Desire's Second Act: "Race" and *The Great Gatsby*'s Cynical Americanism

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> I once thought that there were no second acts in American lives.
> —Fitzgerald, "My Lost City" (31)

Few books have suffered Americanism's presumptions more unremittingly than has *The Great Gatsby*. This has again become apparent in the recent outpouring of work that draws attention to dynamics of racialization in the novel—to how Fitzgerald's book engages discourses that render racial and ethnic difference recognizable, including how certain characters are made to bear distinguishing racial or ethnic markers. By highlighting the novel's interest in race and its role in the development of discourses that continue to administer the recognition of race and ethnicity in America, this new criticism—most appearing in the last 10 years or so—purports to rescue *The Great Gatsby* from the sentimental attractions of a universalized, imperial American identity. Like the scholarship it claims to challenge, however, this new criticism reveals the enduring hold of the Americanist romance and its confidence that the novel offers a straightforward description of something called "America" or "American" identity. In its attention to representations of raced difference in the novel, much of this new work—as represented by such critics as Michaels, Goldsmith, Thompson, Washington, and Nies—is enabled by an assumption that practices and signs *already* bear racial meaning. This scholarship thus often ends up reifying a variety of presumably characteristic raced American identities in place of a presumably characteristic unraced (if

surreptitiously white) one, reinforcing the very formations whose genealogy it purportedly seeks to unearth. Thus this essentially statist inquiry into American literature and culture presumes, as it is administered by, the self-evidence of "American" history and identity. Foucault, we should remember, indicted just such rightist thinking in *Discipline and Punish,* where he warned against "writing a history of the past in terms of the present" (31). In this essay I show how *The Great Gatsby* resists precisely the recognizant expectation upon which historicism, especially in the guise of an analysis of the novel's interest in racialization, is based, and how in doing this it points toward the possibility of a more open and critical form of reading.

By repeating the primal error of assuming coherence between text and nationalized—and racialized—symbolic order, of seeking the national in the individual, recent criticism overlooks the irreducible complexity of the novel's attention to identity and betrays a desire to buttress the ideological coherence of "America" as that entity is currently understood. One reason for the enduring critical fascination with the novel's rendering of American selves, to be sure, is that *The Great Gatsby* is intimately engaged with tropes of identity. But the narrative structure of this engagement, ever suspicious of the sentimental enticements of recognition, precludes taking "American" identity—even racialized or ethnicized American identity—for granted. Despite more than two-thirds of a century of criticism portraying *The Great Gatsby* as the avatar of the American novel,[1] the manner in which the novel is thought to represent America continues to be taken for granted, relying on the same assumptions about identity that drive the "romantic speculation" about origins to which Gatsby himself endlessly gives rise (48): unswerving attention to the significance of "Gatsby"—both in the text and in its criticism, either as an unmarked typical American or as an index to the hold of discourses that encode race and ethnicity—precludes focus on the presumption that he means anything at all.

If the desire to read American history into *The Great Gatsby* ends up locating in the novel particular racial or ethnic representations of American identity, in doing this it also illuminates the book's cynical relationship to the representational enticements of a nationally encoded identity: the irreducible complexity of the novel's attention to identity—its narrativization of a longing for precisely the kind of stable identity that Americanist criticism has so consistently found in it—in fact challenges the instru-

mentalist critical tendency to anchor interpretation of the novel in the recognizability of "America." Notably, the novel is deeply troubled about the positivism underlying what Nick calls Gatsby's "appalling sentimentality" (118), remaining ambivalent about both what Gatsby has done with the sentimental category of "America" and how Nick responds to it, and illustrating a longing for the imaginative and ideological matrix out of which this sentimentality arises. This book enacts a deeply problematical drama of identification whereby the representational capacity of identity—ultimately *American* identity—is an object alternatively of desire and skepticism. Interpreted through Nick's insecure skepticism rather than through Gatsby's deluded optimism—and therefore through doubt about identity's ability to signify rather than through faith in its representational promise—the novel ultimately lacks faith in the symbolic orders on which stable conceptions of identity rely. When read for its narrative production of this cynicism rather than for its construction of raced American identities that we already know how to recognize, *The Great Gatsby* offers a means to liberate criticism of American literature from the straitjacket of an increasingly racialized Americanism.

The Great Gatsby and American identity

In order to show what is at stake—and especially what is lost—in reading the novel in terms of identities that can already be recognized, I start with an examination of how *Gatsby* has recently been read for race. This new scholarship falls into the historicist habit of relying on recognition as the final warrant of legitimacy. Looking for the national present in the literary past, it takes as self-evident the very racial and ethnic differences—along with the behaviors that, according to racialist logic, constitute those differences—that it presumably wants to challenge. Thus this criticism, which seeks to uncover racial particularities elided in an existential fantasy of universalized American identity, remains constrained by a positivist national fantasy that particular identities can reliably be recognized.

With *Our America*, Walter Benn Michaels is probably the most visible recent critic to pay close attention to *The Great Gatsby*'s engagement with race and ethnicity. In arguing generally for a "structural intimacy between nativism and modernism" (2)—for a link between modernism's "fantasy about the sign" as material and self-sufficient and nativism's fantasy about identity as inherited, racial, and determinative of beliefs and practices—

and more polemically that "the great American modernist texts of the '20s must be understood as deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing the American" (13), Michaels rereads *The Great Gatsby* as an anxious meditation on racial identity. Michaels is most interested in characters—in particular, Gatsby and how other characters think about him. At root, Michaels suggests that Gatsby functions in the book as a figure of the threat of racial admixture. As the text's most transparent register of xenophobic concern, Tom is most overtly sensitive to this threat: "For Tom . . . Gatsby (né Gatz, with his Wolfsheim 'gonnegtion') isn't quite white" (25). Thus Michaels cites the confrontation at the Plaza, where Tom begins by mocking Gatsby's lack of origins—"Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (*Gatsby* 137)—and "ends by predicting 'intermarriage between black and white'" (Michaels 25), as evidence of how the text evinces anxiety about the danger of inherited racial difference. Indeed, Tom isn't the text's only racist in Michaels's account: Nick also seems to think Gatsby wants to defile Daisy's—and nativist white America's—racial purity. Nick understands Gatsby's love for Daisy as "the following of a grail. [Gatsby] knew that Daisy was extraordinary, but he didn't realize just how extraordinary a 'nice' girl could be" (25). Michaels argues:

> "Nice" here doesn't exactly mean "white," but it doesn't exactly not mean "white" either. It is a term . . . that will serve as a kind of switching point where the Progressive novel's discourse of class will be turned into the postwar novel's discourse of race.

