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From Oklahomans to "Okies": identity formation in rural California

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FROM OKLAHOMANS TO “OKIES”:
IDENTITY FORMATION IN RURAL CALIFORNIA

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
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in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by

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Until the lion writes his own story,
The tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.
- African Proverb

If you must attack the bear you can’t afford to think small!
– Old Okie Proverb
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ABSTRACT

Throughout the twentieth century difficult economic circumstances have resulted in reduced employment opportunities. In-migrants have long borne the brunt of these limitations, facing open hostilities from residents who felt that these “outsiders” were undeserving of employment and social services. Within the context of the 1930s Depression in the Central Valley of California, such negative public sentiment was often directed at “Okies,” the 315,000 former residents of the “Western South” who crossed the California state line in search of employment in the agricultural fields of the Golden State.

In this dissertation, I examine the changing conceptualizations of Okie identity throughout the twentieth century in California’s Central Valley. In the early years after their arrival to the “Golden State,” Okies found themselves the subject a public discourse that classified them as socio-spatial transgressors, unfit for inclusion in California society. Denied by social and economic means from easily participating in this discourse, Okies turned to their own venues or expressing their own public identity. Okie migrant constructions of their own public identity developed in direct response to the labels bestowed upon them by Californians. While Californians drew boundaries of exclusion along state lines, Okies turned to notions of inclusion based upon their American heritage.

With the rise of World War II and a rebounding economy, Okies faded from public discourse for several decades. With their socio-economic rise, though, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Okies once again rose to public attention as they sought to reassert their own unique identity. Now a socially,
economically, and politically dominant group in California’s Central Valley, Okies have gained their own voice and begun to re-establish their own unique public identity. Importantly, however, like the Okie identity of the 1930s, Okies today continue to draw upon the past, but this time that past is 1930s California. Okie identity is culled from a social memory of the migrant experience and has come to represent the diversity of contemporary California identity. Without California, Okie identity would not exist. But without “Okies,” contemporary California identity would not exist as it does today.
CHAPTER 1
STARTING WITH ONE VOICE

Nine years ago, I spent four days rambling along Interstate 10 heading eastward for my promised land of graduate school in Louisiana. Lumbering along just ahead of me were all my worldly possessions stacked high in the bed of a small pick-up truck that struggled over the Tehachapi Mountains. I didn’t own much, but it was more than the truck bed alone could handle so plywood sides were built up and everything was secured from wind and rain with a used olive-green tarp purchased from an army surplus store.

I related the story of my move to a friend who immediately pointed out that it sounded very similar to the images of the Okie migration shown in the film *The Grapes of Wrath*. He joked that it seemed the only thing I was missing were the spare tires lashed to the hood of the truck – and maybe Grandma tucked away in back.

Since that time, I have made the trip between my home in California and my adopted state of Louisiana many times. Curiously, however, each time I stop at the agricultural inspection station at the entrance to California, I feel a sense of relief at being home no matter how many years have interceded since my last trip. Regardless of how much time I spend physically away from California, my heart remains there. This is certainly not meant as any slight to Louisiana, a state that has taken me in and been exceptionally generous to me as a student; however, I am still drawn to my roots.
My grandparents, on the other hand, traveled in the reverse direction of my out-migration. They arrived with their families from Oklahoma in 1940, headed for the cotton farms of Bakersfield. Even after marriage and starting a family, they continued to make the trip back and forth between California and Oklahoma perhaps hoping that at some point they could resettle in the place they regarded as home. As the years went on though and their California-born “prune-picker” elder daughter and Oklahoma-born “Okie” younger daughter grew, the annual trips to visit family back home were curtailed. My mother, the younger of the two enjoys recalling the trips and raucous fun she had in Oklahoma, but as she became an adult, she had less desire to return to her birth-place as California was her home. She has yet to return since marrying in 1964.

My grandparents’ annual trips to Oklahoma eventually ended as health problems and the effort needed to arrange such journeys had simply become too burdensome. But despite this interruption to their travels and the fact that my grandmother has remained a legal resident of California since the late 1940s, when prompted she will tell you that she is not a Californian, she is an Okie.

So who is an Okie? What is Okie identity in California’s Central Valley past and present? Those were the central questions this dissertation initially sought to answer. But what about me? What about my identity? Growing up I was aware that, despite the similarities in the socio-economic backgrounds of my grandparents, the fact my California-born father married my Oklahoma-born mother was at times a thorny problem for my paternal grandmother. It was one thing for Mom to have married a “prune-picker,” but even more a concern that
Dad married an Okie. Although I’ve always noticed a difference in the two sides of the family, at the time that I embarked on this research endeavor, I had never really thought about who I was. My original research goal was to describe the historical Okie presence in California and how this group of in-migrants has become associated with a unique contemporary identity in the Central Valley. But I hadn’t yet paused to ask whether I identified with this group.

As is evident in the anecdote that opens this dissertation, my research made me acutely aware of how intertwined my own identity had become within this project. At each point along the way, (whether I was prepared to admit it or not) I evaluated all materials in terms of my own experiences and those of people I grew-up around. Of course, scholars never embark on a research journey without some prior knowledge or connection to their chosen topic. That the topic has even occurred to them reflects their personal and professional experiences. Completely objective research in the purest sense then cannot exist – we are all affected by our own lives (Dear 1997). For me, that personal connection not only sparked my interest in Okies but helped maintain it through what has been my largest research effort thus far. Despite this realization, I still initially felt a need to present a final document, a dissertation, that might reflect an unbiased presentation of a singular Okie identity in California.

In the beginning, my research led me to the works of prominent scholars who wrote on Okie culture or Dust-Bowl migrants. Unconsciously, I still tried to place the lives of my family and friends within their context. Did the people, places, and events described by historians like James N. Gregory (1989) and
Walter Stein (1973) ring true for me? Perhaps, it was irrelevant as my initial goal was to compile a literature review and surely that could be done objectively. Yet as I continued with my research and went beyond those secondary sources and ventured into archives and conducted interviews¹, I still struggled with my own personal involvement. I could not separate my own stories and experiences from those chronicled in local newspapers and told by the people with whom I spoke. In fact, extensive conversations often continued long after formal interviews had ended. What seemed to fuel the extended discussions was that I too had a personal connection to the places, people, and experiences that were woven within the lives of the interviewees. Often, I found myself beginning the interview by introducing myself and how my family roots had drawn me to my topic. Such positioning of myself for the interviewees seemed to provide a comfort level that I might otherwise not have gained with them. I could not be a distanced interviewer. But then why should I?

My role in this dissertation effort then was clearly not as an objective observer, but rather that of a reflexive autoethnographer who uses my own personal experiences to gain perspective on the group I am studying (Richardson 2000). Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner (2000) describe this approach as one in which the author uses “their own personal experiences in the culture reflexively to bend back on self and look more deeply at self-other interactions” (p. 740). The use of the phrase “to bend back on self” is particularly appropriate

¹ Signed releases were acquired in pre-arranged formal interview situations. For interviews that were not pre-scheduled and a signed notice of informed consent was not possible, pseudonyms have been used. In one instance a spontaneous conversation occurred but was supplemented by information from the interviewee’s public internet website; therefore, his own name has been used.
for my work here as I’ve been forced to consider my place within the broader
Okie story – a task that has at times been uncomfortable.

Fortunately, scholars far more established and esteemed than I had
struggled with this same crisis of representing a group with whom they were
affiliated. Geographer Ruth Butler (2001) writes of her own difficulties in
addressing the issue of positionality. In her work relating to the experiences of
the visually impaired, she felt the need to explicitly state that she was a member
of this group. And, while an important point to make at the time, upon later
consideration, she questioned if she failed to reflect upon herself enough. Was
her visual impairment the only aspect of her life that was interwoven within her
work? While in some respects, she considered herself an insider within the
community she studied, she still wondered if “power relations between
researchers and those they research are too complex, working on too many
different levels, to cover in any detail even in a lengthy thesis” (p. 264). In
essence, can we as researchers adequately deal with the myriad ways in which our
own lives fall inside and outside of those of the groups we study?

Other geographers like David Ley and Alison Mountz (2001) echo these
concerns over the uneven distribution of power inherent within the research
process and question the ability of a researcher to overcome the crisis of
representing of the Other – a group from which the researcher feels separate.
Noting that “the researcher is typically articulate, well educated and socially and
economically privileged, [and] able to reach and influence a like-minded
audience,” Ley and Mountz ask if representation of the Other is even possible or
ethical given the “ideological baggage” scholars bring with them. The simple fact that researchers are people granted an authority to create formal knowledge and control its dissemination contributes to an epistemological dilemma. How can we claim to represent a group, even those with whom we may feel even a slight common bond of personal experience, when our role as academics and researchers explicitly separates us from those who we seek to understand?

How can I even claim to represent Okies, a group typically characterized as white, politically conservative, and working-class, when I currently possess but one of those traits (Gregory 1989)? Although I grew up the daughter of an Okie in a white, working-class household, the fact I was born in California, lived abroad, graduated from college, and choose academia as my profession are but a few experiences that set me apart from the lives of my other family members past and present. While my Okie grandmother has been enthusiastic about my research, I do realize that this is due more to the time we spend together as grandmother and granddaughter during the research process than a concern over what I ultimately contribute to the academy.

But what I write does have an impact upon her as it will contribute to the larger body of knowledge that claims to represent Okies. Dydia DeLyser (2001) warns that such research efforts are rewarding, but a person conducting insider research must comprehend how their role may also “unwittingly” help to create the subject they seek to understand. Furthermore, Mona Domosh and Denis Cosgrove (1997) caution that as researchers who produce knowledge,

we must recognize that the problem of representation is in fact a problem of what and who constructs meaning.... When we write
our geographies, we are creating artefacts that impose meaning on the world. (p. 36-37)

What I choose to write about Okie identity in California will contribute to the construction of that identity from both inside and outside the group (Tierney 2000). My own “cultural baggage” includes a public voice and access to an audience. Not only as an academic, but also as a “native-born” Californian, I have gained the ability and public acceptance to speak for them – BUT the story I tell is not the same story that they would each tell, nor is it the story another geographer without my family background would tell. I am in other words, a researcher who operates as neither purely insider and outsider.

The fact that Okie identity has been interwoven throughout my life cannot be separated from this research (Pile 1991). But the narrative I tell here is neither testimonio nor pure autobiography (Beverly 2000). I am aware of what separates me from those I study and testimonio precludes an author from recognizing herself apart from the group discussed. And while autobiography implies that an author recognizes that they are not in a situation that they once were and can thereby reflect upon it, my life story is not the primary concern for this dissertation (Beverly 2000).

I am in some respects an insider within the context of my research subject. I have lived among the people I study for most of my life. For Miles Richardson (2003), insider research is as much a means of understanding the subject under inquiry as it is an exploration of self. For me, it offers an attempt to comprehend myself and question my understanding of the world. But simultaneously, my current status as an outsider also grants me insight into the role I play in the
construction of power relationships and authorship of Okie identity as well as the dissemination of knowledge.

That my own identity falls somewhere between insider and outsider among Okies does not however preclude me from undertaking the task of describing Okie identity but rather grants me the ability to recognize the variety of voices that contribute to the overall chorus – including my own. James Duncan (1997) explains that

[t]o claim simply that discourses of the Other “distort” the nature of other places and peoples by representing them in ways that are alien to the residents of such places, while justified, misses the inescapability of discourses. Any discourse regardless of its claims, cannot create mimesis (reveal the naked truth) rather, through its ideological distortions, it operates in the service of power. By analyzing these relations of power, we can more clearly see how interests play a constitutive role in vision and representation. (p. 39)

By recognizing that my own position of power allows me to represent Okies to a public audience, I came to understand that the story of Okie identity in California is a question of both who they are and of who has been allowed to publicly define them. As this dissertation will show, the public voice of self-identification that was denied my grandparents and other Okies like them who arrived in California in the 1930s, has since been granted to me. Following upon Cosgrove and Domosh (1997) and their conceptionalization of the power inherent within the right of authority and the social construction of language, I explore how “the voiceless are the oppressed, the powerless” (p. 37). That Okies gained the right of authorship in itself is a study in the acquisition and representation of power.
My role then is that of the “interpretive bricoleur” [who] understands that research is an interactive process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 6). That I am neither explicitly insider nor outsider grants me an interesting vantage point. As an insider, I have a unique insight into Okie identity, while at the same time I realize that my status as an outsider has come as a result of the development of that identity.

Despite being labeled as outsiders in California at one time, Okies have transitioned not only to insiders but also to a position of political, economic, and cultural power in California’s Central Valley. Okie public identity initially emerged as an oppositional response to those who publicly claimed they did not belong in California – they could not be Californians. Okies had few widespread public venues by which to respond to these charges, but the more localized ones suggest that Okies explicitly defined themselves in response to negative media stereotyping. Denied free access into Californian society, Okies turned to what they saw as an identity that superceded the importance of state-lines – an American identity that drew upon notions of reward coming from a willingness to work. In the early years in California, work often meant laboring in the agricultural fields of the Central Valley, but with the rise of the defense economy, Okies found jobs away from the fields and with them came upward economic and social mobility. Also, with this ascension came the benefits that are conferred upon those with power – including a public voice of self-identification. I am one of the beneficiaries of that power. Without my family’s socio-economic gains
throughout the twentieth century, I would likely not be writing this dissertation about Okies – even though it too sets me apart from them.

**Methods**

Despite the changing focus of this study, even my original research agenda suggested qualitative methods would prove most beneficial to this study.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000), qualitative methods

> [involve] the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study; personal experience; introspection; life story; interview; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. (p. 3)

The moments and meanings to which they refer ultimately comprise identity – both individual and collective. Qualitative researchers acknowledge the value of cultural representations across multiple forms of media and seek to understand the meaning inscribed within them. As a result, qualitative approaches allowed me to seek out public expressions of Okie identity from a variety of resources depending upon the socio-historical context that allowed for their creation and preservation. But even more importantly, qualitative methods allowed for the research process to remain flexible – something particularly vital in understanding my own positionality and role in the formation and representation of Okie identity. Qualitative approaches allowed me to pause and in some cases take a second or third look at materials to understand how they might be interpreted in other ways. It is from this vantage point, that I will describe the research process itself.

To initially understand historical constructions of Okie public identity, I first turned to secondary-source literature. Among the most important to this
research were the contributions of Charles Shindo (1997) and James N. Gregory (1989). Shindo’s work explores nationalized conceptualizations of Okies within an historical context while Gregory examines the Okie “subculture” in California. My work here examines the intersections of these two foci. I seek to understand not only how Okies were conceptualized by Californians, but also how they saw themselves and formulated their own identity both past and present within California. How did California as a place contribute to Okie identity?

Toward this effort, I first turned toward more localized constructions of Okie identity through an exploration of public dialogue as presented in the pages of a Central Valley newspaper, the Modesto Bee. Owned by McClatchy Newspapers, the Modesto Bee provided public dialogue not only within the community of Modesto, but also from the Sacramento and Fresno areas where its sister newspapers are produced. In addition to general news articles, letters to the editor as published in the “Public Thinks” section of the daily paper provided the greatest insight into Central Valley Californian public definitions of Okies. In all, I read daily editions of the Bee throughout the 1930s and early 1940s until discussions of Okies or domestic migrants seemed to have been eclipsed by the daily events of World War II and were no longer present.²

Based upon secondary source literature, I developed a set of general themes to look for while reading the newspapers (see Bogdan and Biklen 1998). Original themes were broad and included such topics as “Migrants” and

² The years I began with were 1930, 1933, 1935, 1938, 1940, and 1950. I also added in additional years (1939, 1941, and early 1942) given significance with the publication of the Grapes of Wrath and the U.S. entrance into World War II during the extra years. By 1950, there appeared to be no public discussion of Okies or domestic migrants in the Modesto Bee.
“Unemployment,” but as I continued reading, I soon realized that additional topics had to be added as I started to get a better impression of the larger issue at hand. At times, the new additions to the list of themes required that I re-read some newspapers. When I located an article, editorial item, or letter to the editor relevant to a listed topic, I made a photocopy of the item from microfilm. Having gathered the material, I once again read each item and created an even more extensive coding scheme that created sub-categories among those initial themes and would better organize the data I had collected (see Appendix A). I then studied the photocopied items again and coded each item (and in some cases individual lines of text) according to those sub-categories. Although most items were brief, they often made reference or applied to more than a single sub-category and so I made coding notations on each photocopy accordingly. Having coded all the items, I then photocopied each one according to the number of codes listed. For example, if a letter to the editor listed five applicable codes along side its text, I made five copies – one for each code. What resulted were thousands of pages of coded photocopies of items that could then be sorted according to individual codes.

The process of reading and coding (and sometimes re-reading and re-coding), was extremely time-consuming and precluded me from extensively examining other locally published newspapers similarly, but ultimately proved the best means for organizing the data. Once organized, the data suggested some commonalities among constructions of Okie public identity, but equally important was that most of the discourse surrounding this controversial group of migrants
was that Okies themselves were not as often involved in these public discussions. For the most part, Okie public identity was being constructed by Californians.

Given the absence of a significant Okie voice in these public dialogues, I had to seek other means by which to understand Okie conceptualizations of self and turned to publications produced by migrants themselves. Following on the work of Gregory (1989), I explored newspapers authored and published by migrant workers in the labor camps operated by the Farm Security Administration in the late 1930s and early 1940s. And while I cannot precisely determine whether the content of these newspapers was guided by governmental policy and its administrators, for the purposes of this research, they were the best available source for comprehending how Okies constructed their own public identity. And, like the items from the more widely distributed *Modesto Bee*, I organized materials from the FSA newspapers in a similar fashion, but due to fewer newspaper editions being available, I found many of my original categories superfluous. And because I was not always able to photocopy the original camp newspapers held at archives, I instead typed the entries into a word processing document that could be copied, cut, and pasted into the coding scheme.

With the socio-economic rise of Okies during and after World War II, the camp newspapers ceased to be printed since Okies left the camps and agricultural migrant lifestyle to take up permanent residence throughout the Central Valley. And as previously mentioned, I no longer encountered a public dialogue relating to Okie migrants in the pages of the *Modesto Bee* either. Once again, I was forced to explore other avenues of by which Okie identity was expressed publicly.
Expressions of Okie identity returned most significantly in the 1970s and early 1980s. While Gregory (1989) documented the popularity of Okie music personalities such as Merle Haggard and Buck Owens during this time, also significant was a growing interest in capturing the experiences of less than famous self-identified Okies. In the early 1980s, California State College Bakersfield, located in the southern Central Valley of California, undertook an oral history project to record the voices and life stories of these domestic migrants as part of the California Odyssey Project. Because these oral history interviews were conducted and transcribed in 1980 and 1981 and attempted to capture life stories from an aging former migrant population, they provided a solid point from which to begin more contemporary explorations of Okie public identity.

I initially attempted to organize the Odyssey Project oral history transcripts according to my previous coding scheme, but soon found the result to be a somewhat fragmented assortment of quotations that seemed disconnected from the people who spoke them. As a result, I began summarizing each transcript individually to achieve a more generalized impression of the interviewees’ life stories and then supplementing those with appropriate quotations that seemed to best represent their individual experiences and ideologies. While the coding scheme was effective in addressing the volume of material generated through newspapers, when applied to the oral history transcripts, it seemed to de-contextualize the interviewee’s comments from their life story. When examined out of their context, quotations from oral history may serve to essentialize Okies and fail to depict the diversity of experience within the
group. And while there are indeed concerns that oral history itself may not be precise history as it is based upon recollected memories of events that occurred in many decades past, for the purposes of this research, that is indeed the strength of oral history. Identity is built upon conceptualizations of self through time and place, therefore, how former migrants described their life experiences and perceptions of them was indeed a valuable asset of using oral history.

The California Odyssey project sought to capture the voices of those who would otherwise not likely be heard; however, the fact that they were created amid an academic environment for an academic audience is a weakness of the resource. Okie voices from academia, however, did not remain isolated from more mainstream media sources. Because of the socio-economic rise of Okies in the Central Valley, by the 1980s, both first and second generation Okies had entered academia themselves. Their expressions of public identity did not remain within the academy, but rather were expressed through autobiography and novels that appealed to a broader audience. Similarly, at the same time, non-academic Okie poets forged new ground as their verses were published on a national scale and they were honored within literary circles. Like the Odyssey oral history transcripts, I felt that the literary work of these Okie writers could not be captured through a coding scheme. As a result, I took notes while reading each document and then attempted to summarize them to attain a broader sense of the public identity each author seemed to convey.

Even more recently within California, the Okie story became the “California Story” – a naturalized component of the state’s heritage. The John
Steinbeck novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was designated by the California Council for the Humanities to be the ideal story of in-migrant hardship and eventual success in California. Okies had now become widely accepted and recognized in official governmental discourse as Californians. But, I also still sought to hear from self-identified Okies themselves by conducting my own interviews, attending the Annual “Dust Bowl Days” festival, and making observations in the landscape. And while I tape-recorded the formal interviews, I soon found that the notes I made immediately following the interviews proved more valuable when I later attempted to describe what had transpired. My overall impressions of demeanor and setting helped to better contextualize the words that were recorded on tape. Similarly, although I captured the commemorative event and landscape expressions of Okie identity on film, without my own field notes, they would have been merely thin representations of a complex public identity. Identity, Okie or not, is a means by which people attempt to locate themselves within places both present and past and make sense of their lives and the world around them.

According to education theorists Robert Bogdan and Sari Biklen (1998), a search for underlying meaning – how people make sense of their lives and formulate the “taken-for-granted – is a key tenet of qualitative approaches. Qualitative approaches place value upon the opinions and feelings of the individuals within the groups they study and seek to understand the processes by which meaning evolves. But because meaning evolves within a given historical, cultural, and geographical context, qualitative approaches seek the context from
which that meaning emerges. For some qualitative researchers, context may
involve placing themselves in the spaces shared by the people they study –
conducting interviews where people live, work, or socialize. In archival research,
the context may involve searching for social, political, or historical circumstances
that allowed for the preservation of documents. Or in the case of Okies, it meant
searching for the context that allowed Okies to assume a public voice of their own
in the media.

As noted earlier, my original research agenda was modified in the process
of conducting my study. This, in fact, is part of the very nature of qualitative
approaches – they do not seek to prove a theory in a controlled situation, but
rather take place inductively allowing theory to emerge from the data. Bogdan
and Biklen (1998) compare this process to “constructing a picture that takes shape
as you collect and examine the parts” rather than “putting together a puzzle whose
picture you already know.... The qualitative researcher plans to use part of the
study to learn what the important questions are” (p. 6-7). Denzin and Lincoln
(2000) refer to this process as “triangulation” – a method by which richness and
depth of inquiry and interpretation of multiple meanings takes precedent over
claiming to capture objective reality.

Geographers too have cautioned against the ability of scholars to describe
“objective reality” in their work. For Cole Harris (2001), historical geographers
face a particularly daunting task in their attempts to make sense of the past given
the limitations of archival documentation. Geographers who journey into
archives in their investigations of past places and places past must learn to
negotiate at times both enormous quantities of disparate documents that threaten to “swallow the researcher” and the tendency to ignore data that doesn’t fit discretely within preconceived categories of analysis thereby resulting in a perceived lack of data. Both of these hazards, Harris notes, can be particularly troublesome as they may ultimately deny “the complexity of the archives and the myriad of voices from the past contained in their amorphous record” (Harris 2001, 331). Historical geographers then, should be acutely aware of the potential for multiple voices and that they cannot expect to capture all possible interpretations. Given the constraints of the archive, we must realize that at times, partial knowledge is indeed the only possible knowledge in historical geography.

Partial knowledge, however, need not necessarily be devalued. Rather, the strength of partial knowledge comes its recognition that other stories are still left to be told and the quest for these stories will ultimately continue the research process and create a broader understanding of the past and present (Perramond 2001; DeLyser 2003). And although I faced obstacles of limited data sources within the archival record, what is produced here remains an important component of present and future inquiries into the complexities of Okie identity in California. Nevertheless, I must recognize the constraints imposed by my use of archival records. As discussed already, my initial investigations into the archival record led me to an examination of two types of newspaper publications: The Modesto Bee and the camp newspapers of the Farm Security Administration.

Centrally located in Stanislaus County, Modesto experienced a significant population increase in the 1930s that is typically associated with an influx of Okie
migrants. From 1935-1940, Stanislaus County grew in relative population by just over 32% – approximately the median value of most California counties (Stein 1973, 46). As such it may serve as a sample community in which to study historic public dialogue related to Okie migrants. And while this characteristic of the *Bee* makes it useful in this investigation, I cannot avoid discussing the hazards associated with the use of such a source. Perhaps the most difficult constraint has been reconciling the fact that the newspaper is an edited publication. As a result, I attempted to investigate the editorial history of the newspaper to gain greater insight into the context that allowed for the publication of some letters to the editor while others were rejected. Unfortunately, I was not granted access to the private archives of the newspaper that might have helped in this attempt.

I experienced similar limitations in using the newspapers of the Farm Security Administration labor camps. According to the articles that appeared in the newspapers, the purpose of these publications was to provide a public medium of expression that would be written and edited by migrants themselves. Nevertheless, questions remain as to how much influence the opinions of camp managers and other governmental officials may have had in the public dialogues that took place on the pages of these texts. Similarly, little is known as to how much influence individual camp residents may have had on the content of the newspapers. Could individual campers involved in the process of publication have used the newspapers as their own personal forum to serve their own interests at the expense of the opinions of other residents?
Like the issues of the *Modesto Bee* and FSA camp newspapers, my use of the California Odyssey Project oral histories is also constrained in some ways by my limited knowledge of the producers of those texts (Tierney 2000). Neither the oral histories themselves nor resulting transcripts were produced by me alone. Created over twenty years ago by an academic community, I cannot claim to fully understand the complete context within which they developed or the individual goals of those involved in the process. William G. Tierney (2000) cautions that all texts are “co-produced” — as much the creation of the person studied as they are of the person who collects the information. Here, Tierney is specifically referring to the person who is first involved in the gathering of information — often the interviewer or recorder of testimony — but this line of thought must also be extended to include anyone who uses the resulting text or for that matter reads it even years later (Richardson 2003). David Silverman follows along this line of reasoning, arguing that

by abandoning the attempt to treat respondents’ accounts as potentially “true” pictures of “reality,” we open up for analysis the culturally rich methods through which interviewers and interviewees, in concert, generate plausible accounts of the world. (Silverman 2000, 823)

Texts, whether written or oral, are unquestionably subject to multiple interpretations throughout the entire research process, each of which contributes to a greater overall understanding of the complexities of society and the world.

Laurel Richardson (2000) refers to this point in terms of the post-modernist concept of “crystallization,” stressing that there are always more than three sides to a story with meaning being dependent upon a researcher’s
positionality. She advocates writing as a means for inductive research and in particular endorses alternative forms of writing that challenge the academic tradition. Unlike more quantitative endeavors in which the bulk of analysis occurs prior to “writing it up,” qualitative methods recognize the process of writing itself to be a form of analysis (see also Charmaz 2000). While this dissertation continues to examine Okie identity in California’s Central Valley, only through the writing process did I come to understand some of the more guiding themes at work – namely, that only through the acquisition of socio-economic power did an in-migrant group transition from outsider to insider and gain the ability to define itself publicly.

While Laurel Richardson’s suggestion of adopting alternative forms of writing as a means to gain additional perspectives is appealing, I must admit that as a prospective addition to the academic ranks, I am not yet as adventurous as she in adopting what she terms “illegitimate” forms of research and writing. The format of this dissertation will therefore follow some generally accepted conventions for this type of work. In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review of historical Okie in-migration to California to offer a basic understanding of the push and pull factors related to this population movement. Having established Okies as a group with a documented and remembered migrant past, I follow in Chapter 3 with an exploration of how migrant identity and experience was negotiated through space. Migrant identity was constructed from both within a group and by definitions formulated from outside the group and is constantly under negotiation. Outsiders could transition to insiders but not before
challenging socio-spatial norms. Chapter 4 then explores how Okie public identity in the 1930s and 40s was largely constructed by a public discourse that regarded them as outsiders unfit for immediate inclusion in Californian society. The venues of public expression open to most Californians were not necessarily available to Okies, so in Chapter 5, I seek to understand how Okies were able to publicly define themselves in the early years through one form of media (and free-speech) available to them – Farm Security Administration (FSA) Labor Camp newspapers. Through their writings, Okies identified themselves in juxtaposition to Californian and national definitions of “Okie.” FSA newspapers, however, had limited audiences in terms of both geographic circulation area and time span. And with the rise of World War II and employment in the defense industry, Okie residence in the camps declined. For a few decades during and after the War, little was heard from Okies publicly, other than the songs of nationally-known country performers like Woodie Guthrie, Buck Owens, and Merle Haggard (Gregory 1989). But in the late 1970s and early 1980s public identity as defined by “average” Okies experienced a resurgence. In Chapter 6, I explore this gain in public voice and efforts to preserve Okie identity and heritage, but at the same time the Okie voice heard was also constrained by power. Only with their rise in socio-economic status and thorough transitioning to insiders, could Okies in California acquire the power and freedom necessary to publicly reclaim their ties to the past publicly. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes this dissertation with a reflection upon how the Okie story is one not so unlike many other immigrant groups in the United States. And like other groups, while there
may be common threads that tie Okies together to form a public identity, there is
great variety among individual strands, or voices. Although born in California,
Okie identity is firmly rooted in past places and experiences and is but one of
many possible former “outsider” stories that may be told.
The wind grew stronger. The rain crust broke and the dust lifted up out of the fields and drove gray plumes into the air like sluggish smoke…. As the day went forward the sun became less red. It flared down on the dust-blanketed land. The men sat in the doorways of their houses; their hands were busy with sticks and little rocks. The men sat still – thinking – figuring (Steinbeck 1992, 4-7).

The dilemma described by John Steinbeck in this passage from The Grapes of Wrath (1939) has long provided Americans with a visual image of the Depression Era migrants who departed the Western South destined for California. The startling experiences of the fictional Joad family became internationally synonymous with dust-bowl migrants – hard working, honest, white Americans victimized by ecological and economic circumstances beyond their control. No longer able to support themselves as tenant farmers as a result of being “tractored out” or “blown out,” these “refugees” of the dust sought a means of survival in what would be an equally harsh new agricultural environment in the fields of California.

In 1939, however, Steinbeck’s words were merely a reflection of the most prevalent explanation for the large influx of migrants to California from the Western South. Likewise, the striking images of Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange together with the prose of Paul Schuster Taylor further reinforced such beliefs:

…dried by years of drought and pulverized by machine-drawn gang disk plows, the soil was literally thrown to the winds which whipped it in clouds across the country. The winds churned the
soil, leaving vast stretches of farms blown and hummocked like deserts or the margins of beaches. They loosened the hold of settlers on the land, and like particles of dust drove them rolling down ribbons of highway (Lange and Taylor 1939, 102.)

While the work of Steinbeck was primarily intended for a middle-class audience that could exact some type of social change, it was through the photographs of Lange that the larger American public became alerted to the dire condition of the migrants. Lange’s photographs appeared in newspapers across the country and put a face on migrant and, just as importantly, American desperation during the Depression (Shindo 1997).

Lange was not alone in her attempts to reach a broader audience. Through the musical compositions of Woodie Guthrie and his “Dust Bowl Ballads” as well as John Ford’s cinematic interpretation of *The Grapes of Wrath*, the plight of the dust bowl migrants reached a wider audience with the aid of twentieth-century technology – radio and movies (Shindo 1997).

Despite the differences in presentation and the goals of each interpreter of the migration, the common thread between Steinbeck, Lange, Taylor, Ford, and Guthrie was their reliance upon the environmental image of the dust bowl. In short, the migration out of the Western South to California in the 1930s was most often visualized in terms of rolling clouds of dust that swallowed up not only the homes, barns, and crops of the migrants, but entire community networks.

Such assumptions were not limited to national communication networks, but became prevalent in the areas in which the migrants ultimately found themselves living. In the agricultural San Joaquin Valley of California, the Stanislaus County regional newspaper, *The Modesto Bee*, chronicled the
devastation wrought by the dust bowl. Even within local opinion pages, the few letters to the editor that sought to evoke compassion toward the migrants drew upon ideas of natural disaster. Letter writer Bob Robison reminded readers of the humanity that must be granted the migrants from Oklahoma:

Oklahoma had dust storms and drouth [sic] with the depression which quite naturally caused a great number to migrate from that state. Why slander and curse them for their misfortune? They are human, educated and as deserving as any other (Robison 1938, 12).

References to dust storms and drought were most often meant to elicit sympathy for the migrants – without it, they were simply transients and vagrants. Hence, within the context of nationalized popular media, the term “dust-bowl migrant” or “exoduster” came to initially suggest a compassionate voice for the incoming tide of migrants to California regardless of their place of origin. The widespread migration out of the Western South to California however, is the result of factors much more complex than the eroding earth emphasized by popular media. In this chapter, I examine the historical agricultural and economic context from which emerged the westward exodus. I first examine the agricultural history of the Western South – focusing particularly upon the development of large-scale wheat and cattle agriculture due to technological innovation and legislative measures. I then profile the socio-economic characteristics of the migrants and review the various push factors that contributed to the exodus out of the Western South to California. I follow with a discussion of the development of industrialized agricultural practices in California and the ensuing demand for a migrant labor force as the primary pull factor that
drew the migrants westward. Finally, I conclude with a brief case study of cotton agriculture in California as the major enticement for the migrants given previous experience with the crop in their home states.

**From “Dustbowl” to “Okie”**

While the image of dark looming dust clouds swallowing up everything in their paths is certainly memorable, seldom is a large-scale movement of population from one region to another linked to a single cause. Abundant research on this topic has revealed a complex network of factors contributing to the departure of the Western South natives bound for California.

In broad terms, Donald Worster (1979) characterizes the outpouring of people from the Western South in the early twentieth century as the culmination of a growing capitalist economy in the United States.1 Premised originally upon Jeffersonian concepts of economic expansion through agricultural development, land was the means by which justice and equality could be ensured. Operating within the context of this idealism, the “beef bonanza” of the plains in the early 1880s as well as the sodbusters and their quest for land ownership boosted the population of the Great Plains to approximately 6 million. Few of these arrivals, however, came with the intention of remaining permanently on the plains. As Worster explains, “…they came wanting not a place to stay forever, but simply cash – a stake in someplace else.” Hence the people were mobile and the land of

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1 Environmental historian Geoff Cunfer (2002) asserts Worster’s argument is lacking due to its emphasis upon governmental policy and proposes an evaluation of environmental data with the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as the key to understanding the Dust Bowl. Unfortunately, although Cunfer finds fault with earlier work, he still relies on Worster’s data in his own analysis including digitizing maps from Worster’s (1979) book.
the plains came to be a commodity which could be exchanged for cash easily if a better opportunity arose elsewhere (Worster 1979, 84).

