Migrating Fictions

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Manzella, Abigail G.H.
Migrating Fictions: Twentieth-Century Internal Displacements and Race in U.S. Women's Literature.

The Ohio State University Press, 2018.
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CHAPTER 2

The Environmental Displacement of the Dust Bowl

From the Yeoman Myth to Collective Respect and Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown*

PART OF the last chapter showed how an economic displacement could become an environmental displacement with migrant labor in the South being moved again by the disastrous effects of the 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane, as stated in the historical record and in Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This chapter also follows an environmental displacement but one that prompted an economic displacement. Taken together, these events broaden our understanding of the varied causes of internal migration while showing the effects of ideological and governmental forces on seemingly natural disasters. Both remind us of the ways in which citizenship rights are denied at various points in U.S. history as well as how the category of internally displaced person needs to be rethought to include the ethical imperative of the refugee.

On Sunday, April 12, 1935, a date that would be called Black Sunday, a dust storm of unprecedented size enveloped the U.S. plains. Historian Timothy Egan describes that day:

People looked northwest and saw a raggedly-topped formation on the move, covering the horizon. The air crackled with electricity. *Snap. Snap. Snap.* Birds screeched and dashed for cover. As the black wall approached, car radios clicked off, overwhelmed by the static. Ignitions shorted out. Waves of sand, like ocean water rising over a ship’s prow, swept over the roads. Cars went into ditches. A train derailed.1

The dust storm inundated a north-to-south stretch from North Dakota to Texas and a few days later even deposited dust onto the East Coast and into the Atlantic Ocean. It was the most memorable in a long line of such storms during the 1930s that covered the “Dust Bowl” region. The dust and wind combined with drought to create a natural catastrophe of the vastest proportions known in U.S. history, and this environmental disaster accompanied the economic disaster of the Great Depression. Communities whose mainstay was farming saw the earth and people’s means of living being swept out from under their feet, so much so that it triggered an environmental migration of 250,000 people from the region by the decade’s end, mostly to the West.

The historical reality of U.S. migrant workers on the West Coast during the Depression included a dominant population of whites, but this racial breakdown was not and is not typical. As Douglas Wixson affirms,

For generations, non-native-born workers—Mexican, Filipino, Asian—have planted, pruned, and harvested California’s farmlands and orchards. For a relatively brief time, however, from about 1935 to the early years of World War II, dispossessed Anglo-Americans, mainly from the Great Plains, accomplished the main field labor in California’s fertile valleys. [...] It was considered intolerable [...] that Anglos should experience conditions viewed as normal for immigrants and blacks.

During the Dust Bowl migration, it was whites in the center of the country who were the main racial group on the move, though they joined a variety of people of color who had long been working in migrant labor. Therefore, this migration is significant for several reasons: The inclusion of a large number of white people brought to the forefront the connection of citizenship and race to movement that previously had been used to disenfranchise other racial groups. Further, the Dust Bowl migration, which is often given an exceptional status, needs to be put in dialogue with other migrations that are mainly of nonwhite peoples because it was neither unprecedented nor dissimilar from other displacements. Additionally, in the short term, the Dust Bowl migration shows the strength of the governmental logic that links citizenship to whiteness and American-ness while denying the claims of all migrant workers.

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2. Ibid., 228.
3. Reporter Robert Geiger coined the term “Dust Bowl” in an article about this very storm (“If It Rains . . .”).
4. Egan, *The Worst Hard Time*, 10 and 9. For more on environmental migrations, or, as he labels them, “ecomigrations,” see Wood’s “Ecomigration.”
5. Wixson, introduction, xvi.
regardless of race, since California laws, corporations, and local communities created new categories—turning U.S. white people into nonwhite, immigrant “Okies”—rather than acknowledge their rights and citizenship. In other words, the Dust Bowl migration brought to the national consciousness the plight of migrant workers in a way that exposes the ideological contradictions regarding and lack of care for internally displaced peoples that is typically concealed by racism. Only by attending to the mixed racial character of the actual migrant laborers as well as the ways in which the category of whiteness was changed during this extended state of migratory “emergency” in California can we see how exploitation is based on long-standing notions of landownership and their relationship to class and race.6 I will consider these configurations of landownership, citizenship, and power through a theoretical framework that calls upon concepts of governmentality, bare life, and precarity discussed by Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and Alexander Weheliye.7 Applying such terms to moments of migration reveals the need to re theorize the concept of the internally displaced person so as to demand protections from the state and ensure equality for all citizens.

While the first chapter showed how landownership and rights were shaped by the foundation of slavery that led to limited citizenship for African Americans, this chapter approaches the same issues of landownership and rights for white settlers by tracing the nineteenth-century settlement of the Great Plains and the subsequent disaster of the Dust Bowl migration back to Jeffersonian ideals, which are themselves responses to the spatializations of slavery. Drawing on the version of space and ownership found in Henry Nash Smith’s view of the mythic yeoman, an independent farmer who cultivates his own land, I argue that the Dust Bowl migration exposes a specific incarnation of the “white settler society myth,” the idea that white Europeans came to a “blank slate” (in this case what would become the United States) and “developed” it without the aid of other people, including slaves, women, and laborers of various races.8 The myths of possession of the yeoman and of the white settler society equate power and success with landownership and self-possession. This ideal is framed through an imagined individual who moves where there is economic opportunity to cultivate and possess the land and

6. To read more about the migrant labor in the Southwest from a nonwhite-centered viewpoint, see Carlos Bulosan’s America Is in the Heart (first published in 1946) and Chris Vials’s analysis of this text in Realism for the Masses, 110–48. Michael Denning states that Bulosan’s novel includes characters based on Sanora Babb and her sister, since they knew each other (Denning, The Cultural Front, 519n33).
7. See the “Theorizing Migration and Citizenship” section of the introduction for a fuller overview of these theories.
himself. The farmers who settle in the plains accept the governmental myth about their ability to access both the land and the power which that landownership promises. They believe in the values the myths represent of independence and autonomy in relation to a foundational movement to claim a legal territory. In its Depression-era manifestation, however, the mythic yeoman no longer opposes the plantation slave system, as Smith states was the case in the nineteenth century. Rather, this figure in the twentieth century, who is still both white and male, now opposes the capitalist incorporation of farming on the West Coast.

Sanora Babb, a young, white woman who had grown up in the plains, was working with the Farm Security Administration in the 1930s to help displaced farmers in California while at the same time writing a story about their plight, *Whose Names Are Unknown.* This novel, set during the Depression, follows the Dunne family’s fight to hold onto their land until adversities force them to leave Oklahoma and move to California, where they are faced with the problems of homelessness and an incorporated farming system. Although Babb’s opening chapters were accepted by Random House Press, John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was released before her book was published, cornering the market. Thus, *Whose Names*, a novel written by a woman with firsthand knowledge of her subject, unlike Steinbeck, was not published until 2004.

Babb’s newly available novel presents historically specific issues about white farmers during the Depression, the gender and racial politics of their homes and workspaces, and far-reaching environmental and economic change on the plains and in California. My investigation of the historical Dust Bowl migration and its fictional telling in Babb’s novel begins with a consideration of the relationship of land to ownership and citizenship as shaped by governmentality and its associated myths. Many Americans were motivated to move to the middle of the country because of governmental advertisements and policies that offered more opportunity for those who could farm their own land. Their arrival, of course, displaced Indigenous people already on the land, who were erased from the promises of available territory. Furthermore, the farming practices encouraged by the government destabilized the land, affecting farmers’ abilities to economically sustain themselves and their property. This environmental and economic disaster resulted in their loss of landownership and their displacement to the West. As internally displaced persons, however, they were now subject to a precarious life as migrant labor. The farming system turned farmers into laborers on the move precisely to prevent them from being autonomous and able to possess land. Corporate farm owners, local officials, state representatives, and even the federal government developed

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or contributed to new migrant laws, restrictive corporate farming practices, and harsh domestic spaces that dispossessed the migrants and brought into question their “American-ness.” All of these entities held a capitalistic view of ownership that fought against any attempts to unionize and desired to keep property and its economic benefit in the hands of the few.

Babb’s *Whose Names* is valuable because it reveals how the claims of the farmers in the Dust Bowl region are “unsettled” as the land, in its ecological and legal properties, shifts beneath their feet. The book exposes the empty promise of the yeoman myth while also depicting the characters’ response to the atomizing effects of capitalism that led to precarity; this utopian, Third-space solution, helped along by the federal housing camps and their own unionization, extends the farmers’ ideas of collective respect to the land, animals, and neighbors beyond just the white community to one united across race and gender in the aims of social justice. In contrast to the first chapter, where I demonstrate how Hurston’s novel addresses precarious citizenship for African Americans through individual home ownership, Babb’s novel more fully imagines a community connected through class. Ultimately, though, *Whose Names* cannot sustain its notion of inclusive community. At first, an idealized vision is possible because the farming corporations view their employees as interchangeable units of labor, no matter their race or gender, and ironically this bare life status bereft of rights and protection enables workers of various backgrounds to occupy shared spaces of employment. This breaking down of boundaries between individuals allows workers to conceive of a cooperative space among themselves. The fulfillment of this cooperation is unattainable, though, because finally the legal system, racism, and internalized gender discrimination prevent boundary crossings when the workers attempt to rise above the lowest economic level. The new farm system that separates farmers from a connection to the land and animals also inhibits a progressive environment among people. In the end, Babb’s text concedes to only expanding the Thirdspace of empowerment to include white women at the periphery of the white male political space, while people of color are left behind, literally and figuratively remaining imprisoned.

**HISTORY OF THE YEOMAN**

In the previous chapter, I pointed to landownership’s connection to citizenship as a foundational element brought by European colonists that was then expanded not only to disempower those who did not have the wealth to own the land but also as a means to disenfranchise along racial lines and to keep

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10. See Soja, *Thirdspace* and Bhabha, “Third Space.”
power in the hands of the few. Slavery and blackness were set against landownership and citizenship from the start of North American colonization. While many early colonists relied upon this binary for restrictive purposes based on class and race, later some U.S. politicians attempted to use this ideology as a path to class egalitarianism that eventually also included blacks.

The yeoman myth played a large but shifting role in constructing space and movement in the United States. In the late eighteenth century, scholar Thomas Cooper, describing to the English the prospects for an emigrant, embraces the yeoman myth: “In America a farmer is a land-owner, paying no rent, no tythes, and few taxes, equal in rank to any other rank in the state, having a voice in the appointment of his legislators and a fair chance, if he deserve it, of becoming one himself.”¹¹ The glorified yeoman represents the possibility of a white egalitarian society where power is gained through the hard work of the individual, not through birthright. The most famous proponent of the yeoman’s possibilities was Thomas Jefferson, who presented the white farmer as an American image in opposition to the laborer of Europe. However, as 1940s Americanist Chester Eisinger stresses, in this “Jeffersonian myth,” land was still strongly connected to economic power. The yeoman not only worked the earth but owned it, with the land itself facilitating his social status and wealth.¹² In theory, all could share in the bounty of the land through its ownership. In fact, however, the space was finite and with it the power; by putting so much stress on the lone individual, a strong community could not emerge to address problems that extended beyond the capabilities of one person.

