"TOO MANY OLIVES IN MY MARTINI": W.C. FIELDS AND CHARLES BUKOWSKI AS POSTMODERN CARNIVAL KINGS

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ABSTRACT

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In the early history of America, constant, steady drinking brought the carnivalesque into official life such that the carnival and the official, as Bakhtin describes these terms, were intertwined. As hard alcohol, binges and drunkenness flourished in America, official life separated from carnival life. Temperance and prohibition movements that rose to significance in the early nineteenth century successfully marginalized the use of alcohol and also the alcoholic carnival. As the American alcoholic carnival diminished as a part of lived experience, it continued on in the mediated form that is its primary embodiment today.

W.C. Fields and Charles Bukowski are two particularly successful purveyors of the mediated alcoholic carnival, Fields as an actor and screenwriter and Bukowski as a writer of poetry, stories, novels, and one screenplay. Bukowski’s mostly autobiographical texts often detail the steps his character, Henry Chinaski, takes to ensure he is able to drink and write, to the exclusion of most other considerations. A Fields character tries harder than Chinaski to succeed according to American middle-class standards, but first has to deal with the distaste he inspires as an alcoholic eccentric. Bukowski/Chinaski, by defining his own terms for success, stands largely outside of American hegemonic culture, criticizing the American Dream and American notions of alcoholism. Fields, as an eccentric trying to succeed according to middle class standards, reveals the shortcomings and contradictions of the American Dream by juxtaposing his mainstream misfit with the equally absurd American middle class.

Fields and Bukowski both use alcohol as a carnival tool of rebellion. They are carnival kings because they foreground and lead the misrule in their carnival texts. They are postmodern carnival kings because, as celebrity figures who are at once real, imaginary, and somewhere in between, they inspire misrule not only in their own texts, but in other texts and lived experiences. To give examples of the effect of these postmodern kings on other texts and lived experiences, I detail the carnival creations of two creative fan forums to conclude this thesis.
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INTRODUCTION

On October 20, 2007, I drove north of Detroit to Brighton Hospital, a care center in a suburban resort community. I expected to find a typical outpatient hospital, but Brighton Hospital was of a kind I had only experienced through old Hollywood films. According to the hospital’s literature, Brighton Hospital is “a freestanding chemical dependence treatment center” founded in 1950 by Harry Henderson, former chair of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission. “One of Henderson’s colleagues was Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. They believed addiction is a physical, mental and spiritual disease that can be treated with medical intervention, counseling and a strong spiritual life supported by 12-step programs. This principle still guides Brighton’s treatment philosophy today” (Recovering). I had come to Brighton to see an exhibit that had just relocated to the hospital from the New Detroit Science Center, titled LIVE outside the bottle: The Story of Alcoholism in America. Between the science museum and the chemical dependence center, the latter was probably a more comfortable home for LIVE. The exhibit does not tell the story of alcoholism so much as it gives information about the condition and urges the observer to seek help for himself or his friends and family. LIVE presents alcoholism as a disease that “willpower alone can’t overcome,” as a promotional poster for the exhibit puts it. Likewise, LIVE’s Web site warns “Don’t get trapped into thinking you can quit on your own.”

This disease model of alcoholism is a common American conception of the condition, and I by no means wish to discredit it as a useful and, for many, life-saving notion. I do wish, however, to point out that the disease model is not simply the result of science, and LIVE outside the bottle demonstrates this fact in at least two ways. First of all, the promotional content for the LIVE exhibit is copyrighted by Cephalon, a drug company that “specializes in medications to
treat and manage neurological diseases, sleep disorders, cancer, pain and addiction” (*Cephalon*).

Also on the promotional material for the exhibit is the logo of Alkermes, another pharmaceutical company that has collaborated with Cephalon to create Vivitrol, a drug to aid those recovering from alcoholism (“About”; “Collaborative”; *Vivitrol*). On the page of the *LIVE* Web site that details alcoholism treatment options, the first option listed is medication, and the first type of medication the Web site suggests is naltrexone for extended-release injectable suspension—in other words, Vivitrol (“Treatment”; *Vivitrol*). Clearly, *LIVE outside the bottle* is concerned with more than just the alcoholic’s well-being when it assures him that he cannot overcome his condition through willpower alone.

What interests me more about *LIVE outside the bottle* than the exhibit’s political economy is how *LIVE* displays, without reservation, the role that popular media play in supposedly scientific conceptions of alcoholism. The exhibit begins with a video that combines clips of Hollywood films with text commentary. The first clip is from the 1916 Charlie Chaplin short *One A.M.*, in which Chaplin’s character drunkenly attempts to make his way upstairs to his bedroom. After about twenty seconds of Chaplin’s comic drunken stumbling, *LIVE*’s first message appears onscreen: “Alcoholism is no laughing matter.” As the video transitions from one clip to the next, more text appears: “The reality of the disease is DEVASTATING.” To show the reality of alcoholism, *LIVE*’s creators chose a clip from *The Lost Weekend* (1945), an iconic fictional Hollywood alcoholism film. For the specifics of the alcoholic’s devastating reality, including loss of control and the impact of alcoholism on the drinker’s family, the creators used clips from other fictional alcoholism films: *When a Man Loves a Woman* (1994) and *Duane Hopwood* (2005).
“It is always a question of proving the real through the imaginary,” states Baudrillard in "The Precession of Simulacra" (465). Indeed, it is hardly a surprise that *LIVE outside the bottle* employs fictional depictions of alcoholism rather than images of the real thing. One might reasonably question even the reality of documented footage of lived alcoholic experience. In our postmodern reality, the imaginary often stands in for the real, and even the distinction between the imaginary and the real is itself very often unclear. This blurring is particularly evident in the American discourse on alcohol consumption. Many people accept fictional characters like Don Birnam of *The Lost Weekend* as realistic-enough depictions of an alcoholic reality that they would not experience in intimate detail but for seeing films dealing with the subject.

Likewise, conditions like alcoholism lack credibility unless they have some simulated media presence, such as a celebrity spokesperson. *LIVE outside the bottle* features quotes, video and audio clips from several famous (or at least notable) people who have dealt with their own alcoholism. The *LIVE* Web site’s home page prominently features a link to a video clip of their spokesperson, Indianapolis 500 winner Al Unser, Jr. The experiences of celebrity spokespersons are not imaginary per se, but they do exist somewhere between the media consumer’s lived reality and the simulated worlds of print and electronic media. When one accepts a mediated celebrity’s word as cause enough to reconsider one’s life, one acts on faith that the simulated image (or actual person, whom one is accustomed to seeing only in simulations) is honestly sharing a reality that one has no empirical evidence to verify as truth.

In their hyperreal existence between media and lived reality, media celebrities wield a great deal of power in the American discourse on alcohol, even when that discourse is presented as a matter of science. But the American alcohol discourse is rarely confined to matters of science and medicine alone; it fluctuates between the realms of science, economics, law, and
culture without pause. Alcohol and alcoholism serve as signifiers for much more than simply inebriation and disease, and both permeate all matter of American popular culture. Many are the American cultural products and icons that signify alcoholism as a disease and/or alcohol as a social ill, but there are also more than a few icons that resist this dominant conception of heavy drinking. Because alcohol is not a simple signifier, those who resist dominant conceptions of alcohol and alcoholism also, intentionally or not, resist many of the most widely held cultural assumptions of American society.

In this thesis, I detail the role and significance of two media figures that join the American discourse on alcohol by using the drug as a tool to challenge hegemonic conceptions regarding alcohol itself as well as conceptions of morality, hard work, achievement—in total, the American Dream. Charles Bukowski was a writer of poems, stories, novels, and a screenplay. He published his first collection in 1969, when he was nearly fifty years old (Hollywood). His writing is based almost totally on autobiographical experience, presented through the fictional character Henry Chinaski. Much of his written work details his experiences finding ways to support his two insatiable habits: drinking and writing. Though W.C. Fields was once a vaudeville star and was widely considered to be the greatest juggler in the world (Erickson; Rich, “Clash”), today he is primarily remembered for the feature films in which he plays the lead role. These films were produced from the early 1930s, when Fields was already over fifty years old (Erickson), to the early 1940s. Fields’ work is not as thoroughly autobiographical as Bukowski’s, but Fields did have, and continues to have, a consistent public persona. Whether as a dishonest circus leader or a henpecked middle-class father and husband, Fields never presents himself to the public as a man of many principles. Rather, he is the image of misanthropy: he barely tolerates his fictional family, even as he works hard to support them, and he would sooner cheat
an honest man than earn an honest living. All the while, he drinks as often as he can, despite the disapproval of his family and community.

They worked in different times and usually in different media, but in many ways, Fields and Bukowski are celebrities of a kind. In their art and in their lives, the two figures challenge and critique the American Dream. Bukowski presents himself to the public as a drinker who only holds down a job as long as he needs to, or can, in his quest to get to the next drink and rent check. He does not strive to achieve any goals or change his station in life; he strives only to support his drinking and his writing. W.C. Fields presents himself as either a misfit drinker stuck in middle-class America—trying to support a family in often innovative ways while that family criticizes his every move—or a dishonest vagabond businessman, keeping always one step ahead of the people whose ire he has inspired in his largely illegal quest for the American Dream. In this thesis, I argue that these roles Bukowski and Fields create for themselves allow them to parody and critique the cultural norms of American society. Through their behavior and attitudes towards work and other people, and through their use of alcohol, Fields and Bukowski separate themselves out from their societies in ways that throw their supporting characters into question, even as those supporting characters question and criticize them for their counter-hegemonic behavior.

Through their artistic personae, Charles Bukowski and W.C. Fields enact a particular, unique type of carnival. In the first chapter, I explain in detail the concept of carnival, but to offer a brief description here, carnival is a concept described most famously by Mikhail Bakhtin. As Bakhtin describes it, carnival is based in centuries-old European rituals wherein life is “turned inside out” (251). Binaries like rich and poor, moral and immoral, and life and death, are flipped and/or erased during carnival, such that the classes mingle freely, ideals of decorum and
good behavior are suspended, and the lowliest of society are held up as temporary carnival kings, admired for socially destructive and self-destructive behavior. Bakhtin explains that carnival long ago went from being a form of lived experience to being a trope of literature, something we now only experience through the “literary tradition” of “carnivalized literature” (258).

I argue that Bukowski and Fields are carnival kings—heroes admired for behavior that is usually detested by mainstream middle- and upper-class America. The simple fact that these alcoholic eccentrics play leading roles in their artistic works makes their art carnivalesque; their works flip normal conceptions of the kind of characters with whom a reader or filmgoer will relate and sympathize. However, the manner of carnival enacted by Fields and Bukowski is more complex than this one point suggests. Their carnival is a mediated form of carnival, following in the tradition of the carnivalized literature that Bakhtin describes as emerging in seventeenth-century Europe (258). However, mediated carnival in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries does not function quite as simply as it did in the seventeenth century. I argue that Bukowski and Fields enact postmodern mediated carnival because, as media celebrities with consistent public personae, they appear to the audience to exist in their art (onscreen or on the page), in the real world, and simultaneously within and between these two realms. Therefore, they enact carnival as leaders of misrule in the print and film media, but they also act as leaders of misrule beyond their art, as carnival kings for their readers, viewers, and fans.

W.C. Fields and Charles Bukowski are both American artists, and this facet of their identities accounts for another central aspect of their function as carnival kings. Namely, for both media figures, alcohol is a central tool of their carnival labor. In Chapter One of this thesis, I refer to the history of the American alcohol discourse as well as Bakhtin’s explication of European carnival to describe the specifically American form of carnival life and media. I argue
that American carnival life and media are often enacted through the use of alcohol. The history of the American alcohol carnival began in the colonial era, when behavior that would come to be considered carnivalesque and inappropriate for everyday life was intertwined with the official, routine aspects of everyday life. Over time, as extreme drunkenness and disruptive carnival behavior gained greater prevalence in American society, official fears of carnival as a threat to social order also increased and eventually led to the marginalization of alcohol and, thereby, carnival. American drinking levels peaked in the early nineteenth century, when American habits had largely changed from constant, transparent, and social consumption of beer and cider to solo, secret binges of whiskey, and at this time effective social movements encouraging temperance and/or prohibition first emerged (as did many of the salient aspects of our modern concept of alcoholism).

After providing the history of alcoholic carnival in America from the colonial era through the early nineteenth century, I explain how Charles Bukowski relates to this American carnival tradition. I argue that, as a largely nonsocial binge drinker, Bukowski parodies the American drinker of the early nineteenth century. Whereas the early-nineteenth-century American man drank alone in binges to quell his fears of not achieving the American Dream, Bukowski as a carnival parodying double gladly dismisses the American Dream and binge-drinks alone because he wants to drink. Importantly, Bukowski also achieves success in a manner consonant with the American Dream that many of the fearful drinkers of the past could not, even though they tried where Bukowski does not.

In Chapter Two, I bring my exegesis of the American alcohol discourse into the twentieth century by describing how that discourse has manifested itself in Hollywood film. I explain that Bukowski is not only a parodying double of the frightened heavy drinker of America’s past, but
also of the primary fictional icon of the dominant voice in the twentieth-century American alcoholism discourse: Don Birnam, the weepy, nonproductive alcoholic writer at the center of *The Lost Weekend* (1945). I begin by explaining the dominant strains of the alcoholism discourse in Hollywood film, which are consonant with the ideals of the nineteenth-century temperance movement as well as twentieth-century support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous. I then discuss the Bukowski-penned film *Barfly* (1987) as a carnivalized text of resistance to this dominant strain. I describe how the main character of this film—Henry Chinaski—exemplifies the manner in which the Bukowski/Chinaski figure consistently works as a paroding double of *Weekend*'s Birnam and all that Birnam signifies.

Chapter Two provides a segue from the historical and literary exegesis of the first chapter to my discussion of W.C. Fields as a silver screen star in Chapter Three. In this third chapter, I generically situate W.C. Fields in relation to Bukowski. Even though Fields plays heavy drinkers in nearly all of his movies, his films do not quite fit the alcoholism genre because drinking is never the sole focus of his films. Rather than place W.C. Fields films in the genre of alcoholism comedy, with films like *Harvey* (1950) and *Arthur* (1981), I argue that Fields’ body of work is the generic predecessor to Bukowski’s art. Fields provides a generic foundation in part by creating a consistent public persona, one that is very similar on- and offscreen. In so doing, he establishes the form of postmodern carnival that Bukowski, in turn, enacts later in the twentieth century. Also, though W.C. Fields’ carnival is not exactly the same as Bukowski’s, it is based in the same sort of critique of the American Dream. Whereas Bukowski challenges the American Dream by totally rejecting it in favor of a literary skid row alternative, Fields throws the pursuit of the American Dream into question by pursuing the Dream from an eccentric angle. Whether he is a middle-class misfit or a lowlife cheat, the Fields character is always trying to better his lot.
in life, often ultimately achieving the goal of wealth and comfort that Bukowski/Chinaski actively rejects. Through his carnival eccentricities, of which heavy drinking is the primary example, Fields stands out from the others around him who strive to achieve according to the ideals of American culture. By standing out from, while simultaneously existing among, American Dreamers, Fields reveals the dubious and dishonest tactics that Americans employ in the pursuit of security, wealth, and respect. Even though the supposedly more proper and moral characters around the Fields character detest him, the viewer ultimately sympathizes with Fields because he is at least no worse than these others, who are revealed to be less than what they seem. To provide a specific example of Fields’ middle-class version of carnival, I explain how Fields’ character in You’re Telling Me (1934) exemplifies the trajectory his middle-class character often takes from dreary, official middle-class life to middle-class carnival kingship.

In the Conclusion, I provide examples of Bukowski and Fields functioning as carnival kings outside the text of their films and written works. Both Fields and Bukowski remain icons of a countercultural lifestyle, media figures who are better known today than most of the characters featured in LIVE outside the bottle’s opening video. I describe two creative bodies that serve as both forums for fandom of alcoholic carnival kings and as sources themselves of both mediated and lived carnival. I first describe the Drinking and Writing Brewery of Chicago, a theater duo that performs a series of plays on the topic of heavy-drinking writers. In addition to these plays, the duo hosts a radio show on the topics of drinking and writing and holds the annual Drinking and Writing Festival. I attended the 2007 festival, which the Brewery held in honor of Charles Bukowski. This festival, an afternoon of drinking, lectures, and writing, provided a space for carnivalesque behavior.
However, the type of carnival encouraged by the Drinking and Writing Brewery is mild compared to that embodied and engendered by *Modern Drunkard Magazine*. This in-print and online publication celebrates inebriation and its champions, including the Rat Pack, Jackie Gleason, and of course W.C. Fields and Charles Bukowski. *Modern Drunkard* celebrates the mediated and postmodern carnival kings of the past at the same time that the editor of the magazine, Frank Kelly Rich, becomes a carnival king himself as the face and voice of his controversial publication and its thoroughly carnivalesque annual convention. Rich sees drinking, and drinking to excess, as central aspects of a bygone American “golden age” (Gumbel) that the nation needs to recapture. Rich uses the carnival of Fields and Bukowski—wherein alcohol is a tool to deconstruct the American Dream—as a starting point from which to build his own form of carnival, one that re-imagines the American Dream with inebriation as an end worth achieving just as much as wealth or respect.

In a scene from *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941), W.C. Fields’ last feature film, Fields (playing himself) is sleeping in an airplane when a stewardess comes to awaken him. As Fields wakes, he groans and feels his forehead, prompting the stewardess to ask him if he is “airsick.” “No, dear,” Fields responds. “Somebody put too many olives in my martinis last night.” Fields blames his hangover on the one part of his cocktails that has any nutritional value. Such is the spirit of carnival: seeing poison where most see nourishment and nourishment where most see poison. I certainly do not wish to suggest that alcohol is simply a cultural force for good, or that Charles Bukowski and W.C. Fields were valorous in their pursuit of inebriation. I do wish, however, to point to some of the ways in which carnival kings like these two drinkers help us to find nourishment in places that official, hegemonic culture cannot. I wish to suggest also that alcohol often serves as an important cultural tool for finding the poison in the taken-for-
granted and everyday. Even if the carnival alternatives that Bukowski and Fields present through their artistic personae are not of the type that most would do well to emulate, these alternatives nonetheless provide food for thought—food that nourishes as much as it intoxicates.
CHAPTER ONE

“THE DRUNKARD’S PROGRESS”: CHARLES BUKOWSKI AND THE AMERICAN
ALCOHOLIC CARNIVAL

In *Easy Rider* (1969), Jack Nicholson plays George Hanson, a Southern rich man’s son who helps the two countercultural main characters get out of the jail where he himself is held for drunken behavior. Spending the night in jail is nothing new for George, whose drinking causes him at least as much strife as pleasure. Though George is willing to accept his role as a troubled, disorderly alcoholic, Peter Fonda’s Wyatt offers him an alternative. As he, George, and Dennis Hopper’s Billy sit around a campfire, Wyatt rolls a joint, passes it to George, and tells him to “Do this instead.” George is reluctant, citing the fact that he has “enough problems with the booze and all.” Wyatt assures George that he “won’t get hooked,” presenting marijuana as an alternative to alcohol with fewer complicating factors. George smokes the joint and shares a conspiracy theory regarding UFOs, “Venutians,” and the highest levels of earthly government. When George has smoked half of the joint handed him, Wyatt tells him to save the rest for the morning, when smoking marijuana will offer “a whole new way of looking at the day.” George laughs, “I sure could use that.”

