

Picturing the Migrant Father of the Dust Bowl

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Abstract

In the most iconic image of the 1930s American Dust Bowl—Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother—one figure is conspicuously absent: the father, the male figure in the family unit. The same can be said for our historical understanding of the Great Plains Dust Bowl, whereby an analysis of the role of manhood and masculinity, of the representation of men during an anthropogenic environmental disaster is largely lacking. In this paper I examine how men and patterns of gender at large were represented during the Dust Bowl through analysing the photographs of the federal Farm Security Administration (FSA).

Keywords: Masculinity; Gender; Environment; Photography; Migration.

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Figure 1. Dorothea Lange, Dust storm. It was conditions of this sort which forced many farmers to abandon the area. Spring 1935. New Mexico, April 1935. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-002812-E.

1 Introduction

A haunting image shows a man, alone, with his land in the air around him. Taken by Dorothea Lange in 1935, the photograph seems to capture at once the movement of a billowing dust storm and the stasis of a farmer who is helpless in the face of his life and livelihood crumbling away. Looking at this image (figure 1) of the Dust Bowl—an environmental crisis in the mid-1930s across the Southern Plains of the United States in which drought, crop failure, and aridification left millions of acres of farmland barren and hundreds of thousands of people displaced—evokes many of the themes that have come to be associated with this event of mass migration and ecological disaster: destruction, devastation, and isolation. This vision of the people and environment of the 1930s American west, the visual language that has been used in the following decades to evoke the suffering of the time, has been shaped fundamentally by the photographs of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), of which Lange's image is one of the earliest products.

Created amidst the profusion of 'alphabet agencies' that spawned from President Roosevelt's grand New Deal policy, the FSA sought to combat rural poverty by relocating farmers from 'worn-out' land to fertile new pastures and instilling sustainable farming practices. What the FSA is perhaps best remembered for, however, is not its agricultural or resettlement programmes but instead the vast photographic project that came from the publicity arm of the agency. Produced on behalf of the euphemistically titled Historical Section, the FSA photographs were intended to catalogue the dire conditions of rural America in the 1930s in order to justify the expensive and expansive agricultural reforms that the agency was proposing. Their influence immediately bled into other contemporary cultural products. The other pillar around which popular cultural memory of the Dust Bowl is built—John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—was itself informed and shaped by the FSA photographs. Steinbeck was invited to spend time leafing through the vast number of images of environmental refugees, abandoned farms, and farm workers in its collection.¹ And later the FSA was eager to send John Ford hundreds of reference images in preparation for his classic cinematic adaptation of the novel.² The legacy of the FSA's photographic programme is long and central to how the Dust Bowl has been thought about, read, and seen.

Probably the most famous FSA photograph, indeed maybe one of the most famous photographs ever, is another of Lange's images. The so-called 'Migrant Mother'—or, to give it the title that Lange intended, 'Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo,

1. For a comprehensive account of the relationship between Steinbeck's work and the FSA photographs see: James Swensen, *Picturing Migrants: The Grapes of Wrath and New Deal Documentary Photography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015).

2. Mary Jane Appel, "The Duplicate File: New Insights into the FSA," *Archives of American Art Journal*, 54, 1 (2015): 15–16.

California’—shows a woman cradling her baby whilst two other children bury their heads into her shoulders. The symbolism of dignity in the face of destitution and the woman’s Madonna-like embrace has led to the image being abstracted to represent the troubles of the Depression in America at large or even motherhood as a whole.³ But, as Linda Gordon reminds us, Lange’s images and those of the FSA photographic project as a whole were utilising the skill and artistry of its photographers in service of the specific political purpose of exposing rural poverty.⁴ The director of the photographic project, Roy Stryker, wanted to introduce ‘Americans to America’ and specifically to the harsh reality of the lives of millions of its citizens. It was fundamental to him that this was to be done through steely sociological documents rather than an artistic eye.⁵ Thus, although they are undeniably moving and human images, the photographs are also the record of the specific intentions of an agency and its photographers in the 1930s, visually elucidating the culture, projects, and benefits of the FSA. The photographs speak then both of the subjects—of migrants, farmworkers, communities, and the land—as well as the institutional powers that were surveying them.

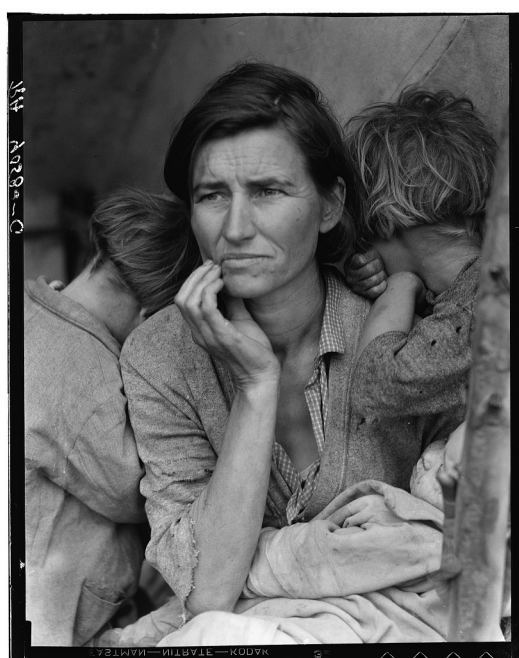


Figure 2. Dorothea Lange, Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, California, March 1936. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-009058-C.

