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Culture in Crisis: The Grapes of Wrath Cultural Formation from the Great Depression to
the Green New Deal

By

Frank Eugene Cruz

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Committee in charge:

Professor Genaro Padilla, Chair

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Abstract

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During the 1930s, artists from the US responded to the period's social locations of crisis through a remarkable range of cultural forms. The New Deal state and the culture industries played a significant role in amplifying many of these forms, including mass-market literature, documentary photography, and film. This collision between historical crisis, capitalist cultural production, and New Deal liberalism produced a number of discrete cultural formations during the Great Depression. With few notable exceptions, however, scholarly literature about US-American cultural history tends to marginalize "the Thirties," treating it as an exceptional interlude, a period of cultural production that creates a curious gap in literary historiography between the transition from "high modernism" to "postmodernism." My dissertation addresses this historiographic problem in the literature by mapping the form and function of popular culture in the Great Depression through the grapes of wrath cultural formation and by illuminating connections between popular culture and crisis.

This project explores the emergence of the grapes of wrath cultural formation during the Great Depression in order to unravel contradictions between popular culture forms, the democratic liberal state, and capitalist ideology. It analyzes popular culture texts by John Steinbeck, Américo Paredes, Gregg Toland, and Hugh Hammond Bennett, among others, that map all too familiar social locations of crisis: economic collapse, ecological catastrophe, and racial anxiety. I analyze the grapes of wrath cultural formation's bestselling novels and recovered literary texts, its Hollywood blockbusters and state-sponsored documentaries, its popular-press photography, journalism, and lost government archives. Through this analysis, I assert that popular culture's overwhelming response to the Dust Bowl eco-crisis and the mass migration it produced during the Great Depression in fact established a major cultural formation in the American popular imagination that previous scholars have overlooked or misread. By combining insights from cultural studies, literary theory, and subaltern studies, this project maps the radical edge of the 1930's popular imagination.

This investigation also demonstrates that the grapes of wrath cultural formation did not die at the end of the Great Depression, but has continued to occupy and unsettle the US popular imagination of crisis diachronically over the past eighty years, ultimately uncovering the US cultural imagination's twenty-first century return to the aesthetic forms and social locations of the Great Depression's grapes of wrath cultural formation. The apocalyptic environmental crisis of the Dust Bowl has been scaled up to the apocalypse always of twenty-first century climate change. The logic of neoliberalism and late capital have normalized catastrophic economic collapse and facilitated billion-dollar corporate welfare packages, even as both logics continue to dismantle the social safety net originally established by the New Deal. The Dust Bowl's racialized crisis of migratory labor in California's factories in the field (which was met in the 1930s with reactionary vigilante violence and homegrown "Gunkist" fascism in the Golden State) has grown to monstrous proportions and produced horrifying results, ultimately creating migrant concentration camps in the US-Mexico Borderlands. By connecting the Great Depression, the Great Recession, contemporary migrant struggles in the Borderlands, and the Green New Deal through the grapes of wrath cultural formation, *Culture in Crisis* reads popular culture symptomatically from Steinbeck's age to our own as evidence of unhealed wounds on the body-politic of the nation in order to reclaim popular culture as a potential site of resistance against our present, late capitalist event horizon of permanent crisis.

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Introduction

A Heartbreaking World; A Duty to Tell

So I turn to Frank when we reach the end
 And he said, “This is only the beginning my friend
 It’s a heartbreaking world and we’ve got a duty to tell”

Cuz this is Steinbeck’s America
 And these are fields of broken dreams
 This is a shattered America
 And we live a chorus of silent screams

—JD Levin, “Steinbeck’s America” (2007)¹

When I first encountered *The Grapes of Wrath* as a high school student near the end of the twentieth century, nearly everything about what indie-folk singer songwriter JD Levin calls “Steinbeck’s America” resonated with me: its places, people, and problems. The Californian agricultural settings of Steinbeck’s America mirrored where I was from: a small, valley town in southern California. And the Oklahoma “red country” of Steinbeck’s America did too: my hometown was also violently remade throughout my childhood by the logic of late capital. Rose, Rice, and Vineyard: these long roads, which were named after the crops they had yielded for generations in my hometown, had not yet been completely paved over by Caterpillar tractors and the other heavy machines that

¹ JD Levin and I, in fact, grew up together in Steinbeck’s America. He followed El Camino Real north to the University of California, Berkeley in 1999 and joined the fine tradition of Berkeley English rock and roll musicians that includes Adam F. Duritz of Counting Crows, Stephen Jenkins of Third Eye Blind, and current PhD student Ted Alexander of Saves the Day. Levin literally paved the way for my academic career. My visit to the East Bay Area for Levin’s graduation was only the second time I had set foot on a university campus—and the first time I had travelled north on El Camino Real beyond Santa Barbara. We began playing music together one summer vacation when he was home from Berkeley. He encouraged me, at that time a recent high school grad, a waiter, and a dishwasher, to go to our local community college (I was a C- student back home in Steinbeck’s America). And he was the first to tell me I could make it at Berkeley. Levin wrote “Steinbeck’s America” in his Clark Kerr dorm room at UC Berkeley after the summer we spent playing music together and “cruising out past the fields” in my 1970 Ford Mustang (“Steinbeck’s”). Levin mailed me the acoustic demo for “Steinbeck’s America” on CD-R (this was the early-2000s) and I went on to play piano and Hammond organ in his band, Far From Kansas, and produce the band’s second LP, *The Ghost Inside of You* (2006). While I don’t engage Levin’s deeply humanist and often powerfully political pop music (which belongs to same tradition as Guthrie, Dylan, and Springsteen on the one hand and Elliott Smith, The Get Up Kids, and Jason Isbell on the other) beyond borrowing his powerful figure of “Steinbeck’s America,” Levin’s discography represents a promising archive for future work on regional, low-fi, indie rock at the transitional moment between the decline of the modern (recording) culture industry and the emergence of the Soundcloud generation. Cf. Far From Kansas, *Pictures Framed by Their Borders: A Retrospective* (2013).

rumble across worksites in my memories of childhood. These worksites proudly displayed billboards featuring corporate-America's warm artistic vision of what the future would look like in my agricultural community and many communities like mine throughout Steinbeck's America. This future was one of shopping centers, big-box stores, auto-malls, and chain-restaurants mile after mile along California's two major freeways, Highway 101 and Interstate 5. In the mythologies these billboards endorsed, the future was underwritten by this-or-that transnational banking conglomerate, who scrawled their corporate logo across these "Coming Soon" signs not unlike the graffiti that rival gangs still tag on the walls of our barrios.

Year after year, acre after acre of farmland was sold off and paved over in my hometown, so that the sun might never set on Sam Walton's empire. But miraculously, large stretches of agricultural land survived: there's a good chance the strawberries or marigolds you buy today from multi-billionaire Jeff Bezos at your local Whole Foods was grown in my hometown, picked by low-paid Mexican or Mexican-American workers, and carries a label that reads "Grown in Oxnard, CA." These agricultural fields surrounded the neighborhood where I grew up, as well as the neighborhood schools I attended, which were all named in honor of *el rio*, the Santa Clara River, the source of the soil's unusual richness and spectacular productivity. Because these agricultural fields remained, agricultural workers were also an essential part of daily life in the new-millennial version of Steinbeck's America where I was raised.

But while Steinbeck's agrarian California trilogy of the Great Depression (*In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*) was almost entirely peopled by the white working-class, my experience of Steinbeck's America (v. 2.0), some sixty years after Steinbeck's novel, was different.² The laborers who picked crops and lived year-around in Oxnard, El Rio and nearby Santa Paula and Filmore were mostly Mexican and Mexican-American. Yet the presence of these ethno-racial (American) laborers in Steinbeck's America v. 2.0 in my childhood was not a revision of history or a return of the repressed. As public intellectual Carey McWilliams shows in *Factories in the Field* (1939), the historical saga of agricultural production in California was in fact "a story of nearly seventy years' exploitation of minority racial and other [ethnic] groups [...]."³ We have inscribed the names of Camarillo, Gonzalez, and Oxnard, representatives of McWilliams' "powerful clique of landowners," upon the maps and city limit signs of the

² I am self-consciously evoking the contemporary language of one of California's most well-known "valleys" here by using the phrase "Steinbeck's America v. 2.0" in relation to what I call elsewhere our own "millennialist time of the now." This "versioning" of Steinbeck's America is of course highly figurative. After the Great Depression (and in part because of the dizzying success of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939), Steinbeck largely stopped writing about the place he was from and eventually left California to take up permanent residence in New York until his death in 1968. I am fully conscious of the historical trajectory of agricultural labor in California in the decades after "Steinbeck's America" became a "place" in the nation's cultural imagination after the 1930s. For example, a less figurative, more historically grounded notion of "Steinbeck's America v. 2.0" might label the Bracero period of agricultural production in California as v. 2.0, while the unionizing efforts of civil rights leader Caesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers might appropriately be evoked as v. 3.0 of Steinbeck's America.

³ McWilliams 7.

Santa Clara River Valley.⁴ But it was the mostly anonymous agricultural workers of color who produced the state's fantastic wealth through their labor, picking crops in places like El Rio long before my own Arkie grandparents (or Steinbeck's fictional Joads) joined these workers of color at the level of economic base in California's pastures of plenty during the Depression and displaced them at the level of cultural superstructure in 1939 with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The workers (of color) who populated Steinbeck's America in all but fictional terms since the state's inception must also be reinscribed at the historical base of an even more fantastical monument to the Golden State: the global myth of California as "a Garden of Eden" (to echo America's Shakespeare in Overalls, Woody Guthrie).⁵ This Garden of the West mythology has been inscribed in the popular imagination since the birth of agribusiness via bucolic (and almost completely fictional) images that the industry plastered across millions of crates of produce that it shipped around the nation, then the world. These labels, resplendent with clear blue skies, gentle green hillsides, small orchards, and perhaps even a little farm house with a white picket fence in the background did much more than promote a product, individual growers, or even the industry at large (which brought in \$383 million the year Steinbeck's novel was published).⁶ Long before other now-iconic California industries found success exporting their own mythologies to the world (made of celluloid and "Apples" of the technological variety), these box-crate labels contributed to the mythic inscription of California as the Salad Bowl of the nation (if not outright Shangri-La of the West) in the American cultural imagination.

If and when laborers were represented in the industry's advertising images, they were always well-fed and well-clothed adults who looked serene, even happy, as they picked fruit under the never-too-hot California sun. In light of the pervasive mythic power of this image, consumers of California's (agri)cultural products from around the world might be excused for misinterpreting these piece-workers and corporate-owned factory farms as farmer-owners and small family farms of Jefferson's classic agrarian model (the Bank of America was in fact one of the largest "farmers" during the Great

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "California is a Garden of Eden, a paradise to live in or see," Guthrie sings on the major label release *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Victor Records, 1940). The popular imagination (in perpetuity) would prove to have a much more difficult time accepting Guthrie's next line: "But believe it or not, you won't find it so hot, if you ain't got the do-re-mi." Guthrie's distinctive Dust Bowl delivery places conspicuous emphasis on the "do" of "do-re-mi." Guthrie plays with this homophone (do/dough) to produce a materialist critique of California's Garden of the West mythology at the same exact time that he produces and disseminates it (Guthrie, "Do-Re-Mi").

⁶ Historian Douglass C. Sackman helps us account in specific terms for the fantastic wealth of California's Depression-era growers. According to Sackman, California agribusiness "brought in 383 million dollars in return [in 1939], making it the richest agricultural state in the nation" (ix). Adjusted for inflation, agribusiness' 1939 income translates to \$7.12 billion, an obscene figure especially in light of the Okies' disturbing underclass American experience that the novel introduced to the popular cultural imagination the same year. The human cost of maintaining this profound level of economic inequality is figured most explicitly in Steinbeck's novel through scenes of child malnutrition, infant death, and the murder of labor leaders. For this calculation from 1939 to 2020 dollars, I used the US Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation calculator at https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

Depression). But if you lived in Steinbeck's America, then or now, you knew better. And after 1939, everyone else knew better as well. In that year, the veracity of the "Sunkist" mythology produced by the agricultural industry's capitalist iconography was challenged not just by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* but by McWilliams. In his famous revision of one agricultural brand name, McWilliams suggested that a more appropriate name for the Sunkist corporation and the commodities it sold was "Gunkist," because of the explicit connection between agribusiness and rightwing "farmer fascism" in California.⁷

Upon first reading *The Grapes of Wrath*, I also recognized many of primary characters who populate the fictional world of Steinbeck's America from my own daily life. These characters reminded me of folks I grew up with. I know quiet, figuring men, like Steinbeck's Pa Joad, who are silenced and stripped of all but titular familial authority by the logic of late capital. I know haunted, hollowed-out men, like Steinbeck's Uncle John, who struggle with too-often unnamed traumas of the past and surrender to substance abuse, who only ever seem to find relief once they have reached the bottom of an orange tube of Vicodin or after a bump of crystal meth. In many ways, I myself became something like young Connie Rivers, Rose of Sharon's shotgun husband in *The Grapes of Wrath*: a father but still a child, on the road with a family I didn't know at all, with only the vaguest idea that studying at night might amount to a better life for me and my new family.

In stark contrast, were the women in my family. They were strong, larger than life, even visionary. These women, like Ma Joad, tried desperately to hold the family together. And like Ma Joad, they were more than able to wield a crowbar if necessary to protect that family. I knew women like Rose of Sharon, who embraced the human family with powerful conviction. I saw them offer hungry, neglected children a place at our already too-small table time and again. I saw these women work alongside men in hard labor, yet still get the spareribs in the oven at night or wake up early in the morning to make *huevos con chorizo*. These women code-switched freely between the glory-shouting and holy-rolling of our Southern Baptist church, where like Steinbeck's Granma Joad, they praised God for victory on Sunday morning, and the dying dialect of the Popular Front on Monday at work: of union activism, civil disobedience, and hand-painted picket signs in solidarity with social justice movements.

Like Casy, our preacher might have been the only formally educated, vaguely intellectual person, approaching middle class means, who ever set foot in our government subsidized Section-8 apartments. This preacher's homespun homilies and plebian philosophy baffled and amazed, comforted and entertained us all. But unlike Steinbeck's Jim Casy, the backsliding preacher who lost the call, our preacher's doctrine was not dedicated to the human family or inspired by the Emersonian over-soul. His sermons amounted to little more than rightwing neoliberal ideology shrouded in evangelical slogans: pie in the sky, mansions of glory, and the meek shall inherit the Earth. Not many members of our impoverished bilingual congregation in El Rio in the '90s had yet realized that after late capital was finished, there might not be much of an Earth left for

⁷ In addition to "agribusiness," "factories in the field," and "Gunkist," "farmer fascism" is another of McWilliams' inspired turns of phrase.

the poor like us to inherit. In spite of the preacher's Christian conservatism, the characters who populated the story-world of my life prepared me to recognize one of the lessons that I would eventually read in Steinbeck's fiction. *Lesson #1: Poor people are the best people.*

Other lessons from my lived experience also resonated with my reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*. *Lesson #2: Don't ever trust the boss.* The boss will accuse you of stealing from the cash register, fire you at-will, and then refuse to pay you for your last day of work, telling you to be thankful that he didn't get the police involved. This accusation, of course, only materialized after you finally got tough in declining his most recent sexual advances, and this after enduring months of grab-ass and his objectifying gaze in the workplace. Another boss will fire you ("an outside agitator") when he learns you've been bringing homemade cookies to undecided nurses in the midst of the early, hard days of an SEIU organizing campaign at the for-profit hospital where you answered telephones. But the bosses at the big interstate trucking company are perhaps the most cruel: They will turn a blind eye as long-haul runs crisscrossing Eisenhower's highways slowly break you down. First, your family, because of the distance. Then your mind, from gazing too long into the ever-receding horizon and keeping track of time in terms of cents per mile. Then, inevitably, after a slip and fall on black ice while putting chains on "your" rig, the bosses will finally be as through with you as your stranger children are back home. And you will suddenly find yourself unemployed, and permanently disabled, left to spend the rest of your life sitting in front of the television, depressed, strung out on pain pills, and waiting for the next MediCal surgery, a safe arm's distance between you and everyone you used to love.

Lesson #3: ACAB. And the state was indeed a repressive apparatus. Its agents should always be viewed with suspicion, regardless of which party was in power. I vividly remember the terrifying sight of the SWAT team jogging down the dirt road outside my family's house in El Rio, in full body armor, machine-guns drawn, before my mother tackled me to the ground and covered me up with her trembling body. They weren't coming to our house. Not that day. I remember they took away our neighbor, who was growing marijuana in his bedroom down the street. And when the LAPD kept pulling my father over, he told me it was because he drove around in an old, beat-up jalopy, and in the United States being poor is treated as a crime. True. But my father didn't want to tell his biracial son, the other, all too obvious reason why the LAPD viewed Chicanos, Mexicans, and other people of color in Los Angeles in the 1990s with such suspicion...

I left my corner of Steinbeck's America two years after 9/11 to earn a bachelor's degree in English at UC Berkeley, where I also completed a master's degree and a doctorate of philosophy. While it didn't take long to discover that nothing written by John Steinbeck would ever be assigned reading in my American literature courses at this

elite university (at least until I was the one writing the syllabus),⁸ I was nevertheless caught off guard when I learned that virtually all respected literary scholars, especially those at Ivy and Ivy adjacent institutions, read *The Grapes of Wrath* as a sentimental, second-rate novel, whose people, places, and problems lack any semblance of verisimilitude and whose total lack of aesthetic value is only matched by its lack of real political significance. My realization of this dominant critical narrative in my chosen field of American literature was baffling in light of all the evidence I had gathered through my own lived experience up to that point. My experience certainly suggested that the places, people, and problems that I had encountered in Steinbeck's fiction were in fact very real—and perhaps more significant than some of the more fashionable arguments and texts that I was told any serious young scholar should care about at UC Berkeley. For these literary scholars, the novel's cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies were not only out of sync with our contemporary moment at the beginning of the twenty-first century. *The Grapes of Wrath* was inarticulate and insufficient even to its own historical moment of crisis.

But because I continued to live with those people, places, and problems that Bruce Springsteen evoked when he conjured “the ghost of Tom Joad” in 1995, this obviously elitist and deeply *uncritical* attitude failed to move me much.⁹ From my own newly discovered critical subject position within elite academia, in the unhomey twilight of the American Century, on the rapidly unravelling edge of the Last Frontier, I was thankful that elite academia and its “custodians of discourse” (to quote Terry Eagleton) hadn't yet swept my memories of Steinbeck's America under the rug—that I hadn't yet become another working class kid who goes off to the big school and falls victim to “the politics of amnesia” (also Eagleton).¹⁰ Mostly, when I observed the elitist and uncritical prejudices of people in my department towards John Steinbeck's work and philosophy (and my own), I was thankful that I still remembered what the heartbreaking politics of poverty and the dialectical aesthetics of hope and hopelessness looked like, in spite of the misguided misreading of critics like Harold Bloom (whose critical gaze appeared to me like the burning Eye of Sauron, peering out across Steinbeck's America and piercing my critical imagination from atop his Ivory Tower at Harvard or Yale or wherever he was back then). The politics of poverty and the aesthetics of hope and hopelessness, at least as they were experienced and expressed in my lived experience, still looked a lot like Steinbeck's America: a lot like darkness on the edge of town.¹¹ Almost all of my family and most of my friends were still stumbling through that darkness, doing their best to “live it every day.”¹²

But at the same time, the larger stakes of the critical dismissal of Steinbeck's work made perfect sense to me, in spite academia's half-hearted attempts to hide their

⁸ In 2015, I designed and taught my first solo course as a graduate student instructor at UC Berkeley. This course was titled “Waking the Ghosts of Tom/ás Joad: The Great Depression, the Great Recession, and the US Cultural Imagination.”

⁹ Springsteen, “Ghost.”

¹⁰ Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 174, 175; Eagleton, *After Theory* 1-22.

¹¹ Springsteen, *Darkness*.

¹² Springsteen, “Badlands.”

motivating logic in the discourse of aesthetics *qua* aesthetics and the sort of Ivory Tower doublespeak that I was beginning to be interpellated into after sneaking across the border-patrolled *frontera* of elite academia and into graduate school at Berkeley. These stakes are easy enough for those who recognize themselves in the people, places, and problems of Steinbeck's America to deconstruct, inasmuch as these stakes are also constantly reinforced from almost every corner of hegemonic discourse in our own millennialist time of the now. The institutional rejection of Steinbeck's fiction, journalism, narrative nonfiction, eco-criticism, travel writing, Tony-award winning Broadway play (*Of Mice and Men*), and film plays for Herbert Kline (*The Forgotten Village*), Elia Kazan (*Viva Zapata!*), and Alfred Hitchcock (*Lifeboat*) is nothing less than a rejection of Steinbeck's America itself. While elite academia's wholesale critical dismissal of Steinbeck's America is shocking, the deeper significance of this dismissal is unambiguous. *This story doesn't count*. Which of course sounds a lot like *your* story doesn't count to anyone from a community that has been historically marginalized (economically, ethno-racially, culturally, or regionally).

As one prominent scholar argues in not one, but two books, *The Grapes of Wrath* is hardly worthy of the honorific of "literature" let alone the title of great American literature (in spite of what the Nobel Prize committee believed in 1962). For Leslie Fiedler, *The Grapes of Wrath* instead is merely "sentimental social protest" (perhaps the most pejorative three-word phrase some literary critics can think of) which was "marred by social piety and turgid symbolism."¹³ I soon discovered that Fiedler, along with a few other respected literary critics, appear to fall into some sad form of repetition compulsion when confronted by Steinbeck's work and continued popularity among "regular people." These critics then regurgitate (write, publish, and let us never forget, *sell*) the same exact arguments about Steinbeck's most famous novel every ten years or so.¹⁴ Why, I wondered, did elite scholars need to repeat themselves every decade if their earlier conclusions about just how insignificant Steinbeck's America always was and always would be were so sound?

¹³ Fiedler, *End to Innocence* 192. Apparently unsatisfied with this send-off, Fiedler returned to Steinbeck's novel in 1964's *Waiting for an End: The Crisis in American Culture and a Portrait of Twentieth Century American Literature*, with a slight addendum. "Turgid" was not quite right, Fiedler had discovered nine years after *End to Innocence*. In his revised assessment, *The Grapes of Wrath* was less marred by "turgid symbolism," than "hoked up with heavy-handed symbolism" (61)! More significant, perhaps is Fiedler's repetitive dismissal of the novel in somewhat contradictory terms, as both "sentimental" and "sociological" first in *Innocence* and again in *Waiting*. This is partly explained by Fiedler's own Cold War time of the now. According to Fiedler, as legible in his piece on the Rosenbergs, one of the worst sins of committed Communists is their drab lives and sentimental, middlebrow tastes. According to Fiedler, their bad taste was clear from the "Stalinized" apartment buildings where they lived. But it is also important that we consider what Fiedler's may mean by the word "crisis" in his study's subtitle. These repetitions, when connected to Fiedler's generational obsession with the straw-man of "the crisis in American culture" begins to suggest the implicit logic of Fiedler's dismissal of *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this light, it seems likely that his generation's rejection of Steinbeck's work likely has much to do with their frequent critical hand-wringing over what today is generally seen as a trite and entirely illusory "conflict of cultures," between high art and debased entertainment, highbrow and lowbrow, Culture with a capital "C" and mass culture and popular forms.

¹⁴ Noble 2.

Perhaps these scholars, famously including Harold Bloom, imagine they're repeating themselves for *our* benefit: for the sake of “millions of ‘regular people’” who obviously haven't gotten the message out here in Steinbeck's America—who have persistently ignored academia's disdain for Steinbeck's work and kept all of the California writer's books in print for the last three-quarters of a century?¹⁵ Or this critical compulsion to repeat may be rooted in anxiety about their own *fundamentally* unsophisticated and *deeply* reactionary critical posture in relation to Steinbeck's America? Especially because as the twentieth century barreled recklessly towards the finish line, it became increasingly clear that the people, places, and problems that are legible through careful consideration of Steinbeck's America were refusing to lay quietly in the grave that elite literary theorists had dug for them.

But something else also continues to stir in the unhomey popular cultural imaginary of crisis, here at the so-called end of history. As I hope to demonstrate in this dissertation, those unhomey reverberations are the ghost of Tom Joad, who continues to rise up from the shallow grave that elite literary studies prematurely dug for him. This specter has persistently arose to haunt the US popular cultural imagination for nearly one hundred years.¹⁶ In light of this fact, the old debates about “culture and anarchy,” “the anxiety of influence,” and even newer debates about deconstruction and poststructuralism, appear not only academic and exhausted, but perhaps even a little cowardly in the face of mounting evidence from the US-American popular imagination that not only did Steinbeck's America survive the Great Depression, high modernism, postmodernity, the neoliberal turn, and the advent of social media, but the ghost of Tom Joad is still wandering around the US cultural imagination, like the speaker of Woody Guthrie's Dust Bowl ballad, “I Ain't Got No Home.”

I ain't got no home, I'm just a-roamin' round
 Just a wandering worker, I go from town to town
 And the police make it hard wherever I may go
 'Cause I ain't got no home in this world anymore¹⁷

No one knows for sure how long the ghost of Tom Joad will continue to haunt Steinbeck's America or the twenty-first century popular cultural imagination. But it's clear he continues to move from “town to town,” from one social location of crisis to another, hopping aesthetic forms the way he used to hop boxcars during the Depression.¹⁸

¹⁵ Benson 10.

¹⁶ I prefer “arose” to “arisen” here because it calls to mind a Baptist hymn we used to sing on Sunday mornings in El Rio: “Up from the grave He arose / With a mighty triumph o'er His foes / He arose a victor from the dark domain / And He lives forever with the saints to rain / He arose! He arose! / Hallelujah, Christ arose” (quoted from memory).

¹⁷ Guthrie, “I Ain't Got No Home.”

¹⁸ I'll define Raymond Williams' concepts of the dialectic of aesthetic form and social location in some depth in the Introduction. Williams' foundational concepts are deployed throughout the remainder of *Culture in Crisis*.

But unlike Guthrie's wandering worker, it's not the cops, "fat-ass deputies" who "flop their gun aroun'," "tryin' to break us," "a-tryin' to make us cringe an' crawl" the way they did Floyd before "they killed him" that Tom Joad has to worry about these days.¹⁹ He's a ghost after all. Ironically, the ghost of Tom Joad, just a-roamin' round the cultural imagination, looking for a home, must be on high alert for those who enforce, discipline, and punish ("[work] away at our spirits") from the other side of Althusser's theory of the state apparatus.²⁰ The cops can't hurt Tom anymore. But "literary theorists, critics and teachers" certainly can: those who Steinbeck dismissed in his Nobel acceptance speech as "the cloistered elect," and who Eagleton reminds us are "not so much purveyors of doctrine as custodians of a discourse" "as part of the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist state."²¹

In another irony, the ghost of Tom Joad is also locked into a form of repetition compulsion, not unlike Bloom, Fiedler, and other custodians of discourse. But Joad's mantra is much different. He can't stop repeating an almost 90-year-old conversation that he once had with his Ma outside a homeless encampment in California's San Joaquin Valley, almost halfway between El Rio and Berkeley. The ghost of Tom Joad is repeating this conversation so that all those who aren't too afraid to venture out into the darkness on the edge of town might hear:

"I been thinkin' a hell of a lot, thinkin' about our people livin' like pigs, an' the good rich lan' layin' fallow, or maybe one fella with a million acres, while a hundred thousan' good farmers is starvin'. An' I been wonderin' if all our folks got together an' yelled [...]."

Ma said, "Tom, they'll drive you, an' cut you down like they done to young [Pretty Boy] Floyd."

¹⁹ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 280; 279; 419.

²⁰ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation." According to Althusser, "the State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus" (137). The various functionaries of the state "enables the ruling classes [...] to ensure their domination over the working class" through a combination of both repressive and ideological controls (137). The agents of the "Repressive State Apparatus" include "the Government, the Administration, the Army, the Police, the Courts, the Prisons, etc." (142-43). The institutions of the "Ideological State Apparatus" include religious systems, educational systems, the family, legal discourse, political parties, trade-unions, mass communication systems, and culture ("Literature, the Arts, sports, etc.") (142-43).

²¹ Steinbeck, "Acceptance Speech" 293. Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 174, 175. It is important to recall that Eagleton's explicit project in *Literary Theory* is to make literary discourse legible to those outside of the friendly confines of the formal academy. In the introduction to his now canonical primer on the history of literary criticism, he suggests that his imagined audience is as much those who study and teach in places like Berkeley's Wheeler Hall, as those who share space in the same building and work to keep it clean every night after the professors and grad students go home.

“They gonna drive me anyways. They drivin’ all our people. [...] I been thinkin’, as long as I’m a outlaw anyways, maybe I could—”

They sat silent in the coal-black cave of vines. Ma said, “How’m I gonna know ‘bout you? They might kill ya an I wouldn’ know. [...]”

Tom laughed uneasily, “Well, maybe like Casy says, a fella ain’t got a soul of his own, but on’y a piece of a big one—an’ then— [...]”

“Then it don’ matter. Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look. 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 an’ 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. See? [...]”

“I don’ un’erstan’,” Ma said. [...]

“Me neither,” said Tom. “It’s jus’ stuff I been thinkin’ about. Get thinkin’ a lot when you ain’t movin’ aroun’.”²²

This project, *Culture in Crisis: The Grapes of Wrath Cultural Formation from the Great Depression to the Green New Deal* is the result of “thinking a lot” when I was finally able to stop moving around myself. It is rooted diachronically in the material, ecological, and racialized problems of people I know, who live in a place I call, following singer-songwriter JD Levin, Steinbeck’s America.²³ It is also rooted in the aesthetic forms that many of these people actually enjoy and, with what amounts to courage on this side of the millennial divide, continue to spend their ever-more limited time and hard-earned dollars on, not just to be entertained (although there’s certainly nothing wrong with that), but also to be educated, to engage, and be engaged: bestselling novels, blockbuster movies, stories in magazines, and photographs in newspapers to name a few. In *Culture in Crisis*, I route these people, their problems, and what Steinbeck called their “humble pleasures” through social locations that have dominated and indeed overdetermined life across Steinbeck’s America since at least the Great Depression.²⁴

²² Steinbeck, *Grapes* 419.

²³ Levin “Steinbeck’s.”

²⁴ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 330. For more of Steinbeck’s thinking on popular culture, see chapter twenty-three of *The Grapes of Wrath*: “The migrant people, scuttling for work, dug for pleasure, manufactured pleasure, and they were hungry for amusement” (325).

These social locations in chapter one, “We Ain’t Foreign: Race, Representation, and Political Inclusion in the Grapes of Wrath Cultural Formation,” include those places where agents of the state apparatus hail and interpellate us as racialized subjects throughout the US-Mexico Borderlands, whether that interpellation is repressive or ideological. As I show, that interpellation happens on the side of the highway, where cops pull us over to harass us, or in a homeless camp where a government photographer takes a photograph as we see in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” (1936). Or racialized interpellation can occur walking to work, when you are confronted by a “sweaty man with a pistol belt around his middle”²⁵ asking papers, please, or at the government owned housing project where you live as it does in Américo Paredes’ *George Washington Gomez: A Mexicotexan Novel* (1990) and Robert Hemmig’s archive from a Mexican migrant labor housing camp in southern California (1940-41). Through these racialized social locations, I consider questions of racial formation, cultural representation, and political inclusion in the hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation. I argue that the representational silences of these texts were in fact elisions and these silences and elisions were deeply racialized in the Depression-era and that while “Migrant Mother” and *The Grapes of Wrath* certainly contributed to the whitewashing of Depression-era migratory labor from popular culture narratives of the 1930s, which in turn reinforced the racialized limits of political inclusion during the period and the racialized limits of the popular imagination thereafter, Steinbeck’s novel and Lange’s photography also unsettled and redefined those very same limits through the racialization of whiteness in their texts. I then recover and listen to the crystal-clear, counterhegemonic voices of novelist Américo Paredes and photographer Robert Hemmig. These artists speak resoundingly to the era’s twinned racialized crises of representation and political inclusion and to Steinbeck and Lange, but have been largely overlooked in relation to the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

Chapter two, “Apocalypse, Always: The Cultural Politics and Aesthetic Ideologies of Eco-Crisis from the Okie Exodus to #OccupyMars,” explores those social locations where people come together across Steinbeck’s America to imagine and ignore, debate and define the most important dialectic in the history of our species: the dialectic of humanity and the environment under late capitalism. From the Great Depression to the Green New Deal, these imagined communities include real-world flashpoints of ecological catastrophe that intersect in geography, ideology, and culture via mass market magazines and mainstream journalism, such as the “dust bowl of the continent” in Avis Carlson’s “Dust” (1935) and media reports of a small town called Paradise that was erased from the face of the earth in twenty-four hours in 2018.²⁶ These social locations on the map of Steinbeck’s America are explicitly political (and performative), like the United States Congress as setting for the proto eco-political theatrics of soil scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett (1935). And they are also places where the political always was, but is now becoming more powerfully legible, such as the space between the front seat and the back seat of an Uber car. In this social location, the political is made

²⁵ Paredes 197-98.

²⁶ Geiger A2.

powerfully legible through the red-gray haze of apocalypse always that came to the San Francisco Bay Area in the aftermath of the fire in Paradise as “gigging” Uber drivers hustled “dust bowl masks” to their bosses in tech and finance. These social locations include the biggest screens and the smallest ones, too: your local IMAX theater, where Christopher Nolan’s neo-Okie characters in *Interstellar* (2014) grapple with the politics and poetics of our present and coming age of permanent eco-crisis via the grapes of wrath cultural formation. And also the smaller screen on your smart phone, where a billionaire “futurist” hawks his luxury automobile line to eco-refugees and sells his for-profit vision of our Martian future and his plan to Make Humanity Great Again to our emergent “interstellar colonial imaginary” on Twitter.com. I show the powerful connections between these diachronic social locations of ecological crisis and argue that like our counterparts from the 1930s, we too are grappling with an ideological crisis of eco-narrative in our own millennialist time of the now. I argue that this tension in the popular cultural imagination, a result of our present ecological moment of no longer *impending*, but *actually occurring* ecological apocalypse, is figured in terms of the equal and opposite, deeply embedded human evolutionary impulses of “fight or flight.”

Next, I acknowledge with Craig Finn, that while “the stars are in the sky [...] the money’s still down on the ground.”²⁷ Chapter three shifts from thinking about forms of crisis that threaten our planetary home to forms of crisis that have threatened our neighborhood homes since the time of the Joad’s famous foreclosure and eviction in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Chapter three, “Sign Your Name Right Here; We’ll Take Care of Everything: Capitalism Comes Home in Hollywood Films of ‘Great’ Economic Crisis,” explores the dramatic collision of two social locations: the American home and capitalism in crisis. These social locations connect the tenant farms in Oklahoma during the Great Depression to the middle-class track houses in south Florida during the Great Recession via the abstraction of these homes into tiny pieces of paper: stacks of unopened bills, eviction and foreclosure notices, and finally the “mortgage paper” that is bought and sold, bet for and bet against on Wall Street; so that the hedge fund, the finance company, “The bank—the monster [can] have profits all the time.”²⁸ Because, you see, “a bank or a company [...] don’t breathe air, don’t eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don’t get it, they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It’s a sad thing but it is so. It is just so.”²⁹ I read the logic of these social locations via Hollywood films that represent the invasions of capitalism in crisis into the intimate space of the home the Great Depression and the Great Recession. I consider the violent encounter between the logic of financialization and the preeminent symbol of the American Dream through two Academy Award winning films: John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940) and Adam McKay’s *The Big Short* (2015). While these two culture industry responses to historic moments “great” economic crisis seem to have little in common in terms of cinematic form or narrative content, I argue that *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Big Short* stand together as powerful examples of the cinematic

²⁷ Finn “Soft in the Center.”

²⁸ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 35.

²⁹ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 35.

imagination's effort to make narrative meaning to mass audiences out of social encounters with economic trauma.

In *Culture in Crisis*, my thinking begins with a few simple questions about the relationship between the political and cultural present and past, between popular culture and contemporary crisis, and about the potential of each of these terms to speak to each other through “the darkness and the great cold” of the twentieth and early-twenty first centuries, from within “this vale which resounds with misery,”³⁰ through the figure of what I call the grapes of wrath cultural formation.³¹ By connecting the Great Depression, the Great Recession, contemporary migrant struggles in the US-Mexico Borderlands, and the Green New Deal through this cultural formation, *Culture in Crisis* reads US-American popular culture symptomatically and diachronically, from Steinbeck's age to our own, as evidence of unhealed wounds on the body-politic of the nation.

I hope that through this reading of Steinbeck's America we might begin to reclaim popular culture as a powerful aesthetic form *and* social location, as both site *and* constituent of resistance against our present “time of the now”: a late capitalist event horizon of seemingly permanent economic, environmental, and racialized crisis.³² I hope

³⁰ Brecht qtd. in Benjamin, “Theses” 256 (this is Benjamin's spelling). In this “Thesis,” Benjamin breaks with nineteenth century French historian Fustel de Coulanges in Benjamin's seventh thesis on the philosophy of history. Whereas De Coulanges counseled historians who “wish to relive an era” to “blot out everything they know about the later course of history,” Benjamin argues that “There is no better way of characterizing the method with which historical materialism has broken” (256). Instead, according to Benjamin, the historical materialist critic must follow Bertolt Brecht and “Consider the darkness and the great cold / In this vale which resounds with misery.”

³¹ In “The Uses of Cultural Theory” (1986), Raymond Williams argues for cultural theory in practice. According to Williams, the “discovery of genuine formations which are simultaneously *artistic forms* and *social locations*” is “the most central and practical element in cultural analysis” (my emphasis). My project in *Culture in Crisis* responds to Williams' call for the “discovery” of new cultural formations and deploys his notion that “aesthetic forms” and “social locations” are the dialectical terms of any historical materialist praxis of cultural-intellectual labor. This concept of “cultural formation” is essential to my project of mapping the constellation of texts that emerged in response to the American Dust Bowl of the 1930s. I have named the diachronic formation I discovered “the grapes of wrath cultural formation.”

³² I deploy Benjamin's notion of the “time of the now” throughout *Culture in Crisis* (“Theses” 261; 263). Benjamin writes, “Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the “time of the now” [...]” (“Theses” 263). I return to Benjamin's thinking (along with the insights of related anti-fascist and anti-totalitarian thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Zygmunt Bauman, Luis Althusser, Antonio Gramsci, and Horkheimer and Adorno) throughout the dissertation. These thinkers have already begun to return to currency among the current generation of scholars and students who are forced to not only think, but act and certainly labor, well beyond previous generations of scholars and critics due to the impact of permanent crisis on our time of the now. I would argue that the rapid canonization of the Frankfurt thinkers and associated schools by the last few generations of cultural critics, followed by the subsequent neglect of the urgent, real-world political pleas and warnings that these thinkers issued in light of their struggles against the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century was premature, if not cynical. That just one or two generations ago, scholars in the

that by returning to the foundational texts of Steinbeck's America and discovering other texts that continue to press forward across and into the new millennium, to engage economic, environmental, and racialized crisis, in solidarity with the politics and poetics of grapes of wrath cultural formation (even eighty-five years later), might help us imagine what steps we might take going forward heal those wounds, and then begin to take them.

As JD Levin sings in "Steinbeck's America": "It's a heartbreaking world. But we've got a duty to tell."

humanities somehow assumed their own turn inward to self-isolating and almost totally irrelevant paradigms of deconstruction and postmodern theory would have no real-world consequences for the broader culture appears shocking and indulgent today. Recall, of course, that "post-truth" originated not with the Trump administration's merry-go-round of press secretaries after the 2016 election, but in the Ivory Towers of the 1980s, with a generation of intellectuals who obsessively "played" with ideas like deconstruction, postmodernity, and the end of history. What that generation of intellectuals apparently failed to consider is what it might look like to actually have to live in the world they theorized. Inasmuch as the generation of intellectual workers to which I belong have been formed by the institutionalization of the logics of permanent crisis (9/11 was the primal scene for many in my generation), soul-crushing austerity (for others it was the Great Recession and Occupy Wall Street), never-ending precarity (the privatization of the university began while I was still in Head Start—"Head Start" was a preschool program for the poor in the United States), and most recently explicit state-sponsored neo-fascism, I believe that the field-imaginary of literary theory, cultural studies, and the humanities in general are at a true inflection point, not unlike the one that produced the theorists of the Frankfurt school. I, for one, am no longer content to simply produce "academic" intellectual intervention, reproduce the hegemony of either the neoliberal or the elitist university, and take my place within a state and economic apparatus that in fact has *never* been willing to support me or most of my colleagues, let alone my community or culture.

