

【Article】

The Crack-Up of the Signification of Gatsby:

The Impossibility of History in *The Great Gatsby*

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To enforce its invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body.

———Toni Morrison (10)

‘You can’t repeat the past.’ ‘Can’t repeat the past?’ he cried incredulously. ‘Why of course you can!’ He looked around him wildly, as if the past were lurking here in the shadow of his house, just out of reach of his hand. ‘I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before,’ he said, nodding determinedly. ‘She’ll see.’ He talked a lot about the past and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy.

———*The Great Gatsby* (86)¹

Interpellation is an address that regularly misses its mark, it requires the recognition of an authority at the same time that it confers identity through successfully compelling that recognition. Identity is a function of that circuit, but does not preexist it. The mark interpellation makes is not descriptive, but inaugurative. It seeks to *introduce a reality* rather than report an existing one; it accomplishes this introduction through a citation of existing convention.

———Judith Butler *Excitable Speech* (33)

Abstract

Based on Freudian psychoanalysis and Cathy Caruth’s claim about “the language of trauma,” this paper explores what is repressed and excluded in the universalization/idealization/iconization of Gatsby in Nick’s narrative. By relocating and highlighting what is repressed and repudiated as alterity in the figuration of Gatsby, one can highlight and politicize the traumatic exteriority in the process of creating an American collective image. Traces of resistance against the hegemonic ideology can be made visible through this process. In this study’s interpretation, these repressed alterities (excluded voices) harbor and haunt even after the death and seemingly “complete” idealization of Gatsby as the myth, serving as an intersection between cultural translations. Though excluded from the universal (Nick’s national narrative), these repudiated voices maintain a ghostly presence

and are still claiming their voices to Nick's narrativization and are always resisting being signified and incorporated into the universal. The past is "present" in the way that it is totally absent and is seemingly already past and lost.

Introduction

By identifying himself with a Franklin-esque American tradition of hard work and morals, Gatsby rereads, or reconstructs and rewrites his own past so that he can recreate his new identity. Significantly, Nick's reading of Gatsby's identity or his past is already a metanarrative in a double sense. Nick reads Gatsby's romantically invented past narrative/romance metanarrativistically, which is already read, interpreted and resignified by Gatsby himself. In terms of structure, Nick rereads and sublimates Gatsby into an idealized icon of American nationality. Nick's narrative is already deconstructed, and so it is by one more implied "narrator," F. Scott Fitzgerald himself: the reader is positioned to witness the inventiveness of Nick's American national narrative. Then, based on the Freudian psychological theory, one can ask what is repressed and excluded in the universalization of Gatsby in Nick's narrative, especially at the end of the novel, and what is the return of the repressed in *Gatsby*, and its ideological function? As Cathy Caruth claims with regard to the repressed, "the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand" a "new mode of reading and of listening" (9). A new mode of reading and of listening in this study corresponds to reading it as a metahistorical romance. As Meredith Goldsmith contends, "Illuminating the racial and ethnic subtexts of *Gatsby* reveals his interdependence of white working-class identity formation with African-American and ethnic models" (463).

By relocating and highlighting what is repressed and repudiated as alterity in the figuration of Gatsby, one can highlight and politicize the traumatic exteriority in the process of creating an American collective image. Traces of resistance against the hegemonic ideology can be made visible through this process. In this novel, the presumption that identity can be securely fixed is rejected. There are actually various repressed voices claiming its involvement within the totalizing national universality. As Ralph Ellison argues, "A people must define itself, and minorities have the responsibility of having their ideals and images recognized as part of the composite image which is that of the still-forming American people" (44). This national universality is the space into which those around Gatsby read and interpret Gatsby as a hollow projective tableaux onto which they can project themselves.² This is where subversive challenges to the dominant hegemony of

national idealization can be made possible.

1. The Return of the Repressed through the Figuration of Gatsby

Gatsby's identity is predicated on Jewishness based on the immigrant narrative, which reveals the ethnic past and the Americanized present. His "dubious" ethnic origin, making him even more threatening, is hinted at by Nick in Chapter Three: "I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York. That was comprehensible" (41). At the turn of the twentieth century, those with ambiguous identities are considered social threats in terms of eugenics and on white supremacy narrative. While the image of the East Side is associated with poor immigrant whites such as the Irish, Italians, and Jews in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century, "the swamps of Louisiana" remind one of the connotation of Creole identity. As Carlyle Van Thompson points out, it is hard not to interpret Fitzgerald's repeated references to Louisiana as a reinforcement of the novel's theme of interracial breeding as a catalysis to racial passing.³ Gatsby's identity is blurred and threatens the fixed notion of whiteness.⁴ In Homi Bhabha's words, this is "the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge . . . a hybridity, a difference 'within,' a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in between' reality" (*Location* 12-13).

