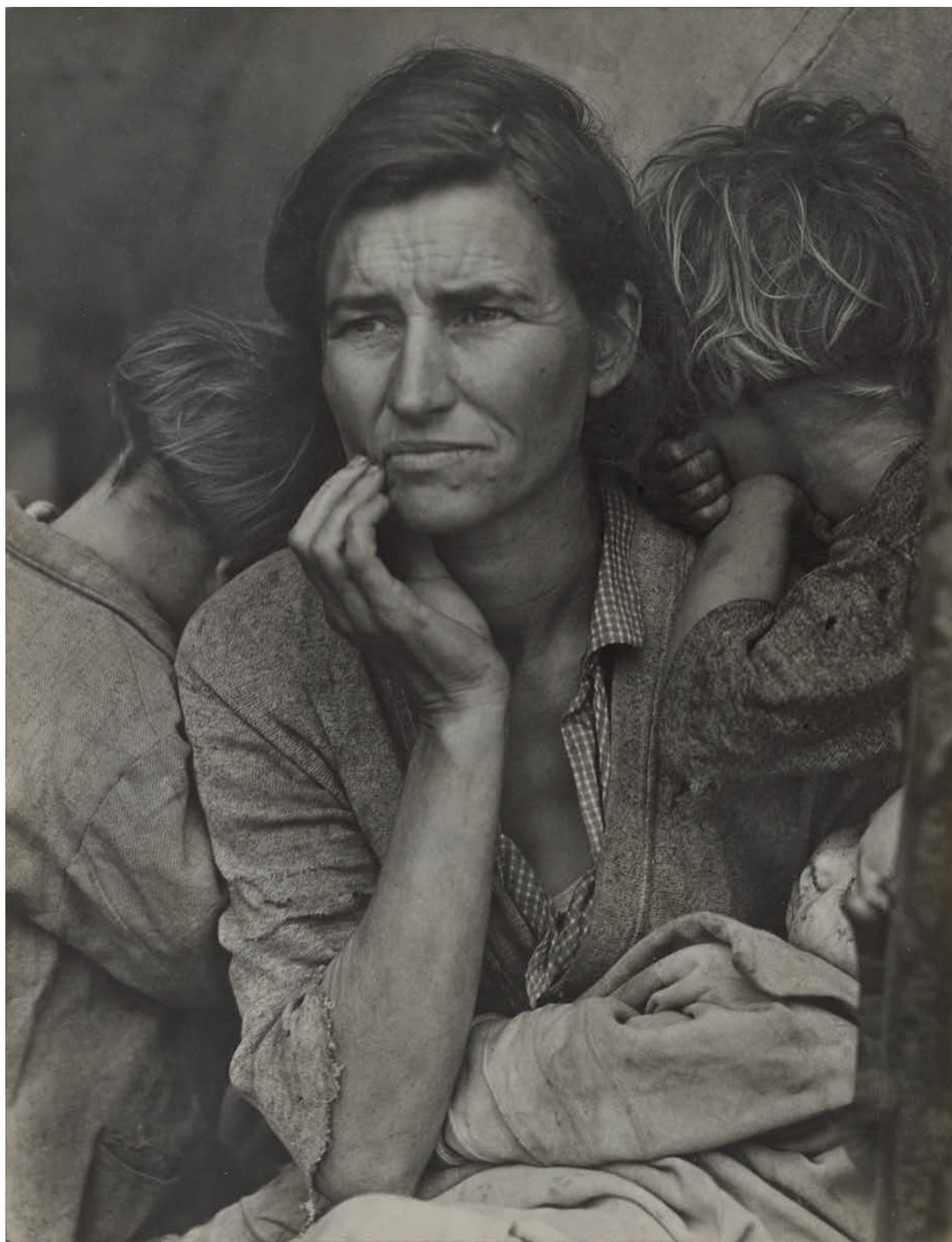


**IT IS PERFECTLY LOGICAL TO WRITE ABOUT THE SINGULARITY OF A PAINTING,** whereas photography's multiplicity is central to our understanding of the medium. The vast majority of photographs are made from negatives—or today, from digital files—from which it is possible, at least in theory, to make an infinite number of identical prints. The subject of this book, Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, exists in more formats, prints, and places than (arguably) any other photograph in the world. In this regard it is, ironically, singular.

*Migrant Mother* is also a singular icon of twentieth-century art. Lange made this photograph—along with six others of the same woman, Florence Owens Thompson, and her daughters—in Nipomo, California, in early March 1936. Since that time, the image has been so widely circulated that it is now a fixture in the public imagination. On March 10 Thompson's likeness appeared in tens of thousands of copies of the *San Francisco News*, and tens of thousands more with a follow-up article the next day. The impact of those photographs was quick and profound, not only on the community of migrant workers near Nipomo. One beleaguered federal employee wrote in July 1936: "We are snowed under with requests for migratory labor pictures. . . . All this material is being grasped at eagerly by all press services, newspapers, and magazines. We are getting the greatest spread that we have ever had."<sup>1</sup> In 1936 Lange was an employee of the United States government, so her images made during that period are in the public domain, which means that anyone could (and in fact still can) reproduce them for any purpose, free of charge. Surely this ease of access has contributed to the ubiquity of *Migrant Mother*. The U.S. Postal Service chose to use it on a thirty-two-cent stamp in 1998, adding millions of (slightly cropped) copies to its circulation history [FIG. 1]. It has appeared on dozens of book and magazine covers, has been transformed into a thousand-piece puzzle and a cross-stitch

Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, California. 1936. Gelatin silver print, 11 1/8 x 8 9/16" (28.3 x 21.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE, 1949 (PROMOTED 1995)





**FIG. 1.** Thirty-two-cent stamp issued by the U.S. Postal Service in 1998. PHOTOGRAPHY DEPARTMENTAL COLLECTION, THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. PURCHASE, 2018

pattern, and has decorated countless trinkets and T-shirts, posters and postcards. Prints from Lange’s negative have been included in landmark photography exhibitions seen by millions of people around the world, and shown in untold numbers of other displays, both public and private. The image has seeped into our common cultural consciousness. Even a scene from a 1967 Hollywood film carries with it echoes of Lange’s photograph [FIG. 2].<sup>2</sup> Its omnipresence—facilitated by the inherent reproducibility of the medium and encouraged by its powerful emotional impact—may be what most clearly distinguishes *Migrant Mother* from any other photograph.

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Dorothea Nutzhorn was born on May 26, 1895, in Hoboken, New Jersey, the first child of two first-generation German Americans.<sup>3</sup> They lived comfortably, with ample access to music and literature. The family’s only other child, Martin, was born in 1901. During the summer of 1902 Dorothea contracted polio, a potentially life-threatening virus that left her with permanent damage to her right leg and foot. As she later recalled: “I was physically disabled, and no one who hasn’t lived the life of a semi-cripple knows how much that means. . . . [It] formed me, guided me, instructed me, helped me, and humiliated me. All those things at once.”<sup>4</sup> The other defining trauma of her childhood occurred when she was twelve: her parents separated and (as she saw it) her father abandoned the family.



FIG. 2. Still from *Bonnie and Clyde*. 1967. Film: 35mm, color, sound, 111 minutes. Directed by Arthur Penn

Dorothea and her brother and mother moved in with her maternal grandmother in Hoboken. Her mother took a job at the Chatham Square Branch of the New York Public Library on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Dorothea commuted into the city with her every day and began attending public school near the library. Later, she went to high school on Manhattan's Upper West Side and, upon graduation in 1912, declared her intention to become a photographer. Having never owned a camera, she first took a position in Arnold Genthe's studio (eventually she would apprentice with various other photographers) and augmented her practical training with a class taught by Clarence H. White at Columbia University's Teachers College. Both Genthe and White were adept at navigating the concerns of clients with their artistic ambitions; and their aesthetic approaches, while distinct, shared a pictorialist tendency toward soft-focus that would characterize Lange's early studio work.

In early 1918 Dorothea embarked upon what was intended to be a journey around the world with a high school classmate, Florence (Fronsie) Ahlstrom. By May they had reached San Francisco, where their savings were wiped out by a pickpocket. That misadventure closed the door on their travels, stranding them in the Bay Area, which would remain the photographer's home until her death in 1965. She took a job at Marsh & Company, a general goods store that sold, among other things, photographic supplies, and provided photo-finishing services. Perhaps sensing the significance of this liminal moment, the young job





**FIG. 3.** Imogen Cunningham (American, 1883–1976). *Magnolia Blossom*. c. 1925. Gelatin silver print, 6  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{1}{2}$ " (17.1 x 21.6 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ALBERT M. BENDER, 1939

seeker used her mother's maiden name, Lange, on the application, severing a final symbolic tie with her father.

Keen to connect with the photographic community, Lange soon joined the San Francisco Camera Club, and within a year, with money borrowed from friends, she opened her own photographic portrait studio at 540 Sutter Street. That studio became a gathering place for San Francisco's bohemian crowd, and it was there that she met the painter Maynard Dixon, whom she married in March 1920.<sup>5</sup> Photographer Imogen Cunningham was a close friend; her husband, Roi Partridge, had been one of Lange's first customers at Marsh & Company, and their son, Rondal, would later work as Lange's trusted assistant. Despite these close personal ties and their parallel studio-based practices, there were dramatic differences between Cunningham's and Lange's work. Cunningham embraced a rigorous clarity and delicate tonal range characteristic of contact prints from eight-by-ten-inch negatives [FIG. 3], while Lange's first priority (at least through the early 1930s) was to



**FIG. 4.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *Clausen Child and Mother*. c. 1930. Gelatin silver print, 6 1/8 x 8 1/4" (15.6 x 21 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. THOMAS WALTHER COLLECTION. GIFT OF HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON, BY EXCHANGE, 2017

satisfy clients unlikely to relish such potentially unflattering detail, yet without adopting the fanciful tropes then common in studio practice. In her words:

People like Imogen Cunningham, whom I knew very well by that time, all worked for name and prestige, and sent to exhibits. But I was a tradesman. At least so I regarded myself. And I was a professional photographer who had a product that was more honest, more truthful, and in some ways more charming. At any rate there was no false front in it. I really and seriously tried, with every person I photographed, to reveal them as closely as I could.<sup>6</sup>

Even within the bounds of traditional studio portraiture, Lange's images are notable for their ability to evoke a sense of relaxed intimacy, and for their unconventionally and artfully asymmetrical compositions [FIG. 4].

