



# Dust Bowl Migrants in the American Imagination (Rural America)

*Charles J. Shindo*

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More than any other event of the 1930s, the migration of thousands of jobless and dispossessed Americans from the Dust Bowl states to the "promised land" of California evokes the hardships and despair of the Great Depression. In this innovative new study, Charles Shindo shows how the public memory of that migration has been dominated not by academic historians but by a handful of artists and would-be reformers.

Shindo examines the images of Dust Bowl migrants in photography, fiction, film, and song and marks off the various distances between these representations and the realities of migrant lives. He shows how photographer Dorothea Lange, novelist John Steinbeck, Hollywood filmmaker John Ford, and folksinger Woody Guthrie, as well as folklorists and government reformers, sympathized with the migrants' plight but also appropriated that experience to further their own aesthetic and ideological agendas.

The haunted look of Lange's "Migrant Mother" and other photos, the powerful story of the Joad family in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ford's poetic cinematic adaptation of that novel, and the gritty plainfolk lyrics of Guthrie's *Dust Bowl Ballads* have all combined to portray the migrants as the quintessential victims of the Great Depression. Shindo, however, contends that these artists failed to fully grasp the realities of "Okie" culture and seemed far more concerned with promoting views and agendas that the migrants themselves might have found inaccurate or unappealing.

Shindo's study shows us how art can dominate history in the popular mind and illuminates the ways in which artists blend aesthetics and politics to make a personal statement about the human condition. His book not only increases our understanding of a tragic era in American history but also expands the scope of current histories of the American West to include cultural representations and their importance.

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