Despite the economic opportunity offered by settlement upon the plains, farming there was characterized by hazards that required adaptations. After suffering a severe drought in the late 1880s, farmers introduced the new technique of dry farming. Perhaps the most prominent agricultural adaptation to the environment involved a shift from corn production to more drought-resistant grains such as Turkey Red winter wheat and various types of sorghums. By combining these new crops with dry farming methods (most notably a summer fallowing period for moisture restoration), the region seemed to have found a more secure level of production. With new techniques in hand, thousands of people rushed in to claim their stake in the agricultural frontier of the late nineteenth century. The key to this new expansionist era was the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act which allowed for even larger farms and a growing reliance upon machinery – in the words of Worster, the Great Plains had become, “a vast wheat factory.” In this new profit-driven agricultural economy the Jeffersonian ideal of the self-supporting, independent yeoman farmer was no longer appropriate (Worster 1979, 87, see also White 1991).

Similarly, Paul Bonnifield (1979) emphasized the ecological consequences of large-scale agricultural mechanization in his discussion of dust-bowl afflicted regions. The increasingly larger tracts of agricultural lands combined with the introduction of the tractor, combine, one-way plow, and truck just after the turn of the twentieth century eliminated the need for a large supply of manual labor and
initiated the “great plow up.” Such a trend is evidenced in the growth of average farm size after the introductions of wheat mechanization. For example, in Texas County, Oklahoma, the average farm size in 1910 was 247.3 acres, by 1930 the 320-acre farms of the Enlarged Homestead Act were typical and average farm size had more than doubled to 570 acres (Bonnifield 1979, 48-60).

Although farm size in the plains increased dramatically in the early twentieth century, the amount of human labor required in agriculture decreased (Table 2.1). As Worster (1979) noted:

> By the end of the twenties more than three-fourths of the farmers in the winter wheat section owned such a machine [the combine]. Instead of hiring ten or twenty bindlestiffs – the seasonal laborers coming in on the railroad – who drank heavily, frightened the children, required the wife to feed them, and sometimes demanded higher wages, the farmer bought a combine that he and one or two others could manage. Pulled by a tractor, the combine could cut a 16-ft swath through the wheat, and in two weeks harvest 500 acres (p. 91-92).

Thus, by investing in machinery, the farmer was saving time and labor costs. Much of the initial investment in machinery occurred during a period of high demand for wheat from Europe during World War I. In addition, wheat growers were enticed into making investments in such large machinery by a minimum price of $2.00 per bushel established by the wartime Food Control Act of 1917 (Worster 1979, 92-94).

Prospects for economic success seemed good, but these times were short-lived as many farmers struggled to meet the increased cost of purchasing and maintaining farm equipment. The end of the war and the subsequent restoration
Table 2.1

Distribution of States by Percent Change in the Number of Agricultural Workers
1870-1880 to 1940-1950

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+110 and over</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+90.0 to +109.9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+70.0 to +89.9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+50.0 to +69.9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+30.0 to +49.9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+10.0 to +29.9</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-10.0 to +9.9</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>-30.0 to -10.1</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>31</td>
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<tr>
<td>-50.0 to -30.1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of European agricultural production resulted in a decline in market prices for U.S. wheat and left many farmers struggling to pay-off debts incurred for agricultural machinery during the boom times. The few farmers who were able to survive the economic bust were primarily those who created “factory farms” on which the costs were reduced by large-scale production. Smaller farmers were often faced with tax liens, foreclosure, and eventual absorption into the growing population of tenant farmers (Worster 1979, 92-94).

The increasing reliance upon a mono-crop system of wheat agriculture and mechanization was further complicated by periodic drought in the Great Plains. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg notes that between 1930 and 1940 southwestern Kansas received only 15.25 inches of precipitation per year with a low of just 11.14 inches in 1934. One county in particular, Finney County recorded less than ten inches of rain in three separate years (1934, 1935, 1937). The droughts in tandem with the mechanical deep plowing and then fallowing of extensive plots of land had loosened the dry topsoil and made it susceptible to wind erosion (Riney-Kehrberg 1989, 187-188).

Bonnifield points out that the people usually associated with the dust bowl migration to California, historically referred to as “Okies” and “dust bowl” migrants, were rarely from the region described by Riney-Kehrberg. Despite the popular image of dust-ravaged Oklahoma communities forced onto the highways, most residents of the Oklahoma panhandle where dust storms did occur remained; they regarded their economic conditions in the drought-stricken southern Great Plains as no worse than elsewhere in Depression America. The largest portion of
dust bowl migrants came from the poverty-ridden, non-dust storm afflicted areas of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. In fact, less than six percent (16,000 people) of the known Depression-Era migrants bound for California were from what Bonnifield designates as the ecological region characterized by overpowering dust storms. Despite this lack of dust clouds to force them onto the highways westward, “Okie” migrants were nonetheless subject to the same effects of large-scale farming, drought, erosion and mechanized agriculture as those from the adjacent dust bowl region (Bonnifield 1979, 188-189; see also Gregory 1989).

The findings detailed in the 1941 U.S. House of Representatives Report of the Select Committee to Investigate the Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens (Tolan Report) further support Bonnifield’s interpretation (Figure 2.1). According to the report, more than half of the agricultural families migrating to California originated from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Oklahoma alone, the report states, contributed one-fourth of all agricultural migrants arriving in California in the 1930s. It is perhaps for this reason that the term “Okie” became synonymous with this group of migrants (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 312-313).

Indeed, significant numbers of families migrated from other states into California during the Depression, but the regional and socio-economic composition of these people was quite distinct from those originating in the four “Okie” states. Typically, those people who migrated from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri in the 1930s earned their livelihood through agriculture. Less than twenty percent of those in-migrants whose place of residence in 1930
was an “Okie” state earned their livelihood through non-agricultural industries (sales, service, manufacturing, etc.) (U.S. Congress, House, 1941, 313).

Also significant was the trend for rural people to migrate to rural areas and urban residents to seek urban destinations. Statistics gathered by Bogue, Hoermann, and Shrylock (1957) from the 1940 Census data on intrastate and interstate migration further verify this pattern in California from 1935 to 1940 (Table 2.2). Although the large number of migrants to California originating in such states as Illinois and New York (51,840 and 46,140, respectively) ranked fourth and fifth as contributors to California in-migration, further examination of the subregional origin and destination indicates that these migrants were typically urban oriented in both respects. Of the total number of migrants leaving Illinois for California, approximately half originated in the Chicago area and moved to the Los Angeles area. Similarly, almost 25,000 residents naming the New York City subregion as their home in 1935 lived in the Los Angeles subregion in 1940 (Bogue, Hoermann, and Shrylock 1957, Table 1).

These findings seem to suggest that the flow of rural migrants from the “Okie” states may have indeed had the most significant impact upon the agricultural areas of California (Table 2.3). In the following section, I will focus my attention on these four states – Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, and Arkansas – as the primary sources of “Okie” migrants and examine the reasons for their migration to California in the 1930s.
Table 2.2
Five Largest State Contributors to the Migration Stream into California, 1935-1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State of Origin</th>
<th>Number Residing in California in 1940</th>
<th>Out-Migration as a Percent of Total Interstate Migration to California</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>94,659</td>
<td>10.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>67,896</td>
<td>7.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missouri</td>
<td>57,954</td>
<td>6.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>51,840</td>
<td>5.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>46,140</td>
<td>5.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2.3
Population Increases, Selected Counties, 1935-1940

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Population Change</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kern (SJV)</td>
<td>52,554</td>
<td>63.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuba (Sacto V)</td>
<td>5,703</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madera (SJV)</td>
<td>6,150</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings (SJV)</td>
<td>9,783</td>
<td>38.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tulare (SJV)</td>
<td>29,710</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Diego</td>
<td>79,689</td>
<td>38.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monterey</td>
<td>19,327</td>
<td>36.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stanislaus (SJV)</td>
<td>18,225</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Joaquin (SJV)</td>
<td>31,267</td>
<td>30.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merced (SJV)</td>
<td>10,240</td>
<td>27.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Los Angeles</td>
<td>577,151</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fresno (SJV)</td>
<td>34,186</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Bernadino</td>
<td>27,208</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacramento (Sacto V)</td>
<td>28,334</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Barbara</td>
<td>5,388</td>
<td>8.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alameda</td>
<td>38,128</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
<td>142</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SJV = San Joaquin Valley  
Sacto V = Sacramento Valley  

Source: Walter Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration*  
(Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1973), 46
The Exodus

Within the first seventy years of the twentieth century, over five million natives of Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, and Arkansas were living outside their birth states. Of particular significance to this exodus is the number who eventually came to reside in California. By 1930, 430,810 residents of what historian James Gregory (1989) terms the “Western South” were living in California. The force of this trend was particularly evident in 1950 when 23 percent of all persons native to Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, and Arkansas made their homes in other states. More than a third of this group, 1,367,720, gave California as their new state of residence (Table 2.4).

Between 1930 and 1940, California experienced a net in-migration of almost 315,000 migrants from the Western South. By the end of the 1930s slightly less than 11 percent of the total population of California traced their place of birth to one of the “Okie” states. Although the number of migrants arriving in California during the Depression decade paralleled the “Okie” in-migration of the 1920s (estimated to be approximately 250,000), the migrants of the 1930s drew much greater attention (Gregory 1989, 8-10).

According to Gregory (1989), the distinguishing feature of this later group of arrivals was their purpose and social composition. Whereas earlier groups could afford to relocate and thus were perceived to have been expanding westward with the rest of the country, the “Okies” of the 1930s were envisioned as poor whites who where pushed by economic desperation from their home
Table 2.4
Western South Natives Living Outside the Region, 1910-1970

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Living Outside Region</th>
<th>Living in California</th>
<th>Net Increase to California Population from Previous Decade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>661,094</td>
<td>103,241</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>1,419,046</td>
<td>187,471</td>
<td>84,230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>2,027,139</td>
<td>430,810</td>
<td>243,339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>2,580,940</td>
<td>745,934</td>
<td>315,124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>3,887,370</td>
<td>1,367,720</td>
<td>621,786</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>4,966,781</td>
<td>1,734,271</td>
<td>366,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>5,309,287</td>
<td>1,747,632</td>
<td>13,361</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

states. Media depictions contributed greatly to this image of destitute masses (see Shindo 1997).

Other scholarly work has extensively chronicled the “push factors” of this migration and emphasized the difficult economic circumstances faced by the “Okie” migrants in their home states. Worster (1979, Bonnifield (1979), and Walter Stein (1973) attribute the “dust-bowl” migration to processes far more reaching than the eroding earth or even the Great Depression. Stein notes that the committee appointed by Oklahoma Governor Leon C. Phillips in 1940 to investigate the specific causes of migration out of the “Okie” states identified five specific factors: 1) over-reliance upon agriculture fostered by discriminatory tax rates upon Oklahoma manufactured goods; 2) crop curtailment; 3) farm mechanization; 4) drought; and 5) soil depletion (Stein 1973, 4-9).

The first of these, the over-reliance upon agriculture, was regarded by the Oklahoma committee as having prevented citizens from diversifying their economic activities. According to the Oklahomans, federal regulatory bodies and rail carriers had conspired to levy higher freight rates upon Oklahoma manufactured goods than were imposed upon agricultural products.

The second factor reported by the committee was the New Deal policy of crop curtailment in which the federal government was allowed to pay farmers to remove their land from agricultural production, thus leaving farm laborers and tenants unemployed. Farm mechanization was also a factor in driving people off farms as the growing system of extensive agriculture in the Western South rendered the tenant system unnecessary. Subsequently, many of the landlords
failed to distribute the governmental benefits they received to their tenants, choosing instead to invest the money in additional farm machinery. Thus continued large-scale farming drove the laborers and tenants from the agricultural land that had not only supported them but also served as their homes.

These five factors, the committee reported, combined to result in one general cause of migration – low farm income. Rural poverty arising from a surplus of agricultural laborers and high debt-profit ratios forced people from a land that could no longer support them. These conditions not only affected farm owners, but also the communities and the inhabitants that surrounded them – farm laborers, tenants, merchants, and service providers (Stein 1973).

As with Stein’s account of dust-bowl migration, the Tolan Committee discounted the impact of discriminatory freight rates. The Committee emphasized farm mechanization and enlarged farm size. The report states:

Two developments in agriculture in during the past 50 years have been of major importance to the problem of rural migrations, namely the increased application of machine techniques in the cultivation and harvesting of crops, and the expansion of business organization in farming similar to that found in large commercial and industrial enterprises (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 275).

Factory-farms had come to dominate agricultural production, further reducing the ability of small farms to compete economically. By 1930, “50 percent of all farms in the United States produced only 10 percent of the gross cash income from agricultural production.” A study by the National Resources Committee indicated that 1.7 million farm families earned, on average, less than $500 per year with more than half of that number earning less than $250 per year (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 276).
In addition to the decline of family-owned farms, the ranks of “Okie” migrants were swelled by the changing state of farm tenancy. By 1935, over half of all the farmers in the United States (52.2%) rented at least some portion of their land. Tenancy levels among cotton producing farms was even higher. As early as 1900, slightly less than 68 percent of all farms upon which cotton was the major crop were operated by tenants; and by 1930, the figure had risen to almost 73 percent (Turner 1937, 424-428; see also Schmidt 1936-1937).

In response to the economic instability they faced, the growing numbers of tenants were also characterized by a high turn-over rate. A comparison of owners and tenants in 1935 indicates a mobile tenant population. Among the 16 southern states, over 35 percent of tenant farmers stated they had occupied their land less than one year, while less than 6 percent of owners reported such a brief period. Whereas 41 percent of owners occupied land 15 years or longer; only 4.5 percent of tenants did so. The Tolan Committee reported: “eight southern cotton [s]tates and Kentucky (where tobacco tenancy is prevalent) showed 30- to 40- percent change in occupancy in 1922 [alone]” (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 301).

Cotton agriculture appears to have been especially characterized by high tenant mobility – a tradition carried over from the old Cotton Belt of the Mississippi Delta region to the New Cotton Belt of Oklahoma and Texas in the 1920s. With such high levels of tenancy and tenant mobility it is not surprising that many of the “Okie” migrants to California came from the cotton-growing regions of the Western South. As noted by the Oklahoma committee, federal governmental policies of crop curtailment fostered the removal of tenants from
the land in the cotton-growing areas of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri. Under the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) introduced in 1933, farmers received cash from the federal government in exchange for removing their land acreage (and their tenants) from production. Faced with problems of drought, flooding, boll weevil infestation, and falling cotton prices (from 16 cents per pound in 1929 to below 7 cents in 1932) farmers eagerly signed up with the AAA administration (Gregory 1989, 11-13, see also Manes 1982).

The result of the AAA was a dramatic reduction in the cotton empire. By 1939, 12.5 million acres of cotton had been removed from production; total acreage fell by one-half. The receipt of subsidies by cotton farmers ultimately resulted in the eviction of tenants from the land. Within only 7 years, the AAA helped reduce the Western South’s tenant population by 24 percent (Gregory 1989, 11-13).

With tenant farmers leaving the land and community businesses suffering in 1937, the local farm economy faced regional unemployment rates of 22% across the entire Western South. Despite levels of unemployment in California only slightly lower than those in the “Okie” states, the prospect of finding unskilled work in California cotton was attractive. In addition, the state’s vegetable and fruit crops demanded large pools of seasonal manual labor that “Okie” migrants could more than adequately supply (Gregory 1989, 11-13; and Mitchell 1996). From the desperate rural poverty so prevalent in many parts of the Western South, the agricultural fields of California offered the migrants at
least a chance at employment. But why did the fields of California seem to offer so much more to migrants than those they left behind?

The Lure of California

Even prior to the discovery of gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills, the agricultural potential of California was impressive. As Varden Fuller (1991) notes, the Spanish mission padres speculated upon its potential to produce tropical crops including sugar, tobacco, coffee, and fruits. The impact of the Spanish empire upon California agriculture extended far from such a simple prediction. The vast land grants of the Mexican empire left an indelible mark upon the California landscape by establishing a precedent for large-scale landholding and an agricultural system distinctly different from the family-based farms of the rest of rural America. By the end of the nineteenth century when the California gold mining industry declined due to rising cost of extracting a scarce resource, the landholding pattern was already well engrained. While mining was retreating, more residents of foothill California followed in the footsteps of the first European residents of the state, the Californios – turning to raising livestock through extensive grazing (Paul 1947).

Meanwhile, in the lower lands of the Central Valley, dry agricultural methods had already been applied in the introduction of wheat farming to the fertile lands. Premised upon the size of the Mexican land grants and enhanced by the advent of the Stockton Gang Plow and broadcast seeder, California became one of the greatest wheat producing states through the use of large-scale farming practices (Limerick 1987; Fisher 1945; and McWilliams 1939).
Small-scale irrigation was initially introduced to California with the early Spanish missions, yet with the decline of these institutions, came a decrease in its usage. Irrigation practices thus remained somewhat dormant until the 1870s when extensive development proceeded and large amounts of investment were made. Under the financial control of San Francisco Industrialists, Miller and Lux, by 1880, 190,000 acres of the San Joaquin Valley was under irrigation, providing water at a cost of approximately $1.50 per acre (Fisher 1945).

With the implementation of extensive irrigation networks in California came the wide-spread introduction of fruit and vegetable crops. Aiding in their development was the pre-existing arrival of immigrant groups who worked in the fields. By the 1930s California agriculture became characterized by its tremendous diversity with over 200 farm products grown for commercial markets (Figures 2.2-2.4). Accompanying such diversity was an intensification of labor in production and a high demand for seasonal migrant agricultural labor at crucial moments in the growing and harvesting seasons (Table 2.5). Theoretically, given that labor was not in oversupply, the variety of crops demanding seasonal labor could have allowed migrant agricultural workers to remain employed year round by following the crops (U.S. Congress, House, 1941, 344).

While patterns of seasonal agricultural employment varied based upon the personal lives of the migrant workers, a general pattern of employment in the extensive fields of California emerged. According to a Labor Department Study, the harvesting season began with winter work in the Imperial Valley of Southern
Figure 2.2. Distribution of fruit production (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 341).
Figure 2.3. Distribution of vegetable production (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 342).
Figure 2.4. Distribution of field crop production (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 343).
Table 2.5
Seasonal Labor Requirements and Demand for Migratory Workers in California Agriculture, 1935

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Seasonal Requirements for Total Agricultural Workers</th>
<th>Demand for Migrants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>61,649</td>
<td>13,004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>50,500</td>
<td>16,829</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>48,173</td>
<td>13,319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>73,035</td>
<td>19,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May</td>
<td>103,240</td>
<td>38,513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June</td>
<td>102,810</td>
<td>30,634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July</td>
<td>93,728</td>
<td>35,366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August</td>
<td>130,330</td>
<td>41,053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September</td>
<td>144,720</td>
<td>41,258</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October</td>
<td>126,835</td>
<td>49,551</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November</td>
<td>65,610</td>
<td>17,744</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December</td>
<td>56,760</td>
<td>7,620</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

California during lettuce and pea harvests from December until March and then onto melons which in the best circumstances provided employment until June. With the end of the season in the Imperial Valley, the workers most often moved northward to the San Joaquin and Sacramento Valleys to work in thinning and harvesting apricots and peaches, as well as in the fields of asparagus and peas until late August. Overlapping with these crops was the grape harvest from June to October which due to the sheer volume of labor demanded resulted in a convergence of workers from all over the state. Before the conclusion of the grape harvest, however, the cotton harvest in the San Joaquin Valley began in September or October. With the eventual completion of the grape and cotton harvests, workers began to move southward once again to the citrus and walnut groves in San Bernadino, Riverside, and Santa Barbara counties until December when the 350-mile cycle once again renewed itself (Schwartz 1945).

While highly generalized, this pattern of employment provides a basic outline of migration patterns up and down the state and only reflects a few of the many crops produced. For example, orange picking alone in some cases provided year-round employment based upon the variety of oranges grown. Similarly, year-round employment could be supplemented through planting and pruning periods which, although they required less manual labor, occasionally provided income between harvests (Schwartz 1945).

More often than not, seasonal harvest workers in California were paid at a piece rate rather than by an hourly wage. As Schwartz (1945) notes, piece-rate data for crops is extremely fragmentary, however, two crops in particular, grapes
and white asparagus provide examples of labor costs relative to grower costs (Table 2.6). Typically, the average farm worker in California was estimated to have earned $2.50 to $3.00 per day; however, under especially difficult economic circumstances including periods of scarce employment workers may have been forced to work for as little as $1.00 a day. While these rates may not seem terribly low amid the Great Depression, the migrant worker in California was also subject to many days without employment (Gregory 1989). As a result of the intermittent nature of seasonal agricultural work, the average estimate of income among California’s migrant families in the 1930s is $300 to $400 – an income still comparable to overall national average family-farm earnings (Taylor 1983, 189 and U.S. Department of Agriculture 1940, 913).

Crop diversity alone, however, was not the only element in the economic success of California in the early decades of the twentieth century. In contrast to the typically smaller scale of agricultural production in most other parts of the rural United States, California agriculture was dominated by continuing large-scale agriculture that Carey McWilliams (1939) characterized as “factories in the fields.” According to McWilliams, the agricultural system of California was premised primarily upon profit motives similar to those of industrial endeavors rather than those of the self-sufficing yeoman farmer.

In 1935, the majority of farms in the United States were less than 174 acres in size with the average-size farm comprised of just 154.8 acres. The total farm acreage for the nation that same year was estimated at 1,054,515,111 acres,
Table 2.6

Wage Rates for Picking Thompson Seedless Grapes and for Cutting Asparagus in California, 1926-43, and Percentages Harvest Wage Rates are of Prices Received by Growers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Picking Rate per Tray (cents)</th>
<th>Percent Picking Rate is of Grower Rate</th>
<th>Cutting Rate per Cwt. (dollars)</th>
<th>Percent Cutting Rate is of Grower Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1928</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>.60</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>.75</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1936</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1937</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1938</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>1.54.3</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>2.75</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

with about one-third associated with farms over 1,000 acres in size. The total number of farms in California during this same period was 150,360 farms with an average acreage for a farm in 1935 estimated at 202.4 acres and most farms comprised of less than 29 acres (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1936b, Tables VIII and XIII; and 1936a Table I and California County Table I).

These numbers alone might suggest that the typical California farm was indeed significantly smaller than that of the national average; however, it is only when we begin to examine the acreage accounted for by the largest farms that the nature of the California agricultural system become apparent. Whereas, approximately one-third of U.S. farm acreage was located on farms of over 1,000 acres, over 62% of the farm acreage in California in 1935 was on farms of over 1,000 acres (U.S. Department of Commerce 1936b, Tables VII and XIII).

Certainly these statistics further attest to the fact that the scale of production of California agriculture was significantly larger than the national trends.

The economic profits of large-scale agriculture are likewise evident in average farm values. In 1935, the national farm value average, including both land and buildings, stood at $4,823 and the average value per acre was $31.16; California farms on the other hand averaged $15,466 in total value (down from $25,203 with an average acre-value of $112 in 1930) with an average market value per acre at $76.40 (U.S. Department of Commerce 1936a, Table I and California County Table I).

Clearly, the sheer size of California’s farms demanded the hiring of outside labor beyond that of the owner’s family. On a national scale, 967,594
farms reported hiring outside labor, amounting to 1,645,602 people hired. Thus, on farms that hired labor, less than 2 people on average were hired to supplement family labor. The size and nature of California agriculture, however, necessitated much greater levels of hired help. In 1935, the 45,458 farms in California that noted hiring outside labor amounted to 127,873 people hired, or over 3.5 hires per farm (U.S. Department of Commerce 1936a, Table I and California County Table I). As the Tolan Report notes:

Industrial farming not only changes the hired man and the farmer into an industrial wage-worker; it changes the operator into an employer who has little in common with the traditional farmer hiring family labor (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 414).

Farm laborers came to have little say in actual farming practices – relegated to simply providing the back upon which the farm functioned and then moving on to other farms. Thus, the structure of California agriculture had diverged from the national model of family-based farm operations to large-scale agribusiness as 57% of all people employed in California agriculture in 1930 were paid wage earners, twice the national average (Taylor 1983, 179).

While steps toward mechanization were evident in most regions of the United States between 1925 and 1930, farmers of the Pacific region experienced the least amount of increase in reliance upon tractors – increasing only 58.1% from 151.4 to 239.4 tractors per 1,000 farms (U.S. Congress, House 1941, 410). Two reasons have been cited for the slower adoption of mechanization in the Pacific region: 1) the oversupply of cheap seasonal labor in California which decreases the need for machinery investment; and 2) harvesting machinery for fruit and truck crops as well as labor-intensive cotton was not available in the
California agriculture was typified by manually intensive labor with the average cash expenditure on farm labor the highest in the nation in 1929 ($1,438 per farm per year – four times the national average) (Taylor 1983, 178-179).

Naturally, however, labor costs among farmers ranged tremendously between crop varieties. Schwartz notes, for example, that during the 1930s the growth and harvesting of an acre of wheat in the United States demanded an average of only 13 man-hours of labor and reflected the increased usage of mechanical harvesters and threshers. More typical of California’s agriculture, were the labor requirements for crops such as lettuce which required 125 man-hours or even more demanding, strawberries which required 500 man-hours per acre (Schwartz 1945, 32).

The acquisition of farm labor took on several forms in the 1930s. The first of these practices required a minimum of effort and expense through its use of posted notices, local newspaper announcements, or more simply word-of-mouth, at times declaring the labor force necessary so as to ensure the arrival an adequate supply of labor. An additional technique which allowed growers to avoid responsibility for employment conditions was the use of labor contractors who contracted with the owner an agreed upon payment to guarantee a supply of labor. Typically, there were seven types of services provided by the contractor with regard to the workers’ recruiting, daily transportation of workers, direct supervision, payment of workers, payment of workmen’s compensation
premiums, the maintenance of labor camp sites for workers and the provision of
drinking water. Unfortunately, as most accounts reveal, these services were most
often not provided or done inadequately due to the fluidity of the verbal contract
between contractor and farm owner. The contracted agricultural workers of the
1930s were often left uninformed of the terms of the contract. As such they were
left at a disadvantage and subject to the will of the contractor who often left them
in poor living conditions or restricted to purchasing goods at the contractor's store
(U.S. Congress, House 1941; and Fisher 1953).

The means used to attract migrant laborers to the fields spanned not only
California county lines but also across state lines and into the Western South. At
times “Okie” migrants cited flyers and advertisements as the impetus for their
ultimate decision to migrate. Often though the reason given for departure from
the Western South was based upon word-of-mouth touting of the bounty that
California beheld. Through friendships and kinship linkages chain migration
appears to have played one of the greatest roles in establishing migration patterns
(Gregory 1989). Manes (1982) further implicates the role of family history in the
decision to migrate from Oklahoma in the 1930s and 1940s. In her examination of
migration patterns between Oklahoma and California, she suggests that the
decision to migrate was not so much due to economic circumstances or ecological
conditions in Oklahoma, but rather to a continuance of westward migration begun
generations earlier by the migrants’ forefathers.

As Gregory (1989) notes, the success of the cotton industry in California
provided further impetus for the mobile tenant population of the “Okie” states to
gradually include the Far West in their harvest circuit. Cotton was first planted in the San Joaquin Valley of California in 1921. The small initial experimentation with this crop soon revealed that an average acre of land in California was capable of producing three times the national average of 116 lbs. Whereas California’s total acreage in cotton in 1921 amounted to just 1,500 acres, by 1937 the total had risen to 600,000 acres (Stein 1973, 25). By 1934, California cotton production had far exceeded the production capacity of the “Okie” states – California produced 251,060 bales of cotton on 216,177 acres for an average of 1.16 bales per acre. In contrast, during the same period, Oklahoma cotton farms averaged only 0.126 bales per acre (Table 2.7) (U.S. Department of Commerce 1936a, Table I and California County Table I).

Likewise, California cotton farms operated at a much larger scale than those in the “Okie” states. By 1934, the average California cotton farm was almost 57 acres in size versus Oklahoma’s average of just under 21 acres. During that same period, the three primary cotton-producing counties in California – Fresno, Kern, and Tulare -- produced over half of the total cotton acreage (Table 2.8). In each of these counties the average cotton farm ranged in size from 46 to 59 acres. At the state level, the median size of cotton-producing farms was between 50 and 90 acres (U.S. Department of Commerce 1936a, Table I and California County Table I).

The increase in acreage and production necessitated an increased demand for cotton pickers. With this came higher wages for farm labor. Between 1932
## Table 2.7

Comparison of 1934 Average Cotton Production between California, the “Okie States” and the United States

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>California</th>
<th>Oklahoma</th>
<th>Texas</th>
<th>Arkansas</th>
<th>Missouri</th>
<th>U.S.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average Farm Size in Acres</td>
<td>56.9</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Cotton Bales per Acre</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>0.126</td>
<td>0.230</td>
<td>0.390</td>
<td>0.741</td>
<td>0.354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Number of Bales per Farm</td>
<td>66.08</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>4.60</td>
<td>12.14</td>
<td>4.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.8
Cotton Lint Production in Selected California Counties, 1929 and 1934

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1929 Farms Reporting</th>
<th>1929 Acres</th>
<th>1934 Farms Reporting</th>
<th>1934 Acres</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresno</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>51,457</td>
<td>760</td>
<td>44,605</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>22,165</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>5,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kern</td>
<td>1,077</td>
<td>65,930</td>
<td>1,089</td>
<td>50,134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kings</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>25,781</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>22,575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madera</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>23,448</td>
<td>462</td>
<td>22,359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merced</td>
<td>228</td>
<td>17,71</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>11,891</td>
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<td>273</td>
<td>20,486</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>10,699</td>
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<td>Stanislaus</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>2,630</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tulare</td>
<td>987</td>
<td>64,403</td>
<td>826</td>
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<td>300,058</td>
<td>3,799</td>
<td>216,177</td>
</tr>
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</table>

and 1936 wages jumped from an average of 45 cents per 100 pounds of picked cotton to $1.00. Although wages in all cotton-growing regions in the United States rose during this period, California cotton farmers typically paid 20 to 50 percent more than those in the southern plains (Gregory 1989, 24-25).

Cotton production in California was also a fairly centralized endeavor that provided structure and basic product standards throughout the state. Not only was cotton produced in rather distinct regions of the state, but that four firms ginned two-thirds of the entire crop further reinforced state-wide operational procedures. By utilizing the local agricultural labor bureau and access to crop loans, the ginners, lenders, and corporate growers were able to ensure product uniformity, guide production levels, and determine state-wide wages for chopping and picking (Gregory 1989).

Although not all “Okie” migrants consciously intended to end up in California, the feeling among some migrants was that it was inevitable. A member of a family from Arkansas remarked while on the highway in June of 1938: “We’re bound for Kingfisher, Oklahoma to work in the wheat, and Lubbock, Texas, to work in the cotton. We’re not trying to, but we’ll be in California yet” (Lange and Taylor 1939, 53). For others, California held the prospect of a better existence. Oklahoma migrant Tom Palmer commented upon the movement of his family west in 1936: “I knew if there was cotton to pick I wouldn’t starve to death” (U.S. Congress, House 1941).

Like family ties, cotton seemed to provide a gateway to the Far West for many “Okie” migrants. Although cotton production in the Western South was
declining due to economic, environmental, and governmental policy; the result was a continuing shift of the Cotton Belt westward. Cotton-farming practices were often familiar to the rural migrants and suggested a staple for survival. After the cotton harvest, migrants could if necessary enter the cycle of crop tending and harvesting that stretched throughout the state. The chance of seasonal harvest work however, was by no means guaranteed. The opportunity for any type of employment was insecure whether participating in the seasonal, migrant agricultural cycle or even for those who attempted support themselves through agricultural employment by settling in a particular area.

This chapter has traced the development of the “Okie” migration in terms of the agricultural and economic history of both the areas of origin as well as destination of the migrants. The “Okie” migration stream developed out of agricultural practices that long preceded the 1930s arrival of these rural poor whites to the Central Valley of California. In many respects the development of large-scale agricultural practices may be credited as both a push and pull factor in their decision to migrate westward. The movement toward large-scale agribusiness at the turn of the twentieth century led to a reduced demand for labor in the central plains as humans were replaced with machinery. The need for manual labor in the plains was then further decreased by the effects of worldwide economic depression in the 1930s as well as governmental attempts to reduce agricultural production and raise crop prices. The forces of nature added to the difficult situation in the plains when seasons of drought and wind erosion contributed to further crop failures. No longer needed, tenant farmers and
sharecroppers in the “Okie” states often found themselves forced off the land upon which they lived and worked.

As agricultural opportunities in the plains declined, those in California seemed to suggest a glimmer of hope. California agriculture had long been premised upon large-scale production, yet the crops introduced in the early twentieth century had yet to become mechanized and continued to demand a large mobile labor force. In particular, the growth of a more profitable cotton agricultural system in the San Joaquin Valley of California provided further incentive for the experienced cotton sharecroppers and tenant farmers of the plains to seek employment with a familiar crop. Once in California, the migrants sought additional employment in the fields and orchards of other crops. Bolstered by the positive reports of family members who had made the move to California as early as the 1920s, the “Okie” migrants of the 1930s made the difficult decision to leave home despite great uncertainties.

While the history detailed here is rather generalized, it provides a basic framework upon which to begin a discussion of the experiences of the “Okie” migrants in the San Joaquin Valley of California. As the story of the Joad family in The Grapes of Wrath and the FSA photos of Dorothea Lange suggest, there was a stark difference between expectations of the departing migrants and the realities of life as in-migrants in the rural Central Valley of California. “Okies” came to be a group publicly set apart. In the next chapter then, I examine some theoretical concerns regarding group identity formation and explore how some
groups become designated and represented as Other – something outside accepted norms.
CHAPTER 3
THE MIGRANT IDENTITY

In the early 1950s in California, at the start of the first grade, my mother, came home from one of her first days of school with her new best friend in tow. My mother and her new-found friend played happily until dinner when it was time for the little girl to go home for the day. After she left, my Okie great-grandfather sat my mother down and explained to her: “Now Diana, it’s fine to have them as friends, but you don’t bring them home with you.” To the six year-old mind of my mother, her transgression came as a shock. Why couldn’t a friend come over to play with her? To my great-grandfather it was a natural request – white people didn’t bring black people into their home.

