



PROUD TO BE AN OKIE

CULTURAL POLITICS, COUNTRY MUSIC,
AND MIGRATION TO SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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PIPER CHAPPELLE

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Preface and Acknowledgments</i>	xi
Introduction	1
PART I. BIG CITY WAYS	
1. At the Crossroads of Whiteness: Antimigrant Activism, Eugenics, and Popular Culture	21
2. Refugees: Woody Guthrie, "Lost Angeles," and the Radicalization of Migrant Identity	45
3. Rhythm Kings and Riveter Queens: Race, Gender, and the Eclectic Populism of Wartime Western Swing	76
PART II. RHINESTONES AND RANCH HOMES	
4. Ballads for the Crabgrass Frontier: Suburbanization, Whiteness, and the Unmaking of Okie Musical Ethnicity	113
5. Playing Second Fiddle No More? Country Music, Domesticity, and the Women's Movement	159
6. Fightin' Sides: "Okie from Muskogee," Conservative Populism, and the Uses of Migrant Identity	180
Reprise: Dueling Populisms: The Okie Legacy in National and Regional Country Music	208
<i>Notes</i>	223
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	313
<i>Index</i>	329

1 At the Crossroads of Whiteness

Antimigrant Activism, Eugenics, and Popular Culture

My people
are not quaint
They're not colorful
They ain't odd nor funny nor picturesque.

.
It makes me sore to hear or to see or to read
How you big long haired writers
Whack away at my people
Chew and cut and saw away at my people
Trying to make like you are their savior
Or their way shower
Or their finder,
Or their discoverer,
Like Balboa, like Colombo

.
setting your maps and your charts and your pens,
And stumbling onto my people
Like they was some sort of a new piece of land
Sticking up out of an old body of water.

WOODY GUTHRIE, "My People"

If Dwight Yoakam is correct in insisting that the cultural ethnicity of country music is the "*Grapes of Wrath* culture," then we must begin by considering how that "ethnicity" came into being. In some respects, Okie country music emerged on a sour note in the mid- to late 1930s: a time of privation, worrisome migration, and intense media scapegoating in California. Although much of this book is concerned with the images and sounds that migrant musical performers created, this chapter focuses on the images that others produced to malign the migrants. So relentless were these attacks, in fact, that migrants' social status began to founder, leaving many to assume a class position so low it appeared racialized or otherwise unsuited for "white" citizens. Recoiling from these attacks, migrant performers did what musicians around the world have done in times of ethnic or cultural perse-

cution. They weathered the barbs and fashioned personalized responses—the prideful, sorrowful, angry, joyous, and sometimes rebellious songs that would come to characterize much of the Okie music repertoire.

Looking back today through the lenses of the film directors John Ford and Pare Lorentz, the Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange, and our own nostalgia, it is easy to see the Okies as an oppressed lot, the dutiful displaced citizen-farmers of Steinbeck or Ford's *Grapes of Wrath*, the victimized stalwarts of Lorentz's *Plow That Broke the Plains*, or the hardened Madonna-heroines, like that of Lange's iconic, incessantly reproduced photograph "Migrant Mother." Indeed, with Ford, Lange, and Steinbeck as our chief chroniclers, it is difficult to even imagine that the poor Okies of the late 1930s and early 1940s might stir up hatred, much less an antimigrant campaign.

Not so at the time, particularly for "native" white Californians, who were likely to speak of the migrants as a plague, often employing the same hysterical sort of rhetoric that sometimes surrounds discussions of Mexican immigrants today. Doomsdayism and hyperbole abounded. "No greater invasion by the destitute has ever been recorded in the history of mankind," Thomas W. McManus, high chieftain of the anti-Okie movement in California, warned readers of the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1940. "It has overwhelmed us; they will soon control the political destiny of California. We must stop this migration or surrender to chaos and ruin."¹

Historians, in fact, have long puzzled over the amount of animosity that native white Californians leveled at the more than 350,000 migrants who entered the state during the 1930s. Dust Bowl migrants were, after all, mostly native-born American citizens of European ancestry and of Protestant faith. Traveling from drought-ravaged Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas, and Missouri, the economic migrants of the Depression formed a legion of what would have been celebrated in an earlier age as sturdy pioneers or "pathfinders of civilization."² Instead they were threatened, ridiculed, exploited, shunned, and encouraged to return to their native states. In the eyes of native white Californians, poor whites from the Ozark and Ouachita mountains, the southern plains, and the prairie Southwest had transformed from model frontiersmen into unwanted Others.

Scholars have traditionally explained the hostility of white Protestant Californians toward white Protestant migrants as a product of tension over the local distribution of relief. Migrants, according to this view, were overloading county and municipal welfare systems and therefore were subject to criticism and political contention.³ An examination of the prevailing de-

pictions of "the migrant problem," as well as the actual track record of antimigrant activism, however, indicates that negative representations of migrants and poor whites were as potent, if not more so, in provoking antimigrant sentiment. Although arguments that migrants misused relief did raise alarm, native Californians were also inundated with stereotypical images and reminders that members of the migration from the southern plains were "white trash" and *Tobacco Road*-like misfits—economic and hereditary inferiors who engaged in uncontrolled reproduction, lacked a proper work ethic, and destabilized functional structures of political and social control. Native white Californians learned to revile the Dust Bowlers much as they had earlier "learned" that people of Asian, African, Mexican, and Native American ancestry posed a threat to civilized society.⁴

The result of this onslaught was a rather remarkable circumstance in the history of American prejudice: a group of ostensibly white citizens became so stigmatized that its members became fodder for the kind of race talk and eugenic baiting normally reserved for racial minorities or immigrants.⁵ This race talk took the form of a major political and media campaign that drew from phenotypic and behavioral stereotypes to racialize migrant bodies and actions. As a system imbued with "scientific" authority, eugenics—the effort to beget well-born, or "eu-genic," children as opposed to poorly born, hereditarily deficient offspring—was also an important part of this equation. Eugenics and race talk allowed native white Californians to create myths that downgraded the status of white Dust Bowlers to such an extent that migrants were subjected to forms of harassment typically faced by racial minority groups.

