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## **Exposing Necrocapitalism, Slow Violence, and Precarity: Necropolitics in The Grapes of Wrath**

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EXPOSING NECROCAPITALISM, SLOW VIOLENCE, AND PRECARITY:  
NECROPOLITICS IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

A Thesis

by

DINORAH ARISTA

Submitted to Texas A&M International University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2021

Major Subject: English

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Approved as to style and content by:

Chair of Committee,	Manuel Broncano
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## ABSTRACT

Exposing Necrocapitalism, Slow Violence, and Precarity: Necropolitics in *The Grapes of Wrath*

(May 2021)

Dinorah Arista, Bachelor of Arts, Texas A&M International University;

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This work begins by briefly exploring the historical, environmental, economic, and socio-political factors springing up from the Great Depression to the Dust Bowl migration. Although it is argued that John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* through a religious lens, Steinbeck alludes to the Bible only as a bridge to a social gospel. More importantly, my focus is mainly centered on Achille Mbembé's concept of necropolitics (the sovereign right to decide who lives and who dies) and applying it to the first world country of the United States. Mbembé expands on Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics by including the *state of siege*, the *state of exception*, and the *war machine*. I am going to break down necropolitics into three categories to analyze the novel to a full extent; they are necrocapitalism, slow violence, and precarity. Looking at the novel through a necropolitical lens, it is evident that the Okies were victims of a system that categorized them as "disposable." The experiences of the Joads are not an isolated family tragedy; it is a migrant issue and a class problem. Although it seems deterministic, Steinbeck's social gospel (based off Transcendentalism) helps restore the novel as guidance and inspiration for humanity, proving that a different type of "freedom" does exist. It is important to revisit and update our classics with contemporary readings because they provide a panoramic view of the issues that still affect our world today.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The publication of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) elicited a mixed reception by either praising the literary value of the novel or harshly criticizing its evident political content. According to Rick Wartzman, on Monday, August 21, 1939, Kern County's Supervisor, Stanley Abel, successfully passed the banning of *The Grapes of Wrath* from their library and schools because of three main reasons: "Steinbeck presents [their] public officials, law enforcement officers and civil administrators, businessmen, farmers and ordinary citizens as inhumane vigilantes," "Steinbeck chose to ignore the education, recreation, hospitalization, welfare and relief services [...] made available by Kern County to every person resident in Kern County," and the novel is "filled with profanity, lewd, foul and obscene language unfit for use in American homes" (8-9). Evidently, the reasons underlying the ban were the biased representation of Californians and its conspicuous leftist tone. On a larger scale, Nicholas Visser claims that the "novel's standing came under pressure as early as the decades immediately following its publication, as literary studies with the onset of the Cold War intensified a long-standing tendency in modern poetics to strip literary texts of social and political implications" (409). Nevertheless, it is because of those social and political implications that this novel is highly valuable today as it portrays the United States' necropolitical system. As stated by Achille Mbembé, Necropolitics is the "power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" as it "account[s] for the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds"

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This thesis follows the model of *Arizona Quarterly*

(11 and 40). Thus, this thesis will examine the Joads family-in conjunction with other migrants- to illustrate how necropolitics affected the environment and Dust Bowl victims through necrocapitalism, slow violence, and precarity. For necrocapitalism, I am going to analyze how the state, corporations, and banks impose unjust and inhumane laws on the marginalized for capital gain. For slow violence, I am going to analyze how human-induced ecological disasters cause ecological degradation and create the environmentalism of the poor. For precarity, I am going to analyze the paradoxical effects it produces on marginalized communities, such as terror and wrath. Hence, the goal of this project is to revisit and analyze John Steinbeck's novel through a contemporary capitalist approach to expose the U.S agribusiness necropolitical agenda.

### **Dust Bowl History**

Before the Dust Bowl phenomenon occurred, farmers were already in a dire situation that eventually led to the Great Okie Migration. One of those factors was the implementation of the Homestead Act. According to Paul Wallace Gates, "The Homestead Law of 1862 [...] offered free a quarter section of public land in the West to citizens or intended citizens who settled upon and improved it" (41). This was intended to help the "propertyless poor, the day laborer, [and] the immigrant," but the freeland policy system was "ill-fitted and incongruous" (Gates 42). Since the "West interposed every kind of objection to plans to curb the alienation of homesteads or to provide effective administration of land laws that would prevent accumulation," states and territories, railroads, and investors selected "between 400 and 500 million acres" (Gates 42). These acres were not subjected to homestead and were sold instead. Other Westerners noticed this loophole and bought "one or two quarter sections beyond their needs or acres numbered by the hundreds or thousands" at inexpensive prices (Gates 41). Even the government was benefited since it "derived from the sale of public land in the sixty years following the adoption of the

Homestead Act a far greater sum (\$223,000,000) than it did in the first sixty years of its land administration (\$186,000,000)” (Gates 43). This means that, at the end, few free grants were left for people who really needed it. In addition, the land was free as long as they made improvements at their own expense. The average years for the original entries to mature were five years, but it took some homesteaders many more since they were “driven out by drought, grasshoppers, or other misfortunes” and had to be “allowed extensions of time in which to prove up” (Gates 48). Although the Homestead Act was meant to benefit the needed, its inefficient management placed many at an even greater disadvantage. Tenant farmers were often tricked by landlords who were speculators. These speculators often offered migrant families to work their land and their crops with the promise of a place to stay and eventually owning the property themselves; however, the landlords used them for free labor and exiled them after five years. Other famers lost their land to the bank. If they had a bad crop year, they borrowed money from the bank, which led them to become tenants. Tenant farmers had no security because they did not own the land and depended on the crops as their main source of income. They had to work under harsh conditions to earn just enough money to feed their family. Their constant exposure to illness, disease, and manipulation marks the beginnings of the slow violence inflicted on them.

Another factor that affected farmers before and after the Dust Bowl was the Great Depression. During the Great Depression, farmers worked under deplorable conditions. Regardless of the climate and health conditions, “farmers needed to produce more and more just to make ends meet” (Lüsted and Casteel 53). According to James R. Swensen, “Rural families throughout the United States were already poor and susceptible before the Dust Bowl drove them to desperation” (12). He asserts that “around four million farm people were living on an average income of \$1 a week—about 5 percent that of an average American household,” and they were

also “plagued by rising unemployment and lower labor demands caused by the advent of mechanized farming” (Swensen 12). This further proves the turmoil already present in the lives of farmers due to economic instability and lack of job opportunities.

The Dust Bowl became the breaking point for many farm families. The Dust Bowl phenomenon started in 1930 and ended in 1936. According to Marcia Amidon Lüsted and Tom Casteel, in 1930, eastern United States faced problems like “crops dr[y]ing up in the fields and farmers fac[ing] foreclosure of their farms and homes” (54). The Great Plains experienced this the following year, but it became more severe as there was no rain and the temperatures rose to “118 degrees and ‘stayed at that level for days” (Lüsted and Casteel 54). According to John R. Wunder, in May 1934, the dust storm “spread from the Plains to Washington, D.C., and New York and then far out over the Atlantic Ocean” (82). According to Philippe Baveye, the “following spring, windstorms again tore through parched fields in Kansas, Texas, Colorado, Oklahoma, and Nebraska” (2037). The dust storms brought “drought” and “intense heat” both “summer and winter” from 1934-1936 (Wunder 81). Besides the draught and intense heat, Lüsted and Casteel also note that the “monster dust storms [...] coated everything, inside and outside, with layers of grit and dust” (56). As if that was not enough, “In the more seriously affected areas, the dust lay from a few inches to more than 6 feet deep” (Lüsted and Casteel 82). In 1934-1936, newspapers reported “many grim stories of the extensive human suffering incurred by heat, drought, and dust storms” (Wunder 82). This eventually led farmers to migrate in search for a better future.

Although the Dust Bowl phenomenon was a natural disaster, the main concern is that it was also human-induced. According to Eliza Williams, “The Dust Bowl was not just an outcome of nature alone or man alone, rather it was a joint effort caused by drought and over-plowed

lands that were never meant to provide food for entire nations” (Williams 2). Lusted and Casteel assert that “because so much of the earth had been plowed up for farming, the system of sod and deeply rooted grasses that kept the soil in place had been destroyed” (55). Ecologists, such as H.A. Wallace, urge people to prioritize nature as they have seen how ‘Man treats her harshly’ by ‘overflow[ing] the cropland, overgraze[ing] the pastureland, and overcut[ing] the timberland’ (qtd. in Baveye 2038). He claims that “no man has the right to destroy soil even if he does own it in fee simple” because it “requires a duty of man which [society] have been slow to recognise” (Baveye 2038). Fortunately, after the Dust Bowl, society recognized that they needed to implement different farming methods to avoid another disaster to ensue. The federal government “hired a variety of ecologists and scientists to investigate the Dust Bowl region and issue reports” (Williams 6). The government also created programs to teach farmers how to treat the soil properly and to help them regain economic stability. According to Timothy Egan, “Afterward, some farmers got religion: they treated the land with greater respect, forming soil conservation districts, restoring some of the grass, and vowing never to repeat the mistakes that led to the collapse of the natural world around them and the death of the children breathing its air” (9). Thanks to these efforts and the sponsorship of the Soil Conservation Service, the Great Plains recovered by the “end of the dry cycle between 1936 and 1939” (Wunder 82). Unfortunately, it did not last long. The promises of taking care of the ecosystem vanished with a “new rush to spin gold from straw” (Egan 9). It is clear this ecological disaster had economic and political implications. It was not until the 1960s that people truly started to acknowledge the idea that they were “inescapably part of a larger ecosystem” (Williams 6). Disasters like this keep reoccurring because of the carelessness and selfishness of agribusinesses. The blame is placed on the farmers who exploited the soil instead of the agribusinesses who encouraged the farmers

knowing that they needed the money. The Dust Bowl was not just an ecological disaster; it was an ecological injustice. The violence inflicted on the earth went unnoticed for many years until it became visible with the dust storms, which is a form of slow violence.

The Dust Bowl caused a health hazard for people and animals alike. In 1935, the Monthly Weather Review published the damage the Dust Bowl caused by stating, "Dust storms [...] cause much discomfort to human beings and animals through inhalation of the drifting particles" (Wunder 18). Because of their daily exposure to the dust, "Many people became sick with silicosis," as it "acted like glass, slowly shredding the lungs" (Lüsted and Casteel 56). Moreover, the dust storms created health hazards that caused respiratory diseases such as bronchitis, asthma, and tuberculosis. Even the livestock, their last source of consumption, also "perished from starvation and suffocation" (Wunder 82). Although it might seem like the Dust Bowl was the sole cause of people's health deterioration and deaths, corporations are to blame as well since they exposed the farmers to illness and disease for many years. Their health was already weakened, and some families also lacked the means to migrate to a safer place. This displays the systematic oppression against the minority, the poor, whose lives are expendable.

Knowing what happened during the Dust Bowl is different than experiencing it. Timothy Egan gives the reader insight into the reactions and emotions of the survivors of the Dust Bowl as they tell their stories firsthand. Ike Osteen, an eighty-five-year-old man, recalls his experience in Baca County, Colorado as a child experiencing the Dust Bowl. He grew up in a dugout, so when the dirt filled out their house, they had to scoop the dirt with a shovel (Egan 4). He remembers how the dust empowered the land: "dust clouds boiled up, ten thousand feet or more in the sky, and rolled like moving mountains," and "When the dust fell, it penetrated everything: hair, nose, throat, kitchen, bedroom, well" (Egan 4). Because of the black blizzards, "Cattle went

blind and suffocated,” and “Children coughed and gagged, dying of something the doctors called ‘dust pneumonia’” (Egan 4-5). He particularly can’t forget that the “eerie thing was the darkness” as ‘there’d be days, you couldn’t see your hand in front a’ your face’ (Egan 4). People could not hug their loved ones anymore since it could “knock two people down” due to the static of electricity from the dusters (Egan 5). What concerned him mostly was that even the “simplest thing in life-taking a breath-was a threat” (Egan 5). This rang particularly true to Jeanne Clark, another dust bowl victim from Colorado who has to live with an oxygen cylinder. When Jeanne was eight years old, on April 14, 1934, also known as Black Sunday, she was caught in the worst duster. She recalls: ‘All of a sudden it got completely dark. I couldn’t see a thing’ (Egan 7). She, along with many more children and the elderly, were “spitting up fine particles” (Egan 7). The doctor “diagnosed Jeanne with dust pneumonia, the brown plague and said she might not live for long” (Egan 7). Fortunately, Jeanne did survive, but her lungs were permanently scarred just like her mental health; she confesses, ‘I still have terrible nightmares’ (Egan 5). In Dalhart, Texas, Melt White also experienced a uniquely tough childhood. While other families moved out, his family was “stuck, without money or prospects” (Egan 8). His father passed away, and he had the responsibility to take care of the family. He lived in a broken land that was also infested with grasshoppers. The townsfolk, with the help of the National Guard, spread the land with a “mixed blend of arsenic, molasses, and bran” in an attempt to get rid of the infestation (Egan 8-9). Besides having to endure the Dust Bowl, they were also exposed to harmful chemicals. To feed his family, Melt gathered with the townspeople on Sundays and “herded rabbits into a corral and smashed their skulls” (Egan 8). Melt acknowledges that nature was not entirely to blame for the Dust Bowl. He affirms: ‘God didn’t create this land around here to be plowed up. [...] Folks raped this land. Raped it bad’ (Egan 8). These personal anecdotes are

disheartening, and regardless of what each survivor experienced individually, they were all scarred by it. Unfortunately, their experience during the Dust Bowl was just a glimpse of the hardships that awaited them.

