

Emily Byrne  
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Redefining the West: The Films, Music, Photography and  
Literature of 1939

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The 1939 Academy Awards included a succession of films focusing on American history and politics. These included *Gone with the Wind*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, and *Stagecoach*. Although *Gone with the Wind* would garner most of the attention and awards, the presence of John Ford's *Stagecoach* amongst the previously mentioned films and other candidates like the *Wizard of Oz* and *Dark Victory* is notable. In the decade before 1939, few westerns of substantial content were produced. Most were short B-movies to keep audiences entertained during double features by including slapstick comedians and singing cowboys. Not until 1939 did the concept of the West as a serious and important place return to the minds of Americans. Along with *Stagecoach*, theatergoers saw a variety of westerns produced that year. Some were patriotic statements of "American exceptionalism" and others questioned the myth that American had tamed the frontier. This conflict between American success and failure appears in the film, literature, music, and photography of the time. Through this conflict, the West became a symbol of democratic American identity while simultaneously being a symbol of loss and despair.

Traditionally the myth of the West pertained to the belief in the unique capabilities of Americans to dominate the forces of nature and create bounty from barren land. This suggested that by moving out to the frontier, where one would encounter challenges, individuals would rise to the occasion and develop a civilization that was detached from the institutions of the East that were modeled after European absolutism and material excess. In Robert Athearn's study *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America*, he describes this desire to carve out a new American identity and culture. He suggests that

deeply embedded in the conscience of Americans was the notion not only that their nation was the land of the free and the home of the brave but also that in the West, at least in an economic sense, lay the very heart of this implied promise.<sup>1</sup>

The settlers of this mythic West would be democratic missionaries sent out to spread the successes of American civilization into the most isolated territories. These values and priorities of these heroic American settlers characterize the Westerner. Henry Nash Smith explains this prototype as, “the representation of a benevolent hunter without a fixed place of abode, advanced in age, celibate, and of unequalled prowess in trailing, marksmanship, and Indian fighting.”<sup>2</sup> Patricia Limerick expands on this definition of the typical Westerner by arguing that their monogamous relationships or asexuality stood as a differentiation from the “uncivilized” marital behavior of Mormons and Native Americans.<sup>3</sup> The West, for authors Athearn and Limerick, is not just a geographic concept, but also a symbol for possibilities of progress, opportunity, and individual success beyond the limitations of reality.

Two major events can account for these opposing perceptions in American life in 1939. First, the decade-long struggle of the Dust Bowl was reaching an end. This environmental and social disaster led to homelessness, refugee migration, abject poverty, starvation, and death. The devastation of this event was in the minds of many Americans like John Steinbeck and the photographers of the Farm Security Administration. Secondly, the emergence of the Second World War only two decades after the conclusion of the traumatic First World War, terrified Americans who wanted to avoid conflict but struggled to sit by and watch the destruction of their European neighbors by the forces of totalitarianism. The images of the West after the Dust Bowl

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<sup>1</sup> Athearn, Robert G. *The Mythic West in Twentieth Century America*. University Press of Kansas, 1986. pp. 90.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Henry Nash. *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978. pp. 92

<sup>3</sup> Limerick, Patricia Nelson. *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1987. pp. 283-87.

reveal anxieties, suspicion, and disappointment that could only be inspired by the despair of the Dust Bowl. On the opposite side, the emergence of totalitarianism and the threat of war inspired a resurgence of American pride in the success of American individualism and democracy.

In the beginning months of 1939, films, photography, and literature laid bear some of the anxieties and traumas of the Dust Bowl. Although the plots and messages differ in each one, they all begin with the uprooting and displacement of people by the greedy or powerful members of society. Whether it is a man from the railroad pushing pioneers off the land, or a group of elitist women hypocritically pushing unsavory people out of their town, the trauma of forced removal from one's place is evident. The release of John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath, in the spring of 1939, revealed to the entire world the consequences of the Dust Bowl. The novel focuses on the injustices, hardships, and desperation of migrants who long for the myth of the West. This myth is heavily dependent on Smith's suggestion that the West was the "garden of the world," that had been promised to homesteaders for their voluntary exile into one of the most isolated and unforgiving regions in the country<sup>4</sup>. While Steinbeck focuses on the migrants of the Dust Bowl, the Farm Securities Administration was busy documenting the lives of those who had stayed or attempted to migrate.

The filmmaker, artist, or author's proximity to the region or lifestyle explains the differences in the views of the West. For instance, many of the filmmakers, artists, and musicians who created images of the West were outsiders, living on the East Coast or in Europe, saw the region as opportunity, and mistook the poverty and isolation for simplicity and independence. However, for those artists who created their works from within the borders of the West, the poverty and isolation missed by outsiders was impossible to ignore. For the writers, filmmakers,

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<sup>4</sup> Smith, Virgin Land. pp. 123.

photographers and musicians who contributed to this myth in 1939, their perceptions of the West are often determined by whether they are outsiders or insiders.

Released in January of 1939, *Jesse James*<sup>5</sup> starred Tyrone Power and Henry Fonda as the James brothers who seek to destroy the greed and injustice of railroad capitalists. The director of the film was Henry King, a native of Virginia, with a screenplay written by Nunnally Johnson of Georgia. The importance of these two men being from the South is to acknowledge that the South and North would have had different understandings of what the West meant since the early nineteenth century. Although it had been less than a century after the Civil War, the North and South were still clashing over various issues. Even though these issues are not obvious in the film, this western, and the westerns of John Ford, born in Maine, possess different qualities. It is difficult to tell how individual or regional differences influence these works, but it is possible to examine the portrayal of heroes, villains, and landscape and consider the artist's personal perspective.<sup>6</sup>

*Jesse James* begins with the eviction of homesteaders from their land by slick eastern men who use sneaky and violent means to remove settlers. This contrast between the good old frontier folk and the greedy railroad man is evident in that the victims, usually women, children or older men, are threatened or assaulted until they voluntarily give up their land. It is hard not to notice the similarities between this experience and that of the settlers in The Grapes of Wrath, who have their land taken by distant eastern banking and landholding institutions. This violence and injustice lead the James brothers into crime, however, the community and audience see it as a justified crime and they become heroes of the West. The logic is that they are protecting

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<sup>5</sup> *Jesse James*, directed by Henry King, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1939.