Yet, the Migrant Mother is also interesting for what, or rather whom, is *not* shown. Where is the migrant father? Lange herself of course took many pictures of men—as farmers, fathers, and migrants too—as did the other FSA photographers. But whereas photos such as the Migrant Mother have been seen to speak to ideals, symbols, and practices of femininity, the masculinity of the FSA photos has not been explored in detail.⁶ Nor, indeed, has masculinity in the Southern Plains been analysed in

3. David Company, “Migrant Mother, 1936,” in *Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing*, ed. Alona Pardo (Munich: Prestel, 2018), 20–25.

4. Linda Gordon, “Dorothea Lange: The Photographer as Agricultural Sociologist,” *The Journal of American History*, 93, 3 (2006): 689–727.

5. Roy Emerson Stryker & Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America 1935-1943 As Seen in the FSA Photographs* (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 9.

6. For brief exceptions see Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 38–39; Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: Norton, 2009), 245–246. For recent general examinations of gender (which is to say, in the existing literature, of women) in the Dust Bowl see: Christina D. Weber, “Dust Covered Privilege: White Women’s Experience of the Dust Bowl,” *Humanity & Society*, 45, 4 (2021): 556–

great depth. Early studies of ‘American’ manhood in the 1990s mainly focused on the Northeast and whilst regional analyses of masculinity in the South and the far West have developed since the Great Plains is still largely neglected.⁷

By turning our attention to the way masculinity, or, more accurately, masculinities are represented and encoded in these pictures of the Dust Bowl region of America we can better understand how the federal government saw rural men in the wake of an environment disaster, who was being blamed for it, of how men’s place within the family was shaken by land loss and migration, and the vision for collaborative relationships to the land that the FSA envisioned. The FSA photographs of the Dust Bowl present a project to break down manhood by chastising farming men for their individualistic, naïve, and unsustainable agricultural practices—practices presented as a hangover from a bygone era of the American west. The FSA would then rebuild men of the Plains in their own image—as rational, collaborative men taking tutelage from its experts in Washington. As we shall see, this ideal of the FSA to do away with the old image of the lone man on the range was not always followed through by the photographers themselves who allowed some romanticism to linger in their images.

Nowhere, however, in the FSA photographs is there an attempt to refashion men’s fundamental role within the family or society. By focusing on men’s patriarchal position as something to be protected and restored, the FSA sought to maintain and in fact reinforce existing power structures of gender. In this sense, the radicalism of the resettlement plans and financial cost of the FSA belies its relative conservatism in regards to gender. And whilst I do not have the space to discuss it in the detail that it requires, the FSA also acquiesced to pre-existing social structures of race.⁸ We have then masculinity in these photographs being visualised in two interconnected ways. On the one hand, the practises, knowledge, and skills of men are being remoulded to make men modern and break away from a destructive pioneer mentality in which new fertile pastures would always be available to exploit. On the other, this refashioning of masculinity is presented as a necessary intervention in order to shore up men’s patriarchal power for the good of social order and cohesion in a time of uncertainty brought about by an environmental disaster.

2 Working Men, Naïve Men

The FSA photographs, and their meanings for masculinity, begin with two men: Roy Stryker and Rexford Guy Tugwell. Stryker was born in Kansas in 1893 but grew up in Colorado on land that his father farmed. In the early 1920s Stryker moved to New York and studied at Columbia University where he

⁵⁷⁵; Abigail Manzella, *Migrating Fictions: Gender, Race, and Citizenship in U.S. Internal Displacements* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2018), 67–108.

