# CHASING THE DREAM: LITERATURE AND REGIONAL CONSTRUCTION IN CALIFORNIA'S GREAT CENTRAL VALLEY

by

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# ABSTRACT

As a region, California's Great Central Valley can be defined through the physical and cultural characteristics assigned to the space by its residents. Not unlike the larger regions of which it is part, the Valley's cultural landscapes have long been constructed as sites of wealth, fertile ground, and opportunity. Drawn to the region's myriad promises and possibilities, populations moving into and within the region often search for their part in a frequently elusive California Dream. Yet as with any place, the lived experience of the Valley's residents is often far removed from the construction of the region as a land of prosperity and mobility.

Tracing the various constructions of region in the Great Central Valley requires an understanding of cultural and regional identity as complex and multifaceted. No two individuals experience the landscapes they inhabit in the same way; as a result, any attempt to define a unitary regional identity in the Valley is ultimately problematic. Despite the diverse experiences and interpretations of the Valley and its inhabitants, many overlapping themes emerge, resulting in what I call a "regional imaginary"—a set of meanings assigned to a region by its residents. Although many methods exist by which to explore and tentatively define the idea of a regional imaginary in the Central Valley, one of the most productive involves utilizing critical regional approaches to literature and other narrative works. By examining the many novels, poems, and other narratives written about the Valley, the various cultural, historical, and natural forces that converge and conflict in the Valley's landscapes may begin to come into focus.

# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION: SITUATING REGION IN AGRICULTURAL CALIFORNIA

Place names occupy a significant role in creating the stories we tell ourselves about the places in which we live. As cultural critic Lucy Lippard writes, "every place name is a story, an outcropping of the shared tales that form the bedrock of community" (46). Place names communicate the priorities and beliefs of the people who name the land, and no place name can be dismissed as a benign force on the landscape. California's Great Central Valley, named primarily for its physical situation as an immense valley in the center of California, is home to thousands of communities and landmarks whose names communicate the optimism, faith, pitfalls, and ironies involved in Spanish and Anglo-American settlement in the region. Mount Diablo—or the devil's mountain—is the name of the most prominent peak in the low-slung coastal mountains west of the Valley. The city of Merced takes its name from a Spanish word meaning mercy. North of Merced is another Valley town named Manteca, which has the dubious distinction of meaning lard or fat. These names make evident the Spanish and Mexican influence on the landscape, yet dozens of other Valley cities are named for early California settlers—such as Stockton or McFarland—or for features in the natural landscape, like Woodland, Oakdale, or Red Bluff.

Arguably the best known place name in the Valley is Sacramento—California's state capitol and the name of one of the Valley's two major rivers. Sacramento is a Spanish word meaning *sacrament*, connoting something holy, pure, sanctified, or

consecrated. Sacramento is not the biggest city in California, nor it even perhaps the most important; similarly, the Sacramento River, though an important source of water for the Valley, is not the river that fills the water needs of most Californians. Yet the word *sacramento* holds significant meaning as it helps to construct the Central Valley as something sacred—a place apart, endowed with unique natural gifts that have enabled countless transformations of the landscape at the hands of its human inhabitants.

The Great Central Valley, if nothing else, is a region within a region within a region. As part of California, as part of the American West, the Valley has both inherited and helped to form a cultural identity and legacy that is significant not only for the landscape itself but for larger narratives of regional formation and nation-building within the United States. As a region, the Central Valley can be defined in terms of the physical and cultural characteristics assigned to it by its residents. Like the American West, the Valley has been characterized by a construction of the landscape as being a site of wealth and opportunity. Drawn to the region's myriad promises and possibilities, people moving into and within the region are often searching for their part in a frequently elusive California Dream. Themes of opportunity and prosperity have continued into the present, as individuals and groups look to the Central Valley as a land of hope, wealth, and new beginnings. Today, the region is often heralded as the "New California," and residential growth in the Valley is seen by many as the salvation of the state[1]. As the Valley emerges

[1] I first encountered the term "New California" while perusing the California State University—Fresno website. Fresno State borrows the phrase from an August 2002 National Public Radio series on demographic change in California that, in part, situates the Central Valley as the destination for "reverse migration" from coastal metropolises to the state's interior. In many cases, "New California" seems to indicate the potential of the Central Valley to fill a need for real estate expansion, but along with such expansion comes a promise for the Valley's renewed cultural and political significance within the state.

Figure 1. County outline of the Great Central Valley

*Source:* United States Census—www.census.gov

from its marginalized status as a “flyover zone”—an area that exists simply as a space filler on the way to someplace else—regional identities continue to shift and change.

The Great Central Valley, so named for its position running down the center of California, rests primarily at sea level between the rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains and the lower, rolling Coastal Ranges. Its seventeen counties (Figure 1) comprise a quarter of California’s total land area and are home to more than six million residents. While its

population is just one-sixth of California's total, the Valley's five major cities are among the fifteen most populous urban areas in the state. Yet even these urban centers seem to factor only minimally in the state's popular imagination, as the Central Valley and its cities are typically perceived as secondary to coastal metropolises such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Sacramento, as the state capital, occupies a position of prominence in the region, yet somewhat lesser known cities such as Fresno, Stockton, Modesto, and Bakersfield all boast populations exceeding 200,000 and continue to influence the distribution of capital—including oil, labor, and agricultural products—within the state.

Given the large urban areas and concentrated population in the Central Valley, the region's traditionally defined position as a sleepy rural landscape seems almost non sequitur. Yet despite the Valley's burgeoning population, in many ways the area remains a series of connect-the-dot urban clusters surrounded by thousands of square miles of open space and farmland. Even the biggest Valley cities tend to cling, at least in part, to an imagined landscape that foregrounds the pastoral nature of the region's rural hinterlands. In the Great Central Valley, agricultural landscapes dominate and often overshadow urban and other cultural influences.

Understanding regional production in the Central Valley through literature and other narrative accounts requires an exploration of selected literary texts in order to find a place for the literature of the Central Valley on its own terms and as part of larger narratives of California and the West. The literature of the Central Valley, as with the literature of any place, does much to shape and complicate the various meanings assigned

to the space by its residents and other observers. Literary production in the Valley traces changes in the physical and social composition of the region, and the dozens of writers whose works center on the Valley add a critical voice to historical accounts of the region's development. Literature and other narratives that focus on Valley cultures and landscapes ultimately provide a framework through which to examine the creation and re-creation of the Valley as a site of struggle and opportunity, destruction and renewal.

As is the case with any region, the Central Valley does not exist as an island, and the region's literature often focuses on the interconnections between the Valley and the larger landscapes of which it is a part. Sometimes referred to as "the Other California," the Valley's history, culture, and development are inextricably bound to the rest of the state, just as the American West is bound to the East. The Valley does not exist as a region because it is separate from the rest of California, but rather because it is part of it. Without situating the Valley, its culture, and its literature in the larger contexts of California and the West, any analysis of the Valley's many literary and regional identities would be hollow.

Additionally, any study of regional literature must also focus on finding a place for scholarship on region and regionalism in literary studies. Influenced by the Anglo-American pastoral tradition, literary critics too often dismiss regional writing as marginal works that do little more than reflect "local color" of typically rural landscapes. New directions in literary regionalism, however, provide a means through which to explore the critical implications of place and region. Works produced about place also occur *in* place,

and the unique social, economic, and historical frameworks inherent in any regional landscape influence and are influenced by those who write about these specific places.

An understanding of region or regionalism as a valid site of literary or cultural study is not possible without an understanding of how regions fit into narratives of nationalism in the United States. As with the relationships between the Central Valley and California and the West, relationships between regional and national narratives of meaning are similarly hollow if the two constructs are not placed together. Exploring region both as part of larger narratives and as a focused site of literary and cultural study provides a rich context for examining the access to and distribution of power and resources in specific regional settings.

Any study of regional identity would be misguided without acknowledging that the attempt to uncover a singular or unitary regional identity is not possible. The Great Central Valley as a region is bounded by physical as well as cultural lines, all of which encompass an area that is as vast and varied culturally as it is geographically. Almost entirely flat other than where the Valley floor begins to rise to meet the surrounding mountain ranges, the Valley is over 450 miles long and about 60 miles wide at its widest point. While the geographic boundaries that mark the region have changed little in modern descriptions of the area, cultural boundaries in the region are continually being reconstructed and redefined. The shifts in these cultural boundaries are often tied to the movement of the diverse groups and individuals who have moved to the Valley. Following promises of a fruitful and abundant life in one of the most storied agricultural regions in the country, populations have relocated to the Valley and have become

participants in the Valley's own brand of the California Dream. Motivations for settling in the region are likely as individual as the people themselves, and each of the themes and ideas explored in this thesis are an attempt to find threads of connection between narrative and experience while simultaneously acknowledging the ultimate futility of attempting to define a single sense of collective identity for Valley residents.

Acknowledging the dominant imprint of agriculture in the Central Valley's physical and cultural landscapes, this thesis explores the development of agricultural empire in the Valley and its effects on the physical landscape and on the movement of people and capital in the region. In the early days of California statehood, and in some cases even sooner, Euro-Americans were drawn to the fertile space in the center of the state. Harnessing the region's considerable natural resources, founders of the Valley's agricultural empire transformed the preexisting environment from plains of abundant wildflowers into one of the most heavily irrigated areas in the United States. In the many decades that have followed, the empire of farmland prompted a great deal of movement in the Valley, from migrant farm workers dependent on seasonal labor to peripheral industries benefiting from the economic success of agribusiness. As the landscapes of the Central Valley have changed over time, populations living in and writing about the region have worked to understand these alterations and to reflect upon how these shifts have influenced the Valley's regional identities.

Tensions between the idea of the local versus the idea of the national or global are becoming ever more apparent as the world becomes increasingly polyvocal and interconnected. Regions, whether in the case of the Great Central Valley or elsewhere,

can never be divorced from the external cultural influences that both shape and are shaped by local landscapes. For the agricultural landscapes of the Central Valley, an understanding of the sometimes destructive interplay between local cultural and economic production and national or global demands highlights the critical place that the region occupies in both perpetuating and complicating dominant American myths of opportunity, mobility, and prosperity.

# CHAPTER TWO

## PLACING THE DREAM: LITERATURE AND THE REGIONAL IMAGINARY

Driving into California's Great Central Valley from the surrounding foothills on a clear day yields an impressive vista of the Valley's level, expansive terrain. On the north-central side of the Valley, Interstate 80 winds out of the Tahoe and Eldorado National Forests in the Sierra Nevada mountains, through formerly gold-rich foothills, and into the Valley north of Sacramento, where the freeway continues in a straight line for miles toward the horizon. These glimpses offer just a partial perspective of the Valley's magnitude, and are among the only ways for modern viewers to approximate the panoramic vision often described by early European, Mexican, and Euro-American explorers and settlers in the area.

This long view into the Valley is one I have seen many times in my travels. As a child I often waited for the moment when Interstate 80 would straighten and provide the clear line of sight into the Sacramento area. For me, the view into that flat distance was equivalent to the local, with place, with my own home-space. Yet my position as a Valley resident is only one story, and my perspective only one view. The many meanings of the Central Valley as a region are continually shifting and changing as its residents move into, out of, and within the area. And no understanding of the region is complete without a sense of the ways in which the human presence on the landscape has altered its appearance and meaning, both to the Valley's residents and to outside observers.

Early European and Anglo-American narrative accounts of the Great Central Valley often focus on the seemingly limitless expanse of its terrain. The Franciscan priest Fray Juan Crespi offered one of the earliest European accounts of the Valley when in 1772 he wrote that from the summit of the peak upon which he stood he could see "a great plain as level as the palm of the hand, the valley opening about half the quadrant, sixteen quarters from northwest to southeast, all level land as far as the eye can see" (qtd. in Crow 380). The point upon which Crespi stood as he absorbed this panorama was Mount Diablo, a relatively low peak in the Coastal mountains east of San Francisco. Charles Crow points out that many believe the view from the summit of Mt. Diablo offers a view of more of the earth's surface than any other point on earth (380). The enormous scale of the region, which Crespi attempts diligently to convey, continued to provide challenges for other early Anglo visitors to the region, including the U.S. government surveyor William Henry Brewer, who described the Valley in 1862. Brewer's panoramic description also seeks to quantify the Valley's scale when, also viewing the area from a peak, he writes the following: "The great central valley of California, as level as the sea, stretches to the horizon both on the north and the southeast. …But there is nothing cheering in it—all things seem blended soon in the great, vast expanse" (qtd. in Crow 381). While Brewer's vantage point allows him a relatively unbroken view of the Valley's immense area, his language suggests that he finds the sheer enormity of the terrain less magnificent than dismal.

In their attempts to make sense of the Valley's distinctive geography, both Crespi and Brewer engage in what Crow calls "perspective moments" (381)—a convention that

Valley writers continue to favor. These perspective moments, or the opportunity to witness the Valley's scale and unique physical features from above, become significant throughout the region's literary history not only for what these moments reveal but for what they conceal. As literary critics point out, although the scene from a mountaintop or some other aerial position enables a stunning view of the flat valley landscape, such a perspective also blurs the material and social conditions apparent only from close study of the Valley floor. The view from the top of Mount Diablo may be remarkable in scale, but such a view is far from complete. Perspective moments are, after all, only moments; arriving at any sense of the complexity of the Valley's human and physical landscapes requires the synthesis of many moments, from many perspectives.

Yet for many Valley observers, the perspective from above is often the first—and perhaps the easiest—way to gain a broad sense of the region's various human and physical landscapes. The difficulty many early Anglo visitors to the region had in describing the immense scale of the Valley is not surprising, given its physical features. Covering approximately 30,000 square miles of terrain, the Central Valley is one of the largest valley regions on the globe. In practice, though the Valley's topography is contiguous, the region is usually spoken of in terms of the Sacramento Valley in the north and the larger San Joaquin Valley in the south, where the two sub-regions' major eponymous rivers flow to a delta confluence before emptying into the Pacific Ocean. Maps of California usually shade the entire valley in green to reflect the region's sea-level elevation, and the coloring combined with its elongated, oval shape leads to the area's striking resemblance to an oversized cucumber. Arguably unique on the earth's

surface in terms of its scale and geography, the Central Valley has a long history as a contested landscape. From the displacement of native populations beginning with Spanish colonization of California to the continued superficial alterations of the landscape by Mexican and white American settlers, the Valley's lands have been habitually reinvented. With each incarnation of land use in the region comes concomitant shifts in the human population as well.

In his book *The Seven States of California: A Natural and Human History*, Philip L. Fradkin describes the ways in which the history of the Valley is bound to the land and landscape. While refraining from an environmental determinist view of human-land interactions, he does argue that throughout its history the Valley's "landscape would be altered—transformed to a greater extent than any similar place on earth—but the elemental factors remained in place and determined what occurred there" (217). And what has occurred and continues to occur in the region is land-intensive industry, usually in the form of agriculture. Many of the shifts in land use and economy in the Central Valley have occurred rapidly, causing accompanying changes in the peoples and cultures that populate the region. Fradkin traces four superficial alterations of the landscape since the turn of the nineteenth century: "The natural landscape became the livestock landscape around 1800. The livestock landscape became the wheat landscape in 1865. Wheat gave way to irrigated agriculture in 1900. And the urban landscape that crept out from the Bay Area began to replace the rural landscape in 1960" (219). Each of these major shifts in land use has spawned contributions to a rich literary and narrative history centered on the Valley's landscape, cultures, and people. Although very few comprehensive literary

studies explore this literature, these works play a significant role in the way the Valley is constructed and perceived as a region, both in and of itself and in its relationships to the larger regions and nation of which it is a part. Narrative depictions of the Valley also play into the ways in which its inhabitants view themselves as part of a "regional imaginary."

I adapt the term regional imaginary from a theoretical position within urban studies that seeks to understand the ways in which individuals assign meaning to urban spaces. As Sharon Zukin and her colleagues discuss in another context, "often, new meanings of place result from deliberate image creation, as when real estate developers market a 'gentrified' downtown in terms of cultural activities or manipulate cultural symbols of an archaic industrial past in a factory complex they wish to convert to an office park or art museum" (1). As policy-makers and residents of urban settings work to re-imagine their own understanding of and relationship to the places in which they reside, they must often come to terms with unsavory elements of their history. Cities and other urban areas become redefined through the actions of human agents, which allow urban environments to convey to both insiders and outsiders a certain image of their locale. Zukin further describes what French social theorists term the "social imaginary," which refers to "a mythologized, but internalized, set of cultural meanings. These meanings are held and communicated collectively" (1) through a variety of images and texts. Yet these mythic, symbolic constructions of culture are not limited to the domain of discourse; they also have material counterparts in the landscape: "While the set of meanings of the social imaginary is conceptualized in symbolic languages, these meanings are materialized and become real in all sorts of spatial and social practices" (1).

