LOST IN THE DUST: SANORA BABB EXISTING WITHIN AND OUTSIDE OF THE GARDEN

by

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ABSTRACT

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Lost in the Dust: Sanora Babb Existing Within and Outside of the Garden

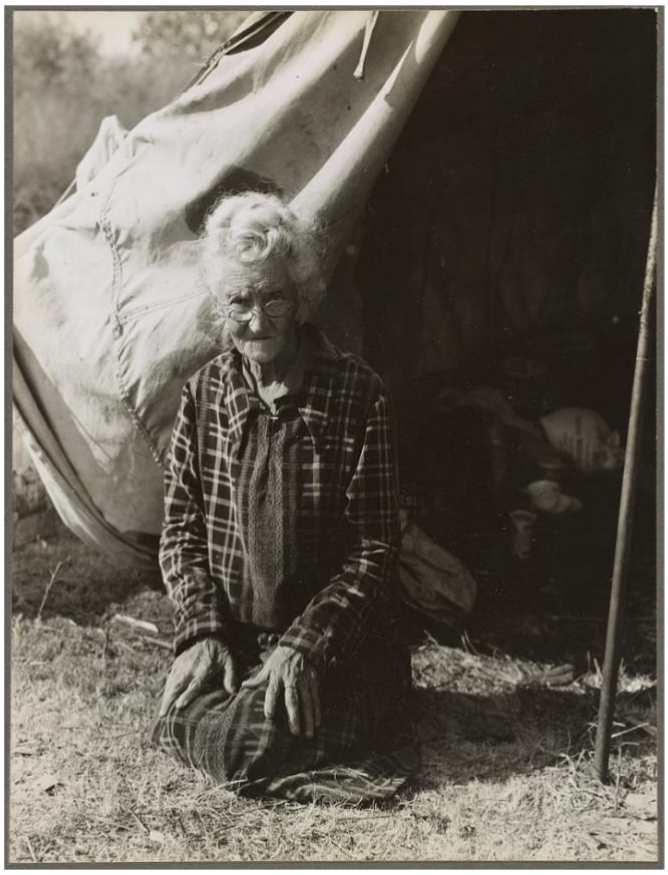
Thesis directed by Professor Penelope Kelsey

The lowly soil beneath our feet
In fruitful field or meadow sweet,
In gardens all so trim and neat,
Or trampled in the town's broad street,
Has risen in rebellion
-Eva Morely Murphy (1934)[1]

April 1935 marked the year that the "Dust Bowl" was termed. It was a catastrophic national event that primarily impacted the American Great Plains—specifically the Panhandle of the central United States. Stories of the Dust Bowl situate themselves within the narratives of the Great Depression, war, and national tragedy. While there was a national focus on spreading the stories of Americans in the heart of this national and ecological disaster, there was little understanding and, perhaps the omission, of the ways that women—primarily the mothers of the Dust Bowl—were impacted. We can look to Dorothea Lange's most famous photograph, "The Migrant Mother" as a source for inspiration for survival which the mothers of the Dust Bowl bore. Buried within this dusty demise of both human and land, we find metaphorical and literal *gardening* of the female body. As a literary motif, the "garden" has operated as a means of

[1] Murphy, Eva. "Dust Storm Collection." *Kansas Authors Bulletin,* 1934. Accessed https://www.kansasmemory.org/item/211010/page/1

control over the body from biblical times at the hands of Adam and Eve and the Fall of Man. It has, as a result, become a place for women to rebel and cultivate their spaces of wilderness. The definition of wilderness, safety, and the garden are questioned in the face of mass ecological disasters such as the Dust Bowl owing to poor farming practices which arose out of the colonial-settler narrative. Authors like Sanora Babb found an area within this disaster to remove themselves from the metaphorical and physical garden to cultivate a conversation about ownership, authorship, and mothership. This inquiry is directly aggravated by toxic male authorship which attempts to control definitions of land and the garden which seeks to exist within and without borders. Operating within the language and voice of women, we find that the domesticated garden has allowed for the burying of women's history, struggle, and triumph, but that like the dust, all things can be moved by the winds of change.



Photograph 2 Dorothea Lange, Grandmother, 1936

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I owe the inspiration for this thesis to Dr. Patricia Oman. I would never have met Sanora Babb's work if it weren't for your class. Your work with the Hastings College Press has shone a light on the unacknowledged and lost works of women and created a passion for work that I never knew existed. I would have never fallen in love in the works of the open plains had it not been for you and your quiet guidance.

To my parents: Thank you for supporting and reading every paper I've ever written, even the most horrible of writings. Thank you for teaching me that listening to the stories of others is just as important as telling my own.

To Jake: Thank you for the constant reminder that I am worthy and capable of doing this work. Thank you for listening to me read pages on pages of writing even when you didn't really know what I was talking about. I literally would not have survived without you.

To Sanora: Thank you.

To Gram.

I so wish I could tell you about this.

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Preface

This project has been built on the back of Sanora Babb's *Whose Names Are Unknown* and her following works. Of course, knowing the history, both rumored and substantiated of her controversy with John Steinbeck has greatly influenced this thesis. However, using Babb's own notes through her time as an FSA journalist and relying on a theoretical framework which situates the female body as in harmony with nature, we can better assess her impact and the role of the *Dust Mothers*. I will operate from within and outside of the garden to create this analysis.

Feminist scholars have sought, since the advent of the third and fourth wave of feminism, to separate the female body from the representations of nature. I posit, however, that for the purposes of this analysis and the time period of the 1930s and '40s, that we, as the reader, situate ourselves back into this mode of thought. As Douglas Vakoch writes in *Feminist Ecocriticism: Environment, Women, and Literature*, "there is an innate connection [according to cultural ecofeminist] between women and nature" and while this theory of women and nature does recognize certain traits as inherent, it also fails to acknowledge the social and historical factors which "have led to women's oppression."[2] In order to combat this systemic failure, we must employ, as Vakoch writes, a critical lens in the way that ecological narratives create emancipation. Looking specifically at the ways in which nature writing provides a platform for women authors, characters, or storykeepers to speak. For the farmers and families of the Panhandle, life, love, joy, and family were not separated from the land. The Dust Bowl might not

[2] Vakoch, Douglas. *Feminist Ecocriticsm: Environment, Women, and Literature*. Lexington Books, 2014.

seem, initially, as a suitable period for emancipatory actions. Yet, the Dust Bowl proved to be the means through which women were able to escape the confines of the garden.

I suggest that in this reading, we look to the way that nature creates the possibility of emancipation from exploitative farming practices as synonymous with the way that the garden is both created and destroyed for women during the ecological disaster known as the Dust Bowl. We can begin to think of this in the context of the garden. The garden, having been created as a means of cultivated nature, was also a tool for the management of women. The garden was a space that was a part of nature but had been deemed safe through its separation. Existing just outside of the physical garden would have been the farm. The differences between the farm and the garden are marked by the garden being a formed space specifically designed for women. The farm is marked as a masculine space in which women may enter. The farm, during the 1930s and 1940s, was on the brink of technological change—with consumer needs requiring more than the farmer or the land could possibly produce—which resulted in ecological and financial ruin. The farming practices that occurred during this period left the land destitute and, in turn, left the farmers wanting much and having very little. The space between the farm and the wilderness became a site of conflict. It is in these two places that the garden emerges as a place of confinement and as a place of solitude. The garden, much like exploitative farming practices, was created as a means of control. Those placed within it are controlled (i.e. the land and the female body). However, through extremes such as the Dust Bowl which entirely eviscerates the land, the people, and the economy, we find that these places of sanctuary or captivity are abolished. They can longer exist. Natural disaster acts as an economic and social catalyst for change within oppressively systemic governances.

I warn as well that the literature of the Dust Bowl and the subsequent and accompanying photography does not directly position women and nature as either antagonist or synergetic. Rather, the ecological happenings serve as a backdrop for the framework in which women were forced. We could choose to focus on the background—the overwhelming poverty, dust, depression. Or, we may choose to focus on the central image—the family, the face of the mother, the struggle for survival. But by focusing on both things, the *Dust*, the *Garden*, and the *Mother*, we find ourselves working within the narrative of Sanora Babb, Dorothea Lange, and the *Dust Mothers*.

Photograph 2 Dorothea Lange, Tulare County, California, 1936

INTRODUCTION

The 1930s marked one of the worst ecological disasters the United States had ever experienced. Farmers through the Great Plains were hit with extreme drought, wind, and depression which was exacerbated by irresponsible farming practices, the stock market crash, and the 1862 Homestead Act which encouraged farmers to claim land in the panhandle in order to encourage western expansion and trade through farming practices. These actions resulted in a natural disaster which we are still attempting to understand 80 years later.

The *Homestead Act* was signed into law in 1862. The law offered free homesteads on "unappropriated public lands." It allowed for any citizen of the United States who was the head of a family to claim a title to "public" land of up to 160 acres.[3] The Homestead Act and all following revisions entirely ignored Arapahoe, Otoe, Cheyenne, Crow, and Comanche tribal nations who inhabited those lands as migratory areas, hunting ground, ceremonial sites, and community living[4]. The law did allow single or widowed white women to claim parcels of federal land in their own names. Married women were barred from claiming the land as they were not considered heads of the family.

[3] I note the use of quotations around public as it is important to remember that historically this land was not privately owned nor was it public access. The Native American and Indigenous peoples that inhabited these lands were forcibly removed for this to happen.

[4] This is a limited list of the tribal nations that lived in the Great Plains and mid-west region of the United States.

