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Does Money Indeed Buy Happiness?

“The Forms of Capital” in Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* and Watts’ *No One is Coming to Save Us*

A Thesis by

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Orange, CA

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2019

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May 2019

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ABSTRACT

Does Money Indeed Buy Happiness?

“The Forms of Capital” in Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* and Watts’ *No One is Coming to Save Us*

by Allie Harrison Vernon

Looking primarily at two critically acclaimed texts that concern themselves with American citizenship—F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and Stephanie Powell Watts’ *No One is Coming to Save Us*—I analyze the claims made about citizenship identities, rights, and consequential access to said rights. I ask, how do these narratives about citizenship sustain, create, or re-envision American myth? Similarly, how do the narratives interact with the dominant culture at large? Do any of these texts achieve oppositional value, and/or modify the complex hegemonic structure? I use Pierre Bourdieu’s “The Forms of Capital” to investigate the ways in which economic, cultural, and social capital are distributed amongst identity groups of citizens, focusing on its favorable distribution to white upper-class men. Interesting, too, is the way in which these texts relate with one another and evolve over time. As Fitzgerald reaffirms boundary rights to white upper-class social capital to longstanding wealthy white males, Watts celebrates the survival of black individuals through the hard-earned persistence of human connection. Ultimately, as *Gatsby* fails to repeat the past, Watts succeeds in rewriting it.

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Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Stephanie Powell Watts' *No One Is Coming to Save Us* (2017) have more in common than their shared rudimentary plot line. Although one could argue that the two texts are in many ways antithetical to one another, both grapple with concepts of American citizenship, identity, and consequential access to rights. What makes a citizen? How does one become American? Likewise, does citizenship guarantee access to the American Dream? Moreover, Fitzgerald and Watts consider the relationship between American identity and the socio-economic system. Reaching vastly different conclusions, both texts ask, what are citizens allowed to want? Further, what laws—often unwritten and unspoken—govern the distribution of the fulfillment of American desire? Using Pierre Bourdieu's "The Forms of Capital," I look at the ways in which these two texts question, police, represent, and shape the allocation of what appears to be a limited supply of goods, both tangible and intangible commodities. All the while, a pervasive and upsetting notion looms near, one that I think was equally present and distressing to Fitzgerald and Watts; namely, that all the good things in life—even and especially the ethereal goods like family, a home, peace, romantic love—are dependent upon purchase in the form of economic capital.

Part One

Fitzgerald Defines “American:” Cultural and Social Capital in *The Great Gatsby*

“I am still a little afraid of missing something if I forget that, as my father snobbishly suggested, and I snobbishly repeat, a sense of the fundamental decencies is parceled out unequally at birth.”

-Nick Carraway, *The Great Gatsby*

(2)

Critics have long considered Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* to be a text concerned with the American Dream. However, there is debate regarding the particular vision of American identity and values that the novel advocates. Edwin Fussell, in “Fitzgerald’s Brave New World” (1952), was among the first to argue that *The Great Gatsby* illuminates the “corruption” of the American dream in industrial America, or, in other words, the destructive quality of a dream which invests in the quest for vanity (youth and beauty) and money (“it is the romantic assumption of this aspect of the ‘American dream’ that all the magic of the world can be had for money”) as means of fulfillment (292). Indeed, Fussell notes that the two goals are “so intimately related as to be for all practical purposes one: the appearance of eternal youth and beauty centers [in *The Great Gatsby* on] a particular social class whose glamor is made possible by social inequality and inequity. Beauty, the presumed object of aesthetic contemplation, is commercialized, love is bought and sold.” As a result, while Fussell affirms Gatsby’s “capacity for wonder,” he insists that Gatsby is ultimately spoiled “by values and attitudes that he holds in common with the society that destroys him” (295). Ross Posnock, in “‘A New World, Material Without Being Real’: Fitzgerald’s Critique of Capitalism in *The Great Gatsby*” (1984)

concurr, adding that “the doomed character of Gatsby’s quest” inheres in his paradoxical drive to transcend his class position and “the distortions of capitalist social reality” by way of using the “most mystifying commodity of all—money” (210). Both Fussell and Posnock describe the dream in terms of Gatsby’s quest for romantic wonder and love, youth and beauty, and see the demise of that dream in terms of its comingling with the materialistic aims and social inequalities wrought by consumer capitalism. Jeffery Lewis Decker, however, calls attention to another aspect of the novel’s “nationalist vision,” highlighting its investment in contemporary nativist ideologies. He concludes that Nick’s narration echoed the common white fear of the immigrant in the 1920s, and more specifically, fear of the foreigners’ desire to become American (263).

Does *The Great Gatsby* simultaneously find fault in the American dream of prosperity and consumerism as a means to fulfillment and also promote narrow versions of American identity? Fitzgerald’s disdain for the emerging culture of excess, which seems to include lavish parties, exorbitant drinking, unmarried sex, unabashed consumerism in mass-produced goods, and infidelity, is made most apparent in the plot’s reliance upon unintended consequences; first, in the blasé retelling of Owl Eyes’ car accident, and later, in Jay Gatsby’s climactic murder by Mr. Wilson. Yet, perhaps more important to Fitzgerald’s critique is his careful construction of distinctions—Nick versus Myrtle, Daisy versus Myrtle, Nick versus Tom, Tom versus Myrtle, Nick versus Gatsby’s party guests, Nick versus “three modish negroes,” Nick versus Wolfsheim, Daisy versus Gatsby, Tom versus Gatsby, Nick versus Daisy, and last, Nick versus Gatsby. Overall, in his constant juxtaposition of his narrator Nick—whom I will argue stands in as a representation of upper-class white tradition, or what I refer to as “white purity”—and

other various characters—who act as representations of “the other” or “the fallen”—Fitzgerald ultimately suggests that his greatest issue with the progressing capitalist market is not solely “money’s dehumanizing effects” and the reification of social relationships, as Posnock argues, but, as anticipated by Decker, his fear of “the other/the fallen’s” accessibility to cultural, and potentially, social power.

In order to scaffold my argument, I use Pierre Bourdieu’s theory “The Forms of Capital.” In his description of the less readily quantifiable capital—social and cultural—he notes, “Priceless things have their price, and the extreme difficulty of converting certain practices and certain objects into money is only due to the fact that this conversion is refused in the very intention that produces them, which is nothing other than the denial of the economy” (242, 243). Thus, he sets off in his efforts to “establish the laws whereby different types of capital (or power, which amounts to the same thing) change into one another.” Dealing first with cultural capital, defined as “convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and [which] may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications,” Bourdieu names three possible forms: the embodied state, the objectified state, and the institutionalized state (243). The embodied state, “the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body,” also referred to as “culture” or “cultivation”; the objectified state, “the form of cultural goods... which are the trace of realization of theories or critiques of these theories” and which require access to embodied cultural capital; and the institutionalized state, “the objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications” all work in relationship with one another to create, maintain, and alter complex networks of social capital (243, 244, 248). Bourdieu then defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources

which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit" (249).

White Purity: Nick as Distinct Embodiment of Cultural Capital

According to Bourdieu, cultural capital exists within the embodied state similar to "the acquisition of a muscular physique." Culture is attained in a "process of embodiment, incorporation, which, insofar as it implies a labor of inculcation and assimilation, costs time" (244). An individual's attainment of cultural capital relies heavily upon personal effort and sacrifice, "the length of acquisition," access to wealth and time to attain cultural capital (in education, health, etc.), and the economic freedom to do so without the need to actively participate in the labor market for economic survival. Moreover, Bourdieu explicates, because the embodied state of cultural capital becomes an essential part of an individual, it cannot be transmitted immediately, but is often subject to "a hereditary transmission which is always heavily disguised." That is, cultural capital is passed along from generation to generation, in a similar but more subtle process than the inheritance of family wealth. More importantly, the possession of cultural capital is often acknowledged as "legitimate competence," and therefore "derives a scarcity value from its position in the distribution of cultural capital and yields profits of distinction for its owner" (245).

Nick Carraway opens his narration of *The Great Gatsby* by first providing an overview of his portfolio of cultural and social capital. He begins by describing his family as "prominent, well-to-do people in this Middle Western city for three

generations,” “something of a clan,” who are supposedly descended from “the Dukes of Buccleuch,” but, more importantly, are founded by a man so wealthy that he was able to send a substitute to the Civil War in his place so he could focus on his wholesale hardware business, which still remains in the family. Nick claims to look like this great-uncle, thus further naturalizing the process of the transmission of cultural capital by making it appear to be a direct familial inheritance. In a similar way, Nick mentions his own morality, passed along by the influence of his father, by recalling that he and his family possess more “fundamental decencies...parceled out unequally at birth” than others. Accordingly, he continually reminds his reader that his possession of such capital and others’ lack is hereditary and therefore fixed. “I am part of that,” Nick states, in reflection of his upbringing in “his” Middle West compared to his time in the East, “a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a family’s name.” Subsequently, Nick’s inclusion of other white individuals who possess embodied cultural capital within his delineation of distinction further illuminates his acceptance of genetically transmitted, embodied cultural capital, and the more obvious social capital networks, such as the Yale senior society. Nick remarks, “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” (Fitzgerald 176). The use of the word “deficiency” is misleading, however; immediately following, Nick relates the East to a painting by El Greco—he describes a neighborhood of “a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque” where “four solemn men in dress suits” carry a stretcher which holds “a drunken woman in a white evening dress.” He

portrays her hand dangling over the side of the stretcher, sparkling “cold with jewels.” The woman is returned to a random home, not her own, because, as Nick reflects, “no one cares.” Here, a woman’s white purity, made evident by Nick’s mention of her “white evening dress,” is corrupted by the promiscuity and lavishness of city life, and as she is overcome by it, she is unable to return home, or return to tradition. Nick understands that the East presents a threat to those who are in possession of cultural and social capital—in this context, the white Westerners who originate from wealth and inherited conventions.

Nick further separates himself from Daisy, Tom, Jordan, and Gatsby, those with whom he shares social capital, or the social membership and privilege of upper-class whiteness. He promotes this distinction by the repetitive highlighting of several traits that he deems innate: honesty, temperance, religiosity, and adherence to tradition. To begin, Nick, although financed by his father, lives modestly in “a weather-beaten cardboard bungalow for eight a month” that is juxtaposed to Gatsby’s extravagant mansion; he chastises Tom’s “freedom with money” as a “matter of reproach”; writes that he “has been drunk just twice in my [his] life”; desires to leave Myrtle’s loud wild gathering and “walk eastward toward the Park in the soft twilight”; feels “ill at ease” at Gatsby’s elaborate parties due to the lack of formality and social rules, which he compares to “the rules of behavior associated with an amusement park”; dresses simply in comparison to the “gaudy” fashion of the day; and ultimately remarks that he is “within and without [the cosmopolis], simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (3, 6, 29, 35, 41, 40). Likewise, Nick’s distinction is evident in his relationship with Jordan Baker. Chastising Jordan for what he considers her lack of care while driving, Fitzgerald suggests that Nick sees Jordan’s driving as a metaphor for the way that she

chooses to live her life outside of conventional feminine norms, manifested in his comments regarding her “hard, jaunty body,” and “inability to endure being at a disadvantage” (58). With religious undertones, he concludes that due to “interior rules that act as brakes on my [his] desires,” he cannot openly love Jordan until he stops writing letters to another woman. He writes, “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known” (59). In his self-proclamation, he separates himself from Daisy, Tom, Jordan, and Gatsby, all of whom he deems dishonest or immoral at least once in the novel.

Following Nick’s description of the East as always possessing “a quality of distortion,” even before Gatsby’s death, he pronounces the East as “haunted,” “distorted beyond my [his] eyes’ power of correction” (176). Here, Fitzgerald’s Carraway notes that that East, although exciting, is dangerous and potentially resistant to his authority. The question arises, what specifically about the East is threatening to Nick, and in consequence, the current socio-economic “laws” in place, which govern the attainment of cultural and social capital, laws that create the appearance of genetic, white purity (Bourdieu 243)?

There is of course the constant difficulty of whether Nick functions as a mouthpiece for Fitzgerald, or if Nick is, as Scott Donaldson argues in “The Trouble with Nick,” Fitzgerald’s “greatest technical achievement in the novel,” a “narrative voice at once ‘within and without’ the action” (98). On the one hand, I see the irony of Nick’s judgmental observations as a reflexive tool used to prompt social critique on the part of the reader—as Donaldson writes, “One does not have to like Nick Carraway to discover something about oneself in the tale he tells” (106). However, equally true at times is

Fitzgerald's condemnation of class-based "sin" by the plot of the novel, not merely Nick's observations of that plot. It is my conservative conclusion that Fitzgerald, like his contemporaries, was wrestling with his own assumptions about class, gender, race, and American access to cultural and social capital, and consequently, perhaps *The Great Gatsby* can be understood as a self-conscious examination of his own prejudices.

The Other: The Inferior Product and Its Necessary Part in the Preservation of White Social Capital

In his outline of social capital, Bourdieu defines the maintenance of membership within a social group. He discusses the "alchemy of consecration," or "the symbolic constitution produced by social institution...and endlessly reproduced in and through the exchange (of gifts, words, women, etc.) which it encourages and which presupposes and produces mutual knowledge and recognition." Just as important to this process is the reaffirmation of the limits of the social group, or "the limits beyond which the constitutive exchange—trade, commensality, or marriage—cannot take place" (250). Here, we notice that the value of social capital, or the cultural value of membership within a certain social group, which is often converted to economic capital, is derived from distinction—the exclusion of an "other" who is deemed inferior. To put it another way, social capital cannot exist without the compulsory result of competition: the construction and perpetuation of a loser.