While no scholarship seems to exist on what I would term the "regional imaginary," the connection between urban and social imaginaries and a regional counterpart seems evident. Just as human agents in urban and social spaces seek to create an image or sense of collective identity based on carefully chosen examples of symbolic discourse and their material counterparts, so too do regions. Defining a regional imaginary requires examining the ways in which discourse—often in the form of visual or narrative messages—constructs and reflects regional landscapes and cultures. In the Central Valley, which is a part of or connected to larger symbolic and material regions including California and the American West, the regional imaginary—which is never a stationary or unified construct—has been and continues to be constructed in myriad ways, including through a diverse body of regional literature.

Before arriving at a sense of the ways in which the literature and narrative of the Great Central Valley have worked to reflect, resist, and produce the regional imaginary in the area, looking at some of the key trends and movements in regional literary and cultural studies may prove fruitful. Regional writing, which is obviously not unique to the Central Valley, has undergone numerous incarnations, both in terms of its popularity as a genre and as a site of critical inquiry. Often criticized for focusing too much attention on the authenticity of the local and tending toward a nostalgic look at a rural pastoral ideal, in recent years regionalists have worked to define new approaches that counter an elegiac longing for a distant, often forgotten past in order to explore the complex social and historical forces that converge in local places and that connect those places to a larger world.

Criticism of regionalist nostalgia is not entirely unfounded. The tendency has been to view place through a lens of longing, assuming that the local provides a sense of the real or authentic rather than the merely "imagined communities" of national and global landscapes[2]. Poststructural critic Hsuan L. Hsu counters this notion in writing that "these approaches to place-based identification, which envision community as spreading outward from sentimentalized 'closeness' to an abstract obscuring distance, assume that local communities of some sort exist in isolation from large-scale geographical entities such as nations, empires, and transnational economic currents" (36). While some regional writing does attempt to view place as an insulated island, untouched by forces of a larger world, critical inquiry into regionalism can resist this urge by becoming a site through which to study place-based approaches to critical issues of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. In demonstrating the critical potential of regionalism, Hsu goes on to argue that literary criticism should look toward the relationship between region and literature to uncover the ways in which literature contributes to regional production—or the regional imaginary. Opposing the view of regional writing as simply a reflection of "local color," Hsu writes that "the relation between literature and regional production involves not only the production of literature about regions but also the ways in which literary works produce, reimagine, and actively restructure regional identities in the minds and hearts of

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[2] The concept of imagined communities is introduced at length in Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Anderson's argument centers on the theory that "nationality…as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind…. [The] creation of these artefacts…was the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces; but that, once created,…became 'modular,' capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness, to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations" (13-4). The selective, largely imagined constructions of the meanings of place and landscape comprise an important element of the regional imaginary.

their readers" (36). This critical understanding of the local cannot be divorced from larger economic, social, and political forces that influence region.

One factor that contributes to the continued tendency of some scholars and writers to think of region and place in terms of an always historical, "forgotten" landscape stems from a prevalent postmodern perception of landscapes as always already known. Popular images of local, national, and global places often reduce the diversity of "real" landscapes to the scenic, a picture-postcard understanding of modern geography. Literary historian Michael Kowalewski, in defining "New American Regionalism," cites Barry Lopez's concept of "false geographies," which refers to "a congeries of romantic preconceptions by means of which the 'essential wildness' and 'almost incomprehensible complexity' of the American landscape have been reduced to 'attractive scenery'" (173). Kowalewski draws a parallel between this view of American landscapes and what he argues has been an unfortunate practice of mainstream literary criticism, which he contends "has similarly reduced the complexity of the American literary landscape….At the very least, certain critical categories now seem to be 'memorized' ahead of time such that their premises frequently dictate many of their conclusions" (173). At the heart of Kowalewski's argument is a belief that contemporary critical inquiry favors the examination of the "memorized" categories of race, class, and gender over an analysis of place and region. The omission of region as an additional site of critical analysis, Kowalewski contends, assumes that "region or a sense of place is not an imaginative factor that can be internalized and struggled with in the same literarily rewarding ways that writers struggle with issues of race, class, and gender" (174). Excluding region as a

valid site of critical exploration leads to potentially significant omissions in literary theory.

Kowalewski's regionalism, in many ways, resists Hsu's postructuralist rendering of the place of the regional or local in broader national and global contexts. While both Hsu and Kowalewski argue that, in Hsu's words, regions are "both productive…and continually *produced*" (38), at times Kowalewski's argument threatens to reduce the complex scope and possibility of region to an overly romantic construction of place and the local. In analyzing what he calls a trend toward regional, place-based action and activism in the United States, Kowalewski writes, "More and more frequently, unforgettable experiences of American places now consist less of lovely memories of snowfalls and sunsets than of disturbingly congested, poisoned, or threatening places" (172). Kowalewski's argument implies that attention to region or regionalism is, in essence, an act of reclamation, or of a nostalgia that privileges the local as the site of authentic experience. Although the bulk of Kowalewski's argument aims to establish a place for regionalism as a valid mode of critical inquiry that works as much to shape human experience as do race, class, and gender, in many ways he simply perpetuates a "memorized landscape" that claims the regional or local as the apex of the Real.

While Kowalewski and Hsu may diverge in their theoretical underpinnings, both critics argue for the deliberate inclusion of region in literary studies, although for Hsu this inclusion does less to perpetuate regional nostalgia than to give artists and critics a means through which to explore "both the distant and the local—to analyze regional communities without losing sight of the larger global community that requires and

enables the production of region" (62). The local, in other words, is never exclusively or entirely local. Of course, adding region as a critical category does not in any way downplay the significance of race, class, and gender. In fact, region can provide a localized approach to examining these issues in a meaningful way.

Historian Patricia Nelson Limerick, for example, has long argued for an academic focus on regionalism in her scholarship on the American West. Although her work does not explicitly engage in contemporary critical approaches, she often acknowledges the potentially combative relationship between region and other critical categories. In reflecting upon the role of region in her own work, Limerick writes:

> I never saw regionalism as peripheral to the tensions of ethnicity; on the contrary, I fell into the belief that thinking in regional terms provided the fairest and most reasoned response to the challenge of American diversity. If one tried to reckon with the whole of American history at once, one saw only an uninstructive blur, a jangle of unrelated parts. But region permitted one to adjust and train one's vision in a way that uncovered connections, ties, and relations. With particular places brought into focus, one could build one's units of generalization outward, from place to subregion to region to nation to hemisphere to planet. With region as the key transitional category, the blur began to sort itself out. (84)

Although Limerick, Kowalewski, and Hsu approach region and regionalism from different theoretical frameworks, the type of regionalism they advocate in their own work departs from simply being a mirror of Lopez's "false geographies." New regional studies, rather than conceptualizing regionalism as simply a genre of "local color" writing, imagines region as a localized site of critical inquiry through which to comprehend the diverse social, economic, political, and physical American landscape. As the diverse body of regional writing about the Great Central Valley often indicates, region and place are never as benign a force as they may sometimes seem.

Exploring regional production in the Great Central Valley through literature and other narrative accounts provides a way to trace the construction of a regional imaginary in the Valley through time and in place. Returning to Fradkin's division of the region's land-use patterns since the turn of the nineteenth century provides a framework through which to trace the changes in the ways the Valley has been written about throughout its history. Although I can only begin in this project to examine the Valley's literature, the representative samples that follow provide a sense of the ways narrative and landscape intersect to help form a regional imaginary.

As Crespi and Brewer's early descriptions of Valley geography imply, much of the early literature of the region focuses primarily on descriptions of the Valley's "natural" landscape—or the landscape as it existed before Anglo conquest in the region. In the time before European contact, California had the largest Native population north of Mexico (Crow 380). Approximately half of these estimated 300,000 Natives lived in the Central Valley, although most of the population was concentrated around rivers and in the bordering foothills. During California's Spanish mission phase, European populations lived primarily near the coast, so during this time the region's interior was altered slowly. Early visitors to the Valley, in addition to marveling at the region's size, often commented on the abundance of wildflowers that filled the valley floor in the spring. Thomas Jefferson Mayfield, who traveled through the Valley with his mother and father in the mid to late 19th century, writes of the flowered landscape in some detail:

> The entire plain, as far as we could see, was covered with wild flowers. Almost all of the flowers were new to us….As we passed below the hills the whole plain was covered with great patches of rose, yellow, scarlet, orange, and blue….I believe that we were more excited out there on the plains among the wild flowers than we

> had been on the mountain the day before when we saw the valley for the first time. (13)

Mayfield's father, though well-traveled, remarked that "he would not have believed that such a place existed if he had not seen it himself" (13). Mayfield's mother, in turn, "cried with joy and wanted to make a home right there in the midst of it all" (13). This remarkable landscape had such an effect on Mayfield that when recounting his journey in the 1920s he remarked: "For my own part, I have never seen anything to equal the virgin San Joaquin Valley before there was a plow or a fence within it" (13).

Several elements of Mayfield's account are worth pausing over. His vivid description provides one of the earliest civilian depictions of the valley floor, and his language indicates the ways in which the Valley, even in the very early years of California statehood, was becoming endowed with a powerful regional imaginary. Mayfield describes the land, uncultivated by eastern American standards, as virginal, and his language evokes images of a prelapsarian garden, unspoiled by human presence. This erasure of Native presence is surprising, given that Mayfield spent most of his days in close contact with a southern Valley tribe. No doubt Mayfield and his family were influenced by existing rhetoric about the American West in general and California in particular, which often painted the regions as unspoiled mythic paradises waiting to be tamed and settled.

Another account of the Valley's pre-agricultural landscape is provided by the botanist and explorer John Muir in his essay "The Bee Pastures." Muir, writing of his journeys through the Valley during roughly the same period as Mayfield, also employs Edenic language in his narrative when he refers to the Valley as the "Grand Central

Garden" (28). Evoking an image similar to Mayfield's, Muir writes that in the spring the Valley was "one smooth, continuous bed of honey bloom, so marvelously rich that, in walking from one end of it to the other…your foot would press about a hundred flowers at every step" (25). Yet in addition to the trope of the garden, Muir also references another significant element in California's regional imaginary: gold.

> Sauntering in any direction, hundreds of…happy sun-plants brushed against my feet at every step, and closed over them as if I were wading in liquid gold. The air was sweet with fragrance, the larks sang their blessed songs, rising on the wing as I advanced, then sinking out of sight in the polleny sod, while myriads of wild bees stirred the lower air with their monotonous hum—monotonous, yet forever fresh and sweet as every-day sunshine. (26)

Much of Muir's account of his travels through the Valley focuses on the specific types of plants he discovered during his long tramps through the landscape, as well as on his musings about the potential for bee keeping in the region. Yet Muir's evocation of the Valley floor as "liquid gold" is somewhat prescient, given the shift in agricultural practice that was, at the time, just beginning to flourish in parts of the Valley: dry-land wheat farming. When Muir published this essay in his book *The Mountains of California*, he reflected on the changes that had occurred in the Valley in the twenty years that had passed since his first visit. From endless miles of bee pastures had come a surge in those who "began experiments in a kind of restless, wild agriculture" (28). While even from this later vantage point wheat farming had not yet taken its full hold upon the region's landscape, Muir foresaw that the Valley's transformation into an agricultural region was close at hand:

> The time will undoubtedly come when the entire area of this noble valley will be tilled like a garden, when the fertilizing waters of the mountains, now flowing to the sea, will be distributed to every acre, giving rise to prosperous towns, wealth,

> arts, etc.…In the mean time, the pure waste going on—the wanton destruction of the innocents—is a sad sight to see, and the sun may well be pitied in being compelled to look on. (29)

Muir's distress at the alteration of the Valley landscape into something that he paints in almost unnatural terms is the beginning of a type of critical nostalgia that will figure prominently in much Valley literature.

The tensions between natural and unnatural, between wildness and cultivation, figure prominently in Valley literature and in the literature of California. Landscape historian John Brinkerhoff Jackson comments on the way this binary plays out in what he terms "a peculiarly California environmental philosophy, a philosophy which to this day persists in seeing two, and only two, significant aspects of the world: the city and the wilderness" (qtd. in Fradkin 216). Of course, neither California as a whole nor the Central Valley as a subregion are alone in setting up this perception of a dualistic landscape. In many ways, these binaries figure prominently in popular conceptions of the relationship between the eastern and western United States. But perhaps because so much of the Central Valley's history has been bound up in tensions over appropriate land use, sentiments like Muir's continue to figure prominently in the region's literature. An extension of Muir's lament over the transition of the Valley's landscape from "natural" (or native) to cultivated is found in Gary Snyder's late twentieth century's poem, "Cover the Ground." Snyder alludes to Muir's "The Bee Pastures" several times, yet his language describes a much different ground covering than Muir's "liquid gold": "And the ground is covered with/ cement culverts standing on end,/ house-high & six feet wide/ culvert after culvert far as you can see" (30). Snyder writes of Muir's premonitions made

material in the landscape, and his tone is also one of a critical nostalgia for an alternative to unchecked agricultural expansion.

But agricultural empire, in many ways, is precisely what has defined the Central Valley as a region. In the years following the boom of the California gold rush and in the face of a waning livestock industry, many individuals began looking to the state's interior as a location for the state's next bonanza, and the dry-land wheat farming industry began to take hold. The miles of wildflowers and bee pastures evoked so vividly in Mayfield and Muir's narratives gave way to seemingly limitless acres of golden grain. Although grain farming became an unsustainable economic response to either mining or cattle ranching, in its day wheat farming was immensely successful. As historical geographer George Henderson points out, "during the best harvests, wagon trains, loaded down with sacks of wheat, stretched for a mile or more, at the dozens of warehouses dotting the San Joaquin Valley" (4). During the California grain heyday in the 1870s, the state's wheat production, which was centered in the Valley, "twice led the United States' annual output of wheat" (4), an extraordinary achievement given the relatively short rise of the wheat industry in the region.

Until the early 1900s, irrigation technology was underdeveloped, which made wheat farming an ideal fit for the Central Valley's landscape, which does boast a brief winter rainy season despite being "punishingly hot in summer" (Crow 379). Wheat required relatively little investment in human capital, as the process of sowing and reaping the grain was highly mechanized. This meant that individual farmers could cultivate immense tracts of land with little hired help, but this also meant that the wheat

culture tended to favor large landowners, creating a system that separated the "land rich" from the "land poor" (Henderson 5). The Valley's early agricultural system, therefore, began to solidify the land-based class system that even today divides the region's inhabitants, especially in the agricultural sector.

Unfortunately literary production exploring the wheat farming revolution and the resultant shifts in the Central Valley's regional imaginary is not abundant. The most compelling and representative example of literature exploring this period is Frank Norris's first installment in his proposed "trilogy of wheat": *The Octopus*. In writing *The Octopus*, Norris not only chronicles a local example of the Valley's wheat empire, but he also invokes the ongoing divide between nature and culture, which highlights the conflict in the Valley's regional imaginary between the pastoral ideal of an agrarian "paradise" and the attendant emergence of technological and transportational forces that connect the region to a larger world. Although imperfect in the ways in which he draws connections between his fictional "Rancho de Los Muertos" and the regional, national, and global forces to which the ranch is inextricably bound, Norris's novel does resist the categorization of regional writing as a genre that "appears to be nostalgic" and therefore "has sometimes been understood as dealing with elements of culture whose power is diminishing" (Foote 27). On the contrary, *The Octopus* seeks to lay bare the events and individuals who construct the Central Valley's economy as a site of intense power struggle between the means of production and the means of distribution. As Hsu asserts, in Norris's text "the San Joaquin Valley is not an isolated and 'forgotten' place but an agricultural region emerging in tandem with a statewide railroad monopoly" (47).

