

Becoming “Migrant John”: John Steinbeck and His Migrants and His (Un)conscious Turn to Marx

Huei-ju Wang

“When they need us they call us migrants, and when we’ve picked their crop,
we’re bums and we got to get out.”

– Qtd. in *The Harvest Gypsies*¹

“Men who have created new fruits in the world cannot create a system
whereby their fruits may be eaten.”

– Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*

“We are storing grapes of wrath on a global scale.”

– Alexander Saxton

Abstract

John Steinbeck’s literary career took off during the Great Depression, and he secured a spot in the canon of Depression-era (California) literature by tackling the issue of migrant farm labor in journalism and fiction. From the migrant farm workers, Steinbeck earned the nickname of “Migrant John” for advocating their civil and human rights. This paper examines Steinbeck’s ideological and political transformation from a detached observer of the migrant workers’ struggle against capital in *In Dubious Battle* (1936) to a compassionate spokesperson for the dispossessed Dust Bowl migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). In doing so, the paper interrogates Steinbeck’s materialist politics: his deployment of the body of the white migrant, especially that of the migrant mother, in both his strike novel and protest novel to represent the struggle and plight of the migrant farm laborers, on the one hand, and to contain revolutionary class struggles in favor of social reforms espoused by the New Deal, on the other. The paper identifies two major events that took place after the publication of *In Dubious Battle* and combined to transform Steinbeck from a politically neutral observer to a politically engaged activist in the matter regarding the migrant farm labor, a matter that California historian Carey McWilliams insightfully describes as “the cancer which lies beneath the beauty, richness, and fertility of the valleys of California.” The two events – writing for *San Francisco News* on the migrant farm labor, which was published under the title of *The Harvest Gypsies* (1936), and participating in the rescue of migrants trapped in a flood at Visalia in Central Valley – thus accelerated Steinbeck’s road to *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which he moved ideologically closer to Marxism than he realized or was willing to acknowledge in his critique of profit-driven capitalism, his re-conception of man as man of labor

¹ Steinbeck attributed the quoted passage to an unnamed little boy in a squatters’ camp (23-24).

fulfilling needs through labor, and his re-understanding of history as the effect of class struggles.

Keywords: migrant mother, migrants, materialist politics, Dust Bowl, Great Depression, Steinbeck

Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" is unquestionably one of the most recognized iconic photographs taken from the Depression era, capturing the worries of Florence Thompson, a migrant pea picker trapped at Nipomo, California, with her small children in a lean-to tent. Taken in a chance encounter by Lange, who, in March 1936, was working for the Resettlement Administration, a New Deal farm agency, the photo was destined to become permanently associated with the Great Depression in American historical and cultural memory.² The iconic photo, as California historian Kevin Starr suggests in *Endangered Dreams: the Great Depression in California*, also helped generate the public's fascination with the "nursing migrant mothers" during the era (252). In literature, John Steinbeck also made a prominent use of the figure of the migrant mother, deploying it to both represent the struggle and plight of the migrant farm workers in Depression-era California and to contain revolutionary class struggles in favor of social reforms espoused by the New Deal.³ In a literary career that was built on the representation of the migrant farm labor in the 1930s, earning him the nickname of "Migrant John" from the migrant laborers, Steinbeck demonstrated his ingenious use of materials – the body of the migrant worker, especially that of the migrant mother – to depict and dissect class conflicts and class struggle between capital and migrant labor during the Great Depression. His California migrant labor trilogy begins with seizing the body of a laboring mother as a site of ideological and class struggle and ends with appropriating the body of a nursing mother to contain the anger and fury of the

² Lange, however, sent other shots of Thompson and her children to the *San Francisco News* to solicit help for the starving migrants at Nipomo; the "Migrant Mother" image first appeared in *Survey Graphic* in September 1936 (Meltzer 132-34; Starr 249-51). Historian Linda Gordon in her new book, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, also devotes a chapter to "Migrant Mother" (235-43).

³ Alexander Saxton notes that Steinbeck's works on migrant farm labor helped justify the existence of the New Deal. But ironically the farm workers have been excluded from most of the benefits resulting from its programs such as Social Security, unemployment insurance and labor legislation (260).

dispossessed Dust Bowl migrant workers.⁴ In writing the struggle and plight of the migrant farm workers, Steinbeck transformed himself into a corporeal materialist using the body of the migrant as a site of ideological and class struggle, as a weapon of protest, and as a means of narrative strategy of containment to forestall the outbreak of militant class struggle.⁵ At the end of the trilogy, the New Deal-minded Steinbeck moved ideologically closer to Marx than he realized or was willing to acknowledge in criticizing profit-driven capitalism and embracing historical materialist understanding of man and history, emerging as if he had been converted to Marxism, though he resented being associated with it.

Steinbeck's materialist politics – his deployment of the body of the white working class, including its men, women and children – also changes with his own political ideology during the writing of his labor trilogy. The change, or his radical turn, was brought about by his deeper involvement with the migrant farm workers – writing on the Dust Bowl migrants for *San Francisco News* and rescuing migrants trapped in a flood at Visalia. His materialist representation thus is mediated by his own ideology. In writing *In Dubious Battle*, a political strike novel published in 1936 and the first volume of his California labor trilogy, he was interested in exploring the theory of “phalanx,” or, in a simpler term, that of the group man, as well as the issue of mass psychology. He also professed his neutrality in the battle between capital and migrant labor, an ideological position that allowed him a greater degree of freedom in pursuing and pushing his materialist politics. Thus, in the strike novel, Steinbeck shows the ruthlessness of a communist strike agitator in exploiting the body of the migrant workers to rally the rural mobile working class to work together to advance their class and material interest, while exploring how the migrant “mob” would react to corporeal materials, laboring maternal body and mutilated dead body, which are given new ideological and political meanings.

⁴ Steinbeck's migrant worker trilogy consists of *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). My essay focuses on the first and last volume of the trilogy.

⁵ In *In Visible Light: Photography and the American Writer: 1840-1940*, Carol Shloss suggests that although Lange and Steinbeck never worked together, Steinbeck followed in the footsteps of Lange and Paul Taylor in his study of migrant farm workers in the fields in California and in his mining of their cooperative field reports and photographs for his own journalistic and fictive writings (203, 211). The implication in Shloss' view is that Steinbeck is not an original writer in his representation of the migrant farm workers. But my paper seeks to demonstrate Steinbeck's ingenuity in exploiting his “materials”: the migrant workers.

By the time he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, which concludes his migrant labor trilogy and was published in 1939, Steinbeck had ideologically evolved to become a compassionate spokesperson for the migrant workers.⁶ He thus used the body of the hungry migrant workers and their hungry children, including a stillborn baby, to protest the deplorable living and working conditions of the migrants and to warn of the inevitability of a revolution by the dispossessed and oppressed. However, his New Deal reform politics forced him to re-contain the militant working-class struggle he suggested earlier in the protest novel, and instead he performed an act of containment with the body of a nursing mother at the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, one of the most controversial and discussed scenes in the novel.

