

## WHEN WILLIE MET GATSBY: THE CRITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ERNESTO QUIÑONEZ'S *BODEGA DREAMS*

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I first heard about Ernesto Quiñonez's *Bodega Dreams* through a student, an interesting reversal of the entrenched academic hierarchy wherein we professors are the ones who tell our students about good literature. This reversal is also very much in keeping with what interests me in this article, for my subject is the postmodern appropriation by Ernesto Quiñonez of a modernist classic—F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. And with this appropriation comes the questioning—perhaps even the disabling—of certain modernist hierarchies. The student who recommended *Bodega Dreams* did not say, “This book reminds me of *The Great Gatsby*”; indeed, he probably had not read *Gatsby* since high school. But he loved the book and wanted to share it. To him it was a good book about a Latino American dreamer. But to anyone who has recently read Fitzgerald's classic, there is no mistaking the fact that Ernesto Quiñonez is consciously rethinking it. In this article I would like to analyze *Bodega Dreams* as a commentary on the transformation of the American dream in postmodern America and, at the same time, to theorize Quiñonez's position as a contemporary Latino writer confronting the American literary canon.

To refresh the memories of those who have not read *Gatsby* for a while, it is in many ways a classic American modernist text.<sup>1</sup> The protagonist, Jay Gatsby, in aspiring to move from one class to another, is at home in neither. Isolated, but following his own moral compass, he seeks to win success and status in the America of the 1920s, embodied in the person of the rich and beautiful Daisy Buchanan. Having been rebuffed by her family when he is a young army officer because of his lack of money, he makes a huge fortune through bootlegging and then buys a showy mansion in West Egg, across the

bay from East Egg where Daisy lives with her husband Tom. Gatsby's first appearance in the book finds him stretching out his arms in the darkness toward the green light on the dock of Daisy's house across the water. The book is a classic tale of naïve optimism, corner-cutting, aspiration, and commercialism that we recognize as a familiar variety of the American dream. This dream, which Gatsby briefly attains, proves elusive and betrays him, leaving him shot dead for a crime he did not commit, floating alone in his swimming pool. The story is narrated by Gatsby's next-door neighbor Nick Carraway who, like Gatsby, is a loner, a refugee from the Midwest, and a person who is uncomfortable in upper-class American society. At the story's end, after his oft-quoted peroration about the wonder and beauty of the American continent and the dogged optimism of those dreamers who beat endlessly against the current, Nick withdraws—alone still—to the Midwest.

*Bodega Dreams* consciously (one might even say ostentatiously) borrows many of *Gatsby's* themes and key episodes. From its eponymous hero Willie Bodega, to the pointed mention of a green light toward which he aspires; from the telling of the tale by an individual whose familial ties are used to reacquaint the hero with the woman whom he loves, to the grudging testimonial about that hero's goodness at the story's end, the similarities abound. When I was trying to explain the concept of intertextuality to a class of mine, I used this book as an example. And one student asked, perplexed, "Isn't that plagiarism?" This was not as naïve a question as it first appears, for Quiñonez is giving a good deal more than just a nod to Fitzgerald's book. But if it isn't homage and it isn't ineptitude or lack of imagination (or plagiarism), then what is it? And more importantly, what does Quiñonez's action accomplish?

My answer is that Quiñonez's project falls under the rubric of "imitation," and that it accomplishes a great deal. Imitation is as old as literary history, but the motives for it and the explanations of it depend heavily on the social position of its writer or expositor. For example, Harold Bloom, the polymath of modernist criticism, writes about the "anxiety of influence" felt by successor poets towards their precursors. Not surprisingly, Bloom models his theory on Freudian notions of rivalries between fathers and sons, and posits that younger "strong" poets "misread" their elders in different ways so as to "clear imaginative space for themselves" (5). He notes the "creative mind's desperate insistence on priority" (13), assuming in his model that the struggle is primarily personal and psychological, rather than social and cultural. His theory acknowledges and prioritizes the role of the ego in the work of the great male poets. It also assumes that a critic

