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Jill R. Demers

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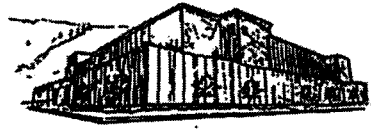
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GRAMPA KILLED SNAKES AND INDIANS: NATURE AND THE ECONOMY OF  
WESTERING IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

by

Jill R. Demers

B.A. Fort Lewis College, Colorado, 2000

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

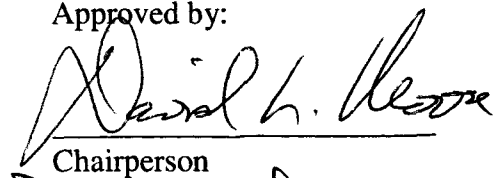
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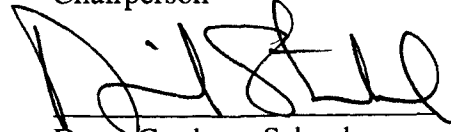
Master of Arts

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Grampa Killed Snakes and Indians: Nature and the Economy of Westering in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Chairperson: Professor David Moore, PhD



Many scholars interested in the works of John Steinbeck have noted the role of nature in his texts. Some argue that Steinbeck's tendency toward natural-realism is representational of his own eco-politics. As frequently as nature is a topic in Steinbeckian critique, not surprisingly, social justice is equally examined. Although these subjects continue to be discussed separately, until recently, literary scholars have paid little attention to the links between nature and social justice in Steinbeck's works. These links are crucial to understanding some of the key components to *The Grapes of Wrath*: namely, the troubles associated with diaspora, westward expansionism, the destruction of nature, and their inextricable ties to capitalism. It is therefore my intention to explore the *Grapes of Wrath* linking the social ecology of the marginalized Joad family to their perception of and relationship to the natural world. I pay particular attention to the family's anthropocentric vision of nature as a space provided for human profit. This reductive perception presents the more-than-human world as utilitarian. In these terms, nature becomes commodified and fetishized. Often not recognized or understood as part of an intricate ecosystem, nature thus becomes a space for human control and domination.

I contend that the Joads' relationship to the natural landscape is essentially unecological, defined in terms of labor, capital, ownership, imperial domination, and westward expansion. I complicate this relationship by showing the ways in which the ideologies that dominate the Joads' perception of nature parallel the same paradigms that cause their marginalism. Paradoxically, the family participates in these same, disenfranchising, social practices through their desires to accumulate wealth via the domination and ownership of land. By linking land acquisition with economic power in *The Grapes of Wrath*, I intend to reveal the ways in which nature as capital inextricably links the social with the environmental.

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## **Introduction: Nature and Culture in *The Grapes of Wrath***

Many scholars interested in the works of John Steinbeck have noted the role of nature in his texts. Some argue that Steinbeck's tendency toward natural-realism represents his own eco-politics, which according to his later work *America and Americans* includes examining "the savagery and thoughtlessness with which our early settlers approached this rich continent" (377). Woodburn Ross describes Steinbeck as "Naturalism's Priest" (57) while Joel Hedgpeth views him as a "Late-Blooming Environmentalist." Warren French wonders "How Green Was John Steinbeck?" and John Timmerman argues that "Steinbeck's Environmental Ethic" consists of "humanity in harmony with the land." Lloyd Willis comments on these authors' perceptions of Steinbeck as "an ecologically minded writer who did indeed waffle when it came to environmental activism" (357) when he concludes, "if Steinbeck did not become enough of an environmental activist, it may mean, ironically, that the man who ultimately finds hope in a bumbling, mistake-prone American culture [...] also understood that very culture as one that would have recognized environmentalism— if he presented it as vehemently as twenty-first-century readers and scholars would have liked him to—as a monstrosity" (360). Monstrous or not, it is my contention that Steinbeck was, indeed, an environmentalist whose activism penetrates the pages of his texts by providing the reader with a heightened awareness of the destructive relationship Western culture has typically maintained with the natural world. This ethic is clearly evident in many of his fictional and non-fictional texts. For the purpose of this essay, I will focus on *The Grapes of Wrath* to demonstrate Steinbeck's preoccupation with the relationship between the human



impact on nature and Western culture's historical exploitation of land and people for profit.

As frequently as nature is a topic in Steinbeckian critique, not surprisingly, social justice is equally examined. Patrick McCormick maintains, "*The Grapes of Wrath* puts a face on the poor, the face of ordinary people, and asks why the Joads (or anyone) are poor and what can be done about it" (46). Charles Lee describes the Dust Bowl migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath* as a "'parade of hurts,' sick and ragged in body, sick in soul, despised and feared and abused by those from whom all they ask is a roof and water and food to keep hope from dying" (48). And according to Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh, "*The Grapes of Wrath* [is] a widely read story of heroic resistance to unwanted social circumstances" (598).

Although these subjects continue to be discussed separately, until recently, literary scholars have paid little attention to the links between nature and social justice in Steinbeck's works. These links are crucial to understanding some of the key components to *The Grapes of Wrath*: namely, the troubles associated with diaspora, westward expansionism, the destruction of nature, and their inextricable ties to capitalism. By examining the interconnection between these subjects, scholars can engage in greater understanding of the creation of the Dust Bowl migration and an anthropocentric ideology that has dominated the settlement of the United States. It is this anthropocentrism related to a shared history of conquest and the exploitation of nature and culture that has resulted in the ecological travesty we now face as modern-day Americans.

It is therefore my intention to examine *The Grapes of Wrath*, linking the social ecology, defined for the purpose of this essay as the network of relations maintained between living organisms within a given landscape, of the marginalized Joad family and the disparate Dustbowl migrants to their wider social perceptions and ideologies of the natural world. I will do this by providing a close reading of the text, focusing on the Joads' anthropocentric vision of nature as a space for human profit. This reductive perception presents the natural world as utilitarian. In these terms, nature becomes commodified, even fetishized, and is often not recognized or understood as an interdependent system. Emphasis on the reductive and utilitarian treatment of nature will provide evidence for the ways nature becomes a space for human control and domination in Steinbeck's narrative. The Joad family maintains an essentially unecological relationship to the natural landscape, defined in terms of labor, capital, ownership, imperial domination, and westward expansionism. I intend to complicate this relationship by showing the ways in which the capitalist ideology that dominates the Joads' perception of nature parallels the same paradigm that causes their marginalism. The family and other migrants participate in capitalism through their desire to accumulate wealth by fetishizing and exploiting the land. Ironically, these same ideological patterns of ownership and exploitation result in their disenfranchisement. Illuminating the dialectical relationship between the components of capitalism and perceptions of nature will engage the reader and scholar in a holistic discussion by suggesting that an interconnectedness exists between the social and the natural in this monumental text.

Diasporic traversal plays a particularly important role in this discussion conjoining the social with the environmental in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Over the past two

decades, diaspora has become a topic of conversation among anthropologists, cultural critics, and literary theorists around the globe. Focusing on multinational migration, Arjun Appadurai maintains that “a global cultural system is emerging” (28). Diaspora and the “global” to which Appadurai refers fit together on both political and cultural levels by suggesting that diaspora contributes to a global system through cultural integration, whether forced or voluntary, by the constant melding of migrant peoples. In other words, diaspora forces cultures, both from the place of origin as well as the adopted nation state, to participate within one another’s cultural communities. This sharing of cultures does not necessarily mean customs are willingly adopted or shared, but rather sharing occurs inevitably when cultures clash, meld, or unite. As in any ecosystem, adaptation becomes crucial for survival—otherwise species face the fate of extinction. We need only look to the dinosaurs as an example of this theory. Cultural existence within an ecosystem exists much in the same way, so that introduced languages, ideals, customs, etc., must be adapted within as well as by cultural communities for the survival of those practices. Whether some traditions are abandoned and others adopted and altered remains unimportant, but that ideas are shared between cultural communities remains significant within diaspora studies when considering the political and cultural implications diaspora carries with it.

In addition to diaspora, there are multiple components contributing to this discussion combining the social with the environmental in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Among these include our human perceptions of nature and culture, Jeffersonian agrarianism and the West’s history with pastorality, and an Edenic myth where the act of westering is coupled with the actions of fall and recovery.

## De-Mystifying Nature

Steinbeck's role as an environmental writer has been the subject of contradictory praise and blame by various literary scholars. In an attempt to identify the significance of naturalistic tendencies in *The Grapes of Wrath*, an examination of contemporary scholarship surrounding our human perceptions of nature will assist in mapping this discussion by deconstructing myths and facts about our natural environment.

Many contemporary scholars address the role of myth in the ways humans conceive of, identify with, and relate to nature. "The potential for us to make progress with environmental issues," writes Daniel Botkin in his book entitled *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century*, "is limited by the basic assumptions that we make about nature, the unspoken, often unrecognized perspective from which we view our environment. This perspective, ironically in this scientific age, depends on myth and deeply buried beliefs" (5). These assumptions to which Botkin refers have a tendency to interfere with our human ability to objectively identify with or define what, *exactly*, nature is. For example, Botkin suggests that one of the "changes that must take place in our perspective [...] [is] the recognition of the *dynamic* rather than the *static* properties of the Earth and its life-support system [...]" (6 emphasis mine). William Cronon also addresses this perception of nature in his introduction to *Uncommon Ground* entitled, "In Search of Nature," where he writes that "the natural world is far more dynamic, far more changeable, and far more entangled with human history than popular beliefs about 'the balance of nature' have typically acknowledged" (*Uncommon* 24). Cronon goes on to note that "many popular ideas about the environment are premised on the conviction that nature is a stable, holistic, homeostatic community

capable of preserving its natural balance more or less indefinitely if only humans can avoid ‘disturbing’ it” (ibid). This perception of nature as static directly affects the ways humans interact with what they call “nature.” If nature is conceived of as a locus for stability, any human interaction or “disruption” to “the balance of nature” forces people to perceive themselves as separate from or existing in some other, ambiguous space outside the natural world—where that is, exactly, I attempt to unravel or, at the very least, reconcile within my own life. More often than not, however, that space is considered “unnatural”—something other than or outside of nature.

It remains a fact that humans, over the course of our short history on this planet, have altered the planet in many ways—subtle and obvious. Changes wrought by humans are often perceived, as Cronon confirms, as unnatural or even as acts “against” nature. With a static and balanced nature, humans become an external force pressing against an otherwise stable habitat, and the binary separating nature from culture—along with the hard and fast belief of indivisibility from nature—is reinforced. With this myth at the forefront of Western thought, one wonders whether our ability or motivation to question whether or not we, too—as countless other species—were designed to function as part of one whole, dynamic system? If we begin to examine what lies at the core of these ideals rather than complacently maintain what we believe to be true, we may begin to see the dynamic capabilities of our environment paired with human-wrought changes to the environment. By adjoining what we typically see as unnatural and sometimes devastating human impacts with other, more assumedly natural acts of nature, we find ourselves in a conundrum. Although Cronon proclaims “that human beings have been manipulating ecosystems for as long as we have records of their passage” (*Uncommon*

25), if change is unavoidable, is all change acceptable? Where, then, do we draw the line? If human actions are considered part of nature's dynamism, all changes occurring both as a result of human and non-human interference can pose problems creating a socially, ecologically just land-ethic and potentially subsequent sustainable planet. If change is inevitable in the natural world, who or what determines which changes are acceptable and which, ultimately, are not? Steinbeck brings these very questions to the forefront, as we will see in the following chapters, in his depiction of the Oklahoma Dust Bowl migrants, their perceptions of nature and their colonial history rooted in pastoralism.

I do not pretend to possess any concrete answers to these complex issues, nor do I believe Steinbeck's Okies can resolve these quarries. But rather, my aim is to enter into a dialogue surrounding these issues in the hope that this discussion may make a contribution. I do, however, believe that there is potential for the creation of a more ecologically sound relationship between the human and the more-than-human world. To demystify means, literally, to remove a myth; or perhaps, at times, it means to reveal. By questioning and deconstructing Western myths about the natural world, we may begin to reveal how the perceptions that dominate the way nature is identified and utilized affect the ways we determine what is natural from what is not.

William Cronon's notorious book, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, addresses varying perceptions of the human relationship to the natural landscape. Cronon examines the changes caused by human interaction in pre-colonial and post-colonial New England. In this comparison between New England's northern and southern tribal cultures and its English colonists, Cronon determines that

“the choice is not between two landscapes, one with and one without a human influence; it is between two human ways of living, two ways of belonging to an ecosystem”

(*Changes* 12). In his analysis, Cronon determines that all human-wrought changes do not necessarily have a negative impact upon the given ecosystem. He argues that these changes do, however, directly relate to the varying ways the tribal cultures and colonists interact with and utilize the natural world.

Cronon contends that upon arriving in the new world, the colonists transferred a land-ethic resembling an ethos politically and economically charged by the dominant perception maintained in England. The naming of the landscape, *New England*, provides rhetorical evidence supporting this theory of transference. Transporting ideals from *home* was not unique to New England’s colonists, as we will notice in the following chapters addressing the diaspora of Steinbeck’s Dust Bowl migrants. Cronon confirms that “most of the early explorers sought to discover [...] ‘merchantable commodities’” which he identifies as “the natural products which could be shipped to Europe and sold at a profit in order to provide a steady income for colonial settlements” (*Changes* 20). It is fair to claim that the indigenous cultures of pre-colonial New England did not support a market economy that closely resembled that of their English neighbors, and, therefore, did not conceive of the region’s natural resources in the same way as the colonists. The colonists identified the New World’s resources as a means for profit and they “dreamed of a world in which returns to human labor were far greater than in England” (*Changes* 35). Here, at least according to Cronon, we see an overlap between the perception of nature as an abundance of resources whose exploitation results in profit. From this we may assume that the market determined which items were considered to be of value, and which were

not. We can also assume that because the market determines value, the items most valuable or resulting in the least labor and most profit, were extracted or utilized at a rate less-sustainable than if resource extraction was more evenly dispersed. The region's Indians, on the other hand "made sure that no single species became overused [...]" (*Changes* 53). Quite obviously, these opposing ways of interacting with the natural world resulted in conflict. We need only consider one of many contemporary conflicts surrounding "land use" to realize that this has been no easy problem to solve.

