Mobility, Car Culture, and the Environment in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

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Abstract

Set during the Great Depression, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) focuses on an American family who are forced to leave their home in Oklahoma and travel to California in search for a better life. Apart from its authentic representations of the economic instability in the U.S. in the 1930s, industrial transformations that took place throughout the country, as well as the severe draught, the novel also comments on the issue of (auto)mobility that this articles analyzes from an eco-critical perspective. The major part of the novel takes place on the road, as the reader witnesses the family traveling west on Route 66. While the road turns into a symbol of freedom and, in a way, a means to pursue the American Dream, the truck that the family travels by makes one ponder the meaning of U.S. mobility and the nation's fascination with, and dependence on, cars. Through its focus on the highway and car, *The Grapes of Wrath* also touches upon the issue of environment. Providing meticulous descriptions of the vehicle, commenting on its enormous size and the large amount of smoke that it exhausts, the novel introduces automobility as menacing to ecology and the environment.

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Mobility, Car Culture, and the Environment in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

Tatiana Konrad

Mobility occupies an important place in American culture. One of the earlier examples that outlines mobility as not just a part of the American lifestyle but a means of sheer survival is John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). Set during the Great Depression, the novel focuses on an American family which is forced to leave their home in Oklahoma and travel to California in search of a better life. Apart from its authentic representations of economic instability in the 1930s United States, the industrial transformations that took place throughout the country, and the severe drought-induced "Dust Bowl"—all primary reasons for the poverty of thousands of families—the novel also comments profoundly on (auto) mobility. It is this issue that I will analyze from an ecocritical perspective in this article.

Mobility, i.e., "the ability to move and movement itself," plays a crucial role in people's lives.[1] In his influential book *Mobilities* (2007), John Urry observes: "It sometimes seems as if all the world is on the move."[2] The world as we know it has been created because individuals and nations were mobile, travelling to different places in their home countries and the world. People have chosen to go to new territories or have been forced to leave their homelands; some travel for a short period of time, others never return to the places they thought they belonged. Together with people, animals, insects, microbes, and viruses are forever on the move; products and packages are constantly shipped to various parts of the globe. Our planet is a large space where mobility is one of its key defining components. As Tim Cresswell notes, "Mobility is everywhere": our culture is "more about routes than roots," mobility being one of the key frameworks that inform the issues of "the body and society," "the city," "the social," "nomadism," and many others. Mobility defines and is defined by "progress, …

freedom, … opportunity, and … modernity" as opposed to "shiftlessness, … deviance, and … resistance."[3]

This perpetual mobility has resulted in a variety of positive outcomes. Yet it has also caused problems that have led to various types of destruction. For example, in her book *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes* (2018), Mimi Sheller argues that "the historical development (and present effects) of interlocking systems of uneven mobility distort human relations with each other and with the world"; based on that, the scholar calls for "mobility justice."[4] Certainly today, in the era of climate change, mobility studies scholars revisit the phenomenon of mobility while paying particularly close attention to the relationship between the environment and movement. Transportation enabled by fossil fuels facilitates mobility. This kind of transportation also destroys our planet. Urry singles out a number of significant anti-environmental effects of mobility, including "reduced air quality; increased noise, smell and visual intrusion; ozone depletion; social fragmentation; and many medical consequences of 'accidental deaths and injuries, asthma and obesity."[5] It is because of these and many other critical problems that, as Sheller notes, the major task for the global population today is to solve "a series of crises related to how we move" and find out "how to make the transition to more environmentally sustainable and socially just mobilities."[6] Or, to borrow from Nancy Cook and David Butz, we need to address the most pressing ramifications of mobilities, which the scholars identify as "climate change" and "marginalized social groups immobilized in the slow lanes of life or forced into the express line."[7]

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* explores mobility and its consequences. The core of *The Grapes of Wrath* takes place on the road, as the family travels west on Route 66. While the road becomes a symbol of freedom, the truck in which the family travels prompts one to ponder the meaning of U.S. mobility and the nation's fascination with, and dependence on, cars. Via the establishment of the interstate highway system and the concurrent infusion of support of American car culture, a car has been glorified as an absolutely necessary object in one's life through which one can achieve freedom, success, comfort, and independence. The dependence of Americans on cars and the nation's fascination with this means of transport have profoundly intensified since the middle of the twentieth century. Through its focus on the highway and the truck, *The Grapes of Wrath* touches upon the issue of the environment. Providing meticulous descriptions of transportation, commenting on the enormous size of vehicles and the high amount of exhaust they emit, as well as foregrounding their necessity for survival during the Great Depression, the novel introduces the problem of automobility, which can and should be studied in light of environmentalism. Thus, this article focuses on such concepts as the highway, car culture, and mobility as they are represented in *The Grapes of Wrath* and examines

them as crucial issues in current environmental debates. The article's main aim is to discuss the literary imagination of transportation and traveling as representing a menace to ecology and to the environment.