Acknowledgments

A Chicano-Okie does not simply write a PhD dissertation at Berkeley. From the Ohio-Kentucky borderlands and the mountains of Zacatecas, to the archipelago towns of the San Gabriel Valley (West Covina, Azusa, Monrovia, and Duarte) at the end of John Steinbeck's mythic Mother Road, generations of faith, hope, and charity have always-already been inscribed in any Chicano-Okie who might dream to one day call himself Dr. Zoot Suit Yokum. And so I appreciate all those *Californios* and Arkies (a machinist and a janitor), those *pochas* and hillbillies (a homemaker and a waitresses), those Brown Buffalos and Raoul Dukes (a truck driver and a carpenter), those Dolores Huertas and Norma Raes (a lemon picker and a telephone operator). I acknowledge those who walked the line and crossed the line so that my hands don't have to be as hard as theirs. Thank you Frank Romo Robles and Florence "Vivi" Robles, Eugene Franklin Philhower and Jeanette May Philhower, Raul J. Cruz and Rosemarie "Murmur" Cruz, W.K. Shelton and Nancy Augusta Shelton, Frank David Cruz, Danny Shelton, and my Mom.

I left the PhD program without a degree after a personal tragedy in 2009: the death of my son oldest son and best friend, Zachary Michael Cruz. When I decided to return to finish my degree, I was supported by many wonderful people at Berkeley. I wish to thank Sue Schwiek, Hertha Sweet-Wong, Dorothy Hale, Lee Parsons, Donna Jones, Laura Pérez, Steven Goldsmith, Ken Mahru, Robert and Mary Catherine Birgeneau, Carol Christ. Thank you to my friends at the Transfer, Re-Entry, and Student Parent Center at Cal, who have helped me honor Zachary's memory all these years and will continue to do so long after I am gone through the Zachary Cruz Memorial Scholarship at UC Berkeley: Alice Jordan, Ginelle Perez, Tomie Lenear II, Ron Williams, and Lorena Valdez. Thank you to Martín Perez and my friends at Café Milano. Thank you to all the bartenders who encouraged me and talked to me about teaching, research, and life over the years, especially Kevin and Alex from the Bears Lair. Thank you to my students at Berkeley who collaborated with me in the classroom on the questions of form, content, and context in Steinbeck's America, especially Sonia Hamilton, Brunston Poon, and Anna Bernick. Thank you to the GPC for years of conversations and feedback about this project: Robert L. Reyes III, Carlos Macías Prieto, and Matthew Gonzales. Thank you to my loved ones who have shown enormous patience with me and love over the years: Katieanne Moran, Harold Terezón, Christopher Dixon, Aristides Dimitriou, Kevin McGuigan, Lauren Holland, and Christie Bahna.

I was first taught to embrace the intellectual power of my family's roots and routes as an undergraduate honors student at Berkeley. My first teachers in this, without whom I would never have considered a career in academia, were Faulkner scholar and New Historicist pioneer Carolyn Porter and José David Saldívar, one of the institutional founders of critical Borderlands theory. These two mentors were the first to encourage me to embrace my critical instincts and the first to validate my interest in analyzing Steinbeck's America. Porter introduced me to critical theory, modeled the radical, deconstructive potential of close reading, and made me believe that my scholarly voice was not just valuable, but necessary in the elite academy, despite what some faculty or colleagues might think about my critical investments and objects of analysis. Saldívar,

who also directed my research as a McNair Scholar and is a member of my dissertation committee, first helped me see the discursive shape of my experience in the Borderlands of culture. He first taught me how to use the fantastic counter-hegemonic critical tools developed by postcolonial theory, world systems theory, and the Birmingham school. But most importantly, he had enough confidence in both of us to not only allow, but demand that I use these tools on the aesthetic forms and social locations that mattered most deeply *to me*. When I returned to complete the PhD program, I was welcomed with open arms by Scott Saul, who has also served generously as a member of my dissertation committee. Saul has been my mentor and role model for many years at Berkeley. He not only modeled how to teach with humanity and compassion through crisis (during the 2016 presidential election), but he supported me in profound ways through personal crisis after my son died. Saul has not only modeled how to write about popular culture in his excellent work on jazz and Richard Pryor, but he has also taught me how to persevere and made me and my work stronger in the process.

Finally, I would not have finished the PhD without Genaro Padilla, my dissertation director. He and his wonderful wife Maria have been powerful advocates for not just me, but for generations of Chicana/Latina students at Berkeley in their joint careers at this institution. Padilla brought me back from what felt like death and showed me how to live a life of the mind again. He believed in me and my work in a time when almost no one else inside or outside of the university did, not even me. Padilla introduced me to new texts, new interlocutors, and some of my best friends. He has been there for me consistently in the highs and lows of academia, and my highs and lows have been extreme. He never lost patience, he never lost faith, and for that I am in his debt forever. He has shown me what it truly means to be a public intellectual. And he has made me believe again in the future. While this dissertation is not the project I had in mind, nor does it do all the things I set out to do long ago, I'm confident that Genaro Padilla is right: this is only the beginning.

I intended to include a formal dedication page as part of this dissertation but decided against it. My inscription was for those who willed it and lived it: my children, Zachary, Miles, and Frankie, and my family. The intention remains. But these people deserve nothing less than my best. At least, that's what I have always tried to give them. So I will save the formal inscription for the book manuscript, when the project is what I know it can be. But I do want to close these acknowledgements with special word of love and thanks to my three boys: Zachary Michael Cruz, Miles George Eugene Cruz, and Frank Alexander Cruz. I love you more than life itself and I will always be here for you. Thank you for making my world complete. The most important lesson to draw from these thousands of words, guys, is never give up.

FRANK EUGENE CRUZ

Curriculum Vitae

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PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLES

- 2007 “‘In Between a Past and Future Town’: Home, the Unhomely, and *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *Steinbeck Review*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 53-75.

BOOK CHAPTERS

- 2009 “‘In Between a Past and Future Town’: Home, the Unhomely, and *The Grapes of Wrath*,” *The Grapes of Wrath: A Reconsideration*, edited by Michael J. Meyer, Rodopi, pp. 305-30.

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- 2007 Louis Owens Essay Prize, Martha Heasley Cox Center for Steinbeck Studies, San Jose State University
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2011 – Director of Development and Selection Committee Chair, Zachary Cruz Memorial Scholarship, Student Parent Center & Transfer Student Center, Center for Educational Equity and Excellence, University of California, Berkeley

2010 Departmental Liaison and Community Guide for Terry Eagleton, Forum on the Humanities and the Public World Lecture Series, Townsend Center for the Humanities/Department of English, University of California, Berkeley

2008 Teaching Docent, Enrique Chagoya's *Borderlandia* Exhibit, Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA), University of California, Berkeley

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2014-2016 Head Coach, North Oakland/South Oakland Little League, City of Oakland

- 2013 Tutor, School of Rock After School Program, Oakland Unified School District
- 2010 – Founder and Director, The Zachary Michael Cruz Foundation, a California Non-Profit Public Benefit Corporation
- 2010 – Public Policy Advocate, Zachary Cruz Pedestrian Safety Month, City of Berkeley
- 2010 Director of Development, Le Conte Elementary School (Berkeley) Technology Improvement Grant, Berkeley Unified School District
- 2008 Head Coach, North Oakland/South Oakland Little League, City of Oakland

Chapter One

We Ain't Foreign: Race, Representation, and Political Inclusion in the Grapes of Wrath Cultural Formation

We ain't foreign. Seven generations back Americans, and beyond that Irish, Scotch, English, German. One of our folks in the Revolution, an' they was lots of our folks in the Civil War—both sides. Americans.”

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)¹

Textual Erasure, Critical Elision: Listening to Silence and Locating New Voices

The textual erasure of racial minorities and their labor from popular culture narratives of migrant labor during the Great Depression is one of the most self-evident yet difficult problems to consider in relation to the grapes of wrath cultural formation. This problem, however, is also among the least theorized aspects of two of the most iconic texts of that cultural formation, Dorothea Lange's photograph, "Migrant Mother," (1936) and John Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).² Regarding critical readings of race in *The Grapes of Wrath*, literary critic Sara D. Wald notes that "surprisingly little work has been done to analyze the formation of race" in Steinbeck's novel.³ The same can certainly be said about the critical response to Lange's iconic photo. This critical silence is especially notable, Wald argues, if we consider "the prominence of race in most studies of California's agricultural workforce."⁴

On the other hand, this lack of critical intervention into problems of racial formation in Steinbeck's novel of Depression-era migrant labor becomes easier to understand in light of the "critical presuppositions" that many scholars of American literature bring to their reading of Steinbeck's fiction, to borrow a phrase from Ramón

¹ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 233.

² Sara D. Wald's recent work heralds the arrival of a significant new scholarly voice speaking against this critical silence. Her excellent essay, "'We Ain't Foreign': Constructing the Joads' white Citizenship," argues that "the construction of 'Americanness' and citizenship within *The Grapes of Wrath* depends on the novel's construction of whiteness" (481). See also Wald's most recent book, *The Nature of California: Race, Citizenship, and Farming since the Dust Bowl*, published in 2016, which explores the "paradoxical ways" California "agrarian narratives" have represented farmworkers as both "ideal US citizens" and "abject aliens" along the lines of ethno-race from the Great Depression to the present (5).

³ Wald, "Foreign" 481. The quintessential study of multi-ethnic agricultural labor in California from Steinbeck's period is Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (1939).

⁴ Wald, "Foreign" 481.

Saldívar.⁵ These critical presuppositions pivot on the notion that *The Grapes of Wrath* can be summed up as a sentimental, middlebrow novel by a “canonical” white, male author of the last century, which was as insufficient to the politics and poetics of its own time as it is to our own. These problematic presuppositions seem to define the position many contemporary literary scholars stake-out in relation to Steinbeck’s work, especially among those “cloistered elect” who are ensconced most comfortably within the more elite niches of American academia:⁶ that there is simply nothing to be gained by reading, teaching, or even considering Steinbeck’s cultural productions in the twenty-first century, except perhaps as a part of the public high school curriculum in states like California.⁷ Inasmuch as John Steinbeck’s novel of Depression-era, white migratory labor is rarely taken seriously these days even by scholars of mainline American literature, it is hardly surprising that *The Grapes of Wrath* has yet to be carefully analyzed in relation to problems of US-American racial formation.⁸ Through analysis of the presence and absence, the inscription and elision of race and racial formation in Steinbeck’s and Lange’s hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, I begin to challenge these critical presuppositions and address the silence in scholarship that Sarah Wald’s recent work speaks out against.

Speaking out against these critical silences begins with careful listening, first to the racialized silences, absences, and elisions of the two most hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation: Lange’s “Migrant Mother” and Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Listening to the racialized silences of these texts produces a more sophisticated reading of Dorothea Lange’s and John Steinbeck’s mid-twentieth century racial imaginations. I argue that racial discourse and racial formation are in fact central, though sometimes deeply sublimated, concerns for these two artists and their most important texts. While “Migrant Mother” and *The Grapes of Wrath* certainly contributed to the whitewashing of Depression-era migratory labor from mainline, popular culture narratives of the Great Depression, which in turn reinforced the racialized limits of political inclusion during the period, and the racialized limits of the popular imagination thereafter, Steinbeck’s novel and Lange’s photograph also unsettled and redefined those very same limits through the racialization of whiteness in both texts. While the

⁵ As Ramón Saldívar argues in “Narrative, Ideology, and the Reconstruction of American Literary History,” “we have reached a point in literary studies where it is no longer fruitful, nor even accurate, for us to assume that we can go directly to a text without first considering the critical presuppositions that we bring to our reading of the text. This is as true for noncanonic texts as for those of the established canon” (11).

⁶ Steinbeck, “Acceptance Speech” 293.

⁷ These “critical presuppositions” were remarkably legible among literary critics in the English department at Berkeley where I completed my doctoral degree. While advising me on job market cover letter in my final year of the PhD program at Berkeley, a faculty member in the English department told me, “When I see ‘Steinbeck’ here, I just immediately lose interest. I simply don’t care.”

⁸ I have put “canonical” in scare-quotes here because while Harold Bloom argues that “no canonical standards worthy of human respect [...] could exclude *The Grapes of Wrath* from a serious reader’s esteem,” Steinbeck’s critical reputation, especially among “serious” literary scholars at elitist academic institutions (like Bloom—RIP) is virtually worthless. Bloom’s strange fixation on Steinbeck in his many Steinbeck monographs (called *Bloom’s Guides*) makes his almost sadistic fascination with the California novelist shockingly legible (5).

implications of this early interventionist deconstruction of the ideology of whiteness—their project of making whiteness legible as a category of US-American racial formation in Lange’s and Steinbeck’s texts of the 1930s—is laudable, perhaps even radical in its own historical moment, it is clearly no substitute for *direct* cultural representation and *actual* political inclusion of US-American ethno-racial subjects within the aesthetic forms and social locations of the grapes of wrath cultural formation.⁹ Therefore, I go beyond the first step of listening to static Lange’s and Steinbeck’s racialized silences. Next, I recover the crystal-clear voices of two Depression-era artists who spoke resoundingly to the twinned racialized crises of representation and political inclusion, and the deep-seeded racism of their own historical moment. I reconsider Américo Paredes’ recovered *bildungsroman*, *George Washington Gómez* (1990), and excavate a previously unexplored archive of documentary photographs of a New Deal Mexican migrant worker camp in southern California by unknown photographer Robert Hemmig (1940-41) in order to inscribe these voices into the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

Earlier cultural historians of the Great Depression have either overlooked Paredes’ and Hemmig’s literary and visual texts entirely, or failed to consider them in relation to the grapes of wrath cultural formation. Taken together, Hemmig’s photographs of Mexican/American agricultural workers living in a New Deal housing camp in southern California in 1940-41 and Paredes’ transcultural re-inscription of the Great Depression as *la chilla* and Steinbeck’s Okies as “Mexicotexan laborers” in *George Washington Gómez* begins to give voice to the minoritized experiences of Mexican and Mexican-American agricultural workers during the 1930s. The cultural productions of Paredes and Hemmig thereby help us break the racialized silences of Steinbeck’s and Lange’s hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation. I argue that Paredes’ and Hemmig’s counterhegemonic texts from the Depression-era must be included in our contemporary critical understanding of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, for these counterhegemonic texts explicitly revise and vigorously respond to the presumed textual erasure of racial minorities and laboring ethno-racial bodies in Steinbeck’s America.¹⁰

The US-Mexico Borderlands as Social Location in Steinbeck’s America

⁹ Following cultural critic José David Saldívar’s *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, which draws on historian David Hollinger’s formulation of “ethno-race,” I will use the term to signify the complex political, historical, social, and linguistic tensions produced by the interaction of race, ethnicity, and power in a heterogenous nation like the United States. Hollinger has pointed out that while race is a useful concept in reference to “the lines along which people have been systematically mistreated on the basis of certain physical characteristics” it begins to break down “[f]rom a postethnic perspective” (35, 34). In the context of my work, the critical construction of “ethno-race” allows for a more nuanced conception of race and ethnicity, dominant and subaltern, and majority and minority than either ethnicity, race, or national origin alone can accommodate.

¹⁰ See also Wald’s *The Nature of California: Race, Citizenship, and Farming since the Dust Bowl* in addition to her essay, “We Ain’t Foreign.”

Because they focus so myopically on the “Protestant, white, ‘plain folk’”¹¹ of the Dust Bowl migration in their hegemonic texts, Steinbeck’s and Lange’s narratives instantiate the “function and necessity” of Frederick Jameson’s “doctrine of [the] political unconscious.”¹² As Jameson writes, “It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative [of oppressor and oppressed], in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and necessity.”¹³ The hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation have indeed “repressed and buried reality” of a number of histories and tensions that are fundamental to understanding not only this cultural formation, but indeed to Steinbeck’s America itself. This understanding is significant not just for reconsidering the nation’s crisis of racial formation in the aesthetic forms of the Great Depression, but also diachronically, into the violently racialized social locations of the new millennium in Steinbeck’s America: of racial whiteness and racial others in the American cultural imagination, of oppressor and oppressed in the US-Mexico Borderlands, and the racial oppression and class struggle that has defined the experience of Mexican people in the United States, uninterrupted since the expansion of American empire into the frontiers of the Mexican nation beginning in the nineteenth century.¹⁴ By conceptualizing the grapes of wrath cultural formation to include the counterhegemonic texts of Américo Paredes and Robert Hemmig, we might begin to restore the repressed and buried reality of racialized crisis to the surface of the popular-cultural imagination of the Great Depression and perhaps also train our ear to listen in a different way to the racialized crises of our time of the now based on the sound of dissensus produced by putting Lange, Steinbeck, Paredes, and Hemmig in dialogue with each other.

My reconsideration and recovery of these texts from the Great Depression simply amplifies what has never really been in doubt: that problems of representation and political inclusion were racialized during the Great Depression. I depart from this well-known critical story by insisting that the grapes of wrath cultural formation, properly defined and rigorously theorized, in fact engaged this social location of Depression-era crisis. But perhaps most importantly, this reconsideration of the absence and presence, the inscription and elision of racial formation in the American popular imagination via the literary and visual texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation is more urgent now

¹¹ Smith 116. This critical construction of the Okies’ religious and racial subject positions is common throughout the archives and the literature on texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation. Scholars use this phrase and others (Denning’s preferred construction is “Plain-folk Americanism”) in explicit reference to the Great Plains and Southern Plains regions of the United States, as the place of origin of many Dust Bowl migrants of the 1930s. This geological region of the North American continent was impacted by the dramatic, man-made eco-crisis of the Dust Bowl beginning in 1934 (I consider environmental catastrophe as a social location of the grapes of wrath cultural formation in elsewhere in this dissertation). But beyond this explicit meaning, the interpellation of Dust Bowl migrants as “Plain folk” also functions unintentionally to reinforce the Dust Bowl migrants’ whiteness and normalize that racialization as unexceptional, standard, common, or “plain” in opposition to the racialization of minoritized agricultural laborers in the popular imagination. I prefer to avoid this construction whenever possible.

¹² Jameson, *Political Unconscious* 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

than ever before. In many of the exact same geographical places that Lange, Steinbeck, Paredes, and Hemmig deployed as settings for their textual productions of the grapes of wrath cultural formation during the Depression, which we now understand as the US-Mexico Borderlands thanks to the contemporary theoretical interventions of Gloria Anzaldúa, José David Saldívar, Ronald Rael, Américo Paredes himself, and others, migrant struggles continue to this day.¹⁵ Indeed, the tragic escalation of racial crisis and racist violence in the US-Mexico Borderlands has become unavoidable in the contemporary cultural imagination. Sadly, the racialized crisis in California's factories in the fields that the Dust Bowl migration dramatized for the nation (which was met with reactionary vigilante violence and what Carey McWilliams calls the homegrown "Gunkist" fascism in Depression-era California) has grown to even more monstrous proportions and produced even more horrific results in the age of President Donald J. Trump. Trump's embrace of rhetorical violence against the Latinx community, especially via the evocation of the social location of the US-Mexico Borderland as the mis-en-scene of his white supremacist political base, was evident from the infamous inception of his campaign for president in 2015:

And now they are beating us economically. They are not our friend, believe me. But they're killing us economically. The US has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems. [...] When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. They're not sending you. They're not sending you. They're sending people that have lots of problems, and they're bringing those problems with us [sic]. They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people. But I speak to border guards and they tell us what we're getting. And it only makes common sense. It only makes common sense. They're sending us not the right people.¹⁶

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*; Saldívar, JD, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*; Rael, *Borderwall as Architecture: A Manifesto for the US-Mexico Boundary*; Paredes, *With His Pistol in His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* and *Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border*. See also Calderón and Saldívar, *Criticism in the Borderlands*, Gutiérrez-Jones, *Rethinking the Borderlands: Between Chicano Culture and Legal Discourse*, and

¹⁶ Trump "Here's Donald Trump's Presidential Announcement Speech." I have cited the speech using *Time* magazine's publication of the transcript online because it demonstrates a serious problem the mainstream media in fact produced during its honeymoon with the virulent racist and neo-fascist who would become the 45th President of the United States. *Time*, not unlike other mainstream media outlets who Trump would spend much of the next four years blindly attacking as the "fake news media," publishes the entirety of Trump's announcement without fact checking a single word, providing commentary or correction, or even linking to other stories on the platform that might provide analysis of the speech. In a time of rising neo-fascism and explicit white supremacist violence in the United States, which we could unequivocally demonstrate Trump's MAGA coalition to both embrace and embody by 2020, this kind of media silence is deafening and ultimately, dangerous to the very fabric of mainstream democratic liberalism. The silence of

Symptoms of our current crisis of US-racial formation include the escalation of racist and political persecution of Latinx communities across the nation via ICE raids (and the terrifying, persistent psychological effect of gaslighting the ever-present threat of these raids also produce) among the community in recent years. In 2019, racially-motivated mass shootings of Latinx people in Gilroy, California and El Paso, Texas, and finally the institution and normalization of state-sponsored migrant concentration camps in the US-Mexico Borderlands that persist as of this writing.

Dissensus in the Key of American Racialized Crisis

I blend these voices, Lange, Steinbeck, Paredes, and Hemmig, not in an effort to produce some sort of overly-Autotuned, artificial, or ahistorical cultural mythology of “racial harmony” within the grapes of wrath cultural formation. Rather, I blend these voices to produce something like what Sacvan Bercovitch called “dissensus.”¹⁷ Dissensus, continuing the musical analogy, is most certainly *not* harmony. But dissensus isn’t pure dissonance either, the overwhelming, inarticulate, and incoherent “resounding gong” or “clanging cymbal” that Paul wrote about in his letter to the church at Corinth.¹⁸ If blending these four cultural voices from the Great Depression does not produce the sound of harmony, unison, or dissonance, what might it produce? What might dissensus in the key of racialized crisis sound like in the grapes of wrath cultural formation?

I hope that inviting these four cultural voices to share the same social location of racialized crisis via the grapes of wrath cultural formation might produce something only rarely glimpsed, and still less frequently captured, in the green rooms of gin-soaked jazz clubs, the smell of the crowd’s sweat still hanging in the air, while the waitress wipes down the tables; or sometimes in the smoke-filled big rooms of recording studios, after the tape machine has been turned off, and the second engineer is putting away the microphones and rolling up the cables. Not just improvisation, not simply the sound of genius when it thinks no one is watching, listening, or judging, but the almost spiritual sound that four very talented people, riffing off of each other, can sometimes produce. Dissensus sounds something like four jazz musicians at the top of their game exchanging solos on their own unique instruments, in their own unique styles, comprised of their own

Time magazine and others in the mainstream media, from 2015 to today, must be forcefully critiqued by cultural historians and political scientists. Accessed 12 July 2020.

¹⁷ Bercovitch viii.

¹⁸ As Paul writes, “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1, New International Version). Blending the voices of Lange, Steinbeck, Paredes, and Hemmig could never produce the harsh sound Paul warns his early Christian readers about because these four artists, as I have come to understand them through careful consideration of their textual productions, each possessed that which Paul says is necessary for those who seek to true common-union. Each of these four artists embraced Paul’s *radical* humanist ideology of love in their cultural productions from the Great Depression, particularly for the working people and the poor they not only encountered in Depression America, but very actively sought out so that through love and aesthetics they might intervene and alleviate the human suffering they saw around them.

unique interpretations of the principals of musical theory and composition, but *always* listening with incredibly intensity to every other player, every other instrument, and even the specific phrasings and grace-notes their interlocutors are producing in that room. Partially so they might try to best the soloist who came before them, yes. The ego of any musician is indeed prodigious. But more to the heart of the matter, they are listening with such intensity to the voices of the other artists around them simply for the love of music. And even more unconsciously, as an act of faith in the collective sound they individually believe they might one day be able to produce together.

While it has been clear to critics for some time that the hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation played a powerful role in reinforcing the limits of national inclusion during the 1930s in explicitly racialized and recursive terms (i.e., the nation was white, and whiteness was the nation), a number of important questions remain. How exactly do the texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation racialize whiteness in Steinbeck's America? Was the erasure of ethno-racial subjects from the cultural productions of Steinbeck's America total? How do we account for the pervasive presence of racialized populist rhetoric in this cultural formation? And what are the historical and socio-cultural forces (beyond "racial populism," "racial rhetoric," and explicit racism and discrimination in the service of white supremacist ideology) that might bear on the active construction of the white yeoman as the paradigmatic protagonists of not only the Depression-era grapes of wrath cultural formation, but New Deal culture itself?

"A Room of Experience into Which I Cannot Enter": Exploring John Steinbeck's Racial Imagination Beyond *The Grapes Of Wrath*

In 1962, the same year he accepted the Nobel Prize in literature and six years before his death, John Steinbeck published a bestselling nonfiction travelogue, *Travels with Charley in Search of America*. *Charley* documents Steinbeck's cross-country road trip Steinbeck, which he embarked upon in the winter of 1960.¹⁹ The purpose of the road

¹⁹ A number of journalists and independent literary sleuths have called the veracity of Steinbeck's travels into question in recent years. While their findings have yet to be submitted to the peer-review process, their investigations are absolutely breaking new ground in Steinbeck studies. The most significant of these *Charley* "truthers," a retired journalist from Pennsylvania whose blog-post and self-published e-book garnered page-1 attention from the *New York Times* Books Section in 2011, is Bill Steigerwald (McGrath). Steigerwald compared the manuscript draft of *Charley* to the published version and re-traced Steinbeck's journey in 2010. Steigerwald uncovered a number of omissions, exaggerations, and fabrications in *Travels with Charley*. His main point, that *Charley* is not purely journalistic, and perhaps even novelistic, is less surprising than the attention his independent scholarship was afforded by the *New York Times*. For the purpose of my work in this chapter, perhaps the least significant thing about *Travels with Charley* is its genre. Like Steinbeck biographer, Jay Parini (who was interviewed by the *Times* for their feature on Steigerwald's self-published e-book), I'm more interested in the larger questions *Charley* helps us pose about the twentieth century American cultural imagination. For Parini, one such question is, "Why has this book stayed in the American imagination, unlike, for example, Michael Harrington's 'The Other America,' which came out at the same time" (McGrath)? As Parini told the *Times*, "I have always assumed that to some degree it's a work of fiction. [. . .] If you want to get at the spirit of something, sometimes it's

trip, Steinbeck writes, was to “look again” at the nation he had explored in literature, journalism, nonfiction, theater, and film since the Great Depression because Steinbeck feared he “did not know [his] own country” anymore and perhaps only knew about America’s “changes [...] from books and newspapers.”²⁰ In the prologue to *Travels with Charley*, Steinbeck confesses that “as an American writer, writing about America” he had been “working from memory” more than from experience.²¹ And memory, he concludes is “at best a faulty, warpy reservoir.”²²

In the last section of the travelogue, Steinbeck finally ventures into the American south. And by doing so, he is forced to attempt to read (and then write) the unavoidable racial crisis of the 1960s and the tensions produced by the collision of white supremacy and the Civil Rights movement, Jim Crow and integration. Steinbeck admits that he “faced the South with dread” because here, he knew,

were pain and confusion and all the manic results of
bewilderment and fear. And the South being a limb of the nation,
its pain spreads out to all America.

I knew, as everyone knows, that true but incomplete statement of
the problem—that an original sin of the fathers was being visited
on the children of succeeding generations.²³

As one critic has argued through analysis of Steinbeck’s personal correspondence and nonfiction, John Steinbeck was perhaps “one of the most liberal-minded of prominent American writers on the subject of racial prejudice in the early twentieth century” with “broad-minded attitude[s] on race relations.”²⁴ Yet paradoxically, Steinbeck also insists in *Travels with Charley* that he is “basically unfitted to take sides in the racial conflict” of the Civil Rights era.²⁵ Furthermore, Steinbeck argues that he is incapable of “real and emotional understanding of the agony” of America’s race problem.²⁶ “[Not] because I, a

important to use the techniques of a fiction writer” (McGrath). I am not surprised, but only disappointed, that the editors of the *New York Times* book section have forgotten this fact, which Tom Wolfe and *New York* magazine taught them and the other gray ladies of east coast publishing way, way back in 1972.

²⁰ Steinbeck, *Travels* 5.

²¹ Steinbeck, *Travels* 5.

²² Steinbeck, *Travels* 5.

²³ Steinbeck, *Travels* 244-45.

²⁴ Lynn 150.

²⁵ This contradiction is not lost on Steinbeck scholars. Lynn’s journal article explores this problem in some depth, concluding that while Steinbeck’s fiction “tended to indulge in stereotyping, he did so with no perceptible intent to denigrate his nonwhite characters. His preoccupation, even when addressing the race issue directly, was always with the danger of moral decline in American society at large” and “Steinbeck’s African American was presented as a dignified and courageous foil to the materialistic white American, who was ‘trapped and entangled’ in avaricious individualism” (149).

²⁶ Steinbeck, *Travels* 245.

white, have no experience with Negroes,” the 62-year-old Steinbeck writes, “but because of the nature of my experience.”²⁷

That experience, as recounted in *Travels with Charley*, is grounded in Steinbeck’s childhood: “In Salinas in California, where I was born [in 1902] and grew and went to school gathering the impressions that formed me, there was only one Negro family.”²⁸ Steinbeck tells the story of this African American family in northern California, the Coopers, recounting their participation in community life in Salinas and the high regard with which the community seemed to regard the only Black family in town.²⁹ Steinbeck quite tenderly describes his personal relationships with each of the Cooper children, which included serving as pallbearer for Ulysses Cooper, who died young, during his junior year of high school. As he travels into the symbolic, if not literal, center of American white supremacy in 1960, Steinbeck recounts the intellectual achievements, talents, and physical gifts, of each of the Cooper children with sincere affection, finally noting that above all, “the Cooper boys were my friends.”³⁰ Steinbeck even asks and answers that question that has haunted the white, patriarchal American imagination for generations, which none other than Barack Obama confronts in his own work of narrative nonfiction: “Sure—but would you let your daughter marry one?”³¹ “I think I would have laughed,” Steinbeck writes diachronically to the question Obama’s own “Okie” grandparents indeed answered the same year Steinbeck was journeying into the south and thinking about his friend, Ulysses Cooper. *I think I would have laughed, Mr. President, if someone had asked, “How would you like your sister to marry a Cooper?”*³² *For it would have occurred to me “that a Cooper might not have wanted to marry [my] sister [...].”*³³

Critics have argued that Steinbeck simply did not engage with the subject of American racism directly in his published work before 1960, when *The Saturday Review* published “Atque Vale.” In this essay, Steinbeck clearly critiques white supremacist logic, racist violence, and seems to position himself publicly in support of the Civil Rights Movement: “A negro must be ten times as gifted as a white to receive equal recognition” Steinbeck points out.³⁴ On the other hand, “The only violence was white violence. [...]” during a bus boycott in Alabama (1955) and during integration of Central High School in Little Rock Arkansas (1957), “we knew there would be no Negro violence” and in fact “any brutality would originate among the whites [...]”³⁵ Steinbeck ends the essay by highlighting Martin Luther King’s selflessness and nonviolence, even after an assassination attempt on King’s life in 1958: “When Martin Luther King was stabbed by a hysterical woman, he might well have felt some anger or hurt or despair. But his first words on coming out of the anesthetic were: ‘Don’t let them hurt her. She needs

²⁷ Steinbeck, *Travels* 245.

²⁸ Steinbeck, *Travels* 245.

²⁹ Steinbeck, *Travels* 245-47.

³⁰ Steinbeck, *Travels* 246.

³¹ Obama 12.

³² Steinbeck, *Travels* 246.

³³ Steinbeck, *Travels* 247

³⁴ Steinbeck, “Atque Vale” 105.

³⁵ Steinbeck, “Atque Vale” 105.

help.”³⁶ Yet when Dr. King wrote John Steinbeck in March 1965 to ask for the author’s “sponsorship” of a general boycott in Alabama, “the great critic of social injustice in the thirties,” as one critic has called Steinbeck, equivocated.³⁷ Steinbeck cites Dr. King’s quote “In this morning’s Times,” in which King suggested he might consider a selective boycott in Alabama rather than a general strike. Steinbeck urges the Civil Rights leader to continue to embrace the kind of moderate incrementalism that a targeted boycott would represent, writing that he “would back [a selective] boycott with every bit of influence I could bring to bear. So that is my answer, Sir. I am for a selective boycott but not a blind one.”³⁸

In his concluding moment of remembrance of the Coopers in *Travels with Charley*, Steinbeck’s describes the “main feeling” this recollection of his African American friends from Salinas produced he turned his car towards the “dreaded” south. In that moment in 1960, just months after the publication of “Atque Vale” in *The Saturday Review*, perhaps even remembering the weight of Ulysses Cooper’s coffin in his own young hands that long-ago day in Salinas, Steinbeck writes of his “sorrow at the curtain of fear and anger drawn down between [the races].”³⁹ And the once-great writer of Depression-era social justice concludes that the “Negro-white subject” is “a room of experience into which I cannot enter.”⁴⁰

Yet as some critics would argue, it wasn’t only the “Negro-white subject” in the Civil Rights-era, but indeed virtually all discourses of racial formation since the Great Depression that had proven to be “rooms of experience” into which John Steinbeck could not (or would not) enter, especially in his fiction. And on those occasions when Steinbeck did attempt to enter those racialized discourses and rooms, according to many critical readings of racial formation in Steinbeck’s fiction, the results were at best predictable, insensitive, and stereotypical. At worst, the result was the production, maintenance, and extension of racist ideology in the popular culture imagination.

Michael Denning, for example, is one of the strongest critics of Steinbeck’s erasure of ethno-racial reality from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Denning points out that it was “Mexican, Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese farmworkers” who constituted the rank and file of the great strikes that erupted across California’s factories in the field in 1933-34.⁴¹ Yet while these multi-ethnic working-class formations are the historical “roots” of both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle* (1936), Steinbeck inscribes *all* of the workers these two novels as white.⁴² Denning surmises that Steinbeck’s subaltern fictions and journalism of the ’30s are all “deeply inflected” by Steinbeck’s sense of “racial

³⁶ Steinbeck, “Atque Vale” 107.

³⁷ Lynn 151.

³⁸ Steinbeck, *Life in Letters* 818-19.

³⁹ Steinbeck, *Travels* 244; 247.

⁴⁰ Steinbeck, *Travels* 245.

⁴¹ Denning 260.

⁴² Denning 260. Denning overlooks the single exception to Steinbeck’s textual investment in whiteness in these two novels. Jule, the oft-discussed “half-breed” Cherokee-Okie in *The Grapes of Wrath* who befriends Tom Joad in the FSA camp at Weedpatch is considered at length in Louis Owens’ chapter, “‘Grampa Killed Indians, Pa Killed Snakes’: The American Indian and *The Grapes of Wrath*” in *The Grapes of Wrath: Trouble in the Promised Land*.

populism”: “In the racial populism of Steinbeck, the noble white Americans of *The Grapes of Wrath* are set against the minstrel show Mexican Americans of *Tortilla Flat*.”⁴³

Yet the historical phenomenon of the Dust Bowl Migration (1934-41) that Steinbeck thematized in his work of the 1930s was indeed a mass movement of predominantly white Americans.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the larger thematics of Depression-era crisis that *The Grapes of Wrath* tapped into, including social dislocation, pathetic poverty, permanent and intensive migrancy, capitalist exploitation, and class conflict (especially in what Carey McWilliams called California’s “factories in the fields”) certainly were not.⁴⁵ In fact, Steinbeck’s near-singular focus on what came to be known as the American Exodus (thanks to Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor’s 1939 book of the same name), required a remarkable form of social blindness on Steinbeck’s part—a sort of fantastic cultural and creative myopia.

How else might we reconcile this contradiction: that at the same moment in the middle-1930s that the great moral voice of his generation was turning his artistic gaze to the “matter of the migrants” throughout California, those “Thousands of [Okies ...] crossing the borders in ancient rattling automobiles, destitute and hungry and homeless,” New Deal immigration officers were literally herding between 400,000 and 1,000,000 people of Mexican ancestry out of fields and barrios across the US-Mexico Borderlands, pushing them into Union Pacific “boxcars instead of inside the [trains’]” passenger cars and deporting these people to Mexico?⁴⁶ These mass deportations of people racialized as Mexican, and therefore deemed to be “impossible” US-American subjects by the Depression-era state, were conducted regardless, indeed in spite of legal citizenship status.⁴⁷ That this tragic violation of and civil liberties and “human rights” (a term

⁴³ Denning 267.

⁴⁴ See Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California*.

⁴⁵ See Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*. Published six months after *The Grapes of Wrath*, while Steinbeck’s novel was still on bestseller lists across the nation in 1939, Carey McWilliam’s landmark social history has been linked to Steinbeck’s novel ever since. In contrast to Steinbeck, who wrote his plebian American trilogy (*In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, *The Grapes of Wrath*) from outside of the official New Deal state apparatus, McWilliams published *Factories in the Field* while he was serving as California Commissioner of Immigration and Housing under Democratic Governor Culbert Olsen, who rode FDR’s New Deal coattails to the Governor’s mansion in Sacramento in 1936, breaking a decades-long Republican strong hold on the executive branch in the Golden State. Nevertheless, it was McWilliams, not Steinbeck, who insistently reminded the nation of the long history of capitalist exploitation, colonial occupation, and racialized labor in California. McWilliams may well have had Steinbeck in mind, in fact, when he described “latter-day commentators, busy recording impressions and giving vent to their indignation,” who “have largely ignored” the reality that California’s social history was “a story of nearly seventy years’ exploitation of minority racial and other groups by a powerful clique of landowners” (3, 5).

⁴⁶ Steinbeck qtd. in DeMott 3; Steinbeck, “Harvest Gypsies: Beaten, Bewildered and Half-Starved” (3); Takaki 333-34; Kennedy 165.

⁴⁷ See Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. One witness to the New Deal state’s abhorrent “repatriation” procedure, whereby immigration officials literally shipped people of Mexican ancestry out of the country “in boxcars instead of inside the trains” on the Union Pacific railroad remarked, “They were in [the country] illegally but the moral part of it, like separation and putting them in boxcars... I’ll never forget as long as I live” (qtd. in Takaki 334). Ethnic studies scholar Ronald Takaki cites Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce documents that acknowledge that “60 percent of the

Steinbeck uses in his reportage of the Dust Bowl Migration in 1936), appears to receive short-shrift among the hundreds of thousands of words that Steinbeck wrote on the subject of California agricultural labor during the Depression?⁴⁸

From *Harvest Gypsies* to *Grapes of Wrath*

Contemporary critics have connected the grapes of wrath cultural formation's failure to represent ethno-racial subjects to the larger failure of the racial politics and policies of the New Deal state itself. As one historian writes, "The Protestant, white, 'plain folk' of Steinbeck's novel can be thought of as a cultural reflection of the racial boundaries of the political and economic order constructed by the New Deal in response to the Great Depression, indicating both the limits of this order and one of the potential sources of its popularity."⁴⁹ Yet Steinbeck's earliest published writing on the Dust Bowl migrants in California suggest these boundaries were less set in stone, at least in Steinbeck's racial imagination, than critics have usually recognized:

In the past [agricultural laborers] have been of several races, encouraged to come and often imported as cheap labor; Chinese in the early period, then Filipinos, Japanese and Mexicans. These were foreigners, and as such they were ostracized and segregated and herded about. [...] But in recent years the foreign migrants have begun to organize, and at this danger signal they have been deported in great numbers [...]⁵⁰

Under the title "The Harvest Gypsies: Beaten, Bewildered and Half-Starved They Wander the Trails of the Fruit Season; What Can Be Done to Aid Them?", this passage appeared near the beginning of Steinbeck's first published piece on the Okie exodus on Monday, October 5th, 1936. The article was the first in a series of objective, sociological investigative report for the left-leaning *San Francisco News*. There is little doubt from this passage and the title of the piece itself that Steinbeck understood the racialized nature of capitalist exploitation in California agriculture and that the novice journalist also had a clear grasp of US immigration policy and migration push-pull patterns.

Nevertheless, it is the white Dust Bowl migrant workers, not the previous workers "of several races" who are Steinbeck's focus in this series for *SF News*. Steinbeck does return to non-white agricultural labor in the penultimate installment of the *SF News* "Harvest Gypsies" series, however, which is sympathetically titled "California's Treatment of Alien Labor Forms Ugly Picture." In his conclusion, he writes:

'repatriated' children were American citizens 'without very much hope of ever coming back into the United States'" (Takaki 333-34).

⁴⁸ Steinbeck, "The Harvest Gypsies: Agriculture and State Must Plan Future of Migrant Workers" (8).