can readily perceive which poets are “strong.” Women, colonized peoples, and those who inhabit the margins of society because of their race or ethnicity are not directly addressed. Bloom assumes either that they will not be players at all, or that if they are, they will follow the patterns of the “strong” males.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* modify Bloom’s theory to allow for the struggle of the woman author. They suggest that until the mid-twentieth century, female authors had few precursors of their own sex, and as a result they were reduced to male impersonation, with its resultant sense of freakishness, or to searching ardently for buried role models from the past. Their anxiety, according to Gilbert and Gubar, has been, not one of influence, but instead a battle over their male precursors’ view of the world. There is an “anxiety of authorship” and a struggle against male authors’ conceptions of them as a group forbidden to write. I say that Gilbert and Gubar “modify” Bloom’s theory because they retain the idea of literary history as struggle. But they also expand Bloom’s field of vision and take the argument in a new direction by suggesting that the struggle of women authors with their precursors is not a “battle between strong equals” (6). Instead it is a contest between unequals, between the powerful and the powerless—one that calls for subversive tactics rather than direct confrontation. Gilbert and Gubar see nineteenth-century women authors as “revising” and telling their own stories “in disguise,” hiding their messages below the surface in order to subvert patriarchal norms (73). In essence they are expanding on Adrienne Rich’s 1971 essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” where she asserts that the woman writer’s activity of “entering an old text from a new critical direction” is less a new chapter in literary history than an “act of survival” (167). For her, as for Gilbert and Gubar, the imitative positions of the combatants differ from men’s in works by women authors, but the concept of literary history as a struggle remains.

Writers from colonized countries (or as Frantz Fanon refers to them, “native intellectuals”) are, like women writers, far less concerned about outdoing their precursors than they are about being heard at all. However, unlike women writers—who have been ignored or dismissed—native intellectuals have been perceived as a political threat. The colonizers have worked actively to estrange these “perverse offspring” from their own cultures. The anxieties of the colonized, then, have been more intense; native intellectuals have feared not only being “swamped” by the dominant Western culture but also “losing their lives and [...] becoming lost to their people” (209). According to Fanon, the literary production of native intellectuals progresses from

imitating their colonizers to recuperating their pre-colonial literature to a third, forward-looking phase in which they “shake the people awake” (222). In this final phase, these writers modernize past traditions. By using their own past and openly alluding to it, the native intellectuals revitalize, legitimize, and bolster the present struggle. In modifying and modernizing the tradition, they become part of it. Their audience changes from their colonizers to their own people.

Although Quiñonez as a Latino would seem to have much in common with both women and postcolonial writers, *Bodega Dreams* lacks the nineteenth-century woman writer’s intent of hiding critique, of writing “in disguise,” and the postcolonial writer’s angry urgency. There is no hiding here and no mistaking the precursor to whom Quiñonez is alluding. One could certainly say that Quiñonez is doing what Adrienne Rich suggested twentieth-century women writers should do, entering an old text from a new critical direction, but his intent does not seem subversive. Although Quiñonez has entered an American classic from a new direction and has treated that classic as part of his own past and then modernized it (as Frantz Fanon has suggested native intellectuals should do), he seems much more serene than they are in his position. The anxiety and the anger, as well as the metaphors of struggle, have receded, if not totally disappeared. Rather than dismissing Quiñonez as someone who has been co-opted by the literary establishment, I would like to put forth a third paradigm of imitation that this contemporary Latino author may be following. For want of a better term, I will refer to it as the Renaissance paradigm. Its signature lies in its preoccupation with the furthering of the author’s national culture. While the author’s motives are not totally impersonal, his gaze is outward rather than inward. He sees himself as a good citizen trying to advance his culture rather than an individual struggling to make a space for himself in a hostile environment.

Just as Willie Bodega, the protagonist of *Bodega Dreams*, shows a sociological, postmodern concern for a group rather than just for himself as an individual, so does his creator Ernesto Quiñonez. In an online interview Quiñonez noted:

I think that publishing has a golden opportunity to do what it did in the postwar years of the 50s and 60s with Jewish literature, when you had Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, Bernard Malamud, I. B. Singer, Henry Roth, all those heavyweights. No one in their right mind would now think of teaching American Literature without mentioning those writers, yet once they were considered the outcast. Now they are no longer classified as Jewish literature; instead, they are “literature”—part of the canon.

Now Latino literature is poised to achieve the same recognition. The publishing world needs to continue to recognize our writers and the audience that exists for our stories, both in the Latino community and within the mainstream. (“Author Q & A”)

Quiñonez’s concern for recognition of “our writers” both within the Latino community and the mainstream indicates that his writing has a social dimension. He considers himself part of a specific writing community and desires the recognition and acceptance of that community.

