

DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY, CLIMATE CRISIS, AND IMMIGRATION:
MIGRANT MOTHER AS A LENS TO UNDERSTAND
CONTEMPORARY MIGRANT STORIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Photographs are an important tool for understanding American culture and have the potential to influence public perception. Documentary photography specifically can often be used to enact social change and facilitate discourse about uncomfortable or difficult topics from both the past and present. Individual photographs can become defining symbols of entire periods of American history. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* is one such example. The current research within the fields of History and American Studies regarding photography is mainly centered on how it can be used in museums and how it fits into our understanding of the past. However, it is also important to acknowledge how particular images have influenced our present understanding of America and how images can be used to facilitate conversations that will contribute to social change. As social media and mass media at large become more integrated into our daily lives and we, as consumers of media, become increasingly inundated with painful images the impact of documentary photography is changing.

This first part of this thesis examines the history and tradition of documentary photography in America, including Dorothea Lange's contributions to the field and how *Migrant Mother* impacted and continues to impact people's understanding of the Great Depression through that single photograph. Chapter Two focuses on the relationship between climate crisis and human migration patterns by examining the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s and the current climate crisis, with a focus on border communities. Chapter Three then examines modern examples of documentary photography to understand how today's documentary photographs impact American attitudes and the effect that America's current state of extreme political polarization has on the social power of particular photographs. Specifically, I analyze three examples: the picture taken of a drowned Syrian child migrant who was attempting to reach Greece in 2015, a photograph taken during the summer of 2019 of a migrant father and his young child drowned in the Rio Grande River after attempting to cross the border into the United States, and recent images taken during the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August of 2021.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As a high school Social Studies teacher photographs are the basis for much of my teaching methodology. In my classroom I use images to facilitate conversation, encourage students to think critically, and help them draw connections across different periods of history. Other primary sources are important, too, but photographs tend to have a more profound impact on students and their ability to connect with history. Rob Kroes, author of *Photographic Memories: Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History*, explains that there is a “relation between memory and photography, as they connect to American history” and “one of the recurring ironies is that photographs as public images have become remembered pictures themselves.”¹ Images dominate our understanding of American history and “Our contemporary sense of history is replete with photographic memories.”² Photographs of people specifically allow contemporary viewers to empathize with the past more strongly than other primary sources. Photographs are relatable and exist for observation.

Documentary photographs can often allow observers to connect with a time period on a much more empathetic level than written sources or artifacts. This is in part due to the fact that documentary photographs of human beings do not always demand background knowledge, but rather facilitate a connection through a shared sense of humanity. Human faces and their

¹ Rob Kroes, *Photographic Memories Private Pictures, Public Images, and American History* (Dartmouth College Press, 2007).

² Kroes, 4.

expressions are universal. Sadness, joy, anger, etc. are emotions people learn to recognize from a very young age. This means that photographs of people can also often generate more attention than other mediums. Today, it is not uncommon for a single image to “go viral” and be shared globally through the internet. Social media users view countless photographs daily on their various feeds. In recent years many of these viral images have included migrants who have endured bodily harm or death.

The migrants in these images and their stories vary greatly, but the public perception of contemporary migrant photographs tends to follow a consistent and predictable pattern. The image is published online, goes viral, many people use social media to demand change, but eventually attention to the image and the situation it represents fades. This is a stark contrast to Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* which continues to dominate our understanding of the Great Depression. This thesis attempts to understand why *Migrant Mother*, the photograph of a mother and her children displaced by drought and poverty, continues to hold a significant place in American culture, while also exploring why images of modern migrants, also displaced by climate crisis and its consequences do not have a similar impact.

CHAPTER TWO

THE TRADITION OF DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY IN AMERICA

Documentary photography is a method or style of photography used to record a person, place, time, event, or object as they are during a moment in history. While documentary photographs can be stylistically aesthetic, the goal is to record and inform. Historically this method of photography is often used in journalism or reporting but in recent years it has become an important tool for social media users to communicate and share information, crises, injustices, and ideas through the internet. Among the best-known examples of documentary photography's use as a means for social reform are Lewis Hine's images of child labor and tenement living conditions during the early 1900s. Hine's photographs drew attention to the struggles young factory workers faced and ultimately helped to secure child labor laws. Oenone Kubie writes about the importance of Hine's photos in his article for the *Journal of American Studies* by stating:

In the twelve years Lewis Hine worked for the Nation Child Labor Committee, he took well over five thousand photographs. These pictures captured the child laborers of the United States from the southern textile factories to the Appalachian mines to the streets across the nation. Appearing in the widely read philanthropic journal *Charities and Commons*, Hine's photographs were hugely popular among the reforming classes of the early twentieth-century United States. Owen Lovejoy, director of the NCLC during Hine's tenure, once wrote in a letter to Hine, 'The evils inherent in the system were intellectually but not emotionally recognized until your skill, earnestness, devotion, vision and artistic finesse focused the camera intelligently, sympathetically and effectively on social problems in American industry.'³

³ Oenone Kubie, "Reading Lewis Hine's Photography of Child Street Labour, 1906–1918." *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 50, no. 4 (2016): 873. doi:10.1017/S002187581600058X.

Lewis Hine knew that his documentary photography could bring about social change in America. He intentionally and methodically framed his subjects and their living conditions to ensure that the people who saw his photographs could almost feel the squalor in which their impoverished and immigrant neighbors lived. Hine's images inspired those who had financial means and social power to enact change to improve the living and working conditions of working-class Americans for generations to come. Lewis Hine's photographs of tenement and factory life have become synonymous with the American Industrial Revolution (Figure 1). Most high school history classrooms have students examine this period of US history by reading Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, alongside Hine's images. Paired together, Hine's images and Sinclair's words allow students an experiential understanding of life in America during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Students can vividly imagine the conditions described through Sinclair's words, but they can literally see the pain, suffering, and struggle in the faces of Hine's subjects. Hine's photographs enable students to truly begin to empathize with people of the past. Over time, the images captured by Hine have come to represent the era of the Industrial Revolution in America as a whole.



Fig. 1. Hine, Lewis, photographer. *Bibb Mill No. 1, Macon, Ga. Many youngsters here. Some boys and girls were so small they had to climb up on to the spinning frame to mend broken threads and to put back the empty bobbins.* Photograph. Retrieved from National Archives, <<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/523148>>.

Dorothea Lange built on Hine's work and later used documentary photography to record the struggles many Americans faced during the Great Depression. The director of the Farm Security Administration, Roy Stryker, enlisted several photographers (including Dorothea Lange) to travel around the country documenting the drought, poverty, and struggles of both rural and urban Americans during the period that later became known as the Great Depression. Sally Stein explains that "Most who could turn away from evidence of the crisis tended to do so. The impulse to turn away from the directly fearful while obliquely allowing for a surrogate image of that difficult situation may ultimately explain why social photography soon began turning heads, becoming a staple in mass media by the second half of the 1930s and helping to

galvanize support for expanding government relief programs.”⁴ The use of documentary photography to draw attention to the national crisis was a powerful tool in shifting people’s perception. While living in San Francisco, Dorothea Lange began documenting the impact of the stock market crash on the people around her. She took a series of images of people waiting in breadlines down the street from her studio. Her assistant, Roger Sturtevant, developed the photographs and was struck by the images Lange captured, particularly one that later became known as the *White Angel Breadline* photograph (Figure 2). “Sturtevant was not the only one to be wowed by this image both brutal and poignant in its juxtaposition of a faceless crowd of men’s backs with one individual turned away, still seeming isolated in his shameful misery.”⁵ What makes the image powerful is Lange’s framing and the expression on the face of her subject. Without knowing the man’s personal experiences, the viewers of the past and present can empathize with his expression of despair. For many struggling to survive during the Great Depression, their experiences may have felt shameful and isolating. Lange’s images proved that these people were not suffering alone, but rather that their experiences were shared by many. Her images were also a powerful force in mobilizing relief efforts by putting human faces to the statistics of the widespread impact of the financial crisis.

⁴ Sally Stein. *Migrant Mother, Migrant Gender: Reconsidering Dorothea Lange's Iconic Portrait of Maternity*. (Londres: MACK, 2020), 23.

⁵ Stein, 24.



Fig. 2. Lange, Dorothea, photographer. *White Angel Breadline*, San Francisco, 1932. Photograph. Retrieved from Kennedy Center, <https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/media-arts/dorothea-lange-white-angel-breadline/>

The original intent of Roy Stryker and his team of FSA photographers was to document the social effects of an economic crisis, but the images produced by Lange and her colleagues became much more. In his piece titled, “Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration,” Michael Carlebach writes:

Roy Stryker probably would have hated the title of this essay. He was sensitive about his work for the government, and bridled at those who easily dismissed it as

propaganda. The photographs produced under his direction were documentary, he argued: accurate, truthful, unmanipulated slices of real life.⁶

The mission for Roy Stryker and his team of photographers was to systematically and honestly document what every day Americans were experiencing during what became known as the Great Depression. However, photographers also view the world through a literal aesthetic lens. They inherently want to capture the beauty of the world around them, even the common beauty in the suffering of others. Photographers throughout American history, like Lewis Hine, or Dorothea Lange, view the world through that lens. Photography is an art, and powerful documentary photographers are able to force a human connection between their subjects and their viewers that transcends time and place. They create images that serve as windows to the past, and ultimately influence people's understanding of American history, culture, and life.

During the American Civil War, independent photographers would follow the conflicts and take images of the aftermath. This allowed people to see the brutality of war more vividly than ever before. However, it was during the New Deal era with the FSA that the US government began formally sponsoring documentary photography projects. The United States government has since used documentary photography as a tool to shape the national perception about its history and influence public attitudes. In some instances, a single photograph has had a profound influence over Americans' perception of their history. One of the best examples of this is Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*. Lange was returning from an assignment for the FSA, when she decided to turn down a dirt road with a sign that said, "PEA PICKERS CAMP." As she approached some of the people in the camp, she snapped a series of images of a mother and her

⁶ Michael L. Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, vol. 8 (1988): 6, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1503967>.

children. The images were first published on March 10, 1936, in the *San Francisco News* alongside an article demanding assistance for destitute pea pickers in California. In a later *San Francisco News* publication from October of 1936, author John Steinbeck “published seven articles he wrote on the agricultural migrant, along with several FSA photographs taken by Dorothea Lange. Two years later those articles and pictures appeared again as a pamphlet entitled *Their Blood is Strong*, which served as Steinbeck’s journalistic base for the great novel to follow.”⁷ Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* and Lange’s *Migrant Mother* have become defining cultural depictions of the entire Great Depression Era. This particular photograph invokes a visceral emotional response from observers. Just as Hine’s photographs of child laborers have become symbolic of the costs of industrialization, Dorothea Lange’s photograph of a mother and her children can be found alongside descriptions of the Great Depression in most textbooks of US History and is frequently interpreted alongside Steinbeck’s novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. This single image has been cemented in Americans minds as a defining image of this period of history. While people may not remember the dates or specifics of the Depression, *Migrant Mother* and the feelings this image inspires continue to resonate in their memories. This single image has shaped the opinions of past, present, and future Americans, particularly regarding how the Great Depression and poverty during the 1930s are viewed.

Photographs have a significant impact on popular thought and attitudes by accessing affective attitudes that transcend historical accounts. Photography offers us a unique window to the past and provides a lens through which we can better understand various social movements

⁷ Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 55.

and popular thought. Photography is a tool to draw attention to a particular issue, gain public interest or upset, and generate pressure to enact social change. Photography can act as a catalyst for social change. Photographs can have a profound influence on how human beings view and interact with the world around them. This applies to both historic and modern examples of photographs. Alan Trachtenberg explains in *Lincoln's Smile and Other Enigmas*:

Photographs have become so thoroughly engrained in our way of life that we rarely give them a second thought. They seem part of the air we breathe, as natural as language. And very much like language, they frame our world. They show us how things look, how we ourselves look, and often, in advertisements and pictures of celebrities, how we may want to look. Photographs are compelling things, and more than we may want to admit, they fashion and guide our most basic sense of reality.⁸

This is part of what can make documentary photographs so much more powerful than a written document or physical artifact, such as a clay pot. Photography has completely changed how we interact with and understand history because in a sense, photographs freeze time and place. They can be staged and manipulated but humans have a tendency to trust photographs completely. This has created a phenomenon where entire cultures and histories have come to be defined by single or a specific set of photographs. Alan Trachtenberg explains this using one of the last photographs taken of Abraham Lincoln prior to his assassination (Figure 3).

