

Racial Fantasy in Joseph Conrad's *Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

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You couldn't see that there was anything wrong with him: *a nigger does not show*. (*The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* 32, italics added)

I. The Problem of Meaning in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"*

Critics as disparate as Ian Watt and Fredric Jameson have asserted that Joseph Conrad's preface to *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* first published in 1897, provides one of the inaugural manifestos of literary modernism due to the ideas regarding language and representation that it sets forth.¹ Given the interest that both the novel itself and the short, seemingly inconsequential, preface have generated, it is interesting that the concept of "race" has so persistently escaped these discussions. Further, this elision seems noteworthy given the central importance of the overly racialized body of James Wait, the "Nigger" of the title, in both the novel and the preface. Although Wait's identifying feature in the title, the preface, and the story itself is his blackness, his racial status is customarily rendered irrelevant to the considerations of language and representation that are inspired by the book.² This critical blindness seems all the more significant if we consider Conrad's own fascination with the character of Wait in the preface, and the centrality of Wait's body to Conrad's inquiry into issues of literary representation within the novel itself. In fact, we could say that the question of meaning within the novel centers on Wait's black body, and that this question takes shape strictly in relation to his body's resistance to being inscribed with any stable meaning. As the narrator states toward the beginning of the voyage of the *Narcissus*, "*no one could tell what was the meaning of that black man sitting apart in a meditative attitude and as motionless as a carving*" (33, italics added). Wait's body is resistant to meaning, and it is around this body and in

relation to this resistance that questions of meaning unfold within the story.

Conrad is consistently attentive to the fundamental but paradoxical role of Wait within his story. In the preface, he writes that “in the book he [Wait] is nothing; he is merely the centre of the ship’s collective psychology and the pivot of the action ... the book [is] written round him” (xlv). In these remarks, Wait’s role in the formation of the community of the ship is presented as both contradictory and necessary. As the strangely absent inaugural point of the “ship’s collective psychology,” Wait is “nothing,” but he is simultaneously the center of the action. Wait is, in other words, the absent center within the community of sailors. Conrad’s emotionally ambivalent description of Wait further reinforces his role as a central fetish around which the ship’s community revolves. Within the preface, Wait is first described as “an imposter of some character ... scornful of our sentimentalism, triumphing over our suspicions” (xlv). Despite Wait’s triumphant scorn, which inspires both fear and disdain, the writer notes “in the family circle and amongst my friends” Wait, who “is familiarly referred to as The Nigger, remains very precious to me” (xlv). This “very precious” object that inspires both resentment and affection is shown to be the constitutive exclusion around which Conrad’s community forms, even in these very short passages. Conrad first opposes Wait to the “us” in the construction “mastering *our* compassion, scornful of *our* sentimentalism, triumphing over *our* suspicions”; his function, within this sentence, is that of the abject, excluded object, inspiring ambivalence, around which the group of “chums” coheres (xlv italics added). Moreover, the reiteration of the word “our” in this passage would seem to represent an attempt to shore up this community against the outsider through sheer repetition. With each “our” we witness the endeavor to exclude another aspect of Conrad’s imagined community from Wait: he does not share in the community’s “compassion,” “sentimentalism,” or “suspicions.” Instead, this need for repetition emphasizes the impossibility of such foreclosure, for the community attains its imaginary consistency only as a reaction to the traumatic, antagonistic kernel of the real that is Wait’s body. In other words, the repeated failure of the community of the ship to seal itself

off hermetically against Wait, its foundational exclusion, demonstrates his necessity to its social fabric. A few lines later, when Conrad refers to the "circle" of his "family" and "friends," Wait is similarly a "very precious" but obviously excluded and absent object. He is, in Conrad's own words, the "nothing" around which both of these communities cohere. We might say that Wait is the "exiled, foreclosed uncertainty which haunts the system and generates the illusion" of its unity and coherence (Baudrillard 6). Wait's body is, both in the preface and in the novel, shown to hold forth the possibility of an immaculate communion of sailors around which Conrad constructs the ideal totality of an imaginary community. Although it serves as the necessary condition of community that guarantees meaning, Wait's body is nevertheless repeatedly experienced as the very thing preventing the consummation of perfect community, and it is in this double role that questions of meaning come to focus on Wait.

