Gatsby's Pristine Dream: 
The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties

JEFFREY LOUIS DECKER

The Great Gatsby (1925) represents the diminishing moral authority of uplift stories in an age of declining faith in the nation’s ability to assimilate new immigrants. Through the eyes of Fitzgerald's narrator, Nick Carraway, Gatsby appears in the guise of the archetypal, if somewhat misguided, self-made man in America. Gatsby's upward struggle is inspired by traditional purveyors of middle-class success, such as Ben Franklin and Horatio Alger Jr. However, another less virtuous narrative of Gatsby's self-making unfolds, which connects our hero's business schemes to the tainted hand of immigrant gangsters. A story of entrepreneurial corruption, accented by the language of nativism, competes with and ultimately foils the traditional narrative of virtuous American uplift. In this way, Gatsby stages a national anxiety about the loss of white Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the Twenties.

Nick informs the reader in the opening pages that, despite his hero's criminal connections, "Gatsby turned out all right at the end" (6). In order to fulfill this expectation, the novel's famous conclusion must elide the narrative struggle—perpetrated by Gatsby's nativist rival, Tom Buchanan—over the ethnic as well as ethical nature of our hero's enterprise. On the book's final page, Tom's interrogation into Gatsby's clouded past is displaced by Nick's inspirational vision of Gatsby's inviolate dream of the New World. The narrator conceives a myth of American origins by imagining the Dutch explorers' initial contact with a virgin continent. Through this incarnation Gatsby becomes great: a forward-looking visionary who not only transcends the crisis of his contemporary moment but who is associated with the nation's legendary pastoral promise.

The frequently cited conclusion of The Great Gatsby illustrates nationalism in its generalized form as well as in a manifestation peculiar to the 1920s. Broadly speaking, Fitzgerald represents the Janus-faced logic of nationalism by offering, on the one side, a promising future in the prophesy "tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—" and, on the other, an immemorial myth of American national origins envisioned by "boats ... borne back ceaselessly into the past" (189).1 I offer the final passage from Freud's Interpretation of Dreams as a gloss on Gatsby's pristine dream in the famous last lines of Fitzgerald's novel.

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1 Nairn persuasively argues that nationalism, like the old Roman god Janus, watches over the passage to modernity. "As human kind is forced through its strait doorway, it must look desperately back into the past, to gather strength wherever it can be found for the ordeal of 'development'" (349).
By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past. (660)

Following Freud, we might say that Nick’s belief in Gatsby’s gift of hope for a more perfect future is inverted in the expression of his hero’s vision of an inviolate past. Gatsby’s Janus-faced wonder at “the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us” is mirrored in the eyes of Nick’s sixteenth-century Dutch explorers.

Whiteness in the American Grain

In death Gatsby is freed from his venal partnership with immigrant gangsters and remembered within a lineage of explorers of northern European stock. Fitzgerald might have returned his reader to the “Columbus story” (9) used near the beginning of the novel to map the geographical configuration of Gatsby’s “ancestral home” (162). Instead, Nick resurrects his hero’s fallen reputation by transforming Gatsby’s glimpse at Daisy’s green light into the desire in the “Dutch sailors’ eyes” for the continent that “flowered” before them as “a fresh, green breast of the new world.” Against the current wave of immigration, Gatsby is “borne back ceaselessly” into a Nordic past as recollected within the climate of the Tribal Twenties, when conceptions of whiteness both narrow and become a sign not of skin color but of national identity.

Fitzgerald’s familiarity with the grammar of nativism was likely informed by his professional affiliation with The Saturday Evening Post in the Twenties. During this period Fitzgerald placed many of his short stories with the Post and, as such, it became his most lucrative source of income while composing Gatsby. As the nation’s most popular magazine, the Post began publishing nativist opinions in its pages as early as the spring of 1920. At this time Post editorials advocated the racialist doctrines of Madison Grant. During the same year the Post’s editor, George Horace Lorimer, sent Kenneth Roberts abroad to report on European immigration to the United States. According to historian John Higham, Lorimer’s articles, which appeared in the Post and which were published in a 1922 collection under the title Why Europe Leaves Home, became the most widely read effusions on Nordic theory of its day (265, 273). Roberts began from the twin premises of Nordicism: “The American nation was founded and developed by the Nordic race” and “Races can not be cross-bred without mongrelization.” Writing overseas, Roberts speculated that “if a few more million members of the Alpine, Mediterranean and Semitic races are poured among us, the result must inevitably be a hybrid race of people as worthless and futile as the good-for-nothing mongrels of Central America and Southeastern Europe” (22).

Nordicism, a form of racial nativism that became popular in America following World War I, provides a context for understanding the production of classic American literature at mid-decade. For example, William Carlos Williams’s relocation of the discovery of America in the voyages of “Red Eric” (father of Leif Ericson) in the opening pages of In the American Grain (1925)
might signal something more than the anti-Puritan impulse also common to writers of this era. Fitzgerald’s Dutchmen, like Williams’s Norsemen, bear the inadvertent mark of nativism specific to the Twenties. Nick’s invocation of the Dutch sailors’ vision of the New World adheres to the nativist logic of President Coolidge’s April 1924 Message to Congress on the passage of the Immigration Bill: “America must be kept American” (qtd. in Grant 347).

The discourse of Nordicism circulated in academic and popular forums alike. For instance, during the same month and year as the President’s congressional address, an argument for Nordic superiority appeared in a letter to the editor of the New York Times, signed by Henry Fairfield Osborn. Its author, a prominent biologist and president of both the American Museum of Natural History and the Second (1921) International Congress of Eugenics, proposed that “the selection, preservation and multiplication of the best heredity is a patriotic duty of first importance.” Attempting to make sense of the current “confusion between nationality and race,” Osborn points out that “Columbus, from his portraits and from his busts, authentic or not, was clearly of Nordic ancestry.” For Osborn, tracing blood lines of racial descent is the key to ending the confusion over the identity of the “discoverer” of New World America.

