

Self-Deception in Suburbia: Plotting Escape in
The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay

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Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* concerns itself primarily with the issue of escape. This thread runs through the novel in the forms of physical escape, magical escape, imagination, and denial. One of the ways in which Chabon explores this subject is through the novel's protagonist, Sammy Clay, a comic book writer. Sammy escapes from reality in various modes with diverse results. Critic Lee Behlman identifies comic books as one of the novel's major interrogations of escapism. He writes that comic books "show, in a phenomenological way, how fantasy feels, and how it may assuage pain" (62). Immersed in the world of comics, Sammy uses fantasy to assuage his pain, and his denial of his homosexuality is the direct result of such an impulse. The novel uses the terms of self-deception to frame these larger themes of fantasy and escape as they present themselves in the domains of comic books, sexuality, suburbia, and the novelistic enterprise.

Chabon's protagonists Sammy Clay and Joe Kavalier are cousins who create a collection of superheroes for Empire Comics, owned by Sheldon Anapol. Their main character is the Escapist, a Superman-type hero and a member of the League of the Golden Key whose goal is to liberate innocents from the oppression of the Iron Chain. Sammy and Joe find great professional and personal successes during the Golden Age of comics in the 1940s.¹ When Sheldon Anapol requires Sammy and Joe to give up drawing comics in which the Escapist fights Germans, Sammy and Joe take the comic book industry in a new direction. In the early comics, the Escapist fights crime in a gritty, urban setting that uses "Empire City" as a stand-in for New York and focuses on the

¹ The Golden Age of comics lasted for most of the 1940s: "America's entry into World War Two gave the superheroes a whole new set of enemies, and supplied a complete working rationale and world view for a super-patriotic superhero such as Captain America" (Reynolds 8). Golden Age comics allowed readers to escape the realities of war, and to believe in the power of patriotic men in tights to put an end to unthinkable violence overseas.

criminal activity that takes place there. The new comic books, on the other hand, explore the traditional themes of good and evil in the space of an Empire City that becomes a domestic entity, a home to everyday people, not just heroes and villains. The city is still clearly an urban space, but by focusing on “the everyday heroics of the powerless” (Chabon 368), Sammy and Joe domesticate the city, forming the kind of community that Sammy will eventually discover in the suburbs.

The innovative fantasies focus on the day-to-day goings-on of a superhero as told by new narrators: the ordinary citizens of Empire City. The superheroes, moreover, are humanized; in one example, flashbacks tell the story of one Luna Moth’s alter ego, the librarian Judy Dark. This focus on the more quotidian elements of the comic book universe revolutionizes comic book narratives for their makers, and the comics become more attractive to an adult audience that is too sophisticated for simple tales of beat-’em-up heroism. Inventive artwork that employs filmic visual effects causes “the nine million unsuspecting twelve-year-olds of America who wanted to grow up to be comic book men nearly [to fall] over dead in amazement” (361) when they read them. More than introducing the language of film to the printed page, the new comics accomplish “the total blending of narration and image ... the fundamental principle of comic book storytelling” (362). This appeal to both children and adults causes the circulation of Kavalier & Clay titles to double.

This adaptation of print restrictions into permission for greater creativity is the sort of tactical undertaking outlined in Michel de Certeau’s essay “‘Making Do’: Uses and Tactics.” According to de Certeau, the dominant order is capable of producing and imposing order on spaces through the use of strategies, while an individual can in turn

manipulate those spaces through the use of tactics (30). At this moment in the *Kavalier and Clay* history, Anapol's restriction is a strategy; as the owner of Empire Comics, he is clearly in a position of power over his employees, Sammy and Joe, and can impose whatever creative constraint he likes. In the face of this constraint, Sammy and Joe focus their energies on crafting new editions of the comic that showcase more advanced artistic techniques and sophisticated storylines even though they are working in a seemingly less glamorous setting. In an example of tactical maneuvering at its most successful, Sammy and Joe incorporate a limitation imposed from above into a larger vision of what comic books will become, and in doing so they usher in a new era of success for themselves and Anapol.

Their success is short-lived, however. When the ship carrying Joe's brother Thomas to the United States is struck by German U-boats, Joe runs away to join the army. Sammy's male lover, Tracy Bacon, the actor who provides the Escapist's radio voice, moves to Hollywood and eventually enlists in the army. Left behind are Joe's girlfriend, Rosa, and Sammy—Rosa pregnant with Joe's child and Sammy the survivor of a sexual assault after a brutal run-in with a vice squad. These events make Sammy desperate to find a place where he can escape the reality of his life that is marked by suffering and abandonment. In the aftermath of the attack, Sammy decides "that he would rather not love at all than be punished for loving" (420). This decision constitutes a denial of his homosexuality, and a willingness to repress his identity in favor of social acceptance. Mirroring the move made by the comic books from an urban sphere to a domestic one, Sammy chooses a domesticated suburban existence where the denial of his homosexuality is a necessity, but where he can live without fear of recrimination. The

crucial difference between the comic book move to a domestic realm and Sammy's move to the suburbs, however, lies in the freedom of identity expression or lack thereof that the transition entails. In the comic books, a superhero is still a superhero who is merely transported from one setting to another. The Escapist is still able to appear in his superhero form and that of his alter ego, Tom Mayflower. Sammy, on the other hand, is unable to appear in the many forms that define him. By choosing suburbia, Sammy cannot express his sexual identity and he therefore limits himself in ways that do not apply to his comic book superheroes.

Such a limitation may at first seem attractive to Sammy, who has been punished for expressing his sexuality. Denial and repression of the freedom to express himself will permit him to participate in this new social space that has not readily tolerated his homosexuality up to this point in the text. Such reintegration through denial is a technique often used by trauma survivors, explains Bruno Bettelheim, but it is a form of fitting in that is "somewhat shaky and incomplete" (31) because the energy spent perpetuating denial diverts energy from coping with real life.² In other words, Sammy is too caught up in the appeal of a fantastic new suburban and "straight" life, in which he is a husband to Rosa and stand-in father to her child Tommy, to consider fully the negative consequences of his choice. Most notable about Sammy's choice is that he turns to suburbia as his protective space. There, he believes he can surround himself with the promises of suburban life and forget the painful world of homophobic violence associated with the urban space that he previously occupied.

