When I was a young boy, my father would take me out to the stretches of fields that engulfed my hometown to walk alongside the migrant workers. He was a union rep, and would lead me between the fields of strawberries and lima beans, passing out flyers for upcoming elections. I would trail behind and toss what I could pick into the workers’ blue plastic buckets while he spoke. “Where are the streets paved in gold?” he would ask, “All I see are rows and rows of dirt.” My interest with those considered “outsiders” trying to realize a very different American dream lies within these early autumn days in the fields. The story of the outsider in the land of opportunity has become an obsession I have carried into my studies, and wish to carry into my career as a professor.

Over the past four years, I have worked towards making myself the best student and teacher I can be by working as an English tutor and conducting original research into the nature of Steinbeck’s “Phalanx Theory.” After a bout of severe illness in which I was forced to withdraw for the fall semester of 2012, I was able to return to school and refocus on my studies and career path towards being a professor. Upon my return, I immersed myself into a schedule heavy in modern American literature. The “Outsider” narratives I encountered in this coursework unified these “rows of dirt” into a road intimate to myself.

In my fourth year, I was able to more fully develop this interest in two courses, namely: the modern American novel and modern California literature. While the writers’ styles in these courses differed greatly, a single strand of experience seemed to tie them all together—the subtle tension between those perceived to be normal and those made to be alien. No other country in the world offers such a complex paradox between a promise of equality for all and the realized equality for an elect few. The strain in Steinbeck’s appeal for dignity among the dispossessed, Chang-Rae Lee’s search for an identity as an Asian American, Wright’s unapologetic portrayal of the struggles of blacks in America all do their part in telling a part of a uniquely body of American literature. This chorus of struggle and exclusion in a land without “liberty and justice for all” provides the bedrock for the research I wish to continue within the future.

Steinbeck, whose work I based my research upon, provides distinct examples of America’s process of “othering”, and search for identity that I would like to explore in my research as a PhD student. I have found in my research that there is a contradiction in the “influential actor’s” (see writing sample) place in the phalanx theory. For if Doc is the influential actor, group-man or mass man winds up being fostered by the figure who himself remains an outsider. This is a rather odd position to be in if one is invested in community building, as Steinbeck seems to be, since the community itself never winds up capable of integrating the person who sees to its fortification.

If one can grant a kind of tension between mass man and individual man at the level of their fictional representations, it would be easy to suggest at least one parallel to Wright and Lee (among a host of other American masters). What does it mean, for Wright, to put the entire weight of blackness on Bigger Thomas? What does it mean for Lee, to create a character that simultaneously reject his Korean upbringing, and yet admire the creation of a Korean-American society? Is it telling then that all three choose to capture their respective messages through a specific form—the novel? My plans for research lie within this discrepancy. In a country plagued with such a unique paradox in the promise for equality and its flagrant shortcomings, the great works of fiction that delve into this contradiction provide an equally unique opportunity for examination.
The outsider, the underprivileged, the alien provide the key to understanding what makes American literature uniquely *American* and it is in their stories that I wish to uncover some greater understanding about how Americans view themselves. I would like to join you in the PhD program at Cornell University to continue this research, improve as a thinker, and become a better teacher. Cornell offers a dynamic intellectual environment cultivated by some of the greatest minds in the study of modern American literature. Specifically, I have followed the work of Dr. George Hutchinson and Dr. Margo Natalie Crawford. Both have contributed extensively to the academic discourse of the outsider narrative in American literature. Dr. Hutchinson’s *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* offers an incredibly unique investigation into the little-known transracial nature of the Harlem Renaissance. Dr. Hutchinson addresses the severe gap in the critical framework surrounding the burgeoning black intellectual movement during the early 20th century by identifying its mixed cultural influences. By highlighting the direct involvement of Jewish publishers and white editors (to name a few) in fostering the birth of the Harlem Renaissance, Hutchinson re-writes history with cross-cultural considerations. This re-evaluation, I believe, contributes to a more holistic and accurate understanding of a larger multi-racial American history. Dr. Hutchinson’s attention to the nuances of interracial influences and efforts to re-frame literary history through a trans-ethnic lens represents the very best in the field of modern American literature and is someone I hope to work with in forming my own research.

In addition, Dr. Crawford’s *Dilution Anxiety and the Black Phallus* is representative of what I believe is the vanguard in the study of modern American literature—focusing on the anxiety and psychoanalytic repercussions *shades* of skin color have on identity formation. Dr. Crawford contends that skin color dilution can be understood as a type of castration. This insight, I believe, can act as a launch pad for similar lines of inquiry into the understanding of the self in other ethnic literary works. What are the psychoanalytic repercussions for an Asian American to be half white? Does this particular kind of dilution feminize the individual in the eyes of the full-Asian community or serve to integrate the individual better in white society? Or both? Does the emasculation of light skinned blacks translate to Latinos? Working with Dr. Crawford would be an incredible in helping contour my research to address these issues.

Cornell’s lively intellectual environment and contributions to American literary discourse, and more specifically minority discourse, make Cornell the ideal institution to continue and develop my research interests. There is always more to explore in a genre as diverse and fluctuating as American fiction. I believe with Cornell University’s support and guidance, I can help plow roads of understanding through such terrifically wild terrain.