⁴⁹ Smith 117.

⁵⁰ Steinbeck, "Harvest Gypsies: Agriculture and State Must Plan" 8.

Thus, in California we find a curious attitude toward a group that makes our agriculture successful. The migrants are needed, and they are hated. Arriving in a district they find the dislike always meted out by the resident to the foreigner, the outlander. [. . .] The migrants are hated for the following reasons, that they are ignorant and dirty people, that they are carriers of disease, that they increase the necessity for police and the tax bill for schooling in a community, and that if they are allowed to organize they can simply by refusing to work, wipe out the season's crops. They are never received into a community nor into the life of a community. Wanderers in fact, they are never allowed to feel at home in the communities that demand their services.

In 1938, the articles were collected and published in pamphlet form as a fundraiser for the white migrants by the Simon J. Lubin Society under a new title, *Their Blood Is Strong*. While the exact editorial process whereby Steinbeck's articles were renamed is unclear, the phrase appears exactly once in the seven-part series, in the October 5th essay: "[The Okies] have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong."⁵¹ What is clear is Steinbeck's field work for this series of seven articles became the research backbone of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother": Not Far from Xanadu

In February 1936, not far from William Randolph Hearst's Xanadu, Dorothea Lange photographed the grapes of wrath cultural formation's "Migrant Mother" (figure 1). Critics have argued that this image inscribed the same racialized silence into the US popular imagination as Steinbeck's novel did in 1939, when he whitewashed California agrarian literature down to one "half-breed" migrant, a Cherokee-Okie named Jule in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Like Steinbeck's novel, Dorothea Lange's photograph from Nipomo, California appears to instantly revise the "story of nearly seventy years' exploitation of minority racial [...] groups by a powerful clique of [California] landowners" into a tale of white, singular, passive, pathetic poverty in the blink of her camera's eye.⁵²

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² McWilliams 5.

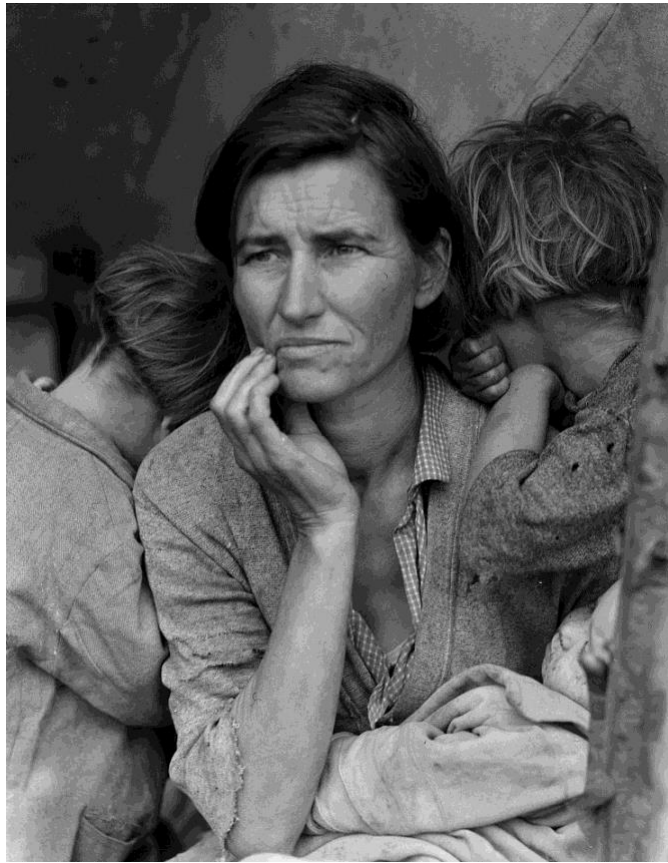


Figure 1

Lange first encountered these white Dust Bowl migrants while working for the State of California's Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) in 1935 with Paul Taylor, a UC Berkeley economist and state administrator. Lange was never shy about her investment in representing the Okies, nor the lasting force her encounter with the Dust Bowl migrants had on her aesthetic imagination. The title of the image/text book that Lange co-authored with Taylor in 1939 is *American Exodus: A Story of Human Erosion*. As if the biblical allusion in the book's title isn't enough to suggest the scale of this story for Lange, the subtitle deploys an epic geological metaphor. In her later recollection of her initial encounter with white Dust Bowl migrant farmworkers in California, Lange amplified the epic geological rhetoric, reiterating the notion of "social erosion" and adding that the Dust Bowl migration she documented was a "landslide that cut this continent," and a "symbol of [...] tremendous upheaval like an earthquake."⁵³

Critics have argued that this kind of intense investment in representing the Dust Bowl migration is explicitly racialized and connected to larger problems of why the nation told itself the story of the Okie Exodus during the 1930s. Legal historian Mae Ngai argues that the New Deal administrators who supervised Lange and the other

⁵³ Doud, "Oral History."

photographers of the Information Division of the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration (RA/FSA) constructed a racially selective vision of California's factories in the fields to suit their own political and ideological ends. "Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph 'Migrant Mother,'" Ngai writes, "delivered the FSA's preferred message that migratory workers were white, pathetically poor, singular, and passive."⁵⁴

Two months after Lange's photograph of the migrant mother first appeared in *The San Francisco News*, the political stakes of perpetuating a white, conservative, and docile image to the American public played out on the front page of *The New York Times* on 19 May 1936, the very same day, ironically, that the *Times* reported that Dorothea Lange's New Deal patron (the Resettlement Administration) had been deemed unconstitutional by a federal appellate court in Washington, DC. Adjacent to the piece on the RA, the paper ran a separate article under a dramatic headline that likely alarmed a Depression-era public still jittery from the violent class conflict that rocked the nation from San Francisco's waterfront to Minneapolis' Market District to Toledo's auto industry during the spring and summer of 1934: "50,000 Mexican Rail Men Strike; Red Flags Raised Over Stations."⁵⁵ While the news from Mexico City bore no direct connection to the question of the constitutionality of FDR's Resettlement Administration, the image it evoked, of a revolutionary Mexican proletariat shutting down national utilities under a "red banner" ("all entrances were covered with similar emblems," the *Times* breathlessly added) was unambiguous.⁵⁶ In spite of the *Times*' awkward editorialized reassurance in a parenthetical bracket in the middle of the story that "[After a personal appeal by President Cardenas [...] the striking workers decided to comply [...]"⁵⁷ it is precisely this sort of connection between labor movements, revolutionary politics, and ethno-race that the New Deal hoped to short-circuit by offering up images of white, Dust Bowl migrants for reproduction throughout the culture industry.⁵⁸

When juxtaposed against this contemporary media report of brown men with red flags, the potential political function of Lange's photograph of a white woman with dust-kissed children in the popular imagination becomes evident. But while the *Times* editors seem to pitch their story of brown men with red flags in Mexico in particularly high (if not alarmist) key through their headline, Lange was ultimately not responsible for the mythic title that her image would acquire in the popular imagination. Indeed, Lange did not name any of the photographs she produced while working for the RA/FSA. It was RA policy to decouple artists' names from the work and to let the culture industry name the pictures themselves. This is because without a unique, identifiable artist, it can't be art. And without words, a photograph is just a mere fact, which cannot be confused with political opinion or propaganda. These choices were intentional. Because the RA was an offshoot of the ultra-conservative Department of Agriculture, their experiments with "new devices, the movie and the still picture" to communicate the hardships of rural

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ "50,000 Mexican Rail Men Strike."

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Editorial bracket of the main clause in the quotation is from the original source; bracketed ellipsis are mine.

⁵⁸ "50,000 Mexican Rail Men Strike."

America to the electorate and their goal of galvanizing support for FDR's New Deal interventions on behalf of rural America, to say nothing of the RA's wholesale embrace of experiments in the "democratization of land ownership," public housing, and social engineering, was treated with hostility not only by Republicans in Congress, but by its more powerful sister agency, the Department of Agriculture itself.⁵⁹

Many critics have noted the fact that the artists of the RA/FSA were explicitly instructed to observe racist American social formations in their arts and archival projects, particularly in the US-South. One common explanation for this fact, as historian Linda Gordon has argued, is that "the FSA was forced to defer to the department [of Agriculture's] racism." At the same time, Gordon notes that "racism saturated New Deal agencies" themselves well beyond the conservative Department of Agriculture.⁶⁰ Indeed, literal and figurative segregation was the mode *de jure* of the FSA's programs and policies: ethno-race, whether in migrant camps, photographic exhibitions, even press releases, was segregated along the color line or erased altogether.⁶¹ Yet this problem of how institutionalized racism and the reactionary right-wing of both parties, as well as the racism of the American people themselves during the Great Depression effected the work of the Information Division's Historical Section is by no means a simple one to solve.

While the FSA paid poll taxes for their black clients in the South, arguing that "a person couldn't be a good citizen without being a voter," they also ignored requests for images of racial diversity from magazines like *Survey Graphic*.⁶² While their staff was multi-ethnic, and eventually multi-racial, included African American photographer Gordon Parks, the dark room staff of the FSA in Washington, DC (an "all-southern laboratory" Parks recalled) scoffed at the notion of processing his film and Parks was not paid by the agency itself, but by an external fellowship at the level of intern (an employment classification even those FSA photographers who had never worked in photography before, like Ben Shahn, were not obliged to labor under).⁶³ But while these racialized contradictions are of critical concern to students of cultural history, they seem to have mattered very little to Dorothea Lange which is perhaps one of the reasons she was fired from Stryker's New Deal agency repeatedly between 1936 and 1939 (for his part, Roy Stryker was much beloved by his photographers, including Lange; she is the second most included photographer in the photographic memoir he published late in his life, in fact, and Stryker consistently pointed to Lange's work as the best the Historical Section produced and justified Lange's lay-offs in terms of budgetary realities).⁶⁴

⁵⁹ Tugwell qtd. in Gordon 196; Gordon 194.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Gordon 196.

⁶² Baldwin qtd. in Gordon 196.

⁶³ Doud, "Gordon Parks" 317-333; Gordon 199.

⁶⁴ In Sprin's persuasive reconstruction and account of Lange's frequent expulsion from Roy Stryker's Historical Section of the Information Division, Sprin acknowledges that "The reasons were undoubtedly complex and multiple" but finally identifies sexism as the likely root cause: "a male boss who saw Lange as a difficult woman who meant trouble, not as a great artist who brought his office renown; a clash between artist and bureaucrat; [and] an insecure boss who needed to protect his sense of power" (34). See Gordon's chapter, "Father Stryker and the Beloved Community" for a different perspective on the

While the managers and bureaucrats of the RA/FSA were fighting a constant political battle for survival in Washington DC during the 1930s, Dorothea Lange's priority was to "tell the stories she discovered in the field."⁶⁵ Lange firmly believed that "[a] camera is a tool for learning how to see without a camera" and what she saw, first in California's factories in the fields and later as a photographer of people and places far flung from her Bay Area home, did not conform to the politically expedient, the racially selective, or the ideological boundaries of political inclusion drawn by the New Deal state.⁶⁶

From her very first official photographic report on farm labor conditions in California, produced in conjunction Paul Taylor for the State of California's Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) in 1935, Dorothea Lange's vision was anything but color-blind. Their report documented the deplorable living conditions of multi-ethnic agricultural laborers and their families (Mexican, Filipino, and "white Americans")⁶⁷ in the factory farms of California's Imperial Valley—"hovels made of cartons, branches, and scraps of wood and cloth, with primitive privies, no waste disposal, [and] no potable water."⁶⁸ "All races serve the crops in California," one caption reads in this, Lange and Taylor's first collaboration, which used as its title the effect it indeed produced when their report circulated in Sacramento in 1935, a year before she photographed "Destitute Peapickers in California."⁶⁹ The title of their report was "Establishment of Rural Rehabilitation Camps for Migrants in California."

Beyond this early and explicit rejection of the racialized boundaries of New Deal ideology that were actualized in the racial politics and programs of the RA/FSA, the language of servility in this caption is especially notable. For Lange, image and text were coequal, making this seemingly minor, non-visual detail worthy of our consideration. In this evocative language of servility, which Steinbeck picks up and elaborates in his own Dust Bowl narratives, Lange begins the complex process of racializing whiteness at the very moment that the figure of the Okie, the poor white interstate migrant from the newly established social location of the Dust Bowl, enters both California's caste-like agricultural system, her own aesthetic imagination. Lange and Taylor's effort to connect racial heterogeneity, servitude, and California's factory farms is the result of their understanding that labor price conferred social identity, particularly in California agriculture, which traces its roots in one line to the US-Southern labor formations of

Lange/Stryker dynamic in *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, pp. 193-208. See also Stryker's *In This Proud Land: America 1935-1943 as Seen in the FSA Photographs*.

⁶⁵ Sprin 34.

⁶⁶ Gordon reports that Lange frequently repeated this phrase and that Lange traced its source to Max Ernst. Gordon xviii, 440 n.1.

⁶⁷ Lange and Taylor qtd. in Sprin 18. "Establishment of Rural Rehabilitation Camps for Migrants in California" is currently only available for inspection by appointment at the Library of Congress and even digital access is only available at the Library of Congress. Therefore, I have relied upon Sprin's scholarly study for an understanding of the details of Lange and Taylor's first collaboration and for quotations from this archival text.

⁶⁸ Sprin 17.

⁶⁹ Lange and Taylor qtd. in Sprin 18.

Reconstruction (if not slavery) and in another to the indentured servitude of the Catholic colonial project in New Spain and the *latifundias* of the Global South.

Racial Formation and General Captions of 1939

As was her practice, Lange did write descriptions, or general captions, for each of the images she took of the migrant mother and her children in February 1936 in Nipomo, California. Lange submitted these captions with the photographs to her supervisor, Roy Stryker, at the RA. In the archives of the Library of Congress, where the negatives and original prints are stored today, “Migrant Mother” is catalogued under a much less iconic name. Lange’s caption for the image we know as “Migrant Mother” is “Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.”⁷⁰

As biographers and cultural historians have noted, Lange was strongly opposed to the RA/FSA practice of decontextualizing the work of the photographers of the Historical Section, which included decoupling the names of individual photographers from their pictures as well as allowing editors in the popular press to rewrite captions and retitle images.⁷¹ For Lange, the problem posed by this decontextualization of her work for the RA/FSA was much more complex than politics, authorial agency, or narrative control. As scholar Anne Whiston Sprin has powerfully shown, “Lange employed images and words, together, not merely to record conditions, but also to discover and explore ideas.”⁷² In Lange’s conceptualization of documentary photography, image and text were not exclusive and “documentary” and “art” were one in the same. Sprin argues that “the photographs are not illustrations, nor are the texts explanatory footnotes to the images. Coequal, they correspond” in the work of Dorothea Lange.⁷³ Her innovative use of the “general caption” form—long typewritten texts revised from field notes that incorporate “an ethnographer’s eye, a writer’s ear, [and] an artist’s vision”—reached its mature articulation in her fieldwork of 1939 for the FSA and Sprin recovers Lange’s archive of that year, publishing the general captions in their entirety for the first time.⁷⁴ The marriage of image and text that Dorothea Lange officiated as she produced art about people, landscape, and architecture provides us a unique lens through which we can more carefully consider her cultural productions of the period, including “Migrant Mother.”

⁷⁰ For Lange’s complete Nipomo series, including the original, unedited version of “Migrant Mother,” see www.loc.gov/r/print/list/128_migm.html. For a critical biography of Dorothea Lange see Linda Gordon’s *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits*, especially Gordon’s chapter on the production of Lange’s iconic photograph. On the significance of “Migrant Mother” in public memory, see Hariman and Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy*. For a reconsideration of Lange’s work from 1939, specifically the relationship between the Lange’s photographs and her captions and field notes, see Anne Whiston Sprin’s *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs and Reports from the Field*.

⁷¹ Gordon 207. See also Sprin 12-15.

⁷² Sprin xi.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Sprin xiii.

What do we see through the lens of Lange's 1939 images and general captions in relation to racial formation in the most important cultural production of FDR's New Deal state, the mythological "Migrant Mother"?⁷⁵ How might Lange's 1939 archive, produced three short years after her epoch-defining encounter with the migrant mother in a flooded Nipomo field inform our reading of the racialized silences of this image? How might we situate this archive from 1939 in relation to the cultural formation of the grapes of wrath narrative that reached its apotheosis that same year? And how might juxtaposing this archive with *Migrant Mother* complicate the racialized aesthetic narrative (and later critical construction) of the grapes of wrath cultural formation that I argue is inscribed across Steinbeck's America? To read this recovered archive of 1939 against the grain and to place it in dialogue with "Migrant Mother" tells a much different story than most critical narratives of this image have traditionally allowed.⁷⁶ Indeed, Lange's 1939 photo archive represent California's segregated "Shacktowns" and multi-ethnic factories in the field, the proto-Fascist practices and panopticons deployed against white and ethno-racial farm workers alike in the Pacific Northwest, the exploitation of environmental and human resources by the logging industry across Idaho's "Stump Ranches," the labored tension between segregated and integrated social space in rural North Carolina, and the same tension in the implementation of New Deal social programs throughout the country. Ultimately, these texts, the images and the photographs, transgress the traditional boundaries and critical narratives imposed on both "Migrant Mother" and the grapes of wrath cultural formation as well.

All the Suffering of Mankind

⁷⁵ See Barthes, "Myth Today" in *Mythologies*. Roland Barthes' valuable project of reconciling myth (as a type of speech in bourgeois, or what I conceptualize in my project as "popular," culture) with the insights of radical poststructuralist critical theory informs my reading of "Migrant Mother's" "mythic" iconicity in the cultural imagination. As Barthes argued in *Mythologies*, myth fundamentally impoverishes "speech" in two ways. First, mythic speech is a-historical, "depriv[ing] the object of which it speaks of all History" (151). "The very principle of myth" Barthes continues, is that it seeks to "naturalize" history (111-17, 129). This "privation" or "evaporation" of history impoverishes the object of myth until "all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from. Or even better: [the beautiful object] can only come from eternity: since the beginning of time, it has been made for bourgeois man [. . .]" (151). Second, Barthes argues, "myth is depoliticized speech" in a "bourgeois society" (his emphasis) (143). This is the second way in which cultural mythologies are impoverished in bourgeois/popular culture. While Barthes argues that we must consider the notion of the "political in its deeper meaning, as describing the whole of human relations in their real, social structure," the "operational movement" at play in the depoliticization of Lange's "Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California," is perfectly legible in the contemporary sense of the political as well. Furthermore, this de-politicizing function (what Barthes calls the "active value" of the prefix "de-") is inscribed in Lange's "Destitute pea picker" the very instant popular culture (as ideology) hails the photo by its new, mythic name: "Migrant Mother." As Barthes reminds us, "The function of myth is to empty reality: it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence" (143).

⁷⁶ Benjamin, "Theses" 257.

As Roy Stryker noted, “Migrant Mother” “has all the suffering of mankind in her but all of the perseverance too. A restraint and a strange courage. You can see anything you want to in her. She is immortal.”⁷⁷ And as we have seen, critics like Ngai suggest that this restraint was instrumental in delivering the FSA’s preferred political narrative of racialized

The sense of restraint however, is not connected to the mother’s presumed ethno-race or produced by the sense of “racial transparency” traditionally thought to be connotated by Dust Bowl migrants’ whiteness in New Deal cultural formations. Instead, the sense of restraint Stryker gestures towards is produced by the tension between the family’s desperate physical circumstances and their eerie passivity—their total monolithic stillness in its shadow—which is inscribed in “Migrant Mother” by the image’s visual syntax. As one prominent critic has noted, the power of this photograph rests in its “narrative stasis [...]”: indeed, it is ironic that “little sense of migration or movement” is legible in a picture known to cultural history as “Migrant Mother.”⁷⁸ In place of migration or movement, or any indication of the slightest effort to distance or protect herself and her children from the source of their presumably “noble suffering,” the woman in Lange’s photograph is indeed restrained, perhaps courageous, but alarmingly so. I locate this alarming courage in the photograph’s problematic faith in the power of the aesthetic over the evolutionary human trauma responses of fight or flight (which Lange of course documented in other images from the ’30s). As a visual text, “Migrant Mother’s” response to what Stryker describes as the timeless suffering of all mankind (but is actually the very real, intimate, and historical suffering of one woman’s family) is an explicit *investment* in beauty, in art itself. The migrant mother’s profound beauty almost completely dominates the compositional logic of the image, in fact. This beauty is at once amplified by her desolate circumstances in the frame and also works to quiet those very same visual cues of historically situated poverty and desolation. Under Lange’s controlled portraiture technique, developed over years photographing San Francisco’s most prestigious families in her studio practice (the Levi-Strauses, the de Youngs, the Haases),⁷⁹ the “Migrant Mother’s” uncanny beauty becomes so overwhelming that the concrete textual signs of the family’s class position (particularly in this mythological mode) are far too easy to elide. Yet even Lange’s talent for capturing “beauty in unexpected places” doesn’t totally repress the stark material reality of the mother’s lived experience in California’s factories in the field.⁸⁰

Even in this key image of the Nipomo sequence (the only one of six that has achieved wide currency in the popular imagination), where the larger physical environment of the family’s poverty is entirely excluded from the frame by Lange’s portraiture and almost overshadowed by what Gordon describes as the mother’s “extraordinary beauty,” the tentpole in the foreground, obviously a branch scavenged from a tree, and the rough, dingy fabric of the tent that blurs into the background of the photo gesture toward a stark tale of economic dis-ease.

⁷⁷ Stryker qtd. in Hariman and Lucaites.

⁷⁸ Denning 137.

⁷⁹ Gordon 103.

⁸⁰ Gordon 235.

Here again, Roy Stryker is correct. In the text's mythic form as *Migrant Mother*, that suffering (produced by complex capitalist economic logic) is indeed reduced to the "immortal" "suffering of all mankind"—economic dis-ease is also dislocated from any particular social or historical class formation in "Migrant Mother." Ultimately, it is perhaps only due to the diachronic presence of the grapes of wrath cultural formation in late capitalist popular culture, that we are still able to connect the mythic, immortal *Migrant Mother* to a specific site of American economic rupture and class conflict. Certainly, as art critic Frank Getlein has argued, "Migrant Mother" has inserted itself "into our interior magic lanterns" to become (along with Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" and Botticelli's "Birth of Venus," he argues) one of the "stock of mental images we all carry around in our heads."⁸¹ But that image it seems (in its aestheticized and decontextualized iconicity), can be "about" almost anything.⁸²

In its subjugation of the photograph's visual cues of poverty into an overarching rhetoric of the mythic and "immortal" "suffering of mankind," and the individual beauty of one American Madonna, the popular imagination has been largely successful in its effort to depoliticize and dehistoricize the materialist class implications (capitalism's critical failure in the United States) that were likely quite legible for "Migrant Mother's" original audience during the Great Depression. Beyond the overwhelming force of aestheticized poverty in the photo, "Migrant Mother's" main visual referent, the Christian tableaux of the Madonna and Child (an oft performed critical reading of Lange's text) further attempts to consolidate this "class-washing" of Lange's text. While Madonna and Child iconography in Western art history typically sanitizes the stables of Bethlehem with great care, Lange's contribution to this tradition ultimately refuses this kind of class-washing. While careful to not represent poverty in such abject terms that it might alienate or alarm middle- and upper-class American viewers (recalling that far too many critics have incorrectly claimed that the highbrow, managerial-class reformist magazine *Survey Graphic* was the first to publish "Migrant Mother" in 1936), the photograph absolutely shows signs of the family's material hardship, even before Lange's original title highlights the family's "destitution."

The clothing of the mother and her children, for example, are tattered and torn. Similarly, the oldest child's hair is tangled and unkempt and the child's partially clenched fist (echoed by the mother's famous "reflexive" hand gesture) is stained with dirt, but

⁸¹ Getlein qtd. in Sprin 50-51.

⁸² "As public property," Linda Gordon notes, "['Migrant Mother'] was available for any person or corporation to use for any purpose whatever without fee" (241). This fact, in addition to the power of the original photograph, has resulted in some truly incredible uses and re-imaginings in the last eighty-odd years, including her re-inscription as an African American woman by the Black Panthers in the 1970s; by an ad agency for a TV commercial called "California and the Dream Seekers," featuring a blonde woman in a classic red convertible in the 1990s; as a critique of continuing economic inequality in the United States on the cover of *The Nation*, where the mother is dressed in a blue Walmart vest and nametag to accompany a cover story titled "Down and Out in Discount America" in the 2000s; and as a gender-non-binary celebration of matriarchal power in a self-portrait by a San Francisco commercial fashion photographer as recently as 2016 (Hariman and Lucaites; Elias, "Lange in There Baby").

again, not in a way that might produce an abject response from the cultural imaginary.⁸³ Likewise, the infant this mother holds in one arm while her cherub-like children lean on her shoulders is dirty around the mouth and eyes, and this is particularly noteworthy. Dirt and dust, as Shumsky has shown, were associated with disease during the Depression, and both were linked explicitly to the immigrant, urban poor in the cultural (particularly Progressive/reformist) imagination of the period. Yet these signs of poverty no more challenge “Migrant Mother’s” claim to national belonging in the cultural imaginary than the family’s dirty bodies disrupt the image’s ability to function in its main art-historical register as a secular reimagining of the Madonna and Child (in spite of the scriptural edict that cleanliness is next to Godliness).

Perhaps that is because much of this rhetorical work was accomplished in the cultural imagination by simply assigning the photograph a new name, “Migrant Mother,” rather than naming the image via Lange’s original caption, “Destitute Peapickers in California; A 32 Year Old Mother of Seven Children, February 1936.” True, the photographic syntax of this image—its subjugation of visual cues of poverty into the individual beauty of one American Madonna and an overarching rhetoric of mythic and “immortal” suffering—remains constant regardless of the title. But its openness as a mythic sign (to return to Stryker’s idea that “you can see anything you want to in her”) is due in large part to its renaming in the cultural imagination.

Though Lange did not perfect the general caption form until her 1939 fieldwork, her notion of the general caption form was legible in the specific captions she wrote during her early years working for the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration, including the captions to her Nipomo photographs of 1936. “Migrant Mother” is often credited, if not celebrated by critics for its iconicity. While its new name undoubtedly played an important role in the production of its iconic status, a closer look at Lange’s caption for this particular photo, which doubles as her intended title in my reading, as well as the captions Lange attached to the other photographs in the Nipomo sequence suggests something much different than the straight forward representation of racial transparency or the abstract, universal, American subjecthood of whiteness. In other words, by first recovering Lange’s original name for the “Migrant Mother” then by putting that text (words and image) in dialogue with her work of 1939, I argue that Dorothea Lange’s cultural productions of the Depression must be read as a dialectic between “iconicity” (or the easily and often reproduced) and specificity (the racialized, historicized, and the local). Furthermore, in spite of the best efforts of the racialized logic of the New Deal state, the culture industry of the Depression-era, and the US popular imagination itself, I argue that Lange’s RA/FSA photography (like Steinbeck’s novel), doesn’t simply “displace” Mexican and other ethno-racial minorities from its representational field of vision, as Denning and others suggest, but rather attempts to zoom in on the intricately interwoven fabric, or texture, of race and class through the unity of aesthetic form and social location in the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

⁸³ Hariman and Lucaites describe the “involuntary gesture of her right arm reaching up to touch her chin as communicating tensions between “a sense of individual worth and class victimage.”

These competing significations of the grapes of wrath cultural formation (the Okie migrant as symbol of both hope and dignity, but also fear and failure), are legible across most if not all texts of the Dust Bowl Migration. Yet what these cultural productions (and sometimes critical frameworks) seem unable to reconcile is the problem of ethno-race in America during the 1930s.⁸⁴ Yet even in this “failure,” the grapes of wrath cultural formation “[puts] ideology to work” and exposes “the [ideological] framing limits of what we take as self-evident truths, as common sense” about racial formation in the socially symbolic acts of the Great Depression.⁸⁵ While “Migrant Mother” and *The Grapes of Wrath* certainly failed to accurately inscribe historicized racial form into their textual productions, that failure opened up valuable aesthetic and discursive spaces for counterhegemonic cultural intervention from other writers and photographers laboring from the periphery of the culture industries and the New Deal state during the period. While Lange’s and Steinbeck’s hegemonic narratives of the grapes of wrath cultural formation appear to instantiate the ideological “‘common sense’ of the time,” as we have seen, the racial unconscious of both these artists and the cultural formation they helped define is indeed more complicated. Beyond listening for the racialized static in the overwhelming silence of these texts hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, however, it is also essential to explicitly listen for other that can also help us more fully understand problems of racial formation, representation, and political inclusion in the grapes of wrath cultural formation. For this, I look to the counterhegemonic narratives of Américo Paredes and Robert Hemmig in hopes that their texts, previously overlooked or misclassified, but now properly situated within the grapes of wrath cultural formation, might “reveal the heterogeneous systems that resist the formation of a unitary base of truth.”⁸⁶

If, as critics have suggested, Steinbeck’s and Lange’s texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation threatened to reveal the nation’s Anglo-American Dream as a dystopic nightmare during the Great Depression, Américo Paredes’ text allows us to glimpse how colonized and minoritized artists of the period, whose ethnic-American Dreams were fitful and restless long before the crash of 1929, the rise of the New Deal order, and the economic and environmental crises of the Dust Bowl, attempted to reconcile the “ironic” and “disturbing” contradictions of both the New Deal state and the grapes of wrath cultural formation in light of their own historical memories and ongoing lived experiences of racialized economic exploitation, marginalization, and a trifecta of violent repression (state-sponsored, capitalist, and vigilante).

⁸⁴ Following cultural critic José David Saldívar’s *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies*, which draws on historian David Hollinger’s formulation of “ethno-race,” I will use the term to signify the complex political, historical, social, and linguistic tensions produced by the interaction of race, ethnicity, and power in a heterogenous nation like the United States. Hollinger has pointed out in *PostEthnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* that while race is a useful concept in reference to “the lines along which people have been systematically mistreated on the basis of certain physical characteristics” it begins to break down “[f]rom a postethnic perspective” (35, 34). In the context of my work, the critical construction of “ethno-race” allows for a more nuanced conception of race and ethnicity, dominant and subaltern, and majority and minority than either ethnicity, race, or national origin alone can accommodate.

⁸⁵ R. Saldívar 11, 12, 17.

⁸⁶ Thompson qtd. in R. Saldívar 13; R. Saldívar 13.

One critic has argued that Steinbeck's and Lange's Okie exodus narrative "gained much of its popularity because it was told as a story of white Protestant 'plain people.' The depression years had seen white migrants from the Southwest displacing the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers [in the fields]" but "the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers" had by and large been displaced in the popular cultural imagination even earlier.⁸⁷ While this critical story of Tom Joads and Migrant Mothers "displacing the Mexican" first from the fields of California agriculture then from the fields of Depression-era cultural production has long been taken for granted by American studies scholars, the question of race, representation, and political inclusion in the hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation is not nearly so simple. And as I will show in the next sections of this chapter, this critical narrative itself fails to listen hard enough for other voices from the Great Depression, which were also speaking from within the grapes of wrath cultural formation, to clarify the racialized static and challenge the cultural silence of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Lange's "Migrant Mother" with their own crystal-clear aesthetic voices. In the next section, I recover one of those voices who attempted to break the racialized silences of the grapes of wrath cultural formation by analyzing Américo Paredes' *George Washington Gomez: A Mexicotexan Novel*.

George Washington Gómez: The "Mexicotexan" Borderlands of the Great Depression

In his Nomination Acceptance Speech of 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously pledged "a new deal for the American people."⁸⁸ Elsewhere in the speech, Roosevelt makes another promise that is not as well remembered in the popular historical imagination today. Roosevelt pledges to

resume the country's interrupted march along the path of real progress, of real justice, of real equality for all of our citizens, great and small.⁸⁹

One way to understand the hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation is as aesthetic responses to the abstract political promises Roosevelt made on behalf of the New Deal state in his 1932 Nomination Acceptance Speech. Both Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Lange's "Migrant Mother" attempt to come to terms with the New Deal state's failure to keep these convention speech promises in light of the white Dust Bowl migrants' experience in California. This experience was not defined by progress, justice, or equality, but instead by economic exploitation, forced migration, and the violent, repressive tactics of labor, the state, and mobs of proto-fascist

⁸⁷ Denning 267.

⁸⁸ Roosevelt, "Acceptance Speech."

⁸⁹ Roosevelt, "Acceptance Speech."

vigilantes. Many of these experiences weren't unique to California's factory farms in the 1930s. Some weren't even all that new to America's white agricultural working class.

But the grapes of wrath cultural formation's story of American exodus, as James Gregory has argued, was "a spectacle rich in drama and pathos," whose themes of "westward migration, the search for opportunity, and the dignity of the American farmer" presented themselves in "ironic and disturbing ways" to Depression audiences.⁹⁰ These themes "seemed to suggest a pathetic failure of the American Dream, a failure of all the promises of opportunity that formed its vital core, a failure which if true confirmed Americans' worst fears about the meaning of their Depression-era experience."⁹¹

But what did Roosevelt's campaign pledge of a new deal mean for the nation's ethno-racial subjects during the 1930s? What did his promise to "resume the country's interrupted march" towards the high-minded ideas of abstract democratic liberalism mean for the nation's Mexican-American citizens who would largely be excluded from participating in that march for at least another generation? And what did the grapes of wrath cultural formation and its critique of the failure of the Anglo-American Dream mean to minoritized and colonized subjects in the US-Mexico Borderlands for whom the "pathetic failure" of the promises of the New Deal state (to say nothing of the promises of the American Dream) were simply facts of everyday life?⁹² While the hegemonic voices of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, as we just saw, successfully racialized whiteness in their most famous cultural productions from the 1930s, these questions were indeed "a room of experience" into which most artists of the grapes of wrath cultural formation could not, or would not, enter.⁹³ While John Steinbeck and Dorothea Lange were unable to enter that room in their cultural productions from the Great Depression, proto-Chicano author, scholar, and musician Américo Paredes was. He would do so explicitly in one of the most important texts of the Chicana literary tradition, *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel*. And by walking through that door and seeking to answer some of these questions about racial formation, cultural representation, and political inclusion he would not only challenge the racialized cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies of the grapes of wrath cultural formation: he would ultimately succeed in bringing that cultural formation through that door of experience with him.

⁹⁰ Gregory xiv.

⁹¹ Gregory xiv.

⁹² As legal historian Mae M. Ngai has shown, "The legal racialization of these ethnic groups' [Asians and Mexicans] national origin cast them as permanently foreign and unassimilable to the nation" ultimately producing "'alien citizens'—Asian Americans and Mexican Americans born in the United States with formal U.S. citizenship but who remained alien in the eyes of the nation." (7-8). Furthermore, Ngai argues that "alien citizenship flowed directly from the histories of conquest, colonialism, and semicolonialism that constituted the United States' relations with Mexico and in Asia [...]. For Mexicans, the concept of alien citizenship captured the condition of being a foreigner in one's former native land. The immigration experiences and racial formations of Asians and Mexicans in twentieth-century America cannot be understood apart from these legacies of conquest and colonialism" (8).

⁹³ Steinbeck, *Travels* 245.

In his introduction to *George Washington Gómez*, Chicano novelist Rolando Hinojosa argues that we must read Américo Paredes's recovered *bildungsroman* as "an historical work, not as an artifact [...] as a dated work, but not in the pejorative sense."⁹⁴ Paredes's novel is indeed historical, perhaps even hyper-historical. *George Washington Gómez* is "set at the beginning of the century, written near mid-century, but published at the end of the century," making it a "curiously polytemporal text."⁹⁵ Paredes drafted the novel between 1936 and 1940 and the manuscript was then put aside, "lost," for almost half a century. During that time, Paredes served in World War Two as a journalist for *The Pacific Stars and Stripes*, a military publication. After the war, he married and raised a family and completed his education (BA, MA, PhD in rapid succession) from the University of Texas. Paredes' dissertation was the first publication of his long and storied career: *With His Pistol in His Hands: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* immediately established Paredes' reputation as a scholar of folklore, ethnography, and is widely seen as the founding critical text of US-Mexico Borderlands studies. Paredes stumbled across the lost manuscript of *George Washington Gómez* in the bottom of a drawer sometime in the late 1980s. The novel was published with virtually no revisions by Arte Público Press in 1990.

In tracing the life of its protagonist, *George Washington Gómez*, from the small town of Brownsville, Texas, situated on the US-Mexico border across from to Yale University and back again, the novel incorporates a number of historic events from the twentieth-century: the history of violence along the US-Mexico border in the decades following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, the economic crash of 1929, the Great Depression, and the run-up to World War Two.

Critical interpretations of *George Washington Gómez* have been deeply impacted by this complicated polytemporality. To situate *George Washington Gómez* within American literary history, we must first decide to which historical period the text properly belongs: the Great Depression or the Neoliberal Nineties. Certainly a case can be made for both historical framings. José David Saldívar has suggested we might understand *George Washington Gómez* in its relation to the "exemplary postmodern year 1990" (38). In contrast, Ramón Saldívar, has argued that Paredes' novel is "a product of the Great Depression" that "speaks from the past to the present" ("Borderlands" 274)? Both are right. Paredes's concerns in *George Washington Gómez* prefigure postmodernity's obsession with self-reflexivity and contemporary ethnic-American literature's considerations of race, class, and subject formation. Yet as a narrative that is deeply connected to the aesthetic forms and social locations of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, especially in part four, "La Chilla," Paredes' novel can be situated within the artistic, political, and social milieu of Lange, Steinbeck, and the Great Depression. As a diachronic cultural formation, both historical framings of *George Washington Gómez*, either the Great Depression or the Neoliberal Nineties would be productive ways to approach the text. But in relation to the problem of the textual erasure

⁹⁴ Hinojosa 5, 6.

⁹⁵ Saldívar, R. "Borderlands," 274.

of ethno-racial American subjects from the cultural memory of the Great Depression and the grapes of wrath cultural formation, I will read Paredes novel diachronically, from the present to the past and back again. I re-historicize *George Washington* by reading this “Mexicotexan novel” as a cultural production of the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

Américo Paredes’ “proto-Chicano” *bildungsroman*, *George Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel*, functions as a socially symbolic acts of “counterhegemonic resistance to the dominant ideolog[ies]” of the grapes of wrath cultural formation in the popular racial imagination of the 1930s, and even the critical imagination of today.⁹⁶

Perhaps more than any other contemporary US writer of the 1930s, Steinbeck’s influence on *George Washington Gómez* is the most significant. As José David Saldívar has noted, *George Washington Gómez*’s formal strategy of “expansion and contraction [...] echoes the structural features of one of the most sensational modernist social protest novels of the period, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*” (41). By expansion and contraction that Saldívar describes is the oscillating formal movement of both texts from the general to the specific; from an expanded social and historical view of the Depression in the United States to a contracted view of how these circumstances effect the texts’ central characters and determines their experiences in south Texas, and Oklahoma and California, respectively. The entirety of *The Grapes of Wrath* is based on this pattern.

Paredes adapts and utilizes this pattern of expansion and contraction most dramatically in part three of *George Washington Gómez*, not coincidentally at the moment his text turns to consider the historical crisis of the Great Depression. In an example of his appropriation of Steinbeck’s technique, *George Washington Gómez* represents the effects of an impacted labor-market on both under-employed wage laborers as well as those seeking new employment through the use of several generalized, representational characters who appear in brief vignettes that bleed into each other.

Recalling the nearly 25% unemployment rate in the United States at the height of the Depression, the text evokes layoffs at a department store and an airport, and repeatedly thematizes the same kind of quest for low-wage work that concerns much of *The Grapes of Wrath* as well. We follow generalized characters in *George Washington Gómez*, Paredes “Mexicotexan laborers” as they stand in line at federal relief agencies, apply for jobs as clerks, chase rumors of employment unloading trucks, and are finally consolidated in the fields as low-wage laborers. From this social history vis-à-vis representative characters and their conditions, the text’s gaze rapidly shifts focus, zooming in on the novel’s protagonist, Gualinto. Young George searches for work amidst *la chilla* (Paredes’s term of signification for the Depression) eventually taking a job distributing circulars for a local grocery store at twenty-five cents a day (Paredes 196-201).

In the context of the novel at large *George Washington Gómez* spends relatively few pages in the mode of *The Grapes of Wrath*’s inter-chapters. Nevertheless, these pages are significant because it is here that we find Paredes’s most explicit critique of Steinbeck’s racial imagination as well as his most substantial rewriting of Steinbeck’s text as well. While both John Steinbeck and Américo Paredes were contributing to what

⁹⁶ Saldívar, R.

