Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965) conveyed the stories of everyday life with sharp and compassionate attention to the human condition. Her career is widely heralded, yet the connection she cultivated between words and pictures has received scant attention. In conjunction with a major exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, this catalogue provides a fresh approach to some of her most iconic images, such as *White Angel Breadline* (1933) and *Migrant Mother* (1936), as well as rarely seen works. These photographs, some reproduced in their original published form, are accompanied by contributions from a distinguished group of contemporary writers, artists, and critical thinkers who respond to the images with observations both personal and scholarly. By viewing the breadth of Lange’s career and the diverse contexts in which her work appeared, we gain a more nuanced understanding of her achievement and her belief that “all photographs can be fortified by words.”

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Inside flap, front: Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona (detail). November 1940 (page 5)

Jacket back: On the Road to Los Angeles, California. March 1937 (page 76)


Sarah Hermanson Meister
The Museum of Modern Art
New York

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Director's Foreword
Glenn D. Lowry

Acknowledgments

Fortified by Words: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs
Sarah Hermanson Meister

Plates
Introductions by River Encalada Bullock

San Francisco Streets

Government Work
Kimberly Juanita Brown, Lauren Kreitz

Land of the Free
Tom Taylor

An American Exodus
Sandra S. Phillips, Woody Red Star

Pictures of Words
Jennifer A. Greenhill

12 Million Black Voices
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World War II
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Life

The Family of Man

Public Defender
Sally Mann

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Late Work
Rebecca Solnit, Ian Contra

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Trustees of The Museum of Modern Art
The contemplation of things as they are, without substitution or imposture, without error or confusion, is in itself a nobler thing than a whole harvest of invention.

FRANCIS BACON Novum Organum, 1620

This quote from Francis Bacon, which hung on the door to Dorothea Lange’s studio for many years, perfectly reflects the photographer’s ethos: the beauty and abundance that can be found in the world in the “contemplation of things as they are.” Her photographs embody this, of course, with the utmost clarity and compassion. Her career of uncommon breadth and depth — from her photographs for the Farm Security Administration to those in the extraordinary photo-essay “Public Defender”— has few, if any, rivals across the history of the medium.

Many of us are familiar with Lange’s images, as well as with her decisive courage and clear-sightedness at a time when few women were so active in the field. Her writing, however, has received less attention, as have the texts with which her photographs have gone out into the world — such as the many and various captions that have been published with Migrant Mother (1936), perhaps her best-known image — which attest to the demands of different eras and different editorial biases. This relationship between text and image is the focus of Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures, organized by Sarah Meister, Curator in the Department of Photography, with River Bullock, Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow. The Museum of Modern Art is proud to present this exhibition, which does not merely exhibit the work of this important photographer — the iconic images, alongside lesser-known documents of an era — but also offers a fresh scholarly approach to her photographs and the words that through the years have amplified them. With this exhibition we also demonstrate MoMA’s refocused attention on the works in its unparalleled collection, through this and the other exhibitions that opened the Museum’s new building in 2019.

Lange first exhibited at MoMA in 1940, when Migrant Mother was displayed in the newly formed Department of Photography’s inaugural installation. During her lifetime, she was held in high regard by the department’s first three curators — Beaumont Newhall, Edward Steichen, and John Szarkowski — who were responsible for the department’s programming in its first fifty years and who frequently featured her photographs in their exhibitions. In 1966 Szarkowski organized the definitive retrospective of her work, which, although Lange was actively involved in all aspects of its planning, she did not live to see realized. When that exhibition opened, a retrospective of the
work of the Belgian Surrealist painter René Magritte was also on view. Frank Getlein, The New Republic’s art critic, remarked that while Lange and Magritte seemed quite obviously unlike each other, they were a felicitous pairing, singling out Lange’s Man Stepping from Cable Car, San Francisco (1936), with its “movement caught in the middle, in action stopped.” Here, he wrote, we are “witnessing life — not momentous life, not the imaginative life, certainly not the life of social protest, just plain, every minute, life — halted, examined, presented. Somehow, it’s an image as chilling and as compelling and as baffling as anything in Magritte.” As MoMA is poised to look inward, to engage our collections through experimentation, installations across mediums, and new scholarship, Getlein’s words are a concise description of what we hope to achieve.