Nick's confusion arises in part because Gatsby initially appears oriented toward the "magically" (Michaels 26) transformative future and away from his possibly racially suspect grandfathers, who, as Horace Kallen reminds us, cannot be changed (220). Socioeconomic barriers give way before him: that he initially misleads Daisy into believing he is not, in fact, penniless is immaterial because all those things whose absence he conceals from her—including "one's clothes, one's manners, [and] one's friends," as Michaels puts it—are easily obtainable. But Gatsby's real problem, in Michaels's account, is that he is "without a past": he does not have an acceptable pedigree, and winning Daisy (in the nativist imaginary) requires that he have one. Only rewriting the (racialized) past—precisely what Gatsby cannot do through (economically) transformative agency—could "retroactively make him someone who could be 'married' to Daisy" (Michaels 26). The past cannot be changed; indeed, in Michaels's modernity,

the "meaning" of an American's past "has been rendered genealogical," has been racialized, suggesting that no degree of class mobility can make Gatsby into something he is not (which is to say, in the crucial instance for Michaels, a [white] American). "Insofar as the desire for a different future is the desire to belong to a different class," Michaels argues, "the desire for a different past that replaces it should be understood as the desire to belong to a different race" (150).

It remains unclear, however, who Michaels imagines "should" be doing this understanding. He convincingly indicates the representation of nativism in the text by demonstrating how certain nativist characters respond to what they see as a racial threat. But this isn't the same as showing that Fitzgerald's novel enacts its cultural milieu's nativist worry over a racialized American identity, or illuminating "the structural intimacy between nativism and modernism." Racist characters alone do not make a racist book, and Michaels has done little to argue that Fitzgerald's book itself—rather than Tom and, to a lesser extent, Nick and Daisy, and, to a more "vulgar" extent, Myrtle Wilson and Lucille McKee (26)—is "deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing the American." It is indeed probable that "race" operates for Tom et al. as a self-evident category, but that doesn't mean that it necessarily does so for the text. Suppressing this distinction, Michaels doesn't engage Fitzgerald's complex relationship to the hold of self-evidence itself. In fact, we don't have to draw attention to the fantasy that signs like race are unproblematic in *The Great Gatsby:* the book already does this. Michaels sees *Gatsby* as a reactionary book because he doesn't account for how it already worries about the manner in which signs signify. Fitzgerald's novel is far more concerned about how identity is understood than it is about the representative traits of its particular characters. Michaels thus seems to treat the book in the same way that Tom, encouraged by "this man Goddard" (*Gatsby* 17), treats Gatsby: he reduces it to a simple signifier within an unquestioned sign system where race is already visible and subject to social hierarchy and valuation.[2]

In a book published the same year as *Our America,* Bryan Washington also appears to reduce the novel's perspective to that of a group of its characters. Like Michaels, Washington claims that *The Great Gatsby* is "preoccupied with and intolerant of the racial and social hybridization of America" (42) and that Gatsby is a threat to the "family" (45), the "Middle West," and to "the white cultural center" precisely because he "sprang from his Platonic conception of himself" (Washington 45; *Gatsby*

104). Lacking the right kind of origin in a novel where all origins are racial, Gatsby is "the worst kind of outsider" (Washington 45). Also like Michaels, Washington sees Nick as nativist, even if, as in Nick's reaction to the "three modish negroes" in a limousine "driven by a white chauffeur" (*Gatsby* 73) who pass Gatsby and Nick on the way into the city,[3] it is less obtrusive than Tom's "unabashed racism" (Washington 43). Revealingly, Washington finds the many "so-called ethnic" names of Gatsby's party guests—as recorded by Nick—to

> clearly attest to *Fitzgeraldian* outrage at the new America, one in which so-called ethnics are ubiquitous—in which the citizens of East Egg, who form a "dignified homogeneity" in the midst of "many-colored, many-keyed commotion," must contend not only with the inhabitants of West Egg but with all of New York. (49; my emphasis)

The danger here, according to Washington, is that Gatsby stands "ready to welcome the masses," posing a threat to an embattled WASP America. But Washington ultimately doesn't suggest why Nick's behavior should be relied on as a key to Fitzgerald's agenda. He can finally argue that the "celebrated concluding paragraphs of *The Great Gatsby* compose a reactionary social manifesto dressed up in the romantic rhetoric of loss" (52) only by assuming that the novel doesn't allow for something outside Nick's self-admitted narrow-minded provincialism. As with Michaels, missing here is precisely the examination of how racial and ethnic difference become visible in the first place and operate within the text (as different from Nick's imagination) in the second place.

Unlike Michaels and Washington, Carlyle Van Thompson attends to how the text, and not just some of its characters, treats Gatsby, though he too rests his analysis on the categorical stability of race. Thompson notably reads Gatsby as a light-skinned African American; he cites, for example, repeated descriptions of Gatsby as "pale" that render his racial identity ambiguous (79), the novel's many associations of Gatsby with colors that associate him with minstrel imagery (85), and Nick's description of Gatsby's estate as having "forty acres of lawn and a garden," which associates Gatsby with Reconstruction. "Although the class and ethnic tensions in the novel are lucid," he argues, "literary scholars have not considered the theme of racial passing. Indeed, the narrative constantly whispers the presence of blackness" (75). Xenophobic, against immigration, and a

white supremacist, Fitzgerald in Thompson's estimation makes passing a kind of impossible metaphor for achieving the American Dream (77–78). Indeed, Thompson casts *The Great Gatsby* as a product of Fitzgerald's anxiety about the racial other transposed onto the established American narrative of class aspiration; insofar as he evinces a "desire for whiteness," Thompson's Gatsby is threatening to the worldview with which the text allies itself (85). Along with the attempt at class passing, the novel's

> subversive subject is the paradoxical phenomenon of racial passing, the racial masquerade implicit to many black people's desire for enduring inclusion in the American Dream. By appropriating the symbolism, diction, and associations of racial passing, Fitzgerald illuminates the miscegenation core of the American Dream. (102)

However, if Thompson seeks to expose the reification of class in critical reception of the novel as having served actually to hide Fitzgerald's (and America's) own "specious" (102) reification of race—"simply put," he says, "race constructs class" (103)—he himself seems to participate in this reification by taking it as the key to this text: the visibility and ideological coherence of racial difference, that is, is assumed.

Meredith Goldsmith similarly locates reified ideological constructions of race at the center of Fitzgerald's book, though she finds them to work to opposite effect. The scandal of Gatsby's performance, according to Goldsmith, is his suppression of his "ambiguously ethnic, white, working-class origins" in a relatively successful "imitation of African-American and ethnic modes of self-definition" (443). Gatsby adopts modes of self-fashioning proper to African American passing narratives and ethnic (frequently Jewish) Americanization narratives, in both of which "racial and national identities become objects of imitation . . . through the apparatus of speech, costume, and manners" (443–44). Goldsmith understands Gatsby's negotiation with these non-WASP modes of performativity to underlie what for her is a desirable "explosion of the dialectic between imitation and authenticity," one by which "Fitzgerald refutes the possibility of any identity, whether racial, class, or ethnic, as 'the real thing'" (444) despite his flirtation with "the scientific racist thought of his day" (446). In fact, Goldsmith argues that reading the novel alongside "narratives of racial passing and ethnic Americanization complicates Fitzgerald's class politics" by "complexly and ambiguously intermingl[ing]" the "ostensibly

biological imperatives of 'race' and the supposedly more fluid boundaries of class" (451). She sees this as a function of style: Fitzgerald "engage[ed] with the racially and ethnically diverse popular culture of his day through textual allusions and stylistic innovations" (463). However, though she reads the novel for its textual ironies, Goldsmith, like Michaels, Washington, and Thompson, ends up essentializing racial categories, claiming that Fitzgerald engaged in a "tacit dialogue with the African-American and ethnic literary context of the era" (445); her argument thus relies on the existential legitimacy of the very categories (or "contexts") she wants to debilitate. If Michaels and Washington accuse Fitzgerald of the racism of his characters, and Thompson reads one of his characters as black in order to accuse him of reproducing his culture's race panic, Goldsmith celebrates Fitzgerald for deconstructing the category of race because, in her account, a white character adopts behaviors that are the province of nonwhite people. These arguments depend on the logic they want to destabilize.

