Since the 1960s, discussions pertaining to the literary canon have been sites of increasing academic and public discord. As questions have developed around which texts should be required reading in schools, the curriculum has become a progressively more contested domain, fostering debates about the social and cultural functions of literature. Such disputation is evidenced by the “culture wars” waged over the past generation and their aftermath (Ravitch, 2002). As we see it, all iterations of a literary canon, whether “Eurocentric” or “multicultural,” concern authority, cultural capital, and the privileging of one set of texts at the expense of others (Guillory, 1993). While ongoing academic interrogations of the canon are valuable and perhaps inevitable, as literacy educators, we prioritize recognizing and learning from the literate legacies of our students over the impetus to divide the world of texts into ideological camps.

Literacy scholars have looked beyond the literal embodiment of the book to consider multiple genres, modes, media, and a wide range of lived contexts within which people construct and express meaning (New London Group, 1996). The hegemony of alphabetic texts has thus given way to multiple literacies, such as comics and graphic novels, digital storytelling, hip hop, video games, and youth media culture (e.g., Carter, 2008; Hall, 2011; Low, 2012; Simon, 2012). “Literacy pedagogy,” argued the New London Group, “now must account for the burgeoning variety of text forms” (1996, p. 61). Scholars and educators alike suggest that new literacies provide culturally relevant avenues for historically minoritized youth to navigate schooling, deconstruct dominant narratives, and assert their social and experiential knowledge (Morrell, 2002; Vasudevan & Campano, 2009).

We believe distinctions between the canon and popular culture should not be cast too starkly. In an ideal learning environment, students will encounter and create a range of texts and come to see themselves as operating within rich and evolving intellectual traditions. The question thus needs to move away from whether there should or should not be a literary canon and toward how literary legacies are manifested in our students’ lives and writings. We contend that texts not conventionally considered academic (such as comics) and texts often read in schools (such as canonical novels) have porous boundaries and often share similar literary roots. Based on our research, we examine how African American naturalism finds its way into contemporary texts as well as into the multimodal writings produced by youth. By highlighting an excerpt from the graphic narrative *Yummy* and the work of a fifth-grade student in a school comics club, we show how visuo-textual narratives may reasonably be seen as extensions of preexisting literary traditions.
The Naturalistic Tradition

Words can be used “as a weapon,” wrote Richard Wright in *Black Boy* (1945, p. 248), a book often acknowledged as canonical. Indeed, Wright found ample opportunity to deploy words as weapons of social critique, making salient the realities of inequality and racism not often visible to a dominant white majority. From the Southern lynchings he documented in his earliest fiction to his later depictions of ghettos in Chicago, Wright remained determined to expose the dehumanizing living conditions he encountered (Moskowitz, 2008). Reading Wright, wrote Irving Howe, “made impossible a repetition of the old lies . . . [and] brought out into the open . . . the hatred, fear, and violence” (1963, p. 354).

An extension of realism’s “faithful reproduction” of reality, naturalism refers to the “frank, harsher treatment of that reality” (Gates & McKay, 2003, p. 1356), emphasizing how one’s environment and broader social and political dynamics can shape success and even one’s very nature (Cormier-Hamilton, 1994). In the African American literary tradition, naturalism is concerned with, among other things, poverty, violence, racism, criminalization, and social protest. This is epitomized in Wright’s work, as what he encountered in Chicago bore little resemblance to the North of his childhood imagination. Instead, Wright found the “urban equivalent of the slave ship’s ‘festering hold’” (Baker, 2010, p. 110). Baker’s invocation of the Middle Passage, in reference to Wright’s portrayal of Chicago, historically connects antebellum slavery and the modern Black condition, including the surveillance and mass incarceration of people of color. Forms of oppressive control are thus “reborn in new form” (Alexander, 2010, p. 21). Wright portrayed the state as embodied in a police force that, in its interactions with the African American community, often tramples constitutional rights (Clapp, 2011). In depicting an unjust justice system, Wright used his words as weapons to make visible slavery’s and Jim Crow’s institutional successors.

Yummy: A Contemporary Manifestation of the Naturalistic Tradition

The legacy of African American naturalism cannot be neatly slotted into any one literary epoch, and it is manifested in many genres, including film, street literature (Morris, 2012), and the graphic novel *Yummy: The Last Days of a Southside Shorty* (Neri & DuBurke, 2010). Neri and DuBurke use public records to visually document the story of Robert “Yummy” Sandifer, who in 1994, at the age of 11, drew national attention for the killing of 14-year-old Shavon Dean in a Southside neighborhood of Chicago. Through the perspective of a fictitious teenage narrator, Neri and DuBurke invite readers to navigate complex issues related to family, racial inequality, gang violence, media, and politics.

