

# LEAVING THE SOUTH

A critical discourse analysis of Roy Stryker's Historical Section representation of domestic migration (1935-1943)



Jack Delano, photographer. *Florida migrants studying road map before leaving Elizabeth City, North Carolina for the state of Delaware.* Elizabeth City, North Carolina, United States, 1940. July. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017747804/>.

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## Introduction

For my Master Thesis I am looking into documentary photography taken and collected during the Great Depression and New Deal era in the United States. During that period photography was used as a communicative tool to illustrate the necessity of New Deal reform. The New Deal was a reaction to the Great Depression, and it introduced various government institutions, occupied with providing social security to American society. Organizations such as the Resettlement Administration and its successor the Farm Security Administration, were given the task of combatting rural poverty. A branch of these institutions, called the Historical Section, was occupied with depicting the necessity and the practices of the organizations it was part of. In doing so, it created a mission for itself, which was documenting American reality. The photographs taken by the photographers employed by the Historical Section depict despair, hope, scarcity, and suffering, but in the last years of the project they also depict progression and patriotism. This thesis takes a poststructuralist approach to the Historical Section's photography project that took place from 1935 until 1943, which means that the approach assumes that visual representations that claim truthfulness are socially constructed through powerful discourses. To what extent did the Historical Section (1935-1943) succeed in their mission to document and represent the American reality and particularly the domestic (great) migration? To answer this question five sets of sub questions will be answered. First, three transformations of American society are described to put the project in its historical context. The second set is to do with the Historical Section's mission to document American reality. Third, the modes of distribution are examined. These three chapters combined showcase how the truth claims made by the Historical Section were constructed. The fourth set of questions delves into the popular narratives dominating public discourse of the time and concerned with domestic migration. The last set highlights the possible omissions of the certain themes and problems by the Historical Section to determine to what extent the documentative mission can be considered successful.

Photographs shape our perception of phenomena as diverse as war, diplomacy, election campaigns, refugee crises and recessions. As Ronald Bleiker articulated; New technologies facilitate fast distribution of photographs and film around the world. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, have become vital to politics, from terrorist recruitment, social justice campaigns, to the molding of public opinion. With today's rapid and easy distribution of images across national borders it is especially relevant to address the relation between politics and the practical implications of photography. This thesis contributes

to the scholarly work on the Historical Section and the Great Migration by offering a nuanced examination of power relations, agency, and representation concerning the Historical Section and its publications of the Great Migration. By integrating diverse perspectives, using a variety of primary sources and employing an innovative methodology, I contribute to a deeper understanding of how visuality shapes (historical) narratives and societal perceptions.

## Chapter 1:

### Theory & Method

This research takes a poststructuralist approach to photography. To explain this, I will be using Ronald Bleiker's aesthetic approach from the field of International Relations. In 2001, Bleiker made a plea for an entirely different approach to the study of world politics: aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> He was influenced by postmodern thought which rejects the positivist foundations of knowledge and embraces the growing scholarly interest in studying popular culture.<sup>2</sup> The aesthetic approach always presumes a gap between the represented and its representation. This means that there is always a subjective nature to a representation which can be used to create a certain narrative. Instead of ignoring this gap or trying to narrow it, the aesthetic approach recognizes it and presumes this is where politics come in.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the aesthetic approach and postmodernism, also known as poststructuralism, under which it falls, are both more an approach, rather than a theory. Poststructuralism is a critical attitude that explores the assumptions that make certain types of knowing, being and acting possible.<sup>4</sup> The poststructuralist approach draws its critical attitude from a multitude of writers, one of them is Michel Foucault. Foucault states that the critical approach is a critique of what we are and at the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us, as well as an experiment with the possibility of going beyond those limits.<sup>5</sup> Foucault states: "A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest."<sup>6</sup> To understand how this works it is useful to look at Foucault's ideas of discourse, knowledge, and power.

A Foucauldian approach assumes that "discourse is a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it."<sup>7</sup> This means that Foucault's conception of power does not necessarily come from above, quite contrary, the

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory', *Millennium* 30, no. 3 (1 December 2001): 510.

<sup>2</sup> Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn,' 510.

<sup>3</sup> Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn,' 510.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Bleiker and David Campbell, 'Poststructuralism', in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Timothy Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith, 5th edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 197.

<sup>5</sup> Campbell and Bleiker, 'Poststructuralism,' 197.

<sup>6</sup> David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992): 245.

<sup>7</sup> Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 4th edition (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2016), 187.

power structures are everywhere: “Discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting, but this is not simply repressive; it does not impose rules for thought and behaviour on a pre-existing human agent. Instead, human subjects are produced through discourses.”<sup>8</sup> However, what makes pinpointing the limits of this conception of power difficult, is that it cannot be traced back to one specific individual or group of individuals that enforce it. Power is something that everyone is subjugated to. In other words, the power is partly found in the indirect products of the practices of human subjects and partly found in the customs and assumptions upheld within society.<sup>9</sup> All discourses hold a certain power to discipline society into normalizing a particular understanding of the world. In other words, controlling metaphors, notions, and categories produce, prohibit, and limit specific ideas of truth and knowledge, while other ideas fall outside of this scope and are deemed incomprehensible.<sup>10</sup> This means that the most powerful discourses, in terms of normalizing a certain knowledge, rely on the assumption that this knowledge is the truth. The grounds on which a truth is claimed are what Foucault calls a *regime of truth*.<sup>11</sup> This study sets out to describe the grounds on which the Historical Section made certain truth claims.

To extend the regime of truth to photography I will be using Gillian Rose’s *Visual Methodologies*, which provides a framework for the critical visual method that will be used in this research. Rose cites both John Tagg and Allan Sekula to describe the starting point of the truth claims held by photography throughout history. Tagg is a prominent contributor to critical theory of photography and Sekula was a photographer and theorist. Tagg explains that a photograph always seems to declare that the represented is real.<sup>12</sup> The camera was there to capture it, and this photograph is the proof. According to Tagg this quality of a photograph is produced and reproduced by certain institutions, such as scientific establishments, government departments, the police, and courts of law. While Sekula writes: “photographs achieve semantic status as fetish objects *and* as documents. The photograph has, depending on its context, a power that is primarily affective and a power that is primarily informative. Both powers support the mythical truth-value of the photograph.”<sup>13</sup> However, the power to bestow a certain authority on a representation is limited. To make this clear, Tagg says we should ask ourselves under

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<sup>8</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Cornel West, ‘A Genealogy of Modern Racism’, in *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context*, ed. Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg, Eerste editie (Malden, Mass.: John Wiley & Sons, 2001), 93.

<sup>10</sup> West, ‘A Genealogy of Modern Racism’, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 190.

<sup>12</sup> Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> Allen Sekula, , “On the invention of Photographic Meaning,” in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982), 94.

what condition a picture of the Loch Ness monster or an UFO would become acceptable as proof of their existence.<sup>14</sup> Tagg therefore argues that persuasiveness and the power of the institutions behind a representation are important when analyzing the grounds of certain truth claims.

Rose divides her method of discourse analysis into two different visual methodologies, which she subsequently names discourse analysis I and II.<sup>15</sup> These methods have in common that they are both based on Foucault's idea of discourse, but they make use of it in different ways. Discourse analysis I is concerned with the notion of discourse articulated through specific photographs, while discourse analysis II is more concerned with the material practices of institutions.<sup>16</sup> Material practices here refer to modes of circulation, use of captions, and layout. Because the methods are related and overlap, they can both be of use. However, given the methodological choices and sources available for this thesis, I will look at the material practices and methods of institutions to establish the grounds on which a certain truth is claimed by the Historical Section. I will then combine this with the insights gathered from the visual analysis of the selected photographs. This choice was made to make the research more defined and feasible in relation to the sources I have found.

Furthermore, Rose points at three criteria central to a critical methodology: taking the image itself seriously, thinking about the social conditions and effects of images and their modes of distribution, as well as being aware of your own subjectivity as a researcher.<sup>17</sup> The methodology of discourse analysis II considers all three but is mainly to do with the second criterium. In other words: "The cultural practices that create and circulate images both depend on and produce social inclusions and exclusions, and a critical account needs to address both those practices and their cultural meanings and effects."<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Rose explains that to operationalize her discourse analysis II method, modes of distribution, selection of objects, and the layout of the items that are distributed must be analyzed. For this research this means analyzing exhibitions and exhibition boards created or facilitated by the Historical Section and picture books created by social scientists in collaboration with Historical Section photographers. This is done by looking at three aspects. First, who is responsible for the selection of photographs? Second, what do the captions, spatial organization, and the layout of certain panels tell us? Last, what do the specific photographs tell us? Because this research

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<sup>14</sup> Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 156

<sup>15</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 191-192.

<sup>16</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 192.

<sup>17</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 22.

<sup>18</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 22.

centers around a period from 1935 to 1943, visiting the exhibitions is not possible and therefore the analysis is limited to written accounts and photographs of exhibitions and exhibition boards. These can be found at the Library of Congress FSA/OWI collection. The analysis to establish how the truth claims of the Historical Section worked, constitute chapter two, three, and four. These chapters explain *how* the Historical Section's methods of documentary photography, in combination with its modes of distribution worked, to showcase the grounds of their truth claims.

Furthermore, Rose states that for the analysis of the specific documentary photographs that are used in the exhibitions and books the researcher can fall back on the main aspects of discourse analysis I. The main aspects of discourse analysis I are key themes, truth claims, complexity and absences.<sup>19</sup> This is thus where the methods overlap and where this research uses the method of discourse analysis I as a tool to apply discourse analysis II. However, to keep this research feasible the key theme is already predetermined as I am particularly interested in studying the theme "migration" and the truth claims relating to it, which will be uncovered through discourse analysis II. This leaves complexities for chapter five and absences for chapter six. Chapter five uses popular culture and the discourse of art to explain how the complexities of discursive power held by Historical Section photographs worked. As mentioned above, a critical approach must address the cultural meanings and effects of the images that are analyzed. Chapter six zooms in on an absence in the migration narrative coproduced by the Historical Section: The Great Migration. Invisibility can have effects as powerful as visibility, and it can also tell us about the intended audience. The analysis will focus on the photographic work of Jack Delano, who was sent out to capture black migration from the South to northern states. The analysis for chapters five and six thus lies in careful examination of the power held by photographs themselves in relation to the society they represent.

One way of analyzing specific photographs is to "historicize the spectator," in other words, it is important to specify to whom and under what conditions a photograph appeals to a certain person, and therefore who it might persuade.<sup>20</sup> Sara Blair gives an example: she writes that the FSA had a "nostalgic" element to it that was longing for a "safer and more peaceful" past, while many of the photographers with an immigrant background had no recollection of

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<sup>19</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Tagg, *The Burden of Representation*, 156.



this American past.<sup>21</sup> Analysis thus relates social modalities to the image site.<sup>22</sup> Discourse analysis I looks at the persuasive aspects of a photograph and the social construction of difference and authority present in the image.<sup>23</sup> To understand how such images can hold discursive power requires us to look at representation. Representation creates meaning about the world we live in. The aesthetic approach can help explain this. This approach contrasts aesthetic forms of representation with mimetic forms of representation.<sup>24</sup> Mimetic forms try to capture the world as it is, they try to represent politics as realistically and authentically as possible. However, an aesthetic approach assumes that this reflection of the world is impossible, and that we construct the world through abstract representations.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the history of photography, photographs have functioned as the bearers of basic information about certain groups, places, and phenomena, making them vital in creating assumptions. Foucault's critical approach moves away from seeing these photographs as representations of reality. Dominant representations can be reconsidered by calling attention to the inclusions, exclusions and assumptions involved in producing such a photograph.<sup>26</sup> The political actions that follow from dominant constructed representations and understandings could have been pursued differently, had the representation been different. This is why politics can be found in the gap between the represented and its representation. Analyzing certain absences can therefore help explain *how* the migration narrative held a certain discursive power.

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<sup>21</sup> Blair and Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography*, 12.

<sup>22</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 193.

<sup>23</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 193.

<sup>24</sup> Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn,' 510.

<sup>25</sup> Bleiker, 'The Aesthetic Turn,' 510.

<sup>26</sup> Campbell and Bleiker, 'Poststructuralism,' 217.

## Source Criticism

Various kinds of primary sources are used and analyzed in this research. I will first discuss all of them beginning with a collection of Historical Section photographs and documents. Second, correspondence between Roy Stryker and his photographers or between him and other parties. Third, the transcripts of two oral history interviews by Richard Doud with Roy Stryker and Edwin Rosskam. Last, *Photographic Memories*, which is an autobiographical account by FSA photographer Jack Delano.

The Library of Congress holds various exhibition boards and photographs of these boards, and for this research the ones concerning migration are the most relevant. The Historical Section photography and documents are all stored within the FSA-OWI file in the Library of Congress archive. It is therefore useful to critically look at the file as a whole. The archive holds around 107,000 black-and-white photographic prints.<sup>27</sup> These are photographs from Stryker's Historical Section under the RA, FSA, and OWI, as well as photographs from the News Bureau at the Offices of Emergency Management, various branches of the military, and industrial corporations.<sup>28</sup> About 77.000 of the photographs are made under Stryker's command and about about 30.000 come from the other sources mentioned above. Many of the photographs taken under Stryker's command have therefore been uploaded to the online archive. However, a substantial portion did not make it to the archive. The photograph book *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943 as seen in the FSA photographs*, co-authored by Stryker himself and Nancy Wood, published in 1975, claims that 270.000 photographs were made between 1937 and 1943.<sup>29</sup> This is the period when the Historical Section was a part of the FSA and does therefore not consider the photographs taken by the Historical Section under the RA and OWI. This can partially be explained by the "killed" negatives, which were near duplicates or alternate views of a printed negative and were therefore destroyed.<sup>30</sup> However, it remains unclear why the rest of the photographs did not make it to the FSA-OWI file at the Library of Congress.

In 1985 an inventory document named *Farm Security Administration, Historical Section: a Guide to Textual Records in the Library of Congress* was put together, which

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<sup>27</sup> 'About This Collection', Farm Security Administration/Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives, Digital Collections, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 20540 USA, accessed 21 June 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/fsa-owi-black-and-white-negatives/about-this-collection/>.

<sup>28</sup> Library of Congress, 'About This Collection'.

<sup>29</sup> Roy Emerson Stryker and Nancy Wood, *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943, as Seen in the FSA Photographs*, First Edition (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1975): 7.

<sup>30</sup> Library of Congress, 'About This Collection'.

functioned as a guide to the textual records of the Historical Section held at the Library of Congress.<sup>31</sup> The document is available online as a pdf file and it introduces a chronological timeline of the events concerning the Historical Section and an explanation of how its documents ended up at the Library of Congress.<sup>32</sup> The document is put together by Annette Melville who worked for the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress. The document shows that a reorganization of the FSA-OWI file began in 1943, and in 1944 the files were handed over to the Library of Congress.<sup>33</sup> The document lists all the various written records that are available at the Library of Congress. These written records were copied onto reels of microfilm that have later, in 2009, been uploaded to the Library of Congress website.<sup>34</sup> I have used the inventory document to decide which reels could be useful for my research. I decided that Reel 3 on Exhibits and Reel 5 that consists of correspondence between the Historical Section and the Museum of Modern Art could be useful for my study.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, searching within the reels for key words must be done manually by scanning through all microfilms. I have therefore looked through the two reels that both consist of hundreds of microfilms one-by-one scanning for key terms such as ‘migration’, ‘migratory camp’, ‘Stryker’, and ‘exhibition’.

Furthermore, for access to other Historical Section documents that cannot be found online I have relied on secondary literature or book publications. For example, many of the shooting scripts that were made by Stryker to instruct his photographers are not readily available online. These scripts contain some of Stryker’s priorities directly sent to his photographers, which are useful perspectives for this research. For this part I rely on *In This Proud Land: America, 1935-1943 as seen in the FSA photographs*, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography*, a book by Nicholas Natanson from 1992, which quotes various shooting scripts and correspondence from Stryker, James R. Swensen’s 2015 book *Picturing Migrants: The Grapes of Wrath and New Deal Documentary Photography*, which quotes correspondence between Stryker and his employees, Marren Stange’s *Symbols of ideal*

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<sup>31</sup> Annette Melville and Library of Congress. Prints And Photographs Division. *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records in the Library of Congress // prepared by Annette Melville*, 1985. Washington: Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/85600147/>.

