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# Radical Genealogies: Okie Women and Dust Bowl Memories

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Radical Genealogies:  
Okie Women and Dust Bowl Memories

Carly Fox

Submitted in Partial Completion of the Master of Arts Degree at Sarah Lawrence College

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## ABSTRACT

This paper complicates the existing historiography about dust bowl migrants, often known as Okies, in Depression-era California. Okies, the dominant narrative goes, failed to organize in the ways that Mexican farm workers did, developed little connection with Mexican or Filipino farm workers, and clung to traditional gender roles that valorized the male breadwinner. This thesis tells a story that the dominant narrative obscures. Centering on exceptions, I highlight the life and political work of three, relatively unknown Okie women: union organizer Lillie Dunn, radical writer Sanora Babb, and Dust Bowl poet Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel. Together, their stories stand outside and in conflict with most of what is written about the history of Okies in California. Using such exceptions as a guiding framework, I engage several historiographical debates about the Dust Bowl migration, New Deal labor politics, capitalist agriculture, and shifting gender constructs of the 1930s. By complicating knowledge of Okie history and culture in California, this thesis builds on the arguments of earlier Dust Bowl historians to consider the possibility that a tradition of radicalism, interracial alliance, and proletarian feminism, a politics which centers working women's experiences and communities and understands class and gender as mutually constitutive, is also part of the story.

*To my grandmothers, Lucile Stutsman and Deanna Moore.*

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Many thanks to the eclectic bunch of folks who partook in the laborious work of raising me: Cindy, Deanna, Dan, Carol, and Jeff. I know the task of loving me is not always an easy one, and still we continue to show up, the complicated and messy novices we may be. If, as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa say, "The revolution begins at home," we certainly have our work cut out for us.

Thank you to my brother James Fox, who drove with me across country to help move me to Sarah Lawrence and who continues to take interest in all of my academic pursuits.

Finally, thank you to my Okie and part-Cherokee grandfather, Ellis Fox, who I never knew in this lifetime but whose memory led me to Lillie, Sanora, and Wilma. May you rest assured that in these pages and elsewhere you are in good company.

## PREFACE

*Beginnings and Destinations*

I must have traveled Highway 99, and later I-5 when it was built parallel to 99, up and down California's Central Valley a thousand times, passing through, headed for L.A. or Portland, Mexico or Canada, New Mexico or Oklahoma. But I stopped in the Central Valley only if necessary. I did not want to talk to the people I knew were there, people I didn't want to be like.

—Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie*

To a stranger driving 99 in an air-conditioned car (he would be on business, I suppose, any stranger driving 99, for 99 would never get a tourist to Big Sur or San Simeon, never get him to the California he came to see), these towns must seem so flat, so impoverished, as to drain the imagination. They hint at evenings spent hanging around gas stations, and suicide pacts sealed in drive-ins.

—Joan Didion, "Notes From A Native Daughter"

A native of the so-called "Golden State," I have driven California's Highway 99, which stretches north and south along the state's vast Central Valley, countless times. I grew up east of the Central Valley, in the small-town foothills of Yosemite National Park and went to college on California's Central Coast. Like Dunbar-Ortiz, I, too, saw Highway 99 and its Valley towns as places I did not want to be. These towns were flat, hot, and economically depressed—seedbeds of conservatism, racism, and good-old-boy mentalities. As I drove west through the Valley and south on Highway 99 headed to college, large billboards of Republican anger dotted the scenery: "Stop the Congress Created Dust Bowl"; "No more Pelosi!"; and conservative pundits like Christian evangelical James Dobson of *Focus on the Family* and demagogue Rush Limbaugh filled

the radio stations. For me, the Valley was a place to traverse, to get through—never a destination. Yet, as a graduate student at an East-Coast liberal arts school, I again found myself traveling—both literally and figuratively—along California’s Highway 99. This time, however, the Valley and its complicated history of industrial agriculture, labor activism, Communist organizing, and erasure of poor migrant farmworkers would become a destination.

Ironically, my journey along Highway 99 came about by way of my grandfather—a man whom I never knew and with whom I have little in common. My grandfather exists to me only in family legend—stories passed down by my grandmother, father, and uncles. Born in Braggs, Oklahoma, Ellis Fox came to California as a young boy in 1936. Like many Okies, his family were poor sharecroppers who found they could no longer make it in depression-era Oklahoma. In California they picked cotton, denied being Cherokee, and traveled up and down Highway 99 in search of work in the Central Valley. Ellis dropped out of high school, learned construction, started his own business and eventually became very successful. What remained constant in his life were the shame and stigma of having once been a poor “Okie.” As my father remembers, Okie was a “fightin’” word for grandpa.

For much of my life, I have thought little about this man called my grandfather. Yet as a women’s history graduate student, studying labor history, gender theory, and feminist understandings of intersectionality, my curiosity in the context of my grandfather’s life grew. Only in retrospect did I realize that my interest in my grandfather also came as an attempt for me to understand my own father—his conservative Christian beliefs, his



homophobia and anti-intellectualism. As a student of history and anthropology, I cannot help but situate my family members—especially the ones who appear so different from me—within their particular historical and cultural contexts. As long as I can remember, this has been my way of making sense of my world. I wanted to understand, or at least grapple with, what my grandfather learned about being a man, specifically a poor “white” man, in Depression-era California. Or, to use my graduate-school Butlerian rhetoric, how did my grandfather, and later my own father, learn to perform their gender?

As I learned more about my grandfather and his experience as an Okie in California during the 1930s, I soon realized I was searching for a story that my grandfather could never tell. I wanted him to go on strike, to be a radical, to express a feminist consciousness—a tall order, indeed, for a down-and-out Okie of the 1930s. But if my grandfather never did these things; was it possible there were other Okies who did? What I discovered was that there were, in fact, many competing and contradictory stories about Okies.

While a majority of literature focuses on Okies’ racism and anti-unionism, I also discovered a tradition of women who did not fit the traditional narrative about Okies in California. To this extent, my thesis is indeed particular. I chose three women whom I hoped could tell me a story that my grandfather never could. Were another historian to look at the literature and primary sources on Okies, a very different narrative might emerge. In this vein, the thesis that follows is not *the* history on Okie identity and culture in California. It is, rather, *a* story—partial, selective, and colored by the historian’s own position, as all histories are.

## FIGURES

Figure 1: “Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.” March 1936. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34- 009058-C [P&P] (LUSF346-009058 C).

Figure 2: “Once a Missouri farmer, now a migratory farm laborer on the Pacific Coast. California.” February 1936. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF347- 002470-E (LC-USF347-002470-E).

Figure 3: “Along the highway near Bakersfield, California. Dust bowl refugees.” November 1935. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34- 000963-E (LC-USF34-000963-E).

Figure 4: Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Paperdolls. Box 19, Folder 2. The Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Papers, MSS 001, Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Merced Library, 5200 North Lake Road, Merced, CA 95343.

## ABBREVIATIONS

AAA	Agricultural Adjustment Act
AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor & Congress of Industrial Organizations
CAWIU	Cannery and Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union
CPUSA	Communist Party USA
FSA	Farm Security Administration
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
RA	Resettlement Administration
UFW	United Farm Workers

## INTRODUCTION

It's not the suffering of birth, death, love that the young reject, but the suffering of endless labor without dream, eating the spare bread in bitterness, being a slave without the security of a slave.

—Meridel Le Sueur, “Women on the Breadlines”

Lillie Dunn, a 1930s Dust Bowl migrant to California who found work in the cotton fields, remembers in her oral history that it was a “little Mexican girl” who first taught her the Spanish phrase for calling workers out of the fields to support a strike: *Huelga, piscodores!*<sup>1</sup> Born in Porum, Oklahoma, Dunn migrated to California in 1931 with her husband and two young sons, one of whom would later die after a hospital in Tulare, California, refused to admit him because Dunn was from out of state. During the early 1930s, Dunn worked closely with the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) to help organize both Mexican and Anglo migrant farm workers. Through her activism she would witness the infamous attack on strikers in Pixley, California, in 1933, when local law enforcement shot and killed two Mexican organizers; she would spend time in jail on account of her organizing, earning the reputation as “the worst red-headed agitator in Tulare County” among local authorities; her children would suffer discrimination at school for having a “communist” mother; and she would go on to organize farmworkers in the 1960s and 1970s alongside Cesar Chavez. Indeed, Dunn’s oral history recalls a woman whose life was deeply influenced by radical politics, interracial labor organizing, and motherhood—themes Dunn continually invoked in

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<sup>1</sup> Pickers, go on strike!

defining herself. Responding to a judge who asked if she were a Communist, Dunn replied: “Judge, I never heard that word before. I don’t know what Communism is. If Communism means having enough to eat and enough to wear—I was born like that.”<sup>2</sup>

Dunn’s narrative of labor organizing and interracial alliance stands in contrast to much of the historiography surrounding the Dust Bowl migration. Okies, the dominant narrative goes, failed to organize in the ways that Mexican farm workers did, developed little connection with Mexican or Filipino farm workers, and clung to traditional gender roles that valorized the male breadwinner. This thesis tells a story that the dominant narrative obscures. Centering on exceptions, I highlight the life and political work of three, relatively unknown Okie women: union organizer Lillie Dunn, radical writer Sanora Babb, and Dust Bowl poet Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel. Together, their stories stand outside and in conflict with most of what is written about the history of Okies in California. Using such exceptions as a guiding framework, I engage several historiographical debates about the Dust Bowl migration, New Deal labor politics, capitalist agriculture, and shifting gender constructs of the 1930s. By complicating knowledge of Okie history and culture in California, this thesis builds on the arguments of earlier Dust Bowl historians to consider the possibility that a tradition of radicalism, interracial alliance, and proletarian feminism, a politics which centers working women’s experiences and communities and understands class and gender as mutually constitutive, is also part of the story.

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<sup>2</sup> Lillie Ruth Ann Counts Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, Bakersfield, February 14 and 16, 1981, California Odyssey Oral History Program, California State College, Bakersfield, CA, 9, 18.

While radicals and union organizers were certainly not the majority among Dust Bowl migrants, their presence merits much more attention than it has received in historiography on southwestern migration to California during the 1930s.<sup>3</sup> To fill in some of the gaps, my thesis foregrounds instances when Dust Bowl migrant women in California engaged in organizing and union activity, espoused radical political sentiments, challenged traditional gender roles, and forged interracial alliances with Mexican and Filipino farmworkers present in California's fields prior to the influx of white southwesterners in the mid-1930s.

Foregrounding gender, this thesis deploys an analytic category often overlooked in the dominant historiography on Okies.<sup>4</sup> In particular, I consider how discourses of motherhood and womanhood factored into my subjects' organizing, politics, writing, and understanding of self. Dominant discourses from the 1930s of the suffering yet strong and selfless mother—epitomized by Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographer Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother" (1936) image (See Figure 1) and John Steinbeck's character Ma Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—continue to color much of the popular historical memory of the Great Depression in general and the Dust Bowl

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<sup>3</sup> For autobiographical writing by self-identified Okies, see: Gerald H. Haslam, *Okies: Selected Stories* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1975); Betty Grant Henshaw, *Children of the Dust: An Okie Family Story* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006); Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Ann Marie Low, *Dust Bowl Diary* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984). See especially Dunbar-Ortiz for writing about Okies and radicalism.

<sup>4</sup> For exceptions to this rule, see: Jeanette Gardner Betts, "Women's Role in Migration, Settlement, and Community Building: A Case Study of 'Okies' in the Migrant Farm Workers' Camp, Marysville, California" (M.A. thesis, California State University, Chico, 1997), passim; Lisa R. Saiz, "A Study of the Southwestern Migrant Women of the 1930s and 1940s" (M.A. thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2002), passim.

migration to California in particular.<sup>5</sup> This thesis considers how a small group of radical Okie women of the 1930s challenged, reworked, and sometimes reinforced multiple and competing discourses about womanhood and motherhood, as espoused by FSA camp officials, New Deal politicians, conservative Okies, and Hollywood. This deployment of gender analysis and focus on the radical lives of Lillie Dunn, Sanora Babb, and Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel bring to light aspects of Okie history that scholarship on the subject routinely obscures.

Historian Walter Stein's *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (1974) was the first work to offer a comprehensive narrative of Dust Bowl migrants in California. Stein argues that vulnerability and destitution, unfamiliarity with unions, individualism, and their racism prevented Okies from supporting organizing efforts in the fields. For Okies newly arrived in California, Stein argues, "it took far too much effort to survive, even to consider the possibility of improvement."<sup>6</sup> Their energy went to basic day-to-day survival—securing shelter, feeding children, and finding work no matter how despicably low and unpredictable the wages—not union organizing. By the time they had settled in California and their suffering had lessened, Okies reasserted what Stein calls, a "tradition of rugged individualism"—values that were not conducive to collective action. Finally,

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<sup>5</sup> For more about the photography of Dorothea Lange, see: Willard Van Dyke, "The Photographs of Dorothea Lange: A Critical Analysis," *Camera Craft* 41 (October 1934): 461-67; James Curtis, "Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, and the Culture of the Great Depression," *Winterthur Portfolio* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 1-20; Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: Norton, 2009); Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (New York: Farrar, Staus & Giroux, 1978); Anne W. Spirn, ed., *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); Sally Stein, "Passing Likeness: Dorothea Lange's 'Migrant Mother' and the Paradox of Iconicity," in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed., Coco Fusco and Brian Wallis (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2003), 345-355.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Stein, *California and the Dust Bowl Migration* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Company, 1973), 262.

Stein argues that Okies' racism kept them from uniting with Filipino and Mexican farmworkers in the fields.<sup>7</sup>

Historian James Gregory's *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (1989) is frequently cited as the definitive social history on Oklahomans in California. Gregory's work focuses primarily on the cultural impact of Okie migration on California's Central Valley. For Gregory, evangelical Protestantism, country music,<sup>8</sup> and a political-culture he labels "plain-folk Americanism," which celebrates hard work, individualism, and toughness, are the defining features of the Okie subculture.<sup>9</sup> While Gregory offers an extensive social history of the Okie experience in California—going into much detail about the day-to-day experience of the migrants—his work stops short of offering a gendered analysis. Strikingly, his surveys of Okie occupations and income 1940-1970 record only those of men.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, while white supremacy, race, and racism are included in the index to *American Exodus*, both gender and sexism and noticeably absent.

Gregory does, however, challenge Stein's assessment of Okies' relationship to labor organizing and suggests that their responses to unionization were not so uniform. A sizable minority, he argues, did in fact go on strike and join or support a union. Yet, while

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 264-69.