Norris's construction of the California wheat empire plays a significant role in continuing to establish the Valley's regional imaginary as an abundant cultivated garden, and to set the stage for the subsequent revolution in irrigated agriculture that has come to define the region for the past one hundred years.

The opening pages of *The Octopus* center on the young writer, Presley, as he tours the countryside around the Los Muertos ranch on his bicycle. From Presley's wanderings comes the first of several "perspective moments" in the novel that attempt to take in the scope of the San Joaquin Valley's wheat empire. As Presley stands upon a foothill on the borders of the ranch, he sees

> The whole gigantic sweep of the San Joaquin expanded, titanic, before the eye of the mind, flagellated with heat, quivering and shimmering under the sun's red eye…[The wind] seemed to exhale from the land itself, a prolonged sigh as of deep fatigue. It was the season after the harvest, and the great earth, the mother, after its period of reproduction, its pains of labor, delivered of the fruit of its loins, slept the sleep of exhaustion, the infinite repose of the colossus, benignant, eternal, strong, the nourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world. (39)

This imagery, both of the region's immensity and of the feminized landscape's value as reproductive and plentiful, reappears throughout the book, often in contrast to the dead, mechanized influence of the railroad. Norris's language here evokes a sense of the simultaneous energy and tranquillity of the harvested landscape, and the connections to an almost pastoral agrarian utopia are obvious. Yet ironically, Norris often uses similar language to describe the imprint of the railroad monopoly upon the landscape. Not long after ruminating about the splendor of the Valley's ranch lands arrayed before him, Presley returns to valley floor and encounters a scene of graphic slaughter: a herd of sheep has crossed onto the railroad tracks and been decimated by an oncoming train. In

reflecting upon this scene, Presley's words clearly convey his horror, yet the language is not unlike that he used to describe the idealized wheat fields:

> Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless force, the ironhearted power, the monster, the colossus, the octopus. (42)

As both of these passages indicate, *The Octopus* pits nature against culture, yet endows both of these elements with similar characteristics. Both the wheat and the railroad are powerful, and integrated into the land—colossal forces that Norris eventually portrays as outside the realm of human agency.

As Presley's experiences show, *The Octopus* is a novel about the forces that converge in the Central Valley's early agricultural industry. Norris places the Valley and its politics and economy at the center of his novel, and urban areas like San Francisco play peripheral roles in what happens in the areas surrounding Los Muertos. The rising tensions between the grain farmers and the railroad magnates from whom they are leasing their lands come to a head during an Old West-style shoot-out. Ranchers attempting to protect Los Muertos from being taken by the railroad wait for the evicting forces to approach a dry, unfinished irrigation ditch. During a brief skirmish, most of the ranching protagonists are killed or wounded, along with two railroad goons. The blood-bath proves vain, however, as the ranching families are all eventually evicted and broken, and the railroad takes possession of the ready-to-harvest lands at an enormous profit.

Following the gunfight at the irrigation ditch, Presley travels to San Francisco, where he meets with the president of the rail company that has wrought so much

devastation upon the people and lands Presley loves. Far from finding in the company president the tyrant he had expected, in Shelgrim he finds a selectively generous, if single-minded, businessman. When Presley attempts to confront Shelgrim about the ills suffered by so many at the hands of the railroad, the magnate provides him with the following explanation of the Valley's rail-farming economy:

> "You are dealing with forces, young man, when you speak of wheat and the railroads, not with men.… The wheat is one force, the railroad another, and there is the law that governs them—supply and demand. Men have only little to do in the whole business. Complications may arise, conditions that bear hard on the individual—crush him maybe—*but the wheat will be carried to feed the people* as inevitably as it will grow. If you want to fasten the blame of the affair at Los Muertos on any one person, you will make a mistake. Blame conditions, not men." (405; emphasis in original)

Presley is immediately struck by Shelgrim's superorganic argument, and in fact later seems to find himself swept away by this economic rhetoric. Seeking for refuge from the tragedy of Los Muertos, Presley books passage to India aboard a grain ship, where he reflects upon the lives destroyed by the actions of the railroad. Yet even in the midst of his lament, he begins to see his version of the "greatest good" (457) wrought by the tangle of the farmers and the railroad: the wheat itself. No matter how many individuals' lives were lost in the struggle, "*the* WHEAT *remained*. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves" (458; emphasis in original). Presley's ultimate epiphany—that individual humans have no chance to effect change in the face of global economic and political forces—seems to appease his sense of injustice at the horrors of Los Muertos.

The removal of the human agent implied in Shelgrim's and Presley's interpretation of the unequal power relations between farmers and the railroad hints at an alarming attitude that continues to appear in some Central Valley literature, and hence in the regional imaginary, particularly as the landscape approaches the transition from dry-land wheat farming to water-intensive, irrigated specialty cropping at the turn of the twentieth century. These arguments seem to value what the land can produce (nature) and what exists on the superficial landscape (culture) over the lives of individual people. While this preference for the land and its production value may not be stunning in itself, the telling factor is the way in which Norris's novel as a whole ignores unequal distributions of power other than those between the grain-kings and the railroad magnates. The voices of the people in the working class, as well as those of minorities in the area, are virtually silenced. When class or ethnic "others" are mentioned, Norris typically relies on stereotype or a general tone of disdain, as Presley's attitude reflects: "These uncouth brutes of farmhands and petty ranchers, grimed with the soil they worked upon, were odious to him beyond words" (10). This erasure of the laboring class, necessary in order to produce the landscape as a pastoral garden, becomes even more significant with the advent of irrigation agriculture.

As is symbolized by the demise of the grain-king class at the end of *The Octopus*, dry-land farming was not to prove successful for the long term in the Great Central Valley. Though immensely successful during its tenure in the landscape, wheat farming was not an ideal fit for the temperamental Valley climate, particularly on the scale in which it was attempted. As Muir points out in his narrative, the region's "'rainy season'

is by no means a gloomy, soggy period of constant cloudiness and rain. Perhaps nowhere else in North America, perhaps in the world, are the months of December, January, February, and March so full of bland, plant-building sunshine" (27). Muir's notes during the winter and spring of 1868-69 indicate that rain fell a scant 14 days in four months (27). Fradkin outlines that once irrigation technology caught up with the demand, the method became an easy sell for farmers and ranchers. "Irrigation became a movement, then swelled into one of the panaceas that periodically swept California: Irrigation was blessed by God, strengthened the family, evened out the disparity between poverty and wealth, and would put food on the table for the nation" (231). The fervor for early irrigation efforts continued to blossom until the wheat industry was almost entirely overtaken by irrigated specialty crops. By 1929, specialty crops represented 78.4 percent of California's agricultural output, compared with a low of 3.9 percent only fifty years earlier (Henderson 9). With the shift in agricultural methods came an accompanying transformation in the Valley's regional imaginary into an image of the area as the nation's fruit basket—a construction that still largely defines the region and appears in its literature today.

If the most valuable commodity the Central Valley produced during the years of the wheat empire was the grain itself, the most valuable commodity of the specialty crop industry is arguably a colossal laboring class. George Henderson writes vividly of the change in the landscape wrought by migrant farm labor. "In a single year, throughout the San Joaquin Valley…legions of bodies will tramp the ground that feeds the roots; they will temporarily interrupt sunlight as they lean over and work their fingers through stems

or vines….Sometime during the heat of the day, these legions will pause for some food and drink. A portion of agrarian capital will come to a halt" (81). Despite the explosion in corporate farms' reliance upon human capital in the form of migrant laborers, not all of the Valley's Anglo literature highlights this, leading to omissions and erasures similar to Norris's. Fortunately, along with the influx of migrants to the region came an accompanying flowering of literature and narrative by the workers themselves, and their descendants.

One Anglo work that explores the early phase of the Central Valley's irrigated landscapes is Joan Didion's *Run River.* Set in and around Sacramento in the first half of the twentieth century, Didion's novel follows two farming families of old-time pioneer stock—the Knights and the McClellans—and traces the events that lead to their downfall. As in Norris's text, Didion explores the challenges of those running large-scale farming operations as they try to make a profit and retain their land. But the picture Didion paints resists the depiction of the landowning class as heroic and the forces of the outside world as the only threats to the agricultural lifestyle; in *Run River*, most of the threats are internal. The novel's characters work to make Sacramento and its surrounding lands the center of California, politically, economically, and culturally—a feat they attempt by throwing lavish parties in their ranch homes along the Sacramento River. When Lily Knight McClellan is a teenager, her politician father Walter Knight often throws such fetes. "Everyone came to those parties: river people, town people, and, when the Legislature was in session, people from Red Bluff, Stockton, Placerville, Sonora, Salinas, everywhere. Even the people from down south came, proof to the doubtful that Walter

Knight was more interested in California than in water rights" (38). And of course, the farming operations that feature so prominently in Didion's novel are hugely dependent on water rights, as only water can nourish the land and crops.

For the Knight and McClellan families, their ties to the soil are what define them, as well as their long claims to the land they work. In one scene, Walter Knight brings Lily to the family cemetery to see the grave of a baby who had died in the Valley in 1848.

> The baby had been the first of them to die in California…."I think nobody owns land until their dead are in it," Walter Knight had said to Lily, playing a familiar variation on a familiar motif. Even as she recognized that all he was giving her was the official family line, Lily could not help but be disarmed. She answered in the same rich vein: "Sometimes I think this whole valley belongs to me." "It does, you hear me?" Walter Knight said sharply. "We made it." She had never doubted it. (84-85)

Walter Knight's claims to making the land highlight a hubris of the landowning class that in the novel eventually leads to their downfall. Lily marries Everett McClellan, and their combined land holdings are immense, yet Lily's sense of ownership and entitlement to the land and everything else around her leads her to constantly be unfaithful to her husband. She ultimately feels trapped by her enclosure on the ranches and by her marriage, and her love-hate relationship with the land and the man that are hers darkens the story. Everett feels a similar sense of attachment and disdain for his ranch and his wife, and he eventually responds to his bondage by killing first Lily's lover and then himself, on the banks of the river that had sustained the Knights and McClellans for over a century.

Murder, love, and betrayal aside, *Run River* is less about the day-to-day operations of the Knight-McClellan lands in particular than about the tensions between

the demise of California pioneer families and the future of agribusiness interests in the region. Despite these overarching themes, Didion pays little attention to the details of how that transformation was taking place, especially in the relative invisibility of the ethnic and immigrant farm workers who make large-scale fruit and vegetable production possible. Other than periodic mentions of the Knight's Mexican foreman, Gomez; the McClellan's Chinese housekeeper, China Mary; and occasional references to "Mexican pickers" (174), *Run River* is a novel about the Valley's white landed gentry. Yet the stories of the people who work the land without owning it comprise a large percentage of the Valley's population, and these individuals are also responsible for authoring a wealth of the region's literature and in other ways contributing to and complicating the idea of a regional imaginary.

The regional imaginary in the Great Central Valley, like any representational construct, is both a fact and a fiction: it is a fact because residents of any regional space share in some way a sense of belonging or identity based on the place in which they reside; and a fiction because no landscape or place is universally experienced and cannot be interpreted as such. Yet recognizing the lack of universality inherent in any regional imaginary does not invalidate a regional approach to literary study. What people have written and continue to write about their regional landscapes offers intriguing insights into how individuals interact with the landscape, and how individuals in any landscape create insiders and outsiders. The Central Valley is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse regions in the United States, and the ways in which that diversity is experienced and conveyed through a regional imaginary is telling. Mary Austin writes

that “no sort of experience…works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment. …It arranges by its progressions of seed times and harvest, its rain and wind and burning suns, the rhythms of his work and amusements. It is the thing always before his eye, always at his ear, always underfoot” (qtd. in Kowalewski 171). While I might alter Austin’s words to include more room for human agency—and for women or racial minorities—region is indeed a powerful construct, and the ways in which humans have interacted with and written about their landscape in the Great Central Valley continue to inform how we as humans order our connections to the land and to those around us.

# CHAPTER THREE

## WORKING THE DREAM: CALIFORNIA'S LABORED LANDSCAPES

California's Highway 99, stretching from the small city of Red Bluff to just south of Bakersfield, often features prominently in both the physical and cultural-historical landscapes of the Great Central Valley. Built in the late 1920s, the highway served for more than 40 years as the main transportation artery in California and throughout the Pacific Coast states, connecting urban and agricultural centers. Following the construction of the eight-lane Interstate 5 in the 1960s, the federal government eventually decommissioned Highway 99 as a federal roadway, leaving maintenance for the highway in the charge of state and local governments. Although most of the highway was absorbed into the new interstate, much of the original road remains in steady use, primarily in the Valley. As the only major thoroughfare directly connecting Valley towns and cities from Sacramento to Bakersfield, Highway 99's imprint on the landscape is not easily diminished.[3]

Much of the length of Highway 99 is flanked by an overgrowth of oleander bushes, whose pink and white blooms peek out from a network of dense green leaves. Where oleanders do not grow, much of the view from the highway opens onto the Valley's famed agri-scapes: thousands of acres of richly cultivated farmland that make the region one of the most agriculturally productive landscapes in the country. These

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[3] Stan Yogi's introduction to his *Highway 99: A Literary Journey through California's Great Central Valley* offers a brief review of the highway's literary significance. Information on the highway's current status, including preservation efforts, can be found at the Great Valley Center, www.greatvalley.org.

seemingly endless fields stretch out to an often horizonless sky, interrupted only by the occasional miles of urban landscape as the highway runs through cities like Stockton, Modesto, and Fresno. But in the dominant regional imaginary of the Great Central Valley, the fields, not the cities, comprise the landscape of primary significance. In many literary and narrative accounts of Valley life and landscape, even the occasional urban references are typically foregrounded by descriptions of lush and plentiful fields. Land, water, growth, and harvest: these are the subjects that often figure prominently in the various incarnations of the Valley's regional imaginary, especially in the multiethnic narratives that work to construct and complicate the meanings of place and region in the area.

For many Valley residents and outside observers, the region's agricultural landscape represents the continuation and triumph of nature. California, along with other western states, has long been defined by a similar imagined construct; California, as a recent anthology tells us, is the "natural state," the golden land, the promised land, the lost garden re-found (Gilbar). The bounty of the Valley does much to establish this construction. Part of California's cultural construct as a natural paradise stems from the messages and images that have helped to construct the state's own regional imaginary since the late eighteenth century, when the first European and Euro-American explorers in the region began to describe California's landscapes through literary and other narrative works. In other ways, this conception of California as a land of promise and plenty is also related to what geographer Barry Lopez identifies as a common tendency of Americans in general to romanticize their surroundings—to claim an intimate knowledge

of the local or regional while in reality mistaking for knowledge simply a familiarity with the cultural constructions of landscape and scenery (55). Lopez argues that many Americans "look out on a familiar, memorized landscape that portends adventure and promises enrichment. There are no distracting people in it and few artifacts of human life….It is, in short, a magnificent garden, a colonial vision of paradise imposed on a real place that is, at best, only selectively known" (55).

While Lopez's argument seems to imply that landscapes, as "real places," can ultimately be deeply and objectively known (an assumption called into question by postmodern theories of knowledge and experience), his conception that most Americans see even their local environs as "memorized landscapes" is an interesting one. In the case of the Central Valley, the memorized landscape is one of beauty and abundance, and evokes the image of an unpeopled, unproblematic garden. Images of the Valley, perhaps especially the series of images that comprise the "roadside view" seen from landmarks such as Highway 99, reinforce the conception of the region's agricultural landscape as a fertile, natural, a-human space. Carey McWilliams, an early twentieth-century social historian who wrote at length of the contested landscapes of the Central Valley, argues that the illusory character of this landscape is reinforced by a lack of the typical landmarks of rural life:

> There is a surface placidity about the great inland farm valleys of California that is as deceptive as the legends in the books. Travelers along the highways pass through orchards that seem literally measureless and gaze upon vast tracts of farm land stretching away on either side of the road to distant foothills, yet, curiously enough, there seem to be no farms in the accepted sense. One looks in vain for the incidents of rural life: the schoolhouse on the hilltop, the comfortable homes, the compact and easy indolence of the countryside. Where are the farmers? Where are the farmhouses? (4)

In California's agricultural valleys, the traditionally recognized form of the Anglo-American family farm was radically transformed, leading to the creation of a landscape that hid the imprint of human agents, erasing recognition both of those who owned the land and of the workers who made large-scale specialty crop farming possible. The lack of human artifacts on the visible landscape lends to the tendency to cast aside human agents from the landscape, which in turn oversimplifies the means of production in an agricultural region and also removes accountability from the individuals who make agricultural production possible—and from those who benefit from this production. This erasure also has significant environmental consequences, which I discuss in detail later in this study.

