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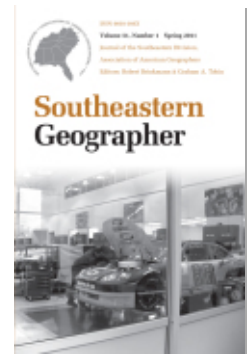
Citizenship Contested: The 1930s Domestic Migrant Experience  
in California's San Joaquin Valley

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# Citizenship Contested

## The 1930s Domestic Migrant Experience in California's San Joaquin Valley

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*Citizenship has come to the forefront of contemporary political, social, and geographical debate. Recent research has importantly highlighted the multiple scales at which citizenship is acquired and maintained, but has most typically theorized citizenship from the perspectives and experiences of transnational migrants or ethnic groups. In this article, I explore barriers to full citizenship through a case study of domestic Okie migrants to the California San Joaquin Valley in the 1930s. As poor whites pushed from their home states, Okies were not only subject to social and legal marginalization that paralleled the experiences of California residents of seemingly foreign origin. Despite holding national de jure citizenship, the domestic-born impoverished Okies faced public outcry and legal attempts at exclusion due to their perceived limited ability to assimilate into local de facto expectations of proper citizenship.*

*Temas de ciudadanía han llegado a dominar el debate político, social y geográfico contemporáneo. Investigaciones recientes han puesto en evidencia las múltiples escalas en las que la ciudadanía se adquiere y se mantiene, pero típicamente han teorizado la ciudadanía desde las perspectivas y experiencias de los migrantes transnacionales o grupos étnicos. En este artículo, exploro las barreras obstaculizando la ciudadanía plena a través de un estudio de caso de los migrantes internos okie al Valle de San Joaquín de California en la década de 1930. Como blancos pobres ex-*

*pulsados de sus estados de origen, los okies no sólo estaban sujetos a la marginación social y legal que replicaba las experiencias de los residentes de California de aparente origen extranjero. A pesar de poseer ciudadanía nacional de jure, los empobrecidos okies nacidos dentro del territorio nacional se enfrentaron a protestas públicas y a intentos legales de exclusión debido a su percibida limitada capacidad de asimilarse a las expectativas locales de facto sobre ciudadanía apropiada.*

KEY WORDS: California, citizenship, Great Depression, domestic migrants

### INTRODUCTION

By Autumn 1941, Fred Edwards and his brother-in-law Frank Duncan found themselves at the center of a U.S. Supreme Court legal debate. At stake was Edwards' freedom as almost two years earlier he had been convicted under § 2615 of California's Welfare and Institutions Code of knowingly bringing an indigent person, Duncan, into the state. For this offense, Edwards was sentenced to six months in the county jail. Although the sentence was suspended, Edwards nonetheless contested the constitutionality of the state law that criminalized and effectively banned the free travel of all U.S. citizens across state lines.

After an unsuccessful appeal of his con-

viction in the Yuba County Superior Court, Edwards sought legal recourse through the U.S. Supreme Court where he was represented by attorney Samuel Slaff. Slaff argued that interstate migration constitutes a form of commerce and “economic necessity” as it is a redistribution of population from areas lacking economic opportunity to areas of the country that may offer employment (U.S. Congress. House 1942, p 9997). Therefore, Slaff contended, the State of California could not restrict the flow of persons, indigent or not, across state lines as it would be a violation of Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. The attorney representing the State of California, Charles A. Wetmore, Jr., countered that the law was indeed a proper exercise of police power as legal precedent, including Article IV of both the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution, had previously supported the right of states to exclude paupers, traitors, and criminals from their boundaries, particularly if those in-migrants would likely become dependent upon public support.

Ultimately, the Supreme Court issued an opinion that overturned Edwards’ conviction and rendered California’s code unconstitutional. The reasoning behind the opinion, however, was not uniform. Justice Bynes agreed with the arguments presented by Slaff in that “the transportation of persons is ‘commerce’” and that the California code at the heart of the case did indeed represent an “unconstitutional barrier to interstate commerce” (*Edwards v. California* 1941, p 172). While Justice Douglas did offer a concurring opinion that a reversal of Edwards’ conviction was indeed appropriate, he felt that to equate human beings with “cattle, fruit, steel and coal” as Bynes’ commerce-based opinion

suggested was inappropriate. Rather, he felt that the right to move across state lines was absolutely inherent within U.S. citizenship and guaranteed as a privilege and immunity by the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (*Edwards v. California* 1941, p 176).

In his concurring opinion Justice Jackson similarly explained that the question at hand was not one of commerce at all, but rather the “privileges and immunities” guaranteed to citizens. At the heart of the case, he argued, was whether “indigence” as suggested by the Attorney General of California, justified abridging the rights of U.S. citizens to cross state boundaries. Was indigence as objectionable as “crime” or “contagion” which had been used to justify the suspension of the rights of citizens? For Jackson, that answer was clearly “no.” Just as indigence did not suspend the obligations of citizens to contribute to the country as in military service, it likewise did not suspend the rights of citizens to freely move about the country. Jackson concludes his opinion by explaining that:

Rich or penniless, Duncan’s citizenship under the Constitution pledges his strength to the defense of California as part of the United States, and his right to migrate to any part of the land he must defend is something she must respect under the same instrument. Unless this Court is willing to say that citizenship of the United States means at least this much to the citizen, then our heritage of constitutional privileges and immunities is only a promise to the ear to be broken to the hope, a teasing illusion like a munificent bequest in a pauper’s will. (*Edwards v. California* 1941, p 185–186)

By the time the Supreme Court considered the consequences of such interstate migration of the poor, U.S. Congress had already begun its own investigation. On April 22, 1940, House Resolution No. 63 was unanimously approved by Congress. The purpose of the Resolution was to allow the Speaker to appoint a committee that would

inquire into the interstate migration of destitute citizens, to study, survey, and investigate the social and economic needs, and the movement of indigent persons across the State lines. . . (U.S. Congress. House 1941, p 1)

The congressional inquiry was extensive, culminating in a report that summarized months of primary and secondary source research as well as the testimony of 371 witnesses during 28 days of special hearings held in 8 different cities across the country. Known as the Tolan Committee (chaired by Congressman John H. Tolan of California), the original mission of the organization reflected concurrent popular interest in interstate migrants that arose in response to media depictions of agricultural migrant “Okies” as described by John Steinbeck (1939) in his novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*; film director John Ford’s (1940) adaptation of the novel; as well as in the poignant photographs taken by Farm Security Administration photographer Dorothea Lange; and the song lyrics of Woodie Guthrie. While the initial focus of the study emphasized the migrant experiences of agricultural labor, the expanded scope of the Committee came to also be an investigation into the role of indigent interstate migration as it related to the rise of the defense industry.