Gatsby's kinship to Jewishness is also shown in his relationship with Meyer Wolfsheim, who is characterized on the Americanization narrative.⁵ Wolfsheim is a disreputable gambler, who was said to be responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series. By stressing the criminal aspect, this notorious character, who proudly draws attention to his cufflinks made from human molars, Gatsby's identity as an ethnic Other is, accordingly, emphasized even more. Nick begins to suspect Gatsby of underworld dealings due to his close association with Wolfsheim. Especially pertaining to the categorization of Jews and the changing nature of Jewish identity with its ever mutating raced/gendered/classed formulations, Gatsby can be categorized as white, but at the same time resides in the changing nature of the racial construction of the off-whites (those not quite white and not African) in U.S. history. As Itzkovitz writes, in twentieth century America, the Jew was "American but foreign; white but racially other," a situation which is also symbolized by the case of Leo Frank (177).⁶ Thus, he becomes "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," and, therefore, under the rubric of his "vanishing" racial vagueness, is situated as subversive "in-between," transgressing the ethnic boundaries and threatening the slippery category of whiteness.

Along with the explicit theme in this novel of class and ethnic tensions, the theme of transgressing racial boundaries combined with miscegenation has been discussed recently in this literary field. This text is implicitly but profoundly concerned with racial mixture and, especially, the possibility of racial passing with many references to race and breeding evident, as well as figurative descriptions of blacks.⁷ Tom's accusations against Gatsby "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" reinforce this theme even more in this context. As Charles Lewis contends, "we cannot know whether [Tom] has just proposed that Gatsby represents a literal position on a gradated scale of racial Others (i.e., blacks, Jews, Slavs, Italians, and Irish as non-white), that race is here a metaphor for something else (e.g., class or region), or some uncertain combination of both" (74).

The people around Gatsby try to fill in the gaps in his identity created by his elusiveness, so that, in this novel, there are many voices in conflict. Gatsby serves as a non-signifier, which directs the reader towards a political battlefield on which people find what they desire to find. In this sense, the novel is dialogic. In the policing of Gatsby's elusive and indeterminate identity, while Nick attempts to fixate his identity as a national icon, there is one more interpreter of the unrepresentable text "Gatsby," Tom Buchanan. Though Gatsby "vanishes" at critical moments from the narrative, Tom persistently continues to identify him firmly based on nativist racism.⁸ In Tom's "narrative" (for this is also narrated by and based on Nick's observation), his nativist feelings and fear of white racial loss are vividly exemplified, and it unveils and problematizes the stigmatization of the racial Other that takes place, as well as the tension between whites and "nonwhites."

'Civilization's going to pieces,' broke out Tom violently. 'I've gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read 'The Rise of the Coloured Empires' by this man Goddard?' 'Why, no,' I answered, rather surprised by his tone. 'Well, it's a fine book, and everybody ought to read it. The idea is if we don't look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It's all scientific stuff; it's been proved. (14)

In Chapter One, Tom, who has already shown an intense dislike for outsiders, mentions one of the most prominent racial works of the era, Lothrop Stoddard, whose book, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* (1920), crossed with Madison Grant's best-seller, *The Passing of the Great Race* of 1916, whose contents nearly summarize the socio-political context of the 1920s.⁹ As Walter Benn Michaels demonstrates in relation to *Gatsby*, the definition of being "American" is displaced from what it meant in the early twentieth century, when anyone who entered America could be assimilated at a time when

the social policy was moving towards naturalization.¹⁰ However, around the mid-1920s, the new logic of the assimilation regarded identity as “the determining ground of action or significance” or “what people or things do or mean is a function of what they are” (Michaels 1). This view comes from an imagined social chaos that is a result of the expansion and building of an American empire and its contact with the imagined “colored empire,” in which eugenically unwanted others invade the country, and as a consequence, accelerate the social anxiety of miscegenation and degeneration of White Nordicism. Tom continues, “This idea is that we’re Nordics. I am, and you are and you are and——’ After an infinitesimal hesitation he included Daisy with a slight nod and she winked at me again. ‘—and we’ve produced all the things that go to make civilization—oh, science and art and all that. Do you see?’” (14). Gatsby, whose racial identity is ambiguous, symbolizes this kind of social threat. In terms of the growing anti-immigrant sentiment around 1925, there were rising voices with fears against racial mixture that were, in their minds, brought about as a result of expansive imperialism and escalating migration of black people from the South to the North. They claimed that the overseas policies of the era sought for overseas colonies inhabited by racially “inferior” people, and from whence genetically undesirable people came to America. The Immigration Act of 1924, for example, limits the numbers of non-European immigrants, reflecting American nativism with regard to the rising tide of immigrants, which was at its peak in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The nativists believed assimilation was impossible, and they believed that the melting pot of America was suffering from “alien indigestion” (“The Immigration Act of 1924” 23).¹¹ The American public were not satisfied even with the arrests and deportations of racial Others, the boundaries imposed by state legislation, and the emerging support for the KKK, so they asked for even more security. Then, the concept of “race as the crucial marker of modern identity” emerged during the 1920s, when American modernist texts were “deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing America” (Michaels 13). Tom’s citation of Stoddard in the novel, who warned that the rising number of inferior non-whites indicated the dwindling prevalence of the white race, serves as a policing boundary of racial border, a *lex non scripta*, as if he is taking a stand against the rising racial tides. During this scene, he pauses for a while before he includes Daisy in the Nordic category, which could imply uncertainty with regard to Daisy’s racial purity, rendering her tainted, along with the non-Nordic Others. Tom’s “infinitesimal hesitation” also implies his concern that women are the cause of racial mixture. Thompson suggests (82) that “the pale magic of her face” and her racial ambiguity foreshadows Gatsby’s blackness (119).

