

Cover essay

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This photograph was made in 1936 during the height of the Great Depression. The photographer Dorothea Lange had been hired by President Roosevelt's Resettlement

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Administration to document agricultural poverty in California. She had spent a month traveling and photographing around the state when she saw this encampment of pea pickers by the side of the road in Nipomo. The result became her most well-known photograph, and the most famous picture of the depression. In 1960 she remembered the day:

I saw and approached the hungry and desperate mother, as if drawn by a magnet. I do not remember how I explained my presence or my camera to her, but I do remember she asked me no questions. I made five exposures, working closer and closer from the same direction. I did not ask her name or her history. She told me her age, that she was thirty-two. She said that they had been living on frozen vegetables from the surrounding fields, and birds that the children killed. She had just sold the tires from her car to buy food. There she sat in that lean-to tent with her children huddled around her, and seemed to know that my pictures might help her, and so she helped me. There was a sort of equality about it.¹

What her memory—and the photograph itself—fails to reveal was that this woman, Florence Owens Thompson, had seven, not three, children. Other photographs from the series include her 17-year-old daughter, but the picture that became famous as one of the greatest documentary photographs of all time was in fact manipulated in subtle ways to fulfill Roosevelt's mission of generating sympathy for the dispossessed and support for his New Deal programs. Lange not only worked to edit out members of this large family, she positioned the mother and children in a quite traditional artistic composition reminiscent of a 'Madonna

¹ Dorothea Lange, *Popular Photography*, February 1960.

with Angels'. The children, who in other images are standing around staring at the photographer, are in the work that became known as 'Migrant Mother' each helplessly draped on one of her shoulders. At the same time Lange knew that the educated viewers who would see this image would be much more likely to identify with a typical middle-class family size. Contrary to what many people think are the obligations of documentary images, Lange surely encouraged the highly effective gesture of the mother's right hand. In the other pictures from the set, the mother is holding her infant with both arms; with this gesture she had to reach out to grasp the pole in the foreground as a way to support the infant's head, and we know that Lange retouched the final photograph to omit the

resulting visual distraction of her thumb. While these differences from the first photograph she took that day distance it from what we might call 'purely' documentary work by interpreting what she saw in terms of well-known Christian imagery, Lange surely expresses a profound truth about the children's reality, one that she hoped might work to mitigate their plight.

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