

Climate Change of Mind: Revisiting Dust Bowl Narratives
in a Time of Climate Catastrophe

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the approaches that novelists have used to write about the 1930s Dust Bowl on the Great Plains, with particular attention to how writers have made this broad environmental disaster legible through its impacts on humans living in the affected regions. Far from merely portraying this historical “climate change,” novelists such as John Steinbeck and Sanora Babb instead sought to shape public opinions about this crisis by emphasizing the human cost of this environmental disaster and its ensuing migration. This dissertation furthermore applies these lessons from the past to contemporary climate destabilization, as it argues that effective writing about climate change must foreground the impacts on people affected by it.

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Introduction: If It Rains: An Introduction to Climate Changes, Past and Present

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was published on April 14, 1939. Approximately four months later, on August 18, 1939, the Kansas City Board of Education voted to ban the controversial novel from its public libraries due to charges of obscenity. This decision to ban *The Grapes of Wrath* is perhaps a bit curious, as the novel's characters never venture as far north or east as Kansas City, instead partaking in the Dust Bowl migration from Oklahoma to California.¹ And yet, news of the ban in Kansas City was a favorable development for a segment of the population at the receiving end of this migration—particularly in Kern County, California. The next day, W.B. Camp, the owner of a nearby corporate farm, acknowledged the issues stemming from the influx of migrants in the local newspaper, the *Bakersfield Californian*, before adding: “in our efforts to obtain solution of the problem, we are constantly being harassed by propaganda such as Steinbeck's book which blames the farmers of Kern and the San Joaquin valley for the entire problem” (Lingo 358). Camp then expressed optimism that Kansas City's ban would be a bellwether for additional censorship of the novel and, two days later, the Kern County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution, with a vote of 4-1, to ban Steinbeck's book from the shelves of their public libraries.

It is particularly noteworthy that Kern County's decision to censor the book was clearly influenced by seeing a ban enacted elsewhere. That is, it was a copycat decision borne of regressive ideology: the influential population of Kern County disagreed with the way in which they were portrayed in the novel—and they further disliked that a film adaptation was in production—so they simply opted to remove the book from their shelves. Another important point from this response lies in Camp's characterization of

Steinbeck's book as a piece of "propaganda." Although this characterization of *The Grapes of Wrath* has long since faded from popularity, it was nevertheless a relatively common interpretation of the narrative within the first years after its publication. Of course, Camp's note quoted above misses the essential point of the "propagandistic" nature of *The Grapes of Wrath*, as Steinbeck's motivation was not primarily destructive in nature, but instead it was intended to be constructive: whereas Camp suggests that Steinbeck wanted to turn public perception against the wealthy landowners in California, he actually aimed to inspire indignation on behalf of the migrants who were often given no alternative but to live in inhumane conditions upon their arrival in California. This is perhaps a subtle distinction, though it is an important one that will be discussed at length in the first chapter of this dissertation.

Notably, Camp's characterization of *The Grapes of Wrath* is also interesting for its inherent contradictions with regards to the context of the Kern County ban: in a photo published in the *Bakersfield Californian* on August 24, 1939, Camp is shown posing with a migrant, Clell Pruett, who is burning a copy of the novel. Although Pruett admitted that he had not read *The Grapes of Wrath*, the photograph of him burning the book—while the area's landowners look on approvingly—was nevertheless circulated as proof that Dust Bowl migrants largely objected to Steinbeck's portrayal of them (Wartzman 152). This publicity stunt was staged by the local chapter of Associated Farmers and was taken as an attempt to generate support for a statewide ban of the book. Of course, the photograph is clearly misleading, as it collapses the interests of the landowners with the interests of the migrants, which were in fact in opposition to each other. It is moreover noteworthy that this publicity stunt was "propaganda" of Camp's own—albeit with a

more nefarious motivation than Steinbeck, considering its misleading nature. Camp's hope for a broader ban never occurred, however, and it should also be noted that the Kern County library system was not involved in the decision to ban the book; they only learned of the resolution after the vote had passed (Lingo 351).

Notably, this resolution was unable to remove every copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* from its libraries' shelves, as there remained one copy in circulation at the FSA labor camp in Shafter, whose library had been "organized as a branch of the Kern County Library" (Bowman 44). And approximately three weeks before Kern County passed the resolution banning the book, the Shafter camp council carried a motion to give their librarian "permission to place the Grapes of Wrath Book in [their] library" (Bowman 45). Considering the Shafter camp library was part of the Kern County system, it is unclear if there were any outside pressures to remove this book, or if it simply flew under the radar given the broader priorities underpinning the push to ban the book by the Associated Farmers. What is clear, however, is that there was consistent demand for the book within the Shafter camp, and the librarian was forced to publish a note in the camp's newspaper, *Covered Wagon News*, asking for the return of the overdue book (Bowman 44). So while the influential corporate farmers in Kern County banned the novel from regular circulation and staged photographs to popularize the notion that even migrants rejected the book, the migrants of the Southern Plains covertly retained their access to *The Grapes of Wrath* and found power in Steinbeck's words of support for their position.

As this episode demonstrates, the effect of the Dust Bowl on the Southern Plains (and the corresponding migration to the West Coast) was being contested even while it was still occurring. The implications of this debate has had longstanding impacts on how

we remember not only the Dust Bowl but also Dust Bowl literature, which is inextricably linked with public perception of this environmental disaster in a way that is perhaps surprising in the context of contemporary climate destabilization. For while literary fiction directly contributed to sociopolitical responses to the Dust Bowl crises, contemporary climate change fiction—or “cli-fi”—has frequently inspired little more than apathy or powerlessness among its readers, as the next section will detail.

The Challenges of Reading and Interpreting Climate Change Fiction

Broadly speaking, climate change has been a fraught topic within the realms of literary studies over the past few decades. While there has been a veritable explosion of publications within the genre of climate change fiction, literary critics have nevertheless struggled with this topic due to the variety and magnitude of impacts of global climate destabilization. That is, the broad timescales and geographies impacted by climate destabilization pose direct challenges to the granular specificity with which literary scholars typically operate, which has stunted the development of adequate literary theories that address the scope of these phenomena. Frequently, the result of this impasse is that ecocritical analyses of climate change fiction lack a clearly defined intentionality that fuels their discussions. Instead, many scholarly analyses of cli-fi can be distilled into an exercise of identification of the impacts of climate change within works of literature—often without much consideration to the implications of the way in which these phenomena are portrayed. Thus, the significance of this analysis is frequently reduced to the rubrics of “raising awareness” about climate destabilization.

For example, in *Cli-Fi: A Companion*, editors Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra note that: “The sheer prevalence of cli-fi might suggest that literary and cinematic artists are continuing to grapple, in ever greater numbers, with the demands of climate change,” before arguing that this increasing number of cli-fi narratives is evidence that authors are aiming “to achieve” the following outcomes with their audience: “alerting readers to the dangers of global warming, informing debates, motivating and empowering to think and act, and thereby facilitating attitudinal and behavioural change” (12). While these intended impacts on the audience of cli-fi are largely indisputable, there nevertheless remains a question of the utility of what is essentially a verbose description of raising awareness about climate change in 2019 (the year in which the collection was published), as climate change was, by this point, well known and widely discussed by the general public.

That is, to raise awareness about climate change is a notably vague aspiration—if not an irrelevant one, given the primacy of this topic in public discourses—for the writers of climate change fiction, and corresponding scholarship frequently mirrors this lack of directionality. Beyond the ambiguity found in its introduction, *Cli-Fi: A Companion* offers a collection of close-readings of particular works of climate change fiction from a variety of ecocritics, though the analyses frequently boil down to an identification of how a specific piece of cli-fi portrays a specific aspect of climate destabilization without further consideration of what is at stake beyond these basic exercises in identification. While there are indeed compelling analyses within the collection – to be clear, my intention is not to disparage the editors of (or contributors to) this collection – it is

nevertheless emblematic of the deeply-rooted issues that literary and cultural critics have faced when dealing with the expanses of climate change.²

This question of purpose is nevertheless an important point to consider. If, as I argue above, and as Amitav Ghosh writes in *The Great Derangement*, that: “the problem [of the climate crisis] does not arise out of a lack of information: there are surely very few writers today who are oblivious to the current disturbances in climate systems the world over” (8), and that “the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9), then the primary issue with climate change discourses is not one of awareness, but in the creativity that fuels contributions to these conversations. Simply put, we must examine not only the ways in which we talk about *what* is occurring in a destabilizing climate, but also what is at stake in *how* we are writing and talking about these issues. While this argument is occasionally made in cli-fi scholarship, when it occurs it is frequently associated with the discourse’s orientation toward the future: although climate change is occurring in real time, it is nevertheless frequently written about as if it is something that will only affect people and communities in the coming decades, which writers often connect to present-day inaction. That is, the present and future are often connected in climate change fiction, but in a way that perpetuates the notion that climate destabilization is continuously looming in the future, and not something that has occurred in the past, or that is actively disrupting daily lives for people around the world. While this emphasis on the future is not inherently inappropriate for phenomena that will likely intensify over time, the result is nevertheless a gap in the literature on historical experiences of anthropogenic climatological changes.

A noteworthy exception to this trend is Jesse Oak Taylor's 2016 monograph, *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*, which traces the portrayals of air pollution in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature. As Taylor argues with regards to this time and place: "Smog does not simply emerge at the intersection of nature and culture, it emerges *as* that intersection. Smog presents a single term or substance, perched at a semantic, historical, aesthetic, meteorological, and material crossroad between the nineteenth century and the twentieth, between Victorianism and modernism, between art and science, between city and sky" (3). While the object of Taylor's analysis—air pollution in London—is quite obviously far removed from the topic of this dissertation, there is nevertheless a notable similarity between the ways in which Taylor frames his analysis of early depictions of smog and the ways in which this dissertation interprets the dust storms of the Southern Plains in the 1930s, as the Dust Bowl can be interpreted as a remarkably similar intersection of nature and culture, which will be detailed in the next section.

Nevertheless, Taylor furthermore notes a potential pitfall in the approach of reading fiction from an earlier era in the context of contemporary climate destabilization. As he writes: "Tracing the conceptual emergence of anthropogenic climate change in the cultural artifacts of the past almost inevitably opens one to charges of presentism, the anachronistic fallacy of mapping present concerns onto historical materials" (9). With this point in mind, it is important to clarify the relationship between Dust Bowl fiction and climate change fiction within this dissertation's analysis. Although three Dust Bowl novels will be analyzed in the ensuing chapters, only one of these novels, Kristin Hannah's *The Four Winds*, will be considered a work of climate change fiction, since it is

the only novel of the three that was written and published with a conscious awareness of this literary trend. While Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Sanora Babb's *Whose Names Are Unknown* are also set within the anthropogenic "climate change" of the Dust Bowl, their composition nevertheless preceded the broad popularization of this term and genre.

Although these novels cannot be considered climate change fiction without charges of anachronism, this dissertation nevertheless argues that their analysis in the context of contemporary climate change helps fill the historical gap in cli-fi scholarship noted above, and which also potentially opens new avenues for engaging with contemporary fiction. For example, after noting that Steinbeck was "never a favorite of the avant-garde," Ghosh nevertheless argues that: "if we look back upon Steinbeck now, in full awareness of what is now known about the future of the planet, his work seems far from superseded; quite the contrary. What we see, rather, is a visionary placement of the human within the nonhuman; we see a form, an approach that grapples with climate change *avant la lettre*" (79-80). The premise of the analysis in this dissertation originates from a similar position—and extends it to Sanora Babb—as it interprets these Dust Bowl novels as an early archive of fiction that not only grapples with climate change, but also seeks to frame this setting in a way that inspires their readers to action. The details of this setting, and the ways in which these novels were crafted to have this impact, will be clarified in the following sections.

The Dust Bowl: A Case Study of Climate Change

The phrase “Dust Bowl” is an imprecise term, and for current readers, it likely carries connotations of a bygone era in an unfamiliar, though definitely rural, place. The phrase originated about five years after the drought on the Plains began, as it was coined by an *Associated Press* reporter, Robert Geiger. In an article published on April 15, 1935, in the *Washington Evening Star*, Geiger writes: “Three little words, achingly familiar on a Western farmer’s tongue, rule life in the dust bowl of the continent—if it rains” (Worster 28). Although Geiger was not intentionally creating a proper noun for this area—a fact further evidenced in an article shortly thereafter in which he referred to it as the “dust belt” (Worster 28)—it nevertheless captured the imaginations of an American readership broadly ignorant of the area’s geography and climate. This term was also immediately contentious among residents of the Plains: not only was the term void of specific geographic parameters, but it also had clearly negative implications for what visitors might expect to encounter upon arrival. As entrepreneurs and businessmen looked to market the area as a desirable location for settlers heading west, the nascent descriptor “Dust Bowl” encapsulated an obvious obstacle for the marketability of their brand.

For many readers today, the Dust Bowl is a term that is likely entwined with the Great Depression, and indeed, as Donald Worster argues, there is a definite relationship between the two phenomena. As he writes: “the same society produced them both, and for similar reasons. Both events revealed fundamental weaknesses in the traditional culture of America, the one in ecological terms, the other in economic” (5). While Worster here notes the obvious “economic” roots of the Depression, his characterization

of the Dust Bowl as an event of both cultural and ecological origins is particularly salient for a reading of Dust Bowl literature in the broader context of anthropogenic climate destabilization. Although current readers may think of the Dust Bowl as a primarily environmental disaster, or perhaps as a crisis created by the Depression, its origins actually trace back decades, to the beginning of white settlement of the Plains. As white ranchers and farmers displaced Indigenous Peoples and implemented new land-use practices in the area – typically oriented toward livestock grazing and then agricultural cultivation – the roots of native plants were ripped from the soil, and were replaced with the seeds of the Dust Bowl. And so, while the Dust Bowl famously began in the early 1930s, its origins nevertheless begin more than a century prior, in the early 1800s.

In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase brought much the Great Plains under control of the United States government. One of President Thomas Jefferson’s motivations for this acquisition was the proliferation of agricultural independence, which was implemented via genocidal displacement of Indigenous Peoples from this area. There is much to be said about these policies, though with consideration to the scope of this dissertation, it is important to note that white settlement of the Plains changed the ecology of the region in an incredibly short amount of time. Perhaps the most visible nonhuman casualty of this genocide is the American bison, whom white settlers and soldiers considered a close ally to Indigenous cultures. As Worster argues, the corresponding intentional massacre of the American bison disrupted the balance of predators and prey on the Plains by the 1870s, and did so in an alarmingly efficient fashion: “In a very few years the plains went through more profound changes than it had known in 40 millennia, and more sudden ones than it had ever passed through before, even during the geological revolutions of the past.

Changes now were to be measured in decades, not epochs” (78). Quite literally, westward expansion by white settlers ushered in an era of unparalleled ecological destabilization on the Plains.

Though white settlers most commonly used the Southern Plains for cattle ranching in the late 1800s, by the turn of the century more farmers were moving to the area. At this time, a new agricultural technique called “dry farming” was rising in popularity, as it promised to make the Plains more productive, thus keeping the land “from reverting to useless grass and imperial cattlemen” (Worster 87). Although it is likely unsurprising, the notion that native grasses were “useless” is emblematic of the dominant culture at this time, and this point is a concise explanation of the origins of the Dust Bowl. Congress soon passed the Enlarged Homestead Act in 1909, which promised settlers 320 acres of land, and which resulted in “a feverish scene, as thousands rushed to get their share of the last agricultural frontier” (Worster 87). As more settlers raced west with intentions of plowing the “useless” native grasses and replacing them with agricultural crops—Turkey Red wheat, in particular—the stage was beginning to be set for the Dust Bowl.

For the first several years after the Enlarged Homestead Act, farmers on the Southern Plains enjoyed relative prosperity, as growing domestic and foreign markets drew demand for their grain. This prosperity rapidly increased with the onset of World War I, as European markets were cut off from their supply of Russian grain, resulting in 1919 wheat prices soaring to 250% of their 1914 levels (Worster 89). Importantly, as this demand increased, farmers were able to increase their production without dramatically increasing their labor, due to the mechanization afforded by improved agricultural

technology. As Worster reports: “In the 20 years after 1910 the labor needed to plant and harvest the nation’s wheat fell by one-third, while the acreage by almost the same amount” (89-90). That is, the number of farmers on the Plains was growing, and this expanding population was also able to cultivate more acreage, relatively speaking, than ever before. Of course, there was a substantial cost for the farm equipment required to maximize this farmer-to-land ratio, though with the increased demand for their crops due to World War I, these were easy loans for farmers to take out in these years.

However, European grain production and trade rebounded at the conclusion of World War I, which began eroding the value of wheat cultivated on the Southern Plains. As this value shrank, conventional wisdom for farmers on the Plains was to increase their “productive” land to account for this loss in revenue. As Worster explains: “their salvation depended on more, not fewer, machines, so that they could achieve greater economies of scale” (92). Of course, this economic “salvation” was predicated on the conversion of more “useless” Plains land to productive farmland, which further reduced the ecological resiliency of a region prone to harsh environmental conditions. Ecology was a nascent field at this time—not a widely accepted or studied concept by any means—so there was little objection during the 1920s to this broad conversion of land to agricultural production on the Southern Plains. In fact, as is perhaps clear, the conventional wisdom of the time was quite the opposite: land was a potential source of capital, and settlers of the region had every right to maximize the land’s ability to produce wealth for its inhabitants (Worster 6). As James N. Gregory summarizes: “Declining international markets for wheat, corn, and cotton, mineral depletion and erosion of marginal soils, pests, drought, and the introduction of tractors and new farm

machinery combined to usher in a massive reorganization of agriculture as acreage was consolidated into more efficient farming units and machines replaced mules and family labor” (6-7). That is, to the settlers on the Plains, there was virtually no serious consideration given to the detrimental effects of uprooting wide swaths of native plants and grasses, as this was ultimately seen as the logical path forward through the challenges that they were encountering at the time.

As noted above, the prices for wheat crops in the 1920s had already begun to come back down following the boom from World War I, and the stock market crash of 1929 certainly did not improve the farmers’ position. While Plains farmers were somewhat insulated from the immediate impacts of the crash due to geographic isolation (and, to an extent, the basic fact that grain is an essential food staple that can’t be easily replaced), their bottom lines were nevertheless under yet another threat due to the onset of the Great Depression. As Gregory succinctly writes: “Distress descended upon the region from several directions at once” (11). Given the economic forces already threatening the livelihoods of farmers, it is perhaps obvious that the early 1930s would be a catastrophic time for the region’s cyclically occurring droughts to reappear. And yet, natural forces know nothing of economic circumstances, nor do they seek the approval of the area’s inhabitants before severe conditions take hold, and that is precisely what occurred.

Thus, the broad conversion of the region’s land from drought-resilient native plants to farmland reduced the land’s ability to tolerate a drastic decline in precipitation, and as the ground dried out, it lacked the resilience afforded by the roots of native plants, and so the top soil started to blow. The Dust Bowl had begun, and it was borne of both

natural and cultural circumstances. Of course, given the clear causal relationship between capitalism and the onset of this disaster, it should be noted that the Dust Bowl's story shares much in common with contemporary climate change, as profit-driven emissions—combined with misguided public opinions and broad policy failures—have created a similar mechanism of anthropogenic destabilization of “natural” systems. And while the Dust Bowl is clearly a disaster of a smaller scale than contemporary climate destabilization, it nevertheless also had “planetary significance,” and it has been characterized by George Borgstrom, an expert on world food issues, as “one of the three worst ecological blunders in history” (Worster 4). Timothy Egan similarly notes the global and national significance of the Dust Bowl, as he writes: “American meteorologists rated the Dust Bowl the number one weather event of the twentieth century. And as they go over the scars of the land, historians say it was the nation's worst prolonged environmental disaster” (10).

Importantly, the Great Plains was not the only region to experience drought conditions during this time. As Worster notes, between the years 1930-1936, all but two states (Maine and Vermont) received at least 15% less precipitation than their historical means, making this a continent-wide phenomenon (11-12). And yet, the reduction of native plants and grasses resulted in the Plains developing dust storms that were absent from the rest of the country—though dust from the Plains was carried to the Midwest, the East Coast, and beyond. As Egan writes, “a storm in May 1934 carried the windblown shards of the Great Plains over much of the nation. In Chicago, twelve million tons of dust fell. New York, Washington – even ships at sea, three hundred miles off the Atlantic coast – were blanketed in brown” (5). Nevertheless, the onset of the dust in the first years

of the 1930s was not an immediate cause for concern, given the region's history of recurring cycles of drought. However, more severe dust storms, or "black blizzards," embodied the most extreme conditions of the time. The most notorious of these storms occurred on April 14, 1935—which was the impetus for Geiger to coin the phrase "dust bowl"—and which became known as "Black Sunday." As Egan describes, this storm: "carried twice as much dirt as was dug out of the earth to create the Panama Canal. The canal took seven years to dig; the storm lasted a single afternoon. More than 300,000 tons of Great Plains topsoil was airborne that day" (8). Indeed, Worster characterizes the dust storms as "the most severe environmental catastrophe in the entire history of the white man on this continent" (24). Though this declaration was made before the intensification of contemporary climate destabilization, it is nevertheless a persuasive reminder of the enormously powerful storms that represented the worst conditions of this time and place. As such, this dissertation will pay particular attention the representations of lived experiences of the Dust Bowl in the ensuing chapters.

And yet, despite the severity of this period, the Dust Bowl is a largely forgotten disaster for current readers. This is perhaps due, in part, to the relatively obscure location (at the time) of the worst impacts of the Dust Bowl: society was not as connected then as it is now, so news of these extreme conditions was not as immediately available to the residents in other regions, nor were they as immediately pressing to those folks as they navigated their own personal circumstances in the Depression. Not only was the Dust Bowl somewhat unknown to even contemporaries in the 1930s—at least, in the first part of the decade, before many of the journalistic and artistic works that will be analyzed in this dissertation began to circulate and inspire spirited public discussion toward the end

of the decade—but society often tends to have a short memory when it comes to the extent of trauma endured over prolonged periods of time. This likely rings true for current readers who experienced the Covid-19 pandemic, and it was certainly the case on the Southern Plains in the late 1930s and early 1940s: once conditions in the region rebounded in the 1940s, the area was nevertheless unprepared for the return of dust storms in the early 1950s (Worster 227). Simply put, this is because ecological lessons were not broadly learned from the “Dirty Thirties.”

As Worster explains: “Agricultural conservation of the New Deal era was, on balance, a failure in the Great Plains. Neither the federal land-use planners nor the ecologists made a lasting impact on the region. The agronomists and soil technicians, although they were more successful in getting their version of conservation translated into action, were ultimately ineffectual, too,” though he also notes that “the region would not have come back so spectacularly without their assistance” (229). Solutions that helped mitigate the worst impacts of this crisis were identified, but long-term implementation of them was ultimately neglected by society at large. All of this may sound familiar in light of recent events (climate destabilization on one hand, and the Covid-19 pandemic, on the other), which is an essential premise of this dissertation: facts and figures are undoubtedly valuable in the face of catastrophe, but they are not guaranteed to create an immediate response in the general public, let alone the adoption of a long-term plan of action. And yet, the role of art and artists is often overlooked or omitted in discourses surrounding disasters, though artistic works frequently have much to offer in these contexts, as is notably evidenced by the impacts of Steinbeck’s *The*

Grapes of Wrath on public perceptions of the Dust Bowl crises, for example, as this dissertation will analyze.

A Note on Structure

This dissertation is divided into three chapters, which correspond to the three major novels set in the Dust Bowl: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Sanora Babb's *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and Kristin Hannah's *The Four Winds*, respectively. The chapters are arranged in chronological order of publication. Although there are a small handful of additional novels pertaining to the Dust Bowl, the nature of their composition as response novels to Steinbeck's book preclude a broader analysis here, though they will be briefly discussed in the first chapter on *The Grapes of Wrath*.³ Broadly, each chapter of this dissertation will analyze the context in which the author wrote their novel, and the ways in which they portray the lived experiences of this particular time and place, before relating this analysis to the contemporary issues surrounding global climate destabilization.

More specifically, the first chapter begins with a review of the critical interpretations of *The Grapes of Wrath* from the 1930s to the present day. This overview reveals how the scope and focus of critical interpretations of *The Grapes of Wrath* has evolved over time, with relatively consistent (albeit perhaps misguided) arguments about the text and author. By outlining the shortcomings of these historical perspectives, this chapter argues that *The Grapes of Wrath* has long been misinterpreted by literary scholars. Importantly, an often-overlooked nuance of this novel is that it was written as a piece of propaganda with which Steinbeck aimed to shape public perception of the people

impacted by the Dust Bowl. This point is supported within this chapter through an analysis of Steinbeck's correspondence and essays to illuminate the intentionality underpinning his approach to *The Grapes of Wrath*, as Steinbeck sought to leverage his newly-found fame for the benefit of migrants from the Southern Plains. As this chapter argues, the propagandistic nature of *The Grapes of Wrath* uniquely positions it to contribute to contemporary discourses of climate change fiction.

Following this analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s "job" of improving living conditions for Dust Bowl migrants, this chapter then reconciles the straightforwardly anthropocentric aims of this piece of literary propaganda with its ecological context of being set in (and published during) an environmental disaster. Of course, it should be noted that these anthropocentric appeals are incongruent with many of the prevailing positions within scholarly discourses in the environmental humanities and social sciences. While a variety of contemporary intellectual trends have converged to place eminence on the "non-human" in ecological discussions within these disciplines, this chapter argues that there is an irreducible practicality in Steinbeck's propagandistic anthropocentrism. While there are indeed progressive, proto-ecological philosophies that shape his narrative, the essential aim of this book was to generate humanitarian responses in the general public at the time, and the emotional weight of *The Grapes of Wrath* is crafted to reflect this aspiration. This aim is reflected throughout the book's plot and structure, and culminates in its hopeful, open-ended conclusion. As this chapter argues, this emphasis on optimism—which is evident throughout the novel—is yet another powerful reminder for readers of today, who are perhaps more attuned to the currently popular narrative trends of dystopia and apocalypse in environmental fiction.

The second chapter begins by reviewing the contexts in which Sanora Babb researched and wrote *Whose Names Are Unknown*, as she completed her first draft of the book in 1939, and eventually revised and published it in 2004. With consideration to this timeline, this chapter analyzes Babb's archival materials to detail her experiences writing and revising this book throughout these decades, and it clarifies the variety of events in Babb's personal and professional life that precluded further work on this project until her final years in the early 2000s. This overview of Babb's timeline fills gaps that are currently present in critical discourses on *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and it adds clarity to this novel's relationship to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Because the initial publication of Babb's novel was scrapped due to the success of Steinbeck's book, and since her experiences volunteering with government programs that assisted migrants in California in the late 1930s led her path to cross with Steinbeck's on a handful of occasions, this chapter provides clarity on the nature of Babb's and Steinbeck's interactions in the late 1930s. Although the publication of Babb's novel occurred relatively recently, the majority of critical engagements with *Whose Names Are Unknown* offer mischaracterizations of this working relationship, which this chapter seeks to correct through an analysis of her correspondence and related archival materials.

After reviewing the contexts in which Babb researched and wrote this book, this chapter then transitions into an analysis of the ways in which Babb drew from her childhood on the Southern Plains—and on her family's experiences of the dust storms in the 1930s—in her portrayal of life in the Dust Bowl. In her novel, Babb focuses on the increasing hardships of life in this time and place, which culminate in the difficult decision for her characters to migrate to California in search of a better life. This

approach not only communicates the deep affection for the Plains felt by those who lived there, but it also positions her main characters to participate in communal living with other migrants as they face hardships in California, where they seek to live with dignity despite the hardships that they face on the Plains and on the West Coast. This chapter concludes by arguing that Babb's emphasis on creating an inclusive community was relatively unique for this time and place, and her radical political solutions to this crisis are particularly relevant for discourses on contemporary climate change fiction, as they place primacy on the essential humanity of those forced into migration due to inhospitable environmental conditions.

Lastly, the third chapter of this dissertation begins by analyzing the extensive influence that Steinbeck and Babb had on Kristin Hannah's recent novel, *The Four Winds*. Since there are myriad examples of parallels between Hannah's book and its predecessors, this chapter details these similarities in plot and tone, while also citing Hannah's interview responses that clarify her research using Babb's archival materials, to trace the lasting impacts of the works by Steinbeck and Babb. With consideration to this analysis, this chapter also identifies historical inaccuracies—or, perhaps, points of artistic license—in Hannah's book, which are clearly chosen to have the Dust Bowl serve as a backdrop for somewhat unrelated issues that Hannah tackles in her narrative. After detailing the influences that Steinbeck and Babb had on Hannah, including specific moments in which Hannah appears to have borrowed material without proper citation or acknowledgment, this chapter then transitions into an analysis of *The Four Winds* as a piece of climate change fiction, since it was written and published in a time in which it consciously responds to contemporary climate destabilization.

That is, while a central premise of this dissertation is that Dust Bowl fiction offers a unique insight into the power of literature to impact social change with regards to environmental disasters, *The Four Winds* is a particular embodiment of a text that operates in the realms of both historical fiction and in climate change fiction, thereby testing the central hypothesis of this dissertation. As such, this chapter briefly discusses the typical scope of the cli-fi movement, before then analyzing how Hannah's novel subverts many of the common tropes of this contemporary genre. In doing so, this chapter concludes that despite the many shortcomings of Hannah's novel, its emphasis on hope in the face of environmental disaster—like its predecessors by Steinbeck and Babb—offer an important contribution to, and new point of departure for, contemporary climate change fiction.

Chapter 1: “The book has a definite job to do”: Reading John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* as Dust Bowl Propaganda

Although he wrote in a wide variety of genres and formats throughout his career, John Steinbeck was relatively consistent in his approach to introducing his narratives, which often open with brief environmental sketches to set the tone of the story, before introducing the main characters and developing the plot in subsequent sections or chapters. Examples of this framing technique range from *The Pastures of Heaven*, *East of Eden*, and *The Wayward Bus*, with even Steinbeck’s most accomplished novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, deploying this approach in its opening chapter, which traces the extremely dry conditions from late spring through early summer in 1930s Oklahoma. And yet, despite beginning the novel by portraying a severe drought, Steinbeck’s introduction to this setting in the first chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath* is nevertheless largely absent of the hostility one might expect from such harsh and unrelenting conditions. For much of this chapter, the dust hangs around, the wind is “gentle,” and even the drought’s effect on the crops is described in a relatively graceful manner (1-2). As the drought intensifies over the course of the summer—and even in the description of the dust storm—Steinbeck conveys little anxiety throughout much of this landscape-oriented first chapter of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Instead, at the beginning of the novel, the drought merely seems to be “something that happened.”⁴

It is not until the aftermath of the dust storm, rendered in its impacts on people and their homes, that the negative implications of the 1930s drought comes into focus in Steinbeck’s novel. As the dust storm subsides, the people “stirred restlessly in their beds,” and when they go outside, it is in a mournful state: “the children came out of the

houses, but they did not run or shout as they would have done after a rain. Men stood by their fences and looked at the ruined corn ... And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men—to feel whether this time the men would break” (3). Thus the tone of the first chapter evolves as the focus shifts from the fields of Oklahoma to the people who live there, beginning with a “bemused perplexity” toward the dry environmental conditions, and growing into an ominous trepidation as the men become “hard and angry and resistant” during the sustained drought (3).

In addition to Steinbeck’s characterization of the drought in the opening general chapter, he approaches the dry conditions similarly in the novel’s first three narrative chapters (numbers 2, 4, and 6), which follow Tom Joad from McAlester prison to his family’s home near Sallisaw, Oklahoma. Although Tom is surrounded by dust on this journey, he is initially naïve to its ruinous impacts on his family, as is foreshadowed by his conversation with the truck driver (8), and his surprise when he finds the house knocked off its foundation (40). Despite “dragging his cloud of dust behind him” (18) on the journey, its sinister implications aren’t fully felt until they literally “hit home” for Tom Joad. In this manner, in both the general and narrative chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck makes the ecological disaster of the 1930s emotionally legible by transforming it from a regional phenomenon to a sympathetic narrative about a family struggling to survive, enabling the novel to have an unrivalled impact on national discourses surrounding the Dust Bowl migration.

It is not the case, however, that Steinbeck’s novel was prescient, nor was it particularly timely. When *The Grapes of Wrath* was published in 1939, extreme drought conditions had been ravaging the middle of the continent for the better part of a decade.

During these “Dirty Thirties,” a naturally-occurring drought cycle combined with “groundbreaking” agricultural plow technologies to create soil erosion on a virtually unprecedented scale, making this an emergent crisis of both “natural” and “cultural” origins; indeed, some consider the Dust Bowl to be among the worst ecological disasters in recorded history (Worster 4). Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite common associations between *The Grapes of Wrath* and the Dust Bowl, environmental historians such as Worster and Timothy Egan have argued that it is technically inaccurate to refer to Steinbeck’s novel in this context, since the Joad family originates some 400 miles east of the Dust Bowl’s epicenter of southeast Colorado, western Kansas, and the Oklahoma and Texas panhandles (Worster 57-58; Egan 9). Although there were no clear nor static boundaries for the geographic area referred to as the Dust Bowl, and although dust from the Southwest fell on cities as far away as the East Coast on more than one occasion (Worster 5), Steinbeck’s placement of the Joads east of the Dust Bowl “proper” has been a persistent source of criticism for the veracity of Steinbeck’s portrayal of Oklahoma—and Oklahomans—in the novel.

Regardless of this criticism, this chapter will nevertheless approach this ecological crisis from a broad perspective, using the phrase “Dust Bowl” not to connote the relatively limited geographic area described above, but instead to refer to the complex ecological crisis arising from the confluence of “natural” and “cultural” sources across much of the American Southwest in the 1930s. Indeed, this is how the term was often used even as the 1930s were unfolding, despite awareness that equivocating the Dust Bowl area with the 1930s migration across the Southwest was not always accurate, as the majority of the “Dust Bowl” migrants came from further east than the area most heavily

impacted by the drought. This approach to the term “Dust Bowl” and *The Grapes of Wrath* has moreover been undertaken in several discourses in recent years, such as ecocriticism, Steinbeck studies, and creative writing—all of which pay particular attention to the relevance of Steinbeck’s novel for contemporary conversations surrounding climate change and the Anthropocene.

As ecocritic Scott Slovic writes, those interested in climate change literature should revisit *The Grapes of Wrath*, which “puts an entirely new spin on the novel about the 1930s Dust Bowl when you think of it as a book about how people struggle to survive in a landscape radically altered by drought” (129). Slovic then emphasizes the importance of historical context, recommending Worster’s *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, before noting the interdisciplinary relevance of these texts to contemporary discourses.⁵ Despite these passing observations, Slovic’s cursory references lack close-reading analyses of these texts while simultaneously avoiding precise suggestions for ways in which they might be placed in conversation with climate fiction narratives. And although a number of other ecocritical studies of Steinbeck’s works have recently been published, the majority of these focus primarily on his earlier works, leaving *The Grapes of Wrath* largely undertheorized from this critical perspective.⁶

As connections between *The Grapes of Wrath* and climate change remain underdeveloped in ecocritical studies, they are similarly nascent in scholarly circles surrounding Steinbeck’s work. Examples here are typically found in introductory texts such as Susan Shillinglaw’s *On Reading the Grapes of Wrath* and Robert DeMott’s introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Whereas Shillinglaw calls the novel an “ecological text” that “consider[s] the interconnections

between humans and their environment” (xi) before later contending that it “reminds us of the ways that global warming changes everything” (134), DeMott asserts the novel’s relevance as it “continues to perform meaningful cultural work in shaping perceptions toward social justice, compassion, and understanding, perhaps more important than ever in the unstable global climate of this new century” (xliv-xlv). And yet, considering the comprehensive and introductory nature of Shillinglaw’s and DeMott’s texts—and their general intended audiences—their comments on the parallels between sustainable land-use and anthropogenic climate change ultimately function more as passing observations than sustained analyses. Moreover, when considered in the broader context of literary criticism beyond Steinbeckian circles, their arguments for the novel’s continued relevance generally run counter to the so-called “critical decline” of Steinbeck’s works within academia—whose assumptions and claims this chapter will later analyze as it argues for the novel’s recuperation in literary studies.

It is perhaps surprising that the most nuanced exploration of climate change and *The Grapes of Wrath* to date comes from a blog post directed at creative writers. In his October 24, 2015 post entitled “How Writers Can Read *The Grapes of Wrath* as Climate Fiction,” J.G. Follansbee, author of a speculative fiction series entitled *Tales of a Warming Planet*, reviews the historical context of the Dust Bowl and identifies the primary drought motifs in Steinbeck’s novel, before connecting these phenomena to contemporary appearances in speculative and science fiction.⁷ After discussing the destructive effects of the Dirty Thirties on the Joad family, Follansbee argues that the novel is a “case study in how to imagine the future consequence of climate change, showing in a personal way how life might play out in a world turned inhospitable and

heartless.” And yet, although Follansbee offers more comprehensive analyses than other literary critics, the conventions of writing for a blog preclude him from more sustained instances of close-reading analysis and consideration of previous scholarship on the subject.

Despite these technical deficiencies, Follansbee’s blog post on Steinbeck is ultimately more closely aligned with the motivations of ecocriticism than are many of the ecocritical interpretations of climate change literature. Just as Follansbee writes with ambitions of improving practical responses to climate change, ecocritics often claim similar activism-oriented aspirations. For example, Richard Kerridge writes that “many ecocritics feel that their work has an activist mission. They are searching for ways of getting people to care. That is their fundamental aim of their criticism of culture. They hope their arguments will directly persuade people to care, and will influence new creative works that will move people to care” (362). Adam Trexler agrees, positing that “environmental criticism has a significant role to play in the articulation of climate change” (220), and Jesse Oak Taylor adds that “contemplative scholarship, reading, and teaching are not alternatives to [political, personal, and legislative] activism but generative complements to it” (9). Yet considering the tentative state of ecocritical engagements with climate change, different approaches to the study and interpretation of its literature are clearly necessary. The volume of cli-fi texts have exploded in recent years, but ecocritical responses have so far failed to approach this goal of complementing activism, much less influencing the articulation of more effective climate fiction narratives. Considering these obvious deficiencies, and in light of the varied, yet cursory, connections between historical texts from the Dust Bowl and contemporary climate

change, this chapter reexamines *The Grapes of Wrath* from an ecocritical perspective to recuperate the crucial aspects of its production and reception that are currently absent from climate fiction narratives and criticism.

