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STEINBECK'S MIGRANTS: FAMILIES ON THE MOVE AND THE POLITICS OF RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Bryan Yazell

As perhaps the most widely read account of poverty and migration in the United States, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* has exuded a powerful influence on the discourse of migration politics since its publication in 1939. Much has been written on the specific aspect of Western migration that Steinbeck portrays—the “Okies” fleeing both the Dust Bowl and the farm tenancy system—to advocate for the expansion of the social welfare net. That Steinbeck's novel influenced welfare governance is unsurprising. Indeed, numerous critics have brought to light the extent to which literature during this period considered and repackaged emerging political platforms on behalf of the American public at large. For Michael Szalay, *The Grapes of Wrath* is an archetypal case of popular sources participating in the “reinvention of modern governance” in the wake of the New Deal (3). Though the reception of the novel among the political left continues to shift, reviews at the time of its publication likewise identified the policy-oriented focus of the book.¹ The close proximity of Steinbeck's novel to the legislation of its day indicates not only the sweeping relevance of the text, but also the

broadly ambitious scale of New Deal governance in general. In addition to stimulating the economy, the progressive policies enacted immediately following the Great Depression did more than respond to financial crisis: champions of the New Deal both in and outside government saw these reforms as crucial to transforming the social fabric of the United States. To this end, the welfare codes crafted during this period enabled the state not only to provide for its neediest citizens but also to define the standards by which citizens appear worthy of support in the first place. Literary sources like *The Grapes of Wrath* played a central role in actualizing the state's social policies by assisting in this project of scrutinizing among different segments of the population.

This essay seeks both to build on and to move beyond the debate concerning the racial politics implicit in the novel's presentation of the social transformation associated with New Deal policies. Michael Denning provides the definitive version of the narrow picture of race in *The Grapes of Wrath* when he argues that Steinbeck works to "reinforce interpretations of New Deal populism as sentimental and conservative" (267-68) insomuch that his novel depicts only "noble white Americans" to the exclusion of non-white migrant farmers (267). Denning's comprehensive overview of the novel's problematic populism in regards to race has set the tone for subsequent studies on the novel vis-à-vis its political advocacy.² To be sure, critics have revised or otherwise countered some of the most critical aspects of Denning's assessment. For example, Mollie Godfrey argues that, if Steinbeck emphasized the whiteness of his migrant characters, he did so not to reinforce conservative racial politics but to "deliberately" incorporate "the slippages within humanist terminology and techniques to correct readers' sympathies with racist and bourgeois ideologies" (109). As this scholarship

makes clear, the presentation of the deserving poor in Steinbeck's work assumes distinctly racialized forms. However, in the debate over this subject we should not lose sight of how Steinbeck uses racial discourse to introduce a new economic logic in which white nobility figures as a form of labor sufficiently exploitable and durable to be worth the state's investment. Concerned with the future of migrant labor, Steinbeck deploys this racial terminology to distinguish among different populations of people. He therefore implicitly produces a timeline during which certain populations wither while others—in this case, the white migrant farmer—enter the center of society through a combination of their own so-called natural talents and specific government policy.³ In other words, for Steinbeck the family on the move is a resource that the state must tap in order to prosper.

Viewing migrancy in these terms expands previous accounts of Steinbeck's interest in the family as a matter of social policy. For example, Szalay argues that Steinbeck's representation of the Joads' domestic drama mobilizes "populist sentiment" in order to garner readers' sympathy for an underlying brand of governmental policy (167). According to this reading, the family matters to Steinbeck inasmuch as he takes the private relationships it connotes and then abstracts them, applying them to the essentially impersonal world of governance. While this interpretation is useful for placing Steinbeck's fiction into proximity with official policy, it risks overlooking the specific forms the Joad family assumes throughout the novel. Steinbeck treats the Joads, and the Dust Bowl migrant class they embody, as one specific population among many competing migrant groups. He makes this concept especially clear in *The Harvest Gypsies* (later republished as *Their Blood is Strong*), a series of essays commissioned

by the *San Francisco News* in 1936 that details the conditions in migrant labor camps in central California.

The basis for *The Grapes of Wrath*, these essays provide a plain look into the more polemical underpinnings of the novel. In addition to describing life inside the work camps, the essays in *The Harvest Gypsies* also “contain specific policy recommendations” for addressing the hardships facing migrant families (Steinbeck, *Harvest* ix).⁴ As is the case in his novel, Steinbeck resorts to the language of race and national types in order to frame the debate over migrant labor in terms of preserving the future integrity of the nation-state. On the subject of migrant labor in California, he presents a scenario in which “Mexicans and Filipinos” are waning in numbers even as white migrant workers are flooding the state (21). Although this flurry of movement on both sides of the border gestures to the international breadth of the Depression, it is also indicative of a distinct transformation unfolding at home, Steinbeck claims. Referring to the nonwhite laborers, he argues:

The earlier foreign migrants have invariably been drawn from a peon class. This is not the case with the new migrants. They are small farmers who have lost their farms, or farm hands who have lived with the family in the old American way. They are men who have worked hard on their own farms and have felt the pride of possessing and living in close touch with the land. . . .

