

“Each’ll Help Each”: Imagining Mutual Aid in *The Grapes of Wrath*

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“For everyone who has any idea of the life of the labouring classes it is evident that without mutual aid being practiced among them on a large scale they never could pull through all their difficulties.”

—Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*

“Each’ll help each, an’ we’ll all git to California.”

—Ma Joad, *The Grapes of Wrath*

I. Introduction

In late October 2012, Hurricane Sandy moved through the Caribbean

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and toward the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, killing 254 people in eight countries while causing \$70 billion in damage (Diakakis 132). In the US, Hurricane Sandy impacted twenty-four states, and the damage was especially severe in New York and New Jersey, where 600,000 homes were destroyed (Firth 1). As the fossil fuel-driven heating of the planet intensifies, hurricanes like Sandy are becoming more frequent, more destructive, and more deadly. In response to this climate disaster, a loosely-knit social movement and mutual aid network was mobilized, Occupy Sandy, many members of which were active in Occupy Wall Street (OWS), which took over Zuccotti Park next to Wall Street one year earlier to protest economic inequality in the US. Occupy Sandy involved some 60,000 volunteers who distributed food and blankets, provided medical care and legal aid, repaired communications and restored properties, while raising \$1.36 million in cash. This anarchist-inspired social movement outperformed both FEMA and the Red Cross (Firth 99-101). In the first decades of the twenty - first century, mutual aid has seen a resurgence in the US and around the world – Mexico, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Greece, Italy, the UK – due to the global spread of occupy movements and in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate emergency. Mutual aid is a hot topic amongst activists and journalists but has yet to impact the discourse of the environmental humanities. As the climate emergency intensifies and new global zoonoses emerge, so will the importance of mutual aid, as both theory and practice, and the study of representations of mutual aid in literary and cultural texts can help scholars working at the intersection of American studies and the environmental humanities engage with ongoing environmental disasters both big and small. One literary work that foregrounds the importance of mutual aid in everyday life amidst environmental disaster is John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

The opening chapters of *The Grapes of Wrath* transport readers to a damaged planet, a “scarred earth” where the soil has been robbed of its native grasses, exposed to wind and sun, and no longer supports plant or human life (1). Dust is everywhere: “An even blanket covered the earth. It settled on the corn, piled up on the tops of the fence posts piled up on the wires; it settled on roofs, blanketed the weeds and trees” (3). *The Grapes of Wrath*, along with Dorothea Lange’s iconic photographs and the Pare Lorenz film *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1938), etched the apocalyptic Dust Bowl (1930-36) into public memory, a memory that has been revived by Ken Burns’ eco-cinematic documentary miniseries *The Dust Bowl* (2012) and the climate fiction film *Interstellar* (2014). Dust storms were an externality, an unintended consequence of the development and expansion of capitalist agriculture on the Great Plains. In the 1930s, capitalist agriculture, combined with the Great Depression and drought, turned part of the Great Plains — Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Texas — into a disaster zone which “dusted out” many families and communities, forcing them to sell their belongings, pile into old cars and trucks known as “jalopies,” and make the hard journey across the desert and over mountains to the agricultural valleys of California where they hoped to find work, food, and new homes. *The Grapes of Wrath* tells the story of one family of Dust Bowl refugees, the Joads, as they migrate from their home in Sallisaw, Oklahoma to the San Joaquin Valley.

The novel, which opens in Oklahoma with deadly dust storms and closes in California with a devastating flood, documents the physical, emotional, social, political, and economic impact of environmental disaster on refugees and migrant farmworkers, vulnerable populations who survive in part through informal, spontaneous practices of mutual aid. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (1902), Peter Kropotkin argues that mutual aid refers to acts of cooperation and care that enable human

and nonhuman species to reproduce and flourish. "Man is no exception in nature," Kropotkin writes, "He is also subject to the great principle of Mutual Aid which grants the best survival to those who best support each other in the struggle for life" (69). In the novel, Dust Bowl refugees confront harsh climates, unfamiliar geographies, militarized borders, racist discrimination, vigilantes, and fascist growers while struggling with illness, both mental and physical, and ever-present food insecurity and starvation. The sharing of food, resources, knowledge, skills, and care enable refugees and migrant farmworkers to survive the slow, grinding, traumatic violence of life on the road, in homeless encampments, and in the fields. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a story of the 1930s and the Dust Bowl, but it is also a story unfolding around the planet in the first decades of the twenty-first century. As Hannah Holleman writes in *Dust Bowls of Empire*, "Clear parallels between the social and ecological crises of the 1930s and those we confront today mean the Dust Bowl has become a major historical referent of the climate change era" (4).

