

2014

Culture on the Move: Depression-Era Documentary and Migrant California

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Recommended Citation

Entin, Joseph (2014) "Culture on the Move: Depression-Era Documentary and Migrant California," *Criticism*: Vol. 56: Iss. 4, Article 7.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol56/iss4/7>

CULTURE ON
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DEPRESSION-ERA
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CALIFORNIA
Joseph Entin

California on the Breadlines: Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the Making of a New Deal Narrative by Jan Goggans. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. Pp. 368. \$40.00 cloth.

The camera is a tool for learning how to see without a camera.

—Dorothea Lange¹

In recent years, leading up to and after the onset of the Great Recession of 2008, scholars have greatly enriched our understanding of one of the most innovative and accomplished photographers of the last great economic crisis, Dorothea Lange. Linda Gordon's magisterial biography of Lange (*Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* [2009]), Anne Whiston Spirn's elegant collection of Lange's 1939 field reports (*Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Notes from the Field* [2008]), and Richard Street's *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850–2000* (2008), which characterizes Lange as the "greatest exemplar" of a "humanist form of photography" developed in West Coast farm fields, all open new ways of understanding Lange's life and visual labor.² This spike in Lange studies has occurred in the context of a broader shift in photographic theory, away from the largely cynical judgment of photography as a disciplinary, imperial apparatus in the work of critics such as Susan Sontag, Allan Sekula, and John Tagg to a more sanguine assessment, in recent work by Ariella Azoulay, Susie Linfield, and others, of the medium as a democratic form of cultural engagement

capable of generating vital axes of empathy and solidarity.³

Jan Goggans's *California on the Breadlines* is a welcome addition to these overlapping critical fields and to several additional subfields, including the history of progressive social science and the New Deal, California studies, and the history of protest literature. Her book examines the creative synergy that flowed from the close working and personal relationship Lange shared with her second husband, labor economist Paul Taylor, during the 1930s, when they devoted their professional energies to addressing the problem of migrant workers in California. Goggans argues that Lange and Taylor "fell in love over what they could do together, over the strength that her photography, so long unrecognized as a central and unique power, gave to his work" (161). Lange and Taylor, Goggans contends persuasively, taught each other how to see in new ways, and the result was an innovative, cooperative oeuvre that not only offered new insight into the significance of migratory workers and California to Depression America but also established new, more democratic modes of photographic practice and sociological field research.

California on the Breadlines is a gracefully written book that nimbly blends biography, literary analysis, and cultural and intellectual history in a narrative tracing the

work these two immensely energetic, driven individuals completed together through mutual inspiration and assistance. The opening chapters of the book are composed contrapuntally, oscillating between accounts of Taylor's and Lange's early lives and careers, which intersected when Taylor asked permission to use several of Lange's images to illustrate an article he was writing about Mexican farmworkers in California.

One strength of the book is the emphasis it places on Taylor, who is much less well known than Lange. Taylor was raised in Iowa, where he imbibed the Populist ethos of producerism, which he saw embodied on his uncle's small farm. Taylor studied at the University of Wisconsin with noted Progressive economist John R. Commons, married his college sweetheart, Katharine Whiteside, served in World War I, and was gassed at the Battle of Belleau Wood in France, temporarily losing his sight after removing his gas mask to help lead fellow soldiers out of danger. Taylor emerged from the war believing that catastrophe provides opportunities for social and political renewal and redemption, a conviction that dovetailed with the Progressive-era faith in building a new, more rational social order out of the chaos of the modern world. After earning a doctorate in economics at the University of California, Berkeley, Taylor joined its faculty

and completed what is probably the first-ever study of Mexican migrant labor in California.

Lange's biography is more familiar, but Goggans renders it deftly, adroitly sketching the key elements of her early life and career: her childhood polio, her father's abandonment of the family, her time strolling the sidewalks of New York City's Lower East Side, her apprenticeships to Arnold Genthe and other photographers, her move to San Francisco and establishment of her portrait studio, her marriage to West Coast modernist painter Maynard Dixon, and her transition to street photography as the Depression set in. While obviously not nearly as comprehensive as Gordon's authoritative biography of Lange, Goggans suggests, like Gordon, that Lange's personal struggles made her sensitive to social hardship—a trait that would shape her photographic work. "The difficult childhood," Goggans asserts, "produced a woman open to human possibility and human frailty, a woman who valued the unexpected even if it disappointed her" (53).

