

Rethinking the Politics of *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Paradoxically, *The Grapes of Wrath* is both an exemplary radical analysis of the exploitation of agricultural workers and the culmination in the thirties of an implicitly racist focus on whites as victims. The novel scarcely mentions the Mexican and Filipino migrant workers who dominated the California fields and orchards into the late thirties, instead implying that Anglo-Saxon whites were the only subjects worthy of treatment. This focus also seems to join contemporary journalistic representations in mythologizing the Okies as quintessential American pioneers -- an ideological convention that resonated with the implicit white supremacism of Jeffersonian agrarianism and of manifest destiny.¹ Yet, the novel also attacks the very assumptions about private property and class difference on which the social order rests ideologically. Far from being merely racist, it presents one of the most radical critiques of the social order in all of popular -- and canonical -- literature. Thus, its political intervention was -- and is -- contradictory. In fact, *The Grapes of Wrath* (along the Okie mythology in general) arguably became a site of confrontation between the thirties anti-capitalist consciousness and the American racist tradition -- between manifest destiny and manifest exploitation and dispossession.

Ironically, we can see vestiges of this confrontation in comparing recent criticism of the novel with its reception in 1939. Michael Denning has lately remarked the implicit racism of *The Grapes of Wrath* in his encyclopedic account of thirties left cultural production, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* -- a work that has been reshaping the field. For Denning, the novel is not typical of the Popular Front cultural production he celebrates, because it is imbued with "racial populism" -- in contrast with what he sees as the PF's nascent multiculturalism. Yet, this is a view that was apparently unavailable to critics during the thirties, when racial essentialism was only recently coming to be understood as racist.² They instead emphasized the novel's critique of capitalism. On the left, Granville Hicks's 1939 review in *The New Masses* declared *The Grapes of Wrath* an exemplary proletarian novel, noting that Steinbeck's "insight into capitalism illuminates every chapter of the book." He went on to remark that "No writer of our time has a more acute sense of economic forces, and of the way they operate against the interests of the masses of the people." In contrast, Denning never mentions the implicit Marxism in the novel.³ He is more than sympathetic with leftists, but from his point of view, the triumph of the thirties and of the Popular Front was to have working class people become cultural workers and enter the culture industries. For him, the "laboring" of American culture means that the working class came to be included as both subjects and producers of culture. Questions about what it means to be compelled to sell one's labor power or to be co-opted against one's class interests -- hardly an unlikely scenario in big business cultural production -- drop out of his analysis.

My contrast of Hicks and Denning is intended to prompt questions about what a current left analysis of the thirties should look like. Hicks, the thirties leftist, well-recognized *The Grapes of Wrath*'s condemnation of the capitalist mode of production (as did many mainstream reviewers⁴), but, like most of his contemporaries, was blind to the novel's racism. Denning, our contemporary leftist, sees the racism, but not the anti-capitalism. I would argue that neither perspective is adequate as left analysis: missing the racism means failing to realize that a working class divided by race cannot change the world; on the other hand, to ignore the impact of capital accumulation on workers is to misunderstand why workers need to band together in the first place -- across race and other lines. Denning's analysis is in many ways more troubling because it fails to draw on the knowledge of thirties leftists; rather than offering supplemental and corrective critiques that would invigorate our current knowledge of the relationship between class and race, his book seems to forget the Depression's radical challenge. Instead, I believe that *The Grapes of Wrath* in effect wrestles with the contradiction between a radical class politics and American racial nationalism. Understanding how the novel deals with that contradiction may help us to better understand the class/race relationship today.

Here, I will begin by trying to place the novel's cultural intervention in historical context, first by assessing its relationship to other popular accounts of the "Okie" migration, then by giving an account of the labor struggles in California agriculture up to that point. Finally, I will look at Steinbeck's 1936 reportage of the migrant problem and contrast its politics with the novel's. According to Denning, the novel reproduces the

racial nationalism of the reporting, a charge I will argue is reductive given a careful reading of both.

Most people remember the cause of the Okie migration as the Dust Bowl disaster, which took place in the Great Plains states. According to this narrative, the soil literally blew away during the great drought of the mid-thirties because the plains should never have been cultivated in the first place. The resulting dust storms of topsoil left some areas buried and others denuded, generally rendering farming impossible and causing the agrarian inhabitants to have to migrate. This version was attractive to the press because the Dust Bowl and drought were spectacular and, as represented, were often uncomplicated by reference to power relations. Margaret Bourke-White photographed dust storms for *Fortune* in October of 1934, wrote about them for *The Nation* (22 May 1935), and many other magazines reported the story, often with accompanying photographs. *Life* ran gruesome photographs of desiccated animals and cracked earth (4 Jan. 1937), followed a few months later by Alexandre Hogue's forlorn drought and dust paintings (21 June 1937).⁵ The early reports of the Dust Bowl did not connect it strongly with the California migration, but most did by the late thirties.

A paradigmatic example of the "dust" explanation was offered in Pare Lorentz's documentary film *The Plow That Broke the Plains*, made for the Resettlement Administration in 1936. As titles announce from the start, the film's focus is not so much the migrants; instead, it is "a story of land, soil -- rather than people." The narrator notes that the westward march across the continent brought cattle-grazing to the Great Plains and later the plow. Then, millions of acres of grassland were planted with crops in order to make as much profit as possible. At this point, and throughout the rest of the film, the narrator ominously declares that this cultivation took place in a land of "high winds and sun." The film then remarks the coincidence between the replacement of the horse drawn plow with the tractor and World War I's extraordinarily high demand for wheat. A counterposing montage of military tanks marching across the battlefields and tractors marching across the plains suggests that both technologies are destructive. Indeed, after the war boom, drought follows and the soil begins to blow away, unchecked by its native grass cover. Towards the end of the film, migrants in their old cars are seen fleeing the dust storms and arriving "blown out, baked out, and broke" in California. The narrator tells us that 30,000 people a day are moving west and that sun and wind are responsible.

The film identifies technology and a drive for profits as complicit in breaking the plains. Yet both forces are disembodied; technology is without human agents, as is the profit drive. As a critique, this aspect of the film resembles what might be called the "man's folly" genre, attributing problems to humanity in general, erasing class interests and complex histories. In this genre, there is no distinction between the tenant farmer and the conglomerate in based in Chicago that he or she might ultimately work for. But overall the film primarily relies on the "wind and sun" analysis, leaving the migrants as helpless victims of natural forces.⁶ A drawing over which the closing credits roll depicts covered wagons and pioneers marching up a long hill, not in Sisyphean misery, but in steadfast progress. The explanation offered little insight into the migration, and by focusing on the past, offered little in the way of solution to the present problem.