The Dust Bowl was the ultimate factor that drove millions of people to migrate, which created the Great Okie Migration. This mass exodus had a “new and different dynamic” because “85 percent of all migrants were displaced white Americans” (Swensen 14). This means that it became a socio-economic problem rather than a race problem. Most people were agricultural migrants from different regions, but all were called “Okies” although only a “fifth of them were from Oklahoma” (Lüsted and Casteel 57). Any migrant, regardless of their state of origin, was given the pejorative term of “Okie” because Oklahoma was the “most wind-blown state in the country” and “among the worst eroded” (Swensen 13). Oklahoma was also seen as a “symbol of Depression” because half of its population was on relief (Swensen 10). Out of the 2.5 million people who had to migrate, 10 percent went to California. California’s ads “promised high wages and immediate work” for harvesting crops (Lüsted and Casteel 58). Entire families “packed up their belongings in overloaded, ramshackle vehicles” and “camped by the side of the road” (Lüsted and Casteel 58). These “tin can tourists” only stopped for gas and to let their radiators cool off to beat the competition for jobs (Lüsted and Casteel 58). Their journey was arduous and some perished on the way.

As migrants reached California, some families were “accepted and manipulated to fit the needs of California’s burgeoning agricultural market” (Swensen 15). Those who took the few available jobs experienced turmoil as they were paid “meager” wages for “long hours seven days a week” (Swensen 14). Their yearly income was estimated at \$450, which is \$25 less than the “minimum cost for an adequate diet for a family of four” (Swensen 14). Although former tenant

farmers, sharecroppers, and agricultural day-laborers were accustomed to toil, it was still “difficult for a migrant to survive, much less get ahead” (Swensen 14). The rest of the migrants who were not hired were treated as a “nuisance and a blight on the sunny history of the state” as Californians “feared their growing numbers, power, and potential to organize” (Swensen 15). Many towns took it upon themselves to post signs stating, “NO JOBS HERE! IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR WORK—KEEP OUT! 10 MEN FOR EVERY JOB!” (Lüsted and Casteel 60). Even officials “enacted laws to keep migrants out, although they would later be overturned as unconstitutional” since “Americans had the right to travel anywhere they wanted to in their own country” (Lüsted and Casteel 60). Farm owners also contributed to the migrants' grievances as they would “pour oil on extra produce and burn it” to prevent “migrants from eating the extra and force them to move on” (Lüsted and Casteel 61). Due to all these injustices, many migrants eventually died of silicosis, starvation, or exhaustion. The rest were still used for cheap labor. The migrants' unjust treatment sheds light on the necropolitical agenda of the United States as no life is considered more valuable than the continuous production of capital.

### **Steinbeck's Inspiration**

John Steinbeck's inspiration for the novel came from close observation of the “changes that were taking place around him” in his native Californian state (Swensen 30). Although he grew up ignorant of the minority, lower-class struggles, he soon gained interest in their livelihoods. He tried to capture their essence and “expose the underlying violence of rural life” through various works, like *Tortilla Flat* (1935), but none were as impactful and outstanding as *The Grapes of Wrath* (Swensen 30). The reason for the novel's enormous success is due to Steinbeck's “wealth of material that included his own experiences, interviews with migrants, the writings of others, and photographs” (Swensen 29). To truly understand the migrant, Steinbeck

took on the project of writing articles for the San Francisco News. This gave him the opportunity to go “into the fields and shanties of the refugees,” where he “saw how they lived and heard their stories of what life had been like back home and why they had had to flee to the West” (Swensen 31). He quickly realized he needed to “correctly capture his subjects’ habits of speech and mannerisms, as well as the circumstances of their lives” if he wanted his narrative to have “power and credibility” (Swensen 30). Steinbeck’s search for accuracy drove him to seek information from administrators of agriculture and managing directors of government camps for migratory laborers. Jonathan Garst and Frederick Soule “provided information and reports to anyone who was interested” (Swensen 19). Soule also “let Steinbeck go through the files,” and his staff “provided him with information on FSA migrant camps, statistics, and other information” (Swensen 31). In addition, Eric H. Thomsen, managing director of government camps, became Steinbeck’s “first guide to the camps,” showing him that “Camps were designed to provide a place for the migrants free of the squalor and filth of the ad hoc squatter camps sardonically known as ‘Hooverilles,’ or ‘Little Oklahomas’” (Swensen 32). Most significantly, Thomsen introduced Steinbeck to Tom Collins, the manager of the Arvin migrant camp who would provide Steinbeck with authentic experiences and knowledge. Not only did Collins allow Steinbeck to explore the camps and attend council meetings, but he also accompanied Steinbeck outside of local Californian government facilities. Steinbeck states that he and Collins “sat in the ditches with the migrant workers, lived and ate with them[,] [...] heard a thousand miseries and a thousand jokes[,] [...] ate fried dough and sowbelly, worked with the sick and the hungry, listened to complaints and little triumphs” (Swensen 33). All these memorable experiences helped shape Steinbeck’s creation of the migrant farmer in his book.

Unknowingly, Steinbeck would also be enlightened through Collin's eyes. Collins entrusted his "Big Book" to Steinbeck knowing Steinbeck would make good use of it. Collin's "Big Book" compiled "information on the migrants, including their different dialects and speech patterns, manners, songs, anecdotes (funny and odd), sayings, inventories, editorials on living conditions, and other pertinent details" (Swensen 34). Steinbeck did not only use this information for his novel, but he also published "The Harvest Gypsies" articles in the San Francisco News in October 1936 (Swensen 34). The articles were "designed to make visceral what California's newcomers were experiencing" and were labeled as 'investigative, advocacy reporting' (Swensen 34). According to Linda Wagner-Martin, Steinbeck believed writers had "high duties and [...] responsibilities" of "exposing our many grievances, and especially charged to declare and celebrate man's proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit" (158). However, California declared the novel "unworthy of serious attention" because it represented "actual material conditions and social processes" that exposed the state's injustices (Visser 9-10). Therefore, although *The Grapes of Wrath* is a fictional story, Steinbeck "actually interviewed some of the "Okie" families who experienced what the Joads did" (Lusted and Carteel 54). This new knowledge ignited a new power in him: a power to empathize and cause change.

Although Steinbeck's ideology caused confusion, he was a pioneer of a new form of literature. According to Jackson J. Benson, "Steinbeck's scientific outlook created many problems for him as an artist and contributed significantly to a generally negative response to much of his work by literary critics" (248). Critics did not understand his perspective on science and the breaking of the "novel form and its traditions, leading him into difficulties with characterization, plot, and point of view" (Benson 248). Steinbeck's new form of writing explored the "nature of reality," science, and a mixture of fiction with fact, creating a "profound

philosophical dualism” (249). Steinbeck’s ideas become more complicated as we take in consideration his love for humanity. According to Woodburn O. Ross, “Steinbeck's ethical system, which, as we have thus far seen it, finds ultimate virtue only in obedience to the natural law which demands reproduction and survival, is in reality complicated by [...] altruism” (434). Altruism is seen throughout the “entire body of Steinbeck's work [as] he excites admiration for characters who in some fashion love their brothers,” but it is also reflected in “his own affections, in his love of all nature, human included” (Ross 434). In other words, Steinbeck’s writing is so intricate because it is a mixture of Naturalism, Ecocriticism, and Transcendentalism.

*The Grapes of Wrath* epitomizes this new form of literature. According to Donald Pizer, “Naturalists were like the realists in their fidelity to the details of contemporary life, but that they depicted everyday life with a greater sense of the role of such causal forces as heredity and environment in determining behavior and belief” (10). In the novel, Steinbeck describes in detail the events of the Dust Bowl and how it conditioned and controlled the lives of the Okies to a point where it determined their livelihood and lives, which is called "pessimistic materialistic determinism" (Pizer 10). Nonetheless, Steinbeck does not place full blame on the environment; he analyzes the politics and science behind such occurrences. Looking at the socio-political forces during the Great depression and the Dust Bowl, he understands that big farm owners, banks and corporations are also to blame for the deterministic fate of the Okies.

Moreover, as a scientist, Steinbeck criticized the lack of environmental ethics and awareness. According to Susan F. Beegel, et al., Steinbeck was an “advanced early ecologists, not only evaluating organisms in relation to the physical environment, but also considering living populations, including man, in relation to each other” (4). Thus, Steinbeck “reject[ed] the notion of a man-centered universe and describes commensal relationships in an interconnected whole”

(Beegel et al. 9). Sam McNeilly takes a similar approach 21 years later as he claims ecology and the community are Steinbeck's two major priorities in his life and writings. McNeilly states, "Steinbeck's approach to the environment demonstrates the potential for a community-based morality by means of a transcendent understanding of the global ecosystem and the power of cooperation" (32). Clearly, *The Grapes of Wrath* supports the need for interconnectedness and the rejection of ecological injustices. Such interconnectedness is what leads to the concept of *Transcendentalism*. According to Barry Maxwell Andrews, transcendentalism stems from the "belief that human beings are interconnected with one another and with all of nature" (4). The "soul and its cultivation were the primary preoccupation of the Transcendentalists," and they found that the "the ethical consequences of transcendental idealism impelled them into social, political, educational, and religious reform" (qtd. in Andrews 4). Steinbeck's complex literary style was an issue at the beginning, but it is now one of the reasons his novel can be analyzed from various perspectives, including my analysis on necropolitics and social activism.

## CHAPTER II

### INTRODUCTION TO THE METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research method I will follow in my study of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. Looking at the novel through the concept of necropolitics is important because it provides the reader with new insight of the world under a neoliberal global capitalism, which has resurfaced from the nineteenth century. The first and most influential author who explored the concept of necropolitics is Achille Mbembé in his article "Necropolitics" (2003). According to Mbembé, Necropolitics is the "ultimate expression of sovereignty," in which "sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not" (Mbembé 26-27). Sovereignty also has the power to "dictate who may live and who must die" (11). Plainly, sovereignty is "expressed predominantly as the right to kill" (16). Therefore, necropolitics is the "subjugation of life to the power of death" (39). The politics of death involves driving these "disposable" individuals to their death directly or indirectly through the creation of death-worlds. Death-worlds are "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead" (40). Ultimately, according to Antonio Pele, necropolitics is the "economic and political management of human populations through their exposure to death" (par. 1).

It is important to distinguish between biopolitics and necropolitics. Although Mbembé draws on Michael Foucault's theory of biopolitics, he clearly states that the "notion of biopower is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (39-40). Biopolitics focuses on the "domain of life over which power has taken control," but neglects modern sovereignty's focus on the war machine and the state of exception (Mbembé

12). According to Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, “In biopolitics, life is controlled but for the citizens of the sovereign First World capitalist countries it is about providing a good life,” whereas necropolitics “regulates life through the perspective of death, [...] transforming life into a mere existence below every life minimum” (33). However, the difference between both concepts narrows as Foucault notes that biopolitics is a façade; in reality, it serves to expose a population to death. Through this perspective, Mbembé “re-politicize[s]” biopolitics by including contemporary forms of subjugation (Gržinić and Tatlić 33). It is important to clarify that although biopolitics and necropolitics are different, they are not separate; necropolitics is an “intensification” of biopolitics (Gržinić and Tatlić 33).

Mbembé starts by explaining Foucault’s biopolitics along with the state of exception and the state of siege. The state controls the “distribution of human species into groups” and subgroups to establish a “biological caesura” (Mbembé 17). This biological division separates the superior race (Whites) from the inferior race (minorities), making the inferior race the enemy. Using the nation’s safety as an excuse, it becomes acceptable to annihilate human masses. Thus, racism regulates the “distribution of death” and makes “possible the murderous functions of the state,” which is the “acceptability of putting to death” (Mbembé 17). Foucault exemplifies this perspective of the sovereign right to kill by using the Nazi state’s “biological extrapolation on the theme of the political enemy, in organizing the war against its adversaries and, at the same time, exposing its own citizens to war” (Mbembé 17). This is “one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity” because it claims that the “death” and “elimination” of the “Other” stems from the “absolute danger” it poses on their “life and security” (Mbembé 18).

Furthermore, the Nazi's example of extermination is a combination of "colonial imperialism" and the "the serialization of technical mechanisms for putting people to death" that sprang between the "Industrial Revolution and the First World War" (Mbembé 18). This "process of dehumanizing and industrializing death" was "aided in part by racist stereotypes and the flourishing of a class-based racism that, in translating the social conflicts of the industrial world in racial terms, ended up comparing the working classes and "stateless people" of the industrial world to the "savages" of the colonial world" (Mbembé 18).

Another link between modernity and terror is the slave plantation and the colony. The slave was a "biopolitical experimentation" and "emblematic [...] figure of the state of exception" (Mbembé 21). The slave endured the "loss of a "home," loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status," which brought with it "absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether)" (Mbembé 21). The slave was also used as an "instrument of labor," a pure "form of commerce" (Mbembé 21-22). This is the only "value" of the "thing" and the only reason the "master" keeps it "alive" (Mbembé 21-22). Indeed, the slave is kept alive but in a "phantomlike world of horrors and intense cruelty and profanity" (Mbembé 21). Despite this situation, some slaves can "draw almost any object, instrument, language, or gesture into a performance and then stylize it (Mbembé 22). Through these actions, the "slave is able to demonstrate the protean capabilities of the human bond through music and the very body that was supposedly possessed by another" (Mbembé 22). Nonetheless, for many slaves, this state of injury keeps them controlled because it causes terror. In the end, the slave life is a "form of death-in-life" due the state of exception (Mbembé 21).