As a "custodian of the limits of the group," Nick defines his own value in opposition to those who are not white upper-class males who behave according to hegemonic principles—most often, the Lower Class, the Woman, the Jew, and the Black Man (Bourdieu 250).

A caveat is worth mentioning. Tom is a clear benefactor of white upper-class cultural and social capital, yet Nick condemns Tom's brash ways. Although Fitzgerald insinuates that Nick's disdain is of moral quality, I suggest that his disapproval has more to do with his fear of change in regards to the social and cultural capital system. In *Gender, Race, and Mourning in American Modernism*, Greg Forter theorizes that recognizing the economic transformation toward the end of the nineteenth century from free-competition capitalism to monopoly capitalism, Fitzgerald (and Nick) acknowledges and mourns the loss of 19th century masculinity, defined by Forter as "a masculinity that combined aggressiveness and competitive vigor with the gentler, more 'feminine' qualities of self-restraint, moral compassion, and the cultivation of interior values" (26). As the job market provided less opportunities for "self-making," more white men became dependent upon their employers for identity and livelihood and thus experienced emasculation. This emasculation was further exasperated by the increasing autonomy of women. In response, a new form of masculinity arose, one that was "unambiguously hard, aggressive, physically dominant, potent," which Tom undoubtedly represents (Forter 26). His "cruel body" and straining "pack of muscle" provides him "enormous leverage" and power, and likewise necessitates his victimization of others (Fitzgerald 7). It can be argued that nearly all of Fitzgerald's characters are in some way subject to Tom's rule, and more metaphorically, this new form of ruling-class masculinity: Daisy's identity is limited to the emptiness of objectified beauty; Myrtle is perpetually less-than, disposable, and abused on various fronts; George is cuckolded and dehumanized; Gatsby is inferior competition, the equivalent of a Mom-and-Pop diner up against the goliath McDonald's. Forter reasons that these characters are the consequence of an exploitative

economy, which he describes as “a more *systemic* anatomy of beauty, vitality, gender, and class, which links these figures to Tom in a structurally mediated fashion” (29). Within this economy, the “objects” of highest value—feminine beauty and this new model of violent masculinity—are monopolized by men like Tom and made unavailable to those who are not white male members of the upper class. Taking great pains to differentiate himself from men like Tom, Nick sits in moral judgment of the severity of Tom’s masculinity and, at times, even acknowledges the value of Gatsby’s more “feminine” qualities, such as his “receptivity, lyrical interiority, a belief in the colossal power of desire, [and] the possibility of economic and imaginative self-making,” qualities that can be ascribed to earlier 19th century concepts of masculinity (Forster 26). Similarly, although Nick remains obedient to the confines of the socio-economic system, which protects many of his own interests as a white upper-class male, he also displays moments of desire to experience relationships and conduct himself freely outside of his own social group, similar to Tom’s behavior with Myrtle. For example, as Scott Donaldson argues, in addition to admiring Gatsby’s “extraordinary gift for hope” and his “romantic readiness,” so too does Nick reveal his “wanting loneliness,” his yearning for imaginary “sumptuous and romantic apartments” in the “valley of ashes,” and his hunger for affairs with the romantic women of Fifth Avenue he picked out from the crowd as long as “no one would ever know or disapprove” (Fitzgerald 2, 56, 25, 56). Donaldson concludes that “Nick is too proper, too emotionally cautious, to bring his fantasies about strangers to life: who would introduce them?” (104). Here Donaldson suggests that Nick’s self-policing is a result of good manners or a method of emotional self-preservation. Yet, I’d like to propose that perhaps the stakes are even greater. Tom’s lack of social restraint, a

byproduct of this new masculinity, creates further opportunity for class mixing. Along the same lines, his general cruelty and unhidden affair with Myrtle eventually provides Daisy with the ammunition to engage romantically with Gatsby. Thus, it's reasonable to conclude that Nick finds Tom's impudence threatening to the social system as a whole, and more importantly, upper-class white men's monopolized access to cultural and social capital.

The Lower Class

Nick's first mention of the lower class occurs immediately after he summarizes his portfolio of cultural and social capital, and then provides an example of this capital in scene by recounting a dinner with Daisy, Tom, and Jordan. In contrast to the Buchanan's "cheerful red-and-white Georgian Colonial mansion, overlooking the bay" clad with "French windows, glowing...with reflected gold and wide open to the warm windy afternoon," Nick describes Myrtle's neighborhood as a "desolate area of land" and a "valley of ashes" (6, 23). In his depiction of lower-class men, he uses disparaging language devoid of life, such as "ash-gray men," and "men who move dimly" (23). More specifically, upon his first impression of Wilson, he writes that he was a "spiritless man" with a shop empty of customers, and he characterizes Myrtle as a woman who "carried her surplus flesh sensuously as some women can" and whose face "contained no facet or gleam of beauty, but there was an immediately perceptible vitality about her as if the nerves of her body were continually smouldering" (25). Through the use of religious language, which emasculates Wilson by describing him as lacking in the Christian-prized quality of male leadership over the household, financial provision, and spiritual life, and his representation of Myrtle as temptress, coupled with the God-like surveying presence

of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, Nick connects lower class life to sloth and hyper-sexuality. Later, on the way to Tom and Myrtle's city apartment, Nick remarks, "We drove over to Fifth Avenue, so warm and soft, almost pastoral, on the summer Sunday afternoon that I wouldn't have been surprised to see a great flock of white sheep turn the corner" (28). He creates a not so subtle connection between Fifth Avenue—which signifies wealth and whiteness—and religious purity. Sandwiched narratively between two upper-class spaces—the dinner party and Fifth Avenue—the "valley of ashes" is further separated as a dissimilar space lacking the symbolic quality of white purity attributed to the dinner party and Fifth Avenue. Nick's value, or his embodied white purity, is created in opposition to this manifestation of the lower class represented by the "valley of ashes."

Moreover, Fitzgerald further separates Nick from the lower class as "other" in his characterization of Myrtle, Catherine, and Mr. McKee. Myrtle, once alluring, becomes "more violently affected moment by moment," "revolving on a noisy, creaking pivot through the smoky air" (31). He disdainfully assesses the small apartment, describing the living room as "crowded to the doors with a set of tapestried furniture entirely too large," as well as a poorly executed "over-enlarged photograph," old copies of what appears to be a gossip magazine called "*Town Tattle*," "small scandal magazines of Broadway," and a "terrible" novel, "*Simon Called Peter*." (29). While speaking to Mrs. McKee, she lists items she plans to purchase: "A massage and a wave, and a collar for the dog, one of those cute little ash-trays where you touch a spring, and a wreath with a black silk bow for mother's grave that'll last all summer" (36). Here, Myrtle, like Gatsby, serves as a symbol of a woman fallen prey to what Posnock defines as "the most mystifying fantastic commodity of all," money (203). Furthermore, Myrtle's inferiority is shaped both by her

unfashionable taste in and unmannered public cataloging of consumer goods, or in Bourdieu's words, her lack of cultural capital in the objectified state. In Bourdieu's *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, he further discusses the ways in which individual taste in consumer goods reflects the embodied process of cultural capital. "Consumption [of art]," he writes, "is...a stage in a process of communication...an act of deciphering, decoding, which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cipher or code." This "code" is only decipherable by those who, in family life, education, or circles of relationships, have been taught the cultural competency necessary to decipher it. This "socially recognized hierarchy of the arts" corresponds to the "social hierarchy of the consumers" ("Introduction" 1). The choices one makes in all consumer goods reflect upon the taste of the consumer. "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (6). In Nick's critique of Myrtle's furniture, décor, reading choices, and desired purchases, he is classified as a member of the "nobility" (in its American approximation), while Myrtle is classified as common (2). Thus, in her purchase of "those cute little ash-trays," Myrtle imprisons herself in "the valley of ashes." Catherine also, according to Nick's assessment, is a "worldly girl" who has failed to make herself beautiful with her severely plucked eyebrows, "powdered milky white" complexion, and "innumerable pottery bracelets," and like Myrtle, she speaks shrilly (30). Mr. McKee, the photographer of the painting that Nick demeans, is a "pale, feminine man" with shaving cream still on his cheek—a social faux pas that functions as evidence of his lack of embodied capital, and which worries Nick all afternoon until he finally wipes it away with his handkerchief.

Similar to the way in which Myrtle improperly consumes commodities, demonstrating her lack of cultural capital, the abuse of alcohol is an act associated with the lower class and deemed threatening to both Tom and Nick as white upper-class men. (As a side note, similar alcohol abuse occurs at Gatsby's parties among the upper class, and Nick likewise finds this problematic for the preservation of white upper-class capital.) As Myrtle's bohemian gathering progresses, Tom drinks more whisky to combat his boredom with the attendees' conversation, evident in his audible yawning, and he eventually reaches a drunken rage, which results in a violent physical outburst against Myrtle. Nick indicates that Tom's social capital is at risk in his association with the wider party attendees, and more specifically, Myrtle herself as a lower class woman, as violence and indecency could have the potential to threaten his public character and therefore his social capital. Nick, too, in succumbing to drinking contrary to his "nature," is nearly or actually involved in a homosexual relationship with Mr. McKee, conspicuous in his vague and time-warped retelling of a suggestive bedroom scene, which is a breach against the hegemonic norms of his upbringing. Here, the reader is reminded of Nick's disapproving observations of Tom's financial habits. If Tom were to squander his money away irresponsibly, he would threaten the Buchanan legacy, and therefore the entire network of white wealthy men with whom he shares social capital.

The Woman

Nick generally distances himself from women, both in his detached relationship with Jordan Baker and his measured fascination with Daisy, which enables his easy objectification of them as "objects of selfish wish fulfillment" made compliant by his romantic gaze (Person 252). This mythic gaze is most palpable in the game he liked to

play while walking along Fifth Avenue. After picking out “romantic women from the crowd” and imagining entering “into their lives” with no one knowing or disapproving, he adds, “sometimes, in my mind, I followed them to their apartments on the corners of hidden streets, and they turned and smiled back at me before they faded through a door into warm darkness” (56). Nick, in his use of female characters as archetypes, plot tools, and scenery, succumbs to the limited portrayal of women as “other.”

To begin, Daisy, as the most prominent female figure, functions as a symbol of both purity and seduction. In her female purity, she is an airy, white beauty, charismatic, socially graceful, and a victim of Tom’s “cruel body” and brute masculinity, as well as Gatsby’s inviting but unrealistic promises (7). Simultaneously, she relentlessly seduces—Nick, Tom, Gatsby, other women—with her “absurd, charming little laugh” and the “kind of voice that the ear follows up and down, as if each speech is an arrangement of notes that will never be played again” (9). In fact, Daisy’s seduction, used as a plot tool, contributes to Gatsby’s pursuit of cultural and social capital outside of the economic system’s conventions—both legally-stated conventions and conventions decoded by Bourdieu. She is likewise used as a tool to highlight Nick’s morality, as Nick is needed to forgive, “without resentment,” her murder of Myrtle as merely a consequence of her carelessness and her abandonment of Gatsby as justified and “natural” behavior (179, 145). Moreover, as Decker suggests, Daisy also functions as a “gendered sign for the mythological American continent.” As a representation of “white girlhood,” her pure beauty and fragility tempts men to romantically exploit her, similar to the way in which the American frontier “is seductive not in spite but because of its exploitability”

(Fitzgerald 24, Posnock 268). As such, Daisy is further reduced to a male-conjured concept of conquest.

In her objectification, Daisy functions as the “object par excellence” of Gatsby’s desires, held just out of reach by the socio-economic system (Posnock 206). Similar to Gatsby’s emotional response to the fading of symbolic value of the green light at the end of the dock, Gatsby’s sexualized commodification of Daisy ends in “gloom” (209). Upon his romantic reunion with Daisy, Gatsby “becomes his possessions” as he displays his fine shirts. His ecstatic show-and-tell develops into a near sexual act meant to arouse Daisy. However, the intensity of the act, or the sexual climax, results in both a “soft rich heap” of shirts as well as Gatsby’s flaccidity. So too is Daisy’s symbolic value stripped away. Daisy, or Gatsby’s commodification of Daisy, is no longer available; equally as important, the actual possession of the symbolic—Gatsby’s fantasy of Daisy—was never truly available to Gatsby to begin with. In the same vein, influenced by capitalist market trends, Gatsby’s valuing of Daisy increases as a result of competition—as other men, including Tom, find her worthy of “purchase.” Posnock discusses this phenomenon: “The transformation of reality into symbol defines the condition of commodity fetishism—the passionate chase after symbolic representations of other men’s desires” (207). Thus, Nick, and arguably Fitzgerald, uses Daisy as a narrative tool to provide Gatsby an additional motivation for pursuing cultural, social, and economic capital.