Photograph 3: Solomon D. Butcher, 1862

The Homestead Act was developed to increase the development of the Western United States. Arguably, it was also intended to redistribute wealth. For immigrants, such as the Irish who were cruelly discriminated against in the eastern parts of the country, the act allowed them to start their own farms and strive towards economic wealth. According to Deidre Blanchfield from the Environmental Encyclopedia, nearly a quarter of a billion acres of land was distributed under the Homestead Act.[5] In 1909, the United States government approved the Enlarged Homestead Act which led to a massive increase in new and inexperienced farmers moving westward in an attempt for economic prosperity. "Rain Follows the Plow" was a popular phrase for the possibility of economic prosperity in the middle parts of the country. To be truly free in America was to not only make it on the fortitude and assertion of one's own worth but to own land. The Homestead Act afforded this opportunity to American immigrants which could not have been offered in more populated portions of the country. The act meant, in turn, that virtually incapable farmers were moving to a portion of the country with which they were

[5] "Homestead Act (1862)." *Environmental Encyclopedia,* edited by Deirdre S. Blanchfield, Gale, 2011.

unfamiliar. Described as “The Great American” desert, the high plains were marketed as an adventure and as an opportunity to conquer.[6] Directly speaking, this references the opportunity to “work” the land and tend to it so that it produced a specific type of agriculture. However, this implicants the rhetoric around the colonial-settler narrative of stealing the land through the act of “conquering.”

Photograph 4 Planting, Jasper County, 1940, USDA

Demonstrated through the “Planting of Jasper County,” the land is notably stripped of any natural vegetation and the implicit absence of Indigenous bodies which would have belonged there. Therefore the land is conquered through the successful production of planted agriculture which can only be successful through the act supplanting of the native species.

[6] “The West: Rain Follows the Plow.” PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 2001, www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/seven/rainfollows.htm.

Issues with the land first arose in measurable ways in 1930, but of course, it would be several years before it gained national attention. Historians cite various reasons for the Dust Bowl. Primarily, poor land management practices across the Great Plains region caused an increase in land vulnerability. The National Drought Mitigation Center cites that:

> 'Boosters' of the region, hoping to promote settlement, put forth glowing but inaccurate accounts of the Great Plains' agricultural potential. In addition to this inaccurate information, most settlers had little money and few other assets, and their farming experience was based on conditions in the more humid eastern United States, so the crops and cultivation practices they chose often were not suitable for the Great Plains. But the earliest settlements occurred during a wet cycle, and the first crops flourished, so settlers were encouraged to continue practices that would later have to be abandoned.[7]

The farmers of the great plain's regions were grossly underprepared, uneducated about the realities of working with this type of soil and were left unsupervised by the governing body of agriculture.

We cannot conjecture whether the Dust Bowl would have never happened had the farming practices of the decades leading up to the '30s been regulated. We know it might have happened at any point, because the impact of humans and technology has continued to throw the environment off "track." But what is clear is that the earth was drained of all it had to give and in return, it provided one of the worst ecological disasters the United States has ever seen. It resulted in thousands of displaced and migrant workers who headed to California where they

[7] "National Drought Mitigation Center." *National Drought Mitigation Center*, drought.unl.edu/, 2020.

believed work was to be found. Farmers abandoned their parcels of land for the hopes of a new future or at the very least, a hot meal.

What followed was some of the worst years in American history for the working and farming class of citizens. What is not documented in these histories are the voices of the marginalized peoples, particularly those of color. However, in looking towards the history of the Dust Bowl, we find that there is a mitigated space of resistance that culminates itself in the stories of the time. Photographs, such as that of Dorothea Lange's, "Oklahoma Mother" creates a conversation around the role of women. Pictured is a mother, in dirt clothes, surrounded by children. Her role as mother is clear in the photograph. The photos documented the impact of the Dust Bowl for the rest of the country.

Photograph 5 Dorothea Lange, Oklahoma Mother, 1936

The Dust Bowl marked one of the first recorded instances of ecological disaster which was not only nationally recorded but internationally discussed. Emerging from these stories is Sanora Babb and the garden narrative which is the inspiration for this thesis. I first learned of

Babb while working on my undergraduate senior thesis which aimed to "rediscover" American women's lost work. Though published in 2003, Babb's novel *Whose Names Are Unknown* remained unpublished for much of her life. The novel follows the Dunne family, comprised of Julia and Milt, the old man, and their daughters Myra and Lonnie. Based in western Oklahoma, the first half of the novel showcases their struggle to maintain their crop as well as their sanity as the Dust Bowl begins. Julia experiences a stillborn birth of what would be their first son, the girls experience the death of their beloved cow, and the old man experiences the death of his home. As things worsen, the family, except the old man, decide to follow the "Okies" and leave for California. Here the Dunnes live in tents and move from camp to camp to find enough work to feed themselves. Amongst the Dunnes are other families, suffering through similar situations, marking the community of the Okies. Though few moments in the novel can be considered uplifting, it ends with the hope that things will get better as a letter from the old man arrives describing the dust settling.

The framing of this thesis should focus on the legacy that the Dust Bowl left in its wake as well as the language of *forgotten* texts in America. These texts should and do include the stories of women who I term the *Dust Mothers*. These are women who belong to the garden and the dust and left their legacy in the survival of their children. Their stories are documented using FSA photography and the stories collected by Babb. The Dust Mothers are responsible for the emotional, physical, and spiritual burdens that were presented to them during the Dust Bowl period (as well throughout history). The Dust Mothers were presented with a disproportionality hard task to maintain the social norms of existing within the garden while stepping foot into the wilderness which exists outside of it.

Through the pages of this thesis are photographs from Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, two of the most well-known FSA photographers and including photographs from Babb's own sister Dorothea Babb. They had the difficult task of capturing the faces of rural America during ecological disaster. These photographs mark a moment in modernity which situates us at a precipice of change. Of course, the photographs are arguably used to exploit the impoverished for the purposes of advertisement and research. But what they have also done is to document the struggle that Dust Mother encountered in their daily lives as storykeepers and caretakers.

My aim in this discussion is to shift the dust to reveal the boundaries of authorship, mothership, and citizenship in a retrospective look at the Dust Bowl period. Through this critical gaze, we seek to sublimate the literary trope of the garden into our everyday discussion of what it means to be a woman, an author, and a mother. It is through this that I seek to unbury the buried.

Chapter One: Creating the Garden Narrative

Photograph 6 John Vachon; The Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs, 1940

In her memoir, *An Owl on Every Post*, Babb describes the life she had as her father moved her family from town to town in search of fortune. Eventually seeking a life as a farmer, Babb's family settled down on the flat plains of Eastern Colorado near Lamar. She would describe her first morning:

> We were up at dawn, a cool, frosty dawn. We saw the gray fields of night on the plain, tall like the once-tall grass. We watched the big sky turn pink and orange, then blue. We turned around and around to see the full circle of horizon, the perfect meeting of earth and sky. Two pointed buttes to the northwest were the only blemish on the plain. Their

> hulks had been thrown up from the earth in digging a silver mine. We were at once in a grand and endless space, and enclosed, locked in.[8]

It, perhaps, seems contradictory to both describe the space around her as open and enclosed. To be both free and trapped, but looking towards the concept of the garden narrative, this contradictory yoking creates a space in which the natural world that exists around the conceived world does entrap and release what exists within. In order to understand the complications of the garden, we are forced to reckon with the concept of the pastoral. Gregg Garrard in *Ecocriticism* writes that "no other trope [pastoral] is so deeply entrenched in Western culture, or so deeply problematic for environmentalism."[9] The American romantic movement left behind the pastoral phase of environmental literature and preservation. While problematic, it has proven itself to survive virtually every literary movement and it is where we find ourselves positioned within the garden.

The *pastoral* is presented in three phases which, I argue, builds the momentum, both socially and agriculturally that would form the circumstances of the Dust Bowl in the United States. Most simply, these can be broken down into:

1. Removal of nature from the garden
2. Formation of the garden through the cultivation of nature
3. Return to nature from the safety of the garden

Radically, these phases of the pastoral neglect to address the ecological or sociopolitical conflicts that directly arise from the formation of the *pastoral garden*. The pastoral garden—though not

[8] Babb, Sanora. *An Owl on Every Post.* Pg. 11. McCall Publishing Company, 1970.
[9] Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism.* Pg. 37. Taylor & Francis Books, 2012.

directly defined by Garrard-- traces its roots to renaissance writers that imagined that "nature" was a green, lush, landscape which was the site of a farming utopia or a return to a simpler time which rooted itself in biblical proportions.[10] Considering the writings of poets such as Milton, we are forced to acknowledge that the pastoral created and maintained an image of a cultivated wilderness which would permit man to feel closer to nature (i.e. god) without the dangers of uncultivated aspects of a natural world such as those of perceived Native "savages", animals, disease, and "dirt." This rhetoric maintained popularity in England and as Leo Marx explains in *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, translated itself into early American rhetoric through such scholars as the writings of Jefferson.[11] Jefferson promotes these images of the pastoral in his *Notes on Virginia.* Kristin Van Tassel writes that the "self-reliant yeoman farmer" is the "representative American, articulating an agricultural vision for the nation"[12] which not only indicates the lasting effect the simple idea that a farmer—a supposed steward to the land—can have on the development of a nation. But continuing, she argues that this image—though lasting into contemporary America—was not a sustaining image. Pushing forward the rhetoric of the garden endangers the sanctity of nature and the lasting preservation of nature.