The colony is also placed in a "terror formation" through the "concatenation of biopower, the state of exception, and the state of siege" (Mbembé 22). It is a link between "national-

socialism and traditional imperialism” where “sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a “war without end” (Mbembé 23). It is a war between the conqueror and the native. The conqueror sees savage life as a “form of animal life, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension” (Mbembé 24). This difference in commonality stems “less [from] the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master” (Mbembé 24). Savages “lack[ed] the specifically human character [...] so that when European men massacred them they somehow were not aware that they had committed murder” (Mbembé 24). Through these “rational objectives,” the state “civilize[d]” the ways of killing (Mbembé 23). Thus, colonial welfare and terror is not “subject to legal and institutional rules” since the “sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner” (Mbembé 25).

Another example of colonial occupation through spatialization is the apartheid regime in South Africa. Frantz Fanon states that spatialization “involves the setting of boundaries and internal frontiers epitomized by barracks and police stations; it is regulated by the language of pure force, immediate presence, and frequent and direct action; and it is premised on the principle of reciprocal exclusivity” (Mbembé 26). The apartheid system is a prime example of spatialization since it institutionalized racial and class segregation through “severe oppression and poverty” (Mbembé 26). The functioning of the homelands (reserves) and townships (structural forms) involved “severe restrictions on production for the market by blacks in white areas” (Mbembé 26). This limited their economic growth and job opportunities. Moreover, the apartheid system also entailed “terminating of land ownership by blacks except in reserved areas, the illegalization of black residence on white farms (except as servants in the employ of whites),

the control of urban influx, and later, the denial of citizenship to Africans” (Mbembé 26). This system of political making of spaces and subjectivities facilitated surveillance and control. Ultimately, space was the “raw material of sovereignty and the violence it carried with it,” which is a way in which necropower operates (Mbembé 26).

Slavery and the colony are early-modern colonial forms of occupation. Late-modern occupation differs in its “combining of the disciplinary, the biopolitical, and the necropolitical” (Mbembé 27). An example of late-modern occupation is the Israeli-Palestinian war. Israeli authorities secluded Palestinians in Gaza claiming that “peoplehood itself is forged by the worship of one deity, and national identity is imagined as an identity against the Other, other deities” (Mbembé 27). Thus, sovereignty and violence against the other is excused due to a divine foundation. The separation of spaces (Gaza and West Bank) depended on topography, creating a vertical sovereignty. According to Eyal Weizman, “Under a regime of vertical sovereignty, colonial occupation operates through schemes of over- and underpasses, a separation of the airspace from the ground” (qtd. in Mbembé 27). The high ground in West Bank offered Israelis “strategic assets not found in the valleys (effectiveness of sight, self-protection, panoptic fortification that generates gazes to many different ends)” (Mbembé 27). Israelis used their location and other technologies to police Palestinians from the air. Moreover, Israelis also policed them through the ground by using infrastructural technologies such as bulldozing. Bulldozing was used to “demolish[...] houses and cities,” “uprooting olive trees,” “riddling water tanks with bullets,” “bombing and jamming electronic communications,” and much more (Mbembé 29). Clearly, the *state of siege* is “itself a military institution” that does not “distinguish between the external and the internal enemy” (Mbembé 30). It militarizes daily life

by giving “freedom” to “local military commanders to use their discretion as to when and whom to shoot” (Mbembé 30). Hence, late-modern occupation relies on high tech tools to instill terror.

In the new era of globalization, contemporary wars become another link between terror, death, and freedom. These wars aimed to “force the enemy into submission regardless of the immediate consequences, side effects, and ‘collateral damage’ of the military actions” (Mbembé 31). For example, “During the Gulf War, the combined use of smart bombs and bombs coated with depleted uranium (DU), high-tech stand-off weapons, electronic sensors, laser-guided missiles, [...] unmanned aerial vehicles, and cyberintelligence quickly crippled the enemy’s capabilities” (Mbembé 30). This high-tech strategy “multiplied the capacity for destruction in unprecedented ways” (Mbembé 30). Similarly, in Kosovo, the “infrastructural war [...] targeted and destroyed bridges, railroads, highways, communications networks, oil storage depots, heating plants, power stations, and water treatment facilities” (Mbembé 30-31). Particularly, the “destruction of the Pancevo petrochemical complex [...] left the vicinity so toxic with vinyl chloride, ammonia, mercury, naphtha and dioxin that pregnant women were directed to seek abortions, and all local women were advised to avoid pregnancy for two years” (Mbembé 31). The effect of this military-technological revolution and imposed sanctions ended the lives of many Kosovan citizens instantly and left many more to suffer the ecological and health consequences of the chemicals. The Gulf War and the Kosovo campaign that “military operations and the exercise of the right to kill are no longer the sole monopoly of states, and the ‘regular army’ is no longer the unique modality of carrying out these functions” (Mbembé 31).

Moreover, the most notable necropolitical aspect of contemporary wars are the *war machines*. War machines are “made up of segments of armed men that split up or merge with one another depending on the tasks to be carried out and the circumstances” (Mbembé 32). They

function by “borrowing from regular armies while incorporating new elements well adapted to the principle of segmentation and deterritorialization,” and they have the “features of a political organization and a mercantile company” (Mbembé 32). In fact, the state has the power to “transform itself into a war machine” (Mbembé 32). War machines involve “raising revenue and commanding and regulating access to natural resources within a well-defined territory,” but they typically “forge direct connections with transnational networks” (Mbembé 33). In this way, they “control dependents through the creation of debts” and form “enclave economies,” which lead to “privileged spaces of war and death” (Mbembé 33). Eventually, war machines, under militias, become “highly organized mechanisms of predation, taxing the territories and the population they occupy and drawing on a range of transnational networks and diasporas that provide both material and financial support” (Mbembé 34).

Resource extraction leads to an “unprecedented form of governmentality that consists in the *management of the multitudes*” (Mbembé 34). Mbembé explains this connection by stating:

The extraction and looting of natural resources by war machines goes hand in hand with brutal attempts to immobilize and spatially fix whole categories of people or, paradoxically, to unleash them, to force them to scatter over broad areas no longer contained by the boundaries of a territorial state. As a political category, populations are then disaggregated into rebels, child soldiers, victims or refugees, or civilians incapacitated by mutilation or simply massacred on the model of ancient sacrifices, while the “survivors,” after a horrific exodus, are confined in camps and zones of exception. (34)

Evidently, new technologies of destruction made this kind of massacre possible. Some are directly massacred, and others are indirectly massacred through dispossession, segregation, confinement, and imposed sanctions. Even when victims are not killed, their wounds remind them and the “people around him or her” of the “morbid spectacle of severing” (Mbembé 35). The significance of this is that “war is [...] waged by armed groups acting behind the mask of the state against armed groups that have no state but control very distinct territories,” and both sides

target “civilian populations that are unarmed” (Mbembé 35). This means that terror and death are no longer necessarily monopolized by the state; they are monopolized by war machines.

Mbembé closes his article by explaining how terror, death, and freedom are intertwined. The *logic of survival* explains how terror and death are interconnected (Mbembé 35). The survivor is afraid of dying, so he or she kills the attackers. The survivor’s “horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead” because it makes the survivor “feel more secure” (Mbembé 36). Although it is a valid point, Mbembé argues that the survivor stays in perpetual pain. It is the pain of having to continue enduring the madness of “interrogations,” “beatings,” “soldiers patrolling the unlit streets,” “children blinded by rubber bullets,” “parents shamed and beaten in front of their families,” “loud offensive slogans,” “bones broken,” and “shootings and fatalities” (Mbembé 39). In this case, the *logic of martyrdom* is better. Mbembé explains this by using the example of the “suicide bomber.” The self-destruction of a suicide bomber symbolizes “resistance” against “the state of siege and occupation” (Mbembé 37). The “power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity,” and it is “represented as agency” (Mbembé 37 and 39). In other words, according to Gilroy, “This preference for death over continued servitude is a commentary on the nature of freedom itself (or the lack thereof)” and the “same lack [of existence] is also precisely the way in which he or she takes account of his or her mortality” (qtd. in Mbembé 39). Evidently, in a necropolitical world, death and sacrifice and death and freedom are the only options.

Although Mbembé uses examples from Germany, Africa, Palestine, and the United Kingdom, necropolitics also applies to the United States. Mbembé mentions that race has “been the ever-present shadow in Western political thought and practice,” but he does not discard

“class-thinking” (Mbembé 17). Gržinić and Tatlić also clarify that “necropolitics is not reserved only for the Second and Third Worlds [...], but is operated in First World Capitalism” (European Union, the United States, and Japan, etc.) where the “logic of the organization of life and the division of labor is not (and never was) to achieve maximum life, but in reality is a pledge only to provide the bare minimum for living and sometimes (today, too often) not even this” (Gržinić and Tatlić 34). Therefore, I apply Mbembé’s “Necropolitics” to John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* because the content is pertinent, and interestingly, Steinbeck uses a similar chronology as Mbembé.

Mbembé references early modern colonialism, then late-modern colonialism, and lastly contemporary necropolitics to demonstrate that they are all intertwined; it is imperative to understand one to understand the other. Similarly, Steinbeck references the Bible to demonstrate that religious practices of imperialism and capitalism still exist today but in an intensified way due to the war machine. Just like we can better understand the context through historical examples of slavery and the Holocaust, Steinbeck knew that his religious audience would understand his message with the Bible. Although both authors are from different time periods, their cause is the same: to expose those “figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (Mbembé 14).

Necropolitics is a relatively new concept, but it is applicable to *The Grapes of Wrath*. After World War I, the United States went into the Great Depression. Too much money was spent on the military, so they needed something to bring back the economy. The Great Plowing was the solution, but the exploitation of land caused the Dust Bowl. Already living in a state of precarity, the Joads, along with other tenant farmers, were colonized by banks and corporations

(speculators). They were dispossessed and displaced when their labor was not useful anymore. Their houses were torn down by war machines, bulldozing. Once they arrived in California, they were treated like slaves and were reduced to less than human (“Okies”). Their labor was exploited, and they had to follow arbitrary state and local regulations. They were placed in Hooverilles (unofficial camps). Californian police were given weapons to kill the Okies whenever their reasons were “justified.” Within a short period of time, thousands of migrants died due to starvation, dehydration, exploitation, and police brutality. They were placed in a constant state of terror wondering if they were going to get to live another day. Some, like Tom, killed to survive. While others, like Casey, sacrificed themselves for freedom. In both instances death permeated in the lives of the precarious. This is what my chapters will consist of to connect the concept of necropolitics to the novel. I will also use the terms *necrocapitalism*, *slow violence*, and *precarity* to analyze the concept of necropolitics in depth.

### **Necrocapitalism**

According to Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, “In neoliberal necrocapitalism, the whole of society has been transformed into merely one big investment sector that provides new opportunities for the incessant capitalization of capital in order to make surplus value” (Gržinić and Šefik 38). Necrocapitalism is part of necropolitics because it “organizes its forms of capital accumulation around dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death” (Gržinić and Šefik 33). Because it involves the “capturing of the social space,” it “implies new modes of governmentality that are informed by the norms of corporate rationality and deployed in managing violence, social conflicts, fear, and the Multitude” (Gržinić and Šefik 33). Most importantly, necrocapitalism is intolerant of any conflicts that “challenges the supreme

requirements of capitalist rationalization— economic growth, profit maximization, productivity, efficiency, and the like” (Gržinić and Šefik 33).

Necrocapitalism thrives on the intensification of deregulation and privatization.

Deregulation is the reduction or removal of state regulations in order to create more competition within the industry. Privatization means that the state “withdraws step by step from social, cultural and public life, and leaves all public sectors to struggle for private money” (Gržinić and Šefik 36). It also implies a “form of private property or of a private instrumentalization of public institutions by those who run them” (Gržinić and Šefik 36). These two represent a “state of (at first) exceptionality that is soon seen as completely normalized and accepted” (Gržinić and Šefik 36).

Necrocapitalism also thrives on speculation, labor exploitation, and debt servitude.

Speculation ““could be understood as buying, holding and selling something (anything from real estate to fine art) in order to profit from the fluctuations in the market (something like ‘buy low, sell high’)”” (Gržinić and Šefik 38). This loophole was created to keep capital inflow. Not only did they sell the property at a high cost, gained more from it by renting it. Another component of necrocapitalism is the intensification of brutal exploitation. This exploitation can be explained through the four great rationalization principles, which are “reducing the number of employees and wages, introducing more and more work obligations, restructuring companies, and redistributing goods and resources” (Gržinić and Šefik 39). An intensification of exploitation also results in an “intensified management of the whole of society (only and solely to extract more and more surplus value)” and an “intensified precarization of life” (Gržinić and Šefik 39). This leads to debt servitude. Debt servitude is when workers offer their labor to pay off a debt. It was “imposed on mass populations in the interest of transnational capital” (Gržinić and Šefik

36). This concept originated “when the “democratic” era began in the 1980s” and they needed “another mechanism to keep countries in line” (Gržinić and Šefik 37). Also, debt servitude “works hand in hand with harsh privatization and the sell-off of whole States” (Gržinić and Šefik 37). Therefore, the core “neoliberal policy is privatization, deregulation, and cuts to social spending accompanied by increases in military spending; the kind of policies that were first imposed under dictatorships (Gržinić and Šefik 18).

