

The Spatial Politics of Crooks's Room in *Of Mice and Men*

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Abstract: This article examines Crooks's room in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, bell hooks's discussion of the margin, and an intersectional perspective. It argues that the room is not merely a setting for marginalized characters but a changing social space whose uses reveal how power is organized and reproduced on the ranch. Crooks's separation from the white bunkhouse materializes racial hierarchy as an everyday spatial order. Lennie's and Candy's entries briefly reappropriate this imposed margin and turn it into a site of conversation, affiliation, and a shared dream of land. Curley's wife's arrival, however, exposes the unequal positions that remain among marginalized subjects, as race, gender, class, age, and disability continue to shape who can speak, exclude, threaten, or withdraw. The room's eventual return to segregation shows that the resistant potential of marginal space depends on the social relations that sustain it. Steinbeck thus presents spatial marginality as both a possible site of resistance and a mechanism through which hierarchy is repeatedly restored.

Key words: John Steinbeck; *Of Mice and Men*; production of space; marginal space; intersectionality; reproduction of power

Introduction

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* is set on a California ranch during the Great Depression, a world in which migrant laborers live with economic insecurity and unstable belonging. Crooks, Candy, Lennie, and Curley's wife occupy especially vulnerable positions shaped by race, age, disability, cognitive difference, and gender. Existing studies have approached these conditions through loneliness, interpersonal relations, geographic alienation, Black resistance, and intersecting forms of discrimination ^[1,2,6-8]. Yet less attention has been paid to the changing function of Crooks's room: why a space created by racial segregation can briefly become a shared space across social boundaries, and why that opening collapses so quickly.

This question requires treating the room as more than a symbolic backdrop. Lefebvre's theory of the production of space emphasizes that space is socially produced rather than neutral. Social relations are stabilized through spatial divisions, everyday practices, and the ways people learn where they may or may not belong ^[5]. bell hooks's account of the margin adds a second dimension. The margin can be imposed as a site of exclusion, but it can also be reappropriated as a position from which alternative relations and resistant forms of consciousness emerge ^[4]. An intersectional perspective further clarifies why shared marginality does not erase differences in power ^[3].

This article traces four movements: the spatial production of segregation; the room's temporary reappropriation by Crooks, Lennie, and Candy; the reappearance of unequal power within that community; and the return to segregation. The argument is that the room becomes resistant only when its imposed use is altered, while its restoration shows how deeply ranch hierarchies shape everyday relations.

1. Crooks's Room as a Mechanism of Segregation

Crooks's room first appears as a space produced by the ranch's racial order. The white workers live together in the bunkhouse, where they play cards, talk, and go into town as members of a shared laboring community. Crooks, although employed on the same ranch, lives apart in a harness room attached to the barn. The distinction between the bunkhouse and Crooks's room turns racial hierarchy into a visible spatial arrangement. Who can enter the collective living space, who must sleep alone, and who can participate casually in evening social life are all regulated through everyday spatial practice.

Lefebvre's claim that social space is socially produced becomes concrete here ^[5]. Racism operates not only through insults or openly hostile individuals but also through ordinary arrangements that make inequality appear routine. Beds, doors, distance, and patterns of movement repeat the same judgment about belonging. Crooks does not need to be told every day that he is separated from the white workers; the arrangement of the ranch continually tells him so. His room therefore has a double character. It gives him a limited private boundary, yet that privacy exists because he has been excluded from collective life.

This spatial separation shapes Crooks's relations with others. Steinbeck describes him as a man who "kept his distance and demanded that other people keep theirs" ^[9]. Read as a personality trait, the sentence suggests aloofness. Read spatially, it points to a protective response produced by long experience of segregation. Because Crooks cannot freely enter the white bunkhouse, he turns enforced distance into a boundary that he can at least partially control. When Lennie arrives, Crooks initially refuses him entry by insisting that the room is his. The gesture is significant because the ranch determines where Crooks must live, while Crooks can only decide who may remain at the threshold of the space assigned to him.