They have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong. (22)

At once, Steinbeck conflates race, class, and nationalism in order to make a claim about the temporal integrity of migrant labor: by delineating the face of the “new” migrant worker, he produces a thoroughly nostalgic vision of “the old American way.” Of course, this representation relies on a notion of Protestant self-reliance and other stereotypes premised on “their blood.”⁵ At the same time, Steinbeck gives his readers the ability to see the most contemporary aspects of what he argues is a much longer narrative, one in which the state must regulate its populations on the basis of their productivity and civil-mindedness. “Foreign labor is on the wane in California,” he advises, “and the future farm workers are to be white and American” (57). Steinbeck implies that this population’s ability to move is a boon to resource management inasmuch as the national workforce has the good sense to relocate as the economy changes gears. Conversely, the totalizing picture of society in this account also excludes subjects who fail in his eyes to meet certain civil and domestic standards. Simply put, he visualizes a future American social structure that is akin to Jeffersonian democracy without the slaves—a typology that embraces a totalizing picture of the general public by occluding deviant subjects entirely.

Steinbeck’s exclusion of nonwhite subjects is not anomalous, but rather echoes the long and concerted effort on state and federal levels to restrict nonwhite migrants’ access to the mainstream of civil life. At the onset of the Depression, for instance, the US government dramatically increased the deportation of Mexican laborers in the American Southwest. Begun during the Hoover administration and carried over into the Roosevelt era, these efforts were not limited to foreign-born workers: Americans with Mexican ancestry were subject to repatriation as well, effectively nullifying the civil rights

associated with citizenship altogether (Hoffman 218).⁶ The setting for Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, California in particular was a laboratory for exclusionary policies that would eventually emerge as the subject of debate at the federal level. Published in 1939, Carey McWilliams's *Factories in the Field* makes this history especially clear, tracing the state's lengthy reliance on—and suppression of—foreign labor populations starting well before the Great Depression. Recent scholarship has also brought into focus the numerous anti-immigrant legislative efforts that originated in California. For example, Mae M. Ngai details the federal lobbying effort by the nativist California Joint Immigration Committee to exclude Japanese subjects from citizenship during the 1920s (47). Steinbeck's minimal representation of Japanese, Filipino and Mexican laborers in his work therefore mirrors, intentionally or not, the anti-immigrant policies aimed at these populations on the state and federal levels.

While Steinbeck's narrow picture of racial types dovetails with contemporary governmental policy, his construction of migrant labor looks well beyond this immediate political context. The national fantasy that he imagines is therefore not a preservationist one per se, but rather one that both forecasts and manages the movement of labor well into the future. To this end, his writing facilitates the end of one era of migratory politics even as it works to create a new one. The novel thus quickly establishes a model for the political activism that will play out throughout the narrative, in which the self-reliant qualities of the migrant are writ large on families—and later, Steinbeck predicts, on whole populations. On one level, this move reflects the new reality of labor after the onset of the Depression. Arriving penniless on agricultural sites, Steinbeck explains in *The Harvest Gypsies*, migrant workers must take out debts from the landowners in

order to keep their families intact: “while single men are able to get from harvest to harvest on the railroads and by hitch-hiking, the man with a family will starve if he loses his car. Under this threat he goes on working” (35). In light of these practices, the family emerges in Steinbeck’s novel as a point of contention for both the migrants who wish to stay together and the big agribusinesses that exploit this desire as a tool for driving down wages.

Steinbeck’s call for better management of the migrant family involves a fundamental refashioning of the state’s own tools for identifying its vagrant classes in the first place. The vagrant status Steinbeck describes in the passage above contradicts what apparently should be the white migrant’s exceptional status; rather than becoming the cornerstone of “the old American way,” white migrants are treated no better than “foreign labor.” As Godfrey points out, “white migrant workers of the period did not necessarily count as white” in the public eye (219). As they appear in the novel, antivagrancy laws maintain this perception to the extent they empower local governments to disrupt the migrant family’s productive labor. More robust intervention in the arena of vagrancy law, Steinbeck implies, would not only end this harassment but also elevate the status of the white migrants by helping to facilitate their mobility. Only when the state can refigure the vagrancy policies that ensnare the exceptional form of vagrancy the Joads embody, Steinbeck posits, can society benefit from this population’s inherent talents: the Depression has made them migrants and big farming has kicked them off their land, but the state can turn them into assets. The intimate pictures of getting by in Steinbeck’s novel therefore coexist and move in tandem with the government’s dream of managing its populations on biological as well as economic

lines.

The Migrant Family and the State

Along with the appeal to population management, Steinbeck identifies the threats against the nation-state that failure to act will engender. The “armed vigilantism” of local authorities, Steinbeck warns, “is an attempt to overthrow [the] system of laws and to substitute a government by violence” (*Harvest* 61). The violence meted out against the migrant families is, in this figuration, as dangerous to the nation-state as it is to the individuals involved. At stake in this battle of migrant labor is the spirit of liberal democracy, he concludes: “Fascistic methods are more numerous, more powerfully applied and more openly practiced in California than any other place in the United States. It will require a militant and watchful organization . . . to fight this encroaching social philosophy” (*Harvest* 61-62). Steinbeck here borrows from the rhetoric of antilabor forces inasmuch as he frames this debate around the idea of protecting American values against foreign influence. Of course, in this case he identifies not the laborers but the owners as the agitators borrowing tactics from overseas. According to this logic, the current state of agricultural labor threatens to topple the ideological status quo in the United States. In making this assertion Steinbeck frames the political reform he is seeking—more federal oversight of the wages and working conditions of migrant labor—around the moral issue of preserving America’s spiritual identity. In making this case, however, Steinbeck must play up the most stereotypical cultural and racial underpinnings inherent to this identity. If reforming the migrant worker will transform government, he suggests, his readers can take comfort knowing that workers like the Joads represent the most familiar segments of the US population.