Like popular media, the final committee report suggested that federal, state,

and local governments and the general public should adopt a sympathetic approach when addressing the needs of these destitute citizens. In its discussion of state anti-migrant measures, the report mirrored the opinion of the Supreme Court Justice Bynes:

. . . [T]he Founding Fathers had learned before 1789 that a free flow of commerce between the States was an indispensable element in the founding of a Federal Union. . . A body of Stateless people is appearing, existing in a limbo of lost settlement rights and forced to migrate in search of elusive employment opportunities. . . (U.S. Congress. House 1941, p 4)

In addition to the Tolan Committee’s pragmatic reasoning for addressing the needs of destitute migrants as a means of preserving flows of commerce, it too implied that the right to move across state boundaries was indeed inherently “American.” The influence of *Edwards v. California* was clearly present. Among the specialized subtopics explored in the Committee hearings, was that of “Constitutional Rights of Destitute Citizens of the United States to Move from State to State—the Edwards Case.” Held on January 19, 1942, in Washington, D.C., the hearings detailed the arguments of the case as well as the court opinion. In his testimony before the committee, Leonard A. Thomas, Counsel for the Tolan Committee declared that “[e]ach member of the committee as a body interested in these problems, and as a thoughtful American, has rejoiced in this Supreme Court declaration that such an un-American exclusion act be invalidated” (U.S. Congress. House 1942, p 9970).

For both the U.S. Supreme Court and

the U.S. Congress, the conviction of Fred Edwards served to not only explicitly outline the rights of citizens, but also implicitly define the character of the nation (Cresswell 2006). Based upon the decisions and recommendations of the Supreme Court and Congress, the term “citizen” seems to have taken on a purely formal interpretation describing a legal citizen of the United States by either nativity or naturalization. That Duncan and other indigent migrants at the time held U.S. citizenship was never in question. How then did California and other states come to justify formal policies that discriminated against legal citizens? Domestic migrant exclusion occupies a liminal space that bridges the divide between native citizenship and foreign Otherness and highlights the way that legal citizenship is but one dimension of migrant social acceptance and security and how citizenship is created at a variety of spatial scales ranging from the national to the local.

In this article, I explore the means by which domestic migrants to California in the 1930s were met with exclusionary public opinion and practices rendering them something less than full citizens in the 1930s. In particular, I focus upon Depression-era “Okie” migrants arriving in the San Joaquin Valley of California (Figure 1) who would be denied full citizenship and relegated to the status of “shadow citizens” during their early years in the “Golden State” (Cresswell 2006). This research explores the parallels and difficulties associated with directly applying traditional transnational immigrant-based theories of citizenship to groups of native-born citizens historically marginalized by poverty and domestic origins. While Okie migrants possessed legal citizenship, they



Figure 1. California's San Joaquin Valley counties and major cities.

often found themselves regarded as something more akin to unwanted foreign immigrants. I begin with a review of past and contemporary approaches to understanding how citizenship is constructed at a variety of scales through narratives of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion. I then outline my methods for evaluating public discourse surrounding the Okie migrant presence in the San Joaquin Valley. I follow with a description of the historic origins of domestic Okie migrant and discuss the factors that contributed to their migration decisions. Finally, I examine public opinion associated with the arrival of these impoverished domestic migrants and suggestions for isolation and physical or social exclusion as a solution to their presence. Such public discourse mirrored that surrounding the arrival of previous foreign groups and like these earlier ar-

rivals, was premised upon the migrant groups' potential to assimilate within local citizenship norms. I conclude by briefly exploring how the citizenship debate surrounding Depression-Era Okies still resonates with contemporary contests over *de facto* and *de jure* citizenship in the United States.

#### CONSTRUCTING CITIZENSHIP

Approaches to understanding citizenship have traditionally traced its evolution from classical Greek origins to the emergence of conceptualized nation-states or realized "consolidated state" (Heater 2004; Isin 2002). As this discussion will highlight, with a rise in globalization and increased transnational migration, a re-theorization of citizenship has come to the forefront of contemporary political and social debate thereby questioning whether single nation-state citizenship is still appropriate (Kymlicka and Norman 1994; Castles and Davidson 2000). Much of this debate revolves around issues related to the appropriateness of employing notions of the singularity of citizenship amid the current blurring of nation-state boundaries and growth in hybrid identities at a variety of spatial scales (Hanagan and Tilly 1999; Castles and Davidson 2000; Heater 2004).

For the most part, contemporary citizenship scholarship largely builds upon the seminal work of T.H. Marshall (1950) who defined the historical evolution of three primary components of citizenship: civil rights, political rights, and social rights (Kymlicka and Norman 2000; Lister 2005). Civil rights were conceptualized as the general rights of "man" in that a person is not only expected to behave accord-

ing to the law, but also be protected by its umbrella. At this most basic level of citizenship, civil rights do not imply any kind of equality of rights or protections among all citizens as we commonly think of the term Civil Rights today, but rather only that a written or normalized citizenship contract exists. According to Marshall, the development of political rights historically followed the establishment of civil rights as political rights allowed citizens to participate in political institutions. Finally, social rights would evolve, providing access to social services and entitlement programs and thus conferring full citizenship within the modern social welfare state.