Yet, even if Gatsby were able to class jump his way to the top floor where Daisy resides, waiting for purchase, he would not be able to possess her. Female beauty is always a desired object, but never attainable. Forter describes this phenomenon in his analysis of Daisy’s voice, which he depicts as “beautiful inasmuch as it promises a

possession it cannot but betray.” This betrayal is caused by her voice’s “insubstantiality of vocal utterances, which can neither be seen or physically possessed,” “the lack of signifiatory content to Daisy’s speech,” and the “ephemeral character of vocal expression” which “ensures its immediate evaporation.” Like the way in which commodities cultivate buyer desire for complete and total fulfillment while at the same time denying that desire by cultivating a similar desire in the heart of the buyer for new commodities, the commodifying process renders Daisy’s voice an object that cannot be permanently retained. Forter concludes, “Daisy’s beauty, in other words, *may* have been recently possessed, and *may* be again soon, *but it isn’t by definition possessed now*. Satisfaction resides in an irrecoverable past or a perpetually deferred future; the present becomes a temporal affliction defined by the metaphysical unavailability of an object that is by definition lost.” Even Daisy’s own husband, a man of the uppermost class with the greatest access to her as a “highly rarefied, immaterial” object that upon purchase serves as evidence of his class privilege, is unable to truly possess her (Forter 37). One might conclude that Nick is condemning the capitalist system at hand. Perhaps Daisy’s confined state serves as a critique of the commodification of women. To the contrary, Nick ascribes the responsibility of Daisy’s existence as a perpetual tease to both Gatsby and Daisy herself. Gatsby is responsible for his inability to possess Daisy because he is unable to compete effectively with Tom, but as Forter argues, Fitzgerald “rewrites Gatsby’s failure to re(possess) her” as consequence of Daisy’s own moral failure, as evidenced by Fitzgerald’s choice to have her drive the car that kills Myrtle. As Forter notes, “she is unpossessable because [she is] unable to live up to the magnitude of Gatsby’s vision of her” (37). Daisy is careless and thus just as guilty as Tom for the

destruction of Myrtle and George's lives. Nick warns his reader that the emergence of consumer capitalism is a threat to Nick's class position, and consequently white upper-class capital. Like Gatsby's efforts to consume Daisy, Gatsby's purchase of an automobile, the popular 1920s commodity and ultimate signifier of social mobility, inflicts destruction. In the wrong hands, consumer goods can be "monstrous" (64).

The Jew

Nick understands Meyer Wolfsheim to be a "small, flat-nosed Jew" with a "large head," "tiny eyes," and "two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril" (69). Upon his first introduction, Nick connects Wolfsheim's glance toward the ceiling, which depicted "Presbyterian nymphs," and his comment, "'This is a nice restaurant here... But I like across the street better,'" as a confirmation that Wolfsheim exists in opposition to Christian identity (70). With his repeated references to Wolfsheim's nostrils and nose, and his scornful observation of Wolfsheim's eating habits, social missteps (such as his pronouncing "Oxford" as "Oggsford" or "connection" as "gonnegtion"), and Wolfsheim's abandonment of Gatsby after Gatsby's death, Nick associates the Jew as caricature with immorality and incivility, successfully raising his own status in competition with the Jewish "other" (71).

However, the Jew as caricature operates as more than an anti-Semitic device; instead, Fitzgerald writes Wolfsheim as a derogatory prototype of immigrant identity at large. As a result, Nick, the "custodian of the limits of the group," and his negative interpretation of Wolfsheim effectively dictate that all immigrants unable to appropriately assimilate must remain "other-ed" (250). In this "othering" of one ethnoreligious group, Nick suggests that all unassimilated immigrants pose a threat to white upper-class capital.

Bourdieu, as he interprets the guiding principles used by a social group in order to protect their stake in social capital and guard against potential threats, clarifies Nick's logic. He writes, "Through the introduction of new members into a family, a clan, or a club, the whole definition of the group, i.e., its fines, its boundaries, and its identity, is put at stake, exposed to redefinition, alteration, adulteration" (250). Indeed, as Decker addresses, Nick's aim was not at odds with the general atmosphere of the early 1920s. Racial prejudice by white Anglo-Saxon supremacists, wearing the name of Nordicism, was widely publicized in *The Saturday Evening Post* (a publication for which Fitzgerald often wrote), and later intensified with the dramatic influx of foreign labor and the economic meltdown of the Great Depression. Notions of whiteness narrowed as the rhetoric claimed that Americans must combat affronts to the mythologized origins of American settlement (Nordicists claimed the continent had been discovered by northern Europeans) as well as promoted the phenomena that the "most objectionable classes of the 'new' immigration are rapidly breaking down American institutions and honorable business methods" (Burr qtd. in Decker 266). Consequently, the Immigration Act of 1924 was passed, mandating a decrease in immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe to the United States (United States). As Clinton Stoddard Burr proclaimed in his 1922 book, *America's Race Heritage*, "Americanism is actually the racial thought of the Nordic race" (qtd. in Decker 262).

Fitzgerald's exclusion of Jews and thus immigrants who were not of Nordic descent is achieved largely due to his use of a prominent aspect of Wolfsheim's characterization and Nick's disapproval: Wolfsheim's connection with crime. As a seedy member of New York's underworld, Wolfsheim is associated with bootlegging alcohol

during Prohibition, gambling, wearing human molars for cufflinks, witnessing the murder of Rosy Rosenthal, and according to Gatsby, fixing the 1919 World Series. It is this last great crime that upsets Nick the most. “It never occurred to me,” Nick writes, “that one man could...play with the faith of fifty million people—with the single-mindedness of a burglar blowing a safe” (73). In Fitzgerald’s use of Wolfsheim’s manipulation of the annual baseball tournament result, Wolfsheim is transformed into a criminal of unimaginable proportions—to upset the “faith” of white Americans in sport is to undermine not only the American idealization of sport, but also, the idealization of America itself. Arnold Rothstein, the man who inspired Fitzgerald’s Wolfsheim character, was accused of fixing the 1919 World Series but was declared innocent in court. Following the famous Jew’s release while eight baseball players remained on trial, the public was in uproar. Demanding dramatic restructuring of the baseball business, journalists insisted on the hiring of a “baseball commissioner with totalitarian power.” In Michael Alexander’s *Jazz Age Jews*, he cites Asinof, the gambler supposedly partially responsible for the fixing of the Series, stating that the search for commissioner was run “like a Presidential nominating committee list for the Republican party.” The owners settled on Judge Landis of the U.S. District Court in Chicago. In his address of the American people, he mused over a propeller in his office from an airplane his son flew in France. ““Baseball is something more than a game to the American boy. It *is* his training field for life work. Destroy his faith in its squareness and honesty and you have destroyed something more; you have planted suspicion in his heart.”” Alluding to the threat of enemy danger by mentioning the propeller, Landis raises the stakes, implying the threat of “a foreign power...at work against the American ideals of ‘squareness and honesty.’”

Moreover, Landis suggests that upsetting the American myth of the sacredness of baseball threatens the American's belief in the capitalist system of labor, and likewise, the socio-economic laws of economic, cultural, and social capital. If a boy cannot rely on the "squareness" of baseball, immune from the threatening influence of seedy outside powers such as Jewish gamblers, how could he feel secure about his own social place in the American socio-economy?

The Black Man

Although Nick clearly others Eastern European immigrants in his determination to solidify social economic power lines, when confronted with black presence, his narration reveals that although he might permit a few limited opportunities for intra-white brotherhood—such as with Michaelis—he is adamant regarding the exclusion of African Americans from access to social and cultural capital. Even more, Fitzgerald's writing of black presence and lack thereof communicates a deep and pervasive anxiety regarding the potentiality of black power.

Returning to Nordicism and its influence on Fitzgerald, Decker notes that included within the myth of America's origins is the unwavering elimination of African slaves from the nativist narrative. He writes that this was not a "mere oversight," and instead, "is symptomatic of how black/white difference was enforced through racial segregation during the Twenties." Fitzgerald, consciously or unconsciously, places Nick in a white New York—a New York that did not actually exist. The novel is set during the infamous Jazz Age, the musical movement set in motion by the Harlem Renaissance, making New York the "mecca of black American politics and culture" (263). By omitting this New York, Fitzgerald displays his anxiety regarding his urgent need not to see that

which causes him shame. Applying Mitchell Breitwieser's argument regarding Fitzgerald's characterization of the "valley of ashes" in *The Great Gatsby: Grief, Jazz, and the Eye-Witness* to Fitzgerald's suppression of black presence, "we skulk in order not to see, and therefore not to have to know that we can be seen as the authors of this mess" (22). Fitzgerald preserves the nativist view of the American citizen as a white body, and therefore, sees the body as an anchor of identity. In the same way, whiteness acts as one aspect of cultural capital embodiment, and Fitzgerald, like Nick, as a narrative "custodian of the limits of the group," strives anxiously to redefine, through narrative, a color boundary that was already growing obscure in the 1920s. In his appropriation of black culture and disregard of black characters, reflective of the pervasive "mass cultural appropriation" of jazz music in the 1920s that "tended to neutralize jazz performance" for a white audience, Fitzgerald achieves the "ubiquitous power of racial segregation" (Breitwieser 56, Decker 263). Similar to 1920s white musician Paul Whiteman's determination to take and "clean" Afro-American jazz, Fitzgerald seeks to colonize black culture. Or, in Bourdieu's words, through the "alchemy of consecration" of whiteness, Fitzgerald denies black men and women the theoretical right to white upper-class social capital (Bourdieu 250).

When black characters are present, Nick's observations are enlightening. For example, while riding along the Queensboro Bridge in Gatsby's car, from the window Nick comments upon the promise of the city "rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money." In his use of "white" as well as "sugar lumps," Nick signifies the exploitable fertility of the city, its "wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world" (68). Through his gaze, we see a

passing funeral hearse, the passengers, deemed “friends” by Nick, looking out the window through “tragic eyes and short upper lips of southeastern Europe.” As we can always count on Nick’s narrative judgments, he comments, “I was glad that the sight of Gatsby’s splendid car was included in their somber holiday.” In this moment, right before an interaction with black presence, Nick extends intra-white brotherhood to the passing mourners by wishing to lighten their grief. Yet, crossing Blackwell’s island, he watches “three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl” pass by in a limousine driven by a white chauffeur. “I laughed aloud,” he writes, “as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry.” Here, Fitzgerald calls upon a ready history of blackface minstrelsy as he stereotypes black men and women as the “happy darkies aping white ways;” however, perhaps his mention of “rivalry” is more noteworthy. In black access to economic capital, Nick muses, “Anything can happen now that we’ve slid over this bridge.” Although separated by the car door barriers and the physical space of the road, the sharing of commodities (such as a limousine and white driver) threatens the insulation of white upper-class social capital and power in way that is new and terrifying to Nick. Nick continues, “Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder” (69). Just as Tom attacks Gatsby’s origins, which are “colored” by his intimacy with Wolfsheim and immigrant crime, in the Plaza Hotel scene, so too does Nick draw parallels between Gatsby and the black passengers’ economic success. Gatsby, like the “three modish negroes,” becomes dangerous as he attempts to disarm the instituted limits of cultural and social capital. Fitzgerald confines the three black characters, characters who are “aspirant outsiders,” to the car, which provides Nick the power to “perceive the minority group as meat, as animals, as eggs [in reference to ‘yolks of their eyeballs’], as jokes, as energy, as

anything but subjects” (Breitwieser 47, 49). His ability to see the black characters as “anything but subjects” relies upon the “brevity of the glimpse-in-passing” (Breitwieser 51).

Yet, the presence of the “pale well-dressed negro” as witness to Myrtle’s murder is especially telling of Fitzgerald’s fear of black access to economic, cultural, and social capital. As Tom, Nick, and Jordan pass Wilson’s garage, they see a crowd gathering around Myrtle’s body. In the commotion, a witness steps forward, the “pale well-dressed negro,” who claims to have seen a big yellow car “going faster’n forty. Going fifty. Sixty” (139). The cop asks the witness for his name, but the narration continues, and we never learn anything more about the witness. As Breitwieser writes, the black witness is “pure narrative cog,” “an outsider getting in, or at least enjoying for a time the illusion that such is possible” (43-44). The narrative silence begs the question, why include a black witness to begin with? Because black presence is such an anomaly in Fitzgerald’s narration, the reader is left to “wonder about him [the witness] at the same time that Fitzgerald condemns us [the reader] to speculation” (Breitwieser 44). In the “abstemiousness of [the witness’s] characterization,” the witness becomes unavoidable, “enormous, pervasive, abstract, everywhere,” and his gaze carries “haunting magnitude” (54). Fitzgerald is unable to posit the witness’s gaze nor his identity because “he has never known the witness” (Breitwieser 52). This character has the power to upend the lives of the principal characters, even if—or perhaps especially if—he acts as a truthful witness to white upper-class violence. So too, in the witness’s staggering absence, Fitzgerald’s anxiety regarding the foreignness of black personhood comes to be—the fears one is unable to name are often the most threatening.