This concern for Latinos and for Latino literature recalls nothing so much as European Renaissance writers trying to assure the validity of their own vernacular literature by imitating classical models (or other successful European models). Renaissance critic Mark Taylor has noted that “imitation, certainly in the Renaissance, follows from a recognition of the permanence of the model. When Petrarch imitates Virgil or Ovid, he is deliberately trying to do for Italian letters what they had done for Latin letters; even more, he is trying to create a modern Italy that is a worthy successor to the ancient one (hence his decision to be crowned laureate in Rome rather than Paris).” Furthermore, Taylor notes that “when Wyatt translates and imitates Petrarch, he is ratifying Petrarch’s success and is trying to do for English letters what Petrarch had done for modern Italian letters” (Email). Of course, there is ego involved here, but the writers’ enterprises are enlarged (and their personal psychological anxieties are blunted) by their aspirations for their cultures.

Although contemporary adherence to this cultural position could well be fraught with anxiety over legitimacy or survival, neither Ernesto Quiñonez nor his novel shows rhetorical evidence of such insecurity. When he talks about legitimizing ethnic literatures, he sounds more like the Renaissance critic than the modernist, feminist, or postcolonial writer. He speaks not in terms of warlike struggle but of sport. Alluding to two of his well-known Latino contemporaries, he says, “Junot Diaz and Sandra Cisneros may prove to be our equivalent of [mainstream Jewish writers and Nobel Prize winners] Singer and Bellow; they are two heavyweights about to be permanently crowned” (“Author Q & A”). No, this is not exactly the equivalent of Taylor’s allusion to Petrarch’s coronation as poet laureate, but it can be seen as a contemporary rewriting of it. After all, sporting crowns are often laurels. And Quiñonez is well aware that his slangy use of the term “heavyweight” goes beyond the boxing metaphor into the literary realm where these two Latino authors are designated as talents to be reckoned with.

Imitation not only enlightens readers as to the intentions of the successor author, it also opens new perspectives on the time in which he is living and on the time to which he is alluding. If *Bodega Dreams* is the reimagining of a modernist classic in the postmodern era, then its points of divergence from *The Great Gatsby* will tell us a good deal about the state of the American Dream in postmodern America. I would like to look at just a few areas (though there are many more) that demonstrate Quiñonez's vision and revision of aspiration in America at the turn of the twentieth century. The first and most striking instance lies in the construction of his book's hero. Unlike Jay Gatsby, Willie Bodega has no desire to move out of his neighborhood. And although like Gatsby he has taken on another name, it is not to hide from his former life. Indeed, it is the reverse. Everyone in the *barrio* takes on a new name to indicate that he *belongs*—hence the narrator Julio Mercado becomes Chino and the former Young Lord William Irizarry becomes Willie Bodega. Bodega's dream is not to become *someone* else but to make his neighborhood *somewhere* else. He doesn't simply want to change his own class; he wants the entire *barrio* to experience mobility into the middle class as well. Thus, though like Gatsby he makes his fortune dealing with a controlled substance—in his case, drugs—Willie Bodega's money is to benefit a community, not just an individual. And he doesn't buy a huge house like Gatsby; he buys *housing*—old buildings that he renovates and rents to *barrio* residents.

This preoccupation with the fortunes of a group rather than with one's individual life strikes me as peculiarly postmodern, for it destabilizes the modernist image of the alienated striving hero and replaces it with the strivings of a community of outsiders. Willie Bodega is preoccupied not with the rich (who are few) but with the poor (who are many). Accordingly, his narrator Chino Mercado—*his* Nick Carraway—is not a loner, but rather a married man with a pregnant wife. Chino and his wife Blanca, at the outset of the story, aspire to leave the *barrio*; they are both in college and dream of a house in the suburbs. By the story's end, however, they have become—almost without noticing the change—committed residents of the *barrio*. It is not only their pleasant apartment in one of Bodega's renovated buildings that has made them want to stay; it is Bodega's death and Chino's gradual acceptance that he and other denizens of the *barrio* must try to further Bodega's plans. The last pages of the story see him taking in an old man and his grandson who have newly arrived from Florida. They have been given Bodega's name, and when Chino says they can stay in his apartment until they get settled, the man asks tellingly, "Are you Willie Bodega?" Bodega by this time is

dead, but unlike Gatsby, not forgotten. He lives in others. Chino is not Willie Bodega but he is doing some of Willie's work.

