri says, using her name again. “My wife is dying as we speak. None of us knows if we are the next target of a misguided missile, or think about what happened to your mother. Inna lilahi wa inna ilayhi rajioon. How much longer will you confine yourself to this prison?” The shadow of his raised palms hovers like death itself as it penetrates walls and waits impatiently for the fateful moment to plunge. “Who knows how soon Allah will take us?”

He stands and puts his palm against his chest. Majda stands, too, candle in hand.

“I will consider your kind offer,” she says.

“Come to my home tomorrow with Naim for dinner and I shall understand it as your consent,” he says. “I will take the opportunity then to ask Naim’s permission.”

Majda closes the door behind Yosri.

The thought of a full meal is tempting enough to brave the streets she has not stepped out into for a year. Marriage to this man? She isn’t sure it lures her as much. At least fifteen years older than her, Majda had attended his wedding with her family wearing

her first training bra and high heels. His bride had been the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen, and Majda had felt pity for her having to marry a man with such a bristly mustache. In her opinion he is arrogant, but he is also a doctor with his own private practice, which in times like these is nothing to turn her nose up at.

In the kitchen she pours the bag of coffee beans into a canister to keep them as fresh as possible. She's perspiring in the stifling air. She has to get out sooner or later. Majda looks toward the shutters as she sits on the floor where she left the coffee cup since Naim left the apartment. She'd had a sense of dread all day, but couldn't bring herself to look at it. The flame of the candle flares, suddenly, as though a gust of air had blown in and she knows it is speaking to her—*Pick it up*—while even through the closed windows and shutters the explosion and screams can be heard.

Hands trembling, she holds her breath as she sets the cup upright and peers into its report.

The funeral prayer had been performed within twenty-four hours of the blast, even though there was no real body to bury. There were just a few bits and pieces thought to be Naim, identified by the clothing and witnesses that had seen him in the café. But Majda is sure; it had been written in the grounds.

The chief of the Civilian Aid Organization sent an agent to inform her, which she didn't really need. She'd opened the door to a phenomenon she'd only heard rumors about. The woman was alone; she wore pants, boots, and her dark, uncovered hair hung exposed and splayed brazenly across her shoulders.

“Do you speak English?” she asked.

“Yes,” Majda replied.

“I’m here to express my condolences on behalf of the U.S. Government and our organization for the death of your brother,” she said.

Although Majda hadn’t needed this confirmation to be certain of her brother’s death, it was still a shock to be faced with a formal verification. Her brother’s name uttered in the accent of the Occupiers was like the blade of a sword slicing into her chest, and she’d sat down hard on the floor, burying her face in her hands. The woman, who called herself Jackie, had knelt beside her, holding her tightly as though she would shatter into pieces, like Naim had, if she’d let go. Through her pain, Majda couldn’t help but admire her strength and compassion. A fleeting desire passed through Majda where she wished to be Jackie instead of herself. She wanted to be the strong, whole woman in boots; not the crumpled, whimpering victim who’d lost every last member of her family.

Majda sits in a chair. She is swaddled in the cover from Mama’s bed. She rocks back and forth in agony, her stomach hollow as her soul. Entombed in the apartment she watches as the sun’s rays creep through the window slats spanning the floors and walls as the days take their course from dawn ’til dusk. She has not touched coffee in a week, unable to think of it as anything but her enemy.

Like the ticking cadence of a clock, her ears register the disapproving tsk of her brother’s tongue, and she feels a presence. Madja eagerly searches the room.

“Naim?” Her voice echoes off the wood floors and bare walls. Was it possible?

“Tell me what to do. I just don’t know.”

There is a knock at the door and it startles her. The presence recedes like the ebb of an ocean's wave that deposits the empty shell of a former life on the shore as it retreats.

Majda tiptoes to the door and looks out. She cracks the door open. Yosri is there without the girls. Majda allows him to enter and they sit once again in the salon.

Majda, pulls out a clump of tissues from a box and wrings them in her fists. She has cried so much that her eyes are nearly swollen closed, and her throat hurts from screaming into her pillow.

"It isn't safe to be without the protection of a man," Yosri says. "Do you believe that sitting here in your home you are safe?"

Majda certainly didn't feel safe. While Naim had been there she hadn't had to go out. But what she had seen in the grounds of the widow had told her that she wouldn't be safe either way any more.

"Without Naim how will you manage?" he asks.

"I have my students," she says. Although the last week had been particularly volatile and nobody had come for lessons. What little money she'd had saved was waning, as she'd had to send the caretaker's son to buy bottled water, some biscuits and fruit.

"My offer still stands, although I have to tell you in times like these any sort of a dowry is just not possible," he says.

Majda's options were slim, anyone could see.

"I have a few things I could sell. Mama's gold, some furniture..." Majda looks around desperately calculating, hoping to buy some time.

"That would be a shame," he says. "Let me give you some money for the gold. I'll return it to you if you accept the marriage."

“I don’t know how to express my appreciation for your charity,” Majda says. How fortunate he has the resources to buy Mama’s gold. Perhaps it would be safe with him until she can manage to buy it back.

Majda goes to the kitchen to prepare some coffee from the beans he had brought for her the week prior. It is always best to serve guests from their own gift. Another general rule her grandmother had taught her. He had asked her a question after all.

She returns to the salon with a tray of coffee and biscuits. Taking the handle of the dallah she pours them both a cup. Majda drops two cubes of sugar into each cup and stirs. A little froth rises to the top. She pushes the cup across the table rather than handing it to him, her hands tremble.

Majda straightens her posture, not wanting to show weakness.

“When will the girls resume their lessons with me?” she asks.

“I didn’t think you’d be up to it just yet.”

“Why don’t you bring them over tomorrow?” she says. “They may forget what they have learned with too much of an interruption.”

He tilts his head back and drains his cup in one gulp. The muscles of his throat contract as he swallows the steaming liquid. He was not one to savor it like Naim.

“Shall I bring you some biscuits?” she asks.

“Perhaps just a glass of water?” he says.