This scene is indicative of a shift in at least subcultural attitudes towards substance use in America in the late 1960s. Though alcohol did not go—and has never gone—completely out of style, countercultural movements of the time came to be associated primarily with illegal hallucinogens rather than the legally sanctioned alcohol. In *Easy Rider*’s depiction of this shift in substance use, a mild hallucinogen like marijuana is both safe and productive. Whereas alcohol sends George into a stupor, which in turn leads to social and legal troubles, marijuana facilitates his explication of complex original theories. The drug expands his mind at apparently no cost of
health or sanity. It is not only enjoyable, like alcohol, but also, and unlike alcohol, potentially important as a facilitator of thought.

At the same time that this shift in American substance preferences occurred, alcohol, as always, remained the drug of choice. Even as such, alcohol was not then and has never been a simple cultural sign. It is at once a joy and a temptation, a sacrament and a disease, a symbol of sophistication and a marker of poverty. Throughout American history, various folk heroes have embodied the various significations of alcohol. Though many such folk heroes existed during the late 1960s and throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, few embraced alcohol, with all its complicated significations, as thoroughly as Charles Bukowski. In 1969, the same year that *Easy Rider* came out, Bukowski published his first book of poetry, introducing readers to his unapologetic, mostly autobiographical renderings of life tainted by poverty, depravity, and nearly always alcohol. Bukowski, as a literary icon, embodied (and continues to embody) rebellion, a signification carried out mostly through his use of alcohol. However, the sort of rebellion, or counterculturalism, he signifies is very different from the sort that a hero like *Easy Rider*'s Wyatt signifies. Bukowski was not using his drug of choice to expand his mind. He associated his own alcohol use with destructive, rather than constructive, behavior and attitudes. He reaffirmed a traditional (albeit unique) sense of manhood in an age when counterculture movements were often associated with resisting patriarchy.

As useful as a comparison of folk heroes and their respective use of drugs may be, I believe that such a comparison does little to explain the cultural significance of Charles Bukowski as an alcoholic American folk hero. Alcohol was a part of American life before “American life” was a concept. As with all long-lasting cultural products, our history with alcohol doubtless informs our relationship with the drug today, whether that relationship is
mediated by a bottle cap or a poet. In this chapter, I will argue that the history of drinking in America, following Bakhtin’s description of carnival life and the carnivalesque, has progressed such that whereas the alcoholic carnival was once intertwined with everyday life, over America’s history it has come to pass that carnival life (as enacted through the use of alcohol) has been completely separated from official (or everyday) life. With this shift, as Bakhtin noted regarding the European experience, carnival has also gone from a being a lived experience to being a mediated experience, enacted in large part by alcoholic folk heroes like Charles Bukowski. I will further argue that Bukowski is a particularly relevant alcoholic American folk hero in that he enacts a form of alcoholic carnival that responds to the fears and concerns that grew out of America’s most dangerously inebriated period by providing a parodying double to the drinker of that time: the early nineteenth century.

Since America’s history with alcohol so closely mirrors Bakhtin’s description and history of carnival, the two will be best understood if described in tandem. In Bakhtin’s history of the carnival (which is articulated in the context of European history),

“The Renaissance is the high point of carnival life. Thereafter begins its decline…Until the second half of the seventeenth century, people were still direct participants in carnivalistic acts and in a carnival sense of the world; they still lived in carnival, that is carnival was one of the forms of life itself. Therefore carnivalization was experienced as something unmediated….The source of carnivalization was carnival itself. (Bakhtin 257-258, emphasis Bakhtin’s)

If alcohol use is to be understood as a form of carnival life (and I will contend that it should be), colonial American life not only fits Bakhtin’s description of an era when people “lived in carnival,” but seems to even be an era in which the boundaries between carnival life and the
everyday were blurry at best. As a means of both explaining America’s alcohol consumption
during this time and explicating the notion of carnival, I will now describe how early American
life—in terms of alcohol use—fits Bakhtin’s description of carnival.

“The main arena for carnival acts,” says Bakhtin, “was the square and the streets
adjoining it…by its very idea carnival belongs to the whole people, it is universal, everyone must
participate in its familiar contact. The public square was the symbol of communal performance”
(255, emphasis Bakhtin’s). While the public square itself plays no particular role in the carnival
life of colonial America, an equally public and communal arena does: the tavern. Indeed,
Bakhtin notes that, in carnivalized literature (in other words, literature with plot and characters
derived from carnival life), the carnival square need not literally be a square (even if it was in the
historical European carnival activity he describes). “Other places of action as well…can, if they
become meeting- and contact-points for heterogeneous people—streets, taverns, roads,
bathhouses, docks of ships, and so on—take on this additional carnival square significance”
(256). If we read colonial American life as a carnivalized text, since it is outside the context of
Bakhtin’s Eurocentric description of carnival life, the tavern may indeed be substituted for the
square. Nikkari explains that taverns in colonial America were indeed such meeting-points for
their surrounding communities. “[D]uring the colonial period, drinking was a communal affair
and a serious social commitment. The social aspect of drinking made taverns important
community centers, serving as local courts, inns, polling places, meeting rooms, and landmarks
as well as sources for alcohol” (“Part One” 32). Rorabaugh further explains that, though “social
and political inequalities were recognized and respected” in colonial society, making upper class
monitoring and control of taverns not only possible but congenial, the tavern was nonetheless a
place where in many ways “the hierarchical nature of colonial society” was turned inside out:
In Virginia, for example, where the law allowed only one tavern per county, this
drinking place most often adjoined the courthouse. Before trials it was common
for defendants, attorneys, judges, and jurymen to gather there to drink, and
sometimes matters were settled ‘out of court.’ At other times, when a
controversial case attracted a crowd, it was necessary to hold the trial in the
tavern, which was the only public building roomy enough to accommodate the
spectators. New England public houses were often built next door to meeting
houses so that Sunday worshippers could congregate there before and after the
service. (27-28)

A judge drinking with the accused before his trial exemplifies perfectly Bakhtin’s assertion that
the “laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is
noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical
structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it” (251).
Even if the defendant did not manage to settle his case in the tavern, for the moment that all
involved in the trial were sitting in the tavern drinking together, the hierarchy of the courtroom
collapsed. The tavern served, in this instance, as a means of relaxing hierarchical tensions, either
with the result of subverting the authority of the courtroom to the far less formal decision-
making of the tavern, or simply of allowing power structures momentarily to be ignored.

The simple fact of a tavern being attached to a courthouse, used as a courthouse, or being
located (very deliberately) next to a church exemplifies another significant aspect of carnival:
profanation, or “carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasings and
bringings down to earth” (251). Profanation, in other words, is the manner in which “[c]arnival
brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low,
the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (251). This profanation can be found simply in the familiar contact between people of different social strata in the tavern, but it is also evident in the tavern’s relationship with the church, the law, and essentially all institutions of colonial society.

Contrary to conventional wisdom regarding American Puritanism and substance use, Increase Mather, one of America’s most influential early Puritan clergymen, pronounced in 1673 that “[d]rink is in itself a creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness” (Rorabaugh 23). As also shown in the example of New England churchgoers who unproblematically “warmed their…interiors with rum before yielding to the necessity of entering the unheated meeting house” and, after church, “thawed out at the tavern,” drinking and piety were far from mutually exclusive in colonial America (28). Indeed, due to licensing laws designed to ensure “that only men and women of good moral character should operate” taverns, clergymen very often moonlighted as taverners (28). In general, “[p]ublicans were commonly among a town’s most prominent citizens” (Lender and Martin 13), a fact that in itself speaks to a carnival aspect of colonial life. From a modern perspective, the idea of a barkeeper as a widely respected member of a community is unusual; therefore we see an inverting of taken-for-granted notions of social hierarchy in the colonial American tavern.

Through the necessity of asserting the previous point from a modern perspective, I have touched on the uniqueness of colonial America’s carnival life. When Bakhtin describes carnival, he describes it as a way of living that was opposite ordinary, day-to-day life:

It could be said (with certain reservations, of course) that a person of the Middle Ages lived, as it were, two lives: one was the official life, monolithically serious and gloomy, subjugated to a strict hierarchical order, full of terror, dogmatism,
reverence, and piety; the other was the *life of the carnival square*, free and unrestricted, full of ambivalent laughter, blasphemy, the profanation of everything sacred, full of debasing and obscenities, familiar contact with everyone and everything. Both these lives were legitimate, but separated by strict temporal boundaries (256, emphasis Bakhtin’s).

In colonial America, where “taverns were a vital…institution—an institution highly regarded by most colonials and attended as faithfully as many churches” (Lender and Martin 14), and where carnivalization, I argue, was carried out primarily through the consumption of alcohol, the “strict temporal boundaries” between carnival and official life simply did not exist. Colonials were “perpetually drunk but seldom out of control” (Nikkari, “Part One” 32). Drinking on the job “was not only accepted, it was encouraged as an aid to carrying out hard, physical labor, and even Southern slaves were allowed an alcohol ration under certain conditions” (32). The subverting of social hierarchies, one of the key elements in Bakhtin’s description of carnival life, was only carried out under certain circumstances, while on the whole, colonial America remained a “deferential society…Most colonials willingly conformed to community values…and the majority accepted the community’s right to compel prescribed behavior” (Lender and Martin 15). Since members of the upper classes were the accepted leaders of a community, the values of a community inevitably meant the values of those upper, ruling classes. Hierarchies were paramount in colonial society, even as they were subverted daily in the tavern.

Carnival and official life were two different, but not distinct, ingredients of colonial American life. As American alcohol consumption changed, so would the relationship between official and carnival life, but for the moment, they were very much intertwined. This mingling of carnival and official is perhaps best embodied in the unique form of the carnival king during the
colonial era. “The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king” (Bakhtin 252, emphasis Bakhtin’s). It is essential, in this crowning and decrowning, that “he who is crowned is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester” (252). In this sense, there was no true carnival king during the colonial era. However, keeping in mind the interrelation of carnival and official life, and my assertion that alcohol was the key source of carnival in colonial America, we can find a hybrid official/carnival king in colonial America. During the colonial era, the “obligation to demonstrate power through display” manifested itself through the use of alcohol. “[I]t was necessary to be ‘drunk as a lord’” to show that one had the wealth to afford enough alcohol to be drunk on a regular basis (Rorabaugh 57). In the icon of the drunken lord we find an unusual authority figure (once again, from a modern perspective). The male members of the elite classes were expected to incapacitate themselves in order to give the impression of control. Community leaders leading by regularly drinking themselves into a stupor reveals a combining of the lofty with the low in a way that perhaps can only be appreciated from a modern perspective, one that perceives carnival and official life as two very separate spheres. Colonial leadership and wealth were displayed in a thoroughly carnivalized manner during the colonial era, but “a decrowning glimmer[ed] through the crowning” of even these loftiest of carnival kings (Bakhtin 252).

Rum, Whiskey and the American Carnival

For various social and economic reasons, as the American colonies prospered, hard liquors like rum, gin, brandy, and eventually whiskey increased in popularity (Nikkari, “Part One” 32). With the popularity of these stronger drinks came drunker colonists, and with those drunk colonists the carnival aspect of American life increased. While intertwined with official
life, carnival life was widely accepted and even appreciated. However, as hard alcohol increased in popularity, outdoing other popular beverages like cider, so increased the fear of the carnivalizing affect of alcohol on American society. Increase Mather’s son, Cotton Mather, agreed with his father that alcohol was indeed a “creature of God,” but in 1708 he added the caveat that inebriation was a thing to fear (Rorabaugh 30). “What the Puritan Mather feared especially was that the ‘Flood of RUM’ would ‘Overwhelm all good Order among us.’…The ‘Order’ he feared for was the class structure of New England society. Rum, he believed, was a threat to the existing social hierarchy” (30-31). Mather was especially concerned that the wealthy, who could afford to buy the most alcohol, would drink themselves out of power. “Society was threatened by a tide of upper class inebriates who would sweep away the authority of the righteous; the church would yield to the tavern, the minister to the barkeeper” (31). In other words, Mather feared that carnival life, or “‘life turned inside out’, ‘the reverse side of the world’” (Bakhtin 251), would no longer be so nicely balanced with official life, that carnival would overtake, or even replace, official life. Though other clergymen joined Mather in his call for abstinence among the elite classes, there would be no widespread social movement against alcohol for over a century, and in some ways, the carnivalization of daily life that Mather feared came to pass in the meantime. However, this increased carnival life also led to a greater separation and clearer delineation of official and carnival life. This separation made the eventual marginalization of carnival as an actual way of life possible.

“One of the early consequen ces of cheaper, more plentiful rum was that the upper classes began to lose control of the taverns” (Rorabaugh 32). As prices fell and demand increased, the number of suppliers also increased, necessitating a greater number of tavern permits. The greater number “of public houses proved to be more than the upper classes could watch effectively”
(33). Various liquor law reforms were attempted, but all “failed to stop the erosion of upper class authority” (34). While social hierarchies therefore appear to have been eroded, thus increasing the carnival nature of colonial life, at the same time, “free and familiar contact among people” regardless of social status, was becoming less common. As licensing laws grew stricter, unlicensed taverns proliferated; meanwhile, members of the upper class created private drinking clubs (32-33). Those of lower class status had access to more alcohol, the source of carnivalization, but the carnivalizing effect of the drug was diminished by the increased separation of the social classes.

After 1720, as the price of rum steadily fell, it came to pass that “a common laborer could afford to get drunk every day” (29). The lower classes thereby succeeded in decrowning the drunken lord as carnival king. Indeed, with the increasingly prevalent spirit of the coming American Revolution, the American lower classes maintained their dominance, for roughly a century, of the carnival sense of the world. The very spirit of democracy—the concept of the equality of all men—necessarily confounded traditional colonial notions of hierarchy. The unlicensed tavern, as the watering hole of the lower classes, came to stand for the “chaos and disorder” that many members of the upper class feared was resulting from “the growing independence of the lower classes” (34). At the time, taverns became the places where British tyranny was condemned, militiamen organized, and independence plotted. Patriots viewed public houses as the nurseries of freedom…There is no doubt that the success of the Revolution increased the prestige of drinking houses. A second effect of independence was that Americans perceived liberty from the crown as somehow related to the freedom to down a few glasses of rum….Upper class patriots found it difficult after the Revolution to
attack the popular sentiment that elite control of taverns was analogous to English control of America. (35)

Just as taverns came to represent “a new American sense of self that valorized the individual common man and demonized anything that smacked of British elitism and privilege,” so did changing beverage preferences reflect this toppling of hierarchies (Nikkari, “Part One” 33). “It was during the early nineteenth century that domestic whiskey supplanted rum as the favorite spirituous beverage” (Rorabaugh 61). Various economic considerations had a great deal to do with this shift, but of equal significance was the sociopolitical signification of whiskey. As a substance that could be made in America from American corn, whiskey was a sign of “rising nationalism. Imported molasses and rum were symbols of colonialism and reminders that America was not economically self-sufficient” (67). Like the dumping of so many tea leaves into the Boston harbor, drinking whiskey was a significant statement about America’s individuality and self-sufficiency. The act symbolized, and in fact enacted, a dismissal of the hierarchy inherent in dependency on a foreign Mother land.

Significantly, whiskey continued to play a role in toppling the hierarchy once so central to American life after the American Revolution’s end. In 1794, in response to an excise tax on corn whiskey charged to the producers of the beverage, southwestern Pennsylvanians took up arms against tax collectors. These corn farmers and distillers saw the excise tax “as an ‘unequal’ measure that taxed ‘the common drink of a nation’ and that fell ‘as heavy on the poorest class as on the rich’” (55-56). In response to the uprising, the government sent in thousands of troops and quickly ended what became known as the Whiskey Rebellion. The rebellion, though apparently unsuccessful, was nonetheless a significant carnivalizing moment in American history. “[I]t is probably no exaggeration to make the claim that whiskey was, in part, responsible for
establishing popular resistance to centralized power in the early republic after the Washington administration,” since the Whiskey Rebellion dramatized the furor with which regions of America were willing to fight to preserve their autonomy (Nikkari, “Part One” 34). And despite the quelling of the Pennsylvania insurrection, the excise tax was soon repealed anyway. The Whiskey Rebellion was therefore carnivalizing because, through this battle over alcohol consumed by the lower classes, democracy was reaffirmed and the efforts of power structures were confounded. Furthermore, the Whiskey Rebellion arose not only out of economic considerations, but also out of class issues inherent in the excise tax:

The majority of Americans resented a measure that appeared to favor the rich who drank Madeira over the poor who drank whiskey….in the 1790s a fierce republican pride caused most Americans to resist any attempt by the wealthy and powerful to set standards of morality and coerce the ordinary man to adopt them. The excise tax, aimed at curbing the use of distilled spirits, was seen as just such an attempt. (Rorabaugh 56)

Once again, we see here that the defense of affordable alcohol production was equivalent to an offensive against the hierarchy of social and political class, “and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it.”

Carnival’s Marginalization and “The Drunkard’s Progress”

America continued to enjoy its whiskey—in increasing amounts—into the nineteenth century. The success of the lower classes at maintaining a carnivalized society was clear in that “[b]y 1800 traditional colonial society had all but disappeared,” in terms especially of the deference of that society (56). However, the nineteenth century also saw the first truly successful
social reform movements concerned primarily with curbing—or ending completely—alcohol consumption. It is with the rise of this form of official life that I will conclude this history of America’s early alcoholic carnival, since it is with these social reformers that we see “the beginnings of a quarrel about alcohol that would become a curious theme threading its course throughout American history” (57).

While whiskey served as a democratizing source of carnival, through its crowning of the lower classes inevitably gleamed their decrowning. In early nineteenth century America, the self-reliant man came to be valorized more even than during the Revolutionary era. This glorification of an independent attitude bore promise for the common man, but “the era of rugged individualism brought with it increasing individual competition and a diminished community identity, which gradually changed drinking habits. From the communal wine and ale binges of the colonial and post-Revolutionary eras, Americans (by far, mostly men) began to indulge in solo whiskey binge drinking” (Nikkari, “Part One” 35). With the new emphasis on the individual came the end of the “free and familiar contact” of the carnival. Drinking had become not only divided along class lines, but even within the separate social classes and within families. The rise of “separate spheres” for husbands and wives “led husbands to binge drink in taverns while wives used alcohol-laced patent remedies to relieve stress” (35). Drinking on the job was losing acceptance, and this shift too led to more frequent solo binges, further reducing the communal aspect so important to carnival life (35).

Not surprisingly, this shift to heavier and more secretive drinking was quickly followed by serious efforts at social reform. A primary inspiration for this new temperance movement was Dr. Benjamin Rush’s 1784 publication *An Inquiry into the Effects of Spirituous Liquors upon the Human Body, and Their Influence upon the Happiness of Society*. In this publication, Rush used
the image of a “Moral and Physical Thermometer” to explain the “moral consequences of various beverages” (Nikkari, “Part Two” 28). This illustration was adapted into other representations of the same idea. One in particular—the image of “The Drunkard’s Progress”—is particularly relevant to a discussion of the decrowing of the lower class drinker as carnival king (see illustration below).