The conflicting and ambiguous nature of Steinbeck's materialist politics makes it difficult to categorize *In Dubious Battle* or *The Grapes of Wrath* as a genuine proletarian novel.⁷ Despite his lack of full commitment to working-class emancipation and his focus on white migrant workers, more than any writers of his generation, Steinbeck makes visible the exploitation, oppression and hardships of the migrant farm workers during the Great Depression in his labor trilogy, as Lange's "Migrant Mother" does. More important, Steinbeck's labor trilogy touches on a significant farm labor issue, an issue that California historian and labor activist Carey McWilliams famously and insightfully characterizes as "the cancer which lies beneath the beauty, richness, and fertility of the valleys of California" (*California: the Great Exception* 150). When the speaker in Allen Ginsberg's short poem, "A Supermarket in California," shops for images and has an imaginary dialogue with his beloved poet Walt Whitman, the working-class poet, in "a neon fruit supermarket," he conveniently forgets about the labor that went into the growing, harvesting, packaging and transportation of the peaches, avocados, tomatoes, watermelons, bananas, artichokes and other food items on display in the supermarket. Marx has called this failure to see the labor and social relations behind commodities as commodity fetishism (*Capital* 165). The enduring impact of Steinbeck's migrant labor

⁶ In addition to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the year 1939, an *annus mirabilis* in California's social and literary history, also saw the publication of two other important books on migrant farm labor: Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* and Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Starr 246).

⁷ In *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, edited by David Madden, Steinbeck gets a few mentions and is not treated as a major proletarian writer.

novels is to remind us that the invisible hands and labor of the migrants, no matter whether they are Asian, Mexican or white, make it possible for consumers in Ginsberg's poem or in real life to pick and choose the bountiful fruits and vegetables on display at the markets.

Steinbeck's literary career took off in the beginning of the Great Depression and, in some Steinbeck scholars' view, reached a "greatness" in his California labor trilogy for giving voice to the migrant workers of the Depression era.⁸ Despite his literary achievement, which can be compared to John Dos Passos' achievement in *U.S.A.* trilogy, he has been dismissed for being too simplistic, sentimental, ideological, and what not.⁹ Even when the current Great Recession compels us to reconsider the literary and cultural works of the Great Depression to learn the insights they offered in dissecting the ills of American capitalist society in economic, ecological and social crises, some like Miles Orvell still chose to pass over Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in favor of James Agee and Walker Evans' *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a text that ostensibly is more experimental and modernist in representing its subjects: the dispossessed southern sharecroppers.¹⁰ Even with the leftist or Marxist critics studying literature of the 1930s, Steinbeck's work has been marginalized and given scanty space, compared with other more "popular" proletarian writers such as Dos Passos, Josephine Herbst and Richard Wright.¹¹

This paper thus seeks to challenge the old debate on Steinbeck's literary merits, contest the marginalization of Steinbeck in Marxist literary study and reinvigorate Steinbeck study by drawing attention to Steinbeck's *materialist* politics, his ingenious and vigorous use of various materials, including the body of the working class and the

⁸ For an assessment of Steinbeck's literary "greatness" during the depression years, see *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936-1939*, edited by Tetsumaro Hayashi.

⁹ Dos Passos in the prologue to *The 42nd Parallel*, the first volume of *U.S.A.* trilogy, notes that "U.S.A. is the speech of the people" (xiv). Steinbeck's migrant labor trilogy, which can be said to be the voice of the migrant farm workers, thus can be seen as a companion piece to Dos Passos' work.

¹⁰ Orvell professed his less favorable view of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* on a March 2009 radio talk on "Literature during the Depression"; other guests on the show included Steinbeck scholar Susan Shillinglaw. For the transcript see <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2009/2515269.htm>>.

¹¹ In *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered*, Robert Shulman devotes no chapter to Steinbeck's migrant labor trilogy. Laura Browder in *Rousing the Nation: Radical Culture in Depression America* also does not discuss Steinbeck's migrant labor fiction. Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* discusses Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* in detail and length (163-99), but touches on Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* tangentially in his discussion of the Okie exodus and instead focuses on the film adaptation of the novel (259-82).

paper houses built out of the city dumps (commonly seen in Hoovervilles during the Depression), to represent the struggle and plight of the migrant farm workers in the Depression of the 1930s, as well as to contain militant revolutionary class struggles.¹² My reading of Steinbeck's migrant farm labor writings in fiction and journalism, or his "socially symbolic acts," focuses on his materialist politics and his literary resolutions to the unsolvable social and class contradictions, as well as his (un)conscious turn to Marx and Marxism, as manifested in his first and last volume of California migrant labor trilogy, and *The Harvest Gypsies*. In doing so, I follow Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson's call in his seminal book, *The Political Unconscious*, to uncover "the repressed and buried reality" in the history of class struggle, a doctrine he calls the political unconscious (20).

In the beginning of the Great Depression, Steinbeck was still a struggling writer, but his literary fortune soon changed when he began to engage with California's migrant farm labor issue.¹³ Having grown up in Salinas Valley, California, and having worked as a field hand in his youth on the ranches, he more than any other writers of his generation was equipped to deal with this pressing issue of his home state in his fictional and journalistic writings. As his early critic Joseph Henry Jackson put it, Steinbeck came of "literary age" when migrant farm labor became an explosive issue in the state whose agribusiness depended on a "permanent peon class" to thrive and prosper even in the midst of the Depression.¹⁴ Steinbeck's engagement with the migrant farm workers began with the writing of *In Dubious Battle* in 1934, a strike novel that models on the real-life struggle of migrant workers in two previous strikes. In their well-researched essay on the background of the strike novel, Jackson J. Benson and Anne Loftis trace Steinbeck's sources for *In Dubious Battle* to the peach strike on the Tagus Ranch in Tulare County in

¹² Steinbeck scholarship seems to experience a surge due to a celebration of his centennial and the recent global economic recession. See *Beyond Boundaries: Rereading John Steinbeck*, edited by Susan Shillinglaw and Kevin Hearle, *Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Susan Beegel, et al., and Shillinglaw's *A Journey into Steinbeck's California*. Steinbeck also features prominently in Morris Dickstein's new book, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*.

¹³ In *The Great Depression: America, 1929-1941*, Robert S. McElvaine suggests that the cause of the Great Depression lay in the "chronic overproduction" of the Roaring Twenties (11, 36).

¹⁴ See Carey McWilliams' *Ill Fares the Land* (42) and *Factories in the Field* (211-29).

August 1933 and the cotton strike in Kern County in October 1933 (202).¹⁵ Yet in his first attempt at representing the migrant workers' struggle, Steinbeck chose to maintain a neutral stance in the "dubious battle" between the owners of his fictive Torgas Valley and the "fruit tramps" who go on strike to protest a pay cut. Controversially, he also chose to depict his "crop tramps" as white, disregarding the fact that most of the strikers in the cotton strike of 1933 were Mexican. In her account of the event in *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, Devra Weber notes that Mexicans, who consisted of at least seventy-five percent of the cotton strikers, were more militant in fighting for better working and living conditions than white Americans, and Mexican women also actively participated in the strike (79, 95, 159). Benson, Steinbeck's authoritative biographer, also points out that puzzlingly Steinbeck remained silent on the racial aspect of the strike in *In Dubious Battle* despite a majority of the strikers in both the peach and cotton strike were Mexicans (*John Steinbeck, Writer* 304). This infidelity in racial representation to the actual event that inspired Steinbeck's literary imagination may cast doubts on the realistic claim of the novel.