As noted earlier, this argument for the recuperation of Steinbeck is nevertheless complicated by the common perception of his “critical decline” over the past several decades, with his body of work receiving diminishing esteem among many in the American literary establishment. In light of this “decline,” this chapter will begin by examining the evolution of criticisms of Steinbeck since the early 1940s, revealing how scholars’ claims have changed over time, particularly after Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize in 1962, to present a reductive and exaggerated interpretation of his work in general, and *The Grapes of Wrath* in particular. After close readings of key pieces of criticism by figures such as Edmund Wilson, Alfred Kazin, Arthur Mizener, Harold Bloom, and Leslie Fiedler, this chapter then shows how the very aspects of the novel that these critics attack—such as Steinbeck’s stylistic break from canonical literary movements and his perceived oversentimentalism toward migrants—are incidentally the same aspects of the novel that enabled its unrivaled impacts on discourses surrounding the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s.

That is, not only have the tenets of Steinbeck’s “critical decline” been inconsistent over time, as evidence provided by critics has shifted drastically while supporting the same general conclusion, but they are furthermore directly incongruent with his novel’s relevance to contemporary discourses surrounding environmentalism and climate change. This chapter thus concludes by putting *The Grapes of Wrath* in conversation with ecocritical discourses, showing first how Steinbeck held similar concerns to

contemporary environmental humanists (albeit in different terms and with different motivations), and then how writers and scholars might shift their attention, both creatively and critically, to produce more effective contributions to conversations surrounding ecocriticism, climate change, and the Anthropocene, just as Steinbeck radically influenced the discourses surrounding the Dust Bowl some eighty years ago.

Biology, Sentimentalism, and the “Critical Decline”

“It would be very interesting for a good and intelligent critic to exercise his craft on a body of work of his fellow critics. If this should happen I think it would be found that the product of a reviewer is not objective at all, but subject to all of the virtues and vices of other writers in other fields. I don’t think critics should change; only our attitude toward them. Poor things, nobody reviews them.” – John Steinbeck⁸

One of the most famous scenes in *The Grapes of Wrath* comes in the third chapter, which depicts the challenges a turtle faces while crossing an Oklahoma highway. Traditionally interpreted as a thinly veiled metaphor for the Okie migrants’ westward journey, the turtle in this general chapter laboriously climbs the highway embankment, encounters traffic that alternatively swerves to avoid it and attempts to crush it, and is eventually sent down the other embankment after being tipped by a truck tire (14-16). This turtle metaphor is then mirrored in the narrative chapters, as Tom Joad grabs a turtle to give as a gift to his brother (18), watches it try to escape at his family’s old house (21; 25), and ultimately sets it free, where it continues its journey in the southwest direction (44). Later in the novel, this turtle metaphor for the Okies is presented even more straightforwardly through juxtaposition in chapter 16, a narrative chapter, in which “[the Joads and the Wilsons] were in flight out of Oklahoma and across Texas. The land turtles crawled through the dust and the sun whipped the earth” (163).

Since the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's depictions of the turtles have received a considerable amount of critical attention. Indeed, among early criticisms of the novel, Edmund Wilson's *The Boys in the Back Room* points to Steinbeck's pervasive attention to animals, like the turtle scenes described above, as evidence of his sub-par writing tendencies. This critique, combined with Wilson's other observations of sentimentalism in *The Grapes of Wrath*, is often pointed to as an origin for what would later develop into the common scholarly perception of Steinbeck's "critical decline," inspiring critics such as Kazin, Mizener, Bloom, and Fiedler to take up similar positions with regards to Steinbeck's works. These texts, published from the 1940s through the early 1990s, develop, refine, and amplify a relatively consistent argument about Steinbeck's deficiencies as a writer while pausing only briefly to offer backhanded accolades to his fiction from the late 1930s: especially *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Even while this novel's strengths are acknowledged, it is nevertheless not immune from the broader criticisms of Steinbeck's works, with the establishment consensus propagating two basic arguments: first, by failing to completely align with popular modes of writing such as naturalism or modernism, *The Grapes of Wrath*'s literary prestige is diminished, thereby attracting an unrefined audience with correspondingly uncouth literary tastes; and second, that Steinbeck's sympathetic portrayal of migrants overflows with moralizing sentimentalism, reducing the narrative to half-baked romantic philosophizing on behalf of the undeservedly-admired Okies. Yet attention to the evolution of these criticisms reveals that the textual evidence supporting them has become heavily distorted—indeed, at times abandoned—over the years, as trends in

literary criticism have elided the novel's historical context, which has divorced the novel's criticisms from the realities of its production and reception.

Returning to Wilson's chapter on Steinbeck, his primary intervention is to correct the notion that Steinbeck's body of fiction lacks consistency from text to text, surveying early works ranging from *To a God Unknown*, *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *The Long Valley*, among others. Instead of discontinuity, Wilson finds consistency in Steinbeck's interest in biology, which he also suggests differentiates Steinbeck's writing from his peers, albeit in an unfavorable sense. As Wilson argues, "Mr. Steinbeck almost always in his fiction is dealing either with the lower animals or with human beings so rudimentary that they are almost on the animal level," before clarifying that "Mr. Steinbeck does not have the effect . . . of romantically raising the animals to the stature of human beings, but rather of assimilating the human beings to animals" (42-43). By referring to people in animalistic terms—such as the turtle's journey as a metaphor for the Okie migrants in *The Grapes of Wrath*—Steinbeck's fiction therefore suffers from oversimplified characters, since these "lower animals" necessarily lack in higher-order cognition and "stature" more typical of human beings (45).

Historically, Wilson's objections to Steinbeck's biological predispositions are relatively unsurprising. During the late 1930s and early 1940s, the field of ecology was not yet established, much less broadly accepted.⁹ Considering the nascent stage of "ecology" at the time, when Wilson describes Steinbeck's "irreducible faith in life" that underpins his "biological realism" (52), he is ultimately taking issue with Steinbeck's refusal to wholly embrace the anthropocentric paradigms of this period, as Steinbeck instead explores the various ecological connections between humans, animals, and their

environmental surroundings.¹⁰ Despite its unpopularity with his contemporaries, Steinbeck had a lifelong interest in biology that predated his famous friendship with marine biologist Ed Ricketts,¹¹ which was remarkably interdisciplinary in its inspirations, and which did influence his writing in straightforward ways.¹²

In Steinbeck's fiction, this ecological worldview manifested in what he called his "phalanx theory," which details how humans behave differently in individual and collective scales. In this regard, Wilson's basic criticism that Steinbeck's exploration of the "biological" tended to supersede his portrayal of "realistic" characters is entirely accurate; for example, Steinbeck considered *In Dubious Battle* to be his "phalanx novel," and "phalanx"-related mechanisms operate throughout *The Grapes of Wrath* on levels beyond even those that Wilson identifies.¹³ For example, the decision to feature the turtle so prominently in the novel is likely a subtle nod to its shell, which forms a protective shield in a manner similar to the Greek phalanx formation—indeed, the word "phalanx" is derived from the Latin word for "tortoise"—which thus expands the metaphor beyond the mere action of crawling by "lower animals," to also encompass Steinbeck's complex theories of human behavior (Benson 266-269). That is, the turtle is biological in the straightforward sense that Wilson identifies, but also has richer, more nuanced historical, philosophical, and ecological implications within this narrative.

Although Wilson ultimately commends Steinbeck for his unique, "ambitious" writing (35),¹⁴ he nevertheless argues that Steinbeck's biological tendencies make for a "mixture of seriousness and trashiness" (52). Of course, while ecology had not yet come into prominence, literary trends were also antithetical to Steinbeck's biological impulses, which ran counter to the prioritization of individualism in the naturalism and modernism

movements. As Jackson Benson argues, Steinbeck was “the only major writer within the American tradition of naturalism who reacted to science in a positive way, embraced a scientific perception of the universe with enthusiasm, and really knew something about science” (243-244). Neither a writer of pure naturalism nor one who aspired to high modernism, Steinbeck’s gravitation to the biological and proto-ecological was thus the heart of early criticisms of his work—a marked contrast to contemporary claims of sentimentalism, which was found only in the margins of Wilson’s critique.

Indeed, at times, Wilson argues that Steinbeck is not sentimental enough. After concluding that Steinbeck reduces the human to animalistic terms, Wilson suggests that this is even more egregious since Steinbeck does not appear to love animals, which he supports from a passage of Steinbeck’s *To a God Unknown*: ““He was not kind to animals...He was too much an animal himself to be sentimental”” (44). That is, in direct contradiction to a common criticism of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Wilson argues here that Steinbeck’s biological approach to his characters renders them unsympathetic due to this lack of sentimental anthropocentrism. Despite making this broad claim about Steinbeck’s oeuvre, however, Wilson paradoxically alludes to iterations of sentimentalism in *The Grapes of Wrath* elsewhere in his monograph, writing in a footnote in a subsequent chapter that “Steinbeck has certainly learned from the films—and not only from the documentary films of Pare Lorentz, but from the sentimental symbolism of Hollywood” (61). Nevertheless, this apparent discrepancy in Wilson’s criticism—that Steinbeck’s characters are presented simultaneously as detached biological specimens, while existing in an emotionally sentimental narrative—ultimately remains unresolved in his study.

Underpinning Wilson's reading of *The Grapes of Wrath*—alluded to both in his reference to Lorentz and in his categorization of the text as a “propaganda novel” (42)—was the social, political, and environmental climate in which *The Grapes of Wrath* was published. Although Wilson faults Steinbeck largely for his scientific impulses (and marginally for his sentimentalism) he nevertheless understood the text as a project undertaken for social change. As Wilson notes, Lorentz and his films indeed had a palpable influence on Steinbeck's approach to the novel, and Steinbeck's journal from the time is evidence of the regularity with which the two corresponded.¹⁵ In addition to the documentary narrative techniques that Steinbeck learned from Lorentz, he also had similar aspirations of swaying public opinion regarding the Dust Bowl, and Lorentz played a large role in getting pieces of Steinbeck's journalism on the migrants into print.¹⁶ Writing a mere two years after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Wilson understood this sociopolitical context and how it affected the novel's portrayal of the migrants, which perhaps limited his critiques of perceived sentimentalism within the novel.

Seventeen years after Wilson's study, Alfred Kazin's “The Unhappy Man from Happy Valley” echoes Wilson's critiques, but emphasizes certain traits over others. Kazin's article, which opens with the rhetorical question, “What happened to John Steinbeck?” (1), first compares Steinbeck favorably to Thoreau and Twain, before lamenting his inability to write compelling characters. Regarding *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row*, Kazin argues: “Steinbeck is less fortunate, I think, in the ‘natural’ characters he likes to present ... In such characters his admiration is too explicit, and he sentimentalizes them, uses them against ‘civilization’” (1). Here, Kazin marries Wilson's

earlier critiques of Steinbeck's simple, "biological" characters with his sentimentalizing tendencies; whereas Steinbeck had earlier been criticized for his scientifically detached approach to his characters, by the late 1950s, they were no longer interpreted as "biological realism," but instead in terms of "over-sentimentalism."¹⁷

And yet, despite the fundamental shift underlying these criticisms, Kazin refrains from wholly dismissing *The Grapes of Wrath* for its perceived sentimentalism, referring to it instead as an "impressive concentration of emotion" (29). For while he refashions Wilson's earlier arguments to emphasize Steinbeck's sentimentalism over his biological predispositions, he nevertheless factors the context of *The Grapes of Wrath* into his evaluation, noting how Steinbeck "reluctantly felt himself being pushed over to the side of 'action' in order to save so many people from starvation" (29). Although he falls short of labeling the novel as propagandistic, Kazin here nevertheless astutely notes the tension between Steinbeck's desire to remain an objective observer and the purpose with which he wrote the novel.

Four years later, following the announcement of Steinbeck's Nobel Prize in literature, this context would be abruptly dropped from critical responses to his work. Perhaps the most infamous critical response to Steinbeck's Nobel Prize was Arthur Mizener's *New York Times* editorial, "Does a Moral Vision of the Thirties Deserve a Nobel Prize?," which doubles down on previous criticisms of Steinbeck's artistic deficiencies and sentimental tendencies, while furthermore mocking the activist-inflected context in which *The Grapes of Wrath* originated. Whereas Wilson and Kazin acknowledge Steinbeck's influence on social discourses of the time, Mizener instead attributes his success to a "generous and indiscriminating atmosphere for even bad

proletarian novels,” while claiming that “at the end of the thirties, most serious readers seem to have ceased to read him” (4). In both passages, Mizener subtly shifts the focus of his critiques from Steinbeck’s text to his audience, which heralds a new mode in post-Nobel Steinbeck criticism: critics like Mizener did not believe Steinbeck’s creative powers were worthy of the Nobel Prize, and thus anyone who reads him must necessarily have artistic tastes of a lower caliber. That is, in the four years between Kazin’s and Mizener’s articles, the harsh realities of the 1930s were all but overlooked in favor of a new critical condescension stemming from a prestigious award over which Steinbeck had no control, as well as the ascension of a postmodern critical style that privileged the separation of text from context.

As Mizener’s conclusion shows, the faults he finds with Steinbeck are only partly motivated by the author’s work, with the other source arising from frustration with others’ appreciation of it, as he writes that “it is difficult to find a flattering explanation for awarding this most distinguished of literary prizes to a writer whose real but limited talent is, in his best books, watered down by tenth-rate philosophizing and, in his worst books, overwhelmed by it” (45). In this way, just as *The Grapes of Wrath* was written while Aldo Leopold was in the early stages of drafting *A Sand County Almanac*, critical attention to Steinbeck’s ecological predisposition was ignored at the very time that Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* was causing an uproar about the implications of widespread pesticide usage. Although the power of the literary narrative as it combines with biological and ecological principles was finally gaining traction in public discourses, literary scholars now had a new basis on which to dismiss Steinbeck’s work, and rather

than tuning into these broader interdisciplinary conversations, literary critics instead relied on ad hominem attacks on Steinbeck's artistic abilities.

By the late 1980s, this mode of Steinbeck criticism reached a pinnacle with the publication of Harold Bloom's *Modern Critical Interpretations: John Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath*, which has since been republished in 2007. Bloom's contributions to this anthology, a collection of critical articles that have mostly been previously published elsewhere, are limited to a brief introduction and even shorter "afterthought." In both, Bloom wastes little time before delving into sneering dismissals of Steinbeck's works—typically without citing evidence from these texts to support his claims. Indeed, in the first sentence of the introduction, Bloom writes: "It is nearly forty years since John Steinbeck died, and while his popularity as a novelist still endures, his critical reputation has suffered a considerable decline" (1). As this introductory sentence foreshadows, the dichotomy of general audience versus critical establishment is central to his comprehension of Steinbeck's works. Echoing Mizener, Bloom furthermore implicitly suggests that the Nobel Prize is a main factor in his critique, as he writes: "If Steinbeck is not an original or even adequate stylist, if he lacks skill in plot, and power in the mimesis of character, what remains in his work, except its fairly constant popularity with an immense number of liberal middlebrows, both in his country and abroad?" (4). Although he refrains from mentioning it by name here, Bloom's invocation of a foreign, "middlebrow" readership is likely at least in part a reference to the Swedish Nobel committee.

Of course, condescension from American critics toward the Nobel committee had also been an aspect of Steinbeck criticism immediately following the award; for example,

in addition to deriding the average reader, Mizener also writes that “perhaps those Europeans who influence the awarding of the prize are simply behind the times and in all sincerity believe that the judgments of the thirties are still the established judgments” (44). While assuming that Americans hold a monopoly on textual criticism, statements like these by Mizener and Bloom moreover highlight the fundamental flaws of these critical perspectives, as their deficiencies with regards to historical context contribute to reductive and inaccurate conclusions about Steinbeck’s literary texts. For while these criticisms of European reviewers not only elide the magnitude of the migratory crisis of the 1930s (and Steinbeck’s impacts on it), they also betray a limited perspective on the myriad reasons that foreign audiences might admire Steinbeck; for example, his 1942 play-novelette, *The Moon Is Down*.

During the Second World War, Steinbeck worked voluntarily for two governmental organizations: the Office of Coordinator of Information, and the Office of Strategic Services. Considering the effects that *The Grapes of Wrath* had on public discourses just before the United States’ entrance into the war, Steinbeck undertook an assignment to work on a piece of propaganda for the United States government. His story was first set in the United States, before ultimately being relocated to an unnamed location in Europe after U.S. government officials decided that the implications of a domestic occupation by foreign powers would be too demoralizing for American readers. In March 1942, it was published as *The Moon Is Down*, and it “touched off the fiercest literary battle” of the war (Coers xi), as American critics thought Steinbeck was too soft in his portrayal of the occupying Nazis.¹⁸ While American literary figures doubted the novel’s potential contributions to the war, resistance fighters in Denmark, Norway,

Sweden, and other occupied countries risked their lives to translate and distribute handmade copies of it to their supporters.¹⁹ Whereas Kazin calls it “banal propaganda” (1), King Haakon VII of Norway awarded Steinbeck a Freedom Cross medal for his contributions to the resistance effort, and a Danish newspaper ran the headline “JOHN STEINBECK, ALL OF DENMARK IS AT YOUR FEET” (Parini 365). This situation offers a close parallel to later interpretations of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and reiterates the gulf between the American literary establishment and the Nobel committee in their abilities to comprehend how literature has the power to influence major world events. For in *The Moon Is Down*—much like *The Grapes of Wrath*—Steinbeck’s nuance and empathy for the oppressed and marginalized is erased by critics unwilling to consider anything outside their narrow, privileged points of view, resulting instead in facile oversimplifications of “middlebrow” audiences.

Of course, the cause of much of this misinterpretation lies within the style of critical posturing from the middle of the twentieth century, as towering figures of literary criticism—such as Wilson, Kazin, and Bloom—shaped the American canon with broad-strokes arguments about the merits and shortcomings of authors and texts. For example, Wilson has been characterized as an “elitist” who led “a movement in criticism that was extremely narrow in its sympathies and that placed emphasis not on the author’s intentions or accomplishments but on the intellect and wit of the reviewer or critic in response to selected occasions for the exercise of his wit” (Benson 984). For his part, Kazin, who was best known for his texts such as *On Native Grounds* and *A Writer’s America*, primarily offers sweeping surveys of American literature, with little attention to disciplinary conventions such as formal analysis or close-readings.²⁰ That is, like Wilson,

Kazin's critical impulse is to promote broad statements intended to shape the narrative of the American canon, rather than to conduct the more granular methodologies of literary interpretation. Ultimately, Bloom refashions this elevation of the critical tastemaker to a near parody, as his "Modern Critical Interpretations" series attempts to encompass the works generally accepted as canonical, while often repackaging articles published elsewhere with minimal contributions of his own. In these ways, critics of this time period were often more concerned with promoting their own brand than they were in producing quality scholarship, as they published broad, grandiose texts that elided the foundations on which literary theory and analysis rest—which has furthermore underscored the duration and degree of misinterpretation of Steinbeck's works among subsequent scholars of American literature.

Perhaps the final noteworthy addition to the lineage of Steinbeck's "decline" is Leslie Fiedler's 1990 article, "Looking Back After Fifty Years," which dwells at length on the implications of this persistent critique of Steinbeck's "middlebrow" audience. Although Fiedler is considerably more attentive to textual analysis than his intellectual predecessors, he nevertheless intensifies virtually every strand of the criticisms heretofore made by them, as he laments how Steinbeck's "shameless sentimentalism" overpowered an alignment with modernism (57), oversimplifies his background and his "motivat[ion] by a kind of guilt-ridden self-hatred" (58), and criticizes his "middlebrow" fiction (61) and the "second-rank academics" who study it (60).²¹ Like Bloom, then, Fiedler echoes previous criticisms while revising historical realities to support his arguments. Whereas Steinbeck's break from his peers had initially been primarily ascribed to his biological interests (and with his sentimental tendencies referenced in a passing observation), fifty

years later, this ecological approach is all but forgotten; what had once been merely a footnote in Wilson's book—a text that Fiedler references for support (61)—is now the crutch upon which the American literary establishment leans in its dismissal of Steinbeck's fiction. Of course, this point is all the more unfortunate considering that this shift in the focus of these criticisms has coincided with the growing influence that ecology, biology, and environmental thinking have had over the past several decades.

In this way, the perceived “decline” of Steinbeck's work that is so prevalent in contemporary English departments is actually predicated on arguments that are incongruent with current concerns, and a recuperation of the context in which the novel was published will not only correct the specious criticisms of Steinbeck over the past six decades, but also reintroduce the notion that *The Grapes of Wrath*—like *The Moon Is Down*—can, and perhaps should, be read as a piece of propaganda. Of course, Steinbeck scholars have long had a fraught reaction to this notion. John Ditsky claims that *The Grapes of Wrath* “refuses to be contained” by the term “propaganda” (2), and after referencing *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, Benson writes that Steinbeck “thought he had transformed the particular into the universal, creating a work of literature, but many of his readers took the novel to be a work of social reform and political propaganda. The same misreading would haunt him even more painfully in the reception that would be accorded to his great novel about the Dust Bowl migration” (“Background” 53). Yet, just as a close consideration of Steinbeck criticism reveals inconsistent criteria applied in contradictory manners, so, too, does archival research of Steinbeck's correspondence reveal that his novel was, in fact, approached in a manner indistinguishable from his other works that have been broadly interpreted as propaganda.

To be clear, this is not to suggest that the novel was a piece of political propaganda in the partisan sense, as Steinbeck was well-aware that much of his late-1930s fiction would satisfy neither the political left nor the political right.²²

Instead of composing propaganda to advance a dogmatic ideology, Steinbeck instead aimed to write propaganda on humanitarian grounds, influencing attitudes and policies with regards to the Dust Bowl migrants. Moreover, Steinbeck received significant governmental support in the early stages of his research that culminated in the novel, which he wrote with straightforward intentions of shaping discourses while generating empathy for the Okies in California. Indeed, it is perhaps generally unsurprising that *The Grapes of Wrath* is not typically considered in terms of propaganda: the narrative lacks many of the formulaic tropes associated with the genre, and the Okies are clearly shown to have character flaws, which is unusual in the depiction of the heroes of propaganda. Nonetheless, Steinbeck's aversion to these tropes is part and parcel of his mastery of shaping readers' sympathies. That is, Steinbeck consciously subverted the common tropes of propaganda so that his books would not be immediately associated with the term, and thus disbelieved, thereby making their social influence all the more probable.

Steinbeck was uncharacteristically vocal about these theories later in his life. During the Cold War, when he was asked how to overcome the Berlin Wall, Steinbeck said that people should throw books over it, since “the book is revered ... whereas propaganda is suspected ... The moment it is all good, it is automatically propaganda and will be disbelieved” (Benson 802). Elsewhere, he similarly states that the “use of the book as propaganda is more powerful and effective than any other medium. A broadcast

has little authority but a book does not lie. People automatically distrust newspapers. They automatically believe in books” (“Random” 170). As will become clear, this is particularly evident in the disparate effects that *The Grapes of Wrath* had in comparison to Steinbeck’s journalistic reporting on the migration crisis of the 1930s. In these ways, although Steinbeck’s participation in propaganda is often overlooked—and, when acknowledged, often derided, as in the case of *The Moon Is Down*—this was nevertheless a clear strategy of maintaining legitimacy while influencing readers’ opinions on current events, and which guided his approach to literature in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Whereas Steinbeck scholars reflexively avoid associating *The Grapes of Wrath* with propaganda, this is not the case with his fiction during World War II. Regarding *The Moon Is Down*, Benson writes that it “was not executed as a work of art; it was, in [Steinbeck’s] view ... a contribution to the war effort” (498). However, as Steinbeck’s correspondence from the late 1930s reveals, he very much thought of *The Grapes of Wrath* as completing a similar type of “contribution.” Despite Benson’s diametric positioning of art and propaganda, this chapter nevertheless aligns its interpretations with Lorentz, who pointed to Steinbeck’s novel and Dorothea Lange’s photographs as “proof that good art is good propaganda” (Loftis 191). That is, “propaganda” and “literature” are not mutually exclusive qualities—even as the requirements of the former conflict with the demands of the latter—and the consideration of *The Grapes of Wrath* as both propagandistic and literary offers a more nuanced portrait of the novel’s enduring power. Indeed, as this chapter will argue, it is this conscious deployment for social reform that makes *The Grapes of Wrath* uniquely relevant to contemporary environmental and climate change discourses.

Writing *The Grapes of Wrath*

“[You can’t write] about the proletariat... whatever they are, unless you have lived with them and worked and lifted things and fought and drank with them ... All the terms are phony—proletarian—bourgeois ... it’s all just people. Write about people not classes.” –John Steinbeck²³

In the famous ditch scene near the end of *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which Tom Joad says goodbye to Ma Joad, he cites the influence of their family friend, Jim Casy, on his decision: “I been thinkin’ what he said ... one time he went out in the wilderness to find his own soul, an’ he foun’ he didn’ have no soul that was his’n. Says he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul. Says a wilderness ain’t no good, ‘cause his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ‘less it was with the rest, an’ was whole” (418). Along with implicit connections to Steinbeck’s phalanx theory, this passage also has, for perhaps obvious reasons, been traditionally interpreted in terms of religion, considering Casy’s past as a preacher, his allegorical initials, and his own tendency to refer to himself in Christ-like terms (81; 381).

Yet there is also a message here for environmental thinkers to consider, as Steinbeck writes that a solitary experience of wilderness is pointless without a wider consideration of its relevance to people in communities, which further echoes the novel’s approach to telling the story of the Dust Bowl migration in both specific and broad registers in its narrative and general chapters. In this regard, for a novel arising out of an ecological disaster, Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* has remarkably little concern for geographic accuracy with regards to the Dust Bowl epicenter, or even the broader drought in abstract terms. Instead, considering his experiences researching and writing about the Dust Bowl migration leading up to *The Grapes of Wrath*, his primary project in writing this novel was to portray the living conditions of the migrants in a manner that

would spur the general public to action in response to this crisis. As such, the techniques and approaches to this novel highlight not only the narrative aspects considered sympathetic by audiences of the time, but also the advantages of fictional over nonfictional narratives in response to these broad environmental challenges.

Although Steinbeck scholars have been hesitant to consider *The Grapes of Wrath* as a “propaganda novel,” preferring instead the less incendiary terms “social novel” or “protest fiction,” the activist motivations underpinning its inception and production are nevertheless an integral part of its structure, and align it closely with Steinbeck’s works of propaganda immediately following *The Grapes of Wrath*, including *The Forgotten Village*, *The Moon Is Down*, and *Bombs Away*. As the culmination of Steinbeck’s years’ long experiences with migrant laborers, *The Grapes of Wrath* embodies a concerted effort on his part to eschew literary trends for the sole purpose of improving the material conditions in which these people lived. In this regard, despite critical grumblings over the novel’s failure to adhere to the tenets of naturalism and high modernism, and thus its failure to reach a “highbrow” audience, this is nevertheless an intentional strategy, as Steinbeck did not aim for a book that could be discussed in abstract terms by elites in an ivory tower, but instead a book that forced its readers to take sides on the very real issue of the substandard living conditions that were being ignored in the 1930s American West.

Steinbeck’s awareness of and involvement with migrant laborers in California has been thoroughly documented. Growing up in the agricultural hub of Salinas, he worked intermittently alongside bindlestiffs throughout his teens and early twenties, including during his college years at Stanford. These experiences, as well as the success that followed his stories set in California, primed him for what has been called his “labor

trilogy” of the late 1930s: *In Dubious Battle*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*. Following *In Dubious Battle*’s publication in 1936, Steinbeck’s relatively objective handling of a Communist labor strike led to opportunities for him to write journalistic accounts of the situation, reporting for *The Nation*, the *San Francisco News*, and *Life*.²⁴ It was from these experiences, researching for these nonfiction journalistic projects, that the angry compassion that fueled *The Grapes of Wrath* originated.

As a journalist, Steinbeck intended to deploy his newly-found name recognition to bring attention to the plight of the migrants, much to the excitement of those working on the relief efforts in California. To research his articles, he was given a tour of several Farm Security Administration migrant labor camps by Regional Director in Charge of Management, Eric Thomsen, and Camp Manager, Thomas Collins—the latter with whom Steinbeck developed a close working relationship.²⁵ After his initial round of articles were published in 1936, Steinbeck’s concern for the migrants continued to simmer, as he maintained regular correspondence with Collins and occasional visits to the labor camps. By early 1938, his letters to his literary agent, Elizabeth Otis, reveal that his anger had reached a boiling point. On February 14, 1938, Steinbeck describes the flooding conditions near Visalia, California—where many migrants were located—noting that the “resettlement administration of the government asked me to write some news stories. The newspapers won’t touch the stuff but they will under my byline,” before mentioning his plans to donate the proceeds of the articles to relief for the migrants (*Letters* 159). While the fact that government employees were paid to give Steinbeck weeks’ long tours of the camps has led some critics to point out that *The Grapes of Wrath* was indirectly financially supported by the Roosevelt Administration, the reality is that governmental

support ran even deeper, as officials requested that Steinbeck attract publicity to the issue, and he furthermore reported meeting with the Secretary of Agriculture about the underlying goals of these articles (“23 March 1938”).

In this regard, Steinbeck’s concern over the migrant situation resulted in a variety of actions to improve their lives, from immediate financial donations and volunteer work to journalistic projects—and eventually, a novel. In the context of the persistent criticisms of his failure to produce “highbrow” literature, it is perhaps difficult to imagine Steinbeck pursuing such a “literary” approach considering his comprehension of, and involvement in, these circumstances. Indeed, by this time, he had actually begun to doubt the contributions that any of his writing might have on the issue. As he writes to Otis in February 1938, which is quoted at length here due to discrepancies between the archival document and its published version in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*:²⁶

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 are 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 get down there and see it and see if I can’t do something to help 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. I guess that is all. Funny how mean and little books become in the face of such tragedies. (*Letters* 158)

Despite otherwise pejorative stances toward Steinbeck from critics like Kazin, the anguish demonstrated in Steinbeck’s letters from this time clearly support Kazin’s points about Steinbeck’s shift toward activism, and display the manner in which he hopes to

sway public opinion toward the migrants, which is eventually disregarded in Steinbeck criticism.

As Steinbeck's correspondence also shows, later critiques of his "middlebrow" audience are perhaps not wholly surprising, since he actively eschews writing for the upper classes during this time period. As he writes to Otis on March 7, 1938: "I went down for *Life* this time. *Fortune* wanted me to do an article for them but I won't. I don't like the audience" (*Letters* 161); and again on March 23, 1938: "I don't care to write for the *Fortune* subscription list, particularly on this subject."²⁷ With regards to intended audience, and the recently imposed distinctions of high-, middle-, and lowbrow readerships in Steinbeck criticism, it is perhaps germane to note here that *Life* was reported by the Okie migrants as the most popular magazine in the Indio FSA camp (Parker). That is, Steinbeck was pursuing a publication with precisely the readership that he hoped to reach in both journalistic and fiction writing, which transcends the broad reductive categories imposed on him by recent scholars. The irony, of course, is that even *Life* found Steinbeck's article to be too provocative to print, and refused to publish his reports. Nevertheless, the sense of responsibility that Steinbeck conveys in these letters, about both his subjects and his audience, clearly apply to both his nonfictional and fictional projects from the time. These letters, written only about two months before Steinbeck began work on *The Grapes of Wrath*, also come during the time that he abandoned a different approach to telling the story, as he destroyed the only manuscript of a draft entitled *L'Affaire Lettuceberg*, which he thought would be too destructive to the volatile public discourses of the time.

As Steinbeck finished the draft of *L’Affaire Lettuceberg*, a reportedly scathing satire of the migrant crisis in the area of Steinbeck’s hometown, he began to have doubts about this project. As he writes to Otis on May 2, 1938: “Yesterday or rather the day before yesterday I finished the first draft of this book. Now just the rewriting but a lot of it because it is pretty badly done. It is short, just a few thousand over sixty thousand words. We’ll finish it and send it on and if you think it is no good we’ll burn it up and forget it” (*Letters* 163). After this comment, though, the letter continues beyond what was published in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*, as he states bluntly: “The book has a definite job to do and I don’t know yet whether it does it or not,” before then proclaiming:

I don’t care about its literary excellence, understand, only whether it does the job I want it to do. In fact if it could be vulgar, I would like it. Vulgar in the true sense I mean. It is written not for intellectuals at all but for people who make up vigilance committees. It explains in easy words how the committees are formed and for what purpose. I should like anyone reading it to be hesitant before he takes up arms for good old Tom Girdler not on the grounds that it is wrong but on the grounds that he is being a sucker. So much for it. It is a mean, nasty book and if I could make it nastier I would. (“2 May 1938”)

While the final sentence appears in the published collection of letters, Steinbeck’s impulses toward the “vulgar” over the “literary” are nevertheless omitted. Although *A Life in Letters* wasn’t published until the mid-1970s, more than a decade following the awarding of the Nobel Prize (and subsequent elision of historical context in criticisms of the novel), the omission of Steinbeck’s propagandistic impulses here has perhaps nevertheless contributed to the persistent misinterpretations of the novel over the past six decades. Yet, this is not the only letter whose heavy-handed editing has contributed to this critical misreading; in another letter to Otis from May 1938, published in a heavily redacted form (*Letters* 164-165), Steinbeck writes:

I don't want it to be a good book. I want it to do a job. You see, I want it to outrage the committees of seven and such because these men are never vigilants. They just work out methods by which the vigilantes are formed and kept steamed up. To be on the attacking groups might be dangerous. That is one point I am making. No, the Vigilantes are clerks, and service station operators, and small shopkeepers and generally dopes. And it is to them I am writing. I want them to know they are being made suckers. For instance, if you were pumping gas in Salinas, and you didn't show the proper spirit about foreign agitators and take up a gun to defend America against a strike, then you would soon lose your job. I'm writing a common book. The burlesque is overdrawn, the points are underlined. I don't want any subtlety in it. It isn't for people who look for or understand subtleties. It is intended to hurt on the one side and to instruct on the other and it hasn't any intention of being literature. ("May 1938")

Like the preceding letter, all mentions of the book's "job," and Steinbeck's disdain for "literature" as defined by critics, have been edited out of his published correspondence from the time. Yet these are not minor revisions to the novel's history; in 1937 and 1938, Steinbeck seems to have mentioned his sense of duty to complete this "job" to everyone close to him, as Collins remembers Steinbeck proclaiming as he left the camps: "'I've got a big job to do and when that is done you will realize I'm always there to do what I can for your work among the rural poor'" (226). What has largely been lost in these omissions is that the very narrative strategies employed by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* that are so often attacked by critics were intentional in their deployment, and it was this intentionality that enabled the novel's unrivaled impact on discourses surrounding this migrant crisis. Moreover, these strategies mirror his approaches to writing on behalf of the government during war efforts, which perhaps makes sense, considering this novel, too, originated from projects written on behalf of the American government.

As the "American critical establishment" dismisses Steinbeck for "eschew[ing] evasive irony in favor of shameless sentimentality" (Fiedler 57), his satirical approach to

L’Affaire Lettuceberg appears to have had commonalities with the dark satire of Nathanael West—whose work Fiedler and Bloom unequivocally identify as superior. Yet, in Steinbeck’s decision to burn the manuscript rather than submit it for publication, he cites the anticipation of a destructive effect on the popular perceptions of the migrants as his rationale. As he writes in a letter jointly addressed to Otis and his editor, Pat Covici: “It is bad because it isn’t honest. Oh! The incidents all happened but I’m not telling as much of the truth about them as I know,” noting that satire requires him to “restrict the picture,” which on this topic would “cause hatred through partial understanding” (“May 1938”). To be clear, the criteria with which Steinbeck evaluated the narrative is fundamentally distinct from how literary critics approach fictional texts, as he reads his manuscript with an eye for its “job” and its effects rather than its participation in “literature,” and he believed that conditions would not improve for the migrants through a cynical reliance on irony and caricature.

Of course, critical observations of Steinbeck’s tenuous relationship with high modernism are not incorrect. But what this relatively common note misses is that this tenuous relationship was not necessarily evidence of authorial shortcomings, but instead displays a conscious decision to align artistic form with sociopolitical function; indeed, Steinbeck actually anticipated that critics would receive *L’Affaire Lettuceberg* positively, but he burned it anyway, writing: “You would print this book now and most critics would praise it. I have only myself to keep me in line. It is the overtone that is bad” (“May 1938”). And while later critics dismiss Steinbeck’s “middlebrow” audience, his letters indicate that he attempted to walk a narrow line, reaching audiences among the people he portrayed—migrants and vigilantes alike—as well as other Americans unaware of the

scope of the crisis in California, and he kept this desire for a mass audience in mind as he structured his late-1930s fiction.²⁸ Of course, Steinbeck's novel ultimately transcended these audiences as it reached the Roosevelt White House—a “middlebrow” audience, indeed.

