

FSA Photography and the 1930s

An Online Professional Development Seminar



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AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]

from the National Humanities Center

FROM THE FORUM

- Was the work of the documentary photographers of the 1930s echoed in literature or other arts of the day?
- Was the work of the FSA photographers documentary or propaganda or both?
- What impact did the FSA photos have?

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- Did the FSA photographers exploit their subjects?
- How quickly did the FSA photographs reach the public?
- For what purposes were the FSA photos used?
- Did other FSA photos have the impact of “Migrant Mother”?
- What accounts for the iconic status of the FSA photos today?

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?



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

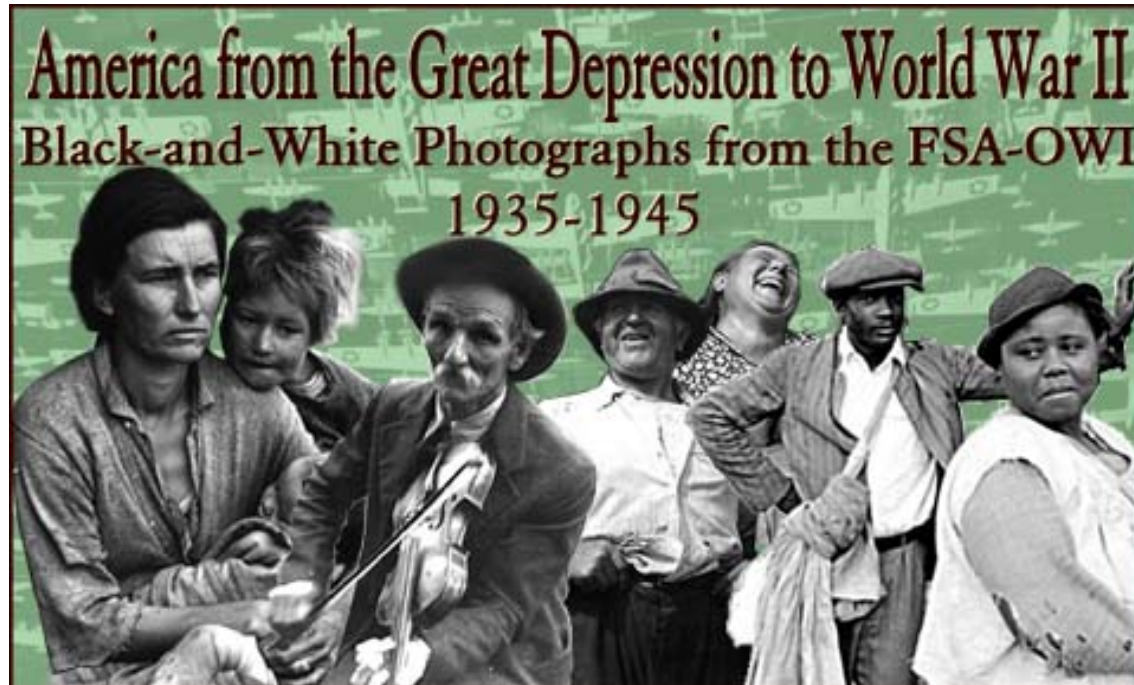
Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA
co-authored with Eric Rosenberg
(2012)

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

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?

