Sally Stein

Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* is arguably the most familiar image from the Great Depression, haunting the nation and, in different ways, both the photographer and the picture’s principal subject. Toward the end of her life, Lange was asked to write about her most famous photograph. She began that recollection by noting that some pictures take on a life of their own, overshadowing all the other pictures a photographer may consider to be equally, if not more important. Surely this image fits that description.¹

Lange made the photograph at a migrant labor camp in Nipomo, California, in early March 1936, as part of her work documenting conditions of rural labor for the New Deal’s Farm Security Administration (FSA). Within a few years, the FSA office used this photograph on an in-house poster to proclaim the multiple uses its growing file of government pictures served, for *Migrant Mother* had appeared in major newspapers and magazines, along with photography periodicals and museum exhibitions. In at least one installation photograph from the early 1940s, it already was being represented as worthy of special veneration and, for women, emulation. During and immediately following World War II, it seems to have been retired from active use. But it acquired new legs when its role was reprised for Edward Steichen’s book and exhibition *The Family of Man* (1955), Beaumont and Nancy Newhall’s book *Masters of Photography* (1958), and then Steichen’s final MoMA exhibition and catalogue *The Bitter Years* (1962). As both social documentary and the populist politics of the Great Depression attracted the interest of the postwar generation coming of age in the 1960s, a wide variety of publications made frequent use of *Migrant Mother*. As a government picture in the public domain, it was readily available for minimal cost. Moreover, the picture’s extensive prior usage only added to its serviceability as a shorthand emblem of both the depths of misery once wide-spread in this society and its heartfelt recognition by socially engaged New Dealers. Indeed, since the early 1960s, it has been reproduced so often that many call it the most widely reproduced photograph in the entire history of photographic image-making.

Celebrity, we know, attracts critics along with acolytes. It is no surprise, then, that this national icon of maternal fortitude has provoked an unending series of challenges to its documentary authenticity. As much as anyone, the photographer helped lay the groundwork for subsequent skeptics. Two years after Lange made the series that already was gaining exceptional notice, she borrowed the negative from the Washington office in order to make a fine enlargement for a traveling museum exhibition. With art on her mind, she temporarily took leave of her New Deal political senses and decided to have a corner of the


*Dorothea Lange, Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936*. Gelatin silver print, 13 ½ x 10 ½ in. (34.3 x 26.7 cm). Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland, the Dorothea Lange Collection, gift of Paul S. Taylor.
negative retouched. Since the picture had begun gaining special notice, Lange judged the intrusion of a thumb and index finger beside the tent pole to be an extraneous detail, detracting from an otherwise unified composition that was reminiscent of sacred Marian imagery. This embellishment of the picture may have led to her being fired, for one photographic historian has proposed that Lange’s FSA boss, Roy Stryker, was so angered by her tampering with a government negative that he named Lange for termination when the FSA faced budget reductions at the end of the 1930s.2

Over time Stryker expunged this dispute from memory. In later years, he not only championed Lange’s signal contribution to the file but also claimed that of all the thousands of FSA pictures Migrant Mother represented the apex of the documentary project.3 But as the study of photography moved from an infancy of jubilant celebration to a more critical adolescence, others initiated their own investigations. Historian James C. Curtis questioned whether the presumed final picture was absolutely documentary; his reconstruction of the sequence of negatives she exposed in Nipomo demonstrates that Lange worked very selectively to achieve her portrait composition, in the process sacrificing any sense of location and even some family members.4

Feminists have brought other concerns to the reexamination of the picture. Cultural historian Wendy Kozol treated Migrant Mother as the quintessential example of the FSA traffic in conservative stereotypes. This modern version of the longstanding pictorial genre of mother and child, Kozol argues, chiefly served to reassure the public in the Great Depression that the most fundamental social unit—the nuclear family—was beleaguered but still strong.5 Subsequent scholarship has extended this critique of the way Migrant Mother both drew upon gender conventions and in turn helped keep them in circulation, thereby perpetuating pictorial and social clichés. “Whatever reality its subject first possessed,” literary historian Paula Rabinowitz declared, “has been drained away and the image become icon.”6 Some scholars contend more bluntly that study of Depression culture would benefit from shifting attention to less-celebrated pictures, preferably those depicting women engaged in wage work instead of preoccupied with domestic responsibilities.7