### **Slow Violence**

According to Rob Nixon, slow violence “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2). It is a violence that goes unseen because it does not cause a “spectacular nor instantaneous” change (Nixon 2). Slow violence is also “exponential” as it can “fuel long-term, proliferating conflicts in situations where the conditions for sustaining life become increasingly but gradually degraded” (Nixon 3). It is a degradation of the environment that affects the community who lives in it. The “principal casualties of slow violence” are the poor since their “unseen poverty is compounded by the invisibility of the slow violence that permeates so many of their lives” (Nixon 4). In fact, “Our media bias toward spectacular violence exacerbates the vulnerability of ecosystems treated as disposable by turbo-capitalism while simultaneously exacerbating the vulnerability of those whom Kevin Bale, in another context, has called “disposable people”” (Nixon 4). Therefore, the only way to confront slow violence is to “plot and give figurative shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time” (Nixon 10).

The slow violence perpetrated on the environment causes ecological degradation that is visible years after its exploitation. To illustrate, the U.S. used the Republic of Marshall Islands as

a site for nuclear testing in 1954. In the 1980s, women were “delivering into the world ‘jellyfish babies’—headless, eyeless, limbless human infants who would live for just a few hours” (Nixon 7). The environment was exposed to radioactive chemicals that exposed people to the same slow degradation. The bombing was the immediate action that caught attention, but the media ignored the consequences it brought decades later. Another example is the Deepwater Horizon disaster caused by the Minerals Management Service of the U.S. Interior Department. The department claimed that ““spills in deep water are not likely to affect listed birds. . . . Deepwater spills would either be transported away from coastal habitats or prevented, for the most part, from reaching coastal habitats by natural weathering processes”” (qtd. in Nixon 21). However, when the opposite occurred, the department “persisted” that their “reasoning” was right to avoid responsibility. Although there is a “consensus among climate scientists that climate change is happening, is human-induced, [and] is accelerating,” all the misnamed ‘denialists’ need do is keep ensuring that, in the public’s mind, the jury remains permanently out, so that irresolution rules” (Nixon 39). They do not care about the catastrophic consequences for human and much nonhuman life on earth. The “government, NGO, [and] corporate” sees the land in a “bureaucratic, externalizing, and extraction- driven manner that is often pitilessly instrumental” (Nixon 17). As Nixon forewarns, “Natural agency can indeed take unexpected, sometimes heartening forms, but we should be alert to the ways corporate colossi and governments can hijack that logic to grant themselves advance or retrospective absolution” (22). While environmental change is inevitable, the pace of change is not.

Environmental degradation is equivalent to the environment of the poor because both entities are treated as if they were nonexistent. The “environmentalism of the poor” is “frequently catalyzed by resource imperialism inflicted on the global South to maintain the

unsustainable consumer appetites of rich-country citizens and, increasingly, of the urban middle classes in the global South itself” (Nixon 22 and 41). Evidently, in an era of imperial overreach, there is a “widening divide separating the gated über-rich from the unhoused ultrapoor within and between nations” (Nixon 41). This division is caused by “militarization, privatization, deregulation, corporate self-policing,” and now, exposure to harmful environments. Poor communities are “often disproportionately exposed to the force fields of slow violence” such as “military residues or imported e-waste or the rising tides of climate change” (Nixon 16). They “experience environmental threat not as a planetary abstraction but as a set of inhabited risks, some imminent, others obscurely long term” (Nixon 4). These communities suffer the environmental repercussions of human-induced disasters because they are “least likely to attract sustained scientific inquiry into causes, effects, and potential redress” (Nixon 16). At the end, “Contests over what counts as violence are intimately entangled with conflicts over who bears the social authority of witness, which entails much more than simply seeing or not seeing” (Nixon 16).

### **Precarity**

According to Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al.,” Precarity is the “emergence of a new global norm of contingent employment, social risk and fragmented life situations – without security, protection or predictability” (3). The migrant is the “quint-essential incarnation of precarity, with irregular and circulant migrant workers and refugees and asylum seekers being among the most disadvantaged in this expanding ‘relative surplus population’” (qtd. in Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. 5-6). In a necrocapitalist perspective, the “vulnerable” are “valuable” because they are particularly “exploitable” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. 4). They are exploitable because employers and labor users control them through mechanisms of “institutional uncertainty” and

“irregular migration,” such as “informal labour, wage squeezes, temporariness, uncertainty and pernicious risk” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. 3-4). Outside of work, precarity relates to the “uprooting human beings from their communities, looting all that is common, and effectively dispossessing people of social protection and their daily livelihoods” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. 1). Precariats are at a disadvantage because they suffer the consequences of the deterioration of social and economic support networks. Most significantly, they are constantly exposed to violence and death.

On the other hand, precarity is not just “bleakness,” it is “also resistance” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. vii). When precariats come together and let their “undefeated despair” guide their cause, they create change (Nixon 42). This change is seen globally through resistance. There is resistance “in the political subjectivity and activism among un-documented migrants across the five continents” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. VII). There is resistance in the “refugee solidarity movements opposing a European Union that avoids responsibility and is losing its humanity and political legitimacy” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. VII). There is resistance in South Africa though “alliances of ‘poor people’s movements rising from a rebellious ‘uncivil society’, beyond the control of neoliberal governance” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. VII). There is resistance in “China workers refut[ing] the flawed image of China as the victor of capitalist globalisation in thousands of wildcat strikes every year” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. VIII). There is resistance in the US and UK due to “inequality, labour conditions, citizenship and racism” (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. VIII). There are many ways to demonstrate resistance. Nixon claims that writer-activists also demonstrate resistance by writing about “injustices they wish to see redressed, injustices they believe they can help expose, silences they can help dismantle through testimonial protest, rhetorical inventiveness, and counterhistories in the face

of formidable odds” (5-6). Ultimately, precarious lifestyles can determinate the fate of their victims, but it can also create solidarity and bring change.

After this introduction to the basics of the method, I will summarize the concepts for the reader’s convenience. *Necropolitics* is an extension of Michael Foucault’s biopolitics. It is the right of sovereignty to decide who lives and who dies, which is strongly influenced by race and/or class. The unwanted populations are directly and indirectly killed through death-worlds. I break down necropolitics into three concepts, which are *necrocapitalism*, *slow violence*, and *precarity*. Necrocapitalism is the production of surplus capital at the expense of human lives. Slow violence is violence that does not have a direct effect yet is detrimental to the environment and people’s health. Precarity is a constant state of instability and uncertainty caused by unemployment, social risk, and fragmented life situations. Ultimately, necropolitics is the act of creating an enemy, using the enemy for capital gain, and disposing the enemy by exerting violence through war machines when they are no longer useful.

### CHAPTER III

#### JOADS DISPOSSESSED

The first ten chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* capture the first instances of environmental degradation, social disparities in health, and socioeconomic inequities. The occurrence of the Dust Bowl exemplifies the exploitation of soil, causing massive soil erosion. This form of exploitation also foreshadows the abuse and expendability of farmers and tenant farmers in the hands of banks and corporations. The dispossession of the Joads of their Oklahoma land marked the beginning of an arduous journey full of hardships and losses, yet it also expands on the anger and the fighting spirit that keeps them afloat.

#### **Necrocapitalism**

Necrocapitalism is a contemporary neoliberal global capitalist social system that manipulates, controls, and endangers human beings for capital accumulation. Although the concepts of neoliberalism and necrocapitalism did not exist during the 1930s, Steinbeck's novel epitomizes them by portraying banks and corporations as the main malefactors for the impoverishment and exploitation of farmers. Although this viewpoint might seem far-fetched, Paul Thompson claims that Steinbeck's "target" were the "bankers, business owners, and large farmers" who held "libertarian values" (170). These views conflict with Steinbeck's "egalitarian" values since libertarians found it acceptable and legal to endorse "economic practices such as farm evictions, exorbitant prices charged to transients and the manipulation of wage rates in California" (Thompson 170). Evidently, Steinbeck had issues with laws that protected inhumane practices because he knew that was just the beginning of a social system driven by capitalism. His left-wing bias helped him foresee the issue of "environmentally harmful technology and bloated markets" that he prominently highlights throughout the novel (Thompson 170).

Necrocapitalism is evident in a conversation between a spokesman for an owner and an unnamed tenant farmer; by excluding the name of the farmer and using a third-person point of view, the narrator includes all tenant farmers that went through the same situation as the Joads. The narrator introduces the bank or finance company as “machines and masters all at the same time” that “ensnared” men and treated them like “slaves” (Steinbeck 84). Banks, companies, and owners are hereafter referred to as monsters who are stronger than men. By asserting that the bank is “stronger” than the men, the narrator turns the spokesmen into victims of the same system that forces the tenants to move. Knowing that many tenant farmers lost their land to the bank when their “crops fail[ed]” and were unable to “pay taxes,” the spokesman was still unable to provide them support (Steinbeck 85). His argument is that the “tenant system won’t work any more” since “One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families” (Steinbeck 86). In reality, he is fully aware that he must be productive as well if he does not want to lose his job. He fully understands and warns the tenant that the banks are “creatures [that] [...] breathe profits; they eat the interest on money” (Steinbeck 85). The narrator dehumanizes the banks and companies by labeling them as “monsters” and “creatures” whose only interest is to make money at the expense of human lives. This is further accentuated as the spokesman affirms the tenants that the “fifty-thousand acre owner can’t be responsible” for their lives, and clarify that they will be “stealing if [they] try to stay, [they]’ll be murderers if [they] kill to stay” (Steinbeck 87). Ironically, this system turns the victims into the perpetrators. The tenants must be aware of the bank because even though the “monster isn’t men, [...] it can make men do what it wants” (Steinbeck 87). By threatening the tenants in this manner, the bank employs a fear tactic that assures the tenants will not revolt. Although a libertarian would argue that the bank and companies are in their legal right to evict tenant farmers, the narrator illustrates how this method

is inhumane and violent against a people who worked the land for their whole lives and have no other means of survival. Mainly, the narrator displays the greed of the state, who manages these banks, and their indifference for the people who can no longer serve them.

Moreover, another prime example of necrocapitalism is how the narrator illustrates a three-way effect of the usage of tractors for the plowing of the land; they enslave the driver, replace the farmer, and damage the land. Whereas the bank was previously referred as the monster, this time the “snub-nosed monsters” are the “diesel tractors” by “raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through dooryards, in and out of gullies in straight lines” (Steinbeck 88-89). Clearly, the tractors have no limitations, damaging the soil and property alike. Joe Davis’ boy, a former farmer, becomes “part of the monster, a robot in the seat” (Steinbeck 89). The narrator depicts this transformation as he states,

A twitch at the controls could swerve the cat’, but the driver’s hands could not twitch because the monster that built the tractor, the monster that sent the tractor out, had somehow got into the driver’s hands, into his brain and muscle, had goggled him and muzzled him—goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest. (Steinbeck 89)

The repetition of the words “goggled” and “muzzled” highlight the limited autonomy of the driver as he is manipulated by the “monster that built the tractor,” the “monster that sent the tractor out,” or the monster as the tractor itself. The fact that there are multiple monsters, and each overpowers the other also showcases the hierarchical scheme of corporations of the state. Previously, the narrator explicitly claimed that “men made [the monster], but they can’t control it” (Steinbeck 87). Now, the narrator affirms that the “driver could not control it,” and he felt “proud of the power he could not control” (Steinbeck 89). The assumption that the monster cannot be defeated drives some people to turn into mere slaves of the power. Joe Davis’ boy used to be part of the community of farmers, but since he became a tractor driver, everyone could see

he “loved the land no more than the bank loved the land” (Steinbeck 89). He was aware of his wrong doings, but he did not see any other way out. He ‘Got to think of [his] own kids. Three dollars a day, and it comes every day’ (Steinbeck 91). Similarly to the spokesman, the truck driver is just another slave forced to believe that since “times are changing,” he must change too regardless of what he must do to survive (Steinbeck 91). This is a form of manipulation that keeps the poor producing more capital for the wealthy.

Furthermore, besides turning men on each other, banks also replaced farmers for tractors. Since tractors were faster and more efficient at picking cotton, banks had no need for farmers anymore. However, instead of allowing tenant farmers to keep their homes until they regained financial stability, the bank forced them out by destroying their homes. They paid the driver to run over the farmers’ homes with the tractor. The narrator depicts the anger and melancholy of the farmers as they hear that their fences and homes will be destroyed. One farmer declares, “‘I built it with my hands. [...] It’s mine. [...] You bump it down [...] and I’ll pot you like a rabbit”” (Steinbeck 91). The driver replied indifferently to the man stating, “‘suppose you kill me? They’ll just hang you, but long before you’re hung there’ll be another guy on the tractor, and he’ll bump the house down”” (Steinbeck 91). His message of “‘You’re not killing the right guy”” perplexed and infuriated the farmer (Steinbeck 91). He demanded an answer to “‘But where does it stop? Who can we shoot?”” But the answer was “‘I don’t know”” (Steinbeck 92). All they know is that they must comply with the bank orders that state, “‘Make the land show profit or we’ll close you up”” (Steinbeck 91). This is what Steinbeck referred to as bloated markets. The fact that farmers were squeezed and then disposed of is necrocapitalism since capital was gained at the expense of their lives.

