

Dorothea Lange

Words & Pictures



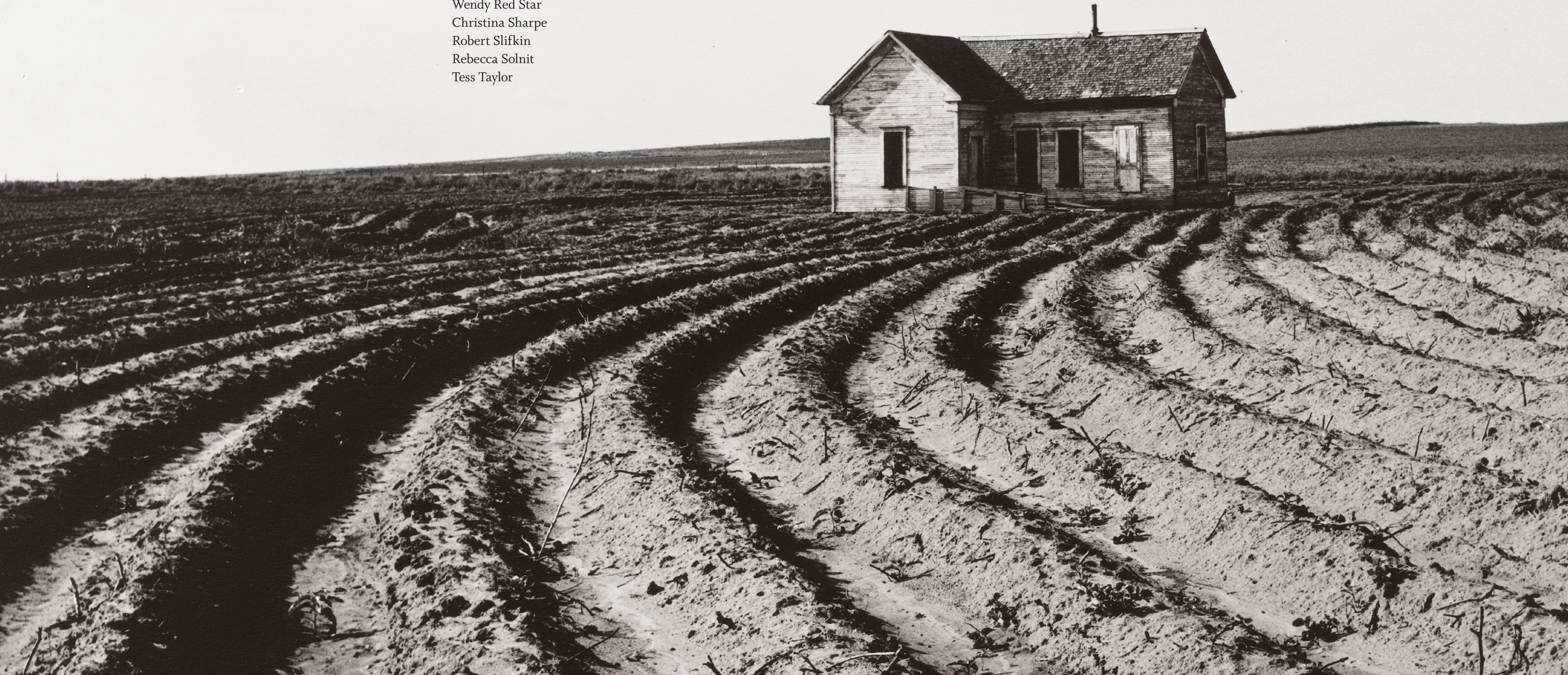
*The Museum of Modern Art
New York*

With contributions by

Julie Ault
Kimberly Juanita Brown
River Encalada Bullock
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Jennifer A. Greenhill
Lauren Kroiz
Sally Mann
Sandra S. Phillips
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Christina Sharpe
Robert Slifkin
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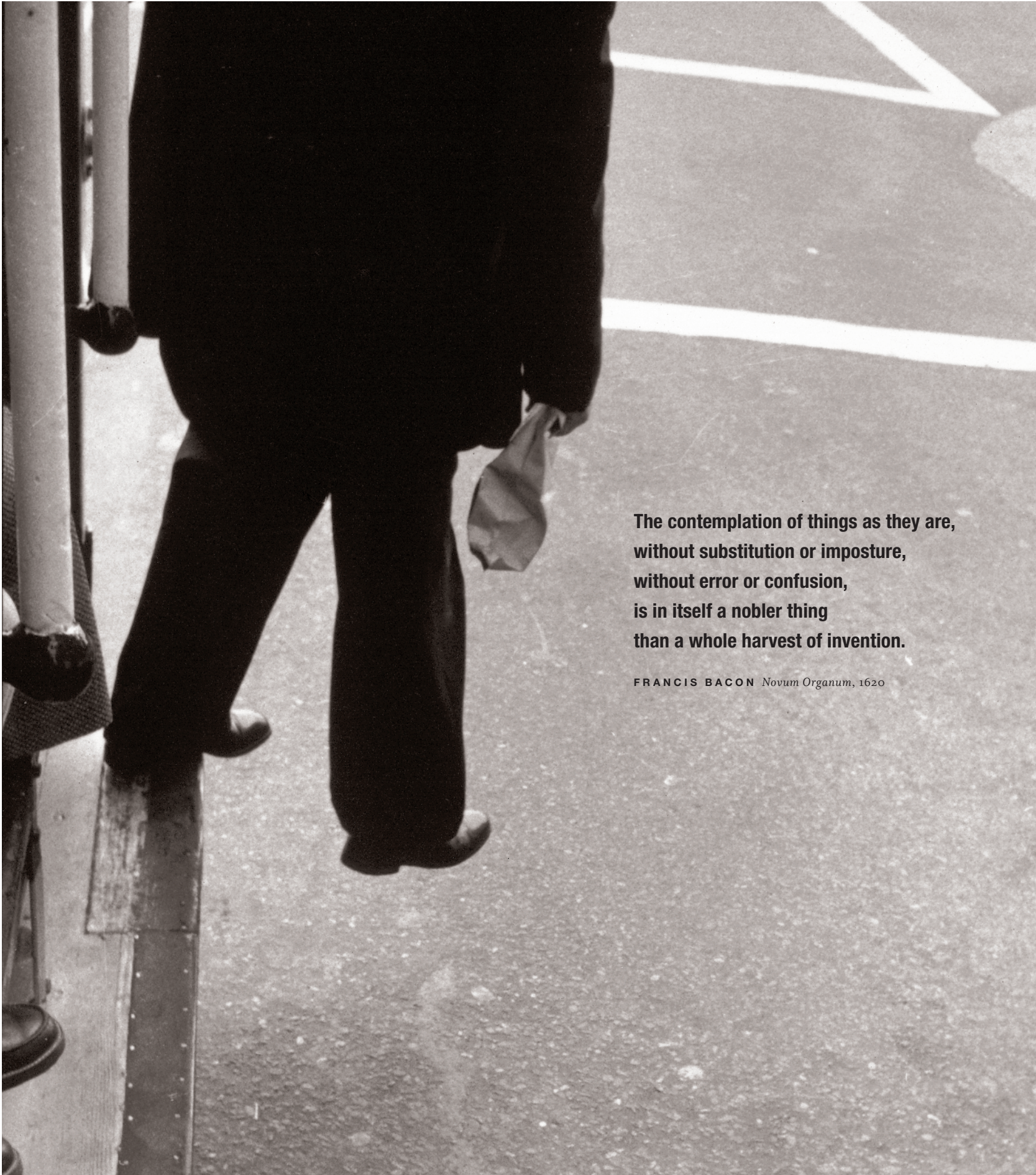
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**The contemplation of things as they are,
without substitution or imposture,
without error or confusion,
is in itself a nobler thing
than a whole harvest of invention.**

FRANCIS BACON *Novum Organum*, 1620

Director’s Foreword

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

Acknowledgments

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* (1956), 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 Contis, Lauren Kroiz, Jennifer Greenhill, Sandy Phillips, Christina Sharpe, Wendy Red Star, Rob Slifkin, 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 inflected by the exceptional scholarship and keen attention of Tasha 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 Ostrander, Curatorial Assistant. 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 Straus, 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 with Margaret Bauer’s deliberate and elegant design, and we deeply appreciate the nimble way she has given shape to the book we imagined together. The contributing authors join us

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 Lana Hum, Director; Mack Cole-Edelsack, 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 Sellar, 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 Persse, Editorial Manager. The Department of Education developed and produced programs to stimulate engaged and meaningful conversation in the gallery: Sara Bodinson, 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 Encalada Bullock
Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Curatorial Fellow,
Department of Photography

Sarah Hermanson Meister
Curator, Department of Photography



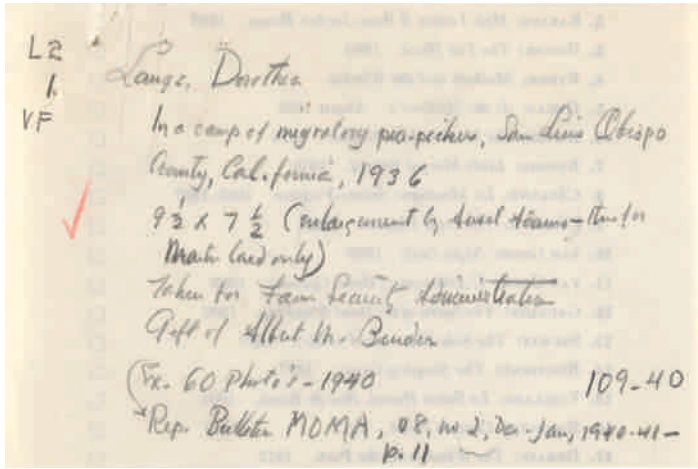
All photographs — not only
those that are so-called
“documentary,” and every
photograph really is
documentary and belongs
in some place, has a
place in history — can be
fortified by words.