Lange and Dixon's first son, Daniel, arrived in May 1925, and their second, John, in June 1928; also in the home was Dixon's teenage daughter, Constance (Consie), from his first marriage. Although Lange maintained her studio, the competing demands of being a wife, mother, and professional photographer were compounded with the onset of the Great Depression in late 1929. Even their modest lifestyle was difficult to maintain, as demand for Lange's portraits and Dixon's paintings dwindled. After a short stint living in Taos, New Mexico, they moved back to San Francisco in 1932, and sent the boys to a school in Marin County, where they boarded with local families. Lange and Dixon gave up their shared home and moved into separate studios.

From her second-floor-studio window on Montgomery Street, Lange witnessed scenes of devastation wrought by the faltering economy. In early 1933, with trepidation and conviction in equal measure, she went down to photograph in the street for the first time. As she recalled: "I wasn't accustomed to jostling about in groups of tormented, depressed and angry men, with a camera."<sup>7</sup> One result was *White Angel Breadline*, an image that succinctly humanizes the impact of unemployment: a man grappling with poverty and hunger, alone in a sea of men in similarly dire straits [FIG. 5]. This photograph marked the beginning of a new chapter for Lange, who was becoming increasingly confident in her ability to use photography to confront the urgent circumstances around her. As the writer George P. Elliott would later note: "This image does not derive its power from formal elegance so much as from its being inextricably entangled with the comment it is making. It is art for life's sake."<sup>8</sup> The same may be said for much of Lange's work.

In 1934 Lange photographed the May Day demonstrations in San Francisco; shortly thereafter, the photographer Willard Van Dyke presented these images in his exhibition space in Oakland. Paul Taylor, a professor of agricultural economics at the University of California at Berkeley, describes his visit to the gallery and his first encounter with Lange's work:

What fascinated me especially among her prints was one of a street agitator bellowing into a microphone at the San Francisco Civic Center. It fitted my current need exactly. In collaboration with a colleague at the university, I had just completed and sent to the *Survey Graphic* the draft of an article on San Francisco and the General Strike of 1934. I wanted that photograph to accompany it. The exhibitor, Willard Van Dyke, put me on the phone with Dorothea Lange; and her photograph became the frontispiece of our article. I think we paid her fifteen dollars for the photograph. That was money in those days.<sup>9</sup>



**FIG. 5.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *White Angel Breadline*. 1933. Gelatin silver print, 10  $\frac{3}{4}$  x 8  $\frac{7}{8}$ " (27.3 x 22.6 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF ALBERT M. BENDER, 1940



In late 1934 Taylor was hired by the California State Emergency Relief Administration to study the contemporary circumstances of agriculture and migrant workers and recommend a program to help them. By early 1935 he had convinced his superiors to hire Lange as a typist—they had yet to be convinced of the need for a photographer—to accompany his team on research trips around California. In their first spiral-bound report, submitted on March 15, 1935, were fifty-seven photographs by Lange, including at least ten made in Nipomo and San Luis Obispo County, where she would create *Migrant Mother* the following year [FIG. 6].<sup>10</sup> This was the first of many journeys Lange and Taylor would embark upon together, bound by a commitment to illuminate—and improve—the extraordinarily difficult circumstances around them. Taylor provided Lange with an intellectual framework for her natural sympathies; together, his scholarship and her keenly observed depictions became hugely influential in effecting public policy.<sup>11</sup> That summer, the state agency for which they both worked was transferred to the newly formed federal Resettlement Administration (RA; in 1937 renamed the Farm Security Administration, or FSA). Their personal mission was unchanged, although the official scope of their responsibilities was enlarged. By November they had divorced their respective spouses, and on December 6, 1935, they interrupted their work only long enough to be married by a justice of the peace in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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In 1934 Van Dyke noted: “Miss Lange’s real interest is in human beings and her urge to photograph is aroused only when human values are concerned.” He went on to clarify: “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.”<sup>12</sup> Time and again, this observation would be confirmed, most memorably in the photograph that would come to be known as *Migrant Mother*. Lange’s evident compassion for a destitute thirty-two-year-old mother of seven children is an essential element inspiring the powerful response to this now-iconic photograph. The fact that Lange was an

**FIG. 6.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Camp of white American pea pickers. Nipomo, Calif. / Mexican pea pickers’ camp. Nipomo. / Jan. 26, 1935,” in Paul S. Taylor, *Establishment of Rural Rehabilitation Camps for Migrants in California*, report of March 15, 1935. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

*Note: The image captions in quotation marks are taken verbatim from the Resettlement Administration/Farm Security Administration files, now with the Library of Congress. They were often drawn from Lange’s notes. Those for the Migrant Mother series were likely derived (by Lange or an RA/FSA staff member) from United Press reports published in the San Francisco News and elsewhere in March 1936. The Library of Congress reference numbers for individual Lange negatives appear on page 47 of this volume.*



Camp of white American pea pickers.  
Nipomo, Calif.