<sup>8</sup> As Gregory notes, country music is the "essential language of the Okie subculture." James N. Gregory, "Dust Bowl Legacies: The Okie Impact on California, 1939-1989," *California History* (Fall 1989): 80. For more on Okies and country music, see: James N. Gregory, "Country Music and the Okie Subculture," in *New Directions in California History*, ed. James J. Rawls, (New York, 1988), 281-92; Peter La Chapelle, *Proud to Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), passim.

<sup>9</sup> James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xviii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 252-253.



some Okies organized, religious concerns, red-baiting, and nativism and racism kept others away.<sup>11</sup>

According to Gregory, gender relations among Okies changed little within the context of the Dust Bowl migration. While Depression-era emergencies did bring about some changes to traditional gender roles, he argues, “there is little evidence that this was particularly widespread among the Dust Bowl migrants.” For Gregory, women like Lillie Dunn—who left her husband to help the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU) organize—were exceptions who do not require attention. In fact, he argues, old patterns of family organization not only remained intact, but also intensified.<sup>12</sup>

Like *American Exodus*, historian Devra Weber’s *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (1994) focuses on migrant farm work in Depression-era California. Unlike Gregory, however, Weber places Mexican farm laborers at the center of her analysis. Guided by underlying questions about the relationship between social structure and human agency, Weber examines to what extent New Deal legislation and the overarching system of capitalist agriculture affected the lives of Mexican farm workers and, in turn, how such workers shaped their own lives in response to this system. Unlike much labor history, which defines unions as the *sine qua non* of working-class organization, Weber’s work focuses on the role of families, neighborhoods, and in particular, women’s networks and alliances in the formation of working-class consciousness and organizations. Using oral histories of Mexican women involved in California cotton strikes of the 1930s, Weber argues that, in fact, strike

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 154-169.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 48.

activity was based on informal structures, and activated by female networks that became the foundation for “gender-specific collective action.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Weber argues that the dislocation and disruption caused by migrant work indeed altered gender relations.

As in Gregory’s work, Lillie Dunn is but a footnote in Weber’s book. She notes merely that “One Anglo woman remembers that it was a Mexican woman who taught her how to call out, in Spanish, ‘¡Huelga,pizcadores!’”<sup>14</sup> And, like Gregory, Weber concludes that Okies seldom responded to unionization. She argues that their extreme vulnerability, middle-class aspirations, racism, and religion combined to prevent them from organizing in ways that Mexicans did.<sup>15</sup>

Historian Brian Cannon follows Stein, Gregory, and Weber in their arguments that Okies responded poorly to unionization. According to Cannon, however, Okies’ reluctance to join strikes and forge alliances across racial lines had less to do with individualism or plain-folk Americanism than with living conditions in FSA camps. While New Deal officials and FSA camp managers imagined the camps as places where Okies would learn collective and cooperative action, in practice the difficult and substandard conditions in many of the camps fostered “rancor and undermined group identity or class consciousness.” Increased division and resentment among campers, Cannon argues, rather than unity and collectivism, were thus the chief result of the FSA camp project.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 11.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 147-148.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Q. Cannon, ““Keep on A-Goin’”: Life and Social Interaction in a New Deal Farm Labor Camp,” *Agricultural History* 70, no.1 (Winter 1996): 22, 31.

Recent contributions to Dust Bowl historiography, Jan Goggans's *California on the Breadlines: Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the Making of a New Deal Narrative* (2010) and Erin Battat's *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left* (2014), use analytic frameworks similar to my own.<sup>17</sup> Blending literature, biography, and history, literary scholar Jan Goggans traces the relationship of photographer Dorothea Lange and labor economist Paul Taylor and their decade-long project of documenting the lives of Dust Bowl migrants. Goggans offers a sophisticated reading of the gender politics of Lange's photos—her insistence on female subjectivity, her protest against the exclusion of migrant women from dominant definitions of appropriate motherhood, womanhood, and domesticity, and her exposure of the inherent impossibilities and failings of these constructs. Goggans argues that Lange's many photos of migrant women involved in housekeeping and maintaining beauty standards document Okie women's attempts to establish an identity in a hostile and bigoted environment. By dressing up, combing their hair before being photographed by Lange, and keeping house in transitory and unstable environments, Okie migrant women laid claim to traditional and popular discourses about domesticity and beauty standards, thereby challenging their exclusion from California's cultural of respectability.<sup>18</sup>

In *Ain't Got No Home*, historian Erin Battat argues that writers and artists of the 1930s and 1940s engaged the theme of migration to strengthen the alliance between African Americans and the Popular Front. For Battat, Depression-era migrations were

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<sup>17</sup> Jan Goggans, *California on the Breadlines: Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the Making of a New Deal Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Erin Royston Battat, *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Goggans, *California on the Breadlines*, 201-207.

interconnected responses to the capitalist collapse and political upheavals of the twentieth century. Her work counters historiography that sees populism and antiracism as antithetical. Offering critical close readings of novels, photography, radical journalism, and other cultural texts, Battat shows how both Black and white writers laid the groundwork for class-based interracial alliances. She reveals lesser-known Depression-era figures like radical writer Sanora Babb, whose novel *Whose Names Are Unknown* narrates the Dust Bowl migration from a woman's point of view and imagines interracial alliances among white, Filipino, and African-American workers. Likewise, Battat argues that writers and artists across a broad racial and political spectrum used Lange's "Migrant Mother" image to offer a gender-based critique of capitalist and racist oppression. African-American artists and authors like Elizabeth Catlett, Ann Petry, and Marita Bonner took up the "Migrant Mother" motif, both challenging and reinforcing its Christian symbolism of the Madonna and child, while white working-class writers like Tillie Olsen employed grotesque imagery to rework Lange's redemptive icon. In conclusion, Battat argues that the images produced by such writers and artists challenged the American mythology of progress, prosperity, and self-making.<sup>19</sup>

Expanding on both Battat's and Goggans's work, this thesis foregrounds themes of interracial alliances, radical politics, and changing gender conventions within the context of migration and dislocation. In line with Goggans, I explore how Lillie Dunn, Sanora Babb, and Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel employed and reworked dominant discourses of motherhood and domesticity—Dunn in her oral history, Babb in her novel

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<sup>19</sup> Battat, *Ain't Got No Home*, 115-126.

and stories, and McDaniel in her poetry. Like Battat, I also focus on moments of solidarity between Mexican, Black, and Filipino farm workers and Dust Bowl migrants and consider how Dunn, Babb, and McDaniel challenged notions of white chauvinism.

Chapter one begins by situating Lillie Dunn's life in the political and social context of Depression-era California. To connect Dunn's narrative to the larger story of the Dust Bowl migration, I offer a summary of the push and pull factors that lead to the migration of over 300,000 south westerners to California in the mid-1930s, as well as an overview of industrial agriculture and migrant farm labor in California prior to the Okies' arrival. After outlining Dunn's move to California, I focus on her political activism, alliances with ethnic minorities, and her identity as a Communist. Most significantly, I show that in framing her oral history, Dunn employs rhetorical devices that defend radical politics in terms of motherhood. In conclusion, I offer an analysis as to why Dunn's narrative may pose challenges to the dominant historiography on Okie history and identity construction and argue that a complex and nuanced understanding of the Dust Bowl migration requires attention to Okie women like Dunn.

In chapter two, I focus on the life and political writing of Sanora Babb. Babb's Dust Bowl novel *Whose Names Are Unknown*, written in the late 1930s but not published until 2004, has remained largely unknown to the general public and academia.<sup>20</sup> While a substantial amount of scholarship has analyzed the imagery of California migrant workers produced by Depression documentarians like Dorothea Lange, John Steinbeck,

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<sup>20</sup> Sanora Babb, *Whose Names Are Unknown* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

and Carey McWilliams, virtually none of this work has included Babb.<sup>21</sup> Unlike Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, which has come to symbolize the Dust Bowl and Depression-era California, Babb's work centers on migrant women's experiences in a fundamentally radical way. Expanding on Battat's argument, I offer a close reading of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, suggesting that proletarian feminism and interracial alliance are at the heart of Babb's political work there. As in chapter one, I pay particular attention to discourses about motherhood, which play a central role in Babb's avowal of radical politics and vision of interracial alliance.

Finally, in chapter three I explore the poetry of Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel. While McDaniel was not involved in labor organizing or radical politics in a direct way like Dunn or Babb, her poetry—with its emphasis on the everyday and ordinary and its insistent focus on working women—is in fact deeply political. Read closely, her work offers a trenchant critique of white bourgeois culture in the United States; its nationalism, its normative gender expressions and expectations, and its racist practices and beliefs. Connecting the world view expressed in McDaniel's poetry with insights of Queer Theory, I suggest that McDaniel's work queers the narrative of Okie history, offering a model of radical resistance that has yet to be fully incorporated into scholarship on the Dust Bowl migration.

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<sup>21</sup> For scholarship about Dust Bowl documentarians, see: Wendy Kozol, "Madonnas of the Fields: Photography, Gender, and 1930s Farm Relief," *Genders* 2 (Summer 1988): 1-23; Anne Loftis, *Witnesses to the Struggle: Imaging the 1930s California Labor Movement* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998), passim; Paula Rabinowitz, Ch. 4, "People's Culture, Popular Culture, Public Culture: Hollywood, Newsreels, and FSA Films and Photographs," in *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (New York: Verso, 1994); Charles J. Shindo, *Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997), passim.

As a whole, my project is distinctively interested in exceptions to the grand narrative about Okies as it is usually told. This is not only because I find these individuals worthwhile and meaningful in and of themselves, but also and more important because I am curious about what such exceptions might tell us about the ostensible norm, its inherent instability, and its limitations. In other words, how might an understanding of the political work of Lillie Dunn, Sanora Babb, and Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel affect how historians understand the Dust Bowl migration as a whole? By coming to terms with these exceptional women, might historians locate a tradition of radicalism, interracial organizing, and proletarian feminism, alongside the country music, evangelical Protestant Christianity, and plain folk Americanism so often seen as the defining features of Okie subculture?

## Chapter 1

### “The Worst Red-headed Agitator in Tulare County”: The Life of Lillie Dunn

Being without food for your children makes an activist out of you.  
—Lillie Dunn

Lillie Dunn, a Dust Bowl migrant who headed west from Oklahoma with her husband and two young children during the 1930s, in many ways exemplifies the quintessential Okie story. She grew up poor, the daughter of tenant farm workers, was pushed out of Oklahoma by dust storms and the Depression, and traveled up and down California’s Central Valley looking for low-paying work in the fields. Yet, in significant ways, Dunn’s narrative differs from the national myth about Okies. In 1981, nearly fifty years after the Okie exodus to California began, Dunn participated in “California Odyssey: The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley,” an oral history project conducted by California State University Bakersfield. The testimony she offered recalls a life much at odds with the popular stereotypes of Okies as racist, anti-union, and conservative.

By Dunn’s own account she was an activist, a radical, and a *born* communist. She participated in labor strikes, helped organize farm workers, and created interracial alliances of white, Mexican and Black farmworkers. The account rests on a political script in which Dunn draws upon her identity and experiences as a mother. Indeed, by linking her rhetorical claims about Communism and labor activism to motherhood, she



reworks popular discourses that construct maternalism as conservative and normative. Her activism in the 1930s did much the same.

Like many Okies who migrated to California during the Depression era, Dunn grew up in rural poverty, moving year to year to different sharecropping farms throughout Oklahoma. She was born one of eight children in Porum, Oklahoma (Indian Territory), on February 14, 1908. Her parents separated when she was just six years old; by the time she was a young girl she was working in the cotton fields. At age thirteen, Dunn's stepfather abandoned the family, leaving Dunn's mother and the children "to make it the best we could." To get by, Dunn recalled in her oral history, she and her eleven-year-old brother took on the responsibility of supporting their mother and younger siblings:

By the time I was fifteen we were the sole supporters of our mother and the children. We didn't know too much about how to farm but we did what we could. We picked cotton in the fall and hauled it off to the cotton gin in town to buy enough food to last through the winter. We raised hogs and we usually had a cow. My mother made a garden. By all of us working we survived.<sup>1</sup>

Themes of work and survival coupled with motherhood surface throughout Dunn's oral history. Once she had children, there was little division between her role as a wage earner and her identity as a mother. As James Gregory has suggested, for Okies in the 1930s "married women generally worked outside the home only in the case of exceptional need or exceptional opportunity."<sup>2</sup> For Dunn, there was never a question of whether or not to

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<sup>1</sup> Lillie Ruth Ann Counts Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, Bakersfield, February 14 and 16, 1981, California Odyssey Oral History Program, California State College, Bakersfield, CA, 1, 3. Hereafter cited as California Odyssey.

<sup>2</sup> James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 47.

work; she had to, both inside and outside the home. When she was married and later when she divorced, “exceptional need” seemed always to be the case.

As with many Okie families who wound up in California in the mid-1930s, a series of complicated factors led to the Dunns’ eventual emigration out of Oklahoma.<sup>3</sup> Ongoing drought, violent dust storms, and the effects of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) made sharecropping in Oklahoma nearly impossible. Almost fifty years later, Dunn still recalled the oppressive dust storms that made life a constant struggle:

I mean the dust storms that they had there. You could find any number of houses just boarded up along the roads—nice houses out on ranches or farms just boarded up. The people couldn’t survive there. There would be sand knee-deep up to the side of the house where the sand had blown.<sup>4</sup>

Coupled with drought and dust storms, the passage of the AAA only compounded the situation for small landowners and tenant farmers. Passed in 1933 as part of FDR’s New Deal programs, the AAA aimed to reduce farm surpluses and thus inflate agricultural prices by providing cash subsidies to farmers who limited production. This worked well for larger farmers and agribusinesses. For small farmers and tenant workers, like Dunn’s family, however, the effects were devastating. In 1930, tenants operated roughly 60 percent of the farms in Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas. Because it was more cost effective for landlords to reduce their crop production under the AAA than to keep tenants on their lands, by 1939 the region’s tenant population had dropped by 24 percent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For more about the factors that contributed to the Okie migration of the 1930s, see: Paul Bonnifield, *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1979); Donald Worster, *Dust bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 23.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 11-13.

At nineteen, Dunn left home and moved to the oil fields of Wewoka, Oklahoma, to find work in hotels. Looking back, she remembered Wewoka—filled with drinking, prostitution, and single men working in the oil fields—as a “howling wild place.” Her first job, in which she made five dollars a week cleaning rooms in a hotel, evaporated after the nephew of the hotel’s manager “got fresh” with her. In Wewoka, Dunn met her future husband Dell Dunn. Six weeks after meeting, Lillie and Dell were married on February 23, 1927. For Dunn, marriage was an attempt to find stability in an environment that was anything but secure: “I would have never had married when I did if I had had a home. But it was kind of rough without a home.”<sup>6</sup> In Wewoka, Dell Dunn worked in the oil fields and then in a garage, tearing down cars for just a dollar a day.