DOROTHEA LANGE

Fortified by Words: Dorothea Lange’s Photographs

Sarah Hermanson Meister

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 138–42).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 checklist 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.



1 The Museum of Modern Art cataloguing sheet for *Migrant Mother*, 1940. Department of Photography Files, The Museum of Modern Art, New York



2 Dorothea Lange. *Clausen Child and Mother*. c. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 6 1/8 x 8 1/4 in. (15.6 x 21 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Henri Cartier-Bresson, by exchange, 2017

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 1960.³ 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 months shy of her forty-first birthday, the mother of two children and stepmother to four others.⁴ She was living in Berkeley and newly married to her second husband, the agricultural economist Paul Schuster 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.⁵

Lange had operated a successful portrait studio in San Francisco, located on Montgomery Street since the mid-1920s. Her photographs attest 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 26–31).

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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



3 Installation view of *Diogenes with a Camera II*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, November 25, 1952–March 8, 1953. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York

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.”⁸ 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 *Diogenes with a Camera II*, 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 photograph paired as she had suggested (fig. 3).⁹

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.¹⁰ 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 presented one of Lange’s photographs on the cover: a signpost at such an angle that its words cannot be seen (fig. 4).¹¹ 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, descry the new potentials”—announced its existence with a photograph of signs pointing in multiple directions but declining to identify any specific destination.¹²

That same year saw the publication of *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism*, 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 photojournalism remained elusive. His claim that the “techniques of photojournalism, 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.¹³ *Words and Pictures* was reviewed in the fourth issue of *Aperture* with measured enthusiasm; the critic felt that Hicks provided welcome insight into the goals and frustrations of an editor, even if he failed to appreciate why a photographer would aspire to do anything other than produce pictures for *Life*.¹⁴

Hicks and Newhall each devoted considerable attention to the question of training photographers to write their own captions. The debate seems quaint now that this division of



4 Cover of *Aperture* no. 1 (1952)

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.¹⁵ 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 piqued by how little control they had over the ways in which their images appeared.¹⁶ To suit a 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 opinion or intent. That photographers around the world began to make concurrent efforts to develop independent contexts for their work — sometimes writing their own texts but more often collaborating with writers of their choosing — comes as no surprise. Words and pictures function as an indissoluble whole in several photobooks 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 80–89). Some of them, conceived as collaborations between photographer and writer, signaled a new genre.¹⁷

One of the first (and most commercially successful) photobooks to receive widespread attention was *You Have Seen Their Faces*, from 1937, by the photographer Margaret Bourke-White and the writer Erskine Caldwell, her future husband. Like several such books that followed, it functioned as a window, more concerned than clinical, into the lives of Americans struggling through the Great Depression. In the preface they explain, “No person, place or episode in this book is fictitious, but names and places have been changed to avoid unnecessary individualization; for it is not the authors’ intention to criticize any individuals who are part of the system depicted. The legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors’

own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons.” The thought of privileging the “authors’ own conceptions” over the authentic voices of the people pictured would have been anathema to Lange and Taylor, who in their own photobook, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, from 1939, published excerpts from their extensive field notes beneath the images. Their transcribed quotations from the people they interviewed literally enveloped the book in the form of endpapers (pages 58–59). Posterity has favored Lange and Taylor’s publication, although more for the sense of identification and empathy fostered by Lange’s photographs than for its methodological rigor. Bourke-White and Caldwell were appropriately transparent about their methods, but their book’s tenor is undeniably paternalistic and, at times, racist. Nevertheless, if sales are any indication, more people learned of the desperate conditions faced by American farmers and sharecroppers through their book than through Lange and Taylor’s.

Commercial success was hardly a reasonable goal for any photobook of this era; the circle of those who might appreciate the production quality and finely calibrated content was small, and of those who could afford such luxuries in the 1930s even smaller. The photographer Walker Evans and the writer James Agee, after *Fortune* magazine rejected their photoessay on the living conditions of tenant farmers in the South, were eventually able to persuade Houghton Mifflin to publish *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1941. That it sold only six hundred copies in its first year and was remaindered for nineteen cents is most likely an expression of the impending world war (which also explains, partly, the poor sales of *An American Exodus*), but the density, length, and creative structure of Agee’s text — and the relative paucity of Evans’s photographs, all grouped at the beginning of the book — may not have helped.¹⁸ Agee explained, “The photographs are not illustrative. They, and the text, are coequal, mutually independent, and fully collaborative. By their fewness, 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.”¹⁹

Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland had grand ambitions for the relationship between words and pictures in

Changing New York, which would present the city as a living, breathing entity. The book took years to bring to fruition, and then only because the publisher, E. H. Dutton, imagined it might be well received as a guidebook for visitors to the 1939 World’s Fair. An early prospectus declares that “the text be integrated with the photographs. This involves an adventure in form. The theory underlying the adventure is: PORTRAIT OF A CITY = photographs + text . . . composed for tension between two mediums.”²⁰ But the editors at Dutton chose to replace McCausland’s captions with distilled versions containing mostly practical information. Without her sociohistorical frame, readers are left to consider Abbott’s photographs formally rather than in dynamic relation to the urban fabric, as the authors had planned.

It is striking that in the two years before and after the publication of *An American Exodus* so many books inventively combined words and photographs. By the end of the 1950s, several compelling examples had followed. *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), by the photographer Roy DeCarava and the writer Langston Hughes, is the pinnacle of the genre, as well as being the least assuming (a paperback printed in black and white, a mere six inches high). Equally important, and more well known, is Robert Frank’s *The Americans*, published first in 1958 in France, where its publisher, Robert Delpire, included supplementary texts, and then in the United States in 1959, where, at Frank’s insistence, those texts were stripped away and replaced by a sparkling, irreverent prose poem by Jack Kerouac. It would be more than a decade before the productive joining of words and photographs would be soundly deflated by works such as Martha Rosler’s *The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems* (1974–75). The work’s title acknowledges that neither its twenty-four straightforward black-and-white photographs nor its twenty-seven text panels, containing adjectives describing the Bowery’s usual occupants (“plastered stuccoed / rosinced shellacked / vulcanized / inebriated / polluted”), were able to capture the street known as New York’s Skid Row. Rosler’s deadpan use of photography was a signature of Conceptual art, and its dispassionate affect also hearkens back to the work of Evans; together these two elements highlighted and undermined the clichés so often linked with the Bowery, challenging the supposition that words and pictures might function together to produce art or reveal truth.

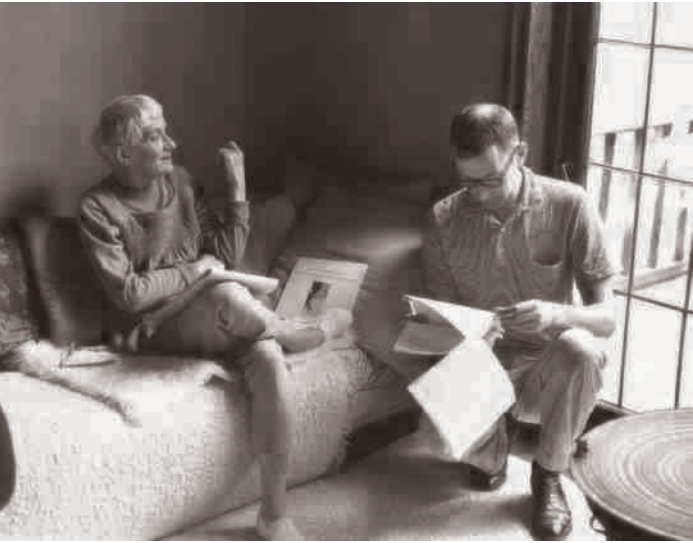
Lange & Words | *An American Exodus*, the most thoughtful and complete expression of Lange’s interest in words and pictures, reveals her particular commitment — and Taylor’s — to the authentic voices of the individuals represented in her photographs. Their words are reinforced by the measured phrasing 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*.²¹ 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.”²² 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.²³ 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: “Dan 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.”²⁴ 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.²⁵ The photographs 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.”²⁶ 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