While *The Grapes of Wrath* lacks the direct appeals contained in *The Harvest Gypsies*, it nonetheless constructs a similar picture of homespun American democracy. The novel consistently upholds a distinction between the federal government as an institution for social reform and more localized authority figures as agents of unregulated capitalism. The repressive authorities that appear in the text are motivated by economic forces out of their control: a laissez-faire industry that fears for its existence so long as progressive government holds power. More specifically, *The Grapes of Wrath* points to both “widening government” and “growing labor unity” as sources of concern for reactionary “owners” in the United States in general and the agriculture industry in particular (150). In contrast to the deputies and local posses who keep migrants out of their small towns, big business interests appear in the novel in the form of the singular “monster” that “can make men do what it wants” (34). As this image makes clear, Steinbeck sees the struggle against unregulated capitalism as one that pushes against the dehumanizing aspects of both mechanized industry and the consolidation of big business itself, which compel laborers to work against the best interests of the federal government on one hand and the working classes on the other.

For Steinbeck, the solution to antilabor oppression lies in a truly national framework of regulation. A site of federal relief for migrants, the Weedpatch camp appears in *The Grapes of Wrath* to effectively supersede the authority of local law-enforcement agencies. As a literal, bounded space, this setting provides the migrants (as well as the novel’s readers) the means to visualize the power of national sovereignty in play. One migrant farmer in the novel explains this dynamic directly: “You know a vagrant is anybody a cop don’t like. An’ that’s why they hate this here camp. No cops

can get in. This here's United States, not California" (334). The narrative suggests that the big businesses that are keeping living standards low stand to lose if the government's plan for relief comes to fruition. Along similar lines, the government camp provides for the migrants a way to organize themselves according to a properly national (rather than a local) basis of affiliation: thrown off their land, they seek a form of identity that supersedes the local. Governance provides the crucial nationalizing element in this case: the appearance of federal authority removes the migrants from "California" and places them squarely within the "United States." The intersection of law and land in the camp provides these subjects with a clearly defined homestead within which they can begin to build on the communal bonds they have forged on the road.

At once, Steinbeck constructs an American type that both embodies a self-reliant work ethic while also deploying this labor for the benefit of society at large. But while this national type may be naturally occurring, Steinbeck reasons, it nonetheless requires the state to protect these traits from the unnatural interference of unregulated industry. The scenes that take place within Weedpatch exemplify what Steinbeck sees as the ideal relation between workers and a socially conscious government. At the same time, the broad humanistic appeal of the Weedpatch camp in Steinbeck's account is belied by the exclusive characteristics of the families who thrive there. Steinbeck's reimagining of migrant labor in terms of specific national types undergirds scenes depicting the interaction between destitute Americans and the federal programs meant to help them. In what follows, I place Steinbeck's literary depiction of these values within the context of specific components of the New Deal that endure beyond the nominal end of the welfare state. These laws, while aiming in theory to enfranchise impoverished

Americans in toto, in practice often entrenched the political power of a specific type of American at the cost of others. The continuing controversy over the implementation of Social Security in particular showcases one of the most prominent cases of ostensibly humanist political codes operating according to hegemonic social values.

Refiguring the Family: Steinbeck and Social Security

The crowning achievement of the New Deal era, Social Security continues well after its inception to foment political debate on the subjects of race, class, and civil responsibility. Much of the scholarship on the subject has centered on the underlying racial animus that shapes the program's reception among the American public. One study published in 2001, for example, states that "race is the single most important predictor of support for welfare" among the US population (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 186). The authors claim that, decades after the Roosevelt administration's reforms, "America's troubled race relations are clearly a major reason for the absence of an American welfare state" of the likes operating in western Europe (Alesina, Glaeser, and Sacerdote 186). The idea that today's welfare politics intersect with an overarching debate involving race should be familiar to most observers, especially in cases where the language of racial stereotype undergirds antiwelfare rhetoric. What is less clear in the decades since the New Deal, however, is the extent to which the state designed these social programs in order to link racial typology to welfare administration in a matter that continues into the present day.

The implicitly hegemonic politics of Social Security belie its nominally color-blind policies. Indeed, the appeal of Social Security among New Deal proponents rested on the notion that the program is truly universal by design, theoretically allowing nearly all

Americans in need to receive welfare benefits regardless of other demographic considerations (Winter 400). The actual insurance that the program offers, however, falls well short of the universal coverage that is characteristic of European welfare models (Schieber and Shoven 17). Instead, the original Social Security Act of 1935 established an old-age pension fund—the largest and most publically visible component of the legislation—as well as benefits for impoverished children and the unemployed with strict restrictions on eligibility.⁷ As is the case with any regulation of public health, popular media worked with government in both creating and policing the subsection of poor Americans who met these criteria. A broadly popular text with a very specific picture of poverty, Steinbeck’s novel stands out among literary sources in shaping the public’s reception to the deserving poor as components of welfare reform.