² Additionally, Theodor Adorno writes in *Minima Moralia* that while the world was once interested in irony, defined as the difference between claims to reality and reality, now the world is content to accept the appearance as the reality. Not only does Sammy choose self-repression, but he also is supported in that choice by a society that refuses to confront the consequences of such repression.

My working-through of the plot in these first pages serves to establish the background necessary to connect Sammy's need to escape reality to his suburban move. This thesis will explore the way Sammy uses the model of the comic book superhero to construct his identity (using the dual nature of the alter ego and the secret identity), an identity developed to facilitate his continued denial of his sexuality. The fact that Sammy chooses suburbia as the locus of his new life speaks directly to his use of the superhero model. Suburbia's distance from the city where he works permits him to create dedicated spaces for his alter ego and secret identity. Additionally, with its promise of a better future, suburbia appeals to Sammy's desire to leave his past behind. This fantasy, however, is thwarted by the inability of these dual roles to protect Sammy effectively from his past. The longer Sammy lives in suburbia, the more he comes to realize that the promise of escape from one reality contains within it the inexorable obligations to another.

Section I: Suburban Promises

The promise that suburbia makes to those who live there is one of a better life, an opportunity to own a plot of land and a piece of the American Dream. The novel's narrator describes the urban dwellers' move to suburbia as a search for peace and quiet not found in the city:

Their families were chaotic things, loud and distempered, fueled by anger and the exigencies of the wise-guy attitude, and since the same was true of New York City itself, it was hard not to believe that a patch of green grass and a rational floor plan might go a long way to soothing the jangling

bundles of raw nerves they felt their families had become. (Chabon 474)

Unlike the chaos of the city, suburbia becomes a soothing zone where what Jean Baudrillard calls “radical thought” can flourish, where consciousness of a fantasy world beyond reality sustains the individual. The belief that grass and a floor plan can improve one’s quality of life is inherently fantastic, yet an awareness of the fantasy as such does not diminish its power since the American Dream relies, to a certain extent, on the firm belief in fantasies coming true through the individual’s mastery of reality. Sammy is not immune to suburbia’s promise, and when he sees a chance to escape his demons, he purchases a house in the development community of Bloomtown, Long Island.

Chabon’s choice of Bloomtown for the novel’s model of suburbia is particularly fitting because Long Island is one of the most famous sites of suburban development in the United States. The mass move to the suburbs began in the early 1940s when private building companies realized that they could be put out of business by public housing that was subsidized by the government as a result of the New Deal. The end of World War II offered these private companies the opportunity to build homes for returning veterans and their families. The best locations to build new homes were in the areas of largely undeveloped land outside major metropolitan areas. Of course, the new suburbs had to be marketed correctly to entice hordes of Americans to buy when they could rent or live in government-funded housing (Baxandall 79). While government-subsidized homes came with many comforts, they did not come with the promise to improve the lives of American families as the suburbs did.

Marketers of the suburbs were aided by the fact that many Americans were ready to buy what the suburbs were selling. After the deprivation and inconvenience of

rationing and other home front obligations, Americans wanted to return to the personal freedom that had existed before depression and war besieged the country. Therefore, it was relatively easy, as Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen suggest, for the “master builders, banks, the real estate lobby, automobile industry, the highway lobby, and appliance manufacturers ... to persuade the government and the public that individual home ownership was crucial for preserving ‘the American way of life’” (107). After fuel rations and carpools, the idea of freeways carrying individuals in their own automobiles was highly attractive; after wives and children had gathered around a radio to hear news of absent husbands and fathers, watching television as a family was a symbol of the country’s technological progress and a return to safety (Erenberg 39).³ Long absent from middle class life, the ideas of safety, convenience, and friendliness attracted many families to the suburbs (Martinson 31).

Ironically, the private building companies were also aided by the philosophy of subsidized public housing, which stated “every man, no matter what his economic status is, is entitled to a decent, healthy place to live” (Baxandall 65). Public housing was initially built on sites of run-down tenements for low-income families or near military bases for soldiers’ families. The homes built by the government were often of a better quality than those that members of the lower-middle class could afford, and so support grew for expanding public housing to include more than only the lowest income groups (64). With development reaching its limits within the cities, and rural areas being too remote, the suburbs offered an attractive middle ground (Dolce 41). Private companies

³ Television became an important part of suburban life. Many new development homes were outfitted with television sets, and “residents tuned in for information and advice on how to live in communities in which they had never lived before” (Baxandall 146). Programs like *Leave it to Beaver* became a social primer on how to live in suburbia. Not only was television a form of entertainment for the whole family, but it was also a form of subtle propaganda through which the norms of suburbia were reinforced.

saw this clamor for high-quality housing as their opportunity to market comfortable homes to middle-class families who could afford to buy instead of rent. The success of the suburbs, then, stemmed from their ability to meet both the needs of the builders and the American middle class.

The locations for development, especially on Long Island, were carefully chosen to attract such consumers, which contributed to the widespread appeal of suburbia. In the early twentieth century, the American aristocracy—men like William Randolph Hearst, J.P. Morgan, and William K. Vanderbilt—bought large mansions on the North Shore of Long Island. As a result, the area was known as “the Gold Coast” (Baxandall 7). When private developers looking to house the masses descended upon Long Island, they took to the South Shore. Although the heyday of the “robber baron” was past, and twenty miles separated one shore from another, the new residents could claim some of the social cachet originally associated with living on Long Island. As one suburbanite explains in an interview with Baxandall and Ewen, “when you move out to Long Island, everyone thinks you’re living in the Gold Coast. After all you live in suburbia and you own a house” (13). This image of social mobility was another selling point for suburbia: though many suburbanites struggled to make their house and car payments (expenses they did not have when living in the city), suburban living was still a sign of success (147). Even in the few suburban neighborhoods that had existed before the development boom, people coveted and preferred modern homes to older, pre-war homes for the better ideal of living they offered (Martinson 54).