It is important to note that the mythology of the Okie migration actually involved two distinct, but related problems. The outmigration of people from the Southwest, South, and upper Midwest to California was an ongoing twentieth century phenomenon that received the most public notoriety in the thirties. On the other hand, the migrant labor problem in California dated back to the mid-nineteenth century but also became famous in the thirties. As for the westward migration, James Gregory notes that it came in three major phases: the teens and twenties, the Depression years, and during and after World War II (3-35). Of these three, the thirties period was perhaps the largest, and the one that concerns us here. Challenging previous assumptions, Gregory convincingly argues that refugees from the dust bowl accounted for only six percent of the southwestern migrants to California, and he reminds us that only the panhandle of Oklahoma was in the dust area (which encompassed mainly eastern Colorado, western Kansas, eastern New Mexico, and the Texas panhandle) (11).

The reasons for the outmigration from the principal feeder states, Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri are complex, but a few main ones can be discerned. The first is directly related to the collapse of the tenant system, which pushed people off the land and into cities and towns while impoverishing those who stayed on farms. The Depression exacerbated the collapse because the non-agricultural industries of the urban areas slowed down considerably, greatly hindering the absorption of displaced agricultural workers. The land retirement policies of the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) furthered that displacement, as did the mechanization of farming, which was more pronounced in the Southwest than in the old South. The drought of the mid-thirties -- the worst in a century -- only worsened conditions for the working people of the region, an area where unemployment was higher than the already soaring national average (Gregory 14).

Contrary to the Okie mythology, not all the migrants were farmers, who actually composed slightly less than half the total. The next largest segments were workers from cities and towns, although many of these may have been recently displaced rural people (17). Gregory also argues that the migration was not the result only of the push of economic crisis, but the pull of California. The image of the state as a paradise had been well-marketed for years and its economy had mushroomed since the turn of the century. California growers also advertised for agricultural labor in the outmigrating states, if perhaps to a lesser degree than the myth usually suggests. Thus, Gregory surmises that choice was a critical element of the migration.

While Gregory rejects a narrow determinism -- be it economic or meteorological -- it is important to note the extent to which choices are determined -- have their limits set -- by structural conditions.⁷ As the older structures such as tenancy collapsed because of internal contradictions, or because they failed to generate enough capital, they were pushed aside or abandoned, leaving displaced and dispossessed workers to try to attach themselves to the other sites of accumulation -- in this case, California industry and agribusiness.

Once in California, the story of the migration westward becomes distinct from that of

the migrant farmworkers who were Okies. In general, the southwesterners tended to migrate towards the kinds of locales they had come from; city and town dwellers predominantly settled in the Los Angeles area and most of the farm people headed into the agricultural San Joaquin Valley (Gregory 36-77). The latter area became the principal locus of the mythical Dust Bowl Okie and of *The Grapes of Wrath*. If the migrants began with dreams of sharing the wealth of the great agricultural valleys by eventually becoming small landowning farmers, what they found was an entrenched corporate agribusiness that mocked agrarian myths. As Cletus Daniel documents, California agriculture since the latter half of the nineteenth century had been controlled by large growers who banded together in corporate cooperatives to dominate the industry. Ownership of the grower corporations often rested with banks, utilities, and other investment companies, and thus the farms themselves were often absentee-owned and managed by corporate employees. Even smaller farmers were under the sway of the large growers, because the latter's connection with the banking industry meant that they controlled credit -- a necessity for farming. The corporate growers also effectively set wages and determined the character of working conditions throughout the industry. Dissenting farmers could be bullied by banks, or sometimes squeezed out of business by large growers with vertical operations that included processing, canning, distribution, and shipping.⁸ Thus, it becomes clear that the title of Carey McWilliams's history of California agriculture, *Factories in the Field*, was not merely a simile but an apt description.⁹

The conditions for agricultural laborers were as bad or worse as those for southern tenant farmers and sharecroppers. While there were small permanent workforces on California farms, the vast majority of the labor was needed at harvest time, and was performed by migrant laborers who followed the crops as they matured over a six-month harvest season. By the 1930s, the pay and working conditions had both been terrible for at least sixty years. Migrant workers had few possessions, lived in substandard company housing or in makeshift camps, and had to provide their own transportation -- usually ancient "jalopies." Their children had limited or no access to schools, and they had little healthcare, making malnutrition and preventable diseases common.

The ethnic makeup of the migrant workforce changed over the years, but the groups involved usually had in common that they were minorities not considered citizens of the United States -- or at least *proper* citizens. As "aliens," they were thus particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Before the Civil War, Native Americans were the first group to dominate the workforce, because the black slavery advocated by some growers was politically untenable in California. Native Americans were followed by Chinese immigrants, who were followed by the Japanese. By the 1920s, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans were the majority, with a significant Filipino minority. As Daniel recounts, growers initially felt that Mexican workers were attractive because their vulnerability would make them docile.¹⁰ Natives of Mexico could be readily deported at government expense and Americans of Mexican descent could be fraudulently deported. Nevertheless, this hoped-for docility quickly disappeared under the "nearly intolerable" conditions in the industry (Daniel 26). Work stoppages and spontaneous strikes were not uncommon and intensified with the onset of the Great Depression. Growers anxious

about reduced profits decided to extract the difference from workers, who responded with "angry militancy" (68). Into this contentious situation stepped the Communist Party-sponsored Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU), which after faltering first steps garnered an excellent record of organizing between 1929 and 1934. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) had traditionally thought migrant labor too difficult to organize, but the majority Mexican and Filipino workers proved committed unionists.

In response both to this militancy and to the general surplus of workers produced by Depression conditions, a sentiment rose in the state to deport Mexican and Filipino workers. Anti-immigrant racism was mobilized as a false palliative for unemployment, and as a result, about one third of the Mexican and Filipino populations of the U.S. were deported or repatriated between 1931 and 1934 (Ruiz 8, 51). While the threat of deportation made life precarious for migrant farmworkers, other factors also undermined the union movement of the early thirties. California had an anti-syndicalism statute that made labor organizing very difficult; under its auspices, several of the best CAWIU leaders were prosecuted and served years in prison before finally winning appeals and being released (see Daniel, especially 252-55). The unconstitutional law took good organizers out of the field and had a dampening affect overall. Then, in late 1934, the Communist Party disbanded the CAWIU in the shift to its new Popular Front strategy, which called for CP labor activists to work within existing unions in order to radicalize them. Unfortunately, in California agriculture there were virtually no other unions interested in organizing farmworkers, and the AFL consistently colluded with growers (Daniel 274). Thus, a heretofore effective statewide union movement was abandoned, not to be seriously resumed until the CIO-affiliated United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) was founded in 1937. Yet, UCAPAWA was less effective in organizing migrant workers than the CAWIU, because it concentrated its efforts in the canneries and processing plants.[11](#)

Another development that set back the farmworker cause was the growers' formation of the Associated Farmers in 1934. If they had been a formidable force before then, the AF became the vehicle by which the growers suppressed workers and controlled the countryside even more thoroughly. Under AF auspices, vigilante armies were formed, workers were beaten and killed, law enforcement was more thoroughly co-opted, and growers hesitant to go along were threatened. When contemporary observers like Steinbeck and McWilliams labeled the AF "fascist," the description was justified. Whenever a strike broke out or worker unrest seemed to be on the rise, the AF could quickly mobilize managers, thugs, and hostile townspeople into an armed force. Many groups actually drilled in formal paramilitary units. It was into this extraordinarily hostile situation that the Okie migrants entered. Migrant workers were subjected to some of the worst wage and labor conditions the United States had to offer. Moreover, the Okies -- like evicted tenant farmers and the workers who were being deported -- were homeless in a hostile land; they had little or no refuge. The white Okies would even find themselves racialized as inferior to other whites as we shall see.

