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Dust-Bowl refugee migrant workers picking cotton in California during the 1930s. This illustration and others in this article are by the great American artist Thomas Hart Benton, from the Limited Editions Club edition of *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Courtesy The Limited Editions Club and the Steinbeck Research Center, San Jose State University
III. Literary California

John Steinbeck's Spatial Imagination in

The Grapes of Wrath:

A CRITICAL ESSAY

by George Henderson

Introduction: Representation as Social Action.

The winter of 1937-38 was especially wet in the San Joaquin Valley. Steady and heavy rains saturated the San Joaquin flood plain, particularly in cotton-growing Madera County. In February of that winter John Steinbeck wrote to his agent Elizabeth Otis:

I must go over into the interior valleys. There are about five thousand families starving to death over there, not just hungry but actually starving. The government is trying to feed them and get medical attention to them with the fascist group of utilities and banks and huge growers sabotaging the thing all along the line and yelling for a balanced budget. In one tent there are twenty people quarantined for smallpox and two of the women are to have babies in that tent this week. I've tied into the thing from the first and I must knock these murderers on the heads. Do you know what they're afraid of? They think that if these people are allowed to live in camps with proper sanitary facilities, they will organize and that is the bugbear of the large landowner and the corporation farmer. The states and counties will give them nothing because they are outsiders. But the crops of any part of this state could not be harvested without these outsiders. I'm pretty mad about it. No word of this outside because when I have finished my job the jolly old associated farmers will be after my scalp again (Steinbeck and Wallsten, 158).

For several years Steinbeck had been eyeing the situation of migrant agricultural workers in the "interior valleys." In October 1936 The San Francisco News ran "Harvest Gypsies," a series of Steinbeck's articles, commissioned by the paper's chief editorial writer (see St. Pierre, 79-81 for excerpts). In those brief pieces a reader could find most of the major themes about California agriculture that Steinbeck would later chronicle in The Grapes of Wrath in 1939.

Shortly after "Harvest Gypsies" was printed, Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men and In Dubious Battle appeared in the bookstores. In Dubious Battle was selected by the Book of the Month Club, and within a month one hundred thousand copies had been purchased. Both novels concerned the social costs and unique social formations that Steinbeck attributed to the system of corporate agriculture in the valley (St. Pierre, 81). Thus, by the time Steinbeck began The Grapes of Wrath, his vision was keen and his hand well practiced.

The new novel began to take on a spectacular life of its own. Six months after publication, when two hundred thousand copies had been sold, Common-wealth magazine noted that "when a book sells like that, and when it causes the comment and controversy this book has, it becomes a cultural phenomenon of important dimensions. The literary and critical industry of the country is not really geared to handle it" (quoted in St. Pierre, 98-101). The critic lamented the lack of attention to the book's literary merit. Most readers only wanted to know whether or not California resembled Steinbeck's depiction (see Kappel, for example, on the novel's ban in Kern County). Too much criticism, both good and bad, had been geared to assessing the factual
content and background of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Only in later years did the "pattern of criticism" turn to an assessment of the novel's relationship to themes, such as biblical allegory and the "Wagons West" idiom.

During the late thirties anyone who cared could have corroborated the general events, if not the details, provided by Steinbeck—the Hoovervilles and Resettlement Administration camps, grower-induced labor surplus, crop specialization by region, the migrant trek from the Dust Bowl states, the vigilantism and the relief work, and the importance of cotton as the new speculative crop.

The release of *The Grapes of Wrath* could not have been better timed in relation to the publication of Carey McWilliams' *Factories in the Field* (1939). In broadly supported and convincing prose, McWilliams wrote a mirror text for Steinbeck's novel, although the two writers did not collaborate. Although many contemporary readers apparently did, they did not need to refer to the novel in order to understand the historical reliance of much of California's agricultural production upon a migrant labor class. Yet *The Grapes of Wrath* did fulfill a role as a regionalist and social realist interpretive text. The novel stands as a document of social change. Nonetheless, more can be asked of it.

For example, it might be interesting to turn to a problem of the human condition that Steinbeck apparently set up in *The Grapes of Wrath*. One of Steinbeck's fundamental concerns was to represent the migration of white midwestern families to California as part of that recurrent human condition, while arguing that the human condition itself is shaped by historical and social contingencies. He asked what relationship the laws of nature had to human-made situations: nature does not transcend or determine history, nor does history supercede nature. This idea, I think, accounts for the immortal qualities of some of Steinbeck's characters. At the same time, only the historical moment, the intervention of social relationships, could reveal what might be enduringly true: Ma Joad's heroic will to survive—to humanize the natural survival instinct—was only manifested by economic threat. Tom Joad's and Casy's ultimate belief in a transcendent human family was hammered out only by virtue of their ability to gauge just how far power relations had penetrated the local situation. Steinbeck's adeptness at elevating demoralized and beaten migrants to the epochal level of history-makers, and inventing social relations by phrasing specifically local questions in terms of grandiose themes, fueled his detractors, who would not have dared to vest moral authority in a rootless, landless class. The point, then, is that Steinbeck registered the duality of history and nature in terms of a social inversion.