The yeoman’s location in the heart of the country was crucial. Benjamin Franklin stated that the “body of our nation” consisted of “the industrious frugal farmers inhabiting the interior part of these American States,” and he believed the country’s focus should not be on the seaports when “the great business of the continent is agriculture. For one artizan [sic] or merchant, I suppose, we have at least 100 farmers, by far the greatest part cultivators of their own fertile lands.”¹³ This shift of focus to the interior did not just reimagine the economic structure of the United States. It also reimagined the land itself, previously known as the Great American Desert, a label that described the region as “inappropriate for cultivation and uninhabitable by a people dependent on agriculture.”¹⁴ In an early form of “rebranding,” that space was now presented as a place desirable to settle, attracting immigrants and eastern

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¹¹. Cooper, Some Information Respecting America, 72–73.
¹³. Franklin, Autobiography and Other Writings, 347 and 344.
¹⁴. Lookingbill, Dust Bowl, USA, 9–10.
citizens to new economic opportunities as part of the government’s advertising this yeoman myth.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, when the government debated granting small homesteads to farmers who would cultivate and live on land in the plains, spatial ideology remained a central factor. As historian James Shortridge states, “The region became America’s middle ground, literally and figuratively between the urbanized East and the western wilderness,” making the plains an appropriate place to mediate the argument about America’s future economic principles. Attempting to maintain a pastoral ideal while accommodating the perceived progress of industrialization, these politicians spatialized a distinction between the bucolic and the technological, but this endeavor to have both the machine and the garden, as Leo Marx labels these disparate perspectives, in the long run reduced this “middle ground” to long-established colonial views of landownership and power in order to populate the area. Added to this view, however, was an antislavery hope articulated by Rep. George W. Julian of Indiana that under this plan

poor white laborers of the South, as well as of the North, will flock to our territories; labor will become common and respectable; our democratic theory of equality will be realized; closely associated communities will be established; whilst education, so impossible to the masses where slavery and land monopoly prevail, will be accessible to the people through their common schools; and thus physical and moral causes will combine in excluding slavery forever from the soil.

National and personal economics would unite to create a prosperous, egalitarian country and community.

As Julian’s words emphasize, the yeoman ideology countered the plantation slave system. If a farmer cultivated his own land, he was not using slaves for that work. “Slavery only thrives on extensive estates,” Julian stated in 1851. “In a country cut up into small farms, occupied by as many independent proprietors who live by their own toil, it would be impossible—there would be no room for it.” This argument, which explicitly acknowledges and inverts the colonial view that prevented blacks from acquiring citizenship rights, held that slaves cannot work land to the fullest because, without civil rights, payment for their labor, and landownership, they cannot love their country.

15. Shortridge, “The Emergence of ‘Middle West,’” 214.
18. Ibid.
Conversely, independent farmers—white or black, though the overwhelming majority were white, as was the popular image of the yeoman—would not only work the land to the greatest avail, but they would also fight for the country because “the man who loves his home will love his country.” Slavery hurts the individual, the land, and the country, Julian argued, and a yeoman society would right those wrongs. But as this imagined yeoman society was realized, the same mythology of the rugged individual removed any sense of shared responsibility for others as well as of the communal nature of work and home.

By endeavoring to bring the yeoman to the plains, the government created a new role for the internal United States and its inhabitants. The homesteads served to erase the association of this space with a desert and instead focused the nation on using the region to alter the country’s economic system, to expand the area’s white population, and to pacify and rejuvenate the populace of the white underclass by promoting a move to the center of the country. All of these changes were quickly turning the middle of the country into the symbolically “most American part of America.” Conveniently, as this myth was propagated, it described the new settler as a rugged, white individual, erasing the association of that land with its Indigenous inhabitants. Uncovering that erasure through Babb’s novel will give us a better sense of the significance of migration and space in American culture in general, and of a key transitional moment in the logic of mid-century capitalism and its spatialization.

CIMARRON COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

In Sanora Babb’s novel, two of the oldest characters had engaged in this governmentally supported migration to the center of the country by journeying to Oklahoma to homestead most likely in the 1890s, shortly after the Organic Act of 1890 made the panhandle region part of the newly formed Oklahoma territory. As Old Sandy explains, "Me and your father-in-law there [old man

19. Ibid. Homesteading itself was not exclusively a white male enterprise. African Americans (as well as white women and immigrants) were among the homesteaders, especially after the Civil War. Even so, the figure of the yeoman, like most prototypical “American” ideals promoted by the dominant culture, was conceptualized in racial terms as a white man. For information on the Exodus of 1879, when a large group of African Americans moved westward, see Neil Irvin Painter’s Exodusters.

20. Shortridge, “The Emergence of ‘Middle West,’” 216.

21. Lowitt, American Outback, 15. The complicated history of the unusual panhandle-shaped area of Oklahoma is worth noting, if briefly. In 1836, Texas revolted from Mexico and, in 1845, became part of the union. This inclusion after the Missouri Compromise created a complicated No Man’s Land, however, since no new slave territory could extend above the 36.5 line of latitude. Consequently, the Oklahoma panhandle could not be claimed by Texas, creat-
Dunne, we’ve knowed each other a heap of years. Me and him is old nesters. We proved up goviment claims side by side in the early days” (52). These claims remained small, first at 160 acres and then doubling to 320, in order to ensure that one pair of hands would both own and cultivate the land, unlike plantation farms.

Old man Dunne and Old Sandy represent the new Anglo wanderers who believed the advertising that this territory was a new “Promised Land.” This form of governmentality promoted the idea that America developed and strengthened itself by “continually beginning over again on the frontier,” what Frederick Jackson Turner explained as the “frontier hypothesis.” Because of these new inhabitants, the grassland, previously grazed by buffalo when Indians still controlled the area and then by cattle, was soon overwhelmed with farmers; they were told that new methods of “dry farming” could be utilized in this area that did not receive the twenty inches of rain necessary for conventional farming. They also hoped that the “rain follows the plow,” the pseudo-scientific viewpoint believed by many, which stated that “by the repeated processes of sowing and planting with diligence the desert line is driven back [. . .] so that in reality there is no desert anywhere except by man’s permission or neglect.” Although the farmers did their best to be diligent in order to prove these disingenuous governmental tactics true, eventually, instead of rain and ongoing progress, drought and dust arrived, and with it the Depression. In other words, by encouraging internal migration to the Great American Desert through racial displacements and land claims, the United States’ large-scale governmentality would eventually result in environmental and economic catastrophe.

The white world that Babb presents in Cimarron County, Oklahoma, involves an erasure of the thousands of Native Americans who were relocated to the state and whose land rights were repeatedly ignored via U.S. assertions of Manifest Destiny, as discussed in my introduction’s look at the Cherokee

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23. Lookingbill, Dust Bowl, USA, 11.
26. While some, like the Dunne family, did migrate after experiencing dust storms, many more moved because of the drought (without dust) and the economic depression that accompanied it. Most were from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri (Gregory, American Exodus, xiv, 11).
on the Trail of Tears. In fact, the white families’ claims exist only through breaking the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, which had given this area to the “Five Civilized Tribes” of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muscogee (Creek), and Seminole, unsettling these tribes yet again. Yet Native Americans are barely mentioned in the text, even as white ranchers and farmers fight over who rightfully “possesses” the land (6). It is therefore significant that while “the government placed the geographic heart of the dust-lashed land” in Cimarron County, making it a symbolically appropriate location for the novel, Babb’s story originally took place in southwestern Kansas and southeastern Colorado, both areas also within the hardest-hit parts of the Dust Bowl.

According to Lawrence Rodgers, author of the book’s foreword, the location was changed to Oklahoma when the University of Oklahoma Press accepted the text. This movement just a few miles east may seem inconsequential, but it alters our insight into the initial racial picture. The white world that Babb portrays is more true to Colorado than Oklahoma at the time, since U.S. military campaigns against Indians between 1863 and 1865 led to the forced removal of the Comanche, Arapaho, Kiowa, and Cheyenne from the Colorado area to Oklahoma. That is, the Oklahoma area that Babb names in the book had a significant number of Indigenous people that would have been difficult for anyone, including her, not to see.

27. In the Medicine Lodge Treaty of 1867, the United States limited the hunting terrain for the Comanche and other tribes to the area south of the Arkansas River—much of modern-day Oklahoma (Egan, The Worst Hard Time, 17). The treaty was supposed to guarantee at least this area, but instead it marked the space that would continue to be constricted around the Indigenous peoples.

28. The Comanche lost the Red River War of 1874–75, and then the United States systematically destroyed the buffalo. “‘For the sake of a lasting peace,’ General Sheridan told the Texas Legislature in 1875, the Anglos should ‘kill, skin and sell until the buffaloes are exterminated. Then your prairie can be covered with speckled cattle and the festive cowboy . . . forerunner of an advanced civilization’” (Egan, The Worst Hard Time, 19). In just a few years the last bison had been killed, and in 1907 this region became the 46th state: Oklahoma, another U.S. conquest.


30. Lawrence R. Rodgers, e-mail message to the author, October 16, 2008. Although happenstance pushes the story to Oklahoma, the geographic names in the text reflect the Mexican and Native American foundations of the area. “Oklahoma” is the combination of two Choctaw words meaning “red people” (Egan, The Worst Hard Time, 35), and the country of “Cimarron” is “a Mexican hybrid word, descended from the Apache who spent many nights in these same buffalo wallows. It means ‘wanderer’” (Egan, The Worst Hard Time, 15) (as the characters themselves wander).

31. In addition to the Indians’ absence from the novel, other people of color are also excluded in these opening pages, including Mexican “immigrants.” These inhabitants remained in the vicinity since the panhandle of Texas had not long before been part of Mexico. Additionally, no African Americans appear in the text, although many African Americans had traveled west to become cowboys or migrant workers themselves. For more information, see J. LeSeur, Not All Okies Are White.
Moreover, this omission should be analyzed based on the author’s own priorities. Her later memoir, *An Owl on Every Post* (1970), follows much of the same action in this novel but keeps it in its original location of Colorado. In the memoir, Babb mentions Oklahoma as the place of her early childhood, and with that association she mentions “the white man’s unjust treatment of the Indian.”32 She also writes extensively about spending much of her childhood with people in an Indian community who welcomed her, only answering to her Indian name, Cheyenne. As she states in her memoir, when an adult teases her about her connection to Native American culture, she responds: “I was dead serious about my Indian family and he was not.”33 Even outside her texts, Babb showed an investment in the Indian community. When she died, she asked that funds be sent in her memory to support the American Indian College Fund.34

This dedication to Native American issues suggests that her text, though not directly confronting the issue, questions the United States’ proprietary view of the land. Old man Dunne recalls the old days by stating, “If there was no need for a man one place he could go another. New land to claim—why, I had two horses and a spring wagon and I rode like Blitzen into the Cherokee Strip and didn’t get any land, but I just went someplace else” (100). Readers should not take this reminiscence as nostalgia. Instead, Dunne conveys a perspective that the U.S. landscape is free for the taking even as he acknowledges that others inhabit the space through labels such as the “Cherokee Strip.” These words expose the white settler society myth, which ignores Indians’ claim to this land—the fact that the land is not a *terra nullius* or “virgin land” before the settlers’ arrival. As Dunne continues, his words more directly reveal the problems in U.S. attitudes: “In those days we just went somewhere and started building a town” (100). But now there is “no more new land, no more free gold out west” (101), he says, pointing to Turner’s idea that the frontier is now technically closed. “Danged if I know what we’ll do when we ’Mericans run out of west to move on to. [. . .] Guess we’ll go to sea” (102). Old man Dunne’s conclusion points to the novel’s skepticism about the project as a whole; Manifest Destiny disrespects those already on the land and the land itself by treating it as limitless. Therefore, the novel may be focused on a white community that created itself through government claims, but Babb, even as she respects her characters, quietly asks us to consider the appropriateness of even the early moves of these white settlers, showing how the myths that bring these white settlers dispossess many and call into question the notion of possession itself.