But the “middlebrow” critique does not only fail to encapsulate the novel's influence on the country's leaders, but it also misconstrues its impacts on the Okie migrants that it portrays. This misinterpretation is not particularly unique to the “critical decline” crowd: a plurality of critics have traditionally focused on the responses of Oklahomans who did not leave the state, as well as migrants who were easily integrated into the fabric of Californian communities, and few critics have looked at the reception of Steinbeck's novel within the migratory labor camps, who were typically poorer and newer to the area (Gregory 143). Whereas critics have typically contended that *The Grapes of Wrath* was poorly received by the Okies, evidence from the camps' newspapers from the late 1930s and early 1940s directly contradict this assumption. Instead, migrants within the FSA camp system formed book clubs to discuss the novel, reprinted Carey McWilliams's review of *The Grapes of Wrath* from *Westways* magazine, and defended the verisimilitude of Steinbeck's portrayal of them in the novel. When the film was released, migrants in Visalia flooded the local theater with requests for an early screening, which was ultimately successful, and at a discounted price.²⁹ And in a letter to Otis on July 20, 1939, Steinbeck writes that the “latest is a rumor started by [the Associated Farmers] that the Okies hate me and have threatened to kill me for lying about them. This made all the papers. Tom Collins says that when his Okies read this smear they were so mad they wanted to burn something down” (1). In this regard, criticisms of

Steinbeck's audience are not wholly accurate in their consideration of its initial reception, which was not, in fact, aimed squarely at a "middlebrow" audience, but instead to a cross-section of society, from the Okie migrants to the President of the United States.

The final common criticism of *The Grapes of Wrath* is its over-sentimentalism in the portrayal of the Okie migrants, which has grown more prevalent following Steinbeck's Nobel Prize. Yet, close readings of the novel again reveal these critiques to be overstated to the point of inaccuracy. For while Steinbeck was indeed motivated by an impulse to assist the migrants, he did not allow this desire to preclude him from presenting their flaws in both the narrative and general chapters. Whereas Benson argues that Steinbeck "avoids casting his characters in a heroic mold" to avoid being "perceived as propaganda" (303), his treatment of characters in his more straightforwardly propagandistic pieces, such as *The Moon Is Down*, reveals that he was actually not avoiding propaganda in *The Grapes of Wrath* per se, but instead he understood that characters must have faults in order to be believable to their readers. Considering Steinbeck's theories of propaganda discussed above, and how his concepts of character portrayal relates to his intended reader response—which was ultimately validated by *The Grapes of Wrath*'s major influence on public discourses—the common claims of oversentimentalism fall short of presenting the whole picture, considering Steinbeck's efforts to desentimentalize the migrants in the novel.

One way that Steinbeck pursues this de-sentimentalism is in the novel's structure. As Louis Owens argues, Steinbeck is "painstakingly careful *not* to sentimentalize" the Okies in the novel, particularly through the usage of the general chapters, which he argues creates an emotional distance between the Joad narrative and the reader, enabling

broader historical context to factor into interpretations of the novel (“Culpable” 109). In addition to this structural technique, Steinbeck is also careful to implicate the tenant farmers for their participation in the environmental destruction on the Plains. For example, although Steinbeck is clear in locating much of the responsibility for the anthropogenic environmental destruction with the landowners and the banks, the sharecroppers are nevertheless shown to be complicit in this process in both the general chapters (32) and the Joad narrative (47). In both instances, the tenants are aware of the damage being done to the land, but they ultimately persist in exacerbating the environmental degradation on a broad scale. As Owens argues, it is “difficult to feel excessive sorrow for these ignorant men who are quite willing to barter death to maintain their place in the destructive pattern of American expansionism” (“Culpable” 112). Thus the Dust Bowl was not a disaster caused by a lack of knowledge, but indeed, like contemporary climate change, one borne of a pervasive failure by all involved to act on this knowledge, which Steinbeck does not hesitate to depict in the narrative.

Unsustainable land use is only one of the ways in which the Okies are de-sentimentalized in the novel, as Owens also points to how the Okies’ emphasize the “theft of the land from the Indians, freely acknowledging that murder was their grandparents’ tool” (“American” 73-74). Considering Steinbeck’s propagandistic aims, his portrayal of race, and unquestioned racism, in *The Grapes of Wrath* requires careful scrutiny, considering both his decisions as author and the context in which he was writing. As critics have rightfully taken issue with the novel’s elision of people of color—especially egregious considering the long history of diversity within California’s agricultural labor force, including people of Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Mexican, and

African-American descent—this omission is complicated by broader consideration of Steinbeck’s writing on the conditions in which agricultural laborers in California were forced to live and work. On the other hand, as Owens notes above, Steinbeck’s treatment of Indigenous Peoples in the novel was informed by a similar logic but with different ramifications; that is, whereas Steinbeck believed that the Dust Bowl migration would improve the conditions for California’s agricultural laborers of all backgrounds, his efforts to solidify the migrants’ “Americanness” is at the direct expense of Native Americans. While his portrayal of racism in the novel undermines the sentimentalism with which he portrays the Okie migrants, it furthermore highlights the limitations of his perspective and his approach to the narrative.

To be clear, it is not difficult to criticize the representation of race in *The Grapes of Wrath*. It portrays an almost exclusively white cast of characters, focalizing its narrative chapters through a white family encountering a plurality of other white families, while similarly failing to inject an accurate conception of racial or ethnic awareness into the general chapters. Moreover, this elision of race is a clearly conscious decision by Steinbeck: it parallels his whitewashing of the labor strikes in *In Dubious Battle* (Benson 303-304), and is furthermore inconsistent with his familiarity with the exploitation of foreign labor in California agriculture, which he writes about at length in the *Harvest Gypsies* article series, and even notes in the novel (232).³⁰ In this regard, Steinbeck’s (non)portrayal of race in *The Grapes of Wrath* might indicate more about his understanding of his American audience than his own personal familiarity with the issue, as he appeals to what Gregory calls the “empathetic value of white skin” (81). That is, when reconsidered as a work of propaganda, the emphasis on whiteness in *The Grapes of*

Wrath clearly aligns with the distinctive coverage that the Dust Bowl migration was receiving in the press at the time (Parini 220).

From the beginning, discourses surrounding the Dust Bowl migration have been understood in terms of class and whiteness, as a migration of this magnitude was unprecedented at the time for white Americans (Gregory 10), and since it revolved around “white people doing traditionally non-white work” (Wald 151). In its racial composition, the migration was approximately 95% white (Gregory 17), and the sanitary camps where Steinbeck did much of his research were estimated as 98% white (Loftis 151). Considering this intense focus on the migration as a “white” experience, journalists covered it in a fundamentally unique manner. Of course, Steinbeck’s journalism was no exception. As conveyed in *The Harvest Gypsies*, Steinbeck firmly believed that the publicity of this white migration would inevitably lead to a reckoning for California’s elite agricultural producers with regards to their treatment of laborers. Whereas they had traditionally gotten away with mistreating and underpaying large workforces of Asian and Hispanic descent, Steinbeck was convinced that a white labor force would unionize and pressure the wealthy to pay their workers fair wages. In this context, Steinbeck’s focus on white characters in *The Grapes of Wrath* appeals to the same public sympathies as his journalistic reports, and furthermore aligns with his propagandistic aims: while striving for a mass audience, he presented an empathetic narrative of a white migrant family that would be the most likely approach to have success in inspiring action to change these conditions. Of course, Steinbeck’s approach was misguided at best—and ultimately incorrect—as the Okie migrants were unsuccessful at widespread unionization, much less labor reform. And while Steinbeck’s emphasis on white characters was likely

an approach that bolstered its appeal to those in power, it nevertheless clearly perpetuates the same racist logic that he had sought to navigate and undermine in these anticipated reforms.

And even as Steinbeck offers backhanded support for California's Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Mexican agricultural laborers in his newspaper articles on the migrant crisis (and briefly in the novel), he is nevertheless unflinching in his racism toward Indigenous Peoples in both his journalistic and creative projects from the time. In both contexts, he condones the theft of land by white settlers, and cites this land occupation as evidence of the Okies' "Americanness," and thus for the legitimacy of their connections to the land. There are several examples of this throughout the novel: as grandfathers had to "kill the Indians and drive them away" to take the land (33-34; 237), as the migrants swap stories of "kill[ing] a hundred braves" with the army (325), and as Tom and Jule make incorrect generalizations about life on the reservations (339). As Wald notes, these moments have a clear purpose: "Within the frontier myth, the white American pioneer emerges as the 'true' American through conquest of Native Americans and the feminized landscape. Through the death of the Indian, the pioneer becomes native, the continent becomes his" (56). Again, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, these implications are not accidental; in Steinbeck's first draft, Tom Joad is strongly implied to have "some Indian blood," though Steinbeck crossed this line out (Shillinglaw 109-110). That is, as he settled on the particular American mythologies to deploy in his novel, Steinbeck ultimately privileged the racist worldviews that he thought would generate the most sympathy among his readers over other histories of oppression and forced relocation. As Owens has argued, these racist attitudes complicate claims of

sentimentalism in the novel, as they presented character flaws within the Okie migrants.³¹ As offensive and unsatisfying as Steinbeck's narrative decisions are today, in the contexts of his comments on how to write successful propaganda and the attention to this migration as a "white" experience, they likely contributed to the novel's immediate influence and success at the time.

In this regard, consideration of *The Grapes of Wrath* in terms of propaganda sheds new light on many of its structural and stylistic elements. Critics have long faulted the novel for its noncompliance with naturalism and modernism, but this break was nevertheless intentional to ground the novel in the urgent situation unfolding in the late 1930s. Moreover, criticisms of sentimentalism in the novel often neglect the racist logic at the core of the migrants' claims to the land, which was likely deployed to generate empathy for the migrants among readers in the late 1930s, but which also complicate its legacy in the American literary canon. Of course, although Steinbeck was successful in generating sympathy for the Okie migrants at the time, contemporary writers of climate fiction must obviously approach their narratives with more inclusive perspectives than those to which Steinbeck aspired.

As his experiences with the migrants foreshadowed, Steinbeck's pursuit of improving living and working conditions for them in a tangible way led him to privilege their roles in the novel, superseding representations of the ecological disasters associated with the Dust Bowl. Although he had attempted to assist the migrants for years with his journalistic endeavors, it was not until his fictional account of their experiences was published that he succeeded in generating widespread attention on their behalf. This is perhaps not altogether surprising, considering the differing spheres of influence that each

respective publication afforded. And yet, later in life, Steinbeck wrote that “[journalism] is the mother of literature” (Parini 470)—the implications of which are worthy of consideration in terms of nonfictional and fictional responses to climate change.

Although he was by all accounts an “ecological” thinker before ecological principles gained widespread acceptance, his novel arising from the Dirty Thirties—and the years of research leading up to its publication—nevertheless paradoxically privileges the human over the environmental. This approach might seem counterintuitive to contemporary readers and writers of climate change fiction, yet as Tom Joad’s monologue in the ditch shows, Steinbeck understood that purely biological realism (or indeed, naturalism or modernism) in response to environmental disasters would not be the most effective approach to influencing social change, and these narratives must foreground the impacts of these disasters on the people affected by them. Despite the inherent shortcomings of Steinbeck’s portrayal of these people, his novel nevertheless opens the door for conversations on how his approach to writing a novel about the Dust Bowl migration might be relevant to ecocritical discourses, while inspiring more impactful contemporary cli-fi narratives.

Ecocriticism and Steinbeck

“And it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical out-crying which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, knowable and unknowable. This is a simple thing to say, but the profound feeling of it made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, an Einstein. Each of them in his own tempo and with his own voice discovered and reaffirmed with astonishment the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things—plankton, a shimmering phosphorescence on the sea and the spinning planets and an expanding universe, all bound together by the elastic string of time. It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again.” –John Steinbeck³²

Chapter 25 of *The Grapes of Wrath*—a general chapter—describes the landscapes of California, and its direction is immediately apparent in the opening line: “The spring is beautiful in California” (346). This chapter is filled with dramatic and evocative nature writing, describing the fertile land in poetic passages, such as: “Valleys in which the fruit blossoms are fragrant pink and white waters in a shallow sea. Then the tendrils of the grapes swelling from the old gnarled vines, cascade down to cover the trunks” (346). As the chapter unfolds, spring transitions into summer, and Steinbeck describes the greening of the valleys with particular attention to the crops as they grow and ripen. However, congruent with earlier discussions of the novel in this chapter, these passages are not presented solely through environmental descriptions, as Steinbeck depicts this flowering with interspersed references to the landowners, whom are referred to as “men of understanding and knowledge, and skill, men who experiment with seed, endlessly developing the techniques for greater crops of plants whose roots will resist the million enemies of the earth” (346). In these passages on crop experimentation, Steinbeck introduces yet another facet of human influences on the “natural” world. Moreover, this chapter bears resemblance to the opening chapter, as Steinbeck introduces a dramatic,

human-altered landscape, which is then focalized and interpreted through the people connected to it. Yet while the Okies of the opening chapters are shown to relate intimately to their environments, the separation here between the wealthy California growers and their land is evident through their attempts to completely master and improve it. This distinction is intricately related to the societal critique of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and is furthermore at the core of an ecocritical recuperation of it.

Although Steinbeck writes from a primarily humanist position in *The Grapes of Wrath*, reading the text from an ecocritical perspective nevertheless reveals a number of concerns that scholars now associate with posthumanism and the Anthropocene, as Steinbeck critiques the worldviews that culminated in the creation of the Dust Bowl and in the resulting migratory crisis of the 1930s. This is a major paradox of *The Grapes of Wrath*, as Steinbeck writes propaganda aimed squarely at shaping readers' attitudes toward the sociological injustices of the migration, while simultaneously infusing it with an early ecological awareness that was genuinely innovative for the late 1930s. That is, despite his anthropocentrism in the novel, Steinbeck simultaneously decentralizes the human through descriptive metaphors with non-human subjects, ranging from animals, landscapes, and machines, which anticipates a number of trends in ecocritical theory over the past decade.

Although the "environment" did not connote the same concept in the 1930s as it does today, there is nevertheless considerable attention given to the conditions of the various landscapes in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In these passages, such as the descriptions of Oklahoma and California in chapters 1 and 25, the landscapes are presented as a nexus of natural and anthropogenic forces, functioning in a manner similarly to the London smog

analyzed by Jesse Oak Taylor in *The Sky of Our Manufacture*. Steinbeck's agricultural landscapes, like Taylor's readings of smog, "[do] not simply emerge at the intersection of nature and culture, [but they emerge] *as* that intersection" (3). In this regard, save, perhaps, for the musings of the preacher Jim Casy, it should be established early on that Steinbeck's novel is largely absent of pastoral conceptions of an unpeopled "wilderness," as his landscapes are always already transformed by humans.³³ That is, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck essentially anticipates a number of aspects of second-wave ecocriticism that challenge the notions of stable concepts of "nature" and "culture." With this in mind, reading *The Grapes of Wrath* from an ecocritical perspective will perhaps be particularly instructive for how writers and critics might consider approaching narratives in a time of anthropogenic climate change.

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's avoidance of a lost "wilderness," and his early collapse of the concepts of nature and culture, serves a clear propagandistic function in the novel. By foregrounding this close relationship between human and environment, Steinbeck establishes sympathy for the Okies as they are forced to relocate from the homes that they have known to the uncertainties of California. That is, the injustices of the Dust Bowl are made tangible through the loss of this land, which, as others have noted, is deeply entwined with historical American attitudes toward white land ownership (Wald 53). As the novel follows the Joad family from eastern Oklahoma to California, the primary anxiety at the heart of this journey is the loss of a connection to their home near Sallisaw. Although the legitimacy of this deep connection to the land has been critiqued by scholars who argue that the Joads' participation in the practices that exacerbated the Dust Bowl conditions undermines the extent to which they can actually

feel remorse over leaving it (Worster 164), as well as by those who accurately point out that the white settlers had stolen the land in the first place and thus have no legitimate claim to it, the devastation resulting from this migration is nevertheless one of the strongest early appeals to readers' sympathies in the novel. That is, by appealing to the Okies' connections to the land, this vast ecological crisis is made legible from the human perspective through readily understandable moments of great personal loss of land, and thus, home.

For the Okies in the opening chapter, this personal loss is conveyed through the linked effects of the weather patterns on the landscape and people. Shillinglaw has noted that the opening sentences immediately introduce the role that humans have had in transforming this scarred agricultural earth (15-16), but the implications of this human-nonhuman relationship extend beyond sod-busting into a shared experience of the drought. As the soil dries out and the dust blows, so too, become the Oklahoman farmers "hard and angry" (3), and Tom's naivety over the implications of the dust is shattered when he sees its direct impacts on his family's house. In both instances, the parallels between the dusty land and the Okies are clear: the health of the former implies the health of the latter, to the point where the lives of two of the Okies, Muley Graves and Grampa Joad, are portrayed as being literally at stake in the possibility of leaving their homes in Sallisaw.

Muley's refusal to leave this place, despite being tracted out of his home, and despite his family having relocated to California, is due to his attachments to the locations where important life events have occurred—particularly where his father died, which he still associates with his father on a physical level. As he explains: "An' his

blood is right in that groun', right now. Mus' be. Nobody never washed it out. An' I put my han' on that groun' where my own pa's blood is part of it'" (51).³⁴ In these places, he feels that the land is a physical embodiment of his father due to these important events, and that his father is still present in this place on a material level. And, of course, by representing this relationship through Muley's father, the familial relationship to this land is furthermore portrayed as one lasting generations, rather than the relatively short time frame that would have been more likely considering the historical pattern of white settling on the southern plains.³⁵

This generational relationship is intensified through the characterization of Grampa Joad, who does not consent to migrating from Oklahoma, and who dies soon after leaving the Joads' place. Following his death, Casy explains: "It's just the same thing. Grampa an' the old place, they was jus' the same thing ... Grampa didn' die tonight. He died the minute you took 'im off the place'" (146). Despite the unforgiving conditions of the Dust Bowl, the identities of Grampa—and Muley—are nevertheless so entwined with their homes in Sallisaw that they not only understand themselves in terms of this land, but are also existentially threatened by the possibility of being removed from it. In this regard, Muley and Grampa offer individualized portrayals of the broader phenomenon of Okies being reluctantly forced from the land, which is furthermore described in a generalized manner in chapter 9. As Steinbeck writes: "This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us" (87). That is, even when the stakes aren't portrayed as life or death in a straightforward, literal sense, this relationship between the people and the landscape is nevertheless shown to be part and parcel of the Okies' sense of identity, as the loss of land means loss of self.

In the novel, this relationship between human and landscape is furthermore portrayed as a reciprocal one. As the migrants are forced to leave, the novel suggests that the land's capacity for life leaves with them: "The houses were left vacant on the land, and the land was vacant because of this" (115). That is, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the humans both animate, and are animated by, their connections to their land, and just as the health of one connotes the health of the other, so, too, does the absence of one create a lifelessness in the other. Of course, it should be noted that this depiction of the land as "vacant" here is ultimately untenable, as critics such as Owens remind us that "you cannot 'kill the land.' The land can be altered, made inhospitable for the sons of Cain who inhabit it, but it will survive" ("Culpable" 112). Nevertheless, however inaccurate Steinbeck's portrayal of the "death" of this land might be, it ultimately stems from an ecological perspective that connects humans to their environments, and in doing so, highlights the agency of non-human influences on the lives of the Okies. By connecting the people to the land on this material basis, Steinbeck's portrayal is not altogether dissimilar from the ecological foundations of recent ecocritical neologisms, such as Stacy Alaimo's "trans-corporeality," Donna Haraway's "natureculture," and Timothy Morton's "mesh"—all of which seek to recuperate the agency of nonhuman subjects within ecocritical conversations.

Despite this ecological perspective, the "vacant" land following the Okie migration nevertheless retains anthropocentric origins, which perhaps makes sense, considering the nascent stages of ecological thinking at the time, as well as the social purposes for which Steinbeck wrote. Although this anthropocentrism would certainly be unpalatable for critics situated within intellectual movements arising from deep ecology,

including many of the critics behind the neologisms referenced above—as the value of this land is not shown to be innate, but instead is contingent upon the human experience of it—this human-oriented approach merits renewed consideration in the context of anthropogenic climate change. For in this characterization of Muley, Grampa, and the broader migration in terms of a foundational connection to their agricultural land, the collapse of the “cultural” with the “natural” in the novel enables readers to identify with, and care about, the Dust Bowl in a highly sympathetic manner. In doing so, Steinbeck establishes a context of loss for the Okies while simultaneously complicating the humanist project underpinning the novel, as he regularly deploys metaphors involving non-human entities in order to explore the nuances of this human experience.

As is perhaps clear from the earlier discussion of Wilson’s critique of the “lower” animals in Steinbeck’s writing, the landscapes are far from the only non-human entity with which he characterizes the Okies in *The Grapes of Wrath*. For while the implications of unsustainable agricultural practices on the Southern Plains are rendered clearly in the pervasive dust described in the novel—and in how this dust affects Okies on a basic level—it is also apparent in the turtle episodes mentioned earlier, which show how this radical transformation of the land affects the lives of nonhumans. That is, in Steinbeck’s novel, the earth is not scarred only by agriculture, but also by the roads in which the Joads spend roughly one third of the narrative. For the turtle, this results in the struggle to climb the embankment and the layer of concrete (14-15), followed by the challenges of crossing the road, as the turtle is shown to be at the whim of humans, who display benevolence in their attempts to avoid it, as well as cruelty in their efforts to hit it (15-16). By navigating these unnatural obstacles in the embankment, the road, and the traffic,

the turtle highlights both unintentional and intentional risks of living in a world radically altered by humans, which, by extension, reflects the societal forces affecting the Okies on their own westward migration.

In the passages of the turtle's journey, Steinbeck is indeed guilty of the biological preoccupations for which Wilson criticizes him. Yet instead of interpreting these preoccupations as a persistent weakness, as Wilson does, this portrayal of a nonhuman perspective that is affected by humans in a variety of ways instead is evidence of further ways in which *The Grapes of Wrath* is primed for an ecocritical recuperation, as it reveals the extent to which Anthropocene concerns existed almost a century ago, while decentralizing the focus on the human in the narrative. Of course, as noted above, the turtle passages function as straightforward representations of his "phalanx" concepts, as do his frequent references to invertebrates in the novel. Throughout the drought and the migration, the tractors are like insects (35), the cars are like bugs (193), and the humans are like ants (233; 284). In these comparisons, Steinbeck paradoxically collapses Wilson's hierarchies of life, as humans, other animals, the landscapes, and machines are portrayed as equal participants in meshworks of life and animation. Of course, since these comparisons are deployed as elaborations of the migrants' experiences heading west, they nevertheless retain an anthropocentric function within the novel.

While it is not difficult to understand Wilson's objections to the implications of Steinbeck's equivalence of human life with "lesser" animals (and machines and the landscape) given the time period in which he wrote, these qualities of *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Steinbeck's underlying theories of the phalanx, are nevertheless relevant to recent conceptualizations of the Anthropocene and ecocriticism's material turn, despite—

or, perhaps, because of—their divergent approaches to anthropocentrism. As demonstrated in the discussion above, Steinbeck understood everything to be interconnected, which has only relatively recently come into fashion in literary discourses through interdisciplinary initiatives such as ecocriticism and posthumanism. Although Steinbeck’s concepts of the phalanx are generally structured in terms of “species units,” which investigate groups of individual species, instead of meshworks of human and nonhuman agencies—and in doing so argue for varying scales of human agencies, such as the difference in the Joad narrative and the migrant experience writ large—Steinbeck’s phalanx theory nevertheless operates on a recognition that physical context shapes individual behavior, thus functioning in an ecological manner. Although ecocritics might take issue with Steinbeck’s anthropocentrism, the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* in generating and in shaping conversations about the human costs of the Dust Bowl merits a revisitation in light of contemporary climate change. For in this approach, Steinbeck made the abstract phenomena of the Dust Bowl meaningful to readers who were otherwise unaware or unsympathetic to these conditions. By attending primarily to human concerns, Steinbeck did not merely preach to the choir, but instead converted skeptical readers and reached new audiences—which is precisely what must occur for literature (and literary criticism) to achieve the activist role discussed above in conversations surrounding anthropogenic climate change.

Aligning with the rhetorical power of this ecological anthropocentrism, the majority of the anxieties in Steinbeck’s Oklahoma are not directly from the drought conditions, but instead originate from the owners of the land who are tractoring families out in efforts to save money while planting more crops. In this regard, the closeness felt

between the tenant farmers and the landscape is directly contrasted with the lifelessness of the tractors, and the distance from which the owners relate to this land. This is the subject of chapter 5, which provides a general view of the interactions between the owners and the tenants,³⁶ establishing the dichotomy between the owners of the land and those who actually live on it. After the owners blame the banks for the predicament, the tenants respond: “but it’s our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it’s no good, it’s still ours. That’s what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it” (33). In this way, this general chapter reiterates much the same sentiments expressed above by Muley and Grampa, privileging the experiential relationship to the land, which is in direct opposition to the owner-tenant system. By approximating the identities of the tenants with their ability to remain on the landscape, Steinbeck critiques the status quo that benefits from this system, while forcing readers to consider the Dust Bowl crisis from a more comprehensible and sympathetic position.

This societal critique, present throughout the novel in the struggles of the migrants to find work and assimilate into California societies, is again focalized in the environmental passages of chapter 25. For after the descriptions of the blossoming of the crops are juxtaposed with the engineers who “improved” them, Steinbeck ultimately asserts that these improvements nevertheless contribute to the poverty experienced by the migrants, who, despite starving, are not allowed to eat this food. He writes: “The decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land. Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce” (348). As these foods spoil, the social injustices of this situation are

again made legible through juxtaposition between the rotting fruit and the starving people, which furthermore establishes the context for the final scene in the barn. In this way, through both the individualized experiences of the Joads and the broad depictions in the general chapters, Steinbeck's portrayal of the Okies' close relationships with their respective landscapes provides a fundamental point of contrast between them and the wealthy landowners in both states. This dichotomy is founded on ecological thinking that was unusual at the time, but which nevertheless successfully appealed to readers' ingrained expectations of white land ownership, thus contributing to the propagandistic goal of the novel.

Moreover, as is perhaps clear, the repetition and amplification of concepts and themes in the narrative and general chapters is a regular occurrence in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Throughout the novel, Steinbeck utilizes this narrative technique to provide context to the Joads' journey. In the novel's alternating narrative and general chapters, this relationship to the land is explored across narrow and broad scales, as the focus of the novel shifts from the local to the regional. In addition to expanding upon the individual experiences of the Joads by placing them in the context of others having similar experiences, this telescopic shifting of focus in the novel moreover anticipates environmental truisms of the late twentieth century, such as "think globally, act locally," as well as Ursula Heise's concept of "ecocosmopolitanism," which is a staple of second-wave ecocriticism.³⁷

Although these general chapters have received a great deal of critical attention, ranging from their imperfect structural utilization, to their predecessors in John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy, to their further inspirations from Lorentz's documentaries, these

chapters are nevertheless more than mere exercises in narrative experimentation, as they also served a quite practical purpose: by providing context for the Joads' experiences, *The Grapes of Wrath* anticipates and precludes criticisms that the experiences of the Joads were anomalous, thus infusing their individual storyline with support on a significantly larger scale. As Peter Valenti writes: "When Steinbeck added the fictional story of the Joads to the documentary material of the interchapters, he achieved the unity of human and physical worlds that constitutes his ecological rhetoric" (93). That is, in this bifurcated narrative comprised of specific and general chapters, Steinbeck pushes readers to think ecologically, seeing the Dust Bowl crisis from narrow and broad perspectives, while enabling them to understand how the wide, abstract phenomena of the Dust Bowl, the migration, and the labor crisis relate to each other on a variety of scales.

As a structural element in a piece of propaganda, this alternation between the particular and the general is a powerful tool, and one that Steinbeck was attentive to elsewhere in his writing from the time. In the preface to *The Forgotten Village*—one of the first projects undertaken by Steinbeck after *The Grapes of Wrath*, which focused on the tensions between traditional and Western medicine in a remote Mexican village—he writes:

A great many documentary films have used the generalized method, that is, the showing of a condition or an event as it affects a group of people. The audience can then have a personalized reaction from imagining one member of that group. I have felt that this is the more difficult observation from the audience's viewpoint. It means very little to know that a million Chinese are starving unless you know one Chinese who is starving. (5)

Thus Steinbeck's approach to *The Forgotten Village* provides a great deal of insight into his theories of narrative scale and audience sympathies in *The Grapes of Wrath*. By shifting between the local and the regional, Steinbeck not only preempts attacks from the

California elite on the veracity of the Joads' experiences, but he also consciously appeals to the empathy of the readers on behalf of the migrants. In this regard, the structure of the novel is evidence of not only Steinbeck's ecological predispositions, as he situates the Joad narrative in a regional ecosystem, but also propagandistic, as he seeks to inspire sociopolitical progress to improve the migrants' conditions.³⁸

In this way, the novel's general chapters successfully navigate scale, which is one of the most challenging aspects of portraying broad environmental phenomena, and which continues to plague contemporary narratives of climate change. As Timothy Clark writes, the challenges of "scale framing" often lead to what he calls "Anthropocene disorder," which refers to "the mismatch between familiar day-to-day perception and the sneering voice of even a minimal ecological understanding or awareness of scale effects" (140). In the context of anthropogenic climate change, this often manifests in the impulse to pursue micro solutions to these macro phenomena, creating an anxiety of helplessness when the desired improvements do not occur. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the challenge of scale, as negotiated in the narrative and general chapters, portrays the Dust Bowl from a variety of perspectives, which enables readers to conceptualize this issue as one both borne of individual choices, as shown in the Okies' culpability in creating the conditions for massive soil erosion to occur, as well as in much larger societal forces, represented by the landowners and the banks. This balance of a broad context with a narrow narrative is often absent from cli-fi (or, if present, often operating under logics of dystopia), and a recuperation of this approach to narrative scale will perhaps contribute to a reduction of perceived Anthropocene disorder among contemporary writers and critics.

Similarly, although Steinbeck's ecological worldview offers some points of comparison to ecocriticism's material turn, his anthropocentrism nevertheless marks a fundamental difference between these philosophical approaches. On one hand, in his propagandistic aims, Steinbeck is already thinking in terms of what Timothy Morton calls "ecology without nature," since the landscapes of *The Grapes of Wrath* are not presented as "natural" entities, having already been shaped by human intervention. In doing so, Steinbeck portrays the interactions between humans and nonhumans in a manner similar to material ecocritics, who argue that "the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of agencies, which can be 'read' and interpreted as forming narratives" (Iovino and Opperman 1), and who probe "most basic assumptions" such as

the chasm between the human and the nonhuman world in terms of agency. Compared to a human endowed with mind and agentic determinations, the material world—a world that includes 'inanimate' matter as well as all nonhuman forms of living—has always been considered as passive, inert, unable to convey any independent expression of meaning. The drawbacks of this vision are considerable. Besides restricting the latitude of ethics to our species, this dichotomous ontology has also reinforced other common misunderstandings, including the 'break-it-and-fix-it-mentality of some environmental rhetoric, a mentality informed by the assumption that human agents (knowingly or inadvertently) create ecological problems, but can readily solve all of them at will with the right technology.' (Iovino and Opperman 2-3)

In a straightforward manner, the overlapping agencies of *The Grapes of Wrath*'s tenant farming system, Oklahoma soil, and natural drought cycles combine to create emergent environments that are inhospitable to the Okie migrants. And, in the novel's concluding chapters, the precipitation cycles again combine with California geography and inadequate housing conditions that lead the remaining Joads to the barn for the infamous final scene. In both the opening and concluding environments, the "inanimate" nonhuman world indeed exerts major influences on the trajectories of the novel. In structuring the

narrative in this manner, Steinbeck critiques the humanist attitudes at the heart of the anthropocentric origins of these environmental conditions, even as he creates a piece of humanitarian propaganda. While he ascribes culpability to the migrants for their roles in creating the Dust Bowl, he finds the greedy worldviews of the bankers and the growers to be the foundational sources of these issues, which is furthermore intertwined with their aspirations of “improving” the land and the crops. This is not altogether dissimilar from the primary contributors to contemporary climate change, which reveals yet another aspect of *The Grapes of Wrath*’s relevance to contemporary conversations.

The Dust Bowl Meets Climate Change

“The ones capable of using their eyes and ears, capable of feeling the beat of time, are frantic with material.” — John Steinbeck³⁹

The last two chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* portray severe flooding conditions near the migrant camps, in both narrative and general contexts. These chapters were likely heavily inspired by the conditions that Steinbeck observed and experienced with Tom Collins and Sanora Babb near Visalia, and which he describes in his letters to Elizabeth Otis from February 1938. Whereas the penultimate chapter provides a general overview of the rainfall and the migrants’ reactions to it, the final chapter includes the infamous barn scene in which Rose of Sharon Joad, who had previously given birth to a stillborn baby, offers her breast to a starving man. This chapter, which elevates the Joad narrative from realism to mythology, is perhaps the most controversial scene in the novel, with common criticisms attacking the unlikeliness—and the likely impossibility—of this altruistic gesture coming from a malnourished woman, the implied sentimentalism of this conclusion, and the lack of a realistic solution offered by Steinbeck in response to the

overwhelming challenges of the Dust Bowl migration. Nevertheless, despite adamant requests from his editor to change this scene, Steinbeck refused, insisting that this was the only way that he was willing to close this novel.⁴⁰

And yet, this lack of resolution in the final scene is not an oversight on Steinbeck's part, nor is it due to a lack of ideas on how to resolve the migratory crisis, as he proposes several solutions in *The Harvest Gypsies* article series (58-62). Considering the adamance with which Steinbeck refused to revise the final scene, it is clear that the underlying message of this chapter is critical to the novel's propagandistic project. For as the Joads—and indeed, the nearly 400,000 migrants that relocated from the Southern Plains to California during the 1930s—were forced to abandon their homes in search of opportunities elsewhere, Steinbeck believed that they would ultimately survive this crisis due to a fundamental sense of hope for the future. In this regard, while the ecological worldview of *The Grapes of Wrath* offers parallels to the developments of ecocritical theory from the past few decades, the persistent expression of hope in the novel offers a direct point of contrast to the vast majority of recent climate change narratives. That is, while contemporary writers often start from a place of pessimism and despair, Steinbeck's optimistic novel perhaps provides a model to which cli-fi writers might turn to create more socially influential narratives that unite abstract environmental phenomena—for that is quite literally what “climate” is—with sympathetic faces, to inspire more productive responses in society at large.

As discussed above, Steinbeck's decision to break with popular genres of modernism and naturalism has generally been unfavorable from a critical perspective. However, this narrative strategy was nevertheless purposeful in its deployment, as it

aimed to shape popular attitudes toward the Dust Bowl migration by contributing to it in a positive manner, thus precluding more critically “esteemed” approaches marked by fatalism, pessimism, irony, and satire. Although Steinbeck’s optimistic approach has been typically deemed unrealistically sentimental, this evaluation ultimately relies upon an incomplete consideration of historical circumstances, often omitting the novel’s influence on the migratory crisis. But these are not the only grounds upon which claims of sentimentalism might be revisited. For Steinbeck’s earnest approach to the narrative also perhaps offers more verisimilitude than is presently granted by critics who focus disproportionately on the concluding scene in the barn.

As Rebecca Solnit argues in *A Paradise Built in Hell*, basic assumptions and personal beliefs matter a great deal in times of disaster, and these beliefs are often reified in popular narratives—often wildly inaccurately. She writes: “in the wake of [disasters], most people are altruistic, urgently engaged in caring for themselves and those around them, strangers and neighbors as well as friends and loved ones. The image of the selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human being in times of disaster has little truth to it” (2). With this perspective in mind, while critics have often taken issue with the “sentimentalism” conveyed in the barn scene, a reinterpretation of it in terms of the benevolence that commonly emerges from catastrophic situations, such as the Dust Bowl and its ensuing migratory crisis, reveals a different sort of verisimilitude in this gesture—if not in a literal sense, then perhaps in its investment in hope in the face of overwhelming circumstances.

Although critics have faulted this ending for being unsubstantiated in the rest of the novel, this is not entirely the case, as benevolence is a relatively consistent trait

throughout the narrative. For example, as the Joads drive from Oklahoma to California, they travel for a stretch with Ivy and Sairy Wilson, who are relocating from Kansas. When the Wilson's car breaks down, the Joads offer to fix it, with Pa asserting that they are "beholden" to the Wilsons, who respond with: "There's no beholden in a time of dying" (139). Despite clarifying a lack of formal obligation to each other, the Joads and Wilsons nevertheless decide to stick together. As they face persistent auto trouble, they split the load and the passengers evenly among the cars to prevent additional avoidable obstacles in their journey. Although both families are poor and have little to give, they nevertheless cooperate to ensure collective survival as they live and travel together as one of Steinbeck's phalanx "units" (163). Although this cooperation is perhaps unsatisfying for readers searching for "hardboiled" fiction, it nevertheless reflects the altruistic behavior that arises in disasters that Solnit describes above. Moreover, *The Grapes of Wrath* never claims to be hardboiled, and the altruistic gestures depicted align neatly with the novel's project as a piece of propaganda.

As with other motifs referenced in this chapter, the benevolence between the Joads and Wilsons is further developed and amplified in the general chapters, such as chapters 15 and 17. In chapter 17, which portrays makeshift camps along Route 66, Steinbeck describes the cooperation among migrants as night falls: "And because they were lonely and perplexed, because they had come from a place of sadness and worry and defeat, and because they were all going to a new mysterious place, they huddled together; they talked together; they shared their lives, their food, and the things they hoped for in the new country" (193). As these distinct families merge into a singular phalanx unit, Steinbeck writes that "Every night a world [is] created," with "friends made and enemies

established; a world complete with braggarts and cowards, with quiet men, with humble men, with kindly men. Every night relationships that make a world, established; and every morning the world torn down like a circus” (194). Even as the migrants are forced from their homes, they nevertheless recreate social bonds in the contexts available to them. That is, the communal nature of this trip is direct evidence of the dignity retained by the Okies in this migration, which directly contradicts the chaos and panic commonly featured in cli-fi stories—and which critics have yearned for in this narrative—and which is moreover at the heart of Steinbeck’s utopian characterization of the Weedpatch camp, as well as the concluding scene in the barn.