Many scholars and critics who write of the history and development of agriculture in California work to deliberately reinsert the human into the landscape. To do this requires a critique of the notion that agriculture is a "natural" process and relies on a critical understanding of both landscape and labor. Following the lead of literary critics Leo Marx and Raymond Williams, several critics call for a deliberate reinsertion of the labor class into California's agricultural landscape.[4] Acknowledging the powerful symbols and images that create a "California of the imagination," Marxist geographer Don Mitchell argues that focusing too heavily on representation rather than materiality in

[4] Marx's *The Machine in the Garden* and Williams' *The Country and the City* both explore the construction of a pastoral ideal in the United States and Great Britain, respectively, and how that ideal often leads to the erasure of the agricultural laboring class. In agricultural landscapes, as Williams writes, "The inclusion of work, and so of working men, is a conscious shift of affiliation" (86). This "shift of affiliation"—and an accompanying focus on the men and women who labor in the Valley's agricultural landscapes—is critical to understanding the dynamics of power that enable agricultural production on the immense scale attempted in California.

California leads to the erasure of the fact that "ordinary, and often very poor, working people have assembled the material constituents of the state out of which the erratic imagination can do *its* work" (1). Although materiality is ultimately no less a product of ideology than are other forms of representation, Mitchell's focus on agricultural labor provides a critical means through which to examine the human struggle inherent in the creation of California's agricultural landscapes. Mitchell works to challenge the roadside perception that the landscapes of agricultural California are created through nature's grace by instead laying bare the landscape as a space of struggle between the empires of agricultural production and the individuals whose labor supports and perpetuates that empire.

In many ways echoing Mitchell's call to re-place the labor class in the California landscape is another geographer, George Henderson, whose explorations into the movement of capital—including human capital—in agricultural California seeks to trace the ways in which "investment, disinvestment, and reinvestment of capital" in the state have worked to create an agricultural "production regime" on the landscape (3). Both Henderson and Mitchell discuss the impact of the movement of capital and labor on a statewide level, but each of their studies examines closely how landscapes of struggle have been created in place and through time in the Central Valley. Although California does boast more agricultural subregions than just the Central Valley, by sheer merit of its size and history, the Valley is a landscape that has borne and continues to bear the lion's share of agricultural labor issues.

Coming to an understanding of how the often conflicting pressures of capital and labor converge in the Central Valley requires an understanding of the various cultural and physical connotations of the word “landscape.” Landscape, along with related concepts such as place and space, seems deceptively simple: in common parlance, landscape is a scene or vista. Yet beneath this relatively uncomplicated definition is a complex layering of meanings that shift and overlap, making landscape as a concept difficult to pin down. Even noted landscape historian J.B. Jackson concedes that “for more than twenty-five years I have been trying to understand and explain…landscape. I have written about it, lectured about it, traveled widely to find out about it; and yet I must admit the concept continues to elude me” (qtd. in Meinig 153). Some representations of landscape distinguish between the physical landscape—what can be seen in the physical, primarily natural, world—and the cultural landscape, or the human imprint on the physical (natural) world. The conception of landscape as physical or natural often translates into the land being nothing more than just empty space wherein human actors live their lives and develop their civilization, often at the expense of the natural landscape. Cultural landscape, conversely, is constructed in this paradigm as land devoid of nature, the end result of filling the empty space of the natural world with the human element. Dividing landscape into the often competing realms of physical and cultural (or natural and human) relies on an outmoded structuralist definition of how humans interact with the world around them, and often tends to privilege the natural over the human.

Recent poststructural readings of landscape seek to break down the binary opposition between nature and culture in favor of a more nuanced understanding of

landscape that refuses to divorce either from the effects of the other. Moving away from both an environmental determinist construction of nature and a superorganic rendering of culture, critical landscape studies seek to understand how physical and cultural elements converge on a landscape or in a place. Taking his cue from urban geographer Sharon Zukin, Mitchell articulates a definition of landscape that breaks down the nature-culture divide:

> Social struggle makes the landscape, and the landscape is always in a state of becoming: it is never *entirely* stable. Yet landscape is also a totality. That is, powerful social actors, as we have already suggested, are continually trying to represent the landscape as a fixed, total, and naturalized entity—as a unitary thing. Landscape is thus best understood as a kind of produced, lived, and represented space constructed out of the struggles, compromises, and temporarily settled relations of competing and cooperating social actors: it is both a thing (or suite of things),…and a social process, at once material and ever changing. (30)

The emphasis that Mitchell places on the interconnections between the physical and cultural elements as defining landscape is typical of new cultural geography, which resists a holistic approach to landscape and place. By emphasizing the material and symbolic as simultaneously separate from and inextricably bound to each other in a specific place, this view of landscape studies helps to articulate not only the nature of place, but also its human elements.

I define landscape as the convergence of social, historical, and spatial forces in a specific place, resulting in something akin to urbanist Edward Soja's "thirdspace." In broad terms, Soja defines thirdspace as "a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances, and meanings" (2). In spatial terms, thirdspace begins with a rejection of the binarism often invoked by looking at the world only in terms of sociality

and history. Soja's theories call for the deliberate spatialization of academic inquiry, arguing that events can only be understood as they reconstruct the actions of human agents in a specific time and in a specific place. Incorporating a spatial element into academic discourse comes through the process of "thirding," which "introduces a critical 'other-than' choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness" (61). The process of thirding rejects the totality of binary thought and "recomposes the dialectic through an intrusive disruption that explicitly spatializes dialectical reasoning" (61). Although he does not specifically call this intersection (or thirdspace) "landscape," his argument in favor of breaking down and adding to the traditional socio-historical academic binary resonates with critical landscape studies.

While Soja does not claim that the spatialization of academic work makes the inquiry more "real," he does see a need to combine and to complicate the dialectic of the "real" (or material) and the "imagined" (or representation). To think of landscape as the spatial intersection of the real-and-imagined elements of socio-historical thought is to think of landscape, as Richard Schein argues, as "discourse materialized" (664). Alongside that materialization, landscape is also "seen as symbolic, as representative, and as a representation; as duplicitous; and as gendered, class-based, politicized, and central to the (re)production of social life" (Schein 660). Such a multilayered construction of landscape allows for a deliberate exploration of how human agents shape and are shaped by the natural-cultural elements of a place.

In any landscape, the interactions between human agents and the physical world are anything but transparent. As the view from Highway 99 shows, even visual

perceptions can be grossly misleading, or at the very least reveal only a few of the many conflicting elements that compose a landscape. In many ways, Highway 99 is the quintessential representation of the spatial, social, and cultural landscape of the Great Central Valley. Often named in twentieth-century narratives of Valley life—perhaps most famously in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—the highway represents mobility as well as constriction for those who travel it. Beyond the oleanders, the cityscapes, and the pristine fields viewed along its borders, Highway 99 functions both as a fulfillment of the California dream as well as the means through which the antithesis of that dream is revealed.

Nearly every study of the Central Valley's agricultural landscape explores the thematic elements of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Not only does the novel provide a portrait of the economic and social effects of the Okie migration to California during the 1930s, but it also works to unmask and critique California's agricultural empire. In addition to these features, Steinbeck's novel also vividly portrays the disconnect between the expectations and experiences of California's imagined landscapes. As the novel traces the journey of the Joad family from Oklahoma to California, Steinbeck scrutinizes the ways in which the communication of California's regional imaginary at the time shaped the way these Anglo migrants perceived the physical and cultural landscape in the San Joaquin Valley. Far from being the Edenic landscape the region was often billed as in marketing efforts to Dust Bowl refugees, the working and living conditions of the Valley revealed the injustices inherent in the region's agricultural empire.

After being forcibly evicted from the land they had worked for more than a generation and facing the daunting prospect of supporting a large extended family, the Joads decide to move with as much as they can carry to the promised land of California. Their decision to relocate to California is not made on a whim, but is rather the result of a deliberate marketing effort on behalf of California growers and boosters. Throughout their journey to the San Joaquin, the family members refer to the numerous handbills they have seen advertising the bountiful landscape and limitless employment opportunities in the region. Ma, though skeptical, still feels drawn to the apparently idyllic landscape. "'I like to think how nice it's gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An' fruit ever' place, an' people just bein' in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees" (91). What Ma sees as a vision of their future life in California fits cleanly into Mitchell's classification of a "California of the imagination" (Mitchell 1)—a California notably evoked by the myths, songs, stories, and images that characterize the state as a land of limitless wealth and opportunity.

Ma is not the only one to be influenced by this vividly constructed imagined landscape. Grampa, preparing himself mentally to leave Oklahoma for California, also conjures up a version of the Valley's regional imaginary: "'Well, sir,' he said, 'we'll be a-startin' 'fore long now. An', by God, they's grapes out there, just a-hangin' over inta the road. Know what I'm a-gonna do? I'm gonna pick me a wash tub full a grapes, an' I'm gonna set in 'em, an' scrooge aroun', an' let the juice run down my pants'" (93). Although Grampa does not live long enough even to cross into California, he derives a sense of comfort and optimism from a carefully crafted booster message. The Joads

attach all of their hope to the promise of the California dream; the powerful construct of the family farm with endless acres of fruit trees is difficult to unsettle.

The Joads equate the storied beauty and abundance of California's agricultural valleys with opportunities for work and economic self sufficiency. Even when the Joads begin to hear rumors that the California they're hoping to find may not exist as they envision it, they still cling tightly to the stability and comfort implied in their imagined landscape. During a brief stay at a roadside camp, an anonymous traveler who is returning to the Dust Bowl after failing to make a new life in California warns Pa, Tom, and Casy of the harsh economic realities they will soon face in the Valley. Landowners, he reveals, over-advertise their employment opportunities, then when twice as many workers show up to work the owners are able to pay a fraction of the advertised wage. When workers hear of the lower wage, the man says, "Maybe half a the men walk off. But they's still five hunderd that's so goddamn hungry they'll work for nothin' but biscuits. Well, this here fella's got a contract to pick them peaches or—chop that cotton. You see now? The more fellas he can get, an' the hungrier, less he's gonna pay" (190). The Joads believe the migrant's account but still feel optimistic that their own California experience will yield more promising results, and they continue in their determination to reach the San Joaquin Valley. At this point the hunger and desperation California offers to most Dust Bowl migrants are still foreign concepts for them.

Shortly after this revelation at the roadside camp, the Joads cross the border into California and face the long crossing of the Mojave desert before arriving in the Valley. The bleak landscape does little to settle their fears, but as they look out over the desert Pa

says, “Wait till we get to California. You’ll see nice country then” (204). Exasperated, and beginning to understand the limits of California’s imagined landscape, Tom replies, “Jesus Christ, Pa! This here *is* California” (204). This visual evidence that the California they are traveling to find may exist only in the regional imaginary hits the Joads forcibly for the first time. Yet even this vista does relatively little to dampen their spirits, especially when the next day they descend into the Valley for the first time, engaging in one of Charles Crow’s “perspective moments” as they drive over the Tehachapi mountains into the San Joaquin Valley. Steinbeck’s description of this moment provides a bird’s eye view of a typical roadside perspective through which the Edenic perfection of the Central Valley’s imagined landscape shines through:

> They drove through Tehachapi in the morning glow, and the sun came up behind them, and then—suddenly they saw the great valley below them….The vineyards, the orchards, the great flat valley, green and beautiful, the trees set in rows, and the farm houses….Pa sighed, “I never knowed they was anything like her.” The peach trees and the walnut groves and the dark patches of oranges. And the red roofs among the trees, and barns—rich barns. (227)

From a safe distance, the Valley offers the beleaguered Joads everything they had dreamed would be true about California. Steinbeck’s language helps to establish a stark contrast between this initial perspective of the Valley and the harsh realities of labor and class that will soon confront the Joads and other migrant families. Their Eden, a veritable land of plenty where fruit and trees seem to spring forth spontaneously from the land, ends up being for them a landscape of struggle, starvation, and social and economic ruin.

Interspersed throughout the narrative of the Joads’ ill-fated travels into the San Joaquin Valley are several “interchapters,” which feature anonymous actors whose trajectory parallels that of the Joads. Steinbeck uses these sections to provide landscape

descriptions of both the Dust Bowl region and of California. His critique in these interchapters is often acute, perhaps especially when he describes the purportedly faceless economic forces that drove hundreds of thousands of Dust Bowl refugees into California, where their eventual economic situation in California's labored landscapes would often prove even more dire than their circumstances in the Dust Bowl. Steinbeck reflects in these segments what was likely a common argument to explain why new economic powers forced poor white tenant farmers from their land in the Midwest. Many of these tenant farmers, justifiably angered at the perceived injustice of their situation, desperately sought individuals upon whom they could exact their revenge. Echoing shades of superorganic logic, in one of the early interchapters the nameless "owner men" explain to a family of "squatters" that no *individuals* are to blame for the eviction of Dust Bowl tenant farmers; everyone involved in the expulsion is simply acting at the behest of a faceless economic "monster." "If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said, The Bank—or the Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or the Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which has ensnared them" (32). The owners claimed to have no more control over the situation than did the tenants. After all, "they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time" (32). The lack of individual human agency in the environmental and social ruin of the Dust Bowl region parallels the similar vacuum of agency in California's agricultural empires.

This evocation of banks and corporations as faceless, impersonal monsters or machines whose actions are not controlled by individual human agents is reminiscent of

the vast railroad and industrial interests in Norris's *The Octopus*. In the initial Oklahoma setting of Steinbeck's novel, the embodiment of this monster is the tractor, a literal machine that of course is unable to feel pity or remorse at the plight of the tenant farmers. The tractor driver, though in every case an individual human, remains somehow similarly innocent of the effects of his machine, as he is nothing more than an extension of his tractor. He is not in control of his machine's actions, nor is he culpable in its impact. In Steinbeck's characterization, even the tractor driver becomes less than human: "The man sitting in the iron seat did not look like a man; gloved, goggled, rubber dust mask over nose and mouth, he was part of the monster, a robot in the seat….The driver could not control it" (35). Even though a "twitch at the controls could swerve the cat'" (35), once the driver mounted the tractor he was no longer capable of making the twitch happen: "The monster that sent the tractor out…had goggled him and muzzled him—goggled his mind, muzzled his speech, goggled his perception, muzzled his protest" (35). Steinbeck leaves a potential space open for human agency, but acknowledges that in the superorganic logic of the day the machine overran the individual.

The economic machine that led to the systematic ruin of the Dust Bowl's rural landscape was only the first "machine" faced by the Joads and other Dust Bowl refugees. Once in California, the Joads find themselves the victims of a different machine, in the form of California's corporate agricultural industry. Jobs and housing are scarce in the Valley, although Tom is initially able to secure a few days' work laying pipe for the gas company. This early boon to the Joad family is short-lived, however, as Tom's wage is low and the other family members have no luck finding employment. They continue to

travel along Highway 99 following rumors of work throughout the southern San Joaquin Valley, and their increasing hunger and growing despair reflects the powerlessness common to workers in the bleak landscapes of California agriculture. Steinbeck writes in one of his interchapters that the Valley's agricultural abundance does not lead to improved living conditions for those who provide farm labor. Owners often let excess produce rot to artificially inflate prices, and as the fruit rots, "the decay spreads over the State, and the sweet smell is a great sorrow on the land. Men who can graft the trees and make the seed fertile and big can find no way to let the hungry people eat their produce" (348). The Dust Bowl migrants, lured to the state under the false premise of agricultural empire, grow hungrier and angrier, "and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath" (349). But as was the case with the Dust Bowl, the wrath leads not to revenge but to hopelessness, not to economic benefit but to ruin.