Majda rises with the tray, taking it into the kitchen. She turns his cup over on the saucer. Filling a glass from a bottle, she places it on the tray along with a plate of biscuits and returns to the salon to find Yosri sitting in her place on the settee. He pats the seat next to him, but Majda sits on a chair as though she hadn’t noticed this gesture.

Yosri soon bids Majda good night. She closes the door behind him and latches the deadbolt. She takes the cup and saucer from the kitchen and sits on the settee in the Salon. She looks into the grounds nearly sure that she should find what she is looking for. She can't believe what she sees.

Majda gathers a few items and follows them into the corridor. She descends the stairs and pauses in the foyer. She hesitates. She had not even gone out for Naim's funeral. Ayesha holds her hand while Yosri opens the door. She slowly walks into the searing sunshine.

Yosri goes to find the car and pull it around. At the base of the steps sits a woman holding a bundled baby blanket, rocking the filthy thing in her arms. She is draped in black like Majda. She sings to it, a familiar lullaby, as though there is a baby to comfort. If Yosri didn't pull the car up at that moment, Majda might have collapsed on the pavement. Dizzy from the blinding light and the overwhelming misery she swoons against him and he shuttles her into the back seat.

There is a small gathering, subdued for an occasion that should be ostentatious by traditional standards. She is wearing a borrowed dress. There isn't enough time to have something made. Did it matter anyway? Naim has only been gone for a week, and Majda hasn't a single family member to give her away. She can't recall if any cousins are still nearby, does not know if anyone has come looking for her upon hearing of Naim's death. Yosri puts the ring on Majda's finger and not even Ayesha seems happy. An old woman trills her tongue, but none of the other witnesses join in.

There is a small reception in Yosri's home. Majda has not seen so much food in as long as she can remember. Perhaps it is her imagination. She feasts with her eyes so intently that she is full before taking a single bite.

The house is large, so many rooms. She has her own bedroom with a sitting room. The furniture is ornate, after the French style so loved by many. But none of it speaks to her. Even when the coffee is served, and she takes her first sip since that day. In the grounds she can't see anything. This is a new quietness that frankly Majda is grateful for.

In the early hours of the morning, Yosri enters her room. In his hands is a gift box. Majda opens it to find all of her mother's gold. She is grateful to have it back.

"How do you like my home?" he asks. "Are you comfortable here?"

"It is a nice house," she says. She felt like a visitor to someone else's life. There was already a family living here.

"I would like to have my mother's furniture brought over from our apartment," she says. "Perhaps the chairs from the salon would fit right here," she adds, pointing to the sitting room.

"Why would you want that old furniture?" He laughs. "I thought we could sell it, though it wouldn't bring much."

Majda turns the ring on her finger; tired and disoriented. So much is gone, yet so much is new and being forced into the void.

"Why don't you unpack your valise and make yourself at home?" he says. "I am going to work now. We will have a quiet dinner at home; there is so much food still. And tonight you should join me in my room. It is our honeymoon, after all."

Majda opens her suitcase and he leaves. Her abaya hangs in the armoire. There are several empty hangers waiting. She'd only worn pajamas and her abaya for a year. The clothes in the suitcase were like strangers to her now; things that she'd forgotten she even had.

She removes her robe and feels something hard in the pocket. Rummaging it out, she found Jackie's card. She must have slipped it in there during her visit. Majda throws it into the wastebasket in the corner.

She pulls out a pair of jeans and tries them on. She must have lost weight. They were a little baggy and she looks in the mirror that hangs on a wall. She finds a blouse and slips it on. She doesn't like the billowy fabric, so she changes it for a simple chambray button down. The only shoes she'd packed were a pair of sandals.

Majda sits on one of the chairs. She dropped her head in her hands and it is the first time she's let herself feel that this is a mistake. But grounds are never wrong. Naim had said that fate couldn't be changed. But were the grounds the ultimate determiner? If she had warned the widow's husband, is that changing fate? If she had looked at Naim's cup before he'd gone out could she have saved him? What did fate have to do with reading the fortune anyway? What was the point of reading fortunes if it couldn't be used to fix something that was wrong?

Majda grabs her mother's gold and locks it in her suitcase. She slips the ring off her finger and drops it on the pillow. She retrieves Jackie's card from the trash. She sees Ayesha and Fatima eating breakfast in the kitchen with the housekeeper.

"Where are you going Majda?" Ayesha asks.

Majda kisses each one on the head.

“Thank you for the sleepover,” she says, heading out the door. The housekeeper looks at her as though she’s glad to see her leave. Majda knows she doesn’t have to ask her for a head start before she sends someone to tell Yosri.

Majda isn’t heading home. She doesn’t want to talk to coffee grounds or Mama’s furniture. They had all gone silent for a reason. She flags down a taxi and goes to see a woman about a pair of boots.

Critical Sample

**World Literary Space; Comparing the Literary Space of the French
Revolution and the Cuban Revolution of 1959**

J. Geisenberger-Sayed

France in the 1700s was a hot bed of thought surrounding the rights of the proletariat similar to the Cuba of the mid 20th century, which was struggling to equalize the disparities between the elite and the peasant classes. Although the French Revolution and the Cuban Revolution of 1959 occurred nearly 200 years apart it is worth comparing the literary space that was created as a result of the political and social changes that took place in order to see if revolution in general can thrust marginal nations into the world literary milieu.

Pascale Casanova illustrates in her book *The World Republic of Letters*, that “literary capital is inherently national...[and] through...language—itself always national...[and is] invariably appropriated by national authorities as a symbol of identity—literary heritage is a matter of foremost national interest...Thus it is that language and literature jointly provide political foundations for a nation...” (34) But, how was this literature created in Paris and Cuba, and did the success of one necessarily mean the triumph of both in positioning France and Cuba among the universal canons of world literature?

Literary Space and the French Revolution

Paris became the literary capital of the world in the late 18th century as a result of the French Revolution. It was an “idealized city where artistic freedom could be proclaimed and lived” (24). In revolutionary Paris a great concentration of literature—in fact all art in general—was being created, which produced one of the greatest concentrations of art in the western world, earning its prestigious status. As the art and literature of the French revolution spread and was widely read internationally, belief in the ability of Paris to provide the freedom and climate for the creation of art and political thought developed abroad.

