A SYSTEM WITH PARTS AND PLAYERS:
THE AMERICAN LYNCH MOB IN JOHN STEINBECK’S LABOR TRILOGY

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Life Magazine Photo
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This thesis will explore the subject of lynching in John Steinbeck’s work, specifically his 1930s labor trilogy: *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

My interest in John Steinbeck’s work and its connection to lynching was sparked by a particular reading of his 1937 novel, *Of Mice and Men*. I say particular because I have encountered the novel many times. I read the text for the first time as a high school student. The discussion, I remember, was largely focused on the dynamics of George and Lennie’s friendship and the book’s traumatic resolution, which, as a high school student, I could not begin to wrap my mind around. When I read it for the second time, in an undergraduate English class, the discussion was noticeably more sophisticated and complicated. We delved into Steinbeck’s background, the history of 1930s California, and the book’s larger, cultural resonance. By the time I opened it for the third time, I was in a graduate American Literature course at The University of Akron and very much aware that a piece of literature can transform with each additional reading. I loved the novel each time I read it, but this third time it was a whole different book.

This time I was reading *Of Mice and Men* for a course that covered a piece of the American Literature canon—late nineteenth and twentieth century. Perhaps it was the
structure of the course, but one author seemed to flow seamlessly into the next. In this case, just before I began *Of Mice and Men*, I read James Baldwin’s short story, “Going to Meet the Man.” At first, Baldwin’s confrontational and graphic account of the mutilation of an African-American male performed by a 1930s lynch mob could not have been more dissimilar to the Steinbeck novel I remembered. But then I re-read *Of Mice and Men*, and for the first time in three readings I noticed that the word “lynch” appeared in the text.

About halfway through the novel, George partakes in a conversation with one of his bunkmates, Slim, in which he details the, up until then, mysterious reasons for Lennie and his journey from Weed to the ranch for work. As George reluctantly recounts, Lennie had been accused of rape in Weed, and “the guys in Weed start[ed] a party out to lynch Lennie” (Steinbeck 42). After discovering the word I had completely missed on the first two readings and the corresponding story of an attempted lynching I had previously overlooked, I began to feel the presence of the lynch mob throughout the text. That presence became even more significant for me when I discovered a second lynch mob—less explicit in the sense that “lynch” is not used to describe it—in *Of Mice and Men*. In the final scenes, after Lennie accidentally kills Curley’s wife—the unnamed wife of another farmhand—the boys immediately form a lynching party, grab their guns, and head out to hunt down and “kill the big son-of-a-bitch [Lennie]” (Steinbeck 96). As Slim mentions to George amid the chaos, it seems just “like that time in Weed you was tellin’ about” (Steinbeck 97). Not only does the novel begin with Lennie being run out of Weed by a lynch mob, but it also concludes with a second lynching party chasing him to the river. After this particular read-through, I began to think of *Of Mice and Men* as a lynching novel.
I was plagued by questions while developing the short novelette as a lynching story. If this is a lynching novel, why is a white migrant worker the target of a lynch mob? How does the lynch mob operate? How does this fictional account resemble or conflict with the American lynching narrative? What does it mean that this lynching story is grounded in 1930s California and not the South? What happens to the notion of race when Lennie—the target—is figured as a black male? I had tried to address these in what originally was just another paper on *Of Mice and Men*, but the project grew larger. I came to realize that, like most of Steinbeck’s other work, *Of Mice and Men* is a very historically and geographically specific piece because of his investment in the 1930s and California. As a result, I spend much of the *Of Mice and Men* chapter (Chapter III) demonstrating that both Lennie’s complicated racial status and the lynching presence help illustrate that 1930s California represents a time and place in which the borders surrounding race become increasingly unstable. From there, my interest in Steinbeck’s work and the subject of lynching quickly spread to the rest of the 1930s labor series. And, this thesis project was conceived.

After discovering all of this in *Of Mice and Men*, I became interested in investigating the subject of lynching in Steinbeck’s other works, specifically *In Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*. I did not know for sure that lynching would come into play in either novel, but it did. Much like *Of Mice and Men*, the word “lynch” only appears once in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*. It happens the morning after Tom Joad clubs a union buster to death in retaliation for Jim Casy’s murder. Uncle John says, “Seems like the people ain’t talkin’ ‘bout much else…they got posses out, an’ they’s fellas talkin’ up a lynchin’—‘course when they catch the fella” (Steinbeck 399). The
fleeting reference to lynching passes quickly, as it does in Of Mice and Men, but as I traced the reverberations of the word through the whole novel, it became more than just a marginal reference to me. It shed light on the racial complexity of the Okie population and revealed the racial underpinnings of Depression-era California.

Again, I was fascinated by the centrality of the white migrant worker to the lynching narrative that Steinbeck created in his work. Like Lennie Smalls, Tom Joad was the target of a lynch mob. It seemed clear to me that Steinbeck was complicating the racial status of the white migrant population in a significant way.

Racialized readings of The Grapes of Wrath have been conducted before. In his essay, “‘These are the American People’: The Spectre of Eugenics in Their Blood is Strong and The Grapes of Wrath,” Steinbeck scholar Kevin Hearle explores the influence of eugenic theory and discourse in Steinebeck’s article series and novel, proposing that a “reconsideration of the role of race and racialized discourse” in both works is necessary (244). Similarly, Ashley Lancaster also explores the influence of eugenics in her essay, “Subverting Eugenic Discourse: Making the Weak Strong in John Steinbeck’s Their Blood is Strong and The Grapes of Wrath,” arguing that Steinbeck’s work countered the belief that the migrants’ genetics made them inferior.¹

Marilyn Wyman also explores ideas of racial superiority in relation to Steinbeck’s work. In “Affirming Whiteness: Visualizing California Agriculture,” she focuses on the cultural context of a specific group of agricultural murals in California that represent, she believes, “the growing nativism of the Depression years” (Wyman 33). Noticing the very white images of the American farmer and American farming family in these federally-

¹ Only a brief introduction to the work focused on representations of racial superiority in Steinbeck’s text.
funded murals, Wyman argues that the art work “reinforced the marginalization or otherness of the actual field laborer,” (45). Though these works contribute important criticism to the study of race in Steinbeck’s work, they don’t touch on lynching at all.

In Chapter IV, I explore the racial ambiguity of Tom and the other migrant workers, concentrating on what Steinbeck’s use of lynching and black history contributes to that racial complexity.

My interest in lynching also brought me to the 1936 strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*. This text is the first novel in Steinbeck’s 1930s labor trilogy and details the story of a California apple orchard strike. I came to *In Dubious Battle* after reading both *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, but unlike those novels, I had never read *In Dubious Battle* before. I did know that much of the *In Dubious Battle* scholarship pointed to the 1930s labor movement and the strike-torn years of 1933 and 1934 as influential in Steinbeck’s development of the novel and his implementation of the phalanx theory—the study of, what he called, the “group animal.”

Again, lynching had not been mentioned in the criticism, but it played a significant role in the novel. Although perhaps not the central focus, there are still numerous allusions to lynching and four explicit invocations of it within the text. And, again, the white laborers—and strike leaders—are the targets for the lynching. Chapter II

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1 For a cursory overview of this criticism, see:
investigates how and why the subject of lynching slips into this strike narrative. Instead of focusing on the California labor strikes from the early 1930s, my analysis considers the 1933 lynching of two white men in San Jose, California as influential in the development of the novel and suggests that lynching is key to an understanding of *In Dubious Battle* and the labor series.

Steinbeck’s interest in the labor movement during the 1930s is widely-accepted as influential in his work, especially his labor series. However, the subject of lynching also manifests itself in each of the three novels and develops simultaneously in his 1930s work. In early 1934, shortly after the San Jose lynching, Steinbeck begins work on a short story about a lynching—what would become “The Lonesome Vigilante.” The lynching story is finally published in 1936, the same year as *In Dubious Battle*, and later republished in 1938 with his short story collection, *The Long Valley*. Steinbeck also begins work on a vigilante novel in the mid-1930s, which he would work on for several years before abandoning the project in 1938 and beginning work on *The Grapes of Wrath*. After reading his labor series and slowly backtracking through his work from that decade, it became clear to me that lynching actually pervades Steinbeck’s work in the 1930s. This thesis unveils the presence of lynching in the labor trilogy and negotiates its connection to Steinbeck’s vision of Depression-era California.
CHAPTER II

“’THEY’RE THE SAME ONES THAT LYNCH NEGROES’: VIGILANTES AND LYNCH MOBS IN STEINBECK’S IN DUBIOUS BATTLE

On November 26, 1933, a mob of several thousand San Jose residents battered down the doors to the Santa Clara County Jail, dragged two prisoners from their cells, and lynched them across the street in St. James Park. Several days earlier, Thomas Harold Thurmond and John Holmes had confessed to the kidnapping and murder of Brooke Hart, son of the wealthy department store owner Alex Hart. On the morning of November 26th, Brooke Hart’s body had been discovered floating in the San Francisco Bay.

That night a crowd of, reportedly, fifteen thousand surrounded the jail containing Thurmond and Holmes. Loud chants of “Lynch ‘em! Lynch em!” and “Brook-ie Hart! Brook-ie Hart!” echoed through the night as the crowd threw stones at the building and searched desperately for a way inside. Eventually one teenage boy stood up in front of the encroaching mob and asked, “Are there men with guts enough to follow me in and get those sons of bitches?” (Farrell 211). After breaking through the police barricades with a battering ram and beating the sheriff and deputies out of the way, the mob identified the two terror-stricken prisoners. They dragged them from their cells and beat them along the way to the park. The crowd surveyed the park for two strong tree limbs, partially
stripped the two white men, and prepped the ropes. After identifying two strong limbs near one another, the crowd readied for the lynching. The possibly-unconscious Thurmond put forth no resistance and was strung up quickly. Holmes’ death took a bit longer. After struggling furiously with the rope for several minutes, the mob finally pulled it so forcefully that Holmes’ neck snapped. The crowd of men, women, and children cheered furiously at the sight.

After both men were dead, but still hanging lifelessly from the elm tree limbs, one man fought his way to the front of the mob and “touched a match” to Thurmond’s dangling body (McGinty 301). Shortly thereafter, a woman also pushed her way to the front and touched a burning twig to Holmes’ foot (Delgado 76). The crowd lingered for about an hour before San Francisco police arrived on scene and cut down the bodies. On Monday morning, the front page of the local *Oakland Post-Enquirer* read: “San Jose Vigilantes Lynch Two Hart Killers.”

It is in early 1934 that John Steinbeck, then writing and living ten miles south of San Jose in the Santa Clara Valley, starts writing a short story about a lynching. The story is finally published in *Esquire* magazine’s October 1936 issue as “The Lonesome Vigilante.” It was also later republished as “The Vigilante” in Steinbeck’s 1938 short story collection, *The Long Valley*, where it received wider attention. This Steinbeck text is often over-shadowed by some of his more well-known writing, but the 1936 short story about a lynching is actually central to an understanding of Steinbeck’s more famous mid-late 1930s work, especially the contemporaneous strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*.

In this first leg of what is often referred to as the labor trilogy—*In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—Steinbeck tells the story
of a migrant worker strike in California’s apple orchard country. For many, *In Dubious Battle* is Steinbeck’s “first major novel” and the book that signals a significant turning point in his fiction (French vii). Firstly, it debuts his considerable study of the phalanx theory, which engulfed much of his time throughout the 1930s and represented a noteworthy shift in his approach to literature. Secondly, it is “the first [novel] to stir up the kind of controversy that his fiction would subsequently arouse over serious social and political issues” (French vii). It is in this pivotal 1936 text that the words “vigilante” and “lynch” appear consistently and frequently. Both the 1933 San Jose lynching and the often-over-looked 1936 short story permeate Steinbeck’s first landmark novel.