(Source: www.humanillness.com)

What makes this illustration of the alcoholic’s plight so relevant to a description of American drinking as carnivalization is that the “drunkard’s progress” is not portrayed only as a decline, but as a rise followed by a decline. Even though the steps up are not always happy ones (Step Three is “A glass too much” and Step Four is “Drunk and riotous”), the author of this illustration appears to concede that there exists some cultural or subcultural capital in the alcoholic’s ascent to “[t]he summit,” the point at which he is a “confirmed drunkard.” Of course, however, the image is meant to be cautionary, warning the aspiring carnival king that he will be decrowned—
and dramatically so. Step Nine, the final step, is “Death by suicide,” suggesting that this fate is inevitable for all heavy imbibers.

“[B]y the 1820s and 1830s,” the same time images like “The Drunkard’s Progress” were becoming common, “consumption of alcoholic beverages reached the highest level in American history” (Nikkari, “Part Two” 29). Nonetheless, new social reform groups like the American Temperance Union and the Washingtonians, through means both tame and violent, managed to rather rapidly affect the character of American drinking. Beginning with the middle class but moving surely on to the working class, these temperance groups provided space in which drinkers could, with some comfort and ease, become teetotalers. At the same time, through violent, destructive, and illegal protests, these groups often made taverns very uncomfortable places to drink (31). No matter the method, the results were unmistakable. “By the end of the 1840s, it seemed that the temperance movement had produced solid results: the rate of consumption had fallen from an all-American high of 7.1 gallons in 1830 to a new low of 1.8 gallons in 1845, and temperate habits appeared to take on social respectability, even an impression of normality” (32).

Bukowski and Mediated Carnival

Though the history of American drinking from the 1840s to the 1960s is by no means a simple progression from de-carnivalization to further de-carnivalization, any further examination of American drinking history through the lens of Bakhtin’s carnival is beyond the scope of this chapter and unnecessary for its purposes. It is sufficient to have established that colonial American life was so carnivalized that there was no clear delineation between the carnival and the official. Also of significance has been the fact that alcohol continued to be a source of
carnivalization as the official and the carnival separated themselves from one another during the Revolutionary era, until carnival life burned itself out and/or was smothered by social reform movements.

In Bakhtin’s formulation of carnival, however, the form of life does not simply disappear. Rather, it becomes mediated: “From the second half of the seventeenth century on, carnival almost completely ceases to be a direct source of carnivalization, ceding its place to the influence of already carnivalized literature; in this way carnivalization becomes a purely literary tradition” (258). Without exploring how the mediation of carnival came to pass in America, we can easily witness the fact that contemporary American experience with carnival comes mostly through our interactions with popular media. Even then, the most thoroughly carnivalized texts appear, more often than not, to have cult status rather than mainstream popularity. Within the context of America’s alcoholic carnival history, I will now look at Charles Bukowski, a prominent cult figure of twentieth century American literature, and explain how he functions as a mediated carnival king (and, thereby, as a source of carnivalization).

In order to establish that Bukowski is a carnival king and a source of carnival, I will explain the persona he creates (or re-creates) through his literary output in terms of Bakhtin’s carnival criteria. Since I am discussing Bukowski and carnival in a specifically American context, alcohol will be paramount. It is also important to note that, while Bakhtin concerns himself with literature that recreates carnival within its plot and characters, I am concerned not only with the inner workings of Bukowski’s works. As with so many contemporary cult artists, Bukowski’s persona is intertwined with his art: to know one is to be given the impression, at least, of knowing the other. Bukowski’s output is particularly inseparable from his personal legend, since most of his narratives are told from the perspective of the thinly-veiled
autobiographical character Henry Chinaski. Therefore, it is possible to argue that Bukowski’s work is a source of carnivalization at the same time that it creates a real-life icon of a carnival king in Bukowski himself.

The element of carnival that is most often regarded as the key feature is the suspension of hierarchical structure, including the “laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary…life” (Bakhtin 251). Bukowski carries out this aspect of carnival in his writings by having Chinaski mostly ignore and express complete disdain for what is expected of him by everyone from his father to his many bartenders. Though this characterization of Chinaski runs through most, if not all, of Bukowski’s work, his novel *Factotum* in particular illustrates this point thoroughly. *Factotum* concerns Chinaski’s efforts to maintain an income sufficient to pay his rent and drink frequently. These efforts are in conflict with Chinaski’s distaste for work, particularly because the regularity and persistence of a full-time work schedule does not dovetail with his desire to do as he pleases when he pleases. Chinaski loses nearly all of the jobs for which he is hired because he ignores the “prohibitions and restrictions” that separate these jobs from his private life. Despite orders to the contrary, Chinaski is caught smoking, sleeping, entertaining women, taking very long lunch breaks, and, many times, drinking on the job. One particularly carnivalesque scene in *Factotum* involves Chinaski returning to his office job at the Hotel Sans after blacking out there the day before. Mrs. Farrington, an office manager at the hotel, explains to Chinaski why he has lost his job:

You were drunk. You cornered Mr. Pelvington [the hotel’s assistant manager] in the men’s locker room and you wouldn’t let him out. You held him captive for thirty minutes….You were lecturing him on how to run this hotel. Mr. Pelvington has been in the hotel business for thirty years….The security guard couldn’t get
you to let go of Mr. Pelvington. You tore his coat. It was only after we called the
regular police that you relented. (194-5)

The fact that Chinaski actually suffers consequences—he loses this and his other jobs as a result
of ignoring the restrictions and hierarchy of the workplace—would seem to undercut the carnival
nature of *Factotum*. However, because Chinaski is perfectly content to give up every occupation
he attains in a short period of time, his carnivalesque behavior while on the job is emphasized
over the fact that such behavior causes him to lose the jobs. Compare the above description of his
carnivalesque dealings with superiors to the simple description of his exit from the Hotel Sans: “I
walked along the loading dock, then I jumped into the alley. Coming towards me was another
bum. ‘Got a smoke, buddy?’ he asked. ‘Yeah.’ I took out two, gave him one, took one myself. I
lit him up, then I lit myself up” (196). Compared to the humor and excitement in Mrs.
Farrington’s description of Chinaski’s on-the-job drunkenness, Bukowski’s return to the realm of
the unemployed is calm and congenial. Chinaski willingly jumps back into the alley, the place
where he quickly runs into “another bum;” already he associates himself again with other
unemployed men, even christening his return with a shared cigarette. The main point of interest
and drama in Chinaski’s trip to the hotel is in his dealings with Mrs. Farrington, and not in the
ease and contentment with which he leaves his former workplace.

The suspension of hierarchies that is carried out in Chinaski’s character translates to a
similar though perhaps even more thorough suspension carried out by the figure of Bukowski
himself. Bukowski’s success as an author derives from his renderings of Chinaski and his
parallel first-person poetry. It is understood by Bukowski’s readers that he and Chinaski are one.
Therefore, his readers also understand that the artistically accomplished and financially solvent
author whose works they are reading managed to succeed with little to no regard for social,
educational, and even legal hierarchies and restrictions. More so even than in the character of Chinaski, Bukowski’s readers find in Bukowski himself carnival profanation. The very type of person that has long been regarded as a failure in American society—the alcoholic, so often supposedly doomed to the skid row lifestyle Bukowski once lived—can be witnessed, through Bukowski’s public persona, to prevail. While bearing the signifiers that, since the early nineteenth century, have been associated with a drunkard’s progress towards complete and utter ruin, Bukowski nonetheless lived a long life of prodigious creative output and thereby gained great cultural capital. The icon of Bukowski therefore “combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin 251).

For all of Bukowski’s carnival dismissal of hierarchies, Bakhtin might have found grounds on which to dismiss the author as not quite carnivalesque enough. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, Bakhtin states that, “[s]omething of the carnival atmosphere is retained, under certain conditions, among the so-called bohemians, but here in most cases we are dealing with the degradation and trivialization of the carnival sense of the world (there is, for example, not a grain of that carnival spirit of communal performance)” (257-8). This statement about “the bohemians” could easily apply to Bukowski. Chinaski’s drinking is not contingent on the presence of others, and in fact, the character often expresses disdain for other human beings in general. When asked in Bukowski’s film *Barfly* (1987) if he hates people, Chinaski responds “No, but I seem to feel better when they’re not around.” While taking a bus from Los Angeles to New York in *Factotum*, Chinaski uses alcohol to tolerate the constant presence of strangers: “I took five pints of whiskey in my suitcase on the bus with me. Whenever somebody sat next to me and began talking I pulled out a pint and took a long drink. I got there” (38). Both through the filter of Chinaski and in his first-person accounts, Bukowski often mentions the importance of
alcohol to his solitary work as a writer, all the more thoroughly associating the substance with
time spent alone (or at least desiring to be alone). An example can be found in the poem titled
“how did they get their job?”: “tonight this second-rate Saroyan is drinking his/ way toward a
first-rate hangover/ not because of a crappy review but because it’s just what I like to do/ while
writing little stories and poems and sometimes novels” (Slouching 44).

While it is true that Bukowski’s written works and public persona lack the communal
aspect of carnival, the way in which both his works and persona function as part of our culture
do not. Chinaski/Bukowski may have, at best, tolerated the presence of others and appreciated
solitude and solitary drinking, but the very presence of Bukowski as a public persona creates the
communal aspect of carnival. As a public figure who confounded the hierarchies and restrictions
of official life by becoming a well-regarded and, in many circles, canonized author, Bukowski
was a carnival king. As an impoverished alcoholic, he lived the life of “the antipode of a real
king” before (and to a certain degree during) his success as a writer (Bakhtin 252). He became a
king through his written works, which presented an example of “life turned inside out” to a mass
of people who themselves could (and can) only know carnival through such mediated texts.
Therefore, he was (and is, after his death) indeed a carnival leader. The cult of Bukowski fandom
is the community that Bakhtin rightfully argues is a central aspect of carnival. Consider, for
example, the hard-drinking subculture to which Modern Drunkard Magazine caters. The article
“40 Things Every Drunkard Should Do Before He Dies,” one of the online edition’s ten most-
frequently accessed articles, includes the suggestion “[w]atch the movie Barfly with five of your
closest friends” (Rich). Even though Barfly does not consistently present drinking as a communal
activity, fans of the film can use it as a way to promote community.
It is in this juxtaposition of the solitude with which Bukowski presents himself and the community of appreciation surrounding his life and work that Bukowski’s significance as a specifically American carnival king and source of carnivalization comes out. To explain how, I will turn again to the history of alcoholic carnival in America. The emergence of whiskey alongside an increasingly individualistic mindset in nineteenth-century America led to the greatest ills of alcoholism and the marginalization of alcohol use (carnivalesque and otherwise) as a way of life in America. Alcohol’s decline came in part from the widening gap between the actual rate of consumption and the rate of consumption that was becoming socially acceptable. This gap in turn led to guilt: “One ‘symptom’ of problems emerging from change was delirium tremens, or the DTs. This affliction is not so much biological as it is social, and it turns out that not all societies suffer from it. In the 1820s, it began to appear with increasing frequency in America” (Nikkari, “Part One” 35). Bukowski’s drinking habits and his relations, as a drinker, with the broader community in many ways align with those of early-nineteenth-century binge-drinkers. Both drank alone frequently (though not exclusively) and both suffered crippling hangovers as a result of their heavy imbibing. Two key differences exist, however, between the nineteenth-century drinker and Bukowski. First, the nineteenth-century drinker drank alone out of social necessity while Bukowski preferred solitude. Second, and perhaps more important, the nineteenth-century working man experienced guilt for his lonely binges, while Bukowski projects the image of a self-satisfied binge drinker. His feelings on the issue of his binge drinking are expressed straightforwardly through Chinaski in the novel Hollywood: “My idea about the whole thing was that most people weren’t alcoholics, they only thought that they were. It was something that couldn’t be rushed. It took at least twenty years to become a bonafide alcoholic. I was on my 45th year and didn’t regret any of it” (75, emphasis Bukowski’s).
Bukowski is a particularly relevant American source of carnivalization because he so directly dismisses the concerns that coincided with alcoholic carnival’s demise as a way of life in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth-century laborer aspired to achieve as an individualistic American, drank alone to calm his fears of failure, and felt requisite guilt. Bukowski aspired to drink and write (two things that came to him naturally), and therefore drank happily and without guilt. Bukowski’s reflection of nineteenth-century male drinking habits brings out another significant aspect of his carnival nature: parody. Bakhtin explains the literary manifestation of carnival parody as the presence, in literature, of “[p]arodying doubles.” Through these characters, “the hero dies (that is, is negated) in order to be renewed (that is, in order to be purified and to rise above himself)” (255). Since I have already established that a figure like Bukowski carnivalizes in his texts and as a figure within our culture, I will further suggest that, though parodying doubles may also exist within Bukowski’s works, he himself works as just such a double for the nineteenth-century American whiskey drinker. Through him, the fears and hardships of alcoholism embodied in the historical binge-drinker die, such that the carnival nature of drinking alcohol, even in a context of solitary drinking, can be revived (albeit only in a mediated, rather than directly lived, manner).

One key element of carnival remains to be addressed in regards to Bukowski’s role as a carnival king. Bakhtin makes clear that, for the carnival king, “crowning and decrowning are inseparable, they are dualistic and pass one into the other; in any absolute dissociation they would completely lose their carnivalistic sense” (253). This statement problematizes Bukowski’s kingship. If we are to look at him as a parodying double of the nineteenth-century drinker, then we can look to “The Drunkard’s Progress” to find how he might be expected to lose his crown. Indeed, other alcoholic folk heroes of the twentieth century (Ernest Hemingway, Janis Joplin,
and so forth) have been decrowned by premature death, either through suicide or overuse of alcohol or other drugs. It is central to how we view so many alcoholic folk heroes that they die from causes directly related to their alcohol use. However, Bukowski lived a full life, from 1920 to 1994 (*Hollywood*). If I am to stay loyal to Bakhtin’s criteria for carnival, Bukowski does not qualify as a carnival king.

However, I do not believe it is necessary to take Bakhtin’s word as gospel in this instance. Rather, it seems to me that Bukowski’s continued reign is perfectly in sync with his character as a parodying double. Just as Bukowski’s work and image as a guiltless alcoholic challenge the fears that have been associated with alcohol consumption in America since the early nineteenth century, so does the fact that he is a uniquely constant carnival king. Were he to have died young, his carnivalizing effect would not have been as great as it is. He would not parody as thoroughly the culture of anxiety around which America’s ambivalence about alcohol came to be as we know it today. By having lived a full life of heavy drinking, the figure of Bukowski rejects not only the guilt and sense of failure embodied by the nineteenth-century drinker, but also the social restraints that were tightening on that drinker, embodied by “The Drunkard’s Progress.”

In this chapter, I have presented the history of drinking in early America as a history of alcohol-centric carnival. Within the context of this carnival history, I explained the significance of writer Charles Bukowski as a carnival king and as a source of carnivalization, particularly in his role as a parodying double to the guilt-ridden nineteenth-century drinker. My hope is that, through this research, I have given some context to the appeal of a unique cult figure in American history. Such context may help us to better understand why countercultural figures like Bukowski are appealing to so many, which in turn may help us understand how public figures
are, generally, used by Americans in their dealings with popular culture and with each other. In order to get at a deeper understanding of this issue, however, some voice needs to be given to readers of the Bukowski/Chinaski text. In the Conclusion to this volume, in order to give a richer sense of the importance of these figures as carnival kings, I will examine how two creative fan groups operating today use Bukowski/Chinaski and W.C. Fields in their creative and fannish activities.

I hope also to have given here a sense of how relevant Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival remains to countercultural movements in popular culture, while nonetheless pointing out how Bakhtin’s rendering of carnival is necessarily flexible. By looking to those texts that fit most of Bakhtin’s criteria but not all, we can better see how carnival changes to fit cultural needs and desires in a given time and place. In the next chapter, I will further explicate the importance of carnival to the Bukowski/Chinaski text by analyzing the Bukowski-penned film *Barfly* (1987) as a carnival text within and representative of the broader Bukowski/Chinaski text.
CHAPTER TWO

THE SPECIAL TALENT IT TAKES TO BE A DRUNK: BARFLY AND CARNIVAL

In the previous chapter, I described Charles Bukowski and his work together as a carnivalized text/carnivalizing force by explaining his place in the greater scheme of American alcohol history. One might reasonably question, however, the validity of an argument that finds meaning in Bukowski only by comparing him to the heavy drinkers of the early nineteenth century. There are few people who are familiar with the history of American drinking habits, and it is safe to assume that Bukowski was not one of them. However, my point in the previous chapter was not to suggest that Bukowski is only a carnivalizing figure when we juxtapose him with Americans who lived many decades before he was born. Rather, I hope to have shown that Bukowski is particularly relevant and effective as a figure of counter-hegemony because the figure he parodies holds an important place in the history of America’s relationship with alcohol.

The reason I chose to end my historical exegesis of alcoholic carnival with the emergence of social reform groups in the mid-nineteenth century is that, in many ways, the American discourse on alcohol consumption reached a sort of stasis at about that time. This is not to say, of course, that American beliefs and concerns about alcohol have gone unchanged for nearly two hundred years. I mean only that, in the early nineteenth century, Americans confronted dilemmas regarding alcohol that they have never fully resolved. The manner in which Americans have dealt with these dilemmas has shifted several times over the years, but in many ways, Americans still grapple with the conflicts that came to a boiling point in the 1820s and 30s.

A medium in which we can see an attempt to forge a dominant, even universal, American understanding of alcohol use and abuse is the film medium. In this chapter, I will expand my argument of the previous chapter by explaining how Bukowski/Chinaski functions not only as a
parodying double of the nineteenth-century binge drinker, but also of the iconic film alcoholic. This argument will segue into the next chapter, wherein I will discuss the carnival debt Bukowski owes to film comedy icon W.C. Fields.

When it comes to the issue of substance abuse, there are only a few conceptualizations that the majority of Americans are willing to accept. One way in which the general consensus on topics of substance abuse can be gleaned is by looking at how American films dealing with such topics are received by viewers and critics. For instance, the 1936 cautionary tale *Reefer Madness* is still popular today only because it is thought to be completely inaccurate in its over-the-top portrayal of the potential evils of marijuana use. Since the majority of Americans do not accept the idea that marijuana can turn an otherwise sane man into a murderous lunatic, *Reefer Madness* is considered “[t]he granddaddy of all ‘Worst’ movies” (Maltin 1149) and most viewers enjoy it for its apparent ineptitude. On the other hand, *The Lost Weekend* (1945), a film that portrays the descent of a hard-drinking writer into hallucinogenic madness, is today regarded as “a landmark of adult filmmaking in Hollywood” (840) and “one of the most clinically accurate representations of the alcoholic’s dilemma ever put on screen” (Cornes 6). The film was nominated for seven Academy Awards and won four, in the categories of Best Actor, Best Picture, Best Director and Best Writing, Screenplay. The film picked up many other awards around the same time, including Grand Prize at the Cannes Film Festival (*The Internet Movie Database*).

It should be no surprise that the country that attempted Prohibition and spawned Alcoholics Anonymous also embraced a film that warns of the extreme dangers of alcohol, complete with minor key, sweeping strings to accompany every step towards rock bottom. In fact, while I was immediately struck by the melodrama of this film, many others have expressed
their appreciation of what they see as a lack of melodrama in the film. Crowther called the film “a shatteringly realistic and morbidly fascinating film [whose] most commendable distinction is that it is a straight objective report, unvarnished with editorial comment or temperance morality” (qtd. in Denzin 53). Even more to the point, Flemming and Manvell pronounced Weekend “the first nonmelodramatic feature made by Hollywood on the issue of alcoholism” (qtd. in Denzin 53). While critics laugh at the over-the-top downfall of pot smokers in Reefer Madness, they find nothing funny in the equally sweeping degradation of Weekend’s alcoholic.