Spatial transgression, notes Tim Cresswell (1996), provides a key to revealing social and spatial ideologies. Taken-for-granted norms associated with certain spaces are often only recognized when someone, like my mother, breaks the rules. While my mother’s childhood experience is merely anecdotal, it draws attention to the fact that places are constructed through both space and time. My mother’s childhood world was simply inclusive of all friends, while her grandfather’s drew boundaries as to what types of friends, specifically what race of friends, were allowed where. By stating who was not allowed in his home, my great-grandfather also articulated his own identity – namely, that he was white.

Interestingly though, two members of the same family lived in the same household, yet their definitions of who belonged in their home were distinctly different. My mother’s sense of identity, who she was, incorporated the
acceptance of other races into her home, while her grandfather’s identity remained firmly rooted in recognizing the home as a segregated place. Conflicting views of who was allowed to enter the home versus who was to be kept outside had changed dramatically over the generations. Despite both my mother and her grandfather having common family links, the passage of time had altered how members of their family saw themselves in relation to other people. Exposing my own family’s changing conceptualizations of insiders and outsiders draws attention to the continual reconstruction of self, other, and identity.

In this chapter, I explore the development and reformulation of individual and group identity. I begin with a review of geography’s engagement with identity as a response to positivist approaches which “distanced” geographers from the people they studied. I then address “Othering” as one of the key elements to understanding identity and follow with a discussion of the practice of creating Others and some of the categorical means by which we recognize difference among groups of people. But how people define Others, and in turn themselves, changes over time. With change comes periods in which some people cannot be discretely placed either inside or outside a group. These people may occupy a liminal zone of ambiguity characterized by hybrid identities. The notion of hybrid identity is useful in examining the relational identities – those formed with respect to other groups – of migrant groups as they may signal a transition from outsiders to insiders. Both the formation and transformation of public identity occurs within the context of daily activities and behaviors. I stress that public displays and the practice of identity are crucial to its formation and
reinforcement and apply this concept to nationalized identity in the United States. Finally, I suggest how this approach to identity as lived experience is particularly appropriate in my case study of California’s Okies and suggest that mobility and lack of permanent place are vitally important in understanding how Okies came to gain the right to define themselves publicly.

**The Place of Identity**

In the most literal sense, “geography” seeks to provide a written accounting of the world around us. This definition has historically resulted in idiographic chronicling of physiographic and cultural regions, thus seeking to simplify the world around us into discrete spatial categories that could be more easily comprehended. During the twentieth century, the definition was expanded beyond simple observation and came to embrace the “scientific” principles of positivism. A description of the world came to include facts and findings that could be replicated and ultimately result in the formulation of theory. Thereafter, the rise of the more structuralist approach occurred within geography – searching for metanarratives upon which social relations could be examined and utilized for socially responsible policy generation. Subsequently, during the growth of humanism, geographers saw a “peopling” of geography and the inclusion of human agency – human choice. People were no longer the unwitting victims of the world (and social structures) around them, but played an active role in shaping it as well (Ley 1977; Cloke, Philo, and Sadler 1991; Adams, Hoelscher, and Till 2000).
This concern for human agency has undergone much transformation since the initial rise of humanism – through engagements with Gidden’s structuration theory, realism, post-structuralism, postcolonialism, feminism, and postmodernism to name just a few approaches. Regardless of which paradigm is embraced or argued at a given time, early humanist concerns have planted a seed within each of these resulting in a common theme today. The humanist geographers of today place an emphasis upon the everyday lived experiences of people and how those people come to understand their experiences within their social and spatial contexts. The contextualist approach, Paul Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen Till (2001) explain:

Pays explicit attention to place and language, while it rejects a dependence on standards of either “objective” geographic knowledge or radical antifoundationalism. It examines the various contexts – whether marked by difference in class, race, gender, sexuality, or nationality – within which individual meanings and social practices are produced, understood and negotiated. (p. xvii)

This emphasis upon practice, everyday lived experience, plays a significant role in any analysis of identity. Group identities, or how people see themselves collectively, are greatly determined by how people interpret and react to their experiences within social and spatial contexts. The integration of process with space has become a vital component of human geography. We transform space into place through our experiences, thus joining what might appear to be an external empirical world with one of values and ideas. In contrast to the seemingly “objective” nature of positivism and structural emphases of Marxism, contextual approaches recognize that humans are rational and make choices based upon their understandings of the world, but do not necessarily act as “rational
economic men” who remain separate from their own experiences and interpretations. In combining the spatial with social processes, geographers “must encounter the situation of the decision-maker, which includes incomplete and inconsistent information, values, and partisan attitudes, short-term motives and long-range beliefs” (Ley 1977, 502; see also Tuan 1990; Entrikin 1991; Bourdieu 1977).

David Ley (1977) traces this turn toward the experiential to traditions of phenomenology and its examination of the subjectivities of both the observer and observed. Within geography phenomenology drew attention to the role of human agency in the construction of places. Places reveal how human experiences and the meanings they evoke are inseparable from locations in which they occur. But as experiences and people’s interpretations of them change, so too does the definition of a place. Drawing on Allen Pred (1984), Miles Richardson (1989) describes place as a “‘historically contingent process’ in which biography and structure reshape themselves into one another” (p. 143). Place then is characterized by a dynamic relationship that involves not only socially constructed meaning based upon lived experience but the definition of a place can also change as those experiences and meanings change. Place plays an important role in the formation of identities as identities emerge in given places and can change as those places do.

Places are physical manifestations that both reflect and are constituted by human values (Tuan 1990; Entrikin 1991). Values develop in specific places and contribute to ideas of who and what belong, or are “in-place.” Notions of who is
in-place versus who is out-of-place become naturalized and are reinforced through daily lived experiences (Cresswell 1996). And while the way that people interpret these experiences and define their situations (and themselves) may occur as individuals, these interpretations are rarely their’s alone – rather, they are shared with others and incorporated within group understandings of the world.

In the process of group consolidation its collective view of the world becomes more telling on the individual, as he becomes successively more ‘included’ within it. So too his action becomes increasingly identified as group norms. As the extreme, a common reality is enacted by repeated interaction and shared tasks, a reality which becomes socially defined and may appear quite eccentric to the outsider who does not share its taken-for-granted norms (Ley 1977, 505).

Ley’s use of the term “identified” is particularly significant for it draws attention to the role of identity with regard to both people and places. Geographers have often turned to landscape studies as a way to understand conceptualizations of how people create their identities and inscribe them into places (Cosgrove 1989; Jackson 1989; Duncan and Ley 1997). Their works have shown that the cultural landscape itself is often a reflection of power distribution within society. Those with greater power in society have greater right to control the authorship of landscape. Don Mitchell (1996) contends in the case of the California agricultural system, that the landscape may “lie” due to inequalities in power. He calls for greater investigation of the social, economic, and political relationships that underlie such deception (see also Harvey 1979). Migrant workers have been proven vital to the success of California agriculture, yet their contribution is often forgotten or remains hidden from view in most depictions of the California agricultural landscape. Mitchell asserts that this is due to the
inherent imbalance of power that exists between farm owners and migrant farm laborers. By preventing the depiction of the levels of extreme subordination experienced by migrant laborers, California farm owners can avoid public outcry and a demand for change, thereby reaffirming the pre-existing power imbalance. The economic success of California’s agricultural system is dependent upon hiding its harshness from view in the landscape or through its representation. So if this is indeed the case, how then do we examine the historical identity of an immigrant group, like Okies, whose presence may not be immediately discernable from the landscape or representations of it?

Recent work undertaken in the search for socio-spatial boundaries may provide an answer to such a question. Power and domination are inherently intertwined within conceptualizations of place-based identity. Those with greater social authority are able to exercise greater control over notions of how a place is defined, who is allowed to be in a certain place, and how those parameters will be articulated both symbolically and physically. Spatial boundaries shape places, but they need not always be physically marked upon the ground. Rather they may be realized through practice. They demarcate who is allowed inside the boundary as well as who is to be excluded and carry with them very real consequences for those people or groups that dare to become transgressors (Kobayashi and Peake 1994; Cresswell 1996; Clark and Peterson 2003).

Transgressors are those who have violated behavioral and ideological norms in a given place – people whose way of understanding their lived experiences does not coincide with the hegemonic group. The socio-spatial
boundaries the transgressor dares to cross center upon notions of “us” and “them.” Those who behave and think in commonly accepted ways are categorized as being one of “us” and allowed to share common spaces. In contrast, those who fail to operate similarly are labeled as “them” – something Other.

**Negotiating Identity through the Other**

The concept of Othering in geography today has roots in Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism*. Said’s work links notions of identity to geographic space. He demonstrates that the Orient as a place was constructed by European minds as a means for securing European identity and world power. The Occident, or the West, drew upon its stereotypes of the East as a means for defining itself in opposition. Without the Orient, there would be no Occident – no sense of common identity upon which power could be organized. Said (1978) writes:

> ... locales, regions, geographical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other. (p. 5)

The coalescing of Western identity then occurred in response to what was viewed as an almost unimaginably different Eastern world – an Otherness.

The determination of a common group identity then is anchored in difference. When a person recognizes someone else as different they also define who they are – they identify their affinities. Such relational identities then are formed in response to the process of defining Others. As definitions of Other and Self change, so too do group identities. These common identifications are never constant, but rather like places, are historically contingent and constantly
evolving. Within this recursive relationship, as affinities change with time and place, so do to conceptions of “Other” (Bentley 1987; Clifford 1988; Jenkins 1994).

Echoing this sentiment is the concept of “impact integration.” Premised upon studies of ethnic group interaction, Gerard Postiglione (1983) defines this approach as one that allows for continual change. When groups come in contact with each other, their reactions and interpretations of the other group feed back into daily practices and formulations of their own respective identities. Thus, cultural collision, or ethnic conflict is not only inevitable, but is likewise necessary in the shaping of not only group identity but also society as a whole.

Examinations of such conflict provide insight into both groups. As there is a seed of self deposited within the process of defining “Other,” objections to one group inevitably illustrate what constitutes acceptance as well – thus self-definition. Categorization provides as much information about the group being categorized as it does about those doing the categorizing (Jenkins 1994). Geraldine Pratt (1999) credits group conflict with stabilizing identities. Pratt recognizes that contact between different groups may contribute to changes in those groups as they interact with each other however, she draws attention to the way conflict between groups reaffirms pre-existing identities and notions of difference. When a group with a common identity has been threatened from outside, it re-establishes the socio-spatial boundaries that have been transgressed. By doing so, the identity of the group is collectively expressed and stabilized.
As the work of Pratt suggests, there is a strong interest in conceptualizations of the Other within the field of geography. Much of this work has focused upon the Othering of minority groups by dominant white society. Kay Anderson’s (1987, 1988) work is particularly important in this respect as her study of Vancouver’s Chinatown discusses the role of governmental institutions in the construction of people and place identity. Within the context of nineteenth-century North America, the Chinese were socially constructed by dominant white society as an Other, so different that they were unassimilable. As a group unfit for integration within Canadian society, spatial segregation of the Chinese in Vancouver was seemingly justified.

In a slightly different vein, Paul Kariya (1997) examines the construction of not an immigrant group Other, but rather the indigenous population of Canada. Kariya shows how the Canadian government allowed the Department of Indian Affairs to define both socially and spatially who is an Indian. In contrast to the Chinese community studied by Anderson who were regarded as too different for eventual inclusion in white Canadian society, Indians were deemed different, but not without potential for inclusion. Indians were granted a socially, politically, and spatially protected status – a classification that only existed under the authority of the British Crown and later the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs. But the protective boundaries available to this group were defined by government officials who also decided when those boundaries should be transgressed in the interest of assimilating Indians into Canadian society.
The experiences of the minority groups studied by Anderson and Kariya are not simply issues of governmental policy. Rather, as the contextualist approach would suggest, the governmental policy had been shaped by normalized categories that served the interests of dominant society. Kariya (1997) explains that

> setting people apart and legalistically and socially labelling [sic] them as Indians [or Chinese] established a cycle of social reinforcement within the Indian [and Chinese] communities and also within the dominant Euro-Canadian society. (p. 197)

Euro-Canadians established their own categories of exclusion and inclusion as well as the means by which some people may transition from one to the other. Such categories are rooted in Othering and carry within them social boundaries with spatial impacts.

**Categories of Difference**

Othering provides a way for people to organize their world both socially and spatially by creating normalized “rules.” Among the rules that emerge are the creation of categories for comparison. While the number of possible categories are too many to count and are subject to change, there are several which many scholars suggest provide a basic foundation for this system of organization: race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

As the work of Anderson suggests, race has been a common classification scheme by which groups create an Other. Race has been traditionally utilized as a means by which people have been distinguished from each other according to physical appearance. The employment of this definition of race placed primary emphasis upon notions of heredity (Baton 1994; van den Berghe 1994). With the
demise of slavery, biological concepts of race became particularly dominant as heredity was used to explain the natural inferiority of blacks and thus the inherent superiority of whites (Ignatiev 1995; Winant 1995). This assumption of race as an immutable trait was eventually challenged as scholars came to theorize race as a social category which was but one criterion upon which ethnic “cultural” processes revolved – race was socially constructed (Omi and Winant 1986, see also Anderson 1987, 1988; Valdez and Valdez 1998; Walter 2001).

Drawing upon prevailing views of race as a social construct, Susan Olzak (1992) combines race and ethnicity into a single classification scheme. As Olzak explains, both of these categorizations result from “inequities of power, income, and other rewards” rather than immutable genetic linkages. She makes no distinction between race and ethnicity for she regards race as merely an assumed physical characteristic.

In contrast to Olzak (1992), Roger Sanjek (1994) regards race as a distinctly separate mode of classification that, although historically and spatially contingent, is to be distinguished from claims of superiority relating to ethnocentrism. Race is always based upon perceived phenotypical differences among people. To dismiss race as a social construct is to oversimplify the complex social relations that underlie such distinctions. He disputes claims to the irrelevance of race as a social category explaining, “To contemporary anthropologists, none of this scaling is ‘real,’ though it has been real enough in its effects”(p. 1). What matters most is not whether race is perceptual, but rather how it is lived and experienced despite or because of those perceptions.
Whereas Olzak and Sanjek appear at opposite ends of the spectrum in their views on race and ethnicity, Howard Winant (1995) suggests that the relationship between these two categorizations is not mutually exclusive. Within the context of whites, Winant notes that ethnicity becomes symbolic – a means of distinguishing themselves from the homogeneity of normalized racial hegemony.

The politics of racialization and the racialization of politics in the United States, Winant claims, permeated society to such an extent that it structures inclusion and exclusion within dominant society.

[T]he political consequences of racialization: [sic] beyond class formation, beyond territorial expansion, beyond the biologism that informed the building of a herrenfolk society, racialization organized a basic U.S. social structure: [sic] it established the overall contours, as well as the particular political and cultural legacies, of subordination and resistance. It restricted or even eliminated the political terrain upon which racially defined groups could mobilize within civil society, thus constituting these groups as outsiders…. Racialization, then also tended to homogenize distinctions among those whose difference with whites was considered the only crucial component of their identities (Winant 1995, 36).

Although ethnicity may provide whites in the United States a means by which they can express their own individuality and sense of identity, it is by choice that they do so. All others are ultimately reduced to colors: white, black, brown, red, or yellow. In essence, race supercedes ethnic identity, but is a key contributor to its formation (see also Omi and Winant 1986; Meinig 1986; Takaki 1993).

Like race, ethnicity is a social construct and subject to change – this fluidity, however, is ultimately determined by members of the ethnic group. Cheryl Leggon (1979) explains that “…an ethnic group should be defined not by the total sum of ‘objective’ traits, but in terms of those features which its
members regard as significant” (p. 3). Ethnicity then allows for a level of self-determination that race precludes. Steven Hoelscher (1998) likewise points to the significance of human agency in the formation of ethnic identity. In his study of “America’s Little Switzerland,” he notes that within the United States, contemporary ethnic identity premised upon European ancestry is a cultural construct that may rise and fall in importance as these groups “create and re-create themselves in response to, first, an ever changing set of social, economic, and political pressures, and second, information about those pressures” (p. 20). Humans play an active role in the creation and constant renegotiation of their own ethnic identity, but one cannot ignore the structural forces that may contribute to this decision-making process.

The structural forces that Hoelscher describes extend beyond the scope of racial or ethnic identification; to form the foundation of class identity. Traditional approaches to the concept of class in the United States have often relied upon Marxist critiques of the inequitable distribution of wealth, property and power that seems inherent to the capitalist system of production. Class is embedded within economic structures of a capitalist system that distinguishes and separates producers from owners of the means production (Cloke, Philo, and Sadler 1991; Shrestha 1997; Ortner 1998).

Discussions of class in this respect have most often revolved around the topic of poverty and the imbalance of power inherent within the capitalist system. The work of sociologist William Julius Wilson is particularly indicative of this strain of thought. For Wilson (1989), class is primarily defined by income
classifications which provide a hierarchical ranking of people from the extreme of “hyperghettoized” or extremely poor to middle and upper-classes. These classifications are premised upon the level at which the capitalist system of production has marginalized various groups in the United States. In the case of Wilson’s work, class is the primary determinant in people’s lives, but is tempered or exacerbated by race and ethnicity.

More recent efforts to explore notions of class have called into question the basic categories upon which traditional Marxist-based and social-scientific approaches have long been premised. Among the most common criticisms has been that the hierarchical wealth pyramid employed in these approaches is confining and does not encompass a broad enough scope of human experience and power distribution particularly with respect to the current post industrial economy (Yapa 1996; Hall 1997; Walton 1997; Mohan 2000). Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner (1998) draws attention to this defect in her exploration of the naturalized linkages between Jews and the “Middle Class.” Ortner utilizes “class as an identity” in which the folk usage of class categories does not necessarily coincide with those of an objectivist (i.e. Marxist or social scientific) standpoint. People who might feel their experiences and lives to exist within the more inclusive “middle class” might in fact be designated by census statisticians and critics of the capitalist system of production as “working class.” Importantly, her study also points to the interconnectedness of class strata with racial and ethnic discourse. Through human experience and practice, ties between specific racial and ethnic groups and corresponding classes are reinforced and naturalized as
“there is no class in America that is not already racialized and ethnicized ... racial and ethnic categories are already class categories” (Ortner 1998, 10; see also Newitz and Wray 1997; and hooks 2000). Thus, it is not truly possible to strip away the discourses of race and ethnicity and reach the bare essence of class relations as traditional Marxist approaches might suggest.

The work of Ortner illustrates, issues of race and ethnicity are not the only means by which identity has been contemplated. bell hooks (2000) notes “class matters” despite conversations about class often being cloaked in racial terms. The interpretation of class to which hooks refers however is not that of the strict economic definition, but rather that of experientially based social class. John Walton (1997) defines class as

... the condition in which a number of people share common life chances insofar as those are determined by their power to attain goods, services, and income in the market place (p. 247).

Although social classes are based in economic structures, they focus less on the relations of production and more on the social consequences of capitalism and its subsequent consumerism. Social class is the culmination of the lived experiences of people operating within the capitalist system. Like race and ethnicity, social class distinctions have not only served to separate people by providing a means by which to establish the Other, but also tie people to each other through what is viewed as common experience. Walton’s (1997) study of industrial development and labor relations in Monterey’s Cannery Row illustrates how social-class alliance overcame racial, ethnic and gender differences to rally around a common cause. Unfortunately, however, this historical community
identity based upon a diversity of social classes, races, and ethnicities remains overshadowed by the contemporary popular memory of John Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row* which fails to emphasize that diversity.

In her reflections on her own life, hooks (2000) notes that although class was rarely discussed it was always experienced – it was taken for granted. She recalls that both she and her belongings were physically embraced by poor immigrant outsiders as she boarded a local bus upon her arrival in California as a student. It was one of the first times, hooks notes, that her overall status as an outsider outweighed the normally Othering color of her skin. From this, she suggests that one possible solution to the widening discrepancy between the rich and poor in the United States is that the wealthy achieve solidarity with the poor – not revulsion or pity, but rather compassion – much in the way the immigrant bus passengers did toward her. As a social construct like race and ethnicity, class boundaries may be reorganized in accordance with changing ideologies.

Contemporary feminist scholars have also drawn attention to the normalized social construction of gender and its role as a means of Othering. Audrey Kobayashi and Linda Peake (1994), however, caution against those who would fall prey to an essentialist argument that attempts to minimize the impacts of social constructions by relying upon perceived biological differences between the categories “male” and “female.” While these geographers do not deny that there are certain biological events (for example childbirth) that affect women’s lives and life chances, they point out that the effect of these experiences is most typically determined by normalized power relations within society. In light of
this, they call for the implementation of an “unnatural discourse” that would call into question and deconstruct the basic dualisms (of male and female) and power relations upon which these socially constructed gender roles are based (see also Monk 1992; Winchester 1992; Kaye 1994; and Johnson 1996).

Issues of power and domination are inherent within the creation and maintenance of categories such as race, ethnicity, class, and gender. Dominance, however, is not a “monolith” predicated upon a singular category or trait, but rather, like power is diffuse as “[a]ll subjects, ruler and ruled alike, are constrained by their location in the discursive networks underwriting society” (Sharp 1996, 105). These types of social categorizations contribute to the formulation of identity, but in doing so each may become more important to individual and group identity at different times and places. A categorization such as gender may be used to Other a person and reinforce their subordinate place in society. But this same person that experiences domination on the basis of gender, may in turn use their racial identity to exploit a racially defined Other. Identities are multifaceted and the component of an individual’s identity that is exercised will vary with the person’s interpretation of their situation – their lived experience (Sharp et al 2000).

Just as power may be redistributed in different amounts and forms throughout groups in society, so too are the people within those groups. Individuals locate their personal identities within multiple social categories simultaneously. Thus, “there are no absolute oppressors or victims.... historically constructed categories create intersecting and cross-cutting group histories...”
For Patricia Hill Collins, the power to determine social categories and labels lies within the interstices of these various group divisions through the ability to perform violence upon others. Power then is the ability to do harm to or restrict the freedoms of another group in society. Collins also suggests that issues of identity and power may be better examined in terms of the “matrix of domination” whereby domination and resistance are not only intertwined but that identities (both individual and group) and power distribution are constantly negotiated through lived experience of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. Thus human agency plays an active role in the creation and re-creation of identities and power distribution (Collins 2000).

The work of feminist and gender studies scholars such as Kobayashi, Peake, and Collins also echoes the sentiment of the contextualist approach. Each of these scholars seeks an understanding of the social circumstances and discourse that creates and re-creates social categories, yet realizes that the same categories she attempts to deconstruct are those that offer a means of solidarity for political action for subordinated groups. Practice, or the daily reaffirmation of these categories through ideology and behavior, plays an important role not only for those with greater power who can define categories, but also for those that use them as a form of resistance. The affinities that tie together these groups may wax and wane in relation to time and place, with some categorizations taking precedence over others; however, “ultimately, we would argue that no one is well served by attempts to reduce the complexities of human identity to a single ‘dimension,’ particularly since identities are as much the creation of human
subjectivities, forged through the struggles of everyday life, as they are a simple matter of skin color, place of birth or other ‘objective’ criteria” (Jackson and Penrose 1993, 17). The human subjectivities that Peter Jackson and Jane Penrose (1993) describe have undeniable consequences in the human world. Whether or not a categorization is deemed socially constructed by academia is irrelevant as long as it is believed to have validity by people in their everyday lives. It is the consequences of ideologies and identities with which we must live. Identities are forever under reconstruction and thus create a wide spectrum of social hierarchies and networks. Race, ethnicity, class, and gender are but just a few means by which people identify themselves and those around them. In the following section, I explore how these varying gradations of difference have contributed to conceptualizations of national identity.

Practicing Identity

Battles over identity extend beyond the level of the interpersonal or local. Questions of national identity are debated on a daily basis around the world. Mitchell notes that “when national identity is bought into contact with the politics of race, gender, sexuality, and class, it can be understood as nothing more than an on-going struggle – a culture war –over the determinants of social identity” (Mitchell 2000, 262). Conceptualizing the nation is far more complex than the discovery of a singular trait upon which all members of the nation might be deemed insiders or outsiders. Rather there are overlapping webs of identity at smaller scales feeding into the larger composite of national identity. Defining a nation goes well beyond the establishment of political boundaries, it establishes a
sense of belonging within those boundaries. “It is about establishing a purified link between ‘blood and soil’” (Mitchell 2000, 262).

Within geography, postcolonial approaches have proven particularly significant in this respect as they examine how space and identity are inextricably tied to power distributions. For example, Judith Kenny (1995) demonstrates how, in India, the inequitable power relations between the colonizing British and the indigenous Indians were inscribed upon the landscape through the construction of hill stations in the most preferred locations. Following normalized views of British superiority, the structures and daily practices associated with these developments established spatially segregated islands of upper-class British identity and colonial authority that would represent the power wielded by the “Raj” – or British rule.

Kenny’s work illustrates the role of postcolonial approaches in uncovering the imposition of a colonial authority upon an indigenous group as well as the sites of resistance that arise through the passage of time (see also Anderson 1993). In contrast, Lindsay Proudfoot (2000) contends that the identity of the colonizer is also shaped by the historical narrative of the indigenous people and can thus create a hybrid space where the colonizer adopts behaviors and attitudes of the colonized. Although Proudfoot fails to fully address the inherent imbalance of power in the relationship between landlord and tenant; her research in Ireland does indeed illustrate how the landlord’s integration of perceived Irish traditions within his own identity takes place incrementally rather than in total. Thus,
individuals and groups may unconsciously select the extent to which their identity is intertwined with that of another group.

As discussed previously, human perception cannot be dismissed as merely a social construct. Individual beliefs and ideologies carry with them very real spatial and social consequences. Mitchell’s (2000) tracing of historical German national identity through the concept of *Heimat* illustrates how “invented tradition” provides a guideline upon which inclusion or exclusion is determined. Similarly, Karen Till (2001) locates this sense of German national identity and social memory within the physical landscape of a Berlin museum. Through a failure to depict the overlapping ethnic, class, gender and sexuality diversity in museum exhibits, German identity was most often represented as a homogenous experience. The complex experiences of Others (foreign or *Ossi*) were rendered invisible (see also Winant 1995).

The depiction of national identity is unquestionably tethered to questions of power and authority. Museum exhibit designers such as those described in Till’s work stand as a prime example of the authority that “museum experts” are granted in representing national experience or identity. The designers, whom Till calls “exhibition authors,” were aware that the exhibit they have created is indeed a reflection of their own individual experiences combined with representations by the media, social sciences, and popular history. Nonetheless, they regard the value of their construction to lie in the ability of patrons to compare and contrast their own sense of identity and experience to that presented in the exhibit. One author explains:
And thus we have presented our construction, against which many of the visitors are now placing their own, likewise constructed remembrance, without it being possible to arrive at a uniform view or indeed at an identity. The chasms – as well as many a bridge – will remain, for we are not able to return to the past to reconstruct the way it “really” was (Till 2001, 294).

That the “exhibition author” recognizes the difference that divides their professional understanding of German experience and identity from that of patrons is significant – particularly because the goal of the exhibit itself was to articulate German experience through time. But because the authors at least produced an exhibit that recognized the possibility for multiple German identities, patrons were able to locate their personal identities within this constructed German national identity.

In contrast to the exhibitors in Berlin, other authors of identity are more overt in their role as agent. In Condensing the Cold War, Joanne Sharp (2000) chronicles the production of political “truth” in the pages of Reader’s Digest. Expert editors of the magazine “digested” information for readers – sifting out useless clutter from original publications and providing only “significant” information – with the declared goal to create a magazine for the self-improvement of “everyday folk ‘hungry’ for knowledge” (Sharp 2000, 9). Through its selection and editing of geopolitical information, Reader’s Digest constructed an image of the Soviet Union and thereby posited, in opposition, an American identity. Sharp explains: “The construction of Otherness [in the pages of Reader’s Digest] simultaneously presents a normative image of identity, here an image of idealized American society” (Sharp 2000, 29).
Nations, however, are not simply comprised of idealized images, but also embedded within the realities of daily existence – they are both time and place specific. In the United States, national identity is negotiated on a daily basis through peoples lived experience. Despite images that have relied upon turn-of-the-century accounts of the “tired, hungry, and poor masses” of European immigrants being welcomed to U.S. shores at Ellis Island, the actual encounters were typically more confrontational than the stereotypical immigrant experience might imply. Such friction was the result of conflicting viewpoints as to who could hold the title of “American.” The actualization of the perceived national identity, then became nationalism which “is in itself an organizing and energizing force; it is a set of ideologies about what a nation can be…. nationalism organizes the masses around the idea of a space to be defended, a space that is the very embodiment of national sovereignty” (Mitchell 2000, 272).

Nationalism extends beyond the simple demarcation of a nation’s territorial boundaries. People within those boundaries maintain ideologies that underlie daily practices of exclusion and protection of the borders by way of nativism. John Higham characterizes nativism as “intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e. ‘un-American’) connections” (Higham 1988, 4). He does not attempt to subsume all periods of discontent under the title of “nativism” rather he classifies anti-foreign sentiment in the United States into three primary categories. The earliest of these he defines as an anti-Catholic sentiment that finds its origins in the Protestant Reformation in Europe. In contrast to the seemingly democratic freedoms associated with
Protestant beliefs, papal allegiance associated with Catholicism was perceived to inhibit Catholic immigrants from full assimilation. The second nativistic tradition in the United States identified by Higham was based upon the infiltration of foreign political radicalism. Although the United States as a nation is seen to have emerged out of political upheaval, foreign radicalism became regarded as a threat to the perfected democratic political stability of society. Finally, Higham defines the ideal of Anglo-Saxonism as a fuel for nativist activities. Whereas the previous two traditions were exclusionary in nature, Anglo-Saxonism overtly defined American identity. Premised upon notions of assimilability, Anglo-Saxonism – representing a belief in a superior social group that best epitomized American ideals in an expansionist era – provided the model by which all others desiring participation in U.S. society would be judged. Higham’s classifications of American nativism provide further support to the notion that identities – in this instance, the American identity – is not fixed but rather changes in response to new notions of Otherness.

Higham’s categorizations provide a reasonable explanation of anti-immigrant sentiment experienced by Jews, Irish, and Southern Europeans at the turn of the century (see also Steinberg 1989; Brodkin Sachs 1994; and Sanjek 1994). Each group, in one way or another, initially failed to meet the expectations of those who defined themselves as Americans – namely, white, economically successful Protestants already assimilated within a democratic system of government. But because, identity is not fixed but rather fluid and constantly negotiated; with time, groups that were once deemed unsuitable for inclusion
within the rubric of Americanism were redefined as acceptable. Noel Ignatiev’s (1995) examination of Irish entry into the American “white republic” provides just such an example of the historically contingent nature of American identity. Only when juxtaposed with the arrival of free black labor in the North, were the Irish able to align themselves and their interests with those of “Americans” (see also Sanjek 1994; Winant 1995; and Roediger 1999). Karen Brodkin Sachs (1994) echoes this emphasis upon economic competition as a means by which social groups may gain entry into “white America” in “How Did Jews Become White Folks?” Unlike Ignatiev, however, Brodkin Sachs questions such a cause and effect relationship; rather she presents the situation as the “chicken or the egg” dilemma. Did Jews become white by improving themselves economically or did becoming white open the doors to economic opportunity? Jews became the success story of economic self-sufficiency, but whether or not this was possible due to achieving the designation of “white” is less certain.

The ideal of self-sufficiency – pulling oneself up by their bootstraps – was a key component of American identity. Originally premised upon the Jeffersonian agrarian myth and utopian ideals, the expansion of the American West served as a magnet for people from around the world and provided a staging ground where traditional notions of this American identity were challenged (Limerick, Milner, and Rankin 1991; Nash 1991; Nugent 2001). According to Limerick (1988),

...the American West was an important meeting ground, the point where Indian America, Latin America, Anglo-America, Afro-America, and Asia intersected. In race relations, the West could make turn-of-the-century Northeastern urban confrontation
between European immigrants and American nativists look like a family reunion (p. 27).

While Limerick points to the contentious racial issues in the American West, she less explicitly points to the threatened nativist ideals relating to religion and political experience characterized by Higham. Group relationships in the American West were not simply defined in terms of a singular dominant Anglo-society and the subordinated Other. Rather, minority groups encountered each other often for the first time, forcing the individuals within them to renegotiate their own identities within the context of a complex cultural milieu.

One example of this constant renegotiation of identity across space and time is found in the experiences of those people living in the West prior to the arrival of “Americans.” Within historical power schemes, Native Americans have most often been cited as having the least ability to control others. Classified by the United States government as “domestic foreigners,” Native Americans were denied the right of citizenship by either birth or naturalization until they could be properly “civilized” into American society by becoming Christian farmers and in doing so mitigate the affects of their skin color (Prucha 1964 and 1984; Otis 1973; Takaki 1993).

Native Americans were not the only pre-existing group affected by the expansion of the U.S. borders westward and the expansion of the Anglo-American population and its identity. Like the indigenous population of Native Americans, Californios, the Hispanic population native to California during the Spanish and Mexican occupation, effectively became “foreigners in their native land” (Weber 1973, 140). Although official governmental policy reassured the
Californios of their continuing property ownership rights as “if they [the ownership rights] belonged to citizens of the United States” (U.S. 1848), in practice and experience this was far from the truth. Even those Californios who chose to naturalize and claim U.S. citizenship were denied the full privileges of that membership – the burden of proof for establishing property ownership was upon their shoulders. Through the legal process, land ownership previously recognized through Californio tradition rather than governmental documentation, was transferred into the hands of the United States government and eventually into the hands of Anglo settlers. Unfortunately, the consequences of the Californio land loss were not merely economic.

... It eroded the basis of the [Californio] elite’s power, leaving that class preoccupied with its personal economic problems and less able to devote its attention to political affairs or provide leadership for the community ... (Weber 1973, 160).

Thus, changes in national boundaries, altered not only the “official” categorization of the Californios, but also how their lives were experienced as individuals and as a group. They became citizens in legal discourse but fell far short of the definition in daily practice. For Californios the territorial and legal boundaries of the United States were expanded to include them, but the social and economic consequences of this movement would lead to their disintegration as a group. Ultimately, Californios were formally within Californian society but their Hispanic heritage denied them full membership. Californios occupied a state of uncertainty in which they were neither fully insiders nor outsiders in their own homeland. The lines of distinction between American and not-American were blurred. In the following section, I discuss two approaches that have been used to
examine groups of people, like the Californios, who have crossed a socio-spatial boundary: hybridity and liminality.

