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**ARMIES OF THE DISPOSSESSED: LABOR, LANDSCAPE, AND
REPRESENTATION IN JOHN STEINBECK'S *THE GRAPES OF
WRATH***

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LITERATURE

by

Nicholas A. Norman

June 2016

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Nicholas A. Norman

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Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Abstract

California has existed in the collective imaginary of popular American culture as the 'Land of Promise', or Eden of the American West, at the very least since its state ratification in 1850. Early representations of the American West drew many to the California landscape in search of this mythical "garden". This project examines how landscape, operating as a visual ideology, impacted social relations in the California agricultural industry during the 1930s. My argument is that landscape as a visual ideology imposed severe restrictions on the representation of migrant labor through what I define as the 'cultural optics of labor'. This project explores how John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) mediates the complex exchanges between labor, landscape, and representation during the Dust Bowl era, suggesting that the novel develops a set of possibilities for worker revolution along the two ideological lines of space and class.

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I'd also like to extend a separate thanks to the Falge family for their continued support, Jared Harvey for the beat downs on the chessboard, Zach Montgomery for being a friend first and a colleague second, and to Maggie Welsh and Olivia Walker for sharing their home with me.

There are more people to list than I have room for here, and so in this list as in my thesis, all mistakes belong entirely to me.

For my parents,

Charles and Terri

Introduction

When the Joad family in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* crested Tehachapi Pass, laying eyes on the San Joaquin Valley for the first time, what they saw were not the verdant pastures their friends in Oklahoma had described to them nor the lush orchards promised in California booster pamphlets, but instead a teeming mass of starving families, covered in filth, moving scared and wide-eyed like cattle among the fetid squalor of the Hoovervilles, families of all colors, toiling in the hot sun, hunched low amidst the endless rows of cotton, giving their last sweat, blood, and tears to keep the myth of California alive and well. This was the heart of the California agricultural industry. These were the armies of the dispossessed.

That California was not the ready-made Eden the Joads, along with the thousands of other Dust Bowl refugees, had believed it to be, but in fact depended upon a largely invisible, itinerant labor force, signaled the beginning of a process which would slowly begin to dismantle the myth of California as the Land of Promise. The year was 1939. The Dust Bowl was in its third and final wave. John Steinbeck had published his great fiction, *The Grapes of Wrath*, followed by Carey McWilliams' groundbreaking study *Factories in the Field*, who in the same year had accepted a nomination to lead the California Division of Immigration and Housing (CDIH), an organization devoted to labor reform in the California agricultural industry. Increasing pressure to join World War II had redirected U.S. national funding to frontlines abroad in the war against fascism, and as a result, the CDIH was dissolved by the federal Department of Labor and Industrial Relations. However,

McWilliams' efforts as chair of the CDIH had a lasting impact that would permanently transform the California agricultural industry. The immediate effects were measured in concrete forms, like increased wages and federally subsidized labor camps for migrant workers. Less tangible but equally significant were changes in what Raymond Williams theorized as the "structures of feeling" (Williams 12), as the work of McWilliams and Steinbeck helped raise cultural awareness about the exploitative labor relations that made agribusiness California possible.¹ Together, Steinbeck, McWilliams, and others worked to expose how the California agricultural system was fundamentally dependent upon a system of exploitation in which migrant laborers were continually pushed to the margins of the cultural, political, and geographical landscape, where they remained all but invisible, both to the public eye, and to the eyes of power.

My project begins here, at the fringe of the farmland itself, where a long history of exploitative labor and social relations has been carried out relatively unnoticed in the making of the California landscape. My project is, in part, a response to Phoebe S. Kropp's concept of the 'built environment': who built it? ² The answer is undeniably those who made up the labor force of the railroad, timber, and agricultural industries of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but the myth of California as Eden has worked to obscure these laborers and their stories in many problematic ways. My first claim is that the California landscape has, historically in the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, operated as a powerful visual ideology for the staging of capital, and thereby, exploitative labor relations in the California agricultural

industry. But before exploring the formal implications of this visual ideology, a brief note on the word ‘landscape’ is necessary.³

The term ‘landscape’ derives from Middle Dutch, first appearing in the 15th century as *lant-skap* (land-ship), a noun used to describe the process of literally shaping, or, in the case of the Netherlands, draining the land, so as to make it inhabitable. It was only after *lant-skap* had combined with its English cognate *land-schaap* (features of a region or tract of land) by the end of the 16th century that ‘landscape’ became applied principally as a painter’s term. As it was further assimilated into a standardized form of cultural usage, over time, the word was stripped of its connotations of labor, making ‘landscape’ a powerful term in the vocabulary of farm owners seeking fortunes under the auspices of an Edenic California. Even today, the cultural sublimation of the term is upheld by the highest level of authority in the English language, the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines ‘landscape’ as “all the visible features of an area of countryside or land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal”. This dubious etymology can also be traced through developments in landscape painting from the early 19th century, particularly through the practices of artists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Cole, whose paintings glorified nature in its most ideal form while excluding native subjects from their scenes, creating the double-illusion in popular culture that the American West was a paradisaal and, for the most part, unpopulated region. Even works that did feature human subjects, such as Thomas Cole’s *The Savage State* (1836), drew an uncanny connection between an untamed American frontier and its

savage native inhabitants, thus priming American pioneers to assume the task of “settling” the West during the Manifest Destiny movement of the mid 19th century.⁴

These early paintings of the American West, in conjunction with other media like the dime novel, which heralded the cowboy figure as the modern-day equivalent of the knight of Old England, not only established the conventions for representing landscape, but also and via extension, helped cement an idea in the logic of American visual culture of what the West ought to look like. Virtually all who looked west toward California during the mid to late 19th century saw the land through the rose-colored lens of opportunity, as a chance to flee from the overcrowded, industrial cities of the Eastern Seaboard to the land of abundance, where a seemingly endless supply of natural resources waited ready for the taking; indeed, as a garden similar to that of Eden. California was the dream space of capital, made real.⁵

In *Virgin Land*, Henry Nash Smith shows how the Manifest Destiny movement of the 19th century was fundamentally dependent on the American West’s transformation into a myth and symbol, into what he calls “The Garden of the World”, and how this transformation impacted social relations in newly acquired U.S. territories like California.⁶ What Smith’s book demonstrates most clearly, besides the ironic failure of Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian utopia, is how the symbol of the garden ultimately led to social and economic divisiveness in the American West. Propelling westward migration in the 19th century was a visual logic that, much like the British Enclosure Acts which had preceded it, equated “empty” space to potential personal property in a one-to-one ratio. It was the scopic drive for expansion, enacted and

reaffirmed through the capture, enclosure, and partitioning of space, that constituted the seeing practices of large-scale farmers, and contributed to uneven social and economic development in the American West.⁷

With improvements in modern technology and the introduction of industrialized wheat farming in the 1860s, the California landscape became a powerful sign under which the space of the farm was transformed for the signified purposes of capital.⁸ By the turn of the century, farm owners no longer saw their farms as simply farms, but as powerfully symbolic representations of value. The material referent of the word ‘landscape’ was no longer the farm itself, nor the bodies of the laborers who worked the farm, but a set of abstract principles which concealed both under the closed-sign system of production.⁹ W.J.T. Mitchell suggests that what has made landscape such an effective tool of imperialism is its ability to function, in the words of Marx, as a “social hieroglyph” (Mitchell 15) that conceals the actual basis of its value while naturalizing certain forms of power.¹⁰ In the context of the 20th century, not only did the visual ideology of landscape lend further credence to the myth of California by erasing signs of the labor that went into its making, but became the very means – apart from violence – by which exploitative labor relations were produced and maintained as necessary forces in the California agricultural industry of the 1930s.