The Nordic debate over Columbus’s place in American history emerged in the New York Times as early as the summer of 1922, at about the same time Fitzgerald began composing short stories that would lead to Gatsby and at the moment when Fitzgerald allows Nick to meet Gatsby at his Long Island estate. A dozen years earlier, at the height of the Progressive Era, Columbus Day was officially introduced as a holiday in New York. Now a backlash in public opinion raged on the editorial pages of the Times. A letter dated June 23, 1922, opened by congratulating the Times for its “fine editorials ... against perverted historical facts tending to encourage Anglo-phobia.” The author proposed “the elimination of the Columbus legend” in light of recent discoveries that “reveal the real America, discovered by ... Leif Erikson, from whose strong Nordic stock our early pioneers derived their rugged virtues” (Timpson). The nativist proposal drew a response in a Times letter, dated June 30, from the editor of a journal published by the Knights of Columbus. While the author acknowledged “Ericson’s arrival” in the New World, he complains: “At present there is a persistent and extremely verbose propaganda seeking to diminish the achievement of Columbus” (Kennedy). Not surprisingly, counter-responses ensued, including one dated July 4 under the title “Leif Did Discover America!” and signed “Nordic.” The letter insisted that “Americans of Anglo-Saxon lineage are glad to know that ... one of their own Nordic strain, was the real discoverer of this continent.” Clinton Stoddard Burr flatly summed up the nativist tone of the Times with his 1922 proclamation: “Americanism is actually the racial thought of the Nordic race” (208).

The Limits of American Dream Scholarship

Lionel Trilling’s statement that Gatsby “comes inevitably to stand for America itself” (251) best exemplifies the consensus among Fitzgerald critics who have
turned *The Great Gatsby* into the novel of the American dream.\(^2\) This sentiment, I believe, carries with it residual traces of 1920s nativism that are embedded in the book’s ending. One of the earliest critics to identify the theme of the American dream in *The Great Gatsby* was Edwin Fussell. In “Fitzgerald’s Brave New World” (1952), he suggests that Gatsby is corrupted “by values and attitudes that he holds in common with the society that destroys him.” Within a “mechanized” world, Fussell points out, “a dream like Gatsby’s cannot remain pristine, given the materials upon which the original impulse toward wonder must expend itself” (295).\(^3\)

Nevertheless, we are left with the persistent question. Despite mounting evidence supporting Tom’s accusations regarding his rival’s entrepreneurial corruption through shady associations with immigrant gangsters, how does Gatsby maintain “his incorruptible dream” (162) in the eyes of the narrator and readers alike? The standard procedure among critics is to interpret Gatsby’s dream according to Nick’s narrative demands: like Nick, critics usually separate modern corruption from a pristine dream located in the nation’s distant past. This type of commentary reads *Gatsby* according to an opposition between present and past, between Gatsby’s unethical business connections and the pastoral promise he inspires.\(^4\) Marius Bewley, in his “Scott Fitzgerald’s Criticism of America” (1954), was one of the first commentators to use this now widespread formulation. “The theme of *Gatsby,*” Bewley flatly states, “is the withering of the American dream” in industrial society (223).\(^5\) “We recognize that the great achievement of this novel,” he concludes, “is that it manages, while poetically evoking a sense of the goodness of that early dream, to offer the most damaging criticism of . . . deficiencies inherent in contemporary manifestations of the American vision itself” (245-46). Regardless, Fussell’s and Bewley’s interpretive models share the assumption that Gatsby’s dream is principally a product of the past. These critics assume that the emergence of the American dream is

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2 Troy, in his 1945 essay “Scott Fitzgerald—the Authority of Failure,” was the first critic to use the term “American dream” in an interpretation of *The Great Gatsby.*

3 Kenner similarly places not only the American dream in the distant past but Gatsby’s sensibility as well: “It has been dreamed since the Renaissance, and Gatsby is the last Renaissance Man.... [In 1925 it was still possible to recapture the Dream, or at least how it had felt to be one of the Renaissance voyagers who had dreamed it]” (27-28). More recently, Steinbrink has suggested that in Fitzgerald’s novel “any attempt to realize the dream is destined not only to fail but to sully the dream itself. The actual settlement of this country, by the Dutch and others, gave rise not to edenic bliss but to mercantile avarice, divisiveness, and war” (167).

4 Nowhere, institutionally or pedagogically speaking, is the use of these analytical binaries more evident than in the criticism contained under the section headings “Crime and Corruption” and “The American Dream” in the well-worn Scribner’s Research Anthology entitled *Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby: The Novel, The Critics, The Background.*

5 Bewley’s model for interpreting *The Great Gatsby* has found numerous restatements. In the early 1970s, for example, Callahan stated: “In its totality *The Great Gatsby* sketches the evolution of America from . . . continent with a spirit . . . to place of nightmare, exhaustion, and death. Founded on the myth of a new Eden, the history of the United States has displaced that vision into an industrial, excremental reality” (12). Callahan concludes that while the industrial nightmare we call modern society is our ugly reality, the nation’s spiritual dream is an idealized “aesthetic impulse . . . in opposition to the rest of life” (215). Likewise, Bicknell parallels Fitzgerald’s world-view to T.S. Eliot’s by asserting that the author of *The Great Gatsby* perceives “modern corruption in contrast to a lost rather than to an emergent ideal” (72). More recently, Rohrkemper argues that the power of *The Great Gatsby* issues from “juxtaposing that corrupted present with the luminous possibilities in a rapidly receding past” (153). He too concludes that “Fitzgerald seems to suggest that America has indeed become Thomas Jefferson’s Disgusting City, and that the presiding spirit of Jefferson, no less than Franklin, has been corrupted in modern America” (160).
conterminous with either European discoveries of the New World or the birth of the United States as a nation.