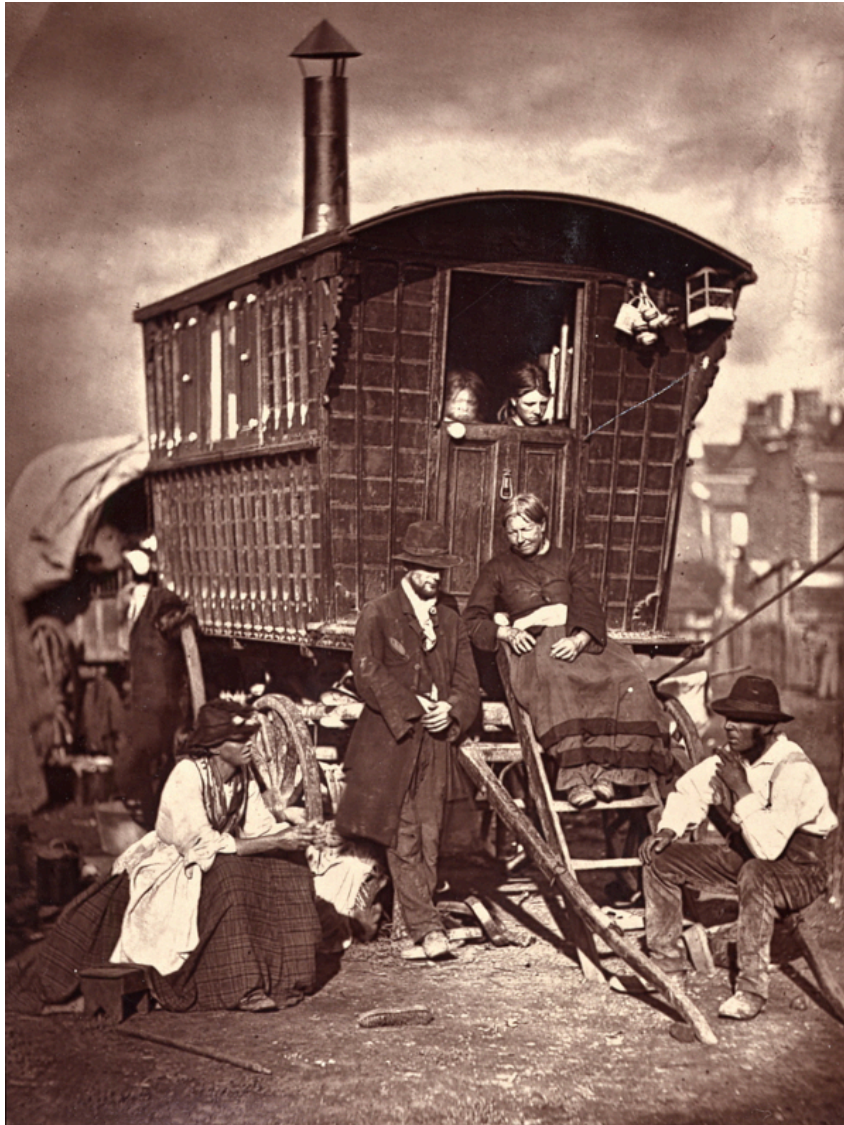
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What were the FSA photographs?

