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## What Nick's Careless Laughter Both Reveals and Obscures: Reading Race in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Caroline Brown

For some time now I have been thinking about the validity or vulnerability of a certain set of assumptions conventionally accepted among literary historians and critics and circulated as “knowledge.” This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States. It assumes that this presence—which shaped the body politic, the Constitution, and the entire history of the culture—has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and development of that culture's literature. Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular “Americanness” that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence. There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. [...] The contemplation of this 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.

-Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

I first encountered *The Great Gatsby* as a junior high student in the American public educational system. I now use it as a text in the courses I teach as a university professor. However, my understanding of *Gatsby* is fundamentally affected by my subject position as an African American woman from a working-class background. When I read F. Scott Fitzgerald's text, I see it not only as a product of a certain man, a talented artist who lived in and wrote about a certain era called the Jazz Age, but of a particular racial sensibility that in turn reflects a multiplicity of attitudes from the larger culture of which it is a part. Although *The Great Gatsby* is not about race as such, the text is saturated in racist iconography that for me is glaringly obvious. Yet I have been stunned that what is so transparent to me as a reader is not necessarily to others. This tension both fascinates and frustrates me.

I felt this tension as a first year college student reading *Gatsby* in a Freshman English course. I loved the course and took it for granted that I would be an English major. Yet one day, I decided

I felt uncomfortable with the depiction of blacks in the text. After class I questioned my English professor, hesitant and confused. I was not certain that one could do this. But I liked her as an individual and trusted her as an authority figure. Weren't writers supposed to be somehow more sensitive and aware, outsiders who recorded injustice, remedying it through their own writing and lives? My teacher responded with a thoughtful shrug. She was Jewish, she said, and look at the depiction of Jews. It was just the way things were. It was not a hostile or insensitive reaction, and I perceived that even as she spoke, she was pondering some of these difficult issues. But her response left me feeling as though a door had been shut. I assumed the case was closed but nevertheless longed for more answers, newer ways of approaching these epistemological questions. I could neither dismiss *Gatsby* nor any number of texts by non-black writers where blackness was a presence, sometimes amorphous or depersonalized, sometimes derogatory. However, I felt also as though I could not trust them with my maturing self-image. I felt increasingly alienated by the representations of black people in English language texts by non-black writers, and uncertain about how my questions regarding this treatment would be received in classrooms where they would not necessarily be understood or welcomed. I ended up as a French and Africana Studies double major. Yet the questions themselves did not disappear, they merely shifted.

When I eventually decided to teach a college course on racial representations by both black and white American authors, how they depicted the self and the other, *Gatsby* was an instant choice. I was struck by the immediate resistance on the part of both students and faculty members, many of whom could not comprehend my fixation on race in a text that was almost exclusively not about race. If anything, *Gatsby* was about class, another great American taboo. To me it seemed however, that just because a plot did not revolve around race did not mean that race was not there, an active and shaping entity. Even more profound was how deeply intertwined race and class were and how they not only mirrored but actively informed American national consciousness; yet, this influence was denied in favor of less “political” interpretations of identity.

By focusing on uses of race, and blackness in particular, I hope to, on the one hand, address the conversation around these issues related to canonicity. I feel there is a place for all texts, from highbrow to low, within the walls of the university. The central issue, rather than what is studied, is how it is studied and how any particular product gets categorized in the first place. I do not believe it practical or necessary to displace mainstream texts. Doing so does not, in any way, remove or transform the power structures that they are a manifestation of. Instead, I want to scrutinize them in any number of ways, some quite traditional, others much more novel. In doing so, I am participating in Claude Steele's concept of “wise schooling,” the manner through which what is learned within the academy is viewed as pertinent to lived experience on the part of both faculty and students. In using this terminology, however, I do not want to exclusively address the needs of supposedly minority students. I want to acknowledge the situation of a multiplicity of students. I think there are spaces of profound silence in American letters, culture, and social systems around race and class. Too often both are reified during dialogues centered on