Mexican pea pickers'  
camp.  
Nipomo -

Jan 26 - 1935

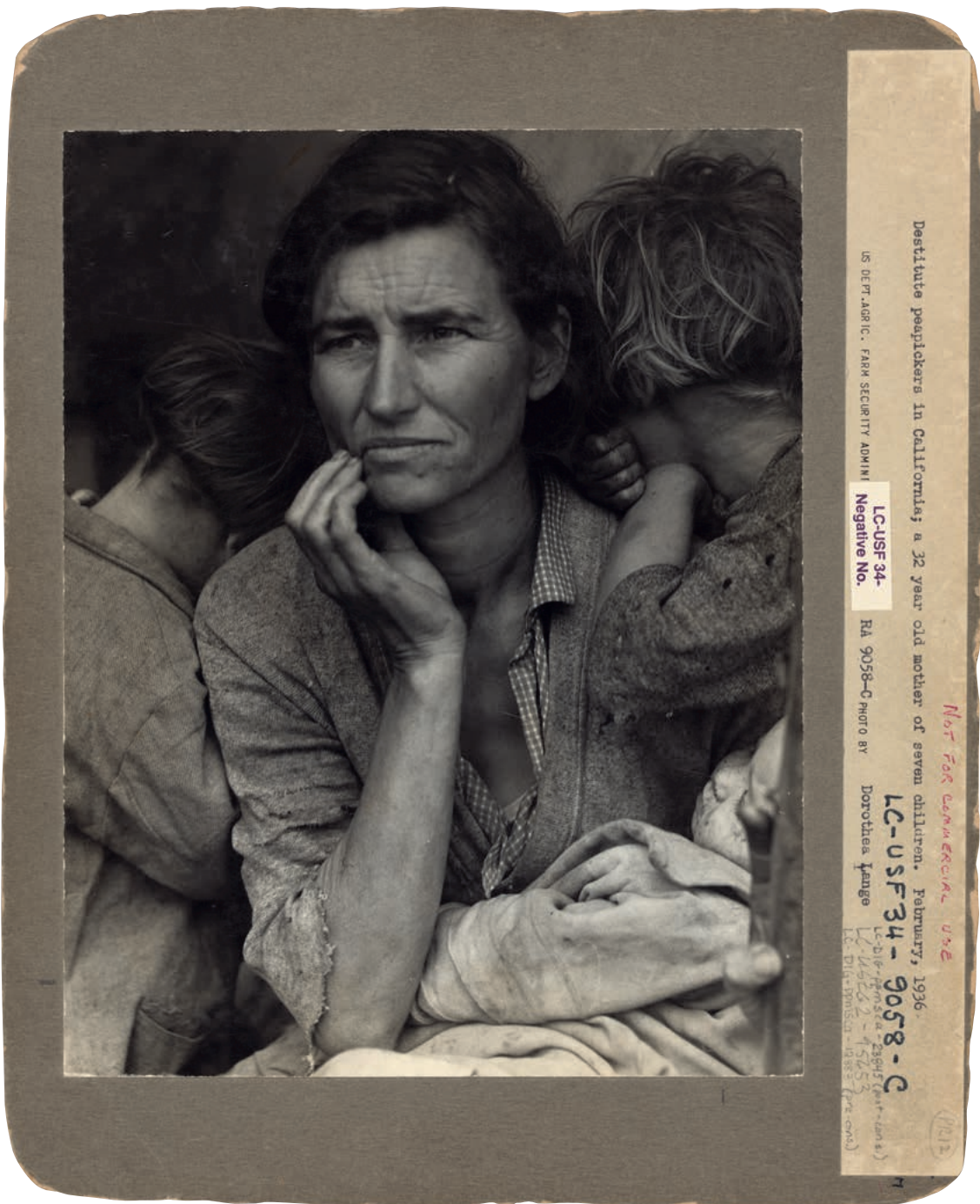


**FIG. 7.** “Dorothea Lange on the Job.” February 1936. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

employee of the federal government—as she was, with a few interruptions, from mid-1935 through late 1939—had no impact on the character of her work, although it helped pay the bills and dramatically expanded her audience [FIG. 7]. In the days before databases, thumbing through the FSA files in Washington, D.C., was the most efficient way to access her works from this period, as countless researchers did: the worn corners of the file card to which an early reference print of *Migrant Mother* was affixed testify to the enduring interest in this image [FIG. 8].<sup>13</sup>

By March 1936 Lange had been by herself on the road in California for several weeks and was understandably eager to get home.<sup>14</sup> She recalls initially driving past the sign for a pea-pickers camp, but then—twenty miles on—feeling inexplicably compelled to turn back. When she arrived at the camp she exposed a handful of negatives. Unusually for Lange, she spoke only briefly to the woman before her camera.<sup>15</sup> Slightly less unusual was the fact that Lange did not note her name: Florence Owens Thompson.<sup>16</sup> The sequence of these seven images





**FIG. 8.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Destitute peapickers in California; a 32 year old mother of seven children. February [sic: March] 1936.” Gelatin silver print mounted on board, image: 9  $\frac{1}{8}$  x 7  $\frac{1}{16}$ ” (23.1 x 18 cm). FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