One of the devices by which Steinbeck infused his work with this thematic content was to saturate his readers' minds with an understanding of the genetic, formative processes that seemed to push the story along in such a way as to make every character and every action part of an enveloping process. This point seems to lie behind Peter Lisca's observation over thirty years ago:

Kenneth Burke has pointed out that "most of the characters derive their role, which is to say their personality, purely from their relationship to the basic situation." But what he takes to be a serious weakness is actually one of the book's greatest accomplishments (Lisca, "*The Grapes of Wrath* as Fiction," 736).

*The Grapes of Wrath* was indeed relentlessly didactic, even formulaic, but by ensuring that the readers grasped the processes involved (or the "basic situation," as the above quote would have it) Steinbeck could then suggest how different orders of experience represented and contained others by virtue of the overarching causes; for example, attachment to land represented a wholesomeness of body and spirit. What is inherently geographical also turns out to be inherently social, both constituting, and constitutive of, the same processes. It is from social and geographical relationships that meaning radiates, rather than from an individual character or action.

In this way small details were charged with representing and bearing out larger processes. This seems like just the sort of thing befitting a philosophical argument of naturalism. But it should not be forgotten that it was the modernization of agricultural production and its attendant forms of consciousness that, Steinbeck argued, brought about this state of affairs; in particular that aspect of modernization whereby technological change loosens boundaries, brings into contact formerly discrete things and persons, and allows for a seemingly small event to be nested inside something more significant. The particular importance of the modernizing process as detailed by Steinbeck was that it foreshadowed representation (the power to grasp cognitively the rending and reshuffling of traditional social bonds) itself as a precursor to social action. A fundamental dilemma for the Joads was the inappropriateness of their own daily thought and practices to an interpretation of the new political and economic order. Nowhere was
this contradiction more evident than in the endless bickering over the value of talking over their problems. Steinbeck himself took on the problem of representation insofar as the interchapters narrated the story as a form of documentation. Moreover, representation became by the end of the novel both a narrative strategy and a form of social action.

Taking these general points, I want to explore how they conferred a particular kind of imaginative process to Steinbeck's writing of the *The Grapes of Wrath*. This imagination orchestrated the geographical sites and the situation of characters depicted in the novel, the particular social processes as they unfolded across space, which only people swept up in the modernizing process could have understood.

*The Grapes of Wrath* cannot be understood fully unless the characters are seen to develop in relationship to the places through which they moved—places that they also reconstituted, if only momentarily. This approach is meant to be a general, illuminating one and not necessarily an argument to be sustained for each character. Rather, the interpretative approach addresses action in the novel as a totality. Since Tom Joad carries a large proportion of the thematic load of the novel from such a perspective, the bulk of my discussion will focus on him.

Steinbeck's primary thesis, in geographical terms, was that you cannot understand what is going on inside California unless you know what is occurring outside. This notion was borne out by the novel's overwhelming concern with mapping the Joads' migration across the western states. Given the family's goal of obtaining a family-size farm in California, it could be argued that the Joads never really got where they were going. The migration upon which they embarked has no conclusion in the novel other than an ironic symmetry between beginning and ending. The literary "map" charted in *The Grapes of Wrath* was finally not just a geographic product, but was laden with social meaning. It is important, then, to move the line of questioning away from how the Joads got from one place to the next, and by which routes, toward how meaning is produced, controlled, and disseminated with regard to social and workaday space. Also, we need to discover where Steinbeck sat in regard to a general theory of place formation in capitalist society. Specifically, I would like to show how Steinbeck demonstrated his awareness of social/geographic space as the medium and the outcome of certain processes: the division of labor along class and gender lines; the territorial demands of capitalist agribusiness; and family and community needs to appropriate space for their own production, reproduction, and private fulfillment. These processes, conditioned by the modern era, were brought to bear on the Joads' travails as they encountered the wider social world and it, in turn, received or resisted their arrival.

In a sense my outlook may be criticized as too economic. Let me state at the onset that I am familiar with some of the common cultural and ideological idioms of Steinbeck's work, including the myth of the garden, the family farm as a reformist ideal, and the closeness of women to nature. While Steinbeck appeared to have left these myths intact, and indeed to have relied upon them, he dismantled others of a specific local and regional character: the innocence of California's agricultural bounty, the myth of an egalitarian frontier in the West, and the family farm as a basic unit of democracy. Instead of treating each of the above concepts explicitly, I will simply let them inform my thinking, drawing on them as necessary or appropriate.