## **Slow violence**

Slow violence is violence that goes unseen because there is no immediate effect. In this novel, Steinbeck presents the reader with slow violence by detailing the Dust Bowl phenomenon. The narrator mentions that in May, “The surface of the earth crusted” and the sky and earth “became pale” (Steinbeck 51). In June, “the big clouds moved up out of Texas and the Gulf” leaving “drop craters where the rain had fallen” (Steinbeck 52). Then, “the dust was evenly mixed with the air,” and “an even blanket covered the earth,” so “When the night came again it was black night, for the stars could not pierce the dust to get down, and the window lights could not even spread beyond their own yards” (Steinbeck 53). The way that the narrator progressively outlines the effects of the dust bowl mimic the effects of slow violence. This slow violence comes from the constant abuse of the soil that eventually caused its displacement. Moreover, there is also slow violence against a people. The narrator states that “Men and women huddled in their houses, and they tied handkerchiefs over their noses when they went out, and wore goggles to protect their eyes” (Steinbeck 53). Regardless of these precautions, their homes were still unsafe since the “dust came in so thinly that it could not be seen in the air, and it settled like pollen on the chairs and tables, on the dishes” (Steinbeck 53). Exposing farmers to this kind of harmful environment is also a form of slow violence because their health suffers the repercussions throughout the years. Mainly, Steinbeck’s disturbing and surrealistic presentation of the Dust Bowl as a wasteland establishes the theme of determinism that aggravates the lives of the poor and marginalized from this point forward.

Although others might construe Steinbeck’s depiction as a sign of God’s wrath, it is a clear and accurate depiction of the Dust Bowl, which is the central event that led to a mass exodus. Looking at this event through an environmental lens, the narrator explicitly and

implicitly exposes the purposeful violence humans cause to the environment. In a conversation, a tenant farmer clearly warns the spokesman that they will “kill the land with cotton,” and the spokesman simply said, ““We know. We’ve got to take cotton quick before the land dies. Then we’ll sell the land”” (Steinbeck 86). The bluntness in his tone unmasks the awareness of the damage banks and companies are causing to the land, and it also unveils their indifference to anything other than their investments. Furthermore, the narrator’s aggressive description of the tractor showcases the vicious and cruel way the land is treated:

Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades— not plowing but surgery, pushing the cut earth to the right where the second row of disks cut it and pushed it to the left; slicing blades shining, polished by the cut earth. And pulled behind the disks, the harrows combing with iron teeth so that the little clods broke up and the earth lay smooth. Behind the harrows, the long seeders—twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion. (Steinbeck 89)

Words like “cut,” “surgery,” “blades,” “broke,” and “pushing,” highlight the hostile interaction between men and land. Sigridur Gudmarsdottir supports this claim as he contends, Steinbeck “describes the tractor that cuts the land as a male rapist and the seeding machine as his iron phallus” drawing “similarities of cuts, rapes and violence between male domination over earthly production and female reproduction” (212). By showcasing the raping as a symbol of dominion, Steinbeck illustrates the feeling of entitlement men have over the earth and the soil. It also leads to the concept of ecofeminism. According to Elizabeth Carlassare, “Many ecofeminists share the perception that the oppression of women and ecological degradation are connected in that they both arise ‘within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination’” (qtd. in Carlassare 90). Thus, the tractor is not only a machine causing ecological degradation, but it is also the macho who rapes and impregnates the vulnerable female. Gudmarsdottir claims that the female character who represents the connection between earth and gender oppression is Rose of Sharon. He makes this comparison by stating that, “As the humans

have deserted the earth, her husband has deserted her. As the damaged and raped earth gives birth to dead fruit, the malnourished and deserted Rose of Sharon gives birth to a stillborn child” (Gudmarsdottir 215). Yet again, the narrator transparently displays how men engage in slow violence through the maltreatment of the soil and people.

### **Precarity**

Precarity is the loss of material wealth and psychological wellness. When the Joads lost their jobs and home, they fell into precarity. Before this, however, they already suffered from instability and lack of security. The Joad family lost their land to the bank because they could not keep up with technological advancements that increased the demand of produce at a faster rate and at lower prices. Since they had to borrow money from the bank, they became tenant farmers. This change did not impact them as harshly as being dispossessed from their land, however. The problem was not losing a piece of property but that they considered the soil and the land to be part of themselves. Yeoman farmers are “tied to the land on which they live and farm” (Thompson 173). Because of this agrarian ethic, it is hard for the Joads to move and leave everything behind. Tom mentions, “This land, this red land, is us; and the good years and the dust years and the drought years are us” (Steinbeck 148). This means that regardless of what tragedies they might live through, they belong and will always belong to the land. The character who was most impacted by the move was the grandfather. He adamantly protested, “This country ain’t no good, but it’s my country. [...] I’ll jus’ stay right here where I b’long” (Steinbeck 175). He was fully conscious that the land did not fulfill their basic needs any longer, but he was not emotionally or mentally prepared to depart from it. Farmers had a commitment with the land because they saw the “whole land” as valuable, not just a fragment (Steinbeck 176). This is a

concept that libertarians would not understand since they placed more value on property rules, public policies, and the spread of enhancing technology (Thompson 171).

Whilst precarity signifies instability and uncertainty, it also takes out the best in people. The narrator exemplifies this using a land turtle. The land turtle with its “horny beak partly open” and “humorous eyes” “threshed slowly through the grass, not really walking, but boosting and dragging his shell along” (Steinbeck 65). The turtle’s efforts were frantic as the embankment grew deeper, but “Little by little the shell slid up the embankment” (Steinbeck 65).

Unfortunately, the turtle now faced a concrete wall. Once the turtle almost crossed over, a “red ant ran into the shell, into the soft skin inside the shell, and suddenly head and legs snapped in, and the armored tail clamped in sideways” (Steinbeck 66). It took a while, but the turtle continued its path. Finally, the turtle reached the concrete, but a car’s front wheel “struck the edge of the shell, flipped the turtle like a tiddly-wink, spun it like a coin, and rolled it off the highway” (Steinbeck 66). The turtle “jerked into its shell” but “little by little the shell pulled over and flopped upright” (Steinbeck 66). At the end, “The old humorous eyes looked ahead, and the horny beak opened a little” (Steinbeck 67). The land turtle faced many obstacles that forced it to retract and rest, but it never gave up. The narrator repeats “slowly” and “little by little” to show that regardless of how long it takes, there is progress. The repetition of the turtle’s humorous eyes also highlights the optimism and hope for a better future. Interestingly, this is the same turtle Tom Joad grabbed. The narrator foreshadows that Tom, like the turtle, will go through great adversity, but as long as he perseveres, he will create change.

Persevering as a community is a bigger challenge, but it also creates unity. While experiencing the effects of the Dust Bowl, “Women and children knew deep in themselves that no misfortune was too great to bear if their men were whole” (Steinbeck 4). This concept of

interdependence is later emphasized when tenant farmers firmly assert, “‘There’s some way to stop this [...] We’ve got a bad thing made by men, and by God that’s something we can change’” (Steinbeck 92-93). Even though their fates seem doomed, their anger and courage drove them to never give up and have hope. This type of mentality portrays and foreshadows the resiliency and actions of people who fight for social change. They know that if they stick together, they will persevere.

A character that embodies the mentality of the precariat is Jim Casey, a former preacher. Although authors like Joseph Fontenrose draw biblical allusions comparing Tom Joad as a “kind of Moses [...] who will lead the oppressed people” and “Jim Casy a parallel to Jesus Christ,” it is imperative to understand that Steinbeck’s big picture is not about Christianity (39). Casey confesses to Tom that he left religion because he believes in something beyond religion (Fontenrose 39). He explains his thought process by stating,

‘Why do we got to hang it on God or Jesus? Maybe,’ I figgered, ‘maybe it’s all men an’ all women we love; maybe that’s the Holy Sperit—the human sperit—the whole shebang. Maybe all men got one big soul ever’body’s a part of.’ Now I sat there thinkin’ it, an’ all of a suddent—I knew it. I knew it so deep down that it was true, and I still know it.” (Fontenrose 76)

Casey prioritizes the love and fate of humanity over the blind fate society places on religion. Eric W. Carlson reaffirms this view by stating that the novel’s “primary symbolic structure, as well as meaning, is naturalistic and humanistic, not Christian” (172). Moreover, Casey’s emphasis on the “big soul” demonstrates his faith in the spiritual. Fontenrose eventually admits that “Casy’s doctrine went beyond Christ’s” since he “rejected the Christianity which he once preached” and “arrived at the doctrine of the Oversoul” (41). The oversoul is a transcendentalist ideal that was popular during Steinbeck’s novel publication. According to Barry Maxwell Andrews, “The Transcendentalists [...] were spiritual seekers looking for new sources of inspiration and insight in a milieu that was becoming, in their view, increasingly materialistic, dehumanizing, and

alienating” (9). In an effort to bring society together, Steinbeck’s own personal beliefs are represented from his characters. Harold Bloom claims that “Steinbeck's Okies are detached by him from traditional Protestantism and believe instead in a curious but very American religion of their own, in which the lapsed minister Jim Casy is a secular Jesus Christ and his survivor, Tom Joad, is a kind of St. Paul of social rebellion” (5). Although transcendentalists abandoned their faith in historical Christianity, Steinbeck’s usage of religious text is central to promoting a social gospel. Steinbeck realizes that although the marginalized community is oppressed and their lives are dependent on those in power, they must continue fighting for social change. He believes that once they “access [...] the Universal Soul,” they will experience a “Feeling of the Infinite” (Andrews 10). It is this notion of being one with nature and the universe which leads to the idea of community. This proves that Steinbeck’s central message is indicative of a social organization that prioritizes the need of cooperation over competition and community over individualism. This also demonstrates that precarity does not only represent determinism, but it also creates interdependent communities.

## CHAPTER IV

### JOADS ON THE ROAD

Chapters eleven through nineteen presents the Joads on the road to California. These chapters exhibit the hardships they had to endure to survive in a toxic capitalism. They also solidify the Naturalist connection between earth and the subjugated as *slow violence* is inflicted on them through economic strife and inadequate healthcare. Most importantly, these chapters forewarn the Joads' deterministic fates as *precarity* takes over their livelihood, while foreshadowing their success through communal unity. In the following pages, I will define these terms.

#### **Necrocapitalism**

As a reminder, capitalism centralizes on capital accumulation, whereas necrocapitalism is governed by new “norms of corporate rationality and deployed in managing violence, social conflicts, fear, and the Multitude” (Gržinić and Šefik 33). These norms are directly and/or indirectly dependent on death for profit gain. The shift between capitalism and necrocapitalism became evident when California was acquired by Americans. Their politics and priorities changed the land and their people. Mexican farmers were dispossessed from their land, and American farmers took over. These “frantic hungry men [...] guarded with guns the land they had stolen” (Steinbeck 316). They soon became owners, and banks and corporations were created. These banks and corporations only saw monetary value; “crops were reckoned in dollars, [...] land was valued by principal plus interest, and crops were bought and sold before they were planted” (Steinbeck 317). Their initial love and care for the land was “thinned with money,” “their fierceness dribbled away in interest,” and they became “little manufacturers who must sell

before they can make” (Steinbeck 317). Farmers who could not keep up lost the land to businessmen. The narrator illustrates how farming became an industry:

[T]he owners followed Rome, although they did not know it. They imported slaves, although they did not call them slaves: Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans, Filipinos. They live on rice and beans, the business men said. They don’t need much. They wouldn’t know what to do with good wages. Why, look how they live. Why, look what they eat. And if they get funny—deport them. (Steinbeck 317)

The narrator juxtaposes the Romans with Californians to highlight the similarities between their ruling regime; they both subjugate and repress the vulnerable for capital interest. These “imported serfs were beaten and frightened and starved until some went home again, and some grew fierce and were killed or driven from the country” (Steinbeck 317). This tactic of instilling fear and using violence against the multitude for capital gain is capitalism. The fact that immigrants were used and killed turns this practice into necrocapitalism. Therefore, the narrator’s historical allusion to the Romans helps the reader realize that necrocapitalism is not new—the term is. Most importantly, the narrator establishes that history repeats itself; the Joads will become serfs.

Although Californians typically treated immigrants as slaves, the exodus caused by the Dust Bowl brought another type of slave—the Okie. Californians built a different system for the Okies since they were displaced Americans and could not be deported. The first step was to draw a distinction between them and the colonized individuals. According to Rob Nixon, “An era of imperial overreach has brought [...] a widening divide separating the gated über-rich from the unhoused ultrapoor within and between nations” (41). Thus, all migrants, regardless of their origin, were labeled “Okies.” The word Okie meant “dirty son-of-a-bitch,” scum (Steinbeck 285). Not only was this a derogatory term, but it also served to sever ties with them since they were considered “outlanders, foreigners” who “ain’t human” and had “no sense and no feeling”

(Steinbeck 303 and 321). Besides being dispossessed of their land and property, the Okie was also dispossessed of an identity and value as a human being. For this reason, the Okies were treated with indifference and hatred. The owners hated the Okies because they feared the Okies would “steal land;” the storekeepers hated them because they had “no money to spend;” the little bankers hated them because there was “nothing to gain from them;” the laboring people hated them because the “wage payer automatically gives him less for his work” (Steinbeck 318). Everyone hated the Okies because they did not want to share their wealth. Thus, the slave issue turned from a race problem to a class-consciousness problem (Thompson 170).

Additionally, Californians kept Okies subjugated by exploiting their labor, preventing labor union meetings, and exercising unfair and inhumane practices. The Joads learned about labor exploitation from a man and his son after passing Arizona. The father warned the Joads of what awaits them in California as he explained, “Pick cotton, an’ you gonna be sure the scales ain’t honest. Some of ’em is, an’ some of ’em ain’t. But you gonna think all the scales is crooked, an’ you don’ know which ones. Ain’t nothin’ you can do about her anyways” (Steinbeck 285-286). Clearly, owners cheated their workers by not paying them fairly for their labor knowing their necessity was too great to risk losing their jobs if they rebelled. The narrator adds that a “man might work and feed himself” and “when the work was done, he might find that he owed money to the company” (Steinbeck 318). There is an evident domino effect that accentuates the owners’ corrupted system. Because the workers are cheated and paid less, they cannot afford to buy their own food anymore. Because they cannot buy their own food, they borrow from the company and end up owning them. Then they were no longer paid in money, but on food on credit (Steinbeck 318). Evidently, the owner’s greed drove them to exploit their workers.