33. Ibid., 22.
34. Woo, “Sanora Babb, 98.”
FLAWS IN THE YEOMAN MYTH

Because the fictional characters in Babb’s novel correspond to the historical circumstances of many migrants and farmers in the heartland, the novel allows us to see how within this white community, people distinguish their identities based on space and movement, particularly as it relates to heritage and gender.35 These differentiations even early in the novel reveal some of the ways that the myths of possession are flawed. The white characters, though they are supposed to represent a new, permanent farming culture, have all recently moved to Oklahoma, and every main character was born elsewhere. Among the characters of Whose Names are many of these displaced peoples. For instance, Mrs. Starwood comes from generations of internal U.S. movement. Her parents moved from Ohio, and she and her family traveled from Missouri because they mortgaged their farm when the Depression hit and now need to rent land (50). The Brownells came with some saved money, but they too are the first generation hoping for a better life on the plains (18) even as they yearn for the simple things they have left behind, much as Julia Dunne wishes for “fruit like we had back home” (70). Despite the fact that the yeoman myth presents an idea of an enduring settlement, these characters have long been on the move, showing that the myth misrepresents the nature of success under such a farming system.

These specific families made internal migrations to get to Oklahoma, but the novel also emphasizes that they are the descendants of Europeans who had journeyed to the United States. Many had been convinced by the propaganda that they should “flee [...] exhausted land for prairies untouched.”36 Therefore, in the Oklahoma community they mark their generational transience by labeling each other with their family’s country of emigration, often in a joking way or to speak about their heritage. For instance, Milt Dunne’s grandparents, the old man’s parents, were Welsh and Irish on his father’s side and Irish/English and Spanish on his mother’s (58–59). Although two generations back, this tie to the family’s now optional ethnicity remains a part of how these characters identify themselves. Some of the identification, admittedly, takes on more stereotypical qualities: “Where do you suppose she gets that Dutchman’s blood?” (28), Milt asks when his younger daughter saves her candy. Mostly, however, these stereotypes are delivered in a lighthearted manner that the characters themselves invoke. Mrs. Starwood turns to Frieda Brennerman, “‘You Germans sure are cleaner’n anybody,’ she said, and the girl laughed. ‘And stubborn too’” (123). Mrs. Starwood states a generalization about Germans that is often

36. Ibid., 57.
used to undermine, but she says it with appreciation of Frieda, not with anger or hatred. Even the young lovers in the novel, Max and Anna, refer to each other based on ethnic stereotypes. Max mentions Anna’s “old German discipline” (105), and then she scoffs at his “old English muddling” (105). The “old” countries give them roots. At the same time, Max proudly proclaims that he may be “half Irish” but is vitally “all American” (105). The characters invoke their heritage in order to create a history for themselves, but they still want to claim this “new” American culture in order to demonstrate their connection to this space and their full citizenship.

The characters also differentiate themselves based on the spatial, gendered relations of separate spheres that limit the women’s access to the benefits espoused by the yeoman myth. Women control the house, cooking, cleaning, gardening, and entertainment while men run the fields, but although the women control their own spaces, they are trapped within them. In the case of the Dunnes, their small dugout keeps Julia Dunne in a cramped, underground space all day to complete her duties. The novel, like the historical record, emphasizes that women were not seen as part of the yeoman myth: both the concept and the label are exclusively male. Women were often made “invisible in representations of the frontier” even though they were essential workers to this farming society, something which this novel points out by having wom-

37. Woman as culture bearer was a common distinction. One way that women entertained and cultured the family was by playing the piano. As Domosh and Seager note, “even the crudely built farmhouses on the western frontier contained elements that would have resonated with middle-class urban Victorian women. Parlor organs, for example, were often hauled long distances and installed as the primary object of pride in sod houses on the Nebraska frontier” (13). Egan also points to this historical phenomenon (The Worst Hard Time, 14). Julia Dunne's piano is her pride, but because of financial burdens, the family eventually sells off that token of dignity, entertainment, and self-identification. Julia also reports that she built a small garden to expand her domain, but drought ruined it—a miniature equivalent to the men's fields. Additionally, although Anna Brennerman holds a position as a schoolteacher, the widespread marriage ban during the period makes it likely that she will be forced to resign upon her marriage. See Cooke, Cardwell, and Dark, “Local Residents and Married Women as Teachers,” 236. The journal of MaryKnackstedt Dyck confirms the historical veracity (Riney-Kehrberg, Waiting on the Bounty, 17).

38. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg notes, “Daughters aside, most of the Dycks’ visitors were men. The mobility afforded by the automobile was more easily enjoyed by males, who were generally unfettered by the constant round of repetitive daily chores that tied the area’s women to the farmhouse” (Waiting on the Bounty, 16). Mobility is, however, not always desirable. As Domosh and Seager state, “the spatial boundedness of women is not only—and not always—a constraint. Just as mobility is not inherently a path to power, so immobility is not always a disadvantage” (Putting Women in Place, 120). Later these characters will yearn to be in the domestic space of their sod homes.
en’s daily activities—cooking, cleaning, interacting with neighbors, as well as bearing and caring for children—be such a dominant part of the story. 39

While Babb’s white community formulates its identity based on a sense of constant movement, stemming from recent internal migration as well as its ancestors’ immigration to the United States, within the group, the key category that separates workers is gender, creating varying levels of opportunity and access for different inhabitants. Babb’s distinctions show the failures of the myths of possession because they do not take into account the lived experiences that transpire under the cover of these fictions.

COMMUNITY INTERACTIONS AND COLLECTIVE RESPECT

With a community built upon recent and generational migration, the farmers in Whose Names work to develop a strong support system based on social interactions. They visit each other for entertainment and give assistance, such as helping to dig wells and harvest crops. They even offer food when they do not have enough for themselves. This form of communal bonding stands in stark contrast to the individualistic and atomistic mentality of the yeoman myth, pointing to the incongruity between these ideas of movement for individual ownership and movement for community togetherness and showing how, even as the characters believe in the myth at this point, they are still trying to engage with each other using what I am calling “collective respect.” This idea of community is based on the acceptance of differences between people, giving assistance to others who need it, and treating others as valuable, whether they be other people, animals, or the land itself. Some kindnesses are part of the farmers’ quotidian existence, but support expands even further when situations are dire. Although Mrs. Brownell, a neighbor, offers to have Julia stay at her house when it is time for her to have a baby (19), it is after Julia loses the baby that the community demonstrates its full potential. Various women come to the house to cook, clean, and take care of the children (49). The women spend most of their time indoors with Julia, echoing the traditional spheres of their daily lives, while the men talk to Milt or the old man out in the field. The social support of these neighbors shows a willingness to aid others for the well-being of the entire community.

Although the farmers want to prove their self-sufficiency, their actions belie their complete belief in the individualistic notions of the yeoman myth through their compassion that extends to the treatment of animals and the land; the farmers respect the animals that work the land just as they respect

39. Domosh and Seager, Putting Women in Place, 162.
each other. They even think of them like friends and call them by name (12, 24, 37, 63). When the dust gets bad, old man Dunne sets up a breathing contraption for the family, but then he stays in the barn, spraying the air with water to help the animals’ breathing. Making the connection between themselves and the animals, the farmers consider that the animals “are frightened by death same as we are, poor things” and grieve for them when they die because “the animals are like persons to us” (92). At the same time, they maintain a pragmatic eye, recognizing that the loss of an animal costs them its use. When the cow dies, the Dunnes mourn both the animal and the fact that “the kids won’t have milk now” (92). In general, though, old man Dunne sums up the feelings of his neighbors: “I’d rather go hungry myself than the horses, they can’t say much” (117). This community makes sure to protect those who cannot speak for themselves.40

The farming families also value the land and nature in general. They are not boastful or intentionally harmful to the world around them because they know even ecology and meteorology have to be on their side in order for them to survive. Rain, a sought-after element, brings joy with its arrival. When it comes, Milt Dunne and the old man “listen [. . .] happily to the even thudding on the roof” (8). The weather affects not only the harvests but also relationships; for Max, he needs the beneficial snow in order for him “to get married on [his] wheat crop” (64). The weather alters lives in many ways, so they think of the climate as an essential part of themselves. The old man’s journal expresses this link: “He named the day and the year of natural disturbances the way another man names the events of his life” (90). It is this environmental connection that stands in stark contrast to the governmental notions of settlement that limited land solely to an economic source of production that can be mastered and which would result in the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl.

All of these instances demonstrate the connection between the self and the environment, anticipating an ecocritical ideal not to be theorized as such until decades after Babb wrote her text—that identity and place are interrelated—but more importantly showing how the characters resist basic elements of the myths that they more generally embrace. The farmers not only better understand themselves through their association to nature but also realize that they are able to empathize with those not directly like themselves—in this case, animals and inanimate objects in nature. This recasting of the pathetic fallacy rejects the idea that the yeoman should have individual mastery over nature through possession and instead points to a responsibility toward all liv-

40. Vials discusses similar tactics of showing the positive relationship between a farmer and his animals in America Is in the Heart and other agrarian novels (Realism for the Masses, 141).
ing things—a collective respect. This egalitarian bond between each person’s life and the environment resurfaces throughout Babb’s writing. As a character in her own memoir, the young Babb states, “We were not separate from all of nature; we were not looking on, we were a part.” Seeing oneself as a piece of the universe underlines much of what happens to the characters in *Whose Names*. When the characters see the ties among self, place, and social relations, they enhance the community, but that society is fractured when some replace respect and responsibility with hierarchies and greed.

Some of the wealthier individuals do not ascribe to collective respect. The key representative is Mrs. Brennerman, who is unwilling to think about the betterment of the community even on the human level. Because she does not want to share her dinner with Julia Dunne and her girls (a rare occasion when only women are traveling and socializing), she asks them to leave in the midst of an impending storm. This expulsion leads to Julia’s giving birth to a stillborn child. Although women in the text yearn for companionship, Babb shows that class overwhelms gender. Mrs. Brennerman’s failings confirm that a democratic society as presented by the yeoman myth does not fully exist; those who “have” are precisely the ones who do not share. Erin Royston Battat’s recent discussion of Babb’s novel highlights the stress within the community during the drought, reading this conflict in terms of an opposition between producers and parasites, between groups such as farmers and bankers. I would add that this distinction reveals a deeper opposition between two forms of ethical behavior, namely collective action and individual selfishness, and that this split is the basis for class distinctions within the community.