I reread *The Grapes of Wrath* from an eco-critical perspective, set against contemporary debates surrounding climate change. Steinbeck's novel presents an early corrective to a too celebratory perspective of mobility in general and U.S. car culture in particular. In doing so, *The Grapes of Wrath* turns into a story of a doomed journey—the journey of a single family, but also the journey of humanity writ large, for the desire to be on the move using transportation enabled by fossil fuels has, as we understand it now, essentially become a means of destroying the environment. In my analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath*, mobility, or rather, automobility, becomes a prism through which to understand the role of anthropogenic factors in triggering environmental degradation, including climate change. Automobility is thus not a simple term that can be conflated with transportation or car culture; it is a complex phenomenon that denotes a way of existing and being. In my analysis of the novel, I illustrate John Urry's argument that automobility negotiates the car as a "manufactured object" along with "individual consumption," "technical and social interlinkages with other institutions, industries and related occupations," "public and private life and time *and* space," "a dominant culture," as well as the environment as such.[8]

As I will further demonstrate, *The Grapes of Wrath* profoundly challenges the issue of autonomy communicated through automobility—autonomy that stands for liberty, democracy, self-awareness, and individualism—vividly illustrating how mobility can be compelled rather than chosen. In doing so, *The Grapes of Wrath*, however, does not undermine the role of the human in causing ecological degradation, but rather it emphasizes the complex nature of the human-environment nexus. The novel hence does not simply foreground mobility as a destructive force consciously chosen by humans but rather reinforces the role of various socio-political systems, including class, in shaping the intricate meaning of automobility, with ecology and the environment being its constituent parts. Indeed, as Noel B. Salazar argues, mobility creates a "hierarchy of movements."[9] This, in my view, largely reinforces the contested nature of mobility, identifying mobility as not necessarily liberating or signifying freedom but also as an instrument to oppress multiple agents, among them nature, the environment, and migrants.

The Grapes of Wrath is not only a novel about overcoming hostile social relations and a hostile environment, but it is also a novel about being hostile to the environment. As Rick Marshall claims, "Steinbeck uses [the] dual nature of the highway landscape as an illustration of the constant tension between opportunity and oppression in

the 1930s. He maintains this tension by placing artifacts in the highway landscape for the reader to discover, stressing the concept of the highway as a product of the economic machine that feeds increasing industrialization."[10] It is the novel's focus on hostility toward humans *and* the environment that indeed makes it, as Alexa Weik von Mossner calls it, "environmental fiction."[11] The focus on both the road and the environment renders *The Grapes of Wrath* an intriguing example of where mobility—symbolized through the road—and environmental degradation intersect.

My eco-critical reading of Steinbeck's novel intends to highlight its capacity to challenge the maintenance of hegemonic meanings of the road and car culture as purely freeing. I contend that mobility involves a number of factors that challenge the dominant understanding of mobility as a positive phenomenon, its influence on the environment being one of the major ones. Combining an eco-critical perspective with mobility studies in my analysis of *The Grapes of Wrath*, I argue that the two inform each other in profound ways, broadening existing meanings of both the environment and mobility. The intricate connection between the two helps one understand the ecological and cultural crises that humanity finds itself in today and paints an alternative picture of the history of mobility and environmental degradation. This reading of the novel foregrounds a crucial question: Is humanity, like the Joads, currently on the road to nowhere?

Road Narratives and Ecology

Re-reading travel literature through an eco-critical lens is an essential task for scholars today. Including the images of transportation enabled by fossil fuels in their portrayals of mobility, these narratives contribute to (literary) environmental history. They outline not only the development of the very phenomenon of mobility with the creation of such modes of transportation but also the transformation of our culture that has become largely defined by speed, comfort, production, and consumption. Literature that discusses mobility through this kind of transportation tells us the story of progress that resulted in a rapid destruction of the planet and climate change.

Ronald Primeau writes, "Travel narratives are found in the earliest American literature across regions, in many genres, using several modes of transport. From pioneer diaries to science fiction, movement has been a central subject and theme of a national literature of exploration and self-discovery."[12] Traveling has been central to the American experience; indeed, maritime explorations of the New World led to the settling of America by Europeans, and the United States, upon its foundation as a country, pushed the exploration, settlement, and development of the North American continent further westward throughout the nineteenth century. Mobility was,