7. For two classic 1990s studies see: Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) and E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993). For an example of regional studies of masculinity in the South see Craig Thompson Friend (ed.), *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South Since Reconstruction* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2009). In the West, cowboys and gold rushers get most of the attention and states like Kansas and Oklahoma are often overlooked. For but two examples see: Jacqueline Moore, “‘Them’s Fighting Words’: Violence, Masculinity, and the Texas Cowboy in the Late Nineteenth Century,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, 13, 1 (2014): 28–55; and the excellent Christopher Herbert, *Gold Rush Manliness: Race and Gender on the Pacific Slope* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018). Studies of masculinity that overlap with the Southern Plains tend to be contemporary and sociological and/or dealing with agriculture: Tony Silva, “Masculinity Attitudes Across Rural, Suburban, and Urban Areas in the United States,” *Men and Masculinities*, 25, 3 (2022): 377–399; J.L. Anderson, “‘You’re a Bigger Man’: Technology and Agrarian Masculinity in Postwar America,” *Agricultural History*, 94, 1 (2020): 4–23.
8. For the definitive account of Black people in the FSA archive see Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992). For the specific instances of racist FSA practices see Jane Adams & D. Gorton, “This Land Ain’t My Land: The Eviction of Sharecroppers by the Farm Security Administration,” *Agricultural History*, 83, 3 (2009): 323–351; John Henry Scott with Cleo Scott Brown, *Witness to the Truth: My Struggle for Human Rights in Louisiana* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003); Jason Reblando, “Farm Security Administration Photographs of Greenbelt Towns: Selling Utopia During the Depression,” *Utopian Studies*, 25, 1 (2014): 56–57. Lange was the most prodigious in capturing the reality of Mexican, Japanese, Filipino, and Chinese farm labourers, especially in California. See Richard Street, *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 186–248.

met Tugwell, an economics professor and later key advisor to President Roosevelt.⁹ It was whilst at Columbia, meandering towards a doctorate that never came, that Stryker first developed an instinct for the power of photographs. It began with a frustration at the lack of knowledge about ‘real’ rural America. “I got impatient because the bright boys of Columbia had never seen a rag doll, a corn tester, or an old dasher churn. I dug up pictures to show city boys things that every farm boy knows about.”¹⁰ At the same time, Stryker was entranced by the gritty social photographs of Lewis Hine, particularly those documenting the reality of child labour across pre-First World War America. The public exposure of these pictures was instrumental in bringing about legal changes to working conditions. Hine’s work showed Stryker that photographs could be sociologically informative, honest, and, most importantly, politically effective. Stryker’s passion for the didactic use of photographs caught the attention of Tugwell. ‘Roy’, Stryker recalled Tugwell telling him, “you’ll never make an economist. But you can teach in another way—a better way—the way you know, with pictures.”¹¹

Tugwell remembered this when he was appointed director of the newly formed Resettlement Administration (RA), the precursor to the FSA, by Roosevelt in 1935. The RA was radical in its intentions: distributing the best part of a billion dollars in loans and grants to farmers, retiring up to one hundred million acres of ‘worn-out’ farm land, and resettling hundreds of thousands of farmers on fresh, more productive pastures.¹² The widespread perception of the RA as ‘socialistic’ made it deeply unpopular, ideologically and fiscally, in Congress; so much so that Tugwell left the Resettlement Administration in 1937 and the RA was subsumed into the Department of Agriculture as the watered-down FSA.¹³ In the meantime, however, Tugwell knew that he needed a popular mandate for the project if it couldn’t be found in Congress. Stryker was brought in to illuminate the ills of rural folk and bring their suffering to the attention of middle-class, urban Americans, in the spirit of Hine’s shocking exposés. Tugwell and Stryker had collaborated before on a photographic-cum-economic project in the form of the 1925 textbook *American Economic Life*, for which Tugwell wrote the text and Stryker provided ample explanatory photographic illustrations. The book is informative for it reveals the beginnings of the ideological framework through which Stryker later approached capturing the Depression and the Dust Bowl.

American Economic Life, textually and pictorially, challenges the romanticism of old forms of labour and agriculture and calls for new expertise to pull the rural poor out of their slump. In America’s heartland, Tugwell writes, “diseased or feeble-minded strains have for years intermarried, in remote and secluded districts or among the outcast poor; the result is a generation of children that are doomed from the start to misery.”¹⁴ What these people need is an injection of knowledge and up-to-date practices to save the next generation. In Tugwell’s mind, this will come from the government or philanthropic institutions—which is to say external from the rural poor themselves. Stryker provides proof of the effect such knowledge can have, showing side-by-side photographic comparisons of, for example, irrigation projects initiated by the Department of Agriculture that had transformed barren scrub land into neat rows of fruit trees: “man’s efforts to conquer nature have borne picturesque fruit” the caption reads.¹⁵ It is with how the book reappropriates Lewis Hine’s photographs, however, that the meanings for manhood of Stryker and Tugwell’s vision becomes clear.

In the 1920s, Hine began a project cataloguing the heroism of male industrial labour. Instead of fetishising the machine in the modern age, Hine’s photographs ask the viewer to celebrate the men

9. F. Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade: Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 3–18.

10. Stryker & Wood, *In this Proud Land*, 11.

11. *Ibid.*, 11.

12. Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 266–272.

13. Although many of the photos I look at here were taken under the aegis of the RA, which is to say during 1935–1937, I refer throughout to the whole collection as just the ‘FSA photographs’. This is for simplicity’s sake and follows common convention.

14. Rexford Guy Tugwell, Thomas Munro, & Roy Stryker, *American Economic Life: And the Means of Its Improvement* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), 35.