- 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

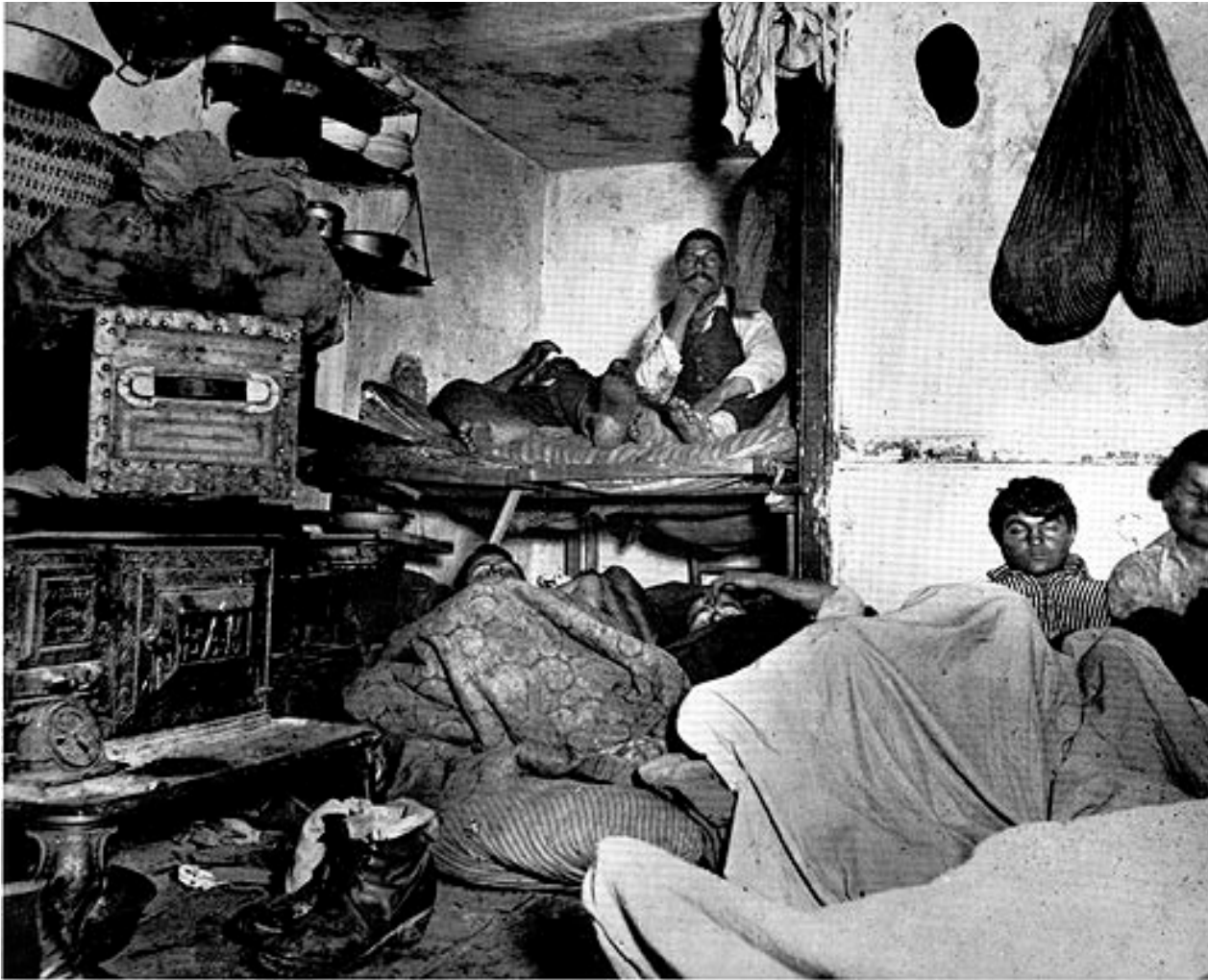
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John Thomson, London Nomades,
1876