and remains, the way to "discover" a country or, more generally, any geographic space as well as one's own place in it. Transportation and the road are traditionally understood to be the two concepts most central to mobility. The road, for example, has been the subject of a number of interpretations that regard it as the key aspect of American democracy. Ann Brigham specifies, "For writers, directors, protagonists, scholars, and audiences, the road endures as a realm of possibility and promise. This association begins with its spatial character. As a space and a symbol, the road represents expansiveness and open-endedness. It may lead out of somewhere specific, but it could go anywhere. In the vast United States, and in our vaster imaginations, the road twists and turns, offering new directions, exciting detours, unprecedented access, and a beckoning horizon."[13] From the idea that "the road holds out the promise and possibility of the unknown—or unrealized" to the "expect[ation] [of] something better down the road," the road is a sign of change—not only in "orientation" but in *being* as such.[14] The freedom to choose where to travel and by which means, to exchange one lifestyle for another, to make plans and then realize them in a new place, or to leave for parts unknown and to allow the life you find there to decide your fate: this idea is central to a prominent understanding of human rights and democracy. Literature, and specifically "road stories," writes Katie Mills, portray "freedom of movement" as the primary aspect of a broader and more fundamental issue of "liberty."[15]

Ann Brigham suggests that we take road literature to be a relatively new genre, arguing that "road narratives date back to the early twentieth century."[16] She refers here to the transportation system's twentieth-century transformation, a time that first saw the building of paved roads that were particularly necessary for bicycles and the subsequent establishment of a vast automotive highway system. Literature responded to these innovations, and thus the genre of road literature was born. This genre's narratives all have a rather peculiar setting: "While most literary road trips move through several geographical regions, often portraying a cross-country trek, the highways through the heartland are in many books either the major setting of the story or the significant space through which travelers must pass on their way toward their destination."[17]

Most road narratives include means of transportation as the key agent. Transportation is not just some sporadic element in a story, but rather a chief signifier of the nomadic nature of the American nation. Making movement through space faster and more convenient, transportation (excuse the tautology) transports one to a desired place—a place that will presumably guarantee some benefit, whether it be financial stability, physical and moral safety, aesthetic pleasure, inner calm, or other comforts that an individual desires or seeks.

Portraying a road trip as "an iconic American experience,"[18] road literature can create an idyllic image of travel. Even if the characters experience certain misfortunes on the road, or have problems with their means of transport, mobility in such examples of literary works is positive. A given trip's positive outcome might never happen, or maybe one's plans are not realized, but even in the most tragic stories, a certain positive valence of mobility as an experience provides a silver lining.

It is rather unprecedented, however, that while the road and transportation have each been singled out as key elements in road literature, another significant presence—the environment—has been neglected. Certainly today, when climate change has finally become an issue that many scientists, scholars, and activists have started to worry about in earnest, it is essential to incorporate the idea of ecological degradation into transport narrative analyses, not only to underscore the ubiquity of environmentalism in the human experience but also to reimagine the genre of travel narratives and the concept of mobility as such, which have enabled (among other factors) climate change to take place.

Transportation by air, land, and water enabled by fossil fuels accounts for around "15% of global greenhouse emissions" and is thus a significant factor to consider when searching for ways to minimize the ramifications of climate change.[19] And although "the environmental effects of transport have long been recognized, … until the 1970s only a few policies or actions were enacted to address these effects. Moreover, the actions enacted were for the most part of very limited scope. Hence, with only few exceptions (such as the 1963 Buchanan Report) it cannot be said that they amounted to an overall policy or strategy to address the environmental effects of transport."[20] Indeed, along with the problem of transportation, "anthropogenic climate change involves various types of mobility and processes of deterritorialization."[21] The reimagination of mobility, including its literary representations, as a trigger of, and contributor to, environmental degradation is crucial to the collective understanding of transportation, the road, and the freedom of movement with regard to both the United States and the world.

The twentieth century has irrevocably transformed our vision of civilization and of comfortable living. The extensive use of fossil fuels has enabled humanity to create a new model of existence oriented toward nations and individuals reaping profits and benefits from nearly any activity. In the introduction to their anthology *Petrocultures: Oil, Politics, Culture* (2017), Sheena Wilson, Imre Szeman, and Adam Carlson argue, "Oil and its outcomes—speed, plastics, and the luxuries of capitalism, to name a few—have lubricated our relationship to one another and the environment for the duration of the twentieth century."[22] These scholars underscore the intricate relationship between humans, on the one hand, and natural energy resources, on the other; a

web of connections has become so pervasive and tenacious that it seems impossible for us to sever it. The dependence on fossil-fuel energy is particularly difficult to eliminate because of the deeply rooted democratic notion of car usage as an integral part of what has long been understood as "living the 'American' way." In the 1950s, "when Congress funded construction of the interstate highway system, nearly all of the basic patterns underpinning the creation of car-centered landscapes—as well as nearly all of the most significant environmental problems related to heavy car use—were firmly in place. With these changes, the United States became Car Country."[23] Today, the U.S. remains perhaps the most scarily vivid example of a country where the nation is literally bound to their private forms of transportation for various purposes: commuting to work and school, driving to places of leisure and shopping, even getting to parks so one can then go for a walk. The relationship between the human and the car has become so intricately intertwined that the car is now an extension of the human body, enabling mobility but also ensuring that without the involvement of an automobile it is not simply restricted but practically impossible.