By the time John Steinbeck had started compiling his interview notes for *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1936, a crippling inertia had already set in amongst laborers of the California agricultural industry. This inertia was the result of a deep-seated

history of labor oppression that had gone into the making of the California landscape, naturalizing itself as a necessary force of capitalism, or, to borrow Lukács' term, reifying itself as the established social structure of the California agricultural industry.¹¹ Previous attempts to organize labor, such as the famous Wheatland Riot of 1913, or the cotton strikes of October 1933, followed the same basic pattern that had persisted since the mid-19th century, when industrialized wheat-farming created a demand for unskilled labor on a massive scale: sporadic bursts of labor revolt were violently repressed, over and over again, until equilibrium was restored. Steinbeck saw the pattern of labor relations as a cycle that moved predictably by ever-increasing degrees of violence, observing that these "repressive methods result inevitably in flares of disorganized revolt which must be put down by force and by increased intimidation" (Steinbeck 36-7).¹² The circumstances seemed to beg the question: how could real change, if not labor unionization, be achieved in such an overdetermined system of social relations that had persisted since the mid-19th century?

Part of the problem consisted in the controlling and policing of the public sphere, which the visual ideology of landscape had essentially worked to shrink by consolidating land ownership among a select group of private corporations, like the Miller and Lux corporation.¹³ According to Carey McWilliams, by 1870, less than .01% of California's total population (roughly 750 out of 380,000 people) owned over half of the state's arable land. My argument is that prior to and during the 1930s, as a result of the fact that certain ideas about labor reform, such as unionization, could not be articulated publicly where they might gain legibility without being violently

repressed by farmer militias and state policemen, a social ecology was produced along the fringe of popular American culture whose representation was subject to what I label here and will refer to throughout the paper as the ‘cultural optics of labor’. The practice of representing migrant farm labor during the Dust Bowl – i.e. making migrant workers, their stories, and their experiences, visible to public audiences – was subject to a politics of representation that had in part been determined by a visual ideology central to the making of the California landscape. What I suggest is that the visual ideology of landscape imposed severe restrictions, both material and symbolic, on the representation of labor by collapsing what Jacques Rancière defines as the ‘distribution of the sensible’, and that unless the discourse between workers and farmers could be rescued from the cultural hegemony and its attendant assumptions regarding migrant workers, labor reform would remain impossible.

According to Rancière, the ‘distribution of the sensible’ can be likened to a sphere made up of individual community members who, through their occupation, establish the range and scope of elements available for public discourse.¹⁴ A given member’s occupation “determines [their] ability or inability to take charge of what is common to the community; it defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language” (Rancière 13). During the Great Depression, with national unemployment hovering around 25%, California farmers leveraged their farms for social and political gain as the safety net that could rescue an ailing economy. California farmers seized the opportunity to reap huge profits with

relatively low expenses by extending “generosity” in the form of jobs to the more than 500,000 Midwestern Americans who had been displaced by the Dust Bowl, knowing that their personal business interests were safely hidden behind the façade of FDR’s New Deal initiative for social reform. Growers thus enjoyed a tremendous power in the agricultural industry that was maintained at the socioeconomic level through the Associated Farmers (AF) group, and reinforced through legislation like the Criminal Syndicalism laws.¹⁵ Additionally, the power that their economic function as farm owners afforded them during the depression-era allowed California growers to shape public opinion on migrant labor through social discourse, nominate particular elements for articulation while censoring others, and thus effectively control the distribution of the sensible within the California agricultural industry. As a result, large-scale farmers helped standardize a cultural optics of labor for popular audiences across America whose access to developments occurring within California’s agricultural industry were limited mainly to newspapers, photographs, and personal letters. Most of the news that did attract national attention was yellow journalism that slammed the migrant worker, his propensity for violence, and often discredited labor unrest as quixotic idealism. What the cultural optics of labor during the 1930s did in particular was eradicate points of knowledge acquisition within the public sphere by cleverly masking worker exploitation behind the visual ideology of landscape (or set of seeing practices) that functioned primarily by ‘othering’ the migrant worker across two separate but reinforcing ideological lines: space and class.

Class difference characterizes the heart of the struggle between farmers and

workers in the California agricultural industry during the 1930s, but is itself informed by competing notions of space as a category of social configuration within the capitalist regime. The peach, citrus, cotton, and grape farms of California brought a wide variety of people together into a common space with the shared goal of not just simply working to survive, but to develop and articulate a consciousness that could grasp both the particularity of individual suffering while understanding itself as a collective social formation tied to conditions operating beyond subjective experience. Migrant workers of the 1930s participated in remaking the farm into a distinctly social space, a site of discursivity and rhetorical possibility, whose product might take the equally social form of class abolition in the California agricultural industry. At the very least, the space of the farm itself was where revolutionary elements on the discourse of labor could be mobilized, if not made immediately visible to the American public. Farms had served as social spaces in pre-capitalist England for centuries, mainly through the religio-political role the agricultural tribute system played in connecting the worker to the Royal Crown and thus to God. Both Leo Marx and Raymond Williams point out that, despite the economic order imposed by the historic division between country and city, a notion of “pastoral idealism” (Marx 74) persisted throughout Western literature, continuing well into the mid 19th century during the period of American literary nationalism.¹⁶ However, following the Industrial Revolution and the turn of the 19th century, Henri Lefebvre argues that:

[...] around 1910 a certain space was shattered. It was the space of common sense, of knowledge (*savoir*), of social practice, of political power, a space thitherto enshrined in everyday discourse, just as in abstract thought, as the environment of and channel for communication. (Lefebvre 25)¹⁷

It is worth noting the resonance between Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault concerning knowledge and power, especially as it relates to Foucault's concept of 'social enclosure'. What interests me here is not the specter-like role capitalism assumes, nor a metaphysics of subjectivity, but rather how changes in space put pressure on the channels of knowledge acquisition and distribution, and the extent to which something like a 'cultural optics' might be held responsible. I am also interested in how knowledge survives transitions like the one of 1910 – how ideas adapt new forms, how and where they become distributed, and how they engage a politics of visibility and representation. Lefebvre's argument about social space, when paired with Rancière's notion regarding the distribution of the sensible, may help us begin to read the space of California farmlands in a way that brushes against the grain of a predominant cultural discourse on migrant labor. Such notions might provide insight on how a cultural optics of labor posited seeming transparency into the nature of the conflict between workers and farmers during the 1930s, when in fact, workers had slipped between the cracks of a fragmented social system that had denied them agency within the discourse on labor while subjecting them to its effects, negated their basic rights as human beings while exploiting their means as such, and prevented them from securing livable wages, even while California agribusiness fundamentally depended on their well-being to reproduce a reliable labor force.