By framing an examination of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* in terms of Conrad's use of a single black body to serve as the necessary/impossible condition of community within the space of the ship, my interpretive claim about this novel will suggest a redefinition of the form that the recurring critical inquiry into the meaning of race in Conrad's work might take. By examining the role of the black body as the constitutive exclusion that forms the condition of possibility of Conrad's "brotherhood of the sea," I mean to provide an analytic frame that allows us to leave behind the critical dead end of merely asking whether or not Conrad was racist in the sense that he believed in the racist stereotypes of his contemporaries and utilized them in his writing (21). While my answer to this question would be a qualified "yes" (I think that Chinua Achebe's "An Image of Africa" made this case convincingly in a way that has not been addressed directly³), the way the question is framed suggests that racism within the context of colonialism is merely a matter of personal choice, rather than a fundamental mechanism according to which the colonial order is both conceptualized and made operative. I believe that by redefining the meaning of race in symbolic terms, we are able to free the question of Conrad's racism from the lethargy dictated by a behaviouralist definition of race that trivializes the matter from the beginning,

and effectively quarantines the question of race from formal problems of representation.⁴ Within an interpretive frame such as the one that I utilize in this essay, we are better able to understand Conrad's fascination with racialized bodies, and recognize their centrality to his inquiries into the problems of literary representation.

II. James Wait and the Imaginary Community of Sailors

Despite Conrad's oft-noted cynicism regarding utopian politics (witness, for instance, the portrait of political revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent*), critics have also frequently observed that the community of sailors within the space of the ship, and, more generally, the image of the sea, consistently remain outside of the scope of such skepticism. Caesar Casarino, for instance, notes that in Conrad's fiction (as in Herman Melville's) the "construction of the ship as a hermetic space is ... a central narrative condition of possibility" for imagining an ideal world in contrast to the emergent industrial capitalism that defines late nineteenth-century society. For Casarino, "the removed and privileged perspective of the ship" provides the narrative possibility of imagining an alternative existence (29). Similarly, David Simpson argues that within Conrad's fiction the sea frequently functions as "the image of completion, the repository and synthesizing medium of all created forms" (120). Within Simpson's analysis, the image of the sea provides a synthesis of the contradictions that define life on land in the industrialized metropolitan centers of empire, thereby escaping "complete conflation with the idols of trade." The sea connotes "the resumption of totality and the abolition of difference," and even suggests the possibility of an unalienated "prelapsarian consciousness" (120). While it is important to note that Conrad's use of sea imagery and the space of the ship to imagine an alternative, and sometimes utopian, society frequently escapes the scope of his political pessimism, it is equally important to observe that Conrad's skepticism prevails in a manner that extends to his portrayal of the ship's community in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* To do justice to the complexity of Conrad's imaginings of community among sailors, we must take the role played by the body of James Wait into consideration. In this article I will argue that James Wait's body functions as a mate-

rial manifestation of the Lacanian real, or as an *objet a* and that, as such, Wait's body enables Conrad's imaginings of an ideal community within the space of the ship even while it seems to thwart the realization of this ideal. Stated in somewhat starker terms, I contend that in this novel the very thing that enables an ideal community to be imagined (the black body) is simultaneously perceived as that which prevents the attainment of such a community. Wait's body therefore suggests the fantasy of an ideal communion within the space of the ship in the manner described by Simpson and Casarino but only at the cost of simultaneously rendering the fulfillment of this ideal impossible.

We notice that Wait is experienced as a disruption to the social hierarchy of the ship literally from the moment that his name is introduced in the text. As Mr. Baker, the first mate, performs roll call for the trip from Bombay to London, the crew assembles as a collective body for the first time, and this ritual coming-together at the beginning of the voyage proceeds smoothly until Baker reaches Wait's name. Wait's existence is first felt as an absence; his presence is first signaled by Baker's comment "I am one hand short" (11). Wait appears on the ship as Baker ponders the mystery of the missing sailor whose name appears as an indecipherable "smudge," and when Wait calls out his own name in order to elucidate the meaning of the smudge and signal his presence on the ship, Baker instead perceives the "deep, ringing voice" as a challenge to his authority, a command contradicting his order at the moment he has given up on deciphering the smudge and ordered the men to "Go below" (11). Baker is first disconcerted and "open-mouthed" and then "furious," and, unable to articulate a lucid response, instead babbles incoherently (11). Wait's presence, from the moment of his introduction, is experienced as a disruption of an otherwise smoothly-functioning authority. Yet, we must also recognize that this disruption occurs at the point when Baker first asserts his authority over the men. The fact that Wait's disruptive presence is introduced at the same moment that the crew is constituted as a crew through the ritualistic first gathering at roll call is emphasized by Conrad in this scene, for in the midst of the alternating silence, fury, babble, and fascination that is introduced with Wait's initial audible presence on the *Narcissus*, "the men approached and stood behind him