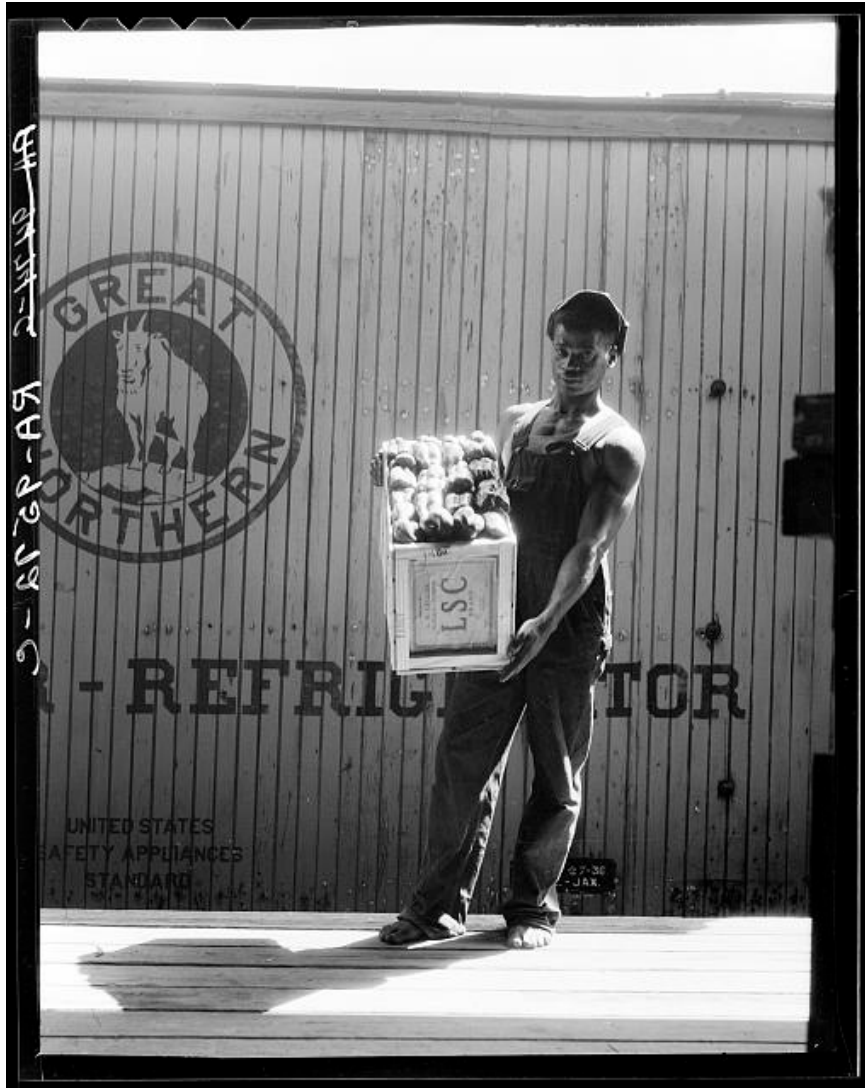
A shantytown in New York, Daily Graphic, 1880
(first photograph reproduced in a daily newspaper)



Jacob Riis, Five Cent Lodging, 1889



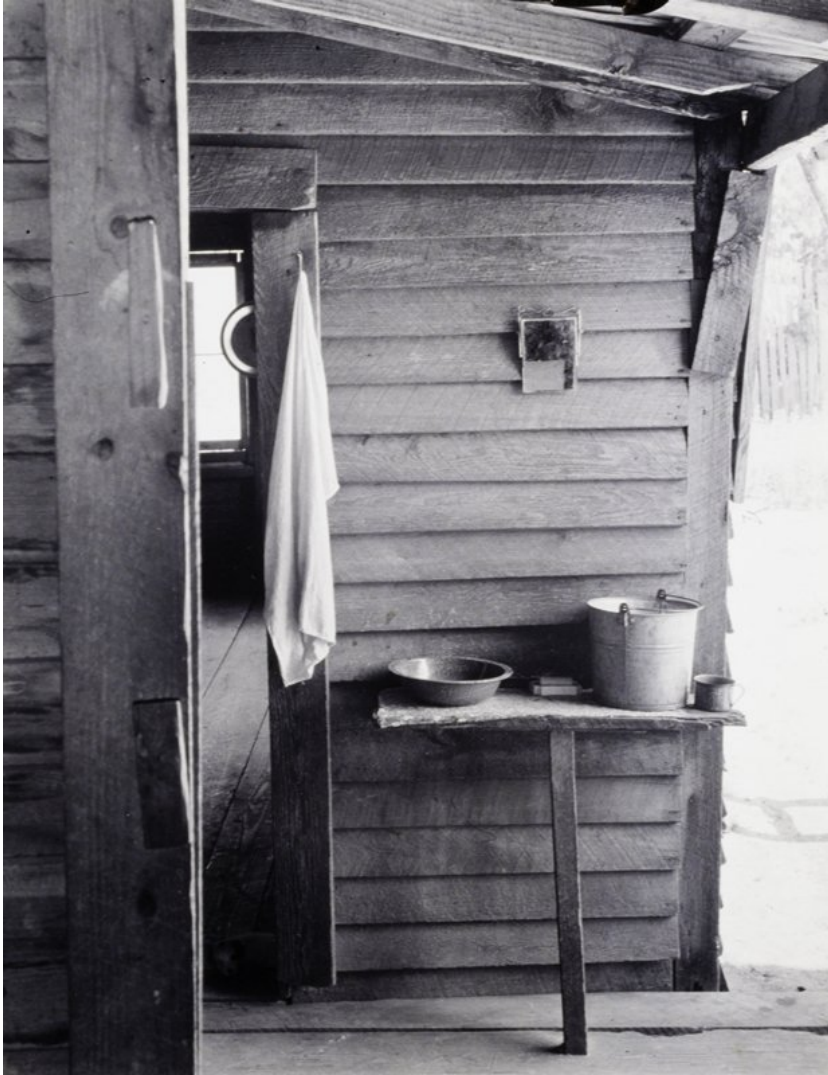
Marion Post Wolcott, Migrant Workers Waiting for Pay, Florida, 1939