Specifically, Steinbeck uses the essentializing language of family and race as shorthand for the productive workforce he believes the state can create. Rather than an oversight, the gap between his novel’s universalism and its distinct typologies mirrors a governing discourse that, from its earliest stages, struggled to reconcile its humanist aims with its more exclusionary policies. For instance, the exceptions to Social Security’s so-called universal coverage are indicative of the concessions progressives made in order to ensure the program’s passage through Congress. As a result, the Social Security Act actually excluded nearly half of the US labor force. The bill’s insurance protections originally applied only to those in “commerce and industry,” leaving domestic and agricultural workers completely excluded from the pool of beneficiaries (DeWitt 49). Because African Americans were disproportionately affected by this provision, many scholars have argued that the bill was intentionally written in

such a way as to marginalize nonwhite Americans, especially in the South.⁸ Although the program's provisions became gradually more inclusive over time with subsequent amendments, the original exclusions speak to the overriding impulse of the US welfare state to tie relief provisions to those citizens who satisfy the state's narrow definition of the deserving poor. In his address to Congress in 1935, Roosevelt spelled out this rationale in moralizing terms. "Continued dependence on relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber," he argued (qtd. in Schiltz 30). In contrast, he presented administration-backed welfare programs that "derive their social legitimacy from the achievements of beneficiaries" (qtd. in Schiltz 30). According to the logic of the governing regime, charity was harmful to the nation precisely because it damages the integrity of the individual worker. In contrast, Social Security appeared to deliver the just deserts of the hard-working citizen.⁹

Deriving from its authors' definition of social legitimacy, Social Security further entrenched the social values of certain national types in spite of its supposedly universal scope. As part of this push to establish a universal standard for evaluating welfare subjects, Social Security also scrutinized the family structure—and its encompassing gender roles—as a regulatory object. Indeed, for many scholars the codification of traditional gender roles in the name of family has been the most enduring cultural legacy of Social Security in the United States. Part of this legacy extends from tax exemptions in the original legislation given to religious and nonprofit organizations, employment fields whose workers were disproportionately female (Mettler 73). According to Kessler-Harris, sixty percent of the exempted workers were women, even though women at the time made up less than thirty percent of the workforce (92). In

addition to these initial exemptions, the marriage benefits built into Social Security also came with drastic social consequences for women.¹⁰ The state's distinguishing of worthwhile from nonproductive labor further underscores the reverberations of the Social Security program outside the workplace and inside the home.

Steinbeck's interest in fostering a more radical population is likewise tethered to a logic that imposes clear divisions between groups based on demographic difference. "Thus [the families] changed their social life," the narrator of *The Grapes of Wrath* explains, "changed as in the whole universe only man can change. They were not farm men any more, but migrant men" (196). Steinbeck's tempered rhetoric of universalism is especially apparent in this passage, in which even the most sweeping social changes leave untouched the exceptional nature of these (thoroughly masculine) individuals. The depiction of Ma Joad "takin' over the fambly" gestures further to how the novel revises certain family roles (423). On the one hand, the rise of Ma Joad signals the novel's interest in rejecting patriarchal family models in view of migrant labor's new realities. At the same time, this implicit critique of patriarchy implicitly hinges on a generalizing sense of gender identity to rationalize this change. "Woman can change better'n a man," she explains, since a "[w]oman got all her life in her arms. Man got it all in his head" (423). As this language suggests, the scope of Steinbeck's reform is more modest than it might otherwise appear. At once, he foregrounds dramatic changes in the domestic power dynamic and emphasizes the inherited gender roles that help facilitate these changes.

Steinbeck's critics have argued that the fine line the author often constructs between conventional social norms and more radical ones derives from his interest in

applying social Darwinism to the world of policy-making. To be sure, the extensive diversity of Steinbeck's written oeuvre militates against any attempt at reducing the author's social philosophy to an essential core. One version of Steinbeck's social Darwinism appears in his nonfiction *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*, in which observations collected during a marine-biology expedition lead to discussions of natural selection on a larger scale. Specifically, Steinbeck and Ed Ricketts, marine biologist and collaborator on the expedition, expound the concept of what they call "'is' thinking," a perspective that stresses "[n]on-teleological ideas . . . associated with natural selection as Darwin seems to have understood it" (112). In this instance, Steinbeck and Ricketts craft a scenario wherein people must negotiate between biological impulses on one hand and inherited social norms on the other.¹¹ On its face, this outlook at least nominally celebrates social change as a means for survival. But as Cyrus Zirakzadeh concludes in his account of this philosophy, it also hinges on the premise that certain communities live or die on the basis of their cultural beliefs and practices (616). For humanity to thrive, according to this reasoning, it must adapt—but not completely ignore—its inherited knowledge in order to respond to new challenges and "avoid extinction" (Zirakzadeh 608). *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*—researched, written, and published in the decade following *The Grapes of Wrath*—highlights Steinbeck's long interest in discerning the biological underpinnings of social practices. In view of his sustained engagement with this idea, my reading analyzes a crucial moment in Steinbeck's thought, visible in his figuration of white migration in both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Harvest Gypsies*.¹² While Steinbeck might push for social reform on all fronts in these texts, he presents a scenario in which specific groups will naturally thrive

where others fail. In this light, Ma Joad's embodiment of feminine strength assumes distinctly racial and cultural overtones as well.