in a body” (12).⁵ The first indication of their existence as a cohesive group, as opposed to a disconnected collection of individuals, therefore takes place as the fascinated crew is almost magnetically drawn together around Wait’s body in the space created by the auditory confusion resulting from the introduction of his name.

Within this context we are not surprised to discover that Wait’s straightforward factual statements, apparently intended to dissipate the confusion, only serve to deepen it. Thus, Wait’s declaration “I belong to the ship,” an unambiguous statement of fact, takes on a paradoxical set of meanings for the puzzled narrator and crew, much as Wait’s presence at the center of his “brotherhood of the sea” becomes a riddle for Conrad in the preface (21). While Wait’s words, on a literal level, serve as a simple explanation of his presence—he is reporting for duty because he has signed on for the voyage from Bombay to London—this meaning is by no means accepted as the entire significance of the statement. Wait’s statement of belonging is an obvious, accomplished fact—he is officially a member of the crew—but within the context of the passage this belonging is anything but simple. Although his presence is accepted as an unequivocal fact, it seems, nevertheless, simply impossible. Wait’s body, introduced into the text amidst the confusion caused by the mere enunciation of his name, is experienced as a manifestation of this confusion. The sense of impossibility that his presence inspires is overtly racialized from the beginning, when the men are “amazed” to discover that Wait’s face “was black,” which results in a “surprised hum . . . that sounded like the suppressed mutter of the word, ‘Nigger’” (12).⁶ While the crew of the *Narcissus* literally comes into being with the introduction of Wait onto the ship, his existence is experienced as deeply disturbing to the point that it causes amazement and confusion; his presence for some reason immediately inspires the sense of sheer impossibility, and this sense of impossibility centers on the same attributes that mark Wait’s racial difference.

In this scene, the narrator is able to meet this seemingly impossible and explicitly racialized physical presence only with a series of radically divergent statements. Wait’s body forms a space that can simultaneously contain diverse and even antithetical meanings, yet it refuses to yield

any definitive or satisfactory knowledge. He is first described as "calm, cool, towering, [and] superb," an overpowering impression, but one that cannot be sustained even for the space of a short paragraph. This description is immediately countered by a series of seemingly antithetical terms, for Wait also appears to the narrator to be "misshapen" and "tormented," "pathetic and brutal," "tragic," and "repulsive" (12). The violent ambivalence of the narrator and the seemingly equivalent response of the crew as a whole indicate that an *aphanisis*, or splitting of desire that forms "the essential division of the subject," has taken place on both a subjective and communal level around the body of Wait (Mitchell 16). According to Lacan, this "primal separation" (Lacan 83) gives birth to questions of meaning, for through this originary self-division "the subject appears on one side as meaning and on the other as ... disappearance" (qtd. in Mitchell 16). Readers witness an explicit narrative account of this process with the introduction of Wait in the text. Because Wait marks the origin of the symbolic realm of communication for Conrad's ideal community, his presence not only enables questions of meaning to be opened, but also marks their limit. Wait's presence is therefore experienced as an irruption of nonsense, as a material limit of meaning; his body is experienced as a thing to which meaning cannot cohere. No definitive meaning can stick to Wait's body, and we are therefore not surprised that his body, which seems to convey radically divergent and even contradictory impressions simultaneously, becomes the object of the narrator's fascinated gaze, which roams its surfaces as though it might reveal some secret.⁷ He comments that Wait's hands "seemed gloved" and describes Wait's face as "inscrutable" and as a "mysterious ... repulsive mask" (12-13); Wait's individual body parts are described as though they each conceal some important, unsavory, and ultimately impenetrable truth. His face remains "indistinguishable" throughout the passage, despite the detailed observation of particular facial features, especially his eyes and teeth (12).⁸ It quickly becomes apparent that Wait's simultaneously "superb" and "repulsive" physical presence poses a question of meaning, a question that is met with the silence of the crew and with persistent and thoroughly self-divided attempts at expostulation by the narrator. The narrator's attempts to unpack the truths he supposes are hidden behind "the

tragic, the mysterious, the repulsive mask” and within “a nigger’s soul” are never quite satisfactory (12), however, for after a great deal more obsessive scrutiny, several pages later the narrator unambiguously re-states the problem that Wait continually seems to put before him: “[N]o one could tell what was the meaning of that black man” (33). We come away from this scene, in which Wait first appears on the ship, with virtually no knowledge of him apart from an intimate awareness that he radically divides the desire of the narrator as well as the first mate and crew, thereby eluding any definitive or consistent response.