The car's vital role in the lives of American individuals has prompted various lofty interpretations. For David Louter, the car is "the very symbol of technology destroying an older way of life, [which] offered mobility and freedom."[24] Stephanie LeMenager, in turn, claims: "For Americans, the car and the road enable the sense of radical materiality—feeling embodied—that has been theorized as ecological affect." She adds, "Cars made the human body more valuable, pleasurable, and fun. They also caused, and still cause, more human deaths per day than any single agent, forcing questions about human consumption, the price of the mediated self made possible by cheap energy."[25] The great tragedy is the extent of Americans' transportation dependence. The enormous role fossil fuel transportation and mobility have assumed in the American cultural imagination have become so great that they are hallmarks of the "American" way of life. Transportation, though linked to considerable progress, has given rise to numerous other problems, both for humans (among them widespread obesity and a high number of deaths in accidents) and for the environment, most profoundly apparent in the ecological decline that is currently manifesting itself on multiple levels.

Mobility and the Environment in *The Grapes of Wrath*

The heated debates regarding climate change force one to consider not only the current ecological situation but also to examine the historical development leading up to it. Transportation enabled by fossil fuels has been destructive for the environment since its inception. Literature, among other media, offers powerful descriptions of transportation, its role with regard to the American nation, as well as its influence on the environment. One such narrative is *The Grapes of Wrath*, which mostly unfolds on

the road, inside a truck.[26] In what follows, I explore mobility and environmental degradation, as portrayed in the novel, through the prism of power relations, where class and gender play a prominent role. I first focus on the novel's depictions of agricultural transport. I demonstrate how these portrayals reinforce the issue of monstrosity so prominently voiced in *The Grapes of Wrath* through the images of class oppression and humanity's (ab)use of nature. I then move to the dual meaning of transportation in the novel as both a means through which mobility is enabled and a home. Finally, I revisit the concept of monstrosity that informs mobility in *The Grapes of Wrath*, illustrating how mobility turns from an opportunity to find a better life to a doomed and deadly experience.

Given the age and reputation of the novel, it has become the subject of numerous scholarly debates, and has been particularly helpful for the construction of the cultural image of the Great Depression. Yet, in light of today's problems related to mobility, I revisit *The Grapes of Wrath* in order to make it meaningful within contemporary discourses and demonstrate that current events related to ecology and the environment open up a new, ecocritical perspective on the novel.

The Grapes of Wrath falls into the category of road narratives for which "the meaning of the road-story genre takes shape through an understanding of the importance of who takes to the road."[27] The focus on a poor family of tenant farmers, who have been caught up in a succession of radical social, economic, and environmental transformations, which include bank foreclosure, agricultural changes, drought, and severe dust storms—the phenomenon that has become known as the Dust Bowl—is crucial to the analysis of the plot. That the novel is "most essentially a road book" can hardly be questioned.[28]

According to *The Grapes of Wrath*, two themes best describe the 1930s: "industrialization and migration."[29] Crucially, in the novel, one is the cause of the other: mechanization and the industrialization of agriculture cause forced mobility, which, in turn, causes pollution and more ecological degradation. It is also through the process of mechanization that (auto)mobility, transportation, cars, tractors, trucks, and machines are introduced as *eco-objects*, among their other roles, i.e., their destructive connection to the environment is foregrounded. Louis Owens pinpoints the unequal relationship among migrants, nature, and machines: "While the migrants are identified closely with the natural world, the mechanistic world stands in antithesis to the biological migrants. *The Grapes of Wrath* indeed abounds with examples of destructive machines, beginning with the light truck that swerves in order to hit the land turtle making its way across the highway. Later, not only will a car hit and kill the Joads' dog, but we will hear a story of a 'Big Cad,' which hit a truckful of migrants,

killing one of the migrant children and throwing 'bed clothes an' chickens an' kids' all around."[30]

Some of the most vivid descriptions of mechanization and its evils are introduced through the images of the tractors that invade the tenants' land. The tractor is first described as the weapon of the "monster"—the novel's powerful metaphor for "the Bank or the Company"—for "One man on a tractor can take the place of twelve or fourteen families."[31] Yet soon the tractor itself becomes a "monster":

> The tractors came over the roads and into the fields, great crawlers moving like insects, having the incredible strength of insects. They crawled over the ground, laying the track and rolling on it and picking it up. Diesel tractors, puttering while they stood idle; they thundered when they moved, and then settled down to a droning roar. Snub-nosed monsters, raising the dust and sticking their snouts into it, straight down the country, across the country, through fences, through door-yards, in and out of gullies in straight lines. They did not run on the ground, but on their own roadbeds. They ignored hills and gulches, water courses, fences, houses.[32]