15. Tugwell, Munro, & Stryker, *American Economic Life*, 140.

with the brain and brawn to fashion and operate them. Working men in his pictures are active agents, they are skilled, they are “our soldiers, our sustainers, the very parents of our life.”¹⁶ His images also highlight the power of the caption in dictating the meaning of a photograph. In one set of picture and caption (figure 3) Hine bestows godly powers upon the working man. It is not the hammer, the power station, nor the train itself, the caption tells us, that propels the system forward. It is the work of a skilled man whose energetic work radiates out from him.

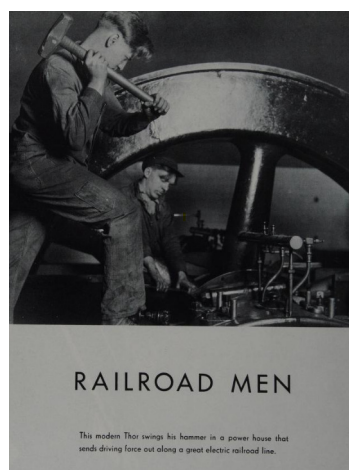


Figure 3. From Lewis Hine, *Men at Work: Photographic Studies of Modern Men and Machines*. New York: Dover Publications (1932) unpaginated.

In contrast to the original intention of Hine’s photographs to valorise working men, Stryker instead uses them in *American Economic Life* to celebrate the rationalisation of production that machines allow. Below one image of Hine’s showing a man tinkering on a machine, Stryker writes: “The modern lathe has made possible the speedy completion of operations which were formerly accomplished only by tedious hand processes.”¹⁷ Stryker’s images and captions serve then to deemphasise men’s labour. He sees men’s work and skill as something to be organised, managed, modernised, and improved by expertise without considering that the act of work itself could be, as Hine presents it, of value to men’s sense of self and pride. This, coupled with Tugwell’s paternalistic tone taken towards the ‘diseased or feeble-minded strains’ of the rural poor who needed external intervention, reflects the broad message of *American Economic Life*. Using photographs to convey this message may have started for Stryker here in 1925 but it reached its biggest audience through the vector of the FSA a decade later.

The visual output of the RA and FSA relating to the Dust Bowl can be split into two themes: images of destitution and destruction and then images of the work the FSA has done to fix things. In the first instance, farming men are portrayed as helpless in the face of the environmental disaster around them. In the second, they have had their dignity and livelihoods restored by the work of FSA programmes.

Consider these two posters produced for the RA by husband-and-wife Ben and Bernarda Bryson Shahn (Shahn himself was also a photographer for the FSA programme). In Ben Shahn’s poster (figure 4), a glum farmer looks out dejectedly with the news of dust storms wreaking havoc across the Plains on his lap and the dried-out relic of his farm behind him. In his state of desperation, he is oblivious to his son (?) trapped behind the window. Shahn presents the farmer as figure not without dignity but still as a man who has suffered and has no way out on his own. Bernarda Bryson Shahn’s image (figure 5) shows the new start that the RA has given this victim by restoring the land to its proper use. With the help of the RA, the slouched and despondent man has been ennobled and stands proudly by his modest holding. An implication of these posters is that the Dust Bowl farmer, worthy of our sympathy as he is, has in part caused the mess that he is in. This was certainly the conclusion reached

16. Lewis Hine, *Men at Work: Photographic Studies of Modern Men and Machines* (New York: Dover Publications, 1932), unpaginated.

17. Tugwell, Munro, & Stryker, *American Economic Life*, 345. Stryker’s use of Hine’s images was brought to my attention by James Curtis, *Mind’s Eye, Mind’s Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 8.



Figure 4 (left). Ben Shahn, *Years of Dust*, 1937. Lithograph. New York: MoMA. 147.1947.

Figure 5 (right). Bernarda Bryson Shahn, *A Mule and a Plow*, c.1935. Lithograph. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums. M22839.

by the Great Plains Committee in 1936, commissioned by Roosevelt to investigate the causes of the drought and wind erosion that in turn precipitated the Dust Bowl. “The Plainsman cannot assume,” the report states in a sharp rebuke, “that whatever is for his immediate good is also good for everyone [...] He must realize that he cannot ‘conquer Nature’—he must live with her on her own terms, making use of and conserving resources which can no longer be considered inexhaustible.”¹⁸ Things have quickly changed from when Stryker used a Department of Agriculture’s image of fruit fields in *American Economic Life* to show the bounty of ‘man’s effort to conquer nature’.