These negated aspects of Gatsby as black/Jewish can be more profoundly analyzed

in the racial passing in the novel. Because of its position as “double-consciousness” of race and “two-ness,” Gatsby’s ambivalence has been characterized in the present discussion in terms of “non-identity or political signifier,” and this can be problematized once again with regard to racial passing. In this regard, Gatsby’s paleness can be seen as a sign of his racial Otherness. Thompson persuasively argues that Gatsby is a lightskinned African American, noting the repetitive descriptions of Gatsby as “pale.” For Thompson, the ambiguous racial identity of Gatsby is threatening in that it causes anxiety in terms of the established racial boundaries, exposing America’s violent history of racial exploitation and exclusion. When light-skinned blacks choose to pass as whites and to perform acts of whiteness, they need to “change their names, to prevaricate, and to deny their families, their culture, and their history.” When they assume a white identity, paradoxically they posit challenges to the universalizing ideology of white supremacy “while revealing the fallacy of the social, political, and legal construction of race” (Thompson 77). “Race is always already experienced as a construction,” Alan Hyde also states, “as a performance in which a person self-consciously creates her own race, as an act of existential self-affirmance, in some specified relation with others” (223).¹²

The theme of racial passing/miscegenation resonates in several other episodes in the novel. When Gatsby and Nick are crossing over the Queensboro Bridge, a dead man passes them “in a hearse heaped with blooms, followed by two carriages with drawn blinds, and by more cheerful carriages for friends.” They look out at Nick and Gatsby “with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe” (eugenic Others). When they cross over Blackwell’s Island, Nick observes, “a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry. ‘Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge,’ I thought; ‘anything at all’ Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder” (55). This encounter with racial/ethnic Others on the Queensboro Bridge is really indicative of racial passing by juxtaposing Gatsby with representations of black people: Gatsby and Nick are literally “passed” by other cars, which reminds readers of Tom’s insistence that “Civilization’s going to pieces.” As Meredith Goldsmith points out, Nick’s inductive reasoning mobilizes immigrant and African-American presences as a precedent for the ambiguous identity of Gatsby (446). Moreover, once theorized like this, when *Gatsby* concerns itself with (re)discovering American literary history, it is not too much to contend that Tom’s remarks above-cited are totally contingent on the existence of excluded black people, the Harlem Renaissance in the period of the 1920s. (Interestingly Gatsby’s figuration owes a great deal to this literary movement, especially in terms of

resistance against the universalizing discourse of whiteness through racial passing.) This episode en route to New York City is the only overt mention of blacks in the novel, but serves to elucidate “Fitzgerald’s tacit dialogue with the African-American and ethnic literary context of the era.” The immigrants and “modish Negroes” on the bridge exemplify “how racial and ethnic paradigms of identity formation irrupt into *The Great Gatsby*” (Goldsmith 445-46).

Evidence for Gatsby’s kinship to racial Others as a counter collective national icon against Nick’s idealization can be found in Fitzgerald’s repetitive references to the Slavic country “Montenegro.” When Gatsby talks about his background, he takes out a medal awarded by the government of Montenegro as well as a photograph of himself in Oxford cricket whites (53). Though Gatsby’s photographic portrait and medal function as fictive and imaginary tools produced to corroborate his heroic story, his affinity with racial Others ironically reinforces Gatsby’s position as a racial Other, as Montenegrins are considered as racial Others in eugenic terms. These eight references to the nation of Montenegro in the novel, with its highly-developed racial consciousness, should be interpreted in association with the inhabitants “with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe.” These references not only associate southern Europeans with black people as racial Others, but reinforce the xenophobia among white Nordics.¹³ Considering these two episodes together (one about a dead man and the other about Montenegro), a dead man not only foreshadows Gatsby’s fate but is also indicative of Gatsby’s position as vanishing signifier in the text. The reader has no definite information about this dead man but he is there, implicitly signifying Gatsby’s position as absently present and his non-signified identity. That the man is accompanied by three Negroes “with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of south-eastern Europe,” and that these modish negroes turned hateful gazes toward Nick, reverberate with and critically reinforce Gatsby’s signification as a symbol of the resistance against hegemonic discourse, though Nick himself persists in attempting to purify Gatsby in terms of his becoming a genuine national icon.

This anxiety against racial passing is also hinted at in the remarks of a black witness to Myrtle Wilson’s (Tom’s mistress) death, who is the only black who has a “voice” in the text. When Myrtle is hit by Gatsby’s car, driven by Daisy, at the place that “hasn’t got any name,” “a pale, well-dressed negro stepped near” and said “It was a yellow car.” Because of this statement, Tom explains to George Wilson (Myrtle’s husband) that he was not driving the car. After the sorrow at the loss of Myrtle, Tom exclaims “The God damned coward!” (109). This episode, as Lewis suggests, is linked with passing. The pale black man being well-dressed means that he has already begun the process of assimilation into

mainstream society and his paleness is evidence of both racial mixture and social integration.

