Motherhood in Farm Security Administration Photographs, 1936-1940

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Historiographical Introduction

Perhaps the most recognizable image from the Great Depression is Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photograph, taken in 1936 as part of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) documentation project. In the image, a woman stares into the distance, her forehead marred with lines of worry. Two of her children lean against her for protection, sporting tattered, dirty clothes and unkempt hair. The mother is centered as the backbone of her family in the absence of a male figure, a solitary woman sheltering her children from their total poverty. Lange stated that when she met the woman while capturing images of migrant workers in California, the woman first approached her desperately, seemingly knowing that Lange’s photographs could help her.¹

The “Migrant Mother” came to symbolize the economic instability, uncertainty, and destitution of the Great Depression through its humanized depiction of a poor family. Additionally, “Migrant Mother” represented a constructed, amalgamated symbol of motherhood during the Depression. Lange’s and the FSA’s decision to use the subject’s figure to represent and raise awareness for desperate poverty, did not help her or her children as later described by

Lange. Florence Owens Thompson, a Native American woman whose symbolic image in “Migrant Mother” as the figurehead of poverty and white motherhood did not reflect how Thompson and her family viewed their own existence. Thompson and her daughter stated that the family simply existed and that Thompson’s sacrifices for her children were necessary for survival.\(^2\) Her idealized, Madonna-like image, though based off of her actual circumstances, allowed the FSA to depict poverty and motherhood in a distinct manner. The FSA’s role in shaping the American cultural landscape during the Great Depression raises important questions about how and why particular representations of mothers emerged through the documentary photography project, as family units and mothers have historically been symbolized and nationalized to present specific constructions of the social order and the nation.\(^3\)

In order to answer these questions and examine the ways in which representations of motherhood emerged during the Great Depression through FSA photography, one must first examine the historiography of women’s studies and the Farm Security Administration. Women’s studies surfaced as a field within historiography in the 1970s and was taught through the lense of the second-wave feminist movement.\(^4\) These early studies often focused on “women worthies” of

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organizational and institutional movements. During this phase, historians of women during the Great Depression such as Susan Ware concentrated on singular women or women’s generalized experiences and achievements during the Great Depression. Through the 1980s and 1990s, the field broadened its scope to include a larger variety women’s histories, masculinity, sexuality studies and subaltern studies. In recent years, the scholarship has shifted from women’s studies to a gender studies focus, incorporating intersectional issues as well as deeper structural examinations of female agency within fundamental constructions, such as Elaine S. Abelson’s examination of homelessness among women during the Great Depression. The secondary sources used for this paper demonstrate this trend in scholarship, as well as that despite the wealth of primary sources such as ladies’ magazines and newspapers discussing motherhood and women’s roles in the Great Depression, little research exists on representations of motherhood during the Great Depression and tends to focus on families or women as a whole.

Critiques and analyses of the Great Depression and the Farm Security Administration fall into three main camps: biographies and studies of individual photographers, such as Mary

6 In Beyond Suffrage: Women in the New Deal (1981), Susan Ware demonstrates the initial revisionist trend of women’s studies, arguing that the 28 women she examines had a significant role in shaping New Deal policies.
Murphy’s “Picture/Story: Representing Gender in Montana Farm Security Administration Photographs,” critiques of the FSA as illustrations of specific narrative or propaganda, or interpretations of FSA photography as representative artforms. These three camps have all exhaustively addressed different features within FSA photographs and the historical nature of the project; however, whereas some feminist critiques of the FSA occur, surprisingly little research exists on depictions of gender and sexuality in these historically significant photographs.9

While the women’s studies and Farm Security Administration historiographies provide a detailed, useful, and varied depiction of both women’s and the FSA’s roles during the Great Depression, they do not discuss the questions that I seek to answer in this paper. I will examine the role of the FSA photographic project in developing specific concepts and new definitions of motherhood during the Great Depression. In this paper, I will argue that FSA photographs depicting mothers created paradoxical roles of the Madonna and the Survivor in order to generate specific constructions of motherhood and nationhood during the Great Depression.10 By analyzing FSA photographs and comparing these to arguments and evidence from other primary and secondary scholarship, I will draw conclusions about the new constructions of motherhood during the Great Depression.