The heart of *California on the Breadlines* examines Lange and Taylor's "unprecedented partnership" (157) as it emerged in the mid-1930s, when Lange joined the Farm Security Administration (FSA) camera corps and the couple journeyed through the South and Southwest to explore the

roots of the migrant problem that was engulfing California. Working together, they each learned to see in new ways. Lange began to expand her sense of what photography could do and show: she "increasingly thought in terms of contextual information, a filling in of the detail necessary to tell not just the story of the moment she captured, but the story behind it" (94). Taylor, with his knowledge of labor and political economy, helped Lange grasp this larger story, which "allowed her to move beyond simply witnessing the tragic conditions before her" (104). The result, Goggans claims, was the veritable invention of documentary photography as we know it: "[T]he genre that came into such focused form in her hands was largely the result of the work she did with Taylor" (99). In turn, Lange's powerful portraits of migrants workers and displaced families gave compelling visual form to the social forces that Taylor wanted to show were sweeping California and the nation at large. Lange "was able to 'say' things with her camera that [Taylor] had not yet been able to say, things that needed to be said" (104).

Lange and Taylor were members of a broad coalition of reformers in and around the New Deal, but Goggans is less interested in the policy implications of their work than in the *narrative* that underwrites their efforts—a narrative that she distills and interrogates

with precision and insight. In framing their research, Taylor and Lange relied on an implicit conversion narrative in which the “fallen,” degraded state in which migrants existed could be redeemed once the broader public was convinced of the migrants’ essential dignity. Taylor, in particular, saw the Okies and Arkies, fleeing the Dust Bowl and other hardships in search of opportunity, as contemporary versions of classic American pioneers. The narrative that Lange and Taylor produced, Goggans contends, is traceable to a foundational national form, the American jeremiad, and should also be read in the tradition of the social protest novel, epitomized most famously by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), and also by 1930s’ social realist novels, of which John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) was the most popular example.

While Lange and Taylor shared a common project and an abiding love for each other, their perspectives on migrant life were not identical, as Goggans astutely demonstrates. Although Taylor was committed to “large-scale, radical, grassroots changes” (132), his casting of migrants as modern embodiments of the pioneer spirit was ultimately grounded in a “nostalgic faith in small farms and land ownership” (21) and in a “conservative appeal to unity and order” (27). Lange’s photographs, however, offer an embedded critique

of the optimistic Jeffersonian, and implicitly masculinist, ideology that animates his redemptive vision of reform. Lange’s disability and her struggles to balance motherhood and professional work—during a period of peak unemployment when there was a great deal of male resentment against working women—made her especially sensitive to the challenges facing migrant women. As Goggans shows, many of Lange’s images, which focus on migrant women performing domestic chores in severely compromised circumstances—washing clothes on the bumper of a dilapidated car (205) or cleaning out a ragged tent with a dirt floor (202)—suggest that the myth of pioneer life was founded on a double standard. “Lange’s photographic narrative,” Goggans insists, “does much more than simply expose the fact that the dream of the West had failed for Dust Bowl migrants; it interrogates the validity of that dream, suggesting that for 50 percent of its citizens, it *never* existed” (28).

For readers especially interested in Lange and documentary photography, the highlight of the book is likely to be chapter 6, which examines what Goggans calls the “distinctly female vernacular” (183) that Lange developed to render the Depression era’s massive social displacements in visual form. Many of Lange’s images that focus on the particular struggles that women

faced have an edge to them, Goggans explains. Comparing Lange's depiction of women to the romantic faith in women's redemptive potential that marks Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Goggans insists, "in Lange's photos, no such romantic vision exists" (208). In this chapter, Goggans offers detailed, delicate readings of several (mostly lesser known) photographs, including a shot of a woman's crossed legs displaying a roughly mended stocking and an immensely poignant portrait of a woman opening a brown paper bag of food at a relief office—an image that stands as a feminist counterpoint to her celebrated photograph of male suffering, *White Angel Breadline* (1933). Goggans claims that Lange's iconic photograph *Migrant Mother* (1936) encapsulates the "raw historical moment of the Great Depression in the burden it placed on mothers" (216). Of course, the photograph itself is not "raw," but carefully constructed, the final shot in a series that Lange took of Florence Thompson and her children, as Goggans, following the work of other critics, demonstrates. "Taking photographs of hundreds of women whose dispossessed lives contradicted the dream of a Golden State and the entire idea of the western dream," Goggans argues, "Lange presented a silent critique of California's failure—not simply its well-documented failure to be the land of plenty for three hundred

and fifty thousand migrants, but its social failure and the tension between men and women that failure had created" (208–9).