While financially strapped post-war suburbanites may have been fooling friends back in the city into thinking that life in suburbia was effortless, they were also deluding

themselves. After all, the image of the American Dream only lasts as long as Americans buy into it. Not only did suburbanites often mislead themselves as to the ease of their new life, they had to support the delusions of others in order to make suburbia the dream location they needed it to be. This support most often came in the form of face-value acceptance of a projected image of success. The financial realities of suburbia were not the only elements of life that differed from the illusion. One of the most famous Long Island suburbs, Levittown, was designed by William Levitt, and its houses were famous for their ease in building. In fact, Levitt's non-unionized workers could build twenty-four houses in a day (Baxandall 128). Another attribute of Levittown was the iron fist with which Levitt ruled the community (144–145). Americans flocked to suburbia to find a space they could call their own, and yet they often faced strict rules about how lawns should be maintained, how frequently such maintenance should occur, where to park, and so on. Suburbia was not necessarily the idyllic, independent safe haven that suburbanites hoped it would be, but they worked to incorporate their own individuality into their living space while still obeying such rules. Although the houses in a neighborhood were all prefabricated and looked alike, it was not long before homeowners began making renovations to better suit the cookie-cutter homes to their needs (165). Psychologically, carving out an individual space was of great importance to new homeowners, for it offered them a chance for them to define reality in their own terms and come closer to living the dream (Martinson 54).

The marking of such an individuated space was not only an opportunity to redefine reality, but also a chance to use de Certeauan tactics to adapt to the authoritative strictness that marked early suburbia. Self-reliance and individuality, however, would

only get the new suburbanites so far. To refigure the strict order of their new neighborhoods, homeowners had to work together as members of a collective. Viewed only as consumers by Levitt and other developers, suburbanites had to affirm each other's humanity by banding together to meet their need for networks of support. Neighborhood groups made informal arrangements for childcare and formed parent organizations for the local schools (Baxandall 154–155). In this way, residents could balance their needs as individuals with their need to have a “sense of attachment to a covenanted community” (Dolce 3), while simultaneously taking control from the developers wherever possible.

This context of suburbia—a space where fantasy, individuality, and a sense of community were used as forms of resistance against strict regulations—offers a backdrop against which to read the series of deceptions Sammy employs in his attempts to become invisible. As opposed to using tactics to reassert power as some of the early Levittowners did, Sammy uses tactics to become invisible to his suburban peers; rather than manipulating the system imposed by others (the developers) outside of the suburbanites' realm, Sammy struggles to control the perceptions of the people around him. In order for his homosexuality to go undetected, no one can know or suspect it. Therefore, while suburban housewives were able to form support networks for each other by meeting for coffee and sharing child care responsibilities, no such networks exist for Sammy in suburbia. As a result, the maneuvers that Sammy performs rely on the use of another space and the leading of a double life. To avoid suspicion, Sammy only enacts his homosexuality in the city during discreet lunches with men. At home in the suburbs, he appears to be just like everyone else, but that appearance is actually a deliberate act to deflect attention from any behavior that could connect him to his secret life.

Through his move between two locations, Sammy draws a clear line between his earlier life in the city and his new life in the suburbs, as well as a line between his present suburban existence and his stolen time in the city. The strength of these lines, I will suggest, is akin to the line drawn between superheroes' secret identities and their alter egos. On a basic level, Clark Kent lives a very different life from that of Superman, just as Tom Mayflower, crippled from birth, is not capable of performing the feats of derring-do that the Escapist can. Yet, in each case, the superhero and the alter ego are two roles played by the same man. Somewhere within Tom Mayflower is the ability to walk without a limp, just as Clark Kent can throw off his glasses and see through objects when he is Superman. Similarly, as much as Sammy would like to keep his two lives separate, it is impossible. He must navigate the space between his alter ego (husband and father) and his secret identity (gay man). The alter ego is a persona developed to protect the secret identity from discovery. Having the alter ego allows a superhero to go through life disguised as a "normal" person, only using the secret identity when the situation warrants it. In the case of some superheroes, like Superman, the secret identity is the "actual" identity. Superman is really Kal-El, the last son of Krypton, and Clark Kent is the human disguise he assumes to avoid being Superman at all times. For other superheroes, like Batman, the alter ego is the actual identity. Bruce Wayne is a mortal human being who fights crime dressed as Batman. In each situation, however, the more mundane alter ego is the everyday self, and the secret identity is employed only when needed. Accordingly, the superhero's friends and loved ones cannot be targeted by enemies, and the superhero does not leave himself open to attack.⁴

⁴ In *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology*, Richard Reynolds further explains the alter ego/secret identity dynamic: "[Superman] pays for his great powers by the observance of this taboo of secrecy" (15).

By outfitting Sammy with his own secret identity and alter ego, Chabon makes a direct connection between comic books and the novel, between suburbia and “the real.” Behlman identifies Chabon’s use of comic books as “a form of fantasy that resolutely avoids the real, for it seeks to resolve history either by overcoming it through neat, miraculous reversals or by escaping its terms completely” (57). This description also aptly describes Sammy’s treatment of suburbia: resolutely avoiding the real, Sammy hopes to escape the terms of his personal history in a new space. The pages that follow will examine how such an escape functions within the text. The ultimate failure of Sammy’s identity construction, I will argue, proves the impossibility of escaping reality—the collection of events and expectations that make up one’s conception of the everyday. In suburbia, these conditions take on two forms: the reality of the present, which serves to facilitate Sammy’s double life, and the reality of the past, which constantly threatens to undermine it. Chabon’s narrator lends his support to Sammy’s double life through a set of narrative tactics, and by doing so reveals the benefits and limits of escaping the troubles of everyday life in order to survive.