*In Dubious Battle* has attracted less critical attention than the more widely-read *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, but the historical grounding for the strike and Steinbeck’s implementation of the phalanx theory have still engendered important critical discussion within the scholarship. Steinbeck delved into his study of the phalanx in 1933, which marks an important turning point in his creative life. The phalanx theory involves the study of, what he referred to as, a “group animal.” Despite the existence of individual members, Steinbeck came to believe that the group itself takes on a character and identity different and separate from that of its members—it becomes a whole different animal. In a letter to Carlton Sheffield, in which Steinbeck first mentions his ideas about the phalanx, he writes, “It is quite easy for the group, acting under stimuli to viciousness, to eliminate the kindly natures of its units. When acting as a group, men do not partake of their individual natures at all. The group can change its nature” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 75).
Howard Levant explores this group theory in Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* and identifies the “group-man”—the collection of individuals—as “a creature of violence” that is instrumental to the migrant workers’ strike (24). Levant’s analysis implicates the moral character of the group-man, which he finds to be the “force that uses and destroys [Jim’s] sense of his own humanity” (25). Jackson Benson and Anne Loftis also touch on the presence of the phalanx in *In Dubious Battle* during their investigation of the strike’s historical background. While drawing connections between Steinbeck’s apple strike and both the 1933 Tulare County Peach Strike and the October 1933 Cotton Strike in the San Joaquin Valley, Benson and Loftis do suggest that Steinbeck’s “transformation of man into animal” functions as a compelling and accurate aspect of this strike composite (223). More recently, Will Watson has also examined both the phalanx theory and the historical grounding of *In Dubious Battle*’s apple strike. Watson investigates the “strike-torn year” of 1934 and places *In Dubious Battle* in conversation with one of the largest labor strikes in California history, “The Big Strike” of August 1934 (33-34). He reads Steinbeck’s representation of the phalanx from the novel alongside the “actual revolutionary masses of 1934” in order to reveal the, as he says, “tensions” between the two (38).

There is clearly much attention paid to the phalanx theory in Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle*. However, most of this critical attention is devoted to analyzing the idea of the group-man in relation to the migrant worker population—both their representation in the novel and from various historical California strikes. *In Dubious Battle*, though, contains another group that takes on characteristics of the phalanx: vigilantes. Though they play a less central role in Steinbeck’s text, their presence warrants investigation. Much of the scholarship mentions these vigilantes in passing while detailing the ins and
outs of the plot, but no analysis of *In Dubious Battle* has attempted to investigate the historical significance of Steinbeck’s “vigilantes.” The dominant, critical narrative points to the California labor strikes of 1933 and 1934 as influential in the development of *In Dubious Battle* and essential to Steinbeck’s conception of the labor series. I would like to suggest a different narrative. The 1933 Thurmond-Holmes lynching by the “San Jose Vigilantes” is critical to both a reading of Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* and an understanding of the labor scene in 1930s California. This chapter investigates the presence of vigilantes and lynching in Steinbeck’s 1936 strike novel.

While a link between the “San Jose Vigilantes” and the vigilantes of *In Dubious Battle* is absent from the scholarship, connections between the 1933 San Jose lynching and Steinbeck’s short story, “The Lonesome Vigilante,” have been recognized by some scholars. Steinbeck scholar Martha Heasley Cox first draws attention to the San Jose influence in 1978.\(^3\) In a subsequent treatment of the Thurmond-Holmes lynching, Brian McGinty briefly mentions that “novelist John Steinbeck published a compelling short story that was inspired by the events in San Jose” (304). James Delgado, too, places the historical lynching and the Steinbeck story in conversation with one another, drawing out the similarities between the two. Delgado’s analysis of the two texts is the most compelling. He points to the numerous striking consistencies:

> the setting in a public park, with the jail located across the street, the alleged confession of the lynched man, a streetcar line running by the park, the manner in which the lynched man died, what happened to the corpse, the reaction of the town, and even the use of elm trees as the gallows. (Delgado74)

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\(^3\) In “Steinbeck Used San Jose Hangings for Short Story with Lynching Theme.” *Phoenix.* 26 April 1978. Print. 20 February 2013.
Delgado’s investigation, however, lacks any substantial analysis of the most obvious difference between the two accounts: in Steinbeck’s short story, he writes the victim of the lynching as a black male.

The tradition of lynching in America is obviously closely tied to the powerful and lengthy period of systematic execution of thousands of African Americans in the South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. As Delgado aptly notes, “The identification of the lynch mob’s black victim as ‘the nigger’ and the well-publicized resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan led readers familiar with current events to assume that the story was set in the deep South” (70). The story was of course actually set in California, but as Steinbeck’s own substitution suggests, much of the Thurmond-Holmes lynching actually resembles those lynchings of black males in the South. Phillip Dray’s *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* details the long history of America’s gruesome tradition. His specific accounts of, what are often referred to as, “spectacle lynchings” illuminate some of their most common practices: enormous audiences and crowds, radio and newspaper advertisements, a mob hunt of some kind, stripping of the lynched body, castration, mutilation, the actual hanging, the burning of the body, celebratory cheering, bloody souvenirs, among others. In the San Jose lynching, many of these traditions play out: a mob of fifteen thousand, by many accounts, showed up for the lynching; many “reporters were on the scene in force” (McGinty 299); both victims were “kicked and beaten and spat upon as they were dragged forward” to the lynching spot (300); both were stripped of at least some of their clothing, strung up on tree limbs for the hanging, and burned by individual members of
the mob; materials from the lynching—blood-soaked rope, torn clothing—were sold and passed around as souvenirs after the event.

Steinbeck demonstrates an awareness of many of these rituals, as he includes some of the most gruesome into “The Lonesome Vigilante.” In an early scene from the short story, Mike—central vigilante—and the entirety of the mob watch as “the flame curled about the feet of the grey naked body hanging from the elm tree. It seemed curious to him [Mike] that negroes turn a bluish grey when they are dead” (Steinbeck 1). The naked black male body, the actual hanging from a strong tree limb, and the burning corpse are all present in this opening scene from the short story account.

Later, Steinbeck even incorporates the souvenir ritual, which very often accompanied lynchings in the South. The black male’s body—ears, fingers, penis, etc.—was frequently dismembered during the process of the lynching and then sold or exchanged amongst the town’s citizens after the event. The victim’s clothing and the tools from the lynching, too, were often showcased in store front windows or traded amongst mob members as mementos. “The Lonesome Vigilante” contains a comparable manifestation of this souvenir ritual: while discussing the lynching with the local bartender, “Mike reached into his trousers pocket and brought out a piece of torn blue denim” from the black male’s pants (Steinbeck 2). In response, the bartender pleads, “I’ll give you a buck for it…All right, I’ll give you two bucks for half of it” (2). The substitution of a black male victim for the white Thurmond and Holmes from the 1933 San Jose lynching signifies an awareness of and an attention to the Southern lynching narrative within “The Lonesome Vigilante.” Through Steinbeck’s lynching of a black male, the racial undertones of what unfolds in San Jose in 1933 is made apparent.
In the contemporaneous *In Dubious Battle*, this lynching narrative also emerges, albeit more subtly. The strike novel is not only full of references to “vigilantes,” but it also contains several allusions to lynching. The first mention of the racially-charged term is jarring—almost out of place—in this novel full of mostly white characters. In this first occurrence, Mac attempts to explain the possible consequences for their involvement with the strike and provides explicit instructions for Jim Nolan: “First they’ll try to scare us…Now listen, if any time when I’m not around somebody tells you you’re going to be lynched, you just agree to anything” (Steinbeck 74). By this point in the novel, Mac has begun to explain the danger that will accompany their involvement with the strike, specifically danger from vigilantes—the “they” who will try to scare them in Mac’s warning. Before this moment in the novel, the vigilante threat is a bit nebulous for both the reader and Jim. Here, though, this first appearance of the word “lynch” shapes a palpable connection between vigilantes and lynch mobs. The suggestion that Jim would be “lynched” by vigilantes for his participation in the labor strike is still startling.

The racial undertones of lynching, which make this threat toward Jim so jarring, become apparent in other moments from the text, as well. After the first real vivid encounter with the vigilantes at the railroad tracks, Jim, specifically, is perplexed by what he witnesses: “Mac, who in the hell are these vigilantes, anyway?” (Steinbeck 131). Mac’s response brings the latent racial implications of lynching to the surface:

> Why, they’re the dirtiest guys in any town. They’re the same ones that burned the houses of old German people during the war. They’re the same ones that lynch Negroes. They like to be cruel. They like to hurt people, and they always give it a nice name, patriotism or protecting the constitution. But they’re just the old nigger torturers working. (Steinbeck 131)
According to Mac, these California vigilantes are “the same ones that lynch Negroes.” Yet, in Steinbeck’s novel, these same “nigger torturers” harass, threaten, and harm the white laborers and strike organizers in order to disrupt and put down their burgeoning insurrection. In this chapter, Mac’s understanding of the vigilantes’ identities is concurrent with the murder of one of the white picketers—Joy. At the railroad crossing, the vigilantes shoot Joy to death. Within the span of just a few pages, Joy is killed by the vigilantes and Mac subsequently reveals that they are the same kind of group that lynchers and tortures “Negroes.” In this context, Joy’s death is set alongside the lynching of “Negroes” and suggests a parallel between this group of migrant picketers and the black population.

Before the novel ends, a second story from Mac brings lynching back into focus. By this point in the novel, the strike participants have witnessed a significant amount of vigilante violence. London, one of the leaders of the strike, confesses to feeling fearful of the vigilantes. He notes that “Y’can kind of feel what’s goin’ to happen before it starts” (211). Mac replies:

I know…The air gets full of it. I saw a nigger lynched one time. They took him about a quarter of a mile to a railroad over-pass. On th’ way out that crowd killed a little dog, stoned it to death. Ever’body just picked up rocks. The air was just full of killin’. Then they wasn’t satisfied to hang the nigger. They had to burn ‘im and’ shoot ‘im, too. (Steinbeck 211)

London’s fearful anticipation of a vigilante attack is what prompts Mac to tell this story about the lynching of a “nigger.” London can sense when a vigilante attack is imminent, just like Mac could tell that the “nigger” from his anecdote would be lynched. The air gets “just full of killin[g]” before vigilante attacks on both migrant picketers and blacks. In this short anecdote about the lynching of a “nigger,” Mac again figures the white
laborers and the black population in very similar positions. Much of this short story, too, is reminiscent of Joy’s earlier death at the hands of vigilantes. The “railroad over-pass,” where they lynched “the nigger,” evokes that earlier standoff at the railroad and pushes Joy’s death by vigilante violence into the lynching context.

The burning of the victim’s body in this lynching memory resembles the nature of the lynching from Steinbeck’s “The Lonesome Vigilante,” as well as the 1933 Thurmond-Holmes lynching, which also resurfaces here. Both Thurmond and Holmes were burned after their hangings. In his exploration of that lynching, Ken Gonzales-Day notes that the burning of the bodies—as well as the “stripping of the lynched body,” which also unfolds in that case—is odd for a California lynching of two white men. As he explains, “The stripping of the lynched body was relatively rare in California, and there is almost no mention of bodies being forcibly mutilated. On the East Coast lynched blacks were stripped, chained, burned, shot, mutilated, and blow-torched” (Gonzales-Day 111). This phenomenon, common during black lynchings, surfaces somewhat unexpectedly in the Thurmond-Holmes case and in two subsequent Steinbeck stories—“The Lonesome Vigilante” and In Dubious Battle. Steinbeck appropriates the racially-charged ritual from the Thurmond-Holmes lynching and adopts it for his two stories, where he then sets the burning in relation to black male lynchings. The racial undertones of the burning and stripping ritual suggest something complex about race in Steinbeck’s work and in 1930s California.

The lynching of African Americans does haunt In Dubious Battle in the form of these short, sporadic anecdotes and allusions. However, Steinbeck’s vigilantes also evoke another regional lynching history—one far less visible in the larger American
lynching narrative. This history surfaces with the first reference to vigilantes within *In Dubious Battle*. In this scene, Mac, Steinbeck’s veteran strike organizer, attempts to illustrate the basic structure of a labor strike for the newly-turned Communist organizer, Jim. Mac outlines the sequence of events that normally unfolds after a strike has been implemented:

Now what happens? We congregate the men. A bunch of sheriff’s men try to push them around, and that starts a fight. There’s nothing like a fight to cement the men together. Well, then the owners start a vigilantes committee, bunch of fool shoe clerks, or my friends the American Legion boys trying to pretend they aren’t middle-aged, cinching in their belts to hide their pot-bellies…Well, the vigilantes start shooting. If they knock over some of the tramps, we have a public funeral; and after that, we get some real action. (Steinbeck 26)

Like the Thurmond-Holmes lynching—“San Jose Vigilantes Lynch Two Hart Killers”—and the Steinbeck short story—“The Lonesome Vigilante”—this 1936 novel also invokes the word “vigilante” to signify the individuals participating in the mob violence. Here, though, the specificity of “vigilantes committee” calls upon a less obvious Californian lynching history.