I am deeply grateful to the Museum’s Board of Trustees for their essential support, and to the Committee on Photography, led by David Dechman, for their dedication to the Department of Photography’s program. Previous generations of this committee were responsible for building the collection that is the foundation of this exhibition; its current members make possible the acquisitions that will enable comparable studies in the future. Dorothea Lange: Words & Pictures has been made possible by the exceptional generosity of Monique M. Schoen Warshaw, whom we thank for her outstanding support of our exhibition programs, and by the leadership donors of the Annual Exhibition Fund.

Glenn D. Lowry
The David Rockefeller Director
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

The opportunity to think and talk with others about Dorothea Lange’s work has reinforced and strengthened this project. Our deepest gratitude goes to our interlocutors. For their brilliant insights and texts we thank Julie Ault, Kimberly Juanita Brown, Sam Cotriz, Lauren Ksiaz, Jennifer Greenhill, Sandy Phillips, Christina Sharpe, Wendy Red Star, Rob Silfkin, Rebecca Solnit, and Tess Taylor. Their observations — sharp, discerning, deeply felt — have shifted our understanding of Lange’s work and its importance to our present.

The immense support of Glenn D. Lowry, The David Rockefeller Director, has been essential to this project, as it is to all aspects of our work. We wish to express our thanks to several colleagues who have been instrumental in MoMA’s success: Peter Reed, Senior Deputy Director of Curatorial Affairs; Ramona Bannayan, Senior Deputy Director of Exhibitions and Collections; James Gara, Chief Operating Officer; and Todd Bishop, Senior Deputy Director, External Affairs. The steadfast support of the Committee on Photography, led by David Dechman, Chair, makes possible so much of what we do. The generosity of Monique M. Schoen Warshaw has been critical for this exhibition and continues to encourage innovative programming.

The contributions of our MoMA colleagues have made this exhibition and publication possible, and the list of them is long, not least because Lange’s work has meant so much to so many. The warmth and exceptional dedication of our colleagues in the Department of Photography is truly a gift. Every detail has been inflicted by the exceptional scholarship and keen attention of Tascha Lutek, Collection Specialist; Jane Pierce, Carl Jacobs Foundation Research Assistant; and Madeline Weisburg, 12-Month Modern Women’s Fund Intern, who together completed a comprehensive assessment of the Museum’s collection of more than five hundred of Lange’s photographs. Madeline painstakingly researched and compiled the annotated checklist and bibliography for this volume and contributed to the rigor of the project. The grace and enthusiasm of Alessandra Nappo, 12-Month Intern, contributed immensely to the exhibition’s last stages. Our project was greatly enriched through conversations with Roxana Marcoci, Senior Curator; Lucy Gallun, Associate Curator; Phil Taylor, Curatorial Assistant; and Dana Bell, Preparator, thoughtfully assisted us with framing. Quentin Bajac, formerly The Joel and Anne Ehrenkranz Chief Curator of Photography,
saw the promise in a deeper look at Lange’s career and gave us guidance in the early months of the project. We are exceedingly grateful to Marion Tandé, Department Manager, and Megan Feingold, Department Assistant, who provided the logistical support that kept everything together.

The Department of Publications created the volume you hold in your hands. Christopher Hudson, Publisher, and Don McMahon, Editorial Director, gave their support at every stage of the planning and production. Matthew Pimm, Production Manager, and Marc Sapir, Production Director, beautifully rose to the challenge of exceptionally and accurately reproducing Lange’s images with the separations overseen by Thomas Palmer. Hannah Kim, Business and Marketing Manager; Bryan Strauss, Associate Business Manager; Naomi Falk, Rights Coordinator; and Sophie Golub, Department Manager, handled the business, distribution, and circulation aspects of this complex and collaborative project. We welcomed the fresh eyes and attention of interns Ali Grace Hanna and Anora Sandhu. We are thrilled to inform our colleagues in many Museum departments. Erik Patton, Director of Exhibition Planning and Administration, and exhibition managers Margaret Aldredge, Kate Griffin, and Elizabeth Henderson worked tirelessly to ensure that the insights of our contributors were made manifest in the gallery as well as in this volume. In Exhibition Design and Production we thank Luna Hum, Director; Mack Cole-Efedauck, Senior Exhibition Designer; Peter Perez, Frame Shop Foreman; LJ McNerney, Assistant Production Manager; and Benjamin Akhavan, Design Assistant, who together brought to light what we only imagined. For their care and attention to the photographs and archival publications, we thank Lee Ann Daffner, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Conservator of Photographs; and Annie Wilker, Associate Paper Conservator. John Wronn, Collections Photographer; Kurt Heumiller, Studio Production Manager; Jennifer Sellas, Digital Assets Manager; and Roberto Rivera, Production Assistant, patiently imaged each work, allowing us to beautifully reproduce important archival materials here.