Finally, Betsy Nies, too, argues that the "theme of the rise and decline of a Nordic civilization prevails" in the novel (95), but in lieu of arguing either the book's racism or its performative potential, she promisingly claims that identity—especially as a racial category tied to the body—is held in contention by Fitzgerald's text, which, by worrying about the diminishing "physicality" of identity, focuses attention on the mechanisms by which race and ethnicity become legible as facts:

> The text's ethnic angst—registered both as a fear and fascination with shifting identities—seems bound up with the idea that identity itself may be a performance, a textual performance linked only loosely to some referential reality, not to a stable, definable body. The concern about Gatsby as either black or a new immigrant send-off seems based on the idea that Gatsby has created an identity, thus rendering the whole concept of identity as physically based unclear. Gatsby, of course, is the ultimate text, fabricating an identity in a unique imitation of the real. Nick's concerns over changing ethnic identities seem interminably tied to this concept of textuality. (102)

Because Gatsby can "narrate" his own identity, according to Nick's anxious logic, any identity can be "simulated" or "fabricated," endangering the physical foundation of Nick's own privileged WASP identity. Nick's reaction to Gatsby's prevarication about his past is important to Nies's argument:

> Nick, while not concerned with racial purity *per se,* is still concerned with a certain type of eugenic logic when he tries to find out Gatsby's background. He looks desperately for a referent for Gatsby's sign, something to undergird and back up the image of the man Gatsby proposes to be. (103)

Nies reads Nick's faith in Gatsby as diminishing to the extent that he marks Gatsby's performance *as performance;* for as long as Gatsby sounds like a textual mélange, like discontinuous "bits and pieces of collected phrases" and "misplaced textuality removed from any defining anchoring physicality" (103), Nick distrusts him. But Gatsby's presentation of the photograph from Oxford quiets Nick's doubts and establishes, in Nies's words, "physical proof of his identity."

Nies wants to expose in Fitzgerald an anxious desire to hold on to the body or some other physical basis as "an anchor for the meaning of identity" (107), and she discovers a suspect nativist drive to conflate racial identity with nation in Nick's elegy to "my Middle-West . . . the thrilling, returning trains of my youth" (183) traveling at Christmas time through the "the real snow, our snow," and in his recognition of his own "complacen[cy] from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family's name" (184). For Nies, this scene presents

> a vision of ethnic similitude naturalized against the background of an American landscape. As the text ends, Nick returns to the image of the train tracks [the first tracks being those along the ash heaps], yet covers them not with the ashes of outlying New York, but with the snow of his Mid West. (104)

If the trains that travel to New York run through the anomic gray of racial and ethnic admixture, the trains that travel home to the Midwest, on which Nick and his WASP schoolmates are "unutterably aware of our identity with this country" (*Gatsby* 184), are invariably as white as snow. "What . . . seems threatened," as Nies sees it, "is a class and national identity which became registered through racial terms" (109). Not quite the eugenicist Nick is, Fitzgerald uses race to imagine a "homogeneous . . . physical body which carried with it all the referents for self-definition." Nies's *Gatsby* is a nostalgic text, longing "for a time when identities were tied firmly to fixed bodies" (102).

But here Nies's argument typifies the way the genealogies of racialization offered by *Gatsby*'s recent critics depend on the racialist premise that race is physical, biological, or otherwise anchored in the body (rather than a more loosely defined if still binding representational category, which is perhaps closer to what these critics want to say[4]). Bodies can only be critically examined as sites of racialized discourse if they have already become "registered through racial terms." In other words, Nies, like many who share her interest in "whiteness studies" (xi), begins by assuming precisely what she proposes to provide a history of: the correlation of cultural discourse (about race) and physical body. In this context, her calling Gatsby's photograph from Oxford the "physical proof" that Nick needs to believe Gatsby's mostly fallacious story is telling: it betrays the equation of representation and thing in her interrogation of the book's concern with physicality. In fact, the photograph functions to undercut any attempt to rely on it as a benchmark of accuracy, and Nick's justification in understanding it as proof that Gatsby is telling the truth is certainly limited.[5]

The most important question in a genealogy of race, I'd argue, is how bodies become raced in the first place, not how they are administered by discourses like nativisim once they are raced. I don't really know how they get raced, but to limit oneself to examining the disposition of raced bodies within racist (and ultimately nationalist) discourses, as Michaels, Washington, Thompson, Goldsmith, and Nies all essentially do, is both to reproduce—according to their own shared logic—those racist (and ultimately nationalist) discourses and, more to the point, to preclude any critical account of the novel's participation in processes of racialization in the United States. Ironically, Nies gets this point perfectly as she ends: while Fitzgerald's anxious "rewrit[ing] and rephras[ing of] eugenic logic . . . suggests the difficulties of escaping the body as a textual ground for identity," it also "raises the possibility of rewriting social and ethnic hierarchies based on re-envisioning 'types'" (107). Thus it seems that the literary critic's job is done when blacks and immigrants, perhaps, are no longer the objects of racialist discourse, though some other, as yet undetermined, groups are.

The perspective common to these accounts finds nativism and racism in the text because it's looking for nativism and racism. Taking for granted that racial difference is already legible, such a perspective cannot really offer an explanation of how race becomes legible. Interpretation in this

mode is built on a desire to recognize current understandings of identity in the past. But by offering a prescribed discovery of the present in the past and of "America" in American literature, recent criticism of Gatsby's racialization illustrates the machinery of literary critical Americanism. In fact, while these readings are grounded in a faith in the stability and national significance of identity, *The Great Gatsby* lacks precisely this faith. This book does not simply illustrate patterns of identity and thereby invest them with particular political meanings that remain—at least insofar as they always already are—recognizable and valid within a larger, essentially statist inquiry into American literature and culture. Focusing on the techniques of the text's narrative management of identity rather than on locating the validity of particular images of identity in the text reveals this inquiry at work in Fitzgerald's American novel. It also indicates a way to examine how racialism may serve to compensate for—and fill the breach left by—this problem in the thinking of identity.