Even the names of the two narrators in relationship to the two books' heroes reflect the modern/postmodern split in their authors' sensibilities. Gatsby, readers always remember, is a man who cares so deeply about his dream, in the person of Daisy, that he tries to protect her with his own life. He does so by taking the blame for her hit-and-run killing of Myrtle Wilson, an action that contrasts sharply to the "careless" Daisy and her husband Tom, who retreat into their mansion as if they've had nothing to do with the ugliness. All readers of *Gatsby* remember Nick's famous line toward the story's end when Daisy goes back to her husband: "They were careless people, Tom and Daisy" (180). Nick, whose last name is Carraway (care-away), seems to *care* for Gatsby, but in the end he goes *away*. Chino, in contrast, not only stays, but, as his surname Mercado suggests, will carry on Bodega's aspirations in a more evolved, more assimilated way. In name and in purpose, *bodega* (Spanish for those little grocery stores, often associated in the *barrio* with the selling of drugs) becomes *mercado* (a larger, more legitimate American market).

Even Bodega's fixation with the woman whom he has amassed his fortune to impress has a postmodern spin to it. Bodega's Daisy Buchanan is Vera Saldivia, whose parents married her off to a rich Cuban because they saw no future for her and the penniless Young Lord (Bodega) who loved her in the late 1970s. Vera, like Daisy, will betray the man who has idealized her and made himself important to catch her attention. Her flaw, however, is not carelessness, but ambition. Daisy betrays only Gatsby, but Vera betrays both her community and Bodega. When she leaves the *barrio* as a young girl, she changes her name from Veronica to Vera and adopts Anglo ways. When, through Bodega's machinations, she returns to the community, it is not to affirm his dreams (which she does not care about at all) but instead to displace him and take up with his socially polished lawyer and supposed friend, Edwin Nazario. Although she has returned to the community, she cares only for herself and works only to advance her own personal position.

But if Vera has no use for Bodega and indeed is complicit in his death, she cannot totally defeat him because his American dream is not individual but communal. His funeral, a striking contrast to Gatsby's, reinforces this point. No one comes to Gatsby's funeral except his father and Nick and one other unnamed mourner, whose impromptu eulogy, "The poor son of a bitch," underlines Gatsby's lonely failure. Everyone goes to Gatsby's elaborate parties, but nobody cares to know him and nobody pays respects to him when he dies. In

contrast, Bodega's funeral is a three-day affair, recalling the death of a head of state. People wait in long snaking lines that back up onto Fifth Avenue as far down as the Guggenheim Museum to view his casket. They remember what he did for them and share their memories of him with one another. Quiñonez underlines Bodega's impact in his community and endorses his dreams by placing famous Latino artists, writers, and community activists on the scene. "Nearly the entire East Harlem aristocracy" (208) is at the graveside. He is no "poor son-of-a-bitch" to them; he is a part of their life that they wish to acknowledge. This is the postmodern American dream, enacted in an ethnic community; it is not the lonely striving of a Gatsbyesque hero but rather the response of a group to a leader—not Anglo-conformity but ethnic pride. And although Bodega is personally betrayed and disappointed, his dream is not only made coherent by its retelling, it is also disseminated in his community.

When *The Great Gatsby* ends, Nick is alone trying to give Gatsby's dream a life by retelling his story. But when *Bodega Dreams* ends, Willie Bodega comes back to Chino in a dream so that they may *together* look at the *barrio* and appreciate its vitality and imagine its future. Bodega's story is not just in the past but also in the future. There is no lonely modernist striving while being beaten backward by the tides for Bodega and company. Instead we read, "Tomorrow Spanish Harlem would run faster, fly higher, stretch out its arms farther, and one day those dreams would carry its people to new beginnings. [...] The neighborhood might have been down, but it was far from out. Its people far from defeat. They had been bounced all over the place but they were still jamming. It seemed like a good place to start" (213). Quiñonez takes Fitzgerald's phrases—"run faster" and "stretch out our arms farther" and with them gives his characters forward momentum rather than having them beating "against the current, born back ceaselessly into the past" (182). Furthermore, he speaks of a new language that mixes both Spanish and English in which their story will be told.