Migrants, in fact, began to assume a liminally white status that clashed with existing mythologies of whiteness celebrated by Los Angeles and Southern California elites.⁶ These mythical regimes of whiteness—known variously as the "Mission myth," the "Nordic outpost" argument, and the "seaport of Iowa" legend—were a set of fictional stories that sought to make the region more attractive to middle-class newcomers by emphasizing the white heritage of Los Angeles. The Mission myth did this by highlighting the white Spanish roots of the former Mexican city, while later Nordic and seaport-of-Iowa myths emphasized the lily-white "Aryan" complexions, midwestern roots, and western European origins of the region's later American settlers.⁷ A complex set of beliefs often based on notions of social hierarchy, whiteness mythologies of the 1930s found Dust Bowlers to be an indigestible population of poor or displaced persons, leaving migrants at the periphery, the most liminal edge of white status in "Anglo-Saxon" Los An-

geles. Although migrants were never forced to forfeit the right to vote, for a time they confronted obstacles typically faced by racial and cultural minorities, including police harassment, vigilante attacks, discrimination in public relief, and legal and extralegal restriction on movement across borders.⁸

My suggestion that white Californians saw Dust Bowlers as liminally white builds on a body of work that examines racial hierarchies and whiteness in the United States. Responding to W. E. B. DuBois's and Frantz Fanon's calls for an exploration into how and with what results a people comes to define itself as white, scholars of whiteness such as David Roediger, Karen Brodtkin, and Matthew Frye Jacobson have rejected racial essentialism, the notion that race operates as a fixed biological characteristic independent of cultural and political variables. Instead, they have shown how racial categories—especially white or Caucasian classifications—have served as fluid, socially constructed identity markers that can change over time and place. Much of their work has focused on how the Irish or eastern and southern European immigrants exchanged a low-status, ethnic, "not yet white" existence for the privileged condition of assimilation, higher status, and "whiteness."⁹

Dust Bowl migrants similarly saw their whiteness fluctuate, but rather than trading upward, as had Jews or the Irish, they regressed in social and phenotypic standing. Before the migration, the 43 percent of migrants who had had farm occupations, and the 46 percent with blue-collar experiences, could subscribe to what Roediger has called a "white workerism," or what Neil Foley has phrased as "white agrarianism," widely held notions of white superiority that gave would-be migrants real advantages over people of color at home, a region still deeply segregated.¹⁰ After the drought and exodus of the mid-1930s, native Californians described and treated migrants as a pariah-like substratum of liminal whites. Although this metamorphosis was uneven, generally mitigated by migrants' occupations and economic backgrounds, it often had an impact that superseded individual class positions, linking Okies as an entire ethnoregional group with a shared set of seemingly racial character flaws. The duration of this racialization, however, should not be exaggerated. The most vehement forms of scapegoating began to wane after the outbreak of World War II, when demand for migrant labor peaked and migrants achieved some measure of economic stability.

That the Okies oscillated within a spectrum of whiteness—proving themselves pronouncedly white in their home states, liminally white in

California, then acceptably white again after the war—further undermines universal essentialistic approaches to the history of race. Whereas the victims of racial categorization have typically been racial minorities, the cultural fictions surrounding the idea of whiteness can turn on their owners by providing elites with a weapon to scapegoat lower-status white groups who traditionally profited from such classifications. Such oscillations also challenge Frederick Jackson Turner's model of socioeconomic development, which has been correctly expunged from recent histories of people of color in the West, but which remains an important element in discussions about westward-bound European-Americans. That descendants of Turner's celebrated white frontiersmen could be subject to a collapse in ethnosocial status as they traveled along Route 66 suggests something that Turner failed to predict: that the westering process could actually debase the social standing of the very people it was supposed to uplift.

BUILDING THE WALL: ANTIMIGRANT ATTITUDES AND THE LEGACY OF RACIAL SCAPEGOATING

So flagrant was Depression-era Okie baiting that even visiting Europeans began to take note. Blaise Cendrars, a French filmmaker and journalist imbued with a certain Tocquevillean knack for commentary on life in the United States, traveled through California in the mid-1930s and took to satirizing the nativist mood. The piece he penned, which found its way into the newspaper *Paris-Soir*, suggested that Okies were nothing less than barbarians in the eyes of the Southern Californians: "Can the hillbillies from the interior be kept from coming to seek their fortunes in . . . Hollywood? When will they build their Chinese wall?"¹¹

Workmen never broke ground on a "Great Wall of Los Angeles," of course, but Cendrars's imaginative phrasing does raise important questions: How did the figurative wall between one group of white Protestants and another become so formidable that one was temporarily excluded from fair passage from one U.S. state to another? And if this campaign was so powerful, where did its support come from?

California's turbulent history of racial and ethnic scapegoating offers some answers. Here it is worth considering antimigrantism as an organized political movement. Political anti-Okie activism was unable to choke off the flow of migrants, but it proved an overwhelming success in making the Dust Bowl migrant the social threat of the moment. Although nowhere near as

brutal or as protracted, white Californian reaction to the Dust Bowl exodus corresponded with, and in some ways mimicked, earlier demonization of racial minorities in legal code and public discourse.

Racial demonization in fact was the harsh flip side of the California Dream, a long and shadowy legacy of twisted logic in which a Yahi Indian could be displayed in a museum highlighting his "savagery" after previous generations of white Californians had systematically hunted and slain all his kin.¹² Though vitally important to the economy, immigrant Chinese workers similarly faced mob violence and an Exclusion Act, frequently decried as a "Yellow Peril" that endangered white jobs, democracy, and public health.¹³ Alternately portrayed as compliant peons and violent aggressors, those of Mexican ancestry were also thrall to this inverse dream, being relieved of much of their hereditary land in the 1860s, restricted at the border in the 1920s, and even illegally repatriated to Mexico in the early 1930s.¹⁴ White California could prove similarly nightmarish to African Americans, who faced restrictive housing covenants, accusations of criminality, and rounds of Ku Klux Klan and police brutality.¹⁵

Demonization of the Okies, in fact, seemed a logical extension of earlier forms of racial ostracism. Faced with a comparatively small black population, restricted Asian immigration, and the forgone repatriation of hundreds of Mexicans and Mexican Americans, that California selected the Okies for vilification does not seem surprising. Journalistic accounts of the migration, furthermore, emphasized that, within the labor structure, white migrants were "filling in" for earlier vilified Mexican or Asian workers, with these reports often suggesting the shared undesirability of the Okies and earlier groups whose threat had now been neutralized. *Country Gentleman*, a nationally prominent farm magazine, for instance, began a July 1938 article by comparing the Morenos, an impoverished Mexican family of "fruit tramps" being repatriated by train to Mexico, with their replacements, the bottom-rung Williams family of Arkansas. Although Mexican workers and their Okie replacements shared some flaws, such as having too many children, they offered trade-offs in other areas. The outgoing Mexicans, the article warned, had been "easily aroused emotionally," while Okies and Arkies were lazy and just plain filthy, tossing "garbage and rubbish outside the kitchen door" and defecating through "a hole in the floor to avoid going outdoors to toilet facilities."¹⁶