The updated message—do not have hubristic intentions to dominate the natural world—was taken and spread across the country through the most significant documentary film funded by the RA, Pare Lorentz’s 1936 *The Plow that Broke the Plains*. Throughout the film the narrator repeats the description of the Plains: “A country of high winds and sun. High winds and sun.”¹⁹ The implication being that they—the homesteader, Plainsman, and farmer—should have known better than coming to farm here. At the same time, the central villain in the piece is in fact mechanisation, specifically the tractor. Lorentz cuts between the march of troops and tanks in the First World War and tractors across the Plains to emphasise the destruction wrought by industrial farming. Far from being in control of machinery, as Hine’s men are, the simple farmer is passenger and accomplice to the hungry tractor. These men are beholden to machines rather than masters of them and that naïve trust is their downfall. Yet, if the diverse outputs of the RA—posters, films, and photographs—suggest that the ordinary Dust Bowl farmer has contributed to his decline, there is still hope. The RA is here to intervene and get men back on their feet—whether through giving loans, offering technical instruction, or providing new pastures on which to not make the same mistakes as last time.

This intervention not only represented new knowledge and skills but also a different kind of man. Tugwell himself embodied the sort of values and skills that Dust Bowl men needed to pick up. Arthur Rothstein’s 1936 photo of a meeting between local farmers and representatives of federal agricultural agencies (figure 6) in south-eastern Colorado—at the very centre of the Dust Bowl—is one of the most overtly propagandised images in the FSA collection. We see Tugwell sitting on the ground, relaxed, in sincere dialogue with a local farmer. The intention is to show Tugwell, and by extension the RA as a whole, as in touch with rural needs. Tugwell is literally on the same level. At the same time, however,

18. Great Plains Committee, *The Future of the Great Plains* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), 6.

19. Pare Lorentz (dir.), *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (Washington: Resettlement Administration, 1936).

the two men's differences are shown through their clothes. The nameless farmer wears his denim dungarees and crumpled hat; Tugwell his crisp head-to-toe all-white outfit. Through his clothes and relaxed demeanour, Tugwell represents expertise, rationality, and control. Clearly, this outfit would not be practical for hands-on farm work. It does, however, intimate at Tugwell's managerial and intellectual credentials for telling farming men of the Dust Bowl how to do their job properly.



Figure 6. Arthur Rothstein, Dr. Tugwell confers with farmer on lawn of courthouse. Springfield, Colorado, July/August 1936. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-005243-E.

Throughout the FSA archive we can see photos of meetings between local agents of the FSA and farmers. In each one there is this same divide between the men in white shirts (always white shirts) and the beneficiary of their expertise in farming clothes. These photographs and the clothing depicted in them represent a unilateral exchange of information. Knowledge flows from the man in the suit and tie to the man in the old work wear. Russell Lee captured this process in action in Kansas (figure 7). The contrast of clothing is here too which adds to the paternal, teacher-student relationship being fostered in the classroom atmosphere of the room—pencil out, chalkboard at the ready for explanations. But note too the ghostly appearance of a woman peeking through the door—perhaps the farmer's wife? Despite the power imbalance between the farmer and agent they both belong in this manly realm. Women, however, were locked out of holding such knowledge about farming and instead were instructed by the FSA on matters of the home.²⁰ This exclusion of women is somewhat ironic given that the work of women—both that which was financially remunerated and that which was not—during the disaster of the Dust Bowl was essential to keeping their families and their husbands afloat.²¹ At the same time, it was perfectly in keeping with the aim of the FSA to facilitate the maintenance of male power in the family.

3 Family Men

Men in 1930s America, during the Great Depression at large, were feeling uprooted and powerless. Contemporary sociologist Mirra Komarovsky charted the effects of unemployment on men. She

20. For a parallel women's meeting see LC-USF34-034085-D.

21. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, "Separation and Sorrow: A Farm Woman's Life, 1935-1941," *Agricultural History*, 67, 2 (1993): 185-196; Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994).



Figure 7. Russell Lee, FSA (Farm Security Administration) supervisor conferring with client about farm plan. Sheridan County, Kansas, August 1939. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-034093-D.

found that what was most disconcerting for men was their changed relationship to their wives. They felt embarrassed by having to rely on their wives financially. They were more acutely affected, however, by the intense emotional isolation that economic stress brought. Komarovsky identifies common anxieties from such men being: “when money goes, love flies out the window;” “when you are not working, you do not get much attention;” “she gets mad at me when I tell her that I want more love.”²² Whilst Komarovsky’s study was not of the Dust Bowl specifically, going back to Lange’s image of the lone man (figure 1), this sense of isolation and detachment is clearly represented in the Dust Bowl too. In the FSA photos of the Dust Bowl region, destitute men are often pictured alone and very rarely in a complete family portrait. If they are, it is usually with just their children and not their wife, as in Arthur Rothstein’s seminal image of the Dust Bowl (figure 8). The missing mother in this image reads as a companion piece to the absent father in Lange’s *Migrant Mother*. What is more significant, however, is the presence of the two young sons, walking aimlessly with no destination in sight. What sort of men, the viewer is asked, will these boys grow up to be if this present situation persists? How will they be able to fulfil their manhood and role as provider and protector for the family? They are, symbolically, the same boy in Ben Shahn’s poster: trapped with no way out.