Steinbeck, I think, structured the meanings of the places in which the book's characters were situated on two levels. First, each place took on meaning through its dynamic relationship with an opposite kind of place, either real or imagined. Second, the interaction of these polarities transformed or overturned social relations.

How can two places "interact"? Contradictions among the processes of the division of labor, capitalist agribusiness, and small social units arise as each asserts its territorial demands for space—critical to its very continuation—and brings the novel's places and characters into a dialectical relationship. With the notion of dialectically interacting places in mind, I would, then, posit three sets of oppositions which typify the relationships among the primary settings in *The Grapes of Wrath*. These oppositions constitute major literary devices through which Steinbeck represented the processes of the creation of social/geographic space. The three sets of oppositions are:

1. The tension between places where power is centered—or represented—and places of socially marginal activity for peripheralized people;
2. The contradiction between California as a visible, knowable, Edenic landscape and the Joads' invisibility and ignorance within it;
3. The conflict between divergent modes of transforming nature and producing humane habitats.

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Places of Centralized Power and Marginalized Activity.

The geography of power and disenfranchisement is relatively straightforward in *The Grapes of Wrath*. A primary distinction is drawn between towns and banks, on the one hand, and Routes 66/99 and the migrant camps on the other hand. The implication, which comprised the fundamental antagonists in Steinbeck’s book, was that finance capital, fixed in places (the banks), and the entrenched urban settlement pattern were both hostile to the “independent” and dispossessed rural smallholder and migrant worker. Oklahoma banks extended their domain to foreclose on small or mid-size farms, while California towns resisted the onslaught of the displaced migrants. Migrant families were thus pushed from two directions: away from their homelands and away from the small-town sanctuary of the farmers and merchants. Bankers, big farmers, and town-dwellers alike feared that the Joads would find a place in which to belong. Fixity translated into power, whereas uprootedness was the best assurance of continued disenfranchisement. From this point, Steinbeck wrote what might be called a drama of settlement.

The settlement drama has two dimensions in the novel. In one, Steinbeck imagined a reinvention of a natural, organic society formed by the exigencies of the highway life along the “Great American Roadside.” This new, transitional society both chal-

lenged and rivaled the exclusive claims to authenticity held by the historically validated, pre-existing settlement pattern, in which moral authority and political power were vested in fixed centers, either towns or farms. Steinbeck reversed this notion and outlined a vision of moral purity and impending political power as they were taking shape on the road:

The cars of the migrant people crawled out of the side roads onto the great cross-country highway, and they took the migrant way to the West. In the daylight they scuttled like bugs to the westward: and as the dark caught them, they clustered like bugs near to shelter and to water . . . Thus it might be that one family camped near a spring, and another camped for the spring and for company, and a third because two families had pioneered the place and found it good. And when the sun went down, perhaps twenty families and twenty cars were there.

In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all . . .

Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus . . . gradually the technique of building worlds became their technique. Then leaders emerged, then laws were made, then codes came into being . . . (p. 264-5).

Steinbeck wrote into the situation a sort of moral
regeneration of American society, borne on the backs of its most beleaguered members. At first, the new society seemed a parody, a "circus", but it was simply that the basic social rules, forgotten by the dominant society, must be learned anew. This proposed change was resisted by those who were socially well-placed: the haves against the have-nots. A manifestation and medium for this struggle was the new spatial form of social relations overlaid on the landscape of the new, depression-era West:

The families, which had been units of which the boundaries were a house at night, a farm by day, changed their boundaries. In the long hot light, they were silent in the cars moving slowly westward; but at night they integrated with any group they found.

Thus they changed their social life—changed as in the whole universe only man can change. They were not farm men any more, but migrant men (p. 267-8).

The struggle to which Steinbeck implicitly alluded, at this point in the novel, was one over legacy, over historical authenticity, over the notion of "free" land in the West. Migrant culture stretched out into a great protective net across the roads of the west. No longer was land the democratizing element. Rather, geographical mobility was the great social leveler, because its laws had been revised to accommodate lives as lived on the road. In the new landscape, the trucker was the benefactor. Steinbeck was enamored of the new roadside culture—the diner, the truckers, the truckstops—just as he ridiculed its transgressors—the fee campgrounds, the salesmen peddling used cars for ill-gotten profits.

