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The Presence of *Gatsby* in the Absence of Towers—9/11 Literature and the American Dream

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In the nearly one hundred years since its publication, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* has invariably changed the landscape of American literature. With its poetic language and enduring themes, it is little wonder that the novel's structural elements have been reimagined in various literary projects. Intriguingly, Fitzgerald's work has lent itself especially well to the genre of 9/11 literature, particularly Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*. Despite their disparate temporal settings, the underlying economic framework that contributes to the historical context in which these 9/11 novels are situated makes the insertion of *Gatsby* not only more germane, but also more conducive to an expanded discourse on the relationship between financial success and the racial "other" as a literary trope and mode of characterization. With consideration to the conceptualization of the American Dream, the way in which *Gatsby* is re-envisioned and invoked in McCann's and O'Neill's works, it functions to critique the sustainability of the overarching narrative of American exceptionalism as well as the problematic positioning of immigrants and minorities within this narrative.

Understanding the American Dream and its centrality to the thematic design of these works requires an acknowledgment of the way in which it is intertwined with capitalism as the U.S. economic system of choice. While the idea of the American Dream is popularly tied to the nation's immigrant story, its theoretical underpinnings provide a less romantic view. Indeed, Ray E. Canterbery briefly outlines the historical circumstances under which this idea arose:

> During the Gilded Age (1870-1910), when cutthroat competition and unbridled capitalism led to the accumulation of wealth and capital in a few hands, a need arose to justify the excesses of the newly rich and their corrupt business practices. Thus emerged the "American Dream"—a blend of the Newtonian belief in a beneficent, finely tuned universe and the

> American versions of Calvinism and Puritanism, which condoned and encouraged the accumulation of wealth as a way of doing God's work. (297)

This establishes the connection between capitalism and the creation of the American Dream as well as the corruptibility of such a system. The overwhelming narrative about success in the U.S. that is disseminated, however, contributes to an erasure of this corruptibility—an erasure that *Let the Great World Spin* and *Netherland* reveal through their treatment of economic (and, not unrelatedly, racial) subordination.

Materiality is an equally significant factor that relates to the discussion of capitalism's essential role in the U.S. Peter Temin refers to the first volume of *The Cambridge History of Capitalism* when he states that one of the components of capitalism identified as being essential to the success of the economic system is "private property rights" (1003). While the issue of property and its ties to the American Dream are explicitly accessible in *Gatsby* with the extensive references to West and East Egg properties, it is more implicitly available in McCann's and O'Neill's texts. However, the immigrant status of each of the novels' Gatsby-esque figures subverts the ability of these prominent characters to achieve the same property and material wealth evidenced by Fitzgerald's Gatsby. Temin acknowledges a gap in the writings on capitalism, which further relates to the disparity between Gatsby on one end and the Gatsby-esque characters on the other; in large, this gap is a near erasure of the way in which slave labour was integral to the birth of U.S. capitalism (1011). The U.S. economy's growth and success owes itself to an enslaved workforce and this oppressed source of labour had—and, in many ways, has—no access to the very economy that it functioned to build. Though much research has suggested the probability that Gatsby is Jewish, the concept of "passing" makes this less obstructive to his attainment of material wealth.[1] The Black body, represented in both McCann's and O'Neill's books, becomes the literary realization of the ways in which race serves as the external mediating factor through which economic success is denied. This ultimately contributes to the perversion of one of the most tightly held narratives about the American Dream and, while Fitzgerald provides the initial criticism, McCann's and O'Neill's attention to the relative erasure of minorities and immigrants within the scope of economic success furthers that

[1]Just one of many examples, Michael Pekarofski writes that the "argument can be made that Gatsby is Jewish and that on many levels, this is really a novel about otherness, about passing" (57).

criticism. It is their work, overwhelmingly, that orients readers toward a new understanding of the American Dream.