As in Wright’s oeuvre, the police in *Yummy* function as an occupying force, rather than as community protectors, and a naturalistic emphasis on criminalization becomes visually prominent (see Fig. 1). Six police officers tower over three submissively posed neighborhood residents, while looks of suspicion greet the former from the periphery. As Wacquant (2002) writes, “the remnants of the dark ghetto and an expanding carceral system have become linked in a single system that entraps large numbers of younger black men . . . to make the ghetto more like a prison.” DuBurke’s illustrations—replete with fences, bars, bricks, and shadows—visually represent Chicago’s Southside as demonstrably prisonlike; his scenes expose dehumanizing neighborhood conditions similar to Wright’s representation of segregation in the same city over half a century earlier. The visuo-textual medium of comics, as employed in *Yummy*, augments the naturalistic tropes invoked by Wright. The synergy between words and images highlights the porous boundaries between mediums traditionally considered within and outside the literary canon.
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**Comics Club and the Legacy of Naturalism**

Over the past year, David has been working closely with a group of fourth- to eighth-grade African American boys as part of a comics club (Bitz, 2006) within a larger research project initiated by Gerald in a multietnic, multilingual community in a large northeastern city. The club meets weekly for three hours to read, write, draw, and discuss comics. As the club’s facilitator, David provides students with a variety of comics genres (e.g., superhero, humor, adventure, biography, nonfiction) as well as art supplies for making their own comics. The instruction in the club is based in critical inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), creating opportunities for the students to explore issues relevant to their lives via the medium of comics.

Much like the comics the students read, those they have created vary in subject matter and style. However, two major genres appear consistently: the superhero adventure and the naturalistic story of black urban life. Many of the comics feature the day-to-day activities of Randy, a fictitious protagonist several members of the club created for storytelling purposes. In the early weeks of the club, while members were deliberating about what sorts of comics they wanted to make, several had the idea that if they jointly designed a single character, they could tell a better story.

In this collaborative spirit Randy was born, and whoever used the character could interpret Randy in his own way. Members of the club wrote about Randy’s relationships, his nightmares, and his encounters in the neighborhood, among other subjects. Often, these could be read thematically as forms of social critique. The Randy character may offer a way for middle level students in the club to safely “fictionalize reality” (Medina & Campano, 2006) and to address challenging issues facing their families and community. Similar to *Yummy*—which the club members had not read—the students’ Randy stories employ the comics medium to convey and augment the naturalistic tradition.

One example of a Randy story, as sketched by 12-year-old Larry (pseudonym), portrays the character being confronted and harassed by four police officers, presented as a faceless monolithic block (see Fig. 2). Randy’s flip retorts are construed by the officers as a criminal provocation, leading to his being handcuffed. In the center of the page, the word “cuff” is explicitly labeled (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), becoming a visual synecdoche for the relationship between African
American youth and the criminal justice system. Drawing on the historical ties between slavery and imprisonment (Hedges & Sacco, 2012), Larry’s “cuff” recalls chains of bondage. Ultimately, Randy is taken away to prison for his oppositional but typically teenager-like comments to the officers.

As Larry explained to David about the genesis of his graphic narrative, “I was watching a cop show . . . and this guy, he was just sitting on a curb and smoking, and the cops just came up and started, like they got racist with him. So that’s what made me think of that.” Larry’s comics satirize injustices in the criminal justice system—specifically with respect to the racist profiling of young black males—in a way that echoes both Wright’s and Neri and DuBurke’s naturalist approaches. In his own way, Larry also portrays the segregation of African American communities as a mechanism for physical and social subordination (Wacquant, 2002). The police officers in Larry’s comics are antagonists, embodying an impersonal occupying force. Larry’s sketches seem to convey how “mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals” (Alexander, 2010, p. 192). Larry critiques this America, as did Richard Wright, by exposing the injustices and racial discrimination at the core of its institutions. In Larry’s hands, the synergy of image and word becomes the weapon.

Larry offers one example of how a popular medium can reinforce African American naturalism, enabling students to contribute to evolving literary traditions and social legacies of dissent. Although he has not yet read Richard Wright or Yummy, Larry is working within this literary heritage; he has significant knowledge about inequality borne from his experiences—a form of epistemic privilege (Campano, 2007)—and passed down to him through intergenerational literacy practices (Gadsden, 1992) outside of school. We believe it will be important for Larry to make explicit links between his comics and the more established canon, a pedagogical imperative that is becoming increasingly difficult in a policy climate emphasizing remediation and standardization at the expense of shared inquiry.

Conclusion

Many literary and artistic genres that have a canonical aura were once considered popular, if not lowbrow, forms of cultural expression, from the drama of Shakespeare to the jazz music of Lincoln Center. While a multiliteracies framework would suggest that students critically engage the world through a range of texts and practices, it is perhaps premature to disassemble the canon altogether, especially when the contributions of authors from minoritized communities are entering the school curriculum after longstanding social and political struggles for recognition, as well as facing a backlash, as exemplified in the recent assault on Ethnic Studies in Arizona. How, then, do educators both expose students to the canon while simultaneously honoring the intellectual

Figure 2. Larry’s graphic narrative adopts several central tenets of the African American naturalist tradition.
engagement young people are drawn to on their own, often in out-of-school contexts (Gainer & Lapp, 2010)? What we have learned from Larry, as well as so many other youth in our research, is the need to view all students as cosmopolitan intellectuals (Campano & Ghiso, 2011) who have the capacities to think transculturally and across genres, making any texts they may encounter potential grist for their creative mills. The canon is not solely a mechanism to be reproduced; it is also critically reinvented by our students. Larry employed comics, a marginalized medium, to situate himself within a deeper literary legacy. In the process, he began to make the canon his own, while cultivating and expressing critical perspectives that were immediately relevant to his life. By coupling new literacies and canonical texts and encouraging multimodal composing, teachers can provide educational spaces where students understand themselves as both inheritors and creators (Campano & Ghiso, 2011, p. 175) of literary traditions.

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