My reading of *Grapes* begins with Chapter 13 and the chance meeting between the Joads and Wilsons on the side Highway 66, the "mother road," a representative encounter that highlights the practice of mutual aid in the everyday lives of Dust Bowl refugees. This chapter brings to life Kropotkin's observation that, "If, in the working classes, they would not help each other, they could not exist. I know families which continually help each other - with money, with food, with fuel, for bringing up the little children, in cases of illness, in cases of death" (153). The climactic expression of mutualism comes in the last chapter and last sentences of the novel which are set amidst a devastating flood. Inspiration for this chapter came to John Steinbeck in the winter of 1937-38, when California was hit by heavy rain and flooding. In Visalia, 4,000 migrant worker families were flooded out of their tents and starving while smallpox spread through the camps (Souder 190), and

Steinbeck joined efforts to aid the “sick and half-starved people whose camps had been destroyed by the floods” (Wollenberg 15). John Steinbeck may have been a New Deal liberal, but *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel with anarchist tendencies, which is most evident in its vision of mutual aid as a whole way of life. Unlike charity, which maintains the status quo, mutualism works to change the status quo through symbiotic relations between helper and helped that, as Rhiannon Firth argues, “operate as an ontological break, prefigurative utopias, autonomous expressions of agency and solidarity, and as mechanisms of consciousness-raising and pedagogy against the inequalities that lie at the heart of the ongoing disaster of capitalism” (6). *The Grapes of Wrath* is not simply about mutual aid—the novel itself was an act of mutual aid, an effort to support Dust Bowl refugees and migrant farmworkers by exposing readers to the inequalities and injustices that lie at the heart of the ongoing disaster of capitalism.

II. “Each’ll Help Each”

In the 1930s, drought came to the Great Plains. The confrontation between climate and capitalism, drought and agriculture, banks and tenants, turned a section of the plains into a disaster zone known as the Dust Bowl. Donald Worster writes, “The storms were mainly the result of stripping the landscape of its natural vegetation to such an extent that there was no defense against the dry winds, no sod to hold the sandy or powdery dirt” (13), so that, “When the black blizzards began to roll across the plains in 1935, one-third of the Dust Bowl region—33 million acres—lay naked, ungrassed, and vulnerable to winds” (94). Low crop prices encouraged farmers to put more land into production and to abandon conservation practices, such as the rotation of crops, to make a living and avoid foreclosure. Ecological rupture was the overdetermined

effect of climate, financial markets, and bad farming practices.

Like fine dust pollution in Asia today, the dust storms were a hyperobject (Morton), both nonlocal and viscous as the dust stuck to everything: corn, fence posts, horses, children, pillows, lungs. Thousands of people died from lung disease caused by the dust, a public health catastrophe memorialized by folk singer Woody Guthrie in songs like “Dust Pneumonia Blues” and “Dust Can’t Kill Me” (*Dust Bowl Ballads* 1940). 2.5 million people became, as Guthrie sang, “Dust Bowl refugees,” many of whom piled into jalopies and drove along Route 66 to California where they hoped to secure food and work amidst the oranges and sunshine:

66 is the path of a people in flight, refugees from dust and shrinking land, from the thunder of tractors and shrinking ownership, from the desert’s slow northward invasion, from the twisting winds that howl up out of Texas, from the floods that bring no richness to the land and steal what little richness is there ... 66 is the mother road, the road of flight. (*Grapes* 118)

In Chapter 12, Dust Bowl refugees struggle to fill their gas tanks and stomachs, praying that their overloaded and overheated cars don’t fall apart, while labor recruiters fill them with dreams of a better future out west. The novel alludes to Jeffersonian agrarianism, Manifest Destiny, the Virgin Land, and the Frontier Thesis, yet the people in flight are not headed to Edenic paradise but to agricultural hell. In California, the American Dream is a capitalist nightmare.

At the end of Chapter 12, after cataloguing the minor and major emergencies faced by people in flight, from leaky radiators to racist California border patrol, the narrator speaks directly to readers, “And here’s a story you can hardly believe, but it’s true, and it’s funny and it’s beautiful:”

There was a family of twelve and they were forced off the land. They had no car. They built a trailer out of junk and loaded it with their possessions. They pulled it to the side of 66 and waited. And pretty soon a sedan picked them up. Five of them rode in the sedan and seven on the trailer, and a dog in the trailer. They got to California in two jumps. The man who pulled them fed them. And that's true. But how can such courage be, and such faith in their own species? Very few things would teach such faith. (122)

This beautiful story about the importance of carpooling amidst economic hardship and environmental disaster may or may not be true, but it prepares readers for the encounter between the Joads and the Wilsons on the side of the highway in the following chapter. Both chapters foreground acts of improvised, informal mutual aid, of ordinary people sharing resources, time, space, and emotional support to survive life on the road. In *Grapes*, these acts are ordinary and automatic; they are like the air characters breathe. Mutual aid is so ordinary and ever-present in the novel that it can be easily overlooked or dismissed as naïve utopianism. But this ordinariness, this everyday utopianism, gives weight to informality and improvisation because such acts, when formalized and ritualized, could become the foundation for new ways of living together on this damaged planet. Mutual aid both incorporates and is antithetical to humanitarian relief efforts because it is motivated by the desire to change, not preserve, the status quo. When mutual aid transforms unconscious acts into conscious social movements, ordinary practices of care and cooperation are scaled up and become a new common sense or default setting of society. *The Grapes of Wrath* draws attention to ordinary, unconscious acts of mutual aid in order to make them extraordinary.

Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid was anything but naïve, as it was

shaped in part by five years spent in Siberia studying geography, geology, and zoology shortly after the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859). Exposure to the harsh, sparsely populated Russian interior inspired Kropotkin, along with many Russian intellectuals, to critique Darwin, whose theory of evolution was indebted to Thomas Malthus' ideas about the connection between overpopulation and the struggle for existence. Stephen Jay Gould summarizes this formative experience in the young Kropotkin's life, before he devoted his life to anarchist communism:

There, in the polar opposite to Darwin's tropical experiences, he dwelled in the environment least conducive to Malthus's vision. He observed a sparsely populated world, swept with frequent catastrophes that threatened the few species able to find a place in such bleakness. As a potential disciple of Darwin, he looked for competition, but rarely found any. Instead, he continually observed the benefits of mutual aid in coping with an exterior harshness that threatened all alike and could not be overcome by the analogues of warfare and boxing. (Gould 17)

Kropotkin targeted Darwin's most notorious disciple, Thomas Henry Huxley, who popularized a "gladiatorial" image of evolution as a war of all against all. Siberia taught Kropotkin that a fundamental conflict in nature was not only between organisms within a species, or between species, but between organisms and their environment. Mutual aid emphasizes the importance of cooperation in helping organisms within a species to keep warm, survive fires and storms, and persevere through periods of drought. To survive and reproduce in a hostile environment, mutual aid can be the difference between life and death, reproduction and extinction. Kropotkin did not refute Darwin but rather argued that cooperation was as important as competition in natural selection. Darwin

understood that natural selection involved both cooperation and competition, but the former disappeared, or was downplayed, when another disciple, Herbert Spencer, invented the slogan “survival of the fittest,” which rooted economic inequality, white supremacy, colonialism, and genocide in the natural order of things (Morris 135). Mutualism, Kropotkin argued, was just as important and “natural” as competition in the evolution of life on this planet, evidence of which could be found everywhere, from bee colonies to bicycle clubs (Kropotkin 149).

Moving from the nonhuman to the human, Kropotkin argued that mutual aid practices were central to life in medieval cities, exemplified by guilds, in which members engaged each other as equals and owned cattle, land, buildings, and places of worship in common (97). For Kropotkin, medieval city charters were variations on a basic theme, “All will aid each other, according to their powers, within the boundaries of the Commune …” (99). With the enclosure acts and emergence of strong centralized states, mutual aid networks, from the guilds to the commons, came under attack but never completely disappeared. Kropotkin writes, “Although the destruction of mutual-aid institutions has been going on in practice and theory, for full three or four hundred years, hundreds of millions of people continue to live under such institutions” (125). While Kropotkin’s theory of mutual aid emerged out of his experience studying the harsh, unforgiving Siberian environment, John Steinbeck began to observe ordinary people practicing mutual care and support in the harsh, unforgiving environment of California agriculture.

In 1936, George West, the editor of *The San Francisco News*, asked Steinbeck to write a series of feature stories about Dust Bowl migration in rural California. This series, entitled *The Harvest Gypsies* (1936), was later published as a pamphlet entitled *Their Blood is Strong* (1938). Touring the San Joaquin Valley in an old bakery truck that was converted into a camper, Steinbeck visited farms, government camps,

ditch-side settlements, and squatters' camps known as "Hoovervilles" and "Little Oklahomas." Steinbeck's guide was Tom Collins, an official from the Federal Resettlement Administration, later renamed the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal Program designed to "set up clean, well-managed camps for migrants who were otherwise living in appalling conditions in ditches and fields" (Souder 172). Collins, who appears as Jim Rawley in the novel, was a camp manager at the Arvin Farm Labor Supply Center, also known as Weedpatch, a project of the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal's largest agency, which employed millions of people during the Great Depression (Souder 174). While on assignment for the *San Francisco News*, Steinbeck read Collins's reports about the living conditions and experiences of Dust Bowl refugees, "which included troves of stories about everyday life at Weedpatch that Collins did his best to record exactly as the migrants told them" (Souder 214). These reports, along with Steinbeck's own observations and interviews with refugees and migrant farmworkers, provided the inspiration for a new novel about Dust Bowl migration, while his wife and editor Carol gave him a memorable title: *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The importance of mutualism in the everyday lives of Dust Bowl refugees is foregrounded in Chapter 13 when the Joads stop on the side of the highway to camp for the night. Tom Joad, who is on parole, is breaking the law by crossing state lines. His brother Al, a mechanic, is driving: "Al was one with his engine, every nerve listening for weaknesses, for the thumps or squeals, hums and chattering that indicate a change that may cause a breakdown" (123). Al is worried that the "ancient, overloaded Hudson" might not make it over the mountains. Grampa Joad, who is extremely ill, also might not make it over the mountains. They pull alongside a car with its hood up and Tom asks if they can stop there. The man under the hood, Ivy Wilson, responds,

"Why, sure, come off the road. Proud to have ya" (135). His wife Sairy steps out of a tent, "She was small and shuddering. She held herself upright by a tent flap, and the hand holding onto the canvas was a skeleton covered in wrinkled skin" (135). Sairy, who is ill and can barely stand up, says, "Tell 'em good an' welcome" (135). Despite her illness, Sairy offers their tent to the Joads so Grampa can lie down on their mattress and rest. Shortly after lying down, he has a stroke and dies.