More important, this erasure of Mexican migrant workers' struggle from California migrant labor history constitutes Steinbeck's political unconscious in *In Dubious Battle*. Steinbeck's novel depicting the class conflict between capital and migrant farm labor explodes "the myth of the garden" California commands in American cultural imaginary, but the exclusion of the Mexican migrants creates another myth that the migrant farm labor problem during the Depression is a white problem.¹⁶ Critic Warren French in his 1992 introduction to the strike novel points out that Steinbeck in a letter to a friend argued that "honest fantasy" is more realistic than the real, and suggests that Steinbeck's intention in writing the strike novel is to "imagine a possibility rather than reflect a reality" (xiii). French's defense of Steinbeck's "honest fantasy" in *In Dubious Battle* still evades the issue of racial exclusion in Steinbeck's strike novel.

The reception of *In Dubious Battle* is less controversial than that of *The Grapes of Wrath*, largely due to Steinbeck's ideological and political transformation between

¹⁵ Also see Loftis' *Witnesses to the Struggle: Imaging the 1930s California Labor Movement* (chs. 4 and 11).

¹⁶ Critic David Wyatt in the introduction to *New Essays on The Grapes of Wrath* notes that California for Steinbeck is "the garden lost" and credits Steinbeck for seeking to elevate his home state with its unique features and history to the "status of myth" in his works during the 1930s (17).

writing the first and last volume of California labor trilogy.¹⁷ In writing the strike novel, Steinbeck chose to be a neutral observer of the battle between the owners of Torgas Valley and migrant farm workers in rural California. In a January 1935 letter to his friend, novelist George Albee, Steinbeck frankly discussed his creative thoughts or “symbolic act” behind the novel, noting that he had “used a small strike in an orchard valley as the symbol of man’s eternal, bitter warfare with himself” (*Life in Letters* 98). He went on to spell out the neutral stand he took in writing the “dubious battle” in the fictive Torgas Valley, telling Albee that

I’m not interested in strike as means of raising men’s wages, and I’m not interested in ranting about justice and oppression, mere outcroppings which indicate the condition. . . . I wanted to be merely a recording consciousness, judging nothing, simply putting down the thing. (98)

Steinbeck’s professed objectivity in the class conflict and class struggle between capital and migrant labor allows him to create a Bakhtinian dialogical narrative in the strike novel. In such an inclusive and antagonistic narrative that represents the voice of the two major contending classes (the large growers and the “crop tramps”) and their respective supporters (red agitators and pro-labor sympathizers and pro-capital fascist vigilantes), as well as that of neutral observer Dr. Burton, his characters of contending classes fight it out in words (ideology) and in action (strike or strike-busting) to struggle for or maintain their respective class and material interests.

Materialist Politics

Steinbeck’s professed neutrality also gives him a lot of leeway to pursue and push his materialist politics in the novel. The result is his literary creation of the strike organizer, Mac. Modeled on a CAWIU strike leader named Pat Chambers (Benson and Loftis 201), Mac is a relentless opportunistic *materialist* using every “material” coming

¹⁷ The publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* provoked dissenting writings from right-wing writers to counterattack Steinbeck’s indictment of the harsh living and working conditions the Dust Bowl migrants were subject to. They include Ruth Comfort Mitchell’s *Of Human Kindness* (a novel) and Marshall V. Hartranft’s *Grapes of Gladness* (a pamphlet). See Susan Shillinglaw’s account of the controversy in “California Answers *The Grapes of Wrath*” in *John Steinbeck: The Years of Greatness, 1936-1939*. 145-64.

his way to facilitate his political agenda: to win the migrant workers' trust, to call the strike and keep it alive and to agitate the working class to fight for its own class and material interest.¹⁸ Mac's materialist politics, evidenced in his exploitation of the body of the migrant workers – the laboring mother (Lisa) and the injured picker (Old Dan) – and his fellow communist party workers (Joy and Jim), provides an engine for the narrative, driving it and creating climaxes along the way until the end of the novel. As Mac seizes on the body of the working class, both alive (at various conditions of pain and suffering) and dead, to play his materialist politics, the body of the migrant becomes a site of ideological and class struggle. The body and the corpse thus become not only a spectacle as Thomas Fahy points out in his study of the damaged body in Steinbeck's migrant labor fiction (88-95), but also a battleground, both literally and metaphorically, on which the battle between capital and migrant farm labor unfolds.¹⁹

In *In Dubious Battle*, Mac and his protégé, Jim Nolan, provide the most powerful militant working-class voice to contest the owners' material interests and ideology. Mac, as imagined by Steinbeck, is not a typical party man who applies what he has read, say, Marx's *Capital* or the socialist pamphlet, *New Masses*, to workers' struggle in a real situation. As the Communist party's strike organizer in the field, Mac is adept at harnessing the migrant workers' discontents over their living and working conditions to go on strike because he knows how to use any material at hand to conduct class struggle. As Mac tells Jim before they head to the Torgas Valley to agitate for a strike, "You can read all the tactics you want and it won't help much. . . . We just have to use any *material* we can pick up. That's why all the tactics in the world won't do it. No two are exactly alike" (25; italics mine).

In his political agitation in the valley with Jim, Mac quickly proves that he is an able and indiscriminate materialist, coaching Jim that "We've got to use everything. . . . any materials we can find" to start the strike (39). Being a materialist, Mac first uses a bag of tobacco to socialize with the migrants talking at a camp fire near London's tent in the jungle in the valley. Earlier in the novel, Mac urges Jim to "take up smoking,"

¹⁸ The Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union organized the cotton strike in September 1933 (Weber 79, 91).

¹⁹ Fahy also explores the idea of freakishness deriving from freak shows in *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath* (92-93).

instructing him that “it’s a nice social habit” and a “quicker way” to get “strangers” to loosen their tongue to talk (33). As the bag passes from one man to another, making the men talk, Mac learns that London is their leader and that the orchard owners have cut the wages. With this information, he thus begins to plant the seed of the strike among the “crop tramps.” In agitating for a strike, Mac cunningly hints at the *materiality* of the apple, telling the pickers that “All them nice apples. If we don’t pick ’em, they’ll rot” (41).

