



**USA25152B: MOMA**

**Dorothea Lange: Words and Pictures**

**Voices included:**

*Sam Contis*

*Sarah Meister*

*Wendy Red Star*

*Dyanna Taylor*

*Tess Taylor*

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## 223 Introduction and American Exodus endpapers

SARAH MEISTER: Welcome to *Dorothea Lange: Words and Pictures*. I'm Sarah Meister, curator of this exhibition. We've invited a couple of contemporary artists, a poet, and Dorothea Lange's granddaughter, to share their thoughts on Lange and some of the words and pictures on view here.

We're standing in front of a photograph that Dorothea Lange chose to call, *Migratory Cotton Picker, Eloy, Arizona*. But in fact, there's much more information on file at the Library of Congress. There she wrote, "Resting at cotton wagon before returning to work in the field. He has been picking cotton all day. A good picker earns about \$2 a day working at this time of year".

To our right is an enlargement of the end papers from Lange's landmark photo book *An American Exodus*. Lange cared a lot about words and pictures and the relationship between them, and *An American Exodus* is the most important example of her bringing these two things together.

Here's the poet Tess Taylor:

TESS TAYLOR: It's documenting people moving out of the small farms of the Midwest and the South and into the West. The texture of their lives is changing so rapidly, and they're in the face of forces that are enormous. The economy, the changing of the climate, the Dustbowl happening.

Lange would go and talk to people, listen to what they had to say, sneak back to the car and write down these snippets.

WOMAN: All we got to start with is a family of kids.

MAN: I couldn't do nothin if I went back.

MAN: We trust in the Lord and we don't expect much.

WOMAN: Yessir, we're starved, stalled, and stranded.

MAN: They say, we took work cheap, but you gotta take work cheap, and we didn't want a relief.

TESS TAYLOR: Somebody said that and she wrote it down.

It's an amazing way of capturing this chorus of everyday voices and their music and their passion and their sense of justice.

## 224 White Angel Bread Line, 1933 (San Francisco Streets)

DYANNA TAYLOR: I'm Dyanna Taylor, a cinematographer and documentary filmmaker, and I'm Dorothea Lange's granddaughter. The White Angel Breadline helped the men in the Depression who were hungry and on the streets looking for work.

My grandmother had been a portrait photographer, and had a studio in San Francisco. Her studio was at a crossroads where she could look down and see the men drifting about down there.

She said, "I've got to go down there and challenge myself. I'm going to photograph this thing to see if I can grab a hunk of lightning."

This gentleman, with the cup that he's hoping will be filled with soup and his beaten hat, turned away from all the others, is very powerful.

She was a tiny woman and had a limp left over from severe polio when she was a child. She was carrying a heavy camera, and yet she somehow could blend in to a crowd. She had a magical way of doing that.

She never looked back after that. This really inspired her. Seeing that that photograph told a powerful story, I think moved her to leave her portrait studio work and turn to the streets.

**225 Ex-Slave with Long Memory, Alabama, c. 1937 (Government Work)**

DYANNA TAYLOR: I've looked at this photograph many times, and I've always been struck by the rim of light that falls on the woman's face, her shoulder, and on her hands - those hands tell us about a life of work, and a life of care.

This photograph was taken during a time when my grandmother and her husband, Paul Taylor were working for the Farm Security Administration. At that time, the government was sending out photographers to photograph the conditions around America.

This image is titled "*Ex-Slave with a Long Memory*", and it was taken in Alabama in 1937. She doesn't always caption it. Sometimes it's basic. But "*Ex-slave with a long memory*" makes us pause and think.

**226 Six Tenant Farmers without Farms, 1937 (Land of the Free)**

DYANNA TAYLOR: It's hard enough to take a good portrait of one person. To get six men who are in a state of distress, who are without work, who are struggling to make a living, presenting themselves to you, is a real accomplishment,

This image, taken in 1937, is called *Six Tenant Farmers without Farms, Hardeman County, Texas*.

Dorothea must have approached them to ask if she could take their portrait, but she always did this in such a delicate way. Dorothea gained the trust of her subjects by letting them get to know her a little bit before she produced the camera. She sometimes allowed them to ask questions, about why she was there – how many children did *she* have? Why was she interested in photographing them? And I think they all felt less threatened, and she was able to make them feel more comfortable.