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10 These two terms will be expanded upon further in the paper. To summarize, the Madonna describes images in which an idealized, virtuous woman, typically seated, holds and infant or cares for her children in the midst of unfortunate circumstances. The Survivor describes images in which a resilient woman takes on responsibilities in order to provide for her children.
Background: The 1920s and The Farm Security Administration

Public roles for women increased in the early twentieth century through women’s suffrage movements, Progressive Era reform movements, changes in social expectations of women, and increased employment and unionizing, particularly during World War I.  

Women attained a greater level of economic independence as well as suffrage. Despite economic and social gains made by women on a large scale, women faced factors that continued to limit them. Women’s new freedoms and roles in society faced scrutiny in the 1920s concurrently with industrialization, suffrage, and contemporary media. Paradoxical images emerged of liberated flappers and domestic mothers, as demonstrated by the advertisements in Figure 2. Increased roles in the film industry, the rise of advertising, and consumerism simultaneously enforced conservative notions of femininity and motherhood and created images of women independent from the family unit. The paradoxical image of the modern woman portrayed in media such as film, advertisement, and journals limited women between extremes and ostracized those who did not fit either mold.

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13 Ibid.
The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 devastated families and individuals alike. Millions of Americans lost jobs and the ability to provide for their families. Women were disproportionately impacted by unemployment, and those who did work were paid less than men. New roles presented to women included that of a desperate breadwinner for the family and a sacrificing, stay-at-home mother. Just as during the 1920s, constructions of idealized women and mothers appeared based on socioeconomic conditions. Through the Farm Security Administration photographs, specific images of motherhood were portrayed, both reflecting and contributing to the contemporary state.

Officially lasting from 1937 to 1943, the Farm Security Administration (FSA) served as an important visual and cultural record of daily life in rural communities. Designed as a replacement for the Resettlement Agency (1935), the FSA sought to remedy rural and agricultural poverty. President Roosevelt conceived the program in four points to combat issues that affected tenant farmers and rural Americans. The FSA also sought to improve rural health and increase medical coverage. An important component of the FSA was the Historical Section of the Information Division, the public relations department established in 1935 that was led by Roy Stryker. Staff photographers moved about the countryside with the assignment of taking pictures intended to serve as a governmental public education and relations tool. Their wish for

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17 "Farm Security Administration Families Learn how to Keep Well." *Philadelphia Tribune (1912-2001)*, Jan 11, 1940.
artistic expression coincided with institutional needs and bureaucratic obligations for public relations and demonstrating that New Deal agencies were fulfilling their promises.18

The FSA photography project emerged at a moment when visual media had immense societal sway and importance. Advertisement rose in prominence in the 1920s, and photographic magazines such as Life spread documentary photography.19 The photographic genre, seen as unbiased and objective, allowed “FSA photographs [to take] an ascendant place in the new order … as a cultural program wedded to a political platform, the FSA had in its methods of communication and public relations a powerful ideological tool.”20 FSA photographs were regarded as “the most vital, forceful and thought provoking examples of camera technique that have ever been produced by any agency” in their project to capture the habits and lives of those being covered.21 As such, the representations of Americans spread through FSA photography had immense cultural significance in the context of the emerging obsession with authenticity of experience and truth during the tumultuous and uncertain Great Depression.22

20 Ibid.
Constructions of Motherhood

Included within this historical structure were constructions of families and motherhood. In her study of Russell Lee’s 1937 FSA photographs taken in Montana, Mary Murphy argues that photographs are revelatory sources of gender and familial roles because of their intrinsic connection to the display of the human body. The iconographic and paradoxical representations of mothers through the FSA photographic project are displayed in ten images taken from Maryland to California between 1936 and 1940 by FSA photographers Dorothea Lange, Russell Lee, Arthur Rothstein, and Marion Post Wolcott. The photographs communicate resilience and vulnerability of mothers across the nation at a time when women’s familial and economic roles changed and women gained more control over their independence and agency through “glorifying and extending the traditionally female role, [not] challenging it.”