The question then remains: how does the garden develop from the European and American pastoral image? What emerges from early American writing is the economic dependence on the curation of both the agrarian and the systemic control of a "wild" world. The garden had appeared, from biblical times, as the image of the pastoral. I suggest that while the

[10] Solomon, Deborah. Walking the commonplace of paradise: Pastoral precursors in Milton's garden of Eden. *The Seventeenth Century, 2018. doi:10.1080/0268117x.2019.1627904*

[11] Marx, Leo. *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America*, Oxford University Press USA - OSO, 2000.

[12] Van Tassel, Kristin. Ecofeminism and a New Agrarianism: The Female Farmer in Barbara Kingsolver's *Prodigal Summer* and Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*. *ISLE*, 2008.

pastoral image is not typically an enclosed space, it is pertinent to draw similarities between the pastoral (typical images of the agrarian farmer) with the imagery of the garden. In order to do so, we are forced to understand the formation of the garden in both the control of society through the predominant Christian religion and the formation of farmland through governmental policies and practices.

Garrard argues that the pastoral orients itself at three periods in history through three key genres: the elegy, the idyll, and the utopia. As Garrard defines, the *elegy*, "looks back to a vanished past with a sense of nostalgia", the *idyll* "celebrates a bountiful present", and the *utopia* "looks forward to a redeemed future." I suggest that the Dust Bowl resides somewhere in the middle of idyll and the utopia, the promise of a better future at a time when farmers were led to believe that the bountiful present even existed. The elegy is ingrained in Anglo-Judaic culture, to the point of which it still invades the works of scholars, writers, and artists. This schema allows for the comprehension of Judeo-Christian conception of time and space as well as an orientation around key morals that define and, arguably, built the United States. Of course, a reading of Genesis revolves around the fall of man from the garden of Eden. It is noteworthy here to point out that it is the fall of man from the hands of woman which I believe will become important in an analysis of Sanora Babb's work. After Eve eats the apple, God expels Adam and Eve to wilderness beyond the Garden. It is then their responsibility to cultivate and populate the earth through the caveat that they must survive. As Garrard argues, it is also this moment in which mankind experiences not only the fall from the garden but the fall from "primal ecological grace." As agriculture becomes an important staple of civilization, so does the cultivation of wilderness. This, I posit, establishes the first boundary of the agricultural garden, in which a false

nature is created and those contained inside are trapped while seeking freedom and that which lies outside is prevented from survival.

Yazdani and Lozanovska, scholars in landscape architecture, believe that "Eden has a strong narrative role in human history and has been referenced as inspiration, source, and metaphor in cultivated gardens in both the east and the west.[13] Whether this role in human history can be attributed to an innate desire to return to the garden could perhaps be debated, what becomes clear is that civilization has created an obsession with the cultivation of nature. By its very definition, the Garden of Eden is a place of paradise and safety. Eviction from such sanctity is reason for concern but orienting the rest of the globe in such way as to face and aspire to achieve the status of such a garden is detrimental to civilization and nature.

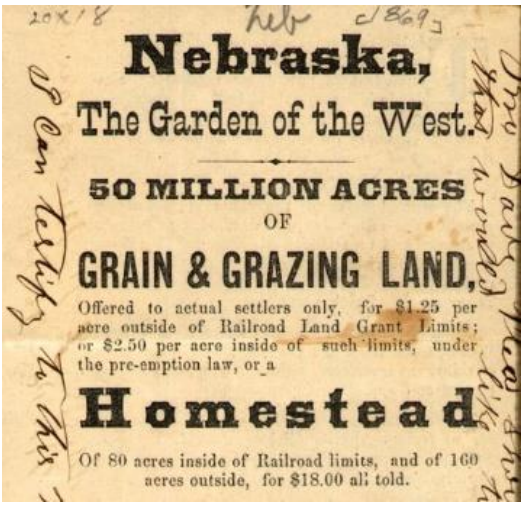
Garrard finalizes the pastoral by establishing "at the root of pastoral is the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change in human societies.[14] How ironic that the only way to achieve the pastoral is to disrupt everything around it. Of course, the American pastoral varies slightly from that of the British pastoral in that it relies more heavily on the image of the agrarian farmer and farming which by its very nature is the tilling and changing of the earth. However, by attributing the farmlands of the United States to that of the Garden of Eden, I suggest a substantive change in the impact the garden has by creating a space of repression and conflict. Yazdani and Lozanovska argue that as civilization has continued to grow, the desire for Eden has never diminished. This has resulted in the attempted development of Edenic gardens. By establishing the American pastoral (farming) as the site of an

[13] Yazdani, Nasim., Lozanovska, Mirjana. The design philosophy of Edenic gardens: tracing 'Paradise Myth' in landscape architecture. *Landscape History*. 2016. doi: 10.1080/01433768
[14] Garrard, 63

attempted Edenic garden, we are better suited to find that the garden of America can be attributed to the downfall of the 1930s and 1940s farmers.

Garrard continues that the pastoral seeks to create an "idealization of rural life that obscures the realities of labour and hardship[15]" which I would propose is presented during the 1930s and 1940s as a desperate means of agricultural advancement.

The harsh realities of living in the plains of central America is sublimated into a vision of the American dream. For many of the immigrants into the United States, financial success was a means of escape from the realities and fears that they might have been escaping from—particularly those from central and eastern Europe—and it also served as means of success and escape from the harsh realities that the, at times, racists and tense United States created. For many, the great plains via the homestead act served as a sight of resistance and freedom, perhaps explaining why so many unexperienced farmers fled towards central United States.



Photograph 7 Nebraska, the Garden of the West Advertisement, 1869

[15] Garrard, 38

Looking at this ad in a newspaper (c. 1869), little is interesting about the ad itself. The ad is only offered to the "actual settler" which reinforces the idea that the Homestead Act is explicitly tied to the settler colonial project and the implicit connection to the American Indian displacement and dispossession. This distinction establishes who exactly gains the privilege of land during the 19th and early 20th century. Drawing our attention to the phrase "Nebraska: The Garden of the West" brings an interesting analysis of the means in which the United States afforded inexperienced farmers the opportunity to "make it" in America. Of course, we know that the Midwest, particularly the farmlands of the Midwest, cannot be easily described as an idyllic garden. Referring back to the notion that the whole of civilization is seeking some retribution or return to the garden, we might think that the attempt to market a gardenless land as garden is creating what R.W.B Lewis calls the "authentic American" one who is a "figure of heroic innocence and vast potentialities, poised as the start of a new history.[16] Of course, it's important to note that this is not a heroic venture into the mythic "wilderness" as defined by Thoreau; rather it is the wilderness as defined by Jefferson in which the yeoman farmer must stake his claim and till the land.

At what point does the literal garden then enter the narrative? Truthfully, the garden entered the American narrative far earlier than the 1930s. In *The Land Before Her,* Annette Kolodny explains that for many frontier women, they:

> did not share their male counterparts' gendered projections onto the wilderness landscape…the experience of many women on the frontier was that of being enclosed in small, dark cabins while men roamed the wilderness…the Euro-American woman seems

[16] Groover, Kristin. *The Wilderness Within*. The University of Arkansas Press, 1999.

> to have been the unwilling inhabitant of a metaphorical landscape she had had no part in creating—captive, as it were, in the garden of someone else's imagination.[17]

It is at this moment that the formation of the garden—one of captivity—is created.

I posit that the garden in American literature and society operates on two levels, that of captivity and that of creation. The first being the original place in which women are *forced* to reside. It is from within this garden that women emerge to create and cultivate a space of understanding and belonging for themselves. They do this, as Kolodny suggests, by bringing in flowers, fruits, trees, and vegetables to grow. Certainly, in one respect this might be considered an artificial wilderness, but it is still a natural aspect of an artificial space that seeks to contain what is inside and protect from what is outside.

The second formation of the garden is pertinent to the success of what Tom Lynch terms the settler-colonial project in order to decorate a "nothing but" landscape of barren and open skies.[18] I would also like to add that this is precisely what the Homestead Act via Westward Expansion was—a settler-colonial project—in which the only objective was to control and cultivate all aspects of the country that were not under the control of the Anglo-European conqueror.

Capitalizing on the premise that the garden operates on two separate spheres, it would be apt to title them. As a response to the pastoral movement in literature and society, the first garden that is established is the "safe space" for women (domesticated garden). It is used as a means of control on not only what is allowed in—from the site of nature—but on what is allowed out.

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[17] Groover, 102

[18] Lynch, Tom. 'Nothing but Land': women's Narratives, Gardens, and Settler-Colonial Imaginary in the US West and Australian Outback. *Western Literature Association.* 2014.

Women were severely limited in their access to freedom both economically and socially and the garden has operated as a site of control on the actions and behaviors of women. I would argue against the idea that gardens were entirely cultivated by women because the garden has served as a means of justifying the ways in which women are held responsible for the fall from the garden of Eden.

The second definition of the garden comes from the pastoral itself and the notion of the agrarian farmer. The pastoral serves to be connected to the figurative wilderness without entering literal wild. It becomes an artificial space of materiality that poses itself as a wilderness space. The cultivation of farming land creates the framework for a garden. In consideration of the Dust Bowl, however, we find that the agricultural garden never positions itself on the brink of wilderness such as the agricultural practices of the south. Rather, due to the increased rate of people moving to the plains and the Midwest who were inexperienced farmers, as well as the pressures from the United States government to increase farming practices, the agriculture that was started there never was able to resemble or disguise itself as nature. Instead, it immediately established itself as a garden. Artificial and unnatural, it set the tone for one of the greatest ecological disasters the United States would ever see.