Though the conditions for field workers in California changed little in sixty or seventy

years, attention to their suffering was late in coming. When the American Civil Liberties Union tried to get *The Nation* and *The New Republic* -- two of the era's leading left-of-center publications -- to write articles about the suspension of the constitution during the 1930 lettuce strike in the Imperial Valley, the magazines declined, believing the story minor (Daniel 178). There was more reportage in the liberal press after the middle of the decade -- McWilliams, for example, wrote several articles for *The Nation* -- but it was not until the white Okies were involved that the story became nationally known. When whites were subjected to fascist conditions, the story became more than just a "labor dispute." Because mythic yeoman farmers were involved, so were the agrarian mythologies of American exceptionalism and their prerequisite white supremacism. If these quintessential Americans could be treated as badly as Mexicans and Filipinos, then Anglo-Saxon white supremacism, an ideological bulwark of US capitalism, was threatened. The worst depredations of California agribusiness had before then been concealed or sanctioned by white supremacism, which effectively blamed non-whites for their own oppression. The Okies thus highlighted the ideological contradiction between the inalienable rights of American whites to freedom and prosperity, and the rights of growers to exploit whomever they could. The Okie mythology became the site on which this struggle played out.

The contradiction the Okies posed to white supremacy was often subsumed by the "dust and drought" explanation, as we have seen in *The Plow That Broke the Plains*. This narrative saved the Okies -- and the social order -- from blame for their condition, because they could not be expected to control nature. The "pioneer" invocation also tended to erase the social problem by turning the Okies into symbols of America's heritage and then wishing them happily on their way. Yet, Steinbeck (like McWilliams and others) had a lot to do with keeping migrant suffering -- not merely the migrant symbol -- public. In his October 5-12, 1936 series of articles for the *San Francisco News* (collected as *The Harvest Gypsies*), Steinbeck repeated the "dust and drought" explanation, but did not dwell there, choosing to focus instead on what was happening to the Okies in California. While more nuanced and politically to the left of the mainstream, the analysis in Steinbeck's series seemed to assume Anglo-Saxon white supremacism. As was true with most representations of California agricultural labor after the white workers became a majority, Steinbeck's excluded non-white workers -- despite the fact that when the articles were published, the displacement of non-white workers was "by no means total" (Wollenberg xi).¹²

The Harvest Gypsies series articulates, in effect, a rationale for why Anglo-Saxon whites should dominate accounts of the migrant problem. In the first article, Steinbeck states that his focus will be on the "dust bowl refugees," because they are rapidly replacing deported Mexicans and Filipinos (21). Yet, his analysis does not merely register a quantitative shift in the composition of the workforce, but a qualitative one as well, describing "a new kind of migrant" (20). The Mexican and Filipino workers were "drawn from a peon class" and presumably were "migrants by nature" (22). The Okies, on the other hand, are "Old Americans," "resourceful and intelligent Americans" who have experienced owning their own land (22). "They are the descendants of men who crossed into the middle west, who won their land by fighting," which confirms that "they are

gypsies by force of circumstances" rather than birth (22). The nationalities from which they originate are all Nordic: "English, German, and Scandinavian descent" (23).

The reason their racial lineage is important, according to Steinbeck, is because it will prevent the growers from abusing them as they did the "peons." "With this new race, the old methods of repression, of starvation wages, of jailing, beating and intimidation are not going to work: these are American people" (23). (It is little wonder that when the Simon J. Lubin organization -- a group of migrants' rights supporters -- published the series as a pamphlet in 1938, it was entitled *Their Blood is Strong*.) On the one hand, Steinbeck seems to be arguing that class exploitation will be exposed for what it really is once the confrontation is clearly between white owners and white workers; on the other hand, he elides the class nature of the problem by arguing implicitly that other races are more amenable to being exploited than whites. And of course, he leaves out the fact that the "peons" had proved militant workers -- arguably better unionists than the Okies would become (Wollenberg, xii). One could speculate that Steinbeck refers to a *heritage* of fighting and dissent, rather than a racial *inheritance*. He notes that the new migrants are accustomed to local popular democracies based on the "old agrarian, self-containing farm," where "industrialization never penetrated" (23). When thrust into California agribusiness, they will presumably respond with the independence they are accustomed to. However, he consistently names "race" as the primary agent of this hoped-for migrant militancy.

The second article describes conditions in the makeshift "squatters" camps or "Hoovervilles" common to the roadsides in the agricultural valleys. Steinbeck identifies three categories of Okie families, each in a stage of despair directly correlating with the amount of years they have been in the state. In a pathos-heavy tone, he notes that those having been there the longest are surrounded by "filth," are wearing "foul clothing," and are possessed of a paralyzing resignation. He graphically describes a scene in which fruit flies try to feed on the mucus in a torpid child's eyes (30). The article thus seems to contradict Steinbeck's prediction that the Okies will not stand for their oppression; he depicts no one fighting back.

The third article focuses on the power of the growers over the workers, detailing the existence of armed guards at the company camps, payment in company scrip usable only at high-priced company stores, and the thoroughgoing complicity of legal authorities in these ostensibly private enterprises. He sums up the process of grower control as a "system of terrorism that would be unusual in the fascist nations of the world" (37). In contrast, the fourth article describes the migrant camps run by the federal Resettlement Administration. Prefiguring a similar contrast made in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the "fascism" of the grower camps is countered by the "experiments in natural and democratic self-government" existing in the RA camps. However, as if to be in tune with middle-class morality and propriety, Steinbeck observes that no one is on relief at the camp he visits. In fact, he relates, the self-governing committees have expelled a family who applied for relief; moreover, the reputation of the camp is that its "men are better workers" than average (41). Their hygiene is also excellent: "the people are of good American stock who have proved that they can maintain an American standard of living.

The cleanliness and lack of disease in the two experimental camps are proof of this" (43). These observations implicitly divide workers into the good, clean group that will not accept relief, and the unhygienic, lazy, often non-white one that will -- in other words, the worthy or unworthy poor. These categories -- which were common to representations of the poor in the thirties¹³ -- inherently create a distance between poor worker and middle-class reader, one from which the middle-class reaction would likely be sympathy, or its repressed other, contempt. In fact, the need to remind readers continually of the worthy qualities of the migrants also keeps alive doubts that they might be unworthy.