Marriage did little to change Lillie Dunn’s financial circumstances. In November of 1927, her first child, Jay, was born; two years later she had a second son, Donald Ray. Unable to support their new family in Wewoka, the Dunns moved to Roswell, Texas. In Roswell Lillie found work at the Bankhead Cafe. Several weeks later a customer who had received a settlement from an industrial accident asked Dunn if she wanted to go into business with him and open a small cafe. Dunn agreed, and the two began work on opening their business. Soon, however, Dell grew jealous of the man with whom Lillie worked, sold her part of the business without her knowledge, and declared to the family that they would be moving to California, where he could find a “he-man’s job.”<sup>7</sup>

In January of 1931 with ninety dollars and two young boys the Dunns drove to California in an old Essex car. There they settled in a one-room cabin on the Vetter Ranch

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<sup>6</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 4, 3, 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

in the San Joaquin Valley town of Tipton in Tulare County. Life there was nothing if not rough: within six months of arriving in California, Donald Ray, Dunn's two-year-old son, gravely ill from eating frostbitten oranges, died after a Tulare hospital refused to admit him; three months later, in September 1931, Lillie gave birth to a baby girl, Bonnie Rae.<sup>8</sup> Dell went to work at the Tagus Ranch<sup>9</sup> north of Tulare and Lillie found work in the cotton fields, where she would bring her young daughter in a cotton sack:

I would bathe her every morning and put her in a wicker basket and take her to the field. I had a wire that went over the top and a mosquito net to keep the mosquitoes and flies off of her. I'd take her in the basket and sit it on the end of the row and pick cotton. I'd pick down a ways and then back. Then I would move her to the other end or the middle of the field then I'd pick down and back so I could watch after her.<sup>10</sup>

Significantly, nearly fifty years later, Dunn still recalled the details of bringing her daughter to the fields—the struggle to stay clean, the ongoing annoyance of mosquitoes, and the need to continually balance picking with watching her baby. Dunn never had the luxury of separating life “at home” from her grueling work in the fields. Moreover, by juxtaposing images of her young daughter and a hot, mosquito-infested cotton field, Dunn suggests that the system of large-scale industrial agricultural rendered motherhood nearly impossible for poor working women.

In 1933, just two years after the Dunns arrived in the state, a wave of agricultural strikes spread across California's Central Valley. Dust Bowl migrants like the Dunns

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<sup>8</sup> Dust Bowl migrants were ineligible for most types of public assistance until they had been in California for at least a year. Gregory, *American Exodus*, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Owned by the Merritt family, the Tagus Ranch was one of the largest fruit ranches in California and was famous throughout the state for its vertical integration, diversified production, and aggressive support of welfare capitalism. During the 1930s it would become the site of many strikes. Don Mitchell, *The Lie of The Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 138.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 7.

found themselves in the midst of widespread political and social upheaval in California.<sup>11</sup> The cause of the eruption lay deep in California's long history of industrial agriculture—as journalist Carey McWilliams put it in the introduction to his 1939 exposé on migratory farm labor in California, “a melodramatic history of theft, fraud, violence and exploitation.”<sup>12</sup>

California had always required an underclass of cheap migrant workers to support its large-scale farming. During the nineteenth century, Chinese men did the bulk of the work, while Punjabis, Japanese, and Koreans were common beginning in the early twentieth century. Between 1920 and 1929, nearly 30,000 Filipinos entered the fields. By the early 1930s Mexican workers were the largest group, with nearly 368,013 Mexicans residing in the state and accounting for nearly 56 percent of the agricultural labor force in the San Joaquin Valley. As the Depression worsened, however; a combination of deportations, voluntary repatriations organized by the federal government, and intimidation by state and local authorities pushed hundreds of thousands of Mexicans out of the United States. California's growers, who needed 150,000 workers at the peak of the harvest cycle, found a new labor supply in the Okies who poured into the state in the mid-1930s. By 1936, white Dust Bowl migrants accounted for nearly 90 percent of the state's migrant labor force.<sup>13</sup> Working for starvation wages, often under brutal conditions,

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 35.

<sup>12</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 7.

<sup>13</sup> T.H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 394; Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 63-65. Mark Arax and Rick Wartzman, *The King of California: J.G. Boswell and the Making of a Secret American Empire* (New York: Public Affair, 2003), 257; Devra Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold: California Farm Workers, Cotton, and the New Deal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 138.

and with little support or protection from the government,<sup>14</sup> California farmworkers were the most marginalized of workers; their desperation generated a wave of spontaneous strikes.

Between April and December 1933, nearly 50,000 agricultural workers participated in close to some thirty-seven strikes in California.<sup>15</sup> Lille Dunn first heard about the strikes in the early fall of 1933, when she was cutting raisin grapes on the Stark Ranch near Tipton. Reflecting on this moment in her oral history, she recalls that, at the time, she “didn’t even know what a strike was.”

We were down in the field cutting raisin grapes and the pickers asked us if we were going to strike. We said, “Strike?” And they said, “Yes, everybody’s out of the field but you people.” I said, “Well, what are they doing?” He said, “They’re striking.” And I said, “Well, what are they striking for?” He said, “Well, we’re trying to get better wages.” So we went out to the end of the field.

Before the strike, the grape pickers were working nearly twelve hour days earning roughly a penny a tray. As Dunn remembered, that meant “you’d have to cut 200 trays to make \$2.”<sup>16</sup>

The grape strike soon spread to the cotton fields.<sup>17</sup> Under the banner of the Communist-aligned CAWIU, led by organizers Pat Chambers, Caroline Decker, and

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<sup>14</sup> Agricultural workers were not covered by the protections of Section 7(a) of the 1933 National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) which gave workers in industry the right to organize and bargain collectively. For more about the passage of NIRA, see: T.H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 334, 401.

<sup>15</sup> Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 7, 7, 8.

<sup>17</sup> For more about the cotton strike of 1933, see: Caroline Decker oral history, interview by Sue Cobble, 1976, California Historical Society, San Francisco, California; Helen Hosmer: “A Radical Critic of California Agribusiness in the 1930s” oral history, interview by Randall Jarrell, August 26, 1992, University of California, Santa Cruz, University Library, Special Collections; Paul S. Taylor and Clark Kerr, “Documentary History of the Strike of the Cotton Pickers in California, 1933,” in *On the Ground in the Thirties*, Paul Taylor (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Books, 1983).

Dorothy Ray Healey,<sup>18</sup> nearly 12,000 cotton pickers walked out of the fields, launching the largest single agricultural strike in U.S. history up to that year.<sup>19</sup> The strike lasted twenty-seven days, running nearly a hundred miles north and south of California's Central Valley.<sup>20</sup> Prior to the strike, growers had cut wages; as Dunn remembered, at the beginning of the strike, "we were getting 40 cents a hundred and you had to pick 200 pounds to make 80 cents."<sup>21</sup> The CAWIU's demands were threefold: a wage rate of one dollar per hundred pounds of cotton picked, recognition of the union, and an end to the system of contract labor. On September 18, 1933, the union announced that unless its demands were met within ten days, pickers would strike. Its demands unmet, the union called for a strike on October 3.<sup>22</sup>

Soon after the cotton pickers went on strike, the Dunns were kicked out of their cabin on the Vetter Ranch.<sup>23</sup> As Lillie Dunn recalled, "we found that our things were moved out on the side of the road." With nowhere to live, the Dunns moved to Pixley, eight miles south of Tipton, where a strikers' headquarters had been set up. At Pixley, Dunn and other activists began going around the fields in car caravans to organize the

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<sup>18</sup> Devra Weber points out that although leadership and organization of the strike is often attributed to the CAWIU, much of CAWIU's success came from informal structures created by workers' families and networks. In fact, many of the cotton strikers did not know the union or Anglo organizers by name. The CAWIU was in this sense an "ephemeral part of the consciousness of workers." Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 91-92. Echoing Weber's claim, communist organizer Dorothy Ray Healey recalled in her 1972 oral history: "I notice that the history books on the agricultural organization always say that [CAWIU] dominated and controlled the Mexican workers there, which is not true at all. In the first place, we never went there without their inviting us in, and there was never a strike in which they did not play the most important role, more than anybody else." Dorothy Ray Healey, interview by Joel Gardner, October 24, 1972, Los Angeles, Oral History Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles, Tape III, Side One.

<sup>19</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 75.

<sup>20</sup> Raymond P. Barry, ed., "The California Cotton Pickers Strike-1933," *Federal Writers Project*, Oakland, 1938, 77.

<sup>21</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> Barry, ed., "The California Cotton Pickers Strike-1933," 2, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Evicting strikers was a common tactic used by growers. Within a few days of the strike growers evicted over 3,500 migrant workers around Corcoran and other Valley towns. Weber, *Dark Sweat, White Gold*, 89.

workers to strike. Eventually, her organizing earned her the nickname “The worst red-headed agitator in Tulare County” among local authorities.<sup>24</sup> That Dunn was specifically targeted as a “red” speaks to the reverberations of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the fact the Communist Party, closely aligned with the Bolshevik regime in the USSR, had become the most dynamic voice of the American left.

Fearing the loss in crop revenues and likely enraged that migrant workers were defying them, growers responded to the strikes with violence. On October 10, pickers held a mass meeting at Pixley, Tulare County, where CAWIU organizer Pat Chambers led the crowd with speeches. As Dunn recalled,

[Chambers] was standing on the back of a pickup bed and was making a speech. He told us that the farmers were trying to make the streets of Pixley run red with blood as did the streets of Harlan, Kentucky during the coal mine strike years before.<sup>25</sup>

In the middle of Chambers’ speech, a caravan of forty armed vigilantes disrupted the crowd.<sup>26</sup> Alterations occurred between the strikers and farmers and eventually shots rang out. For Dunn, the violence was shocking: “During all of this I was getting my daughter a drink of water in the rear of the hall and I heard these shots—it sounded like firecrackers. It never occurred to me that these people would actually shoot us.”<sup>27</sup> Just as she brought her daughter into the cotton fields, so too did Dunn bring her to labor rallies. Indeed, Dunn’s memory of such historical events is always laced with images of where her children were and how she was caring for them.

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<sup>24</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 8, 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 77.

<sup>27</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 9-10.



By the end of the attack at Pixley, growers had shot and killed two Mexican strikers, Dolores Hernandez and Delfino Davila, and left eight others injured.<sup>28</sup> Eight ranchers were indicted for murder; all would be acquitted and released. Chambers and Decker, along with nineteen others, were arrested and charged under California's Criminal Syndicalism Act and sentenced to ten years in prison.<sup>29</sup> The hearing for the union organizers, Dunn recalls, was little more than a "mock trial." The authorities refused to let Dunn testify in Chambers's trial "because they knew I would tell the truth and that I wasn't afraid to tell the truth—I didn't really know enough to be afraid."

Refusing to be silenced, however, Dunn found her way into the courtroom:

They barred me from the courtroom so one time I put on a hat and lipstick which I never wore and dressed up a little different than what I'd been dressing with borrowed clothes, and I went into the courtroom. I was sitting there listening to the things they were saying and it was a farce.<sup>30</sup>

Dunn understood well what the dominant discourse required of women. By "dressing up"—putting on a hat and lipstick—Dunn bowed to conventional stereotypes of the good mother and defender of the community. Ironically, however, she played upon these stereotypes for radical ends: by adhering to traditional markers of womanhood she was able to enter the courtroom in defense of fellow Communists. After the strike Dunn was blacklisted from working in the fields: "Some farmers were very mad...we worked in the

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<sup>28</sup> Delfino Davila was a part-time consular representative of Mexico in Visalia, CA. Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 78.

<sup>29</sup> Legislated in twenty-four U.S. States between 1917 and 1922, Criminal Syndicalism laws were designed to defeat radical labor and prevent political subversion of the government. In California, criminal syndicalism was broadly defined to include "any doctrine or precept advocating or teaching or aiding and abetting the commission of crime, sabotage or other unlawful acts of force and violence or other unlawful methods of terrorism as a means of accomplishing a change in industrial ownership or control or effecting any political change." Eldridge Foster Dowell, *A History of Criminal Syndicalism Legislation in The United States* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1939), 17.

<sup>30</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 10, 10, 11.

fields but a lot of time they wouldn't let me work because they called me a redheaded agitator."<sup>31</sup>

While not all of the strikers' demands were met, Dunn recalled that the workers did, in fact, win the strike on October 17, 1933.<sup>32</sup> A compromise was reached, and the strikers received a wage rate of 75 cents. Official recognition of the CAWIU, however, was never granted and the abolition of the contract labor system was denied.<sup>33</sup> By the spring of 1935, moreover, the CAWIU would be crushed as workers faced increased threats of vigilante violence and intimidation from the newly-formed Associated Farmers.<sup>34</sup> Founded in 1934 to combat unionization among farm workers, the Associated Farmers consisted of powerful corporate farmers and industrialists, intent on manipulating the press and pressuring politicians to adhere to the interests of large farmers.<sup>35</sup>

In her oral history, Dunn's memories of labor organizing in the 1930s resist the dominant narrative about Okies' racism and unwillingness to connect with Mexican migrant farm workers. On the contrary, throughout the 1930s, interracial alliances were crucial for Dunn. Echoing Dunn's experiences, CAWIU organizer Dorothy Ray Healey recalled in her 1972 oral history:

The attitudes between the Filipinos, the Chicanos, and later the Anglos was again a remarkable thing to watch: all of them, each in their own way, afflicted with degrees of racial feeling, and yet within a few days the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>33</sup> Barry, ed., "The California Cotton Pickers Strike-1933," 89-91.

<sup>34</sup> Arax and Wartzman, *The King of California*, 156.

<sup>35</sup> For more about the Associated Farmers, see: "Who Are the Associated Farmers?" *The Rural Observer* Vol. 1.9, The Simon J. Lubin Society of California, (September-October 1938).

suspicious, the hatred, the prejudices, just evaporating under the impact of the comradeship engendered by the strike, by the sharing of mutual experiences, including the police attacks, trying to maintain the strike and extend it.<sup>36</sup>

While James Gregory and others have suggested that the Okies' attitudes towards Mexicans and Filipino farm workers prevented them from organizing together, the cotton strike of 1933, as Dunn's narrative emphasizes, in fact, helped forge interracial solidarity among migrant farm workers.<sup>37</sup>

Following the 1933 cotton strike, Dunn was put on trial in Visalia for "rioting" at the Pixley Food Depot when she pushed herself into the Depot to demand food for her family. As she says in her oral history, it was a Black man who came to speak on her behalf:

There was a colored man out there in the country and he would kill rabbits and give them to us for meat. I'd milk this old cow and give him milk. When they had me on trial in Visalia for rioting he wanted to be a witness for me. Bless his heart. He got up—he was an old fellow—and he didn't wait for them to ask him any questions—he said, "This woman is a good woman!" He was waving his cane at them and they kept saying, "Sit down, sit down." He was telling them how good a woman I was but they made him sit down, bless his heart.<sup>38</sup>

Just as she did with the young Mexican girl who taught her to call out to the pickers in Spanish to go on strike, Dunn created alliances and personal relationships across race lines. Moreover, that a Black man would testify on behalf of a white woman during the 1930s is indeed significant given the racial and gender politics of the time. Gregory's

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<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Ray Healey, interview by Joel Gardner, October 24, 1972, Los Angeles, Oral History Research Center, University of California, Los Angeles, Tape II, Side Two.