Mac’s next materialist move, a daring one, is to seize on the body of London’s daughter-in-law, who is in labor pain, to win the trust of London and his fellow migrant workers as part of his agitation for a strike in the valley. In seizing Lisa’s laboring body as his “material” to work for the cause of the strike, Mac proves himself not only a quick learner as a midwife in delivering her baby but also a symbolic and psychological materialist. To temporarily get hold of his “material,” Mac first accuses an old woman who is helping Lisa give birth of not qualifying for the job for having dirty broken hands. And he quickly installs himself as a doctor and falsely claims to have some medical training in delivering babies. Once in charge of Lisa’s laboring body, Mac begins to perform the task of delivering the baby for the first time in his life while supervising others to help with the delivery. Equally important, he asks the migrants traveling with London to donate whatever white cloths they can spare to help with Lisa’s birth-giving. The act of donation, though a material act, has both symbolic and psychological effect on the donors, arousing them from their former apathy and allowing them to work together for a common cause. Once the migrants are mobilized to help Lisa give birth to her baby, Steinbeck writes, “A change was in the air. The apathy was gone from the men. . . . A current of excitement filled the jungle” (46). It is under this atmosphere of collective excitement that Mac works on Lisa’s laboring body, his “material,” washing “the legs, and thighs and stomach,” and finally delivers the baby by cutting “the cord with a sterilized pocket-knife” (47).

Mac’s materialist politics, as applied on Lisa’s laboring body, does not end with the baby’s birth, however. After the baby is born, Mac carefully instructs London to burn all the collected cloths not used in Lisa’s birth-giving. Later Mac explains to Jim, his student in organizing the strike, that those unused cloths need to be destroyed and cannot

be returned to their owners because those materials symbolically represent the migrants' contribution to the birth of Lisa's baby, and returning them will hurt the donors' spirit. He adds that: "There's no better way to make men part of a movement than to have them give something to it" (49). Thus exploiting Lisa's laboring body, Mac not only teaches the migrant workers how to work together to help with the birth, but also wins the trust of their leader London, who is to become a leader of the strike.

With Lisa's birth-giving, Mac and Jim insert themselves into the life of the migrant workers traveling with London. Mac's second "break" comes when Old Dan, the bindle-stiff who was with the Wobblies in the Pacific Northwest felling tall trees before becoming a "fruit tramp," falls off a shaky ladder, breaking his hip, while picking apples. Again, exploiting the materials coming his way – the broken ladder and Old Dan's injured body – Mac seizes the event of the fall to jump start the strike, beginning to organize the migrant workers angered by their working conditions for a strike and to rally sympathizers to support it. "He tipped the thing off. We can use him now," Mac says of Old Dan's fall (79). Despite his professed neutrality in class conflict and class struggle, Steinbeck here asks us to look at the ladder from which Old Dan fell to the ground in order to reflect on the workers' working conditions. Gathering at the site where Old Dan fell, some migrant workers begin to shout: "Look at the ladder! That's what they make us work on!" (78). More pickers arrive at the site to look at the "broken ladder" and comment that "[l]ook what they give us to use" (79). Using the broken ladder and Old Dan's broken hip as the "materials" for Mac to harness and channel the workers' anger, Steinbeck proves himself an opportunistic materialist as Mac is. For Steinbeck, the plotting of the strike depends as much on the materials – the body of the migrant – as on his literary imagination.

Steinbeck's materialist politics, however, takes a grotesque turn when Mac the opportunistic materialist plays working-class politics with the bodies of his fallen fellow party workers, Joy and Jim, turning their bodies into symbols of working-class martyrdom to goad the striking migrant pickers to go on fighting against their employers and exploiters. As with the laboring Lisa and injured Old Dan, Mac does not lose time in making a "good" use of a new "material" coming his way even though it turns out to be Joy's body with bullet wounds. After Joy is gunned down by the fascist vigilantes in the

beginning of the strike, Mac immediately tries to make a claim over his dead body to work for the ongoing strike, telling Jim that: “We’ve got to use him to step our guys up, to keep ’em together. This’ll will stick ’em together, this’ll make ’em fight” (129). Joy’s body, while becoming a spectacle as Fahy suggests, quickly becomes a site of fierce ideological and class struggle and, metaphorically speaking, an extension of the battleground of the apple strike when the sheriff under the pay of the valley’s growers also attempts to claim him and paint him as a strike breaker murdered by the strikers. When the body is returned to the striking migrants by the coroner after a medical examination, Mac immediately seeks to put it into a good use, saying “Joy always wanted to lead people, and now he’s going to do it, even if he’s in a box” (131). Justifying his use of Joy’s body, Mac declares that “there’s no such things as good taste” in the struggle against capital (160). In Mac’s cunning materialist calculation which is turning grotesque, Joy’s corpse can still be used as a material to be “looked at” by the strikers, “shoot[ing] some juice” into them to keep them fight together and prolonging the strike for a while (160).

Steinbeck’s materialist politics thus carries a grotesque strain that can “wrench us out of the repose and distance of the ‘aesthetics,’” as Michael Denning says of the proletarian grotesque of the 1930s (123). Steinbeck’s materialist grotesque is best manifested when he shows us the made-over Joy, appearing to be lying peacefully in his coffin. As he describes the dead working-class man, “Joy looked flat and small and painfully clean. He had on a clean blue shirt. . . . His face was composed and rested” (160). But this newly groomed Joy, injected with formaldehyde and without his former “gnawing bitterness,” becomes useless for Mac who schemes to *show* the corpse to the migrant workers at the coming funeral. In Mac’s view, it is no longer feasible to put Joy’s body on a public display because he “looks so comfortable all the guys’ll want to get right in with him” (160-61). Despite his sarcasm, which is tinged with homoeroticism, what Mac leaves unsaid is that a severely beaten-up corpse without the beautification rendered by the mortician will better serve the cause at the funeral. Nevertheless, Mac still exploits the corpse lying in the coffin, strategically placed on a platform for a better viewing, at the funeral to appeal to the strikers to keep on fighting. Speaking eloquently at Joy’s funeral, Mac shouts to the mourning migrants that Joy was a radical, who sought

to help “guys like you to have enough to eat and a place to sleep where you wouldn’t get wet” and who “didn’t want nothing for himself” (177). In his speech, Mac elevates Joy as a martyr who has sacrificed his life for a working-class cause, fighting to have their basic material needs met. Thus, at the funeral Mac manipulatively uses Joy’s body to urge the migrant workers to fight for themselves as well, while giving a new ideological and political meaning to the body of a fallen communist party worker, turning it into a symbol of working-class martyrdom.

The Scandal in the Strike Novel

As Steinbeck relentlessly pursues his materialist politics and the politics of working-class martyrdom, which culminates in Jim’s death in the end of the novel, in depicting and dissecting the strike, he is also rigorously pushing his politics of neutrality through Dr. Burton. Through his portrayal of Dr. Burton, who performs free health and medical care for the strikers and yet refuses to believe in the working-class cause, Steinbeck manifests his non-commitment to the working-class movement in his early engagement with California’s migrant farm labor. Although he does not appear in the novel until Chapter 7, Dr. Burton performs an important ideological function in the strike novel, just as Mac and Jim do. In adopting a non-committed stand in the class struggle between capital and migrant labor, Burton also enunciates a philosophy of group man and mankind’s fatal problem with self-hatred, two ideological outlooks that go completely against Marxist understanding of history and class struggle. However, Steinbeck would abandon those ideological positions held by Burton and embrace, to a large degree, a Marxist conception of class struggle and history in *The Grapes of Wrath* when he took on the cause of the migrant workers full-heartedly.