Although it may come across as criticism of the modernist position or an evolution out of it, Quiñonez's imitation of *Gatsby* may also be read as a conversation with it. For imitation—especially Renaissance imitation—is not simply a one-way process. Mark Taylor, in explicating Petrarch's famous letter to Boccaccio on the subject, concludes that the act of imitation, while creating a new work, has "reciprocal benefits" for the older work, which becomes better understood because of the new work's appearance (*Shakespeare's Imitations* 25). And indeed, Quiñonez's interest in *The Great Gatsby* does open it up in new and interesting ways. In treating Fitzgerald's classic as a product of a

successful culture that is to be imitated (following the Renaissance paradigm of an author trying to legitimize his own emerging culture), Quiñonez invites readers to look at *Gatsby* with new eyes. As a result we can see *Gatsby* not only as a modernist classic but also as a work rooted in Fitzgerald's own ethnic past—an immigrant tale. By alluding to *Gatsby* and updating it, Quiñonez articulates the interest of contemporary immigrants and ethnic groups while at the same time helping readers to see these elements in the original work.

This expansion of *Gatsby* so that it may be read as an immigrant text makes a good deal of sense, given Fitzgerald's background. F. Scott Fitzgerald's ancestors came from both the seventeenth-century American establishment and the nineteenth-century immigrant masses, and so he had an appreciation of the life of the ethnic outsider, as well of as the clubbiness of those inside. One branch of the Fitzgerald family was descended from the early Maryland Catholic nobility; the other, according to Fitzgerald, was "straight 1850 Potato Famine Irish" (Mizener 2). Even into his own generation, Fitzgerald's class status remained divided. His family had been quite well off, but both his father and his grandfather had suffered financial reverses. He therefore knew what it was like to be rich, even though he spent his youth as "a poor boy in a rich town; a poor boy in a rich school; a poor boy in a rich man's club at Princeton" (Turnbull 150). One of the last things the Irish-American Fitzgerald would have admitted to was a greenhorn insecurity, but his personal behavior clearly manifested it, and his fiction showed a knowing understanding of it. If his hero Jay Gatsby's life in some respects parallels his own, it also recalls the familiar struggles of American immigrants. Gatsby possesses "an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness" (2) that is the stuff of immigrant dreams, and he is also inherently commercial in mindset and absurdly taken with notion of what money can buy. His intensely focused life makes him a candidate for dizzying successes as well as a target for violence and premature death—all staples of American immigrant life.<sup>2</sup>

There is also much in Gatsby's migration to the East Coast from rural North Dakota that makes his story sound like an immigrant's. He leaves home to seek his fortune and, as he steps aboard the boat (in this case, millionaire Dan Cody's yacht), he changes his name from James Gatz to the very Anglo-sounding Jay Gatsby. He is a poor boy, but he works hard, learns a great deal, and is cheated out of one fortune only to make another—by doing some cheating himself. His attraction to business, as well as his willingness to cut corners, reenacts immigrant behavior in both fiction and reality. His stint in the army during World War I and his subsequent brief stay at Oxford,

thanks to the army, foster in him the sense that he is the equal of any man in America. And, indeed, it is while he is in uniform that Daisy Fay meets him and falls in love with him. But the army's egalitarianism betrays Gatsby, as it has betrayed so many immigrants when they return to civilian life, for Daisy loses interest while he is away and ends up marrying a man of her own class, Tom Buchanan.<sup>3</sup>

If Gatsby is bamboozled by the American dream and, like his creator, overimpressed by the aura of wealth, he is nevertheless shown to be ennobled by his aspirations and his belief in "the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us" (182). Yes, he has underworld connections and foolish ideas about the possibility of his acceptance in established American society, but he also has a sense of decency. He gallantly defends his image of America—Daisy Buchanan—from public shame by assuming the blame for her hit-and-run killing of Myrtle Wilson. Gatsby has that conservative immigrant sense of value that Daisy, Tom, and their crowd have lost. He cares, while they are "careless" (180), and this is what makes him—as the title suggests—great. But the term "the Great Gatsby" also suggests a second-rate magician or circus performer. And indeed, through a less romantic lens, Gatsby's pursuit of his dream can be read as so much immigrant awkwardness and longing.