Finally, it is of no little significance that the invocation of *Gatsby* occurs in these samples of 9/11 literature given the representative nature of their historical settings which, despite appearing in works of fiction, provides authentic snapshots of their respective national climates. The attacks on the World Trade Center hold heavy symbolic weight insomuch that the towers were the physical manifestation of U.S. capitalism; not only were the towers home to numerous corporations and firms, but their position in a New York landscape was also, arguably, the very heart of the twentieth-century American Dream makes their collapse wholly symbolic. In this sense, their absence from the national landscape exposes an absence of actualized economic success for a group of people who were previously hidden in the shadow of the towers' greater narrative. When the attacks on capitalism are read as a simultaneous attack on the American Dream (which is not such a conflation when considered through the lens of their aforementioned linkage), McCann's and O'Neill's literature as the site of *Gatsby*'s rebirth reveals the contemporary implications of the narrative's position in the U.S.

Though McCann's novel depicts the stories of multiple characters in the New York area, a single excerpt serves as the space in which *Gatsby* is reimagined. In a section titled "A Fear of Love," readers assume the narrative lens of Lara, a woman who, along with her partner Blaine, is traveling down the FDR when their car hits a van occupied by John Andrew Corrigan, a poor Irish immigrant, and Jazzlyn Henderson, a prostitute of minoritized racial distinction.[2] Corrigan and Jazzlyn are killed on impact, and, motivated by a selfish self-perseverance, Lara and Blaine flee the scene of the accident. While the incident itself occupies only a relatively brief part of the book, its symbolic meaning holds essential commentary on the status of the American Dream as a fading vision.

Ironically, the use of the FDR as the site of the accident and subsequent deaths mirrors the site of the hit-and-run accident that kills Myrtle Wilson in *Gatsby*. Both locations are in-between places—places that are neither here nor there, but rather only exist insomuch that they connect two geographic points of greater significance. The

[2]McCann writes, "She looked half Mexican, half black" (28). While Jazzlyn's racial identity is moderately ambiguous, she is still representative of the Black body within the context of this work.

vehicles, however, are necessarily deserving of closer analysis, since, as Jacqueline Lance states, "…the car itself further reflects each driver's socio-economic status" (26). McCann provides a description of Lara and Blaine's vehicle as a cared-for object, while Corrigan's van is an extension of the poverty he exhibits as a resident of a housing project in the Bronx. In this way, Lara and Blaine's car is also indicative of their socio-economic standing, which was predicated on the financial success Blaine garnered from making art films. Though the couple achieved relative success, it did not last long. Again, Lara's narration describes their socio-economic status, though this time it focuses on the downward spiral that followed the height of their achievement:

> We had … moved out of the city, kept our prize car—our only concession—and had lived without electricity, read books from another era, finished our painting in the style of the time, hid ourselves away, saw ourselves as reclusive, cutting edge, academic. At our core, even we knew we weren't being original. In Max's the night before—pumped up on ourselves—we had been stopped by the bouncers, who didn't recognize who we were. They wouldn't let us into the back room. A waitress pulled a curtain tight. She took pleasure in her refusal … Blaine bought a bag of coke from the bartender, the only one to compliment our work. (McCann 120)

While Lara and Blaine's economic failure cannot be read as a failure of the American Dream, per se, it does speak to its fleeting nature. Unlike the narrative in which the American Dream is painted as a static tangible achievement, Lara's recollection shows that sustaining the dream is never guaranteed. However, if Gatsby is considered the character manifestation of the corruptibility and unsustainability of the American Dream, Lara is not McCann's literary equivalent. Her position as the narrator through which events are recounted positions her more closely alongside *Gatsby*'s Nick.[3] This, then, leaves another possible reading for the reimagined character of Gatsby–Corrigan.[4]

[3]Lara, as the reimagined *Gatsby* narrator, differs from Nick in her emotional involvement. Though Nick appears to care for Gatsby, his guilt drives him to leave after Gatsby has been killed. On the other hand, Lara's guilt drives her to *insert* herself into the had-been lives of Corrigan and Jazzlyn in the aftermath of their deaths.