He saw Lincoln's "aspect" as that of the "pattern American." Eventually the whole history of the nation and its typical character traits came to seem inscribed and indexed by the face of Lincoln. How can we look at Lincoln's photographed face without seeing the debates with Douglas, Fort Sumter, the Emancipation Proclamation, Gettysburg, the Second Inaugural Address, John Wilkes Booth? Is it Lincoln's face we see, or versions (there are many) of the history of which he partook? The most famous photographed face in American history may be the most overdetermined, the easiest, and at the same time, the most difficult to read as the expression of a person.⁹

⁸ Alan Trachtenberg, *Lincoln's Smile and Other Enigmas* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 87.

⁹ Trachtenberg, 75.

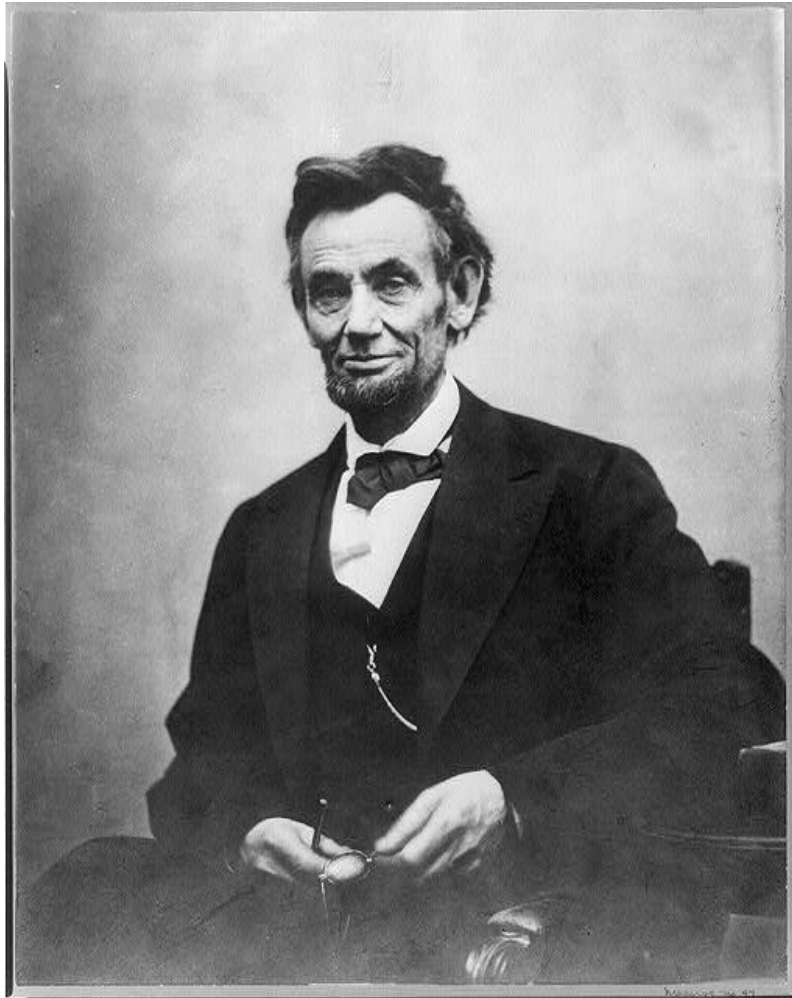


Fig. 3. Gardner, Alexander, photographer. *Abraham Lincoln, three-quarter length portrait, seated and holding his spectacles and pencil (retouched to stand out)*. Photograph. Retrieved from Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2007675780/>>.

Photographs shape not only on our understanding of the past, but our national identity and interpretation of the present. This is especially true with a select few salient images, such as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, Gardner's portrait of President Abraham Lincoln, and Hine's images of child laborers. Each became iconic representations of entire eras in America's history. They are critical to fully understanding America's past.

During the American Great Depression in the 1930s, the US government commissioned several photographers to travel around the United States and document American life, agriculture, public works projects, food, etc. The photographs taken by these FSA, or Farm Security Administration, photographers shaped how many Americans and the world viewed the United States during this challenging period. Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* is the most well-known photograph from this project (Figure 4).

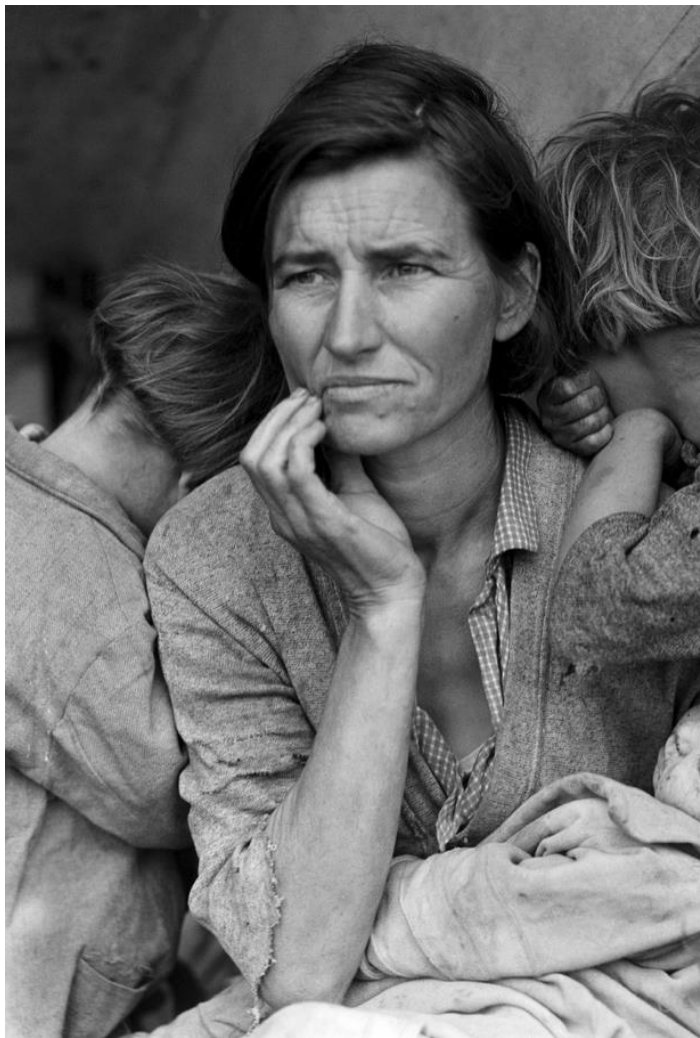


Fig. 4. Lange, Dorothea, photographer. *Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California. March.* Photograph. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2017762891/>.

Migrant Mother and the Great Depression have become almost synonymous terms. In her 2014 piece, *A Paradigm of Resilience*, Meighen Katz explains that “Depression-era photography has become a regular, almost expected, feature in museum interpretation of the American experience of the 1930s.” She provides the following example: “when the National Museum of American History closed for major renovation between 2006-2008, a ‘Treasures’ exhibition from its collections was staged in a gallery at the National Air and Space Museum. The case on the 1930s had three objects: Roosevelt’s radio microphone, a shell used as alternative currency, and a print of *Migrant Mother*. The image has become a synecdoche, a small part of the American experience of the Depression that is called upon to represent the diverse narratives of the entire decade.”¹⁰ This demonstrates the level of influence that Dorothea Lange and her fellow FSA photographers had, and continue to have, on our understanding of the Great Depression. While it is problematic that this one photograph came to represent the entirety of the American experience during the Great Depression, it has been hugely important in shaping our modern understanding of American history.

A well composed, thought provoking photograph can connect with a person in ways that an artifact or written document cannot. Alan Trachtenberg writes in his piece, *Photography and Social Knowledge*:

Of any photographic picture we naturally ask what it gives us to see, what it shows to us. Ultimately, we want to understand the picture as an act of knowledge, a knowing. To say what a photograph shows is the simple part; to articulate what it knows, or means is something else. Photographs typically lead us inward from what they depict on the surface toward less visible matters present in shadows or

¹⁰ Meighen Katz, “A Paradigm of Resilience: The Pros and Cons of Using the FSA Photographic Collection in Public History Interpretations of the Great Depression,” *The Public Historian*, vol. 36, no. 4 (2014): 17, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.8.

hovering just beyond the borders. What seems transparent to the eye may turn opaque under the scrutiny of the mind.¹¹

Photographs force the observer to empathize with the subject on an emotional level without requiring a detailed amount of prior knowledge of a subject, or person. Because of this, photographic images are in many ways more accessible to viewers than written documents or literature. Particularly in documentary photography, viewers are able to focus on the conditions depicted without extensive background knowledge. Photography also transcends time to an extent, even as it represents a brief moment in time. Images that were powerful in the time they were taken can continue to be powerful to modern observers. Meighen Katz argues that, “Much of art changes its meaning over time: the way a modern audience understands and thus views a sixteenth-century painting differs from that of the audience for whom it was originally rendered. In contrast, although the photographs of the Great Depression may expand their meaning, their initial purpose, allowing Americans a visual means to understand the effect of the economic crisis of the 1930s on other Americans, remains intact.”¹² In other words, a photograph can oftentimes elicit a strong connection from the observer even if it was taken ninety years ago. Katz goes on to explain that, “A car in a museum does not transport anyone across distances. However, these photographs do; they maintain their power to illuminate the experience of the Depression poverty for those who are not experiencing it directly.”¹³ This interpretation suggests that FSA photographs are so powerful that the viewer in various times can empathize and understand the feelings of the subjects in a way that is not possible through written text or

¹¹ Alan Trachtenberg, “Photography and Social Knowledge,” *American Art*, vol. 29, no. 1 (2015): 5, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681649.

¹² Katz, 15.

¹³ Katz, 17.

artifacts. In her book, *Migrant Mother, Migrant Gender* Sally Stein explains the cultural significance of Lange's most famous image:

Quite a few have argued that this 1936 image by Lange has been more widely reproduced than any other in the history of photography. If we already have an “app” that can track and quantify such dissemination, I am not aware of it. But the number of times and diverse cultural contexts that *Migrant Mother* has been reproduced or served as a clear source of new emblematic images of mothers holding strong or beset by new challenges (including the challenge of parody) is phenomenal.¹⁴

This image came to represent not only *American* motherhood and resiliency, but has also been reproduced, adopted, and internalized by other cultures as well (Figure 5).

¹⁴ Stein, 10.

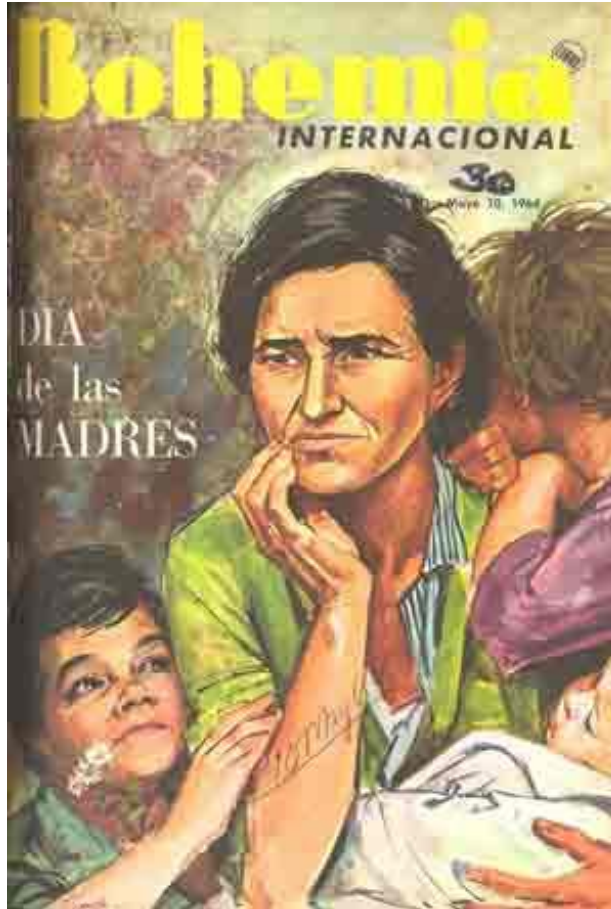


Fig. 5. Cover image of *Bohemia Venezolana Internacional*, Volume 10, May 1964. Retrieved from Oakland Museum of California, <https://dorothealange.museumca.org/image/dia-de-las-madres/EX83.00.30/>

The cover of this periodical uses Lange's photograph to introduce a piece in celebration of Mother's Day. Part of what makes *Migrant Mother* so powerful across cultures is that the image is relatable. Motherhood may look different in different places, but mothers everywhere can identify with the struggle depicted in the image. Mothers are universally recognized as protectors of their children, which makes *Migrant Mother* accessible across time and cultures.