My argument is that Steinbeck's intervention on behalf of migrant workers during the 1930s can be read productively along the lines of both space and class as the two categories Steinbeck uses to imagine what change in the California

agricultural industry might look like. In this sense, *The Grapes of Wrath* reads as an expression of a new set of imagined possibilities for migrant labor. However, as a novel of social realism, *The Grapes of Wrath* fails because of its inability to account for race in positing of how change might take place within the California agricultural industry. Steinbeck's failure to account for the Chinese, Japanese, Mexican, and Filipino workers who constituted large sections of the migrant work force during and prior to the 1930s seems indicative of what Chris Chen calls the 'limit point' of capitalist equality: "Without an account of the relationship between 'race' and the systematic reproduction of the class relation, the question of revolution as the overcoming of entrenched social divisions can only be posed in a distorted and incomplete form."¹⁸ Chen's limit point might reveal where *The Grapes of Wrath* breaks down as the 'Great American Novel', but the question of representation still remains: why did John Steinbeck code migrant labor as being dominantly and heroically white? How might this decision reflect some of the political, cultural, and social conventions – or what might be summarized as the cultural optics – dictating the representation of migrant labor during the 1930s? And lastly, how might Steinbeck's decision to code labor as white be read as a subversive rather than complicit gesture towards popular audiences and what they identified as a recognizable racial category in the Joad family?

It is reasonable to assume that Steinbeck knew *The Grapes of Wrath* would sell better if it featured a white American family as its central group of protagonists. However, my aim is to show how equal representation of race was ultimately

subordinated to a separate project within the novel that imagined new possibilities for change along the lines of space and class only, due to the cultural optics governing the representation of migrant labor during the 1930s. Steinbeck was well aware of the types of stories that would appeal to American audiences. For example, Steinbeck offered a less than flattering portrayal of Communist Party organizers in his 1936 novel *In Dubious Battle*, which concerned itself less with expressing a clear political ideology, necessarily, than with “addressing what [Steinbeck] saw as the root of man’s problems: alienation from the land and his fellow creatures” (Yancey 41).¹⁹ These terms, both spatial and social in their direct invocation to land and man’s relations to one another, respectively, thus defined the categories of analysis Steinbeck would use in *The Grapes of Wrath* to imagine how change might occur within a California agricultural industry that had been hindered by violence for decades.

Subversive Mobility: Migrant Labor and the Visual Politics of Representation

Carey McWilliams once famously argued that real change in the California agricultural industry could be brought about only through violence, and indeed, for many workers during the 1930s, means for effecting this change often came down to one of two choices: a poem or a pipe bomb. Steinbeck himself often faced threats of physical intimidation and blackmail by farmers for the pro-labor stance he took in his writings.¹ The recurring pattern of violence in the California agricultural industry had precluded not only certain forms of knowledge from circulating publicly, but had restricted the movements of migrant workers to such familiar routes within California, like the infamous Dirty Plate Trail documented by Sanora Babb.² Although Steinbeck lamented the fact that workers must remain constantly mobile due to the seasonal nature of their work, geographic zones of segregation like the Dirty Plate Trail served as one of the few remaining spaces in the California landscape where workers could exercise a degree of autonomy, move freely through space without being policed, and openly exchange information with one another. To use Lefebvre's terms, routes like the Dirty Plate Trail represented one of the last open channels for communication between migrant workers that did not fall under the immediate gaze of power. Granted, these zones lacked the advantage of more publicly visible spaces like a town square or public meeting hall, but the freedom they afforded migrant workers to assemble, converse, and organize, indicated the possible degree to which liminality could be leveraged for effecting change in the California agricultural industry.

This chapter uses Don Mitchell's concept of 'subversive mobility' as its starting point in a close reading that examines how Steinbeck postures the theme of revolution around space and class in *The Grapes of Wrath*. According to Don Mitchell, who argues that "Class struggle in the California fields was truly a spatial struggle" (Mitchell 193), worker mobility posed a threat to the capitalist order of the California agricultural industry, which essentially depended on a landless yet fixed and thus stable class of peasant workers for its continuation:

[...] mobility became a tool of class warfare... As Henri Lefebvre has put the matter more generally, the ability to mobilize new spaces and new spatial patterns – in other words, the ability to create counterspaces in opposition to the domineering power of the capitalist political economy (like union halls and hobo jungles) – "shakes the existing space to its foundations, along with its strategies and aims – namely the imposition of homogeneity and transparency" through which the reproduction of capitalism is ordered [...] By connecting place-based struggles migratory workers were able to transcend the spaces and places of their oppression; they were able – at least potentially – to rattle the patterns that underlay capitalist productivity. In this sense, mobility was both necessary and subversive to the aims and desires of capital and the state. (Mitchell 65-6) ³

For Mitchell, subversive mobility is both a restricting and emancipating mechanism for the migrant farm worker. The precarious balance between worker mobility and worker fixity was just one of several ongoing struggles in a labor system fraught with contradictions. On the point of fixity, Bruno Latour deftly remarks that "reality, as the Latin word *res* indicates, is what resists", and only once the trials of strength have come to rest does an object become definable within a set morphology of "limits and edges". ⁴ Latour's understanding of resistance suggests how worker mobility could serve as one of several possible counterforces in a capitalist regime that sought to objectify workers and their bodies, render them as stable objects within a fixed field

of spatial parameters, and thus make them visible to constant surveillance, even if the California agricultural industry depended on them as an explicitly mobile labor force. As George Henderson suggests, "Fixity translated into power, whereas uprootedness was the best assurance of continued disenfranchisement" (Henderson 214).⁵ Power in the California agricultural industry was just as much a product of competing spatial practices as it was a product of economic forces. Subversive mobility as a tool of "class warfare" thus became an organizational method for the social formation of migrant workers who sought to develop new spatial strategies of resistance. If migrant workers during the 1930s could carve out a space of their own, and successfully mobilize that space for assembly, and the articulation and representation of their ideological position, then labor reform might be possible.

Steinbeck calls the theme of subversive mobility into being through the motives and actions of Tom Joad Jr., who first appears in the second chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Tom has just been released from jail after serving a four-year sentence for murdering a man with a shovel during a bar fight. Jail has hardened Tom into a rough-hewn man with sharp senses and a keen wit, who now possesses a certain kind of wisdom about the world in which he lives. At the very least, Tom has been made into a subject of reform by the penal system, even if he has not been fully rehabilitated. Tom's criminal history seems to evoke what Steinbeck would later allude to in his 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech as 'the perfectibility of man',⁶ not as a testament to criminal reform, necessarily, but as a critique of a broken social system that punishes its citizens for crimes society itself has created.