Michael Denning has called “the laboring of American culture” through their textual productions of the 1930s, their distinctive ideological positions in relation to the problems of the period can be allegorized in part through their competing significations of the era itself (xvi, 228). Steinbeck’s “Depression” is both challenged and complicated by Paredes as “la chilla”:

For some time now, the newspapers had been telling of strange things happening in the North. Men were blowing out their brains in Chicago [...The Mexicotexan laborer] heard about the people of Oklahoma, who were leaving their land, getting on their trucks and going west. To the Mexicotexan laborer, anybody who owned a truck was rich [...].

La Chilla, Mexicans called it. The Squeal [...]. Sugar is two cents a pound and men are two cents a dozen, Mexicans half-price. (Paredes 194-5)

Here we see the Depression is initially represented through the standard tropes of the period: ruined bankers committing suicide after the crash and the rural poor crossing the country along Route 66 in their jalopies. For Paredes, the Depression, Okies, and ultimately the grapes of wrath cultural formation’s engagement in the social location of American racial form fail to signify. First, according to Paredes and his Mexican characters, the Depression is always-already unable to articulate ethno-race as a category of social difference. Second, it fails to signify the kind of profound, underclass poverty that characterized the cross-ethnic experience of many in the Jim Crow South and the US-Mexico Borderlands.

As we have seen, Steinbeck described the problem of racial representation later in his career as “a room of experience into which I cannot enter.” This problem for Steinbeck is also connected to larger questions of how and why the nation told itself the story of the Great Depression. As Denning notes, “the ‘grapes of wrath’ narrative gained much of its popularity because it was told as a story of white Protestant ‘plain people.’ The depression years had seen white migrants from the Southwest displacing the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers [in the fields ...]. But the Mexican and Filipino farmworkers had been displaced in fiction earlier” (267). While Steinbeck’s novels of the period—both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle*—certainly participated in this type of textual displacement of ethno-racial subjects, Mae Ngai has argued that the administrators of Roosevelt’s New Deal programs, on the other hand, were also active in constructing a racially selective vision of the period for their own ideological ends. According to Ngai, this ideological commitment to representations of racial homogeneity on the part of New Deal administrators not only effected the programs themselves, but ultimately impacted the cultural producers of the Popular Front as well: “the FSA chose white migrants for its [labor camp] social experiments in part because they presented a conservative, docile image to the public. Dorothea Lange’s iconic photograph ‘Migrant

Mother' delivered the FSA's preferred message that migratory workers were white, pathetically poor, singular, and passive" (136).

In his counter-construction of "La Chilla," then, Paredes first acknowledges the hegemonic narratives of the grapes of wrath cultural formation and the dominant racial ideologies of the period. Next, Paredes explicitly inscribes the figure of the Mexicotexan laborer into these standard narratives of the the Great Depression's cultural imagination. Paredes challenges the displacement and erasure of the ethnic-American subject not only from Steinbeck's text but also, historically, from Depression era discourses at large. Once the figure of the ethnic-American laborer is allowed narrative representation, their presence initiates a deconstructive challenge to what Denning has called Steinbeck's overarching "racial rhetoric" in *The Grapes of Wrath* (267).⁹⁷

This challenge takes the form of a direct address to Steinbeck's Joads and the economic logic of poverty motivated many artists of the grapes of wrath cultural production to intervene in the Great Depression's social locations of economic crisis:

[The Mexicotexan laborer] heard of some sharecropper families who had nothing to eat but flour and bacon. The Mexican laborer, who had subsisted on tortillas most of his life, wondered how people who could afford biscuits and bacon could be poor."⁹⁸

While both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *George Washington Gómez* criticize the capitalist logic which dictates that "Sugar is two cents a pound and men are two cents a dozen," it is primarily through Paredes's text that the deeper racial logic of capital becomes legible.

⁹⁷ See Denning, 267-8. Denning argues that Steinbeck's "racial populism deeply inflects *The Grapes of Wrath*" and that Steinbeck's version of the "Okie exodus" reinforces "interpretations of New Deal populism as sentimental and conservative" (267-8). Denning then goes on to describe Steinbeck's novel in contrast to Carry McWilliams's *Factories in the Field* which—while linked to *The Grapes of Wrath* since publication—reconstructs the history of migrant labor in the Southwest as the history of "Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, Armenian, Filipino, and Mexican workers" (Denning 267). Denning points out that for McWilliams the Dust Bowl refugees were simply the most recent laborers in a long tradition of agricultural migratory workers in California. While Denning is correct to maintain that Steinbeck and McWilliams (like Steinbeck and Paredes) had different representational concerns in their respective texts, Denning fails to consider the moment in *The Grapes of Wrath* where Steinbeck sheds historical light, similar to McWilliams, on the long line of laborers who were exploited by California agribusiness before the arrival of his Joads. According to Steinbeck, "farming became industry" in California and the owners "imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves: Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos" (232). Implicit in this chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath* is both Steinbeck's historical consciousness of racialized labor in the Southwest—which Denning fails to acknowledge exists in his text—as well as a critique of the exploitative system that profited from the labor of those Mae Ngai has described as "impossible subjects."

⁹⁸ Paredes 195. It should be noted that the extravagance of "biscuits and bacon" evoked by the speaker in Paredes's novel is something of a simplification of Steinbeck's text. While the family lives on side meat and fried dough in the early chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, by chapter 19 we encounter a description of Okie poverty that can hardly be equivocated or mistaken for luxury: "Which'd you ruther for your kids, dead now or dead in two years with what they call malnutrition? Know what we et all week? Biled nettles an' fried dough! Know where we got the flour for the dough? Swep' the floor of a boxcar" (Steinbeck 236).

“Mexicans,” precisely because of their status as what Ngai calls “impossible subjects” are “half-price”: degraded and devalued by the market to an extent Steinbeck’s Okies can never be (Paredes 195; Ngai 5). This critique of the popular conception of Depression-era poverty and the racialization of class, a critique of the type of lily-white “pathetic poverty” which Lange’s “Migrant Mother” and Steinbeck’s Joads symbolized, only truly becomes legible when we inscribe the grapes of wrath cultural formation with Paredes’ novel. In this way, *George Washington Gómez* not only poses a direct challenge to the textual erasure of ethno-racial American subjects in the grapes of wrath cultural formation: it also speaks into that cultural silence in a clear and resounding voice.

As we have seen, Paredes first adopts Steinbeck’s narrative mode and then uses that very mode to critique the grapes of wrath cultural formation’s elision of ethno-racial subjects from the cultural and agricultural fields of the US-Mexico Borderlands. Clearly, Paredes understood his own project in part four of *George Washington Gómez* in relation to *The Grapes of Wrath* as both response and revision. As a response, however, *George Washington Gómez* is better understood as dialogically engaged with Steinbeck’s text, as opposed to dialectically negating it. A dialogic model helps account for Paredes’s interesting form of Bakhtinian ventriloquation (by which I mean both his text’s appropriation of Steinbeck’s dominant narrative voice and the heteroglossic multiplicity of voices that speak in the section titled “La Chilla”). In contrast to the pure difference of a Hegelian reading, a dialogic view of *George Washington Gómez* and *The Grapes of Wrath* makes space for a reading of both the “dissensus” and consensus created by allowing the two texts to “speak” to each other (Bercovitch viii). While the past few pages have considered moments of dissensus between these two distinct textual visions of the 1930s, largely on the grounds of the authors’ ideologically invested readings of ethno-racial categories of difference, we should now consider a few instances in the two texts where their reverberations against each other produce something approaching consensus if not harmony: a shared vision and collective critique of significant problems of the period, which affected both communities they sought to represent through their respective texts. In their textual productions of the late-1930s both Steinbeck and Paredes, for example, shared an interest in documenting the ways in which representatives of what Althusser, following Marx, later called the (Repressive) State Apparatus implicated themselves in the lives of subaltern communities during the Depression.⁹⁹

According to Althusser, “the State is explicitly conceived as a repressive apparatus” (1487). The various functionaries of the state—the police, the army, the church, the school—“enables the ruling class . . . to ensure their domination over the

⁹⁹ This turn towards Althusser provides an opportunity to pause and consider my description of Steinbeck’s Okies as a subaltern community. Admittedly, I am aware that a certain tension exists between describing Steinbeck’s text and his characters as both ideological agents of cultural and racial hegemony, implicated in the displacement of other texts and ethnic-American subjects to the periphery of cultural discourse, and at the same time as members of an exploited subaltern community. This tension is at least partially resolved by returning to R. Saldívar’s notion of polytemporality. From the temporality of Steinbeck’s contemporary reading audience, the Joads were indeed a subaltern community. From the temporality of our critical position, we can reflexively implicate Steinbeck’s characters and text in the subjugation of other voices, texts, and ethno-racial subjects.

working class” through a combination of both repressive and ideological controls (Althusser 1487). Both Steinbeck and Paredes represent overt state repression (in the form of police brutality) in the service of the interests of the “ruling elite.” In Steinbeck’s text that ruling elite is largely figured as the shadowy and faceless “owning men” of California while in Paredes’s text those same elite are the more general “Anglotexans”—the line of difference between elite and subaltern drawn not on the basis of ownership status but, like before, along ethno-racial lines. In *The Grapes of Wrath* the operation of the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) only becomes truly manifest after the Joads join the migrant circuit in California. In *George Washington Gómez*, however, the primary agents of state repression—the Texas Rangers—are present from the first pages of the novel onward and the tactics of terror and counterintelligence on the part of the state against its own ethnic-citizens frames the entirety of the narrative.

In Althusser’s formulation, the “‘machine’ of repression”—that is, the state and its various sponsored agencies—is historically figured in the service of “the ‘class’ of big landowners” (1487). Like Althusser, Steinbeck also connects monopolistic property accumulation (“the farms grew larger and the owners fewer”) with repressive state action on behalf of the ruling elite (Steinbeck 232). When an unscrupulous labor contractor, recruiting Okies on behalf of a large farmer in Tulare County, is challenged by a migrant to produce a license and sign a work order guaranteeing a specific wage (what the contractor characterizes as “‘talkin’ red, agitating trouble’”), an agent of the RSA is called in to intimidate the labors and defend the interests of the land owning elite (263). This challenge to the prerogatives of capital prompts the representative of agribusiness to call to a companion waiting nearby in an unmarked car: a deputy sheriff wearing “A heavy pistol holster hung on a cartridge belt around his waste” and a star pinned to his chest (Steinbeck 263). The laborer’s challenge to the unfair hiring practices of the “owning men” of California and his interrogation of the relationship between capital, the state, and the state sponsored agent of repression—“‘You see?’ Floyd cried. ‘If this guy’s on the level [the contractor], would he bring a cop along?’”—is met immediately with a threat of violence that is quickly actualized (Steinbeck 263).

In concert with *The Grapes of Wrath*’s representation of the Repressive State Apparatus’ offensive against its most powerless subjects, one of *George Washington Gómez*’s scenes of police repression is similarly situated. In Paredes’s text, a “group of dark-skinned men, waiting”—unemployed Mexican laborers—are confronted by “a heavy sweaty man with a pistol belt around his middle” (197).¹⁰⁰ One among the group is singled out, interrogated, threatened with violence (later beaten), and ultimately deported (Paredes 197-8). While Steinbeck’s sheriff is called into action when the going gets tough for the labor contractor, Paredes’s pair of officers are out enforcing immigration law. In the scene discussed above, Steinbeck’s sheriff is hailed after the prerogatives of capital

¹⁰⁰ Compare Steinbeck, 263-4, 236 and Paredes, 197-8. It is interesting to note the striking similarity of tone and in many cases identical diction in both texts’ representations of scenes of police repression and intimidation. Agents of the RSA, in both texts, are consistently represented as “heavy” “sweaty” men; the officers in each text even share the same name—Joe. In both cases, particular emphasis is placed on the gun, holster, and belt—usually slung low on “fat asses.” Perhaps this emphasis is both a reflection on and a critique of the Wild West mythos, which both Steinbeck and Paredes, as Southwesterners, knew well.

are challenged, but it is unclear whether Paredes's agents of the RSA are working on behalf of the Anglo agricultural establishment in south Texas, or on behalf of the unemployed Anglotexans who were forced by Depression era unemployment to compete with ethnic laborers for jobs in the fields. (One of Paredes's generalized Anglo narrators voices his racist concern with the latter circumstance: "These damn greasers! . . . Taking the bread out of white people's mouths" (196).) The deportation of ethnic fieldworkers, as Denning points out, was a favored tactic of agribusiness which served to discourage union organization and labor radicalism among ethnic laborers, who could then be replaced by their more politically conservative Anglo counterparts (267; Ngai 136).

While this shared interest in documenting repressive police tactics in both texts seems to situate *George Washington Gómez* and *The Grapes of Wrath* within the "documentary" tradition which has long characterized traditional interpretations of not only Steinbeck's text but the period at large, that narrative in fact must be complicated by Paredes's insistent question throughout *George Washington Gómez* which is articulated nearly every time his novel engages Steinbeck's. While both Steinbeck and Paredes can be read as representing "the people" and the effects of poverty, Depression, and repressive state action on those people in their respective texts, Paredes's text poses a supplemental question to Steinbeck's which can be simply stated: which "people" are we in fact talking about?

Steinbeck, who died of a heart attack in 1968, never had the opportunity to read one of the most significant responses to his text (ethnic or otherwise) ever produced. While the "monotemporality" of Steinbeck's life didn't allow direct response to Paredes's question, the polytemporality of *The Grapes of Wrath* suggests an answer that was available before the question was even posed. Rather than attempting to disguise his "racial rhetoric" in an assimilationist logic of *e pluribus unum*, which might argue that the Joads are more representational of than repressive to ethnic-American subjects, Steinbeck's text is un-self conscious and nearly self reflexive in articulating the reason for its interest in the Joads: "We ain't foreign. Seven generations back Americans, and beyond that Irish, Scotch, English, German. One of our folks in the Revolution, an' they was lots of our folks in the Civil War—both sides. Americans" (233). *The Grapes of Wrath* is hardly shy in defining the "who" the text is speaking of and speaking for.

If Steinbeck's apparent textual investment in whiteness informs or exposes his personal ideological commitments in relation to the problems of the Depression, then Paredes's text is revealing in a similar way. Like Steinbeck, Paredes's representational concerns in *George Washington Gómez* are closely linked to his ideological commitments. For Paredes, those commitments are both literary and political. They turn on not only Paredes's question of representation in the narratives of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, of who is the text inscribes in the cultural sphere and who it erases, but also on other related questions: Who has the text excluded (or repressed), and on what grounds? How does so-called proletarian literature figure the laboring American subject? In what ways are the dominant cultural narratives of the Depression (poverty, labor, the Okie exodus) problematic when situated in isolation? In what way is the mainstream textual production that has come to emblemize those narratives incomplete when situated outside of a literary history that would include texts like *George Washington*

Gómez? If Steinbeck's Depression era writing demonstrates an ideological commitment to a possessive investment in whiteness, then Paredes's early attempt at fiction can be said to prefigure his mature ideological interest in the conflict of cultures in America that he fully articulated in *With His Pistol in His Hands*. When this conflict of cultures becomes a conflict of literatures (and by extension ideologies)—as it does when Steinbeck and Paredes share the same epistemological space—each text is interrogated, and ultimately expanded, in a way otherwise impossible.

Inscribing the FSA's El Rio Archive on the Map of Steinbeck's America

As we have seen, earlier critics of Dust Bowl culture and Depression history argue that the aesthetic ideologies of several hegemonic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, such as Lange's "Migrant Mother," were explicitly racialized by New Deal administrators at the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration (RA/FSA). Beyond representation, Mae Ngai suggests, the New Deal's ideological and political commitment to whiteness also racialized access to and inclusion within the New Deal's FSA labor camp housing program for agricultural workers in California. These programs were made famous by Steinbeck's novel in 1939 and Ford's Hollywood adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1940 as the Dust Bowl migrants' only refuge from the filth, dehumanization, and vigilante violence that dominates life in the Hoovervilles and agribusiness camps in both texts. Ngai argues that "the FSA chose white migrants for its [labor camp] social experiments in part because they presented a conservative, docile image to the public."¹⁰¹

Yet as we've seen, even Steinbeck and Lange weren't quite as myopic on matters of racial representation and political inclusion as these readings at first suggest. And surprisingly, neither was the New Deal state. The FSA, in fact, not only "included" non-Anglo agricultural workers in their federal housing migrant camp experiments that many Dust Bowl texts celebrate and Ngai's scholarship problematizes, but the state actively supported a group of *striking* Mexican agricultural workers in one small town in southern California, sixty miles north-west of Los Angeles called El Rio. One reason we know the FSA (the same New Deal agency within the Department of Agriculture that funded Lange's work in Nipomo) was building and managing these migrant camps to support the labor unionism of ethno-racial agricultural workers in southern California is because a small group of independent scholars visited the El Rio FSA camp over two summers near the end of the Depression (1940-41). These scholars, Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin, and photographer Robert Hemmig, captured the narratives of these striking Mexican-American workers in photographs, musical field recordings, and oral history interviews.

While the two archivists, Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin, were rooted in the same Columbia University academic community that produced New Deal Brain Trustee Rexford Tugwell and his Columbia protégé turned RA/FSA administrator Roy Stryker, neither Todd, Sonkin, nor photographer Robert Hemmig, were formally affiliated with

¹⁰¹ Ngai 136.

the FSA or on the payroll of a New Deal agency while working in El Rio, California. Their multi-year project in FSA camps up and down the state of California, however, did benefit directly from the policies and best practices of the New Deal technocracy via the Works Progress Administration's "Folksong Questionnaire." And more importantly, their El Rio archive was produced with the explicit approval and material support of the Library of Congress and the Assistant in Charge of the Archive of American Folk Song, the legendary Alan Lomax. Yet (unlike Lange) these artists and archivists ultimately worked from the periphery, not the center, of the New Deal state's cultural apparatus.

This small archive from El Rio, California appears to be mostly forgotten today, overshadowed by Stryker's voluminous Historical Section and Lomax's own work for the Library of Congress, where he was one of the first to record the grapes of wrath cultural formation's "Shakespeare in overalls," Woody Guthrie.¹⁰² Nevertheless, the work of Todd, Sonkin, and Hemmig was significant enough to warrant an invitation from Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt to the white House to play their field recordings for the President and First Lady before World War Two.¹⁰³ In my estimation, this peripheral (but still clearly legible) relationship between ethno-racial agricultural workers in El Rio, archivists from east coast academia, and the center of the New Deal state's political and cultural apparatus makes the El Rio archive more significant for scholarship in multiple fields of cultural inquiry than its individual pieces might first suggest. In part, this is because of the complex triangulation of social location from which the El Rio archive was produced. This triangulation, I argue, gave the rag-tag, informal, leftist/academic "Historical Section" from Manhattan the ability to pose more complex questions about racial formation and political inclusion through their cultural productions from Southern California precisely because they were laboring from the periphery of the New Deal state.¹⁰⁴ While similar questions about racial formation and political inclusion can be glimpsed through Lange's FSA photography, as I will demonstrate, they were certainly more difficult to engage from the politically contested center of the USDA/RA/FSA, where Lange herself was embedded, an argument I'll consider more fully in the following pages as I listen to the racialized silences of "Migrant Mother."

Perhaps the complex socio-geographical-political positionality of the El Rio archive helps us account for the strange undervaluation and critical neglect of Todd's, Sonkin's, and Hemmig's work which I encountered in the scholarly literature. While important questions emerge from the recovery of this archive, virtually none of these

¹⁰² I borrow this phrase from the title of Dickstein's chapter on Guthrie in *Dancing in the Dark: "Shakespeare in Overalls: An American Troubadour"* (pp. 496-506).

¹⁰³ See also the brief (but informative) article by the Library of Congress, "The Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin Collecting Expedition" and also Norm Cohen's "Songcatchers in the West: Other Traditions," in Scott B. Spencer's *The Ballad Collectors of North America: How Gathering Folksongs Transformed Academic Thought*. Beyond these very preliminary historical and critical commentaries on the work of Todd, Sonkin, and Hemmig, my research is perhaps the first significant consideration of the Library of Congress' El Rio archive of 1940 and 1941. Certainly, this chapter is the first to place the El Rio archive and the social location of the El Rio FSA camp in the conversation with the texts and discourses of Steinbeck, Lange, and the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

¹⁰⁴ Recalling again that RA/FSA chief Rexford Tugwell, who was the spiritual and intellectual father of this generation of Columbia University thinkers, was openly known as "Rex the Red" in Washington, DC.

questions have yet been posed in relation to the cultural formations of the Great Depression. Indeed, by simply introducing the El Rio archive into critical debate on racial formation, cultural representation, and political inclusion during the Depression decade, many earlier critical assumptions are disrupted. While a thoroughgoing investigation into what the Library of Congress has named the “Todd and Sonkin Migrant Workers Collection” (some 533 pieces) is beyond the scope of this project, a careful consideration of this untapped archive would be an incredibly productive direction for future scholarship. As the first scholar to engage with the El Rio archive, my overview of this collection, and the questions guiding my reading are admittedly limited but I hope only the first of many future excavations. How, for example, does the El Rio archive help us reconsider racial formation, cultural representation, and political inclusion not only in relation to Lange’s famous FSA documentary photography from the ’30s, but in Steinbeck’s *America at large*? How does the El Rio archive help us come to terms with racial formation as a site of permanent crisis in the grapes of wrath cultural formation, and how does that reading inform our understanding of the relationship between racial formation, permanent crisis, and late capitalist popular culture? Placing El Rio photographer Robert Hemmig’s visual rhetoric in dialogue with Dorothea Lange’s photographic syntax in “Migrant Mother,” I believe, is a useful place to begin searching for answers to these questions.

Robert Hemmig’s visual rhetoric in the photographs from the El Rio FSA camp inscribe a number of interconnected aesthetic forms and social locations into the archival record of the grapes of wrath cultural formation including civic nationalism, the paternalism of the New Deal state, and the iconography of the plebian-heroic. One El Rio photograph, for example, titled “Three Men and Two Women Seated Behind a Table with a Microphone in Front of It” (figure 8), highlights the *de jure* rights of free speech, free assembly, and democratic process as key values of US civic nationalist ideology in ways that both recall Dorothea Lange’s 1934 photographs from the San Francisco General Strike (figure 9 and figure 10) and anticipates FDR’s “Four Freedoms” State of the Union address in 1941 and Norman Rockwell’s articulation of those freedoms into visual popular culture form for the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1943 (figure 11).

Hemmig’s “Three Men and Two Women” appears to focus on a young, unnamed Mexican community organizer, standing behind a makeshift “conference table” at a meeting in the El Rio FSA camp. While both the young Mexican man’s central location in the frame, as well as his position before a microphone in “Three Men and Two Women” certainly echoes Lange’s “Worker’s Unite!” taken during the San Francisco

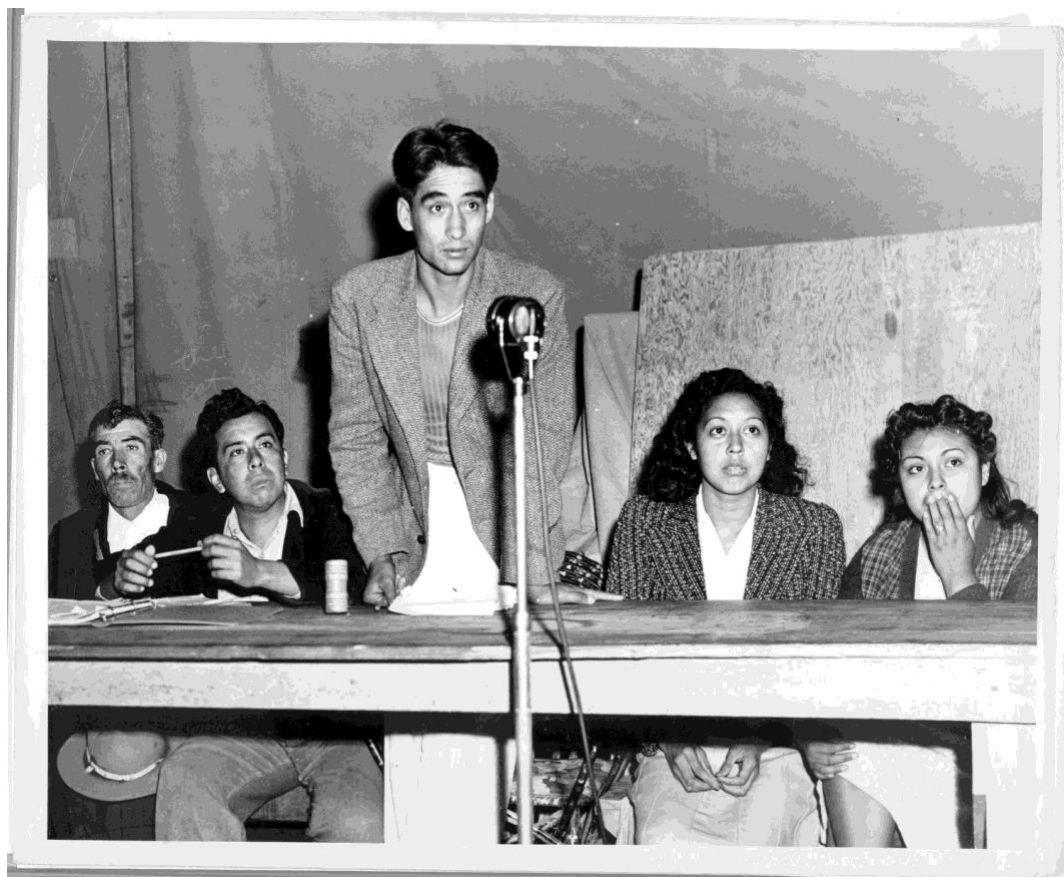


Figure 8

General Strike earlier in the Depression decade, there are important differences between these two proletarian pictures from California's cultural front. Besides Hemmig's explicit representation of American ethno-racial subjects, "Three Men and Two Women" also tells an important story about ethno-racial gender politics in California's factories in the field. By situating two young female Mexicana leaders on the same compositional plane (and literally at the same table) as two of their older male counterparts on the opposite side of the frame, "Three Men and Two Women" suggests a level of equality and activist participation on the part of gendered ethno-racial subjects that is largely absent in many other texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation and the Popular Front at large. While the young male Mexican agricultural laborer who leans into the microphone with a wooden gavel near his right hand might be read as upsetting the mathematical logic of gendered power among the leadership committee, it must be noted that he is in fact *not* the true center of the frame. Instead, the true center of Hemmig's "Three Men and Two Women" is the mass communication technology that is symbolic of free speech itself—the microphone.

The visual economy of "Three Men and Two Women" is also notable. One of Dorothea Lange's preferred techniques throughout her career was the selection and pairing of images in what she called "twos": "The twos are inseparable" she told a

reporter in 1965, on the occasion of an exhibition of her work. “In some cases, one of them is dominant to the other, so that the second is contributory. In some cases, they are perfectly balanced in importance: one amplifies the other. In some cases, they act completely together and make a loud noise.”¹⁰⁵ We can observe this technique in the juxtaposition of Lange’s “Workers, Unite!” with her “May Day Listener at Rally.” Regardless of how we read the relationship between these “twos,” either as inseparable, as dominant/subaltern, as coequal, or as unified, the fact remains that Lange’s visual economy in “Workers, Unite!” and “May Day Listener” requires *both* images in order to tell a complete story of civic nationalist ideology. The impassioned speech of the man at the microphone in “Workers, Unite!” (indicated as much by the plebian-heroic angle of Lange’s lens as by the quieter anatomical details in the photograph such as the vein that springs from his neck and the contacted muscles of his jaw) can only tell part of the story of the San Francisco General Strike of 1934 without its complimenting pair, its “two” in “May Day Listener.” It should also be noted that these paired images also reveal something of the regressive gender politics that played out along much of the Popular Front.

The visual economy of “Three Men and Two Women,” in fact, stands in marked contrast to Lange’s texts from the period, even as the two photographers work along the same ideological axis (civic nationalism). “Three Men and Two Women” compresses both speaker and listener, citizen-leader and citizen-subject into the same dense photographic frame. At the same time, this photograph attempts to shift the center of power and authority onto the imagined audience of migrant workers who remain just outside of the frame—who the camera’s eye does not see.

While Hemmig’s field notes for “Three Men and Two Women” and the other photographs from the El Rio FSA camp amount to little more than a few handwritten phrases scrawled on the back of the original prints of the images themselves (“El Rio – Mexican FSA Camp – 1940”), these photographs must still be read in relation to Dorothea Lange’s notion of the interdependency of word and image that she articulated through her theory of the “general caption” form, which she practiced and perfected for the FSA’s Historical Section throughout 1939.¹⁰⁶ Just as Lange argued against the primacy of the image and for the necessity of the union of text and image in order to fully represent the complex narratives she encountered during the Great Depression while working for the RA/FSA, Hemmig’s “Three Men and Two Women” is in fact only fully legible in conjunction with the interviews Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin collected in the same El Rio FSA camp where the three worked together to document California migrant voices in the wake of Steinbeck’s sensational novel and Lange’s widely circulated photographs.

Beyond social-democratic civic nationalism as a central social location of Hemmig’s El Rio FSA photography, New Deal paternalism is also legible in these archival images, which corresponds to other critic’s reading of the ideological function of Lange’s *Migrant Mother* and other texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation as well.

¹⁰⁵ Lange qtd. in Sprin 36.

¹⁰⁶ Anne Whinston See Sprin, *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs and Reports from the Field*.

Hemmig's photos from El Rio are important because they demonstrate that the same discursive moves that were at work in New Deal and Dust Bowl discourse in relation to the white, Protestant "Plains people" of the Okie exodus were similarly deployed in relation to the nation's ethno-racial, Mexican subjects through the contiguous social location of the FSA farm worker camps in California.

Hemmig's visual formulation of the state's youngest, most vulnerable ethno-racial subjects in "Group of Children Posing Under Sign That Reads 'US Department Of Agriculture Farm Security Administration Farm Workers Community'" (figure 12) is much more interesting than its long, bland, social-scientific title at first indicates. In the photograph, six young kids sit, stand, and dangle in front of a large billboard sign outside of the El Rio FSA camp. The photograph's title repeats verbatim the language that appears on the billboard, reminding us explicitly that these children have been "posed."

Hemmig's "Children Posing" hits the same notes of parental lack and the demand for paternalistic New Deal intervention as Dorothea Lange's more famous family portrait *Migrant Mother*, particularly in the latter's mythic form. "Migrant Mother" manages these notes with remarkable, almost miraculous visual economy: through the mere suggestion of paternal abandonment, Lange's photograph produced the necessary affect for its Depression-era audience to project the New Deal state, perhaps even FDR himself, into the gendered role of protector and provider (in sum *patria*) for the mother and children in her "Migrant Mother." Remarkably, the Depression-era cultural imagination achieved this substitution of the New Deal state for the presumably derelict father without the aid of any concrete referent in "Migrant Mother's" visual syntax to the New Deal itself.



Figure 9



Figure 10

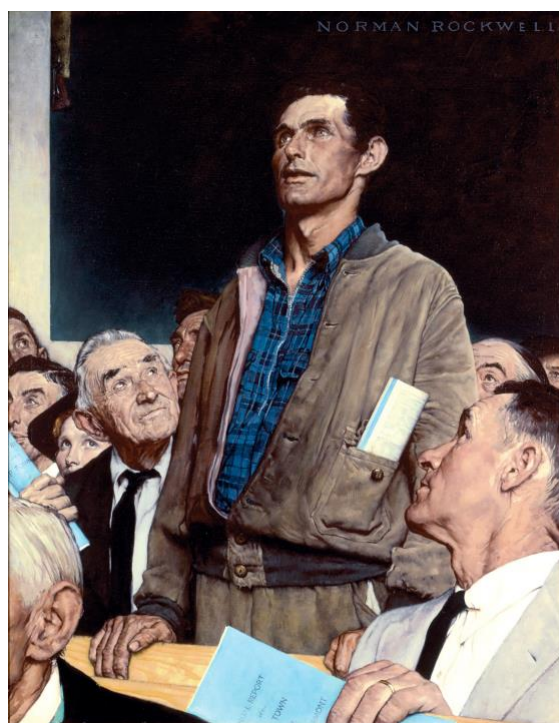


Figure 11



Figure 12

In other words, this substitution occurs almost as an autonomic response of the body politic to the abandonment of the family not only by the literal father but also figuratively by the promises of American political and economic systems (democratic liberalism and industrial/finance capitalism).

In Hemmig's "Children Posing," these same notes of parental lack and New Deal paternalism are sounded, even amplified, but they resonate in a much different register. The body of the mother dominates the frame in Lange's iconic photograph from Nipomo, providing shelter, comfort, and protection for her three children, who turn inwards, toward that body, away from both the documentary camera's eye of the technocratic state and the voyeuristic eye of their fellow citizen-viewers (pp. 15, figure 5). In contrast, there is no Mexican migrant mother to shelter and protect the state's young ethno-racial subjects in Hemmig's El Rio photograph: in fact, there are no parents, no caregivers, no adults at all.

In place of "Migrant Mother's" maternal body, Hemmig selects a literal billboard sign to dominate the visual syntax of his photograph. In place of Lange's purely rhetorical gestures toward the deadbeat father, or crises of democratic liberalism, capitalism, and ecology that the American cultural imagination obviously inferred into the narrative of "Migrant Mother," Hemmig's motherless migrant children explicitly hail the political, social, and spatial authority of the United States of America via the Department of Agriculture and the Farm Security Administration by name in "Children

Posing.” Several children in Hemmig’s picture literally lean against the sign, while others sit beneath it; another child trusts in the strength of the sign, a figure for the nation, to support his weight as he holds tight to the billboard as if it were steel monkey bars on a playground. Yet even under the supervision, care, and protection of their powerful and benevolent “Uncle Sam” in the photograph, the children still appear quite vulnerable to the viewer. They squint into the harsh Southern California sun as their young brown faces strain to make eye contact with Hemmig’s lens and meet the nation’s gaze. The older children in the photograph, between six and eight years old perhaps, try (almost successfully) to smile and look into the camera’s eye. But the younger boys gathered beneath Uncle Sam’s shingle simply can’t maintain the correct posture or expression for the picture: their faces squint, grimace, and turn away. One young Mexican child, perhaps four years old, rubs the harsh sun from his eyes as he sits in the dirt beneath the El Rio FSA camp sign with another dark-haired little boy.

This transition from the implied logic of abandonment and paternalism in “Migrant Mother” to the total lack of parental authority and the explicit inscription of the New Deal state in both “Children Posing’s” visual syntax and its title suggests that the effort to elicit similar responses of individual empathy from the photographic subjects’ fellow American citizens and political action or intervention from the state was contingent during the period on assumptions about ethno-race, cultural representation, and the racialized boundaries of national inclusion among contemporary, Depression-era US audiences. While the whiteness of Lange’s destitute migrants from Nipomo undoubtedly bolstered that photograph’s demand for the nation’s empathy and justified the widespread interpretation of the text as a call for FDR and the New Deal state to assume the explicit role of “step-father” to Lange’s white migrant mother and her children, Hemmig’s photograph suggests that identical demands on behalf of these young ethno-racial American children required a much more forceful visual syntax, perhaps in part because of the racist hierarchies that structured the boundary of national inclusion during the period. These racist hierarchies and their articulation as racialized limits of national inclusion made it difficult for the New Deal state apparatus (in its political and cultural formations) as well as the US popular imagination to interpellate these brown American children into the same forms of entitlement to resources yes, but also the same forms of comfort, protection, and even empathy that were so freely read into Lange’s photograph of their white childhood compatriots in “Migrant Mother” by the US popular imagination.

As Lange herself argued frequently throughout her life, a camera is a tool for learning how to see. Lange considered herself “lucky” to manage to glimpse the US Depression through that tool: “I saw these people [the Okies]. And I couldn’t wait, I photographed it. [...] Luckily my eyes were open to it. I could have been like all the other people on that highway and not seen it. As we don’t see what’s right before us. We don’t see it till someone tells us.”¹⁰⁷ Hemmig understood that it would be harder for the US popular imagination to “see” the same thing in the El Rio camp that they saw in Lange’s Nipomo photograph due to the racialized limits of national inclusion that were inscribed

¹⁰⁷ Riess 145.

not only in New Deal policy during the period, but perhaps more powerfully in the hearts and minds of the American people. Hemmig knew, like Lange, that the popular imagination likely wouldn't see what had been in plain sight for decades in California's factories in the field unless he "told us" in no uncertain terms. While much FSA photography was afforded the privilege of aesthetic subtlety (most notably the work of Lange and Walker Evans), Hemmig took no such chances with his peripheral El Rio photography of Mexican agricultural laborers and their lives, perhaps because of the historical relationship between the American state and their own ethno-racial subjects on the one hand and the prevalence of ethno-racial nationalism that was animated throughout the 1930s by radio demagogues like Father Charles Coughlin on the other.

While clearly distinct from Lange's iconic texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, Hemmig's "Children Posing" is at the same time directly engaged with that cultural formation. This engagement is legible in part through the larger compositional rhetoric of "Children Posing." This rhetoric, clearly dependent on the visual language of advertising and the logic of the roadside billboard recalls the Joad family's complex border crossings out of California's proto-fascist social relations in the private "Keene Ranch" of Ford's film and into the New Deal's California "Farmworkers' Wheat Patch Camp" in Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*, which debuted in theaters nationwide to popular and critical acclaim the year before Hemmig photographed the El Rio camp. In Ford's film, cinematographer Gregg Toland repeatedly uses shots of road signs, advertising signs, and other similar "visual images that dotted the symbolic environment" to track the Joads' cross-country migration in the film. Yet Toland's treatment of the FSA camp signage in *The Grapes of Wrath* is unique. Like Hemmig's photograph (and title/caption), Toland's cinematography is *incredibly* self-conscious in its treatment of the sign that marks the place where the white interstate migrant underclass in both the film and the novel symbolically "leave" the proto-fascist social relations of California and enter New Deal's civic nationalist space of the "United States of America."

After enduring death, discrimination, police repression, vigilante violence, and capitalist exploitation in the state of California, the Joads are pleasantly surprised to learn that the Wheat Patch Camp of the film (as a New Deal social location in California's Central Valley) is defined not by the proto-fascist, socio-economic spatial hegemony of California agribusiness, but by the civic-nationalist ideologies of the United States of America. In the novel, Ma Joad encounters this spatial logic of internal-colonialism as soon as the Joad family crosses the border into California at the Colorado River. In a scene ultimately not included in the film version, Ma takes issue with a policeman who is harassing her, her pregnant daughter Rose of Sharon, and her sick, elderly mother-in-law, telling the cop, "Mister [...] you got a tin button an' a gun. Where I come from, you keep your voice down. [...] In my country you watch your tongue."¹⁰⁸ The cop "loosened the gun in the holster" and tells Ma Joad, "Well, you ain't in your country now. You're in California, an' we don't want you goddamn Okies settlin' down."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 213.

¹⁰⁹ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 213-14.

Nunnally Johnson's screenplay for *The Grapes of Wrath* film gestures towards this border between William Randolph Hearst's California and FDR's United States of America by emphasizing Tom Joad's relieved amazement when he learns from the FSA camp manager (the spitting image of FDR) that local police cannot enter the Department of Agriculture's FSA camp without probable cause and a warrant. Johnson's screen direction to the actor playing Tom Joad in the film indicates the profound sense of refuge the Joad family finds from California's repressive state apparatus and the vigilantism of rural California's Chambers of Commerce and American Legions (figured as "poolroom fellas" in the film.) In Johnson's script, the screen direction indicates the actor is "Marveling" upon learning there's "no cops" in the New Deal. The line is: "I can't hardly believe it. Camp I was in once, they burned it out—the deputies and some of them poolroom fellas."¹¹⁰ Toland's cinematography articulates something of this same tension between "our country" and the state of California despite the exclusion of Ma's confrontation with the California cop in Ford's adaptation. Toland highlights these two overlapping, but radically different social locations by zooming in on the sign above the gate that functions as a border between the state of California and the United States of America, figured by the fictionalized FSA camp in the movie (figure 13a and figure 13b).



Figure 13a

¹¹⁰ Johnson, *Grapes*.