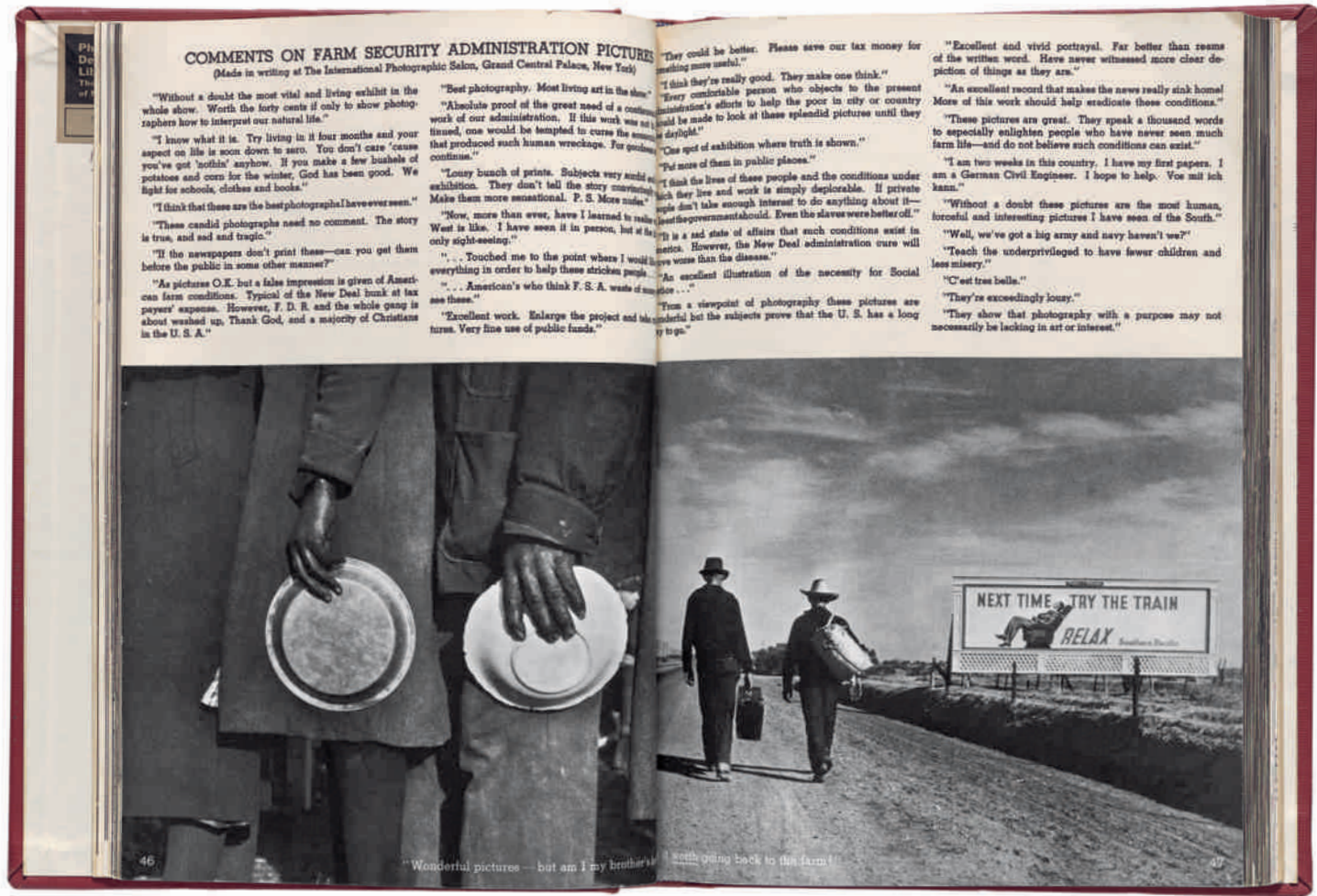


5 Lange and John Szarkowski working on her MoMA retrospective, 1965. Photograph by Shirley C. Burden. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

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).²⁷ 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 die, you’re dead, that’s all”; the quotation reappears as a title for a different image in *Diogenes with a Camera II*.²⁸ *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.

Fact & Fiction | Just as photographs operate along a range of registers, from functional document to fantastical creation, so, too, do the words that accompany them fall along a spectrum of fact and fiction.²⁹ Factual words are most often found in catalogue cards, field notes, government reports, newspaper articles, and the like; fictional words are creatively conjured in the service of personal expression; editors or caption writers might draw selectively from all such available material. There is a certain amount of fluidity between the verifiable and the invented: the words people speak, for example, may or may not be reliable, but a direct quotation is its own sort of fact. Lange’s photographs appeared in all of these contexts, with words most often fortifying their impact, with the obvious exception of a 1943 Nazi publication in which a variant of *Migrant Mother* was reproduced with the caption “Thoughts about Prosperity. Roosevelt’s recipe: Build Less” — a sarcastic paraphrase of President Roosevelt’s New Deal agenda.³⁰

A moment of particular interest in this respect is 1939, a year after a selection of photographs made for the FSA — including more than a dozen by Lange — had been displayed at the International Photographic Salon, at New York’s Grand Central Palace. Visitors to the exhibition were given an opportunity to submit written comments, a selection of which was published in *U.S. Camera 1939*, producing an authentic,



6 Spread from *U.S. Camera* 1939, edited by T. J. Maloney, (New York: William Morrow, 1939), 46–47. Photographs by Walker Evans (left) and Lange (right)

if edited, sense of the public’s reaction (fig. 6). In that volume, a variant of *Migrant Mother* was overprinted with one of these submissions: “Propaganda! A selected few!,” perhaps to suggest that the desperate circumstances captured by Lange’s camera were not as prevalent as had been claimed (the author of this comment was apparently unaware of widespread hardship created by the Great Depression). In a statement preceding the FSA photographs, Steichen addressed the charge in the show as a whole: “I do not look upon these pictures as propaganda. Pictures in themselves are very rarely propaganda. It is the use that is made of pictures that makes them propaganda. These prints are obviously charged with human dynamite

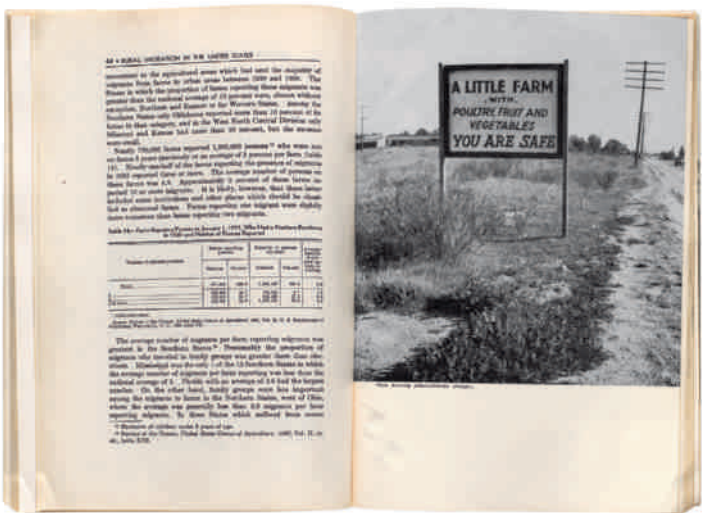
and the dynamite must be set off to become propaganda; they are not propaganda — not yet.”³¹

Steichen’s career as a curator did not begin until May 1942, when, less than six months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, his baldly propagandistic exhibition *The Road to Victory* opened at MoMA. (It would be another five years before he was hired to take the helm of the Department of Photography.) But even in 1939 he was anticipating the ways in which a photograph’s impact might be transformed by where it is seen, and with what. This idea was embedded in the FSA’s mission: not merely to document the plight of millions of citizens affected by the economic and environmental disasters of the 1930s but

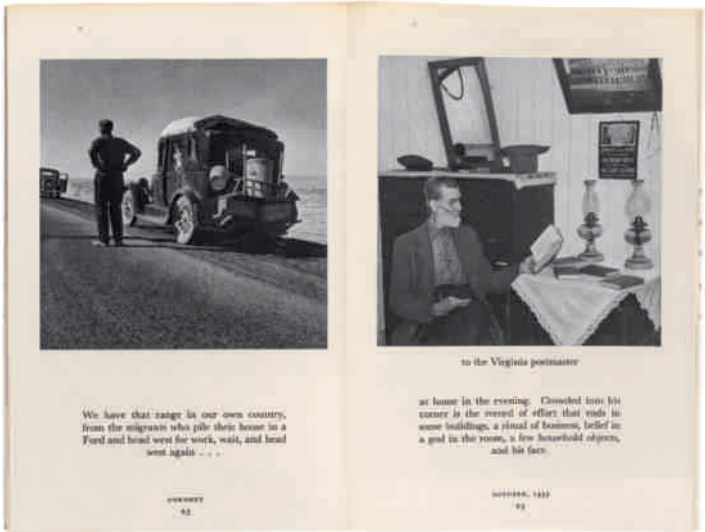
also to widely circulate the images in order to reach a large audience and amplify their impact. “Propaganda” is a fitting term for this practice; Lange’s work rests comfortably in it.³²