Burton’s first ideological act in the novel is to proclaim the possibility of *seeing* the apple pickers’ strike in a neutral manner. Insisting on seeing “the whole picture,” he claims that his senses are all he has in observing the strike, and that he is not going to put on the “blindness of ‘good’ and ‘bad’” and thus limit his vision (113). Burton, in some sense, can be said to be a materialist, insisting on observing the strike with his own eyes. But he (or Steinbeck) conveniently forgets that seeing is not only a material act but also an ideological act. That is, seeing – especially seeing the class conflict between capital

and migrant labor – is also mediated by ideology that has its material roots in the social relations of production and class struggle. Burton's assumption to be able to go outside of ideology or do away with it in his seeing of the strike thus is itself ideological and anti-Marxist, to say the least. What Burton wants to see in the strike in the valley is how a group man might act in a collective movement. But he already has a set idea, which is also ideological, on how a group man will act in a collective event. According to Burton, despite the idealist slogans, such as the Holy Land, Democracy and Communism, used to goad the group man to move toward a collective goal, the group as a collective does not care about those ideals, but simply "wants to move, to fight" and uses those appealing words to "reassure the brains" of its individual members (114).

Still the most important ideological act Dr. Burton performs in *In Dubious Battle* is to ascribe a final cause to men and women's material and class struggle in class-divided society, thus allowing Steinbeck to contain the strike narrative.²⁰ Before he is kidnapped by the vigilantes, disappearing from the novel, Burton delivers a rather cynical view of mankind's struggle. He proclaims that

man has engaged in a blind and fearful struggle out of a past he can't remember, into a future he can't foresee nor understand. And man has met and defeated every obstacle, every enemy except one. He cannot win over himself. How mankind hates itself. (199)

Burton's assertion about mankind's unsolvable psychological problem constitutes the scandal of the strike novel for attributing the fundamental contradictions in capitalism – mass production for private accumulation and class exploitation – to mankind's self-hatred. His claim that "mankind hates itself" also underscores the problem of reification in capitalist society, which with its mass production of commodities fosters a reified consciousness that presumes one's ideas or thinking are cut off from the material production and the social relations of production. But his claim does not go uncontested. Jim, whose thinking is being transformed by his involvement with the strike, quickly

²⁰ Jameson claims that some nineteenth-century realists and naturalists engage in "a host of containment strategies, which seek to fold everything which is not-being, desire, hope, and transformational praxis, back into the status of nature" (*Political Unconscious* 193). Steinbeck is doing the same thing in *In Dubious Battle*.

rebukes Burton's claim, reminding the doctor that the migrant workers do not hate themselves, but hate "the invested capital" that has kept them down (199).

In Burton's articulation of mankind's problem with itself, which quietly suspends class exploitation and class contradictions, Steinbeck plants the seed of containment in the narrative on the strike which is soon to peter out without reaching the strikers' goal of getting a raise or winning over the migrants to a revolutionary working-class movement. With Jim's protest that points out capital is the real cause of migrant workers' plight, Steinbeck is able to present a neutral façade in representing the class struggle between migrant workers and capital. But Steinbeck in his early engagement with the migrant farm labor had naively believed he could stand above the fray without taking sides. In his letter to his friend Albee cited above, Steinbeck also wrote, "But man hates something in himself. He has been able to defeat every natural obstacle but himself he cannot win over unless he kills every individual" (*Life in Letters* 98). Burton's view thus echoes Steinbeck's.

Becoming Migrant John

Despite his refusal to take a side in the battle between capital and migrant labor in *In Dubious Battle*, the strike novel nevertheless helped establish Steinbeck as the "literary voice of the California migrants" (French, *Companion* 51). Equally important, it earned him an assignment in August 1936 to investigate the migrant labor situation in California for *San Francisco News*, a liberal and pro-labor newspaper (Benson, *John Steinbeck, Writer* 332). The journalistic investigation resulted in *The Harvest Gypsies*, a seven-part series which the *News* published in October 1936. In the essays, Steinbeck focuses on the white Dust Bowl migrant workers, displaced by the drought and mechanization of farming in the Southwestern plains states (21). He was sympathetic toward those migrant workers, calling them the "new gypsies" who were called into being by "force of circumstances," pointing to their status as "a peon class" in California's agriculture and calling for government measures to alleviate their hardships (19, 22, 23, 58-62). Moreover, Steinbeck notes that the "unique nature of California agriculture requires that these migrants exist, and requires that they move about" to harvest the cash crops (20).

In the second essay in the series, “Squatters’ Camps,” Steinbeck gives a graphic and memorable description of the deplorable living conditions in the Hoovervilles, makeshift tent colonies sprouting up during the Great Depression in California and other states.²¹ A typical “home” for the new Dust Bowl migrants, which was often located nearby the banks of a river or an irrigation ditch to be close to a water source, would look like “a city dump” from a distance because the materials used to build the temporary shelter were picked from the city dumps, and only at a close range it turns out to be a “home,” he informs the reader in a rather cinematic narrative while indicating the ingenuity and resourcefulness of the migrants in using materials found in the city dumps to build a temporary shelter for themselves (26).²² In the same essay, Steinbeck also tells of a compelling story of how a typical migrant family coped with their hardships on the road and how their spirit was being weighted down by their difficult material conditions and family tragedy. In the face of the father and the mother, one can see “absolute terror of the starvation” (27), he writes. For the migrant mother, Steinbeck notes, she bears an extra burden of giving birth while on the road, and, in some cases, she has the misfortune of seeing her young ones dying of malnutrition.

In the last and seventh essay, Steinbeck called for the organization of migrant farm workers for their own protection, and appealed to the middle classes to fight the “armed vigilantism” or “terrorism” used by the large growers to intimidate or terrorize the migrants in the state (60-62).²³ In studying and observing the migrants at a close range for the *San Francisco News* series, Steinbeck gave up the neutral position on the migrants’ struggle against capital he had held while writing *In Dubious Battle*. *The Harvest Gypsies* thus marks a turning point in Steinbeck’s engagement with the migrant farm labor situation in California, showing him as a New Deal reformer promoting the migrants’ interest and human rights.

For Steinbeck, the essays printed in the *San Francisco News* between October 5 and 12, 1936, also helped win him a term of endearment, “Migrant John,” from the

²¹ Steinbeck provided no titles for the essays. The title, “Squatters’ Camps,” was added in the version appearing in *John Steinbeck: America and Americans*, edited by Susan Shillinglaw and Jackson J. Benson.

²² William Howarth discusses Steinbeck’s “narrative shots” that move from “opening wide-angle panoramas” to “close-ups” in his reading of the final chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* (74).