<sup>6</sup> *Internet Movie Database, Online*, "King, Henry," "Ford, John."

communities, women, children, and the simple homesteader from the greed and exploitation of capitalists from the East. Before they become criminals, Tyrone Power as Jesse James says to a gathering of the community, “We bought our land, built our homes and raised our crops. If we have to give ‘em up we got a right to a fair price.” These injustices turn a “civilized” town that relies on attorneys, judges, and free press into a town hamstrung by corporate greed and the corruption of eastern legal institutions. In fact, while Jesse James and his gang rob one of the railroads that destroyed their community, they politely take the money and tell their victims to “make sure you sue the railroad ‘cause it’s their fault.” So while these men fly in the face of law and order, they are simultaneously advocating the proper use of the justice system. A common aspect of the myth of the West is the power of women, children or eastern institutions to reform the “barbaric” West. However, in the case of this film these powers do not civilize, but instead stand on the periphery and observe, or in the case of eastern institutions, contribute to the downfall of the community.

As in many westerns, the federal government plays an important role in the small western community. This film suggests that the federal government can sometimes be helpful, especially when it understands the unique situations of the West. This understanding is revealed in the scene of the two judges who preside over a case against Jesse James. The flexible, uncorrupted and understanding Federal Peace Marshal brings in the first judge, who shows more leniency to James. The first judge’s western background gives him a less rigid interpretation of the law in the face of unique situations presented by the West. However, the railroad manager removes the first judge and chooses a judge from the East, whose form of justice is malleable when met with the persuasive powers of the railroad’s money, and he sentences James harshly by handing down a death sentence.

Although Jesse James temporarily escapes this fate, he follows what Limerick and Smith outlined as the archetypal monogamous and asexual western figure, by marrying his sweetheart and starting a family, even though his life is constantly in danger. The frontier in this film does not seem to be a place of opportunity, but a place where opportunity, land, and life are unfairly taken away. Unable to see his son and be with his loving family, James decides to move to California and start over. This plan fails when two former friends who were tempted to kill James for the reward money from the railroad shoot him in the back. His murder occurs as he takes down his wife's "God Bless this Home" embroidery sampler while his son plays outside and his wife packs. The murder of this seemingly domestic figure contributes to the final message of the movie that is best summarized by a relative at his funeral, "He wasn't all to blame!"

Aside from the plot, the structure and casting of the film are also vital in understanding its message and popularity. In casting Tyrone Power as the lead, the filmmakers were interested in portraying Jesse James as a heartthrob, because song lyrics and a booming fan base had long mythologized Tyrone Power's looks. In the same year, the *Motion Picture Herald* awarded him the title as "number one man on the screen," proving that he was one of the most popular actors of the time.<sup>7</sup> Playing his brother Frank James was Henry Fonda, who had not reached the level of fame that he would a few years later, but began to play characters that would define his presence on screen. A few months later, he played a young Abraham Lincoln and a revolutionary war-era frontiersman in *Drums Along the Mohawk*. In all three of these films, Fonda plays characters that defend helpless women, protect families, and strengthen the community through honor and justice. By casting two very likeable and heroic actors as the criminals, the film

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<sup>7</sup> Basinger, Jeanine. The Star Machine. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. pp. 155.

seems intent to focus on depicting homesteaders as victims of the powerful, and as sympathetic characters who are justified in doing what they need to do to protect themselves and their land. Shot in the new technology of vibrant color, the film's highly saturated colors create an idyllic landscape that takes away from the sadness of the movie that would have existed had it been in black and white.

Referred to by film historians as a "race-western,"<sup>8</sup> *Harlem Rides the Range*<sup>9</sup> was released in February to theaters catering to all-black audiences. The content of the film is not unique to the genre, nor is the cinematic quality very memorable. What is important is the purpose of the film's production. This film was one in a series of all-black westerns, normally following the same plot arc as other westerns, and rarely lasting over fifty minutes, since it was probably a filler film in between a double feature. Much like *Jesse James*, this movie begins with the threats of greedy prospectors attempting to remove a settler from his resourceful land. They use violence to intimidate the settler until the hero of the film, played by Herb Jeffries, saves the man's property and brings the antagonists to justice. The similarities in narrative, plot, and characters are almost identical to all-white westerns. Jeffries as the film's smooth crooning star, looks handsome on his white horse, and falls in love with a nice girl with whom he plans to settle down. In addition to the conventional western hero looks, Jeffries' character is monogamous and only shows romantic desires for a future wife. Jeffries even sings, "It's the Cowpokes Life for Me," a song that could have been sung by Gene Autrey or any other crooning cowboy. The obvious distinction between this film and other popular films of the day is race. Surprisingly, although this film was meant for entirely black audiences, racist stereotypes that

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<sup>8</sup> Miller, Cynthia J. Tradition, Parody, and Adaptation: Jed Buell's Unconventional West. *Hollywood's West*, ed. John E. O'Connor and Peter C. Rollins, 65-80, The University Press of Kentucky, 2009. pp. 76.

