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STEINBECK'S QUEER ECOLOGY: SWEET COMRADESHIP IN THE MONTEREY NOVELS

LELAND S. PERSON

IN AN EARLIER ESSAY I argue that, in *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck "explores alternative economic and social structures through the interdependent bond between George and Lennie" (3)—indeed, that it represents "a utopian dream founded on male bonding, masturbatory *jouissance*, and a sublimated homosexual domesticity" (1). I would like to expand on those ideas by exploring the relationship between ecology and male friendship in Steinbeck's Monterey novels, *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Cannery Row* (1945), and *Sweet Thursday* (1954). I am struck in those novels, as in *Of Mice and Men*, by the conjunction of Steinbeck's economic vision and his idealization of male friendship—what he calls the "sweetness of comradeship" in *Tortilla Flat* (45).

In writing about Steinbeck ecologically, I am not going to focus solely on the relationship he depicts between man and nature. In their introduction to *Steinbeck and the Environment*, Susan Beegel, Susan Shillinglaw, and Wesley Tiffney note that Steinbeck's characters are "intimately related to one another in the ecological web of interrelationships we call economy" (18). I want to go a step further and explore the way that Steinbeck's social relationships, especially between men, can be understood as part of his ecological vision. It follows that a truly ecological vision of life—a deep ecology, as it has been called—would carry over into social relations. To live nonhierarchically in nature should mean living nonhierarchically in other relationships.

Ingeniously, Steinbeck experiments with an ecologically constructed human community in his three Monterey novels. He

explores the ways that ecological understanding warrants a conception of human relationships and how it may lead logically to homosocial and even homoerotic bonds between men—that is, to a queer ecology. Put another way, Steinbeck translates the ecological paradigm of the tide pool to the human community of Cannery Row. Predicated on an ideal of comradeship, Steinbeck's ecological community liberates male relationships from the marketplace and from conventional heterosexual relationships, which encourage competition and jealousy. "You just can't trust a married guy," Mack says in *Cannery Row* (76), and Steinbeck goes furthest in that novel toward articulating an alternative theory of manhood and manly relationships. When Mack and the boys visit the Carmel Valley Farm on their frog-hunting trip, for example, they are "unconsciously glad" that the farmer's wife is absent, because the "kind of women who put papers on shelves and had little towels [in the house] instinctively distrusted and disliked Mack and the boys" (86). Steinbeck interests himself less in this flight-from-women theme than in the homosocial alternative that relationships between men make possible. Echoing Thoreau's observation that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (*Walden* 8), Doc explains that Mack and the boys are "your true philosophers." "All of our so-called successful men are sick men, with bad stomachs, and bad souls," he says, "but Mack and the boys are healthy and curiously clean. They can do what they want. They can satisfy their appetites without calling them something else" (133). Most important, Mack and the boys opt out of a money economy, "for they were not mercantile men. They did not measure their joy in goods sold, their egos in bank balances, nor their loves in what they cost" (112–13).[1]

Thoreau's *Walden* can be helpful here because, even though Steinbeck's ecological vision seems to resemble Thoreau's—at least as Steinbeck conceives the relationship between human beings and their natural environments—the two writers' ecologies deviate significantly in the social relationships they imagine. In particular, the two writers display very different attitudes toward male friendship. Thoreau rejects comradeship in *Walden* in favor of self-centered epiphanies, a comradeship with nature. He maintains condescending relationships with such male figures as James Collins, Alek Therien, and John Field. He

expresses open contempt for Collins, the Irish railroad laborer whose shack he buys and then reconstructs so deliberately as the Walden cabin. He disparages the French Canadian Therien as well, although he gives him grudging respect for his prowess with an axe. He reserves his greatest contempt for John Field and the "owner" of Flint's Pond, probably because Field and Flint represent the traditional model of land ownership and proprietorship from which Thoreau wishes to distance himself. He calls the married Field "honest, hard-working, but shiftless" (*Walden* 204) and Flint an "unclean and stupid farmer," a "skinflint, who loved better the reflecting surface of a dollar, or a bright cent, in which he could see his own brazen face" (*Walden* 195). Thoreau's ecological vision does not sponsor better social relationships with his fellow men. In contrast, Steinbeck's theory of comradeship seems to melt the ego boundaries between men to the extent that they remain free from both entangling

Los Gatos Ranch, 1938.

heterosexual relationships and an exchange economy. Most important, Steinbeck's queer ecological vision enables him to imagine alternative social relationships.

