

THE AMERICAN DREAM AND THE MARGINS IN TWENTIETH CENTURY
FICTION

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For Shannon, who made it happen,
and for Papa, who I had always hoped would see it finished.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	ii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1: Another Essay on <i>The Great Gatsby</i> and the American Dream: Passing, Criminality, and the Self-Made Man	31
Chapter 2: The Gangster in the Boardroom: <i>Scarface</i> and the Alger Hero	65
Chapter 3: Coming Home: Mobility, Domesticity, and the American Dream in <i>On the Road</i>	121
Chapter 4: <i>The Joy Luck Club</i> and the Margins: Relocating the American Dream	166
Conclusion	209
Notes	213
Works Cited	216
Vita	228

Introduction

In his 1997 book *Assimilation, American Style*, Peter D. Salins argues for the value of immigrants in American life while simultaneously mounting a conservative critique of the types of cultural changes engendered by immigration, including multicultural instruction, institutionalized use of languages other than English, and “anti-Americanism” more generally.

Salins’ arguments, as fits his pro-assimilationist position, are predicated on stability.

America is a constant value and “immigrants would be welcome as full members of the American family” if they could adapt themselves to the fixed core ideas that define that

“family”: “First, they had to accept English as the national language. Second, they were expected to take pride in their national identity and believe in America’s liberal

democratic and egalitarian principles. Third, they were expected to live by what is referred to as the Protestant ethic (to be self-reliant, hardworking, and morally upright)”

(6). But these core ideas themselves are situated atop an even firmer ideological bedrock.

“Americans,” Salins claims, “have been animated by two primordial impulses that have distinguished them from other nations [...]: a millenarian faith in their country’s historic

destiny as the world’s exemplar of liberal principles of governance and an unrelenting determination that the United States should expand on all fronts” (20). Given the

progressive, expansionist nature of these principles, it’s easy to see why Salins would recognize immigrants’ value since their marginalized position, a function of both their

distance from the promised bounty of American success and their unfamiliarity with

established ways of doing things in their new country, made them a motivated labor force

that was, crucially, also able to provide a regular infusion of new ideas to support the United States' expansion. Immigrants' value to America, in other words, has been a function of their difference, their ability to incite change. As Salins points out, "Americans' enduring enthusiasm for 'progress'" means that America is "a country that is always willing to embrace change" (54-55). The rub here, of course, is that while immigrants' cultural difference, as a precipitant of progress and change, gives them the potential to become ideal Americans, it also threatens to collapse the meaning of Americanness by robbing the term of any stabilizing center.

This is why Salins feels the need to define the "simple precepts" of Americanness that he places at the core of his assimilationist project: they provide a stabilizing referent to counterbalance the potentially destabilizing changes wrought by a social imperative towards "unrelenting" expansion. There is nothing particularly revolutionary about Salins' definitions of Americanness here, and in fact they should seem quite familiar. The contractual elements that Salins identifies are more widely circulated as core tenets of that central American story: the American Dream. In this narrative, the self-made man, the paradigmatic American Dream figure, is able to rise to success so long as he works hard and buys into the American way. The self-made man, however, is an ideal American Dream figure not just because he believes in the type of American principles that Salins describes—particularly the Protestant ethic—but also because he embodies the "primordial impulses" that Salins refers to: because the notion of self-making encodes the idea of a new self, he is the ideal representative figure for a nation that thinks of itself as a new world. Just as Salins places American precepts side by side with animating American ideals, even though they would appear to be in tension, so too is the story of

the self-made man as newly created, self-propelling individual told alongside that of the self-made man as hard-worker, despite the way that the newness encoded in the former seems to be undercut by the conventionality of the latter. I suggest that disentangling these narrative threads helps to reveal the role the American Dream—as a meta-narrative about the meaning of both America and Americanness—plays in mediating the relationship between the center and the margins in American society. Despite the way that these two narratives conflict—because of their respective presuppositions of fluidity and change, on the one hand, and order and stability, on the other—they are often told together, I suggest, as a way of encouraging the assimilation of the energy and innovation found on the margins—a spur to progress—while maintaining the essential division between center and margin—a means of ensuring a stable social structure. In short, I will argue in this dissertation that the American Dream exists as an (often self-reflexive) narrative of American identity that attempts to balance social stability with the freedom and creative energy demanded by a national commitment to progress.

The narrative of the hard-working self-made man functions to link material success with a set of embody-able values. Those values, in turn, represent an individualistic ethos designed to replace an Old World emphasis on inheritance as a determinant of social status with a model based on individual ability. For James Truslow Adams (1934), who is given credit for coining the term,¹ the American Dream is one of “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyman, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement [...] a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and to be recognized for others for what they are, regardless of the

fortuitous circumstances of birth or position” (415). John Tebbel (1963) puts the point more succinctly by saying that in the Dream, “the United States is a place where anyone, no matter what his origins, no matter how poor and obscure he may be, can rise to fame and fortune” (4). Daniel T. Rogers (1978) expands on Adams’ notion of “ability or achievement” by noting that in “the fluid American economy, hard work, self-control, and dogged persistence were certain escalators of success” (12). Even those who are skeptical of or hostile to the notion of the American Dream as an ideology tend to circulate this basic formulation. Kathryn Hume (2000), for instance, who titles her book *American Dream, American Nightmare*, and whose project is aimed at interrogating fictional “responses to the Dream’s failure” (4), starts her definition of the Dream by noting that “[p]rosperity for anyone willing to work hard is a crucial component of the Dream” (3). Joseph L. DeVitis and John Martin Rich (1996), who detail modern disenchantment with the Dream, concur:

Today, the American Dream has been formulated in terms of certain basic values and character traits. Americans generally believe in achievement, success, and materialism. This combination of values, in conjunction with equal opportunity, ambitiousness, and hard work and the means of attaining it, could be considered the American Dream. Among the core beliefs underlying the ideology is to work hard in order to succeed in competition; those who work hard gain success and are rewarded with fame, power, money, and property; since there is equal opportunity, it is claimed, those who fail are guilty of either insufficient effort or character deficiencies. (5)

The nod to “basic values and character traits” in DeVitis and Rich’s formulation is a critical one. While the American Dream is often thought of as a material condition (thus, it is possible to speak of someone having attained the American Dream), fame and fortune, strictly speaking, are usually viewed as products of the American Dream, rather than the Dream itself. In order to be said to have truly achieved the Dream, in most estimations, a person should usually have a complex of character traits that are themselves valuable, with material success serving as a reward or manifestation of those traits rather than as a value in and of itself. As Irvin G. Wyllie (1954) asserts in an early study of the history of the self-made man, ‘the office boy who has become the head of a great concern [...] represents our most cherished conceptions of success, and particularly our belief that any man can achieve fortune through the practice of industry, frugality, and sobriety’ (6).

What this narrative offers, and what makes it so helpful to arguments like Salins’, is a vision of citizenship. Such narratives explicate what an ideal American should do and look like. Linking specifically delineated character traits to a vision of individual self-creation helps curb the potential excesses of individualism and puts self-making to work in service to a common identity. By selecting a set of productive values, this narrative of self-making projects outward from the individual to the nation; the citizen becomes one of many individuals, all pursuing different, personalized goals, but all pushing in the same direction, one that serves the large-scale ends of national progress. It is the fact that this narrative of self-making links individual achievement to national progress that allows Salins to claim that, “Immigrants at all times have been good for America, and America has been good to them” (40). Salins elaborates on this reciprocity:

“the Protestant ethic [integrated immigrants] on the playing field of everyday life. Immigrants, whatever their native religions or cultures, eagerly responded to a society in which everyone was judged so heavily by their accomplishments” (39). Here the Protestant ethic (a means to achieve success) qualifies the notion of being judged by accomplishments (the ends of success). In this narrative, achievement itself is devalued, as receiving recognition for success is predicated on the means by which success is achieved. In this way, because the self-made man must follow a pre-determined path to success, he can’t strictly be said to be self-made at all, but instead would simply be self-propelled.

If the self-made man narrative imagines a national character and then abstracts from that figure a model of nationhood, the second narrative, that of national progress, imagines a vision of national identity and maps that back onto individual Americans.² Depending on the critical orientation, this narrative has been said to have roots in, among other things, Puritan ideology, the fact of the American frontier, transcendentalist thought, the United States’ historical role as a refuge for immigrants, or a combination of all of these strains. But all these sources produce a similar American narrative of continual progress and change. In formulating his famous frontier thesis, for instance, Fredrick Jackson Turner (1893) asserts that, “American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character” (2-3). For Leslie A. Fielder (1970) this notion of rebirth means that “only the United States has accepted and glorified the notion of newness as its essential character,

its fate, its vocation. To be new, make it new, to get a new start [...] is not so much a program of revolution (such ideas belong to the Old World) as of renewal, self-renewal”

(19). Similarly, Michael Spindler (1983) has said that:

Nothing, it seems, could be more foreign to the modern American mind than the idea of a society in stasis. ‘Standing still’ on a social scale (as on the individual scale) has come to carry unfair implications of failure, decay, a radical loss of energy and direction. ‘Change,’ ‘transformation,’ ‘development,’ ‘progress,’ renewal,’ these are the affirmative terms that pepper debates, magazine reports, political pronouncements. (1)

This creates, for Spindler, an idea “of America in a permanent process of becoming” (1).

This process of becoming means, for David Madden (1970), that “Americans have always asked, What next?—more inclined to dream into the future than to rest upon traditions of the past” (xxv).

As Madden’s comments illustrate, taking newness or change to be a primary characteristic of America means that such terms can also function as descriptors of Americans. Proceeding from the assumption that newness is a national characteristic, it becomes possible for Richard Weiss (1969) to say that, “Tradition has it that every American child receives as his birthright, the freedom to mold his own life” (3).

Likewise, because he recognizes that “the American myth saw life and history as just beginning,” R.W. B. Lewis (1955) is able to make the claim that “[i]t created a new kind of hero, the heroic embodiment of a new set of ideal human attributes” (5). This new hero—Lewis’ American Adam—is “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race;

an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5).

Like the narrative of the hard-working self-made man, the American narrative of progress is commonly thought to use a shared set of productive values to link individual and national self interest. In her analysis of the American Dream, for instance, Jennifer Hochschild (1995) points out that “Americans believe that they can create a personal mini-state of nature that will allow them to slough off the past and invent a better future” (19). However, because one of the tenets governing Americans’ understanding of achievement is that “[t]he pursuit of success [...] is associated with virtue” (23), the newly invented future is kept in check, as it must fit within certain prescriptive boundaries.³ Thus, says Hochschild, Americans “distinguish between the worthy and unworthy rich, as well as the deserving and undeserving poor” (23). Only wealth accumulated within guidelines that serve the national interest seems to qualify as a legitimate manifestation of the American Dream. This is why it is possible for Hochschild to speak of criminality as an instance of the dream being twisted, distorted, or deviated from (184-199). Without the interpolation of virtue, it would be impossible to speak of distortions or derivations, because the only real marker of legitimacy for a newly-created future would its newness. While unifying, this emphasis on productive virtues reveals American Adam-style re-creation—man in a mini-state of nature—to be a chimera. A freshly invented future that is just like the future everyone else is inventing is little more than the euphemism for a used-car: “new-to-you.”

While the mobilization of production-centered values, specifically hard work, harnesses individual energy and puts it to use in the public sphere, these values seem to

be in tension with the narratives of newness and change in which they are putatively ensconced. That is, the narratives of self-making and national progress seem bigger than the limited, prescriptive means of attaining them with which they are commonly linked. Because in these narratives newness is a legitimate goal for both the individual and the nation, it is possible to recalibrate our sense of the narrative to recognize that progress, not virtue, is the real engine of the American Dream story.

In *The End of Affluence* (1995) Jeffrey Madrick produces an account of the United States' economic history that reads as a revised, expanded, and more nuanced version of Turner's frontier thesis. For Madrick, the progressive national character is a product of America's material conditions, as he understands the frontier's abundance of raw materials and growing population as economic challenges calling for innovation. Americans' successful ability to meet these challenges "emboldened" "America's optimistic, individualistic, and self-reliant ideology" (25). Far from seeing the closure of the frontier as a limiting force on this expansive sense of national self, however, Madrick suggests that America's industrial economy functioned as a second frontier, in that both linked innovation to progress. The frontier for Madrick, as for Turner, was a forum for creativity and independence. In Turner's account, each frontier line forces settlers to purposely re-create their civilization, to come up with new and better ways to organize society, interact with the environment, etc. For Madrick, finding ways to use the frontier is equally important, in that innovations like railroads not only allowed Americans to more effectively take advantage of the frontier's natural resources, but also opened up markets. Such an opening becomes particularly important in the second frontier, as Madrick details a series of innovative new ways Americans both produced and marketed

goods, all of which contributed to the nation's economic growth. Thus the two decades of slow economic growth that began in the early 1970s—the central concern of Madrick's book—are chalked up in large part to a failure of imagination. That is, Madrick blames politicians and economists alike for placing too much faith simply in the belief that the economy will grow again because it has always grown in the past, which doesn't allow them to think through America's economic difficulties and find *new* solutions. Without the frontier and the concomitant frontier mentality (here defined not just as self-reliance, but more critically as innovation and creativity) the economy stops growing. Even though he doesn't offer any specific solutions to what he calls "America's economic dilemma," Madrick's conclusions find recourse in the narrative of progress: "The genius of a successful society is to solve its problems in unanticipated ways. Energy and innovation typically arise from surprising places, more often from the bottom than from the top" (147).

Importantly, Madrick's account devalues hard-work and virtue in favor of energy and innovation. It is my contention that evolving definitions of success, along with a similar dynamism of the narrative of self-making, tends to privilege the narrative of progress over the narrative of the hard-working self-made man, so that the latter is absorbed into the former, privileging a model of self-making that crucially disengages traditional virtues from the narrative and makes progress and innovation themselves virtuous. In other words, with the rise of Madrick's second frontier, increasingly the self-made man who simply works hard and follows traditional paths to economic success is replaced by a figure who can radically remake himself, who can break out of existing patterns of behavior and thought, in a way that provides new models of economic and

social behavior. If the American Dream is progress, and if progress is predicated on innovation, the ideal self-made man is an innovator. In order for the link between individual and national models of self-making to hold up, then, this innovator needs the ability to re-make the self as he re-imagines his society.

In *The Rites of Assent* (1993), Sacvan Bercovitch convincingly argues for the primacy of the narrative of progress as a foundational ideology for America, while outlining a way to understand the link between individual and national self-making that does not need to rely on productive virtue as a mediating force. Because he is primarily interested in intellectual and political, rather than economic, history, Bercovitch replaces Madrick's emphasis on innovation with ideas of improvement, dissent, and anxiety. Bercovitch notes that, "It was a strategy everywhere to compartmentalize dissent so as to absorb it, incrementally, *unos inter pares*, into a dominant liberal discourse. But American liberalism *privileged* dissent" (22, emphasis in original). The United States could do so not only without risking anarchy, but in fact as a method for maintaining a cohesive, functioning, and productive nation, because it invests itself in an ideology of progress adapted (its adaptability is key) from the Puritan concept of errand. For Bercovitch, the concept of errand had three central tenets, which should by now sound familiar, as they are closely aligned with the narratives I've described above. The first tenet was "*migration*—not simply from one place to another, but from a depraved Old World to a New Canaan. Properly speaking [...] the newness of their New World was prophetic: it signaled the long-awaited new heaven and new earth of the millennium" (32). By making migration "a function of prophecy" the Puritans gave themselves an "unlimited license to expand" (33). If this sounds like the narrative of national progress

outlined by Turner, Madrick, and Salins, it should, as another of Bercovitch's tenets reveals: "By definition, the errand meant progress [...] As a community on an errand, New England was a movement from sacred past to sacred future, a shifting point somewhere between migration and millennium. Its institutions were geared not so much to maintain stability as to sustain process and growth" (34).

While imagining such a sacred destiny is certainly productive, it risks rampant, anarchic individualism. Notions of the self-made man as embodiment of the Protestant ethic solves this problem by recourse to individual productive virtue, but Bercovitch's second tenet allows us to recognize productive virtue not as an informing principle of the relationship of the individual to society, but as an outgrowth of the broader "concept of representative selfhood" (33):

In this sense [in which the individuals' journey through life was a "pilgrimage through the world's wilderness to redemption"], the Puritan venture was above all a matter of personal self-assertion. It built upon a series of free and voluntary commitments, and it made for a community grounded not in tradition or class status, but in private acts of will. Yet not merely private, for in the larger sense, as the Puritans never tired of saying, every one of those acts was part of a communal venture. To assert oneself in the right way, here in the American wilderness, was to embody the goals of New England. (33)

Although Bercovitch doesn't address notions of the work ethic as such, it is clear from this account that representative selfhood serves the same purpose that I ascribed to productive virtue above: it binds individual and national destiny. That is, so long as the

mission is sacred, then virtue is implicit—members assert themselves “in the right way.” While narratives of the virtuous self-made man assume that success is a manifestation of virtue, under tenets of representative selfhood, virtue is already a manifestation of preordained success and progress is the tie that binds.

It may seem like I’m parsing words here, but it is important to remember that virtue is imagined to be the force that unites individual and national narratives of self-making. It is assumed that only the insertion of virtue into the quest for success makes individual self-making look like (and aid in) national making because individualism is assumed to be a selfish pursuit of individual interest. Here, however, the individual goal is the communal goal—individual and community alike are fulfilling prophecy. Whereas in the narrative of virtuous self-making, the emphasis on following the right method to success is imagined as a way of reconciling the fact of self-making—what an individual’s success looks like—with the promise—what success should look like—Bercovitch points out that “the Puritan vision fed on the distance between fact and promise. Anxiety became their chief means of establishing control. The errand, after all, was by definition a state of *unfulfillment*, and only a sense of crisis, properly directed and controlled, could guarantee the outcome” (34). It was promise itself that bound members of the community and kept them in line. It made the individual *goal* the national goal, with the means to attaining it naturally falling in line; so long as a belief in the errand and progress existed, then whatever means aided in its attainment were the right methods.

The ability of the concept of errand to provide a method for unifying individual and national ambition allows for a more secular version of progress as well as an eventual disarticulation of hard work and virtue from self-making. While it is popularly assumed

that the self-made man is one who exemplifies the Protestant ethic—Hochschild, for instance, bases her conclusion that virtue is often seen as a prerequisite for “real success” on public opinion polls—John G. Cawelti (1965) has observed that, “In spite of their persistent devotion to the idea of success, Americans have differed greatly in the way they defined it” (3). While ceding that “the self-made man meant many things to many people” (4), Cawelti is able to identify three distinct versions of the self-made man narrative:

The first was the conservative tradition of the middle-class Protestant ethic which stressed the values of piety, frugality, and diligence in one’s worldly calling [...] The second tradition of thought about the self-made man placed its major emphasis on the individual’s getting ahead. Its definition of success was largely economic [...] where the religious tradition stressed industry, frugality, honesty, and piety—the self-disciplinary and religious virtues—the second indorsed [sic] such secular qualities as initiative, aggressiveness, competitiveness, and forcefulness [...] The third strand[’s...] definition of success was tied to individual fulfillment and social progress rather than to wealth or status. (4-5)

What is important about Cawelti’s formulation is that he is able to recognize that the narrative of self-making is not monolithic, but is in fact fluid and changes over time. Because he is able to do so, but to still organize his different versions of this idea under the same general heading of “the self-made man,” he opens up possibilities for reading self-making outside of the limiting confines of the Protestant ethic.

While there is a sense in Cawelti's account that these shifting definitions represent a declension of the concept of self-made man from the ideal third definition to the more vulgar second definition, Bercovitch would interpret these competing definitions as just different versions of the same (Puritan) story:

It was that larger, American vision which the Puritans bequeathed to the culture. This was their legacy: a system of sacred-secular symbols (New Israel, American Jerusalem) for a people intent on progress; a set of rituals of anxiety that could at once encourage and control the energies of free enterprise; a rhetoric of mission so broad in its implications, and so specifically American in its application, that it could facilitate the transitions from Puritan to Yankee, and from errand to manifest destiny and the dream. That these transitions effected changes in rhetoric and ritual goes without saying. But the capacity to accommodate change is proof of *vitality*, in symbolic no less than social systems. (35, emphasis in original)

Thus, for Bercovitch, narratives of the American Revolution were just secularized versions of the same basic story of sacred errand. Although revolutionary fervor and antiauthoritarianism posed a threat to Whig leaders' economic and social position after the war, they were able, asserts Bercovitch, to harness those energies into the maintenance of the status quo by casting the revolution as just another stage in "America's long-prepared-for, divinely *ordered* passage into nationhood" (38, emphasis in original). "In other words," he goes on, "the Whig leaders brought the violence under control by making revolution a controlling metaphor for national identity" (38). Thus, in

Bercovitch's account, the narrative of newness and national progress becomes the primary means by which the individual's goals come into line with those of the nation. The two come together because individual and national self-making are both critically premised upon the notion that what will get made will be better than what existed before and that self-making itself (both nationally and individually) is the American way. Or, as A. N. Kaul (1963) has asserted, the difference between American and Europe "lay in the fact that on this continent there was no older order, no constituted order at all, to hinder growth. The only countervailing force was provided by ideals" (13-14). It is the belief in growth and change itself that can be read as the essence of the American Dream.

The real threat to the social structure in this narrative, then, is not individuals pursuing success in selfish and/or un-virtuous ways—because all success is progress, and all progress is good—but instead stagnation and complacency. It is this basic understanding that allows Richard Powers (2005) to venomously observe that "possibility and contentment may be sworn enemies. Pure potential and its despair combine to create the ideal late-capitalist perpetual motion engine, with self-realization powering the drive train. So long as we believe there is no ceiling, there will be no end to the effort we'll expand on the way to self-making." Here Powers enacts the same rhetoric of crisis that Bercovitch observes was so effective in disciplining the Puritans. The tension between the seemingly limitless promise of the American Dream and material realities that fall short of the promise acts to combat complacency, and it does so precisely to the extent that the Dream is believed not to be an idea, but a description of reality (a manifest destiny). What is important here is the way that this vision of American progress-as-freedom "enlist[s] radicalism itself in the cause of institutional stability" (Bercovitch 50).

The Dream, in effect, creates a society where real structural change is unnecessary because in a progressive society, things are always getting better anyway. Dissent becomes another vehicle of progress, a new idea that is grounded in the old. In this way, it is possible for Bercovitch to observe that in American culture, “the true conservatives were on the left; their characteristic strategy was to displace radical alternatives with an indigenous tradition of reform” (19). In dissent, though, Bercovitch notices an ambiguity: “dissent was demonstrably an appeal to, and through, the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture; and in every case, it issued in a fundamental challenge to the system” (20). Although the rhetoric of progress, then, is deeply rooted in maintaining the status quo, there is also a way in which its encouragement of dissent is more than just rhetorical (although never radical)—progress creates progress.

If the American Dream is a promise, then those most likely to pursue it energetically and creatively are those for whom the promise least closely matches their material conditions. Not only is the interaction between the Dream and the margins good for developing a motivated workforce (as in Power’s understanding) but it also aids in the march of progress itself by spurring new methods and ideas for improvement. Thus while Richard Weiss admits that, “as many historians have noted, the ‘rags-to-riches’ tradition, by creating an illusion of opportunity, served as a social pacifier inimical to reform,” he also argues that “[t]he belief that anyone can succeed is a two-edged sword. Taken as a description of what is, it encourages complacency; taken as a description of what ought to be, it encourages the impulse to reform” (7). Bercovitch elaborates on American reform movements’ ideological use of the idea of America as the land of opportunity:

But in the long run exclusion was a strategy for absorption. Like the Puritan concept of errand, it was a way of saying ‘not yet’ so that finally one could say ‘you, too.’ The conflict between garden and wilderness implied that what was wilderness now would one day be a greater New Canaan. So it was also in the case of the chosen people versus the world (including European culture); so also in the case of true versus false Americans. The American consensus *could* absorb feminism, if feminism would lead into the middle-class American Way. Blacks and Indians could also learn to be true Americans, when in the fullness of time they would adopt the tenets of black and red capitalism. (50-51)

Here the very existence of an exclusionary and unequal power (and, I would argue, economic) structure channels radical impulses toward national progress. Because the belief in the American Dream is so strong, the actual fact of marginalization can be exploited to create a society that is, in fact, always growing and always progressing.

This same emphasis on the radically reconstructive possibility inherent in marginality under the American Dream is what allows Salins to claim that immigrants have always been good for America. Immigrants, in Salins’ account, weren’t just valuable because their “sheer numbers” provided “sufficient manpower” to take advantage of America’s vast expanses of land and American industry’s technological advances (33). Nor were immigrants good for America simply because they “were younger than native Americans, they worked longer and harder, and they accepted lower wages” (34). Although these were all important qualities that helped immigrants help America succeed, for Salins, “the most overlooked national attribute that has facilitated

assimilation is American's enduring enthusiasm for 'progress' and all things modern" (54). "A country that is in love with progress," then, "appreciates the potential contributions of immigrants and is eager to incorporate them" (54). Importantly, Salins characterizes "American society and American culture" as "works in progress," which allows him to claim that "immigrants are the artisans who are fashioning those works" (106). Salins relies heavily on notions of voluntarism to make his case, suggesting that immigrants have left their "imperfect societies" behind in order to create not only better lives for themselves, but a more perfect society in America (55). Thus he is able to claim both that "the very fact that immigration continued unabated indicates that the United States offered immigrants vastly greater gains than did the places they came from," and that "given the truncated economic opportunities of their homelands, those immigrants who decided to come to the United States were probably Europe's best and brightest" (34). In other words, by invoking the narrative of national progress, Salins is able to downplay the role of immigrants as exploited laborers, and focus more on how immigrants have contributed to the shaping of what would eventually become a perfect society.

As we saw above, this narrative privileges the position of marginality. By comparing immigrants' experiences of limited opportunity in Europe with both the economic opportunities of America and its insistence on "judging people mainly by their accomplishments" (53), Salins is able to create a vision of immigrants as model Americans. The coupling of potential economic advancement and a belief in progress allows these best and brightest artisans to be seen not merely in terms of the drudgery of menial labor, but as creators who offer new and innovative ideas. These immigrants-as-

Americans are more motivated to offer new ideas because of their marginalized position—by starting at the bottom, they have a greater impetus to rise to the top.

At the same time, Salins' investment in the Protestant ethic as a key means of assimilation, twinned with his assertion that multiculturalism is antithetical to assimilation (and thus to Americanness), indicates a crucial rupture in his argument. On the one hand, Salins' observation that "immigrants have offered a way of rapidly expanding the workforce; they have contributed new or formerly scarce skills; and, most importantly, they have always been willing to work very hard—much harder than most natives" (124), seems like a recapitulation of his earlier points. However, the assertion that immigrants tend to work harder than most Americans critically shifts the relation of center and margin in this account. If Americanness is extended to those who embody the Protestant work ethic, then those who do not work hard are inassimilable and therefore marginalized. In this formulation, though, "natives" do not work as hard as immigrants, and so become, if not un-American, less American because they do not fully embody American ideals. Thus, "natives," who are the standard bearers for normative Americanness in most scenarios involving immigration—see Salins' emphasis on English-only for a clue to his feelings about normativity—are in this scenario inadvertently marginalized, denied their birthright, as it were. Of course, stripping Americans of their rights to be American is outside the scope of Salins' argument because such a move would undermine an insistence on assimilation: if Americans are not American, then what is left to be assimilated into? The result is a Janus-faced notion of Americanness as either a priori and normative ("native") or cultural and earned.

Salins relieves this tension, at least to a degree, via his attacks on multiculturalism. For Salins, multiculturalism is bad because it privileges a diverse set of competing values over those outlined in his contract. But the type of monoculturalism that would result from erasing difference altogether negates the advantages immigrants—as not yet Americans—bring to the table. Thus the solution is a kind of acculturative *détente*: as long as immigrants “have *competence* to function in American workplaces and in all the normal American social settings [...] exercise *civic responsibility* [and] *identify themselves as Americans*, placing that identification ahead of any associated with their birthplace or ethnic homeland” (and of course, follow the assimilationist contract), then they are free to express their ethnicity through means like speaking their native language at home, living in ethnic neighborhoods, or opening a pizzeria or Chinese food restaurant (50, emphasis in original). Far from being concessions to his multiculturalist adversaries, I suggest that these limited forms of ethnicity are crucial for Salins to help maintain the balance between center and margin that he disrupted earlier. The examples he gives of ways to maintain culture are importantly both visible and shallow. That is, for the American Dream to function as an ideology, it must compel belief, or become culture; to identify as American is, for Salins, to make a belief in American institutions and ideologies central to identity (thus his repeated insistence on immigrants embracing a culture that allows self-making). In this scenario, deep cultural affiliations must be emptied out in order for the American ideology to take hold. What that leaves, then, are not only shallow remnants of culture evacuated of their original meaning, but visible reminders of difference. If an American can be less American because she doesn’t work as hard as an immigrant, an immigrant (especially when she lives in ethnic enclaves or

speaks a different language) can never be simply American. Immigrants can act American, but they can never be taken for Americans.

These emphases on the continuity and importance of the narrative of progress, along with the recourse to visibility as a sign of difference, allow Salins—and I will argue the chroniclers of the American Dream with whom I deal later in this dissertation—to overcome the potential inversion of center and margin that I described above. That is, if the American Dream is predicated on a sense of renewal and change, if those ideas are posited in terms of material success, and if those on the margins are imagined to be the creative and productive locus of progress, then it follows that the American Dream might provide the site through which those on the margins might be able to stake a claim to the political, social, and economic status of the middle-class. Those on the margins can either work themselves or invent themselves into the middle-class. Highlighting the visible differences of those on the racial and ethnic margins solves this problem by maintaining empirical difference against the sameness of ideology. In other words, those on the margins of society can (and, in fact, should) *act like* Americans, but visible difference ensures that they will be denied a share of the privileges of *being* American; thus the status quo goes largely unchallenged, while progress progresses.

The American Dream's insistence on progress, then, also belies a deep investment in the status quo. By making Americanness attainable for some, the Dream seems to promote competition. While competition should foster progress on a national level—with the best and brightest continually coming to the fore—on an individual level, competition always carries with it the threat of regression; yesterday's winners might be today's losers. Such a formula could ultimately undercut belief in self-making, and thus

undermine progress. At the same time, in order to judge progress (or the extent of individual self-making) there must exist something against which individual and national success can be measured, a function filled in large part by those who exist in America's economic margins. The American Dream needs the margins—groups who are lower on the socio-economic ladder—in order to define progress outside of the possibility of regression. So long as there is a visible margin, competition for those in the center becomes individualized and internalized, individuals competing with themselves without the possibility of losing their position to someone from below. By securing the center, success becomes relative rather than competitive.⁴ In other words, the existence of a stable margin makes self-making possible, while supporting progress by removing the possibility of being un-made. Despite its insistence on the idea that American society lacks a rigid social structure (and thus that vertical mobility is possible), the Dream depends in large part on the existence of a stable structural hierarchy of center and margins in order for Americans to believe in it.

In the context of this understanding, arguments advanced by Catherine Jurca (2001)—who asserts that white, middle-class privilege is often recast as spiritual emptiness, complacent conformity, and, indeed, subjugation—and Kathleen Pfeiffer (2003)—who reads race passing as an expression of American individualism—lead me to argue that the white middle class looks to society's margins to find ways to re-engage the American Dream and avoid the trap of middle-class complacency that stands in the way of real and rhetorical progress. In *White Diaspora*, Jurca contends that, despite the fact that the suburbs seem to be the apotheosis of white, middle-class privilege (and thus can stand in for a model of normative Americanness), literary and sociological

representations of the suburb in the twentieth-century more often than not pose the suburbanite as devalued, de-spiritualized, deadened, and perhaps most amazingly, subjugated. In large part, Jurca sees this stance as one that allows for the maintenance of privilege, with “thinking of oneself as the victim” being “the necessary condition for not becoming one” (139). Jurca understands such affect to be largely rhetorical. However, if we remember that the American Dream is not just the well-worn, static story of the office boy moving up through the ranks, or even a middle-class narrative of achieving and maintaining a suburban home, but is instead a narrative that both describes and advocates innovation, then it follows that the rhetoric of victimization Jurca identifies might be a necessary step in maintaining progress.

In Jurca’s analysis of representations of American suburbia, the suburb is defined in terms of order, in which the trappings of privilege (grid-like neighborhoods, standardized housing and furnishings, codes of proper conduct) come to feel like a trap. What Jurca’s discussion leaves out, however, is the way in which being white and middle-class—being comfortably ensconced in a stable, normative position—is then imagined to be outside the narrative of progress, or insufficiently American. Caught in the impasse, middle-class, suburban characters who imagine themselves as victims align themselves with a marginalized subject position that is believed to be more in line with the American Dream. That is, while Jurca’s “study highlights the ways in which Babbitts begin to think of themselves as Biggers” (8), I suggest, following Jurca’s terms, that the American Dream demands that Babbitts should not only think of themselves like Biggers, but should act like them as well. If the resonance of *Native Son* derives from its thematic insistence on the individual’s quest for self-determination against the rigid determinants

of his social environment, then it becomes another milestone in Bercovitch's narrative of progress. Understood in this way, a Babbitt spinning his wheels in the suburb can be seen to be impeding progress because his purpose is to maintain, not create or change. In other words, the conditions of marginalization, coupled with the belief—instilled by the promise of unlimited potential held out by the Dream—in the achievability of material success, are imagined to produce in the margins vitalizing energy and new methods and modes of achieving success (many of which are by necessity outside normative realms of behavior and often outside the scope of law, as well), and these methods and modes are then aped and appropriated by society at large as a way of maintaining progress.

If we re-read Jurca's observation about Babbitts' desires to become Biggers as a pragmatic, rather than rhetorical, way of maintaining progress, then we can recognize the way in which the middle-class might use passing as a way to re-engage the American Dream, inasmuch as passing can be read as a form of radical or creative self-making. As Susan Marie Marren (1995) points out, traditionally critics of passing view the act of passing as a blind, something that masks more subversive elements in a text. But, she goes on to note, "the passing plot is itself subversive. It denaturalizes racial and thus inevitably...national identity, and in so doing creates a subversive narrative climate, setting in dizzying motion all of the terms of identity with which race is bound up" (5). Pfeiffer echoes this idea when she points out that typical readings of passing (which tend to depend on notions of "authentic" identity) "try to categorize a character who deliberately *resists* categories" (2, emphasis in original). In other words, while passing narratives are purportedly about categories (racial and otherwise), because the passing figure is one who has stepped out of categories, as it were, or at least has the ability to

chose which category he or she belongs to, such a figure challenges the very notion of boundaries and classifications. Pfeiffer's claim that we should "think of passing *as* American individualism, and vice versa" allows us to understand the passing figure as an American Adam, and passing itself as an innovative means of identity formation (4, emphasis in original).

What makes the passing figure an appropriate model for middle-class Americans seeking to re-engage the Dream is the way in which the condition of marginalization functions as a spur for radical and innovative ways to re-fashion identity and productively partake in middle-class privilege. If the suburbs are defined by orderly boundaries, then the passing figure's insistence on crossing lines can be read as a model for conceiving an individual and un-circumscribed selfhood—a type of identity frontierism. Such boundary crossing does threaten to disrupt the status quo by allowing marginalized individuals and groups access to full Americanness. However, as Elaine K. Ginsberg (1996) has noted, "passing is about specularly: the visible and the invisible, the seen and unseen" (2). Narratives of passing, in other words, necessarily depend on visibility, and so the act of representing passing exposes the act of passing itself and works to fortify racial boundaries. The discourse of passing-as-individualism, then, allows for white Americans to temporarily adopt innovative, non-normative models for self-making—which help to drive the engine of progress—while maintaining class privilege because they remain visibly white.

Chapter One of this dissertation will explore the relationship between economic success, self-making and marginality in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In this chapter, I will argue that the characters in Fitzgerald's novel represent competing

versions of American identity. Americanness is alternately defined in the novel through heredity, hard-work, and—more surprisingly—criminality. Ultimately, the novel privileges criminality, but uses notions of passing to underscore criminality's metaphorical possibilities, while avoiding its messy, real-world implications. In other words, Fitzgerald recognizes the transgressive potential of criminality—the freedom, in other words, that comes with stepping over the boundary lines of socially imposed rules—but tempers such criminality with the patina of respectability conferred by Gatsby's expensive clothes and charming smile. Jay Gatsby, a quasi-ethnic criminal with a working class background, passes for a member of polite society. In telling his story, Nick Carraway both exposes this passing gesture (thereby defusing the criminal threat Gatsby poses) and associates himself with Gatsby's story, effectively passing for a version of Gatsby's self-made persona. This act of passing, in turn, provides Nick with a way to narrate his own life in terms of the American Dream, preserving his social status while at the same time making a claim to Dream-style progress.

Chapter Two will extend this focus on criminality as an energetic model of self-making by examining two narratives of American Dream-style upward mobility: Horatio Alger's novel *Risen from the Ranks* (1874) and Howard Hawk's gangster classic *Scarface* (1932). The aim of this chapter will be to test the limits of the most popular American Dream formulation—the rise of the hard-working, morally upright self-made man—against the needs of an American story to embody the national ethos and spur large-scale progress. Each of these narratives present a model of entrepreneurial self-making, but I suggest that Alger's—despite his status as the go-to American Dream author—is too static and limiting, as his investment in a stable, pre-approved path to self-making works

counter to the American Dream's insistence on progress and innovation. The element of immigrant ethnicity encoded in a character like *Scarface's* Tony Camonte reveals the potential for self-making to escape the bonds of morally-defined success. Specifically, this chapter will argue that the gangster exposes the limitations inherent in the Alger model of self-making, and replaces it with a performative model of American identity that is at once valuable—in that the freedom associated with the gangster's quest for self-realization can be read as a necessary ingredient for progress—and dangerous—in that criminality offers a threat to middle-class stability. *Scarface* mitigates this danger by visually highlighting the gangsters' failed attempts to pass as respectable Americans, thus ensuring their continued marginalization.

Chapter Three is also about mobility and transgression, but replaces the previous chapters' focus on criminality and economic mobility with the transgressive potential of experiencing difference through travel. This chapter focuses on Jack *Kerouac's On the Road* (1957), a novel that I argue portrays a tension between an Algeresque desire for a stable and secure home and a concomitant drive for the space needed to re-create the self. While the road, in one sense, offers such a space, it is only ever imagined in Kerouac's novel as a temporary solution, in that Sal Paradise's drive seems always to return home and fulfill his long-term wish to get married and settle down with his family. I suggest that the novel uses the concept of radical, imaginative self-making to mediate Sal's twin desires for stability and freedom. More specifically, Sal sees in the margins simultaneity, a series of versions of domesticity that resemble his own ideal. Despite their resemblance in kind, these various domesticities, because of their positions on racial and ethnic borders, appear markedly different. Thus shifting between these versions—first literally

in his travels, then later through narrative acts of creation—allows Sal to experience the effects of self-making—to encounter newness and different incarnations of himself. Thus, Sal can claim self-making while also being able to enjoy the stable comforts of home in much the same way that narrating *Gatsby* allows Nick Carraway to maintain his own class status.