In 1850, the year California officially joined the Union, “vigilance committees” emerged in various areas of the state, most famously in San Francisco. These vigilance committees were official organizations comprised of California citizens who sought to bring justice to their towns, and to the state. The committees took it upon themselves to carry out their version of justice whenever the legal and established forms of law enforcement allegedly failed to do so (Gonzales-Day 89-91). Often, these vigilance committees would circumvent the law and lynch whichever criminals—or alleged criminals—they saw fit. As Ken Gonzales-Day asserts in his historical work on lynching in the West, “the success of San Francisco’s first vigilance committee” in 1851 prompted
new committees to emerge across the state, many of which would exist for the “next seven decades” (89). Over the course of those seven decades, according to Gonzales-Day, “it becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish between the best intentions of those first vigilante committees, which assembled in the light of day, and the bloodshot vision of the lynch mob, assembled in the dark of night” (91). The vigilance committees, essentially, became lynch mobs. As Gonzales-Day details:

Recurrent throughout the case list [of lynchings] are instances in which a suspect was being held for legal trial when the machinations of due process were interrupted by a lynch mob or vigilance committee. In still other instances, the accused may have been captured by a posse, mob, or vigilance committee and should have been turned over to the legal authorities, but was not. In each of these scenarios, the criminal no longer presented an imminent threat to the safety of the community but was willfully denied due process. (Gonzales-Day 84)

This kind of vigilante activity in California slowed slightly in the twentieth century, but a total of three hundred and fifty-two persons were still lynched between 1850 and 1935 in the state. And, as the Thurmond-Holmes lynching demonstrates, even in the 1930s vigilante action was still sometimes difficult to prevent.

Steinbeck’s *In Dubious Battle* suggests that this kind of vigilante violence was discernible within the 1930s California labor movement. The apple orchard setting for *In Dubious Battle* is in and of itself suggestive of lynching. Nearly every page in the novel involves cottonwoods, elm trees, apple trees, tree limbs, or rows of trees. The multitude of strikes from 1933 and 1934 are often presented as influential in the conception of the novel, but Steinbeck’s choice of an orchard setting—a setting that critics have had a difficult time pinning down—strongly evokes lynching and suggests that the San Jose lynching possibly informs this strike novel.
The trees are extremely pervasive throughout the novel, surrounding the white laborers at every turn. They are nearly inescapable. Steinbeck’s laborers and strike organizers are always either climbing up and in trees, picking apples off the trees, talking up in the trees, walking through rows of trees, finding shade in the trees, resting against trees, sitting on the limbs of trees, or—most jarring—fearing the trees.

There is this sense, especially when Mac’s plans for the strike really move forward and the danger commences, that the migrant picketers should “look out for trees” (159). Near the end of the novel, during the thick of the strike, Mac confesses his fears to Jim: “It’s closing in on us, Jim. I can feel it, closing in…Maybe it’s because I need sleep. On the way out from town just now it seemed to me there was a bunch of guys waiting for me in the shadow under every tree. I got so scared, I’d of run if a mouse moved” (231). Here, the tree represents a specific location around which Mac’s fear and anxiety is centralized. In this confessional moment, he associates the trees and his “scared” feeling with “a bunch of guys waiting for [him] in the shadow.” Those guys are, of course, the vigilantes, and Mac’s apprehension is not minor. As he mentions to Jim, he would run at the smallest sign of movement from under those trees—even a “mouse.” And, that is because Mac understands where this fear is coming from and what might be “closing in” around him: a lynch mob. He knows that the trees, the vigilantes, and a Communist strike leader like himself equals a lynching.

This conclusion that Mac fearfully arrives at is key to an understanding of lynching within In Dubious Battle. The presence of “lynching” and “vigilantes” clearly evokes, as Steinbeck’s inclusion of them suggests, racial connotations. In this strike novel, however, the vigilantes’ targets are white laborers and strike organizers. Similarly,
the Thurmond-Holmes lynching in San Jose is a lynching of two white men. It seems possible that Mac’s identity as a “Red,” which during the 1930s was strictly un-American, relegates him to a less-than-American identity or a less-than-white citizenry, making him an almost racial target.

Mac’s fear that a vigilante attack is lurking around the next tree is not an isolated feeling. The white laborers and the strike organizers are constantly on edge and apprehensive about the vigilantes. There is a lot of looking over the shoulder throughout the novel. Mac is often warning the strikers “not to go out alone” (Steinbeck 94). “If they want to go any place, take some friends along for company,” he advises (Steinbeck 94). Because he has participated in strikes many times before, Mac is especially in tune to the movements of the vigilantes. He realizes there is more danger in being a solitary white laborer and warns Jim: “Listen, Jim, I just happened to think. That guy this noon means they’ve got us spotted. From now on you be careful, and don’t go away from the crowd very far. If you want to go someplace, see you take about a dozen guys with you” (Steinbeck 91). Slightly later in the novel, too, Mac pleads, “Go with one of the bunches, then. But stick close to them, Jim. They got your number here. You know that. Don’t let ‘em pick you off” (Steinbeck 138). As expressed here, there is much concern for Mac and Jim, specifically. Their positions as strike leaders and as “Reds,” really, make them important targets for the vigilantes.

Mac’s fears increase for good reason as the strike moves forward. As targets for the vigilantes, Mac and Jim are, consequently, targets for a lynch mob. In one specific early encounter with a representative from a “citizens committee”—reminiscent of the aforementioned Californian vigilance committees—Mac and Jim are threatened with mob
violence. Three “almost invisible” men dressed in long overcoats confront Mac and Jim: “We know who you are, and what you are. We want you out…This isn’t the law; this is a citizens’ committee. If you think you God-dammed reds can come in here and raise hell, you’re crazy. You get out of here in your tin can or you’ll go out in a box. Get it?” (Steinbeck 91-92). This “citizens’ committee” recalls those vigilance committees that populated California for several decades. The clear, self-imposed distinction that this group “isn’t the law” suggests that they will not follow any form of legal procedure and disregard due process. They are, like the vigilance committees were, a band of citizens willing to resort to brutal forms of violence in order to uphold their own version of justice.

That the three men are “almost invisible” is also worthy of note. The shining flashlights they carry with them prevent Jim from discerning their faces. The obscurity here is perhaps significant since it mimics the invisibility that hoods, masks, and robes provided vigilantes who lynched Negroes in the South and joined vigilance committees in the West. Additionally, the invisibility is complicated because lynch mobs and “citizens’ committees” themselves are very visible and noticeable groups. Often the lynchings they performed were recorded in newspapers and announced publicly. But, the individual members of these mobs were not as easily identified. As Phillip Dray’s work on Southern lynching informs us, the deaths of thousands of African Americans were reportedly attributed to “persons unknown.” Gonzales-Day, too, explains that individual vigilantes were rarely identified in California. If the mob was even investigated, the verdict often came back as: “deceased came to his death from strangulation, by a crowd of persons to the jury unknown” (Gonzales-Day 196).
Steinbeck’s text suggests that the identity of these three indistinct vigilantes functions in a similar fashion, one which is also explained by Steinbeck’s phalanx theory. The phalanx is a group organism that, Steinbeck writes, “has a soul, a drive, an intent, an end, a method, a reaction and a set of tropisms which in no way resembles the same things possessed by the men who make up the group…They [the groups] are beings in themselves, entities” (Steinbeck and Wallsten 76). One of the key facets of the phalanx, according to Steinbeck, “is the plug which when inserted into the cap of the phalanx, makes man lose his unit identity” (Steinbeck and Wallsten). In *In Dubious Battle*, the individual vigilantes become part of the lynch mob or the vigilance committee, and they subsequently shed their own “unit identit[ies]” and become an “almost invisible” part of the larger group.

After these three unidentified men threaten to kill Mac and Jim if they don’t comply with ending the strike and leaving the Valley immediately, they add: “There’s just three of us. But if you’re not out of the Valley in the morning, there’ll be fifty” (Steinbeck 92). In other words, these three will prompt more vigilantes to become involved in a lynch mob that would drive the strikers out of the Valley and most likely kill many of them. This mob threat is not the last from the citizens’ committee. Mac and Jim wander too far outside of camp on their own while trying to gauge morale and unknowingly approach more members of the vigilance committee. After surprising the two strike organizers, one of the vigilantes commands, “Get your guns in their backs. If they move, let ‘em have it. Now march!” (Steinbeck 117). With “rifles pushed into their backs,” Mac and Jim are led farther away from camp. The uneasy and harrowing presence of trees resurfaces again in this scene, as “they [are] marched across the road
and in among the trees on the other side” (117). As they do throughout the novel, the trees here suggest, or foreshadow, lynching, as does the unwilling journey away from camp at gun point. It resembles the walk to the gallows and mimics the variety of ways lynching victims have been forced toward the hanging tree. Thurmond and Holmes are dragged, as is “the nigger” from Mac’s lynching anecdote, while Mac and Jim are here pushed with rifles.

As the two strike organizers become more and more nervous about their increasingly precarious position, they ask, “You takin’ us to jail, mister?” (Steinbeck 118). One of the vigilantes responds:

Jail, hell, we’re takin’ you God-darn reds to the Vigilance Committee. If you’re lucky they’ll beat the crap out of you and dump you over the county line; if you ain’t lucky, they’ll string you up to a tree. We got no use for radicals in this valley. (Steinbeck 118)

Steinbeck’s text here directly invokes California’s “Vigilance Committees” and identifies the circumvention of the law—“Jail, hell”—which this text suggests remained an essential facet of vigilante practices in the 1930s. In this representation, too, the 1930s vigilance committee is also still using direct violence in the form of lynching to illegally police its community and purge it of, in this case, “radical” strike organizers. As the vigilantes flippantly explain, the vigilance committee could easily have Mac and Jim “str[u]ng up to a tree.” The trees prove extremely daunting in this moment, as they do throughout the novel. Because of the ever-looming threat of lynching, which the vigilantes make explicit, any tree can easily be turned into a hanging tree for Mac and Jim.
The vigilantes are not the only ones who participate in mob violence, though. As many scholars have pointed out, the strikers strongly embody characteristics of the phalanx. The moments from the novel in which the individual strikers transform into a machine-like unison are plagued with violence. As Howard Levant has rightly suggested, the “men need the stress of violent emotion (blood) to become group-man” (26). Will Watson, too, concurs that “the sight of blood converts the strikers into an unstoppable mob” (39). Indeed, the strikers band together and form the group-man in times of bloodshed. Both Joy’s early death and London’s later bloody assault on another striker function as catalysts for group-man. While the formation of the mob is a key component to both the strikers’ morale and Steinbeck’s group-man idea, the fully-formed group unit cannot be ignored.

In addition to joining together as a reaction to violence, the strikers themselves are also collectively and outwardly violent. After London beats a fellow striker bloody and incites the group-man, the strikers move together to destroy a police barricade just outside the camp. As Jim watches them leave,

> the bodies weaved slowly, in unison. No more lone cries came from lone men. They moved together, looked alike. The roar was one voice, coming from many throats…it was no longer loose and listless. It had become a quick, silent, deadly efficient machine. (Steinbeck 247)

The strikers form a mob of their own in this scene, and they collectively march to “knock hell out o’ that barricade” of deputies (247). Violence incites the strikers to form the group-man, but the group itself and the mob mentality that accompanies it also produces more violence.
Moreover, Jim’s description of the strikers in this scene sounds oddly similar to a vigilante lynch mob. Throughout the novel, the vigilantes are these unidentifiable individuals who work in groups to accomplish various tasks—identify Communist leaders, lynch the strike organizers, burn the striker’s base camp, etc. They are this silent force in the novel because they move quietly and quickly in the shadows to accomplish their work. And, as Mac notes numerous times throughout the course of the strike, they are very “organized” (Steinbeck 121).

This depiction of the strikers, then, at the end is evocative of the very group that hunts them throughout the text. They have become organized, mechanical, and efficient, like Mac says a mob should be: “efficient as trained soldiers” (Steinbeck 249). The problem with that efficiency, he notes, is that the group becomes “stronger than all the men put together” and “when it gets started it might do anything” (Steinbeck 249). It might even become indiscernible from a lynch mob because of its “power and unpredictability” (Lojek 131). There is a moment from much earlier on in the novel that contributes to the mob characteristics of the strikers here at the end. When the white laborers are just beginning to come together as strikers, Mac, London, and Jim have a conversation with the “super,” in which Mac casually says, “We’ll take a vote on whether you get that five dollar job and—then—we’ll try to keep the guys from lynchin’ this gent [the super] here” (Steinebeck 102). According to Mac, it’s possible that this group-man could become so strong and so efficient that it might conduct a lynching itself. The text suggests that by the end of the novel, the strikers have taken on characteristics of the vigilante lynch mob. Any simplistic distinction between the good guys and the bad guys is blurred greatly here.
By the conclusion of the novel, lynching becomes an integral part of the strike narrative. Despite that, every mention or hint of it still feels somewhat incongruous at the end. The abnormality is not just about the strikers being on the other side of a lynching either. Rather, it’s about this being a 1936 novel set in California and full of white characters that contains a handful of lynching allusions. That context doesn’t quite add up for the reader because the dominant narrative tells us that lynchings occur in the deep South, happen to African American men, and become less frequent by the mid 1930s. *In Dubious Battle*, then, does not fit the dominant American lynching narrative; it draws from it while simultaneously disrupting it. This text appropriates both the lynching atrocities that plague the black population in the South and the lynchings conducted by vigilance committees in the West and brings them together in this 1936 strike novel. And, in doing so, *In Dubious Battle* suggests that lynching is much more closely tied to the 1930s labor movement than the dominant narrative would let on.