<sup>9</sup> *Harlem Rides the Range*, directed by Richard C. Kahn, Hollywood Pictures Corporation, 1939.



were common in mainstream white films are still present, including a sidekick who can only think about food, and an easily frightened dimwitted chef. The purpose of these characters in white westerns is usually as comedic relief and a reminder to the predominantly white audience that the racial superiority was part of the success of the racially homogenous white West. To occur in the film by black actors for a black audience suggests that these ideas of racial superiority in the development of society had much more subtle variants than just black and white. In fact, Herb Jeffries is very light skinned, and had to have his skin “darkened with makeup because he filmed “too white.””<sup>10</sup> By having a hero with lighter skin outsmart the other characters with darker skin who fit into racial stereotypes, the film created a new structure of on screen racial values that broke up identity into smaller categories as variations in skin color became more diverse in the film industry.

This film could suggest the idea of embracing the multiculturalism of the United States in the face of the ethnic rhetoric of European totalitarianism. The film seems to allow blacks to have a key role in the shaping of the West that most historical and fictional accounts of the West ignored. Both Athearn and Limerick acknowledge this exclusion of minorities from a place in the myth of the West, even though the racial and cultural diversity occurring in the West was unique. Limerick even suggest putting, “the diverse humanity of Western America into one picture and the “melting pot” of the eastern United States at the turn of the century begins to look more like a family reunion, a meeting of groups with an essential similarity.”<sup>11</sup> As the only characters are black characters, their experiences become their own myth of the West. By

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<sup>10</sup> Miller, Cynthia J. Tradition, Parody, and Adaptation: Jed Buell’s Unconventional West. Hollywood’s West. pp. 77.

<sup>11</sup> Limerick, The Legacy of Conquest. pp. 260.

including blacks in the crowning achievement of America, it is subtly allowing blacks the opportunity to define their identity with the greater identity of the country, and the West.

Published in April of 1939, John Steinbeck's scathing portrait of the injustices met by a family of Dust Bowl refugees encapsulates a popular sentiment that could not have been expressed in mainstream Hollywood films. Although not typically categorized as a western and with distinct and dramatic delineations from the genre, Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath includes many of the common tropes found in western narratives. For instance, homesteader displacement, a great migration to a land of opportunity, a moral hero, and continuous examples of the power of community occur throughout the epic novel.

The main issues of the novel revolve around the destruction of the environment, loss of opportunity, and the strength of community. The focus on the extreme hardships felt by migrants in California might lie in the author's background. John Steinbeck is the only individual amongst this study's various filmmakers and artists who was born and raised in the West, specifically California. The majority of filmmakers and artists were born in the urban and suburban areas of the East, some even as far away as Europe. Steinbeck's experience growing up in the Central Valley would have diminished the dramatic experiences of an outsider coming in to the extreme landscapes of the West. By seeing the West as a flawed and unjust region, Steinbeck's novel contributes a political and social pessimism cured by radicalism not found in most Westerns that eventually would be omitted from the 1940 film. His writings have a deeply personal relationship with nature, as do many of his characters, and the treatment and violation of the land is a prevalent grievance in his novel. Steinbeck's understanding of the West on a personal level allows him to see the reality of the West, not a fantasyland of heroics, but a land of fragility and struggles.

The novel follows the Joad family as they abandon their home in Oklahoma to journey to the West in search of jobs. Much like Athearn and Limerick's belief that the possibilities and opportunities of the West lie beyond geographical borders, Steinbeck's characters move beyond the traditional concept of the West as the region between the Rocky Mountains and the Missouri River. Their movement towards California becomes an updated narrative of the myth that expands the geographical definition of the West. During their migration West the family encounters death, sickness, and physical setbacks. These struggles are lessened by the relationships they form with other migrants on their journey, and the sense of community that is built amongst those whose sole possessions are strapped to their truck. The major motivation behind their movement is the hope of employment and a simple domestic life. During the journey and their experiences in California, this dream of future opportunities found in the bounty of California is chipped away by their continuous exposure to injustice, discrimination, abuse, and poverty.

The story begins with descriptions of the Dust Bowl and the failures of the homesteaders. Steinbeck explains the dust blowing the crops away, creating a dust fog, and being an unstoppable force. Once a dust storm has finished Steinbeck writes

The men were silent and they did not move often. And the women came out of the houses to stand beside their men- to feel whether this time the men would break...and the children sent exploring senses out to see whether the men and women would break.<sup>12</sup>

The weakening of men and the subsequent weakening of the family makes the experience of the dust storms an emotionally destructive force. After years of continuous struggle to grow crops,

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<sup>12</sup> Steinbeck, John. The Grapes of Wrath. New York: Penguin Books, 1992. pp. 6.

live in the frontier, supply food for the world, and maintain some self-sufficiency, the final blow of these dust storms makes this already difficult life impossible.

The close relationship that the small-scale farmer has to his land is mentioned often in the novel. This is especially the case when tractors are destroying everything in sight to remove any evidence of human settlement. These tractor drivers

could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth...He did not know or own or trust or beseech the land...He loved the land no more than the bank loved the land.<sup>13</sup>

No longer the “garden of the world” that Smith suggested, the West becomes a wasteland that has been ruined and mistreated. Although the tractor driver is not solely to blame in the mistreatment of the land, the farmers who overworked the soil at least had a personal and historical connection to the land. This explains why the majority of residents in the areas affected by the Dust Bowl remained on their land- it was home.<sup>14</sup> The misuse of the land is understood by some homesteaders, even one of the men from Tom Joad’s past that has been living in the wilderness like a wild animal; “Well you know I ain’t a fool. I know this land ain’t much good. Never was much good ‘cept for grazin’. Never should a broke her up.”<sup>15</sup> The importance of the West for those who stayed, or did not feel bitterness towards the land, is not about fertile ground and opportunity, but overcoming hardship and building upon the legacy of

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<sup>13</sup> Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*. pp. 49.