The difference between these dominant ideologies is distinct and significant when considering perceptions of the human role within the natural world. Cronon summarizes this difference as follows:

To European eyes, Indians appeared to squander the resources that were available to them. Indian poverty was the result of Indian waste: underused land, underused natural abundance, underused human labor. [...] Colonial theorists [...] posited two ways of owning land, one natural and one civil. [...] This natural ownership had been superseded when individuals began to raise crops, keep cattle, and *improve* the land by enclosing it; from such actions, [...] came a superior, civil right of ownership. (*Changes* 56 emphasis mine).

As Cronon notes in this passage, the way land is utilized and, ultimately altered by humans, directly relates to the ways in which the human occupants identify with nature. The northern and southern tribes of pre-colonial New England, according to Cronon, were dependent on utilizing the resources within their natural habitats for millennia. This way of existing was not dependent on human isolation from nature, or myths about nature existing in a state of static harmony. Instead, according to Cronon, the tribes of pre-



colonial New England, whether conscious of it or not, participated in ecosystems function and maintenance through human alteration of the environment. The southern tribes used fire, for example, to create “ideal habitats for a host of wildlife species” (*Changes* 51). “Indian burning,” Cronon writes, “promoted the increase of exactly those species whose abundance so impressed English colonists: elk, deer, beaver, hare, porcupine, turkey, quail, ruffed grouse, and so on. When these populations increased, so did the carnivorous eagles, hawks, lynxes, foxes, and wolves. In short, Indians who hunted game animals were not just taking the ‘unplanted bounties of nature’; in an important sense, they were harvesting a foodstuff which they had consciously been instrumental in creating” (ibid).

In this instance of New England’s pre-colonial peoples, the human roles within that ecosystem functioned as part of one great system. New England’s colonists, on the other hand, held wildly different values about their place in the world. Imposing Western European ideas about the way land should be utilized or improved—establishing permanent residences, for example, or raising crops and livestock—appears to have been as natural to them as the approach their Native neighbors had taken. The colonists and indigenous cultures of New England held radically different visions about their roles as humans on earth and acted in ways that supported these beliefs. Unlike northern New England’s nomadic tribes, the colonists believed that utility determined improvements to the land, resulting in rights of ownership. The mobile tribes-peoples “who moved so much and worked so little,” according to some colonists, “did not deserve to lay claim to the land they inhabited. Their supposed failure to ‘improve’ that land was a token not of their chosen way of life but of their laziness” (*Changes* 55). The colonists considered improvements to be the ways in which land could be altered to better fit their notions

about land use. A permanent domicile, for example, worked toward the creation of a township which was seen as productive and therefore as an improvement. Raising one's own food was perceived as labor by the colonists—the labor taken to tame the wild landscape was also perceived as an improvement—where the hunting and fishing undertaken by tribal men were considered leisurely activities. The Indians' failure to improve the land—at least according to New England's colonists—resulted in their loss of property and the “European perceptions of what constituted a proper use of the environment thus reinforced what became a European ideology of conquest [...] conveniently available to justify the occupation of another people's lands” (Changes 53-57).

Cronon extends this dialogue to various other myths and misconceptions about nature in his essay in *Uncommon Ground*. His contention that nature itself “is not nearly so natural as it seem” but is rather a “profoundly human construction” is particularly insightful (*Uncommon* 25). Cronon argues that “what we mean when we use the word ‘nature’ says as much about ourselves as about the things we label with that word” (ibid). In short, Cronon makes the claim, as he does in his examination of the ecology and cultures of New England, that what we consider to be nature, the natural, the unnatural, and perhaps even the supernatural, is dictated by heavily relied-upon cultural beliefs and assumptions. The belief held by New England colonists that the region's tribes were “lazy” and failed to make environmental improvements, reinforces the ways in which conceptions and misconceptions about our relationship to the natural world can be driven by assumptions—for as Cronon reveals, New England's Indian cultures were far from “lazy.” This attempt to understand some of the ways in which our perceptions of nature

directly relate to ideals maintained by various cultural communities will help shape the argument I make later in this essay in terms of Steinbeck's examination of the relationship between nature and culture: namely, that one cannot exist without the other.

Nature, its construction and social perceptions, is not the only myth that needs clarifying in the context of this project to understand the social as part of the natural. Another myth, one perhaps as heavily weighted and equally contingent upon social perceptions, requires clarifying and explanation in order to fully understand the various themes embedded within the arguments I make about diaspora, westering, pastorality, and ecological justice in *The Grapes of Wrath*. This myth of fall and recovery from the Garden relates to the West's pastoral nostalgia as much as it relates to our social perceptions about nature. This myth is about Eden.

### **The Edenic Myth: An Overview of Fall and Recovery and the Roots of Pastoralism**

"New World colonists have undertaken a massive effort to reinvent the whole earth in the image of the Garden of Eden," writes Carolyn Merchant in her essay entitled "Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as a Recovery Narrative." She continues her argument to note that "[h]uman labor would redeem the souls of men and women, while cultivation and domestication would redeem the earthly wilderness" (Merchant 134). Merchant's contention makes for an interesting contrast to modern notions of wilderness which is often perceived as wild and untrammled, nature untouched by humankind or, as Merchant declares, "absence of civilization" (144). If, according to Merchant, labor, cultivation, and domestication are the processes through which humans redeem earthly wilderness, wilderness can then be perceived, like a garden, as a space of order and control. Merchant clearly articulates this notion when she writes that "[n]ature as

wilderness, has been defeated” (141) or wilderness, in other words, is the result of domesticated nature. These contrasting notions about wilderness as both untrammelled and uncivilized as well as a space controlled by humans, sets the stage for a discussion not simply about perceptions of wilderness but also about the means undertaken to recreate the world and thus regain Paradise Lost.

Where Eden was divinely cultivated and maintained, the labor of earthly paradise relied on human hands. It is labor, therefore, that enacts the process of creating the Garden and suggests that the human will over the land involves subduing wildness and taming an otherwise wild nature. Emerson speaks to this notion when he writes, “[t]his great savage country should be furrowed by the plough, and combed by the harrow; [...] these wild prairies should be loaded with wheat; the swamps with rice; [...] How much better when the whole land is a garden and the people have grown up in the bowers of a paradise” (qtd. in Merchant 142). Though Emerson referred to a preindustrial time of agricultural husbandry, its thematic implications ring true today. When considering current agricultural practices, it is hard to imagine that cultivation, especially mechanized monocropping, is capable of redeeming earthly wilderness any more than converting swamps to rice fields actually was.

It is this very process of conversion that needs more examining in order to understand the motivational factors behind transforming the earth into Eden’s likeness. Merchant describes this process as a “movement from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’ and the problem of lapsing back into the darkness of wilderness” (142). Creating Paradise here on earth, then, could pave the way for humans to reenter the Garden from which Adam and Eve were banished. “The Enlightenment idea of progress” Merchant writes, “is

rooted in the recovery of the garden lost in the Fall—the bringing of light to the dark world of inchoate nature. The lapsarian origin story is thus reversed by the grand narrative of Enlightenment that lies at the very heart of modernism. The controlling image of Enlightenment is the transformation from desert wilderness to cultivated garden” (Merchant 137). This belief that what Adam and Eve lost for mankind can be regained on earth through the act of cultivation, recreation of the Garden, and domestication of nature has profound implications for humans’ interactions with the land. Within this theological and mythic framework, then, lies the mandate—divinely sanctioned and culturally accepted—for human dominion over the land. This dominion, which many have interpreted as domination and control, of land is also tied to the most important Christian religious ideal: to regain Paradise. In the western world, then, religious ideas of dominion became tied to Enlightenment ideas of progress and New World exploration. Thus, a set of powerful, overlapping ideas concerning humans and the natural world became ingrained in western thinking, and the complementarity and reinforcement of these philosophical and religious threads made it virtually impossible to view man and nature as anything but two separate spheres, with Man almost always at the top of the hierarchical view of the cosmos. From Genesis, we received the religious mandate to have dominion over Nature, and the expulsion launched humans into a natural world that would give up its resources only through labor; Enlightenment thought reinforced the idea that humanity’s highest faculty was Reason whose “light” would probe the darkness of the natural world. Finally a backlash against some of these ideas came with Romantic ideas, in which more complicated, if sometimes sentimental, views of nature may be seen as laying the foundation of some of the much-later ecocritical

possibilities of seeing humans and nature in a different relationship than the previously held hierarchical, power-based one. One ironic implication is that which God created is divinely perfect and could not, therefore, have improvements made upon it. Cultivation, on the other hand, seeks not to improve that which God made, but rather to return the human occupants on earth closer to divinity by returning to the Garden.

One major dilemma associated with this will toward redemption is the means undertaken to pursue recovery. Merchant alludes to this problem when she writes, “[i]n America the recovery narrative propelled settlement and ‘improvement’ of the American continent by Europeans. Euroamerican men acted to reverse the decline initiated by Eve by turning it into an ascent back to the garden” (Merchant 140). As Cronon mentions, the Euroamerican settlers’ idea of improvements upon the land excluded the labor of American Indians. Making “improvements” upon the land provided colonist with the means to justify the act of appropriating land that was not their own, as was the case, as I previously mentioned, with opposing perceptions of nature’s utility between settlers and New England Indians. “The idea of recovery” Merchant contends, “functioned as ideology and legitimation for settlement of the New World [...]” (137). It is this legitimation and appropriation of land and its relationship to the act of recovery along with varying perceptions of nature that I will discuss at length in my examination of Steinbeck’s Dust Bowl migrants.

The act of cultivation extends beyond a return to the Edenic myth, however. Couched within this ideal exists a portrait of the cultivator who is both literal farmer as well as an abstract, sentimental, and quasi-religious figure, through whose labor the New World is redeemed. Thomas Jefferson speaks to this idea in his *Notes on the State of*

*Virginia*: “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breasts he has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue” (Jefferson). This nostalgia associated with the farmer became more than a means to justify removing indigenous peoples and altering the landscape of the New World. If the cultivators are God’s chosen people, and their labor God’s work, the implications are clear: anything and anyone standing in the way of the laborer is against God. If the New World was entirely composed of members of the Christian faith, and the integrity of the landscape maintained in the process of cultivation, then perhaps Jefferson was right. Since this scenario was not the case, we are left to wonder why God or anyone would have supported such a notion. Jeffersonian pastorality was so tied to his ideas of God’s mandate that these pervasive, even pernicious ideologies prevented him from seeing that this campaign masked the cultural and environmental depredations; his religious, pastoral idealism blinded him to a perspective that could acknowledge the horrendous realities that stemmed directly from the ideal.

And yet, this ideal is still held strongly by contemporary Western culture as part of the principles of rugged American individualism. The yeoman farmer has come to represent the West at its best: the resistor of industrialism, the democratic idealist, the pioneer; in sum, the rugged individual. “What is attractive in pastoralism” writes Leo Marx in his noted book, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, “is the felicity represented by an image of a natural landscape, a terrain either unspoiled or, if cultivated, rural. Movement toward such a symbolic landscape also may be understood as movement away from an ‘artificial’ world” (9). If Marx’s contention is correct, the shift toward pastoralism is another means through which Western culture

attempts to return to an Edenic virgin landscape. It became a way to reject industrialism, to pioneer a new frontier in search of another untrammelled landscape, seeking pristine wilderness untouched by man. Following along this line of thought, Marx opens his book with the following statement: “The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination. The ruling motive of the good shepherd, leading figure of the classic, Virgilian mode, was to withdraw from the great world and begin a new life in a fresh, green landscape. And now here was a virgin continent!” (3). The irony within Marx’s observation rests in the fact that once Eden has been discovered, it is the yeoman’s job, according to Jefferson, to tame the wild landscape and cultivate it in the vision of the Garden. Here again we see the cycle of fall and recovery played out at the hands of agricultural idealism. Marx confirms this notion when he remarks that “[the dream to retreat to an oasis of harmony and joy] was embodied in various utopian schemes for making America the site of a new beginning for Western society” (L. Marx 3). But what are the consequences of these new beginnings to which Marx refers? Within this “yearning for a simpler, more harmonious style of life, an existence closer to nature’ that is the psychic root of all pastoralism” (L. Marx 6) exists dispossession on a national scale and ecological depredation beyond repair. The pastoral vision, romantic as it is, depends on the acquisition of land and human dominion over nature at the cost of those indigenous cultures whose land was stolen by settlers in pursuit of the pastoral ideal and recovery from the Fall; it depends largely on the vision held by New World settlers that a utilitarian nature was available to serve the needs and desires of a conquest marked by ecological and cultural destruction at the hands of the plow—the reality behind this myth



loses its luster when conceived of in these terms. The pastoral myth depends also on notions of cyclicity: when Eden becomes corrupted or loses its virginal appeal, another Eden must be sought out and created. How else could we justify Western humanity's pressing desire to irrigate an entire arid region, converting a desert landscape to lush agricultural land? All these complexities woven within the West's history with Eden and pastoralism I attempt to unravel in my examination of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and his disparate Dust Bowl migrants.

## Chapter One: Diaspora, Displacement, and the Ecological Imagination

In his essay entitled, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” Arjun Appadurai describes the notion of “*imagined worlds*” which he suggests are “constituted by the historically situated imaginations of personas and groups spread around the globe” (ibid). He argues that through the traversal of the various landscapes within these imagined worlds a global cultural politics is created, and examines various forms of “imagined world landscapes” which he defines as ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes and ideoscapes. Appadurai claims that these landscapes are foundational to his notion of a new global order.<sup>1</sup> Of these landscapes, this section is primarily concerned with ethnoscape or “the landscape of personas who constitute the shifting world in which we live” (32). Therefore, the focus of this discussion will include a comprehensive examination of diasporic movement though a specific landscape—from the southwestern region of the United States commonly referred to as “The Dustbowl” to California during the Depression Era in the 1930’s.

Although it is an ambivalent term, diaspora is a word “which literally and on an historical level, negatively denotes communities of people dislocated from their native homelands through migration, immigration, or exile as a consequence of colonial expansion [...]” (4). The Dust Bowl migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath* undoubtedly fall within these components of diaspora and yet have been overlooked as participants within a diasporic migration because of their failure to traverse between nation states.