The Lost Weekend, while perhaps not maintaining a wide audience itself as the years have gone by, has nonetheless provided a significant basis for a great many subsequent films dealing with alcoholism. Denzin notes that Weekend is “the film against which all future alcoholism films were judged (44). Cornes labels the film as a landmark in the history of alcohol-related film: “with the release of The Lost Weekend in 1945, the motion picture portrayal of alcoholism reached a maturity that has lasted to this day” (Cornes x). This so-called maturity is indeed evident in recent films. Consider, for example, the highly-lauded Leaving Las Vegas (1995), in which Nicholas Cage plays a writer whose alcoholism has destroyed his career and brought him to Las Vegas, where his only plan is to drink himself to death. The story of the artist who tragically drinks his life away has apparently not lost any legitimacy over the years, as Leaving Las Vegas was nominated for four Oscars (Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director, and Best Writing) and won one (Best Actor), while simultaneously winning a slew of awards from other groups around the country (The Internet Movie Database).

While film dramas like The Lost Weekend and Leaving Las Vegas exhibit a somber, serious reflection of American drinking-related fears, anxiety is obviously not the only feeling that the bottle engenders in Americans. This country did indeed enact Prohibition laws in the
1920s, but only about a decade later it repealed those laws. If alcohol consumption were not a common, legal, and usually socially acceptable practice in America, there would be much less room for fear of the habit; *The Lost Weekend* would look much more like *Reefer Madness* does today. But alcohol is a socially acceptable drug, and this fact can be gleaned by looking at film as well. The first on-screen advertisement, for any product, appeared in 1898, only two years after the public debut of the film medium. Entitled *DeWar’s—It’s Scotch*, the film features four men in kilts happily dancing with the words “Scotch Whiskey” above their heads (Cornes 1-2). The legacy of this commercial is far more readily evident even than that of *The Lost Weekend*. While one might have difficulty thinking of a fun, silly commercial for scotch that has recently aired, commercials in print or on television for other alcoholic beverages—like beer, gin, and malt beverages—often employ fun-loving men acting out in one way or another to sell their products.

In films designed for entertainment rather than advertisement, representations of drinking do not always fit one description alone. The drinker’s drunken behavior may be used for comic effect, as in films ranging from the early shorts of Charlie Chaplin to *Beerfest* (2006). On the other hand, a hard-drinking hero can work as a figure of gritty manliness. This image is particularly prevalent in the Western genre, wherein “the teetotal cowboy exists only as a figure of fun,” someone to be ridiculed (Cook and Lewington 28). However, when we Americans are not looking for a laugh, or a hero from some other age that played by different rules, Ray Milland’s portrayal in *The Lost Weekend* of the alcoholic drinking his life away appears to be the image of drinking that we take seriously. “Americans want to drink and they do not want alcoholics” (Denzin 4). American films draw the line for us by sometimes showing acceptable drinking behavior, but more often telling us which characters have crossed the line into alcoholism. There exists a standard, widely accepted portrait of heavy drinking that is far from
flattering, but this image does not stop many from drinking heavily anyway. So, where does the ambivalent American (or, for that matter, the carefree heavy drinker) turn when only one view of alcoholism is Oscar-nominated?

Enter *Barfly* (1987), the only film ever to be made from a screenplay by cult author Charles Bukowski. The author’s personal take on alcoholism stood quite apart from the view perpetuated by *The Lost Weekend*. Interestingly, though, in *Hollywood*, Bukowski’s fictional account of making *Barfly*, Bukowski claims that *The Lost Weekend* is the last movie he enjoyed watching (103). Also in *Hollywood*, Bukowski describes his view on alcoholism through the voice of his autobiographical main character, Henry Chinaski: “My idea about the whole thing was that most people weren’t alcoholics, they only thought that they were. It was something that couldn’t be rushed. It took at least twenty years to become a bonafide alcoholic. I was on my 45th year and didn’t regret any of it” (75, emphasis Bukowski’s). Alcoholism, in Bukowski’s view, is reserved for the select few who keep up their heavy drinking for decades. Rather than an issue for concern, it is just a fact (arguably, also a source of pride). Most importantly, Bukowski regards himself as an alcoholic, and is satisfied with this identity.

In this satisfaction with alcoholism lies the spirit of *Barfly*. The story, like that of *Hollywood*, involves Henry Chinaski, only in a younger incarnation. This particular Chinaski tale concerns his life in Los Angeles, living in a low-rent apartment above a bar that he frequents daily. At the bar, he either chats with Jim, a friendly, older bartender, or brawls with Eddie, a younger bartender who hates Chinaski for his fiscal irresponsibility and impish behavior. Chinaski becomes involved with Wanda Wilcox, a woman who drinks just as heavily as he. They move in together, drink, try to support one another financially, and fight. Occasionally, Chinaski makes time to write a poem or story. One day, while Wanda is off trying to find a job,
Chinaski receives a visit from Tully Sorenson, a magazine editor who has accepted one of his stories and fallen in love with his writing. She gives Chinaski $500 for the story and offers to be his patron, so that he can “write in peace” while living in her guesthouse. Chinaski stays the night with her, but ultimately declines the offer, takes the $500 and goes back to the bar. He and Wanda reconnect, Chinaski buys several rounds of drinks for everybody, and, to end the story, Chinaski and Eddie head into the alley to fight.

Even though Denzin calls Barfly “a film that celebrates alcoholism” (218), I argue that this claim is not entirely accurate. Denzin groups this film with a small batch of others in which the heavy drinkers face “no negative consequences from their drinking” (246, emphasis Denzin’s), but in truth Chinaski faces real problems as a result of his drinking. Though she never sees him in prison (and neither does the viewer), Tully comments, at one point, that she knows about Chinaski’s many jailings for drunk and disorderly behavior. Chinaski’s one attempt at finding a job during the film is enfeebled by the many gaps in his employment history. Many of his drunken decisions—for instance, to fight Eddie or argue with Wanda—result in serious physical damage for Chinaski. In fact, much of the film’s drama derives from the consequences, or expected consequences, of Chinaski’s alcohol-centric behavior.

The understanding of drinking that the film espouses is only that of the main character and screenwriter, and is best embodied in Chinaski’s decision not to allow Tully to support him. He explains this decision not as a matter of pride (he has no aversion to hand-outs), but as an issue of personal preference. He sees the life that Tully offers him as “a cage with golden bars.” Chinaski lives his life in drunken squalor because he wants to live in drunken squalor. Wanda explains the same view of her alcoholic life when she explains why she has cheated on Chinaski
with his enemy, Eddie: “I drink. When I drink I go down a wrong path.” This statement is not an apology. It is an explanation of a simple truth of her life.

*Barfly* offers a perspective on alcoholism that is completely out of sync with the dominant perspective espoused by most popularly respected films dealing with the subject. “[T]his film turns its back on the antialcoholism films that have come before” (Denzin 220-21). While not a wildly popular film, it does, like Bukowski’s written work, have a cult following. It offers a very specific perspective of alcoholism, and Bukowski even suggests in *Hollywood* that the film is written solely for the enjoyment of alcoholics (221). In reality, of course, this film is probably enjoyed by a group representing more than just alcoholics. Even though he counters hegemonic morals, Henry Chinaski is an appealing character to a sizable audience. As “[t]he film elevates to protagonist status two confirmed alcoholics” (Denzin 219), the viewer hopes to sympathize with Chinaski at the same time that this main character does not make any concessions to the dominant morality of filmgoers. He is an unapologetic alcoholic, and his character bears all the benefits and drawbacks of that identity. He also displays all the best and worst characteristics of an alcoholic. In one instance, Chinaski will earn his drinks by going out to pick up a sandwich for a fellow bar patron. In the next, after the patron has bought Chinaski a drink, Chinaski swoops down and steals the sandwich for himself.

Perhaps Chinaski’s appeal lies not in the originality of his character, but rather in a centuries-old tradition that he recreates, albeit under mediated circumstances. Charles Bukowski was a consummate purveyor of carnivalized literature. His poems, stories, novels, and film, all of which are mostly based in his own personal history, are usually told from the perspective of Henry Chinaski. Bukowski’s works cover a long history of Chinaski’s life, from childhood to old age, but whenever Chinaski is involved, so is Chinaski’s alcoholism. Often in descriptions of
Bukowski’s oeuvre, the works that concern either the later, more comfortable era of Chinaski’s life or his childhood are neglected. Emphasis is placed on the majority of Bukowski’s work, which concerns Chinaski’s middle years as a member “of the drunken underclass” (Garver, “Soused Cinema”), working his way into blue collar jobs, drinking his way out, and writing poetry during the wee drunken hours.

In many ways, Bukowski’s work does indeed embody the idea of mediated carnivalization that Bakhtin describes. *Barfly* is no exception, and I in fact argue that it is a thoroughly carnivalized text. At the same time that Chinaski is content to live drunk and poor, he is invited into a world of upper-class patronage by Tully. In other words, he experiences the “free and familiar contact among people,” regardless of socioeconomic status, that Bakhtin argues “is a very important aspect of a carnival sense of the world” (251, emphasis Bakhtin’s). *Barfly* also emphasizes its main character’s “eccentricity,” which Bakhtin states is “organically connected with the category of familiar contact; it permits…the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves” (251). Chinaski is eccentric first of all in that he is an alcoholic—an identity out of sync with the preferred identities of the dominant culture. To call alcoholism an eccentricity may seem problematic, but it is not necessarily so if one thinks of eccentricity in the terms that Bakhtin uses. While for the majority of Americans heavy drinking may be only a very occasional celebration, for Chinaski it is a lifestyle. Therefore, we see in Chinaski “the latent sides of human nature,” those uninhibited characteristics that emerge only on special occasions, revealing and expressing themselves regularly. Notably, Chinaski is repeatedly marked as unusual even among alcoholics. Wanda, his lover, early on tells him, “It’s the way you walk across the room…you’re the damndest barfly I’ve ever seen.” In the Golden Horn, Chinaski’s preferred dive, he can call none of the regulars friends except for one bartender who asserts that
Chinaski is “as right as any of us.” Even in the realm of alcoholics, Chinaski is an outsider whose sanity and worth are defended by only one friend.

*Barfly* even contains carnival’s “image of constructive death,” expressed in Tully’s praise of Chinaski’s literary talents (Bakhtin 253). The image of the self-destructive artist was hardly new when *Barfly* debuted in 1987, and the filmmakers reinforce the concept by tying Chinaski’s depravity to his talents. After chastising him repeatedly for his drunken lifestyle and thoughtless behavior, Tully offers Chinaski the shelter of her guest house, where he “could write in peace.” Chinaski’s response is, “nobody who could write worth a damn could ever write in peace.” Bukowski reinforces here the theme that I argued (in the previous chapter) runs through his work: he must drink, he must write, and the two are basically inseparable.

Simply by portraying the life of an alcoholic, without any moral judgments or laudatory celebrations, *Barfly* challenges the idea of absolutes. Just as *Barfly* neither criticizes nor celebrates Chinaski for his alcoholism, “absolute negation, like absolute affirmation, is unknown to carnival” (Bakhtin 253). The film suggests that, though there exists a standard by which one’s life is judged, one can choose not to live up to that standard and still be perfectly pleased with himself. To use Bakhtin’s words, *Barfly* “absolutizes nothing, but rather proclaims the joyful relativity of everything” (252-3). Partly in this proclamation lies the carnivalistic “profanation” of the film. The main character of the film, a role normally reserved for a thoroughly likeable and sympathetic figure, is a nobody in the eyes of the dominant culture. *Barfly* therefore “combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” in a filmic context (Bakhtin 251).

*Barfly* bears so many traits of the carnival that, in describing them all, one can forget that the film problematizes carnival’s central characteristic. Through all the above descriptions of
how the film fits the concept of mediated carnivalization, I have mindfully ignored the fact that no “laws, prohibitions, [or] restrictions” (251) of day-to-day life are suspended in *Barfly*. Though Chinaski associates briefly with Tully, and therefore the upper class of the social hierarchy, he quickly rejects this suspension of the social hierarchy, going so far as to drink away the five hundred dollars Tully gives him in a few short rounds at The Golden Horn. “[C]arnivalistic life is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent ‘life turned inside out’, ‘the reverse side of the world’” (250-1). While *Barfly* may present “the reverse side of the world,” it does not present it in a truly carnivalized manner. Inherent in Bakhtin’s definition of carnivalistic life is the idea of celebration. While *Barfly* depicts a normally marginalized type of character in a leading role, it does not take that character “out of [his] usual rut.” Chinaski drinks and suffers the consequences of drinking. His lower class status is not inverted in *Barfly*, and his depravity is not celebrated.

Even as Chinaski’s world is not fully turned upside-down in *Barfly*, to say that his experiences in the film are no more carnivalesque than those of any other skid-row alcoholic would be disingenuous. Chinaski may end the film in the same place he began it, but that fact may actually speak further to the carnival nature of the film. “Carnival celebrates the shift itself, the very process of replaceability, and not the precise item that is replaced” (252). In other words, in the context of *Barfly*, carnival manifests itself in the rapid shifts of lifestyle that Chinaski carelessly undergoes. These shifts, in their fleeting nature, betray the fact that Chinaski does, for a time, experience a carnival suspension of hierarchies. “The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king,” (252) and Chinaski experiences both parts of this act in *Barfly*. In Bakhtin’s description of the carnival, “he who is crowned [carnival king] is the antipode of a real king, a slave or a jester” (252). Little wonder,
then, that we find a parallel twentieth-century figure in the skid row alcoholic. The crowning of a carnival king entails the rise of this slave or jester to the top of the social hierarchy, as a temporary leader of misrule. The example I have mentioned repeatedly, of Tully’s offer of high society life to Chinaski, is an obvious place to look for Chinaski’s crowning. Though one might argue that, by rejecting the offer, Chinaski rejects his crown, one could also argue that in rejecting the offer he only rejects the notion of the superiority of the wealthy class. By willfully remaining drunk and poor, Chinaski belittles the hierarchical status that Tully is so certain will attract him to her.

A key element of the carnival king’s rule is that “crowning and decrowning are inseparable…in any absolute dissociation they would completely lose their carnivalistic sense” (253). In Barfly, this dualism manifests itself in that Chinaski rules as carnival king by squandering the resources that make him king. After his brief stay with Tully, Chinaski returns to Wanda’s apartment and the two of them go to the bar. Chinaski begins buying rounds of shots for the whole bar, raising a toast with each one: “To all my friends!” Indeed, it appears that, for once, Chinaski’s presence at the Golden Horn is appreciated by most, if not all, of its inhabitants. Eventually, Tully walks into the bar to try for the last time to convince Chinaski to come live with her. Wanda attacks her, and Tully leaves Chinaski’s life forever. By spending all the money he has just earned and ostracizing the woman who made his carnival crowning possible, Chinaski is quickly decrowning himself. However, by doing so, he earns the camaraderie of his fellow bar patrons, who, for the first time, cheer him on as he heads out into the alley to fight Eddie. The result of this fight is left unknown, but given that the beginning of this fight parallels the first scene in the movie, one can assume that this final scene suggests a return to normality for Chinaski—his decrowning. Complementing such a reading of this scene are Jim and Wanda’s
appeals to Chinaski not to fight because he is insufficiently fed and rested. If Chinaski’s previous
carelessness is any indicator, they are probably right to discourage him and Chinaski may be
reasonably expected to lose this final fight, and thus his carnival crown.

_Barfly’s_ rendering of the carnival king entails a crowning and fairly swift decrowning,
just as Bakhtin claims it must. However, the legend of Bukowski himself, which is largely
inseparable from the tales of Chinaski, does not follow this formula so neatly. Charles Bukowski,
like many cult artists, has a public persona that is wedded to his body of work: to know one is, it
appears, to know the other. Just as Chinaski, Bukowski’s autobiographical/fictional counterpart,
is a carnival king in _Barfly_, so is the public persona of Bukowski himself a carnival king of
American cult media. However, Bukowski the cult figure has never been decrowned as carnival
king. Furthermore, fourteen years after his death at the age of 74, Bukowski continues to
carnivalize, especially with the recent documentary _Bukowski: Born Into This_ (2003) and the

Since Chinaski and the public persona of Bukowski are mostly inseparable in the minds
of Bukowski enthusiasts, then even as Chinaski is presumably decrowned in the context of
_Barfly_, his character as a carnival king is inevitably affected by the viewer’s understanding of
Bukowski as a living carnival king. Granted, this assertion assumes that the viewer is watching
the film with previous knowledge of Bukowski’s work and/or life. Obviously, this assumption
will not always be accurate, but I am largely concerned with _Barfly_ as an object of
cult/subcultural/countercultural devotion. _Barfly_ fandom is part and parcel of Bukowski
fandom—the film does not appear to exist separately from the author’s oeuvre in the minds of
fans. After the film’s initial release (and lead actor Mickey Rourke’s descent from stardom), one
would be hard pressed to think of a situation in which one would seek out _Barfly_ (especially now
that it is out of print) unless one had some knowledge of its author. In order to understand how *Barfly* functions as a part of Bukowski’s oeuvre and personal legend, then, Chinaski’s role as carnival king in the film must be considered in conjunction with Bukowski’s unique creation of the carnival king as public persona. Such consideration necessitates looking both within and beyond the text of *Barfly* itself. In doing so, one last element of Bakhtin’s carnival will once again prove useful: the carnival literary device of the parodying double.

Such a double may exist within *Barfly* itself, but it is doubtful that this character alone could help explain how *Barfly* works as a carnivalizing text vis-à-vis Bukowski/Chinaski as a carnival king. Since the idea of parody embodies the carnival ideas of subversion, reversal, eccentricity, profanation, laughter, and so on—in other words, all the characteristics that are also embodied in a carnival king—we can look to *Barfly*’s Chinaski to see how, as a carnival king, he may perhaps work as a parodying double of a pre-existing film character. Furthermore, since carnival is concerned with the toppling of hierarchies, a logical place to look for this parodied hero is the archetypal alcoholism film: *The Lost Weekend*.

As film’s best-known bar-hopper (within films, that is, dealing with alcohol in a somber manner, and therefore the ripest for parody), Ray Milland’s Don Birnam is a likely target for Chinaski. Indeed, Bukowski’s affection for *The Lost Weekend* speaks to the possibility that he mindfully constructed his persona, and therefore Chinaski’s character, as a bastardized version of the tragic, hopeless alcoholic writer. In fact, Bukowski framed the narrative of many of his novels in the same manner in which the story of *The Lost Weekend* is framed. *The Lost Weekend* began as the novel by Charles Jackson. Though it is unclear in the novel itself, the film adaptation of *Weekend* suggests that the narrative is at least somewhat autobiographical. In the film adaptation, Birnam is the main character, suffering through a final weekend of alcoholism
before resolving to commit suicide. However, Birnam’s girlfriend, Helen St. James, helps him redirect his anguish towards writing about this horrible weekend. Thus, the narrative ends with the scripting of the narrative.

Bukowski’s repeated use of Chinaski as a thinly-veiled fictional self has a precedent in the film adaptation of Jackson’s novel, as does the structure of many of Bukowski’s novels. For example, Hollywood ends with this conversation between Chinaski and his wife Sarah:

“What are you going to do now?” Sarah asked.

“What?”

“I mean, the movie is really over.”

“Oh, yes.”

“What will you do?”

“There are the horses.”

“Besides the horses.”