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 Caldwell 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 unabashedly 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.³³ 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 1938.³⁴ 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



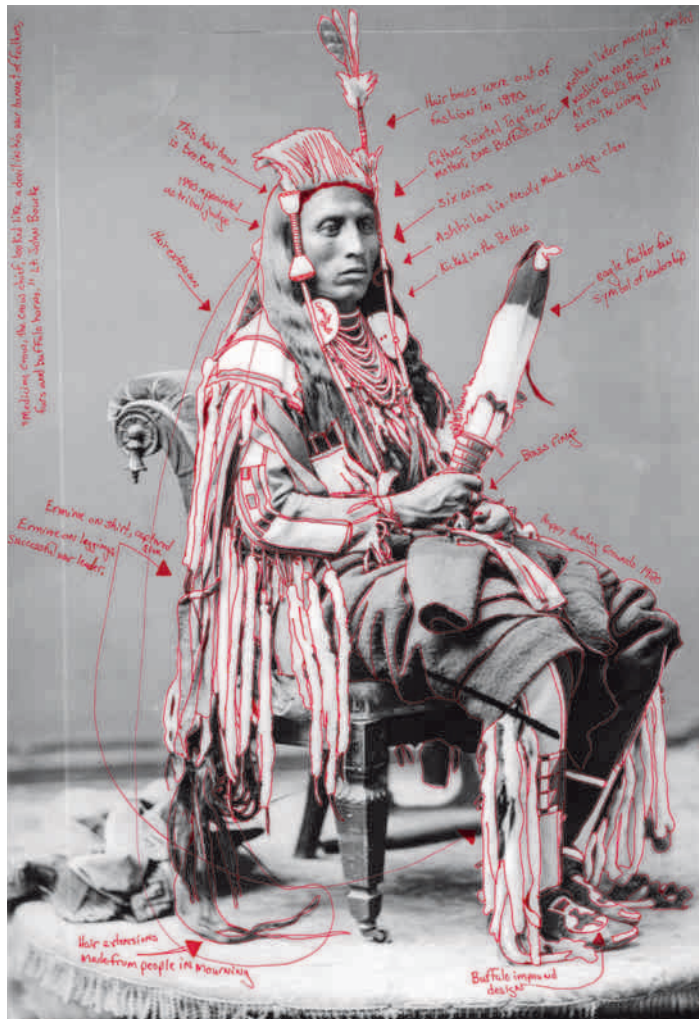
7 Spread from *Rural Migration in the United States*, by C. E. Lively and Conrad Taeuber (Washington, D.C.: Works Progress Administration, Division of Research, 1939), 44–45. Photograph by Lange



8 Spread from “Worlds Alongside,” by Muriel Rukeyser, *Coronet* 6, no. 6 (October 1939): 92–93 Photographs by Lange (left) and Arthur Rothstein (right)

advertised in the previous image, seen through a storefront — an actual window across which “STUDIO” has been painted. The titles of these images are not listed until halfway through the book, and Lincoln Kirstein’s brilliant essay is tucked at the end: readers are left to engage with the pictures (and the words they display) without distraction.³⁵

Artworks that draw directly on the physical and literary qualities of words have been around since the early twentieth century, when groups of artists and poets, from Futurists to Dadaists to Surrealists were mining the connections and disjunctions between words and pictures. The best-known of these may be René Magritte's word-image paintings of the late 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 1960s in the work of Robert Indiana, Edward Ruscha, Lee Friedlander, and others, and the subject was equally ripe for the Conceptual artists working later that decade, such as Sol Lewitt, Yoko Ono, and Lawrence Weiner, who challenged the very necessity of images in works consisting exclusively of words or instructions. The wide-ranging legacies of these inquiries continue to unfold, in artists working in very different veins: from Alfredo Jaar to Carrie Mae Weems, from Christopher Wool to Shannon Ebner. Wendy Red Star's images of the 1880 Crow peace delegation deploy handwritten words to teach us to read the significance embedded — but overlooked — in each element of the delegate's ceremonial dress (fig. 9). More recently, artists such as Trevor Paglen have been pointing out the biases embedded in the datasets used to train computers to read images; searched together, the words "migrant" and "mother" bring up Lange's photograph, but separately they call forth very different types of images. By considering the many ways in which pictures and words were intertwined throughout Lange's career, we become wary of drawing from them simple conclusions.



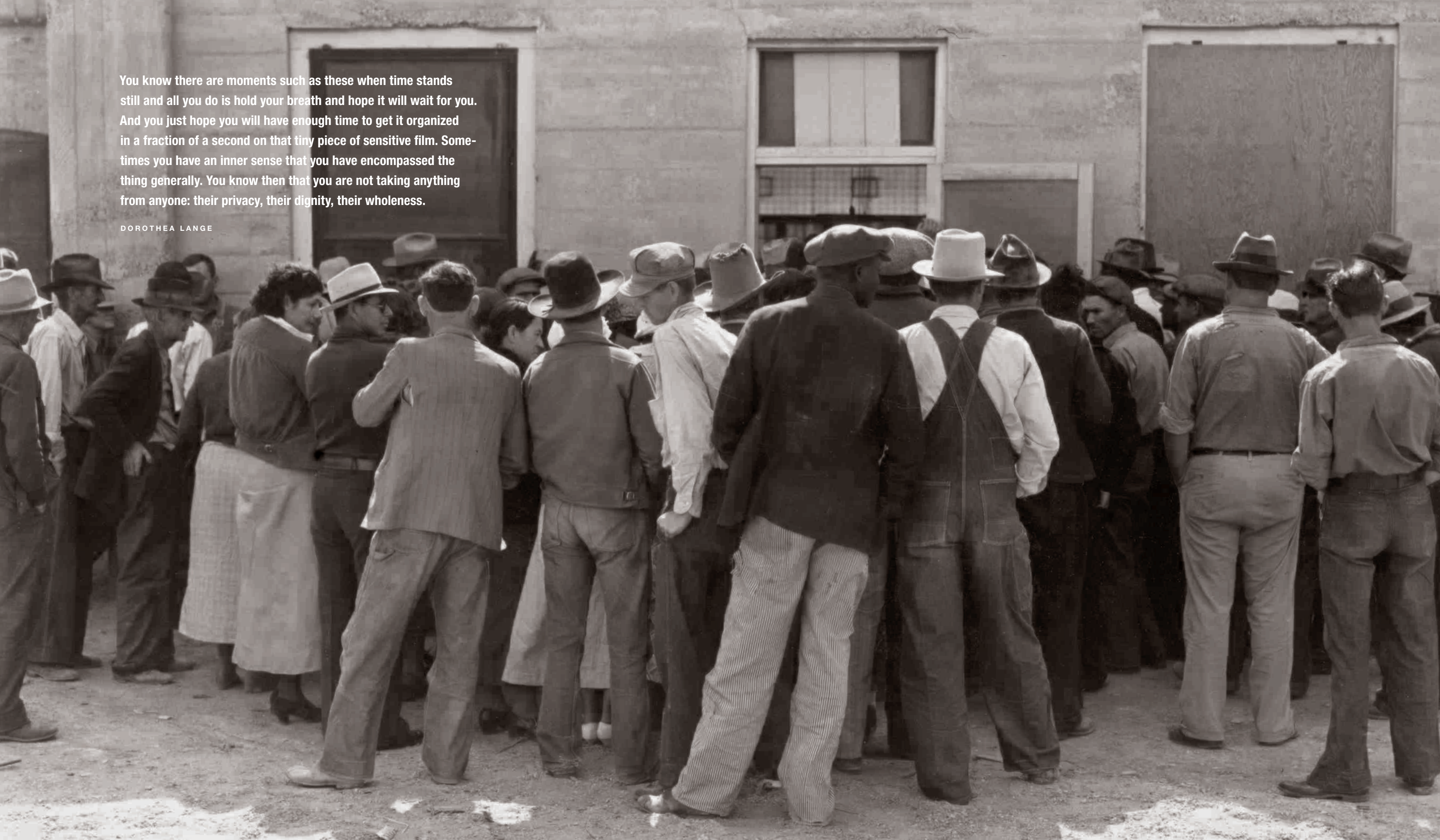
9 Wendy Red Star. *Peelatchiwaaxpáash / Medicine Crow (Raven)*, from the series 1880 Crow Peace Delegation. 2014. Pigmented inkjet print from a photograph by Charles Milton Bell, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 25 × 17 in. (63.5 × 43.2 cm)