<sup>32</sup> Melville and Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records*.

<sup>33</sup> Melville and Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records*.

<sup>34</sup> Library of Congress, ‘About This Collection’.

<sup>35</sup> Melville and Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records*.

*life: Social documentary photography in America, 1890-1950*, and Stu Cohen's *The Likes of Us: America in the Eyes of the Farm Security Administration*, which contains memo's from Stryker to his higher-ups.

Furthermore, to gather personal perspectives on the Historical Section and how it functioned I have relied on oral history interviews by Richard Doud. The transcripts of two oral history interviews available at the Smithsonian Institute, with Roy Stryker and Edwin Rosskam, provide personal perspectives on documentary photography and the Historical Section. These sources can give us an understanding of what the Historical Section saw as truthful documentation and exhibitions as a tool of communication, which are important parts of the discourse analysis. The interview with Stryker was conducted in 1963 and the interview with Rosskam and his wife was conducted in 1965. Both interviews were conducted by Doud for the Archives of American Art.<sup>36</sup> Doud was an art historian who, between 1963 and 1965, collected information on government funded art programs. He interviewed staff, photographers, and government officials who were instrumental in the establishment of the FSA-OWI photo file. All his findings can be accessed in person at the Archives of American Art. However, the oral history interviews can partly be accessed online the Smithsonian Institute. In the interviews, Stryker and Rosskam talk about the ethics and bureaucracy, political problems with the project, and the use of photographs as a force for change. These are all relevant topics for this research, because they tie into the truth claims made by the organization. The aim of an oral history interview is to let the interviewee recall most of his memories on his or her own and the interviewer is not meant to ask probing questions. However, the interviews by Doud are clearly moved into certain topic directions relating to photography by the interviewer.

Lastly, the book *Photographic Memories*, which is an autobiographical account by FSA photographer Jack Delano. I have chosen this source because Delano, in my opinion, is one of the Historical Section's photographers that receives too little attention and because he provides relevant perspectives on the migrant experience during the interbellum era. This primary source provides insight into the perceived autonomy of one of the Historical Section photographers. On top of that, it gives a personal account of Delano's trip to document migratory movements from the South to northern cities in 1940, which is relevant in determining how representation of migrants worked. The book was published in 1997, which is five years after Natanson's

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<sup>36</sup> Roy Emerson Stryker, Oral history interview with Roy Emerson Stryker, interview by Richard Doud, 17 October 1963, Archives of American Art.

research. This allows me to build on Natanson's study of black representation during the Great Depression era with a new perspective.

To conclude, the strength of this research lies in the wide variety of primary sources. Accounts by the most important figures are analyzed. Accounts by Stryker as a representative of the Historical Section, but also his private perspectives. On top of that, correspondence with his employees and a personal account by one of his photographers, Jack Delano. The variety of perspectives helps nuance the mission and motivations of the Historical Section, while it also helps establish the complexity of the power relations influencing the Historical Section from within and without. The fact that not all Historical Section documents can be analyzed is unfortunate, however the sources that are available allow me to analyze the Historical Section extensively and allow me to accurately answer the research question.

## Historiography

The historiography discussed will be divided in two main themes, first the academic work concerning the Historical Section and secondly the work concerned with the Great Migration. The first theme logically contains the wider subject of the New Deal and its organizations such as the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration, under which the Historical Section fell. The first theme is divided into three groups, although many of the research in the different groups overlaps. The first group of scholars is concerned with defining the program as propaganda and, in doing so, it studies the structures of the FSA mainly from above. What intentions did Roy Stryker, head of the project, and his superiors have, and whose needs were being served by the organization? The second group of scholars highlight the intentions and agency of individual photographers employed by the Historical Section and their relationships with Stryker. The third group contains individual outliers that are relevant to this research. The second theme is subsequently discussed, to conclude with an overview of how this research adds to the existing scholarship concerning both themes.

After the 1932 presidential election Franklin D. Roosevelt became President and brought the Americans the New Deal, an innovative social democratic set of reforms. The New Deal can be divided into two waves of policies, first in 1933 and later in 1935.<sup>37</sup> The first New Deal was supported broadly within the US Congress, the second wave however faced political resistance.<sup>38</sup> This second point in time is where the government organizations relevant to this research came into existence: The Resettlement Administration (RA), which later became the Farm Security Administration (FSA). However, as will be shown through the work of multiple scholars, the RA and FSA became most known for its Historical Section headed by Roy Stryker. This project within the larger organizations was concerned with documenting American rural life, and to a lesser degree urban life, and the progression made by the organizations under which it fell. FDR believed an informed public was necessary and advantageous to support government action.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, he relied heavily on his Brain Trust, which consisted of a group of social scientists and other scholars who helped create his reforms. Peter Szto argues that gaining broad support for the New Deal involved employing documentary photography, which

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<sup>37</sup> Joseph A. McCartin, 'The New Deal Era', in *The Oxford Companion to United States History*, ed. Paul S. Boyer (Oxford University Press, 2004), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780195082098.001.0001/acref-9780195082098-e-1103>.

<sup>38</sup> Peter Szto, 'Documentary Photography in American Social Welfare History: 1897-1943', *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* 35, no. 2 (2008): 104.

<sup>39</sup> Szto, "Documentary Photography," 104.

was seen as a part of the social sciences by the Brain Trust.<sup>40</sup> Scholars such as Szto, concerned with the persuasiveness of the Historical Section's photography project, will now be discussed.

The photographs themselves, their meanings and their intentions have been a topic of discussion for historians. Some of the photographs taken by the Historical Section, such as the *Migrant Mother* by Dorothea Lange and *Dust Storm* by Arthur Rothstein, have become some of the most iconic photographs in American photography.<sup>41</sup> The images have become prized as works of art and national treasures. This has sparked the interest of numerous historians that regard the project as propaganda. These studies highlight the institutions behind the photographs and their agenda. This research adds to this perspective as a new method is used to study the Historical Section as an institution. The first notable article is by Michael Carlebach, who is a historian specialized in photojournalism. He writes that the Historical Section's purpose was convincing the American people and Congress of the need for reform and the effectiveness of reform, specifically in the agricultural sector.<sup>42</sup> The project was never meant as an accumulation of photographic art but it was the first attempt in American history to produce a broad visual record of society.<sup>43</sup> Carlebach considers the photographs to be propaganda, following Walter Lippmann's definition of the term, which is: "the effort to alter the picture to which men respond, to substitute one social pattern for another."<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, Peter Szto, who stresses the importance of the influence of social sciences in the FDR administration, follows Carlebach's approach and refers to the pictures as propaganda. However, he takes a more nuanced stance because he makes the distinction between propaganda and persuasion and states that not all information from the 1930s rose to the level of propaganda.<sup>45</sup> Carlebach and Szto agree that propaganda is not inherently immoral in a democratic society. Szto writes: "To pre-judge propaganda as inherently immoral fails to appreciate its positive value to gather and disseminate credible information."<sup>46</sup> Carlebach only sees propaganda as inherently negative in an autocratic system: "Propaganda becomes intrinsically suspect only when it is, by law, the only information permitted, and when its

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<sup>40</sup> Szto, "Documentary Photography," 104.

<sup>41</sup> Sara Blair and Eric Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA* (University of California Press, 2012), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Michael L. Carlebach, 'Documentary and Propaganda: The Photographs of the Farm Security Administration', *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 8 (1988): 8.

<sup>43</sup> Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 8.

<sup>44</sup> Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 10.

<sup>45</sup> Szto, "Documentary Photography," 107.

<sup>46</sup> Szto, "Documentary Photography," 107.

purpose is to deceive rather than to educate."<sup>47</sup> The authors thus agree on the fact that the propaganda had a positive and humane goal, because it promoted social democratic reforms. However, James Curtis goes beyond this perspective and argues that the individual FSA photographers intentionally created propaganda, in his book *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*. He bases this claim mainly on the fact that photographers staged the photographs in various, but commonly extremely minor ways. However, as rightfully pointed out by William Stott, this is unavoidable in photography. Stott writes about Curtis's book: "This book reinvents the wheel – badly."<sup>48</sup> Stott holds a more understanding perspective towards Stryker and his ways.

Maren Stange's perspective is in line with this more nuanced perspective on Stryker. Stange, a cultural historian, convincingly describes why the documentary photography was of a persuasive nature. Stange follows a semiotic approach towards documentary photography in her book *Symbols of ideal life: Social documentary photography in America, 1890-1950*: "In order to assert more or less explicitly that their images presented viewers with the truth, reformers relied on the photograph's status as index." In the semiotic sense this means that the photographs are a trace of the real.<sup>49</sup> In other words, where there is smoke, there is fire. Stange centres her book around documentary photography as reform publicity during a sixty-year period, and she argues: "that documentary, a central mode of communication, has assisted the liberal corporate state to manage not only our politics but also our esthetics and our art." This research is set apart from that of Stange in various ways. Obviously, the smaller timeframe and the focus on migration set this research apart. Yet, the more complex distinction lies in the methodology. Stange's method of semiology is concerned with questions of *why* power works in certain ways, while Foucauldian discourse analysis is more concerned with *how* power works. Stange's work is therefore an important source for describing the intentions of the main actors and mapping out the historical context. However, this thesis emphasises *how* presenting viewers with the truth worked for the Historical Section. This is found in Stryker's ideal form of documentary photography that will be explained in detail in chapter two.

The scholars mentioned above form the first group. The consensus among the scholars is that the project was of a persuasive nature. Some argue that the photographs must be seen as propaganda, while others refrain from using the term. However, I position myself in line with

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<sup>47</sup> Carlebach, "Documentary and Propaganda," 11.

<sup>48</sup> William Stott, 'Review of *Mind's Eye, Mind's Truth: FSA Photography Reconsidered*, by James Curtis', *The Journal of American History* 77, no. 3 (1990): 1076–77.

<sup>49</sup> Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life : Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xiii.



the perspective of Stange, and Stryker himself, that the project only took a major propagandistic turn with the beginning of the Second World War.<sup>50</sup> This thesis adds to the scholarship of this group, by providing a nuanced perspective of Stryker's limitations by looking at various factors outside of his control. The extremely negative connotation that the term propaganda holds, might explain why some historians refrain from using the word when writing about the Historical Section and Stryker.

For example, Meighan Katz refrains from calling it propaganda herself although she does state that some might call it propagandizing.<sup>51</sup> Katz is part of a group of scholars that highlight the photographers' personal intentions instead of looking only at Stryker and the organization as a whole. These scholars follow the path of the scholars mentioned before that looked critically at the organization's biases and practices but have a clear focus on the independent directions among the FSA photographers. By looking at personal accounts from the photographers, Katz highlights the motivations of the individuals and their wish to capture resilience within subjects and not only suffering.<sup>52</sup> She writes that the photographers embraced the FSA attitude, and they were no longer seeking to only capture reality, but also a message. Katz gives an example of how Dorothea Lange struggled with this. Lange asserted: "I had to get my camera to register the things about those people that were more important than how poor they were—their pride, their strength, their spirit."<sup>53</sup> Lawrence W. Levine states that for the FSA photographers "the image of victim was never sufficient; it had to be accompanied by the symbols of dignity, inner strength, and self-reliance."<sup>54</sup> Highlighting personal narratives that the photographers wanted to capture but that also had to match with the Historical Section's expectations.

Moreover, Sara Blair and Eric Rosenberg add to this in their book *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA*. Anthony W. Lee who drafted the introduction to their book wrote: "Even during the program's heyday ... its photographers could never quite agree on what *documentary* amounted to or how their pictures of the Depression fit snugly, if at all, with the New Deal programs they were purportedly championing."<sup>55</sup> What sets Blair and Rosenberg's work apart from other research is their focus on the presence of trauma in FSA

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<sup>50</sup> Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, xvi.

<sup>51</sup> Meighan 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* 36, no. 4 (2014): 15.

<sup>52</sup> Katz, "A paradigm of Resilience," 15.

<sup>53</sup> Katz, "A paradigm of Resilience," 15.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 283.

<sup>55</sup> Blair and Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography*, 2.

photographs. They write contrasting perspectives arguing for and against the ability to freeze trauma in a photograph. They focus on the identities of a small group of photographers and analyze a collection of their photographs. What makes them interesting for this research is their approach. This research will also analyze both the identity of the photographer and the photograph, but what sets this research apart from their work is the focus on migration rather than trauma. According to John Tagg not all FSA photographers embraced the same perspective, which can be traced back to their identity as shown by Blair and Rosenberg. Tagg states that Dorothea Lange was not looking for a picture that could get a point across but that she was genuinely interested in the people she photographed.<sup>56</sup> While, for example another FSA photographer, Russell Lee, “generally accepted the commitments and terms of the FSA.”<sup>57</sup> This is exactly the reason why, James R. Swensen, an art historian, tends to focus his analysis specifically on Lee, because he could be seen as a yes-man to Stryker.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, Linda Gordon writes in her biography of Dorothea Lange that Lange embraced the FSA’s vision for America; a vision of equality, social security, and general interest.<sup>59</sup> However, the FSA and the photographers could differ in their interpretations of this vision. Gordon states that Lange made no exceptions in her photographs, she captured every American, every race, every religion, unemployed or immigrant, male or female, she made no distinction.<sup>60</sup> This would clash with the organizations outlook on things which leads Gordon to highlight a racist pretense within the FSA. She goes so far as to state that the *Migrant Mother* would not have been publicized if Stryker had known that the woman depicted was native-American.<sup>61</sup>

To sum up, Stryker has become a controversial figure among scholars in the second group. He was seen, by some, as an authoritative figure within the organization that at times could be relentless in achieving his goals. The tension between Stryker and some of his employees becomes apparent when looking at the different scholarly works. This research attempts to take into account both a nuanced perspective of Stryker and the individual photographer’s perspective. This latter aspect is studied through analysing the freedoms and limitations of the employed photographers and biographical accounts of FSA photographer

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<sup>56</sup> John Tagg, *Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993), 209.

<sup>57</sup> Blair and Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants: The Grapes of Wrath and New Deal Documentary Photography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>59</sup> Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange: A Life Beyond Limits* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2011), 11.

<sup>60</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*, 11.

<sup>61</sup> Gordon, *Dorothea Lange*, 339.

Jack Delano. By focusing on a photographer that is often overlooked in scholarly work, this research adds to the existing historiography concerned with the power relations within the Historical Section.

The last group of scholars have in common that they are also concerned with power relations. Firstly, Nicholas Natanson, who wrote an extensive and innovative book about the Great Depression era photography. In his book *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* he highlights the presence, or more specifically the absence of the black American in FSA photography. This means that people of color were kept out of the publications in government documents, newspapers, magazines, and at exhibitions, causing a skewed representation of American society. He states that a lot more photographs were taken of people of color than that were eventually publicized.<sup>62</sup> What makes his work innovative is his quantitative approach. Natanson invigorates his arguments by percentages of photographs that include black Americans. Another scholar that looks at the Historical Section from a minority perspective is Blair, who was mentioned above in the second group. She writes about clashing perspectives on American society between Stryker and his photographers. She does this by looking at a case study of FSA photography in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Blair argues that “Stryker’s defining subject and underlying vision of America were decidedly foreign” to the “overwhelmingly Jewish,” immigrant or children of immigrants, photographers.<sup>63</sup> Blair explores different forms of iconography related to the pictures taken in NYC. Lastly, Sue Currell investigates a collection of FSA photographs that were used in the rhetorical structure of eugenic ideology. The photographs discussed portray victims of forced sterilization before their incarceration, yet there is no evidence to show that the photographer was aware of, or complicit with, this fact.<sup>64</sup>

These studies have in common that they recognize the gap between represented and representation and point at politics that can be at play here. For Blair this is creating a recognizable America, but in doing so excluding certain groups. For Curell this means looking at intertextual meanings of pictures that are in line or in contrast with the photographer’s intentions and assumptions. Furthermore, the theme of migration is present in both Natanson’s and Blair’s research. Natanson touches upon the topic of the Great Migration, however a more in-depth analysis of its omission in Historical Section publications is missing. Blair analyses

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<sup>62</sup> Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 5.