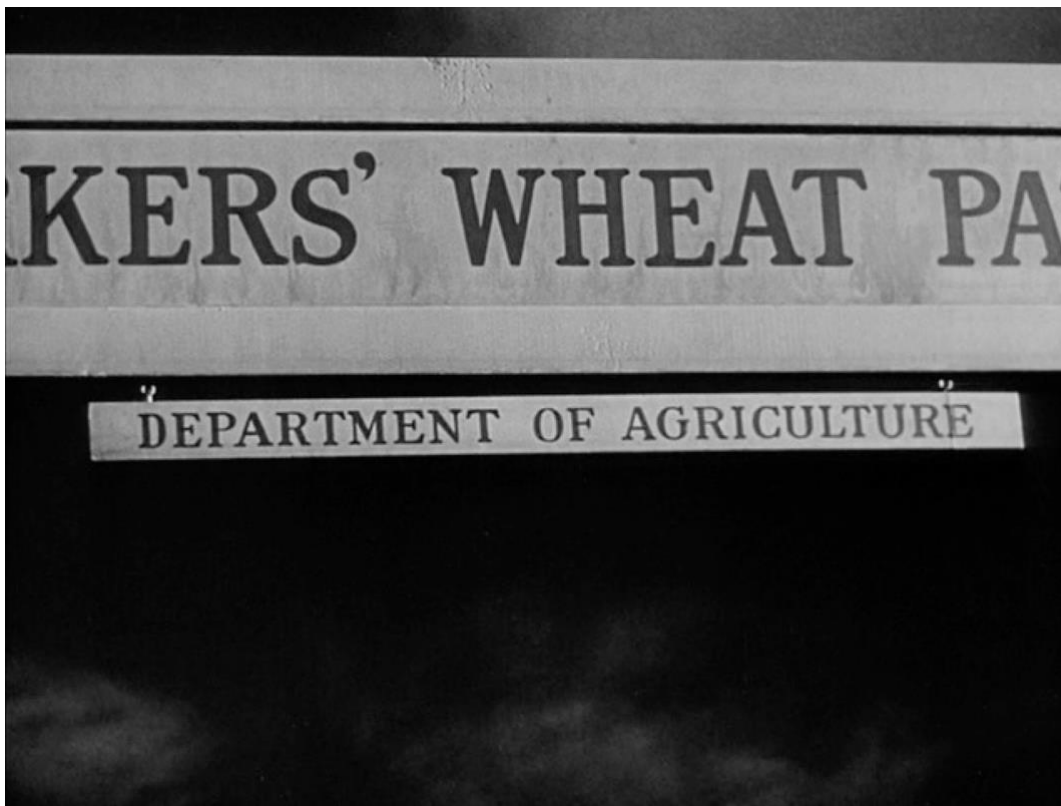


Figure 13b

But like Lange's "Toward Los Angeles, Calif." (figure 14) the migratory laboring class in Hemmig's "Children Posing" are also juxtaposed against what critics have described as other "visual images that dotted the symbolic environment" of Depression America.¹¹¹ Both Lange's unknown migrant men walking down an indistinct rural American highway in the powerful shadow of a Southern Pacific railroad marketing campaign and the Mexican children in Hemmig's photograph from El Rio, who pose beneath the USDA/FSA shingle of their even more powerful Uncle Sam, are positioned in their respective visual environments in direct relation to competing visual rhetorics of authority and "Americanness" (to borrow a phrase from José David Saldívar) that composed the symbolic visual landscape of the Great Depression. The tension produced by these separate, but related claims on authority is both literal and figurative. Taken together, these two photographs contradict Will Rogers' claim that those with nothing left to lose "rule" when it comes to the wild west game of showdown that the Depression seemed at times to be on the verge of producing in the US. Instead, they suggest that authority (literal, in its hegemonic sense; figurative, in its ascriptive register) is located less in the American working class, the physical reproduction of their labor power, or hope in its future, and more in the prerogative of capital and the logic of New Deal

¹¹¹ Hariman and Lucaites.

liberalism, and perhaps more importantly, at the juncture of intersection between the two which dominated the long New Deal era. The billboards in both Lange's and Hemmig's photographs are much more than just competing "visual images that dotted the symbolic environment" of the Great Depression: in both Lange's and Hemmig's photographs, I argue, they also work to represent political and economic social asymmetries in visual form. Yet the specifics of the social relations suggested in each photo work to disguise the relationship between capital and New Deal liberalism. In Lange's "Toward Los Angeles, Calif." the juxtaposition of a billboard featuring a middle class man in a suit reclining in luxury on the Southern Pacific line toward Los Angeles with two itinerant men walking with their luggage down an abandoned highway that seems to go on forever, bright yet at the same time somehow still dusty, produces a palpable sense of the tone-deafness of Depression America's great corporate/industrial powers and also reveals the taut class antagonism that strained, and indeed broke, at several moments during the Depression-decade (such as during the general strikes and violent confrontations between workers and police in San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Toledo in 1934). The advertisement's suggestion to the men ("Next time try the train") is particularly cruel in Lange's photograph as the men in working-class clothes (cuffed blue jeans, cowboy hats, and dirty shoes) walk in the dirt on a long on a highway that appears never ending.



Figure 14

This archive of photographs by Robert Hemmig from El Rio, California not only directly contradicts the previous critical triangulation of racial formation, cultural representation, and New Deal political inclusion in California during the Great Depression, but it also helps us reconsider the formal and rhetorical impact of Dorothea Lange's RA/FSA photography through the eyes of one of her contemporaries. Furthermore, the archive from El Rio also demands that we reconsider earlier critical assumptions about the displacement of the figure of the Mexican not only in New Deal culture in general, but particularly in the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

Chapter Two

Apocalypse, Always: The Cultural Politics and Aesthetic Ideologies of Eco-Crisis from the Okie Exodus to #OccupyMars

To the red country and part of the gray country of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently, and they did not cut the scarred earth.

—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

This is part of a trend, a new normal. ... I don't like to scare people but we've got tough times ahead.

We're going to have more fire, more destructive fire, more billions that will have to be spent. ... All that is the new normal that we have to face.

—California Governor Jerry Brown (2018)

Paradise Lost: The New Normal and the Cultural Cycle of Response

In the fall of 2018, the town of Paradise, California, ninety-minutes north of Sacramento, was erased from the face of the earth by a form of ecological catastrophe that former California Governor Jerry Brown shockingly described as the “new normal” in the Golden State that same year.¹ Ignited on 8 November 2018 by outdated utility infrastructure that was improperly maintained by California utility monopoly Power Gas & Electric (PG&E), the fire in Paradise spread rapidly due to gale force winds that blew down from the Feather River Valley and across the town.² While wildfires are not

¹ See Del Real and Kang. In the immediate aftermath of the Mendocino Complex Fire, former California Governor Jerry Brown said, “This is part of a trend, a new normal. ... I don't like to scare people but we've got tough times ahead” (Brown qtd. in Skelton). In separate remarks to the media, Brown went further: “We're going to have more fire, more destructive fire, more billions that will have to be spent. ... All that is the new normal that we have to face” (Brown qtd. in Skelton). In part due to public backlash after his “new normal” remarks (see Skelton's op-ed for one example), Brown shifted his position (rhetorically at least) two months later in the midst of the Camp Fire that leveled Paradise, California saying, “This is not the new normal. This is the new abnormal, and this new abnormal will continue certainly in the next 10 to 15 years” (Ashton).

² See Serna and Hamilton, “PG&E Pleads Guilty to 84 Counts of Involuntary Manslaughter” and Penn, “PG&E Ordered to Pay \$3.5 Million Fine for Causing Deadly Fire.” According to both the victim impact statements recorded at sentencing and the California judge who handed down this verdict in accordance with the plea deal struck between the Butte County DA and PG&E, this judgement was remarkably un-just. Judge Michael R. Deems entered the following opinion into the record: “If these crimes were attributed to

unusual in California, and are indeed becoming more common and more in the state and the region due to global warming, Paradise was different. That is because within twenty-four hours of ignition, the entire town was “wiped out,” according to breathless reports in the popular press that spread across media eco-systems even faster.³ Heather Williams, spokesperson for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire), points out that 20 to 30 fires start on any given day in California and each one is named by first responders. They named the fire in Paradise the Camp Fire. Williams adds that only a few fires “reach the point that the public knows about them.”⁴ With nearly 19,000 structures destroyed, and 84 people left dead in its wake, the Camp Fire is not only the most destructive wildfire in California history in terms of property damage, but also the deadliest wildfire on record in the United States to date.⁵ The American public not only learned the name “Camp Fire” in the fall of 2018, but in light of this historic level of devastation, PG&E’s plea of guilty to 84 counts of involuntary manslaughter and the court’s multimillion dollar sentence two years later, it is safe to assume that as a proper-name of millennialist eco-crisis, Paradise and the Camp Fire will haunt the US popular imagination for some time into the twenty-first century, not unlike other recent proper-names of US environmental catastrophe such as Harvey, Sandy, and of course, Katrina.⁶

While wildfires like the Camp Fire, as so-called spontaneous ecological events, lack the run-up of official warning and the attendant media spectacle of the ever-expanding hurricane season in the United States, the aftermath of both types of “natural” disaster follow a strikingly similar pattern in the cultural imagination.⁷ It is important to note the simultaneity of eco-crisis in recent years in the US: even before one social location of environmental catastrophe has cycled through the cultural imagination, another eco-crisis emerges elsewhere, and a new cycle begins. ⁸Affectively, this contributes to our experience of environmental catastrophe as a permanent feature of

an actual human person rather than a corporation, the anticipated sentence based on the applicable statutes to which the defendant has pleaded guilty would be 90 years to be served in state prison.” Joseph Downer, whose brother Andrew was killed by PG&E’s criminal negligence agreed: “The court is supposed to provide justice. I don’t believe justice is served by a \$3.5 million fine. If ever there was a corporation that deserved to go to prison, it’s PG&E.” Another victim, Philip Binstock, whose father was killed by PG&E’s criminal negligence spoke to the utility monopoly directly as if it were indeed a person: “You had the capacity to know what you were doing would kill people. You knew what you were doing was wrong. And rather than reduce your bonuses, you allowed your failed equipment and your improper inspections to kill people.” I record these statements here in honor of the 84 victims of Power, Gas & Electric. May these 84 people rest in power. May we remember their lives and deaths and be moved to fight the twinned evils of global climate change and late capitalist greed and nihilism in their memory. I dedicate this chapter to them.

³ St. John et al; Kahn.

⁴ Williams qtd. in Stevens.

⁵ “Top 20 Most Destructive California Wildfires.”

⁶ Serna and Hamilton; Penn.

⁷ McNoldy.

⁸ The Carr Fire of July 2018 in northern California was in the midst of its cycle, for example, when it was displaced in the cultural imagination by the Camp Fire, whose wholesale holocaust almost totally overshadowed the Woolsey Fire in Los Angeles and Ventura Counties in southern California, which burning simultaneously and even began on the same November day in the 2018.

lived-experience in our time of the now, even if the eco-crisis itself does not personally impact our lives. I argue this affective experience of permanent eco-crisis, driven by global warming, has produced a new ontology which defines our time of the now. I describe this new ontology as one of “Apocalypse Always.”

The pattern of twenty-first century cultural response specific locations of eco-crisis typically proceeds in six stages. First, the cataclysmic event is documented and broadcast in real time via traditional and social media ecosystems. Second, the social media ecosystem produces and disseminates hashtags, prompting the virality of eco-crisis in the cultural imagination. Third, the public intervenes in direct and indirect ways (mutual aid/volunteerism; signal boosting/trending topics).⁹ Fourth, political mechanisms begin to grind forward at variable rates of response and efficiency. Pronouncements that the community will rebuild and endure typically mark the fifth and penultimate stage of the cycle.¹⁰ In the cycle’s sixth and final stage, the mainstream media frequently returns to the people and places impacted by eco-crisis in order to document the new shape and figure of lives impacted by our collective “new normal” of permanent ecological crisis.¹¹ Beyond the media ecosystems, however, it is increasingly rare that our contemporary social locations of eco-crisis produce sustained response or engaged audiences via popular culture. Though largely absent in the twenty-first century cycle, we might consider popular cultural representation of eco-crisis in the popular imagination (the production of sustained aesthetic response and engaged popular culture audiences) the seventh stage of the cycle.¹²

Our twenty-first century cycle echoes the cultural response to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, which climate scientists have described as the “worst prolonged environmental disaster” of the twentieth century.¹³ In the example of the Dust Bowl however, this seventh stage was not only present, but incredibly productive of course. The popular imagination’s sustained engagement with the Dust Bowl produced a remarkable wealth of cultural representation as well as mass audiences from this twentieth century social location of eco-crisis. Indeed, the production of grapes of wrath cultural formation itself is the direct result of these sustained representations and engaged audiences. What might account then for this absence, given that otherwise the cycle of response seems to correspond in both historical periods? Once a successful template or model has been established, it is unusual that the culture industries will deviate from them, especially at

⁹ In some cases, the telethon industrial complex (an anachronistic hold-over from the twentieth century’s culture industries) will organize to produce mass mutual aid in the form of star-studded benefit concerts featuring celebrity hosts and performers.

¹⁰ In March 2019, city officials granted the first permits to rebuild in Paradise only to discover that the city’s water supply turned toxic as a result of the fire (Bizjak; Siegler).

¹¹ In September 2019, *NPR* revisited Paradise to report that the water was still toxic (Peterson).

¹² While these instances are rare, the representation of millennialist eco-crisis in popular culture are notable. Such instances include Kevin Devine’s indie-rock song “From Here,” which considers Staten Island in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy, and Hurricane Katrina texts by Spike Lee (*When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts*), Jay-Z (“Minority Report”), and Jesmyn Ward (*Salvage the Bones*).

¹³ Egan 10. Egan cites historian Donald Worster, who argues that, “In no other instance was there greater or more sustained damage to the American land” (Worster qtd. in Egan 10). See also Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*.

the precise point where low hanging profits wait to be plucked from the money tree of popular culture. In light of this question, it is the relative absence of this seventh stage of the cycle (the representation of eco-crisis in the contemporary popular cultural imagination) that I will problematize in this chapter.

(Eco) Crisis of Narrative

The cycle of response to eco-crisis that I sketched above recalls the “standard narrative” of iconicity that Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites have theorized in relation to visual rhetoric and public culture and Michael Denning’s “ideological crisis of narrative” that he defined in relation to the Popular Fronts of the Great Depression. Hariman and Lucaites analyze “iconic” images in American public culture, including “Migrant Mother,” Dorothea Lange’s 1936 photograph of a Dust Bowl refugee in California.¹⁴ According to Hariman and Lucaites, iconic texts typically acquire a “standard narrative” in the popular imagination, which “includes a myth of origin, a tale of public uptake or impact, and a quest for the actual people in the [text] to provide closure for the larger social drama captured by the [iconic] image.”¹⁵

As we can see, this notion of the standard narrative of iconicity resembles the cycle of response I discuss above, only in reverse. Twenty-first century environmental catastrophe has produced a standard narrative, a cycle of response, but without aesthetic symbols or popular culture textual productions. While Hariman’s and Lucaites’ standard narrative begins with an “iconic” image and develops a standard narrative around it, our cycle is an inversion of that process. The question that emerges from this inversion is not so much why twenty-first century social locations of eco-crisis have yet to produce *iconic* aesthetic representations in contemporary popular culture. The question is why our proper-names of contemporary eco-crisis (Paradise, Katrina, *et al*), which certainly haunt the American cultural imagination long after the immediate crisis has past, seem to resist aesthetic representation altogether. Despite the production of an overwhelming amount of documentary “content” in response to the new normal that these places signify, popular

¹⁴ The word “refugee” in relation to climate crisis was challenged during Hurricane Katrina as a racist code word. As many critics and survivors noted in the immediate aftermath of the environmental, political, and migrant crisis that the name “Katrina” connotes, the term refugee, as used casually by politicians and the press in relation to the large numbers of African-American citizens impacted by Katrina was problematic. Historically, the word “refugee” was also deployed frequently in popular culture to describe the mostly Anglo-American citizens impacted by the Dust Bowl eco-crisis. That eco-crisis and its attendant migration, in fact, also resulted in similarly racialized discourses surrounding the eco-crisis migrants represented by the grapes of wrath cultural formation, as I show in chapter three. I deploy the word intentionally here (and elsewhere, as in “eco-refugee and “climate refugeeism”) as a keyword in this project to describe a form of specifically eco-political alienation and forced displacement from one’s *habitus* itself, in that word’s biological and Bourdieuan registers, rather than as a term for displacement from a particular nation-state or in relation to transnational migration, race, or citizenship. Finally, eco-refugee is an essential term for this study in relationship to the argument I advance here about permanent eco-crisis as an emergent ontology in our time of the now. Sooner rather than later, I fear, many more millions, perhaps billions, will be interpellated into the subject position of the “eco-refugee” as a result of global climate catastrophe.

¹⁵ Hariman and Lucaites.

culture appears virtually incapable of constructing significant cultural narratives or aesthetic objects in response to these contemporary social locations of eco-crisis. This is especially remarkable if we consider that these social locations signify nothing less than the most powerful dialectical plot in the history of our species: the dialectic of humanity and the environment under late capitalism.

Michael Denning explores questions of social location, aesthetic form, and historical crisis in his study of the cultural formations of the Great Depression. Denning attempts to account for why certain social locations produced “successful” “myths” and “enduring icons in popular culture” during the Depression by arguing that one crisis of the 1930s was an “ideological crisis ... of narrative” in the US popular imagination.¹⁶ In Denning’s formulation, this broader “ideological crisis ... of narrative” represented a two-fold “failure” of the cultural imagination. First, an inability to conceive a workable genesis for the nation’s Depression-era ordeal. Second, an inability to imagine how the nation’s nightmarish, seemingly never-ending story might resolve: a failure to imagine “what had happened and what would happen next.”¹⁷ Denning argues that the reason the Dust Bowl eco-crisis produced aesthetic objects like Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Lange’s “Migrant Mother,” which became “iconic” texts of “American mass culture,” is because Dust Bowl narratives offered a mythic solution to the period’s ideological crisis of narrative.¹⁸ According to Denning, that narrative solution, the “way out” afforded by the proto-environmentalist fable of the Dust Bowl was mass migration, what Lange and UC Berkeley economist Paul Taylor “called the exodus.”¹⁹

In this chapter, I argue that like our counterparts from the 1930s, we too are grappling with an ideological crisis of narrative in our own millennialist time of the now: a still-widespread inability to come to terms with what has happened vis-à-vis catastrophic global climate change and an inability to truly imagine the devastation that comes next in humanity’s story of climate crisis in the late Anthropocene. But unlike our counterparts from the 1930s, mass migration is not an option for us, no longer a viable “way out” in our time of the now. Unlike our counterparts, our ecological time of the now is defined not by regional environmental crisis, but by catastrophic global climate change. While some buy into the #OccupyMars discourse produced by Elon Musk and other rocket billionaires and would-be space barons, most of us live on this planet, and recognize that as the real world consequences of global climate change continue to rapidly escalate here on earth, approximately ninety-nine percent of us will find, like those 84 people dead in Paradise, that indeed we have nowhere left to go.²⁰ From within

¹⁶ Denning 262-64.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Denning 259.

¹⁹ Denning 264. Cf. Lange and Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*.

²⁰ I was formally introduced to the #OccupyMars discourse of these rocket billionaires and space barons at a private screening of *The Martian* in 2015. Ridley Scott’s film version of Andy Weir’s bestselling novel asks: what if Matt Damon were Robinson Crusoe on the Red Planet. The screening was hosted by the San Francisco venture capital firm Founders Fund, one of tech’s most secretive and powerful companies, which is run by Elon’s old Paypal Mafia buddies, including vampire Peter Thiel. In addition to the Founders, the screening was attended by the novel’s author, Andy Weir, who was interviewed by Bruce Upbin, managing editor of *Forbes* magazine, who acted as MC for the event. I wrote about my phenomenal glimpse inside

our eco-political time of the now, both recent past and today's endless "feed" of apocalyptic climate change headlines appear too frightening, too hopeless, too complex, and too ideologically fraught for late capitalist popular culture to represent what *has* happened or imagine what *will* happen next.

I argue that the grapes of wrath cultural formation intervened in the Depression-era's ideological crisis of narrative in proto eco-political terms.²¹ These interventions not only defined eco-crisis a new social location in the US cultural imagination, but also introduced climate refugeism as a new form of American subjectivity within that social location. In order to understand the emergence of this eco-political social location and this eco-political subjectivity, which of course are also our own, I analyze the aesthetic ideologies and cultural politics of the Dust Bowl, perhaps the best-known twentieth century proper-name of ecological crisis, through two little-known figures in Dust Bowl cultural history: Kansas author Avis D. Carlson and soil scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett.²² I read Carlson's narrative nonfiction for *The New Republic*, titled "Dust" (1935), and Bennett's political theatrics on behalf of the people and land of the Dust Bowl in his appearance before the United States Congress (1935) as examples of the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies of the grapes of wrath cultural formation. These cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies, as I show, have continued to speak to the cultural imagination of eco-crisis diachronically, from the past to the present.

While US popular cultural forms have struggled to represent eco-crisis or produce engaged audiences in response to our contemporary moment of Apocalypse Always, there have been some notable exceptions, including *Interstellar* (2014) by Christopher Nolan. I analyze this texts to argue that the grapes of wrath cultural formation has

this incredibly insulated Silicon Valley subculture for the pop-culture blog, *Tiny Mix Tapes*. (See Cruz, "Let Them Eat Code.") In response to my minor story on an unknown blog, I later learned, the Founders' convened a number of high-level internal meetings and consulted with their attorneys about my work.

²¹ I use the prefix "proto" in an intentional way throughout the dissertation (proto ecological, proto-environmentalist, etc.). This construction attempts to accurately historicize the eco-political imagination of the Great Depression. This construction is necessary because while biologist Aldo Leopold published "The Conservation Ethic" in 1933, arguing for an ecological perspective that placed man within, as opposed to above, the "organic whole" of nature, the ideas from his essay were not in wide circulation during the Dust Bowl (Egan 134). Contemporary biologist Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr. agrees, noting that the American Ecological Society was still in its adolescence during the Great Depression (established in 1915 but not publishing until 1920) and that "'environmental science' was not a recognized [academic] specialty in the 1930s" (2, 3). Tiffney argues that Steinbeck was a "pioneer ecological thinker" who not only insisted that organisms must be considered "in relation to the physical environment, but also [considered] living populations, including man, in relation to each other" (4). Steinbeck's "outstanding idea" according to the biologist, "is that microcosm and macrocosm are interacting entities and part of a grand, interlaced continuum embracing human society" (7). Even so, Tiffney cautions that "it would be a mistake" to conclude that Steinbeck held the "concept [of environment] in its current form" (4).

²² I follow Michael Denning's argument that it is necessary to distinguish between *cultural politics*, "the politics of allegiances and affiliations" and *aesthetic ideologies*, which he calls "the politics of form" (xix). The first, cultural politics, is at one level simply the politics of letterheads and petitions, the stances taken by artists and intellectuals, the pledges of allegiance and declarations of dissent" (xix). Denning continues: "But [cultural politics] is also the politics of the cultural field itself, the history of the institutions and apparatuses in which artists and intellectuals work. For the kinds of political stances artists and intellectuals take depend upon their understanding of the ground on which they work" (xix).

continued to impact the representation of eco-crisis in our time of the now, diachronically challenging the contemporary popular imagination to actively resist what cultural critics have called our current “politics of amnesia,” and “ecology of fear.”²³ By drawing on the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies of the grapes of wrath cultural formation and the Depression-era itself, popular culture in our time of the now has produced cultural and political counter narratives to the eco-political nihilism of Jerry Brown’s new normal. I read this eco-political, popular culture act of resistance to the logic of Apocalypse Always through Nolan’s neo-Dust Bowl sci-fi blockbuster movie.

The grapes of wrath cultural formation quite literally emerged from the historic drought and blinding dust that devastated the American Plains throughout the 1930s to move on the US cultural imagination and eventually engage other social locations of crisis it encountered during the Great Depression. The most famous texts of this cultural formation all represent the deadly environmental catastrophe of the Dust Bowl to a greater or lesser extent. Eco-crisis functions as the inciting incident of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. It emerges as leitmotif in Pare Lorentz’ documentary film *The Plough That Broke the Plains* (1936) and Woody Guthrie’s *Dust Bowl Ballads*. While much work remains to be done on ecophilosophy and climate refugeeism in these canonical texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, I begin with an account of two critically neglected, but indeed foundational artists of that formation: Avis D. Carlson and Hugh Hamond Bennett.

The Cultural Politics and Aesthetic Ideologies of Dust Bowl Disaster

Writing for *The New Republic* in the spring of 1935, Kansas author Avis D. Carlson begins an evocation of the Great Plains with a paragraph-long, single sentence, a kind of prose poetry that seems at first to have more in common with William Wordsworth than Woody Guthrie: “In the western half of Kansas spring is a fairy time of lowing green wheat fields, of wild-plum thickets foaming into whiteness, of anemones and wild verbena, of blue-blue skies washing into infinity, of sweet, clean curtains of hope and joy storing themselves against the scorching summer to come.”²⁴ This sort of comforting, pastoral image of the Great Plains might have been what some members of the 74th Congress of the United States had in mind on 19 April 1935 as they listened to testimony in Room 333 of the Senate Office Building from Hugh Hammond Bennett, President Roosevelt’s director of a new alphabet agency called the Soil Erosion Service about something the newspapers had just begun calling “the dust bowl of the continent” only days before.²⁵

²³ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*; Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*.

²⁴ Carlson 332.

²⁵ Egan 227. My account throughout this section of the dust storms of 1932-35 on the Great Plains, Hugh Hammond Bennett’s life and work, and his testimony before Congress on 19 April 1935 is deeply indebted to Timothy Egan’s excellent cultural history, *The Worst Hard Time: The Untold Story of Those Who Survived the Great American Dust Bowl*. See also Wellington Brink’s *Big Hugh: The Father of Soil*

Carlson's narrative nonfiction, however, was anything but a psalm of praise to the Plains. The essay, in fact, is a profoundly uncanny elegy for a region caught in a feedback-loop of ecological crisis. While Carlson's text covers less than two pages in the May 1935 issue of *The New Republic* and has gone largely unrecognized by cultural historians of the 1930s, I argue that in order to read the radical eco-politics of the grapes of wrath cultural formation we must grapple with Avis D. Carlson's nonfiction narrative, which is nothing less than the foundational aesthetic gesture of the grapes of wrath cultural formation itself.

Simply titled "Dust," Carlson's piece appeared shortly after the concept of the "dust bowl of the continent" entered the popular imagination via Robert E. Geiger's journalism and Harry Eisenhard photography for the Associated Press (AP) on the historic Black Sunday dust storm that tore across the High Plains on 14 April 1935.²⁶ Rather than refuting the testimony of the "father of soil conservation,"²⁷ as Hugh Hammond Bennett has come to be known, Carlson's essay provides an uncanny, eyewitness literary account of the new form of eco-crisis that first confronted people on the Great Plains in early 1932—a monstrous environmental phenomenon that baffled regional weather bureaus, defied meteorological classification, and was unlike anything even the old-time Mexican *vaqueros* on the hardtack southern Plains had seen before.

This new environmental menace, coming on the heels of both historic drought across the region and economic depression across the nation, in fact had no official name when the phenomenon first appeared in the sky three years before Black Sunday, just outside of Amarillo, Texas on 21 January 1932. Gathering without warning, swirling and rolling upwards of 60 miles per hour on frigid, furious winds that could knock an adult off their feet and displace surface temperature by 20 to 30 degrees in a matter of minutes, this new environmental phenomenon reminded the people of the Great Plains of blizzards. But these "blizzards" didn't bring snow or ice. Instead, they dropped literal tons of calcified, airborne topsoil over everything in their path while at the same time accumulating even more dust as the "storm" raged across former grasslands that had been plowed-up during the wheat boom of World War One, grasslands which by 1932 stood naked in the path of the storms' fury, abandoned by speculative sodbusters and suitcase

Conservation, "Hugh Hammond Bennett" from Oxford University Press' *American National Biography*, and Paul Bonnefield's *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt and the Depression*.

²⁶ The term "dust bowl" entered the American lexicon in news-print lowercase on 15 April 1935 thanks to Geiger's and Eisenhard's eyewitness coverage of Black Sunday on the High Plains. Geiger invented the phrase "dust bowl" en route to his explicit point about the prolonged drought that was affecting farmers in the middle of the country. This region, and the unique hardships of their people, had come to national attention during the early years of the Depression. Like the storms themselves, the words "dust bowl" appeared unexpectedly in Geiger's reportage and were gone with the wind: "Three little words, achingly familiar on a Western farmer's tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains" (Geiger A2). "Dust bowl" did not appear in Geiger's next two articles in the series and was replaced in Geiger's final AP story by the phrase "dust belt." Scholars disagree regarding "the rapidity with which the term became part of the national vocabulary" but there is no doubt that Geiger's neologism was rapidly adopted (Shumsky 218-19). By 1936 *The Atlantic* was publishing a regular feature called "Letters from the Dust Bowl" by Oklahoma writer Caroline Henderson (Henderson). By 1940 the phrase would be immortalized via Woody Guthrie's major label recording debut, *Dust Bowl Ballads* (Guthrie).

²⁷ "Hugh Hammond Bennett."

farmers who used the Great Plains like their own personal slot machines and talked of “trying to hit a crop” in the first decades of the twentieth century—only to walk away from the land when the slot machine suddenly cooled and the casino went bust on Black Tuesday 1929, leaving millions of acres of bare and depleted topsoil exposed to the harsh prairie sun.²⁸

The dust clouds raised by these storms were black in color, sometimes gray or brown. They could grow to over 10,000 feet high and they would often block out the sun as they moved across the land. Avis D. Carlson figures the power of these phenomena in understated, but nonetheless apocalyptic prose—in a literary mode that recalls her contemporary, fellow Plains writer Willa Cather. “The darkness is like the end of the world,” Carlson stoically reports in “Dust.”²⁹ The power of these dramatic storms, which eyewitnesses compared to mountains that appeared to move across the horizon, was “pure terror even to Plains people hardened to the wind.”³⁰ The fauna of the Great Plains (rabbits and birds in particular) sometimes provided early indication of an approaching storm, taking flight in advance of the dust and darkness. Cattle caught outdoors in the punishing gusts went blind or suffocated to death due to the dust. So did people. And even indoors, out of direct contact with the worst of the storms’ fury, children and the elderly were still vulnerable to the deadly airborne silica that crept into even the best-sealed houses, hung in the air, and continued to fill people’s lungs long after the storm had passed. As Carlson writes,

Dust comes in [to the home], driven somehow through bolted windows, even through taped windows. It seems to sift through the very walls. . . . If quiet storms excite brooding anxiety, [dramatic storms are] pure terror. . .

In time the fury [of the storm] subsides. If the wind has spent itself, the dust will fall silently for hours. If the wind has only settled into a good steady blow, the air will be thick for days.³¹

The terror and anxiety these unpredictable climate events produced between 1932 and 1935, however, paled in comparison to a new health crisis that began to spread across the newly named Dust Bowl of the continent, “that mighty strip of drought-baked prairie running from Canada to the Gulf and reaching to the feet of the Rockies,” during these years.³² The real danger was not the fury of the storms, though horrific reports of individuals who were caught outside in a storm and buried alive dot the archival record of the Dust Bowl. The real danger was the particulate matter, the dust itself, that fell silently and made the air thick even days after the storm had passed. As if life on the always hard-

²⁸ Egan 50.

²⁹ Carlson 333.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Carlson 332. “At its peak,” Egan writes, “the Dust Bowl covered one hundred million acres” (9).

scramble Great Plains during the early-'30s, over-determined by economic depression and historic drought, wasn't already hard enough, people began dying of something the doctors called "dust pneumonia" beginning in 1932.³³ The culprit was this terrifying new form of ecological catastrophe that people on the High Plains had begun to call "black blizzards."

At least some of the politicians gathered in Room 333 of the Senate Office Building on 19 April 1935 to hear "Big Hugh" Bennett's testimony on the problems facing the new Dust Bowl of the continent must have known that the stories of debt, drought, dust, death, and displacement told by Bennett and other hayseeds out on the Great Plains weren't completely hysterical.³⁴ Not least of all because some of the Senators who had survived the New Deal midterm wave of 1934 had personally *tasted* the topsoil of the Great Plains less than a year before Black Sunday and Big Hugh's congressional hearing, when a "monstrous visitor from the heartland" arrived in the nation's capital in the spring of 1934.³⁵ That spring saw a massive dust cloud that originated in the Dakotas move east on the jet stream overnight on 10 May 1934 and drop an estimated 6,000 tons of dust on Chicago.³⁶ When the storm reached the east coast the next morning, it was 1,800 miles wide and weighed 350 million tons. While that Friday morning had dawned bright and cloudless in Manhattan, the automatic streetlights clicked on by noon. And while the New York Yankees beat the Chicago White Sox on that spring day in the Bronx, outfielders reported they had a hard time tracking the baseball against the suddenly soot-stained sky (a moment Christopher Nolan alludes to in *Interstellar*, which I analyze at the end of this chapter). In one of history's many unintentional ironies, President Roosevelt was discussing plans for Midwest drought relief when the dust from Yankee Stadium began to fall at the White House on 11 May 1934.³⁷

By the time Hugh Bennett stood up to speak in Room 333 on behalf of the battered land and beleaguered people of the "dust bowl of the continent" it had been almost a year since the topsoil of the Great Plains had fallen like snow on Washington, New York, and Chicago: *Simply a freak occurrence of nature*, the Senators might have rationalized in the intervening months. The skies above DC, after all, had been quiet ever

³³ Egan offers an especially tragic account one Oklahoma family who was rocked by dust pneumonia related death in April 1935. Within hours, both past and future generations of the Shaw family succumbed to the disease. Parents Hazel and Charles Shaw lost their infant child Ruth Nell Shaw in a hospital in Enid, Oklahoma just hours before Hazel Shaw's grandmother, Louzima Lucas, succumbed to the disease at home in Texhoma, Arkansas. As if to add insult to injury, the double funeral for great-grand mother and her great-grand daughter that the Shaw-Lucas family planned for 14 April, 1935 was interrupted by Black Sunday (Egan 193-222). Egan draws on Hazel Shaw's self-published memoir, *Sunshine and Shadows* for much of this account, as does Dayton Duncan for his publication *The Dust Bowl: An Illustrated History* (with documentary filmmaker Ken Burns).

³⁴ Egan notes that "many in the East did not believe the initial accounts [from the Great Plains] of predatory dust until a storm in May 1934 carried the windblown shards of the Great Plains over much of the nation" (5).

³⁵ Egan.

³⁶ Egan.

³⁷ Egan 222, 150-52.

since, seeming to confirm what the experts from Texas A&M who monitored the region from a relatively primitive weather station along the Red River first believed: that the black blizzards were anomalous.³⁸ Besides, what did Roosevelt and Bennett expect Congress to do about drought and dust? “You gave us beer, now give us rain,” read one farmer’s sign when the new President visited the Great Plains after seeing through the repeal of prohibition. And Congress agreed with that farmer’s sentiment: “If God can’t make rain in Kansas,” one congressman flippantly asked Hugh Hammond Bennett during his testimony, “how can the New Deal hope to succeed?”³⁹ The mighty New Deal had proven itself capable of changing the winds of politics after the FDR wave of 1934, but even Roosevelt had known since his nomination acceptance speech in 1932 even he was no match for “the winds of heaven.”⁴⁰

Meteorologists had begun classifying black blizzards in terms of visibility. “Severe storms” were so dense that they reduced vision to less than one-quarter of a mile. According to official weather bureau records, fourteen such “severe storms” hit the region in the winter of 1932.⁴¹ By 1934, severe storms were no longer just confined to one season—they occurred every month on the southern Plains that year (fifty-four in all), with one storm in April lasting twelve hours.⁴² After three years of severe dust storms, these ecological events could no longer be dismissed as “most spectacular” anomalies on the Great Plains.⁴³ Yet Carlson’s narrative nonfiction forgoes this sort of catalog of catastrophe and instead opens, as we saw above, in a gratuitous mode of grammatical and syntactical excess via the essay’s long, single-sentence first paragraph that attempts to evoke “the poetic uplift of spring”:

In the western half of Kansas spring is a fairy time of lowing green wheat fields, of wild-plum thickets foaming into whiteness, of anemones and wild verbena, of blue-blue skies washing into infinity, of sweet, clean curtains of hope and joy storing themselves against the scorching summer to come.⁴⁴

But “Dust” then pivots unexpectedly, not unlike the black blizzards themselves. The next few sentences, which begin the essay’s second paragraph, are short, staccato, and almost brutally to the point:

³⁸ Egan 121.

³⁹ Qtd. in Egan 226.

⁴⁰ Roosevelt, “Acceptance Speech.”

⁴¹ Egan 121.

⁴² Egan 153.

⁴³ Amarillo, Texas Weather Bureau qtd. in Egan 113.

⁴⁴ Carlson 332.

But this is the spring of 1935. Nothing is as usual. It is like a long nightmare from which we cannot get free.”⁴⁵

The tension Carlson packs into these first two paragraphs of her essay is formal, produced by the juxtaposition of radically distinct sentence structures on the one hand and the play between genre conventions (romanticism and realism) on the other. Carlson’s text also subtly acknowledges the way in which the eco-crisis of the Dust Bowl had unsettled the very syntax of the story of environmental crisis on the Plains that was finally being told through popular culture by 1935. Both the romantic evocation of the *past* in the western half of Kansas as well as Carlson’s *contemporary* moment of Hemmingway-esque literary modernism (“But this is... Nothing is... It is...”) are figured in the present tense. Grammatically speaking, Carlson obliterates the distinction between past and present in these opening paragraphs: in the present tense of the essay, spring is figured paradoxically as both a “fairy time” of “blue-blue skies” and *simultaneously* as a “nightmare from which we cannot get free.” While these two paragraphs seem to collapse the narrative distinction between past- and present-tense into Carlson’s contemporary, writerly moment, the remainder of the text forgoes “the past” entirely (both formally and thematically) and dwells in the essay’s leitmotif, the present-tense-moment of waking, uncanny nightmare.⁴⁶ The text will return to this leitmotif in its final paragraph: “The nightmare is deepest during the storms. [...] We live with the dust, eat it, sleep with it, watch it strip us of possessions and the hope of possessions.”⁴⁷

In this way, Carlson’s “Dust” does more than simply deconstruct romantic regional notions of the past through formal tension. It also begins to suggest a new, alienated and unhomey ontology in the Dust Bowl, a nightmarish ontology “from which we cannot shake free.”⁴⁸ The articulation of this uncanny ontology in texts of the grapes of wrath cultural formation accounts in part for the Nolan brothers’ return to the tropes of the Dust Bowl in the story of *Interstellar*, as we shall see in the next section.

While “Dust” begins by foregrounding formal tension, the remainder of Carlson’s essay explores tensions produced by a series of uncanny confusions: between day and night, waking and sleeping, and consciousness and unconsciousness (which was prefigured in the text by Carlson’s troubling of narrative tense). These uncanny tensions in Carlson’s *New Republic* essay continue to elaborate an ontology in the text that is not only unhomey, but also seemingly permanent—a persistent moment of eco-crisis where “the dawn is not coming today”; where reality is confused with a “nightmare from which we cannot get free”; and where moments of environmental normalcy (spring showers) are radically disorienting, even deceptive events, ultimately only allowing the people of the Dust Bowl to “almost swim back to consciousness.” This deeply unsettling construction that suggests the horrifying notion of death by drowning in dust, of asphyxiation just

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ See Freud, “The ‘Uncanny.’”

⁴⁷ Carlson 332-3.

⁴⁸ Carlson 332.

below the surface of consciousness, by dust pervasive enough to invade even the sleeper's dream-work.⁴⁹

This *unheimlich*, otherworldly confusion in the essay is the result of the environmentalist materiality of the dust storms themselves—their ability to literally snuff out the sun of once poetic spring days behind wholly unpredictable black-gray clouds of calcified topsoil: “‘It’s only the dust, mother,’” Carlson imagines a farmer “with a forty-year habit of early rising” mumbling to his wife at 9 a.m. after looking at the clock, “then at the black window panes,” before finally checking these first two experiences of chronology against “A watch brought out to verify the time.”⁵⁰ Because there is “[n]o dawn, no schools, no traffic, almost no work,” the farmer’s “bewilderment fades into dreary resignation” in the “[s]trange world” and “spectral” quiet of the Dust Bowl.⁵¹ It is important to note that as an articulation of an ontology of permanent crisis, “Dust” is completely incapable of figuring the future beyond the present nature or state of being in the Dust Bowl of the continent, either in terms of how the eco-crisis might be addressed environmentally, how the New Deal might respond to it politically, or how the story of the Dust Bowl might find imaginative resolution in the cultural imagination.⁵² The environmental, political, and narrative future is fundamentally *unimaginable* in “Dust.” In light of this inability to imagine the future, Carlson’s text dwells on the nightmare of the long present tense, a nightmare of eco-crisis as ontology, a seemingly permanent nightmare that “is deepest during the storms,” that “is becoming the Real,” that “is becoming Life.”⁵³

In this sense, Avis Carlson’s “Dust” can be read as something more than the foundational aesthetic gesture of what would evolve into the grapes of wrath cultural formation by the end of the Depression decade. Carlson’s essay, in fact, is also an instructive example of Michael Denning’s notion of the Great Depression’s crisis of narrative that I discussed earlier in this chapter: the inability in the midst of the profound uncertainty of the present to imagine (in narrative terms) either past or future. While it was clear to Bennett and other observers by 1935 that the ecology of the Great Plains had changed, their perspective on the crisis (as observers rather than participants) maintained a strong teleological sense of past, present, and future. On the other hand, the syntactical logic of “Dust’s” introductory paragraph, and the abundance of language and nature it signifies produces an affective sense of loss of any relationship between past and present. In fact, the essay is unable to figure the Dust Bowl’s recent ecological past at all, even from Carlson’s first hand, lived-experience in the region—a fact that challenges our fundamental conception of the documentary impulse of Depression culture.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Carlson 332-3.