The initial scrutiny of Wait’s body only ends when attention is instead drawn to his booming cough, which strenuously re-emphasizes the disruptive aspect of Wait’s role in instantiating Conrad’s ideal community. The cough is described as “tremendously loud; it resounded like two explosions in a vault; the dome of the sky rang to it, and the iron plates of the ship’s bulwarks seemed to vibrate in unison” (13). Wait’s cough forces both the “dome of the sky” and the body of the ship to resound to its pulsation. The cough is so powerful as to seem to both interrupt and re-establish the natural rhythms of the material universe within which the ship exists. Described in such superlative terms, this cough seems to threaten to blow apart the ship, a threat that we obviously cannot take literally. Instead, we must interpret the narrator’s exaggeration as an expression of his sense that the cough somehow poses an immanent threat to the world in which he moves. In other words, Wait’s cough menaces his ideal society of the ship, his “small planet,” at the moment of, and at the point of, its formation (21). Wait’s physical and audible presence is not only distressingly resistant to meaning; it also seems to portend some form of devastating disruption to Conrad’s ideal society.

In the scene of Wait’s introduction, the community of the ship is threatened by the very object that marks the point of its origin, or the point around which it forms and re-forms, defines and redefines itself. Here, readers witness the dialectic of identity initiated by the introduction of Wait. If he brings the possibility of meaning initiated by the division of desire, he simultaneously marks the point of its “disappearance” and is therefore encountered as an irruption of non-sense in the midst of meaning. In sum, Wait is encountered as the inassimilable outside of the

symbolic order to which he gives birth, holding forth the possibility of its destruction, emphasizing its fragility and incompleteness with each groan, cough, or enunciation through which the community is re-instantiated by virtue of his always incomplete exclusion. Wait, who threatens to destroy the ideal community of the ship at the same time that he serves as its constitutive element, demonstrates that within the fictive world of the *Narcissus*, the very possibility of "the one," or of an ideal, self-identical totality, "is introduced by the experience of . . . rupture" (Lacan 26). In these terms, it is significant that the world of the *Narcissus*—described as an ideal, self-enclosed world, as "a fragment detached from the earth" that carries with itself a "great circular solitude" and is "guided by the courage of a high endeavor," which isolates itself from "the sordid inspiration of her pilgrimage"—can only be imagined through the prism of "The Nigger" who is the constant source of disruption within this ideal world, serving both as its center and its outside (21). It seems that the imaginary unity that defines Conrad's ideal society of the ship can only be thought through the prism of its own disruption.

Immediately following Wait's forceful, disruptive cough we are told that Wait's words, as he requests help with his luggage, "spoken sonorously, with an even intonation, were heard all over the ship, and the question was put in a manner that made refusal impossible" (13). While the narrator perceives Wait's cough to be so powerful as to establish the rhythms of the material universe, forcing the world to respond to its own cadences, in the latter passage Wait's voice has the same effect on the human universe. Just as the statement of his name is mistaken for a command counteracting the authority of the mate, his voice is perceived as issuing a demand, to which all within earshot have no choice but to respond. A seemingly banal request for help with luggage takes on the meaning of a forceful demand to which "refusal [was] impossible."

What is the nature of the strange demand that cannot be refused and that is issued by Wait through the simple fact of his physical and audible presence on the ship? In what way should we understand Wait's voice, which issues a demand that is strangely in excess of his seemingly simple and straightforward statements? How should we interpret the strange fascination of the lingering gaze that searches obsessively for a visible

clue to the riddle that is posed by Wait's body? It is a body that yields none of the truth that it seems to promise, and instead acts as a source of renewed desire in the form of a scopic drive that lingers on his physical features as though they conceal some important secret that always exceeds any knowledge that they yield.