oppression and victimization during which the disenfranchised become what African American theorists from W.E.B. DuBois to Claude Steele term “problems”. This process destabilizes this deadlock and permits sites to open that all students can potentially understand and relate to. Nevertheless, this is not to assume that the process is devoid of various forms of conflict, from anger at the ideological corruption of much cherished texts by the thought police to resentment that once again white people manage to insidiously insert themselves in other people's disciplines and movements, thus becoming the focus of even oppositional discourse. What I believe is permitted by this pedagogical method is the critical insertion by any number of populations into what we hold most sacred in the United States, conceptual forms and intellectual currents assumed to be untouched, and therefore unsullied, by race. Yet by looking at *Gatsby* specifically as a racialized text, it permits discussions to analyze the uses of race in the building of American identity. Not only are the obviously racially marked a part of this tradition but whiteness itself, a state of being conventionally viewed as somehow falling outside of race, becomes a concept to be interrogated and problematized. Yet blackness does allow an important segue into this larger discussion.

Africans have served important real and symbolic functions in the creation of Western, and certainly American, identity. Blackness is a sign that functions as its own system of signification, becoming what Evelyn Higginbotham calls a “global sign“ or “metalanguage.” As she explains, this is because race:

speaks about and lends meaning to a host of terms and expressions, to myriad aspects of life that would otherwise fall outside the referential domain of race. By continually expressing overt and covert analogic relationships, race impregnates the simplest meanings we take for granted. It makes hair “good“ or “bad,” speech patterns “correct“ or “incorrect.” (95)

Perhaps nowhere is this more resonant than in literature itself with its supposedly lofty intentions and endless contradictions. Ralph Ellison, in his various essays and interviews, most notably those collected in *Shadow and Act*, examines the uses of blackness in the texts of European American writers. Toni Morrison, pushing the thesis further, systematically explores the Africanist presence in the works of some of America's most canonical white writers in her *Playing in the Dark*. Through her literary archeology, she reveals how central blackness is to the creation of American identity. Morrison excavates layers of meaning embodied in black characters as well as how and why whites symbolically perform blackness. Race, as she reminds, echoing Higginbotham, is not a biological but a social construct, “disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and division far more threatening to the body politic than biological 'race' ever was” (63). However, Morrison's essays, though analyzing the often-neglected Africanist presence, examine it as a response to actual, albeit secondary and vaguely drawn, characters. In this essay, I explore blackness as a floating signifier, a nebulous concept that never quite takes shape-yet that informs so many dimensions of American culture as it is lived and understood. *The Great Gatsby*, capturing so eloquently and unintentionally the internal conflicts and contradictions of race and its various forms of representation, speaks to the tensions less through the medium of a sustained black presence than through its notable absence. Yet this absence, juxtaposed first against a black presence so fleeting as to be negligible and secondly

against a fragmented whiteness that is far from a coherent identity, is equally portentous. Jay Gatsby, whose presence connects the two extremes, speaks directly to this literary absence.

Actual black bodies in *The Great Gatsby* are in conspicuously short supply. When first referred to, however, their presence is striking. On a bridge in a luxury automobile driven by Gatsby, Nick notices another luxury vehicle, a limousine. Once again the driver is white. However, this driver is the car's chauffeur. Its passengers are three blacks. Or more specifically, "three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl." Nick's reaction is telling:

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. (69)