While the first three chapters focus on narratives of the margins—that is, stories told about the margins from a narrative position in the center—Chapter Four looks at a narrative written from what I argue is a self-aware position of marginality, Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989). In this chapter, I argue that Tan’s narrative structure—in which the voices of Chinese-born immigrant mothers are balanced against those of their American-born (and Americanized) daughters—dramatizes the center/margin split that has been at the core of my dissertation. In so doing, it reveals the way that the American Dream narrative privileges the margins as the productive locus of self-making. Because the daughters are thoroughly assimilated, they become representations of the social center, as the book plays up their American habits and modes of thought and plays down the fact of their ethnic heritage. The crux of the novel is the way in which the daughters have lost touch with said heritage, which in many ways accounts for the banal, unfulfilling lives they lead. However, the ethnic heritage that they need to regain contact with, I argue, seems simply a version of the American Dream that has been displaced to China. In other words, the mothers tell stories of their own lives in China which reveal them to be self-made in the American tradition. *The Joy Luck Club*, then, recognizes an essential split between lived American experience and narratives of Americanness, suggesting that the former, because they are descriptive and static, are too limiting as

American Dream models, and so advocating the later as a means of claiming and maintaining the type of creativity and innovation required to re-make the self.

Another Essay on *The Great Gatsby* and the American Dream: Passing,
Criminality, and the Self-Made Man

It is far from original to write about *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and the American Dream. In fact as Marius Bewley reported in 1954, “critics of Scott Fitzgerald tend to agree that *The Great Gatsby* is somehow a commentary on that elusive phrase, the American dream” (263). Bewley goes on to pithily remark that “the assumption seems to be that Fitzgerald approved,” but “it can be shown that *The Great Gatsby* offers some of the severest and closest criticism of the American dream that our literature affords” (263). The continued focus on the material underpinnings of American society as represented in *The Great Gatsby* is not surprising. After all wealth is *the* subject of the novel. What is somewhat puzzling, however, is that despite the different methodologies and critical foci of Fitzgerald’s critics, commentators on the treatment of the American Dream in the novel still tend to fall into the two camps identified by Bewley—those who believe Fitzgerald “approved” of the dream and those who read *Gatsby* as a critique or indictment of it.⁵ In general, this limitation results from the way critics often assume a singular definition of the American Dream, and then map that definition onto Gatsby himself. If one reads Gatsby sympathetically, then the Dream is “alive” in the novel; if one reads Gatsby critically, then the Dream is “dead.” What this approach to the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* ignores, however, is that the characters in Fitzgerald’s novel represent competing versions of the American Dream. Assuming that economic success is the end result of the American Dream, and that participation in the Dream is what qualifies a person as officially American, then Americanness in Fitzgerald’s novel is

alternately defined by inherited status, hard-work, and criminality. Nick Carraway's narrative position, both "within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life" (40), allows him to survey the various American Dreams offered up by the cast of characters in the novel in order to find a version of Americanness that most effectively justifies and protects his own class position. Because Nick ultimately privileges criminality, and uses notions of passing to underscore criminality's metaphorical possibilities, we can understand the real problem of the novel to be Nick's (how to avoid a non-productive and un-American sense of stasis), not Gatsby's (how to achieve upward mobility). Because criminality circumvents the element of hard work that is commonly understood to be part and parcel of the narrative of upward mobility, in other words, Nick's privileging the elements of passing and criminality in Gatsby's story highlights his investment in a more radical notion of self-making that is in line with the broader American tradition of self-reinvention.

Because the American Dream is so often thought of in terms of the rags-to-riches story,⁶ and because the novel evokes Gatsby's rise from obscure James Gatz from Minnesota to wealthy Jay Gatsby from West Egg, it is tempting to read *The Great Gatsby* as centrally interested in this paradigm. However, Nick is more interested in the American characteristics Gatsby embodies than in his economic accomplishments. For instance, in their first substantive encounter, Nick says of Gatsby:

He was balancing himself on the dashboard of his car with that resourcefulness of movement that is so peculiarly American—that comes, I suppose, with the absence of lifting work or rigid sitting in youth and, even more, with the formless grace of our nervous sporadic games. This

quality was continually breaking through his punctilious manner in the shape of restlessness. He was never quite still; there was always a tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand. (68)

The belief that American youth are subjected to neither rigid sitting nor heavy lifting is a convenient, class-specific fiction, and Nick's counterposing Gatsby against both reveals his investment in elaborating on familiar notions of the American spirit. Both images recall ideas of rigid European caste systems, with sitting evoking the boarding school education reserved for the aristocracy and lifting standing in for the drudgery in store for everyone else. Likewise, both rigid sitting and lifting work suggest structure and oppression, with heavy loads literally weighing down the carriers and sitting representing absences of both play and movement. To this end, the correlation between this passage and Fredrick Jackson Turner's (1920) frontier thesis—another piece heavily investing in defining a sense of the American character—is striking. According to Turner:

That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier (37)

Not only does Gatsby's restlessness recall Turner's "restless, nervous energy," but more importantly, both Nick's and Turner's formulations hinge on a balance similar to the one

I described in the introduction. The “coarseness and strength” and “acuteness and inquisitiveness” in Turner roughly parallel the hard work/education dyad that Nick establishes. But just as Turner’s frontier-influenced American does not let either of those characteristics become definite, instead funneling them through a free, restless spirit to always achieve something new, Gatsby here *balances* on the dashboard of his car, with a restlessness that trumps the limitations of rigid sitting or heavy lifting, temporarily at rest but ready to drive off into the future. These emphases on restlessness and energy gesture at a performative element of American identity. The balanced pose Gatsby strikes and his constant bodily movement suggest a characteristic anti-stasis, a self newly created from moment to moment in the same way that the American character, in Turner’s account, was continually reformed in the meeting between the structure of civilization and the freedom of the untamed frontier (and an uncreated future).

This performative quality that Gatsby embodies here helps to explain why Nick, who claims to have “disapproved of [Gatsby] from beginning to end” (162), would nevertheless chose to narrate Gatsby in such romanticized, Turnerian terms. As I discussed in the introduction, Kathleen Pfeiffer reads passing as a characteristically American gesture in that it signals autonomous individualism by performatively resisting the limitations imposed by categories. Susan Marie Marren, who examines the passing trope in *The Great Gatsby*, echoes this idea when she calls passing to be “subversive” (5). Thinking about passing in this way is important in this context because Nick, unlike Gatsby, is defined by structure. Nick’s position within an old-moneyed family leads Peter Lisca (1967) to claim that “Nick is a paradigm of order and decorum almost inviolable” (18), an observation seconded by Janet Giltrow and David Stouck’s (1997)

comment that Nick's narration betrays "a conservatism, a resistance to change," whose end goal is the "restoration of a social order that has been confused and disturbed by reconfigurations of power and property, by the disheveling forces of the age." These comments rightly reveal not only that Nick is a product of his class, but also that he has an investment in actively maintaining his position. At the same time, both readings fail to account for the way the American Dream legitimates wealth, and for the way order (social and otherwise) runs counter to the Dream's insistence on change and innovation. In other words, Nick's class anxiety is evidenced in the text, but it's a paradoxical anxiety. Nick is torn between an aristocratic, European notion of inherited privilege and a middle-class, American notion of perpetual upward mobility. While the former is designed to protect rank and status, it is un-productive and de-legitimated under the terms of the American Dream. Upward mobility, on the other hand, can validate certain class positions and forms of wealth, but carries with it the threat of encroachment on pre-existing privilege. Nick's narrative task, accomplished via his presentation of Gatsby, is to find a way to simultaneously justify and perpetuate his own wealth and status under the productive and legitimating terms of the American Dream.

Both Nick's impulse to maintain his status—his desire for "the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever" (Fitzgerald 6)—and the limitations of doing so outside of the terms of the American Dream can be seen in the opening pages of the novel. The famous advice that Nick's father imparts as the novel begins—"Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone...just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had" (5)—combined with Nick's misinterpretation of that advice—"a sense of the fundamental decencies is parceled out unequally at birth" (6)—

sets up a sense of *noblesse oblige* that is implicated in a project of perpetuating aristocratic privilege. By explicitly linking material advantages with “fundamental decencies,” Nick is suggesting that those who are born rich are naturally morally superior. The urge to not criticize implies a limited sense of agency among those who have not had the same advantages of the Carraways of the world, an essential inability to recognize, and therefore change, the flaws in their character. That Nick’s repetition of this advice is broken by his observation that his father “didn’t say anything more but we’ve always been unusually communicative in a reserved way and I understood that he meant a great deal more than that” further suggests a limitation on change by implying that morality and decency are understood or known *a priori*, not communicated or learned (5). Taken together, then, these ideas represent an effective denial of self-making. By substituting “fundamental decencies” that are “parceled out unequally at birth” for “advantages,” Nick has not only denied the possibility of *becoming* a better person, but essentially limited status change as well. According to his father’s logic, anyone with money is advantaged and thus presumably exempt from criticism, but in the critical change that Nick imposes, gaining material advantages still does not engender decency. Nick’s desire for a logical, orderly, well-mannered world, then, can be read as an impulse to maintain an aristocratic social structure that ensures advantages based not on wealth alone (which can fluctuate and change hands) but on birth.

The argument for inherited decency as a justification for limiting status change, however, is undercut almost immediately by the looming presence of Tom Buchanan, who, as even the most casual reader knows, is far from decent. In his analysis of Tom, Alberto Lena suggests that the character “embodies the decadence of the upper classes,”

and so can be read as Fitzgerald's critique not of wealth per se—Lena recognizes the novel's fascination with, and even approval of, Gatsby's wealth—but of non-productive wealth. As might be expected, in order to make his case, Lena leans heavily on Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899). Veblen defines the leisure class in terms of the conspicuousness of both their consumption and their leisure, which function as markers of social standing because they distinguish between those who are compelled by economic necessity to work and those whose are free of such restrictions. That Tom is a paragon of the leisure class is immediately apparent. Nick tells us that:

his family were enormously wealthy—even in college his freedom with money was a matter for reproach—but now he'd left Chicago and come east in a fashion that rather took your breath away: for instance he'd brought down a string of polo ponies from Lake Forest. It was hard to realize that a man in my own generation was wealthy enough to do that.

(10)

It is important here to note the resonances of European aristocracy with the polo ponies—an idea that is intensified in the following paragraph when it is revealed that Tom and Daisy had recently returned from a sojourn in France “for no particular reason” (10). Both the extravagance of Tom's spending and the purposelessness of the trip to France are examples of what Veblen characterizes as “conspicuous waste,” a means of consumption of both time and money designed to signal the consumer's detachment from the necessity of being productive (87). While Veblen is (slyly) careful to warn against reading the term “waste” pejoratively, as Lena says of the American instance, “money earned without labour was an invitation to corruption in the eyes of a Republican nation,

and it was assumed that hereditary wealth had caused the decline of Europe.” If Nick seeks a means by which to legitimize his class status against the backdrop of an American value system that puts a premium on productiveness, then Tom’s example warns him against doing so via a claim to the innate superiority of the upper class.

It’s not just Tom’s lack of productiveness that represents the limits of leisure-class aristocracy and that ultimately spurs Nick’s quest for alternative models of Americanness. More important than Tom’s wastefulness is the sense of creative, moral, and intellectual inertia that he represents. First made known to readers as “one of the most powerful ends that ever played football at New Haven...one of those men who reach such an acute excellence at twenty-one that everything afterwards savours of anticlimax” (10), Tom represents a type of stagnation that is incompatible with an American economy, and more importantly a sense of national identity, predicated on change and innovation. Consider Nick’s characterization of Tom’s mangled reading of the already muddled logic of Goddard’s “The Rise of the Coloured Empires”: “As for Tom the fact that he ‘had some woman in New York’ was really less surprising than that he had been depressed by a book. Something was making him nibble at the edge of stale ideas as if his sturdy physical egotism no longer nourished his peremptory heart” (25). Not only does such a sentiment echo and amplify the notion of intransigence and stagnation developed in earlier characterizations of Tom, but it also carries a strange sense of foreshadowing. To vaguely identify a mysterious “something” intimates that whatever it is will be revealed at some point in the text, and yet there is no clear indication that Nick ever pins this something down. In essence Nick is not foreshadowing the revelation

of some secret depth to Tom's character, but gesturing at its absence. He is highlighting the stalled plot that characterizes Tom's life.

Of course, even in a progressive society that takes productiveness as a core virtue, wastefulness (wasted leisure, wasted money, a wasted life) is not in and of itself indecent. In the final analysis, Tom undercuts Nick's notion of *noblesse oblige* because his leisure-class wastefulness is not just the absence of production, but is in fact a destructive, and thus anti-progressive, force. As Lena points out, "For Veblen, behind the cloak of virtue with which members of the leisure class envelop their lives, there lurks a type of person whose manners bear close resemblance to that of a barbarian." Thus, Lena notes that "Buchanan is very often associated with physical violence," and "Carraway shows Buchanan in a permanently warlike attitude, like that of a predator even in a moment of apparent ease." This predatory relationship with society is best shown by Nick's characterization of Tom and Daisy as "careless people" who "smashed up things and creatures and then retreated into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made" (187-188). The specific referent for this comment is Tom's admission that he was complicit in Gatsby's murder since he erroneously told Wilson that Gatsby, not Daisy, ran over and killed Myrtle—another careless act. But the "things and creatures" Nick refers to are meant to indicate this as a general and pervasive pattern of which these two instances of negligent indifference to human life are merely representative. Such carelessness, then, is not merely a benign disregard for the rest of society, but a legitimately disruptive force that has ripple effects across a large swath of society. The kind of aristocratic privilege Nick would like to assert, then, is rendered illegitimate within an American system

predicated on progress, as the kind of leisure-class aristocracy embodied by Tom is revealed to be not just stagnant and non-productive, but actually destructive and regressive.

Given the regressive and anti-American values embodied in Tom, as well as the superficial similarities between Tom's and Nick's back stories, it shouldn't come as a surprise when Nick lets slip a seemingly damning detail early in the novel that reveals his aristocratic ancestry to be a sham: "The Carraways are something of a clan and we have a tradition that we're descended from the Dukes of Buccleuch, but the actual founder of my line was my grandfather's brother who came here in fifty-one, sent a substitute to the Civil War and started the wholesale hardware business that my father carries on today" (7). Here, Nick seems to be undercutting the very foundation of the sense of class privilege that he tries to establish for himself from the start. Not only does the family money come from the prosaic realm of commerce, but it is based on a type of legally acceptable subterfuge. Far from calling into question Nick's status however, this passage, especially when compared to descriptions of Tom, endears Nick to the reader. Whereas Tom's money has come from unknown sources, descriptions of his sprawling estate, trips to Europe, and polo ponies links him in spirit, if perhaps not in fact, to European aristocracy that the Carraways only pretend to be. The sense of anticlimax attributed to Tom can be extended to his entire line when contrasted with the Carraways' associations with the hardware business, connoting as it does ideas about building and creating. A useful parallel here might be Tom Corey from William Dean Howell's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), whose desire to go into Lapham's paint business suggests a welcome return to the source (moral and literal) of the family's wealth, an embrace of his

grandfather's commitment to commerce over his father's decadent affiliation with leisure. As Howells does for Tom, Nick argues for his own decency by pointing toward the hard work that lies behind it rather than simply relying on the class structure that supports it. Even though Nick wants to argue for the innate or natural Carraway sense of decency, he specifically sells it as a creation, something new or invented in the recent past.

It is important to note, however, that while the true Carraway family narrative echoes traditional notions of the self-made man (building up a business from scratch) and thus could be told in terms of the value of hard work, Nick emphasizes instead the element of passing (the substitute).⁷ While associating the Carraway story with the American narrative of hard work seems to add legitimacy, it doesn't solve the problem of stasis because, as Nick's trip through the Valley of Ashes makes clear, hard work doesn't necessarily lead to progress. John Hilgart (2003) has effectively argued for a reading of the Valley of Ashes as a "history of material relations, moving from agricultural 'ridges and hills' of 'wheat' to a factory town of 'chimneys and rising smoke,' to the final dehumanized image of masses of indistinguishable men 'who move dimly and crumbling through the powdery air'" (97). Although Hilgart asserts that it is important to remember that "what this 'swarm' of men *do* is hidden from view behind 'an impenetrable cloud which screens their obscure operations from your sight'" (97, emphasis in original), it should be noted that Nick does subsequently give a (barely perceptible) face to one of these invisible men. First described by Nick as being "a blonde, spiritless man, anæmic and faintly handsome" (29), Wilson becomes "that ashen, fantastic figure" that Gatsby sees "gliding towards him through the amorphous trees" before Wilson kills Gatsby and

then himself (169). That the physical descriptions of Wilson should so closely resemble the landscape itself suggests the draining, vampiric effect labor has on the working class in this novel. Likewise, while the actual work Wilson does remains obscured—an idea that prompts Hilgart to argue for the way that commodity culture devalues the means of production—Fitzgerald nevertheless gives us a look into the business Wilson would like to do. An excuse for Tom to stop in at Wilson’s garage to pass messages to Myrtle, Tom’s car represents the possibility of a better life for Wilson. That Wilson is a mechanic by trade, and yet is not insulted by Tom’s stalling line “I’ve got my man working on it now” (29), suggests that Wilson recognizes the limits of getting ahead by means of manual labor: he doesn’t want to work on the car, but instead wants to get in on the buying and selling game. Being on the winning end of consumer culture (and outside of the realm of manual labor) represents Wilson’s best and only hope for economic selfhood, as the “damp gleam of hope [that] sprang into his light blue eyes” when Tom walks into Wilson’s shop attests (29). Representing labor in terms of ash and decay and locating Wilson’s only material hope in a lucky break or the benevolence of the upper class denies agency to the workers who populate the Valley of Ashes and thus undermines the notion of the hard-working self-made man. That the spring of Wilson’s hope is really just the means by which he is cuckolded further suggests that hard work is chief among what Nick later calls “the old euphemisms” that “herded” the underclass “along a short cut from nothing to nothing” (114).

If Tom and Wilson represent two competing models of success, neither model seems to be particularly effective or particularly American. Not only is Tom aligned with European aristocracy, but his anti-climatic sense of stasis runs contra to characteristic

American progress. Likewise, despite a lifetime of hard work, Wilson seems to have made little of himself, and thus self-making through hard work seems to be nothing more than a cruel fiction that masks a reality just as static as the inheritance model.

It is important to remember here that the moment Gatsby is declared to be “peculiarly American” is a moment of balance, with Gatsby framed against the extremes of the aristocratically-inflected “rigid sitting” and hard “lifting work.” If Nick is invested in maintaining his own class position, then he needs a narrative that legitimates it. Remembering that Nick memorably aligns himself with Gatsby by asserting that Gatsby is “worth the whole damn bunch put together,” his interest in portraying Gatsby as a romanticized American Dream figure becomes more clear (162). Nick narrates Gatsby as he does as a way of telling his own story by proxy, so that upon Gatsby’s death, Nick is the only figure in the novel that isn’t one of “the whole damn bunch” and who isn’t the “foul dust that floated in the wake of [Gatsby’s] dreams” (6). By aligning himself with Gatsby, and by narrating Gatsby as an American Adam—a figure completely free to craft his own identity—Nick positions himself to become the heir of the American Dream, thereby legitimating his own class position.

The novel aligns Nick and Gatsby, in large part, in the car ride scene that directly follows Gatsby’s introduction as a specifically American figure. In this ride, Gatsby tells Nick the first (and most outrageous) of his origin stories. In her excellent reading of passing in *Gatsby*, Marren suggests that Nick is willing to believe the dubious history of himself that Gatsby first tells Nick, despite the fact that its ridiculous credibility is sustained by only the flimsiest of material evidence (the Montenegrin medal and the picture from Oxford), because Nick’s own family histories—the public and the private—

mirror those of Gatsby. Most importantly, both “official” versions—which, like the medal and the picture, carry romantic, Old World inflections—are just cover stories for more prosaic truths. “Nick’s uncle,” Marren notes,

has secured the continuity and the prosperity of the Carraway line by commodifying another, presumably someone ‘shiftless and unsuccessful.’ His own survival and therefore that of the three generations of ‘prominent, well-to-do’ Carraways depended upon that other’s desperate willingness to risk terminating his own family line on the bloody battlefield. (90)

Nick’s willingness to believe Gatsby’s tale suggests for Marren that Nick “may want what Gatsby’s smile promises: assurance that *he* is passing convincingly” (88, emphasis in original). However, while Marren is correct in asserting that Nick recognizes the parallels between both his and Gatsby’s real and cover stories, and thus that both are, in effect, passing, her reading doesn’t take into account the fact that Nick has already dismissed the heredity narrative (via Tom) as static and un-American. With this in mind, Nick’s reaction to Gatsby’s story suggests not that he is relieved that he can continue repeating his own false family history, but instead that he is experiencing a dawning awareness of the reinvigorating power of the passing narrative itself.

Whereas Marren understands Nick’s response to Gatsby’s incredible origin story as an “eagerness to credit it” (88), and thus as proof that Nick hopes to obfuscate the passing gesture at the heart of his own lineage, she mischaracterizes the degree of Nick’s credulity. While Nick certainly does leap into faith rather quickly, his response to Gatsby in this scene can more accurately be described as waffling or oscillation. As Gatsby’s story begins, Nick “knew why Jordan Baker had believed he was lying...and with this

doubt his whole statement fell to pieces” (69). And yet directly after Gatsby admitted coming from the distinguished Midwestern town of San Francisco, Nick says that he “suspected that [Gatsby] was pulling my leg but a glance at him convinced me otherwise” (70). One paragraph later, however, Nick manages “with an effort” to “restrain [his] incredulous laughter” at the thought of Gatsby collecting rubies throughout Europe, a story that he characterizes as “threadbare” (70). On the next page, Nick’s response is ambiguous: “My incredulity was submerged in fascination now; it was like skimming hastily through a dozen magazines” (71). As media for circulating narratives on a mass scale, magazines would seem to be a site where narrative becomes “threadbare,” and thus Nick’s characterizing Gatsby’s tale as a quick look through several magazines at once in one respect reflects Nick’s feeling that Gatsby’s story is superficial and contrived. At the same time, Nick’s expression of “fascination” with the story blunts what otherwise would seem to be severe criticism. In fact, Nick’s enchantment turns the idea that Gatsby’s story is a kind of simultaneous, evolving collage into a narrative virtue, one that has little to do with veracity. Such details as proof or accuracy seem subsumed along with Nick’s incredulity in the fascinating possibilities opened up by the narrative itself. What Nick is describing is his own willing suspension of disbelief; he is caught up in the story, and while he might know it is a falsehood, he is willing to accept the facts presented as true for the greater good of the story itself.

Nick’s wavering between credulity and incredulity, or more precisely the narrative awareness of this movement, forms a type of meta-narrative comment on how to read *Nick’s* story. As Elaine Ginsberg (1996) contends, “passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen” (2). For a passing performance to

be effective the passer must remain invisible, must “be” the new character he has invented. But for the passing gesture to have the disruptive power that Marren and Pfeiffer credit it with, it must also be made visible. A purely invisible passing performance maintains the naturalized boundaries that the passer crosses, but the visibility of the passing act—achieved safely through narrative—makes those lines visible in the moment it gestures towards their constructedness. Nick is making the readers aware that he sees Gatsby’s act, understands the way that the Gatsby he is showing/being shown here exists only as a narrative construct.

If Nick truly fell for Gatsby’s story or deluded himself into accepting it, there would be no need for Nick to later have what he calls “*one* of those renewals of complete faith in him that I’d experienced before” after Tom susses out Gatsby’s underworld connections, because his faith would never have been shaken (136, emphasis added). In fact, Nick makes this comment at exactly the moment when the wandering heir origin story unravels, as Tom has just goaded Gatsby into admitting that the story he told Nick was only partially true. That Gatsby’s admission of only attending Oxford briefly as a post-war reward necessarily renders the far more outrageous claim of treasure-hunting a complete fabrication is important. For in setting up a model of readership that is based on how compelling the story is, Nick has colored this exposition scene as well. Nick’s renewal of faith is not based on the veracity of the fact of Gatsby’s story but on the truth of its spirit. Clearly Gatsby’s revelation that he only attended Oxford as a result of an opportunity offered to “some of the officers after the Armistice” (138) undermines his early claim that he went to Oxford “because all [his] ancestors have been educated there for many years” (69). And yet Nick chooses this moment to tell the reader that he regains

complete faith in Gatsby because this new version of the story is more resonant, and therefore more “true” than the first version. Having just been offhandedly dismissed by Tom as equivalent to Biloxi, the crasher of Tom and Daisy’s wedding who shape shifts in each character’s imagination (134-135; 138),⁸ Gatsby reveals that his ancestors didn’t go to Oxford (a claim that is important to an aristocratic figure like Tom). This moment both casts him as a descendant of the self-made tradition (coming from regular folk) and imbues him with almost supernatural power (as he, like Biloxi, can be whomever he wants, can move in any circles based only on the power of his imagination and the effectiveness of his performance). Nick’s willingness to credit *both* versions of Gatsby’s story, even in the face of his own better judgment and evidence mobilized to the contrary, suggests that what Nick sees as important about Gatsby is the fact that his story can change.

These ideas resonate with Nick’s introductory claims that he is drawn to Gatsby because the latter has “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness,” an idea that is heightened with Nick’s observation that “if personality is an unbroken series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about [Gatsby], some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away” (6). Here, Nick recognizes that Gatsby’s “hope” and “romantic readiness” participate in a project of radical self-making predicated on the type of performative gestures that compose the most subversive elements of passing. Gatsby is neither Jay Gatz, poor Minnesotan farm boy, nor is he Jay Gatsby, wandering scion of an aristocratic family. Gatsby is whomever he wants to be, at any given moment. His entire personality is nothing more than a series of gestures. Nick can

both believe that one version of Gatsby's story is "all true" and affirm that a different version compels "complete faith" because he recognizes that each story is only a gesture, complete and successful unto itself.

The energizing potential of the passing narrative is punctuated by Nick's introduction to Meyer Wolfsheimer. Here connections are drawn between passing's potential as a de-structured way of composing identity and crime's extra-legal mode of creating and maintaining wealth. Wolfsheimer is most famous in the novel for being "the man who fixed the World's Series back in 1919" (78). Upon hearing this news, Nick is "staggered" (78). "It never occurred to me" he muses, "that one man could start to play with the faith of fifty million people" (78). Nick's focus here is not on how such a massive fraud might negatively impact scores of unknowing bettors, but instead on the way in which criminality is a matter of perception, or playing with faith. Previous to this moment, Nick asserts that "if [he] had thought of it at all [he] would have thought of it as a thing that merely *happened*, the end of some inevitable chain" (78, emphasis in original). If Gatsby's outrageous origin story suggests to Nick that one's identity doesn't necessarily have to be fixed, then criminality here becomes an emblem of unfettered agency. The extra-legality of crime comes to be aligned in this passage with the breaking from an orderly, patterned, and pre-determined world where things happen as the result of "some inevitable chain." Tom Buchanan's appearance directly after this revelation only amplifies the juxtaposition between criminality's liberating potential and the stasis implied by a patterned, predetermined existence.

The convergence of the liberating potentials of passing and criminality in terms of the 1919 World Series fix brings issues of race, ethnicity, and perception to the fore.

According to Robin F. Bachin (2003), because baseball owners had worked hard to align baseball with a conservative, pastoral vision of Americanness, “the Black Sox scandal was interpreted as an instance of ‘foreign’ threats against the wholesomeness of an American institution. Gamblers, with their foreign-sounding names and associations with immigrant working-class subcultures, bore the brunt of attack” (943).⁹ In fact, focus on the actual players involved in the scandal quickly subsided, replaced with a battle cry against “lean-faced and long-nosed” and “dirty, long-nosed, thick-lipped, and strong-smelling gamblers” (qtd. in Nathan 33). The linkages between impurity, un-Americanism, and immigration are best seen in the cleanliness metaphor that dominated (and still dominates) understanding of the fix. With the term “Black Sox scandal” itself being the prime example, headlines and comments on the affair—like “Making the Black Sox White Again,” and “The Flaw in the Diamond”—and the prolific use of phrases like “taint,” “clean up the game,” “dirty, crooked money,” and “straight and clean and honest”¹⁰ make clear the uproar over the World Series fix was less about illegality than about notions of contamination.

The chief figure of this popular vitriol was the Jewish gangster Arnold Rothstein, the model for Fitzgerald’s Meyer Wolfshiem. Although most agree that Rothstein’s role was tangential, at best, because of his prominence and Jewishness, he bore the brunt of the blame.¹¹ Nick’s descriptions of Wolfshiem make it clear that he wants to capitalize on ideas of un-Americanism and its concomitant notion of impurity. In the brief scene in which Nick is first introduced to Wolfshiem, the man’s “tragic nose” is mentioned no less than six times (76-77). He is described as eating with “ferocious delicacy,” he wears human molars as cufflinks, and of course, he talks funny. By linking up the more obvious

signs of Wolfshiem's difference—his nose and his speech—with his more animalistic qualities—his name and his style of eating—Nick clearly intends to set Wolfshiem up not just as a visible symbol of difference, but as someone who is impure, contaminated, and sub-human.

That Nick should want to cast such obvious aspersions on a man who is so closely linked to Gatsby at the same moment that he is beginning to recognize the possibilities encoded in both passing and criminality might at first seem puzzling. However, an explanation lies within Wolfshiem's own descriptions of Gatsby, as well as his involvement in the Black Sox scandal. Of Gatsby, Wolfshiem says, "Fine fellow, isn't he? Handsome to look at and a perfect gentleman," and "I knew I had discovered a man of fine breeding after I talked with him an hour. I said to myself: 'There's the kind of man you'd like to take home and introduce to your mother and sister'" (76-77). Later such praise gives way to a hint at Wolfshiem's motives: "I saw right away he was a fine *appearing* gentlemanly young man and when he told me he was an Oggsford I knew I could use him good" (179, emphasis added). Such descriptions of Gatsby suggest, for Thomas H. Pauly (1993), "the propriety Wolfshiem seeks from Gatsby" (230). In other words, Wolfshiem is using Gatsby, and Gatsby's successful ability to pass, as an effective front for his criminal organization, a way to provide structural cover for his extra-legal activities.

Nick, no less than Wolfshiem, appreciates Gatsby's usefulness as a front. As Michael Beatty (1999) has noticed, "as a criminal [Gatsby] is neither realized nor convincing" (114). While Beatty attributes this to Nick's being blinded by his romantic desire to heroicize Gatsby, I suggest that Gatsby is specifically drawn as an unconvincing

criminal (the tawdriness, danger, and violence associated with his profession being absent from the novel) in order to suggest his success at it and to illuminate the transgressive potential of the passing act. If crime can be understood as the transgression of society's juridical and social norms and mores, then calling Gatsby a criminal but failing to show his crimes highlights that potential while denying its danger. In other words, as he does with passing, Nick turns crime into a metaphor. It certainly wouldn't be in Nick's best interests to advocate criminality (as crime can be considered a tangible threat to his assets), but metaphorizing crime helps Nick capitalize on the energizing spirit of transgression without encouraging its material enactment. The actual act of criminality, represented by Wolfshiem, is always safe because it is visible, while its spirit, like Gatsby, is transformed into a revisable narrative.

The twin acts of turning criminality into a metaphor and using Gatsby as a front, then, animate Nick's narrative project. Although the plot of the novel is the chronological retelling of the events leading to Gatsby's death, Nick's narration itself, on both semantic and plot levels, seeks to align Nick with the notions of agency encoded in the self-made man paradigm. Having recognized the flaws in both the hard-work and inheritance models of success, and having recognized the resonances Gatsby's criminal background and ability to pass have with American notions of freedom and self-determination, Nick's impulse to tell Gatsby's story as a proxy for his own becomes more clear. Just as Wolfshiem uses Gatsby's malleable identity to stake a claim to legitimacy, Nick intends to use Gatsby's ability to pass to make himself the true heir of the American Dream. Nick desires to stake his claim to class privilege based not on heredity—which is both stagnant and unproductive and a hard-sell to an American public inculcated with

notions of democracy and individualism—but on the idea of self-making. Specifically, the style of Nick’s narration does much of the heavy lifting of turning the story of a Minnesotan farm boy turned gangster into a seductive, romantic tale of an American Adam. Even though Nick seems to focus mostly on reportage, as Giltrow and Stouck have noted, “in Nick’s way of speaking, the core of the narrative sentence establishes focus on time, place, event; drawn out endings evoke accumulations of romantic sensitivity” (3). The novel’s characteristic use of terminal ellipses, likewise, reveals a “resistance to closure, suggesting that the sentence (like the dream) has no conclusion” (4). Both syntactic features induce a feeling of possibility, a resistance to fixity and stasis, and thus produce in the reader a romantic sense of hope. This feeling of hope, in turn, not only helps Nick to sell Gatsby’s capacity for creative self-refashioning, but it also helps him create an aura of romantic sensibility for himself.

On the level of plot, it is vital in this context to remember that the passages that seem to most explicitly link Gatsby to the American Dream are those in which Nick’s fact-based narration breaks down. Because Nick seems to have an eye for detail, it is easy to forget that Gatsby speaks very little in the novel, with Nick often “telling” Gatsby through physical descriptions and summaries of dialogue. In fact, after Nick is first introduced to Gatsby, he notes that he “had talked with [Gatsby] about a half dozen times in the past month and found, to [his] disappointment, that he had little to say” (68-69). Gatsby is never very interesting for who he is, but instead for what he represents. Unsurprisingly, the most articulate assessment of Gatsby’s self-making is Nick’s *version* of Gatsby’s back story. By maintaining control over what (and how) he reports, Nick is able to pass Gatsby off as an American Dream figure. Further, the achronological

interludes that punctuate the more straightforward story of Nick's summer (and that are usually devoted to re-casting Gatsby as a completely self-made character) highlight the sense of agency encoded in both passing and criminality. If criminality is an ability to play with faith, to author a course of events outside the scope of an "inevitable chain," then the structure of Nick's narrative employs the same paradigm. Without the interspersed teases of Gatsby's back story, the novel would essentially read like a series of events inevitably leading to Gatsby's death. However, by continually adding personal asides and meditations on Gatsby's origins, and of course by meta-narratively commenting on them, Nick is asserting control of the text—making readers aware that he is shaping their perceptions (playing with faith) and thus maintaining a sense of agency and control over the text itself.

While the tale of James Gatz's magical transformation into Jay Gatsby is not a fabrication (Gatsby tells his true life history to Nick after the accident that kills Myrtle), it is also not reported speech. Speaking of Gatsby's self-creation, Nick tellingly says, "I *suppose* he'd had the name ready for a long time, even then" (104, emphasis added). The hedging start to the paragraph in which the most romantic and radical conception of identity is housed makes clear that what follows is Nick's vision of Gatsby's self-conception.

His parents were shiftless and unsuccessful farm people—his imagination had never really accepted them as his parents at all. The truth was that Jay Gatsby, of West Egg, Long Island, sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was a son of God—a phrase which, if it means anything, means just that—and he must be about His Father's Business, the service

of a vast, vulgar and meretricious beauty. So he invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent, and to this conception he was faithful to the end (104)

It is easy to be swept up by the lyricism of this passage. Nick pulls out all the rhetorical stops in order to create a seductive sense of purity here. Invoking both God and Plato, Nick not only plays off of familiar and easy symbols of pure being that have consistently captured the Western imagination for centuries, but he also ties such a vision to his own revised version of self-making and the American Dream. Here, Nick's suggestion that Gatsby is a son of God recalls the Puritan sense of errand. Nick has Gatsby imagine himself out his family, and the vulgar, secular world of which they are a part. Like the Puritans, Gatsby is a pioneer and founder of a new land that he conforms to his own desires.

In order to maintain his own social position within the American system, Nick must establish himself as heir to the American Dream. This means maintaining his own sense of agency at the expense of Gatsby's. In other words, Nick must present Gatsby's death, at least to some extent, as Gatsby's fault. Nick sows the seeds of this understanding at the exact moment that he is most trying to sell the romantic illusion of Gatsby. Even as Nick is asserting Gatsby's moment of imaginative rebirth—and thereby recalling the idea that Gatsby is always in the process of becoming, reinventing himself from moment to moment—he also gestures to the purported cause of his death. Despite the fact that Gatsby “invented just the sort of Jay Gatsby that a seventeen year old boy would be likely to invent,” Nick also notes that “to this conception he was faithful to the

end” (104). In other words, in the instant of its greatest triumph Gatsby surrenders his agency by settling on a single concept of himself.

This idea is elaborated upon later, in another deviation from Nick’s reportorial style. Just as Nick’s earlier reverie was marked by the telling hedge “I suppose,” the passage describing Gatsby’s and Daisy’s first kiss is marked off from the rest of the narrative by ellipses, thus signifying that Nick is again departing into the realm of imaginative conjecture. Here, Nick imagines Gatsby “seeing” that “the sidewalk really formed a ladder and mounted to a secret place above the trees—he could climb to it, if he climbed alone, and once there he could suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder” (117). Significantly, the earlier language of pure imaginative self-making (a concept disconnected from the processes of labor and the material world more generally) here is linked through the image of a ladder with more traditional concepts of self-making. That is, the ladder image is often invoked in discussion of the American Dream, signifying as it does the idea of economic and social ascension. Whereas in traditional narratives, one moves up the ladder by hard work and initiative, Nick here is suggesting that the ladder leads not to affluence, but to a dematerialized dream world, and the only requirement to mount the ladder is a commitment to unfettered individualism. In other words, Nick is arguing for a conception of the American Dream that is just that, a dream. In dematerializing the dream Nick makes it both more seductive—an imaginative utopia where pure life resides vs. a vulgar material world—and more safe—as it moves the goalposts of desire outside of the real world, where his own class privilege resides.

In further warning to readers of the danger of embodying the Dream, Nick asserts that Gatsby “knew that when he kissed [Daisy], and forever wed his unutterable visions to her perishable breath, his mind would never again romp like the mind of God” (117). Here Nick specifically recalls his earlier assertion that Gatsby is a son of God, and in so doing implies that Gatsby initiated his own destruction by betraying the ideals of self-making that Nick has ascribed to him. Such an implication is later realized as Nick muses about Gatsby’s death, again imposing thoughts and a value system on Gatsby. “I have an idea” Nick tells us, “that Gatsby himself didn’t believe [the call from Daisy] would come and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream” (169). For Gatsby did kiss the girl after all, and in so doing the narrative implies that he lost his claim to the mantle of self-made man. His death seems disembodied, “material without being real” (169), a result not of a series of real-life circumstances, but of a failure of living up to a concept of self-making that he once represented. Thus Gatsby’s life after the fateful kiss smacks of the same sort of anti-climax that Tom’s does, an idea most famously summed up in Gatsby’s own exclamation: “Can’t repeat the past?... Why of course you can” (116).