Curiously, the comparison of the tractor to an insect helps reinforce mechanization of nature/the environment: the tractor invades the ecological space as a new, human-made species. The mechanical nature of a tractor is described further through "its machined surfaces, its surge of power, the roar of its detonating cylinders." The novel goes on to characterize its destructive relation to the earth as a perverse sexual act, a violent rape that humiliates, enslaves, and destroys: "Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades—not plowing but surgery, pushing the cut earth to the right where the second row of disks cut it and pushed it to the left; slicing blades shining, polished by the cut earth. And pulled behind the disks, the harrows combining with iron teeth so that the little clods broke up and the earth lay smooth. Behind the harrows, the long—twelve curved iron penes erected in the foundry, orgasms set by gears, raping methodically, raping without passion." The driver of such a machine is no longer a human being: "it did not look like a man . . . he was a part of the monster, a robot in the seat."[33] A sense of the tractor's monstrosity is created through the descriptions of its strong and dangerous carcass, the fuel that it requires, and its relatively large size. The tractor, whose components are thoroughly described in the novel, replaces humans in the field, in terms of body parts. The novel also effectively contrasts the vulnerability of the human body and the metal body of the tractor. Owens makes an important observation: "It is not the machine, however, that is evil but the uses to which it is put."[34] According to the novel, those in power use the machines to dominate over those it has subjugated, nature included.

Sigridur Gudmarsdottir even introduces the term "ecorape" to describe the influence of certain events on nature: "*The Grapes of Wrath* discloses an ecorape that

takes place through sociological, economical and ecological disaster, known as 'The Dust Bowl.'"[35] The themes of motherhood manifested through both the main matriarch Ma Joad and her pregnant daughter Rose of Sharon can be juxtaposed to the economic and agricultural transformations depicted in the novel to understand the sufferings experienced by life-giving nature and a life-giving woman. This juxtaposition turns the novel not only into a work of environmental fiction due to its focus on transportation and transportation's destructive role on the environment, but also, more specifically, into an eco-feminist narrative that highlights the masculinist-predatory representations of the machines. To borrow from Gudmarsdottir, "Steinbeck draws similarities of cuts, rapes and violence between male domination over earthly production and female reproduction."[36]

While the images of the bank and the tractor are so prominent in the novel, portrayed quite literally as monsters, they are, of course, merely parts of the larger monster: runaway capitalism. *The Grapes of Wrath* reconstructs a transformative moment in the history of the United States through the personal stories of the tenants, unveiling not only the ways in which capitalism has dramatically changed the economy of the U.S. but also how it has impacted class relations within the nation. The working class, represented by the Joads (and numerous other families) in the novel, cannot withstand the power of capitalism—the system that prioritizes production, consumption, and the profit that one can gain through these two processes. Unable to produce so much as is now required, the working class is sacrificed, and technology comes to replace humans. The bank and the tractor in *The Grapes of Wrath* are thus the instruments of capitalism.

Along with the tractor, illustrated as the machine of people who belong to a certain class, a superior group, the novel ponders the usage of other machines—those created for the purpose of transporting people, in this case, independent of their social class. The Joads believe that the only way they can survive is by heading west to California, obviously unaware at first that thousands of other migrants from Oklahoma have also decided to do this, and unable to anticipate that their dream of a decent life in California will become a nightmare as they will have to fight for jobs, money, and their very existence and future.

Stuart W. Leslie argues, "That Steinbeck chose the road as its setting reveals his shrewd appreciation for geographical and social mobility as a defining American trait."[37] Yet it seems problematic to me to characterize the forced mobility described in *The Grapes of Wrath* as "a defining American trait," for had it not been for the Great Depression, the family would not have moved, given the strong bond between the land and its human inhabitants, as described in the novel. The novel foregrounds the barbarism of depriving people of their land and forcing their relocation: "Sure, cried

the tenant men, but it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours. That's what makes it ours—being born on it, working it, dying on it. That makes ownership, not a paper with numbers on it."[38] Thus not only does *The Grapes of Wrath* question the concept of ownership that was clearly abused in the 1930s, but it also takes a negative stance on mobility and migration, seeing these phenomena to be the result of class inequality and a forced necessity imposed on those whom the system leaves powerless. That the country, as the Joads contemplate on their way to California, still has something to offer them acknowledges its geographic vastness as well as the potential that mobility may ultimately provide what one desires. Yet "with every mile the Joads drive the Highway 66, with every new cut and rape inflicted on the land, and with every new page of the novel anger and injustice are slowly accumulating."[39]

The truck in which the Joads' journey serves several purposes in the novel. It is, of course, a means of transport that speeds up the trip in addition to its added comfort; it is also their temporary home, as it manages to accommodate not only the whole family but also all their possessions; finally, it is an agent that helps one look at mobility through the prism of environmentalism.[40]

Unlike the tractor, the truck seems to gain a positive connotation for the Joads. Though they are forced to load it and use it to move away, the truck symbolizes a favorable change for them. Being sure that they can start a new, good life in California, the Joads use the truck as a means of reaching their goal—both literally and metaphorically. However, except for this single nuance, *The Grapes of Wrath* does not seem to differentiate between trucks and tractors. In the novel, both are machines—the monsters of the new system that are used to enslave or destroy both the poor and nature itself.