During the Great Depression, American women largely focused on their families’ survival, but concurrently gained and lost agency through their socioeconomic advancements and situations. Women in the 1930s were expected to be homemakers and complacent wives, and though women gained power during this period through their status as wives and through their control over the domestic sphere, it was difficult to maintain certain traditional women’s roles within the family. Women also had to act as breadwinners, while men’s unemployment caused familial strife. Families during the Great Depression saw both a simultaneous weakening of the husband’s role and elevation of the wife’s role and a reinforcement of traditional concepts of

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25 Ibid, 162.
26 Ibid, 147-149.
femininity and motherhood.\textsuperscript{27} Such changes within the family often depended on socioeconomic status, as “the lower the economic class, the greater the likelihood of the mother's assuming leadership.”\textsuperscript{28} However, women also served in supportive roles to their husbands as families faced destitution.

The nationalization of the mother during the Great Depression emerged in a larger context, a context to which the FSA documentary project both contributed to and broke from. Mothers were often constructed as harbingers of peace and national stability through the roles in childrearing and the household as well deficient figures solely responsible for the inadequacies in the mental, spiritual, and moral characteristics of the nation’s children (the future of the nation).\textsuperscript{29} The FSA’s mission to create a comprehensive and universalized image of the rural face of the American country and humanize its subjects as a form of propaganda for the New Deal government resulted in the creation of archetypal images, especially of families and mothers.\textsuperscript{30} Scholars of gender studies such as Deniz Kandiyoti, Beth Baron, Elleke Boehmer, and Klaus Theweleit have established that the body of the woman is a space in which paradigmatic constructions of nationalism are found. By theorizing women as bearers of the future of the nation (children), individual mothers become mothers of the nation.\textsuperscript{31} Such a process often emerges during difficult times, such as during the financial and social turmoil of the Great Depression.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid, 150-153.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 154.
Depression. Mothers, frequently relegated to domestic spheres during this period, were often criticized and viewed as lacking in their abilities to maintain the home and provide for their children in the context of economic turmoil.32

The representations of mothers in the FSA photographs are divided between two categories, the Madonna and the Survivor, which had important implications for how mothers during the Great Depression were perceived and continued to be viewed as today.

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Rebecca Stiles Taylor, “To Insure Better Children, Mothers Must Be Better: Mother’s Day Programs to Emphasize Better Mothers.” The Chicago Defender 7 May 1938.
Photographic Analysis

I have chosen ten photographs out of the larger body of FSA photographs. These photographs are divided into two sections: depictions of the Madonna and depictions of the Survivor. The Madonna describes images in which an idealized, virtuous woman, typically seated, holds and infant or cares for her children in the midst of unfortunate circumstances. The Survivor describes images in which a resilient woman takes on responsibilities in order to provide for her children. In both cases, the women are unnamed and demarcated as mothers by the photographs’ captions and by the presence of their children.

Figure 3
Dorothea Lange. “Migrant agricultural worker's family. Seven hungry children. Mother aged thirty-two. Father is a native Californian. Destitute in pea picker's camp, Nipomo, California, because of the failure of the early pea crop. These people had just sold their tent in order to buy food. Of the twenty-five hundred people in this camp most of them were destitute” California, 1936.

Figure 4
Russell Lee “Migrant mother with child, near Harlingen, Texas.” February 1939.