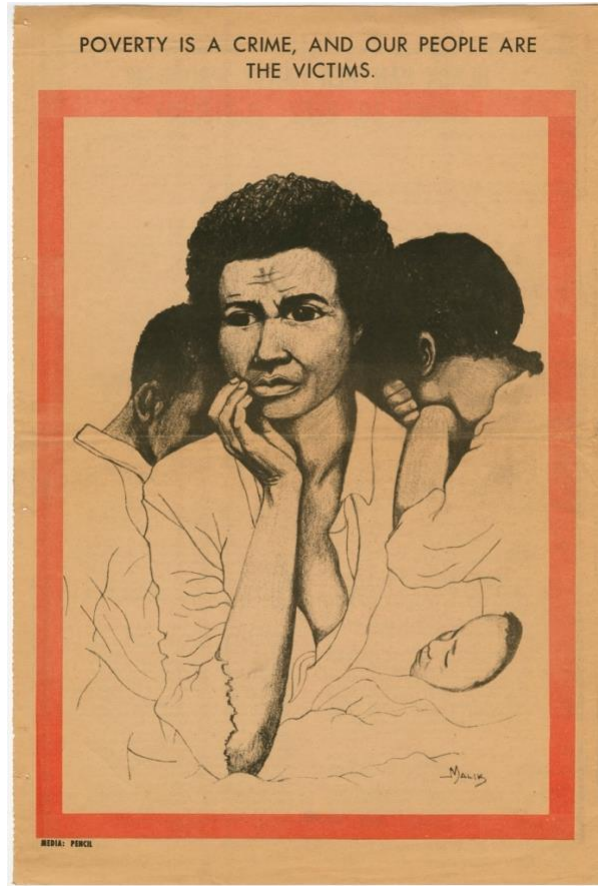


Fig. 6. *Poverty is a Crime and Our People are the Victims* (Black Panther Party Newspaper with “Migrant Mother” variant). Retrieved from Oakland Museum of California, <https://dorothealange.museumca.org/image/poverty-is-a-crime-and-our-people-are-the-victims-black-panther-party-newspaper-with-migrant-mother-variant/2016.0.2a/>

This reproduction of Lange’s image is evidence of its influence throughout American history (Figure 6). *Migrant Mother* has a history of re-emerging, particularly during times of crisis, or social unrest. This is a reproduction of the image from the perspective of the Black Panthers during the Civil Rights Era. Poverty and motherhood are themes that people can identify with at many different points in America’s history. These continue to be relatable struggles today, as is seen in the image below of *Migrant Mother* edited to look like Lange’s subject is a modern struggling Walmart employee (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. *The Nation* magazine, “Down and Out in Discount America.” Retrieved from Oakland Museum of California, <https://dorothealange.museumca.org/image/the-nation-magazine-down-and-out-in-discount-america/EX83.04.03P/>

These reproductions indicate the lasting impact of Lange’s *Migrant Mother*. People continue to resonate with this photograph and the feelings of struggle, stoicism, and resiliency it invokes. While the meaning behind this image has evolved and arguably even grown stronger over the course of history, the fact that it is still used as a visual representation of hard times is proof that it remains an important visual representation of the American experience. Sally Stein explains in her book, *Migrant Mother, Migrant Gender* that the sheer number of reproductions is not what makes *Migrant Mother* great, but rather the larger connotation behind the “Madonna motif”:

I refuse the essentially tautological argument one encounters in too many studies of Lange and *Migrant Mother* that this most famous Lange picture is *ipso facto* great

chiefly because it has been so widely reproduced. It seems more productive to focus on those elements of the picture that have imbued this Depression image with lasting power as compared with countless other short-term candidates for the “Madonna” status, which was one staple or fallback motif of Depression photographers, Lange included.¹⁵

Migrant Mother is not the only image Dorothea Lange captured of Depression Era mothers and their children (Figure 8) but this singular image became the most well-known and widely reproduced.



Fig. 8. Lange, Dorothea, Photographer. *Mother and two children on the road. Tullake, Siskiyou County, California. General caption number 65.* Retrieved from Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8b34850/>

¹⁵ Stein, 13.

Migrant Mother's success can best be understood through its initial publication in the *San Francisco News* and later alongside Steinbeck's writing. Its use as a means to draw attention to the desperate situation many Americans were experiencing made it relatable from the start.

The director of the FSA photography project himself, Roy Stryker, would likely disagree with the claim that photographs can act as powerful social commentary without the help of written words. In a 1963 interview with Richard Doud for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Stryker explains:

RICHARD DOUD: Do you think the reason for this was because pictures are more potent as a communications medium than, for example, an article, or –

ROY STRYKER: No, definitely not, definitely not. Despite the fact that I have been involved, now, for practically all my life since Farm Security days -- from 1933 on, I have been involved almost continuously with photographs. I still think that the printed word, that the word is dominant thing, and the photograph is the little brother of words.

RICHARD DOUD: I'm surprised to hear you say that.

ROY STRYKER: I feel very keenly. And I think the word -- if I may digress for a moment -- I think we've coined a very unfortunate phrase -- "photojournalism." We're riding it hard now. Life (magazine) came along in its early day and was so dominated by the idea of the picture that they almost forgot the words. No, that's not a fair statement; but they kidded themselves into thinking the photograph was the dominant thing. It is not. And my feeling is that there are some times when photographs stand alone, but more often the photograph is, as I say, the corollary, the assistant, and the helper of the word. And (?) of the two joined together. And I don't happen to think the word is "photo-journalism." I think that's too bad that we talk about photojournalism. We don't use the expression "word journalism." Did you ever hear that?¹⁶

Stryker's assertion that "photographs are the little brother of words" demonstrates that while stand-alone images can be powerful, their impact often depends on the support of corresponding written words. Words and images have a symbiotic relationship and contribute to each other's

¹⁶ Roy Stryker, interview by Richard Doud, *Archives of American Art*, Smithsonian Institution, 1963.

impact on a given viewer or reader. Lange's FSA photographs drew attention to the struggles of migrant workers and mobilized relief efforts for her subjects, but the photographs were often used in conjunction with data and description "In sum, these reports utilizing photographs as much as words fashioned a strong call for government intervention, which had impressive if limited results."¹⁷ The work done by Lange and her fellow FSA photographers was an important complement to news reports, articles, and novels being written about the economic crisis. Part of what makes *Migrant Mother* timeless is its association with John Steinbeck's writing about the Depression experience.

Lange's image has become something that viewers can connect with just as strongly in 2021 as they did in 1940 and has gained influence over time, partly because it is a strong "stand alone" photograph, but partly because of the literature associated with the image. These FSA photographs in particular and *The Grapes of Wrath* have come to define an entire period of American history and the photos have "become an effective conduit for discussions on constructed visual language, on concepts of audience, and on communication strategies of the 1930s."¹⁸ They continue to invoke responses from viewers even in 2021, as is seen in the modern recreations of *Migrant Mother* during times of stress, which demonstrates just how powerful these images can be.

One of the main goals of the FSA photography project was to shift public attitudes towards poverty and to "personify relief recipients as commendable even as they sought

¹⁷ Stein, 31.

¹⁸ Katz, 17.

assistance” from the Social Security and welfare organizations.¹⁹ Lange was particularly adept at this and composed her photographs “to appeal to the moral consciousness of middle-class America.”²⁰ Dorothea Lange’s “purpose lay in convincing her audience that those aided by the FSA were not degenerates who had created their own misfortune” but that “they were people with whom that audience could identify, and of whom they would approve.”²¹ She portrays her subjects as stoic, dignified, hardworking, and relatable. They are shown as people trying their best to survive the challenging circumstances around them, not as people looking for a handout. Lange’s attempt to humanize her subjects was successful not just during the 1930s and 1940s, but even today. Modern Americans look at these photographs and feel empathy or even pity towards the person in the image, they rarely blame the individual for their destitution. Before introducing the Great Depression to high school students, history teachers will often display Lange’s *Migrant Mother* and ask students to closely analyze the image. When prompted to “dig deeper” students often point out the subject’s frayed sleeve as an indicator that she is poor; they also recognize the baby’s dirty face and children’s messy hair as evidence that the family is maybe homeless. However, students always begin their observation and analysis with comments about the expression on the mother’s face. They use words like “sad,” “stressed,” “overwhelmed,” “defeated,” and “stoic” to describe the image. When prompted with the question “What can you infer about the Great Depression based on this photograph?” students answer that it was “hard” and “people struggled to get by financially.” Students of history today look at

¹⁹ Katz, 17.

²⁰ Katz, 17.

²¹ Katz, 18.

Migrant Mother through an empathetic lens. This may be due to the framing of the questions or classroom culture, but it is at least in part due to Dorothea Lange's ability to capture her subject's aspect while maintaining their dignity.

The photographs from the FSA project also continue to serve as a means to discuss poverty in American history. Katz explains that displaying the FSA photographs in a museum setting facilitates conversations about this uncomfortable topic. She says, "there is much to be said for engaging in dialogue with audience members than simply instructing them."²² By providing a visual framework through which to discuss poverty and the Great Depression, people are not only more receptive, but more willing to learn. Americans can be incredibly judgmental when it comes to poverty and "the public interpretation of the lowest socio-economic strata is a complex undertaking at the best of times."²³ *Migrant Mother* is a tool to help people discuss societal issues in a more open, constructive manner. The issues people faced during the Depression Era are still issues Americans are grappling with today, namely climate crisis and migration.

²² Katz, 10.

²³ Katz, 11.

CHAPTER THREE

CLIMATE CRISIS & MIGRATION

21st century America is facing many major crises, two of the more urgent are climate change and immigration. These crises are inextricably intertwined, and neither can be fully understood without the other. As the seas rise, the earth warms, and water scarcity becomes more of a problem, the number of displaced people drastically increases. In *Storming the Wall*, Todd Miller succinctly explains that, “Climate change means either too little or too much water, and we are already experiencing both.”²⁴ We tend to think of the climate crisis as a problem for future generations. Unfortunately, the effects of global warming are immediate and visible right now. There is already irreparable damage to the planet and permanent changes not only to where people live, but how they live, their economies, their geo-political relationships, and their sense of security more broadly. The climate crisis is already reducing the amount of habitable land available and is continuously increasing the number of displaced people globally. “Though the numbers are often disputed, the most common projection used by the United Nations is that 250 million people will be displaced by 2050.”²⁵ There is no legal classification or protection for these climate refugees, thus forcing people to languish in refugee camps or find other, often illegal, means of immigration to new places. Miller argues that “if nothing changes we will find ourselves living in an increasingly militarized world of surveillance, razor wire, border walls,

²⁴ Todd Miller, *Storming the Wall: Climate Change, Migration, and Homeland Security* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 2017), 20.

²⁵ Miller, 22.

armed patrols, detention centers, and relocation centers.”²⁶ Miller explains that the United States military fully understands the threat that climate change poses and its relationship to the migrant crisis, but unfortunately military and public policy are focused on deterrence, rather than resolving the root of these two world-altering issues.

Much of the rhetoric surrounding the migrant crisis at America’s southern border is focused on defensive security measures. In his 2011 article titled, *Climate Barbarians at the Gate? A Critique of Apocalyptic Narratives on Climate Refugees*, Giovanni Bettini surveys the language used when referring to people displaced by the climate crisis. The language used to describe these climate refugees directly influences the militaristic approaches often employed to address the broader issues of migration and climate change:

Millions of desperate victims of climate change abandoning their homes sinking under rising seas. Remnants of human settlements in desolated regions devoured by an encroaching desert. Children and women walking in lines, with waters up to their chest, carrying on their shoulders the few belongings saved from the storm’s fury. Looming humanitarian catastrophes spreading throughout the world, menacing international peace and security. Tsunamis of peoples displaced from the global south pushing at the gates screening affluent countries. Climate refugee camps installed in the symbolic epicenters of global capital in the post-climate change apocalypse.

Such imaginaries underlie many academic publications, documentaries, policy briefs and NGO reports on climate-induced migration (C–M) – in blunt words the impacts that climatic change will exercise on human mobility patterns. The topic is frequently depicted as a future crisis, narrated with images of massive, unrestrainable and threatening floods of “climate refugees” from the global south in a post-climate change apocalypse. Words like catastrophe, threat and urgency are extensively employed: titles such as “Here comes the flood” (Bogardi and Warner, 2009), “The Human Tide” (Christian Aid, 2007) or “The Human Tsunami” (Knight, 2009) are symptomatic of such tendencies.