The only physical thing separating the garden, including the agricultural garden, from the wilderness is fencing. Leo Marx writes in *The Machine in the Garden* that America's obsession with the garden really begins in England during the 18th century, in a futile attempt to protect and preserve the rural pastoral. The idyllic garden as Garrard establishes exists because man has cultivated a type of land which creates a humanistic yearning for the return of the yeoman farmer to rural landscapes. Yet, Marx posits that the importance of the garden is marked by its separation of nature from the natural. For many in the 18th and 19th centuries, the garden

marked a space of mythology, a "natural" world of art and care. It separated itself from nature due its infusion with unnatural products and the cultivation of the land for the purposes of agriculture, commerce, and control.[19] In this space, Marx argues, the American farmer creates the image of noble husbandman. He is cloaked in the American dress with the old pastoral beneath.[20] Concretely, this presents two issues.

1. How exactly are these boundaries of the garden and wilderness defined?
2. Where do women belong in this image of the pastoral?

Of course, establishing the placement of women within the garden would require the acknowledgment that women indeed exist in this world. Rather than establishing the place of womanhood within the pastoral, women are regulated to the garden where they are encouraged, for health reasons (mental, physical, and spiritual),[21] to grow fewer hardy means of produce. Flowers and vegetables became the favorite for women in the garden. The work of planting and growing all women to operate outside the domesticated garden into the agricultural garden, but their work is rarely recorded beyond the measures of the home.

The garden is separated from the wilderness by arbitrary means of a signpost or a fence, which acts as a guard to the outside world. Initially, this was, of course, irrelevant to the production of the pastoral in which the vision was meant to create "gardens" of agri-perfection. Wide-open fields forced the reminiscences of days of old. Lockean legal theory claims that labor on unclaimed or vacant land which deems productive value equates ownership. Locke's emphasis on labor works to perpetuate the image of the yeoman farmer who works to cultivate

[19] Marx, 93
[20] Marx, 127
[21] Hampden, Mary. *Every Woman's Flower Garden: How to make and keep it beautiful*. The Anchor Press, 1915.

the land for the betterment of civilization. Yet, the work fails to adequately address the labor done by Native peoples of the US and the Chicano cattle ranchers of the late 19th and early 20th century. Valerie Sirenko argues that early colonists and later American farmers saw this production as ownership as their legal right to claim lands that were not actually theirs. To ensure ownership of these parcels, farmers began to place fencing in order to signify the permanence of their ownership versus those who had no fence. This would eventually lead to farmers pushing fencing onto other claimed lands—effectively legally stealing them.[22] I argue that it is through this claim to land—which in effect is a claim to "civilize" the wilderness—that led to the permanent creation of the garden in American landscape. The garden at this moment becomes a site of colonial-settler efforts which, in order to survive, must continue its gendered-colonial gaze by placing an unwilling subject within which becomes the female body.[23]

The garden, through the success of the Homestead Act, "created a new spatial imaginary by dividing the land into individual family plots, a geographical abstraction oriented toward recreating American legal tradition" which perpetuated the visibility of the agricultural garden and invisibility of the garden in American history which forced the female body to reside inside it as a trapped figure of maternal American success.[24] These marked spaces worked to aggravate the land because while the land was marked for ownership, it also created perimeters of available spaces to farm. Meaning that once locked into privately "owned" land, the agricultural garden deems whatever belongs outside of it as wilderness. As Marx might explain, the machine is

[22] Sirenko, Valerie. "Property and the Ideology of Improvement in Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* and California Travel Narratives." *Western American Literature,* 2020.
[23] Note: I make this juxtaposition to colonialism not to denigrate the oppressive successes of colonialism on the oppressed figure such as those of indigenous, black and Hispanic bodies, but rather to draw the line between those who created the garden through oppressive means and those who are forced to reside within it and excluded from it.
[24] Sirenko, 366

established within the garden further pushing the premise that the cultivated land no longer distinguishes itself as natural. Orienting ourselves in this space is complicated to say the least.

The dust that flew across the plains would frequently bury the fencing that distinguished cultivated space from wilderness. Dorothea Lange captures this in Oklahoma as the damage to a fence from a recent dust storm is shown.

Photograph 8 Dorothea Lange, Carter County, Oklahoma, 1937

The invasion of the natural world into cultivated space marks one of the first moments of liberation and resistance for the Dust Mothers. A poignantly marked moment in *Whose Names Are Unknown* comes as the men gather outside the schoolhouse, discussing the possibility and potential for moving to California to work. As they talk, the distance landscape glooms and rises with dust that moves towards them rapidly. Positioned inside the garden, the men are uncomfortable, unsure of themselves. They are forced to retreat from the garden into the safety of the school. It is inside that they find the coffin of a neighbor, decorated with red geraniums. They note, "There were only a few, but all she could get from her dusty potted plants; she had

woven the leaves into a circle and secured the flowers between them to make a respectable wreath."[25] Cyclical to the entire event is the stark contrast of authentic nature versus artificial nature. Geraniums are not native to Oklahoma, certainly, neither are potted plants. Mingled among the flowers is the oppressive presence of the wild world (dust) which permeates every nook and cranny of the lives of the farmers. Singularly, we are forced to note the presence of Frieda Brennermann who is responsible for extracting the artificial from the natural and arranging it from the garden. I suggest that the stark contrast of artificial and natural is a marked example of the ways in which the natural world possesses the ability to ignore markers of ownership and that the female body acts as the conduit for this invasion. The dust threatens the safety of the men by directly facing them. The dust is far gentler to the women—in particular Frieda. It is through Frieda that both the artificial and the natural world are introduced. It is Frieda who is responsible for communicating between both worlds and it is her position within the garden that enables her to do so. Perhaps the garden acts as an oppressive regime that the female occupants are under the gaze of, but through the permanence of the natural world, this space is cultivated and changed into a place of resistance and communication which can only be achieved through those whose the principles of Lockean ownership failed to touch.

[25] Babb, 103

Chapter Two: Sanora Babb and the Dust Mothers

Born in Oklahoma territory in 1907, Sanora Babb grew up moving around with her itinerant father and mother. In 1913, they would move to a small town to work a broomcorn farm on the high plains where they spent nearly five years homesteading in eastern Colorado. Despite their best efforts, nearly every crop failed, forcing the family to move back to the Oklahoma Panhandle where Babb eventually attended school. Working for a printer at the age of 12, Babb grew to love "print" life, eventually working for local newspapers, farming magazines and as a teacher. In 1929, she moved to Los Angeles to work as a journalist with an impressive resume of publications in literary magazines. Of course, Babb was faced with multiple problems in this venture. The United States was in the midst of the Great Depression which wouldn't be resolved until the 1940s. There was little money to be made and fewer jobs to be had. Publications and newspapers hesitated to hire a woman. Perhaps, the shortage of workers was to her advantage because in the late 1930s, during the height of the Dust Bowl, Babb was hired by Tom Collins to help work for the Farm Security Administration governmental camps for migrant works in California. Babb was responsible for interviewing the migrants, to hear their stories and troubles, and report them to Collins.[26] An employment opportunity that would set her up for a life in California writing novels and articles.

Documenting her life in *An Owl on Every Post* (1970) and the semi-autobiographical novel *The Lost Traveler* (1958) readers are invited to take an intimate look into the life of Sanora Babb. Interestingly, between the two pieces, we are given slightly varying perspectives on the two most important figures in her life—her mother and her father. The memoir owes huge depths

[26] "Sanora Babb." *Sanora Babb—Welcome*, Authors Guild, www.sanorababb.com, 2020

of gratitude to her mother. *The Lost Traveler* is finitely critical of her father. Both elements build critically into *Whose Names Are Unknown* (2004).

Photograph 9 FSA: Babb and Workers, 1936

As demonstrated in this photo, Babb worked closely with the migrants in the FSA camps, many of whom she became close friends. During her time at the FSA camp, Babb was building a manuscript for the novel which would become *Whose Names Are Unknown*. In the Spring of 1939, Babb had sent out four completed chapters to Random House, where Bennett Cerf read and enjoyed her writing, sent her a check and a contract, and asked her to finish the novel over the summer. However, after Babb had finished the novel and sent along the final manuscript, *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck hit the shelves. It was at this moment that Cerf wrote Babb to tell her that "What rotten luck that *Grapes of Wrath* should have swept the country! Obviously, another book at this time about the same subject would be a sad anticlimax!"[27] Dismissed and disheartened, Babb would tuck the manuscript away to work on other pieces. It

[27] Babb, Sanora. *Whose Names Are Unknown.* University of Oklahoma Press, 2004.

wouldn't be until 1958 that Babb would gain any recognition with the publication of *The Lost Traveler*.

It would be neglectful to assume that Babb was struck with a case of bad luck in the realm of publication. It comes as little surprise to mention that spaces of publication and authorship are contested places of sex and gender. Clearly, her writing had the literary merit necessarily for publication as it, in its earliest drafts, generated some excitement from publishers. Something of urban legend in literary communities is the case of where Babb's research went. According to Joy Lazendorfer, when Steinbeck visited the migrant camps for research on his novel, he and Tom Collins met. It was during this time that they struck a deal. If Collins could provide Steinbeck with governmental reports, help him get an "in" in the camps, and introduce him to "interesting" workers, then Steinbeck, in turn, would help edit Collins' book on the crisis, and Steinbeck would dedicate *Grapes of Wrath* to Collins. Of course, Babb was working under Collins during this time. Babb's research was turned in to Collins who would give the writings to Steinbeck which he would use to finish the novel.[2829] It is unsurprising that Steinbeck was able to finish his manuscript in a matter of six months. He wasn't doing the research.

