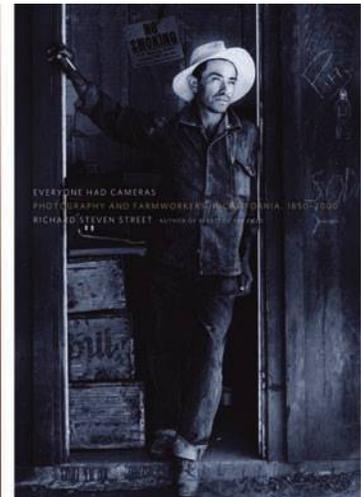
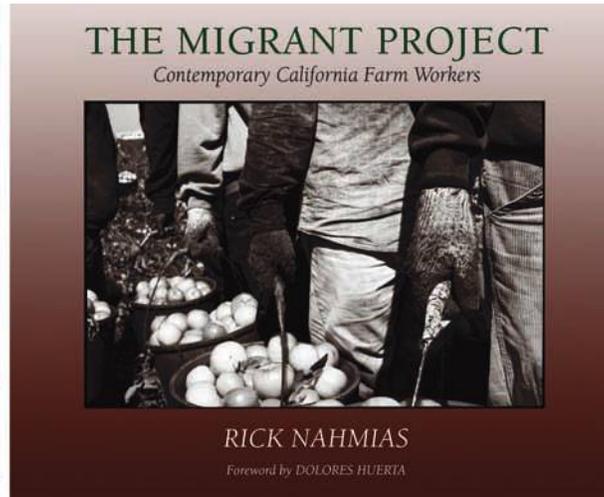
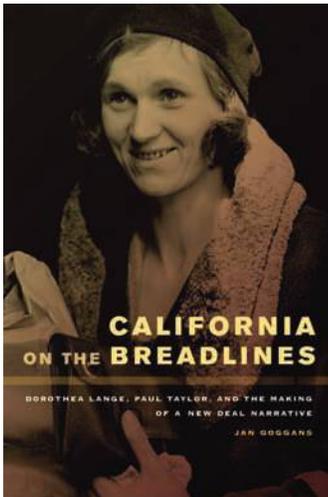


MICHAEL ZISER

Framing Farm Labor

Coming into focus



Richard Steven Street, *Everyone Had Cameras: Photography and Farmworkers in California, 1850–2000* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

Jan Goggans, *California on the Breadlines: Dorothea Lange, Paul Taylor, and the Making of a New Deal Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010).

Rick Nahmias, *The Migrant Project: Contemporary California Farm Workers* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008).

We are all familiar with California's privileged relationship to the visual technologies that captured the twentieth century—photography, film, television—but less well-known is the fact that during the same period the state was at the vanguard in the production of equally influential forms of *invisibility*. As large landholdings were snatched up by wealthy and often absentee owners in the late nineteenth century, California's agricultural sector became a key site in the broader American shift

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from reliance on relatively small resident farmers to the post-Civil War reconfiguration of farmwork into a form of wage labor paid by distant corporate owners of land and equipment. The corporate ownership/wage labor model has come to dominate our agricultural landscape so thoroughly that most middle-class Californians today have no personal experience of agricultural labor, regarding it (if at all) as something outdated and alien. Indeed, farmwork is now largely performed by “aliens,” migrants from Mexico and Central America who speak languages other than English and carry Latino cultural traditions.

Chronically impoverished, politically disenfranchised, and largely excluded from the dominant culture, California fieldworkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—historically hailing from China, the Philippines, India, and Japan, as well as Latin America—found themselves in the curious position of living and laboring unseen at the very epicenter of what another immigrant, Theodor Adorno, famously described as “the culture industry.” In the unprecedented concentration of technological and human resources dedicated to producing and distributing visual images, there was a powerful tension between farmworkers’ material presence and their social absence. Still photography, which emerged just as California agriculture was getting established, was particularly well-suited to capturing this paradox, and the long, mostly underground tradition of photojournalism in California’s agricultural interior is a prime study in the relationship between politics and aesthetics.

The three books reviewed here all focus on the century-plus tradition of documentary and artistic photography centered on farm labor to explore its role in the history of professed American ideals like shared economic prosperity and the democratic mediation of cultural difference. Richard Steven Street’s *Everyone Had Cameras* is a historically comprehensive survey of visual records of farmworkers over the past 150 years; Jan Goggans’s *California on the Breadlines* pursues a narrower and deeper engagement with the most effective photojournalist in that tradition, Dorothea Lange, and her economist husband, Paul Taylor; and Rick Nahmias’s *The Migrant Project* exemplifies the ongoing personal and political value of taking a camera out among the furrows.