As the novel begins, Tom, the second Joad son, is on the way home after his release on parole from prison. Given his situation, he must hitchhike. Eventually he boards a truck, whose detailed description opens the novel's second chapter: "A huge red transport truck stood in front of the little roadside restaurant. The vertical exhaust pipe muttered softly, and an almost invisible haze of steel-blue smoke hovered over its end. It was a new truck, shining red, and in twelve-inch letters on its sides—OKLAHOMA CITY TRANSPORT COMPANY. Its double tires were new, and a brass padlock stood straight out from the hasp on the big back doors."[41] The novel's attention to detail is crucial here. While the truck as such is important to the novel, for it enables mobility, *The Grapes of Wrath* leaves this use as a self-evident fact. Instead, it comments on the monstrosity of transportation, which is manifested through its deadly influence on nature. While describing tractors, the narrator finds it important to specify that they are "diesel" ones; during the aforementioned inventory of the

truck, the narrator mentions "the vertical exhaust pipe" and "steel-blue smoke."[42] The machines' massiveness seems only to amplify their negative effects on the environment. The suggested gentleness and beauty of the truck (as understood through the way the pipe works, the description of the smoke, and the condition and color of the truck) helps intensify the unwillingness of car users to see the truck's negative impact on the environment.

As the truck moves, attention is drawn to the mechanisms that bring the monster to life: "The hitch-hiker flopped down out of sight and clung to the door handle. The motor roared up for a moment, the gears clicked in, and the great truck moved away, first gear, second gear, third gear, and then a high whining pick-up and fourth gear. Under the clinging man the highway blurred dizzily by. It was a mile to the first turn in the road, then the truck slowed down. The hitch-hiker stood up, eased the door open, and slipped into the seat." Later: "Then the motor roared up and the gears clicked and the great red truck rolled heavily away." And finally, "When Joad heard the truck get under way, gear climbing up to gear and the ground throbbing under the rubber beating of the tires, he stopped and turned about and watched it until it disappeared. When it was out of sight he still watched the distance and the blue air-shimmer."[43] Paying close attention to the way the truck is constructed and meticulously describing how the truck can be activated, the novel emphasizes the omnipresence of technology and mechanization in human lives and how they change the nature of *being*, both illustrating what mechanical being is and suggesting that it largely improves a human's being. One the other hand, through these descriptions, *The Grapes of Wrath* brings to the fore the issue of mobility and the practice of moving as such, largely upgraded through transportation. As it does so, the novel, however, also constructs the image of the new world—the world dominated by transportation that, in turn, largely transforms the environment.[44]

As a kind of transportation enabled by fossil fuels, the truck, just like the tractor, destroys nature. Yet the novel seems to differentiate between the two vehicles, such that whereas the tractor becomes the weapon of the system, the truck is used by an individual. In the novel, tractors drive through fields, while trucks use highways. The highway, in a sense, becomes a continuation of the truck and, interestingly, of its destructive influence on nature. Thus, chapter 3 opens with a description of the human-made highway, and of nature that must adjust to the transformed ecosystem:

> The concrete highway was edged with a mat of tangled, broken, dry grass, and the grass heads were heavy with oat beards to catch on a dog's coat, and foxtails to tangle in a horse's fetlocks, and clover burrs to fasten in sheep's wool; sleeping life waiting to be spread and dispersed, every seed armed with an appliance of dispersal, twisting darts and parachutes for the wind, little spears and

> balls of tiny thorns, and all waiting for animals and for the wind, for a man's trouser cuff or the hem of a woman's skirt, all passive but armed with appliances of activity, still, but each possessed of the anlage of movement.[45]