Several critics point out that the episode about Biloxi can be regarded as a subtext for the shadowing of Gatsby's ambiguous passing racial identity.¹⁴ He was a mysterious guest, who is only remembered as having fainted during the ceremony at the wedding of Tom and Daisy, about whom they pointlessly converse during one evening in New York. His identity is uncertain and he is, just like Gatsby, "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," with no definite familial or social identity. As Lewis points out, "Biloxi's narrative is a suggestive backdrop for what follows, Gatsby's more radical rewriting of the same social framework" (77). The fact that Biloxi introduces himself as a Yale alumnus is mirrored in Gatsby's claim to have attended Oxford.

Even though the reader is not made categorically aware of Gatsby's racial and ethnic identity as interpreted by Tom, it is this ambiguity that makes Gatsby considered to threaten, violate, and dismantle the stable idea of Americanness by blurring its boundaries once his identity is indeterminate, "vanishing," and passing. Tom associates Gatsby's affair with Daisy with the national fear of racial miscegenation, which is the very result of his passing racial identity.

I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife. Well, if that's the idea you can count me out. . . . Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white.' Flushed with his impassioned gibberish he saw himself standing alone on the last barrier of civilization. 'We're all white here,' murmured Jordan. (101)

The relationship between Daisy and Gatsby is likened to that of a white/black interracial marriage, and Gatsby is considered to be passing and transgressing both racial/sexual borders, posing threat to the ideology of whiteness. Tom's effort to translate the text "Gatsby" into the narrative of racial passing is much closer to the ideology of eugenicists. What matters for Tom is to keep the American family intact, through breeding and racial purity. For Tom, like for imperialists of the era, the family is now the basis of a nation, which in Tom's idea is under threat from "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," and therefore needs to be preserved and safeguarded. Therefore, "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere," like Ellison's invisible man, reveals not only the fear against racial mixture, but also serves as a sign of Gatsby's racial passing in the context of the 1920s. Besides, as Tom's remark refers to broader society, what is conjured up here is not only a national matter, but an imperialistic

one: as Amy Kaplan suggests, one has to think of the American national identity in the international arena. Gatsby represents, with these repressed Others in Tom's nativist's articulation, the threat of colored racial Others excluded from the boundary of a nostalgically-constructed national identity.¹⁵

The figuration of Gatsby is also concerned with imperialism. In *Gatsby*, symbolized under the rubric of green light, the image of pre-colonial America to be sought for, conquered, and "discovered" has its ideological impact and appeal because of "pastness of the past, its inaccessibility," "the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire" (Linda Hutcheon *Irony*). Hutcheon contends that it is precisely on the "*irrecoverable* nature of the past" that nostalgia relies. Gatsby's quest for Daisy and Dutch's quest for the new continent are discursively overlapped with Nick's quest for a national identity. As Hutcheon stresses, "nostalgia is less about the past than about the present," and "[i]t operates through what Mikhail Bakhtin called an 'historical inversion': the ideal that is *not* being lived now is projected into the past" (195). Besides, by idealizing past into "the site of immediacy, presence, and authenticity" and denying and degrading the present, nostalgia functions as a "prelapsarian" and, indeed, utopian ideology (Susan Stewart 23).¹⁶ Looking back at the imagined national past/origin contributes to Nick's (present) performative attempt to weave a national narrative.

This kind of nostalgia corresponds to what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia," in which people who conquer others begin to feel a kind of nostalgia for them, for a past in which Native Americans are, for example, imagined as more noble, pure, and dignified than white people. Such idealization overlaps with an imperialistic gaze directed towards women. This imperialist ideology/nostalgia colonizes the continent by gendering it as female, and is combined with "Nordicism." It defines the White Race as supreme, while regarding other races like Blacks, Jews, or those who are considered "racial inferiors" as degenerative in order to endorse racial superiority in the context of imperialism. The desire felt by Gatsby towards Daisy is contextualized in the quest of the first American colonists for "the fresh green breast of the new world" (as a feminized national body) in the form of "gendering imperialism."¹⁷ This does not mean that Fitzgerald's novel can be read as a colonialist allegory, in which each character symbolizes colonialist types. Rather, it is how colonialist psychology along with colonialist ideology functions to form the national identity of America ever since its foundation. As Lois Tyson contends, "[f]or although the founders of this nation broke with Anglo-European political philosophy when they framed the American Constitution, they nevertheless inherited many aspects of Anglo-European cultural philosophy" (444).