In order to answer these questions, we should turn to the mutiny scene, in which the problems of meaning posed by Wait are staged in the starkest form imaginable.⁹ As the story progresses beyond the introduction of Wait, the desire of the crew for some conclusive and final discovery regarding the mystery that he poses comes to focus on the issue of whether or not Wait is actually as ill as he appears to be.¹⁰ Their inability to settle the question of Wait's illness culminates in an insurrection on the *Narcissus*, which is set off when Wait insists on returning to work, only to have his demand refused by the captain. The fact that the men rebel, however, is not simply a result of the belief that Wait has been faking his sickness and should have been working all along, or that he has been sick but has recovered from his illness and therefore deserves to return to his duties. Rather, the rebellion seems to result from the refusal to accept any final determination regarding Wait's condition. It is therefore only when the captain finally officially pronounces Wait to be ill that the crew engages in rebellion. The crew's cries of outrage indicate a continued irresolution regarding Wait's illness, varying from "We have been hymposed upon this whole voyage," implying that Wait was never actually ill, to "a sick chap ain't allowed to get well in this 'ere hooker?" implying that Wait actually was ill and should therefore now be allowed to return to work (89). As the confusion increases, the men lose any semblance of group cohesion and deteriorate into "gesticulating shadows that growled, hissed, [and] laughed excitedly" (89). In this violent reaction to any resolution regarding the ultimate meaning of Wait's illness, which threatens to erupt into the literal overthrow of the communal order of the ship, we discern what type of demand is passively issued by Wait through the very fact of presence. His indeterminately ill body cannot be declared definitely ill because any attribution of a definitive meaning to his body would rob it of its function as the central fetish around which Conrad's ideal communi-

ty is organized. This refusal to accept any resolution regarding Wait is staged most dramatically when Captain Allistoun effectively squashes the potential rebellion by directly confronting the crew with the question of their own desire, bluntly asking them, "What do you want?" (98). When confronted in this manner, the entire crew is struck dumb. Significantly, Conrad depicts this silence in terms of an imaginary confrontation with an obscenely grinning Wait, "chuckling painfully over his transparent deceptions" (98). As the crew engages in this imaginary confrontation with James Wait and attempts to put the confused, fascinated frustration that he somehow inspires in them into language, "all the simple words they knew seemed to be lost forever in the immensity of their vague and burning desire," and "although they knew what they wanted . . . they could not find anything worth saying" (98–99). Their "desire" in this scene can only be collectively imagined in the form of a laughing, mocking Wait, and although this imaginary confrontation with Wait clarifies their desire—we are told that "they knew what they wanted" for the first time—"the immensity of their vague and burning desire" inspired by the imaginary Wait simultaneously dries up all of their words. Confronted with the object of their desire, the crew experiences a profound and definitive failure of enunciation, a failure that is never elucidated in the text, for the narrator never explains, or is unable to explain, the desire inspired by Wait. We might also note that this very failure is laboriously underscored as Captain Allistoun bullies the crew in the wake of this failure. He first asks if they want more food, then less work, and his questions are met with an "offended silence" (99).

The fact that the crew is offended by the Captain's insistence of attaching an object to their desire tells us something about the sort of desire that Wait inspires. Alenka Zupančič asserts that

desire can be defined precisely as the *pure form of demand*, as that which remains of demand when all the particular objects . . . that may come to satisfy it are removed. Hence the *objet petit a* can be understood as a void that has acquired a form. In Lacan's words: "Object *a* is no being. Object *a* is the void presupposed by a demand." (18)

It would seem that Wait's body and voice fill this role, the role of the *objet a*, within the community of sailors on the *Narcissus*. As the narrator elaborately emphasizes in this scene, Wait's sick black body serves as the "void presupposed by a demand," the thing that inspires the purely formal demand that cannot be attached to any definitive end or limited by any object. His body acts, in other words, as a thing that inspires a "vague and burning desire" (Conrad 98) that no particular object can satisfy. The narrator emphasizes precisely this aspect of the desire inspired by Wait in his account of the crew's confrontation with the captain. In this scene Conrad's interrogation of the conditions of his persistent imaginings of the community of the ship baldly reveals the Nigger to be the thing that is denied symbolic existence in order that such existence might arise elsewhere. And this is, finally, Conrad's own view of the Nigger as set forth in the preface: the Nigger must simultaneously serve as the "centre of the ship's collective psychology" and remain "nothing," the thing with no being from which the being of the community arises (xlv).

