DUST BOWL MEETS GREAT DEPRESSION

Environmental Tools and Tales of the Dust Bowl

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“When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”
—Aldo Leopold, 1948

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ABSTRACT

In the 1930s the Great Depression and a severe drought and dust storms rocked the U.S. A decade and a half before, the First World War marked a period of rising global wheat demand, and the Great Plains became an international breadbasket. American farmers met the demand and turned the region into a one-crop resource. The droughts of the early 1930s would further devastate the Plains topsoil, as farmers continued to break the sod and strove to top the yields of the war years. High winds took hold of the dry, overworked soil, now reduced to a fine powder, whipping up dangerous dust storms that transformed farmland into desert, and left thousands homeless and desperate. Inhabitants of the Plains, now termed the Dust Bowl, reacted to harsh conditions by attempting to combat nature, for the land ethic at the time was such that humans thought themselves stronger than and able to defeat the environment, rather than being part of it.

At the same time, the Stock Market Crash of 1929 created domestic turmoil and international calamity, and the nation had to confront two unrelated crises simultaneously. With more than 15 million Americans unemployed, President Franklin Roosevelt sought to bolster American morale and unity through his ambitious New Deal, which enacted sweeping social and economic changes. The New Deal offered the American public a chance to combat its predicament and rise above its current circumstances, and the government and the populace united to boost morale by cultivating an attitude of toughness. That the Great Depression occurred at the same time as the Dust Bowl made it so that the environmental disaster was fought in the same manner as the economic crisis — with determination, perseverance, and grit, rather than understanding and moderation.

Thus in the public consciousness the Great Depression was linked to an agricultural and environmental crisis, both of which had to be met with fierce resolve. As a result, there would be few opportunities to change the nation’s land ethic. The Dust Bowl in and of itself could have presented a teachable moment, to even create a national environmental consciousness. Instead, the concurrence of the Great Depression postponed the start of the modern environmental movement, which would not emerge until the 1960s.
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Sundays were no longer reserved solely for God during the decade of the 1930s in the Great Plains region of the United States. They were also utilized for jackrabbit drives: whole towns came out to watch and participate in the slaughter of thousands upon thousands of jackrabbits. Men rounded up the animals into fenced off areas, and then everyone could grab a club and start pounding. Although it may have offered entertainment to some, for most these jackrabbit drives were necessary activities so as to protect the pitifully little amount of crops and food that were left. The rabbits had run out of their own vegetation due to the droughts so they came to the wheat fields in swarms to attempt to eat anything they could. At the end of the drive some rural folk brought back rabbit meat to feed their families, and some meat and fur were sent off to the big cities to be sold. Thousands though were left out in the blazing sun to shrivel up and blow away in the heat and dust that defined the 1930s in the Great Plains.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Plains was once immense grassland where buffalo and cattle roamed, yet with westward migration small family farms sprinkled the landscape. With the start of the First World War there was a global demand for wheat as European suppliers were immersed in the bloody war. The Great Plains region of the United States was thus called upon to supply much of the global wheat demand during the war years. This region became a one-crop farming business that tore through soil most of which was not fit for agriculture. Dust Bowl historian Donald Worster in 1979 comments the “only certainty is that droughts will come” in the Great Plains, and in the 1930s after the WWI
wheat boom that is exactly what happened. The droughts came and farmers continued to plow the sod, attempting to top past yields of the war years so as to pay back machinery costs and make a living without government war assistance.

Then came the dust storms that caused immense erosion throughout the Plains. In 1935 this central region of the United States comprising large sections of Colorado, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, and Kansas came to be known as the “Dust Bowl.” One storm in 1935 “carried away from the plains twice as much earth as men and machines had scooped out to make the Panama Canal.” Dust storms howled through this area leaving many sick with dust pneumonia, crops blown up, and burnt vegetation due to electricity within the dust clouds. The dust storms started when the drought started; for years man had planted and harvested crops on the Great Plains without a care in the world, yet when drought and dust struck these men were forced to rethink and reconsider their very way of life. The Dust Bowl was not just an outcome of nature alone or man alone, rather it was a joint effort caused by drought and over-plowed lands that were never meant to provide food for entire nations.

During the 1930s Americans were hit not only by dust storms and drought that threatened the food supplies of the entire nation and the lives of millions, but also by an international economic depression. The 1920s had been full of intense banking and investment speculation as well as complex war reparation cycles set up at the end of the First World War; when the stock market crashed in 1929 it caused international calamity and domestic turmoil. Agricultural prices collapsed during the Great Depression because

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2 Robert Geiger, “If It Rains...These Three Little Words Rule Life in Dust Bowl of U.S,” The Evening Star, April 15, 1935.
3 Worster., 18.
of overproduction; other wheat markets had recovered because the war was over and thus the international demand for wheat from the United States was diminishing.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president in 1932 on a platform of change. Right away FDR began to enact sweeping social and economic changes and initiatives that included the Agricultural Adjustment, Works Projects, and Farm Security Administrations, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and Social Security. These humanitarian and economic policies were all part of FDR's New Deal in which millions of Americans were given jobs and opportunities to recover. It became necessary to aid farmers especially because of the Great Depression: "the wind and drought of the 1930s had a greater impact than they might have otherwise have had because of the poor economic environment in which they occurred."^4

Many historians have written about the infamous Dust Bowl, yet they seem to disagree as to which factors contributed most heavily in its occurrence. Many agree that the Dust Bowl occurred because of a mix of natural and man-made actions; some blame technology rather than humans, and some blame nature more than aggressive capitalist American culture. However in all of the Dust Bowl literature and theories there is hardly any analysis of how contemporary Americans and farmers viewed their land or environment. How can historians such as Donald Worster place blame onto farmers for causing the Dust Bowl or accelerating its effects, if we do not know how these individuals interacted or thought about their land?

Douglas Hurt and Donald Worster have both written about the technological and cultural influences that contributed to the Dust Bowl. Hurt argues, "the nature of the

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southern Plains soils and the periodic influence of drought could not be changed, but the technological abuse of the land could have been stopped."⁵ Of course one must keep in mind that this relationship with the land is a mere projection of the historian’s ideas onto farmers, and we do not hear actual testimonies from farmers or those who personally worked the land. Did farmers view themselves as abusers of the land, or did they even think about their connection to the land?

Linda Nash, an environmental historian writing in 2006, states, “one of the major cultural developments of the late twentieth century was the reenvisioning of human beings’ place in the world.”⁶ This statement implies that Americans before this time period held a different concept of the land and viewed their natural environment through a different lens. Nash identifies Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring of 1962 as an instrumental tool in educating the American people and masses about environmental issues and problems.

There were more than 15 million unemployed Americans when FDR took office, and the largest goal of the New Deal was to alleviate immediate suffering and create jobs. Yet the New Deal was not just a series of programs and initiatives that sought to alleviate immediate suffering, but aimed to “preserve and reform capitalism and to promote economic recovery.”⁷ A high level of determination and optimism were projected and promoted onto the American people with the implementation of the New Deal. Historian Brad Lookingbill argues, “Depression America socially constructed a cult making people

more powerful than the circumstances confronting them.”

The New Deal and its agricultural projects and relief activities promoted a cult of toughness; Americans were taught that they could rise above their circumstances and fight both the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl.

To modern readers and historians, the Depression era and the Dust Bowl may seem like obvious indicators of resource mismanagement and general environmental disregard. Yet this is only because we have grown up in a time in which we view nature and the environment differently. Environmentalist Philip Shabecoff points out, “The nation’s attention to conservation was diverted by the Roaring Twenties, the two great wars, and the Great Depression. For many years, with few exceptions until the 1960s, efforts to preserve the land and its resources had a low priority on the nation’s public agenda.”

Essentially in addition to having a different view of their natural environment and the land, 1930s Americans and farmers were distracted by the Great Depression. Not only were farmers struggling to stay afloat and keep their crops healthy and fruitful but millions of fellow Americans were suffering as well.

Thus the Great Depression helped in transferring an agricultural crisis and land crisis into a national and international economic disaster in which there was hardly any room to change the nation’s land ethic. The Dust Bowl could have created a national environmental consciousness yet instead the concurrence of the Great Depression postponed the start of the modern environmental movement; this would not occur until the 1960s.

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During the 1930s there were many agricultural projects and plans set into action to combat nature and improve rural life, yet combating nature did not help in advancing a new land ethic. Projects included the Shelterbelt Project organized by the National Forest Service. The plan submitted to FDR in 1933 "called for the creation of a 'shelterbelt zone' from the Canadian border to northern Texas."\(^{10}\) The plan was twofold: to prevent erosion and soil blowing, and to create jobs. The project lasted eight years, and succeeded in planting 18,600 miles of shelterbelts and over 200,000,000 trees; around 30,000 farmers participated and the program cost the federal government more than fourteen and a half million dollars.\(^{11}\) The trees succeeded in curbing some of the blowing dust yet the land practices remained practically the same. The federal government also hired a variety of ecologists and scientists to investigate the Dust Bowl region and issue reports. Yet the man versus nature battle continued to be waged during the 1930s and not until the 1960s was the idea proposed on a mass scale that "people were inescapably part of a larger ecosystem."\(^{12}\)

Examining the way in which contemporary 1930s Americans viewed nature and their environment sheds important light onto why the ecological debacle of the Great Plains occurred, the kinds of reactions it met, and what lasting effects it had on American environmentalism. In seeking to understand the 1930s imagination and construction of nature I will examine various 30s contemporary reactions to the Dust Bowl. These reactions are two government-sponsored projects, a 1936 film directed by Pare Lorentz entitled *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and two Farm Security Administration photographs by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The

\(^{10}\) Hurt, 123-124.  
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 135.  
\(^{12}\) Nash, 1.
Grapes of Wrath, and a compilation of various plainsmen’s journals and testimonies. These primary sources from the 1930s demonstrate that contemporary Dust Bowl farmers and Americans were not forced to change their land ethic or their techniques of agriculture.