There might be good reasons for employing strong tones. The latest IPCC Assessment Report (2007) foresees drastic climatic changes with epochal impacts (at least *ceteris paribus*) on human societies, and the latest climate science expects global warming to be more pronounced than before: what was previously presented as worst case scenarios’ seems more and more likely to happen (Parry et al., 2009; Schneider, 2009). Climate change threatens a large share of the world’s population

²⁶ Miller, 27.

and gilding the bitter pill would be an act of irresponsibility, denial or intentional deceit.²⁷

The climate crisis is a life-altering apocalyptic event and should be discussed as such. However, addressing the human beings displaced by global warming using negative vernacular directs attention away from the climate crisis. Meaning, that rather than focusing on resolving climate change, the focus, anger, fears, and frustrations become directed at the “migrant crisis” instead. Unfortunately, there is not enough public empathy or conversation about why these migrants are risking their lives to live undocumented in the United States or other western European countries. The push factors motivating people to travel for hundreds of treacherous miles through Central America are frequently linked to the climate crisis. Farmers who are struggling with drought, people who cannot find work due to the population shift from rural spaces to urban areas, children without access to education, lack of healthcare, gang violence because of corruption, and economic insecurity, are just some of the climate change related impacts to human life. “People are traveling across borders in unprecedented numbers, and expectations – including those of people who live in vulnerable areas – are that this will continue.”²⁸ If staying in their country of origin was a viable option, most would never choose to leave. For many, migration is a last resort. Miller cites a 2010 Gallup poll in which a staggering 12 percent of respondents, “stated that they thought environmental problems would force them to move within five years.”²⁹ This poll surveyed over 750,000 adults worldwide between the years 2005 and 2010. Their responses are yet another indicator that climate change is already significantly

²⁷ Giovanni Bettini, “Climate Barbarians at the Gate? A Critique of Apocalyptic Narratives on ‘Climate Refugees,’” *Geoforum* vol. 45, (2013): 1.

²⁸ Miller, 23.

²⁹ Miller, 23.

impacting the security of people globally. The effects of climate change have made many densely populated, coastal, and arid areas uninhabitable and unsafe, thus forcing people to move to more stable locations that are not yet suffering the effects of climate change.

Miller also explains that American border security is heavily influenced by the ever-worsening climate crisis. Huge amounts of money and military resources are dedicated to preparing the United States and its borders for a mass migration event. Miller explains that “there is more spending on border reinforcement than ever before in the history of humankind.”³⁰ Those people and countries who have been less affected by climate change or have more financial means to protect themselves from the effects, are able to maintain their current standard of living. The ever-growing rift between the majority poor and minority wealthy populations is made worse by the effects of climate change. Miller explains, “Volatile political and social situations often worsen economic processes that enrich a few while impoverishing many. Climate change will only intensify these inequalities and widen the gulf between those who are environmentally secure and those who are not.”³¹ Climate change is the driving force behind much of the economic inequality in the world today and will continue to cause further division as more people are displaced.

The more obvious issues are homes and land becoming inhospitable due to climate change. Land scarcity is one of the major causes for conflict throughout the world. Places like Syria or Darfur, for example, have not only been irreparably transformed by global warming, but have also been ravaged by civil war. Conflicts like the one in Syria are complex and cannot

³⁰ Miller, 24.

³¹ Miller, 23.

simply be explained as disputes over land. Instead, as livable land becomes even more scarce, conflict increases, which often destroys the area further. People ultimately are forced to leave the area and become refugees in search of safety somewhere else. The stark reality is that “the crises caused by a rapidly warming world will be addressed with walls, bullets, drones, cops, and cages.”³² To begin to address the migrant crisis, there must be more of a focus on protecting the environment. By focusing military and public policy agendas on “building the wall” and further restricting immigration, the United States is merely treating the symptom, not the cause. The symptom is the migration crisis, the cause is climate change. Unless the cause is addressed, migration from areas of political unrest, social unrest, and food insecurity will continue and likely worsen as global warming further changes landscapes worldwide.

Large groups of people who previously lived in coastal areas find their land and homes battered by hurricanes, flooded, or entirely submerged by the ocean. Similarly, people who live in more arid climates are facing unprecedented periods of drought, water scarcity, and crop failures. Both of these situations (too much water and too little) are the direct result of the climate crisis and can be used to at least partially explain the significant increase in displaced persons in recent years. In her piece, “Rethinking climate refugees and climate conflict: Rhetoric, reality, and the politics of policy discourse,” Betsy Hartmann explains, “For those familiar with the environmental security field, particularly neo-Malthusian models of environmental conflict developed in the 1980s and 1990s, climate refugee and conflict narratives seem very much like old wine in a new bottle. The vintage goes back even further, however, to a powerful policy

³² Miller, 32.

narrative that I call the ‘degradation narrative.’”³³ Climate crisis driven migration patterns are not new, but rather something that has contributed to many instances of migratory patterns throughout American and global histories:

Drawing on old colonial stereotypes of destructive Third World peasants and herders, degradation narratives go something like this: population-pressure induced poverty makes Third World peasants degrade their environments by over-farming or over-grazing marginal lands. The ensuing soil depletion and desertification then lead them to migrate elsewhere as ‘environmental refugees,’ either to other ecologically vulnerable rural areas where the vicious cycle is once again set in motion or to cities where they strain scarce resources and become a primary source of political instability.³⁴

While this is a centuries’ old issue, the severity of the climate crisis today has compounded the problem and more people than ever before are competing for resources, land, and security, leading to countless displaced refugees.

Migration during the American Dust Bowl was also largely fueled by a period of climate crisis. The causes of the Dust Bowl can best be explained as a manmade ecological disaster. Historian Donald Worster explains, “The storms were mainly the result of stripping the landscape of its natural vegetation to such an extent that there was no defense against the dry winds, no sod to hold the sandy or powdery dirt. The sod had been destroyed to make farms grow wheat to get cash.”³⁵ Similar to the overexploitation of the bison during Westward Expansion, or the exploitation of dwindling fossil fuels today, the human-fueled destruction of the sod made the American Plains almost uninhabitable during the 1930s and 1940s. For crops to grow the soil needs to be nutrient rich, however, during the Dust Bowl, “The dirt that blew away,

³³ Betsy Hartmann, “Rethinking Climate Refugees and Climate Conflict: Rhetoric, Reality and the Politics of Policy Discourse,” *Journal of International Development* 22, no. 2 (2010): 233.

³⁴ Hartmann, 2.

³⁵ Worster, 13.

one Iowa-deposited sample revealed, contained ten times as much organic matter and nitrogen – the basics of fertility – as did the sand dunes left behind in Dallam County, Texas.”³⁶ Without healthy topsoil successful, high yield agriculture was impossible, but even more importantly the blowing dust made living in the Plains regions of America a miserable experience:

The underlying hardpan was laid bare, as sterile and unyielding as a city pavement. The winds exposed long-buried Indian campgrounds, as well as arrowheads, pioneer wagon wheels, Spanish stirrups, branding irons, tractor wrenches, the chain someone had dropped in the furrow the previous year. By 1938, the peak year for wind erosion, 10 million acres had lost at least the upper five inches of topsoil; another 13.5 million had lost at least two and a half inches.”³⁷

These destructive agricultural practices present on the American Plains during the Great Depression were a symptom of the nation’s capitalist social structure. The emphasis was on growing to make more profit, rather than on understanding the nature of the land. Worster goes on to explain that “the ‘dirty thirties,’ as they were called, were primarily the work of man, not nature.”³⁸ Ultimately, this contributed to one of the largest ecological crises the United States has ever endured:

The dust storms that swept across the southern plains in the 1930s created the most severe environmental catastrophe in the entire history of the white man on this continent. In no other instance was there greater or more sustained tragedy visited on its inhabitants. Not even the Depression was more devastating, economically. And in ecological terms we have nothing in the nation’s past, nothing even in the polluted present, that compares.³⁹

Americans have held agriculture as the bedrock of American society since the founding of this nation. Thomas Jefferson’s writing outlines his ideas of a great American agrarian society,

³⁶ Worster, 29.

³⁷ Worster, 29.

³⁸ Worster, 23.

³⁹ Worster, 24.

where democratic ideals rest of the shoulders of land-owning farmers. Jefferson writes in *Notes on Virginia*:

Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example. It is the mark set on those, who, not looking up to heaven, to their own soil and industry, as does the husbandman, for their subsistence, depend for it on casualties and caprice of customers. Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition.⁴⁰

Jefferson argued that the success of the republic depended on agriculture creating moral, virtuous, independent members of the electorate. He goes as far as to claim that “those who labor in the earth” are quite literally chosen by God as the backbone of “genuine virtue” in America. The value placed upon agriculture is a continuous thread throughout American culture and history. The Dust Bowl farmers are perhaps the best example of this. Today, the term “Dust Bowl” is used to describe the period of extreme drought and blowing dust during the 1930s on the American Plains. However, in 1935 *Washington Evening Star* reporter Robert Geiger who documented the dust storms ravaging the plains used both the terms “belt” and “bowl” in his initial reporting of the crisis. For whatever reason “bowl” resonated with Americans and the “Dust Bowl” came to define the ecological disaster moving forward. “Geiger more likely had recalled the geographical image of the plains pushed forward by another Denver man, William Gilpin. In the 1850s, the continent, Gilpin thought, was a great fertile bowl rimmed by mountains, its concave interior destined one day to become the seat of an empire. If that was the

⁴⁰ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on Virginia*, 1781-1785.

unconscious precedent, then Geiger's "dust bowl" was more ironic than anyone realized."⁴¹

Historian James N. Gregory writes of the Dust Bowl states (Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri), "One of the last farming frontiers, these plains states had filled in and then overfilled in the late nineteenth century as farmers fought for one more chance at the independent agricultural way of life the nation had always revered."⁴² This idealized image of the American agrarian society also contributed to a warped perception of the climate of the Plains. Worster explains, "Plains farmers consistently and habitually underrate the possibility of drought – that they minimize the risks involved in their way of life. When drought occurs, they insist that it cannot last long, they feel no need to seek out logical solutions or change their practices. They are prouder of their ability to tough it out than to analyze their situation rationally, because they expect nature to be good to them and make them prosper."⁴³ American farmers lacked a sense of self-awareness when it came to their contribution to the Dust Bowl:

Dry spells are an inevitable fact of life on the plains, predictable enough to allow successful settlement, but only if the settlers know how to tread lightly, look ahead, and shape their expectations to fit the qualities of the land. As the federal administrators studied the problem more fully, they came to see that the settlers of the West had never shown those qualities. They had displayed instead a naïve hopefulness that the good times would never run out, that the land would never go back on them. Some officials, therefore, began to call for major revisions in the faulty land system; others emphasized new agronomic techniques, rural rehabilitation, more diversified farming, or extensive grassland restoration. But their common theme was that staying meant changing. The Dust Bowl, in this evolving government view, must be explained as a failure in ecological adaptation – as an absence of environmental realism."⁴⁴

⁴¹ Worster, 29.

⁴² James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 6.

⁴³ Worster, 27.

⁴⁴ Worster, 42.

There was a disconnect between the reality of Plains ecological systems and the destructive farming practices. America's capitalist agricultural systems were used to the detriment of the overall health of the Plains.

Unfortunately, the plains farmers of the 1910s-1950s were fighting for an impossibility; the land in those midwestern states was not built for Jefferson's great American agrarian society of small independent farmers. "The ultimate meaning of the dust storms in the 1930s was that America as a whole, not just the plains, was badly out of balance with its natural environment. Unbounded optimism about the future, careless disregard of nature's limits and uncertainties, uncritical faith in Providence, devotion to self-aggrandizement – all these were national as well as regional characteristics."⁴⁵ This imbalance and destruction of the natural world, particularly in the Plains, resulted in human suffering, widespread health issues, and economic disaster for many. The land was profoundly stressed by over farming and damaging agricultural techniques which ultimately drove farmers out of the Midwest, towards California, or to abandon farming altogether:

Census figures tell the story. Between 1910 and 1930 the number of farmers and agricultural workers in the Southwest declined by 341,000. That was followed by the loss of at least 800,000 more the next two decades. By 1950, Oklahoma had lost 55 percent of its agricultural labor force, Arkansas 52 percent, Texas 51 percent, and Missouri 47 percent. At mid-century, rural farm areas in the Western South supported two million fewer people than just twenty years earlier.⁴⁶

As people left farming in the Western South, they were forced to migrate to new places, many to California:

Investigators often found the newcomers tight-lipped about their reasons for coming to California. Sensitive to the controversy surrounding their Depression-

⁴⁵ Worster, 43.

⁴⁶ Gregory, 7.

era relocation, they typically responded with no-nonsense references to troubles back home and jobs up ahead. “It just got so hard to get-by” back in Oklahoma fifty-seven-year-old Marvin Montgomery told the congressional committee looking into the causes of the migration. “I just drug along as long as I wanted to. I wanted to change countries to see if I could find something better.” Inspecting a newly opened government camp for migrant workers, Vice President Henry Wallace asked another newcomer what he was doing in California. “Well, Mister, I was farmin’ back ther in Oklyhomy and it jist kep getting’ droughthier and droughthier, and droughthier so...Here I be.”⁴⁷

Popular culture often depicted California as a refuge with an abundance of jobs and resources.