The lynching presence also reveals something about Steinbeck’s own work. The 1933 and 1934 labor strikes and the larger, burgeoning labor movement undoubtedly contextualize much of *In Dubious Battle* and partially “provide the historical context of the novel” (Saxton 260). However, lynching and vigilantism undeniably come together in this novel, as well. It’s possible that the contemporaneous 1933 San Jose lynching of Thurmond and Holmes provides a way to read lynching and vigilantism as influential in Steinbeck’s conception of the phalanx theory and instrumental to the development of this first book in the labor trilogy.
CHAPTER III

STEINBECK’S OF MICE AND MEN: A LYNCHING NOVEL

In its December 1937 issue, LIFE Magazine featured a story on the stage adaptation of John Steinbeck’s still-relatively-new novelette, Of Mice and Men. The feature boasted a spread of photographs that were taken at the November 1937 Broadway opening at the Music Box Theatre in New York. Within the arrangement is an image (Fig. 1) that captures the re-enactment of an important moment from Steinbeck’s short Californian novel. The photograph depicts a “posse,” as LIFE calls it, of stern, gun-wielding ranch hands on a mission to track down and kill Lennie, Steinbeck’s “big, brainless hulk” who is “so strong he kills everything he touches” (“Mice and” 44). The group of white men, all wearing the same grim and determined facial expression, all carrying guns for their hunting expedition, and all dressed in Stetsons and burly work clothes, come to a brief halt as Curley commands, “Shoot for his guts!” (44).

Lennie is, in fact, shot in the head by his best friend George during the posse’s hunting party. The LIFE Magazine headline, “Of Mice and Men: New Yorkers Flock to See a Brutal Stage Murder,” however, does not refer to this killing. Just before the “posse” of ranch hands sets out to track Lennie, the hulk’s “brute strength” leads him to accidentally strangle Curley’s wife to death (44). LIFE writes, “The scene in which
Lennie played by Helen Broderick’s big son Broderick Crawford, strokes the flirt’s hair, then breaks her neck, is perhaps the most brutal killing yet acted on the U.S. stage” (44).

Figure 3.1

Accompanying the article is an entire spread of twelve photographs that vividly depicts the strangling scene frame by frame.

The order of the photographs – those photos representing both the “posse” and Lennie’s death follow the spread on Curley’s wife’s death – hones in on and reveals the direct correlation between the two scenes; her death is the catalyst for the “posse” that kills Lennie. Additionally, the emphasis on the brutality of Curley’s wife’s death scene contributes to Lennie’s vilification and anticipates his death as an inevitable outcome. In
the context of this rather explicit and focused article then, the word “posse,” obviously essential to both the article and the adaptation, as it is repeated four times in the feature, seems both underwhelming and ill-suited for the description of the group of men that hunts down Lennie. The strategic wording critically avoids the use of another, better-suited phrase: lynch mob.

*Of Mice and Men* has certainly attracted no shortage of critical attention, but no analysis has attempted to develop the significance of lynching in the novel—and in its adaptations. Like the *LIFE* article, the *Of Mice and Men* scholarship seems to ignore or avoid the subject of lynching. Michael Meyer spends the entire first chapter in his newest edition of *The Essential Criticism of John Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men* cataloguing reviews of the novel—twenty-six in all—that were published just after the book came out and in the very closest years following. In all twenty-six reviews, there is only one mention of lynching, and it is important to note that it occurs in a non-American publication, *The London Mercury* (Meyers 29). The topic of lynching has not risen in popularity in the years since these earliest reviews. The extent of its exploration is conducted by Daniel Griesbach in his article, “Reduced to Nothing: Race, Lynching, and Erasure in the Theater Revision of Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men,” in which Griesbach investigates the role of Crooks, the black stable hand, in Kaufman’s stage adaptation. Griesbach analyzes Crooks’ reduced role in the play and Kaufman’s omission of a specific altercation between Crooks and Curley’s wife, in which she threatens to get Crooks lynched (255). Though Griesbach brilliantly explores the omission of an important scene from the novel, he does not fully investigate the overall presence of lynching or the significance of Lennie’s position as target of the lynch mob.
Griesbach’s article also appears to be an anomaly within *Of Mice and Men* scholarship, as there has been no further work devoted to the subject. Much like the palpable avoidance in the *LIFE Magazine* feature, the word “lynch” itself is rarely used in the criticism surrounding the novel. Occasionally a critic will hesitantly mention it while summarizing or defining the mob scene from the novel’s closing pages, but just as quickly move on without further investigation. Whereas the novel’s easy transition to the stage, the moral vision of the text, and the nature of Lennie’s disability are some of the more frequented subjects of discussion, the subject of race has gone largely undeveloped within the scope of criticism, with a few exceptions. In addition to Griesbach, Charles Johnson has also explored the only black character in the novel with his essay, “Reading the Character of Crooks in *Of Mice and Men*.” And though exploring a different kind of racial presence, Louis Owens, in a 2002 essay, does lend a few pages to the influence that eugenics and the rise of fascism in Europe may have had in Steinbeck’s work, specifically in the “mercy killings” present in *Of Mice and Men* (331). For the most part, the subject of race and a full investigation of the lynch mob’s presence in Steinbeck’s novelette is absent from *Of Mice and Men* scholarship.

A few things probably contribute to the avoidance of “lynch mob.” Given that lynching, especially in the 1930s, is most assuredly linked to black history, Lennie’s whiteness complicates its invocation here. Secondly, the word “posse” successfully avoids invoking America’s gruesome, cultural ritual and, in doing so, elides the widespread presence and socially accepted nature of lynching. The avoidance is undeniably a product of its 1930s context, for that decade sparked a push towards a discussion of lynching as coming to an end. Ashraf Rushdy, in particular, focuses on the
denial of lynching in the 1930s and unveils the ways in which that discourse – materialized in the LIFE Magazine article – sought to discuss lynching as “a thing of the past,” “downplay anything resembling a lynching,” and “lessen the publicity previously granted to lynchings” (Rushdy 17). In this chapter, I unmask Steinbeck’s lynch mob and expose Of Mice and Men as a lynching novel.

In making a case for the presence of the American lynch mob in his text, I investigate historical photographs and records of lynchings, as well as literary accounts of them. These texts foreground the ways in which Steinbeck adopts the lynch mob context and rewrites it for his 1937 novelette. With particular attention paid to the dual image of the white female and the mythical black rapist, Steinbeck’s text exposes the centrality of sexuality in this racial conflict. In this chapter, I explore the ways Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men enters a conversation with the lynching narrative and further complicates an already racially-charged American West. Of Mice and Men adopts much of the lynch mob context and utilizes Lennie and the migrant worker setting to complicate the meaning of race and lynching in 1930s California.

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The cultural practice of lynching is deeply embedded within American history. Though lynchings have been held for a wide variety of racist reasons, particularly between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they “most sensation[all]…came to be associated with what was seen as the ultimate symbol of black autonomy, sexual access by black men to white women” (Dray 60). Between 1890 and 1930, specifically, the black male’s “readiness” to “access” white women became increasingly mythologized and his sexuality became a direct threat to white men.
Within this myth of the “black beast rapist,” as Joel Williamson calls it, race and sex were entwined together in a way that became essential to the lynching of black men all the way through to the twentieth century. The white South “imputed, implicitly and explicitly, great sexual potency to black people, and especially black men” (Williamson 309). George Frederickson, in his exploration of lynching and “race-hate literature” from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, explains that black males were depicted as “wild beasts with uncontrollable sexual passions and criminal natures” (276). This image of the “black brute” pervaded the racist literature of the time. Preacher-turned-novelist Thomas Dixon appropriated and perpetuated the image in much of his own work, including his 1905 novel *The Clansman*, in which his “black brute” is lynched by the Klan after raping a white virgin.

The racial and sexual threat of the mythical black rapist moved beyond “race-hate” literature, too. The rhetoric of lynching also became obvious in newspapers and magazines that published “stories of sexual assault, insatiable black rapists, tender white virgins, and manhunts led by determined men” (Dray 4). These dramatized reports deployed a kind of rhetoric that perpetuated the image of the “black brute,” encouraged more lynchings, and glorified the act as a righteous, cultural ritual taken up by heroic white men.

In the highly publicized 1899 lynching of Sam Hose in Palmetto, Georgia, this narrative plays out. After an eleven day manhunt, twenty-one year old Sam Hose was lynched for the murder of former employer Alfred Cranford and the alleged rape of his wife, Mattie Cranford. *The Newnan Herald and Advertiser* defines the crime as “the most brutal and revolting [crime] ever perpetrated in Coweta county” and depicts Hose as
“a negro fiend,” “a black brute,” and “a monster in human form” (“Murder and”). The murder of Mr. Alfred Cranford is mentioned and detailed in the opening paragraphs of the article, but the description of the controversial rape—it became unclear upon investigation whether it had occurred or not—comprises most of the article and takes on a common dramatic form, which Edwin Arnold describes as “the equivalent of a serialized novel” (Arnold 6). In the local Newnan paper, Mattie Cranford is described as “a poor little woman” attacked while “carrying her 8-month-old child” and “forced to submit to the most shameful outrage which one of her sex can suffer” (“Murder and”). After detailing the intricacies of the alleged rape and laying the foundation for a foreseeable ending, the article concludes by reassuring readers of the impending lynching: “By 10’clock in the morning bloodhounds had been brought from Atlanta and put on trail of the fugitive, and every able-bodied white man for miles around had joined in the chase” (“Murder and”). The article both anticipates the lynching and endorses it as the only sensible and justified punishment for such a brutal crime committed by a black “fiend.”

*LIFE Magazine’s* 1937 feature on the *Of Mice and Men* stage adaptation is startlingly reminiscent of the rhetoric employed in *The Newnan Herald and Advertiser’s* report on the Sam Hose incident. In both pieces, the vulnerability of the white female and the viciousness of the crime are established immediately. The local newspaper reports that Coweta County witnessed “the most brutal and revolting crime ever perpetrated” by a “black brute,” while *LIFE* explains that New Yorkers watched the “most brutal killing yet enacted on the U.S. stage” by Steinbeck’s very own “big brute.” The corresponding mob hunts and lynchings themselves are, in both articles, portrayed as the inevitable and natural outcomes of the rape, or killing in Lennie’s case, of a white
woman. *The Newnan*’s series of articles on Sam Hose appears just as theatrical as *LIFE Magazine*’s feature, though *LIFE* doesn’t utilize the same call to action that the *Newnan* publication employs. It does, however, make the connection between the “vicious” crime and the undeniable outcome with a thank-goodness-justice-prevailed attitude.

For the *LIFE* article, the most brutal Broadway killing ever perpetrated is accompanied by a suitable and proportional ending. While reassuring readers of the looming lynching, *The Newnan Herald and Advertiser*’s report on Sam Hose simultaneously paints a heroic image of the mob of white men who gathered from miles around to carry out justice. This picture of the avenging white men complicates the centrality of the white female in the lynching narrative. Her rape is of course the catalyst for the formation of the mob, but because of the involvement of the white men in the hunt for the black male, she becomes marginalized. As a later article in the Sam Hose series by *The Herald* states, “It is the white men who are carrying the burden, while their wives are huddling together at home for fear” (“Cranford Case”). While the white woman sits on the margins, the hunt for the “black fiend” very quickly develops into a male-centered, cultural ritual. This crowd of white men has gathered as a result of the alleged sexually threatening assault on a white woman. Somehow, the rape of a white woman is the burden of all white men. The white woman’s marginalization, both in *The Newnan Herald and Advertiser* article series and in the lynch mob context more largely, establishes the sexual insecurity of the white male and reveals the homosocial nature of the lynching.
Ida B. Wells was particularly involved in the Sam Hose lynching and launched an investigation that refuted the accusation of rape against Hose. In Wells’ long investigation of lynching, she discovered:

> in the majority of cases the charge of rape was untrue, and had either been added to a complaint about a black suspect in order to incense local whites or, in some instances, to obscure the fact that the black man’s real sin had been to have consensual sex with a white woman. (Dray 7)

Along with the obvious centrality of sexual envy in these accounts of lynching, Wells exposes the utilization of the white female as the trigger for the lynching of black males. Regardless of it being an accurate accusation, which Wells declares it often was not, sex with a white female is what motivates the mob to mutilate, burn, and lynch black males. The murder of Alfred Cranford perhaps would not have aroused the same participation in the lynch mob as the rape of his wife did. With the help of W.E.B. DuBois, Wells and others discovered that the newspapers had invented the rape “in order to arouse the neighborhood to find” Hose (Dray 7). The charge of rape was invented in the Hose-Cranford case and many other lynchings to enrage and elicit the townspeople’s, and more specifically the white males’, participation in the lynching. Essentially, the charge of raping a white woman expedited the formation of the lynch mob.