In this way, the power of the final scene in the barn is located in its extension of the benevolence portrayed earlier in the text to the apocalyptic conditions of the flood. In Rose of Sharon’s altruistic gesture, Steinbeck subverts naturalistic fatalism, and provides a powerful message of resilience that engages with the reader’s imagination. In spite of the adversity of the Dust Bowl and the ensuing migration, the Joads have nevertheless retained their capacities for empathy and kindness, or what Steinbeck calls “the simplest survival symbol,” as he argues that this scene is “far from being one old man sucking on one woman this [is] the whole principal of human survival” (“12 April 1939”). Moreover, in a letter to Otis, Steinbeck responds to early criticisms of this conclusion, writing: “Amazing that these critics don’t seem to know what the last chapter is about. One says superficial and another sentimental, and it is neither” (“17 April 1939”). That is, in the face of disaster, the Joads continue to care for others in need, which undermines the misconceptions surrounding how people react to extreme stressors. As Steinbeck notes, this conclusion not only contributes to the power of the narrative, and its capacity to

generate sympathetic responses from its readers, but it also reflects his own personal experiences with Okie migrants in California, written about in his journalism and letters from the time. That is, this symbolic gesture—as mythological and elevated as it appears—is nevertheless firmly grounded in the realities that humans retain capacities for hope and altruism in times of great struggle.

In this conclusion, Steinbeck communicates how readers should interpret and respond to these environmental conditions. As discussed above, Steinbeck’s basic empathy for those affected by the Dust Bowl superseded his anger over the formation of these conditions; that is, he focused more on improving the lives of these people, rather than on the remediation of these environments to a more “natural” state. Because he was motivated by this empathy, his approach to the novel privileges the experiences of those most affected by it over the abstract details of environmental disaster. By focusing on the people hit hardest by these environmental changes, the novel empathizes more with people from lower-class backgrounds than the upper- and middle-classes, who are the demographics identified by Solnit as being the primary culprits of privation and greed in times of disaster, as they struggle to preserve the status quo (305). Of course, these were the demographics, primarily organized and led by the Associated Farmers, who enacted a smear campaign on Steinbeck in the wake of the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The implications of this discussion of Steinbeck’s subjects should be clear: even if all of the evidence that refutes the claims of Steinbeck’s overly-sentimental approach to the migrants is disregarded, critics must nevertheless consider the value that his “sentimentalism” had on the conversations surrounding the Dust Bowl. For Steinbeck not only raised awareness—he also raised sympathy for the migrants across societal strata,

which has thus far been absent from climate change discourses. Moreover, with consideration to Steinbeck's conscious choice to align narrative form with sociopolitical function—that is, to break from popular literary genres to create the most effective propaganda possible—the perpetuation of dystopian and apocalyptic genres by cli-fi writers is fundamentally antithetical to the activist-oriented motivations of a plurality of contemporary writers. Rectifying this contradiction will be crucial for cli-fi writers to contribute to a new chapter in the struggle against anthropogenic climate change.

Of course, we will never know what would have happened to the Okies if the United States hadn't been pulled into World War II. The combination of escalating military concerns for the press to report with the sudden demand for war-time labor led to a dramatic loss of public interest in the Dust Bowl migration, as well as a dramatic improvement in the quality of life for migrants through an immediate need for factory labor. Meanwhile, advances in soil conservation, and a natural end to the drought, helped revive agriculture on the Plains in the 1940s, resulting in rejuvenations of both peoples and environments in a short period of time. Despite the dire outlook in the late 1930s, everything changed dramatically in the early 1940s. On the other hand, at present, there are no clear solutions for the challenges associated with climate destabilization. Nor is there a shortage of journalistic accounts of this destabilization with which writers of climate fiction might find inspiration. Nevertheless, while we wait for technological innovations, policy changes, cultural shifts, or any combination of the above, we must first remember to have hope in the way that Steinbeck did—throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, but especially in the final scene—otherwise it is difficult to believe that any mitigation of climate change will come to fruition.

Chapter 2: Whose Notes Were Known: Revisiting the Legacy of Sanora Babb's Whose Names Are Unknown

In 2004, Sanora Babb's "first" novel, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, was published approximately 65 years after she completed its first draft. The general history of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, which Babb once described as having "a kind of underground life of its own,"⁴¹ is as well-known as the novel itself: in the late 1930s, Babb volunteered alongside Tom Collins in and around the Farm Security Administration migrant labor camps in California. Collins, to whom John Steinbeck jointly dedicated *The Grapes of Wrath*, reportedly asked Babb to take notes on their experiences with the migrants—ostensibly for government purposes, but also possibly for more informal uses—which Collins then shared with Steinbeck as he wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*. After months of volunteering with Collins, Babb then set out to write a novel on the Dust Bowl migration, and her blind submission to Random House was immediately accepted. However, progress on her novel was a few months behind Steinbeck's, and when *The Grapes of Wrath* became an instant bestseller upon its publication on April 14, 1939, Random House withdrew their offer for *Whose Names Are Unknown*, citing obvious comparisons to Steinbeck's book. Babb's novel then languished in a drawer for more than 60 years, until a concerted effort near the end of her life resulted in its delayed publication, which was a long overdue correction in this unfortunate saga.

Given the unique history of the novel, and the obvious misfortune (if not injustice) experienced by Babb in 1939, this basic story is repeated in virtually every review and critical analysis of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, albeit with varying degrees of specificity and with varying degrees of accuracy. The reasons for this repetition are

clear: it's an attractive spin for a story, as David M. Wrobel summarizes: "the John Steinbeck-Sanora Babb story sounds like a classic smash-and-grab: celebrated California author steals the material of unknown Oklahoma writer, resulting in his financial success and her failure to get her work published." Yet by reducing a story that spans 65 years to a mere paragraph, these critical responses have often not only perpetuated false narratives about *Whose Names Are Unknown*'s history, but they have also preempted the consideration of additional ways in which this novel is uniquely relevant to contemporary literary discourses. That is, while many critics have approached *Whose Names Are Unknown* from the premise that it should be interpreted as a rival to *The Grapes of Wrath*—for example, Joy Lanzendorfer pits Babb's agent and friend, Joanne Dearcopp, against leading Steinbeck scholar, Susan Shillinglaw, whom she describes as being "firmly on Team Steinbeck"—this chapter instead begins with the premise that Steinbeck and Babb—and *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown*—are better served by being placed in conversation, rather than in competition, with each other.

There are myriad reasons for this premise, with perhaps the primary one being that the basic notion of a rivalry between these two individuals is false; it appears unlikely that Steinbeck knew about the fate of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and, as this chapter will show, Babb never blamed him for the delayed publication of her novel. Moreover, the reductive accounts of *Whose Names Are Unknown* being "lost" for 65 years are also perhaps a bit misleading: Babb's novel was never really forgotten in the way that critics imply, and the real story of Babb's novel during these decades is far more interesting than the notion that it was simply forgotten in a drawer. And while critical responses to *Whose Names Are Unknown* often point to the sheer length of 65 years as a

barometer for the injustices inflicted by Steinbeck, there were, instead, a variety of intersecting pressures and influences that combined to slow Babb's progress on revising and resubmitting this novel for publication. And by approaching *Whose Names Are Unknown* and *The Grapes of Wrath* as complementary narratives, this chapter argues that critics should finally move beyond merely perpetuating these inaccuracies, and instead analyze Babb's novel as a unique response to the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl. This intervention thus seeks to correct inaccuracies in discourses surrounding *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and to furthermore provide ecocritics with additional historical examples of literary depictions of an anthropogenic environmental disaster as we continue to grapple with the challenges of contemporary climate change and its corresponding fiction.

To correct these incomplete (and often inaccurate) accounts of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, this chapter will first begin with an overview of Babb's initial attempts to publish the novel in 1939, and the intervening years before its final publication in 2004. After clarifying the various reasons for the length of this duration, this chapter will then revisit Babb's time in the FSA with Tom Collins to shed additional light on her working relationship with him, and on her impressions of Steinbeck from this time. Together, these two sections will intervene in general discourses surrounding Babb's work, providing more context on the novel's history, while correcting inaccuracies that are all too often perpetuated in critical responses to *Whose Names Are Unknown*. These corrections provide a foundation for moving beyond these points in critical interpretations of the novel, and the third section of this chapter will then engage with Part I of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, examining how Babb pulled from first- and

secondhand accounts of life in “no man’s land” in her portrayals of the Dust Bowl, which offers different narrative strategies for portraying this environmental disaster than those employed by Steinbeck, albeit with very similar aspirations of improving the experiences of the migrants in California. And finally, the fourth section of this chapter applies insights gained from this analysis of Babb’s depiction of the Dust Bowl to ecocriticism and related scholarship on climate change narratives, clarifying Babb’s relevance to recent developments in ecocritical theory, and examining how strategies similar to those that Babb used might be used in climate change discourses today.

The “Lost” Manuscript: The Publication History of *Whose Names Are Unknown*

“Considered a ‘lost’ work, Whose Names Are Unknown was intended for publication until Steinbeck’s The Grapes of Wrath became a bestseller.” –Eileen Charbonneau

“Originally written and slated for publication in 1939, this long-forgotten masterpiece was shelved by Random House when The Grapes of Wrath met with wide acclaim.” –Margaret Flanagan

“Finally, in 2004, Babb was convinced to release the original manuscript of her first book, Whose Names Are Unknown, through the University of Oklahoma Press” –Carla Dominguez⁴²

Since 2004, much of the critical discourse surrounding *Whose Names Are Unknown* has focused on the novel’s publication history, as it was first accepted by Random House in 1939, only for that offer to be withdrawn in the wake of the immediate financial success of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. Yet while critics often write that Babb’s novel was “forgotten” or “lost” during these 65 years, this is simply not the case. In reality, Babb received interest from a variety of presses throughout the more than six decades between the first draft and its final publication. This interest typically came in

flurries as she completed other writing projects—such as the late 1950s, when she completed her second novel, *The Lost Traveler*, and the early 1970s, following the publication of her memoir, *An Owl on Every Post*. Despite this press interest—and, indeed, encouragement from a variety of literary agents and friends—revisions to Babb’s first draft were precluded by a variety of factors, such as family emergencies, financial constraints, artistic priorities, uncertainty over conflicting editorial suggestions, and dropped correspondence with publishers—all of which combined to delay progress on the novel until the early 2000s, when a concerted effort spearheaded by Joanne Dearcopp finally resulted in its publication with the University of Oklahoma Press in 2004.

The story of *Whose Names Are Unknown* begins in the fall of 1938, as Babb began plotting her novel while volunteering with Tom Collins in the FSA—which is the subject of the next section of this chapter—and she began work on her first draft upon returning to her home in Los Angeles in October 1938 (*Dirty* 35). According to Douglas Wixson, in early 1939 Babb “sent several chapters of her manuscript as a blind submission to Bennett Cerf, the legendary Random House publisher. Cerf paid Sanora’s airfare to New York City, put her up at a hotel, and pushed her to finish the novel” (*Dirty* 35). Upon her completion of this draft, Cerf’s first letter to Babb, from July 27, 1939, was encouraging, noting that their “first reader’s report on your book is exceptionally fine” (1). Just over two weeks later, on August 16, 1939, Cerf’s tone shifts, as he informs her of Random House’s decision not to publish her novel:

I’m extremely anxious to have you on our Random House list, but after viewing the matter from every angle and discussing it in a full editorial conference for an hour, I don’t see how in God’s green earth we can publish ‘Whose Names Are Unknown’. What rotten luck for you that ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ should not only have come out before your book was submitted, but should have so swept the country! Obviously, another book at this time about exactly the same subject

would be a sad anticlimax! And I think that you must face that fact just as we did here. The last third of your book is so completely like ‘The Grapes of Wrath’ that the families and characters might easily be interchanged in the two. (1)

That is, approximately four months after *The Grapes of Wrath* was published to immediate success—a fact that Cerf alludes to in his note above that Steinbeck’s book had come out before Babb had submitted her full draft—Random House decided that the market would not support two novels on the Dust Bowl migration. While it might seem perplexing that Cerf would reverse course within three weeks, especially since Steinbeck’s book had been a success for months by this point, it appears as though Random House indeed had concerns about similarities between the two novels earlier in the review process, though they hadn’t yet concluded that these similarities would prevent their publication of Babb’s novel.

Having mentioned one reader report in his letter from July 27, Cerf includes two reports with his letter from August 16. Although these reports—signed “KB” and “BB”—lack dates, it is probable that KB’s was submitted first, and is therefore likely the one enthusiastically referenced in Cerf’s July 27 letter.⁴³ While KB’s report is indeed encouraging, arguing that “I think this is a very fine book, solid and rewarding. The GRAPES was first, and many will follow. This will be one of the best. I hope we take it,” they also note that “Comparison with THE GRAPES OF WRATH is inevitable” (1). Despite predicting these comparisons, KB nevertheless argues that Random House should publish Babb’s novel based on a premise similar to the one taken up by this chapter: that Babb’s novel and Steinbeck’s novel can complement, not detract from, each other with regards to their portrayals of the Dust Bowl migration.

Yet while KB recommends that Random House publish *Whose Names Are Unknown*, BB finds their similarities irreconcilable, as they begin their report with the following: “It would almost seem as if Sanora Babb and John Steinbeck had thoroughly discussed an identical theme and set out to write their separate books – so similar are GRAPES OF WRATH and WHOSE NAMES ARE UNKNOWN” (1). As the next section of this chapter will show, it is indeed quite probable that a conversation such as this did occur between Babb, Steinbeck, and Collins during their encounters in the California valleys in late winter 1938. Ultimately, though, BB finds these thematic similarities too troubling to proceed with publication, as they conclude: “If there hadn’t been a GRAPES, I would say unreservedly here is something new, something fine, we must publish,” but that “coming so close upon the heels of GRAPES, this book will inevitably invite hypercritical attention – to its own disadvantage. The reviewers would quietly tear it to bits by the simple process of comparison, and the sales of GRAPES would automatically increase ... Very reluctantly, I’d say no to WHOSE NAMES ARE UNKNOWN” (1). Of course, Cerf ultimately agreed with BB’s assessment over KB’s—Cerf’s letter from August 16 reads quite similarly to BB’s report—and Random House decided against publishing *Whose Names Are Unknown* shortly thereafter.

It is impossible to say what would have happened had Random House published Babb’s novel in 1939, though it is perhaps germane to note here that the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* was actually a catalyst for the publication of Carey McWilliams’s *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California*.⁴⁴ McWilliams’s nonfiction book had previously been rejected by Houghton Mifflin because it was “lacking in the sort of individual human interest material which would

catch the public eye” and because its topic was “pretty well restricted to California,” though it was picked up by Little, Brown, and Company in May 1939 after McWilliams was appointed chief of the Division of Immigration and Housing in California earlier that year, and following the “huge audience” found by Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* one month prior (Richardson 87). Moreover, the popularity of *The Grapes of Wrath* also spawned reactionary responses to its portrayals of California, with Ruth Comfort Mitchell's 1940 novel, *Of Human Kindness*, being perhaps the most notable example. Though Random House argued that Steinbeck's success meant that the market wouldn't allow for another novel on the subject, the publication of these texts as a direct result of this success suggests that they perhaps misread these circumstances. While none of the ensuing books achieved the same financial success as *The Grapes of Wrath*, the underlying point remains that the market did, in fact, allow for multiple titles on this topic, and it appears as though the coastal bias of the New York publishing houses perhaps precluded a more nuanced understanding of the potential regional and national audiences for Babb's book on the Dust Bowl migration.⁴⁵

Although Cerf ultimately rejected Babb's draft, he nevertheless saw promise in her writing, and he writes in the August 16 letter: “What I'd really like to do is to sign a contract with you for a future book and pay you an advance on it right now” (1). In this request, it appears as though Cerf underestimated the extent to which Babb's time in the FSA fueled her draft of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, as well as her deeply-felt attachment to this story. While Cerf hoped that Babb would agree to abandon her first novel for the time being, she instead wanted to submit it to other publishers for consideration, though he discouraged her from doing so, saying in a letter from October

30, 1939 that the “only reason I hate to see it going around to a lot of publishers is that I think it will be a constant source of irritation to you. Why not put it aside and let us see that synopsis of your new novel?” (1). Nevertheless, with the assistance of Kyle Crichton, an editor in New York to whom Babb had submitted several short stories earlier in the 1930s,⁴⁶ *Whose Names Are Unknown* was shopped around to various publishing houses—all without success—and most of whom echoed Random House’s logic in their feedback.

For example, although Maxwell Perkins of Scribner’s notes in a letter from October 5, 1939, that all three of their readers “admired” the novel, he also writes: “The war enters into the question, and so does the fact that it would necessarily be compared to the more spectacular and sensational ‘Grapes of Wrath’. But the truth is your book shows a great deal of ability and I am mighty sorry that we had to come to an adverse decision with regard to it” (1-2). Similarly, on December 21, 1939, Charles A. Pearce, of Duell, Sloan, & Pearce writes: “In many respects I think that she is a more capable and exciting writer than Steinbeck. The stuff in this book is, to me, more honest, moving, and human than much of the stuff in THE GRAPES OF WRATH,” but he also notes that as “much as I hate to say it, however, I think that the Random House scheme is a sound one.

WHOSE NAMES ARE UNKNOWN is bound to be compared to THE GRAPES OF WRATH, and when all things are taken into account, the results are not going to help Miss Babb now or in the future” (1). Surprisingly, *Whose Names Are Unknown* was even sent to Viking Press—the publisher of *The Grapes of Wrath*—where Pascal Covici, Steinbeck’s editor and one of his personal friends, responded on December 6, 1939: “Frankly, we too find it difficult to decide against your book. Its subject matter is so

similar to Steinbeck's we don't see how we can go to the trade and enthuse about your 'Whose Names Are Unknown' when we so spectacularly sold 'The Grapes of Wrath.' We feel it would be a mistake for us to do it" (1). Ultimately, in the face of this bitter reality, Babb finally acquiesced to Random House's proposal, shelving *Whose Names Are Unknown* and accepting an advance to begin work on her next project, *The Lost Traveler*.

There are no apparent surviving letters that provide details on Random House's proposal with regards to *Whose Names Are Unknown*, though Babb writes in her biographical notes from March 1978 that Cerf wanted "to put the book in the safe for seven years and publish it then when it would have historical value, and escape the stiff competition of the best-selling GRAPES" (3). Of course, this plan never came to fruition, as Babb experienced sustained tension with Random House over expectations for *The Lost Traveler*—which was subsequently passed to Millen Brand of Crown Publishers, before finally being published with Eugene Reynal of Reynal and Company in 1958. Instead, the 1940s saw little progress on the revision of Babb's draft of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, though a short excerpt from Chapter 26 of the manuscript was nevertheless printed in *The Kansas Magazine* in 1941.

Published under the title "Morning in Imperial Valley," the excerpt from *The Kansas Magazine* comes from pages 140-144 in the final version of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and includes the introduction of Milt Donne⁴⁷ to Woody—a thinly-veiled character based on the real-life Tom Collins—shortly after the Donne family arrives to the FSA camp, and which includes Woody's delivery of a migrant's baby. Preceding this excerpt in *The Kansas Magazine* is the following introduction: "As this short excerpt

from a well-documented novel opens, the head of a work-seeking migratory family whose food and money have run out, starts to the transient-camp office to ask for assistance” (16). It is unclear here whether “well-documented” refers to the novel itself—acknowledging Babb’s first- and second-hand experiences that supported the events in the narrative—or whether it refers to the response to her novel, describing the notoriety of its rejections by publishing houses. In either case, this introduction is noteworthy for this reference to the novel, which had no immediate prospects of being published, and which remained, unedited, in the form of its first draft.

Beyond this excerpt, the bulk of the feedback that Babb received on *Whose Names Are Unknown* in the decade of the 1940s came from close personal friends, such as Ralph Ellison and Waldeen Falkenstein. Ellison’s feedback on *Whose Names Are Unknown* has indeed been widely referenced in critical responses to the novel: critics often note the affair between Babb and Ellison, and mention Ellison’s suggestion that Babb more fully develop the character of Garrison (Wald 66). Beyond this point, Ellison references Babb’s draft in his letters throughout 1942 and 1943, with his most pointed criticisms coming in an undated letter (from circa 1943), in which he writes: “I keep coming back to dramatization.: if at all crucial points, such as the beginning, and especially the end, you allowed the characters to take over, the effect would be terrific. And allow the crucial scenes to develop at length.” In addition to his critiques, all of which are generally aimed at “intensif[ying] the splendid moods [Babb] captured so well,” he concludes this letter with the following personal note: “Don’t worry about not getting this book published. Reading it closely makes me feel sure that you will find an occasion to say your say about the same people and the same problems. The incidents

might change, and the scenes, but your personal investment in their problems seems, to me, strong enough to produce not one, but several novels.”

Beyond these criticisms and notes of encouragement, Ellison’s possession of Babb’s draft of *Whose Names Are Unknown* also foreshadows the struggles that she would encounter again in the 1950s. As he writes in a letter from July 4, 1943:

I was painfully glad to hear from you. It makes me glad that I failed to send the novel. But let me hasten to say that I’m sending it this time, as soon as the post office opens after this holiday weekend. You’ve caught me at a moment when I’m giving-up things, being so full of disgust, and sickness and despair that I’ll part even with this thing which symbolizes so much that was meaningful and dear for so short a while. But really it isn’t as bad as all that. It is the fact that you’ve gotten another novel down that makes it possible for me to surrender this. (1)

That is, while Ellison held onto Babb’s draft of *Whose Names Are Unknown* as a means of maintaining a sense of intimacy with her in the early 1940s, by doing so Babb was nevertheless unable to revise or resubmit this manuscript to others, and it appears that it was no small effort to have it finally returned to her. Of course, Ellison also mentions that Babb has “another novel down”—*The Lost Traveler*—which would not see publication for another 15 years.

After receiving feedback on her draft from Ellison in the early 1940s, Babb sent it to another close personal acquaintance, Waldeen Falkenstein—who often went solely by her first name—in 1946. Waldeen resided in Mexico City, and Babb grew close to her when she and her partner, James Wong Howe, relocated there to escape xenophobia during World War II. Although Waldeen was not a writer—she was a dancer and choreographer—she and Babb had a close intellectual and artistic relationship. And, in a letter from October 12, 1946, Waldeen offers glowing reflections on Babb’s portrayal of the characters of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, while making the following suggestions:

I dare to murmur in your pearly ear the proposal that you re-write the novel (and please change its too colorless title)—tighten sections in the first part (about some seasonal events, repeated, and details of other families than the principal one); choose your hero and heighten him above his companions (for example, at present grandad is IT for me!) and give it another ending. This book should not be archived for publication years hence! Its theme, people and problems belong to our generation, need to be heard now, and the ‘Okie-angle’ is incidental to these dominant factors, in my opinion. (5)

Of course, while Waldeen suggests Babb’s portrayal of the Okies in California was “incidental” to the novel’s plot, this assertion lacks a fundamental awareness of, or concern for, the historical context that surrounded the Dust Bowl and its corresponding migration. Moreover, her suggestion that Babb trim the “repeated” events embodied by the dust storms, and to restructure the novel to follow a single character instead of the experiences of the collective family, were unfaithful to what Babb knew to be true of life in this time and place. In this sense, while Waldeen argues that Babb’s novel’s “theme, people and problems belong to [their] generation,” her suggestions were nevertheless primarily oriented at separating the narrative from the experiences of “their” generation’s Dust Bowl migration, which is fundamental—not “incidental”—to the plot of *Whose Names Are Unknown*. Regardless, Babb did not revise her manuscript with consideration to Waldeen’s feedback at this juncture, likely due to her sustained work on *The Lost Traveler*.

Once again, Babb circulated her draft of *Whose Names Are Unknown* in the early 1950s, as there was renewed interest in the topic, which coincided with the resurgence of dry conditions similar to those of the 1930s Dust Bowl (Worster 227). By this point, Babb was working on *The Lost Traveler* with Millen Brand of Crown Publishers, and she sent the draft his way. On September 29, 1953, Brand writes to Babb that he is reading the draft “with great affection and admiration” (1), though he follows up with a letter

from October 20, 1953, noting that there are “very considerable problems of timing and structure (perhaps) if the book is to come out now. In fact the timing may be to wait, hoping that this kind of novel will swing back into the mainstream again” (1). After mentioning the inevitable “Steinbeck comparison,” Brand writes that another colleague at Crown, Wanda Whitman, suggests modernizing the story, though Brand acknowledges that “the problem of the sod house, the pioneering, the depression, the migrant scenes and start of organizing in California—all this makes the change a hazard” (1). Finally, Brand echoes Waldeen’s criticisms of the number of characters, and the “documentary quality” of her writing, which he argues is “a serious problem in the current fiction market” (1). In this sense, although Brand praises the draft, he also thoroughly criticizes both its content and its style, and, once again, the market is cited as a significant obstacle—though not an insurmountable one—for the publication of *Whose Names Are Unknown*.

Meanwhile, Babb was also in communication about the draft with her agent, Harriet Wolf, who writes on November 10, 1953: “I certainly think you have a publishable book here. The whole first part of your book up to page 253 when the Donnes leave, is a book in itself and does not need part two which dates it. The characterization, the suspense, the dust storm and other descriptions are terrific” (1). It should be noted here that in many respects, Wolf’s notes are antithetical to Ellison’s feedback from the decade before, and offer contrasting solutions to Waldeen’s recommendations from approximately seven years earlier. These discrepancies highlight the dangers of revising this draft to suit specific readers, which was moreover a concern familiar to Babb as she worked through multiple versions of *The Lost Traveler*.

In a follow-up letter on November 23, 1953, Wolf writes that Brand agrees with her suggestions on *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and that “Crown would exercise the option on this book by publishing as soon as Lost Traveler as possible. He didn’t seem to have any feeling about the lack of timeliness. He felt that if the book were given to them completely revised as we have specified that it would make an excellent title for them” (1). That is, while Babb struggled to revise *The Lost Traveler*, the publisher of this book was serious about wanting to revitalize her first novel, albeit with significant editorial suggestions. Just under 15 years after Random House withdrew their offer, there was nevertheless a legitimate opportunity for its publication with Crown.

In response to Wolf’s suggestions that she omit Part II of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, Babb writes on May 13, 1954, that she is “reluctant to toss away the California part of this book, but there is nothing comparable in the relation of these two areas in this period” (3). Of course, this perception of a lack of continuity is only accurate without the consideration of historical context, as the realities of the Dust Bowl migration indeed links these two parts in a coherent manner. Around this time, though, Babb’s correspondence with Brand entered a rather precipitous decline, as he requested similarly drastic edits to her latest version of *The Lost Traveler*, on which, by this point, she had been working for more than a decade. By mid-1954, their working relationship became irreconcilable, and Babb was granted a release from Crown shortly thereafter. In this manner, the ultimate failure to publish *Whose Names Are Unknown* in the early 1950s had less to do with the significant, and at times conflicting, editorial feedback she received on this first novel, but it was instead the collateral damage of the publishing status of her second project.⁴⁸

Interest in *Whose Names Are Unknown* waned through the mid-1950s as Babb continued work on *The Lost Traveler*, which was eventually published in 1958 by its third suitor, Eugene Reynal of Reynal & Company. By this time, she also had a new agent, Mary Squire Abbott of McIntosh & Otis, as Babb explains in a letter from February 22, 1958, that Wolf had become a “very busy psychiatrist” by the late 1950s (1). As Babb completed work on *The Lost Traveler*, she appears to have had renewed motivation to work on *Whose Names Are Unknown*. As she writes to Abbott on July 25, 1957:

I keep meaning to ask you if Harriet Wolf gave you a copy of my first novel? At the request of CROWN, I had it copied from my one and only ragged copy, at some expense, and it was sent to Crown. A woman editor [Whitman] there liked it better than the second book, but it would need changes for dating, and was returned to HW's office, with plans for the future. HW told me she was holding it in her office. Then when she gave up her agency, I did not receive the manuscript, and would very much like to have it, as mine is in bad condition ... As far as I'm concerned, this book will never be published, and I want to go on to new work; but I should like the good manuscript. I have the sad feeling that you don't have it either, or you would have given it to me in NY. Anyway, I ask. No hurry to answer. (1)

This request is significant insofar as it outlines the accountability, or lack thereof, for the existing copies of Babb's draft, as well as her priorities with regards to her creative endeavors. Despite the interest that she had received for this book, even by 1957 Babb expressed a “want to go on to new work”—a desire that remained consistent throughout her lifetime, and which often superseded her motivation to see *Whose Names Are Unknown* published. Moreover, despite interest in her first novel, there were clear financial hurdles involved in circulating it to presses, as she struggled to track down the copies that she had already sent out. As Babb further explains to Abbott in a letter from December 26, 1957:

I have only a ragged first draft of this book, but it was accepted in first draft and I did no other after the rejection. It was easier to write and organize than [*The Lost Traveler*], because of the nature of the experiences. I had only my work copy. A friend staying here once while I was away typed the book for me, as I asked, and I paid her, and then found that she had simply made one copy! That copy I sent to Harriet to read and then send to Crown when Millen Brand asked for it. Crown returned it to her, and in a letter from Harriet, in my file, she wrote she would hold it there and return it later, because, if Crown gave me a release, she wanted to show it to other publishers. It was never returned to me, and I didn't discover this until after she had closed up shop. You may remember that I asked you about it once. I shall write Harriet to ask, but this doesn't seem hopeful, if the ms. was not turned over to you. To have it copied here would cost \$240, or more. And I had already paid \$150. I don't feel I can take on such a task myself; I'd better be writing. All this just to say how serious it is to find the good copy if possible. (2)

That is, the sheer cost of producing another copy of *Whose Names Are Unknown* was a major obstacle for the prospects of its publication in the late 1950s. Indeed, a few weeks after Babb wrote to Abbott in search of her missing draft, her English agent, Patience Ross of A.M. Heath & Company, requested to see it, to which Babb explains on February 22, 1958: “two copies have been lost in NY, one by my former agent, one by an editor. I have only a poor copy here which must be copied anew at a cost of more than a hundred pounds, so you can imagine that I must give some attention to whether I should first revise it” (1). In this sense, there was a clear gamble in submitting her manuscript to Ross. Despite there being a possible avenue to publication in England, submitting her original draft with no known additional copies would risk losing the manuscript entirely, and having another copy produced was a cost prohibitive option, particularly given the extensive (and conflicting) editorial feedback that she had already received on this draft. This left *Whose Names Are Unknown* at a financial and creative impasse—particularly with Babb's clearly stated preference for pursuing new writing projects.

Meanwhile, Babb continued to write to Abbott in search of Wolf's missing copy, and they ultimately located a draft with one of Babb's friends: Melissa Blake, who had

produced the version Babb referenced above. The issue here, though, was that this copy was one Blake had made for herself—and not one paid for by Babb—so while another manuscript was found, Babb writes in a letter from March 29, 1958, that she didn't feel comfortable sending it across the ocean as it wasn't her property (1). By August 26, Ross concedes that Babb was making the right choice to hold onto the draft for the time being (1)—especially since there was clear interest from Reynal to publish *Whose Names Are Unknown* in addition to *The Lost Traveler*. According to a letter from Babb to Ross on July 31, 1958, Reynal said that “the material now seems dated, especially in the last half. But he liked a number of scenes so much that he listed them and suggested I find a way to use them in other work, or perhaps in some other version of the book,” which Babb notes echoes earlier suggestions by Wolf (1). Earlier that year, on April 28, 1958, Babb moreover writes that Reynal had suggested using flashbacks to account for the “dated” aspects of the novel (1). Of course, these revisions to *Whose Names Are Unknown* did not come to pass at this point in time—though Babb did take some of Reynal's advice, as she incorporated elements of *Whose Names Are Unknown* into her next book, *An Owl on Every Post*, which was published in 1970.

Just as Babb's completion of *The Lost Traveler* reignited interest—both her own and her agents'—in *Whose Names Are Unknown* in the late 1950s, so, too, did the publication of her memoir, *An Owl on Every Post*. Moreover, the early 1970s were also a time of reclamation of “lost” stories from the 1930s, with Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* being “discovered” in 1972, and published in 1974 (Pratt vi). In fact, Babb received serious interest from two publishers at this point in time—as well as possible interest in a television adaptation of this story—more than 30 years after she finished the first draft in

1939. Regarding this television proposal, there is little information available: Babb mentions it in a letter to her agent, Julie Fallowfield of McIntosh & Otis, on May 21, 1973, though nothing appears to have materialized from this “TV nibble” (1).

Meanwhile, Babb had a much more promising lead with Paul Foreman of Thorp Springs Press, whose active interest in publishing *Whose Names Are Unknown* spanned the mid-1970s. Once again, a variety of factors combined to prevent the revision and publication of *Whose Names Are Unknown* at this juncture. For example, while Babb writes to Fallowfield on October 11, 1973, that although she is “relieved” at Foreman’s interest in her first novel, calling it “one of those unheard-of happenings, this thirty year old book being published,” she also notes that it comes “at a good time when I need some new print! Of course, I’d rather be writing a new book” (1). That is, even with a motivated press ready to take on *Whose Names Are Unknown*—and even while acknowledging the unexpected nature of Foreman’s interest—Babb once again conveys ambivalence, as she was torn between the prospects of seeing her first book in print and her desire to work on new projects.

Although Foreman was likely unaware of Babb’s generally slow writing process—there were 19 years between the rejection of *Whose Names Are Unknown* and the publication of *The Lost Traveler*, and another 12 years before the publication of *An Owl on Every Post*—he was nevertheless surprisingly naïve in his proposed timeline for publishing *Whose Names Are Unknown*. In a letter to Babb on October 1, 1973, he suggests that Thorp Springs will publish it by April or May 1974 (1). To his credit, Foreman wanted to take a much more hands-off approach to editing *Whose Names Are Unknown* than its previous suitors, clarifying to Babb in the same letter that “[he] would

be against your making any major changes in the book, since that would change it into a novel written now rather than then” (2). This, of course, is a position antithetical to the suggestions of friends, agents, and editors in the 1940s and 1950s. Babb was amenable to this approach, noting on October 4, 1973, that “[she] should not make any major changes now because with so many years of writing between, that might result in unevenness. I couldn’t update it if I wished too because the time is in the whole texture of the book” (1). Nevertheless, Babb pointed out that *An Owl on Every Post* replicated some aspects of her first novel, and that someone at Thorp Springs Press should ensure that there isn’t too much overlap between these two books (1), and a few weeks later, on October 23, 1973, she writes that she is “sure [she] must write a new opening chapter if publication is going to be” (1).

By June 7, 1974—already about two months after Foreman’s initial projections for when *Whose Names Are Unknown* would be in print—he confirms Babb’s assumptions, as he asks her to rewrite the first chapter, and he says that Thorp Springs “might be able to get started on it this fall” (1). Foreman then sends Babb a follow-up on December 22, writing that “You do the fixing on it which you should, and as soon as you return it, we will go to work on it” (1). Six months later, on June 6, 1975, he asks: “Have you done some work on ‘Whose Names Are Unknown’? Let me know when you want us to start work on it” (4). Meanwhile, as Foreman waited in limbo for Babb’s revisions, she writes to Ross, her English agent, on November 16, 1974, that she has “heard several times from the Peregrine Smith Press in Salt Lake City, Utah, asking to see this book,” and that she is “thinking of submitting the book there since Paul Foreman is months late. I can at least see what happens. I won’t do any work on it until I have a commitment” (2).

Given the topic of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, Peregrine Smith's interest in it during this time makes sense, as they issued several runs of Carey McWilliams's *Factories in the Field* during the 1970s.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, it is unclear why Babb would suggest that it was Foreman who was months late, since he had in fact been waiting for her revisions for approximately a year at this time. Babb eventually answers Foreman's letters on August 10, 1975—the following year—when she writes: “It would please me to answer your good letters with the news that I have gone through WHOSE NAMES ARE UNKNOWN and am ready to return it to you, but, alas, not so. I haven't even had time to look at it, or to read all the tempting things you have sent me,” though she explains that her husband, James Wong Howe, had been gravely ill (1).

Due to the emotional, physical, and temporal demands of caring for a sick spouse, Babb had not been able to complete any work on *Whose Names Are Unknown* during this time. And when Howe passed away in July 1976, Babb continued to delay her own projects, as she instead worked on Howe's collection for the American Film Institute, which she continued to work on for much of the next two years. While Babb wrote that working on this collection helped her cope with the loss of her husband, it also complicated the status of *Whose Names Are Unknown* with both of its potential publishers at this time. Unfortunately, Babb appears to have contributed to this confusion, as she asks Foreman on January 4, 1977, for permission to submit her draft to Peregrine Smith (2-3)—about whom she had written to Ross approximately two years before—and she then asks Foreman on August 7, 1977, whether Thorp Springs is still interested in publishing *Whose Names Are Unknown* (1). Foreman confirms their interest on January 10, 1978 (2), to which Babb, on January 13, 1978, reiterates her interest in revising the

first chapter as soon as she is done with Howe's collection (1). This, of course, was more than four years after Foreman first expressed interest in the novel in 1973, and after several years of inquiries from Foreman with regards to her progress on the revisions.

Two months later, on March 7, 1978, Foreman writes to Babb to say that he is "looking forward to seeing 'Whose Names Are Unknown', when you have it ready" (2), and Babb thanks him two days later for his "infinite patience" with her (1). This, however, appears to have been the conclusion of their correspondence. And so, despite having two viable presses in Thorp Springs and Peregrine Smith interested in the novel, the failure to publish *Whose Names Are Unknown* in the 1970s was ultimately due to the combination of family emergency, as Babb cared for her husband during his illness; grief, as Babb coped with the loss of her partner; and artistic priorities, as Babb demonstrated time and again that she was more interested in pursuing new writing projects than in rehashing old ones. Although a publishing window had opened for *Whose Names Are Unknown*—which is further evidenced by the publication of Olsen's *Yonnonidio* and the reprinting of McWilliams's *Factories in the Field* during these years—it nevertheless closed without fruition.