Alternatively, I want to argue two points. First, the "American dream" is not a trans-historical concept but, as I discuss at the end of this paper, a term invented after the Twenties in an effort to address the crisis of the Great Depression. Second, the social climate of the early 1920s, specifically as it is expressed in increasingly racialized forms of nativism, creates the conditions under which Fitzgerald’s narrator imagines Gatsby as a figure for America. Gatsby’s dream is a pure product of the Tribal Twenties. This latter point builds upon the provocative work of Walter Benn Michaels, who situates American national literature of the period, including *Gatsby*, within a discourse of nativism. However, as I detail below, Michaels’s singular focus on nativism in the work of Fitzgerald and other canonical writers—exemplified in the statement, “What is to be feared most [in classic fiction of the Twenties] is the foreigner’s desire to become American” (“Vanishing” 224)—elides the persistence of racial segregation in this literature.6

The Resilience of the Color Line in the Nativist Twenties

When the specter of black/white integration emerges, at least in *Gatsby*, the rising tide of hostility toward new immigrants recedes. Fitzgerald’s novel reveals the degree to which, even for an uncompromising nativist such as Tom Buchanan, the transgression of black/white difference remains the most profound threat to the preservation of the country’s white Anglo-Saxon identity. This threat is embedded, for instance, in the nativist myth of national origins. Nordicists, in assigning the role of New World discoverer to northern Europeans, systematically excluded the introduction of black slaves in the New World. The founding contributions of Africans in North America are not missing from a nativist history because of a mere oversight. Their exclusion is symptomatic of how black/white difference was enforced through racial segregation during the Twenties.

At first glance, nothing seems more remote from *The Great Gatsby* than the issue of racial segregation or black empowerment. Despite the novel’s being set in metropolitan New York, African Americans almost never appear in Gatsby’s world. Yet, from Garveyism to the fledgling Harlem Renaissance, New York was becoming the mecca of black American politics and culture. The near-complete absence of blacks from the novel can be comprehended only if we factor in the ubiquitous power of racial segregation. The absence of African Americans alongside the novel’s conspicuous appropriation of black culture is what makes it a definitive text of the so-called Jazz Age.

In Nick’s eyes, Gatsby lives on the edge of two worlds, neither of which is black: the established white society of the Buchanans and the not-quite-white immigrant underworld of Meyer Wolfsheim. Yet Nick is at home in neither en-

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6 In the simplest terms, the principal task of Michaels’s commentary on classic American literature of the Twenties is to prove his hypothesis that the segregationist question “Are you white?” is “replaced” by the nativist query “Are you American?” (“Anti-Imperialism” 366; “Souls” 192; “Vanishing” 235). Armed with this presupposition, Michaels is unable to account adequately for the irrepressible significance of black/white difference in Jazz Age fiction.
vironment, a feeling reflected by his precarious sense of moral order in society. It is precisely the homeless perspective coupled with the ambivalent narrative expression of racial politics that places *Gatsby* squarely within the high modernist literary tradition. Like the work of Joseph Conrad, to which Fitzgerald acknowledged a primary debt, *Gatsby* undermines contemporary forms of racism only to the degree that it maintains them. While Nick consistently dismisses Tom Buchanan’s racial nativism as “impassioned gibberish” (137), his own narration re-enforces both the stereotypical degeneracy of the new immigrant (especially the Semite) and the minstrelsy of the Negro.

If blacks are conspicuous in their absence from Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age fiction, then there are notable exceptions that provide ways of reading the persistent tension between black and white within the context of the Twenties. African Americans appear at two crucial moments in the novel, both involving Gatsby’s famed automobile: during Nick’s memorable ride across the Queensboro Bridge and at the moment of the hit-and-run killing of Myrtle Wilson. Each scene, in its own way, anticipates Nick’s concluding invocation of Gatsby’s capacity for “wonder” in the Dutch sailors’ eyes. In both instances new immigrants play a prominent role. In the latter (and, for our purposes, less significant) scene, a “pale, well dressed Negro” is described as the one person able to identify accurately the “death car” as Gatsby’s. Interestingly enough, the only other witness to the hit-and-run accident is the “young Greek, Michaelis” (143-47).

In the Queensboro Bridge scene, immigrants and blacks are not passive witnesses to Gatsby and his gilded machine. Instead they share the American road with him. As Nick rides beside Gatsby and experiences the “wonder” associated with “the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise” (73), an immigrant funeral procession passes. Our narrator observes that the deceased’s “friends looked out at us with the tragic eyes and short upper lips of southeastern Europe.” Here, Nick implicitly and explicitly marks these immigrants as emotionally and physically distinct from old stock Anglo Americans. However, by cheerfully adding that his hero’s “splendid car was included in their somber holiday” (73), Nick implies that the distance between Gatsby’s world and that of the immigrant is not so great after all. The Queensboro Bridge exertion immediately precedes Nick’s introduction to Gatsby’s business associate, Meyer Wolfsheim, the Jewish gangster characterized by stereotypical Semitic features.

Before Nick and Gatsby reach their noon engagement with Wolfsheim, another car overtakes them on the Queensboro Bridge. It is a limousine, “driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish Negros, two bucks and a girl.” In contrast to the funeral procession, the narrator finds this scene intensely amusing: “I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry” (73). Beyond the obvious racial stereotyping of the happy darkies aping white ways, note the pleasure Nick takes in observing the high-spirited

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7 Fitzgerald confessed the influence of Joseph Conrad on his craft in the Introduction to the 1934 Modern Library Edition of *The Great Gatsby*. Note that Nick echoes no one so much as Conrad’s narrator Marlow, and, like *Heart of Darkness*, Fitzgerald’s novel neither embraces white supremacy nor ultimately rejects imperialist thought. As Terry Eagleton describes it, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* conveys the “message”... that Western civilisation is at base as barbarous as African society—a viewpoint which disturbs imperialist assumptions to the precise degree that it reinforces them” (135).
Negroes, an amusement indebted to the legacy of blackface minstrelsy in the United States. The reflection of the sportive Negroes in Gatsby's "mirrored" car—rather than their inclusion in his world—illustrates how the color line fixes the separation between blacks and whites even as it generates an ambivalent identity between the two.