<sup>14</sup> Worster, Donald. *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*. Oxford University Press, 2004. pp. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*. pp. 64.

ancestors. This connection to the land is direct, as one settler says, “This land, this red land, is us; and the flood years and the dust years and the drought years are us.”<sup>16</sup>

This sentiment is an element of traditional westerns; however heroic this might seem, it is important to remember that the only choice is poverty at home or poverty abroad, not about furthering civilization or moving towards an optimistic future. The Farm Security Administration photographs of those who stayed suggest that the living conditions are rarely different from those who migrated. In both cases, poverty and sorrow are evident on every face, and the starving children have the same bloated bellies in Oklahoma as they do in California. For those who chose to migrate and leave everything behind, there was bitterness and heartbreak over the loss of their home and possessions. Steinbeck writes, “The men were ruthless because the past had been spoiled, but the women knew how the past would cry to them in the coming days.”<sup>17</sup>

With the possibilities of achieving the success immortalized in the myth of the West becoming more and more unlikely, the pain felt with the loss of land, loss of a sense of security, and a loss of self-sufficiency, became only more disappointing for those who gave up everything and migrated. For the Joad family, this realization of never-ending hardship culminates when they finally drive out of the Mojave Desert and come upon the “great valley” with vineyards, orchards, fruit trees, and greenery in grand abundance. However, with this vision of bounty comes huge loss, as they discover that Granma has died in the night, and Ma suffered through the loss on her own to ensure that the family made it into the state.<sup>18</sup> This is not the only sacrifice the family would make, and these tragic sacrifices always follow images of bounty and opportunity. For instance, the smells of vegetables and growth, and the “hot breath of the

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<sup>16</sup> Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath. pp. 119.

<sup>17</sup> Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath. pp. 117.

<sup>18</sup> Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath. pp. 309-311.

valley”<sup>19</sup> seem like paradise but contrary to this image is the destruction of crops for profit while starving migrants look on. Steinbeck bitterly writes,

The works of the roots of the vines, of the trees, must be destroyed to keep up the price, and this is the saddest, bitterest thing of all. Carloads of oranges dumped on the ground...And men with hoses squirt kerosene on the oranges...A million people hungry, needing the fruit- and kerosene sprayed over the golden mountains. And the smell of rot fills the country.<sup>20</sup>

These few pages reveal the true message of the novel. For Steinbeck is furious that the greatest assets of the legendary West, the agricultural bounty and the strong farm workers, are being wasted and destroyed. In the most revealing passage of his vitriolic message, he writes

There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize. There is a failure here that topples all our success. The fertile earth, the straight tree rows, the sturdy trunks and the ripe fruit. And children dying of pellagra must die because a profit cannot be taken from an orange. And coroners must fill in the certificates- died of malnutrition- because the food must rot, must be forced to rot.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout 1939, organizations created under President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal attempted to repair an America damaged by the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression. Amongst these groups was the Farm Securities Administration that consisted of photographers documenting the lives of the down and out. Some of these photographers included Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, and others, who would receive recognition for their honest work even after the 1930s. This enormous collection of photographs would offer some of the most profound

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<sup>19</sup> Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath. pp. 313.

<sup>20</sup> Steinbeck, The Grapes of Wrath. pp. 467-7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

images of the decade, some being the images that the population would consider as the essence of the Dust Bowl.

However iconic these images are, many historians seem to ignore the Dust Bowl. Limerick dedicates a few pages to the mention of environmental impacts of the Dust Bowl, while Smith, who suggests the possibilities dramatic economic, social, and environmental failure in the West of the nineteenth-century, completely ignores the event. Few historians and authors focus specifically on the Dust Bowl, and most document the diaspora of settlers instead of those who stayed. The exception to this is Athearn who focuses on the desperate poverty of the American West during the Dust Bowl and the need for federal aid. Westerns and historical studies of the West rarely mention the role of the federal government, most likely because suggesting the dependence on federal assistance, especially during the Dust Bowl and Great Depression, would contradict the myth of an entire region of American individualists detaching themselves from the federal institutions of the East. Athearn explains, "...to ask for aid was a further strain upon an ingrained tradition of seeking favor from no man, and when they put out their hands they did it with great reluctance, it was a confession of failure, both personally and by a system they believed in."<sup>22</sup> Regardless of the reluctance to accept federal aid, "by 1936 about two million American farmers...would be drawing public assistance."<sup>23</sup>

The most astonishing images are those of starving children and living conditions. Many of the subjects of Russell's photographs are the shacks lived in by families who were not part of the exodus of the Dust Bowl and who remained in Oklahoma. These photographs capture the desperation and poverty experienced by these individuals. One hut looks like a derelict shed

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<sup>22</sup> Athearn, *The Mythic West*, pp. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Athearn, *The Mythic West*, pp. 83.

with a combination of canvas and wood as the main parts of its construction.<sup>24</sup> Another image shows a kitchen inside one of these huts with a hole for a window covered by part of an iron fence. Paper covers the interior and a wooden coffee crate has replaced a missing part of wall.<sup>25</sup>

Lee sometimes includes notes explaining his photographs. He describes one scene as

A family of agricultural day laborers eating dinner after a morning spent in chopping cotton. Though the fare of these people consists of the inexpensive and heavy starches, it is usually well prepared. This tent in which eight people lived was clean and neat. Notice the freshly combed hair of the youngsters. Near Webbers Falls, Oklahoma.<sup>26</sup>