With Gatsby’s death, inevitable after he forfeits his ability to re-invent himself, Nick can position himself as the only heir to the American Dream in the novel. Nick signals this transition in the novel’s final pages. Immediately after describing Gatsby’s funeral, Nick breaks in with a seemingly out of place remembrance of train rides home from his Eastern boarding schools to the Midwest. After having left Chicago behind, Nick notes the “sharp wild brace [that] came suddenly into the air” (184). “We drew in deep breaths of it” he goes on, “as we walked back from dinner through cold vestibules,

unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour before we melted indistinguishably into it again” (184). Of this passage Hilgart has noted that a “complete ‘identity with this country’ would preclude an awareness of itself, would *be* indistinguishable melting, so Nick is actually describing a liminal sense of *non*-identity—a temporary experience of difference that renders identity discernable” (112, emphasis in original). Here is yet another example of Nick being “both within and without,” able to recognize and benefit from his identification with a system, but possessing the critical distance necessary to maintain autonomy. In other words, Nick is passing, or at least gesturing towards the way in which he can melt indistinguishably into an identity, but maintain awareness, and therefore control, of it.

This is important when considering Nick’s assertion several lines later about the geographical thrust of the novel: “I see now that this has been the 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” (184). Such a “deficiency” becomes easier to define when read against Nick’s observation that he had been made “a little complacent from growing up in the Carraway house in a city where dwellings are still called through decades by a families name” (184) and his earlier admission that after the war he returned to the Midwest “restless... Instead of being the warm center of the world the middle-west now seemed like the ragged edge of the universe” (7). The frontier having long passed it by, the Midwest for Nick now represents comfort and its dangerous twin, complacency. As the narrative has progressed, every major character flaw Nick observes in others has at its root a sense of complacency and stagnation. The Wilsons and the other denizens of the Valley of Ashes are stuck on

the short cut from nothing to nothing, Tom and Daisy are content to exist within their money and carelessness, and Gatsby has wed his “unutterable vision” to Daisy’s “perishable breath.” In each case, forward momentum is surrendered, and with it a claim to American identity.

Notably, though, Nick says “this has been a story of the West” instead of the established term “middle-west” that he has used throughout the text. Such a lexical substitution recalls Gatsby’s own placement of San Francisco in the Midwest (69-70), which Marren believes represents, for Nick, Gatsby’s “power to mobilize geographic and political boundaries” and which therefore implies that the boundaries of identity have become unfixed along with their geographical counterparts (94). Viewed through the twin lenses of history and ideology, such geographic substitution gains even more weight because by conflating the West and Midwest as geographical regions, Nick is also calling up associations with the individualistic pioneers that so captured Fredrick Jackson Turner’s imagination. While the Midwest may be the “warm center of the world,” it was once the frontier, and Nick wants to reclaim that frontier spirit, to revert the region to the “ragged edge of the universe” as a way of combating what he understands to be a threatening stasis. In other words, just as Dan Cody, the only representative of the “real” West in the book, once “brought back to the eastern seaboard the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon” Nick brings his and Gatsby’s story back to the Midwest in order to partake of its erstwhile vitalizing power (106).

This is not to say, of course, that Nick intends for himself or his family to become “pioneer debauchee[s]” (106), but it does reveal a pair of intertwined desires which have the potential to lead to the continued security of his family’s economic and

social position. By incorporating the ethos of the American Dream, Nick is helping to ensure both the material and spiritual vitality of his family. With his repeated connotations of the old-moneyed American class—both in East Egg and the Midwest—with decadent European aristocracy Nick seems to be aware of the way in which European aristocracy enjoyed a position of privilege that had become, in large part, merely symbolic. What aristocracy stands for in this novel is illegitimate and decaying power, with Tom and Daisy's movement "back into their money or their vast carelessness or whatever it was that kept them together" recalling the European aristocracy's retreating into their world of hereditary privilege when faced with the threat of economic and social encroachment posed by the mercantile classes. But in a world increasingly chafing under old euphemisms, such blind carelessness can have devastating material effects.

A solution to this problem can be found in the novel's famous closing paragraphs. Nick relates that, while sitting on Gatsby's beach,

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. Its vanished 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, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder (189)

By turning back the clock here, Nick is assigning an ideological causality to the conquering/building of America. Man's "capacity for wonder" becomes an originary condition that necessarily leads (to re-reverse the chronology) to the felling of the trees and the building of Gatsby's house. In other words, he is telling a narrative of both imagination and building, with the one necessarily leading to the other. Remembering that Nick's family fortune follows from their involvement in the hardware business, what Nick seems to be doing is recalling the important way that a capacity for wonder (the root condition of creative self-making as Nick understands it), or a recognition of possibilities and the will to act on them, is the foundation of wealth. The Carraways, Nick seems to be hinting, should not retreat into their money like the Buchanans, but continue to build and re-invent in order to maintain their position.

The point at which Nick ends the novel then, keeps this vision of the American Dream intact. We, Americans, are balanced like Gatsby between the moment of pure wonder and some climatic future. The act of stretching after the future and never attaining it is, for Nick, the necessary condition for self-determination. And yet, as the story ends, concrete embodiments of this model of American identity have fallen away. The Wilsons are dead, but were stuck on the short cut from nothing to nothing anyway, unable to imagine themselves out of that structure. Tom had long since resigned himself to anti-climax. Daisy never existed as more than a commodity to be possessed by the male characters (and thus had limited agency). Jordan Baker, whose willingness to bend the rules to her advantage is redolent of Gatsby's own involvement in crime and can, at least in part, account for Nick's fascination with her, lacks the expansiveness of Gatsby's personality. As a model of self-making that must resonate on a national level, the fact

that Jordan feels “safer on a plane where any divergence from a code would be thought impossible” renders her an ineffective symbol for the type of creative self-making that Nick imagines (63); as a rule-breaker, Jordan can massage her story, but as a blue blood, she can never really re-invent herself. What’s more, Jordan’s limited self-interest renders her useless as a model for national identity. Gatsby, likewise, loses the power of self-creation by focusing all his energies and attentions on Daisy, and thus loses his status as self-definer. So it is, in the end, only “us” and Nick beating on against the current. By dispatching or discrediting all the other characters’ claims to the capacity for wonder while simultaneously claiming that capacity as a national ethos, Nick in effect makes himself the embodiment of America itself.

It is Nick, remember, who both claims that he is “one of the few honest people that [he] has ever known” (64) and tells Jordan that he is “five years too old to lie to [himself] and call it honor” (186). This move to redefine honesty to match the subjective, individualist refrain of “be true to yourself,” marks Nick as the ideal passing man. As his narrative comes to a close, Nick alone has retained his ability to be both within and without, or to be “that most limited of all specialists, the ‘well-rounded’ man” (8-9). Nick seems to feel comfortable in all environments in the novel, from Tom and Myrtle’s apartment, to the Buchanans’ estate, to Gatsby’s parties. Nick can always blend in and yet remains aloof enough to never become a part of any one scene. He can be, in effect, whatever the situation dictates. It is little wonder, then, that the two places that most capture Nick’s imagination are trains moving through the Midwest, defined by transience and a melting sense of identity, and New York City, which Nick describes as having a “racy, adventurous feel” (61). Like the train rides on his way home from school, New

York for Nick represents a site where identity is malleable: “I liked to walk up Fifth Avenue and pick out romantic looking women from the crowd and imagine that in a few minutes I was going to enter into their lives, and no one would ever know or disapprove” (61). As with his portrait of Gatsby, Nick draws himself as a character created in his own imagination, creates visions of himself passing so successfully that “no one would ever know.” In the closing moments of the novel, then, Nick enacts the same sort of imaginative passing, placing himself physically in the same location where Gatsby once stood, the same location that the Dutch sailors once gazed upon, and imagines himself for the reader as the embodiment of both.

Speaking of common understandings of the representation of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby*, Michael Shudson (2004) has observed that

to see *The Great Gatsby* as the quintessential novel of the American dream rests on the mistaken assumption that the dream of having the opportunity to make *something* of oneself is the same thing as the attempt to make *anything* of oneself, to make oneself over from scratch, as if one’s parents, upbringing, hometown were just lines on a curriculum vitae that could be deleted and replaced with new information. Gatsby does not personify the American dream but perverts it. He has an eye not to the main chance but to the romantic gamble. The typical American dreamer is, strangely or not so strangely, a pragmatist. The romantic—and that is what Jimmy Gatz, aka Jay Gatsby, was at his best—simply misinterprets the dream by believing he can live a life inside it. The actual American dream, in contrast, is very much about living in reality. (572, emphasis in original)

It is true, of course, that those who are most able to realize the fruits of whatever material rewards promised by the American Dream are those who, to borrow from Thoreau, do not live in their castles in the air, but instead build foundations under them. In this scenario, Nick is the pragmatist to Gatsby's romantic hero. But it is important to realize that Nick pragmatically realizes that the romantic notion of radical self-making with which he imbues Gatsby is an enabling condition. By suggesting that both individual and national identities are always in flux, always amenable to change or re-creation, the narrative of self-making posits a goal that is always tantalizingly out of reach, instilling believers with a sense of agency while also working to ensure that the foundation will keep being built up. At the same time, by associating this notion of radical self-making with America itself, Nick is both hiding and touting his dubious claims to prior class status. By making Gatsby's story a proxy for his own, he charges himself with the cultural cachet associated with his concept of the American spirit and simultaneously capitalizes on the revitalizing power of narrative, ensuring that his story is not one of decadence and decay, but instead one of newness, building, and becoming.

Fitzgerald's creation of Nick Carraway as a narrator who is both "within and without" reveals the ways that his understanding of the American Dream goes beyond simply approving or disapproving. The novel can be read as both a critique of the deadening effect of consumer capitalism and a celebration of a romantic sense of possibilities because Fitzgerald recognizes the way that both are inextricably tied together in the American imagination. Here the Dream conditions capitalism's effects by offering a fantasy solution to them. The American Dream in *Gatsby* is offered up not as an achievable material condition, or a long dead sentimentalized ideal, but as a vital

structure of belief. *The Great Gatsby* reveals that a belief in the possibilities of radical self-making is an energizing force that forms the engine of national progress. Neither Tom, Daisy, nor Nick is the prime mover in the novel. Such a creative capacity is instead shown to inhere in characters like Gatsby and the denizens of his parties, who chafe under the old euphemisms and seek to find a way out. Unlike Daisy, who can't comprehend these characters because they push on the borders that should contain them, Nick does understand them. More specifically Nick understands that containment is neither possible nor desirable. Instead, Nick recognizes the possibilities raised by those who seek to work outside of borders and boundaries and realizes that the only way to stop encroachment is to absorb that spirit of creative self-making.

The Gangster in the Boardroom: *Scarface* and the Alger Hero

Any study of the American Dream is bound to encounter the specter of Horatio Alger. “Alger heroes,” says Carol Nackenoff (1994), “are part of our language of discourse about social mobility and economic opportunity, about determination, self-reliance, and success” (3). Considering that the action of his didactic children’s fiction takes place under titles like *Strive and Succeed*, *Struggling Upward*, *Striving for Fortune*, *Making his Mark*, *From Farm to Fortune*, *Bound to Rise*, and *Risen from the Ranks*, its not hard to see why. Alger’s books seem to endorse, indeed embody, the rags-to-riches myth. In fact, says Nackenoff, the Alger myth is so pervasive that ““Horatio Alger’ is shorthand for someone who has risen through the ranks—the self-made man, against the odds” (4). Alger’s name often popularly functions, in fact, as a type of synecdoche for the whole self-making tradition, a representative hero of a “discourse in the United States [that] concerns strong-willed, courageous individuals who struggle against the odds and triumph rather than engage in collective struggle or collective action” (Nackenoff 4).

However, the promise of radical status change and individual success implied in his titles—the promise of fortune on which Alger’s place at the center of the self-making discourse is based—bears a problematical relationship with the exploits described between the books’ covers. As I’ll describe in more detail below, the typical Alger hero very rarely rises to anything more than a comfortable, middle-class position, is rarely shown engaging in actual labor, and depends a great deal on the intervention of luck or wealthy patrons (usually one and the same) for his modest success. On the other hand, screen gangsters like Tony Camonte from Howard Hawks’ 1932 film *Scarface*, who are

often strong-willed individualists, struggling against the odds to achieve great wealth and social status, are most often classified as “misguided self-made [men]” (Schatz 1981 84), who “[turn] the self-made man myth on its ear” (Rebhorn 1988 78) simply because they are not Algeresque boys of good character. In other words, the hegemony of the (misunderstood) Alger myth creates a false type/antitype dichotomy that clouds any attempt to deal with narratives of entrepreneurial self-making that fall outside the (real or imagined) Alger pattern. In this chapter I engage the conventional wisdom regarding gangster films and the American Dream by reading *Scarface* against Alger’s novel *Risen from the Ranks* to show how both narratives work together within the self-made man tradition to help shape and discipline notions of Americanness.

Both *Scarface* and *Risen from the Ranks* explore the nature and value of hard work and the interrelationships between work, economic achievement, and American citizenship. While in many respects these texts represent opposite poles of thinking about this relationship, it is necessary to understand how both interact within the popular discourse to form the American story of self-making. If, as I’ve been arguing, the rags-to-riches story is so resonant with the American Dream because change in economic status so easily and concretely exemplifies the notions of progress, change and anti-stasis that are used to describe America itself—*Gatsby* is often popularly understood as an American Dream figure, for instance, because his re-creative abilities are most obviously rendered in his spectacular economic success—then the morally-defined success offered up in the Alger narrative is too static and limiting to function as a model for success under the terms of progress demanded by the American Dream. Just as *The Great Gatsby* uses Wolfshiem’s criminality to suggest a way out of limiting, orderly structures,

Scarface uses the element of individual and group (inter- and intra- gang) competition to recast and update the familiar Turnerian frontier virtues in an urban milieu, positing a means of business success that specifically avoids the pitfalls to progress encoded in the Alger story. In short, Camonte becomes the rugged, individualist American Dream figure that the Alger hero only pretends to be, and in the process he offers an imitable model of success tailor made for his times.

At the same time, gangsterism is inherently anti-social and unstable, and these are precisely the type of problems Alger's citizenship narratives—with their focus on creating a stable sense of American-style gentility—are best equipped to address. Alger's focus on creating a body of clear middle-class cues and a cooperative sense of the common good functions to promote stability and protect citizens (those who conform to his sense of American values) from the specter of downward mobility. The tension between the characteristic American drive for upward mobility encoded in the gangster story, and the equally characteristic drive for a stable, middle class position predicated on a stable and restricted Americanness, is mediated in gangster films via the gangster's very clear ethnicity. The element of visible ethnicity allows gangster narratives to metaphorize and compartmentalize the violence inherent in the gangster's business practices, to deny that violence and criminality are integral to a national narrative of progress and upward mobility, and to hide instead behind a normative, Algeresque veneer of middle-class virtue.

The lionization of the Alger narrative as the more true or definitive version of the rags-to-riches story, along with a concomitant casting of the gangster narrative as a perversion of that discourse—despite gangster films' close resemblance to the attributes

mistakenly ascribed to the Alger narrative—reveals the role the meta-discourse of the American Dream plays in mediating symbolic citizenship. The Alger narrative is, in essence, passing as the ideal American tale, symbolically claiming the traits deemed valuable in narratives of ethnic striving and covering them in a veneer of stable, normative respectability. Viewed macrocosmically, that is by focusing not just on the heroes of Alger's books but on the cast of characters that makes up the society of his novels, Alger doesn't tell stories of widespread status change or upward social progress, but instead reveals what Bruce Robbins (2007) describes as “an impulse to rectify extreme inequalities while maintaining a hierarchy,” an attempt to produce a more reasoned, transparent, and orderly society (72). The Alger narrative is not about social mobility so much as it is about a differently configured status quo. Likewise, despite its titular commitment to upward mobility, *Risen from the Ranks* is less about economic and social advancement than it is about promoting and maintaining social stability. Instead of espousing an idea of unlimited financial and economic success, the novel is more concerned with finding the appropriate position for each character on a fixed social ladder. In this way, the novel, and the Alger cannon more generally, emphasizes predictability, equilibrium, and a natural social order as key elements of the general social welfare. Alger's emphasis on ideal republicanism and civic virtue promotes stability, but also invites stasis.

The distance between what Nackenoff calls “the *prevailing* image of Alger's stories [as those that] celebrate the rise of capitalism and the proliferation of economic opportunities and riches” (5-6, emphasis in original) and *Risen from the Ranks*' project is made clear from the book's opening pages. Picking up the action from where the novel's

prequel *Bound to Rise* left off, this book finds Harry saying goodbye to his current employer, magician Professor Henderson. In the previous story, Henderson had taken Harry in and given him a job as his assistant when Harry had lost his position with a shoemaker due to one of what we are told are many common but unpredictable fluctuations in the market. Harry was only working for the shoemaker to help his struggling family pay off a predatory loan on a cow, but his lifelong ambition (Harry begins *Risen from the Ranks* at sixteen) has been to become a newspaperman, a desire Harry has harbored since receiving a copy of the Franklin's *Autobiography* as a school prize. The force of this ambition causes Harry, at the beginning of *Risen*'s first chapter, to turn down Henderson's offer of a raise and a promotion in order to take a position as a printer's apprentice that pays only "board the first month, and for the next six months...two dollars a week and board" (21), wages that we learn are less than subsistence and will cause Harry to dip into savings.

All of this—undeserved unemployment, the need for rescue from economic ruin by an outside agent, deliberate downward economic movement—supports Cawelti's conclusion that "Alger was not a partisan of 'rugged individualism,' and only within limits an admirer of pecuniary success" (102). More than that, though, it also signals an investment in republican virtue as a countervailing and stabilizing force against what Nackenoff terms "the economic dislocations occasioned by the rise of capitalism" (8). As Harry's period of unemployment shows, the economy is not imagined as an open, expanding, vertical system, but is instead an uncertain terrain with horizontal movement (farm to shoe shop to magician's tent to printing office) common and the threat of poverty ever present. Likewise, Henderson's timely assist demonstrates the way that

civic-mindedness can inject a much-needed dose of stability into the system, as a network of citizens willing to help each other can counteract larger, unpredictable economic forces. Finally, Harry's desire to give up a promising and reasonably lucrative career in magic for the chance to become an editor closes the loop on the republic project, as we learn that Harry wants to follow in Franklin's footsteps in order to attain "an honorable position in the community" (23). By giving up one job in order to take another that offers less pay, Harry reveals the novel's commitment to access over advancement. Social mobility is a matter of assuming a position in a stable social hierarchy, not rising to the top.

Henderson's support of Harry's decision establishes the novels' interest in productive citizenship. Instead of urging Harry to reconsider this career choice in the name of pecuniary advancement and upward mobility, or even in the name of simple self preservation—remember that Harry stands to potentially lose all of his savings in this venture—Henderson commiserates. "I don't fancy being a magician myself," he says of his own trade, and of Harry's eventual goal to become an editor, Henderson offers, "I sympathize with your ambition" (22). Henderson's tepid feelings about his own profession reveal the way that Alger tries to engineer a fictional republic, to reorganize social valuation based on a commitment to the commonweal. Thus, Henderson justifies his trade not in terms of its profit value, or its ability to offer him some sort of inner satisfaction, but instead by saying: "I contribute to the innocent amusement of the public, and earn my money fairly" (22). This comment echoes Henderson's chief regret in terms of Harry's leaving:

I have had perfect confidence in you, and this has relieved me of a great deal of anxiety. It would have been very easy for one in your position to cheat me out of a considerable sum of money....Money is the great tempter nowadays. Consider how many defalcations and breaches of trust we read of daily in confidential positions, and we are forced to conclude that honesty is a rarer virtue than we like to think it is. (21)

In both cases, honesty is the principal mark of legitimacy and value. Henderson's praise of Harry supports Cawelti's claim that "The Alger hero demonstrates to a high degree those traits that might be called employee virtues: fidelity, punctuality, and courteous deference. It is upon these latter traits that Alger places the greatest stress" (112).

However, the similarity between Henderson's description of Harry's value as an employee and of the value of his own profession suggests that Alger's emphasis on these virtues isn't just about training children to become good employees, but more expansively about inculcating civic values. The relationship between employer and employee is just part of a larger system of trust and obligation that helps to maintain stability and balance in society. Henderson's valuing of Harry as an employee because he doesn't steal is just a version of the novel's characterization of Henderson's trade as "useful employment" (22) simply because it is a "fair" way of earning a living; both reveal that social legitimacy is grounded in doing no harm.

At the same time, doing no harm is hardly the same as helping, which is why Henderson pointedly sympathizes with Harry's ambition to be an editor. "The editor in America," Henderson says, "is a man of influence" (22). Far more than upward mobility or economic success, this idea of influence permeates the novel, in the same way that it

dominates the Alger canon as a whole. As John Tebbel (1963) notes of the typical Alger hero, despite the prevailing image of Alger heroes as paragons of hard work and self-reliance, “it is almost always an incident which brings them to the attention of a successful businessman, who gives them the job which makes the difference between mere struggle and opportunity” (14). John Cawelti (1965) seconds this idea when he asserts that “Alger’s heroes are rarely ‘alone and unaided,’ and do not win their success entirely through individual effort and accomplishment. From the very beginning of his career, the Alger boy demonstrates an astounding propensity for chance encounters with benevolent and useful friends and his success is largely due to their patronage and assistance” (109).

Critics like Tebbel and Cawelti tend to conceptualize these lucky breaks as failures of storytelling, with the patrons functioning as little more than *dei ex machina* necessary to make Alger’s virtue-rewarded plot play. However, the very preponderance of these encounters both across Alger’s oeuvre and within each text suggests that patronage is far more than a lazy plot device, but is instead a significant thematic concern. As Michael Moon (1987) has observed in regards to the Ragged Dick series, patronage in Alger’s books tends not to be a one-off affair: “just as Dick has been saved in order to learn to ‘save’ himself, so will he save younger boys and provide them a model of ‘saving’ both money and still more boys” (99). Bruce Robbins takes this idea a step further when he notes that the boys Ragged Dick saves tend not to exhibit the same kind of ambition, pluck, and vigor that Dick himself does. “This asymmetry,” Robbins argues, “comes perilously close to the very antithesis of rugged individualism: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” (71). The end result of all this

saving, this exerting of influence, is the production of “a vision of ineluctable social interdependence” (Robbins 73). The end result, then, is a more stable notion of society organized around cooperation rather than competition. Mentorship is a cornerstone of Alger’s formula because, as Harry and Henderson’s agreement on the importance of becoming a man of influence attests, benefactors provide access to that stable common culture.

It is no coincidence that Harry’s first published piece is on “Ambition,” but is really about helping others in order to contribute to the common good. Here Harry tries to sell ambition as a republican virtue. Just as professional legitimacy was earlier cast in terms of a do-no-harm ethos, Harry here uses the same criteria to defend personal ambition against those who would “denounce [it] as wholly bad and to be avoided by all” (98). In order to make his case, Harry divides his subject into true and false variants. True ambition—exemplified by Benjamin Franklin and Christopher Columbus—is “a desire to excel in what would be of service to the human race,” while false ambition “is selfish in itself” (98). Interestingly, among the falsely ambitious, Harry seems to rank those “who are ambitious to dress better than their neighbors” (98) right alongside Napoleon, even though the ambition of the latter “has brought misery and ruin to prosperous nations” (98). While Harry suggests that dressing well is wrong because “it is a waste of time which could be much better employed,” given the tenor of the essay, it is reasonable to surmise that both forms of false ambition are problematic because they contain the potential for dangerous social instability. Note that Harry offers no prescription against dressing well—gaining a new suit is, in fact, a signal event for Alger’s heroes¹²—but against the desire to dress *better than* one’s neighbors, and that

Harry's example of false ambition in this category, Beau Brummel, was noted for "displaying [his clothes] in the streets, or in society" (98). Note, too, that Harry's essay ends with "an appeal to boys and young men to direct their ambition into worthy channels, so that even if they could not leave behind a great name, they might at least lead useful lives, and in dying have the satisfaction of thinking that they had done some service to the race" (99). That is, by admitting the likelihood that the reader will fail to achieve greatness, the essay discourages measuring success against others (who might be great) and thus redirects the potentially disruptive energy of competition into civic virtue.

Cathy Birkenstein-Graff (2003) calls Alger's attitude toward ambition "one of the central contradictions of the rags-to-riches story: its celebration of ambitious individuals who rise above others—and nonetheless, at the same time, retain a populist humility that connects them to their modest, humble roots" (54). This contradiction, especially as expressed in Harry's essay, can be chalked up in large part to the bourgeois values encoded in Alger's republicanism. On one level, as Birkenstein-Graff explains, "having seen what could happen to those who wielded power transparently and with great pageantry, America's bourgeois elites migrated towards stories and symbols in which their power was effaced [... which] suggested that those in power in the New World retained deep connections to the lower and middle classes and to their own lower or middling origins" (54). As might be expected in this context, Harry's piece makes sure to mention "the difficulties and discouragements over which [Columbus] triumphed on the way to success" (99). Even more interestingly, after describing and providing lengthy excerpts from Harry's essay, Alger then tells the readers that "there was nothing remarkable about it, and no striking originality in the ideas" and that "it must not be

supposed that our hero was a genius” (99). In fact, narrative undercutting of Harry’s talents and abilities is a regular feature of the novel and serves in large part to help cloak Harry in the garments of a republican everyman: whatever rank Harry will eventually rise to, he will always remain the humble farmer’s son.

Harry’s splitting of true and false ambition is also part and parcel of a project in which, “by continually contrasting his heroes and villains, Alger seeks to keep in place a series of hierarchical oppositions between the exceptional, upwardly-mobile individual and the undeserving, undisciplined masses” (Birkenstein-Graff 32). In fact, says, Birkenstein-Graff, discipline was an important watchword during Alger’s time, as material gains were thought to be rewards for disciplined values like sobriety and frugality, while economic and social ruin were thought to be the lot of those who could not control their impulses. Clearly, class and ethnicity played a role in the perpetuation of these values, as the libidinous qualities—like masturbation, drinking, sex, violence—it sought to contain became increasingly associated with the nation’s underclass (Birkenstein-Graff 31, 65 n.5). Within this context, then, we find another reason why Harry comes down so hard on those who spend too much time on their appearance: “Now this is a very low form of ambition, and it is wrong to *indulge* it” (Alger 98, emphasis mine). Vanity is an indulgence, and as such it represents a problem of containment and so represents potential disruption of the social order. As Birkenstein-Graff points out, “How subjects carried themselves [...] was a window into one’s economic fate, one’s moral control and integrity, and a sign of where one positioned oneself regarding the nation’s ascendant bourgeois-capitalist ideology” (30).

Cawelti, too, discusses the inculcation of “bourgeois virtues”: “honesty, hard work, family loyalty; good manners, cleanliness, and neatness of appearance; kindness and generosity to the less fortunate; loyalty and deference on the part of employees, and consideration and personal interest on the part of employers” (121). What is important to note about these qualities is the underlying sense of order they imply. Such values promote a smooth-running social system, in which restraint promotes stability. In this context, it’s worth pointing out that, for Cawelti, “the most important group of qualities which operate in the hero’s favor are those which make him an ideal employee: fidelity, dependability, and a burning desire to make himself useful” (118-119) and that for Harry, true ambition is “a desire to excel in what would be of service to the race” (98). It’s not hard to see a vision of the republic at work here. Not only does Harry imagine a society in which everyone sublimates their own impulses for the common good, but he also imagines a disciplined society in which hierarchies are respected and maintained. Ambition is always social and competition is eschewed, leaving a stable society based on genteel values behind.

Harry’s choice of careers is clearly related to this social vision. According to Nackenoff, Alger was “an active participant in [the] struggle over pleasure” (240) in which traditional guardians of culture battled with purveyors of popular amusements over the meaning of culture itself. Although Alger was “not ...a critic of mere amusements that he considered innocent,” he believed that “the pleasures of hearth and home, of a good book and good companionship were better than public spectacle” (Nackenoff 240). In large part, this preference was a result of his abiding belief that the strength and cohesion of the Republic depended on the maintenance and transmission of a shared

national culture. The problem of transmitting shared culture, however, is one of media. The innocent amusements Henderson provides may be harmless, but the very fact of their innocence suggests that they don't do any productive cultural work, either, which explains Professor Henderson's general dissatisfaction with magic as a profession. The good books and good companionship Nackenoff describes are preferable means of entertainment because they both transmit and embody learned culture. The quiet discipline of reading, in other words, is a means of self-improvement that also marks the virtue of the reader.

So it goes in *Risen from the Ranks*, as books and elevated conversation play an important role in Harry's rise. As I mentioned earlier, Harry's ambition to become an editor was prompted by the gift of a book (Franklin's autobiography), and following Franklin's lead, Harry's plans for self improvement require him to "get some books and study a little everyday" (34). It is while making these plans for himself that Harry meets (trips over) Oscar Vincent—son of prominent Boston editor John Vincent—who becomes a type of peer mentor to Harry and facilitates his entrée into polite society.¹³ Oscar is reading a Greek lesson at the time, and after Harry fawns over Oscar's language ability, Oscar invites Harry to his rooms to "sit over the fire, and chat like old friends," where Harry moons over Oscar's "fine library" (39, 40). Harry's estimation of Oscar increases, then, when Oscar casually points out his collection is really just "a few books" and adds "my father filled a couple of boxes" (40). On learning of Harry's own dearth of books, Oscar offers to lend Harry anything he likes. This tableau is revisited often during the novel, although the level of formality increases. That is, while Oscar casually models proper patrician values in this first meeting, and passively aids in Harry's cultural uplift

by lending him *Ivanhoe*, later his role as cultural instructor becomes explicit, as Oscar becomes Harry's French tutor and these fireside meetings become official lessons. Oscar's gift to Harry of the French reader *Télémaque*, then, becomes an important symbol of Harry's rising respectability.

The importance of reading, and its relationship to both mentorship and republicanism, is reiterated in a companion scene to Harry's initial visit to Oscar's rooms. Harry, now an apprentice at the *Centreville Gazette*, has been invited to dinner at the home of the journeyman printer in the office, Ferguson. Although older than Harry, and married, Ferguson is in many ways Harry's doppelganger. Not only do Harry and Ferguson share a trade and similar ambitions (Ferguson wants to own a paper, but not edit one), but they also display a similar work ethic and possess matching attitudes towards thrift and share a desire for self-improvement. In many ways, in fact, Ferguson is a grown-up Alger boy—a diligent and dedicated employee of impeccable moral qualities who does not waste his money and who works to improve himself at every opportunity. After dinner, Harry and Ferguson share the following exchange:

“It isn't much of library,” [Ferguson] said, “but a few books are better than none. I should like to buy as many every year; but books are expensive, and the outlay would make too great an inroad upon my small surplus.”

“I always thought I should like a library,” said Harry, “but my father is very poor, and has fewer books than you. As for me, I have but one book besides the school-books I studied, and that I gained as a school prize—‘The Life of Franklin.’”

“If one has few books he is apt to prize them more,” said Ferguson, “and is apt to profit by them more.” (57-58)

On one level, of course, this scene functions as a restatement of the novel’s commitment to the importance of reading as a means of self-betterment. Reminding readers of Harry’s obsessive re-reading of Franklin, too, helps place self-improvement squarely within the republican tradition—self-culture as nation building. More than that, though, this passage points out an important dilemma in regards to the role of books in the republican project: books are expensive. Ferguson’s contention that fewer books equal greater value is belied by his own desire for more, as it is elsewhere in the novel by Harry’s continual acquisition of new books.

In this light, Harry’s decision to become an editor takes on an important new dimension, as newspapers are imagined as vehicles of public instruction that can mediate between the mass amusements of magic and the culture and discipline of books. As can be imagined given the tenor of the exchange, Harry and Ferguson’s discussion about books becomes a natural segue into a broader conversation about the economics of self-betterment. Hearing Harry’s expressing (mild) jealousy of Oscar’s freedom to focus only on learning, Ferguson replies: “I heard a lecturer once who said that the printing office is the poor man’s college, and he gave a great many instances of printers who had risen high in the world” (59). While on first blush, this seems to be yet another paean to the values of hard work—even posing a type of “street smarts” value to manual labor—within the context of the broader conversation another meaning becomes possible. That is, Harry and Ferguson have just been discussing the value of reading against the problem of access. Not only do books require capital to acquire, but they also require leisure to

consume. Likewise, upon the conversation's close, Alger tells us that "For the first time [Harry] had formed definite plans for his future": "I will be an editor," Harry says "and exert some influence in the world" (59).¹⁴ Harry's newfound resolve to exert influence is telling, since the idea hadn't been mentioned in the conversation. In fact the discussion ends with Ferguson expressing some regret that he didn't read more as a youth and exhorting Harry to maintain diligence in his studies while he is still young and unmarried in order to "prepare [him]self for [his] editorial duties" (59). The point is that Harry takes Ferguson's advice to better himself, in conjunction with his awareness of the difficulties of obtaining a traditional education, to mean that his career ambition is to exert influence. Here authorship becomes mentorship. Unlike Oscar, Harry lacks the means to perpetuate cultural norms conventionally—he cannot lend books because he cannot afford books—but as an editor, he can make his newspaper a cultural vehicle. Not just the printing office, but the material printed there, too, can be the poor man's college.

As the juxtaposition of magic and editorship in the opening pages hints at, newspapers in *Risen from the Ranks* are presented as conduits of instruction instead of amusement. This mirrors contemporaneous debates about the relationship between the press and society. According to Nackenoff, while the press at the time "occupied a position of public responsibility, [it] was frequently charged with failing in its most minimal obligation not to *further* debase public opinion" (116, emphasis in original). Although Harry's "Ambition" essay serves a didactic role for Alger's readers, as the editorial note that accompanies it suggests, didacticism has its place in the newspaper as well: "it contains some good ideas, and we especially commend it the perusal of our young readers" (104). The fact that Harry's boss Mr. Anderson, without knowing its true

author, chooses to reprint the essay in the *Centreville Gazette* (it had first appeared in the Boston paper *Weekly Standard*), speaks to the potential reach newspapers have in inculcating social standards, and so reinforces the link between editorship and influence that repeatedly crops up during the novel.

The role newspapers can play in the republic is best illustrated by Harry's efforts to improve the *Centreville Gazette*. While in his temporary role in charge of the *Gazette*, Harry begins working harder to gather local news and to solicit news from surrounding areas, and he adds a national and world news summary to the paper. "He aimed," Alger tells us, "to supply those who did not take a daily paper with a brief record of events, such as they would not be likely, otherwise, to hear of" (197). The response to these additions is positive, and the paper increases subscription rates in both Centreville and the surrounding neighborhood. Nackenoff explains that, for Alger, "patronage was more than a mere financial transfer, it helped define the man and wove classes together into a community" (Nackenoff 168). In this sense, then, Harry's commitment to the more effective dissemination of the news suggests the way that editorship becomes a type of mass mentorship. Newspapers are shown to be communal organs of shared culture and information; as an editor, Harry's role is to establish a common, easily accessible body of information for the community. An editor, no less than a patron, provides access to culture.

In Alger's world, the end goal of success is to be placed in a position to help others reach their own position in society, which is why Oscar and Henderson help Harry, or why Harry desires to become an editor: they are all interested in providing access to those who might otherwise be outside the social structure. It is important to note,

however, that helping someone find a place is distinctly different from helping someone move up the social ladder. As Roy Schwartzman (2000) points out in regards to upward mobility in the Alger canon, “rather than a simple shift from a restricted place to a free space for personal development, Alger’s heroes exchange one particular place for another” (87). Alger’s republic is a place where everyone fits into his assigned place in the social order, so the goal is social definition, not self-definition. Even Harry, whose upward movement is the novel’s *raison d’etre*, imagines social mobility as movement towards a pre-defined landing place, as he tells Oscar that he must work hard now because he hasn’t “got high enough up to stop and rest” (93). The end goal of rising, in other words, is resting.

Giving the novel’s emphasis on social status, it’s telling its chief villain, Fitzgerald Fletcher, is a social climber—one who has risen to a social standing of which he is not worthy. Fletcher’s two obsessions are his neckties and the people with whom he is seen in public, and his abiding interest in cultivating appearances, rather than character, is the primary marker of his villainy in that it misrepresents his “true” nature and imputes a social rank above that where he “naturally” belongs. Not only do Fletcher’s fancy clothes belie his low origins—his father is a newly rich merchant—but in dressing like a gentleman Fletcher also threatens to undermine the category of gentility by destroying the ontological link between surface and substance, a canon-wide concern of Alger’s: “Alger invariably puts forward some character whose appearance is deceiving[, which] reveals how critically important is the separation of appearance, artifice, reputation, and pretense from nature (being)” (Nackenoff 42). So it is with Fletcher. Fletcher is introduced in a long passage that tells readers that his father was “supposed to be rich” and that Fletcher

“cultivated the acquaintance of those boys who belonged to rich families” (44). The “supposed to be” and “cultivated” highlights the aura of artifice that surrounds Fletcher before explicitly driving home the moral to the readers: “He had tried to ingratiate himself [...] with Oscar’s sister Florence, but had disgusted her with his airs” (44), an attitude that Oscar shares as well.¹⁵

It’s worth noting here that the passage makes clear that Oscar’s family occupies a higher social position than the Fletchers, so that Oscar’s and his sister’s distaste reaffirms the ontology that Fletcher threatens. The Vincents’ humility indicates their natural position atop the social hierarchy while simultaneously marking the very visible unnaturalness of Fletcher’s attempt at passing. “If refinement consists in wearing kid gloves and stunning neckties,” Oscar later tells Fletcher, “I suppose the higher classes, as you call them, are more refined” (64). In contrast, when Harry travels to Boston to meet Oscar’s family, he refuses to wear any of the new suits Oscar has given him, saying “when I first appear before your family, I don’t want to wear false colors” (164). Just as with Harry’s refusal to wear nice clothes lest the Vincents take him for something he is not, Fletcher’s insistence on wearing fancy clothes as a way of affecting refinement reveals him to be something he is not, and both serve once again to re-assert the status quo. Harry, of course, is deferent to social hierarchies, and his refusal to do anything that might smudge the line between the classes is a marker of his character. On the other hand, Fletcher’s attempt to over-reach is ultimately a transparent one, as both the characters and the reader see through the ruse, indicating both the naturalness and the resilience of the social structure, a notion that is only compounded with the failure of Fletcher’s father’s business and the restoration of the natural order.