The hunt for Sam Hose lasted eleven days before he was captured by the mob and brought back to Palmetto to be lynched. In his account of the lynching, Philip Dray records “four thousand visitors” to the area for the lynching, some travelling by train from all over the state to attend. In the lynching ceremony itself, the sexual fears lying at the heart of the lynch mob construct become manifest:

> The torture of the victim lasted almost half an hour. It began when a man stepped forward and very matter-of-factly sliced off Hose’s ears. Then several men
grabbed Hose’s arms and held them forward so his fingers could be severed one by one and shown to the crowd. Finally, a blade was passed between his thighs, Hose cried in agony, and a moment later his genitals were held aloft…three men lifted the large can of kerosene and dumped its contents over Sam Hose’s head, and the pyre was set ablaze. (Dray 13)

The castration of the black male and the burning of the naked black male body speak to the manifestation of the sexual insecurity of the white male and reveal that, as James Weldon Johnson believed, “in the core of the heart of the American race problem the sex factor is rooted” (Dray 73). The lynch mob is motivated by a kind of sexual insecurity rooted in the putative vulnerability of the white female and the alleged hypersexuality of the black male. The “black beast” mythology projects an image of the black male that is more powerful, more sexual, and more attractive to the white female. The investment in the myth contributes to this inferiority complex within the white male that leads to him joining the lynch mob and, often, to him dissecting the black male body as part of the lynching ritual.

The practice of lynching also continued long after the turn of the century, as did the continual perpetuation of the myth of the black archetypal rapist. Novelist Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* made the jump to the big screen in 1915 with a new title, *The Birth of a Nation*. Much like the novel itself, the film, which premiered in cities all over the country, constructed an image of the virginal, vulnerable white female and the black beast rapist, while depicting the Klan as a heroic force. America’s celebration of the Klan, who were depicted as bravely defending white women, and by extension their country, from the sexually aggressive “black brute,” infused the ritual of lynching in the twentieth century with a great sense of American pride. Lynchings continued to be carried out, often concurrently with functions like town picnics and Fourth of July
celebrations. Despite the increase in advocacy for the anti-lynching movement, especially in the 1920s and 1930s, lynchings still took place well into the twentieth century. A Marion, Indiana lynching of two young black men—Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith—for the murder of a local white man and the rape of his girlfriend became one of the most well-known lynchings of the twentieth century. The photograph of the 1930 lynching has become one of the most widely-disseminated and iconic images of lynching from the twentieth century. The infamous 1931 Scottsboro case, too, was one of the “most controversial racial and political episodes of the 1930s” and largely defined discourses on race, sex, and racial mixing for that decade (Carter xiv). Though Alabama narrowly avoided a wholesale lynching of the nine black men who were wrongfully accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama, the case proved that the images of the black beast rapist and the vulnerable white female figure were still paramount in Southern race relations in the 1930s.

In his own iconic lynching story, “Going to Meet the Man,” which titles his 1965 collection, James Baldwin details a chilling account of lynching in the South. In his short story, Baldwin presents a confrontational and graphic account of the mutilation of a black male performed by a 1930s lynch mob at a Fourth of July picnic. The lynching he details greatly resembles the lynching of Sam Hose from 1899, but of course most Southern lynchings were conducted in a very similar fashion. The black male in Baldwin’s story is also stripped, castrated, mutilated, and burned alive in front of a large gathering of men, women, and children. Baldwin details the lynching from the perspective of a young white boy attending his first lynching. From his place in the crowd, the young boy notices that the naked black male “was a big man, a bigger man than his father, and black
as an African jungle cat, and naked” (Baldwin 246). The threatening body is fully displayed for the crowd, emphasizing the sexuality and strength of his perceived beastly—jungle cat—form, so as to make the degradation more profound. The physical dissection of the black male body is also just as obvious in Baldwin’s text as it is in the account of the Sam Hose lynching. Directly following the castration, numerous white males step out from the crowd and take turns stabbing, tearing, and severing different parts of the perpetrator’s body. As Baldwin details, “The crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones” (248). Then the pyre was set ablaze. The sexual insecurity of the white male and the destruction of the black male body are once again made manifest in the ritual itself.

As in the Sam Hose case, the lynch mob leaps into action in “Going to Meet the Man” because an unnamed black male “knocked down Miss Standish” (Baldwin 243). A lynch mob systematically forms, hunts down the black male, and drags him back to town for the ceremony, where the townspeople awaiting the ritual repeatedly shout, “They got him!” (Baldwin 241). Miss Standish physically appears nowhere in the text and is merely alluded to this once at the beginning of the narrative, but she does exist in a very real way as the trigger for the lynch mob. Baldwin’s short story demonstrates that the 1930s lynching narrative is still very much invested in the vulnerability of the white female and the hypersexuality of the black male. The lynching ritual, from the 1880s onward, illustrates the manifestation of the sexual fears of the white power structure and the violence that white males would utilize to both repeatedly recreate their own “superior” masculine image and degrade the black male population.

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John Steinbeck’s 1937 novel *Of Mice and Men* borrows from and rewrites the lynching narrative. The mutilation and burning that occurred during black male lynchings may be absent, but Steinbeck’s text still contains two lynch mobs, both of which have gone undetected in the study of his work. *Of Mice and Men* begins with George and Lennie travelling on foot in search of work as a result of being “run outa” Weed (Steinbeck 7). As George recounts the incident, Lennie, who cannot help but touch shiny pretty things, had reached out to stroke the red dress of an unnamed female in Weed and became unintentionally too rough with her. He was subsequently accused of rape. The false accusation of rape against Lennie triggers “the guys in Weed to start a party out to lynch Lennie” (Steinbeck 42). Just as in Baldwin’s representation of Miss Standish in “Going to Meet the Man,” this white female – whose lack of subjectivity is amplified even more so by the fact that she is unnamed – is also absent from Steinbeck’s story except for this single allusion to her. The white female in both these texts serves one purpose: to set in motion a relationship between men, specifically the white and black male figures. Neither lynch mob really has the interests of the white female on their mind as they rush to capture and execute the “transgressor,” because this relationship really is not about the white female. Her position as conduit is purely functional, engendering in the lynch mob a sense of insecurity that becomes the motivating force for the lynching. It is fitting that both Steinbeck’s unnamed white female and Baldwin’s Miss Standish would disappear from their respective stories after the lynch mob becomes active because they serve no further purpose.

Though the implications of the history of lynching in America are more subtle in Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* than in Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” Steinbeck’s
text does produce a second white female, just as essential to revealing his text as a lynching novel and just as marginalized, in Curley’s wife – only referred to as “Curley’s wife” for the entirety of the novel. Often perceived, rather simply, as the mischievous and overtly sexual female, Curley’s wife represents the white fear of miscegenation already embedded within historical depictions of lynching.

As the LIFE Magazine feature noted, Curley’s wife exits the novel in a climactic scene, in which Lennie once again becomes unintentionally too rough and strangles her to death. Lennie finds himself in the same situation in which he begins the novel: the target of the lynch mob. After the men discover Curley’s wife’s dead body, they instantaneously know they must hunt down Lennie. After taking one look at her lifeless body, Curley asserts, “I know who done it…That big son-of-a-bitch done it. I know he done it” (Steinbeck 96). Much like the groups of white men that lead the hunt for Sam Hose and the unnamed black male in Baldwin’s text, Curley and the boys excitedly gear up to hunt Lennie.

The snapshot of the hunt for Lennie, which LIFE Magazine provides (Fig. 1), evokes a clear differentiation between “the hunters and the hunted” that became central to lynching photography. Curley and the boys appear determined, virile, and stationary while holding their rifles, almost as if hunting an animal. This depiction of Steinbeck’s “cohesive” and “stoic” white mob seems evocative of the lynching photography that Ashraf Rushdy believes came to represent white supremacy. Those images of the lynch mob, Rushdy writes, “were photographs of celebration, visually capturing the operation of white supremacy and creating a tangible record of it” (Rushdy 64). Lennie, however,
is noticeably not included in this moment of white solidarity. Hiding in the bushes, he occupies the position closest to that of the hunted black male.

Curley’s wife, then, successfully serves her purpose in facilitating the relationship between the men within the novel and “triggers” the lynch mob with her death. Even Curley, her husband, knows she is no longer needed within the narrative. In response to being asked if he wants to stay with his dead wife instead of joining the lynching party, Curley exclaims, “I’m goin. I’m gonna shoot the guts outa that big bastard myself even if I only got one hand. I’m gonna get him” (Steinbeck 98). This isn’t about his wife at all, rather, he’s “going for his shotgun,” he’s going to “kill him” himself, he’s going to “shoot the son-of-a-bitch” himself. Curley’s eagerness is entirely about reconstituting his masculinity, which Lennie’s access to his wife has dented and endangered. His masculinity and sexuality can become whole again through Lennie’s demise in the lynching process.

The position of the white female in 1930s California, then, is very similar to that of the white female in the South. She functions as the conduit in the relationship between the white male and the black male, a relationship that Steinbeck complicates, as he figures Lennie as the black male in *Of Mice and Men*. Lennie is forbidden to talk or think for himself throughout the entire novel, much like the black male is often forbidden to raise his eyes to or talk back to white men. George, on more than one occasion, asks Lennie to remain silent while he deals with the white bosses. Upon arriving at the ranch to meet the boss, George says, “You keep your big flapper shut after this” (Steinbeck 23). He is also forbidden to gaze upon the white female. Upon one of their first encounters with Curley’s wife, George says to Lennie, “Listen to me, you crazy bastard, don’t you
even look at that bitch” (Steinbeck 32). He is from the start forbidden to look at Curley’s wife much like the black male is forbidden to look at the white female, a phenomenon accounted for within the lynching narrative itself, but also represented in much African American Literature. Lennie even “drop[s] his eyes in embarrassment” when Curley’s wife returns his eye contact in a later encounter (Steinbeck 79). In another short story of Baldwin’s, “Previous Condition,” the denial of the male gaze for the African American male plays out similarly to this encounter in *Of Mice and Men*:

The train stopped. A white boy and white girl got on. She was nice, short, svelte. Nice legs. She was hanging on his arm. He was the football type, blond, ruddy. They were dressed in summer clothes…He said something I didn’t catch and she looked at me and the smile died. She stood so that she faced him and had her back to me. I looked back at the ads…The white boy and I did not look at each other again. (Baldwin 98-99)

Upon being caught looking at the white female, the African American male is forced to look away while the “white boy” can continue to look. Like the black male in this story, Lennie is figured as a threat to white women and not permitted to gaze at Curley’s wife like white men would be.

Lennie’s physicality evokes that of the black male figure, as well. He survives on the ranch by way of his utility and physical ability, but he also harms two women by accident because his physical strength and size are so uncontrollable. Much like the “black beast” myth, the threat he poses toward women is entirely tied to his body. He personifies the myth of the black archetypal rapist, whose “hypersexuality” is a result of the threat that his body poses. Lennie’s uncontrollable strength crushes Curley’s hand without hardly any effort and snaps Curley’s wife’s neck unintentionally. Steinbeck’s text constantly reminds the reader of Lennie’s unmanageable strength, as he from the
opening kills mice, puppies, rabbits, and harms women. His sheer power coupled with his penchant for pretty, shiny things makes him the kind of threat that produced anxiety in white men in the South.

His brute strength inspires fear in Curley, particularly. The sexual component involved in their relationship is very similar to that between the white male and the black male. The death of his wife inspires in Curley a sense of sexual insecurity similar to that which is engendered in historical accounts of the white lynch mob and in Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” both of which depict the vulnerability of the white female as key to the sexual insecurity of the white male. Like Baldwin’s text and numerous historical accounts, the “sex factor,” as James Weldon Johnson calls it, is also very involved in Steinbeck’s novel. Curley’s physicality, for instance, comes into play often. After his wife’s death, he mentions that he is going to get Lennie “even if he’s only got one arm” (Steinbeck 98). In addition to Curley’s obvious physical inferiority, made explicit by his crippled hand, he is often described as “a mean little guy,” while Lennie is “a big guy” (Steinbeck 27, 25). Reminiscent of the young white boy’s perception of the black male body in Baldwin’s text—he notes that the unnamed black male was definitely bigger than his father—Lennie is also noticeably bigger and more physically imposing than Lennie and the other men on the ranch.