Surprisingly, Okies actually fared *worse* in many journalistic comparisons, which often waxed nostalgic about departing minority workers' purported skill, humility, and servility. The Moreno-Williams piece, for instance, argued that Okies lacked Mexican workers' "instinctive touch" for

finding ripe fruit, and that Okies were absolutely barbaric in their treatment of their own homes: "Wood is provided for the chopping on most of the ranches, but the migrants tear out partitions between rooms, and even the floors, for firewood—something no Mexican family ever did."¹⁷ Another article challenged the very citizenship of the Okies, arguing that migrants knew less about "Americanism" than "the foreigners who come to live in our community": "Our migrants from the cotton lands have been Americans always, and many generations of ancestors before them, but they have never understood what America means."¹⁸

Nevertheless while earlier racial minorities had faced outright loss of rights, deportation, or even annihilation, the Okies were subject to challenges and marginalization within a spectrum of whiteness that periodically stripped them of specific privileges of citizenship rather than marking them as completely expendable. Still, something about the language and actions of the anti-Okie movement seemed to resonate with earlier, racially motivated campaigns.¹⁹ Much as Mexicans had been portrayed as "illiterate, diseased, [and] pauperized," and Asians as "swarms of . . . barbarous invaders,"²⁰ newspaper and magazine columns maligned Okies with such terminology as "white trash," "pauper labor," "misfits," "marginal people," and "irresponsible wandering hordes."²¹ And like the San Francisco workers who joined impromptu "anticoolie committees" or the middle-class Angelenos who made up the Keep West Slauson White campaign,²² anti-Okie businessmen, members of the American Legion, and growers formed ad hoc organizations that hoped to reroute the stream of newcomers.²³

Even brutality and border constrictions became common in some instances. In rural areas, law officers, vigilantes, and trained quasi-fascist paramilitaries periodically blockaded rural roadways, quashed strikes, and assaulted Okie meetings and encampments.²⁴ Dismissive of even the U.S. Constitution, Los Angeles police chief James Edgar Davis sent city police officers to the California-Arizona border to stop the flow of migrants for several months in 1936.²⁵

Such efforts eventually culminated in discriminatory legislation and officially sponsored force. First among these was the passage of an anti-Okie amendment to the Welfare and Institutions Code of California in 1937, which punished with six months' imprisonment anyone assisting in the transport of migrants who fit a new, very loose definition of "indigent."²⁶ Later that year, Los Angeles county sheriff's deputies forcibly evacuated and burned to the ground a migrant encampment in the Rio Hondo wash.²⁷ In 1938, more than one hundred thousand individual Californians and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors signed an anti-Okie petition that

urged Congress to discontinue the migrant housing programs of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Spearheaded by the state's leading anti-migrant group, the California Citizens' Association (CCA), the petition and its endorsements were presented before Congress in January 1939 by the state's longtime Republican senator Hiram W. Johnson.²⁸ Even as late as 1942, migrants working at defense plants in Burbank and Glendale were subjected to systematic police harassment, including the unwarranted ticketing of their automobiles.²⁹

The anti-Okie movement's Thomas McManus, who would become secretary and leading spokesman of the CCA, was particularly adept at creating the climate of hostility that led to these attacks, and his verbal assaults often cut with a racial edge. Hyperbolically conjuring up an image of the migrants that accentuated their purported ruralness, backwardness, and cultural barbarity, McManus warned radio and newspaper audiences of a decline in educational and moral standards as well as local relief funds. Migrants not only threatened the very foundations of civilization, he claimed, evoking a long tradition of alarmist and racist disaster literature, but also stemmed from the "impoverished submarginal stratum of the east Texas cotton belt and from southeast Missouri and Northeast Arkansas," forming a class nearly impossible to educate and uplift.³⁰ Soon newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, William Randolph Hearst's *Los Angeles Examiner*, and Alfred Harrell's *Bakersfield Californian* were using pejorative CCA-coined metaphors that attributed insectlike characteristics to migrants.³¹ Such attacks particularly recalled the scapegoating of Asian immigrants in California: "hordes of indigents" or "migrant hordes" had "swarmed into the state," newspapers reporting about the Dust Bowlers warned.³² Whether the local press cautioned the public about the "chaos and ruin" that McManus warned of in 1940 or the "anarchy and ruin" that anti-Chinese activists had hoped to avert in 1869, only the cultures and complexions of the scapegoats had changed.³³

Before long, racialized ostracism wasn't simply the forte of McManus but a statewide phenomenon. Occasionally this racialization involved journalistic assaults on actual minorities among the migrants, such as 1938 magazine attack on "a mass migration of seventy-five Negroes from Oklahoma" living "on relief" in central California.³⁴ More often, ordinary Californians lumped white migrants together with people of other races in their diatribes and day-to-day practices. While newspaper characterizations of migrants as hordes or swarms invoked the specter of "Yellow Peril" alarmism, one Bakersfield movie theater equally discriminated against blacks and white Dust Bowlers by segregating both from the general white

moviegoing population, posting a sign that read: "Negroes and Okies Upstairs."³⁵ The sociologist Stuart M. Jamieson noticed that ethnographic-like epithets formerly applied "only to other races" were being applied to white migrants with great frequency by the early 1940s. "'Okies,' 'Arkies' and 'Texicans' have taken the place of 'Chinks,' 'Japs' and 'Dagos' in rural terminology," he wrote. Though used differently in an earlier historical context, the term *Texican*, a combination of Texan and the presumably mestizo identifier *Mexican*, suggests that white Californians believed the poor white migrants of the Lone Star State to be of mixed or indeterminate racial identity.³⁶ The author and progressive political activist Carey McWilliams even commented that Madera County residents referred to themselves as "White-Americans," implying that the Okies were outsiders and "aliens."³⁷

PROGRESSIVISM IN RETROGRADE: THE NEW MIDDLE CLASS AND POLITICAL ANTI-OKIE ACTIVISM

Though antimigrant activists drew impetus from a long legacy of racial ostracism, the peculiar class dynamics of the state also help explain the successes of antimigrantism as an organized political movement. Often overlooked by historians who focus on support that the movement gained from big business and labor, the real backbone of the movement was a group of ideologically driven white-collar workers, what C. Wright Mills identifies as the "new middle classes." Make no mistake: big business was involved. Companies ranging from Standard Oil of California to Levi Strauss and Company and agribusiness trade groups, particularly the fascistically inclined Associated Farmers of California, contributed generously. But sources from the era suggest that, when big business sided against the migrants, it did so out of self-interest: large companies and growers either feared that the federal camps the government provided for migrants were conduits for trade unionism, while oil companies simply wished to spite the migrant-sympathizing Governor Culbert L. Olson for his efforts to prohibit offshore drilling.³⁸

