

## Documenting America, 1935-1943

Edited by Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan  
University of California Press  
361 pp., \$24.95

## Chicago and Downstate: Illinois As Seen by the Farm Security Administration Photographers, 1936-1943

Edited by Robert L. Reid and Larry A. Viskochil  
University of Illinois Press  
194 pp., \$19.95

By Peter Friederici

**I**N 1936 ARTHUR ROTHSTEIN WAS A 21-year-old photographer just finishing his first year on assignment with the photographic division of the Resettlement Administration, a New Deal agency that had been set up to aid poor American farmers. Rothstein's job was to docu-

## PHOTOGRAPHY

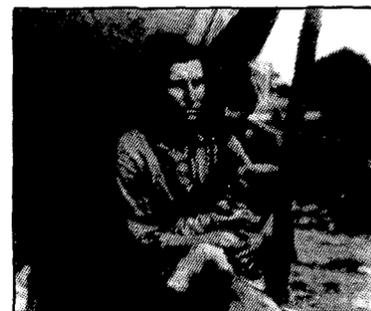
ment the hard times faced by Great Plains farmers. Traveling north from the Dust Bowl of Texas and Oklahoma, Rothstein found an assortment of cow skulls scattered in a parched South Dakota pasture. He photographed one, moved it 10 feet and photographed it against another backdrop.

Later that year Rothstein's photos were released to newspapers as graphic evidence of drought. One of his skull pictures made the front page of North Dakota's *Fargo Forum*. Normally this would have been cause for celebration, but the newspaper denounced the photograph as a fake, claiming that Rothstein had been carrying the skull around as a prop. The caption read "A Wooden Nickel," and it implied that other photographs of drought-stricken areas might be just as artificial, might involve just as much manipulation of evocative but fake symbols.

The timing was embarrassing for Rothstein and his boss, Roy Stryker—the photo was published just as President Roosevelt, campaigning for re-election, reached the Dakotas. The incident was used by the anti-New Deal editors of the *Forum* to inveigh against Roosevelt's insistence that more New Deal programs were needed to ameliorate the drought's effects. The controversy received national attention, but—fortunately for Rothstein and Stryker—Roosevelt was re-elected anyway.

**Every picture sells a story:** The story demonstrates the effect one photograph can have, and shows how aesthetic decisions can have political ramifications. Indeed, on the same trip Rothstein took one of the quintessential Depression photos—a shot of a farmer and his two sons crossing a barren field in Cimarron County, Okla., in front of a wooden farm building almost buried in dust. It, along with Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*,

# Between promotion and emotion



Through a past, starkly: Arthur Rothstein's portrait of Artelia Bendolph (top); Jack Delano's Chicago boy scout waits for the flag dedication ceremony (left); two alternate shots of Dorothea Lange's famous "Migrant Mother" (above).

has become one of the archetypal images of Depression poverty: these visions are what we think of when we think about the '30s.

But we've seen the photographs so often—in newspapers, magazines, textbooks—that it's hard to perceive the subjects as real people. Instead, they've become only types

—the doughty, suffering farmer, the despairing mother. Although the North Dakota editors were unwilling to accept the skull photos as visions of drought, we've learned to accept these photographs as generalized visions of poverty.

A variety of new collections of Farm Security Administration (FSA)

photos have appeared recently. Two of the latest are Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan's *Documenting America, 1935-1943* and Robert L. Reid and Larry A. Viskochil's *Chicago and Downstate: Illinois As Seen by the Farm Security Administration Photographers, 1936-1943*.

The two books address new facets of the FSA's formidable collection of 77,000 prints. *Documenting America* focuses not on individual images—which is how the FSA photographs were most commonly published, in the '30s and more recently—but on "lots," of photographs taken by a single photographer on a single

theme. *Chicago and Downstate* shows us FSA images of Chicago—which were long neglected because it was commonly supposed that the FSA was interested in only rural poverty.