<sup>63</sup> Blair and Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography*, 12.

<sup>64</sup> Sue Currell, ‘You Haven’t Seen Their Faces: Eugenic National Housekeeping and Documentary Photography in 1930s America’, *Journal of American Studies* 51, no. 2 (2017): 481.

the migratory background of FSA photographers, but not that of Jack Delano. This study delves into the discursive power held by Historical Section publications about domestic migration. This is partly done through an analysis of Delano's photographs of black migratory workers moving north from the South.

Moreover, this research examines migration within American borders from 1935 until 1943, it is therefore relevant to discuss scholarship on the Great Migration. This refers to a massive movement of black Americans from southern states to northern and western states that took place roughly from 1910 until 1970. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was the first scholar to write on black domestic migration. He was an African American scholar, sociologist, historian, and civil rights activist. In 1899 he published *The Philadelphia Negro*, which was a study that "sought to ascertain something of the geographical distribution" of black Americans.<sup>65</sup> Du Bois emphasized how migration played a role in the growth of black communities in the city of Philadelphia. He writes about living standards and migration streams and points out: "When Negroes in the South have a larger opportunity to work, accumulate property, be protected in life and limb, and encourage pride and self-respect in their children, there will be a diminution in the stream of immigrants to Northern cities."<sup>66</sup> However, this diminution did not come any time soon, the stream of black migrants leaving the South only became larger. In 1917 Du Bois wrote an article titled "The Migration of Negroes" in *The Crisis* a monthly journal published by The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In this article he discusses the great increase of movement due to the labor opportunities in the northern cities with the ongoing First World War. He points at two factors that will determine the scale of the movement in the next years; the involvement of the US in the war and the labor shortage in Europe that will decrease European immigration and increase demand for colored laborers in the northern cities.<sup>67</sup> He concludes: "At any rate, we face here a social change among American Negroes of great moment, and one which needs to be watched with intelligent interest."<sup>68</sup>

Multiple scholars watched the black communities with interest in the coming years, however, the theme of migration was neglected. Joe William Trotter divides interbellum scholarly work on the Great Migration between the period until the early 1930s and from the mid 1930s onwards. The former work is largely focussed on the black migrant as an asset in

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<sup>65</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study and History of Pennsylvania's Black American Population; Their Education, Environment and Work* (Pantianos Classics, 1899), 1.

<sup>66</sup> Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, 304.

<sup>67</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, 'The Migration of Negroes', *The Crisis* 14, no. 2 (1917): 63–70.

<sup>68</sup> Du Bois, 'The Migration of Negroes', 63–70.

national security and economic development. This means that the focus is on interracial experience, and the black migrants intraracial experience is overlooked.<sup>69</sup> From the mid 1930s onwards a decrease in scholarly interest in black migration occurred. The net migration of black migrants dropped by around 50% which shifted attention to black urban and rural life, instead of the black migratory movements.<sup>70</sup> Trotter writes: “Between 1937 and 1941, for example, in a series of impressive studies on black life in southern towns, social anthropologists ... paid little attention to the dynamics of black population movement.”<sup>71</sup> Trotter explains that the ghetto model of black urban history of the 1960s and the emergence of a proletarian approach since the 1980s, mostly overlooked the dynamics of black migration itself.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the civil rights movements in the decades after the Second World War dismantled much of the worst white supremacist policies in the South. This has introduced a reverse migration of black Americans back to the southern states. Recent scholarship is therefore also largely focused on the reverse migration that has been taking place roughly since the 1970s. William Frey writes: “The reversal of the Great Migration began as a trickle in the 1970s, increased in the 1990s, and turned into a virtual evacuation from many northern areas in subsequent decades.”<sup>73</sup> A decay of the push factors that drove migration from the South, mentioned by Du Bois in 1899, was finally becoming reality. Trotter advocates a more interdisciplinary approach, that considers new sources, approaches and theoretical perspectives.<sup>74</sup>

To conclude, the historiography of the first theme consists of a variety of perspectives. One of them is concerned with defining the program as propaganda and in doing so it studies the structures of the FSA mainly from above. What intentions did Stryker, and his superiors have, and whose needs were being served by the organization? Another perspective is from below. These scholars highlight the intentions and agency of the employees of the organization. Both these perspectives are vital to this research. Based on the historiography discussed, this research contributes to the existing body of work by offering a nuanced and complex examination of the Historical Section's role. It focuses on the institutional intentions, the individual agency of photographers, outside forces, such as art and popular culture, and it looks

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<sup>69</sup> Joe William Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class, and Gender* (Indiana University Press, 1991): 10.

<sup>70</sup> Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, 11.

<sup>72</sup> Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, 2.

<sup>73</sup> William H. Frey, ‘A “New Great Migration” Is Bringing Black Americans Back to the South’, Brookings, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-new-great-migration-is-bringing-black-americans-back-to-the-south/>.

<sup>74</sup> Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*, 147.

at what invisibility can tell us about the era. There is still debate about the nature of the Historical Section's documentary photography. By analyzing the work through the lens of Foucauldian discourse analysis, this research shifts to understanding *how* power is exercised through these visual records. This methodology provides a fresh angle on the persuasive and potentially propagandistic elements of the Historical Section's work. By delving into the personal accounts and motivations of photographers like Jack Delano, often overlooked in previous scholarship, this research highlights the diverse perspectives and internal dynamics within the Historical Section. This approach reveals the complexities of the photographers' roles and their interactions with Stryker, adding depth to our understanding of the internal power relations and creative freedoms within the FSA. Furthermore, the research extends the historiography of the Great Migration by examining how the Historical Section's publications represented (or failed to represent) black Americans' domestic migration. Trotter advocated for new theories and sources and this study does that by analyzing Historical Section sources related to the great migration, through a poststructuralist approach. The study provides a nuanced perspective on the Historical Section, enriching the scholarly work on documentary photography and its social and cultural implications.

## Chapter 2: Historical Context

The Historical Section played a crucial role in documenting American life through photography during a transformative period in the nation's history. This chapter explains how this came to be by answering two main questions concerning the organization and its historical context. First, what constituted this transformative period? This question is answered by looking at three key themes relevant for the Historical Section and this research: The Great Depression, the New Deal which was meant to counteract it, and the overarching period of the Great Migration. Second, what was Roosevelt's "Brain Trust" and who were the main figures that shaped the Historical Section? A short description of the political landscape of the period preceding the New Deal is given, to help understand who the significant individuals were in the Historical Section, to which generation these individuals belonged, their ties to the Brain Trust, and what kind of worldview they had.

The Great Depression refers to a severe economic depression that had a hold on the US and large parts of the world during the 1930s. The depression led to a decrease in international trade and national incomes. Agriculture was suffered particularly hard in the US as drought and dust storms also hit large parts of the US in the 1930s. Prior to the Great Depression a recession, was brewing in the 1920s, which came to its peak with the 1929 stock market crash. The significant decline in economic activity that started in the US and Germany pulled most of the world in a downwards spiral, which turned into the Great Depression. In the US, President Herbert Hoover was largely blamed for the economic downfall of the country, as camps, cynically named 'Hoovervilles' filled with impoverished unemployed people, started to pop up. During the 1932 election campaign Hoover's long-term vision based on individualism and voluntarism could not convince the depressed voters with short-term needs.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, Franklin D. Roosevelt's interventionist approach, although pragmatic, spoke to a lot of voters with different ideological alignments.<sup>76</sup> President Herbert Hoover was held accountable by the American population for the Great Depression and Roosevelt won the election by a landslide.<sup>77</sup> At the beginning of 1933 Roosevelt entered the oval office and brought the Americans the New Deal. Most of his New Deal plans, and part of his campaign, were constructed by his "Brain trust", which consisted of social scientists.<sup>78</sup> The New Deal reformed American society and it introduced a social safety net to it for the first time in the nation's

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<sup>75</sup> Martin L. Fausold, 'President Hoover's Farm Policies 1929-1933', *Agricultural History* 51, no. 2 (1977): 375.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Keith Conkin, *The New Deal* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 22.

<sup>77</sup> Donald A. Ritchie, *Electing FDR: The New Deal Campaign of 1932* (University Press of Kansas, 2007) 5.

<sup>78</sup> Fausold, 'President Hoover's Farm Policies, 375.

history. As Donald Ritchie puts it: “Before the New Deal, the closest federal agency to the average citizen had been the post office.”<sup>79</sup> After the reforms, citizens could count on a wide net of federal agencies that provided old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, maximum work hours and minimum wages, federally insured bank deposits, regulated stock exchanges, subsidized farm prices, rural electricity, and much more.<sup>80</sup> Thus, the New Deal introduced the rise of a large array of federal entities based on the ideas of several social scientists. The Historical Section was a part of several of these government institutions throughout its existence. It was part of the Resettlement Administration created in 1935, its replacement the Farm Security Administration created in 1937, and the Office of War Information that subsumed the FSA in 1943.<sup>81</sup>

Furthermore, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, another transformation of American society was happening. A large migration within the United States was taking place, termed the Great Migration. This migration took place roughly from 1910 to 1970. When it started, around 90 percent of black Americans were living in the South as opposed to just over half in the 1970s.<sup>82</sup> The migration was caused by different factors. On the one hand there were the discriminatory Jim Crow laws and lawless lynchings of black Americans in the South, and on the other hand, the labor opportunities in the north, that were accelerated by the First World War. According to Ellora Derenoncourt, the Great Migration can be divided into two distinct waves, one from 1910 until 1930 and one from 1940 until 1970, with an interval of ten years during the Great Depression when migration of black Americans slowed down considerably.<sup>83</sup> The first wave consisted mostly of migrants moving to northern cities, while the second wave also saw large movements to western states.<sup>84</sup> William Collins shows that black migration almost halved but was still noteworthy. The number of black migrants leaving the South was around 900.000 during the 1920s, around 480.000 during the 1930s, and around 1.6 million during the 1940s.<sup>85</sup> There is a substantial decline during the Great Depression however, still a large group of almost half a million black Americans left the South. The decline during the 1930s must be seen in a broader decrease of pull factors in the northern states, especially for black Americans, caused by the Great Depression. In the decades before 1930 demand for employees had been extremely

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<sup>79</sup> Ritchie, *Electing FDR*, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Ritchie, *Electing FDR*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> Jason Reblando, “Farm Security Administration Photographs of Greenbelt Towns.” *Utopian Studies* 25, no. 1, (2014): 53.

<sup>82</sup> Ellora Derenoncourt, ‘Can You Move to Opportunity? Evidence from the Great Migration’, *American Economic Review* 112, no. 2 (February 2022): 369.

<sup>83</sup> Derenoncourt, ‘Can You Move to Opportunity? Evidence from the Great Migration’, 369.

<sup>84</sup> Trotter, *The Great Migration in Historical Perspective*,

<sup>85</sup> Derenoncourt, ‘Can You Move to Opportunity? Evidence from the Great Migration’, 369.



high, with employers even offering to pay for the migrants' way up north.<sup>86</sup> Although black migrants that moved north found themselves in areas free of legally imposed segregation, many of the areas were still racially discriminatory. This led to what Cheryl Lynn Greenberg describes as black people being “last hired, first fired” when employers selected their workforce during the depression era.<sup>87</sup> At the beginning of the 1940s, when the war in Europe was raging, American industrial production expanded and young men started to leave the workforce to join the army. The demand for labor exploded in both the northern and western cities, leading to employers integrating their workplaces, which in turn led to an increase in black employment.<sup>88</sup>

The Historical Section therefore attempted to document American life in a period of multiple political, societal, and economic transformations. To understand to what extent the project was successful in documenting and representing these transformations, a closer look at two individuals is necessary: Rexford Guy Tugwell, described by the press as “Brain Truster no. 1”,<sup>89</sup> and his teaching assistant at Columbia University Roy Emerson Stryker. During the 1920s Stryker travelled east from his rural home in Colorado to become a student at Columbia University in New York City. He became close friends with his teacher and mentor in economics Dr. Tugwell. This is where a cooperation centered around visuality started to take shape. In 1924 Tugwell asked Stryker to provide visual representations for a book he was putting together with his colleague Thomas Munro.<sup>90</sup> Stryker was responsible for the selection and editing of all illustrations present in the textbook. The book *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* was the first book centered around American society that had photographs on almost every page.<sup>91</sup> As the title suggests, it was a reformist book, and it suggested ways in which people that lived in poverty might become more prosperous. The book was meant to introduce students to urban and rural poverty, labor relations, production, distribution, and other aspects of modern society.<sup>92</sup> In doing so it gave a social perspective on

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<sup>86</sup> Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance: African Americans in the Great Depression* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 27

<sup>87</sup> Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance*, 27.

<sup>88</sup> Greenberg, *To Ask for an Equal Chance*, 27.

<sup>89</sup> ‘TUGWELL A CENTER OF ENDLESS STRIFE; Target of President’s Foes Ever Since He Left Columbia to Join “Brain Trust.” VICTOR OVER PEEK IN AAA Frequently Attacked as “Red,” He Strongly Asserted His Loyalty to Constitution.’, *The New York Times*, 18 November 1936, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1936/11/18/archives/tugwell-a-center-of-endless-strife-target-of-presidents-foes-ever.html>.

<sup>90</sup> Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, xvi.

<sup>91</sup> William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 212.

<sup>92</sup> Rexford G. Tugwell, *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1925), xii.

the living standards of less prosperous Americans. The book rejected the teaching of classical economic theory, inspired by figures such as Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham, which to Tugwell was an “elaborated abstraction” that was “relevant to nothing in the real world.”<sup>93</sup>

Moreover, the book drew inspiration from the works of “two great thinkers”: John Dewey and Simon Patten.<sup>94</sup> Dewey founded the philosophical approach known as pragmatism. Dewey’s pragmatic approach to education boils down to a rejection of metaphysical truth in Western philosophy.<sup>95</sup> This had reduced knowledge to unverifiable abstractions, which is in line with Tugwell’s rejection of classical economic theory mentioned above. Pragmatists look at the consequences of actions to confirm or deny the validity or truthfulness of an idea.<sup>96</sup> In other words, applying science to social problems in society. The book by Tugwell and Stryker showed that the metaphysical theory of the invisible hand did not solve major societal problems such as poverty, with photographs and statistics to prove it. Tugwell placed himself therefore in line with Patten, who supported a rethinking of economics. Patten was an idealist who believed that mankind could take control of its own destiny, instead of relying on natural laws in economics.<sup>97</sup> Time showed that Tugwell’s solutions to classical economic theory were collectivism and a non-communist planned economy.<sup>98</sup> The book by Tugwell and Stryker does not explicitly mention this but it does call for an experimental attitude to the economic and societal problems of American society.<sup>99</sup> Four years after the book was published the Great Depression began in 1929. The societal problems became enlarged and Tugwell later joined Roosevelt’s brain trust.

Maren Stange argues that the attempt to give a realistic view of the social and economic state of the US helps explain Tugwell’s and Stryker’s interest in visuality as a means of communication.<sup>100</sup> Tugwell aimed to bring economics back to “the real world” by relying on the perceived objective nature of photography. Tugwell was later appointed by FDR to head the Resettlement Administration, which was concerned with relief for impoverished

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<sup>93</sup> Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, 90.

<sup>94</sup> Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, xii.

<sup>95</sup> Craig Calhoun, ed., ‘Dewey, John’, in *Dictionary of the Social Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/display/10.1093/acref/9780195123715.001.0001/acref-9780195123715-e-454>.

<sup>96</sup> Calhoun, ed., ‘Dewey, John’.

<sup>97</sup> Scott Spillman, ‘Patten, Simon’, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Cultural and Intellectual History*, ed. Joan Shelley Rubin and Scott E. Casper (Oxford University Press, 2013), <https://www-oxfordreference-com.eur.idm.oclc.org/display/10.1093/acref/9780199764358.001.0001/acref-9780199764358-e-509>.