Artists and political refugees immigrated to Paris from countries around the world and as a result “organs of the émigré press calling for national independence in their various homelands proliferated, among them *El Americano* (founded in 1872), which championed nationalist causes in Latin America...and *La República Cubana* (1896), organ of the Cuban republican government established in Paris” (31). That stature as a world leader of thought and the amalgamation of foreigners from all over the world established Paris as one of the greatest centers of culture and society.

The improbable combination of qualities lastingly established Paris both in France and throughout the world, as the capital of a republic having neither borders nor boundaries, a universal homeland exempt from all profession of patriotism, a kingdom of literature set up in opposition to the ordinary laws of states, a transnational realm whose sole imperatives are those of art and literature: the universal republic of letters (29).

It is this quality of being “without borders” that literary gatekeepers attribute to writing and art having universal value, and worthy of being called literary capital.

Pre-Revolutionary Cuban Literary Development

José Martí, a Cuban poet-writer of Spanish descent was prolific on the world setting from the late 19th century until his death in battle in Cuba's War of Independence from Spain, immortalizing his writing and ideals. It was at his urging that Cuba break from Spain and establish its own cultural aesthetic (Suchlicki 66-70), which had become so distinct from the mother country, if it could even be called that being so far removed from the concerns of the island nation. This tension with paternalism perpetually propelled Cuba into internal conflict with the rejection of imperialistic interference from both Spain and the United States.

It is commonly believed that prior to the Cuban Revolution of 1959 Cuban literary space was stagnant. This was not entirely true. There were restraints on the development of Cuban literary capital such as no large-scale publishing facilities and a limited elite and bourgeois population that was literate or interested in literature and culture. There were a few celebrated Cuban writers, but they had to leave the island, heading to other countries such as Venezuela, France, the US, or Spain in order to be published on any large scale (*Literary Culture in Cuba* 6-7). This emigration of talented writers brought international exposure to the postcolonial-nationalistic Cuba and generated a sense of value for literature as cultural capital. But, it also presented the problem of connection with the rapidly changing socio-political dynamics, which were unique within the island nation.

The limited quantity of literary production on the island was a hindrance to Cuba's significant participation in the global literary arena. In Pascale Casanova's work on world literature, she writes,

In the case of literature, ...material objects include texts—collected, catalogued, and declared national history and property. Age is one of the chief aspects of literary capital: the older the literature, the more substantial a country's patrimony, the more numerous the canonical texts that constitute its literary pantheon in the form of "national classics" (14).

Cuba was both a very young country with a population whose literary-savvy elite was very small and without a substantial publication system, early production of literary capital was restricted.

Those who stayed in Cuba joined groups called *tertulias*, where writers gathered for philosophical and literary exchange, and started small magazines (*Literary Culture in Cuba* 7). In fact, one small literary magazine, *Orígenes*, established in 1944, set out to cultivate the Cuban spirit through literature—prose and poetry—and visual art. The principle founders of the small magazine, José Lezama Lima and José Rodríguez Feo, strove to avoid the political arena, preferring to appeal to a Catholic sensitivity, in order to elevate Cuban culture and society, which they believed to be in a degenerated condition (Lesman). But the partnership and friendship between these two successful writer-editors suffered an irreparable rupture and José Rodríguez Feo moved on to establish a much more politically inclined small magazine called *Ciclón*. *Orígenes* soon folded because Rodríguez Feo had been the main financial supporter of the magazine, but the *Orígenes* group who remained on the island became the most influential writers of the first phase of the 1959 revolution (Buckwalter-Arias). Lezama Lima's vision of a literature that was apolitical in order to elevate Cuban society through art, perhaps could have fit with the Parisian characteristic of art but he was criticized and marginalized for not emphatically joining the revolutionary rhetoric.

Literary Cultivation Under the Revolutionary Government

Freedom of writers and artists to develop a Cuban culture without the interference from external guidance or definition of what culture ought to be was perhaps at its most liberal period in the island's history from 1959-1961. The entrance of the Rebel Army from the *Sierra Maestra* Mountains in January 1959 brought a feeling of hope, often described as a period of euphoria, that anything was possible and freedom from the former political oppression of the previous decades was in the past (Suchlicki 137). The Rebel Army leader, Fidel Castro, was educated as a lawyer and well versed in the literature of the great national hero José Martí as well as the literature of the French Revolution, which he acknowledged was educational during his years in prison and influential in his approach as a revolutionary. When Fidel Castro was interviewed by Ignacio Ramonet in *Fidel Castro, My Life*, he spoke about his admiration for the ideals of the French Revolution. He had grown up in the countryside of Cuba without much constraint or discipline, but he did spend time living in the home of a teacher of Haitian-French origin who taught him many of the bourgeois manners he maintained throughout his life. He studied French in high school and developed a love for the French Revolution and the motto of its revolutionaries: *Liberté, égalité, fraternité* (507). Castro was well versed on the literature of the French Revolution such as Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, and several of Honoré de Balzac's work like *Père Goriot*. He claimed that Karl Marx was influenced by Balzac's style —“the clarity of prose, the effectiveness and elegance of the expression” (509) and compared it to Marx's *The Communist Manifesto*, crediting Balzac's writing style with the popularity of Marx's work. Fidel Castro had been imprisoned by the Batista regime after the failed attack on the Moncada Barracks calling

his incarceration the years of the “cultural university” where he often spent 15 hours a day reading (509). Perhaps this knowledge of the power of literature was what influenced Fidel Castro in the early years of the 1959 Revolution where among the first state institutions to be established were cultural institutions indicating that art and literature were a priority.

Fidel Castro’s rhetoric, and that of the 26th of July movement, was fundamentally based on anti-imperialistic, nationalism as a means to ending the US’s involvement with Cuba’s political system (Suchlicki 141). He sought to mobilize the farmers in the countryside to challenge the US-supported Batista dictatorship, and to create a country where social inequalities would be addressed (139). Largely illiterate, impoverished and subjugated to the elite and bourgeois classes, the farmers protected and aided the movement as they operated from the Sierra Maestra Mountains, from 1957, leading up to the fall of Batista’s dictatorship, which was violent and retaliatory toward dissent. After his army’s loyalties had been compromised, President Fulgencio Batista fled Cuba on New Year’s Eve of 1959 and Fidel’s army of rebels arrived in Havana within a week (131-133).