Tortilla Flat begins, for example, when Danny returns from the army to discover that he has inherited two pieces of property. Even without seeing the houses, he feels "a little weighed down with the responsibility of ownership." He begins to drink, his "very worst nature came to the surface," and "race antipathy" overcomes his "good sense" (5). More important, he runs the risk of alienation from his friends. As his friend Pilon explains, "Thou art lifted above thy friends. Thou art a man of property. Thou wilt forget thy friends who shared everything with thee, even their brandy." Pilon, of course, has his own self-interested motives for encouraging Danny to take the high road. He wants Danny to share brandy and other things with him. Nevertheless, this tension between property and friends, between exclusive ownership and communal sharing, goes to the heart of *Tortilla Flat*, and for much of the novel Steinbeck labors to create a utopian homosocial community similar to the one he would envision in *Of Mice and Men*. Danny swears that he will not forget his friends. "While I have a house, thou hast a house," he assures Pilon (10). Indeed, Danny and Pilon work out an arrangement that depends upon their tacit subversion of the official landlord-renter relationship that they have. Danny does not simply invite Pilon to live in his second house free of charge. Officially, Pilon rents the house, but Danny never asks him to pay. The test for each of them, then, involves *not* falling back upon the official agreement—sustaining comradeship under the sign, as it were, of ownership. Pilon himself eventually violates the terms of the homosocial ideal when he charges his friend Pablo Sanchez to rent part of the house he himself is renting—or not renting—from Danny. Then, the two of them rent part of the house to Jesus Maria Corcoran for $15.00 a month. Although Pilon ostensibly intends this money for Danny, he ends up spending it on wine, which indirectly—because of the drunken state into which the three men fall—leads to their burning the house to the ground. An object lesson in the power of money, owner-

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ship, and greed to destroy communal bonds between men, the loss of the house actually enables the men to rediscover a better relationship. Danny, for example, enjoys a Thoreauvian epiphany in which he recognizes the corrupting influence of property ownership on his male identity and on his relationships with his male friends.

> He had indulged in a little conventional anger against careless friends, had mourned for a moment over that transitory quality of earthly property which made spiritual property so much more valuable. He had thought over the ruin of his status as a man with a house to rent; and, all this clutter of necessary and decent emotion having been satisfied and swept away, he had finally slipped into his true emotion, one of relief that at least one of his burdens was removed. (42)

The removal of burdens also extends to Danny's relationship with women. His relationship with Mrs. Morales cools when he becomes the owner of only one house, and he recognizes, "Too often we are tied to women by the silk stockings we give them" (45). Better the friendship between men in which pretense of ownership and superiority dissolves. Better the sharing of a quart of grappa when there is "just enough to promote the sweetness of comradeship" (45).

If Steinbeck subtly proscribes heterosexual relationships as a precondition for an idealized male bond, he also polices the sexual boundaries of those male-to-male relationships. When the three displaced men move into the remaining house with Danny, he warns them immediately, "I want all of you to keep out of my bed." "That is one thing I must have to myself" (46). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues in *Between Men*, homosocial relationships between men depend upon the repression of homoerotic attraction between men—what Steinbeck refers to as "the inviolable quality of Danny's bed" (128).[2] Unlike homosocial relationships between men that feature competitiveness, moreover, Steinbeck's comradeship also depends upon the elimination of hierarchies and the money nexus that promotes them—that is, upon a Thoreauvian minimalist economy, a scavenger and barter economy that promotes sharing. The less

the men have, the more likely they are to share. When Jesus Maria rashly promises that it shall be the three men's burden and duty to see that "there is always food in the house for Danny," Pilon immediately recognizes the danger of such a commitment. If the promise "were enforced," he explains, "it would be worse than rent. It would be slavery" (46). A relationship predicated on debt and obligation enslaves men to the larger exchange economy; they must acquire things to pay off their debts. If everyone shares, however modestly, no one has power over anyone else.