Racial segregation, by excluding African Americans from full participation in U.S. society, managed the challenge that blacks posed to white supremacy. When, during the Twenties, black empowerment threatened white privilege, nationalists readily abandoned their nativist attack on non-Nordic Europeans and reasserted the need for black/white separation through appeals to (among other things) intra-white brotherhood. A case in point was President Warren Harding's widely publicized speech before a racially mixed audience in Birmingham, Alabama during November of 1921. Harding was an influential post-Progressive Era nativist. Upon entering office, he immediately overturned former President Woodrow Wilson's veto of an immigration restriction bill. The temporary law "proved in the long run the most important turning-point in American immigration policy" (Higham 311). In his fall speech before the southern city of Birmingham, however, Harding conveniently suppressed his nativist platform. Lecturing on behalf of "the self respect of the colored race," the President argued for maintaining the "natural segregations" between black and white. Without hesitation, he turned to the white audience and pleaded for national unity: "The one thing we must sedulously avoid is the development of group and class organizations in this country" based on "the labor vote, the business vote, the Irish vote, the Scandinavian vote, the Italian vote, and so on" (qtd. in Du Bois, "President" 1194). Clearly, here was a prominent American who, while supporting nativists demands for restricting immigration from southeastern Europe, appealed to intra-white brotherhood when the specter of desegregation was raised.

Black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois, who once described "the problem of the Twentieth century" as "the color-line" (Souls 359), was outraged by what he called "the logical contradictions" of the President's address. In order to illustrate his point, Du Bois used his December editorial in the N.A.A.C.P.'s Crisis magazine to place the contradictory statements side by side. Harding promoted black/white segregation while, in the same breath, criticizing "demagogues" who pitted old stock white Americans against recent European immigrants. Du Bois thus asked rhetorically: "Is the President calling himself a demagogue?" He countered the President's statements by offering a two-fold warning to "Harding or any white man" about teaching "Negroes pride of race." First, "our pride is our business and not theirs." Second, black pride is something whites "would better fear rather than evoke." Du Bois concluded apocalyptically: "For the day that Black men love Black men simply because they are Black, is the day they will hate White men simply because they are White. And then, God help us all!" ("President" 1194).

8 Lott demonstrates how the minstrel show is structured by "interracial recognitions and identifications no less than the imperative to disavow them" (55).
Du Bois was making a thinly veiled reference to his political rival, Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born nationalist leader who based his United Negro Improvement Association headquarters in Harlem. In late 1921, Garvey was reaching his peak in popularity among the black masses. A few months earlier he had publicly chastised “the Dr. Du Bois group” for fighting racial segregation. In opposition, Garvey reiterated the U.N.I.A.’s belief that “amalgamation … is a crime against nature.” Writing in a November 1921 issue of the U.N.I.A. newspaper *Negro World*, Garvey heaped praise upon President Harding for the “Great Vision” conveyed in his Birmingham address, and he urged blacks to stand together “against the idea of social equality” (qtd. in Hill lxxxii).

Garvey built the first and largest mass movement ever among blacks in the United States by, in part, conceding that “America [is] a White Man’s Country” and exploiting the racist assertion as a means of promoting his “Back to Africa” campaign.9 After 1922, a period historian Robert Hill refers to as Garvey’s “political retreat” (lxxxiii), the U.N.I.A. leader openly flirted with white racist and nativist groups, ranging from the Ku Klux Klan to the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America. However, public overtures to white supremacists did little to stop the federal government from arresting the U.N.I.A. leader on mail fraud charges and jailing him in 1923 and between 1925 and 1927. Even the vague threat posed by Garvey’s unprecedented ability to mobilize huge numbers of blacks forced the U.S. government to deport him immediately upon his release from prison. Garvey was both black and an immigrant in an era of intense hostility toward each group. However, Garvey’s nationalist dream of a distant but glorious African past was not far from being the black mirror image of Gatsby’s dream of Nordic national origins seen through Dutch explorers’ eyes. In their own way, both were partial products of the politics of immigration restriction and racial segregation in New York City during the Twenties.

The Rising Tide of Immigrant Enterprise

Higham reports that around 1920 Nordicists began attacking new immigrants—particularly Catholics and Jews, but Japanese on the Pacific Coast as well—under a nativist banner which now tied racial to more traditional religious xenophobia (266).10 During the latter half of 1920, the gathering tide of anti-immi-

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9 While Garvey claimed to forfeit control of the United States to men of European descent, he was adamantly opposed to white world supremacy. Speaking before a U.N.I.A. meeting in Harlem’s Liberty Hall in the summer of 1920, Garvey exclaimed: “We are a new people, born out of a new day and a new circumstance. We are born out of the bloody war of 1914-18” (411). Amidst crowds in Harlem and in segregated cities across the country, the self-proclaimed Negro Moses could be heard preaching: “the bloodiest war is yet to come, when Europe will match its strength against Asia, and that will be the Negroes’ opportunity to draw the sword for Africa’s redemption” (qtd. in Moses 254). Garvey’s disdain for European imperialism in the post-war era confirmed the worst nightmare of Lothrop Stoddard and his disciples. Despite his disapproval of European colonialism in the Far East, Stoddard was no “anti-imperialist” (as Michaels’s inaccurately suggests “Souls” 194-95) when it came to imperial rule of Africa. The author of *The Rising Tide of Color* used a biological explanation of racial inferiority to make an argument for the lack of history and civilization among Africans and, hence, the necessity of pursuing colonial policies on the Dark Continent (90-92).

10 This trend was best exemplified in the changing philosophy, membership, and activities of the Ku Klux Klan. The first official post-war Klan appearance did not occur until 1920 and, with the “Red Summer” of 1919 behind it (which witnessed numerous race riots and lynchings), the organization began focusing its attacks on white foreigners. The Klan was not less race conscious than before but it did introduce a number of changes into its fold. The Knights of the Invisible Empire made
migration sentiment was fueled by both an economic downturn and a sharp increase in the importation of cheap labor from abroad. These twin factors, the state of the economy and the scale of immigration, regularly play a role in establishing the level of nativism in the United States. However, Higham puts forward a third determinant in nativist politics that exploded on the scene in 1920 and assumed greater importance than ever before: namely, the connection between foreigners and crime (267).