Narrating Nick's Gatsby: The form of cynicism

The Great Gatsby is cynical about identity as a sentimentally invested category: while it rehearses the desire that identity serve as an interpretive key to America, the book insists on that desire's frustration and fundamental inconsequence. Through its administration of longing, Fitzgerald's text resists the attempt to recognize identity—including raced identity—as nationally representative. Analysis not of *what* identities the book represents but of *how* it narrates identity—including the emotional and epistemological network identity occupies, the desire, intention, and imagination it constitutes—helps us avoid reducing Fitzgerald's novel to an instrumental accessory of racialist Americanist ideology. The principle forum in which the text carries out this narration is Nick's conflicted assessment of his experiences, and the structure of this assessment is established fairly early on. A scene in the second chapter articulates a model of intelligence—one always in contention with an impulse to reify, at once holding on to the fetish it makes of experience and exposing it as such—that will underlie Gatsby's significance to Nick and the novel's cynical approach to American identity.

Dragged by Tom to meet his mistress, Myrtle Wilson, Nick spends a drunken evening in the Washington Heights apartment Tom keeps for her. While he is as straightforward as he gets in describing his displeasure,

Nick also admits to being captivated. Both eyewitness and participant, at once disdainful and attracted, Nick feels at the same time an urge to escape and a sense of wonder:

> I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight, but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.[6] (40)

Repeated throughout the novel, this sense of being both inside and outside indicates Nick's alienation—by turns compelling and cowardly—but it also discloses the structure of Nick's ambivalent skepticism, a form of intelligence marked by a conviction of its own impertinence. As the tension between estrangement and participation mounts, disaffection and desire butt heads over the same object. *The Great Gatsby* never resolves these two equally persuasive positions: announced in his brief prologue, where he admits to contemning the world Gatsby gorgeously represented but also to admiring Gatsby's existential magnanimity, Nick's ambivalence underlies the book's cynicism.

Nick thinks of himself as an outsider—and as having a kind of autonomy. That the war left him apprehensive that the "Middle West" (7) of his youth, that erstwhile "warm center of the world," is in fact the "ragged edge of the universe" intimates a new independence, and once on Long Island, he delights in the proud residential "freedom" a tourist's request for information confers upon him. Nick's attempt to end his "rumored" engagement and the observation that he is "a little disgusted" (24–25) with Daisy and Tom also contribute to a narrative of sovereignty. He displays just enough contempt that we want to trust him.[7]

We suspect, however, that his autonomy may not be inviolate. We know at the outset, for example, that he eventually gives up on the East, presumably defeated by the "foul dust" (7) that circulated around Gatsby. And his independence is certainly embattled in Washington Heights, where his attempts to reclude himself are foiled by his "entangle[ment]." The apartment is claustrophobic: it

> was on the top floor—a small living-room, a small dining-room, a small bedroom, and a bath. The living-room was crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large for it, so that to move about was to stumble continually over scenes of ladies swinging in the gardens of Versailles. (33)

Though containing at its fullest only six people—Nick, Tom, Myrtle, Catherine, and Chester and Lucille McKee—the apartment overflows. Myrtle's proclamation that "I'm going to make a list of all the things I've got to get. . . . I got to write down a list so I won't forget all the things I got to do" (41) aggravates this sense of congestion. Even the photograph on the wall (later revealed to be of Myrtle and Catherine's mother) is "over-enlarged" (33). And Myrtle herself, her ego fed by Tom, is monstrously uncontained: "Her laughter, her gestures, her assertions became more violently affected moment by moment, and as she expanded the room grew smaller around her, until she seemed to be revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air" (35).

Nick's attempts to leave the congested apartment for the expansive "soft twilight" outside are thwarted—"each time I tried to go I became entangled . . . as if with ropes"—but he is also outside, looking up in wonder at the mysteries lying behind that "line of yellow windows." Provincial Nick is now drawn toward the spectacle. Still inside—"I was him ["the casual watcher on the darkening streets"] *too*" (my emphasis)—"wonder" supplements "entangle[ment]." Nick is at once critical and inside the apartment, annoyed by its tacky pretension, and compelled and outside, spellbound by its promise. Alienation and fascination are simultaneous. If he bristles at the "inexhaustible" degeneracy of the scene, the "variety of life" he glimpses challenges his self-assurance. Neither enchantment nor scorn alone is an adequate response. This scene characterizes the way Nick experiences and knows in this novel, and it points to the manner of the text's disposition of sentimental attraction. Simultaneously in his encounters and outside them, both "within and without," Nick construes experience as both affective and analytical, at once earnest and ironic.

This theme of imaginative doubling is well established in Fitzgerald scholarship, even if its full implications have not been pursued. John Aldridge, a whipping-boy of recent "lost generation" criticism, calls attention to an opposition between a "spectatorial role" and a "role of active participation" common to Fitzgerald and his peers:

> The two together—the sentimental and essentially immature longing of the observer . . . and the premature disillusion of the participant who saw too much too soon—seem to me to account for the duality of so much of the literature that generation produced. (6)

Arthur Mizener quotes Fitzgerald's friend John Peale Bishop (from an October 1921 article in *Vanity Fair*) that Fitzgerald had "the rare faculty of being able to experience romantic and ingenuous emotions and half an hour later regard them with satiric detachment." As Mizener himself elaborates, "At his best, his mind apprehended things simultaneously with a participant's vividness of feeling and an intelligent stranger's acuteness of observation" (xxi). Later, Mizener cites Malcolm Cowley:

> It was as if . . . all his novels described a big dance to which he had taken . . . the prettiest girl . . . and as if at the same time he stood outside the ballroom, a little Midwestern boy with his nose to the glass, wondering how much the tickets cost and who paid for the music. (qtd. in Mizener 63)

Here, Fitzgerald is both knowingly immersed and ingenuously excluded; the affiliations of inside and outside are reversed. Fitzgerald's "double vision" is revealed as a tension alternatively between earnestness and irony and between participation and naïveté. Identification in Fitzgerald shuttles between dispossession and involvement, governed by neither a simple opposition of inside and outside nor a narrative of corruption. Nick's adventure with Myrtle and Tom reveals a desire for identification that ultimately precludes the emotional investment it demands. Cynicism makes its first appearance in *The Great Gatsby* as desire's proleptic knowledge of its own shortcomings.