Despite these critical admonitions, not all have heeded the call to shelve this familiar photograph but instead have explored new avenues for comprehending the picture’s persistent power. One lacuna in earlier discussions of Migrant Mother was the lack of any detailed information about the woman. Lange spent so little time making the photograph that she did not even record the name of her subject. By the time Lange died in 1965, she had come to think of her model as having only

6. Paula Rabinowitz, They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary (London/New York: Verso, 1994), p. 87. Rabinowitz does not specify whether she means icon in the vernacular sense of shared cultural symbol, or in the more technical, semiotic sense of a sign that works by means of resonant likeness, or in the most traditional religious sense of an image meant for literal veneration, or some combination of these various meanings.
the generic name *Migrant Mother*. But in the 1970s, a younger generation of photographers began to revisit places and people already rendered historic by earlier documentation. In that spirit of rephotography, Nebraska-based photojournalist Bill Ganzel spent years tracking down people and locations photographed by the FSA. With the aid of a story in the *Modesto (California) Bee*, Ganzel located Florence Thompson and persuaded her and the same children to pose for him in 1979. The book that resulted from his wide-ranging research was the first major publication to put a name to her face, yet in most other respects, the information supplied was sparse. Apparently wary of further national exposure, the family members offered only general remarks about the hard times they had survived.8

Ganzel’s photograph offered a bit more information. For this unusual public portrait, Florence Thompson quietly displayed her own sense of style by donning white slacks and a white sleeveless top, adorned only by a Southwest-style squash blossom necklace. In itself, there is nothing conclusive about this detail; one response to the surge of Native American activism in the 1970s was the widespread fashion for silver-and-turquoise jewelry. But for Thompson it was a deliberate, if quiet, statement of identity. During the same period, this long-obscure celebrity made a point of acknowledging her Cherokee heritage in occasional interviews with news media. Thompson also volunteered

that she always had resented the famed picture by Lange, and would never have allowed its being taken had she understood the way and the extent to which it would be used.9

But for more than a decade after her widely reported death in September 1983 and the national circulation of Ganzel's book in 1984, public information about Florence Thompson consisted largely of a proper name. Then, in the early 1990s, Geoffrey Dunn, a freelance journalist and University of California doctoral student, resolved to reconstruct her life story. Extensive interviews with surviving members of the family left him shocked by the gulf between her actual situation and the minimal details Lange had recorded. The varied details of Thompson's life that Dunn pieced together for this first biographical essay were no less stunning than his overriding conclusion of the photograph's betrayal of its immediate subject.10

When her path crossed that of Lange's in March 1936, Florence Owens was thirty-two years old. Born Florence Leona Christie in September 1903, she grew up in the Indian Territory of the Cherokee Nation to which both her parents claimed blood rights. Her biological father left her mother before she was born, and her mother soon married a man who did not think of himself as Indian (though his children later came to think that he may have been of part-Cherokee descent). Throughout her youth, Florence believed her mother's second husband to be her biological father. Thus, although she grew up in Indian Territory, she did not identify herself as "pure" Cherokee. In 1921, at the age of seventeen, she married Cleo Owens, a farmer's son from Missouri, and over the next decade they proceeded to have five children.

Oklahoma in the first decades of the twentieth century bore little relation to the locale envisioned in the popular World War II-era musical. The long-running Broadway show simply eradicated the Indian presence and prior claim to the land, while suggesting unlimited opportunities for all newcomers. The historical record is more dramatic. Following the white land rush at the turn of the twentieth century that had been precipitated by the forced allotment system of the federally enacted Dawes Plan, opportunities to homestead turned cutthroat: "Of the thirty million allotted acres more than twenty-seven million passed from Indians to whites by fraudulent deeds, embezzlement, and murder."11 Florence and Cleo Owens saw no chance of farming on their own, so by the mid-twenties they opted to move west, finding work and temporary housing in the sawmill camps of California’s Hill Country. By 1931, they were expecting a sixth child in northern California when Cleo Owens died of tuberculosis.

According to Dunn, Florence supported her family as a waitress and soon became involved with a local businessman. Florence's

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grandson Roger Sprague, who is currently preparing his own biography of the many generations of his grandmother’s family, notes that the young widow was fiercely independent but made the mistake of obtaining county aid, which stipulated that any sexual relations with men would result in the removal of her children. When she became pregnant, she immediately left for her home state, determined to avoid any custody dispute. But Oklahoma in the 1930s was devastated by drought and offered even fewer opportunities than it had in the previous decade. Florence quickly set out a second time for California.