Dorothea Lange, Migrant shed worker,
northeast Florida, 1936



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

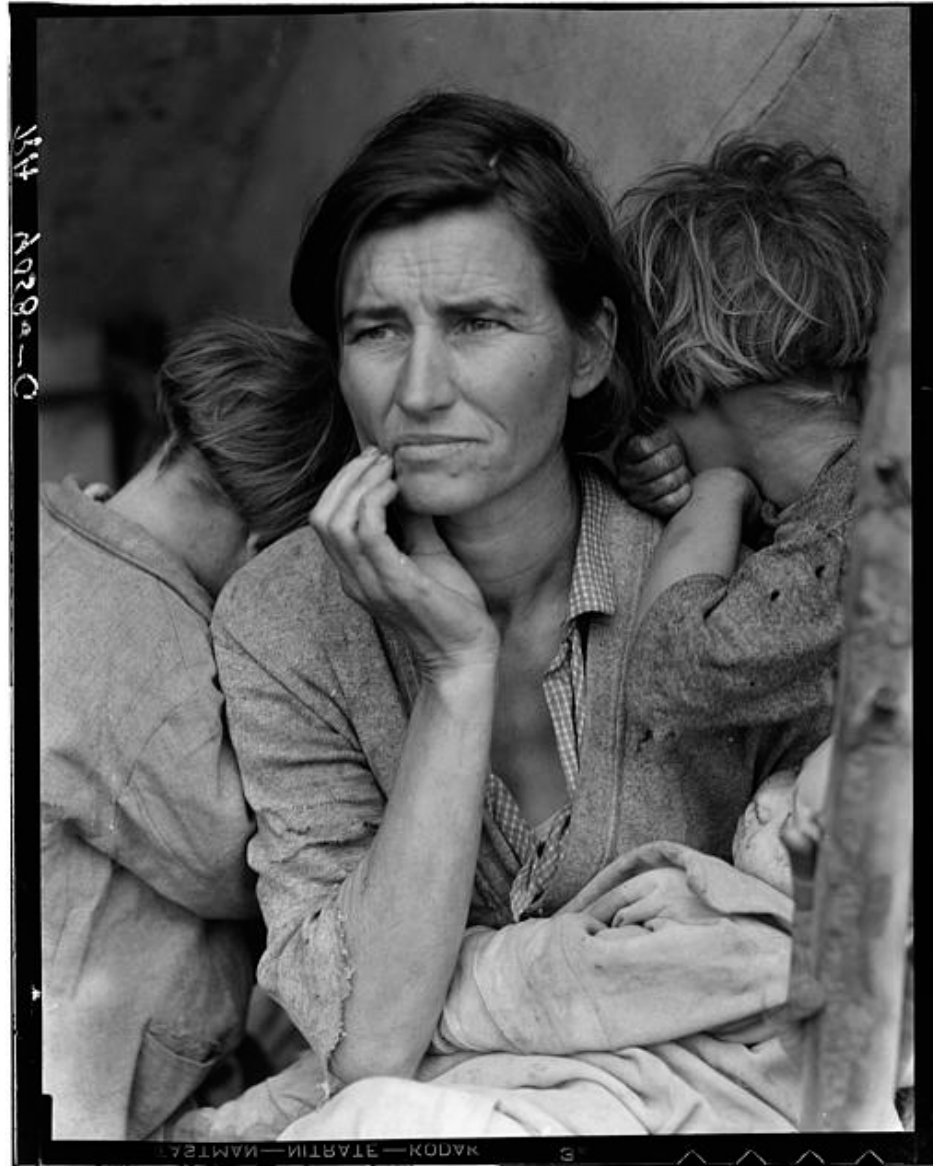


Walker Evans, Wash stand in the dog-run of Floyd Burroughs' house, Hale County, Alabama, 1936