<sup>98</sup> Clyde Weaver, ‘Tugwell on Morningside Heights: A Review Article’, *The Town Planning Review* 55, no. 2 (1984): 228–36.

<sup>99</sup> Tugwell, *American Economic Life*, 587.

<sup>100</sup> Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life*, xvi.

Americans. Tugwell relocated to Washington D.C. and took Stryker with him to lead the Historical Section within the new agency. Tugwell shared Stryker's interest in using documentary photography as a communicative tool. The idea of the Historical Section, Tugwell states, "was mine and Stryker's, and we wanted to make as complete a record as we could of an agonizing interlude in American life."<sup>101</sup> In a sense, Tugwell proceeds to make use of photography as a tool to achieve what he wants, relying on its persuasive power, when used as a form of documentation.

Yet, rather soon after his appointment, Tugwell and his project received some harsh criticism. *The New York Times* prompted on its front page on 17 November 1935: "Tugwell has staff of 12,089 to create 5,012 relief jobs" and "2 Tugwell aides to one relief job."<sup>102</sup> A year later, in 1936, Tugwell would resign and the same newspaper reported: "he nevertheless was almost constantly in hot water, through no particular fault of his own, according to his friends, but because of his "radical" ideas, according to his enemies, who were legion." This refers to scrutiny he received from members of congress from both parties.<sup>103</sup> Republicans accused him of being a communist and planning an American revolution.<sup>104</sup> He would be called "Rex the Red" underlining the fear of a communist revolution present among the Republican opposition.<sup>105</sup> Others would cynically refer to him as "professor" referring to his background at Columbia University and not in rural America.<sup>106</sup> The Historical Section's photographs would also be used to provoke controversy in the same year. The organization was blamed for staging photographs, according to *Fargo Forum* Resettlement Administration photographer Rothstein had moved a steer's skull to the forefront of multiple photographs to create overly dramatic shots.<sup>107</sup> Although Tugwell was not a communist, many of his enemies could not understand the nuance in his experimental attitude towards economics.

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<sup>101</sup> Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, 212.

<sup>102</sup> Frank L. Kluckhohn, 'TUGWELL HAS STAFF OF 12,089 TO CREATE 5,012 RELIEF JOBS; Pays His Aides \$1,750,000 a Month While Workers on Projects Get \$300,000. 138,000 JOBS GOAL IN MAY But Officials State Chief Work Is for Resettlement and Rehabilitation. 2 TUGWELL AIDES TO ONE RELIEF JOB', *The New York Times*, 17 November 1935, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1935/11/17/archives/tugwell-has-staff-of-12089-to-create-5012-relief-jobs-pays-his.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 51.

<sup>104</sup> 'TUGWELL A CENTER OF ENDLESS STRIFE; Target of President's Foes Ever Since He Left Columbia to Join "Brain Trust." VICTOR OVER PEEK IN AAA Frequently Attacked as "Red," He Strongly Asserted His Loyalty to Constitution.', *The New York Times*, 18 November 1936, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1936/11/18/archives/tugwell-a-center-of-endless-strife-target-of-presidents-foes-ever.html>.

<sup>105</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 51.

<sup>106</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 51.

<sup>107</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 59.

These controversies were undoubtedly related to the presidential campaign of 1936 and aimed to embarrass the FDR administration. They also stress the thin line, in both the Republican and public mind, between acceptable social reform and detestable communism. For example, Dorothea Lange, one of the early Resettlement Administration and Historical Section photographers, quoted an impoverished farmer stating: "We got enough troubles without going Communist." The uproar would however conclude with the resignation of Tugwell at the end of 1936. Stryker meanwhile remained at the head of the Historical Section, aware of the press and Republican opposition watching his every move. On January 1<sup>st</sup> of 1937 the Resettlement Administration was incorporated into the Department of Agriculture and in September of that year the Farm Security Administration (FSA) was created to take over all its activities.<sup>108</sup> Stryker remained at the head of the Historical Section during this period, and he could continue his work under the FSA. At its height, the FSA was active in forty-eight American states, had over 2.000 offices, and helped around 850.000 farmers.<sup>109</sup> The organization bought up bad farms, offered training, established health clinics that provided free health care, built migrant camps, and loaned money to farmers so they could become landowners.<sup>110</sup> The Historical Section was a part of this government institution and was occupied with publicizing the FSA's relief efforts. They did so from a "grubby little government office in Washington D.C."<sup>111</sup> From this office Stryker led a group of photographers that made around 270.000 photographs between 1937 and 1943.<sup>112</sup> At first, the project was centered around capturing the construction of suburban housing communities and documenting cash loans to farmers. Later, roughly around it's succession into the FSA the focus became on the daily lives of farmers, sharecroppers in the South, and migratory workers in the Midwest and West.<sup>113</sup>

The intertwined narratives of economic collapse, experimental recovery efforts, and demographic shifts are essential in comprehending the period's complexity. Placing the project in the context of the Great Migration is relevant because migration is the key theme of this study and chapter five and six will expand further on it. The first two themes help explain why the Historical Section was established. Tugwell and Stryker were part of a generation of economists that rejected classical economic thought and aimed to experiment and implement social scientific solutions to the problems caused by the Great Depression. This culminated in

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<sup>108</sup> Melville and Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records*.

<sup>109</sup> Blair and Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography*, 2.

<sup>110</sup> Blair and Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography*, 2.

<sup>111</sup> Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 7.

<sup>112</sup> Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 7.

<sup>113</sup> Library of Congress, 'About This Collection'.

the New Deal. Tugwell and Stryker set up the Historical Section with the aim to depict the social and economic realities faced by millions and as a tool to achieve their pragmatist economic goals. Documentary photography therefore formed a scientific tool to showcase the necessity of such reforms. The next chapter will elaborate on how this aim of publicizing was at times difficult to reconcile with Stryker's ideal of documentary photography.

## Chapter 3: Stryker's Idea of Documentary Photography

The previous chapter established the Historical Section as a documentation project, occupied with publicizing the relief efforts of the government institutions it was a part of. This chapter focusses on how the project worked. What was Stryker's role in the Historical Section, and how did he create the Historical Section's mission to document and represent the truth? This question delves into the leadership and vision that guided the project. This helps understand how the Historical Section as an institution held a certain power. Furthermore, understanding the role of the employed photographers and the extent of autonomy they had reveals much about the dynamics of the project. This is examined by analyzing accounts by Jack Delano, one of the employed photographers and his correspondence with Stryker.

The office in D.C. formed the nerve system of the project. Every negative produced by one of Stryker's employees passed his desk. From the office, photography equipment was distributed, the funds were managed, negatives were developed and printed, and the captions received by the photographers were reviewed and edited.<sup>114</sup> Stryker had an important and decisive role in what went on in the headquarters and therefore what his employed photographers spread out over the nation did. Before venturing out into Depression stricken areas the photographers read relevant reports, newspapers, and books to familiarize themselves with the area.<sup>115</sup> They were given a certain area to cover over a span of a few months and a shooting script was often prepared to give the photographers priorities. Stryker envisioned a role for photography in the social sciences accompanied by verbal or written accounts so that they could provide "accurate meaning" to the "social historian of tomorrow."<sup>116</sup> There was a communicative role for photography that was best expressed with the help of social scientists and historians. I will now argue that the Historical Section's method of documentary photography helped create certain truth claims.

The written records of the FSA in the Library of Congress archive hold a description of the "FSA photographer." This document gives an indication of the standards the FSA photographer was expected to uphold in order to build a certain reliability into the photographs:

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<sup>114</sup> Library of Congress, 'About This Collection'.

<sup>115</sup> Library of Congress, 'About This Collection'.

<sup>116</sup> Roy Emerson Stryker and Paul H. Johnstone, 'Documentary Photographs', in *The Cultural Approach to History: Edited for the American Historical Association*, ed. Caroline Ware (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), 324–31.

“Alone in the field, the FSA photographer must be able to interpret what he sees from many aspects: He must be a good deal of a social scientist, with some theoretical and ... much practical grounding; he is the social investigator with a camera as his note-book; he must be a first-rate reporter – not of spot news – but of the major currents of our time as they manifest themselves pictorially in any one locality.”<sup>117</sup>

Although it remains unclear exactly when between 1937 and 1943 and by who it was written, Stryker’s ideal of documentary photography shines through in this quote. Stryker himself wrote in 1942:

“The question is not what to picture nor what camera to use. Every phase of our time and our surroundings has vital significance and any camera in good repair is an adequate instrument. The job is to know enough about the subject matter, to find its significance in itself and in relation to its surroundings, its time and its function.”<sup>118</sup>

By upholding a certain standard for the photographers, the Historical Section aimed to freeze in time the significant expressions of American reality. Moreover, by claiming that the photographer can report and depict the “major currents” of society a certain truth claim is made.

In other words, the ideal documentary photographer was able to visualize subjects and objects that represent American reality in any “locality”. A big part of this was that the photographers were expected to deliver captions and some written context along with the photographs. Stryker wrote: “photography cannot ordinarily stand by itself, but there are certain things that the photograph, set in a context that the historian or social scientist can supply, can communicate better than words alone.”<sup>119</sup> A 1937 memo written by Stryker for budget purposes defines the aim of the project:

“The whole purpose behind Resettlement Administration photography has been a simple and unspectacular attempt to give information. The task has been to confront the people with each other, the urban with the rural, the inhabitants of one section with those of other sections of the

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<sup>117</sup> FSA-OWI written records, 1935-1946 (Box 5), United States Resettlement Administration. *The F.S.A. photographer*, 1935. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2018645752/>.

<sup>118</sup> [https://www.moma.org/documents/moma\\_catalogue\\_3433\\_300188233.pdf](https://www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_3433_300188233.pdf)

<sup>119</sup> *The Cultural Approach to History* edited by Caroline Ware, 377.

country, in order to promote a wider and more sympathetic understanding of one for the other.”<sup>120</sup>

He goes on to state about the employed photographers: “Their job has simply been to demonstrate what the facts are and by letting the facts speak for themselves to make known the real living conditions of rural America.”<sup>121</sup> Almost forty years later Stryker recalled about the project: “We succeeded in doing exactly what Rex Tugwell said we should do: *We introduced Americans to America.*”<sup>122</sup> And he would go on to state: “it helped connect one generation’s image of itself with the reality of its own time in history.”<sup>123</sup> By turning photography into a social scientific method, Stryker claimed to be able to depict the reality or facts of American society to then introduce those facts to its citizens.

However, the successfulness of the Historical Section at the time was measured by the scope of distribution and reach of its photographs. It was not measured, as Stryker might have wanted, by their usefulness for future social scientists and historians. Stryker was limited in doing this by different factors. Stryker had to deal with political opposition to the FSA, a from time-to-time limited budget, and certain expectations from his superiors and society itself. Stryker’s documentary photography was bound to be confined to the political, capitalist, and social realities of its time in history. The aim of the project was therefore twofold: on the one hand safeguarding the existence of the organization, while showcasing American social conditions to contemporary Americans, and on the other hand creating an accurate documentation of America for generations to come.<sup>124</sup> The following quote from a letter by Stryker sent to Historical Section photographer Dorothea Lange in 1937 can help explain this twofold aim: “Regarding the tenancy pictures, I would suggest that you take both black and white, but place the emphasis on the white tenants, since we know these will reach much wider use.”<sup>125</sup> Several things stand out in this quote. First, the emphasis on white tenants. This is where the first aim of the project becomes apparent. The emphasis must be on the thing that is most helpful in creating momentum for the project at that time. Second, Stryker suggests that photographs must be taken of both black and white tenants, which must have been with the second goal of the project in mind. Stryker aimed to create a representative visuality of the

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<sup>120</sup> Stu Cohen, *The Likes of Us: Photography and the Farm Security Administration*, ed. Peter Bacon Hales, First Edition (Boston: David R. Godine, Publisher, 2008), 1.

<sup>121</sup> Stu Cohen, *The Likes of Us*: , 1.

<sup>122</sup> Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 9.

<sup>123</sup> Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 9.

<sup>124</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, *Documentary as Art in U.S. Camera*.

<sup>125</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 4.



American tenants, both black and white, for the photo file. Third, the quote suggests that photographs of white tenants will be received better by the viewer. Stryker wanted the photographs to fit into a certain discourse of that time, which could expand the project's reach, however this discourse excluded black tenants. Chapter six expands on the omission of black Americans in the popular narratives of that time.

Correspondence between Stryker and his photographers can offer an insight into the priorities of the Historical Section, but it can also be a testament of the autonomy of the employed photographers. The Historical Section employed around twenty photographers during its existence and usually around five at the same time. Photographers, such as Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, Jack Delano, Marion Post Walcott, and Gordon Parks were employed by the organization. The quote mentioned earlier that described the "FSA photographer" suggests that a certain responsibility and agency was expected of the photographer. It was after all the photographers who were expected to be "a good deal of a social scientist" themselves. Photographer Jack Delano offers insight into the autonomy of the FSA photographer. Delano reflected on his relationship with Stryker:

"His instructions to us about what to photograph were often quite detailed. I did not resent his "shooting scripts," which were often lengthy and very specific, because as I got to know him better I realized that they were not *orders* and that I could take many liberties as I felt it advisable."<sup>126</sup>

He would continue to state: "After all, his was a historical vision, which I respected." This meant, at least to Delano, that there were directional points of attention but any depiction of the social conditions of American society were "fair game" for the camera.<sup>127</sup> Stryker was under constant pressure to deliver photographs that helped secure his budget, but at heart he aimed to document a slice of American history. This is what documentary photography was really about, for Stryker. The photographers were therefore quite free in their interpretation of the shooting scripts as long as some of it was covered. At one point Stryker wrote to Delano: "This method will help keep the FSA man out of our hair."<sup>128</sup> This underlines the necessity of covering at least some of the priorities in the shooting scripts to safeguard the Historical Section's existence. However, it also emphasizes the difference between Stryker's idea of

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<sup>126</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 34.

<sup>127</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 34.

<sup>128</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 34.

documentation and the FSA man's idea of documentation. Stryker's idea being the second aim as discussed earlier and the FSA man's idea being the first aim.

Furthermore, the constant interplay between the two aims of the project becomes even more apparent with the rise of nationalistic currents within American society as a reaction to the looming involvement in the Second World War. A shift towards more patriotic and nationalistic representation was inevitable. The FSA received criticism from Congress that it was "non-essential" and was in dire need of proving itself.<sup>129</sup> In 1940 he sent out the following to Delano:

"Emphasize the idea of abundance – the horn of plenty – and pour a little maple syrup over it – you know, mix well with white clouds, and put it on a sky-blue platter. I know your damned photographer's soul writhes, but to hell with it. Do you think I give a damn about a photographer's soul with Hitler at our doorstep? You are nothing but camera fodder to me."<sup>130</sup>

Stryker had been influential before, but the photographer's spontaneity and freedom that he had applauded before is hard to find in this quote. American agriculture was to be "coated with maple syrup", while the harsh reality of rural America was to be depicted in the preceding years. Natanson argues that this shift showcases Stryker's pragmatism, which can be substantiated by many examples.<sup>131</sup> One of these examples, according to him, is the shift in Delano's photographic work while working for the Historical Section.

However, Delano, who himself received this letter, looked quite differently at it. He states about the letter that it is: "Often misinterpreted and therefore the subject of much controversy."<sup>132</sup> Delano explains that, because of how his relationship with Stryker was, he could not take the letter seriously and thought it to be an "awkward attempt at cynical humor."<sup>133</sup> To Delano it was obvious that Stryker was under pressure from his superiors and was trying to keep the Historical Section alive, while also making clear to his photographers that they should provide these photographs but not abandon their documentative ways.<sup>134</sup> Stryker was not willing to leave his ideals but had to affirm to the will of congressmen and senators to keep his project going. Delano concludes: "To tell the truth, I often took photographs of that sort without any urging from Roy, simply because that was part of the

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<sup>129</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 34.

<sup>130</sup> Stryker and Wood, *In This Proud Land*, 16.

<sup>131</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 188.

<sup>132</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 59.

<sup>133</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 59.