<sup>37</sup> For more about interracial solidarity in the California Cotton Strike of 1933, see: Alicia Judith Rivera, "Solidarity in The San Joaquin Valley, California Cotton Strike of 1933" (M.A. thesis, California State University, Fresno, 2005), *passim*.

<sup>38</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, California Odyssey, 14-15.

history of the Okies argues that “the superiority of white over black was the bottom line of plain-folk culture.”<sup>39</sup> For Dunn, however, the bottom line seems to have been survival through interracial solidarity, as the Black man who testified for her, not only stood up for her in court, but also participated in a relationship of vital food sharing with the Dunns.

Dunn’s commitment to interracial alliance continued throughout her life. In the mid-1960s, when Cesar Chavez began organizing migrant workers through the United Farm Workers (UFW), Dunn was quick to respond. Looking for a union organizer to help talk to the Okies in California’s Central Valley, the AFL-CIO asked Dunn if she could help; Dunn responded with a resolute yes: “Sure, I’d be willing. I came into this country with my pots and pans flying.”<sup>40</sup> Gregory has noted that in the 1960s and 1970s, descendants of Okie migrants to California did not sympathize with the UFW.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, Dunn explains in her oral history that when she first began organizing for this union Mexican farmworkers were surprised to see an Okie like herself out in the fields with them: “...they were scared of Okies—the Okies really had it in for the Mexicans.” Unlike the majority of Okies, however, Dunn felt deeply connected to Mexican farm workers and she regarded Chavez as “one of the finest people you ever met.” She not only stood in solidarity with the UFW, but also saw herself as one with its members: “I organized those people—they were part of me. I understood what the Mexican people were going through.”<sup>42</sup> Throughout her life, that is, Dunn continued to connect her struggles with those of migrant workers from other ethnic groups. For Dunn, hard work and oppressive

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<sup>39</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, 166.

<sup>40</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 34-35.

<sup>41</sup> Gregory, *American Exodus*, xvii.

<sup>42</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 35, 35.

conditions did not distinguish Okies but rather connected them to others exploited by California agribusiness.

In contrast to the narrative that portrays Okies as anti-communist and racist, radical leftists politics, including inter-racialism, informed Dunn's experience in the cotton fields during the 1930s. Certainly, they shape her recollection of her past. Throughout her oral history, she describes Communism not simply as a political philosophy with which she learned to identify later in life, but as a calling or impulse with which she was born: "If Communism means having enough to eat and enough to wear then I was born like that."<sup>43</sup> Likewise, her connection to Communism is always deeply tied to her children. Throughout her oral history she explains her politics and activism by invoking her identity as a mother, thereby reconfiguring motherhood as a site for the construction of a political subject.<sup>44</sup>

That Dunn employs the rhetoric of maternalism is not surprising. Indeed, maternal symbols were ubiquitous in FSA discourses during the 1930s. FSA photographs repeatedly depicted women as mothers, wives, and victims, playing on traditional notions of gender relations and family stability in order to win public support for the agency. These "secularized portraits of the Madonna and Child," as American Studies professor Wendy Kozol calls them, took on a mythic structure, emphasizing ostensibly universal

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>44</sup> Dunn's narrative is similar to the oral history of Mrs. Valdez, a Mexican women also involved in the 1933 cotton strike. Like Dunn, Valdez focused on female concerns about food, caring for families, and, by extension, the greater community. As Devra Weber explains, "Her interests as a Mexican worker were considered, weighed, and expressed within the context of her interests as a woman, mother, and wife." Devra Weber, "Raiz Fuerte: Oral History and Mexicana Farmworkers" in *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History*, 4th ed., ed. Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol DuBois (New York: Routledge, 2000), 422.

themes of suffering, maternity, and child care.<sup>45</sup> As Kozol and others have argued, with regard to gender, the New Deal was a conservative project that celebrated motherhood as the very essence of female identity.<sup>46</sup>

Dunn's usage of motherhood as a rhetorical device, however, differs significantly from FSA discourses. For Dunn, motherhood was not merely a conservative and normative construct but a means and justification for radicalism. By evoking motherhood as the basis for her politics, Dunn's narrative employs what historian Temma Kaplan terms "female consciousness," whereby women "accept the gender system of their society...which assigns [them] the responsibility of preserving life." In accepting this task, "women with female consciousness demand the rights that their obligations entail." This "collective drive to secure those rights...sometimes has revolutionary consequences insofar as it politicizes the networks of everyday life." Thus, as Kaplan argues, "women's most conservative self-image," motherhood, might also be a space for radical critique.<sup>47</sup>

By defining herself as a mother and at the same time demanding that she be given the necessary means to support and care for her children, Dunn redefined discourses that were often confining and conservative. For Dunn, Communism was a logical solution to a set of problems which local and national governments had done little to remedy: "I was a Communist because I didn't have the necessities of life."<sup>48</sup> In this way, Dunn borrowed

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<sup>45</sup> Wendy Kozol, "Madonnas of The Fields: Photography, Gender, and 1930s Farm Relief," in *Feminist Cultural Studies Volume II*, ed. Terry Lovell (Brookfield: Edward Elgar Publishing Limited, 1995), 527, 541.

<sup>46</sup> For more about conservative discourses of motherhood during the Great Depression, see: Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

<sup>47</sup> Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 545, 565.

<sup>48</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 18.

the dominant discourse of the day—which defined child care and home making as woman’s primary duty—and used it to justify her identity as a Communist. For Dunn, Communism meant providing for her children. Defining “Communist agitation” she said,

Communist agitation. When you have to pick 100 pounds of cotton for 40 cents and you have to take a little child of one and a half or two years and let it stand out in that cotton field all day and all you can pick is maybe 200 pounds at the very most, there’s something wrong with your country! And it’s not because you’re a Communist. It that’s Communism I was born like that.<sup>49</sup>

In her repeated usage of the phrase “I was born like that,” Dunn echoes the Popular Front feeling of the time that sought to unite leftists and centrists in a coalition against Fascism. As CPUSA leader Earl Browder put it in the 1930s: “Communism [is] twentieth century Americanism.”<sup>50</sup> For Dunn, it was motherhood, not simply patriotism, that was the basis for her Communism and activism.

Likewise, it was through childcare that Dunn forged a community with other Communists. While Dunn was in jail for four months in 1934 for “agitating” in the Pixley strike, her little daughter stayed with a family in Tulare:

You know, I found the most precious people were Communist. They called me a Communist but this drew me to people I didn't even know existed. They took care of my little daughter... They dressed her and fed her and took care of her and took pictures of her and everything. Real nice.<sup>51</sup>

Aware of anti-communist rhetoric that saw Communists as anti-American and dangerous individuals, Dunn offered a new image of Communists as caregivers and loving

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>50</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 274.

<sup>51</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 20.

neighbors. For Dunn, it was not FDR's New Deal that supported her children, but fellow radicals.

Dunn's identity as a mother both promoted and justified her radicalism. Moreover, her oral history challenges the notion that traditional gender roles that glorified the male breadwinner were unaffected by the Dust Bowl migration. To the contrary, Dunn's husband plays a very minor role in the story she tells. When he is mentioned, it is with little admiration. Indeed, he seems to have done nothing if not made her life more difficult: he drank too much, wasted their money on gambling and alcohol, and emotionally abused both Dunn and the children. As for his feelings about her activism, Dunn explains that "he would rather have gone back to Oklahoma and curled up and died than to have been in it." For her, a husband was nothing more than another mouth to feed: "I guess I had to do it or else we'd starve." In the mid-1940s Dunn left her husband and moved to Bakersfield, where she worked in the Kern County Hospital for two years. Tired of supporting the family, she told him, "Now I'll make a living for the children, but I won't make a living for you any longer...I went through one depression with you and I'll never go through another depression."<sup>52</sup>

Unable to support herself at her hospital job, Dunn began working in packing houses, unloading and processing fruit. From 1949 to 1974 she followed the crops throughout California's Central Valley as well as in Florida. Recalling this time, Dunn distinctly remembered where she was at critical moments in U.S. history:

I was in Florida when Martin Luther King was killed. I was working in the apricots in Winters, California when Robert Kennedy was killed. I was in

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 12, 13, 30.



the pears in Ukiah when Marilyn Monroe died. I was in Bakersfield when John F. Kennedy died.<sup>53</sup>

Here, Dunn places her life experience within a larger narrative of national history. By juxtaposing her life with champions of social justice, Martin Luther King and the Kennedy brothers, she suggests the importance of an unknown Okie woman. Moreover, the image of Marilyn Monroe, the quintessential symbol of idolized beauty, is contrasted against a picker in the fields: the very antithesis of dominant white, bourgeois beauty standards.

In offering such distinct contrasts, Dunn's oral history makes visible the painful labor behind commodities like apricots and pears. If figures like King, the Kennedy brothers, and Monroe are ubiquitous in the national memory of United States history, stories about migrant farm work are all but invisible. By linking her memories of fruit picking to famous figures, Dunn disrupts the dominant narrative of American history that so often hides the labor of the working poor and reminds us that the ugly reality of grueling labor and despicable wages has always been a central part of California's vast system of industrial agriculture.

Furthermore, her story suggests that legacies of radicalism are part of the Okie experience. Such legacies have routinely been overlooked, yet they live on in unexpected and surprising places. In 1989, Dunn's third son, Michael Dunn, was interviewed by the *Los Angeles Times* about his experiences growing up as a poor Okie during the Depression. On the surface, Michael's story follows the stereotypical account of Okie history in California. He recalls a past of poverty coupled with hard work and willpower.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 32.

Determined to “get even,” Michael attended classes at Bakersfield Junior College, saved his money and began investing in real estate. At the time of the interview, he owned twelve convenient-market stores between Oxnard and Mission Viejo—businesses he says are worth millions. An Orange County Republican, he is proud of campaigning for Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan.<sup>54</sup>

At the same time, Michael’s name evokes the hidden history of his mother’s radicalism. Born one year after the 1933 cotton strike and infamous attack on pickers at Pixley, Michael is named after Mike Kerney, a fellow organizer who posted bail for his mother, Lillie Dunn, when she was detained in jail on account of her activism. Born two years later, Michael’s brother Pat is named after CAWIU leader Pat Chambers.<sup>55</sup> Within the dominant historiography on Okies, the significance of Michael’s name is lost. By grappling with the stories of women like Lillie Dunn, one exposes the threads which connect Michael Dunn to a legacy not only of middle-class aspirations, but of resistance and radicalism as well.

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<sup>54</sup> Richard Lee Colvin, “Dust Bowl Legacy: 50 Years After 'The Grapes of Wrath,' Five Okies Remember How Their Families Struggled During the Great Migration—and Endured,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 26, 1989, accessed April 18, 2015, [http://articles.latimes.com/1989-03-26/magazine/tm-677\\_1\\_dust-bowl/5](http://articles.latimes.com/1989-03-26/magazine/tm-677_1_dust-bowl/5).

<sup>55</sup> Dunn, interview by Judith Gannon, *California Odyssey*, 36.

## Chapter 2

### Song to the Plains: Sanora Babb's *Whose Names Are Unknown*

I suppose one writes of one's life not simply to look back in nostalgia, but to find some order and a possible meaning related to the present.

—Sanora Babb

For radical author Sanora Babb, writing was an act of both love and recognition, a platform on which she tied the personal to the political. A native of Oklahoma, Babb moved to California in the late 1920s, where she wrote her Dust Bowl novel *Whose Names Are Unknown*, a painful and moving portrait of Okie farmworkers who migrated to California during the Great Depression. Unlike many Depression-era documentarians, however, Babb drew not only from field notes but also from her personal experience growing up poor in the rural high plains of Oklahoma. Her novel follows a people with whom she felt not only political bonds, but also intimate community. In 1959, looking back at her life in a letter to her cousin, she described her writings about southwesterners as a “song to the plains, a small tribute to my parents, my grandfather, and others who settled those treeless plains,” people who lived “quietly courageous lives” amidst crushing poverty and environmental chaos.<sup>1</sup>

The image of downtrodden white southwesterners trekking to California in overcrowded jalopies in the mid-1930s is a stereotype in national memory. (See Figure 2). Thanks to the work of New Deal intellectuals, artists, and writers like John Steinbeck, Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and Carey McWilliams, the displaced Okie has in many ways become

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<sup>1</sup> Sanora Babb to Cousin Glenn, 21 December 1959, Sanora Babb Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

symbolic of the Great Depression. The images and narratives produced by Babb are less familiar, however. As historian Erin Battat argues, Sanora Babb is an “undiscovered star,”<sup>2</sup> whose work remains relatively unexplored in scholarship on radical women writers of the 1930s<sup>3</sup> and Dust Bowl documentarians. Analyzing the political work of her novel *Whose Names Are Unknown*, I argue that Babb offers an alternative narrative of Okie history and subculture—one that centers women’s experiences, charts a proletarian feminism, and imagines interracial alliances among Mexican, Filipino, and Black migrant farmworkers and white Okies.

Born April 21, 1907, in Leavenworth, Kansas, Babb experienced a childhood of uncertainty, rural poverty, and frequent moves. Her father, Walter Babb, was a hard and domineering man with an incessant gambling problem. Writing to her cousin in the late 1950s, Babb recalled:

He was violent and brutal—his answer to almost everything was physical beating and verbal, vulgar shouting the like of which you never heard. Poor Mama was beaten so many times, so badly that I am sure it [a]ffected her personality for life.<sup>4</sup>

Outside of gambling, Walter worked from time to time as a baker, and in 1913 he moved the family to Baca County in southeastern Colorado, hoping to make a future by raising

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<sup>2</sup> Erin Royston Battat, *Ain't Got No Home: America's Great Migrations and the Making of an Interracial Left* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 41.