Paradoxically, the fifth article in the series demonstrates that the available relief is woefully inadequate. While the previous article never mentions health problems as a possible reason for needing relief, this one chronicles the history of a family in which both parents have been laid up with illness and injury. Steinbeck shifts attention away from the workers' worthiness or unworthiness and onto the outrageous conditions they are suffering. The family trying to get on relief lost a son to a burst appendix after a doctor gave him an incompetent, but expensive, examination (47). As Steinbeck notes of the migrants generally, "even in the flush times the possibility of remaining healthy is very slight"; their diet is so meager as to produce malnutrition and related diseases (49). The analysis here shows that whether or not individual migrants are hard workers is a moot question at best.

The sixth article returns to platitudes about how the growers' methods will not work on "our own people," Anglo-Saxon whites; yet contradictorily, it first recounts the history of resistance among Mexican and Filipino workers. While calling both groups "peons," and the Filipinos "little brown men," he argues that the primary reason they are being replaced in the fields is because they had "attempted to organize" (55). Thus, a contradiction in his evidence looms large; the peons who will accept a miserable lot by nature are being deported for organizing, while the strong-blooded whites are falling into despair. None of the articles resolves this contradiction.

The final installment lists reform proposals for solving the migrant problem. Steinbeck advocates setting aside federal lands in California for subsistence farms for migrant workers, who could buy the land on "long time payments" or rent it cheaply (58). The migrants could work in growers' fields during the harvest, and live off their own produce in the slack seasons. He maintains that farmers' subsistence crops "should be arranged so that they do not conflict with the demand for migratory labor" (59); then their farms can be "managed during the harvest season by women," leaving the men to do the migrant labor (59). The subsistence farms will receive government assistance in health care, sanitation, and "scientific farming." They will be self-governing, giving the farmers experience with "social responsibility" so that they might be "restored to the rank of citizens" (59). Another element of the proposed plan is that farm workers should be "encouraged and helped to organize" into unions to self-advocate, to protect themselves, and to "intelligent[ly]" distribute labor (60). To help insure that unionization can be accomplished, Steinbeck suggests the formation of a "migratory labor board," which would ultimately function like the longshoremen's hiring halls and would also set wage minimums. Simultaneously, the state will begin prosecuting the "deadly fascistic groups"

-- meaning the Associated Farmers -- under the same criminal anti-syndicalism laws used against labor organizing. Finally, Steinbeck argues that to monitor the reforms will require a "militant and watchful organization of middle-class people, workers, teachers, craftsmen, and liberals to fight [the fascistic forces] and . . . to maintain this state in a democratic form" (62). He warns that not undertaking these reforms may cause the Okies to become "an army driven by suffering and hatred to take what they need" (62).

The solutions offered would not have hurt the cause of migrant labor, but they display the middle-class condescension for the poor evident throughout the series. The subsistence farms resemble finishing schools for the rough Okies, who apparently have trouble taking care of themselves -- in spite of their ostensible racial advantages. Nor does the solution address the difficulty of arranging crops around agribusiness schedules or of having the older males leave the households for long periods. Moreover, the plan assumes that the family is the requisite -- not just normative -- unit of labor, which would leave out singles or non-traditional partnering (an example of which would be, ironically, Lennie and George from *Of Mice and Men*). The make-up of the "watchdog" group -- a notion that already assumes a middle-class gaze -- is heavy with "respectable" types and notably excludes leftists, those who had most closely struggled with migrant workers. The picture painted is not so much one of poor and middle-class workers coming together, but of a paternal stewardship. Despite some vacillations on Steinbeck's part at moments, the analysis in *The Harvest Gypsies* articles is mired in the worthy/unworthy worker ideology, the assumptions of which effectively make fundamental change impossible. Because the plan essentially leaves the growers in control, the watchdogs would essentially be policing a somewhat more benign version of the status quo, with the migrants becoming a kind of managed underclass.

Though public awareness of migrant suffering was growing, it became ubiquitous with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* in the spring of 1939. Although Denning asserts that the "racial populism" of *The Harvest Gypsies* "deeply inflects *The Grapes of Wrath* as well," I would argue that the novel does not simply reproduce the articles' racism, as Denning seems to imply (267). On one level, it is undoubtedly true that the novel is inflected by racism; there are no Mexican or Filipino workers in *Grapes*, and Ma's claim that the Joads descend from soldiers in the American Revolution sounds -- when read with *The Harvest Gypsies* -- like a reference to their Anglo-Saxon pioneer blood. The first point is arguably the more egregious one: there could be no sustainable, whites-only solution to the problem of exploitation; wage competition between racial groups would only play into the growers' hands. Furthermore, the near erasure of non-whites in the novel meant that much of the militant history of farmworker organizing would be forgotten. While Chapter Nineteen in the novel does provide some history of the non-white migrants, they are not included in the story as characters, or even as a presence. However, beyond the racism inherent in this virtual exclusion -- a point to which I will return -- *Grapes* is otherwise drastically different from *The Harvest Gypsies*. Denning does not account for the novel's critique of the mechanisms of capital accumulation and the brutality those mechanisms visit on the poor and middle class alike.

In fact, I would argue that *The Grapes of Wrath* is a call for solidarity from a middle-

class novelist to a similar audience. It attempts -- not always successfully -- to leave behind the frightened condescension of *The Harvest Gypsies* and to reveal a shared humanity, and, more subtly, a shared condition among members of all non-owning classes. Steinbeck's insight -- which Denning misses -- is that poor migrants and middle-class readers are both workers and ultimately victims of the same social processes, if in different ways. Thus, what was at stake was not merely sympathy, or even respect for other races, but the possibility of a revolutionary understanding of the mode of production. Doubtless, the novel speaks *for* the migrants, but not in the oddly removed manner, for example, of Erskine Caldwell in *Tobacco Road*. *The Grapes of Wrath* is peopled with thinking working-class characters who are trying to understand the overarching structures that shape their lives and choices. One could argue that there is an inherent condescension in a higher status group speaking for a lower one, which was a point of contention in trying to define proletarian literature in the thirties.¹⁴ Beyond the fact that the distinction between working and middle classes is primarily a matter of degree than kind -- both have to sell their labor power in order to sustain themselves -- the politics of the novel are a more important issue than the class status of the author. This is especially true of *The Grapes of Wrath*, given that its tremendous popularity meant that it made a powerful intervention in the popular analysis of poverty and of the social structure.