<sup>134</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 59.

America I saw.” In 1941 Stryker wrote to Delano: “it is very important that we keep our finger in defense activities the way the whole world is moving now; and particularly the way things happen around, we may have to do much more for defense and a great variety of things can be done, and I am determined that we are not going to find ourselves liquidated because we got on the wrong wagon.”<sup>135</sup>

This is in line with the Historical Section’s absorption into the Office of War Information the following year in 1942. Stryker’s team was expected to do more “upbeat documentary” when this occurred.<sup>136</sup> At the beginning of 1943 Stryker’s unit merged with the News Bureau photographic staff forming the Domestic Branch of Photography. Alfred Palmer, who headed the News Bureau, recalled: “When Stryker and I began to work together, he’d be so proud to show me the (FSA) pictures that had been reproduced in newspapers all over the country and abroad, gruesome pictures of poor sharecroppers, shacks, trash all over the floor. My reaction was, ‘Look, Roy, those pictures aren’t helpful to us, they’re not going to contribute to what we’re trying to accomplish here.’”<sup>137</sup> The two clashed in worldview. Stryker thought that Palmer had no idea what documentary photography entailed, while Palmer saw Stryker’s work at the Historical Section as nothing more than manipulation, by encouraging his employees to capture the worst conditions. Paul Vanderbilt, who oversaw the reorganization of the different photography files into the FSA-OWI photo file, recalled: “As time went on, we saw less and less of Stryker ... He was holed up in his office, on the phone, in meetings, trying to hang on to the kind of photography he believed in.”<sup>138</sup> Stryker would resign in October of 1943.

In conclusion, Stryker's role in the Historical Section was essential in shaping its mission to document and represent the truth. This chapter has shown *how* this mission of documentation and representation worked. I have done this by explaining Stryker’s role, *how* the method of documentary photography was constructed, and to what extent the photographers were free to interpret it. His leadership ensured that the photographs passed through a process that combined both artistic freedom and strategic direction, brought together in the detailed shooting scripts. Stryker's vision of integrating photography with social sciences aimed to create a comprehensive and truthful portrayal of American life. Despite facing political and financial constraints and having to navigate the shifting priorities brought on by

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<sup>135</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 189.

<sup>136</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 258.

<sup>137</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 258.

<sup>138</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 258.

the Second World War, Stryker managed to maintain a degree of integrity. The autonomy granted to photographers like Jack Delano was significant, allowing them to interpret social conditions through their lens, which underscores the dynamic interplay between Stryker's directives and the photographers' agency. Ultimately, Stryker's was constantly balancing the two aims of the project. On the one hand, securing the project's survival and on the other providing an authentic visual history of America. The next chapter delves into the next step of ensuring the project's survival, that is the modes of circulation.

## Chapter 4: Modes of Circulation

The previous chapter has shown the importance of safeguarding the Historical Section's existence for Stryker. Therefore, one of Stryker's most important activities was making sure that the Historical Section's photographs received maximum use. This chapter focusses on how the Historical Section presented its photographs to the public. It does so by delving into what we know about the material practices of the Historical Section. First, an overview of the different modes of distribution used by the Historical Section is given. Second, I look at how the Historical Section helped form our understanding of the era. This question is answered by looking at how the material practices in combination with the power held by the institution created certain truth claims. The material practices of the Historical Section produce a certain discursive power that will be explained in this chapter. By analyzing a collection of exhibition boards and relating them to the findings of chapter two and three, certain truth claims that form the grounds of a regime of truth, become apparent.

Throughout its existence from 1935 until 1943 the Historical Section published its photographs in various ways. This chapter and the following chapter will show how these modes of circulation became more and more refined through the years. In the first two years of the project Stryker was mainly concerned with providing photographs for pamphlets and reports of the Resettlement Administration.<sup>139</sup> On top of that, in these years the project relied heavily on magazines and newspaper articles to bring the photographs to the public. The project would sponsor publications that made use of the photographs.<sup>140</sup> However, as the previous chapter has shown, Stryker was constantly reinventing new ways to justify his budget and assure the existence of the project. By 1937 multiple Historical Section photographs had gained exposure in newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines. From some of the most iconic photographs, such as the *Migrant Mother* and *Dust Storm* to the controversial ones that included an alleged portable skull prop. However, the exposure was not as far-reaching as the government was aiming for. Stryker wanted his photographs published for political and social aims but also needed more of them published to justify his budget to his superiors.<sup>141</sup> To make sure that the Historical Section could keep existing Stryker had to distribute his collection of photographs more broadly. In 1937 Stryker was contacted by Pulitzer Prize-winner and poet

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<sup>139</sup> Forrest Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade; Roy Stryker and the Development of Documentary Photography in the Thirties* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 122.

<sup>140</sup> Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade*, 122.

<sup>141</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 203.

Archibald MacLeish, to collaborate on a book.<sup>142</sup> This collaboration with an established name in American literature was exactly what Stryker needed. The book *Land of the Free*, was one of more than a dozen books that were published between 1936 and 1943, making use of Historical Section photography.<sup>143</sup> Many of them were made in collaboration with scholars and social scientists. The idea of a picture book was not new but the interest in publishing one for commercial reasons was.<sup>144</sup> Stryker had been looking to publish such a book since his efforts in putting together *American Economic Life* with Tugwell.

In addition to the newspapers, magazines, and books, exhibitions were a useful way of drawing attention to the FSA's work. Exhibitions, consisting of Historical Section photography, were plentiful from 1937 until 1943. The exhibitions presenting Historical Section photographs were held at universities, museums, government offices, and fairs.<sup>145</sup> The rooms and places used by the the Historical Section to present their educational boards play a role in how their discursive power is produced. Exhibition sites such as universities, museums, and government offices hold a certain power within society. The Library of Congress archive holds an abundance of correspondence between Stryker and institutions that exhibited or could potentially exhibit FSA photographs. Prepackaged displays were distributed to institutions across the country free of charge, only transportation costs were to be charged, and not even in all instances.<sup>146</sup> For example, Stryker refers Florence Wyckoff, a potential client, to an employee at the San Francisco office of the FSA and writes: "You might get in touch with him right away and if you are not satisfied with the exhibit material he has on hand, we will be very happy to arrange to ship the exhibit which was at Princeton. The only charges in connection with this would be the transportation."<sup>147</sup> Besides showcasing the importance of accessibility to the FSA, this correspondence shows a variation in readily available exhibition boards. Figure 1 shows an example of what these travelling exhibition boards looked like. They were foldable and easily transportable and just as Stryker envisioned, they were a combination of visuality and text. The exhibition boards expanded on a variety of topics. The person responsible for most of the exhibition boards was Edwin Roskam.

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<sup>142</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 203.

<sup>143</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 212.

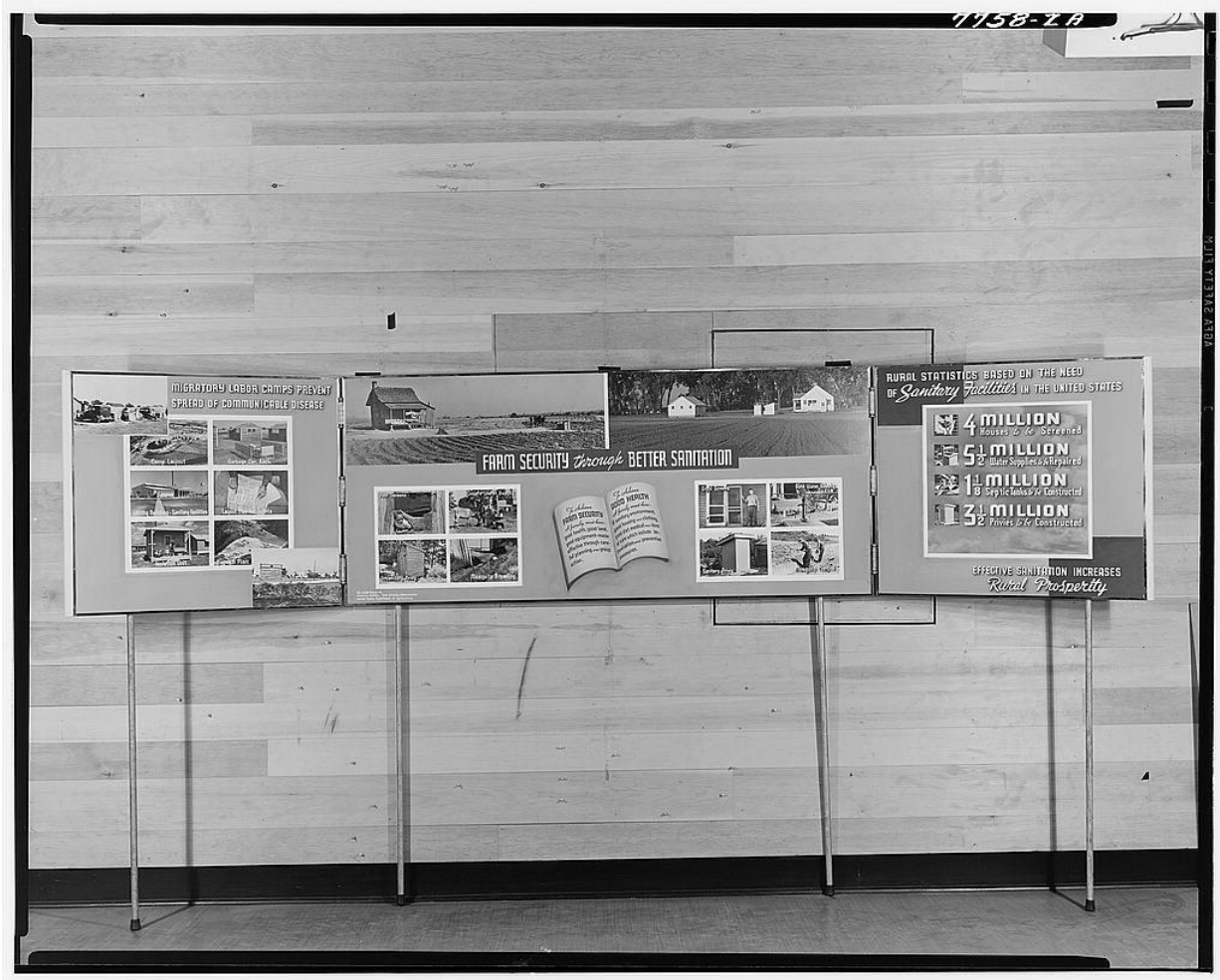
<sup>144</sup> Jack Hurley, *Portrait of a Decade*, 136.

<sup>145</sup> Melville and Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records*.

<sup>146</sup> Melville and Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records*.

<sup>147</sup> Roy Emerson Stryker, 'Letter about Exhibitions to Florence Wyckhoff', 20 May 1938, FSA-OWI written records, 1935-1946 (Reel 3), Image 28.

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/phpdata/pageturner.php?type=&agg=fsahsr&item=003&seq=28>.



**Figure 1** *Farm Security Administration exhibit.* United States, 1941. Oct. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762099/>.

Roskam was born in 1903 in Germany to American parents. He moved to the US after witnessing the First World War and he recalls being an “enemy alien child” during this period in Germany.<sup>148</sup> This experience motivated him to quickly finish his high school in the US and enroll in the Academy of Fine Arts. He became a moderately successful painter, but figured out rather soon that he was more interested in photography. A sponsorship allowed him to travel to French Polynesia for three years, where he did his own version of photojournalism, as he combined photography and writing for a French magazine. Roskam remembers: “So, I came back from the South Seas not knowing that there was a depression here - right smack in the middle of it -.”<sup>149</sup> After struggling to find work and going to Puerto Rico to do coverage on political unrest in 1937, which did not end up being published, Roskam found a job at a book

<sup>148</sup> Edwin Roskam and Louise Roskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Roskam, interview by Richard Doud, 3 August 1965, Archives of American Art.

<sup>149</sup> Roskam and Roskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Roskam.

publisher. There he had work on a book that illustrated the functions of various government agencies. This caused him to go to Washington D.C to gather photographs depicting the activities of various agencies, and one of them was the FSA. This is how Rosskam came into contact with Stryker, who, as Rosskam recalls, had a hard time finding people with experience in “things like layout and picture use.”<sup>150</sup> He joined the Historical Section in early 1938 to work at the D.C. office and not as a photographer. Ideally for Stryker, photographs were accompanied by text to put them in their historical context and make them as representative as possible.

Therefore, Rosskam was given different editorial responsibilities within the Historical Section. Rosskam recalls: “I was making exhibits. I was deriving books and publications; I was filling them. All kinds of people would be putting out articles and I would be selecting their pictures for them, just what a photo editor does.”<sup>151</sup> Rosskam became familiar with the Historical Section’s practices of using photographs as a tool of communication. Rosskam:

“I got my step up into an understanding of the use of photographs as a language. From there it was only a short step to photographs with captions as a language, and then only another short step further to photographs with text so combined, that they complimented each other at all times.”<sup>152</sup>

Rosskam speaks of thousands of exhibition boards that were sent out by the Historical Section to regional offices and other institutions around the country.<sup>153</sup> He states: “We made all kinds of exhibits for sending out into the field.”<sup>154</sup> The boards consisted of “whatever point the Administration wanted to make.”<sup>155</sup> The exhibition boards therefore form the best example to showcase how the truth claims made by the Historical Section, as part of the FSA, worked.

Usually, the content of the exhibition boards was constructed in the same manner. They showcased a problem in society that needed fixing and expanded on the FSA’s efforts to alleviate said problem. The exhibition boards therefore possess a certain educational narrative that can be seen as a truth claim in of itself. The boards are organized in a way to make itself persuasive. Figures 2 and 3 showcase this very well. They are two halves of an exhibition board that showcase what I would call a ‘before FSA intervention’ and ‘after FSA intervention’ perspective. The photographs form the prove of the improvement. The aim of an exhibition

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<sup>150</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>151</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>152</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>153</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>154</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>155</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

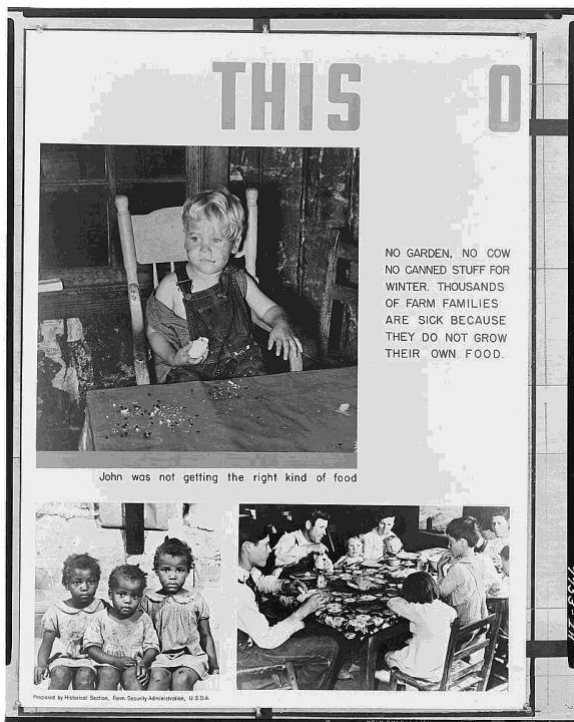


board is to inform, using both text and visuality. A closer look at Figures 2 and 3 reveals the use of captions to frame the photographs as proof. The photograph shows a little boy, apparently named John, who is looking unhealthy and uncared for and according to the caption this is because his family can't grow its own food. The particular cause of the problem showcased in the photograph is defined. The caption then shifts attention to thousands of families that are sick. The truth is assumed in a sense by using the photograph of one boy as proof. Rosskam describes the language of exhibition boards as: "Put the things together in such a relationship to each other, that theoretically, at least, you read them jointly." The photographs in this instance thus compliment the educational narrative of the captions. The problem, before FSA intervention, is defined and a specific strategy to combat it is given.