Section II: Escape through Transformation

The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay describes Sammy Clay’s life as one increasingly mediated by the superhero comic genre in which he works, to the point that Sammy fashions his existence in the style of a superhero. For much of the novel Sammy does not merely escape reality during brief moments; instead he actively works to deny his past by creating a present based on lies and deceptions he is willing to perform for a lifetime. Due to his inability to understand the limitations of escape through

the superhero comic book genre, however, Sammy's over-reliance on the genre to revise his identity begins to fail him.

Sammy's dependence on comic books to structure his life begins early in the novel when he outlines the background of his character, the Escapist: Tom Mayflower depends on a crutch to walk, but when he is the Escapist, empowered by his golden key, he is capable of performing magnificent feats of heroism. Such a transformation mirrors Sammy's own situation—stricken by polio at a young age, Sammy went on long walks as a child with his father to strengthen his legs. It takes another comic book man, Davy O'Dowd, to point out the similarity: “[Y]ou don't want to have a gimpy leg no more. So, boom, you give your guy a magic key and he can walk” (Chabon 145). This observation startles Sammy, as he “had chosen not to look at the process of character creation in quite so stark a manner” (145). He unconsciously uses comic books to work through the narrative of his own life by inserting an idealized version of himself as the central character of his new line of comic books. This move is a sign of his desire to be someone else—“common enough among the inventors of heroes” (113)—that is complicated by a lack of self-awareness. Sammy embarks on a series of “regimens and scenarios and self-improvement campaigns that always [run] afoul of his perennial inability to locate an actual self to be improved” (113). That is to say, he takes an active role in creating comic book characters, but, in the early sections of the novel, he does not take an active role in identifying himself.

Since he is a writer engrossed in his own fantasies to the point that he loses sight of himself, moments of self-awareness take Sammy entirely by surprise. When, for example, he is with his lover, Tracy Bacon, the word *boyfriend* “[flies] into Sammy's

mind and careen[s] blindly around it like a moth while Sammy chase[s] after it with a broom in one hand and a handbook of lepidoptery in the other” (372). The word appears without Sammy thinking about it—in fact, Chabon’s narrator slips it in at the end of a sentence and allows for a brief exchange between Sammy and Bacon before Sammy realizes what has happened. His mode of dealing with the word is to chase it out with a broom as though it is something that does not belong, an act that demonstrates his own discomfort with the topic of homosexuality and foreshadows the violence that will eventually befall him. Yet, the word simultaneously interests him, as it is something of which he has no previous knowledge and he must depend on the lepidoptery handbook, a reference tool, to find the word’s meaning. Sammy’s response is to cry out, “I don’t care!” (373), revealing a reluctance to plum the depths of his identity, a desire simply to let things be.

The first time Sammy takes an active step to change a part of his identity that dissatisfies him is also an important moment in his trajectory to superhero status. In a legal deposition to determine whether or not the *Escapist* comics infringe on the *Superman* comic’s copyright, Sammy perjures himself by saying that Sheldon Anapol never told him and Joe to “get me a Superman” (288). After the deposition, Sammy walks around the city, ashamed of himself, and wanders into a group of volunteers training to watch for enemy planes from the observation deck of the Empire State Building. Although Sammy discovers plane spotting in an accidental manner, his active choices are reflected in his decision to commit perjury and his commitment, after meeting the plane spotters, to scan the skies three nights a week to make up for his previous wrongdoing. In this way, Sammy has a superhero origin story of his own: racked by a

guilty conscience, he must turn to acts of heroism to make his moral ledger balance.

Monitoring for signs of disturbance is a way for Sammy to right a wrong, but it is also a means by which to escape the reality that his life's narrative includes the crime of perjury.⁵ By taking on his responsibilities as a plane spotter, Sammy's self-narrative includes two important characteristics of the comic book superhero: a desire for justice and a need to escape reality.⁶

Sammy's life adopts yet another important aspect of the superhero identity when he meets the aforementioned Tracy Bacon. Bacon plays the titular role in the *Escapist* radio show. Physically, he looks like the Escapist: tall, blond, and muscular. His physicality even comes to inform that of his character: "Not always knowing his own strength was eventually to become, thanks to Tracy Bacon, one of the Escapist's characteristic traits" (303). Yet, Bacon sounds exactly like Tom Mayflower and, in fact, has trouble vocalizing the Escapist. Bacon explains, "Well, I *am* Tom Mayflower, Mr. Clay, and that's the explanation for that" (305), meaning that he identifies most with the figure of the alter ego, but needs Sammy to help him understand the Escapist's motivations. Of course, Sammy understands the Escapist, not only because he wrote the character, but also because he sublimates his own wishes in the Escapist's storylines. Although at first Sammy can only focus on how opposite he and Bacon are—"Big, radiant, confident fellows with string-bass voices always made him feel acutely how

⁵ "Engaging in denial and repression in order to save oneself the difficult task of integrating an experience into one's personality" (Bettelheim 33) is a frequent tool of trauma survivors, and one that resurfaces later in Sammy's refusal to accept his sexual assault as reality.