Gregory explains, “expectations of a better life in California survive in songs and poems created by disillusioned migrants.”⁴⁸

Some examples of migrant poems documented by Gregory include:

When I first came to California,
Was the year of thirty-seven,
From what I read in papers,
I thought it was poor man’s heaven.⁴⁹

They said in California,
that money grew on trees,
That everyone was going there,
Just like a swarm of bees⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Gregory, 19.

⁴⁸ Gregory, 20.

⁴⁹ Gregory, 20.

⁵⁰ Gregory, 20.

Unfortunately, Dust Bowl refugees were not always welcomed into California with open arms.

California was also struggling through the Great Depression, groping to provide aid for its current residents:

Had they believed what many journalists and public officials said about California, few would have come. From the start of the Depression, state officials tried to discourage newcomers from heading west. Anxious to head off the migration of job seekers, authorities spread the word that economic conditions in California were deplorable. At the end of the decade a billboard on Highway 66, just outside of Tulsa, Oklahoma, carried the message the state tried to promote:

NO JOBS in California

If YOU are looking for work – KEEP OUT

6 Men for Every Job

No State Relief Available for Non-Residents⁵¹

Upon arrival in California many migrants face discrimination, financial distress, and housing insecurity. For many, life in California was not necessarily any easier than life back in “Oklyhomy.”

Drawing parallels between the climate crisis today, and periods of severe drought, such as the Dust Bowl in 1930s America, can help provide a better understanding of migration patterns and government responses of both the past and present. In both, we see mass migration events that are a direct result of climate related emergencies. The United States’ response to migration has not changed much since the Great Depression, and as Miller explains, “In the event of massive upheavals in the United States – with vivid past examples that include the 1936 Bum Blockade set up on the California state borders to stop Dust Bowl victims from crossing

⁵¹ Worster, 22.

into the state, or climate catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina that included Border Patrol agents policing black neighborhoods in New Orleans – a constellation of armed checkpoints can quickly attempt to establish authoritarian domination over a population.”⁵² Throughout 20th Century America, the primary focus of responding to migration has been deterrence, rather than a wholistic understanding of the forces driving these displaced people from their homes.

Dorothea Lange was tasked with documenting American life during the Great Depression. Her photographs, specifically *Migrant Mother*, forever altered how Americans and the world viewed those most affected by the economic crisis of the 1930s. Through her work, she was able to shift later generations of Americans’ perception of 1930s poverty from something shameful, to something almost stoic. Prior to the Great Depression, poverty in America was often viewed as a personal problem, rather than a social problem. FDR’s New Deal policies demonstrate a shift in how the US government addressed hardship. Lange and her fellow FSA photographers also contributed to this change as well. Lange’s *Migrant Mother* photograph helped draw necessary attention to raise relief funds for disadvantaged pea pickers in California, but also eventually came to define the 1930s Depression Era. However, it is also important to remember the discrimination many migrants, most commonly minorities and “Okies,” faced during this period. The issues confronting the United States of America today are remarkably similar to the crises faced by Americans one hundred years ago, and while much has changed, the issues surrounding migration have largely remained the same.

⁵² Miller, 33.

CHAPTER FOUR

MIGRANT PHOTOTOGRAPHY: CASE STUDIES

Images of migrants in crisis remain a significant part of the American and global photographic narrative. As the climate crisis forces more people from their places of origin, horrifying images of migrants desperately fleeing have become almost commonplace in the news and on various social media platforms. This thesis focuses on images of migrant people because these images invoke a far more widespread response when compared to other photographs addressing the human displacement.

Photographer Edward Burtynsky captures photographs of human beings interacting with the environment. In his project titled, *Anthropocene*, Burtynsky focuses specifically on landscape photographs depicting the impact of human beings on their environments (Figure 9).



Fig. 9. Burtynsky, Edward, photographer. *Makoko #1, Lagos, Nigeria, 2016*. Photograph. Retrieved from <https://www.edwardburtynsky.com/projects/photographs/anthropocene>.

His images of the Anthropocene are powerful, but do not invoke the same visceral connection as photographs of migrant bodies. Viewers of these landscape photographs by Burtynsky might feel anger, frustration, or even humbled by the impacts that human beings have had on the world around them. However, the composition of Burtynsky's images make the issues of climate crisis and human displacement seem massive and impossible to solve. While images of human beings harmed by these two crises allow viewers to feel more like they can take action to resolve their fellow man's suffering by helping just one other person. Documentary photographs where the focus is on people allow for a level of intimacy that other compositions do not. Photographs of migrant bodies have a higher tendency to "go viral" compared to photographs like Burtynsky's landscape-oriented images. People share these images of migrants on social media, and this can

garner greater public attention, fundraising efforts, and international conversations about the factors driving migrants to attempt risky journeys.

In September of 2015 the global community was shocked by images of Syrian refugees who died trying to reach Greece. The most horrifying was an image of a drowned toddler washed up on the beach in Turkey (Figure 10). This little boy was one of 11 who died in the attempted crossing.



Fig. 10. Demir, Nilufer, photographer. *A Turkish policeman in Bodrum approaches a child who drowned in a failed attempt to sail to the Greek island of Kos, Sept. 2, 2015.* Retrieved from Aljazeera America <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/9/2/syrians-refugees-drown-wash-ashore-in-turkey.html>.

This image dominated the media and public attention in the weeks immediately following its initial publication. While Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* was only shared in newspapers until gaining national attention when published alongside Steinbeck's writing, this image appeared

and was shared globally on all major social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter, immediately. European leaders from France, Germany, and Turkey made public statements about the photograph and implored the global community to take action to confront the refugee crisis. French President François Hollande stated at a press conference to address the crisis, “If the picture went viral around the world, it must also get a round of responsibilities... I think about all the victims that are never photographed, and the future victims if we do nothing.”⁵³ The immediate response was swift and sparked conversation about the refugee crisis. People worldwide donated to relief organizations like the Migrant Offshore Aid Station who received £150,000 in the first 24 hours following the viral photograph’s publication.⁵⁴ Since the initial publication of this image, attention to the Syrian migrant crisis has been minimal and public attention on this child’s death has faded almost entirely. At most, the image might be mentioned in passing alongside new horrifying images of injured or lifeless migrant bodies, but only as a parallel to the newest image. While there was significant initial attention and financial support for the Syrian migrant crisis, the public quickly shifted its focus to the next, most pressing, most outrageous issue or crisis. This image has become one of many examples of photographs demanding intense public attention only to be quickly “forgotten” when another image is published.

This shift in public attention is in part due to viewer fatigue but is also a symptom of heightened nationalist attitudes in recent years. In his text, *Imagined Communities: Reflections*

⁵³ “French President Calls Erdoğan over Images of Drowned Syrian Boy, Calls for Common EU Refugee Policy,” *Daily Sabah* online, September 2, 2015, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2015/09/03/french-president-calls-erdogan-over-images-of-drowned-syrian-boy-calls-for-common-eu-refugee-policy>.

⁵⁴ “Britons Rally to Help People Fleeing War and Terror in Middle East,” *The Guardian*, September 3, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/03/britons-rally-to-help-people-fleeing-war-and-terror-in-middle-east>.

on the *Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson examines nationalism and its role in establishing national identity. He states, “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it *invents* nations where they do not exist.” He goes on to explain, “In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”⁵⁵ Nationalism is a social construct, something invented and perpetuated by human beings, and media plays a pivotal role:

The development of increasingly rapid communications drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history. No surprise then that the search was on, so to speak, for a new way of linking fraternity, power, and time meaningfully together. Nothing perhaps more precipitated this search, nor made it more fruitful, than print-capitalism, which made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways.”⁵⁶

Where historically people were previously united under religious or government authority nationalism today is often driven by communication innovations. Today, the media, specifically social media, allows people to connect with like-minded peers more easily, and faster than ever before. While this increased connection can be incredibly beneficial in the sharing of information, it has also created online forums that encourage nationalist tendencies and arguably emboldens people who may not have otherwise found those communities. The twice-impeached former president of the United States, Donald Trump, was an active participant in many of these online nationalist communities (until his twitter account was indefinitely suspended following the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol). In their article from the *Stanford Law Review*

⁵⁵ Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, 1936-2015. *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* Rev. ed. (London; New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

⁵⁶ Anderson, 36.

titled “White Nationalism as Immigration Policy” authors Jayashri Srikantiah & Shirin Sinnar outline many of the horrific statements about immigrants made by Trump throughout his presidency:

The President’s statements and policies suggest that he views U.S. national identity in racial terms and seeks to preserve the nation’s predominantly white identity. As a general matter, the President has parroted ideas of white cultural threat popular among white nationalists. For instance, on multiple occasions, Trump excoriated the removal of Confederate monuments as a threat to “our culture”—identifying “our culture” with memorials erected to send a message of white supremacy in the name of a war fought to protect slavery. He gestured at the notion of a “white genocide”—a rallying cry of white nationalists worldwide—by tweeting support for South African far-right claims that white farmers were suffering from mass killings and land seizures in that country. Most notably, following the largest U.S. gathering of white supremacists in a generation, the President insisted that some who marched in Charlottesville were “very fine people.”

With respect to immigration, Trump has repeatedly disparaged various groups of nonwhite immigrants. He began his presidential campaign by denouncing Mexican migrants as “rapists.” He allegedly commented that Haitian immigrants “all have AIDS” and that Nigerian immigrants would never “go back to their huts” after seeing the U.S. He repeatedly conflated Middle Eastern and Muslim immigrants with terrorists and falsely claimed that most people convicted of terrorism in the U.S. came from abroad. In addition, Trump has trafficked in age-old racist tropes, portraying immigrants as criminals, invaders, threats to women, and even subhuman. On one occasion, Trump described unauthorized immigrants as “animals;” on another, he conjured images of vermin in describing immigrants as threatening to “pour into and infest our Country.” Perhaps most infamously, he reportedly railed against immigration from “shithole countries”—an apparent reference to Haiti, El Salvador, and African nations—and asked why the U.S. couldn’t get more people from countries like Norway.⁵⁷

Many of these ideas, phrases, and beliefs were, and continue to be, re-shared on social media platforms including Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Trump fueled these anti-immigration communities with his inflammatory comments but was equally influenced by things others were

⁵⁷ “White Nationalism as Immigration Policy,” *Stanford Law Review* (2019), <https://www.stanfordlawreview.org/online/white-nationalism-as-immigration-policy/>.

posting online. He frequently re-tweeted false, racist, and hateful information or verbally referenced others posts during meetings and press conferences. This negative rhetoric used to describe migrants has become mainstream in many American communities, further fueling anti-immigration sentiments and policies. The 2020 study, *Monitoring Users' Behavior: Anti-Immigration Speech Detection on Twitter*, “collected and manually annotated an immigration-related dataset of publicly available Tweets in UK, US, and Canadian English.”⁵⁸ Some of the hashtags they analyzed included, #buildthewall, #stoptheinvasion, #americafirst, and #illegalaliens. The language used in and alongside these hashtags is very public proof of the anti-immigration sentiment openly shared in online platforms. These specific hashtags were frequently used by former President Trump himself and were re-tweeted, re-shared, re-posted by countless others, particularly when discussing immigration policy, groups of people camping at border crossings, or reports of migrant “caravans” moving towards the U.S. / Mexico border.

People are motivated to leave their homes for a variety of reasons. Some are seeking to escape persecution, some have been displaced due to climate crises, others are simply in search of something “better.” America is a nation of immigrants, but has a complicated, often contentious, relationship with immigration policies and migrants themselves. Rob Kroes writes:

Generation upon generation of immigrants have been drawn toward America under the impact of such public images, advertising the lures and attractions of the new country, casting America in the light of a land of promise and bounty. When confronted with the realities of American life, many must have felt a sharp disillusionment.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Pitropakis, Kokot, Gkatzia, Ludwiniak, Mylonas, and Kandias, "Monitoring Users' Behavior: Anti-Immigration Speech Detection on Twitter," *Machine Learning and Knowledge Extraction* 2, no. 3 (2020): <https://doi.org/10.3390/make2030011>.

⁵⁹ Kroes, 50.

America is portrayed as the land of opportunity, but for many, this is far from reality. Upon arrival in the United States many migrants are faced with immediate discrimination and hardship.