The other dimension of the settlement fantasy is the raising of individualized forms of consciousness to the level of class. Steinbeck wrote that "one man, one family [is] driven from the land." The single migrant is "alone . . . and bewildered." But then something happens. Two men meet, "squat on their hams and the women and children listen. . . ." This meeting, Steinbeck pointed out, is the "mode" of revolution. "Here I lost my land' is changed . . . [to] 'We lost our land.'" (p. 206). Steinbeck continued the reasoning in the succeeding passages to foretell a day of revolution, unforeseen by large propertied interests because they were still in an "I" frame of mind, not yet liberated into communal consciousness.

The author presented a pattern of fragmentation of the rural freeholder class which moved toward a portentous regrouping on the road. The road in this role is transformed from nemesis to necessity, if history is to follow the contradictory logic of modernization. Yet the road maintained ambiguous status in the novel. It beckoned at the same time as it restrained.

Route 66 was essential for the formation of the migrants' new social consciousness, yet for all its symbolic and cultural weight, it led the Joads down a circular path in their search for house and garden. After the Joads' scrape with the law in the first California "Hooverville" they came to, they made a narrow pre-dawn escape down Route 99. It is tempting to think that Steinbeck was manipulating the route numbers themselves to reveal their symbolic content (p. 384). Turning south on "99" inverted the route number to "66." The Joads were far from home, but essentially on the same highway that used to lead to their old front door.

The Joads' Invisibility and Ignorance within a Visible, Edenic Landscape.

A critical juncture in the book arrived as the Joads were astride the top of the Tehachapi Mountains, looking out over the Central Valley toward Bakersfield. They had just endured the disappointment of Needles ("Gateway to California"), a funeral procession through the Mojave Desert, and the agricultural inspection station at Daggett:

Al jammed on the brake and stopped in the middle of the road, and, "Jesus Christ! Look!" he said. The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses . . . The distant cities, the little towns in the orchard land, and morning sun, golden on the valley . . . The grain fields golden in the morning, and the willow lines, the eucalyptus trees in rows. Pa sighed, "I never knew they was anything like her."

. . . Ruthie and Winfield scrambled down from the car, and then they stood, silent and awestruck, embarrassed before the great valley . . . and Ruthie whispered, "It's California" (p. 309-10).

This moment, when they were faced with the spectacle of California, was foreshadowed in the novel when the Joads took a respite outside Needles. Tom Joad wondered then whether the image of California would pan out in reality: Pa said, "Wait till we get to California. You'll see nice country then." Tom admonished, "Jesus Christ, Pa! This here is California" (p. 278). Moments later Tom talked with a man versed in the subtler aspects of the California landscape. He told Tom what to expect, and although he was leaving California, he encouraged Tom to go see for himself:
"She's a nice country. But she was stole a long time ago. You git acrost the desert an' come into the country aroun' Bakersfield. An' you never seen such purty country—all orchards an' grapes, purtiest country you ever seen. An' you'll pass lan' flat an' fine with water thirty feet down, and that lan's layin' fallow. But you can't have none of that lan'. That's a Lan' and Cattle Company. An' if they don't want ta work her, she ain't gonna git worked. You go in there an' plant you a little corn, an' you'll go to jail!" (p. 279)

The migrants had seen pictures of California—a rural paradise draped with a snow capped background (p. 271). In the scenes depicted above the Joads are brought to confront and question that image. But even when the visible landscape seemed to fit the pictorial myth, the social and economic reality had brutal implications. The landscape, a spectacle, as presented to the observer from the crest of the Tehachapis, concealed the enveloping contradiction between the subsistence potential of the soil and the monopolistic tendencies of the large landowning companies.

Still, however, the Joads asserted their blind, almost masochistic fortitude, (that evidence of the survival instinct bordering on animal drive—bugs "crawl," the Joads "crawl") which flew in the face of everything they had heard along their migration. They were distrustful of "words" and "talk":

[Uncle John by the riverbank outside of Needles]

"... We're a-goin' there, ain't we? None of this here talk gonna keep us from goin' there. When we get there, we'll get there. When we get a job we'll work, an' when we don't get a job we'll set on our tail. This here talk ain't gonna do no good no way" (p. 283).

Indeed, Uncle John foresaw the truth of their experience in the great valley. Yet he could not have seen any of the particular features and would not have been able to map out the continuation of their journey from the vantage point at the pass in the Tehachapis. The crisis of representation here had two expressions. One was the inability of the Joads to convey to each other what they were getting themselves into. The other expression of the crisis was the very landscape that lay before them. The power of the landscape, to represent future events as they would be shaped by social/power relations and to lend predictability to the migrants' lives, rapidly diminished. The landscape ambiguously revealed and concealed its contents. All along, the Joads had been making the equation between the visible and the possible, between reality and representation. The notions of "there" and "here" as points on a map, or as elements of the field of vision that could be identified and reached, were continually obscured because the Joads were lured in the first place by the spectacle of California. Or,
rather, California was revealed to them only as a spectacle. What they found, in fact, was a parallel, though peripheralized, world.