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

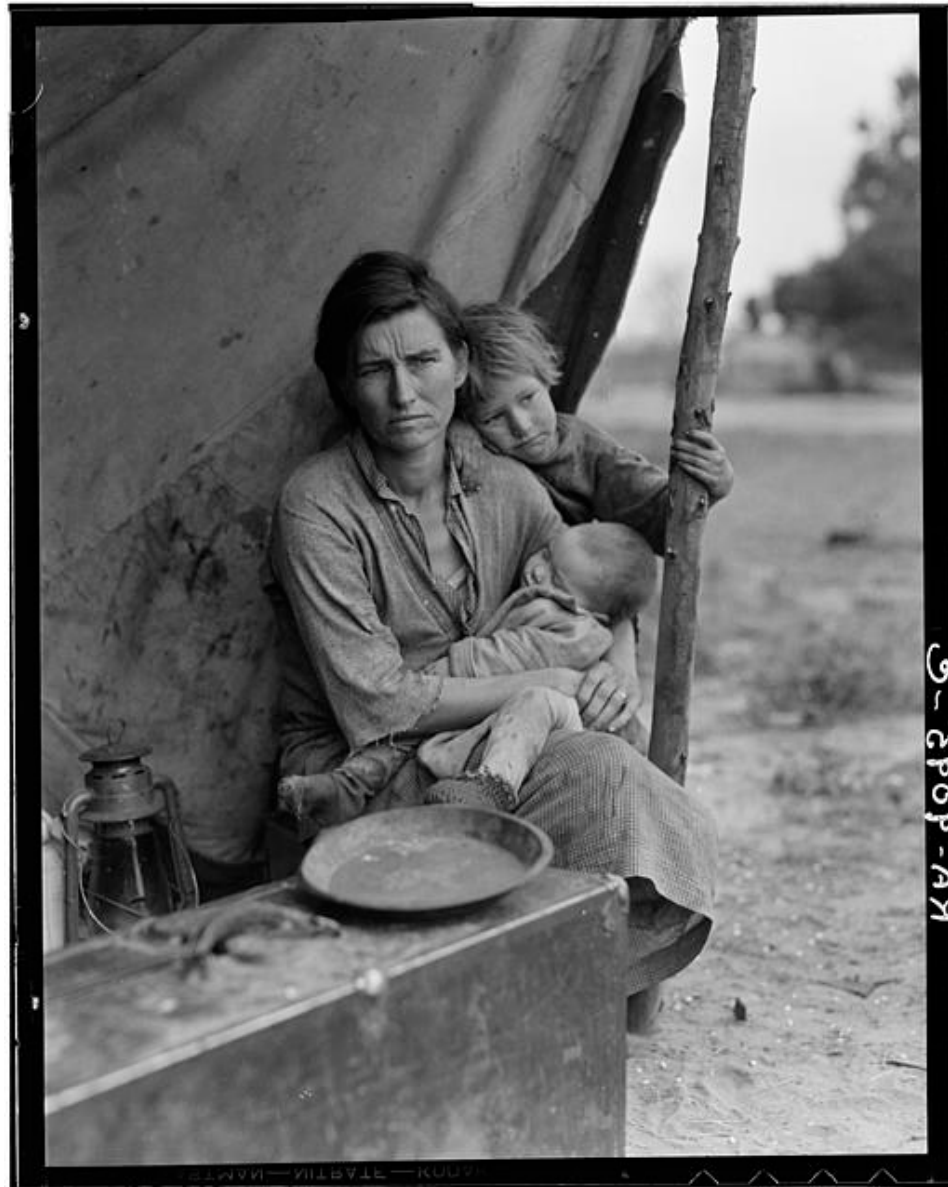