This class separation becomes accentuated when the banks follow Mrs. Brennerman’s viewpoint—appropriately, since her husband works as a banker. When the economy worsens, the banks demand payment regardless. They hide behind the claim, “It’s simply business” (112). The rest of the community, however, is not based upon a business model of survival. Instead, farmers expect businesses to function with humanity, realizing the circular logic of repossess-

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43. Some, however, who could prosper by ignoring the needs of others do not. Flanery, the owner of the grocery store, allows the farmers to shop on credit (while customers who could afford to pay full price haggle). The doctor in town gives his services in trade or for free to those who cannot afford it. Because of their actions, the doctor has been left by his wife and lives in the back of his office, while the store owner eventually descends into such despair and debt that he kills himself. These two men could have individually fared better if they thought only of themselves, yet because of their willingness to throw their lot in with their neighbors, they are esteemed members of the community.
ing someone’s farming equipment when a dry year occurs. As Mrs. Starwood notes when she confronts the bank’s overdue notices, “All I know how to do is work and if I can’t pay back that little mortgage on our things you’ll stop me from working” (112). The banks take away the very things that would allow the farmers to pay back the banks, and then they take away the land itself.

These farmers espouse an egalitarian society from the way they think of animals and land to their treatment of each other. Yet, although the yeoman myth posits a society without class limitations, in middle America people and organizations with more money finally do exert power over those they see as beneath them. As the environment makes farming more difficult, the farmers begin to adjust their sense of identity. Their tie to their ancestral countries becomes less of a factor than money. As Max states, “Funny how we talk about our roots when our people have been here for generations.” Anna responds, “We’re not really divided according to our nationalities, but by how much or how little money we have” (105). Ancestry does not, in fact, distinguish them; instead class separates people in this supposedly classless society. To return to Rep. Julian’s words, this practice does not result in “our democratic theory of equality” being “realized,” in part because of a flawed understanding about the relationship of territorial possessions and the nature of the land itself.

THE EFFECTS OF THE DEPRESSION AND THE DUST

In both historical reality and in Babb’s fictional representation, economic and environmental displacements are intertwined. Such an understanding underscores the harm done by governmental ideologies that cause environmental catastrophes through a misrepresentation of human beings’ relationship to the earth and the natural world. The onset of the Depression heightened the cyclical effects of an already falling market for crops, which had been declining throughout the 1920s, showing how the capitalistic and imperialistic logic of limitless expansion ignores the finite space of the country and the damage to the farmers and the land they work. As the price of wheat plummeted, farmers, believing in their government’s promise that they could tame the earth, plowed more and more land to try to make the same amount of money, even though each turning of the land weakens its long-term viability. Scholars have often connected this disregard for the land to the dust storms that began appearing with great regularity.45 As more land was plowed, more dust was available to be swept into the air in the windy clime of the central states.

45. For examples, see Timothy Egan’s The Worst Hard Times, James N. Gregory’s American Exodus, and Pare Lorentz’s documentary The Plow That Broke the Plains.
These storms continued the vicious cycle by inhibiting social interactions; as the land eroded, so too did the community. It was not Adam Smith’s invisible hand of the economy alone that destroyed them but what Babb describes as the “smell of dust [. . .] strong in their noses now, slapping their senses like a thick fat hand” (77). By harming the land, the economic pain the farmers feel becomes palpable.

In Babb’s novel, although the farmers attempt to maintain their ideas of communal responsibility for all living things, the incompatibility of collective respect with the ideology of individual gain espoused by banks and corporations begins to become apparent and, indeed, to shape the farmers themselves. As the farmers overwork the land in order to make it profitable, their respect for others also begins to wane. Even those who do not let a lack of money stop them from helping their neighbors find themselves in circumstances that begin to remove them from the benefits of community. As the Depression and the drought wear on, kindness breaks down: Milt gets angry at his family; Julia gets angry at the old man; then the two girls, Lonnie and Myra, fight with each other. All express their pent-up anxieties. The interactions between neighbors could be stronger if things were not so bad, the old man explains: “Since the depression [sic] it ’pears to me the same troubles bothering us are the ones bothering everybody else in the world. Everybody has to keep his nose so close to the grindstone he can’t know his neighbor or anybody else” (72). The long-term frustration and additional work caused by the economic downturn diminish the benevolence between neighbors.

The farmers also misdirect their frustration onto the land. Therefore, the farmers not only sometimes disrespect their neighbor, but they also disrespect the land. In Babb’s memoir, her grandfather, who closely resembles old man Dunne, observes, “Man is the only one out of kilter. [. . .] And the chances are he has it in him to get back when he finds out he’s a part of nature and not its lord and master. Right here, now, if we plow up all this grassland and kill off all the wild animals, there’ll be a hard price to pay.”46 The farmers’ view of the interconnectedness of all living things breaks down when individual economic concerns overwhelm a holistic view of the collective good.

The nearly surreal experience of the dust storms captures the dissolution of the farmer’s egalitarian relationship with nature through the literal movement of the land into their farms, houses, and bodies, showing how the loss of collective respect harms both the environment and humanity. When the storms begin, the people are startled by them, even though their plowing is the direct cause. They cannot understand the change to their environment through their own experiences and so must compare their space to other

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things that have been read and seen: “It looks like the desert you read about in books, desolation itself” (90), and “the dust could be seen lying in gentle waves, like pictures of desert sand they saw on calendars” (87). Ironically only able to understand the region of the country formerly known as the Great American Desert through pictures of deserts from elsewhere, they reveal the totalizing acceptance of the governmental myths that has repackaged this region as farmable while obscuring the fact that this nonarable land was not suitable for crop expansion. While the farmers do not understand the cause, they do, however, recognize it on the literal level as the movement of earth. Milt says, explaining an approaching storm, “It looks like Canada raised up and flew this way” (78). He also recognizes that with the movement of this land goes his livelihood:

He knew it was not his own loose field soil that was often picked up by the regular winds. This was a rich, organic loam, torn from its bed because it was without root and moisture to hold it. If no rain came and the wind kept on, this same precious layer of his own field would rise and follow the great dark clouds to other land. (87)

As the land literally erodes, fleeing and smothering as it destroys the farmers’ wheat, symbolically the ground continues to shift beneath them. The government had told those who moved here that they would be able to make a life for themselves on these plains. If, however, the land itself is not permanent, how can the farmer himself avoid transience?

Once the dust arrives, this “evil monster” (77) not only alters humans’ routines and threatens the wheat, but it also invades their homes: “Look how it’s sifting in around the windows” (79), “sifting in from places that had kept out even the wind” (86). Because of this ongoing invasion, “Old man Dunne nailed gunnysacks over the windows outside” (86), but eventually they have to strengthen the barrier and board up the windows (88, 90). They physically try to separate themselves from the outside world, but the boundaries continue to be permeable: “Think someone’s farm is in our house, maybe our own” (91). The spaces of the field and the home are no longer personally theirs—the boundaries have been eroded, revealing both that possession is not permanent and that the problems of the community, the economy, and the environment have become unsettled, seeping into everyone’s lives.

The intrusion does not stop with the assault on material space; Babb again anticipates the formal arguments of ecocriticism by showing that when the land is harmed so too are individuals. The dust repeatedly invades their bodies: “He felt it in his throat like fur and had to cough” (79), and “she felt the dust in her clothes and on her skin, in her mouth and nose, on everything she
touched” (86). The farmers have to cover themselves and make masks, but, just like the house, their bodies remain permeable (89). Because of the disturbed earth, people die from blindness, from dust pneumonia, and from losing their way in the storms. Even for those who do not die, Julia hypothesizes that “the effects of the dust will be showing up on a lot of people later” (94). The power of the environment over the well-being of the farmers refutes the image of the lordly master who is superior and distinct from his possessions.

Instead, as these storms develop, the environment controls the actions of the community. Because of the dust, neighbors isolate themselves in their homes. The children also have to stay home from school during storms. The physical limitations are reflected in a new phrase, “when the dust clears,” that anticipates the communal connections but, because of the perpetual presence of dust, keeps these wishes from being fulfilled. For instance, Julia states, “When it clears up, I’ll make her a nice cake” (95). This “when” quickly dissolves into “hope,” such as “Hope the dust clears a little so I can go over and help Mrs. Starwood” (95). Finally, it becomes an accepted opposition and excuse: “I mean to write him but this dust has got me so I just do what I have to” (106). The partitions that block windows and bodies emblematize the barriers between farmers, their social support, and their previous positive relationship with their environment.

Historically, women journaled about their experiences during the storms. Mary Knackstedt Dyck, for example, composed short entries that reveal the cyclical patterns of chores and the weather, including Dyck’s often mentioned “terrific duster[s].” These journals make women’s lives on farms visible because they are a “glimpse into life inside the farm house.” They also demonstrate, however, the claustrophobia caused by this space. In Babb’s account, the limits to their world are taken to the extreme when the dust forces them to “nail a cover over the door when we were inside” (94). They are trapped alive inside their own coffins. Once the dust storms start, an entire chapter of the novel is written as journal entries by Julia. The adjustment in mode and point of view to the solitary diary creates a sense of isolation, with just one

47. Riney-Kehrberg, *Waiting on the Bounty*, examples 78, 122, 283. Battat comments that Sanora’s fictional diaries are slightly modified versions of her mother Jennie Babb’s diary entries. The edits show how the environmental crisis impacts Julia’s home as well as Milt’s crops: “Her fictional rendering of the ‘push’ factors in the dust bowl migration [sic] thus balances the masculine implications of an agricultural bust with the domestic image of a home besieged by dust” (*Ain’t Got No Home*, 56).


49. This natural disaster, just like the earlier natural occurrences, is treated as a part of their identities, and Julia notes this by recording the dust storms like the old man recorded previous disasters.
voice speaking about the events—it is anti-communal. The annalistic style that lacks narrative continuity also shows the repetition and disjointedness of living in such seclusion. Here we see that the farmers’ attempts to become the yeoman of myth confine them. They own their homes, but those homes suffocate them.

Even as the novel aligns landownership with a symbolic death, the characters attempt to bring their society back to life by extending their help to others in ways that the storms now mandate. They leave the house’s external light on so that people lost in the storm may find their way, even though it raises their electricity bill (91). Some strangers stop, wanting something to drink, and although they “looked liked bandits with noses and mouths tied up, faces and hair dirty, and clothes covered” (91), the Dunnes provide for them and then later “hope those people get where they are going safely” (91). They still care for others, but now the people are strangers with hidden faces; they may try to help their community, but they can no longer “know” it.

Their environment pushes them toward an individualistic approach represented in the myths of possession, but the farmers continue to fight for a more collective sense of identity. One new way they attempt to connect to the outside world is by listening to the radio, an item that many people during this period considered their most valuable commodity, because it allows them to recognize “we are not the only ones to suffer. It is just terrible for everyone” (93).50 The radio broadcast is a way of relating to others that at the same time highlights their physical separation (91, 93). They are searching for new, egalitarian ways to interact with society that transcend space, but they are starting to see that their pursuit might require them to give up their land and move elsewhere.