Social fragmentation, the kind of “shattered” space Lefebvre alludes to, figures prominently throughout the entire novel, first becoming apparent in Chapter 2, where Tom Joad Jr. appears as a shiftless vagabond, walking along the edge of the highway, trying to find a ride back to his home in Sallisaw, a rural farming district of Oklahoma where the Joad family resides. Although Steinbeck makes no historical reference to time anywhere in the novel, based on the drought-stricken landscape described in Chapter 1, and the families being displaced in Chapter 2, it is reasonable to assume that the story begins somewhere between 1935 and 1936, at the height of the Dust Bowl and the federal Resettlement Administration’s initiative to relocate struggling families from the Midwest. Tom notices a red transport truck parked at a roadside restaurant with a sticker that reads, “*No Riders*”, which indexes the theme of social fragmentation while differentiating mobility into two discrete categories: mobility as a mode of production, and mobility as a mode of subversion. The description of Tom draws attention to his rough features in relation to the sticker and the class boundaries it demarcates:

He was not over thirty. His eyes were very dark brown and there was a hint of brown pigment in his eyeballs. His cheekbones were high and wide, and strong deep lines cut down his cheeks, in curves beside his mouth. His upper lip was long, and since his teeth protruded, the lips stretched to cover them, for this man kept his lips closed. (Steinbeck 9)

Steinbeck describes Tom’s face using specific phrases, like “strong deep lines cut down his cheeks” (9), to compare him to the “water-cut gullies” (1) and “scarred earth” (1) of Oklahoma. Comparing people to the landscape became a recurring trope that Steinbeck would return to throughout the novel as a way to develop a theory on

personal property, suggesting in Chapter 5, “The property is the man” (48) himself, and that “it’s part of him, and it’s like him” (48). This collapsing of the boundaries between the human body and physical geography would become important later in the novel, during Tom’s metamorphosis into a diffuse spatial presence. Additionally, Steinbeck elevates the visual indicators of class difference to a level that dignifies Tom. His weathered face and protruding teeth stand out defiantly against a landscape of entrenched social divisions, where class difference is signified by stickers like “*No Riders*”. Tom maintains his respectability in spite of such overt signifiers by keeping his “lips closed” and not overstepping class boundaries with undue speech, which in the terms of Rancière, can be read as a reference to Tom’s understanding of how his role or class position in society *a priori* dictates what he can and cannot say within certain social contexts.

Tom is keenly aware of how his appearance creates certain impressions, and how these impressions in turn affect his interactions with others. Tom uses his social intelligence to persuade the truck driver into giving him a ride by deploying a rhetoric that not only negates the relevance of class difference through an appeal to the driver’s moral conscience, but also reveals the basis of power relations as a delicate social fiction that is maintained by abstractions like money and banal corporate axioms:

“Could ya give me a lift, mister?”

The driver looked quickly back at the restaurant for a second. “Didn’t you see the *No Riders* sticker on the win’s shield?”

“Sure – I seen it. But sometimes a guy’ll be a good guy even if some rich bastard makes him carry a sticker.” (Steinbeck 11)

The driver realizes that if he refuses Tom's request on the basis of the "No Riders" sticker, he risks undermining his ability to exercise freedom of thought. What makes Tom's reasoning so persuasive is the extent to which it attempts to restore accountability and responsibility for social inequity at the individual level. Steinbeck was more interested in the individual condition of man himself, rather than what he called the "mere outcroppings" (Benson 53) of social injustice, like labor strikes and worker oppression. But this is part of what makes *The Grapes of Wrath* such a troubled project. Steinbeck was trying to capture the specificity of migrant labor, derive a fundamental essence from the particulars of the Joad Family that could be made portable to American families who had endured similar hardships. Steinbeck was trying to capture the essential condition of migrant labor. However, American audiences viewed the novel as a work of "social reform and political propaganda" (Benson 53), a misreading that would haunt Steinbeck for years to come.

Although Steinbeck's view of his own work suggests he was more interested in how change took place at the individual rather than social level, *The Grapes of Wrath* is also preoccupied, to a certain extent, with understanding how contingent social and historical forces shape individual experience. The novel's narrative structure, which telescopes between the microexperiences of the Joads and the macroexperiences of social phenomenon, invites the notion that Steinbeck had a dialectical understanding of the relationship between individual and social realities during the Dust Bowl era. It remains unclear just exactly who, or what, the narrator presence is in these "macro" chapters of philosophical exegesis. With regards to

space and class, the novel's narrative structure can be viewed as a kind of working out of the dialectical relationship between landscape morphology and social relations. George Henderson sees *The Grapes of Wrath* as a project that aims to defamiliarize established concepts in popular culture, like labor and landscape, that perhaps had long been taken for granted, specifically by joining them together in shocking and often times transgressive ways:

What is inherently geographical also turns out to be inherently social, both constituting, and constitutive of, the same processes [...] Steinbeck demonstrated his awareness of social/geographic space as the medium and the outcome of certain processes: the division of labor along class and gender lines; the territorial demands of capital agribusiness; and family and community needs to appropriate space for their own production, reproduction, and private fulfillment. (Henderson 212-13)

Henderson's basic argument is that the synthesis between social and geographic space renders representation into a form of social action. Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* was trying to do more than simply tell a story; he was trying to fundamentally change the way American society viewed the California landscape. To this end, Steinbeck reasserted space as a category for critical examination, teasing out the various "processes" behind landscape morphology. The Joad family would bear the brunt of this examination. For example, members of the Joad family find themselves struggling to adapt as they become increasingly more enmeshed within the web of power relations the closer they get to California. Giving shape to their struggle with language that could adequately express their suffering was one of many challenges the Joads would face. Ma attempts to grasp the nature of the Joad family plight during a conversation with Tom, observing how the drama of settlement has strained the

family unit:

They was the time when we was on the lan'. They was a boundary to us then. 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 ain't nothin' keeps us clear...Pa's lost his place. He ain't the head no more. We're crackin' up, Tom. There ain't no fambly now. (Steinbeck 503)

Ma can only define the contours of a problem which neither she nor the Joads as a whole can comprehend. The various forces of landscape morphology, unfolding against the expanded social backdrop of California, defy description, leaving Ma speechless and bewildered. George Henderson alludes to Lefebvre and a certain sense of collapsed space in his discussion of the Joad family's disintegration, suggesting that "It is important to move the line of questioning away from how the Joads got from one place to the next, and by which routes, toward how meaning is produced, controlled, and disseminated with regard to social and workaday space" (213). It is also worth noting that by the time the Joads reach Tehachapi Pass and gain their first glimpse of California, they have already lost three of their family members, Grandpa, Granma, and Noah. Mapping the interrelationship between social and geographic space ultimately boils down to a question of representation: how might Steinbeck give form to the complex social relations that had both shaped and been shaped by landscape morphology?