<sup>3</sup> For scholarship about 1930s radical women writers, see: Constance Coiner, “Literature of Resistance: The Intersection of Feminism and the Communist Left in Meridel Le Sueur and Tillie Olsen,” in *Left Politics and the Literary Profession*, ed. Lennard J. Davis and M. Bella Mirabella (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993); Laura Hapke, *Daughters of The Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in The American 1930s* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), passim; Paula Rabinowitz and Charlotte Nekola, eds, *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (New York: Feminist Press, 1987), passim; Deborah Rosenfelt, “Getting into the Game: American Women Writers and the Radical Tradition,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 9 (1986): 563-572.

<sup>4</sup> Sanora Babb to Cousin Glenn, 21 December 1959, Sanora Babb Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

broomcorn. Here, the family lived with Walter's father, Alonzo, in a one-room dugout, almost identical to the home setting Babb would describe in *Whose Names Are Unknown*. Sanora Babb's political grounding occurred early on, under the tutelage of her grandfather.<sup>5</sup> Babb's grandfather, Alonzo, was a Socialist at a time when the Socialist Party enjoyed a strong presence in Oklahoma, so much so that it influenced the writing of the state's constitution in 1907.<sup>6</sup>

In 1919 Walter moved the family back to Oklahoma, settling in Forgan, in Oklahoma's Panhandle. In Oklahoma, the Babbs moved frequently, and Walter's continual gambling took a toll on the family. As literary scholar Douglas Wixson says, for Babb's mother, Jennie, "marriage vows had become a prison sentence."<sup>7</sup>

In 1924, Sanora Babb graduated from Forgan High School as valedictorian of her class.<sup>8</sup> Enrolling at Garden City Junior College soon after, she received a teaching certificate and spent a year teaching in a one-room school house. In 1929, at the age of twenty-two, she moved to Los Angeles, California, with the hope of becoming a newspaper reporter. In Los Angeles she became involved with radical politics and found a home among a circle of other young progressive writers and intellectuals: William Saroyan, Tillie Olsen, John Fante, Carlos Bulosan, Meridel Le Sueur, Ralph Ellison, and Dorothy Parker.<sup>9</sup> Her short stories

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<sup>5</sup> Douglas Wixson, "Radical by Nature: Sanora Babb and Ecological Disaster on the High Plains, 1900-1940," in *Regionalists on the Left: Radical Voices from the American West*, ed. Michael Steiner (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 124.

<sup>6</sup> For more about Oklahoma's history of radical politics, see: James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895-1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), passim; Nigel Anthony Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905-1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), passim.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>9</sup> Battat, *Ain't Got No Home*, 45.

were published in left-wing newspapers and magazines such as the *Daily Worker*, *New Masses*, *Anvil*, *Black and White*, and *Clipper*.

In spring 1934, she returned for a short visit to the southwest to visit Kansas and the Oklahoma Panhandle. Here, she saw the people of her childhood who would inspire *Whose Names are Unknown*. As she visited with them, Babb noticed that the markers of class differences that had once seemed permanent were beginning to erode on account of the Depression:

I saw the people I used to know who had lived smugly in their imaginary stratas—the best people who had bathtubs and cars, the middle ones who had bathtubs and white collar jobs, the unacceptable one who had no bathtubs, manual jobs or doubtful means of support—standing in line together.<sup>10</sup>

Babb's awareness of the permeability of class divisions would become central to *Whose Names Are Unknown*, which imagines a community brought together through women's networks of mutual help and domestic labor. Most significantly, she theorized cleanliness—symbolized by bathtubs—as a powerful marker of class status and respectability. *Whose Names Are Unknown*, is thick with images of women cleaning and struggling to fight off the unabating dust.

In 1936, despite California's ban on interracial marriage, Babb married Chinese-American cinematographer James Wong Howe in Paris, France. The couple would remarry in California after the state's miscegenation laws were overturned in 1948.<sup>11</sup> By 1936, after returning from a trip through eastern Europe and Russia, Babb joined the Hollywood branch

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<sup>10</sup> Sanora Babb and Douglas C. Wixson, eds. *On the Dirty Plate Trail: Remembering the Dustbowl Refugee Camps* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 49.

<sup>11</sup> Battat, *Ain't Got No Home*, 45.

of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA).<sup>12</sup> Two years later, she began working in FSA camps as an assistant to Tom Collins, director of the federal camps for migratory workers. The goal of the FSA was to help white Dust Bowl refugees who had begun streaming into California in the mid-1930s. The FSA was less concerned with the conditions of life for Mexican and Filipino migrant workers who had long worked in California's fields prior to the influx of white southwesterners. Like all New Deal relief projects, the camps were racially segregated in accordance with local custom, which meant that Okie residents lived separately from people of color.

As an FSA camp administrator, Babb gained an intimate understanding of the Dust Bowl migrants' plight. From 1938 to 1939, accompanied by her sister Dorothy Babb, she traveled along Highway 99, beginning in the Imperial Valley in Southern California and traveling north through the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys to document conditions among the Dust Bowl refugees and help them find shelter in FSA camps.<sup>13</sup> In the camps Babb spent her days working with the migrants, and spent her nights composing field notes, which would later be incorporated into her novel, *Whose Names are Unknown*. Paying particular attention to the women in the camps, Babb began asking migrant women to record their stories. As she later wrote,

When I was working in the California fields in 1938, and at brief periods for several years afterwards, I asked some of the women I knew if they would like to write down some of their experiences. They were pleased and enjoyed writing and later seeing their pieces in print.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Wixson, "Radical by Nature," 122.

<sup>13</sup> Battat, *Ain't Got No Home*, 47.

<sup>14</sup> Babb and Wixson, eds., *On the Dirty Plate Trail*, 116.

The stories she recorded would become central to *Whose Names Are Unknown*, which describes in vivid detail the depression's effect on Okie women in FSA camps.

In the summer of 1939 Babb sent several chapters of what would become *Whose Names Are Unknown* to Random House. Initially, the editors gave her an advance contract and moved her to New York to finish writing the novel. In the midst of her negotiations with Random House, however, Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath*. By the end of 1939, it had become one of the most popular books of the decade, selling over 430,000 copies.<sup>15</sup>

The editors at Random House were impressed with Babb's novel. In fact, they seemed to like it more than Steinbeck's. Editor Charles A. Pearce noted that Babb was "a more capable and exciting writer than Steinbeck," and an anonymous editor argued:

Whereas GRAPES had color, excitement, and humor, Babb's book is more uniformly intense...If there hadn't been a GRAPES, I would say unreservedly, here is something new, something fine, we *must* publish. Moreover an unusual talent is displayed in this first novel.<sup>16</sup>

With the success of Steinbeck's novel, however, Random House reneged on its deal with Babb, fearing that the works were far too similar and that readers would not be interested in a second novel about the Dust Bowl migrants. That the novels resembled one another is unsurprising, as Steinbeck had borrowed Babb's field notes and both she and Steinbeck worked closely with Tom Collins.<sup>17</sup> Sadly, Babb's novel would not be published until the University of Oklahoma Press issued it in 2004, over sixty years after Babb finished it and just a year before her death in 2005.

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<sup>15</sup> T.H. Watkins, *The Hungry Years: A Narrative History of the Great Depression in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), 457.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Battat, *Ain't Got No Home*, 49, capitalization and emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> Wixson, "Radical by Nature," 126.



While *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Whose Names are Unknown* do indeed overlap in many respects, Babb's intimate rendering of the day-to-day domestic world, her sophisticated understanding of poverty's particular effect on women, and her vision of interracial alliance are all strikingly absent from Steinbeck's novel. In *The Grapes of Wrath*, women appear as idealized super beings, quintessential Earth Mothers who sacrificially take on all suffering and hardship for the well-being and future good of the community—especially its sons, fathers, and brothers. Limited to this role, the women show little complexity or subjectivity. *Whose Names Are Unknown* offers a powerful counter-image. In its un-romanticized attention to women's labor, networks, and inner lives as well as its insistence on intersectional analysis of gender, class, and race, Babb's relatively unknown novel offers a feminist rendering of the Great Depression in general and the Dust Bowl migration in particular.

*Whose Names Are Unknown* follows Milt and Julia Dunne and their two young daughters, Lonnie and Myra, as they struggle to survive in the arid plains of Oklahoma and then eventually move to California to find work in the fields. The novel is broken into two parts, each consisting of many short chapters typical of Babb's essay-writing style. Part one makes up over half of the novel, focusing on the family's intimate daily struggles in the Oklahoma Panhandle. Part two is set in California, where the Dunnes find shelter in an FSA camp and later move from town to town, desperately seeking work in the fields. By the novel's end, the Dunnes ally with Filipino and African-American migratory workers to take part in a cotton strike.

Women's networks lie at the heart of Babb's overarching narrative about political and social transformation. Indeed, it is through women's domestic labor, bonds with one another, and reproductive struggles that the larger community functions. Milt and Julia and their daughters live with Milt's father, affectionately known as Konkie by his two young granddaughters. Together, the family makes do in a one-room dirt dugout, a home "stuffed with life, a little more than it can hold, some of it spilling over in a vague obscene intimacy."<sup>18</sup> The Dunnes' life in Oklahoma is marked by a constant battle to survive. Drought, violent dust storms, and poverty punctuate their daily activities. This ongoing hardship is experienced collectively, however, and the families in the Dunne's community rely upon one another for emotional and material support.

Women come together to support one another in times of birth, food scarcity, and the loss of a child. Through mutual exchange, they create informal economies whereby the necessities of survival—winter clothes, domestic labor, milk, and food—are shared. The novel opens with Julia receiving a package of old clothes from her cousin in Virginia. Milt has had to use the money they have saved for winter clothing to purchase new seeds for planting. The "red coat," "leather house slippers," "worn underwear" and "long silk mesh gloves" will keep the Dunnes warm through the harsh winter months. Later, when Julia's neighbor, Mrs. Brownell, learns that Julia is pregnant, she insists that Julia come to her home to give birth, as she fears the Dunnes' home—a mere "one room half-buried in the earth, with the two beds and the red mahogany piano bulging from a corner"—is far too small and crowded to make childbirth comfortable. Unfortunately, after getting caught outdoors in a

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<sup>18</sup> Sanora Babb, *Whose Names Are Unknown* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004), 22.

lightning storm, Julia awakens in the middle of the night with sharp labor pains. In the cramped earthen dugout, with no doctor and her two young daughters hiding awake under the covers, Julia gives birth. As her “screams filled the little room with a terrifying finality,” she painfully welcomes into the world a stillborn baby boy.<sup>19</sup>

The stillbirth brings the larger community together, as the farm wives rush to visit Julia: “Each wife brought some bit of food and spent the visiting time at work that Julia would have been doing. Even Old Sandy walked on over, an old settler who lived a mile and a half away in a little adobe hut alone on his unfenced claim.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, as Babb highlights the harsh realities of pregnancy and childbirth for poor farm women, she also portrays birth as a foundation for community—perhaps the primary event that ties neighbors together.

The women take up the domestic chores that Julia cannot perform. They do laundry, scrub floors, bring food, and provide childcare:

In no time, Mrs. Starwood had them all fed, sent Milt to the field, and began clearing and cleaning the house. She gathered up the soiled clothes to take home for washing and announced that she would take Lonnie home with her for a few days.<sup>21</sup>

As the women leave, Julia remarks about her home’s cleanliness: “The house smells so good and clean...I don’t know how to thank you.”<sup>22</sup> As mentioned earlier, Babb was particularly astute about the meaning of cleanliness in Okie women’s lives. Prior to migrating west, farm women fought a constant battle against horrendous dust storms, and in California epithets like “dirty Okie” became constant reminders that the Okies were undesirable others. That

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 4, 24, 43.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 50.

Julia's neighbors leave her home smelling "good and clean," then, is not merely a sign of the practicality and ostensible health benefits of cleanliness, but also a testament to farm women's tacit understanding of cleanliness as a maker of respectability, wholesomeness, and worthiness.

Class divisions within the community are either elided or reinforced through women's networks. While differing material conditions do exist among the farm families, what distinguishes insiders from outsiders is a family's willingness to participate in informal economies of food sharing, domestic help, and kindness. Thus, it is women's mutualism, or lack thereof, that defines farm families' status in the eyes of the community. The Starwoods, Longs, Brownells and Dunnes all have little to share; what brings them together, however, is not only that they are families for whom poverty is a daily reality, but rather that they are families willing to give despite their lack of resources, families who "would make a meal from something if company stayed for mealtime."

The Longs are the poorest family in the community. After losing their livestock under the AAA, which paid farmers not only to stop growing crops but also to kill-off their livestock, the Longs have never been able to recover. They live now with dirt floors, the effects of which are evident in Mrs. Long, who is "always worried and too tired to smile." "A shy, meticulous little woman," amidst the constant dirt and crushing poverty, her cleaning becomes "fanatical." Mrs. Long's destitution, does not, however, prevent her from being generous with the other farm women. When she visits the Dunne's after the stillbirth, Mrs. Long is at first uncomfortable that she is unable to bring food. Julia, perhaps sensing Mrs. Long's embarrassment, suggests she simply sit with her and eat a slice of watermelon. Mrs.

Long sits for a long time with Julia, discussing the Depression and the worsening drought and sharing a letter from Mrs. Long's cousin who has recently moved to California. Lacking material resources to share with Julia, Mrs. Long offers instead her time, her presence, her comfort, and news.<sup>23</sup>

The relatively well-off Brennermanns, on the other hand, effectively distance themselves from the larger collective. Unlike the other farm families, they live in a "tall white house [which] looked like a staid woman in a long white dress." In the eyes of the other community members, the Brennermanns are "the most frightening of all." Owner of tenanted farms in three counties, Mr. Brennermann is on the board of the Flatland's Bank, which holds the farmers' loans. The Brennermanns can afford irrigation and as a result they have more food than anyone else. What distinguishes them most, however, is that they make little effort to share. Mrs. Brennermann is "a tireless frugal old woman who work[s] as hard as her years...let her." Refusing to share milk with her neighbors, "she pinche[s] and save[s] fanatically." When a pregnant Julia comes to the Brennermanns' home asking for milk, Mrs. Brennermann expects that Julia will pay for it: "ten cents is enough between neighbors," she tells her.<sup>24</sup> Mrs. Brennermann's part of the story also suggests that women might even fail at motherhood to the extent that they refuse to create alliances with other women. Shocked at her mother's stinginess, Mrs. Brennermann's daughter, Frieda, eventually abandons her birth mother and travels to California with Mrs. Starwood.