The Dust Bowl and the Great Depression were two separate national events that occurred during the same time frame. Thus two un-related events had to be dealt with at the same time; economic recovery obviously took the forefront during the recovery and Americans were not challenged to change their agricultural methods or plowing. In fact, farmers were turned into victims of the land in order to gain sympathy and support for the New Deal, and FDR called upon his fellow Americans to join together and fight the depression: “These dark days, my friends, will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.”13 The same discourse of determination, perseverance, and power were used to combat the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, and thus Americans were continuously told that they could triumph over nature and bounce back to prosperity. It helped also that the rains returned around 1940 on the Great Plains and so once again, farmers believed they were stronger than their natural environment.

SECTION I

The Plow that Broke the Plains: Combating Nature

The New Deal not only built dams, roads, and bridges but implemented huge arts projects that were meant to produce entertainment, promote American culture, and provide jobs to artists. Some of these arts initiatives were the Federal Theatre, Federal Art, Federal Music, and Federal Writers' Projects that were implemented under the sponsorship of the Works Project Administration. These projects not only provided entertainment and jobs for the American people, but also bolstered enthusiasm and support for FDR's New Deal.

One such project to bolster support for the New Deal initiatives was the Resettlement Administration-sponsored film of 1936, The Plow that Broke the Plains. The film was written and directed by Pare Lorentz, an up and coming journalist and film director. Born in West Virginia in 1905, Pare grew up in a "comfortable family" which had come to Virginia before the American Revolution.14 Pare's father was a small-town printer, and from an early age Pare was exposed to the ever-growing world of journalism. He moved up north after college and wrote pieces for several magazines and newspapers including The New York Times and a New York magazine called Judge. In the early 1930s Lorentz was hired by Vanity Fair and remarked, "I was so impressed with the use of photographs that I began to promote the idea of photographing the great changes that were taking place in America."15

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In Washington D.C. Lorentz pitched his idea of photographing the upcoming changes of America through the New Deal to Secretary Henry Wallace of the Agricultural Department. Although Wallace was not interested, Lorentz was redirected to Rexford Tugwell of the new Resettlement Administration who enthusiastically backed the movie plans. "I suggested the Dust Bowl," reminisces Lorentz, "because I remembered the great vast landscape from my first trip in 1924, particularly the huge arc of sky." He had also witnessed the dust storms from the Great Plains blow right into Manhattan, and thus recognized the pressing agency of such an event and the need to publicize it to the American nation. "My intent almost a half-century ago was to have the pictures tell their story; to augment that story with music that would not only be an accompaniment but also would evoke emotions related to the lives of the people concerned," Lorentz writes in 1992. He continues and states that the words were "solely for explanation and clarity."

Pare Lorentz was accompanied by photographers Paul Ivano, Paul Strand, Ralph Steiner, and Leo T. Hurwitz, the latter three who travelled west as cameramen in September of 1935 to film the Plow that Broke the Plains. Historian William Alexander comments Lorentz was "no sympathizer with the radical left" as were Strand and Steiner yet he was an "admirer of Steiner and Strand's photographic skills." There were some conflicts that arose between the director and his leftist cameramen: "Wiring Lorentz that they could not shoot from his script, they wrote up their own with great excitement." Upon receiving this new version of his film Lorentz immediately tore it up and gave

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16 Lorentz, 37.
17 Ibid., 43.
18 Adams and Stange, 153.
19 Ibid.
Hurwitz and Strand the "choice of a paid trip home or recognition of their subordinate position on the project, a position they accepted begrudgingly."\textsuperscript{20} As members of the Communist Party the cameramen wanted to display more explicit blame for the Dust Bowl onto the farmers and ranchers, yet Lorentz would not allow such negativity and bitterness to take over his American film.

From the title of the film, viewers assume this documentary will display little about ecology. It seems clear from the name that natural climate changes did not cause the dust storms on the Great Plains during the 1930s. Rather humans did; humans and their machines were the sole agents in the occurrence of the Dust Bowl. Yet, "This is a record of land...of soil, rather than people—a story of the Great Plains," read the words on the black screen for the Prologue. From the start Pare Lorentz wants to tell a story of the land, and how humans have altered and changed it. The last words of the Prologue state, "This is a picturization of/ what we did with it;" these simple words clearly lay down the mentality and intention of the government film. The prologue sets up a collective "we," so as to place blame not just on farmers, but also on the American people and society in its entirety. Thus from the beginning of \textit{The Plow that Broke the Plains}, "we" are the culprits, and it is our responsibility and duty to recognize our role in the Dust Bowl and our obligation to attempt to fix it.\textsuperscript{21}

The first picturesque scenes of the film display beautiful and lush wheat fields that stretch on and on. The wind ripples in the fields and all is peaceful save for the narrator's voice and the musical score. From the first panorama Lorentz sets up the pastoral myth of nature. Philip Shabecoff, a distinguished contemporary environmental

\textsuperscript{20} Adams and Stange, 153.
journalist, describes Americans’ obsession with the perfect, boundless landscape of America. In this idyllic perception of nature and the landscape, Americans and settlers were “confident that the supply was inexhaustible.”

In the first shots of the film Lorentz is showing us the beauty of nature and the Great Plains before man touched and plowed it under.

“Progress came to the plains,” comments the narrator, Thomas Chalmers, in a preacher-esque voice as the plow aggressively uproots the soil in a close-up shot. We ride along with the camera as the plow quickly rotates and upchucks soil and roots. A farmer then bends down to pick up the soil, inspecting it to ensure the machine has performed its duties.

Around the eighth minute the camera cuts to a piece of machinery that is spewing out shelled grain. More and more spills out indicating a surplus of food. Directly after we see the giant piles of surplus grain, a railroad steams across the horizon of the picture leaving behind a trail of black smoke. Lorentz is making a clear reference to the new technology and infrastructure that the country now has on behalf of the Industrial Revolution. He is demonstrating the evolution of agriculture from: “Horse-drawn and then later steam- and gasoline- powered harvesters and combines.”

The Industrial Revolution that started in the mid 18th century with the introduction of steam power generated by coal, transformed agriculture. Industrialization meant agricultural surpluses because farmers no longer farmed solely to subsist, but farmed to sell and export to others. A growing number of Americans moved into cities because of industrialization,

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22 Shabecoff, 9.
and by 1920 50 percent of Americans lived in cities.24 Yet the remaining 50 percent still lived in rural areas, working the land for sustenance and now also for the other half of the population who no longer harvested their own crops and fields.

As we witness the changes in agricultural tools and infrastructure in the film, the narrator eerily repeats part of the prologue: "High winds and sun.../High winds and sun.../a country without rivers and with little rain."25 The narrator speaks these words as an all-knowing prophet; he knows that the lands were not fit for mechanized agriculture and is implying that the government and settlers should have recognized this fact.

"Settler, plow at your own peril!" warns the voice-over as tractors are revved up and begin to crawl across the vast fields.

Dramatically cutting from a tractor booming down the hill towards the camera to an explosion, the film explains the connection between war demands for wheat in Europe and more aggressive planting and harvesting methods. War tanks are juxtaposed with militaristic tractors. The war machines are pitted against each other and both are dramatically surrounded by smoke, dust, and exhaust.

The film demonstrates that even after victory in the First World War, American farmers continue to harvest and aggressively work the land. Lorentz also interestingly highlights various land settlement flyers and advertisements. Private companies are selling land as well as the government. This is another example of Pare Lorentz placing blame on the collective American people and society rather than just the farmers.

In the last five minutes the film turns resentful; we are shown frames of cracked earth and animal bones, and abandoned tractors and parts spewed on the ground. There

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24 Marks, 137.
25 Lorentz, 47.
are quick shots of a dog panting, a farmer shuffling in the sand, and numerous children running to seek cover in the midst of dust storms. "Uncomplaining they fought," comments the narrator, giving the audience the sense that farmers attempted to plant despite the weather conditions because they were practically invincible over nature.

Yet the film closes in a sad, downward spiral of mass migration out West- onto new and brighter futures because the farmers had "nothing to stay for," and were "homeless, penniless and bewildered." It is not until the last few minutes of Lorentz’s documentary that we see the New Deal propaganda radiating through towards the audience. People are forced from their homes and are moving into refugee camps. These poor and desolate people have "no place to go," "nothing to eat." "All they ask is a chance to start over.../And a chance for their children to eat.../...to have homes again." Children are used as a political tool here to evoke more heartfelt sympathies from the audience; families have been broken because of this Dust Bowl, and the American people need to unite and support their fellow citizens.

The last line of the film states, "The sun and winds wrote the most tragic chapter in American agriculture" which reverses the commonplace 1930s view that humans are in control of nature. Lorentz warns the audience and his fellow Americans of the powerful abilities of nature throughout his film and rejects the Enlightenment views that humans are controllers of nature. Lorentz’s *Plow That Broke the Plains* is a cautionary tool and tale; like Alfred Crosby in his revolutionary environmental history book *Ecological*
Imperialism, Lorentz is arguing forty years earlier the same thing: humans are and forever will be “downstream of a bursting dam” that is the natural environment.\footnote{Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 192.}

Throughout the government-sponsored film it is clear that the director Pare Lorentz fully blames the American people and human agency for the disaster of the Dust Bowl. Like the famous Dust Bowl historian Donald Worster who wrote *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains and the 1930s* in 1979, Lorentz attributes the dust bowl conditions to human actions created by an economic culture of capitalism which encouraged constant growth and quick profits. Unlike Worster, however, Lorentz never brings together the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression which were clearly interrelated: “There was in fact a close link between the Dust Bowl and the Depression... the same society produced them, and for similar reasons,” comments Worster.\footnote{Worster, xii.}

Some contemporary 1930s farmers state the film overdramatized the Great Plains, and still others angrily cried out that the film blamed the farmers for the whole ecological debacle that was the Dust Bowl. Although there is much criticism for the alleged blaming of farmers in the film, I argue the film makes victims of the farmers. While it shows scenes of farmers plowing and upturning the soil, the emphasis is on technology. There are not many close-up shots of people, but many scenes of machinery and tools. It is clear that the director wants to show the audience the explicit alienation of humans from the earth. This is why tanks are juxtaposed with tractors; both machines have taken the place of humans. No longer do people have a sacred or pure relationship with the land, or humane empathy with the people they are fighting and killing. Technology has made it easier to produce and kill, and easier to mindlessly perform actions without
intellect or emotions. While the emphasis is on technology and the *plow*, humans are nevertheless operators and inventors of these machines; before man, the Great Plains was lush and bountiful. With the plowing up of the lands in an aggressive, militaristic fashion, the once-fertile soil turned into sand. It was not an individual effort of destruction on the part of farmers according to Lorentz, but rather a collective action of annihilation and destruction of the once beautiful “wind-swept” grasses.