²³ McWilliams discusses the rise of farm fascism in rural California in the 1930s in *Factories in the Field* (230-63).

migrants at Weedpatch camp, a government camp at Arvin set up by the Farm Security Administration for migrant workers.²⁴ Originally, some migrants took offense to the term “gypsies” that Steinbeck used to describe them. Steinbeck later wrote a letter apologizing to the migrants for having offended them and explaining that he had used the term “ironically” because “a huge group of workers should, through the injustice and bad planning of our agricultural system, be forced into a gypsy life” (Benson, “the Man from Weedpatch” 181). The apology as a letter to the editor was published in the *San Francisco News* on October 20, 1936. The camp’s central committee composed of resident migrants responded warmly to Steinbeck’s apology and explanation of his choice of the word “gypsies” to highlight the migrants’ struggle and plight. The committee wrote to Steinbeck thanking him for doing “a fine job” for them in the *San Francisco News* series. In the letter, the migrants also said that their struggle was “a big battle which cannot be won” by themselves and that they needed “friends” like Steinbeck to help them “get decent camp places” (182). Moreover, the central committee also enclosed a hand-made stuffed dog with a tag around its neck which says: “Migrant John” (Fensch 20). Steinbeck displayed this legendary stuffed dog to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter in an interview to demonstrate that the migrants regarded him as a friend. The stuffed animal, Steinbeck said, was made of the migrants’ “shirt-tails or whatever scraps of cloth they could spare” (Fensch 20). As Rick Wartzman notes in *Obscene in the Extreme*, his new book on the banning of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, “Migrant John,” for Steinbeck, is a “hard-earned sobriquet – an appellation that came from years of traveling among the valley’s farm workers, earning their trust, taking in their stories, and, eventually, feeling their anger and making it his own” (75).²⁵

In addition to the *San Francisco News* assignment, another significant event to accelerate Steinbeck’s road to *The Grapes of Wrath* was his participation in February

²⁴ *The Harvest Gypsies* was later reprinted in 1938 by a migrant advocacy group, and was renamed as *Their Blood is Strong*. The cover of the pamphlet was graced by a white migrant mother nursing her child, a photograph shot by Dorothea Lange. Tom Collins, to whom Steinbeck dedicated *The Grapes of Wrath*, was the camp manager at Weedpatch. Steinbeck mined Collins’ camp notes for his 1939 novel (Benson, “the Man from Weedpatch” 173, 187).

²⁵ The author is indebted to Rafaela G. Castro for helping locate the two major references to “Migrant John” cited in the essay. Castro is the author of *Provocaciones: Letters from the Prettiest Girl in Arvin* (2006). Brian St. Pierre in *John Steinbeck: The California Years* also alludes to the “Migrant John” episode (81).

1938 in the rescue of the migrants trapped in a flood at Visalia in Central Valley. The flood and the rescue effort further radicalized Steinbeck, who was incensed at the “fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers” for trying to block government aids from coming to the flood victims by “yelling for a balanced budget” (*Life in Letters* 158). Steinbeck’s experience at Visalia and his investigative reports for the *San Francisco News* thus helped transform him into a migrant labor activist. Consequently, he abandoned his neutral position in the class conflicts between capital and migrant labor, which he adopted in *In Dubious Battle*, and became a compassionate spokesperson for the migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the last volume of his California migrant labor trilogy. *The Grapes of Wrath* thus becomes his protest novel, protesting the harsh living and working conditions of the Dust Bowl migrant workers, or the Okies.²⁶ Zoe Trodd in “Star Signals” places Steinbeck’s 1939 novel in the tradition of protest literature, comparing it to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888), and regarding the novel as doing “cultural work” for the Great Depression (12, 13).²⁷ Robert DeMott in *Steinbeck’s Typewriter* notes that *The Grapes of Wrath* strikes a blow at “the myth of California as Promised Land” and undermines the “prevalent American dream of westering” (193).

Steinbeck’s (Un)conscious Turn to Marx

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck was more politicized and experimental than he had been in *In Dubious Battle*, writing out his political anger at the abuses the migrants suffered in the fields, in shantytowns (Hoovervilles) and within the profit system while exploring a new narrative form. Marxist literary critic Barbara Foley in *Radical Representations* remarks that without John Dos Passos’ *U.S.A.* trilogy, which pioneered the genre of the collective novel, Steinbeck and other proletarian writers of the 1930s would not have written their novels the way they did (425). Steinbeck himself also acknowledged the influence of Dos Passos on his “inter-chapter method” in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Benson; *John Steinbeck, Writer* 399). Structurally, the protest novel is divided

²⁶ In *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*, James N. Gregory provides a thoughtful analysis of the stereotype associated with the label Okie (100-03).

²⁷ Jane Tompkins coins the term “cultural work” in *Sensational Designs* to foreground the critical function of the popular and domestic fiction of the nineteenth-century American fiction (xi-xix).

into two sections: the interchapters that comment on the social, economic, ecological and historical conditions that cause the migration of the Joads and their counterparts to the West, and the fictive chapters that focus on the journey of the Joad family to California and their Utopian desire for a small piece of land and a “white house” in the land of sunshine and oranges. And the two sections unfold dialectically for most of the novel.²⁸ In *Working Days*, the journals he kept while working on the protest novel, Steinbeck discloses his working method for the novel as alternating between “the general” and “the particular” (23). The general chapters or the interchapters underscore Steinbeck’s commitment to the migrant farm laborers’ struggle for better housing and working conditions, his critique of profit-driven capitalism, as well as his (un)conscious turn to Marx and Marx’s materialist understanding of history as the effect of class struggles.

Although Steinbeck was known for his anti-Marxism (Benson; *John Steinbeck, Writer* 341), in *The Grapes of Wrath* his analysis of the dispossession and displacement of the Dust Bowl migrants like the Joads and hundreds and thousands like them is nothing but *Marxian*. To begin with, the way in which Steinbeck moves between the general and the particular chapters can be seen as a simple dialectical method, and it recalls Marx’s dialectical method in analyzing capital, which moves between capital in general and capital in particular.²⁹ To a certain degree, Steinbeck shares an affinity with Marx in terms of their working methods and their critiques of capitalism. But they part company in how to address the “inherent vice,” to use the title of Thomas Pynchon’s 2009 novel detective fiction.³⁰ Marx, of course, in his writings had argued for a radical transformation of capitalism by abolishing wage labor, private property and class exploitation, but Steinbeck, as a New Deal democrat, preferred to seek reform within the profit-system despite its inability to eliminate poverty and class exploitation.

²⁸ For an in-depth study of the interchapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*, see Mary Ellen Caldwell’s essay, “A New Consideration of the Intercalary Chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations: The Grapes of Wrath*, edited by Robert Con Davis. 105-14.

²⁹ In *Grundrisse*, Marx elaborates his method of investigating capital as moving from the abstract to the concrete (101). His method of abstraction thus allows him to conceptualize “capital in general” as well as “many capitals,” or “particular capitals,” that is, capital existing in “various moments” and thus in many “individual forms” (258, 264, 414, 449-50).

³⁰ Pynchon explains the term “inherent vice,” a terminology used in marine insurance, as something that cannot be avoided (*Inherent Vice* 351).