Many writers initially supported the Revolution. It was a time of great hope for the freedom of intellectual expression, without the threat of the Batista regime and without an imperial grip. Fidel Castro’s 26th of July movement, with the details of his famous speech “History Will Absolve Me,” it seemed the beginning of something new for Cuba and human rights on the island. And, for the first two and a half years, writers were able to expound upon cultural themes to a great extent in a free and uncensored discourse.

The new government understood the importance of writers and artists in achieving its ultimate goals, and within the first few months of 1959 two cultural institutions were created: the *Instituto Cubano de Artes e Industrias Cinematográficas* (ICAIC) and *Casa de las Américas* (Casa). The establishment of these cultural associations was an acknowledgement of the existence of a significant quantity of cultural activity, which needed to be directed. The responsibility of these organizations was the oversight of creative cultural products, such as film and literature, while creating a truly Cuban cultural repertoire (William, “Exhuming *Lunes*”).

Some of the problems that Cuba faced could be assessed according to Antonio Candido—who points out Latin America’s cultural weakness. Ways to measure the lack of national literary capital:

first, the high rate of illiteracy, which implies ‘the nonexistence, dispersion, and weakness of publics disposed to literature, due to the small number of real readers’; in addition to this, ‘the lack of the means of communication and diffusion (publishers, libraries, magazines, newspapers)’; and, finally, ‘the impossibility, for writers, of specializing in their literary jobs, generally therefore realized as marginal, or even amateur, tasks’ (qtd. in Casanova 16).

Additionally, in Cuba, when the new government took over, it began to purge supporters of the old regime (Suchlicki 138) and a high population of their intellectuals evacuated the country, so they were left with far fewer professionals and experts to embody the literary capital. This all had to be reconstructed and in effect reinvented according to the ideals of the Revolutionary government.

But first it had to educate its peasants; build a literate population. The Revolution made it a priority that the entire population should be literate. This was in the interest of cultivating a society that would be indoctrinated by the developing ideals of the new

socialist-leaning government. The Literacy Campaign (1961), which took about a year, sent young *brigadistas* into the countryside to live among the peasants in order to learn rural living from them as well as to teach them how to read. Thus, the initial focus was on developing a reading public for whom the cultural institutions would provide a body of literature (a literary capital), which would align ideologically with the Revolution (*Literary Culture in Cuba* 19).

Having established the two cultural institutions, the ICAIC and Casa, as well as a newspaper with a literary supplement called *Lunes de Revolución* (1959-1961), in the early months of 1959, the cultural mechanisms of the Revolution could begin contributing to the cause. Carlos Franqui, Fidel Castro's cultural advisor and director of the state newspaper *Revolución*, approached Guillermo Cabrera Infante, primarily a movie critic, to run the literary supplement *Lunes de Revolución*. It claimed to hold no "defined political philosophy" but wanted to "approach reality more" which essentially meant a reality of the culture they lived in including Cuba's "political, social, and economic phenomenon" (William, "Exhuming *Lunes*" 255).

Lunes, with Cabrera Infante at the helm, stated its mission was to "promote culture in the new Cuba" (255). Cultural trends in revolutionary Cuba sought to modernize and distinguish from the past. In the first issue of *Lunes* the editorial stance was that "...literature—and art—of course, should approach reality more and to approach it more is, for us, to also approach the political, social, and economic phenomena of the society in which we live" (qtd in "Exuming *Lunes*" 256). The magazine published articles attacking the previous generation, such as Lezama Lima and other *orígenistas*—including Cintio Vitier, Lezama Lima's loyal friend—who under Batista, were apolitical,

and their writing labeled hermetic, escapist and failed to represent the reality of Cuban society.

Cabrera Infante brought together literary and political writers, participating in the creation of a new society. *Lunes'* contributors represented all forms of artistic culture: novels, plays, paintings, operas, symphonies, architecture, etc. But, in an edition of *Lunes* celebrating Cuban cultural achievements of 1960, there is a clear emphasis on the role of writers as not limited to the realm of the spiritual. *Lunes* sought to reestablish that convergence of literature, writers and national heroism emphasized by José Martí. Making the connection between writers and the nation, writers were considered intellectuals and heroes, and they experienced more prestige than other artists. Additionally, there was a sense of immanent invasion, and *Lunes* urged writers to dedicate their artistic power to mobilizing themselves like soldiers of culture.

Writers were asked about what they hoped would be addressed in the upcoming Congress of Writers and Artists. Both Lezama Lima and Rodríguez Feo, occasional contributors to *Lunes* (even though Lezama Lima often suffered its critical scrutiny), were asked to respond. Lezama Lima emphasized the need to address poetry, with its ability to deliver an ideal aesthetic, which drives the desire to achieve that image (“*Dos Preguntas*”). His comment is consistent with his Poet-Prophet philosophy from his *Orígenes* period suggesting a continued reluctance to publicly enter the concrete political realm.

Rodríguez Feo pragmatically emphasized the need to evaluate the writer’s relationship to his people. He said, “a revolution implies a revision of the old values and concepts” and a “concrete definition of the necessities that the new socio-historical reality

raises” (“*Dos Preguntas*”). The most pressing issue was for writers to explain the principles of Marxism to the people. Not just to read them a poem or some critical analysis from a book, but to “establish an intimate communion of the writer with his people...they need to understand history, economic development, imperialism...to clarify the fundamentals of socialism” (“*Dos Preguntas*”). Rodríguez Feo believed the writer’s mission was to deliver in-depth understanding, in order to instill the people with new socialist values. Both Lezama Lima’s abstract perspective and Rodríguez Feo’s activist viewpoint represent the broad spectrum of approaches and ideas, which was representative of this period of liberal expression printed in the revolution’s cultural magazine.