⁵⁰ Carlson 333.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² This lack of narrative speculation on the future is particularly suggestive in light of the fact that capitalist speculation on economic futures in wheat during and after World War One is exactly what created the ecological conditions necessary to transform the greatest grasslands in the world into the Dust Bowl of the continent.

⁵³ Carlson 333.

⁵⁴ See Stott, *Documentary Expression*.

In place of the chronological or narrative past, “Dust” dwells in the disorienting time-logic of dreams: there is no past in the Dust Bowl, according to Carlson. There is only the ongoing present tense of permanent eco-crisis. In this way, Carlson’s text suggests the Dust Bowl eco-crisis unsettled the very syntax of the *story* the cultural imagination could tell about the ecological present. What Carlson first figured gratuitously via grammatical and syntactical excess fades dramatically “into a phantom out of the storied past” by the end of the essay. An ecological past that we presume to be fixed in both historical memory and lived experience, a reality of life on the Great Plains, is transformed in the essay into phantasmagoric fiction: fading and frightening, but most of all *unreal*—the stuff of stories: “The poetic uplift of spring fades into a phantom out of the storied past.”⁵⁵

Even more uncanny than this phantasmagoric fiction that can unsettle history, memory, and lived experience on the Great Plains is that the ecological “nightmare” of life in the Dust Bowl is in fact not yet real: “It is *becoming* the Real. ...[It] is *becoming* Life.”⁵⁶ Suspended grammatically in the process of *becoming* (that is, *becoming* an intractable part of both the natural ecology and an intractable state of being), Carlson’s essay signals an important shift away from the notion of Depression-era crisis as a moment of extraordinary rupture that could be managed and healed through the telos of the New Deal (triage, temporary relief, reform, and security).

Yet before Geiger’s and Eisenhard’ reportage on the Dust Bowl for the Associated Press and Avis D. Carlson’s essay in *The New Republic* a few weeks later, the political response to the eco-crisis on the Great Plains looked almost identical to New Deal state’s response to the economic crisis that confronted the nation at large. In both cases, the New Deal’s response was informed by a teleology of immediate triage and short-term relief, followed by selective structural reforms designed to address the painfully obvious contradictions produced by American institutions’ powerful allegiance to the hegemonic logic of capital. These reforms, the New Deal was betting, would grant the theoretical (or abstract-ideal) American citizen (white, male, and propertied) with an amended social contract that promised “freedom from fear” while at the same time keeping FDR’s campaign pledge to safeguard “American institutions” from what FDR called “unreasoning radicalism.”⁵⁷ “Freedom from fear,” according to the New Deal state’s rhetoric and telos, produced security by insuring that, once crisis was mitigated, the short-sighted self-interest of the few could never again inflict such widespread devastation on the many. In line with the first stages of this New Deal teleos (triage and relief) the Red Cross declared a state of emergency on the Great Plains and set up

⁵⁵ Carlson 333.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

⁵⁷ Roosevelt, “Acceptance Speech”; “Four Freedoms.” The phrase “freedom from fear” was explicitly deployed by FDR in his 1941 State of the Union Address in relation to people “anywhere in the world.” This rhetorical strategy was intended to galvanize American public opinion in support of the nation’s participation in World War Two. But as David Kennedy has shown, the logic of “freedom from fear” (e.g., security) was implicit in every aspect of New Deal policy long before this speech. At the same time, FDR’s phrase “anywhere in the world” was clearly not taken seriously by the administration. Freedom from fear anywhere in the world meant the places where totalitarian aggression moved abroad, not the New Deal internment camps at home, for example.

temporary hospitals in school gymnasiums to deal with a new disease, dust pneumonia, that began killing people throughout the Plains region during the Dust Bowl. At the same time, the New Deal employed men to sweep dust off the streets in an effort to relieve some of the immediate economic suffering in the region. The federal government also paid cash to economically distressed farmers for fallowing their fields and turning over diseased livestock. The majority of the animals, suffering from malnutrition or veterinary dust pneumonia, were simply destroyed. The few animals (or “troubled assets” we might call them in the language of the Great Recession) that the federal government purchased from distressed Dust Bowl farmers were slaughtering and sent to feed hungry people in the cities. There was even discussion in more radical quarters of the Roosevelt administration about plans to buy back homesteads from drought-struck farmers in an effort to depopulate the Plains—a sort of reverse manifest destiny.

For its part, Congress had allocated \$5 million to the Department of Interior’s Soil Erosion Service for relief and small-scale agricultural demonstration projects in 1933. The Soil Erosion Service was a new agency within Roosevelt’s Department of Interior: “Big Hugh” Bennett was its director. But relief and triage, Bennett believed, even to the tune of five-million Depression-era dollars (nearly \$93 million adjusted for inflation), was simply insufficient to match the magnitude of the eco-crisis on the Great Plains, to say nothing of Bennett’s impassioned ecological imagination. The son of a cotton farmer, that imagination began to mature at the University of North Carolina, where Bennett studied chemistry and geology. He worked for the United States Department of Agriculture immediately after college, in 1903, during the first President Roosevelt’s administration. After more than a decade in the field conducting soil surveys from Alaska to the Caribbean, Bennett began solidifying his status as the “father of soil conservation” via publications in the popular and academic press.⁵⁸ In one such paper, published by the USDA in 1928, four years before the dust storms began, Bennett declared that “soil erosion is the biggest problem confronting the farmers of the nation” and decried “the evils of this process of land wastage”⁵⁹—a proclamation that flew in the face of the precedent established by his own agency, which assured the sod-busters and suitcase farmers throughout the wheat boom on the Great Plains that “The soil is the one indestructible, immutable asset that the nation possesses. It is the one resource that cannot be exhausted; that cannot be used up.”⁶⁰

Like Noah before the Flood, Hugh Hammond Bennett’s plaintive wail (“I didn’t know so much costly misinformation could be put into a single brief sentence”) mostly fell on deaf ears before the Dust Bowl. But like the original climate change activist in the Old Testament, Big Hugh had a plan.⁶¹ Bennett believed that that the New Deal’s dominant telos of triage, relief, and reform was fundamentally insufficient to address the tragic new ontology of permanent eco-crisis that confronted man and nature alike at the

⁵⁸ “Hugh Hammond Bennett” 582-83.

⁵⁹ Bennett and Chapline; Oxford University Press’ *American National Biography* points out that “Bennett possessed the energy and single-mindedness of an evangelist in his promotion of soil conservation” (“Hugh Hammond Bennett” 582-83).

⁶⁰ Whitney 66.

⁶¹ Bennett qtd. in Egan 126.

intersection of drought, dust, wind erosion, farm foreclosures, and (increasingly after 1932) human dislocation on the High Plains as Dust Bowl victims and hundreds of thousands of others from the region began the westward migration to California that would thrust their struggle to the center of the US cultural imagination by the end of the decade. Bennett argued that a new, fully-funded agency—something permanent—was required if the nation hoped to save the ecology of the Great Plains. He envisioned an agency that would educate farmers on their own recent environmental sins, help restore the fragile web of ecology on the Great Plains, and organize soil conservation districts throughout the nation, which he believed might eventually be capable of restoring the health of the land and ending the terror of the black blizzards.

As we can see from the consistently messianic rhetoric of his speeches and publications of the period, which decried “The evils of this process of land wastage” (that is, capitalist mono-crop speculative farming with little understanding and no regard for natural ecosystems and soil science), the gospel of soil conservation seemed to spark an almost evangelical fervor in Hugh Hammond Bennett.⁶² He would describe Americans’ relationship to the natural environment as not just “evil,” but also “sinister,” a result of the “stupendous ignorance” of American farmers, Wall Street financiers, and the US government.

But even more shocking at the time was Bennett’s suggestion that *human activity* was not only to blame for climate change on the Great Plains, but that Americans were in fact changing the natural environment more than “the combined activities of volcanoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, tornadoes and all the excavations of mankind since the beginning of history.”⁶³ Bennett even went so far as to proclaim that “Of all the countries in the world, we Americans have been the greatest destroyers of land of any race of people barbaric or civilized.”⁶⁴ The foot soldiers of this proto ecological holy war were the workers of FDR’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), whom Bennett called to arms with missionary zeal that equaled his fire and brimstone diatribes against the capitalist wasting of the land. “We are not merely crusaders,” he told a group of CCC workers engaged in small scale, Department of Interior-sponsored soil demonstration projects early in the depression, “but soldiers on the firing line of defending the vital substance of our homeland.”⁶⁵

Certainly then, few in Congress who heard Bennett’s testimony less than a week after Black Sunday would have been surprised by either his “crusade” or his extremist rhetoric. Nevertheless, in the midst so much suffering across the nation, many in DC were skeptical about funding Bennett’s radical vision of a permanent, high-priced, eco-political federal agency. According to the cynical austerity logic of some of the politicians in Room 333 on 19 April 1935 (just five days after the horrific Black Sunday storm that made headlines across the nation), “Shattered lives littered the land from sea to sea. Why should the dust-ravaged Plains get special attention?”⁶⁶ Especially when that

⁶² Bennett and Chapline.

⁶³ Bennett qtd. in Egan 125 and 127.

⁶⁴ Bennett qtd. in Egan 125.

⁶⁵ Bennett qtd. in Egan 159.

⁶⁶ Egan 227.

attention went far beyond the telos of the New Deal and looked to many observers like precisely the kind of “unreasoning radicalism” that FDR himself had promised to keep at bay at the Democratic National Convention in 1932.⁶⁷

Indeed, Bennett’s proposal called for the organization of locally managed soil conservation districts across the nation, whose farmer-members would not only coordinate to rest and restore the grasslands on the Great Plains with guidance from New Deal scientists and bureaucrats, but would also be trained to fundamentally reimagine their agricultural holdings *beyond* the logic of capital, to “think beyond their fence lines,” “break down their barriers of property,” and come to terms with an idea that even most biological scientists would not embrace for another generation: that their individual acres of private property were in fact part of “the whole of the living Plains,” just one fragile square of fabric in a patchwork of local ecology that formed the web of life on the Great Plains.⁶⁸

In other words, if Carlson’s “Dust” should be credited as establishing the *aesthetic ideologies* of the grapes of wrath cultural formation and acknowledged for framing uncanny environmental crisis as one of the cornerstones of the emergent cultural response to the Great Depression’s ecological crisis of narrative, then in Hugh Hammond Bennett’s *cultural politics* from the center of the New Deal state apparatus, we see the development of that discourse in a decidedly radical direction, politically and economically, but perhaps more importantly, ecologically. These cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies would come to bear on later cultural productions of the grapes of wrath cultural formation by Steinbeck during the 1930s, and Nolan in our time of the now.

As such, Hugh Hammond Bennett surely understood the long political odds his radical proposal faced in the Congress, even in the immediate aftermath of Black Sunday and before a New Deal friendly legislature. Which is precisely why Bennett requested to postpone his testimony to that Friday afternoon in April 1935. Thankfully for the people of the Great Plains, Big Hugh’s cultural politics came with its own unique aesthetic ideologies, which he likely borrowed from one of his contemporaries, another controversial, uniquely American impresario, P.T. Barnum. According to meteorologists in the southern United States, the Black Sunday dust storm that had lifted 300,000 tons of Great Plains topsoil into the sky on Sunday, April 14th, 1935 was in fact still airborne. And it was heading east. Forecasts indicated the storm would reach Washington, DC sometime on Friday afternoon. As one North Carolina journalist noted, Big Hugh was as much a soil scientist as he was a showboat, frequently “combin[ing] science with

⁶⁷ Roosevelt, “Acceptance Speech”

⁶⁸ Egan 159, 134. While the “stern lantern of history” (to borrow historian David Kennedy’s useful phrase) casts an almost prophetic glow around Hugh Hammond Bennett’s eco-philosophy, Egan notes that even “most scientists [in the 1930s] did not take Bennett seriously” (134). And while biologist Aldo Leopold published “The Conservation Ethic” in 1933, arguing for an ecological perspective that placed man within, as opposed to above, the “organic whole” of nature, the ideas from that essay were not in wide circulation among policymakers during the Dust Bowl (Egan 134). Contemporary biologist Wesley N. Tiffney, Jr. agrees, noting that the American Ecological Society was still in its adolescence during the Great Depression (established in 1915 but not publishing until 1920) and that “‘environmental science’ was not a recognized [academic] specialty in the 1930s” (2, 3).

showmanship” to win political battles in his proto-environmentalist crusades.⁶⁹ In one congressional hearing, for example, Bennett poured a glass of water on a flat, barren table when it became clear to him that the nation’s elected officials weren’t paying attention or didn’t seem to fully comprehend “the effect of rain on unprotected, bare soil.”⁷⁰

As the events of Black Sunday and Avis D. Carlson’s writing both indicate, the stakes had climbed dangerously high on the Great Plains by 1935 and the cost of inaction, both in human and environmental terms, was skyrocketing. Not only did Bennett believe (as early as the 1920s) that American land management, in conjunction with agricultural policy and practice, “had sown the seeds of an epic disaster”—a belief that Black Sunday had dramatically validated—but he also feared that political inaction could affect the nation far beyond the regional confines of the Dust Bowl.⁷¹ If decisive action wasn’t taken to address the eco-crisis on the Great Plains, Bennett feared, the land might eventually grow barren, possibly producing famine conditions in the United States.⁷²

So Big Hugh Bennett borrowed a page from another influential American popular culture form, P.T. Barnum’s three ring circus, and decided it was time to put on a show for the senators. He warmed up the crowd (or perhaps he was poking a chair at the lions) by giving an academic report on the events of Black Sunday, the kind of catalogue of catastrophe that Carlson wholly resists, displaying charts and maps of the Great Plains, and reading telegrams from desperate farmers who were begging the government for help. Bennett even spun salt of the earth yarns about his father’s farm in North Carolina: almost anything to pass the time as he waited hopefully on the weather. After the dust fell on Chicago, New York, and DC the previous spring, Bennett had privately told colleagues in the Department of Interior that “When people along the eastern seaboard [tasted] fresh soil from the Plains two thousand miles away, many of them realized for the first time that somewhere, something had gone wrong with the land.”⁷³ And for his grand finale in Room 333 on 19 April 1935, the showman deep inside of Big Hugh Bennett was betting on mother nature for a dramatic encore.

Bennett’s staff had been passing him notes on the dust storm’s easterly progress throughout the course of his testimony when suddenly, as if Big Hugh were a Broadway director whose temperamental star finally heard their cue, the early afternoon sky above the US Capitol went dark, just as it had the year before. Never afraid of stating the obvious, one member of the 73rd Congress interrupted Bennett’s soliloquy on the Dust Bowl and reported with genuine alarm, “It’s getting dark outside.”⁷⁴ To which Bennett replied,

⁶⁹ Santford Martin qtd. in “Hugh Hammond Bennett.”

⁷⁰ “Hugh Hammond Bennett.”

⁷¹ Egan 126.

⁷² Egan 127.

⁷³ Bennett qtd. in Egan 227.

⁷⁴ Qtd. in Egan 228.

This, gentlemen, is what I'm talking about. There goes Oklahoma.⁷⁵

Big Hugh's theatrics worked incredibly well: within twenty-four hours after Bennett's theatrics in Room 333, Congress had passed the Soil Conservation Act, the first of its kind anywhere in the world, and President Roosevelt signed it into law one week later, on 27 April 1935. Under this new legislation, Big Hugh's previous agency, the Soil Erosion Service, became the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) and Bennett was appointed the new agency's director. The SCS was enlarged and transferred out of the Department of Interior and into the more powerful United States Department of Agriculture. In addition, it took over the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) from the US Forest Service and Bennett dispatched his army of urban, rural, and academic workers from all around the country to the Southern Plains, drawing some 20,000 workers not only from the rolls of the CCC, but also the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA).⁷⁶ By the most important measure, the health of the land, Bennett's crusade was wildly successful. Within three years of Black Sunday, thanks to the work of Bennett's Soil Conservation Service, soil erosion had declined by 65 percent in the Dust Bowl.⁷⁷ Big Hugh would continue to work as director of the Soil Conservation Service until 1951. While the agency would be renamed the National Resource Conservation Service in 1994, it remains today, a little-known eco-political legacy of the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies of the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

Ironic Okie Echoes: Dust Bowl Masks, Vulture Capitalists, and Silicon Valley Climate Refugeism

To conclude this chapter, I situate the cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies that Carlson and Bennett helped inscribe in the twentieth century cultural imagination of eco-crisis culture in diachronic context with a contemporary Hollywood film by Christopher Nolan. Through close readings of this text, I uncover the persistence of the grapes of wrath cultural formation's politics and poetics in our own ecological time of the now. Yet simply by producing this diachronic eco-political framework for analysis, disturbing ironies of Apocalypse Always become legible almost immediately.⁷⁸ As one

⁷⁵ Bennett qtd. in Egan 228.

⁷⁶ Egan 228 and "More Than 80 Years."

⁷⁷ Glass.

⁷⁸ As historian James N. Gregory reminds us, unsettling irony was a powerful component of Dust Bowl narratives. According to Gregory, the Okie exodus produced "a spectacle rich in drama and pathos" that resonated "in ironic and disturbing ways" during the 1930s (xiv). Gregory argues that the story of "the Dust Bowl migrants seemed to suggest a pathetic failure of the American Dream, a failure of all the promises of opportunity that formed its vital core, a failure which if true confirmed Americans' worst fears about the meaning of their Depression-era experience" (xiv). While the contemporary cultural imagination is still cycling through the final stages of response to the Camp Fire eco-crisis, the connections I draw here

cultural historian has argued, irony was a powerful narrative component of the stories the Dust Bowl eco-crisis produced. This eco-crisis and the American exodus it produced were spectacles “rich in drama and pathos” that resonated “in ironic and disturbing ways.”⁷⁹ The story of “the Dust Bowl migrants seemed to suggest a pathetic failure of the American Dream, a failure of all the promises of opportunity that formed its vital core, a failure which if true confirmed Americans’ worst fears about the meaning of their Depression-era experience.”⁸⁰ While the contemporary cultural imagination is still cycling through the final stages of response to the Camp Fire eco-crisis, the connections I draw here between these two diachronic locations of eco-crisis (the Dust Bowl and Apocalypse Always) suggest the ironic and disturbing ways that social locations of eco-crisis like Paradise are already articulating some of our own worst fears and anxieties about our late capitalist time of the now.

Three hours south-west of Eden, an eerie red-gray cloud of smoke and particulate descended on the San Francisco Bay Area and settled there for weeks in the fall of 2018, after Paradise was lost. Dangerous ashen particulate fell like dust on the city both day and night. Almost overnight, neo-dust bowl masks (N95s and even full-face respirators) became hot commodities on the emerging disaster capitalist traditional and underground economies.⁸¹ These masks became an uncanny, but not uncommon sight on the streets of downtown San Francisco in the aftermath of the Camp Fire, as they were in the Dust Bowl of the continent during the 1930s, and as Nolan imagines them to be in the post-apocalyptic future where *Interstellar* is set. Some enterprising Uber drivers in the city read opportunity in the eerie red-gray cloud of particulate from Paradise and began to hawk masks to their upper-middle class gig-economy bosses from the trunks of their rideshare vehicles.⁸²

Meanwhile, billionaire auto-executive Elon Musk, a disaster capitalist in the sleazy tradition of Steinbeck’s infamous used-car salesmen from chapter seven of *The Grapes of Wrath* (“Sign your name right here. We’ll take care of everything”), seized on the environmental catastrophe in Paradise to hawk his futuristic luxury automobile line.⁸³ Musk unironically suggested *the automobile itself* as a helpful tool of survival for the victims of California’s new normal.⁸⁴

between these two diachronic social locations of eco-crisis suggest the ironic and disturbing ways that Paradise is already articulating some of our worst fears and anxieties about our time of the now.

⁷⁹ Gregory xiv.

⁸⁰ Gregory xiv.

⁸¹ We would see the use of these masks scale globally and take on new significance (literal and figurative) two years later with onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In both locations of ecological catastrophe (Paradise and the global pandemic) disaster capitalist markets functioned precisely as expected, another disturbing indication of late capital’s congruity with Apocalypse Always.

⁸² Ghaffary.

⁸³ Steinbeck 67; 64-68.

⁸⁴ @elonmusk, “If Tesla can help.” See also @elonmusk, “Good. But not hospital grade.”



Elon's apparent *total* lack of appreciation for economic reality that would have priced virtually everyone in rural Paradise, California out of the market for his futuristic six-figure luxury car (Tesla's Model X has *Back to the Future* doors) seems surprising at first... Until we recall that Musk, who fashions himself a billionaire genius of both tech and business, hasn't in fact run a profitable company since he co-founded Paypal in the old millennium with capital he inherited from his dad (a wealthy South African apartheid profiteer). Within the obviously vulture-capitalist context of a billionaire marketing luxury cars to poor people under the auspices of service to the victims of the deadliest wildfire in California history, those cool car doors suddenly cease to evoke Marty and Doc. Instead, they conjure the image of that other notorious African bird of prey, with crooked wings spread wide, feasting not only on death but also the labor of others (figure 1).



Figure 1: Tesla Model X (left) and an African vulture (right)

Sadly, it isn't all that unusual that people like Elon Musk (and many others who share the same world view, if not exactly the same economic status in Silicon Valley, the Bay Area, and beyond) manage to forget that there is another side of the income gap, where most can't find \$1,000 to evacuate even in the midst of life-threatening ecological

catastrophe, let alone afford a \$100,000 car to indulge nostalgia for '80s pop culture.⁸⁵ But this notorious insularity in Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area was ironically breached by the Camp Fire. In this new-millennial season of Apocalypse Always, the delicate equilibrium of Tech Bros and avocado toast, Sunday Fundays and Marina Ginas wasn't upset by neo-Okie climate change refugees driving their jalopies into town from Paradise, however. Indeed, this class clueless bubble was burst instead by the very air we all struggled to breathe in the weeks after the Camp Fire. One the one hand, this eco-crisis breach in one of the wealthiest places in the world suggests the undeniable truth that increasingly in our time of the now, even late capitalisms' most spectacular winners won't be able to escape the horrifying consequences of our collective new normal. On the other hand, they certainly will try.

The hazardous air quality in the aftermath of the Camp Fire produced an almost obscene inversion of the Dust Bowl's Okie Exodus once it became evident that the rarefied air the Bay Area elite had grown accustomed to, suddenly soot-stained by toxic dust, smoke, and particulate that drifted west from Paradise, wouldn't be rarefied again anytime soon. Many of the overprivileged of Greater Silicon Valley took a page from the Joad's old dusty playbook and took to the "migrant road."

"The Greater Silicon Valley Camp Fire Exodus" of 2018 doesn't have quite the same ring as Lange's "American Exodus" did in 1939. Nor did it produce much of anything in the cultural imagination beyond a traffic nightmare of gridlocked interstates heading out of the Bay Area. Nevertheless, the Greater Silicon Valley Camp Fire Exodus is considered here for posterity. It too is an ironic and disturbing echo of the Okie exodus. And indeed, it helps confirm some of our own worst fears about the meaning of America in our late capitalist time of the now, while also providing some clues about what might come next as the age of the late Anthropocene continues its entropic escalation into the future. Far from a movement of working-class neo-Okies from Paradise, fleeing the total annihilation of their community, the ironic inversion of the Joad's American exodus consisted of those Tech Bros, Marina Ginas, and other overprivileged neoliberals from Greater Silicon Valley piling into their luxury hybrid SUVs and Teslas and heading East on the Ski Week Road of Interstate 80. They weren't fleeing to the Promised Land of the west, in search of "a living with labor," to quote Woody Guthrie.⁸⁶ Instead, they were headed for the hotel/casino/resort towns of Lake Tahoe and Reno, Nevada for clean air and higher ground, perhaps a few hands of blackjack, maybe crab cake benedict from room service in the morning... Not unlike "the wants of the Californians" that Steinbeck

⁸⁵ Indeed, most refugees from Paradise, like their Okie eco-crisis counterparts from the 1930s, would have struggled with the most basic economics of flight from environmental catastrophe. According to US Census Bureau estimates, per capita annual income in Paradise was \$27,272 before the Camp Fire, \$3,905 below the national median income ("Quick Facts"). And as *The New Republic* recently highlighted (the same publication where Carlson's "Dust" appeared 83 years before Paradise burned), the economics of climate refugeeism isn't on the side of the poor. *The New Republic* reports that the cost of evacuating during 2018's Hurricane Irma was around \$1,000 per family, "a number that is out of reach for many" working poor, even before Donald J. Trump's COVID-19 recession. And, *The New Republic* ominously adds, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association is predicting the 2020 hurricane season will be 60 percent "above normal" (Williams).

⁸⁶ Guthrie, *Pastures* 41.

criticized during the Okie exodus, the wants of today's new ruling class are also "nebulous and undefined": "they wanted many things, accumulation, social success, amusement, luxury, and a curious banking security" Steinbeck wrote about his fellow Californians in 1939, in the midst of an earlier season of eco-refugeeism.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, back in our time of the now, the poorer residents of northern California learned the meaning of "shelter in place" and how to make DIY home ventilators out of \$25 box fans from Home Depot to protect themselves from the deadly smoke that choked half of the state in the aftermath of the environmental apocalypse in Paradise, California.⁸⁸

The Cultural Crisis of the Age of the Late Anthropocene: Interstellar Politics and Fight or Flight Ideologies

Popular culture's ideological crisis of (eco)narrative, its general inability to represent these stories of eco-crisis in the age of Apocalypse Always, is frankly quite remarkable. At the same time, I conceded that popular culture's inability to represent our new normal or produce engaged audiences around stories of what happened, why it happened, and what happens next, is complicated by the recent hegemony of discourses of post-truth, fake news, and alternative facts (which begin not with the idiocracy of Trump's administration but with the mendacity of Nixon's). As different as these discourses are, all have undermined the popular imagination's ability engage with the narrative of global climate change at even the most basic level of fact. In light of this problem, we must contextualize the culture industries' failure to engage ecology as a social location of permanent crisis within the much larger framework of the failure of the nation itself as imagined community. That is, in spite of the overwhelming evidence of catastrophic climate change that confronts global humanity with ever-increasing urgency, the US-American imaginary is indeed deeply fragmented, even on a headline that leaves no room for debate or interpretation. While Bob Dylan once informed the popular imagination that "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," our contemporary crisis of eco-narrative has proven this Nobel laureate in literature wrong.⁸⁹ In spite of powerful evidence from both the weatherman and the very air we struggle to breathe, first through Dust Bowl and then COVID-19 masks, the nation as failed imagined community is dangerously close to succumbing to what Mike Davis calls the "ecology of fear" and Terry Eagleton describes as "the politics of amnesia." If the nation, as failed imagined community appears incapable of even accepting the indisputable fact that *something is actually happening*, then perhaps it is problematic to expect popular culture forms to engage the reality of our present climate dystopia or imagine "what will happen next."

But of course, this project of imagining what has happened and what will happen next has always been the work of "genre" narratives across popular culture media.

⁸⁷ Steinbeck, *Grapes* 233.

⁸⁸ Thompson, "As Toxic Smoke Blankets California, Who Has the Ability to Escape?"

⁸⁹ Dylan, "Subterranean Homesick Blues."

Engaging the epistemological space between science and fiction, beginning from what has happened (socially, culturally, scientifically, and technologically) and extrapolating to imagine what speculative futures and other worlds might look like, what might happen next, has always been the cultural work of those apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian narratives. Only a few examples include Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) and Stephen King's *The Stand* (1978), Orson Welles' *War of the Worlds* (1938), and movies like *Blade Runner* (1982), *Outbreak* (1995), and *Contagion* (2011). One such work of contemporary speculative fiction, Christopher Nolan's 2014 film *Interstellar*, not only imagines humanity's post-apocalyptic future of devastating climate crisis, famine, and extinction, but it borrows explicitly from the aesthetic ideologies of the grapes of wrath cultural formation and extends that cultural formation into our time of the now.

The tension in the popular cultural imagination as a result of our present ecological moment of no longer *impending*, but *actually occurring* ecological apocalypse is figured in terms of tension between the equal and opposite, deeply embedded human evolutionary impulses of "fight or flight." Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar* is structured in such a way that allows the blockbuster audience to indulge both instincts. Both impulses were of course also legible via representations of the Dust Bowl and its Okie eco-refugee crisis, which Dorothea Lange described in terms of "flight" by another name: "American exodus."⁹⁰ As we have seen, the Okies' fight or flight melodrama in the face of their contemporary social location of eco-crisis produced widespread popular culture representation for several years during the Depression-decade.

In contrast, the popular culture imagination in our present moment of global climate change has been eerily silent. Generally speaking, this silence in popular culture has persisted into our time of the now in spite of over four decades of mounting evidence and increasingly dire warnings from the scientific and activist communities that human society is driving the entire natural ecosystem headlong towards the edge of a cliff. We know now that in response to these warnings as early as the 1970s, many of late capitalism's political and economic leaders cynically calculated exactly how long they could profit from their petrochemical-laced societies and stock portfolios, kept calm, and carried on the rape of the natural world for the next half a century.⁹¹ What is now finally undeniable (putting aside the global right's insistence on sowing seeds of disinformation among the ninety-nine percent) is that we fell off of that ecological cliff and into the abyss of Apocalypse Always quite some time ago.

Evidence and warnings from the scientific community have only increased in volume and frequency throughout the first two decades of the new millennium. Yet in response to these warnings, escalating ecological entropy, and a new generation of radical climate activism exemplified by 17-year-old Swedish leader Greta Thunberg, the UK-based Extinction Rebellion, and the Sunrise Movement in the United States, late capitalist hegemony has simply doubled down on Apocalypse Always. Faced with this new ontology, it has become evident that late capitalism simply lacks the stomach to fight for

⁹⁰ Lange and Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*.

⁹¹ Hall.

the present or future survival of the place where it does business and all of its customers currently live. Instead, late capital's response is to engineer a wide range of elaborate, profit-generating, plutocratic eco-crisis escape plans for the one percent: from mercenary first responders to protect private property from wildfires in the West, to multimillion-dollar underground luxury bunker-condominiums in the Midwest, and finally, even a plan to extend the logic of coloniality to the cosmos and colonize the Red Planet on behalf of Silicon Valley's new millennial inheritors of the old Calvinist doctrine of election and predestination, except in Silicon Valley's version, the elect won't be chosen by God Almighty, but by Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and perhaps Richard Branson.⁹²

If the fight or flight response to proto eco-crisis was legible across various aesthetic forms of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, where might we begin to look in the contemporary cultural imagination for a similar tension to our own moment of permanent eco-crisis? It may come as a surprise to some, but your father's collection of girlie magazines might not be a bad place to start looking ("for the articles"). As an aesthetic form, popular press magazines have long been an important vehicle for mainstreaming left-of-center ideologies into the popular imagination. Soft-core smut publishers such as Hugh Hefner and Larry Flint spent the 1960s and '70s doing many things that are obviously beyond the scope of this chapter. But one thing both undoubtedly also did is advance left-of-center ideological positions on a range of democratic-liberalist fronts, from advocating for the sexual revolution and anti-censorship discourse in their early days, to helping mainstream more inclusive definitions of sexuality and gender formation and pushing environmentalism forward today.⁹³ *Playboy* magazine's publication of long form journalism on social locations of ecological catastrophe in recent years provides a good example of one contemporary popular culture aesthetic form embracing our deep evolutionary biological "fight impulse" by implicitly asking its (mostly male, mostly older) audience to be informed, engaged, and fight back against our present ontology of Apocalypse Always. Yet even in the guise of the girlie magazine, *Playboy*'s pro-environmentalist think pieces are absolutely no match for the futurist technocratic ideologies produced by Elon Musk.

⁹² Osnos; Parramore; Iovenko. See Fernholz and Davenport on "rocket billionaires" and "space barons."

⁹³ In the face of widespread and longstanding critiques from feminists and media studies advocates, *Playboy* magazine has recently ended its much reviled and longstanding practice of first airbrushing, then Photoshopping images of women's bodies that appear in the pages of the magazine. This shift in editorial and marketing direction has been accompanied in recent years by other significant changes and improvements to the 65-year-old standard-bearer of men's magazines. *Playboy* experimented with eliminating nude pictorials from the American magazine's pages, adopting an aesthetic inspired more by *Vice* magazine and American Apparel adverts than Pornhub.com (editorial ultimately settled on a semi-nude standard with no full-frontal nudity in the media platform's current iteration). In addition, recent issues of *Playboy* have continued to embrace the expansion of the incredibly narrow definition of (US-American) beauty that the magazine itself once helped to define by featuring its first transwomen playmate (Ines Rau, in November/December 2017) and its first playmate who uses a prosthetic leg (Marsha Elle Spring 2020). While this pictorial feature is literally the centerpiece of each of the magazine's issues, these women are not the first non-binary or disabled models to appear in *Playboy*. Cal State University Northridge professor Ellen Stohl was the magazine's first disabled model in 1987 and Caroline "Tula" Crossey posed for the magazine in 1981.

When not trying to sell his luxury cars to fleeing climate refugees, Musk hustles NASA and the American taxpayer to help indulge his own unique Freudian rocket man fantasies at SpaceX, one of several boutique rocket companies active today (a fact that also functions as unequivocal evidence that class inequality has escalated to grotesque levels that demand immediate correction).⁹⁴ SpaceX insists the future of the human species is not here on earth but out among the stars, “to the Red Country,” as Steinbeck originally wrote in context that I’m suggesting here is more relevant than previously imagined.⁹⁵ SpaceX’s insistence that humanity will soon be “multiplanetary species” and that our planet’s cold, barren, harsh next-door neighbor will be home to a permanent human colony, conjures the possibility that the critical imagination will have to expand Quijano’s and Wallerstein’s useful theory of the colonial of power in the very near future to encompass the “interstellar-colonial imagination.”⁹⁶

The public-facing side of Musk’s program to #OccupyMars is remarkably naïve, but a good bit of breezy marketing: an uncomplicated combination of Tony Robins-style, power of positive thinking pseudo-philosophy with a bland, inoffensive gesture towards Making Humanity Great Again:

You want to wake up in the morning and think the future is going to be great—and that’s what being a spacefaring civilization is all about. It’s about believing in the future and thinking that the future will be better than the past. And I can’t think of anything more exciting than going out there and being among the stars.⁹⁷

Musk’s childlike logic in the PR blurb above belies one of the darker implications of #OccupyMars: that to wake up in the morning and decide to *stay*, to *fight* the new normal of dust bowl masks, melting ice caps, and rising oceans—to take political action, personal action, any action at all against our present ecological ontology of Apocalypse Always

⁹⁴ See *The Economist*, intriguingly titled editorial “In Heaven as It Is on Earth: The New Space Race,” which goes farther than one might expect in support of my argument, but not far enough. The editorial carefully tip-toes around at the profound problem of class inequality that these plutocratic space barons signify: “The fact that a wealthy person is willing to spend his money on such a fanciful space project as going to Mars is [...] a good measure of just how rich some people have become” (15). *The Economist* concludes in the same kind of predictably bland ambiguity: “For now, the world’s private space programmes, whether commercial or quixotic, are mostly American. But the model is spreading. Even China sports nascent rocket firms. The incipient race to Mars will include companies as well as countries. That will make it a better test of economic systems than the original space race ever was” (15).

⁹⁵ The original title of this chapter, a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away was an allusion to the first line of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*: “To the red country and part of the gray of Oklahoma, the last rains came gently and they did not cut the scarred earth” (5). This allusion in fact remains in epigraph at the beginning of the chapter, which I imagine feels to you in this moment also like a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

⁹⁶ See SpaceX, “Mars & Beyond.” As of Spring 2020, the bottom of this webpage reads, “For inquiries about our private passenger program, please contact sales@spacex.com.”

⁹⁷ SpaceX.

(aside from buying a Tesla, of course)—is little more than a fool’s errand. It’s obviously not as exciting as being “out there” “among the stars.” And worse still, perhaps it’s even something of a personal failure, or crisis of faith in the very idea of future itself. Why fight to fix earth’s problems (at any one of the social locations of crisis I explore in this project—racialized, economic, or environmental) when, as Musk constantly assures the cultural imagination via the popular press and his Twitter feed, humanity won’t be here for very much longer anyway? This frat-boy-during-finals-week logic is perfectly in-line with the essentially dystopian and nihilistic logic of late capital and the neoliberal state that actively produced not only Musk’s obscene wealth, but the problems of the late Anthropocene in the first place. The ideological tension implicit between the “fight instinct” I read in *Playboy*’s recent long form eco-crisis journalism and the “flight instinct” self-evident in SpaceX’s #OccupyMars discourse essentially pits one Freudian neurosis against another, especially when we consider the fact that recent studies suggest human reproduction won’t just be difficult, but likely impossible on Mars, meaning that should Musk and his cadre of plutocratic space barons and their technocratic sycophants actually ever make it to Mars, they would likely be the first and last colonial subjects of Musk’s New Outer-World Order. In light of this fact, the psychosexual subtext of *Playboy*’s explicit investment in fighting for the future of human life on earth becomes even more self-evident.⁹⁸

Christopher Nolan’s Neo-Dust Bowl Narrative

Even before the opening scenes of the movie obliterates the lines between documentary and feature film, the historical past, the viewing present, and the film’s speculative future of global dust bowls and interstellar space travel, Christopher Nolan’s sci-fi blockbuster, *Interstellar* (2015), evokes the Great Depression via the paratexts of the film’s corporate title cards. These cards, which flash briefly on the screen to identify the film’s four financiers (Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, Legendary Entertainment, and Nolan’s own Syncopy, Inc.), are each rendered in highly stylized sepia that recalls the look of archival photographs from the era. More specifically, this sepia filter suggests less the color of *actual* photographs from the Great Depression (for how few audience members in 2015 would have actually handled 80-year old photographs?) than the mental image we carry in our minds of what archival images from American Hard Times are *supposed* to look like. For some, this mental trick of filtering our ideas of the past through this sepia tone is the product of early encounters with the American educational system: an old picture we once saw in a high school history text book of a sad, but still beautiful woman holding her babies in a Hooverville had the same tint. For others, this image of the sepia filtered past comes to us (as Morris Dickstein has argued) through popular culture itself, perhaps from watching John Ford’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, Hal Ashby’s *Bound for Glory*, or the Coen brothers’ exceptionally dusty *O*,

⁹⁸ See Szocik, et al, “Biological and Social Challenges of Human Reproduction in a Long-Term Mars Base.”

Brother, Where Art Thou?.⁹⁹ But the particular type of digital-vintage aesthetic at play in the paratexts of *Interstellar*, the sepia-kissed digital filtering we encounter in the first images on the screen, is also commonly used in our time of the now for editing images within social media spaces like Instagram and on smart phones via apps like VSCO and Hipstamatic. These twenty-first century aesthetic technologies are intended to make the digital appear analog, the virtual appear actual, and most of all, to simulate the feeling of the past, but never too closely. This Instagram-esque sepia tone produces a unique spin on feelings of nostalgia for the film's social media saturated, millennial audience. It simultaneously recalls the look of the olden-times, but in a way that the millennial audience has direct experience through these digital filtering tools that are incredibly easy to use, allowing digital natives a sense that even the past is something that we can manipulate, master, and control thanks to the incredible tech-toys that our era has produced.