Notes 1. The collector Albert M. Bender gave this print to The Museum of Modern Art in 1940, on the eve of the Department of Photography's first exhibition, *Sixty Photographs: A Survey of Camera Aesthetics*. MoMA's bimonthly bulletin, which functioned as a catalogue of the exhibition, reproduced the image as "Pea Picker Family, California, 1936." See page 142 in this volume. 2. The sheet is one-third of a printed "Check-list and BALLOT" handed to visitors, who were asked to indicate "Which three works do you like the most?." Department of Photography Files, The Museum of Modern Art, New York. 3. Sarah Hermanson Meister, *Dorothea Lange: Migrant Mother* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2019). 4. Two excellent biographies of Dorothea Lange are Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life beyond Limits* (London: W. W. Norton, 2009); and Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 1978). 5. Paul Taylor was also a field director in the Division of Rural Rehabilitation for the California State Emergency Relief Administration. 6. Dorothea Lange and Suzanne B. Riess, *The Making of a Documentary Photographer*, transcript from 1960–61 interview (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, 1968), 205. 7. I thank Kaitlin Booher, who provided invaluable research assistance, which has since been amplified by River Encalada Bullock, Jane Pierce, and Madeline Weisburg. 8. Beaumont Newhall, foreword to *Dorothea Lange Looks at the American Country Woman* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Amon Carter Museum, 1967), 7. 9. Lange to Edward Steichen, November 20, 1952. The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records 525-3; The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Steichen held a deep respect for Lange; in his first five years as the director of the department, he included her work in as many exhibitions. 10. Nancy Newhall, "The Caption: The Mutual Relation of Words/Photographs," *Aperture*, no. 1 (1952): 17–29. 11. Lange photographed the image on the cover at the Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies. On the conference and the conversations there that led to the founding of *Aperture*, see Peter C. Bunnell, ed., *Aperture Magazine Anthology: The Minor White Years, 1952–1976* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2012), esp. 38–49. 12. Minor White, with Ansel Adams, Melton Ferris, Lange, Ernest Louie, Barbara Morgan, Beaumont Newhall, Nancy Newhall, and Dody Warren, "About Aperture," *Aperture*, no. 1 (1952): 3. 13. Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952), xiv. 14. Unsigned review of *Words and Pictures* by Wilson Hicks, *Aperture*, no. 4 (1953): 38–39. The reviewer claims that Hicks misunderstands any "photographer fighting to make his camera communicate personal growth" (*Aperture's* target audience), and quotes Hicks's observation that "in tomorrow's World of the Image, he [the photographer] could become an editor someday, whereas today he is prepared only to be a photographer" (Hicks, *Words and Pictures*, 39), which the reviewer introduces by saying, "In the following passage I am torn between applauding and handing him exploding cigars." 15. See Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001). 16. See, for example, Russell Lord, ed., *Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument* (Göttingen, Germany: Steidl; Pleasantville, N.Y.: Gordon Parks Foundation; New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 2013). 17. On the breadth of this activity, see Martin Parr and Gerry Badger, *The Photobook: A History*, 3 vols. (London: Phaidon, 2004, 2006, 2014). "The most renowned examples of the genre in 1930s America tend to be marriages of text and photographs. . . . Both the rhetoric of the text and the rhetoric of the

photographs must be considered part of a delicate, almost impossible balance. Most masterpieces of the 1930s documentary photobook tend to wear their contradictions on their sleeves." *The Photobook*, vol. 1, 122. **18.** For statistics on the sales of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, see Andrew Roth, ed., *The Book of 101 Books* (New York: PPP Editions/Roth Horowitz, 2001), 108. **19.** James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1941). **20.** Prospectus for *Changing New York*, January 23, 1938; reprinted in Alide Maude-Roxby and Stefanie Seibold, eds., *Censored Realities/Changing New York* (Graz: Camera Austria, 2018). **21.** Lange and Daniel Dixon, "Photographing the Familiar," *Aperture*, no. 2 (1952): 4–15. **22.** *Ibid.*, 9. **23.** Gerry Mullins and Daniel Dixon, *Dorothea Lange's Ireland* (Washington, D.C.: Elliott & Clark, 1996), 15. **24.** Lange to John Szarkowski, April 28, 1965. The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, 789.13. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York. **25.** These mockups are in the Dorothea Lange Archives at the Oakland Museum of California. See also Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*, 500n30. **26.** "Public Defender," *Manila Chronicle*, August 7, 1960, 24. **27.** On Szarkowski's visits to Berkeley to work with Lange on her retrospective, see *Dorothea Lange: Under the Trees and Closer to Me*, two-part documentary produced by KQED San Francisco, 1965, directed and edited by Philip Green and Richard Moore. The documentary provides valuable footage of Lange in the twilight of her career. **28.** The photograph now identified as *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona* (as it was in the 1966 exhibition) appeared in *Diogenes with a Camera II as Incommunicado*. **29.** Although these categories are hardly novel, I am grateful for Gregory Halpern's consideration of them at a Magnum workshop, Mana Contemporary, Jersey City, N.J., on April 6, 2019. **30.** See USA — *nackt!:* *Bilddokumente aus Gottes eigenem Land* (Berlin: Brunnen Verlag, 1943). My thanks to David Campany for bringing this publication to my attention. **31.** Steichen, "The F.S.A. Photographers," in *U.S. Camera 1939*, edited by T. J. Maloney (New York: William Morrow, 1939), 45. **32.** See Jennifer Greenhill's text in this volume, pp. 77–78. **33.** "Photography is a foreign language that everyone thinks they speak." Philip-Lorca diCorcia, in Peter Galassi, "Photography Is a Foreign Language," in *Philip-Lorca diCorcia* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), 10. **34.** *American Photographs* is not discussed above, with photobooks that create direct relationships between words and pictures; here they are pointedly separate. **35.** Galassi's analysis of the first suite of images in *American Photographs* deserves special mention here. See Galassi, *Walker Evans & Company* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000), 20.

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

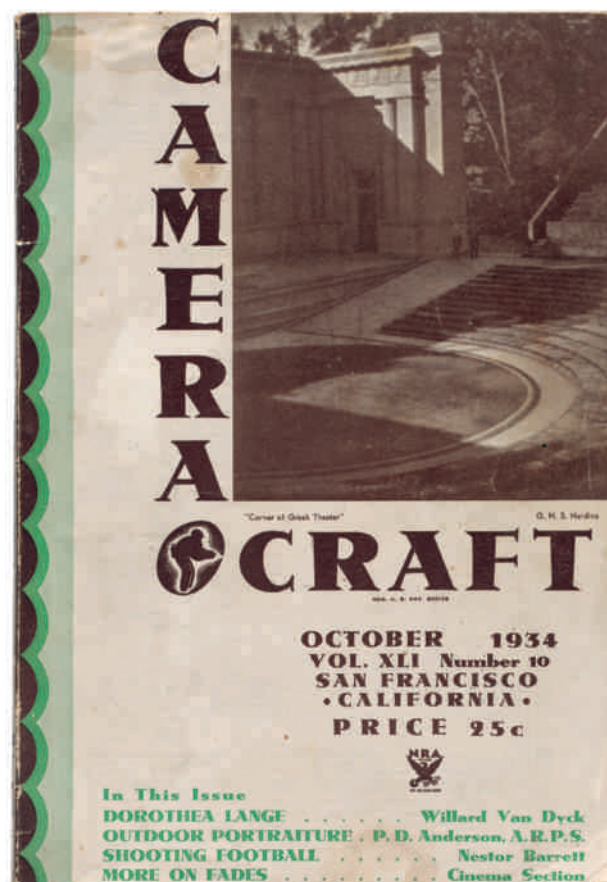


San Francisco Streets

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.

White Angel Bread Line,
San Francisco. 1933





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 adequate photographic record of them. 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.

She sees the final criticism of her work in the reaction to it of some person who might view it fifty years from now. It is her hope that such a person would see in her work a record of the people of her time, a record valid of the day and place wherein made, although necessarily incomplete in the sense of the entire contemporary movement.

One of the factors making for this incompleteness is the camera itself. It must make its record out of context, taking the individuals or incidents photographed as climaxes rather than as continuity. In approaching the subject or situation immediately before her she makes no attempt at a personal interpretation of the individual or situation. Neither does she encompass her work within the bounds of a political or economic thesis. She believes and depends more on a certain quality of awareness in her self. This awareness although perhaps inarticulate through herself (in words) is apparent in her adherence and approach to certain subject material. She is not preoccupied with the philosophy behind the present conflict, she is making a record of it through the faces of the individuals most sensitive to it or most concerned in it. Her treatment of this type of human subject shows her in turn sensitive and

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Dorothea Lange

sympathetic to the uncertainty and unrest apparent at the present time.