Moreover, the second photograph of John already proves that the FSA's intervention strategy is successful. Because John, apparently two years later, is looking healthy and happy. The FSA holds the power and knowledge to fix problems in society and the photographs substantiate this claim. However, some exhibitions took a different approach. The narrative formed on the boards that are a part of the "In the image of America" exhibition held at the Rockefeller Center in New York City in 1941 are an exception to the formula mentioned before while at the same time indicative of a new approach. They take a far more patriotic approach to showcasing the US than the other FSA exhibitions. Captions spread out over different boards part of the exhibition read out: "All of us ... in the North ..., in the South ..., in the West ..., in the East ..., in the Middle West ..., are Americans." And: "All the Riches ..., improvement ... man-made, underground wealth, industrial skill, productive capacity, food, power, manpower, ... of a Nation." They follow a patriotic narrative, while still using the photographs as proof. This is inextricably linked with the looming US partition in the Second World War, and it is a harbinger of what the Historical Section would become in the coming years, as Stryker's idealism of using photography to instigate social change and support New Deal programs was slowly but surely abandoned. However, it also showcases how the regime of truth could be expanded to different narratives. In other words, representativeness became less important than pushing a certain narrative.

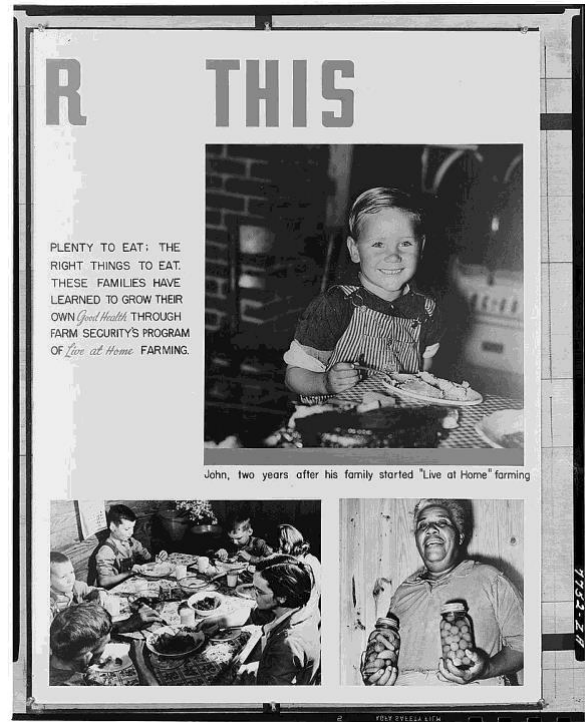
In conclusion, this chapter has shown how the material practices of the Historical Section, in conjunction with the institutional power it wielded, significantly shaped our understanding of the era. By examining the various modes of distribution employed by the Historical Section, we see how these practices produced certain truth claims that established a regime of truth. Through a detailed analysis of exhibition boards and their contexts, it becomes clear that the interplay between visual and textual narratives was created to convey specific

educational and ideological messages. This analysis highlights the discursive power that the Historical Section held. The institutional uses of photography make us think photographs are truthful. This chapter thus provides a detailed consideration of how the effects of dominant power relations work through the details of an institution's practice. The Historical Section did not only produce propagandistic pictures that would satisfy higher-ups, but they also made an effort to document the harsh reality of Great Depression-era America. Ultimately, the chapter demonstrates that the Historical Section's efforts in curating and disseminating photographs were pivotal in shaping historical narratives and public consciousness. This chapter has established that there was no problem with extending the truth claims to less representational narratives, as they in turn assured more use of the photography, solidifying the Historical Section's role as a powerful agent of truth and knowledge production.



**Figure 2**

*Farm Security Administration exhibit This or This. Second part.* United States, 1941. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762094/>.



**Figure 3**

*Farm Security Administration exhibit This or This. Second part.* United States, 1941. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762093/>.

## Chapter 5: Outside Forces

The circulation of photographs produced by the Historical Section was a critical aspect of their impact and legacy. However outside forces impacted which photographs gained traction in their circulation. How were their photographs circulated, and why were certain types of photographs particularly appealing to the popular culture and public opinion of that time? Historical Section photographs were widely disseminated through newspapers, magazines, exhibitions, and books, resonating with the public due to their powerful portrayal of everyday American life. What did those photographs that were appealing to the popular culture represent? The extensive collection, containing thousands of images, was crucial in shaping public perception and awareness, however it was also, by some, seen as art. Through these questions, I pinpoint how art discourse and popular culture boosted the Historical Section's popularity and how the migration narrative gained traction. The previous chapters showed how the Historical Section's main objective, publicizing the FSA's efforts to combat rural poverty using documentary photography, was limited, and influenced by various societal, political, capitalistic, and internal factors. The photographs resulted from complex intersections of knowledge about the world, ideology, pragmatism, political aims, and individual motive.

However, this is only one side of the coin, and this chapter will deconstruct the other side. It will do so by showing how the narratives that were created by the Historical Section's photographs influenced American public perception and helped mold public opinion. This was done through narratives created by the Historical Section's own publications and through various narratives created by authors, poets and other artists inspired by or making use of the Historical Section's photographs. These narratives combined were not just reflections of the real world, but they actively shaped and influenced people's understanding of the world and its politics. The photographs spread out into broader cultural and societal circles, causing the social idealism that shaped the New Deal reforms to become embedded in American society. The New Deal reforms were built on humanistic principles, which were convincingly strengthened by the publications of Historical Section photography. The photographs and what they stood for became ingrained in both the American public and historical consciousness. This chapter will flesh out the social modalities they came to represent, with a focus on migration. This chapter explains this by mapping out how Stryker's documentary photography ended up in the broader streams of visibility, such as art, photojournalism, literature, and popular culture. I will then distinguish why certain aspects were taken in by the current and others sank to the

bottom. After all, to bring this back to the critical and aesthetic approach, the aim is to pinpoint the imposed limits.

The 1930s saw an intersection of art, culture, and politics. This crossroads of concepts is coined ‘The Cultural Front’ by Michael Denning.<sup>156</sup> He argues that the migrant played an important role in the creation of this American cultural aesthetic. James R. Swensen shares this perspective. He writes that two things come to mind when someone thinks of the Great Depression: Dorothea Lange’s iconic photograph the *Migrant Mother* and John Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*.<sup>157</sup> Swensen writes that these things together “have formed an important core to our perception of the Great Depression.”<sup>158</sup> These two artistic and yet documentative works helped shape public memory of the Great Depression era. And more importantly, they also shaped public consciousness of the American population at that time. Swensen goes on to argue that Historical Section photographs heavily influenced Steinbeck’s ideas, while in turn his novel influenced the work of FSA photographers.<sup>159</sup> I will now delve into respectively art and popular culture to explain how they functioned to popularize certain Historical Section photographs.

## The Power of Art

Cara A. Finnegan points out that the Historical Section photographs were often represented as art and according to her there is a complicated rhetorical space between “art” and “documentary” when publicizing photographs.<sup>160</sup> She points at the use of the photographs by Tom Maloney and Edward Steichen in their yearly publication of *U.S. Camera*. These two artists saw, on top of compelling visual evidence of rural poverty, impressive aesthetic expressions.<sup>161</sup> By emphasizing the aesthetic expressions in photographs, the photographs become, to a certain extent, removed from their documentative nature and are placed in a different discourse, being the discourse of art. Finnegan describes how Steichen had various understandings of what photography entailed throughout his career. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he pleaded for photography’s recognition as art. During the First World War he emphasized its technical use as he joined the US army which used photography as a tool for

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<sup>156</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso Books, 2011), xx.

<sup>157</sup> James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 3

<sup>158</sup> James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 3

<sup>159</sup> James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 3

<sup>160</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, ‘Documentary as Art in “U.S. Camera”’, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (2001): 37.

<sup>161</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, ‘Documentary as Art in “U.S. Camera”’, 37.

aerial surveillance. In the 1920's he began to see its communicative use in advertisement as he became head photographer at *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue*. By the 1930's he had embraced the communicative power of photography, as well as potential art in all forms of photography. This leads Finnegan to conclude: "When we read U.S. Camera, then, we should not read it as a mirror of the photography-as-fine-art movement, but as a popular magazine devoted to the artful photograph in all of its manifestations, including those produced as a response to the decade's growing documentary impulse."<sup>162</sup>

Moreover, in 1938 The International Photographic Salon was organized at the Grand Central Palace in New York City and attended by Steichen. The photographs shown there showcased rural poverty and overall hard times, which inspired Steichen to devote a 1939 *U.S. Camera* edition to the FSA and the Historical Section.<sup>163</sup> Finnegan argues that Steichen aimed to showcase the social and political impact of the photographs rather than their aesthetic qualities. Nevertheless, Finnegan points out that Steichen's own essay and captions in the journal often highlighted the artistry of the images, undermining his own intentions.<sup>164</sup> In other words, Steichen could not remove his analysis of the documentative photographs from the discourse of art. To explain the discourse of art I will take a look at one of the most iconic Historical Section photographs, *Migrant Mother* (Figure 4), which is often praised for its aesthetic value rather than its documentative value. Intertextuality can help understand the aesthetic value of the photograph. Intertextuality refers to the meanings given to a certain visuality by other images and texts.<sup>165</sup> The *Migrant Mother* symbolizes the Madonna and child, which is a tradition of iconic imagery in Western art that goes back centuries. A visual icon is often interpreted as something universal while at the same time its meaning can be traced historically and contextually. The Madonna figure is central to Christianity, yet it also represents an ideological assumption that the bond between mother and child is natural and universal.<sup>166</sup> The *Migrant Mother* assumes a place in this iconic tradition.

What is more, the photograph also derives a lot of its meaning from the historical and contextual knowledge of the viewer. When looking at the image itself the 'Migrant' aspect of the photograph does not stand out. The photograph is taken from close by and the background consists of a piece of cloth that could be anything. There is no movement, let alone migration,

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<sup>162</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, 'Documentary as Art in "U.S. Camera"', 45.

<sup>163</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, 'Documentary as Art in "U.S. Camera"', 49.

<sup>164</sup> Cara A. Finnegan, 'Documentary as Art in "U.S. Camera"', 60.

<sup>165</sup> Rose, *Visual Methodologies*, 198.

<sup>166</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 45.

visible in the image. When looking at the other photographs taken in the same collection and reading the photographer's caption it becomes clear that this woman is living in a roadside migrant encampment with her children. The viewer, aware of the circumstances caused by the droughts and dust storms, can envision her situation and see hardship in the photograph. The woman does not look at her children but she stares in front of her. As if she is thinking of the road to come, knowing the context, most likely, a heavy-hearted journey. Yet, the photograph's iconic status allows it to supersede its historical and contextual moment in time. The image no longer represents this particular individual's journey, but it came to represent the struggle of a generation and an era in time. Stryker stated about the *Migrant Mother* in 1972: "When Dorothea took that picture, that was the ultimate. She never surpassed it. To me, it was the picture of Farm Security."<sup>167</sup>

Therefore, I argue that Steichen's failed attempt to analyze the FSA photographs only through the discourse of documentary is telling of the complex relationship between documentary photography and art. Delano explains this complex relationship from the perspective of a documentary photographer:

"I know that any artist in the visual arts is always fascinated by light, color, texture, and the interrelationship of forms. But for me, the most important thing – to use the term as Paul Strand used it: "the thing in front of the camera" – is the subject."<sup>168</sup>

For Delano doing justice to the subject was always the main aim. This is what documentary photography boils down to in his mind. Objects might be moved or positioned, but to bring the representation of the subject closer to what the photographer deems reality. Delano goes on to state: "Light, color, texture, and so on are, to me, important only as they contribute to the honest portrayal of what is in front of the camera, not as ends in themselves." Therefore, if the photographer is talented or just lucky these factors and the subject might collide, which brings forth a documentative work of art. These documentative works of art, such as the *Migrant Mother*, show how the discourses of art and documentary are impossible to separate. However, they also explain the popularity of certain photographs over another while the aim of both was to deliver an honest documentation of the facts. The *Migrant Mother* was published in about twenty different newspapers and magazines between 1936, when it was taken, and 1940.<sup>169</sup> On

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<sup>167</sup> Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange: A Photographer's Life*, First Edition (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1978), 133.

<sup>168</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 56.

<sup>169</sup> Dorothea Lange, photographer. *Migrant mother and children - California*. California, 1936. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/93506674/>.

top of that, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City started to frequently exhibit Historical Section photography from 1938 onwards. In 1938 they honored the work of FSA photographer Walker Evans with the museum's first ever one-man photography exhibition. This was a shift in the museum's policy because it reconsidered its traditional objections to exhibiting photographs.<sup>170</sup> Large institutions such as the MoMA started to recognize photography as art. This exhibition of FSA material at the museum was the first of many. The correspondence between the museum and the FSA became so extensive that after 1940 the written records between the two institutions was filed within its own category instead of under "exhibitions" at the FSA's archive.<sup>171</sup> The exposition in honor of Evans exhibited photographs without Stryker's descriptive big brother. The photographs were exhibited on large white canvases side by side without captions.<sup>172</sup>

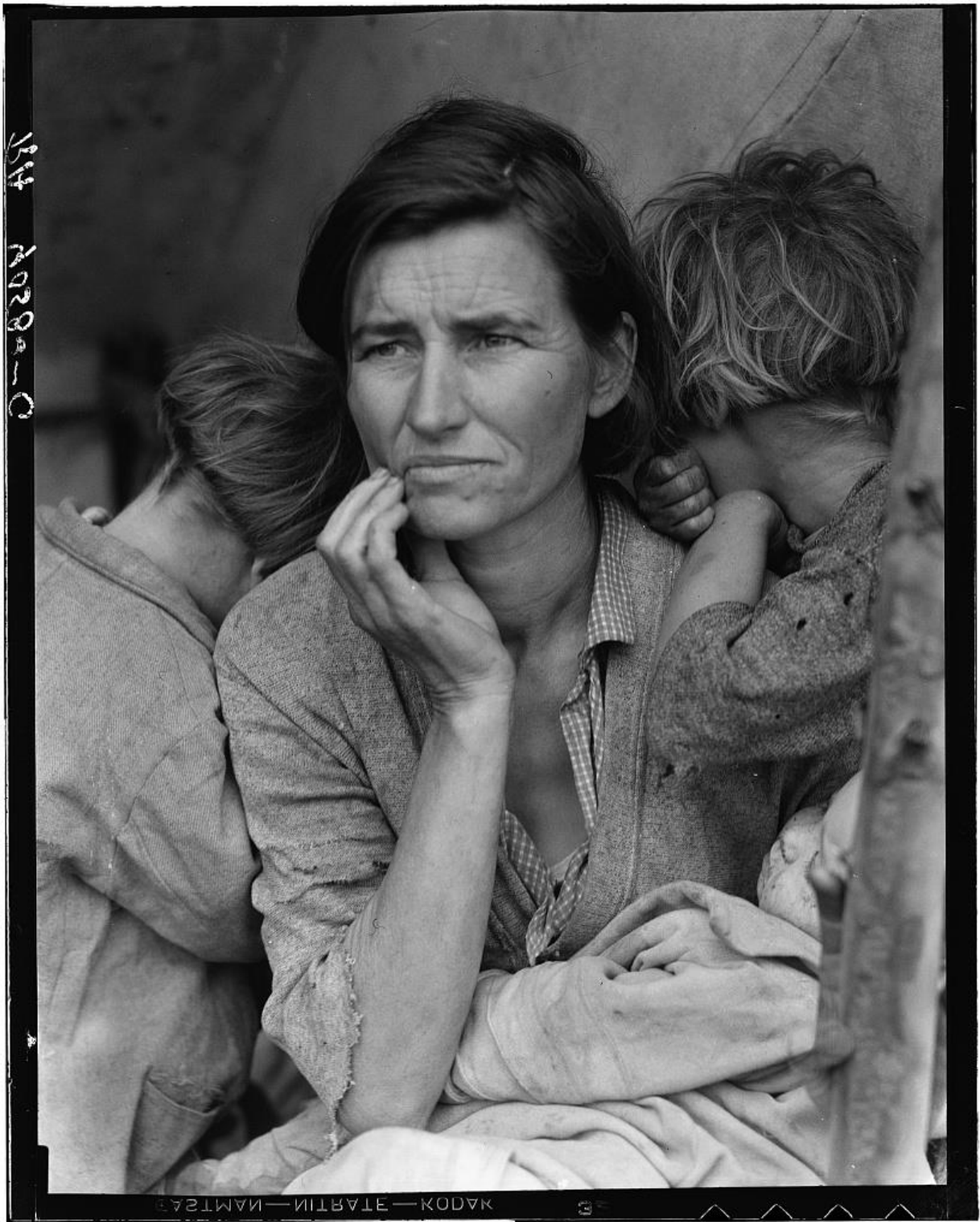
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<sup>170</sup> Stu Cohen, *The Likes of Us*, xxii.