The male utopia in *Tortilla Flat* does not last, and we recognize that it carried the seed of its own destruction from the beginning. Danny does actually own the house, and his ownership—the structure of ownership—entails a feeling of obligation on the other men, who are guests rather than tenants but still subject to eviction. Feeling some pressure to compensate Danny for his hospitality, Pilon becomes obsessed with the Pirate's rumored hoard of hidden money. When the men invite the Pirate to join them in the house, he feels such intense gratitude for the expression of love and friendship that he brings them gifts of food he has scavenged from local restaurants every morning. This sacramental ritual—the men feel like "fed gods"—is betrayed because the invitation to the Pirate was a ploy to learn the location of his money. When he turns the tables on the men by offering them the money on the grounds that it will be "safe" with his friends, the men react in horror (62). Such trust and selflessness throws their own selfishness and greed into relief.

Danny dies at the end of *Tortilla Flat* after an orgy of male-on-male violence that destroys any possibility of continued comradeship. Before this, however, Danny tries to sell the house, ostensibly to liberate himself from the burden of ownership, but the other men see this as a betrayal and sabotage the sale by burning the receipt. They force Danny back into comradeship, desperately and climactically throwing a party which, they hope, will restore the original homosocial unity of comradeship. But the party devolves into a battle royal. "Never had there been so many fights; not fights between two men, but roaring battles that raged through whole clots of men, each one for himself." At one point, in fact, Danny himself attacks the whole party with a table-leg (162). As the narrator concludes, emphasizing the eco-

logical implications, "A dying organism is often observed to be capable of extraordinary endurance and strength" (162–63). Danny's death and the men's deliberate burning of the house have two contradictory effects. Recognizing that the "cord" that bound them together has been cut, the men burn the house so that "this symbol of holy friendship, this good house of parties and fights, of love and comfort, should die as Danny died" and not fall into the hands of some stranger (173). At the same time that they canonize Danny as the high priest of such holy friendship, however, the men surrender the possibility of enjoying such comradeship again. For as they leave the "black, steaming cinders" of the ruined house, Steinbeck observes that "no two walked together" (174).

Susan Shillinglaw has written that *Cannery Row* "weaves strands of Steinbeck's non-teleological acceptance of what 'is,' his ecological vision, and his own memories of a street and the people who made it home" (vi). She calls the novel an "antidote" to the "highly political and politicized" *The Grapes of Wrath* and a "love story" about a place and a man, Ed Ricketts, who "contained all the energy and mystery and creativity that that place signified" (xxvii). "As ecologists," she observes, both Ricketts and Steinbeck "rejected a man-centered universe and stressed the interconnectedness of humans with nature, of humans with others" (xii). More than *Of Mice and Men* and *Tortilla Flat*, both of which posit the promise of homosocial communities of men only to end in violence, destruction, and death, *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday* come closer to realizing and sustaining a male homosocial utopia. Mack and the boys, Steinbeck says, "are the Beauties, the Virtues, the Graces":

> What can it profit a man to gain the whole world and to come to his property with a gastric ulcer, a blown prostate, and bifocals? Mack and the boys avoid the trap, walk around the poison, step over the noose while a generation of trapped, poisoned, and trussed-up men scream at them and call them no-goods, come-to-bad-ends, blots-on-the-town, thieves, rascals, bums. Our Father who art in nature, who has given the gift of survival to the coyote, the common brown rat, the English sparrow, the house fly and the moth, must have a great and overwhelming love for no-goods and blots-on-the-

> town and bums, and Mack and the boys. Virtues and graces and laziness and zest. Our Father who art in nature. (*Cannery Row* 18)

Lee Chong's grocery and Dora Flood's whorehouse, furthermore, both represent benign forms of capitalism that reinforce rather than threaten homosocial solidarity. Like Danny in *Tortilla Flat*, Lee Chong charges Mack and the boys $5.00 a week to rent the Palace Flophouse and Grill but never collects it. Even Eddie, the "understudy" bartender at La Ida, illustrates the beauties of an alternative capitalist economy as he funnels leftover alcohol into a jug and shares the weird concoction with the Flophouse Gang (41–42).[3] Mack, in short, was the "elder, leader, mentor, and to a small extent the exploiter of a little group of men who had in common no families, no money, and no ambitions beyond food, drink, and entertainment" (13).