Nick shares Tom's nativist mindset in the middle of the novel to some extent, although his attitude towards the political signification of Gatsby includes contradictions. Gatsby claims himself, for instance, to be the son of wealthy, deceased parents from the Midwest, saying "My family all died and I came into a good deal of money," which is a lie. When Nick asks which Midwestern city he is from, Gatsby replies, "San Francisco." With Gatsby's grandiose stories of "all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels," Nick manages to "restrain [his] incredulous laughter" because "the very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned 'character' leaking sawdust at every pore as he pursued a tiger through the Bois de Boulogne" (52). Nick ignores his qualms and engages in mythologizing his subject. As is evident in the above quote, as if he had an epiphany, Nick accepts Gatsby's stories as "all true" without hesitation. It is validation, such as heritage, genealogy, or endorsement of "breeding" (Gatsby's implication of "the Earl of Dorchester" about his friend) that matters to Nick, so it follows that, for him, Gatsby must come from a good family with a socially strong lineage. Although the attitude is not as explicit as Tom's nativist view with its use of racialized terms, Nick, by emphasizing the importance of ancestry and repressing and disavowing any hint of an ambiguous background, idealizes Gatsby as a national icon.¹⁸ In this sense (as well as in the vignette of the last paragraph where colonialist Dutch images are invoked), Nick's mindset is closer to that of Tom's nativist one.¹⁹ However, for the present discussion, it is what is repudiated when he characterizes Gatsby that should be problematized in discussing the possibility of resistance against the universalizing ideology. In other words, though Nick, at this point and at the very last scene, holds a Nativist mindset, the signification of Gatsby as a national collective image is never complete. After all, he could have chosen Tom as the national icon, yet he did not. At this point, Fitzgerald leaves the contradictions (critical "fault line") about Nick's position, in which the possibility of resistance by the excluded Others can be feasible.

2. Rewriting History through Gatsby

Nick's fantasization of Gatsby's dark aspects and exclusion of his alleged kinship to racial/ethnic Otherness is also predicated on the metahistorical narrative in the context of American literary history. We can see Nick's attitude as a historian of reading and recreating American literary history through the lens of Gatsby.

[A]s 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 once 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 to his capacity for wonder. And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. (141)

Importantly, through Nick's imagination Gatsby's specific experience is sublimated in this way as the universal truth of an authentic American manhood. Gatsby's gaze toward the green light is aligned by Daisy, with the Dutch sailors' gaze at the green breast as the subtext. These images reveal beneath them an imperialistic encounter with the feminized American continent. By associating Gatsby with other "American" men at different moments in time, the text links together these different men over time and place through the nation-building romance. By representing America as a new world, Nick envisions a new country by erasing the racial Others.

Also associated with the image of the sailor in American history is the work of Herman Melville, although in a different context.²⁰ The social milieu of the 1920s witnessed the "Melville Revival," in which his work, most notably *Moby Dick*, won wide-ranging recognition and was hailed as one of the chief literary achievements of both American and world literature.²¹ Designating Melville's masterpiece as the essence and one of the origins of American history, American literary critics tried to find out something essentially and nationally American in comparison to Britain and other countries. In other words, in sociopolitical phases, the origin of the "American" was discursively required, with *Moby Dick*'s whiteness echoing around it. In this sense, we can see Nick's white national narrative though the cultural translation of Gatsby reverberates with the desperate quest undertaken by Captain Ahab for Whiteness. Besides, by claiming to be a descendent of Dutch or some European origin as its proof of authenticity, Nick connects the American identity with that of European countries though still keeping its particularity.

The green light at the end of the novel, as we have already seen, is also mentioned at the end of the first chapter, where it is employed as a symbol of hope and promise for the future. At the beginning of the second chapter, however, we are introduced to the desolate "foul wasteland" of the present, where George Wilson, a man who mistakenly killed Gatsby after seeing his wife die in a tragic car accident, lives.²² Fitzgerald calls it a "valley of

ashes” (16), over which only the eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg watch from a nearby billboard. The novel’s central place is in the establishment, growth, and reassessment of America. Here we have one more component of a famous American literary theme embedded, the Emersonian transcendental eye.

[A]bove the grey land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T. J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a nonexistent nose. (21)

These enormous eyes represent a figure of God and watch over all events and characters in the novel. The eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, portrayed on the billboard in the ashy environment of Queens, observe many things happening in front of them, including Myrtle’s grotesque death. Actually the eyes are mentioned throughout the book numerous times, described as “blue and gigantic—their retinas are one yard high” (21). George even asks Eckleburg for an answer or approval for what he plans to do after some contemplation. While the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg symbolize out of control materialism in the 1920s in this section, what is important for the present discussion is what Daisy tells Gatsby: she states that “You resemble the advertisement of the man,” and she continues that “You know the advertisement of the man——” (93). By using dashes, Fitzgerald blurs Daisy’s words here. Indeed, through advertising, the materialistic greedy aspects of the American Dream are unveiled, but, considering the discursive usage of dashes in *Gatsby*, which emphasizes blankness and the emptiness of signification, it is notable that Gatsby’s identity is often compared to that of Eckleburg’s (God’s).²³ This statement confirms our interpreting Gatsby as a vanishing mediator/political signifier.²⁴

From the book *Hopalong Cassidy*, we get the impression that what Gatsby always has in mind is self-improvement and this book renders him as a self-made man like Benjamin Franklin. Thus, through Benjamin Franklin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and T. S. Elliot (by mentioning “waste land”) to the American Icon, Gatsby’s images that Nick assembles function as a political signifier with their contributions to the formation of a national identity. Thus, combining national past and history, American literary history through Gatsby contributes to Nick’s weaving a new American national narrative.