Created within the Resettlement Administration in 1935, the photographic section was later part of the the Farm Security Administration (from 1937 to 1942) before it fell under the aegis of the Office of War Information. Under the direction of Stryker, a former Columbia University economics instructor, the agency's mandate was to record the dismal effects of the Depression on Americans—and the positive results that New Deal programs would (it was hoped) have on those lives. The photographers hired had a contradictory agenda: half documentary, half public relations.

**Framing the photographs:** *Documenting America* begins with two excellent essays by Lawrence W. Levine and Alan Trachtenberg about the different ways that FSA photos have been "read" over the years. The selection here is the closest thing yet to a photographer's-eye view of the collection. There are 15 lots by 12 different photographers, each addressing an individual theme, whether a place or a group of people. This system of organization provides a good idea of the working methods and problems of the FSA photographers.

Most assignments took weeks or months to complete, in part because Stryker exhorted his photographers to familiarize themselves with a region before they ever set out with a camera. But at least one assignment—Walker Evans' "New York City Block"—was the work of only a day. Evans, of all the FSA photographers, was (at that time) the most well known, the most fastidious, the least interested in the political goals of the FSA and the New Deal agencies in general. By viewing a number of his photographs from the same lot—instead of just one or two—we get an idea here of what sort of decisions Evans was making while he was wandering the street that day.

What results is an intimate yet removed portrait of a single block, with Evans clearly distanced from the residents of this working-class neighborhood but sensitive to nuances of human expression and to marks of life outside the neighborhood.

**A modern promotionist:** Other lots are far more evangelizing. Rothstein's "FSA Migratory Labor Camp," for example, documents conditions in a camp set up in Visalia, Calif., to house migrant agricultural workers—this in 1940, when California growers and their lobbyists were leading a bitter fight to defeat such aid for workers. Stryker told Rothstein that the agency needed positive pictures of conditions in the camp, hoping that such photos would swing public opinion in favor of the program. The photographer obliged with glowing images of gardens, a medical clinic, a baseball game, a Saturday-night dance.

Most FSA photographers seem to

have Stryker's faith that the New Deal programs they were promoting would do some good. "We were hoping that the programs were helping the people they were supposed to," the photographer Jack Delano told me recently. "And I think we thought

## FSA photographers had a contradictory agenda: half documentary, half public relations.

that it did help some in forming public opinion."

The emphasis on "positive" images was clearer after the war began in 1941, when Stryker demanded more photographs that would show Americans pulling together. Marjory Collins' "Small Town in Wartime" photo essay here depicts Lititz, Pa., in November of 1942. The town residents buy meat, get haircuts, make bullets and pretzels, sit on the local draft board and are almost Norman Rockwellesque in their self-reliance,

self-assuredness, self-governance.

"We never meet the town drunkard," write Fleischhauer and Brannan in their introduction to this section. They also point out, though, and rightly, that the photos address a broad spectrum of people and activities in the town—and that breadth is what makes these photos interesting for historians and others.

Fleischhauer and Brannan juxtapose the small-town series with Russell Lee's photographs of the relocation of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast in early 1942. As presented here, the series becomes a narrative of this forced move, beginning with Japanese-Americans reading evacuation orders in Los Angeles and ending with a "reception center" consisting of endless rows of identical shacks.

Because there are a number of lots and topics here, one gets the impression that the U.S. of the late '30s and early '40s was above all a diverse society, a place of great ethnic and regional variety. In that respect this book is similar to the travel and history guides issued by the WPA writers' project, which emphasized that the U.S. was too diverse to be easily

summed up.

One positive aspect of the FSA's later emphasis on Americans working together was that photographers began to go out and take pictures of African-Americans, who had been largely neglected by earlier documentary and news reportage. Half the photographs in *Chicago and Downstate* were taken in Chicago, and the majority of those depict life in the "Black Belt," the South Side ghetto area. These photos date from the early '40s, after Stryker—his vision broadening—had begun to focus less exclusively on documenting rural America. Chicago, represented by 1,800 prints in the FSA file, was one of the cities documented most thoroughly by Stryker's photographers.