The farmers take a last stand for their community, recognizing that the individual cannot succeed alone. For instance, at Mr. Starwood’s funeral all of the men talk about what they need to do to survive, and their general conclusion is to make “the best kind of life for ever’body” (100) by “stick[ing] together” (98). While the farmers are not unionized, they are strong as a community. They lack a means to fight the banks and to stabilize the prices they receive for their crop, but they maintain respect for each other. When the grocer feels so alone that he kills himself, he still thinks of his neighbors and burns all of the books that list the farmers’ debts (115). Even in death neighbors look out for each other. On various levels, these characters understand the importance of communal support and do not need to be taught this lesson.

Finally, though, the dust points to the cracks in the yeoman myth that already existed, the inequality between classes and the imprudent use of the land on which it is based. In the end of the novel’s first section, the characters find that they need to build a new community somewhere else; they begin “feeling utterly desolate” (130) in the space that is supposed to be their home. Wisely, as they leave, they continue to realize that the ideal of a lone individual is not the way to make a move, even on the simplest level: “If we stick together we can eat cheaper” (127). The yeoman ideal has shattered in Oklahoma. They continue to believe, though, that it can be found somewhere else, so they still cling to the myth of “get[ting] me a little orchard someday” (129).

The Dunnes join with Mrs. Starwood and her family and even take in Frieda Brennerman, the kind, unmarried daughter of their unkind neighbor, when they move as a group. “They went out together and alone, like animals moving with their backs to the storm, moving to shelter they knew was nowhere, yet they could no longer stand still in their stricken lives” (120). They become transient because “the whole plain seemed unpeopled and deserted” (128). This deserted aspect, in both senses of the word, causes their flight.

This economic and environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl would prompt the movement of a third of the region’s population—one of the largest internal migrations in U.S. history. Following the logic of expansion, white Americans were impelled to move to the center of the country and then to move again to the West Coast in search of fulfilling the promised ideology of the yeoman myth, which equated landownership with prosperity. The behavior and conditions of the farmers prior to their migration to the West helps to reveal the full extent of the bare life they inhabit once they arrive at the factory fields.

**PRECAIRUOS INTERNAL MIGRATION IN CALIFORNIA: THE “FACTORIES IN THE FIELDS”**

When the Dust Bowl farmers moved west, they became migrant laborers, trapped in a cycle of movement without a permanent home or the chance for landownership. Identified as homeless, they were subject to local laws, restrictions, and other violent tactics designed to mark them as laboring bodies without citizenship rights. The corporate farming system and the government

51. Of course, many did not flee. Although a staggering third of the population left, the remainder stayed within the confines of the Dust Bowl, moving at most a few hundred miles, surviving through such extreme situations as having to eat tumbleweed. See Timothy Egan’s *The Worst Hard Time*, which vividly describes the experiences of those who stayed even as their community and their crops withered around them.
produced a precarious, bare life that reduced or eliminated their voting, housing, health, and education rights while concentrating power in the hands of the wealthy. Though the Fourteenth Amendment after the end of slavery supposedly guaranteed equal citizenship rights for all, the Dust Bowl migrants in California reveal the persistence of such systems of disenfranchisement as well as their alignment with the forces of capitalism, which transformed human beings, in this case predominantly Anglo-Americans, into merchandise.

The cycle of migrant labor enables the government and corporations to more easily see migrant laborers as inhabiting a bare life that allows them to be excluded from citizenship and encourages the local government and corporations to keep them moving. This idea is paralleled in Whose Names through the erasure of the arduous trip that the Dunnes and their companions make from Oklahoma to California. Instead, the novel skips entirely over this journey and jumps, via its section markers, from “Part I: Oklahoma Panhandle” to “Part II: California.” While some may see this omission as undermining the story’s interest in migratory experiences, I stress that in the past the family was constantly at risk of being forced to move, and in this new section they are constantly on the move. Movement remains their defining characteristic. By skipping the expected discussion of their longest migration, the novel highlights the many smaller migrations and the overall precarity that dominates their existence.

The family’s lack of stability focuses them on pragmatic concerns and complaints. Because this section starts in medias res, they already have aching backs and suntan lines from picking cotton in the fields. We hear the children asking, “Why are we moving again?” (134), instead of the traditional “Are we there yet?” for there is no specific, final “there” as a destination. While the children bemoan being on the road, Milt fears that they will fail to be able to move, running out of gas before they find work and money.52 All these signs serve as reminders that this journey is not an adventure; it is frightening. Its goal is survival.

Travel is not always freedom; as Domosh and Seager point out and as has been shown by the migrant laborers’ experiences on the East Coast in chapter 1, sometimes it is its own punishment.53 These characters, as Samira Kawash explains, like other homeless people, “are forced into motion not because they are going somewhere, but because they have nowhere to go.”54 Even so, Babb shows that they still hope to fulfill the yeoman myth, but they start to doubt their ability to take part in the plenty they see around them even as they drive by it or labor in it:

52. This concern about the need for movement will be expanded upon in chapter 4.
53. Domosh and Seager, Putting Women in Place, 120.
The Dunnes and the Starwoods moved on. [. . .] They moved on, past the date-palm ranches in the desert—then going higher into the green country again, through almond groves, apricot lands, orange and lemon trees, they took long breaths of the high air heavy, intoxicating, fragrant with blossoms. Here were the tall trees, the Spanish names on signs, the tenderness and gentleness of spring.

A few miles on were the cherry trees, ripe and waiting. (160–61)

They see the abundance they had been promised, the land itself and the food to feed their hunger, yet their enforced movement keeps it out of reach—as indicated by the repetition of “they moved on” and the distance from the more immediate senses of touch or taste. Even the cherries that are waiting to be touched by their harvesting hands ultimately cannot satisfy because they will be immediately relinquished to the owners. The workers can only observe the bounty instead of partaking of it; they begin to see themselves as part of a failed myth. Babb shows the characters’ changing perspective as they begin to see they are abandoned for the new system of incorporation that keeps them “moving on.”

The U.S. government’s ostensible, political goal of having farmers practice the yeoman myth in subsistence homesteading was to turn the country away from the plantation slavery system. Now that the United States was decades removed from slavery, the forces of capitalism produced a new farming system more focused on large profits, in which ownership remains the ultimate goal, but the access to ownership is limited to a few. Possession continues to create a struggle that empowers some while disempowering many others, but now the old white settlers are the ones being disempowered through displacement. Additionally, on these new farms, run like factories, the once independent farmers are bound into an unending cycle of migratory labor, continuing their unsettled status and withdrawing any real chance at land possession. No longer are they being told that their movement will gain them a settlement. Instead, farmers work in a system of unequal labor relations that seeks to dispossess them: they own no land, receive no benefits, hold no job security, move seasonally, lack a permanent place to live, and perform the repetitive task of picking. These policies of enforced itinerancy by the corporations and the state legislators constitute a governmentality of precarity and dispossession that differs in type and scale from the U.S. governmentality of encouraging settlement in middle America. These migrant laborers have become part of the new “factories in the field,” which, as writer Carey McWilliams explains, are “large feudal empires” where “farming has been replaced by industrialized agriculture [and] the farm by the farm factory.”

55. McWilliams, Factories in the Field, 6–7.
tem, human beings in many ways can still be owned because they are not paid enough to allow for any independence from their employer—the “farmer-industrialist,” as Babb calls the owner in her notes.\textsuperscript{56} Economics and a process of dehumanization—or, more accurately, the stripping down of the citizenship rights that had previously constructed the farmers’ personhood and American-ness to a kind of bare life—form the basis of this inequality. After one conceives of another human as merely a body that can provide labor, all that is necessary, as Milt himself states, is “money, enough to hire another man” (168). This new system adapts some of the dehumanizing elements of the plantation system to new forms of mechanization and organization to enhance the dominance of the owners and the demoralization of the workers through taking away their rights, their autonomy, and their landownership potential, all in ways that are deemed legal in the post-slavery era.\textsuperscript{57}

The large-scale farming system was able to be established so readily in California because of its distinct history from more eastern states. Those reasons extend from a history before the land was part of the United States because under Mexican rule, colonialism supported large tracts of land that were then usurped by Anglo newcomers.\textsuperscript{58} With these larger parcels intact, it was more difficult to establish and maintain the Jeffersonian ideal for smaller farms. Instead this region established a “monopolistic pattern of landownership” for the California agricultural system.\textsuperscript{59} The nineteenth-century, large-scale, “bonanza” wheat farms showed the desired tradition and model—slavery—with owners asking if black slave labor could be brought in from the South.\textsuperscript{60} Though this importation did not occur, over time farm owners recruited various people from abroad and from within with the same intentions of having “powerlessness” as a key element of the workforce, thereby marking the labor system in California as far removed from the yeoman egalitarian ideal.\textsuperscript{61}

Although the businesses resemble the old plantation system in size and worker dependence on the employer, the farms that the Dunnes find in California are part of the new system of incorporation, what cultural scholar Alan Trachtenberg defines as “a changed, more tightly structured society with new hierarchies of control, and also changed conceptions of that society, of Amer-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{56} Babb and Babb, \textit{On the Dirty Plate Trail}, 55.
\item \textsuperscript{57} In this new system, gendered locations are diminished, as was true in chattel slavery. Migrant women work alongside their husbands for needed money and have no home to maintain. Here is an equality of the least: the workers are seen not as people but as units of labor, with gender mentioned only to compare women’s and men’s capacity for output.
\item \textsuperscript{58} Daniel, \textit{Bitter Harvest}, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 19.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 24.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 68.
\end{itemize}
ica itself.”

This absorption of farms into mass conglomerations nullifies the yeoman’s self-sufficiency. He is now a laborer, tied not to one plantation, but to the whole system at large. The farmer must move seasonally, at best, in order to keep working and thereby feed his family and himself. Additionally, this labeling of the farmer as farmer is itself suspect, since “farming” now consists of the repetitive task of picking, similar to assembly-line specialization. This industrial view of farming has reshaped the yeoman from an independent farmer to a cog in the machinery: a migrant field worker living under precarious conditions—something I discuss further in chapters 1 and 4.

These laborers may hope against hope that land possession is still possible, but the corporations and the state “dispossess” these workers into homelessness. From the large corporations’ capitalistic perspective, profits are the goal. Keeping workers subservient is a means to those ends. In the novel, bosses beat up the workers, hold them on any “convenient charge,” make them pay for mandatory work needs like sacks, and force them to buy their goods at the more expensive company store. This show of power against workers corresponds to general historical instances, such as the frequent strikes throughout the 1930s when workers were beaten and arrested on the authority of owners threatening their bodies and their civil rights; the findings of the La Follette Civil Liberties Committee at the end of the decade confirmed these violations. All of these actions regulate the masses, and they fit within the standard explanations of the violence perpetrated against the homeless to control and contain them. Symbolically, Babb’s characters are separated from that place of safety that one thinks of as “home,” forced from place to place with only temporary housing available to them in California. Having given up their land in Oklahoma and not being able to afford land in California, the migrant workers must respond to the question of “Home address?” with “We haven’t got one anymore” (145). Once in California, wherever they go they are marked as homeless.