Several facts are pertinent to the validity of this story. As Lazendorfer notes in an interview with the literary executor of the Sanora Babb estate, Joanne Dearcopp, there is no evidence that proves that Steinbeck used Babb's exact notes. Susan Shillinglaw, a Steinbeck scholar, argues that this would completely undercut the notion that Steinbeck did his own research. However, as Lazendorfer (and others) have pointed out, the two novels share similarities. Beyond writing about the land and the people on it, the novels highlight stillborn

[28] Lazendorfer, Joy. "The Forgotten Dust Bowl Novel that Rivaled 'Grapes of Wrath.'" *Smithsonian Magazine,* 2016.
[29] There is no definitive proof that Steinbeck used the *exact* notes from Babb. But the similarities between the novels leads historians to believe this is at least partially true.

babies (both described as little mummies), "corruption of corporate farms, high prices at company stores, women giving birth in tents, and small creatures struggling against the landscape and characters [based on] Tom Collins."[30] This similarities indicate that there is a large degree of truth to the narrative Babb tells.

Objectively, we cannot justifiably make a position or argument for either side. However, I suggest that Babb's story better encapsulates the true stories of the migrant farmers and the farmers who stayed behind through its embrace of the domestic tribulations of loss, recovery, and family. Babb spent far more time in the field than Steinbeck did. As Douglas Wixson writes, "She knew her dryland farmers too well. She honored them as individual people, not as symbolic figures bearing the sociohistorical burden of a failed economy and natural catastrophe."[31] Babb did not set out to write her novel to fictionalize their stories. Rather, she incorporated her own narrative, their tales, and the stories from her family back in Oklahoma to write a novel that rightfully stands head-to-head with the better-known authors work.

Babb's own struggle with publication and the subsequent loss of her manuscript demonstrate the garden narrative during the Dust Bowl in a sociopolitical realm of understanding. Constructively, Babb operates inside the domesticated garden created by the homonormative white male gaze in her inability to break through the competitive nature of the publication. It would be easy to assume that Babb's lack of publication could be attributed to her not finishing the novel prior to Steinbeck. But what we find is that Babb was *doing* the work in the field. She was collecting the data and the stories to create a narrative that honored the voices contained within it. In this, Babb assumes traditional narrative forms of women's role within the

[30] Lazenforfer, 2016.
[31] Babb, Sanora., Babb, Dorothy., Wixson, Douglas. *On the Dirty Plate Trail: Remembering the Dust Bowl Refugee Camps*. University of Texas Press, 2007.

garden—both domesticated and agricultural. She acts as the tenant to the land and the family, serves as the keeper of stories and morals, and directly attributes her own success to the caretaking of others.

To act as caretaker is the traditional role of woman as designated by the hegemonic male authority. It is interesting then to consider that the opening photograph in the preface of the novel, *Whose Names Are Unknown*, is from the male photographer Arthur Rothstein. Hired by the FSA, Rothstein captured some of the most iconic pictures of the Dust Bowl era.

Photograph 10 Arthur Rothstein, Fleeing A Dust Storm, 1936

Was this picture selected because it featured the county that Babb based the beginning of the novel on? Or was this photo selected because Rothstein was one of the most popular photographers of the time? Regardless, the editors of the novel overlooked the entirety of the novel and its premise. While it surely captures the moment that nature encroaches on the garden, it doesn't capture the intrinsic and delicate ways that the women of the novel direct the movement and tone of the story. Babb, though not through her own admission at the time,

worked to create work that highlighted feminist tones. Wixson writes that her first novel, in particular, "prefigures ecofeminist concerns today in its circular narrativity and intimacy, its connectedness in place of binary, "we-they" relations with others and with nature.[32] The women in the novel—as well as Babb herself—assume the role of caretaker, storyteller, and a site of strength. It is from this place that women push themselves outside the garden in which they have been placed. However, as the photograph suggests and highlights, the work of women is often overlooked and exiled to the place within the garden which is guarded against the gaze of the outsider.

Whose Names Are Unknown, I posit, suggests a landscape in which the borders of gender and class are crossed in an ecocritical examination of the garden. It is in these borderlands that we find that women are perhaps the best conduits to understanding the changing landscapes of resistance, resilience, defeat, and hope. Though Babb's story encapsulates these factors through the perspective of family, loss, and womanhood, it is directly contradicted by her own path to publication. It is in this that we find that these borderlands not only preclude female characters and voices but female authorship. It is also in these borderlands that we find the possibility to overcome these false borders.

As previously discussed, the concept of civilization, nature, and the garden is a preconceived notion created by man in order to combat sociopolitical conflicts that arise when those outside the framework they have created try to access new rights. In the case of Babb, it is through publication. In the case of the novel, it is the women who are forced to operate in space of inclusion and exclusion. The garden has a unique purpose in the Dust Bowl. It is forced to

[32] Wixson, 2007.

keep what is inside, in, and what is outside, out. This concept loosely frames itself around *wilderness.* As Garrard frames wilderness as the "signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization."[33] While this is partially true, as we explored in the "Creating the Garden Narrative" the wilderness also operates juxtaposed to the garden. Wilderness is a space that the hegemonic male can operate safely or heroically. Whereas the female body cannot operate in a wilderness space as either of these as she is incapable of operating in a noncivilized space without sacrificing her womanhood or purity or without calling into action the consequences of Eve. In either case, she risks the fall of Man.

It is in this space that William Cronon writes that the very principle of wilderness—the thing beyond nature—is an inherently masculine landscape. He writes that "in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity."[34] Two keywords: man and civilization. Man created civilization which has been curated—or tamed—to his needs, resulting in his ability to step away into a space that is different from the civil—a place in need of taming and controlling. But, as feminist scholars have posited, it is a space only invited and dedicated to the male figure. It is in these actions of conquering, as Sarah McFarland in *Women Writing Nature: A Feminist View* suggests, that he builds a border around the landscape to prevent women from entering—it is through feminine metaphors and the literal and metaphorical conquering of the land that he carefully sublimates the notion that women and nature should not cross this border.[35] What happens when these borders are crossed? We find the ecological disaster such as the Dust Bowl, and the publication of a woman, unmarried, educated and motivated.

[33] Garrard, 27
[34] Cronon, 8
[35] Cook, Barbara. *Women Writing Nature: A Feminist View.* Lexington Books, 2007.

There is a question of exactly how farmland—particularly in the middle of the country—sublimates itself into the argument of wilderness versus civilization. We a forced to remember, of course, that this farmland was drastically changed during the settler colonial project. But, using the garden as a metaphor, as well as the placement of sites of Euro-centric agriculture as a garden, we find that the garden works as a means of conquering the wilderness space. This becomes especially clear when considering the placement of the American novel. The American novel of the Midwest and Western portions of the country imagined a sort of egalitarian human family, one which operates on a "self-containing farm" where everything is raised by hand.[36] The farm then becomes a site which borders the position between wilderness and civilization. It requires elements of wilderness such as fresh air, clean water, rich soil but it requires the hand of civilization to mark the changing of time and to experiment with foreign foods and plants which might not ordinarily grow there. The agricultural garden must then separate itself through the act of fencing in order to create a separate space that wilderness can be borrowed but not allowed in. Using the *family farm* ideology, the farm then becomes a site of Anglo-Christian homogeneity which calls for traditional gender roles in order to operate. Women must keep the house and the children because the men must keep the farm and the wilderness. Women cannot be permitted in the wilderness space until the farm is fully established as it risks wilderness seeping into the home. From this framework, the garden, both domesticated and agricultural, becomes a site of resistance for women in the form of story keeping and cultivation of space.

Babb combines both ecological disaster and the strength and stories of women within *Whose Names Are Unknown*. She creates characters based on her own life and the research she

[36] Conlogue, William. Working the Garden: American Writers and the Industrialization of Agriculture. *The University of North Carolina Press,* 2002.

had dedicated herself to, to examine the relationship between land and civilization. Babb seems to, in her history of writing, draw concrete and purposeful lines between women and the land—and ownership. The women in the novel don't transcend their place in society for the time period—it would have been too romantic to imagine that women would have complete control over their farm and family, especially for rural farming America. However, I argue that these women, and Babb herself, are necessarily exceptional. They are mothers first, wives second, farmers third. Babb discretely includes their stories in the narrative of land and human. It is through the act of authorship and consequently storytelling that Babb assumes the role of motherhood and care over the stories that have been entrusted to her.

We might look first to the character of Mrs. Brownell, who negotiated the terms of her landship by including a garden—for which she owns and cares. Babb artfully establishes Mrs. Brownell as a caretaker but also the owner of something. She says, "I made myself a garden and to keep it, I spend half my life taking of it."[37] Initially, this might seem counterintuitive. Mrs. Brownell is both acting in the favor of land degradation by farming practice and confining herself to the garden.

She made a garden and she develops it. She works the farm which is her husband's. But the garden is hers. Tom Lynch argues that one of the capstones of settler frontiers of the US is the "crafting of narratives reflecting settler women's experiences, generally tied closely to the Pioneer Mother icon" which is as he continues, closely related to the planting of flower gardens which is an almost exclusively female activity.[38] This image of the gardening mother in enforced

[37] Babb, 18
[38] Lynch, 383

in Dorothea Lange's photograph, "Mrs. Howard Gardens" in which a woman is seen planting seed while holding a child on her hip—the ultimate maternal figure.