The Fallen: Gatsby's Oscillating Membership within White Purity

It is Nick's distinction, even from those with whom he shares social capital, which defines him as more than merely a typical "custodian" of the social group (250). Instead, he becomes what Bourdieu calls the "*pater familias*," or the head preserver and incorporator of white upper-class purity. In this role, "diffuse delegation requires the great [Nick] to step forward and defend the collective honor when the honor of the weakest members is threatened" (251). When necessary, this patriarchal figure is capable of lessening the degree of consequence for an individual who has shirked his required conformity to the hegemony of the social group. Gatsby, although white and in possession of economic capital, did not derive from roots of white familial wealth and class. Because cultural capital relies upon a subtle process of incorporation that demands enduring economic capital, time, relationships, and education, thus developing a "habitus" in the individual, Gatsby is unable to instantaneously purchase the cultural capital he so desires, and is thus deemed deficient in the social market (Bourdieu 245). Therefore, as Gatsby exists as a precarious member of white purity, at times, Nick, as *pater familias*, defends Gatsby's inadequacies in his effort to integrate him into the social group. For example, following Myrtle's murder, Daisy leaves with Tom, whom Gatsby fears will hurt Daisy. Gatsby remains vigilantly awake, waiting for Daisy's call. Nick stalls, missing train after train, in order to be with Gatsby. Eventually, he heads toward his own home for the night, calling across the lawn, "'They're a rotten crowd...you're worth the whole damn bunch put together.'" Musing on the quality of his comment, Nick writes, "I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him,

because I disapproved of him from the beginning to end” (154). Finally, following Gatsby’s murder, Nick remains to plan the funeral and handle the affairs as “the only one on Gatsby’s side,” “alone.” “I was responsible,” Nick writes, “because no one else was interested” (164). Consequently, Fitzgerald suggests that Nick, as the *pater familias*, makes his last effort to include Gatsby by using his own social and cultural power to provide Gatsby with attendees at a conventional funeral.

However, because Gatsby does not benefit from the security of hereditary embodied cultural capital derived from an upbringing of white upper-class wealth, Nick oscillates between defending Gatsby and reminding Gatsby and the reader that he falls outside of the social group. Nick, acknowledging the weighty responsibilities of the *pater familias* to avoid group exposure to potential “redefinition, alteration, adulteration” caused by the introduction of a new member, protects the interests of white upper-class social capital by delegitimizing Gatsby’s social progress (Bourdieu 250). Carraway often represents Gatsby’s lack of conformity by calling attention to his “fallen” behavior, signified in his characterization as Criminal, Adulterer, Glutton, and Liar. Often, this “fallen” behavior is in some way threatening to the insulation of Nick’s social group.

Gatsby as Criminal

Introducing the reader to Gatsby at the start of his narrative, Nick writes, “Gatsby turned out all right in the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporality closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (2). Nick defines this “foul dust” as unabated consumerism—evidenced by Gatsby’s lavish home, car, and purchases. Yet, as the novel progresses, we see this “foul dust” take shape as something entirely different: Gatsby’s

understanding of the American myth as a myth that asserts that the desire for upward movement, the pursuit of one's own happiness in wealth and social mobility, is a desire that will be awarded in America. That is, if one wants it badly enough, one can attain cultural and social capital. In "Fitzgerald's Brave New World," Edwin Fussell puts it this way: "It is the romantic assumption of this aspect of the 'American Dream' that all the magic of the world can be had for money" (292). However, Nick does not find that this dangerous confusion possesses any real power for Gatsby until he is given access to money through crime, access that Nick most readily associates with Meyer Wolfsheim.

Gatsby is first associated with Wolfsheim by Gatsby's own naïve admission when he invites Nick to lunch with Wolfsheim. Later, Gatsby, noting that Nick doesn't make much money and in his attempt to pay Nick back for his help with Daisy, even suggests that Nick be involved in his "little business" on the side, a "rather confidential sort of thing." After Nick's refusal, Gatsby's response is significant. "You wouldn't have to do any business with Wolfsheim," he says. Here, Gatsby uncovers Nick's earlier discomfort with Wolfsheim, and allows him a method of making money without his influence. However, referred to by Nick as a conversation that could have been "one of the crises of my [his] life," Nick's continued rejection of Gatsby's business partnership makes known the consequence of Gatsby's relationship with immigrant crime (82-83). Gatsby's social capital is permanently fouled. Comparing his own work to that of Gatsby's, Nick draws distinctions that further support his disapproval of Gatsby's immigrant partnerships. Describing his office's neighborhood as "white chasms," noting that he "knew the other clerks and young bond-salesmen by their first names," and adding that he had "dinner usually at the Yale Club," Nick delineates his own working life as one of purity, white

upper-class familial connection, and transparency, contrary to the depiction of Gatsby's work, which includes suspicious phone calls at unconventional times, reference to dealings in the "oil business" which would call to mind the 1922 Teapot Dome Scandal to a Fitzgerald-era reader, and ill-mannered conversation with immigrant company (90, 56). Finally, after Gatsby's death, Nick discovers that Gatsby's real last name is the potentially Jewish "Gatz," and thus could indicate Fitzgerald's efforts to symbolically connect Gatsby with the seedy immigrant community.

By connecting Gatsby's (partial) fall from Nick's graces with the "tainted hand of immigrant gangsters," Fitzgerald advances a "story of entrepreneurial corruption, accented by the language of nativism" (Decker 260). This nativist tint is inseparable from Fitzgerald's work, as it is Gatsby's connection with the unsavory immigrant underworld that "jeopardizes both the purity of his white identity and the ethics of his entrepreneurial uplift" (265). Thus, Nick, as *pater familias* of white upper-class social capital, helps contain the latent power of the American myth.

Gatsby as Adulterer

Although Nick demonstrates moments of sympathy for Gatsby's preoccupation with Daisy (Nick does share a similar sense of wonder regarding Daisy's charm), overwhelmingly, his narration depicts Gatsby as Daisy's exploiter. First, Fitzgerald portrays Daisy as childlike, pure, and cultured; hence, in a sense, all sexual male relationships jeopardize her innocence. However, the unrestraint of West Egg culture possesses extraordinary power to pollute Daisy's purity. Nick makes this judgment upon his attendance at another of Gatsby's parties, late into the summer. Attempting to see the atmosphere through Daisy's eyes for the first time, he feels an "unpleasantness in the air,

a pervading harshness that hadn't been there before" (104). He concludes that other than the voyeuristic worth of the gathering, the atmosphere had nothing to offer to Daisy:

The rest [of the atmosphere] offended her [Daisy]—and inarguably, because it wasn't a gesture but an emotion. She was appalled by West Egg, this unprecedented 'place' that Broadway had begotten upon a Long Island fishing village—appalled by its raw vigor that chafed under the old euphemisms and by the too obtrusive fate that herded its inhabitants along a short-cut from nothing to nothing. She saw something awful in the very simplicity she failed to understand. (107)

In his description of West Egg culture from Daisy's perspective, one is reminded of Bourdieu's explanation of taste derived by class. He argues that the "detachment of the pure gaze" is made possible only by the "product of conditioning by negative economic necessities—a life of ease that tends to induce an active distance from necessity" ("Introduction" 5). As Daisy possesses this "detachment of the pure gaze" through her upper-class upbringing, she is unable to participate fully in the "simplicity" of the party (107). Bourdieu writes, "The denial of lower, coarse, vulgar, venal, servile—in a word, natural—enjoyment, which constitutes the sacred sphere of culture, implies an affirmation of the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane" (7). In Fitzgerald's critique of the party through Daisy's upper-class feminine gaze, Nick and Daisy are set apart as possessing legitimate social differences than those around them. Here, too, Nick is perhaps most explicit regarding the primary issue with Daisy and Gatsby's romance—that Daisy, the angelic symbol of traditional "white girlhood" and

upper-class wealth, cannot marry below her class, or as Bourdieu writes, cannot pass beyond the “limits of the group,” or she negatively affects the solidity of her class. Likewise, as Daisy functions most as an object or symbol, she also must remain an object of “exchange” within the social group. As the social group is maintained through the “alchemy of *consecration*,” or “the symbolic constitution produced by social institution and endlessly reproduced in and through exchange (of gifts, words, women, etc.),” Daisy can only be “given,” presumably by Nick’s authority as the authorial *pater familias*, to another accepted member of the group (250).

With that said, Gatsby especially, as a member outside of Daisy’s social sphere, is depicted as particularly dangerous; so dangerous, in fact, that his eventual corruption (although not lasting) of Daisy results in Myrtle’s murder (a murder for which Nick does not hold Daisy responsible, though she was the one driving the car). To begin, Bourdieu describes a game of roulette, “which holds the opportunity of winning a lot of money in a short space of time, and therefore changing one’s social status quasi-instantaneously, and in which the winning of the previous spin of the wheel can be staked and lost at every new spin,” as an accurate symbol of the myth of (American) capitalism, or, as he defines it, the “imaginary universe of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity, a world without inertia...accumulation...hereditary or acquired properties, in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one...so that at each moment anyone can become anything” (241). Fitzgerald, adhering to similar circular logic, assures his readers that Gatsby’s efforts to gain cultural and social capital outside of his class indeed confirm that he, from a young age, had hereditary embodied deficiencies that in turn determined his inability to gain access to cultural and social capital. In Nick’s biography

of Gatsby, meant to appear to the reader as the most accurate account of Gatsby's life, he mentions that Gatsby "knew women early, and since they spoiled him he became contemptuous of them, of young virgins because they were ignorant, of the others because they were hysterical about things which in his overwhelming self-absorption he took for granted" (98). As a result, Gatsby is to be understood as a naturalized philanderer, taught by youthful experience and lower-class upbringing that women, including virgins, were to be treated without paternal care for their fragility and/or virtue. Similarly, as Nick connects Gatsby's interest in Daisy to his interest in social climbing, we come to see Gatsby's love interest as "added to the pattern of his fancies" or "a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing" (99). Consequently, when Daisy finally arrives at Nick's house and receives the tour of Gatsby's mansion, effectively reemerging into Gatsby's life after five committed years of Gatsby's pining, Nick comments, "There must have been moments even that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault, but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion...No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" (95-96). Though at times he enters into a romantic view of Gatsby's vision of Daisy, Nick also appears to understand Gatsby's interest in Daisy as a symbolic means to an end, the end being the fulfillment of his elaborate dream of attaining cultural and social capital. Therefore, his "extraordinary gift for hope" and "romantic readiness," is somewhat devalued, understood as selfish ambition instead of romance in the purest sense.

Gatsby's corruption of Daisy is represented gradually, becoming more apparent at the start of their rekindled love affair. After their awkward reunion at Nick's home, Daisy

softens, evidently emotional from their private conversation. Immediately following her departure to the restroom, Gatsby demands that Nick compliment his home. He replies, “It took me just three years to earn the money that bought it,” to which Nick responds, “I thought you inherited your money” (90). Gatsby attempts to cover up his faux pas and reminds Nick of his business proposition. At this moment, the reader is confronted with Gatsby’s criminal identity, as well as the destructive potential his criminality has on Nick’s social class. As a result, Gatsby is characterized as criminal in proximity to his impending affair with Daisy. As the night progresses, Nick watches the two lovers settle from the sexual climax of the shirt scene, remarking, “As I watched him he adjusted himself a little, visibly.” Gatsby’s indecorum is twofold, as not only does he adjust himself visibly, but he also forgets to wish Nick farewell. Nick notes, however, that although Daisy is lost in the romantic moment as well, her embodied capital remains distinct from Gatsby’s deficiency, as she does glance at Nick and hold out her hand politely to say goodbye (96). At times, Gatsby’s lack of conventional manners is connected to a threat of violence, evident in Mr. and Mrs. Sloane and Tom’s visit to Gatsby’s home. Gatsby’s social discomfort, at first merely awkward, mounts in severity when he confronts Tom with the declaration, “I know your wife” in a tone described by Nick as “almost aggressively [aggressive]” (102). Upon their abrupt departure, Mrs. Sloane extends a cordial but possibly flirtatious invite to Gatsby. Nick writes, “Gatsby looked at me questionably. He wanted to go, and he didn’t see that Mr. Sloane had determined he shouldn’t” (103). Gatsby, looking to Nick as *pater familias* for his approval of his attendance, does not realize or does not care that Mr. Sloane is uncomfortable with Gatsby’s socialization with his wife. Aside, Tom says, “My God, I

believe the man's coming...Doesn't he know she doesn't want him?" Although there is no indication that Mrs. Sloane does not want Gatsby to come to dinner, Tom, mentioning Daisy's connection with Gatsby and feeling threatened by adultery in his own marriage, is appalled by Gatsby's presumed disrespect for marriage, and in turn, the Family unit. Facilitating their quick exit while Gatsby hurries off to get his car, Nick supports Tom and Mr. Sloane abandoning Gatsby. Ultimately, Gatsby's threat against the Family unit—a crucial aspect of institutionalized social capital—becomes the greatest consequence in his temporary corruption of Daisy (Bourdieu 249). Nick and Fitzgerald's concern regarding this threat is demonstrated in Daisy's developing "vulgarity," evidenced in her imprudent actions, such as kissing Gatsby as Tom leaves the room, and in her mounting carelessness, shown in her "I don't care!" reply to Jordan's reproach, her visual communication of love for Gatsby in front of Tom, and eventually, in her accidental murder of Myrtle (116-17, 119).