Street’s *Everyone Had Cameras* is the comprehensive history of the subject, and it is difficult to imagine

it ever being superseded. Street has devoted more than thirty years to the history and continued chronicling of farmworkers in California, and his long immersion in the subject shows in the astonishing level of historical detail and analytical good judgment he brings to this crowning work. Richly illustrated with 149 photos, Street’s book spans the entire post-contact history of California. Opening with a discussion of Spanish painters such as Padre Ignacio Tirsch and José Cardero, who recorded distant images of native Californian field hands laboring at coastal missions in the mid-1700s, Street moves on to the drawings produced by American military artists from the 1830s forward. Those panoramic images are geographic and documentary in intent, aiming to inform distant audiences of the geology, people, and agricultural practices of what was then an isolated outpost of European civilization. When photography first came to California, its application was limited to portraiture by the heaviness and delicacy of the equipment and the long exposure times required. During this period, Euro-American (and occasionally Native Californian) farmworkers on trips into town sat for their portraits in one of the studios to be found in every city of size, purchasing prints in the form of small *cartes de visite* or slightly larger cabinet cards.

As technological changes allowed the camera to move outdoors, California landscapes began to appear in the works of entrepreneurs who took the images on touring exhibitions through the United States and also in the collections of wealthy landowners who commissioned a photographic record of their holdings. Among the most significant of these patronage relationships was the one between Jonathan Bixby, a wealthy landowner with land in Los Angeles, Orange, and Monterey counties, and William Godfrey, a stereographer from the then-tiny town of Los Angeles. In 1872 Bixby invited Godfrey to document his Los Cerritos Ranch (near present-day Long Beach), and the stereographs of the land he produced, featuring Chinese and Mexican ranch-hands, are some of the earliest *in situ* photographic records of farm labor in California.

The pattern of commissioned work combined with retail stereograph sales persisted through the latter third of the century with Eadweard Muybridge, the technical master and colorful pioneer of moving-image technology. Like Godfrey, Muybridge did not limit his photography to white subjects, taking many neutral and even sympathetic



“Migratory Mexican field worker’s home on the edge of a frozen pea field. Imperial Valley, California” by Dorothea Lange, 1937.

images of the mostly Chinese field hands who brought in the grape harvest at Buena Vista, the massive and storied Sonoma vineyard of Agoston Haraszthy. In the 1880s, photographer Carleton Watkins was drawn into the infamous *Lux v. Haggin* irrigation dispute when he was hired by the attorney for Miller and Lux, Hall McAllister, to document the Kern River and its associated sloughs. Watkins later returned to Kern County, where he advertised his services to local farmers who wanted images of their operations. His photos from this commercial tour, which number over 750, contained many images of the Chinese and Mexican workforce, and his negatives were printed and perhaps also captioned by his Chinese American colleague, Ah Fue, in a San Francisco studio. Godfrey, Muybridge, and Watkins never intended anything in the way of an overt political statement by such inclusions, but in retrospect the mere presence of these poor and nonwhite faces is of great significance, given the rise of anti-Chinese sentiment and the resulting systematic exclusion of the Chinese from California society and from much of the historical record of the late nineteenth century.

Photographers became more firmly allied with the perspectives of big growers and their marketing associations as commercial demand for their work grew alongside the expanding national markets for California produce and the accompanying advances in printing and packaging technology. The major images from 1890 to 1910 tended to

be promotional rather than documentary, and they downplayed the social questions associated with the modern farm economy. Instead of an exposé of conditions in the raisin-packing sheds, for example, we see the carefully managed image of Lorraine Collett, a packer who became the face of Sun-Maid raisins. Mexican workers, who by the 1910s had largely replaced the legally excluded Chinese, often appeared on marketing labels of the era in the form of caricatures of malingering *campesinos* purportedly representing the obsolete culture of the region before annexation. (“Lazy Peon” was one brand of avocados in the era.) Women, who in this pre-*bracero* era contributed significantly to the agricultural work force, especially in the sorting sheds, also found themselves represented in cartoonish, highly sexualized images emblazoned on the fruit crate labels of brands like “Buxom,” “Squeeze Me,” and “Nudist.” These images were part of a larger branding of California as a wealthy, fertile, and white agricultural paradise during the first half of the twentieth century.