In a less optimistic photo, Lee photographs a

Daughter of agricultural day laborer looking out the unshuttered window of the desolate shack which was her home. She had never attended school. Her attitude was one of utter hopelessness; she was listless and completely untouched and uninterested in any living thing. Webbers Falls, Oklahoma.<sup>27</sup>

In another photograph of children, he captures a brother and sister sitting on a broken bed in front of slanting walls and a collapsing ceiling, he describes the inside of this shack as being “meager and broken and filthy.”<sup>28</sup>

Lee also photographs blacks living and struggling in Oklahoma, contradicting the myth that the West was entirely white. Athearn suggests that “the blacks have been more or less ignored, often not being numerous enough or noticeable enough event to attract prejudice,” it is

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<sup>24</sup> Russell Lee, “Shed of White Tenant Farmer...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. Appendix I.

<sup>25</sup> Russell Lee, “Kitchen of a Tenant Farmer...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. II.

<sup>26</sup> Russell Lee, “A Family of Agriculture Workers...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. III.

<sup>27</sup> Russell Lee, “Daughter of an Agricultural Worker...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. IV.

<sup>28</sup> Russell Lee, “Daughter and Son of Agricultural Day Laborers...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. V.



through these pictures that Lee rectifies this exclusion.<sup>29</sup> In one photograph, he captures a man repapering his ceiling and walls, because the house is in such poor condition that “it must be repapered after every rain.”<sup>30</sup> One of the most tragic pictures shows a small frail child whose stomach is bloated from starvation. This child stands in a diaper and stares at the camera, while the mother sits by with another baby in her arms vacantly looking away.<sup>31</sup> The frail woman and starving children who stare blankly at and away from the camera encapsulates the failure of the West and the victims of the myth.

While Russell Lee was photographing Oklahoma, Dorothea Lange was in California. Although not a native of California, Lange moved to the Bay Area in 1918<sup>32</sup> as a young adult and lived in the state for over a decade before the economic and agricultural collapse, making her and John Steinbeck the only two artists in this study who can be identified as “westerners.” Lange spent the majority of her time in the Central Valley photographing the living conditions of migrant workers. Some of her most interesting photos compare the conditions of private work camps and public camps established by the New Deal. In one photograph of a private auto camp she notes, “Toilet for ten cabins, men, women and children in auto camp for Arkansawyers, recent migrants to California. Rent for cabins ten dollars a month. Greenfield, Salinas Valley, California.”<sup>33</sup> The injustices of crowded, unsanitary and expensive facilities reveal the exploitation of migrant laborers desperation in finding shelter and stability. Another photograph shows an emergency camp put up by the FSA for migrant workers. It consists of rows of tents

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<sup>29</sup> Athearn, *The Mythic West*, pp. 243.

<sup>30</sup> Russell Lee, “Negro Day Laborer Repapering His House...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. VI.

<sup>31</sup> Russell Lee, “Wife of Agriculture Day Laborer...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. VII.

<sup>32</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, Online. “Lange, Dorothea.”

<sup>33</sup> Dorothea Lange, “Toilet for Ten Cabins...” 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. VIII.

with cars parked next to them in a desert.<sup>34</sup> Although this does not seem ideal, the conditions in an emergency camp seem more humane than the private camps. This might be some of Lange's bias, as a representative of the FSA; however, Steinbeck also applauded the exponentially better treatment in his novel. Much like Lee, sometimes Lange's descriptions are more impactful than the photo itself. In one she writes, "Farm Security Administration (FSA) migrant camp. Westley, California. This migrant mother lives in a contractor's camp because of contractor's control of jobs. She comes to the Farm Security Administration camp with sick baby and agricultural workers medical association card."<sup>35</sup> The federal government's effective and humane response to the struggles of these migrants is evident in the living conditions, with the inclusion of sanitation, space, reasonable shelter, and basic medical care. By not exploiting these migrants and taking advantage of their desperation, and instead treating them with respect, the federal government's role is one of honor and justice. In this instance, it is not the rogue cowboy who is the hero, but the federal government. Even with these bureaucratic heroics, this collection of stark black and white photos reveal the depravity of life as a migrant worker or day laborer in Oklahoma and California. It focuses on individuals who attempt to live a normal life and raise their children, but are forced to do so in abject poverty and squalor. These images, along with Steinbeck's novel, most likely resonated with audiences because they were so honest and in contrast to the idea that the West supplied unlimited success to those who worked hard and followed democratic ideals.

In 1938 American composer Aaron Copland wrote the music for a ballet about western legend Billy the Kid. By May of 1939 the ballet had premiered in New York City. The music

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<sup>34</sup> Dortha Lange, "Farm Security Administration (FSA) Migratory Labor Camp..." 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. IX.

<sup>35</sup> Dortha Lange, "Farm Security Administration (FSA) Migratory Camp..." 1939, FSA/OWI Collection, Library of Congress. App. X.

became so popular that Copland transformed it into a concert suite by the beginning of 1940. Although the ballet is important in its own cultural impact, the copious writings of Copland describing the ballet and the music are equally relevant and revealing. Much like the previous artists who have glorified the West, Copland was born and raised in New York, so his experience with the great myth of the West is from an outsider's perspective.