The film succeeds in commemorating farmers' past patriotic duties and honoring them as true heroes and breadwinners of the United States. The government is seeking pity for the rural poor in displaying the motivations behind over-cultivation. Farmers were not farming for pleasure or subsistence, rather they were cultivating and plowing to contribute to the American economy and in the process used the land as a commodity and capital.

It was not just farmers who viewed the land as capital; it was the federal government as well who continued to support and sympathize with the rural farmers. By praising the American farmer it encouraged the pastoral myth and belief that the “New World is a cornucopia that cannot be emptied.”

While the film displays California refugee camps, it only succeeds in gaining sympathy for the rural poor and placing blame on the American people. The only alternative for not plowing the land is migrating west to new land. Thus the film never recommends or presents a change in the contemporary 1930s land ethic. *The Plow that Broke the Plains* is quick to acknowledge human’s role in altering the rate of change in the Great Plains’ ecology, but never suggests a finite solution or improvement to farming techniques. The New Deal government of the 1930s viewed nature as an unforgiving entity; it could be loving but it could also be cruel. It

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29 Shabecoff, 9.
blamed its own actions and its predecessor’s actions in encouraging cultivation and
habitation in an inhabitable land. The film warned its audience of the wrath of nature, but
did not attempt to provide ways in which to live with nature in a sustainable nature. Thus
the government’s ideas during the 1930s were of humans pitted against their natural
environments rather than today’s environmental ideas that we are “inescapably part of a
larger ecosystem.”

30 Nash, 1.
SECTION II

Farm Security Administration Photographs: Riling Up the Troops

In October of last year, *The Wall Street Journal* featured an article entitled “Does her face foretell her fate?” by William Meyers.\(^{31}\) In a Sunday paper in 2010, a Farm Security Administration photograph from the Great Depression was the subject of conversation. The Walker Evans photo of Lucille Burroughs taken in 1936 in Alabama captures a young, freckled girl staring directly into the camera lens with a flat and almost sinister expression. Taken in 1936, this photograph continues to resonate and fascinate Americans’ attention, especially today as we are amid our own hard times.

For the United States the 1920s were full of prosperity and opportunity. It was a decade full of economic gains, growing consumerism, jazz, movies, new fashions, sexual revolution, and urban expansion. The happy times mirrored the tone and themes of photographs also; magazines, billboards, and newspapers all featured numerous product advertisements and “unlimited opportunities for pleasure.”\(^{32}\) However these images of consumerism and prosperity were soon to be replaced with documentary images depicting real life struggles of the poor, desolate, and unemployed.

“It was in the 1930s, the decade of the Great Depression, that photography in the United States emerged as the great documentary medium of our era,” comments Alan Trachtenberg in his essay “Signifying the Real: Documentary Photography in the 1930s.”\(^{33}\) Artists became increasingly interested in depicting everyday American life, as


\(^{33}\) Ibid., 3.
did the United States government and in particular Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR, elected on a platform of change, sought to create an American image of hope, and employed government paid workers to create that image. While some of the images turned their subjects into victims, the overall goal sought to unite the American people in order to fight and battle together against the Depression and drought.

In 1935 Rexford Tugwell formed the Resettlement Administration (quickly renamed the Farm Security Administration) as part of Roosevelt’s New Deal. Tugwell was the Undersecretary of the United States Department of Agriculture as well as a liberal economist who served as part of FDR’s ‘brain trust’ that helped shape the initial reforms and recovery policies of the New Deal. Soon after his own appointment as head of the RA, Tugwell selected Roy Stryker as head of the Information Division of the FSA.

A graduate student at Columbia University and a native of Kansas, Stryker had been working closely with Tugwell for a number of years. Stryker’s original mission of the Farm Security Administration was to “record how the submerged third of the nation’s population coped with the plight of displacement in the face of rural blight and economic depression.” He handpicked photographers to record a picture of the Great Depression in the United States, and “current, accurate, sympathetic photographs were to be taken and made available to the media.” Thus the campaign set out to educate the nation about their fellow Americans and to raise support for the controversial New Deal.

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34 Anreus, Linden, and Weinberg, 9.
35 Ibid.
37 Ibid., xviii.
Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s sweeping social and economic recovery projects and policies that were part of the New Deal were not all met with joy: “From the right came demands that the administration cut back on government activities...on the left, various groups and individuals were insisting that FDR must expand the role of the government.”

Some right-winged businesses compared the president and his administration to totalitarian regimes in Europe in the 1930s. Due to political tensions regarding the New Deal, Franklin Delano Roosevelt sought support through the medium of photography. Why not go beyond politics, and show the human contact and face of the current humanitarian and economic crisis?

The FSA photographs were displayed to the public for various reasons. As the New Deal required much government spending, the government in turn needed to gain public support and show the American people the obligation and necessity of these government sponsored programs. By displaying these poverty-stricken photos the government hoped to gain American sympathy and unity in helping fellow citizens. The project did not come without controversy, for “the populist sentiment inherent in the photographer’s sympathy for their subject matter was construed as socialism.”

From 1935 until 1943, a total of fourteen FSA photographers scoured the nation and captured thousands upon thousands of pictures. These photographed moments of time were government assignments, yet they also displayed idiosyncrasies and artistic choices on the part of the photographers involved. Photos are a powerful medium of

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38 Kirkendall, 55.
39 Ibid., 56 and 57.
40 Dixon, xxiii.
41 In the beginning the project emphasized rural life and the effects of the Great Depression yet shifted in later years towards displaying and documenting a variety of American life including black communities, 'braceros,' coal miners, and WWII Japanese internment camps.
history in that they can suspend scenes forever stuck in time, yet because they are snapshots in time they cannot display the context of a scene. What a photographer chooses to encapsulate through the lens can be starkly different than the peripheral visions just beyond the glass border.

Paul Strand, an American photographer and filmmaker of the interwar years and photographer for *The Plow that Broke the Plains*, comments, "The decision as to when to photograph, the actual click of the shutter, is partly controlled from the outside, but it also comes from the mind of the artist. The photograph is his vision of the world, and expresses, however subtly, his values and convictions." The fourteen photographers hired by the Farm Security Administration were sent to different regions of the United States to document different peoples, struggles, and landscapes. Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, in particular, documented images of the Great Plains, the Dust Bowl, and Dust Bowl migrants.

Two photographs by Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein will be discussed and analyzed below as examples of how the federal government chose to depict farmers and farmlands in the Dust Bowl region, and how contemporary photographers and government workers saw the environment and nature during the 1930s. While there are thousands of photographs to choose from, I chose two that displayed both humans and their natural environment. Dorothea Lange’s name has become synonymous with the Dust Bowl due to her California migrant worker photos, in particular “Migrant Mother,” yet she also photographed dust swept farms and lands in the Middle States as well.

Many of Lange’s Dust Bowl photographs display landscapes of deserted houses

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and fields. Rarely are there photos that have both nature and humans as the main subject. One particular black and white image, “Coldwater district, Texas. June 17, 1938” shows a male farmer riding on a tractor who is plowing away from the camera into the sand dunes of the horizon. This picture evokes the epic battle of man and machine versus nature. Although the farmer and his machine occupy the center of the lens, the cracked earth lies in the forefront and takes the focus away from the machine and its accomplice. Lange succeeds in setting up a frame where the natural elements clearly out-power the man and his tractor.

Figure 1: Dorothea Lange, “Coldwater district, Texas. June 17, 1938”

© Library of Congress.
But the photo also tells a story of perseverance. Although the land is no longer soil, but rather sand, the farmer will stop at nothing to continue to produce a crop. We do not know his personal circumstances, but we can note his slouched position on the tractor. The audience can infer that, although his wishes may not be to continue breaking the Plains, his economic reality forces him to. The farmer drives off as a lone individual in a sea of drought, as if not wanting to face his problems and struggles or even look behind at the results.

