

# FSA Photography and the 1930's

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An Online Professional Development Seminar



**Sara Blair**

Professor of English  
University of Michigan

**AMERICA *in* CLASS<sup>®</sup>**

*from the* National Humanities Center

# FSA Photography and the 1930's

## FROM THE FORUM

- How do we get students to analyze photographs instead of just viewing them?
- How did photojournalism evolve?
- Why are there so many iconic photos from the Great Depression?
- Were the documentary photos of the 1930s staged, as were the iconic photos of the Civil War?
- What impact did the FSA photos have?
- What was the purpose of the FSA photography program?
- Were the FSA photos intended to be propaganda or documentation?
- To what extent are the FSA photos and photojournalistic images like them objective?

## FRAMING QUESTIONS

- What does the FSA photographic archive teach us about the Great Depression?
- How were the images made, and what were their aims?
- What understanding of America's shared history do these images make possible?
- How can we critically engage these photographs and use them as learning tools?



## Sara Blair

Professor of English  
University of Michigan

Primary Interests: late nineteenth- and twentieth-century  
American culture, photography and visual culture,  
modernism and modernity.

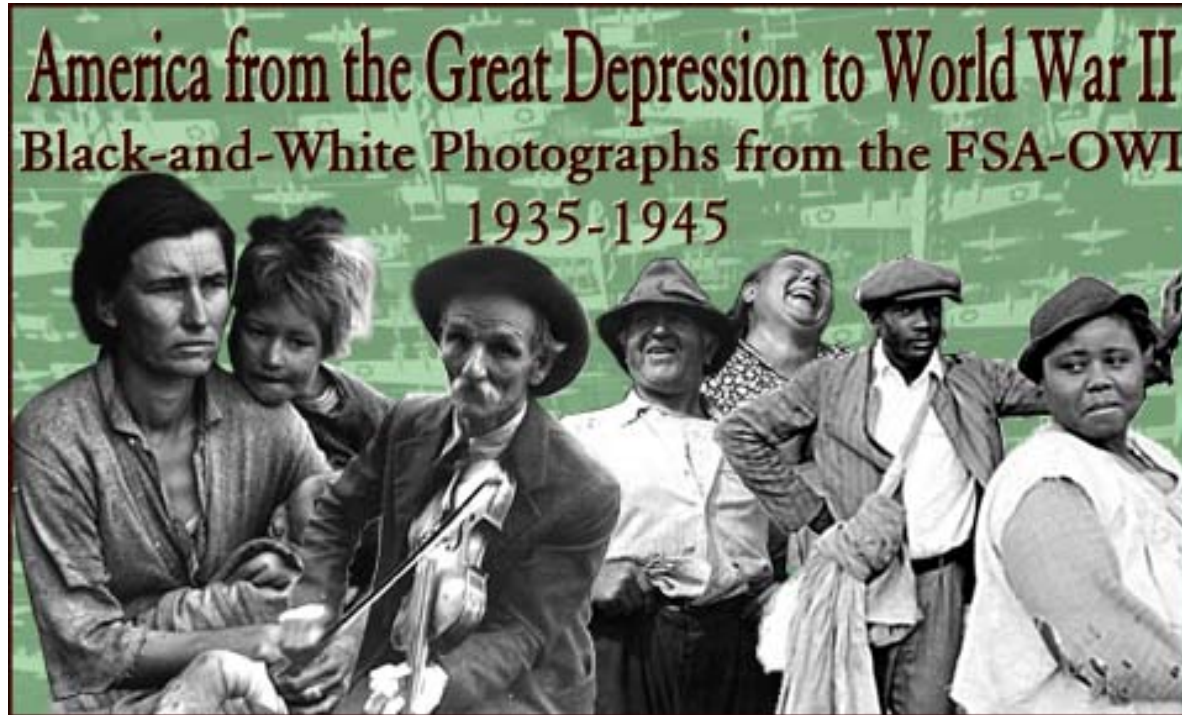
*Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA*  
co-authored with Eric Rosenberg  
(2012)

*Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph  
in the Twentieth Century*  
(2007)

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## Analyzing Photographs: What's in a Picture

- **Who, what, where:** What can we say about the event or action the photograph records?
- **Subject matter:** Why did the photographer include these particular elements? What don't you see in the picture?
- **Composition & framing:** How do people or objects fill the frame? What's in focus (or not)? Where does your eye go as you look at the photograph?
- **Capture:** What might have happened just before or after this picture was taken? What kind of moment is captured?
- **Perspective:** Why did the photographer take the picture from this angle? What would the scene have looked like from another vantage point — from left, right, behind, above, or below?