The conflation of new arrivals and unethical business practices provides obvious motivation for reading The Great Gatsby according to the rise of nativism and the fall of the self-made man. Gatsby's association with immigrant crime, particularly in the form of bootlegging, jeopardizes both the purity of his white identity and the ethics of his entrepreneurial uplift. The association of immigrants with lawlessness was crystallized during Prohibition, which was no less than a moral crusade to preserve the American Way through social control and conformity. The Eighteenth Amendment propelled organized gangsterism to new heights and, in doing so, opened opportunities for new arrivals by creating a lucrative trade in illicit alcohol. It also activated the stereotype of the non-Anglo-Saxon immigrant as gangster, realized in sensational trials such as that of "Bootleg King" millionaire Harry Brolaski who, in his own words, "always took a gambling chance." In four months during 1920, June to September, Brolaski made a fortune which was lost before the end of the year when he was tried and convicted of masterminding a Pacific Coast bootlegging ring.11

Gatsby, although apparently not the child of an immigrant, is a bootlegger who associates with unsavory new arrivals and vile members of the underworld. The association forces Gatsby to make up improbable stories about his past because, as he explains to Nick, "I didn't want you to think I was just some nobody" (71). While Nick desperately wants to believe in Gatsby's grand self-descriptions, contemporary reviewers were not always so sympathetic. One insists that the "Great Gatsby wasn't great at all—just a sordid, cheap, little crook" (Kenny). Evidence marshaled by Tom Buchanan's investigation into Gatsby's past supports such a reading.

"Who are you anyhow?" broke out Tom. "You're one of that bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim—that much I happen to know. I've made a little investigation into your affairs ... I found out what your 'drug stores' were." He turned to us and spoke rapidly. "He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the

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11 Gatsby takes place precisely two years after Brolaski ran his illicit alcohol trade from California. On approximately the same date that Fitzgerald has Nick meet Gatsby for the first time (mid to late June 1922), the New York Times published an exposé headlined "Brolaski, Bootleg King: Man Named by Caraway in Senate Attack a Real Millionaire Bootlegger" (Rogers). Perhaps this was additional source material for Fitzgerald's representation of both his narrator and his American hero. Although he does not mention either Brolaski or Senator Caraway, Corso uncovers other potential sources for Fitzgerald's characters.
counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him and I wasn't far wrong." (141)

Gatsby brazenly refuses to deny Tom's accusation of his rival's bootlegging activities, responding politely: "What about it? ... I guess your friend Walter Chase wasn't too proud to come in on it." Tom's findings not only implicate his rival in various unnamed criminal schemes by providing almost irrefutable evidence of his involvement in the illegal sale of alcohol. Tom, hoping to play to the nativist fears of his audience, binds Gatsby's identity to the Jewish gangster Wolfsheim.

Nick's stereotypical description of Wolfsheim is colored by racial nativism to the extent that it carries with it traces of degeneracy associated with Semites. Upon being introduced by Gatsby to his friend, the narrator provides the following description of Wolfsheim: "A small flat-nosed Jew raised his large head and regarded me with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril. After a moment I discovered his tiny eyes in the half darkness" (73-74). Nick repeatedly characterizes the man he finds "looking for a business connection" (75) according to his gross physical appearance, typified by references to "his tragic nose" (77). The descriptions implicate Nick in a form of what Sander L. Gilman calls "pathological stereotyping" (18). Immutable stereotyping of this sort licenses the construction of a rigid difference between the vigorous Anglo-Saxon, Tom Buchanan, and degenerate Jew, Meyer Wolfsheim. Gatsby, whose original surname ("Gatz") carries a Jewish inflection, is caught in a no-man's-land between the two ethnic extremes.

Wolfsheim's business activities are not merely illegal. They threaten the integrity of the national sporting event, baseball's World's Series. Eventually we learn that Wolfsheim runs his illicit business out of "The Swastika Holding Company," a name that continues to befuddle readers. It is unlikely that Fitzgerald would have known that Hitler was using the swastika as the symbol of his fledgling Nazi party. Instead the swastika was widely recognized at the time as an ancient Aryan symbol of good luck. Wolfsheim's possession of the swastika as the name of his holding company manifest the widely perceived threat to an Aryan nation posed by enterprising immigrants, particularly Jews.12 Burr, in his book America's Race Heritage (1922), insists that the "most objectionable classes of the 'new' immigration are rapidly breaking down American institutions and honorable business methods." In the context of discussing recent Jewish arrivals, he describes "business trickery" as a "trait ... so ingrained that one may doubt whether it could be eradicated for generations" (195).13

12 In the early 1920s, Nordic philosophers indirectly used the discovery of Indo-European languages as evidence to support their own claims. By tracing America's northwestern European origins to a remote Aryan past, nativist writers of the early Twenties distanced the nation's race heritage from what, prior to this discovery, would have been its previous point of departure: Semitic civilization. For instance, Burr opens America's Race Heritage with a reference to "the race migrations in Eurasia as a prelude to the racial history of America" (19). In the course of his study, Burr draws the distinction between a superior Aryan Europe family of man and an inferior Hebrew race.