For Steinbeck, the natural strength of these migrants comes to fruition only with the state's intervention on their behalf. In short, the government camps signify the type of persistent, vigilant oversight necessary to direct these inherited talents to their most useful outlets. What appears at first glance to be an inherent contradiction between nature and nurture is instead a key component to the social philosophy Steinbeck outlines in his work. Taken together, *The Harvest Gypsies* and *The Grapes of Wrath* present a specific population in need of relief, most immediately in the form of state intervention against exploitative labor practices. In addition, both make the case that this population embodies in more ways than one the most advantageous characteristics of American labor. So while white migrants might possess in Steinbeck's text the hereditary traits that set them apart from other populations, this natural strength still needs the support of a strongly collectivist society in order to mature. In *The Harvest Gypsies*, Steinbeck outlines this plan for relief at length, explaining that the federal government will make use of the migrant's agricultural skillset by providing subsistence farms, along with schools and housing, for the laborers and their families. He explains:

Since the greatest number of the white American migrants are former farm owners, renters or laborers, it follows that their training and ambition have never been removed from agriculture. It is suggested that lands be leased; or where it is possible, that state and Federal lands be set aside as subsistence farms for migrants. These can be leased at a low rent or sold on long time payments to families of migrant workers. (58)

The vision of relief outlined in *The Harvest Gypsies* accounts only for “white American farmers,” for these are people who Steinbeck views as being most capable, owing to their particular cultural and social upbringing, to help themselves. For Steinbeck, the government’s interest in nurturing self-sufficiency is crucial not only to help eradicate the worst effects of poverty but also to strengthen its own polity. Accordingly, the particular qualities that he claims make the white migrant farmer useful as a laborer—a conviction in the dignity of work, as well as in the traditional domestic family structure—apply directly to his usefulness in the civic sphere as well. In view of this role, Steinbeck concludes: “In these communities a spirit of cooperation and self-help should be encouraged so that by self-government and a returning social responsibility these people may be restored to the rank of citizens” (59). Once again, Steinbeck focuses here on both improving the lives of migrant workers and strengthening the rule of law on a national scale. In short, the farmers in this scenario internalize the social values that will make them better citizens in the long term.

Recalling his position on subsistence farms in *The Harvest Gypsies*, the government camp in *The Grapes of Wrath* offers a form of relief that nurtures the inherent dignity of the white migrant laborer. In both texts, Steinbeck is careful to distinguish the type of relief he outlines from that of charity; whereas the former build self-reliance, he suggests, the latter turns workers into slavish subjects. Ma Joad hears a version of this argument early in her stay at Weedpatch. In this instance, a member of the camp’s female welcoming committee explains that, in contrast to the uniquely individualistic form of relief at Weedpatch, taking charity “makes a burn that don’t come out” (316):

We don't allow nobody to give nothing to another person. They can give it to the camp, an' the camp can pass it out. We won't have no charity!" Her voice was fierce and hoarse. "I hate 'em," she said. "I ain't never seen my man beat before, but them—them Salvation Army done it to 'im."

As this exchange makes clear, the federal camp fosters a form of relief that rewards self-governance, in opposition to the dehumanizing effects of outright charity. Steinbeck's presentation of welfare along these lines succinctly makes the case for expanding the liberal state while also paying homage to the abiding sense of individual self-sufficiency. Tom's decision to become a labor organizer of sorts is therefore possible only after his experiences in the camp, which provide him with a glimpse of what could be: "I been thinkin' how it was in that gov'ment camp, how our folks took care a theirselves, an' if they was a fight they fixed it theirself" (419). Tom's imagining of collective action here explicitly resists the more oppressive aspects of governmental authority—"Throw out the cops that ain't our people," he reasons—on the basis of communal identity (419). All the same, Tom's vision of a self-sustaining community operates fully under the aegis of the government in the form of the camp in particular and welfare legislation in general. If migrants like the Joad family organize themselves according to a natural sense of democracy, the narrative suggests, then the nation-state can rely on them to self-regulate accordingly. In this light, Tom's decision to "be ever'where—wherever you look" in fighting against labor oppression represents his ultimate transformation into the novel's everyman: he stands in for the generalized image of the migrant radical that Steinbeck believes will right the course of the country at large (419).

Given Tom's prominence early in the text, this transformation further highlights the extent to which the novel has transformed the characteristics of migrancy into a specific, homogenized demographic. For if the novel begins with solitary men (such as Tom and the preacher Jim Casy), its concluding sections offer the family as the model for participation in the civil sphere. Ma Joad's position at the head of the household helps to explain what is at stake in this model for both working families as well as the government at large. It is Ma Joad, after all, who articulates most clearly the identity under duress that once tied together family, labor, and the land. "They was the time when we was on the lan'. They was a boundary to us then," she explains: "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" (393). Throughout the novel, Ma Joad makes the case for a strong family structure buttressed by property ownership. Accordingly, her drive to get her family on stable ground with steady jobs, a large house, and a big yard continually underscores the material dimensions of this domestic identity. In this light, the novel suggests that the repressive tactics of big farming business—encapsulated best by the murder of Jim Casy, the book's prototypical labor organizer—fail in a number of ways. Most immediately, they spell their own doom by engendering greater class solidarity among the abused workers. But more implicitly, Steinbeck offers, these repressive tactics merely stand in the way of what he sees as the inherent drive for migrant workers to become useful contributors to the economy.