## What were the FSA photographs?

- Body of 250,000 images created between 1935 and early 1940s
- Funded by the Resettlement Administration of the FSA
- Intended to build popular support for federal spending on relief programs
- Paid for photographers to work on specific projects across the U.S.
- Created the largest public archive of American life in U.S. history

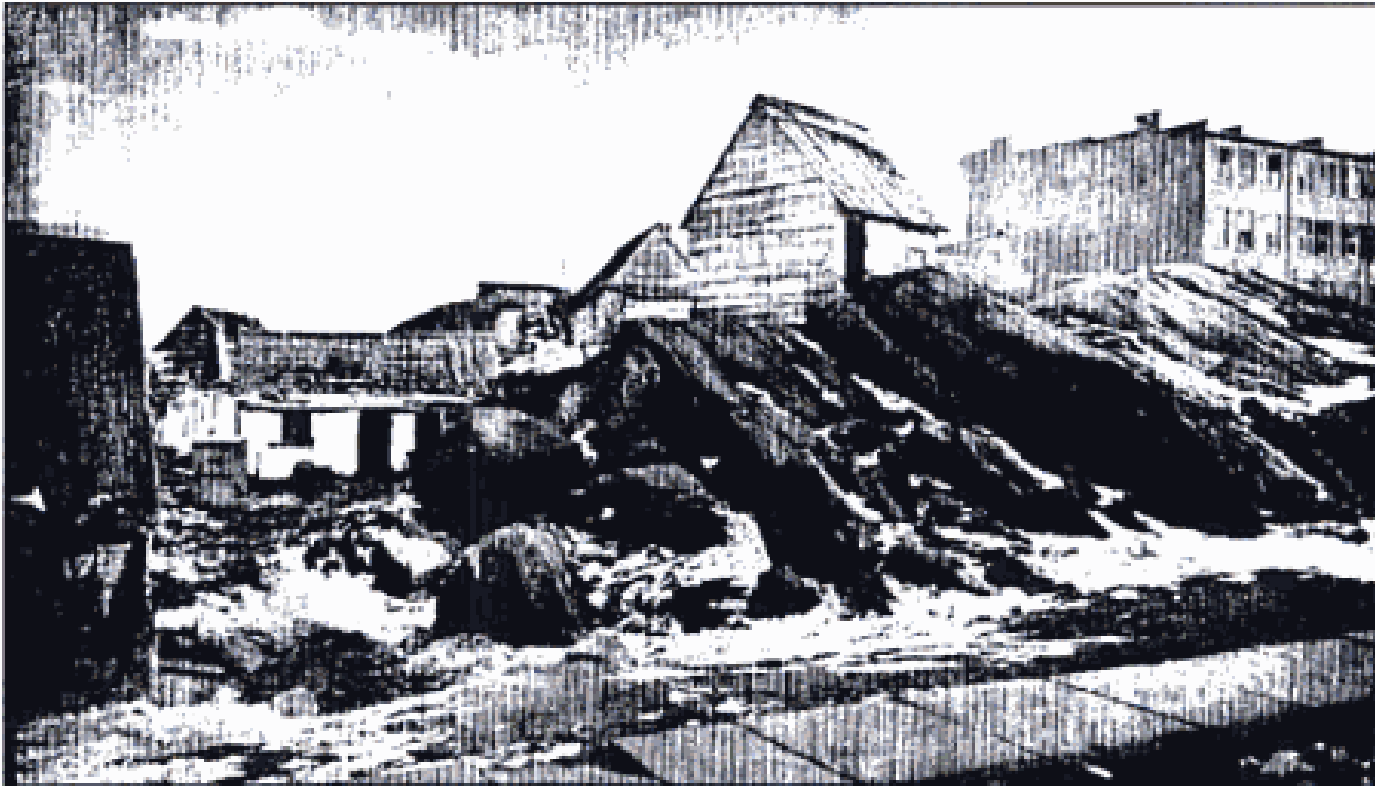


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John Thomson, London Nomades,  
1876