California on the Breadlines culminates with a discussion of *American Exodus* (1939), Lange and Taylor's collaborative photo book about the flow of migration from the South and Southwest to California during the 1930s, which Goggans describes as a "tour de force" (233), Lange and Taylor's "greatest protest" (249). The analysis of the book from an aesthetic perspective, however, comes up a bit short: Goggans doesn't provide extensive, detailed examinations of specific images, or the sequencing of images, or the interplay of verbal and visual text in the volume. Photographic historian Beaumont Newhall labeled the book "a bold experiment, pointing the way to a new medium."⁴ In contrast, filmmaker Pare Lorenz argued that *American Exodus* was "not well presented."⁵ Paul Strand had some praise for the book, as Goggans notes, but also contended that the photographs are merely illustrative, without aesthetic autonomy from the verbal text, and lacking "the impact upon the eye and mind which the subject clearly contains."⁶ How would Goggans explain Newhall's enticing comment and respond to Lorenz's and Strand's criticisms? Her reading of the history of the book's development and underlying narrative is

very rich and deserves an equally intensive assessment of its formal dimensions.

Goggans argues that the power of Lange's sensitive photographic approach and Taylor's attentive interviewing style was that they enabled subjects who had virtually no public voice—transient agricultural workers, especially women—to finally “speak” (268). *American Exodus* was written expressly against the example of Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell's *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), which captions photographs with *invented* speech; in contrast, Lange and Taylor represent the words their subjects actually used to describe their own situations. Yet the voices of these destitute laborers are not, as Goggans states, “unmediated” (257). They are transcribed, edited, and shaped for publication. In her discussion of *American Exodus*, Maren Stange observes that the caption (“If you die, you're dead—that's all”) beneath Lange's well-known image *Woman of the High Plains* (1938) acquires a meaning almost the opposite of the one it had in the woman's original comment, which is recorded in Lange's field notes.⁷ At issue, then, is not only *whether* these figures speak, but also *how* their speech is rendered, under what conditions, in what terms and contexts. How are their voices preserved and presented?⁸ Goggans is alive to such questions, but her final analysis,

which turns on a speech/silence dichotomy, could have fruitfully taken them up in a more rigorous way.

California on the Breadlines concludes with the compelling claim that Lange and Taylor presented a “new perception of California” (268). Their documentation of migrant poverty suggested that “that last Eden, the mythic ‘classless’ society” was “only a great pretender” and was actually structured by “an entrenched class system as rigid and bounded as those in the eastern factories and southern plantations” (268). Bringing together art and social critique, Lange and Taylor belonged to what Michael Denning calls the cultural front, the expansive and fluid formation of Left cultural workers that emerged during the 1930s. Is it possible, we might wonder, that in offering a vision of the Golden State striated by class violence, Lange and Taylor's work converges with the writings of other Depression-era West Coast dissidents, including Nathanael West, Lewis Corey, Horace McCoy, and Carlos Bulosan, who collectively laid crucial cultural groundwork for the emergence of noir, which Mike Davis describes as a “transformational grammar turning each charming ingredient in the [state's] boosters' arcadia into a sinister equivalent”?⁹ Goggans's insightful, diligently researched, and compelling book gives us

provocative food for thought and further research.

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NOTES

1. Dorothea Lange, quoted in Linda Gordon's "Introduction: 'A Camera Is a Tool for Learning How to See . . .,'" in *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), xiii–xxiii, quotation on xiii.
2. Anne Whiston Spirn, *Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Notes from the Field* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); and Richard Steven Street, *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 161.
3. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, no. 39 (1986): 3–64; John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008); and Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
4. Beaumont Newhall, quoted in Spirn, *Daring to Look*, 36.
5. Pare Lorenz, quoted in Street, *Everyone Had Cameras*, 304–5.
6. Paul Strand, quoted in Street, *Everyone Had Cameras*, 304.
7. Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 120.
8. Jeff Allred argues that 1930s' phototextual books in fact dismantled the very idea of representation even as they represented socially marginalized figures (*American Modernism and Depression Documentary* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2009]).
9. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles*, with photographs by Robert Morrow (New York: Vintage, 1990), 38.