Gatsby utilizes and converts symbolism perfectly into a topos of a novel. As Nick concludes in his narrative, “[s]o we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past,” where “we” are all universally transported back in time (172).

Thus the ending of the work emphasizes a close affinity with time as history: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning——” (141). In this last part of the novel, these words seem to contain some of the contradictory impulses of the work itself. They describe proceeding forward (“we beat on, boats against the current”) and drifting backward (“borne back ceaselessly”); they contrast hope (“Gatsby believed in the [...] future”) with despair (the “future that [...] recedes before us”). How, ultimately, does the novel look back at America’s past, envision America’s future, and posit America’s present? What kind of American national history does Nick weave with the emphasis on these apparent oppositions? Considering Gatsby himself in the work, he has been described as a contradictory, elusive, and hybrid figure. In other words, he, as we have seen, embodies contrary, even paradoxical, tensions in the narrative.

Thus, when Gatsby’s elusive racial identity as arriviste, parvenus, and racial passer entails ideological representations and is narrated with the kinship to blackness on the passing narrative and Jews on the immigrant narrative, it reveals the relentless power of a white supremacist culture seeking to police and hunt down the performance of the nonwhite Other. The racial problem understood as a white/black dichotomy is displaced, extended, and reinscribed into a slippery line of whiteness/others. Whether Gatsby is black or non-white Nordic, by characterizing Gatsby as in-between, the blackness or Jewish identity of Gatsby problematizes the political signification of racial Others and makes his “desire for whiteness” subversive.²⁵ Though as a national icon the tradition and essence of American literary tradition is inscribed into Gatsby’s identity, through the interpretation of Gatsby’s alterity, we can politicize this novel’s repressed theme of racial passing in terms of race/class at the core of the American Dream and universalizing ideology of a national icon. In this light, considering how Gatsby’s signification is intertwined with the repressed racial and ethnic Others, it reveals the interdependence of the American national (former white working-class) figure’s identity formation with African-American and ethnic models. This highlights the critical importance of “blackness” in the imagination of white American literature. As Toni Morrison contends, “the black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (5).

3. The Impossibility of the Signification of Gatsby

In the ideological constellation of Gatsby’s identity, Nick’s sublimation of Gatsby from an

individual to a national icon is contingent on various subtexts like white/Others identity politics on the Americanization/immigrant and white supremacy narratives, imperialism and the issue of historiography (recreating American [literary] history). Nick attempts to mythologize Gatsby in the same way Gatsby tries to mythologize Daisy, by repressing the process's contingency: while Nick idealizes Gatsby, he does so as if it is teleologically already predestined, Gatsby aims to seek for Daisy all through the novel, as if to claim that he is her chosen one. Interestingly, Gatsby's pursuit for Daisy is contextualized as a love romance in Nick's mythologization, and is also easily grafted onto universalism in the form of a national narrative.

On the surface of the novel, the reader is invited repeatedly to be a witness to the tragedy of Gatsby narrated by Nick as he is preyed upon by brutal capitalism in his craving for Daisy, yet, notably, the voices of the other characters also function as ideological interpellations in the process of representing and subjugating the central protagonist. In this process, Gatsby's stories are implicated with various literary works such as the discipline of Benjamin Franklin-like charts and schedules, Emersonian transcendental eyes in the figure of the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg, the ash valley of the wasteland motif of T. S. Elliot and the like. Thus, reading Gatsby through the lens of American (literary) history corresponds to reading American (literary) history through Gatsby as an agency of cultural translation, in which dialogic voices are hegemonically contesting and competing with each other. All this is made possible by scapegoating Gatsby between the national history (past) and the romance (present). Once these differences are sublimated into a new metahistorical romance, the differences between them are merely traces of hegemonic conflicts, which are inseparable with regard to the signification of Gatsby.

Gatsby's death, seen from this perspective, heralds both the end and the birth of the already lost mythologization of Gatsby's identity, which is always the border between other boundaries including race, gender, and sexuality. With regard to this point, Nick's idealization of Gatsby and Tom's idealization of the lost past is deconstructed, since both contribute in the end to the creation of the myth of American nationhood. In terms of race, what informs Tom's narrative hinges on the idealization of the pure past being protected against the threat of Others like Gatsby, which is only perceived and generated after its loss or on the verge of its being lost. Then, Tom's narrative is subsumed by Nick and transformed into a narrative of nation-building through the figuration of Gatsby in that he utilizes the same formula to create his own version of American national narrative. Gatsby's design/dream to repeat the past and recuperate what is lost is historicized beyond the genre border of romance. Spinning a story of Gatsby's quest for Daisy and Tom's nostalgic

longing for an immaculate America, Nick weaves it into a myth.