This color effect is especially striking on *Interstellar*'s first card, of the Paramount Pictures logo.¹⁰⁰ The Paramount title card is animated: five-point stars begin to fall gently from the dark night sky and skip across a nondescript body of water towards Paramount Picture's trademarked craggy mountain, set against the horizon. The stars align into a halo around the para-mount's sharp peak and the studio's name appears in its proprietary script in the sky above. Once the stars have properly aligned atop the corporate mountain and the studio's name is in its prominent place, a sun flare breaks on screen and we begin to notice the reddish-brown sepia tint that completely saturates the colors of the landscape, sky, and clouds on the screen. If the heirs to Steinbeck's literary estate ever stop fighting, and Steven Spielberg finally gets to make his *Grapes of Wrath* reboot, *this* is the kind of title card that any self-respecting graphic designer would make to set the stage for Tom Joad's triumphant return to the big screen after all these years (perhaps Joad might also played by *Interstellar* star and Henry Fonda dead-ringer Matthew McConaughey).¹⁰¹ The undeniable affect and strange power of *Interstellar*'s paratextual apparatus (I certainly never imagined I'd be moved to such poetic language about "A Viacom Company") is reinforced by the total silence of the first few sepia-tinted moments on the screen, which is heightened because it flies in the face what audiences have come to expect from a Christopher Nolan popcorn flick, recalling the ominous tones that filled the theater as soon as the lights went down and the money-men's logos came up before Nolan's *Dark Knight* films.¹⁰²

Interstellar's next paratextual shot, the film's title sequence, extends this homage to the "Dirty Thirties," if not the literary tradition itself. Director of photography Hoyte

⁹⁹ Dickstein 9.

¹⁰⁰ Nolan 0:00-0:20.

¹⁰¹ See Kroll and Fleming on Spielberg's 2013 plans to remake Ford's masterpiece. See Associated Press, Melley, and Gardner on the financial family melodrama that prevented it from materializing.

¹⁰² Not to belabor the point any further, but the big, billowy clouds behind the Warner Bros. shield in the second title card look particularly dusty in these sepia tones. Nothing like photo-realistic animation of the Paramount logo, the clouds in the background on the Warner title card actually looks like hand painted animation (Nolan 0:34). The appearance of hand painted, brown-gray-red clouds clearly echoes the studio backdrops of Ford's classic 1939 Dust Bowl feature film.

Van Hoytema tenderly pans his camera from left to right across a book shelf that takes up the entire frame while Hans Zimmer's Oscar-nominated score begins to rise just as tenderly. Specks of dust fall delicately into the frame from above, like sifted flour or powdered sugar, and settle into miniature mountains around two toy spaceships that rest on the bookshelf. While the fake-sepia of the corporate paratexts is thankfully not carried over into the film's title sequence, the color and exposure of *Interstellar's* opening shot is nonetheless nostalgic: soft, muted, and hazy, recalling not the look of the 1930s, but the medium-format analog photography of the 1960s and '70s. This muted color pallet is apt in light of the two toy spaceships that rest on the shelf. The spaceships are at once familiar and fantastic, real and unreal: the iconic NASA shuttle Endeavor, decommissioned in 2011, sits facing the second ship on shelf. The second ship wouldn't look out of place on the cover of a comic book or science-fiction dime novel set in the intergalactic future imagined by American mass culture at midcentury.

The casual placement of these objects on the bookshelf disabuse us of the idea that perhaps these retro toys are intentional interior design choices of nostalgia-obsessed grown-ups (even the Endeavor toy would be vintage in the narrative time of the film, which is not explicitly named, but we infer to be sometime around the year 2050). The off-handed placement of the spaceships establish the toys as left-overs of someone's childhood, casually cast aside by a child in the midst of its play. Framed in this way, these twin spaceships resonate not just with humanity's scientific ambition and technological achievement in our time of the now, but also with those achievements' roots in the popular cultural imagination; not only with the boundless nature of childhood fantasy and the child's capacity for wonder and play, but also with the child's propensity to rapidly shift focus and whimsically discard one toy for another when the child becomes bored or frustrated.

Indeed, the books that line the shelf behind these two spaceships do not belong to a child, or at least not a child at the same stage of development that the toys signify. Through the dust and behind the playthings of childhood, titles, authors, and publisher's imprints are partially legible across the spines of the books. These proper-names, however, even outside of the pace of the film's time, even with the advantage of critical caesura, remain illegible and out of focus. Even the most attentive audience member will only catch fragments of meaning from this stately and impressive literary collection:

Ted Morgan
Out of the Blue
 –*Atomic Tale*
 –*of Solitude* Gabriel Garcia Marquez
 –*Castle* Jeanette Walls
Selected Poems
 –*me Machine*
 Jose Saramago
Three Cups of Tea

Janet Fitch
—*EVERYTHING*

While the pan across the bookcase is slow, wistful even, there is little meaning or significance to make of these texts in the real time of cinema: it's impossible to make these literary fragments signify much, or identify any definite pattern in *Interstellar's* first eleven seconds. As Van Hoytema's camera inches along, it simply refuses to resolve into focus on either the toy spaceships in the foreground or the books in the background. Instead, *Interstellar's* title sequence forces us to focus on the falling dust.

This short sequence plays out in near silence. Zimmer's score floats along at the same level of intensity as the dust itself. The film's title, dust, spaceships, and books all disappear into this silence, in a slow fade to black. The screen dwells in this darkness for a beat. With the poetic dustfall and the nostalgic echoes of both childhood and America's pioneering past gone, the first non-musical sound of the film emerges from the darkness: a folksy, wobbly, aged female voice. "Well, my dad was a farmer," she declares warmly against the cold, blank frame. From this cinematic void, not unlike the void of the first verse of Genesis, the film springs to new, visual life. In the film, as in Genesis, a series of speech acts divide the darkness and the light. The old woman's words seem to impel the jump cut that brings the film into narrative existence.

This transition, from title sequence to first shot, is striking beyond the juxtapositions of dark and light, silence and sound, childhood and old age. This jump cut introduces a new cinematic mode. The elegiac movement of the camera in the title sequence is replaced by the static "objectivity" of documentary film as the old woman completes her sentence: "—like everybody else back then." She is shot in the conventional $\frac{3}{4}$ angle of the documentary interview; her eyes move between the camera and the interviewer we infer to be just off screen but cannot see. But behind her, in the background, the same bookshelf, a figure for the cultural imagination itself, remains.

Chapter Three

Sign Your Name Right Here; We'll Take Care of Everything: Capitalism Comes Home
in Hollywood Films of "Great" Economic Crisis

Sign your name right here. We'll take care of everything.

—Unnamed used car salesman, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)

Once they find out they're getting a home, they don't ask questions. They sign where you tell them to sign.

—Real estate broker, *The Big Short* (2015)

Yes, as through this world I've wandered
I've seen lots of funny men
Some will rob you with a six gun
And some with a fountain pen

And as through your life you travel
Yes, as through your life you roam
You will never see an outlaw
Drive a family from their home

—Woody Guthrie, "Pretty Boy Floyd" (1940)

"Print the Legend"

As newspaperman Maxwell Scott reminds us near the conclusion of John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), "when the legend becomes fact" the choice between the two is self-evident in the west, particularly when the culture industry is doing the writing: "print the legend."¹ This complicated relationship between fact and history, legend and mythology, is inscribed across all of John Ford's iconic filmography, from *The Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) to *The Searchers* (1956) and beyond.² Likewise, this

¹ Ford, *The Man Who Shot* 1:59:46-51.

² I am deploying the notion of the mythological here in a self-conscious Barthesian register. See Barthes' prefaces and the concluding chapter "Myth Today," in his still vital 1957 treatise on reading popular culture, *Mythologies*. For a very evocative contemporary example of John Ford's mythological afterlife in the American popular imagination, see Jonathan Nolan's and Lisa Joy's acclaimed HBO television series *Westworld*. Produced by J.J. Abrams and adapted from the 1976 Michael Crichton film of the same name,

relationship is also important to consider via Ford's filmic contribution to the grapes of wrath cultural formation: his Academy Award-winning screen adaptation of John Steinbeck's novel, which was released in January 1940 by Darryl F. Zanuck, 20th Century Fox's notoriously reactionary executive, just nine months after publication of Steinbeck's novel.³ Indeed, the relationship between fact and legend is only one of several similar tensions produced by the grapes of wrath cultural formation's twinned articulations of the Joad narrative in literature and film. From the moment Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared on 14 April 1939, as critics Peter Lisca and Kevin Hearle have argued, the novel was received more as "sociological tract" than fiction—to say nothing of literature.⁴ Meanwhile, debates surrounding the distinction between art and propaganda have also persistently dogged less favorable critical readings of (particularly Steinbeck's) *The Grapes of Wrath* well into second half of the twentieth century.⁵

How might recalling Maxwell Scott's famous line from *Liberty Valance* in the shadow of the Great Recession—another "great" crisis of capitalism—help us begin to unpack this relationship between legend and fact, not only in the culture industry's representation of the Great Depression in John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*, but also in contemporary popular culture filmic texts that explore similar social locations of economic crisis: in the filmic imaginations of not only the Great Depression, but the Great Recession as well? What might a new reading of John Ford's Depression-era Hollywood classic in light of our own early twenty-first century moment of capitalism in crisis tell us about the form and function of contemporary Hollywood cinema vis-à-vis global economic catastrophe in our own time of the now? How did John Ford negotiate between the "legends" of 1930s economic crisis—signified in the popular imagination as mass speculation on the market in the Roaring Twenties, Wall Street's Crash in 1929, breadlines and Hoovervilles emerging in response to sustained double-digit unemployment, and the New Deal's alphabet soup interventionist programs—and the "facts" of Depression economic and political life as experienced by the underclass of the Dust Bowl migration? And how have contemporary filmmakers like Adam McKay (*The Big Short*; 2015) negotiated similar tensions between legend and fact in the aftermath of the Great Recession, an early twenty first century global economic crisis so devastating

Nolan and Joy's *Westworld* simultaneously fractures and furthers the legend of John Ford from both sides of the camera's eye. The films of John Ford function as intertexts for the first season of the series, which plays with the conventions of the traditional cinematic western that Ford in large part defined, while the series also makes John Ford himself the model for one of its lead characters, Dr. Robert Ford, the "author" of *Westworld*'s overarching "narrative," played in the HBO series by Anthony Hopkins who happens to bear no small resemblance to John Ford himself.

³ "However naively elucidated," one film critic notes, "Steinbeck's message was undeniably socialistic, and it is remarkably undiluted in the film version. This may be surprising coming from the studio of an antilabor executive like Darryl F. Zanuck, but the producer also longed for the prestige afforded by social protest films" (Calhoun 51).

⁴ Lisca and Hearle, "Patterns of Criticism," (#). For an examination of "the Steinbeck problem"—that is Steinbeck's subaltern literary position among his cohort of mid-century white male American novelists, see CITATION NEEDED.

⁵ See Stott on propaganda in *Documentary Expression.... And That One Guy* who said the 1930s allows us to mistake TGOW as a great work of art. See also Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*.

that the media, politicians, economists, and scholars consistently attempted to fathom it through sustained comparisons to the Great Depression of the 1930s?⁶

Morris Dickstein, scholar of 1930s US-American culture, has explored this dialectic of Depression-era legend and fact in his influential study *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression*. Dickstein argues that America's Depression culture is best understood in terms of synthesis: the cultural tension produced by the cultural imagination of the 1930s when it successfully managed to juxtapose Fred Astaire's elegant body in filmic motion with Dorothea Lange's (no-less elegant) images of everyday American bodies in tragic repose, such as "Migrant Mother" (1936).⁷ While the grapes of wrath cultural formation is not identified in Dickstein's analysis, he does write that John Ford's cinematic vision in *The Grapes of Wrath* "fixed the iconography of the thirties" in the popular imagination.⁸ Ford, of course, wasn't the only Hollywood director whose cinematic vision of the Great Depression was indebted to the aesthetic ideologies produced by the New Deal state's cultural apparatus (figures 1 and 2). But Dickstein is correct that Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* occupies a unique place in the cinematic popular cultural imaginary of the 1930s. As others have argued, the iconic look of Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* owes as much to the aesthetic ideologies of the New Deal's FSA photographers as it does to the inspired cinematography of Gregg Toland, who would go on to shoot Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* in 1941, just one year after *The Grapes of Wrath* (figure 3).

Yet Dickstein ultimately concludes that the visual syntax of *The Grapes of Wrath* (the formal choices and ordering logic of cinema's visual language that contributes to the unique production of meaning in film) fixed the iconography of the 1930s *less* in the cultural imagination of the Great Depression and *more* in the cultural imagination of "future generations"—particularly for those artists and filmmakers after the 1970s whose cinematic imaginings of the Great Depression were always already mediated vis-à-vis the legends and mythmaking of the Depression-era culture industries.⁹ Dickstein argues that *The Grapes of Wrath* came to signify more to posterity than it did to the "people of the period"—a point that has been forcefully argued by other scholars of Dust Bowl culture in great depth.¹⁰ For example, Dickstein points to the direct impact of the visual syntax of Ford and Toland on *Bound for Glory*, Hal Ashby's 1972 big screen adaptation of folk-singer Woody Guthrie's rambling autobiography. The cinematic *Bound for Glory*, according to Dickstein, showed signs of "affectionate imitation" if not outright nostalgia only a generation after the national trauma of the Great Depression.¹¹

⁶ Note on problem of naming the 2008 economic crisis.

⁷ "As we look back at it today," Dickstein writes, "the Depression is a study in contrasts. [...] If the FSA photographs give us the naturalistic art of the Depression at its most humane, the Astaire musicals convey an elegant, sophisticated world in which the Depression is barely a distant rumor. Yet the two are equally characteristic of the period" (9).

⁸ Dickstein 9.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. See also Charles J. Shindo's *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination*.

¹¹ Ibid. Elsewhere, Dickstein writes, "The great movie genres of the thirties—the gangster movie, the horror film, the screwball comedy, the dance musical, the road movie, the social-consciousness drama, the animated cartoon—came to dominate American filmmaking [after the Depression]. Significantly, they still



Figure 1: "Towards Los Angeles, Calif.," Dorothea Lange

Dickstein is correct that the "aesthetic ideologies" of the 1930s were indeed more nuanced than the cinematic legend produced by Ford and Toland in *The Grapes of Wrath* could ultimately accommodate.¹² Yet it is more difficult to come to terms with this other claim, that the "look" of John Ford's film (and by extension the look of the 1930s articulation of the grapes of wrath cultural formation) somehow failed to signify in its own Depression-era moment. It is clear enough that Ashby's bio-pic, in addition to more recent films such as the Coen brothers' absurdist pseudo-Okie odyssey *O Brother, Where Art Thou* (2000), Ron Howard's tale of Rocky on relief, *Cinderella Man* (2005), and Christopher Nolan's near-future, post-apocalyptic, sci-fi vision of global dust bowls and

influence the way movies are made, while the old films themselves remain objects of nostalgia or affectionate imitation" (5).

¹² Denning 259. As Michael Denning has argued on the politics of art, it is necessary to distinguish between cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies. Denning defines "cultural politics," as "the politics of allegiances and affiliations," which "at one level [is] simply the politics of letterheads and petitions, the stances taken by artists and intellectuals, the pledges of allegiance and declarations of dissent" (xix). "Aesthetic ideologies," on the other hand, is "the politics of form" (xix). Denning continues: "But [cultural politics] is also the politics of the cultural field itself, the history of the institutions and apparatuses in which artists and intellectuals work. For the kinds of political stances artists and intellectuals take depend upon their understanding of the ground on which they work" (xix).

blight that threaten humanity's existence in *Interstellar* (2014) are all deeply indebted to the cinematic legend of the Great Depression that Ford and Toland articulated vis-à-vis the grapes of wrath cultural formation. Certainly, the lasting influence of the filmic *Grapes of Wrath* on the visual syntax of subsequent generations of Hollywood filmmakers who engage with either the politics or poetics of the Great Depression is virtually undeniable.



Figure 2: Lenny and George in Lewis Milestone's adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*, 1937 (5:21)

Yet as other critics have argued, Ford's and Toland's visual syntax also deployed a number of well-known referents from outside the New Deal state's cultural apparatus that Depression-era audiences would also have recognized. In addition to the well-known cultural productions of Dorothea Lange and other photographers funded by the New Deal's photography and information bureau at the FSA, these visual-cultural referents include Horace Bristol's photojournalism for Henry Luce's conservative *LIFE* magazine, published a year before John Ford's film was in theaters (figure 4) and the rural expressionism of popular mass-market American artist Thomas Hart Benton, who illustrated a special edition of Steinbeck's novel for the Heritage Press while the Ford film was still in production (figure 5).¹³ The visual syntax of the filmic *Grapes of Wrath* so thoroughly saturated the cultural imagination of the late Depression-era, in fact, that

¹³ See also Adams, "Thomas Hart Benton"; Allen, "Re-viewing"; and Baskind, "True Story."



Figure 3: Newsreel producers attempt to print the legend of another icon of the west, Charles Foster Kane/William Randolph Hearst, in Orson Welles' and Gregg Toland's masterpiece Citizen Kane (13:50). The expressionistic play of light and dark, the use of naturalistic lighting, and reliance on shadow to communicate emotional reality that Gregg Toland so skillfully deployed in Ford's The Grapes of Wrath was perfected the following year in Welles' Citizen Kane.

advertisers began marketing the duckbill-ivy hat Henry Fonda wears in the film as the “Joad cap,” in direct reference to Fonda’s character from the film.¹⁴ As one Ford biographer rightly surmises, for “contemporary film audiences” at the close of the Great Depression, the filmic *Grapes of Wrath* was perceived as nothing less than hard-boiled, “gritty actuality.”¹⁵

While Dickstein’s persuasive study of the aesthetic ideologies of the Great Depression has productively challenged reductivist critical assumptions about America’s Depression culture that too often oversimplifies “The left turn of the depression” (“the brief moment when ‘politics’ captured the arts”) “as a detour if not a wrong turn” in US cultural history, Dickstein’s thinking also oversimplifies the function of the grapes of wrath cultural formation in its own contemporary moment. But more importantly, Dickstein’s study begs important questions about the cultural formations of our own, more recent moment of global economic crisis.¹⁶ That is, how has the Great Depression’s

¹⁴ Simon and Deverell 182.

¹⁵ Gallagher qtd. in Allen.

¹⁶ Denning xvi. See also n. 11 in this chapter on Denning’s notion of “aesthetic ideologies.”

twenty-first century counterpart, the Great Recession, been represented in the American cinematic imagination since the “subprime mortgage crisis”? While the legends of the Great Depression were well-wrought in the US cultural imagination even before the end of 1930s, similar “legends” of the Great Recession have almost entirely failed to take root in the contemporary popular imagination more than a decade after our own “Great” crisis of capitalism supposedly found economic (if not narrative) resolution. Why? What is the relationship between the facts and legends of Hollywood’s filmic imagination of the Great Depression and the Great Recession? What stories of twenty-first century capitalism in crisis have taken hold in the contemporary US cultural imagination of capitalism in crisis, and which have languished or been forgotten less than a generation after the economic collapse of 2008?



*Figure 4: “Ma Joad” (1939) by Horace Bristol in Life magazine. Originally rejected by Life in 1937, Bristol’s pictures of Dust Bowl migrants in California were finally published by the magazine only after the runaway commercial success of Steinbeck’s novel (the best-selling work of fiction in 1939). Bristol shot “Ma Joad” and others in this series in 1937 while travelling around the state with Steinbeck for research. This writer/photographer collaboration, in the vein Bourke-White’s and Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and Lange’s and Taylor’s *American Exodus* (1939), was never produced but Bristol’s photographs took on new life after 1939 and were part of Ford’s research for the film adaptation.*

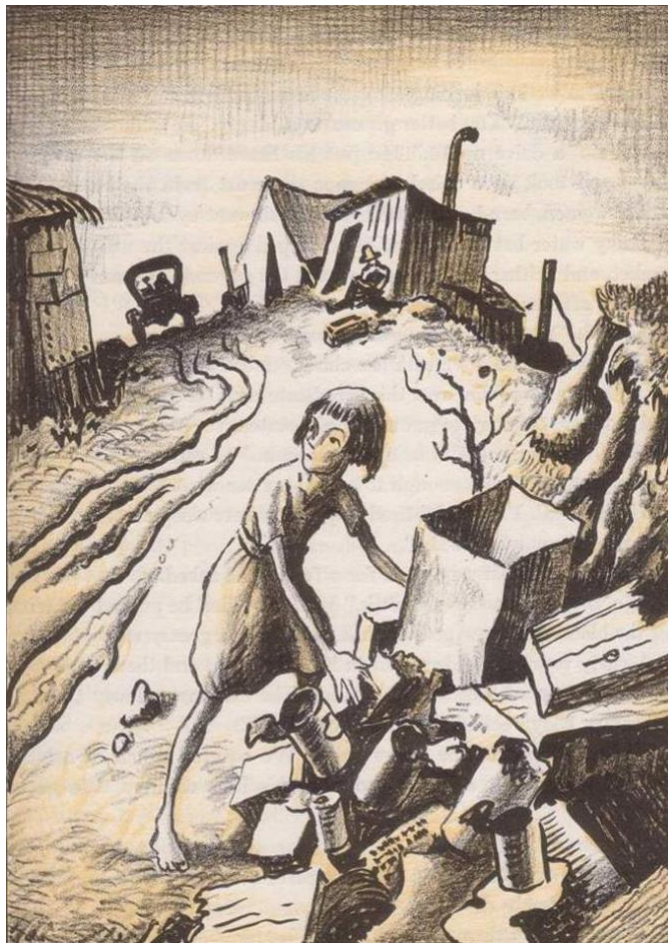


Figure 5: “Hooverville” by Thomas Hart Benton for the Heritage Press edition of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Benton was also commissioned by 20th Century Fox to produce illustrations for marketing material for the John Ford *Grapes of Wrath*.

Placing Ford’s and Toland’s representation of the Great Depression in *The Grapes of Wrath* in dialogue with Adam McKay’s filmic responses to the Great Recession in *The Big Short* helps generate answers to these questions. As I show, the iconicity of the Ford/Toland *Grapes of Wrath* is a result of the film’s ability to represent the intimate invasions that capitalism in crisis enacted at the level of the home during the Great Depression. Formally, Ford and Toland represent this intimate invasion—the crisis of capitalism coming home during the 1930s—through what I call “Okie expressionism,” a unique aesthetic articulation of German cinematic expressionism that emerged among other forms of modernism in the aftermath of World War One.¹⁷ It is this formal

¹⁷ While the grapes of wrath cultural formation’s influence on the filmic imagination of the Great Recession is a complex problem, Steinbeck’s influence on the American stage during the Great Recession is somewhat more straight forward. While beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to remember that John Steinbeck’s deep connection to American theater was revived, even amplified, during the dog days of the Great Recession. Beyond numerous revivals of the Steppenwolf Theatre Company’s 1989 production of *The Grapes of Wrath* that were staged with a powerful sense of contemporary urgency in the aftermath of

innovation in the grapes of wrath cultural formation that accounts for the slippage between of the “legend” of the Okie exodus and the “facts” of the Great Depression in the popular cultural imagination. And while Hollywood’s representation of the American home in Recession-era films of economic crisis has largely moved away from the visual syntax of Okie expressionism, it has remained powerfully focused on the intimate invasions enacted by capitalism coming home in the midst of great economic crisis.

Okie Expressionism in the Ford/Toland *Grapes of Wrath*

Director John Ford and cinematographer Gregg Toland translate the visual syntax of highbrow German expressionist cinema into the aesthetic form of Hollywood film in order to represent one of the most complicated social locations of the grapes of wrath cultural formation: the intimate space of the American home, invaded by the logic of capitalism in economic crisis. How does the Ford/Toland *Grapes of Wrath* represent this crisis cinematically? One formal irony of *The Grapes of Wrath*’s rapid translation from page to screen is the shift in John Ford’s film version of the narrative away from Steinbeck’s naturalism and towards the expressionism of early-twentieth century German auteurs such as Fritz Lange. In as much as the expressionist project itself heralded a mode of aesthetic representation in “extreme reaction” against the two narrative genres most closely associated with Steinbeck’s novel (realism and naturalism), this shift is important to consider in its own right.¹⁸ As articulated by Fritz Lange, as well as earlier artists of the expressionist movement in visual culture (such as German painter Ernst Ludwig Kirchner), expressionism explicitly rejected realism’s focus on objective, external reality and naturalism’s emphasis on social environment, determinism, and natural forces. This representational shift between the literary and the cinematic *Grapes of Wrath* is essential to our understanding of how the hard “facts” of life for rural Americans (whose labor was rooted in a sector of the economy that historians remind us was mired in depression conditions for decades before the 1930s) were printed as the powerful “legend” of the grapes of wrath narrative by Ford and Toland. Beyond the cultural imagination of the 1930s, this representational shift between the realist and expressionist *Grapes of Wrath* helps us account for why the intimate space of the home became such a powerful social location of diachronic resistance to the intimate invasions of capitalism in crisis in the US cultural imagination, even beyond the parallel facts of foreclosure, eviction, and displacement in both historical moments of “Great” economic crisis (the Depression and the Recession).

The surprising generic transformation between the literary and cinematic articulations of *The Grapes of Wrath*, from naturalism to expressionism, was the result of Ford’s and Toland’s translation of the visual syntax of post-World War One German

the subprime mortgage crisis, Steinbeck’s Dust Bowl narrative was also reimagined in radical new ways for the American stage. The Builders Association, for example, an intermedia performance company from New York, wrote and performed a new production called *House/Divided*. See Shannon Jackson and Marianne Weems, “*House/Divided: The Politics of Unbuilding*,” *The Builders Association: Performance and Media in Contemporary Theater*.

¹⁸ Baldick 121.

cinematic expressionism to the unique context of America's Dust Bowl experience. As a result of this translation in the cinematic version of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a unique aesthetic form emerged, which I call Okie expressionism. In order to begin unpacking the form and function of this plebian American voicing of German cinematic expressionism, and its relationship to the legend of the 1930s that the cinematic *Grapes of Wrath* produced in the American popular imagination, we must move beyond the formal irony of the filmmakers' choice to represent the Joad's salt of the earth story of "American Exodus" via the visual syntax of one of the highest furrows of highbrow European modernism. Just beyond this irony, as I will show, it becomes clear that expressionism's ability to visually represent the violent distortions of modernity made it the logical visual syntax for the story of capitalism in crisis and the American home that Ford and Toland sought to tell in *The Grapes of Wrath*.¹⁹

Yet among critics of the Ford/Toland *Grapes of Wrath*, this is far from a consensus reading. While singling out Gregg Toland's cinematography for high praise (the "rich, deep blacks" of human figures silhouetted against the landscape and the "pinpoint of eye light that makes the characters seem to burn with an inner fire of anger and strength"), contemporary critic John Calhoun also notes significant problems with the film.²⁰ He reads Jane Darwell's performance of Ma Joad as "cloying" (in spite of the fact that Darwell won the Academy Award for best supporting actress that year for the role) and argues that Ford's "penchant for knockabout rural humor" (which would be on unabashed display in the director's screen adaptation of Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* the following year) "hasn't worn well" in *The Grapes of Wrath*.²¹ Calhoun also takes issue with the "phoniness" of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s studio sets in contrast to the scenes Ford and Toland shot on location in California.²² Nevertheless, Calhoun acknowledges the cinematic *Grapes of Wrath* as "an authentic American classic, as enduring as the working people it celebrates" before finally surmising that "Whatever the movie's faults, its sense of immediacy remains."

When considered in light of Okie expressionism, however, it becomes clear that almost all of these observations on *The Grapes of Wrath*, both celebratory and critical, can be better understood in relation to the filmmakers' explicit embrace of the filmic techniques of German cinematic expressionism. Furthermore, these techniques (cinematic chiaroscuro, acting performance, and the design of the film's studio sets) are clear examples of Okie expressionism's attempt to represent the violent distortions and intense pressures that modernity, via capitalism in crisis, brought home for the underclass of the Dust Bowl migration during the Great Depression.

¹⁹ We must keep in mind the clear connection between modernity and capitalism that world systems theorists have demonstrated: Walter D. Mignolo recalls "how Quijano and Wallerstein traced the interrelations between capitalism, coloniality, and modernity: 'The modern world-system was born in the long sixteenth century. The creation of this geosocial entity, the Americas, was the constitute act of the modern world-system. *The Americas were not incorporated into an already existing capitalist world economy. There could not have been a capitalist world economy without the Americas*'" (433; emphasis in the original).

²⁰ Calhoun 51-52.

²¹ Calhoun 52.

²² Calhoun 51.

It is not coincidental that the filmmakers of *The Grapes of Wrath* lean on the techniques of German cinematic expressionism most heavily in the Oklahoma scenes of movie. For it is in these early scenes that the film establishes the explicit stakes of capitalism's invasion into the intimate social location of the Depression-era home. It is also in these early scenes of the film that these stakes reach their most dizzying heights. It is here, at the intersection of the twinned logics of finance capital and technological modernity, that *The Grapes of Wrath* deploys the techniques of cinematic expressionism most powerfully to represent the violent distortions this hegemonic nexus produced, specifically for the people of the Dust Bowl migration.



Figure 6

The opening shot of *The Grapes of Wrath* can be read as a gesture towards what philosopher Zygmunt Bauman has described as the “gardening posture” that undergirds twentieth century modernity: “*the pursuit of artificial, rationally designed order*” (figure 6).²³ In the film’s opening shot, Tom Joad, played by Henry Fonda, walks down a perfectly straight stretch of obviously rural road that divides the frame on the vertical axis. This division is further split by a straight line that runs down the dead center of the road. On either side of this highway are agricultural fields, further subdividing the frame

²³ Bauman 269; emphasis in the original.

into logical, ordered, and (most important), economically productive rows. Spaced equidistance along one side of the road, utility poles tower over the figure of Tom Joad as he walks toward Gregg Toland's camera. Like the rows of what are likely a cotton crop on both side of the highway, these utility poles are obviously symbolic of technological modernity, but they also function as symbols of the capitalist logic of "productivity" via speculation and financialization. Their lines carry data via ever advancing forms of communications technology (the telegraph was still widely used in the US during the Depression but the telephone and electricity were becoming more and more common during the period as the New Deal brought modernity to its rural citizens). These utility poles increasingly carried, at higher and higher rates of speed and efficiency, data that was vital to modern capitalist markets about agricultural yields and market demands, back and forth between the nation's centers of capital and its peripheries of production. These utility poles create another set of subdividing lines on the vertical axis, perpendicular to the fields, in Toland's opening shot of *The Grapes of Wrath*. The wires that connect the poles are taut and nearly parallel to each other as well. These wires and utility poles recede backward away from the camera's eye and into the vanishing point of the frame on the horizon. In an inversion of the function of the horizon in other John Ford "westerns," the horizon line of this first frame in *The Grapes of Wrath* does not signify the future—"the infinite and the unknown" to echo Emerson.²⁴ Rather the horizon line in Gregg Toland's opening shot signifies the opposite, as indicated by the directional movement in space and time of Tom Joad's shadowy human figure away from the horizon behind him and towards the camera, into the narrative present tense of the film. As Joad walks away from that horizon and towards Toland's camera, as we discover via the film's exposition shortly after this shot, he is walking away from a past that was marked by unthinking violence and state incarceration in the McAlester Penitentiary (still a maximum security prison in Oklahoma, right across from the Walmart Super Center on Highway 270). Like Springsteen's ghost of Tom Joad fifty-five years later, Toland's Tom Joad is also "going someplace and there's no going back."²⁵

This opening shot subtly argues against the implicit biases of that segment of the film's contemporary American audience who, as historian David M. Kennedy reminds us, lived in the nation's cities, and from whom (like many of their counterparts today) "the complaints of the farmers seemed a distant annoyance, the mewlings of laughably untutored hayseeds as modernity passed them by."²⁶ As a result of this widespread perspective, much of the film's audience might be tempted to approach it with this sort of prejudice in their eye. In anticipation of this, the opening shot of *The Grapes of Wrath* deploys the frames' composition to produce a scene of rural America that is dominated

²⁴ The Ford/Toland *Grapes of Wrath*, of course, is not a traditional Hollywood western in any strict sense generic sense. We know that for the film's conservative producer (and president of 20th Century Fox), Darryl F. Zanuck, the film was designed to function as a "prestige picture." We might also classify productively classify *The Grapes of Wrath* through any number of other taxonomies: drama, social protest, road narrative, exodus, or odyssey. Yet as critics have long noted, Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* draws explicitly

²⁵ Springsteen "The Ghost of Tom Joad."

²⁶ Kennedy 19.

by Bauman's sense of rationally designed and highly artificial order—in other words, a sense of modernity and progress itself. As we will see, the Ford and Toland *Grapes of Wrath* challenged this urban elitism in aesthetic terms as well through their construction of the film's unique Okie expressionist aesthetic ideology, allowing mass culture audience far beyond the drought and dust of Oklahoma, or the historical moment of Great Depression to understand, and even appreciate and identify with, the Joad's Dust Bowl experience, particularly at the level of crisis capitalism's invasion of the intimate space of the home.

As the shadowy figure of Tom Joad continues to walk amid this almost over-determined geometrical order in the opening shot of *The Grapes of Wrath*, away from the irrational violence and carceral logic of his past, and into the future of the film, he approaches another intersecting line on the road. At first, it is tempting to see this intersecting stretch of concrete (another straight line on the horizontal axis) as a continuation of modernity's totalizing logic of rationally designed order. But in fact, this line of asphalt across Toland's frame is a gesture to something else entirely. This intersecting line is less about modernity, rationality, and order and more about the mythic trope of the American crossroads, as implied in the music of African-American Mississippi blues legend Robert Johnson.²⁷ Long before Johnson, the crossroads were one of the Devil's preferred locations of metaphysical exchange with mankind in regional American folklore. This idea was part of southern folk tradition before it attached itself to Johnson's song "Cross Road Blues" (1936).²⁸ But after the release of this single, the idea of the singer who sells his soul to the Devil at the crossroads exploded into a central myth of American popular music. Certainly, many of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s original cinematic audience would not have spent too much time in the Jim Crow south in African American juke joints, where they might have heard this new allusion to the Devil's preferred location of metaphysical exchange. Others might simply have missed it entirely after watching Tom Joad journey across the rationally designed order of modernity itself, cross the street, and walk towards a corner store with a work truck parked outside. So *The Grapes of Wrath* reminds us explicitly. Across the top of the building Tom approaches, in huge black letters, the business' marquee reads: "Cross Roads" in all capital letters.²⁹

²⁷ Implied, and today taken for granted in the popular cultural imagination, but in fact never explicitly articulated in his recorded output, Robert Johnson's transaction with the Devil at the crossroads is *not* part of the explicit lyrical content of "Cross Road Blues." The specific idea, however, likely attached itself to Robert Johnson via a bluesman from the 1920s with a similar name, Tommy Johnson, whose own self-perpetuated legend of his deal with the Devil was in circulation among blues audiences (Wald 27). According to Wald, the southern folk imagination had long identified graveyards and crossroads as the Devil's preferred location for metaphysical dealings in the south (27). In 1937 and 1938 Robert Johnson did release two new songs in which the Devil figures prominently, perhaps indicative of his propagation of the myth of the exchange at the crossroads that had already attached to him and was certainly good for business. While sales figures from the 1930s don't exist, musicologists have argued that "Cross Road Blues" was in wide circulation; the 1936 single went through multiple pressings and was commercially successful enough that a cheap pressing was distributed for sale at dime-stores (Confort and Wardlow 186, 221).

²⁸ Johnson, "Cross Road Blues."

²⁹ Ford, *Grapes* 1:42.

While Toland's use of expressionist chiaroscuro wouldn't reach full maturity until the year after his collaboration with John Ford, as director of photography of *Citizen Kane* (1941), both films are examples of the powerful influence of German cinematic expressionism on Toland's use of camera and lighting techniques in his work of the late-1930s. In both *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Citizen Kane*, we can observe frequent examples of the "much-imitated visual patterns" of light and dark made famous by Fritz Lange in *Metropolis* (1926) and other auteurs of German expressionist cinema.³⁰

Gregg Toland amplifies the visual echoes of German expressionist cinema in *The Grapes of Wrath* in ways that are virtually undeniable. We may read these echoes in the jagged lines of barbed-wire that re-instantiate the ecological conflict between earth and sky that emerged as one of the central social locations of crisis in the grapes of wrath cultural formation (figure 8). At the same time, this jagged barbed-wire is counterpoised with off-kilter, angular fence-poles that jet up from the Oklahoma dirt like tombstones to the logic of capital that the economic collapse of the 1930s seemed to some contemporary observers have laid low in its grave. Furthermore, these broken fence posts also demarcate the old division between the private and public spheres: the place where "home" ends and "the world" begins. The influence of German expressionism on to the highly stylized, surrealist Dust Bowl landscape, and the haunting silhouette of the Joad's abandoned family home, we see Toland's cinematography not only following the modernist imperative to displace realism's emphasis on external reality, but also... disorienting, not least of all because at the level of content, the lowercase grapes of wrath narrative's plot and setting is obviously rooted more in the plebeianism of Jeffersonian agrarianism than the modernism of the Weimar Republic. Those jagged fence-lines of private property call into question the very economic logic that capitalism itself had brought to the brink of self-destruction.

As filmic technique, Toland's expressionistic chiaroscuro deserves much of the credit for the sense of immediacy that critics have observed in the filmic *Grapes of Wrath*. For Toland's masterful use of that technique and its affective result, we need look no further than the early scene of Tom Joad's homecoming after his unexpected parole from the McAllister State Penitentiary in the movie's Oklahoma section. Accompanied by Jim Casy, the tent-revival preacher turned transcendental folk-philosopher, Tom Joad's prodigal return to his family's ancestral Oklahoma tenant farm is haunted visually by the same expressionist shadows we find at the heart of Lange's movies. Capitalism in crisis plays out most profoundly in the filmic *Grapes of Wrath* in these scenes, in the intimate space of the home.

Likewise, the German Expressionist filmmakers' critical investment in exploring "the eruption of irrational and chaotic forces from beneath the surface of a mechanized modern world" finds a surprising analog in the rural environment and plebian plot of the

³⁰ Baldick 121. Gregg Toland's contribution to *Citizen Kane* cannot be overstated. In fact, his contribution was so vital that Orson Welles (the writer, director, and star of *Kane*, whom is well known as an artist of outsized ego) insisted that Toland's contribution to the film be recognized as concomitant with his own, which is one reason why Toland is credited on the same title card as the infamous director himself in *Kane*'s closing credits.

Great Depression's grapes of wrath cultural formation.³¹ As the title of Pare Lorentz' groundbreaking 1936 lowercase grapes of wrath documentary begins to suggest (*The Plough That Broke the Plains*), technological advancements in agricultural mechanization were central to the contemporary understanding of the causes of the Okie exodus.

Situating this problem of verisimilitude and filmic stagecraft in relation to the "sense of immediacy" *The Grapes of Wrath* produces is particularly important because this sense of urgency—this sense of the "gritty actuality" of the Great Depression and capitalism in crisis that was legible for the film's contemporary audience and remains legible for viewers today—is in fact a byproduct of that the very stagecraft and set design technique that Calhoun finds fault with. Ford and Toland deploy these expressionist techniques of filmic stagecraft most affectively the Oklahoma scenes of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Yet it is precisely in this context that it becomes apparent that the film's stylized studio sets must be understood as an example of cinematic expressionism's reaction against verisimilitude itself, rather than a failed attempt at realism or an aesthetic problem of filmic technique.



Figure 7: Chiaroscuro and Toland's subaltern children in *The Grapes of Wrath*

³¹ Baldick 122.



Figure 8: Chiaroscuro and Lange's subaltern children in Metropolis



Figure 9

The self-conscious constructedness, or “phoniness,” of the studio sets in *The Grapes of Wrath*’s Oklahoma section are more easily understood if we keep Fritz Lange’s much celebrated set pieces from *Metropolis* in mind.³² The nightmarish exaggerations of Lange’s set pieces in *Metropolis* are designed to evoke, not resemble, an actual factory. The overwhelming scale of the *Metropolis* set intentionally dwarfs, even mocks, the laboring human figures in the frame in order to suggest the dehumanizing effects of technological modernity. While *Metropolis*’ cinematic genre make these exaggerations and distortions permissible in the film without undermining its aesthetic credibility in the least, *The Grapes of Wrath* (novel, but also film) were always going to be read as a social-realist text in as much as Steinbeck’s story unapologetically engages with very real problems of its own historical moment. While this interpretive frame forced both novel and film into a very narrow critical lane that has always been too easily dismissed by critics in relation to the various modernisms and postmodernisms of the twentieth



Figure 10

century, this is a fault more with our uncritical critical prejudices than it is a rigorous assessment or productive reading of either the literary or cinematic *Grapes of Wrath*.