The type of “leveling” inherent in the fall of the overreaching Fletchers is what Nackenoff calls Alger’s “prescription for healthy democracy”: “while dethroning the oligarchy, he attempts the restoration of the *aristoi*, the best” (165). The model in place here is clearly not one of mobility and progress, but of equilibrium and stasis. Fletcher’s fall is part and parcel of Alger’s larger project of “‘righting’ a world that is being turned upside down, reconstituting community where chasms had appeared” (Nackenoff 165). However, just as we saw with Nick Carraway’s attempt to mediate his desire for “the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever” (6) with the American Dream’s insistence on energy and innovation, the problem with this drive toward social equilibrium is the way that the stability it promotes doesn’t just impede progress but actually creates a kind of social regression. In *Risen from the Ranks*, this can be seen most clearly in Harry’s obsession with Benjamin Franklin. As I mentioned earlier, Harry’s ambition to be an editor is sparked by his reading Franklin’s autobiography, and given this, it’s worth exploring the extent to which Harry’s story is patterned on Franklin’s. The phrase “Second Franklin” or “Young Franklin” is used on six separate occasions to describe Harry, while explicit references to the *Autobiography*—“That is the way Franklin did,” Harry might say of his resolve to spend his nights studying or after he pseudonomisly publishes his first piece (34, 57)—appear no fewer than eight times. Moreover the novel is chockablock with implicit nods to Franklin’s story, from plot points like Harry’s joining of the Clionian society (an analogue to Franklin’s JUNTA) or Oscar’s loaning Harry books (a potential nod to Franklin’s institution of a lending library) to stray bits like Harry’s choice to learn French before mastering Greek or Latin. In fact, the novel is so infused with Franklin arcana that it is difficult to tell Franklidian

allusions from ordinary plot details: is Oscar's preference to engage in a naval life a wink at Franklin's own love of the sea, or is it just a bit of stray characterization?

The problem with all this from the standpoint of the American Dream can be seen in Alger's reassurance to his readers that Harry "did not expect to emulate Franklin, but he thought that by imitating him he might earn an honorable position in the community" (23). In other words, Harry very specifically does not want to match or rival Franklin's achievements, but settles instead for non-competitive, non-original mimicry. More than that, Harry seeks not to capture the spirit of Franklin's story—not the clever young lad who tricks his brother, nor the clever businessman who always seems to get one over on his competitors, nor even the social leader who finds innovative solutions to his society's problems—but instead to formulaically reproduce the particulars of Franklin's tale.

Nackenoff points out that Alger preferred formula fiction because the repetition inherent in it offered readers simplicity, "comfort and hope" in an ever-changing world (54).

Risen from the Ranks is no exception here, as the repeated references to Franklin creates then reasserts over and over a simple, familiar pattern of (limited) upward mobility. Just like Harry, in other words, Alger too seeks to imitate, without emulating, Franklin.

The book's imitative drive produces a pervasive sense of echolalia, the diminishing returns of which contribute to the plot's overarching sense of regression. Harry writes his ambition essay under the name "Franklin," and when he feels he's grown out of it, he changes to "Frank Lynn." Phrases like "second Franklin" are continually repeated, as are set pieces like Ferguson's reminding Harry of the value of hard work or saving money, so that whatever energy or excitement might be generated by them burns out through sheer exhaustion. For example, Oscar's dismissing Fletcher's

taste in fancy clothes isn't the only time Fletcher gets his comeuppance. In one extended episode, the boys at Centreville's upscale boarding school arrange for the local tin peddler to claim to be a long lost relative—a claim that proves to be true—and so to expose Fletcher's over-inflated sense of his own worth. Later in the book, after Fletcher quits the Clionian Society in protest of Harry's presidency, the boys in the society conspire to trick Fletcher into believing that he has been invited to give a public reading at a school-sponsored fair. Fletcher is obviously gratified and spends a chapter preparing for the reading (while having yet more, minor, tricks played on him) before he receives a confused response from the fair's organizers to his enthusiastic acceptance letter. Fletcher is mortified by the event and drops out of school, which is itself a prelude to fate's trick of casting his father into poverty. While there is undoubtedly comfort to be gained from this pattern—virtue is always rewarded, vice is always punished—the cathartic effect that might have been achieved by watching Fletcher squirm in the tin peddler episode is less pronounced in the later scene. Fletcher had by this time already been openly vilified during the Clionian Society meeting, so the continued abuse seems uncalled for and makes Fletcher a pitiable figure. As a result, when the reader learns of the Fletchers' misfortunes, the smug satisfaction that seems to be the intended effect is significantly tempered.

Nowhere is this sense of diminishing returns rendered more problematic than in the novel's central conceit. The book sets out to tell the story of Harry's upward movement through the ranks, from printer's devil, to printer, to editor, and finally to elected official. Of course, this is the basic plot of Franklin's life story and the repetition of it seems designed to convince readers that their society is predictable and so to give

them a limited sense of control over it. The narrative hammers this home by repeating some variation of “some of our most eminent men have been apprentices to the trade of printer” at least seven times (70). Moreover, even within the plot of the book, there are at least two other characters beside Harry who seem to fall into this pattern: John Vincent and Harry’s brother (whom Harry the editor brings into the trade as an apprentice). Harry’s title of “second Franklin,” then, becomes something of a misnomer. He might more appropriately be referred to as “yet another Franklin.” Importantly, though, Harry is only the second-most successful of the Franklin clones in the book. Although Harry does get elected to Congress, as an editor he never moves beyond the backwaters of the *Centreville Gazette* because he “never sought wealth [but] was content with a comfortable support and a competence” (212). John Vincent, on the other hand, like Harry and like Franklin, starts out as an apprentice and moves up through the ranks to become an editor and man of influence. However, not only does John Vincent swim in a significantly bigger pond than Harry, but—as someone who, in Fletcher’s words “move[s] in the first circles” (63)—he is also a much bigger fish. Likewise, even as a Congressman, Harry can hardly be said to have reached lofty heights, as Alger’s narrative makes him seem thoroughly ok: “He sought to promote the public welfare, and advance the public interests...and though sometimes misrepresented, the people on the whole did him justice” (21). On the other hand, John Vincent is, according to the editor of the *Standard*, “one of our ablest journalists,” and his name evokes loving homage from all who hear it.

In essence then, Harry Walton’s story of success is really just a scaled-down version of John Vincent’s story of success, which is in turn just a more modest version of

Benjamin Franklin's story of success. While individually each story reveals an imitable and even enviable version of self-making, when viewed as a whole the diminishing returns of each subsequent version reveals a societal sense of stagnation, if not retrogression. The predictability and repeatability of both the formulaic plot and the Franklin model specifically court a stability that borders on social stasis, encoding a type of regressive social structure in which each new generation becomes a pale imitation of the last. Instead of the "perennial rebirth" Fredrick Jackson Turner described, Alger hints at a closed, constricting loop that ultimately denies progress.

Like the typical Alger narrative, gangster films, particularly *Scarface*, respond to a shifting, unstable economic and political landscape.¹⁶ This prevailing sense of social instability is reflected in *Scarface*'s opening scenes. In a seeming reflection of the way that the Great Depression was often seen as a comeuppance for the high living of the twenties, the film opens with a janitor cleaning up after what appears to have been a wild party. Chairs are upturned on tables, streamers and confetti dominate the frame and pile up ankle deep on the floor, and the bemused janitor even finds a brazier on the floor—all suggesting an over-the-top decadence. This impression is reinforced as the camera pans to three boozey men slouching around the table, with the man in the center sporting a crooked party hat. This man is mob boss "Big" Louis Costillo, who is about to be assassinated by Tony Camonte (the title character), and his conversation reveals both the reason behind his assassination and the real problem with his decadent surroundings. Big Louis, it turns out, isn't bothered by rival gangs encroaching on his territory. "Let some of the other boys get theirs, too...I got all I want," says Louis before running through the

middle-class checklist: “I got house. I got automobile. I got nice girl [belches] I got stomach trouble, too.”¹⁷ Big Louis, in other words, has gotten soft.

The decadence itself doesn’t seem to be a problem—after all, the film takes us to even bigger parties later without doing much to reproach the party goers. Instead the issue seems to be that Louis, like Harry Walton, has believed that the end goal of rising is resting. Louis is satisfied with what he has, so much so that instead of planning his next move, he is more interested in planning his next party. While Louis’s assertion that his next party will be the biggest yet—there will be “much more everything”—suggests that he has taken to heart the expansive ethos of the American Dream, his unwillingness to focus on work and the resulting shrinkage of his territory reveals that that ethos has been misunderstood. Instead of energy and innovation, Louis just offers more of the same—endless variations of the same party—so that Louis, again like Harry Walton, seems to be marked by stasis bordering on regression. His complacency leads to his rival’s seizure of Louis’ business territories and ultimately costs him his life. In this way, Louis’ death can be seen less as punishment and more as just the natural next stage in his dissolution, with the loss of vitality encapsulated in his indigestion becoming a parallel for his unwillingness to mix it up with Johnny Lovo and the other upstarts encroaching on his business interests.

Scenes like this imply a view of society as an inherently unstable place where one’s status and even life is subject to forfeiture at a moment’s notice. The disorienting nature of this sense of instability is only heightened by the gangsters’ extra-legality, their existence outside of society’s stabilizing structures. The discomfiture viewers often feel when confronted with such instability likely accounts for the prevailing trend amongst

gangster film critics to view the genre as always a form of social or institutional critique.

As Jack Shadoian (2001) points out,

In the gangster/crime film meanings emerge, whether deliberately or not, about the nature of the society and the kind of individual it creates. By definition, the genre must shed light on either the society or the outcasts who oppose it, and by definition the gangster is outside, or anti-, the legitimate social order. The gangster/crime film is therefore a way of gaining a perspective on society by creating worlds and figures that are outside it. (4-5)

Because success and upward mobility lie at the heart of gangster films, critics have long pointed to the way that the screen gangster “is a paradigm of the American Dream” (Shadoian 3). However, for most critics, the gangster’s antagonistic position towards legitimate society means that the “perspective on” that Shadoian refers to is really “rejection of,” so that their embodiment of the Dream points to the corruption of either the Dream itself or the institutions that support it. Eugene Rosow (1978), for instance, suggests that gangster films are expressions of the “badly kept promise of social mobility” perpetuated by Dream purveyors like Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Carnegie, and Alger (23). Nicole Rafter (2000), on the other hand, argues that gangster films constitute a critique of both the government and crime, as both are institutions that are hostile to the success of ordinary Americans. Andrew Bergman (1971) makes a similar point when he claims that the fact “that only gangsters could make upward mobility believable tells much about how legitimate institutions had failed” (7). James O’Kane (1992), likewise, accounts for the historical popularity of gangster stories by noting that

“crime served some useful function in American society as it enabled its practitioners to realize their peculiar version of the American Dream” (4), a “version” necessitated by the failure of legitimate avenues. O’Kane, in fact, titles his study *The Crooked Ladder*, which along with titles like *Dreams & Dead Ends*, *Born to Lose*, and *Shots in the Mirror* indicates the way that critics tend to see gangster narratives’ engagement with the American Dream as institutional critique.

As my brief reading of Big Louis’ party shows, however, it is possible to understand gangster films outside the rhetoric of critique. I suggest, instead, that gangster films, like Alger stories, function as parables for survival and success in uncertain times. Nackenoff says of Alger that he “offered guidebooks to surviving the economic dislocations occasioned by the rise of capitalism” (8). I follow by asserting that *Scarface*, no less than *Risen from the Ranks*, functions as a fantasy solution to the problems posed by shifting economic and social landscapes. *Scarface* fictionally meets the threats to individual and national self-making caused by both the Great Depression and the rise of corporate capitalism. Just like *Risen from the Ranks*, *Scarface* tells a story that simultaneously seeks to define and embody Americanness. However, while *Risen from the Ranks* shows a born republican taking his place among the natural aristocracy, thereby ensuring social stability but denying progress, *Scarface* depicts an ethnic outsider constantly moving beyond his defined place in the social order and so pushing, shaping, and destabilizing society. In this way, *Scarface* tells a Turnerian story of violent reform as progress, and in so doing translates the frontier into the closed space of the modern city.

Business, the most visible vehicle of the American Dream, is foremost among the institutions assumed to be under attack by gangster films. Robert Warshow, in his oft-cited essay “The Gangster as Tragic Hero” (1948) initiates the tradition of reading the gangster’s outsider status as critique by asserting that the gangster is a perverse American type, or a national id, whose position outside the rules of normal society makes him part of a mass cultural “current of opposition” (127). Noting the similarities between filmic representations of gangsters and their legitimate business counterparts—“the gangster’s activity is actually a form of rational enterprise, involving fairly definite goals and various techniques for achieving them” (131)—Warshow asserts that because we are “always conscious that the whole meaning of this career is a drive for success [...] the brutality itself becomes both the means to success and the content of success” (132).¹⁸ The aggregate effect of this collapsing of both the means and ends of success and of brutality and business leads Warshow, finally, to claim that “the gangster is doomed because he is under the obligation to succeed, not because the means he employs are unlawful” (133). In other words, the gangster film in this reading exposes the way that the drive for success is always a type of self-perpetuating, vicious game in which the competition inherent in the chase for success both destroys those in the race and ensures that it will never be won.

Others have picked up on Warshow’s line of reasoning—Rosow vituperatively compares gangsters to robber barons, while Shadoian calls the gangster “the monstrous emblem of capitalism” (7)—but David Ruth offers the most extended analysis of the interconnectedness of business and crime in representations of gangsters. Ruth suggests that, from the mid-twenties onward, popular representations of gangsters (filmic and

otherwise) focused on portraying criminals as businessmen engaged in illegal activities that, nonetheless, mirrored the work performed by their legitimate counterparts.¹⁹ Like Warshow, Shadoian, and Rosow, Ruth takes the gangsters' position outside the scope of legitimate institutions to mean that they were intrinsically functioning as critiques of those institutions, asserting that that proliferation of media representations of criminal businessmen in this period indicates that "the media's predominantly middle-class audience and producers in the twenties did not adjust as easily to their business society as historians have conventionally assumed...for the inventors of the gangster offered ambiguous and often disturbing revelations about the businessmen they exposed" (37).

I follow many of these critics in understanding the gangster as an outsider whose marginal position allows him to comment on the norms of mainstream society. In particular, I want to align myself with Warshow, Ruth, and others who see the parallels between gangsters' conduct and that of legitimate businessmen as a way of working out attitudes towards legitimate business and the success ethic that it supports. However, as I will show in my reading of *Scarface* below, rather than seeing the gangster as a grotesque version of the businessman who is designed to expose the moral bankruptcy behind contemporary business practices, I see him as a figure very much in line with celebrated concepts of American character. In short, the gangster film is a medium through which the typical American Dream qualities translate to the realities of a post-frontier, urban, corporate landscape. Specifically, I suggest that *Scarface* injects a frontierist sense of tough-minded individualism, progress, and energy into the struggle with the twin challenges of failure (the Great Depression) and success (the intervention of organizational bureaucracy into all aspects of individuals' lives).

Few would contest the fact that gangster narratives hold an indelible appeal for their audience, one that must, for the genre's profitability, transcend the audience's disapprobation of the acts depicted. Although the point might be fairly obvious, it's worth noting that perhaps the largest appeal of gangster films is their depiction of violence. This idea finds little disagreement among critics, as they tend to see violence as the centerpiece of the genre's social critique. Warshow, for instance, concedes to the "satisfaction of participating vicariously in the gangster's sadism," even if the gangster's brutality encodes the inevitability of his failure. Shadoian, too, believes that "one of the genre's keenest pleasures is in its depiction of violence," even if within that violence he sees a gangster's punishment for success. It would be irresponsible to claim that gangster films or their viewers are endorsing violence itself by taking vicarious pleasure in it, but it is safe to say that the popularity of the gangster film certainly adds up to an endorsement of the *idea* of violence both as a tough-minded response to economic hardship and as a means of asserting agency against an increasingly corporate, bureaucratized business environment.

On the one hand, the notion of toughness and strength—usually accompanied by the implication of violence—had cultural currency in the Depression years. In his study *Advertising the American Dream*, Roland Marchand (1985) points out that "like most Americans, advertising leaders found solace in interpreting the depression as a deserved chastisement for follies and excesses of the boom years," which, within the industry took the form of "ineffectual gentility in advertising technique" (300). Advertisements, in other words, weren't tough enough, and advertisers had become too indulgent, producing clean, elegant, even artsy layouts. In an effort to revitalize the industry and boost

flagging morale, advertisers exhorted themselves to work harder by describing this very prototypical white-collar profession with blue-collar language, which was meant to suggest a vigor and vitality for a profession “struggling to regain a sense of potency” (300). This tough, hard-working language translated to a new visual rhetoric that created busier, cluttered page layouts and packed as much information as possible into the space available. This deliberate move towards advertisements that were, in the words of one ad agent, “crude, ugly, and actually repellent” (qtd. in Marchand 303), was designed to do more than just make the page work harder. This new style was also designed to convey a sense of grit and toughness. As Marchand points out, “the equation of success with courage dominated the verbal and visual imagery of the advertising trade press in the early 1930s and frequently spilled over into the tableaux of national advertising” (318). Importantly, this tough-minded response to economic hard times tended to be accompanied by the implied violence of the clinched fist, a popular advertising motif that Marchand reads as “advertising men invit[ing] Americans to join them in a cathartic response to the depression’s challenges to the American dream” (325).

While violence is shorthand for the type of toughness required to fight off failure, it can also be understood as an antidote to conformist complacency and stasis, the pitfalls of success. That is, violence is taboo in polite society largely because it represents a threat to stability and order, which are themselves watchwords of a controlled, mannered existence. Stability and order, are, in other words, hallmarks of organization. According to Eugene Rosow, *Scarface* screenwriter Ben Hecht (1954) “found gangsters interesting because they had ‘glamorous occupations’ in a society that increasingly demanded conformity and routine” (118). In his autobiography, Hecht himself points out that, after

learning that in the movies the hero must be chaste, but the villain can “have as much fun as he wants cheating and stealing, getting rich and whipping the servants,” he decided to “skip the heroes and heroines [and] write a movie containing only villains and bawds” (479). The equation of fun with antisocial behavior, especially when counterpoised against heroes who must stay within tightly controlled conventions, suggest a backlash (or at least fantasy resistance to) the routinization and control associated with organized society.

Even though he ultimately views the gangster as a fatalistic figure, Warshow makes a similar argument about the appeal of witnessing the gangster’s transgression of social norms and the way that can translate into a fantasy of control. The gangster, Warshow argues, has “skills which the rest of us—the real people of the real city—can only pretend to have, the gangster is required to make his way, to make his life and impose it on others” (131). The gangster, in other words, functions as an audience surrogate, living lives they wish they could lead. In this case, that wish fulfillment specifically takes the form of agency—expressing one’s own will instead of being imposed upon by the strictures of others. While Warshow does understand this as a moment in which the audience is able to exert a degree of control over their lives, his investment in the gangster’s inevitable demise leads him to posit this as a fatalistic choice: “we can choose to fail” rather than be caught up in the success imperative (133). However, if we view the gangster’s death, as Shadoian does, as simply “a concession to morality” (9) and read that against Ruth’s point about prevailing fears “that the modern organizational imperative threatened to render the individual insignificant” (59), then it is possible to view the sense of agency the audience might gain from viewing gangsters’

transgressions not just as an opportunity to reject society, but as an opportunity to assert control within society. That is, even though Ruth, like Warshow, takes the gangster's extremely antisocial activities as a rejection of both gangsterism and its legitimate doppelganger, Ruth can't help but note a marked enthusiasm in the seemingly straightforward accounts of the gangster's business activities (54). I suggest that this enthusiasm is a product of the way that gangsters—especially *Scarface*'s Camonte—combine transgression and conformity. That is, as criminal businessmen, gangsters are able to effectively wed organized rationality with transgressive energy and thereby offer fantasy resolutions to the tension between organizational and individualistic imperatives.

The way that a merger of business-minded rationality and the will to violence constitutes an innovative means of spurring progress is illustrated in *Scarface* during an early conversation between Tony and his sidekick Gino Rinaldo about money they have just received from Johnny Lovo for the hit on Costillo. Although the hit means that Lovo is now in charge—something that Lovo has just explicitly reiterated to Tony in the previous scene—and despite the fact that Tony has just received a big raise and promotion, Tony is already talking about shaking up the system again. “This business is just waiting for some guy to come and run it right. And I got ideas.” Despite the obvious profitability of the current system—as witnessed already in the film by Big Louis' party, Lovo's fancy smoking jacket and expensive cigars, and the stack of bills Lovo hands to Tony as a bonus for the hit—Tony isn't satisfied and is already looking for ways to more effectively manage what he pointedly refers to as a “business.” Tony feels no qualms about his nascent plans to usurp Lovo's power because Lovo is “just some guy who's a little bit more smart than Big Louis, that's all.” Tony understands progress and upward

mobility not as the institution of a more stable hierarchy—the model favored in *Risen from the Ranks*—but instead as newness and perpetual change. If someone is smarter, the assumption is they will apply their abilities to make something different (and presumably better), so it is natural to assume that the next smarter person to come along will do the same, ad infinitum. Thus Tony’s business philosophy: “Do it first, do it yourself and keep on doing it.” In this formula, what could become an Algeresque loop of repetition, imitation, and diminishing returns (“keep on doing it”), is turned into a perpetual motion machine serving the ends of progress by the interpolations of change and innovation (“do it first”) and individualism (“do it yourself”).

Of course, Tony’s patting his holster and making a shooting gesture with his fingers as he expounds on this philosophy suggest that there is more than just smarts at issue here. While it is reasonable to read the “it” that is done first as anything that is new and can spur growth and change, it is also pretty clear that the primary “it” Tony is referring to is violence. Putting the two together reveals the tough-minded resolve behind the progressive system that this film advocates: a willingness to do what one’s competitors might not be ready or willing to do. In fact, it seems like the “ideas” Tony has for running the South Side (Lovo’s new territory) right—what makes him just “a little bit more smart” than Lovo—is to take over the North Side. Lovo is explicitly against this plan, despite the fact that, in Tony’s words, “there’s lots of Jack on the North Side,” because the North Side’s boss O’Hara is “too big a guy to buck now.” While this might seem like a “smart” business move—after all, protracted gang warfare seems a little expensive—Tony disagrees with the decisions, using it as the basis of his assertion to Rinaldo that Lovo is “soft.”

Significantly, though, “softness” here is more than just strength or the willingness to fight, it’s the willingness to fight as a means of expanding. After all, Lovo seems to be right about the North Side’s strength, since even Rinaldo agrees with Lovo’s general assessment of O’Hara’s strength when he says that “those monkeys on the North Side ain’t so soft,” and we later see that they do, indeed, have lots of men and warehouses full of guns. Nevertheless, Tony still doubts their toughness, saying “they’re satisfied, ain’t they? Why didn’t they come and take Big Louis before we did?” In other words, toughness isn’t just a matter of physical strength, but is instead intricately bound to progress and change. Real toughness in this film is a willingness to do whatever it takes to cross new boundaries, whether that be crossing new thresholds of achievement in an upward march through the ranks or expanding the business by taking advantage of new methods or new markets.

This confluence of toughness and smart, innovative business practices is best witnessed in some scenes that depict the early days of Tony’s and Lovo’s business partnership. Despite Tony’s earlier talk about his own great ideas, it is clear that Lovo has been thinking, too, and has come up with a plan to add organizational efficiency to the business of crime. After Big Louis is bumped off, Lovo calls a meeting of all the independent illegal operators on the South Side in order to present a plan for incorporation. To a room full of tough customers—those who had already muscled into Louis’ territory—Lovo lays out his proposal. They can continue their operations, he makes clear, but they have to follow his rules: “we’re gonna get organized...It’s gonna mean twice as much dough for everybody and half as much trouble...Running beer ain’t a nickel game anymore. It’s a business, and I’m gonna run it like a business.” As any

effective business presentation would, Lovo backs up his plan with numbers: “There’s 3000 saloons on the South Side. Half a million customers, figure that out. Add up what they’re gonna lay on the line every year for drinks and nobody in charge.” Most, seeing the potential for efficient operations and increased profits see the logic of Lovo’s plan and agree to join in. “Swell,” says one, “we’ve been cutting each other’s throats long enough.” It is clear in this scene that Lovo is not just selling profits, as it’s safe to assume that everyone is already making money. What he is selling instead is *more* profits facilitated by organizational efficiency and growth. Lovo never specifies exactly how much profit is going to be made, and his “figure that out” seems clearly speculative and thus serves to keep a sense of the actual available profit open ended. Likewise, language like “anymore” and “long enough” reinforce the progressive message, with previous ways of doing business represented as diminished—“a nickel game”—or woefully out of date. By framing these methods specifically as old and outdated and projecting them against a wide-open future, Lovo is touting the corporate model as the next logical evolutionary step. Progress, here, seems inevitable.

Of course that inevitability is shown to be less a matter of an impersonal destiny, and more a matter of will and resolve, which is why the criminal combination Lovo is posing here differs from the static, overly bureaucratized corporate model. Rather than being the end goal, organization in the criminal sphere is just one means to the end of increased profits, a method that importantly exists alongside violence. Lovo makes it clear that everyone is obliged, not invited, to join the combination. One tough decides to assert his independence, saying “I make my own beer and I got my own trucks...I don’t have to go into business with nobody,” but a few quick punches from Tony are enough to

get the dissenter, and presumably everyone else in the room, back on track. Tony's increasingly violent methods of enforcing this new order, too, suggests an increased willingness to push the envelope of existing business practices.

Tony's willingness to push the envelope is developed in detail in the scenes following Lovo's meeting, as Tony is called on to enforce the new order. Despite Tony's manufacturing compliance during Lovo's meeting, three holdouts fail to attend the meeting, bootleggers who were big and strong enough to buck Lovo. Lovo declares their territories forfeit and claims them for the combination, but the assembled gangsters are skeptical. Not only is Meehan, one of the holdouts, likely to "turn this side of town into a shooting gallery" if anyone tries to sell to his customers, but the act of going into rival territory to get the orders in the first place is seen as a big risk. Tony is assigned the task of getting these orders because, as he says of himself, he's a "good salesman."

What follows is a montage of Tony, Rinaldo, and Angelo (another trusted associate) strong-arming saloonkeepers, and this montage offers up a hybrid of criminal and business methods that shows the material advantages of combining organization and violence. For instance, at the first stop, Tony menaces the owner while Rinaldo rifles through his books to determine his current inventory levels. Tony then tells the man that he's to take regular delivery of eight barrels a day of syndicate beer at \$65 a barrel, \$15 more than he's currently paying. Although he's clearly forcing this saloonkeeper to buy the beer, Tony thoughtfully adds the salesmanly touch: "it's better," he says. On the way out Tony gloats about his success, explaining to his compatriots that "there's a system to these things." The encounters become increasingly violent as intimidation turns to bombings and gunfights, but all the while the three work confidently, with business-like

efficiency. This effect is only heightened by the montage technique, as action is presented quickly and compactly. What this montage suggests is the way in which traditional salesmanship lacks a certain tough-minded resolve and a willingness to try new methods. Although the syndicate could survive without these new territories, the payoff for pushing ahead and adapting new techniques is clear for the increasingly successful gang.

Taken together, the back-to-back scenes of Lovo's speech (essentially a board meeting at a pool hall) and Tony's sales montage (which doubles as an action sequence) suggest a peculiar amalgam of business and criminal methods, which itself reflects contemporaneous discussions about the nature of business during the Great Depression. A sample of editorials in *The Business Week* from 1930-1932, for instance, finds business was exhorting itself to both be more aggressive (and thereby more competitive) and to be more cooperative with each other. These editorials show the business community repeatedly criticizing itself for lack of "patriotic courage" ("Stick Out Your Neck" 36), but also for a failure of trust and cooperation. Fear and passivity, in many of these accounts, are the culprits behind America failing to live up to its inherent promise of prosperity. One such piece claimed that "aggressive leadership has reaped abundant reward, right through the period of gloom," and that "initiative in selling, in promoting new products was depression-proof" ("Some Firms Ignore..." 12). Another bemoaned business's "infantile anxiety and failure of faith in the future," and concluded, "our main difficulty now is that our morale is broken, and...our main problem is to restore confidence and courage" ("Paying Proposition" 36).

One editorial found little to fear from the Depression, but was “disturbed” by “the attitude and state of mind of businessmen” who have “succumbed to the alibi habit...waiting for something to happen, quite independently of their own effort, that would make any initiative on their part unnecessary” (“No More Alibis” 36). A special Independence Day editorial asserted that “All we need...is another handful of hard-boiled patriots” (“Oh, Say...” 32). Unfortunately, for this to happen would require the country to “overcome its sentimental tendency to self-pity...shake off its infantile phobias and anxieties...and recover the characteristic courage, common sense and candor, recognizing its vast resources and strength, realistically facing the problems that confront it, and refusing to be frightened by phrases” (32). This same editorial seems to wax romantic about the “rough stuff...by which American business has accomplished [its] purpose in the past,” and so defiantly asserts that “there is not, and never will be, so far as any sensible American can see, anything improper, impossible, or immoral in the unlimited exploitation of every resource in this country for the indefinite expansion of the prosperity of everybody in it” (32). At the same time, this courage and toughness was also positioned within an organizational framework, as the lack of “confidence of us Americans in each other” (“Paying Proposition” 36), seemed to call for “free and courageous cooperation” in the form of a “renewed business initiative in the united national effort to end the depression” (“Stick Out Your Neck” 36).

Within the context of these calls for more toughness in business, the amalgam of business and criminality featured in *Scarface*'s first act seems less like the critique of Americanism that someone like Warshaw might imagine it to be and more like an update of the traditional, Turnerian narrative of American progress.²⁰ After all, the frontier was

important to Turner largely because it served as the “the meeting point between savagery and civilization,” which allowed for “a return to the primitive conditions of a continually advancing frontier line” (3, 2-3). A similar point is made by Richard Slotkin (1992) who argues that “the Myth of the Frontier relates the achievement of ‘progress’ to a particular form or scenario of violent action” (11). Here “the redemption of the American spirit or fortune [is] something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or ‘natural’ state, and *regeneration through violence*” (12, emphasis in original). By this measure, Tony’s violent business methods in *Scarface* are regenerative. That is, Tony interpolates violence into existing business practices once those practices have reached the limits of their own effectiveness. These methods then operate in tandem with other business innovations. Far from the type of pulling-back-the-curtains action that Ruth posits, with gangster narratives exposing pre-existing business practices, these scenes show business adapting to challenges. This point is driven home by the filmic depiction of Tony’s violence, which is kinetic and lively and is juxtaposed against older, more outdated forms of doing business. The message is clear: Tony’s violence offers a shot in the arm to industries that have gotten stale.

Keeping in mind this encounter between savagery and civilization, especially the way the combination of the two work to spur progress, it’s worth looking more closely at the way that the two means of attaining success identified by Warshaw are represented in *Scarface*. In making his case that the gangster film is a rejection of business success, Warshaw asserts that, for the gangster, “film presentations of businessmen tend to make it appear that they achieve their success by talking on the telephone and holding

conferences and that success *is* talking on the telephone and holding conferences,” in the same way that in gangster films “the practice of brutality—the quality of unmixed criminality—becomes the totality of [the gangster’s] career” (132). If for Warshow talking on the telephone functions as a stand-in for a wide range of legitimate business practices, while brutality becomes the gangster’s means to success, it is significant that in *Scarface* the two are often juxtaposed. Big Louis, for instance is gunned down in a phone booth. While Warshow suggests that Louis’ death is the result of the “monstrous lack of caution” inherent in allowing himself to be alone, his ill-considered decision seems to be of a piece with his using the telephone and his “going soft,” more generally (132). Louis has become too civilized. Instead of paying attention to business on the streets, he is acting too much like a typical businessman using the telephone when he would be better served by a gun.

This theme is reiterated in a later scene in which Angelo, now Tony’s secretary—despite the fact that he is illiterate—tries to take a phone message for Tony. This scene is played for laughs with Angelo putting the phone to his ear upside down, causing confusion by trying to talk to Tony and the caller at the same time, and misunderstanding phone protocols by angrily telling the now agitated caller to “go state your business” before slamming down the phone. All this, combined with a smoking-jacket clad Tony coaching Angelo from the wings, could add up to a sense that Tony, like Louis before him, has gone soft by hewing too closely to traditional business methods. However, at this moment Rinaldo walks in and reveals that on Tony’s orders he has just taken out O’Hara. Here again the gun is seen as a more effective business tool than the telephone. While Angelo has been struggling with rigid protocols that seem only to impede action—

even though the caller rings again, whatever message he has never gets through—Rinaldo has been performing a much more profitable task with much less hassle: “it was easy,” he tells Tony. Angelo is later tripped up by telephone decorum again, and again rendered useless, during an ambush on Tony. Having been called away to answer the phone right before the shooting starts, Angelo can’t pull himself away from the phone until he takes a message (which he can’t hear over the din of the gunfire). Angelo draws his gun, but is unable to hold it and the receiver at the same time, and so sets the gun down and tries to resume the conversation. In addition to offering comic relief, this scene also indicates the impotence of finding oneself tethered to the telephone.

However, in another instance of the productive intertwining of business and criminal methods, Tony finds an innovative and effective use of the telephone. After surviving an assassination attempt, Tony is able to use the phone as an expedient. Once he gets to a phone, Tony calls several places around town trying to track down Rinaldo. Unlike earlier scenes in which talking on the telephone replaces action or in which telephone protocols stand in the way of actually doing something, here the phone works to facilitate more decisive action. Not only is Tony making the calls to rally his muscle in order to fight back, he also doesn’t waste time with the niceties of phone conversation. He gets right to the point and then hangs up on the caller once he gets the information he needs.

More importantly, in Tony’s hands the telephone can be a facilitator of more direct action. Tony suspects Lovo of ordering the hit, but he wants to be sure, so he asks a compatriot to call Lovo at a pre-determined time and pass himself off as one of the hit men. Tony and Rinaldo arrange to be in Lovo’s office when the call comes in, and when

Lovo pretends that the call is a wrong number, they know that he was responsible. Here the telephone is used in a creative way and becomes the means through which Tony gains important information which will enable him to act decisively. In contrast, the telephone betrays Lovo in much the same way that it does Big Louis. Like Louis, Lovo had gone soft, calling in the hit on Tony from the safe confines of his office. In other words, like Louis, Lovo had chosen the telephone over the gun, and the telephone was his undoing. On the other hand, Tony's commitment to the gun allows him to exploit the telephone, to find another new and creative way of doing business.

Although critics often mention the frontier in connection with gangster films, more often than not they understand the two to be linked inversely, with the frontier and its space for mobility being replaced by the closed, confined spaces of the city in which the gangster makes his bones; this is another reason the genre is thought to be critical of traditional American institutions. Even though he points out that Howard Hawks seems to have viewed the western hero and the gangster as analogues (6), Rosow nevertheless thinks of the two genres in which they star as opposites. "The gangster film," he claims, "depicts an urban capitalist, industrial reality that is eroding...the mythic West of the American Dream"(8). Rosow does correctly identify the contrast between the horizontal planes of the western and the vertical lines of the gangster film, but he interprets this contrast via a too literal reading of Turner, one that can only see the frontier as a physical space that opens onto a metaphorical space. Shadoian, too, makes much of the juxtaposition of the open spaces of the western with the confinement of the gangster film's cityscape. "All gangster films," he remarks, "are set in the period when the frontier has long been closed, and all possibilities for heroic progress but one—making it

in the city—have shriveled away” (7). The city, according to these arguments, limits agency because, unlike in the western where “staying and moving are real options, and the choice signifies a frame of mind (usually constructive) instrumental to the reordering of the status quo,” in the gangster film “moral choice is an illusion because the city is a prison” (Shadoian 7).

I suggest, however, that *Scarface* re-stages the frontier inside the city space, translating characteristic frontier components for a modern age. On one level, this happens through the film’s creation of a sense of energy and motion that replicates the sense of endless possibilities offered by the sweeping vistas of typical westerns, and so counteracts the verticality of the cityscape. The film tells its story—one that actually covers a long period of time—very compactly and efficiently. Propulsive storytelling techniques like montages are used frequently, especially during action sequences, not only to cover a long period in a small amount of screen time, but also to add energy and excitement to the proceedings. One particularly innovative shot breathlessly whisks the viewer through time as a superimposed machine gun “blows off” pages of a calendar, giving the mundane passage of time a thrilling sense of danger.

The most important way in which *Scarface* conveys its kinetic sense, though, is through its bang-up car chase sequences. As Ruth points out, the “fast cars, explosives, and the recently developed Thomson submachine gun” that were his stock in trade meant that the gangster “became a paragon of technological modernity” (53). While Ruth reads in this an uneasiness with the ends to which technology might be used, in *Scarface*, the medium of film mitigates this uneasiness and translates it into a vicarious thrill. Here the medium is the message as viewers get to ride along with the police as they speed through

traffic to the scene of a crime, watch cars speed through city streets, and look over Tony's shoulder as a car full of gunman fire at his rapidly moving vehicle. Indeed, nearly all of the film's exteriors feature fast moving cars, marking the city as both a stage for technological progress and as a place of constant motion and energy.

In fact, the film's opening shot—an upward look at a street sign, dwarfed and surrounded by buildings extending to the sky—is one of the few exteriors in the film that doesn't include an automobile. While certainly this is of a piece with the vertical cityscape that Rosow and Shadoian describe, and so suggests a sense of entrapment, it is, importantly, the scene that introduced the old fashioned Louis as a prelude to his death—a pull-back even reveals a horse-drawn milk cart beneath the street sign, further underscoring the way that Louis has failed to stay on the cutting edge. As the camera tracks inside, the film reveals another significant way in which it is re-staging the frontier. By moving the action inside one of those tall buildings—most of the scenes in *Scarface* are interiors—as a prelude to introducing Tony at the beginning of his journey up through the ranks, the film seems to be tilting the frontier on its axis, with vertical mobility replacing horizontal mobility. As represented in this film, this new frontier of upward mobility mimics the function of the geographic frontier, as it “furnish[es] a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past” (Turner 38). This movement inside the building offers a space within the city where the old and the new—the civilized opulence of a fancy party and the savage brutality of an assassin—can come into contact.

While it's tempting to see this pattern of violent overthrow as a destructive, fatalistic downward spiral, within the context of the story, such acts of violent

confrontation are shown to serve the ends of both individual and social progress. As Tony's constantly expanding wardrobe and entourage or his well-appointed, fortified penthouse show, these methods have certainly helped him move up the social and economic ladder. Likewise, the combination's ever-expanding territory also seem to help his gang move up the same ladder, as those around Tony also show a marked improvement in their apparel. Most importantly, perhaps, Tony's violent excursions into the North Side become a spur for industry-wide progress, as it prompts the North Siders to import crates of Tommy guns in order to both retaliate and protect themselves. That this move itself precipitates some of the film's most dynamic action montages suggests the way that Tony's methods have injected energy and vitality into his environment and opened up new avenues for progress. The frontier ethos seems to be alive and well here, despite the absence of the real frontier.