Although the hanging, burning, and castrating are absent, the manifestation of a white sexual fear is still present in Curley’s gloved left hand. That glove “fulla Vaseline” that keeps his hand “soft for his wife” is explicitly sexual (Steinbeck 27). It displays his access to her and is a function of insecurity. Curley hopes it serves as a reminder, directed at the migrant workers on the ranch, of who his wife belongs to and who is
capable of pleasing her the most. Once again, Curley’s wife is marginalized within this relationship between Curley and the other migrant workers on the ranch, to whom he must prove his sexual prowess. The gloved hand, of course, is not really for his wife, but for him and the migrant workers. He needs this physical symbol of his sexuality to assuage his own insecurities, but also to ward off men like Lennie, who pose a threat to his sexuality through their access to his wife. In the end, Curley sets out to murder Lennie in order to avenge the sexual inferiority and insecurity he feels after his wife dies, which parallels the dynamic developed in lynching accounts and in Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man.” Lennie embodies the threat of black physical and sexual superiority, and that is what motivates Curley and the lynch mob. Because of his access to and intimacy with Curley’s wife, the lynch mob is compelled to eliminate him and remove the racial threat he represents.

*Of Mice and Men*, and specifically Lennie’s complicated racial status, are in conversation with another important historical moment for the lynching narrative. Despite the resurgence in the anti-lynching movement, led in the early part of the twentieth century by the N.A.A.C.P., the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL), and other anti-lynching advocates, lynchings still took place at the time Steinbeck was writing his novelette. The 1930s, however, developed what Ashraf Rushdy calls the “end-of-lynching discourse” (Rushdy 95). The 1930 lynching in Marion, Indiana was made famous, in part, because of a discourse that proclaimed it was one of the last American lynchings. The idea that mob lynching was coming to an end pervaded the 1930s. *The New York Times* even opened up the decade with a headline that read “Forsees End of Lynching.” In the article, *The Times*
proclaimed, “Lynching will be a lost crime by 1940” (“Forsees End”). Some anti-lynching advocates denied the decline of lynching and believed that while spectacle mob lynchings may have become less frequent, lynching itself had only evolved in its form and strategy (Rushdy 97-98). Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* is produced during a time in which the idea of what constitutes a lynching, where they take place, and who they target is more difficult to pin down.

The changing dynamics of both lynching and the discourse surrounding lynching are compounded in *Of Mice and Men* by the racial confusion that emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. Joining the African-American as a threat to the white woman and ultimately the white race, is the Jew, the Italian, the Eastern European, and, as Steinbeck figures it, the poor migrant worker.

Jeffory Clymer explores the influx of immigrants to America in the early twentieth century and determines that “definitions of ‘whiteness’ and ‘America’ were informed by and took shape in response to an anxiety over the American race’s possible demise in the 1920s” (162). Steinbeck, writing only a few years after the conclusion of the 1920s and clearly very much influenced by it, is depicting the effects of another migration – the movement West during the Depression. As Clymer reveals an amalgamation of lower class stature and race in the 1920s, Steinbeck calls attention to the racial undertones of the Californian migrant worker and the racially and class-charged atmosphere of the 1930s West. In a 1933 lynching that took place in San Jose, California, two white men were strung up in St. James Park after kidnapping and murdering Brook Hart, son of a well-to-do business owner. In the *New York Times* report of the lynching, Governor Rolph of California comments, “Now they have taken to
kidnapping men and women for the purpose of extracting money from distracted relatives” (Associated Press). Governor Rolph does not fail to distinguish between the model citizens of California who participate in the lynching and the “they”—those citizens who lack the economic means to support themselves during the Depression and partake in extreme measures.

Like Governor Rolph, Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* also registers a clear differentiation between certain groups of characters. Curley’s father and Curley himself—marked by their fancy, leather cowboy boots—are the white aristocracy in the West, who are fighting a war against the troubling ways of the “non-white,” lower class migrant workers like Lennie. It is Lennie, a white migrant worker, who inspires the constant fear of “Where is my wife?” in Curley (Steinbeck 53). Much of Curley’s dialogue in the novel revolves around searching for his wife and making sure she isn’t drifting towards the wrong type of men. Curley, like the lynch mob in Baldwin’s “Going to Meet the Man,” and like the lynch mob in San Jose, has to protect the white woman, whose vulnerability “could put America’s supposed racial purity in jeopardy” (Clymer 170). Steinbeck’s positioning of the white female and his figuration of Lennie as the black archetypal rapist embody a racially and class charged 1930s California that is not so different from the American South. Steinbeck’s text exists at the crossroads of the lynching narrative and an emerging racially-complicated twentieth century. Amidst the “end-of-lynching discourse” and the changing definition of “whiteness,” *Of Mice and Men* demonstrates, not only that the barbarity of the American lynch mob lives on in 1930s California, but that 1930s California represents a time and place in which the borders surrounding race become increasingly unstable.
CHAPTER IV

STEINBECK’S *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*:
LYNCHING AND RACIAL INSTABILITY IN THE 1930s WEST

Though there has been an abundance of important scholarship devoted to John Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, there has not yet been any significant analysis of a key scene from the novel’s ending. The morning after Tom Joad clubs a union buster to death in retaliation for Jim Casy’s murder, Uncle John artlessly assesses the fallout: “Seems like the people ain’t talkin’ ‘bout much else…they got posses out, an’ they’s fellas talkin’ up a lynchin’—‘course when they catch the fella” (Steinbeck 399).

This is the sole, explicit mention of “lynching” in the novel, and Steinbeck decisively invokes the weighted term, rather than settling for “hanging” or another less vivid pseudonym. Here, as well, a white migrant worker—like *Of Mice and Men*’s Lennie Small—is the target of a pending lynch mob.

Seventy plus years after its publication, *The Grapes of Wrath* continues to garner critical attention. While the proletarian underpinnings, the biblical and biological influences, and the political propaganda of the novel comprise much of the scholarship, the racial

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undertones of Steinbeck’s Okies and the widespread fear of their mass migration to California have informed some race-based readings of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Mimi Riesel Gladstein asserts that the Joad family’s experience is representative of, what she calls, the “universal immigrant.” According to Gladstein, Steinbeck carefully develops the idea that “the Oklahomans were more immigrant than migrant in the minds of his fellow Californians” (136). The derogatory term “Okie,” the isolated and poorly-maintained living quarters (Hoovervilles), and the grossly low wages, she argues, link the Joads to this notion of the universal immigrant experience. Erin Battat finds a strong Southern racial presence in the novel. She explores the convergence of the American pioneer myth and the fugitive slave narrative within *The Grapes of Wrath*. Specifically, Battat generates a link between the “African American social struggle” and Steinbeck’s poor Okie migrants that revolutionizes the previous white supremacist undertones of the pioneer narrative (470).

The influence of science and evolutionary biology on Steinbeck’s work has long been represented in *The Grapes of Wrath* scholarship, but a considerable amount of criticism has specifically been devoted to analyzing the influence of the eugenics movement in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In “These Are American People: The Spectre of Eugenics in *Their Blood is Strong* and *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Kevin Hearle looks at Steinbeck’s article series and novel side by side and reevaluates the role that eugenics and racialized discourse play in his work. While Hearle considers the possibility that

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Steinbeck employs a white supremacist approach that points to the Okies’ whiteness as proof that they are American people, he recognizes that the eugenics rhetoric that may have been present in his article series is absent from *The Grapes of Wrath*. Ashley Lancaster also examines the eugenics influence, determining that “Steinbeck acknowledges the prevalence of eugenic discourse in America and simultaneously subverts that discourse” with *The Grapes of Wrath* (429).

Readings of the eugenics influence in Steinbeck’s work have rightly involved notions of citizenship, race, and whiteness. As Jeffory Clymer’s analysis of nativism and xenophobia in the 1920s explains, “American nationality was often conflated with the concept of an ‘American race,’ whose purity was threatened by the newest immigrants” and their inferior racial composition (161). While not pursuing a reading of eugenics or immigration specifically, Sarah Wald builds upon these discourses concerning the construction of whiteness and Americanness in *The Grapes of Wrath*. She contends that “the injustice depicted in *The Grapes of Wrath* pivots on the reader’s recognition of the Joads’ racially privileged citizenship” (481). Despite the breadth of these racialized readings of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*, an analysis of the presence of lynching and an investigation of the racial effects of that presence is largely absent.

The invocation of “lynching” in this text is not Steinbeck’s first. His 1936 and 1937 novels, *In Dubious Battle* and *Of Mice and Men*, also contain at least one mention of the word “lynch,” and his 1936 short story, “The Vigilante,” an often-forgotten-about and over-looked text, details the lynching of an unidentified black male. The prevalence

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5 Marilyn Wyman’s “Affirming Whiteness: Visualizing California Agriculture” also investigates the changing definitions of whiteness that emerged in 1930s California with the Depression.
of lynching within Steinbeck’s mid-late 1930s work, including arguably his two most popular novels, demonstrates that lynching is key to an understanding of his work, especially his racially and class-charged masterpiece, *The Grapes of Wrath*. This chapter investigates the racial and historical conditions of the moment of the text’s production, the 1930s, in order to shed light on the presence of lynching and racial tension in the novel.

Racialized understandings of regional histories—particularly Southern racial history—haunt Steinbeck’s novel. The connection between the enslavement of the Okies and the “centuries of brutal enslavement of blacks by whites” (Battat 470), the occasional occurrence of the word “nigger,” and the frequent repetition of mantras like “Grandpa killed Injuns” represent these brief racial hiccups that pronounce themselves within the text infrequently. They function almost as haunting silences that lurk just below the text and surface occasionally to remind the reader that they are still present. Some scholars, like Erin Battat, have recognized these haunting silences in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In addition to seeing connections between the Okie migration and the mass exodus of African Americans out of the South, Battat also argues that Steinbeck draws heavily from “African American narrative strategies” and “builds upon the structure and theme of the slave narrative” to promote social critique in the West (469, 471). Like Battat, I think much of the American South and African American history quietly haunts Steinbeck’s novel, but I would like to add lynching to the list of racial influences on *The Grapes of Wrath*.

*The Grapes of Wrath* was published at the end of what proved to be a transformative decade for lynching. *The New York Times* opened the decade with a
headline that read “Forsees End of Lynching.” The article represents the start of what Ashraf Rushdy calls the “end-of-lynching” discourse. The beginning of the 1930s sparked a transformation in the way America thought about lynching. Suddenly, there were proclamations of the “last” lynching (Rushdy 95) and predictions that lynching “would be a lost crime by 1940” (“Forsees End”). This discourse about the end of lynching emerged with, and because of, increasingly restrictive definitions for what could be considered a lynching. While the form and strategy of lynching began to evolve and move away from the spectacle lynching that had been the most common practice until then, the criteria for defining a lynching became “more narrow” (Rushdy 94-97). In her study of lynching in the 1930s, Jessie Ames explains that the American public, by the 1930s, had come “to accept certain conditions as characteristic of lynchings—a huge mob of maddened citizens; a Negro criminal guilty of a capital offense; execution with rope and faggot” (17). She notes, though, that:

> in these last years, especially the past three [1938-1940], few lynchings have had any of these characteristics. A quiet mob of three white men who flog a Negro to death for having failed to have proper respect for one of the three in the opinion of many white people ought not be classified as a lynching. (Ames 17)

Opponents of this “end-of-lynching” discourse upheld the belief that “the changes after the 1930s marked a transformation, not a termination,” in the history of lynching (Rushdy 96). The 1930s, then, was a time period in which what constitutes a lynching, where a lynching occurs, and who participates or falls victim to a lynching was openly disputed and less easily determined.

Despite the growing popularity of the “end-of-lynching” discourse, the 1930s saw plenty of them. The 1930 Marion, Indiana lynching—which at one time had been
declared a “last” lynching—kicked off the decade and has since become one of the most-circulated and notorious lynching photographs in American history. The 1931 Scottsboro case fueled the end-of-lynching discourse, as Americans, newspapers, and other media congratulated Alabama and the whole country for narrowly avoiding a wholesale lynching of the nine black men unjustly accused of raping two white women in Scottsboro, Alabama. After the nine young men were taken to Jackson County Jail, thousands of men, women, and children gathered outside and called for the nine black men to be given over to the crowd (Carter 7-9). According to Dan Carter, the end-of-lynching discourse had also altered the way newspapers reported on lynchings or attempted lynchings. He recounts that of the two local Alabama newspapers reporting on the Scottsboro incident, “neither included an account of the attempted lynching” (Carter 23).