⁶ Other important motifs of the superhero comic are outlined in Richard Reynolds's books *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. He identifies the seven major motifs, some of which also apply to Sammy: lost parents (Sammy's father leaves home and later dies); identifying the superhero as an earth-bound deity; a devotion to justice that overrides devotion to the law; an extraordinary nature contrasted with the ordinariness of the hero's surroundings; the dual nature of the secret identity and alter ego (which Sammy develops); loyalty and patriotism, which again, supersede the letter of the law; and science as magic (12–16). It is Behlman who identifies escapism as one of the other major elements of the superhero comic genre.

puny, dark, and Jewish he was” (303)—he sees part of himself reflected back at him: “there seemed to emerge ... an unmistakable portrait that Sammy was surprised to find he recognized: Tracy Bacon was lonely. And now, with an unerring instinct, he had sniffed out the loneliness in Sammy” (307). Their mutual loneliness makes them two sides of the same coin, both struggling to make it in a world where the only superheroes are the ones they create. Indeed, Sammy and Bacon both have a hand in creating the Escapist, but at the same time, they create for themselves an identity based around that of the superhero. Sammy and Bacon take turns playing alter ego or secret identity to each other’s role as their friendship and subsequent romantic relationship take on a tone of complementary interrelationship: the good-looking, self-assured actor has no trouble playing the alter ego who is a stand-in for the insecure writer with dreams of becoming the superhero. Sammy and Bacon are able to share the construction of a superhero identity, each occupying both roles at separate times.

This construction is further deepened by a connection that the text draws between gay men and superheroes. Sammy and Bacon participate in New York’s underground gay social network, and through these connections, they end up in Pawtaw, a house on the Jersey Shore, where they vacation with other gay men. Sammy observes the other couples present and remarks, “[T]hey could all play the secret identity of a guy in tights. Your bored playboy, your gridiron hero, your crusading young district attorneys. Bruce Wayne. Jay Garrick. Lamont Cranston” (407).⁷ This observation establishes a crucial link

⁷ Sammy uses the term “secret identity” to refer to what I call the “alter ego.” This difference in vocabulary can be explained by the nature of the word “alter ego.” As a literal “alternate self,” the alter ego is not the superhero’s actual self, but a role assumed to cover a secret. In this case, Sammy’s use of the term “alter ego” would suggest that the “guys in tights” are not actually gay if their alter egos are. Here, Sammy seems to fixate on the secret nature of a gay identity as something, like a superhero’s secret identity, that is only revealed under certain circumstances.

between the gay identity these men keep secret and the secret identity of a comic book superhero. Forced to protect their secret identities from discovery, superheroes and gay men employ alter egos. The roles of these alter egos could be quite easily played by the two “gridiron heroes” Sammy watches play football on the beach. In a way, Sammy is normalizing the idea of homosexuality—something with which he remains uncomfortable—by placing it in a context he can understand: comic books. He is also setting the stage for the double life he will soon lead in suburbia, where he will operate with an alter ego and secret identity of his own.

While on the trip, a vice squad raids Pawtaw and Sammy is raped by an FBI agent. Sammy is unable to accept the reality of what has happened to him, and he breaks up with Bacon before the actor leaves for California. Sammy swears to himself that “regardless of what he felt for Bacon, it was not worth the danger, the shame, the risk of arrest and opprobrium” to continue the relationship (420). Feeling rejected by society, Sammy rejects his counterpart, his complement, and strikes out on his own, thereby forced to be all things to himself, both alter ego and secret identity. In his subsequent move to suburbia with Rosa and Tommy, Sammy shoulders the responsibility of being his own superhero, the role he previously shared with Bacon in a relationship where each supported and protected the other from loneliness. It is the superhero’s job to protect innocent people from the villain, and the construction of hero/villain in Sammy’s tale marks the villain as reality, especially the homophobic reality of the past. More generally, fantasy is also the novel’s mode of choice through which to escape past trauma, as “fantasy may also act as an interruption to memory, a holding action against the incursions of the past” (Behlman 71). The suburban Sammy is necessarily both his own

secret identity and alter ego.⁸ His alter ego—husband/father—masks the detection of his secret identity—gay man. He protects the people in his life from his secret, and at the same time, he attempts to shield himself from his own secrets.

Section III: Holding off the Urban Past with the Suburban Present

Sammy's first encounter with the promise of suburbia occurs at the 1939 World's Fair. Displaying new developments in technology and inspiring generations to hope for what had been previously considered unthinkable, the Fair, as the novel reminds its readers, earned its title as "the World of Tomorrow." Fairgoers were distracted from the horrors of the present war and enthralled by the promises of the future. A monument to escapism, it is no wonder that the World's Fairgrounds are Sammy's favorite place in all of New York:

He had grown up in an era of great hopelessness, and to him and the millions of his fellow city boys, the Fair and world it foretold had possessed the force of a covenant, a promise of a better world to come, that he would later attempt to redeem in the potato fields of Long Island.

(Chabon 375)

Born in the hopelessness of the Depression and facing the turmoil of World War II, Sammy's generation wished for improvement in their lives, and the Fair promised a grand remodeling. As critics have remarked, the Fair "literally and figuratively replaced ashes with promise. It was a beacon of hope for a nation that had endured one storm of

⁸ Just as Bacon is the alter ego to an unknown secret identity. Throughout the novel, the narrator drops hints at a past life that Bacon has left behind. Even the name "Tracy Bacon" is presumably an alias, as he enacts the alter ego all the time—an identity laden with other secrets; for example, in his earlier relationship with actress Helen Portola, he played a straight man to cover up his homosexuality—but that does not diminish the fact that below the surface, he is still protecting his secret identity from detection.

conflict and was about to enter another” (Cohen et al. 5). The Fair gave hope that the world could make progress, that a life better than anyone could imagine was nearby. The Fair also “offered the illusion of better times, an escapism similar to, but more tangible than, Hollywood’s palliatives” (Zim et al. 15). The exhibits of the Fair presented both historical feats of splendor and fantastic visions of the future. In a way that Hollywood movies could never accomplish, the Fair enabled “the better life” to come alive. For all the extraordinariness on display, the Fair was also tinged with a sense that its innovative fantasies were within reach. The Fair witnessed the first public use of fluorescent lighting, nylon, Lucite, Plexiglass, Kodachrome transparencies and color home-movie film, noiseless fireworks, and 3D film viewed through Polaroid glasses (Cohen et al. 3–4). These revolutionary uses of technology assured the public that such visions were not dreams, and that—as the buttons that visitors received upon exiting the Democracy exhibit stated—they had seen the future.