Echoing earlier xenophobic acts by organized labor, important affiliates of the American Federation of Labor tended to support the CCA's anti-Okie 1939 resolution, fearing Okies posed unfair competition for jobs. But labor was internally divided about the measure, and its support tended to involve largely symbolic gestures. The national labor federation's overarching California State Federation of Labor and the Central Labor Council of Los Angeles ratified the CCA resolution, but significant segments, such as the Cen-

tral Labor Council of Bakersfield, objected to any connection with antimigrantism.³⁹ The newer and smaller Congress of Industrial Organizations was also conspicuously absent from CCA endorsements, and some labor leaders in that federation were openly hostile.⁴⁰

The new middle class, on the other hand, formed the rank and file of antimigrant activism, proving to be the real power behind anti-Okie successes. Distinct from the petit bourgeois—like old middle class of shopkeepers, artisans, and small-business proprietors, the new middle class, as defined by Mills and other sociologists, was a group composed of salaried professionals, upwardly mobile managers, and other middle-income white-collar workers.⁴¹ A ceaseless focus of speculation among political commentators, many new-middle-class Californians had clashed with the state's ancien régime of rich developers and powerful industrialists during a period of "good government" Progressive reform in the years between 1910 and 1929.⁴² New middle-class prominence on the political scene only increased during the Depression. By the time the Dust Bowlers arrived in the mid-1930s, the proportion of Californians in white-collar occupational groups had risen above the national level, making up nearly 43 percent of the state's total employed workforce.⁴³

The new middle-class penchant for liberal, civic-oriented reform, however, ran short. The lack of a large working class and highly developed industrial core in cities such as Los Angeles, Mike Davis has noted, meant that "the Depression was foregrounded and amplified in the middle classes," producing a politics that observers argue leaned toward demagoguery.⁴⁴ Frightened by the economic instability, and by subsequent uprisings of labor and the unemployed, many formerly Progressive middle-class leaders and constituencies reneged on their reformism in the early 1930s and began to cement "law and order" alliances with the old elite.⁴⁵ Although some longtime Progressives such as Simon J. Lubin and J. Frank Burke continued to fight for social reforms under the auspices of the New Deal, many, such as Hiram Johnson, veered toward the xenophobic Right.⁴⁶

At center stage in the antimigrant campaign, the CCA proved to be an important vehicle for reactionism within the new middle class. Formed in 1938 for the ostensible purpose of preventing Okies from depleting public-relief rolls, the CCA appealed to the new middle class with a program that included several Progressive-sounding goals, such as using experts and technocrats to solve social problems, working to prevent disease, and safeguarding the rights of labor. According to the CCA's stationery, the group was "organized for the protection of home labor, industry and property, for

the preservation of public health and for the advancement of the common welfare of the state."⁴⁷ Its leading proponent in Washington was none other than Senator Hiram Johnson, the state's most celebrated partisan of Progressive reformism and new middle-class political concerns.⁴⁸

That the new middle class made up the rank and file of anti-Okie activism was especially evident among the 220 individual organizations that endorsed the CCA's anti-Okie petition. While the largest single cohort of group signees was 34 American Legion posts, more than half of the groups who signed on were either white-collar-oriented service clubs—primarily Lions, Kiwanis, and Soroptimists—or business and professional organizations, primarily Business and Professional Women's Clubs but also some real-estate-agent and insurance associations. Groups representing potentially more upper-class participants, such as chambers of commerce, represented a mere 14 percent, and domains of the working class such as trade unions only made up about 10 percent.⁴⁹ Indeed, legionnaires and white-collar groups combined made up two-thirds of the total, suggesting the new middle class's growing enchantment with the jingoism, anticommunism, and archconservatism that historians argue the 1930s-era American Legion represented.⁵⁰

Anecdotal evidence about specific white-collar groups further suggests a link between antimigrantism and new-middle-class politics. The Los Angeles Rotary Club, a bastion of the region's aspiring new-middle-class business and civic leaders, joined the antimigrant crusade early on by praising police chief Davis's border blockade.⁵¹ Social and medical professionals and real estate agents—whether as individuals or as organizations—were also well represented by the late 1930s.⁵² Ultimately these middle-income professionals easily outnumbered the CCA's original blue-chip coterie of wealthy growers, oil men, and anti-New Deal financial interests. Big money alone could not have mustered the hundred thousand signatures collected. Nor could it account for the hundreds of organization members, homemakers, and petition-gathering YMCA youths who made the crusade possible.⁵³

Emblematic of the turnabout within Progressivism and its new obsession with the supposed machinations of "others"—whether Okies, foreigners, or radicals—was the CCA's leading spokesman, McManus himself. A high-ranking legionnaire and a Bakersfield insurance man, McManus started off in local politics a pro-labor, antitrust, Republican progressive, an avid supporter of California's high priest of progressivism, Hiram Johnson. By the mid-1930s, however, McManus's political views were increasingly shaped

by xenophobia, a distaste for internationalism, and an ardent anticommunism. Before taking on the Okies, McManus not only served as chairman of the American Legion's Americanization Committee, which favored a national system of registering all aliens, but also led the group's red-baiting National Americanism Commission. McManus in fact had such a congenial relationship with Johnson as a result of his isolationism, anticommunism, and anti-Okie activism that he personally brought the conservative solon the hundred thousand antimigrant signatures in late 1938.⁵⁴

With McManus at the communications helm, the CCA engineered sophisticated publicity-generating techniques. Personal appearances of CCA officials at organization meetings, a tactic often utilized, encouraged petition signers, but the pressure group was particularly innovative in its use of mass media. Already an experienced orator who had delivered anticommunist radio broadcasts throughout the state, McManus relied on preexisting relationships with Hearst and Alfred Harrell to help publicize his organization's views.⁵⁵

Unlike the captains of industry, white-collar professionals had little immediate economic incentive to get involved. For the most part, the new middle class would not benefit financially from harsh border policies and the dismantling of the FSA, other than perhaps receiving some tax reduction in the distant future. Economic explanations, furthermore, do not account for the persistence of antimigrant discrimination in the first few years of World War II, a period when unemployment declined significantly, or account for the lingering remnants of anti-Okie and anti-poor-white prejudice that survived in Southern California decades after the exodus.