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A shantytown in New York, Daily Graphic, 1880 (first photograph reproduced in a daily newspaper)



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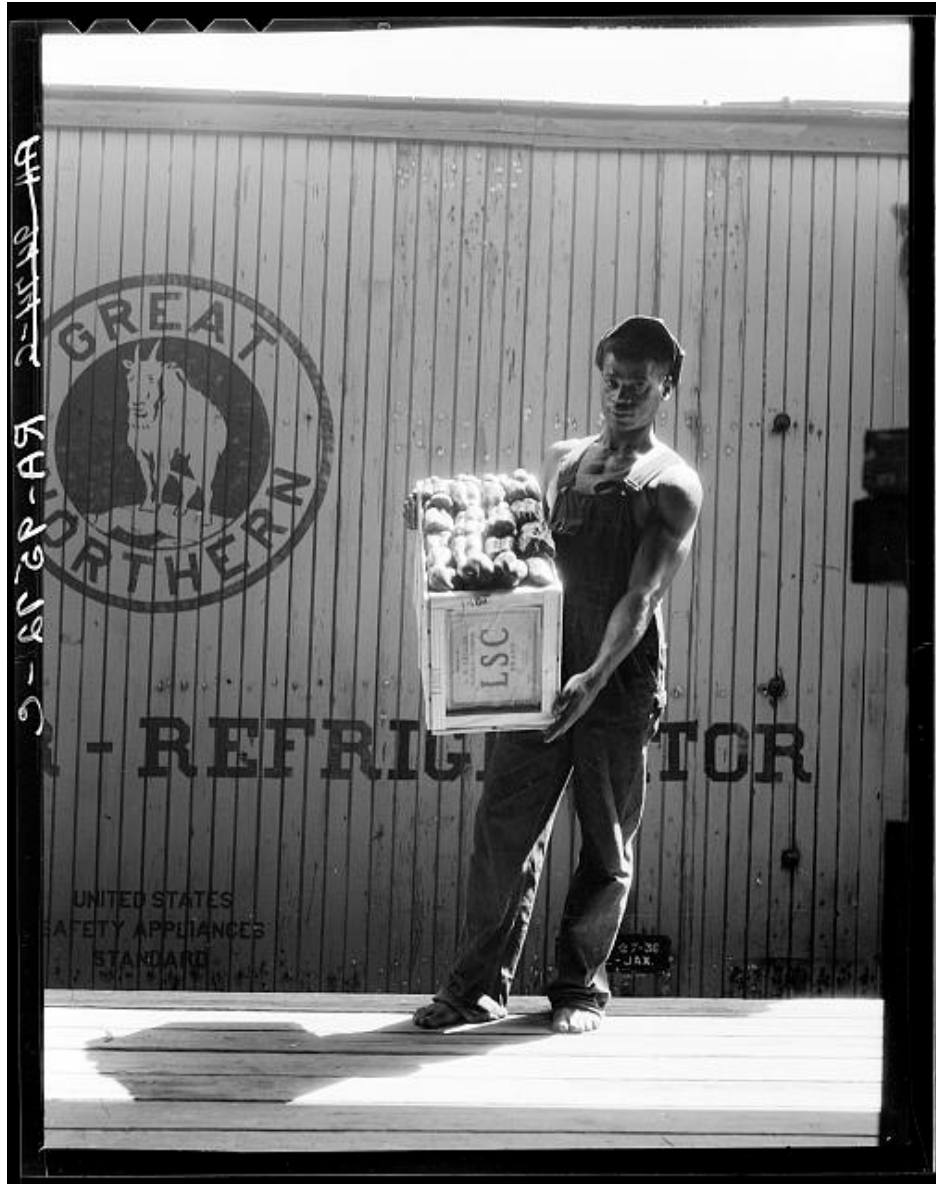