## 227 On the Road to Los Angeles, 1937 (Pictures of Words)

TESS TAYLOR: I'm Tess Taylor. I'm a poet and writer. This is a photograph called On the Road to Los Angeles, California, March, 1937.

What I love about this image is it really demonstrates Lange's ability to capture a paradox. "NEXT TIME, TRY THE TRAIN". Her images are able to convey so much and, and often they cut against each other. They're about suffering and dignity, or they're about the story we wish were true and the story that really is true.

In my poetry, I wove my own travels to the places Dorothea Lange went. So I just wanna read a little fragment called "Note to Self". And all of these are notes that Dorothea Lange made as she was traveling in the 1930s or 40s.

*Note to self, possible title: To Hold This Soil.*

*Note to self, general theme of book, people left stranded by the outwash of industry in America.*

*Note to self, US 99 the splendor and the rest of it.*

*Note, young trees.*

*Note, Poor Man's Canyon, A subject on the move.*

*Note to self, really do the work. Follow the whole travel. Destination unknown.*

*One, the method.*

*Two, this still blank.*

*A book on the conditions of us.*

## 228 Tractored Out, 1938 (American Exodus)

WENDY RED STAR: My name is Wendy Red Star. I'm a visual artist. I'm originally from Montana - I grew up on the Crow Indian reservation.

We're looking at a photograph of a barren field and an abandoned house. It's called *Tractored Out, Childress County, Texas*.

Immediately when I saw this image, I felt a lot of empathy. Something about the starkness.

It reminded me a lot of the landscapes of where I grew up and the initiative of the government to assimilate my community, the Crow Nation, into farmers.

And immediately I thought about the first occupants, the indigenous people who once were on these very fertile prairies. And then these farming communities coming, and then they were also pushed off with this destruction of giant dust storms and great hardship for the landscape.

A lot of times people don't feel like they connect to indigenous people. But to me, this was like two communities that were both forced out that could come together on that shared experience.



**229 One Nation Indivisible, San Francisco, 1942 (WWII)**

DYANNA TAYLOR: It's 1942. With the horrifying and surprising attack on Pearl Harbor, the government made a very rash decision to intern the Japanese-Americans that were living on the West Coast. Dorothea was hired by the government rather quickly to document the rounding up of the Japanese in the Bay Area.

We see almost immediately in her earliest photographs of this assignment, her distress at what the government is doing to the Japanese-American citizens.

And in the photograph of the little girl dutifully holding her hand over her chest and saying the pledge of allegiance, we can already see that Dorothea is at her eye level, and showing us with great compassion the earnestness of this child and that she is already a well-formed American citizen, and yet she's going to be taken away and put in an internment camp.

**230 Richmond, California, 1942 (861.1968) (WWII)**

TESS TAYLOR: I'm Tess Taylor. I love this image because this woman looks happy and she looks like she's arrived. And there she is in Richmond, California in 1942. Richmond was an end point on what is called The Great Migration.

Dorothea Lange knew a lot about displaced people. And she's so consciously celebrating this moment. The Henry Kaiser shipyards in Richmond were America's first desegregated workplace.

So maybe one of the reasons I'm drawn to this picture is, for at least this moment, a woman is standing dressed in beautiful clothes, bathed in sunshine, and she's getting a little slice of the California dream, or her own dream.

**231 Gunlock, Utah, 1953 [483.1959]**

WENDY RED STAR: My name is Wendy Red Star. I'm a visual artist. I'm originally from Montana.

This image reminds me of me, actually. When I was growing up, on the Crow Indian Reservation, I was practically raised by horses. Looking at this little boy's face and how comfortable he is, is something that very much resonates with me.

The horse looks like a landscape itself. And the way that she was able to do a tight shot that shows us this boy's expression, that he is just perfectly comfortable on this mountainscape of a horse, that he can smile at her and have no fear of falling off. I thought that she did a really great job of capturing this real bond between this child and the horse.

I think that's really a true art form that Dorothea has this rapport with her subjects, and that's not easy to do.

It's almost like he's showing her his greatest passion or his, his talent. And there's a lot of pride in that.

## 232 Plantation Overseer, 1936 (12 Million Black Voices)

DYANNA TAYLOR: Here we find ourselves in June 1936, with a plantation overseer and his field hands, in the Mississippi Delta. The overseer proud and full of himself, hand on knee, foot on bumper. What we can see in the photograph is my grandfather standing on the far left edge of the frame, distracting the overseer, so that Dorothea can actually see the men behind him, as they gaze directly at the camera.