Instead, popular support for antimigrant activism was, like McManus's individual support, largely *ideological*. By this, I do not mean that antimigrant ideas sprang from some ephemeral sphere removed from everyday existence. Rather, antimigrant ideology originated in the real, material upheavals of the epoch and was made especially pressing by the psychological toll of ten years of depression. White-collar anxieties about future material circumstances, when combined with a statewide xenophobic tradition of racialized scapegoating, proved a fertile soil in which antimigrant ideology could take root. A proliferation of negative images of poor whites in the media gave proponents of anti-Okie ideology the necessary encouragement to expand a small movement into a larger campaign. Antimigrant ideologies achieved such a level of success in gripping the "minds of masses" that these ideologies in turn began to act as a "material force." As the Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci contended contemporaneously in his own ponderings on

the rise of European fascism, “ ‘Popular beliefs’ and similar ideas are themselves material forces.”⁵⁶

Here it might be useful to rely on personal recollections of the Depression that suggest that the fear of falling into poverty may have also been an important catalyst for ethnic and cultural scapegoating. The sometimes desperate circumstances of the Dust Bowl migrants perhaps became a mirror in which social-climbing professionals, businesspeople, and higher income white-collar workers could glimpse the uncertainty of their own futures. Antimigrant activists from this new middle class likely distanced themselves from migrants by accentuating their difference from Okies and by associating migrants with depravity and a racialized Otherness. Like the thousands of Cincinnatians who denied catastrophe by wearing buttons that read “I’m sold on America. I won’t talk Depression,” the Californian new middle class, many of them transplanted Midwesterners themselves, may have attacked migrants to deny kinship with the Okies—and therefore with the migrants’ perceived economic peril.⁵⁷

A SEPARATE BREED: EUGENICS, OKIES, AND COMMON THOUGHT

By the mid-1930s, the media was already producing cartloads of negative portraits of generic poor whites, many of which drew from pseudoscientific eugenic theories about the degeneracy of rural whites. Combined with the state educational curriculum and popularly disseminated “scientific” literature, these portrayals helped spread anti-Okie attitudes to an even larger audience by bolstering stereotypical images of generic white trash and providing regionally specific material from which antimigrant activists could draw. Such stereotypes not only had pervaded regional consciousness before migrants arrived but also continued to provoke condescension into the 1940s.

Eugenics played an important role in informing media demonizations, helping to turn migrant roustabouts and farmworkers and their families into the late 1930s’ leading folk devils. Derived from Greek, the term *eugenics* was coined by Sir Francis Galton, an English mathematician, trained physician, and cousin of Charles Darwin. In the 1860s, Galton had argued that ancestors of superior achievement and reputation tended to produce superior descendants, whereas those of poor hereditary stock tended to produce inferior offspring. Any preexisting factors related to success, such as

economic privilege, social capital, and societal standing, were ignored or dismissed. By the turn of the twentieth century, eugenics had become a small but influential movement in England and the United States.⁵⁸

Although Galton encouraged a “positive eugenics” program of procreation among the purportedly well born, eugenics work in the United States in the early twentieth century focused on the “negative eugenics” agenda of keeping the unfit, or cacogenic (literally, “poorly born”), from reproducing.⁵⁹ At times, American eugenicists determined that this meant prohibiting racial miscegenation, sterilizing the mentally and physically disabled, and, in its most radical formulation, undertaking a program of racial or ethnic cleansing.⁶⁰ Although American racial minorities proved to be eugenics’ most beleaguered targets, much research also focused on the problem of poor whites.⁶¹

Important to eugenicists were several family studies, most prominently Richard L. Dugdale’s *The Jukes: A Study in Crime, Pauperism, Disease, and Heredity* (1877) and Henry Herbert Goddard’s *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble-Mindedness* (1913), each of which reached a large popular audience. Such texts consistently portrayed “old stock,” American-born, rural poor whites as prone to sexual immorality, drunkenness, criminality, insanity, and feeble-mindedness.⁶² The favored targets for forced eugenic sterilization were immigrant and minority women, but according to the historian Nicole Hahn Rafter, the authors of the Juke, Kallikak, and several lesser-known studies created an “ideologically charged mythology” that implied the hereditary inferiority of rural poor whites as well.⁶³

Californians learned of eugenics in high school courses, which reinforced notions that poor whites were nothing more than “white trash”—a phrase repeated frequently in the *Los Angeles Times* and in other periodicals’ depictions of migrants.⁶⁴ By 1938, the “lessons” of the Juke and Kallikak studies, as well as other principles of eugenics and poor-white degeneracy, were consistently mentioned in textbooks for home management, biology, and sociology at all three of the high schools in Long Beach. Students were instructed that “certain types of mental defectives may transmit their defects to their children; sterilization is one method for the prevention of the reproduction of more defectives; and marriage with good stock is more apt to result in a happy home than is marriage with poor stock.” Concepts of “eugenics and heredity” were regularly introduced into classroom discussions on “the family, crime, poverty, and insanity.”⁶⁵

Eugenic thought proved acceptable partly because the region, already

known for its unorthodox sanitariums and medico-scientific experimenters, had developed an international reputation for eugenics research and racialized science.⁶⁶ As early as the turn of the century, Abbott Kinney, founder of Venice, California, had promoted eugenic marriage as the means of producing "better children."⁶⁷ By the onset of the Depression, the very centers of power in Los Angeles had entered the fray. When citrus tycoon and philanthropist Ezra S. Gosney established the Human Betterment Foundation in Pasadena in 1928 to promote eugenic sterilization of the developmentally disabled, two dozen prominent Californians joined his effort, including distinguished professors, business and religious leaders, and the president of the *Los Angeles Times*.⁶⁸ University of Southern California's second president, physician Joseph Pomeroy Widney, similarly promoted Los Angeles as a center for health, eugenic birth, and "Aryan" supremacy.⁶⁹

Eventually even the state began to experiment with eugenics. By the onset of the Depression, eugenics mania so gripped the state legislature that California had sterilized more than five thousand "feeble-minded" men and women in state institutions. This was four times as many as had been sterilized in the rest of the world, eugenics proponents bragged, and later served as inspiration for the eugenics programs of the Nazis. Within another decade, proponents claimed that California had sterilized nearly twelve thousand total. Gosney revealed the class bias of these operations in his 1937 admission that "the largest numbers of fathers (of those sterilized) are day laborers."⁷⁰ Although some scientific authorities and Catholic clergy began to challenge the claims made for eugenics, it continued to garner respectability in California well into the late 1930s. Experts such as Stanford University's president, David Starr Jordan; the professor of philosophy F. C. S. Schiller of the University of Southern California; and Paul Popenoe, author and founder of the Los Angeles-based Institute of Family Relations, touted eugenic solutions as a panacea for societal ills.⁷¹

Eugenics' focus on poor whites, and the claims that rural isolation and poverty were hallmarks of hereditary inferiority, helped fuel the antimigrant movement in California. Following eugenic reasoning, antimigrant writers fixated on migrants' purportedly hardscrabble origins and bleak rural backgrounds—this despite the fact that migrants on average were only slightly less educated than other new residents, that nearly 80 percent of migrants originated in metropolitan areas and small towns, and that almost as many blue-collar workers as farmers moved.⁷² Alice Reichard, a schoolteacher writing under a pseudonym for the *Country Gentleman* in 1940, argued ruralness had left Okies an inheritance of social and hereditary defi-

ciency: "Coming from the sharecropper cotton lands of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and Southern Missouri, many of them never had a chance. . . . Their only heritage is generations of privation."⁷³ Gretchen Couch, a graduate student affiliated with the prominent sociologist and eugenics promoter Emory Bogardus of the University of Southern California, made similar claims in a study of welfare services at schools in Glendale. "The 'dust bowl' family not only comes to California needing material aid, but considerable correction of low standard ideas regarding the care, training, and education of its children. These children, *often retarded*, need interpretation to the school that they may secure remedial help there."⁷⁴