Contradicting this image were photos of much more limited circulation, such as those associated with the trial of the 1913 Wheatland hop rioters, or the series of criminal mugshots and case histories recorded by Clara Smith between 1900 and 1908. These photos reveal the racial diversity, extreme poverty, and poor living conditions of a California demimonde the agricultural marketers were eager to suppress. The advertising men were aided in their effort by the outbreak of the first World War, when agricultural labor shortages were met with government campaigns to bring women (The Women’s Land Army) and children (The Boys’ Working Reserve) from the cities into the fields at key points in the growing season. These atypical workers were frequently photographed in the smiling attitudes of picnickers in the countryside, a living version of the illustrations of contented laborers on boxes of fresh fruit shipped eastward decades before. Beneath this veneer, however, was the advent of the labor system we know today: in 1917, immigration restrictions and taxes that had somewhat restrained the northward migration of Mexican workers were lifted, and these workers, fleeing the disruption caused by the Mexican Revolution, came by the thousands to work in California fields. The racial and cultural divisions between the Mexican agricultural labor force and the Anglo middle

class deepened over the next thirty years, so that by the mid-1920s a subgenre of newspaper photography emerged that recorded lurid images of the rural poor whose lives and deaths increasingly took place beyond the experience of the average newspaper reader.

The Great Depression both interrupted and ultimately reinforced the disappearance of the migrant labor force from the concerns of the urban public. In the aftermath of the worldwide economic downturn after Black Friday, two remarkable German immigrants, Otto Hagel and Joanna (“Hansel”) Mieth, emigrated to California and began to tumble aimlessly across the American Southwest, traveling and working with migrant laborers, documenting their lives with an intimacy and sympathy unmatched by their American colleagues. But it was a transplanted Iowan, Paul Taylor, who first exploited the power of the photographic image in the service of a larger vision of social and economic justice. A WWI veteran who came to California in the 1920s to rehabilitate lungs damaged by mustard gas, Taylor was driven by a now-rare sense of patriotic obligation to his less fortunate countrymen. Pursuing an academic career in labor and agricultural economics at UC Berkeley, he put the plight of the largely Mexican migrant population at the center of his research. Taylor sought early on to record some of his field experiences in California and Colorado, and as photography became a more common element in academic social science publications he included his images to illustrate the more abstract principles and data sets in his essays.

Hagel, Mieth, and Taylor were being swept along in a greater change in the relationship between workers and their employers. In the 1930s, the laboring classes in California began to assert their political, economic, and physical power, organizing across agricultural and industrial lines to put pressure on the ownership class. The Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, formed in 1930, called for a farmworkers’ strike in 1931 after a grower-imposed wage cut. This was followed by a large and bloody cotton strike in 1933. Such strikes, key moments in the consolidation of both union and anti-union organizing, were directed by Communist organizers aiming to create solidarity among workers of all types and backgrounds in order to secure higher wages, better conditions, and greater control over decision-making from

the politically powerful owners of land and capital. In the summer of 1934, dockworkers in the San Francisco office of the International Longshoremen’s Association called for a waterfront work stoppage and, eventually, a general strike. Although violently put down by private corporate militias, city police, and the National Guard, the strikes heralded a new balance of power between labor and capital that would play out in New Deal policy debates. Recognizing their significance, Taylor coauthored an article in the progressive journal *Survey Graphic* offering historical context and political analysis of the strikes. While waiting for an editorial response, he attended a photography exhibition in Oakland, where he was struck by a set of images depicting workers during the 1934 General Strike. At the last moment, and without knowing the photographer, he sent photos of the strike from the Oakland show to the publisher as replacements for his own illustrations. The photographer responsible for the photos was the young Dorothea Lange, a transplant from New York, studio photographer, and budding chronicler of life on the streets of Depression-era San Francisco, and this conjunction of the photographer’s art with the economist’s science was just the first chapter in what would become a lifelong professional collaboration and personal romance between Taylor and Lange.

While Street’s book devotes much of seven chapters to Lange and Taylor, providing crucial historical details about the context of their ascension as national spokesmen for the poor, Jan Goggans’s *California on the Breadlines* tells their remarkable tale with a storyteller’s ear for all of its human dimensions—as a key moment in the development of activist art, a rare and inspiring example of political ideals being realized in one’s work, a major chapter in California’s long-running struggle over how to pursue agricultural development, and as the subtitle suggests, an important prelude to national reforms implemented by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the New Deal. This last element, which perhaps owes its prominence to the publisher’s need to address a national audience, is in fact the least original and convincing strand in Goggans’s argument, as the evidence points toward a fortuitous convergence among Lange and Taylor’s interests and the needs of Roy Stryker, head of public relations for Rexford

Tugwell's newly established Resettlement Administration, tasked with reconstructing the country's devastated farm communities from 1935 forward. As much as we now associate Lange's famous photos with the Depression and the New Deal programs designed to alleviate it, the evidence is thin that the photos led to any major coalescence of public opinion, or that Taylor's work was picked up by FDR's Brain Trust and incorporated into national policy. These were largely parallel phenomena that are all too easily read, in retrospect, as cause and effect.