<sup>171</sup> Melville and Library of Congress, *Farm Security Administration, historical section: a guide to textual records*.

<sup>172</sup> Walker Evans, 'Walker Evans: American Photographs | MoMA', The Museum of Modern Art, accessed 23 June 2024, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2968>.





**Figure 4**

Dorothea Lange, Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. / Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017762891/>.



## The American Migrant in Popular Culture

The winter of 1933-1934 saw the beginning of a migration of 350,000 people from the South to California to work in the fields and factories.<sup>173</sup> This happened due to multiple factors, such as droughts, mechanization, expropriation of land in the South and multiple labor strikes in California.<sup>174</sup> Therefore, attention was being drawn towards the “migrant problem of California” in different ways. Dorothea Lange and her husband, Berkeley economist Paul Taylor, had published a visual report of Californian migrant camps in the *Survey Graphic* in July 1935.<sup>175</sup> This landed Lange a job at the Historical Section and it inspired a documentary film called *The Plow Which Broke the Plains*, which released in 1936. In 1936, John Steinbeck, a California native, wrote a series of seven articles named “The Harvest Gypsies” for the *San Francisco News*. In the first article, Steinbeck wrote: “There are at least 150,000 homeless migrants wandering up and down the state, and that is an army large enough to make it important to every person in the state.”<sup>176</sup> Visuality and text came together when the articles were republished in 1938 as a pamphlet complemented by Dorothea Lange’s photographs.<sup>177</sup> During this period the RA, and its successor the FSA, were setting up migratory camps in California while the Historical Section was pushing for public awareness of the situation. In a 1938 letter, Stryker wrote to a chairman of the Workers’ Education Committee of San Francisco: “I am glad to inform you that we do have an exhibit on the migratory labor of the United States. We have a great deal of material on the migrant problem in California.”<sup>178</sup>

It was Dorothea Lange’s *Migrant Mother* and Steinbeck’s 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* that pushed the migrant narrative irrevocably into public consciousness. The novel poetically portrays the journey of the Joad family, a white family that flees Oklahoma, with the conviction that work and prosperity is waiting for them in California. It is a fictional work, yet it still aims to be representative of drought refugees leaving states such as Missouri, Texas, Arkansas and Oklahoma for California.<sup>179</sup> Due to its success, the book was turned into a film by Twentieth Century Fox that hit the theaters at the beginning of 1940.<sup>180</sup> The narrative of fleeing natural disaster became powerful in public perception. Denning states that metaphors

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<sup>173</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 260.

<sup>174</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 261.

<sup>175</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 261.

<sup>176</sup> John Steinbeck and Charles M. Wollenberg, *The Harvest Gypsies: On the Road to the Grapes of Wrath* (Berkeley, California: Heyday, 1988), 19.

<sup>177</sup> Steinbeck and Wollenberg, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 15.

<sup>178</sup> FSA-OWI written records, 1935-1946 (Reel 3), Image 28.

<https://www.loc.gov/pictures/phpdata/pageturner.php?type=&agg=fsahsr&item=003&seq=28>

<sup>179</sup> James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 21.

<sup>180</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 259.

of natural disaster were deeply embedded in popular discourse about the great depression.<sup>181</sup> This sort of narrative could be found in films, music, and photography of that time.<sup>182</sup> Several efforts had helped put the story of the migrant into American consciousness, but the novel (and to a lesser degree the film) formed a major impulse to this trend. Many Americans started to associate rural struggle with the Joad family. The power of the Historical Section's photographs can be felt throughout both the novel and the film while they in turn influenced the Historical Section.

Steinbeck dedicated the book to two people, his wife and Tom Collins, who was the manager of an RA migrant labor camp in the California Central Valley.<sup>183</sup> Collins joined the RA in 1935, and he became the manager of the administration's first migratory camp. He and Steinbeck met in 1936, just after the publication of the "The Harvest Gypsies" in the *San Francisco News*. Collins took Steinbeck on several tours of the migratory camps and Hoovervilles of California between 1936 and 1938, and it was during this period that the RA turned into the FSA.<sup>184</sup> This also allowed Steinbeck to read the reports Collins wrote to the RA/FSA office in San Francisco. The RA/FSA documents and accounts by Collins formed a massive inspiration for Steinbeck's popular novel. The migratory camps are present in both the novel and the film, they form the only uplifting places that the Joad's encounter. After the novel was published in 1939 it was immediately linked to the Historical Section. Swensen writes that various reviewers made the link between the Historical Section photographs and the book after its release in their newspaper articles.<sup>185</sup> *Look* magazine wrote an extensive article about the book that featured FSA photography titled: "The Story behind 'The Grapes of Wrath': America's Own Refugees."<sup>186</sup> Furthermore, Calvin Baldwin, former assistant to Tugwell and later FSA administrator, saw the 1940 film as propaganda for the FSA.<sup>187</sup> The film, unlike the book, ends in one of the FSA migratory camps, which is depicted as a migrant utopia.

Furthermore, the Historical Section itself saw an opportunity to capitalize on the popularity of the book. Chapter four showed how representativeness sometimes had to make way for maximizing use in the exhibition boards produced by the Historical Section. Another example of this can be found in the migration exhibitions made by the Historical Section. Figure 6 showcases a migrant exhibition board from 1941. The narrative on the board is copied

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<sup>181</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 260.

<sup>182</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 260.

<sup>183</sup> Steinbeck and Charles M. Wollenberg, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 6.

<sup>184</sup> Steinbeck and Charles M. Wollenberg, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 8.

<sup>185</sup> Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 139.

<sup>186</sup> Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 139.

<sup>187</sup> Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 139

from the chronological storyline of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Rosskam answered when asked about the novel: “I made exhibits on this only after the book had appeared, you see, the book was almost like a threat for Farm Security.”<sup>188</sup> Unfortunately, Rosskam does not expand on how the book formed a threat for the administration. However, he does go on to mention the thin line between education and propaganda: “I don't know and I don't think anyone can describe where information starts and education stops, and propaganda begins.”<sup>189</sup> This could be related to the fact that the Historical Section sought to capitalize on the popularity of the novel. In 1939 Stryker was “bubbling over with ideas” to make use of the popularity of the book.<sup>190</sup> The Historical Section started to put together exhibition boards referring to the novel. Rosskam, recalled: “When Dorothea did her coverage on migration, I remember doing a number of exhibits, incidentally on *The Grapes of Wrath*.”<sup>191</sup> Figure 5 is arranged in the same chronological order as the migrants’ journey described by Steinbeck. “Small farms are going out” and machines take over, followed by the iconic *Migrant Mother*, representing a drought refugee. The board asserts “Over a million men, women, and children wander from State to State in search of work,” to then end with the solution to these problems being FSA migratory camps. In the novel the characters also stay in an FSA migratory camp, however that is not where the story ends.

Furthermore, for Rosskam this narrative about migration was not necessarily representative. He recalls how Dorothea Lange’s coverage of migration opened the door to the coverage of the end of migratory movements. Rosskam recalls: “I went out with Russell Lee to finish the coverage ... because he couldn't do migration without showing, finally where migration went to. Migration went to the city.”<sup>192</sup> Rosskam refers here to FSA photographer Russel Lee’s coverage of Chicago that was used in *Twelve Million Black Voices*. This ties into another migration that was happening, namely the Great Migration, which was a migratory movement that was not covered by Steinbeck. In hindsight, Rosskam links migration of that era to the Great Migration, and in doing so questions the representativeness of the narrative of migration used on the exhibition boards. The next chapter expands on the Great Migration narrative in Historical Section publications.

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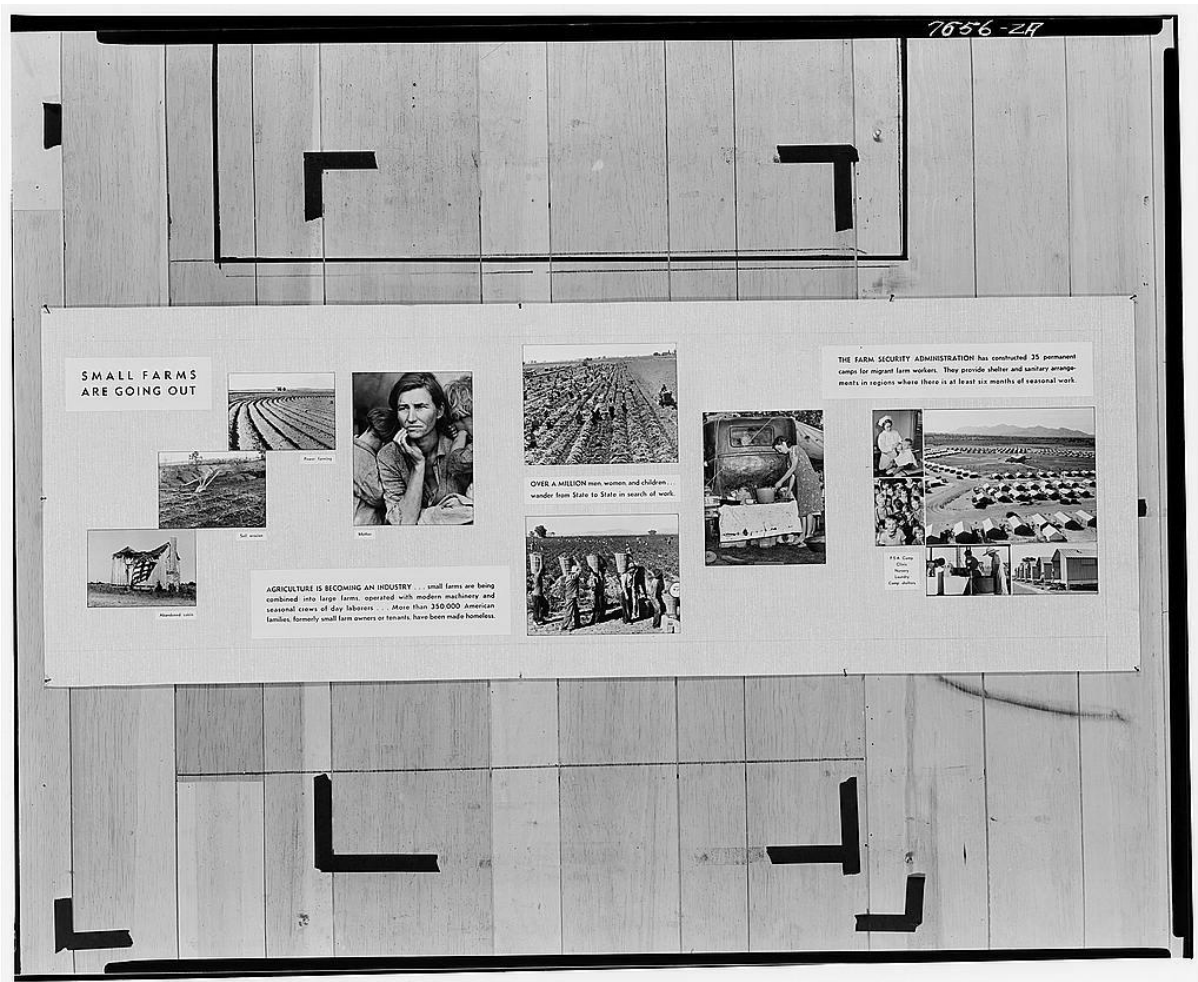
<sup>188</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>189</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>190</sup> James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants*, 139.

<sup>191</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.

<sup>192</sup> Rosskam and Rosskam, Oral history interview with Edwin and Louise Rosskam.



**Figure 5** Arthur Rothstein, Marion Post Walcott, Dorothea Lange, and John Vachon, display from *Migrant Exhibition*, 1941. Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/resource/fsa.8e04732/>.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the significant role of the Historical Section's photographs in shaping public perception and cultural discourse during the Great Depression. The extensive distribution of these photographs through various media channels ensured their wide reach and profound impact. By examining the reasons behind the popularity of certain images, we uncovered how these photographs spoke to a certain audience. The chapter highlighted how the interplay between art discourse and popular culture contributed to the popularity of these photographs, turning them into iconic representations of the era. The documentary photographs, were often appreciated for their artistic qualities, blurring the lines between documentation and art. Moreover, the chapter demonstrated how the narratives created by these photographs, along with the works Steinbeck, shaped and influenced public opinion. The photographs became symbols of the struggle and resilience of certain American people.

These factors help illuminate the complex relationship between the documentary aims of the Historical Section and the broader cultural currents of the time. By tracing the journey of these photographs through various cultural and artistic streams, we saw how they not only attempted to document reality but also actively shaped it.

## Chapter 6: The Great Omission

The Historical Section produced an extensive collection of photographs documenting American life, yet not all parts of this collection received widespread public attention. The last chapter showed popular narratives about domestic migration, while this chapter delves into which parts of this narrative remained unknown to the broader public, what did they represent? Why were these photographs forgotten? These photographs represented critical aspects of American society, such as the experiences of African Americans during the Great Migration, when millions moved from the rural South to urban centers in the north and west in search of better opportunities. By examining the lesser-known parts of the collection, we can gain a more complete understanding of American society and a better understanding of the project's limits. After all, chapter three has shown that Stryker wanted “to confront the people with each other” by “letting the facts speak for itself.” This confrontation was however limited by various factors that I will now explain through Historical Section photographer Jack Delano's personal experiences. What do the methods and experiences of Jack Delano tell us about the limits of visualizing domestic migration? Lastly, the book *12 million black voices* is analyzed to determine if it should be considered an exception to the invisibility of the Great Migration.

Chapter two has shown that the American black population was struck extremely hard by the Great Depression, which caused the migratory movements from the South to decrease. Yet, chapter five has shown that the Great Migration was not the basis of a powerful migration narrative that could make its way into public discourse. That especially the Joad narrative of migration takes over popular culture, while it takes place in a period surrounded by the Great Migration, is painful yet telling of American life at that time. The black oppression in the South, a manmade villain, was not suitable to create a popular narrative around. The exclusion of this minority perspective in the most popular narrative of migration can be explained by several aspects. Firstly, Denning points at a racial populism, favoring people of European descent, in Steinbeck's work.<sup>193</sup> Steinbeck wrote in his articles for the *San Francisco News*: “The names of the new migrants indicate that they are of English, German and Scandinavian descent. There are Munns, Holbrooks, Hansens, Schmidts.”<sup>194</sup> And he would go on to state: “the people are of good American stock who have proved that they can maintain an American standard of living.”<sup>195</sup> The 34-page pamphlet by Steinbeck and Lange that used these texts was titled: *Their Blood is Strong*. The emphasis on ‘good American stock’ and ‘strong blood’ can indicate

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<sup>193</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 260.

<sup>194</sup> Steinbeck and Charles M. Wollenberg, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 23.

<sup>195</sup> Steinbeck and Charles M. Wollenberg, *The Harvest Gypsies*, 43.

a racial bias. However, when looking at the statistics there was only a small percentage of black Americans migrating West during the 1930s. Most black migrants moved to cities in the Northeast or Midwest between 1910 and 1940.<sup>196</sup> The migration of black Americans to California took off from 1940 onwards. The report by Steinbeck that the new migrants were of European descent thus corresponds with a documentative account by Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor. In their 1939 book, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion*, that released shortly after Steinbeck's novel, Taylor wrote about the migrants coming to California: "More than nine-tenths are native American whites."<sup>197</sup> The Taylor-Lange collaboration showcased a somewhat representative image of America according to Natanson. He writes that the photographs used in the book had a black representation of 13 percent as a whole, and of 25 percent in its representations of the southern states.<sup>198</sup> The book stayed away from topics such as segregation and racial violence, but quotations from both black and white Americans were featured in the book and some of them affirmed the harsh reality of black Americans.