**Identities In-Between: Hybridity and Liminality**

Thus far, this chapter has shown how identities are not only socially and spatially constructed, but likewise dynamic. So then, how can we come to understand the place of groups like the Californios for whom they are neither clearly “us” nor “them”? According to Yi-Fu Tuan (1990), place embodies “feelings, images, and thoughts in tangible material.... they attract or repel in finely shaded degrees” (p. 17-18). Given that places can change through time and come to represent multiple meanings or interpretations, identities in those places may do so as well. The categories upon which identities may be formed are many, thus creating “finely shaded degrees” of identity. Those who cannot be neatly classified within normalized categories such as “black” or “white;” “male” or “female;” and even “insider” or “outsider” create discomfort for others who try to place them within their understanding of the world. Bentley (1987) explains that this “experience of distorted communication can generate feelings of discomfort, of alienation, or hostility ... [due to] ... not knowing the [O]ther” (p. 34). Normalized categories have now been called into question.

This type of ambiguity not only instills discomfort on the part of those who seek to control and employ the categories, but also those subordinate groups whose identity is formed out of associations with multiple categories. In his study of the Marawi in the Philippines, G. Carter Bentley (1987) engages with this kind of hybrid identity. He illustrates how Marawi women recognize who they are and
what they want in life, while at same time finding affinities with both the
traditional group in which they were raised and the new modern society of
Manila. As a result, his subjects discover themselves fraught with feelings of
being out-of-place in either living situation. Their sense of being caught in-
between both places in Manilan society is what David Sibley (1995) would term a
liminal zone. Both social and spatial, a liminal zone of ambiguity, like that
experienced by the Marawi women, creates tension for those who fall within it
and creates a disruption to the normalized functions of life on either side. Liminal
zones point to the inability of humans to completely divide the world into neat
packets or categories with clearly defined boundaries.

Slowly as these liminal zones are incorporated into the daily lives of those
who cross boundaries and those who have branded them transgressors, they
become less alien and result in changes in normalized attitudes and behaviors.
The mitigation of these differences “involves reconfiguration of the perceived
world and one’s place in it” thus contributing to a restructuring of social power
schemes (Bentley 1987, 44). Hybridity and liminality allow multiple identities to
construct the same place in different manners and suggests that fixed traditional
categories do not always apply (Proudfoot 2000).

Geraldine Pratt (1999) also writes of the usefulness of hybridity as a
concept, yet cautions against its over employment. She warns that, if all identities
are regarded as hybrid, there may be a tendency to disregard the value of studying
the social and spatial boundaries that contributed to the development of the
categories in the first place. If everyone’s experiences and identity are hybridized
by overlapping boundaries, then how do we continue have the categories that inspire such emotion in the first place? Once again, one returns to the importance of looking to lived human experience and the meaning derived from it because we may see ourselves as fitting in different places at different times, yet we have very specific “unwritten” rules for how that all works – those rules construct the boundaries and do create some degree of stable identity. One may have multiple affinities (hybridity) yet still maintain boundaries that are spatially and temporally real in their affect upon daily life. Those boundaries though, may change as our experiences change. Changing boundaries and identities however, rarely comes without conflict because,

As individuals develop new ways of dealing with a changing world, old truths erode; as what was formerly inconceivable becomes commonplace, degrees of sharing and affinity, hence ethnic identities, become problematic (Bentley 1987, 43).

As the work of many scholars has illustrated, individual and group struggles over places and identities are not simply dilemmas for foreign immigrants crossing national boundaries, but can also include those transgressing socio-spatial boundaries constructed in the mind. From this observation, I conclude this chapter with some final considerations of how the theory of identity formation addressed thus far will play into the changing lives and identity of California’s Okie population.

**Research Implications**

I began this chapter with a family anecdote about social boundaries and their spatial implications at a small scale – the home. The primary value of this story, however, lies in its simple ability to show that even within a single
household, the lines of acceptable and non-acceptable admission into that place are contested even generationally. My Oklahoma-born-and-raised great-grandfather drew his lines of acceptance around racial categories, whereas for my California-raised mother, even at age six, those racial lines were less distinct. From the individual level to larger group affiliation, California’s in-migrant Okies provide an example of social and spatial boundaries changing as a result of daily lived experience.

Studies of changing identity and place have been most often examined in terms of “immigrant” groups in the United States. In contrast, Okies represent a domestic movement of people whose transgressing of physical space impacted not only their own sense of identity, but likewise resulted in a reconsideration of California regional identity and U.S. national identity. American identity has long been structured upon notions of a white, Christian, male whose democratic freedoms (and economic success) were premised upon Jeffersonian ideals of land ownership and self-sufficiency. California’s Okie population seemed to refute those basic tenets. They represented the failure of the land ownership system to guarantee their continued success with hard work. This research explores how the experiences of Okies as poor rural whites reflected the similarities and differences between in-migrant lived experience and conceptualizations of Californian and American identity.

Okies represented a discontinuity in what Californians assumed to be a common language of experience that defined what it meant to be a Californian and an American, thereby drawing attention to the naturalized categories of Self
and Other. The classifications that contribute to designations of Self and Other are interwoven within space and are imbued with meaning – creating places. “But if a place is meaningless without a subject, so too a person removed from his own place is a man of uncertain identity” (Ley 1977, 507). Migration then becomes a key issue in changing identities. Okie migrant identity addresses whether a migrant history or lifestyle will mark a group of people as perpetually different from those groups that remain in one location.

As the following chapter will show, during the 1930s, in-migrants from the Okie states who in the 1920s were welcomed into California came to be regarded with suspicion. During this era, Okies were initially publicly defined in local media sources as outsiders – too different for inclusion in Californian society. The term “Okie” itself came to represent someone who failed to live up to the expectations of “normal society.” But with an increase in nationalized media attention, including the publication of the novel, the *Grapes of Wrath*, the American identity of Okies was reasserted. Publicly recognized again as white, Christian, American citizens, Okies came to be regarded as a group with the potential for assimilation but simply in need of paternalistic guidance that would allow them to reassume their proper role in American society – they were a group in-between.
CHAPTER 4
OKIE ORIGINS: PART ONE

After a brief rest stop and bath in the Colorado River at the California state line, the Joads pile back into their already over-burdened truck. The journey has taken its toll on the family, but the final stretch across Arizona has pushed the radiator to its limits. They have no choice, but to stop at a service station in Needles for water so that they can press onward across the Mojave to seek out work in the agricultural valleys of California. Quite uneventfully, the attendants allow the family to refill their radiator and depart. As Tom fires up the engine and pulls back out onto the road, the service-station attendants in their starched white uniforms assess these travelers and others like them:

“What a hard-looking outfit!”
“Them Okies? They’re all hard-lookin’.”
“I’d hate to start out in a jalopy like that.”
“Well, you and me got sense. Them Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human. A human being wouldn’t live like they do.”

This scene, taken from John Ford’s cinematic interpretation of John Steinbeck’s novel the *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) illustrates how the term “Okie” is employed not so much as a regional designation but rather a racial and economic classification based upon the appearance and behaviors of the travelers. “Okies,” the label, goes unheard by the Joads who have already departed, yet the family has been marked as Other.

By the time the *Grapes of Wrath* appeared on screen nationally in March 1940 (Figure 4.1), the presence of Okie migrant workers in the San Joaquin
Figure 4.1 Roadside settlement in a commercial pea district of Stanislaus County in the Central Valley, 1940 (National Archives, Still Picture Records LICON, Records from the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Record Group 83, ARC Identifier [521807]).
Valley of California had long been acknowledged locally. For the rest of the nation, the film served as a rallying cry in protest of the social and economic conditions under which the migrants lived and worked as well as their treatment by Californians. Although Ford sought to fill theater seats by chronicling the demise of a family searching to better themselves in a promised land and their ultimate absorption into the larger family of migrant workers, the media chose to focus upon the destitution of Okie migrants viewing them as victims of nature, the floundering national economy, and a failing of the idealized system of yeoman farming (Shindo 1997; Cresswell 2001). News media both local and national came to use the term “Okie” to designate a social group outside the norm.

In this chapter, I explore how Okies, like previous foreign immigrant groups, were Othered at both a regional scale in the San Joaquin Valley and eventually across the United States. Throughout this exploration, I focus upon issues of race and socio-economic class as the bases for which Okies were classified as different. Combined, these categorizations provided the foundations upon which Okies of the 1930s were temporarily denied the right of cultural citizenship within the state of California and became a national symbol of victims in need of paternalistic guidance.

I begin this chapter by tracing the experiences of another immigrant group to California – namely, Asians – who were long regarded as unassimilable due to their cultural and economic practices. I then compare the situation of Asians to that of the San Joaquin Valley’s Okie population in the 1930s as
presented through local newspaper public opinion accounts. Finally, I discuss how this Okie image became nationalized and altered through the release of the film the *Grapes of Wrath* and how it ultimately fed into local dialogues concerning citizenship and social responsibility in California’s Central Valley.

**Origins of Exclusion**

The social and physical exclusion of California’s Okies in the 1930s is not without precedent. New Western historians have recently begun to chronicle tales of confrontation between minority immigrant groups and U.S.-born residents (Limerick 1988; White 1991; Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin 1992). And, as I discussed in Chapter 3, this trend began within the national context in the eighteenth century with Native Americans and continued with the Californios after the Treaty of Guadelupe-Hidalgo in the nineteenth-century. With the Gold Rush and increasing influx of Chinese immigrants, the anti-foreign sentiment of Californians soon came to focus upon Asians. Whereas legislative measures were passed granting Native Americans and Californios legal acceptance within the expanding territories of the United States, no such allowances were made for the Chinese. Although the Chinese came to the United States primarily out of economic necessity, rather than for religious or political freedom, they nevertheless threatened the social and cultural fabric that Americans felt tied them together (Sandmeyer 1973). The March 30, 1876 edition of the *Marin Journal* encapsulated this perceived threat by describing a Chinese person as “... a slave, reduced to the lowest terms of beggarly economy ... no fit competitor for
an American freeman.” Furthermore, it provided an extensive list detailing the personal defects characteristic of a Chinese immigrant by explaining

That he herds in scores, in small dens, where a white man and wife could hardly breathe, and has none of the wants of a civilized white man.
That he has neither wife nor child, nor expects to have any.
That his sister is a prostitute from instinct, religion, education, and interest, degrading to all around her.
That American men, women and children cannot be what free people would be, and compete with such degraded creatures in the labor market.
That wherever they are numerous, as in San Francisco, by a secret machinery of their own, they defy the law, keep up the manners and customs of China, and utterly disregard all the laws of health, decency and morality.
That they are driving the white population from the state, reducing the laboring men to despair, women to prostitution, and boys and girls to hoodlums and convicts.
That the health, wealth, prosperity and happiness of our State demand their expulsion from our shores.

In contrast to legislation that at least superficially made allowances for the naturalization of Native Americans and Californios, the anti-Chinese sentiment was institutionalized not only through the Naturalization Act of 1790 which stated that only free “whites” were eligible to become naturalized citizens of the United States, but ultimately resulted in outright prohibition from entrance into the United States through the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 (Takaki 1987; Chan 1991). ¹ Ultimately, residents of California would become subject to the impact of this law more than any other state as California was the home to more Chinese in the nineteenth century than any other U.S. state or territory. Declared

¹ Literature detailing discriminatory legislation aimed at the Chinese in the United States and California is abundant. For additional examples see: Special Committee on Chinese Immigration. California State Senate 1878; Alien Land Act 1887; Carlson and Colburn 1972; McClain and Wu 1991.
as a “perpetual, unchanging, and unchangeable alien element that can never become homogenous,” the Chinese immigrants to California posed a threat too foreign to even be considered candidates for assimilation within American society (Sandmeyer 1973, 25).

Gail M. Nomura (1996) notes that such legislation and negative public opinion directed at immigrant Asians served to create a “necessary ‘Other’” that aided in unifying the heterogeneous white population of European heritage by defining an American character in opposition to that of “unassimilable” Asians (see also Said 1978 and Anderson 1987). According to William Deverell (1996), the ideal American character was dependent upon notions of the independent yeoman farmer – able to forge his own trails and support himself through his own labors. Such Jeffersonian ideals did not allow for the incorporation of allegedly “weaker” races – like Asians – that were seen as destined to become dependents of society.

Deverell’s emphasis upon economic independence would certainly resonate with Aihwa Ong (1996) who also suggests that the inclusion or acceptance of an immigrant group into their host society is directly related to that group’s ability to become financially independent. Ong terms this type of acceptance “cultural citizenship” and extends its effect not only to formal legislation directed at immigrant groups, but also to the perceptions held by the host society about the immigrants and the lived experiences of immigrants themselves. Cultural citizenship is “a dual-process of self-making and being made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society” (p. 738).
Thus, it is constructed and reconstructed both within and outside social groups rather than only through “official” political discourse.

Also crucial to Ong’s thesis is a re-evaluation of traditional approaches that regard race as the primary factor in society’s assessment of an immigrant group’s potential for cultural citizenship. Whereas scholars such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986) stress the impacts of phenotypical perceptions upon social acceptance of immigrants in the United States, Ong draws upon David Roediger’s (1991) argument that racial differentiation as a means of allowing or preventing groups from acquiring cultural or legal citizenship has historically had more to do with perceptions of dependency and self-sufficiency than merely skin color. Thus, Ong’s work utilizes a contextualist approach to understanding not only social and spatial relationships related to inclusion and exclusion in society, but also seeks to understand the historical circumstances that led to the formulation and practice of such dualisms (Adams, Hoelscher, and Till 2000).

While Ong’s work contrasts the ability of contemporary Asian groups in the United States – Cambodian refugees and ethnic Chinese from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia – to attain cultural citizenship, she would nevertheless recognize similar patterns of social exclusion in the 1930s. In the early years of the Great Depression, residents of California’s San Joaquin Valley drew cultural citizenship boundaries along international lines. Predictably, those deemed least deserving of the benefits ensured by U.S. citizenship were foreigners. Typical of such sentiment locally was a letter to the editor published in early 1930 that asked:
Why are we taxpayers called upon to pay a wage to 600 convicts to work on our highways and cause 600 Americans to walk our roads for work and unable to find it, with women and children in want of food and warm clothes? ... I would say that if we haven’t enough room for all the convicts, then let’s have a law passed to weed out the undesirables and send them back to the lands from which they came. [emphasis added] (Edwards 1930, 16)

While Edwards’ first comment is a familiar one even today, the second is far more revealing as to whom he blamed for the problem at hand – foreigners who could easily be exiled from the U.S. Not only were the convicts guilty of being supported by taxpayers but even more devastating was that they were receiving wages for work while many more deserving American men went without.

George Thompson noted in one his two letters to the editor concerning immigrants that “it is true some of these foreigners are desirable citizens and pay their share of government upkeep, but it is also true that the majority of our gangsters and crooks are not real Americans, but come from the scum of Europe....” (Thompson 1932, 10). Recognizing the criminal threat migrants posed to Americans, Modesto Bee editors endorsed the proposal of Dr. Carleton Simon, former special deputy commissioner of police in New York City, to instate compulsory registration and issuance of national identity cards for all U.S. citizens. Dr. Simon, the newspaper notes, “declared the method one of the most powerful and effective measures of control against criminals that could be devised.” Furthermore, Dr. Simon was quoted as saying that such identification cards “would round up in short order a large influx of migratory criminals, and check up the movements of known malefactors in our midst” (Modesto Bee 1932, 10)
Foreigners with criminal convictions, however, were not the only immigrants to bear the brunt of criticism by local residents. Mrs. Ona Paine found fault with working foreigners in her letter to the editor as well.

If Americans had the jobs the Mexicans and some more of the foreigners have right here in Modesto, there would be very few Americans asking for charity, but the foreigners are given first preference and the Americans can go without and live on merely nothing so long as they don’t quite starve.

Go where you may in California, especially, and you will find more foreigners employed than Americans and the Americans idle.

Have we no country of our own? The foreigners all have countries of their own, yet they come to America and take the life from the true American and laugh and tell the world “the Gringo too soft; he got no sense.” (Paine 1932, 16)

Mexican labor was clearly a threat to the employment of Americans, but their characterization as “cheap labor” was also deemed destructive to the local economy and ultimately resulted in a much higher longer-term price to pay in terms of consequences. Writing to the editor of the *Modesto Bee* in 1930, Modesto resident S.E. Courtney wrote:

... often this so-called cheap labor is very high-priced labor.

For example, there are two brothers in this county who are both owners of large orchards of peaches. One hired eight American pickers, the other hired sixteen Mexicans. The first brother finished picking fruit and took his crew to his brother’s orchard to pick as the fruit was getting very ripe.

One truck hauled out the fruit, but after the eight pickers started work, the orchard owner had to engage two other trucks for the eight Americans were picking more fruit than sixteen Mexicans. (Courtney 1930, 20).

Likewise, L. Joseph warned of the economic dangers of employing foreign labor as it reduced the amount of money invested locally – warning farmers that their
money would be better spent by hiring natives of California and shopping within
their own community.

It seems to me the hiring of so-called cheap labor acts as a boomerang. And by the way, I can show you American men who will work for 40 cents an hour and do in one day what it takes the “cheap” labor a day and a half to do.

The farmer is the mainstay of the mail order house. Perhaps after using his power of discrimination, the farmer can see that the local merchant, who is also his friend and neighbor, offers him greater values. (Joseph 1930, p. 16)

Despite the efforts of the Modesto Bee staff to assert, in an April 1930 editorial column, that efforts to legally curtail immigration from Mexico would ultimately prove harmful to farmers by causing a migrant labor shortage (Modesto Bee 1930a, 12), only a few months later they chose to publish an article announcing the release of a state-commissioned report that investigated the “Mexican problem.” Describing the report findings, the article stated:

“Mexican immigrants,” declares the report, “have gained a strong foothold in California industries, undoubtedly supplanting other immigrant races and native Americans.”

Out of 904 farm operators who expressed a preference for various classes of foreign labor, 322 or 35.7 per cent prefer Mexicans, 185, or 20.5 per cent prefer whites, and 134 or 14.3 per cent Japanese....

The committee also found that Mexicans constitute a large percentage of patients in county and city hospitals, and are a burden to charity organizations. (Modesto Bee 1930c, 2)

Although these letters and article show a tendency of Californians to have found fault with immigrants themselves, blame was also placed upon the farm owners who chose to employ them. A letter to the editor from W.M. Donne described how the actions of growers were detrimental not only to the Mexican
migrant workers they hired, but also to the future of the economic status of California. Donne explained:

They [Mexicans] are invited here to do the same work, and even when working do not earn enough to live in decency and comfort, yet those responsible for their presence shoulder the responsibility on to the rest of the community. Stark tragedy has resulted from their abject poverty and these undernourished children will swamp our nutritional homes and tuberculosis sanitariums in a few years.... This would seem to be a fair field offering free scope for the activities of those who oppose birth control, and for those super patriotic societies which are always handing out advice on how to be a good citizen. Eliminating these conditions would help the country more than shouting for a bonus, as they are more dangerous than all the Communistic activities so far uncovered. (Donne 1932, 12)

Donne’s letter suggested that the “Mexican problem” is not so much one of too many Mexican immigrants, but rather the poor living conditions and wages provided by their employers. His solution was that the farmers act as good citizens and take responsibility for their immigrant workers. In contrast, B.W. Robinson wrote that the solution to the over-abundance of immigrant labor in the Central Valley was contingent upon farmers’ rejection of foreign labor in their fields and orchards.

For one thing, too many farmers are employing Filipinos, Japanese, and Mexicans. Yet they expect the white people to buy their almonds, grapes, etc. While I have no use for these people, I have still less use for the man who hires them....

One farmer west of town hires nothing but dark-skinned people to take care of his almonds and grapes; another out on Timbell Road north of town has a bunch of Mexicans pruning grapes and burning brush and in the meantime there are dozens of families in the same neighborhood who can’t buy shoes for their children to wear to school, or enough food for them to eat. Is that fair?

Since Hoover won’t help us out, let us help each other as much as we can and start in by remedying conditions such as these. They are all around us on every side. (Robinson 1932, 14)
Similarly, another writer drew attention to the un-American spirit rampant among those employers who hired foreigners. Hughe C. Williams complained:

Attention should be paid by employers, especially the farmers, to the hiring of foreigners. If the farmer employs Filipinos or Mexicans it is certain that the money paid out to them will not be used in the purchase of any farmer’s fruit or produce. Such people do not buy fruits and vegetables. The same rule applies to canneries and factories. The employer who hires foreigners to the exclusion of American citizens is retarding a return to normality and working against his own interests....

Now is the time for all Americans to stand together and pull America out of the predicament in which she finds herself. The farmer, the industrialist, the manufacturer, the contractor who hires foreign labor, with thirteen millions [sic] of our own people out of work, is not only a slacker but a traitor to American ideals. (Williams 1932, 16)

As the letters by Robinson and Williams suggest, Asians were also dealt a harsh blow by Central Californians amid the economic difficulties of the Great Depression. The most common complaints arose in the form of protests against Chinese and Filipinos who were accused of forcing agricultural wages down and claiming jobs that rightfully belonged to “native born sons.” One contributor to a local newspaper summarized this perception by explaining that “the Oriental, in the past is the one who has caused trouble, for in order to get work [he] has gone about underbidding white workers. The Oriental is the problem in California, not the European” (Silva, 1930, 14). While the Sinophobic nature of the statement is obvious, it reflects the idea that Asian immigrants posed not only an economic threat to the “native sons” of the United States, but also a moral threat as they failed to acculturate within American systems of fair play by accepting lower wages.
Asian employment, declared some letter writers, was the bane of white Californian society. Commenting upon the recent racial unrest in the rural San Joaquin Valley communities of Dinuba, Reedley, and Selma, one writer noted that “[while] violence and in particular mob violence, is not to be condoned, we cannot help but sympathize with the white workers who have had to stand by and see jobs morally belonging to them usurped by the Filipinos” [emphasis added]. Furthermore, this citizen complained

White families live in tents and starve while Filipinos are employed on about the only work under way in the valley at this time. It is enough to arouse the primitive passions of any race of people when one can’t get employment in one’s own country, while an alien race can....

White men spend their money with American merchants and the money remains in the country. Filipinos spend their money, what little is spent, with their countrymen in Stockton and other Filipino centers. This money, as well as that saved by the island workers, goes back to the Philippine Islands there to remain, or else to be used in transporting relatives and friends to the United States to repeat this financial formula. The growers’ and the farmers’ money is forever gone so far as he or American merchants ever have a chance to get any of it back. (Unknown 1930, 16)

By eliminating Asian employment, some contributors felt the problem of white unemployment and state relief measures would cease to exist. In 1935, O.H. McCall chronicled the story of two men (presumably white) who undertook very large vineyard operations in the Central Valley and hired non-white workers. Each successive year, the ranches became more and more dilapidated. Only with the hiring of a new field supervisor and the dismissal of all non-white labor did the ranches return to their former glory.

Now the ranches have never looked better than they have before and when one passes he sees white men working in the
field, not Hindus, Japanese or Filipinos. If more men who are employers would follow this lead, rid themselves of foreign labor and give the white man the chance he is justly entitled to, one could pass the SERA [State Emergency Relief Administration] office and county welfare department and not see white men waiting for assistance. (McCall 1935, 16).

Not even patriotic war veterans were spared from the impact of working Asians. Herman Kribbs asked why those Americans who served in the Spanish-American War were barred from working on the SERA or the PWA (Public Works Administration) projects due to the small military pensions they received “while jobs are given thousands of aliens. Mexicans, Chinese, Filipinos, Hindus and others who never have done anything for this country but come here and enjoy the benefits made possible by these same veterans?” (Kribbs 1935, 10).

Due to Asian employment, other governmental projects were called into question by Edward Pinkham. In response to a previous news article announcing the creation of a “Model Toilers [sic] Camp” (farm laborers’ camp), Pinkham wrote:

If the representatives who attended the grand opening of the aforesaid camp would investigate some Sutter County officials and orchardists, who employ Asiatic labor, and advise that American labor be used, it is possible there would be no camp in the two counties.

Employment of those who belong to the U.S.A. in preference to Asiatic labor would eliminate transient camps, place many at work and lower taxes, thereby stimulating business.

The intelligent use of the ballot is the only means whereby American labor can place in office efficient officials who believe in restoring prosperity and American standards. (Pinkham 1935, 12).

These opinions about Asians in the United States were further strengthened through the attempts of California Attorney General U.S. Webb to
secure the acceptance of the Welch bill in U.S. Congress – a bill that would exclude Filipino immigrants from the United States. In an article distributed through a national wire service and published in the Modesto Bee, Webb defended his position by explaining:

“The question which the [Welch] bill raises is not a new one to the Pacific Coast.... It is the old, old story of races incompatible with the whites entering their domain and entering into competition with white people.... It is believed ... that their presence here can contribute nothing that will inure to the advancement or advantage of the public welfare and that they cannot benefit the race from whom this government was founded. If that be true, their presence here cannot benefit them.” (Modesto Bee 1930b, 12)

Webb’s statement implied that Filipino immigrants would be unsuccessful in their attempts to assimilate within white American Society – a justification that was accepted only a few years prior with the banning of the Japanese from entrance into the United States. The Japanese were described as so culturally different a “race” that they would corrupt that of white Americans. M.H. Kittrelle wrote:

We Californians believe that the saving of the race, the retention of the lands that our fathers gained for us through hardship and toil, is worth more than all the shipping and all the dollars that might possibly come from Japan. We do not dislike the Japanese. It is hoped that we will always be friends, but that the hand shaking will be done across the Pacific.

We learn that a good many Japanese enter this country from Mexico. There is no check on the Mexican border. Protection of the public health and pocket book demands that a guard and inspection should stop the undesirables. A survey of health conditions among recently arrived Mexicans and Japanese shows alarming result, with a consequent heavy drain on taxpayers to care for these people in public institutions, costing $200,000 in Los Angeles County alone in the past two years.

The Japanese are fatalists, holding life but lightly. The story is told of an illiterate voter enjoying the franchise for the
first time asking his landlord to mark his ballot for him. Later finding that he had voted against his candidate, he chose the traditional way of getting revenge, he went out and hanged himself. (Kittrelle 1935, 12)

Corresponding to the Bee from Corpus Christi, Texas this time, Silva warned that the fate of Hawaii would soon become that of the Central Valley unless Californians put their foot down and followed the Texans who “very politely but firmly told them [the Japanese] to go back – and they went back on the next train.” In contrast, the experience of Hawaiian coffee planters was one in which “the Japanese swarmed all over the Hawaii coffee country and put all the pioneer planters out of business with their cheap cut-throat competition – and they are putting the rest of the world out of business with the same weapons. They do not pioneer; they take away from the pioneers” (Silva 1935, 14).

The racial tones of this public dialogue would certainly support Ong’s views as she noted that “because human capital, self-discipline, and consumer power are associated with whiteness, these attributes are important criteria of nonwhite citizenship in Western democracies” (Ong 1996, 739). In essence then, the evaluation of a social group’s “whiteness” or ability to become “white” was primarily a consequence of that group’s ability to economically pull themselves up by their bootstraps eliminating need for state support and thereby transitioning to American cultural citizenship. In the eyes of Californians, Asians could not be white and therefore could not be accepted.

**Domestic Migrant Exclusion**

Certainly such rhetoric regarding the unacceptability of foreign immigrants is not surprising given the difficult economic circumstances of the
Great Depression, and it may even be regarded as a vestige of nineteenth-century nativist attitudes in the United States and California (Steinfield 1970; Sandmeyer 1973; Peterson 1980; Higham 1988). The complaints, however, appear to provide a place from which to stand and cast blame upon other “Outsiders” crossing the California state line. By the late 1930s, non-foreign migrant workers became the primary cause of complaint for the San Joaquin Valley’s economic woes eventually resulting in Californians labeling all migrants from the Western South as Okies – something less than pure white Americans. Whereas the migrants of the Western South who arrived in California in earlier decades did so with greater financial resources and were simply regarded as taking part in the westward expansion of the nation, the Okies of the 1930s were seen as poor whites pushed by economic desperation from their home states (Gregory 1989). As Charles Shindo (1997) has shown, nationalized media accounts have long characterized this outpouring of population as victims of the Dust Bowl. This chapter will suggest that the socio-economic characteristics of this group of migrants metaphorically “darkened” them in terms of social race and in doing so delayed their acceptance as California cultural citizens.

As with the previous generations of foreign arrivals, the primary points of contention revolved around the efforts of the migrant agricultural workers to support themselves financially. Once again, charges of wage-cutting and criminal activity were made. As early as 1935, Opal Van Norman accused domestic migrant populations of reducing her opportunities to obtain summer employment and a winter savings account:
I do not see why they do not send those people back to the state from which they have just come.... The government will support these people during Winter but turn them loose to do what in the Spring? To injure the residents’ employment prospects. That will keep us from saving up anything to live on next Winter.... The government should take care of those people in their own home states and give us residents a chance to take care of ourselves. Who wants to go chasing charity? (Van Norman 1935, 10).

Mrs. A.L. Purcell echoed Van Norman’s suspicion of migrant dependency in her letter to the editor as well, complaining that “[a]t least 500 men have been brought from eastern cities for the taxpayers of California to feed through the new car caravans this Summer so far” (Purcell 1935, 12). For domestic migrants to California, it was a no-win situation. Local residents such as Van Norman and Purcell had decided that Californian citizenship took precedence over U.S. citizenship. A letter to the editor signed simply R.H. summarized this viewpoint:

Surely many of these unfortunate victims are to be pitied, but are we Californians to be expected to save them all? We have spent years to make California the enviable place these people agree she is. Why should we generously open our arms to them and ask them to come share with us?

The part of it all that bothers me most is that their standards of living are low, and they force us to compete with what they have been used to. As farm laborers they beg us to favor them over more efficient foreign help and many of them seem willing to wait for whatever we can give them.

Yes, we have yet to find a practical solution to the whole thing, which in spite of all the sympathy we may feel, becomes more and more serious. Why let California do it all? (R.H. 1938, 18)

California could not do it all. Californians, they felt, could not be expected to support natives of other states with either employment or relief aid – no matter how much they understood the migrants’ reasons for coming to California.
I am not kicking about the migrants coming to this state, but why, after they get here, do they write back for all their kinfolks to join them? Why do they tell them how easy it is to get on relief? Why do they tell them to come on out, and if they do not like it here the state will send them back? Why do they lower wages by working for anything that is offered? (H.H. 1938, 12)

At the extreme end of the spectrum was even a call for the establishment of “cooperative camps” in which the in-migrants would be rounded up, registered, and placed in segregated communities whereby they would perform forced labor at a rate of $1 per day. “This enforced isolation,” explained the letter’s author, “would save Californians millions of dollars which are lost through the vandalism and petty theft committed by criminal bands of vagabond ‘Oklahomans’” (R.W.B. 1938, 12).

Paradoxically, while one writer suggested forced communal living as a potential solution to the problem, other writers took aim at the dangerous potential for agricultural migrant workers to become affiliated with Communist or “Red” activities. Guy Lowe provided his own classification scheme.

There are four kinds of Reds and Communists:
First, the bundle tramps...
The second kind is the fruit tramp that goes to and fro.
The third kind is the cotton-picking tramp...
The fourth kind of tramps are the ones that go about it in a refined manner... This is the Moscow element. (Guy Lowe, 1935, 16)

Lowe’s proposed solution to this threat was that the “fruit and cotton tramps” be forced by the government to remain stationary so they could be tracked easily.

For some residents of the San Joaquin Valley who wrote letters to the editor, migrant laborers from out of state represented the unknown and socially unstable. Okies were neither homeowners nor tax payers,
The taxpayers notice they [migrants] are not the kind of people who come here to establish a business of any kind, but are taking the good jobs away from those fit to do them.... They are really not worthy of some jobs, and the other Summer jobs could be given to the boy or girl who plans to further his or her education. (F.F.M 1938, 14)

Their children not regularly educated,

One [migrant] writer is afraid that the California schools will not teach her children well. Well, one thing for sure, California will see to it that the children go to school, not just as they want to but regularly. That is more than you can say for some states [presumably those from which the migrants arrived]. (H.H. 1938, 12)

Their encampments were unsanitary,

We have about 17,000 Oklahomans settled here if Mr. Rancher would take a trip through California and wear the same rosy colored glasses he did on his trip to Oklahoma he would see plenty of shacks and rag houses the Oakies built.² (G.B.C. 1940, 12)

And their character was flawed by inherent laziness and a preference for handouts over work. For California resident Jack Early they were:

The paupers from the cotton area of the Southeast [who] commenced to arrive in California to help the planters of the new crop, which the natives of this state did not understand.... These people are extremely shiftless and irresponsible and were backed up by our welfare groups. (Earley 1938, 12)

Even some of those people who were enlisted to work for the benefit of the migrant workers held them in contempt for their failure to meet normalized standards of behavior and economic success in California. Reflecting upon her experiences treating Okie migrants at Kern General Hospital in the late 1930s, Dr. Juliet Thorner describes her attitude toward them as “not the warmest. I

² “Mr. Rancher” refers to a previous letter writer who found the conditions in Oklahoma far superior to those described by most critics of Okie migrants (A Rancher 1940, 16).
I can see that we [the hospital staff and personnel] had an attitude of contempt for their ignorance, their poverty, their bad odor, and their frightful gaps in cultural knowledge” (Thorner 1981). Though Dr. Thorner retrospectively felt her opinion of the migrants was perhaps short-sighted, it certainly mirrored that of other Californians who felt the migrants were out-of-place in California.³

Like the anti-immigrant sentiment directed at the Asians in California in earlier decades, civil anti-migrant opinion culminated in legal action. Okie migrants had, at times, been deemed too different to meet the criteria for California cultural citizenship; therefore the only answer was a denial of social benefits and eventually outright exclusion. In 1938, the California Citizens Association (CCA) convened in Bakersfield to coordinate campaign efforts that would purge the migrant menace from their midst. California was for Californians. The CCA’s successes were varied and in some cases short-lived. With the support of State Senator William Rich, conservative organizations such as the CCA gained enough support in the California State Legislature to raise the residency requirement for relief assistance to three years. Similarly, several southern San Joaquin Valley counties chose to enforce the state’s 1933 Indigent Act which deemed a criminal anyone who aided an indigent person in entering California. Though the law was declared unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court in the 1941 Edwards v. California decision, for at least just under a decade, Californians legally closed their borders to Okie migrants (Gregory 1989, 95-99).