Fortunately, Goggans provides a wealth of other interpretive handles for us to take hold of, the most striking and unexpected of which relates to the gender roles and sexual mores at work beneath the surface of the Taylor/Lange collaboration. Their advocacy of better physical living conditions for migrant laborers had, of course, a common-sense rationale: social justice includes indoor plumbing, access to clean water, and protection from the elements. But as Goggans makes clear, Taylor's politics in particular were deeply informed by a domestic ideology that went beyond a simple pragmatic interest in physical conditions, to the point that he regarded the traditional household as the moral basis for egalitarian social relations. His embrace of this ideology may have stemmed in part from the updated Jeffersonian ideal so often invoked by farm and labor activists of the time, but it was also reinforced by contemporary factors operating in the society at large. During the Depression, when pressure rose on women to leave the work force so that male breadwinners would face less competition for scarce jobs, the traditional domestic "women's work" that had been increasingly outsourced to the market was now reabsorbed into the informal, and unpaid, economy. The vision of a self-sustaining family farm, operating smoothly along old gender divisions of labor, became all the more broadly appealing. There were also strong aesthetic conventions at work for Lange. The documentary photography of earlier urban reformers, like Jacob Riis or Margaret Bourke-White, often had relied on images of decrepit or incomplete houses to compel the attention of audiences, and many of Lange's photographs of migrant camps followed suit in highlighting the relation between maternal subjects and their distressed or dysfunctional homes.

This element of Taylor and Lange's photojournalistic project becomes more complex and interesting when we broaden our scope to include their own romantic entanglement.

At the same time that they were making strategic use of traditionalist iconography to broadcast the plight of farmworkers, Lange and Taylor began an affair that would culminate in their marriage in 1935. Lange's first marriage was to Maynard Dixon, the bohemian scion of an established California family and an artist whose long painting expeditions Lange subsidized with her studio portraiture. There was a long foreground to Lange's decision to engage in an affair with Taylor: frequent separations, difficulties at home, and political differences wore down the Lange-Dixon marriage until at the end it was little more than an economic partnership. Taylor's situation was even less traditional. His wife, Katharine Whiteside (his college fiancée), aware of their sexual and temperamental incompatibilities, proposed that they establish an open marriage. Taylor, however, could not abide so radical a challenge to the domestic structure that organized his world view, and after an awkward period of quasi-open marriage, he insisted on a divorce (and marriage to Lange).

An undercurrent of feminist liberation and a halting revision of sexual mores is thus a significant part of the Taylor/Lange story, and with a little imagination we can use these currents to enrich our understanding of Lange's iconic images. Take *Migrant Mother*, the most famous of her photos. The most common version of the photograph shows an intent migrant woman from Oklahoma clutching her two shy children and staring anxiously into the distance. Other images from the same roll of film show the context of the portrait (a worn tent in a temporary pea-pickers' camp). The most striking image, however, is of the woman, Florence Thompson, preparing to breastfeed her youngest child, a pose in which Lange often placed her subjects. It is an allusion to the Madonna, of course, but Goggans argues that it partakes in another visual tradition, that of the glamorous modern woman whose sexuality is a part of her strength rather than a defect in her character. If Goggans's hunch is right, then images like *Migrant Mother* draw their power in part from the contrast between an ancient image of traditional femininity and a heterodox image of a strong, unrepressed woman unaccompanied by any males, a figure often demeaned as a "whore" but here celebrated and promoted. Lange's frequent identification with her female subjects may go beyond their shared interest in economic reform to an underlying feminism that is not usually stressed in treatments of the period. Of her encounter with

Florence Thompson, Lange recalled that “there was a sort of equality about it.”

Paul Taylor’s major academic focus had always been on Mexican migrant farm labor, which had risen in the first decades of the twentieth century to become the linchpin, alongside large irrigation projects, of dramatic growth in the Western and Southwestern agricultural sector. Almost alone among economists in studying what would become a lasting phenomenon, Paul Taylor integrated cultural and ethnographic insights into his more traditional economic methodology. He learned Spanish and recorded *corridos* during his trips into the field in California and Colorado. The presence of white farm laborers in California fields was an anomaly of the 1930s created by the economic and environmental catastrophes of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, which led to the deportation of vast numbers of Mexican migrants (regardless of their immigration status) and the influx of immigrants from Oklahoma. Even then, the rural work force was significantly nonwhite, and a substantial proportion of the “Okies” were themselves of native, Mexican, and/or African American ancestry. Florence Thompson, the woman pictured in *Migrant Mother*, was born on an Indian reservation, was married to a native man, and perhaps—there is some dispute about this—was herself part Native American.