Although Fitzgerald would have us think that Gatsby's transformation is not born of obvious social pressure but of desire, that desire is driven by his sense of himself as an outsider. He has the wrong ancestors, the wrong address, the wrong amount of money in his pocket. Gatsby changes his name, his clothes, his neighborhood, but he never gains acceptance because he can't—as Horace Kallen once said of America's immigrants—"change [his] grandfathers" (91). In the eyes of the careless rich of East Egg, he therefore has no substance, no real existence to be acknowledged. They go to his parties without the slightest nod to him as their host; they neither greet him when they arrive nor thank him when they leave. They ignore his bodily existence to such a degree that they do not even attend his funeral. This unwillingness on the part of the dominant group to acknowledge an outsider's physical presence is a phenomenon to which immigrants are well accustomed.<sup>4</sup>

The book's readers—in contrast to the upper-class rich of East Egg—genuinely wonder about Gatsby's sketchy background. Is his family Jewish? Fitzgerald flirts with this idea, giving his hero the Jewish-sounding surname of Gatz. Although Gatsby's family are North Dakota farmers, a seemingly unlikely line of work for American Jews, there indeed were such Jewish settlers in the Dakotas (Davidson 212). Furthermore, it is a Jew, Meyer Wolfsheim, who functions as

Gatsby's surrogate father and raises him "up out of the gutter, out of nothing" (172). Fitzgerald was not Jewish, but as a Minnesota-born Irish Catholic, he had, like Gatsby, a love affair with America's dominant group, the upper-class Protestant rich. And he knew well the attendant drawbacks and insecurities born of membership in an ethnic minority.

In *The Great Gatsby* Tom Buchanan functions as a representative of the country's dominant group, mean in spirit and nativist in learning. A blunt-spoken philistine, he recommends to Nick Carraway a book called *The Rise of the Colored Empires*, whose author, a man named Goddard, warns that the white race is in danger of becoming "utterly submerged." Arthur Mizener suggests that the book's title is meant to recall Lothrop Stoddard's *The Rising Tide of Color*, a racist diatribe published in 1921. It probably also owes something to Madison Grant's 1916 paean to Nordic superiority, *The Passing of the Great Race*. Without irony, Tom announces that "It's up to us who are the dominant race, to watch out or these other races will have control of things" (13). His derision of Gatsby and his conscious sense that Gatsby is a threat to him mirror his attitude toward "these other races." As far as Tom is concerned, Gatsby is effectively a member of the troublesome, non-Nordic immigrant masses who so worried the dominant group in America at the beginning of the century and whose influx was putatively to be stopped by the restrictive 1924 Johnson-Reed immigration act.

Gatsby's speech even reflects an immigrant's insecurity and aspiration. Although he is obviously a native speaker of English, he seeks to imitate the vocabulary and the cadences of the rich. Not surprisingly, his self-improvement schedule includes among its entries, "Practice elocution, poise, and how to attain it" (174). Despite Gatsby's care for the way he uses the language, his speech betrays him. His unfortunate habit of calling acquaintances "old sport" easily fuels the ever-critical Tom Buchanan's suspicions. Even Nick observes that Gatsby's "elaborate formality of speech just missed being absurd." Like so many other ambitious immigrants, Gatsby knows how important speech is and, in consequence, gives the "strong impression" that he is "picking his words with care" (48). But instead of helping him to fit in, this trait makes him stand out.

All of this brings me back to *Bodega Dreams* and its *lack* of immigrant insecurity. The fact that Quiñonez's book—even though it expresses criticism and anger at the establishment—does not bristle with anxiety of either influence or authorship has critical implications not only for *Gatsby* and itself but for other earlier ethnic texts as well. Quiñonez deftly imitates—daring comparison—especially in passages such as the book's last paragraphs, where phrase after phrase of

*Gatsby* is interwoven. But he also successfully departs from *Gatsby*, and this departure calls to mind his most original character, Sapo, who is Chino's unregenerately criminal friend. Sapo looks like a toad, collects drug money for Bodega, and has a habit of biting chunks of flesh out of his enemies. He knows he will never be the darling of the mainstream and that suits him just fine. He is happy with his life in the *barrio* and with his own persona. As Chino notes, "Sapo was different. [...] I loved Sapo because he loved himself. And I wanted to be able to do that, to rely on myself for my own happiness" (3). The self-assurance of Sapo seems to be there to prod Quiñonez into maintaining *his* integrity, even though he, like his narrator Chino, is much more of a mainstream kind of person. Quiñonez's stance is a function of his talent, certainly, but also of his timing. He has come of age in a period in which Latino writers are being published, noticed, and read. If they are not yet in the canon, their time is fast approaching. Quiñonez himself notes this when he speaks of Latino literature as being "poised" to achieve the recognition that Jewish writers have in American Literature ("Author Q & A").