The room thus gives Crooks a highly restricted form of territorial control. Within the wider ranch order he has little power to exclude anyone, but at his own door he can ask others to wait, leave, or seek permission. This limited control protects his dignity while also exposing the narrowness of his autonomy. The moment a conflict involves racial violence, employment, or the boss's family, his authority over the room becomes fragile. Steinbeck therefore presents oppression as a spatial contradiction: a marginalized person may possess a corner of his own without controlling why that corner exists or whether its boundary will be respected.

Crooks's isolation also creates the condition for an alternative use of the room. When most workers go into town, the room is relatively removed from supervision. The segregation that pushes Crooks to the margin therefore produces a space whose assigned use can briefly be changed.

2. Reappropriating the Margin and Forming a Temporary Community

Lennie's entry is the first event that alters the room's normal function. Because he does not fully understand the ranch's tacit racial codes, he does not treat Crooks's room as a place that white workers should automatically avoid. His movement across the threshold does not erase racial difference, but it forces an implicit boundary to become explicit. Crooks has to explain that the white men do not allow him in their bunkhouse and initially uses the same logic to tell Lennie to leave. Once a boundary has to be explained, however, it loses part of its appearance of naturalness. Through Lennie's imperfect grasp of social convention, Steinbeck makes the power behind "separate" spaces visible.

Crooks eventually allows Lennie to stay, and their conversation changes the room from a site of enforced isolation into a site of relation. Crooks begins to speak about childhood, family, and loneliness, telling Lennie that "a guy gets too lonely an' he gets sick" ^[9]. The importance of this confession lies not only in emotional disclosure. The room's social function has changed. A space that previously blocked interaction now carries a conversation across the very racial line it was meant to maintain. Crooks, meanwhile, shifts from being a passive object of segregation to someone who decides whether the conversation continues.

Candy's arrival extends this reappropriation from an accidental encounter into a temporary community. He pauses at the entrance and, after entering, remarks that despite having worked on the ranch for years, he has never before been inside

Crooks's room. The detail makes the durability of the racial boundary visible. Once admitted, Candy joins the discussion of George and Lennie's plan to buy land. The three men gathered in the room occupy different forms of vulnerability: Crooks is racially segregated, Candy fears that age and physical impairment will make him economically disposable, and Lennie depends heavily on George because of his cognitive disability. Their positions are not identical, but each lacks secure control over his future.

The dream of owning land therefore acquires a meaning that exceeds economic aspiration. On the ranch, the men survive on someone else's property. They sell their labor but cannot decide whether their employment will last, where they will live, or how long they may remain. George and Lennie's imagined farm reverses these relations. Ownership promises greater control over work, residence, entry, and continued belonging. Candy is willing to contribute his savings, and Crooks eventually asks whether he might join and work for his keep. What attracts them is not simply a pastoral fantasy. The dream promises a form of spatial autonomy unavailable in the present ranch system.

Crooks's change of attitude is particularly revealing. He initially mocks the plan because he has seen many workers imagine buying land and fail. His skepticism grows from experience, not from an inherently pessimistic personality. He understands more clearly than Lennie how difficult it is for migrant laborers to accumulate resources and escape the system that employs them. When Candy explains that the group already has a substantial sum of money, Crooks begins to consider participation. The room then moves closer to what Crooks calls a margin that can become a "space of radical openness" ^[4]. Crooks has not left the space imposed on him, but he temporarily changes what that space can do: who may enter, what may be discussed, and what kind of future can be imagined there.

The equality of this temporary community remains fragile. It rests on personal permission rather than institutional protection, and the imagined farm cannot immediately change employment relations or racial power. The room has been reappropriated, while the structure that produced it remains intact. That gap between changed use and unchanged structure prepares the conflict that follows.