The Grapes of Wrath discusses the coexistence of humanity and the natural world; yet this coexistence is, in principle, an inevitability, a situation that has been imposed on nature—it can be raped, enslaved, and destroyed via the exercise of human will. At the same time as being harmful and unamiable, these complex connections and relations between the human (including various objects created by humanity, such as the highway and transport) and nature are also depicted as codependent and symbiotic. The idea of becoming part of, dominating, exploiting, degrading, and shaping or destroying complicates the clear-cut difference between humanity and nature in general, and mobility and the environment in particular, suggesting that one is part of the other. The precarious existence that humanity condemns nature to is the result of the transformation enabled by industrialization and mobility. Commenting on the latter, the passage intensifies the idea of being "on the move" even through the descriptions of nature that awaits its own "transport" to move someplace else, grow, and propagate in an unknown territory, far away from its origin. Likewise, the novel emphasizes the radical changes that the highway enforces on the migrants: "They settled into a new technique of living; the highway became their home and movement their medium of expression. Little by little they settled into the new life."[46] Here, the destructive force of mobility is foregrounded only to intensify the idea of derangement triggered by industrialization and mechanization and manifested through, among others, the transformation of the environment. When analyzed retrospectively and symptomatically from today's experience and knowledge of the climate crisis, the novel's references to trucks, tractors, and the highway, and the deadly nature of the transformations that all three bring can only be reinforced, considering how drastically human interventions have changed the environment and eco-systems through various agricultural practices, air pollution, and deforestation, to name but a few.

The growing transportation addiction is intensified later, in chapter 7, devoted to descriptions of cars for sale and of people who are buying them in order to move west. The chapter opens as follows: "In the towns, on the edges of the towns, in fields, in vacant lots, the used-car yards, the wreckers' yards, the garages with blazoned signs—Used Cars, Good Used Cars. Cheap transportation, three trailers. '27 Ford, clean. Checked cars, guaranteed cars. Free radio. Car with 100 gallons of gas free. Come in and look. Used Cars. No overhead." This description gives the reader an idea of the intensity and speed with which cars are being introduced into human lives. Consider, for example, the indignation of one of the sellers, who was offered mules to cover the expensive price of one of the cars: "*Mules!* Hey, Joe, hear this? This guy wants to trade

mules. Didn't nobody tell you this is the machine age? They don't use mules for nothing but glue no more." Yet such a description also anticipates the expected scale of mobility, borne out in the wave of labor migrants who will drive through much of the country only to find poverty and disappointment at their journeys' end, though now they are absolutely sure about one thing: "I got to get a car. We're goin' to California. I got to get a car." The chapter concludes with a view of a pool of cars as vast as the ocean: "Square noses, round noses, rusty noses, shovel noses, and the long curves of streamlines, and the flat surfaces before streamlining. Bargains today. Old monsters with deep upholstery—you can cut her into a truck easy. Two-wheel trailers, axles rusty in the hard afternoon sun. Used Cars. Good Used Cars. Clean, runs good. Don't pump oil. . . . Cadillacs, La Salles, Buicks, Plymouths, Packards, Chevvies, Fords, Pontiacs. Row on row, headlights glinting in the afternoon sun. Good Used Cars."[47] These cars are mechanical monsters that humans buy, spending the last of their money in hopes of a better future.

What the Joads eventually realize, however, is far from those rather idyllic images that they pictured when leaving for California. They soon understand that there are too many migrants, and getting a job with decent pay will be impossible. Yet through the Joads' story *The Grapes of Wrath* also invites the reader to reconsider mobility during the Great Depression and ponder its deadliness. First, on the way to California, both Grandpa and Grandma die. Through the death of these two family members, the novel arguably promotes some sort of holistic eco-ethics, in which every intervention (whether it is humanity mechanizing nature, one group of people dominating the other and forcing them to move, or otherwise) means a degradation. Grandpa is ultimately buried somewhere in the fields—the tragedy here is not only his death but the realization that members of his family will hardly ever be able to visit his modest grave. The grandmother dies on the road, close to the California state border, and stopping to bury her right away is not an option: "'The fambly hadda get acrost,' Ma said miserably."[48] Along with that, the novel reveals mobility to be a false hope. The overcrowded roads, the places where trucks have driven people to, literally causing overpopulation, prove that the journey taken was a failure: "Three hundred thousand in California and more coming. And in California the roads full of frantic people running like ants to pull, to push, to lift, to work. For every manload to lift, five pairs of arms extended to lift it; for every stomachful of food available, five mouths open."[48] And further: "On the highways the people moved like ants and searched for work, for food. And the anger began to ferment."[49] Mobility thus performs the role of a monster: just as the tractor sliced the soil, so did this forced mobility exhaust, exasperate, and drive to despair some of the migrants, and others were murdered. In this way, the novel draws parallels between the migrants from Oklahoma and their land—both fall victim to industrialization and mechanization. Yet, as the examples have illustrated,

the destructive power of transportation on ecology and human existence is one of the key issues raised in *The Grapes of Wrath*, for through the metaphor of the monster the novel vividly describes the exhaust produced by trucks and tractors, the land taken away from the farmers, and the migrants themselves, who have covered such a long distance only to find out that their destination has nothing to offer them.