With this staging of the crew's unwillingness to allow any definitive meaning to be attributed to Wait, we witness a dramatic exhibition of the Lacanian dictum that "desire is the desire of the Other" which cannot be positively conceived "other than by destroying ... oneself" (Lacan 38–39). Readers therefore realize that, on the one hand, the imaginary confrontation with the Nigger as the object on which their communal desire centres and through which it is defined and given the semblance of self-consistency, results in the near dissolution of the community. On the other hand, readers also come to realize that the strange demand, admitting of no refusal, which is somehow perceived in Wait's most banal statements, is in fact a demand that is placed upon him by the ship's symbolic order, which requires that he serve the function of sustaining desire. The crew's refusal to accept any final determination regarding the meaning of the symptoms of Wait's illness also demonstrates that this desire can only be sustained to the extent that Wait is preserved as an empty placeholder of the real, for we cannot help but see that their desire, in this scene, "implies a certain dialectical mediation: we demand something, but what we are really aiming at through this demand is something else—sometimes the very refusal of the demand in its literal-

ity" (Žižek 21). In the mutiny scene, the desire to force Wait to reveal his "secret" is demonstrated to be just such a demand.

The symptoms of illness, which on Wait's body acquire an uncanny quality, turn out to be nothing other than symptoms of illness, and the "mask" of Wait's face, we discover, conceals no mysterious secret, or at least none that can put to rest the desire inspired by its presence. Wait's face presents us with a Lacanian veil, an uncanny mask that hides nothing other than the illusion that it hides something (Lacan 111). Significantly, it is when Wait's death seems imminent and obvious that the crew displays the greatest confusion regarding his illness. In this light, the narrator's statement that "a nigger does not show" should, perhaps, be read as "a nigger *cannot* show," because, in the terms set out in this novel, "not showing" is what a nigger does (32). A "nigger," in other words, is precisely a human *objet a* that has the function of "not showing."

III. Conclusion

In *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* the examination of the problem of meaning leads Conrad to the discovery of the empty form of desire, and this empty form is figured in terms of the black body and voice of James Wait. Alternately, we might state that within this novel, the black body and voice consistently pose the question of meaning, and not of particular meanings, but the problem of how meaning is possible at all. We must therefore acknowledge that within *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* race cannot be adequately understood in terms of whether or not the author was a racist in a behaviouralist sense, although this question has largely defined the problem of race in Conrad's writing during the past thirty years. Such a critical frame is entirely inadequate for any substantive inquiry into the meaning of race in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* because race cannot be reduced to any particular content that can be dismissed as a superficial matter in relation to "deeper" or more fundamental issues of form. Even if we accept the opposition of form and content as both a useful distinction and a legitimate way to privilege certain issues over others, we have to recognize that race is, in fact, a formal issue within the novel. Race cannot, in this case, be construed as matter of a particu-

lar content that can be included or excluded while the formal integrity of the text is maintained. Rather, it is the racial body that opens up the space within which Conrad's inquiry into community and subjectivity take place. Within this novel, the single black body in the midst of an otherwise all-white crew serves as the constitutive exclusion around which Conrad's investigation into the possibility of ideal community takes place.¹¹ In his persistent inquiries regarding the possibility of an untroubled and self-identical being, the narrator is unable to imagine an ideal, unalienated existence without imagining this existence through the prism of a black body, a body that seems to thwart its fulfillment. What Conrad's narrator therefore discovers is not an edenic, untroubled being-for-itself; rather, in the course of his questionings, he reiteratively uncovers a racialized body functioning as an empty form of desire, an *objet a*, at the limit of the subject and the community.