Similar to the efforts of Dorothea Lange and her fellow FSA photographers, Jason De Leon documents the modern migrant experience. DeLeon is a Professor of Anthropology and Chicano/a Studies at the University of California and the Executive Director of the Undocumented Migration Project. Unlike Lange, who focused her images on those impacted by the Great Depression, DeLeon, has focused his studies on South American migrants seeking to cross America's southern border in the 21st century. Despite the different eras of these photographic projects, there are many parallels between the "Okies" of the 1930s and the migrants of today. De Leon opens his 2015 text, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* by explaining, "After spending just a few weeks on the US-Mexico border hanging out with the desperate people looking to breach America's immigration defenses, I quickly learned that death, violence, and suffering are par for the course."⁶⁰ Desperation and a lack of resources are what drove Lange's subjects, like *Migrant Mother*, to leave their homes in search of relief and work in California. During the Great Depression and today the primary push and pull factors for migrants was and is poverty, climate crisis, danger, and the hope for a better life. De Leon's text includes photographs of migrants, their possessions, and their journey through the desert. He quotes one of his subjects as saying, "I want you to put photos that show our reality. That is better. That way people can see what happens. The realness. That way people will believe what is happening. That way they will know that this is the truth. A lot of people

⁶⁰ Jason de León, Michael Wells, *The Land of Open Graves Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 1.

think it's all a lie.”⁶¹ The “realness” this person wants to convey is the desperation and struggle modern South American migrants face. He wants observers of the photograph to see him as a fellow human being worthy of empathy and dignity. His understanding that photographs can act as a catalyst for social change, or at least as a more accurate documentation of immigration, demonstrates how important photography can be. It can convey emotions that written documents cannot, and hopefully invoke a response in the viewer that contributes to larger positive change.

During the summer of 2019, there was one particular photograph that came to symbolize the immigration crisis confronting the Americas. First published in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, the image is of a drowned Salvadoran migrant father and his toddler aged daughter. The victims are Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and Valeria (Figure 11).

⁶¹ De Leon, 19.



Fig. 11. Julia Le Duc, photographer. Father and daughter drowned during border crossing. 2019. Photograph. Retrieved from NPR, <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/26/736177694/a-father-and-daughter-drowned-at-the-border-put-attention-on-immigration>.

This devastating image should be looked at through a similar lens as Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* or Hine's images of child labor. Unfortunately, due to the current hostile political environment, the photograph of this father and child has been interpreted through an incredibly polarized political lens. The following excerpt from the 2018 *Los Angeles Times* article titled, "Trump threatens foreign aid to Honduras as he continues focus on 'caravan' of migrants" is just one example of many showing the negative rhetoric used to describe migrants:

For the third straight day, Trump used the migrants' journey north to call for tougher immigration policies and warn of what he called "weak" border security. But the prospect of cutting off foreign aid added a new dimension to the string of threats from the president that had centered largely on potentially walking away from the North American Free Trade Agreement, which his administration is currently renegotiating. Honduras received about \$127.5 million in aid from the

United States in fiscal 2016, according to data from the United States Agency for International Development.

“The big Caravan of People from Honduras, now coming across Mexico and heading to our ‘Weak Laws’ Border, had better be stopped before it gets there,” Trump tweeted shortly before 7 a.m. Tuesday. “Cash cow NAFTA is in play, as is foreign aid to Honduras and the countries that allow this to happen. Congress MUST ACT NOW!”⁶²

Rather than viewing this image of a father and daughter with empathy or sense of remorse, it was received by many as yet another rationale for further restricting immigration policies. In a June 26, 2019 article NPR reporters documented Congress’ and Trump’s response to this photograph of the situation on the Rio Grande:

Citing interviews with Border Patrol officers and supervisors, the inspector general's office said it found "evidence that limiting the volume of asylum-seekers entering at ports of entry leads some aliens who would otherwise seek legal entry into the United States to cross the border illegally."

The Hispanic Caucus of the House of Representatives blamed the Trump administration for the deaths.

"They were driven to cross the river out of desperation — only after they tried to legally seek asylum," the caucus said in a tweet. "They should be safe in the U.S. Instead, they are dead because of Trump's cruel policies."

On Wednesday, Trump blamed current U.S. immigration laws for the deaths. When he was asked how he felt about the photo of the dead father and daughter, the president replied, "I hate it."

"I know it could stop immediately if the Democrats change the law. They have to change the laws," Trump said, adding, "and then that father, who probably was this wonderful guy, with his daughter — things like that wouldn't happen."

Trump predicted that if asylum rules were changed and a wall were built, migrants wouldn't try to cross the river. Speaking to reporters before he boarded Marine One

⁶² “Trump Threatens Foreign Aid to Honduras as He Continues Focus on 'Caravan' of Migrants,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.latimes.com/nation/ct-trump-honduras-caravan-20180403-story.html>.

at the White House, he added that conditions at the border prove he was right to say America has an immigration crisis.⁶³

The degree of polarization evident in this article is not a new development but rather a long-standing pattern of how the immigration crisis is discussed in American politics. This screenshot from Twitter summarizes much of the online conversation surrounding the migrant crisis on the America-Mexico border in the year leading up to this photograph being taken.



Fig. 12. Screenshot. Retrieved from Twitter, 11/5/2021.

Part of what made Lange's work so successful in changing American's attitudes towards poverty in the 1930s was her ability to make her subjects relatable. The Great Depression affected almost all Americans to some extent but there was still a negative perception towards those who asked for government assistance. Her photographs challenged this and successfully

⁶³ Bill Chappell, "A Father And Daughter Who Drowned At The Border Put Attention On Immigration." *NPR*, 26 June 2019, www.npr.org/2019/06/26/736177694/a-father-and-daughter-drowned-at-the-border-put-attention-on-immigration.

shifted the national attitude by helping to change the “othering” of people living in poverty. Katz identifies this issue within the realm of museum exhibition by explaining, “There exists a risk that the depiction of poverty within exhibitions can become the presentation of the “other”; a sideshow paradigm whereby the underprivileged are positioned as distinct and foreign from their own society.”⁶⁴ However, Dorothea Lange’s photographs overcome this by framing her subjects in ways that allow them to retain their dignity. Lange herself stated about her photographs that “they attempt to recognize and even foreground a sense of human pride. They also, in many cases, depict their subjects as retaining not just pride, but also beauty; a practice more often reserved for the portraits of the wealthy than those enduring deprivation.”⁶⁵ Modern images of the immigration crisis also frame subjects in a way that allow for human dignity, but the response is very different. The photograph of the migrant father and child was horrifying to most, but also became fodder for the immigration debate in the United States. The responses from liberal politicians to the tragic deaths of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter Valeria ranged from, “Trump is responsible for these deaths” (Beto O’Rourke, 6/25/2019) to “These families seeking asylum are often fleeing extreme violence. And what happens when they arrive? Trump says, ‘Go back to where you came from.’ That is inhumane. Children are dying. This is a stain on our moral conscience,” (Kamala Harris, 6/25/2019). While these statements are true, they also contributed to the state of political polarization in the United States. President Trump’s responses, as reported by CNN, included, “Trump, speaking to reporters on Wednesday, went on to blame Democrats for ‘their asylum policy’. He called the trip to the

⁶⁴ Katz, 17.

⁶⁵ Katz, 17.

United States ‘a very dangerous journey, a very, very dangerous journey,’ and said ‘the asylum policy of the Democrats is responsible because they will not change the policy.’ Trump again falsely claimed that the Democrats want open borders, which is not a mainstream position for the party.”⁶⁶ This again continues the political finger pointing without acting to resolve the issues causing the immigration crisis. The responses have an empathetic tone, but rather than shifting the national attitude, this tragedy was used as ammunition to attack the opposing political party and further agitate the already extremely polarized political environment. This is in stark contrast to *Migrant Mother* serving as a unifying image for Americans and their present understanding of the 1930s. Unfortunately, while creating an increased sense of urgency for immigration activists and some politicians, the image of this drowned father and child have also acted as fuel for the hateful political rhetoric. The immigration crisis on the U.S.-Mexico border has historically treated the symptoms of immigration, rather than the cause. In recent years, the American government has increasingly centered immigration policy on both deterrence (dissuading people from immigrating in the first place) and detention (holding people in custody upon arrival on U.S. soil). However, the numbers of migrants seeking asylum only continues to increase, and thus the number of migrant detainees also increases. In a November 2019 article, the Associated Press outlined the uptick in migrant detentions, specifically the large numbers of migrant children held in U.S. custody:

The nearly 70,000 migrant children who were held in government custody this year — up 42 percent in fiscal year 2019 from 2018 — spent more time in shelters and away from their families than in prior years. The Trump administration’s series of strict immigration policies has increased the time children spend in detention, despite the government’s own acknowledgment that it does them harm. In 2013, Australia detained 2,000 children during a surge of maritime arrivals. In Canada,

⁶⁶ Maegan Vazquez, “Trump Blames Democrats’ Policies for Drowning Deaths of Father, Daughter in Rio Grande,” CNN, 26 June 2019, www.cnn.com/2019/06/26/politics/donald-trump-democrats-migrants/index.html.

immigrant children are separated from their parents only as a last resort; 155 were detained in 2018. In the United Kingdom, 42 migrant children were put in shelters in 2017, according to officials in those countries.⁶⁷

The picture of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and Valeria became a symbol of the heartlessness of the Trump Administration and served as a discussion point for immigration activists throughout America and the world. The responses to this image, and other modern examples like it, were very different from Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* and this difference deserves closer examination.

In *Tell Me How It Ends* Valeria Luiselli recounts her experiences working as an interpreter for migrant children. She describes in detail the struggles many migrant children experience both on their journey and upon arrival in the United States. As an interpreter, she asks these children a series of questions as a part of the legal process:

The danger migrants face in their journeys doesn't end with they finally reach the U.S.-Mexico border. Question number eight addresses crimes and rights violations in U.S. territory: "Has anyone hurt, threatened, or frightened you since you came to the U.S.?"

There are many stories about such violations. Some are liminal, like the well-known case of a sixteen-year-old boy on the Mexican side of the border who, in 2012, was shot to death by an American officer on the U.S. side who later claimed the boy and other people had thrown rocks at him. The officer argued self-defense: his bullets for their rocks. And the dangers continue once the border is crossed. We know, for instance that civilian vigilantes and owners of private ranches go out to hunt undocumented migrants, either as a matter of conviction or merely for sport.⁶⁸

These examples demonstrate the horrifying level of dehumanization many South American migrants face upon arrival in the United States of America. However, the risks associated with

⁶⁷ Christopher Sherman, Martha Mendoza and Garance Burke, "US Held Record Number of Migrant Children in Custody in 2019," *Associated Press*, November 12, 2019, <https://apnews.com/article/us-news-ap-top-news-honduras-trauma-immigration-015702afdb4d4fbf85cf5070cd2c6824>.

⁶⁸ Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (4th Estate, 2017), 28.

migration are still often better than remaining in their countries of origin. Luiselli echoes much of De Leon's descriptions of the migration experience in *Tell Me How It Ends*. This is not a journey undertaken lightly:

Migrants also die of dehydration, hunger, or accidents. At the forensic institute of Pima County, Arizona, alone, more than 2,200 human remains have been registered since 2001, the majority of which are still unidentified. The area surrounding the border between Mexico and the United States is a big common grave, and the migrants who die in this portion of our continent become no more than "bones in the desert."⁶⁹

Death and suffering are par for the course on the migrant trail. DeLeon explains that America's arguably brutal border policy can best be defined as "Prevention Through Deterrence."⁷⁰

Prevention Through Deterrence. It has a nice ring to it. It looks good in big bold letters splashed on the front of federal documents. It stands proudly at the top of PowerPoint slides that Border Patrol shows to visiting politicians who want to know how the agency is fighting the War on Terror and the War on Illegal Immigration. Prevention Through Deterrence. It sounds powerful, but not vicious. It wants to convince you that it's a humane policy designed simply to prevent crime, to discourage it before it happens.

Even if policy planners changed the phrase to "Prevention Through Death" or "Prevention Through Suffering" it still wouldn't come close to capturing the complexity or brutal violence of this system of enforcement. The variables, processes, and actors that structure PTD defy simple linguistic description.⁷¹

Luiselli describes the arduous journey that children specifically undertake (most often as unaccompanied minors) to reach the United States:

Each child comes from a different place, a separate life, a distinct set of experiences, but their stories usually follow the same predictable, fucked-up plot.

Which goes more or less as follows: Children leave their homes with a coyote. They cross Mexico in the hands of this coyote, riding La Bestia. They try not to fall into the hands of rapists, corrupt policemen, murderous soldiers, and drug gangs who

⁶⁹ Luiselli, 29.

⁷⁰ De Leon, 38.

⁷¹ De Leon, 39.

might enslave them in poppy or marijuana fields, if they don't shoot them in the head and mass-bury them. If something happens to a child the coyote is not held accountable. In fact, no one is ever held accountable. The children who make it all the way to the U.S. border turn themselves in to Border Patrol officers and are formerly detained. (Often by officers who say things like "Speak English! Now you're in America!") They are then placed in the icebox. And later, in a temporary shelter. There they must start looking for their parents - if they have parents – or for relatives who will sponsor them. Later, they are sent to wherever their sponsor lives. And finally, they have to appear in court, where they can defend themselves against deportation – if they have a lawyer.⁷²

Reaching the border and crossing into the United States is a feat in-itself, but these children, and migrants more broadly, continue to suffer abuses upon their arrival in this country. The comments cited above made by Border Patrol officers are benign when compared to the language used by former President Trump and countless other Americans who are anti-immigration.