Although *Gatsby* is a text that has almost no black characters, certainly none with speaking roles, this is not to suggest that they are not an integral part of the developing narrative. It is significant that Nick should at this moment observe the blacks in his midst. Nick's narration reiterates Toni Morrison's mapping of linguistic strategies used by white writers to contain and thus dismiss blackness. I have included five of her six categories here. The economy of stereotype "allows the writer a quick and easy image without the responsibility of specificity, accuracy, or even narratively useful description" (67). Metonymic displacement "promises much but delivers little and counts on the reader's complicity in the dismissal" (68). Metaphysical condensation "allows the writer to transform social and historical differences into universal differences. Collapsing persons into animals prevents human contact and exchange." Fetishization is especially useful in evoking difference where difference does not exist or is minimal. Examples might include "black blood, white blood, [...] the purity of white female sexuality, the pollution of African blood and sex." Dehistoricizing allegory "produces foreclosure rather than disclosure. If history is made so vast that the civilizing process becomes indefinite [...] history, as a process of becoming, is excluded from the literary encounter." Perceived through this filter, Nick's very language is, thus, no accident. A buck, a male deer or antelope, relies on traditional systems of classification linking people of African descent to animals. A "girl," on the other hand, while unarguably human, once again contains blackness within traditional motifs of the immature and juvenile, the condescension used for those forced to serve and perceived as inherently inferior. Rolling eyes, their whiteness standing in distasteful relief against dark skin, has become a Hollywood convention, yet is based on long standing forms of representation within Western culture that both parodies and fears the black body, mutilating it into severed body parts separate from a holistic personhood.<sup>1</sup> It is no irony that this language should be mobilized at this particular moment, accentuated by dismissive laughter-to decrease the threat, the danger, of the competition implicit in this newfound black status. Of the arrogance and hauteur of wealth-in the blackface of a reverse minstrelsy, with its pretensions and presumptuous demand for white servants as well as its awkward and naked aspiration. Bert Bender in "His Mind Aglow" identifies this moment as revealing both Nick and Fitzgerald's anxiety about the presence of non-

Northern Europeans in the continuously remapped urban landscape. He further links Tom's fascination with the racist, pseudo-scientific writings of "Goddard" with Fitzgerald's own for those of Lothrop Stoddard.<sup>2</sup> While I agree with Bender's observations, I think it imperative to push his postulations still further. Not only does Nick himself feel a creeping anxiety over the territorial encroachment being enacted about him, but it is telling that this trio, following the Southern European hearse, the death car of mourning and loss, becomes the barometer against which the audacity of the arriviste Gatsby is initially introduced and measured.

*The Great Gatsby* can be read as a document of Nick Carraway's journey into America's "heart of darkness." Unlike Charles Marlow, however, who is submerged in the literal darkness of Joseph Conrad's depiction of a mythical Congo, with its cannibals, warriors, and stench of death and depravity, Carraway descends into the figurative darkness of America's white elite. A naif from the Midwest, Nick learns of the corruption that wealth so capably obscures. Nevertheless, it is also a world of shifting socioeconomic roles and boundaries. It is a world where the carefully guarded borders of old money European Americans are being penetrated and reconfigured by new wealth, upstarts with non-Anglo names, murky backgrounds, and endless ambition. In this world, whiteness itself is still in the process of being contested and constructed. Jeffrey Louis Decker in "Gatsby's Pristine Dream," reports:

"During the Twenties, in popular and academic forums alike, racial nativism was sanctioned by the pseudo-scientific discourse of Nordicism which narrowed definitions of whiteness. After decades of seemingly unrestricted immigration from eastern and southern Europe, nativists responded to the fear of the loss of white Anglo-Saxon dominance by attempting to fix and maintain the boundaries between old stock Americans and all others. [...]he deployment of genetic typologies became widespread in Nordacist descriptions of the racial degeneracy in new immigrants.[...] Nordics must avoid cross-breeding with white Europeans of a lower racial descent, namely Alpines and Mediterraneans, or face the degenerative process of mongrelization." (64)

As embodied in the divide between East Egg and West Egg, East Egg is the preserve of established wealth, the privileged descendants of early Dutch and British settlers: Beckers and Leeches, Ismays and Chrysties, the Stonewall Jackson Abrams, and Fishguards, and the Ripley Snells, an Endive and Whitebait and Hammerhead. From West Egg come the Poles and Galicks and Cohens and Schwartzes and McCartys and Bembergs and Muldoons and Da Fantanos. West Egg has the abrasive accent of newer arrivals and "foreign" names—Jewish, Italian, and Irish; it bears the taint of the entertainment world: films, the theater, promoters. The symbolic meeting of the East, its tradition and discrete inheritances, and everything else—the vast West with its mongrelized culture and new money and brazen energy. All come to meet and play and merge at Gatsby's parties, parties where his guests exchange rumors of the mystery that is Gatsby, actively creating a fabled past and paying him "the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him" (61).