In Chapter 5, one of the many intercalary and polemic chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck describes the collapse of the tenant farming system, which set off a mass migration to the West during the Depression, and makes a strong indictment on capitalism, personifying it as a blood-sucking monster. As Steinbeck writes, after the bank/monster has robbed the land with excess cotton planting, “suck[ing] all the blood out of it” (32), behaving like a vampire, it encloses the profitless land, thus driving small farmers and their tenant farmers off the land and turning some of them into migrant farm workers. In his examination of capitalist agriculture, Marx insightfully notes that “all progress in capitalist agriculture is a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil; all progress in increasing the fertility of the soil for a given time is a progress towards ruining the more long-lasting sources of that fertility” (*Capital* 638). The “human erosion,” as Paul Taylor and Dorothea Lange describe the devastating effect of the severe droughts in the Great Plains states on the society during the Depression in their corroborative book, *An American Exodus* (148), thus cannot be separated from capital’s insatiable drive for profit. Dust Bowl historian Donald Worster also argues that there exists a close link between the Dust Bowl and the Depression, both resulting from capitalism’s economic culture that sees nature as a commodity, as a source of wealth to be exploited on the one hand, and encourages risk-taking in seeking a maximum monetary return on the other (1-8). Furthermore, when the tenant system can no longer produce profits, the bank/monster begins, as Marx and Engels wrote of the revolutionary nature of capital in *The Communist Manifesto*, “revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production” (58), by introducing another monster, the tractor, to replace and thus displace the tenant farmers. As Steinbeck notes, a tractor driver, or a “machine man,” can “take the place of twelve or fourteen” tenant families (33, 116).

The prominent figure in Chapter 5 thus is the figure of the monster, a figure through which Steinbeck explains and indicts the capitalist mode of accumulation, a mode of accumulation David Harvey theorizes as “accumulation by dispossession” (*New Imperialism* 149). As Steinbeck writes, “The bank – the monster has to have profits all the time. It can’t wait. It’ll die. . . . When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can’t stay one size” (32). Driven by profit, the bank/monster thus seeks to exploit the land as much

as it can before the land dies out. When told “you’ll kill the land with cotton,” the bank/monster replies that: “We know. We’ve got to take cotton quick before the land dies. Then we’ll sell the land. Lots of families in the East would like to own a piece of land” (33). What’s so absurd about the bank/monster, Steinbeck says, is that it is a monster created by man who has no control over it (33).

Steinbeck’s analysis of the enclosure of the farm lands, capital’s excessive exploitation of the land and its constant introduction of new technology, and our inability to control the monster/capital we have created thus echoes Marx’s rigorous analysis of capital and its mode of production and accumulation. Interestingly, Marx in *Capital* has described capital in its valorization (accumulation) process as both an “animated monster” and a “vampire.” Of the metamorphosis of money into commodity in the labor process, Marx writes that “the capitalist simultaneously transforms value, i.e. past labour in its objectified and lifeless form, into capital, value which can perform its own valorization process, an animated monster which begins to ‘work,’ ‘as if its body were by love possessed’” (302). Some 40 pages later, he also notes that: “Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (342). Despite Steinbeck’s resentment to be linked to Marxism, the spirit of Marx does haunt *The Grapes of Wrath*, and the haunting thus constitutes the political unconscious of the protest novel.

Significantly, Steinbeck’s conception of man in *The Grapes of Wrath* differs dramatically from the version he offered in *In Dubious Battle* – that “mankind hates itself” – and moves toward Marx’s articulation of man in *Capital* who reproduces itself through labor and exchange with nature. In Chapter 14, one of the polemic, editorial and general chapters, Steinbeck articulates a new understanding of man, whom he defines as “muscles aching to work, minds aching to create beyond the single need” (150). This is a rather historical materialist understanding of man, which he derived from his experience of working with the migrants in the fields while on the *San Francisco News* assignment and from his experience with the flood victims at Visalia. Steinbeck goes on to say, “For man, unlike any other thing organic or inorganic in the universe, grows beyond his work, walks up the stairs of his concepts, emerges ahead of his accomplishments” (150). In this new articulation, Steinbeck also abandons the marine biology philosophy he shared with

his close friend Edward Ricketts. The new man Steinbeck invokes here uncannily echoes Marx's conception of man who in the labor process exchanges with nature and, in so doing, changes his or her human nature (*Capital* 283). Moreover, Marx argues that even the "worst architect" in man is an abler one than "the best of bees" because he or she "builds the cell in his [or her] mind before he [or she] constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally" (*Capital* 284). The haunting of Marx in *The Grapes of Wrath* thus goes beyond Steinbeck's analysis and indictment of capitalism, as I argued earlier, but goes deeper. The haunting begins with Steinbeck's reconception of man as a man of labor fulfilling its needs, both physical and spiritual, and in a dialectical exchange with nature. In a rather Marxian move, Steinbeck also notes that "[n]eed is the stimulus to concept, concept to action" (152).

It is also in Chapter 14 that the migrants, as Steinbeck conceptualizes them, have begun to grow out of their former individual self, the "I," and have begun to see themselves as a collective, as a "we." This dramatic subjectivity transformation from "I" to "we," or the multiplication effect, signals Steinbeck's ability to see the Dust Bowl migrants as an oppressed class, driven off their farm lands by the bank/monster and the machine/tractor. In doing so, he expands his analytical framework to focus on the question of history and class struggles. Steinbeck also begins to warn the capitalist owners that if they know that "Paine, Marx, Jefferson, Lenin, were results, not causes" they might survive (152; italics mine). Indeed, the haunting of Marx and his critical analysis of capitalism, which foregrounds its exploitative social relations of production and periodic economic and social crises, in *The Grapes of Wrath* is the results, and not causes, of capitalism.

Yet the haunting of Marx and his conception of history as "the history of class struggles" (*Communist Manifesto* 55) in the protest novel reaches another high point in Chapter 19, another general chapter, when Steinbeck sounds like Marx in critiquing the concentration of wealth and lands in the hands of the few in capitalism, underscoring the plight of the dispossessed migrants, as well as warning the large owners of the rebellions of the oppressed in history. Again, addressing the "great owners," Steinbeck warns them of "three cries of history":

when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. (238)

But the “great owners” willingly ignore history and let “the causes of revolt” go on unaddressed. And Steinbeck warns darkly that every time the deputies, working for the owners, raid a Hooverville, they help to cement “the inevitability of the day [the revolt]” (238). In effect, Steinbeck’s (un)conscious absorption of Marxism, or his Americanization of Marx, in the protest novel only confirms Marx’s unrelenting critique of capitalism and its fundamental and inherent contradiction: mass production of commodities for private accumulation. This “inherent vice” of capitalism is manifested in the Great Depression of the 1930s, the current Great Recession of the twenty-first century, and many other capitalist crises between these two landmark events.