Jacob Riis, Five Cent Lodging, 1889



Marion Post Wolcott, Migrant Workers Waiting for Pay, Florida, 1939

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Dorothea Lange, Migrant shed worker,  
northeast Florida, 1936



Walker Evans, Lucille Burroughs, daughter of a cotton sharecropper, Hale County, Alabama, 1936





Ben Shahn, Boone County, Arkansas. The family of a Resettlement Administration client in the doorway of their home, 1935

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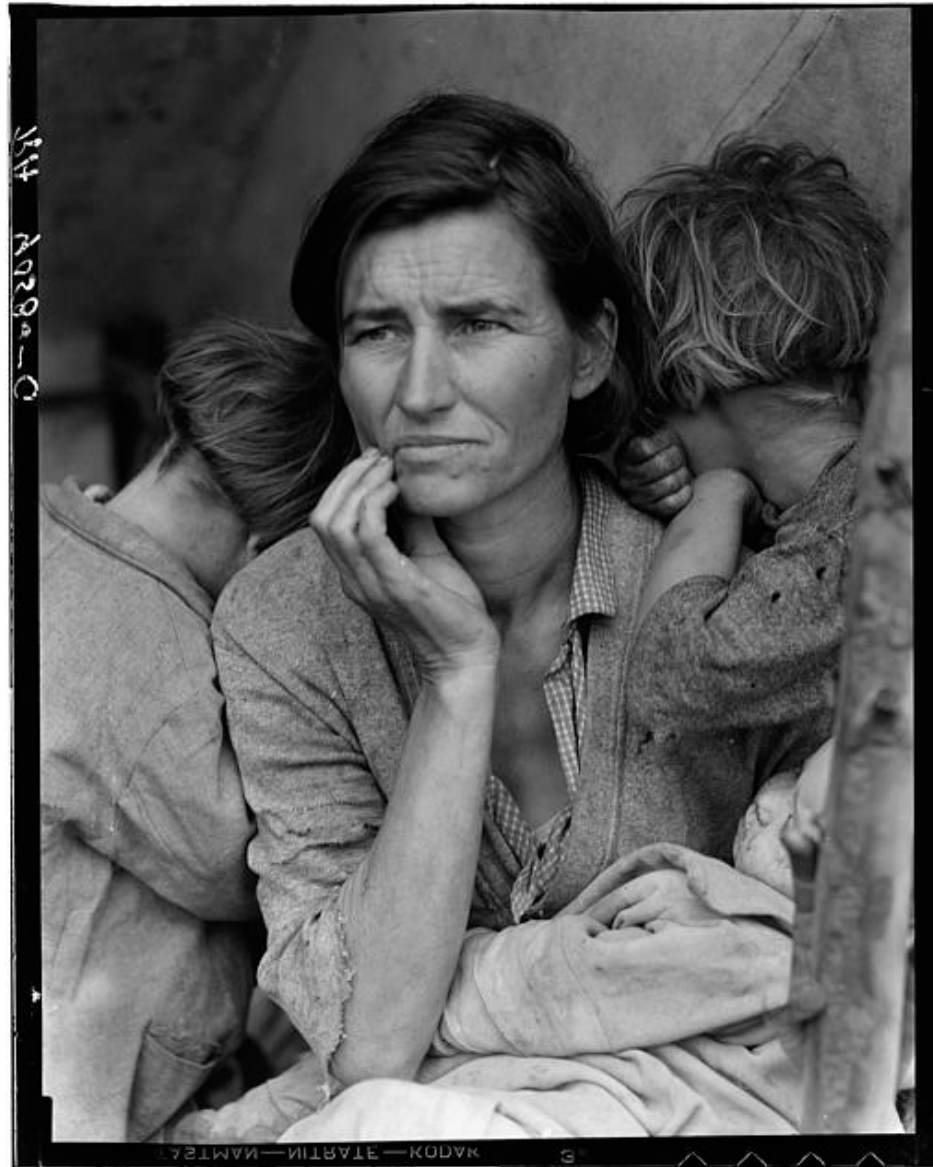
Walker Evans, Wash stand in the  
dog-run of Floyd Burroughs'  
house, Hale County, Alabama,  
1936