According to Janan Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, “subjects [...] are defined by a

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<sup>1</sup> See Braziel & Mannur’s introduction to *Theorizing Diaspora* entitled “Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies.”

traversal of the boundaries demarcating nation and diaspora” (5). In short, diasporic traversal depends on the penetration of boundaries dividing nations. The work of academics devoted to theorizing diaspora involves a reshaping of the ways in which the forced movement, migration, or other forms of cultural communities are perceived. And yet, too often this discourse concentrates on international migration. Limiting focus to international cultural displacement results in the inevitable construction of a hierarchy where theorists favor one type of migration (international) over another (in this case intra-national) through exclusion. This stratification works against much of the core of diaspora theory—“rethinking nationhood, citizenship, and ethnicity in non-hierarchical [...] forms” (13). It is my intention to problematize governing ideas in diaspora studies by insisting on an inclusion of intranational migration in diasporic discourse as a necessary means by which the divisions within a nation state can be re-negotiated. With these notions in mind, this chapter focuses on the forced relocation of subaltern peoples in *The Grapes of Wrath* as a fictional manifestation of the intranational migration occurring in the United States during both the settlement of Oklahoma and the 1930’s. Focusing specifically on the Joad family, I will explore the role that imagination plays in the creation and division of boundaries, the ways in which intranational movement challenges contemporary diaspora theory, and how this migration relates to the economy of nature.

The various subjects frequently discussed in diasporic discourse include migrancy, trauma, involuntary movement, and the creation of “home” and “homeland” identity. These notions are often seen as inextricable, for “the tensions between the old and new homes create the problem of divided allegiances [...] caused by travel and

relocation (Radhakrishnan 122). Thus, a diasporic individual is constantly faced with a dualistic displacement where identification of self and place becomes increasingly difficult. As R. Radhakrishnan writes; “when people move, identities, perspectives, and definitions change [...] [while] one’s very being becomes polemical” (124). With consideration to these concepts, I intend to extend the characteristic components associated with diaspora to the Joad family in *The Grapes of Wrath* in an attempt to open diasporic discourse to various forms of cultural migration including those forms of migrancy which occur within the confines of a single nation state. This project aims to contribute to the field of diaspora studies by suggesting that many migrant subjects participate in experiences comparable to those of more commonly studied diasporas. By stretching theories of diaspora to fit the intranational phenomenon of movement, I am suggesting that diaspora neither can nor should be limited to international migration, as many of the components characteristic of international migration exist within certain intranational movements. The experience of African Americans relocating from the south to the north in the post-antebellum United States or the multiple American Indian tribes forcefully removed from their native homelands and relocated time and time again could be useful as analogous situations to understanding many other forms of intranational diasporic migration. The failure to acknowledge intranational movements within diasporic discourse trivializes the tragic histories of these migrant cultures and thus, the very existence of these individuals and their cultural communities.

Though a fictitious take on a historical event, the intranational movement of the Joad family pushes against diaspora theory while aligning itself with many of these components of diaspora. Dustbowl migrants of America’s 1930’s are infrequently

identified, if at all recognized with “diasporic populations across the globe—Jewish, African, Chinese, Japanese” (Braziel and Mannur 8), and therefore are not considered a classical model in diaspora studies because their migration does not occur between nation states.<sup>6</sup> Yet, *The Grapes of Wrath* could be looked at and I would argue *should* be looked at through this critical lens as a way to open the discussion to more diverse and inclusive forms of cultural migration.

This discussion requires an examination of the ways in which the migration of the Joad family, though a construction of Steinbeck’s imagination, might be perceived as genuine reconstruction of the Dust Bowl. For many, the Joad family has come to represent the hundreds of thousands of “Okies,” who migrated to California during the 1930’s from what is commonly referred to as The Dustbowl, a geographic area of the United States which historian James Gregory identifies as “four southern plains states: Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri” (xiv). For this reason, among others, the historical context of the text has long been noted as a significant focus of many literary critics. Charles Lee refers to the text as the “novel of sharecropper life [...] (a model of) great propaganda and great art” (50). Steinbeck’s non-fictional text, *Harvest Gypsies*, originally published in 1936 as seven articles in the *San Francisco News* and later as a complete text, reveals his knowledge of “nomadic, poverty-stricken harvesters driven by hunger and the threat of hunger from crop to crop, from harvest to harvest, up and down [California]” (Steinbeck *Harvest* 19). In an introduction to this same text, Charles Wolenberg writes: “Steinbeck stayed at Weedpatch Camp for several days, talking to residents, attending camp committee meetings and dances, [...] [he] traveled in the old bakery truck to nearby farms and ditch-side migrant settlements” (vii). It has also been

noted that Steinbeck befriended Tom Collins who was the “manager of a federal migrant labor camp in the California Central Valley” (v) and after whom *The Grapes of Wrath*'s Jim Rawley is modeled. It is therefore evident that *The Grapes of Wrath* combines fictional narrative with interpreted historical fact that Steinbeck was familiar with first-hand. Although the responsible reader will allow room for dramatization and reconstruction of the Joads for fictional purposes, the family's experience can be and has long been interpreted as a moderately accurate depiction of life as an Okie.

Steinbeck scholar Louis Owens notes this representational significance of the Joad family in *John Steinbeck's Re-Vision of America*, in which he maintains that “the journey of the Joads and the other migrants represents both a social phenomenon of the thirties and a recapitulation of the American westering movement” (129). Owens continues this discussion by noting that the central theme of the text involves:

Steinbeck's continued preoccupation with California as the ultimate symbol of the American Eden, and [...] the Great Central Valley of California becomes the microcosm of the new Garden. [...] [T]he Central Valley lures the migrants westward from Oklahoma and the entire Dust Bowl region with their dream of the promised land, the same dream that drove their forebears across the Atlantic and across the continent. (129)

The westward traversal to which Owens refers is complex on many levels. As Owens suggests, the migration undertaken by the Joads and other Okies is not dissimilar from other historical westward movements. Manifest Destiny, an imperial appendage of the American Dream, is predicated on notions of expansion and has often resulted in the displacement and dislocation of occupants previously inhabiting the area being “settled.”

Though some inhabitants relocated by choice, such as individuals seeking wealth during the Gold Rush, others, tenant farmers similar to the Joads for example, were removed by coercion. However, as I will discuss later in this piece, many tenant families of the Dust Bowl diáspora held intimate ties with the imperial force that ultimately resulted in the family's departure from their self-identified homeland.

As in other examples of westward expansionism, the subjugation of peoples occurs even before the migration of the Joads. Anyone even remotely familiar with American history is already aware that this repetitive pattern of conquest remains problematic. The text points to these issues where Steinbeck, taking liberties with authorial intrusion via a representational migrant, declares: "Grampa took up the land, and he had to kill the Indians and drive them away" (*Grapes* 45). By noting that Grampa acquired land by removing Indians, Steinbeck invites the reader to make connections between the cyclicity of conquest with the forceful removal of Indians and the overarching causes of the Dust Bowl migration, which rest in the hands of economic imperial expansion.

Not surprisingly, conquest came with a laundry list of problems. The Dust Bowl region and Oklahoma in particular has had a long history of conflict between numerous, relocated Native American tribes including the Wichitas, Osage, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole, to name a few, and non-native settlers such as Euroamerican settlers inhabiting the Dust Bowl region. According to *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*:

The Euroamerican settlement of Oklahoma was comparable to earlier westward movement patterns [...] As with earlier American frontier history, non-Indian

settlers moved onto former Indian lands obtained by the U.S. government from American Indian tribal leaders through the “twin Cs,” coercion and cajoling [...] [A]s usual, the needs and wishes of Native peoples were ignored. In fact, the settlement of Oklahoma amounted to an invasion of Indian lands. In other words, the movement was a microcosm of the American frontier experience encapsulated into only a few years, little more than a decade. (<http://www.ok-history.mus.ok.us/enc/OkEncyclopedia.htm>)

Although there is historical evidence supporting the existence of conflict and warfare between opposing tribal bands, it is fair to say that nothing has come close to the depredations and dispossession on a national scale caused by the onset of white settlers into tribal lands. One need only think of Wounded Knee, the Sand Creek Massacre, or the malicious “acts [of] passing out smallpox-infested blankets to Indian tribes” to support this claim (Owens *Trouble* 52).

European expansionism obviously caused and continues the legacy of a long history of cultural and environmental devastation. After Thomas Jefferson made the Louisiana Purchase granting the United States Government 800,000 square miles of land stretching beyond the Mississippi River, the many tribes occupying the areas were forced into diaspora.<sup>2</sup> In 1824, the Osage and Quapaw were obligated to cede lands to the United States who, in light of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, “turned [the land] over to the Indians of the old Southeast, (Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek and Seminole) who were being relocated from their tribal homes” east of the Mississippi (Oklahoma website, “history”). By noting that Grampa killed Indians to obtain the Oklahoma land that the

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<sup>2</sup> Oklahoma website, <http://www.okccvb.org/special/native-am-history.htm>, link to “History of Indians in Oklahoma.”



Joad family called home, Steinbeck reminds the reader of this long history of devastation caused by Euroamerican expansionism. Because the tenant speaks these words when he, too, is forced off the land, the reader is made aware of the cyclical nature of this destructive pattern and of the settlers' complicity in their dislocation as well as the dislocation of others.

Native Americans were not the only occupants displaced by westward settlement. The domination of non-human nature also occurs within *The Grapes of Wrath*. Many species indigenous to the American landscape were equally disrupted or dislocated with the onset of European colonizers. Although imperialism has often equated Indians with plants and animals in terms of obstacles to expansion, my comparison between them does not. Such a comparison would only reinforce dominant stereotypes of the "Noble Savage" or Indians' inherent connection to what is considered "natural." I am, however, claiming that the devastation—both cultural and environmental—resulting from the imperial conquest of the American West is equally significant. To separate the two would reinforce the gap between nature and culture. To look at both losses as problematic and related is essential to this attempted project of perceiving the social as part of the natural and vice versa.

In her essay entitled "Saving the Salmon, Saving the People: Environmental Justice and Columbia River Tribal Literatures," Janis Johnson elucidates this relationship between the destruction of nature with the destruction of culture when, referring to the Umatilla, Warm Springs, Yakama, and Nez Perce Tribes of the Columbia River Basin she writes:

Reduced numbers of fish, reduced fishing, and failures by the U.S. government to protect the fish and the treaty fishing rights of the tribes deprives the tribes of resources necessary for their meaningful survival. Because salmon is a pillar of Columbia River tribal culture, its loss contributes to the adverse circumstances of the tribes. These circumstances include poverty rates between 27 and 44 percent; unemployment rates between 19 and 26 percent, and up to 80 percent in the winter; and death rates between 20 percent and 2.3 times higher than nontribal neighbors. (268)

Here we see the ecological overlap between nature and culture. The destruction of salmon in the Columbia River Basin, as Johnson clearly articulates, results in the cultural devastation of the tribes dependent on this natural resource for its survival. This situation is analogous to the relationship between the destruction of the natural landscape in the Dust Bowl region and of the indigenous as well as non-native cultures inhabiting the landscape. Not only were many tribes forced into diaspora upon the Western settlement of the Dust Bowl region, but destructive farming practices including overgrazing, implementation of new flora, and destruction of native ecosystems resulted in the Dust Bowl. It was the obliteration of this natural landscape that eventually caused the Dust Bowl diaspora.

*The Grapes of Wrath* alludes to this domination of the Oklahoma landscape where, voiced as a representational migrant, Steinbeck proclaims, “And Pa was born here, and he killed weeds and snakes” (45). This sentence illuminates the forceful means by which the settlers of Oklahoma eradicated the landscape in an attempt to domesticate it. Pa killed weeds and snakes in order to tame the Oklahoma landscape, only to replace

native flora and fauna with houses and hogs, cultivated cotton, corn and various other cash crops. An attempt was made to transform the landscape from “savage wilderness” to “agrarian cornucopia.” Tom Joad acknowledges the fruitlessness the land yields because of the irresponsible practices associated with the domestication of the landscape: “‘Ever’ year I can remember, we had a good crop comin’, an’ it never come. Grampa says she was good the first five plowin’s, while the wild grass was still in her” (*Grapes* 27). By noting that the land was fertile while the “wild grass was still in her,” Tom connects the imposition of nonnative flora to the land’s inability to reproduce. Like the disruption and displacement of American Indian peoples, the domestication of the Oklahoma landscape repeats the colonial pattern of domination.

In addition to connections between imperialism and forced migration, diaspora studies consider the myriad ways the citizens within a nation state formulate a national identity. Benedict Anderson speaks to this notion in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* when he writes: “[c]ommunities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (5-6). Thus, the nation-state for Anderson becomes a construction of a collective imagination based on certain religious, cultural and political ideals which function to differentiate that specific nation from others. The identity of that nation state is largely dependent on the uniqueness of the collective, imagined identity of its citizens. Jefferson’s agrarian ideal exemplifies this collective identity shared by many citizens and politicians in the United States during the settlement of the West and, to a certain extent, continues today. Steinbeck makes mention of this collective agrarian ideal and its connection to expansionist and imperialist politics in *East of Eden* when he writes,

“[t]hen the Americans came—more greedy because there were more of them. They took the lands, remade the laws to make their titles good. And farmholds spread over the land [...]” (7). By connecting agrarianism with imperial westering, Steinbeck not only recognizes the work of a collective vision for an expanding nation but also the political backing supporting this campaign.

In addition to national identity defined by a collaboration of collective visions shared by citizens of a nation state, scholars of diapora have a tendency to insist that national identity is largely determined by a nation’s geopolitical boundaries. However, with increased permeability between national borders, the nation-state, like its inhabitants, becomes more difficult to define and is therefore as subjective and imaginary as Anderson’s “community.” As Anderson argues, the emergence of a global cultural system results in increased difficulty determining nationalism; boundaries between nation-states cease to exist outside the political exercise of power. In short, boundaries exist specifically for geopolitical purposes of identifying what land belongs to which nation, not what people belong to it. Therefore, in a cultural context, boundaries are arbitrary, mainly due to their permeability by both individuals and groups of people. Thus, the geopolitics of boundary creation and recognition reinforce colonial ideals of segmentation and possession, which inevitably reduce to imperial exercises of power and domination. However, diapora is dependent on the establishment of the hard and fast boundaries of the nation state because, ultimately, there can be no “homeland” if all special division is arbitrary. Therefore, however arbitrary they might seem, boundaries are a necessary component to the political exercise of power for they determine which people follow whose ruling. They are a means of spatial control, for not only do

boundaries determine which people might permeate which borders, but also which things. Keeping people and other living and non living things separate depends on these divisionary, though imaginative, lines.