³ FSA camp newspapers provide an excellent source of material documenting the paternalistic feelings of the social reformers who worked with Okies. For additional examples, see Gregory (1989).
These objections to Okies did not go unquestioned. Rather they sparked a dialogue in defense of the in-migrant agricultural workers. In most cases, their presence was defended by local residents under the banner of victimization and a paternalistic duty of California’s “real citizens” to help them. On describing “Oklahomans,” letter contributor L.O.S. explains that,

But through circumstances beyond their control they have been forced to leave a land which has become too hard on which to eke out an existence. They want to fit into this economic scheme of things as much as we do. And given a little time, most of them will find homes and will become as good citizens as we are.

(L.O.S. 1938, 18)

Repeatedly, references to drought and depression were made in the letters to the editor of the Modesto Bee, explaining that these destitute migrants were forced from their home states “through no fault of their own” and should be treated with “Christian humanity” (Walters 1938, n.p.). These “Oklahomans” were to be pitied and simply wanted to become good citizens the same way that the “native sons” of California already were. Okies showed signs of assimilation, but a greater audience needed to hear the call for sympathy and assistance.

**Raising National Awareness**

The first calls for sympathy and assistance for the migrants came as early as March 1936 with the publication of the now famous Dorothea Lange photographs of the “Migrant Mother” (Figure 4.2). While the immediate impact of her photos resulted in a rush of aid to the Nipomo pea pickers’ camp where the photo was taken, Lange’s images had a far greater impact upon migrant lives. Migrant advocate and economist Paul Taylor credits Lange with providing the
Figure 4.2. One of the first published photos by Dorothea Lange in the “Migrant Mother” series (Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection, [LC-USF34-009095-C]).
images necessary to finally convince the Rural Rehabilitation Division of the California State Emergency Relief Administration to initiate a program that would construct farm labor camps (Figure 4.3) (Taylor n.d., see also Shindo 1997).  

At the same time Lange’s work was publicizing the plight of migrant workers in newspapers and governmental commissions, the *San Francisco News* commissioned John Steinbeck to research and author a series of articles on migrants in California. Entitled, “The Harvest Gypsies,” the articles plunged Steinbeck into a life he had only observed from a distance and aided in transforming him into a novelist. As a result of the assignment, Steinbeck spent from May to October 1938 carefully drafting what was to become his most well-known novel, the *Grapes of Wrath*. The book was a tremendous success upon its publication in early 1939, so much so, that the film rights to the story were immediately purchased by Twentieth Century Fox motion picture company and by the autumn of 1939 production was underway (Stein 1973; DeMott 1992; Shindo 1997).  

Although the book and film were both released to the public only a year apart, the work of film director John Ford, notes Charles Shindo (1997), “...created perhaps the most widely recognized document of the Great Depression.... Elite reformers embraced Steinbeck’s novel, while most of the public, migrants included, flocked to Ford’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1940). Utilizing a medium capable of reaching the entire nation, Ford told his story in universal

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4 It should be noted that Paul Taylor married Dorothea Lange in 1935.
5 Stein gives the original publication date of *The Grapes of Wrath* as March 14, 1939 while DeMott April 14, 1939.
Figure 4.3. Farm Security Administration Shafter Farm Labor Camp by Dorothea Lange (Library of Congress, Special Media Archives Services Division, Series: Photographic Prints Documenting Programs and Activities of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, [ARC 521770]).
terms that touched all segments of society…” (p. 148). Ford’s interpretation of
the novel made available to a much broader audience the story of the Joad family
– giving faces and landscapes to the on-going tragedy of migrant agricultural
workers and their transition from farmers to farm labor cast adrift onto the
highways of California.

While both the book and film of the *Grapes of Wrath* certainly brought a
national awareness to the migration issues at hand, they also gave a name to
those who regardless of their place of origin seemed to live the same
impoverished lives as did the Joads. In Modesto, nearly overnight, the terms
“Okie” and “Joads” became the preferred labels used in most newspaper articles.
Both terms implied much more than simply “migrant.”

In its coverage of the state director of public health’s investigation into
the health status of the migrant labor force in the Central Valley, the *Modesto
Bee*, incorporated this rhetoric into its own reporting. It writes:

> Reminiscent of the Joads is the report’s further comment:
> “Adequate prenatal services were not available. Pregnant
> women often did not arrive at the county hospital until after labor
> pains had begun. Others were delivered in migrant camps
> without medical and nursing assistance.
> “It is natural under such circumstances that the infant
> mortality rates should be high.... Even when migrants live under
> unsanitary conditions it is possible through the use of modern
> health measures, to protect them and the entire population from
> communicable diseases....” (*Modesto Bee* 1940, 2)

The label Okie was also expanded to describe other groups outside of
California. In March 1940, the *Modesto Bee* published a wire service article
entitled “Grapes of Wrath Conditions are Bared in Report.” The article described
an FSA study that “reported the eastern seaboard counterparts of Steinbeck’s
Okies’ and Joad family travel in old trucks, in jalopies, in freight cars and live in ditch-side camps totally lacking in sanitary facilities” (Bailey 1940, 2). The article went on to describe these east-coast agricultural migrants as living two to ten persons to a room, carrying infectious diseases such as syphilis, ignoring the need for their children to receive an education, cohabitating in common-law marriages, and choosing to purchase alcohol over milk.

Even syndicated gossip columnist Louella Parsons incorporated the term into her writing through her description of Steinbeck’s next endeavor, a documentary about the “peons, landless and hungry” south of the border that was entitled “The Okies of Modern Mexico” (Parsons 1940, 6). By simply reading the title in 1940, a reader of such an article would already be cued into the documentary’s subject material.

In each of these instances, “Okie” or “Joad” encompassed all that was presented in the Grapes of Wrath – poverty-ridden outsiders traveling about in old jalopies devoid of most social graces and in need of “rehabilitation” and an education in citizenship. The adoption of the term “Okie” by news media seldom incorporated the family-centered story that John Ford sold to the American public. News media both national and local employed the term “Okie” to designate a group outside the norm but with the potential for economic success and acquisition of California cultural citizenship. In contrast to the previous waves of immigrants in the San Joaquin Valley such as Mexicans and Asians, Okies could eventually reclaim their full status as whites with proper training. Key to this process was their position as American citizens.
Even the Associated Farmers of California resolved:

Whereas, Mr. John Steinbeck in “Grapes of Wrath” has grossly libeled the migrants from Oklahoma and other dustbowl states by representing them as vulgar, lawless and immoral and
Whereas, The great majority of the dustbowl migrants are upstanding, industrious, law-abiding and God-fearing American citizens;

Now, Therefore, Be It Resolved, That the Associated Farmers of California unequivocally condemn this as an entirely unjustified slur upon the good name and the morals of these fine Americans. (Associated Farmers of California 1939, 3)

Typical of this regard for Okies was a series of locally and nationally distributed press articles that appeared in the Modesto Bee detailing the 1940 visit of Eleanor Roosevelt to the government-operated Shafter Labor Camp in Kern County. Mrs. Roosevelt herself commended the women of the camp for their ability to accomplish things “in spite of all your handicaps” (Modesto Bee 1940a, 1). In contrast to her reaction to the government camp, Mrs. Roosevelt also discovered during her five-hour automobile tour of the San Joaquin Valley that the horrific living conditions described in the Grapes of Wrath were not exaggerated, as she was able to stop every few miles to speak to real Okies found along the roadsides (Modesto Bee 1940b, 1, 8) Undoubtedly, the presence of the First Lady, a well-educated easterner, who had personal contact with Okies, granted an authority to the media to define who the Okies were that far exceeded the ability the migrants had to define themselves to the nation.

With the popularity of the Grapes of Wrath, Okie, as a term, was incorporated into local public dialogues. In contrast to earlier media articles, however, the tide of distaste for the migrants had clearly changed to one of sympathy. Letter to the editor contributor V.D.B. explains:
... I feel it is in my duty to write what I know of Okies, as some are wont to call them. Oklahomans are the best of all around workers I have ever come in contact with. They as a general rule, will give a day’s work for a day’s pay, which is more than some who do not come from Oklahoma.

It seems to me Californians have declared war upon their own people. After all, they are Americans and I dare say some of them are almost human! Would you Californians like to be in the dust bowlers’ position? Would you like to be refused work and a place to live because you come from a certain locality? Is a man more or less a man because he came from a certain section of the country?

Give this a little thought, natives, and I think you will arrive at the conclusion that after all we are all one people, united for the benefit of all. (V.D.B. 1940, 12)

Okies had changed from being distinctly different from Californians to having the potential to become like them. The Okies described by the *Grapes of Wrath* were, according to a letter writer,

... a class of people needing help. They need help spiritually, mentally and physically, and I believe they would respond if there were more people in the world who were willing to help them make the most of what they have, not the most of what they do not have.

As long as these people have minds and bodies and the will to live, it is reasonable to believe they can live wholesome, useful and happy lives. (C.C. 1940, 14)

Similarly, the whiteness of their skin came to supercede the poverty that had previously darkened it and resulted in Okies as being denied all the privileges possessed by other whites in rural California. In his call for federal aid in assisting California counties affected by migrant populations, Fresno County Deputy Superintendent of Schools noted that “they are white folks like yourselves. We must assimilate them...” (*Modesto Bee* 1940c, 2).

As victims with the potential for assimilation and cultural citizenship, blame was laid upon the farmers who employed the migrants – once again
invoking racial themes that noted how various foreign groups were used to establish the basis for the current poor treatment of Okies. Prior to the publication of the *Grapes of Wrath*, letter writers urging sympathy drew upon these differences to define a form of American social and economic justice.

I am not a Texan or Oklahoman; or Californian, but a native of the United States. When it comes to out of state people lowering wages there are two ways to look at it. Of course anyone prefers good wages. These people were not forced to come to California, but they were forced to do something. A majority of them were destitute but willing to work....

We will say they started cutting wages and the whole family went to work to make a bare existence. It shows they are determined to earn their way....

What about the Japanese, Filipinos and Mexicans who have cut wages for years and still are doing it? They have the preference among the laboring class. Why? Cheap labor.

I have nothing against any race of people, but I do say the American born should at least have an equal chance. (Seifert 1938, 12)

Upon visiting several “refugee” camps near Bakersfield, letter contributor L.O.S. commented that they were,

... filled with those good people from the Middle West and noted particularly their general features and demeanor. Those I saw could be you, or I, or our next door neighbor insofar as the color or their hair, eyes, and straight, proud bearing was concerned. I saw handsome little children, saw women who could very well be our sisters, or our mothers. But through circumstances beyond their control they have been forced to leave a land which has become too hard in which to eke out an existence. (L.O.S. 1938, 18)

With the *Grapes of Wrath* as an Oscar-nominated film only two years later, the migrants, Okies, were given a face. A face like that of most local readers – a white face.
We must remember that the large landowners bought the first Negroes to get cheap labor and to reduce the white labor to the level of slaves... The large landowners and large employers in California have imported Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos and now American Dust Bowlers to get cheap labor. (Mudget 1940, 12)

Importantly, Californians came to define Okies as deserving poor white Americans thereby making their problems national in scale. As such, proposals were made to find ways for local and federal governments to create social programs that would aid in the assimilation of migrants into not only California society but also back into white American society. On a national level this resulted in the expansion of governmental programs based upon the Tolan Committee’s recommendations which included: additional appropriation of federal funds to provide migrant health and medical care; expansion of the Farm Security Administration’s migrant labor camp program; a relief program to prevent “discrimination” against migrants as well as a public campaign to promote an understanding of the migrant situation; and federal funding for educational and recreational services for communities most impacted by the migrant influx (Modesto Bee 1940d, 3). On a local level, this meant an expansion of local efforts in the area of education and health as was the case with the opening of the first migrant school in the Stanislaus Country community of Hughson in July 1940. The goal of the school was to provide “Bible study and stories, devotionals ... handiwork; arts and crafts, and sanitation” (Modesto Bee 1940e, 6). By offering training in sanitation, hygiene, Christianity, and democracy at places such as migrant schools and FSA camps, Okies became the “deserving poor” – one step closer to cultural citizenship in California as they
only needed to gain capital for full “assimilation” into California.\(^6\) If given the opportunity, Okies could become contributing members of society. At times the call for aid meant reminding readers that charity began at home and juxtaposed the Okie plight alongside those of people in other nations.

So much is written against the migrants, the Okies, and others, and very little against the idea of all these dollars going to Finland.... If so much money can be collected for a foreign country, why not some club, such as the chamber of commerce, Knights of Columbus, Portuguese and American clubs, radio programs, or other groups get together and start a campaign to collect a large sum, all to go to rehabilitate these unfortunate American migrants? (A Christian 1940, 18)

It was only when Californians began to see Okies as possessing qualities similar to themselves that could Okies slowly brush off the layer of dust associated with the poverty of the Dust Bowl and start their ascent within the ranks of white California society through their potential to succeed economically. They held the promise for social and economic rehabilitation. Rehabilitation, however, was not restricted to Okies alone. Rural Californians received an education in sympathy and a social responsibility that extended beyond the California state-line with the publication and film release of the *Grapes of Wrath* (1939, 1940). Both the novel and film brought the plight of Okie migrants into the national conscience, but the same rhetoric also seeped into local opinion and action. If given the proper tools of assimilation, Okies could become cultural citizens of California and fill those “frightful gaps in cultural knowledge” that kept them in poverty and at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Okies could become Californians.

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\(^6\) David Sibley's (1995) work highlights the importance of the ridding the working class of their physical and social "pollution" as a means to ascend to middle-class status.
Whether they became Californians was less of a concern for Okies themselves. As the next chapter will show, reclaiming the rights and opportunities of American citizens was preeminent. Okies did not see themselves as nearly as different a group of people as Californians first suspected. Rather Okies were cast from the same mold as Californians and held the same values of what it meant to be an American. Many Okies had modest expectations in life, and like Californians, felt that hard work was the only way to their attainment. For the Joad family, like many Okies in California, there was a logical order to reaching their goals.

Ma said excitedly, “With four men a-workin’ maybe I can get some credit right off. Fust thing I’ll get is coffee, ‘cause you been wanting that, an’ then some flour an’ bakin’ powder an’ some meat. Better not get no side-meat right off. Save that for later. Maybe Sat’dy. An’ soap. Got to get soap. Wonder where we’ll stay.” She babbled on. “An’ milk. I’ll get some milk ‘cause Rosasharn, she ought to have milk. The lady nurse says that…” “… ‘F we pick plenty of peaches we might get a house, pay rent even, for a couple months. We got to have a house,”

Al said, “I’m a-gonna save up. I’ll save up an’ then I’m a-goin’ in a town an’ get me a job in a garage. Live in a room an’ eat in restaurants. Go to the movin’ pitchers ever’ damn night. Don’ cost much. Cowboy pitchers.” (Steinbeck 1992 [1939], 499-500)

Food to eat, soap to bathe, milk for a baby – all basics that would then allow the family to survive, thrive, and move up the ladder to economic stability, leisure, and permanence of place. Okie aspirations were those of Americans.
CHAPTER 5

OKIE ORIGINS: PART TWO

By May of 1940, Flora Collins’ story was one of desperation. A desperation she felt compelled to explain to anyone who might read her letter to the *Voice of the Agricultural Worker*. Over the previous decade, her life had changed from that of a self-sufficient farmer in the Western South to that of a migrant agricultural laborer living in the Yuba City Farm Security Administration’s migrant laborers’ camp.

…. In 1929 we farmed 100 acres of good bottom land [in Oklahoma] – we made 2000 bushels of corn, 200 bushels of red spuds. We had 50 acres of cotton. We paid the Farmer’s State Bank $1000. We had money left over to buy a new Ford car. We had 4 head of mules, 9 milk cows, 25 pigs & 50 hens, plenty of canned fruit and vegetables. We had a good living at home (didn’t we?)[.] (Collins 1940, 5)

The late 1920s was a time to be remembered and missed by Collins as those successes were soon left behind.

…. But in 1936 here was our average. We made 800 lbs of cotton, didn’t even harvest our spuds, made about 5 bushels of corn, had 9 hens, 1 pig and that’s all. (Collins 1940, 5)

Confronted with a failing farm and children to feed, Collins and her family left their home and headed westward in search of better opportunities.

…. So that is why we Okies are in California in these migratory camps.

We love our homes and our country, and we love God, the one that loves all of us. I am a christian [sic], belong to the Freewill Baptist Church – love to go to church. I am the mother of three children and all three of them are fond of sports.

But we do appreciate the migratory labor camp to have them to live in and we will do our part to help keep them clean.
We left our homes on account of sand storm[s], and drought, that’s why we are rejected and poor. (Collins 1940, 5)

Collins’ motivation for leaving her farm for California was much the same as most other migrants in the 1930s. Victimized by unfortunate economic and environmental problems, she did the only reasonable thing – move elsewhere in search of work opportunities. And as I will demonstrate in this chapter, whereas, Okie migrants were criticized as dependents of society in need of rehabilitation, many Okies themselves strove to assert their independence and self-sufficiency as American-born citizens. If only given the chance, they felt, they would pull themselves up by their bootstraps through hard labor and thus reclaim their rightful place in the American dream. They drew upon commonsense notions of work as the key to earning the social and economic security they were destined to acquire once again. They were not looking for a hand-out in their search for economic and geographical stability. Okies were not failures of the American dream, they would be its success.

In this chapter, I explore Okie efforts at public self-definition. I begin with a discussion of letters to the editor penned by Okies themselves which illustrate how Okie identity in the late 1930s was publicly constructed in opposition to other groups living in California. I then examine Okie identity as presented in their own Farm Security Administration labor camp newspapers. The names of some of these publications alone – the *Voice of the Migrant* and the *Voice of the Agricultural Worker* – point to the value of hearing Okies speak for themselves. Based on these accounts, despite social reformers’ best intentions to “rehabilitate” and “assimilate” the camp residents into American culture, an
understanding of what it meant to be American was already ingrained within
Okies (see Chapter 4). Okies sought a chance to not only know of American
ideals, but to live them. Their publications show the Okies relied upon
commonsense logic of achievement. They worked to show that the American
cultural citizenship they sought in California was not merely based upon feelings
of entitlement and birth-right but rather of rewards earned through hard work and
effort.

**Okies Respond**

In contrast to native Californian impressions of Okies as being in need of
rehabilitation and lessons in American citizenship, the migrants viewed
themselves as having always recognized their value as American citizens. For
Okies, their American identity was preeminent and superceded the regional
divisions drawn by Californians. Through letters to the editor published in the
*Modesto Bee*, they defended their presence in California as the right of U.S.
citizens. That they were being reduced to the level of immigrants rather than
domestic migrants further fueled the resentment of Okies toward their treatment
by Californians. One correspondent writes:

> May I ask if this in [sic] not supposed to be a free country
and cannot natural born American citizens come and go as they
please if they break no laws? Also is not California still part of
the United States?

> A lot of Californians seem to have a chronic grouch. If
citizens from other states come here and take any kind of work
and any wages they can get to keep from starving they howl…. Do they [Californians] not have sense enough to know anyone
wants as high wages as he can get? Any right person does not
want to be on relief if it is possible to stay off.” (Mrs. W.M.R.
1938, 12)
In a “free country,” Okies were granted the right to travel between states at their own will. Guaranteed by the constitution, those rights ensured that Okies could move to the California Central Valley should their will and desire for economic stability direct them westward – the same way that Californians were free to migrate to Oklahoma in previous years.

We did not come here to get relief. We came because we thought we could work and not be forced to accept relief. They have relief in Oklahoma too.

And it is not true that once we get on relief we make no effort to get off. Who wants a steady diet of sardines, canned tomatoes and dried beans?…

We are lucky to have only three in our family. My little girl is staying with friends while I am ill; my husband is camping. I know the kind of people we sound to you who have homes, or at least jobs, but we have tried hard to stand on our own feet.

You even think we had no right in California, that we are not free born Americans citizens, just because we were born in Oklahoma. I know California is carrying an awful load, but some of her citizens helped drain Oklahoma dry a few years ago during the oil booms. I never heard one Oklahoman mention the transient workers taking up all the jobs. They certainly did. (Mrs. E.H. 1940, 14).

Implicit within these letters, however, was not simply a pronouncement of legal American citizenship, but also the goal of cultural citizenship based upon commonsense ideals of economic stability. The migrants sought self-sufficiency through the same hard work they had learned during their years in their home states. Many Okies saw themselves as possessing a heritage and tradition of helping themselves before asking for handouts. Letter writer, L.R.H. explained that “while working on the WPA for the last six months, I found lots of men would take their families and go if there was work when they got there. Being here and broke does not make the migrants trash, no matter what some say”
Okies, like this letter-writer, were not looking for a hand-out or even a hand-up, rather they desired a chance – the same chance history gave their pioneering forefathers. Lucille Brown who signed her letter to the editor as “An Oklahoman” reflects upon the nation-building spirit of the past when she explained that:

Practically all the people living in the United States with the exception of immigrants from foreign countries who seem to be accepted without criticism by California natives, are descendents of the pioneers who fought to make this nation a free country as manifested in the bill of rights included in the constitution by these same pioneers to insure against the tyranny which they escaped in Europe.

These same settlers dispersed to various parts of the nation as their religious and other views became diversified. These territories now settled became states which were added to the Union with the same constitutional government including them all. One of the statements which became famous during those days was that all men are born free and equal – that is, in view of rights and, in the sign of God. Have people forgotten that early conviction? God shall cause the rain to fall on the just and the unjust and because one state was endowed with larger resources does that make the natives of that state any higher in intelligence, any more entitled to human rights than those of less fortunate states?… (Brown 1938, 12)

Other letter contributors also drew upon the logic of questioning contemporary migrants who were simply following in the footsteps of the previous generations of immigrants and migrants. J.R.C. asked Californian readers:

…. What is a migrant?
Why do migrants migrate to California?
Does it make any special difference as to methods of conveyance, whether it be an old Model T, a train or covered wagon?
Did Armenians migrate from Armenia and for what purpose?
Did Mexicans migrate from Mexico and for what purpose?
Does the State of California refuse admission to these migrants because they want to establish residence here?
Did the pioneers migrate from the East and for what purpose?
Did a bunch of Hitlerites migrate from Germany and take California? Is that the reason Californians are refusing rights to the pursuit of happiness to the 1938 migrants who come here for the very same reason that the older migrants did? In fact, is not this state a state of migrants from all over the globe? Why pick on the younger generation? We are here for the same purpose.

How many people in California are there who did not migrate here? Let he that did not migrate cast the first stone. (J.R.C. 1938, 14)

Their heritage of pioneering was a crucial reason cited in migrant letters to the editor to explain their right to live in California. This image tied them to a noble past endeavor – the forging of the American West (see Manes 1982).

Why is California so bitter toward migrants? Are we not human? Some native Californians seem to think we should go back where we came from and give them this bountiful sovereignty. Do they not know that many of our forefathers also helped build this state? After all, this is supposed to be a free country…. I have not noticed the California critics condemning the Filipinos, Japanese or any other foreigners. But when Untied States born citizens want to come here they say we cut wages and lower their standard of living. I do not believe in cutting wages either, but I will do so before I steal or go on relief. Don’t you think that is more honorable?…

There are a lot of migrants here now, I know, but why condemn us? I think California is a wonderful state, but I also think I have just as much right to be here as anyone else, as long as I remain a law abiding and respectable citizen. (W.S. 1938, 14)

As the letters to the editor suggest, some Okies saw themselves as furthering the ideals of America rather than representing the failure of the yeoman farmer. Like Flora Collins, they had been farmers – plowed the soil and grown their own food – they had been self-sufficient and wanted to remain that way. If only given a chance to prove themselves, they could fit into the economic and social system present in California as they were already native-born American citizens. This
qualification, they claimed, imbued them with rights that superceded those of foreign immigrants no matter what the foreigner’s legal status. An example of this is seen in the letter of Oklahoman, Margaret Mitchell, who positioned her own domestic migrant status in opposition to that of foreigners when she asked

> Why do the letters in the Public Thinks [Letters to the Editor section of the Modesto Bee] talk about other states and people coming here from other states and never say a word against the destitute foreigners who come to California? They take jobs from Americans and send the money they make back to their own countries to build arms with which to kill our men and boys. That is what is at the bottom of all this tommyrot they are putting out about migrants coming to California.

> I am an Oklahoman and am proud of it and my ancestors were American and English. The pioneers were our forefathers and fought to make this state a decent place in which to live for all real Americans. As to the poor and destitute being from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas and Missouri, California has more tramps than any state in the Union….

> Foreigners are afraid they will be pushed out and they know their countries do not want them as long as the people in the United States will be taxed to feed and keep them….

(Mitchell 1938, 12)

The contrast she stressed between migrants and immigrants latched upon a normalized notion that there existed a hierarchy of Americans – namely, that the nativity and contributions of the Okie migrants and their ancestors to society entitled them to greater freedoms than those that should be granted to immigrants. Much in the same way they had been designated as outsiders in California, Okies had created their own Others – in this case foreigners. Nativism, like that chronicled by Higham (1988; see Chapter 3), formed the basis of the stratification and extended the xenophobic fears directed at immigrants in the U.S. toward all foreign entities. Differentiating themselves from the foreign-born would position Okies higher in the overall hierarchy of society and
acceptance and publicly reinforce that as American-born citizens, Okies were more like Californians than were immigrants.

In the eyes of some Okie migrants, behaving as patriotic loyal Americans set them apart from the foreigners who were flooding American society and economy. Expected behaviors included defending America from foreign incursion. Okies, like William Sullivan, contributed to this effort not only by toiling upon American soil as a farm laborer but also fighting upon foreign soil in the interest of protecting America militarily. He analyzed the differences between migrants and immigrants in his letter to the editor.

I read [that] the natives of California do not want citizens of other states coming here looking for work; that California has plenty of her own people to take all the jobs.

You have seasonal crops that demand more labor than you have in your community. You are glad to get this surplus labor when you need it, but set up the cry “indigent, outside labor” when you are through with your harvest.

Many projects are helped financially from funds from the United States Treasury. These funds are paid into the treasury by all the people and not alone by Californians.

Have we as citizens of this great republic the right to go anywhere in these United States to try and make an honest living? If not, why have we allowed 82,998 immigrants to come from a foreign nation into these United States? Californians have not made any big cry about them. They came in 1939.

Our forefathers came to this country to found a free and independent nation. Are we going to go back to the old days? It seems Californians are starting that way when they began to tell citizens of the United States they have no right to go from one state to another in search of work.

In the World War, boys and men from all the states fought shoulder to shoulder for one cause, liberty and justice to all. You did not say when they came to California, “We have plenty of our own boys and men to protect her shores.” Many of these men and boys never saw a seashore; they had no shore to protect, but when as citizens they protected the liberty and freedom of America their sacrifices soon were forgotten.
Californians are doing the same to those transient laborers who go from place to place harvesting the crops. It is a mere existence for them. They are in great demand during the harvest but are forgotten when it is over.

Many aliens claimed exemption during the World War. They were not sent back to the country from which they came. Many of them were given work while the boys of the army, navy and marines died.

Let us have one nation, one language and one united, free and independent people. If there are to be barriers let them be to those who will not defend our nation in time of need. (Sullivan 1940, 12)

Sullivan’s letter drew upon the contributions of migrants both economic and political. He suggested that Californians also recognize Okies as different from foreign labor, namely, as Americans like themselves who would step up and work for the benefit of nation whether it be defending the ideas and borders of the United States or by feeding the nation by harvesting crops.

By designating U.S. citizenship as the prerequisite for inclusion in society, Okie migrants, like Sullivan, asserted their own privileged status. From this point of view then, Okies saw themselves as in-place even in California. As white U.S. citizens, they and their forefathers had long contributed to the success of the United States and could not be faulted for trying to make the most of a bad situation (that had been beyond their control) in their home states by invoking their constitutional right to move freely about the country. One author who signs his letter simply as “A Taxpayer” (highlighting his own self-sufficiency) reiterates this theme.

These native sons certainly take themselves seriously. Even though some of their parents barely made it in time to give birth to them in California instead of Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan, Mexico or what have you, they like to call people from the middle western states foreigners.
It is not the aliens you resent coming into your state. It is the white people who have been driven by privation and starvation to seek a living in the land of opportunity. I will admit they are a problem, but they have a right to live in their own land. And after all California is a part of the United States and I consider that she belongs as much to me as to any native son whose people have only been in America a generation or so…. It is not California we do not like, but the attitude of Californians that we are foreigners in our own land. (A Taxpayer 1940, 12).

Just as many Okies struggled to set themselves apart from foreign populations in California, they also strove to define themselves in opposition to the slurs that had been cast upon them throughout the Depression Era. According the Michael Katz (1986), the creation of social welfare programs in the United States under Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal, marked the creation of two different classes of poor. The deserving poor were categorized as those people who were seen to have been the victim of poverty – those for whom poverty was not a choice. The deserving poor then, refused to accept their condition and tried to pull themselves up from the lower economic ranks and had indeed earned a right to governmental aid. In contrast, the undeserving poor were poor by choice – those people who made little effort to change their status yet still sought unearned gain by drawing upon community resources. As the previous letters suggest, Okies resented the notion that they came to California to become “relief chislers”¹ whose goal was to subsist on various forms of public assistance. Moreover they saw themselves as J.C. Barlette who declared himself “a native of them that Osage Hills of Oklahoma” did when he wrote:

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¹ The term “relief chisler” was a common descriptor used throughout the Modesto Bee in the 1930s both in the Letters to the Editor and general reporting articles. The phrase was used to refer to people accused of receiving social welfare benefits (i.e. relief) without having contributed to the tax revenues that paid for the benefits.
We of Oklahoma, Texas and Kansas resent the attitude the socalled [sic] native sons of California take toward our people. We are proud people and an industrious people. Our schools and colleges are the best. Our people do not come to California to sponge off the state or relief. Our poor are provided for at home. Those who come out here come for work to tide over the hard times until we have crops again. They do not sit and howl like some of the natives. They do not waste foods like the Californians do. 

Our people are for the United States first, last, and always. So get over your [Californians’] attack of swelled heads some of you native sons. The taxes we pay to help some unfortunate brother who is out of work or his home buried in the sands of the Dust bowl is money well spent. I am glad the Lord has given me property to pay taxes on. Thank God for taxes and a president who knows how to spend them. (Barlette 1938, 12)

Okie heritage carried with it a sense of American history and a dignity owed to them from effort and hard work over the centuries. Their contribution to the American economy and efforts of self-sufficiency was undeniable, whereas the contribution of Californians was deemed questionable. In his letter, Jim Shafer defends the role of migrants and others like himself, describing them as “poor, honest cotton pickers.” In contrast, he described California’s “native sons” as wasteful people who exhibited a “false pride” that could only be overcome should they ever come to realize that Okie tenacity would prevent Californians from ever forcing out the domestic migrants. He contends that Okies could outwork and outlast Californians in the dispute over rights to occupy the state. Okies were then in some sense morally superior to Californians with regard to their work ethic and will to succeed against all odds (Shafer 1938, 12).

Despite their ultimate need to gain acceptance by Californians through efforts to seem more like them, at times Okie letter-writers struck back at what
they regarded as slanders and asserted what they felt were the primary differences
between Californians and themselves – differences of morality and ethnics that
gave them an advantage in the prospect for their eventual economic success.
Californians achieved their success by the grace of living in an abundant land to
start with, but Okies, like E.H., would succeed not by luck, but rather by hard
work. When accused of cutting wages, this migrant asked that Californians:

… stop riding your own American people and stop some
of the foreign persons from coming to your state and cutting your
wage scale? If you think it is a snap to fight drouths [sic], floods
and freezing weather and still see all kinds of advertising on
“Come to California and Live,” I will gladly give any native son
my job. I do not think I pushed a native son out of a job.
So why do not you native sons try to stop being so narrow
minded and act like Americans. Look up the word
“sportsmanship” and learn the meaning of how to live like an
American. (E.H. 1938, 14)

Living like Americans, Okie letter writers demanded a system of fair play
– commonsense rules by which everyone with commonsense would operate. The
Okie letter writers themselves stressed that the actions of most migrants were
simply a case of employing the basic rules of dignity and survival – they had left
their home states seeking work rather than starve. They were not, as Californians
had declared, deviating from expected behaviors and ideologies, they were living
according to them given the circumstances of their lives.

**Re-Placing Okie Identity**

Importantly, the rules of operation, however, applied not only to foreign
immigrants and Californians, but also Okies themselves. Not all migrants were
created alike and several letter writers wanted to make sure they were not
mistakenly grouped into the less respectable classification. Lucille Brown noted a
previous letter to the editor that categorized all migrants as Oklahomans and explained that the unsavory characters to which the letter referred were “not typical of the true Oklahoman. There is a shiftless class from every state who do not look for work other than relief and they would be on relief in other states if not in California” (Brown 1938, 12). Although some Okies who penned letters to the editor acknowledged there were indeed some unworthy migrants in California, they made efforts to assure readers they were not all of that ilk with the majority of them possessing a commonsense work ethic.

Texas migrant to California, R.D. Hall noted in his letter that he is “never pointed out as a migrant” even though he “came here broke and never have asked for a handout and no one asked me to come here to this land of promise.” Hall credited his assimilation and acceptance by Californians to hard work which allowed him to distinguish himself out from the other kind of migrant, those who “you can not keep … at work – the more you pay the less they work and the less you get done.” Noting that many of the complaints lodged against Okies were based upon the actions of that kind of undesirable migrant, he wished to give “all respect to the migrant who does not come here thinking California owes him anything but a chance” (Hall 1938, 12). For some, one of those chances came in the form of the Farm Security Administration migrant labor camps.

FSA migratory labor camps provided a place for the development and expression of Okie migrant identity in California. Published by the migrant residents themselves, the camp newspapers provided yet another forum in which Okies could describe their world. While mainstream commercial media such as
the *Modesto Bee* did provide a speaking venue for migrants, their contributions, like any letter to the editor, were subject to the editor’s pen. In contrast, FSA farm laborer community newspapers were written and edited by the migrants who lived in the camps.2

The camps and their newspapers provided places where normalized standards of proper migrant behavior could be articulated. The dialogue that developed in them revealed how many Okies defined themselves by using some of the same rhetoric seen in the letters to the editor at the *Modesto Bee*. Whether or not Okie views about themselves were influenced by popular public opinion in sources such as the *Bee* cannot be assured, nonetheless the ways they described themselves in their own publications and may reveal something about how they regarded and interacted with non-migrants.