MoMA’s new Creative Team brought to the public the multiple and complex stories that Lange’s photographs continue to tell: Leah Dickerman, Director, Editorial and Content Strategy; Rob Giampietro, Director of Design; Prudence Peiffer, Managing Editor; Jacqueline Cruz, Department Manager, Digital Media; Claire Corey, Production Manager; and Jason Perse, Editorial Manager. The Department of Education developed and produced programs to stimulate engaged and meaningful conversation in the gallery: Sara Robinson, Director, Interpretation, Research & Digital Learning; Pablo Helguera, Director, Adult & Academic Education; Jess Van Nostrand, Assistant Director, Exhibition Programs, and Gallery Initiatives; and Adelia Gregory, Associate Educator, Public Programs, and Gallery Initiatives.

At every stage of the project, our conversations with informal interlocutors greatly enriched all aspects of it. There are too many to name, but we would be remiss not to acknowledge the thoughtful insights of Linda Gordon, Anne Whiston Spirn, and Dyanna Taylor, whose work on Lange is foundational. We are grateful to Meg Partridge, the daughter of Lange’s assistant, Rondal Partridge, for her wisdom and assistance. Jennifer Tobias, Librarian, Reader Services; Madeline Weisburg; and Jane Pierce sourced the original publications in which some of the photographs appeared, with research assistance from Tim Wyman-McCarthy; Micah Messenheimer of the Library of Congress’s Prints and Photographs Division; Drew Johnson and Brittany Bradley at the Oakland Museum of California; and Michael Bloomfield at the National Archives.

Finally we would like to thank our families for letting us stay late at work to make this happen and, equally important, Dorothea Lange—for the spirit and beauty of her work.

River Escalada Bullock
Beatrice and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow,
Department of Photography
Sarah Hermanson Meister
Curator, Department of Photography

Acknowledgments

in thanking Emily Hall, Editor, who patiently worked in pursuit of clarity and grace. We have benefited greatly from the help and expertise of our colleagues in many Museum departments. Erik Patton, Director of Exhibition Planning and Administration, and exhibition managers Margaret Aldredge, Cate Griffin, and Elizabeth Henderson worked tirelessly to ensure that the insights of our contributors were made manifest in the gallery as well as in this volume. In Exhibition Design and Production we thank Luna Hum, Director; Mack Cole-Efedauck, Senior Exhibition Designer; Peter Perez, Frame Shop Foreman; LJ McNerney, Assistant Production Manager; and Benjamin Akhavan, Design Assistant, who together brought to light what we only imagined. For their care and attention to the photographs and archival publications, we thank Lee Ann Daffner, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Conservator of Photographs; and Annie Wilker, Associate Paper Conservator. John Wronn, Collections Photographer; Kurt Heumiller, Studio Production Manager; Jennifer Sellas, Digital Assets Manager; and Roberto Rivera, Production Assistant, patiently imaged each work, allowing us to beautifully reproduce important archival materials here.

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Within days of the 1936 encounter between the photographer Dorothea Lange and the thirty-two-year-old mother of seven children (identified decades later as Florence Owens Thompson) in Nipomo, California, the photograph now known as Migrant Mother was already famous. Yet the image wasn’t published with this title until 1952, when it appeared with an article by Lange’s son Daniel Dixon in Modern Photography. The photograph went viral at a time when that term was used to describe the spread of disease, yet the captions that described it in each case were as varied as the publications in which they appeared: “A destitute mother, the type aided by WPA,” “A worker in the ‘peach bowl,’” “Draggin’-around people,” and, a few years later, on a catalogue sheet registering its acquisition at The Museum of Modern Art, “In a camp of migratory pea-pickers, San Luis Obispo County, California” (fig. 1, pages 131–42).1 (Endearingly suggestive of the improvisation and economical practices that characterized the Museum’s early years, this sheet is nothing more than a scrap of paper, with a partial check-list from the 1940 exhibition Modern Masters printed on the back.)2 Even in these ostensibly factual settings, no fixed phrase or set of words was associated with the image; its multifarious captions and titles did little to dampen public response to it.
In 2019, in a short book published by The Museum of Modern Art, I traced a path through the mountains of words associated with this iconic image, including Lange's own recollections, which were published in *Popular Photography* much later — in 1960. Many of the captions, descriptions, and analyses contradict each other, much to the frustration of Thompson's family and of scholars. The root of the discrepancies lies in the absence of detailed field notes of the kind that Lange typically submitted with her negatives; as she recalled in the 1960 article, she was rushing home to see her family after a month on the road. When she made the photograph, Lange was a few years shy of her forty-first birthday, the mother of two children and stepmother to four others. She was living in Berkeley and newly married to her second husband, the agricultural economist Paul Schnurter Taylor. They often worked together, she as a photographer and he as a regional labor advisor for the Resettlement Administration (RA), which later became the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a federal agency established in the depths of the Great Depression to support struggling farmers.