Historically there were more obstacles for the migrants than are portrayed in Babb’s novel. Some of these barriers help to elucidate how local govern-

63. Of course, enslaved people were also bound to the system at large, but migrant workers fully experience that tie when they move from harvest to harvest.
64. Another possible exertion of power is even more sinister. After the migrants eat in the orchards, “for some reason or another, none of the women got with child” (163). This possible inference of insecticides on the fruit suggests that serious health risks exist (something I will discuss at more length in chapter 4).
65. See Daniel, Bitter Harvest, 151 and 160 as well as Auerbach’s chapter 8, “The Committee and the Farm Factories,” in Labor and Liberty, 177–218.
mental policies that connected movement and lack of citizenship operated in
direct opposition to the federal government’s Fourteenth Amendment, which
offered equal rights protection to blacks after slavery. At stake were the issues
of citizenship rights, freedom of movement, and poverty. In 1936, California
created a border patrol commonly called the “Bum Blockade” that stopped
“indigents” at the state line, arresting them and anyone who helped them to
move or simply preventing the migrants from entering. While these local
actions were eventually deemed unconstitutional by the Supreme Court case
Edwards v. California, this decision was not made until 1941.\(^67\) Until that time,
the local government employed extreme, biopolitical measures to diminish
the migrants into a state of bare life that undermines their lawful citizenship.

Although the actions of the state and the federal governments were dis-
tinct, it is worth noting that California’s policies were found to be unconsti-
tutional because they violated the Commerce Clause in Article I, Section 8 of
the Constitution. In other words, the Supreme Court decision in favor of the
migrants justified their legal entry into California by labeling the migrants
as “commerce.” Startling as this reduction of human beings to merchandise
may seem, there were at least concerns on the Court about this choice of
precedent and logic. For instance, Justice Douglas in his concurring opinion
stated, “I am of the opinion that the right of persons to move freely from State
to State occupies a more protected position in our constitutional system than
does the movement of cattle, fruit, steel and coal across state lines.”\(^68\) Once
he acknowledges how these individuals have been doubly dehumanized, first
by California’s prohibition of their entry and second by the highest court in
the land labeling them as commerce, Douglas proceeds to argue for the free-
dom of movement based on citizenship: “The right to move freely from State
to State is an incident of national citizenship protected by the privileges and
immunities clause of the Fourteenth Amendment against state interference.”\(^69\)
Stating that freedom of movement is a fundamental right of all citizens, Doug-
las draws on the Fourteenth Amendment to show how in this instance, class
distinctions, rather than racial ones, are being used as a means to disenfran-
chise. As he puts it, California’s policy

\(^67\). Although the court case only occurred in 1941, the blockade stopped years earlier
because of the cost. Interestingly, California had been warned about the prohibitive costs by
Florida, who had also tried such a tactic. Thus, this approach is another small example of how
agricultural workers are being treated similarly in different geographic locations (Leader, Los
Angeles and the Great Depression, 217).

\(^68\). Edwards v. California.

\(^69\). Ibid.
would also introduce a caste system utterly incompatible with the spirit of our system of government. It would permit those who were stigmatized by a State as indigents, paupers, or vagabonds to be relegated to an inferior class of citizenship. It would prevent a citizen because he was poor from seeking new horizons in other States.70

Douglas points to the inherent contradictions in a nation that has created the Fourteenth Amendment and the California Border Patrol. This contradiction extends even to the Court’s decision supposedly protecting those migrants, which reduces them to chattel. In general, this case, with its inability to fully defend personhood, demonstrates the connections among landownership, mobility, and issues of identity such as race and class that would continue to be utilized in other ways in local governmental acts against the migrants.

Several of these local governmental acts represented in Babb’s novel return to this problem of vagrancy via the spaces the migrants can inhabit. Because Babb’s characters do not have a home, the corporations’ overarching control mechanism is the management of housing and with it space and movement. The “free rent” in a wooden shack they give workers requires that the residents pick a minimum of 900 pounds of cotton a day, which means that the Dunne family, Frieda, and the Starwoods must live together. Still, they require residents to pay $6 each month for lights, no matter what their usage (174). When the season ends, or whenever the workers cause any problems, they are evicted; and even when they are housed, someone else dictates how they can use their “private” space. Agamben’s concept of bare life is applicable here because the migrants are reduced to labor without rights and become classified as vagrants. At the same time, the space of the owners’ housing camps reflects this basic structure by eliminating any privacy or ownership.71

Additionally, local legislation that further reduces housing options quickly passes, supported by the corporate farms. That is, not only do companies exert control but also the surrounding community wants to “efface their presence altogether.”72 In Whose Names this occurs under the guise of protection, a common response to the homeless:

Before the crop season, on the basis of stricter health rules, an ordinance had been conveniently and quickly passed prohibiting all squatter camps in the county. This meant that most families must live in private camps on the

70. Ibid.
owners' places. It meant there was no place to go except the public road, and moving on the road called for gas. (192)

Vagrancy laws keep the migrants moving since sleeping by the side of the road is also not tolerated. They are forced to move precisely to exhibit their disempowered status.

Although the farmers attempt to fight for their housing rights, specific manipulations of the housing locations and hiring lists of the corporations keep them moving, something a sheriff himself admitted to the La Follette Committee as the goal to create “complete surveillance over every fruit worker in the district.” This registration could also stop laborers from being able to fight back through voting rights, as Babb demonstrates in a passage worth citing at length:

The men who selected the small plot were careful to find sunken ground on the level valley floor, which would fill with water as soon as the winter rains began. This was just a precaution, a kind of suggestion that nature would make. Of course, there were other means of preserving the migratories as such. One of the most effective was a particular system of bookkeeping, ordained to keep migratory workers from registering and voting. All members of an organization of big farmers kept a record of their workers’ car license numbers and the date they entered into the state. When a worker had been in a county for six months, by law, he could register. If convenient for the crop at hand, the worker was let out just before that time. As he moved on asking for work from other farmers, their records showed he should be on his way to another county. Unless he was fortunate enough to get work from a small independent farmer who had no such record or no reason for keeping one, he found the county an unwelcoming place. (200)

Babb takes these details regarding manipulative record keeping and housing almost directly from her field notes about historical working conditions. With homeless status comes a loss of rights; people who lack permanent roots in an area are reduced to a bare life where they are seen as outsiders, not deserving of the same treatment as others. In this case, many Californians felt the “burden” of the new members of their state and, therefore, as if responding to a state of emergency, limited public services, such as hospital support, which Babb noted in the novel and in her journalistic writing (142, 144).75

73. Auerbach, Labor and Liberty, 188.
74. Babb and Babb, On the Dirty Plate Trail, 84.
75. See Babb, “Farmers without Farms.”
Even though these migrants are technically citizens, they feel ostracized. The state sees them as invaders, a drain on the established community, both financially and socially. Significantly, this elimination of rights stems from the overarching myths of possession. If landownership leads to empowerment, then the loss of land (and by extension a home) quickly leads to disempowerment, as represented here through a loss of rights. Historian Douglas Wixson explains, “[Dust Bowl migrants] were a declassed homeless people, their rights as American citizens ignored and violated; an uprooted folk for whom the American creed of work and success had failed.”76 Or, as I might state it, they were a people for whom the instantiation of the yeoman myth had turned to dispossession. The myth was revealed as something no longer to be sought, since it had disintegrated to dust like their land in Oklahoma.

Without a place to call their own, the characters begin to feel separated from the larger society, and this isolation leads to a withdrawal into the self that inhibits community even among the migrants themselves: “They had come to think of the rest of the world as the outside, because they had lost all the things that connected them to other people” (201). This sense of exclusion is common among the homeless, since, as Kawash notes, “who belongs to the public, who has access to public space, and who has the right to decide what uses of space are within the public interest” ironically excludes those who are forced to live only in “public.”77 This paradoxical situation occurs because “to be without a home is to be without that domain of the private into which the public subject is supposed to be able to withdraw.”78 Always exposed, the migrants discover that others no longer see them as a part of their community. Still, the migrants themselves need to believe they are necessary members of society; as the characters recognize, “not to be needed is to be isolated, displaced and dried up, a dead root” (201). They feel shame about their housing options, so they avoid each other, making even their temporary housing spaces “quiet and [. . .] unlived in” (199). They also feel separated from each other because the companies pay spies to live among them to uncover any unionization plans. These literal invaders cause “a great silence in the fields” (202), creating distrust between neighbors and a general atmosphere of anxiety.

Being stripped of home, community, and voice, workers have only the labor potential of their bodies, revealing the full dehumanizing results of dispossession: “All they had to sell now was their labor—this was all they had to withhold” (202). Each one feels the fear of becoming a “shadow of a man”

76. Babb and Babb, On the Dirty Plate Trail, 22.
78. Ibid., 325.
because, as Kawash states, “the homeless do not appear as individuals with distinctive identities.” With this lack of acknowledged personhood and citizenship comes the realization that the yeoman myth is empty, so that by the end of the book, “their dreams thudded down like the over-ripe pears they had walked on, too long waiting on the stem” (222). They see the prosperity of the country around them, but they have learned that they are not allowed to take part in it or in any myth of possession.

This destruction of the myth partly results from the fact that the frontier is now closed. The corporate owners represent a new vision that excludes the yeoman. From their view, since they possess the land, they control all of the space: the expansive fields and the migrants’ housing. The owners even complain that the federal housing camps, which I will turn to shortly, are paid for by their taxes, so they think they own that land, too (205). Above all, the owners’ physical absence from most of the text demonstrates that true power is disembodied. Their omnipresent absence gives them a godlike, immaterial status in opposition to the physicality of their workers. Even in the one scene where we overhear the owners, there are no descriptions of the men, just quotations of their dominating voices.

From this new economic standpoint, power continues to be shown through permanence and ownership, and weakness through the inability to remain static, but significantly the difference is an abandonment of care for the individual citizen and community building through a combination of various governmental and corporate forces, including increasing mechanization of farming, legal strictures, and the exploitative power of capitalism. This loss reduces the supposedly democratic and equal owners of the yeoman myth to dispossessed, homeless, and isolated physical bodies—to bare life—recognized simply for labor. The owners’ power is stamped on the landscape through the name posts on the land and buildings they own. The workers are the ones who must move and exert themselves; they are the ones who are embodied. From this ideological position, there is no freedom of movement; everything is already owned, so you stay where you “belong,” or you remain perpetually, precariously on the road.

79. Ibid., 324.
81. Lonnie and Myra play at this kind of power with a bug, shaking leaves and putting obstacles in its path. The girls see themselves as “giants,” but they are unseen giants who harm the bug’s progress without his understanding how, just like the corporations. The girls also come up with a response to such acts of aggressive power: “If he would tell all the bugs what we’ve done to him, they could hurt us” (177). They see the value in community.
DEFINING AMERICAN-NESS THROUGH CLASS, PLACE, AND RACE

In addition to being disenfranchised and rendered precarious by their homeless status, the migrant workers in California are also racialized in a way that serves to justify their exclusion from American-ness and an unqualified whiteness. Greeted with the slur “Okies” as soon as they arrived, these internally displaced people, rather than receiving aid and protection, are subject to anti-migrant attitudes that mark them as “foreign” and as racial others. Babb’s exploration of this discrimination in her novel, however, leads to a unifying desire for social justice because “Okie” cuts across gendered and racial lines, allowing the novel to imagine a Thirdspace out of the temporary housing camp. Based on a collective mentality united by class, this Thirdspace is born beyond the boundaries of traditional ownership and domesticity. Even so, it fails to achieve its full utopian potential of a labor struggle that overthrows the myths of possession because the workers are not fully integrated, holding out only the promise of social justice without incorporating an ethic of care for all internally displaced persons.