**FIG. 9.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). From the *Migrant Mother* series. March 1936. Gelatin silver print, 7  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 9  $\frac{5}{16}$ " (19.5 x 24.3 cm). COURTESY THE DOROTHEA LANGE COLLECTION, OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA, CITY OF OAKLAND. GIFT OF PAUL S. TAYLOR

cannot be determined with certainty, but Lange remembers moving “closer and closer.”<sup>17</sup> In one of two frames taken from a slight distance, in which the full lean-to tent is visible, only one child seems to be aware of Lange’s presence. This picture was not included with the group of five Lange chose to send to the RA in Washington, D.C., presumably because she believed it was less successful [FIG. 9]. In the other image made from approximately this distance, the figures are more deliberately arranged: Thompson’s twelve-year-old daughter, Viola, faces Lange; she is perched in a rocking chair, now in front of the tent in which her mother and siblings take shelter [FIG. 10].<sup>18</sup> Everyone in this image (except the baby) is looking directly at Lange, yet she was likely unsatisfied with the imbalance of the exposure: other than Viola, they all appear in the tent’s shadow.<sup>19</sup>

Moving a bit closer, Lange exposed four more four-by-five-inch negatives. One of these features Thompson nursing the youngest child, Norma, then not quite a year old [FIG. 11]; another shows Thompson, still nursing the baby, with



**FIG. 10.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Nipomo, Calif. March 1936. Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven hungry children and their mother, aged 32. The father is a native Californian.” Gelatin silver print, 7  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 9  $\frac{5}{16}$ ” (18.8 x 23.6 cm). FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION–OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

the next youngest, Katherine, squinting quizzically—a little-known image likely set aside by Lange [FIG. 12]. The remaining two pictures made from this distance show six-year-old Ruby (now with her hat removed) leaning on Thompson’s left shoulder. In neither of these do the subjects look directly at the camera; their averted gazes may have struck Lange as promising: she captured this arrangement as both a vertical and a horizontal image [FIGS. 13, 14].<sup>20</sup>

Lange moved even closer and exposed the negative of Thompson with her three youngest children. With that, she had created an image that would become an icon, symbolizing the Depression and the dire straits of agricultural workers—a photograph that would (to Lange’s occasional chagrin) overshadow all others in her long and distinguished career. Her taut composition excludes all but the most essential information. In lieu of the girls’ faces, we see their tousled heads nestling against their mother’s shoulders; their anonymity serves to lend these familial bonds a sense of universality. Still, Lange’s large negative captures a wealth



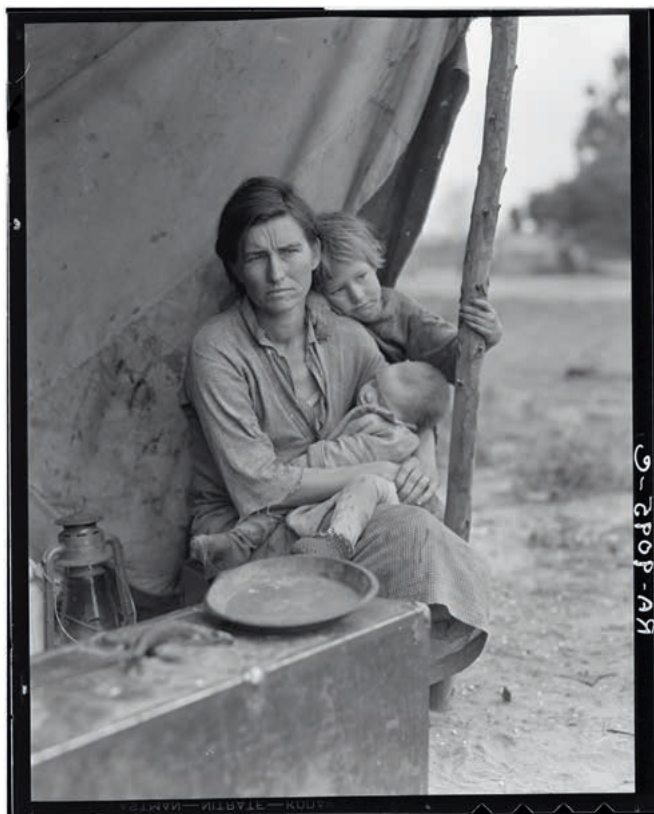
**FIG. 11.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32. Father is native Californian.” Digital file from 4 x 5” (10.2 x 12.7 cm) negative. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



**FIG. 12.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). From the Migrant Mother series. March 1936. Gelatin silver print, 5 x 4” (12.7 x 10.2 cm). COURTESY THE DOROTHEA LANGE COLLECTION, OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA, CITY OF OAKLAND. GIFT OF PAUL S. TAYLOR



**FIG. 13.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven children without food. Mother aged 32, father is a native Californian. March 1936.” Digital file from 4 x 5” (10.2 x 12.7 cm) negative. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



**FIG. 14.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Nipomo, Calif. Mar. 1936. Migrant agricultural worker’s family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged 32, the father is a native Californian. Destitute in pea pickers camp, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Most of the 2500 people in this camp were destitute.” Digital file from 4 x 5” (10.2 x 12.7 cm) negative. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





of detail that anchors our experience in specific fact: from the frayed fabric to Thompson's weary, concerned, strikingly beautiful face. It is, rightfully, the most memorable and most widely reproduced of the series. The superlatives that have been heaped upon it have done nothing to dilute its impact, nor have the passing decades diminished our inclination to empathize with the subjects' plight.