The distinction between romance and historical narrative, Gatsby's romance and his heroic idealization as a national icon, has always already been deconstructed in this text: the boundary between the two is both constituted by the narrator Nick, and in this regard, Gatsby's romance is predicated on Nick's historical view, and vice versa. Each story does not exclude the other, yet, instead, they are crucially independent of each other as its necessarily excluded Otherness. On the surface, Gatsby's "abjectiveness," such as his negated past history, seems to be contradictory to his heroic universalization as a national icon. Only as the result of an exclusive way of political idealization is Nick's national narrative made possible in the form of a metahistorical romance. In other words, Gatsby's neglected past symbolizes the alterity in the idealization and universalization as a liminal excess.

Moreover, after exposing its impossibility of signification, in *Gatsby*, one cannot ignore the ironic gaze surrounding the text from one more "narrator," Fitzgerald himself. By deconstructing the relationship between romance and metahistory after "killing" its narrator Nick (meaning we have finished reading this novel), the novel is now sublimated into a new narrative: a metahistorical romance through the interpretation of Gatsby is staged. The reading of *Gatsby* as a metahistorical novel enables us to interpret the conflicting and contradictory voices in the novel, exploring the possibility of resistance against the totalizing ideology. Despite the sudden embracement and the seemingly complete idealization of Gatsby into an American icon who achieved the American Dream on his own, Nick's narrative is never complete but winds up incorporating the haunting voices of resisting racial/ethnic Others within itself. Nick's narrativization of Gatsby relies on the erasure of Tom's narrative, which renders Gatsby the racial other to Tom's (nativist's) America, who, ironically, could be racialized as black considering the draft version of *Gatsby*, *Trimalchio* (103). In the manuscript version *Trimalchio*, Jordan murmurs, after she says "We're all white here" (137), she sharply adds, "Except possibly Tom" (103) indicating the possibility of Tom's kinship to blackness.²⁶

Put in the context of metahistorical romance, Gatsby, as a scapegoat and absent central character who still performatively functions as a vanishing mediator, symbolizes the flow of time, and provides structural unity in the novel. Slavoj Žižek contends that, in the postmodernist schema, "the Thing itself as the incarnated, materialized emptiness" is shown, as compared to the modernist, as one in which "the structure, the intersubjective machine, works as well if the Thing is lacking" (*Looking* 145). Following the definition by Žižek here, *Gatsby* is the novel that shows the world without an omnipotent and absolute God in a

modernistic sense. However, on the level of another narrative of Nick's metahistory, Gatsby himself is transformed into God and takes the place of an absent God in a post-modernistic way. What is crucial is the artifact of God replaced and highlighted by Gatsby. By presenting how God's place can be replaced and filled by something else, the novel reveals the constructedness of the Thing/universe. In this sense, *Gatsby* contains a postmodernistic vision within itself. Gatsby's identity challenges the universalizing ideology but asserts nothing to replace what it deconstructs instead: there is just the emptiness of signifiers.

This impossibility of representation delineates what is repressed in the novel. Gatsby's "refusal" to be interpreted and his ambiguous identity of "whiteness" as a racial and national identity remains as traumatic Otherness: traumatic Otherness indicates traces that are left unsymbolized in language, especially in the signification of Gatsby. This novel becomes a locus for representing the ultimate impossibility of being white and the challenge against it. Although what Gatsby exemplifies resists against the universalizing ideology of Nick's metahistorical narrative, it still haunts Nick's national narrative as a repressed and hidden alterity. Nick's narration addressing Gatsby as a national icon stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority in which "incomplete signification," as described by Jacques Derrida to indicate that their meanings are always *sous rature* (under erasure), can be seen.²⁷ As an effect of "incomplete signification," we can turn "boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated" (Bhabha *Nation* 4). Then, considering this meaning, Gatsby, as the "white" male American national icon, can be deconstructed, and those excluded from this narrativization can posit a new promising possibility to be included in this universal through the figuration of Gatsby.

Remarking that "I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all—Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I, were all Westerners, and perhaps we possessed some deficiency in common which made us subtly unadaptable to Eastern life," Nick tries to conclude this novel by repressing Gatsby's negated aspects into his idealizing nationhood narrative (137). The difference between West (country) and East (city), rich and poor, is sublimated and converted into a romantic narrative and a national iconic narrative seeking for dreams to be achieved, and Gatsby personal romance is overwritten by Nick into a national narrative. However, the national narrative is predicated on its necessarily repressed alterity, the issues of imperialism, ethnic Others against whiteness, and women/racial Others. All these are haunting the national narrative as trauma. The replacement of the omniscient narrator signals the vacuum apparent in the wake of World War I (also symbolized by Gatsby's identity), and through which Nick weaves the national narrative.²⁸ In Butler's

words, this idea can be expressed clearly: the abjection, Gatsby's repudiated past, is exactly "an ongoing psychic condition in which norms are registered in both normalizing and non-normalizing ways." This is "the postulated site of their fortification," including "their undoing and their perversion, the unpredictable trajectory of their appropriation in identifications and disavowals" which are, just as seen in the signification of Gatsby, "not always consciously or deliberately performed" (Butler *CHU* 153).