Keeping in mind how the cultural optics of labor imposes limits on representation during the 1930s, and how subversive mobility works both within and against those limits, I'd like to suggest that Tom Joad Jr. embodies the system of interrelations between contingent socio-historical forces and landscape morphology

by becoming a spatially diffuse “center” within the novel. He becomes the formal embodiment of the social forces involved in landscape morphology. Another way of phrasing this might be that Tom, by the end of the novel, sacrifices himself to serve as a mediator between the two mutually separate but reinforcing worlds of individual and social realities, as they are informed by the various processes of landscape morphology. Spatial diffusion functions as the ultimate expression of subversive mobility, in that Tom becomes invisible to the eyes of power: his consciousness, his presence, moves silently and undetectably throughout a policed landscape. He is at once everywhere and nowhere. Tom becomes part of the landscape itself, shaping both the “medium” and “outcome” of landscape morphology, the link that restores a connection between man, the landscape, and his “fellow creatures”. Tom as a diffuse spatial presence becomes an undetectable but omnipresent revolutionary force that cannot be traced to a single, fixed point within the California geography. Tom is very much still alive; his body remains fully intact. But Tom understands that his material presence, his corporeality must be concealed if subversive mobility is to serve as a viable mode of representation. Tom also understands how the cultural optics of labor limit his visibility as a political subject. What Tom represents now is an expanded locus of possibility that counteracts the hegemonic space of grower power by multiplying and proliferating sites of class-consciousness and worker revolution. To a certain degree, Tom now represents what Rancière might describe as an “expanded realm” for the distribution of the sensible.

Tom’s metamorphosis takes place at the end of Chapter 28, during the final

conversation between him and Ma. Tom has been hiding out in a culvert along Highway 101 after killing a man with a pick handle in retaliation for the murder of Jim Casy, who had taken the blame for beating a deputy during a riot originally caused by Floyd, a minor character who the Joads meet in Chapter 20 on their way to Weedpatch Camp. Following his arrest, Casy becomes one of the novel's few leading figures for worker organization and labor reform, a short-lived role that would ultimately cost him his life. In Chapter 28, vigilante farmers had pegged Casy as the leader of a strike at a peach farm near Weedpatch, and when they found him hiding in a tent just outside the Hooverville, he was clubbed to death. Tom uses the same club to kill Casy's murderer, but is badly injured in the fight. His nose is broken, his right eye swollen shut, and as a former felon now on parole, Tom must hide, or else put himself and his family at serious risk. In a dramatic final conversation with Ma, Tom decides to leave the family behind and dissolve amongst the California landscape, in order to fulfill Casy's vision of leading migrant workers out of their subjugation and into a state of equality. Tom, as a diffuse presence of resistance, becomes the ultimate expression of subversive mobility, and in the wake of Casy's death, is now the novel's new proletariat figure:

I'll be ever'where—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an' — I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. An' when our folks eat the stuff they raise an' live in the houses they build — why, I'll be there. (Steinbeck 537)

Tom's ethereal, almost supernatural quality here is aligned with a form of protest that remains both within and against the forces of landscape morphology. By reasserting

his agency as a diffuse spatial presence, Tom remains safely invisible to the eyes of power, yet omnipresent as a revolutionary force. Whereas Casy and other “agitators”, as vigilante farmers describe them, once occupied the fringe of farmlands and Hoovervilles, Tom has now come to occupy the “center” of the geography of power. It can be said that Tom now survives as something like the disembodied spirit of worker resistance, preserved in the cultural memory of migrant labor, who now mediates encounters between workers and farmers. It is also worth mentioning how Tom’s ability to move anywhere and everywhere, seemingly without resistance, mimics the fluidity of water.

Water is an essential thematic element to the novel, and additionally, operates symbolically as a kind of restorative force of history. For instance, the novel begins with a gentle rainstorm, which gradually dissipates, leaving behind “water-cut gullies” (3) riven into the surface of the “scarred earth” (3). The “last rains” (3) eventually give way to a pale sky, and a “pale earth” (3), signaling the beginning of the Dust Bowl and the drought. The mechanized forces of capitalism have damaged man’s connection to nature: “The men sat still – thinking – figuring” (7) as they looked up at the red sun which now “flared down on the dust-blanketed land” (7). Nature in these opening pages operates not only as an object of contemplation, but with a menacing agency, as if to suggest nature is now exacting revenge on man for the kind of reckless overdevelopment that accompanied the mode of production at large-scale bonanza farms. Steinbeck represents the drought as a symbolic limit point in the trajectory of capital development, and at the end of the novel, breaks the

drought with a flood, bracketing the novel between two opposing forces of nature. It is ultimately a natural disaster in the form of a deluge, like Noah's flood, that not only presumes a new set of possibilities for the Joad family in the ways of abundance, fertility, and a renewal of Earth's natural resources, but also equalizes the social relations among workers and migrant labors in a dramatic instance of liberation wherein which the trauma of past experiences, like Casy's murder and Noah's mysterious disappearance, are historically redeemed. Water as a restorative force of history resuscitates the subaltern, disenfranchised, and the dispossessed, by supplying them with renewed agency within the structure of social relations. Water, in its capacity for both destruction and renewal, levels the landscape of power. The Joads, like water, naturally seek the path of least resistance through this landscape of power relations. Lastly, this passage is significant for the way in which it brings together the two concepts I've been discussing throughout this paper: the cultural optics of labor, and their relationship to spatial strategies of resistance.

Tom's disembodiment and symbolic, if not physical, transformation, calls attention to the various ways in which the cultural optics of labor have essentially forced him to adopt a spatial strategy of resistance that does not rely on a fixed geographic location for the representation of resistance. His omnipresence means that the articulation of worker resistance can now occur anywhere at anytime. Tom as an omnispatial revolutionary threat recalls Foucault's famous expression, that "Power has no center". To be sure, what the cultural optics of labor have done specifically is impose severe restrictions on the ability of characters like Casy and Tom to organize

space for the purposes of labor strikes. These are what we might call the ‘material restrictions’ created by the cultural optics of labor, the fact that certain public spaces or “channels” for the distribution of knowledge have been made unavailable by police and grower coalitions. Besides their spatial consequences, it is also important to keep in mind the way in which the cultural optics of labor have impacted the categories of free speech and social discourse, or what can simply be summarized as the ‘symbolic restrictions’ imposed on certain characters like Casy and Tom, who each attempt, in their own way, to make migrant labor into a culturally visible and salient category for the American public. Indeed, a rather curious difference exists between Casy and Tom when it comes to speech. Each character deploys radically different styles of speech when discussing what a successful revolution in the California agricultural industry might actually look like. Although each character is invested in using representation as a form of social action, Casy is more outspoken and inflammatory, while Tom more levelheaded, reserved, and understated.

Steinbeck sets up this comparison between Casy and Tom early in the novel, during Chapter 2, as a way to develop a model for revolutionary speech that would be both effective and sustainable. What Steinbeck was searching for in this comparison between Casy and Tom was a way to talk about volatile social issues, like worker exploitation and labor unrest, without a predetermined duality between violence and censorship – the duality that had structured the discourse between worker and farmers for decades. Steinbeck was looking for a way to posture the discourse on labor using a style of rhetoric that didn’t polarize workers and farmers so violently from one

another. It is important to keep in mind that one of the main reasons Casy was killed was because of his outspoken style of leadership and loquacious tendencies. Tom tells Casy that he's "Never seen such a talker" (490), and shortly before his own death, Casy says, "They figger I'm a leader 'cause I talk so much" (494). Both characters understand how the economy of speech performs a specific social function in the California Hooverilles, how the representation of certain ideas carries revolutionary weight and potentially lethal consequences, and it is only after Casy dies that the significance of this verbal economy becomes apparent to Tom.