Photograph 11 Dorothea Lange, Mrs. Howard Gardens, 1935

There is an inherent belief, then, that women's work in the garden is meant to not only serve as a means to "cultivate the land" but also a means to *cultivate the woman*. Arguably, this is true in some measure. The garden serves as a boundary for the women and the natural world outside of it. But the garden, as Lynch explains, serves as a site of "female defiance of both local climate and male authority...[we] are expected to admire the tenacity in denying these equally pernicious forces."[39] The work of caring for the garden—especially in the dry and harsh climates of the great plains with its unique challenges that draw the garden away from the peaceful and

[39] Lynch, 386

"feminine" site of enjoyment and into a space of physical labor. It is through the decision by Mrs. Brownell to determine the terms of her own imprisonment into the garden that establishes it as a site of resistance. Mrs. Brownell decides to plant foreign flowers and trees—to create a means of paradise for their home in the wide-open prairies of Oklahoma.

The women in the novel are the caretakers. They are the collectors of stories, hardships, pain, duty, and responsibility. They are responsible for family health and sanity. We are reminded of this when Milt tells Julia, "You women worry too much." But perhaps, we are forced to be the ones to worry, because it is the relationship between man and nature that has put them in this situation. We begin to see through these characters the possibilities of land and relationships and of ownership.

This is juxtaposed, perhaps, to Babb's own publication journey. We are forced to frame this as a matter of "possibility" versus "responsibility." The notion of borders is built directly off the metaphor of using the feminine body to conquer: the land, the people, your own sanity. The women in Babb's novel own no land themselves. Mrs. Brownell is given a small parcel of land to garden, but the bulk of her responsibilities lie in the care of the family unit. In many respects, Babb had done the same thing. She had gone into the camps to care for the stories of the migrants there. She had been given the opportunity to cultivate a small plot in order to own something. But this act of ownership is only guaranteed through the act of publication. Through Babb's work of curation and preservation, she herself assumes the role of a dust mother. Her writing is dedicated to those whose stories she carried onward, as she dedicates her novel *To John Doe and Mary Doe Whose True Names are Unknown.* Her work is rooted in the place of the garden—where the other mothers reside—but her lasting effect traverses the boundaries of the domesticated garden.

According to *Pink Pirates* author Caren Irr, women's intellectual work is continually pirated and used, historically, by men. However, this practice is in many ways, reinforced by the social norms, particularly that turn-of-the-century women would have experienced. Namely, that ownership is not guaranteed for them. Irr writes that "even well-educated women writers experienced (and to some extend reinforced) limitations on the exercise of their own property rights, including their intellectual property rights)" which she continues stems directly from social conventions. Babb does not fight for her right to be published. She simply tucks the manuscript away and moves forward. Perhaps, behind closed doors, she tried to fight for herself. But what could she do? She acknowledges that she believes she was a better writer then Steinbeck, but she hardly pushes Collins on the fact that he handed over her reports. She gives remarks later in her life on how Steinbeck must have known. Why? We are forced to point to the notion of ownership. In her novel, Babb dreams for her characters to return to their land, with the Old Man writing to talk about the land—remind them and us—that the relationship between land and humans exists. That there is still a sense of hope. We see this through the eyes of Julia looking at her children—for a moment seeing the futures of their lives and knowing that her life will be spent looking to them. However, for Babb this wasn't the reality. Once this door closed, she was forced to look at something else, something new. She knew, better than Steinbeck did, what it really meant to live off the land, to be lost, homeless, destitute.

Photograph 12 Dorothea Lange, Tom Collins and Family, 1936

Lawrence Rodgers explains that Babb is responsible for putting a human face on the victims of the Dust Bowl. She is responsible for placing the stories back into their hands. Yet, we are forced to question why it is her responsibility to do so. As Garrard notes, ecofeminism calls androcentric dualism to explain situations such as those presented by the Dust Bowl and subsequently Sanora Babb's publication.[40] The argument would follow that Steinbeck and Collins were inherently more adept at writing about nature and civilization because they are more suited to do so simply by being men. This is contradicted by the founding principle that women are somehow more attuned to the natural world through their femininity. At what point in modernity do we choose? Are women more capable about nature writing because they are women? Or are women less capable regarding nature writing because their femininity prevents them from truly understanding the natural world? While *Whose Names Are Unknown* might not

[40] Garrard, 26

appear to be a nature book, it is. It relies on descriptions of the landscape to connect the reader intimately with the characters inner emotions and thoughts. Moments in the novel are marked by the changing landscape:

> Russian thistles, tugged by the wind, broke their strong roots and bounded off over the prairie, jostling thick against the barbed wire fences. There drifted the dirt blown from the fields, making deep ridges, which in some places left only the top of the slender cedar posts showing.

which directly correlates itself to the people:

> Late geese flew southward, honking high above the endless plains, sending down into the hearts below their strange cry that spoke of other places. The never-settled hearts of these pioneer-bred people, working hard to make a lifelong home in an unrelenting land, stirred uneasily and dreamed of newer lands.[41]

Why should Babb's work be left by the wayside in favor of someone who didn't know what that land was and felt like? It would be infinitely difficult to argue that Babb was more capable of writing this novel because she was a woman—it opens a web of problematic analysis and critical gender theories. This might tie to biblical readings of Eve in the garden, suggesting that it is her burden to carry the stories of those she worked to banish from the ecological perfect Garden of Eden. This implicants women as being continually punishable by the Anglo-centric male perspective. It is through this reading that we find that the female voice—of all women—is entirely erased. But I suggest that Babb's position as a Dust Mother aligns her work in a way which allows for the critical and creative writing which Garrard suggests is terminally

[41] Babb, 62

impossible through androcentric viewpoints. Rather than directly addressing the issues presented through this, Babb has done what Groover suggests is only possible through a female writer: resistance and emergence in a domestic sphere.

Babb has written a world through the perspective of domesticity. This, initially, I posit positions her in the garden. Yet, through the writing of human stories, she creates an exit for herself. Babb cannot exist outside of the domesticated garden. It is socially and culturally not possible for a woman in the 1930s and 1940s. Yet, Babb has created a means of operating both inside as a domestic story keeper and outside as a domestic author. It is through these means that the garden narrative is directly implicated and challenged.

Chapter Three: Ecological Disaster in FSA Photography and Literature

Nearly all of Babb's work centered around relationships with natural spaces. Being a writer of the Dust Bowl era, and occupant of this land for the majority of her life, she, perhaps better than anyone, knew what the land was capable of and what our relationship with it looked like. The Dust Bowl is one of the greatest and most detrimental examples of what happens when we are poor stewards of the land. We try to control the land and the land has the ability to turn back on us. The conflict dictates our relationship with it. Language and literature have long acted as the regulator for the behaviors of people and the changes occurring in the natural world. However, it is through this censorship that the borders of land and of words have come to act as a physical and metaphorical barrier for individual and landscape. This barrier has been put in place through generations of passively allowing the feminine metaphor of conquering the land to take root. Perhaps, this is best noticed in the era of the Dust Bowl. We might think of this time as both a grounding of massive ecological, social, and creative spaces of change. I posit that in reading the work of Babbs' *Whose Names Are Unknown*, we find that ecological disaster ignores these false borders. In order to combat and understand these falsities, we must first understand the historical contexts. It is in these borderlands that we find that women are perhaps the best conduits to understanding the changing landscapes of resistance, resilience, defeat, and hope. Though Babb's story encapsulates these factors through the perspective of family, loss, and womanhood, it is directly contradicted by her own path to publication. It is in this that we find that these borderlands not only preclude female characters and voices but female authorship, an erasure that is significant for its complete silencing of an entire population.

We must first begin with the question of what ownership looks like and what it means. During the Dust Bowl, nearly 2.5 million people migrated from their homes. The land that they

owned was technically and legally still theirs, however, their ability to control it and own it, was being questioned. The land was quite literally forcing them out. This land ownership is framed by the concept of borders. We have national borders, state borders, and then land borders. Individual property is marked by an arbitrary measure—typically signaled by a post, a fence.

> It was a mistake to plow the plains in a land of little rain and wind, wind, wind, and the mistake resulted in dust, which covered fields and buildings, killed people and animals, and drove farmers out with nothing.[42]

Hindsight is 20/20. Looking back at the era of the Dust Bowl, we know now that the farming practices promoted by farmers were incredibly detrimental to the land. Combining the works of Sanora Babb and the FSA photography works such as Dorothea Lange provides an interesting contrast to the same problem. An author is tasked with compiling a manuscript that captures the *realities* of farm life and migration while a photographer is tasked with challenge of capturing what the emotional strain of farming and migration *looks* like. This discussion through the theoretical framework of the garden and more specifically the gendered agricultural garden requires an acknowledgment of the marginalized fractions of the Dust Bowl and farming of the early 20th century.