Lange had operated a successful portrait studio in San Francisco, located on Montgomery Street since the mid-1920s. Her photographs attract to her talent and to her ability to suggest her clients' individuality in unconventional compositions while also cultivating a forgiving soft-focus effect that minimized unflattering marks and wrinkles (fig. 2). In early 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, observing the suffering and anger swelling around her, she ventured out of the studio with her camera, initially unsure of what she might achieve but aware of photography's capacity to make plain such hardships. By the end of 1934 the resulting images were published as both art and social commentary, an early indication of the range of contexts in which they might function (pages 26–33).

The adaptability of her most famous picture poses a challenge, to some degree, to Lange's claim that “All photographs . . . can be fortified by words,” a curious assertion from someone who devoted her life to making images that say so much without them. Yet she was attentive to words, a quality evidenced in the detailed field notes she kept — with the notable exception of the day she photographed Thompson. Lange's deep sense of social justice and her interest in capturing what it is that makes us human — to say nothing of the splendid photographs themselves — are more than enough justification for a more comprehensive book and exhibition. To structure them around the different forms that the intersections between words and pictures can take provides new opportunities to connect Lange with other artists, writers, and thinkers. After Lange died, in 1965, Beaumont Newhall observed, "Dorothea had a sense of words as acute as her sense of the picture. Not enough has been said of it." More than fifty years later, still not enough has been said of it, and too little has been published.

Words & Pictures Considered | In November 1952, Lange wrote to Edward Steichen, then the director of the Department of Photography at MoMA, with an unusual request. She had typed a series of quotations from the subject of her 1938 photograph By the Chinaberry Tree, attempting to capture his dialect (“The pig — she took up and 'cided she warn't goin' no fudder”). Lange followed with the suggestion that “this is an example of words and pictures where each enlarges and enriches the other. I think. It might be interesting, though unconventional, to show these words along with the print.” The show she was referring to was Steichen’s upcoming exhibition, which included a robust selection of her work. Within five days of her typing these words, the exhibition opened with the text and photographs paired as she had suggested (fig. 3).
Lange was not the only person thinking along such lines that year. The inaugural issue of Aperture magazine included a substantial article by the photography historian Nancy Newhall that explored the relationship between words and photographs, with particular attention to captions, which she dubbed “verbal crutches,” necessary until widespread visual literacy could be achieved. Newhall made a valiant effort to provide working definitions of “title,” “caption,” and “text”—definitions that today seem excessively prescriptive but which were vital at a time when illustrated magazines had become the primary means of circulation for photographs but critical discourse had not been established for approaching them. As one of Aperture’s founders, Lange surely would have studied, if not previewed, the issue containing Newhall’s article, which, if presented one of Lange’s photographs on the cover: a juxtaposition at such an angle that its words cannot be seen (fig. 4). It is no accident that Aperture—“intended to be a mature journal in which photographers can talk straight to each other, discuss the problems that face photography as profession and art, share their experiences, comment on what goes on, decry the new potentials”—announced its existence with a photograph of signs pointing in multiple directions but declining to identify any specific destination.

That same year saw the publication of Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photjournalism, by Wilson Hicks. As a former executive editor at Life magazine and the Associated Press, Hicks was well acquainted with the topic. He wrote nearly two hundred pages dense with opinion but conceded, eventually, that “a precise definition of photjournalism remained elusive. His claim that the ‘techniques of photjournalism, both in the taking of pictures and their use in combination with words, are still in a developmental stage,’ echoes Lange’s and Newhall’s sense of the novelty of such combinations.” Words and Pictures was reviewed in the fourth issue of Aperture, published in the United States beginning in the late 1930s. Many of them using works available free of charge from FSA files (pages 48–55 and 80–95). Some of them, conceived as collaborations between photographers and writers, also explained, partly, the poor sales of An American Exodus, but the density, length, and creative structure of Agee’s text—and the relative poverty of Evans’s photographs, all grouped at the beginning of the book—may not have helped. Agee explained, “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative. By their factual statements and by the impotence of the reader’s eye, this will be misunderstood by most of that minority which does not wholly ignore it. In the interests, however, of the history and future of photography, that risk seems irrelevant, and this flat statement necessary.”