The cultural discussion experienced increasing political incursions as external attacks on Cuba threatened the Revolution, and *Lunes*’ contributing writers were represented as its defenders. On the final page of a special issue commemorating the sabotage of the French ship *La Coubre*, which exploded in the Havana Harbor in March of 1960, and was blamed on the United States (which the US denied), contained the “*Nuevo Manifiesto de los Intelectuales Escritores y Artistas al Pueblo de Cuba.*” A veritable list of Who’s Who of the Cuban literary community is listed at the bottom (about 150 names). The first paragraph of the manifesto concluded with “The Revolution faces its decisive moment and we are ready to defend it, with our lives if necessary.” The manifesto also addressed once again, the idea of unacceptable neutrality:

We know that any passive attitude on our part fosters blindness toward the enemy. We have to be clear at this crucial moment. We have to define ourselves. Those who have signed below have determined: we are completely, unconditionally, and definitively at the side of our government, at the side of our country, and at the side of our Revolution.

Among the names at the bottom of the page are Lezama Lima, Rodríguez Feo, and Cabrera Infante. But, these are *not* individual signatures. In the case of Lezama Lima, it seems unlikely that he would have volunteered his name to anything that was so blatantly political unless it was in the interest of solidarity, which would have brought him security within the writers' community—a balancing act he was able to sustain until the Padilla Affair in 1971 (after which he was marginalized by the Castro government until his death in 1976).

The magazine, in a January 1961 editorial, proclaimed the Revolution and *Lunes* “‘one union against all threats’, revealing the close relationship between weapons and literature” (“Exhuming *Lunes*” 260). Writers willing to defend their political beliefs with their lives show a clearly unified and overt commitment to the Revolution’s ideals. The publication even went as far as to proclaim the writer’s obligation to serve the Revolution by writing in support of the objectives of the 26th of July movement.

Uncertain how socialist propaganda would affect them, many wealthy, educated middle-class Cubans, and former Batista supporters had fled into exile. Perhaps Fidel Castro was initially willing to build his relationship with the US government and its business interests in Cuba, but the distraught exile community and a distrustful US government, contrived a series of events which would push Cuba into close economic association with the communist Soviet Union for protection and resources: the US president did not meet with Fidel Castro on his first trip to Washington to build economic relations, the explosion of the ship *La Coubre* in Havana’s harbor (carrying weapons, killing around 100 Cubans), the refusal to refine Soviet crude oil at US owned refineries in Cuba, the Bay of Pigs invasion, all of which took place between 1959-61.

Although *Lunes* was a unifying influence, it would be the eventual cause of insurmountable conflict with the new government and discord among its contributing writers. The period of liberty to write about anything, and especially to express opinions about culture, for *Lunes* would draw to a close in 1961. The policies of the new government were still in transition and while the initial phase allowed unprecedented freedom, it brought questions of what political and cultural direction the Revolution should follow. Uncertainty over how to pay for the necessities of a country that needed infrastructure, education, healthcare, protection at its borders, and no matter how noble the ideology of an anti-imperialist, nationalist rebel army in the mountains, it was a different dynamic to have to fulfill expectations at the helm of an economy that relied heavily on foreign businesses and money.

The communist cultural conservatism and the cultural image of Cuba abroad soon came into conflict through the overtly liberal attitude of *Lunes*' contributors and the autonomy of its editorial staff. The specific conflict which finally led to June 1961 meetings at the *Biblioteca Nacional José Martí*, was the request to exhibit the 16 minute documentary film, *PM*, which showed the nocturnal leisure activities of black Cubans drinking, dancing and playing music—a sort of political disconnect—while the rest of the country was in revolutionary mode, albeit celebratory. The head of the ICAIC, Alfredo Guevara, after one broadcast, prohibited its continued showing and confiscated it. Cabrera Infante drew up a petition, and with the signatures of approximately 200 intellectuals and artists, he requested a meeting with the approval committee. What actually took place was that Fidel Castro himself came, attended three days of discussions, and at the end he delivered his now infamous speech “*Palabras a los*

Intelectuales” where he said, “Within the revolution everything, outside the Revolution, nothing” making it clear that artists and writers were to adhere to an agenda that, at a minimum, did not offend the Revolution. The parameters as to what those limits *were*, shifted quite unpredictably during this period.

Considering the historical plight of the Cuban writer for political independence and its own cultural identity since the nineteenth century, compared with twentieth century writers’ continuation of the same dilemma, through the vehicle of literary magazines and the journey from subtle to direct, the course of a cultural revolution can be traced. Under the dictatorship of Batista (and the other dictators before him), writers used surreptitious language in their call for change, convinced that cultural reform would bring about socio-political transformation—José Martí’s aspiration. The original philosophy that united José Lezama Lima, José Rodríguez Feo and the other *origenistas* in the 1940s—the need for cultural overhaul—continued to be the driving force even when Rodríguez Feo dissolved his relationship with *Orígenes* to form *Ciclón*. The actualization of freedom of expression upon the arrival of the 26th of July rebels, and the establishment of *Lunes de Revolución*, held unprecedented promise that Cuba’s cultural destiny was finally in sight. The unifying influence of *Lunes* to bring together the voices of all writers with their various approaches still held that same goal of freedom of unfettered cultural expression that represented the unique Cuban aesthetic. But, the political revolution that brought such hope and promise to writers, actually fulfilling that destiny for a short while, eventually closed in and hindered the voices that so ardently supported it.

The Cuban Diaspora and Development of the Cuban Literary Space

Casanova says in *The World Republic of Letters* which talks about the mechanisms of entrance into the world of literature she brings to our attention that “Literatures are...not a pure emanation of national identity; they are constructed through literary rivalries, which are always international” (qtd in Kumaraswami “Peripheral Visions” 95) The perceived external threat formed a division between writers who remained in Cuba and the Cuban writing diaspora. The Cuban writers who left the island in the years following the 1959 revolution and went into exile throughout the world including New York, Miami, Paris, Latin America and Spain, wrote from their memories and dissatisfactions of the new government. The exiles created a literature, which formed in this world space where there was much larger publishing activity and circulation unlike the limitations of those writers who stayed on the island who actually experienced the rapidly evolving socio-political and cultural influences.