Walker Evans, Floyd Burroughs' Work Shoes, Hale County, Alabama, 1936

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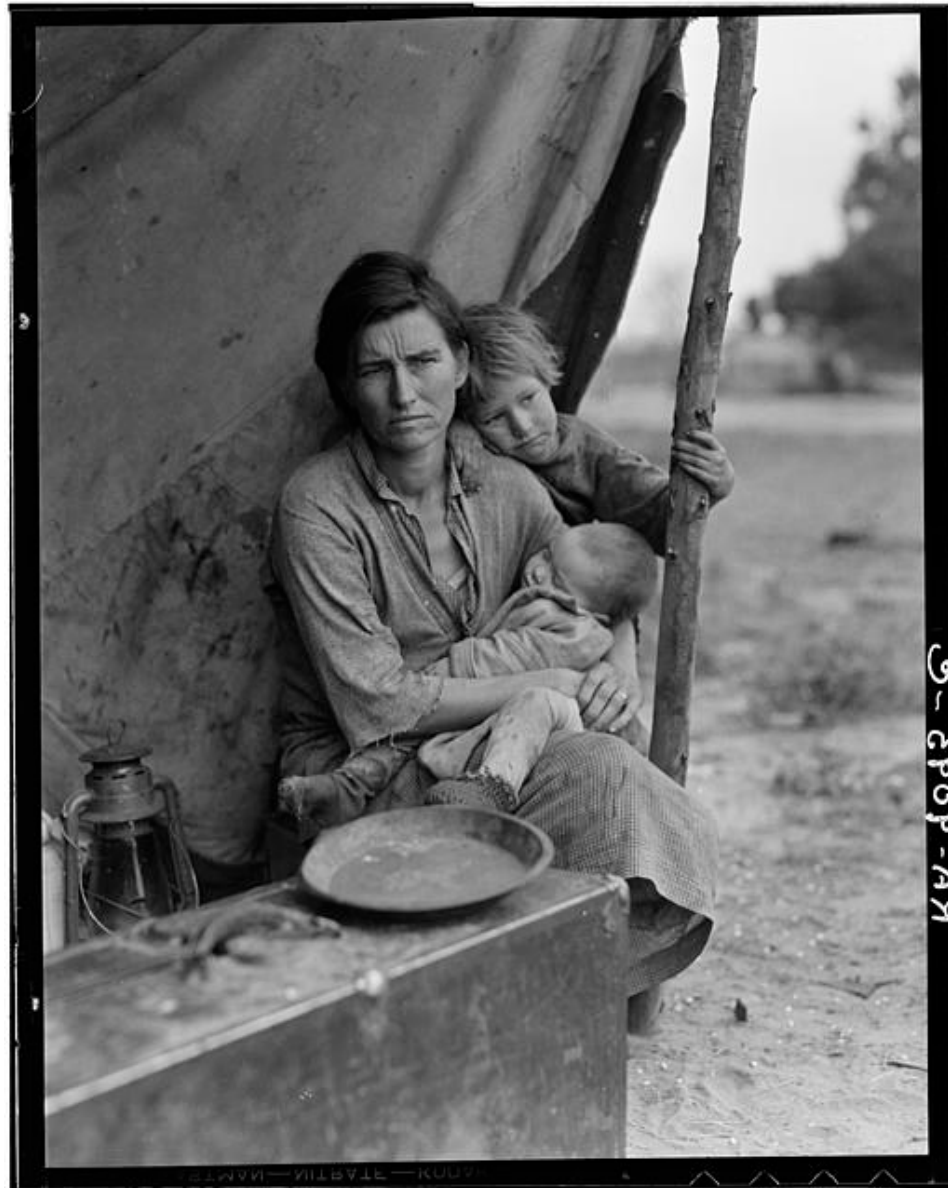