The apotheosis of the peripheral world was the Hooverville. A parody of the American small-town ideal and a continuation of Steinbeck’s settlement myth, these squatter settlements could be found outside of every “real” town: “The rag town lay close to water; and the houses were tents, and weed-thatched enclosures, paper houses, a great junk pile” (p. 319-20). The “rag town” was really nothing but the discharge point of the effluvia of the social order: “a great junk pile.” The description alluded to the flow of goods, but the Hooverville made a mockery of real economic exchange. The flow of goods was uni-directional. And the settlement was illusory — houses were merely tents and paper constructions.

Yet it was in Hooverville that the Joads comprehended the basic contradictions that drove the plot forward. The migrant camp on the outskirts followed the “mother of invention” dictum, but the camp was an essential geographical instrument for concentrating surplus labor in a region where one extensively planted crop ripened all at once over a broad area. In Hooverville, Tom Joad is lectured to by a world-wise, old hand about how the gathering of surplus workers enabled employers to pay miserable wages. “S’pose them men got kids . . . Jus’ offer ‘em a nickel—why, they’ll kill each other fightin’ for that nickel.” The men had been lured by handbills, and “You can print a hell of a lot of han’bills with what ya save payin’ fifteen cents an hour for fri’ work,” explained Tom’s instructor. He continued:

“They’s a big son-of-a-bitch of a peach orchard I worked in. Takes nine men all the year roun’.” He paused impressively. “Takes three thousand men for two weeks when them peaches is ripe . . . They send out han’bills all over hell. They need three thousand, an’ they get six thousand . . . Whole part a the country’s peaches. All ripe together. When ya get ’em picked, ever’ goddam one is picked. There ain’t another damn thing in that part a the country to do. An’ then them owners don’ want you there no more. . . So they kick you out, they move you along. That’s how it is” (p. 334-5).

The California spectacle was revealed as a horrific production racket involving key combinations: a division of labor with a painfully seasonal and spatial underpinning, extensive mono-cropping, and the short term needs of migrant families and individuals to keep the diurnal body and soul together. Although any one Hooverville was a temporary arrangement in the migrant world, Hoover-villes were to be found on the edge of every town. Each was fragile over time. Over geographical space they were extensive and threatening. Thus, they had their hand in a dialectical turn of events: “every raid on a Hooverville, every deputy swaggering through a ragged camp put off the day a little and cemented the inevitability of the day [when the land will belong to the workers]” (p. 325).

Just as the Joads were awed and inspired (embar-rassed too) by the view of the landscape from atop the Tehachapis—a vision of an ordered, productive, and beneficient world—the owners of property, the producers of that landscape and the image of California as a haven for the dispossessed, wished to keep the migrants moving. The landscape itself was to be a fixed, closed entity, and the idea of keeping the outcasts moving was to keep from thinking of them as part of the real picture. The point was to define the laborer merely as a means of production rather than as inheritor of the rewards of an agrarian tradition, one of which would be the very privilege of belonging to the landscape by being a landholder.

Steinbeck attached a particular form of consciousness-historical knowledge—to land ownership. Ironically, it is the great landowner who understands the lesson that when there are masses of dispossessed, revolution will surely follow. But workers need to grasp their role in the historical process. How does the worker in The Grapes of Wrath come into that consciousness? How do the Joads as peasants know that they have become “workers”?

The Joads were not ascribed any potential for social mobility. In addition, their spatial mobility was almost thoroughly restricted, if not prescribed. Thus, a plunge into the self brought about a real- ized relationship to history and society. In spatial terms, seclusion was required. Steinbeck carefully chose places that gave a character a renewed and empowering vantage point from which to see social relations as fraught with contradictions (p. 571-2). Characters must be placed in a position from which to view their world upside down, with the social order reversed. Invariably, these places were marginal, both in the productivity of nature and in the hierarchy of human habitats.

Divergent Modes of Transforming Nature and the Production of Humane Habits.

Steinbeck tried to capture the historical place and time in which putting land into production meant different things to different classes of people. The primary event that set The Grapes
of Wrath in motion was the Joads’ loss of their homestead to a bank that foreclosed on the property. Steinbeck drew a fundamental distinction between a spatial proximity of a people to their land and, conversely, a spatial disjunction:

[Muley Graves] “Place where folks live is them folks. They ain’t whole, out lonely on the road in a piled-up car. They ain’t alive no more. Them sons-a-bitches killed ‘em’” (p. 71).