The two families wake up together on the side of the highway, the air filled with exhaust and the ground thundering from trucks passing by. The Joads thank the Wilsons for helping Grampa, whose dead body poses a problem for the Joads as the undertaker costs forty dollars, money they desperately need to make it to California, and burying him themselves is illegal. After some debate, the Joads decide to ignore the authority of the state and bury Grampa with a note explaining how he died. Ma says she will lay him out but wonders who will cook dinner. Sairy offers to cook along with Rose and donates a half sack of potatoes for the group meal. Ma asks Sairy if they can bury Grampa in their quilt and offers one of their quilts in exchange. Sairy responds, "You shouldn't talk like that. We're proud to help. I ain't felt so - safe in a long time. People needs - to help" (141). Ma nods, "They do." The families then decide to travel together, an improvised carpooling project in which the Wilsons take passengers from the overloaded Hudson, while Al keeps their car running. Ma's symbiopoetic words encapsulate both the chapter and the novel as a whole, "Each'll help each, an' we'll all git to California" (148).

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, mutual aid is fundamentally about survival, about everyday practices of care, cooperation, and kindness that help hungry, sick, tired, and emotionally exhausted refugees survive life on the road following the ecological disaster of the Dust Bowl and the economic disaster of foreclosure. The Joads and Wilsons share resources,

labor, emotions, time, and skills. The Wilsons' kindness enables Grampa to die in a calm, loving environment, while the Joads make Sairy feel safe. Sairy is on her deathbed, yet still manages to support the group. Dean Spade writes, "At its best, mutual aid actually produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being" (8). The representation of mutual aid in the novel was inspired by Collins's and Steinbeck's experiences touring the San Joaquin Valley. In his biography of Steinbeck, William Souder points out that, "Collins found these people remarkable ... whenever a destitute family arrived at the camp, the residents cared for them without hesitation. In one case that month, a man had given up his job for day so a newcomer could earn enough money to buy food for his family. Collins saw it again and again: How fine are these people! How truly generous" (175). *The Grapes of Wrath* celebrates this generosity, and Steinbeck's love and compassion for refugees and migrant farmworkers shines through every page. But there is a glaring absence in the novel's representation of mutual aid: Filipino and Mexican migrant farmworkers, who composed most of the agricultural labor force in 1930s California (McWilliams 124-33), do not appear as either helper or helped. Narrative apartheid excludes these migrant workers from the systems of care and generosity practiced by the white Dust Bowl refugees, who at the time were derogatively referred to as "Okies."

When the Joads first meet the Wilsons, Pa asks, "You ain't Oklahomy folks?" (135). In their self-representation, the Joads are "Oklahomy folks." But as they cross Arizona and into California, they learn that people out west hate Dust Bowl refugees and have a new name for them, "Okie." When the Joad men are sitting in a river cooling off, they are joined by a couple of men who are heading back home to the Panhandle. Pa asks if it is possible to make a living in California, and one of them says, "Nope. But at leas' we can starve to death with folks we know. Won't

have a bunch a fellas that hates us to starve with" (205). The men inform the Joads that, "Well, Okie use' ta mean you was from Oklahoma. Now it means you're a dirty son-of-a-bitch. Okie means you're scum" (206). Later, the Joads learn that people out west see Okies as animals, "Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain't human" (221). As Sarah D. Wald points out, "This dehumanizing and animalistic language echoes racist and derogatory stereotypes traditionally used against people of color" (84). Between 1935 and 1938, almost half a million Dust Bowl refugees arrived in California, where they were discriminated against, viewed as being less than white, as an uncivilized white Other. Many California towns were hostile to Okies. In one Central Valley community, the local movie theater required "Negroes and Okies" to sit in the balcony (Wollenberg 13). As Charles Cunningham points out, "Okies were homeless in a hostile land; they had little or no refuge. The white Okies would even find themselves racialized as inferior to other whites" (6). The exploitation of migrant farmworkers in California was not an issue in the media until white Okies began to arrive.

In his first story about Okie migration for the *San Francisco News*, Steinbeck writes, "Thus, in California we find a curious attitude toward a group that makes our agriculture successful. The migrants are needed, and they are hated" ("Harvest Gypsies" 21). He then situates Dust Bowl refugees in the history of migrant farm labor in California: "In the past they have been of several races, encouraged to come and often imported as cheap labor; Chinese in the early period, then Filipinos, Japanese and Mexicans. These were foreigners, and as such they were ostracized and segregated and herded about" (21). Okies are part of this history, but they are also above it, they are exceptional, they are real Americans: "They are resourceful and intelligent Americans who have gone through the hell of the drought, have seen their lands with and dies and top soil blow away; and this, to a man who has owned his land, is a curious and

terrible pain ... They have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong" (22-23). Because "their blood is strong," Okies will not tolerate being exploited and oppressed by growers: "It should be understood that with this new race the old methods of repression, of starvation wages, of jailing, beating and intimidation are not going to work; these are American people" (23). Steinbeck concludes that, "Foreign labor is on the wane in California, and the future farm workers are to be white and American. This fact must be recognized and a rearrangement of the attitude toward and treatment of migrant labor must be achieved" (54). Steinbeck's analysis of the racial politics of farm labor was wrong on both accounts. It was Mexican American and Filipino American farmworkers, not white Okies, who joined unions and fought against exploitation and oppression. And the racial formation of farm work in California from the 1930s to the present has not been white but composed primarily of people of color.