The Fair’s literature was clear in its intent to demonstrate what was called the “American Way of Living”: one brochure about the Fair stated that “We must tell the story of the relationships between objects in their everyday use—how they must be used ... how they may help us” (Cohen et al. 3). Sammy learns this lesson from the Fair, and he uses the suburbs, the idealized neighborhoods of the Fair, to build a life for himself based on the compelling notion of a fantasy world that promises to solve his problems. Going beyond building relationships with objects—the televisions, washing machines, and lawn mowers ubiquitous in suburbia—Sammy exploits relationships with spaces to suit his needs. In particular, he uses the two spaces that make up his “everyday,” the city and the suburb, to help him keep separate his secret identity and alter ego. By living in

the suburbs and working in the city, Sammy is able to put even more distance between his alter ego and his secret identity. This physical distance reflects the cognitive distance Sammy puts between his dual identities. His commute between the two spaces allows him to transition mentally from one to the other (Brekhus 49).

The delineation between suburban and urban spaces also helps maintain Sammy's mask. Superheroes often wear masks or costumes to signify the shedding of the alter ego and the revelation of the secret identity. As is the case with Clark Kent and Superman, however, "the most cunning mask is no mask at all—as when a hero has a secret identity so unexpected or so well-contrived ... that context is a sufficient alibi for the familiar face" (Reynolds 26). By creating two different contexts for himself, Sammy does not need to alter his physical appearance as other superheroes morphing into their secret identities do. He is protected by the fact that his lunches with men stay in the city and his home life stays in the suburbs.

Sammy employs a routine to legitimize these spaces and ensure their separation from one another. Unfortunately, such a scheme does not provide much room for excitement:

He adopted the same policy with regard to [the house] that he followed with his wife, his employment, and his love life. It was all habit. The rhythms of the commuter train, the school year, publishing schedules, summer vacations, and of his wife's steady calendar of moods had inured him to the charms and torments of his life.

(Chabon 474)

Though Sammy's double life is not wholly without pleasure, the torments of continued deception and the inability to express himself fully dampen his experience of the richness life has to offer. By relying on external structures to shape his life, structures that have power over specific areas, Sammy functions almost on autopilot, allowing his personae to act for themselves only insofar as they can safely respond to the environment in which they exist.

It is important to note, however, that Sammy puts distance between his two selves not because one is more fulfilling than the other, but so they do not overlap and become confused. For the alter ego to be truly successful, it must be an authentic self that experiences real emotion, which Sammy's suburban self seems to be able to do, for he genuinely enjoys the comfort of his relationship with Rosa and the unpredictable nature of his relationship with his stepson, Tommy (Chabon 474). The urban secret identity is also a genuine self, because he is able to express the elements of his personality that he represses as the alter ego. Sammy's commute, then, like that of other gay commuters,⁹ is between "two different but equally 'real' selves" (Brekhus 52). Although Sammy's secret gay identity may be closer to an "authentic" self, that identity can only be fully protected if his alter ego is as realistic as possible. Sammy succeeds in giving substance to his suburban alter ego through his relationship with Rosa. Their marriage, a relationship built on a model of what marriage "should" be, is a simulation in which they pretend to have

⁹ In his book *Peacocks, Chameleons, Centaurs: Gay Suburbia and the Grammar of Social Identity*, Brekhus explores the idea of gay identity as a grammar. To some men, "gay" is a noun or adjective, and to a subset of gay men whom Brekhus refers to as "commuters" or "chameleons," "gay" is a verb, meaning that they enact their gay identities only in specific settings, often removed by physical distance from the everyday functioning of their lives.

what they do not.¹⁰ Originally a marriage of convenience, Sammy and Rosa's relationship does not have the basis in romantic feelings that most marriages do. It cannot be deemed "unsuccessful," however, because they feel genuine, friendly affection for each other. Additionally, after Rosa begins creating her own comic books for Sammy's new line designed for women, their professional relationship informs their domestic relationship, and gives them a blueprint from which to work:

And the truth was that their marriage had improved after she went to work for Sammy. It no longer seemed (to mistranslate) quite as blank. They became colleagues, coworkers, partners in an unequal but well-defined way that made it easier to avoid looking too closely at the locked cabinet at the heart of things. (Chabon 547)

By supplementing the simulated roles of husband and wife with the real roles of coworkers, Sammy and Rosa's relationship feels less artificial and more meaningful. Creating lives for themselves in suburbia makes it easier to mitigate the pain of remembering life in the city. Central to this set-up, however, is the locked cabinet into which Sammy and Rosa steadfastly refuse to look. The very existence of such a set of blocked-off memories continually reminds them, if not of the content of the memories, at least that such memories do exist. By creating a locked cabinet, Sammy and Rosa make a specific place for their memories of the past, potentially granting the memories more power to haunt them than if they had simply forgotten them.

¹⁰ In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard warns, "simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false,' the 'real' and the 'imaginary'" (3). Every simulation ultimately becomes infused with elements of the real—in a fake holdup, the victims will be experiencing real fear—and it is one of the functions of the real to "devour any attempt at simulation" (20).