[Later, a fragment from an interchapter] The man who is... walking on the earth, turning his plow point for a stone, dropping his handles to slide over an outcropping, kneeling in the earth to eat his lunch; that man who is more than his elements knows the land that is more than its analysis. But the machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love, understands only chemistry; and he is contemptuous of the land and of himself. When the corrugated iron doors are shut, he goes home, and his home is not the land (p. 158).

Steinbeck was very keen on establishing the notion that an emotional relationship to land depends on close physical contact with the soil. Because Muley Graves did not join the Joads, he failed to recognize the opportunity for renewal in the experience of migration. However, he was clever enough to recognize the ways and means of survival in a land wholly given over to an alien system of agricultural production. In an early scene on the old Joad homestead, Muley explained to Tom and Casy the fine art of hiding in a land where there was supposedly nowhere to hide (p. 77-8). Cotton had been planted so extensively at the old farm that it likened flushing out the fugitives to looking for a needle in a haystack. To a degree, their invisibility in the cotton field opposed the inability of the small farmer to pin the responsibility of foreclosure on a real person. Each side was a stranger to the other. The modern system divided them, as it brought them together.

Ultimately “tractor farming” became the small landholder’s nemesis. The small farmer could no longer make the land support a crop. Under a system of modernized production, extensive monocropping of cotton engulfed the Joads’ farm.

The Reverend Casy and young Tom stood on the hill and looked down on the Joad place. The small unpainted house was mashed at one corner, and it had been pushed off its foundations so that it slumped at an angle, its blind front windows pointing at a spot of sky well above the horizon. The fences were gone and the cotton grew in the dooryard and up against the house, and the cotton grew close against it... They walked toward the concrete well-cap, walked through cotton plants to get to it, and the bolls were forming on the cotton, and the land was cultivated (p. 54-5).

In a number of such passages Steinbeck brought together potent images of two rural orders in conflict. The new large cotton farm annihilated all former distinctions between the various micro-places of the Joad farm: no more fences, no dooryard, no clear path to shed, outhouse, or trough. There were no places even for “proper weeds that should grow under a trough.” The phrase “proper weeds” seems like an oxymoron, yet gets the point across that the old rough and tumble homestead was part of a good and natural scheme.

It was such a scheme that the Joads and others dreamed of reproducing in their exile. The idea that land should be used and occupied, rather than left fallow, was stymied, however, by the power of the large landowner to let arable land remain idle:... And along the roads lay the temptations, the fields that could bear food.

That’s owned. That ain’t our’n.

Well, maybe we could get a little piece of her. Maybe—a little piece. Right down there—a patch. Jimson weed now. Christ, I could git enough potatoes off’n that little patch to feed my whole family! It ain’t our’n. It got to have Jimson weeds (p. 320-1).

Any attempts to cultivate the “secret gardens” fail—unless the New Deal intervenes (p. 321). Outside of Bakersfield the federal government established the migrant labor camp, Weedpatch.

Weedpatch is reminiscent of both the “secret gardens” and the “rag town” Hoovervilles. The government camp provided momentary respite, even appeared idyllic. Yet in the final analysis it was little more than a glorified sanitary facility and could not support the desire for a permanent, humane habitat:

Tom walked down the street between the rows of tents... He saw that the rows were straight and that there was no litter about the tents. The ground of the street had been swept and sprinkled... Tom walked slowly. He neared Number Four Sanitary Unit and he looked at it curiously, an unpainted building, low and rough (p. 393).

Weedpatch was the vector of several important themes in the novel. It drew on the idea of geometric orderliness and cleanliness as support for the moral authority of the American small town. Its setting resonated with a secure and bounded rural propriety. It was a point from which the power of the migrant “folk” could emanate amidst the enveloping enterprise of agribusiness. Most
powerfully, Weedpatch was the overlapping space of three "institutions": the short term needs of the migrant workers, federal relief policy, and large-scale capitalist agriculture. For all its importance in bringing these systems together, however, Weedpatch remained a marginal place. It was a holding area for the worker in a place where employment was scarce after the harvest. Inside, the migrant community was strong and thwarted the attempts of local vigilantes to incite a riot. Ultimately, though, it was agribusiness that set the rules. The Joads and others like them were forced to leave and look for work.

If the "secret garden" failed to sustain the myth of yeoman independence, Steinbeck experimented with the notion that it is in the seams, or cracks, in the agricultural landscape (the in-between places where the process, rather than the final outcome, of the appropriation of nature can be viewed), where the self can retreat and become empowered through contact with nature, fragmentary though it may be. In The Grapes of Wrath this idea was expressed in the context of the agricultural production process. In this way Steinbeck located in a specific time and place what otherwise would be an ahistorical notion. He took pains to explain that modern farming in Oklahoma and California entailed forms of subordination and social control (p. 50-1; 316-20). Steinbeck’s whole point, of course, was to suggest how these consequences can be resisted.