Gatsby as Liar

Posnock paints Gatsby as a "figure at once exalted and impoverished, utterly rare and embarrassingly derivative," both "'gorgeous' in his 'heightened sensitivity' and 'romantic readiness,' and pitifully empty, less a man than an 'advertisement'" (202). Nick, too, at various points in the novel, fixates upon Gatsby's interest in self-marketing. First, Nick acknowledges that Gatsby's mysterious past and discreet presence at his own parties increases his "market demand." Rumored to be a "nephew or cousin of Kaiser Wilhelm's," "a bootlegger," a murderer, a "nephew to Von Hindenburg," "second cousin to the devil," a gambler, a "gentleman," a "German spy," "in the American army during the war," and a "regular Belasco," Gatsby is essentially advertised through the stories of

others, thus exponentially furthering his appeal (32, 61, 5, 44, 45). Later, Nick writes that Gatsby was in fact aware of the “bizarre accusations that flavored conversation in his halls” (65). Moreover, upon their first encounter, Nick fixes his attention on the false but absorbing quality of Gatsby’s speech, manner, and most especially, smile. At first, he notices little more than his smile. He notes that it was “one of those rare smiles with a quality of eternal reassurance in it.” As he continues his analysis, he provides qualifiers, informed by his later judgments, on the authenticity of his smile. He writes, “It faced—or seemed to face—the whole external world for an instant, and then concentrated on *you* with an irresistible prejudice in your favor.” As if losing its mythical quality, he adds, “Precisely at that point [the point at which the smile believed in the best impression of the viewer] it vanished—and I was looking at an elegant young roughneck, a year or two over thirty, whose elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd.” So, it is not until Nick is demystified by the charisma of Gatsby’s smile that he references the dishonesty of his posturing, adding that he had a “strong sense that he was picking his words with care,” and that his “familiar expression held no more familiarity than the hand which reassuringly brushed my [his] shoulder” (48, 53). Watching him closely in order to decipher his unease, Nick writes, “he could see nothing sinister about him,” yet that perhaps his sobriety in the face of the increasing “fraternal hilarity” set him apart from his guests. In this comment, Nick assumes that Gatsby, as the provider of alcohol and a rambunctious environment, acquires a certain amount of social power in his sobriety. Nevertheless, at the end of the night, ashamed of his demonstration of a lack of manners, or embodied capital, for staying so late, he says “goodnight” to Gatsby. Upon his reply, Gatsby smiles, and Nick reports that “suddenly there seemed to be a pleasant significance

in having been among the last to go” (53). In this scene, Fitzgerald communicates that Gatsby’s magnetism holds dangerous potential to influence social power dynamics.

Gatsby’s own “verbal narration of his life is made empty by lies, clichés, and sentimentality” (Posnock 205). After talking with Gatsby “perhaps six times,” Nick finds that to his disappointment, Gatsby “had little to say.” He adds, “my first impression, that he was a person of some undefined consequence, had gradually faded and he had become simply the proprietor of an elaborate road-house next door” (64). However, during their first “disconcerting ride,” Gatsby “began leaving his elegant sentences unfinished,” and asks Nick pointblank what he thinks of him. Swearing to tell “God’s truth,” Gatsby shares a faulty autobiography, claiming to be the son of “some wealthy people in the Middle West—all dead now,” to be “educated at Oxford, because all my [his] ancestors have been educated there for many years,” and to have “lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe—Paris, Venice, Rome—collecting jewels...hunting big game, [and] painting a little” (65-66). During this speech, Nick comments that Gatsby “looked at him sideways—and I knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying,” “hurried the phrase ‘educated at Oxford,’ or swallowed it, or choked on it,” and that Nick began to wonder if “there wasn’t something a little sinister about him, after all” (65). Following Gatsby’s death, Nick’s concern for Gatsby’s validity is established. Discovering a young Gatsby’s schedule by the hand of his mourning father, Nick uncovers the superficiality of Gatsby’s interests. Containing a list of physical activities, including “dumbbell exercises” as well as “practice elocution, poise and how to attain it,” Nick concludes that from the beginning, Gatsby’s efforts were calculated steps in attaining cultural and social capital. Fussell concludes that “the greatest irony in Gatsby’s tragedy is his belief that he can buy

his dream, which is, precisely, to recapture the past” (299). By mimicking traits of those who possessed embodied cultural capital, coupled with making money, Gatsby believes that he can rewrite his past as an upper-class past.

However, it’s crucial to add that Nick’s disapproval of Gatsby’s questionable self-promotion relies on more than merely the act of lying; it is the specific lies that Gatsby tells that distresses Nick. For example, following Myrtle’s murder, “‘Jay Gatsby’ had broken up like glass against Tom’s hard malice, and the long secret extravaganza was played out.” Gatsby told Nick that Daisy was the “first ‘nice’ girl he had even known,” he was amazed that Daisy lived in such a “beautiful house,” he “knew that he was in Daisy’s house by a colossal accident” because he was “at present a penniless young man without a past,” but that regardless, “he took what he could get, ravenously and unscrupulously—even eventually he took Daisy one still October night, took her because he had not real right to touch her hand.” Nick concludes that Gatsby “had certainly taken her [Daisy] under false pretenses” and that “he had deliberately given Daisy a sense of security; he let her believe that he was a person from much of the same stratum of herself—that he was fully able to take care of her” (148-9). Additionally, Gatsby lies more explicitly regarding his past. He claims to have grown up in the “Middle West,” the region Nick claims ownership of. Nick presses him, asking which city, to which Gatsby responds, “San Francisco” (65). Here, Fitzgerald confirms Nick’s suspicions, and consequently encourages the reader to reach similar additional conclusions—that perhaps there *is* something sinister about lying about one’s birthplace. However, one must ask, what sort of consequence does this lie permit? Dishonesty regarding one’s upbringing, socio-economic background, education, and travelling experiences does indeed create

opportunity for that individual to fool others into thinking that he possesses cultural and social capital that he should not be privy to, and therefore, denies the rules of the current social economic system in a way which is equivalent to fraud and reminiscent of Wolfsheim's manipulation of the 1919 World Series. This is perhaps exactly Fitzgerald's concern regarding Gatsby's false advertising, not primarily its connection with a Marxist critique on capitalism. In his comment regarding Gatsby's upbringing, Nick confirms this conclusion. He writes, "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" (49).

Gatsby as Glutton

Although Nick disapproves of Gatsby's self-promotion, as Posnock argues, "if speech is precarious, an unstable means of creating the self, objects acquire unmerited but impeccable authority" (Posnock 205). Fitzgerald's novel demonstrates moments of "concern with the power of money upon human relationships," most evident in Nick's disapproval of what Marx calls "commodity fetishism" (201). As objects become more real than individuals, "things, not human beings, seem to possess a nearly magical power of legitimation" (205). As a product of his time, coming to maturity during a period of violent postwar change, Fitzgerald's apparent distaste for the "cold, materialistic culture of commerce" that "permeated the United States during Coolidge Prosperity" is reasonable (Miller 206). However, what specifically about objects becoming more legitimate than human beings is upsetting to Fitzgerald, and what does this determine as his most prominent concern regarding capitalism?

As the owner of a mansion described as a “colossal affair by any standard,” driver of an extravagant automobile called “swollen” and “monstrous,” consumer of an abundance of “beautiful” shirts, gold brushes, silks, suits, gowns, and ties, and host of elaborate parties, Gatsby is held liable by Nick for the creation and promotion of a culture of excess (64, 92). Although at the onset of his narration, Nick ironically claims that he is “inclined to reserve all judgments,” his pejorative recitation of Gatsby’s consumption makes his disapproval obvious (1). Foremost, he accounts in detail Gatsby’s preparations for one of his typical parties. He catalogues the “eight servants, including an extra gardener” toiling all day every Monday “with mops and scrubbing-brushes and hammer and harden-sheers, repairing the ravages of the night before,” the “five crates of oranges and lemons arrived from a fruiterer in New York—every Monday these same oranges and lemons left his back door in a pyramid of pulp-less halves,” the juicing machine that “could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler’s thumb,” and the “corps of caterers” carrying “several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby’s enormous garden” (39, 40). By highlighting waste—the unnecessary labor of eight servants, a butler, the fruiterer, and caterers, the “pulp-less halves” of fruit, the “hundred feet of canvas,” and the electricity needed to light Gatsby’s garden—Nick critiques Gatsby’s consumption of commodities, including laborers, as capitalism “forces the worker himself to become a thing to be bought and used” (Posnock 203).

Continuing his recitation, Nick relates the atmosphere of Gatsby’s parties. He describes the public spaces in Gatsby’s private home as “gaudy with primary colors,” the partygoers as having “hair shorn in strange new ways,” and “shawls beyond the dreams

of Castile,” and the bar in “full swing.” Similarly, he writes that the air was “alive with chatter and laughter,” “casual innuendo,” “introductions forgotten on the spot,” and “enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other’s names” (40). In his construction of a flamboyant atmosphere, Gatsby becomes a potential leader within a new social group—a group formed within the sensational walls of his “imitation” mansion, a group which conducts itself according to a new set of collective behaviors (5). “They conducted themselves according to the rules of behavior associated with an amusement park,” he writes. “Sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all” (41). Of course, Nick differentiates himself from the group, clarifying, “People were not invited—they went there,” but that he in fact had been invited. Here, Nick presents the party attendees’ lack of embodied capital in comparison to his own, thus directing that the social rules of his own upper-class whiteness reign superior. As Nick notes later in his sketch of the attendee list, some guests naturally did not possess embodied cultural capital, while others were caught up in the atmosphere of the party, figuratively checking their embodied capital at the door. In his efforts to provide his reader with a “better impression than my [his] generalities of those who accepted Gatsby’s hospitality and paid him the subtle tribute of knowing nothing whatever about him,” he lists guests with special attention to both location of origin, behavior, and class (61). From East Egg, he acknowledges “Bunsem, whom I [he] knew at Yale,” “the Chrysties (or rather Hubert Auerbach and Mr. Chrystie’s wife),” and Clarence Endive, who came “in white knickerbockers, and had a fight with a bum named Etty in the garden.” From “farther out on the garden came” Ripley Snells, who “was there for three days before he went to the penitentiary, so drunk on the gravel drive that Mrs. Ulysses

Swett's automobile ran over his right hand." From West Egg, "the less fashionable of the two" neighborhoods, Nick mentions various Jewish names, such as "Don S. Schwartze," as well as "G. Earl Muldoon, brother to that Muldoon who afterward strangled his wife," "Da Fontano the promoter," and groups that came to gamble. He also notes that many of the guests were "connected with the movies in one way or another" (5, 62). Last, he mentions "Miss Claudia Hip," whom attends the party with a "man reputed to be her chauffeur," suggesting class mixing and potentially interracial dating (63). In his list, Nick calls attention to the mixing of people of different races, religions, behaviors (including adultery, criminality, and drunkenness), business affiliations (which in turn suggest class distinctions), and ultimately, socio-economic backgrounds. One might commend Gatsby for this accomplishment; however, as Nordicist Charles W. Gold writes in his 1922 text, *America: A Family Matter*, "Tear from the phrase the softening metaphor and we recognize 'melting pot' in its true, it's unpleasant form—miscegenation'" (149-50). Although Nick does not support Nordicism explicitly, in his judgment toward the fraternization of the lower and upper class in addition to different races, and their perceived behavioral discrepancies, he makes his disapproval known. Following his description of a near fatal car accident occurring just outside of Gatsby's party and involving a drunken party guest, Nick describes Gatsby's home: "A sudden emptiness seemed to flow from the windows and the great doors, endowing with complete isolation the figure of the host, who stood on the porch, his hand up in a formal gesture of farewell" (55). In this isolation of Gatsby in "sudden emptiness," Fitzgerald mandates the consequences of Gatsby's gluttony: in his efforts to construct and lead his

own social group outside of the current socio- economic system, he effectively achieves his own “othering.”

Concluding Thoughts

Posnock is correct to assume that because it ““confounds and exchanges everything,”” as Marx writes, money unleashes “moral, emotional, and spiritual chaos,” befitting to the dominant narrative of *The Great Gatsby* (Marx). Further, as Posnock claims in his connection between Fitzgerald and Marx, it truly is “social reality rather than individual consciousness that determines man’s existence” (202). Gatsby’s great mistake—and consequently the cause of his murder and insatiable hunger and unhappiness—is his unabashed effort to purchase social capital in a method inappropriate to the overall social economic system. Opening the novel, after boasting of his “tolerance,” Nick writes, “I come to the admission that it [my tolerance] has a limit...it [my limit] is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interests in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (2). As we have seen this “foul dust” connected to the developing modern culture of the industrial city, characterized by “raw vigor” and “distortion,” and manifest in Fitzgerald’s version of the East, and more specifically, the neighborhood of West Egg; what is more striking is Fitzgerald’s suggestion that the “foul dust” is essentially a treacherous misunderstanding of the American Dream (107, 176). Closing the novel, Nick muses, “as the moon rose higher the inessential houses began to melt away until gradually I became aware of the old island here that flowered once for Dutch sailor’s eyes—a fresh, green breast of the new world...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” (180). Bringing to life the sexualized myth of American origins—the conviction that Dutch explorers founded a virgin continent and that these Dutch explorers somehow share a “genealogical definition of kinship relations” with white Americans—Fitzgerald corrects Gatsby’s misuse of this prized narrative (Bourdieu 250). As Bourdieu writes, “by the application of a common name (the name of a family, a class, or a tribe or of a school, a party, etc.) and by a whole set of instituting acts designed simultaneously to form and inform those who undergo them,” Nick uses the narrative of the American Dream and thus American identity to maintain the limits—limits which appear to be “predestined” by the American past—of white upper-class social capital. Nick writes, “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. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” Nick condescends to Gatsby’s belief in the city, or the promises of American capitalism—namely, that if you desire something badly enough, such as position in a higher social class, you can attain it immediately. No, he admonishes Gatsby and America, the fight has already been won “somewhere back [in history]...where the dark fields of the republic rolled on.” Having made Gatsby pay the final price, Fitzgerald rests easy, allowing Nick to redeem Gatsby in his final lines: “Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eludes 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” (180). Similar to the way in which Nick erases obscene graffiti from Gatsby’s abandoned mansion steps, by envisioning Gatsby as a “for-ward-looking visionary who not only transcends the crisis of his contemporary moment but who is associated with the nation’s legendary pastoral promise,” Nick integrates Gatsby into his white social group only in death (Decker 260). In death, Nick frees Gatsby “from his venal partnership with immigrant gangsters” and incorporates his narrative “within a lineage of explorers of northern European stock” (261).