After returning to her adopted state, Florence became involved with Jim Hill, an unemployed local man who had turned to migrant work, and with whom she had a child in 1935—the nursing infant in *Migrant Mother*. Hill had temporarily left the camp with one of Florence’s sons when Lange happened upon the pea pickers’ encampment and made her series of portraits. Though Hill was actually getting a radiator repaired, the photographer soon annotated the closest portrait with

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12. I am indebted to Roger Sprague who has allowed me to read his manuscript-in-progress, “Second Trail of Tears.” Excerpts from his carefully researched text can be found on his website, www.migrantgrandson.com.
the detail that the family had been forced to sell the tires from their car. This factual embellishment offended the family’s sense of logic as well as accuracy, since mobility was the key to even the poorest migrant’s survival. Dunn’s article makes no mention of when Florence married Thompson, her last name at the time of her death. But from Roger Sprague’s more extensive reconstruction of his family history, I learned that the marriage followed her separation from Hill in the 1940s, and again she outlived her husband.

As Dunn makes clear, Lange was quite careless with the facts. However, this was hardly the first time a scholar has noted the liberties Lange took in her documentary practice (as well as in the facts of her own biography). Accordingly, Dunn’s wholesale condemnation of the famous photographer as manipulative, condescending, colonialistic, misleading, and disingenuous made less of an impression on me than the chronicle he had sketched of Migrant Mother’s Native American heritage. On this count, I don’t think we can condemn Lange for deliberately misrepresenting or burying the information.

From all available evidence, it does not seem that Lange never realized she had cast a Native American for the European American role of New Deal madonna. She never questioned the stranger about her ethnic identity; in fact, making such an inquiry would have risked breaking whatever current of empathy she briefly sought to establish. But if there is anything recognizably “Indian” in this striking face, Lange’s misperception is more than a little curious. She prided herself on being able to distill essential truths by looking closely. Moreover, she had spent a fair amount of time studying Native Americans in the southwest. Her first husband, Maynard Dixon, was a plein-air painter who had specialized in idyllic scenes of the pristine West inhabited solely by Native Americans. It was during an early sojourn with Dixon


14. Toward the end of her life she would express this idea in terms of ‘living the visual life,’ words that open the 1966 documentary film The Closer for Me, produced by Philip Greene and Robert Katz of KQED; transcript of the filmed interviews with the photographer in the Dorothea Lange Collection of the Oakland Museum of California.

in the Southwest that Lange began to photograph seriously outside her studio, and those efforts lead to one of her first distinctive portraits. Yet, in the resulting close-cropped print of a Hopi man's face, her framing excluded all conflicting cultural signs like modern, store-bought clothing. In this respect, she continued the quest to find or produce "authentic Indians," a tradition developed by a long line of artists including Dixon and photographers like Edward S. Curtis.\(^{15}\) That these "authentic" stereotypes were manifestly superficial in spite of being deep-seated, proved especially true in Nipomo, California. The migrant woman who attracted Lange's attention displayed no obvious signs of "Indianness," so Lange proceeded to place her in a distinctly Euro-American scenario of hallowed Christian maternity. In turn, this iconographic context led all, including the photographer, to assume that the model was unarguably white.

Lange's mistaken assumption amplifies the generalizing tendencies in both New Deal culture and subsequent scholarship of the period. Photography and direct observation in that era came close to enjoying the powers of a fetish, magically replete without nominal recourse to factual or reasoned discourse. Though our eyes often deceive us, the objective character of photography encourages viewers to rely on sensory appearance as the incontrovertible bedrock of experienced-based knowledge.

The photograph's history likewise exemplifies the way the New Deal was not only most concerned about "the forgotten man"—in Franklin Roosevelt's words—but equally, if less vocally, about the declining status of whites. The mass media were most inclined to

focus on the plight of poor whites, and Lange’s FSA boss was supremely media-oriented. On one occasion, Stryker rejected Lange’s proposal to focus on the situation of blacks and the urban poor, reminding her of the dearth of demand for such pictures.¹⁶ Since there was even less public concern about Native Americans in this period, while traveling for the FSA in the southwest Lange never proposed focusing on the living conditions of Native Americans. But Arthur Rothstein implicitly made such a proposal on one occasion, by sending the FSA a few preliminary studies of Native Americans he had photographed in Montana. Stryker’s response was blatant:

_The Indian pictures are fine, but I doubt if we ought to get too far involved. There are so many other things to be done. You know I just don’t get too excited about the Indians. I know it is their country and we took it away from them—to hell with it!_¹⁷