Moreover, there is considerable evidence that the shift from a more distant sympathy in *The Harvest Gypsies* to a call for solidarity in *Grapes* was bound up with Steinbeck's own contact with the migrants in the intervening years between the writing of the articles and the novel. During that time, he saw more strikes, more Associated Farmers atrocities, and most of the migrant experiences depicted in the novel. He was perhaps most radicalized while participating in relief work during the Visalia flood in 1938, which produced tremendous suffering.¹⁵

At any rate, the novel itself evidences a perspective changed since the newspaper series. Its narrative proceeds not merely with the Joads' journey, but traces the growing awareness of their place in the social structure, particularly in the experiences of Casy, Tom, and Ma. They leave behind not only an irrevocably changed way of life, but also their old ways of understanding. Yet, as Stephen Railton argues, Steinbeck's *readers* also receive a consciousness raising education in the destructiveness of capitalism, one that calls for a new society. The novel is pedagogically structured so that the reader sees the struggle of the Joads placed not just in the context of the Okie migration, but also in the larger context of the mode of production. The narrative alternates between the "story" -- of the Joads -- and the "discourse" of the interchapters, which document general conditions, historicize, and editorialize.¹⁶ This alternation in narrative modes bears an oft-remarked resemblance to Dos Passos's *USA* trilogy, and allows the reader and the Joads different political educations. The Joads become aware of their position near the bottom of the social order by experiencing super-exploitation -- being forced to work for less than subsistence wages. Their analysis is also deepened by the willingness of Tom, Casy, and Ma to ponder larger forces and to develop the sense of solidarity with others that they already possess. The reader presumably does not have the Joads' experience but is guided by the interchapters, which suggest how to interpret both the story and the

social world. While the interchapters have been criticized by some as artless, they steer the reader toward a more radical understanding of the social order than that available to the Joads.¹⁷ True for both the reader and the characters, then, is what the experienced migrant Floyd Knowles repeatedly tells the skeptical Tom: "They's stuff ya gotta learn" (260).

The novel is not just a protest against super-exploitation; its critique is more radical than the reformist argument that capitalism *can* produce terrible conditions. Steinbeck's analysis attacks the logic and consequences of private property itself -- including a description of how it damages the psyches of capitalists. This critique begins in earnest in Chapter Five, an interchapter that records a mock exchange between a landlord and a tenant who is being evicted. The tenant wants to fight back, to "shoot" someone, but the owner maintains that the tenant is not being evicted by a person, but by the "monster," which emerges unnamed as capitalism itself (34). The landlord is a company, which is in debt to the banks, which are controlled by bigger banks and companies in "the East." The big companies are not human: "They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don't get it, they die" (35). Moreover, the monster has to grow to stay alive: "the monster has to have profits all the time. . . . When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size" (35). In effect, this passage reproduces Marx's description of capital accumulation: capital cannot rest in equilibrium, but must always be in motion, constantly producing more capital. Therefore, it cannot be reformed into submission, into a system where the mass of peoples' needs are met; as the narrator notes, "Men made it, but they can't control it" (41). Thus, whether or not the landlord feels remorse or anger about having to evict people is immaterial; "all of them were caught in something larger than themselves" (34). Yet, Steinbeck eschews the customary politics of naturalism; the chapter does not end with human powerlessness or hopelessness. The tenant remarks that "We've got a bad thing made by men, and by God that's something we can change" (41). In other words, the system cannot be made humane, because its operations are inherently monstrous; but the system as a whole can be changed because it is social.

Another facet of the novel's critique of capitalism is to document the horrors that result from this drive for capital accumulation, including the increasing impoverishment of "millions" and the obscene waste of resources. The novel frequently depicts simultaneous surplus and want, as this observation typifies: "The fields are fruitful and starving men moved along the roads. The granaries were full and the poor grew up rachitic, and the postules of pellagra swelled on their sides." In an interchapter late in the novel (Chapter 25), the juxtaposition between waste and want is given its fullest articulation. The chapter is situated at a point in the Joads' story where the family is becoming more desperate; they are out of money and the young children are starting to feel the effects of malnutrition. The narrator notes that fruit is destroyed when its price is not high enough to make it worth harvesting. The prices are low because the largest growing companies -- which are vertical operations owning their own processing -- decide to squeeze out the smaller growers by taking a profit only on the canning, depressing the unprocessed fruit prices (348). The narrator remarks the deadly irony that technology has enabled the extraordinary production of food, but capitalism causes people to starve. The technologists have not been able to create a "system whereby their

fruits may be eaten" (340). Steinbeck then graphically describes the destruction of produce and livestock in the midst of starvation. The outrageousness of this contradiction is underlined by the increasing pitch of the narration, which builds until this judgment is made:

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trucks, and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates - - died of malnutrition -- because the food must rot, must be forced to rot (348-9).

The message here is both a critique and an appeal. First, it skewers the popular myth that technology means progress, and further, that technological progress benefits everyone. Instead, Steinbeck shows that technology is in service to profitmaking, and that the needs of humans are subordinate to accumulation. The passage's reference to "our success" also suggests an appeal not to those starving, obviously, but to the sense of justice of those who share *some* of that success. If the reader has a sense of justice and concern for others, then he or she must realize that the system has to change.

The last paragraph of this interchapter -- like *The Harvest Gypsies* -- refers to the possibility that the dispossessed will revolt if the status quo prevails. But unlike the newspaper series, the novel no longer describes the "wrath" of the people as something that mainly threatens the middle class. Over the shoulders of armed guards, the starving migrants watch the destruction of the food with "growing wrath." The book's title is then invoked: "In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage" (349). While the coming vintage sounds potentially ominous, it is not merely the venting of anger, but the harbinger of a better society for all. If *The Harvest Gypsies* implied that revolt would bring chaos, a threat to a nebulous "peace," *The Grapes of Wrath* seems to argue that a change is not only justified, but inevitable. The reader is not so much warned as invited to participate.

The foundation for that invitation depends both on the reader's sense of justice and on a sense that the Joads are worth caring about. Yet, the call for solidarity also appeals to shared interest. The novel describes capitalism as producing super-exploitation, dislocation, and violence for the dispossessed, but it also comments on the alienation experienced by the middle class and by the "great owners" as well. The monster that punishes the Joads simultaneously alienates the more prosperous from a fulfilling sense of their own humanity and from the profound, even spiritual, connection between people. This argument is made in the novel's opposition between the feeling of solidarity that the Joads begin to discover and the alienation felt by the more prosperous and by those workers who betray their class. This is apparent almost from the beginning of the novel, when Tom induces the truck driver to give him a ride by asking him if he wants to be a "good guy" or the tool of "some rich bastard" (11). Although he gives Tom a ride, the driver is implicitly criticized for wanting to become a manager so that he can "tell other

guys to drive trucks" (14). We do not know Tom well yet, but his frankness about being in prison and his thoughtfulness contrast with the driver's general nosiness and with his anti-intellectual diatribe against "big words." Soon after, Muley Graves observes that sharing is necessary to human community. He gives rabbit meat to Tom and Casy and says that "if a fella's got somepin' to eat and another fella's hungry -- why the first fella ain't got no choice. I mean suppose I pick up the rabbits an' go off somewheres an' eat 'em. See?" Casy answers, "I see," and attributes profound wisdom to the observation (51-2). While a brief scene, moments like this are repeated throughout the novel; those who have little share with those who have even less. The Joads take Casy along with them to California; they share resources with the Wilsons on the road; Ma tries to feed the starving children in the squatters' camp; and truck drivers generously tip a waitress who has undercharged poor migrants for a loaf of bread. The cumulative effect of these stories is to make a communal sense of property normative - and inviting. The reader is encouraged to be "a good guy," not just because it is embarrassing not to be, but because there is a shared reward.