“Oh, hell, I’ll write a novel about writing the screenplay and making the movie.”

“Sure, I guess you can do that.”

“I can, I think.”

“What are you going to call it?”

“Hollywood.”

“Hollywood?”

“Yes…”

And this is it. (239)

By concluding Hollywood with the decision to write Hollywood, Bukowski mimics the finale of The Lost Weekend. Inherent in this mimicry is parody, in that Birnam’s decision to write his
novel is based in his desire to move past his alcoholism and into something productive. This distinction between drinking and productivity did not exist for either Chinaski or Bukowski, both of whom express, in multiple venues, the importance of drinking while writing. In fact, just shortly before the above exchange between Chinaski and his wife ends Hollywood, Chinaski asserts that “I had been preceded by some good drinkers. Eugene O’Neill, Faulkner, Hemingway, Jack London. The booze loosened those typewriter keys, gave them some spark and gamble” (237-38). Parody is specifically played out in the ending dialogue of Hollywood through the nonchalance with which Chinaski decides to write Hollywood. That the novel Birnam decides to write at the finish of The Lost Weekend will be his first success is implicit in the existence of the film, given that Weekend explains that the cause of Birnam’s descent into drunkenness is his failed writing career. From the film’s existence, the audience knows that Birnam finally succeeded—he successfully shared his story with a large public audience. The enthusiasm of anticipated success in Weekend is trivialized by Chinaski’s parallel dismissal of the book he is about to write, a dismissal expressed in his use of the phrase “Oh, hell,” before stating his intentions to write. For Bukowski, writing is necessary, something he has no choice but to do and, to his mind, to do well.

Barfly’s Chinaski parodies Birnam in a similar manner to Hollywood’s Chinaski, though perhaps more directly, given that Barfly’s Chinaski and Weekend’s Birnam exist within narratives of the same medium. Related to the juxtaposition with The Lost Weekend that Bukowski creates at the end of Hollywood are the relative assertions of self, in regards to drinking and writing, that Chinaski and Birnam make. Birnam asserts that there are “two Dons: Don the drunk and Don the writer,” and that these two Dons are in opposition with one another. The writer listens to the drunk because he wants to calm his fears about failure, but the drunk just
wants to pawn the typewriter so he has more money to buy booze. Chinaski, on the other hand, never directly states the importance of drinking to his writing in *Barfly*, but every scene in which he writes begins with him sitting down to an already-poured glass or fixing himself a fresh drink. Even when he composes a poem aloud, he ends it by pouring whiskey over his head. Chinaski negates the conflict which drives the narrative of *The Lost Weekend* through his preference for drinking while writing. Tully, as a literary magazine editor, authoritatively asserts that Chinaski is a brilliant writer; the audience knows he can do everything that Don the writer cannot, and he can do it drunk.

Drinking itself, and the rationale for drinking, is another area in which we see the archetypal tortured alcoholic writer of Don Birnam negated by Chinaski. *Weekend*, even as it offers a practical explanation for why Birnam drinks, makes sure the audience knows that Birnam suffers from a disease. “He’s a sick person,” Helen bluntly states. “It’s as though there was something wrong with his heart or his lungs.” A writing slump is what incites Birnam to drink, but once he has that first drink, his disease takes over. As Nat, Birnam’s preferred bartender, puts it, “One’s too many and a hundred’s not enough.” Meanwhile, not only is drinking completely a matter of choice for Chinaski, but being an alcoholic is also his prerogative. Whether or not Chinaski could in fact stop drinking if he wanted to is up for debate, but such a debate would be pointless. What is significant is the fact that Chinaski believes that drinking is his choice and enacts his alcoholism thusly. In other words, while Birnam suffers weepily through every hangover and drunken misstep, Chinaski revels in his poor choices. Upon first meeting Wanda, he buys himself a drink, guzzles it down, and states, in good humor, “I’m broke. Can’t buy another drink…No money, no job, no rent. Hey, I’m back to normal.” When Tully tells Chinaski that anyone can be a drunk, he counters “Anyone can be a non-drunk. It
takes a special talent to be a drunk. It takes endurance. Endurance is more important than truth.” Here we see Chinaski articulating that the difficulties involved in drinking, not just the pleasure or escapism of it, are important and worthwhile parts of his habit. Chinaski parodies Birnam by taking the most painful aspects of his addiction and enjoying them, or wearing them as badges of drunken honor.

Birnam’s relationship with Helen, too, is negated by Chinaski’s relationship with Wanda, quite simply in that Helen enthusiastically works to encourage Don to quit drinking while Wanda helps Chinaski drink more. This parody, while relevant, is not perhaps as striking, or amusing, as the contrast between the affairs, so to speak, in which the two men engage. After falling down a set of stairs, Birnam is taken to the “drunk ward” of a hospital, a sort of therapeutic holding tank for people who have gotten into an accident or some sort of trouble caused by drinking. Birnam wakes up in a strange bed, surrounded by other patients. However, the only character we get to know well in the drunk ward is Bim, an effeminate male nurse who takes a particular interest in Birnam. He never stops smiling and cracking jokes, even as he is telling Birnam that he is doomed to return to this drunk ward time and time again and that he is soon to experience the horrors of delirium tremens. This introduction of the flirty male nurse is contrasted with a parallel development at about the same point in the narrative of *Barfly*. After Wanda gets on a bus to go to a job interview, Tully Sorenson pays Chinaski a visit at Wanda’s apartment. From there, she takes him to her mansion, where she, like Bim, flirts with the main character. Whereas Bim promised Birnam hospital stays and horrifying hallucinations, Tully offers Chinaski a luxurious home and her body. Both characters reject their respective offers, but only Chinaski had any reasonable choice in the matter.
I will explain one final negation of *The Lost Weekend*’s Don Birnam by *Barfly*’s Henry Chinaski. Both characters suffer the consequences of drinking, but Birnam has much more difficulty coping with those consequences. “[C]ontinuing the conventions of the ‘drunkard’s progress’” (Herd and Room, qtd. in Denzin 53), Birnam’s descent over the course of the weekend is expected to end in suicide. In fact, throughout the film, the audience is presented with the foreshadowed possibility of suicide, through Birnam recalling a past suicide attempt, Nat telling Birnam that suicide is inevitable, and so on. Meanwhile, for Chinaski, there is no descent. He gets in trouble and acts mischievously throughout the movie, all the while enduring serious injuries. But every time he seems to take a step closer to death or jail, be it through a back alley knockout or a late-night cornfield robbery, he simply drinks it off and gets back to writing, fighting, and more drinking. Though both Birnam and Chinaski engage in destructive and self-destructive behavior, only Chinaski is able to sustain that destructiveness as a lifestyle, whereas Birnam recreates the descending second half of “The Drunkard’s Progress.”

Indeed, at the film’s beginning, it is quickly established that Birnam would be at the summit, “A confirmed drunkard,” if he were to be placed at a step on the illustration; the film begins with Birnam and his brother packing for an alcohol-free weekend to get Birnam away from his confirmed temptation. The next step down, “Poverty and disease,” is established when he steals ten dollars from his brother to go out drinking. This theft is followed quickly by Helen’s assertion that Don is “sick,” an assertion to which Don’s brother responds by finally abandoning hope of Don recovering. This decision exemplifies the next step down, “Forsaken by friends.” The next step, “Desperation and crime,” characterizes much of the rest of the film, in which Birnam begs, commits petty theft, attempts to pawn his typewriter and more, all in his desperate pursuit of another drink. In the constancy of Chinaski’s depraved state, on the other hand, we
find a negation of the characterization of alcoholism as failure and death—the characterization against which Bukowski constructed his public persona.

Whether mindfully or not, *Barfly* creates, in Henry Chinaski, a paroding double of *The Lost Weekend*’s Don Birnam. Even though both characters are relatively realistic in their portrayals of drinking, at least inasmuch as neither portrays drinking as purely a source of humor nor of masculine grit, Chinaski manages to take all of the melodramatic wind out of Birnam’s sails. In negating Birnam’s pained, tragic failure of an alcoholic, *Barfly*’s Chinaski parallels the public persona of Charles Bukowski as a perpetual carnival king. Therefore, *Barfly* is both a carnivalized and carnivalizing text, the success of which might be measured in the critical reception of the film. Denzin notes that, rather than comparing *Barfly* to *Fat City* (1972), another film with skid row alcoholic main characters that Denzin believes is *Barfly*’s “logical predecessor,” critics chose to compare *Barfly* to *The Lost Weekend* (220).

A question that remains unanswered, in regards to Chinaski’s role as a parodying double, is how he, through negating Don Birnam, renews Don Birnam. I suggest two possibilities, though I by no means deny the possibility of others. The first possibility is that, by creating a carnivalized version of Birnam, one who suffers as frequently but with more humor and quirkiness and less Sturm und Drang, Chinaski actually reinforces the hegemonic conceptions of alcoholism that *The Lost Weekend* reinforced in its time. Aside from his presence as a main character, there is not necessarily any reason why a viewer should sympathize with Chinaski. His humor may be sufficient for those viewers abhorred by his behavior to nonetheless grant him some leniency, but that humor may also serve the purpose simply of renewing the Don Birnam archetype by presenting a similar character’s alcoholism in a less ham-fisted, cautionary manner.
Alternatively, some may instead see Chinaski laughing his way through the pitfalls of alcoholism and re-imagine the down-and-out writer as an alcoholic folk hero. Indeed, I have identified evidence of subcultures that have made just such a hero out of Chinaski, as well as, of course, Bukowski. This evidence includes the online and in-print *Modern Drunkard Magazine*, which tags *Barfly* as “[w]ithout a doubt the finest drinking movie ever put to celluloid,” and turns the viewing of the film, as one of the “40 Things Every Drunkard Should Do Before He Dies,” into a source of subcultural capital (Rich). Another piece of evidence is Chicago’s Drinking and Writing Festival, now in its fourth year. In June 2007, this group, which “works to keep the tradition of the hard-drinking writer alive, and explore the connection between creativity and alcohol,” celebrated its third annual festival with a specific focus on Bukowski. The festival included speeches, presentations, beer tastings, the “2 Drink Minimum Writing Contest,” and other beer- and Bukowski-related activities (*The Drinking and Writing Brewery*).

For the subcultures represented by these festivals and publications, I believe that Bukowski/Chinaski does indeed function as a carnival king, a leader or example for their own carnivalesque behavior and celebrations (I will have more to say about *Modern Drunkard* and the Drinking and Writing Brewery in the Conclusion).

My hope for this chapter is that this explication of the double role of *Barfly* as both a carnivalized and carnivalizing text will help lead to a better understanding of how audiences find pleasure in a mostly transgressive, counter-hegemonic text. Bukowski’s role in American popular culture has by no means diminished with time, and may in fact be growing more significant. Therefore, my hope is to help figure out what cultural needs and desires such a uniquely transgressive cult figure fulfills in our society.
CHAPTER THREE  
PUTTING ONE OVER: W.C. FIELDS’ MIDDLE-CLASS CARNIVAL

Denzin argues that *Barfly* is a thoroughly original film:

this film turns its back on the antialcoholism films that have come before. Its
comedy-like features…also set it apart from earlier alcoholism comedies…where
alcoholism was defined as a humorous, but negative character trait….[*Barfly]*
explodes all of the previously held stereotypes about the alcoholic’s lifestyle.
Alcoholism now becomes something other than a disease to be rid of by doctors,
A.A., family members or lovers….The alcoholic’s being is not defined in terms of
a struggle to overcome the compulsion to drink. The traditional dimensions of
alcoholic heroism are swept away by this film….In a postmodern fashion it
argues that the ancient signifiers surrounding the term alcoholic no longer hold.

(220-21)

*Barfly* is very unique when juxtaposed with the many films, like *The Lost Weekend*, that treat the
alcoholic’s so-called disease with great import. However, I think Denzin makes a mistake by
distancing *Barfly* from other comedies that feature a heavy drinker as a main character. This
oversight is understandable: *Barfly*, like a Bukowski poem or novel, is not primarily concerned
with delivering laughs.

Denzin dedicates one chapter of his book about alcoholism in film to comedies.
However, this discussion focuses on only two fictional drunks: James Stewart’s Elwood P. Dowd
1988). Granted, these two figures do represent many of the salient aspects of the film comedy
drunk, and Denzin does draw some useful conclusions about alcoholic comedy in general from
these two examples. Denzin might have seen the connection between previous alcoholic comedies and *Barfly*, however, were he also to have considered the alcoholic character(s) of W.C. Fields in more detail. *Modern Drunkard Magazine* frequently explores alcoholism in film, usually either decrying the melodrama of films like *Leaving Las Vegas* and *Drunks* (1995) or celebrating the appreciative portrayals of alcohol in Rat Pack movies, Westerns, and especially comedies. I have previously noted the fact that *Modern Drunkard* expresses particular fondness for *Barfly*. Perhaps even greater, however, is the admiration the writers express for “the Great Man,” W.C. Fields:

In the 100-plus year history of motion pictures, no performer has been more associated with strong drink than W.C. Fields. His preeminent position as Hollywood’s supreme souse is richly deserved: During the 1930s and 1940s, the celebrated comedian produced a string of hilarious feature films and short subjects overflowing with booze-spiked humor. On screen, his characters would go to any length to get booze into their bloodstreams….Off screen, Fields was just as fond of stimulating beverages. (Garver, “Driven”)

Denzin mentions Fields in a sentence or two of his comedy chapter and later dedicates about a page to the 1976 biopic *W.C. Fields and Me* (a film that, unlike many of the films Fields made himself, is nearly impossible to find today). Denzin notes that W.C. Fields is “[p]erhaps the most famous drunk in America” (138), but on the whole pays little attention to the actor/screenwriter.

I believe the reason Denzin (one of very few scholars to write a book about filmic representations of alcohol consumption) basically ignores W.C. Fields’ movies is that Fields’ films do not quite fit the specific guidelines Denzin has set out for his study. Though he
recognizes that it must be flexible, Denzin does set out a general framework for the type of film he wishes to study:

First, a central character…will be characterized as having a problem with alcohol. Second, the narrative will show the main character drinking, not drinking, trying to stop drinking, sometimes drinking again, being tested by a crisis situation, not drinking, and finally establishing a sober, or drunken lifestyle. Third, the end of the alcoholism film will position the alcoholic either back in society, with a family and a job, or outside society, leaving family and work behind….Fourth, sobriety will be accomplished in one of several ways: (1) the loving care of a woman or man, (2) a spiritual experience, (3) the intervention of treatment centers and A.A., or (4) will power….Finally, the alcoholic may be presented in “heroic” dimensions. (12)

The comedies that Denzin chooses to study do not perfectly fit this schema, but they fit more comfortably than the movies of W.C. Fields. Whereas drinking in *Harvey*, *Arthur*, and *Barfly* is very much in the foreground, drinking is often somewhere in the background of a Fields vehicle. It is a central trait of just about every Fields character, but it is not the (sole) impetus of the film narrative as Denzin requires.

Even though Fields’ films do not fit the genre as Denzin sees it, Denzin cannot entirely ignore Fields. Though he claims to have chosen only “the best exemplars of the alcoholism film” (11), he includes *W.C. Fields and Me*, one of many films offering the story of a real-life Hollywood actor struggling with addiction. He already provides other examples of this type of film, and could have chosen others still, but instead includes this film, which he notes was mostly panned by critics (138, even though he notes on page 11 that one of his criteria for
choosing the films he studies is their positive critical reception). The disconnect here is a result of the fact that, though Fields’ movies do not focus primarily on his drinking, the presence of Fields as “the most famous drunk in America” makes alcohol a very important part of his movies even if an examination of the films in and of themselves might suggest otherwise. A biopic like *W.C. Fields and Me* makes blatant what is always under the surface in a Fields film, and allows Denzin to fit Fields, an inarguably important figure in American alcohol comedy, into his work.

Though he mentions some nuances within the alcoholic comedy genre, Denzin generally regards it as a monolithic entity. He does, in his concluding chapter, make the distinction between “the slapstick comedy about the classic drunk,” including *Harvey* and *Arthur*, and “the serious comedy about the alcoholic,” a subgenre including *Arthur 2* and *Barfly* (248). I think this genre distinction is misguided (any classification that separates *Arthur* and *Arthur 2* really ought to be questioned). *Harvey* and *Barfly* are subversive in very similar ways, and I think the similarities that Denzin does not see between “earlier alcoholism comedies” and *Barfly* will be more apparent if we look beyond the films themselves to the celebrity figures with whom they are associated. In this chapter, I will argue that W.C. Fields employs an alcoholic public persona to become a carnival king and parodying double within his films and in American culture generally. In so doing, I will explain how the films in which Fields performed laid a generic foundation for *Barfly* inasmuch as they precede Bukowski’s mockery of the American Dream with Fields’ own parody of this enterprise. Also, I hope to show that, though Fields and Bukowski have unique individual qualities as artistic personae, the manner in which the two enact carnivalization through alcohol makes them both postmodern carnival kings. Fields kept his private life more to himself, and his primary artistic medium was far more thoroughly censored than Bukowski’s. Nonetheless, I argue that Fields, as a hyperreal persona, enacts
carnival no less than Bukowski, only differently, by the fact this enactment was (and is) condoned by the authority structures of official life.

I noted in the previous chapter that one of the central carnivalesque aspects of *Barfly* is simply the fact that it elevates an unapologetic alcoholic to the role of main character. Denzin notes the same fact in describing the film’s originality within the alcoholism genre. This spotlighting of a happy alcoholic is not without controversy. Denzin notes one critic who called the film “a ballad for losers” (218). Bukowski himself describes a more biting criticism delivered by a film critic on television:

> Selby shook his head and limp-wristed the movie away: “AWFUL! TERRIBLE! This has to be the *worst* movie of the year! Here we have this…*bum*…with his pants down around his ankles! He’s filthy, uncaring…obnoxious! All he wants to do is beat up the bartender! From time to time he writes poems on torn pieces of paper! But mostly we see this scum-bag…sucking on bottles of wine or begging for drinks at the bar! In one bar scene we see two ladies fighting to their very *death* over him. Impossible! NOBODY, NOBODY would ever care for this man! Who could care for him? We rate movies from one to ten here. Is there any way I can give this a minus one?” (*Hollywood* 235-36, emphasis Bukowski’s).

Granted, even if there are many similarities between Bukowski’s life and his novels, some or all of this review may have been embellished by the author. But the question it raises is a real one: when a film has a main character that represents everything most Hollywood films tell the audience are bad, who will care for him? The answer for the Chinaski character is simply that many do not care for him. A character in *Hollywood* tells her friend, “‘Henry Chinaski…hates women, he hates children, he’s a creepy bitter old fuck, I don’t see what people see in him!’”
Indeed, my conversations with members of college English departments and other readers confirm that the criticisms this character makes are not simply the work of Bukowski’s imagination. At best, the Bukowski/Chinaski icon can be described as polarizing: many admire the man and/or his work, and others are repulsed by the fact that neither one makes many concessions to popular taste.