Secondly, there was a lack of Historical Section documentation of black Americans migrating until 1940.<sup>199</sup> The lack of documentation can partly be explained by the Historical Section's focus on rural America. Various Historical Section photographers had gone to the South to document economic problems facing black Americans as those were a major part of the rural crisis in the thirties. Many black Americans migrated to the urban areas in the Northeast and Midwest up until the 1940s and this was a huge part of the black experience during the twentieth century.<sup>200</sup> Delano and Roskam tried to convince Stryker in 1941 to start a systematic documentation of urban life. They wrote: "We have pictures of farmer's meetings ... and town meetings, but we are almost completely lacking in the urban counterpart."<sup>201</sup> Stryker blamed a lack of budget for the underrepresentation of urban life. He later recalled that living and working in the city was expensive for the photographers, and that his orders were to focus mainly on rural life.<sup>202</sup> A systematic documentation of urban life, as it was envisioned by Delano and Roskam, never got going, but urban life was sporadically documented in cities such as Chicago and New York. One of these urban documentations was by Lee and Roskam,

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<sup>196</sup> 'African American Migration Patterns | Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series', accessed 23 June 2024, <https://lawrencemigration.phillipscollection.org/culture/migration-map>.

<sup>197</sup> Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1939), 92.

<sup>198</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 236.

<sup>199</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 71.

<sup>200</sup> Trotter, *The Great Migration*, 2.

<sup>201</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 71.

<sup>202</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 71.



as mentioned in the previous chapter. However, one year earlier, in 1940 a trip to document the migratory movement from the South to the Northeast was done by Jack Delano.

Delano was born as Jacob Ovcharov in 1914 in Russia in a village called Voroshilovka in what is now Ukraine<sup>203</sup>. He emigrated with his Jewish family to the United States in 1923. He and his family settled down in Philadelphia and his father became a blue-collar worker. He grew up in a working-class family and attended a racially integrated Boys school. He auditioned for a Music School, and he would go on to study violin, orchestration, and related subjects on a partial scholarship. He would spend over a decade at this school transforming from a student into a teacher and professional musician. Ovcharov majored in Illustration at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. During his studies he was awarded a scholarship which allowed him to travel Europe for three months. In his autobiography he wrote: “I had bought a small camera in Europe, ... and now I began to think that perhaps in photographs I could show the same concern and understanding of ordinary people that I found so compelling in the work of the artists I admired so much.”<sup>204</sup> Ovcharov was inspired by artists such as Goya, Van Gogh, Brueghel, Giotto, and Hokusai.<sup>205</sup> He graduated in 1937 and it was also in this year that he changed his name to Jack Delano.

Delano found himself, as an unemployed artist, looking for work in the late 1930s. He would find work at the Federal Art Project, which was part of Works Progress Administration, another New Deal agency. Soon into his employed Delano set up a project photographing unemployed mine workers. He took the photographs in 1938 and the project would come to fruition with an exhibition at a local railroad station. This exhibit attracted the attention of Paul Strand, who would later recommend him to the FSA. Strand and his mentor Lewis Hine can be seen as major influences on the work of Delano. In 1940, Arthur Rothstein’s departure at the Historical Section led to an opening for Delano. Delano entered the organization while it was being subsumed by the Second World War just like the rest of the world, which makes him a relevant case-study for this research. Delano would move to Washington D.C. and was soon sent out into the field to document. His photographic career under Stryker, at both the FSA and the OWI, can be divided into two periods. 1940-41 when he was photographing migratory workers and other subjects for the FSA and 1942-43 when he was photographing US railroads during the wartime for the OWI. This chapter analyzes only the first period.

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<sup>203</sup> Tony Reeve, *The Railroad Photography of Jack Delano*, First Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>204</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 5.

<sup>205</sup> Reeve, *The Railroad Photography of Jack Delano*, 4.



Delano recalls from just before he met Stryker: “I had heard that Stryker was a dictatorial and authoritarian person, so I looked forward with some trepidation to meeting him.”<sup>206</sup> But his fears quickly vanished when he was welcomed by a friendly Stryker who “exuded warmth and cordiality.”<sup>207</sup> It was the beginning of a friendship. Delano was quickly sent out on short assignments to nearby areas, such as Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina accompanied by Roskam who functioned as his mentor. Stryker approved of what Delano brought back and he was sent out on his first solo trip to photograph social conditions in the tobacco country of rural North Carolina.<sup>208</sup> Stryker often sent out broad directions to his photographers. For example, to Delano: “Follow migratory agricultural workers up the eastern coast from Florida to the Canadian border.”<sup>209</sup> This is where Delano’s journey capturing the Great Migration starts.

The first thing that struck Delano in the South was the racial segregation. The South, even D.C., was filled with racial separation; separate churches, schools, sections on buses and trains, waiting rooms at stations, and separate drinking fountains. Delano recalls strange rules in behavior that were new to him; no shaking hands when introduced to a black person, don’t address a black man with “mister,” the possibility of being refused entrance to a restaurant when with a black friend, or to quote Delano: “don’t this and don’t that.”<sup>210</sup> Delano, who grew up in Philadelphia and before that in the Soviet Union, had not seen such racism before. The Northeast was by no means free of racism, yet Delano was confronted with a North/South dichotomy. He captured an example of the segregation in June 1940 at a service station for trucks in the nation’s capital. Delano would go on to reflect on the South:

“If I had gone out of my way to emphasize segregation and racial antagonism, I wouldn’t have lasted long; I would have found it impossible to work. Local people would have figured that the northerner, the ‘foreigner’ was trying to butt into their affairs, and to stir up trouble.”<sup>211</sup>

This quote shows how society itself could cause invisibility in the representation of the South created by Delano’s photography. However, this did not stop Delano from picturing the Great Migration. On his journey from the Deep South to the Northeast along the eastern coast he

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<sup>206</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 31.

<sup>207</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 31.

<sup>208</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 31.

<sup>209</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 34.

<sup>210</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 33.

<sup>211</sup> Natanson, *The Black Image*, 83.

came across many migratory farm laborers, who were, as he recalls, mostly black.<sup>212</sup> The migrants often followed the crops as they ripened, making it that they never really settled. Delano described different groups of migrants, some travelling in their own cars (figure 7), some in trucks transported from farm to farm by contractors (figure 8), and some “herded about in the boxcars of freight trains.”<sup>213</sup> These migrants often resided in workcamps with terrible conditions. Delano recalled one camp where he was refused admission and photographs were not allowed. When thinking back, it reminded him of a concentration camp, enclosed with barb wires and watchtowers at every corner.<sup>214</sup> Another aspect left out of the representation of the Great Migration was caused by limits imposed on the photographer.



**Figure 6** Jack Delano, photographer. *Negro driver asleep under a truck. There are no sleeping accommodations for Negroes at this service station. On U.S. 1. Washington D.C. District of Columbia, United States, 1940. June. Photograph.*  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017748161/>.

<sup>212</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 37.

<sup>213</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 37.

<sup>214</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 34.



**Figure 7** Jack Delano, photographer. *Group of Florida migrants on their way to Cranberry, New Jersey, to pick potatoes. Near Shawboro, North Carolina.* Shawboro, Currituck County, North Carolina, United States, 1940. July. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017791088/>.



**Figure 8** Jack Delano, photographer. *This truck carrying about thirty-seven North Carolina migrants to pick beans near Easton, Maryland broke down on the road near Princess Anne, Maryland.* Princess Anne, Somerset County, Maryland, United States, 1940. July. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017791208/>.

Furthermore, during his trip Delano noticed the abandoned, scarred and eroded lands stricken by the Dust Bowl and Great Depression. This shows the second dichotomy that Delano was confronted with, between urban and rural life. Delano grew up in the big city and had no experience with rural life. For little Jacob, the existence of food began at the local corner store and not with the farmers and their families who produced it.<sup>215</sup> Families who worked the land had their livelihoods depend on the land and its cultivation. For him, full realization of the human efforts that went into agriculture and what the land and the weather meant to the farmers came when he drove through the vast farmlands of the South.<sup>216</sup> These dichotomies tie into the aims of the Historical Section project discussed in chapter three. Delano's unawareness of racial segregation and rural life underline the necessity of the documentation of their

<sup>215</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 33.

<sup>216</sup> Delano, *Photographic Memories*, 33.

documentation. Stryker aimed to confront people with what they did not know, however urban was more often confronted with rural, and the north/south dichotomy tried to not touch the most sensitive subjects, being racial segregation and racism.

The photographs taken by Delano on this trip cannot be found on the migration themed exhibition boards that are held at the Library of Congress. They can be found in one Historical Section publication, which is Richard Wright's and Edward Rosskam's photobook, *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States of America*. Richard Wright was an African American writer and activist born on a plantation in Mississippi. During his childhood he moved to different places in the South and eventually at nineteen he would move to Chicago. Wright experienced the Great Migration first hand and this can be read throughout the book. Denning refers to *Twelve Million Black Voices* as: "The black migration's counterpart to Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor's *American Exodus*"<sup>217</sup> Wright describes the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, slavery in the US, southern repression of black Americans after slavery, black migration to the northern cities, and the harsh living conditions in the northern ghettos. Rosskam provided the photographs to complement the texts by Wright. Wright emphasized both the push and pull factors for the Great Migration, mentioned in chapter two. The emphasis is on leaving the South and opportunities in the northern cities that are overshadowed by racism and bad living standards. Wright writes:

"We are a folk born of cultural devastation, slavery, physical suffering, unrequited longing, abrupt emancipation, migration, disillusionment, bewilderment, joblessness, and insecurity — all enacted within a short space of historical time!"<sup>218</sup>

Delano provided sixteen of the eighty-five photographs used in the book, three of which were of migrant workers captured during his 1940 trip along the eastern coast (figures 9, 10, 11). These three are shown in the same order in the book accompanied by the captions: "The bosses send their trucks for us", "We labor in the farm factories", "We sleep in wooden barracks."<sup>219</sup> The vast majority of the photographs in the book depict either rural standards of living in the South or urban scenes in the northern cities. The book discusses the migration, and mainly depicts it by showing the living standards of the starting point and the endpoint. However, only

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<sup>217</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front*, 264.

<sup>218</sup> Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices: A Folk History of the Negro in the United States* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 142.

<sup>219</sup> Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voice*, 81-85.

a very small portion, being the photographs by Delano, depict the actual conditions during the migratory movements.

In conclusion, the documentation of the Great Migration, as explored in this chapter, reveals significant gaps in the visual narrative presented to the American public. By focusing on the lesser-known photographs of Jack Delano and examining the factors that limited their visibility, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities and constraints of the Historical Section's work. Delano's experiences underscore the challenges of capturing domestic migration, particularly for black Americans during a period of racial segregation and the Great Depression. Delano's unawareness of racial segregation and rural life underlines the necessity of documenting these experiences. The dichotomies discussed in this chapter therefore tie directly into the aims of the Historical Section project discussed in chapter three. Stryker aimed to confront people with what they did not know, yet the project often juxtaposed urban and rural, North and South, without delving into the most sensitive subjects, such as racial segregation and racism. This approach resulted in absences and invisibility in the published photography, limiting the scope of the narrative and the public's understanding of the Great Migration. Delano was limited by Southern society in his representation of racial segregation and exploitation, while the photographs that he did produce were not prominently featured in public exhibitions or the broader discourse. This invisibility is partly counteracted in Richard Wright's and Edward Rosskam's *Twelve Million Black Voices*, which, despite its significant contribution, could not fully alter the dominant migration narratives that excluded the black American experience. As posed at the beginning of this chapter, why were these critical aspects of the Great Migration forgotten? The exclusion stemmed from a combination of racial biases, economic limitations, and a focus on rural documentation over urban living standards. The methods and experiences of Jack Delano reveal the limitations imposed by these factors, illustrating how societal attitudes and institutional directives shaped the Historical Section.





**Figure 9** Jack Delano, photographer. *Migratory potato picker from Florida at work in the fields of T.C. Sawyer of Belcross, North Carolina.* Belcross, Camden County, North Carolina, United States, 1940. July. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017791203/>.



**Figure 10**

Jack Delano, photographer. *Belcross vicinity, North Carolina. Migratory farm workers sleeping in a house where thirty-five persons are housed.* Belcross, Camden County, North Carolina, United States, 1940. July. Photograph.  
<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017791243/>.





**Figure 11**

Jack Delano, photographer. *Belcross vicinity, North Carolina. A girl sleeping in an old farmhouse which she shares with thirty-five other people.* Belcross, Camden County, North Carolina, United States, 1940. July. Photograph.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2017791256/>.

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored the extent to which the Historical Section (1935-1943) succeeded in its mission to document and represent American reality and domestic migration during the transformative period of the Great Depression and the New Deal. Chapter two established the project's historical context, the roles and intentions of key figures, such as Stryker and Tugwell, and the powerful discourse of the social sciences that played a part in the truth claims made by the Historical Section. Chapter three explored Stryker's pivotal role in shaping the Historical Section's mission to document and represent American life. It detailed how he navigated political and financial challenges while trying to maintain his ideal form of documentary photography. The autonomy given to photographers like Jack Delano underscored the, sometimes hidden, balance between project survival and authentic portrayal of American reality. By examining the Historical Section's distribution practices, chapter three has highlighted how institutional power shaped public perception through photography. It analyzed how visual and textual narratives conveyed specific messages, establishing a regime of truth. Chapter four focused on the cultural impact on the method of the Historical Section. This chapter discussed how the Historical Section capitalized on the cultural streams of art and popular culture, while at the same time its photographs shaped public discourse. It explored the popularity of certain images and their influence on public opinion, blurring the line between documentation and art. These photographs became iconic representations, influencing narratives alongside literary works like Steinbeck's. Chapter six revealed gaps in the Historical Section's visual narrative, particularly regarding the Great Migration. It emphasized the challenges Jack Delano faced in capturing the experiences of black Americans amidst racial segregation and economic hardship. The chapter underscored how societal biases and institutional priorities influenced the depiction and visibility of certain narratives within the project.

Furthermore, through a poststructuralist lens, this thesis has highlighted how the truth claims of the Historical Section were constructed, illustrating the complex and powerful interplay between government institutions, scientific knowledge, visual representation, politics, cultural influences and social reality. These factors played a role in the extent to which the project was successful in the project's mission of documentation. The Historical Section's efforts were significant in capturing the diverse experiences of American life, from despair and scarcity to hope and progress. Yet, it is important to keep the mission of the Historical Section in mind. If the mission is creating and promoting a wide sympathetic understanding from urban

parts of society to rural parts of society the project can be deemed rather successful. However, marginalized groups or the people living in urban poverty often fell outside of this scope of sympathy. The photographs were instrumental in publicizing the government's relief efforts, yet they faced constraints and biases that limited the representation of certain narratives. Overall, the Historical Section's legacy lies in its duality of documenting a critical period in American history, influencing how that period is remembered and understood and maximizing the use of the photographs at that time to ensure its existence. The exhibition boards form an example of the constant duality. The migrant exhibition boards of the Historical Section strategically capitalized on the narrative of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a tale centered on a migration distinct from the Great Migration. This novel, published in 1939, inspired by a wave of migration independent of the Great Migration, immediately caught the attention of the Historical Section. The analysis of chapter five revealed ongoing efforts to capitalize on Steinbeck's work until 1941. Simultaneously, the Great Migration began to intensify in both northern and western directions around the time of the novel's release. This period also saw the photography efforts of Jack Delano in 1940, which depicted a facet of the Great Migration less prominently showcased in the exhibition boards. These photographs captured a migration that appeared less likely to receive widespread use, reflecting Stryker's ongoing challenge of balancing honest representation with the imperative to maximize the project's impact. Thus, the Historical Section was limited in its representation of the Great Migration by its own mission of maximizing use. The manmade villain, which was the major cause of the Great Migration, would not appeal to their perceived audience.

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