In the winter of 1937-38, California was hit by heavy rain and flooding, and Steinbeck returned to the migrant camps to see how people were doing. In the Central Valley, 50,000 migrant workers were "destitute and starving" (Benson 66). In Visalia, 4,000 migrant worker families had been flooded out of their tents and smallpox was spreading through the camps (Souder 190). The growers were preventing relief from reaching the migrant workers because they feared that it would lead to independence and support unionization efforts (Benson 66). The Farm Security Administration (FSA) hoped that publicity about the disaster, which was both natural and political/economic at the same time, could break the blockade, and asked Steinbeck to write something. Steinbeck felt that, "Making money off of these desperate people by writing about their plight was out of the question. He planned to spend any money he got for the articles on medical supplies for the migrants" (Souder 190). Steinbeck engaged in relief efforts during the Visalia

disaster, and this experience, both traumatic and infuriating, provides a crucial context for understanding the last chapter of the novel. Cunningham argues that *The Grapes of Wrath* does not simply reproduce the racial nationalism of the reporting, as the intervening years between Steinbeck's first tour of the valleys and the publication of the novel, specifically the Visalia disaster, radicalized him (Cunningham 11). Steinbeck's "traumatic struggle to save lives in the mud of the San Joaquin Valley," as Benson describes it (70), inspired him to extend the expression of empathy and solidarity in the novel beyond the white Okies to include, as Ma says in the final chapter, "anybody."

III. "Or anybody."

On September 17, 2011, Occupy Wall Street set up camp in Zuccotti Park in New York City to protest extreme economic inequality in the United States. Over the course of its fifty-two-day encampment, a decentralized, non-hierarchical, leaderless form of protest and direct action evolved and spread to more than 900 cities in countries across the world. When Hurricane Sandy hit New York a year later, many Occupy activists quickly mobilized into mutual aid networks which helped people survive the disaster. One influential text in the Occupy movement was Peter Kropotkin's *The Conquest of Bread*, while the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber helped stitch the movement together. In *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, Graeber writes: "Anarchist or anarchist-inspired movements are growing everywhere; traditional anarchist principles - autonomy, voluntary association, self-organization, mutual aid, direct democracy - have gone from the basis for organizing within the globalization movement, to playing the same role in radical movements of all kinds everywhere" (2).

John Steinbeck may have been a New Deal liberal (Wollenberg 13),

but *The Grapes of Wrath* is a novel with anarchist tendencies. In addition to its vision of mutual aid as a whole way of life, the Joads confront crises without relying on an external intermediary or authority, such as when they bury Grampa without notifying the authorities and paying the burial fee. Many anarchist, Black Lives Matter, and #stopcopcity readers probably cheered when the Joads arrive at Weedpatch and learn that cops are not allowed into the camp without a warrant, that the refugees and migrant workers practice self-jurisdiction: “No cops. We got our own cops. Folks elect their own cops. Come along” (286). Like the Occupy movement, *The Grapes of Wrath* is a leaderless novel. Tom Joad’s famous monologue – “Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a cop beatin’ a guy, I’ll be there” (419) – was implanted in public memory through Henry Fonda’s performance in the John Ford film (1940), and helped build a cult of personality around the character. Bruce Springsteen’s “The Ghost of Tom Joad” (1995), which was recorded two years later by Rage Against the Machine, added rock to the cult. But Tom is not the only or necessarily most important leader in the novel. Casey, Ma, Willie, Uncle John, Jim Rawley, and Rose are all leaders in different ways and at different times. A founding mother of the global Occupy movement, of the 99%, should be Ma Joad, “Tommy, I got to thinkin’ an’ dreamin’ an’ wonderin’. They say there’s a hun’erd thousand of us shoved out. If we was all mad the same way, Tommy - they wouldn’t hunt nobody down - ” (77).