The communal feeling is also preferable to the alternatives of alienation and individualism. In an interchapter (Chapter 17) describing the organic democracies that spring up each night in the migrant camps, the narrative states that there are only two punishments for egregious violations of community rules: "a quick and murderous fight or ostracism; and ostracism was the worst" (195). When deputies under the sway of the "Farmers' Association" send agitators into the dance at the government camp to provoke a riot, the migrants are shocked to discover that the men are fellow Okies. Huston, the camp security committee leader observes, "You're our own folks. . . . You belong with us" (343). He tells them, "Don't knife your own folks. . . . Don't tear all that down. Jes' think about it. You're jes' harmin' yourself" (344). The men are not hurt, but are banished from the camp, and subsequently they "disappeared into the darkness" (344).

Besides the darkness of outright abandonment or ostracism, the rejection of solidarity brings self-objectification. The tractor driver who would take the place of farmers becomes a "machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he doesn't know or love. . . . He is contemptuous of the land and of himself" (117). Connie, who wants to rise out of his class to become a storeowner, flees the family, alienating himself in the process. While the family attributes his flight to a weak character, it is no coincidence that he wants to move to town and take advancement-oriented classes like the nosy truck driver. It is unlikely that Connie could persevere in night school, but this is less ironic than the fact that he derives his materialistic dreams from catalogues and magazines -- the false lures of consumer culture (165). The implicitly disapproving judgment upon him exposes some agrarian nostalgia in the novel, associating town life with selfishness, but it also is a critique of the individualism produced by consumerism. Connie's individualist solution to the mass displacement and impoverishment of his people is a hope falsely held out for all, but available only to a few mercenaries. We also see the same impulses working in Al, suggesting that the younger generation is being lured into self-destruction.

Yet the brunt of the novel's judgment does not fall on the working class, but on the "owners." Chapter 14 connects their violent repression of the migrants with the

existential wasteland that is the desire to own. Those who exploit the workers, "who hate change and fear revolution," must crush efforts at human understanding in general. When the people who have had their land taken from them begin to feel common cause with one another, the owners feel anxiety and fear. They only feel safe when the oppressed "fear [and] suspect one another" (152). Besides registering moral outrage at profiting from another's suffering, the narrative argues that private ownership stands against the processes of history and nature. Here are combined elements of a thirties Marxist historiography -- in which socialist revolution is the inevitable outcome of capitalism -- and an evolutionary theory that links that revolution with natural history. The owners' crimes are thus simultaneously against nature and history, as well as morality. The terrible price they pay is that "the quality of owning freezes you forever into 'I,' and cuts you off forever from the 'we,'" a self-imposed ostracism (153). Later, the fearfulness and emptiness of ownership is discussed by the migrant men at a roadside camp. One notes that there is a man in California that owns a millions acres, which mystifies Casy who wonders what one man could do with that much land. The other answers:

He's jus' got it. Runs a few cattle. Got guards ever'place to keep folks out. Rides aroun' in a bullet-proof car. I seen pitchers of him. Fat, sof' fella with mean little eyes an' a mouth like a asshole. Scairt he's gonna die. Got a million acres an' scairt of dyin' (206).

Ownership is thus associated with profound alienation from others and with the delusion that acquisition staves off death. It brings existential, if not material, suffering.

This line of reasoning is also evident in the description of the Farmers' Association vigilantes. They are understood not as evil, but as mistaken or misguided, a sentiment Casy voices before he is murdered. We first see him trying to convince Tom that breaking the pickers' strike will only make the workers more vulnerable and ultimately even hungrier. When Tom argues that his father would never consider more than the immediate interests of his family, Casy tiredly comments, "I wish they could see it. I wish they could see. . ." (384).¹⁸ Then he has to confront a more hardened foe in the vigilantes. He tries to appeal to their senses of justice and shared humanity, telling them, "You fellas don' know what you're doin'. You're helpin' to starve kids. . . . You don' know what you're a-doin'" (386). Casy's appeal obviously does not affect the thugs, but Tom is won over to his position. Even Pa understands after Casy's death that the breaking of the strike will mean a wage cut (390). Simultaneously, the reader is asked not to be complicit with starving kids or to accept the intimidation and killing.

An interchapter (Chapter 21) explains the class position of the vigilante types from what resembles a Marxist perspective. They are "the local people," who have "whipped themselves into a mold of cruelty" mistakenly thinking that they are the owners and that the Okies are a threat to their property:

The men who were armed did not own the land, but thought they did. And clerks who drilled [in paramilitary units] at night owned nothing, and little storekeepers possessed only a drawerful of debts. . . . The clerk thought, I

get fifteen dollars a week. S'pose a goddamn Okie would work for twelve (283).

Fear in the vigilantes causes them to work against their own interests while enriching the real owners.

In another scene, the more prosperous segment of the middle class struggles with alienation. Two tourists on the way to California, a "business man" and his "sullen" wife, stop at a roadside joint. Although they are well-dressed and drive an expensive car, she seems miserable and he is "worried" (156). They are the Babbittry who are "hungry for security and yet sens[e] its disappearance from the earth":

In their lapels the insignia of lodges and service clubs, places where they go and, by a weight of numbers of little worried men, reassure themselves that business is noble and not the curious ritualized thievery they know it is; that business men are intelligent in spite of the records of their stupidity; that they are kind and charitable in spite of their principles of sound business; that their lives are rich instead of the thin tiresome routines they know; and that a time is coming when they will not be afraid any more (156).

Their worry is grounded in two deeper fears: one that a revolutionary change is coming that will end their empty advantages; and two, that the trappings they cling to will never stop making them miserable. The passage argues, in effect, that the prosperous middle class is even more enslaved than the migrants, who are not bogged down in divisive materialism. It is in contrast to this living death - and that of "machine man" and the owner of a million acres -- that Ma declares the Okies to be "the people who live." "Rich fellas come up an' they die, an' their kids ain't no good, an' they die. But Tom we keep a-comin'. . . . A different time's comin'" (280-1). The migrants are on the right side of history and nature.

It is worth pausing to note that this attribution of the migration to natural history has long been noted by critics. Recently, Denning has even asserted that the novel is rife with biological determinism, which he associates with Anglo-Saxon white supremacism. Indeed, the narrative makes an analogy between the Okies' movement westward and the behavior of ants and of a turtle. Moreover, the coming revolution is linked to evolution: the owners and their middle-class enablers are resisting the course of natural history. However, one must distinguish this usage of biological metaphors from eugenics or social Darwinism. The novel does not assert that the social hierarchy is natural or even that the current hierarchy will be replaced by a new one based on biology. The owners are not biologically inferior to the migrants; rather, they are *mistaken*. Their problem is one of knowledge, not biology.