Okie identity in the federal migrant camps employed Othering in much the same way as Californians did in their regard for Okies. The proper camp migrant was defined in opposition to that “other” kind of migrant described by R.D. Hall in his letter to the *Bee*. A good migrant occupied the class of deserving poor who had earned the right to be in California and receive government assistance in the camps by wanting to work.

In the *Covered Wagon*, the newspaper of the Shafter Farm Laborers’ Camp, Sid, a resident from cabin #122 draws attention to the hard-working characteristics of migrant laborers in a joke:

Clerk, “What work have you followed for the last three years?”
Worker, “Alphabetically speaking, I have picked, cut, hoed and scraped many kinds of crops, such as apples, apricots, asparagus,

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2 The exception, however, were the weekly camp manager columns and any advertising space.
berries, beans, be3ts [sic], cherries, carrots, cotton, celery, dates, early peas, figs, filberts, grapes, hops, hay, kale, lemons, limes, maze, melons, new spuds, onions, olives, oranges, peaches, pears, pecans, peanuts, quinces, rhubarb, raspberries, strawberries, turnips, tomatoes, Union Picket, vetch, walnuts, watermelons, also a few yams, for sir, you see I’m a migratory worker.”

------ and the clerk fainted. (Sid 1939, 2)

Okies like Sid were anything but lazy and didn’t want to be mistaken for the “other” kind of undesirable migrant. Frank Kline, turns to poetry in his contribution to the Voice of the Migrant at the Yuba City Migratory Labor Camp.

Just a word from a Migrant.
I am from the dust bowl too.
We came to California for work,
But there is no work to do.

We have asked to take relief,
There is no other choice,
I am sure if there was work,
We Migrants would rejoice.
No if you don’t believe it.
Just put us to the task.
Just a decent Job and
A living wage is all we ask…
(Kline 1940, 6)

As migrant hard-working laborers, Okies writing to the camp papers saw the majority of themselves as the deserving poor – a class that worked hard, demanded little, and appreciate what they were awarded. In their written contributions, the migrants embraced this expectation from society and repeatedly expressed their appreciation for the camps themselves. One anonymous migrant poet expressed his gratitude for the aid he had received from the federal government as well as his intent to repay the favor in “The ’40 Migrants.”
Our ‘forty-niner’ forefathers,
Had troubles untold,
But their well-earned rewards,
Were wealth, land, and gold.

But we ‘forty’ migrants
Know a different fate,
We all came here
Just a few years too late.

The land is all taken,
The gold has been dug
We have lived in tents and shacks,
That were never snug

Our spirits were broken,
We faced near defeat,
Then Uncle Sam realized
We shouldn’t be beat.

He helped us through sickness
Flood, famine and strife,
He built us new homes,
And gave us new life.

The sun is now shining
Our smiles are more bright,
We will all work together,
To prove that ‘he’ was right.

(*Voice of the Migrant 1940, 14*)

The image of Uncle Sam, the federal government personified, further reinforced the “American-ness” of the migrants, making them members of his extended family. As his nieces and nephews, Okies could expect a certain level of care and support. The co-editor of the *Voice of the Agricultural Worker*, suggested in the following commentary:

…. We migrants are just as good as the fellows that own farms and factories. Most of us came from the dust bowl, and we all know where that is, Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, and Missouri. We migrants came to California because we heard that
it was a land of wealth, that when we arrived we could get $6 to $8 a day for farm labor.

We migrants came to California we found no homes, and no places to live, so we had to live in ditch banks, and squatter camps under bridges. And then in 1936 the Farm Security Administration set out to help us migrants by building Migratory Labor camps, in the most needed places in California, Arizona, and other places.

We migrants then had a real place to stay, nice cabins and platforms, hot and cold showers, medical care, and all that we migrants could expect from Uncle Sam…. (de Homsley 1940, 4)

Descendents, even of Uncle Sam, were expected to not merely verbalize their appreciation, but also to show gratitude in their actions. Residents of the camps incorporated normalized standards of acceptable and expected behavior into their newspaper contributions as well. Campers voiced opinions that gratitude for their camps could best be expressed through community service – an appreciation for what had been granted by the government and tolerated by the surrounding communities. Irene Taylor warned of the housing alternatives that were left for those migrants who did not live in a federal camp when she wrote from “Down Yonder” where she was forced to take up residence in the kind of camp occupied by the “other” kind of migrant – “one of those way-side camps you have been hearing about.” In contrast to the sanitation measures imposed in the government camps, she noted that they were forced to “dump our garbage in a hole in the ground and most of the time the hole isn’t big enough.” No more desirable than the heaps of rubbish in the camp surroundings were her fellow residents: “one half are Mexicans and the other half white trash and we have dogs to spare.” Her difficult living conditions were compounded by the fact that most agricultural contractors forbade their workers from living in the government camp.
nearby at Westley. Taylor, however knew that her time in this unbearable situation was limited to the pea picking season and sought solace in knowing she would be moving elsewhere. Nonetheless, she expressed her gratitude for her experiences at the Yuba City federal camp and reminded newspaper readers there that “it is 100% nicer to live in a camp and let your manager tell you what to do in the winter, than to take crap from the farmers in the summer time” (Taylor 1940a, 3-4).

Upon her return to the Yuba City camp only a month later, a grateful Taylor reminded her neighbors in the camp that each person in the camp had a responsibility to give back to the community. Discontent over what was perceived as a condescending attitude by the camp manager had arisen. Peace in the camp, Taylor maintained could not be achieved

…[I]f there is just one family that fails to carry his share of the load [as] there is something lacking. So let[sic] all put our shoulders to the wheel[,] work together, forget these catty remarks and all try to do our part for after all our reputation is at stake, and when we lost that, we haven’t much else to lose. We can easily make this a camp to be proud of and all it will take is, do our part, meet each one with a smile, say a few kind words, and obey the rules in camp. Sounds easy, don’t it[?] I believe it is. Let’s all be a sport and try. (Taylor 1940b, 5-6)

Camp residents made efforts to distinguish themselves from those “other” types of migrants – those disreputable ones who did not possess the commonsense to abide by the social and work obligations of the camps. Campers who did not meet these expectations slipped into the classification of the undeserving poor by either refusing to do their part for the camp community or by taking advantage of the social system. That kind of migrant did not
deserve the reward of living in the government camp with “right minded” migrant families.

At the Shafter Farm Workers Community, the Covered Wagon News reported on the arrest of two drunk boys who attended the camp dance. Their punishment for public intoxication was thirty days of labor in road camps. The article author noted that the sentence was indeed severe; however, “that’s why this place is a decent place to live and bring up a family…. Folks that want to live with drunks and dirt should not live in this camp, because the two Ds,,, [sic] Drunks, Dirt just aren’t wanted here,,, [sic] Only decent farm folks….” (Covered Wagon News 1940, 6)

Warnings from the managers, like Frank Iusi, echoed this sentiment as campers were reminded of camp rules in the newspapers with warnings such as:

Some of you have been throwing the wrong stuff in our garbage cans and when you get caught, just start getting your duds together for we don’t want you with us any longer. (Iusi 1940, 13)

Advisories from the Okie camp managers reflected the same concerns for maintaining an orderly American society. At the Yuba City camp, Iusi warned in his front page column, “From the Manager’s Desk,” that he would begin a “thorough clean-up inspection of the camp” and reminded people that despite the official inspections being held on Saturdays, if he should tour the camp “any day during the week and find that the lots are not clean” residents could expect a letter of rebuke (Iusi 1940a, 1). Despite his announcement of the impending inspections, Iusi continued his warnings in the camp paper over the next several months, finally providing a justification for them in the following:
Our weekly camp inspections are being made with a great deal of care not only for your own benefit, but for the reputation of the camp’s sanitary appearance to the outside public. It is our duty to show the outsiders that we appreciate these camps, and are willing to do our share to maintain them at a high degree of sanitation. If these camps can be made a credit to the community we can rest assured that nobody can feel justified in opposing their existence. This responsibility rests entirely on each and everyone living in the camp. You should make it your job to shoulder your respective share of this common burden. The management and staff are always ready to assist you in this matter. We are always willing to drop everything else for the sake of maintaining sanitary standards that have been set by good judgement [sic]…. (Iusi 1940b, 3)

Good judgment according to both managers and camp newspaper contributors meant that receiving assistance without returning the favor was unacceptable. Not only were those who failed to contribute their own labor toward the betterment of the camp chastised, but so too were those who unfairly accepted too much government aid. The accusations of migrant relief chiseling present in larger distribution newspapers was also reflected in migrant newspapers. In the *Covered Wagon News*, a regular article contributor known only by the pseudonym Gramma and Granpa, cautioned that those people who received payments or goods from relief check recipients were just as much on relief as the person to whom the relief check was mailed (*Covered Wagon News* 1939a, 6). Therefore, should someone not officially approved for relief receive any goods or money from someone on a social welfare program, they were in effect a relief chisler. Migrants were to be grateful for any aid they might receive and accept only that which was allowed by accepted social and governmental standards. Along these lines, the *Voice of the Agricultural Worker* issued the following proclamation:
Notice to All WPA Workers and Single Men – You are hereby notified that you should vacate your cabins immediately. We need these cabins for new campers who are now being turned away because we haven’t enough room. (*Voice of the Agricultural Worker* 1940, 2)

Not all residents, however, approved of such distinctions. Residents like Jessie Leah Mackay objected to policies that restricted full camp participation to legitimate camp residents – a designation that did not apply to herself and her husband as he was affiliated at times with the W.P.A. Mackay’s complaint was premised upon the fact her husband was a World War veteran and she a native-born Californian, but they were nonetheless denied the right to participate in camp council votes as they spent a few months each year working for the W.P.A. As W.P.A. participants, their presence in the camp was regarded by the council and management as a favor to the Mackays. The Mackays were expected to be grateful for what aid they had received already and should not have demanded more than they had rightfully earned (Mackay 1940, 1).

That migrant laborers such as the Mackays questioned the accepted policies and behaviors of the camp was tolerable, but that they were expecting more without earning it was more the issue of contention. Most Okie migrants wanted more in life but the notion of entitlement without work, rather than earned benefit, was unacceptable to many camp residents. Camp residents were expected to behave according to these standards. By following these normalized ideas, the camps would serve as a stepping stone to their ultimate goal – a better life outside of them. Camp paper contributors stressed that while they

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3 While the spelling of the contributor’s name in this particular issue of the Voice of the Agricultural Worker is “Mackey,” other issues spell the name “Mackay” for both this woman and her husband. For consistency, “Mackay” appears here.
appreciated the camps, they aspired to earn more. Transcripts from the dedication ceremony at the Yuba City camp reprinted in the camp paper reiterate these goals. Speaking on the topic of the “Campers’ View,” Camp Council Chairman explains:

This dedication day is the one we campers have been looking forward to for many months, as it meant the first step toward security.

We are indeed happy to be rid of our tents temporarily and while our metal shelters are not quite a six [room] modern house [sic], still they serve our purpose very well and are a decided improvement over what we generally have as we follow the crops about….

While we are grateful to be permitted to live in these government camps, still we realize that this can only be a first step toward re-establishment, and also on [sic] great step forward toward the rebuilding of a greater ambition to have and own once more. (Robinson 1940, 4)

Okies like Robinson sought the same dreams of economic stability as did Californians. This type of Okie mindset meant that the camps were merely staging grounds for action by people already well versed in popular dialogues of self-sufficiency – not training camps as social reformers had proclaimed (see Chapter 4). Okies did not need to be educated in democracy and the American dream, they had known it firsthand already. Fate had robbed them of it. In response to an article in the San Francisco Examiner that criticized the migrants and accused them of coming to California for relief payments and having a preference for the nomadic lifestyle, L. Drake defended herself and migrants like her in the Voice of the Migrant.

…. I, myself, have never had to live along river banks under bridges or in packing boxes. Even since we’ve been in the crops, we’ve never done so. Perhaps some do prefer to so-called
gypsy order, who knows, but I think there are very few who
do….

I would much rather have a home or house than a tent. Anyone else with any brains would.

As for my babies. They are small yet. Both under the age of 4. Thank God. They can’t understand the things that are said about we migrants and I hope they never do. We don’t expect to have to live this way much longer. We appreciate having a sanitary place to come and also in receiving what we do from the F.S.A. But we are not satisfied. It’s a poor person who is….
(Drake 1940, 3-4)

A few issues later, Mrs. James Dunn wrote in defense of herself and other Okies. Like Drake, Dunn remained appreciative for the camps, but at the same time rejected any notion that it is all she and her family aspire to in life. Rather than pity, she asked for empathy from others. She requested that readers of her article try to imagine themselves in an impoverished situation compounded by being held in contempt. She explained her situation with the simple title of “Migrants”:

A migrant’s life is a continual round of fighting to get a decent living wage and sanitary living quarters. He is treated like [he] was a plague of some sort and dangerous to come in contact with. How do you suppose he feels when he passes someone on the street and they gather up their skirts to keep from touching him for fear of catching something. How do you think his children feel when they go to school dressed a little poorer than the other children. To be made fun of and called dirty magats [sic] from the Migrant camp. I speak from experience, not just things people have told me. I was one of those school children. Two years ago one girl in town went to far as to sic a police dog on me. Later when I became acquainted with her, I asked her why she did it. Her words were “I thought you were one of those Okies from the Migrant Camp.” There’s one of the things a migrant has to deal with. We appreciate the government building us nice sanitary camps to live in, but we all long for a home of our own and a decent job. We wade in water and breathe under wet canvass anyone knows that isn’t healthy. We rather resent people for saying that this is good enough for us, for we all long and hope for better. (Dunn 1940, 9)
An anonymous “Camper” follows suit with a commentary that notes that “[s]urely, no intelligent person could believe that human beings have no ambition farther than desire to live in a migratory camp and be classed the lowest paid type of American labor” (Camper 1940, 5).

Each author points to her desire to achieve more in life by appealing to what she feels is commonsense, but to whom are they writing? Although camp correspondents submitted their articles and letters to camp newspapers, they felt the impact of their writings could carry much farther than the camp boundaries. Camp residents were very conscious of appearances – particularly how they appeared to “outsiders.” Outsiders, those people living in the communities surrounding the camps and not participating in a migrant lifestyle, were watching.

Prior to camp dedication ceremonies, *Voice of the Agricultural Worker* editor Pearl Hinkle reminded camp residents to “work hard this week and get this camp clean” as visitors from outside the camp would be arriving for the event and she didn’t want them to find it “all cluttered up. We want them to say something nice about us and the camp. If they were to find the camp all dirty, they will think that the money spent to build [it] was not used in an unworthy cause [sic]” (Hinkle 1940, 3).

Despite Hinkle’s good intentions, she too was the target of complaint in the newspaper. The details of the dispute unraveled in the paper weekly. Hinkle’s behavior as well as the rulings and advisories of the camp council members and manager were suggested to be at times despotic and contrary to the
camp’s democratic principles. Mildred King wrote to the paper of “the change in
times” that had allowed such a situation to evolve.

Times really change quick it seems to me. There was a time
when the campers had a council meeting where they could
express their opinions and ideas, but it isn’t that way any more it
seems judging from the last council meeting. We troop up to the
Council meeting like bunch of school children to sit for an hour
or so to listen to the manager tell us how ignorant we are and to
hear him threaten what he is going to do if we don’t do as he
wants us to such as taking the doors from the showers and many
other things as bad. Well I admit that he has plenty to make him
feel disgusted, but some of us are doing the best we can and we
resent being talked to like we are convicts and we really think
that if the people who are misusing government property were
encouraged to do better and not threatened they might do better
at least the rest of us would feel like they were taking an interest
in the camp and help to see that other do the same. The trouble
in camp is not the fault of the campers. There are two sides to
every story. For instance take our camp paper, it is a joke to
outside people even the editor takes this means of mudslinging
and permits people to write articles about other people and sign
them phony names. No wonder the camp is the talk of the
town….

So if I were the editor, the manager, and the chairman, I
think I would look for my own faults before I said too much
about the campers because we are all human beings and expect to
be treated like one. We may be ignorant and uneducated, but we
feel that we are just as good as anybody. (King 1940, 6-7)

That the dispute was aired in the newspaper was equally as offensive to another
camper who pointed out that “outsiders read this paper. We have enough mud on
us without having more slung on us” (F.C. 1940, 13). Regardless of standpoint on
the dispute, residents agreed about one thing: What others thought of them
mattered. Okies knew they were regarded as different and realized there was not
merely a physical distance associated with living in the camp, but more
importantly as social distance that was difficult to overcome. Okie contributions
to the newspaper like those of King and F.C., reminded campers of the taken-for-
granted assumptions made about them by those living outside the camps. One such letter, entitled “A Migrant Child’s Problem in School,” was a short article penned by a camp teenager and explained how this separation played out in his life. He noted that he attended Yuba City High School and while children outside the camp “are really sociable and will occasionally say hello … friendship hardly ever occurs between them and us so-called ‘okies[.]’ If such friendship did occur, the outsiders[’] parents would do their utmost to discourage the friendship, as they feel it would cut down on their social prestige” (C.R. 1940, 5).

“Outsiders” represented not only a threat but also a comfort to migrants. Some residents welcomed them into the camps as fellow contributors to community effort. Newspapers from several camps noted the donations of the “Steinbeck Committee” and “The John Steinbeck of Hollywood.” In both cases, truck-loads of clothing for distribution to the migrants were sent to the camps resulting in the publication of notes of appreciation (Covered Wagon 1939b, 10; Tow-Sack Tattler 1939, 6). Jessie Mackay and Ruth Luman issued a statement of appreciation for those outsiders who aided the camp with charity over the Christmas holidays. The two writers who noted that “even if we are Oakies [sic],” they recognized the threat of their benefactors – the Associated Farmers – yet suggest that the camp residents accept the “outsiders … as the more they [Associated Farmers] hear the more they will dread.” By interacting more with the Associated Farmers and even allowing them to attend their camp council meetings, Mackay and Luman implied that the residents would come to be viewed
for what they were – strong-willed workers who would succeed in the battle for fair labor standards and pay (Mackay and Luman 1940, 8).

This sense of common identity tied the camp migrants together creating a sense of community. Despite their difficult economic situations as domestic in-migrants in California, some found solace in discovering they were not alone.

Writing to the *Hub’s* Victory Edition, Velma Northcutt remembered:

> When we first came in, and when the purple shadows of evening crept up the side of the snow-capped mountains we were lonesome for the wide open spaces of Texas. But today we are a part of this community. We love the Tulare Farm Workers’ Community, and we feel we belong with it. (Northcutt 1942, 2)

Mrs. Ike Ramsey likewise recalled in the *Hub* her experiences as one of the “early pioneers in the camp”:

> When we first moved into camp we thought we were really getting into something terrible. I thought we’d really be pushed around. But we hadn’t been here long before we found nearly everyone here were migrants just like ourselves. Dewey, Russell, Lefty Barber, and Jess Stephens were all Okies like we were. Jerry Porter, guard, was from Montana, I think, and Bob Hardie, our Camp Manager, was from Nebraska. And Oh, yes, – Mr. Happy Loop is an Indiana Hoosier.

> We’ve had a swell time since we’ve been here in camp. We’ve met a lot of people and had to part with most of them. Sometimes this has been hard, but we always believe they will be back. Why not? You couldn’t find a better place! (Ramsey 1942, 7)

With the escalation of World War II, migrants renewed their claims of American citizenship as both individuals and a community. In contrast to earlier efforts to distinguish themselves as American citizens by birth, Okies in the federal camps now stressed their status as Americans by both military and civic contribution. Just as the proper camp resident was to give back to the camp
community, the proper American, migrant or not, was to aid the nation in its time of war. Key to this wartime assertion of citizenship was the contribution of human labor to the war effort. Camp newspapers included articles detailing the names of those residents who had “taken up arms in defense of their country” (*Hub* 1942c, 2). Community poet, Mary Hogue, lent the following inspirational verse to the *Hub*:

The Japs sure think they are getting Tough.  
To the U.S.A. Their [sic] not even Rough  
But we will fight no matter where  
Any time we don’t care.  

So let’s fight for the U.S.A.  
Lits [sic] start now? And don’t delay.  
The red white and blue shall win,  
So come on boys lets begin.  

Remember boys this is your land,  
So get ready and lets take our stand.  
We will fight, Fight, for our Right.  
Any time noon, day or night.  
(Hogue 1942, n.p.)

The Shafter Farm Workers Community praised those who volunteered for military service asserting that “we are sure that should war come you are prepared to defend [sic] the most priceless thing[s] humans can hope for, Freedom from despots, Freedom to build for the great majority, Freedom to work for those things that are dear to each of us” (*Covered Wagon News* 1940, 1).

The “Freedom to build for the great majority” was not limited to those men who qualified for military service. Older men, women, and children of the
camps could all show their appreciation and give back to the nation that had given them the safety, sanitation, and order in the Farm Security Administration migrant labor camps. By working as farm labor, Okies provided the basic fuel for the American soldier. “The farm worker in California, and all over America,” Marshall E. Huffaker declared, “has a big job to do – and today he is doing it!” (Huffaker 1942, 2).

United under the banner of “Food Means Victory,” farm laborers gave of themselves as paid employees and as private citizens (Hub 1942d, 2). By growing Victory Gardens in the camps, residents applied their skills in agriculture to their own surroundings. In Yuba City, the camp paper praised residents for their efforts to

show the rest of the world that the farm workers are doing a great job in helping to win this war. It isn’t easy to work 10 hours in the fields and then come home and make gardens such as we have in our various communities. But we are doing that and we are mighty proud of our gardens, which are helping us as well as Uncle Sam. (Voice of the Agricultural Worker 1942a, 6)

Camp residents expressed a desire to prove themselves as hard-working and equal in patriotism to Californians and more generally Americans. The Yuba City camp organized a Food for Victory Festival that focused upon a garden competition between Farm Administration camps that would serve to rally the separate camps to a common goal. With over one hundred gardens planted in the Yuba City camp alone, the newspaper projected them to “produce tons of valuable produce that will be used at home … The spirit of the Victory Garden festival is one of justifiable pride in the work we have done. We like to
keep reminding ourselves, and reminding others that we are in this thing to win”

(*Voice of the Agricultural Worker* 1942b, 2).

Reminding others of their contributions was key to the camp communities. The residents of the Tulare camp reported their accomplishments directly to the President. In honor of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s birthday, the camp organized their own celebration – a “real old time party.” In a letter to the President describing the special meaning of the event, the campers explained what they felt was a common bond with Roosevelt:

…. [W]e know what sickness is a little better than some people do… we believe in you and want our neighbors to know just how we feel. We know that our country, under your leadership is going to ‘whup’ infantile paralysis, poverty, the Japs, the Nazis, and anything else that needs a ‘whuppin.’ (*Hub* 1942a, 2, 6)

Accompanying the letter were several additional commentaries by campers who saw their efforts as reflective of not only proper camp citizens but also American citizens. Migrants were indeed grateful citizens. As “America has not time or money to waste on bad citizens people who carry little grudges around, who won’t keep themselves clean and healthy, or work together for the common good,” they were compelled by their fellow community members to give back to the nation that had aided them in their time of need. Tulare camp residents were, in the words of the Recreation Director, “true AMERICAN CITIZENS” [caps in original] (*Hub* 1942a, 2, 6).

Their status as “true American Citizens” was reaffirmed by Eleanor Roosevelt whose letter of commendation appeared on the front page of the *Hub’s Victory Edition*. Mrs. Roosevelt declared migrant agricultural workers assets to
the nation, writing that “the farm worker plays as important a role as the worker who is employed in a defense factory. I am glad to learn that workers of your community are contributing so whole heartedly to our national effort” (Hub 1942b, 1). As times changed, Okies were admitted to the very public identity they strove to create.

Until World War II, Okie identity was largely premised upon defining not only who they were but to an even larger extent who they were not. By distinguishing themselves from other groups of Outsiders, they sought to align themselves with traditional notions of American cultural citizenship and in doing so gain acceptance by native Californians.

Through their contributions to the war effort, both foreign and domestic, Okies in California solidified their status as American cultural citizens. Their toil in the agricultural fields, defense factories, and fields of battle gave them the opportunity to prove themselves economically self-sufficient to Californians. As the national war economy grew, American patriotism came to supercede the regional divisions of identity that predominated in California during the Great Depression. As contributors to the nation, Okies could be viewed by Californians as more American and less Other.

Mainstream media like the Modesto Bee provided some means by which migrants could speak out against what they felt were slanders against them in the 1930s. Such avenues of public dialogue, however, were ultimately shaped by editorial discretion. In contrast, the Farm Security Administration labor camp newspapers provided a mouthpiece by which Okie migrants could describe
themselves to each other and Californians – seeking community both within the
camp and outside. Writing from her home at lot #126 at the Yuba City
Migratory Labor Camp, Mrs. James Dunn summarized her desire:

   It seems there is considerable controversy over the life of a
migrant laborer. So supposed [sic] we set a few people on the
right track. It seems we would be classed as undesirables and
slackers. I mean by slackers that they say we don’t want to
work. Suppose we told our story now….” (Dunn 1940, 9).

Okie migrants sought not only economic stability and permanence of place, they
also wanted a chance to tell their own stories and define themselves.
Reflecting upon growing up as a child in Tipton, California, Charles Newsome described public reaction to the arrival of migrant laborers from the Western South in the 1930s as:

They thought there was nothing lower than Okies and then we’d tell them we were Oklahomans and they’d better start fighting right then. We were somebody back where we came from. We weren’t no [Okie]. What the real “Okie” was called came from all states and California as well which it was a lower class of people just like today…. At that time they just lumped us all together. (Newsome 1981, 37)

Despite the offense at being lumped with those set apart by their social standing and labeled and “Okie,” Newsome nonetheless went on to draw upon his roots and family heritage as a source of pride, even referring to himself as “a little smart ass Okie” child who stood up for himself at all costs (Newsome 1981, 36).

The paradoxical nature of Newsome’s identity was characterized by both an attempt to reject being labeled and socially excluded by native California residents, yet at the same time embraced the uniqueness that this label bestowed upon him. Clearly, whether or not he was an Okie depended upon who was using the term. Newsome was not ashamed of his past but simply wanted some level of self-determination in defining how that past projects his identity in the present.

At the same time self-identified Okies now strive to speak for themselves, they do simultaneously reveal some commonalities among individual experiences and across all modes of expression. This chapter explores how these two seemingly contradictory goals come together as Okie migrants and their
descendents gained the ability to define their own public identity in the latter decades of the twentieth century. To do so, I discuss not merely what self-identified Okies said about themselves, but more importantly perhaps how they reached a greater audience.

As the previous chapter showed, one of the few venues of public speech available to Okie migrants in the 1930s and 1940s was found in the newspapers of the Farm Security Administration labor camps. These publications, however, had their limitations as well. Of the several hundred thousand Okie migrants in California in the 1930s, only an estimated 4,434 families in California could be accommodated with housing at any given time (U.S. Department of Agriculture 1942). What of those for whom the federal camps may have never been home?

To address such a question, I must turn to more contemporary efforts to describe Okie migrant identity and experiences. This chapter will therefore examine the various public venues available for the expression of Okie self-identification today. I begin with a brief discussion of how early attempts to describe the migrants to a broad audience were less concerned about having the migrants speak for themselves than ensuring that migrant issues were presented by those with political and social authority who could affect change. Even in the 1930s and 40s, those involved in improving the migrant social and economic situation had ties to academia. With early academics leading the way, I then discuss contemporary members of the academy who continued to explore the lives of Okies, but with the rise of Okies in socio-economic status, turned to questions of experiences and identity through the practice of oral history. Next I
explore how Okies who had risen socio-economically and entered the academic world continue to struggle with their own identities through their published works.

With the transition of Okies from outsiders to insiders in the Central Valley, public venues available for expressing Okie identity continued to grow. Finally, I explore how Okie identity has become an everyday occurrence at times played out upon the landscape and a reflection of greater social authority as a group.

**Origins of an Audience**

Okie migrants sought to publicly define themselves in response to native Californian definitions since their arrival in the Central Valley in the 1930s as was illustrated in the newspapers of the Farm Security Administration Camps (see Chapters 4 and 5). The geographical extent of the audience was for the most part limited to the inhabitants of the camps and those residents of the surrounding communities who had the opportunity or desire to read the newspapers. For the majority of the twentieth century, those people interested in addressing the socio-economic problems of the migrants who also had access to a more nationalized audience remained professional journalists, photographers, novelists, government officials, and academics. In each of these instances, those reporting on the migrants did not so much seek to provide an available forum for Okies to describe themselves but rather served as authoritative voices speaking on behalf of the migrants. In a vein similar to letters to the editor that attempted to defend the
in-migrants as victims in need of guidance and pity, social reformers seldom
incorporated within their rhetoric the words of the migrants themselves.

The House of Representatives Tolan Committee, a body charged with
examining the pre-war interstate migration streams to the Western states,
incorporated agricultural migrant worker testimony within its hearings; however,
the information sought was singular in purpose. The primary goal of the
committee was to examine the changing population movements in anticipation of
a rising defense industry along the West Coast of the U.S. As such, the
committee was less interested in the public identity of the migrants than the socio-
economic push and pull factors that brought them to the West and would provide
a labor force sufficient to meet the needs of that growing industry (U.S. Congress,
House 1941).

The Tolan Committee investigation culminated in the publication of an
extensive 1941 House of Representatives Report, yet like the FSA camp
newspapers, the audience remained largely limited – to those who would make
governmental funding appropriation decisions including the financing of
migratory labor camps. Likewise, the efforts of members of the academic
community such as Dr. Paul Taylor (1983) and social reformer Carey
McWilliams (1939) were aimed at drawing attention to the poor living and
working conditions of agricultural migrant laborers with the goal of reaching an
audience that could affect policy change. Despite the good intentions of Taylor
and McWilliams, they too, must have been aware that their academic and
governmental affiliations were the qualifications that granted them access to a
broader audience. For social reformers like these two men, the quality of life and employment conditions of the migrants was far more important at that moment than the need for migrants to articulate their identity.

Only by rising up the socio-economic ladder after World War II could Okies and their defenders take a step back from addressing their daily needs and turn toward gaining power, or the right of authorship, in California’s Central Valley. The acquisition of power, however, is neither immediate nor singular in direction – it is redistributed over time through interaction between groups of people. Stuart Hall, drawing upon Foucault and Said explains:

Power not only constrains and prevents: it is also productive. It produces new discourses, new kinds of knowledge (ie. Orientalism), new objects of knowledge (the Orient), it shapes new practices (colonization) and institutions (colonial government). (Hall 1997, 261)

Out of this circulation of power, emerges a new discourse of Okie identity, one that merges the public venues of the past with Okie voices of the present. In 1979, faculty at California State College, Bakersfield\(^1\) were awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (N.E.H.) for an initial planning project entitled “Rural Americans in the Depression: A California Odyssey.” Only a year later the N.E.H. endorsed the research project agenda (via additional funding) to create an oral history collection of migrant experiences.

Located at the southern end of the Central Valley in Kern County, Bakersfield and the surrounding communities were common destinations for Okie agricultural migrants seeking work in the cotton fields in during the first-half of

\(^1\) The current name of California State College, Bakersfield is California State University, Bakersfield. At the time the oral history project was conducted, the former name was in use.
the twentieth century and remain home to many of those former migrants today (California State College, Bakersfield 1980, 1). Among the explicit goals of the Odyssey Project was the desire to avoid the “‘rags to riches’ stories of selected individuals” and rather focus upon “people who otherwise would not have the opportunity to relate their experiences.” In light of this goal, an initial list of interviewees was compiled by either self-identification or referral by personal contacts after articles announcing the study appeared in two major regional newspapers, *The Bakersfield Californian* and *The Fresno Bee*, as well as in local newspapers from smaller surrounding communities. The list was then shortened after potential interviewees submitted two-page questionnaires. According to the *Odyssey Project Guide*, as the emphasis of the oral history project was upon Depression Era migrants originating from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and Missouri, those people who were young children with few memories of the migration westward were excluded from the final roster. Thus, the Odyssey interview list was primarily comprised of first generation migrants (California State College, Bakersfield 1980, 5-6).

The primary value of the Odyssey Project lay in its desire to describe the breadth of migrant experiences in their own voices. The individual backgrounds of the migrants in their home states varied from whose primary subsistence was as sharecropping farmers to those who operated as small merchants and government employees. Nonetheless, throughout most of the interview transcripts underlying themes of self-identification emerged as the migrants described themselves and their lives. Echoing the sentiment of the FSA newspapers forty years prior, the

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2 See the Tolan Committee Report (1941).
interviewees characterized themselves as hardworking and aspiring to better lives and acceptance in their communities.

Exemplar of these life stories was Talmage Collins, who by 1935, was fighting a losing battle. Sharecropping near Waleetka, Oklahoma proved a relentless, more even more devastating, an unprofitable, task. He was in “dust bowl country” and planted his crop of cotton over three times in the hope that he would somehow overcome the powerful dust storms. But each time, he noted, “you’d go out there an it’d be leveled over like you’d taken a bulldozer and bulldozed it…. you get to the point that you wonder what’s the use” (Collins 1981, 17).

In an agricultural area with little cash, trade in products became the primary form of exchange. After struggling with their own crop, Collins and his wife chopped cotton for another farmer – but the farmer had no money with which to pay them for their labor. Collins accepted apples as payment because “you could eat them.” Apples, however, were not enough to sustain them through the whole winter so on Thanksgiving Day 1935, he and his family left for California. Collins summed up his reasons for finally leaving Oklahoma for good:

…. I think when you can see no advantage in what you’re doing and you can see no way out – I was sharecropping. The guy furnished the land and the team. I bought the feed and the seed. We were splitting the crop in half. I couldn’t make enough during the summer months to get me through the winter months. I still had to find a job to partly support me. I think that was one thing that made me come out here. I was looking for a better life. All of us I guess – all the way through life – are looking for a better life to kind of upgrade ourselves. I think that was the thing. I never had any fears about it. I knew that as long as I had

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my health I knew how to work. If somebody told me how – when I didn’t know how to do it – I could do it their way. (Collins 1981, 25)

For Collins and the other migrants, the opportunity to learn “their way” required a relocation to California. And while a life of continuing migration about California was often necessary, it was typically the means to a desired end of settled permanence.

Texas-born migrant, Edgar Crane’s story may have played out in a different state from that of Collins, however, his motivation was the same. In his oral history interview, he explained that his family’s pattern of movement was traceable to a succession of events over which they had no control other than to be proactive and do what they could to survive. After just two years of high school, Crane dropped out because of “hard times. I had to go to work. Naturally, now you look back and see that you should have finished high school. It wasn’t as important then as it is now to have more education…. [I]t got down to where there was no money at all” (Crane 1981, 2). His interview transcript suggested that he holds no bitterness over this interruption of his education and simply saw it as the most pragmatic solution at the time.