The effects of Lange's visit on the lives of the migrant community came quickly. On March 9, 1936, the front page of the *San Francisco News* featured the headline "2500 Rescued from Hunger by SRA Action," and Lange, though not mentioned by name, is credited as a Resettlement Administration photographer who "accidentally" discovered "the desperate plight of the ragged, starving colony" [FIG. 15]. The following day, two photographs from her sequence accompanied a United Press wire article titled "Food Rushed to Starving Farm Colony," and the *San Francisco News* also printed an impassioned editorial encouraging better cooperation between the state and the Resettlement Administration [FIG. 16].

*The San Francisco News*, Monday, March 9, 1936

#### **2500 RESCUED FROM HUNGER BY SRA ACTION**

#### **Starving Community Found Accidentally 35 Miles South of San Luis Obispo / FARM WORKERS STRANDED / Failure of Pea Crop Responsible for Plight; Food Is Rushed**

On the outskirts of the little town of Nipomo, 35 miles south of San Luis Obispo, 2500 persons, the majority of them children, were saved from starvation today.

Foodstuffs were rushed to them by the Surplus Commodities Division of SRA [State Relief Administration] as red tape was cut to alleviate further suffering.

The remnant of California's army of migratory agricultural workers, they had come to Nipomo weeks ago to pick peas, were stranded when protracted rains destroyed the crop.

#### **Found Accidentally**

Many of them had been lured from their homes, they said, by advertisements of work in the pea fields, according to reports here.

The desperate plight of the ragged, starving colony was discovered accidentally by a photographer for the Resettlement Administration, who forwarded the report to W. B. Jenkins, state director of the Surplus Commodities Division.

He immediately ordered a survey by E. M. Brown, Los Angeles, assistant state director, resulting in the dispatching of food. It is expected the Government will be forced to take care of the workers

and their families until the next pea crop, which will not be for a month or six weeks.

This is the story investigators brought back to Federal relief authorities here:

Huddled in their open camp just outside Nipomo, the colony lived through weeks of almost constant rain as they awaited work. Many were without shelter of any kind; others, more fortunate, lived in leaky tents, hastily constructed rude huts or slept in their battered automobiles.

When word came the crop had been destroyed and there would be no work until late April or May, two-thirds of the workers had enough left to get out, but 2500 were left behind.

#### **Sickness Stalks Camp**

To keep themselves in food, they had sold their clothing, blankets, parts of their autos, anything of value. Families pooled their resources, took care of each other as best they could. Meanwhile, children and adults, emaciated by hunger, became ill with colds and sickness swept the camp.

The colony appealed to Nipomo authorities for help, asked the various relief agencies, but as they did not come under any of the various categories, assistance was denied them.

Only the timely arrival of the Resettlement Administration photographer, who had visited the camp before the exodus of the first group and returned to find the stranded workers in a much more desperate condition, saved them from starvation.

#### **Tents Sold for Food**

In past years, the pea crop at San Luis Obispo has been picked chiefly by Mexicans, but this year Americans, most of them with large families, sought the work.

They pitched camp on a site where the Mexicans had lived before them. It was sanitary and there was plenty of water, but there was no shelter.

In destitute circumstances, many of the workers arrived almost empty-handed, expecting to find immediate work. Others who had tents were forced to sell them for food.

Part of the food which will be sent to Nipomo will be purchased from a self-help co-operative cannery at Astascadero, Winslow Carleton, state director of the self-help co-operative service, revealed. The money the cannery receives will be used to retire the last of a \$5000 grant they obtained from the state to start the project.







FIG. 16. The San Francisco News, March 10, 1936, p. 3

The San Francisco News, Tuesday, March 10, 1936

## RAGGED, HUNGRY, BROKE, HARVEST WORKERS LIVE IN SQUALLOR [sic]

"Scores of weary, discouraged and hungry families such as these today awaited the arrival of food at a pea pickers' camp near Nipomo after fighting starvation for six weeks following crop failures."

### FOOD RUSHED TO STARVING FARM COLONY

#### Thousand Jobless Pea Pickers Cheer as Six Weeks of Want Are Ended

NIPOMO, March 10.—A ragged army of pea pickers set up a faint cheer today at news that the Federal Government is rushing them supplies of food to ward off the threat of starvation.

Faces of destitute field workers, stranded by a crop failure, brightened when a United Press correspondent brought word that 20,000 pounds of food were en route here from Los Angeles.

"How we need it!" exclaimed J. W. Carpenter, the camp boss. [...]

Previous reports that San Luis Obispo County had been caring for them were denied by Mr. Carpenter, a former Little Rock, Ark., resident who came West many

months ago to join the nomadic army of workers who follow the seasonal pea crops from the Imperial Valley to Idaho.

#### Two Days Work in Six Weeks

Mr. Carpenter insisted the workers had been left to shift for themselves.

"We have been keeping body and soul together by taking cauliflower and whatever other kind of vegetables we can get from neighboring fields," he said. [...] "We have worked only two days in six weeks. We got an average of about 75¢ each for the two days. That's all the money we've seen and we've been here six weeks. It'll be three or five weeks more before the new crop comes in."

#### Tires Sold for Food

Mr. Carpenter said the camp originally was much larger. But when the blight set in, those that could moved on. The others had no money to buy gasoline for their ramshackle cars. A number of these ancient cars were stripped to their rims, bearing out Mr. Carpenter's statement that their owners had sold the tires to get money for food. Clothes and even bedding were disposed of for the same purpose, the camp boss related. [...]