In *The Harvest Gypsies*, Steinbeck outlines the usefulness of the federal camp program in terms of social rehabilitation. "The success of the Federal camps in making potential criminals into citizens," he argues, "makes the usual practice of expending

money on tear gas seem a little silly” (42-43). The opposition he constructs between “criminals” and “citizens” is especially telling: the migrant is not only in need of relief but also of state intervention if he is to enter civil society at all. Once he does so, he becomes a defender of both labor and liberal democracy against the forces of laissez-faire industrialism. Of course, Steinbeck’s texts paint a thoroughly critical picture of authoritarian union-busting, police brutality, and other displays of violence that had characterized the antilabor movement. At the same time, his formulation places the rights-affirming government camps and such repressive policies on the same governmental continuum. Police action might reduce criminal elements, he suggests, but the camps do the same while nurturing the individual’s sense of “dignity” (43). The camps offer an undoubtedly more ethical form of population control, but they pursue the same end as the tear-gas approach as far as the rehabilitation of marginal subjects is concerned.

The migrancy in *The Grapes of Wrath* likewise strips social practices down to their essential cores. The families that survive the ordeal on the road strike the proper balance between self- and social preservation: in view of their own family structures, these migrants see the value in a collective form of governance that also valorizes individual acts of hard work. In facing life-and-death decisions, these subjects gradually leave outdated modes of thought by the wayside. Describing the spontaneous communities formed on the road, the narrative grounds itself in a thoroughly civil-minded discourse: it dramatizes the process by which certain rights are identified, tested, and implemented among this migrant class. Part of this process involves identifying the limits of self-government on the basis of community consensus. “And the

families learned, although no one told them, what rights are monstrous and must be destroyed,” the narrator explains (194). Ultimately, the migrants receive a crash course in the tenets of democratic organization:

The families learned what rights must be observed—the right of privacy in the tent; the right to keep the past black hidden in the heart; the right to talk and to listen; the right to refuse help or to accept, to offer help or to decline it; the right of son to court and daughter to be courted; the right of the hungry to be fed; the rights of the pregnant and the sick to transcend all other rights.

In this instance, Steinbeck presents a fuller account of the natural democracy he describes in *The Harvest Gypsies*: a nature that must be produced. The passage provides a particularly clear example of how his political advocacy is grounded in provincial scenes of families at work. By portraying the death, starvation, and abuse of countless families, the novel shakes its readers into action against further suffering of this sort. At the same time, this depiction also brings into focus a sharper picture of what Steinbeck sees as the most crucial aspects of a stable American middle class. In addition to advocating for political change, the text suggests that these families have already been fundamentally changed by their experiences. The migrants are builders of “worlds”—complete with “leaders,” “elders,” and “certain physical” boundaries—that live or die depending on the cohesiveness of the makeshift community (195). So long as these families are in flight across the country, these communities prove to be short-lived. Ma Joad’s efforts to keep the family together therefore reflect the first step toward solidifying this demographic as both a political force and a workforce: “They ain’t gonna

wipe us out. Why, we're the people—we go on" (280). If these migrants are to be the future of American labor, the worlds they carry with them promise to fundamentally alter society at large.

Migration's Legacy After the New Deal

We see in Steinbeck's nominally inclusive notion of the people the ideological reverberations of the government institutions coming into full force during this time. The consolidation of the US welfare state during the Depression offered a safety net for some of the country's most destitute and marginalized citizens, but in responding to this poverty crisis the state resorted to creating the very subjects it was purporting to help. Indeed, the suggestion that relief must be earned through worthwhile labor effectively pushed entire segments of the population further into the social margins. But while Steinbeck likely provides the most popular example of New Deal-inspired policy finding its way into artistic narrative, he was far from alone in depicting a universalizing picture of the working classes. The art projects that emanated out from government-sponsored programs were likewise invested in depicting a distinctly American sense of national identity. In particular, the emergence of the Works Public Administration in 1935 cemented (if for a brief time) the government's role in shaping popular culture. Created as an employment relief program, the WPA directly funded numerous facets of cultural production, including art, drama, music, and historical research. As Jonathan Harris argues, federal programs such as the WPA resulted in nothing less than the "explicit politicization of cultural (including artistic) production" during the 1930s (5). On the subject of the Federal Art Project, Harris identifies what he calls the "hegemonizing" influence of the New Deal in the sphere of art (9). "Culture," he continues, "was

recognized [by Roosevelt and New Deal Democrats] to be a strategically important terrain upon which could be constructed (and possibly reconstructed) people's sense of identity and of belonging to a social totality" (9).