Berencine Abbott and Elizabeth McCauldland had grand ambitions for the relationship between words and pictures in labor is common practice, and photographers have ample opportunities to present their own words beside their pictures, even if only online. But at that time illustrated magazines were not only a popular source of news (before being eclipsed by television) but also one of the few ways that even nonnewsworthy photographs could reach a broader audience.

Photobooks | The first issue of Life—with its essential, distinctive mix of words and pictures—was published in 1936, and by 1939 had a circulation of more than two million. The editors were committed to telling stories in which photographs played an integral role in the narrative rather than a supporting one. The need for compelling images that this strategy created was a welcome opportunity for anyone seeking to make a living with a camera, even if many were perplexed by how little control they had over the finished image. Evans explained, “To the particular message or audience, the editors of Life (as well as of many other illustrated magazines) frequently cropped images or crowded them together, and they chose captions that might be unrelated to the photographer’s text, or even in contradiction to it. That photographers around the world began to make concurrent efforts to develop independent contexts for their work—sometimes writing their own texts or more often collaborating with writers of their choosing—comes as no surprise. Words and pictures functioned as an indivisible whole in several photobooks published in the United States beginning in the late 1930s. Many of them used available free of charge from FSA files (pages 48–55 and 80–95). Some of them, conceived as collaborations between photographers and writers, also explained, partly, the poor sales of An American Exodus, but the density, length, and creative structure of Agee’s text—and the relative poverty of Evans’s photographs, all grouped at the beginning of the book—may not have helped. Agee explained, “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative. By their factual statements and by the impotence of the reader’s eye, this will be misunderstood by most of that minority which does not wholly ignore it. In the interests, however, of the history and future of photography, that risk seems irrelevant, and this flat statement necessary.”
Fortified by Words | An American Exodus, the most thoughtful and complete expression of Lange’s interest in words and pictures, reveals her particular commitment—and Taylor’s—to the authentic voices of the individuals represented in her photographs. Their words are reinforced by the measured phrasing of social-science reports, agrarian studies, and government notices, with folk-song lyrics, real estate advertisements, and newspaper headlines animating the mix. Dorothea Lange. Words & Pictures brings together these and other means of connecting text and image; her attentiveness to the potential of this pairing—and her success in harnessing it—manifests itself throughout her work. For Lange, it was also personal: her son Daniel Dixon was a writer. In 1952 Dixon wrote two substantial articles, one a profile of his mother for Modern Photography in which the title Migrant Mother first appeared in print (pages 144–45), and the other, coauthored with Lange, for the second issue of Aperture. Each of these texts captures Lange’s approach to the medium, the first through extensive quotation, and the second, in more philosophical terms, advocating that photographers attend to what matters most to them: “Bad as it is, the world is potentially full of good photographs. But to be good, photographs have to be full of the world.” Dixon is credited as an author of Lange’s first photo story for Life magazine on three Mormon towns in Utah, and was the intended author of the second, on County Clare, Ireland (pages 102–11). His impressionistic account appears not to have been what the editors had in mind (and Lange herself felt Dixon spent too much time gathering information in pubs); when the article was published, it was accompanied by an uncredited text strewn with truisms. A decade later, when John Szarkowski, then the director of the Department of Photography at MoMA, proposed that Dixon write a catalogue text for Lange’s MoMA retrospective (page 154), she seemed uneasy with the suggestion: “Then is, and has been, one of my best understanders. He could do for me and the Museum a unique work. My doubt remains the same—will he do it within the time set by your necessities? Besides, the wear and tear and uncertainty of depending on him to do it are heavy burdens upon me.” Eventually the task was handed over to the poet and novelist George P. Elliott.