In this unguarded exchange, Stryker may have been expressing a personal and regional bias, for he came from western Colorado where his family had struggled as ranchers. But if his sentiments were at all representative of mainstream opinion in the New Deal, it is reasonable to assume that had Lange recognized her subject as Native American, she might not have bothered to take any photographs. Or if she had discovered from extended conversation that the woman she had photographed was Native American and captioned the picture accordingly, the image’s promotion and circulation would have been quite limited. It would have undermined conventional thinking in two ways: it directed attention away from Anglos, and it refused to support the image of Indians as a “vanishing race.” Rather, Lange had depicted someone who seems determined to survive and who, as part of that process, had traveled out of the Dust Bowl region and into California—even the most skeletal caption is quick to inform us—thereby challenging the stereotypes of a defeated minority.

Once we recognize that what has been documented inadvertently is the migration not of a poor Anglo-Oklahoman but of an equally poor Native American Oklahoman with children, we may be led to question the basic concept that Lange and her second husband, University of California at Berkeley social scientist Paul S. Taylor, developed to frame their New Deal magnum opus, _An American Exodus_.¹⁸ Together they wove pictures and text to trace the movement of whites and a smaller number of blacks suffering displacement and immiseration as recent (and frequently despised) newcomers to the industrialized agricultural fields of California. It was an ambitious cross-country chronicle, yet after gleaning just a bit about the background of _Migrant Mother_, it is hard to accept the contours of such a black-and-white story. Indeed, to think of exodus and migration with primary emphasis

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¹⁶. See the exchange of letters between Stryker and Lange, June 18–23, 1937, as well as their correspondence during October 1938; Stryker personal correspondence files, University of Louisville.
¹⁷. Stryker to Rothstein in Great Falls, Montana, May 26, 1939; from the Archives of American Art microfilm correspondence of Stryker’s personal collection of FSA correspondence.
on the Great Depression fails to comprehend that whites were late-
comers to the forced migration across a continent. Okie culture, in
particular, was carried to the West not only by whites and blacks, but
also by Native Americans who were banished from Georgia and other
Eastern states in the early nineteenth century. Those who managed
to survive ordeals such as the infamous Trail of Tears were forced to
resettle in Oklahoma,\(^9\) and yet the records of so-called Okie migration
rarely make reference to Native Americans.\(^9\) Those migrations contin-
ue to be relegated to histories devoted exclusively to Native Americans,
an example of our intellectual reservation system still in operation. The
histories of Oklahoma settlement and resettlement need to be revisit-
ed and elaborated to portray the constant flux and mix in populations.

But the continuing gaps in our social histories should not prevent
consideration of the symbolic implications in the longstanding assum-
ptions about *Migrant Mother’s* whiteness. How to account for this error?
On one hand are the viewers’—including Lange’s—deeply ingrained
stereotypes. On the other hand, it seems reasonable to assume that
the migrant woman made no effort to publicize her identity as a person
of color. When she was already living a life of bare-bones subsistence,
what was the point of gratuitously announcing her minority status
far away from her community of origin (which itself was increasingly
dispersed)? The entrenched federal policy of sending Native American
children to government boarding schools for training in assimilation
provided more incentive to pass.\(^2\)

The concept of passing implies unilateral deception for the sake of
upward mobility and the avoidance of stigma. Deliberate misrepresen-
tation is foisted upon another who seeks to police the boundaries of
a racialized caste system and guard the gates of exclusivity. While
making use of the term, I propose reloading its meanings so that we
consider the role of whites, or any privileged group, more actively
in the process. Misrecognition of conventional affinities may simply
underscore the arbitrary character of such repressive systems of reg-
ulation. But misrecognition may also attest to the active desires that
are being repressed, at least nominally. Since I find it surprising that it
took virtually six decades before anyone began exploring Thompson’s
ethnic background, I propose that this lack of recognition of difference
contains a wish toward generic inclusivity. Such inclusivity may not
be motivated by disinterested liberality or the desire to dispense with
all social barriers. Rather, for those in the mainstream, there may be
other benefits that accrue from imagining oneself more closely con-
ected to the other. At the most banal level, there may be a cosmetic
motive (arguably masking an erotic impulse) to reimagine oneself and
one’s immediate relations with higher cheekbones and a more prominent,
“noble” profile. Such a process of physiognomic affiliation may have