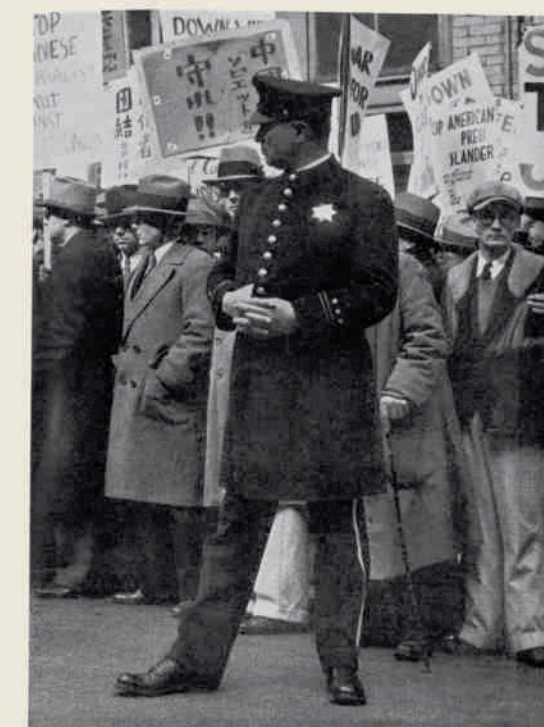
Naturally the range of human emotions which Dorothea Lange now photographs are not those which a sitter expects in a studio portrait. Sixteen years as a portrait photographer have shown her that the subject of a commission rarely sees himself as the camera does, even at its best, and is unlikely to be convinced of the objective truthfulness of the camera. Sitters mistake the lens for a mirror wherein they are wont to see themselves colored by the glamour of their romantic ideas. Of course, in order to please patrons, one must make concessions and this limitation led Dorothea Lange to photographing people with or without their knowledge, outside of the studio.

Most photographers under similar circumstances would have turned to photographing other subject material, or away from photography entirely, but Miss Lange's real interest is in human beings and her urge to photograph is aroused only when human values are concerned.

For equipment she uses two cameras. On any given trip she takes one or the other of these with her, never both. One of these is a $3\frac{1}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{4}$ Graflex equipped with a $7\frac{1}{2}$ inch focal length anastigmat lens and magazine film holders, the other a Rolleiflex which she considers to have a general advantage in that it is less obtrusive and can be operated at closer quarters. The latter, of course, by virtue of the smallness

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CAMERA CRAFT



Dorothea Lange

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"The Photographs of Dorothea Lange—
A Critical Analysis," by Willard Van Dyke,
Camera Craft 41, no. 10 (October 1934):
cover, 461–63

of the film does not permit of as great a degree of enlargement. She also uses a Weston exposure meter to test the general light conditions once or twice during the expedition.

Miss Lange's work is motivated by no preconceived photographic aesthetic. Her attitude bears a significant analogy to the sensitized plate of the camera itself. For her, making a shot is an adventure that begins with no planned itinerary. She feels that setting out with a preconceived idea of what she wants to photograph actually minimizes her chance for success. Her method is to eradicate from her mind before she starts, all ideas which she might hold regarding the situation—her mind like an unexposed film.

In an old Ford she drives to a place most likely to yield subjects consistent with her general sympathies. Unlike the newspaper reporter, she has no news or editorial policies to direct her movements; it is only her deeply personal sympathies for the unfortunates, the downtrodden, the misfits, among her contemporaries that provide the impetus for her expedition. She may park her car at the waterfront during a strike, perhaps at a meeting of unemployed, by sleepers in the city square, at transient shelters,—breadlines, parades, or demonstrations. Here she waits with her camera open and unconcealed, her mind ready.

What is she seeking,—what is the essence of the human situation and through what elements or items does it reveal itself? The scene is a panorama, constantly shifting and rearranging. For her it is transformed into a pageant of humanity across the ground glass—the drama moves, the individuals stir and mill about, by what motivation she cares little. It may be hours before a climax arrives worthy of that decisive click of the shutter. Suddenly out of the chaos of disorganized movement, the ground glass becomes alive, not in the human sense alone, but in the sense that only a photographer can recognize—a scene, a negative, finally a print that is itself alive. And here is where the photographer becomes the creator, feeling all the thrills and all the responsibilities of the creative artist. A dozen questions of possible technical failure flash simultaneously thru the mind and resolve themselves into: "Has the touch upon the shutter release killed something that was palpitating and real a moment ago, or has it preserved it for others to share and enjoy?"

Perhaps the impulse that causes any photographer to open his shutter finally to the object before his lens, is the conviction that the demands of the basic photographic values which give life to a plate have been satisfied, whether the objects which he is photographing be living or inanimate. For Miss Lange, the final clicking of the shutter has the added thrill that she has recorded another climax in the turbulent drama of human relations. Her individual shots cannot tell the whole story, nor has she any plan of sequence—it is only in the broad scope of her life's work, the constant reiteration of the climaxes, that her commentary upon humanity is to be found.

There is no attempt made to conceal her apparatus. Miss Lange merely appears to take as little interest in the proceedings around her as is possible. She looks at no individual directly, and soon she becomes

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Dorothea Lange

one of the familiar elements of her surroundings. Her subjects become unaware of her presence. Her method, as she describes it, is to act as if she possessed the power to become invisible to those around her. This mental attitude enables her to completely ignore those who might resent her presence.

Perhaps we can arrive at a better evaluation of her record in terms of a future observer than as contemporary critics. We ourselves are too poignantly involved in the turmoil of present life. Much of it is stupid, confused, violent, some little of it is significant, all of it is of the most immediate concern to everyone living today—we have no time for the records, ourselves living and dying in the recording.

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Dorothea Lange

We can assume the role of that future critic by looking back to the work of Mathew Brady, who in the dawn of photography made a heroic record of another crisis in American life. Brady and Lange have both made significant use of their common medium—they differ mainly in terms of the technical advancement of the medium itself. Lange can photograph the split-seconds of the dynamic surges of the scene about her—Brady, carrying a complete darkroom about with him through the northern battlefields of the Civil War, sensitizing his own plates before each shot, making twenty minute exposures, had to wait for the ample lulls between engagements. The implications of his record are retrospective, the scene after the battle, the dead that were once living, the

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Dorothea Lange

ruins that were once forts, faces still and relaxed. Both Lange and Brady share the passionate desire to show posterity the mixture of futility and hope, of heroism and stupidity, greatness and banality that are the concomitants of man's struggle forward.

Technical data:

The negatives are made on fast panchromatic film and developed in Metol-hydroquinone. The prints are enlargements on matte or semi-matte paper. There is no retouching on negatives or prints which are printed as sharply as the limitations of her way of working will permit. Most of the exposures are made at 100th of a second or faster.

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"The Photographs of Dorothea Lange,"
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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.

Government Work

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.

Funeral Cortège, End of an Era in a Small Valley Town, California. 1938





*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.

*Grayson, San Joaquin Valley,
California. 1938*



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.