Yet, just as Gatsby destabilizes the boundaries separating old money from new, older waves of European immigrants from the more recently arrived, it is Gatsby who becomes the respectable face of organized crime as embodied in Meyer Wolfsheim. Gatsby, the blond-haired, blue-eyed war hero, represents and assists in the operation of Wolfsheim's underworld empire: bootlegging, fixing the stock market, and running illegal gambling rings. Wolfsheim himself is the embodiment of an aggressive and menacing capitalism, the menace of the not quite assimilated ethnic white, "a small, flat-nosed Jew" (69), whose cufflinks are from the "[f]inest specimens of human molars" (73) and whose speech, laced with references to "gonnegtions," is strong with the awkward gallantry of Eastern Europe. Just as Wolfsheim's name bears the mark of the predatory carnivore at the top of the food chain, his cufflinks reveal his willingness to cannibalize, consume, and display his conquest. Wolfsheim—a parody of the greedy, corrupt Jew (though chivalrous according to the tenets of his own peculiar logic)—is the brain behind the dazzling beauty of a Gatsby, relying on the latter's "Teutonic" physiognomy, warrior posture, and the clean slate of his past. Through Gatsby, Wolfsheim buys a version of whiteness otherwise inaccessible to him. Gatsby himself, though a riddle, has undergone a true metamorphosis. His is the ultimate Horatio Alger story, from rags to riches. From a childhood of poverty and deprivation, he works hard, discovers a mentor, inherits a small fortune, joins the military, and eventually heads a huge and influential corporation. Yet the flip side of this is the parody of the American dream, a parody that resonates in its use of the passing motif.

It is of some consequence that Jay Gatsby, entrepreneur, was born James Gatz, the son of "shiftless and unsuccessful farm people his imagination had never truly accepted [...] as his parents" (99). He commits himself to a rigorous course of self-improvement, making long lists, scheduling his day to the hour, and upholding his vows to his "General Resolves": "No more smoking or chewing"; "Bath every other day"; "Be better to parents" (174). A crucial part of his transformation is the Anglicizing of his name, his erasure of his own ethnic markers. In addition, he consciously buries his past. Or as he admits to Nick:

"I'll tell you God's truth [...] I am the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now. I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford, because all my ancestors have been educated there for many years. It is a family tradition." (65)

Needless to say, Nick realizes Gatsby's lie *even before* Gatsby claims the exact point of his origins to be San Francisco. It is Tom Buchanan, however, who rips viciously at the facade, accusing:

*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.* (130)

Although Gatsby is perhaps the most stereotypically "Teutonic" of the assembled guests, including Nick, Tom, Daisy, and Jordan, the disorder that he represents, at once enigmatic and ludicrous, echoes the menace, the discomfort, and ultimately the resentment, caused by the three

blacks in the car. Once again, Gatsby's presence reintroduces blackness into the text. Yet, it is a "blackness" strategically juxtaposed against the lure of a whiteness that both revitalizes and protects. In *The Great Gatsby*, this figure is Daisy Fay Buchanan, referred to constantly in relation to the glory of her whiteness: her white skin and clothing, her pale, gleaming hair, and her white Louisville girlhood. This whiteness eventually gives way to allusions of silver and gold, whether of her hair, status, slippers, or "indiscreet" voice, which rings with money, with the prestige Gatsby longs, lusts for. In his mind, all ingredients coalesce, becoming one and the same. To attain them he is willing to transform himself completely, annihilating the ghost that is James Gatz, to become his embodiment of the American dream. Although Gatsby himself does not need "protection" as a white man, Daisy will bequeath to him the grace, the privilege and legitimacy of her WASP background, her symbolic whiteness and wealth.