In the case of a photo-essay for Life on Martin Pulich, one of California’s public defenders, Lange was paid for her work, and the magazine went as far as developing page mockups but for unknown reasons never ran it. The photographers humanize an impersonal system, primarily through portraits that remind us that a trial is not a play, but rather a formalized process with very real consequences. These images seem to have been reproduced only twice during Lange’s lifetime, in the Sunday supplement to a newspaper published in the Philippines and in a pamphlet for civil rights lawyers—hardly the kind of attention she might have expected for a two-year-long project. Pulich’s integrity, described in the former publication, is evident in her photographs; the words apply equally to Lange: “He communicates conviction and sincerity. This is important. He is never specious. He will not resort to a false appeal to the emotions. And this gives him great credibility before the court and jury.” Lange didn’t live to see her photographs in the National Lawyers’ Guild book Minimizing Racism in Jury Selection, but it seems likely that she would have been pleased to support the cause (pages 128–33).

Lange’s 1952 note to Steichen lays out her heightened attention to exhibitions and to the ways in which words might work with (or against) photographs in the context of one. Throughout the planning for The Family of Man she exchanged and refined these ideas with Steichen, the exhibition’s curator (page 114), and she was closely involved with the planning of her 1966 MoMA show, the first retrospective organized by Szarkowski in his role as the photography department’s director. In photographs, films, and correspondence, his respect for her is palpable (fig. 5). Lange took great care with the titles of the photographs included in the retrospective, which gives them particular authority: they were drawn from notes and captions and other words that had historically been associated with her images, and they continue to be the works’ titles of record (pages 154, 157, and 158). Which is not to say that Lange did not, on occasion, change her mind—as she did with the photograph reproduced in An American Exodus with the caption “If you, you’re dead, that’s all”; the quotation replaces a title for a different image in Digenes with a Camera II. Migrant Mother may have been the most conspicuous example of the number and variety of titles assigned to an image—at least until 1952—but it was not the only one.

also to widely circulate the images in order to reach a large audience and amplify their impact. “Propaganda” is a fitting term for this practice: Lange’s work rests comfortably in it.46

Along the spectrum of truth, the reports produced in support of government policies stuck the closest to the marshaling of facts and photographs into near-clinical documents that appear to be objective records (fig. 7). The success of these reports depended on how reliable the constituent elements seemed. In the hazy middle ground of truth and invention are the carefully selected truths that hold the power to persuade. These, too, range in their allegiance to reality, documentary films, photo stories, and imagined narratives are all rooted in truth, even if they occasionally depart from it in the service of a broader message. It was in this vein of reasoning that Calkin used his own words with Bourke-White’s photographs rather than using those of the individuals they depicted, and that the editors of Life cropped images or constructed captions. The dire conditions of the late 1930s were such that even the most unashamedly fictitious genres were drawing information and inspiration from FSA files — John Steinbeck’s novel The Grapes of Wrath, published in 1939, being the best-known example. Archibald MacLeish and Muriel Rukeyser each wrote poetry anchored in FSA photographs, maps, public records, and documents, and these present their own transcendence of categories (fig. 8, pages 48–55). Rukeyser, in Coronet magazine, wove a narrative from a suite of unrelated images (including four by Lange) and poetic lines unconnected to their captions in the FSA files.

Reading Pictures | As the twentieth century progressed, the visual literacy anticipated by Nancy Newhall grew, although even in the present it remains an elusive critical skill.47 One way in which artists have encouraged this ability is through the representation of words in pictures, a strategy evinced persuasively in Walker Evans’s book American Photographs, published by The Museum of Modern Art in 1938.48 The book’s first plate shows a dirty, rather forlorn building distinguished primarily by five enormous signs that each declare “PHOTOS;” a circular meta-photographical reminder that the viewer is looking at a photograph rather than at a painting or a scene through a window. On the next page is a neat grid of the kinds of photographs
Artworks that draw directly on the physical and literary qualities of words have been around since the early 1920s, in which representations of pipes or apples are accompanied by declarations that the viewer is not standing before a pipe or an apple. This idea was reconsidered through the lenses of advertising and popular culture in the 1930s for Robert Indiana, Edward Ruscha, Lee Friedlander, and others, by considering the many ways in which pictures and words were intertwined throughout Lange’s career, we become wary of photographs as “Pea Picker Family, California, 1936.” See page 142 in this volume.

You know there are moments such as these when time stands still and all you do is hold your breath and hope it will wait for you. And you just hope you will have enough time to get it organized in a fraction of a second on that tiny piece of sensitive film. Sometimes you have an inner sense that you have encompassed the thing generally. You know then that you are not taking anything from anyone: their privacy, their dignity, their wholeness.