The preservation of men’s role in the family was thus of paramount concern at this time. Historians of gender have long noted that throughout the development of new welfare provisions and in labour movements during the 1930s and 1940s economic gain was consistently sacrificed in favour of the maintenance of masculine power. Barbara Melosh argues that the New Deal was unique because it was a liberal reform movement that not only did not incorporate feminism but actually rolled back the progress of female labour by reasserting women’s place in the home for the good of the family and, by extension, the nation.²³ Welfare and union benefits were lobbied, by working men themselves, to be attached to waged labour rather than being positioned as a right. They were, therefore, a privilege of straight, able-bodied white manly labour rather than available for all citizens.²⁴ And as benefits were

22. Mirra Komarovsky, *The Unemployed Man and his Family— The Effect of Unemployment upon the Status of the Man in Fifty-Nine Families* (New York: Dryden Press, 1940), 14.

23. Barbara Melosh, *Engendering Culture: Manhood and Womanhood in New Deal Public Art and Theater* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 1–5. See too Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 157–178.

24. See Alice Kessler-Harris, “Measures for Masculinity: The American Labor Movement and Welfare State Policy during the Great Depression,” in *Masculinities in Politics and War: Gendering Modern History*, ed. Stefan Dudink et al. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 220–237; Margot Canaday, “Building a Straight State: Sexuality and Social Citizenship under the 1944 G.I. Bill,” *The Journal of American History*, 90, 3 (2003): 935–957.



Figure 8. Arthur Rothstein, Farmer and sons walking in the face of a dust storm. Cimarron County, Oklahoma, April 1936. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-004052.

funnelled through the head of the household, husbands and fathers could maintain their financial power over their dependents.

The FSA photographs attempt to show the remarkable effect that the agency's intervention had in restoring the health and prosperity to families affected by dust storms. In the FSA photographs that are commonly reproduced smiles are hard to come by. But on returning to Kansas in 1939 to see the results of FSA projects, Russell Lee found many happy faces. Of all the FSA photographs I have seen this one has by far the most contented and carefree atmosphere (figure 9). The mother and daughters look healthy, relaxed, and comfortable. But it is the caption that is crucial here. For the description makes clear that this mother and her daughters are at ease and smiling *because* their husband and father has been a recipient of FSA aid. This woman and her daughters are nameless and defined in relation to their husband and father who in turn is defined in the caption by his association with the FSA.

But, in the wake of an environmental disaster, the FSA did not just seek to rebalance men's relationship to the land and their families but also to one another. The ire of conservative critics towards the 'socialism' of the FSA was not just generated by the massive spending and land (re)distribution. It also came as a result of the communal and collaborative domestic and working spirit that it was trying to socially engineer. This objective was most evident in the three model towns built by the FSA in Ohio, Maryland, and Wisconsin around the ideals of cooperative businesses, affordable housing, and communal spaces.²⁵ In these new spaces repartitioning the land went hand in hand with attempts to reshape social interactions. The same spirit carried through to the FSA's plans for agriculture.

The Dust Bowl was, in the mind of the Great Plains Committee, the result of individualistic farming practices leading to disastrous collective consequences.²⁶ This indicated to the FSA that communal practices of land use, as dictated by the FSA itself, was the way forward to protect land, livelihoods, and families. In contrast to earlier photographs of men alone and engulfed by dust, photographs from the late 1930s often stressed men coming together, to great effect. Russell Lee again managed to find more smiling faces when he shot a series of images in south-western Kansas of a tenant farmer, Mr. Wright,

25. Reblando, "Farm Security Administration Photographs of Greenbelt Towns," 52–86.

26. Great Plains Committee, *The Future of the Great Plains*, 11.



Figure 9. Russell Lee, Wife of FSA client with her two daughters in garden. Kaffir corn in background is used as windbreak, Sheridan County, Kansas. August 1939. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection LC-USF34-034111-D.

and his landlord, Mr. Johnson. We find them proudly showing off their new irrigation system together, its pump, their digging for it, and the crops it has nourished.²⁷ Much seems to have changed from the early days of the Dust Bowl. In a sinister image, Dorothea Lange captured an Oklahoma landlord who, with a glint in his eye, admits that “In 1934 I had four renters, and I didn’t make anything. I bought tractors on the money the government give me, and I got shet of my renters.”²⁸ If Lange found highly individualistic landlords at the beginning of the Dust Bowl, Lee is showing us that things are different now. A collaborative relationship between tenant and landlord has been fostered by the FSA programmes. The men’s collaboration is visually emphasised by their physical closeness and touch (figure 10). Having survived the upheaval of a psychologically, socially, and financially devastating environmental disaster, these men are shown as having come out the other side reformed, ready to embrace working with one another for a more sustainable future.