Many of the photos are bleak scenes of poverty: there are ramshackle tenement buildings, squalid and cramped kitchenette apartments, meager meals. But the photographers didn't just take pictures of what was wrong with urban life. Many of the Black Belt photographs were intended to show that African-Americans were just as upright and responsible as their white

counterparts. There are photographs of African-American professionals and their families; there is even a tender photograph of Oliver Coleman, a musician—and thus supposedly a disreputable individual—at home with his five-month-old son, poring over his scrapbook.

Unfortunately, the depressing conditions these photos document have not improved over the years. Photo captions describe how new migrants from the South came to Chicago and were supported by relief money. However bad living conditions in the city were, they were often better than what the migrants had had in the rural South.

So there are hints of hope here in even the grimmer photographs: there is a vague notion that—through government assistance and the goodwill of those who were better off (such as those viewing the published photographs)—the lives of even the poorest Americans could be improved. That such an optimistic attitude is almost unthinkable today makes these historical photographs a searing indictment. ■

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## C.L.R. James: a one-man gang

### C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary

By Paul Buhle  
Verso, 197 pp., \$13.95

By Eric Lott

*It is no mystery. We're making history.*

—Linton Kwesi Johnson

LONDON'S 1981 "BRIXTON" RIOTS unfolded like Allan Bloom's worst nightmare. In April of that year, metropolitan police battled the area's heavily beleaguered Afro-Caribbean residents

### POLITICS

—Prospero muzzling Caliban's curse—as the "disorders" spread first down Atlantic Road, then into Chaucer Road and Spenser Road, up Milton Road, and finally toward the borders of Shakespeare Road itself.

Yet if this street synopsis of empire's decline was the sort of thing to wither a Bloom, it was no less kind to the statist left. Later in the summer, riots continued to sweep through the U.K., finally extending to more than 30 locales. The left was taken wholly by surprise and behaved that way, alternately distancing itself from the rioters and attempting to capitalize on their actions.

**Left holding the bag:** These "July days" constituted an essentially leaderless uprising—"shopping without money," in the words of participants—by working-class kids, black and white, who refused the role of passive victims bereft of a "good job." It could be seen as a grand, spontaneous refusal of the legitimized boredom and irrelevance



C.L.R. James: overseeing the eruptions of empire.

urged upon them by labor elites and political advocates. It appeared from all this that Pan-African éminence grise C.L.R. James had had some (invisible) hand in the events, as Tom Ward later remarked in the *Voice Literary Supplement*. Or as James himself once put it: "There is nothing more to organize. ... Organization as we have known it is at an end."

One of the many good things about Paul Buhle's intellectual biography, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*, is that it clarifies the connections between James' ideas and eruptions like Brixton in 1981, Tottenham in 1985 and New York's Tompkins Square Park in 1988, the latest phase (and form) of Anglo-American class struggle. And it helps

trouble the radical pieties that lately constitute leftward cultural thought—the mostly rhetorical invocations of "gender, race and class," and the cynical games of pin-the-sign-on-the-discourse.

James' life and work offer a potential charge to radical thinking on race, the role of culture in mass movements and the interrelatedness of spontaneity and organization in mass political activity. If Buhle's book did little else, it would be crucial in affirming the centrality of a figure who is still curiously marginal to the metropolises, if not to the Third World.

James' life, which began in Trinidad in 1901 and ended near Shakespeare Road in Brixton where he spent his last years, reads like a resume of this century's radical black cultural and political efforts. Coincident with the Harlem Renaissance and the prestige of Jamaican leader Marcus Garvey, James helped organize a circle of Trinidadian writers and cultural thinkers around the

### James' life was a resume of radical black politics.

journals *Trinidad* and *The Beacon*. Leaving for England in 1932, James produced in 1938 his extraordinary version of the black Atlantic originary moment, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*—close in spirit to another such enterprise, W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935).

**Out of bounds:** During his years of intense political activity in the America of the '40s and early '50s, James was already overseeing at a

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