Cannery Row certainly tests the quality and sustainability of any community such unconventionally virtuous men can form. The party that Mack and the boys plan for Doc to celebrate their successful frog-gathering trip is "pathological," as Beegel, Shillinglaw, and Tiffney term it (19), and it ends in chaos and wreckage. The men profane the spirit of the party from the beginning by selling Lee Chong the frogs so that they can buy whiskey and then drinking that whiskey before Doc even returns to join in the party. In fact, by the time Doc returns, the men not only have sold all of the frogs that they supposedly caught for him but also have gotten so drunk that they have destroyed the laboratory and accidentally released all of the frogs. Doc reacts by getting angry and punching Mack. His "small hard fist whipped out and splashed against Mack's mouth," and his "eyes

Gabe (Mack) leaning against post. Photo by Peter Stackpole.

shone with red animal rage" (122). If the novel ended here, it would resemble *Tortilla Flat* in its assessment of male homosocial bonds and their promise of an alternative community. *Cannery Row* actually ends, however, with another party that effectively redeems the first. This party, "with an ecology based on cooperation and generosity… restores Cannery Row's sense of community" (Beegel 19). Even though there are fights, they are honorable, comradely fights with the crew of the San Pedro tuna boat, with men who are "good hard happy fight-wise men" (*Cannery Row* 177). Even the police "looked in, clicked their tongues and joined" the party (178). Doc himself surveys the wreckage on Sunday morning, with the church bells ringing in the air, and blesses the result: "Good time!" (183). Whatever the level of violence and disorder, all seems part of a natural order—part of what simply "is"—and the ecological balance between the men and the community, as well as among the men themselves, remains intact.

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Even more than *Cannery Row*, *Sweet Thursday* tests the tenuous ecological balance of the Cannery Row community and, more specifically, of the homosocial male community at its center. The novel represents a fascinating example of what might be called homosocial entropy, as Doc's depression threatens the homosocial order. Roy Simmonds observes that in *Sweet Thursday*, Steinbeck "maps the terrifying progression by which the human species, through the application of accumulated scientific and medical knowledge and practice, will inevitably create the conditions for the ultimate catastrophe: the end of the world, certainly the world as we know it" (327). But I think Steinbeck only plays with the prospect of ecological apocalypse in the later novel before steering the narrative into a fairy-tale track. The hilarious and campy attempt (the Snow White masquerade ball) to cure Doc's depression, as well as to guarantee the Palace Flophouse gang's living arrangements, represents one of the queerest scenes Steinbeck ever imagined and offers a carnivalesque climax for the variety of issues that interest me in these three works.

Sweet Thursday is Doc's novel, and its plot turns on the question of his desires and needs. That question is important because, as a loner who participates infrequently in the other

men's socializing, Doc represents a potential threat to the homosocial bonds at the center of the novel. The challenge, then, is to cure what ails Doc by bringing him within the male homosocial circle of the Palace Flophouse. An inner voice from what Steinbeck calls his "marrow" keeps telling Doc that he's "lonesome" (22), the narrator observes that he is "deeply, grievingly unhappy" (55), the voice of a seer he encounters on the beach tells him that he needs love (69), and Mack decides that he needs a wife in order to get his "ass out of the sling of despond" (75). Why does Doc need to be cured and saved at the same moment, it turns out, that he has taken up with another man, Old Jingleballicks? What connection is there between Doc's desperation and the plan to rig the raffle for the Palace Flophouse so that Doc wins and thus preserves the boys' home? Although Doc never visits the Bear Flag whorehouse, "don't let nothing ever give you the idea he's strange," Fauna assures Suzy (107), but it seems to me that the question of Doc's strangeness, or queerness, is precisely what is at issue. Doc himself even suggests that the "tendency toward homosexuality" might have a "mathematical progression" and might therefore constitute the "human solution" to overpopulation and disease (160–61). Steinbeck based Doc on Ed Ricketts, one of his closest friends from his days on Cannery Row, and in the memoir he wrote about Ricketts, he noted that Ricketts, like Doc, did not "patronize" the local whorehouse. "His sex life was far too complicated for that" (*Log* 240). I am not suggesting that Doc is gay, or in the closet, because the more interesting matter is the lengths to which the other characters go to prove that he's not—that is, not "strange." That question has serious implications, not the least of which is the status of the Flophouse as a homosocial home. For if Doc, the beau ideal of Cannery Row manhood, proved to be gay, or strange, the suggestion is, then homosocial comradeship could be jeopardized because it is infected, as it were, with sexuality. Like a new predator, a zebra mussel of desire, homosexuality would threaten the ecological balance of this homosocial tide pool.