Insistent focus in diasporic theory on international movement reinforces these imaginative and necessary parameters dividing nation-states by maintaining an interior and exterior landscape through which cultural communities must navigate, contributing to a separatist perspective of self and other. However, in both international and intranational migration there are interior and exterior landscapes to navigate: “Joad pointed to the boundary fence. ‘That there’s our line’” (*Grapes* 39). The Joad family identifies these borderscapes in a way that defies the linearity of circumscription. They do not perceive the lines of demarcation as definitive, bound, or sovereign: “We didn’t really need no fence there, but we had the wire, an’ Pa kinda liked her there. Said it gave him a feelin’ that forty was forty. Wouldn’t of had the fence if Uncle John didn’ come drivin’ in one night with six spools of wire in his wagon” (ibid). Similar to the ways in which lines defining nation-states are more ideologically bound than geographically static, Pa’s fence was equally arbitrary. Pa recognizes the illusory parameters of the fence in his belief or “feeling” of forty rather than conceiving of the fence as a definitive boundary. His “feeling of forty” suggests that, though he recognizes ownership in terms of capital, Pa refuses to completely endorse a divisionary ideology defined by capitalism. Pa’s elusive relationship with definitive boundaries also suggests that his connection with the land stretches beyond the confines of capitalism where land is not perceived as only a commodity or an object of possession but rather as an idea, a feeling associated with belonging to a place.

Steinbeck's preoccupation with capitalism and land ownership are revealed also in his novel *To a God Unknown*. Protagonist Joseph Wayne prepares to leave his Vermont farm to settle in California in pursuit of his dream to create a prosperous farm. Joseph tells his father, "I have a hunger for land of my own, sir. I have been reading about the West and the good cheap land there [...] [T]hey're homesteading the western land, sir. You have only to live a year on the land and build a house and plough a bit and the land is yours. No one can ever take it away" (2). Like the Dust Bowl migrants hungry for land, Joseph Wayne, as did Walt Whitman, faces West in search of wealth related to the immensity of land. Joseph and the Wayne family conceive of land as a provider of shelter, food and life for them—a wealth of resources at their disposal. For Joseph, the land becomes a utility, a means by which wealth can be acquired. As he tells his brothers, "[T]here's land untaken next to mine. Each of you can have a hundred and sixty acres, and then well have six hundred and forty acres all in one piece. The grass is deep and rich, and the soil wants only turning" (8). The Wayne brothers perceive of land as a mechanism for personal gain and wealth. By maintaining that the land wants "only turning," Joseph recognizes its utility. By noting its acreage, Joseph reduces the land to a form of measurement. For the Wayne brothers, measuring land becomes a way to determine not only their boundaries but the wealth that land amounts to. Their anthropocentric vision of land, as it does for the Dust Bowl migrants, results in the brothers' desire to control, dominate and ultimately yield a fiscal profit.

The conclusion of *To a God Unknown* shares similarities with the ending of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Drought and overgrazing result in the soil's sterility and, like the tenant farmers of the Dust Bowl diaspora, Thomas Wayne, in search of another

uncorrupted landscape, another new Eden, drives the cattle to more fertile ground taking his family with him and leaving Joseph behind. Rather than pursue more sustainable practices to the land they destroyed or restore that which they depleted, Thomas' departure suggests that the land is ultimately expendable. Thomas, like the Joad family and other Dust Bowl migrants, represents a lack of dedication on a national and perhaps global scale to replenish that which has been exhausted. Instead, these members of capitalist culture continue the process of colonialism and destruction in the constant search for an untrammelled Eden.

The relationship between westward expansion and land-as-capital is an essential component to the forced migration of the Dust Bowl diaspora. As Joseph Fontenrose notes, "natural and economic forces had conspired to force them off the lands which they had called home" (71). The "natural" and "economic" forces to which Fontenrose refers include the "dust storms and erosion" and the foreclosed "mortgages [...] terminating tenancy" (ibid). Although Fontenrose separates the "natural" from the "economic" causes for this migration, Donald Worster makes the claim that the "natural" forces were the result of human irresponsibility:

[...] the Dust Bowl took only 50 years to accomplish. It cannot be blamed on illiteracy or overpopulation or social disorder. It came about because the culture was operating in precisely the way it was supposed to. Americans blazed their way across a richly endowed continent with a ruthless, devastating efficiency unmatched by people anywhere. When the white men came to the plains, they talked expansively of 'busting' and 'breaking' the land. And that is exactly what they did. Some environmental catastrophes are nature's work, others are the

slowly accumulating effects of ignorance or poverty. The Dust Bowl, in contrast, was the inevitable outcome of a culture that deliberately, self-consciously, set itself that task of dominating and exploiting the land for all it was worth. (4)

As Worster suggests, there undoubtedly exists a connection between the “cottoned out” earth and economics. The tenant farmers were obligated to cultivate land to yield a profit for the corporate land owners. Through the exploitation of tenant labor, the land owners fetishized the land, perceiving it as capital. This fetishization is directly related to the devastation of the topsoil because the exploitation of the laborers resulted in an equally exploitative method of farming at the expense of the topsoil. These destructive farming practices in the name of production combined with drought to create the Dust Bowl. Thus, the forced migration of the Okies links diaspora with capitalism’s pressing necessity to utilize and ultimately destroy the natural world.

### **Capitalist Aspects of Diaspora**

Capitalism functioned to settle as well as destroy the Dust Bowl region. As Worster writes: “We speak of farmers and plows on the plains and the damage they did, but the language is inadequate. What brought them to the region was a social system, a set of values, an economic order. There is no word that so fully sums up those elements as capitalism. [...] Capitalism, it is my contention, has been the decisive factor in this nation’s use of nature” (5). Because Jefferson supported the notion of small-scale agriculture as a means of prosperity for the yeoman farmer, the impetus for the Dust Bowl includes an investment in the economy of agriculture before its industrialization. The combination of this investment paired with an Edenic sense of a boundless and infinitely fertile land contributed to the settlement of the Great Plains. The results of



Jefferson's capitalist vision for a small-scale agrarian nation had paramount effects on the Dust Bowl region during the time of colonization and non-native settlement. Dan Flores discusses the history of the Great Plains and the destructive impacts 150 years of an agricultural economy has reaped on its ecosystem: "[V]arious Archaic groups [of the Great Plains] [...] were mostly generalist hunter-gathers whose economies were diverse, so that their effect was spread across a wide range of resources" (Flores 175). Although Flores mentions the ways in which these pre-contact Plains cultures indeed altered their environments, he argues that nothing has caused the insurmountable depredation to the Great Plains as has the economy of agriculture:

Triggered as so many times in the past by drought, the Dust Bowl appears in history as the logical consequence of five decades of the most massive human transformation of the Plains since the Pleistocene. [...] There are worrisome doubts about the successes of modern adaptations to the Plains, fears that in fact we haven't done much adapting at all, but have simply imposed patterns from other places, other visions. On the Southern and Central Plains, from Texas to Kansas and Colorado, half a century of irrigated agribusiness has increased the human carrying capacity twenty times beyond what it was when the previous inhabitants—the Comanches/Apaches/Kiowas/Cheyennes/Arapahos—owned the region. Yet the irrigation farming economy has drained the great water resource, the vast Ogalla Aquifer on which it is perched, so much that in Texas alone the wells have stopped pumping on 20 percent of the acreage irrigated in the middle 1980's. On the Southern Plains, which at the beginning of the twenty-first century are home to the most extensive population and two of the largest cities

on the entire Great Plains (Lubbock and Amarillo), the aquifer's estimated remaining lifespan is twenty to fifty years, no more. After that, no more water. Compared to the forty-five-year life of the Archaics, the lifespan of irrigated agriculture—approximately a century—will be a thin stratum indeed in the archeological record. (Flores 176)

It is therefore important to keep in mind that the Dust Bowl region was a result of small-scale farming practices, which utilized nature for profit and resulted in irreversible damage. Here again we see the inextricable interplay of capitalism, diaspora, and ecosystems destruction that has come to define the relationship between Western culture and the natural world.

The onset of industrial agriculture magnified these negative cultural and environmental impacts in the Dust Bowl region. Because the economic and industrial transformations were out of their hands and in the clutches of an industrial-political machine, the tenant farmers had no choice but to flee from the Dust Bowl region. Steinbeck elucidates the ways in which their migrancy was the result of something larger than they were when, speaking through the voice of a representational migrant, he writes: “It’s not us. It’s the monster. The bank isn’t like a man [...] the bank is something else than men [...] something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it” (45). In this passage Steinbeck describes the shift toward industrialization and the move away from rural agrarianism. This approach becomes a tactic for the reader to associate the migrancy forced upon the dustbowl diaspora with an ideological shift happening in America during the 1930’s—one connecting capital with

diaspora contiguously. As Patrick McCormick notes about John Ford's cinematic adaptation of Steinbeck's book, the migrants were:

Driven into diaspora by the Dust Bowl and the Depression, *Grapes* is the American film about poverty, class, and the struggle for economic justice. The Depression was this country's high-water mark for poverty, unemployment, and despair, and tens of millions of out-of-work and down-on-their-luck Americans recognized their own plight in Steinbeck's saga about dirt farmers scrapping for a job and a meal (47).

Though many viewers would attest to the depth and transparency Ford projects on the screen, attempting to compare Steinbeck's novel with Ford's cinematic adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* is a bit like comparing cars to airplanes. However, thematic overlaps do, in fact, exist between the novel and movie. For example, McCormick mentions the economic forces causing the migration of the Joads and other Dust Bowl migrants in the film, which also occurs in Steinbeck's textual version. McCormick does not, however, make the connection between these economic forces to the causes of the Dust Bowl. Perhaps McCormick overlooks this connection because Ford fails to elucidate this aspect, which Steinbeck makes clear. Yet, based on Flores' and Worster's assessments of the connections between the excessive utility of nature for economic profit, we must remember that these economic forces are as much about environmental destruction as they are about economics.

### **Diaspora According to Safran**

Having distinguished the relationship between the forced migration of the Dust Bowl and the capitalist agenda propelling that migration, perhaps an interrogation of the

ways in which this migration matches some of the components of diaspora according to scholar William Safran will help clarify the ways in which Steinbeck's perspective of the Dust Bowl migrants pushes against diaspora studies—notably diaspora's criteria for international versus intranational migration. In "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," Safran maintains seven criteria for identifying diaspora which I have summarized as follows: The diasporic individual (or their ancestors), (1) has been dispersed from a central location; (2) retains a collective memory about their homeland; (3) maintains a complicated/uneasy relationship with the hostland; (4) regards the homeland as their true, ideal, home; (5). Continually relates to homeland in myriad ways; (6) desires to survive as a distinct community; (7) maintains cultural, political, religious, economic, etc., ideals of homeland within communal interactions<sup>3</sup>. Of the first criterion, Safran writes, that the diasporic individual "or their ancestors, [must] have been dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more peripheral, or *foreign*, regions" (39 emphasis mine). The Dust Bowl, having been identified as four southwestern states (Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Missouri), could undoubtedly be perceived as the originary point or "center" from where this diaspora occurred. In the case of the Dust Bowl migrants, James Gregory writes, "cities, particularly the communities of greater Los Angeles, were the destinations of the large majority of Southwesterners entering California during the first third of the twentieth century. But a significant minority headed into the state's southern agricultural valleys where, since 1900, cotton cultivation had become a steadily expanding enterprise. With their knowledge of that crop, Southwesterners were more or less assured to work

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<sup>3</sup> From William Safran's essay entitled "The Jewish Diaspora in a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective." *Israel Studies*. 10.1 (Spring 2005): 37.

opportunities” (9). Following Safran’s definition, we can see how the Dust Bowl migrants found themselves in two geographical regions of California. In *The Grapes of Wrath* specifically, California’s Central Valley becomes the destination of choice because of, as Gregory notes, their familiarity with farming cotton. The migrants settled primarily within one specific state, which could be perceived as a single peripheral. But because California covers 163,707 square miles, it is geographically larger than many countries, including England, Ireland, and Scotland—all countries where, according to theorists, diaspora has recognizably occurred.<sup>4</sup> Referring strictly to its geographic size, the U.S. is significantly larger than many other independent nations—a factor which must, therefore, be taken into account when considering the criterion of diaspora to take place between national boundaries. Although the Dust Bowl migrants fail to travel from a distinctly *foreign* nation which Safran suggests is necessary for diasporic travel, we may, however, begin to see the Dust Bowl migrants as part of other diasporic traversals that have taken place around the globe. This notion pushes Safran’s definition of diaspora and the definition maintained by other cultural critics by suggesting that diaspora need not occur between foreign nations, but can and has occurred within the confines of a single nation. Perceiving of the Dust Bowl movement in diasporic terms suggests that the study of this migration can provide scholars with invaluable information on a global rather than national scale, especially with consideration to the heightened awareness of globalization and the capitalist empire. Through recognition and acknowledgment of the Dust Bowl diaspora, the capitalist world might, perhaps, learn an invaluable lesson about the repercussions of a historically utilitarian vision of nature and culture.

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<sup>4</sup> California Website visited 5/10/05  
[http://www.netstate.com/states/geography/ca\\_geography.htm](http://www.netstate.com/states/geography/ca_geography.htm)

This characteristic of diaspora relates to component number seven where Safran notes that the migrants' "cultural, religious, economic, and/or political relationships to the homeland are reflected in a significant way in their communal institutions" (43). As I have already noted, most of the characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* opt to reestablish roots in the Central Valley as an extension of familiar ties to home. Most of the characters have farmed the Oklahoma landscape for generations, so it is only natural, upon arriving in California, they wish to maintain that part of their culture. The ties that bind them to agriculture are maintained in California, though their pastoral roots were established long before their arrival to the Central Valley.

As I've previously noted, when the Dust Bowl migrants originally settled Oklahoma, Steinbeck notes that Grampa had to "kill the Indians" but also that Pa "killed weeds and snakes" in order to claim their place in the Oklahoma landscape (*Grapes* 45). Though they colonized the land through force and murder, their acts were justified by their sense of entitlement to it—they were merely pursuing the American Dream. It was a historical relationship with pastorality that brought the families to Oklahoma, and thus, this extension of the pastoral ideal the Okies transfer to California. It is this, among other ideologies that distinguishes the migrants as "Okies" when they arrive in California. With the pastoral ideal swallowed by the dust storms of the southern Great Plains, the Okies' fight to maintain this ideal distinguishes them as a distinct group in California culture.