In contrast to *Bodega Dreams*, many of the earlier American ethnic texts are awkwardly and angrily written—John Okada's *No-No Boy*, the tale of a Japanese-American soldier's difficult return to the West Coast after World War II, comes to mind as an example. Okada's position is considerably more embattled than that of Quiñonez. It recalls the first stage of Fanon's native intellectuals, who tell their stories in the voice of the colonizer. The prose of *No-No Boy* (at least to me) is awkwardly Faulknerian, providing sad evidence that a Japanese-American talent in the late 1940s could find neither mentor nor editor to encourage him to speak in his own voice. Most critics—if not most authors—will readily acknowledge that even classics like *The Waste Land* do not spring full-blown from the foreheads of their creators and that good books usually have benefited from editorial comments and suggestions from literary peers.<sup>5</sup> Unlike Quiñonez, Okada had no support and was in consequence making his way using another author's voice—simply because he had not been encouraged to use his own.

A little while ago I heard Ernesto Quiñonez read from *Bodega Dreams* in Spanish Harlem. He was asked where he learned to write and he said he had had some great college professors who mentored him. He was also asked about whether the book ended the way he had first intended it to, and he replied, tellingly, that his editor had suggested a number of changes. Some he was willing to make, some he fought. The point is that there *was* an editor there, one who wanted the book to sell and who had some distance from the manuscript. I am

not endorsing all editorial changes or saying editors know better than authors. What I am saying is that Quiñonez had a community of professors, friends (who are mentioned in the acknowledgments), and book people who supported him. Okada did not. This makes a huge difference and is one final indication of the difference between the modern and the postmodern in literary America. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the modernist elitism is gone. So is the alienation. Not only are ethnic heroes now part of the American community, ethnic authors are as well. Because Quiñonez's work lacks anxiety of influence and of authorship, and because his voice has not been considered a political threat, we have in *Bodega Dreams* both a new way of looking at the American dream and a new way of looking at an American classic.

## NOTES

1. For my assumptions about modernism and postmodernism I am using John McGowan's "Postmodernism" entry in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism*. Because the terms are now so widely used, I am well aware that many will take issue with my categories and with my assumption that *Gatsby* is a modernist text.
2. For the commercial successes of immigrants, see Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut's *Immigrant America*, especially chapter three, "Making it in America." When I speak of violence, I am not necessarily referring to criminal behavior, nor to any particular study, but to my own familiarity with immigrant texts, which seem to display a higher than normal number of fist fights, car crashes, suicides, and accidental deaths. This violence makes sense given the poverty, anxiety, and sense of displacement that so often accompany immigrant life.
3. I would cite by way of example the ill treatment of returning Japanese American soldiers from World War II chronicled in John Okada's *No-No Boy*. Another example, one unconnected to a war, comes from the short story "El Patron" by Nash Candelaria. In it the main character will not register for the draft because he is certain that his service will not alter the fact that he and his family are seen as second-class citizens in the US.
4. See, for example, Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*: "[...] because I'm not heard, I feel I'm not seen" (147) and Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*: "[...] the customers didn't seem to see me. I wasn't there. They didn't look at me. I was a comely shadow who didn't threaten them" (53).

5. I would like to thank one of the anonymous readers of this essay for pointing out that editorial transformation of texts extends to *The Great Gatsby*. Citing Matthew Bruccoli's 1992 edition of *The Great Gatsby*, she points out that Edmund Wilson, after Fitzgerald's death, altered the famous phrase at the book's end from "orgastic future" to "orgiastic future" (182), thus changing the passage's meaning. Wilson "was responsible for an undetermined number of the 134 alterations" in the 1941 text of *Gatsby* and *The Last Tycoon* (Bruccoli xliii).

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