The next wave of interest in publishing *Whose Names Are Unknown* occurred in the late 1980s, and resulted in additional selections of Babb's first draft being published by another literary journal. After Babb was contacted by Alan Wald, a professor at the University of Michigan who wanted to interview her as a "30s-40s writer" (1)—a description that Babb was privately unenthusiastic about, as she notes to Fallowfield on October 26, 1989, that she was still alive and still interested in producing new work. Wald then referred her to Laurence Goldstein, another professor at the University of

Michigan, who was also the editor of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* (2). After Goldstein met with Babb, he selected chapters from the draft to be published in the Summer 1990 edition of the journal. On August 20, 1989, Goldstein asked Babb for permission to print five selections from her first manuscript – from pages “245-253, 287-292, 296-303, 322-327, and 345-350” of the draft (1-2)—though it is noteworthy that six chapters were ultimately printed in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*: chapters 25, 29, 31, 33, 37, and 41. Nevertheless, despite this discrepancy in Goldstein’s proposal to Babb and the final selections for these excerpts, almost 50 years after part of chapter 26 was first published in *The Kansas Magazine*, several more chapters of Babb’s first draft were again in print.

Perhaps buoyed by seeing these selections published, Babb attempted to reestablish contact with Gibbs Smith, of Peregrine Smith—the “other” publisher with whom she had contact in the mid 1970s. On October 16, 1990, Babb writes to explain why their correspondence had abruptly ended some 26 years prior (1). Six days later, Babb received a response from Steven Chapman, of Peregrine Smith, who indicates the press’s renewed interest in publishing *Whose Names Are Unknown*, pending the novel’s availability (1), and on November 12, 1990, he suggests publishing it in their Fall 1991 list (1). However, while things had appeared to be looking up for *Whose Names Are Unknown*, Chapman soon sends Babb familiar “disappointing news” on April 30, 1991, after having more time to review the manuscript:

I’m returning Whose Names Are Unknown with sincere thanks for the opportunity to consider it for our list. Unfortunately we have decided against publishing the novel. Several people on our staff had the chance to read this manuscript. All agreed that the writing is superior, authentic, and obviously from lived experience. However, we all seriously doubted our ability to successfully market the book given its subject matter. I realize based on the decision by your former publisher to decline doing the book after it was contracted that you had doubts about it being suitable for us, but I’m glad, despite your reservations in

sending it, that I had a chance to see your work. In fact, if you have another work with a more contemporary setting or theme I would gladly be willing to look at it. (1)

Despite yet another publishing opportunity falling through, Babb handled this rejection well, writing on May 4, 1991, that “I am not disappointed: rejections are as much a part of the writer’s life (maybe more) than acceptances,” and also noting that she “had serious reservations about the novel at this time. Timing is very important, and I see that this is not its time” (1). While Babb’s response is admirable, her comments about timing are nevertheless questionable, given the heightened visibility of her novel after the publication of excerpts in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and it is plausible that deferring to unquantifiable notions of “timing” was yet another reason for Babb to continue working on other projects.

As she explains to Joanne Dearcopp on August 5, 1993, her “great literary desires now are to have my short story book/manuscript published, and my book of poems” (2), as by July 11, 1994, she had accepted the idea that the manuscript of *Whose Names Are Unknown* would never be published (1). Meanwhile, Dearcopp worked tirelessly to have Babb’s other novels republished, and they were soon taken by the University of New Mexico Press. During this time, the UNM Press also considered taking on *Whose Names Are Unknown*, though they ultimately decided to pass on it. As Barbara Guth (of the UNM Press) explains to Babb in a letter from February 1, 1995:

I’ve been thinking for quite some time about your novel Whose Names Are Unknown and whether it is something that UNM Press could publish. I’m sorry to say that we’ve decided against it. An Owl on Every Post has a following; there are many people who love it and will want to own a new copy. The Lost Traveler is a bit more of a gamble but may do well because of Owl’s popularity. With the unpublished novel, however, we’re not confident that it can succeed in the trade fiction market. I’ve written to Joanne as well and suggested that she query some other publishers who may feel differently. It would have been fun and exciting to

work on another book with you, but I guess I will have to be content with these two. (1)

While Guth's decision is perhaps logical, it is nevertheless worth noting that in the more than 25 years between her letter and the writing of this chapter, Babb's *The Lost Traveler* and *An Owl on Every Post* have both been republished again, this time by Muse Ink Press (in 2013 and 2012, respectively), and the cover of the former notes that it is "From the author of *Whose Names Are Unknown*." That is, while Babb's first novel was viewed as too big of a gamble to print in 1995, it has since become a touchstone for her literary career following its publication in 2004—perhaps outshining the successes and reputation of *The Lost Traveler*.

Still, there was much work to do in the nine years between this rejection by the University of New Mexico Press in 1995, and the eventual publication by the University of Oklahoma Press in 2004. On March 9, 1997, Dearcopp received a letter from John Crawford, of West End Press, expressing interest in the novel, though it appears that little developed from this contact (1). Coinciding with this interest, though, Dearcopp soon began the process of editing *Whose Names Are Unknown*, writing to Babb on May 7, 1997, that "We are going to revisit *Whose Names Are Unknown*. We're reading it to see how much has to be cut and getting it copyrighted. There seems to be more interest in writers/stories of the 30's these days than at the time you read it" (2).

Approximately two years later—on July 24, 1999—Wixson writes to Babb with an extensive list of editorial suggestions for the draft of *Whose Names Are Unknown*—some of which are familiar topics of revision, such as the omission of the early chapters that replicate material from *An Owl on Every Post*, as well as more granular suggestions on specific moments in the text. In the accompanying letter, he writes that "this is the

moment to strike in getting your WNAU in print. I say this because we have a good friend in the senior editor of the Univ. of Illinois Press, Dick Wentworth. He is near retirement; who knows who will replace him?" (1). Perhaps given this personal contact, and the specificity and scope of Wixson's proposed edits, Babb was confident that the University of Illinois Press would finally be the place for her novel, as is reflected in a letter from her on September 15, 1999 (2). If Babb had doubts in the early 1990s about the appropriate time to publish *Whose Names Are Unknown*, by the end of the decade, those doubts appear to have been put to rest.

And yet, the University of Illinois Press was not the final home for Babb's novel, as her advanced age impeded progress on these revisions to the manuscript. Despite the thoroughness of Wixson's suggestions, by August 28, 2000, Babb notes to David Dahl, of Capra Press, that *Whose Names Are Unknown* "will be published next year, if I ever get around to a few necessary changes" (1). By 2002, Dearcopp—along with Wixson and Roxanna Newman—worked in earnest with Alice Stanton and Julie Shilling, of the University of Oklahoma Press, to revise *Whose Names Are Unknown* into its final draft form. As Dearcopp explains to Stanton on March 6, 2003: "Just thought I'd share some observations and notes with you that I made while preparing Sanora's manuscript as a final draft. While I can discuss major issues with Sanora these days, the little details are too tiring. She is agreeable, in principle, to editorial suggestions that you may offer" (1). Revisions continued throughout the summer and fall of 2003, and in 2004, after 65 years of stops and starts, family emergencies and prioritizing other projects, promising leads and dropped correspondence, and financial concerns by both author and prospective publishers, *Whose Names Are Unknown* was finally published.

As this overview of the history of *Whose Names Are Unknown* shows, it was not merely “lost” or “long-forgotten” and then rediscovered 65 years after it was written, as the first two epigraphs to this section suggest, nor is the third epigraph accurate in saying that Babb was “finally...convinced to release the original manuscript” in 2004. Instead, Babb’s first novel had a much more complicated history of stops, starts, and missed opportunities throughout these 65 years. While the decision by Random House to shelve the project in 1939 is indeed regrettable—and is based on logic that perhaps does not hold up under scrutiny given the broader context of other publications resulting from Steinbeck’s success—there were nevertheless myriad opportunities for a version of this novel to be published over the course of these decades. So while reviewers and critics often cite this delayed publication as evidence of Babb’s exploitation at the hands of the publishing industry, collectively—and which they often conflate with John Steinbeck, individually—this logic is reductive and inaccurate, and, as the next section will show, misguided in the subject of its criticisms.

John Steinbeck, Sanora Babb, and the Debate over Intellectual Property

“What she didn’t know was that her detailed notes were being secretly taken by her boss, Collins, to show to his friend John Steinbeck, who happened to be working on a novel with the same theme.” –Carla Dominguez

*“Unbeknownst to Babb, Collins was sharing her reports with writer John Steinbeck. By the time she was ready to publish her work, in the winter of 1939, Steinbeck had come out with his own Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.” –*The Dust Bowl: A Film by Ken Burns**

*“What she didn’t know, however, was that Collins had given her notes to Steinbeck, who was busy researching *The Grapes of Wrath*.” –Joy Lanzendorfer⁵⁰*

In addition to describing it as a “lost” or “forgotten” novel, critical responses to *Whose Names Are Unknown* often reference Steinbeck’s access to Babb’s notes as he revised *The Grapes of Wrath*. And yet, the context of this access is often overlooked; although many of these reviews, articles, and editorials emphasize the optics of his possession of her notes, few of them provide adequate consideration to the role of Tom Collins in this information-sharing scheme, or to the meetings between these three individuals at this time. While the previous section outlined the various factors that led to the 65-year delay in publishing this novel, this section elaborates on the relationship between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown* to correct the reductive accounts of Babb’s notes and Steinbeck’s access to them. This intervention is intended to push the critical discussion of Babb’s novel beyond the perpetuation of inaccurate claims surrounding its creation, and into more substantive considerations of its relevance to contemporary literary discourses.

Although there is some variety in the specific claims of Steinbeck’s impropriety made by the reviewers of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, the general implications are often quite similar: that Babb was unwittingly tricked into writing creative notes for Steinbeck, which he then used to her professional detriment. And, given that both writers used some of the same notes, these novels inevitably ended up with noteworthy similarities. Indeed, in some reviews of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, a comparative approach to basic plot points is the full extent of the analysis provided. For example, Michael J. Meyer begins his review of *Whose Names Are Unknown* by referencing various cases of “plagiarism at the highest levels of academe” (135), before focusing on accusations about Steinbeck’s “magpie” tendencies, and he then lists the scenes, topics, and themes that *The Grapes of*

Wrath and *Whose Names Are Unknown* have in common. These include “a company store that charges exorbitant prices...the obvious contrast between the fertile fields of California and the dying migrants...the emphasis on music as an encouragement for the human spirit...the generosity and compassion of some humans and the disdain of the Okies for charity” (136-138), among others.⁵¹ What the presentation of this list lacks, though, is an acknowledgement that these commonalities arise from the historical facts of the labor conditions forced upon the individuals who were part of the Dust Bowl migration, and that they were not things that Steinbeck would have only been able to learn by reading Babb’s notes.

While Meyer’s analysis of these similarities is a basic juxtaposition that lacks context, nuance, and discernment, other reviews, such as Dominguez’s “The Woman Behind ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’” are more straightforwardly false in their claims. Among its many biographical inaccuracies, and in addition to its contribution to the epigraphs for this section, Dominguez’s article also claims that Steinbeck “relied on Sanora Babb’s notes, which Collins had passed on to Steinbeck without her permission,” and that the success of *The Grapes of Wrath* and subsequent rejection of her novel left Babb “devastated and bitter.” As this section will demonstrate, none of these claims are true, yet they are commonly found in reviews of Babb’s work. Instead, Babb was well aware of Steinbeck’s access to her notes, though there is still debate on the precise nature of these documents. Moreover, aside from the obvious frustrations of having the publication of her first draft postponed, the claims that Babb was “devastated and bitter,” or that she “spent most of her adult life living in the shadow of John Steinbeck” (Dominguez),

mischaracterize the grace with which Babb carried herself in this situation in particular, and her life in general.

Babb's experiences with the Dust Bowl migrants began in the late 1930s, as she moved to California around 1937, and began volunteering with Tom Collins and the FSA in early 1938. In this capacity, Babb and Collins sought out migrants who needed assistance or relief, and registered them with the FSA system. As Wixson reports:

During the winter and well into the fall of 1938, Babb and Collins walked the dirt roads of the Imperial Valley and farther north into the Central Valley to the Feather River north of Sacramento. They set up tent camps and provided supplies for newly arrived Dust Bowl refugees who slept in their overburdened flivvers and roadside ditches. The two FSA workers told the refugees about the FSA camps where they could bathe, receive medical attention, find shelter in tents with wooden floors (for \$10 extra), enjoy the camps social life, and participate in camp management. Confused, dispirited, hungry, and often disbelieving, the refugees needed guidance in the first few weeks of their arrival. (*Dirty* 29)

Indeed, during her time volunteering with the FSA, Babb assisted countless migrants, though Collins estimates that she had visited the “tents, shacks, cabins, and homes” of “472 families or 2,175 men, women, and children,” and that she had met with a total of approximately 781 families, or about 3,640 individuals, during this time (“SRA”). As stressful as these experiences might sound, Babb later described them as some of the most rewarding times of her life.⁵²

While volunteering among the migrants, Babb also found an opportunity to search for material for her own writing, as she had long been a writer of short fiction, having submitted several short stories to magazines throughout the early 1930s. As such, Babb's volunteering efforts detailed above went beyond the straightforward direct action encompassed by registering migrants for relief, as she moreover actively searched for ways in which she could integrate these stories into her creative endeavors. As she writes

in a letter to her sister, Dorothy, in May 1938: “Mr. [Collins] let me help him take applications in the office at Porterville, and one day next week I will do this by myself ... It is a good chance to talk to people, because they do not know I want to write of them. I don’t want them to think I am peering in on their wretched lives. I think this experience was almost as touching as visiting them in their homes” (4). And while Babb is sensitive to treating the Dust Bowl migrants with compassion, this letter also suggests that any notes—whether for personal or government use—that Babb would have taken on this subject would likely include observations useful to a writer drafting a novel on this migration.

And yet, Babb was not alone in her interest in writing stories about the Dust Bowl migrants, or in attempting to document their mannerisms in her reports: Collins often included a section in his government reports that was dedicated to describing personal interactions with these people, and he had a deal in the works with Steinbeck to have these government reports published as an edited collection (Wrobel). Given Collins’s own literary aspirations, as well as his involvement with Steinbeck during this time, it is perhaps unsurprising that Collins was similarly supportive of Babb’s interest in writing. For while Collins was appreciative of Babb’s contributions in the field—for example, Babb writes in a letter to Wixson from November 12, 1936, that Collins gave her a copy of Archibald MacLeish’s *Land of the Free* as a gift, with the inscription: “For Sanora, whose birthday for 1938 has a particular significance because of the Power she gave the thousands of homeless workers—farmers as she visited them in their hovels, and tents and counselled with them at their meetings. / They now have hope – hope that this will yet be the land of the real free, a functional democracy!” (9)—he ultimately argued that

aside from her volunteering efforts, her most effective contributions to the migrants' cause would be through her pen. As he explains to her in a letter from circa 1938-1939:

At this time I believe it to the point to make some suggestions to you on your REAL WORTH TO THE PROBLEM OF THE WORKERS, HERE AND ELSEWHERE. Frankly, I feel that you can do your very best work for the agricultural and industrial workers by and through the power of the written word. You have the unusual ability possessed by so few writers to do a POWERFUL bit of work. The field is rapidly being filled with organizers. Whatever you write will be of great assistance to the workers and organizers. I would like to see you WRITE and WRITE. It is your profession. You are nobly fitted for it. May you DO IT. We all HOPE YOU WILL. WE WANT YOU TO DO SO. (2)

Despite Babb's months of experience working alongside Collins, he argues here that her "real worth" to this cause is not through direct action, which he implies can be done by anyone, but instead through her unique ability to shape others' perceptions of this issue. Moreover, Collins concludes this letter with further references to his hopes for Babb's literary contributions to this issue: "To you, for your efforts, your cooperation your interest and sympathy, for helping us on the road to a united front, the many thousands of us express our thanks. We greet you, warmly, and hope to have you assist us in the bigger job to come" (8). While the conclusion of this letter shares the spirit of the passage above, it is noteworthy that Collins furthermore refers to a "bigger job to come" with regards to her writing and the Dust Bowl migration.

For while there is no reason to question the sincerity of Collins's encouragement of Babb, his enthusiasm was not reserved exclusively for her writing abilities, as it was moreover a characteristic of his correspondence with Steinbeck during the same time period. While the duration of time that Steinbeck spent with Collins in the fields was markedly shorter than Babb's—albeit Steinbeck's was spread out over a longer period of time—the implication of this exchange is nevertheless remarkably consistent: for both

writers, Collins argued that writing about the Dust Bowl migrants in California superseded their direct action on the migrants' behalf, and the unshakeable empathy expressed by both Steinbeck and Babb in their respective Dust Bowl novels clearly reflect Collins's influence on both projects. That is, both writers thought of having "jobs" to do in their novels, which was to cultivate positive public perceptions of the migrants through their literary texts.

Of course, these "jobs" necessitated accuracy with regards to their portrayals of the migrants in California. To this end, Collins furthermore acted as a facilitator of information for the two writers, and both Steinbeck and Babb viewed him as their authoritative source for accuracy in their novels. For example, while it is common for reviewers to mention that Steinbeck "borrowed" Babb's notes, it is often omitted that Steinbeck also routinely solicited information directly from Collins. For example, Steinbeck writes in an undated letter to Collins that he would "have to appeal to you for help again and again for details. Will you give me please a list – a family arrives in Bakersfield in August. What camps will they hit and what wage until the winter and spring," before further reiterating his aims of shaping public opinions of the migrants: "Please help me Tom. If I can do this book well enough and honestly enough it will help the people" (1). At first glance, this appeal might seem to support the claims of Steinbeck's over-reliance on others' work for his own novel's ends. But this is not the whole story; while Babb indeed had months of her own first-hand experiences volunteering in the FSA from which to draw upon for her novel—a fact that reviewers have often cited as proof that her novel is more "authentic" than Steinbeck's—she nevertheless also appealed to Collins in the same manner for her own novel.

For example, Babb requested similar information from Collins while she worked on her draft, asking in an undated letter: “I will list the places you gave me before, and will you please fill in the crops, the months, and trace the movement into California as they would most likely go in order to live along the way?” (1). And in the archive of Babb’s work on *Whose Names Are Unknown*, there are several letters from Collins filling in these sorts of details for Babb’s novel. That is, while reviewers often assume that Babb relied purely on her own notes—which was perhaps fueled by her later recollections that she “kept detailed records of what was picked and where so that the story would be accurate” (Conklin)—this is nevertheless not the entire story. And while much of the critical discourse surrounding *Whose Names Are Unknown* focuses on Steinbeck, the often-neglected central figure behind both of these novels is, in fact, Collins, whose interest in seeing publications about the Dust Bowl migrants precluded any concerns over notions of intellectual property, or in acknowledging the awkward situation that would likely arise should two novels on the same subject be written so close together.

While critics often suggest that Babb was taken advantage of by Collins and Steinbeck, or that she was misled with regards to the purpose of her FSA reports, this seems unlikely given her own personal reliance on Collins for information, as well as other examples of Collins openly sharing information with Steinbeck. For example, in an undated note, Collins references a series of anecdotes that he is sending to Babb, writing that: “These are shorts on my D.F.’s of last summer, and early winter – November & December, before I came here. / Note I call the D.F. ‘Maverick Univ,’” before clarifying that they will likely sound familiar: “You will recognize some of these as John S. told a few the evening we had dinner together. / John loves to tell and retell these stories – an

‘out’ for him and his thoughts. He has had them since early December, having just returned them at my request” (1).⁵³ This note is significant for a few reasons. First, it highlights that Collins, too, was passing his own notes along to Steinbeck, and that Babb was contemporaneously aware of this sharing of knowledge at the time that they were both working on their novels.

Moreover, it emphasizes that in their conversations together, Collins, Babb, and Steinbeck likely discussed Collins’s influence on the FSA system, which has long been documented in Steinbeck studies, and which I argue in this chapter had a similar effect on Babb’s approach to *Whose Names Are Unknown*. Moreover, given their shared interest in writing, it is entirely possible (if not likely) that the three discussed details that would later be incorporated into *Whose Names Are Unknown* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, as the Random House reader “BB” had suggested in their report. That said, while it is likely that these topics arose in their conversations, the actual substance of their discussions remains unsubstantiated. This lack of knowledge is partly due to incomplete reporting of these meetings. For example, Babb is absent from Collins’s account of Steinbeck’s visit to the valleys in winter 1938 in his article “Bringing in the Sheaves,” though it is highly likely that she was present during the trip it describes, since it overlaps with the period that Babb volunteered with Collins. Babb is similarly absent from most published Steinbeck biographies,⁵⁴ though she was alerted in a letter from John Short on June 16, 1975, that Jackson Benson would likely be “keenly interested” in her story (1). It is unclear whether Benson actually approached Babb during his research, but in either case, she is not mentioned in Benson’s biography of Steinbeck or in his related articles.

Beyond these blatant omissions, the scholarly reporting on the encounters between Babb, Steinbeck, and Collins is also somewhat contradictory. Wixson writes that “the three visited for most of the afternoon following lunch in a diner” (*Dirty* 35), and Sarah Wald asserts that the two “met only once” (67). In her letters and autobiographical sketches, Babb, herself, was also inconsistent over the years with regards to her interactions with Steinbeck: she writes to Dearcopp on August 5, 1993, that “Steinbeck came down to the fields (Central Valley) for one weekend,” (1), though she writes in a letter to Mildred Springer on July 26, 1972, that she “was working in the fields with Tom Collins (gov’t man) and we were giving John our daily notes. He came down also for a couple of weekends” (2). Moreover, Babb writes in her autobiographical notes from December 1957: “I knew Steinbeck was writing the book but I thought there was room for two...He went home and wrote a wonderful book; but I felt so involved with those people that I stayed and wrote later” (3). In her biographical notes from March 1978, she describes the interactions as follows: “I knew John slightly. He had come out to the fields two weekends, and he had tramped around all day with Tom and me; we had talked a lot, eaten together” (2). Although there are discrepancies over whether they met once, twice, or more often, it is nevertheless abundantly clear that the two had met on at least one occasion, and that they were familiar with each other’s writing aspirations with regards to the Dust Bowl migrants.

Yet, the contrasting accounts of the true nature of the notes that Steinbeck received from Babb and Collins persist, and this is likely due, at least in part, to Babb’s own inconsistent characterizations of these notes. In her biographical sketches from December 1957, she describes them as “*Tom’s voluminous nightly notes*” (3, emphasis

added), though her letter to Springer in the paragraph above refers to them as “*our* daily notes” (2, emphasis added). As time passes, though, Babb recalls the situation differently. In her biographical information from March 1978, she writes that Tom “had asked me to keep detailed notes of our work everyday, of the people, things they said, did, suffered, worked. I thought it was for our work, or for him, but it was for Steinbeck. Tom ... passed them on to him” (2), and she writes in her letter to Dearcopp on August 5, 1993, that Tom “asked me to make notes everynite, and when John S. came, Tom asked me to give him all *my* notes” (2, emphasis added). At first glance, these discrepancies might appear to be superficial. At stake, though, are the implications surrounding intellectual property that have been integral to critical receptions of *Whose Names Are Unknown* since its publication.

Given this information, and the fact that Collins gave Steinbeck his own weekly and biweekly government reports on the FSA camps, it is perhaps most plausible that Babb’s requests were, indeed, intended to be written on behalf of the FSA, and that copies of them were passed along to the government as well as Steinbeck.⁵⁵ This uncertainty notwithstanding, it is nevertheless germane to note here that Babb’s collection at the Harry Ransom Center includes three letters that Steinbeck wrote to Collins: one of which is undated, and two of which are postmarked from March 21 and March 25, 1938. In the latter of these, Steinbeck writes: “I’m gathering all the reports I have and will send them to you the first time I get out. All the others are in the last” (1). Of course, the exact nature of the reports that Steinbeck is returning to Collins is unclear, though this letter is postmarked roughly a month after the meetings in which Babb remembers passing along their notes to Steinbeck, and it is possible that the notes Babb

wrote were returned at this juncture. What is clear, though, is that given Babb's possession of these letters from Steinbeck to Collins—all three of which reference progress on what culminated in *The Grapes of Wrath*—she was fully aware of the free-flowing information being facilitated by Collins, and she was directly involved in these conversations as they occurred.

To this end, critical responses to *Whose Names Are Unknown* that imagine Babb to be unwittingly exploited by Collins and Steinbeck offer context that is incomplete (at best) or misleading and inaccurate (at worst), and to be clear, these perspectives are represented in the vast majority of *Whose Names Are Unknown* criticism, and not merely in the sensationalized reviews quoted earlier in this chapter. For example, Lawrence R. Rodgers's foreword to *Whose Names Are Unknown* claims that "Collins asked Babb to keep notes and later was impressed enough by the results to request a copy of them for another writer who was visiting the camp to research a novel. That writer was John Steinbeck" (x), though he does not provide any detail on the extensive use that Babb made of similar notes from Collins, the fact that Babb met Steinbeck on at least one occasion, or that she knew that these notes were destined for his eyes.

Aside from perpetuating what should be seen as a historical inaccuracy, it is unfortunate that scholars and critics have focused so heavily on this nonexistent rivalry between Babb and Steinbeck, because it is unlikely that Steinbeck ever knew of *Whose Names Are Unknown*'s fate, and because Babb held no ill will toward him over her publishing woes. In fact, though reviewers like Dominguez claim that Babb was "devastated and bitter," Babb was adamant of the opposite in her correspondence. The clearest example of this insistence is found in an exchange with John Short in the spring

of 1975. Short, who appears to have first contacted Babb with questions about her experiences in the FSA, clarifies in a March 14 letter that he is interested in the possibility that Steinbeck plagiarized her notes, and asks: “Might I have your permission to quote from your letter, especially the brief passage quoted above? I should be most grateful” (1). In her response, Babb grants him permission, with one condition: “Yes, you may quote me if you like from my letter so long as you do not write anything that makes me sound like sour grapes. I don’t feel that way, as I wrote you” (1). However, it appears as though Short’s prospective article ultimately had its own struggles seeing print, as there is no record of it being published.

Yet another example of Babb’s graceful handling of this situation comes in an early exchange with Wixson, who writes to Babb on November 29, 1983, that “It would be fun to do a note on your field notes and how they got into Steinbeck’s clutches” (1), before forwarding her selections of correspondence from *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* on January 14, 1984, noting that “They may stir some memories” (1). Though Wixson does not appear to have pursued writing on Babb’s notes, the language with which he describes “Steinbeck’s clutches” perpetuates the approach commonly taken up by critics—yet Babb does not indulge in this perspective in her response. Though she could have easily been baited into cynicism or resentment, Babb instead responds to Wixson on April 14, 1984: “You were so thoughtful to copy parts of the Steinbeck letters, especially from his book, and I do thank you. I enjoyed reading them, especially the little story on page 106, so typical of real modesty and honesty beneath all those substitute four-letter words” (1). That is, while critics have so often focused on a nonexistent rivalry or resentment, Babb’s attention continued to be on the individuals affected by the Dust

Bowl migration, which is what fueled her novel from the start. Though critics continue to peddle the narrative that Babb's notes "got into Steinbeck's clutches," it is perhaps time to instead focus on how Babb's writing was inspired by the real-life experiences of environmental refugees, and how her approach to this story continues to be relevant in a time of anthropogenic climate change.

Although Babb's novel was unable to contribute directly to the Dust Bowl migrants' cause, its recent publication and subsequent recovery is appropriately timed. When it was published, a year before her death, Babb told Dearcopp that "This is the most meaningful book I've written. It was a story I had to write. This book deserves to be published" (Conklin). As the next two sections of this chapter will demonstrate, her assessment is valid for the future, too. With the likely rise of environmental refugee narratives in the near future, consideration of both Dust Bowl novels offers a variety of insights to writers, scholars, and teachers engaging in ecocritical discourses surrounding climate change, environmental degradation, and migration. For while many Californians resented the influx of Dust Bowl migrants in the 1930s, Babb sought to restore their humanity through her sympathetic portrayals of their lives before their hardships intensified and their profound senses of loss when they were forced to migrate. In this regard, Babb's approach to *Whose Names Are Unknown* is an important lesson in empathy as climate change migrations will continue to grow increasingly common and in much greater magnitudes in the decades to come.

“Today Is a Terror”: *Whose Names Are Unknown* and the “New” Dust Bowl Novel⁵⁶

“I think I’m a better writer. His book is not as realistic as mine.” –Sanora Babb⁵⁷

Even for readers familiar with *The Grapes of Wrath*, it is often difficult to envision the environmental realities of the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. Yet it is unsurprising that readers in the twenty-first century struggle to picture the realities of the Dust Bowl, given the time that has passed since this disaster, and considering the relatively mild portrayal of the drought in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In this context, the long-delayed publication of Sanora Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown* provides another narrative for the cultural memory of the Dust Bowl, as it portrays the dust storms of the Great Plains—and the individuals affected by these storms—with more accuracy than has heretofore been available in the literary imagination. And yet, although Babb approached her Dust Bowl novel with a markedly different writing style, narrative strategy, and attention to accuracy than Steinbeck, *Whose Names Are Unknown* should nevertheless be interpreted in a similar manner as *The Grapes of Wrath* with regards to its intended contributions to the public discourses surrounding the Dust Bowl migration in the late 1930s. That is, while Babb’s novel has only surface-level similarities with Steinbeck’s, both projects were, at their core, designed to persuade readers in the late 1930s to care about the growing number of environmental refugees accumulating in the California valleys.

Whereas critics have long taken issue with the verisimilitude of Steinbeck’s portrayal of the geographic locations, environmental conditions, and cultural life of Oklahoma, Babb relied on her childhood experiences growing up on the Southern Plains, and the experiences of her family who lived in the area throughout the Dust Bowl, to make her portrayal of Cimarron County, Oklahoma in Part I of *Whose Names Are*

Unknown to be the strongest writing in the novel. That is, while Steinbeck completed famously little research on Oklahoma, as he placed the Joads “more or less at random” in Sallisaw (Loftis 152), after first locating them in Shawnee (*Working* 31)—both of which are outside of the area most heavily devastated by the Dust Bowl—Babb was a child of the Plains; as she writes to Temple Lee Reed on August 1, 1978, she spent her earliest years in places such as Red Rock, Oklahoma; Baca County, Colorado; Elkhart, Kansas; Forgan, Oklahoma; and Garden City, Kansas, before moving to California in 1929 (3). Although the precise boundaries of the Dust Bowl are difficult to pinpoint, as it varied from year to year (Worster 29), many of the places in which Babb grew up lie within the area that was later hit the hardest by the dust storms, and Babb channeled this first-hand knowledge of the area and its inhabitants to establish empathy for these people and connections to this place.

Given these personal connections, it is perhaps surprising that the geographic locations in the first half of the novel was a point of debate up until its publication, as Babb and her reviewers considered a variety of options for locating the first part of its narrative—including references to real places, which was Wixson’s stated preference in his letter from July 24, 1999 (2), or using fictional names instead, which Dearcopp writes on August 3, 2003 that she and Babb preferred (1). Through its first couple drafts, the story was set in the fictional “Lafar, Colorado” (“Working Copy, Carbon”), which was then changed to the real “Lamar, Colorado” (“Working Copy, Photocopy”). To avoid repetition with Babb’s memoir, *An Owl on Every Post*, the setting was then shifted from Colorado to Oklahoma in the third and fourth drafts, with consideration given to Boise City (“Revised Draft #3”) and Forgan (“Revised and Edited Draft #4), respectively.

Ultimately, the story was set in the general area of the Oklahoma Panhandle, with references to the fictional towns of Riding and Flatlands (13). Despite this debate, and the final decision to incorporate fictional settings, *Whose Names Are Unknown* nevertheless eludes criticisms of geographic and environmental inaccuracies through its insistence on locating the story generally within the area most heavily affected by the dust storms.

In this regard, Babb's familiarity with this region, where she had lived, ultimately enables her environmental descriptions in Part I to be among the most evocative passages in the novel. This feature of Babb's writing is perhaps counterintuitive, considering the inherent challenges of effectively portraying what Wixson describes as "the unbounded, featureless physical space of the Great Plains" (*Dirty* 9), or what Erin Royston Battat suggests is "a landscape characterized by the *absence* of physical features" (54). Yet, in its portrayal of the Dunnes, *Whose Names Are Unknown* not only brings the sights, sounds, and smells of the Southern Plains alive for the reader, but it also depicts this area, which has often been dubbed "no-man's land," as a region in which people lived and developed a deep sense of place.

In portraying this close relationship between the Dunnes and their farm, Babb skillfully navigates the passage of time in the first part of the novel, compressing it at times to emphasize the duration in which they have been there, and expanding it elsewhere to highlight the sheer extent of the challenges that arise from living in this area. For example, the novel's second chapter spans the first year in which the Dunne family plants winter wheat, and establishes their connection to this land through regular descriptions of environmental conditions. As the Dunnes plant wheat early in the chapter, the "sharp high air of western autumn came into their noses, penetrated their clothes,

made them go about their chores briskly” (6). After this brief description, which introduces the extent to which the Dunnes literally internalize their surroundings, the novel swiftly transitions into the “long cold winter” (6-7).

Time is further condensed at this point in the chapter, as the narrative quickly shifts to the end of winter, despite this season’s initial characterization as a protracted and harsh experience. As Babb writes: “Late snow melted under the tepid spring sun, the rutted byroads held muddy brown water for days, and the yard was wrinkled deep with wagon tracks and pocked by dog paws and animal hooves. The pure white world of winter—with its noble stillness, its grand and awing beauty, its mighty storms—slipped deftly into a wild and windy spring” (7). If the winter receives little contemporaneous description in this chapter—by this point in the narrative, the season has turned to spring—its beauty is nonetheless elevated in this passage through anaphora and dramatic language, both of which enable the reader to interpret this “long cold winter” as one that is also filled with appreciation and admiration for this place.

As the spring transitions into summer, the capricious conditions of life on the Plains are focalized through the anxieties of the Dunnes, though the weather in this season ultimately proves benign. In addition to occasional dust storms, the narrator notes that rainstorms arise with regularity, which enables the wheat crop to grow, and this season produces a strong yield. In this manner, the Dunnes’ well-being is shown to be closely intertwined with the year-round environmental conditions of the Panhandle, which not only emphasizes their connection to this place, but also enables readers, who have perhaps never encountered conditions like those on the Southern Plains, to share in the experience of these positive moments. In this way, the second chapter of *Whose*

Names Are Unknown compresses time in order to provide a complete picture of life in a successful year of raising wheat, which offers a snapshot of a “good” year against which the subsequent hard years can be judged.

In addition to portraying the Dunnes’ deep connections to the Panhandle through the manipulation of time across seasons, Babb also depicts them through access to the Dunnes’ thoughts while farming. For example, after switching from broomcorn to winter wheat, “They looked at the land they had planted the day before, and the land they would plant this day, and they felt a sense of possession growing in them for the piece of earth that was theirs. But these unformed thoughts never came to words” (6). And later on, Milt Dunne thinks that “nothing was quite like the satisfaction he felt after he planted or harvested a crop. *This kind of feeling is one of the things a man lives for*, he told himself on one of the long walks to a neighbor’s farm, *the feeling that I made something, I made something with the soil, together we made a crop grow in order and loveliness*” (58). In these moments, the Dunnes’ thoughts and feelings—even when they elude language—highlight the sense of partnership and cooperation that they feel with the land, which is subsequently threatened and strained by the prolonged drought and the persistent dust storms that soon become a constant presence in their lives.

As Wixson argues: “Ecological disasters occurring on the High Plains are associated in Babb’s writing with broken dreams, human tragedies brought about by false expectations, speculation, and the restless demand for land” (*Dirty* 4). In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, as precipitation decreases, Milt grows anxious, saying: ““If the dust storms get any worse next year we won’t have a field. We’ll be starved out. This land is going back to desert”” (42). In this passage, the concerns that have heretofore remained in the

background are expressed in Milt's words, which introduces the possibility that the Dunnes will be forced to move if conditions do not change. These fears moreover continue to escalate over the winter, despite this season's characterization from the previous year as having a "noble stillness." Instead, this year, "There was a dust storm in January earlier than any had come before, and apprehension blew over the land with the brown wind" (67). Although this particular storm was ultimately inconsequential with regards to their crops, it nevertheless foreshadows the severity of the dust storms that would arise the following summer, while further establishing the physical presence of these storms as manifestations of the constant anxieties felt by the farmers on the High Plains.

Of course, these fears are soon realized, as the dust storms grow in regularity and severity with the warming summer air. As the Dunnes work in the field one afternoon, Julia watches from the yard as a dust storm develops on the horizon: "Along the north the sky was a pale yellow, the strange dead color of a lamp flame through a window in daylight. This dull inert mass had been lingering on the horizon for the last hour, but now she saw it take the shape of a curved wall rising slowly in the air" (75). Here, the storm's physical development mirrors the Dunnes' fears, as it looms ominously in the background. This lingering anxiety intensifies as the cloud grows closer, and they watch as it hits their land:

"Look!" he said again, and they stood together not saying anything, awed by this new attack of nature. It was an evil monster coming on in mysterious, footless silence. It was magnificent and horrible like a nightmare of destiny towering over their slight world that had every day before this impressed upon them its vast unconquerable might. Grains of dust sounded against their shoes in a low flurry. The open land beyond was blotted out as the brown mass struck the edge of his field. (77-78)

Through the formation of this dust storm, the persistent anxieties associated with the dust that have been present throughout the novel manifest in this singular “evil monster” that reduces the expansive High Plains to a “slight world.” Thus the scope and severity of the dust storms are literally brought from the background to the forefront of the narrative, which not only portrays the sheer extent of this “nightmare of destiny” and the sense of inevitability that accompanies it, but it also inherently shows the reader how to feel about these storms through its sinister descriptions. In this regard, while we don’t read about Steinbeck’s Joads being subjected to dust storms before leaving Oklahoma, the experiences of Babb’s Dunnes as they encounter and survive these storms actively portrays the harsh realities of the 1930s Dust Bowl, which establishes sympathy for them as they struggle to survive in this place they have grown to love.