Dorothea Lange was born Dorothea Nutzhorn in 1895 to German American parents. She grew up in Hoboken and Weehawken, both well-off, white middle class New Jersey suburbs of New York City. Heinrich, Dorothea's father, was a lawyer and her mother, Johanna, worked at local public libraries. At a young age, Dorothea caught polio, a disease that would leave her permanently crippled with a slight limp in her right leg. Dorothea went to school in the city and after graduation became interested in photography. After working at various photo studios and learning the ropes of the up and coming art, she moved to San Francisco at the age of twenty-three.44

Once on the West Coast Dorothea changed her last name to Lange, which was her mother's maiden name, and began her photography career. She set up her own portrait studio that catered "to those of wealth and high culture."45 Married for fifteen years to Maynard Dixon, she then divorced and married Paul Schuster Taylor in 1935. Gaining admiration and recognition for her artistic work, Lange was hired by the FSA in 1935. Trekking around for months at a time all over the country for her job, she contributed to

45 Ibid., xv.
and "enlarged the popular understanding of who Americans were, providing a more
democratic visual representation of the nation."\textsuperscript{46}

In 1939, Lange and Paul Taylor wrote and illustrated \textit{An American Exodus: A
Record of Human Erosion}. The book is a documentary through photographs, depicting
the mass exodus of American people leaving the land and "being expelled by powerful
forces of man and of Nature," to quote Taylor.\textsuperscript{47} The authors insist: "quotations which
accompany photographs report what the persons photographed said, not what we think
might be their unspoken thoughts."\textsuperscript{48} The caption that accompanies "Coldwater District"
reads, "Every dime I've got is tied up right here, and if I don't get it out I've got to drive
off and leave it. Where would I go? I know what the land would do once. Maybe it will
do it again."\textsuperscript{49} Our subject has spent his money and hard work on this land and admits
that the soil is not performing. Yet even though the soil cannot produce at the moment,
there is a blind sense of hope and determination for the future. This farmer has spent his
blood and tears for this land, and will not admit defeat to the natural elements of drought
and winds. And of course, where else can he go? All he knows is the land, all he has is
the land — his future is the land; he is a dependent creature on his unpredictable
environment.

Lange chose to document this scene in a manner that prevents us from observing
the individual farmer; we are instead forced to view him as an anonymous driver simply
steering his machine. Perhaps Lange did not want to have a human face connected with
plowing or abusing the land. Because of its sheer size in comparison to the rider, the

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., xiv.
\textsuperscript{47} Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor. \textit{An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion}. (New
York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 5.
\textsuperscript{48} Lange and Taylor, 6.
\textsuperscript{49} Lange and Taylor, 97.
tractor clearly out powers the man in this photograph. Not only has the machine taken
over the traditional human’s task, it is now the object that has direct contact with the soil.
This government-sanctioned photo, which does not appear with the caption except in
American Exodus, like The Plow that Broke the Plains, gives a warning to its audience
and thus survives the challenge of time: Until we rethink our methods and our economic
culture, the future holds nothing but turmoil and environmental disaster. Humans have
allowed technology and machines to control their ways of life and without change, nature
will continue to exert its might and its wrath.

Arthur Rothstein was born in New York City in 1915. He grew up in the Bronx
and from a young age was interested and involved in photography. He had his own dark
room in the basement of his house, and as a teenager exhibited some of his photographs
in local shows. At Columbia University Rothstein founded the Columbia University
Camera Club. Studying to be a doctor, Rothstein sold his photographs on the side: “I
used photography also as a means of supplementing my tuition, and I had many little
projects that I worked on.” Once the Depression struck Rothstein could no longer
financially afford to continue his dream of becoming a doctor, and was instead hired by
Roy Stryker.

Rothstein was hired by the FSA when he was twenty years old. The young man
had worked with Roy Stryker at Columbia University, in the Camera Club. He was the
first photographer hired by Stryker and his starting duties were to “purchase equipment

50 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, “Oral history interview with Arthur
Rothstein,” 1964, May, 25, http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-arthur-
rothstein-13317 (accessed April 8, 2011).
51 Ibid.
and to plan and organize the RA photographic laboratory." He was soon after given regional assignments and on a trip to Oklahoma he took his most famous Dust Bowl image, entitled “Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma,” taken in April of 1936.

The photo shows a farmer, Arthur Coble and his two sons, Milton and Darrel, walking to their decrepit and sand-buried farmhouse. It is another story of “perseverance without alternative in the face of overwhelming blight” and is “one of the two or three photographs to become synonymous with the whole of FSA photography.” There is nothing but sand in the landscape — no trees, no grass, and no crops; this family has nothing left to live on. Again, this photo depicts an uphill battle of man versus nature but this time nature has clearly won.

In this black and white photo the lone family and house occupy the central focal point as the white sky blends and fades into the sandy foreground. Perhaps the family is posing for the photograph, for two of the subjects are leaning forward as if battling a fierce dust storm. Nevertheless the farmer and his two sons are on the move, attempting to return home for another day out on the Great Plains. The only remains of fields and agriculture are the old slanted wooden fence posts that once divided the house from bountiful crops of income and sustenance.

The two sons create even more of a sympathetic tone to the picture. Not only is there a farmer battling his way through a fierce and terrible dust storm, but also this farmer is with his two sons. The children, whether intentional or not, become tools for evoking emotions from the American people. In a way the sons are pleading to the

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52 Dixon, 119.
53 Ibid., 119.
American people, asking for a new, better life. With government support, they could have a life without miserable dust storms and depression. The two sons can be images of a brighter future of sustainable farming and agriculture, one that replenishes the soil with nutrients and does not farm in barren lands.

Figure 1: Arthur Rothstein, “Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma,” April 1936.54

54 © Library of Congress.
Dixon comments of Rothstein that he “never considered himself an artist,” used photos as “instruments,” and considered the photographer “an agent of social change.” In this sense we can note the personal drive behind Rothstein’s work. He wholeheartedly supported the New Deal and believed in promoting the image of a united American people of all walks of life joining hands in helping their brothers for the common good of the nation.

These two photos are examples of how the federal government chose to depict farmers and farmlands in the Dust Bowl, and how contemporary photographers and government workers saw the environment and nature during the 1930s. The photo taken by Rothstein of a Dust Bowl farmer and his family puts a human connection to the disaster. It is not just another number or statistic in a book; this is a suffering family that other humans can relate to. On the other hand, Lange’s photo almost achieves the opposite effect. It shows a farmer and his tractor plowing up already damaged land. One could see this as placing blame or accountability on the farmer for his actions, yet the photographer purposefully chose to document this scene by leaving out the farmer’s face. Without a human face, a critical connection is lost with the audience, and one could either read this as an ignorant farmer, a careless farmer, or a farmer overtaken by technology.

These contemporary representations do not blame humans for this land destruction but rather tend to turn them into victims. There is no accountability placed on the farmers, which is commonplace among 1930s views of the Dust Bowl. Dust Bowlers saw this ecological disaster as a separate entity of nature in which they were observers and bystanders, rather than actors. Farmers did not recognize their place in nature, and

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55 Dixon, 120.
lost sight of their true connection to the land because of technology. Because of this belief they were not held responsible for their actions; they received support and aid from the government, which thus promoted and spread a misinterpretation of the place of humans within nature and the natural environment.
SECTION III

The Grapes of Wrath: Monsters, Victims and Route 66

One of the most famous pieces of art produced during the Great Depression about the Great Depression is John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath* of 1939. This vivid and heart wrenching tale of a family’s migration from the Great Plains has become synonymous with the Dust Bowl. Thousands of high school students around the country read *The Grapes of Wrath* yearly in English classes, discussing symbols, characters, motifs, and tidbits of Depression America. Yet the book, which continues to sell around fifty thousand copies annually in the United States alone, is seldom explored through an environmental lens. And when it is, it is simply through the general background of the ‘Dust Bowl,’ just an environmental disaster.

John Steinbeck was born in 1902 to middle-class American parents in Salinas, California. Both his maternal and paternal grandparents were immigrants from Ireland and Germany who came to America for a new life of opportunity. John’s mother, Olive Hamilton, grew up on a ranch outside of Salinas and it was here that the young Steinbeck learned the routines of farm work and its hard work. John Ernst, John’s father, grew up on a dairy farm in Salinas Valley yet went into business as soon as he could get off the farm. John Steinbeck and his three sisters were raised not in farm life but rather on Central Avenue in downtown Salinas in a large Victorian house.

John “was spoiled,” remarked his younger sister Mary; he was the only son in the family and was a “shy and shambling boy.” He “was something of a loner outside the

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57 Ibid., 4.
58 Ibid., 8.
59 Ibid., 15.
immediate family circle” and “he loved playing by himself in the woods.” 60 Graduating Salinas High School in 1919, young Steinbeck made his way to Stanford University where he encountered many distractions and challenges; during his six years off and on at Stanford he “was rarely off academic probation,” and never graduated. 61

Steinbeck traveled to New York during the 1920s, writing, working and wandering. When that adventure did not pan out, he returned to the West coast working odd jobs as a ship hand and caretaker. Back in California he met Carol Henning whom he married in 1930. While he received financial support from his father well into his twenties, times were not easy for John and Carol during the Great Depression. Allen Simmons, an acquaintance, remarks of the Depression era: “John pretty much lived off the land, scraping around for food.” 62

Failing to write novels that publishers liked, John continued to scrape by with Carol by his side, and often times alcohol to curb his depression and melancholic episodes. He earned money through writing miscellaneous articles and short stories, none too successful, but in 1935, Steinbeck finally succeeded in having a novel, Tortilla Flat, published and praised. This novel brought a considerable amount of money into the family finances and allowed John to stop taking an allowance from his father.

In August of 1936, an editorial writer for the San Francisco News asked Steinbeck to write a few articles for the paper on migrant issues and government work camps in California. The camps he visited were organized by the Resettlement Administration as part of the New Deal, and John was given a personal tour of several in

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60 Parini, 15.
61 Ibid., 23.
62 Ibid., 102.
Joaquin Valley with the regional director of the RA, Eric Thomsen. Biographer Jay Parini comments, “The reality of the situation startled Steinbeck, who was unprepared for the starkness of what he saw.”

John met Tom Collins, head of the Arvin Sanitary Camp, and Collins gave Steinbeck tours of the camp, copies of his weekly reports, and incorporated John into various chores and everyday life within the camp. Upon returning to his considerably more comfortable life outside Los Gatos, Steinbeck wrote a personal letter to Collins thanking him for the camp tours and enclosed a check: “Steinbeck suggested that the money be used by the migrants for raising livestock.” He even promised to contact various people in order to send books out to the camp for the children whose education had been neglected from the migrant journey and the squalid conditions and under-resourced camps. After his migrant camp tours Steinbeck wrote his articles for the *San Francisco News*, which were published in seven parts, which as a whole were to be called “The Harvest Gypsies.”