These sexual and social tensions come together in the masquerade ball, which Fauna, paradoxically, wants to name "At the court of the Fairy Queen" but then uses as an engagement party for Doc and Suzy. Fauna dresses Suzy as a conventional Snow White, but her Prince Charming, it turns out, will not be

Doc, but Hazel, the "boy" whose mother "became confused about his sex when he was born" (*Cannery Row* 33). Transformed by Joe Elegant in order to "get his revenge on mankind," Hazel appears at the party as a drag queen. His army shoes have yellow pompoms on the toes. He wears an Elizabethan ruff and a Knight Templar's hat with a white ostrich plume. His cheeks are rouged and his eyelashes "beaded." A long scabbard hangs from a belt around his middle, and he holds a cavalry saber "at salute" in his right hand. "Joe Elegant had concentrated his revenge in one area," Steinbeck archly observes. "The drop seat of the costume had been removed and in its place, right on the essential surface of Hazel himself, was painted a bull's eye in concentric circles of red and blue" (*Sweet Thursday* 183). Even a resisting reader can hit this target, but the larger question Steinbeck raises in this episode involves the social effects of such carnivalesque play.

Steinbeck's campy efforts to "queer" the masquerade ball obviously suggest the various sexual energies that, like underground springs, provide a foundation for social relationships in the novel. But even though the characters decorate the ballroom as a "veritable fairyland" (180), Steinbeck does not design the event as a collective coming-out party. Quite the contrary. If anything, he demonstrates how carefully the homosocial order must be regulated to ensure that sexuality does not threaten its tenuous balance. Despite the patriotically colored target on his backside, then, Hazel really offers a diversion, or cover. There but for the grace of Steinbeck, it is tempting to say, goes Doc.

The suggestion that Steinbeck opens up the possibility of Doc's homosexuality in *Sweet Thursday* may surprise readers who remember the way he describes Doc in *Cannery Row*. Doc's face is "half Christ and half satyr," the narrator comments, "and his face tells the truth. It is said that he has helped many a girl out of one trouble and into another" (29). "He was concupiscent as a rabbit and gentle as hell" (30). Both descriptions suggest an intriguing doubleness in Doc's character, of course, and like the later novel, *Cannery Row* converts Doc's sexuality into a question for the other men to answer. That question becomes complicated early in the novel when Doc adopts the young boy, Frankie, who quickly falls in love with him and becomes his "slave" (56). This social misfit, who isn't

wanted at school and doesn't want to stay at home because his mother entertains so many "uncles," begins visiting the Western Biological lab at age eleven. Doc adopts him, getting rid of the lice in his hair and getting him new clothes from Lee Chong's. "I love you," Frankie responds. "Oh, I love you" (*Cannery Row* 56). When the boys try to decide what gift Doc would like for his birthday, Hughie suggests a "dame." "'He's got three four dames,'" Jones insists. "'You can always tell—when he pulls them front curtains closed and when he plays that kind of church music on the phonograph.'" Mack agrees with this implicit assessment of Doc's sexual prowess, and he reproves Hughie for his tacit suggestion that Doc is not that interested in women. "'Just because he doesn't run no dame naked through the streets in the daytime, you think Doc's celebrate [*sic*]'" (43). Even though *Cannery Row* seems to feature Doc as an almost compulsive ladies' man, leaving the question of Doc's sexuality up to the men's imagination suggests the stake this male community has in the answer: "He knew Doc had a girl in there, but Mack used to get a dreadful feeling of loneliness out of it. Even in the clear close contact with a girl Mack felt that Doc would be lonely" (96).[4]