#### 11 INDICT

The County Welfare Department has extended medical care, however, to the camp with two residents receiving hospitalization, it was said.

21





**FIG. 18.** Walker Evans (American, 1903–1975). *Alabama Cotton Tenant Farmer Wife (Allie Mae Burroughs)*. 1936. Gelatin silver print, 8  $\frac{1}{16}$  x 7" (22.1 x 17.8 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF THE ARTIST (PROMOTED 2015)

for their absence, it appears that the published newspaper reports were distilled into captions for the series, which explains why they do not perfectly align with the images. To this day, these captions accompany Lange's photographs from the series on the file cards in the Library of Congress, and (with some variations) are provided whenever the images are accessed. It would be many years before *Migrant Mother* came to be known as such.

Lange's photographs were at the heart of two important photobooks from this era: The first was Archibald MacLeish's 1938 *Land of the Free*, described by its author in the volume's notes section as "the opposite of a book of poems illustrated by photographs. It is a book of photographs illustrated by a poem." More than a third of its photographs are by Lange, including *Migrant Mother*. The second photobook was Lange and Taylor's *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, published the following year. *Migrant Mother* is not among its 112 reproductions, perhaps reflecting the authors' sense that Lange's other achievements had already been eclipsed by this one. Roy Stryker, head of the FSA's photographic division, would later reflect: "When Dorothea took that picture, that was the ultimate. She never surpassed it. To me, it was *the* picture of Farm Security. The others were marvelous but that was special. . . . I'll stand on that picture as long as I live."<sup>21</sup>

Stryker's praise is all the more notable given the many other talented photographers associated with the FSA, including Walker Evans, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, Ben Shahn, and Marion Post Wolcott. The comparison between Lange and Evans is particularly significant, as their talents are comparable, although their sensibilities and motivations were very different. In Alabama in 1936, Evans made the FSA photograph that rivals *Migrant Mother* in its iconic power [FIG. 18]. John Szarkowski—the longtime Director of the Department of Photography at MoMA, who organized retrospectives of both Lange and Evans—compared their experiences working for Stryker as follows:

Evans did not so much challenge Stryker's authority as ignore it; he was not interested in photography as a method of political persuasion, but was delighted to be paid by the federal government to make his own pictures, as long as they wished to do so. Clearly, Evans had an attitude problem, but he was not really a threat to Stryker's role. . . . Lange, on the other hand, shared without reservation Stryker's belief in photography as a tool of political education (propaganda), and brought to the belief a more passionate enthusiasm, a larger ego, [and] at least as keen an intelligence.<sup>22</sup>

When Lange encountered Thompson, the photographer was the mother of two sons (ages seven and ten), as well as four stepchildren from Taylor's and Dixon's first marriages. Lange was separated from her children sometimes for





**FIG. 19.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). “Mexican Mother in California. ‘Sometimes I tell my children that I would like to go to Mexico, but they tell me “We don’t want to go, we belong here.”’ (Note on Mexican labor situation in repatriation.)” June 1935. Digital file from 4 x 5" (10.2 x 12.7 cm) negative. FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION—OFFICE OF WAR INFORMATION PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS





**FIG. 20.** Dorothea Lange (American, 1895–1965). *Young Mother, a Migrant, California*. March 1937. Gelatin silver print, 7  $\frac{5}{8}$  x 8  $\frac{5}{8}$ " (19.4 x 21.9 cm). THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK. GIFT OF THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION, 1941

weeks at a time: economic hardship had forced her and Dixon to board their sons out to a more affluent family (not an uncommon practice during the Depression); and after she met Taylor, their field trips often drew her away from home. Decades later, she would reflect: “Even now when I speak of it I can feel the pain. It hurts me in the same place as it did then.”<sup>23</sup> This personal struggle—inflected by the exalted position of maternal figures in the American social landscape, and the centuries-old connections to images of the Madonna and Child—begin to explain the centrality of the theme of motherhood in Lange’s work [FIGS. 19, 20].<sup>24</sup>