Casy's death marks a crucial turning point for Tom who realizes he must now pick up where Casy left off, in order to honor his legacy and fulfill the cause for which Casy had given his life. Tom knows that he now must become the novel's sole proletariat figure. But Ma is worried that Tom will end up dead like Casy if he tries to organize a revolution. The conversation unfolds as a series of questions and answers, punctuated by moments of nostalgia, that ultimately work towards defining a model of revolutionary action that is both effective and sustainable. Reflecting on his past experiences with Jim Casy, Tom has something comparable to an epiphany as he gradually becomes aware of his own capacity for leadership, and the necessity for developing a style of speech, specifically a mode and style of representation, that will ensure his own survival while meeting the ideological demands of fellow migrant laborers. Isolation serves as a precursor to Tom's epiphany, during which the limitations of something like Henry David Thoreau's philosophy on transcendentalism come into focus:

Lookie, Ma. I been all day an' all night hidin' alone. Guess who I been thinkin' about? Casy! He talked a lot. Use' ta bother me. But now I been thinkin' what he 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 a wilderness ain't no good, 'cause his little piece of a soul wasn't no good 'less it was with the rest, an' was whole. Funny how I remember. Didn' think I was even listenin'. But I know now a fella ain't no good alone. (Steinbeck 535)

Tom understands how he must adopt a new style of speech when it comes to the representation of migrant labor, one far less inflammatory than his predecessor Casy's, if he wishes to remain alive. Tom finally begins to grasp how the cultural optics of labor have restricted the representation of certain ideas, like labor reform, and begins to develop a strategy for bypassing those restrictions, a strategy that will not rely on the spoken or written word so much as the realization and deployment of new spatial patterns. Referring specifically to the French Revolution, Henri Lefebvre explains that "It was on the basis of [the ideology of the written word] that people believed for quite a time that revolutionary transformation could be brought about by means of communication alone" (28-9). This is precisely why the need for developing new spatial strategies of resistance was so central to Steinbeck's project: the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* depended on the extent to which the novel could redefine popular culture's understanding of space in purely social terms. This is also why Tom rejects isolationism as a viable strategy for social change. Although isolation and religious seclusion may provide knowledge and wisdom, Tom understands this knowledge amounts to nothing if it can't be shared collectively amongst his fellow migrant workers whose cause for labor reform depends on organizing representation

within an organized space.

The stories to which Tom makes reference come from Chapter 2, when he happens to bump into Casy on his return home from jail. Reverend Jim Casy first describes himself as a former “Burning Busher” (26) who used to shout the name of God, but has “a lot of sinful idears” (26) which now “seem kinda sensible” (26). Casy retreats from society in a manner similar to Thoreau, in order to contemplate man’s relationship to nature, but is left questioning his faith, and more importantly, his credibility as a religious leader in society. Casy’s religious views take on distinctly more secular proportions as he reflects on his relationship to the social dimension of his community:

I went off alone, an’ I sat and figured. The sperit’s strong in me, on’y it ain’t the same. I ain’t so sure of a lot of things...Here I got the sperit sometimes an nothin’ to preach about. I got the call to lead people, an’ no place to lead ‘em. (Steinbeck 27)

Whereas Thoreau may achieve clarity, Casy achieves only confusion, perhaps because he realizes that spiritual transcendence has nothing to do with the “place-based” or worldly struggles of Dust Bowl families facing homelessness and starvation. Casy’s misstep is that he tries to solve a social problem with an inherently antisocial solution. As Casy begins to organize his attention around more ground-level issues like the Joad family drama, he must also develop an understanding of how the Joad’s battles are inscribed within a larger set of interlocking geographic and social relations. He must engage the cultural optics of labor and the limits it imposes on representation, if he is to successfully navigate the geography of power separating Oklahoma from California. However, this is precisely what makes Casy the novel’s

tragic hero in relation to others like Tom: instead of working within and against those limits, he tries to change the social system of the California agricultural industry by attacking it from the “outside”, using coercive speech, union-member recruitment, violence, and worker radicalization as his main strategies. The major problem is that Casy’s strategies remained visible, and thus policeable, to the eyes of grower and police power. Unlike Tom, Casy fails to develop a spatial strategy of resistance that can keep him safe. This is perhaps the biggest point of contrast between Tom and Casy, who both serve as revolutionary figures in the cause for labor reform, but produce different effects. Tom has a significantly different understanding of leadership than Casy when it comes to the category of space.

In an act of literal interpretation that borders on the obtuse, Tom negates the importance of geographic fixity in favor of a simpler version of leadership which understands mobility as an advantage rather than disadvantage when it comes to the overlapping dramas of the Joad family settlement and their need to remain on the move to find work. Tom’s model of revolution doesn’t need a fixed point at all; mobility and liminality are ends unto themselves. Tom’s response to Casy is blunt and direct, even sophisticated for its simplicity:

Lead ’em around and around,” said Joad. “Sling ’em in the irrigation ditch. Tell ’em they’ll burn in hell if they don’t think like you. What the hell you want to lead ’em someplace for? Jus’ lead ’em. (Steinbeck 27)

Tom’s utilitarian, rather crude suggestion stands in stark contrast to Casy’s hyper-rationalization, generating a line of question in regards to how something like one’s level of education (or lack thereof) might factor into viable qualities of leadership.

Indeed, there is something rather “simple-minded” about Tom and the rest of the Joad family, and the way they attempt to rationalize their travail. Here I might argue that Steinbeck wanted to develop a character in *The Grapes of Wrath* who could capture the essence of Midwestern American families while at the same time articulating a progressive solution for labor reform within the California agricultural industry. Steinbeck needed a character who could successfully bridge the two worlds of grassroots political conservatism and the more progressive social liberalism needed for the advancement of worker’s rights. The necessity becomes apparent when considering previous examples of literature that examined the social forces of California’s agriculture industry.

Perhaps the most famous example from this literary tradition is Frank Norris’ *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901). One of the novel’s central figures and protagonists is Presley, an upper middle-class intellectual, who, like Tom and Casy, wants to grasp the essential nature of the conflict between farmers and the Pacific Railway Company (though the difference here should be noted between ‘farmers vs. workers’ and ‘farmers’ vs. the Pacific Railway Company). To do so, Presley writes what he considers to be the epic poem of the American West. Presley publishes his poem in the local newspapers to sparkling reviews and critical acclaim, but fails to stir the kind of action a more revolutionary character like Tom is capable of. Tom’s value as the new proletariat figure who replaces Casy is thus measured by the dangers he poses as a former criminal with minimal education, and his ability to organize fellow class members in a way that Presley, as an upper-class intellectual and poet,

cannot.