Part Two

Watts Celebrates Black Survival: Getting “On with It” Is Worth Remembering

Many artists have attempted to mimic Fitzgerald’s celebrated text, *The Great Gatsby* (1925). When asked about the relationship between her novel, *No One is Coming to Save Us* (2017), and Fitzgerald’s, Stephanie Powell Watts acknowledges that the “spirit” of the work is similar. In an interview with NPR’s Ari Shapiro, she describes that spirit: “the idea that someone returns to a place that is home for him, or he’s hoping is home for him...But it goes in different directions from there.” What different directions exactly? “Seeing” what Fitzgerald couldn’t or didn’t want to see sets Watts’ novel apart. Noting her developing eye for Fitzgerald’s overlooked characters, she describes her interest in black characters and “the women and the tiny, tiny roles that they have in the book.” She stresses her efforts to help these characters “speak.” “I want to hear what they have to say,” she says. Tying her work to her own heritage, she describes the connection between female characters similar to her mother and grandmothers, characters “who are striving and trying to figure out the world with not a whole lot of resources in all kinds of ways, but who want better for themselves and for their children.” Watts is concerned with characters that “don’t get their say” (Watts and Shapiro).

Watts succeeds in bringing these characters to life—this completely new piece of fiction re-envisioned black female characters in a contemporary, hostile, white world and seeks to understand them. Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2014) is a text similarly concerned with 21st century America and its onslaught of micro and macro aggressions imposed against its black citizens. In its reference to the erasure of black voice and personhood, Rankine’s text is a helpful tool to discuss the overlapping themes of Watts’ work.

Perhaps more importantly, it is helpful as a comparison to demonstrate the considerable difference in these two author's conclusions. In *Citizen*, Rankine's mostly upper-middle class black characters exist in nearly all-white spaces. However, Watts' characters live in black communities. Yet, these black communities are far from immune from the threat of hostile white power. At every turn, racial and socio-economic segregation reminds the reader of the longstanding effects of the Jim Crow Era in this small Southern town. As a result, when Watts gives these characters a voice, you might expect to hear about the racism that affects all aspects of her characters' lives. But contrary to Rankine's *Citizen*, Watts' characters quiet when it comes to verbally grappling with racially charged prejudice. Instead, her characters are primarily concerned with desire. In Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, at the heart of it, Gatsby wanted something—namely, white wealthy cultural and social capital—that he could not have. As Jade Chang argues in the *New York Times*, “*The Great Gatsby* is, at its core, a book about wanting things” (Chang). Watts' characters ask a similar question: what are black people allowed to want today? Watts' tired but powerfully involved Nick Carraway-figure, Sylvia, responds sardonically, ““Two ham sandwiches?”” (35). Although time has passed since Fitzgerald warned the white lower class that they must wait for their turn at social climbing or face destruction, has enough time passed for black Americans to want their ham sandwich and eat it too?

Watts' answer is complicated. Many of her characters want, dramatically so. Ava, for example, endures multiple miscarriages in her pursuit of a baby. In a way, Ava eventually gets a version of what she wants—two adopted children. But in another more prominent sense, she fails at biologically conceiving and is forced to revise her desire. As the plural narrator asks, “Haven't we always done this trick? If you can't get what you

want, want something else” (367). Yet, Watts seems to be proposing something a bit more interesting. The act of wanting, whether fulfilled or not, is akin to living. To lose one’s desire completely, then, is the onset of dying.

Unfortunately, wanting is exhausting. Such is the testimony of *Citizen*. Watts, too, does not shy away from this terrifying reality. The very act of wanting within the context of the unsympathetic socio-economic system threatens to kill her characters. Here lies the greatness of survival, according to Watts: to survive in the face of unfulfilled want is glorious in itself. Like *Citizen*, which gives voice to the wasting experience of black life implicated by the capitalist state and therefore acts oppositionally to the racialized system in its testifying to the realities of the black corporeal condition, *No One* elevates black survival in a hostile world. Here, like Rankine, Watts carefully and tragically articulates the compounding exhaustion of existence as a black woman or man in America. Yet, the power of Watts’ narrative is derived not from her characters’ negotiation of racism, but from their movement in the face of physical, emotional, and spiritual struggle—moving forward, not giving up, or as JJ’s mother advises, “*Survive, Jaybird. Get on with it*” (359).

Although rife with disjointed relationships, broken families, adverse public spaces, financial trouble, inconsistent housing, and the struggle to find and/or maintain hope in a future—like *Citizen*, this is a heavy read—*No One* celebrates the significance of human connection. Watts is painfully realistic; black power is limited in a state that defies the humanity of black citizens, and as a result, connecting with one another becomes nearly impossible. However, moving forward, the action that prevents total despair, relies upon continued desire for human connection. As the characters overcome

insurmountable odds in order to relate with one another, these broken but persistent bonds ultimately provide the key ingredient to their survival—a friend to help one get out of the hole. After a vicious verbal altercation between Sylvia and her daughter following Ava’s fourth miscarriage, Sylvia walks downstairs, leaving Ava alone. Remembering an incident with a lost hamster when Devon was a little boy, she dwells on the hamster’s isolated fate. Having no one to pull him out from under the refrigerator, the hamster died. At this thought, Sylvia returns to her daughter’s room, forcing her to attend her doctor’s appointment where her miscarriage would be confirmed. “There is an instinct to hide, and against our better thinking we find the darkest place to squeeze ourselves into. Someone has to be able to find you on those days. Somebody has to pull you out” (294). Watts suggests that in the midst of an antagonistic racialized capitalist state, moving forward through struggle, or, the act of survival, is worthy of praise.

Disputing the Myth of Progress

Throughout the novel, Watts urges the reader to consider notions of racial progress. Moments of disconnect between an “old” generation—embodied by Sylvia, Don, Lana—and the “new”—Ava, JJ, Jonnie—suggest different interpretations of citizenship rights. The old, accustomed to earlier days of severe poverty, institutionalized racism in the form of segregation, and generations of white power, understand their own citizenship as limited. Moreover, in the acknowledgment of the nuanced but omnipotent structure of racial capitalism, the hope required to demand rights, rights that might in their late age be deemed constitutional, appears futile. This older generation’s wants have been confined, circumscribed to fit the contextual container. On the other hand, the new

generation, having no intimate formative memory of severe poverty or unconcealed institutionalized racism, might view life with a less-bridled optimism, a belief in the possibility of social mobility. If this is actualized throughout the plot, this division between old and new suggests racial progress, defined here as the advancement of rights and gradual destruction of the socio-economic legacy of Jim Crow.

Considering first the moments of observable hope in the new generation, Ava, JJ, and Jonnie demonstrate instances of generational difference. The attainment of economic and cultural capital in the objectified state, defined by Bourdieu as “in...relationship with cultural capital in its embodied form” and “transmissible in its materiality,” is most apparent as possible evidence of racial progress (*The Forms of Capital*). Ava, in her late thirties, possesses a stable bank job with a middle-class income (rare in her financially declining North Carolina furniture town). She earned a college education and has access to healthcare and the ability to purchase health food, expensive clothing such as “beautiful high heels” kept on showroom hangers and stuffed with “expensive wooden shapers,” and knickknacks for her home (although secondhand). She qualifies for a home loan to purchase her mother’s house, demonstrating not only financial independence but the passing of generational wealth (40). The passing down of property from one generation to another is considered by some to be a certain indication of racial progress for black families. In fact, The Center for American Progress reports, “even after considering positive factors such as increased education levels, African Americans have less wealth than whites,” which “translates into fewer opportunities for upward mobility and is compounded by lower income levels and fewer chances to build wealth or pass accumulated wealth down to future generations” (Hanks, et al). Consequently, one can

conclude that Ava's inheritance is representative of financial progress for her community. Moreover, JJ, the Gatsby of the novel, is born into a broken family (his father murders his mother while JJ is still a child), yet is able to leave his small suffering Pinewood, make a sum of money through real-estate dealings (though it is never exactly clear how this money is made), and return to build a custom estate on a hill which overlooks the town in the used-to-be white only neighborhood.

With that said, when verbalizations of the younger generation's desires occur, either by the plural narrator or within characters' dialogues, it is rarely for possession of economic capital alone. Instead, characters yearn to love and be loved—physically, yes, but often they are more concerned with the component of companionship—to be known and seen, to have a mother and become a mother, to be a part of a family unit, and when all else is too difficult to want, to merely not to be lonely. The most notable exception to this claim is the desire multiple characters have for a house. This desire is far more suggestive than it appears at first glance, and serves as a focused illustration of the root of the newer generation's desires. The want is not for a house, but for a home. For example, as Ava prepares for the culmination of her last miscarriage, she avoids the impending extraction at the doctor's office by visiting Jay's house. She thinks, "So many black people stay somewhere. Where do you stay? They'd say. I stay with my friend; I stay with my mother. Don't you live anywhere?" (312). In this moment of heartbreak—the destruction of her hope for a biological child—she desires a home. JJ, too, in the midst of the aftermath of his broken relationship with Ava and confrontation of his own desire to revise the past, is encouraged by Sylvia to "come home," and to "stop looking for it [home]." She advises him, "'You've got a house here, JJ. Live in it'" (357-8). Sylvia, like

Nick Carraway, serves as knowledgeable observer, and in this moment, she clarifies the difference between a house and a home. JJ is able to procure the funds to buy a nice house, but he is not able to fashion for himself a home. As Bourdieu writes, “To possess the machines, he only needs economic capital; to appropriate them and use them in accordance with their specific purpose (defined by the cultural capital, of scientific or technical type, incorporated in them), he must have access to embodied cultural capital, either in person or by proxy” (*The Forms of Capital*). Jay does not have access to the embodied cultural capital that a true home requires. Home connotes kinship, love, and relationship—the total absence of loneliness. Although a physical house is helpful for the possession of these desires, it is merely a prerequisite or a conduit, not the fulfillment of the desire itself. The reader is forced to confront the question: why is a home, with all its metaphorical implications, inaccessible to Watts’ characters?

Watts gestures toward several obstacles to her characters’ attainment of a home. In general, she repeatedly references the most prominent result of racial capitalism: explicitly, the destruction of the black kinship system. This destruction is prompted by various factors. To start, unavoidable is the presence of poverty within the town. Set in an early 21st century North Carolina town, Watts intimates historical financial inequalities. Today, the black unemployment rate in North Carolina is far higher than its white counterpoint—10.3% compared to 4.8%—which is a wider gap than the United States average. Likewise, in Charlotte, North Carolina, the UNC reports, “About 40% of black households in Charlotte have annual incomes of \$30,000 or less,” “a quarter live in poverty,” “10% earn \$100,000 or more,” black homeownership is just above 40%, 40% of black citizens only have a high school degree, while less than 10% of white Charlotte

citizens live in poverty, nearly 35% earn more than \$100,000, almost 70% own homes, and 17% have more than a high school degree (Isidore). Across the North Carolina state, the racial gap is “alarmingly consistent” and even more prominent in urban areas where recent economic growth has been greatest (Munn). Similar to Fitzgerald’s “valley of ashes,” Watts’ characters reside in a post-industrial wasteland. Industrial plants created waste, then in their absence, left behind a “valley of ashes.” Watts again gestures to the current historical context in her creation of this fictional town. As the Alliance for American Manufacturing reports, beginning in the 1960s, many small towns suffered widespread industrial job loss due to “unfair trade practices such as import dumping and currency manipulation” (Black Factory Workers). As automation became more common in production practices, employment opportunities were limited to overseas workers or were confined to the South, where “right to work” laws kept labor cheap and restricted union power. Such rampant deindustrialization historically affects black workers more significantly than whites, compounding poverty’s effect for black citizens (Black Factory Workers). With a rise in unemployment and consumption stalls, subsequently it becomes more difficult to keep local business alive. In description of Lana’s store, which is located in the heart of Pinewood’s downtown area, Watts highlights the results of this economic devastation: “The salon was in the middle of Pinewood’s nearly deserted main street beside what used to be a five and dime though no new stores, no twee boutiques or coffee houses had moved in. The only remaining businesses were a thrift store full of leftover garage sale junk on the sagging shelves, a vacuum cleaner repair shop that doubled as the owner’s home, and a few storefronts with blacked out windows, empty except at election time.” Pinewood hopes for tourism as an economic solution to increase consumption. By

making “plans for festivals, concerts and a whole slate of good feelings days,” the town hopes to “distract [potential tourists] from the empty parking lots at the furniture mills,” but Watts implies that this is merely a pipe dream (244-5). Instead, Watts affirms the passion and dedication that it takes for members of the community to maintain locally owned stores that serve the remaining community in the face of financial hardship. Lana’s hair salon functions as a symbol of such black survival.