To write music for this "cowboy ballet" came as a challenge to Copland because, "having been born in Brooklyn...I was rather wary of tackling a cowboy subject."<sup>36</sup> He was given recordings of cowboy folk songs that he was not "particularly impressed with" because "neither the words nor the delivery are of much use to a purely orchestral ballet score."<sup>37</sup> This changes when Copland arrived in Paris to write the ballet, bringing the unappealing cowboy songs with him. He wonders, "Perhaps there is something different about a cowboy song in Paris."<sup>38</sup> By removing himself even farther from the West than he had already been as a New Yorker, he was able to conjure images through music that emulate sweeping and spacious territory.

After composing the ballet, Copland advocates for the creation of an American ballet that would succeed in being unique and revolutionary if it followed "such subject matter as *Billy the Kid*."<sup>39</sup> He began to fall in love with the country, even writing to Leonard Bernstein from New Mexico in October of 1939 claiming: "I'm being swallowed up by this great American continent. Don't forget me!"<sup>40</sup> In the final paragraph of his letter, that was probably intended to be printed on a record sleeve, he quotes Edwin Denby of Modern Music who claims that the ballet is

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<sup>36</sup> Aaron Copland, "About Billy the Kid," box/folder: 197/6, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>37</sup> Aaron Copland, "About Billy the Kid," box/folder: 197/6, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Aaron Copland, "Notes on a Cowboy Ballet," box/folder: 200/19, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

<sup>40</sup> Aaron Copland to Leonard Bernstein, postcard, October 15, 1939, Aaron Copland Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress.

“different from the nervous Franco-Russian style...our own ballet has an easier, simpler character, a kind of American straightforwardness that is thoroughly agreeable.”<sup>41</sup> Not only is the idea of a “cowboy ballet” revolutionary, but the creators of this art are turned into their own western heroes, developing art and culture with a rugged individuality. Based on the western mythology of Billy the Kid and created by outsiders who fell in love with the sounds and look of frontier life, the music became the quintessential music that provided a soundtrack to the myths of the American West. Copland was able to provide a soundtrack that matched the epic scale of the western myth.

In the same month as the vitriolic novel The Grapes of Wrath, Hungarian director Michael Curtiz released his film *Dodge City*<sup>42</sup>. *Dodge City* is the typical western that involves outsiders coming into a town without law, reforming it, falling in love, and making the Wild West domestic. The vibrantly colored film stars Errol Flynn who had played the noble and heroic characters of Robin Hood and Captain Blood a few years before, and Olivia De Havilland, who starred alongside Flynn in the same films as his moral and virtuous love interest. It is a film that applauds the democratic forces of free speech, free press, and the moral compass of frontier people looking to settle down and civilize the West. The film itself holds very few elements that contradict the traditional narrative of the West; the taglines of, “West of Dodge City There was No God!” and “It's Errol Flynn In His Greatest Role . . . A picture for every red-blooded son and daughter of the stars and stripes!”<sup>43</sup> are entirely indicative of the film’s message. William R. Handley, in his study *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*, posits that the importance of marriage between settlers, in this case Errol Flynn and Olivia De

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<sup>41</sup> Aaron Copland, “Notes on a Cowboy Ballet.”

<sup>42</sup> *Dodge City*, directed by Michael Curtiz, Warner Brothers Pictures, 1939.

<sup>43</sup> *Internet Movie Database*, Online, “Dodge City.”

Havilland, suggests that civilizing the West was not only about bringing democracy, but creating strong racially pure babies.<sup>44</sup> *Dodge City* ends with the two main characters realizing their love for each other, defeating the villain, getting married, and finishes with a pregnancy announcement. Handley suggests that this common thread amongst western literature, but can be applicable to film, is the idea that monogamy, good's triumph over evil, strengthens the individual and guarantees fecundity for white Americans.<sup>45</sup>

In November, John Ford released his third movie of the year, *Drums Along the Mohawk*<sup>46</sup>, a Revolutionary War-era film about heroic settlers protecting their land from Native and British invasion. Much like Jesse James, the vibrant Technicolor scenes of pastoral life prevent the lives of frontier people from seeming desperate and impossible. The film takes place in the rugged frontier of upstate New York. Although geographically considered "east" to most Americans since the early nineteenth century, the Mohawk River Valley in the Revolutionary-era would have been the frontier equivalent of Nebraska a century later. This is another example of the idea of the West applying to any situation regardless of geographic location. The period and subject is different from the other films or works mentioned, but it serves as an example of how the myths of frontier life contributed to the sense of a unique element of American identity. The film's November release is important in understanding the patriotic undertones of the film. A month before the release, Hitler had invaded Poland, and the Second World War had officially begun. Although the United States declared neutrality, the fear of fascism and the threat of the Nazi empire on Europe was a prevalent anxiety revealed in the newspapers and popular culture of the time. However, because the United States had declared neutrality, the Hollywood studio

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<sup>44</sup> Handley, William R. *Marriage, Violence, and the Nation in the American Literary West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. pp. 160-61.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> *Drums Along the Mohawk*, directed by John Ford, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation, 1939.

system had to avoid declaring war on Germany through films. This Hollywood neutrality led to the production of a series of films leading up to the United States' entrance into the war that suggest the devastating impact of war in Europe and the threat of an expansionist power. This was not only present in the genre of westerns, but in spy thrillers and mysteries. It is in this vein that *Drums Along the Mohawk* succeeds in being a patriotic story of American's defending their land from aggressive forces intending to destroy families, property, and lives.