The *de jure* rights and obligations of citizenship described by Marshall have typically been conferred as a matter of nativity, due to parental citizenship (*jus sanguinis*), birth location (*jus soli*), or through the naturalization process. Access to citizenship was therefore a consequence of fate or legal process. Wilcox (2004) notes that the naturalization process has typically been regarded as either a process of cultural assimilation or the development of a civic identity. Both of these approaches, however, emphasize the obligations of citizens rather than the rights. Such an emphasis then immediately serves to marginalize immigrants by placing an exclusionary barrier in front of them. In contrast, a polity-based approach to naturalization would foster a sense of political belonging from the moment immigrants arrive through programs emphasizing inclusion and the rights of citizenship (Wilcox 2004).

Geographers have also described the ways in which a sense of community belonging and attachment to place impact conceptualizations of citizenship. Through an exploration of the perceived parallels

between contemporary Arab immigrants and past Irish immigrant experiences, Nagel and Staheli (2008) suggest that immigrants themselves seek a polity-based citizenship that rejects an all-or-nothing approach to citizenship and assimilation. Arab immigrants in their study promoted a citizenship premised upon shared “political values, rather than in a common unhyphenated identity as an American” (Nagel and Staheli 2008, p 495). Citizenship, and the freedoms it protects, is indeed territorialized, but not necessarily at the level of the idealized “nation-state.” Similarly, although framed within broader national contexts, *de facto* citizenship occurs at the scale of people’s daily lives—the neighborhood, for instance—where people act out their citizenship (Clarke 2008; Rose 2000). Communities that emerge from those interactions in turn serve as the sites where civic responsibilities and a pressure to conform are fostered. The result is a moral geography of citizenship that manifests and is maintained at the local scale rather than due to edicts from state policy (Staheli 2008).

Ethnographic research by Leitner and Ehrkamp (2006) draws attention to the multiple scales of citizenship that exist for transnational migrants. Rather than conceptualizing immigrant citizenship solely in terms of national or local identity, transnational migrants in the U.S. and Germany experience and imagine citizenship through multiple place attachments ranging from their home country to their current place of residence. Due to the marginalized position of these migrants, legal citizenship and the rights and obligations associated with it are often experienced in contradictory and conflicting ways. As a result, traditional *de jure* citizenship fails

to address all the needs and multiple identities of these transnational migrants.

Because identities are multifaceted in nature, a single, static interpretation of citizenship will ultimately alienate migrants or traditionally oppressed groups (Young 1989). Both formal and informal citizenship are influenced by social norms and expectations that may change through time and place. Rosaldo (1994a, 1994b) suggests that the social components of citizenship should be considered in terms of “cultural citizenship.” Cultural citizenship, according to Rosaldo, describes the right to be different from the normalized sense of community, but also still allowed full participation and sense of belonging. To achieve full cultural citizenship and then be allowed to publicly convey their origins, however, a non-citizen must first fully culturally assimilate into the new host society. While the cultural citizenship described by Rosaldo may be an ideal, it is less often a reality. Despite possessing the civil and political citizenship described by Marshall as a consequence of having obtained legal citizenship, some groups cannot or do not meet localized expectations of full assimilation and are therefore denied unconditional cultural citizenship.

Perceptions of full assimilation employed by host societies however, can also vary substantially even among immigrant groups of similar geographic origins. In contrast to Rosaldo, Ong (1996) interprets these disparities as more than simply cultural, but rather as a consequence of the complex relationship between immigrants, the state, and other powerful structural forces that define and construct the notion of a proper citizen and member of the community. Such discursive relationships are highlighted in Ong’s study of Southeast

Asian immigrant acquisition of cultural citizenship. Other scholars have recognized the influence of race and employment upon citizenship in the United States (Ignatiev 1995; Omi and Winant 1986; Roediger 2002); however, Ong's work specifically examines how immigrant access to economic capital and perceived financial self-sufficiency can move immigrants along the perceived black-to-white racial spectrum and thus help confer cultural citizenship. In the case of Southeast Asian immigrants, class can alter racial categorization, as well as perceived assimilation, and therefore foster inclusion. Gans (2007) further contends that while assimilation can occur independently of economic upward mobility as evidenced by small businesses persisting in ethnic communities and neighborhoods, it is not the most common path taken. Rather economic mobility and security more typically encourage cultural assimilation as immigrants typically need to possess social and cultural skills common to the host society to achieve economic mobility in the first place.

The moral geographies associated with citizenship construct boundaries of inclusion and exclusion for those who successfully or fail to conform to expected norms at both the national and local scales. Clarke (2008) too supports the importance of citizen conformity but suggests that at the macro level citizenship can indeed precede community. Community, she suggests, can come as a result of unifying people through national identity and political engagement (civic identity). Clarke does not imply that citizenship is tethered solely to state territorial boundaries, but rather seeks to understand how citizenship is

constructed at a variety of scales both legally and in practice.

The spatial complexity of citizenship is also evident when territorial and social boundaries associated with citizenship do not coincide. Varsanyi (2005) calls attention to such patterns in her exploration of alien suffrage in the United States. Contrary to popular notions of the stable and long-standing traditions of limiting voting rights to legal citizens, U.S. practice is instead historically rooted in locally determined naturalization and suffrage policies based upon individual state sovereignty. While this trend has largely changed in the U.S. since the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, similar contemporary inclusionary efforts continue abroad with the expansion of local municipal voting rights to non-citizens in Northern European countries (Kofman 1995). In both the historic and more recent circumstances, the enfranchisement of non-citizens prioritizes residency as the pre-eminent qualification for local citizenship and serves to encourage political participation on the part of immigrants and acceptance by the host society (see also Wilcox 2004). Such scholarship further substantiates the claim that while citizenship may be imagined at the level of the nation state and its associated boundaries, it is practiced at the local community level on a daily basis and may often contradict national policy. Varsanyi (2007) further probes this inconsistency in her examination of local government endorsement and acceptance of consular identification cards by non-citizen residents of their communities. Such "local citizenship" policy refutes U.S. law in that it effectively decriminalizes the presence of undocumented aliens within



U.S. borders in order to address the economic needs of the local community, including both citizens and non-citizens.