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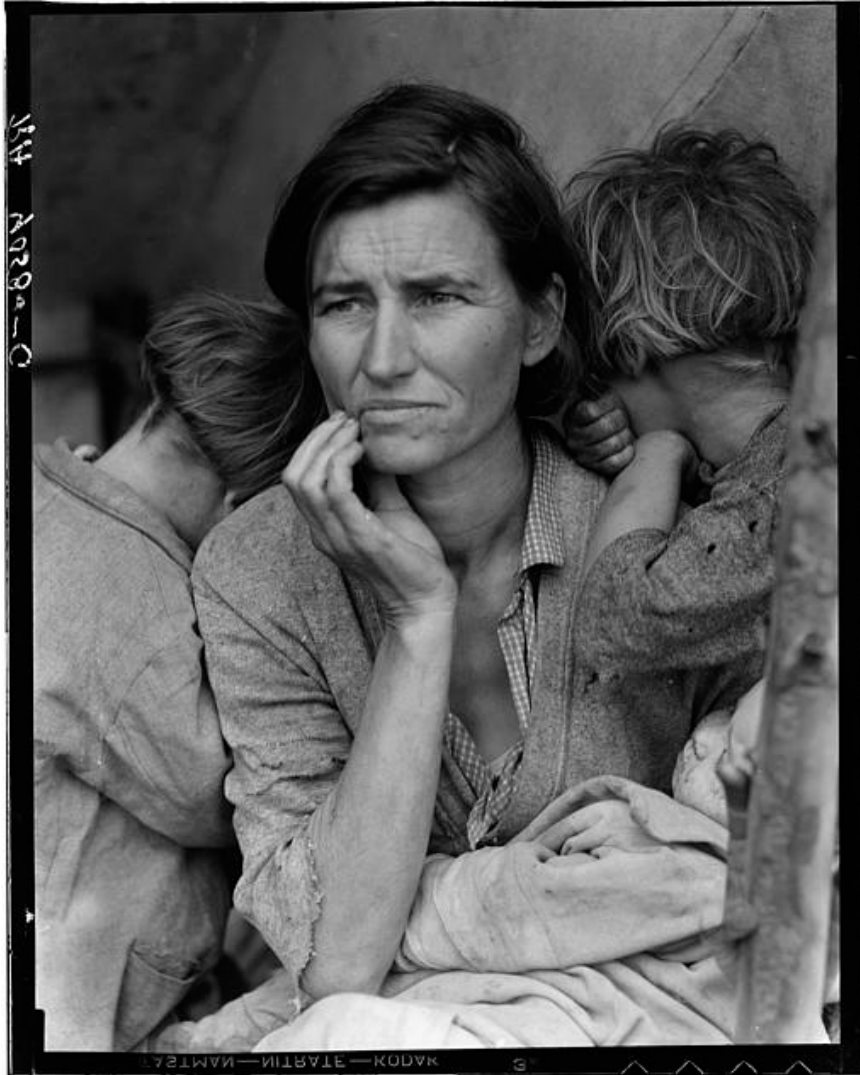