Like eugenicists, antimigrant activists also debated the purported climactic causes of Okie degeneracy, wondering if something about their environment had led this "Old American stock" astray. The editors of the *Examiner* blamed the conditions in the southern plains for migrant decline, calling Dust Bowlers "marginal people" as well as "misfits, failures, the lowest strata of citizenship in the lowest strata of American states." Others argued that conditions in California had taken a toll on the migrants. A Kern County health inspector, Dr. Joseph K. Smith, told the *Times* that long exposure to shantytown Hoovervilles in California dulled migrants' intellects and made their bodies "gaunt and tough."⁷⁵

Much eugenic thought, particularly that of the movement's radical wing, promoted the myths of white supremacy and argued that the conditions of rural poor whites suggested that their racial origins were not white alone. "One doctor spoke of them as a separate breed," wrote the sociologist Walter Goldschmidt in an important study of migrants arriving in Wasco, California.⁷⁶ Oklahomans were especially suspect after certain authors pointed to possible racial miscegenation, because of white Oklahomans' proximity to large settlements of Native Americans. Several eugenic studies attributed hereditary "defectiveness" to "mongrelization" between a rural "old stock" white and "a half breed," "a negro," "an Indian Squaw," or "a mulatto."⁷⁷ Madison Grant, an American eugenicist who later drew international notoriety when identified as Hitler's favorite author, cast aspersions on white Oklahomans in the widely read 1918 edition of *The Passing of the Great Race*. Grant noted the region's reputation for mixed marriages between "Nordic" whites and Americans Indians, which inevitably produced "a population of race bastards in which the lower type preponderates."⁷⁸ Prominent Californians such as Jordan, Popenoe, and Bogardus gave credence to such theories by sitting on the advisory council of the American Eugenics Society in the 1930s, alongside Grant and other paranoid racists such as

Lothrop Stoddard, author of *The Rising Tide of Color against White World-Supremacy* (1920).⁷⁹

Eugenic thought appears to have made an impact in debates about the migrants, encouraging critics to describe migrants as possessing phenotypes different from those of other whites. Like the East Coast nativists who described Italian complexions as “swarthy” and the brows of eastern Europeans as “heavy,” Californians saw migrants as physically different from themselves, characterizing migrants’ skin as “bronzed,” their bodies as “lanky,” and their heads as “small.”⁸⁰ One farm magazine even recommended sorting migrant workers physiologically by state of origin, arguing that the legs of Oklahomans, Texans, and Kansans were too long “for stooping in the vegetable patches,” while “most of the Arkansans can do it, being shorter of stature.”⁸¹

Antimigrant writers and activists also invoked eugenicists’ concerns about poor whites’ rates of reproduction. Still publishing in the late 1930s, Dugdale, for instance, raised eyebrows when he estimated that the twelve hundred descendants of a poor white man from the Revolutionary War era filled county jails and had cost more than \$1 million in social services. Antimigrant lore similarly fixated on migrant rates of reproduction and the burden they would place on local welfare systems. Loring A. Schuler claimed Okies were “always, with almost monotonous regularity, adding to the population,” and a high school principal writing for *Country Gentleman* argued that, in her community, “the migrants go right on having babies—often at the rate of one about every eighteen months—despite their complete dependence upon public relief.”⁸²

Eugenic arguments that poor whites acted childlike and evaded work often appeared in antimigrant literature. A headline in *California—Magazine of the Pacific* declared the migrants were “California’s Adult Children” because of their purported laziness, irresponsibility, reliance on relief, and penchant for wasting wages on movies, new cars, and liquor (figure 1).⁸³ Calling the Okies a “primitive people,” another California expert, writing in the *Los Angeles Times*, accused migrants of infantile behavior: “You can’t force them to bathe or eat vegetables.”⁸⁴ One California police officer even combined stereotypes about migrants’ purported sloth with eugenic assertions that poor whites were prone to crime. Migrants, he said, were a “shiftless stock and inclined to petty thievery and shirking of work.”⁸⁵

Though not enacted, eugenic-influenced solutions proved important in migration policy debates. Eugenics proponents on the extreme end, such as the Madera County Health director Lee A. Stone, argued that migrants



FIGURE 1. Regional media emphasized that Dust Bowlers were not just lazy but also mentally degenerate and impractically radical. This drawing by Davis F. Schwartz accompanied lyrics spoofing the political ambitions and intelligence of Arkansas migrants in the October 1938 issue of *California—Magazine of the Pacific* with the caption "Upon a bench in Halfwit Park they sit from morn till nearly dark." Courtesy of the Institute of Governmental Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley. Reprinted with permission from the California Chamber of Commerce.

should be made unable to reproduce. "If you came down to me," he told a Congressional committee, "I would say, sterilize the whole bunch of them." Stone later told a reporter that the migrants were a result of an unpremeditated phenomena that had permitted the unfit to reproduce faster than the fit. "Many of these people have inbred for years," he said.⁸⁶ Other health professionals sought remedies slightly more humane than sterilization. Gladys de Lancey Smith, a Los Angeles representative of the Birth Control Research Bureau of New York, argued in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1938 that the only solution to the influx of migrants was a sustained Malthusian program of birth control. Neither suggestion was implemented by policy makers, but the fact that such opinions reached thousands in print and warranted serious legislative consideration indicates the extent to which such theories were examined by the social and civic elite.⁸⁷

Antimigrant activists' success in using eugenic stereotyping is best illustrated by the fact that reformers sympathetic to migrants, and the migrants themselves, began framing their defenses of the Okies in the language of natural selection and racial science. In his impassioned 1938

pamphlet about white rural migrants, John Steinbeck espoused guaranteeing migrants access to relief programs and civil liberties by stressing their superb "stock." The very title of the pamphlet, "Their Blood Is Strong," suggests a eugenic evaluation of migrant worthiness. The text inside argues that Dust Bowlers were "not migrants by nature" as Mexican, Chinese, and Filipino farmworkers purportedly were. Moreover, they were of "English, German and Scandinavian descent," nationalities that racial eugenicists usually characterized as superior and Nordic. They, Steinbeck concluded, "are of the best American stock, intelligent, resourceful, and if given a chance socially responsible."⁸⁸