The decade also witnessed numerous, less-infamous lynchings. George Armwood was hanged and burned in Somerset, Maryland in 1933, and David Gregory was castrated and burned in Hardin, Texas that same year. During the latter half of the decade, Tom McGehee was dragged and burned to death in Sharkey, Mississippi, Willie Reed was burned to death in Decatur, Georgia, and John Dukes was dragged and burned to death in Crisp County, Georgia (Rushdy 94). Despite the momentary decrease in lynchings that seemed apparent in the very late 1920s, America experienced “an increase in lynchings during the early 1930s” (Raper 6). According to Raper, the lynch count “went up to twenty-eight” in 1933 and up “to twenty in 1935” (6). Hilton Butler

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6 This list means to provide a brief overview and does not represent the complete list of lynchings that took place in the 1930s. According to Arthur Raper’s *The Tragedy of Lynching*, the year 1930 alone witnessed twenty-one lynchings.
corroborates the spike in lynchings and notes that “figures show a sharp rise of the lynching graph since the beginning of the Depression in America” (Burton “Lynch Law”).

The late 1930s, too, proved to be a tumultuous time for discourses surrounding lynching. The end of the decade witnessed the passing of the Gavagan Anti-Lynching Bill in April 1937, as well as the subsequent repeal of it in February 1938. Thus, the end of the 1930s depicted an America divided politically, regionally, and racially over the subject of lynching. It is in this same decade that John Steinbeck publishes *The Grapes of Wrath*, and in it, mentions that a “posse” of white Californians is out looking for Tom Joad, a white migrant worker, and “talkin’ up a lynchin’” (Steinbeck 399).

The scene in which Uncle John talks of a looming lynching and alludes to an already-active lynch mob is the only scene in the novel that explicitly utilizes the term “lynching.” However, it is not the only scene from the novel that involves a lynch mob, or a lynching for that matter. After Tom reunites with Jim Casy, the preacher-turned-strike leader, they are both surrounded and attacked by a vague mixture of white Californians—some cops, some union busters. Steinbeck’s depiction of the attack seems characteristic of mob activity. Tom and Casy can hear the “faint footsteps” of the mob approaching before Tom exclaims, “I think they’s guys comin’ from ever’ which way. We better get outta here” (Steinbeck 385). Even before the footsteps, the two are both “nervous as a cat” and listening intently to their surroundings, as if they expect trouble or recognize the inevitability of the events about to unfold (385).

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7 The support for the bill was fueled by a gruesome double lynching that took place in Mississippi in 1937. See “Lynchers Torture, Burn Two Negroes.” *The New York Times*, 14 April 1937.
Tom and Casy move quickly into the “shadows” and proceed “quietly along the edge of the stream” to evade the enclosing mob (386). The mob hunt, so closely documented in historical—Arthur Raper calls it the “mob hunt tradition”—and literary accounts of lynchings in the South, unfolds here (Raper 9). Tom and Casy are quickly caught and surrounded by the mob of white men “with flashlights,” who shout, “There they are!” (386). This excited and eager exclamation at their capture is evocative of those cheers and applause common at lynchings in the South. The townspeople awaiting the arrival of the captured black male in James Baldwin’s infamous short story “Going to Meet the Man” shout, “They got him! They got him!” as the lynch mob moves into sight (Baldwin 241). Similarly, at the lynching of a black man in Sherman, Georgia, Arthur Raper recounts, “the negro’s body…was greeted by loud applause from the thousands who jammed the courthouse square” (Raper 7).

Very quickly after the exclamations at Tom and Casy’s capture, the mob leader steps forward and kills Jim Casy:

[A] short heavy man stepped into the light. He carried a new white pick handle…The heavy man swung with the pick handle…The heavy club crashed into the side of his [Casy] head with a dull crunch of bone, and Casy fell sideways out of the light…The flashlight beam dropped, searched and found Casy’s crushed head. (Steinbeck 386)

After the light finds Casy, the mob leader says aloud, “Serve the son-of-a-bitch right” (386).

Because of its connections to historical and literary accounts, it’s difficult to divorce this scene from the history of the lynching of African Americans in the South. The scene detailed here differs in some clear ways from the process of the spectacle lynching, but as Rushdy asserts, that form of lynching had mostly dissipated by the mid-
late 1930s and evolved into different and less predictable forms. The hunting, chasing, evading, capturing, and killing, however, are all present in this crucial lynch mob scene. The most startling difference is that Jim Casy is a white migrant in California. Tom Joad, as Uncle John tells us, also becomes the target of a lynch mob after clubbing Casy’s executioner to death. In addition to beginning the novel as a kind of fugitive, Tom is forced to leave the family and hide from a threatening lynch mob in what is Steinbeck’s second appropriation of the “mob hunt tradition” (Raper 9).

Steinbeck pairs this chapter containing both lynch mobs—Casy’s and Tom’s—and the novel’s sole mention of the word “lynching” with an intercalary chapter about cotton pickers. The southern crop had made its way to the Southwest and the West by the twentieth century, but its connection to the racial history of the South is still very much alive in Steinbeck’s 1930s text. The word “cotton” appears in *The Grapes of Wrath* from time to time over the course of the novel, but just in this single, two-and-a-half page, intercalary chapter, it appears twenty-four times. And in the middle of countless images of cotton, cotton-pickers, and bags of cotton is the word “nigger” (Steinbeck 407). The haunting racial history of the South resurfaces in this chapter with cotton and a story about a “lady back home” who “had a nigger kid all of a sudden” (Steinbeck 407). The short anecdote passes quickly in this stream-of-consciousness styled chapter, but becomes particularly important when read alongside the “lynchin’” from its partner chapter.

The anecdote is framed as a conversation that takes place over cotton-picking and goes as follows: “They was a lady back home, won’t mention no names—had a nigger kid all of a sudden. Nobody knowed before. Never did hunt out the nigger” (Steinbeck 407).
This brief story does a couple of things for the racial underpinnings of Steinbeck’s text. First, the shame and disgust accompanied with the “nigger kid”—the narrator tells us the mother “couldn’t hold up her head no more”—engages American discourses on racial mixing (407). Paramount among all masked and openly expressed fears related to the autonomy of the black male in the South was his access to white women. The white fear of black autonomy and equality was nothing new to the 1930s South, but the lynchings of that decade, along with the troubling Scottsboro case, demonstrate that the purity of both the white race and the white female were still of the upmost importance.

This nod to the long history of discourses on racial mixing emerges in Steinbeck’s text at a time when similar fears were resurfacing in the West. The Okie migration revived the fear of a polluted American race and tightened the borders surrounding whiteness. Though numerous racial minorities engendered fears about racial mixing, this anecdote is specific—“a nigger kid.” The black male has historically been depicted as a threat to white racial purity. As Neil McMillen asserts, “Of all interracial proscriptions, none was more fiercely held by whites…than the taboo on interracial sex (14). That the black male’s inferior and degenerate qualities would denigrate and pollute the American gene pool was still in the 1930s a real concern.

Those concerns were also real for California in the 1930s, only the Okies occupy the position of the dangerous racial minority who threatens to contaminate the good white California stock. As Gerald Haslam finds it, the Okies were perceived as a “promiscuous” and “lawless,” “disease-ridden” people (188-119), who polluted the whole state. Since crossing the border, they had access to white Californian women. The possibility “that their children might date or marry Okies concerned many parents,”
according to Haslam (115). Steinbeck’s text demonstrates a consciousness of the “promiscuous” Okie men at several different points, most vividly in an earlier intercalary chapter that portrays several Californian men discussing their fear and hatred of Okies: “These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They’re degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They’ll steal anything. They’ve got no sense of property rights” (Steinbeck 283). Though it is possible that “property rights” could refer to land, the specific description of the Okies’ “degenerate” qualities and the depiction of them as “sexual maniacs” bring the fear of miscegenation to the forefront.

These Okie men, who have “no sense of property rights,” could very well “steal” California’s white women. One of the Californian men represented in this intercalary chapter confirms these fears of racial mixing when he concludes the aforementioned tirade with: “How’d you like to have your sister go out with one of ‘em?” (Steinbeck 283). Many scholars have rightly pointed to the term Okie as a racial slur that strips white migrants of their whiteness and constructs them as “something of a minority group” (Wollenberg 155), but this widespread fear of racial mixing with the “degenerate” Okies not only denies them their whiteness, but constructs them as a direct threat to whiteness and to the white race in America.

The second thing the “nigger kid” anecdote does for a racial understanding of The Grapes of Wrath is draw out the connection between racial mixing and lynching. As the story-teller mentions, they “never did hunt out the nigger” who impregnated the “lady back home” and, consequently, polluted the white gene pool (407). Though lynchings in the South were not always held for just one racist reason, they were most infamously conducted as punishment for alleged black crimes against white women and as brutal
warnings for black men to stay away from white women. The anecdote from this intercalary chapter explicitly references the lynch mob’s “hunt” for the black male, and in doing so, alludes to the assumed and inevitable punishment—a lynching. Given that this chapter is paired—like a diptych—with the aforementioned chapter about Tom and Casy’s run-ins with lynch mobs, it seems clear that *The Grapes of Wrath* is invested in delineating and complicating the racial composition of Steinbeck’s Okies. That Jim Casy and Tom Joad could be the targets for these lynchings signals both a significant complication in the racial status of the white migrant population and a transformation in the definition of lynching.

Moreover, it is significant that Steinbeck’s appropriation of Southern racial history, particularly through the cotton trope and the use of racially-charged words like “lynching” and “nigger,” does not merely work to confirm the Okies’ white American citizenship. In her profound contribution to literary criticism, Toni Morrison has explored the function of “racial language” in the work of American authors (10). In her analysis, she investigates the construction of “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” (10), asserting that blackness, particularly in the work of white American authors, operates as an oppositional and marginalized force against which whiteness and Americanness can be affirmed and naturalized (12-18). But, here in Steinbeck’s text, the images of and references to blackness only further eradicate the Okies’ Americanness, whiteness, and citizenship. Secondly, while destabilizing the Okies’ whiteness, Steinbeck’s use of blackness and the histories attached to that blackness centralizes the racial struggle of a marginalized Other—African Americans.
That “literary blackness” is appropriated by Steinbeck in other significant moments of racial instability within the novel. As Patricia Penn Hilden notes, the Okies were familiar with police brutality and vigilante action. According to Hilden, “Those Arkies and Okies were met by gun-toting Anglos, all too ready to shoot” as soon as they made the journey into California (232). *The Grapes of Wrath* details a few representations of these run-ins with the police at the migrant camps.

Earlier in the novel, while the Joads are becoming acquainted with the Hoovervilles, some of the more seasoned migrants attempt to both warn them about the police and instruct them on how to behave when “the cops push ‘im aroun’” (Steinbeck 244). Not yet familiar with his uncertain racial position as an Okie, Tom cannot understand why he—a white migrant—would be a target for the police: “Why would they push a fella like that aroun’?” (244). The camp migrants advise Tom and the Joad men on how to present themselves to the cops: “When the cops come in, an’ they come in all the time, that’s how you wanta be. Dumb—don’t know nothin’. Don’t understan’ nothin’. That’s how the cops like us. Don’t hit no cops. That’s jus’ suicide. Be bull-simple” (248). Just as African Americans were taught to play dumb with white authorities and advised to assume the dim-witted persona that was expected of them, the Okies, too, are conditioned to pose as “dumb” and inferior, just as the cops like them to be.

When the contractor and sheriff arrive at the squatters’ camp to clear the unwanted Okies out, the lowly position of the Okies becomes obvious in a way that again evokes the construction of black racial inferiority. When these two men arrive at the camp in their “shiny car,” dressed in clean “khaki trousers,” “Stetson hats,” and “flannel
shirts,” and marked with signs of authority—“a heavy pistol,” “cartridge belt,” and “sheriff’s star”—the “squatting men” on the camp “did not raise their heads to look” (262-263). Steinbeck lends a lot of space to developing the stark contrast between the clearly white authority figures and the dirty, squatting Okies. In addition to their appearance, the Okies do not raise their eyes to meet the newly-arrived men. They are additionally denied the right to address the sheriff and contractor in any way that deviates from their “bull-simple” façade. The deputy threatens Tom with arrest if he “jus’ opens [his] trap once more” (263) and Casy is shortly actually arrested because “[he] talked back” (266). The white denial of black male subjectivity, made obvious in both historical and literary accounts by restrictions on looking and speaking, is superimposed on the Okie population in this encounter with the police.