The diaspora’s version of Cuba’s culture, political and literary freedom was quite bleak. Their reasons for leaving were based on persecution, threat of incarceration, and collectivization of property and general hindrance of economic prosperity either because they were supporters of the previous regime or because they did not willingly conform to the new government’s policies. So, in their reflections on the socio-political conditions either through autobiography or fiction, a clear conviction of control and censorship has been conveyed on the part of the Cuban government. The Cuban diaspora presented a broken, hopeless sad place and they were the writers who were published and read in the world outside Latin America. They gained a place in the literary world by access to other writers of literary credit and publishers willing to promote their work. Writers who had

left Cuba either at the beginning of the revolution, and later, writers such as Cabrera Infante who emigrated after they had become marginalized, wrote what the Western literary world expected to hear. Kumaraswami and Kapcia's assessment in *Literary Culture in Cuba, Revolution, Nation-Building and the Book*, is that "émigré memoirs inevitably tend to have a selective memory, eliminating any commitment to the Cuban system, and any reference to the opportunities which the Revolution brought, and inevitably focusing on the problems, restrictions and pressure...that drove them out." (41) The diaspora's work reinforces the popular assumption that life under the socialist-communist state government was comprehensively oppressive.

This testimony, together with the vagueness of the "*Palabras*" speech, and the difficulty for the remaining Cuban writers to disseminate their work outside the island due to isolation from embargos and the severed relationship with the US, in addition to the overall lack of publishing capabilities, there was a one-sided depiction of the conditions for Cuban writers and Cuban literature. If there was a literary rivalry between the Cuban diaspora and the Cuban writers of the revolution, then the diaspora was clearly winning the lion's share of the literary space even if the quantity of literary production was eventually comparative.

Additionally, Cuban writers, especially those who wanted to join and obtain the support of the newly founded artistic establishments, were required to support the revolutionary spirit or at a minimum, not to counter it. Through research and interviews by scholars Kumaraswami and Kapcia we find a detailed trajectory of how the mechanisms of literary space and writing have developed in Cuba over those years following the 1959-61 period until the fall of the Soviet Union (and beyond). Cuban

literature underwent a transition from mostly individualistic processes to a collective system of developing readers, writers and the institutions that oversaw their protection and development. Once the Literary Campaign had been completed, where almost the entire peasant population had been taught to read, one of the greatest accomplishments of any time in world history, there was now a reading public to provide materials for—to develop the New Man. The Revolutionary government shifted its focus from writers to “sharpening tastes of the newly literate, creating more active revolutionary readers.” (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 91) The state essentially created a system for developing a new generation of writers under the protection, support and reward-system of state literary institutions with the contingency that their writing “reflect in their content a stimulus for the revolutionary consciousness and attitude of our people” (86). In Cuba, a country which sought the support of the Soviet Union, and in the aftermath of the *PM* incident and Castro’s “*Palabras*” speech, it was clear that artistic freedom or any sort of *vie d’artiste* would not be supported if it offended the paternalistic relationship with the conservative communist authority.

Another element in the development of Cuba’s literary trajectory was that its literary institution, Casa, inferred that Cuba, being part of Latin America, now encouraged writers to “look to the wider Third World, battling alongside its intellectuals against imperialism and for cultural decolonization” (Kumaraswami and Kapcia 89). Cuba’s writers, in order to be embraced by their literary institutions, needed to produce literature that conformed to the politics of the Revolutionary agenda. Kumaraswami, in her article “Peripheral Visions? Literary Canon Formation in Revolutionary Cuba” says that “the power imbalances of such struggles for *littérisation*’—the recognition of

writing as literature—often follow the political trajectories of their respective nations and are thus always based on models of periphery and centre.” This new focus on the Third World by the Cuban literary community distinguished Cuba’s literature as regional rather than global, pushing it further to the periphery while the Cuban diaspora continued to enjoy center stage on the world literary scene.

Paris becoming the center of literary capital following the French Revolution was a process of acceptance and celebration across borders throughout Europe. The echoes of its writers’ philosophies on the rights of man could be heard in the agreement from writers in Germany, England, Italy, etc. The repetition of praise for France reinforced the legitimacy of France’s claim to be the literary and fashion capital of the world. By contrast, Cuban writers were trumped by the Cuban diaspora, and regionalized by the policies of the Cuban state including the isolationist condition between Cuba and the US, the pressure to appeal to an anti-imperialist Third World, and the internal focus on indoctrinating a socialist-communist Cuban society.

Conclusion

So, in comparing the political changes that effected the production of literary space in revolutionary Paris and those that affected the Cuban literary space there are some differences that can be drawn:

One of the most important issues was the fact that France was open to foreigners whose influx contributed to a diverse and complimentary development of art and literature. Cuba on the other hand, although initially optimistic toward a new freedom to produce art and literature, eventually, due to the increased mistrust of external invasions

and threats to their new government, during a time many saw as the chance to develop their own aesthetic identity without imperialistic oversight, as their national hero José Martí had urged, became increasingly isolated.

Additionally, revolutionary Paris actually dominated the world literary space with the diversity of literary development, which ultimately formed a canon of literature that seemed to be produced out of a consensus and a belief in the greatness of Paris and the revolution. While for Cuba, the dichotomy of literature between those on the island and the diaspora were in opposition to each other. One major contributing factor to this is that the Cuban government developed a reward policy for younger Cubans that supported literature that aligned with the country's socio-political agenda. Those writers and artists who did not conform were marginalized or worse. The diaspora wrote nostalgically or melancholically about the miseries of Cuba under what they described as an oppressive system that forced them into exile. There were also greater opportunities for the diaspora to be published than for the Cubans on the island who were limited by the scarcity of a publishing apparatus. The fact that they had greater access to the wider literary world gave them more opportunities to be read, so that their images of Cuba may have been discouraging to the proliferation of a revolutionary canon.

Cuba itself valued the production of literature but its policies for a Third World literature, especially promoted in the first decades of the revolution, limited its universality, thus Cuba's literature became useful as regional. The themes of the diaspora and the literature of revolutionary France seemed more empathetic, accessible and universal to a world literary setting.