Sammy's suburban life, then, reveals two distinct forms of everyday life: the past that he hopes to escape, and the present that he embraces. While Sammy's working relationship with Rosa is authentic, the present is also marked by a series of deceptions and avoidances. The truth behind the Clay family's origin story must be withheld for the family to survive. Therefore, Sammy must respond to his stepson Tommy's questions about Joe's whereabouts by refusing to answer them: "Such talk ... made Tommy's father nervous. He would reach for his cigarettes, a newspaper, the switch of the radio: anything to cut the conversation short" (Chabon 505). Sammy's perpetual evasion of Tommy's questions is a form of deception. His silence is a lie of omission, for questions about Joe and why he left are too close to questions of why Sammy and Rosa got married and why they retreated to the suburbs, and so Sammy must resolutely avoid any such questioning of the past. Living his suburban life based on lies (that he is straight, that Tommy is his biological child) affords Sammy protection from his past life. For Sammy's suburban alter ego, the consequences of both the city and the past are damaging and must be avoided at all costs. Indeed, for the alter ego, there must be no acknowledgement of life in the city. It must be categorized as something belonging to the past, since the present suburban life cannot function otherwise. This false distinction between lives, however, ultimately damages his secret identity. Though the urban gay self can express a side of Sammy's identity often repressed, deception is still necessary to protect the suburban man and his life with Rosa and Tommy from discovery.

The narrator, moreover, cooperates in protecting Sammy from the prying eyes of a society that does not accept homosexuality. Such narrative protection comes in the form of language, the central tool that the narrator has at his disposal. The narrator's language

“is at the same time a use *of* language and an operation performed *on* it” (de Certeau 33). By using language, or in some cases, by choosing to avoid description, the narrator can manipulate the presentation of Sammy’s character so as not to reveal that which Sammy hopes to keep secret. For example, when describing Sammy’s relationships with men in the city, the narrator speaks from Rosa’s point of view, a necessarily ignorant perspective: “Rosa always assumed these friendships of Sammy’s . . . went no further than a lunch table at Le Marmiton or Laurent. It was one of her fundamental assumptions” (Chabon 565). By not referring to what happens in these relationships from the perspective of anyone in them, the narrator avoids disclosing too much. At risk is Sammy’s participation in the suburban sphere and his practiced denial of his past. Earlier in the novel, when Sammy was ambivalent about his sexual identity—not confronting it, but not going to any particular lengths to hide it—the narrator offers a slightly clearer picture, describing kisses and alluding to lovemaking. After Sammy decides “that he would rather not love at all than be punished for loving” (420), however, the narrator retreats and leaves more unsaid, thereby respecting Sammy’s wishes to escape the past.

While the narrator makes sure not to reveal Sammy’s specific secret, the narrator does not hide the deceitful nature of the life Sammy and Rosa share; almost every reference to their domestic life includes a mention that it is held together by lies—“As a rule, they tended to avoid questions like ‘How sane are we?’ and ‘Do our lives have meaning?’ The need for avoidance was acute and apparent to both of them” (563). He provides enough information for readers to draw their own conclusions—by making clear that Rosa assumes nothing more than chaste lunches, readers can be assured that more than lunch occurs—but he never explicitly describes a homosexual encounter. Although

the narrator must still perform his role of storyteller and inform the reader what happens, it is as though the narrator is participating in Sammy's superhero construction by masking Sammy's reality from the reader at different points in the story. The reader (and Sammy) cannot un-know the past, but can be kept in the dark about certain aspects of the present.

The narrator is less careful about disclosing the false nature of Sammy's suburban marriage to the reader as the reader is expected to allow and enable the deception, just as Sammy and Rosa do. Baudrillard writes, "reality asks for nothing more than to submit to hypotheses. It validates all of them: that is its ruse and its vengeance" ("Radical Thought" 168). In Sammy and Rosa's marriage, the hypothesis is based on the assumption that their marriage is based on romantic love for each other. Reality validates this hypothesis by conflating professional roles with domestic ones and fostering actual feelings of affection between the two. It fools Sammy and Rosa into thinking that their life is just like everyone else's, but it also punishes them by making their fantasy come true. The responsibility of living in suburbia takes its toll on Sammy. To live in the suburbs, one must meet certain requirements: employment, marriage, parenthood, stability. "If there were not a wife and child for him to support, *a child not even his own...*" (Chabon 547, emphasis in the original) is the unfinished threat Sammy leaves hanging in the air between himself and Rosa. In the unspoken ellipsis, he gestures towards the novel he could write, the love he could find. Suburbia can also make this threat to him: if there were not a wife and child for him to support, he would not have been granted access to this paradise; if the wife and child disappear, so does the promise of happiness in the suburbs. Thus, his configuration of suburbia as a space "conforming beyond

expectations” is ultimately a dead end (Baudrillard, “Radical Thought” 172).¹¹ With his escape from his past reality realized through the form of Sammy’s alter ego, there is nothing left to imagine and the crushing forces of his present reality take over.

These forces, while oppressing Sammy, paradoxically make the mask even more convincing. It is so convincing, so real, that even when hints of that other reality, that of the past/the city, peek through, they go unchallenged: “Everyone knew. That was what made their particular secret, their lie, so ironic; it went unspoken, unchallenged, and yet it did not manage to deceive” (Chabon 566). Sammy and Rosa’s lie does not go unnoticed by their friends and neighbors, the narrator takes careful pains to point out, but it goes unchallenged because of a basic wish on the part of the world to embrace the façade. If the other residents of Bloomtown do more than idly speculate as to the true nature of Rosa’s feelings for “Cousin Joe” or what Sammy does in the city, they would be opening the doors for their own past realities to return.¹² Therefore, the concept of illusion is necessary as it is the consciousness of something beyond the banality of the everyday (Baudrillard, “Radical Thought” 162), and the residents of Bloomtown accept Sammy and Rosa’s illusion because it makes it easier to accept their own.

This tacit agreement establishes the suburbs as the locus of characters’ hopes to escape the past and create new lives for themselves. The power of the past, however, lies in the fact that Sammy was forced to move away from it. By escaping from New York City to Bloomtown, Sammy acknowledges the dreadful power of remembering his attack.

¹¹ The quote continues, “for somewhere you don’t even believe it that much, otherwise you would never have been able to invent it.”