During the summer of 1937 the Steinbecks went off to Europe, traveling within Scandinavia and the Soviet Union. They visited Denmark, Finland, and Soviet Russia; within Russia they saw the two great cities: Leningrad and Moscow. Steinbeck was able to see the results of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, and to witness firsthand communism in action. From 1928 to 1932 Stalin implemented his Five-Year Plan, and part of this plan was the collectivization of agriculture. Stalin thought technology and

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63 Parini, 174,
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 181.
66 Ibid., 190.
mechanization were the solutions in collectivizing farms and organized Machine Tractor Stations to distribute modern equipment; he implemented collectivization as a way of controlling not only the people but also its food sources and supplies. His plan would eventually kill millions of peasants within the Soviet Union, and his self-made “artificial famine” was made that much worse with the concurrence of the international Great Depression. It is probable that Steinbeck saw poverty-stricken folks within Soviet Russia, and perhaps this trip encouraged him further in writing about the bottom tier of American society.

Upon their return they visited the Farm Security Administration headquarters in Washington D.C. where John told the deputy administrator “he hoped to write a novel about the situation of the Dust Bowl migrant workers. He explained that he wanted it to be realistic, showing exactly how these people lived.” The government obviously gave him encouragement on this project for it was in its best interest to garner sympathy for the down and out of the country due to the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Carol and John drove back to California on Route 66 and once back John began visiting more sanitary camps so as to build up notes and ideas for his upcoming novel.

John wrote several articles about migrant conditions and even had an interview and photo shoot with Life magazine at Visalia migrant camp. However, Life pulled the plug on the article, saying it was too liberal for their readership. This was nothing but a minor setback for Steinbeck because he continued his humanitarian theme of migrant

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68 Snyder, 14.
69 Ibid., 20.
70 Perhaps the trip and his interest in the Soviet Union also influenced his hatred and distrust of technology and mechanization of agriculture due to the negative effects of technology in collectivizing farms in the USSR.
71 Parini, 192.
issues and downtrodden folks, and from May through October of 1938 John dedicated his days to writing *The Grapes of Wrath*. Viking Press bought out his publisher Pat Covici and Steinbeck’s contract was sold to Viking for $15,000, an amount roughly equivalent to a quarter million dollars today.\(^72\) Around this time the Steinbecks were also reaping the rewards of John’s *Of Mice and Men*, both the book and the play. They bought a nice ranch house in Los Gatos where Steinbeck could remove himself from society and write undisturbed, except the couple continued to entertain Hollywood movie stars like Charlie Chaplin and fellow artists like Pare Lorentz.

*The Grapes of Wrath* was an instant success. It sold unprecedented numbers of copies and by May 17, only one month after publication, Viking Press had shipped 430,000 copies.\(^73\) It was not only famous among supporters of the book’s social cause, but it was also infamous among critics who were disgusted by the novel: Congressman Lyle Boren of Oklahoma called it “a lie, a black, infernal creation of a twisted, distorted mind.”\(^74\) It was also banned and burned in several districts of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma.

The Red Scare was prevalent during the 1930s and Steinbeck received several threats and accusations of socialist and revolutionary behavior, “not because he himself was a communist but because he sympathized deeply with the plight of the workers and admired the idealism that lay, in theory, behind communism.”\(^75\) Carol Steinbeck attended socialist group meetings, bringing John along sometimes, and registered as a

\(^73\) Parini, 31.
\(^74\) Ibid.
\(^75\) Ibid., 151.
member of the Communist Party in Santa Clara, California in 1938. Carol therefore did not help against refuting these accusations, nor did his trip to the Soviet Union two years earlier. John Steinbeck however, never self-identified as a communist, revolutionary, nor socialist and responded to a reader: “I cannot see how The Grapes of Wrath can be Jewish propaganda, but then I have heard it called communist propaganda also.” For John, the idea that his novel was communist propaganda is as fanatical as the idea that it is promoting Zionism.

The novel follows the Joads, a family of sharecroppers, on their migration to California after being forced off of their farm. Yet it is not just a fictional story of the trials and tribulations of the Joad family; intermingled with the chapters about Tom, Rose of Sharon, Ma, Grampa, and others, Steinbeck wrote characterless chapters. The author refers to them in his journal written during the writing of Grapes as “inter-chapters” or “over-chapters.” These inter-chapters explain the conditions of the Dust Bowl, and allow Steinbeck to place the tale into its historical context. Because of the dual perspectives of the book, the novel functions not only as a piece of literary art but as a piece of historical evidence and record as well of Dust Bowl conditions and life of 1930s Americans living through the dust storms, failed crops, and migrations out West.

John Steinbeck begins his novel, ‘Chapter one,’ by setting up the environmental context of the story: “the sun flared down on the growing corn day after day until a line of brown spread along the edge of each green bayonet.” While using poetic language,

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77 Parini, 236.
Steinbeck narrates the historical process of the drought in the Great Plains. Due to the lack of rains, the dust storms started: "Little by little the sky was darkened by the mixing dust...the dawn came, but no day." After describing the dust storm, families come out of their houses to inspect its outcome: "And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men—to feel whether this time the men would break." The chapter ends with the men sitting on their doorsteps thinking about the future...should they continue on, or move on?

From the first chapter we learn quite a lot about Steinbeck's views on the Dust Bowl. Firstly, he acknowledges the natural drought conditions of the 1930s in the Great Plains region; the sun shone, there was no rain, the dust started blowing, and crops were ruined. Yet Steinbeck also writes, and thus acknowledges, a sense of determination and almost stubbornness on the part of American farmers. The women look to their husbands for answers after the dust storm and watch as the men's faces "became hard and angry and resistant" and recognized that "there was no break." Steinbeck sets up the man versus nature image in the audience's mind as they picture farmers becoming angry and resistant. He also suggests that this is not the first time these farmers have been struck down by nature, and it is certainly not the last. The women wait to see "whether this time," their men would give up; Steinbeck does not blame the farmers for causing the Dust Bowl in this chapter yet implies ever so slightly that perhaps this determination and stubbornness has done the farmers no good thus far.

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80 Steinbeck, 4 and 5.
81 Ibid., 6.
82 Ibid, 6.
In chapter five Steinbeck talks much of tractors, technology, and Americans’ changing relationship with the land. He refers to tractors as “snub-nosed monsters.”\textsuperscript{83} This description allows us to understand Steinbeck’s personal feelings and ideas toward technology. Much like Pare Lorentz in \textit{The Plow That Broke the Plains}, John places much blame on technology for the bad times of the Depression. Technology is an evil in Steinbeck’s mind—an evil that has exacerbated nature’s plans. Going further the author writes: “He [the farmer] could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth.”\textsuperscript{84} John is in a way condemning the farmer for his lost connection with the land. No longer is the farmer walking the earth with his own feet, or touching the earth with his own two hands but instead he has allowed the tractor—technology—to get in the way of this sacred relationship. This exaggerated loss of physical connection is Steinbeck’s way of highlighting the danger, as he perceives technology is, that has struck the nation. The Dust Bowl, in John’s eyes, has partially occurred because of man’s reliance on wicked technology.

Steinbeck continues his accusatory words: “No man had touched the seed, or lusted for its growth...Men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread.”\textsuperscript{85} Here again we see the lost physical connection with the land that Steinbeck perceives. Steinbeck insinuates that all farmers are fixated on their technology, and thus have forgotten the land. The land is no longer sacred, technology is. Steinbeck tends to take out his frustration on the farmers, making no distinction between large agribusiness

\textsuperscript{83} Steinbeck, 47.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 48.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid., 49.
farms and small subsistence farms. From suggesting that man has lost his connection to his land, Steinbeck is converting farmers into abusers of the land.

However Grampa is the symbol of perseverance, stubbornness, and determination in the novel. Like many Dust Bowlers, Grampa refuses to leave his land: “Me—I’m stayin,’” he states, “This here’s my country...This country ain’t no good, but it’s my country.” From this character and scene we learn that farmers do share a special connection to the land. The farmland does not simply represent physical territory, but the land is also home, a home that has thrived for years on end, through thick and thin. Grampa has grown up on this land and has formed a lasting bond with it. Although he may not have treated it well in terms of environmentally friendly agriculture, he nonetheless feels bound to it. When Grampa dies later in the novel on the road, Casy the preacher comments, he “didn’t die tonight. He died the minute you took ‘im off the place.” Thus we observe through the character of Grampa how important the land was to 1930s farmers. Some did not choose to leave the Great Plains, but rather were forced to leave because of drought factors and large greedy landowners with technology. It is important to note that Steinbeck acknowledges how important the connections were between Dust Bowlers and their land and that is was not necessarily all farmers who had lost their connection with the land, but rather those who adopted modern technology.

Chapter eleven is an inter-chapter where Steinbeck once again denounces technology. John writes, “The machine man, driving a dead tractor on land he does not know and love...he is contemptuous of the land and of himself.” The man is no longer human; he is a “machine man,” someone who cannot be defined without technology. The

86 Steinbeck, 152.
87 Ibid., 199.
88 Ibid., 158.
tractor physically separates the farmer from his land, and according to Steinbeck this connection is fatal. The “machine men” become mindless objects controlled by “dead” tractors. One can analyze this scenario two different ways; on one hand Steinbeck has turned the farmers into victims of modernization. On the other hand these “machine men” are dangerous aggressors who have allowed technology to control them.

Once again Steinbeck adds an over-chapter, chapter fourteen, to criticize the role of technology in farming. He states that a tractor does but two things: “it turns the land and turns us off the land.” Again we hear Steinbeck’s sermon condemning tractors and technology for they cause humans to lose their physical connection to the land.

