

Photography as Witness

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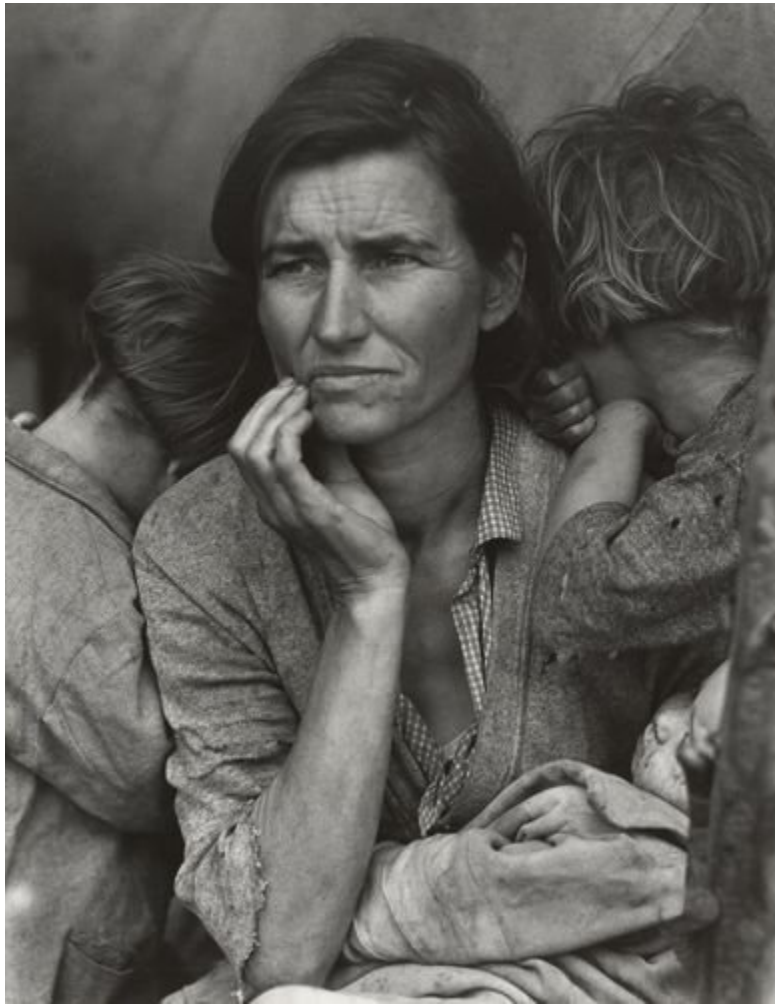
Photography is often perceived as an objective, and therefore unbiased, medium for documenting and preserving historic moments and national and world histories, and for visualizing and narrating news stories. But the choices made by a photographer—including how the image is composed, what is left in or out of the frame, and how it may be cropped, edited, or otherwise altered after it is taken—introduce a point-of-view into the photograph and inevitably impact how we receive and understand images. Such considerations raise critical questions about how willingly we accept any one photograph as a reflection of definitive truth.

Photographs can bear witness to history and even serve as catalysts for change. They can foster sympathy and raise awareness or, alternatively, offer critical commentary on historical people, places, and events. Throughout the history of the medium, photographers have aimed to capture the essence of events they witnessed—though the question of the trustworthiness of their images is always up for debate.

Dorothea Lange, from the Studio to the Street

Though Dorothea Lange had been operating a successful portrait studio in San Francisco since 1919, she was moved by the homeless and unemployed people she saw standing in breadlines as the Great Depression began to take its toll, and she started photographing them. These photographs led to her hiring by the federal Farm Security Administration (FSA), formed during the Great Depression to raise awareness of and provide aid to impoverished farmers. Lange closely identified with the FSA's mission, which was to document the effects of the Depression on Americans, bringing attention to their struggles so that such events would never recur. Due in part to her work with the FSA, Lange became known as a pioneer of documentary photography, a classification she disliked because she felt the term did not reflect the passionate social motivations that fueled her work.

Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California



Dorothea Lange, 1936

Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California

Dorothea Lange took this photograph in 1936, while employed by the U.S. government's Farm Security Administration (FSA) program. In Nipomo, California, Lange came across Florence Owens Thompson and her children in a camp filled with field workers whose livelihoods were devastated by the failure of the pea crops. Recalling her encounter with Thompson years later, she said, "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." One photograph from that shoot, now known as *Migrant Mother*, was widely circulated to magazines and newspapers and became a symbol of the plight of migrant farm workers during the Great Depression.

As Lange described Thompson's situation, "She and her children had been living on frozen vegetables from the field and wild birds the children caught. The pea crop had frozen; there was no work. Yet they could not move on, for she had just sold the tires from the car to buy food." However, Thompson later contested Lange's account. When a reporter interviewed her in the 1970s, she insisted that she and Lange did not speak to each other, nor did she sell the tires of her car. Thompson said that Lange had either confused her for another farmer or embellished what she had understood of her situation in order to make a better story.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. According to the text, how is photography often perceived as a medium for documenting and preserving historic moments?

- A. It is often perceived as an untrustworthy medium.
- B. It is often perceived as an abstract and unrealistic medium.
- C. It is often perceived as objective and unbiased medium.
- D. It is often perceived as a controversial medium.

2. The text describes how and why Dorothea Lange began photographing Americans affected by the Great Depression. Why did Lange want to photograph Americans affected by the Depression?

- A. She wanted to receive more steady work and payment from the Farm Security Administration.
- B. She wanted to make migrant workers and unemployed people famous to help them get jobs and money.
- C. She wanted to document the struggles of Americans during the Depression to raise awareness of their hardships.
- D. She wanted to gain fame and riches for her skill in documentary photography.

3. The text states that the trustworthiness of photographers' images is always up for debate. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

- A. Dorothea Lange is considered a pioneer of documentary photography, but she felt the term did not reflect the passionate social motivations behind her work.
- B. The Farm Security Administration hired Dorothea Lange to document the effects of the Great Depression on Americans and bring attention to their struggles.
- C. Photographs can bear witness to history, serve as catalysts for change, foster sympathy, raise awareness, or offer critical commentary on people, places, and events in history.
- D. Dorothea Lange's account of the story behind her *Migrant Mother* photograph does not match the account of Florence Owens Thompson, the subject of that photograph.

4. Based on the text and the photograph, what did Lange's *Migrant Mother* photograph communicate about the subject, Florence Owens Thompson, and her family?

- A. the desperation and hardship Thompson faced
- B. the hope Thompson held for a better future
- C. the need Thompson had for new tires for her car, so the family could move
- D. the pride Thompson had in her family's strength and willpower

5. What is the main idea of this text?

A. Photographers like Dorothea Lange have aimed to capture the essence of events they've witnessed, but their choices and motivations have inevitably introduced unreliability or a point-of-view into their photographs.

B. Dorothea Lange was a successful photographer whose mission was to document the effects of the Great Depression on Americans, especially by focusing on the plight of migrant workers.

C. Photography can always be relied upon as an objective and trustworthy source of information, and can foster sympathy or raise awareness for people, places, and events in history.

D. While Dorothea Lange provided one description of her encounter with the subject of her famous *Migrant Mother* photograph, the subject of that photograph gave a different account of their encounter.