My grandfather, Paul Taylor, was a field economist and Dorothea and he worked together as a team on the reports that they did for the government.

My grandfather often would interview subjects in this way so that Dorothea could photograph them without their paying much attention to her. They used her photographs to illuminate what they were really seeing on the ground, and it made a great difference in how the government received the information that they were given.

**233 Spring in Berkeley (Family of Man)**

DYANNA TAYLOR: When I see this photograph, *Spring in Berkeley*, of Dorothea's good neighbor, I'm reminded of my grandmother's unique sense of humor.

I'm sure she was drawn to the rakish way in which the hat is staying on her wonderful neighbor's head and the curlers, and she's rooted to the sidewalk like the plants are in some way, with her outstretched leg, and her floral skirt, and her gardening cardigan. Everything about it would've made my grandmother smile. I just love this photo.

**234 Migrant Mother, March 1936 (Migrant Mother)**

DYANNA TAYLOR: This photograph has been used and seen so many times that Dorothea once said to me, "it doesn't belong to me, really, it belongs to the public". It's just part of the imagery we think of when we think of the Depression in America.

Dorothea had been traveling alone on assignment in California and was heading back toward Berkeley, when she passed a sign that said, "Pea-pickers camp". She drove on and then began to argue with herself, "Maybe I should go back". The crops had frozen, and almost everyone was out of work and very hungry. She spotted a woman alone with children.

Dorothea took seven negatives of the woman, Florence Thompson, and her children, and the final image is the one that we've all come to know so well.

When Dorothea returned to Berkeley, she submitted some of the images to the press. The public was very moved by the images, and aid was soon sent down to the pea-pickers camp.

## 235 Three photographs by Sam Contis

SAM CONTIS: My name is Sam Contis, and I'm an artist. And you're looking at three works that I've made in response to Dorothea Lange's work.

In the late 1950s, Dorothea Lange wrote a letter to Beaumont Newhall, who was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art.

The letter says, "I used to think in terms of single photographs, the bullseye technique. No more. A photographic statement is more what I now reach for. Therefore, these pairs, like a sentence of two words".

I was really drawn to those groupings and her way of thinking about photography in a new way. And so it felt like the beginning of a conversation that I wanted to continue having with Lange.

And so, for example, this pairing, I've cropped in close in the same way that she cropped in close. First, this image of hands - this sort of grasping for something in the dark, really. And sometimes I feel like that's what you're doing as an artist, and that's what I think she was struggling with at the end of her life. She was grasping for new ways of seeing.

And I've balanced them with this other image that has an inherent tension to it. There is this push and pull, but also this embrace and holding. And it, in a way, talks about the push and pull of time, of relationships that I saw between myself and Dorothea.

**236 Paul's Hands, 1957 (Late Works)**

SAM CONTIS: I think Dorothea saw the expressive possibilities in hands.

My name is Sam Contis. I'm an artist.

I was working in the Dorothea Lange archive at the Oakland Museum of California, and I saw a picture of Dorothea Lange and her second husband, Paul Taylor, embracing. Dorothea didn't physically take the picture. She's taken this larger negative and she's cropped in very close and made a print that just shows these hands on an anonymous back. And so I understood that it was her body in the photograph. And that the hands were the hands of Paul Taylor. And I thought that was just such a beautiful gesture in so many ways.

I also really liked the way she's printed it. The figures, to my mind, become immortalized. They could be statues. They look like marble or stone carvings.

And the title, "Paul's Hands", gives it this very personal touch and personal feeling. It feels like a really loving gesture, both as a nod to her husband, but also finding that thing that you love in a photograph, and wanting to get closer to it and holding on that particular moment in an image.



## 237 Terrified Horse, Napa County (Late Works)

DYANNA TAYLOR: In the 50s, Dorothea took it upon herself to document a beautiful valley in Northern California, that was going to be flooded. Her interest was in the life of that valley.

What we see behind the horse is the wasteland which once was the beautiful valley and town of Monticello. You no longer see the fence, the field, the orchard, the ivy-covered homes, the ranch hands, women talking on doorsteps, the County store, you don't see any of that anymore - you just see what's left, which is the horse, running, with no place to go.

Dorothea was an early environmentalist. And the assignment, which became a small book called *Death of a Valley*, documented the painful, painful razing of an entire way of life. And the sadness with which the people had to leave their homes and a place they'd lived for decades.