Another important function of the frontier, for Turner, was the inculcation of individualistic values: "the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control" (30). It's not hard to see a similar dynamic at work in *Scarface*. Unlike in *Risen from the Ranks*, where the narrative impulse is to position each character in his proper slot in a stable social hierarchy, in *Scarface* hierarchical organizations are shown to be merely temporary marriages of convenience. Repeated turnover at the top of these criminal organization indicate a general unwillingness among their members to easily defer to power. Although "soft," Lovo is fond of giving orders, and Tony visibly chafes whenever such an order is given, his glare indicating a barely contained rage. However,

Tony does manage to restrain himself because, as he tells Rinaldo, “[Lovo’s] got a setup, that’s all, and we gotta wait.”

This concession to bureaucratic expedience, though, is short lived. Once Tony gets his hands on a Tommy gun, he is no longer obligated to toil under Lovo’s control. As Lovo tries to stop Tony from escalating the violence between his and O’Hara’s gangs, Lovo implores Tony to stay out of the North Side: “I’m giving you orders for the last time.” Tony’s response, however, indicates the way in which the film translates frontier-style individualism to the post-frontier age. “There’s only one thing that gets orders and gives orders,” he tells Lovo while pointing to his new machine gun, “And this is it.” It might seem strange to link frontier values, especially values that Turner connects so closely with primitivism, to an advanced piece of technology like the Tommy gun. However, while the gun very much functions in this film as a cutting edge piece of machinery, as can be seen above, the Tommy gun (or really any of the technological devices in the film) is not depicted as gleaming tool of discipline and control, but rather something deferential to the whims of the user: “you can carry it around like a baby,” Tony enthuses, while cradling the gun in the crook of his arm.

Furthermore, in Tony’s hands, the Tommy gun becomes the instrument by which he can more effectively indulge his anti-social tendencies and concomitantly express his individualistic impulses. In the midst of Lovo’s appeals to group-think and control—before he gives Tony his last order Lovo exclaims, “we gotta get organized”—Tony again appeals to his new gun, calling it “some little typewriter,” the means by which he’s “gonna write [his] name all over this town with big letters.” He then impulsively exclaims, “get outta my way, Johnny, I’m gonna spit” and shoots up the wall of the

gang's headquarters. It's significant that Tony compares his gun to a typewriter, here, because in the film the destructive aspect of modernity isn't technology, it's paperwork. Up until this point in the film, despite his repeated violations of social controls, Tony is never quite his own man. Not only is he still under Lovo's thumb—remember that Tony doesn't act against Lovo because Lovo has a bureaucracy in place—but he's also a known quantity. Tony's life has been written down, fixed on paper, by someone else's hand. For instance, after Tony knocks off Big Louis, a newspaper editor vehemently insists to an underling that the headline should read: "Costillo slaying starts gang war!" When the man replies that he's "working on that angle now," the editor presses ahead, explaining that in Costillo's absence "they'll be shooting each other like rabbits for the control of the booze business!" While this scene is meant to be expository, it is actually predictive. The newspaper editor essentially controls Tony's fate, crystallizing his future in the newspaper.

Tony's past and present, we soon learn, are also the subject of, or subject to, paperwork. When the police bring him in for questioning after the Big Louis hit, the chief detective's quick read through of Tony's file tells the audience everything it needs to know about Tony's background, and the detective even reveals that he knows about meetings Tony has had with Lovo prior to the shooting. More paperwork intervenes in the interrogation, as a lawyer shows up and frees Tony on what Tony calls a "writ of hocus pocus," a term that again indicates the way that Tony's fortunes seem largely out of his hands, resting instead on the almost supernatural power of words written by others. Tony's likening of the gun to a typewriter, then, especially at the moment at which he declares his independence, suggests that he has found a means by which to regain

authorship over his own life. Technology comes to his aid against the vagaries of bureaucracy. Moreover, in another example of the way Tony embodies the meeting point of savagery and civilization, his first “composition” on the typewriter is a spit, a guttural and incoherent exclamation rather than an organized and coherent sentence. Technology, though a product of civilization, becomes the medium through which Tony can express his savagery.

Up until now, I’ve been using Turner’s (and Slotkin’s) terms “savage” and “primitive” unproblematically, especially as related to Tony and his fellow gangsters. The racial inflections of these terms, however, are impossible to overlook, and indeed are vitally important to understanding what messages the film is sending in regards to the American Dream. Tony’s ethnicity is a major, and impossible to miss, component of his personae. Tony has what Rosow calls “a spaghetti-savoring ethnicity” (209), a quality Marilyn Yaquinto (1998) calls “apish and burlesque” (42). In fact Paul Muni’s portrayal of Tony’s ethnicity is so over the top that “[Martin] Scorsese has described Muni’s accent as ‘embarrassing’ and derived from the ‘Mama Mia! school of Italian acting’” (qtd. in Yaquinto 42). It’s not just the accent; everything about Tony in this film draws unflattering attention to his ethnicity, and so to his distance from normative white middle-classness. Tony *does* love spaghetti, and he enthuses in Italian through a big mouthful about one plate cooked by his old-world mother, who herself speaks in a thick accent. The first appearance of Tony’s face in the film (he’s only seen in shadows during the Big Louis hit), likewise, makes it clear that it is safe to judge his character by his appearance. Tony is in a barbershop, reclining under a hot towel. As Tony removes the towel, the close-up frame reveals a massive scar across his cheek below a square, almost boyish

haircut. Still wearing the barber's white bib—which in frame looks strikingly like a straight jacket—and squinting so as to give the effect of a heavy brow, Tony appears slightly off-kilter or unhinged, especially compared to put-together detective Guarino in his three-piece suit, hat, and trim mustache.

Even as he moves up the ranks and gains the economic means to enter the middle class, Tony's gauche style (not to mention his scar) always betrays his essential otherness. Of one suit covered in what appear to be tiny polka dots, Poppy (Lovo's high-class moll) remarks, "That outfit's enough to give anyone the yips." Tony's not even savvy enough to pick up on the insult, though, and he replies: "Nice, huh? I got three more. Different colors." This pattern repeats itself over and over again in the movie, as every increase in the cost or quality of Tony's clothes or possessions is accompanied by a reminder that, beneath the money, he's still a rube: Poppy calls Tony's apartment "gaudy," and Tony replies "Glad you like it"; a tuxedo-clad Tony attends a Broadway play, but speaks of the lead character as if she were a real person. Keeping in mind that for both Turner and Slotkin savagery is always a temporary state meant to regenerate the too civilized world, the reasons behind Tony's marked ethnicity become clear. Not only does this element of ethnicity allow the film to easily draw on the same type of racially loaded notions of savagery that are at play in Turner's work, but it also keeps that re-energizing savagery at a safe distance, always apart from and outside of civilization.

In the context of the safe distance the film creates between Tony and regular society, it is important to remember that the organizations rivaling Tony's mob for control of Chicago aren't just limited to other gangs, but include the police as well. Just like Tony, the police also seem to lack autonomy and are similarly caught in a web of

paperwork and bureaucracy. The chief detective, who is tellingly never shown outside his office and whose lack of an actual name indicates his absence of individualism, is introduced leafing through a file cabinet. Whatever is in the files convince both the chief detective and Guarino of Tony's guilt, but is not enough for a conviction—it doesn't meet bureaucratic standards. Because of this, they need a confession, but Tony is too tough to provide one. Guarino offers to meet that toughness, to “slap [a confession] out of him,” but before he gets the chance, Tony's lawyer shows up with the writ of habeas corpus. The police's hands are tied by unwieldy and overly rational methodology.

This failed confrontation is an example of what Jonathan Munby (1996) calls the “rarefied bookish order the law services” in gangster films, an order that stands in contrast to the “lived realm of human relations the gangster embodies” (114). Its worth remembering, though, that Guarino wants very much to engage in human relations with Tony; unlike the chief detective with his reliance on files, Guarino is much more hands-on. Several times throughout the film, Guarino confronts Tony, but impotently checks his violent instincts. The sense that the lawyer arrives just in time, then, suggests that Guarino's methods would have produced results. Here, the film implies that, were the police free from limiting bureaucratic restrictions on their autonomy, they would easily be able to corral the gangsters; they could be one step ahead, not one step behind. Of course, this freedom from bureaucracy, were they to achieve it, would look a lot like the autonomy already embodied in Tony, as the police—Guarino in particular—are looking for the freedom to enact more violence and impose their will on their competitors.

This idea is echoed later in the film, as a newspaper publisher, upset about being accused of aiding the gangsters by glorifying them while covering their exploits, blames

the government for refusing to take the necessary action to curb gangsterism. Among his solutions are to “put teeth in the Deportation Act,” “make laws and see that they are obeyed, if we have to have marshal law to do it” and accept offers of help from the army and American Legion. In effect, the publisher, too, suggests that legitimate society be more like the gangsters. Just as Tony’s success comes as a result of transgressing boundaries and enacting violence, the publisher is suggesting that the government suspend rules so they can act more violently. Importantly, however, the editor amplifies the meaning of government by telling the assembled citizens in his office: “you’re the government, all of you. Instead of trying to hide the facts, get busy and try to see that laws are passed that will do some good.” This idea, in turn, restates the title card that follows the opening credits, which asserts that, instead of glorifying the gangster, the purpose of the film is to “demand of the government: ‘what are you going to do about it?’” The card continues, moreover, “the government is your government. What are YOU going to do about it?” Just as Guarino could bring Tony down as long as he were to use Tony’s methods, these moments suggest that were society to be more like gangsters, then they could solve the problem of criminality.

This type of representative selfhood suggests a way to read Tony’s death outside of Warshowian fatalism. Shortly before Tony’s demise, the newspaper editor—seeming to wrest some narrative control back from Tony—warns a fellow newspaperman that Tony “better watch his step” because “that new crowd down at City Hall is looking for him.” Since the film hasn’t depicted or discussed any elections up until this point, the editor’s return to predicting Tony’s story combined with the idea of a more aggressive crowd in City Hall suggests that legitimate society has indeed taken the publisher’s

suggestions to heart and toughened up. Sure enough, after Tony shoots Rinaldo (who had secretly married Tony's sister Cesca), the police mobilize, bringing the gangster's methods to bear on Tony. At Tony's apartment, the police pull up shooting in their automobiles, and bring in technologies like spotlights, tear gas, and most importantly, their own machine guns in order to flush Tony out.

Tony's death in a hail of bullets fired from the police's machine guns suggests that the police have adapted to and adopted Tony's methods. Tony himself is rendered superfluous. However much Tony and his renegade methods can re-energize society and spur progress, his criminality must be rendered metaphorical by his death. When viewed as a metaphor for business itself, the type of tough-minded, transgressive practices that characterize Tony's quest for success seem easily translatable to the legitimate world. When viewed as an industry that competes with legitimate business, however, criminality must be neutralized. With Tony dead and the Tommy guns in the hands of the police, Tony's agency has been transferred to the police and the legitimate social order in much the same way that, upon his death, Gatsby's agency is transferred to Nick. Because the film has explicitly established that the government is the aggregate of individual citizens, the implication is that the newfound autonomy and agency of the police can be transferred back onto the individual citizens. To borrow from Slotkin, society has been regenerated through violence.

This neutralization happens with very little guilt on the part of the audience, I argue, because Guarino has been groomed throughout the film as a double for Tony, one more acceptable to the middle class order. Although his name carries an ethnic inflection, there are no other noticeable markers of ethnicity about him. In contrast to

Tony's flash and hotheadedness, Guarino dresses in buttoned-up, conservative suits and has perfect posture. Where Tony speaks with an accent, Guarino hardly speaks at all, and then in clipped sentences with standard pronunciation. Guarino is, in a word, bland. Despite this, the film hints at a smoldering, but clearly harnessed intensity. In addition to his expressed desire to beat a confession out of Tony—a desire he asks permission to execute—Guarino suffers only one real lapse of protocol. After Tony lights a match on his badge, Guarino knocks Tony to the ground with a punch. This moment thematically foreshadows the film's final scene, as in both cases breaching the rules of legitimate social order—resorting to gangster-like violence—is seen to be necessary to preserve and defend the social order.

In fact, the only other time Guarino seems less than impeccably dressed and emotionally contained is in the scene immediately before Tony is apprehended. Leaning on the chief's desk when the call about Tony's murder of Rinaldo comes in, Guarino smiles as he hears the news. Unlike both Tony, who in the end is too individualistic—almost anarchic—for his own good, and Harry Walton whose static world view is derived from protocol, Guarino seems willing to assert himself or breach protocol only when it is the best interest of society. As Gatsby does for Wolfsheim and then Nick, Guarino functions as the legitimate face that the film puts on top of the illegitimate, but necessary, energies that it ascribes to ethnicity, pointing towards a way to capitalize on and control the spirit of ethnicity while maintaining a white, middle-class order. In the end, this reveals *Scarface* to be not a critique of the American system, or a rejection, as Warshow says, of Americanism itself, but instead as an ultimately standard entry into the larger narrative of the American Dream.

While few would disagree that Alger stories and gangster films are both entries into the American Dream master narrative, popular understandings of both would have it that Alger's works are quintessential entries in this cannon—for many they are *the* version—while gangster films are the bastard offshoots, nightmarish distortions of the core narrative. As my comparison of *Risen from the Ranks* and *Scarface* has shown, however, this is not the case. Both are narratives of upward mobility that explore the relationship between an individual's success and the common good under an American system that demands constant progress and innovation. Under this system, the Alger narrative is much too conservative to meet the American Dream's demands of large-scale progress and creative self-making. Because Alger's project is the creation and maintenance of a stable republic, he creates in Harry Walton a character whose rise to success specifically rejects innovation. Harry's world, moreover, is populated with characters who do not want to be anything other than what they are—with the notable exception of the villain—and so who cannot rightly be said to be self-made. Alger envisions, in other words, a new kind of status quo, a deck reshuffling that allows some on the margins to move to the center, but that still maintains a stable division between center and margin. *Scarface*, on the other hand, lives up to the billing that Alger narratives usually get. Tony Camonte is a self-made man whose self-reliance, willingness to work hard, and drive to succeed propel him up the ranks. Tony's productive gangsterism makes him a prototypical American Dream figure. Tony is an innovator, one who adapts existing business practices to serve his own individualistic ends and ended up becoming a success. At the same time, Tony's own success spurs the

progress of his entire industry, helping it reach greater heights of profitability and workplace efficiency.

Despite its commitment to criminality, however, *Scarface* ultimately shares *Risen from the Ranks*' concern with social stability and protecting middle-classness. As texts produced against the backdrop of the uncertainty of economic depressions, it is not at all surprising that both would, in the end, promote a secure social order, but *Scarface* manages to do what *Risen from the Ranks* cannot—mediate the need for growth, innovation, and change with the need to maintain a stable, white, middle-class order. *Scarface* accomplishes this through its embrace of the gangster's innovative, tough-minded methods while rejecting the gangster himself. The element of visibility, which helps Alger distinguish the good guys from the bad guys, plays a similar role in *Scarface*. However, whereas Alger coordinates outward appearance and inward essence, gangster films offer a way of exploiting the same idea. Gangsters look ethnic, and so in the end are rejected for being bad. Their methods, however, are revealed in the film to be valuable. Indeed, once adopted by the buttoned up police force, they became inherently good. In the end, this same dynamic helps explain the way that the Alger narrative is lauded as the accepted version of the American Dream story, despite the way in which the gangster film more squarely aligns with the American Dream's tenets. Alger's clearly delineated investment in social stability functions in much the same way that the police's outward investment in law and order do in *Scarface*. That is, the Alger narrative promotes productive virtues as a means of maintaining their legitimacy and encouraging social stability, while narratives like *Scarface* offer a more transgressive, productive version of the American Dream.

Coming Home: Mobility, Domesticity, and the American Dream in *On the Road*

Sal Paradise begins *On the Road* by saying: “I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won’t bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead. With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” (3). Commentators have taken this opening to signal Sal’s clean break with the conformity of 1950s containment culture. These readings—which are often based on extra-textual understandings of Beat culture rather than an examination of Sal’s story in particular—blame Sal’s illness, indeed his “death,” not on the *undoing* of his marriage, but on the marriage itself, or more accurately, on the very institution of marriage. Marriage is the centerpiece of what Tim Hunt (1981) calls “an increasingly oppressive ‘order’ of domestic and economic obligations” (23) that Sal and his friends are running from. Such a reading necessarily creates a home/road split, with the domestic order Hunt describes becoming aligned with death and decay, while, in Omar Swartz’s (1999) words, “the road leads away from his symbolic death in the city—the world of work, marriage, school, and the military” and towards freedom and new life (66). To translate this line of argument to the terms of this dissertation, Sal’s rejection of domesticity—and institutions of all stripes—in favor of the regenerative powers of the unstructured road makes him an American Dream hero, one who embraces opportunities for radical self-creation and leaves behind the stasis inherent in an orderly society. Sal thus becomes one in a long line of American heroes rejecting the comforts of home and society for a newer, freer life in the wilderness.

However, if we read this passage outside the glare of Kerouac's hagiology—what Robert Bennett (2002) calls the “pedagogical unconscious” that understands Kerouac and his contemporaries always through the “Beat-vs.-Square opposition” (2)—then another more mundane reading emerges. Sal was down in the dumps after he split up with his wife, and taking a vacation with his buddy made him feel better. There's no indication in these opening lines—or, as I will argue later, in the novel itself—that Sal ever intends his travels with Dean as a permanent alternative to living in straight society. Indeed, Sal returns home again and again in the novel. Even Sal's calling his time with Dean his “life on the road” implies impermanence, as the phrase brackets Sal's adventures as simply “part” of a larger story. The novel also does not provide evidence that Sal has given up on the concept of marriage altogether. In fact, not only does he repeatedly articulate his desire for a domestic future for himself and his friends, but he also spends a good deal of the text looking for a new wife.

While calling Sal's travels just a vacation is an oversimplification that ignores the very real American Dream elements in the novel's conception of the road, it does allow a window into a character who has always been decidedly more ambivalent than his ecstatic friend. It is true that “the only ones for [Sal] are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time”—the ones who aren't, in other words, limited or defined by external structures (8). However, Sal's description of his own relationship to these “mad ones”—“I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me”—places him at a safe distance from his friends' disorderly lives, a remove that locates him between the social order and those

who reject it (8). In this, Sal resembles no one so much as Nick Carraway, himself “within and without” the story he tells of the “mad” man who interests him.²¹

Given these ambivalences—Sal’s impermanent rejection of society, his distanced admiration for those who live without structure—I argue that Kerouac is not offering a clear-cut rejection of society. Instead, he is attempting to merge the ability to radically re-create the self, associated in the traditional American Dream narrative with the wide-open spaces of the frontier, with the comforts and security of a stable home life; he is after a simultaneity of the transgressive, anti-social energy of characters like Jay Gatsby or Tony Camonte and a more stable domesticity. Whereas Gatsby embodies a brand of radical self-making in which the self is always new, a product of continual reinvention, and Tony represents a type of linear self-making where each newly invented self—born of aggressive competition—is an updated version of the last, Sal favors multiplicity, the ability to choose between multiple simultaneous selves engendered by the dislocations of the road, as a way of avoiding the type of complacency and stasis that dog characters like Tom Buchanan and Harry Walton (not to mention Sal’s fictional contemporaries like Rabbit Angstrom and Frank Wheeler). Moreover, like Nick Carraway, Sal Paradise understands the way the American Dream exists as a narrative, and uses the power of the narrative to create an alternative space for self-making which, in the end, obviates his need to go on the road to experience the critical distance necessary to re-imagine himself.

Domesticity occupies a tangled position in the American Dream tradition. The single-family home (with white picket fence, of course) is a tangible symbol of social status and economic success and as such it functions as an American Dream icon. In fact, the cover art for Jim Cullen’s book *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that*

Shaped a Nation features a Fifties-era father being greeted by his wife and son at the front gate of his suburban home. An image like this, remarkable only for its typicality, paints domesticity as a natural analogue to the rags-to-riches story. The besuited father, briefcase in hand, returns home from work to enjoy the fruits of his labors: a nice house, a swath of well-manicured lawn, and a happy family. A comfortable home is the resting place the upwardly mobile figure aspires to rise to. However, this image also encapsulates what puts the domestic ideal at odds with the American Dream tradition I have been describing. As the examples of Harry Walton, Big Louie, and even Tom Buchanan show, resting is antithetical to American values. It invites stasis and decline.

This tension between domesticity as a symbol of well-earned rest at the pinnacle of achievement and as a stagnation-inducing perch that only breeds complacency is particularly relevant in Kerouac's postwar United States, which was in the midst of what Lary May (1989) calls an "unprecedented domestic revival" (5). Not only did the postwar generation create a baby boom where once had been an "accelerating divorce rate" (L. May 5), but they also rapidly populated the domestic havens of the suburbs that were "hailed by many as the realization of the postwar American dream" (Baxandall and Ewen 2000, 158). As Clifford Clark (1989) points out in his study of suburbia:

It is not surprising that the middle-class dream of establishing the ideal American family exerted such powerful influence over the public consciousness in the 1950s. During the lean Depression years, when housing starts fell by over ninety percent, middle-class Americans had yearned for better homes and a more stable family life. The war years, with their drain on manpower, money, and resources, exacerbated middle-

class frustrations....When the war ended in 1945...it was not surprising to find an explosion of effort on the part of businessmen attempting to define a new American Dream of the perfect house and family. (172)

In a nation worn out by struggles with the twin challenges of the Great Depression and World War II, in other words, the energy embodied in characters like Jay Gatsby and Tony Camonte held significantly less appeal for most Americans than did the simple, stable, predictable comforts of home. Says Elaine Tyler May in *Homeward Bound* (1988), her oft-cited study of Cold War domesticity: “postwar Americans...wanted secure jobs, secure homes, and secure marriages in a secure country. Security would enable them to take advantage of the fruits of prosperity and peace that were, at long last, available” (13).

Of course, as May points out, even though Americans expressed an increased “willingness to give up autonomy and independence for the sake of marriage and family,” “they had actually resigned themselves to a great deal of misery [and they] found the dividends required a heavy investment of self” (28, 30).²² The cultural push to redefine the American Dream around a stable domesticity, in other words, proved increasingly problematic for an American imagination that had long valued capacities for self-reinvention and relentless energy. The domestic model seemed to sap energy at the same time as it curtailed self-definition. In this, too, the cover of Cullen’s book is instructive. The cover’s artwork is deliberately generic. The figures’ faces are barely discernable, so individuation is not possible. The house is also appropriately generic, a standard Cape Cod with no obvious personalizing touches, surrounded by the all-too-typical white picket fence. The occasion of the picture as well as the generic content suggest routine and

stasis. This is a representative image of any given weekday evening, and the clean lines of the front lawn, the reassuringly bland house, and the neat rows of the picket fence indicate an essential order into which the father returning home from the trials and tribulations of workaday life can retreat. The home is a source of contentment, part of a tradition that paints domesticity as “the embodiment and the environment of stable value” (Brown 1990, 13). Moreover, because this can be any father coming home to any house in any place, the possibility for self-making seems to have been circumvented. The father is no different from anyone else, and his identity is not self-created, but instead imposed by his surroundings. Just as Gatsby loses his God-like ability to create himself once he sets his mind on pursuing Daisy, the generic father’s embrace of his family seems to forestall his ability to create himself as anything other than father, husband, breadwinner.

If, as I’ve been claiming, the American Dream is about an individual narrative of self-making intersecting with a national identity along a common axis of energy, innovation and creativity, then the home as both marker of achievement and as a comfortable, stable retreat from the demands of the business world would seem to be the Dream’s antithesis, a symbol of complacency, order, and stasis. Homes are the quintessence of attachment—they are permanent structures literally attached to their foundations, but as shared familial space, they are also zones of sentimental attachment. As we have seen, the American Dream tradition sees attachment and permanence as dangerous preconditions of stasis and complacency and so is often downright hostile to the domestic sphere. Certainly, the Turnerian frontierist narrative I’ve been discussing hinges on a rejection of the domestic. For Turner, the push toward the frontier is catalyzed by a rejection of civilization, both that of the Old World and the civilizations

that the pioneer himself has built along the way. Likewise, remember that R.W.B Lewis's American Adam is literally and spiritually homeless. Not only is he "happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race" (5), but he is also a "hero in *space*" whose "initial habitat is space as spaciousness, as the unbounded, the area of total possibility" (91, emphasis in original). Just as the father in the suburban family portrait above, the American hero is defined by his surroundings. However, because his surroundings are imagined to be a field—undeveloped and unbounded space that stands in contrast to the boundaries of civilization (the walls of the home, the boundary lines of the neighborhood or city, etc.)—this hero is under the imperative to self-define.²³

Maria Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2002) rightly interprets Sal's opening comment about everything feeling dead after the dissolution of his marriage as "a thinly veiled reference to a loss of sexual potency, metonymically signaling a withdrawal—a deadening—of libidinal drive from the outside world, and inhibition of all active involvement with it" (90). Although Saldaña-Portillo is interested in exploring the Freudian implications of Sal's impotence, it is easy to see the correspondence between her argument and the "disappointments, dashed hopes, and lowered expectations" that Elaine Tyler May claims are common amongst those postwar men and women who had heavily invested their identities in the notion of family (30). That is, the self-reported emptiness and loss of selfhood and autonomy experienced by 1950s suburb dwellers was a function of a commitment to the family unit at the expense of other areas of life, a similar sort of withdrawal as that described by Saldaña-Portillo. Considering that Sal's impotence comes on the heels of his split with his wife, it is reasonable to assume that the

deadness he describes is of a similar order. Sal's investment in his marriage has left him feeling adrift, with neither a coherent sense of self nor the energy necessary to create one. In this sense, then, it is possible to view the way that "the arrival of Dean brings Sal the promise of sexual renewal" as a signal that Dean is a Gatsby-esque American Dream hero who reinvigorates Sal's life in much the same way that his predecessor enlivened Nick's (Saldaña-Portillo 90).

Because Dean is hyper-potent, he becomes the model of free, unfettered selfhood that Sal, at least in the opening pages, aspires to. Dean's libidinous drive for pleasure recalls the transgressive energy encoded in the act of self-making, as his asserting himself over and against society's written and unwritten rules generates the wild energy of his own life that Sal, and presumably the reader, is so attracted to. Like the American Adam, Dean is free of limiting ties, a hero in space: "Dean is the perfect guy for the road because he actually was born on the road, when his parents were passing through Salt Lake City in 1926, in a jalopy, on their way to Los Angeles" (3). Moreover, like Gatsby and Tony Camonte before him, Dean is a criminal whose social transgressions mark him as uncontainable at the same time as it gives him a vitalizing energy. "His 'criminality'" Sal remarks, "was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides)" (10). Here criminality for the sake of fulfilling personal pleasure seems to be a potent act of self-creation, with Dean's impulsive desire for joy rides, combined with his willingness to break the law to fulfill that desire, becoming a type of pure explosion of positive energy—an "overburst" of "joy." Likewise, it allows Dean to be multiplicitous,

undefined. Dean is simultaneously the west wind, an ode, something new, something old, but like those abstractions he finally cannot be contained.

Dean's inability to be contained on one level makes him an ideal model for a kind of non-definitive rootedness, a solution to the stasis implied by domestic order. One of the reasons that Sal is so attracted to Dean is Dean's seemingly effortless ability to bridge worlds, without ever really becoming defined by any of them. Sal says early on that he "wanted to know Dean more" because Dean "reminded [Sal] of some long-lost brother" (10). Sal goes on:

[Dean] made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Patterson and Passaic. His dirty workclothes clung to him so gracefully, as though you couldn't buy a better fit from a custom tailor but only earn it from the Natural tailor of Natural Joy, as Dean had, in his stresses. And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighborhood and drowsy doorsteps of afternoon where boys played guitars while their older brothers worked in the mills" (10)

Dean carries an unexpected nostalgia value in this passage. He evokes very specific images for Sal, and both the specificity of the images and the images themselves seem very rooted, the opposite of the characteristics usually ascribed to Dean. The fact that these characteristics aren't usually associated with Dean is really the point. Despite the way that Dean is certain things—in this case working class—he is not defined by them. Dean can possess characteristics without becoming those characteristics, but he does not

deny them either. Dean possesses the Whitmanian ability to contain multitudes, so that even as he is reminding Sal of his working-class boyhood pals, he is also holding his own against Sal's intellectual college buddies: "Dean's intelligence was every bit as formal and shining and complete, without the tedious intellectualness" (10).

At the same time, the novel reveals Dean's uncontained energy to be increasingly destructive, rather than productive. Dean follows a downward trajectory in the book. Not only does he slowly transform from charismatic ladies man to clownish and incoherent bumbler, but he also slowly alienates—and gets rejected by—those around him, with even Sal in the end leaving Dean behind. As John Leland (2007) sums up the gist of the plot, "Dean spends the book racing away from the messes he makes of his life, while Sal tries to figure out how to live amid the messes handed to him" (7). While this assessment accurately describes the dichotomy between Dean's selfish individualism and Sal's more responsible urges, it also ignores the way that Sal, as Nick Carraway does with Gatsby or the police do with Tony Camonte, very much wants to somehow channel Dean's brand of unencumbered potency into his more responsible, orderly lifestyle.

This desire to simultaneously embody stable responsibility and freeform potency can be seen early in Part One. Sal is working on his novel while Dean is leaning over his shoulder saying "Come on man, those girls won't wait, make it fast" (6), but Sal insists on finishing the chapter before they leave. Not surprisingly, once they get to New York, "there were no girls there" (7). This scene clearly juxtaposes Sal and Dean, with libidinous Dean being impulsive and intuitive while Sal is more responsible and rule driven. While there is no indication that Sal doesn't also want to have sex, he recognizes the structure of the writing unit and insists on finishing the chapter. Despite missing an

opportunity for sex, Sal nevertheless gains a more productive sense of potency here. As Sal writes, Dean peers over his shoulder exclaiming “Man, wow, there’s so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even *begin* to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on literary inhibitions and grammatical fears” (7, emphasis in original). Dean’s relationship with writing is essentially the same as his relationship to sex. Just as he fears the girls won’t wait for Sal to finish his chapter, and thus he’ll miss an opportunity for pleasure, he also fears that intense investment in the structure of prose will interfere with his ability to express himself—the words won’t wait. Nevertheless, Sal notes that this was “one of the best chapters in the book” (6). Sal’s insistence on structure, on finishing the chapter, combined with Dean’s commitment to intuitive non-structure, makes Sal a more powerful and productive writer.

This scene sets the stage for Sal’s quest throughout Part One, and the novel more generally, to find a way to incorporate Dean’s potent energy into his own structured lifestyle, to find a way to transgress that isn’t antisocial. This moment, however, seems hard for Sal to re-create, and he spends much of Part One trying to recapture this fleeting potency in both sexual and personal terms. Importantly, Sal’s failures can’t just be chalked up to lack of trying, to being too reserved or invested in structure, but rather to an inability to find the right balance between Dean-like energy and enthusiasm and his own desire for rules and order. Of Dean, Sal says, “to him sex was the one and only holy and important thing in life, although he had to sweat and curse to make a living and so on” (4). Dean can be sexually aggressive because his aim is the sex act, rather than the sex partner. Sal, who is much more invested in relationships, finds his own lack of potency isn’t just limited to the domestic sphere, but extends into the arena of casual sex, too. In

San Francisco, for instance, Sal “tried everything in the books to make a girl...without success” (73), while in Cheyenne Sal tries to pick up a waitress who has a boyfriend with the sexually aggressive line “Can’t you shake him?”, but he can’t pull it off (34). The Cheyenne exchange is particularly telling. Sal doesn’t wear this type of posturing well because he doesn’t really seem interested in the sexual encounter itself—as Dean, who at one point manages to meet, woo, and have sex with a waitress in the space of a few hours, clearly is—but in a rather old-fashioned way is interested in the girl. When the waitress rejects his advances, Sal “loved the way she said it,” and then he lingers in the restaurant “just to look at her” (34).

Dean’s approach doesn’t work for Sal because, unlike Dean, Sal always seems to be looking for a potential mate. Despite the feeling of deadness his divorce engendered, Sal never gives up on the concept of marriage. Shortly after trying “everything in the books” to have sex, Sal surveys San Francisco and wonders “Oh where is the girl I love?...I [have] looked everywhere in the little world below” (79). Later, he notes, “All these years I was looking for the woman I wanted to marry. I couldn’t meet a girl without saying to myself, What kind of wife would she make?” (116). Sal’s failure to pick up the waitress or to have sex with girls in San Francisco seems to stem from this question. Sal is transforming the potential spontaneity of a sexual encounter into a tryout for marriage. Sal essentially says as much when he tells Dean and Marylou that he wants to find a wife so that he “can rest [his] soul with her till [they] both get old” (116). Significantly he adds, “This can’t go on all the time—all this franticness and jumping around. We’ve got to go someplace, find something” (116). This indicates that the complete freedom of the road, the rootlessness and formlessness that comes from goalless

travel is not for Sal in the same way that one night stands are not for him. Both imply a dangerous lack of structure.

At the same time, too much structure also seems to be a problem for Sal. In sexual terms, this translates for Sal into a knee-jerk propriety, one wholly out of keeping with the image of bohemian progressivism that Sal cultivates throughout his narrative. In one of the novel's signature scenes, Sal visits Central City and participates in a city-wide bacchanal. The frenetic energy of this scene thematically mirrors the road itself, with the constant motion opening up a free space where selfhood cannot be pinned down, where Sal can temporarily forget "the circumstances of [his] crazy life" (52). Here Sal and his friends move freely throughout the city and the action likewise shifts location within just a few sentences. The narrative locus of the scene is the old miner's shack, which the gang uses as a type of home base for the party and where Sal tries to meet women. Of this scene, especially Sal's comment that he and his friends "grabbed women and danced....there was no music, just dancing" (53), Jason Arthur (2007) has argued that "the dancers suggest that group[s] of people who inhabit makeshift spaces of their own will *will* action into being before there is any legislating form to regulate the gestural limits of the action" (131, emphasis in original). This is a setting tailor made for a rebirth, with limiting, deadening structures falling away in favor of the fluidity of the giant party, and so would seem to be the perfect backdrop for Sal to regain a sense of potency. And yet it is that same sense of freedom, the lack of legislating form, that ultimately leads to Sal's romantic undoing: "There were beds in the other rooms, the uncleaned dusty ones, and I had a girl sitting on one and was talking to her when suddenly there was a great in-rush of young ushers from the opera, who just grabbed the

girls and kissed them without proper come-ons. Teenagers, drunk, disheveled, excited—they ruined our party. Inside of five minutes every single girl was gone” (54). We can only assume that Sal’s talking to a girl in the bedroom is a prelude to sex, and yet even this is revealed to be a kind of old-fashioned courtship. The young kids swoop into the house and flagrantly disregard the rules of even accelerated wooing—they skip the proper come-ons. Sal, in other words, is again rendered impotent, only this time his impotence is the result of too closely adhering to rules of decorum in a milieu of complete freedom from structure.

In order to become potent, Sal must find a way to balance his need for order and his desire for excitement and energy in the same way that he earlier balanced his discipline of writing with Dean’s frantic yells. As the narrative implies, this is difficult. Sexually, Sal trying and failing to achieve such a balance can be seen in his brief dalliance with Rita Bettencourt. Sal tells us that Rita “Was a nice girl, simple and true, and tremendously frightened of sex. I told her it was beautiful. I wanted to prove this to her. She let me prove it, but I was too impatient and proved nothing” (57). As a nice girl, Rita seems to be the type of person Sal could rest his soul with and something of an antidote to the fast Central City girls from a few pages earlier. But here it is Sal who is too fast. His energy and excitement ruins what he hopes to be a tender romantic interlude. Afterwards, Sal tries to “tell her how excited [he is] about life and the things [they] could do together,” but Rita just “turn[s] away wearily” (57). Rita seems to understand the implications of Sal’s excitement, that his big plans for what they can do together are little more than pillow talk. Unlike Dean, whose sense of potency only seems to be amplified by the revelation that he has had sex with both Rita and her

sister—obviously without an expectation of commitment on their parts—Sal is rejected and thus rendered impotent here because he can't make a long term commitment. He isn't husband material. This is probably why the encounter sticks in Sal's craw—as he prepares to leave Denver, he wants to “go and get Rita again and tell her a lot more things” (57). This obsession translates to Sal's proclamation that, “Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together; sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk. Not courting talk—real straight talk about souls, for life is holy and every moment is precious” (57). This is the type of balance that Sal is trying to achieve in his sexual encounters. He wants to avoid both the demands of a modern sophistication that throws out the rules or stages of sexual encounters altogether, while also staying away from old-fashioned courting. He wants a girl with whom he can sit and talk about excitement.

As Sal's efforts to write demonstrate, moreover, his lack of potency is not just limited to the sexual arena. Sal's failings in his interactions with women seem in large part to mirror his failings in his interactions with the world. The famous Bear Mountain scene, for instance, in many ways functions as an analogue to Sal's interactions with women. Sal's “poring over maps of the United States in Patterson for months” leads to his effectively falling in love with Route 6 because it “was one long red line...that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada” (12). Just as Sal spends his time looking around for the girl he wants marry, here he spends his time trying to find the most stable, structured path to achieve his goal. Just as with his attempts to initiate Rita into the beauty of sex, however, Sal is too impatient. His “dreams of what [he'd] do in Chicago,

in Denver, and then finally in San Fran” cause him to become too excited and to lose sight of his stable resting places in his rush to get there (12).

As many have noted, of course, the red line also represents Sal’s immature belief in the stable values of his home life—his “stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes” (Kerouac 13)—that run up against the unstructured vagaries of the real world. “Dean’s world and the reality of the road,” says Tim Hunt, “is not governed by the aesthetics of maps” (12). While this is true, and certainly Sal learns a lesson about both eagerness and a too strict reliance on structure, an element of this scene that doesn’t get a lot of play is that Bear Mountain is unsuitable as a launching point not just because “no traffic passes through 6” (13), but also because from the Bear Mountain bridge, Route 6 “disappeared into the wilderness” (12). Straight line or not, Sal isn’t ready to walk off into the wilderness, to make his own way outside of the structuring confines of society. Even the various routes and roads he resolves to take *are* routes and roads, they offer some sense of contour, but looking into the wilderness, all Sal sees is unstructured nothingness. Standing in the rain on Bear Mountain, mixed up about how to achieve freedom inside of structure, Sal is once again rendered impotent.

Sal’s sojourn with Remi and Lee Ann, and specifically his job as a security guard, provides yet another instance in which Sal feels his potency threatened. For Sal, who all along has had trouble asserting himself, being a security guard is distinctly out of character. From the start Sal recognizes the absurdity of his position, expressing “surprise” that “the bastards hired [him]” (63) and feeling out of place among “men with cop-souls” (64). Sal’s lack of a cop soul is nowhere more apparent than when he tries to

calm down a bunch of rowdies. After asking the men to quiet down, then having the door slammed in his face, Sal notes that, “It was like a Western movie; the time had come for me to assert myself” (65). The results reveal Sal to be comically ineffectual:

“Who are you?”

“I’m a guard here.”

“Never seen you before.”

“Well, here’s my badge.”

“What are you doing with that pistolcracker on your ass?”