The climactic expression of mutual aid comes in the last chapter and last lines of the novel. The Joads are living in a migrant worker camp composed of railroad boxcars with the wheels removed. Two families share a boxcar and hang a sheet down the middle to give a semblance of privacy. Rain has been pouring down for several days, and water from the nearby stream is flowing into the camp and turning everything to mud. The migrant workers face a hard decision, one that embattled

communities around the world are struggling with right now as they confront hurricanes, flooding, wildfires, imperialist war, and genocide: should they stay, or should they go? The other families want to leave the camp, but the Joads' decision is complicated by the fact that Rose is sick and about to give birth. Pa desperately tries to convince the other migrant workers to stay and help build a bank to stop the water from flowing into the camp: "'But these here cars is dry,'" Pa insisted. "'Couldn't find no dry place as good as this, you wait'" (437). Like the representation of dust in the opening chapter, water is a powerful, agential, elemental force in the closing chapter. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, water matters: "The stream eddied and boiled against the bank. Then, from up the stream there came a ripping crash. The beam of a flashlight showed a great cottonwood toppling ... The men broke and ran, and the current worked smoothly into the flat, under the cars, under the automobiles" (442). This subaltern community of migrant farmworkers is exposed to the elemental force of floodwater. They are isolated and alone, with no dry clothes, nowhere to go, and almost no food. Their car engines are "sodden" and cannot start. Even if they could start their cars, the mud would prevent them from driving out of the camp. They are stuck.

Steinbeck's experience during the Visalia disaster provides the background context for understanding this chapter, both its content and mood. Visalia was not simply a "natural" disaster, but like the dust storms that open the novel, an unnatural capitalist disaster in which extreme weather was weaponized against a vulnerable and exploited subaltern population. "Word was that thousands of families were starving," Souder writes. "But what enraged Steinbeck were the active efforts of the growers and their allies to block relief efforts" (190). Several years before the Visalia disaster, the growers and their allies formed a union, Associated Farmers (AF), which suppressed workers and

controlled the valleys with the assistance of vigilante armies that beat and killed workers. The police were co-opted by the growers and just as indiscriminately violent as the vigilantes. Cunningham explains, "Whenever a strike broke out or worker unrest seemed to be on the rise, the AF could quickly mobilize managers, thugs, and hostile townspeople into an armed force. Many groups actually drilled in paramilitary units. When observers like Steinbeck and McWilliams labeled the AF fascist, the description was justified" (Cunningham 6; McWilliams 230-263). The growers, with the support of local governments, the police, and vigilante groups, used isolation and starvation amidst flooding as weapons of class warfare. They prevented relief from reaching starving migrant farmworkers because they feared that "it would give the workers enough independence so that they might try once again to organize" (Benson 66). In Visalia, 4,000 families had been flooded out of their tents and were starving to death. As Benson writes:

For the frustrated F.S.A. administrators, it was a heartbreaking struggle. Conditions were so bad that field-workers trying to get food to the migrants and to rescue the sick could not get the supplies in where they were needed ... In the sea of mud that confronted them, rescuers could not even find the stranded and half-buried enclaves of migrants who had hidden themselves here and there across thousands of square miles of drenched farmlands to escape the wrath of local authorities. The F.S.A. realized it was not only fighting the elements in order to save lives, but it was fighting a political battle as well. (Benson 66)

The FSA asked Steinbeck to write something about the situation, and he told his agent Elizabeth Otis, "I'm going to try to break the story hard enough so that food and drugs can get moving. Shame and a hatred of publicity will do the job to the miserable local bankers ... Talk about

Spanish children. The death of children by starvation in our valleys is simply staggering” (qtd. in Benson 66). Steinbeck planned to use any money he earned from writing about the disaster on supplies for the migrant workers, and he and Collins spent several days in the flooded camps trying to help people (Benson 66-7). *Life* magazine commissioned an article about the disaster from Steinbeck, but the editors thought his piece was too liberal, so it was never printed (Benson 69). Instead of non-fiction muckraking, which literally involved raking through muddy fields trying to help migrant workers, Steinbeck poured a mixture of sadness, fear, desperation, disgust, determination, anger, and hope into the final scene of the novel.

As the floodwaters rise, Rose goes into labor and has a miscarriage. Mrs. Wainwright, whose family is living on the other side of the boxcar, was the disaster midwife. When Ma thanks her, she replies, ““No need to thank. Every’body’s in the same wagon. S’pose we was down. You’d give us a han.” “Yes,” Ma said, “we would. Or anybody. Or anybody. Use’ ta be the fambly was fust. It ain’t so now. It’s anybody. Worse off we get, the more we got to do”” (445). Repetition of the word “anybody” prepares readers for the final scene of the novel. Ma decides they need to evacuate the camp and find some place dry. The men carry Rose and the kids through chest high water to the highway. They walk along the empty highway as the sky grows darker and the rain comes down harder. They see a barn and decide to squat there until the rain stops. Once inside, Winfield points to the corner of the barn, “There were two figures in the gloom; a man who lay on his back, and a boy sitting beside him, his eyes wide, staring at the newcomers” (453). Ma asks what’s wrong with the man, and the boy says, “Starvin’. Got sick in the cotton. He ain’t et for six days” (454). The boy stole some bread and gave it to his father, but he puked it up, so he asks the Joads if they have any money for milk. Ma turns to Rose, “And the two women looked deep into each other. The

girl's breath came short and gasping. She said, "Yes"" (454).