With his father laid-off from the railroad and sharecropping failing to support his family, they decided to follow in the footsteps of other family members and look to California for greater work opportunities. New to the state and not yet attached to a single place, the newlywed Crane and his wife began following the crops, but decided early on that it would only be a temporary solution.
We went as far as Dinuba and Reedley and up in there following the crops. At that time you had to live out in deplorable living conditions. I just couldn’t see that. I wanted a permanent address at least. (Crane 1981, 12)

Work, whether it involved following the crops or working multiple short-term jobs in a single area, was the means for meeting their potential. The largest portions of the Odyssey transcripts involved discussions about lifetimes of movements between employment opportunities in California, each one seeking a small improvement over previous wages or working conditions but for almost every interviewee, economic stability and permanence of place was the ultimate goal.

Despite a recurring lifelong kidney ailment, Frank Manies (1981) began his westward journey at the age of only seventeen, hitchhiking from Oklahoma to Texas. Unable to find employment in the New Deal’s Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in Oklahoma, he managed to convince a Texan to trade places with him and relinquish his spot in the CCC. During his four-and-a-half-year term working for the CCC in Arizona, Manies took advantage of the time to become trained as a skilled mechanic. Throughout his time in Arizona, he held to his greater goal of going to California and upon his release from the CCC continued his journey.

From the time he arrived in California, Manies’ goal was to work. He began in the fields picking the same cotton that had been familiar to him back in Oklahoma and transitioned to pruning grapes and picking fruit. With the rise of the defense industry, Manies was finally able to apply his mechanical skills by working for Douglas Aircraft Company and North American Aviation in Southern
California. Eventually, he invested his savings into an auto repair shop back in the Central Valley where he noted that despite being regarded as an outsider to ranchers and farm owners, “I was getting a tremendous amount of work from the townspeople because they were people like myself [having Okie roots]…. I was really happy. I was prosperous and it was something that I liked to do” (Manies 1981, 38).

It took nine years for Manies to gain the support of local businessmen and to be admitted into the local Chamber of Commerce. Eventually, he also “dropped in” to college with less than a high school education and went on to earn the master’s degree that would allow him to teach vocational studies at Tulare High School. He used his own life story of his transition from an outsider in California and the Central Valley to one of a successful member of the community when teaching minority students. He explained:

They [the students] had this give up attitude. I’d say, “Well, look, don’t tell me that because if you really try hard enough I know by first-hand experience you can accomplish some of these goals.” (Manies 1981, 39)

Manies was not the only migrant to notice the transition of Okies from outsiders to insiders in the Central Valley. The interviews of the Odyssey Project also provided some insight into this transition when the interviewers asked the former migrants to address the term “Okie” and what it meant to them. For some interviewees, the term Okie inspired an angry response due to negative connotations that revolved around the label in the 1930s. Terry Clipper explained:
I would never let anybody call me an Okie because I figured I was an Oklahoman. I always figured an Okie was a somebody filthy and dirty that was a liar and a thief and a cheat and wouldn’t pay his bills. I wasn’t any of that. I never would let anybody call me Okie. (Clipper 1981, 19)

Although Clipper felt these terms failed to describe him, he certainly recognized that Californians lumped him and other migrants into the more derogatory classification of Okie and created a physical and social distance between themselves and the Okies. He suggested that any interaction between the two groups was controlled by the Californians.

I couldn’t understand those people. I don’t know whether they considered us white trash. I know we were poor. There was no doubt about that…. The time I was there they wouldn’t associate with us at all. We [migrants] had to associate together except in the grocery store [where Californians wanted Okie business]. They wouldn’t include us in any of their activities and if you did force your way, why, you were left out in the cold. (Clipper 1981, 13)

He referred to these experiences as a lesson in minority group relations – one in which he became keenly aware of the similarities between the treatment of Okies in California and blacks on a national scale. Clipper noted that he

found out what discrimination was and how it worked. So it taught me a lesson, and I don’t feel that way [negatively] about the blacks or the Mexicans or the Orientals. I know they’re people and we all have to be together to get along in this world. (Clipper 1981, 14)

Goldie Farris (1981) also described the difficulties encountered by the stereotypes associated with Okies and like Clipper credited her experiences with her sympathy for the contemporary exclusion and treatment of Mexican immigrants and blacks. Despite the stereotypes, she notes that the only migrants her family knew were all like themselves who “were temporarily down because of
the Depression and the circumstances we were in. But we were the type of people
that would rise about that the first chance we got.” In contrast stereotypical Okies
according to Californians were those who “were good people…. But they were
content to stay at the same socio-economic level and apparently never envisioned
rising above that…. We are extremely successful, very motivated, ambitious-type
people.” Work, claimed Farris, was the key to her family’s eventual success in
California. Despite how she saw herself, she discovered it would take significant
effort and time for the Californians she encountered to regard her as anything
other than worthless. Like many of other Odyssey Project interviewees, Farris
realized that regardless of whether or not she saw herself as fitting the Okie-
stereotype, it took time and effort on her part to prove those stereotypes wrong
(Farris 1981, 12-14).

Over time some interviewees came to see the term Okie in much the same
way Charles Newsome did – as one of both exclusion and inclusion. When
confronted with the term, James Lackey (1981) also noted that the primary
determinant of how his fellow Okies responded to the label depended upon who
was using the term and their intent. He said that

[b]ecause most of the people I was in contact were from back there
and they’d joke amongst themselves. I imagine if some native
come up and called me something like that I would have probably
knocked his block off. But with guys that you know from there and
you know know they’re kidding and just have fun. I would call
some guys dumb Okies. They know I’m an Okie too and they
don’t get mad. But you let a native or somebody like that say it
and you probably had a fight on your hands. (Lackey 1981, 42)

As Okies became economically successful and rose within society’s ranks, the use
of the term Okie lost some of its bitterness. Joyce Seabolt (1981) credited his
overall good experiences in California to an explicit effort to fit in with native
California and ascend the socio-economic ladder.

The established people [Californians] were better off economically than we were so there was a distinction. You could see it and feel it. You had to earn acceptance and that did not come quickly. It was a slow process. We were determined to gain acceptance and in doing so I think we overcompensated (Seabolt 1981, 24)

With acceptance came a change in attitude about migrants and an accompanying change in meaning for the term Okie.

Then it was a derogatory comment. It was insulting. It was meant to be derogatory or insulting. Today when it’s used it’s said in jest. In this area it’s used as a distinction between a white person and a Portuguese person. It is primarily used by the Portuguese who were discriminated against years and years ago. They were looked upon as being less bright than the native Californians. They were shunned and held apart.... They were industrious and saved their money and invested in the land. They became educated. Many of them in this area have become very successful farmers and dairymen – some are the wealthiest people in the area. So now they call all white people Okies – it’s jesting and they do it good naturedly but it’s to make the distinction between Portuguese and whites.... It’s not a derogatory term. (Seabolt 1981, 40)

Once again a self-identified Okie drew a connection between the experiences of Okies and what might be considered traditional minority groups (Mexicans, blacks, and Portuguese) – peers who had made and are making efforts to succeed and fit into society on California’s terms.

For Goldie Farris and others like her, however, that desire to fit in California society was inspired by extreme hardship that has been difficult to overcome. In her Odyssey Project oral history transcript, the interviewer’s Preface explained that “until our interview she [Farris] had never once discussed what had happened to her family or her feelings about it. She had feelings of guilt
and embarrassment inside about it” (Farris 1981, n.p.) When asked if her experiences of poverty and discrimination based upon negative stereotypes of Okies affected her life, Farris complained:

… [I]t has affected me. It still affects me. I get into a new situation and my first reaction is that these people are so intelligent. I could never be as good as they are. Every new group I have to go through this…. I really found it hard to believe that I could do something…. (Farris 1981, 15-16)

Having felt herself an outsider as a child in California, Farris tried to prevent her family identity from being revealed publicly. Growing up in a household of migrant laborers, Farris experienced a continual turnover in schools – always moving to a new one. Making friends at a new school is always difficult, but even more so for Farris who explained that

I remember making friends with one girl and I was very careful never to let her know where I lived. Finally not too long before we left there I told her where I lived and I can remember her looking at me and she was surprised. “You don’t look like one of those people. (Farris 1981, 15)

For Farris, the statement left mixed feelings. It was good not to be lumped with THEM – the stereotypical Okies – but bothered her that the discrimination and images associated with them were even an issue. She admitted that she made a conscious effort to fit in with her school peers and eliminate any traits that might be perceived as different. Her first task was to disguise any roots to her home state.

All you had to do was open your mouth…. Every time I uttered a word that first year we were here [in California] somebody would say, “Oh, I can tell where you’re from.” The California girls sounded very harsh to me…. The first year I was here, my sister and I really worked at getting rid of our accent and by the end of a year nobody could tell. (Farris 1981, 14)
For Farris, coming to accept her Okie heritage and all that it suggested has been traumatic and something she has avoided since her arrival in California. For others, accepting the term Okie as their own served as a form of empowerment.

Gaining control of the term Okie and claiming it for their own today is a key component of Okie identity. For Lillie May (1981), control came early on when she was still in high school and had experienced the negative comments and was determined to prove them wrong.

I’ll never forget when I was a freshman in high school and here’s this girl in tears. I’d never seen her and I sat down and introduced myself to her. I said, “Where are you from?” I knew she wasn’t from around there. She looked at me kind of funny and looked around and looked back at me. I said, “Are you like me? Are you from Oklahoma?” She had the look on her face that I had when I first came to Shafter School. She said, “You’re from Oklahoma? I said, “I’m from Oklahoma.” She said, “Isn’t it awful hard to live here with these people?” I said, “No, just stick your nose up in the air and (be) proud you’re an Okie.” (May 1981, 22)

May, like Newsome, perhaps saw that gaining control of the term, embracing it as her own and proving what “Okie” truly meant – hardworking and able to contribute to California’s society – would eventually result in acceptance. Acceptance in California was a goal, but with it came the right to express one’s identity publicly without fear of reprisals. University professor and Okie migrant Ernest Martin (1981) felt that education and years spent living abroad have given him perspective on the issue of Okie identity and its impact upon the Central Valley. Arriving as a small child in 1936, Martin reached adulthood during what he sees as the transition of Okies from being regarded as a “group apart” to a
community that has come to define the San Joaquin Valley. He described the region as “western Oklahoma” and noted that when he returns to visit as an adult, he feels that he is just as well in Oklahoma, Arkansas, or Texas. He described this change in terms of the success of the migrants.

I think we won. By that I mean, we took over. We were the outcasts in a certain sense at first. But now the people living in the San Joaquin Valley – inside the cities, inside the city limits – and the people in Visalia even in Fresno and Bakersfield are now descendants of those people and it’s changed the whole environment of the central San Joaquin Valley…. This is why you don’t really hear so much of Okies anymore in the area – you might but it’s only a nostalgic term – it’s something that’s not really derogatory anymore. (Martin 1981, 32-33)

Martin’s academic credentials gave him both physical and emotional distance from his past; yet his memories remained. These memories continued to influence present lives and other ways of publicly expressing Okie identity. For Martin, his life as an Okie migrant in California affected the life decisions he would make. He explained that upon graduation from high school, he didn’t want to be a “farm boy” from Oklahoma so I went into town and got a job…. I got a business job. Then I went to the college and wanted to get into meteorology and went into the Air Force. Indeed, I became a meteorologist…. But I’d left the San Joaquin Valley this time and was thankful to. This is something I think is important to say because I know how many others were like this but it’s a natural desire to want to belong – to be like the others. If the others are one way and that’s the way society is, you tend to blend – you want too. (Martin 1981, 33)

Okies like Martin took control of deciding who they wanted to be and defining themselves and Okie academics like him have led the way.
Okie Voices in Academia

Eventually, academic interest in Okies evolved from oral history to autobiographical works authored by self-identified Okies who have made their way into the ranks of academia. In his collection of essays entitled, *The Other California* (1990), retired university professor Gerald Haslam, details life in the Central Valley. What brings life to his writing is imagery culled from his own memories of the Central Valley as place. In explaining his approach to blending both self and place, he explains:

> Everything happens to particular people in particular places at particular times, so when we natives [of California] write, we call our settings California but really think of our personal Californias, because those places are real. They created us and we have created inner visions of them: the topography of our landscapes informing the topography of our souls... (Haslam 1990, 70)

Haslam’s personal California is often characterized by his own experiences of the state’s cultural diversity. Born of an Okie father and Hispanic mother, Haslam’s work draws heavily upon his experiences growing up in Oildale, a “redneck enclave” rooted firmly in an Okie identity. Haslam describes this community reputation as:

> what thin-wristed experts like to call a working-class area, and it remains predominantly white. Because so many of Oildale’s citizens over the years have been fair-skinned Southwesterners, lovers of country music and the self-serving version of patriotism it posits, the community has been assigned a gothic Southern stereotype. This has been aided by the more important fact that many white migrants were poorly educated, products of generations of yeomanry, so they had to compete with nonwhites for jobs on nearby farms or work in the now-integrated oil fields. More than a little pontification on matters racial has been in fact an expression of economic fear. (Haslam 1990, 184)
Although published fifty years after the FSA camp newspapers, Haslam’s work, like the Odyssey Project oral histories, suggests that Okie identity has maintained some common threads over the decades – whiteness, patriotism, working-class and poverty associations. If this is true, how then has the Okie voice gained in strength rather than being continually subjugated by those with greater economic and political power? The key according to Haslam lies in yet another trait stressed by the oral histories as well – aspirations for better lives. Haslam contends that while the more conservative mindset of many Oildale residents may lead outsiders to lump all of them into the category of narrow-minded “fascists,” the majority of people who live in Oildale today have established themselves in the middle class by dint of hard work, survivors whose daughters now aim for honor roll and university, whose sons play football and fight wars. Oildale’s citizens pay their taxes, frequently resent welfare, and shake their heads at punk rock, at ‘Fit ’n’ Forty’ medallions, at sprout sandwiches, but accept the churning present anyway…” (Haslam 1990, 189)

The Okie roots of Oildale may have left vestiges of poor white Americans setting themselves apart from other impoverished groups of blacks and immigrants in the interest of gaining the favor of white Californians and rising up the social ladder; however, it also impressed upon the majority of residents that full acceptance would only come through hard work and a determination to succeed economically.

Haslam himself rose up from his earlier days of working in the oil fields of Kern County to eventually find himself in the role of university professor and
award-winning author\(^3\). His life experiences are evident even in his works of fiction. In his most recent novel, *Straight White Male* (2000), Haslam’s main character Leroy Upton also finds himself in a similar state as he transitions from his childhood days as the son of an oilfield worker growing up in a working-class neighborhood in Bakersfield to a university professor living in an up-scale community north of the San Francisco Bay Area. A second generation Okie, from childhood to adulthood, Leroy is torn between his family’s desire that he remain loyal to his “common” past and his own efforts to succeed in their new home state. Leroy recalls that shortly after entering elementary school, an argument developed between his parents over his school-clothes – his mother insisting on a tie and thereby making him a target to local bullies.

\[\ldots\] That night I told her [Momma] at the dinner table that I wanted to wear blue jeans like the other boys. “You most certainly will not,” she replied.

“Why’s that?” my father asked.

“He will not dress common.”

Daddy pushed his plate away and stood up, saying, “You mean you don’t want him to dress like an Okie, you want him to dress like a prune picker, right?... I wear common jeans and a common shirt to do the work to buy the food we eat. All them kids that wear jeans, most of their daddies work with me in the oil patch and they wear jeans and shirts too, and they’re all good, hardworking’, common guys....”

“Earl, my father wore a white shirt and necktie to work every day of his life.” Momma’s voice quivered. “My brother Joe is an officer [in the military].... Why do you fight every decent thing I try to do for our son?” She turned, and tears began streaming down her cheeks. “don’t you want him to have advantages you never had?...” (Haslam 2000, 23)

While the issue of contention was only debated for a few minutes, it was just one event of many in *Straight White Male* that aptly illustrates how Okie migrant

\(^3\) Haslam’s novel *Straight White Male* was awarded the title of *ForeWord Magazine’s* Book of the Year as well as the Western States Book Award.
identity, particularly that of second generation and latter arrivals, was also an unsure one that required constant renegotiation.

Other academics with Okie roots have also felt compelled to document their feelings of an uncertain identity located somewhere between past places in Oklahoma and their current life in California. Professor of Ethnic and Women’s Studies at California State University, Hayward, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz has also debated the role that her family and people like them have played in American history. Like Leroy Upton, Dunbar-Ortiz’s internal struggle also evolved out of the contradictions that existed between her Okie past and academic present. Trained as an historian, she attempted to apply her research skills to reconcile her own identity, explaining that she “had to master my own life history to reveal who I was in writing any other history” (Dunbar 1997,77).

As she rose along the academic ranks, she found herself “a child of the times” – “devoted ... to social justice movements, identifying more as a child of the sixties than a child of my family.... All I could figure out to do was reject and condemn my people, my history, as middle class white radicals were doing” (Dunbar 1997, 77). What was Dunbar-Ortiz rejecting? Her roots as a poor white Okie – the same deluded people she saw as proof of the inherent lie in the American dream but who nonetheless clung to it. She explains:

The poor whites (white trash) I come from, Okies and their descendants were those who formed the popular base for the post-World War II rise of the hard right in Orange County, California, Richard Nixon the anti-Communist was their man. They were the “little people” and the silent majority” addressed then by Richard Nixon as President, then by Ronald Reagan. They were among the bigots, including my father, who supported George Wallace. They fall in and out of the owning and working class, unreliable in union
struggles. Depending on economic times they may be self-employed or reluctantly working for a boss, but their dream is always to acquire land. We are descendants of peasants and cling to the world view mixed with a common history of struggle to acquire land, blood for land, to seize the promised land, implement the Covenant. We are the true Chosen people.

A populist tradition is associated with poor whites, yet often my people hate the rich only out of envy....

In the end the only advantage for most has been the color of their skin and the white supremacy, particularly toward African Americans, that pervades their culture; what they are not – black, Asian, foreign born – is as important as what they are – white, “true” Americans – in their sense of propriety and self esteem. (Dunbar 1997, 78)

At first glance, both Dubar-Ortiz and Haslam provide similar images of their heritage – even suggesting that the Odyssey Project interview subjects’ feelings of sympathy toward immigrant and minorities could come only after success when these groups no longer posed a threat – however, their personal reactions to Okies differ significantly. In contrast to Haslam, who provides a more idealized interpretation of Okie success and rise from poverty due to the sweat of their brows, Dunbar-Ortiz instead suggests that the most assured means of climbing the social ladder was through marriage or education. She readily admits that the former option was certainly the one espoused by her mother and was first chosen by Dunbar-Ortiz. As a poor white female marrying into the middle-class, she was granted access to privileges such as an education that would cement her social position long after her six-year marriage ended. Despite the economic and social benefits of a marriage into a middle-class, socially conscious family, it still served as a reminder of her more “common” roots and “made [her] feel like a traitor and haunted [her] during the marriage” (Dunbar 1997, 81; see also Dunbar-Ortiz 1998).
Still trying to reconcile her Okie past and California present, Dunbar-Ortiz turned to autobiographical writing. She was a later migrant, an Okie nonetheless, arriving with little and escaping intolerable circumstances back home in Oklahoma even if they weren’t the dust clouds that stories of the Depression-Era migrants rely upon so heavily. Ortiz’s story highlights the continuing pattern of migration from the Western South to California long after the Great Depression. Even more importantly, it shows the diversity of experience, but ultimately the feeling of a common bond with those who proudly claim the title of Okie in California.

Dunbar-Ortiz’s (1998) tale describes her passage from silent Okie child and in-migrant to outspoken women’s right activist in California; however, long before she discovered a public voice for herself, her mother did so. Born of Native American heritage, her mother was long disparaged by both the local community in Oklahoma and her mother-in-law as “‘crazy,’ ‘wild,’ ‘low class’ and ‘red dirt’” – something less than society’s norm (p. 78). Dunbar-Ortiz explains how her mother escaped her circumstance physically at first by marrying a white Oklahoman but did so mentally later by committing the stories in her mind to paper. With the encouragement of Dunbar-Ortiz’s brother, the pages and pages of text she faithfully composed eventually made their way to the desk of a local newspaper editor who hired Mrs. Dunbar as a columnist. The opportunity granted her the ability to “create her own niche in that small, white rural world where she had not been entirely accepted, and she was happy” (p. 81).
Dunbar-Ortiz too searched for something that would help her make sense of her own identity.

Despite the passage of two decades since the publication of the *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and the economic successes of many Okie migrants, Dunbar-Ortiz and her husband found their 1960 arrival in San Francisco still tinged by the stereotypes of the past. She notes:

… our Oklahoma license tags provoked angry honking and obscene gestures from other drivers, hisses of ‘Go home, Okies’ and ‘Dumb Okies.’ Although we had a grace period of one year to maintain our Oklahoma registration, we had it changed within weeks. And I began to work on getting rid of my Okie accent and usages – my speech gave me away…. (Dunbar-Ortiz 1998, 219).

The same accent that served as a detriment upon her initial arrival in California in 1960 would also prove to be her protector in the late 1960s when confronted by police in a politically tense West Los Angeles. With guns drawn, the police threatened Dunbar-Ortiz and her foreign companion all the while calling them “hippies,” “communists,” and “peaceniks.” But within their threats and postures, Dunbar sensed a common identity that linked her to those officers who stood over her. She describes the occurrence as a revelation.

I was no longer scared. I said, “Where y’ll from? I’m from near El Reno.” The effect was immediate. Suddenly the two cops, probably a decade older than me, my oldest brother’s age, became friendly Okies. We chatted, mostly letting them talk because my Oklahoma accent did not come back easily to me, about our origins and family ties – their parents had been Dust Bowl Okies from Choctaw in southeastern Oklahoma – then about the weather, and they apologized for the trouble, and asked if they could give us a ride – “No thanks!” I said – and then they drove away. They never even checked our identification (Dunbar-Ortiz 1998, 221).
As much as Dunbar-Ortiz struggled to distance herself from her Okie roots, she was repeatedly confronted by it. Her initial goal in writing *Red Dirt* was not to interweave herself within the stories of those who came to California from the Okie states before her but rather to chronicle Oklahoma history and the radical legacy of her grandfather and his affiliation with the Industrial Workers of the World union – the Wobblies. The title of her novel, *Red Dirt*, is perhaps intentionally dual in meaning. On the one hand it may be a reference to the color of the soil in Oklahoma, but on the other hand, it may be about the implied “communist” past of her grandfather. Given Dunbar-Ortiz’s role in radical social movements throughout her adult life, she felt an affinity with her grandfather’s experiences. And although she “identified [herself] as working class, part poor white, part Indian, anything but ‘Okie,” she would discover that her writing experience actually served to strengthen her identification with other Okies in California (Dunbar-Ortiz 1998, 221). Specifically, she encountered another author who has long commemorated her own Okie identity through her poetry.

Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel started writing long before her poems were published and recognized by a broad audience. For Tulare’s poet laureate, even from a young age her verses were a means of expressing her feelings about her life, family, and surroundings. In 1936, at the age of eighteen, McDaniel and her sharecropping family arrived in California and assumed their places as migrant labor in the fields of the Central Valley. As her unofficial title, “the biscuits and gravy poet” suggests, she writes of everyday experiences common to her life and those of other former in-migrants like herself (Yogi 1996, 410; and Lopez 1977).
Like Dunbar-Ortiz and her mother, McDaniel’s verses serve as a means for dealing with the past and present – even when the feelings associated with them are not always pleasant. The stresses related to her status as an Okie, an outsider, during her first years in California are readily apparent in her poem “California Frigid Zone 1937”:

It should not have been so hard to understand

a peach
a smile
a yellow pencil
I only wanted something
warm

but California showed me
an icy face each morning
gave me cold shoulder
every night

A vandal
it threw out my poems
from a shoe box

while I picked grapes
and wrote more verses
in the sand

Who knows why
I could not erase a word
blot out a single tear –
nor did I try to
that lifelong year (McDaniel 2001, 87)

The poem suggests that McDaniel isn’t afraid to recount her memories of difficult times. The discomfort she experienced as an outsider echoes that of Dunbar-Ortiz’s despite the decades that separated their individual arrivals in California. And like Dunbar-Ortiz’s mother, writing seemed to provide a means for dealing with the emotions tied to their migration. Both Okie migrant writers eventually
came to feel comfortable in their new state of residence and with their own
identities as well feeling no compulsion to deny their “common” Okie roots. In
“Breadstuff,” McDaniel relishes her heritage:

    I have never liked bagels
    even from Foxxy’s in Las Vegas
    where people thought
    they were the best

    I still don’t like bagels
    It is something
    in my Okie culture
    maybe in my genes

    Breadstuff I do love
    pass the cornbread
    toss me a biscuit
    make me a flour tortilla

    But please
    don’t lay any bagels on me
    the way Good Life
    forced them on derelicts
    and women folding clothes
    in the White Foam Laudromat (McDaniel 2001, 26)

McDaniel is unapologetic for her feelings or who she sees herself as, much in the
same way Haslam’s recollection of Okies in both his novel and essays suggests
they are unashamed of their stances on political, economic, and social issues.
Dorthy Rose, a fellow Okie poet, also draws heavily upon her struggles as an
Okie migrant to complete her verses. With a touch of humor, Rose writes of her
first experiences as a student in her new California school in “9th Grade”:

    Lougene’s family came to California last year
    She has learned a lot and she is a little older than I am

    “Don’t make my mistake” she said
    “Never say YOU ALL
    When talking to one or two people

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To be safe never say YOU ALL
Unless you are talking to at least 500
If you forget and say YOU ALL
They will think that you are ignorant
You are the scum of the earth
That you are white trash
Lower than a snakes’ belly
Worse than a Mexican Dago or Nigger
A real green horn
They’ll shun you
Like a pole cat
Even at church
TRUST NO ONE
The meanest of them all
Are the ‘Okie’ kids
That came here before you”

I had rehearsed and rehearsed my speech
There would be no southern drawl
It was my turn

“I was born in Arkansas” I began
“Moved from that dreadful place
To Oklahoma You know
The state where Indians live
No they don’t sit around in blankets
Smoking peace pipes
Doing war dances
They wear no feathers
They dress like everybody else
In fact they have oil wells
Drive new cars
Wear silks in every color of the rainbow
My last teacher was a Cherokee
Like Will Rogers”

The class seemed warm and responsive
I got carried away

“I toted my lunch to school today
In a poke
I wore my Sunday slippers
The ones I wore to the social Saturday night
My family went the whole shebang
To listen & watch the people dance
Because my brother sangs and plays
In the strang band there
It was a real humdinger of a party
Leastwise that’s what mamma said

I was almost late gittin’ to school today
Daddy carried me here in the truck
We had to mosey along because
The tars were low &
We had to stop at a fillin’ station
To put some wind in them

The subject I like best in 9th grade is typin’
As soon as I can learn
Which keys to mash down
I’m amin’ to git a job
Typin’ in the attendance office”

I heaved a sigh of relief
Glad to be shut of my oral assignment
Without saying yawl onect [sic] (Rose 1987, 51-52)

While Rose appears to be laughing at her own innocence, the poem belies the pain she still feels over her early years in California. In her Odyssey Project interview, the interviewer’s comments note that Rose still carries with her a “great deal of bitterness” over her experiences as an Okie migrant to California (Rose 1981 n.p.). Like many migrants, Rose’s family hoped to find success and happiness in California through their willingness to work, but were instead greeted with a cold shoulder.

In “Gilda,” Rose describes how even children were vulnerable to such harsh responses. Gilda, the poem notes, is an especially important friend of the narrator – the only one who was a native-born Californian as were her parents. Despite first impressions, Gilda’s family-life is less than ideal with an alcoholic philandering father and a mother who must work full-time as a store clerk to make up for his lack of regular employment. Nonetheless, the girls find comfort in each
other and prefer to focus upon just being friends. The friendship, however, is
disrupted when Gilda’s father learns of his daughter’s new friend.

... Her father comes home
I say hello Mr. Rich
He doesn’t speak to me
He kicks the dog
Tells Gilda to come into the house
I hear him slap her
As he yells
I don’t want you to play with Okie kids
They are a no-good bunch
White trash that’s what they are
Worse than niggers
They have no morals
They are ruining the State
They should go back where they came from
We’ve got enough trouble of our own...

As a child, the author’s only means of defense is to flee.

... I grabbed my school books
Tied a knot in my broken shoe-string
And ran with one shoe-sole flopping
Down the street and
Across the tracks toward home

A group of words were fighting
All jumbled inside my head
Smart sharp ugly words
To be used the next time
If ever I was insulted again
Tears pushed to the surface
I tried to swallow
The pit of my stomach churned
I vomited all over Main Street
And my first out-loud curse was born
dirty s o b
son of a bitch
SON OF A BITCH
I screamed in the Middle of West Fresno (Rose 1987, 53-54)

In this instance, Rose’s character is made acutely aware that she transgressed both
social and spatial boundaries. Although just a child she is reminded that she is an
unwelcome outsider, not only in California, but on an even more intimate level, in a native Californian’s home. And although when asked in her Odyssey interview how long it took for her to feel at home in California, Rose responded “never,” she nonetheless credits her experiences with making her who she is – namely, an Okie. Rose explains that although she has no desire to live in Oklahoma or Arkansas again, she feels that her struggles as an outsider will live with her forever. She explains: “I think that will always follow me. Maybe if I lived someplace other than California I would not have that feeling of being an Okie” (Rose 1981, 35).

One experience that seems to add to this feeling of difference is the expectation of work placed upon Rose even as a child. Her goal to fit in with the other children was her responsibility alone, one over which she mentally and physically labored. In, “Cotton Picking Teenager,” Rose describes the ends to which she was willing to go to achieve such status.

Monday it is the end of the season
This last week I can have
For my very own
All that I can earn
I must work hard
Not miss a day
To have ten dollars by Friday

The mornings are cold  wet  foggy
By noon the field is a furnace
My cotton sack is threadbare
It has been patched  turned  and patched
The cotton bolls are hard and thorny
My nails are broken
My fingers swell and bleed
My legs tremble
Sweat boils out of my body
My back rebels
But my head makes pictures
A blue taffeta dress
Hangs in Monkeywards lay-away room
One dollar put my name on it
Nine dollars will bail it out
It wants to be free
To dance Saturday night
At the Veteran’s Auditorium
To the music of Harry James
It wants to be hugged by
Berge   Robert   Sergio   and Tony
It wasn’t to dip to the waltz
Swirl to the fox-trot
Spiral to the jitterbug
Streak across the floor to the tango

Friday night my teeth ache
Saturday morning
Doctor Boyer says
Four cavities
Ten dollars   cash please (Rose 1987, 60-61)

Once again, hardwork has become a hallmark of Okie identity, a badge of both
honor and shame. For some, like Rose, it is a still at times a painful reminder of
the past but nonetheless one she will not forget (Rose 1981, 30). Odyssey Project
interview subject Bobby Russell, remained proud of his dedication to hardwork,
but still bitter over the life that has come from it. As a child of a migrant laborer,
he felt maligned by even those whose job it was to help him. While living in the
Farm Security Administration’s Weedpath Camp, he described his experiences
with the camp directors in the following terms:

    Most of them [the camp organizers and directors] thought they
    were God’s right hand. They were going to tell us how to live –
    what was good for us – manage our lives for us because, “Okies
    and Arkies just weren’t that smart – all they knew how to find
    [w]as the Welfare Office.” (Russell 1981, 5-6)
Furthermore, Russell noted that even the teachers whose duty it was to education migrant children regarded them as unimportant.

.... [A]ll the migrant kids were stuck at the back of the room, regardless [of their abilities]. They [the kids] weren’t going to be here that long, therefore, you can’t teach them anyway. They can’t learn anything anyway. It was a little rough. (Russell 1981, 6)

In contrast to many of the other migrants interviewed in the Odyssey Project, Russell and his father remained in the fields as migrant laborers for most of their lives. After several decades of working in the fields, Russell’s father attempted to retire and file paperwork to collect social security benefits only to discover that only two employers over the years had paid into the governmental program. Unable to support himself on such a small stipend from the contributions of only those two, he was forced to return to the fields where he spent his last three years of life before dying of a heart attack. For Russell, the last three years pushed his father to death (Russell 1981, 21).

Russell himself did eventually leave the migratory circuit to work as a labor contractor and as an administrator for a government poverty relief program. His movement out of the fields was in part the result of an injury – a ruptured disk caused by falling to the ground from 35 feet up in a cherry tree. Despite, his years in the field, he found that his State Compensation Insurance Fund allowance equated to merely $1.15 of pay every two weeks – not enough to possibly support himself, his wife, and their children (Russell 1981, 18). The bitterness over his migrant life is perhaps best summarized in reflection upon life in the fields:
I'm a good worker – I was a good worker and yet I was never able to satisfy anyone (Russell 1981, 24)

In contrast to Rose and Russell, other Okie migrants see their years of labor in the fields and elsewhere in a more positive light today and the means to their success. Success, however, is defined by each individual migrant. Okie author Ron Hugart (2002) writes in his autobiography, the *Place Beyond the Dustbowl*, that his days as a child in migrant labor camps and consequent experiences as a perpetual outsider in every new school gave him an edge in dealing with his life as an adult. In elementary school, Hughart learned very quickly that his fate at each school would be largely determined by his handling of the local bully. The boys of the labor camps all realized this and took it upon themselves to practice fighting amongst themselves in preparation for such confrontations. Hughart found these childhood lessons useful when challenged by peers in the army, but also learned when his fists could not be used. His experiences as an Okie outsider in California’s stratified society, prepared him to handle the military system of ranks by learning to choose his battles wisely.

Time spent in the labor camps and fields also ingrained within him a sense of obligation to continue working and striving even in a highly stratified society that labels you an outsider – an Okie. But that hard work was no guarantee of success, rather a chance for it. Despite the years spent working in potato fields and dairies with his family and contributing to the household income, Hughart was keenly aware that it did not prevent the repossession of a car and land or bankruptcy. All he could do was keep pushing onward knowing that his success
may not include economic wealth, but rather a place in life in which he is comfortable with his past and who he is today (Hughart 2002).