It is actually unusual that we know these two men’s names. The identity of many of the most famous subjects of the FSA photos—such as the Migrant Mother (Florence Thompson) and Arthur Rothstein’s Dust Bowl Father (Arthur Cobble)—only came to be known decades later.²⁹ More often than not, in the case of the photographs of the Dust Bowl region, those who get to have their name recorded in the captions are FSA clients (see Mr. Wright). Whilst some people were left anonymous to preserve their dignity there certainly is also a sense amongst the photographs that engaging with the FSA is presented as a means of restoring identity, pride, and personhood.

Yet, this was not necessarily the perception of the men of the Dust Bowl themselves. Between 1940 and 1941, two academics from New York—Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin—interviewed inhabitants of the FSA’s migrant camps in California. One interviewee, Tom Higginbotham from Oklahoma, gives a different picture to the rosy one represented in Russell Lee’s photographs. When asked why

27. LC-USF33-012398-M1/2, LC-USF33-012399-M1/2/3/4/5, LC-USF33-012400-M1/2/3/4/5, LC-USF33-012401-M1/2/3/4/5, LC-USF34-034123-D.

28. LC-USF34-018172.

29. Photographer Bill Ganzel tracked down these Dust Bowl icons and captured them again in the late 1970s. Bill Ganzel, *Dust Bowl Descent* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).



Figure 10. Russell Lee, Cooperation in irrigation well. Mr. Johnson and Mr. Wright, FSA (Farm Security Administration) clients, Syracuse, Kansas, August 1939. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF33-012401-M3.

he's in California, Tom answers judiciously: "It might be called your fault, it might be called somebody else's y'know."³⁰ But if it was his fault, his mistake lay, he believes, in trusting the government. He had accurately reported the size of his land and the government (presumably the RA or FSA) forced him to half his acreage of cotton growth in order to preserve a portion of his farm's soil. Moreover, the Public Works Administration enforced a price of crops—in Tom's case potatoes—that was less than they cost to grow. He saw the product of his labour wasted, rotting in the field because of the implementation of seemingly arbitrary measures of fiscal and environmental protection. He clearly felt himself to be a victim not of his own ignorant ways but instead of intense drought exacerbated by political incompetence. The effect personally was, if we sense beyond Tom's reserved manner, devastating. "It tore up the family" he plainly states. His oldest son and daughter left to seek work on their own and in doing so were subsumed into other families. Tom's role in creating and maintaining a familial unit had been undermined by a conjoined ecological, economic, and political crisis. This account from a Dust Bowl man himself offers us a rare direct glimpse into their own experiences. It also reminds us that the FSA photographs are but one narrative of this environmental disaster.

4 Which Men?

So far, we have looked at what might be called the 'orthodox' vision for what the FSA photographic programme should do. That is to say, what Roy Stryker and by extension Rexford Tugwell saw as its purpose. Stryker was a domineering figure who oversaw his photographers from Washington through extensive correspondence and instructions. Before every assignment a photographer was sent on, Stryker would, reminiscent of his teaching days at Columbia, set a long reading list intended to explain the sociological dynamics of that particular part of the United States. He would also send lengthy 'shooting scripts' outlining a checklist of what things he wanted the photographers to capture. In the case of the Dust Bowl, this could include: 'needy families', 'farms closed down', 'people evacuating.'³¹ And even with all this direction, Stryker was more than willing to 'kill' any image that did not meet

30. Charles L. Todd, Robert Sonkin, and Tom Higginbotham. *Interview about life in Oklahoma and how and why he came to California part 1 of 2*. Charles L. Todd and Robert Sonkin migrant workers collection (AFC 1985/001), American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

31. 'Letter from Edwin Locke to Arthur Rothstein, July 14, 1936'. Library of Congress. LOT 12024, Box 8, Folder: Travel, Rothstein, 1936. Locke was Stryker's assistant.

his criteria, often by hole-punching the negative.³² In total, Stryker killed, by one means or another, around 100,000 photographs.³³

Yet, this does not mean that the photographs of the FSA merely channel Stryker's intentions. With regards to the shooting scripts, Marion Post Wolcott, another photographer for the programme, recalled that "some of the photographers just disregarded them after a while and went off on their own."³⁴ Lange in particular would butt heads with Stryker, a tension heightened by the mutual respect each had for the other.³⁵ Based in San Francisco with her husband, Berkeley economist Paul Taylor, and already being an established and skilled portrait photographer in her own right, Lange was removed from Stryker and the office in Washington. Her images reflect this isolation and independence whereby they follow the broad contours of the FSA's message but also have the confidence to speak for themselves. Indeed, Lange's portraiture skill—more accomplished than any of the other FSA photographers and more humane than Walker Evans' detached eye—allow the migrants of the Dust Bowl, especially men, to have some expression beyond being symbols of rural poverty. We see in her images of male migrants in California a dignity behind the destitution. Her portraits suggest at a hinterland that other FSA photographs rarely afford to men of the Dust Bowl. In one image (figure 11) her subject is working out his finances, totting together his earnings, trying hard to make them add up.³⁶ But despite his financial perils, Lange pictures his body and pose in terms more reminiscent of the studio portraits with which she made her name than the crumpled figure in, say, Ben Shahn's poster (figure 4). I think that photographs like this were an attempt by Lange to individuate people who are experiencing the effects of environmental migration. She is not showing this man as a sociological symbol as Stryker wished his photographic subjects to be—as a migrant, as a farmer, as a symbol of poverty.³⁷ Instead, he is presented as a man, a person dislocated from his home and having to bear to pressures of this. Lange therefore presents him somewhat romantically as an individual as opposed to the communal men that the FSA was trying to fashion.