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19. Strickland, *Indians in Oklahoma*, pp. 1–7; see also Michael Paul Rogen,
“Liberal Society and the Indian Question,” in Rogen, Ronald Reagan, the Movie, and
Other Episodes in Political Demonology (Berkeley: University of California Press,

20. For example, Indians and Native Americans do not even appear in the
index to the book frequently cited as the definitive social history on Oklahomans
in California: James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and

21. Frederick E. Hoxie, *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians
helped European Americans justify their claims as rightful heirs to the continent. Likewise, the feeling of resemblance might convey the liberating promise of more intimate contact with nature and enhanced physical prowess.\textsuperscript{22} What better figure with whom to create such a fantasy set of relations than a woman whose fair-haired child indicates that she has already entered the process of interracial union? Thus, the danger that Mary Douglas reminds us always accompanies thought of purity is conjured into a fantasy of pleasure, revitalization, and legitimation.\textsuperscript{23}

Is it not fitting that a society struggling to weather a decade-long capitalist crisis would gravitate toward an image that faintly recalled the strong profiles it had already appropriated to legitimate its business? Gracing coins and government buildings, these figures embodied the natural powers that American capitalism both claimed and coerced so that the New World garden could be worked for profit.\textsuperscript{24} That sentiment already found expression in an early Depression report by literary critic and social journalist Edmund Wilson. On a quick visit to the Appalachian region, Wilson was astounded by the visual contrast between the “goggled eyes, thick lips, red, blunt-nosed, salmon-shaped visage” of the County Welfare agent and the “clear oval faces, pale and refined by starvation.” These, he ruminates, represent “the pure type of that English race which, assimilated on the frontier to the Indians’ hatchet profile and high cheekbones, inbred in Boston and Virginia, still haunts our American imagination as the norm from which our people have departed, the ideal towards which it ought to tend.”\textsuperscript{25} Wilson’s idea allows for a bit of assimilation but mainly stresses the pale refining process in the production of prescriptive norms. By contrast, Lange’s image is less concerned with paleness per se, but unwittingly expresses a similar eugenic sensibility, and in the canonization of this image as mainstream Anglo icon, so too has the entire body politic.

News from the parochial world of photographic studies travels slowly, or perhaps stereotypical thinking proves remarkably tenacious. A recent book on the divisive role of race in twentieth-century America once again reproduces \textit{Migrant Mother}, this time as a negative example of white supremacy. To encourage more critical readings of this familiar picture, the author adds his own interpretive caption:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Part of the photograph’s appeal lay in the sheer brilliancy of its composition, but part depended, too, on its choice of a “Nordic” woman. Her suffering could be thought to represent the nation in ways the distress of a black, Hispanic, Italian, or Jewish woman never could.}\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} On the white desire to pass as Indian, at least for brief moments of recreation and resistance, see Philip J. Deloria, \textit{Playing Indian} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).


\textsuperscript{24} While she does not discuss the iconography of the nickel, Barbara Grosclose provides a good basis for such analysis in her genealogy of early official uses of Indian iconography; Grosclose, \textit{Nineteenth-Century American Art} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 62–67. For a trenchant ideological analysis of the contradictory impulses in white paternalism, see Rogin, “Liberal Society and the Indian Question.”


\textsuperscript{26} Thanks to Tom Foliand for directing me to this passage in Gary Gerstle, \textit{American Crucible, Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 180–81.
Even in a text that aims to challenge divisive ideologies, we encounter more evidence of the degree to which race and ethnicity elicits our categorizing impulses and simultaneously mocks them.

One could argue that “reclassifying” *Migrant Mother* as Native American only continues a caste-based tradition of racial labeling. 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? An alternative goal might be that future generations will come to view *Migrant Mother* beside the highly contrived portrait studies of Edward S. Curtis, for example. Recontextualized thus, both depictions may appear as differing versions of Euro American misrecognitions of Native Americans: either as noble savages magically quite removed from encroaching European society, or conversely as fair-to-passing representative figures of that same civilization, with the Native American lending a fantasy of natural nobility to whites’ wishful images of themselves and their supposedly resolute family values. If and when we finally become a society committed to problematizing the historic assumptions of normative whiteness, the notions of passing, and passing likeness, might finally admit thoroughgoing reconsideration of what has been missed with respect to difference and diversity.

*Edward S. Curtis, The Vanishing Race, 1907. Photogravure, 6 x 8 in. [15 x 20.3 cm]. National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.*