Steinbeck goes further in his descriptions of tractors to describe them as military tanks: “There is little difference between this tractor and a tank.” One is immediately reminded of the juxtaposed images of tractors and tanks that Sergei Eisenstein utilized in his silent film, *The General Line* in 1929 who in turn influenced Pare Lorentz to incorporate the same image montages in his 1936 film *The Plow that Broke the Plains.*

The tractor is an aggressive object that need only be controlled by mindless humans. And this is what Steinbeck suggests farming has become – an aggressive, mindless, and militaristic action controlled by “machine men” who have no compassion or regard for fellow humans or the state of the land. These machine men believe in technology as the future, a future in which agriculture has become a business.

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89 Ibid., 205.
90 Steinbeck, 205.
91 Sergei Eisenstein’s cinematic style influenced Pare Lorentz, however the objectives of both films were very different. Eisenstein’s *The General Line* was a propaganda project for the collectivization of agriculture in the USSR during the 1930s.
Steinbeck comments, “Now farming became industry,” and the land owners “imported slaves;” “All the time the farms grew larger and the owners fewer.” Here Steinbeck is criticizing the budding commercial farming mentality that is taking over and laments the downfalls of large agricultural ventures. Technology has obviously allowed the beginnings of what would come to be known as agribusiness to flourish and has allowed farming to become a business. No longer are there subsistence farms where farmers plant and harvest simply to get by. “And it came about that owners no longer worked on their farms. They farmed on paper; and they forgot the land, the smell, the feel of it, and remembered only what they gained and lost by it.” Because of technology and capitalist greed, subsistence farmers no longer exist and large capitalist-driven, commercial farms have taken over. The Dust Bowlers in Steinbeck’s eyes are not these greedy landowners but rather the sufferers for he only views Dust Bowlers as migrants who were forced off of the land.

Aside from the inter-chapters, the Joad family travels to California and upon arrival, discovers that the supposed land of opportunity is nothing more than a myth. Along the road they encounter misfortune after misfortune. Steinbeck turns the migrants into victims; he describes them as “bugs” scuttling together, and as “lonely and perplexed.” They stay in migrant villages and camps that are filthy and are always searching for scraps to eat. By the end of the novel the grandparents are dead, Rose of Sharon has given birth to a stillborn baby, and the Joads still have no home or work.

Historian Jay Parini comments, Steinbeck’s “overriding concern was

92 Steinbeck, 316.
94 Ibid., 317.
95 Steinbeck, 264.
humanitarian” in his writing; he was not writing a piece of communist propaganda or a violent attack on a particular social class. \(^{96}\) His utmost goal for *Grapes* was creating support and sympathy for the poor and blown out American people, just as the federal government attempted to do with the FSA documentary photographs. Steinbeck was clearly successful in this endeavor and garnered much support and sympathy for Dust Bowlers.

Twentieth Century Fox bought the film rights for *Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 for $75,000, production went into full swing, and it took only forty-three days to film. \(^{97}\) The black and white movie adaptation was directed by John Ford, and has an eerie tone throughout. The largest difference between the novel and film adaptation is the lack of narration and inter-chapters in the latter. Yet even without these opinionated chapters the film, like its original novel, makes victims of the migrant farmers while condemning technology. One of the first scenes of the movie play out the struggle between the Joad family, the tenant farmers, and their landlord, the archetype of the greedy capitalist, who is evicting them from their home. The landlord sends a paid farm hand to bulldoze the house with a tractor. The tractor appears as a menacing machine, and John Ford is careful to not show the face of the farmer. This choice is similar to Dorothea Lange’s artistic choice in not showing the farmer’s face in her FSA photograph “Coldwater district, Texas. June 17, 1938.”

Thus John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* offers us a valuable lens as to how he viewed the environment in the 1930s and what he perceived to be the causes of the Dust Bowl. The author writes in colloquial English and chooses to incorporate his


\(^{97}\) Ibid., 226.
personal views within a larger fictional novel. Like Arthur Rothstein in his photo “Dust Storm, Cimarron County,” Steinbeck offers a human connection to the disaster. The Joad family is a suffering family that other humans can relate to and commiserate with. Thus Steinbeck turns migrant families into innocent victims who are forced off of the land because of natural drought and greedy landowners who care more about turning agriculture into a business with the use of technology. At the same time however, Steinbeck places blame on those farmers for using technology, but here we can see that technology has overtaken humans and turned them into victims. Technology is the reason that farmers have lost their sacred relationship to the land.
SECTION IV

Farmer’s Journals and Testimonies: Uniting the Spartans!

Lawrence Svobida was a young man of twenty-one when he arrived in Meade County, Kansas in 1929 to make his life as a wheat farmer. He struggled for years attempting to yield crops sufficient to survive and make a livable profit, yet in the end-1939—he decided to leave after the “failure of seven wheat crops in eight years.”

The Great Plains according to Svobida, were ruined by humans through “the kind of exploitation that takes no thought of the morrow.” He is ultimately writing and publishing this journal in 1940 as a way to let the American public know the truth about the situation; he states “My only aim is to help the reader understand what is taking place in the Great Plains region, and how serious it is; and in some measure, to counteract the studied optimism of newspapers and chambers of commerce which willfully withhold facts.”

In Svobida’s introduction to his journal which he wrote in 1940, after the worst of the dust storms, he comments “tractors and combines made of the Great Plains region a new wheat empire, but in doing so they disturbed nature’s balance, and nature is taking revenge.” Svobida places blame on technology (and not humans) for the ecological blunder of the Dust Bowl, yet also refers to nature as a separate entity as if humans and nature did not occupy the same space or exist together. Speaking of nature’s “revenge,”

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99 Ibid., 246.

100 Ibid., 248.

101 Ibid., 36.
Lawrence offers a warlike image or battle between humans and nature. This was a constant and popular theme in the 1930s, and Svobida saw Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow that Broke the Plains* and was exposed to these common juxtapositions of military machines as tractors and combines. Interestingly, Svobida mentions this very film in the final chapter of his journal, and is candid about the film’s over dramatization.

While Svobida blames technology for much of the conditions of the Dust Bowl in 1940, thus placing partial blame on humans, he does so in 1940 once the dust storms have settled down and the Great Plains was returning to its cycle of rain. Yet during his years on the Great Plains, from 1929 until 1939, he was for the most part full of optimism and determination that would hardly be checked by a little dust blowing about. Lawrence Svobida is but one farmer from the Great Plains region, who plowed through and lived through the infamous Dust Bowl, yet he serves as an example of how farmers reacted to and viewed themselves in the context of the Dust Bowl. 1930s farm men and Plainsmen did not view themselves as helpless victims lacking power and agency, as was the tendency of artists and the government to portray; rather, they saw themselves as the backbone of American culture and life—they created the food for Americans’ tables and were going to stop at nothing to battle against nature in order to persevere on the Great Plains.

Throughout Svobida’s hard times and crop failures on the Great Plains he was determined to succeed. He comments after a meager crop yield, “I was sustained by the elation of success…once again I had a small fortune in my hands, and I fully justified my ambition to be a farmer.”102 One can see a capitalist mindset coming through in the small-town man as he attempts to defy nature and produce in the hopes of making a profit.

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102 Svobida, 50 and 55.
profit. Even though bountiful yields did not come often, Svobida was determined to stick with his land and his farming endeavor to wait until success was possible. Thus we can see that in this farmer’s eyes, a few seasons of hard times were counterbalanced when he made a profit and his hopes were enhanced and magnified.

In a chapter Svobida mentions starting to strip list his soil in 1933 as a method of soil erosion prevention because of the dust storms; this method included plowing deep parallel furrows or ruts every twenty or thirty feet apart so as to “check the force of the wind along the ground” and allow “the fine siltlike dust to fall into the open furrows.” This soil erosion method however was not common as Svobida comments, “There were only five of us in Meade County who listed our land.” This made it difficult for Svobida and the entire farming community because the dust storms could not possibly be checked if only a handful of farmers were participating in its abatement. Svobida points out that some farmers did not have the funds for extra oil to take part in this erosion prevention yet others “simply did not feel like making the effort to check their land from blowing.” It is also interesting to note that while minimal efforts to decrease dust blowing were made, no efforts were made by Svobida or others that he mentions to change their farming techniques.

In an article entitled “Small Farms, Externalities, and the Dust Bowl of the 1930s” Zeynep Hansen and Gary Libecap explain the connections between farm size and investment in erosion control. They comment, “Small farms are associated with more intensive cultivation, less frequent use of conservation practices, and greater soil

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103 Svobida, 59.
104 Ibid., 75.
105 Ibid.
erosion.”

Small farms dominated the Great Plains landscape, a courtesy of the Homestead Act of 1865, and because of this, it was hard to implement and encourage effective soil conservation projects. “Private motivation to invest in strip fallow was reduced when farmers did not internalize the externalities,” state the authors; farmers viewed their individual circumstances and land as a single entity rather than conceptualizing the benefits of individual erosion control’s effect on the larger community level. Farmers also had difficulty imagining long-term results in erosion investment especially when the norm was to invest in short term results.

Soil control techniques and methods were not effective if neighboring farmers did nothing to curb their land’s blowing topsoil as well. Using contemporary statistics of farm acreage and participation in government New Deal initiatives, the authors found that “the smallest farms in the demonstration areas were the noncooperators” in government sponsored soil conservation and control. One can infer the strong sense of individualism that permeated through American society in the 1930s, yet beyond individualism there seems to be a genuine inability on the part of many Dust Bowl farmers to view themselves in the context of a larger society and community. This may have been due to lack of education, as various first-hand accounts of survivors demonstrate, and an incapacity to think abstractly or too far into the future. This concept can be applied in addition to capitalist and cultural motivations for cultivation in the

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107 Ibid., 673.
108 This idea of individual gain and self-interest versus collective interest was explored and made famous by Garret Hardin in his 1968 article, “The Tragedy of the Commons.” Hardin writes “Each herdsman seeks to maximize his gain...ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons.” Garret Hardin, “The Tragedy of the Commons,” Science 162, no. 3859 (December 1968): 1244.
109 Hansen and Libecap, 684.
1930s. Perhaps farmers were not greedy and selfish profit-seeking mongrels as some historians insinuate due to the influences of the modern environmentalist movement of the 1960s and 70s, like Donald Worster, yet these farmers instead simply lacked an ability to project future gains from conserving land use because they could not understand economic returns and investment projections, and did not fully understand or could not afford to invest in long-term investments versus short-term investment projects.