³² “Incredible” is explicitly deployed here in relation to its other definition, which suggests not simply amazement and wonder, but also a fundamental *lack* of credibility. The *incredible* quality of *The Grapes of Wrath*’s Oklahoma set pieces

proved particularly useful for Gregg Toland, *The Grapes of Wrath*'s director of photography, as he attempted to capture the violent distortions and intense pressures that Depression-era capitalism in crisis brought home for the underclass of the Dust Bowl migration.

Yet in the aftermath of the subprime mortgage crisis, another “great” crisis of capitalism, it is necessary to reconsider the influence of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, which Ford’s and Toland’s Okie expressionism introduced to the popular cinematic imagination, well beyond traditional debates about the aesthetic ideologies and cultural politics of the 1930s. One way we might seek to understand this relationship is through two Hollywood films of the Great Recession that, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, explore the social location of capitalism in crisis in relation to the American home. What might an exploration of Hollywood representations of the Great Recession reveal not only about these very contemporary social location of crisis in our time of the now, but also about the legacy of grapes of wrath cultural formation’s aesthetic forms as well? In order to answer these questions, I will examine contemporary Hollywood “problem film”: Adam McKay’s *The Big Short*.

A Good Home is Hard to Find: Adam McKay’s *The Big Short*

The Big Short (2015), the star-studded post-Recession tragicomedy co-written and directed by Adam McKay, is obviously not an example of Okie expressionism. Furthermore, it is difficult to situate the film in relation to either the grapes of wrath cultural formation or the ghost of Tom Joad. Nevertheless, as the most commercially successful Recession film to date, any consideration of the representation of contemporary economic crisis in American popular culture must engage with McKay’s *The Big Short*.³³

A fictionalized adaptation of Michael Lewis’ bestselling, non-fiction novel of nearly the same name (Lewis’ book includes the apocalyptic subtitle, *Inside the Doomsday Machine* [2010]), Adam McKay’s *The Big Short* follows the intersecting misadventures of a group of wealth managers from around the US as they independently

³³ *The Big Short*'s gross worldwide box office earnings (\$133.4 million) easily eclipse other Great Recession movies of the period, including *Hell or Highwater*, \$37.8 million and *99 Homes*, \$1.98 million. Nevertheless, it is necessary to keep these figures in perspective. While *The Big Short*'s earnings are a handsome return on the film's estimated budget of \$28 million, they are dwarfed by the top grossing feature films of 2015-16, a list comprised entirely of superhero movies, action films, animated features, sci-fi, and fantasy, such as *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (\$2 billion), *Captain America: Civil War* (\$1.15 billion), *The Secret Life of Pets* (\$875.4 million), and *The Martian* (\$630 million). Since comparing these box office returns might seem a bit like comparing apples to oranges, given the obvious differences in genre, intended audiences, and expected earnings of the films noted above, it may be instructive to consider *The Big Short*'s box office revenue in relation to another film from the period that also focused on Wall Street malfeasance and bad actors, albeit from an earlier generation and in a decidedly more celebratory framework. Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*, released in 2013, brought in \$392 million at theaters worldwide. All financial data from <http://imdb.com>; See also “99 Homes (2014),” “The Big Short (2015),” and “Hell or Highwater (2016).”

uncover a fatal flaw in Wall Street's pricing of the financialized instruments that it buys and sells (to itself and on the global market) based on the assumed invulnerability of the US housing market and the residential mortgages at the heart of that market. In light of this discovery, each group of financial planners embark on quixotic journeys to "short" this economic "doomsday machine" for a diverse array of deeply personal reasons. But the real reason (which the film mostly avoids) is to turn a profit for themselves and their investors off of the corruption, fraud, and blind arrogance that the film shows to be rampant on Wall Street in the years that function as the prologue to the Great Recession.³⁴ Put another way, all of the main characters in *The Big Short* make bets *against* the millions of tiny pieces of paper that collectively represent the ownership of all of our homes. In yet simpler terms, *all* of the *The Big Short*'s main characters *make bets against you*. And of course, their money on the dark-horse pays off handsomely for them.

But for ninety-nine percent of us, the real tragedy of the Great Recession only just began right at the point where *The Big Short*'s credits roll. *The Big Short*'s conclusion simply marks the end of the formal prologue to the greatest financial collapse since the Great Depression. *The Big Short* reminds the audience of the tragedy that awaited ninety-nine percent of us via a chyron that closes the movie before the screen fades to black and the credits roll to the soundtrack of Led Zeppelin's 1971 song "When the Levees Break":

When the dust settled from the collapse,
5 trillion dollars in pension money, real estate value,
401k, savings, and bonds had disappeared.
8 million people lost their jobs, 6 million lost their homes.
And that was just in the USA.³⁵

When the dust settles and when the levees break, indeed. While McKay's main characters, more "bad news bears" than "wolves of Wall Street," are presented throughout the film as a motley crew of loveable losers ("a few outsiders and weirdos" as the film's chorus-like, Red Bull-soaked narrative voice, Jarred Vennett [Ryan Gosling] intentionally frames them in the movie's prologue), the fact remains that *The Big Short* asks its audience, in the *immediate* aftermath of deeply felt economic trauma, to root for a cast of characters who all make obscene profits off of the collapse of the global economy and the attendant foreclosure and eviction of our neighbors, friends, and family... perhaps even you and I.³⁶

³⁴ In one scene, a group of wealth managers, led by the darkest, most complex, and most wrathful figure in the movie, Mark Baum (Steve Carell), go to the offices of Standard & Poor's, a for-profit credit rating agency, and challenge the high grade, the high safety rating, that the agency has assigned Wall Street's doomsday machine. The bureaucrat-analyst who represents S&P and deigns to "see" into the market's financialized future, struggles to see the papers in front of her in the scene through huge, black, eye exam sunshades. The visual gag here is typical of McKay's tone in *The Big Short* and works incredibly well.

³⁵ McKay 2:01:55 – 2:03:47.

³⁶ McKay 4:24.

McKay's film accomplishes this rhetorical trick by presenting these characters alternately as bad news bears or chicken litters. Vennett is right. All of the film's main characters are viewed as outsiders and losers by their peers on Wall Street. And their chicken little exploits, their increasingly frantic warnings throughout the movie that the nation's housing market and therefore much of its financialized sky is about to fall are met with ridicule and derision by their colleagues in finance. In the film, as in real life, their warnings go unheeded in the years leading up to the crash of the nation's housing market and the financialized global sky, in deed, comes crashing to the ground around it.

At first glance, *The Big Short's* people, places, and plot seem to have little in common with John Ford's filmic adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Of course, both films' do share the same diachronic social location via fictionalized representation of moments of "great" American economic crisis. And both films also have similar cultural politics, perhaps because both are Hollywood adaptations of bestselling books by liberal, socially-minded Bay Area authors. Certainly, these two general connections are interesting enough in their own right.

But as I show, careful consideration of *The Big Short* within the context of the grapes of wrath cultural formation reveals a great deal about culture industry efforts to represent economic crisis through popular culture cinematic form. While intentionally displaced by the economic and cultural history of the 1970s, Adam McKay's post-Recession problem film in fact embeds the economic and cultural history of the Great Depression within its structure, as another important framing mechanism for its cultural politics and aesthetic ideologies. *The Big Short* also demonstrates a powerful didactic imperative which is indebted to John Steinbeck as much as it is to Michael Lewis. Yet while *The Big Short* and *The Grapes of Wrath* (two of the most well-known problem films of their respective moments of "great" economic crisis) have more in common than their obvious generic differences might at first suggest, it is not genre, plot, characterization, or setting that ultimately separates these two culture industry representations of capitalism in crisis. Rather, as I will show, a much more significant problem exists at the very heart of McKay's (and Lewis') *Big Short*. For all of *The Big Short's* "investment" in exploring the roots of the Great Recession's housing crisis, it is finally the Great Recession's crisis of the American home that is almost entirely absent from the most commercially successful film about the subprime mortgage crisis to date.

"When the Dust Settled; When the Levees Break": The Doubled Historical and Cultural Framing Devices of *The Big Short*

From the outset, *The Big Short* explicitly attempts to dress-up its historical and cultural unconscious in a polyester suit from the Me Decade. On the one hand, this makes a good deal of sense. I concede, not least of all through my own conceptualization of our time of the now in this dissertation, that the new millennium indeed has much in common with the 1970s. Our current social locations of crisis, including the neoliberal crisis capitalism, ecological ontology and climate crisis, and the revenge of the logic of white supremacy immediately following a historical moment of widespread hope that change may be possible from within America's entrenched racist systems, were all certainly

prefigured by the sociopolitical ruptures of the 1970s. In light of these connections, *The Big Short* explicitly deploys the 1970s as the opening and closing historical and cultural brackets for its narrative of twenty-first century capitalism in crisis. *The Big Short* begins as a 1970s period piece, replete with smoke-filled business meetings, wide-lapeled suits, Presley pork-chop side burns, and a score drenched in funky wah-wah electric guitar.³⁷ Almost all of these signifiers, however, are deployed in Adam McKay's trademark tongue-in-cheek style.

The movie articulates its rootedness in the economic history of the Me Decade vis-à-vis the story of bond trader Lewis Ranieri and the rise of financialization in banking in the 1970s. We are introduced to the 1970s articulation of Wall Street by Jarred Vennett, our Virgil in a Versace suit (period appropriate of course), who will be our world-weary guide across the financialized decades. Vennett immediately breaks down the film's fourth wall and swaggers through the depressingly drab bond department at Solomon Brothers, speaking directly to the camera. While keeping in mind that Michael Lewis describes the real-life bond trader who Ryan Gosling plays in the film as "a postmodern literary puzzle: The story rang true even as the narrator seemed entirely unreliable," Gosling's character takes us under his slightly vampiric wing to tell us that banking in the 1970s "was a fucking snooze" and no one went into the bond department "to get rich."³⁸

Until Lewis Ranieri. *The Big Short*'s score announces Ranieri's arrival (and by extension the arrival of the logic of financialization) with a piano glissando that plummets into the stabs of a funk horn section and a groovy hi-hat shuffle.³⁹ It was this moment in economic history, Vennett tells the audience, that "the banker went from the country club to the strip club" thanks to Lewis Ranieri's brain child, a financial product called "the private label MBS." This product, the "mortgaged-backed security," made "stocks and savings almost inconsequential" because financial services were now "doing \$50, \$100, \$200 billion in mortgage bonds and dozens of other securities a year."⁴⁰ Beyond Wall Street's after-hours amusements, Vennett argues in voice over narration that Lewis Ranieri also "changed [our lives] more than the iPod, Michael Jordan, and YouTube put together."⁴¹

That is because, according to Vennett, Ranieri revolutionized banking and ultimately our late capitalist time of the now when he began to bundle residential home mortgages together and sell them as bonds to investors in the Seventies.⁴² In McKay's cinematic way-back machine, Ranieri stands in one of those smoke-filled conference rooms and pitches his new "invention" to a group of investors from the Michigan state pension fund, who are so excited they immediately opt to "live a little" and buy \$25 million worth of this new AAA-rated Wall Street product.⁴³ Ranieri smiles with a cigar

³⁷ McKay 1:15 – 3:15.

³⁸ McKay 1:34.

³⁹ McKay 1:55.

⁴⁰ McKay 3:02; 3:10.

⁴¹ McKay 2:05.

⁴² Lewis 92.

⁴³ McKay 2:21-2:57.

between his teeth at the conclusion of the meeting, every inch the classic image of a Wall Street fat-cat, except with a mustard stain on his shirt (because Adam McKay after all first made his name at Saturday Night Live and then as the director of Will Farrell movies). The scene shifts unexpectedly from this smoke-filled conference room at Solomon Brothers, where an overhead projector casts a abstract representation of a group of American homes bundled together with a big bow as a visual aid for the men from the Michigan, to a 1970s strip club.⁴⁴ The contrast between these two settings is almost jarring. The sedate men we encountered just moments earlier chatting casually with equally sedate clients about “treasury bonds and utility stocks” have been literally transformed like Jekyll and Hyde, not just by the strip club (where they and the clients from Michigan drink, sweat profusely, and throw handfuls of cash at two women dancing in pasties on stage), but more importantly by the new, secret source of their financialized power: the private label MBS.⁴⁵

McKay’s highly stylized 1970s myth of Lewis Ranieri is in fact the correct historical bracket for the legend of the Great Recession that *The Big Short* will attempt to endow to the twenty-first century cultural imagination. Why? Not only because Vennett rightly identifies the rootedness of the logic of financialization in the so-called Me Decade (though I’d argue the return of the repressed Chicago School of economics, who were banished by the New Deal’s Keynesian hegemony only to return with a vengeance and produce the neoliberal turn after the Carter administration likely had more to do with it than the myth of Lewis Ranieri). But also because the film invest a great deal of rhetorical energy into avoiding association with either the cultural politics or aesthetic ideologies of the 1930s. And there is perhaps no greater example of contradictory aesthetic ideologies and cultural politics in the popular imagination than the 1930s and the 1970s. It would be difficult for most to imagine Bing Crosby and the Beegees on the same stage, or Fred Astaire and John Travolta sashaying across the same dance studio floor, or Dorothea Lange and Andy Warhol trying to decide between a night out at an Okie hootenanny drinking moonshine in a central California migrant camp or cocaine and caviar at Studio 54 in New York City...

This is why the smoke-filled conference rooms of Solomon Brothers, not the dust-blown Plains of the grapes of wrath cultural formation, become ground zero for *The Big Short*’s explicit historical memory. Because in order to produce the kind of pop masterpiece that Adam McKay aims for (and indeed produces), his tale of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression must go down relatively easy for the film’s early-twenty first century audience. And that narrative indeed goes down much easier with a key of coke from Diana Ross than it would with a spoonful of soothing syrup from Ma Joad. In other words, the 1970s are far more palatable and much less traumatic than

⁴⁴ On the projector in the scene, the American home is figured as a simple geometric line drawing, like a child might make after learning basic shapes in elementary school, an idea that I return to later.

⁴⁵ Steinbeck, in fact, tried to evoke a similar transmogrification for a similar popular culture audience in 1960 when he wrote “A Primer on the ’30s” for *Esquire* magazine. Steinbeck’s image dead-eyed gamblers around a game of roulette on Wall Street, where everyone was trying to hit it big in the years before the Crash of 1929, however, simply doesn’t have the same visceral impact as Vennett’s “primer on the ’70s” in *The Big Short* (Steinbeck “Primer”).

the 1930s (at least in the popular imagination). Perhaps this is why the movie intentionally exaggerates its own rootedness in the Disco decade and so steadfastly avoids association with the Depression decade. While both historical periods were defined by problems of massive economic dislocation for the working class, the 1970s have managed to maintain their glossy shine in the cultural imagination while the Depression's sepia-tinged hard times are simply more difficult for the contemporary cultural imagination to willingly engage because of the frightening structures of feeling the 1930s continue to evoke, even some ninety years later.

The Big Short not only deploys the economic history of the 1970s via the myth of Lewis Ranieri as the opening bracket for its own Recession-era tale of economic crisis, but it returns again to the Me Decade in a parallel gesture at the film's conclusion. As we've already seen, *The Big Short* summarizes the real-world economic trauma and loss that followed the walk-off homerun hit by the bad news bears of Wall Street via the movie's closing chyron: 8 million US-Americans lost their jobs and 6 million families lost their homes. Yet in light of these Recession-era economic facts, however, the film doesn't look to '70s economic logic for its closing bracket but rather to '70s popular culture: to Robert Plant's primal wail and John Bonham's even more primal beat from 1971. Bonham's iconic drum intro on "When the Levees Break" (which was famously sampled for by the Beastie Boys on *Licensed to Ill* [1986]), is cut from *The Big Short's* end credits.⁴⁶ In the resulting edit of "When the Levees Break" for the film's soundtrack, the drums and vocal begin simultaneously, which calls attention to "Levee's" lyrics in a way the album cut does. Indeed, the words of this 1971 recording are front and center as the credits roll on *The Big Short*:

If it keeps on raining, levee's going to break
 If it keeps on raining, the levee's going to break
 When the levee breaks, we'll have no place to stay

Mean old levee, taught me to weep and moan
 Mean old levee taught me to weep and moan
 It's got what it takes to make a mountain man leave his home
 Oh well, oh well, oh well

Oh, don't it make you feel bad
 When you're tryin' to find your way home
 You don't know which way to go
 If you're going down south, they got no work to do
 If you're going north to Chicago, ah, ah, ah, hey

Crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good
 No, crying won't help you, praying won't do you no good
 When the levee breaks, mama, you got to move

⁴⁶ Beastie Boys, "Rymin & Stealin."

All last night I sat on the levee and moaned
 All last night, sat on the levee and moaned
 Thinking about my baby and my happy home
 Oh-ho⁴⁷

It is clear that McKay invites us to read the “mean old levee” of Led Zeppelin’s song as an analogy for capitalism itself during the Great Recession. But in case this isn’t clear enough, McKay intercuts the movie’s credits, which roll behind “When the Levees Break,” with juxtaposing images of how life was experienced after crash by the one percent on the one hand and the ninety-nine percent on the other: a man smiling on the back of a cigarette boat, a construction worker in a hard hat, a deserted work-site with a half-finished home; several luxury cars in a garage and a pickup truck with a for sale sign in the window; walking down the road with plastic bags full of groceries, hands holding a stack of grocery store coupons, and a champagne toast over dinner with a group of well-dressed friends in a beautiful home.

These 1970s historical and cultural bracketing mechanisms in *The Big Short*, the mythic history of Lewis Ranieri and a powerful song of displacement and homelessness by Led Zeppelin, clearly perform valuable narrative, aesthetic, and political work in the film. But they also function to draw our attention away from *The Big Short*’s repressed historical and cultural subconscious—that other main historical and cultural frame that is either confused beneath the shimmering disco ball in the 1970s strip club or lost in a haze of smoke at a Led Zeppelin concert. The power and bombast of John Bonham’s Ludwig drum kit on *The Big Short*’s soundtrack, for example, can too easily displace the cultural memory that recalls that “When the Levees Break” was originally recorded by African American blues musicians Kansas Joe and Memphis Minnie, who wrote the original version that was released on Columbia Records the same year as the US stock market crashed in 1929.

Similarly, the pop cinema shock and awe of McKay’s Lewis Ranieri sequence, resplendent with the kind of period costumes, lighting, and photography that *Mad Men* taught an early-twenty first century audience to cherish, as well as visual gags, situational humor, and Brechtian defamiliarization (and a strip club scene), especially in conjunction with Gosling’s magnetic anti-hero glower as Jarred Vennett, allows *The Big Short*’s 1970s historical bracket to easily overshadow the film’s deeper historical unconscious. For Jarred Vennett isn’t the only character with a history lesson to impart to the audience at the outset *The Big Short*. It’s perhaps simply that his class covers easier material and he’s a more charismatic teacher.

In contrast to the myth of Lewis Ranieri offered by Vennett from the strip clubs of the 1970s, boutique hedge fund manager Michael Burry, MD (played by Christian Bale, another character in the film who expanded his fortune betting against you and me in the years leading up to the Great Recession) presents a decidedly different historical origin story for the Great Recession. And it is clear that the economic history and social location

⁴⁷ Led Zeppelin “When the Levees Break.”

that connect the grapes of wrath cultural formation's representation of "great" economic crisis and *The Big Short* isn't lost on Dr. Burry. If Vennett is the film's Virgil in Versace, guiding us through the levels of Wall Street's financialized hell, then Burry functions as film's historical unconscious, that attempts to connect *The Big Short*'s Recession-era audience to the Great Depression. Sitting behind a cluttered desk that looks like it belongs to an actual history professor, wearing a blue t-shirt that is faded and two-sizes too big, Burry *literally* cuts a poor figure in the frame: this is only one of several glaring contrasts between these two agents of historical memory in movie. With the cigar smoke from Solomon Brothers' conference room still in our eyes, Burry makes a speech to someone outside the frame that is fundamentally the same argument Steinbeck makes across several inter-chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*:

During the 1930s, the housing market collapsed nationwide by roughly 80 percent. I mean, half of all mortgage debt was in default. I mean, there were *very specific* identifiers, *extremely* recognizable. I mean, for instance, one of the hallmarks of mania is the rapid rise in complexity and fraud. And did you know that they're going *up*? [...] And did you know that they're going *up*? The highest fraud rates since the 1930s.⁴⁸

Thankfully, *The Big Short*'s didactic imperative is far from pedestrian. Burry's Steinbeckian history lecture is full of subtle humor produced by camera technique, editing, and most of all, Bale's off-beat performance. And the film's conjuring of the Great Depression as a historical intertext ends with a gag. It is only at the end of the scene that we realize Burry gives his 1930s history lesson in the context of what is supposed to be the interview of a young candidate up for a job at Burry's boutique hedge fund. The young candidate, dressed every bit the part of a man who might one day crash the world, is visibly baffled by Burry's impromptu history lesson, as if trying to figure out if his potential new boss is trying to prank him. The moment the young job seeker *finally* reveals to the audience why he is talking to Burry is comedy gold: "So does this mean I get the job? I really think I can help your [hedge] fund."⁴⁹ (Steinbeck would surely have appreciated McKay's razor-sharp comic instincts. Recall that Steinbeck, like McKay, found professional accolades and celebrity status not as a "serious artist" who tackled serious subjects, but as the author of a funny little book called *Tortilla Curtain* in 1935.)

⁴⁸ McKay 4:55-5:37.

⁴⁹ Lewis' bestselling non-fiction novel is excellent, but it is not a comedy. The incredible blend of levity and laughs that the film version of the narrative manages so perfectly is the product of McKay's writing and direction. Recall that McKay's most well-known movie is probably still the Will Farrell comedy *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004).

So while McKay's film boasts a formal genealogy that is exceptional (following Bretch), a pedagogic imperative that is democratic and admirable (enclosing economic lessons for the multiplex masses in attractive packages like Gosling and Robbie), and even a politics that some might call progressive, *The Big Short* is nevertheless far afield from representing the "gritty actuality" (recalling one biographer's description of Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath*) of the Great Recession in a comparable way to Ford's and Toland's representation of the Great Depression in their canonical film of the Great Depression. While Ford's Depression-era problem film confronts this ideological crisis of narrative in present and forward-looking terms, helping the viewer imagine a contemporary social problem that was ongoing in 1940 and the New Deal's telos of relief and reform that might be embraced as a potential solution to that problem, McKay's Recession-era problem film is engages with the audience's only recent past. *The Big Short* focuses not on what happened on the ground at the social location of "great" economic crisis in the years when we all learned what the phrase "subprime mortgage" meant, or how the crisis of foreclosure and eviction was addressed (or not) by the neoliberal logic of the Obama administration after his election in 2008. Instead, *The Big Short* attempts to help the film's post-Recession audience understand exactly why those pensions, jobs, and homes were lost, so that we might have clarification on who is ultimately to blame.⁵⁰

Nevertheless, in the closing minutes of *The Big Short*, as the bad news bears of Wall Street survey the wreckage of the collapse they had predicted and take stock of the spoils war brought home in the aftermath of their personal war (vendetta might be a better word) against their own industry's incompetence, corruption, and reckless speculation on the housing bubble, McKay does manage to represent the gritty actuality of the crisis from the point of view of the ninety-nine percent.

"Garage band hedge fund" characters Charlie Geller and Jamie Shipley (John Magaro and Finn Wittrock) sneak into the offices of Lehman Brothers on September 15, 2008, literally swimming against the current in the frame, upstream and past the pink-slipped employees of Lehman, the "venerable New York bank," the day the "Wall Street giant's stock went to zero."⁵¹ Here, at the figurative "ground zero" of the Great Recession, McKay's sound design produces a non-diegetic palimpsest that layers audio of TV news reports of the collapse atop shots of alternately stunned and hostile bankers wandering around lower Manhattan. McKay then intercuts this scene of the Great Recession's ground zero with brief glimpses of the "gritty actuality" the audience knows is come. As the TV talking head intones about Lehman's bankruptcy, McKay evokes the human tragedy of mass evictions and homelessness that would play itself out time and again across "Main Street" in the years following the crash as a result of the bad bets made not just at Lehman, but up and down the globalized financial system (as the film makes clear).

⁵⁰ Recall that the New Deal migrant-worker camp program that Toland's camera calls dramatically to the viewer's attention via a zoom-shot in *The Grapes of Wrath* was only in its pilot phase in 1939-40.

⁵¹ McKay 1:38:41; 1:54:26 – 1:54:30.

When our bright-eyed outsiders, Charlie and Jamie, finally gain access to the inner sanctum of Lehman (here representing finance capital at large, which the characters have been comically questing after throughout the film), the *mis-en-scene* of Lehman's abandoned trading floor is less like the Hollywood movies the characters likely grew up on (Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* or Ben Younger's *Boiler Room*) and more like a zombie apocalypse or teenage house-party flick. Instead of the "grown-ups" the young hedge fund hopefuls imagined they would find, Charlie and Jamie discover row after row of abandoned computer workstations and a tower of empty Red Bull cans, stacked high in some "finance bro's" architecturally unsound simulacrum of the tower of Babel. Graffiti scrawled in blood-red paint above Lehman's trading floor reads, "LEH 0.00"—a reference to the corporation's trading symbol on the New York Stock Exchange and its market value now that the bubble has burst (figure 9).⁵²

Against this backdrop of apocalypse on Wall Street, an apocalypse not many in McKay's mass culture audience would have likely shed a tear for, *The Big Short* does offer a glimpse into the "gritty actuality" that the ninety-nine percent endured after the crash as a direct result of the economic recklessness the film critiques. Whereas *The Big Short* appears to be framed by the 1970s, via period piece and consistently exploits the conventions of modern comedy, McKay structures the epilogue of *The Big Short* as a subtle homage to the genres of American photojournalism and documentary that were perfected by artists like Dorothea Lange, Pare Lorentz, and other cultural producers of the New Deal state and the grapes of wrath cultural formation during the Great Depression. In this way, one of the true frames of *The Big Short* is indeed the aesthetic forms (documentary, photojournalism) and social locations (the economy in crisis in the intimate recesses of the American home) of the grapes of wrath cultural formation. *The Big Short* encapsulates the entire story of the fallout on "Main Street" in less than ten-seconds of screen time.⁵³ McKay's first act of this flash-documentary is a still-photograph that departs from this subtle homage to the genre of American photojournalism perfected in the Great Depression by Lange and other photographers of the RA/FSA of an older couple smiling for the camera in front of their ranch-style home (figure 10).⁵⁴ This still-photograph departs from this subtle homage to the genre of American photojournalism perfected in the Great Depression by Lange and other photographers of the RA/FSA. In front of a modest dwelling, their arms around each other, the couple embrace, and their smiles bespeak the sort of pride many associate with home ownership in the United States as one of the cornerstones of the American Dream.

⁵² McKay 1:58:48.

⁵³ McKay 1:54:45 – 1:54:55.

⁵⁴ McKay 1:54:45.



Figure 10



Figure 11

The next act of McKay's flash-documentary consists of another still-photograph. Instead of people, this frame presents the kind of intimate invasion that many members of the Recession-era audience either witnessed or even experienced first-hand after the crash. In this second still-photograph, furniture, household goods, over-flowing dresser drawers, and half-packed moving boxes are strewn across a drive way (figure 11).⁵⁵ This scene of forced eviction was replayed almost nightly on American TV news programs during the

⁵⁵ McKay 1:54:48.



Figure 12

Great Recession and became a powerful signifier of foreclosure and eviction during the crisis.⁵⁶

In the conclusion of McKay's Great Recession meta-narrative, an American mini-movie in three-acts (perhaps another gesture towards the addled attention span of mainstream movie audiences in the age of memes), the static photojournalism of the first two frames shifts to the eerie movement of makeshift tents in a homeless encampment swaying in a calm breeze—presumably where the family from the first frame live as a result of the crash (figure 12).⁵⁷ Besides the rippling of these repurposed blankets and sheets, the encampment is otherwise still. This stillness is amplified formally by the film's camera eye, which unflinchingly holds the frame motionless under the midday sun. A bicycle stands in the background of the frame and clean clothes are drying almost proudly on a line stretched between two tents in anticipation (or perhaps fear) of the days of work and school still to come. McKay's gesture towards those six million people displaced from their homes by the Great Recession, and the homeless encampments many turned to after eviction, is markedly different from the male-dominated Hoovervilles we associate with the boxcar tramps of the Great Depression and even further away from present day Skid Row in Los Angeles or the Tenderloin District in San Francisco, whose "unworthy" poor (drug dependent and unemployed, if not unemployable) have dominated the conservative and neoliberal imaginations of homelessness in the United States both before and after the Great Recession.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See Reyes, "Picturing the Crisis" and Moore, *Capitalism: A Love Story*.

⁵⁷ McKay 1:54:55.

⁵⁸ "The United States had endured depressions before the 1930s," historian Eric Rauchway writes, "but the Great Depression [...] also produced a great compression" (38). Rauchway has argued that one result of this compression was a sense of social solidarity, even across boundaries of economic class during the period. While American poverty and economic crisis was certainly not a new phenomenon in the 1930s, the scale and persistence of "hard times" during the Depression era was unique. What's more, advancement in



Figure 13

McKay concludes this survey of the gritty actuality of the Great Recession via an image that resonates strongly with one of John Ford's leitmotifs in *The Grapes of Wrath*. As America's premier director of big screen westerns, Ford was a master of exploiting the iconic power of what one critic calls the "wagons-west romance" in the American cultural imagination.⁵⁹ According to one early critic of Steinbeck's novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* owes much of its iconic resonance to the exploitation of this popular genre. In this reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joad family is figured not as historically situated economic or ecologic refugees, but instead as ahistorical, twentieth century analogues of America's pioneering past: cops and vigilantes in California threaten the Okies' westering journey with violence, functioning not as agents of homegrown American fascism in this reading, but as "hostile natives." The family's beat up jalopy (piled high with supplies, sundries, and kinfolk) is easily read as a symbol for the covered wagons of the American frontier. While Ford had certainly not read Bernard Bowron's analysis of Steinbeck's novel, he obviously knew a western when he saw it. Ford naturally pulled on this thread in his big screen adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath*. McKay's gesture to the

communication technologies, particularly in the new culture industries of the early twentieth century (radio and movies), brought the nation together in ways that were almost unimaginable just a generation before. Newsreels and radio carried the sights and sounds of American suffering into movie houses and private homes across the nation, making it virtually impossible for those personally unaffected by the crisis to ignore the plight of the underclasses. In addition, as Rauchway reminds us, "So many moved so quickly from one category to another that the employed increasingly identified with their fellow countrymen who were out of work" (39). While the Great Recession failed to produce a "great compression" similar to its twentieth century counterpart, we are currently entering a period of economic crisis in 2020 that seems capable of producing similar types of cross-class recognition and a resurgence of empathy and compassion for the hungry, unemployed, and homeless. As I complete this dissertation, the United States is currently experiencing another cycle of catastrophic economic contraction, this time produced by the Covid-19 pandemic that began in the winter of 2019 and rapidly spread across the nation in the early months of 2020. At the time of this writing, 33 million Americans are unemployed and real unemployment stands at 20.6 percent, the highest level since 1934 according to *Fortune* (Lambert).

⁵⁹ Bowron CITATION NEEDED.

Ford's departs from this subtle homage to the genre of American photojournalism perfected in the Great Depression by Lange and other photographers of the RA/FSA once, in order to Michael Burry types out his swansong to the financial services industry in one last email, informing his investors why he is closing his boutique west coast hedge fund after the crash (plus 489 percent, or \$2.69 billion in "total profit"), McKay intercuts Burry's voice over narration with a newly homeless family encamped in the parking lot of an anonymous gas station.

The Didactic Imperative in Popular Culture Narratives of "Great" Economic Crisis

To its credit, *The Big Short* does an exceptional job problematizing the contradiction inherent in critiquing the cultural politics of capitalism in "great" economic crisis from within capitalist culture industry form itself, like popular Hollywood cinema. As if to come to terms with this contradiction, the film demonstrates a laudable interest in actually informing its mass culture audience about the notoriously complex causes of the Great Recession. Jarred Vennett taunts the audience in voice over narration in *The Big Short*: "I'm guessing most of you still don't really know what happened."⁶⁰ His tone is close to disgust as he mocks anyone who even thinks they might have a clue: "Yeah, you got soundbite you repeat so you don't sound dumb. But come on..."⁶¹

In recognition of this problem, the notorious complexity of the causes of the Great Recession, *The Big Short* embraces an explicitly didactic mode throughout. Even Vennett's sleazy used-car salesman schtick is harnessed by McKay in order to educate the movie's mass culture audience about the even more profound stupidity and hubris of our financial overlords and the convoluted financialized weapons they created only to eventually lose control of later, which brought capitalism to its knees and produced profound suffering for millions of people around the world as capitalism struggled (even with a massive helping hand from the federal government) to get back up again.

The Big Short's didactic imperative and the aesthetic devices it deploys to that end recalls Steinbeck's critically divisive, often maligned inter-chapters in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Scholars have observed the strong cinematic quality of Steinbeck's fiction in general.⁶² In particular, the inter-chapters help produce that quality by intercutting chapters which advance the plot of the novel with chapters that explicitly seek to educate Steinbeck's mass culture audience about the political, social, and economic problems of the novel's time. Whatever we finally decide these inter-chapters are aesthetically and ideologically, Steinbeck's contrapuntal, recurring discursive interruptions of the Joad narrative serve a similar purpose as McKay's meta-narrative filmic devices in *The Big Short*. And indeed, in both narratives these devices function to inform and engage mass

⁶⁰ McKay 4:13.

⁶¹ McKay 4:13.

⁶² See David Seed, *Cinematic Fictions*. Steinbeck, *Grapes*. A few of the problems engaged in some of the novel's inter-chapters include: chapter one (environmental crisis), chapter seven (disaster capitalism), chapter nineteen (violence and discrimination against Dust Bowl migrants in California), and the economic logic of capitalism in crisis (chapter five; twenty-five).

culture audiences on an identical problem: capitalism in crisis, at the intimate social location of the American home, from within the contemporary moment of crisis itself.

Beyond the smart, deadpan humor McKay writes into Lewis' book through characters such as Jarred Vennett, McKay's filmic primer on the Great Recession also comes packaged with a number of other pieces of sticky-sweet pop culture candy for the viewer, including cameos by twenty-first century celebrities and reality TV stars including Anthony Bourdain, Selena Gomez, and Margot Robbie. Like Vennett, these celebrity cameos breach the fourth wall in an effort at Brechtian defamiliarization, recalling the metanarrative devices of Epic Theater.

The Big Short repeatedly breaks its own narrative conceit, deconstructing both the hypnotic power of cinema and McKay's own authority as director in the process. Often *The Big Short* uses Vennett to break that wall. He takes the viewer under his slightly vampiric wing frequently in the movie, where although we fear he may try to suck our blood, we are at the same time charmed enough that we let him in to try and close the deal. Vennett indeed feels unreliable in McKay's *Big Short* as he manipulates or suspends the plot in order to speak directly (while also often speaking *down*) to the audience on the other side of the screen. The most interesting part of McKay's take on this Brechtian technique is that Vennett often breaks that wall simply to mock us or to comment on the film's own problematic relationship to its imagined audience. Our presumed ignorance and addled attention span emerge as the subtext that motivates many of Vennett's adventures across the fourth wall. Indeed, capturing that addled attention span long enough to provide definitions of economic and financial keywords to the Great Recession (such "shorts" and "collateralized debt obligations") are necessary to the emplotment of McKay's movie and absolutely fundamental for the film to succeed as either Hollywood film or populist primer on the destructive mendacity of Wall Street.⁶³

At a pivotal moment in the film, Burry is in the middle of explaining his discovery of the weapons-grade economic cancer that Wall Street has "accidentally" embedded in its profiteering scheme that gambles on housing market futures to his Doubting Thomas business partner. Burry hangs his head in frustration on his desk as he argues across the speaker phone with his partner but Vennett's voice over narration interrupts this incredibly important narrative moment and the film freezes on this frame (figure 10).⁶⁴ Gosling's soothing but cynical baritone speaks to the audience over this frozen frame:

Mortgage backed securities. Subprime loans. Tranches. It's pretty confusing, right? Does it make you feel bored? Or stupid? Well, it's supposed to. Wall Street loves to use confusing terms to make you think only they can do what they do. Or, even better, for you to just leave them the fuck alone.⁶⁵

⁶³ McKay 13:46; 34:10.

⁶⁴ McKay 13:31.

⁶⁵ McKay 12:26 – 13:47.

Having just interpellated his own audience in terms of a very low common denominator of financial literacy and basic intellect, Vennett turns on a dime from insult to punchline: “So here’s Margot Robbie in a bubble bath to explain.”⁶⁶ Even if we take note of Vennett’s interruption of the narrative or take offense at his insult to our intelligence, we laugh as indeed *Margot Robbie in a bubble bath appears on the screen* (figure 11). This tone throughout the film, I argue, helps account for the genuine pleasure produced by watching *The Big Short*’s in spite of its daunting, indeed tragic, subject matter.

In his function as the film’s chorus, Vennett’s explicitly reminds us from the outset of *The Big Short* however, that all of these sticky-sweet, pop culture Brechtian interventions, like the Jenga game that Vennett uses to represent the homes that lie at the



Figure 14



Figure 15

⁶⁶ McKay 13:48.

heart of the big banks' scam, are ultimately doomed to fail.⁶⁷ Vennett even suggests that it was these sorts of pleasures and distractions, offered up by late-capitalist celebrity and consumer culture, and happily indulged by most of us, that allowed the logic of financialization to achieve total hegemony in the first place, from Lewis Ranieri's invention of the "mortgage backed security" in the 1970s to taxpayer funded socialism for Wall Street in the form of now cyclical multi-billion dollar bailouts to try to stabilize markets that consistently show they only work for the very few. *The Big Short* forces us to acknowledge that capitalist popular culture (however well-intentioned) is fundamentally incapable of subsuming its own pleasure principle and market imperative to the kinds of radical praxis that might disrupt its own hegemony, even when its narrative content and historical context explicitly call for anti-capitalist critique and engagement.⁶⁸

McKay advances this point in the film's prologue via a montage of mass market commodities and pop culture signifiers (from Apple computers to the South Park). Deployed in part by the culture industries under the logic of late-capitalism to discourage radical political action or the emergence of anti-capitalist social movements, a political project that became all the more important for the culture industries to maintain and extend in the cultural sphere in light of the challenge posed by the Occupy Wall Street movement.⁶⁹ "And America barely noticed," Vennett intones with a hint of mild disgust at America, "[the nation's] number one industry became boring old banking. And then one day, almost thirty years later, in 2008, it all came crashing down."⁷⁰

In the final analysis, what is missing in *The Big Short* is exactly what this brief montage sequence of the Great Recession's "gritty actuality" seeks to represent through borrowing the Great Depression's most well-known aesthetic form: the intimate social location of American home itself, invaded by the logic of capital in "great" economic crisis. This social location, which was so powerfully represented via Ford's and Toland's Okie expressionism is the figurative "black hole," or "heart of darkness" at the dead center of McKay's plot.

Finally, while *The Big Short* turns away from Ford's and Toland's Okie expressionism to embrace its own unique visual syntax drawn from a range of contemporary pop culture visual forms, such as prestige cable TV period pieces like *Mad Men*, late night sketch comedy like *Saturday Night Live*, and the mockumentary sitcom, it nevertheless maintains important ties to the aesthetic forms and social locations of the grapes of wrath cultural formation. While not a true exemplar of that cultural formation, Adam McKay's *The Big Short*, as a popular culture "problem film" that speaks to the

⁶⁷ McKay 35:43.

⁶⁸ See also Michael Kammen and John F. Kasson on the distinctions between popular culture and mass culture, and the relation of both to what I call the capitalist imperative and the pleasure principal. Kasson writes, "Changing economic and social conditions helped to create the basis of a new mass culture which would gradually emerge in the first decades of the twentieth century. At the turn of the century, this culture was still in the process of formation and not fully incorporated into the life of society as a whole. Its purest expression at this time lay in the realm of commercial amusements, which were creating symbols of the new cultural order, helping to knit a heterogeneous audience into a cohesive whole" (3-4).

⁶⁹ McKay time stamp needed.

⁷⁰ McKay 3:25.

present about its own problems of “great” historical crisis cannot be easily dismissed from larger critical conversations about the relationship between popular culture and the representation of crisis. While it feels disingenuous to recruit *The Big Short* into the grapes of wrath cultural formation, it is clear that McKay’s tragicomedy is not only a fellow traveler and ally, but also a nearly perfect piece of pop culture entertainment that at the same time functions loud and clear as a serious critique of the logic of financialization, crisis capitalism, and in defense of the economic dignity of “the people” John Ford and Gregg Toland so powerfully celebrated in their pop culture intervention on behalf of the grapes of wrath cultural formation.

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