DOROTHEA LANGE
In 1933 Dorothea Lange began to capture the devastation of the Great Depression as it appeared on the streets of San Francisco. About *White Angel Bread Line*, one of the first photographs made outside her studio, Lange recalled, “I was just gathering my forces and that took a little bit because I wasn’t accustomed to jostling about in groups of tormented, depressed and angry men, with a camera.” Willard Van Dyke, a photographer and early supporter of her work, was moved to write in *Camera Craft* magazine, “These people are in the midst of great changes — contemporary problems are reflected on their faces, a tremendous drama is unfolding before them, and Dorothea Lange is photographing it through them.” The article appeared after an exhibition of Lange’s photographs which Van Dyke held in his Oakland studio in 1934, and through which Lange’s future collaborator and husband, Paul Taylor, an agricultural economist, learned of her work. Taylor, convinced of the power of combining images with social research, used Lange’s photographs of the 1934 May Day demonstrations in San Francisco with an article in *Survey Graphic*. These two publications launched Lange’s images, amplified by words, into circulation — Van Dyke’s reflecting on her photographic practice, Taylor’s elaborating the labor conditions of the time.
The Photographs Of Dorothea Lange — A Critical Analysis

Willard Van Dyke

Dorothea Lange has turned to the people of the American scene with the intention of making an all-embracing photographic record of them. These people are in the midst of great change—labor-movement politics are rife in their midst. In this context his photographs are interesting because they are responsive to the instant, and because Lange is photographing a through-shaken world. His is the last chance of a man who might otherwise have opened the door to a new panacea, for his views are based on the world as it is now, not as it was, and he is unlikely to be concerned with the objective standards of the camera. Since successful photography is, then, in the same sense as successful painting, a self-interpretation, they are not in continuous contact by the helps of their mental state. For the most part Lange is photographing a world which his sympathies and his sympathizers have desired of him, but in which the real world remains. It is this later which makes his photographs so interesting, since they are not in continuous contact by the help of their mental state.

The photographs and his sympathy for the people of the American scene is apparent in his photographs and approach to his audience. He is not preoccupied with the philosophy of the photograph, but rather with the truth of the subject. The subject of this type of human subject shows her in two emotions and October, 1934.
Labor Rally Speaker (above left) was also published with Taylor’s article in Survey Graphic, a Progressive Era social-welfare periodical. The caption published with it there—"Workers, unite!"—was a rallying cry echoing the General Strike, in which sixty-five thousand trade unionists participated.

We can assume the role of that laborer busy for looking back to the week of Mayday Rally, who in the dusk of photography puberty a busy rally with the crowd noise and the political fervor. The camera film was silent at the point of the technical boundaries of the medium itself. Lange’s photograph with the split-second of the documentary range of the scene was busy—busy, creating a complex distillation about with less through the frame. The moment was captured ten meters away from each other, sitting twenty meters exposure, had to be for the night itself. The implications of the second are extensive, the same after the battle, the death they were once living, the one...

"The Photographs of Dorothea Lange," 444–47
From 1935 to 1939, Lange worked with government agencies to draw the public’s attention to the economic and environmental catastrophe of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl drought. In late 1934 she first accompanied Paul Taylor in the field, and by early 1935 she was hired by Taylor and the California State Emergency Relief Administration as a typist—a salary for a photographer had not yet been approved. Their reports paired Taylor’s formal, typed brief with Lange’s photographs and handwritten captions, taken from interviews with the migrant workers they encountered. The captions describe a human dimension beyond what is immediately visible—locations, racial and ethnic differences, forms of labor, routes of travel—and include fragments of conversation and individual stories; together the words and pictures made a strong case for government intervention on behalf of migrant workers and drought refugees. Lange’s photographs were a critical part of the Resettlement Administration’s (later the Farm Security Administration’s) promotion of New Deal policies and were made available to anyone free of charge. As a result they circulated, sometimes with wildly variable captions, in books, newspapers, and illustrated weeklies such as Life and Look magazines, increasing the visibility of the lives of sharecroppers, displaced families, and migrant workers during the Great Depression.
Ex-Slave with Long Memory, Alabama. c. 1937
Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona. November 1940
Grayson, San Joaquin Valley,
California | Kimberly Juanita Brown

A corpse wrapped in a blanket has been deposited in the doorway of a clapboard church in Grayson, California. Identity unknown. The anonymity of death encases the image in its presentation and simplifies it visually. Geometrical in its design, the photograph is an offering of lines and angles, shadows and light. Immersed in the banality of death and the gravity of life, images like this one surpass our requisite command of the visual. They haunt us like a book-length poem memorized over time.