3. Differentiated Marginality and the Internal Reproduction of Power

The arrival of Curley's wife forces the temporary community to confront differences within marginality itself. She is also isolated on the ranch. As the only woman given sustained narrative attention, she has no personal name and is identified through her marriage. The male workers treat her presence as dangerous, interpret her attempts at conversation as sexual impropriety, and repeatedly tell one another to avoid her. Her movement around the ranch is partly driven by the same need for contact that shapes Crooks's and Candy's behavior. Yet her gendered marginalization does not place her in the same position in every relation.

Crenshaw's critique of single-axis accounts of discrimination is useful here because it shows how social positions are formed through intersecting structures rather than one identity at a time ^[3]. Curley's wife is constrained as a woman by her husband and by the male laboring community, but she is also white and closely connected to the ranch's authority as the boss's daughter-in-law. When she enters Crooks's room, her gendered vulnerability does not erase racial privilege. She can speak of being isolated by men and, in the same encounter, mobilize the racial order against Crooks.

This difference becomes clearest when Crooks tries to defend the boundary of his room and asks her to leave. By admitting Lennie and Candy, he has established a limited authority over the space. Within the temporary rules of the room, he appears to decide who may stay. Curley's wife immediately exposes how conditional that authority is. She threatens that she could have Crooks "strung up on a tree" ^[9], invoking the possibility of racial terror. Crooks possesses the room but lacks the social power to guarantee that its boundary will be honored. She does not need to carry out the threat; she only needs to name a form of violence that both of them know the surrounding society could make possible.

The scene shows that dominant power has never fully left the room. It does not require the boss or a group of white men to stand physically inside the space. The structure operates through shared knowledge of possible punishment. Crooks knows what the threat means, and Curley's wife knows why it will be effective. Their common recognition of the racial order allows power to function without an external authority being present. Marginal space is therefore not outside power. It is a location where direct supervision may be weaker, while the identities, expectations, and risks produced by

the wider order remain active.

At the same time, the men's treatment of Curley's wife shows that gender hierarchy also continues within the marginal gathering. Candy rebukes her for approaching other men despite having a husband, turning marriage into a rule about where a woman should appear and how she should behave. The male workers have limited power in class and labor relations, yet they can still draw on gender norms to police female mobility and speech. Curley's wife then counters Crooks through racial privilege. These interactions create a cross-cutting pattern of domination rather than a simple opposition between a powerful center and a powerless margin.

Lennie and Candy further show that marginality cannot be reduced to one category. Lennie's cognitive disability makes him dependent on George, while Candy fears exclusion because of age and physical impairment. Their different vulnerabilities can produce recognition without automatically creating equal relations. The temporary community never develops rules capable of displacing the ranch's existing hierarchies.

The failure of the room's temporary openness should therefore not be reduced to a moral failure of solidarity. The characters' interactions have already been shaped by the ranch's social structure. Crooks protects the only territory he can control by excluding others. The men use familiar gender norms to regulate Curley's wife. Curley's wife uses racial privilege when her position is challenged. Each person mobilizes whatever limited power remains available. In doing so, they reproduce the very logics that marginalize them in other contexts. Power is reproduced not only through rulers who repeatedly impose order from above, but also through everyday acts of self-protection among people differently positioned within the same hierarchy.

This point also sharpens hooks's idea of the margin. A margin becomes politically open only when those located there can rework an imposed position into a site for new relations and critical consciousness ^[4]. Crooks's room briefly approaches such a possibility, but the group never develops a durable relational language capable of displacing racial and gender hierarchy. The land dream is still unrealized, and the room's temporary rules have no institutional support. When conflict emerges, the most available resources are the identities and norms already supplied by the existing social order. The failure of the room is thus structural: it exposes the distance between crossing a boundary for a moment and changing the relations that produce the boundary.