In addition to an atmosphere of poverty, Watts also calls attention to a lack of safety for Pinewood’s citizens, and most particularly, black men. Without access to secure employment, many men struggle to make ends meet and turn to illegal methods of income. In a conversation with Ava, we come to understand that JJ served jail time, which Watts vaguely ascribes to JJ’s (illegal) efforts to make money. Additionally, black men remain targeted in public spaces due to the relationship between racial prejudice and assumptions about black criminality. Although *No One*’s characters never verbally acknowledge the racial component to these trends, the fear of incarceration and/or violence remains a constant threat. Marcus, the distant but significant phone companion of Sylvia, serves as a pervasive reminder of the detrimental consequences of the rampant incarceration of young black men. In her book, *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander calls this phenomenon “something akin to a racial caste system” (2). She notes that in the nation’s capitol, researchers estimate that three out of four young black men will serve prison time and “similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America.” She stresses that these racial disparities are not explained away by rates of drug crime because “studies show that people of all colors *use and sell* illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates.” Instead, she argues that due to institutional racism—especially

the laws of our criminal justice system—black men are being “permanently locked up and locked out of mainstream society” (7). Through this unjust incarceration, Marcus and men like him are taught to question both their own citizenship and humanity. Throughout their conversations, it becomes clear that Marcus is desperate for someone to believe that he is worthy of not being forgotten, that he is “a nice man from good people who kept their houses clean,” that he comes from the “good kind of black people that whites saw some good in” (17).

Perhaps even more significant than the threat of isolation and disparagement inflicted by incarceration are the threat of violence against and the early death of young black men by the hands of the criminal justice system and police brutality. Sometimes, this violence is physical—such as the killing of young black men by the hands of the police. More often than not, this violence is manifested in the attempted erasure of black humanity by a system that does not “see” a portion of its citizens. Devon, Sylvia’s son, is the admonishing ghost that haunts this novel. It is not until the 30th chapter that we hear his story. The solitude and loss that pervades his actions and dialogue demonstrate the greatest impediment to the attainment of a home. Like the “furious erasure” Rankine refers to in *Citizen*, unless the state is rendering Devon hypervisible for his blackness alone, it does not acknowledge Devon’s existence (*Citizen* 142). This is most evident in his interaction with others at the gas station convenience store. While inside, a white man who looks like Elvis and his female companion with “skin as pale as a bathroom sink” pass a “foot in front of him [Devon]” but do not look at him once nor acknowledge his presence. In his alienation, Devon asks the fellow black clerk for acknowledgement of his own reality, “Do you see them? You do, don’t you?” (269). As a result of the denial of

his own humanity by the hand of white citizens, Devon doubts first the existence of the white customers, and then permanently his own existence. Watts writes, “Devon didn’t know he could be seen with his eyes closed” (273).

The violence inflicted against the African American community by the state also serves to create disconnections within black communities. Ava acknowledges that children of broken families are more susceptible to gossip and exclusion, even from their own racial community. Watts writes, “Ava had known even then that the stories that get told about you can spin wildly out of control without the buffer and framework of a known family history” (41). When black families are separated by incarceration and death, they are more vulnerable to community ostracism. Additionally, this cyclical violence creates disconnections between black men and women. This disconnect is as simple as the lack of complete intimacy between romantic partners. For example, as Jay attempts to console Ava during the aftermath of her miscarriage, Watts writes, “What she [Ava] wanted to say to him was, ‘I love you. I love you so much. Please be my friend. Please don’t leave me.’ What she managed to say was ‘I can’t do this’” (313). Similarly, Don and Sylvia struggle with a fragmented relationship. Even though Don keeps up a relationship with Jonnie, Sylvia and Don continue to sleep together periodically, although neither of them achieves the level of intimacy they are looking for. More considerably, the violent system can promote physical violence between black men and women; for example, consider JJ’s father’s murder of JJ’s mother. Last, in Ava’s struggle against infertility, Watts gestures toward recent research, such as Prather, Fuller, Marshall, and Jeffries’ study, “The Impact of Racism on the Sexual and Reproductive Health of African American Women,” which, by the method of a socioecological model, demonstrates how

racist contextual experiences intertwine with “the daily lived experiences of African American women” and lead to “poor sexual and reproductive health outcomes” (Prather, Cynthia et al). Ava’s struggle to have a child not only reveals the harsh conditions which help to create her issues in conceiving, but also the compounding effect of the destruction of the future biological kinship system. This too provides another interesting connection to Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. A clear discrepancy is created between Ava’s desire for a child and Daisy’s apathetic approach to her own daughter. Juxtaposing Ava’s desperate want with Daisy’s ingratitude accentuates Watts’ original question: what are black people allowed to want, and further, what are black people allowed to have?

The older generation, having lived in an even harsher historical context, approaches the verbalization of want differently than the younger generation. At times, the older generation grows frustrated and fearful of the younger generation’s desires, advising against unrestrained hope. For example, when Sylvia discovers Jay and Ava’s affair, she encourages them to part ways, demanding, ““You think you’re special because you want something? What happened to you young people? Hell not young, middle-aged brats. You want everything and you think you can get it because you want it”” (234). It might appear that Sylvia is chastising the couple for reasons relating to religious piety or notions of morality; however, she makes clear that she is afraid that acting out the “want,” which in this case includes the desire for a loving, monogamous, romantic relationship and a home to share that relationship in, is a threat to their survival. She thinks, “In Sylvia’s youth even the men you desired, hell, even the men you married, you kept at the edge of your feeling...But under no circumstances do you believe your desire, your stupid fallible body” (232). In other words, believing in the fulfillment of your

desire for a home could cost too much to bear. It could cost one's life. Watts' narrates, "People Sylvia's age didn't expect so much. They understood limitations. They accepted no, they adjusted to no damn way, even when it hurt, even when it meant nothing else mattered...How had all the forty-year-old fools misunderstood?" (234-35). In other words, Sylvia's generation kept wants confined in order to protect themselves from the crushing weight of unfulfilled desires. "Happy endings" were unrealistic (236). As a result, in their effort to protect the younger generation, they advised that their children follow their example.

Although the older generation responds negatively to the younger generation's verbalization of a desire for a home, the older generation shares many of the same desires. Yet, they verbalize these desires differently. Like the younger generation, the older generation acknowledges that commodities—and the objectified cultural capital they represent—are merely stepping-stones to the greater want. In Jay's new home, Sylvia, Ava, and Jay look around the room, "imagining the space." Watts remarks, "Oh the television shows and magazines that tried to convince us our rooms, lamps, and throw pillows are all windows into our truest selves. What a crock! If nothing else Jay's room proved to Sylvia that anything looked beautiful—even folding chairs—surrounded by enough money" (230). Sylvia scoffs at the myth of economic goods while simultaneously supporting Bourdieu's claims—it is the entire social economic system that gives capital its worth. She reaffirms Bourdieu's assertion that "It is in fact impossible to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces capital in all its forms and not solely in the one form recognized by economic theory" (*The Forms of Capital*). Lana, on the other hand, reaches slightly different conclusions in regard to her

salon. While Sylvia punctures commodity fetishism with her understanding that commodity goods do not express individuality but merely reveal the degree to which one is “surrounded by enough money,” Lana sees her own labor represented in her possessions. Lana thinks, “You might think that a place, a room, a house can’t save you but don’t believe it. When people tell you that, they either don’t know better or don’t want you to know...In your own space...these are not just things...but totems, a low level mathematical equation a young child could do that proved what you’ve amounted to, the sum of everything” (246). Lana appreciates physical goods as meaningful in their ability to demonstrate personal striving to overcome hardship to earn a living. Further, Watts suggests that it is not the physical building, or the consumer goods on their own, which provide meaning. Instead, a “home” is made in the communal approval of worth. Sylvia refers to this communal approval as the “transformative power of money” (231). Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* is “overwhelmingly aware of the youth and mystery that wealth imprisons and preserves, of the freshness of many clothes, and of Daisy, gleaming like silver safe and proud above the hot struggles of the poor” (Fitzgerald 150). Sylvia, while acknowledging the personal striving that attaining material items within Pinewood’s economic confines requires, does not seem to believe in the same kind of commodity fetishism that *Gatsby* did. Lana, too, in her understanding of each earned commodity as a representation of arduous labor differs from *Gatsby*. In this sense, both Sylvia and Lana’s understanding of commodities is more self-directed and reflective than *Gatsby*’s, which in turn allows commodities to be less alienating to Watts’ characters.

Conversely, this pragmatism does not change the boundaries of the economic system. Racial capitalism makes it extremely difficult for black citizens to make

themselves “homes” in the United States. Sylvia demonstrates her own struggle with this truth. While waiting to visit Lana, she kills time by going to the mall to shop. She clarifies, “not to shop really just to look at a bunch of merchandise useless to her but calming for its order and sameness.” Here she references the mythical quality of economic goods. However, while sitting in the parking lot, she loses interest. Deciding not to go into the mall, she throws up her hands in surrender. She asks, “What the hell for?” (248). Although not explicitly voiced, Sylvia makes evident her understanding of the system’s boundaries. No commodity will provide for her the access to basic economic capital and the social capital necessary to create a home. Unlike Gatsby, she does not bother trying.

Yet, although the older generation might verbalize their frustration with the economic system more often and with less restraint than the younger generation, is it not the same wants that continue to fuel them? Although Sylvia is aware of Don’s infidelities, she continues to invite him back into her home and bed. It might appear that she is merely keeping loneliness at bay, but as it occurs to Ava for the first time after she adopts her two children, her mother actually loved her father (345). Although Sylvia claimed to merely put up with him, perhaps the desire she felt for a true home with Don was silenced, but lived on. More dramatically, at times, the older generation believes in the impossible, allowing want to even blend with unreality. As Sylvia breaks down in Lana’s store prior to Ava’s miscarriage, she voices her belief in Devon’s return from the dead. “I want my son, Sylvia thought, but she would not live another minute if she said it out loud” (260). To have a home with her children—to keep them safe from a hostile

world and to preserve them in a cocoon of love—is a want that even outlives the death of her child.

The younger generation, although more likely to pursue optimistic desires, demonstrates similar awareness of the antagonistic context of racial capitalism. At the start of the rekindling of Ava and Jay's relationship, Jay acknowledges, "They could pretend they had the power to fix their lives. The trick was making themselves believe it. That's what joy is, isn't it? Belief for a little while that you have the power to mend everything?" (237). Here, Jay voices his disbelief in his ability to create a happy home with Ava. Likewise, Ava shares a similar false sense of hope in her relationship with Jay. For example, when fighting with her mother, she thinks, "Though Sylvia was right about so much, this time she could be wrong" (243). It is clear that Ava finds the actuality of a successful romantic relationship as likely as a miracle. Ava likewise verbalizes her awareness of contextual confines in her altercation with Henry. Henry, as a victim of deindustrialization, can be seen as a representation of Wilson, who also struggled to make a living with the repurposing of industrially produced automobile waste. When Henry arrives at Jay's house to beg Ava to forgive him, Ava refuses. In desperation, Henry puts the gun to his head, threatening to kill himself. "I don't have any more choices," he says. Ava responds, "Nobody gets what they want" (333). Here, Ava exhibits understanding similar to that of her mother and the older generation more broadly. Ironically, accepting the confines of the racial capitalist system while paradoxically fighting to keep desires for a better future alive is the only way to survive. Unlike Fitzgerald's treatment of Wilson, Watts keeps Henry alive by the means of Ava's intervention, providing a glimpse of hope for a better future through relationship.

Often, both the younger and older generation employ a combination of fantasy and pragmatism in an effort to survive. In order to maintain this balance consistently and not be overtaken by one side or the other, characters rely desperately on one another. Watts acknowledges that keeping want alive requires deep relationship. Relationships are not only important to keep total desolation at bay, which often rears its ugly head in the form of debilitating loneliness—“death is an empty house hollow and echoing”—but also because relationships prevent stagnation (329). Movement forward thwarts total despair and eventual death. After all, as Ava observes, “To dwell is to die” (335). Death is the lack of the pursuit of a “home.” Following the mourning of her inability to have biological children, Ava ruminates, “When the miracle, the catastrophe, the unexpected event that ruptures our lives into meaning, foul or ecstatic and forever changed, flashes back to us, how comforting to catch glimpses of the faces of people who love us enough to say ‘I’m here’” (310).