In order to understand how these arguments work in the novel, we can examine certain events as they occur in irrigation ditches and hedgerows—two types of seams, or cracks, in the agricultural landscape that represent gaps in apparently seamless power relations.

Tom Joad, the primary character of the novel, experienced two baptisms in irrigation ditches. The first was performed by Casy when Tom was a boy and Casy a revivelist preacher. His first baptism did not mean too much to young Tom. Its meaning only became clear when Tom was re-baptized—this time by himself—after doing something out of conviction and a sense of social justice. In this scene, Tom's actions were less blind, more than merely the result of the things that he was always bumping into. Tom had just discovered Casy and a number of other labor organizers. In a scuffle with a group of vigilantes who were tailing them down a stream, Casy was killed. Tom fatally struck down the killer, was himself struck, and made his escape up the embankment:

He bent low and ran over the cultivated earth; clods slipped and rolled under his feet. Ahead he saw the bushes that bounded the field, bushes
along the edges of an irrigation ditch. He slipped through the fence, edged in among vines and blackberry bushes. And then he lay still, panting hoarsely. . . . He lay still on his stomach until his mind came back. And then he crawled slowly over the edge of the ditch. He bathed his face in the cool water. . . .

The black cloud had crossed the sky, a blob of dark against the stars. The night was quiet again (p. 527-8).

This second “baptism” was more figurative and secular than the first, but Steinbeck meant them to be parallel events. In each instance Tom and Casy were present. In each case Tom’s baptism followed some form of violence. The first baptism occurred under conditions which were too naive to lend any meaning to Tom’s life. The second, however, marked his passage into a period of solitary resolve and spiritual rekindling. For the moment he was emancipated—“The black cloud had crossed the sky. . . . The night was quiet again.” That the baptisms occurred in irrigation ditches was simply consistent with the setting of the story. Yet their location has something to say about sites of spiritual renewal and resistance in a space of seemingly total social control.

The irrigation ditch is an essential feature and instrument of agriculture in a semi-arid environment. It is part and parcel of the transformation of nature, and hence, of the production and labor process (one of the few jobs Tom gets is digging an irrigation ditch). The ditch of the second baptism is at the field’s edge, protected by water-seeking bushes. As much as it represents evidence of the dominant class’s mastery over nature, it remains its own kind of environment, with water so elemental that its restorative properties are unsullied. The water, unlike the social and economic system that manipulates it, is not selective about to whom it gives life.

The second environment of solitary reflection, and precursor to resistance, is the hedgerow at the margins of the cotton fields. Like the irrigation ditches these micro-environments help build the novel’s architectural symmetry. And similarly they see Tom’s movement from a state of partial denial to affirmation of his role in social change. Twice the reader finds Tom Joad hiding at the edges of cotton fields. The first time is with Muley Graves at the Joads’ old farm, when Tom and Casy follow Muley
to a place where they can stay the night. It turns out to be a cave in the bank of a water-cut. "... Joad settled himself on the clean sand. 'I ain't gonna sleep in no cave,' he said. 'I'm gonna sleep right here.' He rolled his coat and put it under his head" (p. 81-2).

Tom is in hiding despite his pride and deliberations to the contrary, but he falls short of entering the cave as Muley does. The scene presages Tom's future exile in a similar situation in California: Muley warns Tom that he will be hiding "from lots of stuff." Tom himself dug the cave at the edge of the field when he was a youth "Lookin' for gold"—what more appropriate place in which to end up than California at the edge of a cotton field.

After Tom escapes with this family from the peach orchard (where they were working at the time of Casy's death), Muley's prediction comes true:

Al turned right on a graveled road, and the yellow lights shuddered over the ground. The fruit trees were gone now, and cotton plants took their place. They drove on for twenty miles [italics mine] through the cotton . . . The road paralleled a bushy creek and turned over a concrete bridge and followed the stream on the other side. And then, on the edge of the creek the lights showed a long line of red boxcars, wheelless; and a big sign on the edge of the road said, "Cotton Pickers Wanted." Al slowed down . . .

"... Look," he [Tom] said. "It says they want cotton pickers. I seen that sign. Now I been tryin' to figger how I'm gonna stay with you, an' not make no trouble. When my face gets well, maybe it'll be alright, but not now. Ya see them cars back there. Well, the pickers live in them. Now maybe they's work there. How about if you get work there an' live in one of the them cars?"

"How 'bout you?" Ma demanded.

"Well, you seen that crick, all full a brush. Well, I could hide in that brush an' keep outa sight. An' at night you could bring me out somepin to eat. I seen a culvert, little ways back. I could maybe sleep in there" (p. 550-1).