¹² Because suburbia promises through the World’s Fair and suburban marketers to offer an escape from reality, suburbanites transplanted from the city have a past reality they would like to forget or reconstitute also. The quote from page 474 of *Kavalier and Clay* (found on pages 5 and 6 of this thesis) reinforces this notion. Not every suburbanite is necessarily hiding a secret sexual identity, but every move *to* somewhere is also a move *away from* somewhere else.

The force of the past is so strong it would have had the power to cripple him if he had remained in that urban space. The passing of time, however, serves to alleviate his pain. The longer Sammy goes without being confronted directly by the specters of the past, the stronger the illusion of successful escape in the present is. Time is on his side, as he and Rosa spend more than six years in suburbia. Thus, a tentative balance is struck between the strategic forces of reality and the tactics of escape, a balance unique to the suburban space in which it occurs.

This balance topples for Sammy, however, with his outing by a Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the Senate Judiciary Committee. During the Subcommittee hearings, Senator Hendrickson asks Sammy about the frequent use of boy wards in comic books, such as Dick Grayson, Robin's alter ego in the *Batman* comic books. The Senator asks whether Sammy was aware that he was "in any way expressing or attempting to disseminate [his] own ... psychological proclivities" (Chabon 616). Sammy's response is that of the flustered victim: "I'm afraid I don't ... these are not any proclivities which I'm familiar with, Senator" (616). This lie is an attempt at protecting himself thrown up by the alter ego, but because Sammy's secret identity is a gay man, he cannot offer any effective protection from this attack.

Because Sammy's protective system operates on the continued belief of a lie, the failure of the system marks the failure of the lie. The lie teaches Sammy the degradation of the world in which he lives (Adorno 30). Perjuring himself twice (in the *Superman* copyright deposition and the Subcommittee hearing) is a necessary survival technique, as is his continued denial of his homosexuality. Each time he perpetuates those lies and denials, however, Sammy separates himself from a society that, in Adorno's words,

“sings the praises of loyalty and truthfulness” (30). By lying, Sammy places himself on the fringes of society, although such lies were originally motivated by a desire to remain a part of society. In the Subcommittee hearing, his lie is dismissed, the truth revealed, and suburbia lost. Not only is he outed as a gay man, but also as a liar, and the lie’s ability to offer a “glacial atmosphere in whose shelter he can thrive” (Adorno 30) no longer exists.

This turn of events destroys Sammy’s identity construction, but it simultaneously allows a new one to emerge. With his secret identity no longer a secret, there is no need for the alter ego, as there is no one left to protect. Therefore, Sammy is free to unmask his secret identity and make it part of his entire identity. If the reality of the lie is hyperreal, artificial, an illusion, it is able to survive for only a brief while in suburbia, a space shaped by a collective fantasy. Suburbia liberates Sammy one final time by allowing him to leave his life of lies for an unknown future that is unshaped by any corporate marketers, developers, or Fair promoters. Incapable of imagining “what it would feel like to live through a day that was not fueled or deformed by a lie” (Chabon 623), Sammy accepts this intervention and sets off to discover exactly what is real in his life. What was originally a final reassertion of strategic power becomes invigorating as Sammy leaves tactical maneuvers behind, able to survive on his own without the need to mediate his reality through escape.

Section IV: Conclusions — “An easy escape from reality”

If Sammy’s suburban escape from reality is unsuccessful in that it routinely fails and prevents Sammy from living a full life on his own terms, certain forms of imaginary fantasy are nonetheless essential to the human condition. Behlman suggests that Chabon

presents “fantasy as a means of therapeutic escape from history ... he sets up a defense of popular escapism as a quintessentially American artistic response to the Holocaust” (56). Americans need their comic books, their films, their Worlds Fairs, their love lives (all modes of escape presented in the novel) to escape the horrors of history. Why, then, does Chabon routinely establish the failure of that escape when it concerns Sammy Clay?

Through the novel, Chabon expresses the need to forget a historical happening so that individuals can function in their day-to-day lives. If individuals try to escape their day-to-day reality, then they have no place left in which to function. I would suggest that the wider theme of the novel—escapism as a legitimate response to the Holocaust—is tempered by the object lesson of Sammy Clay. Escaping the everyday leaves one empty, and such an escape cannot sustain itself because it is not truly an escape, but denial.

Where escape is a matter of momentary disregard, according to Bettelheim,

[D]enial is the earliest, most primitive, and most inappropriate and ineffective of all psychological defenses used by man ... it does not permit taking appropriate action which might safeguard against the real dangers. Denial therefore leaves the individual most vulnerable to the very perils against which he has tried to defend himself. (Bettelheim 84)

Sammy’s escapism fails because it leaves him vulnerable to the perils against which he tries to defend himself—the political and homophobic realities that permeate all of these spaces. For Sammy, escapism is transformed into denial of such realities, which always return in new forms of social and political antagonism.

In contrast, Chabon uses comic books as a means to channel the desire to change history by individuals who are powerless to do so: hence the cathartic power of the first

Escapist comic book cover which portrays the Escapist vividly punching Adolf Hitler in the mouth. By recasting themselves as heroes during the Golden Age, Sammy and Joe can feel like they are doing something to bring an end to the war. This sort of imaginative escape is productive because it turns feelings of helplessness into feelings of power, which enables individuals to continue their lives without getting bogged down in the realization of weakness to prevent atrocity. Escape is not productive when it replaces one's life with an entirely imagined illusion that cannot sustain itself, but imaginary escape as a supplement to the real can offer a momentary respite from the present.

The moments of liberation are what Chabon's narrative offers the reader. By veiling Sammy's reality, he makes the extent of Sammy's denial clear and the danger of such denial all too real. Readers follow the course of this novelistic meditation, discovering where fantasy succeeds and also where it fails. By establishing reality as both necessary and avoidable, *Kavalier and Clay* makes apparent the dual importance of escape and acceptance. We must face reality, but we do not have to do so all of the time. We can escape reality, but we cannot do so all of the time. We must strike a balance between the impulse to remember and the impulse to forget; only then can we attempt a full and functional life.

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