The Homestead Act of 1862 was a fantastic opportunity for American citizens. The caveat, of course, being that American citizens are defined by the colonizer. Excluded from what Jacob Freund terms an *entitlement program* were Native American tribes whose land was being taken and given away for small sums of money, forcing them to relocate.[43] It is critical to acknowledge the colonial language of the act and following reforms which permitted, once

[42] Babb, xiii
[43] Freud, Jacob. The Homestead Act of 1862: The First Entitlement Program. *Journal of the West*, 2013.

again, the Anglo-European figure to "conquer" the land, despite there having already been people living there. This becomes, perhaps, one of the first sites of extreme ecological degradation on the part of white settlers in the Americas Freud writes that in order to open the land for white settlers, Native Americans needed to be displaced once more. The employed strategy for this task was to "eradicate buffalo, one of the most important resources for the Indians on the plains." They, he continues, killed nearly 9 million buffalo, "making the plains nearly uninhabitable for the Native Americans.[44] This would cause the loss of 30,000 plains Indians lives—including the Otoe people. As numbers dwindled, the Native American population was coerced into moving onto reservations, opening their homelands for distribution. Historical records of western expansion, the frontier, and the Homestead Act fails to properly acknowledge the detrimental impact that Native American groups felt. Pointing to Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" the argument might be made that:

> As Americans became accustomed to the constant availability of free land, provided by the government in the West, the notion that the land was morally and rightfully theirs grew. Consequently, Americans developed a greater sense of independence, individualism, and self-reliance.[45]

I argue that while western expansion through consequent acts such as the Homestead Act aided in the development of national identity, discourse, and consequently legal parameters of land acquisition and ownership, it subsequently developed a sense of righteousness that provided the platform for continued racism, xenophobia, and ecological disaster.

[44] Freund, 20
[45] Freund, 20

With the assumption of virtually free land from a seemingly invisible stockpile of endless land comes the assumption that the land is disposable and self-maintained. I posit that when Americans gained land through the Homestead Act, they failed to gain any sense of land empathy. This would result in the development of the domesticated garden and agricultural garden which barred Native American tribal groups from entering through the continued displacement of entire nations to reservations.[46]

Lawrence Rogers writes in the introduction to *Whose Names Are Unknown* that Babb was born in "Otoe Indian community in Oklahoma Territory" which as Babb's website describes she developed a lifelong affinity and interest with Native American beliefs and community life. Of course, knowing that Babb had some interest in Native American life and culture, it seems interesting that there is virtually no mention of any tribal nation in her novel. Rather, the novel seems preoccupied with the invisible othering of farmers by nature and subversively the othering of motherhood within the community and culture of the Dust Bowl. It is important to keep in mind however, the historical ambivalence of the Otoe peoples of the Red Rock area. Historically, great Plains nations were nomadic and survived via hunting and gathering. Though the buffalo was critical, it was not the only means of survival. Agricultural fields were critical in the Northern plains of what is now considered to be the Midwest. Writers at nativeamericanroots.net note that "sensitive to the ecological demands of the Northern Plains, fields were established in fertile bottomlands where the tillable soil was renewed annually by flooding" which continues to cite Hidatsa elder Buffalo Bird Woman (1910) " 'It was well known in my tribe that burning over new ground left the soil soft and easy to work, and for this reason we thought it was a wise

[46] Li, Stephanie. Domestic Resistance: Gardening, Mothering, and Storytelling in Leslie Marmon Silko's Gardens in the Dunes. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 2009.

thing to do.'"[47] Of course, as white settlers moved into these spaces, they over tilled the dry ground—failing to utilize natural cycles that the earth provided in the cultivation of agriculture—combined with the overly aggressive formations of farmland resulted in the Dust Bowl. It should be noted that after tilling, Northern Plainsmen would allow the fields to lay still for two years for the land to rejuvenate. The white farmers who would move in would fail to do this due to supply and demand and the inexperience that many of them faced.

Babb writes in the first pages of *Whose Names Are Unknown* that "Milt Dunne wanted to change crops. Now, this land lay on the western edge of the wheat country, but many farmers around were trying wheat."[48] Babb, in her understanding of farmland and the Otoe farming traditions, might have been more knowledgeable in the proper usage of the land. Or, perhaps it was retrospection which allowed her to look back at the days leading up to disaster to note that it was the cultivation of ecological incorrect agriculture which would lead to the culmination of the Dust Bowl. Regardless of her reasoning, Babb establishes early in her manuscript with whose fault the Dust Bowl lies.

It is pertinent to note that in traditional nature writing, places of nature serve as sites of solitude and healing where the human body retreats to receive elements of spiritual revitalization. Be it the formation of the agricultural garden or the lack of environmental understanding, the territories the Dust Bowl most directly impacted provide little in the ways of revitalization. The garden, of course, is implicated as a site of nature *for* women which as Karen Kilcup writes traditional nature writing introduces "weeding and house" as "ostensibly conventional images of nature as female" through rhetoric that introduces the reader to the principle of women as

[47] "Northern Plains Agriculture." *Native American Roots*, nativeamericanroots.net, 2012.
[48] Babb, 3

caretaker.[49] Kilcup offers an interesting proposition. The ways in which we read literature of the environment and many traditional women tropes are through the definition and thought of men. The formation of the traditional American landscape defines nature as woman (i.e mother nature) which provides two options:

1. When nature provides, it is because *she* is a mother. It is her duty.
2. When nature does not provide, it is because *she* is a woman. It is her emotional nature.

This critical analysis is crucial to understanding the overarching tones of the Dust Bowl. How disastrous is it that mother nature should turn her back on mankind? And to whose breasts do the beaten and down-trodden farmers return? The Dust Mothers, of course.

The role that the Dust Mothers had during the tumultuous and cumulative years of the Dust Bowl are often understated or neglected. But it is of no uncertain consequence that in Babb's three pieces (*Whose Names Are Unknown*, *An Owl on Every Post*, *The Lost Traveler*) that the most prominent voices are those of the mothers—or Babb herself. Nature writing by its very creation relies on an adventure. As depressing and gloomy as the Dust Bowl might have been, it was truly an adventure. The narratives we are most familiar with in nature writing are that of the Adamic hero. Always a man. Always the victor. This myth "not only precludes the possibility of women as questing heroes; it also casts women as the domestic conservators whom the heroic Adam must flee."[50] Of course, the families of the Dust Bowl who did migrate, migrated together—and those who remained, remained together. The exception to this being the Old Man,

[49] Kilcup, Karen. "'I Like These Plants That You Call Weeds': Historicizing American Women's Nature Writing." *Nineteenth-Century Literature,* vol. 58, no. 1, 2003, pp. 42-74.
[50] Glooser, 3

who stays behind. Women very often had little choice in what they did and where they went. So, the question remains, why do we hear so little from them? The garden is what we must turn to. For women of the time, both writers and those of the stories being told, wilderness is a domesticated sphere which Glosser explains, is expressed through the garden and cultivated spaces.[51]

The garden becomes a place that is heralded as a safe location for the Dust Mothers to belong, but it also a space that is confining and meant to keep in whatever is situated inside. Babb's attempt at writing *Whose Names Are Unknown* demonstrates the power of the garden within a society unwilling to accept the work of "the protected." It is from within this garden that Babb herself emerges—or attempts to—and where the women of the Dust Bowl create a site of resistance and resilience.

Initially, the garden is situated as a place of oppression and the agricultural garden is extended to finite boundaries of arbitrary fencing which signifies the cultural, social, and political boundaries of womanhood. However, through traumatic ecological disaster, these boundaries are removed or hidden and what emerges is resistance storytelling and keeping.

The Farm Security Administration hired photographers to enter these spaces to document what happens inside the garden and outside the garden. Initially, the photographers focused on the citizens of places like Cimarron Country, Oklahoma and eventually followed those that left west to California. Meant to be kept at a distance, to give the rest of the country a furtive view of the downtrodden, photographers like Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein and Babb's own sister, Dorothea Babb, created some of the most iconic images of the 20th century. The images

[51] Glooser, 101

circulated by the FSA were intended to display the true "rural" American in all their plight. It is questionable to the degree that this exploitation truly helped. But what we are left with is the evidence of the burden that women held during the Dust Bowl and the subsequent migrations.

Though the photographs used throughout this project are the creations of multiple photographers, it is the work of Dorothea Lange that most accurately portrays the imagery and criticism that the garden evokes. Lange was particularly interested in the women of the migrant camps. Her most iconic image, "The Migrant Mother" remains one of America's most treasured photographs.

Photograph 13 Dorothea Lange, The Migrant Mother, 1936

The series of photos that follow depict a young mother, Florence Henderson, clutching her child. Descriptions of the photo from Lange herself describe how the family had just sold their tent for

food.[52] The family, having just migrated to California were waiting for work in the pea fields. Considering the photograph itself, we recognize several things, the first being the maternal nature of the mother. Of course, Lange has captured the mother with two of her seven children. Huddled together beneath a tarp with little to eat and dusty. On the edge of the frame are the pea fields from which they desperately try to earn enough to eat. I suggest that the image brings to the forefront the ecological consequences of the agricultural garden. The garden still exists behind her, invoking the sense that the mother exists within this garden. Lisa Kaplan notes that the most popular image from the series is the one that is the tightest frame. It is the image in which the family seems most trapped—reversely, I suggest, however, is that these images aren't just demonstrating her being trapped. They are revealing her expulsion. She is physically uncomfortable and clearly lost. She can no longer can reside within the garden because the garden does not exist. The artificial nature as been invaded by the natural world. We are most comfortable with the feminine figure being "protected inside," but the reality of her situation is that she no longer resides within that space.[53] She is forced into the wilderness—or rather the wilderness has forced its way inside. Her job remains the same, however. Her role is to care for the children, the "home", and the mental well-being of them all. Perhaps, outside the domesticated garden, we are better able to see the maternal struggle the Dust Mothers felt. Similar, of course, to Julia in *Whose Names Are Unknown*, who devotes her entire being to the lives of her children. Babb writes of the ways Julia would look in the distance, clutching her children and that "she knew she did not understand them beyond her love. She would follow them in silence and waiting, and look at their lives as they made them in the hard and tortuous