Yet, as much as Lange's photographs try to show the migrants in a more complex way, they still cannot allow the subjects to articulate themselves in a way that an interview, such as of Tom Higginbotham, can. And there are further loud silences in the photographs when we ask: Which men get pictured in the FSA file and who is left out? We can get a sense of who might slip through the cracks of the photographic archive through some of Lange's glimpses of migrants and those designated as vagrants by the hostile police system in California (figure 12). This man may or may not have had any connection to the Dust Bowl. Californian law enforcement worked hard to keep refugees from the Dust Bowl from crossing the state border.³⁸ It would be unsurprising then if many refused to have their picture taken or Lange demurred out of sensitivity. We simply cannot see who, for whatever reason, was fearful of the camera. Furthermore, because the intention of the agency as a whole was to tackle rural poverty the men and women pictured from the Plains are overwhelmingly the agricultural working class. This perhaps can give us a warped sense of who lived through the Dust Bowl by only focusing on the poorest and not considering how middle-class, wealthy, urban, white-collar people fared. Moreover, important as Lange's pictures are, their cultural significance can overexaggerate the extent to which migration to California was a defining experience of the Dust Bowl, given that the majority of people stayed or migrated within the Dust Bowl region. Even in the very epicentre of the

32. Allen C. Benson, "Killed Negatives: The Unseen Photographic Archives," *Archivaria: The Journal of Canadian Archivists*, 68 (2009): 1–37; William E. Jones, *"Killed": Rejected Images of the Farm Security Administration* (New York: PPP Editions, 2010); Appel, "The Duplicate File: New Insights into the FSA", 9–13.

33. Stryker & Wood, *In this Proud Land*, 17.

34. Oral history interview with Marion Post Wolcott, 1965 January 18. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

35. Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*, 287–300.

36. The caption of another photo of, I assume, the same man tells us he came from Texas—LC-USF34-009066-E.

37. In contrast, the Federal Writer's project sought to *always* convey "life experience from the standpoint of the individual himself." W.T. Crouch, introduction to *These Are Our Lives: As Told by the People and Written by Members of the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), x.

38. Bill Lascher, *The Golden Fortress: California's Border War on Dust Bowl Refugees* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2022).



Figure 11. Dorothea Lange, Migrant agricultural worker in Marysville migrant camp (trying to figure out his year's earnings). California, October 1935. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-002533-E.

crisis, southwest Kansas, three quarters of people remained.³⁹ We can say then that the typical Dust Bowl man depicted in the FSA photos was really one specific type of man—the rural man, the poor man, often the migrant man, and specifically the white man.

This selectivity with which men were captured on film reflects the fact that the photographic programme was a consciously political one and the FSA photographs served as propaganda for this vision.⁴⁰ Whilst at Columbia, Stryker and Tugwell had developed a sociological eye for rural poverty, whereby modernisation, rationalisation, and intervention were deemed necessary to save the immobile rural poor. This fundamentally affected how the FSA later saw the Dust Bowl. The effect for the men of the Dust Bowl of the FSA photographs was to homogenise, infantilise, immobilise, dignify, value, and reveal them. Through examining these photographs we can see how an ecological disaster offers us insights into masculinity, namely how manhood was both of critical concern at this time and also how it was (re)shaped in response to the environment. The FSA attempted to use the environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl to simultaneously reforge how rural masculinity in the American Great Plains was expressed whilst at the same time entrenching patriarchal power. The photographic programme ultimately served its purpose to capture and codify the typical man of the Dust Bowl—to visualise Tom Joad—and to funnel public sympathy towards him. This aim was clearly successful as these images as well as Steinbeck's novel remain at the core of popular memories of the Dust Bowl. And whilst the role of manhood in *The Grapes of Wrath* is yet to be fully explored, by uncovering the pervasive gender dynamics behind the FSA photographs we can begin to see that masculinity is always enmeshed in how we think about and represent the environment, in the 1930s American West and beyond.

39. Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust*, 2.

40. As Carlebach points out, the propagandistic nature of the FSA photographs does not mean they had nefarious intentions. Michael L. Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 8 (1988): 10–11.



Figure 12. Dorothea Lange, "Bum blockade." February 1936. Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection, LC-USF34-001696-C.