That *Gatsby* relies on specific literary conventions related to the narrative of passing is noteworthy. The text moves along a trajectory that relies on passing as a symbolic death; it becomes individual rebirth through class movement. In the process of leaving the old class/ethnic/racial self behind, one becomes a better capitalist. The traditional race-based (read: black) passing narrative obscures the class nature of this movement, drawing us into a dialogue around the morality of racial subversion, the tragedy of self-negation, and the titillation of the erotically taboo that began with the sin of slavery and enforced miscegenation. On the other hand, we do not see whites as passing because we refuse to see the economic and cultural complexity that whiteness itself obscures.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is for the status of a homogeneous whiteness, its freedom and potential wealth, that Jay Gatsby obsesses over a woman and plots her conquest. This, in turn, brings me back to the presence of Tom Buchanan, as used by both Nick and Fitzgerald, as Gatsby's foil.

Throughout *The Great Gatsby*, Tom rants, inveighing the pseudo-scientific writings of Goddard to justify his own paranoid racism. It is Tom's hypocritical oratory that frames the unwinding narrative, which begins with his fears of "colored" encroachment and the destruction of the white power structure: "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," to which Daisy enthusiastically concurs, murmuring, "We've got to beat them down" (13). Gatsby becomes the manifestation of this fear. Yet, Gatsby does not even attempt to dismantle that system, he merely creates a comfortable niche for himself within it, as does the typically passing protagonist, which is perhaps the most unsettling point. They would not disrupt that *status quo*, they would merge with it and thus increase the potential for unperceived contamination, Tom's greatest fear. Still, their passage does suggest the potential for the erosion of the racial divide, the clear-cut division between black and white, and between rich and poor— which race itself initially symbolized in such eloquent and unambiguous terms.



However, much of Tom's insecurity emanates from his recognition of the creolization taking place in the United States. In grasping his reactionary opinions so defensively, he acknowledges on some level the mixture and exchange at the root of American culture. After all, the novel takes place during an era referred to as the Jazz Age, which originated in the lives and music of poor and working class African Americans. Daisy's voice is evocatively described in jazz-like terms, "a husky, rhythmic whisper, bringing out a meaning in each word that it had never had before and would never have again" (109). Even Gatsby and Jordan's color is the golden brown of deeply tanned skin. They possess the leisure allowed by excess incomes to bake their skins in the sun and then glow with health and youth. They are able to buy a symbolic blackness that contrasts with the pale gleam of their hair.<sup>4</sup> It is, in fact, the poor and sickly George Wilson, Myrtle's cuckolded spouse, whose body, caged indoors and beaten down by long hours of unrewarding work, bears the pallor of death and a dis-eased spirit. Interestingly, the presence of jazz music marks both the narrative and the cultural revolution taking place, the very thing Tom fears. Jazz insinuates itself into the text, whether the era, the clothing style and sensibility, or the very music that penetrates almost every dimension of the unfolding narrative. Significantly, however, there are no blacks present, as performers, dancers, and guests, even servants. Only the two bucks and a girl in the flashy limousine and the stylish but virtually silent mulatto who serves as witness to Myrtle Wilson's murder. Blackness and black culture thus become a metaphorical playground allowing the white emotional and consumer excess that then becomes redefined as personal freedom and social reconfiguration, a movement to be seen in subsequent decades, whether with the Jazz Age, the transformation of rhythm and blues into rock n' roll, or the current fixation on hip-hop, with its mutant clones the Beastie Boys, Vanilla Ice, or the especially tepid popesque Boys II Men castoffs, N'Sync, 99, and The Backstreet Boys. As once whites sported afros of their own, then "Bo Derek" braids, presently dreadlocks, cornrows, and nubian knots, so suburban kids now shapeshift into baggy jeaned homeboys and girls, slaves to Tommy Hilfiger and a wide array of expensive accoutrements, like their African American counterparts across the class spectrum. As black athletes and entertainers are lionized, becoming today's version of the national hero, those same boys to men are profiled as potential criminals by law enforcement agencies, which then hold an entire population of the nation's citizens hostage, even as their culture—for which they are being profiled and jailed and which so often begins as a counterculture against oppression—is being co-opted, mass-marketed, and consumed.