The Okies’ relationship to the law, to cops, and to white Californians greatly resembles the relationship of ethnic and racial minority groups—particularly African Americans—to white authority figures. In her aforementioned historical research on the Okies, Hilden is purposeful in her differentiation between the Okies and the “Anglos,” who cannot wait to shoot them. Steinbeck’s sampling from black racial history here helps to destabilize previously accepted definitions of whiteness. The Okies are rejected from the Anglo-Saxon grouping of Americans and relegated to a far more ambiguous racial status. The haunting presence of Southern racial conflicts in these scenes between the Okies and the police works to illustrate the ways in which this population of white migrants has been stripped of its whiteness, but it does not simply equate them with blackness either. It destabilizes and blurs that previously rigidly-enforced binary.
Drawing on much of the same racial discourse that Toni Morrison employs in her literary criticism, Sarah Wald argues that these haunting images of blackness work to reaffirm the Joads’—and the Okies—whiteness (486-487). In the novel’s beginning, Tom has been released from prison and catches a ride to his family’s farm with a truck driver. The truck driver appears reluctant in the agreement and suspicious throughout the drive. He constantly “glance[s] uneasily over” at Tom, prompts him with strange questions, and probes his responses and reactions (Steinbeck 11). Tom’s clothes, especially, function as a source of the driver’s uneasiness. He looks suspiciously through “slitt[ed]” eyes at Tom’s “new cap,” “new clothes,” and “new shoes,” all of which don’t seem to fit him quite right (Steinbeck 8). Eventually, Tom can feel the drivers’ eyes on him and confesses that he was presented with the ill-suited clothing on his way out of McAlester Prison. Tom’s raggedy appearance and his jail time separate him from the truck driver, who is “thinkin’ of takin’ one of them correspondence school courses” (Steinbeck 11). The class difference, which the truck driver senses from the start, creates discomfort between the two men and exacerbates the driver’s apprehension about Tom.

In his efforts to figure Tom out, the driver seems to “test” him with a line from a poem he heard once: “An’ there we spied a nigger, with a trigger that was bigger than a elephant’s proboscis or the whanger of a whale” (Steinbeck 10). It is this moment of poetic recitation that Sarah Wald points to as crucial in the construction of the Joads’ whiteness. Tom and the truck drivers’ “class-based relationship,” she argues, is “cemented through common whiteness when the truck driver tells a joke about a nigger” (Wald 484). The word “nigger” and other representations of blackness appear sporadically throughout the novel, like here in this poem, but not, I would argue, with the
purpose of constructing the Joads’ whiteness. In this scene with the truck driver and Tom, the word “nigger” heightens the already-present tension between the two men.

Steinbeck tells us that as the driver recites the line from the poem, “his secret eyes turned on his passenger” in search of a telling response (10). Tom’s silence at the word “nigger” makes the truck driver more “nervous” (10). The driver is nervous because his racist poem does not successfully cement any kind of white bond with Tom and suggests that there might be something “Other” about Tom. The reorganization of the boundaries surrounding both whiteness and Americanness that takes place in the 1930s American West produces an anxiety and confusion that Steinbeck’s text picks up on in this scene. There is no affirmation of whiteness for Tom through the invocation of the word “nigger.” Rather, the word “nigger” actually exacerbates the possible racial difference between Tom and the truck driver. From their meeting, the trucker is not sure about Tom. He looks white, but the truck driver still seems compelled to probe and spy on him. In fact, the truck driver’s constant probing of Tom mirrors the racially-charged poem—the truck driver spies Tom, like the poet “spie[s] a nigger.” He finds him out to be not quite white.

Peter La Chapelle’s recent work, *Proud to be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California*, emphasizes the racial hierarchy at work during the 1930’s Okie migration and suggests that the Okies assumed, what he calls, “a liminally white status” (23). La Chapelle aptly recognizes the questionable and fluctuating racial status of the Okie, but much of *The Grapes of Wrath* pushes the boundaries surrounding Okie identity beyond “liminally white.” Reading another pair of Steinbeck’s chapters—nineteen and twenty—as a diptych can help further develop the
extent of these racial undertones. In another moment of Okie confusion over the hostility and brutality exhibited by the police and the white Californian population, Tom Joad asks a fellow migrant why these oppressive forces appear to be aligned against them. The migrant replies:

I tell ya I don’t know. Some says they don’ want us to vote; keep us movin’ so we can’t vote. An’ some says so we can’t get on relief. An’ some says if we set in one place we’d get organized. I don’ know why. I on’y know we get rode all the time. You wait, you’ll see. (Steinbeck 244)

The migrant’s response evokes, again, the oppression of African Americans in the South. The connection becomes apparent when read alongside a short segment from the preceding intercalary chapter. In this chapter, Steinbeck represents the voice of the white Californians:

We got to keep these here people down or they’ll take the country. They’ll take the country. Outlanders, foreigners. Sure, they talk the same language, but they ain’t the same…Got to keep ‘em in line or Christ only knows what they’ll do! Why, Jesus, they’re as dangerous as niggers in the South! If they ever get together there ain’t nothin’ that’ll stop ‘em. (Steinbeck 236)

This intercalary chapter helps develop the historical context surrounding the exchange between Tom and his fellow migrant worker. Through the representation of the white Californian’s perspective of the Okies, this passage emphasizes the racial undertones of the Okies by drawing upon Southern racial history once more—“they’re as dangerous as niggers in the South!” (236). The rhetoric that here bolsters hatred for the Okies greatly resembles the Southern rhetoric that encouraged hatred and fear of the black population and fostered anxiety about social upheaval. The possibility that blacks in the South could rise up against the white majority and disrupt the status quo was a long-time fear of white Southerners. In the Reconstruction years, especially, the fear of black progress triggered
a violent response from white Southerners in order to ensure their own racial superiority. The fear of an organized, black collective, the possibility of black economic progress, and the pervasive concern about racial mixing, among other anxieties, resulted in a call for “direct physical compulsion” against blacks by whites (McMillen 32). Though Steinbeck does not call upon the word “lynching” here in his paired chapters, the reference to the “dangerous” “niggers in the South” ushers forth the history of “physical intimidation as an essential tool in the management of negroes” (McMillen 32), of which lynching was the most effective and violent tool.

This particular diptych does not just mention the Californian fear of the Okies’ collective organization, right to vote, and right to property. It also hints at a similar kind of violence employed by Californians in order to maintain superiority and control over the Okies. The Californians are advised to “shoot first,” engage in “raids” with “armed deputies” at the squatters’ camps, and even “set fire to the camp[s]” (Steinbeck 236-237). The Okies are characterized as a direct threat to white California in these chapters, much like the black population was to the white South. Here, too, direct forms of violence work to keep the Okies in their subordinate position to the white Californians.

The Okies’ racial status, however, is far more complicated than “liminally white” or less than white, and Steinbeck’s text does more than recategorize the poor white population. The convergence of the Okie experience in California and the black experience in the South—and the conflation of the “Okie problem” with the “Negro problem”—resists reaffirming white supremacist notions of racial superiority. The presence of blackness in the text does not participate in the construction of whiteness or white superiority for Steinbeck’s migrants. It completely implode the boundaries
between races—especially white and black—and utilizes the Okie migration to centralize the racial injustice done to the country’s black population.

The text, too, is critical of the moments in which, through mantras like “Grandpa killed Injuns,” the Joads attempt to re-identify with whiteness and white racial superiority. Instead of re-identification with white Californians, it is actually the violent oppression of the black population, the haunting presence of the injustice done to Native American Indians, and the marginalization of the Mexican American population that Steinbeck amalgamates into the Okie experience and appropriates to represent American identity. The “I to We” progression of the novel has long been associated with the development of a working class consciousness. But, this chapter suggests that the “We” in Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* is the union between the Okies and the haunting racial presences that influence Steinbeck’s conception of Okie identity.

The Okies’ “I to We” movement also makes one more important contribution to the notion of race in Steinbeck’s text. In the so-called zygote passage that epitomizes the “I to We” movement and the progression toward a collective class consciousness, Steinbeck writes, “a cell is split and from its splitting grows the thing you hate” (151). I would like to suggest that this notion of the zygote splitting also works to demonstrate another key function of the novel: a manifestation of how race and Othering operate. As Edward Said explains in *Orientalism*, the racialized Other is the repository of those aspects of the self that the dominant race finds repulsive. The Okies become that racialized Other in the context of 1930s Depression-era California. The American promise of progress and prosperity came under profound questioning in the 1930s. While the country struggled to rebuild and re-identify the character of the nation, the Okies
came to represent the failure of the Depression. Steinbeck’s text represents this Depression-era, class-based hatred for the Okies, but also draws out its racial implications. As a reminder of American failure, the Okies were left out of the reconceptualization of American identity. *The Grapes of Wrath*, however, subverts that Othering operation by characterizing both the Okies and the marginalized racial identities that haunt the novel as the American people.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Of the numerous articles and books published on John Steinbeck’s work, not many of them give much thought to the presence of lynching, just as the many articles and books published on lynching do not often consider the ways in which 1930s California factors into the American lynching narrative. Before I took on this project, Steinbeck and lynching also seemed dissimilar to me. But, having finished an exploration of Steinbeck’s major 1930s work, it seems clear to me that a latent, easily over-looked consideration of lynching and race underlies John Steinbeck’s labor trilogy—*In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).

Chapter I explored the ways in which lynching penetrates Steinbeck’s 1936 strike novel, *In Dubious Battle*, and considered the impact of the 1933 San Jose lynching on the development of his text and the implementation of his phalanx theory. Steinbeck’s representation of the 1930s labor strikes is infused with a substantial vigilante undercurrent. The vigilante narrative incorporates both much of the Southern lynching narrative and the history of the Vigilance Committees in the West. These regional
accounts of lynching pervade *In Dubious Battle* and suggest a depiction of the 1930s labor movement that is heavily involved with lynching. The tumultuous atmosphere of the labor strike and the Californian hatred for the un-American Reds and strikers makes it so that any tree can become a hang tree at any moment. The chapter suggested that the handful of allusions to lynchings and the prevalence of the vigilantes disrupt both the labor setting and the American lynching narrative, forcing readers to reconsider the relationship of lynching to race, class, region, and history in America.

Chapter II proposed a consideration of *Of Mice and Men* as a lynching novel. This thesis project actually began with my discovery of the word “lynch” in *Of Mice and Men* and spread to the rest of the labor series from there. Though the word only appears once in the novel, its presence reverberates out from that sole occurrence and permeates the rest of the narrative. The chapter examines the similarities between the lynching narrative in the South and Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* in order to propose that Steinbeck adopts much of that narrative for the white migrant labor setting. That appropriation leads to a considerable complication of, specifically, Lennie Smalls’ racial identity. Lennie’s characterization is evocative of the black male figure within the lynching narrative, and he is twice positioned as the target of the lynch mob, the second time resulting in his death. Like *In Dubious Battle*, this conflation of lynching and a white migrant worker setting is slightly jarring and works to complicate definitions of race in California. The presence of the lynch mob exposes racial tensions within the novel and exacerbates an already class-charged Depression-era, labor setting. The lynch mob itself is also central to *Of Mice and Men*. The depiction of it in the text is machine-
like and builds off of Steinbeck’s “organized” vigilantes from *In Dubious Battle*. It becomes active as a result of, what I call, the white female “trigger” and takes its cues from similar representations of the lynch mob in the South and in African-American Literature. The racial undertones of *Of Mice and Men* are intensified in Steinbeck’s decade-end novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

My exploration of *The Grapes of Wrath* in Chapter III uncovered the racial tension of the Okie migration to California. Like *Of Mice and Men*, lynching only makes one short appearance in the novel, but I could not ignore it. The ripples from Uncle John’s utterance of lynching spread throughout the whole novel and deeply affect the class and racial status of the Okies. I realize now that a focus on lynching invites a serious consideration of the racial undertones of the 1930s West, which is perhaps the most significant result of Steinbeck’s incorporation of lynching into *The Grapes of Wrath*. Again, much about lynching and racism in the South penetrates Steinbeck’s depiction of the Okies—fears of racial mixing, threat of Okie organization, and direct conflict and violence with police and white authority figures. The moments I identified, in which some trace of a racial Other—I focus on African Americans, but there is also a strong Mexican American and Native American presence waiting to be analyzed—surfaces in the text, do not work to support or reaffirm the Okies’ whiteness. Rather, the incorporation of black racial history into the Okie experience further complicates their ambiguous racial status and implodes the rigid binary between white and black. Moreover, by conflating the racial struggle of blacks in the South with the Okie struggle,
Steinbeck centralizes the systematic oppression of a marginalized population and brings that racial dynamic to California.

The version of John Steinbeck’s labor trilogy that I discovered through this project has much to do with race and lynching. That is not to say that the labor movement did not actually influence Steinbeck’s late 1930s work. Rather, just that his representation of the labor movement and of Depression-era California is much more synonymous with lynching than normatively supposed. His work produces a friction-filled amalgamation of race and class that complicates the racial status of the white strikers in *In Dubious Battle*, Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*, and the Okies in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Steinbeck’s labor trilogy acknowledges both that lynching is still a real crime in the 1930s and that the South was not the sole culprit. I hope that my analysis of the labor series will invite more readings of lynching within John Steinbeck’s work.
LITERATURE CITED


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