In fact, Ma and the other Joads cannot, and do not, wait for history. They have to learn that the old idea of rugged individualism must pass as the conditions that gave rise to it have passed. Of course, the Okies' notion of individualism and that of the owners are

different anyway. As the novel is careful to detail, the putative independence of the yeomanry depended on cooperation with neighbors, relative equality, and a reliance on the family as the unit of survival.¹⁹ Yet the industrial quality of California agriculture requires a more organized and encompassing solidarity. Much of the story is taken up with Casy's, and then Ma and Tom's, realization of this fact. This expanded notion of cooperation has to happen not just in the fields, but in what used to be thought of as the sphere of the family. Throughout the story, Ma has nurtured the family as the implicit unit of the coming revolution; what has kept it together has also advanced the revolution, by fighting back against the forces of dissolution. Towards the end of the novel however, Ma realizes that individualized families will never be strong enough to resist the great owners. She notes, "Use' ta be the family was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do" (444). In other words, the sphere of interest must expand from the family to the collective.

Though Ma's realization of the need for class solidarity is no less significant, Tom's "I'll be there" speech a few pages earlier is the more famous articulation. Admitting himself to be Casy's protégé, Tom explicitly makes the connection between labor organizing, socialism, and the concept of a collective soul, while implicitly arguing against individualism. Casy's "great big soul," of which everyone is a "piece," is not simply a transcendentalist religious doctrine as some critics have claimed²⁰; it is an attempt to articulate a spiritual expression of the revolution that will take place in society. Even the Biblical passages that Tom remembers Casy reciting concern the strength afforded by sharing and collective action. Though the speech that begins "Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there" draws our attention, it is important to note that it comes after Tom plots a more practical course of action. Inspired by the federal camp, with its self-government, democracy, and non-authoritarian discipline, Tom tells Ma "I've been wonderin' why we can't do that all over. . . . All work together for our own thing -- all farm our own lan'" (418).²¹ The better society Tom imagines carries the trace of the yeoman ideal, but its universalization would nonetheless require a revolutionary change in the social structure. Thus, his immediate plan is to do "what Casy done" -- organize workers (419). Only when Ma asks him what will happen if he is killed does he give her the more spiritual "I'll be there" answer. Tom is, therefore, beginning to acquire the more revolutionary analysis evident in the interchapters.

The penultimate scene in the novel is both an appeal to solidarity within the story and to the reader. Rose of Sharon's baby is stillborn during the flood, and Uncle John is given the task of burying it. He decides that the body will bear the message of the migrants to their fellows in the towns. He puts the body in an apple box -- two symbols of the products of California agriculture, suffering and fruit -- and floats it on the flood towards town. He hopes the body will tell the townspeople a story they have ignored: "Go down and tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. . . . Maybe they'll know then" (446). Simultaneously, the novel tells the *reader* a story he or she has ignored. The waste of the fruit is inseparable from the waste of the people.

While I have read the novel as having a radical critique of capitalism and as calling for a socialist solidarity, there are qualifications and counterarguments that could be raised to such a reading. Denning's argument is that the novel is embedded in the same racial nationalism evident in *The Harvest Gypsies*. In one sense, that argument is impossible to refute: *Grapes* mentions non-white workers only briefly while recounting the history of migrant farming before the Okies. Therefore, the existing non-white workers -- while at that moment fewer in number than before -- are erased. The anti-capitalist critique thus exists side-by-side with this erasure -- a contradiction that goes unresolved. However, I would argue that the novel otherwise implicitly complicates a simple racial nationalism. Foremost, in contrast with the claims of *The Harvest Gypsies*, *Grapes* shows that the Okies' vaunted Anglo-Saxon racial heritage will not save them. It is only through collective action that they can prevail.

Moreover, collective action takes conscious choice and planning and does not happen merely because the Okies are white. All of the characters are white, but they do not all come to this consciousness. Nor do we know what happens to them; the novel ends with the Joads in precarious straits, not in the triumphant climax of Anglo-Saxon pioneering. Furthermore, their race means nothing to the huge growing companies or to the cops and vigilantes who would beat or kill them. This irony is apparent almost as soon as they arrive in California. They are rousted at the river (where Noah leaves the family) by cops who have no respect for their whiteness. Tom and Ma are shocked by the treatment: "we ain't use' ta gettin' shoved aroun' by no cops" (215). It is almost impossible for one to imagine an African-American, or for that matter a Mexican or Filipino worker making such a statement. But the Joads are finding out that they will now be racialized despite their heritage. They hear the cops call them Okies for the first time, and only a few pages later are labeled "gorillas" by gas station attendants (221). At that point, the Joads are setting out across the Mojave Desert in their jalopy, which the reader knows is a brave and stalwart act they have no choice but to undertake. Yet the attendants decide that "They're so goddamn dumb they don't know it's dangerous." Thus, the novel here suggests that what is racialized is not their blood, but their vulnerability to being exploited. The undeniable racism implicit in the erasure of non-white workers exists unresolved alongside an implicit -- and perhaps unintended -- debunking of white supremacism.

Another political contradiction in the novel arises between its call for class solidarity and its naturalization of gender roles, particularly for women. Ma Joad could be said to be a stereotypically nurturing earth mother. Critic Mimi Gladstein counters that Ma's nurturing of the family is a positive representation because of her great strength and because she takes on masculine responsibilities when necessary. Nor is Ma static, because the journey changes her, and she actively acquires new ways of understanding the situation of the migrants. Furthermore, Gladstein argues, the famous breast-feeding scene at the end of the novel demonstrates that Rose of Sharon is inheriting Ma's legacy by stepping out of her self-centeredness. However, Nellie Y. McKay convincingly argues that although Ma is a force in the Joads' realization that their family-centered world view must change, the roles for women within the "changing society" remain the same: they are nurturers, be it of the family or of the new society. Thus, the novel's comprehension

of class solidarity is one that does not adequately take into account gender politics within the working class.

A final question about the novel's political critique concerns possible ambiguity over what constitutes revolutionary change. The novel arguably takes the position that the elimination of capitalism is necessary for a just, democratic, and non-exploitative society. Yet, because we do not see the revolution -- even though it is said to be inevitable -- there is still doubt as to what it might be. A key moment when this question is broached is when Pa and the men at Weedpatch discuss the change that they feel is coming: "Maybe we won't live to see her. But she's a-comin'. They's a res'less feelin'" (344). In the context of the interchapters, the change would be revolutionary, including the end of private ownership, the redistribution of the land, and presumably more. The incidents that the men cite most admiringly as evidence of the change are the rubber strikes in Akron, Ohio. There, the strikers, "mountain men," armed themselves against reactionary "storekeepers and legioners," and demonstrated their willingness to fight by holding a shooting competition (344). "Five thousan' of 'em jes' marched through town with their rifles. An' they had their turkey shoot, an' then they marched back. An' that's all they done. Well, sir, they ain't been no trouble sence then" (345). On the surface, the story is inspiring because the tire workers realize that they have to fight against the owners -- that justice is not to be taken for granted. Yet the notion that the men could show their guns and then there would be no more "trouble" seems both naïve and an outcome that would be far short of revolutionary. In fact, it suggests more that the workers won some concessions from the company, but stopped there, satisfied. But the novel has shown us earlier that capital accumulation never stops, and therefore that the trouble cannot be over. So the scene is perhaps equivocal: it is not clear if the struggle will stop once a somewhat better wage is won or if will it continue until the relations of production themselves change.²² Nor is it clear if the scene is meant to reflect the limited understanding of the migrants at this point, or if the novel as a whole is endorsing the Akron story as revolutionary.