Highlighting Mrs. Brennermann's refusal to partake in the informal economy of reciprocity created by other farm women, Babb defines women's putatively natural

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 17, 16, 53.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 7, 17, 32, 34.

generosity as a trait that is acquired rather than innate. Moreover, Babb suggests that such qualities are not unique to women, but might be learned by men as well. Indeed, men's participation in community life requires their connection to womanly concerns such as childbirth and the struggle with food insecurity. When a pregnant Julia visits the doctor, he offers his services for free: "Let it go, let it go," he said. "I did nothing but talk. Better save the money for the big event." Aligning himself with the poor, the doctor has effectively sacrificed his marriage. Disdained by his former wife for working like a "common man," he lives alone in a cluttered house. Just as the doctor provides his service for free, Flanery, the owner of the local grocery store, offers Milt extra groceries—"A little present for the missus and the kids," he calls them.<sup>25</sup>

By focusing on women's networks, and women's domestic labor, Babb constructs the home as the center of life in the Dunnes' community. Grounding both the personal and public within the home, she illustrates the ways intimate experiences create political sensibilities. In *The Grapes of Wrath* women engage little with the outside world and instead stare out from the private world of the domestic at their men in the public world:

In the open doors the women stood looking out, and behind them the children—corn-headed children, with wide eyes, one bare foot on top of the other bare foot, and the toes working. The women and the children watched their men talking to the owner men. They were silent.<sup>26</sup>

When woman do leave the home in Steinbeck's novel, it is to take their role *behind* men:

And then Ma came out of the house, and Granma with her, and Rose of Sharon behind, walking daintily. They took their places behind the squatting men; they stood up and put their hands on their hips.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 26, 27, 84.

<sup>26</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939; repr., New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 100.

In contrast, Babb imagines the domestic as the sphere in which the political is born. In the Dunnes' world, the day-to-day domestic tasks performed by women—scrubbing floors, drying sheets, baking food, caring for children—bring the political into focus. It is in the home that women come together to support one another, share food, give birth, and discuss World War I, Depression, and the New Deal. When Mrs. Starwood comes to visit, for example, she tells Julia,

Ain't no right time to farm. It's always hard work, but it's worse now, of course, with the dust storms and the depression. Ned keeps reading in the paper the depression is over, but for the life of me, I don't know when! This'n's lasted longer'n any others. I've lived through 'em about every seven years regular, and I heard my father tell about the panics and the booms.<sup>28</sup>

Domestic life is connected with larger issues: dust storms; untenable farming practices; and a history of boom-and-bust economics. Likewise, Mrs. Long's sharing the letter from her cousin in California marks the novel's first mention of Okies' migration to the West. Throughout the novel, the political is enmeshed within women's day-to-day reality within the home.

Foregrounding women's domestic experience and blurring the line between the public and private, Babb articulates a distinctly a proletarian feminism that highlights the inherent interconnectedness of class and gender. For Babb, poverty had a specific effect on women. To be poor and to be a woman meant painful childbirth, inadequate or nonexistent medical care, the threat of emotional and physical abuse from men, and ongoing responsibilities to cook, clean, and care for children.

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<sup>28</sup> Babb, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, 49.

Depictions of cleanliness and birth, in both their literal and metaphorical depictions, are the primary means through which Babb expresses a proletarian feminism. Cleaning—“the smell of soap and the rhythmic sound of clothes rubbing up and down a washboard”—is a constant in the day-to-day life for the women in Babb’s novel. Both in Oklahoma and California, dirt and dust pervade women’s domestic world. Julia, “[feels] the dust in her clothes and on her skin, in her mouth and nose, on everything she touched.” The ongoing battle to stay “clean” wears on Julia’s emotional and psychological well-being as she exclaims: “I’m so sick of this dirt I feel like I’d go crazy with another day of it.”<sup>29</sup> To be clean does not just mean health and comfort.

On a discursive level, standards of cleanliness distinguish the desirable from the undesirable, the acceptable from the unacceptable, and the civilized from the primitive. In essence, cleanliness is a marker of class. In Babb’s novel, it is primarily, if not always, women who shoulder the on-going domestic duty of cleaning: washing, scrubbing, sweeping, ironing. Farm women like Julia, then, are responsible for reproducing, in both symbolic and literal terms, a nuclear family that is clean, respectable, and desirable. Babb thus theorizes class as a construct that both relies upon and reproduces gender constructs. Gender concerns are not secondary to class struggle, as many leftists during Babb’s time had it; instead, Babb proposes, class and gender are entangled, their threads impossible to separate.

Local Californians, government officials, and large landowners, also employed discourses of cleanliness as a means to racialize the Okies. Just as being clean functioned as a class marker, to achieve cleanliness also meant to be properly white. Greeted with epithets

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 46, 86, 89.



like “dirty Okie” upon their arrival in California, the Dunne children are constantly reminded of the inferior status as the *dirty* other:

When they washed their feet at night, bending low over the small pans, seeing the toes come up clean through the brown water, clean for school, the remembered hurts flew in and out their troubled hearts like little birds wanting to settle.<sup>30</sup>

In their ongoing commitment to cleanliness, the women in Babb’s novel refuse to be treated as inferior. “Let them talk. Our kids are as good as theirs, and they’re clean when we have soap and water,” proclaims Julia upon hearing how her children are treated in the local school.<sup>31</sup>

Like cleanliness, rural women’s experiences of birth and motherhood in *Whose Names Are Unknown* reflect Babb’s proletarian feminism. The women in Babb’s novel face particular hardships as a result of their position within interlocking systems of gender subordination and class exploitation. As Virgie, a woman in the FSA camp, whose child dies during birth, exclaims,

I have to suffer like this because we’re poor, that’s why, only poor! They don’t have babies without doctors, starved babies they don’t want. Where is God’s wrath? It only falls on us. Even God is on their side! Do you hear—even *God!*<sup>32</sup>

Centering her analysis of poverty and class relations on Virgie’s intimate experience of pregnancy, birth, and child loss, Babb shifts away from the traditional leftist focus on the male worker as the primary subject of class struggle and towards women’s bodies, experiences, and subjectivities.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 141, emphasis in original.

Childbirth, specifically stillbirth, functions as the primary metaphor for understanding and identifying class struggle. Significantly, part one and part two of *Whose Names Are Unknown* both open with dramatic and harrowing birth scenes. Both women—Julia Dunne and Virgie—give birth without proper medical care, in conditions that are excruciating and life-threatening, Julia inside the family’s dugout and Virgie in an FSA camp “with only a battered mattress between her and the dirt.” Both women’s babies are stillborn. Of Virgie’s baby, Babb writes, “It starved to death before it ever saw the light of day.”<sup>33</sup> The failed births offer a powerful critique of capitalism and New Deal programs: to the extent that the larger economic and class structure render it impossible for women like Julia and Virgie to bring life into the world, capitalism itself is a failed and defunct system. Likewise, Babb’s emphasis on failed birth hints that destitute women will not compliantly produce another generation of exploited workers. Their bodies refusing to bring new life into a system of oppression and brutality, the mothers in Babb’s novel effectively resist the role that capitalism assigns to them.

Rhetoric about the sacrosanctity of motherhood was widespread during the Great Depression. Indeed, New Deal liberals repeatedly took up the mother as a symbolic placeholder—evoking her as a beacon of unfaltering courage, unmatched strength and maternal security for a nation in distress. Steinbeck described Ma Joad as the family matriarch who took on her position as “healer” and “arbiter” for the insecure Joad family with an unquestioned enthusiasm and humility:

Her hazel eyes seemed to have experienced all possible tragedy and to have mounted pain and suffering like steps into a high calm and a superhuman

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.,144.

understanding. She seemed to know, to accept, to welcome her position, the citadel of the family, the strong place that could not be taken. And since old Tom and the children could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear, she had practiced denying them in herself... And from her great and humble position in the family she had taken dignity and a clean calm beauty.<sup>34</sup>

Babb's rendering of motherhood and childbirth as fraught with precarity exposed as a fantasy the notion that mothers could somehow provide security and safety amidst the economic collapse. Moreover, by portraying the often devastating material realities of poor rural mothers, she effectively positioned motherhood as the primary category of analysis from which to draw rhetorical conclusions about the larger economic and political system in which mothers existed. For Babb, then, to engage class struggle in a meaningful way required critical attention to the domestic roles of proletarian women.

In addition to emphasizing women's communities and proletarian feminism, Babb's novel charts a new understanding of race and interracial alliance between white Okies and Mexican, Black, and Filipino migrant farmworkers. A significant amount of scholarship has explored the racial landscape of California's industrial agricultural sector during the Depression era.<sup>35</sup> As Peter La Chapelle notes, "Californians saw Dust Bowlers as liminally white."<sup>36</sup>

Often denied voting rights and access to public schools, Okies were effectively treated as a separate race, comparable to Mexicans and Blacks. As a Kern County physician

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<sup>34</sup> Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> See: Toni Alexander, "Citizenship Contested: The 1930s Domestic Migrant Experience in California's San Joaquin Valley," *Southeastern Geographer* 51, no.1 (2011): 186-208; Erin Royston Battat, "Literature, Social Science, and the Development of American Migration Narratives in the Twentieth Century," *Literature Compass* 4 (May 2007): 539-551; Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> Peter La Chapelle, *Proud To Be an Okie: Cultural Politics, Country Music, and Migration to Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 24.

put it, Okies were “a strange people—they don’t seem to know anything... There is such a thing as a breed of people. These people have lived separate for too long, and they are like a different race.”<sup>37</sup> Testifying before a government agency, Dr. Lee Stone, the public health officer of Madera County, went further: “If you came down to me, I would say, sterilize the whole bunch of them.”<sup>38</sup>

For Dust Bowl migrants, then, as well as for the cohort of New Deal liberals who attempted to bring public and government attention to the Okies’ plight, emphasizing the Okies’ whiteness was crucial. In addition, Carey McWilliams and John Steinbeck both believed the Okies’ whiteness would make them more militant than other workers in demanding better labor and living conditions. As McWilliams explained in *Factories in the Fields*,

These despised “Okies” and “Texicans” were not another minority alien racial group (although they were treated as such) but American citizens familiar with the usages of democracy. With the arrival of the dust-bowl refugees a day of reckoning approaches for the California farm industrialists.<sup>39</sup>

Likewise, in *Harvest Gypsies* Steinbeck argued that “this new race is here to stay:”

It should be understood that with this new race the old methods of repression, of starvation wages, of jailing, beating and intimidation are not going to work; these are American people. Consequently we must meet them with understanding and attempt to work out the problem to their benefit as well as ours.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Quoted in James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 101.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Kevin Starr, *Endangered Dreams: The Great Depression in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 231.

<sup>39</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 306.

<sup>40</sup> John Steinbeck, *The Harvest Gypsies: On The Road to the Grapes of Wrath* (1936; repr., Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1988), 22-23.

In fact Okies seldom took the lead in organizing farmworkers' challenges to intolerable conditions. As much of the historiography on Okies suggests, in their desire to distance themselves from Blacks, Mexicans and other racial minorities, the majority clung to ideas about white superiority, creating few, if any, interracial alliances. They viewed themselves as separate and different from the vast majority of California farmworkers.

Babb's novel, however, imagines interracial alliance as central to Okie identity and experience in California's fields. That they are defined as a lesser race does not prompt the characters in *Whose Names Are Unknown* to cling more tightly to white identities; instead, they come to interrogate their own whiteness and realize their similarity to and interconnectedness with people of color. When the Dunnes first arrive in California they quickly encounter a rigid racial hierarchy in which Okies—much like Blacks, Filipinos and Mexicans—are considered a subordinate other whose oppression is a natural part of the social order. As one Harvey Land Company official puts it: “You can't get around it, there's a class of people made for that kind of work the world over. Put them up and they'll be back down again.”<sup>41</sup>

Milt first discovers the racialized nature of the Okie identity when a fight breaks out in a company store where the field workers go to purchase their weekly provisions. Two company men attack Martin, an Okie farmworker, whom they accuse of assaulting a grower's wife. As the men rush toward Martin, they shout at Milt and the other farmworkers, “Get out of the way, okies,...you white niggers!” After punching Martin, they warn: “He'll pinch his own bitch's ass after this, or we'll kill the sonofabitch.”<sup>42</sup> By framing their disgust

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<sup>41</sup> Babb, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, 205.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 154, 154.

for and violence toward the Okies in racialized terms, the grower's men call into question the Okies' whiteness, suggesting that they have in fact failed at it, thereby consigning themselves to a lower stratum. Moreover, the grower's racial discourse reproduces and relies upon a hierarchy of gender. Because Okies are positioned as an inferior race, their access to women is limited to those of their own "race." Women's bodies mark the boundaries between the dominant white race and the inferior other: Okie, Mexican, Black, or Filipino.<sup>43</sup>

Nearly every aspect of the Dunnes' life in California is structured though racial hierarchy. When Milt inquires about finding a school for Myra and Lonnie, he learns that the locals "don't like their kids mixing" and are trying to force the government to build a separate school for migrant children.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Frieda Brennermann learns about a club whose members want Okies to be sterilized. Milt is also moved when he learns that FSA camps are racially segregated.<sup>45</sup> Garrison, a Black farmworker with whom Milt becomes allies, explains: "We got a camp of our own three miles away." Understanding the implication of Garrison's words, Milt "dares not voice his sympathy in the face of this man's dignity."<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For an account about violence against Filipino farmworkers who connected with white women, see: Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1943), passim; Starr, *Endangered Dreams*, 64.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 171. For more about racism and the segregated schooling practices for Okies and Mexicans in California during the 1930s, see: Christy Gavin, "A School of Their Own: Educating Okie Children in 1930s California," *California Odyssey: Dust Bowl Migration Archives, Special Topics*, February 2001; Paul Theobald and Ruben Donato, "Children of the Harvest: The Schooling of Dust Bowl and Mexican Migrants during the Depression Era," *Peabody Journal of Education* 67 (Summer 1990): 29-45; Kathleen Weiler, "Schooling Migrant Children: California, 1920-1940," *History Workshop Journal* 37 (Spring 1994): 117-142.

<sup>45</sup> For more about FSA camps, see: Greg Hise, "From Roadside Camps to Garden Homes: Housing and Community Planning for California's Migrant Work Force, 1935-1941," *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 5 (1995): 243-258; Kelly R. O'Reilly, "'Oklahoma': The Cultural Mission of California's Migratory Labor Camps, 1935-1941" (senior thesis, Columbia University, 2012), passim; Luke Widener, "Dusting the Peach Bowl: Agricultural Migrants, Camp Managers, and Life in the Marysville and Yuba City Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration Camps, 1935 -1943" (M.A. thesis, California State University, Chico, 2013), passim.

<sup>46</sup> Babb, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, 185, 185.