Furthermore, the owners kept the masses controlled by preventing meetings from taking place. They “strick[ed] at the immediate thing, the widening government, the growing labor unity;” at “new taxes, [and] at plans” (Steinbeck 220). They were fully aware that unity created change. The narrator repeats, “The Western States are nervous under the beginning change” (Steinbeck 222). By repeating this phrase, the narrator emphasizes the fear of owners for a revolution that would bring their empire down. They are afraid because they know that “two men are not as lonely and perplexed as one” (Steinbeck 221). The narrator encapsulated the owners’ mentality and strategy by stating, “you who hate change and fear revolution” keep these “two squatting men apart” by making them “hate, fear, [and] suspect each other” (Steinbeck 221). Through manipulative means, the owners maintained ownership of the land and possession of the workers. Californian government officials assisted owners in this process by moving the Okies from the roads and raiding their self-built towns. One man alerts the Joads, “Gonna be deputy sheriffs, an’ they’ll push you aroun’. You camp on the roadside, an’ they’ll move you on” (Steinbeck 324). This proves that deputy sheriffs intentionally displaced Okies to prevent them from speaking to each other and form unions. When that does not work, they “raid” Hoovervilles to “put off the day a little and cemented the inevitability of the day” (Steinbeck 324). This shows that deputy sheriffs are aware of the inevitability of the Okies’ social rebellion, but they still try to stretch it as much as possible to keep on exploiting their labor.

Another way to control the Okies was through unfair and inhumane practices. Farmers were “hurt by ill-conceived local and federal policies, and declines in foreign markets that cut demand for their crops” (Swensen 12). The Joads encountered a proprietor on the road who charged half a dollar to get a place to camp with water and wood. When Tom claimed he could simply sleep on the side of the road, the proprietor threatened, “Deputy sheriff comes on by in

the night. Might make it tough for ya. Got a law against sleepin' out in this State. Got a law about vagrants" (Steinbeck 262). Tom's anger stemmed from the fact that the proprietor was making money out of their misery and using his connections with the law against them. A more inhumane yet legal measure to subdue the Okies was by preventing them from fetching food for themselves; the owners incarcerate and/or kill them for trying to. For instance, the Land and Cattle Company does not work the entire land, but they incarcerate people who try to plant corn for survival (Steinbeck 285). Owners also have the "right to kill" anyone who tries to touch or eat fruits from the groves even if they have to dump them if the "price was low" (Steinbeck 286 and 319). They have "guards with shotguns patrolling the lines so a man might not pick an orange for a thin child" (Steinbeck 319). Companies, banks, and government officials blame the Okies for the changes that affect their business, but they ignore the part they played. The narrator repeats "results, not causes" to clarify that those changes (results) occurred because of banks and corporations who ignored the million times they caused "hunger in a stomach," hunger in a [...]soul," "hunger for joy," and hunger for "security" (Steinbeck 220).

### **Slow Violence**

Slow violence is violence that goes unseen for years. The narrator showcases slow violence through ecological degradation by drawing a distinction between a machine man to a real man. The machine man, driver of the tractor, understands "only chemistry" (Steinbeck 179). He understands that the land has nitrates and phosphates, but he cannot analyze beyond that. The real man, the farmer, knows he is "more than his elements" and thus, knows that the land is more than the sum of its components (Steinbeck 179). The difference is that one is part of the land, whereas the other one "does not know and love" the land (Steinbeck 179). The narrator reveals the detachment of men and earth, which is a theme that Steinbeck developed since the beginning

of the novel. Those who see land as mere land cannot possibly understand their role on the environment's health. Those who treat the soil properly see that loving the land means loving their environment. A community "can achieve harmony and strength by cooperating with both natural and social environments" (McNeilly 31). However, this lack of vision is what caused the machine man to hurt the soil to a point of no repair; they were violent with the earth for so long that they slowly killed it.

The slow violence inflicted on the earth is further illustrated when the narrator describes how owners "forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it," and "then crop failure, drought, and food were no longer little deaths within life, but simple losses of money" (Steinbeck 316-317). This shift from attachment to detachment with the land is represented through symbolism of the machine with a horse. The narrator asserts that "when a horse stops work and goes into the barn there is a life and a vitality left, there is a breathing and a warmth, and the feet shift on the straw, and the jaws champ on the hay, and the ears and the eyes are alive" (Steinbeck 179). The narrator uses all five senses to describe the horse to resemble the life it radiates. However, the narrator creates a shift by stating, "But when the motor of a tractor stops, it is as dead as the ore it came from" as "the heat goes out of it like the living heat that leaves a corpse" (Steinbeck 179). The narrator uses the word "But" to shift from the vitality of the horse to the machine as lifeless, dead, and dull. According to Florian Freitag, "Corporations are depicted by [...] *The Grapes of Wrath*: as inevitable, disinterested, impersonal, and soulless forces" (101). Thus, this juxtaposition not only highlights the detachment of industrial life from earth and the soil, but it also represents the indifference of corporations and banks toward ecological degradation.

Slow violence is not only perpetuated on the soil but also on human beings. Poor communities, "often disproportionately exposed to the force fields of slow violence, [are the]

least likely to attract sustained scientific inquiry into causes, effects, and potential redress” (Nixon 16). Because poor communities are ignored and forgotten, it was easy for corporations to dispossess and exile the Okies. The hardships they face on the road are a continuation of the slow violence inflicted on them ever since they were tenant farmers. The narrator compares the Okies’ mass exodus and journey through mile 66 to California to the Israelites’ exodus and journey through the desert to the Promised Land. According to Carol L. Meyers, the Israelites “perceive[d] their journey as a path to immediate and certain death,” which was a “sign of the natural human anguish involved in accepting an immediate future that is uncertain and seems fraught with danger” (114). The Joads carried the same mentality because they did not know what awaited them in California. The Israelites had to cross the Red Sea, the Wilderness of Shur, and Mount Sinai to get to the ““land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites,” which was “flowing with milk and honey”” (Meyers 47). The Joads traveled through the Panhandle of Texas, the border of New Mexico, the mountains of Arizona, the Needles river, and Barstow’s desert and mountains to get to California’s orchards and vineyards where jobs were supposed to be abundant (Steinbeck 182-183). Throughout this journey, both the Israelites and the Joads were aggravated by “inadequate food and water, and the external threat of enemy attack” (Meyers 135). The narrator compares both groups to familiarize the reader with the adversity the Joads faced on their way to California. Some might still claim that this biblical allusion makes this novel entirely religious; however, there is a clear distinction that makes this novel more political and subverts the biblical components. Whereas Moses provides the Israelites with food, water, and safety through miracles, the Joads are embraced with starvation, dehydration, and death. The culprit is not any spiritual or insidious

entity; the culprits are banks and corporations that caused the “family” to sink “lower and lower” (Thompson 168).

Slow violence through economic strife and inadequate healthcare also caused fragmentation in migrant families. The Joads, for example, lost three family members on the road to California. Grandpa Joad died of a stroke caused by their abrupt departure from Oklahoma. He continually voiced out, “‘I ain’t a-goin’, I tell you. Gonna stay like Muley” (Steinbeck 190). Nonetheless, he was taken by force and eventually “lost interest” and became “senseless” (Steinbeck 190). His feeble body could not endure the hectic road, and his heart and soul could not endure leaving his home. As Casey said, “Grampa didn’ die tonight. He died the minute you took ’im off the place” (Steinbeck 215). When he had a stroke, the Joads could not afford a doctor. When he died, they could not afford proper burial. His death and the inability to honor him took a toll on the Joads, especially Grandma. Besides suffering from malnutrition and “convulsions from the heat,” Grandma Joad’s mental and emotional health also deteriorated (Steinbeck 235). Before she passed away, she “got no sense no more” and “Jus’ talks on like she’s talkin’ to Grampa” (Steinbeck 248). The Joads were able to take her body to a coroner but only after they reached California several hours after her death. Both deaths were attributed to the lack of healthcare and economic hardships they faced. These same obstacles influenced Noah’s decision to stay behind in the river. Noah was “fond of his folks, but never showed it in any way” (Steinbeck 137). Thus, instead of saying he was staying behind to help the family, he simply said, “‘Get myself a piece a line. I’ll catch fish. Fella can’t starve beside a nice river” (Steinbeck 288). He wanted to save his family food and space and decided to sacrifice himself for it. The fragmentation caused by the loss of three family members is slow violence because it deteriorates the body, mind, and spirit. This also illustrates that “corporations and trusts, too, are

environmental forces that inevitably and, even more importantly, disinterestedly determine the protagonists' lives" (Freitag 101).

### **Precarity**

As I previously explained, precarity is "marked by the emergence of a new global norm of contingent employment, social risk and fragmented life situations" (Jorgensen, Martin Bak, et al. 3). The Okies were victims of precarity because they lacked security, predictability, and protection. Pa Joad admitted his worries for the uncertain as he stated, "What I'm scairt of is we'll run outa money so we can't git there 't all. Here's all us eatin', an' got to buy gas an' oil. 'F we run outa money, I don' know what we gonna do'" (Steinbeck 239). Fearing the unknown is a natural instinct; however, Pa Joad is supposed to be the foundation of the family, so his weaknesses and doubts cause fragmentation in the family's social roles. In New Mexico, one man shared his tragic experience in California with the Joads in an attempt to dissuade them from going. He recounted "tryin' to get work [...] jus' for a cup a flour an' a spoon a lard" for his children, but they died of starvation with their "bellies stuck out like a pig bladder" (Steinbeck 268). He fell for California's job advertisements, and he ended up having to bury his own children. To make matters worse, the coroner reported their deaths as "heart failure" (Steinbeck 268). This tactic was most likely part of California's denial of injustices happening in their state. This proves that poverty is an ongoing violence because it strips people from their dignity.

Although precarity affects a person's mental, psychological, and spiritual health, it also causes resistance and union. The first time the Joads experience communal unity is when they met Ivy and Sarah, "Sairy," Wilson camping on the side of the road. The Joads came from Oklahoma and the Wilsons from Kansas, yet they were united by their precarious situations. Sairy immediately offered her tent to Grandpa Joad even though she was fragile and ill herself.

She brought comfort and support when grandpa was dying and helped to prepare his body for burial. She also took care of Grandma knowing she was distressed and tired. When the Joads told the Wilsons they were beholden to them, Sairy replied, “You shouldn’ talk like that. We’re proud to help. I ain’t felt so—safe in a long time. People needs—to help” (Steinbeck 209). This means that Sairy found comfort and safety in helping and being with others like them. When the Joads suggested for everyone to travel together, the Wilsons rejected the offer since they only had thirty dollars, but Ma Joad insisted, ““You won’t be no burden. Each’ll help each, an’ we’ll all git to California” (Steinbeck 218). Both families established a relationship based on solidarity in times of need because they learned that it made them stronger.

Similarly, the narrator expresses the concept of compassion and kindness reaping rewards through Mae, a gasoline station waitress. Initially, Mae was scornful and prejudicial towards a poor family stopping by for water and bread. She carefully observed them fearing they might steal the water hose. Then, she refused to sell them bread unless they bought a sandwich. Al, the cook, convinced her to sell them bread. Even so, when the man “embarrassedly” confessed to only “got but a little,” she begrudgingly replied, ““You can’t get no loaf a bread for a dime. We only got fifteen-cent loafes” (Steinbeck 230). It took pushing from Al to get Mae to sell them bread, but eventually she genuinely had compassion for them by selling them two pieces of candy for a penny even though each was a nickel. The truck drivers noticed her act of kindness and left her “two half dollars” (Steinbeck 233). By showing the transformation of Mae from indifferent to compassionate, the narrator highlights the need for unity within the working class.

The concept of unity is enlightened with the Okies’ formation of their own utopian society. One by one, families stopped by the road, and “In the evening a strange thing happened: the twenty families became one family, the children were the children of all” (Steinbeck 271).

Unknowingly, they created a self-governing camp with rules that were humane and fair to live in peace and dignity with one another. Amongst those laws were: “the right of privacy in the tent; [...] the right to refuse help or to accept, to offer help or to decline it; [...] the right of the hungry to be fed; the rights of the pregnant and the sick to transcend all other rights” (Steinbeck 272). They prioritize health and dignity over anything materialistic. This form of self-governing foreshadows the strength and devotion of unions to fight for their rights because “when organisms work together they form a phalanx that has greater strength than the sum of its individual components” (McNeilly 31). The narrator demonstrates that whenever people are placed in perilous situations, their unity makes them stronger.

Precarious communities are oppressed and fragmented, but their people are fighters. The more they are stepped on, the more they resist. The narrator states, “If from this problem the sum is ‘We have a little food, [...] the movement has direction. For the quality of owning freezes you forever into ‘I,’ and cuts you off forever from the ‘we’” (Steinbeck 221). By glorifying the “we,” the narrator shows preference and strength in community and social movement over ownership and individualism. This theme is also applied to the example of the Romans. The narrator compares the errors of the Romans with the errors of Californian owners by stating:

[T]he great owners with access to history, with eyes to read history and to know the great fact: when property accumulates in too few hands it is taken away. And that companion fact: when a majority of the people are hungry and cold they will take by force what they need. And the little screaming fact that sounds through all history: repression works only to strengthen and knit the repressed. The great owners ignored the three cries of history. The land fell into fewer hands, the number of the dispossessed increased, and every effort of the great owners was directed at repression. (Steinbeck 324)

By depicting how the Romans were defeated, the narrator foreshadows the defeat of the owners as well; while the oppressed might become despondent due to their precarious livelihoods, they will eventually rise stronger as a unit and defeat their oppressors. The Romans’ example also

encompasses Steinbeck's advocacy on social movements. Steinbeck's "egalitarian response would be to supplement the world of libertarian non-interference rights with a system of justice insuring basic needs and opportunities for advancement for families like the Joads" (Thompson 172). Therefore, it is evident that Steinbeck advocates for social rights and unions because he truly believes it would bring hope and change for the marginalized.