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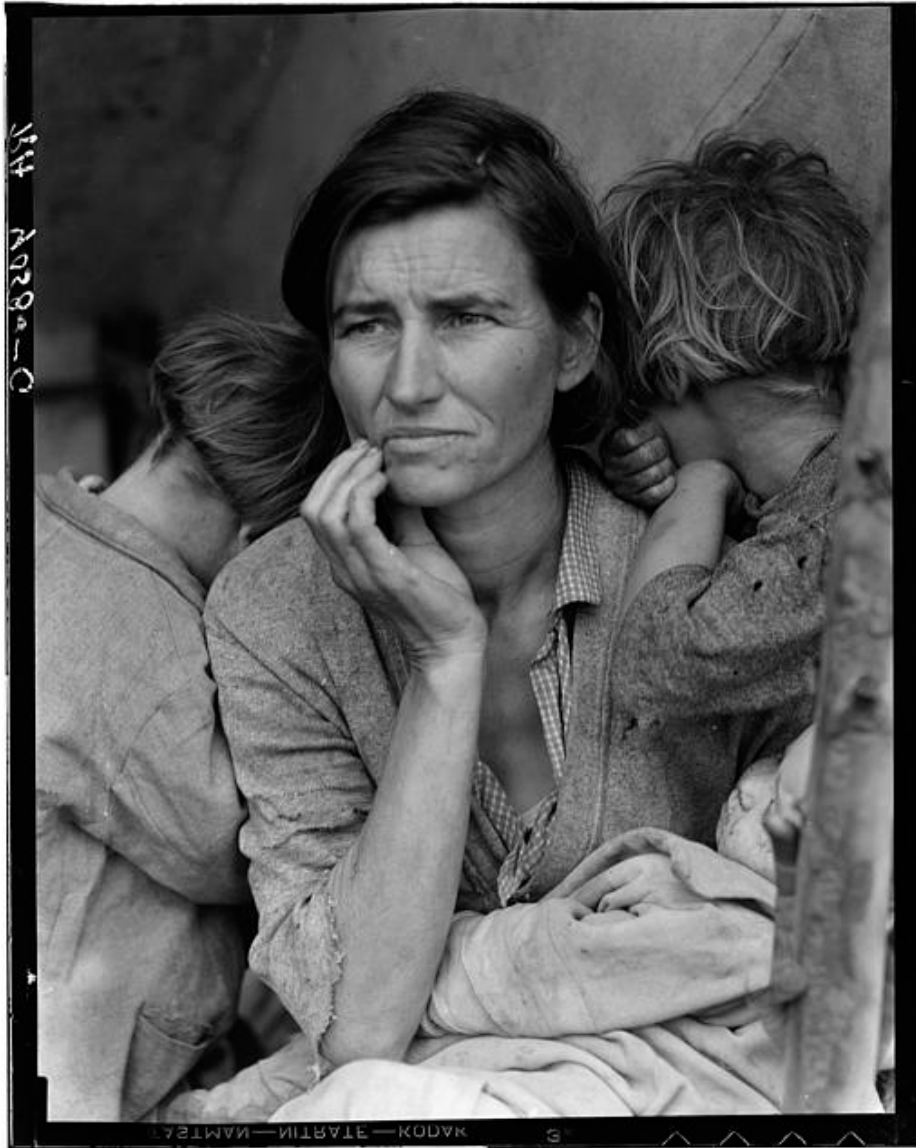
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Dorothea Lange, Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is a native Californian. Destitute in pea picker's camp, Nipomo, California, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Of the twenty-five hundred people in this camp most of them were destitute, 1936