Milt's experience with racism does not lead him to reinforce his claims to whiteness however; instead, he forges alliances with people of color. At first hostile to Mexicans, Milt soon comes to understand that they are exploited by the same class of growers as he is:

I reckon they work for nothing for the same reason we do. But what makes me mad is those rich bastards can't make enough sweating the blood out of us, they got to overcharge and cheat us out of our own money. It ain't how you save pennies that makes you rich, it's how you steal pennies.<sup>47</sup>

To Milt, Mexicans and Okies are united in a class struggle against the powerful California landowners.

Milt's most significant shift in his racial consciousness comes through his personal relationship with Garrison. As they pick cotton side by side under the burning sun Milt questions categories of racial difference and embraces his interconnectedness with Garrison:

We're both picking cotton for the same hand-to-mouth wages. I'm no better'n he is; he's no worse. The memory of being called a white nigger in Imperial Valley lay in his mind unforgotten, sore, like an exposed nerve. Milt looked at him. Garrison looked back, his eyes straight, and there was no difference.<sup>48</sup>

In his refusal to see Garrison as different from himself, Milt effectively rejects the dominant racial hierarchy and political and social discourse which portrayed whiteness as superior. For Milt, Garrison becomes not only a fellow worker with whom he shares political sentiments, but also a close friend whom he deeply admires: "Somehow he wanted this man's respect, and suddenly he was not ashamed to acknowledge it to himself."<sup>49</sup>

By recognizing his personal and political commonalities with Garrison, Milt prepares the ground for an organized alliance among the farmworkers, one that is both multiracial and

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 187.

gender inclusive. Together, Milt, Garrison, and other farmworkers initiate a strike in the fields. After the walkout, Milt and four other others travel to Garrison's home to meet with union leaders, a white American named John Lacy and a Filipino man named Pedro. Significantly, Garrison's wife, Phoebe, shares an equal role in the organizing activities; she takes a seat at the table and reminds the other organizers when they have forgotten something. Garrison takes her comments seriously, affectionately referring to her as "Madame Chairman."<sup>50</sup> Babb's rendering of an interracial and gender-inclusive union meeting was not merely aspirational; she had, in fact, witnessed such a scene during her time working in FSA camps. "Be sure to put in novel about Negro committee with woman chairman—," she wrote in her field notes.<sup>51</sup>

*Whose Names Are Unknown* offers a new narrative of Okie history in the 1930s, at least one that has yet to be fully recognized. For both women's and labor historians, Babb's work requires a rethinking of the intersections and disjuncture between the radical left and feminist politics in the Depression era. She adds to both the feminist and Okie archive, complicating many of their dominant narratives. Babb's work thus charts a proletarian feminist tradition that understands gender as inherently classed and class as inevitably gendered. Furthermore, her vision of interracial alliance and organized labor provides a counter to the many historians who argue that the racist elements of Okie subculture rendered the Dust Bowl migrants uninterested in unionism or strikes.

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 195.

<sup>51</sup> Babb and Wixson, eds., *On the Dirty Plate Trail*, 87.



### Chapter 3

#### **Pick Up Your Name: The Poetry of Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel**

I feel almost certain that you will receive few entries from cotton-picking poets, two-room school academics, but let'er rip. I'm coughing up postage.

—Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel

For Okie poet Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, writing was at the core of her being:

“Right off, I was always (or have always been) some kind of poet. It came with me, like the color of my eyes.”<sup>1</sup> Poems were McDaniel’s offering to both herself and her community, the language through which she responded to the world around her: “I wanted to take the world to myself to cry out to people around me of its magnificent beauty. I actually feared they would miss if I did not tell them that it was there.”<sup>2</sup> And tell them she did.

Largely unrecognized within academe, lacking many of the traditional markers of success and academic qualification—advanced degrees, distinguished lectureships, a tenured position at a prestigious university—McDaniel wrote poems for nearly the entirety of her life, publishing over fifty books of poetry and prose and fostering an eclectic community of artists, intellectuals, and working-class activists. Her poems, often written on scraps of paper, the backs of receipts, or recycled cards, stand as an archive of sorts, preserving an often overlooked Okie history of hard work, the kind that hurts the back and carries little prestige—cotton picking and ditch digging; of poverty and making do; of little-known towns—

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<sup>1</sup> McDaniel quoted in Joan Jobe Smith, “The Almost-Interview of Wilma E. McDaniel,” *Chiron Review* 59 (Autumn 1999), accessed March 9, 2015, <http://www.back40publishing.com/wemonwem.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, “The Poetry Which My Life Has Required Me to Write,” in *Liberating Memory*, ed. Janet Zandy (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 209.

Tulare, Oildale, Herndon, Depew, Bowlegs—far in both space and imagination from Greenwich Village and Los Angeles; of painful childbirth and calloused hands; of flower-sack dresses and two-room school houses; of uprootedness and loss. Indeed, it is by grounding her work in local and everyday life in California’s Central Valley and Dust Bowl Oklahoma, that McDaniel speaks to universal themes of pain, courage, forgiveness, and connectedness. Most significantly, by blending an unapologetic working-class ethos with a trenchant attention to gender politics, McDaniel’s work offers a proletarian feminist narrative of the Dust Bowl Migration, Okie subculture, and life in the small towns of the Central Valley.

Like Lillie Dunn’s and Sanora Babb’s, McDaniel’s childhood was marked by struggle and destitution. The fourth child of Benjamin and Anna McDaniel, she was born on December 22, 1918, near Stroud in Lincoln County, Oklahoma, during a worldwide influenza epidemic that almost claimed her mother’s life. She was raised in the region known as the Creek Indian Nation, where her family worked as sharecroppers.

In 1936, unable to survive as sharecroppers in Oklahoma in the midst of the Great Depression and Dust Bowl, the McDaniel family migrated to California. In California, Wilma worked in the fields and cleaned houses. As recalled in her poem “Picking Grapes 1937,” she was “Magic seventeen / and new in California / working in bursting / sweet vineyards,” dreaming of “the first breath of / Eve in Paradise / the last gasp of Jean Harlow / in Hollywood.”<sup>3</sup> Eventually settling in Tulare, she lived with and took care of her mother and

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<sup>3</sup> Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, *A Primer for Buford* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1990), 63.

sister Opal until their deaths. She remained in California's Central Valley for the remainder of her life.

About her early life McDaniel remembered: "My entire childhood and early adulthood were formed, forged, in great rural poverty and hardship."<sup>4</sup> Yet she looked at her past with neither resentment nor self-pity:

I suppose as far as suffering, ill health, non-existent medical attention for years at a time, and lowered expectations go, I could probably swap horror stories with some of the best whiners, but that would be ridiculous and a waste of energy. I am simply not a whiner. I do not enjoy it, or the ones who indulge in it surrounded by taxpayer luxuries I never dreamed of.<sup>5</sup>

Instead, McDaniel found in her experiences the basis for self-expression and art. Although she began writing poetry as a young child, it was not till 1973, when she was in her mid-fifties, that she published her first book of poetry. She earned the title "The Okie Poet" throughout the Central Valley and was named Poet Laureate of Tulare in the 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Outside of California's Central Valley, however, her work remains largely unrecognized.

Part Cherokee, a convert to strict Catholicism, an adoring fan of hardscrabble country music star Merle Haggard and pulp-fiction writer Charles Bukowski, and a close friend of radical historian and revolutionary feminist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, McDaniel defies orthodox categories and labels in both her work and her personal identity. As literary scholar Janet Zandy observes, "She is not a darling of the Left nor a labor organizer; she is not sanctioned as a suitable subject for graduate students; she is part of no literary establishment;

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<sup>4</sup> McDaniel quoted in Smith, "The Almost-Interview of Wilma E. McDaniel."

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> "Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel," The Poetry Foundation, accessed May 10, 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/wilma-elizabeth-mcdaniel>.

she definitely is not postmodern chic.”<sup>7</sup> Unlike Lillie Dunn and Sanora Babb, McDaniel was not affiliated with political or labor movements. She claimed neither socialism nor communism as a political home, held neither picket signs, nor marched in any strikes. Yet her work expresses political sentiments similar to Dunn’s and Babb’s: a working-class feminism that understands gender and class as mutually constitutive.

Careful not to turn McDaniel into a “red-dirt exotic,” Zandy understands her as a “worker writer,” one of those born into the working class who are conscious of class relations and maintain allegiance to the communities from which they come. While worker writers often express an organic love of learning, they are not intellectuals in the conventional sense.<sup>8</sup> Zandy reads McDaniel’s poetry as an example of radical humanism, an ethos that resists “the theft of working-class epistemology and culture by consumerism,” demands recognition of the diversity within the working class, and bridges orality and textuality, or the centering of storytelling. McDaniel’s radicalism thus lies in her refusal to dismiss the everyday experiences of poor, working people as valid and necessary subjects.<sup>9</sup> Hers is a quiet, yet no less sharp nor insistent, radicalism. In a 2002 correspondence with Zandy, McDaniel explained:

You are absolutely correct that I am not recognizably political in the way the academy would like me to be...I am, perhaps even doggedly, holding to the sure hard and sustaining vision which has brought me this far, a quiet justice is no less a justice.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Janet Zandy, *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 77, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>10</sup> McDaniel quoted in Zandy, *Hands*, 83.

While Zandy recognizes the working-class ethos and radicalism of McDaniel's writing, she devotes little attention to McDaniel's critique of dominant gender constructs and insistence on centering working women's experiences.<sup>11</sup>

This chapter expands on Zandy's reading of McDaniel as a worker writer and radical humanist, emphasizing that central to McDaniel's understanding of class and radical humanism is a feminist consciousness that emphasizes interracial commonality, centers women's experiences, and challenges dominant gender constructs. In this proposal, I am less concerned with McDaniel's personal identification as a radical, leftist, or feminist; instead, I read her work as a *practice* of radicalism, leftism, and feminism. While McDaniel never used words like radical or feminist to describe herself, she did understand her work as a form of witness. When asked by Zandy in 1993 what witnessing meant to her, she replied: "It means a great deal to me. I hear the word from earliest memory, Bible accounts of witnessing 'even to the shedding of blood.' Haven't poor working women always done a lot of that?"<sup>12</sup> For McDaniel, witnessing meant speaking back to power and demanding recognition of poor working women's experiences. This is central to McDaniel's poetry.

Her insistence on centering working women began with her use of poetry as an avenue for recognition of the self. In "Naming a Poet" McDaniel recalls the schoolteacher who encouraged her to write:

Some relatives  
not close enough by love  
to really matter

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<sup>11</sup> For work that examines the gender politics of McDaniel's poetry, see Jasmine Armstrong, "The Iconostasis of Okie Social Memory: Smashing the Screen of Constructed Identities" (unpublished paper, The University of California Merced, 2013), 28-31.

<sup>12</sup> McDaniel quoted in Zandy, *Hands*, 79.

would command  
 the awkward girl with eyes  
 that didn't match

pick up your bare feet  
 don't drag them across the splintered floor

pick up your floursack dress  
 and hang it on a rusty nail  
 until a woman called from

outside the broken window  
 pick up your name  
 and write<sup>13</sup>

Before picking up her name, McDaniel picks up her bare feet, an attempt, perhaps, to avoid the splinters of her life—the sharp points of pain which often found their way into her writing. Likewise, she picks up her flour-sack dress, garb of the working poor. It is only after claiming these pieces of her life—both pain and poverty—that she is then able to pick up her name. It is not by disregarding or overcoming her circumstances that McDaniel discovers herself, but by embracing life and using it as the basis for her art.

In picking up her own name, McDaniel also recognized her connection to a racially diverse community of women. In her short prose piece “Pit Stop,” she remembers the pain she felt at seeing a prison bus full of women inmates, many of whom were women of color:

It grieved me sorely: those women getting off are on their way to prison, the new one in Chowchilla. They wear handcuffs and legchains. I see a thin black woman, now a Latin woman, then a chubby Anglo-type woman with red hair. I hate to stare as they hobble along to the back door of the restaurant. Someone is waiting for their guards. Just then, the redhead begins to sing in a weak sweet voice, This is My Story, This is My Song, Praising My Savior All the Day Long. Somehow, this is too much for me. I go in the restaurant, order

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<sup>13</sup> Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, *Sister Vayda's Song* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1982), 42.

hot tea, take a table in the far corner of the place. I drink tea and don't look up from my cup until I have to ask for more hot water.<sup>14</sup>

Belying popular and academic stereotypes of ethnocentric Okies, McDaniel displaces whiteness as the dominant organizing category and centers the experiences of marginalized and forgotten women. Likewise, she laments the constant expansion of California's prison population and draws attention to the particular way it affects poor women. For McDaniel, the struggles of poor white women and poor women of color are deeply connected, as the prison industrial complex impacts all of their lives. The women in McDaniel's prose, however, refuse to let state and police power in-prison their spirits: in an act of defiance and protest against a system which seeks to erase their identity, the redhead sings hymns, demanding that she and the women with whom she stands be seen as children of God.

For McDaniel, then, poetry was not only a means of memory-making and story-telling, but also a radical tool she used to explore communities that transcend race. In a 1996 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, when asked about Okies' animosity toward Mexican immigrants in California, she responded with a poem: "They forgot so easily, / the same road led / everyone to this place."<sup>15</sup>

In addition to emphasizing commonalities among racially diverse women, McDaniel's poetry depicts women who occupy a multitude of complex and shifting identities. Perhaps most significantly, it portrays women both outside of and in relation to their roles as mothers, suggesting that motherhood is indeed a part of women's experience but not *the* defining feature of their identities. In this sense, McDaniel's discourse on

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<sup>14</sup> Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, *The Last Dust Storm* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>15</sup> McDaniel quoted in Peter H. King, "On California," *Los Angeles Times*, August 11, 1996, 1, A17.

motherhood is more nuanced than Lillie Dunn's or Sanora Babb's. McDaniel herself never married nor had children. In her writing, mothers are absent just as often as they are present. Instead, working women are her constant theme. Again and again, her poems circle back to the working woman: "Indeed, doesn't it always end with working women?" she asks in an essay on her work.<sup>16</sup>

By writing about women both within and outside their roles as mothers, McDaniel challenges discourses that define women by their maternal role. In her poem "Subject Matter" she reminds the reader of the subjects to which she is most drawn:

The critic asked, what are  
 the subjects  
 that interest you most in  
 writing  
 That is easy, I tell her  
 Women  
 men  
 and children  
 tables  
 benches or broken chairs  
 biscuits—cow butter  
 fried eggs—soft  
 strong coffee  
 cream  
 plum jelly—apricot jam  
 The Sierra Nevada, awake or  
 in polluted dreams  
 knee-high poppies in the far-off  
 pure hard  
 days of 1936-37-38-40<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> McDaniel, "The Poetry Which My Life Has Required Me to Write," in *Liberating Memory*, 209-210.