While Tom was secure in the hedgerow above the creek by the cotton field, he could not only reflect on the recent events, but represent them to his mother in their full meaning. In his hiding place he found his kinship to a humanity beyond the family boundary, and came into a sense of overarching social purpose. Steinbeck intimated that Tom would follow in Casy's steps (p. 570).

By repeating the hiding pattern established earlier in the novel, Steinbeck foreshadowed the internal change in Tom's character. Steinbeck played seclusion and personal empowerment against the geographically extensive and demoralizing agricultural working conditions. The spatial reach of agribusiness in the thirties, which seems to have levelled the distinction between one worker and another, is shown in *The Grapes of Wrath* to have enough cracks to allow certain people to individuate themselves. These cracks reflect on the contradictions of the production process, sustaining the idea of unexploited nature as a reserve for the human spirit during historically specific and dehumanizing conditions. Thus, Tom Joad had to be alone in a particular kind of space, in a special relationship with nature, before he could realize that, after all, he is part of a social group, of an historical moment—before he could grant authority to the representational and political value of language.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck appeared to praise the values and unswerving pragmatism of the migrant workers and families. Through Tom Joad, however, who finally discovered in his hideout that talking, thinking, and language are worthy tools for understanding practical predicaments, Steinbeck also criticized the shortcomings of the Joad family's "common sense," in which discussion and the very idea of representation seemed overly precious. What the Joads needed instead was to recognize the value of representation—not as learned in myth, but as relearned in the kinds of spaces where the individual can represent first to himself, then to others, a version of reality closer to the truth. In order for the human family to unite, the boundaries of the nuclear family had to be loosened. Ma Joad's "'famly'" could not remain intact. She realized that, while her family had land, they were a bounded, cohesive entity. Without it they were falling apart (p. 536). However, only through their disintegration would they really think and act beyond themselves.

Finally, we are left to wonder how Steinbeck ultimately appraised the situation of the "Okie" migrant worker. To his credit Steinbeck did not see the migrant class as a monolith, but rather as differentiated. For example, toward the conclusion of the novel Ma and Pa Joad have taken divergent, gender-based viewpoints. Pa became preoccupied with looking backwards, so nostalgic for a time when he was head of the household division of labor that he could not participate in the present. Ma was forward looking, acknowledging that the land in California was, after all, better than their Oklahoma farmland. She rose from the ashes of a burnt-out household, the vehicle for Steinbeck to expose the pitfalls of patriarchy. Pa remained stuck in the historical moment, if not in the past itself.
Rose of Sharon, sister of Tom Joad, the leading character, in *The Grapes of Wrath*. One of the major themes in Steinbeck's novel was the manner in which economic inequality and exploitation undermined the status of men, who earned self-respect by being "breadwinners." On the other hand, women, according to Steinbeck, were less ego-involved in the economic productive system, more in touch with spiritual and life-giving forces of nature, and thus more adaptable to adversity. Reflecting this theme, in the novel's heart-rending, enigmatic, and controversial conclusion, Rose of Sharon, who had just suffered the still-birth of her child, suckled a starving strange man at her breast in order to save his life. Courtesy The Limited Editions Club and the Steinbeck Research Center, San Jose State University
Ma, as a woman, adapted readily to changing situations, accepting life as a "flow." However, the positions ascribed to Ma and Pa are not based on an ahistorical sense of masculine and feminine. For both Pa's nostalgia and Ma's philosophy of "flow" were occasioned by their entrapment in an historical and geographical flux. It was Ma, while still in Oklahoma, who first experienced nostalgic attachments. The tragedy of the migrants' situation, therefore, seems not so much that they had to leave home, but that California did not yet offer the permanent place they thought it promised.

Steinbeck took the view that migrant workers were caught in a complex of relations modernizing the western states, that the particular features of their experience also depended on the forms of consciousness and practice that they brought to situations, and that rules and ideologies set by modern capitalism also relied in part on a laboring class such as the Joads represented. I have suggested that Steinbeck was keenly aware that the division of labor, agricultural production within capitalist agribusiness and the family farm, and the consciousness of individuals and social groups, all had requirements that grew out of and were projected onto contradicting geographical spaces. The particular oppositional motifs, a series of tensions, that I think Steinbeck used to convey his argument, were: the spaces of power and disenfranchisement, the ambiguity of the landscape as a depicting and concealing agent, and the conflicting modes of transforming nature.

These oppositional motifs were the means by which Steinbeck created a space for certain characters to resist the oppressing forces. The Joads were never completely marginalized; power was not all powerful. The attempts to make the Joads invisible in the landscape, a cog in the production process, contributed in some sense to their redemption. Nature was never entirely mastered nor subdued, and it was by virtue of its transformation by the class in power that restorative gaps were left.

See "References" beginning on page 262.

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