The image of surplus fruit being left to rot in order for landowners to yield maximum monetary rewards underscores the economic and social injustices inherent in California's agricultural landscapes. For the Joads, who are able and experienced farmers, the complex agricultural economy in Oklahoma and California impedes their hope of self-sufficiency; in this case, agriculture is not simply a method of raising food but also a system geared towards harnessing and exploiting human, natural, and economic resources. In her study of agriculture as a colonizing force in the American West, historian Frieda Knobloch argues that "agriculture…has never simply been about raising food crops or the sciences that make this more productive and efficient. Agriculture is an

intensely social enterprise, shaped by inescapably social desires and expectations" (2-3). The social and political power wielded by California agriculturists is evident in novels such as Norris's *The Octopus* and in *The Grapes of Wrath*. Although agriculture may on the surface seem benign in that it provides for human sustenance and nutrition, in practice it is intricately bound to the social power struggles that help to structure the ways in which various groups of people experience region and place. In the development American West as a whole, and most certainly in California and the Central Valley, control of agriculture has meant the control of capital, often in the forms of nature and labor. In the Central Valley, agricultural capital has historically been controlled by a comparatively small group of landowners, leading to continued marginalization and exclusion of the laboring class. As Knobloch argues, from the earliest days of large-scale agriculture in California, the state was "socially stratified by the wealth of landowners [and] the size of their holdings" (68). Even before Steinbeck wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, family farmers were systematically excluded from working their own land. According to Knobloch, "in 1916, 310 California landowners controlled more than 4 million acres, which might have supported as many as 500,000 additional residents on small farms" (68). For agricultural laborers such as the Joads, historical precedent in the Central Valley made their dream of self-sufficiency nearly impossible long before they ever drove across the Tehachapi pass.

Of course, the Joads' story, and that of the Dust Bowl migrants in general, is but one story in the continuing tale of labor, class, and race in California's Central Valley. The Joads, though certainly perceived by more established Californians as something

other-than human (in the words a service station employee: “Them goddamn Okies got no sense and no feeling. They ain’t human” (221)), the privilege of their skin eventually allows those who remain in the region to integrate nearly seamlessly into Valley culture. For non-white migrant laborers in the Valley, California’s agricultural landscapes too often represent increased struggle and immobility.

All migrant workers in the Great Central Valley, regardless of race or ethnicity, must negotiate an immense and complex physical and cultural landscape that works constantly toward their dehumanization. For the beauty and abundance of California’s agricultural landscapes to exist, huge numbers of individual workers must toil in the landscape, often under oppressive conditions and with little opportunity for economic mobility or stability. Farm workers in California have never fit into the notion of the romanticized character of the heroic farmhand that often features prominently in the American pastoral tradition. As Carey McWilliams writes in *Factories in the Field*, his 1939 examination of class and labor in agricultural California, farm workers have “been supplanted by an agricultural proletariat indistinguishable from our industrial proletariat;…farm labor, no longer pastoral in character, punches a time clock, works at piece or hourly wage rates, and lives in a shack or company barracks, and lacks all contact with the real owners of the farm factory on which it is employed” (48). Although McWilliams seems not to realize that the pastoral ideal of the noble farmhand was likely always little more than a mythic figure, his critique of California farming practices highlights the dehumanizing practices of the state’s labor practices from very early on in its history.

George Henderson takes McWilliams' critique a step further by arguing that the bodies of waged laborers in California agricultural are transformed in this industrialized farming methodology into individual units of capital to be bought and sold, traded and exploited. "Employed as variable capital, a body, in the singular and plural sense, becomes a *geographical* space for circulating capital, no less than a crop district, an irrigation network, or even a branch-banking system" (81). The many thousands of bodies who perform the intense labor of planting and harvesting specialty crops become literal landscapes wherein the struggle for wealth, labor, and mobility take human form.

The history of migrant farm labor in the Central Valley, though perhaps made most famous through *The Grapes of Wrath*, extends decades before the Dust Bowl migration and continues into the present. And in many cases, conflicts over who does and who should work the land center on a process of what Henderson calls "racialization" (91). For Henderson, the issue of race in agricultural California becomes far less meaningful outside the politics of waged labor. From the earliest days of specialty agriculture in California, race has been defined and redefined in order for landowners to exploit the laboring class and undercut wages and employment opportunities. As Henderson writes, "agriculture—capitalist agriculture, in the form of wages bodies—was an opportunity to further (and further *specify*) the idea and practice of race" (91). White landowners created racial categories through "racialization," or the "process whereby attributes of race are extended to specific relationships and acts, not just to inert body features" (91). In agricultural California, the process of racialization came to mean that

certain races were better suited for different types of agricultural labor, which landowners ultimately used to justify unfair pay and job conditions.

Both Henderson and McWilliams outline that up until the Dust Bowl the vast majority of Central Valley farm laborers were of Mexican or Asian ancestry. In many cases, immigrant groups were actively recruited as laborers, although when individuals from any one racial or ethnic group showed signs of acquiring property, white workers would frequently demand racial exclusion laws (Henderson 83). Often, white landowners saw their use of racial and ethic labor through a lens of racial determinism, recruiting certain ethnic groups to complete given tasks based on their understanding of that group's inherent, essential characteristics. Henderson writes of R.L. Adams, a professor at Berkeley in the early twentieth century whose 1921 textbook, *Farm Management*, outlines these racialized traits for the benefit of white landowners and farm managers. As Henderson outlines, Adams believes that "white labor…is the 'best' one can get. Coming from 'good old farming stock,' they are 'as a rule steady, reliable, kind to stock, and familiar with farm operations'" (92). In contrast, "the common *Mexican* laborer 'is usually a peaceful, somewhat childish, rather lazy, unambitious, fairly faithful person. He occasionally needs to be stirred up to get him to work, but if treated fairly he will work faithfully'" (93). Japanese laborers, according to Adams, "are good hand workers, especially at squat labor such as cutting asparagus, truck gardening…and for picking, sorting, and packing various deciduous and citrus fruits" (93). Adams' management text outlines the various strengths and weaknesses of several other racial and ethnic groups, and his overall purpose is to enable white landowners to select farm laborers from

"types" best suited for fulfilling a variety of farming tasks. Adams' explicit and detailed text enables the naturalization of racism and discrimination for early twentieth-century white farmers.

Of course, many landowners needed little in the way of justification for their treatment of hired laborers. Racial and economic differences simply enabled landowners and farm managers to pit various laboring groups against each other, thereby driving down wages and ensuring a continuous supply of cheap labor. McWilliams, in outlining the increasing anti-Chinese sentiment common in the Central Valley during the last decades of the nineteenth century, writes that racial discrimination of Chinese laborers meant higher profits for farm owners: "From the growers' point of view, the situation was not only desirable, it was well-nigh perfect. The Chinese, being a despised minority fighting for the mere right to exist in a hostile territory, could be employed at sub-subsistence wages" (70). Similar practices were still firmly entrenched by the time of the arrival of Dust Bowl refugees in the 1930s. As outlined in Steinbeck's novel and in McWilliams' exposé, the more migrants "tramping" through the Valley, the less growers had to pay their workers.

As the twentieth century progressed, low wages became only one of many challenges confronting migrant farm workers in the Great Central Valley. Compounding the often crude living and working conditions were increasing health threats that arose from the increased use of chemical pesticides in Valley agriculture. Central Valley writer and historian Gerald Haslam reports that in the late 1980s farm chemicals were used more intensively in California than in any other state (216). Farmers use pesticides to

control worms, insects, and weeds, and in the Valley pesticide use has grown to such an extent that "Valley agriculture has developed a chemical dependency as intense and potentially destructive as any junkie's" (216). Chemicals greatly increase the production value of the Valley's agricultural landscapes, but the detrimental effects of pesticide use on water, land, and human health cannot be ignored.

For many years, the risks of chemical pesticides and fertilizers on the health of farm laborers were downplayed or ignored, despite the protests of individual laborers and of unions such as the United Farm Workers. Reports of cancer clusters and increased occurrences of birth defects and miscarriages in Valley towns are even today often met with skepticism or dismissed due to a lack of direct evidence. Three Valley towns in particular—Fowler, Earlimart, and McFarland—have been "blighted by cancer clusters" and have "come to symbolize worst-case outcomes of long-term chemical contamination" (Haslam 218). For farm laborers in these areas who come in direct contact with pesticide-laden produce or who at times work under the direct spray of crop dusters, the health risks are especially acute. Although the latter half of the twentieth century saw an increase of union activism aimed at mitigating health risks for migrant farm workers, landowners and political groups staged immense resistance to the accusations that the workers labored under unsafe conditions. In McFarland, in the southern Valley, the cancer rate in children in the late 1980s was nearly 30 times the average, yet efforts to investigate causes for these malignancies were typically met with hostility. McFarland is a low-income town with a primarily Hispanic population, and residents' demands for "an investigation into chemical toxicity [are] often deflected by the claim that it threatens free

enterprise or local jobs" (218). In the face of such resistance, the individual voices of the laboring class are often difficult to hear.

The situation in McFarland and other similarly afflicted Valley towns garnered national attention during the United Farm Workers' 1988 grape boycott (Moraga 89). Led by union president Cesar Chávez, the boycott sought to highlight the dangers posed to workers exposed to farm pesticides. Two key events from this boycott were Chávez' 36-day fast and the police beating of union vice-president Dolores Huerta. Yet, as Chicana activist and playwright Cherríe Moraga writes in the forward to her play *Heroes and Saints*, "behind the scenes of these events are the people whose personal tragedy inspired a national political response" (89). Moraga, who is a pivotal figure in Chicano/a Studies, cites the situation in McFarland as the inspiration for her play, which centers on the tragic consequences of pesticide poisoning on the residents of the fictionalized town of McLaughlin, California.

In her staging notes before Act One, Moraga offers a description of the McLaughlin landscape. McLaughlin is a fictional "one-exit town off Highway 99" (330) divided into two sections: the old McLaughlin, with its main street and standard commercial offerings, and the "new" McLaughlin on the other side of the highway, full of tract homes and apartment complexes, all of which "reflect a manicured uniformity in appearance, each house with its crew-cut lawn and one-step front porch" (330). This "island" of suburbanization is surrounded by "an endless sea of agricultural fields which, like the houses, have been perfectly arranged into neatly juxtaposed rectangles" (330). This uniform layout of highway, housing, downtown, and farmland reflect a common

Valley landscape. But lest her readers confuse the standardized landscape of McLaughlin with anything akin to a "natural" or pastoral landscape, Moraga offers the following commentary:

> The hundreds of miles of soil that surround the lives of Valley dwellers should not be confused with land. What was once land has become dirt, overworked dirt, overirrigated dirt, injected with deadly doses of chemicals and violated by every manner of ground- or back-breaking machinery. The people that worked the dirt do not call what was once the land their enemy. They remember what land used to be and await its second coming. (330)

In this evocation of the second coming of the land Moraga alludes to the many indigenous and Christian religious images and references found in her play; much of the play's action is framed by the incarnation of many characters as the potential saviors of McLaughlin. In *Heroes and Saints*, the characters work within the confines and promises of various religious paradigms as they struggle not only with and for the land but also with their own potential for action and the legacy of pesticide poisoning that is causing deformity and death.

The play focuses on the character of Cerezita, or Cere, whom Moraga's notes describe as "a head of human dimension, but one who possesses such dignity of bearing and classical Indian beauty she can, at times, assume nearly religious proportions" (90). Cerezita's lack of body is a deformity explained in the play as the result of her mother working in pesticide-laden fields when Cerezita was in her womb. Cerezita, as a bodiless and therefore virginal woman, becomes a metaphor for the land itself: gendered, broken, and immobile. Yet although Cere's deformity is the most severe and striking of the other McLaughlin children, she is able to survive while other children become ill and die, including Cere's infant niece. The deaths of these children, caused by pesticide-related

cancer, are what drive the action of the play forward and give the other characters their desire for action and protest.

Cerezita almost never leaves her home, which she shares with her mother, Dolores, her sister, Yolanda, and Yolanda's baby. Gifted with great mental capacity, Cerezita is painted as a savior figure, one whose lack of a body endows her with an ability to see what others cannot. Cere has limited mobility, as she rests atop a low motorized table, or "raite" that she can move by pressing a button with her chin unless the wheels of her table are locked. She desperately wants to participate with the growing activist movement protesting the use of harmful pesticides in the grape vineyards where most of McLaughlin's Hispanic residents are employed in seasonal labor, but Dolores, who is certain that her own sins are the cause of her daughter's deformities, does not allow Cere to leave the house. Cerezita, along with her *activista* neighbor Amparo and her friend Juan, a Catholic priest, recognize the source of the children's illnesses and want the world to know McLaughin's story. But Cerezita, though her tongue is her most "faithful organ" (108) is kept silence, mirroring the powerless position of many field hands. At one point, she is discussing with Juan the many definitions connected to the word "tongue," including "the power of communication through speech" and "language, especially a spoken language" (108). But the final dictionary definitions embody Cerezita's powerlessness as a result of her deformity and her overprotective mother:

> JUAN: "Tongueless."
> CEREZITA: "Lacking the power of speech."
> JUAN: "Mute. Tongue-tied—disinclined or"…(*He looks up at her*.)
> CEREZITA: "Unable to speak freely." (109)

Cerezita, though passionate about the struggle of McLaughlin's laboring class and able to speak eloquently and articulately about her people, lacks the capacity of movement and therefore cannot champion her cause. Literally disembodied and figuratively tongueless, Cerezita has no power within McLaughlin's broken landscape.

Cerezita's sense of tonguelessness in many ways mirrors the struggle for power and voice that many other Chicano/as experience as a mestiza or mixed/multi-bordered population in the United States. Chicana feminist writer Gloria Anzaldúa, who like Moraga is a prominent scholar in Chicana Studies, explores the nuances of this relationship between language and power for Chicanas. Anzaldúa argues that linguistic freedom is inextricably bound to Chicana identity: "Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language" (59). The inability to speak—or to speak freely, as is the case with Cerezita—emerges for Anzaldúa from the sense that the language of the Chicana is neither Spanish nor English, but rather a blend of both. Chicanas, therefore, "speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages" (55). For Anzaldúa, this mestiza tongue leads to a sense of illegitimacy and mirrors Cerezita's own feelings of powerlessness. Yet Anzaldúa finds hope that she will at some point be able to take pride in her "forked tongue"; when this day comes, she writes, "I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent's tongue—my woman's voice, my sexual voice, my poet's voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence" (59). Cerezita shares this hope, and throughout the play she fights for the right to likewise overcome the Chicana "tradition of silence."

While Cerezita continually struggles simply for the privilege of exercising her voice, several of McLaughlin's other residents, including Amparo and many of the town's children, work to make disturbingly visible the plight of this cancer-cluster community. In the play's opening scene, a group of children wearing masks erects a cross in a grape vineyard upon which the body of a small child hangs. As part of a desperate act of defiance, the Hispanic townspeople of McLaughlin have begun to crucify the children after they die as "a kind of ritualized protest against the dying of McLaughlin children" (Moraga 93). Ana Perez, a reporter, comes to McLaughlin to uncover the truth behind these crucifixions—and to try to meet Cerezita. Dolores, of course, will not allow Cere to be interviewed, but Amparo tells Ana Perez that "Cerezita's big now. She got a lot to say if they give her the chance. It's important for peepo to reelize what los rancheros…are doing to us" (93). When Ana Perez proceeds to ask Amparo about the most recent crucifixion, wondering "Why would someone be so cruel, to hang a child up like that? To steal him from his deathbed?" (94), Amparo explains that the children are dead before being hung on the crosses. "They always dead first," Amparo says. "If you put the children in the ground, the world forgets about them. Who's gointu see them, buried in the dirt?" (94). Ana Perez quickly dismisses the crucifixions as a publicity stunt, yet this notion of the tension between visible and invisible continues to play a prominent role throughout the narrative. The children, hung on small crosses in the grape vineyards where the cancer originates, gain voices only through death and display. Through the display of their small bodies upon crosses, these children achieve the power and visibility for which Cerezita longs.

The rage that prompts McLaughlin's residents to hang the bodies of their dead children in the fields stems from a growing awareness that the bountiful landscapes surrounding the town are based on a fabrication. Residents are becoming more certain that the growers led the workers to McLaughlin under false pretenses. Describing this duplicitous landscape—one that provides jobs and housing while robbing the laboring class of its children—Amparo explains to Dolores: "They lied to us, Lola. They thought we was too stupid to know the difernce. They through some dirt over a dump, put some casas de cartón on top of it y dicen que it's the 'American Dream.' Pues, this dream has turned to pesadilla" (103). McLaughlin's Hispanic farm workers in the late 1980s are as much a prey to the lure of California's mythic landscape as were the Joads and other migrant workers in the 1930s. What had seemed like an ideal opportunity to work in immaculate and plentiful fields has transformed into a landscape of death, oppression, and despair.