In *Sweet Thursday*, I think that Steinbeck brings up homosexuality in order to lay it to rest and to reconstruct Doc as the ladies' man he appeared to be in *Cannery Row*. Doc "was undergoing reorganization so profound that he didn't know it was happening," Steinbeck notes. "He was like a watch taken apart on a jeweler's table—all jewels and springs and balances laid out ready for reassembling." Reassembly in Doc's case means rehabilitation. It means ordering Old Jingleballicks out of his house and telling him never to return (*Sweet Thursday* 191). Most of all, rehabilitation means getting seriously interested in Suzy and thus laying to rest any questions about his sexuality.

Doc's reformation comes with a price, however—loss of the queer ecological balance that enabled Mack and the boys to live as comrades. Perhaps when you paint a bull's eye on a man's ass, it is hard to see him or any other man as just a comrade. Once the homosocial threatens to cross over into the homosexual, it takes violence to keep the lines in place. "The spirit of the Palace Flophouse, tested under the torques and stresses of so many years, was broken, shattered like granite, which withstands so long as the hammer blows, then suddenly disintegrates" (202). When Hazel

sits down on his bed, Mack doesn't even take a kick at him (203); in fact, Hazel beats him with an oak cudgel, so hard that his pants split open (204). In effect, Steinbeck covers Mack's nakedness by shifting the narrative focus to Doc and Suzy. Even here, however, it takes a measure of violence to wrench the novel back into a conventional path. In a queerly logical conclusion Hazel breaks Doc's arm to prove how much he loves him (243). With Doc incapacitated, the boys teach Suzy how to drive Doc's car, and thus how to steer the novel's conclusion in the direction of conventional heterocentricity. More or less. As the happy couple drive off into the sunset, ripping off the stairs of the Western Biological laboratory in the process, Doc turns in the passenger seat and looks back. "The disappearing sun shone on his laughing face," Steinbeck observes, on "his gay and eager face" (260). Bull's eye!

NOTES

1 This is not to say that Steinbeck promotes an unqualified romantic view of the boys' a-materialism. Richard Frost comments that "'they're just like anyone else. They just haven't any money'" (*Cannery Row* 134). In this example and others Steinbeck shows the difficulty of resisting material temptations and achieving "comradeship."

2 As Sedgwick explains, "it is crucial to every aspect of social structure within the exchange-of-women framework *that* heavily freighted bonds between men exist, as the backbone of social form or forms. At the same time, a consequence of this structure is that any ideological purchase on the male homosocial spectrum—a (perhaps necessarily arbitrary) set of discriminations for defining, controlling, and manipulating these male bonds—will be a disproportionately powerful instrument of social control" (*Between Men* 86). Sedgwick develops these ideas in later studies by examining the mechanisms through which male homosocial desire and relationships are policed. In the many cases where "male entitlement" requires "intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds," she argues, "an endemic and ineradicable state of…male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement" (*Epistemology* 185).

3 In the benign, socially conscious way that Steinbeck depicts it both in *Cannery Row* and *Sweet Thursday*, prostitution fits into the ecology I have been examining. Although prostitution reduces sex to the terms of a market economy, sexual transactions are uncomplicated in these novels, more like the

other minimalist transactions that enable the boys to live easily off the land around Cannery Row. It is marriage, with its complexities and forced alterations of lifestyle, to which prostitution can be contrasted. Prostitution is the safest form of heterosexual indulgence precisely because it is so uncomplicated and does not encourage competition among men.

4 The most obvious place in *Cannery Row* where Steinbeck introduces homosexuality and the fear, even panic, that it can cause occurs in his description of Henri, the boat builder and erstwhile painter. Getting drunk one night in his cabin, Henri suddenly realizes that he is not alone: "There on the other side sat a devilish young man, a dark handsome young man. His eyes gleamed with cleverness and spirit and energy and his teeth flashed. There was something very dear and yet very terrible in his face. And beside him sat a golden-haired little boy, hardly more than a baby" (128). In this horrible scene of displaced sexual violation, this big bad wolf with the flashing teeth cuts the baby's throat, causing Henri to howl with terror and to wonder if the vision is "some Freudian horror" (129).

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