Throughout most of the novel, Rose is depicted as self-centered, as many pregnant teenagers probably are, especially when they are homeless, have been abandoned by their husband, and are living on the edge of starvation. But unlike Joe Davis's boy, the tractor driver who throws the crust of his branded pie away while children stare hungrily at him, or the growers who pour kerosene on oranges and bury pigs, letting food go to waste while refugees and migrant workers starve, Rose does not waste her surplus breast milk, she distributes this surplus freely, and automatically, to a starving father during a flood. The father and son in the barn are not family or acquaintances, they are complete strangers, they are "anybody." Like many of the encounters between refugees on the road or in the camps, this is a chance encounter in a liminal zone. The editors of *Grapes* wanted Steinbeck to change the ending, but Steinbeck adamantly refused. He said it was crucial that the boy and his father were total strangers (Souder 216-17). The exchange between strangers is spontaneous and gives birth to a temporary, improvised culture of care amidst an environmental disaster. The father has not eaten for six days and is wasting away. With encouragement from Ma, Rose is radicalized, making the leap from I to We, and in that strange and beautiful leap, readers are encouraged to have faith that such things can happen. That We isn't limited to family or Okies, but is open to anybody: We the dispossessed, We the exploited, We the starving, We the 99%.

At the same time, the ethnic cleansing of Filipino and Mexican farmworkers from active roles in the novel's third person plural utopianism needs to be confronted, critiqued, and learned from. The failure of *Grapes* to incorporate the racially and ethnically diverse migrant labor force in California should motivate readers to interrogate exclusion and apartheid in their own intellectual, pedagogical, and activist networks. For example, many academics claim to be decolonial,

and yet exclude Palestine from their understanding and practice of decoloniality. Rhiannon Firth points out that “anarchist social movements are often accused of being overly homogenous, creating a kind of ‘activist ghetto’ which is often isolated from the wider community, while it has also been argued that it is harder to sustain non-hierarchical structures among diverse and heterogenous groups” (82). The racial formation of California agricultural labor was diverse and heterogenous, which is absent from *Grapes* but present in another novel about Dust Bowl migration to California, Sonora Babb’s *Whose Names Are Unknown*, which was written in the 1930s, but not published until 2004. Wald explains that “Babb depicts a multiracial “we.” The dispossession of white Americans from their land provides an opportunity for white migrants to develop solidarity with black, Asian, and Latina/o workers, remaking a more inclusive political community” (95). *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names Are Unknown* foster empathy and solidarity with communities of struggle, the former explicitly restricted but implicitly open to “anybody,” the latter explicitly multiracial, creating prefigurative, everyday utopias, that can help twenty-first century readers navigate disaster capitalism and new forms of fascism.

Rebecca Solnit asks, “But what if paradise flashed up among us from time to time—at the worst of times? What if we glimpsed it in the jaws of hell? These flashes give us ... a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become” (9). Describing the strange and beautiful emotional landscape of everyday utopias that arise amidst disaster, of what else our society could become, Solnit observes, “We don’t even have a language for this emotion, in which the wonderful comes wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear. We cannot welcome disaster, but we can value the responses, both practical and psychological” (5). We don’t have a language for the complex emotions that arise when mutual aid practices build fleeting, prefigurative utopias

amidst disaster, but we do have an image, a flash of paradise that appears in the last sentences of the novel when Rose offers her breast milk to the starving father: “Her hand moved behind his head and supported it. Her fingers moved gently in his hair. She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously” (455). Rose’s mysterious smile is “the wonderful wrapped in the terrible, joy in sorrow, courage in fear.” Rose’s mysterious smile is anticipatory, a fleeting image of utopia, of a paradise built in hell that looks forward to the time when, as Ma Joad put it, “we was all mad the same way.”

IV. Conclusion: Occupy *Grapes*

One of the most urgent issues facing humanity, and the humanities, in the twenty-first century is climate-driven environmental migration. As the planet continues to heat at a catastrophic pace, places and regions around the world are becoming uninhabitable due to deadly heat waves, drought, wildfires, desertification, rising sea levels, flooding, storms, and other extreme weather events. In *Nomad Century: How Climate Migration Will Reshape Our World*, Gaia Vince writes, “The number of migrants has doubled globally over the past decade, and the issue of what to do about rapidly increasing populations of displaced people will only become greater and more urgent as the planet heats” (xi). To address this crisis, scholars working at the intersection of American studies and the environmental humanities can find common ground with Critical Refugee Studies (CRS), an emergent field of knowledge and social practice that produces terrains of struggle where scholars, artists, activists, and refugees come together as equals. CRS works with, not on, refugees. As the editors of *Departures: An Introduction to Critical Refugee Studies* describe the project: “CRS is a way to seize control of image and narrative, by and for refugees, centered in refugee epistemologies and

experiences, in ways that enable transformative interventions into legal and political arenas” (Espiritu et al. 15).

John Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath* out of love for Dust Bowl refugees and hatred of the way they were being dehumanized in the media and bullied by the police, the state government, vigilante groups, and the growers. *The Grapes of Wrath* foregrounds white Okie experiences, which Steinbeck learned about through time he spent in unhoused farmworker encampments. Describing the tours with Tom Collins, Steinbeck says that “[we] sat in the ditches with migrant workers, lived and ate with them. We heard a thousand miseries and a thousand jokes. We ate fried dough and sow belly, worked with the sick and the hungry, listened to complaints and little triumphs” (qtd. in Benson 57). The Democratic Party of the United States could learn a lot from Steinbeck in terms of how to connect with white working-class people. *The Grapes of Wrath* was immensely popular when it was published, but didn’t lead to the creation of new public programs to assist migrant farmworkers. When World War II started one year after the novel’s publication, people forgot about Okies and their struggles. Dust Bowl refugees were either drafted or found factory jobs in the defense industry, and the wages of whiteness enabled them to engage the American Dream in ways unavailable to non-white farmworkers (Wollenberg 17). The conflicts that structure *The Grapes of Wrath* returned to public consciousness during the Delano Grape Strike (1965-1970), in which Filipino American and Mexican American farmworkers fought for increased wages, civil rights, and social and environmental justice. When the strike began, many workers were evicted from company housing. Mutual aid networks provided food, housing, clothing, and cultural and religious services that enabled striking farmworkers to survive and thrive during the long fight for justice. These networks included consumer boycotts that put pressure on the growers and helped end the strike. In

1975, the Agricultural Labor Relations Board was established, similar to the one Steinbeck advocated in 1936 (Wollenberg 17).

The Grapes of Wrath is a novel about the 1930s and Dust Bowl migration, but it also includes references to the main events in the long story of capitalism - enclosure, settler colonialism, slavery, genocide, starvation, exploitation, resistance - a story that connects fifteenth century England to twenty-first century Palestine. Mutual aid has been a fundamental, and yet often overlooked or dismissed part of that story. In a new introduction to Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, David Graeber and Andrej Grubačić write, "To create a new world, we can only start by rediscovering what is and always has been right before our eyes" (5). For Kropotkin and Steinbeck, mutual aid is always there, all around us, like the air we breathe. A novel like *Grapes* can help refine the art of noticing mutualism in everyday life. Cataloguing contemporary examples of mutual aid, Dean Spade writes (and please excuse all the ableist eyesight metaphors):

We see examples of mutual aid in every single social movement, whether it's people raising money for workers on strike, setting up a ride-sharing system during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, putting drinking water in the desert for migrants crossing the border, training each other in emergency medicine because ambulance response time in poor neighborhoods is too slow, raising money to pay for abortions for those who can't afford them, or coordinating letter-writing to prisoners. They directly meet people's survival needs, and are based on a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust. (11)

These examples of mutual aid are all present in *Grapes*: helping strikers, ride-sharing, providing drinking water for migrants, emergency medicine,

midwifery, supporting prisoners. From the disaster zones recently created by Hurricanes Helene and Milton, to the disaster zone of Gaza, mutual aid networks are keeping people alive, caring for the remains of those who have been killed, and creating new communities of struggle. Mutual aid might not tear down the walls erected by disaster capitalism, settler colonialism, apartheid, and new forms of fascism, but it can put a few cracks in them. As the student encampments for Palestine that emerged over the past year demonstrate, mutual aid and decoloniality dance, sing, chant, march and pitch tents together.

In *Disaster Anarchy*, Rhiannon Firth points out that, “Decentralised, anarchist-inspired mutual aid disaster relief efforts have arisen after nearly every major natural disaster in the United States since Katrina” (5). As I write this conclusion, Hurricanes Helene and Milton have just devastated the southeastern United States. Massive numbers of people have lost their homes. As the hurricanes were approaching, Helene and Milton *Reddit* communities were created, enabling people to share information, counter misinformation, express their emotions, offer emotional support, and offer help. One *Reddit* post reads: “If you are evacuating Florida and need a place to stay, I have 15 acres just outside of Savannah, Ga. You are welcome to come here and camp/pitch a tent/bring your RV. Power and water available. Send me a message if you are interested” (u/Fiberguru). Another says: “I live in Lexington, SC. Trauma burn ICU nurse, entire month of October off, dying to help ... Just need direction and a safe place to sleep (I’m good with the floor!)” (Objective_Water_9542).¹

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“Each’ll Help Each:” Imagining Mutual Aid in *The Grapes of Wrath*

Abstract

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The Grapes of Wrath (1939) opens in Oklahoma with deadly dust storms and closes in California with a devastating flood. The novel documents the physical, emotional, social, political, and economic impact of an environmental disaster on refugees and migrant farmworkers, vulnerable populations who survive in part through informal practices of mutual aid. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (1902), Peter Kropotkin argues that mutual aid refers to the practices of cooperation and care that enable human and nonhuman species to reproduce and flourish. In this paper I argue that informal practices of mutual aid - the sharing of food, resources, knowledge, skills, and care - enable refugees and migrant farmworkers to survive the slow, grinding, traumatic violence of life on the road, in homeless encampments, and in the fields. *The Grapes of Wrath* is a story of the 1930s and the Dust Bowl, but it is also a story unfolding around the planet in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Key Words: American literature, climate fiction, environmental humanities, ecocriticism, critical refugee studies

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