[4]The concept of Lara as a Gatsby-esque figure, though, will be returned to at a later point.

If the assertion that Gatsby is meant to be Jewish is taken as truth, and if this is further accepted as a depiction of his racial passing, then Corrigan is similarly positioned in McCann's text. As an Irish immigrant, Corrigan is simultaneously "othered"—indeed, the women who work the streets have a preoccupation with his accent—and granted a space in which, because of his whiteness, he is able to escape the racial burden that other minorities must shoulder. Moreover, while Gatsby's obsession with Daisy leads to the collapse of his American Dream, Corrigan's obsession with the world's pain disallows him any access to the American Dream. To be sure, he has no economic value within the context of the book.[5] Though the motivating emotions of both characters are the same, they work in disjunctive ways; Gatsby's vulnerability in regard to Daisy drives him to achieve wealth at any means possible while the vulnerability Corrigan has for the world's downtrodden drives him to shun wealth. In the end, these vulnerabilities, though enacted in different ways, reveal themselves to be the characters' undoing.

Jazzlyn, while not a Gatsby-esque figure in any traditional sense, serves as one of McCann's most poignant commentaries on the failure of the American Dream. Unlike Corrigan, whose whiteness precedes him and thus grants him the privilege of "passing," Jazzlyn has no such experience. Her body is the only viable source of income she has, so, following in the footsteps of her mother, Jazzlyn works as a prostitute. Her situation thus encompasses the corruption of the American Dream; though the serviceable Black body is the foundation upon which U.S. capitalism—and, by extension, the American Dream—is built, her only access to that economy is by perpetuating the serviceability of her body. It is the recognition of this reality that creates distance between *Let the Great World Spin* and *Gatsby*; the presence of the Black body is only marginally available in Fitzgerald's work while McCann overtly corrects this negligence in his own work.

The acknowledgment of Corrigan's and Jazzlyn's socio-economic status highlights a disturbing point that, in its own way, is also highly reminiscent of *Gatsby*: a lack of economic success becomes the justification for a lack of human compassion. Just as Myrtle's death is treated with little compassion— "…[t]he 'death car' as the newspapers called it, didn't stop: it came out of the gathering

[5]Interestingly, there is an arguable connection between this lack of economic viability and the earlier historical framework regarding oppressed labour. While certainly not oppressed in the way of slaves, the Irish suffered a tumultuous labour history in the U.S., suffering intense discrimination and widespread denial of employment.

darkness, wavered tragically for a moment, and then disappeared around the next bend" (Fitzgerald 137)—Corrigan's and Jazzlyn's deaths become the site for *Lara's and Blaine's* suffering and inconvenience. Indeed, the events directly following the moment of collision are described by Lara thusly:

> Blaine went around to check on the damage that was done to our car, the smashed headlight, the crumpled fender … and he let out a little groan of despair, and I knew it was for the car, and our unsold canvases, and what would happen to us shortly, and I said to him: Come on, let's go, quick, get in, Blaine, quick, get a move on. (McCann 118)

This provokes a troublesome question: would Lara and Blaine have left the scene of the accident if they had perceived greater economic worth from the people whom they hit? Here Lara abandons her initial position of objective narrator (a position similar to that of Nick) and moves with Blaine into a space of carelessness more evocative of Daisy and Gatsby: "The status of the upper class is at once gracious in its advantages and privileges but not worthy of aspiration and vision in its callous treatment of those below" (Canterbery 302). This is where Lara again can be read as a Gatsby-esque figure; she seeks only to protect herself and her partner, giving no consideration to the magnitude of the tragedy in which she has played a role. Unlike Fitzgerald's Gatsby, however, she is redeemable. She allows the guilt for her complicity in Corrigan's and Jazzlyn's deaths to steer her toward compassion. This indicates that the decline of the American Dream becomes utter failure at the exact moment when humaneness is abandoned—a concept substantiated by Gatsby's demise and Lara's redemption.