Following the appearance of this first storm of the season, which begins in a “monotonous soundless deluge” (79) in chapter 14, the dust’s effects on the Dunne family become clear in the following chapter, as the “fine dark loam was drifted like snow” and “the smell of dust was everywhere” (81). In chapter 16, “the sky was obliterated” by the dust’s mid-morning arrival, which then hung around for days (86-87). In these chapters, the events of the novel emphasize the inescapable realities of life in the Dust Bowl, which frustrates the Dunnes through the disruption of their daily lives. Indeed, after introducing the dust storms in these chapters, Babb pays particular attention to the storms’ accumulating effects on the Dunnes as they endure these conditions for an extended period of time.

From a narrative perspective, the portrayal of the dust storms as consistent disruptions risks becoming overly repetitive, considering the regularity with which these

storms hit, and the forced mundanity of life trapped inside the Dunnes' dugout. However, Babb navigates this challenge through the skillful interjection of Julia's diary in chapter 17, which provides variety in the structure and content of the narrative, as well as the ability to efficiently portray an extended period of time in a short amount of space. That is, just as Babb compressed time in the second chapter to emphasize the duration of the Dunnes' relationship to their land, she again manipulates the passage of time here by detailing the events of 27 days, between April 4-30, in a mere six pages. These entries vary in length from abrupt phrases, such as: "*April 5. Today is a terror*" (90), to entries that span two full paragraphs, such as the description of April 10 (91-92). Since the narrative format of a diary entry allows for this variety in the accounts of each day, Babb integrates even more experiences of the dust storms into the novel, which further conveys to the reader the extent of the hardships the Dunnes face while living through these conditions. Moreover, since these diary entries shift the perspective of the narration from third-person omniscient to first-person, these descriptions of the Dust Bowl are thus rendered in the characters' own words, which makes these experiences even more personal for the reader.

Of course, it has been well-established that Julia's diary entries in chapter 17 were largely based on an actual journal kept by Babb's mother, Jennie, during the dust storms of 1935. As Battat writes, although "Babb borrowed the language, structure, and content of her mother's own diary" (55), she also "significantly alter[ed] the final entries in order to use Julia's domestic struggles as the family's motivation for leaving the dust bowl. Whereas Jennie's factual diary ends on a positive note with an April morning 'warm and nice,' Julia's fictional diary concludes with the death of a neighbor and the 'dust still

blowing” (56). That is, while Jennie Babb weathered the storms, Sanora Babb’s revision of the diary emphasizes the cumulative effects that the Dust Bowl had on the people who called “no-man’s land” home, and provided the impetus for the Dunnes to search for better conditions in California. The diary entries thus provide a coherent transition from Babb’s portrayal of life in Oklahoma—from which she drew on her childhood on the Plains, as well as the experiences of her immediate family who lived through the Dust Bowl—to her depiction of the Dust Bowl migrants in California, from which she drew upon her experiences volunteering alongside Tom Collins of the Farm Security Administration, which was the subject of the previous section of this chapter.

Although this diary provides the justification for the Dunnes to leave for California, Babb nevertheless includes seven chapters to wrap up their experiences in Oklahoma between the diary (chapter 17) and Part II, which begins with chapter 25. In these chapters—particularly in chapter 18—Babb expands the narrative scope of *Whose Names Are Unknown* beyond the local and the regional, which had heretofore been the primary focus of the novel, to connect the experiences of the Dunnes and their neighbors to a broader national and global scale. For example, early in this chapter, the neighbors are discussing the death of Starwood, which led “them into the usual discussion of dryland farming. Max and Pete had been telling their new ideas on the depression, farming, the prevention of tragedy, and since everything they said was logical, the farmers listened respectfully” (97). As one of the neighbors agrees with Max and Pete’s points, referring to them as “only horse sense,” they further note that “it needs us and the government working together. Some things is just too dern big for US to do alone” (97). This conversation is particularly noteworthy for its progressive critiques of the

unsustainable agricultural practices that exacerbated the Dust Bowl, and it similarly acknowledges the fact that ecosystems are not generally closed along national borders.

From an ecocritical perspective, then, Babb's novel is noteworthy for its navigation of the question of scale, as it provides sufficient evidence for the Dunne's close relationship to their local environments while also considering these events from a much broader geographic scope. This consideration of both the "local" and the "global" aligns with recent developments in ecocritical discourses—perhaps most concisely embodied by the title of Ursula K. Heise's seminal monograph, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. Moreover, by understanding these dust storms as the result of natural events combined with human behavior, Babb complicates notions of "nature" and "culture" decades before the ecocritical material turn, often associated with Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour, Stacy Alaimo, and Timothy Morton. As such, *Whose Names Are Unknown* can thus be seen by literary critics as a contribution to the growing archive of Anthropocene fictions, as it tackles these issues at a time before the maturation of contemporary environmental thinking.

In this regard, Babb's first- and secondhand experiences on the Southern Plains enables Part I of *Whose Names Are Unknown* to portray the Dust Bowl in a thorough and convincing manner. While many readers—in the late 1930s and the early 2020s alike—lack a point of reference for comprehending the severity of the Dust Bowl, Babb emphasizes the Dunne family's experiences of this disaster to establish the challenges of dwelling in it, which forms the foundation for empathy for this family as they migrate to California, and she moreover critiques the agricultural practices that led to this environmental disaster on a broad scale. Although Babb's novel was precluded from

contributing directly to the public discourses of the time, its empathetic portrayal of these migrants is just as relevant now in a time of accelerating global climate destabilization as it was when Babb completed the first draft in the late 1930s, which will be argued further in the next section.

“We Feel Kind of Like Brothers and Sisters”: Creating an Inclusive Community in an Environmental Disaster

“I have always felt such a westerner, and of course, I am. Mainly tho’ I feel deeply close to the earth, and like being just a speck part of the universe, all entwined with earth dirt, plants, birds, insects, stars and planets.” –Sanora Babb

“I always wanted a lot of experiences and I’ve certainly had them. But best of all I love being alive every minute; I love the earth, I love animals, wild and tame and wild birds, and weeds and trees and all growing things, and our magnificent and still unknown universe. Books! What little pip-squeaks we are in this grand place whirling around in the star-spangled dark.” –Sanora Babb⁵⁸

Considering the varied—and at times, conflicting—feedback that Babb received on *Whose Names Are Unknown* between 1939 and 2004, it is perhaps remarkable that more substantial revisions to the narrative did not occur prior to its eventual publication. As this chapter has argued, the primary revisions that did occur between the first and final drafts were in the form of omissions, as Babb cut the first six chapters due to overlap with *An Owl on Every Post*, and name changes for both people and places.⁵⁹ And although Babb was told on multiple occasions to focus on a single protagonist, rather than a collective family (and their close neighbors), she never did make these changes, instead preferring the focalization of this novel through the experiences of a group rather than an individual. Because of the overlap in content between Babb’s memoir and *Whose Names Are Unknown*—and, indeed, her habit of writing about a family unit consisting of two

daughters, a mother and father, and often a grandfather, which is also a feature of *The Lost Traveler* and several of her early short stories—Babb’s decision to focus on the collective group in this story is yet another result of her and her family’s personal experiences of the Dust Bowl, as she saw how people worked together to survive in these extreme conditions.

Although the Dunne family partially fragments, as the grandfather remains in Oklahoma while the mother, father, and two daughters leave for California, the portrayal of this family’s experiences together, before and during the dust storms, offers an intriguing approach to telling the story of an unprecedented environmental disaster. While the blueprints for contemporary climate change fiction typically include a post-apocalyptic or dystopian society—which is sometimes, using a split narrative, juxtaposed with a naïve pre-collapse society—*Whose Names Are Unknown* instead dwells within the disaster as it unfolds. As the previous section of this chapter has argued, setting the narrative in this manner establishes empathy for the Dunnes as it first develops their connections to this place, before showing the toll that it takes on them as this place grows increasingly inhospitable to human life. In this way, the realistic approach to this narrative focalizes the Dust Bowl through its disruptions to everyday life, which enables the dust storms to be relatable for audiences who may have never seen conditions like those in Cimarron County, Oklahoma. That is, whereas the realities of the Dust Bowl are often incomprehensible to contemporary readers, *Whose Names Are Unknown* highlights the severity of the dust storms while simultaneously clarifying their implications for the individuals who call this place home.

In some ways, *Whose Names Are Unknown*'s approach to portraying this environmental disaster from an anthropocentric perspective is not unlike Steinbeck's approach in *The Grapes of Wrath*, and its emphasis on collective survival in the face of an unprecedented environmental disaster is also similar to Steinbeck's reliance on the "phalanx" unit. That is, both novels feature cooperation among individuals to survive—and not the stereotypical "selfish, panicky, or regressively savage human being" that Solnit argues in *A Paradise Built in Hell* is often perpetuated, but has "little truth to it" (2). And yet, Babb's collectivism is not a white-washed one, and is instead inclusive of all the migrant workers in California. This is demonstrated poignantly in Milt's thoughts as he discusses the eventual strike with Garrison in chapter 37. After Milt and Garrison introduce themselves, "Milt waited automatically to hear the 'suh' and when it did not come, he was relieved. He had been wondering how he would say it, tell him not to. *We're both picking cotton for the same hand-to-mouth wages. I'm no better 'n he is; he's no worse...* Milt looked at him. Garrison looked back, his eyes straight, and there was no difference" (185). Through this portrayal of Milt's sense of solidarity with Garrison, Babb shows how people might come together to form an inclusive community during times of disaster.

Moreover, although Babb's novel is also similar to Steinbeck's insofar as it does not solve the challenges faced by the Dust Bowl migrants, *Whose Names Are Unknown*'s emphasis on the collective offers an arguably more optimistic conclusion than *The Grapes of Wrath*. For example, after the strike is broken, the migrants plan their way forward:

"Well, folks," began a man named Nelsen. "I think we better get down to business so's we can get out of this camp before we're flooded." He stopped and looked

around the tent, and he rested his eyes on a tall thin man with big blurry features and gentle eyes. “We hardly ever move off together like this, but we’re thinking about it now, being’s we all been together through some pretty tough sledding these last few months, and I reckon we feel kind of like brothers and sisters, as we say in the union, and can stand each other a while longer. All of us’re broke, as you may well know, and we can get where we’re going better together. Mr. Hightower has a little something to say to us.” (218)

In this portrayal of a coming flood, Babb’s characters subvert conventional portrayals of panic and chaos that are said to result from disaster, and instead shows them deciding to stay together to survive the impending challenges. Indeed, this privileging of the collective is reinforced in the novel’s concluding paragraph:

It was as if these men and all the men they knew had been standing alone in the wide valleys, dwarfed beneath the western sky, and over to the east the dark Sierra Madres bristled with hidden guns, and over to the west, farther than they could see beyond the fields, the ocean made an end. South to north the valleys curved in a long green flowering bowl, filled with food enough for a nation, while hunger gnawed these workers’ bodies and drained their minds. An old belief fell away like a withered leaf. Their dreams thudded down like the over-ripe pears they had walked on, too long waiting on the stem. One thing was left, as clear and perfect as a drop of rain—the desperate need to stand together as one man. They would rise and fall and, in their falling, rise again. (221-222)

Although *Whose Names Are Unknown* was precluded from contributing to public discourses during the Dust Bowl, its portrayals of the experiences of this environmental disaster are nevertheless uniquely relevant today for their uncompromising recognition of the cross-cultural humanity of the individuals affected by this migration.

For while many Californians resented the influx of Dust Bowl migrants in the 1930s, Babb sought to restore their dignity through her compassionate portrayals of their lives before their hardships intensified, which translate in the novel to the profound senses of loss for these people who become migrants, and a resounding feeling of solidarity as they struggle to survive in the California valleys. In this way, Babb’s approach to *Whose Names Are Unknown* is an important lesson in empathy as climate

change migrations will continue to grow increasingly common and in much greater magnitudes in the decades to come. As a global phenomenon, these changes will affect everyone—albeit disproportionately—and cultivating an inclusive sense of community will grow increasingly important as migrations, both internal and international, will continue to increase in number and in the coming decades.

Chapter 3: “We’re Americans!”: Historical Climate Change Fiction and Kristin

Hannah’s *The Four Winds*

For approximately 65 years, the novelistic portrayal of the Dust Bowl was primarily the domain of John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Aside from a handful of obscure response novels to Steinbeck’s book, his was the only Dust Bowl novel that achieved a substantial readership beyond the state of California. This literary dominion ended in 2004, when Sanora Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown* was published by the University of Oklahoma Press, making it a “new” Dust Bowl novel—despite its first draft being completed nearly simultaneously with Steinbeck’s back in 1939. While Babb’s book added variety to the narratives of Dust Bowl novels, *Whose Names Are Unknown* nevertheless did not approach the popularity of *The Grapes of Wrath*. More recently, a newer Dust Bowl novel, Kristin Hannah’s *The Four Winds*, was published in early 2021 to immediate acclaim. As with Steinbeck’s “big book,” the success of *The Four Winds* is largely due to the established reputation of the author combined with a unique social context at the time of publication: Steinbeck’s novel was released on the heels of the Depression, and Hannah’s was published in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whereas *The Grapes of Wrath* was the bestselling book of 1939, and would go on to win the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, *The Four Winds* spent five weeks atop the *New York Times Bestseller List* and was the Book of the Month club’s Book of the Year for 2021.⁶⁰

It is perhaps surprising that a new novel set during the Dust Bowl would achieve this immediate commercial success in 2021, as there are no shortages of environmental disasters related to present-day climate change from which contemporary environmental

writers might draw inspiration. That is, the Dust Bowl is an arguably niche setting for a novel that achieved broad readership during a time of global climate destabilization. Simply put, as climate change continues to accelerate in the early 2020s, it would perhaps seem more likely that a work of cli-fi set in the present (or near future) would attract more attention, and generate more discussion among its readers, than a work of historical climate fiction set in rural areas nearly a century in the past.

And yet, the success of Hannah's novel is due to a complex array of factors—not the least of which is precisely this decades' long period between the narrative setting and the novel's publication. Indeed, as this chapter will argue, a primary reason for the popularity of *The Four Winds* is the extent to which it successfully appeals to cultural memories established by earlier Dust Bowl novels. To argue this point, this chapter will first comparatively analyze Hannah's novel with the books by Steinbeck and Babb. Because there are only a few Dust Bowl novels that have been widely circulated—and because the first of these is broadly considered an American classic and the second has gained traction among literary scholars—this chapter will begin by analyzing basic plot and narrative similarities between *The Four Winds* and the first two Dust Bowl novels. While this approach to comparative analysis has been completed between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown*, incorporating *The Four Winds* into these conversations will contextualize this new Dust Bowl novel against its historical predecessors in a clear and direct manner, which will establish the full extent to which earlier Dust Bowl narratives have influenced the plot of *The Four Winds*.

After looking at a variety of broad similarities between these three books, tracing the ways in which these earlier writers appear to have shaped Hannah's understanding of

the details of this time-period, this chapter will then focus more narrowly on the specific similarities between the Dust Bowl novels by Steinbeck and Hannah. For multiple reasons—some of which are previewed above—early reviewers of *The Four Winds* drew direct comparisons between it and *The Grapes of Wrath*. This chapter will analyze those connections, and then build on them by comparing the broader contexts of each novel's publication and the ensuing adaptations that followed. After drawing parallels between the works of Steinbeck and Hannah, this chapter will then argue that *The Four Winds* and *Whose Names Are Unknown* perhaps have more in common than *The Four Winds* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, which is largely due to the research that Hannah completed in the Harry Ransom Center using materials in Sanora Babb's archival collection.

After analyzing the influence of the earlier Dust Bowl novels on Hannah's book, this chapter will then approach it in the context of contemporary climate fiction. This section will first identify and define structural qualities of cli-fi narratives, before then interpreting *The Four Winds* against these common tropes. While there are indeed some similarities between conventional approaches to climate change fiction and *The Four Winds*, this section will argue that the latter's success is partially due to the ways in which it subverts these tropes rather than the ways in which it replicates them. While most climate change novels tend to feature pessimistic narrative tropes, Hannah's novel instead offers a more optimistic portrayal of a response to a broad environmental crisis. As this section will argue, Hannah's depiction is largely derived from the influences of Steinbeck and Babb discussed in the first section of this chapter, and is moreover shaped by Hannah's consideration of the sociopolitical tendencies of her target audience. Although the implications of the political and rhetorical appeals in Hannah's novel are

ultimately inadequate to address the complexities of contemporary climate change, this section will nevertheless conclude by arguing that *The Four Winds* offers a point of departure for a much-needed correction to the present body of climate change fiction.

Facts and Fiction: On the Plot and Narrative Similarities in *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and *The Four Winds*

Considering its relatively niche historical setting in the Dust Bowl, it is noteworthy that Kristin Hannah's *The Four Winds* was one of the top-selling books in 2021. This success, however, does not exist in a vacuum. Despite setting the novel in an environmental disaster that has long since faded from popular American consciousness, Hannah's authorial reputation, combined with a uniquely captive audience due to the Covid-19 pandemic, helped fuel her novel's bestsellerdom among American readers. In addition to the context of the novel's publication during a global pandemic, its strong sales figures have also been bolstered by Hannah's clear consideration of her target audience: the largest demographic of readers in the United States is currently white, middle-class women, which aligns well with Hannah's reputation for writing novels with strong female protagonists.⁶¹ That is, Hannah's priorities as a writer generally position her novels for success with current prevailing readership trends. Upon the release of *The Four Winds*, reviewers frequently compared it to *The Grapes of Wrath*, likely due to the combination of their shared focus on the Dust Bowl, the prominence of both writers, and the immediate success of both novels. Of course, although relatively few reviews of *The Four Winds* mention *Whose Names Are Unknown*, Babb's influence on Hannah is also apparent in her novel in a variety of ways, as this section will later detail.

Among all three Dust Bowl novels there are indeed a host of similarities—some of which are perhaps due to historical realities of the Dust Bowl migration, and are therefore generally unavoidable in a novel on the subject—and some of which are perhaps due to direct and indirect influences on these writers by their peers and predecessors. While the previous chapter detailed the exchange of information between Steinbeck and Babb, this chapter will first turn its attention to the plot and narrative commonalities among *The Four Winds*, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*, before engaging in a narrower comparative analysis of Hannah’s novel with Steinbeck’s, and finally her book with Babb’s. The purpose of these comparisons is to situate *The Four Winds* within the context of previous novels set in the Dust Bowl, and to detail the entanglements of influence that have contributed to the plot, structure, and tone of this newest Dust Bowl novel.

Broadly speaking, each of the novels by Steinbeck, Babb, and Hannah begin by orienting the reader to life on the Plains during the Dust Bowl, before then detailing the ensuing westward migration, and then finally showing the many difficulties of securing stable employment and adequate living arrangements in California. Early on, the intensification of the Dust Bowl on the Plains is shown by all three novels to be driven by human impacts on the landscape, while further locating blame for this environmental disaster with the powerful banks who control much of this land. This primarily occurs in *The Grapes of Wrath* in chapter 5, a general chapter, in a conversation during which the owners of the land evict their tenants (31-33), and in *Whose Names Are Unknown* when the neighbors gather to discuss the impacts of dryland farming (97-100) and when Mrs. Starwood confronts the bank over their threats of repossession (111-113).

In *The Four Winds*, this occurs when the residents of the fictional town of Lonesome Tree gather for a visit from Hugh Bennett—who was a real-life soil conservationist for the Roosevelt Administration during the Dust Bowl—who tells the town: “The way y’all farm the land is destroying it. You dug up the grasses which held the topsoil in place. The plow broke the prairie. When the rain died and the wind came up, there was nothing to stop your land from blowing away. This here is a man-made disaster, so we got to fix it. We need the grasses back. We need soil-conservation methods in place,” to which a farmer angrily replies: “It’s the weather and the damn greedy banksters on Wall Street, closing their banks, taking our money, that’s what’s ruining us” (147-148). In this passage, the straightforwardly didactic elements of Bennett’s speech introduce the ecological solutions for mitigating the Dust Bowl to the reader, while also drawing implicit parallels to the roots of present-day climate change for a contemporary audience, as Bennett characterizes it as a “man-made disaster.” Hannah’s inclusion of a scientist as an authority on the ecology of the Dust Bowl moreover parallels the present-day warnings from scientists about the causes and effects of climate destabilization. This passage also introduces contemporary readers to the economic realities of farming on the Plains at this time, which were similarly featured in the earlier Dust Bowl novels, and which also resonate with our contemporary economic disparities.

Although the societal critiques in Hannah’s book mirror those made by Steinbeck and Babb, the tone and conclusions of her writing are perhaps more authoritative than her predecessors. The cause (profit-driven agricultural practices) and effect (the Dust Bowl) are connected in all three books, but while Steinbeck’s critique primarily occurs in a

general chapter and is thus largely separate from the Joad narrative, and while Babb's is channeled through a conversation between two educated brothers, Hannah includes a historical authority on the subject to deliver these points in her novel. This difference in authority—the brothers in Babb's novel are on somewhat equal social standing with Babb's Dunnes, whereas the government-affiliated scientist is perceived by Hannah's Martinellis and their neighbors as condescending—clearly communicates the moralistic implications of the human contributions to the Dust Bowl to the reader. Although Hannah's characters find Bennett to be out of touch with their needs and their way of life, the historical separation from this place and time enables Hannah's readers to understand the validity of Bennett's arguments without the bias exhibited by the town of Lonesome Tree.

As the Dust Bowl persists to the point at which families must consider moving from the Plains, all three novels feature characters who are reluctant to leave, citing a categorical inability to live elsewhere. These characters include Muley Graves and Grampa Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Konkie (often referred to as “the old man”) in *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and Tony and Rose Martinelli in *The Four Winds*. Notably, at least one character in all three of these novels is the grandfather figure in the family, and each of these situations is portrayed in a remarkably consistent way by all three writers. In Steinbeck's novel, Grampa argues that the Joad family should: “go right on along. Me—I'm stayin'. I give her a goin'-over all night mos'ly. This here's my country. I b'long here. An' I don't give a goddamn if they's oranges an' grapes crowdin' a fella outa bed even. I ain't a-goin'. This country ain't no good, but it's my country. No, you all go ahead. I'll jus' stay right here where I b'long” (111). After he passes, Jim Casy

suggests that: “Grampa an’ the old place, they was jus’ the same thing,” clarifying that “Grampa didn’ die tonight. He died the minute you took ‘im off the place” (146). That is, the older generation is used in *The Grapes of Wrath* to depict a sense of place with the home on the Plains from which they are forced to move, which is fundamentally incompatible with the precarity of life as a migrant.

In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, this relationship between the grandfather and the land is similarly present, albeit perhaps not as explicitly articulated; when the family is ready to leave, one of the girls asks why Konkie won’t join them, to which he bluntly replies: ““Now let’s don’t go into that again,’ he said crossly. ‘I can’t, and I don’t feel like talking about it’” (125). In *The Four Winds*, this similarly occurs when Elsa discovers that Tony and Rose would not be joining the other Martinellis on the trip to California, which is neatly summed up by Loreda’s observation: “They’re like a plant that can only grow in one place” (196). While Hannah is unique in her characterization of the older Martinellis’ relationship to this place as akin to plants putting down roots—which reframes this relationship to place from the “human” to the “more-than-human” realm—her portrayal is nevertheless consistent with the earlier novels: although the majority of white settlers on the Southern Plains had not actually called the region home for more than a couple decades, the older generation is still used as a narrative device to convey a deeply-felt connection to this place, which establishes a sense of loss as these families migrate west.

After the decision is made to leave the Plains, all three Dust Bowl novels briefly feature the family’s arrival to the California valleys (Babb 133; Hannah 211; Steinbeck 227). These scenes offer a direct point of contrast to the desolation of the Plains, while

further providing a glimmer of hope that their fortunes will be reversed in California. Nevertheless, these aspirations are quickly dashed, and the families in all three novels struggle to find work and adequate living conditions there. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Joads stay briefly at a Hooverville before finding the government camp, which they are then forced to leave due to a lack of work. In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, the Dunnes quickly find the government camp, though their supplies do not last and they soon apply to receive commodities from the government (145-146). In *The Four Winds*, the Martinellis immediately encounter the prejudice of Californians, who refuse to rent rooms to “Okies” (220). They soon find space in a nearby Hooverville, which is described in the following manner: “Elsa couldn’t believe people lived this way in California. In America. These folks weren’t bindle stiffs or vagabonds or hobos. These tents and shacks and jalopies housed *families*. Children. Women. Babies. People who had come here to start over, people looking for work” (222). In this passage, Elsa’s thoughts reveal inner biases with regards to whom this lifestyle would perhaps be considered acceptable, with American citizenship being one factor that she believes would preclude someone from living “this way,” and with additional prejudice against single male migrant laborers. This implicit weight carried by one’s “American” identity—and the particular emphasis on women and children—in this novel will be analyzed in more detail later in this section. Nevertheless, it is important to note in this general comparative analysis that it is in this camp where Elsa learns to apply for government relief (225-226), and she quickly realizes how much they will have to conserve in order to stretch their resources through periods when there is little work available. Far from solving their

problems, life in California thus becomes yet another experience of struggling to survive on limited resources in all three novels.

These challenges faced by the Dust Bowl migrants are then compounded by the business model of the company stores that were often the only place at which they could shop. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, the store is described in chapter 19, as the general chapter notes: “Then such a farmer really became a storekeeper, and kept a store. He paid the men, and sold them food, and took the money back. And after a while he did not pay the men at all, and saved bookkeeping. These farms gave food on credit. A man might work and feed himself and when the work was done, might find that he owed money to the company” (232-233), which is later contextualized in a narrative chapter as Ma Joad visits the Hooper Ranch store and discovers drastic markups on their items (373-376). In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, this exploitation is described when Milt asserts: “But what makes me mad is those rich bastards can’t make enough sweating the blood out of us, they got to overcharge and cheat us out of our own money. It ain’t how you save pennies that makes you rich, it’s how you steal pennies. Pay ‘em out and steal ‘em back before a man even gets to feel his own money” (180).

While Steinbeck opts for a broader view of this issue that is then focalized through the Joads, and while Babb opts for provocative assertions from one of her main characters, Hannah uses didactic explanations from her narrator, as she summarizes the Martinellis’ experiences in the Welty camp: “They’d had no choice but to fall into the cycle the growers wanted them in: living on credit, building up debt, and never making enough, even with relief, to break out. They had to pick enough to pay off this year’s debt, so they could start living on credit again in the winter when the work vanished”

(372). Through the narrator, Hannah provides a clear explanation of the store system, which is likely unfamiliar to contemporary readers, and then clarifies how it traps the Martinellis in this cycle of poverty. While the company store might perhaps be an unfamiliar setting, the underlying system that results in the rich growing richer at the working class's expense nevertheless resonates with Hannah's readers due to the scope of contemporary economic imbalances, which have also been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. As such, regardless of the specific point of view that delivers this point in the narrative, each of the three Dust Bowl novels consistently clarifies the inaccessibility of basic necessities from the stores at which they are forced to shop in California.

As Dust Bowl migrants endure hostile economic and environmental conditions in the valleys of California, all three novels portray a flood as the climax of their hardships. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, flooding conditions push the remaining members of the Joad family from their boxcar home to higher ground, which results in the famous final scene in the barn. In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, the threat of a coming flood is the impetus for migrants in the camp to band together following their broken strike. In *The Four Winds*, a flash flood washes away much of the Martinellis' money and belongings (312-314). In this way, the floods in all three novels emphasize the precarity of the camps and Hoovervilles in which many migrants lived, and represent the confluence of environmental destabilization with economic loss for Dust Bowl migrants. For contemporary readers experiencing economic turmoil combined with the effects of a destabilizing climate, these situations are particularly poignant, with the implications being that similar situations could occur again.

The primary difference among these portrayals of a flood is its placement in each novel: while flooding conditions conclude the books by Steinbeck and Babb, the flood in Hannah's book occurs earlier in the narrative, and it provides the impetus for the novel's romance storyline as it brings Elsa closer to Jack. This relationship further contributes to her growing political consciousness, and leads to her prominent role in the strike near the novel's end. For contemporary readers, not only does the flooded roadside camp in *The Four Winds* connote recent economic turmoil amid climate uncertainty—from the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis to the increasingly dire predictions of millions of climate refugees in the coming years⁶²—but it also introduces her audience to radical political solutions to the crises of the Dust Bowl migration in a non-threatening matter. That is, Elsa's "wholesome" Plains politics based on the American mythologies of self-reliance and agrarian independence are complicated by the environmental and economic circumstances on the Plains and in California in the 1930s, and the injustices of the situation are laid bare by Jack's passionate appeals to solutions arising from communism. While Elsa never embraces communism as fully as Jack (nor as much as her daughter, Loreda), her role in the strike nevertheless embodies an endorsement of a less sociopolitically conservative perspective than she had previously demonstrated, and which is clearly borne of Jack's influence. As Elsa's position on labor exploitation and justice evolves in *The Four Winds*, Hannah thus filters her critique of the powerful landowners through her narrator's sympathetic point of view, rendering radical politics more palatable for her primary audience.

Notably, while the flooding conditions in the earlier Dust Bowl novels broadly reflect the realities of the time period during which Collins, Babb, and Steinbeck

volunteered together in early 1938 (though there are no specific dates ascribed to the flood in these novels), the flooding in Hannah's novel is explicitly placed in early 1936, as specified by the section heading in which it occurs. Although flooding of this magnitude did not actually occur in these valleys in 1936, Hannah clarifies in the author's note at the end of the book: "There are instances in which I chose to manipulate dates to better fit my fictional narrative. I apologize in advance to historians and scholars of the era" (450-451). With consideration to her research in Babb's archival materials, the timing of this flood is perhaps the most obvious example of this date manipulation, and the details of it were likely directly informed by the accounts of Babb and Steinbeck. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize here that flooding of this magnitude was not particularly common in the California valleys in the second half of the 1930s, and as such, the flooding events in *The Four Winds* are both ahistorical to 1936 and are also therefore likely heavily based on the factual—and fictional—accounts of the floods in 1938 by Babb and Steinbeck.

Beyond the consistent inclusion of a flood in California, there are also a handful of additional scenes in all three books that have similarities in content, but which perhaps arrive at varying points in each narrative. For example, all three Dust Bowl novels depict complications with pregnancies, and the difficulty of finding adequate settings in which to give birth. For example, in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Uncle John sends Rose of Sharon's still-born baby down the river in a box near the novel's conclusion (448), which is unique among Dust Bowl novels as it draws upon Biblical imagery to communicate the direness of this situation. In *Whose Names Are Unknown* and *The Four Winds*, these circumstances are portrayed in a more realistic manner.

In the former, Julia experiences the trauma of a stillbirth while still on the Plains (44), and the Dunne family later helps Woody deliver a stillborn baby in the migrant camp in California (143). In the latter, Elsa similarly loses “her third child” while in Texas (91), and she later helps deliver the stillborn baby of her friend, Jean, at their encampment in California (291). While Steinbeck’s biblical portrayal embellishes the bleak outlook for the migrants in California, Babb’s and Hannah’s emphasis on realism highlights the hostile conditions on both sides of the migration. Of course, these scenes reflect realities of the time, and Babb and Steinbeck were frequently witnesses to these events during their time with Tom Collins, who regularly delivered babies in the homes and camps of the Dust Bowl migrants. These experiences are thoroughly documented in Babb’s archival materials, such as her biographical sketch from March 1978, in which she writes: “We had had some terrible births with half-starved women and starved or dead babies; the women lying on newspapers in tents, not having been allowed to enter local hospitals” (2). While these experiences directly informed events in Babb’s novel, they also likely influenced Hannah’s book, given her time researching at the Harry Ransom Center. And considering that these scenes in *The Four Winds* detail an inhumane response to these white, American women who were part of the Dust Bowl migration, these moments moreover likely resonate strongly with Hannah’s primary audience for her book.

In addition to having similarities in the traumatic circumstances described above, all three Dust Bowl novels also show moments of benevolence, which specifically occur in the context of the general stores on the Plains visited before the migrants reach California. For example, while Mae sells candy below its advertised price in a general

chapter in *The Grapes of Wrath* (161), Flanery sends Milt home with extra food, candy, and tobacco in *Whose Names Are Unknown*, despite his protestations that: “We don’t need any charity yet” (84). In *The Four Winds*, this specific type of benevolence is demonstrated when Mr. Pavlov offers “two [licorice] whips for the price of one,” to which Tony replies “You know I don’t believe in handouts” (145). Nevertheless, Elsa thanks Mr. Pavlov for his kindness, and accepts the gift. In these scenes, Hannah’s novel once again has consistently closer similarities to Babb’s book than to Steinbeck’s, as her dialogue here mirrors that which is found in *Whose Names Are Unknown*. Regardless, across all three books, the stores on the Plains offer a direct contrast to the company stores in California, as they demonstrate the empathy and kindness with which people treated each other on the Plains during the Dust Bowl. These moments are informed by historical accuracy, as people of the Plains were notoriously ideologically resistant to aid—as this chapter will later discuss—while furthermore appealing to popular American “bootstrap” imagery associated with rural agrarian ways of life.⁶³

As this analysis demonstrates, there are a variety of plot similarities among the three Dust Bowl novels, despite the decades that separate their respective publication dates. Although all three books have the shared elements discussed above, early reviewers of *The Four Winds* nevertheless consistently referenced only *The Grapes of Wrath* as a touchstone for this book. As this chapter has argued, the basis for these references to Steinbeck are likely due to their similar settings, their strong authorial reputations, and their immediate reach to a wide audience. Of course, these comparisons are also supported by basic similarities in the plots of these two books. For example, *Publishers Weekly* characterizes *The Four Winds* as “a Tom Joad-like fight for Justice”

(63), and Ron Charles writes for *Washington Post* that “Clearly... Hannah was reading ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’” while writing her novel, noting that: “the echoes of Steinbeck's classic are sometimes so strong that I expected to see the Joads’ Hudson Super Six chugging along the road.” In these references, reviewers broadly allude to the similarities in plot that have been detailed above, as well as some additional parallels in plot and tone between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Four Winds* that are absent from *Whose Names Are Unknown*.

Perhaps the most important of these parallels occurs in both novels’ treatment of race and citizenship in the Dust Bowl crises. For example, a common criticism of Steinbeck’s novel in recent scholarship has been its straightforward emphasis on white citizenship and the “Americanness” of his characters, which is then put in direct contrast to the “foreign” laborers who had historically worked in California’s agriculture.⁶⁴ Simply put, Hannah’s novel mirrors Steinbeck’s as it does not aspire to an inclusive portrayal of this environmental crisis or its corresponding migration. For example, while Steinbeck straightforwardly establishes the citizenship of Dust Bowl migrants in passages such as: “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), Hannah’s novel similarly proclaims: “Damn right. My father fought to make Texas a part of the United States. He joined the Rangers and fought in Laredo and was shot and nearly died. Our blood is in this ground” (23). In these passages, both novels appeal to participation in militaristic violence as a self-evident demonstration of American citizenship, which thereby

highlights the injustices that the white Dust Bowl migrants are forced to endure on the Plains and in California.

This appeal is consistently echoed throughout *The Four Winds*, through repeated references to the mistreatment of migrants despite their “American” identities. The repetition of this word fulfills a variety of functions throughout the novel, as it is presented as evidence of the “hardworking” nature of white settlers on the Plains (76-77; 242; 278), highlighting the prejudice of Californians toward migrants from the Plains (302; 409), establishing skepticism toward the unionization of labor by communist organizations (311), and critiquing the treatment of laborers by the wealthy landowners in California (360; 382-383; 421). Importantly, though, there are a variety of implications of these appeals to American citizenship that are left unexplored by the novel. For example, by leveraging the Americanness of the Dust Bowl migrants as the rationale for the issues listed above, Hannah inherently suggests that people of non-American citizenship do not necessarily deserve the same essential rights as those who are coded as “Americans.” Considering the multiethnic and multinational realities of agricultural labor in California preceding the Dust Bowl migration (and, indeed, succeeding it), this appeal places a clear limitation on the extent to which Hannah objects to agricultural labor exploitation in the United States along racial and ethnic lines. Moreover, as with *The Grapes of Wrath*—and in contrast to *Whose Names Are Unknown*—*The Four Winds* portrays a primarily white cast of characters, which further implicitly limits the scope of Hannah’s critiques. Not only is “American” cited as a reason that Dust Bowl migrants deserve better treatment, but it limits the definition of who, precisely, constitutes this “American” identity.

This point is further demonstrated in *The Four Winds* by a speech from Jack, as the Dust Bowl migrants rally toward a labor strike. Here, Jack proclaims that “Eight years ago, Mexicans picked almost all of the crops in this great valley,” before adding: “They came, they picked, and they returned home for the winter. Invisible to the locals at every stage. Until the Crash of ‘29 broke the system and made Californians afraid for their jobs. They feared who Americans always fear: the outsider. So the state cracked down on illegal immigrants and called the Mexicans criminals and deported them” (409). In these opening statements, Jack’s phrasing communicates sympathy toward Mexican migrant workers as he is careful to locate the perception of them as “criminals” with the xenophobia of the state, and not as an accurate characteristic of these individuals. This declaration performs a dual purpose, as it not only directly addresses the fears of his audience within the novel, but it moreover echoes the high-profile discourses on immigration in recent years for Hannah’s readership. By incorporating this didactic speech into the novel through Jack, Hannah is thus able to emphasize the injustices felt by migrants in the 1930s while also connecting them to recurring debates over citizenship and identity in American history.