While nominally outside the WPA, Steinbeck nonetheless portrays in his work an image of American identity and labor that is fundamentally in sync with official government accounts. Many critics have looked to the murals and sculptures installed in public buildings during this period as the archetypal examples of official New Deal propaganda at work. As in Steinbeck, the farmer appears in these works as a potent symbol for the American values that undergird the governmental policies of the era. As Marilyn Wyman notes, one WPA mural in Central California depicts "white farmers" standing in the foreground while "[g]rain in the field waves in an unseen breeze," all without any "trace of migrant laborers" or the violence they faced (34). On one level, idyllic scenes such as these present an untroubled picture of workers and the machines of industry in order to quell public anxiety over the state of the economy. But in addition to addressing the fears of the American public, Wyman explains, these art projects also use the connotative power of the farmer as a "marker for Jeffersonian republicanism distinguished by its faith in the virtuous yeoman (independent) farmer who owned and worked the land" (36). To be sure, in contrast to these WPA works Steinbeck's novel provides a clear view of the various hardships facing the migrant worker and of an economic system on the brink of collapse. At the same time, however, Steinbeck relies on the same fundamental motif as these propaganda projects—in particular, a nostalgic depiction of the white yeoman farmer who augurs in a future state of American governance. For both artists and government officials invested in this transformation,

then, the migrant farmer personifies a period of transition between Jeffersonian democracy and its future realization via government policy

The valorization of this specific form of migrant labor continues to reverberate beyond the context of the Depression. By 1939 Congress had defunded the New Deal art projects, putting an end to a period when “America’s emerging literary talents . . . worked for the federal government” (Arthur 4). The period surrounding *The Grapes of Wrath* is a liminal one, representing at once the apex of the US welfare state and the beginning of the dismantling of its governing ideology in the buildup to the Cold War. If Steinbeck’s novel agitates for an end to the oppression of the white migrant, the push for labor-industry jobs during World War II resulted in the near-complete disappearance of the problem of vagrancy from the pages of popular news media in both California and the United States more generally (Wild 330). While the agricultural industry required only seasonal employees, the country’s entrance into World War II produced a rapid growth in long-term jobs that employers struggled to fill. Owing in part to this dramatic economic shift, many migrants found more welcome reception in local communities than they had before the war.

Consolidating this shifting reception to migrant labor, the federal government ended the string of anti-migration legislation enacted on state and local levels, with the passage of federal legislation in particular signaling the rehabilitation the migrant laborer had undergone since the onset of the Depression. By the early 1940s, Congress had commissioned an investigative committee to study the problem of transient populations and to offer solutions for integrating these citizens into the civil sphere. The name of this legislative body, the Select Committee Investigating National Defense Migration,

immediately connotes the state's interest in the migrant underclass. Written in response to the problem of "Stateless people," the 1941 Congressional Report on Interstate Migration scrutinized local anti-migration laws and proposed greater federal oversight (4). The committee took specific exception to states that imposed "higher barriers against the interstate flow of the American people" on the basis that they violated what "the Founding Fathers had learned before 1789"—namely, "that a free flow of commerce between the States was an indispensable element in the founding of a Federal Union" (4). The committee's findings defend the right to interstate migration by appealing both to the integrity of the federal government and to the "Founding Fathers" as the nostalgic embodiment of American democratic principles. Of course, the committee's report is also quick to add that migrants are "above the average in initiative, younger on the average of the general resident population, and in search of a job and not a hand-out" (4). So while interstate migration in principle is crucial for maintaining the "Federal Union," the characteristics of the migrants in question must still be such that they provide useful labor to their respective communities.

As the committee's language implies, governmental sources after Steinbeck and the New Deal continue to strengthen in theory the position of migrant families while also embracing the qualities of a specific version of the American laborer. In delineating this population, the committee sees itself as putting the nation-state on the right footing for addressing the needs of modern industry. "These defense migrants were in search of jobs in a rapidly expanding job market," the report explains (217). "Prior to the defense program many of these people had been barely holding on to part-time industrial jobs or resisting the pressure to migrate for nearly hopeless farming occupations" (217).

“Defense migrants,” the term the committee uses to refer to the interstate migrant population, forcefully underscores the extent to which this governing body codifies the subject of migration according to the exigencies of the state. In the same year the report was published, *Edwards v. California* struck down so-called anti-Okie laws and upheld the right to migration, but only insofar as such interstate movement met “the requirements of national defense” (Wild 330). By the time the United States entered World War II, the white migrant figure had moved from the fringes of society to the center of the security state.

As the notion of defense migration makes particularly clear, the rehabilitation of the white migrant unfolds according to the needs of the state as it manages its resources on a national scale. Steinbeck’s novel precipitates this shift in governance in more ways than one. Most immediately, it stages a critique of antivagrancy laws that presages the reasoning in such cases as *Edwards v. California*, which shifted the matter of migration from local to national importance. On a more implicit level, Steinbeck also anticipates the state’s formulation of the defense migrant in his very construction of the migrant laborer. As I have argued, Steinbeck is completely invested in identifying productive labor as a prerequisite for civil participation. On a theoretical level, his texts thus close the door to the possibility of nonproductive labor coexisting with the governing interests of the nation-state. Along these lines, Steinbeck works very carefully to underscore how productive his migrant subjects truly are.