While an isolated section in *Let the Great World Spin* falls under the jurisdiction of a reimagined *Gatsby*, the entirety of *Netherland* has the markings of Fitzgerald's greatest work.[6] Hans van den Broek, a Dutch financier, relocates from London to New York for the purpose of work. It is here that he meets Chuck Ramkissoon, a Trinidadian whose greatest passions are cricket and America. In many ways, Hans fulfills the role of *Gatsby*'s Nick; not only does he provide narration that is reasonably removed from the emotional experience of

[6]In an interview conducted by Charlie Reilly, O'Neill states that "Netherland, of course, is a retrospective novel, and retrospection is inextricably linked to longing" (7). Even in the most general consideration of tone and narratorial orientation, *Netherland* echoes the style of *Gatsby*.

his subject[7], but his socio-economic status stands in contradistinction with Chuck's, highlighting the privilege—or lack thereof—that contributes to their disparate economic standings.

The race of these characters is not coincidental when discussing their socio-economic statuses. Chuck is wholly concerned with establishing his "Americanness," and it is through his sensitivity that readers are first made aware of the significance of the racial distinction that exists between himself and Hans. In a letter he writes to Hans, Chuck calls him "…a member of the first tribe of New York, excepting of course the Red Indians" (O'Neill 58). Chuck sees Hans's whiteness as something that he would like to emulate, which is the greatest irony: Hans is able to move between Europe and the U.S. and, despite having no particular predilection for being seen as "American," is able to automatically pass as such; Chuck, on the other hand, wants nothing more than to be seen as American yet must constantly struggle to establish and authenticate this identity.[8] This is best evidenced by the changing of his name from Khamraj to simply "Chuck." Michael Pekarofski writes that

> the Anglicizing (or "Americanizing") of ethnically or religiously identifiable names, either to simplify them or deliberately to mask their origins, was certainly not an uncommon practice for immigrants and subsequent generations, especially in a climate of intense anti-immigrant sentiment. (59)

The landscape of post-9/11 U.S. is an exemplification of the heights to which anti-immigrant sentiment can soar. Minorities, particularly those who originate from other countries, are often viewed as potential threats to a so-called American way of life. Chuck's changing of his first name, then, is understandable within this context; his name precedes him and so there is an intrinsic logic in adopting a more "American" name. However, the fact remains that Chuck can do nothing to change his racial distinction. It is this, more than anything else, that precludes him from achieving the American Dream, since his race determines his societal positioning and disallows him from accessing an American identity in the same way that Hans can.

[7]Benjamin Schreier observes that "[Nick is] both eyewitness and participant, at once disdainful and attracted" (164), the same can be said of Hans.

[8]As Hans recalls: "[Chuck] told his own story constantly, and the autobiography might succinctly, and clankingly, have been titled *Chuck Ramkissoon: Yank*" (O'Neill 133).

Because Chuck has limited access to traditionally accumulated economic success, he makes his money by way of involvement with an illicit gambling market. Placing this within a historical consideration of immigrant economic viability, Pekarofski writes that the production and distribution of liquor during the Prohibition was often the only gateway to financial success available to immigrants (54). He notes further, however, that this gateway remained narrow for many of the immigrants who pursued it (Pekarofski). While the time period that Pekarofski refers to is not the same as the one in which Chuck exists, the description is nevertheless helpful in explaining his involvement with an unsavory racketeer.[9] Given the ways in which American nativism affects immigrant employment opportunities, gambling grants Chuck the quickest access to the kind of wealth he associates with the achievement of Americanness.