Relationship as savior is employed at pivotal times in the lives of Watts’ characters. Sylvia, in her relationship with Marcus, keeps total despair at bay for the lonely inmate. Likewise, in return she receives a meaningful connection, one that fills the Devon-sized void within her. Sylvia extends a relationship to even the most difficult to love. For example, when Frank Ferguson arrives at Sylvia’s house looking for JJ, she tries to harden her heart toward him. She thinks, “You get what you deserve if you make a disaster of your life.” But, she corrects herself. “Only a body that hasn’t lived long enough to see anything would believe that.” In their subsequent conversation, Sylvia cautions that JJ’s house will not make any money when it sells. Frank responds, “I am long past wanting anything” (351). Softening, Sylvia reminisces with Frank, considering

their past love for James Brown and his lyric, “please, please, please.” “There’s nothing just please, please. That’s all you can say,” Frank says. In her sadness, Sylvia disagrees. “There’s no getting beyond some things.” Frank doesn’t give up on her, maintaining his responsibility within their relationship. “Every word makes a difference. Please makes a difference. It does. All the difference in the world” (353). By allowing Frank into a relationship with her, Sylvia’s desire for connection is reinvigorated. Ava and Sylvia, too, have an often broken and explosive but obstinately loving relationship, even when it hurts desperately. As Ava and JJ begin their affair, Sylvia urges Ava to keep moving forward and not to look for happiness in the “rearview” (242). Later, following the loss of her fourth pregnancy, Sylvia and Ava have a volatile fight where Ava commits emotional violence against her mother by accusing her of breaking her marriage with Don and subsequently the family unit. Without any time to heal from Ava’s words, Sylvia sacrifices her own needs, swallowing the pain her daughter inflicted on her and instead “went up the stairs to her child” to force her out of bed, to keep her moving. ““Get up, Ava,”” she says. ““We’ve got to go”” (294). Ava also provides within her relationship with Sylvia. She prompts Sylvia’s desire to want economic goods, such as a new pair of shoes, which metaphorically contributes to her want for a future (even if, in so doing, she engages in a measure of commodity fetishism). While looking at Ava’s pretty things, Sylvia vows to get better shoes. She asks herself, “She had been a stylish young person, hadn’t she?...When did it all come to this?” Ava’s persistence reminds Sylvia that there is a need to want; that to lack want is to “decay” (40). Likewise, after her own heartbreak, Ava comes to terms with her ignorance of Sylvia’s greatest struggle—her weight. “How had Ava missed the struggle?” Watts asks. Presumably, upon this realization, Ava’s

acknowledgement of Sylvia's struggle will aid in Sylvia's battle, lessening the struggle's ability to preserve her isolation. Ava applies this same dedication to her relationship to her own children. She vows to remember to tell May "that she is loved and can make mistake after mistake with the certainty that her mother, her grandmother, and a small but passionate group of people would open their arms, cluck their tongues, but keep their arms open to her every single time" (343). Here, she reminds herself that there are multiple generations of relationships that will help to keep her daughter alive and wanting against the odds. She even envisions extending this same "home" to Henry's child, the child he had with another woman while they were still married. Henry acknowledges the gift that Ava's continued relationship is to him and his son. He says, "'You know, I didn't used to think that black people did this...Spoke to each other after they hate each other'" (344). Ava is surprised herself.

Devon, unfortunately, is the most tragic and complicated example of the power of relationship. After Joy's brother refuses to allow Devon's "black ass" in his car, Devon walked for hours along the road in the direction of home. Entering a store hungry, he speaks to the "beautiful" "moon-faced" girl at the counter, saying the first words he had said aloud in hours of walking. "I'm sad." Gently, the moon-faced girl offers the promise of a relationship. She replies, "'Don't be sad'" (268). Outside, an older man Jimmy approaches Devon. Noticing that "there was something a little lost about him [Devon] that caught your attention, but didn't make you afraid," Jimmy offers to buy Devon dinner at the adjacent McDonald's (271). Worried, Jimmy calls Sylvia. In conversation, Jimmy tries to console Devon for his heartache. Devon communicates his inability to recover from his "mistakes." For example, telling a story about a time he

forgot to use the emergency brake on his car, he says, “I don’t feel that good sometimes” (273). Upon further prompting from Jimmy, Devon shares that he walks because ““I don’t have to think so much.”” Jimmy offers relationship, trying to get Devon to “move” in life. ““Whatever it is, Devon, you have to let it go. Keep on trying to get a job. Get a girl. That’ll take your mind off of things. Work is the main thing” (274). Although the advice given is limited—as seen earlier, it is extremely difficult for Watts’ characters to find happiness in their economic production—the relationship offered to Devon by Jimmy provides Devon with the energy to continue home. Sadly, along his walk back to Sylvia, Devon is hit by a car. In the presence of various relationships providing life to an exhausted people, why might Watts ordain Devon’s death after such a hopeful encounter with Jimmy? After all, Devon believed that if you were just able to come into most people’s sight, “not just be an idea,” “then they could show their goodness plain” (269). Devon possessed a bit of hope left, a desire to be seen and see others, to experience a metaphorical home. Devon, with his “extraordinary gift for hope” can be seen both as our tragic Gatsby as well as our run-down Myrtle (Fitzgerald 2). However, unlike Fitzgerald’s treatment of Myrtle or Gatsby, Watts reaffirms Devon as she paints him as a representation of persecuted goodness, verging on holiness.

In a sense, Devon’s death is a reminder that although there is a method of survival available to black citizens, it is not foolproof, and it is absolutely not without tragedy. Devon then is evidence against progress in the activist use of the word. It’s obvious to Watts that we have not reach any sort of racial utopia. However, does Watts believe in any amount of “progress?” If so, what does it look like? To begin to answer this question, it’s important to note Watts’ artistic care with all things “past.” Like Fitzgerald, she too is

concerned with the ways in which we remember and attempt to reconstruct the past. Overall, the past carries with it great threat to destroy a hope-worthy future. Simmy's, Pinewood's burger joint that opened during the Jim Crow era and was therefore segregated for much of its days, serves as a threatening reminder of a painful past. To Sylvia, passing by the establishment causes her pain. It reminds her "not managing to die had become a triumph" (251). Like Rankine's analysis of microaggressions in *Citizen*, Watts suggests that even physical landmarks can function as microaggressions. Thus, its final closing at the end of the novel is celebrated because its removal from the town removes the emotional violence it inflicts on its citizens and provides a more expansive space for a hope-worthy future for Sylvia's children and grandchildren. Yet, Sylvia analyzes the problematic erasure of the past. Watts writes, "The past had started erasing behind Sylvia like in a cartoon. Her life as a girl; the lives of her parents; her son; all disappearing as if they had never been. Giving up the pain and exclusions meant also losing years of her life. The trick was cutting out the bad like a tumor, hoping the nasty had not spread into the rest of your thinking. Cutting it out, but somehow managing to survive" (252). Claudia Rankine, in her interview with *Sampsonia Way*'s Elizabeth Hoover, worries over the downfalls of rampant social media and the "stream of information coming in" (Hoover and Rankine). She stresses the importance of reminding both others and herself of the terrible history of black racism and the ways in which black people are being wounded on a daily basis. While Rankine does encourage movement, her tone angrily and righteously resents white-inflicted racism. Differing slightly in tone from Rankine, Watts suggests that certain pain must be let go. In many instances, releasing segments of the past is necessary for Watts' characters to move forward. As

Gatsby attempts to recreate his past love with Daisy, JJ fights nostalgia for the past. In a similar way, dwelling on and obsessing over the recreation of the past is suicide for both Fitzgerald's Gatsby and Watts' JJ. When a character isn't able to "cut out the bad," they aren't able to create a "home."

Watts also make a careful distinction between the past that must be thrown away and the past that must be retold in order to take hold of it and build a future with it. In an interview with *LitHub*'s Bethanne Patrick, Watts asks, "What do you do when the past is not a nostalgic past? It's really true for people in places like Pinewood, especially for people of color. My parents' generation remembers a very different landscape than mine does, one in which the shadow of Jim Crow loomed over every shoulder. This sort of nostalgia the pull of home is so powerful and so forceful even when you remember that home was a very difficult place" (Patrick and Watts). In a separate interview with *BookPage*, Watts answers, "So many of the people in my family and my community were wonderful storytellers. They would tell stories about just awful things that happened to them. But their humor made what happened into their own kind of triumph" (Mudge and Watts). In their wisdom, *No One's* elderly retell the past in order to help their children survive and build a future. Watts writes, "Thank God the old tell it slant so the jagged edges don't kill their babies. That's what family does, sanitize the filthy or at least dust it off, give it to us in bite-size morsels" (345). Each character, to some extent, grabs hold of the past and rewrites it for their own survival. For example, Ava rewrites her past often in order to hold onto the positive and let go of the negative, fueling her hope for a desirable future. By "some glorious trick of memory," she could not remember her life before her two children, "their sweet faces" inserted into "every circumstance and location of her

past, present, and future” (342). Likewise, she salvages memories of JJ that suit her needs, making him a “past with a name” (347). Watts writes, “She knew she had made her own choice not to lose him [JJ] or at least to lose all of her memories of him. She wanted the past where they lived and struggled and loved each other. A past that couldn’t and shouldn’t be erased. The possibility of the past, if it s a good one, or even if it has good moments, is that it can be alive, if you let it” (336). Even Carrie, Watts’ Myrtle figure, mentions that although “Most people construct the story to explain the life later,” “people living the crazy make up the story as they go. Right there in the moment” (165).

A worthwhile future for Watts’ characters, then, is a place, as she says in her *BookPage* interview, where Watts can see her characters “having a future, a difficult one, but a future” (Mudge and Watts). Although we are never assured completely that JJ finds a peaceful future, Watts does hint at his redemption, which lies in his belief in a worthy future with Ava, not a recreation of the past. While Fitzgerald’s *Gatsby* attempts to preserve Daisy in time, JJ muses over the beauty of Ava’s aging face. He notes the “turns of Ava’s face” where he could see “age flowering” and where he could “catch a glimpse of the older woman she would be.” He thinks that she would be “another artist’s interpretation” of her mother. Most importantly, he loves that “their eternity, his and hers, was built in their faces” (307). Here is a moment so different than *Gatsby*’s love for Daisy, one which can be seen perhaps as Watts’ feminist revision of Fitzgerald’s text. Unlike *Gatsby*, JJ finds the passing of time with Ava and the changing of their mortal bodies as evidence of the survival of their relationship. Overall, Watts’ characters accept aging and likewise change as an unavoidable and even positive part of living.

In JJ's reoccurring dream, he envisions his own "American Dream," which to him is a home, both in the literal and metaphorical sense, with Ava. He concludes, "Going home is easy if you can find it" (367). Yet, at the end of the novel, Watts reminds us that for now, it is only a dream. Unlike Fitzgerald, who bores back into the past to console Gatsby's empty future (i.e. his death), Watts creates hope for an entirely new future. "But for now we dream. For a moment, a blink that can stretch over a lifetime, look out over the valley JJ, take it all in the points of light for miles and miles. God help me, God help me, the seeker says many times at the dead end, the crossroads, the fork in the journey. Help me bear it. God help me remember this. Help me take in the wide open forever, the endless yes. Help me love it as I live it. Help me see today what the richest man sees" (367).

Conclusion

In Fitzgerald's novel, it can be argued that while Nick is sure in his demonization of the other in order to preserve the structure of economic, cultural, and social capital, Fitzgerald is not. Although the text often reproduces inequalities, Fitzgerald's self-conscious rendering of Nick can also be realized as a representation of his own awareness of and discontentment with the prejudice of the socio-economic system. Nick can be read, too, as a character who encourages self-reflection on the part of the reader. We are, after all, invited to critique Nick, and accordingly, our own biases. So, in this line of thought, Fitzgerald's work can be recognized as an oppositional text for its historical context.

Watts, understandably so, is far beyond Fitzgerald's philosophical questioning of the prejudicial transmission of capital. Watts deeply understands Bourdieu's claim that as the transmission of capital becomes more obscure, it also becomes more powerful, and unfortunately, this obscurity is increased as the socio-economic system is disrupted. Bourdieu writes, "When the subversive critique which aims to weaken the dominant class through the principle of its perpetuation by bringing to light the arbitrariness of the entitlements transmitted and of their transmission...is incorporated in institutionalized mechanisms (for example, laws of inheritance) aimed at controlling the official, direct transmission of power and privileges, the holders of capital have an ever greater interest in reproduction strategies capable of ensuring better-disguised transmission, but at the cost of greater loss of capital, by exploiting the convertibility of the types of capital." And consequentially, "Thus the more official transmission of capital is prevented or

hindered, the more the effects of the clandestine circulation of capital in the form of cultural capital become determinant in the reproduction of the social structure” (255).

Thus, set in today’s contemporary landscape, Watts’ *No One* nods toward the various ways in which the “holders of capital” attempt to disguise transmission of capital in their own self-interest. For example, thanks to President Trump’s 2017 tax law, large corporations, such as Amazon, Chevron, and General Motors paid little to nothing in federal taxes. Interestingly enough, Trump, a man whose political career began in his advocacy of birtherism, described by writer Ta-Nehisi Coates as the “modern recasting of the old American precept that black people are not fit to be citizens of the country they built,” was voted into office primarily by white people of more comfortable economic backgrounds. Although many have understood Trump’s elector as white ““people living in areas with diminished economic opportunity,”” Coates argues that to the contrary, whites who voted for Trump “generally had a higher mean household income (\$81,898) than those who did not (\$77,046),” and that this mean household income was nearly double the average African American household income and \$15,000 more than the national median. Not surprisingly, Trump’s 2017 tax plan benefitted wealthy Americans. Trump’s qualifications for the presidency, according to his constituents? His business acumen. In other words, his commitment to the preservation of white access to capital. As Coates writes, “that is the point of white supremacy—to ensure that that which all others achieve with maximal effort, white people (particularly white men) achieve with minimal qualification.”

In her interview with *LitHub*, Watts sums up her thoughts on progress while considering her past experience as a Jehovah’s Witness and current role as mother: “I

operate from a hopeful place. I really can't afford not to be hopeful. I have a seven-year-old and I have to pass a world on to him that he can thrive in and in which things are going to be OK. Being a parent gives me a lot of hope. Dr. King knew he was not going to live after he gave that speech at the Lincoln Memorial. Knowing that, knowing that he still persevered? I can't afford to give up" (Patrick and Watts). While, through the deaths of Myrtle, Wilson, and Gatsby, Fitzgerald warns his reader about the pursuit of a more equitable America, Watts revises Fitzgerald's message to include hope. As Watts says in regards to her title choice, "inside of adversity is opportunity" (Patrick and Watts). JJ remains alive at the close of this novel, leaving the reader to wonder, what new opportunity awaits JJ in the distant and "orgastic future," if we only join him in running faster, stretching "out our arms farther...And one fine morning——" (Fitzgerald 180).

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