This cynicism will govern Nick's final judgment of Gatsby, his simultaneous craving and unwillingness to identify with him. If Gatsby is attractive in his "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life" (Gatsby 6) and his rare sincerity, then Nick, in declaring also that Gatsby "represented everything for which I have an unaffected scorn," marks disenchantment as the register in which that sensitivity and sincerity are proven to be incommensurate with the welter of clichés to which they were directed. Gatsby's naively romantic sincerity and sentimental dream of fetishized identity, of course, are not the center of this text; their impertinence is,

and while Nick remains skeptically incapable of identifying with Gatsby's desire, he also wants to disown the conditions that undermine it. Nick reads Gatsby's fate through his own ambivalence, caught between acknowledging Gatsby's effort to maintain ignorance on the one hand and the benign productivity enabled by such ignorance on the other. As we do, he sees through Gatsby long before he starts liking him, but he *does* start liking him, and the end of the book is nothing if not an attempted defense of him. The text puts us in the position of wanting to sanction both poles of Nick's ambivalence, rendering Nick—precisely in his skepticism—the reader's potential proxy. Indeed, the one thing Nick does that the reader really cannot sanction is retreating back to the Midwest, racially pure or not. This is decisive: just as Nick can't quite identify with Gatsby, so the reader can't quite apologize for Nick. But if this novel is not really about Gatsby, Nick—with whom we feel more empathy—untragically validates Gatsby's failure, and not the dream it followed: Gatsby mistakenly believed he was justified in shaping his world, while Nick correctly knows he is unjustified in valuing Gatsby's imaginative labor.[8] So, while *The Great Gatsby* is more fundamentally the story of Nick Carraway's disillusionment than it is of Jimmy Gatz's tragic rise and fall, it is about Nick precisely to the extent of his miscarried identification with Gatsby. Through Nick, Fitzgerald's novel dramatizes a naive longing for interpretive security. If it emerges in desire's canny bad conscience before Nick even meets Gatsby, the novel's cynicism coalesces around the representation of Nick's disenchanted and unsustainable identification with Gatsby's failure. Staging an identification that ultimately cannot be consummated even as it is repeated for the reader, this book renders representivity itself untenable.

Nick never discovers something in Gatsby that survives outside Gatsby's sentimental delusion. The discomfiture or Gatsby's naive imaginative project and the banality by which it is framed articulate for Nick Gatsby's inevitable trajectory: Gatsby is a cliché searching, via Nick, for substance. He expends himself in his vigorous, futile faith, and Nick is left alienated from this faith because he knows it transcends nothing of its contemptible field of exercise. The pathos of Nick's "You're worth the whole damn bunch put together," coming on the heels of "They're a rotten crowd," is that Gatsby may stand out from his milieu, but it is a milieu he has chosen.

> I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. . . . His gorgeous pink rag of a suit made a bright spot of color against the white steps, and I thought of the night when I first came to his ancestral home, three months before. The lawn and drive had been crowded with the faces of those who guessed at his corruption—and he had stood on those steps, concealing his incorruptible dream, as he waved them good-by. (162)

Critics interested in exposing the lineaments of racialist discourse in the novel might see here the text's implication of Gatsby in practices of concealment and passing (*pace* Thompson) or its ironic foreclosure of Gatsby's impossible claim to ancestry (*pace* Michaels), but such attempts would belie the cynical negotiation of pathos through which the text narrates Nick's appraisal of Gatsby. The opposition of Gatsby's rumored "corruption" and his actual "incorruptible dream" is transfigured in Nick's ambivalent transit between admiration and scorn. Refusing to wise up, Gatsby is never really deceived by the failure of his vision. Nick, however, is another story, insofar as he tries to draw meaning from the "foul dust [that] floated in the wake of [Gatsby's] dreams" (7). Nick's Gatsby stands out like his suit against the steps, like his "complete isolation" at the first party (60), because he has to, because this is how Nick rescues Gatsby's imagination from its "rotten" setting.

Despite the best efforts of its titular character, *The Great Gatsby* is about knowing better. Nick's disenchanted knowledge at the novel's end of Gatsby's perversely naive desire is framed by that desire's optimistic trajectory. This tension between the propulsive energy of the imagination and skepticism about its experiential investment is heralded in the interrogation of hope in the novel's initial pages, an interrogation that forges an alliance between Nick and Gatsby. Nick first claims, in discussing himself, that "[r]eserving judgments is a matter of infinite hope" (6). If he in fact finds it difficult to reserve judgment, his narrative nonetheless offers a kind of testimony to a "hope" that Gatsby would, indeed, repay his investment of attention. Nick soon invokes hope once more, this time in the context of introducing Gatsby's "gorgeous" sincerity, a "responsiveness" that was also "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness such as I have never found in any other person and which it

is not likely I shall ever find again." Through the linking term of a hope that he has not quite embraced, Nick reveals how hard he tries to disown his skepticism, insofar as it is a skepticism that—as the ensuing narrative will reveal—short-circuits identification and therefore the possibility of forging useful knowledge from experience. At the end of the book (as at the beginning), only Nick cannot find such significance; like Tom and Daisy (and every other figure in the novel's rogues' gallery), Gatsby has absolute faith in experience's significance, believes experience to be an affair of signs that bear the straightforward representations of desire. If Tom and Daisy provide Nick with evidence that he is right to presume that experience cannot be affirmatively significant, Gatsby offers impossible confirmation of imagination's benign productivity.

Nick leaves the East finding "riotous excursions" distracting, but they are distracting because, despite hope's "heightened sensitivity to the promises of life," those promises can never be fulfilled. The "extraordinary gift" bestowed by Gatsby's hope survives in—but only in—its degradation: "No—Gatsby turned out all right at the end; it was what preyed on Gatsby . . . that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men" (7). Nick finds value in Gatsby's dream precisely in its naïveté, but this discovery also marks that desire as unavailable. Gatsby's naïveté is his expectation that he will find what he longs for, his fundamental faith that experience follows desire; indeed, his naïveté figures its own imaginative potential.[9] Yet Nick's commentary narrates hope's ultimate failure: Gatsby's idealism is continuous with Nick's skepticism. Nick neither can nor, it turns out, does he necessarily desire to look at the world except through the broken prism of Gatsby's shattered dream; Gatsby's hope survives, but only in Nick's rejection, only at the inaccessible limit of the text's cynical production of reality.

This ambivalence becomes obvious in Nick's imaginary account of Gatsby's final moments before Wilson murders him:

> I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn't believe it [Daisy's call] would come, and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream. He must have looked up at an unfamiliar sky through frightening leaves and shivered as he found what a grotesque thing a rose is and how raw the sunlight was upon the scarcely created grass. (169)

Gatsby's disillusionment is a possibility only for Nick. Gatsby dies before what would have been the disappointing revelation of Daisy's return to Tom. Nick's repetition of "must have" tries to ascribe disillusionment to Gatsby, but it is Nick, not Gatsby, who questions whether Gatsby "paid a high price for living too long with a single dream," who wonders if Gatsby "must have felt that he had lost the old warm world," and whether Gatsby saw a "new world, material without being real, where poor ghosts, breathing dreams like air, drifted fortuitously about." Nick, not Gatsby, must live with the memory of a broken dream, and ascribing it is the only way he can understand his impossible appropriation of Gatsby. Desire and knowledge intersect without reaching a tenable equilibrium; they merely insist on each other's inadequacy, and thus identification necessarily fails, precisely where it is desired. Gatsby represents nothing besides the desire that he be representative.