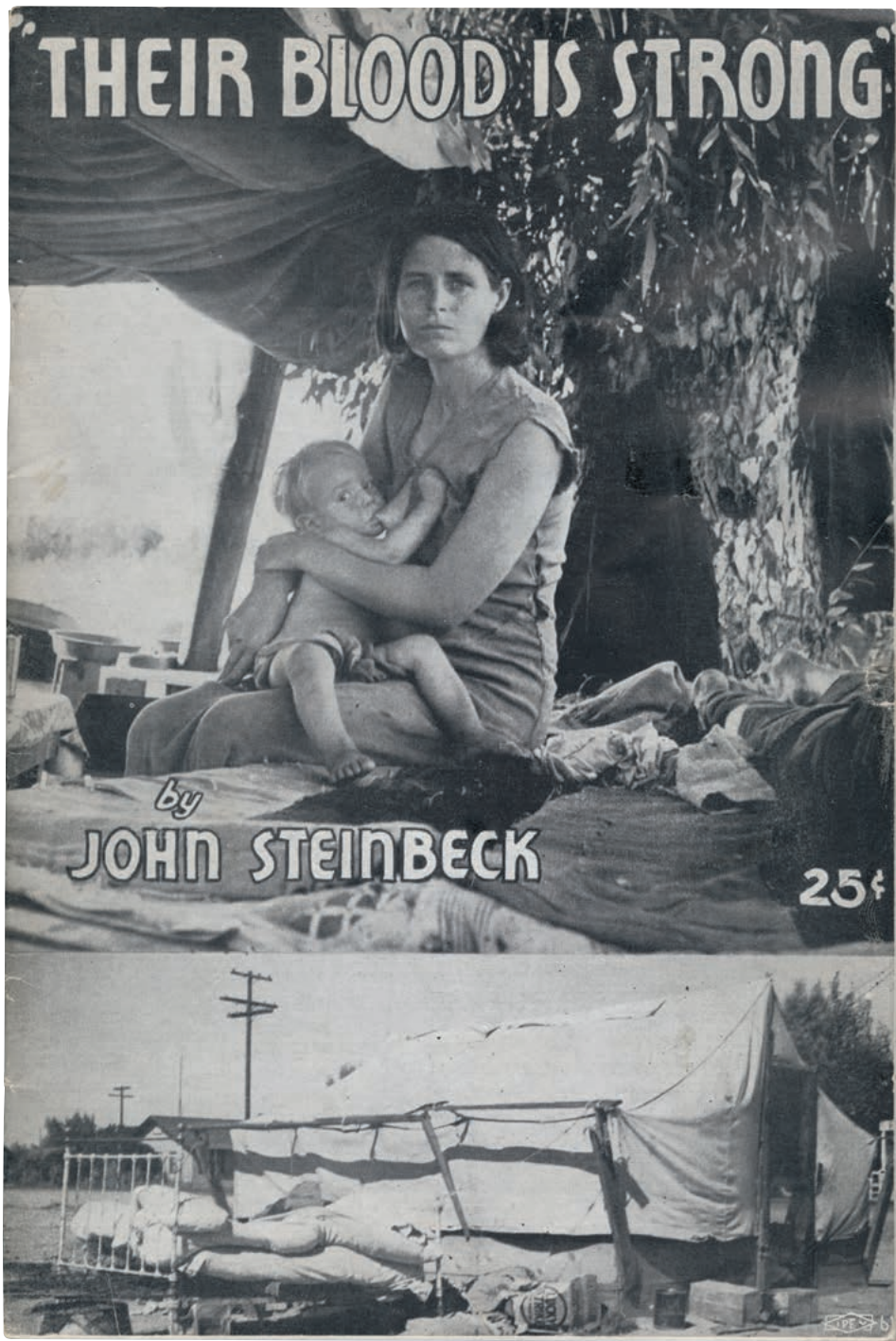


FIG. 21. John Steinbeck's *Their Blood Is Strong* (San Francisco: Simon J. Lubin Society of California, April 1938). Cover photographs by Dorothea Lange. RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY, NEW YORK

Attuned to this profound symbolic power, the editors of the *San Francisco News* reproduced one of Lange's photographs from the *Migrant Mother* suite [SEE FIG. 14], cropped into a vertical, on October 5, 1936, alongside the first installment of "The Harvest Gypsies," a series of articles on California's migrant workers by John Steinbeck. These writings solidified Steinbeck's standing as an authority on the Dust Bowl migration in California, more than two years before the publication of his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. The articles were gathered into a pamphlet in 1938, published under the title *Their Blood Is Strong* and illustrated with photographs by Lange [FIG. 21]. As the historian James R. Swensen has pointed out, *Migrant Mother* and *The Grapes of Wrath* have both come to represent the Great Depression for generations that did not experience it firsthand.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps not coincidentally, both works are anchored in a maternal figure.

The identity of the *Migrant Mother* remained unknown to the millions who encountered the photograph until 1978, when reports circulated via the Associated Press that Thompson felt exploited and intimated that she should have been somehow compensated for her role in the famous photograph, threatening a lawsuit to anyone who persisted in publishing it.<sup>26</sup> This hostility waned in August 1983 when her children's plea for help offsetting Thompson's medical costs (first published in the *San Jose Mercury News*) brought a reported \$30,000 from thousands of strangers who had been touched by Lange's photograph over the decades.<sup>27</sup>

In 1978 it was also revealed that Thompson was in fact Cherokee, not of European descent (as had been assumed by Lange and many others), introducing the question of how race affects our reading of this image.<sup>28</sup> Art historian Sally Stein reflects:

There is something to be said for thinking that the ethnicity of the central subject in this revered picture should not matter, especially because in the past it never seemed to matter. Downplaying the belated revelation of *Migrant Mother*'s Native American identity may serve as proof that our society is moving close to a state of color blindness. Then again, can the eradication of racism ever be achieved if we ignore the racialized ground on which the nation established itself and continually expanded?<sup>29</sup>

Surely the assumption that Thompson was white has been a factor in the reception of this photograph that we can no longer ignore. Would the image's iconic power have been as far-reaching had Thompson been seen as nonwhite? We cannot know, but it must be said that Lange (and Taylor) had an equitable concern for itinerant workers of all races [SEE FIGS. 6 AND 19] that was uncommon for the era, and indeed for today.