## CHAPTER V

### JOADS IN CALIFORNIA

Chapters twenty through thirty dramatize the Naturalistic and Transcendentalist concepts applied on the previous chapters. *Necrocapitalism*, *slow violence*, and *precarity* play an even more aggressive role for the Joads in California. The Joads discover that their promised land is nothing but a fraud. Disappointment, sadness, and anger take over their lives; however, their wrath sparks a need for social change and unity that serves as their beacon of hope.

#### **Necrocapitalism**

As mentioned in previous chapters, necrocapitalism is intolerant of any conflict that “challenges the supreme requirements of capitalist rationalization— economic growth, profit maximization, productivity, efficiency, and the like” (Gržinić and Šefik 33). This desire for economic growth and productivity drove corporations and banks to seek productivity and efficiency through industrialization. The invention of canneries is a result of this capitalistic mindset. The cannery system cut the price of fruit below the cost of raising it (Steinbeck 378). Owners of canneries were not affected by this change because they simply raised the price of the canned goods, but regular farmers could not afford it. This was foreseen by the “great owners, the banks, and the companies” who waited for that opportunity to take the farmers’ land (Steinbeck 378). Up to this point, it might seem like a fair business plan; however, once they dispossessed farmers of their land, corporations also used their privileged position to exploit, cheat, and divide their workers.

Companies sought profit maximization through the exploitation of the marginalized. As tenant farmers became Okies, they became part of the crowd of men on roads who were “murderous for work” (Steinbeck 378). The companies took advantage of their desperation,

luring them with false promises and paying miserable wages. When the Joads arrived in Hooverville, a young man informed Tom, with a dignified and sour tone, that the companies printed so many handbills with what “ya save payin’ fteen cents an hour for el’ work” (Steinbeck 332). The irony of the handbills is that they promote an abundance of well-paid jobs, yet the handbills were paid with the money companies saved from underpaying their workers.

Companies got away with this fraud because they lured men that would “kill each other” for a job that would feed their “hungry” children (Steinbeck 332). The Joads’ desperation also turned them into victims of this monopoly. In their first job at Hooper ranch, the Joads were paid five cents an hour and were given a room to sleep in. They conformed because they had a place to stay, and they could afford some food. Nonetheless, as the company hired more people, they lowered everyone’s wages to two and a half cents. This new wage was not enough for a family to survive, yet they preferred it over not eating at all. The Joads kept the job because Windfield and Rose of Sharon were malnourished and needed milk. It was until they gained a little strength that the Joads decided to risk leaving the camp. Many others did not risk it, and corporations knew this. They knew they could exploit the Okies because jobs were scarce.

The corporations and banks’ thirst for economic growth continually led them to fraud workers for cheap labor. Companies sent fake contractors to hire workers to avoid legal contracts. In Hooverville, a contractor was looking for ““a lot of pickers”” for Tulare County, and he offered a “little more” or a “little less” of ““Bout thirty cents”” (Steinbeck 352). His vague responses immediately arose concern for a man named Floyd who demanded, ““You jus’ show your license, an’ then you give us an order to go to work, an’ where, an’ when, an’ how much we’ll get, an’ you sign that, an’ we’ll all go”” (Steinbeck 352). Instead of providing answers and proof of his legitimacy, the contractor called deputy sheriff Joe to arrest Floyd under false

accusations. When Tom tried to defend Floyd, the contractor said that ““They was two fellas hangin’ around that lot”” or ““maybe you’re wanted someplace else”” (Steinbeck 354). The fact that the sheriff is also involved proves the systematic corruption pervades in California. This abuse of power is also part of the system that subjugates and oppresses the poor.

Another way to keep the Okies from going up the social and economic ladder was for companies to treat them as second-class citizens. They assure themselves that they are “good” and the Okies are “bad” invaders as an excuse to start a “fight” (Steinbeck 376). Now that the Okies are seen as the enemy, corporations and banks have the right to protect themselves. At Weedpatch, one boy told the Joads that when he lived in a land owned by “Sunlan’ Lan’ an’ Cattle Company,” they had a ““cop for ever’ ten people” but “one water faucet for ‘bout two hundred people”” (Steinbeck 435). By enumerating the figures, the narrator highlights the sharp contrasts between the overpowering role of the police and social poverty. Another way sheriffs, policemen, and guards treated Okies like the “other” is by keeping them away from government camps. Tom overheard a deputy say, ““Them goddamn gov’ment camps,’ [...] Give people hot water, an’ they gonna want hot water. Give ‘em flush toilets, an’ they gonna want ‘em. [...] You give them goddamn Okies stuff like that an’ they’ll want ‘em”” (Steinbeck 435). In other words, they wanted to prevent “folks in the camp [from] getting used to being treated like humans” because later they would want to “gove’n [them]selves”, and they would be “hard to handle” (Steinbeck 392 and 394). To this end, the state government implemented a strategy of segregation by systematically depriving them of basic human rights.

Companies hired authority figures to drive the Okies away from government camps. Since the “Association don’t like government camps,” they made sure to have deputies and police set up traps to close them down (Steinbeck 392). Local government camps required a

warrant to make an arrest, but deputies were able to go in and clean out the camp without a warrant if a fight broke up. While the Joads stayed at Weedpatch, Tom, Pa Joad, and Al joined the committee. They receive notice that intruders were going to stir a fight on purpose at the dance to get the deputy to clean out the camp. The camp's committee organized themselves to prevent the fight to ensue and capture the culprits. They were correct in their assumptions and were able to prevent the fight by employing non-violent methods. Unknowingly, the deputy sheriffs went straight ahead and demanded, "Open up. We hear you got a riot" (Steinbeck 447). Clearly, the sheriffs' actions proved that they sent the men to cause the riot. Through this example, the narrator exposes the loopholes companies find to subdue the marginalized.

The worst tactic companies used to separate the Okies was by pitting them against each other. When the Weedpatch committee questioned one of the intruders who tried to stir a fight, they discovered he was an Okie. The man acted against his own migrant people because, "Well, goddamn it, a fella got to eat" (Steinbeck 448). This desperation was so ingrained in all of them that they understood that men go to unimaginable lengths and "'don't know what they're doin'" when their family is placed in a life and death situation (Steinbeck 448). Therefore, without harming him, the committee members let him go with the advice, "'Don't knife your own folks'" (Steinbeck 448). Using this same tactic, corporations and banks threatened the few remaining farm owners to follow their steps. Mr. Thomas received an order from the Bank of the West, owners of the Farmers' Association, to cut down his workers' wage or he would cause "unrest" since other farms and corporations lowered their wage to twenty-five cents (Steinbeck 390). Mr. Thomas resisted but was obligated after they asked him, "'By the way, [...] you going to need the usual amount for a crop loan next year?'" (Steinbeck 390). What was seemingly an innocent question was in fact a fear tactic implemented by the bank to control farmers, and in return, make

farmers control the Okies. By using people as pawns, banks and corporations engage in a system of manipulation for capital gain.

When companies and banks were unable to stop the Okies from forming unions, they relied on physical violence. Casy was a victim of an abominable act: cold-blood murder. After Casy was released from jail, he formed a social union with other Okies who were willing to stand up for their rights. Casy learned that whenever the Okies voiced their dissatisfaction, they were driven away and “all the cops in the worl’ come down on [them]” (Steinbeck 494). He heard the cop say “how they’re gonna beat the hell outa [them] an’ run [them] outa the county” (Steinbeck 497). Therefore, they knew that they had to hide and plan their strategy of resistance carefully. Unfortunately, when their hideout was discovered, the cops’ main target was Casy since ““They figger [he was] a leader ’cause [he] talk[ed] so much”” (Steinbeck 497). A cop named George hit Casy on the head with a club so hard that it crushed his skull. However, instead of feeling remorse, George boasted, ““Serve the son-of-a-bitch right”” (Steinbeck 498). By targeting the leader, the cops dismantled their plan for social rebellion and instilled terror in the rest of them. Clearly, corporations and banks were willing to preserve and defend their status quo despite the dire situations they place the Okies in.

### **Slow Violence**

Slow violence is also evident in the way the land is treated in California. The narrator assures: “Behind the fruitfulness are men of understanding and knowledge and skill, men who experiment with seed, endlessly developing the techniques for greater crops of plants whose roots will resist the million enemies of the earth” (Steinbeck 451). These men know how to take care of the land, but they are also pressured to keep “driving the earth to produce” (Steinbeck 452). Once the vines are full of fruits, the owners want workers to “pick the fruit, put it in boxes,

load the trucks, deliver the fruit to the cannery- forty boxes for five dollars” (Steinbeck 453). The longer the fruit waits, it starts to rot, and they have to spray it with sulphur, tannic acid, formic acid, and alcohol. In the end, the “works of the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price” or the “vineyard will belong to the bank” (Steinbeck 454). The earth is overproduced and wasted only because of California’s agricultural practices that prefer to damage the earth and leave people hungry to maximize their profits. Steinbeck called this “the saddest, bitterest thing of all” (454).

According to Patrick McCormick, “In an increasingly separate and unequal society, the poor can become an abstraction, an invisible race that does not shop in our malls, live in our neighborhoods, or haunt our consciences” (46). McCormick’s statement is the epitome of slow violence. This slow violence in California is even more transparent as the Okies are deprived of government services. They were afraid that if the Okies stayed too long in one place and held “red meetin’s,” they would want to “git on relief” (Steinbeck 436). By getting relief and governing themselves, the companies and banks would have no more cheap labor and would lose money. Therefore, they provided the Okies with temporary jobs only. They know that without a permanent job, the Okies will relocate constantly and would not be able to get government relief. When the Okies went to Californian government offices to ask for relief, they were told, “You got to be here a year before you can git relief” (Steinbeck 554). Enduring a year without any help placed the Okies in a life-threatening situation, especially since there “ain’t gonna be no kinda work for three months” due to the floods (Steinbeck 554). With no work, they were bound to relocate once again and most likely would not last the year. This was the companies’ hidden agenda all along. They squeezed the Okies as much as they could knowing that at some point they were going to break and need help. When that time came, the Okies would be the most

vulnerable and accept any working conditions in order to survive. The deprivation of basic needs is a form of slow violence.

Besides being deprived of government services, the Okies were also deprived of health care. This is inhumane and immoral because they were exposed to harmful chemicals such as formic acid, tannic acid, sulfur, and decaying mash that “poison[ed] the air” (Steinbeck 454). This exposure, along with other working conditions, caused starvation, malnutrition, pneumonia, and measles (Steinbeck 554). The absence of a union deprived the Okies of any legal protection. Most importantly, the healthcare system also failed the Okies. When the “Frantic men pounded on the doors of the doctors,” the “doctors were busy,” but when they asked for “the coroner to send a car,” the “coroners were not too busy” (Steinbeck 555). By juxtaposing the two professions’ availability, the narrator clearly indicates the doctor’s preference not to assist and the coroner’s hurry to get rid of the bodies. When the men went in person to request help, the doctors closed their doors. However, when the Okies reported the deaths to a “country store,” the coroners immediately brought “wagons” to take “out the dead” (Steinbeck 555). They did not even investigate the cause of such mass casualties, which demonstrates they wanted to cover it up to save California’s reputation. Certainly, California's health system is part of a necropolitical strategy to perpetuate slow violence.

Tragically, the Okies were also deprived of any other means of survival. By instilling in the minds of Californian citizens that the Okies were “dirty,” “ignorant,” “degenerate, sexual maniacs” and “thieves,” the citizens stopped pitying them and started hating and fearing them (Steinbeck 376-377). This fear and hatred made them close their doors to the Okies. Despite the Okies’ “begging” for “bread” and “rotting vegetables,” they refused to help (Steinbeck 554). Then the Okies tried to get food through other means. They try to “fish for potatoes” in the river,

but the “guards hold them back” (Steinbeck 454). They try to pick up dumped oranges, but “the kerosene is sprayed” (Steinbeck 454). Consequently, they end up relying on lying and stealing. Using this as an excuse, the sheriffs and deputies used their rifles, ammunitions, and tear gas, causing even more fatalities (Steinbeck 555). At the end, there are a “million people hungry” and “children dying of pellagra” just because the food “must be forced to rot” (Steinbeck 454). Consequently, after months of overworking and starving, many Okies passed away. Corporations, banks, farm owners, local government officials, and the average Californian citizen subjected the Okies to this form of slow violence.