Notes

- 1 Watt comments on the role of this document as a transitional piece bridging nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic theories in his discussion of literary "impressionism" (76–87). See also his comments on this topic in "Conrad's Preface." See also Jameson's analysis of the language and aesthetics of *Narcissus* (206–80).
- 2 Although Wait's racial status has been the subject of many discussions of the novel, the question of the role of race is persistently separated from inquiries into the (characteristically modernist) problem of meaning in the novel. That is to say, critics tend to address either one or the other of these topics, but they are not viewed as interconnected problems. For significant exceptions to this critical trend, see chapter two of Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism*, discussed in note 8. Also see Messenger and Marcus, who both argue that problems of meaning in the novel center on Wait's body.
- 3 Messenger's comment regarding Conrad's racism is, I think, incisive in exposing the overall futility of this debate: Conrad is exceptional for his "ability both to replicate imperialist racist prejudices and to contest them"—simultaneously, I would add (65). See also Achebe. The responses to his essay have been legion and have effectively dominated inquiries into the meaning of race in Conrad's work in the thirty years since its appearance. A comparatively limited number of works have been produced during this period that address the issue of race in Conrad's fiction outside of the reductive parameters dictated by this debate. In addition to the previously mentioned works of North, Messenger,

and Marcus, see Andrade, London, and Said for important exceptions to this trend. Esonwanne notes that the impact of Lacanian thought within Conrad criticism has, so far, been "negligible" (202). I believe that my approach of reading the textual production of race in terms of the Lacanian "real," and using this reading to emphasize how race functions as a fundamental structural and formal aspect of Conrad's work, is unique.

- 4 Firchow's *Envisioning Africa* opens with a behaviourist definition of racism and clearly demonstrates the limitations of such a definition for a substantive inquiry into the meaning of race. We might note, for instance, based on Firchow's questionable definition of "racism," that Conrad was more racist in his attitude toward Belgians than Africans (9–10).
- 5 Marcus asserts that Wait, in this scene, becomes "the catalyst around which the text and the crew uneasily and unwillingly converge and contradict themselves" (41).
- 6 North explains the importance of Wait's cough as a disruptive force in *The Nigger of the "Narcissus."* He argues that the frequently identified modernist impulse in this work can be understood as an extreme tension between the wish for a language capable of conveying important sensual truths, expressed by Conrad in the preface, and a fear of the impossibility of attaining this goal, which is the motivating force of the novel itself. This tension is expressed through a focus on "the asignifying aspects of language" that hold forth the possibility of "phatic communion" (North 51, 54). The promise of an experience of solidarity that bypasses the mediation of the construction of meaning and in doing so achieves an immediacy of experience that can be expressed only in terms of its sensual impact is repeatedly disrupted, however, by the existence of linguistic and cultural barriers, for "nothing is more particular, less easily translatable," than the asignifying aspects of language (47). According to North, this disruption is consistently figured as racial difference within *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* expressed as both the auditory disturbances of the rhythms of the ship provided by Wait's cough and, later, his death groans, and in the visual register as the inscrutable black mask that is Wait's face: "[A] nigger does not show" (*Narcissus* 32). In this reading, both the black voice and the black body become symbols that absorb the central contradictions of a modernist theory of language.

From the standpoint of my argument, the asignifying hum that is somehow experienced as the word "Nigger" in this scene would underscore the fact that Conrad's ideal of "phatic communion" is, from its inception, founded on the condition of its own rupture, for such ideal communion is depicted in this scene as somehow expressive of the very thing (the "Nigger") that seems to prevent it from being fully realized.

- 7 Stockdale argues that Conrad's dominant figure for the problem of meaning in *Narcissus* is that of "a surface which must be penetrated."

- 8 Bonney notes that the narrator is “incapable of comprehending the visual signals” conveyed by Wait, rendering “the Nigger ... essentially inaccessible” despite the narrator’s continual scrutiny (570).
- 9 Levenson argues that because *Narcissus* presents “a plea for order and community ... in the face of the ‘modernizing habits’ of individualism and class antagonism ... the near-mutiny aboard the *Narcissus* ... is the dramatic center of a cautionary tale” (101).
- 10 Messenger suggests that Conrad’s choice of tuberculosis as Wait’s illness is very deliberate. He quotes Susan Sontag, noting that it is “a disease ‘rich in visible symptoms’ ... with sudden remissions and relapses,” and that for these reasons Conrad’s contemporaries thought of tuberculosis as a “deceptive illness” (72). Marcus develops this point, arguing that not only was tuberculosis thought to be deceptive, but (also quoting Sontag) “morally, if not literally, contagious” (43).
- 11 As Batchelor points out the world that the *Narcissus* represents in microcosm is shown to be England. Conrad, for instance, refers to England as a “ship mother of fleets and nations, a great flagship of the race” (120–21). In this context, Batchelor finds it significant that the fictional crew of the *Narcissus* is much more English than that of the *Narcissus* on which Conrad actually sailed (36).

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