Safran's second criterion includes the diasporic group's retention of "a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, achievements, and, often enough, sufferings" (40). This collective memory is

undoubtedly the case for the Joads and other migrants. When on the road, the families continuously form kinships based on kindred experiences, most of which came as the result of being forced from their homeland. As Steinbeck notes in an interchapter: “And because [the migrants] were lonely and perplexed, because they had all come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together [...] [the] families became one family, the children were the children of all. The loss of home became one loss, and the golden time in the West was one dream” (*Grapes* 264). This kinship is from a common experience of loss. The families could identify with one another because they, too, had lost their farms, their homes, their identities and their lives. Beyond these losses, the families also abandoned a collective vision of the Great Plains as Eden. The inexhaustible soil of the Dust Bowl region proved to be exhaustible. The Dust Bowl migrants transfer these notions to California, keeping synch with their agricultural past and continuing a cyclical nature of conquest marked by capitalism.

Music was another means through which the Dust Bowl migrants shared a homeland identity. As James Gregory notes, “the music was critical. What we today call country music by and large belonged to Okies in the 1930’s [...] Country music at an early date appealed across the moral-religious boundaries to illuminate the common denominators of their subculture, the essential values and symbols that over the year have comprised the Okie identity” (223). Okie migrant Earnest Martin maintains that music “was part of our way of thinking [...] [it] had a powerful influence upon melding the people together” (ibid). Music was often played on the road to California and in the labor camps once they arrived: “the man played and the people moved slowly in on him until

the circle was closed and tight, and then he sang ‘Ten-Cent Cotton and Forty-Cent Meat’” (*Grapes* 273). The title of this song perfectly demonstrates the way the country ballad maintains stories of collective identification for the Dust Bowl migrants. Because their poverty and migrancy was largely due to the low price of cotton compared to the price of food, the simple task of providing food became increasingly difficult. Thus, the song becomes a way to identify this problem by giving voice to a mutual understanding of suffering.

Safran’s third component of diaspora involves the “relationship with the dominant element of society in the host-land” which he describes as “complicated and often uneasy. They believe that they are not, and perhaps cannot be, fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it” (41). Upon their arrival to California the Joads are faced with rejection, isolation, and class discrimination. Ma is the first to experience disempowerment when a police officer tells her; “You’re in California, an’ we don’t want you goddamn Okies settlin’ down” (*Grapes* 291). Though the term “Okie” no longer maintains the loaded negativity it once possessed, Gregory contends, during the time of the Dust Bowl migration the word became “a synonym for ‘no-account trash’ and [...] a label nearly everyone sought to avoid” (120). Ma’s confrontation with the term “Okie” leaves her feeling isolated and distinctly separate from the dominant California culture, which in turn evokes a sense of belonging with other “Okies.” This is exemplified in an exchange between Ma and another migrant mother; “‘You been frien’ly,’ she said. ‘We thank you.’ The stout woman smiled. ‘No need to thank. Ever’body’s in the same wagon. S’pose we was down. You’d a give us a han” (*Grapes* 606). The reciprocity between the women shows their empathy for one



another's position as outsiders in California by maintaining a "we're all in it together" mentality. This shared desire to stick together suggests the women and their families, as well as other migrant families, identify with one another through their common experience of suffering.

The Joad's isolation from the dominant culture is not the only experience they encounter in California. Ma happens upon a farm owner who treats her with kindness, rather than the isolation and racism she experienced with the police officer. They make small talk about the weather and the effects of the rain on the cotton crop. The two discuss prices paid to the pickers when he tells her, "Little fella like me can't do anything. The Association sets the rate, and we got to mind. If we don't we ain't got a farm. Little fella gets crowded all the time" (574). Though Ma and the farm owner don't share a history, they share, though on different levels in the labor force, economic adversity resulting from agricultural industrialization. Through this suffering the two form a kinship and establish a similar solidarity to that shared by the migrant laborers. Steinbeck uses careful rhetoric to show this camaraderie when he writes, "their footsteps beat on the road together" (573).

Ma's experience with the police officer, more so than her experience with the farm owner, resonates with many other Dust Bowl migrants in the text. Based on California's generally negative reception of the Dust Bowl, real-life migrant Ernest Atchley writes:

This is a great day, although it is raining, because what we have been waiting for patiently here three months for, has come to pas. We're leaving today for home, sweet home, and if we ever come back, we'll have a round trip ticket tucked

securely away. California is all right for Californians, but we're going back to "Bid D" where the long-horn cattle roam, where the 'gen'ral sto 'keeper treats yo' all lak humans', and where hospitality reigns. A fellow don't appreciate home until he comes to California. (qtd in Gregory 114)

As a form of resistance to these feelings of isolation, the migrants create an independent labor camp and community called Weedpatch Camp. When the Joad family enters Weedpatch, Tom inquires how the camp is governed and the watchman answers, "there's five sanitary units. Each one elects a Central Committee man [...] [and] that committee makes the laws" (*Grapes* 391). Though the rejection from California culture pushed the migrants to the fringes of society, the creation of Weedpatch and similar camps functioned to maintain the independence and community of the Dust Bowl migrants. This sense of community at Weed Patch foreshadows a new political order—one of communion and unity rather than one of a separatist nature—that many of the narrative's migrant laborers advocate for later in the text.

Safran's criterion number four consists of the migrants' regard for "their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendents would (or should) eventually return—if and when conditions are appropriate" (41). Although the Okie's often referred to the Dust Bowl region from where they migrated as their "true and ideal home" to which they longed to return, the reality of their return was often one of the fictions maintained by the Okie culture. The Joads, like many Dust Bowl migrants, had no place to return to nor the means to leave California. The family did not, however, wish to embark on the westward journey to begin with. As Safran's fourth criterion suggests, their loyalties remained to their homeland in Oklahoma. Grampa and

Granma emphasize the ties a diasporic individual has with home, for theirs were so intimate they did not live to see California. In their deaths, Steinbeck displays not only the physical hardships of migrancy, but the emotional attachments one creates to a homeland. Their deaths symbolize the difficulties associated with forceful abandonment of home and the lack of desire to reconstruct life elsewhere. Grampa's resistance indicates his inability to sever ties to home;

Al came back with Grampa struggling and limping by his side. "He wasn't sleepin'," Al said. "He was settin' out back of the barn. They's sompin wrong with 'im." Grampa's eyes had dulled, and there was none of the old meanness in them. "Ain't nothin' the matter with me," he said. "I jus' ain't a-goin." Pa demanded, "What you mean you ain't a-goin? Why, here we're all packed up, ready. We got to go. We got no place to stay." "I an't sayin' for you to stay," said Grampa. "You go right on along. Me—I'm stayin'. I give her a goin'-over all night mos'ly. This here's my country. I b'long here. An' I don't give a goddamn if they's grapes crowdin' a fella outa bed even. I ain't a-goin'. This country ain't no good, but it's my country. No, you all go ahead. I'll jus' stay right here where I b'long." (152)

Grampa's apprehension toward leaving is related to a loss of identity associated with abandoning his homeland. By claiming he is staying where he belongs, Grampa associates who he is with a personal history of where he is from.

When Acoma Pueblo poet, fiction writer, and essayist, Simon Ortiz visited The University of Montana in February, 2005, he discussed the connection between self and place, claiming that you don't know who you are unless you know your history. Ortiz

speaks personally to this matter in *Speaking for the Generations: Native Writers on Writing*, where he writes, “I identify myself as Acoma or Aacqumeh (a person of the Acoma people) because I was born of the Acoma Pueblo people and my native cultural identity is Acoma. When I say I am from Acoma, I am speaking about my cultural identity, but I am also talking about the place where my native culture and community reside in New Mexico” (xviii). Ortiz maintains that his identity depends directly on where he is from. This notion of identity formation, historicity, and place is clear in the *The Grapes of Wrath*, particularly with Grampa’s connection to the family farm in Oklahoma and by his actions of “taking up the land” and killing snakes and Indians to do so (45). By showing that Grampa’s connection to the land was not only rooted historically, but established through force and murder, the contemporary reader is obligated to question the authenticity of Grampa’s relationship to the land. By forcing Native Americans off the land, Grampa microcosmically parallels the large land owners who forced the Joads and other tenants off the land, uprooting thousands of men, women and children. Steinbeck leaves the reader questioning the cyclical nature of forced migration in the name of Westward expansion while simultaneously illuminating the incongruence of authenticity and identity with sense of place. This notion echoes Radhakrishnan’s inquiry as to whether or not there even exists such a thing as a truly “authentic identity” and his assertion that “there is more than enough room for multiple versions of the same reality” but that “our intentions and interpretations are themselves products of history and not subjective substitutes for history” (124). Therefore, Grampa’s relationship to Oklahoma and his sense of self is a product of his own historical fiction. Stuart Hall suggests in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” “we should think [...] of identity as a

‘production’ which is never complete, always in process” (234). Hall’s suggestion concerning the fluidity involved in identity construction offers a means for understanding Grampa’s feelings of authenticity with the Oklahoma landscape. Though the reader may find it easy to denounce his original sense of place in Oklahoma, Grampa, nonetheless, self-identifies with that particular place. Grampa is unable to perceive of himself outside of the fixed landscape with which he identifies because leaving inhibits the progress of self-identification, For this reason, Grampa perishes almost immediately after leaving home.

Safran’s fifth and sixth criteria are inextricably linked in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and he describes them as follows:

5. [The diasporic individual] continues to relate, personally, or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity, which reach across political boundaries, are importantly defined in terms of the existence of such a relationship. That relationship may include a collective commitment to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its independence, safety, and propriety.
6. They wish to survive as a distinct community—in most instances as a minority—by maintaining and transmitting a cultural and/or religious heritage derived from their ancestral home and the symbols based on it. In so doing, they adapt to hostland conditions and experiences to become themselves centers of cultural creation and elaboration (42).

Though they realized they could not change the hyper-industrial growth in agricultural industry that forced them from home, Tom Joad and former preacher Jim Casy created a

horizontal kinship attempting to maintain and restore a way of life that was connected with life at home. As defenders for the Dust Bowl lifestyle, the two men became advocates for their homeland. Casy, though murdered in the process, developed himself as a union leader campaigning for the rights of migrant laborers. Because most migrants in the Central Valley wished to transfer their agrarian culture to California, Casy became a proponent for the rights of this ideal. After Casy's murder, Tom vowed to take Casy's place: "Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there [...] An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there" (*Grapes* 572). This same notion is transferable to Safran's suggestion that diasporic communities become "centers of cultural creation" in their hostland (42). Weedpatch camp exemplifies one aspect of the Okies' wish to survive as a distinct cultural community whose collective identity and individual sense of self depend largely on where they are from. By establishing self-governance they resist the control and domination of the large land owners who attempt to disrupt the group's collective kinship out of fear they will organize against the injustices they experience. It is their organization as well as their association with a common homeland that define the laborers as a distinct group. Together, through the traumas typical to diasporic individuals, the farmers become unified toward a composite goal—one including the basic rights allowed to other Caucasian-American citizens. Though this goal rings a common bell with other forms of injustice, the Okies are distinct in their mission. Not only are they fighting against the social injustice they experience as a minority, but more importantly, for the integrity of their agrarian ideal. It is this distinction that maintains their collective cultural identity.

## **The Imagination, Identity, and Trauma**

In addition to Safran's characteristic components, many theorists discuss the role of the imagination and trauma in communities of diaspora. As do many diasporic subjects, the Joads have a tendency to fabricate notions of homeland identity and create a home away from home (in their case, California) more rooted in fiction than fact.

"Places are both real and imagined [...] [and] we can know places that are distant as much as we can misunderstand and misrepresent places we inhabit" (Radhakrishnan 126). Thus, the role of imagination in the construction of place and homeland

identification is one of the most examined subtexts in diaspora studies. In his article, "Disjuncture and Difference" Arjun Appadurai writes:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: *The imagination as a social practice*. No longer mere fantasy (opium for the masses whose real work is elsewhere), no longer simple escape (from a world defined principally by more concrete purposes and structures), no longer elite pastime (thus not relevant to the lives of ordinary people), and no longer mere contemplation (irrelevant for new forms of desire and subjectivity), the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (both in the sense of labor and organized practice) and a form of negotiation between sites of agency ("individuals") and globally defined fields of possibility [...] The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order. (29)

As Appadurai notes, the imagination becomes an important social practice for diasporic subjects. The fictions imagined in the psyche of diasporic subjects are often created when they are not situated in the place they are imagining. As Radhakrishnan writes, “it is counterproductive to maintain that one can only understand a place when one is in it” (126). And yet, though clouded between fiction and fact, a sense of authenticity, however subjective, is maintained. Therefore, a nostalgic transformation “marked by ambivalence and contradiction” (Brazier and Mannur 3) combines the imaginary with reality. The nostalgia is often paired with a desire to escape from the perils of “home.” And conversely, the imagined experiences of home are frequently fabricated in a more favorable light from the real encounters the subject may have experienced there.

The Joads participate in the imaginary creation of California before their departure from Oklahoma. The new homeland rather than the old is the site of imaginative work for the Joads, which again pushes theorists to reconsider the definitive parameters drawn in an attempt to identify diaspora. Though the subject of new homeland creation is less frequently examined in diaspora theory than fabrications of the old, it is not atypical practice of diasporic individuals. “Mrs. Sen,” a short story in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies*, exemplifies this trait. A middle-aged woman from Calcutta, Mrs. Sen leads an unhappy life in New York City, far away from the home she most closely identifies with. She becomes nostalgic when she receives mail from her relatives in Calcutta but the nostalgia quickly fades when the fictions they create about her life in New York are backdropped against the reality of her loneliness and longing for home: “‘Send pictures,’ they write. ‘Send pictures of your new life.’ What picture can I



send? [...] They think I live like a queen [...] they think I press buttons and the house is clean. They think I live in a palace” (125). Like the fictitious New York Mrs. Sen’s relatives have imagined, Ma Joad is equally optimistic and imaginative in her creation of California:

‘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—that is, if we all get jobs an’ all work—maybe we can get one of them little white houses. An’ the little fellas go out an’ pick oranges right off the tree. They ain’t gonna be able to stand it, they’ll get to yellin’ so.’ (124)

Ma’s image of California echoes an all-too-familiar ideal that has saturated the Western psyche long before the Dust Bowl era. “The Judeo-Christian [...] has one core myth,” writes William Cronon in his introduction to *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, “that is so deeply embedded in Western thought that it crops up almost anytime people speak of nature. [...]: *nature as Eden*. [...] Nature as Eden encourages us to celebrate a particular landscape as the ultimate garden of the world” (37). As Cronon suggests, Ma conceives of California as the ultimate Eden, a fertile garden contrasting the desolate and barren Dust Bowl. Ma emphasizes this ideal when she states, “I’m just a-twitterin’ to go on. Wanta get where it’s rich and green” (*Grapes* 261).