W.C. Fields, on the other hand, is not and was not such a polarizing figure. Even though his characters may not be well liked within his films, the actor’s work enjoyed widespread popularity in his time and, though the popularity has diminished, it now enjoys artistic prestige. Many of the films, books, and articles that celebrate Fields’ life and work try to answer the question of how his popularity was possible. Fields played characters who, like Chinaski, displayed many of the qualities that most Hollywood films attribute to villains. Usually, by the end of the film, Fields has triumphed in spite of his deplorable personality traits, winning the love of his family and the comforts of wealth even though he has not changed or learned anything. In some films, Fields plays characters that are so crooked they are reasonably disliked by everyone (except his character’s daughter). In these cases, Fields’ character does not end up winning big like he does in his other films, but neither does he get caught for all his cheating and stealing—even when he cheats those less fortune than himself. Modern Drunkard explains,

Not only were Fields’ characters drunkards, they were also dishonest, profane, child-hating, prone to boasting, lecherous, and even, on occasion, physically violent….Much of the secret as to why Fields’ mean-spirited humor connected with audiences was that his characters usually absorbed more abuse than they dispersed….W.C. was eternally the underdog, and his wrath was only unleashed after patiently enduring abuse or public embarrassment from shrill relatives, bill-
collectors, dullards, policemen, small children, or dogs. Consequently, his anger was understandable, as was his heavy drinking. (Garver, “Driven”)

In the 1965 television program “Wayne and Shuster Take an Affectionate Look at W.C. Fields,” the two hosts make an opposite claim to Garver’s:

In order to be successful, [comedians] must win the sympathy of the audience….But how about Fields; was he the underdog?...He was the overdog! He was a bully; he was crooked; he was the original Mister Mean. We could never sympathize with him!...and yet we love him. Why? Well, we think it’s because he’s loveable….Even when he’s doing something nasty, there’s a twinkle in his eye that almost makes you feel sorry crime doesn’t pay.

Both of these explanations apply to some of Fields’ films, but neither one succeeds in explaining the appeal of the Fields persona. One problem is that the most enduring of Fields’ characters do not fall into one category but two. On the one hand is the “underdog” described by Garver: the husband whose family hates him and the worker who is stuck in a bad place despite his best efforts. Some of the feature films in which Fields plays this character are *It’s a Gift* (1934), *You’re Telling Me* (1934), *The Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1935), *The Bank Dick* (1940), and to a certain extent *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* (1941), a film wherein Fields plays himself. On the other hand is Wayne and Shuster’s “overdog:” a confidence man whose primary profession usually involves leading some kind of carnival or circus act (a carnival king in a very literal sense). Films featuring this character include *The Old-Fashioned Way* (1934), *Poppy* (1936), *You Can’t Cheat an Honest Man* (1939), *My Little Chickadee* (1940), and to an extent *International House* (1933). Some overlap occurs between these two character types, but to put
both of them under the same umbrella makes for too general a description of the Fields character type.

There may be more than one specific Fields character type, but there is only one W.C. Fields. By looking only within the films to explain Fields’ appeal, both Modern Drunkard and “Wayne and Shuster” ignore the fact that they are dealing not just with film characters but also the actor whose public persona is at once a key factor in the reception of those characters and largely determined by them as well. Exactly who W.C. Fields is, in this sense, is harder to describe than the Bukowski/Chinaski persona. Bukowski was not at all guarded about his private life and most accounts of his life reassert that the line between the character Chinaski and the author Bukowski is a fine one. In fact, Ecco’s Run with the Hunted: A Charles Bukowski Reader is organized not according to the dates Bukowski’s major works were published, but rather chronologically according to the time of Bukowski’s life that each covers.

By contrast, W.C. Fields is now widely described as being enigmatic offscreen. Indeed, having first watched the documentary W.C. Fields Straight Up (1986), wherein the account of Fields’ life is provided largely by his grandson and biographer Ronald Fields, I was confused by “Wayne and Shuster Take an Affectionate Look at W.C. Fields.” Each documentary gave often wildly different descriptions of Fields’ life. The reasons for these discrepancies became clearer when I began researching recent W.C. Fields biographies. Apparently, W.C. Fields constructed a public persona very deliberately, one that did not in fact represent the private man. According to Phoebe-Lou Adams’ review of Simon Louvish’s 1997 Fields biography, “The hard-drinking curmudgeon who hated babies, kicked dogs, and stashed money in unlikely places under fantastic aliases was a deliberate invention, except for the drinking” (117). Another reviewer argues that “Even people who have never seen a W.C. Fields film probably know him as a man
who loved to drink and hated dogs and children. Most likely, they would assume that the
onscreen character and the offscreen man were one and the same. But Louvish…delves beneath
the surface and discovers an artist who carefully built this character as a comic construct”
(“Man”). It appears that the focus of every biographer, from Ronald Fields on, has been to
uncover as much of the private man behind the public Fields persona as possible.

For those who have read the recent biographies and invest much of their understanding of Fields in them, the Fields persona may be a bit complicated. However, for many Fields fans, the W.C. Fields that exists onscreen is, for all intents and purposes, W.C. Fields. Though Modern Drunkard Magazine does not represent all of W.C. Fields fandom, it is a mouthpiece for some of his most outspoken advocates. It is meaningful, therefore, that the magazine concerns itself almost exclusively with Fields as he exists onscreen, except for his offscreen wranglings in show business (with crooked vaudeville producers early on and film censors later). Some aspects of Fields’ offscreen self may be relevant to fans, and I do not want to assume too much without input from actual fans, but given that Fields’ films are the primary documents responsible for his legacy, any biographical information in which most fans will be interested will probably relate directly to aspects of his onscreen presence. One such bit of information that would be important to fans would be the question of Fields’ alcohol use. Nearly every biography, documentary, and review is quick to stress that yes, Fields was a hearty drinker in real life. Alcohol, therefore, appears to be a key (perhaps the key) component to maintaining a sense of W.C. Fields as a figure that exists within, outside, and between film and reality.

Even though recent biographies have dedicated themselves to breaking through Fields’ constructed personality, Cantor notes that this construction remains a most important part of Fields’ legacy.
The construction of identity is the principle that unites Fields the man and Fields the artist….W.C. Fields has become a mythic figure, and the public has confused the persona he created with the real man in a way that is not the case with the other great comedians of the era….No one has ever believed that Groucho was really a grouch, or that Charlie Chaplin was really a tramp, but everyone believes that W.C. Fields was really a drunk. (72)

Like so many others, Cantor follows this point by noting “He did in fact drink heavily” (72). Partly, this note serves the purpose of stating a relevant fact, but at the same time, it always seems to arrive just in time to assure the worried and disoriented reader that, even if Fields might actually have liked dogs and children, he is still basically the misanthrope we have known all along.

Just like Chinaski/Bukowski, we find a postmodern figure in W.C. Fields, although, as Cantor notes, “Fields was constructing his identity…long before postmodernism or poststructuralist French philosophy was ever heard of” (72). This constructed postmodern identity makes Fields a potent figure equal to Bukowski in the American alcohol discourse; they both exist (or at least give the illusion of existing) in both the real world and in popular media. Therefore, the carnival they enact within their chosen media finds avenues into the lived experience of Americans past and present. Having already elaborated this point for the Bukowski/Chinaski persona, I will now explain the manner in which W.C. Fields functions as a carnivalized text/carnivalizing force within his films, and how this carnivalization reaches out beyond the movie screen into lived experience. I will offer an analysis of You’re Telling Me, a film representative of the “underdog” Fields character and the journey this character takes from dreary middle-class life to carnival kingship.
Fields scholars and fans may well wonder why I chose *You’re Telling Me* out of the entire Fields canon for my discussion here. If one looks at most of the literature on Fields, one will see that *The Bank Dick*, *It’s a Gift*, and sometimes *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* are the widely accepted cream of Fields’ crop. For one thing, I am not concerned here with artistic quality, indefinable as that quality always is. For another, even though Garver believes that watching *You’re Telling Me*, though thoroughly enjoyable, is “a little like watching a cobra with his fangs removed” (“Telling”), this film struck me, more immediately than any other W.C. Fields film, as being particularly subversive. The fact that Garver, writing for *Modern Drunkard*, one of the key subversive texts of Fields fandom today, believes that this film “has a softer edge than the classic W.C. Fields films that would follow” (“Driven”) may seem out of step with my argument that Fields is a carnival king by leading his fans in their carnivalesque behavior. However, Garver does include *You’re Telling Me* in his list of “the Great Man’s greatest” and notes with delight that this film is an exception to the rule that Fields, though always associated with drink, rarely appears “pie-eyed drunk” in his films. Most importantly, I am particularly interested in juxtaposing Fields with Bukowski because Fields is a more mainstream figure. Because *You’re Telling Me* is, in some ways, a “softer” film than some Fields vehicles that came after it, the film presents the possibility of carnival where carnival is not suspected. *Modern Drunkard* may not embrace this film as heartily as *The Bank Dick*, and the latter may be a more meaningful source of carnivalization for the magazine’s readership. However, I see reason to believe that *You’re Telling Me* may have caused more subtle and more widespread carnivalization upon its release and later as well (even today, perhaps) because it makes the brash, sometimes cruel Fields persona more widely palatable.
The Fields “underdog” character in You’re Telling Me is Samuel Bisbee, an eye doctor whose real interest is invention. Bisbee has been married to Abigail for twenty years; they have one daughter, Pauline, who seems to be about eighteen years old. This family of three lives in a well-decorated, spacious suburban home in the town of Crystal Springs. Despite the appearance of the Bisbee residence, we are told early on and throughout the film that the Bisbees live on “the other side of the railroad tracks.” In fact, one of the two major conflicts in the film concerns Pauline’s desire to marry Bob Murchison, the son of the wealthiest family in Crystal Springs. Bob is even more enthusiastic about this marriage than Pauline, but his mother (Kathleen Howard, who appears in other Fields features as Fields’ henpecking wife) will not allow her son to marry a member of a family so far down the socioeconomic ladder.

The Bisbees have a large, well-appointed home, they dress well, and Sam has a respectable job. Sam’s behavior and avocation are the only signifiers of the family’s lower-middle-class status. Sam begins the film by stumbling home drunk, establishing right away the thirst for alcohol that will be reiterated throughout the film and that serves as a primary signifier of his inability to please his wife or his society generally. In his drunken state, Bisbee has an opportunity to showcase one of his inventions. Unable to connect his key with the keyhole of his front door, Bisbee pulls out a funnel that fits perfectly over the keyhole and guides his key to its destination. Having used this novel contraption to enter his house, he is immediately accosted by his wife. She is furious at him for coming home late and is unsympathetic to his explanation: he claims, as usual, to have been at his shop, working on an invention. This may in fact be the truth: many of the times we see Fields drink in this film he is at the shop where he works on his inventions.
Mrs. Bisbee is not interested in Mr. Bisbee’s hobby, however. She tells him he’s “no Edison,” and expresses her displeasure with the fact that Sam is not properly concerned with their daughter’s social life. During this argument, Pauline and her date (Bob) drive up to the front of the house. Contrary to Mrs. Bisbee’s belief that Bob is a “no-good” who is “making a fool of” their daughter, Bob expresses his intention to marry Pauline as he says good night to her. Sam is correct when he tells his wife “I don’t have to worry about my daughter,” and though Abigail insists that Pauline only goes out because she is embarrassed by her father and the pathetic home he has made for her, Pauline is sweet and friendly with her father when she comes inside and speaks with her parents.

This set-up is typical of Fields films featuring the “underdog” character. An important aspect of this character, and one that will be key to understanding how he works as a carnival king, is that he is only an underdog in the context of the American middle class. While they do not quite live in the “cage with golden bars” that Chinaski avoids, no one would mistake the Bisbees for skid row alcoholics. While Barfly’s Chinaski is of the social standing that would qualify him to be a carnival king in a true European carnival celebration—where he would be juxtaposed with an actual king—Sam Bisbee is only “the antipode of a real king” inasmuch as his family is discussed as being the opposite of the richest family in town. Unlike Chinaski, who resents the American aspiration to achieve, the Fields underdog really does want to live the American Dream. But as Cantor points out, “W.C. Fields both lived the American Dream and tried to expose it as an illusion” (72). While Bisbee works to meet his wife’s (and his town’s) sometimes unreasonable demands, he sticks out from the crowd in a way that allows the film to critique the behavior of those others who strive to succeed individually, and have succeeded before Bisbee.
He sticks out because of his carnival eccentricities. These eccentricities primarily manifest themselves in two ways: Bisbee’s role as an inventor and his drunkenness. From Abigail, the mouthpiece of middle-class propriety, we have learned that Sam’s interest in invention is incongruous with a respectable middle-class lifestyle. At the same time, having witnessed the usefulness of one of his inventions, we appreciate the fact that Sam is in fact a skilled and clever inventor. The fact that his funnel is useful only because he is drunk, and he has gotten drunk while working on his inventions, ties his avocation as an inventor to the eccentricity that most separates Bisbee from his middle-class brethren: his strong thirst for alcohol. The manner in which Abigail harangues Sam within the first few minutes of the film for his drinking is typical of Fields’ middle-class underdog films. It is also typical for (female) characters to reiterate these criticisms as the underdog films develop, but it is very significant that You’re Telling Me, The Man on the Flying Trapeze, and The Bank Dick all include these criticisms within their introductory scenes and thereby set Fields’ character apart from his society right off the bat. This setting-off of the Fields character is mirrored in the introductory scene of Barfly, wherein Chinaski is badly injured in a fight with Eddie, but afterwards his drinking companions do not care enough even to lift him out of the alley.

Though his drinking may be described as his key eccentricity, it is not drink but one of Sam’s inventions—a puncture-proof tire—that provides the second major conflict of the film. Bisbee is in his private room in the rear of his optometry practice (the aforementioned invention shop) when he receives a letter from the National Tire Company inviting him to demonstrate his puncture-proof tire at their offices in the city. Sam has already demonstrated these tires to his friends and they really do work, so naturally Sam agrees to head downtown that Saturday. Before Mr. Bisbee makes it home to share the good news of his upcoming trip with his family, Mrs.
Bisbee is visited by Mrs. Murchison, who intends only to tell Abigail that the idea of her son Bob marrying Pauline is “absurd.” However, Abigail is able to convince Murchison that her lineage is “beyond reproach.” One can safely assume that Mrs. Bisbee is not being entirely honest. Her only evidence of being a member of the pedigreed Warren family of Virginia is a family photo album. The only picture in which she claims to be featured is a picture of a man with a baby on his lap. When Murchison asks, “Are you sure this album belongs to you?” Mrs. Bisbee pauses suspiciously and, with a furrowed brow of consternation, replies “Quite sure.”

In this scene, we begin to get a sense of what Cantor means when he claims that W.C. Fields “tried to expose [the American Dream] as an illusion.” In elaborating this point, Cantor states that “in Fields’s vision America is one gigantic con game….so much of his comedy was devoted to satirizing get-rich-quick schemes, social climbing ambitions, and in general people’s efforts to construct their identities and become something other than what they are” (72). *You’re Telling Me* is full of characters who construct false identities; this scene between Abigail and Mrs. Murchison offers the first major example.

Abigail’s attempt at constructing an identity is foiled by her husband, whose arrival is announced by the tire he rolls through the foyer and into something offscreen that loudly breaks. Unlike his wife, Mr. Bisbee does not pretend to be of higher social standing than he is, and takes pride in showing his own family photo album of “real down-to-earth people” who “speak our language.” The photographs he shows include a picture of a man in a prisoner’s uniform and a photo of a woman in a dancer’s outfit. Mrs. Murchison is not impressed and, by the time Pauline and Bob enter the scene, she declares her intention to block their “impossible” marriage. Sam’s wife denounces him again, this time for ruining his daughter’s chance at marrying well. Even his daughter, who expresses support for her father’s decision to act like himself, is not happy with
his insensitivity to her situation, walking off as he tries to read aloud his letter from the National Tire Company.

Even though Bakhtin argues that carnival “proclaims the joyful relativity of everything,” Stallybrass and White note that “In his exploration of the relational nature of festivity, its structural inversion of, and ambivalent dependence upon, ‘official culture,’ Bakhtin set out a model of culture in which a high/low binarism had a fundamental place” (16, emphasis the authors’). By willfully rejecting the American Dream and keeping a safe distance from any behaviors that might make him socially mobile, Bukowski/Chinaski keeps the high/low binary in place. He becomes a carnival king by ultimately winning even though he acts like a loser and often willfully loses along the way. While on the surface the high/low binary exists in Fields’ work, his films, which point to the ways in which winning identities are constructed, blur the distinctions between high and low. Fields’ underdog character can only ultimately become a carnival king because he starts as a middle-class failure. But if success is only a matter of constructing the right identity, his failure is only a failure to pretend to succeed. The reasons for his lower-middle-class status—drinking and inventing, his two hobbies—are as arbitrary as the reasons why others succeed. If all it takes is a lie for Mrs. Murchison to approve of her son’s marriage to Pauline, then there must be plenty of successful people in Sam’s world who are successful by virtue of nothing more dignified than deceit.

Sam Bisbee, on the other hand, actually has a reason why he deserves success: his miraculous puncture-proof tires. However, Bisbee is only further humiliated when he heads downtown with the puncture-proof tires on the wheels of his car. Bisbee absentmindedly parks in an illegal spot and, while he is upstairs talking to the company’s board of directors, the doorman for the National Tire Company Building moves his car down a spot. A nearly-identical car takes
the illegal spot behind him. This car is a police vehicle, and the two policemen inside get out to investigate something down the street. When Bisbee comes back out with the board to demonstrate the capabilities of his tires by shooting them with a pistol, he mistakes the police car for his own, shooting and deflating all four tires. The police finally notice what Bisbee has done and he is forced to flee without finding his own car.

Bisbee takes a train back home. Expecting to be ridiculed and belittled by all of Crystal Springs upon his return, he attempts to kill himself on the train by drinking iodine. But Bisbee cannot bring himself to do it, and leaves the car where he set himself to the task. Before finding another seat, he notices a woman in a private room who also has a bottle of iodine out. Believing she is about to kill herself, he drains the bottle, explains his own suicide attempt, and the two begin talking in detail about the plights of Sam and his daughter. Bisbee does not know it, but this woman, who introduces herself to him only as Marie, is Princess Lescaboura, who herself must give up the man she truly loves because she is to marry the “crown prince.” She is affected by the story of Bisbee’s daughter, and decides that she will help Pauline marry the man she loves.

In this scene, Bisbee begins a relationship wherein, in a carnival fashion, hierarchies are suspended. The relationship between Bisbee and Princess Lescaboura is the primary instance in the narrative where free and familiar contact occurs between the classes. Even here, though, we must examine the terms “free” and “familiar.” The contact between Bisbee and Lescaboura is free inasmuch as Sam is free to be himself around Marie. He never puts on airs or treats her delicately. This understanding of “free” could work as a definition of “familiar” as well. Sam’s contact with Marie is familiar inasmuch as they are on a first name basis and she allows the degree of physical contact that would be appropriate in a close friendship. However, the contact
between these two characters is also unfamiliar inasmuch as Bisbee has no idea that he is in contact with a member of a higher class. Just as *You’re Telling Me* offers a high/low social binary in its narrative while simultaneously giving viewers reason to question that binary, it further offers this sort of meta-carnival in the way that free and familiar contact is enacted within the narrative. To elaborate this point, I must first describe how the relationship between Bisbee and Lescaboura unfolds.

Throughout Bisbee’s train ride, two sharp-nosed women, also from Crystal Springs, watch him carefully. Seeing him struggle to walk a straight line while the train is moving, they incorrectly assume that he is drunk and complain bitterly to each other. When Bisbee enters Lescaboura’s room, they assume that she is a woman he is entertaining. The fact that Sam misses the stop for Crystal Springs because he is engrossed in his conversation with Lescaboura leads the two Crystal Springs women to believe that he is willfully neglecting his husbandly duties in favor of gallivanting about with this floozy. The two women spread these rumors far and wide when they get back to Crystal Springs. Once he finally gets home the next day, Sam slowly realizes what has happened. Rather than confront his probably furious wife, Sam decides to stay at his shop and drink with his friends. “Ain’t it funny how much trouble a man can get into innocently?” he asks them. In light of the question of constructed identities raised by Abigail’s photo album deception, this question could be read as a mirror of the film’s central question: Ain’t it funny how high a man can climb with a little deception?