4. Spatial Restoration and the Structural Limits of Resistance

After Curley's wife leaves, the room has already lost much of its temporary openness. George's return completes the restoration of ordinary spatial norms. His displeasure at finding Lennie in Crooks's room signals that the usual boundary between white workers and Crooks is again becoming the standard by which behavior is judged. More importantly, Crooks soon withdraws his request to join the land plan. The man who had briefly imagined a place in a future community retreats from that possibility. This change follows directly from the racial threat that has just reminded him of how vulnerable his position remains.

The land dream had allowed Crooks to imagine himself as someone who might belong to a different community. Curley's wife's threat forces him to recognize that he still lacks basic security in the present order. A future farm might allow him to live with white companions, but that future has not been built and cannot protect him from immediate racial danger. His withdrawal is therefore a form of self-protection shaped by a realistic assessment of unequal power. The more clearly he understands possible punishment, the harder it is to treat a brief moment of emotional openness as evidence of durable social change.

From a Lefebvrian perspective, the room undergoes a temporary alteration in spatial practice ^[5]. Entry, permission, conversation, and collective imagination change how the room is used. A room produced to isolate a Black worker briefly hosts interactions across racial and bodily difference and becomes a place where an alternative future is discussed. This transformation shows that everyday practice can give an established space a new meaning. Yet the alteration remains inside the ranch's larger structure. The room's physical location, the employment system, and white racial power remain unchanged. A new use appears without new institutional relations to sustain it, making restoration highly likely.

The dream of land can therefore be read as an imagined escape from the ranch's spatial order. Migrant workers labor on someone else's property and occupy bunkhouses only as long as they remain economically useful. Owning land would reconnect work, residence, and community under conditions they could partly control. For Candy and Crooks, this promise is especially significant because it imagines belonging that is not determined entirely by labor efficiency or racial separation. The dream ultimately cannot protect them because it remains prospective. Without a new material space, the old ranch continues to define their actual positions.

The room's restoration has in fact begun before George returns. Curley's wife's racial threat has already broken the possibility of equal conversation, and Crooks's later withdrawal from the land plan shows that the ranch's hierarchy has entered his own judgment about what is possible. George's return makes the ordinary spatial code of the white workers visible again, but no single external command is needed to reimpose segregation. The hierarchy survives in the characters' knowledge of boundaries, punishment, and social position.

Crooks's room thus becomes a small-scale model of the ranch. Residence is distributed through race, value through labor capacity, and mobility through gender norms, while age and disability become risks of exclusion. The gathering allows marginalized characters to recognize one another's loneliness while revealing the hierarchies they still carry. They can alter the use of space, but without altering the relations that produce it, that change remains vulnerable to reversal.

Conclusion

Crooks's room moves through three social functions in *Of Mice and Men*: enforced segregation, temporary community, and restored segregation. Its initial separation from the white bunkhouse materializes racial hierarchy as a residential arrangement. Lennie's and Candy's entries then reappropriate the imposed margin and turn it into a place where conversation and the dream of land make another form of relation briefly imaginable. Curley's wife's arrival exposes the internal limits of that community. Race, gender, class, age, and disability intersect in ways that allow people who are marginalized in one relation to exercise power in another.

Seen through the production of space, the room therefore reveals both the durability of structure and the variability of everyday practice. Spatial segregation becomes routine through ordinary arrangements, yet those arrangements can be temporarily repurposed through entry, conversation, and collective imagination. The resistant potential that hooks associates with the margin appears for a moment, but it lacks the social relations needed to sustain it. Crooks can briefly turn an assigned marginal space into a place of shared possibility, while racial hierarchy, gender regulation, and employment insecurity continue to organize the world around it.

The deeper tragedy is that the power producing segregation has entered the characters' everyday relations. Marginalized men may reproduce gender norms; a woman constrained by patriarchy may still mobilize racial privilege; and the person most directly segregated may retreat to the position assigned to him after repeated reminders of possible punishment. Domination is therefore reproduced through spatial boundaries, risk perception, and self-protective action as well as through direct coercion. Steinbeck's episode ultimately suggests that crossing a doorway can interrupt a social order, but it cannot by itself transform the relations that produced the doorway.

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