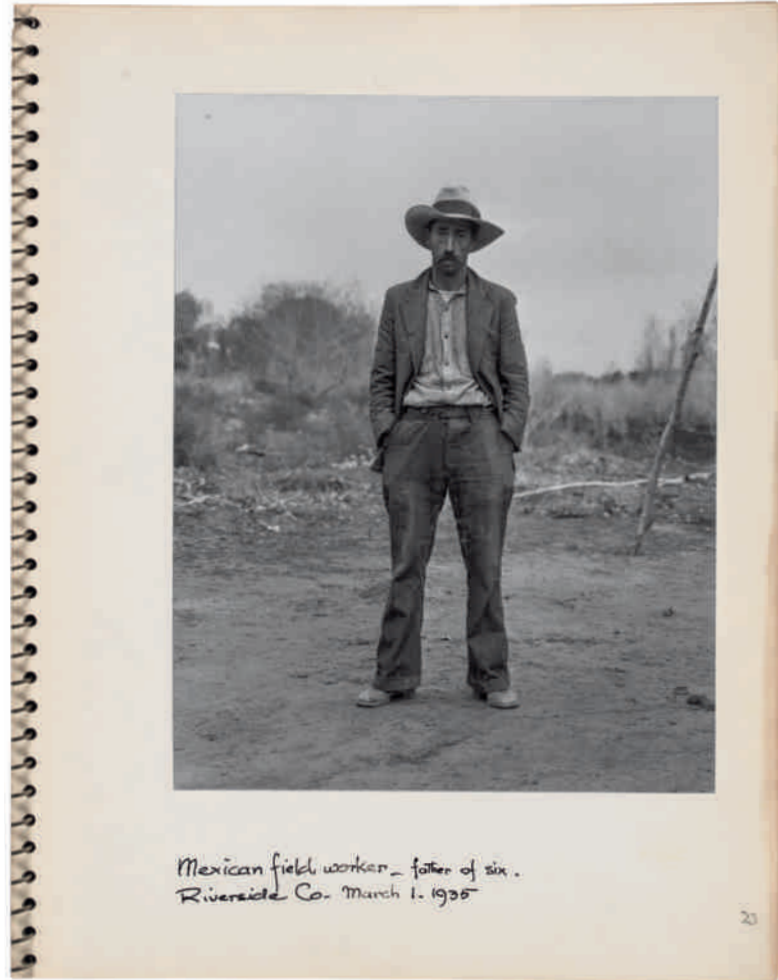
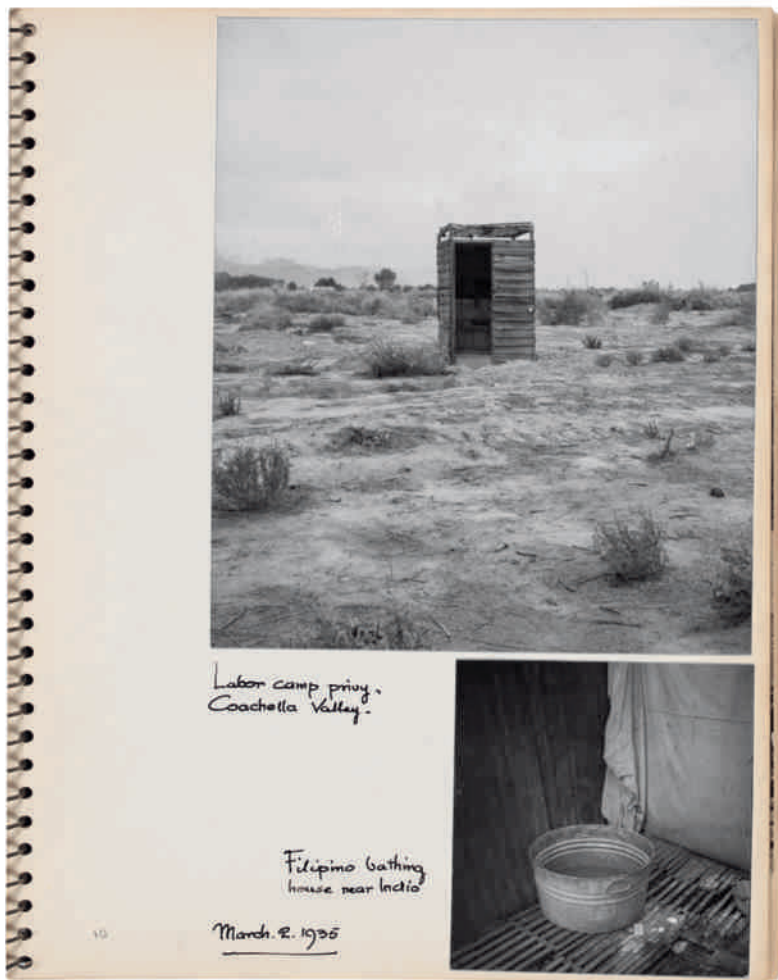
Barbed wire technology also aided in the General Allotment Act of 1887, a federal law that divided tribal lands into small parcels to be owned and farmed by Native American families with the goal of having them assimilate white norms. Any treaty land not allotted to the families was deemed to be surplus, 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?

Child and Her Mother, Wapato, Yakima Valley, Washington. August 1939





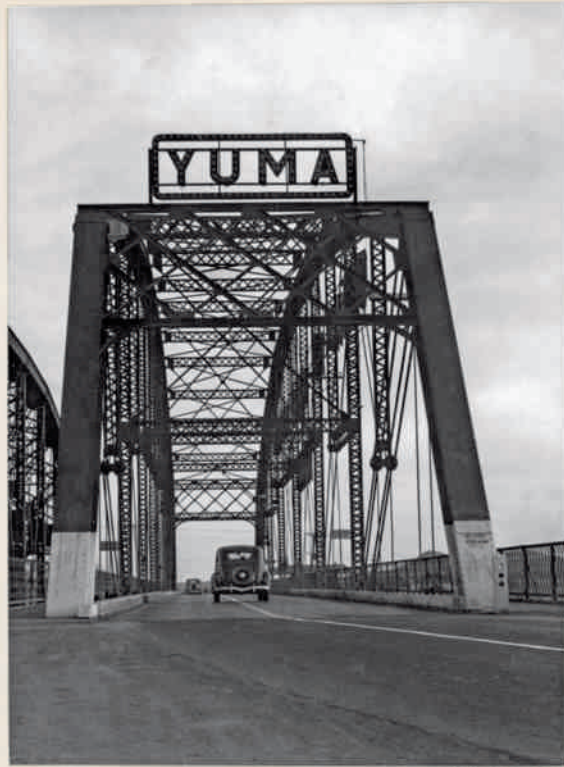
"Establishment of Rural Rehabilitation
Camps for Migrants in California," report
for the California State Emergency Relief
Administration (SERA) by Paul Schuster
Taylor, March 15, 1935, 10, 23. Photo-
graphs by Dorothea Lange

"Migration of Drought Refugees to Cali-
fornia" (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," California State Emergency
Relief Administration (SERA) by Paul

Schuster Taylor, April 17, 1935, n.p.
Unattributed map by Maynard Dixon



Over this bridge drought refugees are crossing the Colorado River into California.
U.S. 80



Social erosion:
shelterless families in
carrot pullers camps.
Imperial Valley. Apr. 1935



More Oklahomans reach Calif. via the cotton fields of Ariz.

"We got blowed out
in Oklahoma."

Share-croppers family
near Bakersfield.
Apr. 7. 1935



"How about that Townsend plan?"

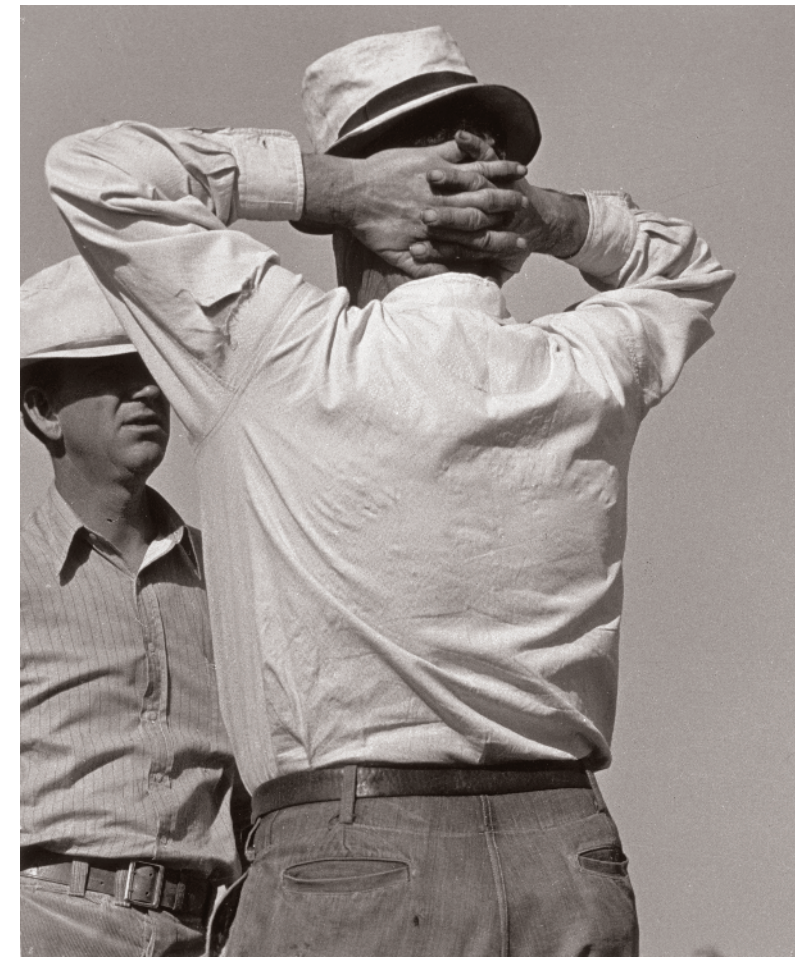
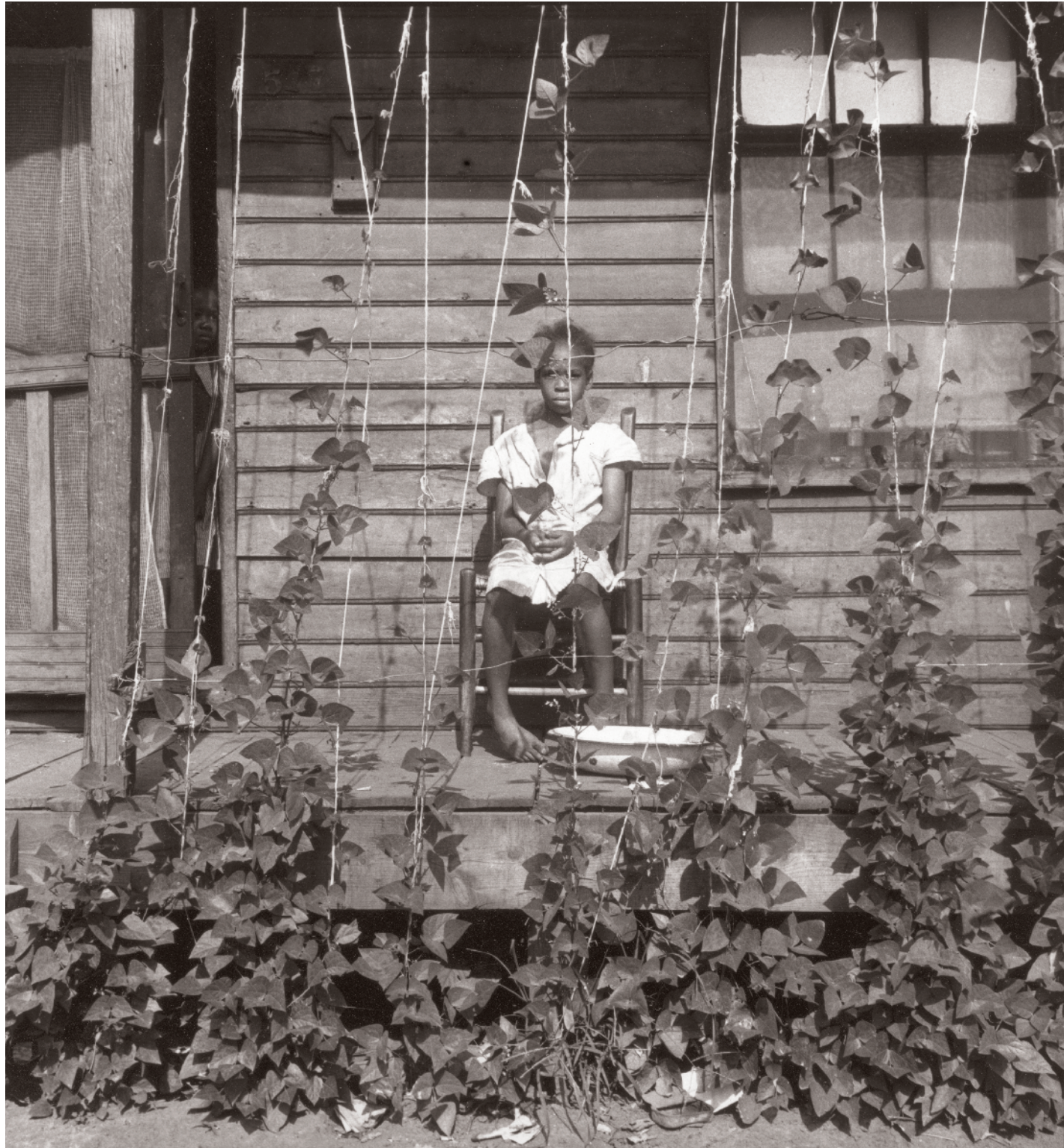
"If they'd a' give it to me
in one chunk I could a'
gone bank & bought me
a little piece o' land."