Svobida also speaks of an undying hope for a better future. He remarks, "You might have become convinced that there was no profit in farming wheat in the Great Plains. But I was a glutton for punishment, and here I was planting wheat again, and still hoping." Svobida acknowledges his dependence on the land and his knowing that wheat farming is risky business on the Great Plains. He also recognizes the imbalance between humans and nature, however he believes more so in luck and the power of science and technology and hoping for better times in the future rather than moving on to more fertile and sustainable lands. He also writes about a common characteristic that Americans and human beings in general share in terms of learning from the past: "Although history reveals that events of major importance are likely to repeat, human beings cling to a naïve faith in the possibility of a special intervention of Providence on their personal behalf." Svobida is including himself in this statement because he too was a believer in fate and that he could outlast and triumph in the Great Plains. He is also commenting that many Dust Bowl farmers during the 1930s put themselves in this category; they kept on fighting an uphill battle against nature because they believed that God, fate, or technology would save them.

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110 Svobida, 62.
111 Ibid., 245.
Finishing on a pessimistic, yet realistic, tone of the time, Svobida concludes “My own humble opinion is that, with the exception of a few favored localities, the whole Great Plains region is already a desert that cannot be reclaimed through the plans and labors of men.” In other words, humans have played their game with nature or rather have attempted to defeat nature in battle, but to no avail. Humans have been defeated on the Great Plains in the eyes of Svobida, and it would be useless to try and plow any longer in the Great American Desert that the Great Plains has once again become.

Thus Lawrence Svobida was a typical Dust Bowl farmer who continued to plant, plow, and attempt to harvest throughout the decade of the 1930s. He moved to Meade County, Kansas to be a wheat farmer, and did not want to give up on his dream. He also did not want to give up his hard worked land that he had put countless amounts of blood, sweat, and tears into. He was a typical farmer who was determined to succeed, and determined to outlast the drought. He wanted to win the battle against nature. In the end, he gave up, declaring that the land was never suitable to plow. Although he finally left, it is interesting to note the reasons that had kept him on the Great Plains for an entire decade. Like so many other Great Plains farmers, Svobida wanted to write his own fate. He wanted to succeed on his own terms, beat the natural environment, and make a profit from the land. And like so many other 1930s farmers and Plainsmen, Svobida during the 1930s makes no mention that he has had any part in creating the Dust Bowl conditions.

In 1947 Vance Johnson wrote and published a book called *Heaven's Tableland: The Dust Bowl Story*. In his story he includes testimonies and statements from Dust Bowl farmers. Among these statements is a common thread of optimism and stubbornness on the part of the farmers. Cary Kraus, of Ellis County, Kansas comments,

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112 Svobida, 255.
"I was born in this country. I've seen worse weather conditions than this. It was worse in the drought of 1913, but we came out of it." From this statement we come to understand this particular farmer's insistence on staying on the Great Plains. He had lived through much worse than the Dust Bowl years, and he was going to stay and battle nature. This is a story of optimism and the strong and assertive mentality that men can always win and triumph over nature.

These thoughts of success and a brighter future did not come from farmers alone but also came from the government, large businesses, and the media. An advertisement printed in *The Topeka Daily State* newspaper on May 23, 1935, paid for by The Cooperative Levator and Supply Co. of Meade County Kansas reads, "Time to PLANT! We have had a fine rain and are sure to get more soon. Our land has had a three-year rest, and the law of averages is sure to give us moisture and a big UP." The law of averages, essentially science, is used here to convince farmers that rain is sure to come soon. There is no language or mention of alternatives to planting—American farmers and rural businessmen clearly did not understand how large a disaster the Dust Bowl truly was. Farmers are encouraged to plant more wheat and buy more tractors, and there is no mention of the current ecological blunder. This optimistic advertisement was meant to reinstate hope and success in the minds of American farmers and was meant to rile up the troops and technology and continue battling against nature.

Another advertisement published in the *Catholic Advance* of Wichita, Kansas in November of 1934 was paid for by the Tampa State Bank. It reads, "The farmer...the farmer is the man who feeds us all. If the farmer should quit work the whole world would

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have to go out of business. He is the most important factor in the world today—always has been—always will be.” This is another example of undying optimism in the heart of despair. The Tampa State Bank of Kansas is attempting to build up the confidence of Great Plains farmers. This encouragement and positive reinforcement and acknowledgment are other examples of the cult of toughness that was so thoroughly promoted during the Depression era. This advertisement, as well as the previous one, are also examples of large business owners and banks who had a large stake in maintaining confidence in capitalism, and thus reinforcing the American way of life which was capitalism.

Brad Lookingbill, author of *Dust Bowl, USA: Depression America and the Ecological Imagination, 1929-1941*, comments that this determination and optimism was not unique to farmers. Rather he argues: “Depression America socially constructed a cult making people more powerful than the circumstances confronting them.” This cult of toughness was promoted not only among farmers in relation to their land and crops, but promoted to all of America. No matter the current circumstances, people were taught that as a nation they would all bounce back to prosperity together. In his inaugural speech delivered on March 4, 1933 FDR spoke these words to his fellow Americans: “These dark days, my friends, will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.” He continues and states: “If we are to go forward, we must move as a trained and loyal army willing to sacrifice for the good of a common discipline;” in this FDR is riling the troops

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115 *Catholic Advance*, November 17, 1934.  
116 Lookingbill, 106.  
117 FDR Inaugural Speech, March 4, 1933.
in order to combat the national and international economic disaster.\textsuperscript{118} It is important to realize the context of the Dust Bowl; the ecological blunder occurred in the midst of the Great Depression and was made worse not only because of farmer’s willingness to continue to plow but because of the shared experience that farmers felt in helping to combat the economic situation of the United States.

John Steinbeck in \textit{The Grapes of Wrath} and Dorothea Lange in her Farm Security Administration photographs depicted the Dust Bowl as a time of mass exodus and moving away from the Great Plains region. However, in reality the majority of farmers remained on their land. Douglas Hurt in the 1986 edition of \textit{Farming the Dust Bowl: A First-Hand Account from Kansas}, comments that only three percent of farmers in Meade County, Kansas moved away from 1930 to 1935.\textsuperscript{119} By the end of the entire decade of the 1930s Meade County’s population had fallen by twenty percent yet as Dust Bowl historian Hurt explains, “Most Kansas wheat farmers simply had too much invested in their lands to leave, and the government helped them to stay.”\textsuperscript{120}

The most stubborn and aggressive man in Dust Bowl stories is always John L. McCarty. He was the editor of a local Texas newspaper, the \textit{Dalhart Texan} and in 1935 created a club called the Last Man’s Club. John thought the Southern Plains were “the best damned country God’s sun ever shone upon,” and was intent on staying to be the last man.\textsuperscript{121} This club was focused on keeping farmers in the Great Plains and McCarty’s

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Svobida, 14.
\textsuperscript{120} Svobida, 14.
\textsuperscript{121} Johnson, 197.
famous phrase was that he would remain in the Dust Bowl until "hell freezes over," and he encouraged his fellow members to "Grab a root and growl!"\textsuperscript{122}

In 1934 McCarty stated, "Spartans! No better word can describe the citizen of the north plains country and of Dalhart...bravery and hardship are but tools out of which great empires are carved and real men made Spartans."\textsuperscript{123} John L. McCarty helped to build up the cult of toughness and to build up the popular government ideas that man could triumph over nature. Because of his extreme determination McCarty was able to attract a fair number of supporters in Dalhart due to his meetings, fundraisers, and newspaper articles. The Last Man's Club even hired an explosives expert in 1935, Tex Thornton, who was a self-proclaimed "rainmaker."\textsuperscript{124} After four days of sending fireworks and TNT explosions up into the sky, there were light snow flurries in the county—and in Denver, Albuquerque, and Dodge City. "A grateful citizenry thanked the rainmaker...he had done his job. Some even thought the drought was over."\textsuperscript{125}

McCarty clearly believed that men could triumph over nature during the Dust Bowl era and went so far as to attempt to create rain from the explosives. It did not help matters in Dalhart, Texas when it began to snow after Thornton had fired off his TNT. This environmental occurrence and coincidence of snow reinstated the 1930s view of nature as a separate entity that could be controlled and dominated by human beings. This strong-willed man also helped to keep his fellow farmers and citizens in good spirits and helped to keep their optimism alive during hard times. Although he was extremely

\textsuperscript{122} Lookingbill,90.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 231.
\textsuperscript{125} Egan, 233.
against government intervention in agriculture and aid, like many farmers, he agreed with
the government that humans should continue to battle against nature.

Vance Johnson comments at the conclusion of his 1947 Heaven's Tableland: The
Dust Bowl Story, “Mass attitudes of the mind – attitudes shared by the whole nation –
also played a part [in creating the Dust Bowl]. Men believed they could conquer
Nature.”\textsuperscript{126} A letter published in American Exodus displays this same language of
conquest and control over nature. Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor included this letter
from Lon Gilmore, a reader of the Dallas Farm News on May 16, 1939. The letter reads:

“Then man entered with tractors and plows to break up for cultivation the
millions of acres of land, plowing under the natural cover crop. As he turned
the soil under he ground it into dust. Out of this came golden grains of wheat. Then came old Mother Nature with her dust storms, in answer to Man’s
ruthless violations. Then entered the Federal Government and spent millions
of dollars on grass and other cover crops to restore the land as nature
intended.”\textsuperscript{127}

It is interesting to note the linguistic choice in capitalizing “Mother Nature,” as if
introducing her as a powerful entity worthy of respect. It is also important to observe that
while tractors and plows broke up the Plains, Gilmore places blame on “Man’s ruthless
violations” as well.\textsuperscript{128} He recognizes the hand that humans have played in this disaster
and is not shy to share this; farmers have been careless with their machinery and their
management of land. He also sets up the common battle scene of Mother Nature against
Man.