The success of France in generating a universal and internationally praised world literature would be difficult to repeat in a more contemporary scenario. When revolutions occur there is necessarily those who are winners and losers. But, Cuba ended up isolated by its location so far from the Soviet Union that supported it. The US embargo may have created pressures that could have otherwise not existed for freedom of thought, art and literature for Cubans. The fact that Cuba had to align itself with communism as a matter of survival if not merely as its own preferred policy, forced it into a political niche where freedom to dissent no longer existed, and for these reasons Cuba could not become a Paris.

As Cuba moves into a new era, with the death of Fidel Castro (which occurred during the course of my writing this paper) and the aging population of Cuban Revolutionary leadership, it is important to understand the struggles of Cuban writers with the nation's political policies and against its rivals on the world literary stage, especially the Cuban diaspora in order to trace the continued literary trajectory. As a nation that continues to evolve and whose true intellectual and cultural identity is still obscured by its periphery, politics and anti-imperialist position, Cuba has yet to develop a canon of literature that expresses its true cultural aesthetic free from political arm twisting that has skewed it over nearly its entire history. As the Cuban nation looks back on Fidel's era, it will be interesting to see the literature and criticism that is generated in the path of his legacy.

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A college professor lusting after coeds eventually finds himself in trouble for having an affair with a young undergrad. He is fired from his post and goes to live with his daughter, a pregnant lesbian whose disdain for him and his predicament place him in a position where he must face what he has done. Provocative; presenting a flawed hero the reader may never like or understand. This story also deals with the ethnic/racial tensions of South Africa.

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A story told in episodes of a conformist society where a woman whose life is defined by her role as a mother. Her emotions of anxiety toward any sort of dissent or change are revealed through her actions. Subtle and poignant.

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A psychological adventure story about a family in a house they move into and find strange things and then eventually escape. Written in a collage of print styles and footnotes.

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This is a series of stories where Diaz' endearing character Yunion, who we know from his previous work, negotiates the trials of finding and keeping love within the abilities and propensities of his personality. The author explores the different scenarios of Yunion's encounters with various women and his struggles with his own weaknesses and shortcomings.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit From the Goon Squad*. New York: Anchor Books, 2010. Print.

This is a series of linked stories from the perspective of different characters whose lives are intertwined yet each brings their own baggage to their moments on the page. It takes a while to assemble the puzzle of sequence, events, characters and their histories in order to flesh out the portrait of how this group fits together, and where each one is situated in the present, but by the final chapters the picture is well rounded. The details are unique and strange, centered around the music business and how once promising futures and friendships disintegrate.

Engel, Patricia. *It's Not Love, It's Just Paris*. New York: Grove Press, 2013. Print.

A young woman goes to Paris and stays in the House of Stars, as it is called, and meets a young man, falls in love, but then leaves him for her responsibilities to her family. He dies of some illness.

Engel, Richard. *War Journal: My Five Years in Iraq*. New York: Simon & Shuster, 2008. Print.

Richard Engel is a foreign correspondent living in the Middle East who reports on events during his time there. Presents vivid descriptions and details of life in war-torn Iraq from a western perspective.

Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. New York: Picador, 1993. Print.

This is a novel told in the "we" narrator point of view dealing with a group of boys' observations of a conservative catholic family with five daughters. After one sister commits suicide, the parents allow them more freedom, which leads to problems and they are eventually isolated from everyone. The other four commit suicide together, which leaves the boys confused. The reader is left to interpret why they did it through action and dialogue, without access to their internal thoughts.

Fitten, Marc. *Valeria's Last Stand*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009. Print.

Story about a Hungarian village so remote that during WWII it was completely ignored. After the war, new influences begin infiltrating into the town, resisted by the elderly Valeria, until she falls in love and doesn't fight off change any longer.

Foer, Jonathan Safar. *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2005. Print.

A boy whose father died in the Twin Towers on 9/11 finds a key and believes his father left it for him with the intention that he should find what the key is for. He sets out on his quest which alternates between the present and the past, including

his grandparents' lives in WWII. A story about healing. Often plays with text on the page.

Fowler, Connie May. *When Katie Wakes*. New York: Doubleday, 2002. Print.

A novel is a memoir about the author who suffers under the physical and mental abuse of her boyfriend until she is comforted and empowered by the unconditional love of her dog. Eventually, she finds the strength and confidence in herself, which allows her to leave him.

Garcia, Cristina. *A Handbook to Luck*. New York: Vintage Books, 2007. Print.

A lyrical exploration of the lives and psychology of three characters who have experienced displacement through politics and war as they try to negotiate change; linked through intersection of their paths and the need to make sense of the world.

Gautier, Amina. *Now We Will Be Happy*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. Print.

Series of linked stories of various characters exploring the complex issues of identity, displacement, family relationships, love, culture in richly rendered scenes.

Hansen, Ron. *Mariette in Ecstasy*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1991. Print.

Lyrical/Poetic prose style telling of a mysterious power of a young woman to bleed like Christ. The world that is supposed to believe in miracles is the last to give Mariette the benefit of the doubt.

Howard, Ravi. *Driving the King*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2015. Print.

In Montgomery Alabama in the 1940-50s, bus boycotts, Nat King Cole; mix of true historical events and characters with the fictional protagonist Nathaniel Weary, who was imprisoned for defending NKC from a white man who attacks him.

Johnson, Charles. *Middle Passage*. New York: Scribner, 1990. Print.

A picaresque tale of a recently freed slave and thief, escaping from debtors, and his fiancé ends up on what turns out to be a slave ship. The narrator tells the story as journal entries. Language is rich and sophisticated, which the narrator explains is due to his master insisting that he be educated. He assumes the identity of the cook whose papers he stole before stowing away and the rest of the story's tension and humor builds on this.

Johnson, Dennis. *Jesus' Son*. New York: Picador, 1992. Print.

This is a series of stories that presents the wanderings of a guy whose experiences are admittedly drug and alcohol hazed, which establishes an understanding with the reader that his perspective is somewhat distorted. Brilliant scenes where the narrator is placed in awkward and humorous situations, combined with his slanted

interpretations of events and other characters, lead the reader to half-trust his reactions and yet admire his profound reflections.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1999. Print.