Tom Joad attempts to counter Ma’s fantastical California, demystifying the lure of a false Eden, with a second-hand depiction more closely resembling reality;

I knowed a fella from California. He didn’t talk like us. You’d of knowed he come from some far-off place jus’ the way he talked. But he says they’s too

many folks lookin' for work right there now. An' he says the folks that pick the fruit live in dirty ol' camps an' don't hardly get enough to eat. He says wages is low an' hard to get any.' (ibid)

Like many diasporic subjects, Ma adheres to her optimistic fiction rather than accept a more accurate reality. By maintaining this fiction, Ma gives voice to a mythological trope that attempts to protect the Edenic image she maintains and stems, in part, from the palatability of her fabrications compared to the trauma resulting from their forced migration from home.

The effects of trauma have created an on-going dialogue among diaspora theorists. In "Reconsidering Trauma, Identity, and the African Diaspora: Enslavement and Historical Memory in Nineteenth-Century Highland Madagascar," Pier Larson contends that "collective identities and memories of trauma are deeply intertwined. Most [...] minorities anchor their collective identities in the remembrance of past and present victimization. Victims of social trauma and their descendants often engage in purposeful and explicit remembering as a form of empowerment and identity formation" (335). In the face of trauma, many characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* struggle not only with identity in terms of home and self, but also with their place in the family—arguably, the most important community in the novel. Because they associate the stability of home with a secure sense of self and place and community, most of the characters regret leaving Oklahoma. In his essay, "Pilgrims; Politics: Steinbeck's Art of Conversion," Stephen Railton speaks to the Joad's associations with identity and the act of abandoning home when he writes; "human's lives are caught in the pattern of being pulled up from the soil. Farmers are mad migrants. Forced to sell and burn all of their pasts that won't

fit onto a homemade flatbed truck, they too are uprooted, torn from their identities” (27). A disruption of sense of place in community is typically associated with diaspora. Radhakrishnan claims that “the very organicity of the family and the community displaced by travel and relocation, must be renegotiated and redefined” (123). Pa relates loss of home to a lost sense of self and position in the family; “Pa complained, ‘Seems like the man aint’ got no say no more. [Ma’s] just a heller. Come time we get settled down, I’m a-gonna smack her” (546). Pa associates an unstable sense of home with his demoted position in the family. He senses a loss of patriarchal control, which he aims to regain upon returning to a state of stasis. He connects stability with regaining hegemonic control over his family, which Ma temporarily maintains.

Though Pa senses his displacement in community, Ma seems to better understand the disruption the entire family experiences. This is most evident when she explains to Tom the difficulties the family experiences renegotiating their communal positionalities as a result of leaving home;

The was a time when we was on the lan’ [...] Ol’ folks died off, an’ little fellas come, an’ we was always one thing—we was the fambly—kinda whole and clear. An’ now we ain’t clear no more. I can’t get straight. They aint’s nothin’ keeps us clear. Al—he’s a-hankerin’ an’ a-jibbitin’ to go off on his own. An’ Uncle John is jus’ a draggin’ along. (231)

The trauma experienced by the Joad family has caused them to rethink their positions in the family as well as their positions in society. They no longer fit into the “whole” they once perceived to be the family. They are forced to renegotiate their positions within the Joad family, as well as within various cultural communities existing

in California. This renegotiation through the trauma forced upon them becomes the catalyst for a dramatic change in social perception the family experiences at the end of the novel—a subject I address in the next chapter of this essay.

## Chapter Two: Colonialism, Land Ethic, and the Economics of Westering

I have already established the relationship between diaspora, and cultural and environmental devastation and have also touched upon the ways in which these notions relate to the onset of a capitalist regime established and maintained in the West. In this chapter, it is my intention to focus on a closer examination of the relationship between Westward expansionism, capitalism and the role these aspects have played in the creation of an agrarian land ethic common to the settlers of the Dust Bowl region. It is this land ethic, I argue, that not only creates the Dust Bowl and the Dust Bowl diaspora, but continues a cyclical nature of conquest by perceiving nature and culture as utilities in a capitalist economic structure.

The imperial westering of Euroamerican settlers held intimate hands with agrarian idealism. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson writes:

The political economists of Europe have established it as a principle that every state should endeavour to manufacture for itself: and this principle, like many others, we transfer to America [...] In Europe the lands are either cultivated, or locked up against the cultivator. Manufacture must therefore be resorted to necessity not of choice, to support the surplus of their people. But we have an immensity of land courting the industry of the husbandman [...] (Jefferson “Manufactures”)

In this passage Jefferson notes the transference of European ideals to the new world, and though he refers directly to the process of agricultural manufacturing, he acknowledges the accompaniment of “many other” virtues to the United States. Colonialism ironically exists among those values. Interestingly, Jefferson pairs the notions of agricultural

industry with the “immensity of land” available for such practices without mention of the tactics used to acquire the land. He fails to discuss the measures of colonization and domestication of peoples and landscape undertaken to pursue his vision. And although Jefferson presented expansionism as an explicitly imperial conquest of the West, his agrarian ideal masks conquest by failing to address the destructive and often violent means undertaken in pursuit of this ideal.

Chester E. Eisinger discusses the connections between the Jeffersonian ideal and *The Grapes of Wrath* where he maintains: “Jeffersonian Agrarianism in *The Grapes of Wrath* [was] essentially democratic: it insisted on the widespread ownership of property, on political and economic independence, on individualism; [...] Steinbeck was concerned with democracy [...] [and an] essentially inhuman and unproductive nature of the machine age [which signifies] a way of life that was based on the retention of the land” (qtd in Owens *Trouble* 53). As Eisinger notes, *The Grapes of Wrath* undoubtedly brings to light the problematic nature of modern industrialization and the Jeffersonian ideal. But the problems associated with mechanized agriculture resemble those related to Jefferson’s yeoman farmer. Both ideals depend largely on capitalist principals perceiving nature as an expendable utility. Cletus Daniel makes the connection between Jeffersonian pastorality and capitalism in his text, *Bitter Harvest* when he writes:

[...] the surest guarantee of democratic institutions and a wholesome national life consisted in the maintenance of an agricultural economy whose mainstay was the yeoman farmer working his own land on a scale commensurate with the labor power that he and his family represented. Thus it was not simply the agrarian life that Jefferson and others cherished and promoted, but farming on a small scale by

self-sufficient citizens who were in the greatest degree possible the masters of their individual economic fates[0]. (Daniel 15)

But the very nature of this economic relationship between the yeoman farmer and the landscape is severely problematic. Small-scale or “self-sufficient” agriculture does not necessarily mean sustainable agriculture, as the history of the Dust Bowl tells us.

Worster makes mention of the ways in which the pre-industrial Plains settlers irreversibly altered the landscape when he writes:

[Cowboys] generally viewed the southern plains as another Comstock Lode, to be mined as thoroughly as possible by overstocking the range. In some areas they ran four times as many cattle as the grass could carry, resulting in depletion and long-lasting damage. [...] Into the post-1886 vacuum poured the waiting farmers, armed with iron plows to “break the land” [...]. (83)

Therefore, pastoral nostalgia aside, the farming practices used by both industrial agribusiness and the pastoral to which Jefferson refers are quite similar in their destructive and utilitarian tendencies.

Nonetheless, Steinbeck remains preoccupied with the mechanization of agriculture. In one of the sections many critics refer to as the “intercalary chapters,” Steinbeck maintains authorial anonymity while speaking vicariously through the voice of a tenant farmer when he declares: “Times are changing, mister, don’t you know? Can’t make a living on the land unless you’ve got two, five, ten thousand acres and a tractor. Crop land isn’t for little guys like us any more” (50). The text overtly notes the complexities and injustices linked to the industrialization of agriculture. Yet, the careful reader can’t help but question what Steinbeck is doing with the tenant farmers—is he

celebrating small-scale agrarianism or imploring his audience to question what lies at the core of this principle? Some critics argue that Steinbeck's preoccupation was not necessarily with political ideals but rather with people. To do so, however, oversimplifies the complexities carefully woven into the text. In "Proletarian Leanings," George F. Whicher calls Steinbeck a "sympathetic observer" claiming he was "more interested in people [...] than political measures" (67). He goes on to note that Steinbeck's "sympathies are decidedly with the oppressed laborers [...]" but his attitude [...] is experimental and philosophical" (68). To be fair, Whicher's essay, published in 1951, was written in the wake of New Criticism, which may account for his more formal approach to the text. By focusing specifically on Steinbeck's tendency toward philosophical experimentation, Whicher, like many critics, leaves plenty of room for alternatives to his interpretation. Based on the content of his observation, Whicher perceives Steinbeck's position as lamentation for a lost ideal. And yet, contemporary scholar Louis Owens, on the other hand, takes Whicher's argument one step further:

If we look more closely at attitudes toward American and, in particular, the small farmer in the *Grapes of Wrath*, it should become clear that Steinbeck, too, saw fully illuminated the 'bankruptcy of Jefferson's ideal.' By carefully and precisely placing the tenants within the historical pattern that has led to the destruction of the land, Steinbeck is making it obvious that agrarianism alone is insufficient.

(*Trouble 54*)

Although it is possible Steinbeck saw the mechanization of the small farm as a regretful slip from Jefferson's ideal, it is more likely that the philosophical author aimed to



question something larger than the obvious: namely, the originary point and mechanisms of idealized pastorality and the devastating results this ideal wrought.

The capitalist roots couched in Jefferson's pastoral ideal bear the weight of his vision and connect to the imperial ideology of westering. Not only does Jefferson emphasize the economic enterprise in cultivating cash crops, but, more importantly, his notions of expansionism connect the pastoral with the economic. Wealth, on both an individual and a national level, became coterminous with the ownership of land. This capitalist connection to the land repeats itself throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, becoming one of the most important elements to this discussion. The dialectical relationship between these elements is multifaceted, however. Thus, a brief discussion on the subject of capitalism will assist in sculpting the mold for this argument.

In *Capital*, Karl Marx maintains that "a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (665). He expands on this discussion by noting that "the wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as 'an immense accumulation of commodities,' its unit being a single commodity" (ibid). Marx examines the role of the commodity in capitalist societies and argues that the value of a commodity is established by socially recognized standards of measure for the quantities of these useful objects" (ibid). In other words, the value of a commodity is socially determined.

### **Commodification and Fetishization of the Land**

In "Fetishizing the Fetish," Matt Wray describes the construction of value by noting "material objects are given value by people—we construct hierarchies of value, placing more value on some objects—for instance, gold—than others. [...] [W]hat

makes gold valuable is a specific set of social relations. This is easily proven when one considers that only a minority of cultures have considered gold to be a precious metal.

[...] This is true not just of gold, but of all commodities”

(<http://bad.eserver.org/issues/1998/41/wray.html>). Because value determines the network of relations in a market of utility, labor, and exchange, the exchange value of a commodity plays an important role in a capitalist economy.

For many characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the landscape is a commodity, an external object of desire. As a commodity the land assumes both a use-value, or “the utility of a thing,” and an exchange-value, “a quantitative relation, as the proportion in which values in use of sort are exchanged for those of another sort” (Marx 666). The commodification of land, Marx would argue, results from the appetite for its accumulation through ownership. In this way, the land sustains a use-value. The use value of the land is maintained in *The Grapes of Wrath* by the characters’ desires to possess it. Steinbeck uses an intercalary chapter to relate this desire through the representational voice of a banker repossessing the land from a tenant family: “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” (*Grapes* 45). The land is incontestably reduced to a commodity in this instance. The banker acknowledges its use value by recognizing that many families “in the East” would like to claim ownership to a piece of land “out West.” The land maintains exchange value in its ability to be bought and sold or exchanged for “values of another sort,” namely, another form of labor or capital.

This passage also embraces Jeffersonian ties between expansionism and capital. Westward migration, specifically within but not limited to the United States, has largely

depended on land acquisition. This particular passage from *The Grapes of Wrath* demonstrates the intricate ties between the acquisition of land and capital by suggesting land owners from the “East” wish to purchase land in the “West.” Though the passage fails to indicate whether or not the eastern proprietors intend to physically migrate West remains unimportant. The significance, then, lies within the metaphor maintained by the fiscal exchange of land inasmuch that it repeats the colonial process of expansion, possession, and domination through the commodification of land. Land ownership equates with domination through possession and objectification.

In order to possess or own land in a capitalist economy, an exchange converting labor to capital must take place. In this way, the exchange value of the land is maintained. Marx deconstructs this conversion in *Wage Labor and Capital* where he writes: “workers exchange their commodity, labor power, for the commodity of the capitalist, for money, and this exchange takes place in a specific ratio” (659). Pa Joad relates his understanding of this economic transaction when he claims, “‘We’ll get out west an’ we’ll get work an’ we’ll get a piece a growing’ land with water’” (*Grapes* 256). Here again we see connections between capitalism and the exploitation of nature and culture. Pa speaks these words in the face of economic hardship yet still correlates labor’s conversion to land possession through the act of work. Pa does not, however, recognize the exploitation of his labor that occurs in such a transaction. As Wray so clearly articulates:

The appearance of commodities as valuable, while not exactly false, masks an important truth which can only be disclosed through theoretical analysis. Yes, commodities are valuable, but we are routinely deceived about where the value

comes from. We think these things have value in and of themselves, but in reality, they have value because somebody, somewhere made them—their labors were exploited for profit. In the act of fetishizing commodities, in imagining them to have natural powers about and beyond what they actually have, we lose sight of and forget the processes of exploitative production which create commodities in the first place. (Wray)

As Wray notes, when an object is fetishized, there must be a disjuncture within labor's conversion to capital, which is exactly the case with Pa Joad. In his inability to connect the exploitation of even his own labor to his desire to purchase land, Pa develops a fetish for the land.