There is also no guarantee that migrants who cross into the United States will be allowed to stay. Valeria Luiselli explains that Mexican migrants "detained by Border Patrol can be deported back immediately."⁷³ She continues, "they don't have to be given temporary shelter, are not allowed to attempt contact with parents or relatives in the U.S., and are certainly not granted a right to a formal hearing in court where they could defend themselves, legally, against a deportation order."⁷⁴ After risking everything including their physical and emotional wellbeing, these people can be sent right back to the situations they are trying to escape:

The procedure by which Mexican children are deported in this way is called "voluntary return." And, as unbelievable as it may seem, voluntary return is the most common verdict. Other than a handful of lucky exceptions, all Mexican children are deported under this procedure. This – irrational, if not completely absurd – practice is legally backed by an amendment to the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, which was signed by President G. W. Bush in

⁷² Luiselli, 51.

⁷³ Luiselli, 52.

⁷⁴ Luiselli, 52.

2008. The amendment states that children from countries that share borders with the U.S. can be deported without formal immigration proceedings. That is, if a child comes from either Mexico or Canada, he or she is immediately “deportable” – a “removable alien.”⁷⁵

Anti-immigration policies are an American presidential tradition; however, Trump and his determination to “Build the Wall” have taken this sentiment to new heights.

The Great Depression became the crisis that defined the 1930s and immigration will likely become one of the crises that define this decade. Immigration has become one of the most discussed and contentious wedge issues of our time. Social media both highlights and contributes to the divisive nature of this crisis. Americans see very little gray area when it comes to immigration and as De Leon explains, “Americans of today have no problem putting nationality before humanity. A cursory glance at the online comment section of a recent article titled ‘Border Crossing Deaths More Common as Illegal Immigration Declines’ proves insight into some of the more extreme anti-immigrant perspectives on migrant death.”⁷⁶ President Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign was almost entirely centered on immigration and “building the wall” along America’s southern border. There is not currently data on how often the phrase and hashtag “build the wall” is used on various social media platforms, but a brief analysis of President Trump’s now banned Twitter account revealed the phrase had been used or retweeted by him almost daily during his presidency. Trump’s Twitter account is an extreme example, but many Americans view immigration as the most pressing crisis facing the United States at this time and are extremely divided when it comes to immigration policy. In *The Land of Open Graves*, De Leon discusses Americans’ negative attitude towards immigrants. He writes about

⁷⁵ Luiselli, 55.

⁷⁶ De Leon, 26.

finding skeletal remains on the migrant trail and explains, “For many Americans, this person – whose remains are so ravaged that his or her sex is unknown – is (was) an “illegal,” a noncitizen who broke US law and faced the consequences.”⁷⁷ There is a lack of empathy for the countless victims of the migrant trail. Luiselli explains that, “Official accounts in the United States – what circulates in the newspaper or on the radio, the message from Washington, and public opinion in general – almost always locate the dividing line between “civilization” and “barbarity” just below the Rio Grande.”⁷⁸ Much of the American public views the immigration crisis through this lens that “others” the migrants themselves. These people are immigrating out of desperation, just as Dorothea Lange’s subjects were in the 1930s. De Leon points out Americans’ inability to draw parallels between modern immigrants and their own migrant ancestors by explaining, “Countless citizens today suffer historical amnesia and draw stark divisions between the “noble” European immigrants of the past and Latino border crossers of today.”⁷⁹ Lange’s *Migrant Mother* and the 2019 photograph of the migrant father and child have many parallels. The most obvious of these are that both subjects were migrants seeking a better life. The immediate reasons may be different, but motives are the same, these people have no other choice and want a better life for themselves and their families. Unfortunately, the responses from the public have been very different. Patterns of migration cannot be simplified to one single push or pull factor, but there is a distinct through line that can be drawn between the increasingly desperate immigration crisis and global climate change.

⁷⁷ De Leon, 26.

⁷⁸ De Leon, 83.

⁷⁹ De Leon, 26.

On August 17, 2021 the world was again shocked by images of refugees attempting to flee as the United States military hastily withdrew from Afghanistan following the Taliban takeover of the country. The first image captures the stunned faces of 640 Afghan men, women, and children crammed into an American cargo plane taking off from Kabul (Figure 13). The second image is a screenshot from a viral video of Afghans running alongside or clinging to the U.S. Airforce plane as it struggles to take off (Figure 14). Horrifyingly, in the video a few people can be seen falling from the wings of the airplane to their deaths as it leaves the ground. These images showcase the desperation these human beings are experiencing as they attempt to escape the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. Like many migrants worldwide, these people are willing to risk their lives to escape their country of origin. Yet, just as with the images of the drowned Syrian toddler, and the image of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his young daughter Valeria, public attention has quickly shifted to the next, newest, most pressing crisis.



Fig. 13. *Hundreds of Afghans packed into a US military cargo plane as they flee Kabul.*
Retrieved from BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58242733>.



Fig. 14. *Hundreds of people run alongside a U.S. Airforce C-17 transport plane, some climbing on the plane, as it moves down a runway of the international airport, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Monday, Aug.16. 2021.* Retrieved from AP, <https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-784681c4400b097cf73b93cec34c5c61>.

Observers of these images immediately expressed outcry and anger at the United States government's handling of the American withdrawal from Afghanistan. However, as time passes the conversation and indignation quickly subsides and shifts to the next viral crisis. The human suffering of displaced migrants worldwide continues even as the internet's attention is drawn elsewhere. The individual migrant stories from Latin America, Syria, and now Afghanistan, quickly fade into the background and are largely left without resolution.

Valeria Luiselli succinctly describes the experiences of Mexican migrant children at the close of her book, but her summary can apply to almost all migrants globally. Whether they are fleeing war, climate crisis, humanitarian abuses, poverty, or other factors, migrant children are

faced with extreme adversity not only on their journeys to safety, but also upon their arrival in America.

The children who cross Mexico and arrive at the U.S. border are not “immigrants,” not “illegals,” not merely “undocumented minors.” Those children are refugees of a war, and, as such, they should all have the right to asylum. But not all of them have it.

Tell me how it ends, Mamma, my daughter asks me.

I don’t know.

Tell me what happens next.

Sometimes I make up an ending, a happy one. But most of the times I just say:

I don’t know how it ends yet.⁸⁰

There are instances where photographers keep track of their subjects and their loved ones after the publication of an image. Steve McCurry’s National Geographic photograph known simply as *Afghan Girl* is perhaps the best example of this (Figure 15).

⁸⁰ Luiselli, 90.

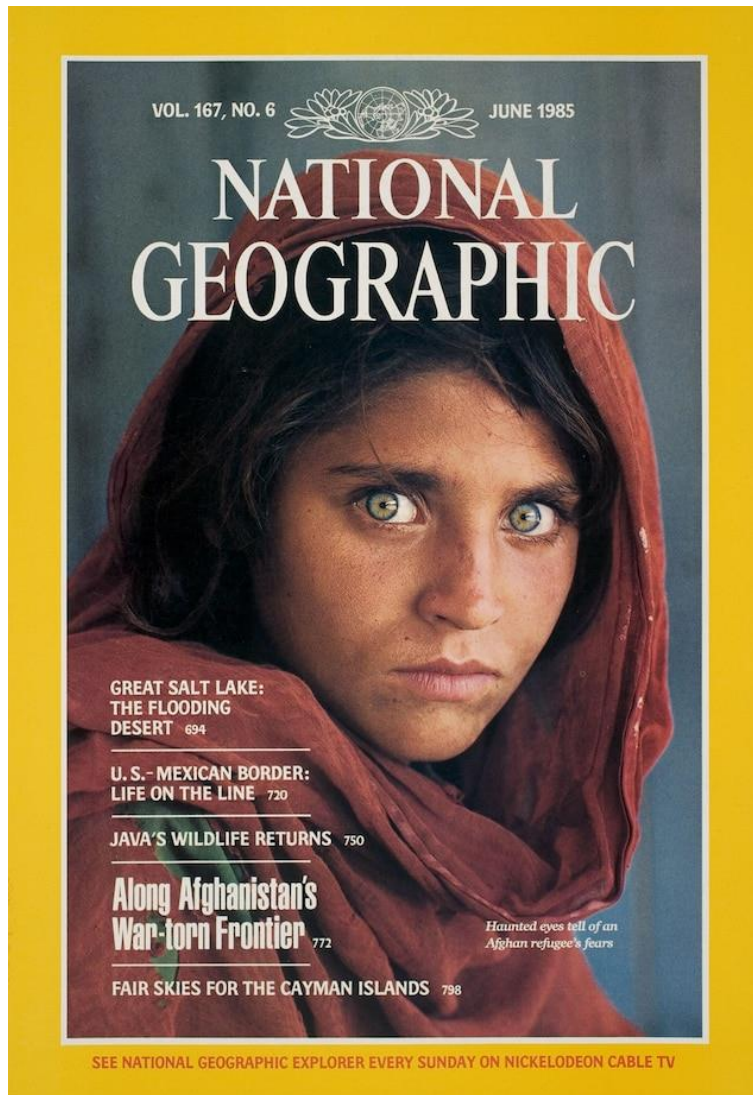


Fig. 15. McCurry, Stephen, photographer. *The June 1985 issue of National Geographic magazine made the "Afghan Girl" world famous.* Magazine Cover. Retrieved from National Geographic, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pages/article/afghan-girl-home-afghanistan>.

Sharbat Gula was first photographed by McCurry when she was 12 years old and living in a refugee orphanage in Pakistan. Her portrait was featured on the cover of the June 1985 cover of National Geographic and "McCurry's picture of her made her the unwitting posterchild for the

plight of thousands of Afghan refugees streaming into Pakistan.”⁸¹ Her name and identity were unknown until McCurry later tracked her down in 2002, 17 years after the initial portrait was published on the cover of National Geographic, and took an updated portrait of her (Figure 16).



Fig. 16. McCurry, Stephen, photographer. *Afghan Girl: A Life Revealed*. Photograph. Retrieved from National Geographic, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/afghan-girl-revealed>.

⁸¹ Nina Storchlic, “Famed ‘Afghan Girl’ Finally Gets a Home” *National Geographic*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/pages/article/afghan-girl-home-afghanistan>.

This second photograph was accompanied by an essay describing her life story in the time between the two images. Sharbat Gula's portraits are one of the rare cases where the photographer went out of his way to find his earlier subject and provide her with a new degree of autonomy. Most migrants who are photographed and whose images go "viral" will never be seen or heard from again on a global scale. Too often the passage of time causes attention on their stories to subside and for the migrants themselves to pass into relative obscurity.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *MIGRANT MOTHER*,
LIVED MIGRANT EXPERIENCES, & AMERICAN STUDIES

Within the field of American Studies, scholars are examining how migrant stories fit into the national narrative, specifically regarding archives. The migrants of the 1930s and the people fleeing South American nations today have much more in common than scholars, law makers, and social scientists tend to acknowledge. In *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies, Migrant Archives*, Rodrigo Lazo explores the intersections between archives, migrants, and American Studies scholarship. Archives are important and powerful institutions that “constitute the memory of nations and of societies, shape their identity, and are a cornerstone of the information society.”⁸² He explains:

The physical manifestation of archival parameters in the modern period has been a building, which literally housed the materials and served metaphorically to delimit the information. The records office or rare-book library provided safekeeping for documents and became a place where archive rats could gather empirical evidence for their accounts of the past. In the United States, the National Archives occupies both a modern research facility in College Park, Maryland, and a museum facing Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., not far from the Capitol. The latter location features copies of the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. This tourist attraction, resembling the Parthenon and featuring New Deal-era engravings on its façade, provides an image of the nation that is connected to a grand narrative of freedom stemming from 1776.⁸³

Archives not only act as a place to store important national documents and artifacts but are also critically important to a nation forming its national identity.

⁸² Rodrigo Lazo, “States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies,” *University of North Carolina Press* (2009), www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9780807895511_castronovo.

⁸³ Lazo, 868.