Historically, many Californians during the Depression felt that they had been strapped with too many of the migrants and the costs associated with poorer inhabitants, so their fears became quickly tied to anti-migrant attitudes.82 These fears manifested in the construction of the slur “Okie,” which in history and in the novel marks the migrant workers as spatial outliers. They do not belong to California. Although this slur locates them as Oklahomans and therefore citizens of the United States, the language of deportation is still associated with these words, calling their citizenship into question. Egan states that historically, workers experienced “strangers staring at [them] like just another piece of Okie trash, saying [they] should be deported. Deported? Where?”83 These insults of deportation parallel those leveled at the Mexican migrant workers and Asian workers, since Babb writes in her field notes that the migrant farmers are called “Oklahoma coolies,” adapting the slur used against Asian laborers.84 James Gregory agrees that “white, old-stock American natives, Protestant Americans, rural Americans, heartlanders [. . .] were now bearing the brunt of prejudices traditionally addressed to ‘foreigners.’”85 The white characters’ geographic alienation and economic oppression tie them

82. Gregory, American Exodus, 80–81.
84. Babb and Babb, On the Dirty Plate Trail, 89.
to other marginalized groups seen as "un-American," uniting them in diminished access to the rights of citizenship.

The fact that the new migrants were white, however, brought attention to the problems in California, since much of America saw these migrants as unfairly unable to fulfill the American dream in a way that was not expected (or desired) by racist whites for nonwhite Americans. Writers capitalized on "the empathetic value of white skin." Therefore, while the connection between the white migrants and other groups is repeatedly made, the whites still had advantages based on race. For instance, during this time period Mexicans were deported en masse from California with Mexican Americans sometimes deported along with the undocumented, while Anglo-American migrants were never subjected to such measures.

Babb’s novel explores and contests these racializing slurs through an examination of the myths of possession and the idea of collective respect in this new migrant community. In this space where corporations own everything and new land cannot be bought, the farmers need to adjust their view of what constitutes an "American" identity. In Oklahoma their ancestry and class defined them; in California they find that the spatial histories still matter but in ways they do not expect. The migrant workers quickly stop making references to their own ancestral roots once in California, as they see the owners doing, but, for them, without the money and the land necessary to "transcend" their origins, they are not escaping their link to another land. Instead, their tie to Oklahoma replaces their older geographic connections, and being from Oklahoma takes on meanings of nation, class, race, and citizenship that diminish these characters in the eyes of the powerful while opening up new possibilities for connections, even across gender and race, that expand further than the putatively white community in Oklahoma.

The corporate farm owners symbolize the "successful" method for identity formation in California, and Milt thinks specifically about the European names he notices on some corporate buildings: "Did any one of these men ever walk among the vines, picking the grapes with his own hands, remembering when he came to America a worker?" (168). The unseen owners, who have risen to become the names on the building, no longer connect themselves to their immigrant pasts. Their ethnicity may remain in their names but presumably not in their thoughts or actions, which focus only on money. From this view, to be truly prosperous, any embodied past needs to be shed. These owners do not need to remember coming to America, because "American-ness"

86. Ibid., 81.
87. See Balderrama and Rodríguez’s Decade of Betrayal.
and with it the rights of citizenship are now marked as belonging to those with
wealth and property as well as coming through the construction of a nonim-
migrant past that claims an unmarked whiteness.

For the farmers, their embodiment and their past is fully seen by others.
Not only do state inhabitants make remarks against their new neighbors, but
company owners also clearly voice their feelings: “There’s a class of people
made for that kind of work the world over. Put them up and they’ll be back
down again” (205). While they are disparaged with these claims of inferior-
ity, as well as continued reverberations of the spatializing slur of “Okie,” the
migrants see themselves as unified in this negative treatment. They start to
re-form as a community because they are not welcomed by California. But
the question they begin to ask is about their own standing in society because
what they learn is “an okie [sic] is me. Someone different. Someone not as
good” (164). They begin to doubt their equality because of their position as
internally displaced people.

The term “Okie” also affects gender roles precisely because of its lack of
gender specificity. Both men and women are equal targets of this slur since
they are no longer perceived as having separate spheres but are instead inter-
changeable in and out of the fields. As one camp manager tells them, in answer
to Milt’s protest that Julie was not strong enough to pick cotton: “To live in the
cabin, you gotta average nine hundred pounds a day. Women usually always
pick with the men” (172). The individual no longer matters; all that matters
is the weight of cotton, fruits, or vegetables harvested each day, with gender
only acknowledged in terms of relative productivity. This new view, which
erases gender distinctions in an equal-opportunity oppression, also opens up
new possibilities within the migrant group for the equal inclusion of women
in their response to this subjugation.

The migrants’ right to citizenship is called into question not just by a per-
ceived foreignness but also by segregation and physical threats, which classify
them as inferior nonwhites who must be kept separate. In Whose Names, this
process starts with separate school systems: “They don’t like their kids mix-
ing” (171). Babb refers to this as Jim-Crowism, paralleling these attitudes to
racial segregation.88 The migrants also hear rumors about sterilization: “Yow,
they want to fix us like horses. Just good for work” (171). In addition to the
dehumanization revealed in the animal comparison,89 compulsory steriliza-

89. The prevalence of dehumanization is pointed out when a judge sentences a man for
stealing junkyard radiators in order to buy food for his mother. He said, “It was the first time
he had thought of these okies [sic] as human beings” (213), but he still put the man in jail for
11 years. This incident comes from Babb’s field notes (she often pulls from her observations).
tion was supported during the time under a eugenics agenda that advocated it “as a means of eliminating the ‘unfit’ sectors of the population,” including African Americans, which reveals the racist intentions that connect oppressed groups.90 A quotation from a California physician about the white migrants makes this tie explicit: “There is such a thing as a breed of people. These people have lived separate for too long, and they are like a different race.”91 Such attitudes and actions toward the farmers elide the geographic with the racial, marking the migrants as just another portion of the “wrong” type of people and revealing that not even the kindness of collective respect that the farmers had given to their animals in Oklahoma is bestowed on them.

The connections among place, class, and race mutually reinforce the disempowerment of the farmworkers. This interaction is overtly stated by a “stooge” who speaks for the corporations: “‘Get out of the way, okies [sic], or we’ll give you some.’ The men did not move. ‘Git outa the way, you white niggers!’” (154). The migrant farmers are viewed on the same level as blacks, in a slippage from a geographic slur to a racial one—with both place and race equaling class and general inferiority.92 All of this occurs in a lynching-type incident targeting an “Okie” who is a rumored unionizer. The slur becomes an attempt to keep this man and the community from changing their status. The term “Okie,” then, is a crucial concatenation because it condenses movement, race, gender, and citizenship into one delegitimizing insult. It works as a spatializing term that marks the migrant workers as outsiders to California, as a racializing term that casts them as an inferior group only fit for manual labor, as a gender-neutral word that reduces individuals to their productivity, and as a synonym for “foreigner” (in opposition to American-ness) that makes the workers into possible targets for legal action and deportation. In other words, “Okie” is significant because it transforms white bodies and U.S. citizens into perceived racial others that can be exploited and threatened in the same way that various racial groups had experienced for years.

Moreover, her notes include this statement from another state official: “We ought to damn [sic] all the rivers in the state and drive them into them” (Babb and Babb, On the Dirty Plate Trail, 67, 65). The prejudice had expanded to threats of lynching.

90. Davis, Women, Race, and Class, 215.
91. Wasco field notes qtd. in Gregory, American Exodus, 101.
92. In the novel, this racialization begins with the dust storms that are referred to in various colors, from black and brown to yellow. When the residents’ faces are covered by this discoloring dust, they are tied to the working past of African Americans and of Mexicans and Asian immigrants and separated from the “clean,” white, dominant class. This association of dirt and darkness continues in California. The children consider why they are called Okies so hatefully, “when they washed their feet at night, bending low over the small pans, seeing the toes come up clean through the brown water” (164). Dirt’s correlation with nonwhiteness is a relationship they see, even though their racialization is one that can “wash off.”
Though the white owners equate the Okies with other racialized groups to disempower them, the conditions they create inadvertently allow the transplanted farmers to slowly begin to see their shared plight with these other groups. At first the racism of the owners causes the workers to develop their own prejudices against their competition, the “fast-working, and nimble-fingered Filipinos, the resident hard-working Japanese and Mexican” who could better “endure” the hot working conditions (160). These essentializing attributes as well as others related to stature, lack of ambition, and stoicism were historically stated by farm owners to the legislature when they were seeking workers as well as by the white migrants themselves. With the realization of their common plight, however, the migrants start to adjust their bigotry. For instance, Milt begins to recognize how “poor Mexicans” are subject to the same corrupt working practices as he is, and “reckon[s] they work for nothing for the same reason we do”: survival (180).

The racial diversity of the working conditions in the fields also leads to moments of potential interaction that break down prejudices and the corporately imposed hierarchies of difference. Milt demonstrates an unintended consequence of the corporate governmentality that reduces all racial groups to labor when he begins talking to a black worker, Garrison, in the cotton rows. His confusion as to how to broach the societal expectations about race is apparent, but so is his general respect for this other man:

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.* The memory of being called a white nigger in Imperial Valley lay in his mind unforgotten, sore, like an exposed nerve. Milt looked at him. Garrison looked back, his eyes straight, and there was no difference. (185)

By recognizing the humanity in the man who picks alongside of him, Milt attempts to break down the expected racial barriers that ordinarily would not allow him to acknowledge Garrison as his equal. Quickly, Garrison becomes someone whom he esteems: “Somehow he wanted this man’s respect, and suddenly he was not ashamed to acknowledge it to himself” (187). In part, the slurs leveled at Milt that negatively associate him with another racial group enable him to positively bond with a man who also does not deserve slurs. Others’ hatred and shared working spaces facilitate the development of a tentative multicultural community.

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Once the workers in the novel start to unionize, racial diversity is exemplified not merely in the workers but in the leadership. Historically, this cooperation of races did not happen to such an extent. It would have been helpful, though, for unionization since, as Wixson states, the dispossessed Anglo farmers did not have experience in this area, but the “Hispanic farm-workers [.] were familiar with collective labor activities; it was central to the Mexican Revolution.” Babb’s work imagines how multiracial interaction would help to develop social connections and to strengthen the political fight for empowerment.

Racism is, of course, not fully eliminated from this text through simple interactions. For instance, after the appearance of a white organizer named John Lacy, “a short, stocky Filipino” is introduced but not named as Pedro until after a caricature-esque description. Even as Milt overcompensates with statements about Pedro’s neatness (194), which imply that the world expects him to be dirty, it is obvious that equal treatment of all of the characters is not achieved. In contradistinction to the limited views of American-ness promoted by the owners and framed through the derisive term “Okie,” however, the novel does assert the need for gender-inclusive, multiracial community building and respect in order for people to gain strength in this new economic system that seeks to deprive some of its own citizens.