Pseudoscientific thinking also influenced the migrants' perceptions of themselves. Like Steinbeck, "Mother" Sue Sanders, a poor white transplant from Texas who became wealthy speculating in oil, defended migrants by emphasizing the healthiness of their stock, comparing Okies to the hearty plain cattle that had outwitted and outlived her mother's "blue-blooded Jersey" cow: "I will take the common herd every time," Sanders wrote in her 1939 autobiography *Our Common Herd*. "I don't mind saying I'm one of them in breed and in fact." Sanders's arguments invoked eugenic reasoning but turned it on its head by suggesting that poor whites were in fact hereditarily *superior* to higher class whites, a train of thought that later would occasionally find its way into Okie music culture.⁸⁹

TOBACCO ROAD MOVES WEST:

WRETCHES AND RADICALS IN THE POPULAR ARTS

Popular-culture depictions of poor whites amplified the assertions of eugenics, reinforcing certain ideas about the purported degeneracy of the Okies, especially migrant women and recently registered migrant voters. The photo magazine, a literary form that since its inception had been marketed to the middle class, proved a significant forum for antimigrant debate. Michael Denning argues that the middle-brow photo magazines of Henry Luce's *Time-Life* empire often reflected a certain progressive political tendency that arose as young left-leaning contributors brushed up against the staid corporate liberalism of its ownership.⁹⁰

Photo magazines could also be used to support reactionary or xenophobic politics, as they were in the anti-Okie campaign. Two photo magazines, in particular, propagated anti-Okie sentiment: the California Chamber of Commerce's picturesque, boosterist monthly, *California—Magazine of the Pacific*, and the color-illustrated *Country Gentleman*, a national publication

geared to rural readers by the Curtis Publishing Company, producers of the *Saturday Evening Post*.⁹¹ Whereas newspapers ran articles and an occasional photograph that disparaged migrants, the formats of *California* and *Country Gentleman* allowed editors to present a barrage of images in a single issue. Often pairing their own inflammatory text with pictures shot by FSA photographers sympathetic to the Okies' plight or by staff photographers who mimicked the FSA style, antimigrant magazines used the New Deal's own photo-documentation to stigmatize Dust Bowlers and disgrace the FSA. In a full-page spread appearing in *Country Gentleman*, for example, an editor argued that communities had been "invaded by an unusually large number of highly irresponsible migrant families." The accompanying photographs, all "courtesy" of the FSA, include close-ups of a migrant child playing in the dirt, other children riding unsafely behind the rear spare tire of a car, a woman escaping the sun under a primitive canvas tent structure, and a wide-angle shot of men loitering near furniture-loaded jalopies.⁹²

Artistic and literary representations of impoverished white southerners also served as sourcebooks to antimigrant commentators delineating the ways in which Californians would view the migration. Such images held so much power because they prompted Californians to confuse geographically distinct Dust Bowlers with the ignorant, threadbare southern tenant farmers who appeared regularly in the popular arts. Although such stereotypes dated back to William Byrd II's 1728 characterizations of Carolina's "lubbers," never before the 1930s had poor-white hobgoblins appeared in the national culture in such numbers or with such vehemence. New York publishers, Hollywood directors, Broadway producers, and national newspaper syndicates created hundreds of images that insisted on poor southern whites' yokel backgrounds. By the end of the Depression, an average city dweller did not have to stroll far to find Al Capp's witless Yokums, William Faulkner's ignorant Bundrens, and Erskine Caldwell's reprehensible Jeeters in print, on stage, on screen, or at the local newsstand. Many, if not most, of these caricaturizations participated in the Juke-Kallikak project of selecting poor whites and, by extension, Okies as less-than-adequate Others.⁹³

Gender played a significant role in anti-Okie caricatures, which were often poorly drawn imitations of the fictional poor white women found in national culture. Addressing an audience already familiar with the image of the single white male fruit tramp or hobo, a figure that often held a degree of romanticism for California audiences, antimigrant activists and writers fixated on what they believed to be a new phenomenon: the poor, white female migrant.⁹⁴ To some degree, this new focus was justified by the numbers. Between 1930 and 1940, the number of itinerant women farm labor-

ers in California nearly doubled, while the number of male farmworkers actually declined by 7 percent. Even more telling, those women and children who did not earn their own wages but worked as farm laborers as part of a family wage structure rose by 85 percent. The specter of women and whole families eking out a living as stoop laborers and camping along roadways and in city washes no doubt provoked the fears of elites and middle-class citizens that something in the social fabric was deeply amiss.⁹⁵

Pop culture depictions of poor white women in national culture contributed to middle-class apprehension by emphasizing purported fissures in traditional gender identities. Caricatures by comic strip artist Al Capp and novelists William Faulkner and Erskine Caldwell helped fuel a belief in Okie Otherness by emphasizing the aberrant gender attributes, body characteristics, and sexual practices of poor whites and hillbillies. Whereas early depictions of poor white women had stressed their American Indian-like roles as hardworking dirt-farming squaws left behind by leisure-seeking hunter-warrior husbands, depictions of impoverished rural women of the 1930s focused less on their participation in the division of labor and more on their physicality and sexuality. Three new modes of portrayal predominated: mannish women who abandoned middle-class standards of beauty, such as Al Capp's gruff, pipe-smoking Mammy Yokum; diseased and dying matriarchs whose bodies acted as metaphors for the plight of poor whites, such as Faulkner's Addie Bundren, and promiscuous sexually aggressive strumpets such as Caldwell's Sister Bessie.⁹⁶

While Capp's *Li'l Abner* strip gave prominent play to Mammy Yokum, its gaunt, comically masculine hillbilly matriarch, antimigrant reporters similarly fixated on migrant women's appearances, using adjectives such as *tough* and *gaunt* to suggest that Okie women had long abandoned any pretense of feminine grace.⁹⁷ Photojournalism furthered this conceit by selecting images of migrant women in the most unflattering positions: shoeless, posed near garbage, hunched over piles of dirty laundry, or carrying dirty children and babies. Of the thirty-one photographs that accompanied antimigrant stories in the *Times*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *California—Magazine of the Pacific*, and *Country Gentleman* between 1937 and 1940, shots of female migrants, almost always disheveled, outnumbered pictures of male migrants by more than four to one.⁹⁸ Typical was a *Chronicle* article that described one migrant as a "gaunt woman, a dirty infant at her breast." The accompanying photograph, captioned "Study in squalor," showed a woman of forty standing amid a pile of laundry and trash.⁹⁹