Citizenship as residence, however, is not universal and the struggle to define who belongs within a particular territory has also been fought at the local level. Coleman (2007) chronicles how the frontline in the battle to exclude undocumented aliens in the U.S. has moved from the borderlands to the interior, emboldened by the contemporary federal war on terrorism. In contrast to the localities described by Varsanyi and Kofman that operate in contradiction to federal law that criminalizes undocumented immigration, elsewhere state and local policing jurisdictions have been increasingly empowered and tasked with enforcing federal immigration and deportation law. Coleman's thesis, however, extends beyond a simple documenting of local practices and examines how this situation has been fostered through a system of federal immigration legislation not subject to judicial oversight. Interestingly, the same legal system that guarantees the rights of citizens is also being used to curtail the rights of non-citizen residents. Operating under plenary power, federal immigration law and its multiscalar enforcement have been strengthened by concurrent popular perceptions of the threat posed by immigrants (terror, labor, etc.) and their place of origin. Just as a universal conceptualization of citizenship remains elusive, Coleman's work demonstrates that so too is a consistent application of physical and social exclusion practices associated with it.

While Marshall (1950) acknowledged that all the rights and privileges of citizenship were historically restricted to white

property owning males; he did not address the full breadth at which partial inclusion or outright exclusion has and continues to take place at both the national and local levels. Contemporary scholarship reveals not only how various social identities have been excluded at a variety of scales but also reflects the moral geographies behind these practices. Coleman (2008) chronicles homosexual immigrant exclusion and deportation in the U.S. during the Cold War. His work explores the comingling of immigration law with social control efforts designed to combat the infiltration of mental deviance. Through a series of four court case studies, he illustrates how "immigrant populations are policed selectively and sporadically" (p 1110). Notably, the moral geographies that are revealed by court cases surrounding homosexual immigrant deportation reflect social geographies of citizenship and belonging that are retroactively constructed and enforced within the borders of the nation-state not along them.

Denial of homosexual participation in New York City's St. Patrick's Day parade has also been used by Marston (2002) to explore exclusionary legal interpretations at the local level. Marston's case study exposes how local interpretations of singular ethnic identity can result in practices that ultimately exclude more recent immigrants proclaiming hybrid identities reflective of their Irish nationality and sexuality. In addition to documenting a localized sense of belonging and the right to occupy public space, Marston also points to the role that group names and labels play in constructing moral geographies of belonging and community citizenship. For the organizers of the St. Patrick's Day pa-

rade, the ability to publically declare oneself as “Irish” was irreconcilable with openly identifying oneself as homosexual at the same time.

Marston’s work points to the power of words to construct identity and offer or deny citizenship at the local to transnational levels. For New Orleanians displaced from their home community by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, a conflict emerged over the language used in popular media describing these involuntary migrants as “refugees.” According to Calavita (2007), the term “refugee” is evocative of “Third World” Otherness and served to further racialize the plight of those who fled their homes. Similarly, Masquelier (2006) points to the way that the term implies impoverishment. As images of Katrina’s “refugees” were broadcast globally, they revealed a view of urban America long ignored and hidden from the world that had been perpetuated by structural inequities premised upon race and class. Katrina’s refugees publicly represented a failure of American political and economic system to develop self-sufficient citizens before or after the storm came ashore. Compounded by media images of black looters violating the obligations of civil society, the term “refugee” then also served as a descriptor that symbolically stripped black New Orleanians of their U.S. citizenship. Spatially, Katrina’s evacuees became a people somewhere in-between—still emotionally attached to their devastated local community and identity, but also seeking to reassert their identities as U.S. citizens far from their homes (Masquelier 2006).

Hammett (2008) further demonstrates that how domestic social groups are labeled and described popularly as well as

by the state further reflects conflicting conceptualizations of citizenship. With the fall of apartheid, the South African government made explicit attempts to provide redress for the long standing marginalization and denial of full citizenship rights to large segments of its population. And while the South African government implemented affirmative action policies to improve race relations by granting civil, political, and social rights to all, they did so using a discourse of racial categories rooted in apartheid. Despite formal governmental policy recognizing the marginalization of all non-white South Africans, popular discourse among “Coloureds” surrounding the racial labels employed by the government revolved around their perceptions of un-entitlement and loss of social rights due to Black access to them. Popular discourse emphasizing exclusion and a denial of *de facto* citizenship took precedence over governmental policy and served to further racially divide the population.

Citizenship then is constructed both formally through governmental decree as well as in the popular imagination. How we speak and write about it matters. Public discourse surrounding the extension, denial, or revocation of citizenship rights is key in understanding how citizenship is constructed at scales ranging from the local to nation-state.

#### METHODS

To understand the patterns of public dialogue concerning in-migrants in the San Joaquin Valley, I turned to the pages of a Central Valley newspaper, the *Modesto Bee*. Owned by McClatchy Newspapers, the *Modesto Bee* provided public dialogue not only within the community of Mo-

desto, but also into the more southern reaches of the San Joaquin Valley, including Fresno where its sister newspaper is produced. In addition to general news articles and editorials, letters to the editor as published in the "Public Thinks" section of the daily paper provided insight into public perceptions of Okie migrants. Letters to the editor also noted the place of residence of each letter writer further indicating the geographic scope of the *Modesto Bee* distribution across the San Joaquin Valley. Importantly, not only do letters to the editor and other news items often reflect common attitudes, but may also serve to influence the opinions of other readers. In all, I examined eight complete years of the *Modesto Bee*, ranging from 1930 to 1942—the period of most substantial Okie migration. With the start of World War II and the rise of the California defense economy, attention paid to Okies in the pages of the newspaper had largely diminished. To ensure that this was indeed the case, I also examined 1950, a post-war year, in full.