<sup>17</sup> McDaniel, *The Last Dust Storm*, 35.



For McDaniel, it is women, not mothers, who top the list. Furthermore, it is the physical place and material reality of women's day-to-day domestic experience—the Sierra Nevada, Depression years, broken chairs, biscuits, apricot jam—that capture her attention.

By allowing women to stand outside motherhood, McDaniel reworks the Dust Bowl narrative that so often depicts Okie women as fearless mothers surrounded by large families. (See Figure 3). In “Last Dust Storm Before Leaving Oklahoma, 1934” she imagines an Okie woman making the trek to California by herself:

The wind blew Zilpha  
over twice, before she learned  
to brace herself and take it  
by both horns, eye-to-eye

The third time, when it blew  
at her with a mouthful  
of red angry dust  
she met it on her own terms  
wrestled it down  
and rode away triumphant  
in a wired-together truck  
toward California<sup>18</sup>

A single women wrestling down a dust storm and then taking off for California by herself is a strikingly unfamiliar image within stereotypical depictions of Okies during the 1930s. James Gregory argues that, unlike previous migrations of southwesterners to California, the Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s involved “*families* on the move.”<sup>19</sup> McDaniel presents the reader with a new image in which women stand on their own terms, “eye-to-eye” with hardships often seen as men's to bear.

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<sup>18</sup> McDaniel, *The Last Dust Storm*, 106.

<sup>19</sup> James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 19, emphasis added.

When McDaniel does write about motherhood, she reminds the reader that, for poor and working-class women of the Depression-era, it had little to do with the romantic images of mothers in FSA photography and the writings of John Steinbeck. In “Remembering Farm Women” she asks, “Why did rough farmers / dream of girls / from the Ziegfeld Follies / when wives were vomiting / with another pregnancy.”<sup>20</sup> And, remembering her own mother in a 1999 interview with Joan Jobe Smith, McDaniel recalled that mothering often meant great pain and demanding physical labor:

I close my eyes and see her with head tied up in a baby diaper taking down frozen laundry from the clothesline. This sometimes had to be accomplished by hauling water two miles from a neighbor’s well. The smell of lye soap assails my nostrils in memory. I see Mama’s hands so reddened and raw from the homemade soap. I learned firsthand how caustic it was, I took my turn at the washboard early.<sup>21</sup>

Like the women in Babb’s *Whose Names are Unknown*, McDaniel recalls a community of women who must learn to help each other early on and for whom motherhood held little of the romantic images so prevalent in dominant discourses of the day.

Highlighting the arduous and often neglected work of mothering, McDaniel offers a counternarrative to popular discourses of American motherhood, one that transgresses normative constructs of gender and the nuclear family. In “A Born Feminist,” a short fictional piece, McDaniel tells the story of widowed mother Tia Lola Montez who lives with her two unwed daughters, Aurora and Connie. To the daughters, heterosexual marriage leaves much to be desired. Explaining why they are not yet married, they joke, “There’s plenty of time left

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<sup>20</sup> Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, *Borrowed Coats* (New York: Hanging Loose Press, 2001), 101.

<sup>21</sup> McDaniel quoted in Smith, “The Almost-Interview of Wilma E. McDaniel.”

to be unhappy.” Like her daughters, the independent and free-spirited Tia lives her life with little regard for confining gender norms. As Connie explains:

Mama was forty years ahead of the women’s movement. She was doing radical things as far back as 1938. Our Uncle Henry said she picked more peaches and apricots than he did. It was hard dirty work. Most people would eat their lunch, and just collapse at noon to regain strength from the afternoon work. Mama had her own trick for refreshing herself. She would eat lunch sitting under a tree with her back braced against the trunk. She always wore a pair of Uncle Henry’s old khaki pants and baggy shirt. When her food was settled, she would light up a cigar and smoke for ten or fifteen minutes...She prays the Rosary out there. When the praying stops, the cigar aroma will drift towards the house.<sup>22</sup>

Here, McDaniel offers what we might understand as a queer image of motherhood. In her introduction to *Queer Theory*, Annamarie Jagose describes queer as “...those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.”<sup>23</sup> Tia’s life as an “unusual” woman,<sup>24</sup> exposes many of the “incoherencies” that Jagose describes: she lives independent of a man; dresses in men’s clothes; engages in “hard dirty work,” outperforming the men with whom she works; and openly enjoys cigars—phallic markers of male power and identity. Tia blurs the boundaries between the feminine and masculine, the profane and reverent. Her cigar smoke is not separate from, but, in fact, intertwined with the Rosary.

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<sup>22</sup> Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, “A Born Feminist.” Box 13, Folder 1. The Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Papers, MSS 001, Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Merced Library, 5200 North Lake Road, Merced, CA 95343.

<sup>23</sup> Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 3. Queer Theory encompasses a broad range of scholars and activists. As such, it is by no means a unified or bounded theory. Other scholars often associated with queer theory include Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Teresa de Lauretis, José Esteban Muñoz, Judith Butler, David Halperin, and Jack Halberstam.

<sup>24</sup> McDaniel, “A Born Feminist.”

Challenging popular visions of mothers, McDaniel also suggests that womanhood is, in fact, something that one does or achieves—a performance that is always in flux. If, as queer theorist Judith Butler proposes, “all gendering is a kind of impersonation and approximation,”<sup>25</sup> one might understand McDaniel’s work as gesturing towards the inevitable impossibility or failure of all gender constructs. In “Mrs Percival’s Toilet Water” she acknowledges that there are, in fact, many ways to *do* gender. “Women” she says “are as different / as the scents they choose / to wear / or in some cases / not wear.”<sup>26</sup> Yet McDaniel acknowledges that such choices, are always mediated by power structures. In “K-Mart Sage” she draws attention to the *work* women must do to achieve a visibly acceptable womanhood:

.....  
 you know  
 us men don’t have to  
 look no certain way  
  
 like a woman does  
 or men expect her to look  
  
 you take Buck Owens  
 why he looks just right  
  
 if you put that face on  
 a woman  
 they’d run her out of town<sup>27</sup>

For McDaniel, womanhood is not simply a matter of identity, behavior, and preferences, but also an aesthetic category often imposed upon women.

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<sup>25</sup> Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 313.

<sup>26</sup> McDaniel, *Borrowed Coats*, 102.

<sup>27</sup> McDaniel, *A Primer for Buford*, 106.

In addition, she presents the dominant discourse about womanhood and motherhood as something she neither accomplishes nor with which she identifies. “Could I Stop There” playfully imagines what it might be like to conform to more normative understandings of femininity and womanhood:

Today I changed from  
plain graham crackers  
to the new chocolate flavor

It made all the difference  
and started me wondering if  
I could wear eye shadow

Would it be like a blast  
of chocolate  
And could I stop there

Would I be a fool  
with black smudges  
under my astigmatic eyes

even go further astray  
sampling Tahiti-red lipstick  
at the cosmetic counter

and longing for  
all the colors of Gauguin<sup>28</sup>

To make up her face with heavy eye shadow and dark lipstick would be foolish, a sign she has gone astray. This is not disappointing, however; instead, in “Agreement” she presents her own non-normative womanhood as entirely valid and beautiful:

I look in my full-length mirror  
from Ace Hardware—(six ninety-five/once in a lifetime price)  
and agree with the mirror  
that I am a beautiful woman/for the type I am

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<sup>28</sup> McDaniel, *Borrowed Coats*, 13.

My hair is a haystack  
 my head classic pumpkin  
 smooth in the jaws  
 Halloween I don't fake—  
 these are my teeth

So many prizes go out  
 to cookie-cutter beauties  
 parading through life  
 what does that matter to me

I look in the mirror  
 thump on my head  
 agree again with the mirror  
 I am the best of my kind<sup>29</sup>

Rejecting middle-class standards that define “cookie-cutter beauties,” McDaniel offers an alternate or transgressive image of womanhood grounded in a working-class aesthetic. The mirror that reflects her haystack hair and pumpkin face is not in a department store dressing room but in Ace Hardware.

McDaniel’s playful, yet astute, dismantling of gender norms is evident not only in her prolific poetry, but also in a collection of hand-made paper dolls that she included in her archive.<sup>30</sup> McDaniel made her paper dolls from cut-out images of magazine models. Almost all of the dolls she made are women.<sup>31</sup> Brightly colored and unaligned to traditional rules of perspective and proportionality, they resemble contemporary folk art.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>30</sup> University of California Merced holds a large collection of McDaniel’s work. The Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Papers, MSS 001, Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Merced Library, 5200 North Lake Road, Merced, CA 95343.

<sup>31</sup> In McDaniel’s archive at UC Merced, I found only one paper doll that appeared to be male. The Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Papers, MSS 001, Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Merced Library, 5200 North Lake Road, Merced, CA 95343.

<sup>32</sup> McDaniel’s cousin was, in fact, the folk artist Reverend Howard Finster. She displayed on her mantle a copy of the Talking Heads’ 1985 album cover, *Little Creatures*, for which Finster did the art.



Figure 4. Box 19, Folder 2. The Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel Papers, MSS 001, Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Merced Library, 5200 North Lake Road, Merced, CA 95343.

Likewise, in almost all of her paper dolls McDaniel left the body the same, yet cut out the face of the model and drew in her own creation. The faces express an exaggerated femininity; bright pink circles stand in for cheeks while long black, spiderleg-like eyelashes crawl across the women's eyelids. The significance of McDaniel's drawing in the faces is twofold: by cutting out the model's face, she rejects middle-class and capitalist notions of female beauty. Instead of letting the model in the clothing magazine define acceptable womanhood and desire, McDaniel centers herself as an active creator of culture and identity. Second, by exaggerating femininity, she exposes gender as performative. McDaniel's paper dolls—themselves literal *constructions* of glue, paper, crayons, and magazine clippings—remind the viewer that gender is, indeed, socially constructed, and as Judith Butler adds “*a kind of*

*imitation for which there is no original.*”<sup>33</sup> By cutting out the woman’s faces—representations of middle class standards of white womanhood and beauty—and drawing in her own faces, McDaniel *reconstructs* new and alternative forms of womanhood. In doing so, she suggests that creative expression, in its many forms, offers possibilities for transgression and liberation.

In a 2009 oral history interview with a librarian from Oklahoma State University, McDaniel’s close friend and fellow writer, Trudy Wischemann, remembered her as “absolutely diligent, adamant, forceful about being her own self.” This, Wischemann believed, was “her main project.”<sup>34</sup> An unapologetic and fierce commitment to embracing herself did indeed lie at the heart of McDaniel’s radicalism. Coupled with her love of self, McDaniel’s recognition of interracial commonality, her insistence on centering working-class women’s experiences and her rejection of gender norms underlie her poetic vision and artistic legacy. Expanding the canon of Okie literature, McDaniel counters a popular opinion and academic historiography that understand Okie culture as conservative, xenophobic, and male dominated.

On April 13, 2007 McDaniel passed away. In her oral history, Wischemann recalls that a group of friends had taped a collection of McDaniel’s poems above the bed in her hospital room. At the time of her death she was not alone. The nurses’ aides gathered around her bed and read the poems out loud. Just as they finished reading the last one, McDaniel closed her eyes and passed on to another place.<sup>35</sup> That McDaniel left this world surrounded

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<sup>33</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 313, emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> Trudy Wischemann, interview by Karen Neurohr, June 12, 2009, Tulare, CA, Remembering Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel: Poet and Oklahoma Dust Bowl Emigrant Oral History Project, Oklahoma State University, 29.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.



by young, working-class women reading her poetry is an apt testament to a woman who refused to put down her name and remain silent.

## CONCLUSION

In his introduction to *Factories in The Fields*, Carey McWilliams lamented that the rich agricultural valleys of California “withhold many secrets from a casual inspection.”<sup>1</sup> In this thesis, I have made an attempt to uncover some of those secrets, suggesting that there is much to learn by coming to terms with exceptions or uncommon stories in the historical memory. The limitation of much of the historiography on the Okie experience is that it leaves little space for competing voices. Instead, it too often falls prey to the grand American narrative of exodus, trial, and redemption.

Moreover, in its celebration of Okies’ hard work and determination to make it out of the fields and into the middle class, it often invites us to overlook or flatten the histories of other ethnic groups who have labored and continue to labor in California’s fields.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, the Okie story is largely about constructing whiteness and mythologizing American progress and westward expansion. As Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz puts it,

Okies are thus the latter-day carriers of America’s national origin myth, a matrix of stories that attempts to justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white frontier settlers into an “indigenous people,” the true natives of the continent.<sup>3</sup>

The lives of Lillie Dunn, Sanora Babb, and Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel belie such simple, linear stories about white progress. Instead they chart a tradition of radicalism and interracial solidarity. While their stories do not provide finite or all-encompassing accounts of

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<sup>1</sup> Carey McWilliams, *Factories in the Field: The Story of Migratory Farm Labor in California* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1939), 5.

<sup>2</sup> For more about present day migrant farm labor in California see: Seth M. Holmes, *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in The United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), passim.

<sup>3</sup> Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Different Types of Hunger: Finding My Way Through Generations of Okie Migration,” in *Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity*, ed. Matt Bernstein Sycamore, (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006), 98.

the Okie experience in California, they do make visible those things which have generally been ignored or marginalized. In doing so, they contribute new and complicated images to the Okie story.

Moreover, their histories suggest alternate ways of thinking about mothers and motherhood. While constructions of motherhood have long been co-opted in support of conservative understandings of nation, family, and womanhood, as Dunn, Babb, and McDaniel suggest, motherhood can also function as a site of potential resistance. Etched into the gravestone of Florence Thompson, the woman in Dorothea Lange's iconic "Migrant Mother" photograph, are the words: "FLORENCE LEONA THOMPSON Migrant Mother— A Legend of the Strength of American Motherhood." What is meant by "American Motherhood" has long been contested, however. Dunn, Babb, and McDaniel's avowal *and* contestation of maternalism suggest that motherhood can be fraught with contradiction as well as deep significance.

The stories in this thesis open up more questions than they answer. By grappling with the contradictions and complexity of these subjects' lives, however, historians can discover with new ways of approaching Okie history. Instead of looking for all-encompassing narratives and unidimensional subjects, I suggest we make room for complexity, contradiction, and nuance.

## FIGURES



Figure 1: “Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California.” March 1936. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34- 009058-C [P&P] (LC-USF346-009058-C).



Figure 2: "Once a Missouri farmer, now a migratory farm laborer on the Pacific Coast. California." February 1936. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF347- 002470-E (LC-USF347-002470-E).



Figure 3: “Along the highway near Bakersfield, California. Dust bowl refugees.” November 1935. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection, LC-USF34- 000963-E (LC-USF34-000963-E).

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