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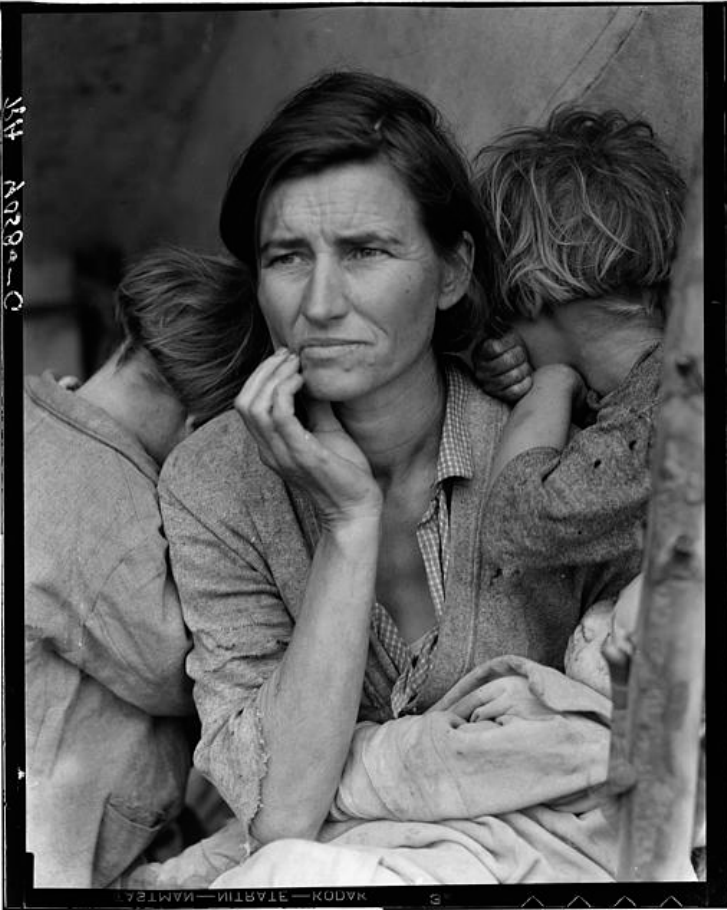
Dorothea Lange, Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is a native Californian. Destitute in pea picker's camp, Nipomo, California, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Of the twenty-five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

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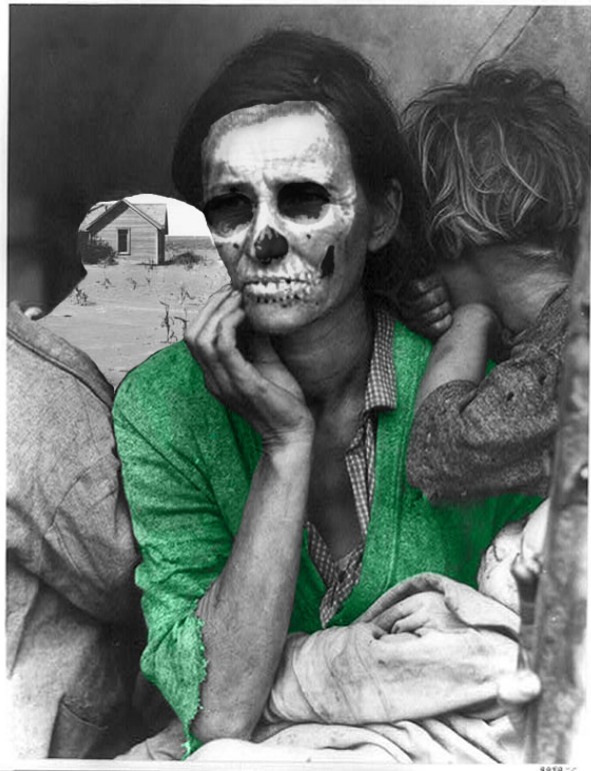


Dorothea Lange, Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California, 1936

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



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

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



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.