Using secondary source literature as a basis, I first developed a set of general themes to look for while reading the newspapers (see Bogdan and Biklen 1998). Original themes were broad and included such topics as "Migrants" and "Unemployment," but as I continued reading, I soon realized that additional topics had to be added as I started to get a better impression of the larger issues at hand. Once a newspaper item was identified and copied from microfilm, it was then reread again within the broader context of all items. From this additional review a more extensive manual coding scheme that included subcategories was developed and applied to each document. Once organized, the data suggested some commonalities con-

cerning Okie citizenship and belonging, but also notable was that most of the discourse surrounding this controversial group of migrants rarely involved self-identified Okies themselves. For the most part, the rights of Okies as citizens of the United States or local community was publically constructed by Californians.

#### OKIE DOMESTIC MIGRANTS

Within the first seventy years of the twentieth century, over five million natives of Oklahoma, Texas, Missouri, and Arkansas were living outside their birth states. Of particular significance to this exodus is the number who eventually came to reside in California. Historian James N. Gregory (1989) estimates that by the conclusion of the 1930s slightly less than 11 percent of the total population of California traced its place of birth to one of these "Okie states." While the influx of these domestic migrants accelerated in the 1920s (approximately 243,000) and peaked in the 1940s with the arrival of over 620,000 "Okies," those who entered the state during the Depression-Era have garnered the greatest attention in both the past and present.

Popular media at the time presented an image of victims cast adrift by swirling seas of dust flooding the Great Plains (McWilliams 1939; Gregory 1989; Shindo 1997; Windschuttle 2002). Although they were commonly known as "Dust Bowl" migrants, the 1930s "Okie" arrivals to California seldom suffered the direct environmental impacts of dust and drought suggested to the national public. Environmental historian Paul Bonnifield (1979) estimates that less than 6 percent of the known Depression-era migrants from the Great Plains bound for California were

from the ecological region characterized by overpowering dust storms. Most scholarly work suggests that the most influential push factor for these particular migrants was poverty resulting from the growth of mechanized large-scale factory farms and federal governmental policies of crop curtailment initiated during the Great Depression. These regional and national economic changes led to the displacement of tenant farmers from their land and sent them westward seeking wage labor in the fields of California's San Joaquin Valley (U.S. Congress, House 1941; Stein 1973; Bonnifield 1979; Worsster 1979; Manes 1982; Gregory 1989).

During the Great Depression, substantial numbers of families migrated from other states into California as well, but the regional and socio-economic composition of those migrants were distinct from those originating in the four "Okie" states. Typically, those people who migrated from Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri earned their livelihoods through agriculture (U.S. Congress, House 1941). Also significant was the trend for rural people to migrate to rural areas and urban residents to seek urban destinations which suggests that the flow of rural migrants from the "Okie" states may have had the most substantial impact upon the rural agricultural areas of California including the San Joaquin Valley (Bogue et al. 1957; Stein 1973). So while domestic migrants to California who preceded (and succeeded) the Depression-Era migrants were often perceived to have been simply marching westward in search of expanding opportunities in the Golden State, Okie migrants of the 1930s were often characterized as destitute rural white masses forced from their homes and left to ply the highways of Cali-

fornia in search of agricultural migrant employment (U.S. Congress, House 1941; Fischer 1945; Taylor 1983; Gregory 1989).

#### EVOLUTION OF OKIE CITIZENSHIP

Depression-Era attempts to exclude Okie migrants from California were framed within an historic context in the U.S. West that denied citizenship rights not only to alien populations, but also those perceived as foreign or unassimilated. Perhaps most indicative of this trend was the treatment of Native Americans who were classified by the United States government as "domestic foreigners" and denied the right of citizenship either by birth or naturalization until they could be properly "civilized" into American society (Otis 1973; Prucha 1984; Takaki 1993). California, likewise, enacted policies that while seemingly intended to protect Native Americans and develop them as proper citizens, instead served to further marginalize them. In 1850, *An Act for the Government and Protection of Indians* was passed by the California State legislature. It and its amendments, ultimately removed Native Americans from their traditional lands, separated children from their parents, indentured Native American children and adults, and denied them the full protection of the court system. Moreover because the 1849 California Constitution explicitly denied suffrage to Native Americans and was never amended they were also prevented from seeking political representation that might change the constitution until U.S. Congress passed 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment and *Citizenship Act of 1924* (Johnston-Dodds 2002).

As the U.S. borders continued to expand westward, other groups encircled by them became regarded as either in need of

cultural assimilation or simply worthy of social and physical exclusion. Like the indigenous population of Native Americans, Californios, the Hispanic population native to California during the Spanish and Mexican occupation, effectively became “foreigners in their native land” (Weber 1973, p 140). Although governmental policy reassured Californios of their continuing property rights as “if they [the ownership rights] belonged to citizens of the United States” (U.S. 1848), this was far from truth in practice. Even those Californios who chose to naturalize and claim U.S. citizenship were denied the full privileges of that membership—the burden of proof for establishing ownership was upon their shoulders. Typically because little documentation of historic land grants existed, Californios often had little recourse through the legal system. Ultimately, Californios were *de jure* citizens of California but their heritage denied them full membership. Californios occupied a state of uncertainty in which they neither fully citizens nor non-citizens in their own homeland.

As Mexican-American naturalized citizens came to comprise a greater proportion of the state population, state laws were enacted in California that excluded them economically and physically from society. In 1850, the California legislature passed the *Foreign Miner's Tax Act*. Although the official intent was to levy a twenty-dollar-a-month tax on non-citizens wishing to mine for gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills, in practice, the tax was originally most often levied upon anyone Spanish-speaking, including naturalized citizens (Weber 1973; Limerick 1987).