“It isn’t mine,” I apologized. “I borrowed it.” (65)

Sal’s lack of assertiveness is obvious here, as he apologizes to the man to whom he is supposed to be giving orders. But Sal is also bullied by cultural expectations. Sal tries to act tough because it is what he has seen done in movies. Just as in the Bear Mountain scene, Sal feels compelled to act in accordance with an external, inert authority (the atlas in Bear Mountain, Western movies here) that he nevertheless feels governs his own behavior. Likewise, lacking a cop soul, Sal still feels compelled to act like a cop because he is sporting the accoutrement of a cop, feebly referring to his badge to grant him the authority that he intrinsically lacks. Sal apologizes for having the gun because it’s not his, but also because it’s not him. He mistakes external signifiers for identity, cop clothes for cop souls.

This isn’t the first time Sal has conflated souls and clothes. While in Davenport, Iowa, Sal differentiates between people by their hats: “all the men were driving home from work, wearing railroad hats, baseball hats, all kinds of hats” (15). Similarly, in Omaha, Sal sees his “first cowboy” who was wearing “a ten-gallon hat and Texas boots”

(19). Strangely, Sal notes that the cowboy “looked like any beat character of the brickwall dawns of the East except for the getup” (19). In other words, this character, who is not currently working cows and who is otherwise indistinguishable from anyone else Sal has met, is given his identity as a cowboy through his clothes. Even Dean seems to take on mythic significance to Sal largely through his appearance: “My first impression of Dean was of a young Gene Autry—trim, thin-hipped, blue eyed, with a real Oklahoma accent—a sideburned hero of the Snowy West” (5). The point here is that Sal seems to believe in an ontological connection between appearance and essence—cowboys are cowboys because of their ten-gallon hats, western heroes are western heroes because they have sideburns, etc. Because he’s wearing a badge—and because he is in a situation that a movie sheriff might be faced with—Sal feels the need to act the part. As a cop, Sal feels compelled to act like a cop; he is what he wears. And so the moral Sal draws from the episode indicates his chafing against what he sees as overdetermined identity: “This is the story of America. Everybody’s doing what they think they’re supposed to be doing” (68).

Despite his overarching desire for stability—expressed here in his extrapolating the identities of others from their clothes—Sal is also wary of prescriptive identity and doesn’t want his own sense of self to be limited by a categorical imperative. A solution to this dilemma occurs during Sal’s second stay in Denver, at the beginning of Part Three. Here, Sal happens onto a kind of utopian moment, a softball game in which “strange young heroes of all kinds, white, colored, Mexican, pure Indian, were on the field, performing with heart-breaking seriousness” (180-181). The spectators for this game are also notable for their varied demographic composition: “an old Negro,” “an old

white bum,” “a Mexican family, then some girls, some boys—all humanity, the lot” (181). As I discussed in chapter one, baseball is a sport that is aligned (in large part through a determined strategy of baseball owners) with conceptions of Americanness. This multi-racial team, then, seems to stand for a vision of national racial harmony, with the field a stage for racial co-mingling whose aim is the common good (the win), an analogue to the American Dream’s promise of earned inclusion. However, in 1949, when this scene takes place, baseball is only two years removed from Jackie Robinson’s integration of the sport and has only four integrated teams (O’Connell). Moreover, the game Sal witnesses is not baseball, but softball, a more informal, recreational version of the national pastime. While the difference between baseball and softball might not at first seem significant, Sal makes clear that the level of formality is important to his impression of this event. “Never in my life as an athlete,” he says, “have I ever permitted myself to perform like this in front of families and girl friends and kids of the neighborhood, at night, under lights; always it had been college, big-time, sober-faced; no boyish, human joy like this” (181). That is, Sal is attracted to the very informality of the game, its spontaneity and looseness, a quality that is specifically juxtaposed against a more “sober-faced,” official version of the game. In overlaying the sandlot game with more official athletic contests, Sal is recognizing the way that one is an unsanctioned alternative to the other, an alternative that is, given the spontaneous ease of the softball game and the plodding, controversial integration of professional baseball, a great deal more attractive.

The softball game, and Kerouac’s joy in discovering this unsanctioned version of the American story, tend to get overlooked because of its proximity to one of the book’s

most frequently cited examples of Kerouac's problematic racialist thinking. In this section, one of the book's most infamous, Sal veers uncomfortably close to the "happy darky" myth when he suggests that he wants to "exchange worlds with the happy, true hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (180). "The best the white world had offered," he says, "was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (180). While Kerouac deserves the critical heat he's taken for his thinking about race here (and elsewhere in the novel), stripped of its essentialist overtones, this passage reveals an articulation of creative self-making.²⁴ Sal's desire to "exchange worlds" stems from a fundamental problem facing the self-made man, one articulated by Sal's admission: "I was only myself" (180). Recognizing the softball game as a parallel version of the official American narrative of baseball sheds light on Sal's desire to exchange worlds. Whatever the problems with racializing his disaffection, the central feeling that Sal is expressing is that his own life has "not enough." It is, in other words, limited. The softball game suggests a loosening of those limits. While baseball is still largely segregated, this game is integrated. A sandlot game is unlegislated and so offers possibilities for creativity and innovation.

At the same time, softball and baseball share a common structure. There is an essential fixity to the concept of baseball that makes sandlot softball not something wholly new, but the same game dressed up in different clothes. This suggests the possibility of a sameness of form with a simultaneous multiplicity of parallel iterations. In this context it is significant that Sal doesn't just wish to be African American. He also wants to be, he says, "a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned" (180). The interchangeability of

African American, Mexican American and Japanese American subjectivities suggests a similar type of multiple simultaneous iterations, different versions existing parallel to each other.²⁵ Sal's desire to be a "poor overworked Jap" is especially telling here, and resonates in important ways with his juxtaposition of the sandlot softball game and his own athletic career. Just two paragraphs earlier, Sal had been describing "the hardest job of [his] life" where he, along with some "Japanese kids," had been engaged in backbreaking labor (179). Sal is already poor and overworked, doing the exact same job the Japanese kids are, which means that wishing to be "a poor overworked Jap," is essentially wishing to be himself, or more precisely a version of himself. Sal is imagining multiple, inhabitable selves that exist simultaneously with each other. He wants to be both himself and a sandlot version of himself at the same time.

Andrew Hoberk (2005) reads "Sal's equation of Japanese American with overwork" as a counterpoint to Sal's feelings about his work as security guard: the security "job seems to symbolize the internal discipline of the organization man," whereas "working-class employment [offers] the same sort of masculine independence [Kerouac's] protagonists find in travel" (68, 69). That is, the lack of externally-imposed structure inherent to both manual labor and travel open the door for self-definition. Importantly, though, Sal is already overworked—he is walking "with every muscle aching" (180)—when he expresses his desire to inhabit an overworked Japanese American identity. This indicates that, for Sal, it is not just a freedom from structure that makes both manual labor and travel useful means for self-creation, but more importantly the temporary estrangement from self that both offer.

The usefulness of estrangement—that caused by exhaustion and that brought on by the experience of difference inherent in travel—to the project of self-invention can best be seen in Sal’s experience waking up in the unfamiliar surroundings of a Des Moines hotel room, a moment that Sal calls “the one distinct time in my life” (17):

I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel, in a cheap hotel room I’d never seen, hearing the hiss of steam outside, and the creak of the old wood of the hotel, and footsteps upstairs, and all the sad sounds, and I looked at the cracked high ceiling and really didn’t know who I was for about fifteen strange seconds. I wasn’t scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost. I was halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future, and maybe that’s why it happened right there and then, that strange red afternoon. (17)

The symbolic rebirth is, of course, hard to miss here. Sitting just on the cusp of the future, of adulthood, of self-directed personhood, Sal feels like a new man. While Des Moines as the dividing line between East and West is significant in creating meaning in this scene, it is also important to note the rest of the setting. As Gregory Stephenson (1990) explains, “For Kerouac the condition of weariness, emptiness, exhaustion, defeat, and surrender is antecedent to and causative of a state of blessedness. In being Beat the ego is diminished and in abeyance” (23). Sal’s identitylessness happens in this hotel room not just because—as he himself seems to believe—the location has symbolic import, but also because both he and the place are beat. Sal is physically beat—“haunted and tired with travel”—and he is occupying an old, creaky, beat up space on the margins

of town (by the rail yards). Both the symbolic notion of rebirth and the beat ideal of holding back the ego open onto self-making. Unlike in his job as a cop, where Sal feels the need to do what he is supposed to do, the condition of being beat births Sal into a new life. He can't do what he is supposed to do here because he doesn't know who he is. And thus all possibilities become open to him.

Of the Denver scene, Rachel Adams (2004) argues that "Sal's desire to be of another race is nothing so much as a wish to escape his own whiteness, a self-rending longing to be other than what he is" (62). However, if we recognize the parallels between this scene and that in the Des Moines hotel room, then it becomes more accurate to say that Sal's desires to experience difference are less self-rending than self-creating. That is, Sal's wish to be both overworked and Japanese is an expression of a desire for rebirth, with work-induced exhaustion substituting for that brought on by travel and the desire to inhabit a Japanese identity offering the possibility of newness and estrangement. In other words, Sal isn't trying to flee himself—to vacate his identity—but instead to locate versions of his life that can offer him the temporary experience of difference necessary to re-imagine himself. Just as a sandlot softball game shares an essential structure with a baseball game, then, Sal recognizes that an identity that is very much like his own—in this case working at the same job he is—can offer him the opportunity for self-making while also avoiding the risk of complete non-definition, identitylessness, that being truly beat would offer.

This is why Sal so awkwardly and self-consciously attempts to label himself as white in this scene. Just as the softball game encodes transgressive potential because of its clearly marked differences from baseball proper, Sal's imagining himself into other

identities wouldn't resonate as self-making unless the new selves he imagines himself into clearly differ from the old self. Four times in two pages Sal alludes to his own whiteness, twice with scare quotes, indicating a self-aware move to differentiate himself from the identities he wishes to inhabit. This is important because, despite Sal's assertion that the white world hasn't offered him enough "kicks," the black world he describes—the one he wants to inhabit—is remarkably mundane. Absent references to race, what Sal describes is a scene that could play itself out in any neighborhood anywhere, a softball game, women going for an evening stroll, children sitting on porches:

Across the street Negro families sat on their front steps, talking and just looking up at the starry night through the trees and just relaxing in the softness and sometimes watching the game. Many cars passed in the street meanwhile, and stopped at the corner when a light turned red. There was excitement and the air was filled with the vibration of really joyous life that knows nothing of disappointment and 'white sorrows' and all that (181).

If the word "Negro" is removed from this passage, Sal's ecstatic reaction to it would come off like a non sequitur. After all, people talk on porches and stop at red lights everywhere. While it is certainly possible to read this scene as Sal naively projecting his own desires onto the African American population he passes, it is also possible to see this as a part of Sal's dawning awareness of the power of difference, or more precisely, the power of restaging as difference. This alternate narrative of a domestic evening—its alternative status highlighted by color-coded markers of difference—allow Sal to feel as

if the moment is infused with excitement and energy. Indeed, the labels seem, in large part, to generate the energy.

The value of both restaging and marking difference can be seen more clearly by looking at the “white sorrows” Sal is alluding to. Although his labeling of himself as a “‘white man’ disillusioned” is part of an effort to make his own disappointment seem universal, the text indicates a specific cause of Sal’s disillusionment: “I saw myself in Middle America, a patriarch. I was so lonesome” (179). The cause of Sal’s gloom is loneliness, specifically loneliness stemming from the failure to establish a stable family life for himself. While these comments are fairly vague, this desire is unpacked in the scroll manuscript of *On the Road*. Here Jack explains that his goal was to move his entire family—“mother, sister, brother-in-law and their child”—to Denver (280).²⁶ Not only did Jack foot the bill, but he also hustled around Denver trying to make the arrangements. Although the family did make the move, it was all for naught, as they didn’t like Denver and moved back. Sounding angry and disappointed, Jack says:

Here I made an attempt to settle down those I love in a more or less permanent homestead from which all human operations could be conducted to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. I believe in a good home, in sane and sound living, in good food, good times, work, faith and hope. I have always believed in these things. It was with some amazement that I realized I was one of the few people in the world who really believed in these things without going around making a dull middleclass philosophy out of it. (280)

In an interesting twist, it is Jack's family's flight from the stable home he hopes to provide that dashes his ambitions. Jack's choice to express his disappointment with this list of beliefs functions as a re-affirmation of domesticity at the same time that it repudiates his own family, as the wounded effect of the passage results from the irony that all these positive ambitions will not be realized because of his family's rejection.

Despite the pervasive notion that *On the Road* is a novel about a flight from or rejection of domesticity and mainstream society, a passage like this helps to uncover the deep attachment to family and home that runs through the edited book. While reading the novel as a rejection sets up the road as a permanent, preferable alternative to home, Sal always understands his adventures on the road as temporary excursions. Each of the first four parts of the book tell a sort of there-and-back-again story, with Sal beginning and ending each of those sections at home.²⁷ Part Five, meanwhile, doesn't discuss a road trip at all, but instead describes Sal's meeting Laura and his rejection of both Dean and the road, as Sal chooses the local, domestic entertainment of a double date with Remi over the chance to travel back to San Francisco with Dean. Even Swartz, who enthuses about how "Sal is rejecting...the 'American Dream,' the corporate psychosis, the work ethic, the belief in uninhibited progress" (91), seems to understand the unsustainability of life in "a transitory universe of perpetual travel and reluctant arrivals, a world void of stability" (95). Speaking of the "burned-out shells" of real world Beats (96), Swartz notes that "they remained fixated in their liminal states and were denied the substance that comes from steady work, family, or respectability" (97). While being too rooted is always a bugaboo for Sal, so too is being too far away from the structure and order of

home. Or as Marco Abel (2003) puts it, “While [Sal] welcomes his spontaneous friend [Dean] into his world, he also longs for structure to his life” (243).²⁸

At the same time, Swartz’s assertion that Sal is “a man who belongs to middle-class existence but who chooses to sever his ties” (95) is rendered problematic by the circular nature of Sal’s travels, his tendency, in other words, to end up at home. In fact, the trip described in Part One, the longest of the there-and-back-again stories and the one that most explicitly deals with Sal’s quest to regain his sexual potency—ends with Sal returning home and literally investing in domesticity, as he and his aunt use the money he earned during his first cross-country trip to buy “a new electric refrigerator...the first one in the family” (107). In this way, going on the road seems to be in the service of coming home, a form of remaking that is not a rejection of the domestic but is rather an investment in it.

It is clear, then, that for Kerouac, domesticity itself is not the problem, but rather the “dull middleclass philosophy” of domesticity. That a middle-class philosophy would look a lot like Jack’s list of beliefs is partly the point. “Dull middleclass philosophy” implies something permanent and official, a statement of belief that guides future action and so becomes a controlling master narrative of a life. The dullness results from that sense of overarching permanence. A statement of things one believes in, even if it matches point for point with a philosophy, is different because it doesn’t imply a causative correlation with future action; it is a stabilizing, rather than prescriptive, structure. By setting his own beliefs apart from “dull middleclass philosophies,” Jack isn’t taking issue with middle-class beliefs so much as middle-class intransigence, a certain ossification that comes from being what one believes. In this way, Jack’s

complaint about the middle class is a double for Sal's complaint about only being himself. As the word "only" implies, Sal doesn't have a problem with being himself per se, but instead has issues with being limited to just one self forever. In the same way, Jack specifically doesn't "make" a philosophy out of his beliefs because doing so would impose a more permanent, rigid structure on top of them. This is why Jack nurses his disappointment with a clearly articulated desire for a flight of his own, as he says to himself, "Well I might as well go be mad again" and then immediately begins making "preparations to go get Neal in San Francisco and see what he was doing now" (281). Faced with the failure of one version of his life story (being a patriarch), he initiates another (being mad). He wants to find a version of his life that works.

Sal's trip across Denver's proverbial tracks—not discussed in the scroll manuscript—helps him find such a version. In the 1957 *On the Road*, both the details of Sal's failure to establish a family and his conscious decision to "go be mad" are absent, having been replaced by, or collapsed into, Sal's perambulations. The twin obsessions the scroll sections reveal—with family and with movement and travel as a means of alternative identity formation—make their way into the final version, but have merged and become embodied in the marginalized figures Sal observes. Notions of familial bonding underlie the entire passage. Sal's description of the "dark porches of Mexican and Negro homes"—"soft voices were there, occasionally the dusky knee of some mysterious sensual gal; and dark faces of the men behind rose arbors"—come across almost like a domestic striptease, as Sal is clearly attracted to the hints of the home lives he witnesses (180). Likewise, the softball game, specifically played "in front of families and girl friends, and kids of the neighborhood," represents a communal coming together

that starkly contrasts with Sal's recent experience with his own family, while Sal's celebration of the mundanity of sitting on front steps seems like a natural alternate ending to his own story of homestead founding. At the same time, Sal's racial labels exoticize these domestic scenes. That is, Sal marks himself as white specifically to signal difference as difference, to call exaggerated attention to the way that his fantasy of "exchanging worlds" really is about becoming something new. While it ultimately fails here—Sal is stuck only wishing and ends up back on the road soon after—this interlude in Denver poses a means of adapting the road's potential for self-reinvention while off the road. That is, Sal is trying to imagine himself into multiple identities as a way of adopting new versions of himself. Moreover, that these new identities are domestic identities indicates that Sal's goal is to get off the road, to bring self-making home.

Sal's interlude with Terry points to a more effective way for Sal to solve his problems and to merge the stability of domesticity with the energy of self-making. Terry helps Sal learn how to adopt new identities, to become something other than himself, while always still managing to be himself. Sal's initial encounter with Terry seems a lot like his previous encounters with women. In fact, in describing the first time he lays eyes on Terry, Sal goes out of his way to call attention to the typicality of what he assumes will be a missed opportunity: "A pain stabbed my heart as it did every time I saw a girl I loved who was going the opposite way in this too-big world" (81). The "every time" here reveals how common it is for Sal to fail to successfully act on opportunities to meet women. His assumption that they are both going in different directions seems like both an excuse for his lack of courage—Sal is quick to assume they are going in different directions, despite the plausible notion that they might be taking the same bus—and an

expression of a resigned fatalism. Sal assumes failure, and in fact even creates a before-the-fact excuse for it, from the moment he sees the girl because he knows himself. Sal is assuming impotence based on the pattern of impotence that has come before, a move that runs counter to self-making.

Sal does break the pattern, though. He hits on Terry. The move seems anomalous not only because it's not something he's done well in the past—failing to pick up girls in San Francisco, relying on Dean's introductions in Denver or on the inhibition-lowering party scene in Central City, etc.—but also because it's not really Sal doing it. That is, while beating himself up for lack of initiative, Sal says “Aren't you tired enough of yourself by now?” and in the very next sentence observes, “And before I knew what I was doing I leaned across the aisle to her (she was trying to sleep on the seat) and said, ‘Miss, would you like to use my raincoat as a pillow?’” (81).

Sal experiences a kind of out-of-body experience here, one that recalls Sal's dislocation from himself in the Des Moines hotel room. That is, just as he feels himself a “stranger,” who “didn't know who [he] was” in the unfamiliar environment of the beat hotel room, sitting in the darkness of the bus, Sal watches himself act as if from a distance.

Sal attributes his ability to work up “the courage necessary to approach a strange girl” to the fact that he “was so lonely, so sad, so tired, so quivering, so broken, so beat” (81). When read in the light of Sal's Des Moines experience, Sal's expression of disgust with himself takes on new meaning, especially given his impulsive actions. Having become tired of himself, Sal (or at least his body) simply acts like someone else. The condition of beatness allows Sal to create a new self, or at least express an uncharacteristic version of himself. Unlike the scene in the hotel room, though, which

suggests via its East/West, old/new imagery that Sal has somehow moved into the next natural, even inevitable, identity available to him—in the same way that moving west naturally takes a person to the West—this scene suggest that this rebirthing process is non-linear. The simultaneity of assertiveness and passivity encoded in the “before I knew what I was doing” is a corollary to “I didn’t know who I was,” as both imply a separation of self from self—the narrating “I” commenting upon the existing or acting “I.” Whereas in Des Moines, though, Sal’s beatness created the conditions for him to be no one as a prelude to becoming someone new, the action on the bus is more instantaneous. Being beat here, it seems, allows Sal to easily adopt a new persona when he has tired of the old one. Moreover, this new identity is less emergent—a newly birthed self—as it is iterative—a new version of the same self.

In fact, throughout the interlude with Terry, Sal’s identity goes through several iterations without one ever becoming definitive. On the bus, Terry tells Sal that upon seeing him in the bus station, she “thought [he] was a nice college boy” (82). Sal confirms this impression, ““Oh, I’m a college boy!’ I assured her” (82), but just a paragraph later he states that “my mind went haywire...I began getting the foolish paranoiac visions that Teresa, or Terry—her name—was a common little hustler who works the buses for a guy’s bucks...” (82). This he chooses not to share. However, after Sal mentions a “six-foot redhead” he knows in New York (83), Terry gets angry: “Six foot redhead, hey? And I thought you was a nice college boy, I saw you in your lovely sweater and I said to myself, Hmm, ain’t he nice? No! And no! And no! You have to be a goddam pimp like all of them” (83). Sal tries to convince Terry that this isn’t true, but then says, “I got mad and realized I was pleading with a dumb little Mexican wench

and I told her so; and before I knew it I picked up her red pumps and hurled them at the bathroom door and told her to get out” (84). The result is Terry taking off all her clothes and Sal “ma[king] love to her in the sweetness of the weary morning” (84). The point here is that Sal cycles through several identities: wary traveler/paranoiac, college boy, pimp, lover. And yet none of these identities can be said to be definitive. While it’s true Sal has been to college, he isn’t currently attending. In any case, “nice college boys” tend not to call women whores and throw their shoes. Pimps do call women whores and act violently toward them, but certainly up until this point Sal hasn’t given the reader much reason to believe he is a pimp. Whereas Terry seems to understand (male) identity in terms of a stable college boy/pimp binary, Sal mixes up those identities, effectively embodying them all at once. And unlike with his job as a security guard, Sal here doesn’t feel the need to live up to the persona implied by his college boy sweater.

In a way, Sal’s “paranoiac visions” of Terry as a hustler form part of her appeal. More precisely, Sal is able to regain his potency with Terry because she embodies the type of multiple simultaneous identities he’s been looking for. If the Central City girls were too fast, and Rita Bettencourt was too slow, then Terry is just right; Terry seems fast *and* slow at the same time. Before he comes to believe that she is running a game on him, Sal learns that Terry is a family woman: “She had a husband and child. The husband beat her, so she left him, back at Sabinal, south of Fresno, and was going to LA to live with her sister awhile. She left her little son with her family, who were grape-pickers and lived in a shack in the vineyards. She had nothing to do but brood and get mad” (81-82). This brief history contains a peculiar amalgam of rootedness and rootlessness. Terry has a family, and family is clearly important to her. She has a

trustworthy kinship network that can protect her and her son, whom she clearly feels conflicted about leaving behind. At the same time, like Sal, she is on the road, suggesting that she is not determined by her family—in fact has chosen to leave her husband. There is, likewise, a certain reconfigurability to her family structures that exists side by side with the essential stability of the family bond. Not only has she left her husband, but she's also going to take up temporary residence with her sister in LA, while her son and the rest of the family live in a temporary structure in a vineyard.

For Sal, who lives with an extended family member (his aunt) and whose marriage has just ended, the story of family that Terry provides is both recognizable and strange. That estrangement serves the same function as beatness in that it makes Sal aware of alternatives and variations while still maintaining the essential stability engendered by the structural similarities to his own family life. It thus, like beatness, opens up the possibility of a type of iterative selfhood. Because her story doesn't conform to his expectations—she doesn't feel “dead” after splitting with her husband, for instance—it becomes possible for Sal to imagine Terry both as a prostitute and as an innocent who has a “simple soul” and a “simple and funny little mind” (83, 84). Just as Sal can be both a college boy and a pimp, Terry can be both a loving mother and “a Pachuco wildcat” (89), Sal's “girl soul” (82) and “a dumb little Mexican wench” (84).

What Sal learns with Terry is that he can create this type of estrangement, this formation of multiple simultaneous identities. Whereas Sal's earlier encounters with his own multiplicity were largely accidental, being tired in the Des Moines hotel room or tired of himself on the bus, Sal experiences iterative selfhood as a function of created space while he is with Terry. With Terry and her son Johnny, Sal sets up temporary

housekeeping in a tent while working as a cotton-picker. Sal's time living in the tent is perhaps the most idyllic in the book, with the prose registering a genuine wonder and contentment. Just as in Sal's discussion of families sitting on their porches in Denver, though, what Sal is actually describing seems in many ways generically familiar. Sal calls his first experience of the tent "delightful": "I had to stoop to get in, and when I did there was my baby and my baby boy" (94). Likewise, in the evenings, Terry fixes Sal food and sews his pants, while Sal plays with Johnny. Later in the evening the three spend quality time together: "Terry curled up beside me, Johnny sat on my chest, and they drew pictures of animals in my notebook" (97). What Sal is recounting so tenderly, in other words, is his experience with a very typical domesticity. Sal paints himself as loving father and husband—note how quick he is to claim Johnny as his "baby boy"—enjoying his family after a hard day of work.

But this reading is never allowed to take hold. After all, in order to see his "baby and baby boy," Sal has to stoop to get in, reminding the readers of the tent's presence. Likewise, the sentence after Sal describes family bonding hour—a tableau easily reminiscent of Mom and Dad helping Junior with his homework—he notes that, "The light of our tent burned on the frightful plain" (97). Not only does this call more attention to the fact that Sal is in a temporary dwelling, but it also serves as a reminder of its position far from society. The tent, in other words, clearly functions as an alternate space, one that resembles home in the same way that a softball game resembles a baseball game. The very temporariness of the tent, as well as its marginal position far from both mainstream society and Sal's home, offers it up as a place for re-inscription. Likewise,

the fact that a tent can be broken down and re-erected points to the same type of multiplicity that Sal is after, an iterative form of re-creation.

Living in a tent, then, gives Sal the opportunity to imaginatively recreate himself. For instance, after returning to the tent after his tough first day of picking cotton, Sal recounts that, “Sighing like an old Negro cotton-picker, I reclined on the bed and smoked a cigarette” (97). Significantly, this comes immediately after Sal points out that the meal Terry cooked was “one of the greatest” he had ever had specifically because he was “so hungry and tired” (97). Once again being beat allows Sal to experience multiplicitous identities, as the condition of being worn out by cotton-picking allows Sal to imaginatively inhabit difference. Importantly, though, Sal isn’t wishing he were black here—moving outside of his own identity—but is instead asserting simultaneity. That is, the effect of the simile is to assert a likeness that exists at the same time as the still-distinct subject, the “I.” The “Negro cotton-picker” is a parallel iteration that exists at the same moment, in the same gesture, that Sal does. At this moment, the boundaries between identities collapse. That this scene happens inside the tent—Sal works (rests in the dirt) near African American cotton pickers in the fields without experiencing this sort of identification—is telling. The anchorage in the domestic scene seems to be what allows Sal to experience this sort of difference. The stability of “home” frees him to imaginatively become others.

A similar dynamic is in play just a few paragraphs later when, after learning of a man who was tied to a tree and beaten by “Okies” (97), Sal says, “From then on I carried a big stick with me in the tent in case they got the idea we Mexicans we fouling up their trailer camp. They thought I was a Mexican; and in a way I am” (97). Richardson reads

this scene in terms of Sal “cross[ing] the color line, as by an act of sophisticated minstrelsy: he puts on a mask of color” (223), an idea that resonates with Robert Holton’s (1995) description of the Denver scene as “a sort of fantasized racial version of cross-dressing” (268). Both minstrelsy and racial cross-dressing, however, imply essential difference, with the mask allowing the wearer to experience his own conception of the Other. Passing, at least as used by Kathleen Pfieffer, is a more promising way of understanding this scene. For Pfieffer, remember, passing is an expression of individualism that encodes choosing amongst identities, disrupting the categorization that accrues to merely racial distinctions. By claiming that he is Mexican “in a way,” Sal is not just choosing his own identity (he says who he is), but he is also choosing more than one identity simultaneously. If there is a way in which Sal is Mexican, there is also at the same time a way in which he is not. Moreover, unlike minstrelsy, which posits a temporary experience of difference, Sal’s tense shifts indicate that Mexicanness is an always available iteration of his own identity: “They *thought* I was a Mexican...and in a way, I *am*.” This becomes possible because the most likely way that Sal is Mexican is that he lives with Mexicans and does the same work Mexicans do. But as I discussed above, living around Mexicans seems in many important ways to be a lot like living the (white) suburban ideal. Essential structural similarities make all identities simultaneously available.

It makes sense, then, that while living in the tent in Sabinal, Sal would say that he “forgot...all about Dean and Carlo and the bloody road” (97), but it makes an equal amount of sense that just a page later Sal would “feel the pull of [his] own life calling [him] back” (98). On one level, as a temporary, flexible, marginal structure that also

recalls home, the tent is able to effectively stand in for the road as a space for self-making, a kind of best of both worlds. At the same time, a tent is an impermanent shelter; it does exist far from home. What makes it attractive as a forum for self-creation also renders it problematic as a site of domesticity. A tent is more a functional model of the type of home Sal is after than it is a functional home. If Sal is really interested in finding a workable model of domestic self-making, the site should be his own home. Sal's project from the start has been to reinvigorate himself and find a model of domesticity that is not static; the road was never imagined as a terminus.

Up until this point, Sal has needed the literal as a referent for alternative iterations of identity. Being near migrant farmers, or multicultural softball players, or African American families allowed him to declare his own essential similarity, while maintaining the estrangement necessary to make moves to adopt those other identities. Increasingly, though, narration itself becomes the means through which Sal is able to stake claims to alternate identities while meeting his own goal of enjoying a stable home life. As Arthur argues, "Through sustained interest in the immediacy and the immensity of American diversity, rather than a sustained interest in difference per se, Kerouac invents new relations among American economic classes and racial groups, relations that amplify the resemblance among all things American" (101). Via narration, Sal gains the ability to be everywhere, to know everyone, and so gains the ability to articulate an essential similarity that allows him to imaginatively inhabit a multiplicity of simultaneous identities.

Consider that during one of Dean's typical bouts of semi-coherent, ecstatic rambling, Sal says: "there was nothing clear about the things he said, but what he meant

to say was somehow made pure and clear. He used the word ‘pure’ a great deal. I had never dreamed Dean would become a mystic. These were the first days of his mysticism, which would lead to the strange, ragged W.C. Fields saintliness of his later days” (121). On one level, the claim seems specious. Because Dean says the word *pure* a lot doesn’t mean that what he’s saying is pure; because Sal can intuit his meaning doesn’t make Dean a saint. On another level, it is essential that Sal makes this claim at this point. The speech Dean makes that earns him Sal’s sanctification is ostensibly about the existence of God. In typical Dean, style, however, that topic only provides a vague contour for a rambling, free-associative conversation. During this discussion, Dean asserts that, “we know America, we’re at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do” (120-121). The road is clearly the means by which Dean can go everywhere. It gives him access to “every corner.” But this road-induced omnipresence also leads to a type of omniscience—“anywhere in America...I know the people.” Dean here takes on god-like dimensions, an effect that is only heightened when this seeming non sequitur is put back into the ostensible topic of the conversation. In a way, then, Dean’s speech here is roughly the equivalent of Sal’s earlier comparison of Dean to the Plains and the west wind. In claiming to be everywhere and to know everyone, Dean seems to become a metaphor. He is the road. But this message seems largely incoherent in the context of his free associative ramblings, one digression among many. The words themselves have meaning—he asserts, perhaps even creates, a type of knowledge—but without any narrative structure that meaning is blunted and becomes lost in the shuffle.

The significance of Dean's speech—the meaning that is made—is a function of Sal's narration, the structure he imposes on it. Not only does he retrospectively encourage reconsideration of Dean's statement through his comment about Dean's mysticism, but he also shades the way the reader understands Dean in general, and this conversation in particular, by saying just before the start of Dean's monologue that, "Dean was tremendously excited about everything that he saw, everything he talked about, every detail of every moment that passed. He was out of his mind with real belief" (120). Not only does this foreshadow the idea of Dean's omniscience by suggesting that Dean has some sort of preternatural ability to know "every detail of every moment that passed," but it also makes Dean's god-like powers a function of belief. As Mark Richardson (2001) argues, "the *act* of believing in Dean actually brings Dean about—makes him, renews him, creates him. We do not believe in Dean; we *believe Dean in*, to adapt a phrase Robert Frost once used about God and the future. Dean Moriarty cannot exist apart from our fictions of him" (219, emphasis in original). If Dean gains the god-like ability to be everywhere and know everyone because of belief, then Sal gains a similar power because, as Dean's narrator, he compels belief in the same way that Nick Carraway capitalizes on the power of his own narrative to "play with faith." The point here is that Sal is right, there is nothing clear about what Dean said. The meaning of this conversation manages to come through, however, because Sal's narration makes it so. If Dean needs the road to go everywhere and know everyone, Sal as a maker of metaphors and a creator of belief simply needs to tell a story to achieve the same effect.

Sal's newly acquired narrative omniscience—a result of Dean's increasing inability to speak for himself—allows him to flatten the distinction between home and

road, and concurrently center and margin, in order to make all places versions of each other. If everywhere is an alternate version of home, then actually going on the road becomes unnecessary. Thus, just as Sal sees essential similarities across identity categories as markers of sameness—allowing him to stake a claim to other identities—so too does he imagine a kind of continental similarity that encompasses both people and their places. For instance, while in Sabinal, Sal works hard to link a locally specific event—something he is doing right now—with a national narrative:

Americans are always drinking in crossroads saloons on Sunday afternoon; they bring their kids...Everywhere in America I've been in crossroads saloons drinking with whole families. The kids eat popcorn and chips and play in back. This we did. Rickey and I and Ponzo and Terry sat drinking and shouting with the music; little baby Johnny goofed with other children around the jukebox. (92)

Categorizing Americanness based on what happens in crossroad saloons on Sundays is strangely specific. But that specificity is what Sal is after here. Taking something that is so context specific and blowing it up to continent-sized proportions gives Sal the same kind of omniscience that Dean was trying to articulate for himself. Sal has been everywhere in America, and so knows what Americans do. At the same time, by claiming Americanness for this ultra-local act, Sal is claiming an essential similarity amongst all Americans that renders each action taken by someone in America simply an iteration within a larger category. Rather than depending on an essential structural similarity to make this move, here Sal uses his narrative prerogative to assert it in much the same way as he imposed meanings on Dean's speech.

Thus, Sal's narration works to create a type of omnibus Americanness that, once claimed, assumes everything inside the continent to be simply an inhabitable iteration. The term *American* is invoked at every turn in the novel. In many cases the usage is utilitarian—referring to the American continent, for instance, or Sal calling himself and his pals “American youths” while in Mexico City (277). In other cases, however, the word becomes, in purely descriptive terms, useless. When describing his gang's visit to Old Bull Lee's place in New Orleans, Sal remarks that, “Doors kept opening around the crooked porch, and members of our sad drama in the American night kept popping out to find where everybody was” (148). Strictly speaking, the quality of night hardly seems to be dependent on national borders in the way that geography or citizenship might be. Even assuming that “American” is meant to describe the action—opening doors, popping out—the terms seems logically problematic as it is reasonable to assume that doors open and people pop out in lots of places, even at night.

Sal uses the term elsewhere, too. Hiding out in the fields while Terry makes up with her family, he watches the family saga:

Her five brothers were singing melodious songs in Spanish. The stars bent over the little roof; smoke poked from the stovepipe chimney. I smelled mashed beans and chili. The old man growled. The brothers kept right on yodeling. The mother was silent. Johnny and the kids were giggling in the bedroom. A California home; I hid in the grapevines, digging it all. I felt like a million dollars; I was adventuring in the crazy American night.”
(100)

Just as before, the action seems relatively mundane and not geographically or politically specific. The passage describes a fairly typical family scene. Absent the term “American,” in fact, the only other markers that might indicate regional specificity—the language and cuisine—would likely be taken for a scene from the night in some other country. The effect, just as with the families on front porches in Denver or with the Mexican families in Sabinal, is to create similarity in difference. The essential similarity of things Americans do makes all American identities interchangeable. At the same time, because each thing that he labels as American is clearly different—singing songs in Spanish isn’t “popping out” in Mississippi—he creates the effect of multiple simultaneous identities, each equally adoptable.

Just as Sal makes the things people do essentially similar versions of each other, he also tends to see individual locations as different versions of the same place. Sal notes, for instance, that sitting in the bus station in Cheyenne is “no different from being in Newark” (35), while he also points out that the place the bus dropped him in L.A. is “no different from where you get off a bus in Kansas City or Chicago or Boston” (82). Similarly, while in San Francisco, Sal stands on Market Street and says: “I didn’t know whether it was that or Canal Street in New Orleans: it led to water, ambiguous, universal water, just as 42nd Street, New York leads to water, and you never know where you are” (172). In an important sense, Sal’s failure to tell the difference between San Francisco, New York, and New Orleans recalls the beat dislocations of the Omaha hotel room, the bus, or the Sabinal tent. Whereas the experience of beatness turns Sal on to multiple simultaneous identities, and so allows him to pick and choose from amongst a variety of iterative selves, the dislocation of place from geography allows him to create multiple

simultaneous presents. If a bus station in Cheyenne is the same as the bus station in Newark is the same as the bus station in Boston, then travel itself is largely moot because the experience of being elsewhere can be had by being here. What this does is create the impression that the entire United States, “from one end of the country to the other” is “the same vast backyard” (14). Given the essential similarity between places, the backyard image, in particular, is telling. Sal is domesticating the travel narrative, or using narratives of travel to stand in for travel. If all places exist in a simultaneous present, then all places can be located from home. Everywhere collapses into Sal’s own backyard, and so the need to actually travel to experience difference is negated. The travel narrative has been brought home.

Consider that the repeated circular structures of the first four parts of the book—the there-and-back-again stories—become increasing shorter as the book goes along. The culmination of this pattern is a barely-six-page fifth section in which Sal stays at home. This creates a centripetal effect, as the book’s action seems to be circling around the narrative center, looking for a final place to land. But this spiraling inward doesn’t limit or constrain the action, as the length and setting of the final section belie its scope. There is a very real way in which Part Five is the most expansive of the book. In the massive 170-word sentence that ends the book, Sal assumes a god-like perspective that allows him to peruse the whole of the American continent as if it were his backyard. Sitting in a stationary location—“the old broken-down river pier”—Sal surveys the American continent, saying that he can “sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievably huge bulge over to the West Coast” (309). Moreover, just as Dean earlier claimed to “know America” and to “know the people” because of his travels, from his pier Sal, too, knows

America and its people. He senses “all the people dreaming in the immensity of it,” and knows without having to see—to literally experience it—that “by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry” (309). While Dean becomes the road while he is on the road—remember that the saintly conversation takes place while they are driving—Sal has learned how to control narrative, to collapse multiple places and identities into one simultaneous, multiplicitous here and now. Sal no longer needs to go on the road, because he can recreate himself through narrative. He doesn’t need to travel with his old friend because he now can simply “think of Dean Moriarty” (310).