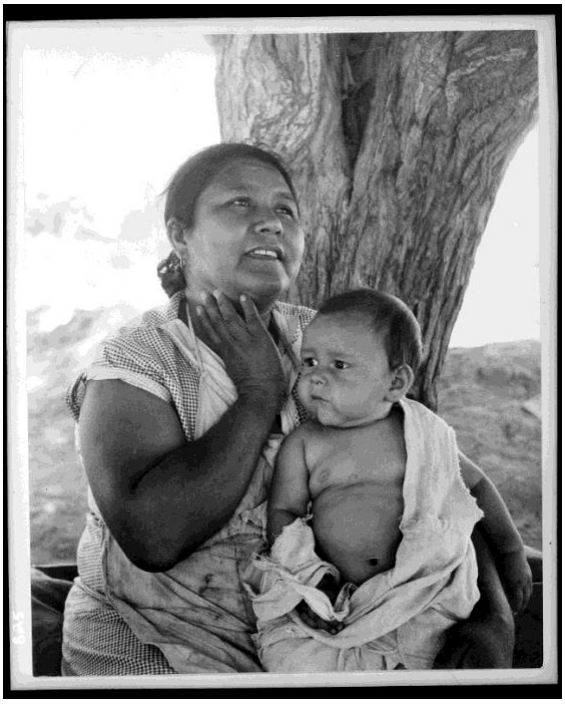
[52] Lange, Dorothea. "The Migrant Mother." *The Library of Congress,* 1936.
[53] Kaplan, Lisa. Introducing America to American's: FSA Photography and the Construction of Racialized and Gendered Citizens. *Bowling Green State University,* 2015.

ways…this gave her an ornament of comfort."[54] Written as if the Migrant Mother is Julia herself, the complexity of motherhood in the garden is circumscribed to the photograph.

It is at this moment important to note that I, and the subsequent research, would be remiss to not acknowledge that this observation into the workings of the migrant mothers and the subsequent Dust Mothers would not have been historically possible were it not for the cultural and social fascination with the figures most prominent in the work. Though many of Lange's photographs picture women of color, the more popular pieces are markedly white—or to the public they appear so. Sally Stein notes that Florence Henderson (the Migrant Mother) is of Cherokee descent, though there are no racial markers to identify her as either Cherokee or Anglo. This allowed the general public to identify her as Anglo through a hegemonic gaze which arguably allowed the image to gain and remain in popularity.[55] It seems ironic that the persons who were forcibly removed during the settler colonial project becomes the poster child for the Dust Bowl migration caused by the hands of the oppressive systemic project. Certainly, non-Anglo European men and women were part of the migrant workers in California or the remaining "Okies" of the plains, yet, we are most often confronted with the imagery of white, heteronormative families.

[54] Babb, 214

[55] Sally Stein, "Passing Likeness: Dorothea Lange's Migrant Mother and the Paradox of Iconicity," Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self, 2003, 345–55.



Photograph 14 Dorothea Lange, Mexican Mother, 1935

A strikingly similar image taken one year earlier depicts a "Mexican Mother" who also worked on the pea farms in California. We are called to question precisely why this image was never circulated in the same way that the "Migrant Mother" was. Is it because she is a woman of color? Is it because she is racially marked in a way that Florence could not be? What emerges is the realization that even with the ecological eradication of the domesticated garden, there are still those who are barred from entering it or what becomes the figurative version of it. Markedly colored bodies are not permitted into the domesticated garden when it is established, and they are certainly not permitted into the entails of what remains following the Dust Bowl. This, of course, completely ignores the work of Mexican migrant labor which has persisted into the 21st century. Those are the laborers which maintain the agricultural garden but are refused entry into them.

Babb's novel attempts to capture the plight of the Dust Mothers—though from an Anglo-centric perspective—through storytelling. Babb uses letters that Julia writes a la diary entries that

her own mother provided. The entries reveal another site of resistance within the garden. Julia becomes not only the protector of the home but the protector of their (i.e the family) story.

Continuing until they are physically expelled from the agricultural garden to California Julia writes:

> *April 28.* A beautiful morning, but everything is buried. Spent all morning cleaning house and getting ourselves cleaned up…Maybe in a few years the country will be all right again but now it looks like a desert. It is sad every direction you look. People imprisoned in their own homes behind covered windows and doors.[56]

Bearing the burden of caring for and maintain the family, Julia turns to writing, much in the same way that Babb had done. Yet, we are marked by the ways that Julia picks up on certain aspects of their decline. Imprisonment. Self-care. Buried. These are all things that every family was forced to deal with. Yet, the brunt of the burden was resting on the shoulders of women, those who could neither escape nor remain within the garden. Arguably, Julia would not have had the opportunity to write had it not been for the ecological expulsion from the garden. But it should be noted that when they leave for California, Julia stops writing. Perhaps this can be attributed to the increased load of navigating a world outside of the garden. Or perhaps this is best left to the magnitude of desolation.

[56] Babb, 94

Photograph 15 Dorothea Lange, Drought Refuges, 1936

Initially, it seems that Milt is our character to follow. He is the farmer and the ultimate decision-maker. But in the background of his noise emerges Julia, our ultimate story-keeper and confidant. Similarly, in Dorothea Lange's image of unknown workers, we are initially focused on the men in the center—those who can exist outside the garden. But we eventually forced to acknowledge the women in the background. Julia rises before the men each morning to provide something to eat—even if it's the scrapings from the bottom of rotten potatoes, to ensure that the work can be done for the day.[57] Babb toils away collecting research and stories to create a novel which is tucked away for decades to ensure that the stories of the migrant workers are shared. The Dust Mothers have always existed in the background. They are the cogs on the machine which ensures that everything operates as smoothly as possible. The Dust Bowl and the FSA

[57] Babb, 6

photography allowed viewers an intimate look at what the Dust Mothers did. It provided a moment outside the garden to reveal the resistance and resilience of the women there. The photography also serves as a reminder and a permanent moment in modernity that proves that women can exist outside of the garden. The women of the garden are forced to reside within it, but it does not mean that they must sit idly by.

Conclusion: Recovering the Work of the Dust Mothers

The clerical definition of non-canonical works marginalizes Sanora Babb's *Whose Names Are Unknown* to the nether regions of forgotten texts. The era of the Dust Bowl operates in a unique space of loss, discovery, and ecological disaster which prompted the country to navigate into an unknown and unprotected space. The novel itself serves as a site of memorial and resistance as the characters (based on those unknown and forgotten people of the real world) operate in an entirely alien world. It is within this framework that we are forced to orient ourselves within and moving against the gendered and constraining garden.

It is important to note that the burden of 2.5 million lives should not rest on the bindings of one novel. However, in exploring and expostulating on the concept of the garden, the central figure of the Dust Mother emerges as the model on which we must bare our souls. Women were responsible for the home, the children, the care of the family, the farm, and the emotional stability of those around them. Babb herself was responsible for the safekeeping of stories from the migrant workers, the families who remained among the dust, and her own history. Her representation of the Dust Bowl emerges as a domestic story. It is in these words that the women of the Dust Bowl exist. Babb's realistic and heart-wrenching story is a testament to the work of the Dust Mothers.

The garden—considering both the biblically literary interpretation and the modern aesthetics of the garden—operates as a guardian from outside forces but more substantially operates as a site of fortitude for the safekeeping of what resides inside. While an argument might be made about the garden being only a means to protect what belongs inside, we are forced to acknowledge that the garden also operates as a site of oppression and conquest. The

garden is defined by its place of *non-wilderness* which signifies it as a place of security. What belongs in the *wild* are arguably those things which were not "cured" through the settler colonial project and have failed to be cultivated to the satisfaction of civilization. It is also the wild which is deemed suitable to only the male figure. The false borders that contain the garden are created through artificial and arbitrary measures which instill a sense of false safety. Of course, nature knows no bounds of land ownership. Through environmental disasters, such as that of the Dust Bowl, these boundaries are implicated under the gaze of the captured and contained.

The Dust Bowl offered few opportunities to Americans. It took farmlands, it took dignity, work, family, and home. It removed barriers of wilderness and civilization, blurring the lines between the two to the point that American farmers were forced to retreat to the gardens that they had created until even those were invaded. From within the garden, the Dust Mothers gathered and organized as keepers of the family, the home, and the stories. It is within those barbed fences that Babb emerged. Growing up as a poor, migrating child of a gambler in the high plains, she knew better than most what it meant to work within and outside the garden.

Of course, proposing that *Whose Names Are Unknown* was left to rot in the garden of domestication and womanhood would seem to negate any literary merit that it has. However, I contend that due to Babb's position in and outside the garden, her work with the mothers both exiled to and expelled from the garden, as well as the cultural and environmental significance of the time, Babb's novel stands as a testament to the work that women silently did. The Dust Mothers were not born from love and care. They were born in dirt and with grit, they rose to answer the call that was directed to them. It is through their labor that we survived one of the worst ecological disasters in American history.

It is unclear whether the Dust Mothers were resigned to be relegated to the garden once the dust had settled and normal life began once more. But, as we see through the eventual publication of *Whose Names Are Unknown*, it is possible for the garden to transform from captor to friend. For our part, we are left in the contemporary moment with the stories and photographs that remain. As Babb ends her pivotal novel, "They would rise and fall and, in their falling, rise again."[58]

Photograph 16 Arthur Rothstein, Oklahoma Pioneer Woman, 1936

[58] Babb, 222

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