As quasi-citizens, Native Americans and naturalized Mexican Americans were not

easily deportable; however, their seemingly intolerable tendencies could be controlled. Anti-vagrancy laws specifically aimed at these groups were also enacted, effectively criminalizing a lack of economic self-sufficiency or simply the perception thereof. Native Americans were also subjected to vagrancy punishments prescribed by the above mentioned *Act for the Government and Protection of Indians* which defined a vagrant as “any Indian able to work and support himself in some honest calling, not having the wherewithal to maintain himself, who shall be found loitering and strolling about, or frequenting public places where liquors are sold, begging, or leading an immoral or profligate course of life.” The *Act* declared the offense punishable by up to four months of semi-indentured servitude to the highest bidder (California 1850, quoted in Johnston-Dodd 2002, p 8). Similarly, in 1855, California enacted *An Act to Punish Vagrants, Vagabonds, and Dangerous and Suspicious Persons*. Like the previously mentioned law, this legislation served generally to define vagrancy in terms of willful unemployment, begging, and mobility. While the whole populace of the state could be subject to general definition, “Greasers,” or persons “of Spanish and Indian blood” were specifically named in the legislation and subject to additional controls by law enforcement (California 1855). Ultimately, the *de facto* interpretation of the law resulted in it becoming known as the “Greaser Act”—primarily directed and enforced against the Mexicans and Mexican-American population (Takaki 1993).

Residents of California's San Joaquin Valley in the Depression Era also initially drew citizenship boundaries without re-

gard to *de jure* citizenship, focusing instead on perceptions of difference and violations of public standards for proper behavior. Public dialogue presented in *The Modesto Bee* in the early 1930s reveals the primary points of contention concerned the presence of residents of foreign origin and reinforces the earlier precedent for how even domestic migrants would be regarded. Predictably, those deemed least deserving of the benefits ensured by full citizenship were those who failed to be financially self-supporting via legal means. Typical of such local sentiment was a letter that asked:

Why are we taxpayers called upon to pay a wage to 600 convicts to work on our highways and cause 600 *Americans* to walk our roads for work and unable to find it, with women and children in want of food and warm clothing? . . . let's have a law passed to weed out the undesirables and send them back to the lands from which they came [emphasis added] (Edwards 1930, p 16)

Edwards' comment, like many others present in the opinion pages of the daily newspaper, found fault not only with a foreign group but also one that had effectively become dependents of the state. That these men were convicts further emphasized that they had failed to support themselves by legal means thereby violating the civic obligations of citizenship. This deficiency also underscores the perceived inability of the foreigners to assimilate into national and local community norms. Some public commentaries such as the one submitted by M.H. Kittrelle, felt that specific foreign groups were simply incapable of assimilating within the local community norms.

. . . We do not dislike the Japanese. It is hoped that we will always be friends, but that the hand shaking will be done across the Pacific.

We learn that a good many Japanese enter this country from Mexico. There is no check on the Mexican border. Protection of the public health and pocket book demands that a guard and inspection should stop the undesirables. A survey of health conditions among recently arrived Mexicans and Japanese shows alarming result, with a consequent heavy drain on taxpayers to care for these people in public institutions, costing \$200,000 in Los Angeles County alone in the past two years.

The Japanese are fatalists, holding life but lightly. The story is told of an illiterate voter enjoying the franchise for the first time asking his landlord to mark his ballot for him. Later finding that he had voted against his candidate, he chose the traditional way of getting revenge, he went out and hung himself. (Kittrelle 1935, p 12)

According to Kittrelle, the Japanese were so inherently different from the local population, they could not be trusted to properly exercise the political rights of citizenship nor recognize the obligations of assimilation and economic independence required for social citizenship. Even those Asian immigrants who supported themselves through their own labor were publicly chastised for preventing "those who belong to the U.S.A." from holding jobs due to unfair competition (Pinkham 1935, p 12).

The general sentiment concerning the pre-existing presence of foreigners in the San Joaquin Valley was clearly one of in-

tolerance premised upon financial dependency and unalterable cultural differences. Such rhetoric, however, is not surprising given the difficult economic circumstances and may even be regarded as a vestige of nineteenth-century nativistic attitudes prevalent in the United States and California (Ignatiev 1995; Higham 1988; Peterson 1980; Sandmeyer 1973). As unwelcomed domestic migrants in the San Joaquin Valley, however, Okies too were regarded as having characteristics reminiscent of previous undesirable residents of foreign origin despite holding legal citizenship. During the Depression Era, they were publicly branded with a liminal citizenship status that resigned them to a position somewhere between inclusion and exclusion.

As with previous foreign arrivals, concerns were raised in letters to the editor over the efforts of the domestic migrant agricultural workers to support themselves financially. Typical of such sentiment were the claims of Opal Van Norman who accused the migrants of reducing her employment opportunities:

I do not see why they do not send those people back to the state from which they have just come. . . . The government will support these people during the Winter but then turn them loose to do what in the Spring? To injure *residents*' [emphasis added] employment prospects. That will keep us from saving up anything to live on next Winter. . . . The government should take care of those people in their own home states and give us residents a chance to take care of ourselves. Who wants to go chasing charity? (Van Norman 1935, p 10)

Mrs. A.L. Purcell echoed Van Norman's suspicion of migrant dependency in her letter to the editor as well, complaining that "[a] least 500 men have been brought from eastern cities for the taxpayers of California to feed through the new car caravans this summer so far" (Purcell 1935, p 12). Like the Californios and foreign groups of the Depression-Era, for domestic migrants to California, it was a no-win situation—those who earned wages were faulted for depriving Californians from employment and economic opportunity while those who did not were accused of failing to participate in the process of assimilating into the local economy and becoming self-supporting. Local residents like Van Norman and Purcell had decided that with regard to social rights, Californian origins and sometimes contradictory behavioral expectations took precedence over U.S. legal citizenship. One letter to the editor signed simply R.H. summarized a common viewpoint:

Surely many of these unfortunate victims are to be pitied, but are we Californians to be expected to save them all? We have spent years to make California the enviable place these people agree she is. Why should we generously open our arms to them and ask them to come share with us?