Figure 5
Russell Lee “Negro mother and child at local chapter meeting of UCAPAWA (United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America). Bristow, Oklahoma.” February 1940
The Madonna image, seen in Figures 3 through 8 and common throughout FSA photography, create a new definition of feminine motherhood through the lens of poverty. The mothers represent broader American society: the captions describe them based only on socioeconomic condition (migrant, Negro, Mexican, Japanese, etc.). They are placed within the context of their situation, often in their living quarters or in the conditions of their poverty, but the photographer does not specify the subject’s unique circumstances (except for the case of Figure 3). The focus of the women’s gaze is also significant in the interpretation of Madonna photos. Women look into the distance, at their child, or at the photographer. This either solidifies their role as domestic mother by gazing on their child or asserts their role as a Madonna through pensive, meditative gaze that connotes emotional poise. The mothers are all positioned as the subject of the photographs, with the other elements of their lives (tents, housing, roads, etc.) taking secondary importance, allowing the scene to become generalized and identifiable to a larger population.
Farm Security Administration photographs created specific narratives of American life through the subjects that the photographers chose to capture. Photographers took pictures according to shooting scripts that guided that outlined what they covered, such as “African American families,” “informal dress,” “families moving,” “home in the evening,” and “drought.”

Photographers generally used short captions for these photographs, as for their purpose, it was more beneficial for unnamed individuals to represent accessible, generalized every-men and -women, such as in Figures 3 through 8. Through these universal and specific thematic constructions of America, the FSA as a bureaucratic organization aimed to “persuade a national audience of voters and policymakers that the country required fixing and that the New Deal had the right tools for the job.”

Intrinsically tied to the images and their subjects were the FSA’s agenda and proposed narrative that staged scenes of poverty and American life. Stryker openly stated that the photographs purposefully created narratives different than photographs in newspapers so that FSA photographs “could stand on their own to evoke the desired effect in the viewer … the FSA banked on the power of documentary photography to create cultural archetypes that would be moving and meaningful.” In working as a public relations department for a federal agency, the FSA produced their own historical structure of the Great Depression.

The Madonna figure represented a thematic construction of the feminine, peaceful mother responsible for her children’s moral and physical wellbeing (as displayed in newspaper and

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34 Murphy, “Picture/Story: Representing Gender in Montana Farm Security Administration Photographs,” 99.
35 Murphy, “Picture/Story: Representing Gender in Montana Farm Security Administration Photographs,” 94.
ladies’ magazine sources of the time).\textsuperscript{37} This construction evoked feelings of domesticity and portrayed women in the form of mothers of the nation during the time of struggle. The nameless Madonna in these FSA images represents the primary construction of motherhood during the 1930s: the woman who paradoxically gained greater agency and less freedoms through her role. The FSA portrayal of motherhood as such by iconizing nameless mothers as Madonna figures creates an idealized version of poverty, one in which FSA photographers (and by extension, the New Deal) such as Dorothea Lange could aid desperate mothers and their children, such as Florence Owens Thompson.

Conversely to the Madonna, the Survivor figure represents the woman and mother during the Great Depression who acted as a breadwinner or a supporter for their family. Women were often depicted as entering the workforce out of sheer necessity for their families.\textsuperscript{38} These mothers, though given more agency through the actions that they are shown completing, are still contextualized within their families through the presence of their children within photographs or the demarcation of “mother” or “wife” in the captions of the photographs.

\textsuperscript{37} R. Smith Fullerton and M.J. Patterson, “Procrustean Motherhood: The Good Mother during Depression (1930s), War (1940s), and Prosperity (1950s),” \textit{The Canadian Journal of Media Studies} 8 (December 2010).


"MOTHER OF FIVE." \textit{Ladies' Home Journal} 55, no. 12 (12, 1938): 29-29, 70.

Evelyn Seeley. "Debunking the Mother Myth." \textit{Chatelaine} 9, no. 2 (02, 1936): 4-4, 40.

\textsuperscript{38} Helen Gregory Macgill, "What of the Wage-Earning Wife?" \textit{Chatelaine} 3, no. 3 (03, 1930): 8-9, 64-66.