In this speech, Jack proceeds to explain that the Dust Bowl pushed migrants from the Southern Plains west, who then became a large portion of the agricultural work force in California: “You came west, needing jobs, just wanting to put food on your tables and feed your families. You took the Mexicans’ places in the fields. Now, your people make up ninety percent of the pickers. But you don’t want to be unseen, do you? You came to live here, to put down roots, to be *Californians*” (409). At this moment, Jack implicitly acknowledges the double standards by which the Dust Bowl migration is perceived

relative to migrations of other agricultural workers, though he does so uncritically; the emphasis on “Californians” aligns with the novel’s recurring appeals to American citizenship, without extending the implied rights that accompany this identity marker to those “unseen” Mexican migrants. In this manner, Jack’s speech echoes the stance taken by Steinbeck in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Harvest Gypsies*: while both appear to be sympathetic to the exploitation of migrants of color, they nevertheless emphasize the rights of white Dust Bowl migrants in their pursuit of justice for agricultural laborers in California. That is, both appeal primarily to the “empathetic value of white skin” previously discussed in the first chapter (Gregory 81).

These differences inherent to Jack’s perception of Mexican migrants and Dust Bowl migrants have important implications for the rights of each corresponding group. As Jack claims that only Dust Bowl migrants want to be “*Californians*,” a person in the crowd yells: “We’re Americans!” to which Jack responds: “Here you have the right to be paid for your labor, and fairly. You have the *right* to a living wage, but you have to fight for it. They won’t just give it to you. They care more about their wallets than your survival. We have to join together. Men, women, and children who pick crops. We have to band together and rise up and say *NO MORE*. We won’t be treated as worthless” (409-410). In this appeal for migrants to unionize and strike against unacceptable working conditions and unlivable wages, Jack’s logic is thus predicated on racial difference: as white Americans, the Dust Bowl migrants are urged to assert essential rights that are implied to be inaccessible to migrants of color. This appeal to unionization moreover presents this radical solution of unionization in a palatable way for Hannah’s target audience, which is primarily made up of white, middle-class women, as the action on

unionization is framed as a response to the deprivation of fundamental “American” rights. That is, Jack’s radical politics in *The Four Winds* are framed as a defense of American values, which preempts potential backlash from Hannah’s more conservative readers, and which echoes the approaches to unionization portrayed in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown*.

Beyond these similarities in plot, there are indeed important distinctions between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Four Winds*. For example, after noting that Hannah’s Martinellis have a similar experience in California as Steinbeck’s Joads, a review published in the *Economist* nevertheless identifies a primary difference between the two novels: “Unlike ‘The Grapes of Wrath’, John Steinbeck’s seminal work of 1939, it chronicles the Dust Bowl, when storms and drought led more than 3m people to abandon their farms in the Great Plains, solely from a female perspective.” In an interview with Jen Doll, Hannah notes that this is an intentional decision, stating that “the most beautiful story arc,” in her opinion, is: “Female strength, female empowerment, female friendship, motherhood—these are things that I believe in. What I really love is taking those themes and issues and blowing the barn doors off by including them in places that you don’t expect, in more historically male situations” (27). And yet, while the Dust Bowl is characterized by Hannah as a “historically male situation,” this assertion is perhaps a reductive one in the context of previous novels on the Dust Bowl, as it broadly ignores the volunteering experiences and literary work of Sanora Babb while also minimizing the centrality of female characters in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

This claim is also inaccurate with consideration to the historical record of the people who were part of the Dust Bowl migration. While James N. Gregory notes that

“fifty-three percent” of Dust Bowl migrants were male, he pointedly argues that this is “a rather small proportion for a migrating population since young males are the prime candidates for relocation in most cultures and situations. Although single men frequently went to California on their own, what stood out about the Dust Bowl migration was the preponderance of families on the move” (19). Although migration has perhaps been a predominantly male enterprise in the broader history of the United States, the specific context of the Dust Bowl migration is nevertheless a uniquely poor representative example of this trend, which was, in reality, much more of a family affair. Indeed, this historical reality is likely the reason that all three Dust Bowl novels centralize the westward migration of a family unit rather than a single character. This also indicates that *The Four Winds*’s emphasis on the regularity of husbands and fathers abandoning their family during the 1930s Dust Bowl—which primarily occurs when Rafe abandons the Martinellis, though it is also present during the family’s drive to California—is generally inaccurate for this time and place.

Aside from mischaracterizing the demographics of migrants who relocated during the Dust Bowl migration, what is primarily noteworthy about Hannah’s comments about this “historically male situation” is the obscuring effect on her research in Sanora Babb’s archival collection, as well as the complete omission of Babb’s published works, including her Dust Bowl novel, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and her collection of short stories, *The Dark Earth and Selected Prose from the Great Depression*. Although Babb’s influence has arguably been understated, Hannah does include the following note in the acknowledgments section of *The Four Winds*: “Thank you to the University of Texas at Austin and the Harry Ransom Center. The original papers of Sanora Babb were

invaluable. Her novel *Whose Names Are Unknown* is a must-read for anyone interested in the time period” (453). And, in the Book Club companion to *The Four Winds*, Hannah similarly points to the work of artists such as Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein as influences on her novel, before mentioning: “Both the University of Texas at Austin and the University of California at Bakersfield offered helpful resources. The more I read about the people who survived this era, the more pressure I felt to get their stories right” (6). While UC Bakersfield is home to the Dust Bowl Migration Archives, UT Austin houses the Sanora Babb Collection, though Hannah does not clarify this, or mention Babb by name, in this reference. This is important to note as it is difficult to understand the characterization of the Dust Bowl as a “historically male situation” while simultaneously centering the novel’s research around female voices, and then not amplifying them in a stronger manner.

And when Babb is mentioned in early reviews of *The Four Winds*, it is often with inaccurate claims over the relationship between Steinbeck and Babb, which was detailed in chapter two. For example, Elisabeth Egan notes in her review in *New York Times* that Hannah was inspired “by the writings of Sanora Babb, an aspiring journalist who documented life in migrant camps for the Farm Security Administration, only to have her own novel in progress scooped by ‘The Grapes of Wrath.’” As the second chapter argues, this claim of a “scooped” project is reductive and inaccurate according to a thorough review of published and archival materials relating to Steinbeck, Babb, and Tom Collins. Moreover, these claims also preemptively minimize the similarities between Hannah’s novel and the work of her predecessors. Indeed, both Steinbeck and Hannah likely had access to some of Babb’s written materials while they planned their novels—Steinbeck’s

access facilitated by Collins, and Hannah's via the Harry Ransom Center Archives—and both of *their* novels achieved immediate bestsellerdom, while Babb's did not. As such, it is also untenable for reviews of *The Four Winds* to repeat these inaccurate claims of a “scooped” story by Steinbeck, while also neglecting to acknowledge the full influence that Babb's notes and fiction also had on Hannah's writing.

With consideration to this point, it is moreover noteworthy that there will likely be one additional similarity between *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Four Winds*, though it has not yet come to fruition at the time of writing this dissertation. Following the immediate success of *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939, a film adaptation of it was released the following year. Given *The Four Winds*'s high volume of sales—and the fact that three of the last four novels by Hannah have had film adaptations—it is anticipated that a Hollywood version of this novel will be produced in the near future. Because there is little information available about this project, and because it has not yet been produced, it is impossible to analyze it here in this chapter. Nevertheless, this point is relevant to mention, as an adaptation of this successful novel will sustain contemporary engagements with the Dust Bowl for a while longer, and it would continue to spur discourse on this historical climate change in a manner that will likely parallel the ways in which the film adaptation of *The Grapes of Wrath* extended the focus on the Dust Bowl in public discourses in the early 1940s. But there is also a noteworthy effect resulting from the adaptation of *The Four Winds*, as Joanne Dearcopp, Babb's friend and final literary agent, has also had *Whose Names Are Unknown* adapted into a film script (“re: Sanora Babb”). However, given Hannah's reputation and her history of successful film adaptations, Dearcopp suggests that this script is no longer a viable project to pitch to

production companies. That is, more than eight decades after Babb's novel was preempted by an established author whose story was then adapted to film, a similar situation is presently unfolding in the realm of film adaptations of *The Four Winds* and *Whose Names Are Unknown* in the early 2020s, as these very same characteristics are positioned to preclude—or “scoop”—a film adaptation of Babb's novel.

Beyond these similarities in the contexts of *Whose Names Are Unknown* and *The Four Winds*, there are also more straightforward examples of Babb's influence on Hannah's writing within this novel. Perhaps the most obvious example of this influence is the epigraph taken from *Whose Names Are Unknown*, which quotes from the conclusion of Babb's novel in the introduction to the final section of *The Four Winds*, set in 1936: “One thing was left, as clear and perfect as a drop of rain—the desperate need to stand together as one man. They would rise and fall and, in their falling, rise again” (222). Epigraphs are conventionally used to introduce concepts from, or to draw comparisons to, other works, and it is noteworthy that the final sentences from *Whose Names Are Unknown* quite literally introduce the conclusion of *The Four Winds*. Importantly, the passage used in this epigraph is an ideological declaration borne of Babb's political allegiances in the 1930s, and which do not accurately reflect the historical realities of unionization among Dust Bowl migrants. Indeed, this point is reflected in Ralph Ellison's early criticism of Babb's first draft of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, as he urged her in a letter from circa 1943 that the ending “should have been ... given in terms of their voices, their idioms, their emotions, not yours” (1). As Ellison notes, Babb's concluding scene that portrays a collective of Dust Bowl migrants is not grounded in fact, as migrants from

the Southern Plains were notoriously averse to unionization, and instead presents a moment of wishful thinking from Babb as she brings her novel to a close.

Given its inclusion as an epigraph in Hannah's book, it is thus clear that Babb's ideologically-oriented conclusion—which privileges the broad strength and resiliency of the Dust Bowl migrants over the realities that these people were generally averse to unionization—shapes the implications of Hannah's conclusion in *The Four Winds*. In Hannah's novel, this sentiment is expressed in a passage that bears similarity to this epigraph, though it appears before the novel's attempted strike, rather than after it. As Hannah writes: "They were like her. Today, they were part of a new group: people who stood up, used their voices to say *No more*" (431). In this passage, Hannah collapses the experiences of the Dust Bowl migrants into that of the protagonist, Elsa, and declares that they have become "a new group," which echoes Babb's characterization of "the desperate need to stand together as one man." And yet, these appeals to unity are not an accurate characterization of Dust Bowl migrants' sentiments, which were, historically speaking, individualistic rather than collectivist in scope. As is perhaps hinted by the shared undertones of these conclusions, the final chapters of these two novels also have much in common with regards to plot; as with *Whose Names Are Unknown*, the conclusion of *The Four Winds* similarly follows an attempted strike that was successfully busted, and with its characters coping with this new reality.

The conclusions of these two novels also feature another prominent example of the ways in which *The Four Winds* is remarkably similar to *Whose Names Are Unknown*, as both include an eviction notice, from which Babb's novel takes its name. In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, this eviction note is introduced two pages before the end of the

novel, during a powerful scene in which migrants gather together to support each other after the strike—which, indeed, is the very scene from which Hannah pulls the epigraph for her novel. In *Whose Names Are Unknown*, the eviction notice appears in the following format, which is included here in full for important details of its content and formatting:

To John Doe and Mary Doe, whose true names are unknown:

You and each of you will please take notice that you are required to vacate and surrender up to me the premises now occupied by you; said premises being known as the California Lands Unit 20.

This is intended as a three day's notice to vacate said property upon the grounds that you are in unlawful possession thereof, and unless you do vacate the same as above stated, the proper action at law will be brought against you for the restoration of said premises to me.

Manager, Hayes and Berkeley Company. (220)

To clarify, this eviction notice is based on a real document from this time and place, and its inclusion in *Whose Names Are Unknown* has an interesting history: it was not present in Babb's first draft, but was instead suggested by Julie Shilling during the revision process in the early 2000s. As Dearcopp writes in a letter to Shilling on August 3, 2003: "Sanora liked your suggestion of getting the eviction notice in at the end. I've put in the copy from a March 7 1938 eviction notice (but omitted the description of location). Sanora likes the idea of using the actual notice to link back to the title of the book" (2), before then including a brief preview of how this eviction notice has been incorporated into the text. The eviction notice is thus not part of Babb's first draft, though its inclusion in the final manuscript involved deliberate formatting alterations as it was integrated into the narrative of *Whose Names Are Unknown*.

This particular eviction notice, referenced above in Dearcopp's letter, is moreover located in Babb's archival collection. Its original format is as follows:

To John Doe and Mary Doe, whose true names are unknown:

You and each of you will please take notice that you are required to vacate and surrender up to me the premises now occupied by you; said premises being known as the California Lands Unit 20 located in the Southwest Quarter of Section 27, Township 16 South , Range 25 East, Mount Diablo Base and Meridian.

This is intended as a three day's notice to vacate said property upon the grounds that you are in unlawful possession thereof, and unless you do vacate the same as above stated the proper action at law will be brought against you for the restoration of said premises to me.

Dated At Oroshi, California / March 7th, 1938. ("Eviction Notice" 1)

Despite the minor formatting changes noted in Dearcopp's letter above, the original phrasing of this eviction notice has been largely maintained in its insertion into Babb's novel. The primary revisions to it are the removal of the specific address at the end of the first paragraph and the replacement of the date and location at the end with a more specific attribution of this letter to the company's manager. These revisions thus maintain the general authenticity of the note's language and tone while adjusting its source to align within the fictional narrative setting.

These specific formatting adjustments between the original document and *Whose Names Are Unknown* are particularly noteworthy here, as the eviction notice in *The Four Winds* maintains a remarkably similar form. It appears in Hannah's novel as such:

To John Doe and Mary Doe, whose true names are unknown:

You will please take notice that you are required to vacate and surrender up to me the premises now occupied by you; said premises being known as California Lands Unit 10.

This is intended to be a three days' notice to vacate said property on the grounds that you are in unlawful possession thereof, and unless you do vacate the same as the above stated, the proper action at law will be brought against you.

Thomas Welty, owner, Welty Farms. (420)

As is immediately apparent, the language of the eviction notice in *The Four Winds* closely mirrors that of the historical document in Babb's archives and that of its modified version in *Whose Names Are Unknown*. Aside from the minor omission of "and each of

you” in the first sentence, the single difference in the first paragraph of the notice in *The Four Winds* and the notice in *Whose Names Are Unknown* is that Hannah places this notice from Unit 10, whereas Babb’s novel maintains the original Unit 20. There are similarly minor revisions to the second paragraph, with the substitution of “on” instead of “upon” in the first sentence, and the omission of “for the restoration of said premises to me” in the second sentence, which do not substantially alter the meaning or tone of the letter. Finally, Hannah’s eviction notice concludes in the same manner as the revised version in *Whose Names Are Unknown*, with attribution to a singular authority figure in lieu of a more general date and place, which makes sense as Welty is an important character in *The Four Winds*.

As should be clear in this comparative reading of the eviction notice in *Whose Names Are Unknown* and *The Four Winds*, Hannah’s inclusion of this note directly pulls material from Babb’s novel and archival collection—and revises it slightly—but fails to appropriately credit these sources. While Hannah offers passing acknowledgments of her time at the Harry Ransom Center, and notes that “the original papers of Sanora Babb were invaluable” (453) in her research, this is nevertheless an inadequate citation for the extent to which her novel’s eviction notice obviously borrows from Babb’s archival research materials, as well as the final draft of her Dust Bowl novel.

Although the epigraph from *Whose Names Are Unknown* and the details within the eviction notice are the most concrete examples of Babb’s direct influence on Hannah, it is also likely that Hannah learned much about the process of relief for Dust Bowl migrants from Babb’s archival collection. While Hannah’s novel is somewhat unique in comparison to the works by Steinbeck and Babb in that it does not feature a scene in an

FSA camp, Hannah nevertheless frequently depicts Elsa seeking relief from the state in *The Four Winds*. This pursuit of relief is not without hesitation from the novel's Dust Bowl migrants. When Elsa is asked if she intends to register for relief, she responds: "No. I'll find a job, but I was told I needed to register. Just in case" (244). Her decision to apply for assistance is ultimately a good idea, as their relief is invaluable once they qualify for it. Nevertheless, this assistance is insufficient to support them, and this process of applying for it (and the reluctance of Dust Bowl migrants in general to pursue it) are thoroughly illuminated in Babb's archival collection and novel.

Given Hannah's consultations at the Harry Ransom Center, it is likely that Babb's materials helped inform this portrayal of state relief. For example, Babb's collection includes a seven-page letter that she wrote to her sister, Dorothy, while she volunteered in a relief office in Porterville, California. In this letter, Babb frequently describes the reluctance of migrants to accept aid, noting variously that, "The thing that perhaps impressed me even more than that is the courage of the people living under such conditions. They are all very proud, and several of the new ones simply had to be pressed to accept relief because they had children and were hungry and there is no more work here now" (2), and that families "want to work, and they don't like relief" (2). This reluctance to accept assistance is moreover featured in Babb's novel, as Milt bluntly states, "We don't want no relief" (136) shortly after they arrive at the government camp, to which Mrs. Starwood agrees: "None of us people wants relief if we could get work. God knows, a man could earn more with working and be a lot happier" (137). That is, Babb's personal experiences in the field dealing with migrants' attitudes to state relief directly informed her Dust Bowl novel—both of which appear to have heavily influenced

Hannah's depiction of relief in *The Four Winds*. Of course, the early skepticism of the residents of Lonesome Tree to government assistance aligns with the Martinellis' disinclination to apply for government assistance in California, and directly contrasts with their eventual embrace of workers' rights in California.

This political awakening is introduced in *The Four Winds* through the character of Jack, who is also another point of confluence between Hannah's novel and *Whose Names Are Unknown*, as this character has similarities with Babb's character, Pedro. With regards to Babb's character, literary scholars have generally interpreted Pedro as a fictionalization of Carlos Bulosan, who was a Filipino novelist and poet, and one of Babb's close personal friends during the late 1930s. A handful of letters from Bulosan are located in Babb's archival collection, which detail his involvement in labor organization in California at this time. For example, a letter sent from Bulosan to Babb on November 22, 1935, begins by rhetorically wondering whether "it pays to really, wholeheartedly devote oneself to the working class, fight for them, open their eyes to day, live with them, and even die for them. Somehow it pays, for the moment," before then proclaiming: "That is why we are drawn together, for the workers. For the working class is at stake" (1). These ruminations not only highlight the political leanings of Bulosan, but also the motivations that fueled his efforts toward labor organization at this time, which parallels Pedro's role in convincing Milt Dunne to join the strike in *Whose Names Are Unknown* (194-195). Nevertheless, it should be noted here that Babb's fictionalization of Bulosan is without the clear passion behind his activism, as Pedro's dialogue in *Whose Names Are Unknown* has a noticeably more succinct and matter of fact tone, and their similarities appear to be limited to their racial identities and political alignments. Meanwhile, the

personality of Hannah's character, Jack, appears to have much in common with Bulosan, albeit from a white perspective. Their shared energy is evident in Jack's speeches quoted above, as he introduces radical politics to *The Four Winds* in a charismatic and romantic manner.

Finally, there is one parallel between *Whose Names Are Unknown* and *The Four Winds* that is likely unintentional, but which is nevertheless interesting to note with regards to the ways in which these novels were revised. This similarity is in the ways in which Hannah's novel is demarcated into sections, as *The Four Winds* is divided into distinct parts organized by year, aside from the prologue which has no definite time-period assigned to it. These years include 1921, 1934, 1935, 1936, and an epilogue set in 1940. Perplexingly, though, the plot does not always align with these specified dates. For example, the section set in 1921 stretches until at least February 1922 (55), and the 1934 section extends into "mid-March" of 1935 (157) – despite there being a separate section that corresponds to that particular year. While these contradictions do not necessarily impede the comprehension of the narrative itself, the clumsy handling of time is nevertheless a curious aspect of this high-profile novel, and it is surprising that these discrepancies appear in the final printed version of *The Four Winds*.

While this is likely a minor oversight by Hannah, it is interesting to note that Babb also had similar issues tracking time in the first draft of her novel. As Dearcopp explains in a letter from March 6, 2003, aside from part one of *Whose Names Are Unknown* (set in Oklahoma) and part two (set in California), "There were originally four time designations (e.g. First Autumn, Fourth Summer) but these were not always consistent with the body copy and quite confusing. Thus, they have been removed from

this [manuscript] and the passage of time conveyed through the body copy” (1). And so, because there were inconsistencies in Babb’s original labeling of the passage of time, direct references to the specific seasons were omitted from the final manuscript by the team that revised it. Once again, while it is unlikely that Hannah would intentionally replicate this aspect of Babb’s first draft—particularly one that adds confusion to the reading experience and which was resolved before the final draft of Babb’s novel was published—it is nevertheless noteworthy here as a final example of the myriad ways in which Hannah’s book has echoes of its predecessors.

Of course, it should also be noted that there are indeed a handful of moments in which *The Four Winds* diverges from the details of *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and the contents of Babb’s archival collection. For example, while Hannah places the Martinellis in Yolo County for picking peaches, noting the youngest child, Ant, helps the family pick (263-264), a letter from Collins to Babb clarifies that peaches would be picked in the towns of Marysville and Gridley, and he specifically states that there would not be any work for children in peach picking (3). This is not to suggest that Hannah’s choice of geographic location here is necessarily inaccurate for peaches due solely to its omission from Collins’s letter, but instead to highlight slight differences between Babb’s archives and Hannah’s book, noting that not all of Hannah’s portrayals of the Dust Bowl migration can be neatly traced back to Babb’s written works or archival materials. Although Hannah appears to have been influenced by Babb in many ways, there are nevertheless a handful of straightforward moments in which her book diverges from those by Steinbeck and Babb.

And yet, as this comparative analysis demonstrates, the plot of Kristin Hannah's *The Four Winds* has much in common with its literary predecessors. With consideration to the full extent to which this most recent Dust Bowl novel has similarities to those by Steinbeck and Babb, it is perhaps unfortunate that an interviewer noted that when she set out to write her novel, "her plot was already suggested" (Doll). Aside from a handful of unique narrative details and plot points in *The Four Winds*, there are indeed myriad similarities in its narrative with those of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown*, and many of these points of commonality are unacknowledged or under-cited by Hannah. Moreover, there are important similarities in tone and in subtext of these books that have been previewed above, and which are particularly relevant in the consideration of Hannah's novel as a work of contemporary climate change fiction, which will be the focus of the next section of this chapter.

***The Four Winds* and Cli-Fi**

With regards to genre, *The Four Winds* is somewhat unique as it participates in both historical fiction and in climate change fiction. As a movement derived from science fiction, cli-fi frequently features the trope of time manipulation to unite decisions made in the present with their long-ranging implications for the coming decades. That is, many works of cli-fi are set in the present and future, often in split narrative formats, to show the dangers of present-day inaction on climate change as the effects of this passivity eventually become realized in the long-term. Although revisiting the past is not an innovation in cli-fi – for example, Maja Lunde's *The History of Bees* (2015) is partially set in 1852, with the novel's other two timelines occurring in 2007 and 2098 – what is

uncommon about *The Four Winds* is that it does not reconnect the past with the present or future in its narrative structure. Instead, *The Four Winds* is set across several different time-periods, all of which take place between 1921 and 1940, and these jumps in time fulfill different functions in this novel than is typical of climate fiction: as a work of historical climate fiction, the parallels between the Dust Bowl and climate change are left for the reader to infer based on the ways in which this past event is described in the novel, with the speech by the government scientist, Hugh Bennett, analyzed in the previous section being a straightforward example of Hannah's didactic approach to describing the Dust Bowl in contemporary terms.

There are a variety of implications for setting a work of climate fiction in the past without explicitly connecting its timelines to the present or future. While Hannah's novel approaches cli-fi from a historical manner, the common future-oriented trope in cli-fi is often entwined with related narrative devices in the genre, as climate fiction narratives frequently depict dystopian or apocalyptic scenarios, and many of these narratives are laced with irony or satire. These features are perhaps unsurprising, as the current state of global efforts to combat climate change do not offer much cause for optimism. That is, when it comes to writing about environmental disasters, there is a seemingly endless supply of grist for the "cli-fi" mill in contemporary times, which has heretofore influenced pessimistic portrayals of the present and future in climate change fiction.

In this context, the historical orientation of *The Four Winds* evades these enviro-pessimistic foundations in a couple ways. First, by turning its attention solely to the past – with only implied connections to the present – Hannah writes a novel about a historical environmental disaster that has long since had closure. While future-looking cli-fi creates

space for an open-ended conclusion, this historical example is less amenable to the “conventional” pessimism of the genre since there have been eight decades since the 1930s Dust Bowl was resolved. Since there has long since been a clear conclusion to the dueling crises of drought on the Plains and migrant camps in California, there is thus an assurance that this particular historical environmental disaster will not directly result in a dystopian regime or large-scale societal collapse. And by choosing this particular setting in the Dust Bowl, Hannah’s novel also derives much of its content and tone from her historical predecessors in Steinbeck and Babb, who have already characterized this disaster as one of human strength and resiliency, which is generally at odds with the negative portrayals commonly found in climate fiction today.

As the first two chapters have argued, Steinbeck and Babb approached their Dust Bowl novels with palpable compassion for the people affected by the Dust Bowl, and both attempted to assuage the crises of the late 1930s in a variety of ways, from direct action to literary projects. This care and concern effervesced throughout their novels and became inextricable from cultural memories of the Dust Bowl, from which Hannah drew while writing *The Four Winds*. That is, in addition to the myriad ways in which the plot of Hannah’s novel parallels the books by Steinbeck and Babb, her purposes for writing this new Dust Bowl novel is also implicitly influenced by her predecessors, as *The Four Winds* is also a proponent of optimism in the face of existential threats from environmental disasters. Of course, this optimism is nevertheless not without its own limitations, given the predispositions of the characters within Hannah’s novel, as well as those of her primary target audience in the early 2020s.

Nevertheless, as this section will argue, the optimism of *The Four Winds* subverts many of the common tropes of contemporary climate change fiction, and is one of the reasons for the novel's immediate success in 2021. To argue this point, this section will first provide a brief overview of the common tropes of the "genre" of cli-fi, showing how their inherent pessimism functions as an echo chamber, becoming a positive feedback loop in literary and popular discourses on climate change. This section will then briefly engage with how historical fiction subverts these premises, before then pivoting to a discussion of how the influences of Steinbeck and Babb—as well as the specific subject matter of the Dust Bowl—helped position *The Four Winds* for its success in 2021. After discussing the alternating ways in which Hannah's novel subverts and embraces the tropes commonly found in cli-fi, this section will then conclude by arguing that its overall emphasis on hope offers a new point of departure for contemporary climate fiction—even with its numerous inherent flaws.

Before engaging with *The Four Winds* as a work of cli-fi, it will first be helpful to briefly discuss what the term does—and does not—encompass. So far, this dissertation has referred to climate change fiction as a relatively new "movement" or "genre." This characterization, however, is technically fraught in two different ways. On the one hand, as the basic existence of Dust Bowl fiction from the late 1930s suggests, literature has long engaged with environmental and climate-related issues, which is perhaps obscured by the characterization of cli-fi as a new idiom. That is, climate change fiction is not actually a wholly new entity and is instead an extension of a long tradition of environmental novelistic writing. However, while environmental fiction has long existed, the host of environmental phenomena that have been referred to in recent decades under

the rubrics of “global warming,” “climate change,” “the Anthropocene,” and a variety of other less common but similarly oriented phrases have signaled a shift in intellectual paradigms with regards to broad contemporary environmental concerns. With this in mind, this dissertation refers to “climate change fiction” as a movement that consciously engages with these recent intellectual paradigms, and which represents a movement that originated in the 1980s with the rising awareness of global warming, and which began to rapidly grow in the early 2000s as more attention was paid to what has become known as climate change. Hence, *The Four Winds* is a work of cli-fi due to its date of publication, whereas *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown* are not.⁶⁵

On the other hand, references to this new *genre* of climate change fiction are also perhaps technically inaccurate, as there is debate on whether it fully conforms to academic conventions of the term “genre.” As Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra explain, cli-fi “lacks the plot formulas and stylistic conventions that characterize genres such as sci-fi and the western,” before noting that it: “borrow[s] from and often embrac[es] elements of different existing genres, it provides a convenient term for an already significant body of narrative work broadly defined by its thematic focus on climate change and the political, social, psychological and ethical issues associated with it” (1-2). Meanwhile, Amitav Ghosh writes that “there is now a new genre of science fiction called ‘climate fiction’ or cli-fi” (72), and Shelley Streeby argues that “climate change fiction is best situated within the larger category of speculative fiction, an umbrella genre that includes science fiction and fantasy” (4). While agreeing that it is a “new” iteration of science fiction and speculative fiction, Ghosh and Streeby nevertheless retain differing opinions on the umbrella under which it falls, which further signifies the

lack of critical consensus over what, exactly, cli-fi is, and how it specifically relates to other categories commonly imposed upon fiction.

With this in mind, this dissertation will variously refer to cli-fi as a “movement,” “genre,” or “subgenre” for variety in phrasing, but with acknowledgment there is an ongoing debate over which is the most appropriate term. The most important implication of this discussion of climate fiction is that while it does not necessarily have a unique set of formal conventions that characterizes it as a genre, it nevertheless does generally have a host of conventions at its disposal that are often associated with science fiction and speculative fiction. As Goodbody and Johns-Putra note, within cli-fi: “A particularly influential mode of writing has been apocalypse, which plays on fears and conveys a sense of the extreme urgency of radical action, but also prominent is its double, pastoral, which conjures up images of harmonious living and cultivates a nostalgic feeling of loss and potential restoration,” and they proceed to note that climate fiction also borrows from “genre models” of the detective story, thriller, and *Bildungsroman*, while also noting specific sub-genres of post-apocalyptic cli-fi, ecotopian narrative, techno-thriller, biopunk, and sci-fi futurist history—the latter of which they note is particularly amenable to satire (12-13). And so, despite the ambiguity noted above, there is nevertheless a clear lineage of influence on the narrative tropes that are found in many pieces of climate change fiction.⁶⁶ However, it is also important to note that a work of fiction does not necessarily require the usage of these conventions to be considered a work of cli-fi.

What is particularly noteworthy about many of these narrative conventions is the eminence of pessimism engrained into the formal structure of these narratives. As Streeby argues, “many recent speculative fictions . . . make climate change the central

problem in imagining the future, often in a dystopian mode. That's not surprising, because imaging the future of climate change at this moment is frightening" (4). Johns-putra similarly notes that most cli-fi is apocalyptic or dystopian (38), and Antonia Mehnert aligns this tendency toward dystopia with "Western society's 'dwelling in crisis'" (10), while further arguing that many cli-fi novels "outline what would be commonly defined as dystopias—places and societies that are generally considered worse than current ones," before noting: "unlike traditional dystopias, which tend to end with the worsening of the depicted doom scenario, the open-endedness and generic ambiguity of climate change fiction impedes closure. It thereby underscores climate change's aporetic nature" (42). While Mehnert here creates space for a work of cli-fi to function as a cautionary tale, Ghosh argues that this approach actually precludes the success of a piece of climate fiction, as he writes: "cli-fi is made up mostly of disaster stories set in the future, and that, to me, is exactly the rub. The future is but one aspect of the Anthropocene: this era also includes the recent past, and, most significantly, the present" (72). Ultimately then, critics tend to agree that climate fiction predominantly deploys dystopian and apocalyptic modes of writing—though Ghosh's acknowledgment of the past here aligns well with Hannah's historically-oriented approach to her novel—but they disagree on the implications of these narrative approaches, and the degree to which a consideration of the present (along with the future) is necessary.

While Ghosh suggests that the tendency to situate cli-fi narratives in the future is overused and counterproductive, Mehnert points to the success of Rachel Carson's appeals to apocalypse in *Silent Spring* (29) before concluding that: "the authors of these works [of cli-fi] could be considered as (artistic) whistleblowers in and of a society that

increasingly dwells in crisis” (44). And yet, the fundamental issue with Mehnert’s assertion here is that climate change is (and was, in 2016, in the year in which her book was published) actively affecting communities around the world. Bluntly stated, the time for traditional cautionary tales has passed, and Mehnert’s argument that current writers of cli-fi are “whistleblowers” counterintuitively supports Ghosh’s point, as Mehnert here implicitly characterizes climate destabilization as phenomena of the future—as opposed to phenomena that extend to the past and present—which shifts the focus, and the stakes, of her argument.

The issue with this common framing of climate change as a set of issues for the future—whether they usher in dystopian regimes, or whether apocalyptic events will pose an inescapable disruption to the fabric of societies—is that it perpetuates the notion that we still have time before climate destabilization begins to occur, which is further problematized by the inherent pessimism of many of these cli-fi narratives. That is, the rhetorics central to these common tropes of climate change fiction discussed above are that global warming and climate change are phenomena that pose challenges to the near and distant future, but which are nevertheless inevitable due to the logics of dystopia and apocalypse. Despite the prevalence of these approaches in climate change discourses, it is nevertheless important to note that it is fundamentally untenable to suggest that climate change phenomena are both inevitable and always located in the future, and the preponderance of this combination in fiction is perhaps one of the reasons why few works of cli-fi have been particularly remarkable—and why Hannah’s synthesis of climate fiction with historical fiction is particularly noteworthy.

One of the primary advantages of Hannah's usage of historical fiction is precisely this ability to subvert these common pessimistic tropes, since it has been several decades since the crises of the Dust Bowl and its resulting migration have come to a conclusion. By being set in the past, Hannah's novel nevertheless lacks the existential anxiety of the pessimistic tropes described above, since present-day readers represent "the future" of this novel's narrative timeframe. That is, *The Four Winds* does not feature apocalypse or dystopia because the Dust Bowl itself did not result in these scenarios; instead, this historical period has become synonymous with human strength and resilience due to Hannah's literary and cultural predecessors. And although *The Four Winds* is set in an environmental disaster that unfolded nearly a century ago—and several decades before the threats of climate change had been widely recognized—the novel is nevertheless intended to engage with our contemporary environmental challenges without explicitly connecting the past to the present within the text.

As Hannah notes in the Book Club companion to *The Four Winds*: "I thought it was important to highlight the Dust Bowl, which has been called the worst environmental disaster in American history. In the world today, climate change is very much front and center in the news, and I think it's important to be reminded that man definitely has an impact on the land, on the world in which we live" (6). That is, Hannah approached this topic from a perspective similar to this dissertation, as she notes that there is much to be learned from revisiting a historical iteration of an anthropogenic environmental disaster, and she uses this past event as a framework in her novel for interpreting our current position in the face of global climate destabilization.

Beyond the specific environmental connections between the Dust Bowl and climate change, Hannah also further identifies societal parallels between the period in which her novel is set and the present day. For example, Hannah notes that: “Part of the inspiration for this novel was the immigration situation in the United States right now. I thought it was important to highlight a time in our history when we treated fellow Americans as ‘other,’ and denied them basic rights. The past can teach us so much about who we are and who we should strive to be” (“Book Club” 6). It should be noted here that while Hannah separates immigration and environmental realities of the Dust Bowl in this response, this “othering” of fellow Americans during the Dust Bowl migration was inherently bound up in the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl itself; without the relentless drought and near-sighted, profit-driven agricultural practices, an unprecedented number of migrants would not have been forced from their homes on the Plains, and communities on the West Coast would not have struggled to accommodate this influx of people. And, of course, as the analysis of race and citizenship above clarifies, this “othering” of Americans during this time—and in *The Four Winds*—occurs in a rather narrow manner that is not generally inclusive of marginalized identities that have faced more consistent “othering” throughout American history.

The parallels between this historical period and our contemporary moment extend beyond the intersections of environmental and immigration crises, as Hannah’s novel also draws clear connections between the Great Depression and the Covid-19 pandemic. This has been a consistent observation in reviews of *The Four Winds*, as Charles succinctly notes: “Hannah's negotiation with this 80-year-old material - during a global pandemic that's weighing on our economy - is necessarily more complicated. She’s examining a

traumatic era in American history while also using it to reflect on the current scourges of xenophobia and economic exploitation tearing through the United States.” Doll similarly echoes: “this is also where historical novels are so helpful. We can find hope in stories tinged with pain from the past, especially when we’re living through new pain ourselves” (27). And yet, while reviews such as those by Charles and Doll are correct in identifying these general comparisons of the novel’s social context, they nevertheless neglect an important aspect of Hannah’s novel: it is not only the parallels between the time periods that are noteworthy about *The Four Winds*, but also Hannah’s emphasis on human strength in spite of these daunting circumstances.

With this in mind, Hannah’s revisitation of the Dust Bowl is not simply to note that there are moments in history that offer precedent for our contemporary challenges, but instead to recast our contemporary challenges in a specifically optimistic manner through her portrayal of Dust Bowl migrants in her novel. Amid these parallels between historical and present time periods, Hannah’s interview responses quoted above indicate that her novel was written to communicate particular attitudes about the Dust Bowl, which might then be applied to our current moment. That is, despite the several decades between the Dust Bowl and the publication of *The Four Winds*, Hannah’s novel is written in a manner consistent with the underlying motivations of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown*. While Steinbeck and Babb wrote to improve the living conditions for migrants of the Dust Bowl, Hannah repurposes this belief in the strength of these individuals by applying them to current environmental, social, and political crises. Of course, this emphasis on strength and resiliency also notably contrasts with the common pessimistic tropes of cli-fi discussed above.

Unfortunately, the importance of these similarities in tone are typically left unexplored in reviews of *The Four Winds*. For example, the anger that fueled Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is referenced when *Publishers Weekly* describes Hannah's book as "a Tom Joad-like fight for Justice" (63), and Charles notes "the echoes of Steinbeck's classic are sometimes so strong that I expected to see the Joads' Hudson Super Six chugging along the road," though neither review pursues the implications of these "echoes" of Steinbeck's book. And yet, it is clear that Hannah approached her Dust Bowl novel with specific arguments that she wanted to make about contemporary society. As the review published in *Kirkus* bluntly states, "The pedantic aims of the novel are hard to ignore as Hannah embodies her history lesson in what feels like a series of sepia-toned postcards depicting melodramatic scenes and clichéd emotions." While *Kirkus*'s review here is critical of Hannah's "pedantic" approach to *The Four Winds*, it is nevertheless clear that her emphasis on "melodramatic scenes and clichéd emotions" portrays a positive response to seemingly hopeless environmental crises. By prioritizing hope in her novel, Hannah is thus well-positioned to counteract the predominantly pessimistic cli-fi narratives written by her peers. While this "pedantic"—or, perhaps, sentimental—approach is generally atypical of climate fiction, it is also nevertheless consistent with recent scholarship on *The Grapes of Wrath*, in which scholars have interpreted Steinbeck's compassion for Dust Bowl migrants as over-sentimentalism. With consideration to Hannah's motivations to write *The Four Winds* as commentary on climate change, xenophobia, and social unrest, this underlying emphasis on hope represents an obvious break from the tropes of contemporary climate change fiction

discussed above, and which is likely due to the extensive influence of Steinbeck and Babb on Hannah's approach to this novel.