Disturbingly, California’s injustice against the Okies for economic gain also endangered the lives of pregnant women and their babies. Pregnant women were not spared from working and being exploited. They had no other option since they had to eat well to provide nutrients for their babies. Rose of Sharon embodies the suffering and hardships of pregnant migrant workers. Her baby’s health was put on the line on their journey to California because of bumpy roads, starvation, dehydration, and the stress of uncertainty. Once she arrived in California, her situation worsened. She barely had adequate meals and not enough milk for the baby. Ma provided her with milk whenever she could, but it was so expensive that it was scarce. The emphasis the narrator places on the need of milk for the baby’s survival mimics the Israelites’ hope for the “land of milk and honey” to gain freedom. Nonetheless, just like Tom realized that California “‘ain’t no lan’ of milk an’ honey,’” Rose of Sharon was also hit with her crude reality (Steinbeck 339). Inside the boxcar, Rose of Sharon was “down with a heavy cold,” which caused her to give birth prematurely. Her body rejected the “cup of hot milk” Ma gave her just like it rejected the baby (Steinbeck 558). After hours of labor, she gave birth to a baby that “‘Never breathed’” and “‘Never was alive’” (Steinbeck 566). The baby was placed in an apple box and

later set in a stream to remind California of its cruelty and inhumanity. This is also a parallel to Moses, however. According to Jack Zavada:

The Hebrew people became so numerous in Egypt that Pharaoh began to fear them. He believed if an enemy attacked, the Hebrews might ally themselves with that enemy and conquer Egypt. To prevent that, Pharaoh ordered that all newborn Hebrew boys must be killed by the midwives to keep them from growing up and becoming soldiers. (para. 4)

Jochebed hid her baby, Moses, for three months so that nobody knew she had a baby. When she could not hide Moses any longer, “she got a basket made of bulrushes and reeds, waterproofed the bottom with bitumen and pitch, put the baby in it, and set the basket on the Nile River”

(Zavada para.4). The narrator compares the past and the present to show that although California did not execute babies, they still participated in the extermination of a race; the babies were killed by their necropolitical system. With this, the narrator stirs moral indignation in the reader and proves how slow violence affects the lives of the most vulnerable.

### **Precarity**

The last portion of the novel hyperbolizes the precarious livelihood of the Okies. They worked hard for a better future, yet their fate seemed determined by natural and man-made forces. Heavy rains caused more unemployment, sickness, and displacement. Despite this, most of California was indifferent to their suffering. Their miseries were ignored, and their deaths were forgotten. The Okies only had each other. They “huddled together” with “faces [...] gray with terror” pondering if they would live or die. The narrator repeats the word “terror” because this feeling is more intense than fear. There are millions of men terrified because there are no jobs; there are millions of migrants terrified because of illness and disease; there are millions of mothers carrying a “blue shriveled little mummy” wrapped up in newspaper (Steinbeck 566). People can get over their fears, but terror petrifies and consumes them. The narrator captures how terror breeds sorrow and wrath:

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. [...] and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage. (Steinbeck 454)

Arguably, corporations and banks did commit a crime by overworking, underpaying, refusing services, and antagonizing the Okies; however, the vilest of crimes was enslaving, torturing, impoverishing, and endangering the lives of the most vulnerable. This is a crime against humanity. A crime that shatters hopes and dreams and fails its people. Moreover, by mentioning the “grapes of wrath,” the narrator alludes to the bible. According to Leonard L. Slade, Jr, “The title of the novel [...] refers to the line: ‘He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored,’ in Julia Ward Howe’s famous ‘Battle-Hymn of the Republic’ [...] [which] alludes to ‘the great wine press of the wrath of God,’ in Revelation” (241). The symbolism of the grapes represents “wrath (as in Deuteronomy 32: 32) or abundance (Numbers 13: 12)” (Slade 241). In the novel, “The grapes mean abundance at first and then bitterness, which turns to wrath as abundant harvests are deliberately destroyed” (Slade 247). Therefore, by repeating “wrath” twice, the narrator establishes that such crime also breeds social anger. Suddenly, the same terror and hostility that ended the lives of many also “changed them, welded them, and united them” (Steinbeck 376). It is a wrath that causes indignation and inspires social change in precarious communities.

Despite being a former priest, Casy became the leader of social revolution for the marginalized. His transcendentalist ideologies from the beginning of the novel transformed into actions as he saw how his people were being subjugated. Just like Moses guided the Israelites from “Egyptians [that] oppress[ed] them,” Casy guided the Okies to fight against California’s oppressive necrocapitalism (Meyers 47). At Hooper ranch, he organized strikes and secret meetings to demand fair pay and basic rights. He had been there before the Joads, so he knew

how the system worked. He knew that the five cents would turn to two and a half cents, and then they would have to exchange their earnings for food at the ranch's overpriced store. Casy, along with his followers, believed social activism were the solution to their current situation since they had seen it happen. Although their actions might seem futile at first, Casy affirms to Tom that, "the on'y thing you got to look at is that ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back.[...] An' that means they wasn't no waste even if it seemed like they was" (Steinbeck 496). This is important because even though there might not be an immediate change, change is imminent as long as there is resistance. Albeit Casy no longer being a priest, he now preached for social justice, embracing the power of social movements and community.

Furthermore, while some argue that Casy is like Moses because he "will lead the oppressed people," it is also arguable that he is "more like Jesus" (Fontenrose 39). According to John J. Han, "A Christ figure characteristically has a time for reflection in the wilderness, agonizes over his mission, suffers, is killed by the authorities, and dies a sacrificial death" (29). Evidently, Casy does parallel Jesus Christ in several ways. At Hooverville, Casy gave himself up to the deputy to save Tom just like "Jesus [...] sacrifices his freedom and life for others" (Han 30). Later on, at Hooper ranch, when Casy was persecuted and attacked by George, a police officer, he did not try to defend himself. Instead, he spoke to him and repeatedly remarked, "'You don' know what you're a-doin'" (Steinbeck 498). These words "echoes Jesus's words on the cross (Luke 23:34)," which means Casy dies a sacrificial death (Han 30). This is one of the most famous religious phrases advising society to forgive their enemies because they are lost and need guidance. Just like this phrase changed from a religious concept to a universal concept of empathy and compassion for each other in times of trial, this novel transforms the gospel's

religious concepts to transcendentalist concepts, creating a “social gospel” (Fontenrose 39). In the end, it does not matter who Casy resembled more. People do not necessarily have to be religious to love and care for each other. Steinbeck seems to be rewriting the biblical text, removing the religious content and highlighting its message of fraternity and sorority, solidarity and love.

Tom eventually understood Casy’s social gospel. Even though Casy had been indirectly “reeducating and influencing Tom to “convert” to his new way of thinking,” it is not until the end of the novel that Tom truly understands Casey (Han 31). As Tom hides from the police in the bushes behind a stream, he realizes that killing George was no different from George killing Casey. His wrath blinded him just as greed blinded his oppressors. Tom acquired a new perspective; he must use his wrath to produce change. He finally understood Casey’s social revolution, so he decided to stop hiding and continue Casy’s legacy. Tom approached Ma Joad to say his farewell. He tells her that he remembers when Casy said, “he foun’ he jus’ got a little piece of a great big soul” and a “wilderness ain’t no good, ’cause his little piece of a soul wasn’t no good ’less it was with the rest, an’ was whole” (Steinbeck 357). This is a very explicit reference to Ralph Emerson’s concept of the Oversoul, a central tenet of Transcendentalism. Tom learned that just like Casy realized his solitude was no good, Tom also realized hiding from the police did not help him or his people. Before Tom departed, he left Ma with a message of hope as he claims:

Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there. If Casy knowed, why, I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re mad an’—I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses they build—why, I’ll be there. (Steinbeck 538)

Tom promises Ma that he will fight for everyone’s rights and freedoms until they live a dignified life where kids do not starve, where they have a roof to sleep in, and where they get fair pay for

their labor. Although it might seem idealistic, it is this hope in change and prosperity that gives them faith and energy to go on. Casy passed it down to Tom, and Tom has the social and moral obligation to pass it down to others. This is important because although their lives do not get better at the end of the novel, it does give hope in humanity.

Interestingly, the novel does not end here. While Casy and Tom do play a major role as models of social activism for an egalitarian society, the narrator constantly proves how others embody these ideals as well through the novel's intercalary chapters. The intercalary chapters demonstrate that not everything is about the Joads; it is about the migrant community. The narrator goes from presenting simple examples to more complex ones. One of the strikers told Tom, "one day they give us some beans that was sour. One fella started yellin', an' nothin' happened. [...] And we all got on the same tone, [...] and they give us some other stuff to eat" (Steinbeck 493). This quite simple example teaches a complex lesson: unity is key. The Joads survived by following this same universal concept when they gave and received help from Wilson and Sairy, Mrs. Wainwright, and everyone they encountered on the road. They shared the pain and struggles of precariousness, and they grieved together. When Mae sold a loaf of bread and two pieces of candy at an inexpensive price to a migrant family, she demonstrated compassion. When Ezra Huston, chairman of Central Committee of the government camp, forgave the migrants who betrayed them because "They don't know what they're doin'," he demonstrated the same compassion Casy did (Steinbeck 448). In fact, Weedpatch, his government camp, provided them with sanitary conditions ("nice toilets an' baths"), basic needs ("good drinkin' water"), and entertainment ("folks plays music," "Sat'dy night they give a dance," and "a place for kids to play") (Steinbeck 342). Most notably, "they ain't no cops let to come look in your tent any time they want" (Steinbeck 342). The camp gave the Okies the

opportunity to join a committee, create their own rules, run the camp, and voice their dissatisfactions, and defend themselves against their oppressors. Weedpatch was the epitome of an egalitarian society. The Okies learned that through government intervention, social movements, and union, change does happen.

On the surface, the ending seems deterministic. Nature, once again, played a big role in the Okies' fate by causing floods that destroyed their homes. However, just like the opening of the novel, wherever there is will to fight, there is hope for change. The narrator states that Rose of Sharon "looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously" as she breastfed a starving man she did not know (Steinbeck 579). It seems like an insignificant deed, but it shows that she is part of the whole. She could have refused to engage in such an embarrassing situation, but she unselfishly gave a man the opportunity to survive. This image also positions Rose of Sharon as the Madonna to elevate her as a symbol of motherhood. According to Edward John Royston, "The object of this "mysterious smile" is the act of saving the dying man by mothering him," which demonstrates her "capacity to care for others" (Royston 157). She feels fulfilled by doing something she believes to be a good deed. John Han supports this claim by stating, "she smiled because she - as a disciple of Casy - experienced the mystery of brotherly or sisterly love while breast-feeding the starving man" (34). Thus, the biblical overtones are replaced by the fact that just like Tom, Rose of Sharon finally understands and practices Casy's social gospel. Her actions not only show love for humanity, but they also show resistance against the companies who want to see them dead. The narrator demonstrates that the common folk has the power to save lives. We cannot rely on miracles; we need to unite and support each other so that our fragmented lives can be whole again. This novel advocates that the "break would never come as long as fear could turn to wrath" (Steinbeck 556).

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

John Steinbeck was a true visionary for foreseeing the corrupt and inequitable system we have today in the United States and giving insight into the crude reality of making a people die; he described what Achille Mbembé calls *necropolitics*. The aim of Steinbeck is to fight oppression through communal resistance and to reinvigorate democracy.

Steinbeck created the Joads family out of real-life migrant families he interacted with; therefore, through the Joads, he represents all Okie families who experienced the same dire life-threatening situations. In this novel, we can see how the Okies were victims of a toxic environment created by men. The Dust Bowl caused mass casualties and economic hardships, especially for poor farmers. The Okies were also subjected to debt servitude as tenant farmers. Some were victims of speculators and others lost their land to banks and corporations. They loved the land so much that they worked just to keep their homes and food on the table. Nonetheless, they were replaced by machines that raped the land, destroyed their homes, and dispossessed them from their land. The necropolitical aspects of this first part of the novel are the exposure to toxic environments, speculation, debt servitude, exploitation, and the war machine through bulldozing and dispossession, which also resemble early-colonialism.

The second part of the novel describes the adversity the Joads experienced on their journey to California. With the limited amount of money they had, they divided it into car expenses, food, and fees. Even though they managed their money as best as possible, they still suffered from hunger, dehydration, heat strokes, and eventually death. Grandpa Joad and Grandma Joad passed away because of these health problems, but many more Okies experienced the same fate. The rest of the Okies who survived had to endure homelessness and the constant

turmoil of uncertainty. Evidently, the necropolitical aspects at work are the lack of health services, homelessness, and deaths, which show that the Okies were left to their own fate to survive.

The last part of the novel shows an intensification of necropolitics. Once the Okies get to California, they are labeled as the “Other,” the “Okie.” This dehumanizes them and turns them into an enemy. Now California can use the *state of siege* and *state of exception* in this invisible war against the migrant-slave. The Okies experience exploitation, debt servitude, and fraud at work. Outside of work, they are subjected to social rejection, state sanctions, police brutality, health services rejection, homelessness, and death. It is not a matter of leaving them to their fate anymore, it is a matter of making them die. The most noticeable aspect of necropolitics is how California made sure to equip the police, sheriffs, deputies, and farm owners with guns to protect themselves from the “savage” Okie.

My research sheds lights on the necropolitical regime present in the agribusiness sector of the United States during the 1930s. *The Grapes of Wrath* is relevant today because it reflects this flawed, corrupted, and unethical system through necrocapitalism, slow violence, and precarity that has resurfaced in the twenty-first century. Most significantly, the novel provides a solution for the new social class of precariats of today who feel the pain of the Joads and empathize because they are hungry Americans too. They are victims too. They yearn for change too. Just as Steinbeck, a writer-activist, demonstrated resistance by exposing the injustices migrants experienced under a necropolitical regime, society needs to expose, dismantle, fight, and show resistance as a community against their oppressors. Hopefully this study shows the relevance and usefulness of *The Grapes of Wrath* for American students to see a panoramic view of the issues that still affect our world today. This study has also sought to provide an example of the practical

application of necropolitics as a theoretical approach that can fruitfully be used in literary studies. Finally, this project can be continued by incorporating other texts from the same period or that present similar problematics such as Hamlin Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* or Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*.

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