The part of it that bothers me is that their standards of living are low, and they force us to compete with what they have been used to. . . . (R.H. 1938, p 18)

Public concern over the impacts of the domestic migrants also led to public proposals concerning how to address the "migrant problem." At the extreme end of the spectrum was even a call for the establish-

ment of segregated “cooperative camps” into which the migrants would be rounded up and registered where they would perform forced labor at a rate of \$1 per day. “This enforced isolation,” explained the letter’s author, “would save Californians millions of dollars which are lost through the vandalism and petty theft committed by criminal bands of vagabond ‘Oklahomans’” (R.W.B. 1938, p 12). Although the suggestion represents a minority opinion among letter writers, it nonetheless harkens back to the indentured labor sentencing that could be inflicted upon Native Americans in California.

While the previous writer suggested forced communal living as a potential solution to the problem, other writers took aim at the dangerous potential for migrant workers to become affiliated with Communist activities. Guy Lowe offered his own classification scheme:

There are four kinds of Reds and Communists:

First the bundle tramps. . .

The second kind is the fruit tramp that goes to and fro.

The third kind is the cotton-picking tramp. . .

The fourth kind of tramps are [sic] the one that go about it in a refined manner. . .

This is the Moscow element. (Lowe 1935, p 16)

Lowe’s proposed solution to this threat was that the “fruit and cotton tramps” (like the Okies) specifically be forced by the government to remain stationary so they could be easily tracked.

The debate over the citizenship rights and obligations as they pertained to finan-

cial independence of Okies was often contradictory as well, faulting those migrants who were employed in addition to those who received public aid. Despite this economic paradox, other opinions were far more certain that Okie migrants had failed to immediately assimilate within local social norms and had retained the cultural markers of rural poverty associated with their former communities. For some residents of the San Joaquin Valley who contributed to this public dialogue, migrant laborers from out of state represented the unknown and socially unstable. Okies were neither homeowners nor taxpayers,

The taxpayers notice they [migrants] are not the kind of people who come here to establish business of any kind, but are taking good jobs away from those fit to do them. . . . They are not really worthy of some jobs, and the other Summer jobs could be given to the boy or girl who plans to further his or her education. (F.M.M. 1938, p 14)

Their children were not regularly educated,

One [migrant letter] writer is afraid that the California schools will not teach her children well. Well one thing for sure, California will see to it that the children go to school, not just as they want but regularly. That is more than you can say for some states [presumably those from which the migrants arrived]. (H.H. 1938, p 12)

Their encampments were unsanitary,

We have about 17,000 Oklahomans settled here if Mr. Rancher [a previous letter writer] would take a trip through California and wear the same



colored rosy glasses he did on his trip to Oklahoma he would see plenty of shacks and rag houses the Okies [sic] built. (G.B.C. 1940, p 12)

And their character was flawed by inherent laziness and a preference for taking handouts over work. For California resident Jack Earley, Okies were:

The paupers from the cotton area of the Southeast [who commenced] to arrive in California to help the planters of the new crop, which the natives of this state did not understand. . . . These people are extremely shiftless and irresponsible and were backed up by our welfare groups. (Earley 1938, p 12)

Even some of those people who were enlisted to work for the benefit of migrant workers held them in contempt for their failure to meet normalized standards of behavior and success in California. Reflecting upon her experiences with migrants at Kern General Hospital in the late 1930s, Dr. Juliet Thorner describes her attitude toward them as “not the warmest. I think I can see that we [the hospital staff] had an attitude of contempt for their ignorance, their poverty, their bad odor, and their frightful gaps in cultural knowledge” (Thorner 1981, p 6). Though retrospectively, Dr. Thorner felt her opinion of the migrants was short-sighted, it certainly mirrored that of other San Joaquin Valley residents who felt the migrants were out-of-place because of their failures to meet community expectations of behavior.

Like the anti-immigrant sentiment that had been directed at foreign Others in previous decades, public anti-migrant opinion culminated in legal action. Okie mi-

grants had at times been deemed too different to meet the criteria for San Joaquin Valley cultural citizenship and ineligible for the welfare benefits associated with social citizenship. In 1938, the California Citizens Association (CCA) convened in Bakersfield to coordinate campaign efforts to purge the migrant menace from their midst. With the support of State Senator William Rich, conservative organizations such as the CCA gained enough backing in the California State Legislature to raise the residency requirement for relief assistance to three years thereby denying Okies social citizenship until they might better prove themselves settled citizens who could document that they had become rooted in place to a community (Gregory 1989; Stein 1973).

Although not all public dialogue by Californians surrounding the Okie migrant presence in the San Joaquin Valley supported outright physical, economic, and social exclusion from the state, even those who felt an obligation to aid the impoverished American citizens premised that help upon the potential of the group to assimilate within local standards of behavior. The Okies were, according to one letter writer,

. . . a class of people needing help. They need help spiritually, mentally and physically, and I believe they would respond if there were more people in the world who were willing to help them make the most of what they have, not the most of what they do not have.

As long as these people have minds and bodies and the will to live, it is reasonable to believe they can live whole-

some, useful and happy lives. (C.C. 1940, p 14)

As victims of nature and a struggling economy, Okies were also defended as deserving poor American citizens who were indeed already similar to local residents of the San Joaquin Valley. Upon visiting several “refugee” camps near Bakersfield, letter contributor L.O.S. commented that they were,

. . . filled with those good people from the Middle West and [I] noted particularly their general features and demeanor. Those I saw could be you, or I, or our next door neighbor insofar as the color of their hair, eyes, and straight, proud bearing was concerned. I saw handsome little children, saw women who could very well be our sisters, or our mothers. . . . (L.O.S. 1938, p 18)

The migrants had been given a face. An implied appearance like many of the local readers—a white American face. Already possessing familiar physical qualities, Okie migrants could learn to become proper residents of California and in turn earn full citizenship. In his call for federal aid in assisting California counties affected by migrant populations, Fresno County Deputy Superintendent of Schools noted that “they are white folks like yourselves. We must assimilate them. . . .” (*Modesto Bee* 1940, p 2). If given proper training and opportunity, Okies could become contributing members of society. At times, the call for aid meant reminding readers that charity began at home and juxtaposed the plight of the American citizens alongside that of people from other countries.