A collection of short stories, which include Indian-American fusion and assimilation, as well as purely Indian oriented subject matter, the author's focus on character desire and remaining in the moment, engage readers of any background with common human emotion.

Larson, Nella. *Quicksand*. New York: Dover Publications, 2006. Print.

A semi-autobiographical account of a young half-black/half-white Danish woman who doesn't find peace at length in any society.

McCall, Jason. *Dear Hero.*. East Rockaway: Marsh Hawk Press, 2013. Print.

A book of poems that references classical and pop-cultural superheroes, this author integrates these legends into personal experiences and expression in order to reflect on contemporary life.

McCormick, Patricia. *Sold*. New York: Hyperion, 2006. Print.

A young girl is sold into sex slavery. Based loosely on true events as told to the author by girls in India. The main character Lakshmi is eventually freed by an American man.

McCown, Clint. *The Member-Guest*. New York: Doublday, 1995. Print.

This book is a series of stories, from different characters' perspectives, describing incidents that occur in a common place over one weekend during a golfing event. Uses humor and peculiar moments to reveal characters' shifts and epiphanies.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Vintage International, 2004. Print.

A remote town up in the rocky hills called the Bottom, is cut off from the world by a white town who sent the blacks to live in the Bottom after they were freed. Women in the Bottom, esp. Sula and Nel are products of the expectations of their society. But Sula defies all.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *Black Water*. New York: Plume, 1992. Print.

Stylized telling of a woman who gets in an accident with a congressman and he leaves her to drown. Repetition, retelling from different angles; shows her getting younger, seeing her parents.

O'Nan, Stuart. *Last Night at the Lobster*. New York: Viking, 2007. Print.

Manny the Manager of the Red Lobster goes through the last day before the restaurant closes when he will say good-bye to most of his employees. Jackie, his great love, who he had an intimate relationship with, is also saying good-bye to him forever. They each have other lovers; she had Rodney and Manny's girlfriend

is pregnant. The day is snowed out, but they still get a few significant diners; one was Manny's former high school coach. Told in third person present.

Oyeyemi, Helen. *Boy, Snow, Bird*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2014. Print.

A girl named Boy runs away from her abusive father who she calls the Rat Catcher. She escapes from New York to a small conservative town where she finds a job, meets and marries Arturo. She has a baby named Bird who turns out to have dark skin. Since she looks white, this puzzles her. It turns out that they both have African-American heritage and racial confusion and conflict ensues. When her father turns out to be her mother, gender issues also are introduced.

Ozick, Cynthia *The Shawl*. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.

A woman who was sent to a laborcamp during the Holocaust and the Nazi's killed her baby by throwing her against an electrified fence, years later lives in Miami, Beach and is a bit nuts. The blanket that her baby was swaddled in was held by her niece; she finally returns it to her. She thinks she sees the girl grown up. Meanwhile, she is courted, against her will, by an elderly man.

Packer, Nancy Huddleston. *Jealous Hearted Me*. Santa Barbara: John Daniel and Company, 1997. Print.

Linked short stories of a woman whose mother moves in with her and her husband, while she believes that her mother prefers her brother.

Palahniuk, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005. Print.

Stylized story of high tension. Begins at the end where Tyler Durden has a gun in the narrator's mouth. Throughout the story we believe they are two different characters having an affair with Marla, who the narrator meets at a support group meeting. We later discover that the narrator and Tyler are the same person; we discover it as the narrator does. First person present.

Patchett, Ann. *Bel Canto*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2001. Print.

Losely based on a true event this story presents multiple characters in a confined space which takes place over a few days. Family relationships/dynamics and love story. Tragic ending is warned from the beginning but through investment in characters the reader tends to forget until it surprises at the end.

Rash, Ron. *Above the Waterfall*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2015. Print.

This novel is told in alternating points of view between a man and a woman. Set in a small town in North Carolina where everyone knows each other, he is a cop who has to negotiate the destructive costs of meth addiction. The story deals with themes of environmentalism and connection to the land.

Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1951. Print.

First person stream of consciousness, young man, Holden Caulfield, is kicked out of boarding school failing for lack of effort, spends a couple of days wandering NYC, trying to connect with people but falls into depression because he fails at it.

He decides to go home and talk to his kid sister, Phoebe, who is wise for her years, yet still inspires his appreciation for her youth.

Seaton, Maureen. *Sex Talks to Girls*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. Print.

An autobiographical series of vignettes tells the story of the author's struggle with identity through religion, alcohol, and relationships. Lyrical and poetic language. Humorous and poignant scenes.

Shockley, Evie. *The New Black*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011. Print.

This is a book of poems that explore the state and shades of race and gender. Moving among figurative external and internal landscapes—political and personal—the author uses text and language to evoke and deliver images and emotions dealing with the historical and contemporary issues.

Torres, Justin. *We the Animals*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011. Print.

This is a series of vignettes, which on the whole, reveal a portrait of a family struggling with violence and poverty. The narrator is one of three brothers who reveals that he is gay, and suffers mental illness. The language is lyrical and terse, visceral in detail and often poetic.

Watson, Larry. *Montana, 1948*. Canada: Milkweed, 2007. Print.

A family story told from a retrospective narrator's perspective who was twelve at the time the events in the story occurs. How he sees his father, grandfather and uncle through his limited experience of the time and looking back on events later in life. Uncle Frank was molesting young Sioux girls as a doctor. His father was the Sheriff, and the grandfather had been the Sheriff before him. Chose between family and justice.

Wolff, Tobias. *The Barracks Thief*. New York: Harper Collins, 1984. Print.

A guy goes away to the Army Aviators and bonds with a couple other newcomers in a tense moment. That bond deteriorates when someone steals one of the soldier's wallet. Shift in POV throughout.

Woolf, Virginia. *Moments of Being*. Edited by Jeanne Schulkind. New York: Harcourt Inc., 1985. Print.

This is a series of autobiographical memoirs about the author's early years growing up with her sister and father. The honest detail and reflection reveal formational moments of Woolf's life and character that would affect and influence the remarkable work she would produce in her fiction.