Yet these two contemporary testimonies from Plainsmen were written after the
Dust Bowl. By 1939 there were still thousands of Dust Bowl refugees, yet the rains

\textsuperscript{126} Johnson, 207-208.
\textsuperscript{127} Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor, American Exodus: A record of Human Erosion (New York:
Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 103.
\textsuperscript{128} Lange and Taylor, 103.
began to fall in the Great Plains and crops were successful. Thus the tendency to blame humans and especially farmers for the Dust Bowl conditions was a phenomenon that occurred largely after the fact. During the Dust Bowl, the picture was quite different, and the object was to keep on plowing and planting so as to yield a crop and make a living.

Timothy Egan’s *The Worst Hard Time* offers personal accounts of Dust Bowlers and succeeds in making the tendency to refer to Dust Bowl farmers as a collective, problematic. We discover different reasons behind staying on the land and waiting for rain such as recent immigrant mindsets, strong familial ties, and lack of education. One farmer that Egan follows is Bam White, the actor in Pare Lorentz’s government sponsored film *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. Lorentz offered Bam White twenty-five dollars to act in his film and drive a plow—it was two months worth of pay, and “more money than he ever earned in so little time.”¹²⁹ When White saw the final film version he was “moved to tears;” “he always thought there was a reason why his horse had died in Dalhart.” Seeing himself on the screen was a completely new experience for Bam and his family; his young son Melt “kept staring up at the screen and then back at the little man sitting next to him” as it was the first time Melt had ever seen a movie.¹³⁰ White was moved to tears because he interpreted the movie as a direct assault on his farming efforts and hard work throughout the years. For Bam, Pare Lorentz and the United States government in 1936 were blaming Bam White and farmers who plowed the Great Plains for a large hand in the Dust Bowl conditions. However this scene also displays the genuine naïveté on the part of Bam White. Not until the film had he even thought that he could have had a role in producing the Dust Bowl. And the only reason he saw the film,

¹²⁹ Egan, 252.
¹³⁰ Ibid., 253.
was because he was its main actor. Not many farmers could afford to go to the movies during the 1930s let alone afford to start blaming themselves for plowing the land when that is all they knew, and had been an integral part of the economy.

From these first-hand accounts of Dust Bowl farmers and Plainsmen we can gain useful insight into how contemporary Americans viewed their natural environment and the Dust Bowl. We can also see how many of them were encouraged to continue to plow and break the sod as part of government initiatives and media advertisements. It is clear that although the government and artists like Farm Security Administration photographers and John Steinbeck tended to turn farmers into victims, farmers did not view themselves in this way. They attempted to maintain an air of determination and optimism throughout the Dust Bowl decade because deep down they believed that they could triumph over nature without changing their agricultural techniques.
CONCLUSION:

1930s Americans viewed and placed themselves in a constant battle against nature as exemplified through the case study of the Dust Bowl. Farmers were sometimes blamed for their part in creating the environmental disaster, but for the most part they were turned into victims so as to bolster support for the New Deal. Government agencies spent exuberant amounts of federal dollars to combat the agricultural crisis, yet in the end no new land ethic was adopted. Turning the farmers into victims allowed the sodbusters to walk away without a sense of accountability, but it also sought to continue the old farming techniques. Technology is mostly blamed for the effects of the Dust Bowl and for the loss of connection to the land.

Because of the concurrence of the Great Depression, this way of viewing nature, as an epic battle against nature's wrath, was perpetuated. The government continued to garner support from its people by pitting humans against their natural environment rather than recognizing that we "are inescapably part of a larger ecosystem." 131

During the 1930s several ecological and environmental projects sprouted up to combat the ferocious "onslaught of nature." 132 The United States government hired ecologists to investigate the natural cycles of the Great Plains region and to determine ways in which to combat the effects of the Dust Bowl. Among these ecologists were Paul B. Sears and Frederic Clements, both affiliated with the new ecology program of the University of Nebraska. Clements talked of an "ecological synthesis," essentially that human's actions "could ripple out over the entire surface of the nature of the world" and

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131 Nash, 1.
132 Paul Bonnifield, The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression (Albuquerque: University of Mexico, 1979), vii.
therefore humans had to work with their environment to uphold the environmental equilibrium.\textsuperscript{133}

In 1933 Aldo Leopold wrote an article entitled “The Conservation Ethic” for the \textit{Forestry Journal}. He writes, “There is yet no ethic dealing with man’s relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land…is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations.”\textsuperscript{134} Aldo Leopold in 1933 states that no land ethic existed during the 1930s; He thus calls upon his fellow Americans to start looking at the world around them not only with love for money and prosperity but with love and respect for all organisms within the larger ecosystem. He proposes a land ethic that “changes the role of \textit{Homo sapiens} from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such.”\textsuperscript{135}

Proposed projects and solutions to the Dust Bowl conditions included policies of crop diversification, shelter bed programs (planting of trees to minimize soil erosion), and new land ethics. And some farmers took part in New Deal initiatives to cut back farming acres and decrease yields, but these were temporary solutions. Yet the majority of farmers on the Plains continued their epic battle against nature because that was what they were taught to do. The Great Depression proposed and taught the American public how to combat their situation and how to rise above their circumstances. The government and fellow Americans bolstered morale by uniting the public in a cult of

\textsuperscript{133} Worster, 200.
\textsuperscript{134} Aldo Leopold, \textit{A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation From Round River} (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 1966), 238. This edition includes Leopold’s draft of \textit{A Sand County Almanac}, which was written before 1948, as well as eight essays and journals. His family put together this compilation of his works.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 240.
toughness. That the Great Depression occurred coincidentally with the Dust Bowl made it so that the Dust Bowl was fought against in the same manner as the general economic crisis—with determination, perseverance, and human toughness. There are those that argue the same culture of capitalism and greed created both the Depression and the Dust Bowl, although they were two unrelated events that happened to be dealt with in the same manner.

The Dust Bowl could have received more attention from the American public and government if it had not occurred at the same time as the largest international depression in modern history. Perhaps if the dust storms, droughts, and crop failures came during a time of prosperity they would have garnered more public attention and there would have been an effort to change the way in which people viewed the land and its limited resources. Because the two events overlapped, the general economic recovery took the front seat, and the environmental disaster became a necessary project but a temporary one. There was no time to change the agricultural techniques of farming or to re-evaluate a nation’s entire way of life and food source.

The truth of the matter is the rain started falling again early in the 1940s on the Great Plains and crops began to grow again. The United States also joined the Second World War in 1942 and once again the breadbasket was called upon to provide wheat to world economies. With the droughts over and a second wheat boom, the American people forgot the Dust Bowl and its lessons. Once again farmers plowed up soil, and this time with record harvests. Ecologists who proposed policies of crop diversification and new land ethics were forgotten and brushed aside.
In the late 1950s and 60s “underground water became the newest bonanza resource” for farming in the United States thus allowing farmers to plow the soil and harvest monoculture crops with no regard for the land or its natural resources.\textsuperscript{136} Irrigation is now the scientific technique for battling the natural environment and its natural cycles of drought on the Great Plains.

In 1962 Rachel Carson’s \textit{Silent Spring} was published. Carson wrote about the dangers of pesticides, and their effects on living organisms. She specifically criticized and protested against the use of DDT, a powerful chemical pesticide. She proved that DDT was not only harmful to birds but to humans as well. Carson was a pioneer of American environmentalism. The original working title for \textit{Silent Spring} was “Man Against Nature.”\textsuperscript{137} The book’s dedication to Albert Schweitzer, a doctor, theologian, and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, includes some of his words: “Man has lost the capacity to foresee and to forestall. He will end by destroying the earth.”\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Silent Spring} was a public call to action – to start caring for the earth’s fragile environment and urged Americans to recognize the interdependence of all organisms and ecosystems. “\textit{Silent Spring} did not begin a social movement,” writes environmental historian Ari Kelman, “instead it lent environmentalists credibility and the common vocabulary of popular ecology, while at the same time spreading the movement’s message to thousands of readers who had never considered such issues before.”\textsuperscript{139}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Worster_2005} Worster, 235.
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As Americans became more aware of their environment and their inherent co-existence within it they started to create additional legislation to protect certain environments and ecosystems and created different projects and movements. They also became more aware of the impending population boom and the need to conserve and re-evaluate finite resources. On April 22, 1970 Americans celebrated Earth Day for the first time as part of this larger environmental movement that came to be known as the American modern environmental movement.\textsuperscript{140} However even with this newfound land ethic and way of viewing ourselves as part of nature, it would still do us good to look back to the tales and lessons of the Dust Bowl. We are continuing to exhaust and over plow our resources in this country. The Dust Bowl can act as a reminder of our past faults and the necessity of adopting our land ethic into practice; Aldo Leopold wrote in 1948 in \textit{Sand County Almanac}, “When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”\textsuperscript{141} Yet the problem these days is not seeing land as a “community to which we belong,” it is convincing people of this land ethic and adopting it into practice.

\textsuperscript{140} Hollywood even jumped on to the bandwagon of the modern environmental wave producing \textit{Chinatown} in 1974. A classic film noir style, the film is embroiled with environmental justice questions and mismanagement of natural resources. \hfill \textsuperscript{141} Leopold, xviii and xix.
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