Throughout Moraga's play, an unseen yet always heard and felt presence is that of the crop dusting planes and helicopters. These machines are harbingers of death in two ways, both because they spray the poison over the crops and houses and because, eventually, the helicopters patrol the fields after dark, prepared to shoot anything that moves in the vineyards. The humming sound of the aircraft is a perpetual reminder to the residents of their own powerlessness against the threat of these mechanized forms of oppression. The crop dusters are what allow McLaughlin's agricultural landscapes to thrive, but within this abundance are concealed hundreds of powerless workers whose mobility is severely curtailed. Cerezita's brother Mario, a gay university student who

eventually makes his escape from McLaughlin, describes the disconnect between the landscape's beauty and his own struggle for change and freedom. As he explains to Juan:

> When I was in high school, I used to sit out there in those fields, watching the cars go by on 99. I'd think about the driver, having somewhere to go. …He was always a gringo…and it'd never occur to him that anybody lived there between those big checkerboard plots of tomatoes, strawberries artichokes, brussels sprouts, and…hundreds of miles of grapes. (114)

Evoking the roadside view of the landscape as it might appear to a member of the privileged consumer class, Mario envies both the mobility he cannot have and the view of the landscape as one of beauty and health. But Mario knows too much, and his own pain wrought from his intimate knowledge of the landscape's poison ultimately drives him away. Yet his departure is not permanent, and he returns by the end of the play in time to witness Cerezita's final protest.

The crosses, the crop dusters, the helicopters, the pesticides, the farm workers, the growers—each of these forces converge and struggle in the landscape of the vineyard. While Mario's gringo sees only miles of groomed and beautiful cropland, Cerezita sees death. Near the end of the play, as Cere prepares to finally have the opportunity to speak to her people, she describes the grape vineyards to Juan. "The vineyards. See all the crosses? It's a regular cemetery….The trunk of each of the plants is a little gnarled body of Christ writhing in agony. Don't you see it?…See how the branches look like arms with the bulging veins of suffering. Each arm intertwined with the other little crucified Christs next to it" (134). Yet within the image of the suffering Christs is the potential for resurrection and rebirth—both for the land and for its victims. Cerezita provides that opportunity for resurrection, though not as a Christ figure but as an indigenous goddess

come to save her people. Perhaps Cerezita represents the embodiment of the Aztec mother goddess Tonantzin, a figure that Chicano theater critic Jorge Huerta argues has been supplanted in Chicano/a culture by the Christian figure of the Virgin Mary/Guadalupe (17). Yet regardless of the specific figure Cerezita represents, she is, as Huerta suggests, “the miracle child” (67), and her passion for justice and for her people ultimately demands a final sacrifice.

At last able to speak at a protest following the severe beating of Amparo, Cerezita draws a connection between the farm workers and the land that existed before the poison. “Put your hand inside my wound. Inside the valley of my wound, there is a people. A miracle people. In this pueblito where the valley people live, the river runs red with blood; but they are not afraid because they are used to the color red” (148). Cerezita’s speech paints the Hispanic workers as children of the land whose literal blood mixes with the figurative blood of a wounded earth. Cerezita calls for the liberation of the land in behalf of those who labor in these contested landscapes. McLaughlin’s Hispanic farm workers—the “miracle people”—will be able to reclaim the fallen earth as they become “free to name this land *Madre*. Madre Tierra. Madre Sagrada. Madre…Libertad” (148). For Cerezita, a pure, sacred, free earth exists that represents the liberation of the laboring class, but only when the people of the land—the farm laborers—are able to name the earth will the land be reborn.

The rebirth Cerezita desires can come only out of death, and Cere’s hopeful manifesto is cut violently short. As Cerezita and Juan move towards the vineyards to place the tiny body of Yolanda’s baby on a cross, machine gun fire erupts from a low-

flying helicopter, ostensibly killing them both. Enraged, Mario and the workers of McLaughlin race to the fields to set the vineyards on fire. In these final moments, the land—and Cerezita—receive rebirth by fire. As Huerta argues, Cerezita long understood that she must "[sacrifice] herself as 'the Virgin Saint.'…She has known all along that this will be her destiny, and she accepts it willingly, hoping to provoke social justice" (68). By provoking McLaughlin's residents to decisive action, Cerezita's death and the subsequent destruction of the poisoned vineyards hold the promise for the figurative rebirth of the land and its people—environmental as well as social justice.

Moraga's play, full of symbolism and rage, highlights the often powerless situation faced by poor non-white workers in the Central Valley's agricultural landscapes. Confronted with low wages, substandard living conditions, and hazardous work environments, the Valley's migrant farm workers must often work long, grueling hours for subsistence wages. Although recent legislation has attempted to control and mitigate the use of harmful chemical pesticides, Valley workers and residents must face the legacy of these pesticides. Valley poet and performance artist Tim Z. Herndandez graphically evokes the legacy of pesticide-laden cropland in his poem "I Pissed on Little Ricky."

I Pissed on Little Ricky

because the guys dared me to.
He was in the sandbox hunched over

plowing his Tonka truck through tiny dunes when
*Pelon*, his big brother, left him there to get more toys.

I had to go pee real bad and one of the guys blurted,
I dare you to piss on him! So, I did,

impulsively spraying on his powder brown hair.

> A fiery gush of yellow went stinging down his face,
>
> drowning his soft shoulders, scalding his little eyes,
> and we ran.
>
> Behind us, his tiny lungs exhausted
> every bit of air they held
>
> out into the vacant valley sky
> —and we laughed.
>
> Days later, while at school, a crop duster blew past our playground,
> its over-spray stung my face like a hornet's dagger,
>
> unraveling a ribbon of blood that clung
> from my nose and wrapped around me,
>
> ending in a fancy knot. (43)

Hernandez' vivid juxtaposition between the brutal act of urinating on a small child and the stinging spray of the crop duster on the school children provides a shocking and effective connection between two ultimately violent acts. In Hernandez' paradigm, anyone who would be appalled by a child "pissing" on a defenseless, ostensibly innocent, toddler should be equally shocked by the harmful practice of crop dusting in the Valley's human landscapes.

The roadside view of the Great Central Valley as an abundant, even Edenic, paradise is violently complicated by highlighting the lives of those whose labor has made these landscapes possible. Since very early on in California's specialty agricultural history, large-scale growers have relied upon and exploited the working class, falsely advertising employment opportunities in order to slash wages and justify unfair labor practices. The systemized exploitation of the Valley's laboring class enables many landowners to extract maximum profits from agricultural production, yet such profits also

depend upon the transformation and manipulation of the Valley's natural resources. The idea of nature in the Great Central Valley has undergone many incarnations, all of which reflect the dominant culture's willingness to create an agricultural empire at any cost. Many Valley writers, in addition to increasing the visibility of the individuals who make California agriculture possible, also aim to show how the transformation and retransformation of nature in the Valley calls into question whether the California dream, or anything like it, has ever truly existed.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## DREAMING OF NATURE IN A GOLDEN LAND

California's state motto is *Eureka*: "I have found it." Emblazoned upon the state's official seal and featured in state booster literature and other narratives, the claim to have found "it" resonates with the image of California as a land of dreams realized and promises fulfilled. Of course, the "it" to be found in California's various landscapes, both cultural and physical, is a constantly shifting signifier. The California Dream, in literature, film, and other cultural products, is not a unified construction, nor does it look the same for any two individuals. Ultimately, *Eureka* is an empty cry, building on a myth of individual freedom and opportunity common not only to California but to its various component parts and to the larger regions and landscapes of which it is part.

In dominant American mythology, California often represents the last outpost of the American frontier[5]. Acquired as a territory by the United States in 1848 and settled at the peak of the fervor created by Manifest Destiny and related doctrines of westward expansion, California assumed a heightened status as the site of El Dorado—the land of gold—during the 1849 Gold Rush. Suddenly California was not just the westernmost American place, but it was also a site where dreams of wealth and fortune could come to fruition.

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[5] While California represents the culmination of Anglo-American expansion to the Pacific Coast, the ethic of frontier expansion led to American acquisition of other "wilderness" territories—most notably Alaska. Susan Kollin examines the position Alaska holds in Anglo-American frontier mythology in *Nature's State: Imagining Alaska as the Last Frontier*.

Aside from its construction as a golden land where anyone willing to work hard enough would be able to find their fortune buried in the mountains and hills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California also garnered a place in the early Anglo-American national consciousness through descriptions of its fertile soils and natural abundance. The published reports of John Charles Frémont, who led a U.S. Army Topographical Corps expedition to California in 1843, played a significant role in establishing California as a garden-like landscape in the dominant American imagination. In one of many passages lauding the area's natural attractions, Frémont describes the pristine beauty of one Sierra Nevada pass: "As we passed the dividing grounds…the air was filled with perfume, as if we were entering a highly cultivated garden; and, instead of green, our pathway and the mountain-sides were covered with fields of yellow flowers" (117). Although Frémont and his party were exploring territory unfamiliar to Anglo inhabitants in California, they had no sense of apprehension or alarm. "All the day snow was in sight on the butt of the mountain, which frowned down upon us on the right; but we beheld it now with feelings of pleasant security, as we rode along between green trees and on flowers, with hummingbirds and other feathered friends of the traveler enlivening the serene spring air" (117). Frémont's account paints the natural landscapes of California as a peaceful, resplendent garden ripe for habitation. California, in Frémont's construction, is indeed a garden.

Of course, Frémont and his companions were not the only white Americans reporting on the beneficent conditions of California's landscapes. Another influential nineteenth century explorer was Lansford Hastings, whose 1843 *The Emigrants' Guide to*

*Oregon and California* heavily influenced white American migration to the West Coast. As the editors of *The Literature of California* point out in their notes to Hastings' text, his *Guide* found its way into the hands of nearly every wagon on the trail during the 1846 "Great Migration." The guide, "promising such things as perpetual spring and freedom from disease…became almost a sacred text" (121). With its emphasis on the region's exceptional natural virtues, Hastings' text is quintessential booster literature for the California climate and landscape:

> In a word, I will remark that in my opinion there is no country, in the known world, possessing a soil so fertile and productive, with such varied and inexhaustible resources, and a climate of such mildness, uniformity and salubrity; nor is there a country, in my opinion, now known, which is so eminently calculated, by nature herself, in all respects, to promote the unbounded happiness and prosperity, of civilized and enlightened man. (122)

Hastings minces no words in constructing California's landscape as the most beautiful, healthful, and pristine on earth—a place endowed by nature, with nature, for the betterment of all (American) humankind.

While Hastings echoes many of the sentiments and descriptions expressed by his contemporaries, including Frémont, Hastings takes his boosterism a step further by writing of California as an "infant country" with few human inhabitants. Positing the Valley as more or less empty of humanity ignores the fact that, as historian Gerald Haslam writes, "long before Europeans saw this valley, its abundance was apparent and it hosted one of the richest concentrations of Native Americans on the continent" (27). Hastings' erasure of California's Native residents helps to further establish the region's imagined landscape as an empty, natural garden waiting to be tilled and cultivated. In arguing for the economic potential of California, Hastings relies on language like

"infant," "newness" and "sparseness" (122) to argue for a landscape ready for settlement by entrepreneurial and industrious Americans. Hastings' ability to make such an utterance—one that discounts or ignores native presence in California—is enabled partially by his desire to lure Anglo-Americans to settle the region and partially from the changes in the native landscape wrought by more than a hundred years of Spanish colonial rule.

Unlike Frémont and Hastings' guides to California climate and topography, early accounts by Spanish and Mexican Californians reflect little of the garden imagery and describe a landscape highly populated by native tribes and villages. These accounts do not ignore the natural landscape or resources of the region, but differ in their emphasis, perhaps due to the fact that, unlike many nineteenth-century white Americans, they were not aiming to support a national myth that depended upon the existence of frontier gardens. Pedro Fages, an eighteenth century Spaniard who served as governor of Alta California from 1770 to 1791, led several expeditions to explore California's interior valleys. In writing of his travels through the south San Joaquin Valley, Fages describes the physical landscape as "a labyrinth of lakes and tulares" near the River San Francisco (2). The river, "winding in the middle of the plain, now enters and now flows out of the lakes until very near to the place where it empties into the estuary of the river. In the midst of the winding river and on the sides there are large rises of land of good soil where, with ease, irrigating ditches could be made" (2). In this description Fages presages a time when the naturally occurring rivers and lakes will be channeled into irrigation ditches to support an intensive agricultural economy.

While his descriptions of the Valley's natural elements differ primarily in tone from accounts like Hastings' and Frémont's, Fages also takes care to describe in some detail the Valley's native inhabitants, in words that convey a human landscape that is anything but "sparse." Fages writes, "All this plain is very thickly settled with many and large villages….In their villages the natives live in winter in very large squares, the families divided from each other….They are people of very good features and of a superior height, and very frank and liberal. It has not been noted that they have committed the least theft" (2). Fages' description is of a people well organized and established in the interior valley. Yet while his writing seems in many ways benign and scientific, his comment on the Natives' lack of theft implies that Spanish settlers have been concerned with or afraid of the native tribes. Though the Spanish are perhaps willing at this stage to at least describe the native inhabitants, the relationship between these Europeans and the indigenous occupants of Spanish California was more often than not one of destruction and death.

In a 1936 oral history, Andrew Freeman, a Nomlaki shaman born in 1881, describes the invasion of Europeans to California, retelling accounts likely heard from his parents' and grandparents' generation. Freeman relates the messages of a fortuneteller from Thomas Creek who foretold the arrival of whites. As Freeman recounts, "One day [the fortuneteller] said, 'There are some people from across the ocean who are going to come to this country….They have some kind of boat…with which they can cross, and they will make it. They are on the way'" (4). After his initial prophesy, the fortuneteller waited for the arrival of the newcomers for three years, all the while telling his people

more about them, informing the tribal members that the white men were single, with no wives among them, but that "'they talk, laugh, and sing, just as we do….They have five fingers and toes; they are build like we are, only they are light.' He said their blood was awfully light" (4). When the whites finally arrived, Freeman continues, they immediately attacked the Nomlaki. The fortuneteller warned other Indians that the white people were coming, and the Indians prepared to fight. What ended in this case was a confrontation in which "they fought from morning till afternoon. The Indians had come all the way from Colusa. They killed all those whites. The Indians were afraid of gray horses. They killed the horses" (5).

Not all of the Indians, Freeman relates, were as successful in defending themselves against the "white invaders." Eventually, the Indians took to hiding in the hills, fighting with the whites and suffering the effects of a three-year drought. Smallpox and gonorrhea killed more Indians, and many others died of continued fighting and starvation. After a time, Freeman says, "the whites began to gather up the Indians" and place them on reservations. "When they took the Indians to Covelo [in Round Valley, on the Nome Cult Reserve] they drove them like stock….They shot the old people who couldn't make the trip. They would shoot children who were getting tired…They killed all who tried to get away and wouldn't return to Covelo" (6). The picture Freeman paints is in line with other narratives that portray how European and American settlers often treated Natives. Previous inhabitants in any desirable landscape threatened not only Spanish colonial rule but also the narrative of the garden and of pure nature held in such high esteem by the dominant American national myth.

The erasure or displacement of California's Native inhabitants, which in the Valley include Miwok, Yokut, and Nomlaki tribes, allowed the Spanish and later the Mexicans to gain a strong foothold in what is now the southwestern United States. When Americans began to settle Mexican California in the 1840s, the work the Spanish and Mexicans had done in displacing the region's native inhabitants perhaps made it easier for boosters like Hastings to describe California as a region pure and unpeopled. The construction of the state as an empty, natural garden awaiting (white) American settlement quickly became a significant component of California's regional imaginary. After the Gold Rush and subsequent statehood, some of the focus of California's regional imaginary shifted from that of nature or the garden to one of wealth, gold, and opportunity. As people flocked to the Sierras' gold rich foothills, California's population grew immensely. Following the Gold Rush, population growth shifted to burgeoning urban centers such as San Francisco and Los Angeles. Partially as a result of this demographic transition, throughout the twentieth century, California's regional imaginary shifted away from natural gardens to the opportunities for fame and wealth offered in many of the state's urban myths, opening space for the formation of a new regional imaginary in the state's interior. The myth of the garden never fully disappeared; rather, in many ways the site of the garden itself moved to the Great Central Valley. In the Valley lay the promise of a pure earth, a state of virgin, uninhabited nature awaiting human cultivation and improvement.