It is also during this time that "from Garveyism to the fledgling Harlem Renaissance, New York was becoming the Mecca of black American politics and culture" (Decker 56). For whites, Harlem embodied a cultural escape into the dangerous and exotic of the club scene, with its availability of sex, prohibited alcohol, and cocaine, as well as a rich cultural laboratory in which the arts were being radically tested and reconceptualized. In *Harlem Renaissance*, Nathan Irvin Huggins writes:

White Americans had identities of their own to find, and black men were too essential to them to be ignored. Men who sensed that they were slaves to moral codes, that they were cramped, and confined by guilt-producing norms which threatened to make them emotional cripples, found Harlem a tonic and a release. Harlem Negroes' lives appeared immediate and honest. Everything

they did—their music, their art, their dance?—uncoiled deep inner tensions. Harlem seemed a cultural enclave that had magically survived the psychic fetters of Puritanism. (89)

This sense neither resonates in *The Great Gatsby* nor in the larger Movement. Gatsby's parties take place in sync with and as an extension of the revolution occurring in Harlem. Like Gatsby's ethnicity, however, Harlem has been effectively erased and consumed within a generic whiteness that sustains itself on denial of the multiplicity at its core even as it profits from it.

Tom's venom reiterates the contempt felt by the larger culture for the colonized African American population in its midst: "This fellow [Goddard] has worked out the whole thing. It's up to us, who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things" (13). When Tom takes his attack to his next logical conclusion, he proceeds to vilify Gatsby, using him to insinuate that before long there will be "intermarriage between black and white" (130). A seemingly tense Jordan assures that: "We're all white here," as if to thus assert solidarity in the face of deeper schisms. Looking at Tom, "[f]lushed with impassioned gibberish [...] standing alone on the last barrier to civilization" (130), Nick's immediate reaction is a now familiar desire to laugh. Or as he states: "Angry as I was, as we all were, I was tempted to laugh whenever he opened his mouth. The transition from libertine to prig was so complete" (131). And Tom, cheating on Daisy with a succession of working-class women, is an incredible hypocrite.

Nevertheless, there is more in Fitzgerald's narrative construction than interracial tension between blacks and whites. Although Bender's reference to Stoddard is especially pertinent here, I would also like to introduce Henry Herbert Goddard's *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* into the discussion. Written in 1914, it is also an argument in support of eugenics. However, rather than focused on race, it records degeneracy through the filter of class as a manifestation of biological determinism. The Kallikaks, a white family, are divided into the side with the "good English blood of the middle class" (50) and the downwardly mobile portion, made up of the "feeble-minded," the "moron," the "idiot," and the "simply stupid," and begun when a "scion steps aside from the paths of rectitude and with the help of a feeble-minded girl, [then] starts a line of mental defectives that is truly appalling" (50). A moralistic tract depending on misuse of "Mendelian expectation[s]" (24), it becomes an argument in support of castration and ovariectomy of the poor, illegitimate, "dull," and "criminal." Decker, in his argument, relates Fitzgerald's fictional Goddard back to the Nativist tensions erupting in the 1920s. What strikes me here, however, is Tom's quoting excessively from Goddard while repeatedly having affairs with working-class women he then mistreats and disposes. While no offspring are mentioned in relation to these illicit unions, his behavior repeats that of the original Kallikak patriarch, who "after this mistake, [...] returns to the tradition of his family" (50). Tom's misconduct, with its potential for "mongrelization," is especially ironic considering his excessive attachment to Goddard. It is a point that could not have been lost on Fitzgerald, consumed by his own nativist and eugenicist passions, a world in which whiteness itself is being actively debated and reconceptualized. Yet, submerged in the narrative, it becomes a point of conflict that is erased by