Cynicism, longing, and America

There is no good reason to assume that this troubling of the machinery of representation safely stops at the covers of the book; this cynical novel destabilizes the literary critical desire to identify characters with nationalist discourses. The disruption of Nick's ability to imagine hope figures the larger failure of the book itself to satisfy Americanism's instrumentalist desire. Cynicism in the novel is a function of knowing. A notable irony of the novel (to judge from the frequency with which it has been noted) is how Gatsby differs from so many assumptions about him. From the perspective of, say, Tom, Gatsby appears practiced and awkward, a dangerous and morally dubious embodiment of an ascendant nouveau-riche culture; but if Tom's "little investigation" (141) into Gatsby's past essentially confirms his suspicions, Tom comes off looking bad because this confirmation comprehends little that the novel thinks is important about Gatsby. When Nick meets him, Gatsby looks like a faker with stiff speech and transparent stories, and again, while strictly speaking this is true, it is also unsatisfying as an account of Gatsby. In Louisville, Daisy never questions her assumption that he is a wealthy WASP (for Michaels, "someone who could be 'married' to [her]"). Indeed, with the possible exceptions of Jordan and Wolfshiem, everybody reads Gatsby through flawed assumptions about him. Nick's early misinterpretation of Gatsby is particularly indicative. Just returned from his "confus[ing]" dinner at the Buchanans, Nick sights

Gatsby in his back yard, "standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr. Gatsby himself, come out to determine what share was his of our local heavens" (25). This passage hints at the trope of longing with which Nick will associate Gatsby, but it is conspicuous because Nick is essentially wrong. Gatsby is there not in a proprietary capacity but in fact out of desire for the one thing he is not able to own.

Gatsby's gestures compel Nick to the extent that Nick assumes they signify, but these gestures will in fact demonstrate how Nick's desire to read Gatsby through his own expectations subverts itself. As an aspect of the apparatus of self, gesture is important in this book, in large part, perhaps, because our attention is drawn to it from the outset, when Nick asserts that a key to understanding personality is its apprehension as "an unbroken series of successful gestures." We more fully appreciate what Nick hopes he means a little later: Nick's first introduction to Gatsby would have been embarrassing for Nick had Gatsby not been so magnanimous. Radiating "eternal reassurance," Gatsby's smile at Nick's confusion exemplifies Gatsby at his finest:

> It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor. It understood you just as far as you wanted to be understood, believed in you as you would like to believe in yourself, and assured you that it had precisely the impression of you that, at your best, you hoped to convey.[10] (52–53)

It is just this gesture's success that is at stake here, however. Ultimately Gatsby appears too self-aware for Nick's comfort. "Precisely at that point" the smile "vanished—and [Nick] was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd" (53). Nick "got the strong impression that he [Gatsby] was picking his words with care." Compelled by the subjectivity promised in Gatsby's gestures, Nick catastrophically pierces their surface. In Gatsby's car on the way to the city, Nick allows,

> I had talked with him perhaps half a dozen times in the past month and found, to my disappointment, that he had little to say. So my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined

> consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door . . . leaving his elegant sentences unfinished and slapping himself indecisively on the knee of his caramel-colored suit. (69)

But of course this isn't quite right, either, as neither Nick nor his book believes with any conviction that Gatsby is "simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house." However perversely, Gatsby never completely fails to make available for Nick a kind of untenable agency.

Nick's interpretive error as he watches Gatsby reach out across the bay is thus as alienating as it is doubly misleading: precisely to the extent that he reads Gatsby according to his own preconceptions, he projects onto Gatsby an ideal form of subjectivity that finally destabilizes his own faith in agency and, more fundamentally, representation. In this sense it is telling from the standpoint of the literary critical history of this book that Nick identifies Gatsby with a particular kind of longing on first seeing him. Longing operates in two modes in this book, and Nick, because of the kind of person he is at this point in the story, here incorrectly categorizes Gatsby's. First, there is the longing whose satisfaction is assumed; this is the kind experienced by most of the book's characters, including Nick when he initially comes East and, conspicuously, Gatsby in his desire for Daisy. Such longing is never anxious, never assailed by doubt. Just as Gatsby cannot question Daisy's devotion, so Nick never doubts himself, and so Tom and Daisy do not worry about whether life will answer to their demands and allow them to be "careless" (187). But then there is the kind of longing, privileged insofar as it frames the narrative, that underlies Nick's wanting "the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" that he intimates at the novel's opening (6) and that, frustrated, leaves the East "haunted" and "distorted beyond my eyes' power of correction" at the novel's close (185). This kind of longing is fundamentally insecure, and it is ironically this kind that Nick mistakenly ascribes to Gatsby when he first sees him, though it takes him the better part of the novel to discover his mistake.

In fact, longing for significance—for representation—always undercuts understanding of Gatsby. It's not just that the signifier "Gatsby" shuttles between several interpretations and therefore has an indeterminate meaning; more profoundly, the text undermines this sign's interpretation in general, challenges the claim that it *means*. In the way this book sees how

longing underwrites understanding—on the one hand how the longing for recognizability shapes an understanding that confirms what is already presumed, on the other how an anxious longing yields an understanding that defies expectations but only too late—it destabilizes the expectation of discovery that prompts so much inquiry both in and about it: whether it is Tom's a priori doubt that Gatsby is who he says he is, a doubt that leads to a shallow if accurate discovery; Nick's hereditary assumption that he is an excellent judge of character, an assumption whose failure essentially constitutes *The Great Gatsby*'s dramatic arc; or, finally, the long postwar literary critical history of this novel that always already expects to find America in it, a history that includes the recent presumption that the novel offers a window onto the dynamics of US racialization. Gatsby may be "the ultimate text," as Betsy Nies contends, but the presumption that this text means something specific has structured interpretation of this great American novel's great American. Indeed, this textual Gatsby is always presumed to represent the meaning of "America." Just as nativist Tom, aroused by "this man Goddard," worries that Gatsby represents the approaching miscegenation of America, and as Nick, finally enchanted by Gatsby's unfailing belief in the "orgastic future" even as it bears him "back ceaselessly into the past," hopes Gatsby represents the confident American optimism with which they grew up "where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (189), so postwar criticism cannot help, it seems, but read him as the historical key to understanding American society. But Gatsby always resists these readings.

Looking back on the enthusiasm of the Twenties from the postcrash perspective of 1931, Fitzgerald wrote,

> it seemed only a question of a few years before the older people would step aside and let the world be run by those who saw things as they were—and it all seems rosy and romantic to us who were young then, because we will never feel so intensely about our surroundings any more. ("Echoes" 22)

This final sentiment sums up Nick's sense of lost possibility, but the lost "rosy and romantic" eagerness was Gatsby's; the book enforces a frustrating—indeed, a subversive—separation between experience and meaning. Chip Rhodes has written that American literary history has largely conceptualized the Twenties through the era's own partial understanding of itself: "The clichés about the period we alternatively embrace and debunk

were clichés to the participants themselves" (3). But if *The Great Gatsby* helped create some of these clichés, at least in light of Fitzgerald's later piece it also pierces them—but only enough to annul the pleasure they grant. Cynicism is the sad knowledge thus produced. This book dramatizes meaning's escape from the desire to fit experience into identifiable patterns that render it representative. While a character like Tom—and recent critics like Michaels et al.—may evade this indeterminacy in favor of the racial decisiveness of nativism, the novel does not. It does not take any a sign system—racial or otherwise—for granted, either as sociological bedrock or as the basis of a critical methodology.