As a fetish, the land maintains an arbitrary value determined by a network of social relations. Land-value, like any other commodity, is determined by a set of social relations. In the first Euroamerican settlement of the West, land was seen as vast and infinite. Countless settlers occupying the landscape caused a decrease in available land. Therefore, the exchange value of land increased based on supply and demand. Increased settlement limited supply, and the demand for land increased over time, resulting in the subsequent increase in land's exchange value. Pa Joad expresses a desire to repeat the colonial process undertaken by Grampa and maintains its exchange value in his wish to purchase land upon arriving in California. The quest for land expressed by Pa Joad and other Okie settlers results in land fetishization.

Land fetishism instigates a desire to accumulate it. Because a fetish possesses “natural powers above and beyond what they actually have,” when fetishized, the value of land is ideologically elevated (Wray). This elevation causes an increase in exchange

value accompanied by an increased desire to accumulate it. In these terms, accumulation can be equated with consumption for the increased value and lure to accumulate triggers a longing to possess or maintain the object of desire as one's own. Therefore, the purchaser becomes a consumer of land. As Pa demonstrates, both tenant farmers and large land owners succumb to the overarching desire to consume land. Of the owners, Steinbeck writes, "they farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only that they owned it, remembered only what they gained and lost by it" (*Grapes* 317). This passage perfectly exemplifies disconnection from the labor involved in the accumulation of land. For the corporate, land is irreducibly commodified and fetishized. By noting that "they farmed on paper," the land becomes an ideological abstraction maintaining socially constructed values, not a living ecosystem.

Perceiving land as an abstract ideal suggests that land itself is, at least partially, socially constructed. As an abstraction, the function of land outside a capitalist framework becomes obsolete. Perceiving land as a place where the existence of many organisms depends largely on the actions of other organisms within that landscape becomes irrelevant. Rather, the disembodied landscape becomes a locus for the instillation of arbitrary values. Harboring such values jeopardizes any value the land may have outside a capitalist structure but functions to maintain its exchange value. This exploitative perception creates the fetishization of a fetish (Wray) meaning the labor related to the colonial undertaking of land is duplicitous. On the one hand, considerable numbers of Native peoples were removed from the Western landscape so settlers could overtake it. On the other hand, the land itself suffered irreversible damage in this same westering process. Both forms of labor—the removal of Indians and ecosystem

destruction—neither of which are recognized, are subject to erasure when land becomes a paper transaction because Indians and landscape are exploited for profit.

The large land owners in the *Grapes of Wrath* maintain a disconnection from the land not only because they are said to be “from the east” but namely because they fail to recognize land as anything other than a commodity. With such a distant relationship, the owners are more likely to exploit land. The exploitation of labor is not enough to retain the exchange value the owners wish to gain from the land, and they therefore expose it to unsustainable practices. The text demonstrates this concept when a tractor-driver speaks to one of the tenant farmers, “The driver said, ‘Fellow was telling me the bank gets orders from the East. The orders were, ‘Make the land show profit or we’ll close you up’” (*Grapes* 52). Because the only connection the owners have to the land is fiscal, they do not care about killing the land. Instead, their concern resides in maintaining its economic value at any cost.

A similar situation occurs with the tenant farmers. The farmers reduce the land to an ideological place providing them with the ability to maintain ownership. This commodification of land is made obvious when, as the tenants lose their land, Steinbeck writes: “The squatting men raised their eyes to understand. Can’t we just hang on? Maybe the next year will be a good year. God knows how much cotton next year. And with all the wars—God know what price cotton will bring. Can’t they make explosives out of cotton? And uniforms? Get enough wars and cotton will hit the ceiling” (*Grapes* 44). By calling for wars to increase the price of cotton, the tenants remove themselves from a direct connection to the landscape. The land becomes the abstract means by which the tenants maintain ownership. Through wars, the price of cotton will rise and the

tenants might make enough to pay property tax to maintain possession of their land.

Owens summarizes this statement nicely when he suggests: “While the reader is likely to sympathize with the powerless tenant farmer, the tenants’ willingness to accept war and death as the price for a change to remain on their farms and thus further ‘cotton out’ the land is difficult to admire on any level”(Owens *Trouble* 52).

As Owens hints and Worster and Flores attest, the farmers’ fetish with the Oklahoma landscape leads to farming practices disproportionate to the integrity and sustainability of the land. Owens speaks to this concept when he writes: “like Americans for centuries before them, they have used up the land and now must move west following the archetypal American path. They have ‘cottoned out’ the earth from which they derive their physical and psychological sustenance” (Owens *Re-Vision* 130). Fontenrose asserts a similar claim noting that “dust storms and erosion exhausted the land and completed what economic depression had begun” (Fontenrose 71). However, both Owens and Fontenrose overlook the positionality of the tenants as part of a larger system controlling the farming practices the tenants maintain. The tenants are the proletariat puppets playing out the wishes of the corporate landowners. Though, like any human, the tenants have free will, in any capitalist structure the proletariat serves the needs of the economic base and superstructure. Therefore, as participants in a capitalist economy, the tenants are not necessarily exempt from their irresponsible treatment of the landscape. And yet, their position in this structure should not go overlooked when attempting to understand their relationship with the natural world.

As we have seen, the fetishization of land takes on many forms in the text. The efforts undertaken to remove snakes and Indians from the Oklahoma landscape in its

original colonization are undeniably exploitive forms of work. Steinbeck makes mention of this labor in *East of Eden* where he writes: “By this time the Indian fighting had become like dangerous cattle drives—the tribes were forced into revolt, driven and decimated, and the sad, sullen remnants settled on starvation lands. It was not nice *work*, but given the pattern of the country’s development, it had to be done” (34 emphasis mine). Steinbeck relates the work required in the removal of Native Americans to the desire to accumulate land, where the laborers of these acts do not. Instead, the laborers dissociate their actions from the decimation they caused to the land and its previous inhabitants. And through their failure to recognize the labor involved in the removal of “snakes and Indians” the settlers’ labor, according to Marx, becomes exploited resulting in the fetishization of the colonized land and its inhabitants.

Though they reject the bank’s correlation between capital and ownership, the removal of Indian peoples along with indigenous plants and animals suggests that the tenants entertain a fetishistic view of land value underwritten by a sense of social entitlement. Steinbeck takes pains to elucidate this relationship between the Okies and landscape. Though the bank owned the land from which they were evicted, the tenants undoubtedly perceive it in terms of ownership. The degrees of ownership are somewhat ambiguous, however. On one level, the tenants reject ownership in terms of capital by recognizing such ownership as an imaginary abstraction. Once again, the reader finds evidence supporting these notions guised in Steinbeck’s tenant voice: “[B]ut it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it” (*Grapes* 45). For the tenants, ownership identified as “a paper with



numbers on it” was not coterminous with ownership identified by “being born on it, working on it, dying on it.” Yet, one cannot forget the means by which this land was acquired.

Though they admit to removing prior inhabitants (i.e. snakes and Indians), the tenant farmers do not recognize this force as *labor* but rather as *entitlement* based on the combination of racism and the often fallacious belief that Native Americans do not “use” the land. On the one hand, through the possession of land, the Okies were merely fulfilling the American Dream at any cost. Land value, then, carefully masks Jeffersonian notions of expansionism because pastorality largely depends on possession and imposition of land. The settlers intended to till the soil and yield a crop, thus maintaining its use and exchange values, where snakes, Indians and weeds did not. These previous inhabitants were perceived as obstacles needing removal in order to fulfill the pastoral creed and maintain the land’s value. The combination of an exalted sense of land value coupled with the Okies own unacknowledged labor in removing Native Americans and indigenous ecosystems results in the Okie’s landscape fetish.

### **Diasporic Aspects of Capitalism**

The fetishization of and desire to accumulate land is a continuation of conquest marked by capitalist economics. This notion takes on many forms in *The Grapes of Wrath* including the impetus for the Dust Bowl diaspora and the manifold results caused by this mass exodus. The forces driving the farmers westward maintain intrinsic relations with capitalism, and there is overwhelming historical and textual evidence supporting this claim. James Gregory contends that “[d]eclining international markets for wheat, corn, and cotton, mineral depletion and erosion of marginal soils, pests, drought, and the

introduction of tractors and new farm machinery combined to usher in a massive reorganization of agriculture as acreage was consolidated into more efficient farming units and machines replaced mules and family labor” (Gregory 6-7). Louis Owens maintains that “the sharecroppers are victimized by an inhuman economic monster—personified by the enormous, impersonal tractors raping the land” (Owens *Trouble* 51). The industrialization of agriculture was not limited to the mechanization of production. Tractors replacing farm laborers increased both productivity as well as profit. As Steinbeck notes in an interchapter: “The tenant system won’t work any more. One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families. Pay him a wage and take all the crop” (*Grapes* 44). The implementation of the tractor allowed for larger areas to be seeded, harvested, and maintained. The amount of labor was reduced and the production increased a win-win situation for agricultural industry. With no use for farm laborers, add one part drought and a large portion of depleted land, and there you have a basic recipe for the Dust Bowl diaspora.

In any type of migration, forced or voluntary, creating an extension of home is, according to Zirakzadeh, typical of the diasporic individual. Jefferson remarks on this tendency in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* where he discusses the transference of European values to the new world. Like the transference of values to which Jefferson refers, the Dust Bowl migrants carry with them, a long with a few, scattered belongings, values from “home.” Attempting to identify with a foreign landscape, the migrants extend their land fetish onto the California landscape where they repeat the colonial process: “like ants scurrying for work, for food, and most of all for land” (*Grapes* 317). As in other areas of Euroamerican colonization, both peoples and ecosystems were

disrupted with the onset of non-native settlement. As Joseph Fontenrose writes of the Okies' arrival into California, "[t]he harvesters of California crops were no longer Mexicans and Orientals; now most of them were Okies and Arkies, families that had been evicted from their farms in Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, Texas, and neighboring states" (72). This passage is particularly illuminating as it not only hints at the economic forces driving the tenant farmers westward, but glosses over some prominent concerns regarding the social groups ("Mexicans" and "Orientals") whose physical presence was disrupted by this migration. Undoubtedly, Fontenrose fails to address the cultural displacement caused by the Dust Bowl diaspora, which, in terms of social, ecological marginalism, are central to *The Grapes of Wrath*. Like the briefly mentioned Indians who disappear from the text, the "Mexicans" and "Orientals" to which Fontenrose refers, do not appear in character form in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Yet, history provides evidence of the existence of these peoples in California before the settling of Dust Bowl migrants. As James Gregory maintains:

[California] was well practiced in the politics of exclusion. [...] Nonwhites had borne the brunt of it. During the state's first major depression in the 1870's, the issue of Chinese exclusion had become first a rallying point of the white working class and afterwards a basic touchstone of state politics. Opposition to Japanese immigration after the turn of the century, and campaigns against Filipinos and Mexicans still later, had followed a similar logic. When economic opportunities narrowed or when war or political struggles raised anxieties, immigrants were often singled out for exclusion. (17)

Though familiar with positioning on the fringes of society, the virtual absence of peoples of color in *The Grapes of Wrath* reinforces the colonial process by denying these social groups validation in terms of existence. They simply vanish, like the Indian, when the Okies settle. Steinbeck makes mention of this when he writes:

Now farming became industry, and the owners followed Rome, although they did not know it. They imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves:

Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos. [...] And then the dispossessed were drawn west— from Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico; from Nevada and Arkansas families, tribes, dusted out, tractored out. [And the migrants said] We ain't foreign. Seven generations back Americans, and beyond that Irish, Scotch, English, German. One of our folks in the Revolution, and' they was lots of our folks in the Civil War—both sides. Americans. (*Grapes* 316-18)

This passage clearly illuminates the privileging of whiteness involved in Eurocentric thought. Because the migrants are predominantly of white, European descent and often identify as Americans, they maintain a position of entitlement to anything—land, or work—over peoples of color. Though the cultural displacement of the aforementioned peoples directly relates to the settlement of the migrants, the Okies too, are pushed to the fringes of society. Yet, the Euroamerican migrants remain somewhat more privileged than other subaltern groups because of the color of their skin and their ability to identify as Americans. But disenfranchised the Okies remained and, as disenfranchised individuals, the Dust Bowl migrants were unable to colonize the California landscape upon their arrival. They therefore colonized that which they could—the labor market. This colonization disrupted the lives of many peoples of color who had previously

occupied the California landscape. And though there are no characters representing these disparate groups, *The Grapes of Wrath* does not dismiss the cultural displacement that resulted from this settlement.

Unlike the methods used for removing Indians in Oklahoma, the Dust Bowl migrants did not forcefully remove the Japanese, Filipino, Chinese, or Mexican peoples from their established homes in California; seemingly because they knew someone else had beaten them to it. As one migrant tells Tom Joad, “[California’s] a nice country. But she was stole a long time ago” (279). Instead, they replaced a position in society that had previously been held by the specified cultural groups. Nonetheless, the problem remains that these peoples of color were displaced by the intrusion of white settlers. Tom Joad notes this repetitive pattern of dispossession when, speaking with a campground proprietor he states; “I on’y wisht they was some way to make [a living] ‘thout takin’ her away from somebody else” (*Grapes* 255).

This colonial process repeats itself time and time again in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Dust Bowl migrants, though slightly more privileged than peoples of color in the text, experience similar notions of marginalism. The Joads are faced with rejection, isolation, and class discrimination upon their arrival to California. Ma, as I noted in the preceding chapter, is the first to encounter disenfranchisement in her interaction with a California police officer; “we don’t want none of you settlin’ down here [...] you ain’t in your country now” (*Grapes* 291). In response to this treatment, Tom Joad replies, “but we ain’t used to gettin’ shoved aroun’ by no cops” (294). Indeed, as Tom states, the family is less familiar with “gettin’ shoved aroun’” than they are doing the shoving until, upon their arrival to California, the Joads’ experience a dramatic shift from colonizer to

colonized. The forceful departure from Oklahoma places the family in ultimate subordination. With no Indians, snakes, or weeds to fight, the Dust Bowl migrants assume the subordinate position of “obstacles”—expendable, replaceable entities—upon their arrival in California, therefore continuing the cyclical nature of colonialism the text brings to light.