The same day that Bisbee gets back to Crystal Springs and learns he has trouble waiting at home, Princess Lescaboura makes an official visit to the town. She shocks the high society members who greet her when she tells them that she is only visiting to meet with her good friend Sam Bisbee. The usual distaste that society members have for the Bisbees is augmented today by
the widespread rumor of Sam’s disloyalty to his wife. However, the society disapproval of Bisbee is partly alleviated when Lescaboura claims that “Colonel Bisbee” saved her life in “the war.” From this construction, Bisbee begins his carnival climb, a climb that will ultimately make him a king like Crystal Springs has never known. A defining aspect of the Fields underdog’s ascension to the carnival throne is that, despite long being a middle-class failure, the underdog character suddenly becomes more than just a middle-class success. He transcends the middle-class to become unquestionably upper-class. By this point in the film, we know that Bisbee has the opportunity to outdo Crystal Springs’ elite by virtue of his association with the princess. This becomes particularly clear just before Lescaboura steps off the train to be greeted by the welcome party, when the mayor tells Mrs. Murchison, “I never met a princess before! I never met anything higher than an Elk.”

The welcome party, led by Mrs. Murchison, sets off towards the Bisbee residence, eager to prove to the princess that she is mistaking their Sam Bisbee for another. However, the party finds Sam on his way home (from drinking in his shop) and, when greeted by the princess, Sam recognizes his friend Marie. Crystal Springs’ elite now accept that Sam Bisbee is in fact friends with Princess Lescaboura. However, Sam still does not realize that he actually has a princess for a friend—he believes that she has fooled all of Crystal Springs into believing she is something more than just a woman he met on the train. She is of course not constructing this identity, though she is constructing part of Sam’s. The people of Crystal Springs accept the word of royalty, and Mr. and Mrs. Murchison are suddenly much friendlier to Mr. Bisbee, even as he openly expresses his dislike of Mrs. Murchison.

The princess’ motorcade continues on to Sam’s house. Even though he is arriving with an impressive entourage, Sam is still reluctant to see his wife. He hides beside the car while
Princess Lescaboura greets Abigail and Pauline, telling them the same lie she told her welcome party about Sam’s heroism. By the time Sam comes out from his hiding place, his wife is too shocked and impressed to be angry. The princess arranges for a party to be thrown at the Bisbee house that evening and Abigail invites all of Crystal Springs’ elite. It is worth noting that Sam has, at this point, essentially just returned home from drinking at his shop. This is the same behavior that landed him in a great deal of trouble at the film’s beginning. Now, his drunken arrival home is a matter of pomp, circumstance, and celebration. Bisbee’s inebriation and other eccentricities (for instance, the ostrich he was walking home when the welcome party found him) are eclipsed by his heroic association with the wealthiest, highest-class person the town has ever known. Another form of identity construction, then, is façade: as long as one has something to hide behind, one can bear lower-middle-class signifiers and still ascend the social ranks. This point is driven home in an incidental scene just before Sam enters his home. The mayor congratulates Bisbee on his banner day, whereupon Bisbee asks him, in a slurred voice, if he has “a little dram on the hip.” “Colonel,” the mayor responds, “I always have something on the hip.” The mayor looks around cautiously then directs Bisbee to follow him into the backseat of a car. The mayor pulls down a blind to cover the car window and removes a pint of whiskey from his coat. He hands the bottle to Bisbee, who, in a carnivalesque fashion, tells the mayor he voted for him five times in the last election and proceeds to drink all of the whiskey. Though the mayor has long been a much more respected citizen than Bisbee, he shares Bisbee’s lower-middle-class taste for liquor; he is just much more inclined to be secretive about it.

Now that Sam is tied to royalty, the Bisbee family has social prestige and Mrs. Murchison is eager to have her son marry Pauline. At the party, Mrs. Murchison publicly announces the engagement and ends the strand of the narrative that began from that class
conflict. Mrs. Murchison and the mayor also invite the princess to stay for the opening of their new country club the next day. The princess agrees, but on the condition that Sam replace the mayor as the first to tee off on the golf course. The mayor and Mrs. Murchison concede to the princess’ wish and Sam, too, nervously agrees to christen the golf course, setting the stage for the famous W.C. Fields golf routine the next day.

As this routine winds down, before Sam ever manages to hit the ball, Mr. Robbins from the National Tire Company interrupts the ceremony to let Bisbee know that the board found his car, tested his tires, and is ready to make him an offer. Robbins initially offers twenty-thousand dollars for the rights to the invention, but Lescaboura helps again by entering her own bid for the tires. Her bidding war with Robbins stops once he agrees to pay one million dollars plus royalties. Everyone present celebrates Bisbee’s windfall.

All conflict resolved, Sam Bisbee is now in every sense a carnival king. However, I should address again the claim I made earlier that Sam’s relationship with Lescaboura is the film’s primary display of free and familiar contact among the classes. I made this claim because the contact between the Bisbees and the Crystal Springs elite is based on the (at first false, but eventually correct) assumption that Sam associates with the wealthy and is therefore, in a sense, an upper-class citizen. By the time Pauline and Bob are actually married, Sam really is a member of the upper class, presumably wealthier than the Murchisons. The contact he and his daughter experience with the Murchison family is not entirely carnivalesque because it relies on the belief that Sam is now of as high a class (or higher) as the Murchisons. I could make the argument that not even Sam’s contact with the princess is really free and familiar; for all he knows, she is a lower-class girl whose virtue he must defend from the rumors spread around town. Once again, however, a key aspect of Fields’ manifestation of carnival in his middle-class underdog films is
that his character exposes the arbitrary nature of the social hierarchies on which the narratives rely. In this way, even if Bisbee in fact becomes not a carnival king but an official, capitalist king, the viewer knows that Fields the actor is embodying this role knowingly. It is not Bisbee alone who embodies the carnival king, but W.C. Fields-as-Bisbee who infiltrates the ranks of the elite as a prankster who will not play by the rules and will expose the relativity of those rules to his viewers.

The film’s final scene makes it clear that Fields is not interested in official kingship; his business, like the business of the characters he portrays in his “overdog” films, is the carnival. In this final scene, the Bisbees and the Murchisons are at the new, opulent Bisbee estate. Pauline and Bob are heading off on their honeymoon, Princess Lescaboura is finally leaving Crystal Springs, and everyone else but Sam is heading off somewhere. Sam kisses Abigail goodbye; whereas she was cold to his affection at the film’s beginning, she is open and receptive now. As Bisbee says goodbye to Lescaboura, he leans in close and asks her, “We certainly put that princess stuff over, didn’t we?” She smiles and replies with a wink, “You’re telling me!” Bisbee gives her a hearty clasp on the back.

The titles of Fields’ films sometimes have little to do with their content. However, I believe that You’re Telling Me is a very deliberate and meaningful title, one that ties together all the issues of identity construction and class distinction in the film. Rather than insisting that she really is a princess, or being insulted by the fact that Bisbee assumes she is something else, Princess Lescaboura, in saying “You’re telling me!” agrees with Bisbee that, yes, she really has succeeded in fooling everyone. Even though the film relies on high/low class distinctions, and even though Bisbee ultimately has to advance his social status to succeed as thoroughly as he does (even his new fortune is dependent on his relationship with the princess, not his invention
itself), the film proclaims the relativity of socioeconomic success. Princess Lescaboura, the person with the greatest social distinction of all, is the most self-aware of the fact that her privilege is arbitrary, maintained by her ability to play a role. Bisbee is a carnival king in part because his constructed identity is temporary. His success relies on the princess entering his life briefly, telling a lie, and leaving once the lie has taken effect. Bisbee never actually changes his behavior and, aside from the façade of his expensive house, he continues to bear all of the signifiers of the lower-middle class.

Once everyone has gone, Bisbee makes this point clear. He removes his hat, suit jacket, and vest, tossing each to one of three butlers lined up at his service. Bisbee tells these servants to allow no one to interrupt him for two weeks and gives them orders to march away. With no one else in sight, Bisbee calls out and his two drinking buddies from the shop appear with a large brown jug. He raises the jug high, announcing “This’ll be the first real drink I’ve had in months!” Even though Bisbee has power now, his behavior has not changed at all. Essentially, he is still the eccentric “failure” who drinks and invents, and it is the eccentric failure that viewers will expect to find when they next watch a Fields film. Indeed, Cantor notes that “Fields leaves us laughing at the idea that money has actually altered anything about Egbert Sousé [Fields’ underdog hero in The Bank Dick]. He concludes the film with an image of Sousé following the siren call of Joe the Bartender….You can take the Fields hero out of the saloon, but you can’t take the saloon out of the Fields hero” (76). Even though Fields’ underdog ends the film with the carnival crown firmly atop his head, he will be decrowned by the presence of the Fields public persona. Ultimately, viewers will understand Fields as a bumbling, drunken eccentric with a nagging wife rather than as a successful businessman with a happy family; the latter identity is always temporary, embodied only for a few moments at the end of a movie.
You’re Telling Me offers one example of the manner in which Fields’ middle-class underdog creates a parodying double of the American Dreamer. Though both of the alcoholic personae I have studied double this particular figure, Bukowski/Chinaski and W.C. Fields each do so in distinct ways. Bukowski/Chinaski gleefully sticks his tongue out at every man who kills himself trying to be somebody, like the early-nineteenth century drinker who drowned his fears of failure in whiskey, or the struggling artist who tries to let loose his muse with a few drinks and ends up an alcoholic with no art to show for it. Since he is overtly opposed to the American Dream (the epitaph on Bukowski’s tombstone reads simply “Don’t try”), Bukowski/Chinaski is read as a countercultural figure. On the other hand, W.C. Fields appears to try and ultimately succeed. By joining in on the game but ignoring the rules, Fields is able to point out the absurdities of the game and its outcome. Because Fields provides a parodying double within the framework that the original of that double exists, and because the medium for which he is best known is thoroughly censored and regulated, Fields is regarded as a mainstream media figure. He might also be regarded by many as countercultural, but he is mainstream (with all the ambiguities that label entails) first and foremost.

The different ways in which these two postmodern alcoholic carnival kings are received—one as against the mainstream and the other as an element of the mainstream—are significant to how they function as carnivalizing forces historically and today. However, the similarity between the two on which I have focused—their alcohol consumption and depictions of alcohol consumption—is perhaps the key to their ability to carnivalize in American society. In my concluding chapter, I will look beyond the texts I have studied to demonstrate how postmodern carnival kings Bukowski and Fields have actually served the carnival role I claim they do.
In this chapter, I have argued that Fields is a hyperreal figure inasmuch as his public persona exists between and within both popular media and lived experience. I have argued that this public persona employs the carnival signifier of alcohol in order for Fields to play the role as a carnival king both within his films and in American culture generally. I have argued that Fields’ films are the generic predecessors of Bukowski’s *Barfly*, though I concede that the latter could reasonably be categorized with alcoholism films while Fields’ films may not. Denzin is correct: within the alcoholism genre, *Barfly* is a true original. However, genres are more fluid than Denzin’s study suggests. The trouble with delineating a specific alcoholism genre is that alcohol is all over American cinema; “the fabric of film history is soggy with the stuff” (Garver, “Soused”). Films that are not centrally concerned with alcohol (or alcoholism) will often feature the substance significantly, and films that are overtly about alcohol(ism) are never only about that one topic.

I can say and wish to say more about how Fields relates specifically to the American alcohol(ism) discourse; in fact, I will in the next chapter. But beyond my brief discussion there, I have still more to say about Fields’ place in history, next to Prohibition and the women’s movements that fueled that law. I would also like to explore in more detail how Fields’ use of alcohol in his films provides a way for him to parody and question Hollywood filmmaking. However, the present work is only an introduction to Fields the carnival figure, and therefore these other explorations are beyond my grasp for the moment. For now, it is sufficient to have shown that Fields, as an alcoholic public persona, carnivalizes by parodying the manner in which Americans strive for the ideal of the upper-middle class. In this way, I have connected Fields’ carnivalization to Bukowski’s, and shown that, even though both use alcohol as a primary tool of carnivalization, their alcoholic carnival is never only about alcohol. For these two carnival
figures, alcohol serves as a key tool in their carnival labor, in particular the deconstruction of American myth.
CONCLUSION

CARNIVAL BEYOND THE MEDIA KINGS

The Drinking and Writing Brewery is more of a theater troupe than a brewery, but is not quite either of these things. The Brewery, such as it is, is composed of two members of the Chicago-based Neo-Futurist Theater Company, Steve Mosqueda and Sean Benjamin. In 2002, Mosqueda and Benjamin began performing “a bar show—or rather, a thinking man’s boozy lecture—about the alcoholic authors of great American literature” (Metz, “Tapping”). Mosqueda and Benjamin explain the concept behind this performance on their Web site, drinkingandwriting.com: “It explored the connection between creativity and alcohol. We sat at the bar and drank and talked about famous drinkers and writers, our drinking and writing, the effects of alcohol on the body and mind and family, and we drank...more.” The concept for this play, titled *Drinking and Writing*, is indeed novel. Unlike some experimental theater, which forces members of the audience into the space of the performers, Benjamin and Mosqueda come down offstage and become members of the audience themselves. It is as if one were to pay a cover charge to enter a bar because they knew that somebody sitting near them would have prepared some really interesting bar banter ahead of time. Despite or because of the novelty of this concept, the play has been a success, spawning three additional “volumes” (*Volume II: The Noble Experiment*, *Volume III: To Cure a Hangover*, and *Volume IV: The Twelve Steps of Christmas*).

The success of the play has allowed the Brewery to expand. Benjamin and Mosqueda now host a radio show the first Sunday of every month on WLUW 88.7 FM in Chicago, wherein they discuss specific writers, brewers, and bars, feature “original writing by artists from Chicago and everywhere else,” and sometimes discuss topics that have very little to do with either
drinking or writing (*Drinking and Writing Brewery*). The Brewery has even lived up to its title by producing a few homebrews with names like Buk Stout and Saison Also Rises (Metz, “Drinking”). The duo’s most visible activity beyond the *Drinking and Writing* play is the Drinking and Writing Festival. On their Web site, Benjamin and Mosqueda explain that “The Drinking & Writing Brewery exists to preserve the spirit and devotion of the hard drinking writer and to uphold the rituals of creativity through their passion for the written word. We strive to attract others who share these principles.” The Drinking and Writing Festival embodies the idea of bringing together the people “who share these principles.” The Festival has been held annually since 2005, changing in some aspects from year to year. Notable in its second incarnation was the “‘Pub Crawl to Cure a Hangover’…wherein several drinking establishments [were] visited and their house hangover cures sampled” (Metz, “Tapping”). Also, in past years the festival day has coincided with the performance of the play or the inauguration of the play’s new run.

Beyond these variations, the sorts of activities featured in one annual incarnation of the festival have been featured in all the others. I attended the third annual festival on June 9, 2007 as a participant-observer and ethnographer. This particular festival had the stated purpose of “Celebrating the Life of Charles Bukowski” and featured lectures on drinking and/or writing from scholars, authors, and brewers; the presentation of The Drinking and Writing Award for Outstanding Achievement in Drinking and Writing; beer samples from “some great microbreweries and brewpubs” as well as samples from homebrewers and the Drinking and Writing Brewery; local publishers and book stores peddling their wares (especially those relating to drinking and/or those written by heavy-drinking writers); and the Two Drink Minimum Writing Contest, wherein, at the end of the day, everyone who has been drinking is offered pencil and paper, given a prompt, and allowed a couple minutes to write. A handful of those
involved in the festival judge the work that emerges from this morass, and the winners are awarded (with beer, in one way or another).

In many ways, there is nothing out of the ordinary about the Drinking and Writing Festival. With the slogan “Write Til You Puke,” the 2007 festival may have promised to some a literary bacchanal of the drunkest order, and to be certain, plenty of the attendees were three or more sheets to the wind by the end of the afternoon. However, the festival-goers got involved in more than just the beer samples and the cash bar. For instance, they proved to be an attentive and respectful audience for the lectures, which were all well-attended. As for those lectures, some of the material presented might have been enough to dissuade one from considering the Drinking and Writing Festival a carnival celebration. Matt Van Wyck’s presentation on cask-conditioned ales implicitly recognized a hierarchy of beer quality, which became explicit when he began one point by saying, “Should, god forbid, you ever find yourself drinking an American macrobrew…” Of course, there is some humor in this phrase, but actually, on the whole the festival was concerned with distinguishing good beer from bad beer (in fact, in 2006, Pete Crowley and Michael Roper gave a lecture titled “Good Beer, Bad Beer,” explicitly designed to help attendees make this very distinction).

Likewise, Bill Savage and Todd Bauer, two literature scholars, gave a joint lecture titled “Bukowski Beyond the Bottle,” wherein they justified their appreciation of Bukowski as a writer by pointing out, for instance, that as much as Bukowski writes about “drinking and whoring,” he writes more about classical music. Bauer in particular earned my academic distaste by arguing that Bukowski is great because “his writing achieves a level of truth and beauty that is rarely reached by most writers, and I think this is what separates artists of their time and artists for all time.” Rather than toppling hierarchies, this presentation, like Van Wyck’s, served to reinforce
arbitrary categories of taste that have historically maintained class distinctions. The audience members laughed a bit harder than they might were they to listen to Savage and Bauer in a university lecture hall, but even their carnival laughter felt reined in by the pomp and circumstance with which the two scholars treated Bukowski’s oeuvre. The audience at a Bukowski poetry reading was never so polite.

However, many aspects of the Drinking and Writing Festival did bring life out of its usual rut. The presentation of the Drinking and Writing Brewery Award for Outstanding Achievement in Drinking and Writing paralleled in some respects the crowning of a carnival king. As journalist Rick Kogan, this year’s recipient, noted in his acceptance speech, the award is “a dubious honor, but following in the footsteps of Bill Jauss [the previous year’s recipient] is the great achievement of my life in Chicago journalism.” Kogan recognizes here that the award mingles the lofty and low, as it rewards him at once for being a good journalist and a good drinker, but nonetheless explains that such a “dubious honor” represents “the great achievement of [his professional] life.” For those of us who are not seasoned drinker-writers, the Two Drink Minimum Writing Contest did mix the sacred (writing) with the profane (drinking) to unremarkable ends (lackluster poetic imitation of Bukowski). Even though the categories of drinking and writing have long been associated in our culture, and even though some people actually produced interesting work in the two minutes we all had to drunkenly write, such a contest would normally be discouraged in most official writing circles (like university creative writing programs) and therefore can be considered carnivalesque.