Nick's casual dismissal, cloaked, as it is in laughter, which brings an immediate release, a relief from mounting tension. Yet, as noted by the psycholinguist Steven Pinker:

Cruelty alone is not the trigger for humor. The butt of a joke has to be seen as having some undeserved claim to dignity and respect, and the humorous incident must take him down a few pegs. Humor is the enemy of pomp and decorum, especially when they prop up the authority of an adversary or a superior. (547-8)

Thus, Nick's laughter both hides and revalidates anger and submerged hostilities. Nick ultimately reveals himself a hypocrite. He scorns Tom and his set with their assumptions of superiority, and their avaricious and reckless snatching of privilege. Even as he admits his disdain for Tom's opinions, however, Nick maintains his silence, never challenging or questioning Tom's dubious convictions. Yet Nick's laughter cloaks his willingness to accommodate bigoted attitudes and behavior. Nick's laughter at Tom echoes his bemused laughter at the uppity African American passengers and is equally insidious. His amusement is his acquiescence to Tom's brutalizing the working-class Myrtle when he slams her face with his fist and breaks her nose; his sexist cheating on Daisy; and finally his betrayal of Gatsby, which results in the latter's murder by Wilson, a symbolic lynching connected to Tom's conception of Gatsby's otherness. When Nick runs into Tom after the passage of some time, he begins to challenge Tom but falls into prior behavioral patterns. Even as Nick first recoils in disgust, he shakes Tom's hand when the latter insists, justifying his response: "it seemed silly not to, for I felt suddenly as though I were talking to a child" (181). Despite Nick's disgust, he covertly supports Tom's entitlement. Nick understands but refuses to take a stand. His laughter at the blacks in the passing vehicle, careless and bemused and self-satisfied, echoes his support of this ideology. It also reveals Fitzgerald's own strategy within the text, which simultaneously acknowledges and obliterates black culture, mobilizing it as a marker for any number of larger ethnic and cultural exchanges and processes. Rather than a critique of Fitzgerald himself, however, I would like to posit these moments as the literary enactment of the racial dilemma that haunts the United States itself. I believe it time to bring these interrelated issues more centrally into classroom and textual discourse, permitting a dialogue to be created around the many layers of racial inscription taking place in written texts, how this process is tied to ethnicity, class, and erasure, and how, finally, these intersect in the formation of what we call American identity.

## END NOTES

1 Sander Gilman in his *Difference and Pathology* traces the development of the black body as a space of degeneracy, revealing how black physical traits manifest themselves in the bodies of white criminals, prostitutes, and members of the working class to reveal their own degeneracy. In addition, see Nancy Stepan's "Biological Degeneration: Races and Proper Places." Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* becomes the ultimate materialization of this textual mutilation with blackness standing both for lack and what could occur to whites when no longer in the "proper place" of a temperate climate and strict social demarcation.

[2](#) Bender quotes from Stoddard who in *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy* states “migrations of lower human types like those which have worked such havoc in the United States must be rigorously curtailed. Such migrations upset standards, sterilize better stocks, increase low types, and compromise national futures.” He subsequently reports Fitzgerald as being so disturbed by “the Negroid streak creep[ing] northward to defile the Nordic race“ that the response should be to “[r]aise the bars of immigration and permit only Scandinavians, Teutons, Anglo Saxons + Celts to enter“ (401-2).

[3](#) See *White by Law* in which Ian Haney López explores the legal complexities of who could qualify as white in any given era, revealing the randomness of racial classification and legal precedent. Fundamental to this process, however, is the entitlement that being classified as white sanctions.

4. Ginia Bellafante in “Tan Is the New Black“ offers a concise reading of skin color as it intersects with class interests and whiteness.

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