The driving force behind their disenfranchisement is in their lack of contribution to California’s economy and their inability to participate in capitalism: “they were hungry, and they were fierce. And they had hoped to find a home, and they found only hatred. [...] The owners hated them. And in the town, the storekeepers hated them because they had no money to spend. [...] The town men, little bankers, hated Okies because there was nothing to gain from them. They had nothing” (318). Because they were perceived as economic parasites in the state of California, the Dust Bowl migrants became the victims of colonization; where they were once colonizer, they became colonized. Because they could afford nothing better, many migrants were forced to live in labor camps outside normative California society. As James Gregory writes: “some families found houses to rent, but tiny incomes forced many others to make their homes in auto courts, trailer parks, or in the private campgrounds usually located just outside established towns. There for a few dollars a month a family rented a tent, a cabin, or a patch of ground and gained access to toilets and showers” (70). The Joad family and other migrants seldom found solace in these Hooverilles: “Tom looked about at the grimy tents, the junk equipment, at the old cars, the lumpy mattresses out in the sun, at the blackened can on fire-blackened holes where the people cooked” (*Grapes* 333).

Though the hardships the Joads experienced on their journey west were difficult to endure, the family could not have anticipated the trials they found in California. The segregation, discrimination, and rejection from society that peoples of color were typically more familiar with, the Okies could now understand. They were prevented from maintaining many of the privileges to which they had been entitled before arriving in California, the greatest of which included the opportunity to own land, a rather hard blow to land-fetishizing people. The Joads were pushed out of California culture and into labor camps in a similar way that American Indians were forced to the confines of reservation lands. Like the many American Indian tribes forced into diaspora as a result of non-native settlement, the migrant farmers were likewise denied an opportunity to maintain a sense of belonging to the California landscape. One way to insure their lack of stability and belonging was to keep the laborers moving. When Tom Joad inquired as to why they were forced to move so frequently, another laborer answered, "I tell ya, I don' know. Some says they don' want us to vote; keep us movin' so we can't vote. An' some says so we can't get on relief. An' some says if we set in one place we'd get organized. I don know why. I on'y know we get rode all the time" (333). Denying the laborers rights becomes reminiscent of the rights the original settlers of Oklahoma denied the Indians Grampa killed. Because the original settlers, as Dan Flores notes, changed the diverse economies of the previous indigenous inhabitants, the Oklahoma settlers forced the American Indians out of the labor market. They utilized capitalism to colonize the Indians in a similar way the corporate agro-giants utilized the labor market to control and subordinate the Joads and other Okie migrants.

## **Conclusion: Transformation, Reconciliation, and the Potential for Hope**

The transformation produced by the disparate conditions they encounter when leaving Oklahoma and arriving in California involves a change in the Joad family's perception of and relationship to the natural world. This change, however ambivalent, illustrates the beginning of a shift in perception where the development of a new, socialized land ethic begins to emerge from the ashes of their capitalist and individualistic past. The experiences propelling this alteration, though difficult for the family (causing several to leave or die) work to absolve their sins of the past. It is suffering that provides them with an enlightened and transcendental perspective that they lacked before these experiences.

The colonial process is never completely reconciled by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but by the end of the text the family's relationship with the natural world begins a healing process and thus offers the reader hope for a different kind of future. Their previous drive to possess land transforms into a conception of land as a place for community rather than individualism. Their initial desire for stability in terms of capital is replaced by a drive for basic necessities—namely food and shelter. Tom notes this transformation after the murder of former preacher Jim Casy: "I been thinkin' what [Casy] said, an' I can remember—all of it. Says one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul. Says wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole" (570). Casy's notion of wilderness differs from the common perception of wilderness as nature untrammelled. Casy suggests wilderness consists of the universe existing in harmony



with all its inhabitants. This idea of complete interconnectedness juxtaposes the idea of creating Eden. Where Eden hints at a controlled space, an orderly garden dominated by the cultivator, Casy's perception of wilderness suggests that interconnection exists in a space lacking control and domination. Speaking in terms of an Emersonian Oversoul, Casy conceives of the world as an intricate system of connections, and sees himself a single part functioning within that great system—as all individuals functioning as a single part within that system. This perception of connection differs greatly from the family who beat off snakes and Indians to stake their claim in the world. Thus, the family begins to participate, if only within the social community, as part of one great whole.

But it is through the social that their reconciliation with nature begins. As Jack Turner notes in chapter four, "Economic Nature," of his book entitled *The Abstract Wild*:

A civil society is marked by a barely conscious consensus of beliefs, values, and ideals—of what constitutes legitimate authority, on what symbols are important, on what problems need resolution, and on limits to the permissible. I think of this consensus as a shared vision of the good. Historically, our shared vision of the good derived from shared experience and interests in a shared place. In the West, these "sharings" have vanished—assuming, of course, they ever existed. We share no vision of the good, especially concerning economic practices. One of many reasons for this is the growing realization that our current economic practices are creating an unlivable planet. (Turner 52-53)

The shared experiences to which Turner refers cease to exist in the West, which he attributes to our shared, utilitarian vision of nature. The Joads, however, come to this realization of a lost shared vision not through sublime experiences *in* wilderness but

rather a sublime experience *about* wilderness. Tom Joad and Jim Casy aim to establish a new shared vision that shifts away from capitalist ideals and toward a new social-political order more grounded in communion and unity rather than separation and competition. This transformation, at least according to Turner, creates a springboard from which a new land ethic can launch. Considering the colonial world's history of viewing nature in capitalist terms, a reconsideration of the capitalist ideals that disenfranchise the Dust Bowl migrants including wage labor, capital, labor exploitation, and fetishism, to name a few, could optimistically lead to the abandonment of conceiving of nature as a commodity. The exploitation of the natural world, according to Flores, Worster, Turner, and many others, is a direct result of capitalism. If the basis of the capitalist structure is not only being questioned but fought against by Jim Casy, Tom Joad, and other characters in the narrative, then perhaps as a new social order takes hold, the effects will not only benefit people, but the rest of the natural environment as well. With these notions at hand, the optimistic reader might conclude that the land ethic previously maintained by Steinbeck's Dust Bowl migrants begins a healing and transformative process. Through their acknowledgment of the destructive tendencies embedded in capitalism, they understand their participatory role as destroyers of Eden—individual components of one big, and at times, destructive soul. It is through this altered social perspective that they understand the ways they participate in the earth's destruction and begin to work against the social practices that lead to the devastation of Eden.

But this drive to recover Paradise is not characteristic of the Joads alone. As Caroline Merchant writes about recovering Eden; “[...] [T]he story of Western civilization since the seventeenth century and its advent on the American continent can

be conceptualized as a grand narrative of fall and recovery” (133). The Joads and other Dust Bowl migrants sought recovery first in their exile from the Dust Bowl fallen from agrarian ideal to barren wasteland to an imagined Eden existing in California. When California became another version of the fall, in terms of desperation, deprivation, and discrimination faced by the Dust Bowl migrants, the act of recovery ensues once again. However, it seems an optimistic Steinbeck, believing that Americans are “an exuberant people, careless and destructive as active children [...] no longer content to destroy our beloved country. We are slow to learn, but we learn [...] And we no longer believe that a man by owning a piece of America is free to outrage it” (qtd. in French 283), was attempting to show an alteration in the Joads beyond that of a simple repetition of fall and recovery. This revision is exemplified in the flood at the end of the narrative.

It seems natural that the novel ends with a flood, given that it begins with a drought: “The water piled up high behind. The tree moved and tore the bank. A little stream slipped through. [...] The water piled against the tree. And then the bank washed quickly down, washed around ankles, around knees. The men broke and ran, and the current worked smoothly into the flat, under the cars, under the automobiles” (*Grapes* 602). The drought hints at the existence of a fallen world, in the case of the narrative the fall becomes Eden corrupted at the hands of capitalist expansionism and the expedience of destruction wrought by industrialism. The flood imagery works as a symbolic renewal for people fleeing a drought-stricken land. Like the biblical flood, the water at the end of the text suggests a renewal from corruption. The excess of water, which can also be seen as an excess of nature, indicates that something is being replenished or washed away. Like the way Original Sin is cleansed at baptism, water is the means through

which renewal and forgiveness is achieved. Therefore, it seems logical that water would cleanse the sins of the Joads' past and, like the descendants of Noah, the Joads become the family from which a new, uncorrupted vision is born. Corruption in the text, or the destruction of nature and culture at the hands of capitalism, is cleansed by a very natural act, one out of human hands and in the hands of the natural world.

Yet, the flood also functions to deliver a message about the destructive tendencies embedded within the relationship previously maintained by the Joad family and adhered to by the industrial farms existing in California. Uncle John places the still-born child of his niece, Rose of Sharon, in an apple crate and sends it down the flooded road:

He held the apple box against his chest. And then he leaned over and set the box in the stream and steadied it with his hand. He said fiercely, 'Go down an' tell 'em. Go down in the street an' rot an' tell 'em that way. Tha's the way you can talk. Don' even know if you was a boy or a girl. Ain't gonna find out. Go on down now, an' lay in the street. Maybe they'll know then.' (*Grapes* 609)

The apple crate ironically suggests that the message Uncle John sends is intended for the corporate owners of the large farms or, perhaps, the mechanized agricultural industry itself. Clearly, Uncle John blames the still-birth on the despair caused by these large corporate entities, the destructive nature of their practices embodied within the dead child.

The apple box itself is packed with implications about Steinbeck's complex and interwoven notions about the natural versus the unnatural, nature versus culture, and human interaction with industrial mechanization. Because the box is intended to bear fruit, a product of nature, human cultivation and, in this case, a corporate orchard, the box

itself suggests an opaque and unclear overlap between these forces propelling nature, culture, and the Age of the Machine. This particular fruit becomes a symbolic product of these combined efforts of nature, culture, and industrialism. That the fruit is an apple alludes to the Fall since it was an apple plucked from the Tree of Knowledge and eaten by Adam and Eve that banished them from Paradise. The apple box in the narrative works not to banish the Joads from Paradise since Paradise is never achieved by the family. Instead, this rhetorical strategy utilized by Steinbeck offers the potential for recovery rather than fall. This recovery differs greatly from the family's previous modes of reinventing Eden, however. Instead of transforming nature to suit the visions of an earthly Paradise, the Joads seek reclamation through proclamation: the baby in the apple box delivers the message that the cyclical nature of conquest repeated throughout the history of New World settlement and whose detriment was magnified with the onset of the industrialism, must come to an end. Where the apple implies the Fall from Paradise, the apple box in the narrative signifies a new form of recovery, one that seeks not to dominate nature and destroy culture in the name of capitalism, but rather one that recognizes the catastrophic results from centuries of a misguided vision.

The baby itself thwarts dominant notions of the natural and unnatural. Rose of Sharon's long awaited birth suggests that hope and renewal await the destitute family in the form of new life. But because the child "Never breathed, [...]. Never was alive" (Grapes 603), the dead child becomes the symbol of a shattered and unnatural event that is otherwise part of the natural human life cycle. The dead child symbolizes the necessary death of a way of life that cannot function to sustain nature, a way of life that, until the end of the novel, the Joads and other Dust Bowl migrants have sought to

maintain—exploiting nature and people for profit. But because that way of life fails to promote sustainability of *even* human life, the reader is pressed to recognize a change in this way of existing must occur.

In the shards of broken hope remains optimism of another kind. Instead of hope for the prosperity of the Joads in the form of a new life for the family, the reader is left with a larger sense of community. When Uncle John sends the baby down the river, we can only expect that the message is intended not merely from the Joad family, but from all those faced with desperation because of the larger system from which the dead child is a product. Interestingly, Uncle John sends a dead infant to speak these words not through the exchange of language, but through the child's rotting flesh—another process in the cycle of life.

Through this despair, the Joad family begins to understand the intricacies of social ecology. This shift can be perceived as an involuntary reunion between the Joads and nature, for their needs and desires do not surpass the basic, primal necessities for survival. Where they were once privileged as colonizer they are now disadvantaged as the colonized. It is from this subordinate perspective they come to realize a greater good; that imperial domination will not fit in a web of social, ecological relationships. As they are oppressed and subordinated by the land owners, the migrant laborers bring the colonial process to an end, at least in textual terms. Ma Joad recognizes the necessity for this finality when she says: "Use' ta be the fambly was fust. It ain't so now. It's anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do" (606). In fighting for a greater good rather than privileging themselves, the Joad family begins a path toward unification with the social and natural worlds. For alongside the fight for a more just social order exists

the rejection of capitalist ideals. They come to recognize, through their own despair, that people are only part of the one great big soul to which Casy refers.

Perhaps the scene most demonstrative of this transformation comes at the end of the novel when Rose of Sharon, after birthing the still-born child, comes upon a starving man in a barn and offers him the food of her breast to save his life. Though this has probably been written about more than any other scene in the text, it beautifully demonstrates the transformation undergone by the family. Their initial desires upon arriving in California were rooted in possession and capital gain—the family and many other Okies were in pursuit of The American Dream at all costs. The act committed by Rose of Sharon, however, is one of primal necessity and perhaps one of the most “natural” occurrences in the text. Although the starving man is a stranger, Rose of Sharon assumes her role as part of an infinite whole. Because she knows she can save his life, she offers him her breast, the way an off-duty nurse might offer her services at the scene of an accident. Although Rose of Sharon would yield no profit from this offering, she offers it just the same. Her selflessness and sense of duty place her as a contributor to a community larger than the family she had previously identified with and successfully implements Casy’s ideal about one great soul. Rose of Sharon participates in an idealized, social, ecological community for, as Giovanni Di Chiro writes, the “idea of community presupposes connection to and interconnectedness with other groups, other species, and the natural environment through everyday experiences with family, comradeship, and work” (qtd. in Johnson 267).

Through this act Rose of Sharon thwarts notions of nature and culture. The name *Rose of Sharon* is that of an exotic flowering shrub. By naming a character as such,

Steinbeck plays with the separation between nature and culture by meshing the cultural with the natural. The act of offering her breast is a natural way to save the man's life. While giving milk and sustenance is a purely natural act for a mother, it is, nonetheless in this instance, a cultural taboo. By overlapping dominant notions of what is considered natural and unnatural, Steinbeck is playing with the idea that the social and natural fail to exist as exclusively separate entities.

Because the novel ends with this benevolent act, the reader is left only to guess what the future holds for the Joad family and other Dust Bowl migrants. However, it seems logical, based on the repetitious insistence on community versus the individual, that the family goes on to fight for the greater good of humanity. As Tom tells Ma, "wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. [...] An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there" (*Grapes* 572). In this declaration, Tom calls for a new political order whereby people no longer disassociate from what they eat or how they live, but establish a way to unify nature with culture, to see "no detail but the whole dawn, the whole land, the whole texture of the country at once" (*Grapes* 154). Therefore, in the face of despair, the reader leaves the text with the hope of a new social ecology where people become participants in a greater good for all living things.



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