Yet again, Henry Fonda is the hero protecting his family and community from the "filthy painted heathens" that have become aggressive because of British manipulation. The existence of Native Americans in the film contradicts what Smith describes as the "virgin land" aspect of the myth of the West that suggests that the frontier was open land that had been untouched by humanity. Ford uses Native Americans in many of his films, suggesting that he does not prescribe to that aspect of the myth of the West. The film possesses the usual tropes of westerns and heroic tales. There are acts of bravery, loyalty to the land and property, self-sacrifice for the safety of the community and the folksy personalities of frontier militias untrained by the rigid, sophisticated and "civilized" eastern militaries. The women of the frontier become strong and brave, fight alongside their men, and bear their husbands' sons. The culmination of this film is when the community must flee to the local fort for protection from violent forces. Once inside the walls of the fort, the local fire and brimstone preacher gives a speech warning the community, "Lord knows only too well what will happen if these sons of Gabriel ever get over these walls or through this gate!" It is not too much of a stretch to suggest that this is Hollywood's warning of a German threat moving beyond Europe. Finally, at the end of the film, the settlers are victorious, they soon get word that the Revolutionary War is over, and America has gained its independence. Following this news, the American flag is brought in amongst

patriotic claims that it is “the most beautiful flag” and the weary eyes of all the settlers turn into warmth and affection for the American flag. One tremendous irony of the film is that during this sentimental scene, the two minority characters, a Christianized Native American and a black servant woman also look at the flag with great hope, regardless of the tragedies these two minority groups will face in the next century. However, much like *Harlem Rides the Range*, these two minority characters allow the film to be inclusive to all groups for the sake of a unified American identity in the face of adversity and oppression.

Imbedded in John Ford’s film *Stagecoach*, are the varying perceptions, conflicts, and beliefs about the West. Released in March of 1939, the film provides a setting that suggests hardship, environmental collapse, immorality, community, self-sufficiency, and the need for American settlement of the frontier. The film begins like many of the other films with an expulsion from the settled lives of the main characters. This is particularly true in the case of Doc Boone and Dallas. Doc Boone is a former doctor in the Union Army, but after the war, his reputation exists only as the town drunkard who associates himself with the local prostitutes. His relationship with these women, including Dallas, is not sexual, but instead it seem more likely that he has assisted in treating the various medical conditions that arise in their line of occupation. The great “civilizing” forces of domesticated white women are pushing these two individuals out to make their town respectable. However, these women also have questionable ties to immoral people, including their leader, Mrs. Gatewood, who is married to the town’s scheming bank manager, Henry Gatewood. A few minutes later, Mr. Gatewood abandons his wife and flees the town after removing all of his customer’s money from the town’s bank with the intention of escaping the law out West and enjoying his newfound wealth. In addition to Gatewood, a former Confederate Soldier, Hatfield is also escaping the institutions of civilization

as well as the consequences of the South's defeat after the Civil War. Instead of fleeing the town, there are a few passengers on board the stagecoach seeking opportunity, including a businessman from "Kansas City, Kansas," Mr. Peacock, and the devoted and pregnant wife of a cavalry officer, Lucy Mallory. These six passengers, along with the driver, Buck, and the Federal Marshall, Curly, travel into the isolated regions of the West hoping for the opportunity to escape or rebuild. Upon the stagecoach's departure, they are joined by John Wayne's character Henry "Ringo" Kid, a young fugitive determined to seek vengeance for his brother's murder.

Although none of these passengers are ethnically different, the diversity in cultural backgrounds was not present in many of the other works previously mentioned. The pattern amongst these sources is the focus on one class or one group that was culturally similar. In this case, the passengers of *Stagecoach* represent the highs and lows of culture and class. For instance, the banker, although incredibly corrupt, represents the epitome of the upper class, beneath him is the middle class businessman Mr. Peacock and pregnant Lucy Mallory, and below these two, are Doc Boone and Dallas. Hatfield is on the periphery because of his dated Southern qualities, which make him highly chivalrous towards Mallory, as he seems to be the only one aware of her condition. Many of the other characters seem "Northern" in the sense that they are capitalists, entrepreneurs, and not of a leisurely class. This dichotomy reveals Hatfield's obsolescent persona as the dapper Southern gentleman whose behavior and mannerisms show a dated elitism from a defeated slave-owning culture. As working men, Curly and Buck fit in somewhere between the middle class Mr. Peacock and the lower class Doc Boone. Both have found their place in the West and exist as western characters, especially Buck who has settled down with a Mexican girl and her family, while Curly is a representative of the federal



government attempting to maintain a semblance of law and order while acknowledging the differences of law in the West.

Although environmental factors are not the cause of this migration to the West, there are certain aspects of the film that suggest hesitancy towards settling the region. One scene shows the stagecoach riding through a dust storm with dust coating all of the quiet and calm passengers. This is interesting because none of the passengers tries to prevent the dust from covering them or spilling into the stagecoach, instead they sit with a quiet resignation, accepting their submission in the face of dust storms. Images like this were common amongst photographs of people in dust storms during the mid-1930s, and it seems unlikely that the prevalence of dust and the inability to control the environment in the film is just a coincidence. Although not an environmental force by modern standards, the portrayal of Native Americans, in this case the Apaches, suggests that they are also a force of nature, appearing as unexpectedly as the dust storm. Most of the references to the Apaches are by the stagecoach passengers as they look around the region at the isolated and seemingly unoccupied environment. This suggests that much like the unpredictability of dust storms, Native Americans are so much a part of nature that they are invisible until they suddenly appear and attack the stagecoach. This sensitivity and fear of nature is not seen in films like *Jesse James*, *Harlem Rides the Range*, and *Drums Along the Mohawk*, in fact, most of those films suggest that migration West is the only obstacle in farming or reaping the benefits of bountiful western land.