This photograph from 1938 is a journey into the rectangular entrance that allows the viewer to pause in front of the double doors that open into the church. The body has no obvious gender demarcations, and the viewer’s eye is drawn to the legs, crossed at the ankles, horizontally positioned in front of the vertical lines of the doorway, the vertical lines of the blanket. Lange’s subtlety is on full and masterful display here, in this photograph of marginality that is also a window of humanity, the image is offering us a glimpse of death as its underside.

Grayson, a sparse rural town that currently has a population of less than a thousand, was, in 1938, much the same. As she did while working with the Farm Security Administration, Lange traveled from village to city to town documenting the humanity she saw. Known for rendering intimacy in her living subjects, here Lange asks the viewer to dwell in the space between life and death in all of its profundity. In this, she marks the image through its constitutive elements: form, fluency, nuance, and the vagaries of human life.
Child and Her Mother, Wapato, Yakima Valley, Washington | Lauren Kroiz

The Library of Congress archives hold eight negatives of Chris Adolf’s family taken by Dorothea Lange. Lange’s general caption for the image shown here records that she took the photograph in Washington’s Yakima Valley, near Wapato, where the family was a client of the Farm Security Administration’s Rural Rehabilitation program. Adolf had been loaned $2,138 and lived on “80 acres of Indian land, on three year lease.”

Adolf, his schoolteacher wife, and their eight children had moved to Washington State in 1937 from Colorado, where drought had forced them to leave. They found assistance from the Rural Rehabilitation program, which at its peak involved approximately eight hundred thousand families. The program’s goal was to support small-scale subsistence farmers in an era when scientific and industrialized agricultural practices were taking hold, thus combining modern managerial ideas with a nostalgic view of rural families. In return for the loans, farmers developed and followed farm and home-management plans supervised by federal experts.

Although the photographs’ captions contain only Chris Adolf’s name, seven of the images feature his ten-year-old child, Lois, alone or with family members. Here, she leans against what we see in other photographs is the top strand of a barbed wire fence, which presses into her body just above the waist of her flowered dress. Her hands are framed by sharp barbs as she wraps them around the wire and looks down pensively. Inexpensive barbed wire, introduced in the 1870s, made possible the division and subdivision of farmland across the West, with its bristling points making boundaries painful for bodies to cross.

Barbed wire technology also aided in the General Allotment Act of 1887, a federal law that divided tribal lands into small parcels to be owned and farmed by Native American families with the goal of having them assimilate white norms. Any treaty land not allotted to the families was deemed to be surplus, and much of it was sold to white farmers (and, more often, speculators) who the Federal Government believed would model correct land use for Native Americans. Congress ended the allotment of tribal lands in 1934, and we now recognize it as part of the government’s campaign of genocide against Native communities in the United States.

Like her photographs’ captions, Lange’s field notes name only the family’s father and identify the farm with him; he is monumentalized by her portrait. In her captions, however, she quotes Adolf questioning a patriarch’s wisdom and, by association, popular agrarian nostalgia: “My father made me work. That was his mistake, he made me work too hard. I learned about farming but nothing out of the books.” Did her father see Lois trapped by the farm fence, as Lange seems to? Interviewed decades later, Lois couldn’t remember why she may have been sad. She remembered the Yakima Valley as beautiful and bountiful, and, indeed, she appears with a smile in another frame taken the same day.

The explicit subject of the photographic assignment was rural rehabilitation, but Lange’s photograph underscores the vagueness of the FSA loan program’s goal. Would rehabilitating a family, and a nation, take years or generations? What would constitute recovery?

"Migration of Drought Refugees to California" (opposite and following spread) is often referred to as the Drobish Report, after Harry E. Drobish, the state senator who submitted it. Lange, sometimes working with Taylor, produced two other reports for SERA in spring of 1935: "First Rural Rehabilitation Colonists: Northern Minnesota to Matanuska Valley, Alaska, Sailed from San Francisco May 1st 1935" and "Cottage Gardens."
“Migration of Drought Refugees to California,” 1, 6, 12, 21. Photographs by Dorothea Lange.

The subtitle of Lange and Taylor’s Art American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion (1939) echoes the caption for “Social Erosion: shelterless families in carrot pullers camps” (below right).
Unemployment Benefits Aid Begins.

November 1938

Outside the Relief Grant Office.