William Faulkner's portrayal of Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* (1930) also contributed to the antimigrant arsenal. In it, Bundren's diseased body

finally expires, only to be carried to a faraway burial, the corpse's smell worsening as Addie's lazy husband procrastinates along the way.¹⁰⁰ Critics of the Okies similarly circulated unfounded rumors that migrants spread contagion, much as earlier Californians had concluded that the Chinese spread disease. "Farming communities dread their approach," opined the *Los Angeles Examiner*. "They constitute disease and crime centers."¹⁰¹ Faulkner's model of a bizarre funeral journey resonates too with the plot of what would become the master narrative of Okie migration. The Joad family's decision to conceal Grandma's death to get past the California border guards in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* is more than reminiscent of *As I Lay Dying*—not only in its depiction of a desperate journey but also in its use of the stiffened matriarch's body as a plot device and certificate of passage. While Steinbeck hoped to stir middle-class sympathy, migrants nevertheless resented his depictions of the funereal border crossing and the life-giving breast that the young Rose of Sharon offers a sickly elderly man in the novel's conclusion—both symbolic desecrations of the poor white female body.¹⁰²

A contemporary of Faulkner, the Georgia-born novelist Erskine Caldwell also emphasized the promiscuous poor white woman's body in his depictions of Sister Bessie, a highly lecherous lay preacher, in his famous 1932 novel, *Tobacco Road*. Caldwell based the character in part on one of the subjects studied by his father, a minister who published eugenic tracts on the ills of poor whites in Georgia.¹⁰³ Thanks to the success of *Tobacco Road* and its subsequent theatrical and motion-picture adaptations, Caldwell's eugenics-inspired white-trash jezebels were the immediate reference points many middle-class Californians evoked when encountering Dust Bowlers. The antimigrant journalist Loring A. Schuler, for instance, mentioned the theatrical version of Caldwell's opus in an article on the Okies in *California—Magazine of the Pacific*: "Tobacco Road has come to California. I thought that play, with its poverty and filth, was a gross exaggeration—until the same kind of folks landed here among us." Californians persisted in emphasizing what the historian Kevin Starr calls "the Tobacco Road canard" in popular depictions as a way of painting Dust Bowlers as sexually deviant, either fuming about the overdeveloped sexuality of Okie adolescents, as one rural community leader did, or insisting upon their penchant for incest, as did Dr. Lee A. Stone of Madera.¹⁰⁴

One depiction, a literary "grotesque" reminiscent of Caldwell's, hailed from the very region in which many California-bound migrants originated. *The White Scourge*, a historical novel by the Texas eugenics enthusiast and college dean Edward Everett Davis, advocated sterilization, arguing that the

limited minds of poor whites left them susceptible to an impractical socialism and allowed them to be duped by anarchists, Communists, and corrupt politicians. Most poor whites, one of Davis's characters reasoned, barely had "sense enough to breed an' vote the Democratic ticket."¹⁰⁵

Californians expressed similar beliefs, even arguing that the migration itself was a Democratic ploy to make sure that the once-Republican stronghold tipped toward a registered Democratic majority during the next presidential year. "Looks to me," argued one businessman, "as if someone, somewhere, was packing our relief rolls and our voting lists with white trash. Most of them come from safely Democratic states; in spite of the summer's registration, California is still to be classed as doubtful. Add two and two under those conditions and you don't get merely four—you get 1940." In reality, many migrants did vote Democratic, but the numbers of registered Democrats in California had already become close to those of registered Republicans by 1932, long before the bulk of migrants arrived.¹⁰⁶

Hollywood offered its own images of naïve Okies being gulled by impractical radicals. In 1934, Louis B. Mayer, president of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and chairman of the state Republican Party, covertly produced *California Election News* #1 and #2, a widely distributed set of fake newsreels that featured carefully chosen and scripted actors posing as average citizens discussing their thoughts about the upcoming state election in a "man on the street" interview style. Particularly prominent were a slovenly fruit picker and a rambling, toothless elderly man, both with southern plains accents, who expressed great enthusiasm for, but little actual knowledge of, the left-leaning relief programs and economic policies of the Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Upton Sinclair.¹⁰⁷ Before the newsreels' screenings, Sinclair, a prominent author and well-known former Socialist, appeared to be leading in the polls.¹⁰⁸ Although newly registered migrant voters nearly gave Sinclair a victory, his Republican opponent, Frank Merriam, defeated him partly because of the films' success in portraying Sinclair supporters as reckless radicals and ignorant Okies.¹⁰⁹

Antimigrant activists similarly argued that radicals would bamboozle gullible, recently registered migrants into helping to pass one of the two contentious state "Ham and Eggs" initiatives, which promised pensions for the elderly and food scrip for the poor. In their analyses of the measures, which were defeated once in 1938 and then again in 1939, opponents repeatedly targeted migrants as the initiatives' key supporters, often exaggerating migrants' mannerisms and lust for the dole and their naïveté as political thinkers. *California—Magazine of the Pacific* parodied the migrant voice in a song titled "A Dream in Crackpot Corners," which associated not

only the migrants but their music with a socially parasitic backwoods mentality:

Well, the first thing I'll do when this plan is law
Is to bring out my kinfoles from old Arkansaw [*sic*].
They've lived all their lives on plain corn pone and pork
But it's ham and eggs now and they won't have to work.¹¹⁰

For Californians, depictions of migrants as crackpots reinforced eugenic fictions that migrants were partial to a gut-level radicalism and half-baked political schemes. *California's* remaking of migrant music, however, only underscored the impact that migrants' musical tastes and traditional Democratic Party allegiances were beginning to make on the state's own cultural life.

Faced with this harsh welcome, Okies responded with defenses that would have a major impact on migrant culture, migrant music making, and the history of West Coast country music. Put down themselves, some subscribed to an ideology of Okie white-Americanism that insisted upon the "whiteness" of Okie stock and argued that this entitled migrants to a higher standard of treatment than that offered to ethnic and racial minorities already established in California.¹¹¹ Others embraced the liminal whiteness that beset them, seeing in it a chance to turn outrage into a productive civic populism, and marginalization into an excuse for testing cultural interaction and even political alliances with other marginal ethnic, cultural, and racial groups. For nearly a decade and a half, this second strain of eclectic liberal populism dominated Okie music culture, only giving way in the 1950s, when a new cultural politics came to the fore.

Though doomed to grow fainter in subsequent decades, liberal-populist country music paradoxically shone brightest when the scapegoating was most intense, evidenced particularly by one young Okie who broadcast live "hillbilly" music from a radio station in Los Angeles. Indulging thoughtfully in the sort of populist radicalism of which his fellow migrants were often accused, the young Okie singer began to toy with this idea that migrants could defend themselves by building solidarity with other ethnic, cultural, and racial groups. By exploring such arrangements, Woody Guthrie offered one of the earliest and most compelling self-portrayals of Okie identity to emerge in the region's growing mass media.