If Gatsby seeks to recognize the image of his desire in experience, Nick, initially presuming his own ability to read experience as a set of relatively uncomplicated signs, eventually reinscribes that experience as evidence of desire's frustration. In this way Fitzgerald's novel surprisingly articulates literary criticism's long history of taking it—in particular its "aboutness"—for granted. Through Nick's contradictory representations of Gatsby, at once positioning Gatsby's idealism as an object of desire and exposing it as ridiculously sentimental, the novel leaves some troubling implications in its narrative wake, suggesting that the recognizable interpretations we want to retrieve from it, admittedly intimated in the text, ultimately remain inaccessible. The elegiac final pages of the book, in which Nick attempts to recover Gatsby, are radically ambivalent; their backward glance, while pervaded with longing, is also shot through with foreclosure. "Gatsby's house was still empty when I left—the grass on his lawn had grown as long as mine" (188): the house can no longer signify anything without also signifying that Gatsby is no longer in it, no longer available. Nick's success in avoiding the taxi driver who "never took a fare past the entrance gate without stopping for a minute and pointing inside" suggests only a miscarried triumph; the driver really only underscores Nick's more fundamental inability to evade the grip of Gatsby's irretrievability.

Gatsby's catastrophe, in Nick's disappointed appropriation of it, exposes in a darkly fraught image the catachresis underlying America's emblematic representationality. Just as Nick can value Gatsby's magisterial if naive confidence in agency only by recognizing what he calls its "appalling sentimentality," so the imagination adequate to America's new world endures only in its ephemeral emergence from the vast landscape of its inadequacy:

> And as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailors' eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world. Its vanished trees, the trees that had made way for Gatsby's house, had pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate with his capacity for wonder. (189)

Nick's vision of "inessential houses" that "melt away" recalls Gatsby's early Lake Superior "reveries," which offered "an outlet for his imagination . . . a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded on a fairy's wing" (105). Once the accidental burden of "reality" is lifted, Nick sees what Gatsby must have seen, "a fresh, green breast of the new world," the "wonder" of imperial creativity formally nourishing Gatsby's "first pick[ing] out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock."

But it is Gatsby who is associated with "America," not Nick, Gatsby who faced "something commensurate to his capacity for wonder." What belongs to Nick is the transitoriness of this "enchanted moment." Indeed, in describing this moment of America's ideal genesis, Nick recurs to his familiar "must have" construction—a form of presumption to which he appeals whenever his attempted identification with Gatsby threatens the judgment from which, despite his opening protestations, he derives so much confidence and self-recognition. He has America on his mind in this closing passage, as he has throughout the novel, and the irreversibility of this "transitory enchanted moment" maps the novel's Americanism. Gatsby did not know, as Nick now does, that his dream is "already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night" (189), and not, in fact, "so close." If Nick wants to associate Gatsby with America, he also knows such an association is impossible—not because Gatsby never achieved his tawdry dream but because the only justification this dream ever had, the one Nick articulates for it, lies in an inaccessibly fictional national past. America is an idea inextricable from the absurdity of its realization: this book cannot separate the epistemological majesty of the

imperial enterprise from its articulation in Gatsby's "roadhouse." But that doesn't simply mean that American history is a tale of corruption. In this book, the pure ideality of "America" is not betrayed by experience; on the contrary, experience is betrayed by the ideal fiction called "America."

On the final page, Nick's shift from the third person to the first seems to associate him with Gatsby's imaginative strivings: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us" (189). And yet Nick breaks with Gatsby on this very point: Nick may want to believe in the orgastic future, but it is still only Gatsby who "believed in the green light." The "inessential" landscape of Long Island was all there ever was to the epistemological productivity of "America," but it only becomes inessential in comparison to its toxic ideal image. This is the remnant of Gatsby's powerful desire, and it is the knowledge Nick can neither dismiss nor embrace. If Gatsby's tragedy was born in his making a fetish of possibility, then Nick's cynical elegy for Gatsby marks the irretrievability of an always fetishized "American" identity—though it may be tempting for criticism to try to recuperate the origin of current articulations of "America" from the literary past. Finally, Gatsby's earnest desire coincides with Nick's skeptical knowledge; the conclusion might seem to offer an image of identification but actually encodes dispossession, as Nick is left haunted by what Gatsby couldn't achieve even as he tries to hide this failure behind an idealized national image. In excavating the idealism underlying sentimental desire, *The Great Gatsby* exposes the sentimentalism underlying idealistic desire. Possibly in spite of itself, much of the historicist criticism that seeks national images of America's racialized identity in *The Great Gatsby*'s literary past remains confined within the Americanist romance of self-fashioning, in which self and nation are metaphorically bound to each other. But this romance relies on an assumption that identity is something existentially stable and epistemologically secure. In fact, this novel stages a splitting of identity into a desire and a knowledge that can never coincide. This novel is not about American identity; instead, it offers disappointed testimony to the impossibility that America can mean anything one wants it to mean. Race becomes, then, another attempt to displace, by reinscribing, this fundamental challenge to statist thinking. The cynical American, Nick, looks back from the moment of frustrated imperfection to the receding ground of perfection, as "America," the ideal anchor of American literary criticism, dissolves in the inessential sentimentality of naive desire.

Notes

1. An abundant body of scholarship has of course located the significance of *The Great Gatsby* in its treatment of the American Dream and in whether the novel is a critique of or appeal to that promise. C. W. E. Bigsby nicely encapsulates this tragic reading: "Gatsby, after all, is corrupted not simply by money but by his naive faith in the integrity and permanence of innocence" (137). Harold Bloom has monumentalized this iconic reading: "Whatever the American Dream has become, its truest contemporary representative remains Jay Gatsby, at once a gangster and a Romantic Idealist, and above all a victim of his own High Romantic, Keatsian dream of love" (1).

2. It may be helpful to understand this move in the context of Michaels's early work with Steven Knapp; given their insistence in "Against Theory" on the identity of meaning and intended meaning, which really resolves into an identity between a thing and its interpreted meaning (730–31), Michaels may in fact be forced into his claim that *The Great Gatsby* is a nativist text.