Likewise for McDaniel, success can be measured in terms of happiness and self-confidence. She describes this kind of success in “Writing Assignment”:

My balky pen lies here
on a junkyard table

posed to write about Okies
and write about Indian

if it suits me
and it does suit me

I have the right mixture
of blood and pain

to wear a red dress
to Saturday Town

I signed treaties
that allow me to window-shop
every store free

and eat corn
from a candy bag

If there is a dime
left to my name

I’ll buy Aunt Maggie Bowman
a can of snuff (McDaniel 1995, 94)

For McDaniel, whose poetry has met with great acclaim, happiness and feeling of being comfortable with oneself, rather than praise from the literary community, is a true measure of success. Her writing displays a comfort within herself, one that has come to terms with the past through her verses. Recognition of the past plays a prominent role in published Okie writing and its public expressions of identity.
Once again, McDaniel’s verses highlight this as well as a sense of duty to those who are now in the same situation in which she once was. Her sense of respect rather than pity for those who now play the same role in society that she once did is even reflected in her attitude toward her characters.

Invitation to Celebration of University Press Magazine

I don’t know how it happened
that Emily Dickinson
gave this square envelope
her own stamp

but she would not approve
this gaudy blowout
a candlelight buffet
with string quartet

And all because I wrote a
poem about
a poor boy who didn’t wear
socks
until he was thirteen

What would the hostess
really think
if I dragged in such a boy
with me

who didn’t know what
Penumbra meant
and didn’t care as long
as the finger sandwiches
lasted
and the rose pink punch (McDaniel 1995, 27)

Despite her success as an author, she remains devoted to the characters derived out of her life experiences. Okies like McDaniel, suggest that a sense of community often binds Okie migrants together with others like them – poor rural whites seeking an opportunity in a new place. Dorothy Rose chronicles a migrant
family’s sense of duty to those that arrived in California after them in “Second Year in California.” Rose’s poem describes how an in-migrant family’s situation has improved in their second year, no longer following the crops. Stability has its appeal despite the “hovel” their employer, the ranch owner, has provided them. But the family is rarely alone as one clan of family members from Oklahoma after another descends upon their home and whittles away at their meager resources while searching the promised land of California for their own “Emerald City” (Rose 1987, 19). The narrator’s older brother eventually revolts, declaring:

... Oh No
When will those dumb Okies
Stop coming from back home
They embarrass me before my friends

They are so tacky
They talk stupid
They say aig for egg  Aint for aunt  tar for tire
Dawg for dog  drank for drink  thang for thing
Ay rab for Arab  git for get  hisn and hern
And yawl  all the time...

But the story-teller’s parents will not tolerate a child forgetting his own recent past and respond:

... Daddy said  J J watch your mouth
You are gittin too big for your britches
You and your Californey friends
Have you forgotten who you are
Don’t you remember two years ago
We got to Californey broke  down and out
Until we could find work
We stayed with some family
Yes Mamma said and they weren’t even relatives
They were just friends
She took off her apron
Smoothed down her hair
And as she went out the front door
She opened her arms (Rose 1987, 57-59)

As the poetry of McDaniel and Rose suggests, written expressions of Okie identity often draw upon this sense of community support and an allegiance to other who have not yet found their own success. For the author of the best-selling 
One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Ken Kesey, duty to others who are following the same geographic and emotional path you traveled at one time is what binds Okies together.

Though my mama came from Arkansas and my daddy came from Texas, and though we all came to Oregon from Colorado by way of daddy being stationed at the Mare Island Navy base in California during WWII, I nevertheless must admit that I think of myself as an Oakie.

Let me tell you what being an Oakie means:
Being an Oakie means being the first of your whole family to finish high school let alone go on to college…
Being an Oakie means getting rooted out of an area and having to hustle for a toehold in some new area…
Being an Oakie means running the risk of striving out from under a layer of heartless sonsabitches only to discover you have become a redneck of bitterness worse than those you strove against…
Being an Oakie is a low-rent, aggravating drag, but it does learn you some essentials… essentials like it isn’t a new car that pulls over to help you when you are broke down with the senile carburetor; it is somebody who knows what it is to be broke down with a hurt machine…. (Kesey n.d.)

Common to each of these authors is the idea that Okies don’t forget where they came from – financially, socially, emotionally, or geographically. Their current situation in life is derived from those past experiences, good or bad, that pushed them forward. When Okie migrant authors write of their roots, they do so not only
in terms of geographic origins in another state, but rather on their migratory experiences in California or their struggle to find a single place to call their own. While literature previously cited here alludes to that bond, Ron Hughart’s work aptly summarizes it. Throughout his childhood, Hughart’s elders from Oklahoma all told tales of past places lost, noting that “[o]nce you were told a ‘back home’ story, it was like gaining acceptance into an exclusive club.”

Most stories spoke of simpler times, times when a penny was worth a penny. A time when all you needed was some tobacco and a horse drawn buckboard wagon to get to town on Saturdays to sell cream or to buy supplies. When a man’s word was truly his bond and a time when a handshake sealed most contracts. Many stories included prideful statements such as; “We never took welfare” or “People were always willing to help each other back then.” Nearly every story of times “back home” told of a full pantry of preserved or canned goods....

Everyone knew we had gone from good times in some state to the east, to despair living in tents or their cars in California.

The longer I sat and listened to these stories, the more intent I became on looking ahead into the future.... (Hughart 2002, 62-63)

For Hughart the future held a career in education that drew inspiration from his past experiences as an Okie migrant child. Labeled “retarded” by educators for academic deficiencies, even by the late 1950s Hughart’s teachers failed to see the relationship between an agricultural migrant lifestyle and academic success. By fifth grade alone he had attended no less than eight elementary schools and moved even more often. His problems in school were compounded by poor nutrition and poor overall health as well as the knowledge that other students saw him as different and on outsider. Upon attending college in the 1970s, Hughart saw among his professors a failure to see how environmental conditions could negatively affect a child’s education. In response,
he abandoned his goal of becoming a pilot and instead became a teacher, one who could draw upon his experiences as a migrant to help other students whose individual experiences might impede their academic progress.

Only after assuming a teaching position in a rural California community, did Hughart come to “identify [himself], to give [himself] ‘the place’ to be.” He describes his place as:

>a lot like the place back home I’d been told about so much in my youth; it was no more or any less a reality, just a different state of being, and solely owned by me. The truth was, that my “place[,]” my forty acres with a house and a barn near a creek with lots of fish in it, was anywhere I could be happy and feel good about myself. (Hughart 219-220)

For Hughart and many other Okie authors, that place was eventually in California. But crucial to the discovery of it was a remembrance of the past. Where Okies see themselves in socio-economic status and happiness is always relative to where they were in past times and places. A key theme brought out by these of these public expressions of Okie identity is one of remembering where you came from and learning to not be ashamed of it. For some authors, this transition was painful and slow to take place. But with this change, connections to past experiences and places provided and continue to provide the comfort of a community of people like themselves. The rise in published Okie literature illustrates that the former migrants are not expected to distance themselves from their Okie roots and identity, but rather contribute their voices to the growing chorus without fear of retribution.
A Growing Voice and Audience

Remembrance of the past as a guidepost for the future is key to being an Okie today, but more than that even is having gained the right to tell your own story in California. It means having the right to be heard either by overcoming the obstacles of censorship or by becoming economically secure and geographically stationary to have greater access to public venues as an accepted member of the community. This attitude was greatly reflected in the words of Katherine McIntosh who as a child was immortalized with her family in Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photo. McIntosh complained that “her mother was shocked and angry that the photo had been published” and that the story Lange included when the photo was published was inaccurate, making them seem pathetic and ignorant. McIntosh realizes the social value of the photo; however, she laments that this brief period in her mother’s life is what she was most remembered for rather than for her tenacity and life-long dedication to keeping her family together. Despite her level of distaste for the photo, McIntosh notes that

Growing up, we were always aware of the picture, but we never thought much about it. It was no big deal. We moved beyond that time. We lived better lives. (Modesto Bee 2002, D-2)

That the same newspaper that once printed photos and stories chronicling the inadequacies of Okie migrants in the 1930s and 1940s (see Chapter 4) now relishes tales like those of McIntosh in their “Monday Life” section is telling. The Okie story has been deemed a valuable piece of Central Valley history.

That the interview with McIntosh appeared in the Modesto Bee in 2002 is far from coincidental. The year marked a significant turning point for Okies in
California. It was the year that John Steinbeck would have celebrated his centennial birthday. It was also the same year the California Counsel for the Humanities began “California Stories.” According to the Counsel, the statewide initiative was “designed to strengthen communities and connect Californians by uncovering personal and community stories that, once gathered and woven together, tell the story of today’s California” (California Council for the Humanities 2002a). Led by the former first lady of California, Sharon Davis, the three-year initiative is based upon three grants programs that would document the cultural diversity of California’s residents as well as a statewide reading drive that would create a literary community across the entire state by selecting and encouraging local discussion about a single selected novel.

Regarded as one of California’s greatest literary sons, a novel by John Steinbeck seemed the obvious choice. But which of his works best encapsulated what it meant to be Californian? The choice: *The Grapes of Wrath*, a book which only sixty years prior created an uproar and was banned in parts of the Central Valley (Haslam 1994; Haslam 1989). According to the Counsel, a statewide reading and discussion of the novel would allow residents to “discover parallels between the book and the contemporary California experience” (California Council for the Humanities 2002a). Jim Quay, Executive Director of the Counsel was quoted in the Salinas newspaper, the *Californian*, calling the novel “an archetypal California story” (Rivera 2002).

The statewide reading effort was largely driven by the support of over 200 public libraries across the state that organized programs dedicated to the novel.
While discussions of the novel itself were the primary emphasis, the scope of programs attempted to reach a variety of age groups and ethnic backgrounds. The approach is evident in the “Reading the Grapes of Wrath” schedule at the Sacramento Central Public Library where teen book discussion groups were organized under the title of “John Steinbeck: Rebel with a Cause.” The Hanford branch of the Kings County Library held bilingual film viewings and book discussions with the aid of a Spanish-speaking facilitator (California Council for the Humanities 2003a). Even corporate sponsors, like Penguin Books contributed to the effort by issuing the first Spanish-language edition of the novel (California Council for the Humanities 2002b).

The novel was also used to segueway into the broader topic of the California agricultural migrant experience as well as more generally ethnic experience. At the Paso Robles Library, the Spanish-language speaker and discussant, Miguel Espino, focused upon his experiences as a child migrant laborer in the Central Valley and later his work with Caesar Chavez (California Council for the Humanities 2003b). Speaking under the title of his novel, “Harvest Son: Planting Roots in the American Soil,” David Masumoto led a discussion of the Japanese-American experience as farmers in California at the Sacramento Central Public Library (California Council for the Humanities 2003c). The Tulare County Free Library in Visalia also organized events to draw attention to social issues described in the *Grapes of Wrath* by organizing a book drive for homeless and poor children in their area (California Council for the Humanities 2003d).
What was once a controversial topic of discussion in the late 1930s and early 40s, became encouraged in 2002. No longer were Okies to be ignored, but rather embraced as the epitome of California’s diverse immigrant experience. Individuals and communities were now encouraged to voice their Okie identity publicly. Among the special events planned in Kern County to coincide with the “Reading the Grapes of Wrath” program was the annual “Dust Bowl Days Festival.” The festival is symbolically held at the Sunset Labor Camp school grounds, the same location of the 1930s Farm Security Administration’s Weedpatch Camp. Organized by the Dust Bowl Committee, the one-day festival is “a chance to share memories with old friends, and make new memories with your children, and your grandchildren” and thus seeks to prevent the loss of Okie migrant heritage in Kern County (Figure 6.1) (Dust Bowl Committee 2003).

Sign-in sheets near the front entrance to the school grounds serve as reminders to that past, asking visitors to sign on the list that properly denotes their state of origin: Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and Other. In this place and time, the Okies have reversed their places and play the role of insiders with the Oklahoma list requiring two spiral notebooks to keep up with the growing list of names. Reminders of past places, times, and experiences are the norm at the Dust Bowl Days festival. Near the sign-in tables in the courtyard, students from the Sunset School display yearbooks from the decades ago and while the names in the yearbooks today are more typically recognized as Hispanic, living in the labor camp still ties them those visitors like Jim Harris who spent his childhood living in an agricultural migrant camp at the Tagus Ranch (Harris 2003).
Figure 6.1. Welcome sign to the “Dust Bowl Days” exhibition hall.
During the festival, the school cafeteria serves as an exhibition hall, drawing a variety of vendors and displays. One corner of the room has been arranged to resemble what might have been in an Oklahoma homestead or Weedpatch cabin. The objects included in the display, for instance a butter-churn, lantern, quilts, or even a burlap sack once filled with pinto beans, are not explicitly Okie in nature, but enough of a reminder of the past, that older visitors pause to examine the items and recant stories of their former days in past places (Figure 6.2). The tables along the perimeter of the room are largely occupied by book vendors offering to sell and sign a copy of their Dust Bowl or Okie-related books. Well-known author Gerald Haslam sits just across the room from the more recently published autobiographers Ron Hughart and Robert H. Rowland⁴. And while all three have produced public expressions of their Okie identity with the support of outside publishers, including the University of Nevada Press, others have taken it upon themselves to print and market their Okie identity – including John O. Day (no date) and his spiral-bound *Oklahoma Cookin’ Cookbook: Authentic “Okie” Soul Food.*

Preservation of the Okie migrant past extends beyond the printed page at the festival as well. At the southern end of the cafeteria the Dust Bowl Historical Foundation, Inc. has erected a display to commemorate and preserve the landscape of the migrants (Figure 6.3). In cooperation with the Housing Authority of Kern County, the non-profit organization seeks to preserve and restore the only three buildings still in existence from the original Weedpatch

⁴ Rowland’s novel, *All Around the Mulberry Bush* (2000) focuses upon the two years in the author’s life as a child growing up in Oklahoma during the Great Depression.
Figure 6.2. “Dust Bowl Days” exhibition hall display of past times and places.
Figure 6.3. Dust Bowl Historical Foundation, Inc. display at “Dust Bowl Days” seeking donations for the preservation of the FSA Weedpatch Camp buildings.
Camp. According to Dustbowl Historical Foundation, approximately $500,000 will be required to move and restore the buildings, create a visitor center and park, as well as preserve any remaining artifacts (Dust Bowl Historical Foundation n.d.). Efforts to raise the money have focused upon sales of postcards commemorating the camp buildings, t-shirts from the Kern County Steinbeck Centennial literary celebration with the image of Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photo, and more significantly bricks and plaques engraved with donors’ names that will decorate the new facility.

Interestingly, the “Migrant Mother” image is seldom far away at this event. Just outside the cafeteria is a large motorhome, but what makes this R.V. unique is the familiar face that stares back at you from just below the rear window – “The Migrant Mother” (Figure 6.4). Continuing around to the side of the vehicle, the image repeats itself, not only on the R.V. itself, but in a myriad of enlarged images of the six photos Dorothea Lange took of Florence Thompson and her children in 1936. The owner of the display is Robert Sprague, grandson of Thompson, and the son of one of the small girls included in the photo Sprague 2003, 2004). In contrast to his aunt, Dorothy McIntosh, Sprague chooses to regularly identify with the image of his family’s past, including within his display a family photo album and other items representing days gone by including old radios and toy replicas of Model T cars. For Sprague, his grandmother’s photo and the social and economic turmoil faced by Okie migrants must not be forgotten which perhaps reflects a need to raise money for the effort by selling her image on posters and t-shirts. A retired police officer, Sprague himself is a testament to the
Figure 6.4. Robert Sprague’s commemoration of his grandmother’s historic “Migrant Mother” photo.
Okie transition from being regarded as outsiders to those holding positions of authority in the Central Valley.

While Sprague wears his Okie identity publicly through images on his vehicle, others choose their own venue. For Bill Carter who was born in Chicasaw, Oklahoma and arrived in California in 1947 at the age of two, he almost literally wears his identity over his heart and proudly calls himself an “Okie” (Figure 6.5 and 6.6). His friend, Frank Alford, also identifies as an Okie, explaining that he was born in the capital of Oklahoma – Bakersfield. Continuing with a series of jokes, the two ask, “What are the first three words an Oklahoma baby learns?” The answer? “Mamma, Daddy, and Bakersfield” (Carter 2003; Alford 2003).

That first, second, and even third-generation Okies can find public humor in their own identity is significant as it perhaps suggests that the pain of the past has been numbed a bit by present successes. Being able to call oneself and Okie and even publicly participate in displays of self-deprecating humor is a sign of comfort and being able to control when people laugh with you rather than at you. For used-car-dealership owner Randy Hicks, it is a sign of his success. His business, Dos Okies Auto Sales, not only provides a memorable slogan but also reinforces where he and his family came from geographically, financially, and socially (Figure 6.7) (Hicks 2002).

Like Carter and Alford, Hicks finds humor in his identity. He notes that growing up in the 1970s, the label “Okie” was still occasionally used by his Portuguese friends looking to get the best of him – the implication being that he
Figure 6.5. Carter and Alford at “Dust Bowl Days.”

Figure 6.6. Carter’s public declaration of Okie heritage as seen on his leather jacket.
Figure 6.7. Hick’s declaration of his Okie pride as seen in the sign for his Modesto, California used-car dealership.
was dumb. Hick’s typical response was to jab back by calling them a “dumb Portagee.” But like several of the older Odyssey interviewees, he acknowledges that it was all in fun and the term Okie is acceptable here because he and his Portuguese friends regard each other as equals and neither term was used with any malice. Hicks sees his Okie heritage as distinct and equal to that of the Portuguese. Hicks jokes that several of his siblings married into Portuguese families leading to a family of “Pokies” – nieces and nephews who identify with both sides of the family – a new identity that will be reinterpreted by each generation that follows (Hicks 2002).

Public expressions of Okie identity in the 1930s were less of a concern for most migrants than was providing for their daily needs – food, clothing, and shelter. But as economic opportunities improved and Okies began their rise in socio-economic status they found themselves at a crossroads. If they chose one direction, they would continue along the path that Californians had built for them and lose touch with their roots, but the other demanded that they still cling tightly to past places and lives and reject the ways of their new place. Freedom can be a scary thing and for many Okies the period of transition from outsider to insider was an uneasy one. Bitterness and resentment over years of exclusion were hard to wash away for many in-migrants, but a desire to prove those native Californians wrong who classified them as dirty and lazy and labeled them Okies was strong. A term that at one time was merely a geographic descriptor was made repulsive and far more expansive in meaning than the label would originally suggest. For some in-migrants, bitterness and resentment over the years of
exclusion were slow to fade, but a desire to prove wrong those native Californians who made the term Okie synonymous with lazy, dirty, and despicable – essentially – un-American – was strong.

As Okies made economic gains and remained devoted to the ideal of American success through hard work, they began to fade from public notice until fears arose that their history and heritage might be lost. Academic communities took first interest in capturing the essence of Okie identity through oral history – giving a voice to those who might otherwise not be heard. But soon Okies too had entered academia and their identities influenced their work as well. Small presses interested in capturing life in the Central Valley emerged and deemed Okie identity valuable through their publications of poetry collects. And while printed media served to highlight Okie identity publicly, more importantly is the recognition that Okie identity is a dynamic lived experience that continues to be articulated today on a daily basis through individual and group experiences and in the landscape. Yet regardless of the means by which Okie identity is presented, all have a common theme of incorporating the past into them and creating new places to call their own. Wilma McDaniel refers to this link to the past as “Buried Treasure” – one that shouldn’t be heavy enough to weigh you down but can be drawn upon to help understand and move forward in the present.

Buried Treasure

Elbie Hayes ruined his expensive shoes squashing around the autumn desolation of a sharecrop farm in Caddo County
Okie boy
turned fifty
searching for anything that
had belonged
to his father
when he was fighting the
Great Depression

Kicked at a lump
behind the caved-in cellar
and uncovered a rusty
Prince Albert tobacco can

Stowed it away
as he would a saint’s bones
in his Lincoln Continental
and headed back to Bakersfield (McDaniel 1982, 49)

For Elbie Hayes, and many self-identified Okies, they carry with them a piece of
past places at all times and use them to forge new places, both mental and
physical, for themselves in California. Having successfully assumed an accepted
place in the Central Valley, Okies have been declared the epitome of the
“California Story.” They have gained political, social, and economic influence in
California and with that the authority to publicly define themselves and create
new paths that allow them to incorporate past places into the creation of present
ones.
CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

In August 2003, I departed Louisiana for Kansas. I had accepted a position at Kansas State University and was moving to begin the next stage of my academic career. As I drove northward through Texas and Oklahoma, I marveled at how the landscape differed so greatly from the preconceived images I held in my mind. The images portrayed on screen in the *Grapes of Wrath* (1940); in the striking Dorothea Lange photos of billowing dust clouds; and in tales of extreme drought and poverty chronicled in the California Odyssey oral history transcripts remained firmly embedded in my mind. Having studied geography for over a decade, I was well aware the environmental images of the dust-ravaged Great Plains had ceased to be appropriate even in the 1940s. Nonetheless, my past experiences with media representations of the Great Plains as place had affected my current impressions and expectations.

But just as my present expectations were affected by my past, how I interpreted that past was dependent upon my present circumstances. But how I remembered and commemorated the past was not only an individual experience. Rather, the past I drew upon arose from the public representations of memories from the society in which I live. Like identity, this public memory is not static but rather is historically contingent and draws upon the present needs of society. How we think about the past as a society is premised upon how we see ourselves today and contributes to our social memory. Dydia DeLyser (2003) describes social memory as
always emergent because of the changing present, the very nature of [it] often alters the ways the past is remembered, thus, in effect, making the past itself appear to change. Not reliant strictly on factual events of the past, social memory relies instead most strongly on the social contexts of the present. (p. 886)

The issue of social memory is particularly relevant to this exploration of Okie public identity today. Okie public identity today is firmly rooted in the past – in past places and the experiences that created those places (Lowenthal 1994). The Okie identity described here developed only within the context of the migrant experience in California. As in-migrants, Okies were initially depicted in local media as Other – following a path similar to previous groups of foreign immigrants. But not all Californians supported complete exclusion of Okies. Those Californians who defended the presence of the migrants in the state, based their public representations of Okies upon the noble white, American heritage of the migrants and drew attention to their potential for assimilation within Californian society through the use of the Farm Security Administration camps – something not necessarily attainable by foreign immigrants. Whereas previous waves of foreign immigrants could be labeled as “unassimilable” and dispensed with through measures of overt exclusion when necessary, Okies occupied a socio-spatial liminal zone of ambiguity that challenged normalized notions of who was eligible for inclusion in Californian society. Okies were white, Christian, U.S.-born citizens excluded from full immediate social and spatial inclusion in Californian society. Okies could not be neatly classified by all Californians as either insider or outsider and as a result remained an ambiguous group. Okie public identity in the 1930s, was contested by Californians.
While Okies themselves, however, were more certain of their right to inclusion within California, the socio-economic context of the Central Valley in the 1930s limited their access to widespread media venues that would allow them to define themselves publicly. As a result, the primary constructors of widespread Okie public identity were most often not Okies.

Based upon available historical documents, Okie declarations of a public identity at that time were more limited than were those of Californians. The primary remaining resource available in this respect were the Farm Security Administration camp newspapers. The camps, social reformers claimed, would provide a place where Okie migrants could be trained to assimilate within Californian society and claim their full rights as American citizens. The newspapers that were published by the camp residents, however, suggest that the migrants did not see themselves in need of training and instead regarded the camps as a stepping stone that would allow them to regain to their former success. Okie identity as shown in the camp newspapers, developed in response to those who opposed their presence in California. Okie public identity in California was initially premised upon defining who they were not and in so doing reasserting who they indeed were. Contributors to the newspapers represented themselves in opposition to foreign Others and the negative Okie stereotypes, always careful to point out their own American heritage – and thus their right of belonging through a shared past. Okie definitions of their own public identity drew upon normalized notions of a national identity. David Lowenthal (1994) credits national identity as a means of unifying a group because
the past we prize is domestic; those of foreign lands are alien and incompatible with ours. National identity requires both having a heritage and thinking it unique. It is a heritage that differentiates us; we treasure most what sets us apart. (p. 47)

Okies who were excluded in California in the 1930s sought inclusion by drawing upon what they saw as a common American past unique from that held by foreign immigrants. Whether it was by describing the endeavors of their pioneering forefathers, belief in success through hard work; or past and present contributions to the nation’s food supply and military, contributors to the FSA camp newspapers drew attention to Okies’ American-ness and their potential for success with full inclusion in Californian society. While Californians often drew boundaries of exclusion around the state, Okies constructed lines of inclusion around the United States.

But simply describing boundaries of inclusion was not enough, Okies had to be sure that their public identity and behaviors matched those expected by Californians should they ultimately be granted inclusion. Despite Okie claims to a right to live in California, they realized that negative stereotypes still plagued them. In the interest of gaining full acceptance within California, many realized they would need to act according to Californian expectations for cultural citizenship and thereby lessen any perceived differences. Defining themselves as Americans was not enough, Okies needed to be perceived as Californians as well. Gill Valentine (1998) describes this process of constructing one’s own public identity and behavior in such a way as to prevent negative reactions from dominant society as “self-surveillance.” The FSA camp newspapers suggest that residents in the camps were all too aware that they would be the gauge by which
other Okie migrants might be judged. By placing themselves under “self-surveillance,” camp newspaper contributors attempted to control how they would be seen by those living outside the camps. The goal, the newspaper contributors implied, was to show Californians that Okies were more American or Californian and less Other.

That expressions of Okie public identity as defined from inside or outside of the group declined for a time after World War II suggests that their socio-economic rise ultimately granted them full admission into Californian society. Okies had not left California’s Central Valley, but rather became a normalized component of society. With the changing international politics associated with the War, Californians had perhaps also reformulated their notions of Other and this time Okies were not among them. Okies had been granted the inclusion they initially sought, but with this success had also contributed to the reformulation of Californian identity – one that now incorporated within it the Okie heritage of the early twentieth century. Okies had gained the right of authorship over their public identity.

Academic inquiries such as the California Odyssey Project oral history collection highlighted a growing interest in understanding the breadth of Okie experience in California. The project sought to give a public voice to those former migrants who otherwise may not have spoken. A unique public voice once hushed in the interest of belonging, re-emerged amid a growing interest in Okie heritage and distinction. What would follow was an increase in the number of self-identified Okie autobiographers, novelists, and poets – each one
contributing their diverse experiences, good and bad, to the chorus of Okie identity. Perhaps more importantly, however, was not simply the tales told, but rather that Okies had gained the right to tell their own stories to the larger public. With Okie success and acceptance in California, new stories, or memories, were allowed to be told.

These memories of the past, however, became more than simply an issue of Okie heritage. Okie heritage had become part of California heritage. The Okie past was not forgotten, but had been incorporated into state-sponsored definitions of Californian identity thus reinforcing the notion that “[a]s one group succeeds another, it brings with it new memories which build on or replace the old” (Schwartz 1982). Memories of and about Okies built upon Californian memories.

The selection of John Steinbeck’s novel the *Grapes of Wrath* (1939) as the “archetypal California story” in 2002, highlighted just how naturalized the Okie presence in California had become. In selecting the novel, the California Council for the Humanities sought to provide connections between past in-migrant stories and contemporary immigrant lives by representing a common experience. The recollection of the past, Barry Schwartz (1982) notes, “is an active, constructive process, not a simple matter of retrieving information. To remember is to place part of the past in the service of conceptions of the present” (p. 374). The success of Okie migrants in the face of adversity could be used as a means for placing into perspective present concerns over racial, ethnic, and class differences within the state. The Okie story of the Joads would perhaps elicit a common understanding of both Californians and Others residing within the state boundaries.
The incorporation of *The Grapes of Wrath* into official public discourse, reinforced the success story of socio-economic assimilation and formally labeled Okies as insiders today. That the novel itself concluded on a less positive note, leaving the fate of the Joad family in question, is overshadowed by the naturalized notion that Okies had actually succeeded and become Californians. The story of the Joads, combined with contemporary roles of Okies, provided a hybrid component to Californian identity that could be used by the state to promote unity in the midst of growing diversity among the state’s population. Within official state dialogue, no longer did the term Okie simply represent socially and economically impoverished masses of Outsiders traversing the state in rattle-trap cars, they had come to represent an ideal of new in-migrant arrivals to the state who had pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to become Californians. Okies had risen from the dust, not simply fled it.

The state was not alone in its association of the Dust-Bowl image with its public identity. The adoption of the *Grapes of Wrath* as the “California Story” was merely the culmination and official recognition that Okie heritage was valued. By the millennium, Okie migrants themselves had already reclaimed the Joad story as their own through the celebration of “Dust Bowl Days.” That the annual event is held on the grounds of the former FSA Weedpatch Camp is significant. Scenes from the movie adaptation of the *Grapes of Wrath* (1940) were filmed there and the location serves to validate the Okie experience and identity by tying it to place. That only a small percentage of migrants could have lived in this particular camp or any government-organized labor camp at all is
irrelevant – the camp stands for a common experience of perhaps several hundred thousand Okie migrants. It is a symbol of their outsider past.

The importance of this place within the construction of Okie heritage is evident in more recent efforts by the Dust Bowl Historical Foundation, Inc. to preserve the three original Weedpatch camp buildings that remain; for they are seen to provide those who now publicly claim an Okie identity and heritage with “tangible manifestations of their identity” (Hareven and Langenbach 1981, 115)

Although Tamara K. Hareven and Randolph Langenbach (1981) point out that while preserved buildings “may ... symbolize past power and success,” in the case of Okies, the Weedpatch buildings draw attention contemporary power and success possessed by this former group of in-migrants (p. 115). Since so many of the in-migrants of the 1930s and 40s were migratory and in those early years found themselves living in temporary housing that no longer exists, for the Dust Bowl Historical Foundation, preservation of the buildings may provide a communal “home” to return to when few others from that period in their lives may exist.

The survival of buildings and landmarks associated with a familiar ways of life provides continuity of social as well as physical fibre. The more mobile the society, the greater the value of continuity symbolized by these buildings.

Recently Americans have begun to counteract feelings of rootlessness by embarking on the reconstruction of individual family genealogies and collective oral histories of communities. Buildings and familiar landscapes play a significant part in this need and search for identity. (Hareven and Langenbach 1981, 118)

Only with their rise and inclusion within Californian society, would Okies be able to reassert their identity publicly without fear of retribution. The ability to
speak for themselves was gained by proving to Californians that they were not the Other that Californians had initially believed them to be (see Spivak 1988). But interestingly, like the public identity constructed in the past, contemporary Okie public identity may also subsume a diversity of experiences among migrants under a more singularly focused expression of heritage as is seen in the celebration of Dust Bowl Days, and the preservation of the Weedpatch Camp buildings. Despite being labeled as the “California story,” an emblem of a common Californian experience, many Okies today also seek to distinguish themselves by claiming a group separate identity.

The former Weedpatch Camp location still serves as a migrant labor camp today, but public efforts to preserve Okie heritage seek to remove the remaining historic buildings from the original site in the interest of reconstructing the Okie past in a new location. Re-placing the past allows those who claim Okie heritage today some reassurance that they have achieved socio-spatial power to author the landscape according to their present needs, but in doing so they restrict the public voice associated with these buildings to their own and deny still marginalized groups a voice (see Spivak 1988 and Mitchell 1996). According to Miguel de Oliver (1996), “the presentation of self as a composite of strategically placed commodities is central to establishing and confirming social status and affiliation,” thus for Okies to now be described as having overcome obstacles and attained socio-economic success in both public discourse and landscape only serves to reaffirm their inclusion and normalized acceptance in California (p. 10).
That Okies today can author their own public identity is a key indicator of their insider status.

OKIE identity today has come to represent more than just Okies. It stands for the ability of marginalized outsider groups to attain the rights and privileges of insiders. Among those privileges is the right to publicly author both your own past and contemporary identities. More recent acts of commemoration that would perhaps suggest a singular Okie experience, but individual Okie voices themselves are diverse and only together create a common identity both yesterday and today. Social authority now grants Okies the ability to define themselves as like Californians or distinct from them as circumstances require. Similarly, no single research investigation into Okies, including this one, has yet to capture the entire Okie story and all its possible interpretations and voices, but together they combine to create a greater understanding of Okies and their place in this world. As a contributor to this greater effort, I too, realize my role in the reproduction of Okie identity.

So upon reflection then, am I an Okie from California’s Central Valley afterall? If to be an Okie means to have experienced an arduous journey across the American southwest and a life as a migrant agricultural laborer classified as an outsider in California, then the answer is certainly no. But if it instead refers to those who today draw upon these conceptualizations of the past, this heritage, in the interest of understanding their present circumstances than perhaps I am. It is only by considering the past experiences of my family and others like them that my taken-for-granted right to describe Okie identity is possible. That someone
today, like myself, may be both an Okie and a Californian is a testament to the acquisition of power by Okies. Californian identity now incorporates components of Okie heritage within it. Okie identity past and present emerged only within the socio-spatial context of California – without California, a unique “Okie” identity would not exist.
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APPENDIX

CODING KEY

Foreigners
01 – Negative sentiment toward Foreigners
02 – Positive sentiment toward Foreigners
03 – Means for dealing with Foreigners
04 – Defining Foreigners/"Others"
05 –“Real Citizens/Americans”
06 – Foreigners and Labor
07 – Stats on Foreigners
08 – Evolution
09 – Defining “White”

Domestic Outsiders
10 – Negative sentiment toward Non-Cal Residents
11 – Positive sentiment toward non-Cal Residents
12 – Means for dealing with non-Cal Residents
13 – Means for dealing with “Okies”
14 – Defining non-Cal
15 – Defining “Real Citizens” of California
16 – “Okies”
16.5 – Grapes of Wrath/John Steinbeck
17 – “The Oklahoma” Problem
18 – Opinions of Okies themselves
19 – Domestic Outsiders and Labor
19.5 – States on migrants/causes/Tolan Committee

Non-Local Outsiders
20 – Non-Local Outsiders and Labor
21 – Positive Sentiment toward non-local outsiders
22 – Negative Sentiment toward non-local outsiders
23 – Transients
24 – Means for dealing with non-local outsiders

Tourists
30 – Positive Sentiment toward tourists or travel
31 – Negative Sentiment toward tourists
32 – Tourism Stats
33 – Image of California

Farmers: Problems and Solutions
40 – Ag Outlook and Statistics
41 – Subsidies
Homeless
120 – Attitudes toward the homeless
121 – Incidents dealing with homeless and “vagrants”

Chislers/Cheats – 130

Women
140 – Married and Working
141 – Doing Men’s Work
142 – Proper Ideals of Womanhood
143 – Women’s Movement

Families
150 – Birth Control
151 – Number of Children
152 – Education
153 – Chain Migration
154 – Stability or permanence of place
VITA

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