13 It is important to remember that, with a loss of faith in Progressive Era efforts to assimilate immigrants, Jews (as much if not more than any other new immigrant group) became a national menace in the eyes of post-War nativists. For example, in the early months of 1920, Henry Ford—the country's leading industrialist, folk-hero to millions, and one-time melting-pot
Gatsby’s illicit business association (indeed, his friendship) with immigrant gangster Meyer Wolfsheim compromises the ethics of our hero’s self-made success while undermining the stability of white ethnic difference. His enterprising efforts among shady foreigners stages the nation’s growing suspicion of immigrants after World War I. This sentiment is confirmed, for instance, in a contemporary commentator’s use of an anti-Catholic slur to describe Gatsby upon his first encounter with Daisy. Stated Thomas Chubb, in his review of the novel in the August 1925 issue of *Forum* magazine: “he is still poor as an Irishman on Sunday morning” (311). Even Nick, after meeting the mysterious Gatsby for the first time at one of his gala parties, immediately thinks of his host as a stranger in his own home: “I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East Side of New York” (54).

Nick’s suspicions about the source of Gatsby’s wealth are heightened just after he is introduced to Wolfsheim. Gatsby is caught off guard and becomes noticeably upset when, having boasted that it took him only three years to earn his fortune, Nick points out that he was under the impression that Gatsby “inherited” his money through a legacy of family wealth (95). In the chapter which follows this uneasy exchange, Nick casts young Jimmy Gatz in the role of Alger boy-hero who has a fortunate encounter with wealthy yachtsman Dan Cody.14 Nick’s telling of Gatsby’s “luck and pluck” tale suggests the loss of faith in stories of the self-made man at this time. For example, Gatsby’s benefactor, Cody, is not the genteel aristocrat of Alger’s stories but “the pioneer debauchee.” He is a product of “the savage violence of the frontier brothel and saloon,” and thus a considerable cry from even the celebrated frontier individualist imagined by Progressive Era historian Frederick Jackson Turner. When he sets sail for the West Indies and the Barbary Coast (places associated with pirating, the African slave trade, and colonialism), Cody employs the impressionable teenager in some “vague personal capacity” and gives him a “singularly appropriate education” before he dies suddenly (106-07). Fitzgerald’s appropriation of the Alger formula reflects the fact that the traditional ideal of virtuous uplift, recently associated with the melting-pot model of immigrant success, was undercut by a growing interest in get-rich-quick schemes and a declining commitment to assimilating new arrivals during the Roaring Twenties.15 In this social climate, the moral efficacy of Alger’s respectable “rags to riches” stories began to lose their appeal in America.

After Gatsby’s own sudden death, Nick approaches Wolfsheim—the deceased’s “closest friend”—for an account of Gatsby’s source of wealth. Wolfsheim’s recollection functions to reconfirm the new threat posed by the

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14 Gatsby’s struggle upward is structured, according to Nick’s narrative, along the lines of Alger’s popular formula. For a discussion of the relationship between *The Great Gatsby* and Alger’s stories, see Scharnhorst’s “Scribbling Upward.”

15 Alger’s juvenile fiction reached its height in popular readership around 1910, at the height of the Progressive movement and at the moment when Gatsby and Nick would have been in their youth. At this time, Progressive reformers advocated self-help and uplift as, in part, a way of managing the greatest wave of immigration in the nation’s history. For an account of Alger’s readership, see Scharnhorst and Bales (149-56).
immigrant to moral uplift and ethical entrepreneurship. To Nick’s inquiry, “Did you start him in business?” Wolfsheim replies, “Start him! I made him,” and continues:

“I raised him up out of nothing, right out of the gutter. 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.... We were so thick like that in everything —” He held up two bulbous fingers “—always together.” (179)

Wolfsheim’s depiction of Gatsby’s success helps confirm the findings of Tom’s investigation. Not only is Gatsby “raised ... up out of nothing,” he is “made” not by the sweat of his honest brow but by the black hand of the immigrant gangster. Wolfsheim’s grotesque “bulbous fingers” offer a degenerate image of togetherness. If he and Gatsby are as separate as fingers, they are also as one as the hand. Wolfsheim’s story of Gatsby’s inauspicious beginnings leaves Nick wondering whether their “partnership” also included the World’s Series scandal.

The encounter with Wolfsheim immediately leads to another illustration of Gatsby’s original ambition, one apparently modeled on the prescriptions of middle-class morality. This example takes a page out of Benjamin Franklin’s autobiography. However, because it mocks the conventions of the self-made man, this illustration ultimately functions to undermine evidence for Gatsby’s virtuous uplift. More specifically, the reader is presented with Jimmy Gatz’s transcription, on the flyleaf of a dime novel, of a Franklin-style timetable and resolves. Unlike young Ben Franklin, who builds the “perfect Character” by pondering questions of inner goodness before setting out for a day of hard work (72-73), sixteen-year-old Gatsby’s morning itinerary is conspicuously devoid of moral questions. Instead, Fitzgerald’s boy-hero focuses on the enhancement of self-image through “Dumbbell exercise and wall-scaling” (181). Furthermore, his general resolves focus more on external presentation of self (“No more smoking or chewing”) than on Franklin’s interest in cultivating the virtuous inner person in the “Project of arriving at moral Perfection” (66).

Fitzgerald’s mock-representation of young Gatsby’s attempt at Franklin-esque uplift demonstrates the extent to which, with the consolidation of consumer society in the twentieth century, the cult of “personality” (based on image-making and competitiveness) eclipses an earlier producer-oriented notion of “character” (founded on an inner sense of duty and piety). The displacement of character by the newer concept of personality did not alone undermine traditional narratives of virtuous success. However, when coupled with rising suspicions regarding the rectitude of new immigrants, the apparent excesses of the personality craze contributed to the diminishing authority of the myth of the self-made man in the Twenties. The resultant crisis in an American national identity is represented by Fitzgerald through the figure of Gatsby.