The continuity between the state’s defense migrant and Steinbeck’s ideal migrant prompts us to reconsider the ostensible discontinuities between the progressive policies of the New Deal and those that immediately followed. Indeed, the rise of the defense

migrant has been read previously as a phenomenon entirely separate from the laboring population that appears in Steinbeck's novel. For example, as Keith Windschuttle notes, domestic migration to California continued to shift beyond the immediate context Steinbeck captures in the novel. "It was not the Depression of the 30s," Windschuttle argues, "but the economic boom of the 40s that caused an abnormal increase in Okie migration" to defense industry jobs in California in particular (25). While providing a broader view of the movement depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Windschuttle's claim imposes a strict division between the policy goals embedded in the novel and the governmental policies enacted during the first years of the Cold War. As I have argued, though, Steinbeck's push for greater control of white migrancy as a matter of national security reverberates in official discourse not only during the New Deal but, even more powerfully, after the official end of this era. The expanding movement of laborers to defense industry jobs in California represents not a break in Steinbeck's vision of migration management but rather its logical extension.

The laborers who thus appear both in WPA art and in the guise of the defense migrant signal the official counterparts to Steinbeck's narratives, all of which recognize the migrant's potential labor power insofar as this work benefits society on a truly national scale. The migrant does not disappear from these sources but in fact reappears in a form closely aligned with the governing institutions of the nation-state. Of course, workers who fall outside this demographic—whether on the basis of their race or national origin—lack such official recognition. The debate over Steinbeck's exclusion of nonwhite migrants in his novel has helped bring to light some of the more unseemly discourse undergirding Depression-era literature and progressive legislation. The

transformation of white migrancy encapsulated by the emergence of the defense migrant—and the security state apparatus it evokes—indicates that this typology of mobile labor reverberates in official government accounts not only during the New Deal, but also well after it.

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Notes

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¹ A typical example of the novel's reception among progressive critics, Granville Hicks's 1939 review praises the "proletariat novel" for depicting how economic forces "operate against the interests of the masses of the people" (23). George Stevens likewise commends the novel for putting readers "in contact not with arguments, but with people" (3-4). Published in 1997, Denning's *Cultural Front* is representative of the way more recent critics from the left take exception to the novel's representation of labor.

² Many works published after Szalay have countered the more pointed critiques of Steinbeck's racial politics. For example, Hearle makes the case that the race-based essentialism of *The Harvest Gypsies* is "one notable exception to Steinbeck's generally progressive depictions of race" (246).

³ Foucault provides the definitive account of this process with his interpretation of the modern race war in *Society Must Be Defended*. Specifically, Foucault discusses how

the state expresses its power by appropriating race war discourse: it fights to protect the “race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage” (61).

⁴ The political consequences of Steinbeck’s literary effort to document government programs while also providing specific policy recommendations were clear enough that the Federal Resettlement Agency paired Steinbeck with a government official during his travels to help steer the author’s critique.

⁵ Cunningham gestures to this dynamic when he explains that Steinbeck’s representation of “Okies as quintessential American pioneers” derives from “an ideological convention that resonated with the implicit white supremacism of Jeffersonian democracy” (1).

⁶ The policy of repatriation noted above of course reflects only a small sampling of the anti-migrant policies exercised during the early twentieth century. The extent to which New Deal initiatives encoded racial prejudice into welfare governance has been the topic of extensive scrutiny. For a recent and comprehensive study on the subject, see Katznelson. On the subject of housing policy, see Freund’s study on the Public Housing Administration, the Urban Renewal Administration, and the Federal Housing Administration in *Colored Property*.

⁷ See Beland’s “Social Security,” which usefully outlines the creation of this program as

well as its eligibility restrictions in comparison to international models of welfare insurance.

⁸ One argument identifies Southern Democrats as the architects of the bill's exclusionist policies. See Lieberman, as well as Alston and Ferrie, for arguments in this vein. DeWitt strongly rebuffs their claims of racial bias, however. For DeWitt, an aversion to new taxes (rather than racial animus) motivated Southern Democrats to limit the bill's language. Of course, any suggestion that the program's intent was free from prejudice does little to address the abiding sense in the US that links welfare programs to race.

⁹ Roosevelt's reasoning offers insight into nearly all the New Deal work initiatives he endorsed during his presidency. As Wild points out, even the expansive Works Public Administration was created in 1935 to replace a no-obligation system of relief for migrants (under the Federal Emergency Relief Agency and the Federal Transient Service) with one that ensured that beneficiaries would always have to work in order to receive payments (321).

¹⁰ As Herd explains, women are much less likely than men to benefit from welfare insurance payments owing to a "breadwinner" system that "best protects individuals who either have consistent lifetime work histories . . . or individuals who get married, stay married, and do no paid work, through noncontributory spousal and widow benefits" (1365-66). As a result of this beneficiary structure, women who marry and never enter the waged workforce "reap the highest rewards from the system" (1367).

¹¹ Railsback argues, along with Zirakzadeh, that the concept of natural selection shapes *The Grapes of Wrath*. Hearle also makes the case that Steinbeck's literature advocates a form of social Darwinism, albeit in a manner stripped of the "supposed logic of white supremacy" (254). See also Osborne, who explains that the biological presentation of non-teleological thinking exposes "internal contradictions" in Steinbeck's otherwise clear concern for oppressed populations (230).

¹² In *The Forgotten Village*, the supposed documentary film Steinbeck wrote following *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck turns his focus from the white migrant farmer to the rural populations of Mexico. In both works, he advances the federal government's responsibility to integrate otherwise marginalized populations into modern civil society. The stark diversity of the demographic subjects of these texts, released so closely together, adds further nuance to any discussion of Steinbeck's overarching racial politics.