This ambiguity is not resolved, and neither are the race and class contradictions. However, this open-endedness does not negate the novel's radicalism. *The Grapes of Wrath* offers an appeal to middle-class readers to join forces with the working-class subjects of the story, arguing that the ravages of capital accumulation are felt throughout the social order -- if more heavily on the destitute migrant workers. The critique encourages the middle-class reader to move beyond sympathy for those more exploited and to a solidarity based on experiences within the same system. The reader is encouraged to care about the Joads and is simultaneously shown that, as society's unit of economic survival, the family is inadequate, the product of an outmoded social order. The novel relies on the ideological notion of the self-contained family to win the reader's concern for the Joads, and then argues for the necessity of communal, rather than familial, welfare.

Nevertheless, the novel's implicit Anglo-Saxon white supremacism (ambiguous as it may be) cannot be ignored or glossed over. Rather, we need an analysis that is subtle enough to see these contradictions as they are. We are not bound to the interpretive

horizons of the 1930s, yet neither should we ignore what writers from that era have to teach us now. At stake, of course, is not the past, but the present and future.

Notes

[1](#) I use the term "Okie" because it names a mythology. It was, of course, a derogatory term in the thirties.

[2](#) I base this claim first on the fact that none of the reviews I have found -- even in the leftist press -- saw the novel as racist. Moreover, as Greg Meyerson has kindly pointed out to me, even African racial essentialism was just coming to be debunked in the thirties. As late as 1935, Paul Robeson spoke of race as "born, not bred," using such terms as "blood," "stock," and "Negro assets." Only in 1939 -- the year *The Grapes of Wrath* was published -- did Robeson begin to understand race as a "pseudo-scientific" category. (Meyerson notes that this trajectory can be followed by consulting pages 91-131 in *Paul Robeson Speaks* (Philip Foner, ed. New York: Citadel P, 1978).

[3](#) In general, Denning's book fails to analyze the processes of capitalism as determinants of culture, a major weakness.

[4](#) For example, James N. Vaughn in *The Commonwealth*, states that the "argument" of the novel is that the migrants are being "driven to death by the forces of 'capitalism.'" While his placement of the word capitalism in scare quotes shows that it is not *his* analysis, he nonetheless sees that as a key proposition of the novel. Earle Birney in the *Canadian Forum* makes a similar observation in more sympathetic terms: "These proletarians of the soil are in the bitter process of learning for themselves in their own terms what wage-labor and capital mean, of creating for themselves fire-hardened leaders and cadres for the coming revolution." More conservative critics from publications such as *Newsweek* (Rascoe) and *The Springfield Republican* ("Reviewing Reviews") saw the novel as an incitement to violence and revolution. These reviews are significant because they demonstrate that the novel's anti-capitalist critique was recognizable as such to many mainstream critics in the thirties.

[5](#) For an analysis of *Life's* depiction of both the Okie migration and of rural poverty during the thirties see Cunningham, "To Watch the Faces."

[6](#) The film's cinematographers disagreed with this emphasis, but Lorentz was unswayed. See Alexander, 93-109 and Denning, 261.

[7](#) I would here invoke Marx's observation in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* that people make history, but not in conditions they choose. For a discussion of the concept of determination, see Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 83-89.

[8](#) In Steinbeck's *In Dubious Battle*, a smaller farmer is burned out when he contracts with pickers who are striking against the big growers.

[9](#) For this account, I am relying on Daniels and to a lesser extent McWilliams.

[10](#) Following Ruiz, I will use "Mexican" to signify both Mexicans and Mexican-Americans.

[11](#) See Daniel 280. Daniel's account of UCAPAWA is much less sanguine than Ruiz's, probably because Ruiz focuses on women cannery workers' self-empowerment in Los Angeles-area union locals. Daniel concentrates on migrant field workers, who the UCAPAWA predicted would be harder to organize. He argues, in effect, that the UCAPAWA strategy failed the farmworkers. Interestingly enough, Denning champions Popular Front cultural production about migrant labor, but does not mention -- or therefore evaluate -- its political strategies.

[12](#) Even the last chapter in McWilliams *Factories in the Fields* drops Mexican and Filipino workers from its narrative -- this despite the fact that they are the subject of most of the rest of the book.

[13](#) See Cunningham, "Solidarity."

[14](#) See Foley 87-97, for debates about the class status of writers, particularly 96-7. In thirties terminology, fetishizing working-class origins was called "workerism."

[15](#) See Benson, DeMott, and Wollenberg. Benson implies that intimate contact with the migrants made Steinbeck realize that he was engaged in a common struggle with them.

[16](#) See Foley for a discussion of the story/discourse interplay in the novel (264-74). In *Grapes*, the interchapters also function to advance the Joads narrative indirectly by describing in detail experiences that are supposed to be common to the migrants, including buying cars, rebuilding roadside communities each night, and others.

[17](#) Foley makes a similar point (417).

[18](#) In the 1950s much of the criticism of the novel focused on its religious allusions, especially statements like Casy's, which were thought to compare him to Christ. Donald Pizer argues convincingly that the Christ-like echo in this speech is about relationships between people, not religious abstractions (92).

[19](#) The extent to which this picture of the past is accurate is less important than the acknowledgment that it no longer existed. See Jones for accounts of the life of the "yeomanry" in earlier times.

[20](#) A good summary of that position is in the "Editors Introduction" to *The Grapes of Wrath*, 552-55.

[21](#) Daniel Aaron argues that because the Weedpatch camp is held up as an ideal, the novel's politics can be summed up simply as pro-New Deal. He also states that the novel is only "radical-sounding." If perhaps Steinbeck personally had naively high hopes for the New Deal, I would argue that in the novel the camp provides an example of how people feel and behave when they are not being exploited. That is why Tom invokes it here, not as a policy endorsement.

[22](#) Sylvia Cook says that this ambiguity results from an unclear definition of the problem (177). I disagree; in the novel the problem is defined clearly enough as the "fruit" of destructive capital accumulation. The ambiguity is over whether or not the solution to the problem will be consistent with the novel's definition of it.

I would like to acknowledge the tireless assistance of Greg Meyerson, who offered invaluable suggestions on several versions of this essay. Moreover, his thinking on the race/class relationship has been indispensable to mine.

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