The construct of unfamiliar land as empty, natural, and waiting to be cultivated is not a construct unique to California or the Great Central Valley; in fact, the myth of the

garden is one of the most powerful of all American myths, and greatly influenced the settlement and regional imaginary of the American West. Much of the attraction to the idea of the garden is bound up in the idealization of agriculture as the ideal social and economic practice. Since the time of Thomas Jefferson, the image of the self-sustaining yeoman farmer has been a symbol of American peace and prosperity. As Leo Marx outlines in *The Machine in the Garden*, farming symbolizes economic independence and sustainable affluence. Yet "what is important about the rural world…is not merely the agricultural economy but its alleged moral, aesthetic, and in a sense, metaphysical superiority to the urban, commercial forces that threaten it" (99). The American garden, embodied in the independent family farm, represents not only economic viability but also the hope for the moral and aesthetic salvation of the American soul—and its landscape.

Although the American West would eventually come to represent the pinnacle of the American Eden and one of the ideal sites for the family farm, for many years, the agrarian ideal was actually situated in opposition to the unfamiliar landscapes west of what was then the United States. Where the farms of the East represented the locus of the morally superior American individualist, the West represented a fallen, debased wilderness. The Midwest, with its vast plains unfamiliar to the treed landscapes of the East, was perceived as a vast desert—a dangerous antithesis to Euro-American civilization. As Henry Nash Smith points out in his exploration of the symbols and myths of the American West, "The absence of trees over great expanses of the plains was regarded as proof that the area was unsuited to any kind of agriculture and therefore uninhabitable by Anglo-Americans" (175). The Midwest, of course, is not a desert, and

within relatively short order the United States began to expand westward. As Americans established family farms in the plains, and as many Eastern agricultural strongholds gave way to increased urbanization during the Industrial Revolution, the western frontier took on new significance as the hope for the continued prominence of the American yeoman farmer—a figure often associated with a closeness to the land and to nature. Even when the plains yielded far less rainfall than was necessary to sustain a healthy agricultural economy, Anglo-Americans were undaunted: "If the Americans could not cause more rain to fall, they could build irrigation systems, and devise the techniques of dry farming: and these were, functionally, equivalent to increasing the rainfall" (Smith 180). In clinging to the powerful construct represented by the myth of the garden, many white Americans ignored climate and geography in favor of a firm belief that the rain would follow the plow; and if it didn't, then any intrepid farmer could find a way to render aridity irrelevant.

While Smith's study centers on the extension of the American frontier into the Great Plains, the myth of the garden infiltrated and shaped western expansion all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Neither California nor the Great Central Valley were immune from the effects of this powerful construction, which among other things helped to firmly establish a cultural framework that privileges nature over the comparatively lowly workings of human culture. As California became increasingly urbanized during the twentieth century, the Central Valley came to represent the antithesis of the crowded, glamorous, sun-drenched landscapes of southern and coastal California. If urban

California was the seedbed of civilization and culture, then the rural Valley was the Other California—and the epitome of the natural.

Establishing the Valley as a natural landscape has been and continues to be a critical component of the area's regional imaginary. Los Angeles and San Francisco may hold the most current incarnation of the California Dream—a construction dependent upon the glitz of Hollywood and the mild Mediterranean climate of the coast—but Sacramento, Fresno, Bakersfield, and other Valley towns continue to distinguish the Valley, in Frank Norris's words, as the "eternal, strong…nourisher of nations, the feeder of an entire world" (39). Since the 1860s, Valley agriculture has refigured the definition of nature in California, resulting in both the farm factory landscapes outlined in the previous chapter and in the complication of a simple binary that stubbornly places nature in opposition to and above culture.

Nature, as a concept, is not concrete, and its ambiguity grants it a place among other "slippery" concepts such as landscape; as postructural critic Dana Phillips argues, "Notoriously, 'nature' is one of philosophy's least precise and most contested terms" (32). Environmental historian William Cronon expands Phillips' definition of nature when he writes that "'nature' is not nearly so natural as it seems" (*Uncommon* 25). In fact, as Cronon continues:

> [Nature] is a profoundly human construction. This is not to say that the nonhuman world is somehow unreal or a mere figment of our imaginations—far from it. But the way we describe and understand that world is so entangled with our own values and assumptions that the two can never be fully separated. What we mean when we use the word 'nature' says as much about ourselves as about the things we label with that word. (25)

Despite the difficulties of clearly defining nature as a concept, the idea of nature—or the draw of the natural—works itself into many cultural constructs such as the myth of the garden or the desire for a return to a more pure, natural, state of being. In a structuralist reading of landscape and language, nature is most often defined as what it is not: nature is not civilization; it is not the city; it is not peopled; it is not cultivated or touched by humans. In his analysis of the ways in which nature informs the film genre of the Western, Jim Kitses argues that nature is often placed under the broader construct of the wilderness. As part of this paradigm, Kitses sets up as key dichotomies wilderness vs. civilization; individual vs. community; nature vs. culture; and the west vs. the east (12). Under the binary of nature versus culture, Kitses lists the following components:

| **Nature** | **Culture** |
|---|---|
| purity | corruption |
| experience | knowledge |
| empiricism | legalism |
| pragmatism | idealism |
| brutalisation | refinement |
| savagery | humanity (12) |

Although elements of both nature and culture in the above lists could be construed as both "good" and "bad," this structuralist grid highlights the connotations that allow nature to exist as a pure, individualistic state away from both the corruption and the humanity of culture. Nature offers freedom; culture provides constriction, and both are gendered as well as racialized.

Kitses' purpose in outlining a structuralist framework is to provide a specific frame of reference for his work in analyzing a specific film genre. Through the binaries of wilderness and civilization, Kitses is able to define the ways in which "oppositions

capture the profound ambivalence that dominates America's history and power" (13). Binaries enables Kitses to ask key questions, relevant not only to Western films but to the ways in which residents of specific western places, including the Central Valley, are able to situate their sense of cultural identity. "Was the West a Garden threatened by a corrupt and emasculating East? Or was it a Desert, a savage land needful of civilising and uplift?" (13). Answers to these questions ultimately have a profound influence on the development of a region's cultural identities. Often, those who work to create a regional imaginary in the West and its subregions deliberately choose to construct an image centered around either the Garden or the Desert. Each of these constructs centers on the idea that a landscape is either endowed with nature or devoid of it; and the choice of garden or desert significantly alters the development of the landscape over time.

As Kitses himself acknowledges, a structural framework that relies on creating meaning out of opposition has significant limitations. Neither nature nor culture, wilderness nor civilization, can ever be completely divorced from the concepts to which they are set in opposition. Nature, if defined as the absence of human influence, does not exist, as even tracts of land established as wilderness areas exist only because they are designated as such by human agents. Culture, if defined as the site of ultimate human impact, completely separate from nature, also does not exist; physical elements of the earth influence or affect human landscapes as much as humans shape the physical world. Dana Phillips argues for a rejection of the binary oppositions favored in a grid such as Kitses'. Instead of perpetuating a world view that attempts, impossibly, to establish the development of the "natural" in opposition to the actions of humans, Phillips posits a

theory that melds the two into one: “nature-culture.” Adapting the term from Bruno Latour, Phillips uses nature-culture to critique what he sees as the flaws of traditional ecocriticism, which he argues tends toward privileging nature and oversimplifying complex ecology through the lens of the pastoral (17). Yet while his theories are decidedly postructuralist, Phillips also criticizes postmodernism for valorizing culture and arguing for the death of nature. Postmodern “partisans argue that nowadays everything belongs to culture, which explains why they dispense with nature summarily. From their certifiably postmodern point of view, nature is at best a remnant of what it used to be, and when culture looks at nature, it says ‘Been there. Done that’” (25). Ultimately, Phillips argues, postmodernists believe that “the disappearance of nature is the price we have to pay for culture, which remains the highest value for postmodernists,” even though they may also question the centrality of culture in a decentered, deconstructed world (27). For Phillips, neither traditional ecocriticism nor postmodernism adequately address or investigate the complexity wrought by the interaction between nature and culture. Partially fusing the term into nature-culture begins to approach a less stringent, less dichotomized paradigm of human interactions with the natural world.

Acknowledging that structuralism ultimately provides an inadequate response to defining the complex interactions between natural and human elements on a landscape does not subsequently erase the binary paradigm from the literary, narrative, and other cultural constructions that still powerfully influence regional imaginations. In the continually evolving regional imaginary of the Great Central Valley, for example, the tensions between nature and culture continually crop up in the region’s cultural discourse.

From booster literature to poetry and other narratives, the construction of the Central Valley as nature's state is a well established component of the Valley's regional imaginary.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the emergence of specialty agriculture in the Central Valley had redefined the region's cultural identities. Increased production of specialty crops led to an increased demand for labor, as outlined in chapter two, and for ever-expanding consumer markets. Critical to the success of the Valley's agricultural empire was the railroad, which began to play an increasing role in marketing and transporting California agricultural products to a wider national market. Agricultural transport was highly profitable for rail companies, and railroads such as the Southern Pacific worked to maximize their profits by publishing pamphlets, booklets, and other marketing tools that extolled the virtues of agricultural California's natural gardens.

One such booklet, a 1904 Southern Pacific publication titled "Eat California Fruit" and authored by "one of the eaters," praises the natural virtues of California's agricultural valleys that enable growers to produce the most healthful, abundant fruit in the country[6]. Written as both an advertisement and a how-to guide, "Eat California Fruit" represents the type of California agriculture booster literature popular for much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The narrator establishes for him/herself the voice of an insider, and describes the benefits consumers could have had if they had only eaten a "mere" one and a half pounds of California fruit daily over the past year. Among

[6] "Eat California Fruit" is one of many Southern Pacific publications preserved through the archives of Sacramento History Online (www.sacramentohistory.org). The archives are a joint project of several Sacramento-area historical associations and libraries and provide researchers with access to thousands of historic photographs, postcards, and other documents related to the Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys.

the promises are: “You would have saved money; California fruit is the cheapest fruit you can buy” and “You would have enjoyed eating more” (3). A third benefit, denied to those unacquainted with California fruit, is that “You would have had better health. Maybe your health was good anyway; it’s robust health that won’t invite a little improvement” (4). Even for these healthy individuals, California fruit assures immense enrichment: “Ask your doctor if a pound and a half a day of California fruit will improve your health. If he says, *yes*, he is wise; if he says no—hardly think it possible—investigate further. You may need a new doctor” (4). California fruit, in this construction, becomes a delicious way to save money, gain gastronomic satisfaction, and improve health and well-being. Quick to dismiss any claims that *all* fruit, California grown or otherwise, may provide similar benefits, “Eat California Fruit” quickly moves into its argument of how the unique natural landscape of California’s agricultural valleys endows California fruit with special properties, making these fruits the best in the world.

The language of “Eat California Fruit” is deliberate in its attempts to sell California produce, and the section on “Why California Fruits Are Best” includes some of the most colorful arguments in the booklet. California fruits are best, in a word, because of nature. And nature, in farming subregions like the Central Valley, creates landscapes of mild temperatures and endless sunshine. “The best climate is essential in the production of the best fruit. Do not permit wiseacres who would plant persimmons in a snowdrift to teach you otherwise. The man who ‘must have frost in his fruit’ may as well eat frozen fruit as to expect a frost stunted tree to bring forth perfect fruit” (4). The perfection of California fruit is made possible through a naturally blessed climate, and

"*Nowhere in the world does the climate so nearly meet…ideal requirements as in California*" (5; italics in original). In the eyes of the Southern Pacific railroad, these ideal requirements center on abundant sunshine and an absence of humidity. In fact, endowed by nature the fruit itself *becomes* sunshine, so that ultimately "when you eat California fruit you eat sunshine fruit. 'Please, Mr. Waiter, a pound of sunshine for dessert'" (5). The construction of the natural landscape in California's agricultural valleys allows consumers from less ideal climes to benefit from eating a bit of California sunshine. No wonder, then, that some of the most successful brand names in California agriculture have included Sunkist (oranges) and Sun-Maid (raisins).

In the eyes of the Southern Pacific boosters, fruit is not just any fruit when it is grown in California, and California nature is not just any nature. "Eat California Fruit" argues insistently for the characterization as California fruit as "something apart by itself, not to be compared with fruit of the same names, raised elsewhere" (6). Acknowledging to the reader that "all this may seem farfetched to you," nevertheless "to us of California it is an old story" (6). The "old story," in this articulation, is as old as nature itself, and Southern Pacific and other boosters argue for a California that has been able to maintain and retain its status as a garden preserved, a natural wonder that has only been improved by human hands. Even when offering suggestions for preparing various California fruits, "Eat California Fruit" continues to evokes the idea of the garden through recipes such as "Eden Vale Prune Whip" (14). The Edenic garden of California—located most specifically in the Great Central Valley—becomes, through the magnanimity of its farmers and boosters, the garden of the world.

Yet despite what boosters want people to believe about the grace of nature in the California's agricultural landscapes, agricultural production on the scale of the Central Valley cannot be achieved without heavy reliance on seasonal labor and an enormous transformation of the Valley's preexisting natural resources. Boosters such as W.B. Thorpe, the early twentieth-century statistician for Sacramento County, may want the world to believe that "the water supply of the Sacramento valley…is without limit" (20), but such claims do little to change the fact that specialty agriculture, especially on the scale attempted in the Central Valley, puts immense strain on land and water.

Water plays a significant role in the formation the Central Valley's regional imaginary. As in any agricultural landscape, in the Valley water reigns. Yet water does not flow in enough of the region to make specialty agriculture viable without extensive irrigation, and in the absence of this technology some early visitors to the region saw the landscape as barren and inhospitable. Historian Donald Worster, in exploring the influence of water and irrigation in creating the contemporary landscapes of the American West, cites George Derby, a topographical engineer who led expeditions to the Valley in 1849 and 1850. Derby, accustomed to the verdant farmlands of the East, records that the Valley was "exceedingly barren, and singularly destitute of resources, except a narrow strip on the borders of the stream; it was without timber and grass, and can never, in my estimation, be brought into requisition for agricultural purposes" (qtd. in Worster 9). Much like the Spanish and Mexican explorers and settlers before him, Derby was unable to reconcile the arid landscapes of much of the Valley with his knowledge of the water needed for agricultural cultivation.

Despite Derby's dismissal of the Valley's agricultural potential, Worster argues that entrepreneurial Americans, firmly believing that if rain did not actually follow the plow then water would have to be gathered through other means, used persistence and ingenuity to transform Derby's arid wasteland into an abundant garden. California factory farmers marshaled resources in labor and commerce, and eventually gained immense political and social power. Yet as Worster writes, despite their influence, still "one essential element, and it was the most essential of all, eluded their control: they constantly had to have water, and plenty of it, to stay on top. And to get that water, they eventually came to need the men of the dam and ditch. By the 1930s, California had worked up the nation's biggest thirst" (192). But this control of water came with a cost: "Thirsty men are desperate men, often willing to bargain away much of what they own to get a drink" (193). What both corporate and family farmers in agricultural California ultimately bargained away was nature itself, although in the regional imaginary the newly created landscapes of irrigation and cultivation would simply come to replace native nature.

The Central Valley receives its water from three primary sources: annual rainfall, the Sacramento-San Joaquin River watershed, and water pumped from a vast underground lake. Mike Madison, a family farmer in the south Sacramento Valley, explored the Central Valley's manipulation of water and other resources while acting as the Artist in Bioregional Residence for the Putah Cache Bioregion Project at the University of California, Davis. While much of Madison's focus is on the landscape surrounding the small Putah Creek watershed, his experience has implications for water

in the Central Valley at large. The rainy season in the Central Valley is between November and April, and only rarely do summer months yield any rain; winter is the "green" season in the Valley. In pre-agricultural California, the wet and dry seasons in the Valley influenced patterns of plant growth and land use in the region. As Madison writes, "The pattern of winter rainfall, summer drought, is a critical determinant of the natural landscape. Plants make their growth in spring (February to May) and become dormant, or if they are annuals, die, in summer" (25). Hot, dry summers are what enabled wheat farming to be particularly successful in the Valley, but in the long run specialty farming proved more sustainable and profitable. And the success of specialty farming required immense innovations in irrigation technology.