In this study's interpretation, however, these repressed alterities (excluded voices) harbor and haunt even after the death/idealization of Gatsby as the myth, serving as an intersection between cultural translations. Though excluded from the universal (Nick's national narrative), these repudiated voices maintain a ghostly presence and are still claiming their voices to Nick's narrativization and are always resisting being signified and incorporated into the universal. The past is "present" in the way that it is totally absent and is seemingly already past and lost. All of these elements of Gatsby's off-whiteness with the possibility of racial passing are erased, excluded, repressed, and purified into the ideal white "Nordic," but still linger in the form of Gatsby and continue to remain through the signification of Gatsby even when Nick attempts to idealize/fantasize him as a national icon.

Conclusion:

This study has asserted that the American idealization Nick desires to narrativize is always already deconstructed by Others' voices imbedded in the text through Gatsby's figuration, which undermine and demythologize Nick's imagined America. Nick's sudden change in attitude toward Gatsby can be explained this way and his death functions as a repressor of the excluded Others in the formation of national narratives. Fitzgerald's ironic depiction of Nick's idealization vividly delineates the way national myth can be forged and its entire process of repudiation, and as a result it indicates to us the fictionality of the mythic narrative. This novel is composed in a modernist way, placing Nick's consciousness at the center of constructing history, while it also involves a postmodern tendency to "focus on the question of what history itself might be" as has been seen above (Amy J. Elias *Sublime* 90). The way in which the universal ideology suppresses and excludes social Others and justifies itself is problematized through the critical reading of Nick's narrativization. By exposing the way a man's quest for his lady can be a national myth through the idealization of himself and his death, the text itself is deconstructive in structure: the mythologization of Gatsby is always already demythologized by various voices embedded in the text. That is,

through the interpretation of Gatsby, Fitzgerald stages a metahistorical romance. Furthermore, these voices of Others, which rebel against the totalizing ideology, are the possibilities for struggle and rebellion against the dominant universal ideology. Through the haunting threat of marginalized characters and Gatsby, Fitzgerald presents the power struggle in the contingency, hegemony, and universality. Fitzgerald demonstrates how essentially American literature and American National Idealization are concerned with race, revealing the construction of whiteness and the elimination of blackness. By emphasizing the performative nature of Gatsby's identity, which is "released from its naturalized interiority and surface," one's reading "can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play" of demonstrating contingent rather than fundamental structure in the novel, despite the present hegemony reinforcing existing hierarchies (Butler *GT* 33).

Notes

- 1 This study will make all subsequent references to *The Great Gatsby* (1925) parenthetically as the main text of this paper unless otherwise mentioned. The title of this work is abbreviated as *Gatsby* below.
- 2 More precisely, see *Gatsby*, 40.
- 3 Thompson (85).
- 4 With respect to this, see Brotkin.
- 5 About the relationship between Jews and African Americans, see Freedman and Melnick.
- 6 This is also quoted by Goldsmith, 446.
- 7 Regarding the importance of passing in American history and literature, see Goldsmith, Wald, Caughie, Sollors, and Ginsberg.
- 8 On the point of Gatsby's "vanishing," see Will (140-41), Shreier (120), and Mallios (358).
- 9 With regard to this point, see Gidley. It is ironic that at one of Gatsby's parties, a man with "owl-eyed spectacles" picks out one volume of "Stoddard lectures," which tells readers that Gatsby even tries to perform white supremacy by keeping the book in his library as a gesture of his belonging to white upper-class.
- 10 As Michaels clarifies, both modernism and nativism are seen "as efforts to work out the meaning of the commitment to identity——linguistic, national, cultural, racial" (2-3).
- 11 I referred to Ngai.
- 12 This is also quoted by Thompson.
- 13 Thompson takes the same interpretation about this episode, 91.
- 14 See Marren and Lewis.
- 15 See also Clymer.
- 16 See also Hutcheon.
- 17 Regarding the "gendering of imperialism," see McClintock.
- 18 Mallios also discusses this point.
- 19 Though Michaels points out this, he does not mention the possibility of resistance against the hegemonic discourse (41).
- 20 This point is also pointed out by Takayuki Tatsumi.
- 21 On this point, see Spark.
- 22 Pertaining to the influence of *The Waste Land* in *Gatsby*, see Audhuy.

- 23 As to the function of dashes in this novel, see Will.
- 24 On this point, see my paper, "From Romance to Epic: The Political Signification of Gatsby as Vanishing Mediator." "Vanishing mediator" refers to a third agency that appears invisible in relationship to two other dialectically connected oppositions, yet it still serves as a catalyst and allows the relation of the two dichotomies to be transparent, as if it were not there.
- 25 Thompson takes the same interpretation.
- 26 Goldsmith also discusses this point (458).
- 27 Derrida bases his discussion on the Heideggerian strategy of placing a cross through words and emphasizes the always inadequate, incomplete nature of the signified.
- 28 See also Egert.

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