So much is written against the migrants, the Okies, and others and very little against the idea of all these dollars going to Finland. . . . If so much money can be collected for a foreign country, why not some club, such as the chamber of commerce, Knights of Columbus, Portuguese and American clubs, radio programs, or other groups get together and start a campaign to collect a large sum, all to go to rehabilitate these unfortunate American migrants? (A Christian 1940, p 18).

Eventually growing concern over the migrant “problem” and the conviction that Okies were American citizens first and foremost and capable of adopting local norms led local and federal governments to create social programs that would aid in the assimilation of migrants into local and national societies. On the national level, this resulted in the expansion of governmental programs that emerged from the recommendations of the Tolson Committee, including: additional appropriation of federal funds to provide migrant health and medical care; expansion of the Farm Security Administration’s (FSA) migrant labor camps that included programs to teach migrants about health, sanitation, and democratic governance; a relief program to prevent discrimination against migrants as well as a public campaign to promote an understanding of the migrant situation; and federal funding for educational and recreational services for communities most impacted by the population influx (*Modesto Bee* 1940b, p 3). On a local level, this meant expansion of efforts in the areas of education and health as was the case with the opening of the first migrant

school in the Stanislaus County Community of Hughson in July 1940. The goal of the school was to provide “Bible study and stories, devotionals . . . handiwork; arts and crafts, and sanitation” (*Modesto Bee* 1940c, p 6). By offering training in sanitation, hygiene, Christianity, and democracy at places such as migrant schools and FSA camps, Okies would learn to assimilate into local society by filling those “frightful gaps in cultural knowledge” and move one step closer to full citizenship in California.

### CONCLUSION

While national conceptualizations of legal citizenship may bind a country together, local *de facto* constructions of citizenship may divide the same people and operate contrary to federal law. Before individuals can safely be different, they must first prove that they can assimilate within local norms. While most research related to issues surrounding the geographic scales of citizenship has emphasized the transnational ethnic experience, the Depression-era public dialogue surrounding Okies of California’s San Joaquin Valley illustrate that similar forces are also at play for domestic migrants, relegating them to the interstices of *de jure* and *de facto* citizenship. As the *Edwards v. California* case that began this paper highlighted, public efforts that were aimed at denying local citizenship, even temporarily, to domestic Okie migrants focused upon the ability or perhaps more importantly the inability of this group to assimilate within local society. Public dialogue surrounding the contested presence of Okies in the San Joaquin Valley revolved around the notion that while these mi-

grants were indeed native-born citizens of the United States, they nonetheless currently violated local standards of behavior that were used to determine who could achieve the full rights of citizenship as described by Marshall (1950). This unacceptable status, however, was not necessarily permanent. As domestic migrants already possessing legal citizenship, Okies were determined by some to be eligible for full citizenship but only with the proper education. And as the findings of the Tolman Committee suggested, the Okies were Americans first and held the potential for local assimilation in the San Joaquin Valley. Ultimately, the ensuing local and federal domestic migrant aid programs instituted were often structured by behavioral norms and served to reinforce the local moral geography of citizenship.

Although almost seventy years have elapsed since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the conviction of Fred Edwards, the struggle of Okies to affirm their citizenship rights legally and socially are nonetheless relevant today. At the heart of the Supreme Court decision was the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment protection of the rights and privileges of U.S. *de jure* citizenship, but contests continue to be waged over who is indeed entitled to that citizenship. As mentioned previously, U.S. national citizenship has traditionally been conferred through birthright or naturalization; however, that right of citizenship at birth has now been called into question as citizenship is being reconstructed at the U.S. state level. In April 2010, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer signed into law Senate Bill 1070 which mandated that state, county, or municipal law enforcement agencies must make a reasonable attempt to deter-

mine the immigration status of anyone they detain provided “reasonable suspicion exists that the person is an unlawfully present alien” (Arizona 2010). Entitled, the *Support Our Law Enforcement and Safe Neighborhoods Act*, the legislation claims to simply execute pre-existing federal immigration policy; however, it effectively allows law enforcement officials at more local jurisdictional levels to evaluate who and who may not seem to be a U.S. citizen. Local norms concerning citizenship behavior will in part determine who might be questioned concerning their immigrant status and criminalized for lack of proper documentation. And as the work of Coleman (2007) suggests it intertwines state and federal law for the purpose of denying civil rights to non-citizens.

The struggle to define citizenship at scales smaller than the nation, is not restricted to the denial of civil rights for non-citizens. In 2008, Arizona State Senator Karen Johnson introduced a bill proposing that the Arizona state legislature formally request that the United States government deny *de soli* citizenship to the children of “illegal aliens” (Arizona 2008). The bill stalled in committee shortly after its introduction; however, its objective has since been resurrected. Senator Russell Pearce, one of the original bill’s co-sponsors, plans to introduce legislation in autumn 2010 that would allow Arizona to no longer issue birth certificates to children born to parents without legal immigrant documentation. Pearce justifies his proposal by explaining that granting citizenship to such “anchor babies” is tantamount to rewarding the illegal behavior of the children themselves and their parents (Pearce nd; Price 2010; Reyes 2010). By challenging

the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, the bill not only represents a redefining of national citizenship at the local scale, but also has the potential to create more ambiguity by creating a liminal group of undocumented citizens, forced to live in the shadows in the state and country of their birth. Moreover, Pearce has said little about whether this will also be the case for the children of documented aliens. Without a doubt, any such state law will indeed be challenged through the courts and deliberated before the Supreme Court. And while the case of *Edwards v. California* denied California the right to use local citizenship norms to deny the entrance of native-born citizens in the past, the intensity of local voices redefining citizenship may now be harder to ignore.

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