In the end, then, Kerouac is able to use the concept of marginality to aid in his project of imaginative self-making. New selves are imagined in the novel to exist elsewhere—the experience of being on the road makes the discovery and adoption of new personae possible. The condition of marginality makes the discovery of new selves possible in that difference qua difference can defamiliarize the mundane. Racial and ethnic difference can put a sheen of newness on the familiar by the sheer force of incongruity. If what Sal wants is a stable domesticity and the freedom and power associated with creativity and self-making in the American context, then the margins offers him that opportunity. What he finds in the margins are models of stable domesticity that look different—because of their visible racial and ethnic markers—than those with which he is familiar. The simultaneity of familiarity and difference, then, offer Sal a means to remake himself—discover or create new versions of himself—and thus gain psychic credit for having been self made, while still maintaining the essential domestic stability that he craves. Moreover, Sal discovers that the same effect of dislocation that he experiences by seeing the mundane enacted in the margins can be

achieved through narrative itself. Through the narrative power of naming, Sal discovers that he can invent difference and sameness as simultaneous categories, and thus can experience the dislocative effects of traveling to the margins by staying at home and narrating the margins.

The Joy Luck Club and the Margins: Relocating the American Dream

Throughout this dissertation, my aim has been to illuminate both the way that the American Dream narrative helps to define and mediate symbolic citizenship and the role the margins plays in that process. To that end, I've had to examine the way that the Dream constructs an ideal version of America and Americanness and also helps mediate between that ideal and the on-the-ground realities of the American instance. Up to this point, I've focused on narratives produced from a more or less central position—where characters like Nick Carraway and Sal Paradise narrate their encounters with the margins from the vantage point of a stable narrative position—in order to demonstrate that the margins are imagined to embody a transgressive spirit that, while potentially threatening to property and stability in actual fact, nonetheless provides a viable model for middle-class reinvigoration. Narratives of the margins, then, meet this threat because they produce these creative, invigorating energies from a stable position in the center. For this chapter, I'd like to reverse this perspective by looking at Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, a book that deals very much with the issues I've been discussing and is, at least in a way, written from a position on the margins.

I say “in a way” because *The Joy Luck Club* is, indeed, a book written by a minority author that deals with issues of difference, ethnicity, and assimilation. At the same time, *The Joy Luck Club* is a former bestseller in the United States that is written by a self-described American author who has been criticized for pandering to American tastes and sensibilities and even for participating in Orientalist discourse.²⁹ Other texts by minority writers might have offered a clearer counterpoint, a means of critiquing the

American Dream discourse I've been discussing throughout. After all, as Kathryn Hume has suggested, "the American Dream is so associated with immigrants' hopes that incomers' experiences are a good place to start sampling a widespread literary dissatisfaction with America" (9). However, throughout this study, I've tried to avoid the bifurcated discourse of celebration and critique that too often dominates discourse around this topic and instead look at the purposes to which the narrative has been put to help justify, shape, and define America. To this end, the contradictions inherent in *The Joy Luck Club* are well suited to my purpose. Tan, like her characters, is both an insider and an outsider; she is a middle-class American author who is also a second generation Chinese American. Tan's text reflects this dual position, as her book features sixteen short stories, two each told by four pairs of mothers and daughters. With a few minor exceptions, the mothers' stories are about Old World China, while the daughters' stories are about modern America. As I will discuss in more detail later, the mothers' stories are much more dynamic than those of the daughters because the mothers' tales describe their attempts at self-definition—which places them squarely within the American Dream tradition—while those of the daughters relate only the girls' fear of declension, their attempts to hold on to a narrow sense of their own middle-class Amerianness. With the alternating story format, Tan has created a book that literalizes in its structure Nick Carraway's narrative position, simultaneously "within and without." This vantage point allows Tan to advocate resistance to assimilation as a means of, paradoxically, becoming American, to avoid, like Nick (and Sal and Tony Camonte), being situated and locked into categories and structure by continually re-creating the self.

In “Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects” (1996), an essay whose ostensible purpose is to lament her own conditional canonization as an ethnic author, Tan offers an important window into her narrative project and its relationship to broader notions of Americanness. The essay uses her books’ appearances on multicultural syllabi as an opportunity to make her case for her own Americanness, a case that rests in large part on a type of narrated selfhood that is itself animated by a rejection of centrism. Conditional canonization in the “literary ghetto” of the multicultural curricula makes Tan feel limited, as her texts’ meanings are co-opted by the category: “If the book is labeled ethnic, it must contain specific nutritive ingredients: a descriptive narrative that provides lessons on culture, characters who serve as good role models, plots and conflicts that contain socially relevant themes and ideas, language that is wholesome in its political correctness” (307-308). Tan doesn’t specify what book she is referring to here, if this label must be earned by writing a work to the pre-defined criteria or if meaning is retrospectively applied to any book by an ethnic author, and that failure to differentiate goes to the heart of the question. The label becomes the text. Under this rubric, self-expression and self-definition are impossible because meaning is always already applied from without.

Small wonder, then, that Tan resists the imposition of the ethnic tag by claiming: “I am an American writer. I am Chinese by racial heritage. I am Chinese-American by family and social upbringing. But I believe that what I write is American fiction by virtue of the fact that I live in this country and my emotional sensibilities, assumptions, and obsessions are largely American” (310). This claim recalls Werner Sollors’ (1986) notion of American culture as one shaped by narratives of consent (as opposed to those of

descent). “Descent language,” Sollors notes, “emphasizes our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and ‘architects of our fates’ to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems” (6). By naming her ethnic heritage, and yet still claiming to be American, Tan is in effect choosing or consenting to being American. Tan frames herself as an American *writer* who writes American fiction, thereby amplifying this idea of choice. In the process, she makes Americanness an expression of selfhood that stands against the passive inheritance of Chineseness. A few pages later, Tan again describes herself as an American writer because she has “the freedom to write whatever [she] wants” and that in writing, she chooses “to express [her]self freely in whatever direction or form [she] wish[es]” (316). Taken together with her earlier disavowal of categorization, this assertion marks a clear alignment with an American Adam-style sense of individualism and self-determination. Her rejection of the “nutritive ingredients” of ethnic literature is a way of distancing her work from any categorically imposed meaning.

In this vein, Tan seeks to separate her work not just from the predetermined meaning assigned to ethnic literature but seemingly from the obligation to mean anything, at least in any describable way. While the main thrust of her argument seems to be aimed at wresting back the meaning of her texts from those implied by the multicultural label, in the process of doing so, Tan seems to void her work of any identifiable meaning at all. For instance, Tan runs through a catalogue of intricate and clever arguments that have been made by critics, reviewers, and students. All of these readings are, she asserts, wrong. While it is not terribly surprising that an author would disagree with her critics, especially given her central point about the dangers of

categorization in regards to individual expression, what is perhaps more puzzling is that she says those interpretations are all wrong because, as she claims, “I don’t place symbols in such clever fashion as some students have given me credit for. I’m not that smart” (301). Elsewhere, she credits dumb luck and her agent’s good sense for the book’s four part structure and doubts her own ability to “think of tricky symbols and plant them in carefully tilled rows of sentences” (319). Significantly, Tan is not making a claim against her own craft; indeed, the opposite is true: “I choose my words carefully, with much anguish. They are, each and every one, significant to me, by virtue of their meaning, their tone, their place in the sentence, their sound and rhythm in dialogue or narrative” (301). Tan’s assertion that she is smart and careful with words and images where she is specifically not smart and careful with symbols is significant, as it points to a view of literature as pliable. Symbols in carefully tilled rows make meaning discoverable and permanent, something to be dug up and displayed. Carefully fussed over words whose meanings are deeply personal, on the other hand, make meaning ineffable, and so pointedly unable to be named or fixed: “It’s simply a feeling. The feeling is the entire story. To paraphrase the feeling or to analyze the story reduces the feeling for me” (323).

This split between words as images and words as symbols has a political undercurrent, as Tan makes similar claims about her ability to speak to real world issues:

Contrary to what some students, professors, reporters, and fund-raising organizations assume, I am not an expert on China, Chinese culture, mah jong, the psychology of mothers and daughters, generation gaps, immigration, illegal aliens, assimilation, acculturation, racial tension, Tiananmen Square, Most Favored Nation trade agreements, human rights,

Pacific Rim economics, the purported one million missing baby girls of China, the future of Hong Kong after 1997, or, I am sorry to say, Chinese cooking. Certainly I have personal opinions on many of these topics, especially food, but by no means do my sentiments or my world of make-believe make me an expert. (305)

While Tan is clearly reacting against the burden of being an unwitting and unwilling cultural spokesperson, she is also, as she did in rejecting the “literariness” of her work, negating the possibility of any permanent assignation of meaning. In asserting “personal opinions” while denying expertise, Tan is making a move similar to the one Kerouac makes in the scroll manuscript, when he refuses to label his own set of beliefs a philosophy, as both expertise and philosophy imply permanence; both create a category, and with it the categorical demand of consistency, where there was once simply self-expression, opinions and beliefs.

Tan takes this disavowal of formalizing or categorizing belief a step further, though, by linking it to her fictional project, and thus posing it as a creative act. A political position is tangible and representational in the way that, apparently, a “world of make-believe” is not; the former describes the world, while the latter creates one (or many). Just as she did when she claimed that she was not smart enough to come up with symbols, Tan calls her fiction make-believe in order to distance it from the seriousness that accrues to real subjects in the real world because the weight and heft of a serious subject carries with it the burden of accurate representation. Freed from this burden, fiction becomes for Tan an erasable slate, subject to constant revision at the whim of the creator. Likewise, if her fiction is a make-believe world, then its contours are defined

only by the imagination and its borders are malleable and permeable. Here Tan is imagining fiction not as representative, in which political perspectives might well be reflected in the text, but as imaginative, created space. As creation rather than representation, fiction is under no obligation to *be* anything, which opens up room for a free play of meaning.

With these claims, Tan is clearly making a case for literature as a forum for pure individualism. As Andrew Hoberek notes in regards to Vladimir Nabokov's articulation of his fictional project in "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," an essay that—despite Tan's and Nabokov's very different aesthetics—shares with Tan's piece a very similar conception of what literature is (or is not), "for Nabokov... what defines literature and distinguishes it from other forms of writing is not its particular form but its essential formlessness" (27). In other words, Nabokov understands art to be a resistance to categories and structures. As Hoberek explains, Nabokov's defense of the artistic merit of his book is simply a listing of images from it, which stands in contrast to his definition of pornography as a formal pattern of consecutive sex scenes. What's important about this is the way that Nabokov's conceptualization of fiction "as a pure expression of individual style" (25) so closely parallels Tan's claim for only personal, not discoverable, meaning for her work. Indeed, Nabokov "detest[s] symbols and allegories" in much the same way that Tan disavows planting symbols in rows for her readers to dig up (qtd. in Hoberek 28). Thus, Nabokov's "preference for ineffability," which finds an easy echo in Tan's assertion that her (non-symbolic) words are important because of their tone and rhythm in the sentence, is an expression of the fear of losing individuality in the face of categorical systems:

“what they think of as ‘their’ ideas—or even ‘their’ identities—may in fact originate in the systemic framework in which they perform their mental labor” (28).

In this sense, by rejecting any claim to be an expert and declaring only the ability to speak about her own experience and opinions, Tan is clearly declaring her own uniqueness in contradistinction to the imposed framework of minority authorship. Just as with her practice of fiction writing, though, this uniqueness isn’t knowable or discoverable, but is more of a fluid, and somewhat mysterious, idiosyncrasy. She has opinions, but doesn’t state them; her words are important, but she won’t say what they mean. In aligning her unique, non-expert self with her world of make believe, Tan seems to be rejecting any sort of essential fixity of either meaning (in the case of her fiction) or identity (in the case of herself). As the creator and inhabitants, respectively, of a world of make-believe, Tan and her characters cannot be pinned down. Whereas Hoberek understands Nabokov’s embrace of ineffable idiosyncrasy as a function of labor—a flight from the mid-century logic of the Organization Man—I see Tan’s espousal of similar ideas to be an expression of the American Dream narrative that poses self-creation as a function of national identity. If Tan is an American writer because “her sensibilities, assumptions, and obsessions are largely American,” but her sensibilities and obsessions are unique and idiosyncratic, then what is left as typically American is simply the ability to express the self freely. What’s more, because that expression can never be assumed to be permanent and because it bears no responsibility for meaning, that expression can be taken back and refashioned again and again to suit the psychic needs of the creator.

Tan’s embrace of the American Dream’s brand of individual-expression-as-national-identity explains why she would explicitly label herself as an American writer

and repudiate the responsibility of ethnic representation at the same time that she would reject canonization. Claiming Americanness and rejecting ethnicity would seem to indicate a play for the mainstream, a move from margin to center. After all, Tan is ostensibly writing the essay out of frustration over being shuffled into the multicultural corner, which implies a concomitant desire to be accepted into the canon proper and a rejection of marginality. However, Tan's "admission" that she isn't talented enough to plant symbols is pretty clearly a jab at the canon, or at least a standard narrative of what canon-worthy literature is supposed to be, an impression fortified by her follow up comment that she never considered writing fiction because she "wasn't an expert on white whales or white males" (319). In fact, Tan spends a whole paragraph discussing being driven away from literature by her collegiate experience with big books.

When I read *An American Tragedy*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Babbitt*, *Tender is the Night*, I was required to look at character flaws as symbols of social ills. I became adept at writing weekly papers, alluding to the trickier symbols and more subtle themes that I knew would please my professors...I would wade through each semester's stack of required reading, pen and paper at hand, ready to catch symbols and social themes with much the same focus as that of a gardener searching for weeds, snails, and leaf rot. (318)

Tan's implication that the themes and symbols she identified in her undergraduate reading were simply sops to her professors suggests a view that canonical works' very centrality to American intellectual life makes their meaning fixed: she is telling her professors what they already know about these books. In this respect, the garden

metaphor makes these books seem picked over, their meanings having already been rooted out by scores of readers before.

This is why Tan notes that “when I completed my literature requirements, I stopped reading fiction, because what I had once loved I no longer enjoyed” (318). It is also why when she does come back to fiction, she reads mostly women authors: “I was feeling again the thrill I had felt as a child choosing my own books, falling in love with characters, reading stories because I couldn’t stop myself” (319).³⁰ Whereas the “white male” books, those that form the core of the American canon, are in Tan’s experience those categorized by fixed meanings waiting to be rediscovered by the reader, those outside of that canon speak to Tan on a strictly personal level. She chooses the books and she falls in love with the characters; in other words, she forms a unique relationship with these books, unlike her relationship with Dreiser or Lewis or Fitzgerald, which is just a pale imitation of her professor’s predefined relationships with them. In preferring women to those who form the backbone of the American canon, especially while claiming Americanness for herself, Tan rejects a kind of categorical Americanness in favor of self-made Americanness—two competing conceptions of what it means to be American that animate *The Joy Luck Club*, as well. If the American Dream rejects fixity and stasis in favor of innovation and creativity, then Tan claim to be an American author whose Americanness is essentially predicated on being different from American authors who have preceded her. In effect, Tan is claiming the center by fleeing to the margins.

Of course, as I’ve argued, the American Dream can rightly be said to be “American” only if it assumes a national scope, if the individual’s quest for self-making can align itself with national reinvention. Although Tan’s distancing herself from the

great books tradition looks like a swapping of the political for the personal—after all part of her disillusionment came from an academic trend when she was in school towards “politicizing fiction,” which temporarily killed off her personal love of literature—Tan’s fictional project is neither as personal nor apolitical as it may at first appear (318). While Tan clearly casts off the burden of speaking for others, she embraces the ability to speak to them, just as she is trading in the obligation to represent in favor of the ability to create. Early in the essay, Tan talks about her own childhood as a time when “Magic happened”: “When an adult explained the concept of hell to me at age four, I dug a hole in the backyard and saw naked people dancing underground; I also saw worms” (302). This collapsing of the real and imaginary is explicitly linked to the fictional project. “I believed the stories I heard,” Tan says, “I then saw what I believed—which is not unlike what I, as a writer, would want you to see as you read my stories. But first I have to make you believe that the stories are true” (302). While Tan elsewhere rejects the appearance of political positions in her fiction, here she suggests that fiction is inherently political in that fiction, because it can compel belief, has the ability to shape the world. This is why later Tan calls her ability to “play with [her] memory of both real and imaginary life” “a weapon” (322, 323). Fiction has, for Tan, an ability to shape the world, to transform it in magical ways. Her rejection of permanence and meaning is, then, a way of preserving this ability, of maintaining storytelling as a creative, transformative act.

Storytelling as a means of exploiting and controlling discourse—a way of invoking and repurposing the American Dream narrative of radical, magical self-

reinvention—animates *The Joy Luck Club*. In an early review of the novel, Orville Schell (2007) describes Tan's narrative structure in this way:

Moving back and forth across the divide between the two generations, the two continents and the two cultures, we find ourselves transported across the Pacific Ocean from the upwardly mobile, design conscious, divorce-prone and Americanized world of the daughters in San Francisco to the world of China in the 20's and 30's, which seems more fantastic and dreamlike than real.

Another reviewer, Susan Dooley (1989), suggests that the book's "characters and events are as powerful as myth." While Dooley says that, "*each* story is a fascinating vignette" (emphasis mine), in her piece she only describes the mothers' stories—those set in China. Similarly, Eleanor Ty (2004) says of both *The Joy Luck Club* and Tan's second novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*, "the most compelling narratives are presented by the mother figures, who have often survived emotional and psychic trauma due to bad marriages, war immigration, and severed family ties" (101). Perhaps for this reason, when the daughters are discussed in commentary about the book, it is often to take issue with them for not recognizing how great their mothers' stories really are, or to compare them unfavorably to the mothers. For instance, Wendy Ho (1996) points out that "Joy Luck daughters often fail to recognize the difficult but vital work and nurture of their working-class, immigrant Chinese mothers" (Ho 331) while Amy Ling (1990) asserts that, "Because their own lives in China had been circumscribed by parental and societal constraints that had led invariably to humiliation, pain, and tragedy, the mothers had all come to America to give their daughters a better life, a life of greater choice. Great is the mothers' exasperation,

then, when the daughters do not take advantage of the choices available to them or choose unwisely” (Ling 140). In short, the mothers’ stories, which tend to deal with the mothers overcoming the obstacles of class and gender in old world China—their struggle for self-definition, in other words—are what make the book memorable. The privileged, Americanized daughters, on the other hand do not have to face such obstacles; without them, and the drive to self-reinvention that they engender, the daughter’s stories seem static, indeed un-American.

This dynamic can be seen in “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away,” the first of the four fables that serve to introduce and loosely unify each of the four sets of stories in the book.³¹ It begins with an old woman remembering a swan she bought in China: “once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose” it ultimately became “too beautiful to eat.” This image is repeated when the woman takes the goose with her on her trip to America where both stretch “their necks toward America” (17). While on the trip, the woman tells the swan: “In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband’s belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!” (17). However, the goose is confiscated on her arrival and its loss is accompanied by the loss of both her hopes for America and her memories of China. Now in the present, the woman is the mother of a “daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow” (17). Although the woman has long wanted to give the daughter the one remaining feather from the goose, this desire is continually deferred as

the mother is always waiting for the time when she could communicate her story “in perfect American English” (17).

This fable is a favorite target of Tan’s critics. In particular, commentators like David Leiwei Li (1998) and Frank Chin (1991) have taken issue with Tan’s use of the fairy tale form, arguing that it incorrectly seems Chinese and so lends the story an air of authenticity, which in turn helps to legitimate its representation of China as a repressively patriarchal nation. Moreover, the story creates an implied contrast between the backward and limiting China that the mother runs from and the enlightened and free America that she runs to. “The invention of the authentic seeming idiom,” says Li, “not only effortlessly implies that the Chinese culture has consecrated its sexism in language, it has also erased, through the Coca-Cola and Sorrow contrast, gender inequality from the civilized liberties of America. It is small wonder that the barbarous and backward East should stretch its neck toward the progressive and blissful West” (113).

Although Chin overstates his case when he calls this fable “white racist,” because “it is not informed by any Chinese intelligence” but rather by a westernized consciousness, both he and Li are essentially correct in asserting that this story is very clearly a product of the demands of an American narrative tradition.³² As Patricia Chu (2000) points out, *The Joy Luck Club* participates in a broader cultural narrative that Chu identifies as “the utopian myth of the immigrant’s Americanization” (143). “In the immigration myth,” Chu explains, “immigrants abandon an old world, which, like the home of a mythic hero, has become incomplete, disordered, or intolerable, to brave the journey to America, which is figured as a promised land of greater economic and social opportunity as well as greater freedom and justice” (143). Rather than a failed attempt at

a Chinese fable, in other words, “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away” seems to be telling an American fairytale, one that depends on casting the Old World as necessarily backward and limiting, so as to, by virtue of contrast, make America seem more open and free.

To this end, the mother in this fable takes on a prototypically American cast, her desire for self-determination and self-reinvention aligning her character with the American Dream narrative that I have been discussing. On one level, this unnamed mother fits the pattern of the other mothers in the novel who demonstrate, in Chu’s words, “an immigrant sensibility—that which marks the Chinese mothers as unfit for their old world milieu and destined to become Americans” (152). In this case, the mother accomplishes this rather explicitly by her repeated use of the term “over there,” demonstrating that she has properly conceptualized America as a land of self-determination (17). Positing America as a place that will enable the fruition of her hopes and dreams, which have pointedly not been allowed to bloom in the old world, is a familiar immigrant trope. What signals this passage’s explicit engagement with the American Dream tradition of self-making is the careful conflation of the type of self-determination possible “over there” and a sort of magical, radical transformation. That is, the duck’s transformation into a swan offers an incisive distillation of the basic desire behind the upward mobility narrative, and so renders itself into a kind of American parable: the duck wanted to be something else so badly, and stretched so hard, that he magically managed to become a new self. The mother’s stretching her neck toward America is an obvious double for this moment, implying that her arrival in America will

effect a similar transformation from downtrodden second-class citizenship to fully realized personhood.

Despite all this, to argue that this vignette operates on an unproblematic contrast between China and America is short-sighted. Although the mother's "over there" mantra celebrates America as a promised land of unrestrained freedom and possibility, within the context of the fable as a whole such celebration proves premature. Contrary to her expectations that in America she will be free from repressive social structures, upon landing the woman finds herself subject to the impositions of a bureaucracy that literally and figuratively robs her of her hopes: not only is the symbolic swan confiscated, but "she had to fill out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she left behind" (17). The mother has been transformed, but that transformation hardly has the transcendent, fantastic quality promised in the fable's opening. Instead, the only change that seems to have been effected is an unexpected declension, with the strong, hopeful woman now portrayed as out of place and confused. As the last paragraph jumps from the moment of arrival to the present, the woman seems trapped in herself, a far cry from the expectation that she would, by this point in her life in America, be able to realize her true self, unencumbered by external demands. The language barrier has prevented her expression of self as the woman continually defers her desire to explain her hopes to her daughter until she can communicate in "perfect American English" (17).

Similarly, the woman's daughter, who was supposed to see the real dividends of the freedom offered in America, seems herself to be a pale shadow of the Dream's promise. The daughter, we are told, "grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow" (17). This is all the information the fable provides about

the daughter, but despite the way in which this sentence literally communicates the fruition of the mother's dream for her daughter—"over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow!"—it also registers a profound sense of disappointment. The exclamation point of the mother's hope has been traded in for a simple declarative, while the elaborate prologue of the mother's journey, undertaken in large part to provide the daughter with opportunity, culminates anticlimactically in a single sentence about the daughter's life. Both underscore an inherent mundanity that contrasts with the mother's Chinese life. The heroic struggle for self-actualization is replaced with the banality of Coca-Cola. In a word, the daughter's life is a disappointment because she has become an American.

In this sense, the fable seems to reverse itself in its stance towards the American Dream. What once seemed like a whole-hearted endorsement comes to look a lot like a portrait of disillusionment. As Hume points out, this is a common trope in immigrant fiction: "That the reality of America falls short of the ideal America is nothing new.... In Cahan's *Rise of David Levinsky*, the protagonist becomes a millionaire but feels that he loses his soul, as do current immigrants in Russell Bank's *Continental Drift* and Oscar Hijuelos's *Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*" (4). Reading *The Joy Luck Club* as a part of this tradition, then, Hume asserts that "Americanized daughters seem weaker in crucial spiritual respects than [the mothers] are, even though one daughter is an architect and another is a tax attorney" (21). The fact that the American reality doesn't live up to expectations, then, prompts a reappraisal of the relative merits of China (or the country of origin more generally) and the United States, with characters and readers alike looking to the Old Country to see what of value they might have missed.

This certainly seems to be the case in Tan's fable, where by story's end the contrast between China and America that Li complained of seems to have been reversed. Consider that while America is posed as a *potential* site of radical self-creation, China in the fable is posed as the *actual* site where both the mother and the swan transform themselves. The very framework of the story, especially the "belching" idiom that Li objected to, poses China as stiflingly patriarchal—as not free vis-à-vis America—but also, crucially, casts it as the site of radical self-transformation. The culturally monolithic nature of the idiom implies that the protagonist must have once been one of scores of women who value themselves simply through a relationship to their husbands. The woman's willingness to assert herself and leave, then, stands out as a radical act of self-refashioning, one that occurs in China. Likewise, the duck's ability to wish himself into a swan seems limited to China, a point that is underscored by the swan's confiscation in America, which suggests its demotion from magical creature to simple bird.

Rather than a reversal, however, I suggest that these instances constitute the displacement, in a post-frontier age characterized more by achievement and consumerist display than by striving, of American stories to China. Despite the way that it locates individual acts of self-making in China, the text gives no indication that self-making is a Chinese characteristic. (The America Dream narratives we've looked at, in contrast, do identify the urge and ability to recreate the self as an essential characteristic of symbolic Americanness.) In fact, quite the opposite is true. Because the woman is purported to be the exception to the rule, one of the few who do decide to assert themselves, the logical conclusion is that while China may be a site of self-making, self-making is antithetical to Chineseness. To be a Chinese woman, the story implies, is to have one's selfhood

determined externally. In this sense, the decision to emigrate to America composes the act of self-creation. It then becomes possible to say that—at least within the context of the fable—to be self-made is to be American. In the same way, despite the fact that his moment of transformation occurred in China, the swan is clearly designed to reaffirm self-making as an American characteristic. Just as the mother’s unconventional decision to become American links the idea of self-making with America, so too does the swan’s stretched neck indicate that self-transformation and becoming American are one and the same. That is, the stretched neck image helps conflate self-making and becoming American in that the duck’s original gesture to recreate himself is the exact same gesture that both he and the mother enact on the ship as a way of signaling their allegiance to their future home.

Moreover, despite the disappointed tone that the fable adopts in its second half, there are strong indications that the promise of the American Dream was fulfilled in the narrative gap between the mother’s moment of arrival and the events recounted in the final paragraph. Although hardly definitive, it is worth noting that the fable does not imply that the mother or daughter faced poverty in America. In fact the daughter’s drinking Coca-Cola seems to suggest that the family has assimilated into a capitalist economy. More substantially, the daughter seems actually to have lived up to her mother’s hopes. The mother wished for the daughter never to have to “swallow any sorrow,” and the text indicates that swallowing sorrow is not something the daughter does. The mother hopes for the daughter to be independent and self-directed, and the text’s implications that she has chosen to follow an American path—speaking English and drinking Coca-Cola—indicates that that is indeed what has happened, especially

when the mother's seeming chagrin at these aspects of the daughter's personality are factored in. The elision of any narrative depicting the woman's life in America—of any representation of the American Dream's fulfillment on American shores—leaves the only instances of self-making dramatized in the story those enacted in China. The effect of this is to imaginatively locate the American Dream outside of America's borders.

If, as Chu asserts, part of *The Joy Luck Club's* project is to pose the “immigrant as quintessential American self” (211, n.4), then we see here that Tan also seems to be suggesting, paradoxically, that Americans are not quintessential American selves. The daughter's problem is not that she hasn't lived up to all her mother's hopes, but that she has. Seemingly everything the mother wished for has come to fruition. Since the acts of dreaming and immigrating to America have already been linked in the fable, then it stands to reason that fulfilling the Dream and actually being an American are also one and the same. However, the way in which the American section of the fable—the part set after these dreams have been fulfilled—reads more like a deflated epilogue indicates that the value of the dream is in the dreaming. Those who have achieved it, and who have attained the symbolic citizenship associated with it, are less valuable than those who want it. This idea, of course, is very similar to Sacvan Bercovitch's observation that “The Puritans' vision fed on the distance between fact and promise....The errand, after all, was by definition a state of *un*fulfillment, and only a sense of crisis, properly directed and controlled, could guarantee the outcome” (34, emphasis in original). Accepting Bercovitch's premise that this Puritan notion of errand is the bedrock of American ideology—and so for our purposes of the American Dream—then we can see that because of its investment in progress and change, the American Dream only exists up

until the moment of its realization. This is why Gatsby, as we saw earlier, loses his God-like abilities of self-creation once he kisses Daisy.

What Tan's fable adds to this insight is the possibility that the sense of crisis that Bercovitch identifies might be resolved by separating the American Dream from America itself. The acts of displacement in the fable—the locating of the instances of American Dream-style self-making outside the borders of the nation—helps to create a vision of America that is sustained by marginality. The daughter's problem in this narrative is that she is too completely Americanized, as witnessed by her predilection for, and so association with, the iconic American brand, Coca-Cola. The daughter's Americanization is, though, the outcome the whole story seems to be pointing towards. After all, the fable invests a lot of time creating a sense that the mother is an ideal American, and then has her invest all her American-style hopes into her daughter while on the way to America. It is no coincidence, then, that in the exact moment that all these narrative threads reach their logical conclusion, the mother seems the most "foreign." That is, the old woman who appears after the narrative gap hardly resembles the proto-American woman who defied her culture and decided to come to America. Instead, the woman seems out of touch with the American milieu, resentful of the Coca-Cola that her daughter is drinking but also, crucially, unable to communicate that to her daughter because she lacks a command of English.

The mother, in other words, is incompletely assimilated, and her inability to communicate her hopes to her daughter both garners the audience's sympathy and creates a contrast between her and her daughter—and by extension between Americans and proto-Americans. The function of the sympathy is to confer final legitimacy on the

mother's American Dream. Her newfound inability to express herself suggests an unrealized or in-progress dream and seems all the more praiseworthy for the struggle the woman has had to keep it alive throughout the years. The seemingly perpetually incomplete nature of the mother's dream, in short, implies an abiding faith in the idea of America, and so legitimizes her as an American figure. On the other hand, the daughter seems not to have had to struggle and not really to believe in anything. Her official American status—itsself a product of her being the tangible product of her mother's dream—makes her insufficiently American. The daughter, in other words, is too Americanized to be an American.

The contrast between the Americanized daughter and the American-like mother poses a division between cultural and spiritual brands of Americanness that map out neatly to relative positions in the center/margin dynamic. This doubled split, then, is in Tan's reckoning the engine that drives the American Dream's continual deferment. Fully assimilated and financially successful, the daughter is unimpeachably American, which, in turn, proves to be her liability. That is, when contrasted with the mother's status as perpetual outsider—either as a would-be American existing outside of America's borders or as a put-upon ethnic whose inability to master English always marks her foreignness—the daughter's story is too pat, too safe, and too complete. It is a story with an end, and as such calls for no revision or refashioning.

Thus, the mother's foreignness is paired with the swan's feather, a symbol of the both the Dream's incomplete nature and of its persistence. The feather, in effect, forces both the mother's and daughter's stories to resist closure, but it does so by harking back to the origin of the feather's power: China. The swan's feather, after all, also serves as a

reminder of the magical nature of the bird. If the dream is deferred, it also reminds the reader where to look to re-activate or re-animate the dream. China in the fable functions in much the same way that the criminal underworld in *Scarface* does: both are portrayed as simultaneously familiar and exotic, mirroring typical Americanness and demonstrating a commitment to the core notion of upward mobility while also maintaining a clearly ethnic, and so transgressive, otherness. That is, China's exoticism makes it a plausible location for magic to happen. And a place where magic can happen, where a duck can transform himself into a swan, is a setting inherently productive of radical self-reinvention.

Besides its status as a quasi-mystical land, China is also framed as a place that has the clear structural limitations that prompt radical, creative solutions. The pervasiveness of the purported misogyny means that the woman has to create a radically new identity simply to assert herself, a clear contrast to the mundanity of the American bureaucracy which seems—and again, this is importantly not narrated—to call for compliance to most effectively achieve success. In other words, unlike the Turnerian hardships of the frontier which shape the American character by calling for innovative solutions, the type of bureaucratic challenges faced by the mother in the fable are most effectively met by capitulation and assimilation. The failure to dramatize these compromises preserves the mother's status as an American Dream figure while also posing hardship-laden China as the ideal antidote to a more prosaic American reality. The existence of such an antidote functions as both inspiration and source of discipline by posing a model for imitation that also points out shortcomings of current reality.

The narrative gap facilitates the mother's change in character from assertive non-conformist to passive would-be storyteller. At the same, it obscures what seems to be the mother's success in America. This is a type of camouflage that should be familiar by now, but which nevertheless might be unexpected in a narrative written by someone on the ethnic margin: this gap reveals the way in which the fable is a kind of passing story. Whatever success the mother had in America that allowed her daughter to drink Coca-Cola instead of sorrow could suggest that the mother, too, had been Americanized. Such an idea is bolstered by the hint that the mother did, in fact, conform to American bureaucratic requirements. The last information the story reveals just before it flashes forward into the Coca-Cola-colored present is the mother "filling out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind" (17). The fact that the other side of this narrative chasm reveals a woman with an incomplete mastery of English to match her purportedly unfulfilled dream—a woman simultaneously non-American and lovable underdog—suggests an awareness of the rhetorical power of marginality within the American Dream tradition. The notable absence of information about the mother's life in America, in other words, helps to construct an image of the mother as perpetual outsider, as a marginalized figure always trying to live up to the dream imbedded in the swan's feather. If my inferences about the likelihood of the mother actually having become Americanized during the undramatized portion of the story are correct, then what is revealed is a carefully managed image of the mother, an affectation of marginality. The effectiveness of such an affectation is attested to by the power of the juxtaposition between the mother and the daughter. The degree to which the mother can be made to seem marginalized is proportional to the degree to which she comes to be associated with

the symbolic power of the American Dream, in the same way that the daughter's own position at the social center reveals her distance from the Dream. The result is a narrative structure that tries to pass the mother off as un-Americanized—as more ethnic—in order to make her seem more American.

At its core, then, “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away” can be understood as a story about storytelling. More specifically, it reveals the way in which storytelling becomes a means of self-creation and so the way that stories themselves (as both Nick Carraway and Sal Paradise have already discovered) become the locus of the American Dream. The fable's manipulation of the story—the gap in the chronology where the mother's assimilation tale should be—reveals a level of narrative self-awareness, one that is multiplied by the ending. As the tale comes to a close, the swan's feather—now heavily freighted as an American Dream symbol—becomes itself a narrative as the mother's desire to pass along the feather is revealed to be one and the same with her need to tell the story to her daughter: “For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, ‘This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions’” (17). The feather's worth is not intrinsic: the mother's good intentions are not immediately apparent. The feather only functions as a symbol when framed as part of a narrative, when accompanied, in other words, by the mother's story.

Turning the feather into a story brings the tale full circle in that it reminds the readers that the symbolic power already attached to the swan's feather—more specifically the way that it stands for magical self-transformation—is itself a function of narrative. In other words, the fable form's grounding in the fantastic, which is

heightened by the narrator's wide-eyed tone, creates the conditions necessary for the type of suspension of disbelief that allows a duck to wish himself into a swan. In this way the fable form functions in much the same way that the China setting does: it suggests a remove from the quotidian and so creates a magical space for transformation to occur. The movement of the American Dream outside America's borders, then, is revealed to be a shift, not to another geopolitical location, but to an imaginative one. The separation from workaday society needed to enact self- and social change that animates the theses of American Dream believers like Fredrick Jackson Turner and R.W.B. Lewis is here revealed to be a product of narrative, not spatial, distance. The implication, after all, is that once the daughter is able to hear the story, to apprehend the symbolic import of the swan's feather, then she too will become less Americanized and so will be opened up to self-change, which is why, as we will see, the novel places so much import on the daughters' being able to apprehend the mothers' stories.³³

What "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" achieves, finally, is a conflation of marginality, self-making, and storytelling, such that the supposed freedom to re-create the self that is—in the American Dream narrative—located in the margins is revealed to be a function of narrative itself. That is, whatever compromises the mother has made with the bureaucratic requirements of America, whatever assimilation has taken place, is obscured by the narrative and re-rendered as a self-aware story of magical self-refashioning so that the non-innovative stability of normative Americanness—that of both the Coca-Cola drinking daughter and the plausibly assimilated mother—is replaced by a narrative gesture that itself constitutes the American Dream act. The idea that the mother will pass this tale on to the Americanized daughter reveals an awareness of the constructedness of

the story, and so an awareness of the narrative nature of Americanness itself and the imbrications of ethnicity with that narrative.

The focus on storytelling isn't just limited to the opening fable, though. From its dialogic short story structure, which gives the impression that the characters are telling stories to each other, to its periodic use of direct address, to its thematic insistence on the importance of telling and hearing stories, *The Joy Luck Club* as a whole is a book about storytelling. While telling stories functions to facilitate intergenerational understanding, there is a distinct sense that this understanding should largely be unidirectional, away from the Americanized daughters and towards the American-like mothers. Just as "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" rejects the daughter's position out of hand—the fable never suggests, for instance that the mothers would be well served by trying to understand their daughter's taste in Coca-Cola, say, but rather implies that listening to the mother's stories would be a kind of cure for said taste—the rest of the novel also seems to be less about mutual understanding and more about positioning storytelling as a means by which the mothers can communicate *to* the daughters. For instance, in her essay "Born of a Stranger: Mother-Daughter Relationships and Storytelling in *The Joy Luck Club*," Gloria Shen (1995) points out that the novel's form "transforms structurally isolated monologues into meaningful dialogues between...mother and daughter" (236). Shen, however, seems to focus her inquiries on the way that storytelling helps the daughters come to a better understanding of the mothers: "After having tried many different strategies throughout their lives," Shen points out, "the mothers finally discover that storytelling is the best way to reach the hearts and minds of their daughters" (240). This discovery, in turn, helps to bring about the novel's desired end: "the daughters'

acceptance of, and identification with, their mothers” (242). Wendy Ho, likewise, suggests that in *The Joy Luck Club*, “Amy Tan advocates the value of reclaiming and understanding these Chinese women’s neglected stories in China and America and of preserving and reimagining their Chinese heritage even as they tell of their bewildering new dilemmas as Chinese women in the United States (Ho 328). Similarly, in his reading of the novel, Ben Xu (1994) suggests that, “Within the microcultural structure of family, the only means available for mothers to ensure ethnic continuity is to recollect the past and to tell tales of what is remembered,” which is important because “identity, as well as the implicated self-definition and self-narrative, almost certainly will be activated from memory” (3, 4).