In some respects, the 2007 Drinking and Writing Festival did bear the burdens of official life. Whether intentionally or not, there were ways in which the festival justified its existence to the official world. On the whole, however, I wish to suggest that the 2007 festival was actually a
mostly carnivalesque experience. I cannot speak for all of the attendees, but I know that my graduate school summer break was definitely taken out of its usual rut for an afternoon. One way this carnivalization occurred was simply through the fact that the festival took place in the afternoon, from 12 PM to 5 PM. In other words, the festival ended at the time when it usually acceptable to start drinking in America. From the moment in the early afternoon when I stepped into the Hopleaf (the Chicago neighborhood bar that hosted the festival, and opened several hours early to do so), and the bartender suggested, “How about a beer?” I knew I was in for an unique experience. I did not appreciate how carnivalesque my afternoon had been until after the festival was officially over and the organizers were available to answer some of my questions. As part of the $15 ticket for the festival, every attendee was given 10 coupons for free beer samples. By 5 PM, I was beginning to appreciate the fact that six ounce “samples” of high-alcohol-content beer, gratis or not, add up and take their toll over the course of an afternoon. Feeling tipsier than I had hoped, I went ahead with my ethnography, informed consent documents and all. The conversation I had with Benjamin and Mosqueda was stimulating and thoughtful, but it was also full of carnival laughter and, towards the end, I could feel the weight of the microbrews on my eloquence. Also worth mentioning is the friend I made at the festival, who fell asleep by my feet on the patio as I talked with Benjamin and Mosqueda. I was scheduled to meet my parents for dinner about an hour later, and this ethnographic setting was an auspiciously carnivalesque forerunner to such an official event as a meal with my sober family.

Towards the end of our discussion, Mosqueda, Benjamin and I got on the topic of alcohol’s marginalization in American social culture. In a brief moment of verbal passion, Mosqueda brought up Frank Kelly Rich, editor of Modern Drunkard Magazine, and Rich’s many written works that speak to the idea that, in America, “you can’t drink anymore!” It makes
perfect sense that Mosqueda referred to Rich at this point in our conversation. Whereas the Drinking and Writing Brewery sometimes appear to justify their existence to official power structures, be they the structures of literary taste or of gustatory distinction, Frank Kelly Rich is much less inclined to do the same.

With a title like *Modern Drunkard Magazine*, one might expect that Rich’s publication is a farce, but it is not. The FAQ page of *Modern Drunkard*’s Web site (“Drunkard Q&A”) makes this point clear. The response offered to the frequently asked question “Are you guys for real?” is “Yes. While there is some satire involved, we believe to the very core of our souls every word we write.” Even here, one might question if a response so hyperbolic could be serious. But if *Modern Drunkard* is not “for real,” but rather a joke, it is a joke that Rich and his associates have taken very, very far without betraying their bluff. The magazine has been in publication since 1996, expanding from a low-budget, black-and-white zine to a glossy magazine (Valentine) available around the country in bars, by subscription, and even at chains like Borders and Tower Records. The publication is also available in England and Japan, and as of 2006 was reported to have a circulation of roughly 50,000 (Lind), though many of *Modern Drunkard*’s readers doubtless get their fix through the online edition of the magazine at moderndrunkardmagazine.com. The magazine’s success has spawned a book (titled *The Modern Drunkard*), allowed Rich to make a few independent films (one of which is titled *Modern Drunkard*) (Gumbel), and earned Rich a good deal of press from dead serious publications like *The New York Times* and Time. Rich is not kidding, and he puts his money where his mouth is with the Modern Drunkard Convention.

The thing that Frank Kelly Rich is so serious about is, simply, drinking. As *The New York Times* describes it, *Modern Drunkard* “is a humor magazine dedicated to the art and culture of
drinking and to its defense against what Mr. Rich calls ‘neoprohibitionists from the left and right’” (Smith). The *Times* profile of Rich describes him and his publication accurately right from the beginning with the headline “A Serious Business for a Humorous Drunkard.” Rich and his drunkard associates are funny, but that does not mean they are joking. So, even though the answer that *Modern Drunkard* offers to the frequently asked question “What are your goals?” is purposefully overwrought, it provides the same idea as that from *The New York Times* above: “To return drinking to the glorious Rat Pack/Jackie Gleason Era. How do we plan to pull it off? First we unite the International Drunkard Tribe. Then we crush our enemies. Then we take over. Then we celebrate with a never-ending series of victory keggers and self-congratulatory cocktail parties.”

In a sense, Rich and *Modern Drunkard* have made strides towards completing each one of these steps (which is not to say that any one of them will ever be completed). The magazine is certainly a tool to unite “the International Drunkard Tribe” as an imagined community (in Benedict Anderson’s sense of this term) at the same time that it specifies who the “enemies” are. The range of subjects for *Modern Drunkard*’s articles is wide, but every article has something to do with drinking, almost always with a positive point of view on the topic. Among the Web site’s top ten archive hits is “The Lost Weekend: How to Save Your Weekend By Losing Your Mind,” wherein Frank Rich takes the film title as a suggestion and explains how best to make a weekend your own—free from the restrictions of the work week—by drinking from “the moment you get off work Friday…until the wee hours of Monday morning.” He presents the do-it-yourself “Lost Weekend” as a way to fight back against work schedules that no longer end on Friday evening, but have made their way into the weekend, which was “once the sovereign territory of the working stiff.”
In the “Weekend” article, we can see that, even though Rich does not approve of official life as it exists today, he does not want to dismantle it entirely either. He wants the American alcoholic carnival to exist in a way he imagines it must have existed in the past: as a hearty element of everyday life, in comfortable balance with the official elements of business and family.

For Rich, the last golden age in America was the 1960s, when Frank Sinatra and the Rat Pack ruled the pop-cultural roost, boozers like John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson occupied the Oval Office, and the ecstatic possibilities of alcohol had not been compromised by the rise of the alternative drug culture (too unstable and destructive, in his view), the growing influence of Christian conservatives (too kill-joy) and the rise of the political correctness movement (too repressive).

(Gumbel)

In order to reestablish balance and return to an alcoholic “golden age,” Rich suggests some aggressive carnivalesque action. In another of the Web site’s top ten archive hits, “40 Things Every Drunkard Should Do Before He Dies,” Rich writes

A man is, ultimately, the sum of his accomplishments. Each culture, of course, has a different idea as to what rates as an accomplishment.….The subculture of avid drinkers, living as we do by our own set of rules and priorities, has an entirely different idea altogether, to the degree that our notion of a goal worth achieving may well appear bad behavior or even a criminal offense to the parent culture.

Indeed, while some of Rich’s “40 Things” are officially permissible (“Extravagantly overtip a bartender,” “Make your best friend a perfect martini,” “Go on a fishing trip with your pals”), and
some would even be encouraged by the mavens of official life (most notably “Sit in on an A.A. meeting”), most of them are carnivalesque to greater (“Get loaded and tell your boss exactly how you feel”), lesser (“Dance like a fool in front of a large hooting crowd”), and illegal (“Spend a night in the drunk tank,” “Fight a good fight,” “Steal some booze”) degrees.

In “The Lost Weekend,” Rich suggests a temporary period of very heavy drinking as a form of resistance, while in “40 Things” he writes to an audience of “avid drinkers,” people who might engage in “Lost Weekend” behavior as a matter of course. In both cases, his intended audience is interested in acting out against social norms. In the former case, he presents the potential acting-out as a way to earn back the free time that has been taken away from American workers. In the latter, he more broadly suggests that the forty tasks he sets out for “Every Drunkard” will allow them to “feel secure in the fact that [they]’ve lived a rich and full life, even if only the boys and girls down at happy hour think so.” While the former article points to the political nature of Rich’s project, the latter points up more strongly the carnivalesque nature of Rich’s magazine, especially in the manner that it replicates the ideologies of carnival alcoholic figures like Bukowski and Fields. Rich often suggests to his readers that they engage not simply in carnival behavior, but carnival behavior as a matter of course, even a lifestyle.

Bukowski/Chinaski would feel at home among the people who follow Rich’s suggestions. Fields would, too, only he would have to compromise his carnival behavior somewhat to appease his sober wife and his business obligations—both of which, in some regards, represent the “enemies” that Modern Drunkard seeks to vanquish. Fields would be of the type to engage in and encourage “Lost Weekend” behavior while also secretly, as Rich suggests every drunkard do at least once, “[j]uicing on the job.”
The influence of carnival kings Bukowski and Fields can be seen in the type of behavior that *Modern Drunkard Magazine* promotes, especially in that it promotes this behavior as part of a call for radical social change. But if the connection between the magazine and the carnival kings I detail in this volume still seems at all tenuous, there are actually many ways in which *Modern Drunkard* makes the connection blatant. Just as the Drinking and Writing Festival uses drunken literary heroes like Bukowski as catalysts for their own out-of-the-ordinary behavior, so too does *Modern Drunkard* look to Bukowski, Fields, and other alcohol-consuming icons of American popular culture for carnival inspiration. These figures are the subjects of *Modern Drunkard* articles as well as the inspiration for lived Modern Drunkard experiences.

In terms of magazine articles, I have mentioned throughout this volume the ways in which *Modern Drunkard* refers to W.C. Fields’ films as well as Bukowski’s *Barfly*. William Garver, author of the blog *Booze Movies: The 100 Proof Film Guide*, has contributed a number of articles to *Modern Drunkard* celebrating the place of alcohol in film. Garver is particularly reverent of W.C. Fields, dedicating the article “Driven to Drink” solely to the best of Fields’ oeuvre. In another *Modern Drunkard* article, titled “Soused Cinema,” he also makes the case for *Barfly*, citing the film as one of “the best drinking movies ever made.” Frank Rich’s praise for *Barfly* is even greater; he refers to the film as “without a doubt the finest drinking movie ever put to celluloid” (“40 Things”).

Aside from Garver’s film articles and Rich’s praise of *Barfly*, Fields and Bukowski also figure prominently in the eight-part series “Clash of the Tightest: History’s Greatest Drunks Square Off,” in which, as the title suggests, the sixteen late drinkers that the magazine deems the greatest in history are pitted one against the other in sixteen fictional single-elimination drinking contests until “the greatest boozers of all time” stands alone. Fields, a tournament favorite, is
eliminated in the second round by Jackie Gleason’s trickery. Gleason goes on to defeat Bukowski in the final round, which turns out to be a knock-down, drag-out drinking battle. More so than many of the drinkers they face in the “Clash of the Tightest,” W.C. Fields and Charles Bukowski appear often as topics of discussion on the Modern Drunkard Chat Board and as sources of quotes and other references in many of the magazine’s boozy articles. Modern Drunkard does not explicitly mention Fields or Bukowski in its mission statement like its does the Rat Pack and Jackie Gleason, but the influence of these two carnival drinkers is nonetheless apparent throughout the magazine.

Much like the Drinking and Writing Brewery, Modern Drunkard uses drunken heroes like Fields and Bukowski as sources of inspiration for lived carnival experiences. The ways in which Modern Drunkard enacts carnival, however, are a bit different from the relatively tame carnival of the Drinking and Writing Festival. Modern Drunkard Magazine began hosting a national convention in 2004 and has held one every year since (except, unfortunately, for 2007, the year during which I conducted most of my research for this thesis) (‘Drunkard National Convention’). Perhaps speaking to the greater carnival nature of the Modern Drunkard Convention is the greater amount of press coverage it has received compared to the locally-admired Drinking and Writing Festival. Though there was no convention for me to attend in 2007, publications from around the country and the world provided me with a wealth of information and opinion on the gathering in past years. Judging from Modern Drunkard’s own promotional materials for the August 2008 convention, British journalist Andrew Gumbel is correct to assert that the convention is “an occasion dedicated to the proposition that there’s nothing a puritanical, religiously conservative country needs more urgently than a weekend-long festival of wanton alcoholic abandon.” Indeed, and of course, drinking is the raison d’être for the
Modern Drunkard Convention. But it is not *simply* drinking that concerns Frank Kelly Rich; his convention is about drinkers drinking together. The Web site’s invitation to the 2008 convention in Denver tells potential conventioneers to expect “The tribe uniting. The elite inebriates finding each other. The best and the booziest. Ever go to a bar and wish there were some *real* goddamn boozers on board? Well, there are for three solid days of heavy drinking and full-bore entertainment.”

In addition to the tribe uniting and getting drunk together, the 2008 convention will include many of the same elements as past conventions. Hard-drinking bands will perform, as will old-fashioned burlesque troupes; Modern Drunkard will give Soused Seminars another shot, even though these informational lectures had to be cancelled in 2005 because “the audience [was] deemed to be unreceptive” (Gumbel); and Elvis will conduct marriage ceremonies for drunken lovers (“National Convention”). Much like the Soused Seminars, the real-life Clash of the Tightest drinking contest ran into trouble in 2005 when too few conventioneers decided to participate. Even the returning champion of the 2004 convention decided to sit it out because, as festival co-organizer Rich English explains, “It messed up his whole weekend….First, he couldn’t drink all day in anticipation of the contest. Then he got so shitfaced he had to go back to his hotel. Afterwards, he couldn’t remember a thing” (qtd. in Gumbel). The 20 Pint Gauntlet, wherein participants are given twenty pints of beer for free, provided they finish them all in eight hours, is the nearest equivalent to Clash of the Tightest for this year’s convention (“National Convention”).

The convention will feature several other events, including the so-called Drunkard Dating Game and First Annual Modern Drunkard Short Film Fest, but Frank Rich is consistent in reiterating that the primary purpose of the convention is “getting the [drunkard] tribe together”
What makes the Modern Drunkard Convention, and the Modern Drunkard enterprise as a whole, so interesting is that Frank Rich really is successful at bringing like-minded drinkers together. The first annual convention drew a crowd of 450 and the convention has grown since (Valentine). Also, the magazine is distributed in impressive numbers nationally and internationally, especially considering the specificity and controversy of its subject matter. A large part of Modern Drunkard’s success can be attributed to the fact that, like a Fields film or a Bukowski novel, the magazine has captured the attention of more than just modern drunkards. The many major press articles covering Frank Rich, his magazine, his convention, and his other projects speak to the fact that there are many newspaper and magazine editors who believe Rich’s work is worthy of, and/or likely to garner, their audiences’ attention. And even though Rich asserts that his magazine’s critics “don’t have to fend us off because we’re not big enough yet” (Lind), some of the “enemies” have heard enough about Rich and his magazine to begin to protest, including former Mothers Against Drunk Driving national president Wendy J. Hamilton (Smith).

What makes Modern Drunkard such a carnival success? There are many possible answers, but most answers come back to the primary cause: Frank Kelly Rich himself. He is the sole original creator of Modern Drunkard Magazine and his presence is felt throughout the publication and everything that it has spawned. His style of writing sets the tone for the magazine, he authored the accompanying book, he created the film of the same title, and journalists seem unable to write about Modern Drunkard without focusing their attention on Rich as a creative and social/political force. Additionally, though he has not always served as the official master of ceremonies for the Modern Drunkard Convention, he has been described as “the man who really makes the whole event worthwhile….He is just the person to induce you to
spend a long night drinking. He is garrulous, charming, funny and razor-sharp, even after the first five or six whiskeys” (Gumbel). From the “farewell motivational speech” (“Convention 2004”) he has given at past conventions to the YouTube clips wherein he narrates dramatizations of the “86 Rules of Boozing,” Rich is continuously serving as the voice and face of, and primary force behind, Modern Drunkard Magazine. Naturally, most of those familiar with the magazine seem to know that it is Frank Kelly Rich’s brainchild. Because he is recognized both as the creator of a publication that flips hegemonic morality on its head and as the leader of an annual gathering at which all those present are welcome—and encouraged—to leave self-control and decorum at the door, Frank Kelly Rich is not just a modern drunkard but also a drunkard carnival king.

Like the Drinking and Writing Brewery, Frank Kelly Rich and Modern Drunkard Magazine follow the lead of hard-drinking creative heroes like W.C. Fields and Charles Bukowski to create occasions for further carnivalization, both mediated and lived. However, Rich takes the lived carnival of the Drinking and Writing Festival a step further. Rather than looking to a specific heavy drinker of the past to be the leader of misrule for a day or a weekend, Rich has made himself, through his publication that celebrates the heavy drinkers of the past, a leader of misrule. “He has a code of conduct based vaguely on emulating the great drinkers of the past—Faulkner, Hemingway, the entertainer Jackie Gleason, even Winston Churchill” (Gumbel), and by living his life according to this code, he has made of himself an unique popular culture figure, one who drinks heavily on a daily basis and encourages his readers that there is nothing wrong in following suit (provided one can do so without causing any serious harm). If there was anything latent in the carnival nature of Bukowski or Fields, it becomes blatant in this newest carnival king. Whereas for Bukowski and Fields creative work and heavy drinking were
equals, “Rich freely admits that alcohol has been a running theme in his life, not just the spur to higher things” (Gumbel). Alcohol was a tool for Bukowski and Fields to artistically negotiate and criticize the American Dream; for Rich, alcohol itself is what we need to make the American Dream whole again.

In this volume, I have described the manner in which carnival and official life, once intertwined in American culture, came to be separated, with the eventual effect of carnival’s marginalization. I have described how American carnival life has historically manifested itself through the use of alcohol. As it became marginalized, alcoholic carnival became less a part of lived experience and more a type of mediated experience. Two major figures of American alcoholic carnival media are Charles Bukowski and W.C. Fields. By parodying Americans’ worst fears about their drinking habits, Charles Bukowski criticized and challenged not only American mores regarding drinking, but many of the American assumptions regarding what it takes, and what it means, to succeed. Likewise, by creating the public persona of an alcoholic middle-class misfit, W.C. Fields achieved the American Dream while throwing the pursuit of that dream, and the morals that surround that pursuit, into question.

In this concluding chapter, I have provided two examples of creative fan groups that take the mediated carnival of Fields and Bukowski seriously. The Drinking and Writing Brewery and Modern Drunkard Magazine both refer back to Bukowski and/or Fields, as well as other sources of carnival, as they themselves create forms of both mediated and lived carnival. I have provided specific studies of these two creative groups to show that the mediated carnival of Bukowski and Fields does matter as more than a form of temporary escape from official life. The Drinking and Writing Brewery takes the mediated carnival of hard-drinking writers like Bukowski as a cue to create opportunities for lived carnival, specifically through the annual Drinking and Writing
Festival. *Modern Drunkard Magazine* does the same with the Modern Drunkard Convention, but goes even a step further as drunkard king Frank Kelly Rich uses the alcoholic carnival as a call to revise social and political norms regarding drinking in America. Stallybrass and White argue that “for long periods carnival may be a stable and cyclical ritual with no noticeable politically transformative effects but...given the presence of sharpened political antagonism, it may often act as catalyst and site of actual and symbolic struggle” (14, emphasis the authors’). In the case of both the Drinking and Writing Brewery and *Modern Drunkard Magazine*, the mediated carnival of W.C. Fields and Charles Bukowski serves as catalyst for forms of symbolic carnival struggle against social norms. In the case of *Modern Drunkard* alone, Frank Kelly Rich also employs alcoholic carnival to act out in ways that he argues are not only symbolically political, but in fact actively so.

The forces of carnival today that take their cues from mediated carnival kings like W.C. Fields and Charles Bukowski deserve further research. I wish to explore such groups further myself, and will be especially interested to watch and see if Frank Kelly Rich’s celebrity status and influence grow. I encourage other researchers and students, if they have taken an interest in any particular aspect of this thesis, to research the American alcoholic carnival further. The place of alcohol in American popular culture has been underappreciated by scholars thus far, despite the fact that alcohol is a major component of both everyday life and popular media. I have prepared this thesis with the intent to begin to unravel the appeal of heavy-drinking popular culture figures, and I believe I have explained some central specifics of their cultural significance. However, I see this work as only a beginning to what I hope will be a rich and lively debate about the relevance of the American alcoholic carnival and its kings, as well as the place of alcohol in American popular culture more broadly.
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