In describing the impact of irrigation on the Central Valley landscape, Madison writes that while the Valley's sun-drenched, cloudless summers favor specialty agriculture, "the soil is dry in summer, and crops will not grow unless they are irrigated. And so much investment, public and private, and much labor and ingenuity have been expended in developing systems of irrigation" (28). Irrigated landscapes, which rely on the deliberate movement or redirection of "natural" water sources, create a unique visible imprint on the land. Madison notes that "as an element of the landscape, irrigation is conspicuous by the many devices used for moving water around—canals, pipelines, weirs, sluices, ditches, furrows, sumps, pumps, sprinklers, drip lines, siphons. Most of the summer work of farming in this district consists of tending irrigation" (28). By listing the many material objects that accompany irrigation, Madison demonstrates the extent to which irrigated specialty cropping interferes with what might otherwise be called nature

in the Valley. Madison's own experience with irrigation and the acquisition of water resources is relatively small in scope, as it stems from his experience running a small truck farm in the Sacramento Valley, yet his story is repeated time and again—and on a much larger scale—by the vast corporate farms that rely almost exclusively on irrigation to produce their yields. The emergence of this large-scale refiguring of water in the Valley has a history almost as long as Valley agriculture itself.

Environmental and historical studies such as Madison's are not the only works that seek to analyze water use in the Valley. Lee Nicholson, a San Joaquin Valley poet, uses his poem "Water, Wealth…" to critique the hubris involved with water use and agriculture in the Central Valley city of Modesto. Nicholson's poem centers on a prominent Modesto landmark: a downtown archway that reads "Modesto: Water, Wealth, Contentment, Health." The juxtaposition of these terms indicates that in Modesto's cultural imagination access to water represents the promises of health and satisfaction—an assumption not unfamiliar to residents of other arid Valley towns. As Nicholson writes: "High over city traffic with much grace/ Curves a metal arch which supports a sign./ A message hanging there in open space/ Reads WATER, WEALTH, CONTENTMENT, HEALTH—a fine/ Combination of abstraction and pride" (315). In Modesto, located in a "hot, arid land" (315), water becomes an abstraction through its scarcity, yet a lack of this resource does not hinder residents of Modesto and other Valley towns from building an unnatural landscape that depends on water in large quantities.

Modesto's heavy reliance on irrigation leads to Nicholson's construction of water as "the blue bride of the sky./ For each daily wedding this band/ Of iron surrounds with

ceremony all/ Those other essences—earth, sunlight, air" (315-6). Water, as a bride whose role is to provide life and nourishment, is an integral part of the Valley's feminized landscapes: all other elements must bow to water for survival, as must the people whose livelihood depends upon this scarce resource. Nicholson concludes his poem: "Look up. See through. Like some great Buddha's ring/ An arch can show space or everything" (316). The Modesto arch represents both "space"—in this case the absence of water—and "everything," in that water is an indispensable commodity. In the Central Valley, water is vital yet scarce, simultaneously everything and nothing.

In its critique, Nicholson's poem seeks to underscore the irony of a landscape that relies heavily on water in an arid climate. Although Nicholson's language refers primarily to water from the sky in the form of rainfall, part of the poem's irony stems from the lived reality that very little of Modesto's water, wealth, contentment, or health is bestowed from rainwater. Like all other agricultural centers in the Valley, Modesto must rely on irrigation—a water source often characterized as "unnatural."

The irrigation history of the Central Valley, on a more or less universal scale, begins with the advent of specialty cropping in the 1870s. Eager to increase production yields and profits, Valley farmers harnessed the native water resources extremely successfully—but at a great cost. In his study of the ecological impact of the development of San Francisco and its hinterlands, historical geographer Gray Brechin writes of the ways in which both mining and agriculture used immense hydraulic force that completely transformed the Valley's natural landscape. In the Central Valley, "hydraulic interventions" that worked to "make the valley safe for farming and urbanization

transformed large stretches of its rivers into sterile ditches, annihilating whatever native plants and animals had managed to survive the initial onslaught of mechanical exploitation" (51). The force of this new hydraulic landscape, Brechin argues, attacked the Valley's existing natural resources and ultimately "transformed California's Great Central Valley into one of the most intensively managed and artificial landscapes in the world" (51). Brechin's characterization of the Central Valley a wholly altered, "artificial" landscape implies a clear distinction between nature and culture. Natural water resources appear in lakes and rivers; artificial water resources are re-formed as irrigation ditches and aqueducts.

By condemning the changes in natural landscape wrought by irrigation, Brechin privileges the idea of nature as unchanged and separates the aesthetic of water in a river from the function of water in an irrigation canal. Not all water, in this paradigm, is "good" water; irrigation water, for example, is "bad" in its artificiality and fields watered via irrigation are ultimately an affront to nature. Although the detrimental environmental impact of large-scale irrigation is impossible to ignore, separating water use into categories of "good" and "bad" oversimplifies the issue. In the Central Valley, water in any form becomes a precious commodity, and water use is a perpetually divisive issue.

In order to complicate the divide between natural and unnatural water use, perhaps Dana Phillips' theory of nature-culture finds one of its most relevant applications. As "natural" water—whether found in rainfall, rivers and streams, underground lakes, or through other means—is acquired, moved, and changed to suit the purposes of agri-*culture*, the temptation to regard irrigation as unnatural or anti-nature

may be strong. Yet rather than conceiving irrigation as the antithesis of nature, perhaps viewing irrigation as simply a change in or refiguring of nature might be more fruitful. Continuing to pull away from the structural opposition of nature versus culture can lead to another incarnation of the nature-culture paradigm in the Hegelian and Marxist concept of first and second nature.

Environmental historian William Cronon uses the concept of second nature in his analysis of the environmental changes that accompanied the development of landscape in Chicago and the Midwest. First nature, according to Cronon, is "original, prehuman nature," while second nature is "the artificial nature that people erect atop first nature" (*Nature's* xix). At first glance, this construction of first and second nature seems to mimic the structuralist distinction between nature and culture. In acknowledging this possible interpretation, Cronon writes that though "this distinction has its uses,…[it] slips into ambiguity when we recognize that the nature we inhabit is never just first or second nature, but rather a complex mingling of the two" (xix). This mingling of first and second nature implies the same sense of interconnection and complication posited by Phillips' nature-culture.

First nature, Cronon argues, is often seen as being "more local than not: climate aside, species succeeded and failed mainly because of circumstances they encountered in their immediate habitats. Quite the opposite was true of second nature" (266). Second nature is necessarily extended beyond the local as commodities such as the fruit and vegetables produced in the Great Central Valley are shipped across the United States and around the world. The resultant disconnection between the products people consume and

where those products are grown "allowed people to look farther and farther afield for the goods they consumed, vastly extending the distance between points of ecological production and points of economic consumption" (266). The geographic distance between points of production and consumption alters not only the experience of the consumer but also the very image of the landscapes where various products are produced. In the Central Valley, this shift in local imagery manifests itself in the confluence of first and second nature, a meld represented often in the region's poetry.

William Everson, regarded by many as one of the premiere American poets of the twentieth century, often explores the tensions that exist between nature and culture in the Valley, and indicates the merge of first and second nature on the Central Valley's landscapes. Everson also works to articulate the tension that emerges in the characterization of the Valley as a "flyover zone"—a place to get over or get through on the way to some place else. The convergence of first and second nature as well as the marginal status often afforded to the Valley feature in Everson's poem "San Joaquin," as well as in the works of other Valley poets. Everson describes the marginalized status the Valley often faces as a subregion of an arguably more glamorous or picturesque California. "This valley after the storms can be beautiful beyond the telling,/Though our city-folk scorn it, cursing heat in the summer and drabness in winter,/And flee it—Yosemite and the sea" (89). Everson's language focuses on the Valley's natural landscape. He privileges that nature, dismissing summarily the "city-folk" who scorn it, ostensibly because they do not possess a capacity to perceive the Valley's beauties. In

favoring a different nature—that of the sea or the famed, tourist-laden Yosemite—Everson sets up the Valley's nature as one accessibly primarily to the insider.

Everson's insider view continues in the second stanza of the poem, conjuring initially the Valley as a second-nature landscape: "I in the vineyard, in green-time and dead-time, come to it dearly,/And take nature neither freaked nor amazing,/But the secret shining, the soft indeterminate wonder" (89). The "it" in this section is the Valley itself, and Everson locates the poem's narrator within the Valley through a vineyard: a site of second nature that Everson argues maintains an ambivalent position in the Valley's landscape. Nature, as "neither freaked nor amazing," simply exists; in this construction the vineyard, or an element of second nature built upon first, is as natural—and as eternal or original—as anything else on the landscape.

Although Everson implies that in the Central Valley second nature has become as natural as any kind of "original" landscape, the poem concludes with a connection back to first nature, indicating the difficulty in separating nature from culture, or first from second nature. Again using the pronoun "it" for the Valley, Everson writes, "I watch it morning and noon, the unutterable sundowns;/ And love as the leaf does the bough" (89). Although Everson positions his narrator in the Valley through the landscape of a vineyard, the ultimate connection to the San Joaquin comes by way of first nature; first and second nature converge through images of the vineyard, the sunset, and the link that binds a leaf to its bough.

Perhaps no construction has as much influence upon the regional imaginary of the Great Central Valley as that of the continuing struggle to define nature and culture in the

region. The Central Valley's agricultural landscapes are, at the very least, impressive, and agriculture has been the primary means through which the Valley's residents have continued to position themselves and their landscapes as natural and close to the earth. Yet continually evolving theories of nature cast doubt—or at the very least complicate—the construction of the Valley as a natural garden. Environmental damage wrought from extensive irrigation, overuse of the soil, and the often liberal use of chemical pesticides impacts both the human and natural elements of the Central Valley, and the more the landscape is altered the more problematic the label of nature becomes in the region.

Cries of *Eureka!* continue to ring throughout the various incarnations of the California Dream, both in the state as a whole and for California's many subregions. Yet as always, the "it" of "I have found it" is both good and bad, beautiful and damned. The lure of the natural, the hope of the garden, the sense of connection to the earth—all of these constructs work to both define and unravel the meaning of the landscape in the Great Central Valley, and the continued search for the discovery of California's golden landscapes will continue to be as fruitful and empty as the landscape itself.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## CODA: PERSPECTIVE MOMENTS

If, as some people believe, the prospect from the summit of Mount Diablo offers a view of more of the earth's surface than any other place on earth, then in many ways the mountain is an apt landmark from which to view the Great Central Valley. As with so many other "perspective moments" in Valley narrative and literature, descriptions of the view from Mount Diablo offer a sense of the area's immense scale while offering only the most limited perspective of the details that comprise the scene. In many ways, the choice to view the Valley from above or from on the ground constitutes a choice in the type of accuracy one is seeking. As with most landscapes, a study of the Central Valley requires a choice of scope and scale, and any view ultimately leads to omission and oversight.

By focusing this study on the agricultural landscapes of the Great Central Valley as a whole, I have selected a scope that is both too narrow and too broad: narrow, because as with any landscape the Valley consists of more than its agriculture; and broad, because seeking to study the Valley as a whole offers little opportunity for a close examination of any particular place or work. The Valley is home to hundreds of individual communities—some big, some small—and millions of individual people whose lives and stories constitute important portions of the Valley's regional imaginary. This thesis ultimately ignores the urban social landscapes that constitute and are constituted by the lived experience of the majority of Valley residents in favor of a focus on agriculture, a

significant economic and geographical component that influences and is visible to everyone in the Valley but ultimately figures prominently in the lives of a critical but dwindling minority. The focus on agriculture was ultimately a choice I made—one that omitted a rich urban cultural landscape in favor of a rural landscape that has worked to significantly shape the Valley's regional imaginary. But this choice in perspective was not an easy one, and many voices are lost in the distinction between the agricultural and the urban.

All academic inquiry is, ultimately, a matter of perspective, and I cannot deny or attempt to hide my own autobiographical interests that have helped to shape both my selection of the Central Valley as a site of study and that leave me wishing I had been able to do more. My situation as a former Valley resident constitutes my own perspective moment, and growing up in the rich agricultural and cultural landscapes of Fresno and Stockton continue in many ways to influence my outlook on my life and scholarship; similarly, my own agency has enabled me to construct a Central Valley that has been shaped and altered by my perception, interest, and experience.

Mount Diablo is the most prominent peak in the Coastal Ranges from which to view the flat expanse of the Central Valley, but this mountain is not the only vista that allows a perspective moment to occur. As an example, California's Altamont Pass, a corridor through the Coastal mountains between San Francisco and the Valley town of Tracy, is a landscape most notable for its acres of towering windmills that provide energy to Bay Area and nearby Valley communities. Yet as with any landscape, the meanings of this place vary from observer to observer. Once, as a high school student, I was driving

with a good friend from the coast back home to Stockton. We traveled through the Altamont at dusk, and as we emerged from the shallow canyon and caught our first glimpse of the Valley floor beneath, the twinkling lights of Tracy seemed almost to float in midair. “How pretty!” I commented passively, mostly to make conversation. To me, neither the Altamont Pass nor this particular place in the Valley held any particular meaning; the section of land existed simply as space-filler—albeit an interesting one—between my two destinations. But for my friend and his family, I soon learned, this place held a special significance, even though no one in his history had ever lived or worked there.

My friend and his siblings are the first generation of his family to be born in the United States. His parents and grandparents moved from China to California in the years following the famine and political unrest that accompanied China’s Maoist Cultural Revolution. His grandfather, after spending time at San Francisco’s Angel Island, drove with relatives into the Central Valley for the first time. As they drove through the Altamont Pass at dusk—just as we had—they emerged from the canyon and caught their first glimpse of the Valley lights below. “As my grandfather tells it,” my friend said, “At first he couldn’t believe his eyes. ‘This,’ he said in Chinese, ‘is the most beautiful place I have ever seen.’”

That story has always stuck with me, and has become part of the way I perceive the landscapes of my childhood and adolescence. Where I saw the pedestrian aesthetic of glowing city lights, my friend saw the beginning of his family in California. But while the landscapes of the Altamont Pass and the city of Tracy meant different things to my

friend and to me, neither of our stories represents the whole Truth of that landscape. Landscapes of every scale are constituted by myriad meanings that overlap and contend with each other. This multiplicity of meanings does not mean, however, that examining the meanings of place, landscape, region, or nation is ultimately a fruitless endeavor. What these multiple meanings mean for anyone studying the interplay between physical place and the sociohistorical elements of those places is that uncovering stories—both through fiction and other narratives—provides a rich, complex element that can help to decipher the multiple meanings of any given place.

At a 2006 conference for the Association of American Geographers, I presented segments of the first chapter of this thesis. Because my research is place-based and inherently geographical, the presentation was well received and did not seem out of place with the other papers in my session. Following my presentation, one of the geographers in attendance asked, “What can we, as geographers, learn from the discipline of English?” Although I was far from any “mountains” from which to view the entire scope of the interconnections between geography and English studies, I nevertheless felt that this scholar’s question had led me to my own kind of academic “perspective moment.” While acknowledging the impossibility of speaking in behalf of a diverse and ever-evolving field, I replied that as a student of English part of my project is to define and redefine what I consider to be “true” in human experience, and that perhaps geographers would benefit from broadening their definition of history and experience to include room for fiction. Fiction, I argued, is neither more true nor less true than newspaper accounts or

census records, yet fiction does provide an/other dimension through which to understand place and human experience.

Since offering something like the above response, I have continued to reflect upon that question, and I have also reframed it in order to more fully understand the interdisciplinary project I have attempted in this thesis: how can a discipline like geography, for example, more fully inform what we do in English? My answers to that question are primarily part of a process to better understand my own intellectual labors, yet ultimately the study of place can also offer an/other layer of meaning and complexity to the study of literature and culture. The many ways in which people experience place or landscape reveals a critical spatial quality that I see as inseparable from other realms of human endeavor. Everything that happens occurs in a place, and the places wherein human action is situated should be conceived as more than a backdrop for experience; rather, place should be understood or refigured as something that can actively shape and be shaped by the people who are writing about and in place. In the end, the inclusion of space or place in literary studies is a choice to gain a different or new type of perspective moment that seeks a more holistic, comprehensive approach to human experience.

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