Migrants, by definition, are often mobile, displaced, and can no longer live in their nations of origin. Lazo proposes that migrant documents and stories exist in what he calls “migrant archives,” or non-traditional archival places. He explains, “Migrant archives reside in obscurity and are always at the edge of annihilation. They are the texts of the past that have not been written into the official spaces of archivization, even though they weave in and out of the buildings that house documents. Migrant archives are oxymoronic because one of the functions of archival organization is storage in a specific (safe) space. Migration, by contrast, connotes a journey.”⁸⁴ He continues, “the contemporary association of migration with border crossings and movement of people in and out of nation-states at great personal risk emphasizes that migration is not safe. Certainly, it is at odds with a storage vault, which historically has been one of constituting elements of an archive.”⁸⁵ Documentary photography is part of this “migrant archive” and is a critical piece of the puzzle to fully understand not only the migrant crisis of today, but also to grasp what it means to be a migrant in the United States. In too many instances the voices of migrants are not heard because they either do not have the means to communicate their extraordinary experiences, or their autonomy has been stripped away. Lazo proposes that “the archive can also contain information about those who do not have authority and even those whose authority has been forgotten.”⁸⁶ Photographs by migrants of their own experiences, from their unique and individualized perspectives, can create a more holistic understanding of the

⁸⁴ Lazo, 881.

⁸⁵ Lazo, 894.

⁸⁶ Lazo, 1041.

migrant experience. However, photographs of migrants by non-migrants can, in a way, strip the individuals of their authority and autonomy.

Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, while often viewed as an important part of changing American attitudes towards Depression-era migrants, also stripped her subject of her autonomy and changed the subject's own personal story as a migrant. In *Migrant Mother, Migrant Gender*, Sally Stein argues that Lange's *Migrant Mother* photograph should be reconsidered as a problematic image of women and their relationship to the home and broader world. Stein also examines the relationship between Dorothea Lange and her most famous, but longtime unnamed, subject, Florence Thompson (Figure 17). Stein details the work Bill Ganzel put into finding the people and locations photographed for the RA/FSA:

With the aid of a story in the *Modesto (California) Bee*, Ganzel located Florence Thompson and persuaded her and the same three children to pose for him in 1979 in the backyard of one daughter's home. The book culminating his wide-ranging research was the first major publication to put a name to her face. In most respects, the information supplied was sparse. Apparently wary of further national exposure, the family members offered only general remarks about the hard times they survived.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Stein, 49.



Fig. 17. Ganzel, Bill, photographer. *Florence Thompson – Migrant Mother* – and her daughters *Norma Rydlewski, Katherine McIntosh, and Ruby Sprague*, at *Norma's house*. Modesto, CA, June 1979. From the book *Dust Bowl Descent*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.

Part of what made *Migrant Mother* later become synonymous with the Great Depression experience was that the subject, Florence Thompson, was stoic, human, and relatable. Lange's photograph told a story that countless Americans could relate to, surviving hard times and motherhood. However, Lange's photograph and Thompson's lived experience varied drastically. At first glance many believe that Florence Thompson is a white woman, however she is actually Cherokee. This is a fact that Lange either did not know or knew and never corrected in the countless publications, articles, and textbooks that helped make this photograph famous. Stein writes:

Ganzel's photograph, however, offered a bit more specificity. For this unusual public portrait, Florence Thompson displayed her own restrained style by donning white slacks and a white sleeveless top adorned only by a Southwest-style squash blossom necklace. In itself, there was nothing conclusive about this detail... but for Thompson it was quite a statement of identity. During the same period, this long-obscure celebrity began making a point of her Cherokee heritage in occasional interviews with new media. Thompson also began volunteering that she always had resented Lange's famous picture and would never have allowed its being taken had she understood the way, and extent to which, it would be used, especially when she personally had gained nothing from its exposure.⁸⁸

Florence Thompson's Cherokee heritage is particularly important to acknowledge when analyzing the impact that *Migrant Mother* had on American culture and the complexities of this nation. Sally Stein explains that it is unlikely that Lange intentionally omitted Thompson's Native American ancestry and says, "From all available evidence, it does not seem that Lange ever realized she had cast a Native American for the Euro-American role of New Deal Madonna."⁸⁹ While unintentional, this omission undermined Thompson's autonomy and completely changed the world's perception of her struggles, both during and after the Great Depression. Unfortunately, there likely would have been a very different perception of Lange's *Migrant Mother* had this information been known at the time of the photograph's publication and later widespread use. Lazo's explanation of migrant archives as transient, often misunderstood, and under-documented representations of the migrant experience holds true for Lange's *Migrant Mother* as well. Florence Thompson's lived experience was very different than how she was represented in American culture, history, and narratives of the Great Depression.

Whiteness and the American identity are complicated and often highlight the racial inequalities this nation continues to grapple with into the 21st century. Stein explains, "The

⁸⁸ Stein, 51.

⁸⁹ Stein, 53.

blanket assumption of whiteness reflects the way that New Deal culture was not only most concerned about – in FDR’s words – “the forgotten man,” but equally if less vocally about the declining status of many whites. When 1930s mass media chose to focus on the plight of the poor, the poor were most often white even though minorities suffered much higher rates of poverty.”⁹⁰ This is a theme that is a significant part of the conversation surrounding immigration and America today in 2021.

It is critically important to ensure that the migrant archive allows for migrant voices to be a part of American Studies literature, scholarship, and academia:

The move toward migrant archives calls for the ongoing examination of how memory is constituted, how history is written, and how research is connected to identity. In other words, control of the archive has epistemological and political ramifications. For Americans studies to move beyond the fixed archive of an Anglo-American nation, scholars will have to undertake more multilingual work in migrant archives. Writing in languages other than English can lead scholars to alternative ways of remembering the past, new ways of naming multiple nations and communities, and even the invention of new ontologies. The writing itself – in Spanish, for example – can constitute a different archive that calls attention to the political choices of writers and also implies that they were unable or unwilling to writing in English. More than a record of social processes or a representation of experiences, the writing itself, whether in book form or scraps of paper, is a site where migrant conditions take material form.⁹¹

Lazo cites a memoir written in 1935 by a man named Luis G. Gomez titled, *Mis Memorias*, recounting his experiences crossing the border from Mexico into the United States. Copies of Gomez’s memoir were kept by his descendants, but the text was not circulated in the general public until 1991 when his grandson, “presented information about the book at a meeting of the

⁹⁰ Stein, 54.

⁹¹ Lazo, 894.

Spanish American Genealogical Association in Corpus Christi, Texas.”⁹² Making Gomez’s memoir available to a broader audience allowed for more people to understand his specific migrant experience and moved the story into a larger migrant “archive.”

In his 1995 text *Mal d’archive*, Derrida “seeks to posit a homology between the field of psychoanalysis and the archive proper.”⁹³ He writes:

But the structure of the theoretical, philosophical, scientific statement, and even when it concerns history, does not have, should not in principle have, an intrinsic and essential need for the archive, and for what binds the archive in all its forms to some proper name or to some body proper, to some (familial or national) filiation, to covenants, to secrets. It has no such need, in any case, in its relationship or in its claim to truth – in the classical sense of the term.⁹⁴

Lazo adds further analysis to Derrida’s ideas about archives by explaining that, “the scraps that might emerge from migrant archives, does not need ‘some body proper’ (an author) or some place (a national archive) for the validation that we would associate with a claim to truth.”⁹⁵

According to Lazo, migrant stories, items, and writings, such as Gomez’s memoir, deserve archivization and are critical to a holistic understanding of the migrant experience:

Given the anti-immigrant sentiments that surface repeatedly in U.S. history, the translation and public dissemination of the Gomez memoir is a necessary evil. In other words, the evil is idiomatic more than ethical. The necessity here is about political participation in U.S. society. In a footnote early in his book Derrida gestures to an important claim that he does not follow. He writes, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory.... political power derives in part from such a national institution because the archivist interprets

⁹² Lazo, 856.

⁹³ Lazo, 973.

⁹⁴ Lazo, 1000.

⁹⁵ Lazo, 1000.

meanings and associations. In some ways, the archive defines the nation, and participation in the archive is one gauge of democratization.”⁹⁶

Migrants are often viewed as “stateless” peoples; therefore, it is even more important that migrant archives are included in the field of American Studies. Without migrant archives, we miss a large piece of the American story and the human beings that inhabit these spaces are not only marginalized by American society, but also by American Studies scholarship.

We live in an internationally connected digital world. As our social media timelines, news sources, and conversations become more and more saturated with images of horrific struggles, we begin to disengage and compartmentalize these photographs. It is not that people do not care about what is happening in the world around them, it is that there is always some new crisis occurring and that apathy has become a coping method for many Americans. In her piece, *Visualizing Labour and Landscapes in China*, Maria Svensson explains that, “the sheer number of photographs can numb people.”⁹⁷ This is absolutely true of the 2019 photograph of Óscar Alberto Martínez Ramírez and his daughter Valeria. NPR’s article, *A Father and Daughter Who Drowned at the Border Put Attention on Immigration*, explains how this image initiated conversations about the immigration crisis on an international scale:

The shocking and unsettling image has drawn comparisons to other powerful photos, of the death of Aylan Kurdi, the 3-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in 2015 as his family tried to reach sanctuary in Greece, and of Omran Daqneesh, who was 5 when he was wounded in an airstrike in Aleppo.

In the same way those images focused the world's attention on the humanitarian crisis in Syria and Turkey, the intense image from the Rio Grande comes as a stark reminder of the human toll of the immigration crisis. As in those earlier cases, it

⁹⁶ Lazo, 1069.

⁹⁷ Maria Svensson, “Visualising Labour and Laboursapes in China: From Propaganda to Socially Engaged Photography” *Dog Days: Made in China Yearbook 2018*, (2019): www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvfrxqcz.27.

also shows the devastating effect strife and desperation often inflict on children and families.⁹⁸

For a while, the photo of Ramírez and his daughter was a hotly debated image and forced Americans to see the human cost of the current restrictive immigration policies. Unfortunately, this attention was short-lived and soon forgotten as people focused their attention and outrage on the next crisis, with the next horrifying image. The NPR article referenced above briefly mentions other examples of migrant photographs that dominated the news cycle and social media platforms. However, the public attention in each of these circumstances was fleeting. Whereas *Migrant Mother* came to define the experience of an entire generation and was used as one of three items to summarize the Great Depression in the Smithsonian, the photograph of Óscar and Valeria is quickly being lost to the ether, like many photographs of migrants before them.

When educators teach students about the Great Depression, they often use Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* to help students empathize with the hardships of the 1930s. It allows students a chance to experience history hands on and make observations that otherwise are impossible, or less relatable, through textbooks. Photographs are a window to the past and a critical tool for fully understanding history. However, they also need to be better utilized to understand the present. The photograph of Óscar and his daughter Valeria is painful to look at, but it conveys the absolute desperation countless immigrants face. This image should receive the same response as Lange's but does not for various reasons. Viewer fatigue, political polarization, and othering are just a few of those reasons. By slowing down and taking the time to discuss images like that of Óscar and Valeria, we can facilitate conversations about immigration and hopefully shift the national attitudes about immigration towards more inclusivity. Treating this

⁹⁸ Chappell, 2019.

photograph with the reverence that *Migrant Mother* receives would be a step in the right direction.

In many ways, *Migrant Mother* is representative of the field of American Studies. Surface level viewers see *Migrant Mother* as a white woman struggling to provide for her children. However, Lange's subject, Florence Thompson, was a Cherokee woman with children from multiple fathers, who was toiling through the Great Depression. The *Migrant Mother* photograph is complicated, just like the field of American Studies. Scholars often joke that American Studies is in a perpetual identity crisis because this academic field is so broad and America is incredibly difficult to define in simple terms.

Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* garnered newspaper readers' attention at the time it was published but has since grown to become a defining image of the American Great Depression. We do not know how these modern photographs of migrants will be viewed in the coming years. It can be assumed that contemporary migrant photographs will follow one of two paths: they will be forgotten almost entirely as attention on these images continues to fade, or they will gain a *Migrant Mother*-like reverence in the public eye. The migrant crisis globally is one of the most pressing issues of this time and I hope that history adds perspective and cultural significance to these photographs. I hope that future historians and social scientists include these photographs in textbooks, but this path seems more unlikely given the already rapidly fading attention these images receive. We can confidently expect this pattern to continue.

Americans have a difficult time confronting the mistakes of this country. Instances of America violating human rights, betraying our own Constitution and principles of democracy are hard to come to terms with. We want to think of this country as Winthrop's "city upon a hill" and

a beacon of freedom. Admitting that this has not always been the case is uncomfortable for many Americans. By using photographs to facilitate conversations about these ugly pieces of our history we can begin to gain a better and more accurate understanding of the American experience from a nonwhite, migrant perspective. Documentary photography is a crucial tool for gaining a holistic understanding American culture and history. Singular images can come to define entire eras of American history and these images are almost universally accessible to people with various levels of background knowledge. Photographs are powerful tools for understanding both the past and present from all perspectives. They are a democratic medium and give voice to those who may not otherwise be heard.

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