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16 Watkins was the first critic to give extensive treatment to the influence of Franklin’s writing on The Great Gatsby.
17 See Susman on the emergence of “personality” after the turn of the twentieth century.
Fitzgerald's Not-Quite-White Self-Made Man

The national climate that guarantees Gatsby's failure as the traditional self-made man also provides the social conditions under which his pristine dream can be imagined. During the Twenties, in popular and academic forums alike, racial nativism was sanctioned by the pseudo-scientific discourse of Nordicism which narrowed definitions of whiteness. After decades of seemingly unrestricted immigration from eastern and southern Europe, nativists responded to the fear of the loss of white Anglo-Saxon dominance by attempting to fix and maintain the boundaries between old stock Americans and all others. Higham demonstrates how, in the wake of World War I, debates over the nation's origins made extensive use of Nordic philosophy to combat the fear of the loss of white supremacy. He explains that the deployment of genetic typologies became widespread in Nordicist descriptions of the racial degeneracy in new immigrants. Respectable social scientist Madison Grant, probably the most important nativist in modern American history (Higham 155-56), worked from the "science" of eugenics and taught two basic lessons. First, old stock Americans should properly identify themselves as Nordic. Second, Nordics must avoid cross-breeding with white Europeans of a lower racial descent, namely Alpines and Mediterraneans, or face the degenerative process of "mongrelization."\(^\text{18}\)

Gatsby's romantic ambition is, of course, to amass a fortune fantastic enough to win the heart of Daisy Fay, who reveals that she is as much southern belle as flapper when she refers to own youth as her "white girlhood" (24). A version of the all-American girl, Daisy is a symbol for Nordic national identity in the Twenties.\(^\text{19}\) She functions within the novel as a gendered sign for the mythological American continent: a nurturing mother and a beckoning lover who offers "the incomparable milk of wonder" (112). The fact that Daisy's voice is also described as "full of money—that was the inexhaustible charm that rose and fell in it" (120) is less a contradiction than the flip-side of the same coin. In an era of U.S. imperialism and corporate expansion, the frontier is seductive not in spite but because of its exploitability. At the novel's conclusion, Daisy's green light in Gatsby's eyes conjures, for Nick, the Dutch explorers' initial sighting of a pristine America, "a fresh, green breast of the new world."

Paradoxically, Gatsby must transgress the Nordic/non-Nordic divide and associate with immigrant gangster Meyer Wolfsheim in order to generate a fortune grand enough to impress the belle of Louisville. In a desperate attempt to foil Gatsby's grand design, Tom spews the slogans and parrots the precepts of Nordic supremacy. It is no secret that Nordicism receives its most unrestrained expression on the pages of Gatsby in the mouth of Tom Buchanan. As one contemporary reviewer of the novel reluctantly observed, Tom "is an American univer-

\(^\text{18}\) Grant and his disciples were not alone among nativists in deploying eugenics to construct a national identity based on narrowing definitions of whiteness. The "expert" services of eugenicist Harry H. Laughlin were retained by Congressman Albert Johnson's House Committee on immigration restriction, where he testified that new European immigrants were bad breeding stock due to their "inborn socially inadequate qualities." Even presidential hopeful Calvin Coolidge lent his signature to a popular piece on immigration restriction, published in a 1921 issue of Good Housekeeping, which used biological laws to argue that Nordic stock degenerates when mixed with other races (Higham 314, 318).

\(^\text{19}\) For a discussion of nativist uses of popular images of the New Woman, see Banta (104-39).
sity product of almost unbearable reality” (Benét 740). He assaults Nick with his nativist racism early in the novel, before either one of them is introduced to Gatsby. Over dinner at the Buchanan Long Island estate, Nick confesses that his cosmopolitan cousin, Daisy, makes him feel “uncivilized.” Before Daisy responds, Tom interrupts conversation with a gloomy prediction: “Civilization’s going to pieces ... I’ve gotten to be a terrible pessimist about things. Have you read ‘The Rise of the Coloured Empires’ by this man Goddard?” Nick answers in the negative, and Tom, in a petulant mood, approvingly explains the book’s thesis: “The idea is if we don’t look out the white race will be—will be utterly submerged. It’s all scientific stuff; it’s been proved” (17). The exchange has led literary critics to speculate that Tom’s authority is Lothrop Stoddard, whose conservative ideas were widely disseminated among nativists after the publication of his The Rising Tide of Color.

Critics have overlooked the possibility that, in addition to Stoddard’s book, the well known geneticist Henry H. Goddard might also be a source of Tom’s ideas. In a book widely reprinted around 1920, Goddard studied degeneracy in an American family he called the “Kallikaks.” The Kallikaks are “a family of good English blood of the middle class.” However, Goddard explains, “a scion of this family, in an unguarded moment, stepped aside from the paths of rectitude and with the help of a feeble-minded girl, started a line of mental defectives that is truly appalling” (50). The “degeneracy” of the Kallikak family is thus “the result of the defective mentality and bad blood,” from the feeble-minded prostitute, “having been brought into the normal family of good blood” (69). Goddard concludes by decrying the effects of mixing good and bad genes, reasoning that it can only produce mental and moral defects, such as feeble-mindedness, madness, alcoholism, sexual perversity, and criminality.

The work of Goddard and other geneticists was circulated among nativists, and used to make arguments against the excesses of democracy, which were thought to be manifested in the failure of the melting pot to assimilate new immigrants into American society. Nativists vocalized the fear that America’s once pure racial stock was now under siege by a generation of non-Nordic arrivals who were, in too many instances, amassing wealth without adhering to the Protestant work ethic and the gospel of virtuous success. “It’s up to us who are the dominant race to watch out,” asserts Tom, “or these other races will have control of things” (17). His sense of control is defined by his faith in the moral strength of white Anglo-Saxon civilization. Nick thinks to himself that Tom’s white supremacist monologue is “pathetic.” Daisy responds to her husband with little more than sarcasm (“We’ve got to beat them down”). Her friend, Jordon Baker, offers the most provocative intervention with her cryptic aside: “You ought to live in California —”

Jordon’s passing reference to the West Coast is made intelligible when we consider the politics of nativism in California at the time. After Japan demonstrated its military prowess in Russo-Japanese War of 1904, Anglo-Americans...
on the Pacific Coast experienced a two-fold threat: fears about Japan's expansionist foreign policy were placed along side the danger posed by Japanese immigration to Anglo hegemony on the West Coast (Higham 172). Even Stoddard, who discusses the international "Yellow Peril" at length in The Rising Tide of Color, makes reference to the California crisis by quoting from the Los Angeles Times: "If California is to be preserved for the next generation as a 'white man's country' there must be some movement started that will restrict the Japanese birth-rate in California" (288). By the time of Harding's presidential election in 1920, anti-Japanese hysteria on the West Coast had reached unprecedented levels (Higham 265). As a result, the Johnson-Reed Act was drafted in a way that prohibited Japanese immigration altogether, completing a long standing policy of Oriental exclusion.