The reader gains an understanding of just how minimally educated Tom is in Chapter 2, during the encounter with the truck driver cited previously, where Tom explains that he “[He] was never no hand to write, nor [his] old man neither”, but quickly adds that “the both of us can, if we want” (13). Whereas Norris stresses the ideology of the written word through Presley the poet, Steinbeck places Tom over and against such privileged societal occupations and quixotic revolutionary imaginings, framing Tom’s illiteracy as a potential advantage for rather than hindrance to the cause of labor reform. Moreover, Steinbeck matches his “simple” protagonist, Tom, with a “simple” Midwestern American landscape, where Jefferson’s agrarian utopia is embodied by the small, self-sustaining farming districts of Oklahoma, Texas, and Nebraska, which exist anachronistically and in diametric opposition to the booming, large-scale, machine-intensive California agricultural industry. Steinbeck chooses Tom over Casy as the novel’s “simpler” protagonist in order to appeal to a wider section of American audiences who could potentially identify, or at least sympathize with, Tom’s lower-middle class social status.

When it came to the social distribution of wealth, Steinbeck toed a rather fine line between socialist and conservative ideologies in his representation of Hooverville communities, often expressing ambivalence on whether migrant families during the 1930s were truly invested in helping one another. For instance, Tom asks Casy rhetorically, “Think Pa’s gonna give up his meat on account a other fellas? [...] Think Ma’s gonna wanta starve that baby jus’ ‘cause a bunch of fellas is yellin’ outside the

gate?” (493). As mentioned earlier, the type of misreading that haunted Steinbeck would read between these lines for a political ideology, but the main focus here is man’s mistreatment of fellow man. Steinbeck wasn’t as interested in expressing a clear political ideology as he was in exposing the root of social alienation.

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that Tom is made to represent the disenfranchisement of thousands of displaced migrant workers. Tom, as the novel’s proletariat figure, represents the realization and enactment of labor reform, a topic of social discourse that during the 1930s was often readily associated with the rhetoric of Communist ideology. So, Tom’s relatability to American audiences, and the cause for which he stands in the novel, generates a curious tension within the ideological fabric of popular American culture.

With this tension in mind, I’d like to make one final claim that, at the back of each one Steinbeck’s artistic decisions for *The Grapes of Wrath*, were the cultural optics of labor, functioning as an ideological limit point that constrained the scope and availability of elements for representing labor reform. Beyond this limit point, certain ideologies and historical players, such as the IWW movement for worker unionization, were invisible to popular culture. The cultural optics of labor functioned essentially as a kind of barrier of visibility whereby Steinbeck was forced to “code” his stories according to visual criteria that was recognizable to and approvable by popular audiences, if he wished *The Grapes of Wrath* to gain maximum cultural exposure. Here, we can see how Tom’s alignment with a quasi-communist political ideology as a proletariat figure might have jeopardized the cultural receptivity of

Steinbeck's novel. But this is also where I think an argument can be made about the subversive qualities of the novel, specifically on how Steinbeck's decision to code migrant labor as purely "white" might be read as a subversive rather than complicit gesture against the culture optics and politics of visibility regarding migrant labor. What would this type of reading tell us about our own viewing practices, our own scopophilic drives? What might this approach yield in the way of self-examination, and how might it expose us to our own visual prejudices and how categories of identification are often constructed out of culturally visible material?

Surely this reading extends beyond the theoretical framework I've established here. But what I hope I've demonstrated is how Steinbeck's decision to remain safely within the cultural optics of labor, and the limits of representation imposed thereby, can be read as a set of artistically and politically strategic choices whose ultimate end goal was to radically defamiliarize such knowable and seemingly transparent cultural concepts as the California landscape and its agricultural industry. Steinbeck exposed audiences to their own misconceptions about landscape by reorganizing culturally visible elements, such as the white American family, under new pressures created by the Dust Bowl, like infant mortality and starving children. Steinbeck showed American audiences how the bucolic landscape of California was fundamentally dependent upon a system of worker exploitation. Defamiliarization functioned as a mode of transgression against the types of assumptions that mediated popular culture's encounter with the novel's main concepts of labor and landscape. Under this system, representation became a tool of social action. The method of

defamiliarization was Steinbeck's representational strategy and answer against a mode of reading the California landscape that had dominated for decades. It was Steinbeck's way of asserting a story that brushed against a predominant version of California history, the version historically upheld by the myth of California as Eden, and reinforced through seeing practices that worked to erase the laborer from the landscape. If the events of California's exploitative labor history themselves couldn't be changed, then Steinbeck would ask his readers to read them differently by reshaping the context of historical interpretation. With *The Grapes of Wrath* acting as a mirror, Steinbeck showed the country an image of itself it could neither accept nor deny was real.

Conclusion

This project has explored how the cultural optics of labor during the 1930s impacted John Steinbeck's practices of representing migrant labor in *The Grapes of Wrath*. I was initially compelled to write about California because of a question posed to me by Loisa Nygaard during one of our many discussions about landscape and ideology: why does the land look the way it does? It is rather fortunate that the most recent California drought just so happened to coincide with my enrollment at UC Santa Cruz, because it occurred to me that California landscape looks the way it does in large part because of water. With Loisa's question in mind, the California drought called into being what I saw as two parallel histories that crystallized in the form of the California agricultural industry: the environmental history of California's water, and the labor history behind its capture and manipulation.

One history was visible, the other less so. The environmental history of California's water appeared all around me in the traces of Earth's relentless geologic activity, visible in the arroyos and canyons and deep scours of the hillsides, left behind from centuries of erosion. I also saw that water was at the center of California's historical development, when considering the role farms had played in California's rise to capital during the 19th century. In *The Grapes of Wrath* I saw the two forces of capitalism and nature encapsulated as one, dialectically interacting with one another. It was the novel which tied together the two separate strands of water's natural and institutional histories. But there was something vaguely disturbing about the neatly manicured, impossibly green lawn in the apartment complex where I lived.

It was the same feeling I got when I passed the farmlands on the outskirts of Santa Cruz county, looking out uneasily across the rows of strawberries and artichokes, where sprinklers cast an eerie haze over what looked to be a deserted landscape: I knew that someone, somewhere had worked to make this landscape possible. I knew that the landscape looked the way it did because of a history I could not see.

Who were these people? What role did they play in shaping the landscape? How was it that their importance had never occurred to me until now? As I looked out over the farmlands of Salinas and Watsonville, I gradually became aware that my encounter with this space was being mediated by a set of visual prejudices that I had automatically absorbed, like language, from the culture around me. I couldn't help but think about the Joad family, about Steinbeck. I began to wonder if I had somehow been visually programmed to read the space of farms, including all landscapes, purely in terms of their aesthetic appeal. How was this possible? I set off to answer these questions by examining how something like a visual ideology may have been responsible for this rather embarrassing realization of mine.

I began first by looking at how this visual ideology was formed. The first and most basic premise of my argument is that a visual ideology specific to California was generated by the myth of California as Eden, maintained and reproduced in popular forms of representation, like landscape painting. This visual ideology was a code of visual criteria based solely on the aesthetic considerations of landscape, which farmers implemented as a set of seeing practices in order to justify the exploitation of migrant workers. In other words, farmers selectively perceived their

farms as landscapes, even as gardens, rather than actual sites of production where labor took place. The consequences of these viewing practices were such that the laborer and his work became undesirable in a visual field of strictly aesthetic considerations. The visual ideology of the California landscape was nothing less than selective perception.