In addition to his involvement with racketeering, Chuck harbors a hope that he will be able to achieve the American Dream by launching a cricket club. The unfortunate irony in his choice of sport is that it has little chance of providing him with the success he so desperately seeks. In explaining the history of cricket's rise and decline in the U.S., Jeffrey Hill asserts, "…cricket remained strongly associated with immigrant groups who played the game partly to maintain their ethnic identity" (221). Though cricket, in many ways, is similar to baseball—and, as Hill states, was equally well-positioned to become the nation's preferred sport—the connotation it has taken on in regards to racial "others" has made it unlikely, if not impossible, for Chuck's goal to be anything more than a pipedream. Moreover, the element of class, which is not removed from race, becomes significant within the context of American sports since, according to Robert Johnson, Jr., "…within our class system, a particular sport may become identified with a particular economic status" (32). Considering the immigrant association to cricket through the lens of economic status (as described by Pekarofski), the sport then takes on a lower economic valuation by virtue of its racial identification.

The use of cricket as the novel's chosen sport also implies the corruptibility of the American Dream, particularly when considered alongside *Gatsby*. Fitzgerald's work, while not overtly focused on sports, does mention baseball with the underlying purpose of showing the violability of an athletic activity with significant ties to the

[9]Incidentally, *Netherland*'s racketeer Mike Abelsky is not only Jewish like *Gatsby*'s racketeer Meyer Wolfsheim, but they are also described in similarly unflattering ways.

economy. Much to Nick's shock and horror, Gatsby reveals that his associate Wolfsheim was responsible for fixing the 1919 World Series. Johnson makes the argument that "…in choosing a sport symbolically to comment on the state of the American Dream, Fitzgerald knew that baseball could reach more people" (35). The way in which baseball is deeply integrated into the American identity makes its corruptibility a source of piercing commentary—one that illuminates the fact that the narratives held most dear by the U.S. are not exempt from exploitation. The use of cricket, then, in *Netherland* is especially telling; not only does Chuck's racketeering involvement insinuate corruption that can be applied to his involvement with cricket—and, by extension, the American Dream he associates with it—but the use of a sport that does not garner much popular national recognition is symbolic of the way that the present failure of the American Dream often goes unacknowledged in the shadow of more idealistic narratives. Just as Chuck's choice to promote cricket as a new national pastime has little basis in reality, the achievement of the American Dream also has little basis in reality for many people.

Though there is not a character who is necessarily meant to be the reimagination of Daisy, the symbolic meaning she holds is clearly present. At one point, Hans finds himself in a graveyard with Chuck and notices that he is, most unwittingly, standing on a gravestone engraved with the name Daisy. Here, it is necessary to look past the idea of Daisy as an individual and recognize what she represents for Gatsby: she is the actualization of his American Dream, the very "object" that would validate all of his accumulated wealth.[10] The absence of a physical Daisy-like character is a morose indication that there is no possibility for Chuck to actualize his American Dream. Moreover, the fact that he unwittingly stands on the gravestone engraved with her name is evidence that not only are his dreams unachievable, but he, unlike Hans and the readers, has no awareness of the reality that he faces. O'Neill's interview with Charlie Reilly reveals the overarching commentary of this plot element: "We're living in a globalized world, and as a consequence, the American Dream narrative which is commonly attributed to *Gatsby* simply doesn't work as a current premise" (13). This globalized world that O'Neill refers to, unlike the era of Prohibition, uniquely characterizes the era of 9/11 and post-9/11 America. Thus, the reimagination of

[10]Fitzgerald substantiates the representative nature that Daisy comes to embody, writing: "There must have been a moment even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion. It had gone beyond her, beyond everything" (95).

Fitzgerald's criticisms of the American Dream functions best when placed within literature that occupies this temporal landscape.