Tom, oblivious to criticism of almost any kind, interrupts Jordon's mention of California with the following proposition: "The idea is that we're Nordics..." (18). Later, during the novel's climactic Plaza Hotel scene, Tom and Gatsby square off against one another. Tom, by linking Gatsby's enterprising ambitions to Wolfsheim's underworld operations, turns his personal claim on a Nordic identity into a weapon against his rival. In doing so, he diminishes Gatsby's standing in society to that of the "nobody" our hero so desperately tries to escape.

I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife.... Nowadays people begin by sneering at family life and family institutions and next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white. (137)

This passage expresses the complex relation between nativism and the color line at the time. It is tempting to conclude, along with Walter Benn Michaels, that Tom is identifying Gatsby "as in some sense black" ("Souls" 195). But this would be to misjudge the degree to which, even during the Twenties, nativists were willing or able to collapse the distinction between blacks and immigrants from southeastern Europe. According to the nativist logic of Tom's argument, Gatsby seems less-than-white because of his intimate connection with immigrant crime. The association licenses Tom's accusation that Gatsby jeopardizes the health of the family, the institution indispensable to maintaining white racial purity. Next, Tom suggests that black/white miscegenation poses the most profound threat to the Nordic race. Although he does not suggest that Gatsby is any sense black, Tom's statement reveals the degree to which nativists used Nordicism to narrow the notion of whiteness while simultaneously maintaining what President Harding called the "natural segregations" between black and white.

Jordon Baker, in response to Tom's diatribe against Gatsby, makes another spontaneous intervention: "We're all white here." Jordon's aside points to a crisis in the nation's Anglo identity where, for nativists at least, whiteness is no guarantee of racial purity. The fragility of the modern family—racial and national, extended and nuclear—was at the heart of nativist arguments against
unrestricted immigration. Nordic nationalist Charles W. Gold, in a book entitled America: A Family Matter (1922), attributes the downfall of Rome, and by extension “the continuing downfall of humanity” up through the present, to mongrelization. Although he appears to be unaware of the fact that the “melting pot” was a concept only recently popularized during the Progressive Era, Gold nonetheless argues that throughout the ages efforts at this type of ethnic assimilation have been misguided. “Tear from the phrase the softening metaphor and we recognize ‘melting pot’ in its true, its unpleasant form—‘miscegenation’” (149-50). He concludes that national histories teach America a simple but indispensable lesson: “Repeal our naturalization laws.” Legislative reform would bar entrance to aliens, helping to “secure our children and our children’s children in their legitimate birthright” (165). Or, as Stoddard pleads, “the immigrant tide must at all costs be stopped and America given a chance to stabilize her ethnic being” (266).

The passage of the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 fulfilled the demands of racial nativists, who insisted upon the preservation of what they regarded as a “distinct American type”: the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant. The law implemented a “national origins” principle. By setting quotas according to the contribution of each national stock to the present American population, the law ensured that six or seven times more immigrants would originate annually from northwestern Europe than from southeastern Europe. Higham concludes that by counting everyone’s ancestors the Johnson-Reed Act “gave expression to the tribal mood, and comfort to the democratic conscience” (322-23).

The American Dream: An Afterthought

The decline of the national myth of the white Anglo-Saxon self-made man during the 1920s predates the birth of the term “American dream.” The term was not put into print until 1931, when middle-brow historian James Truslow Adams used it in his popular history of the United States entitled The Epic of America. Thus, despite a half a century of literary criticism on the expression of the American dream in Fitzgerald’s Great Gatsby, the phrase is a misnomer when used to characterize the book’s nationalist vision.

Adams makes no mention of Fitzgerald or Gatsby in his book, nor should he. The author articulates the fledgling idea of the American dream through a vague concept of moral economics meant to address and subdue the imminent threat of class antagonism caused by the Great Depression. By explicitly appealing to a shared, rather than tribal, sense of the nation’s dream, Adams steers clear of group conflict.

The point is that if we are to have a rich and full life in which all are to share and play their parts, if the American dream is to be a reality, our communal spiritual and intellectual life must by distinctly higher than elsewhere, where classes and groups have their separate interests, habits, markets, arts, and lives. (411)
Adams’s American dream is inspired by pre-war Progressive ideals of individual uplift and ethnic assimilation, values intended to assist readers in managing the crises of the Thirties. It comes as little surprise when, at the very end of The Epic, the historian offers a lengthy quotation from Mary Antin’s optimistic autobiography of Russian Jewish melting-pot success, originally published in 1912.

Nothing could be further from the Nordic inflection given to the national imaginary as it is expressed in Fitzgerald’s fiction. Gatsby’s pristine vision of America past does not belong to the American dream of the Great Depression. Rather, it is a product of the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment in the 1920s, which activated narrowing definitions of whiteness and, in doing so, weakened the moral authority of the myth of the self-made man. If we want to interpret The Great Gatsby historically, we should stop using the American dream as an analytical category altogether. Yet it is not enough to say that Gatsby’s dream is simply an aspect of what Fitzgerald coined the Jazz Age. It is also swept along by racial nativism peculiar to the Tribal Twenties.

Works Cited


My assessment of the meaning that Adams gives to the term “American dream” in The Epic of America concurs with his biographer’s description of the historian’s political outlook at the outset of the Great Depression. Nevins writes that Adams “carried the principles of Theodore Roosevelt’s New Nationalism and Wilson’s New Freedom into the years of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal” (90).