Images of domestication and settlement are common in myths of the West. Throughout the entire film, the only homes seen double as rest stops for passing stagecoaches. The film does not guarantee settlement or domestication; it only suggests that it might happen in the future. The film's final setting takes place in a violent and dirty western town with shootouts, saloons, and an

entire slum full of prostitutes. This is not a rustic West that just needs a woman's civilizing touch, and the only traditionally civilizing forces of domestic women and middle class businessmen have uncertain futures. Mr. Peacock, although the epitome of the middle-class business and family man plans to return home after conducting business, not planning to stay and aid in the reformation of the Wild West. Planning to recuperate in town, Lucy Mallory and her newborn's future seem uncertain because of her fragile health, her husband's absence as he rides with the cavalry, and her tumultuous surroundings. Gatewood, the banker, had he not been a thief, could have helped civilize the town with financial institutions, however, he is arrested the moment he steps out of the stagecoach, proving his attempt to escape law and order futile. Finally, Buck and Curly give Ringo and Dallas the opportunity to escape the town and settle down after Ringo has killed his brother's murderer. Ringo persuades Dallas to come with him to Mexico and create a family with him. Unique to *Stagecoach* is the domestication of traditionally amoral characters, such as the western gunslinger and the prostitute with the heart of gold, who abide by a contradictory set of laws than the civilizing townspeople. Usually killed or banished to encourage the spread of civilization in most western films, characters similar to Ringo and Dallas rarely become domesticated. However, in *Stagecoach*, the future for Ringo and Dallas as domesticated settlers of the West seems more likely than others; however, they are settling Mexico, not the United States, preventing the possibility for their progeny to become part of the strong and unique American identity in the untamed regions of the American West.

Apart from these differences, the film possesses many of the tropes found in the myth of the West. For instance, the asexuality of the main character, Ringo, plays an important role in his courtship with Dallas. Since he was jailed as a teenager, he lacks the sexual experience and moxie of his peers, and does not understand the exclusion of Dallas by the other passengers.

Even after the repeated implications and hints about Dallas' occupation, Ringo is completely unable to comprehend the prejudices of others or the existence of a sex industry. He blindly courts Dallas and treats her with respect and admiration. Because of his limited experience, his love is comparable to that of a young boy and the lack of social aggression allows him to be a sensitive and unintimidating character, as opposed to a rugged western man frequenting brothels and saloons who satisfies his needs through violence and intimidation.

*Stagecoach* has many contradictions in that it is the quintessential western film but alters the myth to suggest an entirely different outcome than films like *Dodge City* and *Harlem Rides the Range*. The characters exist in a vacuum within the stagecoach, where the only traditional prejudices come from characters embodying the East, such as the banker, Hatfield, and initially Mr. Peacock. The real "outlaws" in the film are the banker, who stole all the money from his small town bank, and Hatfield, who condemns himself by proudly defending the Confederacy and existing as a physical opposition to the creation of a new American identity. Ringo is technically an outlaw because of his years in jail and his plan to seek revenge on his brother's killer. Interestingly, he does not question the illegality of his actions; in fact, he agrees to let the Marshall arrest him once he has done his deed. Ringo does not live outside of the law; he acknowledges it and accepts the consequences, contradicting the myth of an extralegal western hero ignoring the existence of law. The film acknowledges the "true" heroes of the West, such as Ringo, Dallas, Curly, Buck, Mr. Peacock, and Lucy Mallory. Mr. Peacock redeems himself by defending Dallas and Ringo, and standing up to Gatewood and Hatfield, even though they exist in the higher social classes. Mallory uses her status as a civilized lady to alter the perception of Dallas amongst the townspeople. She does this by thanking Dallas for her help during childbirth in front of the elitist women in town. These character developments follow Turner's

thesis in suggesting that the hardships and circumstances of the West play an integral role in creating a unique American identity focused on individuality, equality and democracy. However, an underlying message of the film is a suggestion that the West is uninhabitable because of the violent forces of nature, such as dust storms, drought, and Native American attacks. Because of this continuous shifting between praise and suspicion of the region, the perceptions regarding foreign, environmental, and domestic events appear ambiguous and conflicted in the attempt to determine the West's role in forming American identity. The detail and depth of the film, while sometimes ignored because of its genre, explains its iconic status as well as its nomination for the Academy Awards.

The year 1939 presents an interesting transition for the meaning of the West. For some, like John Steinbeck and the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, the West represented an uncontrollable force that broke an entire population of people. Others saw the West as inspiration and evidence that the United States can accomplish anything, whether it is emerging victorious after Native American and British attacks on colonists in eighteenth century America or international threats from tyrannical powers in modern Europe. It seems that there was not a clear dividing line in perceptions of the West amongst American artists, as seen in the dichotomy of fear and pride in the American West of *Stagecoach*. Instead, the complicated mix of anxiety, patriotism, and inspiration reveal themselves through the perspectives of different artists and different messages found in the creations of literature, music, art and films of 1939. This variety suggests that after the traumatic and uncontrollable events of the Dust Bowl in a region that exemplified democracy and opportunity, created a lasting reticence to trust in the myth of the West. However, it was in this myth that artists found hope in America's effort to

respond to fascism and totalitarianism with the unique virtues of American democracy, individualism and strength that could only grow from those traumatic hardships of the West.

## Appendix

I. "Shed of White Tenant Farmer..."



II. "Kitchen of Tenant Farmer..."



III. "A Family of Agricultural Day Laborers..."



IV. "Daughter of Agricultural Day Laborer ..."



V. "Daughter and Son of Agricultural..."



VI. "Negro Day Laborer Repapering..."



VII. "Wife of Agricultural Day Laborer..."



X. "Farm Security Administration (FSA) Migrant Camp..."



VIII. "Toilet for Ten Cabins..."



IX. "Farm Security Administration (FSA) Migratory Labor Camp..."



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