Conclusion

Revisiting Steinbeck's novel—a book filled with images of mobility, transportation, and degraded nature—during our current era of global climate change opens up new perspectives on the cultural interpretation of ecological decline, the environment, and global warming. The focus on the family of poor farmers during the Great Depression sets the text's tone, outlining migration and mobility to be the only way out. Yet the skill with which *The Grapes of Wrath* gradually intensifies the trip as a doomed journey helps one to reimagine mobility as not necessarily a part of the American spirit but as an inevitability that is compelled rather than chosen.

The Grapes of Wrath includes numerous descriptions to demonize transportation. Yet the novel does not seem to be against progress as such; rather, it opposes the ramifications that such progress exerts on a specific group of people and on nature itself. *The Grapes of Wrath* is an epic human drama. While it has already been interpreted from social, economic, and gender perspectives, it is necessary to reconsider it as a text addressing ecological decline. The novel is filled with themes and events that are typical of climate change novels: starvation, migration, and overpopulation, even the flooding that destroys the Joads' dwelling toward the end of the book. Moreover, the novel's insistent focus on transportation simply cannot be ignored, particularly today, when the effects of various means of transport on our planet are well known. The novel's ending is crucial in this respect. As thousands of families drive to the place that they think will bring them peace and stability, ignoring the deadly smoke that rises above the crowded highways, they end up with nothing. This scenario can be aptly applied to the current situation, as humanity's dependence on cars has created the phenomenon of car culture, filling to excess roads throughout the world, whereas our myopic understanding of climate change has allowed us to close our eyes to the smoke that billions of cars emit into the atmosphere. From an environmental perspective, it seems that humanity is, indeed, like the Joads, on the road to nowhere.

Notes

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3 Timothy Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–2.

4 Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes* (London: Verso Books, 2018), xv.

5 Urry, *Mobilities*, 5.

6 Sheller, *Mobility Justice*, 1.

7 Nancy Cook and David Butz, "Moving Toward Mobility Justice," in *Mobilities, Mobility Justice and Social Justice*, ed. Nancy Cook and David Butz (London: Routledge, 2018), 3.

8 Urry, *Mobilities*, 115–18.

9 Noel B. Salazar, "Theorizing Mobility Through Concepts and Figures," *Tempo Social: Revista de sociologia da USP* 30, no. 2 (2018): 159, DOI: 10.11606/0103-2070.ts.2018.142112.

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11 Alexa Weik von Mossner, "Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion," in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 541.

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24 David Louter, *Windshield Wilderness: Cars, Roads, and Nature in Washington's National Parks* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 20.

25 Stephanie LeMenager, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil!*," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 72–73, DOI: 10.1093/alh/ajr057.

26 Along with the novel, its influential film adaptation, John Ford's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940), largely contributed to sustain car culture.

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28 Stuart W. Leslie, rev. *Industrialism in John Steinbeck's* The Grapes of Wrath, ed. by Louise Hawker, *Steinbeck Review* 8, no. 1 (2011): 109.

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30 Louis Owens, The Grapes of Wrath*: Trouble in the Promised Land* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 80.

31 John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 36, 38.

32 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 40–41.

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36 Gudmarsdottir, "Rapes of Earth," 212.

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38 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 39.

39 Gudmarsdottir, "Rapes of Earth," 214.

40 While this truck functions as the family's home, the novel makes explicit that it is a forced, hostile meaning of the vehicle. The abandoned boxcar where the family stays later, by contrast, is perceived as a comforting space that gives shelter to the family. Mobility and immobility are skillfully contrasted here to intensify the idea of automobility as the chief characteristic of the new age (de-mechanized and deranged means of transport are not needed and are thus thrown away) and mobility as a means of oppression and subjugation.

41 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 7.

42 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 41, 7.

43 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 10, 16, 20.

44 For more on the environmental impact of transportation, see Tatiana Prorokova-Konrad, ed., *Transportation and the Culture of Climate Change: Accelerating Ride to Global Crisis* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020).

45 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 17.

46 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 190.

47 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 71, 74, 74, 76.

48 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 269.

49 Steinbeck, *Grapes of Wrath*, 280, 334.

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Tatiana Konrad is the author of *Docu-Fictions of War: U.S. Interventionism in Film and Literature* (University of Nebraska Press, 2019) and (co-)editor of *Cultures of War in Graphic Novels: Violence, Trauma, and Memory* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), *Transportation and the Culture of Climate Change: Accelerating Ride to Global Crisis* (West Virginia University Press, 2020), and *Cold War II: Hollywood's Renewed Obsession with Russia* (University Press of Mississippi, 2020). Currently anchored at the University of Vienna, she was recently awarded an Austrian Science Fund grant for her project "Air and Environmental Health in the (Post-) COVID-19 World," which will launch in February 2022.

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