From here, I wanted to know how this visual ideology structured social relations between workers and farmers. Throughout this thesis, I have tried to demonstrate how the California landscape essentially operated as a concept rather than a set of physical characteristics, as a visual ideology that mediated the exploitative form of social relations between farmers and migrant laborers during the 1930s. My claim is that this visual ideology was responsible for creating what I am calling the ‘cultural optics of labor’, a set of visual prejudices that actively worked to render the migrant laborer invisible as a physical and political subject. My research has led me to conclude that the form of this visual ideology was most evident in the structure of public discourse between workers and farmers, in which workers were continually denied agency. Additionally, what the cultural optics of labor did in particular, I suggest, was subject migrant labor to a strict politics of representation that referred back onto California as Eden, and the visual ideology of landscape, for its justification.

I should mention that the cultural optics of labor had already long been in effect in California before the 1930s. However, the Dust Bowl brought new considerations to bear on the topic of landscape, particularly in regards to the question

Loisa asked me, that is: why does the landscape look the way it does? Steinbeck's greatest achievement in *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps, was exposing how the California agricultural industry was fundamentally dependent upon a system of exploitation. Within the first three weeks of its publication, the novel had shown over 600,000 readers that the California landscape looked the way it did because of a largely invisible and itinerant labor force, because of an army of dispossessed migrant workers. Although the novel remains flawed for its lack of racial inclusion, *The Grapes of Wrath* stands as a potential model for explaining the complex exchanges between labor, landscape, and representation.

Notes and References

From “Introduction”

¹ For more specifically on how the ‘structures of feeling’ impact social relations and shape what he calls ‘knowable communities’, see Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* (Oxford Press, 1973).

² Phoebe S. Kropp originally conceives of the ‘built environment’ as a concept for exploring the relationship between landscape and cultural memory in her book *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (UC Press, 2006), but for my project, I use it to investigate the relationship between the visual ideology of landscape and the form social relations took in the California agricultural industry during the 1930s.

³ Here, the implicit link between the terms “farm” and “landscape” is made intentionally to draw attention to the viewing practices of farm owners who, as I’ll attempt to prove, conflated the two during agriculture’s industrial expansion in California. My claim is that exploitative labor conditions in the California agricultural industry were in part maintained specifically through the viewing practices of large-scale farmers who saw their farms as landscapes instead of centers of production where real people endured, among other things, starvation, dehumanization, extreme poverty, and exploitative labor conditions.

⁴ Thomas Cole’s *The Savage State* (1836) appears as the first installment of a five-part series, titled *The Course of Empire* (1833-36), whose depiction of the heroic rise and fall of the American nation is almost Nietzschean in its rendering of history as doomed to the cycle of the eternal return. For an excellent reading on race and racialization in Cole’s work, see Martin Berger’s *Sight Unseen: Whiteness and American Visual Culture* (UC Press, 2005).

⁵ See Mike Davis’s “How Eden Lost Its Garden” from *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (Metropolitan Books, 1998) for a riveting and detailed study of how the illusion of abundance has shaped popular culture’s relationship to natural disasters in California.

⁶ pp. 123-260. Nash Smith, Henry. “Book Three: The Garden of the World”, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Harvard Press, 1970).

⁷ My understanding of a ‘logic’ in American visual culture is adapted from Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* (Blackwell Press, 1991) and his ideas concerning what he calls a kind of “logic of visualization” that had developed under the Roman Empire as a methodology for representing space and its embedded social relations which, according to Lefebvre, following the historic change in the relationship

between town and country, “became enshrined in architectural and urbanistic practices as the *code* of linear perspective” (p. 41). Here, Lefebvre asserts the primacy of the gaze in his attempt to theorize how a representational system of space became codified through time. It is interesting to note the connection between Henri Lefebvre and Raymond Williams here, in the sense that both critics evoke the city-country distinction in their analyses of historical change.

⁸. The saga of California’s rise to industrial farming, which starts with wheat, is most famously portrayed in Frank Norris’ *The Octopus: A Story of California* (1901), the first installment of a trilogy titled *The Epic of the Wheat*, which Norris never completed.

⁹. Here, ‘production’ is used in accordance with its application in *Grundrisse* by Karl Marx, who never explicitly states whether the rationality of the concept is either immanent to or derivative from modes of production, and in accordance with Henri Lefebvre, who describes production as a “concrete abstraction” (*The Production of Space*, p.69).

¹⁰. See W.J.T Mitchell’s essay “Imperial Landscape”, from *Landscape and Power* (2nd ed., University of Chicago, 2002), pp. 5-34.

¹¹. See Georg Lukács’ essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, from *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (MIT: Cambridge, 1971), pp. 83-222.

¹². From Charles Wollenberg’s introduction to John Steinbeck’s *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath* (Heyday: Berkeley, 1988), pp. v – xvii.

¹³. David Igler combines economic theory with environmental history to tell the fascinating story of how German-born immigrants Henry Miller and Charles Lux became two of the most powerful businessmen in 19th century California through the monopolization of California’s water supply, in his book *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850-1920* (UC Press: Berkeley, 2001).

¹⁴. See Jacques Rancière’s *The Distribution of the Sensible: The Aesthetics of Politics*, Trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum: New York, 2000).

¹⁵. For a detailed discussion of criminal syndicalism laws and their impact on migrant workers, see Carey McWilliams’ *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (UC Press: Berkeley, 1966).

¹⁶ See Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford Press: New York, 1964) for a complete study on the "pastoral ideal" in British and American literature.

¹⁷ From Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Blackwell, 1991).

¹⁸ See Chris Chen's essay "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality: Notes Toward an Abolitionist Antiracism", published in *Endnotes 3: Gender, Class, and Other Misfortunes* (September 2013).

¹⁹ See Peter W. Yancey's "Steinbeck's Relation to Proletarian Literature", from *The Steinbeck Review*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Penn State Press: Spring 2012), pp.38-53.

From "Subversive Mobility: Migrant Labor and the Visual Politics of Representation"

¹ Jackson J. Benson details Steinbeck's relationship to the farm labor community, including the opposition he faced, in his essay "The Background to the Composition of *The Grapes of Wrath*", *Critical Essays on Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*, Ed. John Ditsky (GK & Hall, 1989), pp.51-74.

² See Sanora Babb's *On The Dirty Plate Trail: Remembering the Dust Bowl Refugee Camps* (University of Texas: Austin, 2007), which features a collection of photographs documenting the conditions migrant life by her sister Dorothy Babb.

³ For a more detailed description of this concept and its application, see "Subversive Mobility and the Re-formation of the Landscape" from Don Mitchell's *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (University of Minnesota, 1996), pp. 58-82.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 32.

⁵ See George Henderson's "John Steinbeck's Spatial Imaginary: A Critical Essay", *California History*, Vol. 68, No. 4., Envisioning California (Winter 1989), pp. 210-223.

⁶ A complete video recording of John Steinbeck's 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech is available for viewing on Youtube.com.

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