3. Recent criticism of the novel's interest in race frequently turns to this scene.

4. Arguably, this is precisely the charge Michaels tries to answer in "The Autobiography of an Ex-White Man," an article that came out two years after *Our America,* which argues that race is not a social construction. Michaels defines the position that race is a social construction as the opposite of the position that race is a biological fact; however, he understands this opposition wholly under the authority of its biological essentialist pole even as he suggests that such an essentialism is nonsense. He believes, that is, that if race isn't biological, it doesn't exist. Surely there is a distinction, however, between illusion and belief—indeed, Michaels suggested as much in "Against Theory," where he and Steven Knapp argue that "theory" is, essentially, wrong insofar as belief "can never be separated from practice" and "theory is nothing else but the attempt to escape practice" (741–42).

"Autobiography" has two overt goals: first, to argue that "race" is a theoretical "mistake" (131, 143), a claim that few intelligent people would want to dispute; and second, to expose "social constructionism" as lacking coherence and theoretical rigor. Michaels also seems to have one slightly less overt goal, which is to continue his career-long opposition to nonsubjectivist, nonintentional, and institutional accounts of knowledge. His argument against the social construction of race is that, regardless of how "antiessentialist" one presumes to be, "our actual racial practices, the way people talk about and theorize race . . . can be understood only as the expression of our commitment to the idea that race is *not* a social construction. . . . Either race is an essence or there is no such thing as race" (125). It is built on a foundation of false (or certainly deceptively

incomplete) dualisms—such as that between color and ancestry as determinative of race (128); that race must be either concealed or acknowledged by its raced subject, or that race is necessarily either embodied or represented (with both of these terms understood as active, transitive verbs whose subject is the person doing the embodying or representing [129]); that between acting and being (130); and that between culture (that is, a set of practices defined along intentional, "performative" [again, understood transitively] lines) and what for Michaels is always biological essence (139), to name a few—that, in addition to exposing his true agenda, vitiate his argument. By reducing the cultural problem of race to its disputed biological foundation, Michaels hopes to dismiss it: "race [is] the sort of the thing which, if it doesn't exist in nature, doesn't exist at all" (132). Thus, exposing race as a mistake will "produce a world in which race was *not* a compelling reality" (131). But his argument depends on reducing social constructionism (and its understanding of race) to a purely intentional, agential, and voluntaristic affair; if race is constituted through practices, Michaels understands these practices only as either adopted or declined by the (potentially) raced subject. This is to say that he thinks the essentialist-constructionist debate is perfectly reducible to the being-acting dualism, a dualism which is comprehended wholly under the authority of individual purposive agency.

His evocation of a blues musician might seem to have a seductive logic: "Race no more follows music than music follows race; what you become by playing the blues is a blues musician, not a black person" (134). But the argument here does not account for practices that, instead of being adopted or not by a potentially raced subject, can be recognized in that subject by another subject capable (for whatever reasons) of ascribing "race" as an attribute of others; "mistake" or not, "race" is certainly real in the sense that it authorizes actual social, cultural, and historical practices. Let me rephrase that: if the belief that blues playing produces blackness and the belief that allows white police officers to rape an African American man with a toilet plunger are both incorrect beliefs, they are incorrect in different ways. Blues playing, surely, is not the same kind of racial signifier as the likelihood of being violated in a police station by white public servants, and they certainly don't function in the same way; one cannot pass as white by choosing not to be raped by white cops in the same way that one can pass by choosing to eschew raced signifiers (such as by not playing blues or not frequenting blues clubs known for largely African American clientele). Michaels's argument does not account for this difference, and thus the definition of social constructionism that he attacks is essentially a straw man.

5. The photograph is of "half a dozen young men in blazers loafing in an archway through which were visible a host of spires. There was Gatsby, looking a

little, not much, younger—with a cricket bat in his hand" (71). The ridiculousness of Nick's response to the photo is telling: "Then it was all true. I saw the skins of tigers flaming in his palace on the Grand Canal; I saw him opening a chest of rubies to ease, with their crimson-lighted depths, the gnawings of his broken heart." Even if the absurdity of this description is meant sarcastically to suggest that Nick, like all of Gatsby's guests, is falling prey to the "romantic speculation he [Gatsby] inspired" (48), Nick does, at least for the moment, seem to believe Gatsby.

6. There are many reasons for Nick's not wanting to be in Myrtle's apartment. For one, he has been introduced to her against his will; Tom's determination to bring him to meet her "bordered on violence" (28), figuring Nick's failed resistance. From their time at Yale, Nick already knows Tom to be arrogant; his evening at the Buchanans' house in East Egg only emphasized Tom's brutality. And Nick's Midwestern distaste—what he will a little later call his "provincial inexperience" (54) and much later his "provincial squeamishness" (188)—is probably piqued by Tom's keeping a mistress, especially at the expense of Nick's own once-removed second cousin. Finally, Nick is used to exercising control over experience, and the day's events, his drunkenness not least among them, have wrested a fair amount of that control from him. Yet despite this constellation of negative predispositions, Nick finds simple disapproval insufficient.

7. While we may not finally be able always to trust Nick as a reliable narrator, we appreciate his skepticism as a useful trait in the circles he travels.

8. *The Great Gatsby* can be construed as a tragedy only if it is construed as a story about Gatsby and therefore about the failed convergence of knowledge and desire. See Bloom, for example, or Ronald Berman, who argues that Gatsby necessarily fails to "assemble" a nineteenth-century romantic persona in a twentieth-century relativistic world (*Modern Times* 189, 105–06, 165) and that Gatsby—and through him Nick—struggles heroically and creatively, if ultimately unavailingly, in an antagonistic world: "The end sentence of this novel describes resistance, not acquiescence, navigation and not drift. I think that its key word is 'against'" (*World of Ideas* 196). Another characteristic account is provided by Marius Bewley, who argues that the novel is about the confrontation between illusion and reality, and in particular that Gatsby never succeeds in seeing through the ridiculous sham of his world. In its insistent representation of the doomed attempt to invest illusions with faith, "*The Great Gatsby* becomes the acting out of the tragedy of the American vision" (26).

9. Gatsby's fetishistic idealism manipulates with great energy the consumerist ethos of twentieth-century capitalism—but its misapplication is tragicomic. Recall Gatsby's shirts:

> He took out a pile of shirts and began throwing them, one by one, before us, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many-colored disarray. While we admired he brought more and the soft rich heap mounted higher—shirts with stripes and scrolls and plaids in coral and apple-green and lavender and faint orange, with monograms of Indian blue. Suddenly, with a strained sound, Daisy bent her head into the shirts and began to cry stormily. (97–98)

Each tossed shirt is an emblem both of the scope of Gatsby's imagination and of the fact that Nick and this text have no faith in it. In a rare and paradoxical display of perspicacity, Daisy realizes this too, but at the same moment she reveals herself at her most banal. The perversity of Gatsby's success is underscored by Daisy's base defeat: "They're such beautiful shirts," she sobbed, her voice muffled in the thick folds. "It makes me sad because I've never seen such—such beautiful shirts before" (98). In Gatsby's ability to make beautiful that "for which [Nick has] unaffected scorn," Nick realizes that Gatsby's idealistic imagination is misaligned, but its energy is not lost on Nick.

10. Nick is never himself so generous, and looks to see through most people right away.

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