COMMUNITY BUILDING: A THIRDSPACE TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE

The value of considering fictional narratives about internal migration alongside the historical contexts is their ability to point to real and imagined uses of space that can change how we tell such histories and deal with displaced people in the future. Babb’s novel in particular presents the space of the camp and the workers’ precarious life there as the matrix out of which a utopian labor collectivity could be formed. This Thirdspace seeks social justice but ultimately falters on racial and gender distinctions.

Although the owners and the laws seek to diminish and divide the migrant laborers, community does begin to re-form in Whose Names. The

94. Phoebe, Garrison’s wife, is not fully described, but since the laws at the time still prohibited marriage between races, it can be assumed that Phoebe is herself black. In that case, at this first union meeting Phoebe represents a second black person at the meeting, and the only woman of any race. Of course, Babb herself married interracially during the time when this anti-miscegenation law was still in force, to Chinese American cinematographer James Wong Howe, so this raced position does remain unclear.

95. Babb and Babb, On the Dirty Plate Trail, 16.
farmworkers, including men, women, and children, embrace a collective respect that recognizes the humanity in everyone across racial and gender lines, and with the support of one segment of government, they all work to provide for each other. The children show their interest in helping the community in ways that demonstrate their understanding of collective respect. Even the youngest, Tessie Starwood, helps out by proposing to steal alfalfa from a nearby field when their food supply has run out. Although she is told not to do it, the child goes ahead with her plan anyway and greatly aids everyone when they are starving (139, 149). Tessie sees a need, and she acts upon it, undermining ideas of individual ownership along the way. In the end, the children are building their own union to quit school because they are hungry and demand food (210). They fight for their rights as they watch the adults around them stand up for themselves.

Women are also a key part of the struggle in California, as they literally take up the fight to help the suspected union organizer, showing that unification is also an erasure of the separate gendered spheres that they had practiced in Oklahoma. The farming women scratch and tear at the attackers. In this moment, women unify across some class levels as an owner’s wife also gets involved: “Patton’s wife came through the crowd, screaming and crying and threw herself on the big man, scratching his face and pounding him with her fists. A diamond ring cut into his cheek before he could push her off” (154). Since Patton only owns a small business, this scene shows the collaboration of the downtrodden and the middle class, but it is a purposeful statement, as Mrs. Patton’s money, her diamond, makes a deep slice into the enemy. Significantly, though, in opposition to their unification stands the woman who accompanies the attackers, “the powdered woman,” (154) who runs from the conflict. Representative of the upper class in her silk dress and makeup, she keeps herself at a distance while her husband and other representatives of the upper class instigate the fight. Her makeup, however, shows her not only as distinct but as “made up”: “One of the woman’s tilted eyebrows had got rubbed off in the scuffle and she had a peculiar questioning look,” and “[a] smear of lipstick marked her thin, youthless mouth” (154, 153).96 As the other women break gender lines in the masculine activity of fighting, this woman stands out as false in her separateness. She remains gendered in a way that highlights the change in these migrant women.

In addition to the powerful voices and actions of men, children, and women, newly discovered support in the form of housing supplied by the federal government also helps the migrants to recreate community. The Fed-

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96. Her powder also acts racially to separate by showing her intentions to appear whiter than those who work in the sun.
eral Emergency Migratory Camp, a minimal response to the ethic of care required for the displaced, keeps the characters out of the company camps and off the roads—in contrast to the designs of the state and local ordinances. The accommodations are very basic because of the limited allocations, but the workers can get floors for their tents to keep out the rainwater, have access to bathroom and washing facilities, and most importantly, perhaps, can surround themselves with positive support instead of the animosity of the owners. Woody, the man who runs the camp, cannot give them much, but kindness begins to spread again in this new space. The migrants have found an alternative to the myth of possession. Here the individualistic model of landownership is replaced by a collective respect model of society that is supported, although in a limited fashion, by positive government action.

In the camp, the migrants return to the idea of helping one’s neighbor that they practiced in Oklahoma but without the incompatibility of also maintaining the myths of possession. Julia gives Tessie potato scraps when she sees her hunger, and then, as stated, the child gets her some alfalfa to eat when she cannot get out of bed. Everyone in camp, including Woody, helps a pregnant woman. They gather newspapers and scraps, and even use their precious gas to get milk for the baby (143). This assistance often falls outside expected gendered roles, with women gathering food and men birthing babies. This new community helps each person based on necessity.

Additionally, one thing the government camp allows for is the space beyond necessity that exists for fun. Pleasure unites neighbors and helps them move past mere survival. Migrants play music in the camps, and children play games such as “Run Sheep Run” (146, 152). Enjoying life with group pleasure and games invigorates workers, a benefit of grounded, communal space. With this newfound support and energy, migrants come together politically. Pamphlets about legal rights are slipped under their doors, and they start to recognize that a group is helpful in this situation as well: “We can get where we’re going better together” (218). Unionization symbolizes a new type of community combining necessity and enjoyment.

In the final scene, Milt leads some of the men into his tent, the precarious, bare life space of this temporary camp. Surprisingly, in this space they find community and joy. As one man states, “Gee, it’s a good feeling to be

97. Even so, the baby does not survive, becoming one of the statistics Babb notes in her journalism: in the San Joaquin Valley, in 1937, the death rate of births is “over two and a half times as great” as the national average (“Farmers without Farms,” 17).

98. Sanora and her sister Dorothy Babb, who spent some time at the camps as well, saw the importance of music in the camp. Dorothy even took photographs of some of the musicians. See Babb and Babb, On the Dirty Plate Trail, 32.
together. It’s sure good to feel the love of one another” (221). Part of this feeling of contentment is based on everyone joining financially. They collect money to move together to the next work site, with everyone sharing gas and food. Significantly, part of the way the money is raised is through the sale of a trailer. The one person who owns an individual “home” sells it for the greater good. They still have not found a solution to their constant movement, but the answer to group welfare lies in shared stewardship, the text says. Babb rewrites and resolves the conflict by positioning it into a socialist register: from each according to ability, to each and all according to need.

Not all of the union members are with them in this final scene because they are still being held in jail. Specifically, nonwhite members of the group and the female leadership are jailed (215). This absence may point to the preferential treatment that the local government grants to whites, but it also points to a fundamental problem within the reestablished community. Even as the characters come together, the space returns to a white, male-dominated sphere; as the novel concludes, the key metaphor states that they need to “stand together as one man” (222). When the men come into the Dunnes’ tent, Julia is able to join the circle, and Mrs. Starwood and Frieda also join them, but they are add-ons instead of primary members. The new group attempts to expand who is part of it, but in the end, that community does not yet include nonwhites, and it opens only a small space for white women.

The political action they take in this scene continues to show the limits of their current group dynamics even as it articulates a utopian Thirdspace outside the confines of the individual home—using, as it were, the bare life of the federal camp to work toward collective justice. The characters write a letter to one of the women in jail, who is white, on the back of an eviction notice from a company camp sent “To John Doe and Jane Doe, whose true names are unknown” (220). The signing of this letter can be explained through social geographer Edward Soja’s description of Thirdspace, which addresses the necessity of both real and imagined elements for the creation of new spaces. The letter’s salutation is a legal phrase that allows for expulsion of inhabitants without the need to know or acknowledge who is being dispossessed. The migrants all sign the letter as Jane and John Does to reclaim this nominal anonymity and imagine a power through this group demarcation. That is,

99. Even if the African American members had not been in prison, they still might not be present in this scene because federal housing was segregated (185).

100. Battat suggests that “in a unique twist to the conventional proletarian novel, her characters not only gain class consciousness at the end but a new gender consciousness as well” (Ain’t Got No Home, 50), but while I see a change in the characters, as she does, they possess class consciousness from the beginning, and only realize in California how gender and race are related without fully implementing the consequences of that realization.

101. See Soja, Thirdspace.
by reversing the abstract, anonymous legal discourse as an act of resistance, the migrant laborers embrace the bare life space of their precarious existence and employ it to construct a collective identity of “Does.” Even this symbolic gesture, though, exhibits the boundaries of this newly imagined union. Men and women are acknowledged through the distinct gendered names, but only an Anglo racial element is represented in the legalistic names. The sole use of the novel’s titular phrase points to Babb’s awareness of the ways in which the generic nature of legalized corporate discourse evacuates personal identity even as the workers’ appropriation of it still leaves the multiracial element of their society unrealized. In other words, the workers’ pooling of their resources in a shared working and living environment addresses the “real” element of Thirdspace in a pragmatic bid for collective justice, and their claiming of the anonymous name of “Doe” shows an “imagined,” symbolic rejection of the myths of possession based on individual ownership. By claiming the terminology of naming already available, though, their imagined element does not reconstitute the idea of citizenship and American-ness because they do not consider who is left behind, and thus a more inclusive Thirdspace is not reached.

Babb’s novel underscores that people should act ethically and enact protections for others, especially for the displaced, migrant workers, and those deemed “foreign,” to create an egalitarian and enlarged sense of community. While Janie in Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was only able to achieve a Thirdspace by herself in her own home without a full connection to her black community, the migrants in Babb’s novel find a productive Thirdspace based on class, but in part due to the tactics of the owners and the local government, leave some out of the discussion. Nonetheless, the implications of Babb’s conclusion still point to a communal Thirdspace based on shared ownership and equal citizenship across racial and gender lines without its being fully realized.

In *The Lay of the Land*, Annette Kolodny demonstrates that the United States’ “pastoral impulse” led masculine texts over the centuries to represent the “land-as-woman,” and she calls for others to analyze women’s texts to see if they have avoided this limited metaphor. By showing the yeoman who plows the virgin land as ultimately unrealizable and harmful, Babb’s text presents an example of the alternative feminist discourse that Kolodny desired. Babb’s belief in the land as belonging to all humanity—male, female, and all races and ages—in an ethic of mutual respect, reveals how we might have to change to save the land and ourselves. Or, as Babb states about her own experiences growing up,

Long before I read that everything in the universe is connected, that all life is One, I knew it intuitively when I was seven years old. This was an awareness, not a discovery. It gave me a mystical sense of being in the universe, related, belonging, as transient as a flower but just as welcome. It gave me freedom from the need for specific beliefs and dogmas. It gave me tolerance. Perhaps it was the bigness of the plains and the sky that stretched my thoughts. ¿Quien sabe? It is important to have mysteries. They urge us to seek and change and grow.  

Babb recognized her own transience in the world, but she also knew that with that impermanence comes the need to respect the people and space around you and stand up collectively for justice, as even her use of Spanish and her Native American connections show. She wrote *Whose Names Are Unknown*, finally, in the hope that others would perceive that principle as well. Overall, this chapter shows the potential of group action and political response in the face of governmental and corporate forces to control who has access to the land and power while still indicating the limits of the Dust Bowl migrants’ use of the imagined aspects of Thirdspace. The environmental migration prompted by the settlement and plowing of the Great American Desert was in fact caused by a long-standing governmentality equating landownership with citizenship. This same ideology also recategorized white Americans as nonwhite, immigrant “Okies,” thereby exposing how precarious citizenship is a construction that has certain structural similarities across several migrations and racial groups. The next chapter will show another group living in California who are denied access to citizenship rights, but they have almost no agency as the government forces them at the start of World War II from their homes in a migration back into the heart of America.

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