"Married Women Workers: Why Mothers Work Away from Home; the Attitude of the Labor Movement." \textit{New Leader with which is Combined the American Appeal} 10, no. 11 (Apr 19, 1930): 8.
The Survivor represents the women who took on traditionally male economic roles in order to provide for their children, mothers who described the resilience and continued existence of the American people. The images taken by FSA photographers capture women while laboring or interacting with their sphere of impoverished or rural life. In Figures 8 through 12, each mother is focused on her role as a laborer or family figure, but is shown as the caretaker of her children either through direct contact with a child or by existing in her sphere of control. In each photograph, the mother maintains a position of authority or command. The mothers in Figures 11
and 12 demonstrate this through their active labor, while the mothers in Figures 9 and 10 are displayed as active caretakers of their children, keeping the family in order.

Through the lense of the amalgamated Survivor archetype, one could argue that these mothers demonstrate a higher degree of agency within the socioeconomic confines of the Great Depression. These women are shown as independent from males in their ability to provide for their children, gain employment, or remain as caretakers for their children amongst poor national conditions. However, the conditionality of their position as a resilient, symbolic mother also places these women, through their images, as figures defined by their motherhood rather than by their individualized agencies. Women often functioned as independent economic agents through their employment during the Great Depression and did not necessarily only work to support the family unit and their children.\(^{39}\) However, the depiction of women as working to sustain their children and families created a sense of toughness and familial unity was important during the Great Depression, as Americans sought national unity and stability.\(^{40}\) Thus, the FSA could promote familial unity and therefore national stability through images of mothers as Survivors.

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Limitations of Methodology and Conclusion

The topic of this study had certain limitations. Representations of motherhood through other media sources, such as magazines, advertisements, newspapers, and film during the Great Depression did not lie in the confines of Madonna and Survivor and included a variety of socioeconomic classes, identities, and familial situations. By focusing solely on photographs from the Farm Security Administration, one cannot examine other constructions and ideologies of motherhood during this time period. To extend this study beyond its current limited scope, it would also be necessary to complete a deeper investigation into each individual photograph and photographer included in the paper rather than simply through a categorical analysis of the photographs. However, because of the nature of the FSA photography project—as a pioneer of documentary photography and as “the first attempt by the federal government to provide a broad visual record of American society … [and] the first systematic use of photography by the government for partisan purposes,”41 it is important to consider the messages, interpretations, and constructions of subjects in FSA photographs. Additionally, the sheer amount of FSA photographs as well as the FSA’s broad categorizations of subjects through the use of shooting scripts to create universalized images of rural America in order to create public awareness of national problems necessitates the use of comprehensive classification of the photographs for the purpose of this study.

In a 1939 shooting script, Roy Stryker stated that in order to create the most accurate and widespread coverage of Americans, it was necessary to focus on indistinguishable common denominators between various locations.42 By representing a larger, candid portrait of an

America affected by drought, poverty, hunger, unemployment, and migration, and acting under the directive to both document the Great Depression and the benefits of New Deal programs, the FSA created ahistorical and paradoxical representations of motherhood during the Great Depression. The Madonna and the Survivor archetypes allowed for constructions of motherhood on a national scale in the form of documentary photography, promoting unity, resilience, and stability through the images of mothers distributed by the Farm Security Administration.

The lasting impact of “Migrant Mother” lies in the creation of its universalistic representation of a mother as a spirit of Americans in the Great Depression. Florence Owens Thompson’s figure in the “Migrant Mother” photograph attracts viewers and encapsulates the role of both Madonna and Survivor--an idealized mother who must sacrifice for her children. Because of the FSA photography project’s quest to inform viewers of socioeconomic issues, act as catalysts for reforms, and persuade Americans that New Deal programs were effective, the images of mothers and motherhood that emerged symbolized such paradoxical roles afforded to women during the Great Depression.
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