Squatters & migrants talk politics
& relief. Spring 1935



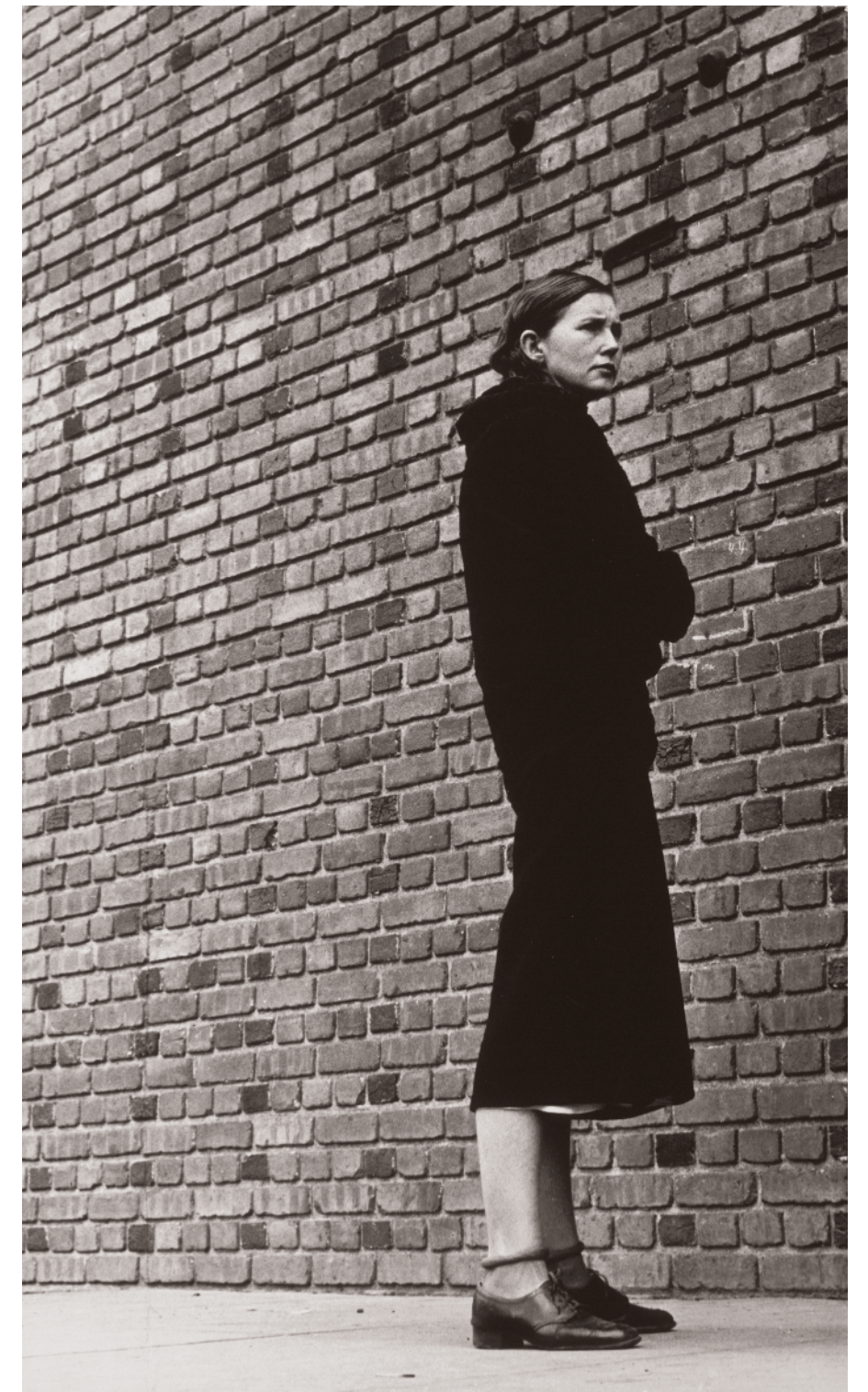
"Migration of Drought Refugees to California," 1, 6, 12, 21. Photographs by Dorothea Lange

The subtitle of Lange and Taylor's *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939) echoes the caption for "Social Erosion: shelterless families in carrot pullers camps" (above right).



Unemployment Benefits Aid Begins.
1938

Outside the Relief Grant Office.
November 1938



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Details and excerpts

Jacket front: *Kern County, California*. November 1938 (see page 63); inside flap: *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona*. November 1940 (see page 35); endpapers: Dorothea Lange’s handwritten captions for photos in LOTs 344-345, 1936 or 1937, page 6, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (LC-DIG-ppmsca-54331); facing pages 1, 176: Rondal Partridge, *Dorothea Lange Studio (Last Ditch)*. Departmental Collection, SC1966.4-3; pages 2–3: *Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas*. June 1938 (see page 64); page 4: *Western Addition, San Francisco, California*. 1951. Purchase, 358.1995; page 6: *Man Stepping from Cable Car, San Francisco*. 1956. Purchase, 793.1968; page 12: Dorothea Lange, “The Making of a Documentary Photographer,” interview with Suzanne B. Riess, 1960–61 (Berkeley: Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1968), 205; pages 12–13: *Women of the Congregation*. July 1939. Gift of the artist, 44.2019; page 24: Nat Herz, “Dorothea Lange in Perspective: A Reappraisal of the FSA and an Interview,” *Infinity* 12, no. 4 (April 1963): 9; pages 24–25: *Calipatria, California*. February 1937. Purchase, 336.1995; pages 162–63: installation view and wall text from *Dorothea Lange*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 26–April 10, 1966; back cover: Dorothea Lange, “The Making of a Documentary Photographer,” 205; and Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 5–6; jacket back: *On the Road to Los Angeles, California*. March 1937 (see page 76)