As Goggans reveals, the apparent whiteness of the iconic images of Depression-era poverty was deliberate, a strategy to disassociate the white Okies from the “gypsy field hands,” whose race, culture, and domestic habits (conditioned by legal discrimination) kept them from becoming viable objects of sympathy for the middle-class voting public. John Steinbeck, whose *Grapes of Wrath* and *In Dubious Battle* are to the literary history of Depression California what Lange and Taylor’s works are to the photojournalistic tradition, was quite explicit about this, frequently drawing sharply racialized distinctions meant to benefit whites at the expense of nonwhite migrants. After public and private publishers passed over many images of native and Latino workers, families, and children in Lange’s early work, eventually Lange herself obliged this appetite by seeking out young, white, often very beautiful mothers for extensive portrait sessions.

During and after WWII, the Bracero program radically altered established patterns of Mexican migration to the fields of California. Although they had a laundry list of



“In a carrot pullers’ camp near Holtville, California”
by Dorothea Lange, 1939.

rights on paper, braceros proved readily exploitable. Delivered in groups to isolated farms where they had no independent means of shelter or sustenance, no family or social support, and no recourse against those who would short their pay, overcharge on rent, or ignore unsafe conditions, they represented the legal codification and institutionalization of the farmworking underclass. The photographic record of this era is relatively thin, owing in significant part to an increasingly aggressive campaign by growers to sue or otherwise punish photographers, filmmakers, magazines, and distributors guilty of what they termed “libel by visual innuendo.” The most famous of these campaigns was pursued by the DiGiorgio Company against the makers and backers of *Poverty in the Valley of Plenty*, a National Farm Laborers’ Union film that was shown to pro-labor audiences and aired on a few public television stations before being suppressed and destroyed per court order. With the DiGiorgio case, a new era of sophisticated visual campaigns began, culminating with César Chávez’s careful cultivation of news photographers in his successful attempts to organize and advance the United Farm Workers.

Street’s history carries us all the way up to the end of the millennium with more images and anecdotes than can possibly be conveyed here, and the visual chronicle of farm



César Chávez addressing strikers at DiGiorgio's Sierra Vista Ranch, March 1966.

labor has continued to evolve in the work of contemporary photographers drawn to what Street calls the “picture of how the system of farm labor developed [and] . . . the price it extracts from a class of people.”

Rick Nahmias’s contribution to this body of work, *The Migrant Project*, is notable not for any special aesthetic achievement or unusual subject matter, but rather its sheer lack of artistic or sociological distinctiveness. Struck by his deep ignorance of the sources of California’s famous food culture, Nahmias set out on an adventure of self-discovery in the fields of his home state and underwent a conversion from blithe consumer to impassioned advocate for the people he found there. The photos he took along the way might have been taken by anyone with a camera, a roll of black-and-white film, a smattering of Spanish, and the desire to cross the boundaries that history has made. By the time one has finished leafing

through *The Migrant Project*, one grasps that in our moment the mediocre snapshots and secondhand history are beside the point, and what really matters is only that last quality—the interest in finding out how our fellow Californians are faring.

The power of the photographic image to produce icons and influence policy appears to be on the wane, the victim of the dilutive power of a fragmented public sphere so saturated in arresting images that even the most effective photos often find no significant audience. But if Nahmias’s work suggests that the value of twenty-first-century agricultural photojournalism lies not in the images produced but in the photographer’s experience of crossing the linguistic, cultural, economic, and geographic lines that separate most of us from migrant farmworkers, the democratic access enabled by cheaply available digital cameras may be something to embrace. Everyone really *does* have a camera now: the average Californian has on his or her

person a pretext for undoing the century-long isolation and invisibility of California farmworkers. You, too, can become a part of a tradition that is as much about sharing a world with the disempowered and keeping them in your thoughts and actions as it is about capturing the perfect image. Because they have few political rights and exist

in innumerable jurisdictions, migrant farm laborers will never be able to directly secure their own just treatment, social inclusion, and prosperity. But those visual images of them in our cell phones and on our hard drives might, if we let them, act through us at the ballot box, the grocery store, and the meeting hall. **B**