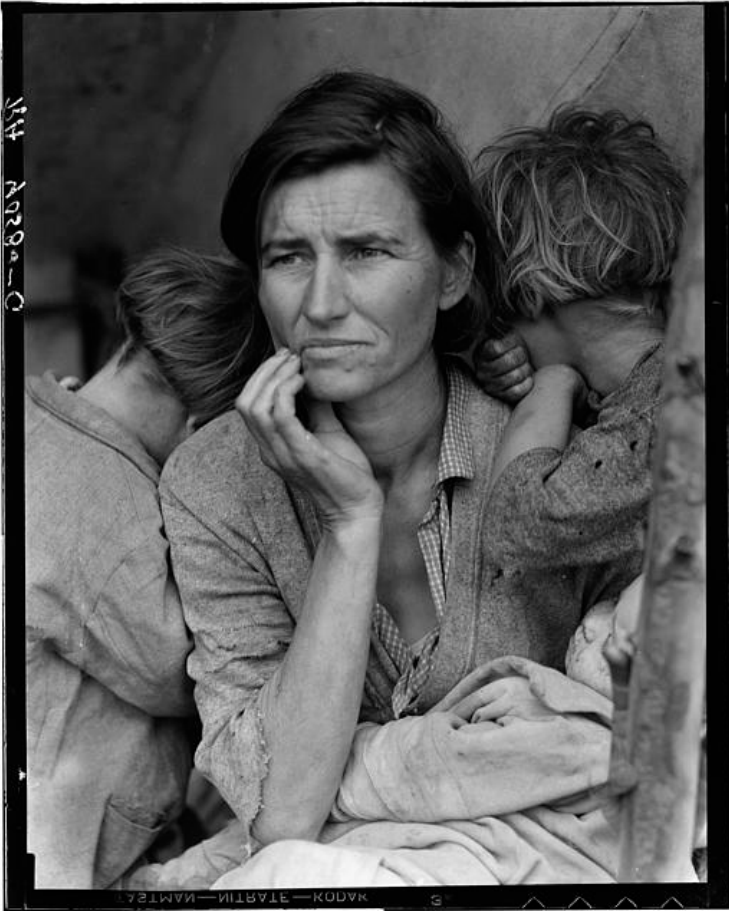


# FSA Photography and the 1930's



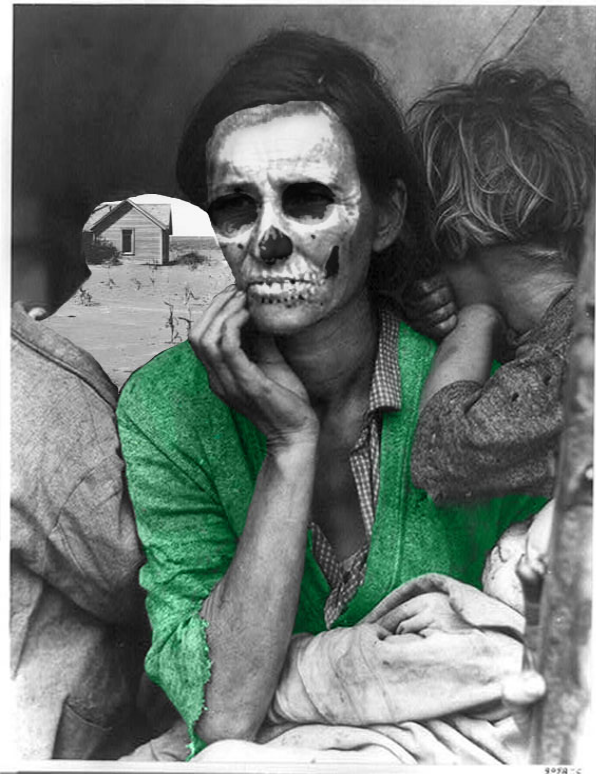
Dorothea Lange, Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California, 1936

# FSA Photography and the 1930's





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Florence Thompson Castle with Dorothea Lange's portrait of her as "Migrant Mother"



# FSA Photography and the 1930's



Arthur Rothstein, The Bleached Skull of a Steer on the dry sun-baked earth of the South Dakota Badlands, 1936



Carl Mydans, Abandoned land and poor pasture at Florida Withlacoochee River Agricultural Demonstration Project near Brooksville, Florida, 1936



# FSA Photography and the 1930's



Walker Evans, Bethlehem graveyard and steel mill, Pennsylvania, 1935

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Dorothea Lange, Plantation overseer near Clarksdale, Mississippi, 1936



Ben Shahn, Medicine Show, Huntingdon, Tennessee, 1935





Ben Shahn, Cotton pickers, Pulaski County, Arkansas, 1935

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Dorothea Lange, Toward  
Los Angeles, California,  
1937

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Gordon Parks, Washington, D.C.,  
government charwoman, 1942



Final slide.

Thank You