Daughter Jing-mei Woo might serve as the best illustration of the importance of the daughters listening to the mothers’ stories. Jing-mei is in a sense the quintessence of all the other daughters, as she embodies both the nadir of their collective weaknesses and the apex of their strengths. All of the daughters suffer from an essential weakness of character and lack of assertiveness: Rose Hsu Jordan’s husband, for instance, is divorcing her because he is resentful of her dependence on him and frustrated by her resultant inability to make decisions, while Lena St. Clair’s marital problems stem from her inability to stand up to her clueless but assertive husband. Jing-mei, however, has the most underdeveloped sense of self. Despite problems in their interpersonal lives, Lena and Waverly Jong are both successful in their careers, and at least until the divorce, even Rose had a stable, albeit not strong, sense of identity rooted in her role as wife. The directionless Jing-mei, on the other hand, needs the energy that her mother’s story can provide, in much the same way that Nick and Sal need Gatsby’s and Dean’s stories to

reinvigorate their own lives. Jing-mei is a college drop out with few ambitions. She is currently employed as a “copywriter for a small ad agency,” a job for which she has shown only modest aptitude (198). In fact, a job she does for Waverly’s accounting firm is so thoroughly mediocre that her rival is even reluctant to criticize it as being “just not...sophisticated” (205, ellipses in original).

Jing-mei’s directionlessness is symptomatic of an essential negation of self produced by a lack of assertiveness. It is telling that the boldest stand Jing-mei takes in the book, the moment in which she is most true to her self, is also a moment of resignation. Pushed by her mother to become a child prodigy, young Jing-mei comes to “[hate] the tests, the raised hopes and failed expectations,” and so resolves effectively to fail: “I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not” (134). The only form of self-expression Jing-mei can muster, in other words, is the decision not to be self-made. Jing-mei’s decision not to be a child prodigy or to excel in her career—“I was...determined not to try, not to be anybody different,” Jing-mei recalls about piano lessons her mother arranged for her, while of her unsophisticated copy she shruggingly accepts that “I was very good at what I did, succeeding at something small like that” (138, 207)—itself exemplifies of her cultural assimilation. She does not want to stand out.

Although all the Joy Luck daughters are uncomfortable or embarrassed about their mothers’ displays of ethnicity, Jing-mei is the most sensitive to any markers of difference. For Jing-mei, her mother’s “telltale Chinese behaviors” were “all those things [her] mother did to embarrass [her]” (267). Of course, such behaviors—“haggling with store owners, pecking her mouth with a toothpick in public, being color-blind to the fact

that lemon yellow and pale pink are not good combinations for winter clothes” (267)—seem hardly culturally inflected. In fact, were it not for the obvious ethnicity of her mother, if noticed at all, such traits might be labeled no more than mildly eccentric. Jing-mei’s conflating eccentricism with Chineseness, then, suggests a similar association between Americanness and normality, both stable values. To be American for Jing-mei, and the other daughters as well, is to fit in. Moreover, fitting in means abnegating her opportunity for self-creation, the potential to be something other than what she is: Jing-mei herself points out that she did have a natural talent for piano, and, had she practiced, she might have been very good. Like the daughter in the fable, then, Jing-mei specifically rejects the kind of spiritual Americanness embodied in the American Dream for a more culturally normative mode of being an American.

At the same time, Jing-mei also embodies the potential in all the daughters to embrace the more performative, creative form of Americanness that is the hallmark of the American Dream narrative. Jing-mei is unique among all the characters in *The Joy Luck Club* in that she narrates four stories versus the two allotted to each of the other seven characters. Jing-mei receives two extra stories because her mother Suyuan has recently died, and so the narratives slots that would have been hers devolve to Jing-mei. In her two extra stories, which bookend the novel, Jing-mei both expresses her own sorrow and regret that she didn’t really know her mother as well as she could and manages to tell Suyuan’s story—and by novel’s end, to embody the story as Jing-mei literally takes Suyuan’s place in a planned visit to China. In this way, the Woos’ story arc becomes the center of this fragmentary novel and reveals its investment in the importance of the

daughters listening to and internalizing their mothers' stories as an antidote to the emptiness of their Americanized lives.

Like "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," *The Joy Luck Club*'s eponymous opening story—in which Jing-Mei introduces Suyuan's story—seems designed in large part to show how the daughter's life is a disappointment and to lay the blame for that at the feet of the daughter's ignorance of the mother's story. However, "The Joy Luck Club," along with its sister story "A Pair of Tickets," follows up on the implied logic of such blame by demonstrating that listening to the mother's stories will reverse that disappointment, will allow the daughter a chance at a new, more rewarding life. "The Joy Luck Club" begins with Jing-mei attempting to take her mother's place in the mothers' regular mah jong game but moves almost immediately into a recounting of the origins of the Joy Luck Club in World War II-era China. Ostensibly this history lesson seems designed to provide context for the existence and endurance of the club, but effectively it serves to heighten the contrast between mother and daughter. Its historical setting and exotic locale give the origin story a romantic tinge that is only heightened by the story itself, which tells of first plucky, then tragic, attempts to persevere through the hardships of war. The story's dips into pathos—Suyuan's decision to leave her twin infant daughters on the side of the road as she flees the Japanese invasion—provides an easy answer to Jing-mei's rhetorical question: "How can I be my mother at Joy Luck?" (27). Importantly, Suyuan's answer—the question is posed after Jing-mei recounts a conversation in which a friend points out the similarities between mother and daughter—does not take recourse to the insurmountable gap between actual experiences, the fact that Jing-mei's life can never be as dramatic as that of her mother. Instead, Suyuan says "You

don't even know little percent of me! How can you be me?" (27). In other words, the relative deficiency of the daughter's life is attributed to a problem of circulation of knowledge, a story problem.

A similar dynamic is at play at the end of the story. The other mothers tell Jing-mei that the twin daughters left on the side of the road not only survived, but tried to make contact with Suyuan after her death. The mothers tell Jing-mei that they have purchased a ticket for her to go to China in order to meet her half sisters and tell them about Suyuan. Jing-mei wonders aloud about her qualifications for such a task, saying "What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don't know anything" (40). The perturbation this response provokes in the older women causes Jing-mei to realize that:

They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. (41)

In one sense, this passage highlights the now familiar intergenerational recriminations and once again poses the daughters as disappointments to their mothers' legacy. The daughters are "ignorant" and "unmindful," and the phrase "closed American-born minds" is a clear echo of the Coca-Cola drinking daughter from "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" whose cultural assimilation is the cause of her character deficit. However, this

passage makes explicit what was only hinted at in the opening fable: the daughters' failures to live up to the legacy of the mothers is framed here as a problem of telling and listening to stories. The daughters do not comprehend the extent or meaning of the "truths and hopes" the mothers "have brought to America," because they are "unmindful" of the ideas being transmitted as "their mothers talk in Chinese," and are too "impatient" to grasp the full implications of the stories.

Clearly transmission of content—the facts of the stories themselves—is less important here than the "truths and hopes" that are embedded in the stories. To this end, it is important to recognize that a key term in the daughter's misapprehension of the mother's stories is the concept of "joy luck," especially because the concept so easily resonates with the kind of radically transformative abilities I have been discussing throughout this dissertation. Although invented by Suyuan in China, the concept of "joy luck" reflects the idea of imaginatively remaking one's circumstances that is at the heart of the American Dream. As Suyuan explains in a flashback, while ensconced in Kweilin during the war, she decided to invite some other military wives over for a regular mah jong party that was quite decadent by wartime standards and flew in the face of the rationing and hardships they were enduring. Suyuan explains: "So we decided to hold parties and pretend each week had become the new year...Each week we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy" (25). "Joy luck," in other words, was for Suyuan and her friends a means of altering reality, at least temporarily, by means of little more than the power of assertion. "What fine foods we treated ourselves to with our meager allowances!" Suyuan exclaims, "We didn't notice that the dumplings were stuffed mostly with stringy squash and that the oranges were spotted with wormy holes. We ate

sparingly, not as if we didn't have enough, but to protest how we could not eat another bite" (23). The Joy Luck members, in other words, effectively alter their existence through storytelling. While this might on its face appear to be little more than a coping mechanism, or a sort of whistling past the graveyard, the perpetuation of the Joy Luck Club in America combined with the way that the mothers seem to feel that the concept of "joy luck" constitutes the essence of the difference between their understanding of the American experience and that of their daughters, suggests a link between "joy luck" and self-making. Both concepts assume a type of radical reinvention of reality. The implication, then, is that were the daughters to really listen to their mothers' stories, to understand the core concepts behind them, they would gain the ability to reshape their own lives as the mothers had reshaped theirs.

The linking of "joy luck" (a Chinese-seeming concept) and reinvention (an idea in keeping with the American Dream tradition) serves the same function as the swan does in the opening fable: it marks the displacement of the American Dream into a narrative realm and shows how such displacement leads to creative self-refashioning. As Jing-mei points out, "my mother believed you could be anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no money down. You could become rich," and "of course you can be prodigy, too" (132). This listing of multiple interchangeable possibilities echoes Sal's understanding of identity as iterative, and—especially when combined with Suyuan's casual "of course"—makes self-making seem like a simple matter of assertion, different endings to the same story. Jing-mei, however, has trouble imagining these different endings because her investment is always in a

limited present, in the “small things” at which she excels. It’s telling in this context that the moment before she decides not to become a prodigy, she looks into a mirror and sees “only [her] face staring back” and realizes “that it would always be this ordinary face” (134). Jing-mei, in other words, harbors a too deep investment in representation; she can only always see what is actually there in front of her, not the multiple possibilities that exist in the unwritten future.

It is worth remembering, then, that her mother’s stories, the ones that Jing-mei was aware of, but never really paid attention to until later (as she was rediscovering her mother and coming to a renewed and expansive understanding of herself in the process), were initially ignored by Jing-mei because they didn’t seem based in a representational reality. “I never thought my mother’s Kweilin story was anything but a Chinese fairy tale. The endings always changed. Sometimes she said she used that worthless thousand-*yuan* note [devalued currency won playing mah jong] to buy a half-cup of rice. She turned that rice into a pot of porridge. She traded that gruel for two feet from a pig. Those two feet became six eggs, those eggs six chickens. The story always grew and grew” (25). Of course, had Jing-mei been paying attention to the story itself, she would have realized that the multiple endings were precisely the point. Suyuan was asserting a sense of multiplicity and re-creation in narrative and so using storytelling as a way to carve out space for self-creation. The real ending of the story—revealed later to Jing-mei by her father—has Suyuan leaving her daughters behind to go for help and never seeing them again. The changing endings, then, suggest a radical revision. Moreover, they indicate that the China Suyuan describes in the stories to her daughter, like the America Sal references throughout *On the Road*, isn’t a geographical or even historical space—

which would be bound by representational conventions—but a narrative one. China becomes for Suyuan a field whose distance from the quotidian allows room for self-creation and so gives her a measure of control denied her in real life. The fact that she is narrating this story from an America that she believes offers the possibility for self-recreation, moreover, signals the way that this narrative refashioning is a distinctly American act. In this light, Jing-mei's refusal to become a prodigy is an un-American act in that it is based on a description of reality (she is not a prodigy), while it should be a creative act whose locus is a marginal, imaginative vantage point.

A similar dynamic informs “The Red Candle,” a China story told by Waverly's mother Lindo Jong. “The Red Candle” tells the story of how Lindo extricated herself from an odious arranged marriage when she was a young girl in China. The candle referred to in the story's title is a marriage candle that, had it burned itself out, would have sealed Lindo's marriage and fate forever. Just before the wedding ceremony, while Lindo was contemplating the fixed path of her miserable destiny, she looks in the mirror and has an epiphany concerning her own value and self-worth, and this newfound sense of agency leads her to sneak down in the middle of the night and blow out the candle. Lindo later uses the blown out candle (which she claims was snuffed out by the wind) and her own cleverness to play on her mother-in-law's superstitions—she claims an ancestor told her in a dream about the candle being blown out and thus predicts ruin on the family, were Lindo to remain in it—and convince the family to release her from her marriage and send her to America.

Lindo's epiphanic moment of self-awareness comes on the heels of an extended passage in which she feels herself to be shaped by forces beyond her control: “I began to

cry and thought bitterly about my parents' promise. I wondered why my destiny had been decided, why I should have an unhappy life so someone else could have a happy one" (57-58). She then notices some billowing curtains and recognizes both the strength and invisibility of the wind. In the next moment she says:

I wiped my eyes and looked in the mirror. I was surprised at what I saw. I had on a beautiful red dress, but what I saw was even more valuable. I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind. I threw my head back and smiled proudly to myself. And then I draped the large embroidered red scarf over my face and covered these thoughts up. But underneath the scarf I still knew who I was. I made a promise to myself: I would always remember my parent's wishes, but I would never forget myself. (58)

Whereas Jing-mei looks into her American mirror and sees only an ordinary face, Lindo's mirror reveals her extraordinary potential. In fact, as Chu points out, the qualities Lindo comes to recognize in herself are, "in terms of the social milieu depicted, inexplicable" (152). Lindo's ability to recognize her own agency here then becomes part of the "overstatement of the character's freedom and agency" that Chu describes, and so functions as one of the book's strongest examples of the way the book marks the Chinese mothers as proto-Americans (158). At the same time, it is equally important to recognize that this passage is also about hiding the newly individuated self behind a mask. Lindo posits two versions of herself here, as the essential, newly discovered Lindo hides behind

the veil of a superficially defined Lindo. In other words, Lindo passes as a daughter-in-law.

Of course, as scholars of passing like Ginsberg, Pfeiffer and Steven Belluscio (2006) have noted, passing usually involves subterfuge that serves the ends of upward mobility, as one passes for someone with a higher status. While Lindo's passing act here denies her political agency, and so perpetuates her subjugated status, it is essential to remember that this story is told in the first person by an elderly Lindo who is in America and who is speaking to her daughter Waverly. On one level, this is significant in that, in the long run, the passing act serves the ends of coming to America, which does register as a move upwards in status—Lindo's passing for a dutiful daughter-in-law with little sense of her own self-worth is the means by which she is able to trick her way to America.

On a more significant level, the frame story structure helps create a sense that the narrative itself is a passing gesture. Consider that the story's first lines are "I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents' promise. This means nothing to you, because promises mean nothing" (49). Within the logic of the story, this is only partially true. It would be more accurate to say that Lindo sacrificed *a portion* of her life because of her parent's promise, and to be more true to the spirit or moral of the story, a more appropriate beginning might be something along the lines of "I once tricked someone to get what I wanted," or "I managed to stand up for myself in difficult circumstances." After all, despite the fact that the story's second line makes it seem as if promises are more important than individual desire, the story itself describes Lindo only superficially following prescriptions. Indeed, the story closes not with Lindo reminding Waverly to

follow orders more, or to be more willing to sacrifice herself, but instead with a celebration of self-definition:

I remember the day when I finally knew a genuine thought and could follow where it went. That was the day I was a young girl with my face under a red marriage scarf. I promised not to forget myself.

How nice it is to be that girl again, to take off my scarf, to see what is underneath and feel the lightness come back into my body! (66)

This slippage between stated or superficial narrative intent and narrative accomplishment suggests that this story itself is a passing gesture, one that uses a narrative whose aims seem merely descriptive to encode and compose a creative act. With the final line, the narrative unmask itself to reveal both its more substantial message and its own status as imaginative space. In telling her story, in other words, Lindo has come to inhabit a whole other body, one whose lightness stands in for its incorporeality, and thus its ability to be refashioned again and again.

The fact that Lindo chooses to tell a story that seems to rely more on creating a version of herself than on representing an authentic Chinese reality resonates in this story within the larger context of Lindo and Waverly's relationship, and indeed between all the mother-daughter relationships in the book. Just like Jing-mei and all the *Joy Luck* daughters, Waverly, as both adult and child, misunderstands and is embarrassed by her mother's foreignness. And Waverly, again like all the other *Joy Luck* daughters, suffers from a lack of confidence. A child chess prodigy whose talent was fueled by what she calls "the art of invisible strength" that she learned from Lindo (89), Waverly loses both her confidence and her ability to play chess after having a fight with her mother.

Thinking that she will be able to gain the upper hand in the relationship by temporarily quitting chess—which would take away Lindo’s proxy bragging rights—Waverly soon misses the game and decides to start playing again. However, Lindo simply tells her “You think it is so easy. One day quit, next day play ... It is not so easy anymore” (172). When Waverly resumes playing, she lives down to Lindo’s new expectations, loses her touch and several matches, and never plays chess again. As an adult, too, Waverly is completely invested in her mother’s opinion, as the story “Four Directions” deals entirely with Waverly trying to introduce her fiancé to her mother while trying not to let her mother’s indirect criticisms influence her own opinion of the man. For instance, after Lindo criticizes the short hair length of a fur coat the fiancé had given her, Waverly suddenly sees the gift as “an imitation of romance,” (169). Unlike Lindo, in other words, who took a literal prescription—her parents’ promise—and worked below its surface to find a more loosely interpretive space for self-definition, Waverly takes what are, or should be, general interpretations, and literalizes them as prescriptive truth. In effect, then, the daughters’ problem seems to be that they understand narrative as too literal and representational, a medium for description rather than creation.

The daughters lack of interest in self-creation makes sense, of course. As fully assimilated Americans their status in the center is secured. A reinvented self might jeopardize that status and risk the marginalization that all the daughters seem to fear as they distance themselves from their mothers’ more idiosyncratic or foreign-seeming personality quirks. Just as a similar investment in status maintenance rather than creative, inventive progress ultimately leads to the declension of characters like Tom Buchanan and Harry Walton, the daughters’ passive insistence on maintaining the status

quo threatens their own positions in it. Both Rose and Lena, for instance, have all the hallmarks of being yuppies: Rose's home is filled with status items like "signed lithographs" and "Steuben crystal strawberries," while Lena's refurbished barn home features such design elements as "hand-bleached" floors and "hand-sponged" paint—elements that she admits don't offset its logistical flaws and cause it to be overpriced (190, 151). Both women's passivity threatens their social and economic positions—Rose's husband is leaving her because she cannot make a decision, while Lena never corrected an assumption her husband made about her when they were dating (that she liked to split bills evenly), and such deference leads to not just the dissolution of her own marriage, but her failure to get credit for the ideas she contributed to her husband's design firm. In other words, both women's unwillingness to take risks or to self-define lead to the possible risk of their upper-middle-class status.

While Rose—perhaps acting as a reader proxy—initially feels inclined to ascribe such innate passivity to a legacy of Chinese female deference, she ends up rejecting such a position. As Lena and Rose are discussing their own status panic, Lena reveals her long-standing fear of being "caught someday, exposed as a sham" (156). Rose admits to similar feelings: "At first I thought it was because I was raised with all this Chinese humility....But my therapist said, Why do you blame your culture, your ethnicity? And I remembered reading an article about baby boomers, how we expect the best and when we get it we worry that maybe we should have expected more, because it's all diminishing returns after a certain age" (156). In rejecting Chineseness as a cause of the women's feelings of inadequacy, this passage turns instead to their Americanness—they are ethnically undifferentiated baby boomers. Moreover, it is the daughters' portion at the

social center of American life which, paradoxically, poses the greatest risk to their position in the center. Their passive expectation of the best, combined with their fear of inevitable diminishment, leads them to simply hang on, trying not to expose what they feel is the sham at the heart of their social position. The daughters don't realize, of course, that they are describing a problem of representation. They feel as if they are shams because their narratives of themselves don't match their perceived reality.

The result is yet another indictment of the daughters' cultural Americanness as compared with the spiritual Americanness of their self-made mothers. In this regard, it is worth noting, by way of closing, that the structure of *The Joy Luck Club* as a whole mimics that of "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" in that the novel likewise contains a narrative gap between the mother's China stories of creative self-refashioning and the daughter's stories of the present. Moreover, just like the mother in "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away," all the other Joy Luck mothers—who, like Suyuan above, have a professed belief in the American Dream and, like Lindo, seem in the China narratives to be picture perfect embodiments of the self-made woman—do not resemble their earlier selves when they are portrayed after the narrative gap, . All seem inarticulate (speaking halting English), conspicuous (the aforementioned gaudy sweaters), and out of place in the American milieu (Rose's mother, for instance, expresses confusion about why Rose can talk about her marriage to a "psyche-atric" but not with her mother [188]). In short, like Tony Camonte and his pals, the mothers suddenly seem conspicuously different, even foreign, and so not totally competent to function in modern American society. However, just like the mother in "Feathers," there are indications that the other Joy Luck mothers also have experienced success in the narrative gap, the assimilation story that has

gone untold: we only incidentally learn, for instance, that the Joy Luck Club now buys stocks, or that all the families have moved away from their original Chinatown landing spots to more upscale locations, or that Suyuan owns an apartment complex. These successes are easy to miss of course, because they don't jibe with the picture of the mothers in the American context; their marked foreignness belies the fact that they are shrewd and upwardly mobile capitalists. In other words, unlike the daughters, who fear exposition of the gap between representation and reality, or the gangsters, whose obvious ethnicity and criminal tendencies justify their ultimate exclusion from the American category, the mothers exploit the gap by controlling narrative. Like Sal Paradise, they recognize it is a symbolic distance from the American center that in fact gives them the freedom to remake themselves and so aligns them with the American Dream tradition. In cultivating their position on the margins, the mothers don't face the need to maintain status that plagues the daughters, and thus they maintain the freedom to re-narrate themselves; like Gatsby before he kissed Daisy, these mothers retain the ability to "romp like the mind of God."

Conclusion

In the end, because it deals so explicitly with immigration and assimilation, *The Joy Luck Club* helps make explicit the central problem of cultural normativity that has animated all the American Dream texts I've dealt with in this dissertation. More specifically, the cultural normativity implied by assimilation—that which gives recognizable shape to the American culture into which the individual is assimilated—stands in contrast to the that culture's foundational notions—notably individuality and self re-creation. Assimilationist narratives like *The Joy Luck Club*, in other words, foreground the problems of achievement and stable values that motivate American Dream stories. As I've discussed, Americans' narratives about themselves tend to highlight innovation, energy, and creativity on both an individual and national scale, and so tend to devalue stability and order. In short, in the American imagination, striving is good, while arriving and achieving is not. As Tan's novel demonstrates, this devaluation of achievement is of particular concern in the immigration narratives because the moment of assimilation—becoming like other Americans—is always paradoxically the moment in which the immigrant becomes un-American. Even though this dynamic is most easily demonstrated in the immigrant narrative, as I've shown, this tension between stable and fluidly creative versions of Americanness is the driving force behind the American Dream narrative more generally because of these stories' deep investment in definitions of American identity. Thus, establishing a happy family (as in *On The Road*) or finding a good, secure job (*Scarface*) or even maintaining wealth (*The Great Gatsby*)—despite the way that all are often popularly thought of a core American values and even vital

components of what most would consider the American Dream— in narratives of the American Dream become simultaneously goals to be pursued (because they do signal normative Americanness) and problems to be overcome (because they represent stable values).

Because this American Dream problem that I have been describing exists between two poles (being and becoming, normative and performative), then American Dream narratives also work on a doubled logic. The stories that I have examined feature characters who have achieved what they believe to be the dream (wealth, a stable job, a good home, undifferentiated citizenship) but who experience these achievements as a lack: of selfhood, of energy, of legitimacy. So, Nick Carraway comes from a wealthy family, but feels his wealth and status exposed in an American context that values creation and innovation, while the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* have become perfectly assimilated Americans, and feel their lives all the emptier and more unsatisfying for it. The police and the other members of legitimate society in *Scarface* have created for themselves a stable social order that is at the same time unable to deal with the challenges posed by the gangster (and by tough economic times). Similarly, Sal Paradise is constantly in flight from the perceived limitations of the very domesticity that he is searching for. Thus, these stories create narrative doubles, figures whose ability to radically re-create themselves fulfill the demands of energy and innovation imposed by a progressive American ideology. Thus Gatsby is a figure who is not just fabulously wealthy, but is also wholly self-created, while Dean Moriarty is an embodiment of the fluidity of the road. The Joy Luck mothers faced obstacles in China and so they invented

new lives and new selves, and gangsters like Tony Camonte provide a business model that is simultaneously tough-minded and innovative.

This doubled logic mimics the center/margin divide that is at the heart of the American social structure. Thus, not surprisingly, the characters who are marked by achievement are those at the social center because the assumption or maintenance of a normative American identity is the sum of their achievement. The narrative doubles are, then, marginalized figures—incompletely assimilated characters whose existence measures the distance between being and becoming. That is, the very marginalization of these characters makes them embodiments of the essence of an American identity that values striving and creating over maintaining because their socially marginalized position is proof that they have not yet reached a stable resting place. Moreover, the very fact of their marginalization makes them ideal doubles because their distance from the center mitigates any real threat they have to the stable social order. Because the margins are imagined to be productive of self-making, then the marginalized (who are quintessential self-made characters) naturally belong there, a fact reinforced by their marked visible difference. Despite their ability to re-create themselves, those on the margins always remain visible different, and so safely recognizable and containable. These self-made figures are imagined as perpetually marginalized, and so, by temporarily visiting or even imagining the margins, the achievers can benefit from the invigorating potential of their opposites' stories of self-making without risking their own stable position in the center.

Because these doubled characters/characteristics are mediated through narrative—those in the center telling (or in the case of *Scarface*, managing) stories about their marginalized opposites—in the final tally, the American Dream is revealed to be less of a

description of reality and more of structured belief. Narrative, in other words, become the ultimate site of the American Dream. If the American Dream is can never be about achievement, lest it risk becoming its opposite, then the American Dream must exist in a space where becoming happily never meets being. Such a space can only really exist in narrative because stories become a location of continual renewal—a story is shapable and re-creatable. Further, stories also provide the stable value that supplies the necessary contour to personal and national identity because the shaper of narrative is a constant that exists outside the narrative space. Thus, narratives of marginality become a means by which those in the social center can continually access the energy associated with self-recreation.

Understanding the American Dream as a narrative structure allows us a way out of the bifurcated celebration/critique that tends to characterize discussion of the topic. That is, both celebration and critique understand the Dream to be a description of reality, and so discourse on the topic naturally runs toward the degree to which the Dream is an accurate representation. Recognizing the way that the American Dream is a narrative of doubling that functions to mediate and discipline citizenship points the way out of such an intellectual trap. That is, as a narrative of Americanness, the American Dream is always simultaneously an attempt to describe and create the American instance, a way of coming to grips with an intellectual and ideological tradition that demands constant re-invention and merging it with the a natural inclination towards a stable sense of identity. As a narrative, the American Dream is able to create itself over and over again, to become multiple iterations of itself, and yet because the story itself follows a recognizable structure, it always encodes its own stable value.

Notes

¹ While most scholars give Adams credit for the coinage, Jim Cullen (2003) notes that “it’s not clear whether he actually coined the term or appropriated it from someone else” (4)

² What I call the narrative of national progress here is similar to the notion of American exceptionalism, especially as defined by Deborah Madsen (1998): “Exceptionalism describes the perception of Massachusetts Bay colonists that as Puritans they were charged with a special spiritual and political destiny: to create in the New World a church and a society that would provide the model for all the nations of Europe as they struggled to reform themselves” (1-2). The emphasis on newness and reform here is at the core of my sense of the narrative of national progress, and, as my discussion of Sacvan Bercovitch later in this introduction will describe, the Puritan notion of errand has played an important role in my thinking about this narrative. At the same time, the concept of exceptionalism, as Seymour Martin Lipset (1991) points out, “could only have arisen in a comparative context” (1), and the definition of Americanness vis-à-vis other countries is only really important to my analysis in terms of a general Old World/New World divide, not in terms of the way that exceptionalism poses “America and Americans [as] special, exceptional, because they are charged with saving the world from itself” (Madsen 2).

³ The other three tenets of success, according to Hochschild, are: 1. “everyone may always pursue their dream” (18), 2. “one may reasonably anticipate success” (19), and 3. “success results from actions and traits under one’s own control” (30).

⁴ According to Hochschild, relative success means, “achieving the American dream [by] becoming better off than some comparison point,” while competitive success is simply “achieving victory over someone else.” Hochschild also notes a third definition of success under the American dream, absolute success, which consists merely in “reaching some threshold of well-being higher than where one began but not necessarily dazzling.” (16-17).

⁵ One of the earliest and most celebratory accounts of the American Dream in *Gatsby* is Lionel Trilling’s “F. Scott Fitzgerald,” (1945) in which he argues that “*Gatsby*, divided between power and dream, comes inevitably to stand for America itself” (19). For Trilling, the power of Fitzgerald’s work, especially *Gatsby*, lies in the (often tragic, but always hopeful, optimism of the title character. See also Giles Gunn (1973), and John F. Callahan (1996). Much more common are arguments that use the novel to critique the Dream. To greater or lesser degrees, these tend to follow Bewley’s logic, which suggests that the romantic sensibilities in the novel are merely a seductive façade that mask the hard realities of excessive materialism or capitalism more generally in America. Some critics, like Bewley, read *Gatsby* as indictment of romanticism and materialism, while others, like Lois Tyson (1994), contend that Fitzgerald was as much in thrall of the seductive powers of the Dream as his characters. In addition to Bewley and Tyson, see Edwin Fussell (1952), Scott Donaldson (2001), Ross Possnock (1984), John Hilgart (2003), Michael Spindler (1983), and Janet Giltrow and David Stouck (1997).

⁶ For instance, Irvin G. Wyllie (1954) asserts in an early study of the history of the self-made man that “the office boy who has become the head of a great concern...represents our most cherished conceptions of success” (6). John Tebbel (1963), likewise, argues that the central tenet of the Dream holds that “the United States is a place where anyone, no matter what his origins, no matter how poor and obscure he may be, can rise to fame and fortune” (4). Joseph L. DeVitis and John Martin Rich (1996) concur: “Americans generally believe in achievement, success, and materialism. This combination of values, in conjunction with equal opportunity, ambitiousness, and hard work and the means of attaining it, could be considered the American Dream” (5).

⁷ See Marren, 88-90, for a more complete discussion of passing in this scene. For more on passing in the novel, see Meredith Goldsmith (2003).

⁸ Of Biloxi, Marren says that “it is as if Biloxi had been a ghost, not palpable at all. And yet he bears a family history, and Jordan still uses the aluminum putter her gave her...Biloxi infiltrates the conceptual framework according to which Tom, Daisy, Jordan and Nick define people, making up plausible new categories...and inserting himself into them. Biloxi’s narrative is a suggestive backdrop for what follows it, *Gatsby*’s more radical rewriting of the same social framework” (96).

⁹ An easy example of baseball owner’s moves to position the game as a national pastime is baseball owner Albert G. Spalding commissioning of an investigation into the origins of baseball that found that it was a wholly American invention, despite its similarities with British sports like rounders and cricket. Baseball owners also managed popular representations of the game, regulated the actions and manners of the ballplayers, and created baseball parks that called up America’s pastoral self-image (Bachin 943-947).

¹⁰ See Bachin 953-955 and Nathan (2003) 24-28.

¹¹ See Bachin 953, Nathan 25, and Katcher (1959) 157.

¹² Cawelti points out that “The most crucial event in the hero’s life is his acquisition of a good suit. The good suit, which is usually presented to the hero by his patron, marks the initial step in his advancement, his escape from the dirty and ragged classes and his entry upon respectability” (118)

¹³ As Oscar introduces himself to Harry in the book’s early chapters, he says that his *uncle* is “the chief editor of a daily paper in Boston” (37). The first mention of Oscar’s father in the book has him as “a Boston merchant, in the Calcutta trade, with a counting-room on Long Wharf” (43). After this, however, the uncle disappears and the father becomes the famous editor.

¹⁴ Harry’s desire from the outset is to model his own life after Franklin’s, but his long-term career goals had been, up to this point, vaguely defined.

¹⁵ Presumably “Florence” is the same sister that eventually marries Harry, although by that time her name is “Maud.”

¹⁶ It’s worth noting that *Risen from the Ranks* is, like *Scarface*, a depression-era fiction, having been published a year after the panic of 1873. For more on the relationship between Alger’s oeuvre and hard economic times, see Nackenoff, ch. 4.

¹⁷ All quotations from *Scarface* are taken from the subtitle feature on the DVD.

¹⁸ Warshow makes a distinction between gangsters and criminals, which helps amplify the way in which he sees the gangster as a national id, while also pointing to the importance of the urban milieu in his conception of Americanness: “the gangster—though there are real gangsters—is also, and primarily, a creature of the imagination. The real city, one might say, produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster” (131).

¹⁹ The timing of this change in representation from gangsters as slum-dwelling brigands to three-piece-suit-wearing criminal executives makes sense: “the gangster’s apparent consolidation of the business of crime was, of course, paralleled in the larger consolidation of economic control” with the rise of the corporation and waves of mergers in legitimate business during World War I and in the late twenties (38-39).

²⁰ Specifically, Warshow asserts that “In ways that we do not easily or willingly define, the gangster speaks for us, expressing that part of the American psyche which rejects the qualities and the demands of modern life, which rejects ‘Americanism’ itself” (130). This rejection is part and parcel of what Warshow sees as the gangster film’s rejection of success—which he understands in business terms—altogether.

²¹ I’m not the first to compare the Sal/Dean diad to that of Nick and Gatsby. Morris Dickstein (2002), for instance, suggests that “Dean is like the unfathomable Gatsby seen through the grudgingly respectful eyes of Nick Carraway; he’s the obsessed Ahab conjured up in lightning flashes by his chronicler, Ishmael” (99). Gary Lindberg (1982) compares Sal’s and Dean’s relationship to “a less prissy Nick Carraway discovering a more frantic Gatsby” (267). For other discussions of Sal and Dean’s relationship to other famous duos from American literature, see Hunt (Chapter 1), Richardson (233), and Ruppensburg (1987, 34).

²² May bases these conclusions on the results of the Kelly Longitudinal Study, “which consists of several surveys of 600 white middle-class men and women who formed families during” the postwar years (11).

²³ See Leerom Medovoi, Chapter 2, for a more complete discussion of the way in which mid-century literary criticism, especially Lewis’ book, was an attempt to re-deploy the American literary canon as a description of a particular set of national characteristics.

²⁴ For extended critiques of race and ethnicity in Kerouac, see Richardson, “Peasant Dreams,” Holton, “Kerouac Among the Fellahin” Nicholls (2003), “The Melting Pot that Boiled Over,” and Martinez (2003), *Countering the Counterculture*.

²⁵ I’ve adapted this term from Jason Arthur, who identifies “multiple simultaneous local affiliations” as one of Kerouac’s strategies for delocalization in *On the Road* (96).

²⁶ In the scroll manuscript, Kerouac uses everyone’s real names. I use “Jack” here to distinguish the fictionalized Jack Kerouac of the scroll manuscript from Kerouac himself.

²⁷ The pattern doesn’t quite hold for Part Four. At the end of the action, Sal is stranded in a Mexico City hospital. The final paragraph, however, begins, “When I got better...” implying reflection at a remove. In other words, Sal is narrating these events from a stable location, presumably home, at his typewriter. In any case, the second paragraph of Part Five narrates his return home from Mexico City.

²⁸ Like me, Abel understands home to be an important site in *On the Road*. “Sal’s return home at the end of the novel,” Abel suggests, “enables him to provide some consistency to his life that ultimately helps him to better understand Dean and their travels” (244). That is, the stability of home (once reterritorialized after Sal’s travels) gives Sal the ability to write about the road experience in a way that is experimental, rather

than simply representational. Kerouac's nonrepresentational style is important for Abel because one of the key tenets of his argument linking Kerouac's poetics to Gilles Deleuze's ideal of rhizomatic art is that "Kerouac is interested in *inventing* a new language, a new literature, rather than representing whatever is given" (231, emphasis in original). For me, of course, a move away from representation is significant in that it signals that Sal is thinking beyond the ontology of visible identity.

²⁹ Tan labels herself "an American writer" in her essay "Required Reading and Other Dangerous Subjects." Among the most vociferous of Tan's critics are Frank Chin, who accuses Tan of parroting racist Western cultural attitudes toward the East, giving readers "Confucian culture as seen through the interchangeable Chinese/Japanese/Korean/Vietnamese mix (depending on which is the yellow enemy of the moment) of Hollywood" (2), and Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong (1995), who claims that "the 'Amy Tan phenomenon' [her sudden popularity, especially among white American women] must be situated in quasi-ethnic, Orientalist discourse" and that "Occasional anti-Orientalist statements made by the characters and the opportunities for anticulturalist interpretation provided by Tan's keen observations of Chinese American life...enable Orientalism to emerge in a form palatable to middle-class American readers of the 1980s. Critics like David Leiwei Li and Patrica Chu also have taken issue with what they see as Tan's capitulation to or perpetuation of Western narrative at the expense of an authentic representation of China or Chineseness.

³⁰ Although Tan says that "most of what I read was by women writers" and then lists thirteen names, she also notes that "I was not gender specific: I also read works by Gabriel García Márquez, Raymond Carver, David Leavitt, Richard Ford, and Tobias Wolff" (319)

³¹ The term "fable" is Tan's ("Required Reading 304). Frank Chin calls "Feathers from a Thousand Li Away" a "fake Chinese fairy tale," David Leiwei Li refers to it as a "vignette" (112), and Catherine Romangnolo (2003) uses the term "myth" (93)

³² Admittedly, Chin makes this claim through the backdoor. While explaining why "Feather from a Thousand Li Away is a "fake Chinese fairy tale, Chin explains that, "Ducks in the barnyard are not the subject of Chinese fairy tales, except as food. Swans are not the symbols of physical female beauty, vanity and promiscuity that they are in the West. Chinese admire the fact that swans mate for life; they represent romantic love and familial bliss" (3). This seems to be a particularly egregious example of missing the forest for the trees. After all, if these symbols are employed by Tan in a way consistent with a Western understanding of them, it seems entirely plausible that this is an attempt at a Western fairytale, not a Chinese one. This certainly seems to be the understanding that informs Chu's reading of *The Joy Luck Club* as an example of the American "immigration myth" (143)

³³ The idea that the daughters should pay more attention to the mother's stories is a common one in Tan scholarship. See, for instance, Gloria Shen "Born of a Stranger: Mother-Daughter Relationships and Storytelling in Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*," Wendy Ho "Swan Feather Mothers and Coca-Cola Daughters: Teaching Amy Tan's JLC" Ben Xu, "Memory and The Ethnic Self," Yuan Yuan (1999), "The Semiotics of China Narratives in the Con/texts of Kingston and Tan," Lisa M.S. Dunick (2006), "The Silencing Effect of Canonicity: Authorship and the Written Word in Amy Tan's Novels," and Amy Ling, *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry*.

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