In an intriguing narrative inversion, the ending of *Gatsby* becomes the beginning of *Netherland*. Indeed, O'Neill's work essentially opens with the moment in which Hans is informed of Chuck's death, whereas Fitzgerald ends his work with Nick's discovery of Gatsby's death.[11] However, their overarching sentiments about human nature are hauntingly similar. The manner in which *Gatsby* closes is one of the most recognizably poetic moments in the novel:

> 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—to-morrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther…And one fine morning——
>
> So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.
>
> (Fitzgerald 180)

This passage, simultaneously hopeful and poignant, suggests that current and past events—political, economic, social, and racial—become the mediating force against which the hope of the future must necessarily struggle. O'Neill opens his novel in a similar way, "You might say, if you're the type prone to general observations, that New York City insists on memory's repetitive mower—on the sort of purposeful postmortem that has the effect, so one is told and forlornly hopes, of cutting the grassy part to manageable proportions" (4). In a like manner, this passage suggests that individuals must constantly struggle to make past and present moments manageable. This ties well into an idea that Kirk Curnutt articulates thusly: "As much as a symbol of endurance, the image of the boat borne ceaselessly into the past is one of *stasis*" (90; emphasis in original). The idea extends to the metaphor of the mower as well, allowing *Netherland* to join *Gatsby* in this revelation of stasis. Despite Gatsby's and Chuck's best efforts their economic situations are never permanently improved though there are few moments of perceived upward mobility. This need within the economic contexts of the novels to subject the focal characters to a

[11]That both deaths occur in or near water—Gatsby in his pool and Chuck in the Gowanus Canal—holds symbolic reference to baptism. There are two possible readings for this symbolism which are elucidated by the remainder of the paragraph: on one hand, this might indicate that, despite the authors' critiques of the American Dream, any hopes of the rebirth of its sustainability rest in the tireless optimism of those who pursue it; on the other hand, this may be irony in its finest form, indicating that any possibility for the rebirth of its sustainability is already dead.

financial equilibrium (what goes up must come down) is the most telling sign that the American Dream cannot be sustained—or, at least, not in the way that the mythologized narrative of American exceptionalism envisions.

The brilliance of 9/11 literature such as *Let the Great World Spin* and *Netherland* to invoke *Gatsby* is not simply the linguistic expertise with which the corresponding themes are expressed, but also the way in which these novels become the site to reimagine and reconstruct the classic novel. Race becomes the basis for the "othering" of the newly conceived Gatsbys, an act which functions to bridge a blatant gap that exists in the original work: "[Carlyle Van] 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" (Schreier 159). This anxiety, then, is addressed not only by casting the post-9/11 Gatsby characters as immigrants, but also by inserting the Black body—and the economic implications of that body—into the foreground of the novels. When the American Dream is considered with regards to the experiences of minority community the luster it once held as an unequivocal truth is irrevocably tarnished.

In many ways, this is even more apparent in the modern U.S. economic climate. Wage gaps and the shrinkage of the middle class—both exacerbated by the element of race—have called into question the applicability of the American Dream that now exists largely in a mythologized state. By assuming Fitzgerald's criticism of the American Dream and reimagining it in a contemporary space, McCann and O'Neill categorically reject previous literary erasures and minimizations of the unique immigrant struggle to equitably access economic success. Interpreting the collapse of the World Trade Center as the collapse of an assumptive American Dream, the modern reimaginations of Gatsby project themselves onto the very space of absence. Accordingly, the way in which *Gatsby* translates so smoothly into the realm of a post-9/11 literary landscapeis almost uncanny; indeed, Roger L. Pearson contends that "[t]he American dream is not to be a reality, in that it no longer exists, except in the minds of men like Gatsby, whom it destroys in their espousal and relentless pursuit of it" (645). With all the theoretical nuances stripped away, this is the reality that remains: the American Dream is unachievable for many and unsustainable for countless more. It is a nativist myth that justifies American exceptionalism, and its economic erasure of minorities and immigrants within the larger narrative is demonstrative of the

problematic way in which this fable operates to perpetuate class differences.

What remains to be investigated, then, is whether the critical assessment of an achievable and sustainable American Dream as the vehicle by which these authors ultimately achieve *their* American Dreams is contradictory to the overarching integrity of the works and their respective commentaries.

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