Indeed, the influences of her predecessors likely contributed to Hannah's sentimental approach to *The Four Winds*. And once again, reviews of Hannah's book tend to bury the lede. For example, Charles writes that, "despite the strong echoes to 'The Grapes of Wrath,' Hannah may be working closer to 19th-century melodrama," while clarifying that: "Hannah never risks ambiguity; her pages are 100 percent irony-free. And she moves with a relentless pace. Her prose, so ordinary line by line, nevertheless accumulates into scenes that rush from one emergency to the next - starving! beating! flooding! - pausing only for respites of sentimentality." Although Charles here distinguishes Hannah's novel from Steinbeck's through its appeals to sentimentalism, it should be clear from the first chapter's analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* that this apparent divergence in narrative approach is actually yet another similarity, as a common criticism of Steinbeck's novel in recent decades has been precisely due to the perception of his over-sentimentalism of Dust Bowl migrants. In this sense, it is not merely that Hannah's novel has similar plot points to Steinbeck's, but that the two novels are told with a similar tone and intention; while Steinbeck wanted to inspire anger among an audience that was living during the Depression and the Dust Bowl, Hannah applies similar rhetorical strategies to inspire anger among an audience dealing with a variety of similar economic, political, and environmental challenges several decades later.

Aligning with this sentimental rhetorical approach, Hannah makes her characters relatable for a contemporary audience through her portrayal of their connections to their environments. In a variety of ways, their lives—and livelihoods—spring from the land,

which is made clear before the drought hits, and which is further laid bare during the Dust Bowl. For example, the importance of the Martinelli family farm is declared early on, as Tony tells Elsa shortly after meeting her that: “My land tells its story if you listen. The story of our family. We plant, we tend, we harvest” (51). Within a novel, it is noteworthy here that Tony describes the land itself as a storyteller of their family, as this characterization connotes a partnership between the human and the more-than-human realms, which aligns well with recent movements in ecocriticism. Of course, the onset of the Dust Bowl soon tests the reciprocal relationship between the land’s ability to produce crops and the Martinelli’s ability to survive in this place. Nevertheless, at this point in the narrative, Elsa absorbs Tony’s conceptual approach to their land, as the narrator describes: “Elsa had never thought of land that way, as something that anchored a person, gave one a life. The idea of it, of staying here and finding a good life and a place to belong, seduced her as nothing ever had” (52). And so, during these good years, the Martinelli farm becomes a place of a “new beginning” for Elsa (54), and she quickly embraces the idea that this location will continue to “[tell] its story” of the Martinellis for generations to come: “*Here*, she sometimes thought, standing on land she cared for, *here* her child would flourish, would run and play and learn the stories told by the ground and the grapes and the wheat” (54). Early on in *The Four Winds*, Hannah thus establishes the sense of place felt by the inhabitants of the Plains, and clarifies this relationship in a way that is easily understood by readers who are likely unfamiliar with the realities of the Dust Bowl.

And when the Dust Bowl intensifies, threatening the ability of the Martinellis to stay on this farm, Elsa resists leaving due to the depth of this perceived relationship to the

land. When Rafe suggests that they leave, asserting that: “This damnable wind and drought will kill them. And us,” the narrator describes Elsa’s emotions as she reacts to his suggestion of leaving: “This land was his heritage, their future, their children’s future. The kids would grow up on this land, always knowing their history, knowing who they were and who they’d come from. They’d learn the pride that came with a good day’s work. They would *belong* somewhere” (105). Although Elsa’s thoughts here are clearly dramatic, they nevertheless encapsulate the importance of this land to her, and do so in a manner that foregrounds the sentimentalism felt toward this place.

And so, in *The Four Winds*, the importance of the relationships between human and environment is consistently made clear through Elsa, in her early thoughts after moving to the farm and in her stubborn refusals to leave until the life of her son is directly threatened by the dust, and through Tony and Rose, who feel unable to leave and are “like a plant that can only grow in one place” (196). Even Loreda, who had early on agreed with Rafe about wanting to leave Texas, eventually tells Elsa that, “This will always be home, Mom. Just because we’re leaving doesn’t change that. Look at Dorothy. After all her adventures, she clicked her heels together and went home” (196). Even while the Dust Bowl forces the Martinellis to migrate west, they nevertheless retain this deeply felt connection to their home on the Plains. And after Elsa is killed during the labor strike in California near the end of the novel, Loreda insists on returning to Texas, feeling the strong sense of place for which Elsa had earlier hoped: “‘She wants us to go home,’ Loreda said. The unexpected word—*home*—gave her a bit of steadiness; something to hold on to. Grandma and Grandpa. She needed them now” (439). In *The Four Winds*, Hannah thus portrays her Dust Bowl migrants in a sympathetic manner due

to the connections felt to their home from which they are forced to move, and which is a constant source of strength for them as they remain hopeful about returning to this place.

However, this consistent emphasis on hope is not to suggest that Hannah's novel is wholly absent from instances of the pessimistic tropes of climate fiction discussed above. Instead, there are a variety of instances in which her narrative appears to be embellished with anachronistic events and inaccurate plot devices, from the dramatic angst of Loreda Martinelli, which characterizes her more like a teenager of the 2020s than from the 1930s, to the general mischaracterization of the migrant experience on the way to California. For example, while the migration from the Plains to California was shown in Steinbeck's novel as a movement characterized by benevolence, the migration in Hannah's novel is portrayed in a much more sinister manner. This is introduced in the novel when Rafe Martinelli abandons his family on the Plains as the Dust Bowl intensifies. As Mr. McElvaine at the train depot says, "Men all over the county been leavin' their families. Families been abandonin' their kids and kin. I never seen nothing like it. A man over in Cimarron County kilt his whole family 'fore he left" (116). This impulse toward abandonment and violence is notably characterized in *The Four Winds* as an exclusively masculine trait, and one that was not uncommon in the area at the time. However, historically speaking, Rafe's abandonment of his family would have been anomalous; as Gregory notes, one of the reasons that the Dust Bowl migration was noteworthy is due to the fact that it was often whole families migrating, rather than single males, which had often comprised other westward migrations (19).

And as a novel that seeks to reimagine a "historically male" situation through a female perspective, this consistent critique of masculinity is noteworthy in *The Four*

Winds for its frequent entwinement with class concerns. For example, when Rafe abandons the family, Elsa: “couldn’t imagine joining the hordes of jobless, homeless hobos and migrants who were headed west. She’d heard it was dangerous to jump onto those trains, that legs and feet could be cut off, bodies severed in half by the giant metal wheels. And there was crime out there, bad men who’d left their consciences along with their families” (106). Importantly, Elsa explicitly connects migration with danger, and diminishes the humanity of migrants through her characterization of them as “hordes of jobless, homeless hobos.” And beyond the mechanical danger imposed by transportation, a primary source of Elsa’s fear is bound up in single men who, in her mind, lack consciences due to her perception of them as poor, single, and homeless males. While Elsa’s attachment to the Martinelli farm might perhaps explain her fear of men without homes, it nevertheless also betrays a host of classist and sexist prejudices entwined in her perspective as well.

This fear is similarly present on their way to California, where Elsa and her children are first almost robbed by a migrant man—before Loreda scares him off with a gun (202-203)—and which is similarly present during Elsa’s thoughts while reflecting on the fact that they “were camped on a wild stretch of land, close to the road, where coyotes howled and bindle stiffs walked alone, many of them desperate enough to steal the pillow from beneath your head or the gas from your tank” (204). And shortly thereafter, while watching a hunger strike – which is, according to the lack of documentation of these events in historical accounts from this time and place, an apparently anachronistic plot device – the narrator describes Elsa’s thoughts while observing these men: “These weren’t town folks, for the most part. You could tell by their ragged clothes and

rucksacks. These were bindle stiffs—homeless men, the kind who jumped on and off trains in the middle of the night. Some were going somewhere; most were going nowhere” (206). While these passages betray Elsa’s prejudices, they are nevertheless importantly inaccurate; again, there is little available evidence in historical accounts of this time and place that characterize it as a conspicuously dangerous place for women or families.

Since this was not characteristic of the time, Hannah’s narrative decisions here likely reflect the influences of contemporary fiction on her novel—with the rise of dystopian fiction discussed previously as a likely source—though these moments do not significantly impact the narrative arc of the novel. Aside from anachronism, these moments are also important in the novel for the ways in which they represent ideological inconsistencies in *The Four Winds*, and in how characters with different identities are intended to be interpreted in the novel. While Elsa is consistently afraid of single men for their lack of employment and stable housing, she is nevertheless forced to uproot her family and seek these very same things in California. And when the Martinellis struggle to secure housing and employment, Loreda reacts to the prejudice of a Californian gas station employee as she declares: “‘Who does he think he is? Just ‘cause he hasn’t hit hard times, the crumb thinks he has the right to look down on us?’ Loreda said, infuriated and embarrassed. He had made her feel *poor* for the first time in her life” (217). To be clear, Hannah’s protagonist (and her family) are shown to be wary of migrant men for their lack of employment and homes, and when it becomes apparent in the novel that their own fortunes are not dissimilar from those people that they had feared, the initial reaction described by the narrator is one of infuriation and embarrassment over feeling

“*poor*” for the first time. Instead of seizing the opportunity to reconcile the Martinellis’ prejudices with the economic realities of the time, the novel instead doubles down on their anger over being on the receiving end of a prejudice that bears remarkable similarity to their own.

Although Elsa Martinelli’s politics shift over the course of the novel, as she ultimately helps lead a labor strike near its conclusion, there is still much left unresolved or underexplored in the politics of *The Four Winds*. While the labor strike arguably demonstrates Elsa’s growing class consciousness, these earlier undercurrents of classism and sexism are nonetheless not addressed in this strike. While Elsa thinks of the other migrants during this strike as “part of a new group” (431), this sentiment is nevertheless not tied to any reconsideration of her earlier perspectives; instead, it is a flimsy attempt at solidarity without actually attempting to connect with other migrants beyond one representative family. Instead, this portrayal of class consciousness in Hannah’s novel is primarily processed through this middle-class family’s descent into being treated as poor, and then rebelling against this label. After being made to feel “poor,” the Martinellis then similarly project this internalized prejudice as they settle into life in a roadside encampment. After their first night, Elsa listens to the noises of people waking up, as the narrator notes: “As if this were a normal community instead of the last stop for desperate people” (226). Loreda’s thoughts are similarly described by the narrator: “Now they looked like all the rest of the poor, desperate people living in tents in this ugly field” (238), and Elsa’s thoughts also dwell on their appearances, noting that residents of the nearby town must think she looks like “trash” (255). This is hardly a portrayal of a cohesive “new group” of unified Dust Bowl migrants, as it actively refuses to consider

other unhoused individuals based on the positive or essential facts of their humanity, and instead dismisses the community as “desperate” and “poor.”

This portrayal is likely another of Hannah’s appeals to her audience, as the politics and philosophies of her main family appear to align more with those of her primary readership today than they do with typical attitudes of Dust Bowl migrants in the late 1930s. That is, rather than empathizing with other migrants, the Martinellis instead display class-based condescension that appears incongruent with the totality of their experiences on the Plains and in California, but which is nevertheless explained with a broader consideration of Hannah’s rhetorical appeals to an upper-middle class readership. In this way, Hannah’s Dust Bowl novel is infused with a handful of inaccurate and anachronistic elements that appear to originate from current popular genres—and beliefs that are possibly commonly held by her main audience—instead of being informed by accurate historical consideration of this time and place.

Nevertheless, despite these historically inaccurate and highly gendered moments, the important distinction in *The Four Winds* is that these dystopian elements are subverted multiple times through an unrelentingly optimistic outcome in this novel, which is primarily shown through the repetition of the phrase “Hope is a coin I carry,” which is the first phrase of the novel’s prologue (1), and which similarly begins Elsa’s speech during the strike in Welty (431). Through the repetition of this phrase in pivotal moments, which embodies the strength and resilience of her protagonist’s family, Hannah undermines the otherwise pessimistic moments of her novel, to singularly place hope at the center of her story. Despite the severity of the Dust Bowl, and despite the prejudices endured in California, Hannah’s Martinellis ultimately hold onto this notion of hope,

which helps them endure these challenges and return home at the novel's conclusion. The centrality of hope in *The Four Winds* not only parallels the emphasis on human strength and resiliency found in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Four Winds*—and as this chapter has argued, these similarities are not incidental—but they also position this novel to negotiate the various pessimistic traits commonly associated with climate fiction today. Although this novel is not without a variety of sociopolitical shortcomings, it nevertheless offers a new—and in some ways, “old”—point of departure for contemporary climate change novels.

“Explorers, Pioneers; Not Caretakers”: Concluding Thoughts on *Interstellar* and the Dust Bowl

On October 26, 2014, the highly anticipated film, *Interstellar*, premiered in theaters. Directed by Christopher Nolan and featuring an ensemble cast, including performances by Matthew McConaughey, Jessica Chastain, Michael Caine, Anne Hathaway, Ellen Burstyn, Matt Damon, John Lithgow, Casey Affleck, and Timothée Chalamet, this sci-fi epic immediately received acclaim for its ambitious portrayal of astrophysics and theoretical sciences. As a film that features a global climate disaster, it furthermore represented the latest Hollywood example of a cli-fi blockbuster in a vein similar to *The Day After Tomorrow*. With consideration to its portrayal of a largescale climate event, *Interstellar* also generated attention for its inclusion of footage from Ken Burns’s *The Dust Bowl* documentary miniseries spliced into the film at key moments in the narrative. These moments, which are primarily short clips of interviews with survivors of the 1930s Dust Bowl, provide what appears to be historical context for moviegoers about what is happening in the film, while furthermore adding emotional depth with regards to broader human experiences of this environmental disaster beyond those immediately depicted by the film’s protagonists. Importantly, though, not all of these interview clips spliced into *Interstellar* originate from Burns’s documentary; instead, several of them were staged for the film, featuring Burstyn as an older version of the character Murphy Cooper, and are filmed in a manner that mimics the aesthetics of the interviews from *The Dust Bowl* documentary series.

As this dissertation has argued, the facts of the Dust Bowl have been contested ever since the environmental disaster began unfolding in the early 1930s, and this public

debate was spurred on by writers and activists such as John Steinbeck and Sanora Babb. Through their direct action and literary efforts, these concerned individuals shaped the discourses surrounding these crises in real time, and contributed to sociopolitical efforts to mitigate these circumstances in the late 1930s. With consideration to these contributions that artists and activists had in the resolution of the issues surrounding the Dust Bowl and its migration, it is worth dwelling upon *Interstellar*'s appropriation of nonfictional recollections of this time and place as they are divorced from their historical context and inserted into a futuristic, dystopian cli-fi film—particularly when additional pseudo-documentary footage is similarly included in the film, and is intended to be indistinguishable from the clips from Burns's documentary.

In some ways, *Interstellar*'s inclusion of these interviews affords parallels to the general chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath*, as it lends the weight of documentary-style context to support the experiences of the story's main characters. As this dissertation has argued, Steinbeck was influenced by Pare Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, which helped him refine his approach to his "big book," and this book's general chapters helped balance the narrative flow as they alternate with the Joad chapters. In *Interstellar*, documentary-style footage frequently provides context for subsequent developments in the film, as they introduce topics that are immediately depicted in the film's narrative—often experienced by members of the Cooper family. Of course, given this dissertation's critiques of the accuracy of Burns's *The Dust Bowl*—particularly with regards to its inaccurate characterization of the relationship between Babb and Steinbeck—it should be clarified that *Interstellar*'s usage of these interviews (and not Burns's broader research) provides the film with anecdotal accounts from a similar event without repeating the

more dubious aspects of Burns's film. The question remains, however, whether this is an appropriate use of these individuals' stories.

Although including these interviews is perhaps an interesting move for the film's narrative development, it is ultimately a fraught one with regards to the finer points of the film's plot, which conflates an ambiguous "blight" with dust storms, and this discrepancy is unresolved throughout. While Alyssa Rosenberg asserts that "Nolan has done his own part to preserve [the] testimony" of the Dust Bowl survivors in *Interstellar*, there nevertheless remains a question of the validity of this testimony when it is edited into brief blurbs and applied to an entirely new context. And although Dayton Duncan, the writer of *The Dust Bowl*, hopes that these survivors and their relatives will watch the film "so they and their children and their children's children could go see them in a Hollywood production. They're often in small places, small towns or farms. And it's good to see that what they had to say was deemed powerful enough, their testimony had such power that it couldn't be exceeded by fictionalizing" (Rosenberg), there is nevertheless a lack of consideration for not only the fictionalization inherent to splicing these clips into a (fictional) film, nor is there an acknowledgment that *Interstellar* straightforwardly fictionalizes this "testimony" through its own scripted interviews. That is, the survivors' stories might be real, but applying them to *Interstellar* in this manner strips them of their historical accuracy by creating an entirely new context in which they are interpreted—particularly since "blight" and dust storms do not seem to mean the same thing.

Whereas much of the analysis of *Interstellar* has focused on the film's accuracy vis-à-vis the sciences of space exploration, there is nevertheless much to be said about the

verisimilitude of its portrayal of a futuristic “dust bowl.” Simply put, for a film that features dust storms and incorporates testimony from survivors of the 1930s Dust Bowl, the film lacks an obvious source of this dust; although an early fictional interview with Burstyn as Murphy Cooper claims that: “The wheat had died. The blight came and we had to burn it. And we still had corn, we had acres of corn, but mostly we had dust,” the film nevertheless features exclusively green, crop-filled fields. In fact, despite saying that there was “mostly” dust in these fields, there is not a scene in *Interstellar* in which their (green) vegetation is covered by dust or withering in drought. And although the film frequently references a “blight” that is systematically killing off crops, this conflation of “blight” with “dust” is under-supported in the film, which thereby renders these historical Dust Bowl allusions incoherent.

Similarly, there are several issues with *Interstellar*'s portrayal of a dust storm that appears early in the film, which is introduced via interview clips from *The Dust Bowl* that describe the Black Sunday dust storm of April 14, 1935—the very storm from which the phrase “dust bowl” was coined. Perhaps the most absurd part of the film's portrayal of this storm is its arrival during a baseball game: despite apparently having detection systems and sirens in place to warn citizens of impending dust storms, the first sign of this storm is depicted when the Yankees' second baseman misses a routine ground ball while watching the clouds of dust roll in. To be clear, this was not an insignificant cloud on the horizon, and it is unclear why the sirens do not sound until a professional baseball player commits a fielding error. And as the storm intensifies and the Cooper family races home to safety, it is hard to ignore that among the dust and debris flying through their yard, the numerous objects on their front porch—which are theoretically exposed to the

same elements as their yard – remain unaffected by the strong winds. Finally, as the film depicts a quiet morning following this storm, the only drifts of dust to be found are small mounds near the truck’s tires, which is a relatively miniscule amount of dust considering the size of the storm. Simply put, while *Interstellar* has received favorable reviews for its depiction of space exploration and theoretical sciences, its interpretation of a futuristic dust bowl leaves much to be desired, which unfortunately underscores this dissertation’s early argument that the severity of the hardships during the 1930s Dust Bowl is largely forgotten today.

However, as this dissertation’s analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath* has argued, verisimilitude and historical accuracy are not the only criteria for assessing the merits of fictional portrayals of dust bowl scenarios. And yet, while Steinbeck’s belief in the resiliency of Dust Bowl migrants elevated his story into a mythology of these experiences, *Interstellar* offers a much more simplified worldview that pits unambiguous notions of scientific progress against what is portrayed as a regressive interest in stewardship of the earth. That is, whereas the three Dust Bowl writers analyzed in this dissertation placed value on reciprocal human relationships with agricultural land, *Interstellar* nevertheless consistently dismisses this approach as a waste of time as blight systematically reduces yields and eradicates crops.

This worldview is consistently communicated through the character Cooper, played by Matthew McConaughey, who is a former NASA pilot who begins the film working as a farmer. For example, when Cooper attends a parent-teacher conference and is told that his son, Tom, will “make an excellent farmer,” Cooper gets angry and questions why he can’t attend college. After being told that universities lack resources

and that: “The world needs farmers. Good farmers, like you and Tom,” Cooper cynically responds with: “Uneducated farmers.” Although this assertion is incoherent with consideration to the premise of the film – indeed, farmers in a world ravaged by “blight” would likely need a high degree of specialized competency in order to maintain yields in such hostile conditions – it is nevertheless unchallenged by other characters in this scene. And shortly thereafter, when Cooper is talking about this interaction with his father, Donald, he laments: “It’s like we’ve forgotten who we are. Explorers, pioneers; not caretakers,” before similarly asserting that: “We used to look up to the sky and wonder at our place in the stars, now we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt.” These moments are curious, as they pit the film’s obvious interest in space exploration against basic efforts toward sustaining human life on earth; although these areas of emphasis are by no means inherently antithetical, *Interstellar* nevertheless insists that they are.

This insistence is unfortunately consistent with the film’s incoherent politics, and is one of the many reasons why this film is ultimately an unsatisfying work of cli-fi. To be clear, for a work of science fiction, it is hard to overlook a character’s early amplification of a moon-landing conspiracy theory, and, as reviewer Michael Svoboda has pointed out, it is difficult to ignore that the film’s two leading scientists both falsify their results. This ideological ambiguity has attracted skepticism from both the political right and the political left, and ultimately reveals incoherent conceptions of progress and factual accuracy throughout *Interstellar*. Similarly, the film’s underwhelming conclusion—that future humans save “present-day” humans by helping a select few of them escape an increasingly inhospitable earth—ultimately places the impetus on climate

action squarely in the future, which, as this dissertation has argued, is an untenable (though frequent) trope of the genre. Ultimately, then, although *Interstellar* features narratives of the Dust Bowl at key junctures throughout the film, it nevertheless does so in a manner that strips them of their historical weight, and which unfortunately locates the culpability for this disaster on the earth itself, rather than on the behaviors and practices of those who inhabit it. This is a frankly irresponsible assertion, particularly considering *Interstellar*'s (mis)use of interview footage of the Dust Bowl survivors. As Svoboda succinctly argues, "*Interstellar* is closer to climate skepticism than it is to climate fiction."

Ultimately, then, *Interstellar* represents an unfortunate application of details from the 1930s Dust Bowl into a futuristic scenario rife with incoherent ideological underpinning and unclear ends. This dissertation has argued that the power of Dust Bowl fiction has been, and continues to be, its emphasis on the human cost of this environmental disaster, and the power inherent to aligning these stories' literary forms with their author's intended sociopolitical function. And so, despite its reliance on historical memories of the Dust Bowl, *Interstellar* nevertheless succumbs to several of the pitfalls common to cli-fi.

Notes

1. Kansas City was not the only location to ban or censor *The Grapes of Wrath*. As Wartzman describes, similar challenges to the book occurred in Buffalo, New York; Trenton, New Jersey; East St. Louis, Illinois; Detroit, Michigan; and San Francisco, California (10).
2. This discussion draws a distinction between “criticism” and “theory.” While scholarly work that is primarily focused on criticism of literary texts has frequently fallen into the pitfalls described above, there have been more impactful works of theory that have grappled with time and geographic scales of climate change, as well as nonhuman agencies that participate in this process as well. Since this dissertation is oriented toward criticism, this critical realm is the main object of this discussion.
3. See Susan Shillinglaw’s “California Answers *The Grapes of Wrath*” for an analysis of these response novels.
4. The phrase “something that happened” characterizes much of Steinbeck’s fiction from the late 1930s, and reflects the growing influence of Ed Ricketts on Steinbeck’s personal philosophy. The phrase was also notably the working title for *Of Mice and Men*.
5. Slovic highlights this interdisciplinary relevance by citing an earlier article by earth scientist Peter DeMenocal, whose article “After Tomorrow: The Peril of Ignoring Global Warming” also discusses Steinbeck’s and Worster’s texts.
6. Examples of other ecocritical essays on Steinbeck include Elisabeth Bayley’s “John Steinbeck’s *To a God Unknown* and Wendell Berry,” Gavin Jones’s “*To a God Unknown*: Drought, Climate, and Race in the West” and Robert Searway’s “Conflicting Views of Landscape in John Steinbeck’s Literary West.”
7. Follansbee appears to be referencing the work of Kim Stanley Robinson, albeit not by name.
8. See page 166 of Steinbeck’s essay “Critics—From a Writer’s Viewpoint.”
9. For context, Aldo Leopold began writing *A Sand County Almanac* in 1937, which was finally published in 1949.
10. Wilson doesn’t note Steinbeck’s attention to the “environment,” since the current meaning of this concept did not exist at the time. See Wesley N. Tiffney’s contributions to the introduction to *Steinbeck and the Environment*, which provides a thorough overview of how the terms “environment,” “environmentalist,” “environmental science,” and “ecology” developed, and how Steinbeck would relate to these terms (3-5).
11. Steinbeck attended the Stanford Hopkins Marine Station, attempted (unsuccessfully) to register for a medical class with cadavers at Stanford, and worked at a fish hatchery for a summer. See Benson (48) and Parini (4-5; 55-56).
12. In a letter to his college roommate, Carlton Sheffield, on June 30, 1933, Steinbeck describes his influences as ranging from figures in anthropology (Ellsworth Huntington and Robert Briffault), history (Oswald Spengler and P.D. Ouspenski), folk lore and psychology (Carl Jung), biology (W.C. Allee), and physics (Erwin Schrodinger, Max Planck, Niels Bohr, Albert Einstein, and Werner Heisenberg), saying that “each one is headed in the same direction and the direction is toward my thesis. This in itself would indicate the beginning of a new phalanx or group unit.” See also Richard Astro’s *John Steinbeck and Edward F. Ricketts: The Shaping of a Novelist*.

13. See Marcia Salazar's "John Steinbeck's Phalanx Theory," Benson (269), and Parini (135).
14. This is particularly noteworthy since Wilson categorically places "ambitious" writers, whom he finds in Steinbeck and Hans Otto Storm, in opposition to writers such as James M. Cain, John O'Hara, and William Saroyan: all of whom he considers derivative of Ernest Hemingway.
15. See *Working Days* (6, 33, 48, 50-51, 55, 57-60, 64-65, 76, 79, 82, 88) for the closeness in which Steinbeck and Lorentz worked during this time.
16. Lorentz's *The Plow that Broke the Plains* was sponsored by the Roosevelt Administration's Resettlement Administration, which also oversaw the migratory labor camps that Steinbeck visited in the late 1930s, and which he featured in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Given the government's support for Lorentz's film, many at the time argued it was propaganda (Egan 251); in a similar manner, critics have recently argued that Steinbeck's tours of the labor camps from government employees make the novel legible as indirect state-sponsored propaganda. See Parini (246-247).
17. Indeed, by the late 1940s, some critics were already suggesting that Steinbeck wasn't biological enough in his writing. See Ditsky (4-5).
18. Literary critics were not alone in this assessment, as writers such as Ralph Ellison privately expressed displeasure at Steinbeck's "weak" portrayal ("2 May 1942").
19. See Donald Coers's introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Moon Is Down* for a comprehensive overview of the novel's impact in World War II and beyond.
20. Interestingly, Kazin's *A Writer's America* has only positive things to say about Steinbeck and *The Grapes of Wrath* (212-215).
21. Among these textual and extratextual criticisms, Fiedler also faults Steinbeck for not predicting and incorporating the American entrance into World War II into *The Grapes of Wrath* (56), as well as the novel's failure to become as commercially commodified as *Gone with the Wind* (59-60).
22. See Benson (424-425; 948), French (80-81), and Visser (207).
23. Quoted in Shillinglaw (47).
24. Steinbeck's "Dubious Battle of California" was published in *The Nation* on September 12, 1936; his Harvest Gypsies series was published in the *San Francisco News* on October 6-12, 1936; and his "Starvation Under the Orange Trees" was refused for publication by *Life*, and was instead published in the *Monterey Trader* on April 15, 1938. These articles have since been reprinted in *America and Americans* and *The Harvest Gypsies*.
25. For detailed accounts of Steinbeck's experiences in the FSA camps, see Jackson Benson's "'To Tom Who Lived It': John Steinbeck and the Man from Weedpatch" and "The Background to the Composition of *The Grapes of Wrath*," Thomas Collins's "'Bringing in the Sheaves' by 'Windsor Drake,'" DeMott (xxvii-xlii), Loftis (145-146), and Parini (217-218).
26. The version of this letter published in *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters* (158) omits a phrase following "I'm pretty mad about it," signaled in the quoted passage by a bracketed ellipsis, which continues in its original form to say "and I want Lorentz out of my system so I can get going." The implication here is that Steinbeck was restless to physically help the migrants, and his artistic obligations were precluding him from doing so. It is unclear why this phrase would be omitted in the published collection.

27. This letter is held in the Stanford University Archives, and was omitted from *Steinbeck: A Life in Letters*.
28. For more on Steinbeck's awareness of audience, see Benson (326-327), Shillinglaw (46), Shillinglaw and Hearle (4), and Visser (201-220).
29. The book clubs are mentioned in the Gridley "Tent City News" on December 8, 1939; December 15, 1939; and January 5, 1940; McWilliams's review was reprinted in the Indio "Covered Wagon" on May 6, 1939; and Steinbeck's verisimilitude is discussed in the Marysville "Voice of the Migrant" on January 12, 1940 and February 2, 1940; and the Yuba City "Votaw" on April 12, 1940 and April 23, 1940. The film screenings in Visalia are covered in "The Hub" on February 23, 1940; March 22, 1940; and March 29, 1940. See Bowman's "'We the Joads': *The Grapes of Wrath* in the Farm Security Administration Camps and Newspapers."
30. See *The Harvest Gypsies* (52-57).
31. Moreover, these character flaws were also not inaccurate, as Gregory describes the racist attitudes prevalent among the Okie migrants (162-168).
32. See pages 178-179 of Steinbeck's *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*.
33. The primary exception here is in Jim Casy's Christ-like journeys to "the wilderness" (81, 381), which Tom later cites as a major influence in his ditch conversation with Ma Joad (418).
34. Although this passage might appear to reference the "blood and soil" ideology associated with Nazi Germany, Steinbeck is not intentionally appealing to these connotations, as the blood in this passage is the result of Muley's father being gored to death by a bull. Instead, Steinbeck is appealing to a "mystical" connection to the land similar to Joseph Wayne in his 1933 novel, *To a God Unknown*.
35. See Egan and Worster for a history of white settlement and land-use in Oklahoma.
36. In addition to the insights that the tenants were knowingly degrading the land, as discussed in the previous section of this chapter.
37. See Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*.
38. See also "Dialogic Structure and Levels of Discourse in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*" by Louis Owens and Hector Torres for their analysis of how reader participation factors into this narrative structure.
39. Quoted in Loftis (2).
40. In a letter to Elizabeth Otis on January 20, 1939, Steinbeck writes: "the other day I got a letter from Pat suggesting that I change the last scene, build it up, make the starving man related to the family, and put a fine movie end to it. I lost my temper but didn't write until I had it again. He had completely missed not only the balance of the book but the meaning of the last scene. I told him I wouldn't change it."
41. See Babb's letter to Steve Chapman from May 4, 1991.
42. See Charbonneau's review in *Historical Novel Society*, Flanagan's review in *Booklist*, and Dominguez's "The Woman Behind 'The Grapes of Wrath.'"
43. The inference that KB's report came first is based on the relative optimism (compared to BB) that this reviewer had for the draft, as well as on the postscript included on BB's report, which said: "I didn't give a detailed synopsis because I understand you have had a first report" (1).
44. Though McWilliams writes in the foreword to *Factories in the Field* that it was "pure coincidence that [*The Grapes of Wrath* and *Factories in the Field*] had been released at

the same time” (x), Richardson suggests the timing was less coincidental than this, and was instead the result of McWilliams’s heightened name recognition and Steinbeck’s instant success (87).

45. Of course, the egos of the editors of the time likely also factored into the decision not to publish Babb’s novel. As Wixson points out: “Editors were different in those days, though. They were more interested in real literature, not just the bottom line. Random House was very prestigious, and possibly Cerf didn’t want to be thought of as some Johnny-come-lately” (quoted in Conklin).

46. Crichton is referenced by Wixson in *On the Dirty Plate Trail* as “a Random House editor who had written satiric pieces for *New Masses*” (36) – which he repeats verbatim in his contribution to Michael Steiner’s *Regionalists on the Left* – which is only partially correct. Babb wrote on several occasions that Crichton was a “Scribner’s editor,” with examples being found in her biographical notes from March 1978 (3), and in her letters to Dearcopp from August 5, 1993 (2) and July 11, 1994 (1). Scribner’s is moreover consistent with the letterhead from which he corresponded with Babb in 1932, when she attempted to have short stories published, though his letters from 1938 are under a Collier’s letterhead. In either case, it appears as though he was not a “Random House editor.”

47. The original name of the family in Babb’s first draft was Donne, though this was changed to Dunne shortly before the novel’s publication.

48. Indeed, a source of frustration for Babb at this juncture was the fact that Crown was more interested in *Whose Names Are Unknown* than *The Lost Traveler*, which Brand made quite clear. On October 20, 1953, he writes that he “loved the book. It has much better form than THE LOST TRAVELER” (1), and Babb writes to Wolf on September 7, 1954, that “one of the editors told [Brand] that she couldn’t even understand why he wanted me signed up until she read my other novel, ‘Whose Names Are Unknown’, which she liked. Aside from Millen, I think there is no warmth of reception there for the book” (2).

49. The copyright page to the 1978 edition of *Factories in the Field* lists five Peregrine Smith editions: 1971, 1972, 1974, 1976, and 1978.

50. See Dominguez’s “The Woman Behind ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’” Lanzendorfer’s “The Forgotten Dust Bowl Novel that Rivalled ‘The Grapes of Wrath,’” and Babb’s biography located on *The Dust Bowl: A Film by Ken Burns* website.

51. Similar positions are also taken up in reviews of the novel by Lanzendorfer and Cortney Stone.

52. In her correspondence and notes, Babb often wrote that her time spent volunteering with Collins was among the most rewarding experiences of her life. Examples include her letters to Barbara Guth (1), Mary Howard (2), and Temple Lee Reed (4), and in her biographical sketches from December 1957 (1) and March 1978 (1).

53. As a point of clarification, Collins’s references to “D.F.,” “functional democracies,” and “Maverick University” all pertain to the self-governing principles that he strove to instill at the FSA camps. For more information on Collins’s “Democracy Functioning” project and how it was implemented in the FSA camps, see Battat (47-48) and *On the Dirty Plate Trail* (26).

54. Babb is omitted from the first two Steinbeck biographies by Jackson Benson and Jay Parini, though the recent biography by William Souder offers brief overviews of Babb's time volunteering with Collins, as well as her experiences with Random House in 1939.

55. Presently, this is purely speculation, though it is possible that answers might be found in the National Archives location in San Bruno, California, which houses Collins's original reports.

56. A version of this section has been previously published under the title "'Today Is a Terror': *Whose Names Are Unknown* and the 'New' Dust Bowl Novel."

57. Quoted in Conklin's "'Whose Names Are Unknown' Finally Becomes Known."

58. See page 1 of Babb's letter to Dearcopp from August 5, 1993, and page 13 of her letter to Wixson from September 29, 1996.

59. That said, these were not the only important revisions that occurred, with the inclusion of the eviction notice on page 220 being a particularly noteworthy change.

60. For *New York Times* sales lists, see "Combined Print & E-Book Fiction" from each of the five weeks in which *The Four Winds* was at the top. For Book of the Month Club's award, see "*The Four Winds* by Kristin Hannah is the 2021 Book of the Year."

61. For information on current readership trends, see Johanna Thomas-Corr's "Without Women the Novel Would Die—Discuss" and Christopher Ingraham's "The Long, Steady Decline of Literary Reading."

62. For recent projections of the scope of climate migrations, see Abraham Lustgarten's "Climate Change Will Force a New American Migration."

63. For a thorough discussion of the origins of the mythologies surrounding American Jeffersonian agrarianism, see the introduction of Sarah Wald's *The Nature of California*.

64. For a discussion of citizenship and agricultural labor in *The Grapes of Wrath*, see chapter two of Sarah Wald's *The Nature of California*.

65. *Whose Names Are Unknown* could arguably be considered climate change fiction due to its 2004 publication date. However, this is somewhat anachronistic due to its original composition in 1939, and due to the well-documented reluctance to edit Babb's original text decades after it was written. See chapter two for more details on the hesitancy to revise Babb's original work.

66. I will briefly note that this dissertation will not engage directly with a specific example of cli-fi that fits these apocalyptic or dystopian parameters, and it will instead refer to these texts from a generalized perspective. While this approach is less precise than a direct analysis of a particular text, there are nevertheless a variety of reasons for this approach. First, as a dissertation organized around Dust Bowl fiction, most contemporary narratives are tangential to this specific context. This is true even if a contemporary author attempts to appeal to the legacy of Dust Bowl writers for their works. For example, T.C. Boyle has repeatedly compared himself to Steinbeck—apparently without any of the irony that pervades his works. Additionally, a central argument of this dissertation is that Dust Bowl fiction has had drastically different aspirations than most works of cli-fi; that is, that its artistic form is united with its activist function, which is often not the case for cli-fi due to the movement's pessimistic tendencies. Simply put, most works of contemporary cli-fi have not contributed to climate change discourses in productive ways, and elevating them to importance through an extended analysis would create a false parallel between literary works originating from, and participating in, these two contexts.

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