Protest and Containment

The roots of *The Grapes of Wrath* can be traced back to *In Dubious Battle* (Benson; *John Steinbeck, Writer* 342), but because Steinbeck had become the migrants’ ally advocating their civil and human rights by the time he wrote the last volume of the migrant labor fiction in 1938, he thus had a new and compassionate approach to his migrants. This change of heart is reflected in his view toward the strike and the way in which he used the migrant’s body in the protest novel. He no longer rejected striking as the migrants’ means of bargaining in their battle against capital. Writing in the journal he kept while composing *The Grapes of Wrath*, he reminded himself of the importance of the strike at the Hooper Ranch where the Joads unknowingly work as scabs in their desperate attempt to find any job in California’s orchards. “This little strike [at the Hooper Ranch]. Must win it. Must be full of movement, and it must have the fierceness of the strike. And it must be won,” he jots down (*Working Days* 79). More important, he does not employ the body of the migrant worker to underscore the ruthlessness of the communist strike organizer as he did with Mac in *In Dubious Battle*; he instead uses the

body as a weapon to protest the migrants' harsh living and working conditions. Ironically, in *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck seems to adopt Mac's materialist politics in *In Dubious Battle*, only to use "any material" to promote the migrants' rights.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck gives a prominent treatment to the figure of the migrant mother in Ma Joad and Rose of Sharon, compared with Lisa in *In Dubious Battle*. But he has a different design for Ma Joad, the matriarch and backbone of the Joad family, and for her daughter Rose of Sharon, who is expecting a baby in the beginning of the Joads' odyssey to California and ends up delivering a still-born baby at the end of the novel. Through Ma Joad, Steinbeck portrays the dispossessed migrants' Utopian desire to have a new home in the land of sunshine and oranges. Before the Joads leave for California after being "dusted out" and "tractored out" (233), Ma Joad expresses her longing to have "a white house" of her own in California. As she tells her Utopian dream: "But I like to think how nice it's gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold, An' fruit ever'place, an' people just bein' in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees. I wonder . . . maybe we can get one of them little white houses" (91). It is with this Utopian dream of having a "white house with oranges growin' around" (148), an idyllic image she has seen on a calendar, that Ma Joad embarks on her journey to California where she soon discovers that Okies, like her, are being treated with contempt for being willing to work for less than the going labor market rate. Nevertheless, for Steinbeck, Ma Joad represents the spirit of the new migrants in California, the "new race" of white Americans he describes in *The Harvest Gypsies* (22). On the Joads' way out of the Hooverville in Bakersfield, which will soon be burnt down by the local police doing the bidding of the large growers, and on their way to highway 99 to seek agricultural employment in California along that route, Ma Joad stoically declares that "we're the people that live. They ain't gonna wipe us out. Why, we're the people – we go on" (280).

As a realist documenting the struggle and plight of one white migrant family, the Joads, who symbolize the three hundred thousand migrants displaced by the Dust Bowl, dispossessed by capitalist mechanization of farming and migrating to California en masse, Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* also engages in containing the anger and fury the migrant farm workers feel for being exploited and oppressed by the profit-driven system. He does so through the figure of a nursing migrant mother, Rose of Sharon.

Unlike Lisa in *In Dubious Battle*, whose laboring body is being exploited by Mac the strike organizer to rally the migrant workers to work together for a common cause, Rose of Sharon performs a double symbolic function for Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In appropriating Rose of Sharon's maternal body and her still-born child, Steinbeck can be said to be acting like Mac as a calculating materialist. Although Rose of Sharon gives birth to a still-born child, the dead baby, for Steinbeck, becomes a means of protest, protesting against the plight of the migrant farm laborers who suffer from chronic malnutrition and chronic underemployment. After the baby is found born dead during a torrential rain, Pa Joad asks Uncle John to bury the child, now put away in an apple box. However, Uncle John changes his mind and instead sets the box carrying the still-born child inside into the stream coursing along the highway. He also delivers those lines of protest while letting go the makeshift coffin: "Go down an' tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. *That's the way you can talk*" (448; italics mine). What Uncle John (or Steinbeck) does with the still-born child here resembles what Mac does with Joy's body: each has to perform his job even if they are "in a box." The body of Rose of Sharon's still-born baby thus becomes Steinbeck's strategic "material" to goad the conscience of the society, which allows the migrant farm workers to suffer from hunger, malnutrition and misery. But as Morris Dickstein points out, it would take the sufferings of the *white* Dust Bowlers to make Americans see the plight of the farm workers including Mexicans and Filipinos ("Steinbeck" 117).

Before this protest episode, Steinbeck has loudly protested why "children dying of pellagra must die" (349). The answer, as he gives in Chapter 25, an angry, polemic, general chapter, is: profit, which lies behind the glaring contradiction of surplus and waste among unmet needs in California's valleys (Cunningham, par. 32). Steinbeck starts this famous chapter by noting that "[t]he spring is beautiful in California" (346), but he soon shows why in the midst of the blossoming fruits in the valleys, there are million hungry people with unmet needs, which in his eye is a crime that defies denunciation, a sorrow that cannot be symbolized with weeping, and a failure that undermines all success (349). The mass hunger is allowed to happen because, as Steinbeck angrily points out, "a profit cannot be taken from an orange" (349). Under such a circumstance, he warns the wrath of the hungry migrants is growing.

How does Steinbeck, who intended *The Grapes of Wrath* as “a call for solidarity” from a middle-class position to the reader (Cunningham, par. 28), resolve the wrath of a million hungry migrants? Well, strategically he finds the solution in Rose of Sharon’s maternal body. Or it is more accurate to say that he engages in a strategy of containment in having Rose of Sharon breastfeed a starving man who has not had food for six days. With a mysterious smile, Rose of Sharon, the nursing migrant mother, performs for Steinbeck a *deus ex machina*, saving him from further dealing with the wrath of the hungry migrants who he has suggested might revolt when they can no longer endure their exploitation and oppression under capitalism. But with her one act of human kindness, the system of profit and exploitation of wage labor remains unchanged. Thus, with Rose of Sharon’s maternal body and her still-born child, Steinbeck uses the body of the migrant mother to underscore the plight of the migrant farm workers as well as to contain the more militant class struggle.

In *Orange Empire: California and the Fruits of Eden*, California historian Douglas Cazaux Sackman draws our attention to a cover of a Visalia migratory labor camp newsletter, *The Hub*, while discussing the plight of the migrant farm workers in Depression-era California. The cover depicts an agricultural worker stepping on a ladder leaned against a tree and trying to reach the tree endowed with fruits of ideas that the worker hopes to harvest in California agriculture: respect, honesty, tolerance, understanding, neighborliness and peace (260-61). The newsletter produced by workers in the migratory camp at Visalia, where Steinbeck was involved in rescuing the flood victims more than a year earlier, was issued shortly before Christmas in 1939. Moreover, under the tree of ideas, a crate filled with fruits bears this Christmas message: “Peace on Earth” and “Good Will Toward Men.” Yet this simultaneous ideological and Utopian impulse of the migrant farm workers is put into question because the artist also put a question mark after the word, IDEALISM, placed above the head of the fruit picker. From *In Dubious Battle* to *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck underscores the struggle and plight of white migrant farm workers during the Depression, thus allowing us to understand why the California Dream of the picker in the *Hub* cannot be fully realized within the profit-driven capitalism. Although Steinbeck’s radicalism in *The Grapes of Wrath* stops short of calling for the overthrow of capitalism, as Marx had done in his own

time, the legacy of the 1939 protest novel is to make visible the deplorable living and working conditions of migrant farm workers. Moreover, as Alexander Saxton reminds us in his essay commemorating Steinbeck's centennial in 2002, if we continue to fail the migrant farm workers wherever they are, then we will be "storing grapes of wrath on a global scale" (262).

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