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*BADCITE* *NOTFOUND* *OTHER*
CHAPTER THREE

Documenting Disasters: Rothstein’s “Steer Skull” and the Use of Photographic Evidence in Environmental and Political Narratives

JAMES HEWITSON

Arthur Rothstein’s “Steer Skull” photograph occupies a controversial place in the history of American documentary photography. Taken in May 1936, under the auspices of the Historical Division of the Resettlement Administration (later the Farm Security Administration), the “steer skull” photograph shows a bleached skull lying on barren earth in South Dakota. This image was used as visual evidence of the extreme drought conditions that were affecting the Midwest at this time, and was widely published in a number of newspapers and magazines across America. Almost immediately, however, the photograph became a focal point for critics of New Deal initiatives. During Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s election-year tour of the region, the Fargo Forum launched an attack on the steer skull photograph, claiming that it was staged and misrepresented the actual conditions in the Midwest. Subsequent investigation led to the discovery of five different images of the same skull submitted by Rothstein, each of which showed it in a different place. The fact that the same object appeared in different positions in these photographs seemed to support charges that the Roosevelt Administration was manufacturing evidence to make the economic and environmental challenges facing the nation appear more dire than they were, in order to justify large-scale intervention into the agricultural sector. The photograph was released in an election year; the controversy surrounding it was picked up by a number of newspapers and became a political issue. Various groups opposed to the Roosevelt Administration and New Deal initiatives used this and similar photographs as evidence of a larger fraudulence on the part of the government programs themselves. Discussion of the image was carried forward in newspapers, popular magazines, and cartoons.
Despite the attention the image received, however, the question of its documentary status has not yet been resolved. While public discussions ended with Roosevelt's re-election that year, the issues connected with the steer skull photograph have remained the subject of more general debate. Critical articles dealing with it in the context of journalism and visual media continue to arrive at different conclusions regarding its veracity—that is, whether it constitutes deliberately engineered propaganda or legitimate historical record.\textsuperscript{1} For this reason, the steer skull photography controversy provides an example of the ways in which the meaning of a photograph can be determined by the larger cultural contexts around it—in this case, by the extra-photographic narrative of America's history and economic development that it is viewed as either interrogating or misrepresenting. The controversies surrounding the steer skull images illustrate the complications inherent to photographic forms of evidence, and in so doing reveal the ambiguous nature of the stories that photographs tell.

As part of the Resettlement Administration's project to document America during the Depression, the steer skull image was used to illustrate the drought conditions prevalent in parts of the Midwest during the Dust Bowl. The Resettlement Administration was one of President Roosevelt's New Deal initiatives; it was intended to address America's ongoing agricultural crisis, particularly the problem of impoverished tenant farmers affected by widespread crop failure and government efforts to stabilize crop prices by limiting production. The solutions proposed by the Resettlement Administration were based on a comprehensive diagnosis of America's economic development and the excesses that had, in the view of the Administration, hindered agricultural production—that it was, amongst other things, caused by the unchecked expansion of farming to areas unsuited to sustained agricultural development, and that attempts to develop such land placed an unbearable strain on the environment, resulting in the loss of ecologically valuable woodlands, soil depletion, and water and soil erosion. Under the direction of Rexford Tugwell, the mandate of the Resettlement Administration was threefold: it would provide low-interest loans to impoverished farmers to help them relocate to better land; undertake large-scale conservation and reforestation projects; and finally resettle migrant farm workers in new communities.\textsuperscript{2}

Many of the policies of the Resettlement Administration had their basis in Tugwell's earlier studies of American economic history. He was a noted professor of Economics at Columbia University before joining the Roosevelt Administration; his chief work was \textit{American Economic Life and its Improvements}, a wide-ranging study of the nature of American economic development. One prominent theme in this work was that traditional farming practices were leading to agricultural and ecological disaster; the development of the American geography had been too haphazard and unsystematic, and that this led to the cultivation of areas unsuitable to agriculture. He argues that "we have lost immense areas of farming land through soil erosion. Prevention of further losses from this
cause would be the greatest single means of aiding agriculture: perhaps the greatest contribution to natural welfare which we could make” (232). After cataloging the damage done to various regions because of erosion, he notes that this problem “is one of those which can be solved only in part by individual initiative. For more complete control some sort of social action is necessary.” This is because small-scale farmers were generally unwilling to implement the kind of immense changes required to place their industry on a firmer financial basis: as Tugwell charges, they typically “want their occupation to be made profitable as it is; they do not want it changed” (238). Moreover, he asserts that the immediate economic pressures farmers experience often makes it very difficult for them to consider the long-term consequences of their actions: “[a] farmer who looks forward to a few years of tenancy, or to selling his holdings in the near future, will not be led, by his expectations of profits, to plant trees which require forty years to mature, nor to prevent erosion, which takes a generation to ruin his fields” (245).

Although in *American Economic Life* Tugwell does not overtly advocate direct government intervention in the agricultural sector, at many points he strongly alludes to the desirability and usefulness of such an approach. Much of the responsibility for the distressed state of farmland in the nation is ascribed to *laissez-faire* business practices that are especially evident here. Farming, he writes,

was and is organized according to the scheme of freedom of enterprise individually directed and independent of supervision from an authority higher than its owner. The exploitation of the land has gone on in this way so far without unbearable social penalties. But the applicability of the idea to agriculture has its obvious drawbacks from the social point of view. It seems strange that this industry, in which the social interest is so strong, should be so dedicated to individualism as to preclude any watching over its custody of our resources. There is no denying the backwardness of agriculture; there is no doubt that we know ways to improve it; there is no question that immense wastes take place which it is hard for the community to view indifferently. Yet an idea, a doctrine, stands quite solidly in our way. Never more than in the present. (248)

The implication is that American society’s celebration of the independent farmer as a heroic figure in the growth of the nation has stood in the way of rational approaches to land management. The problems confronting this industry, however, are such that some kind of concerted social and governmental action is required.

In *The Resettlement Administration* (1935), a publicity and information pamphlet published by the Resettlement Administration, many of Tugwell’s observations on the deplorable state of agriculture are presented as defining government policy. The pamphlet states as fact that the
crisis in American agriculture can be directly attributed to poor farming practices, and that it will only be resolved by a profound change in the way land is understood, distributed and developed:

The causes arise chiefly from three principal factors: (1) Mistaken policies of land settlement, especially the farming of marginal lands incapable of providing an adequate livelihood. (2) Reckless exploitation and exhaustion of lumbering, mining, and oil areas. (3) Overfarming and overgrazing policies, resulting in the destruction of millions of acres through wind or water erosion. As the inevitable result, three of the country’s most vital natural resources have suffered serious depredations during the past. A once immeasurable virgin forest has been destroyed in many parts of the country. The grass cover of the eastern range has been reduced to almost half its former value. Erosion and poor cropping have robbed the soil of much of its fertility. (2)

One proposed method of dealing with this crisis was to attempt a mammoth resettlement of American farmers to new communities in areas better suited to agriculture. The Resettlement Administration explains that “the land policy of the Resettlement Administration is to convert unprofitable land to profitable utilization, that is, to its best economic use.” This means that “[l]and suitable for grazing should be used for grazing, and not, for instance, for wheat growing.” Much of the land being farmed was to be given over to other non-agricultural uses. This report again stipulates that “[l]and purchased by the Administration will not lie idle. It will be used for such public purposes as forest, parks, recreational areas, wildlife sanctuaries, improved ranges, and Indian reservations” (6).

Many of the Resettlement Administration’s proposals were obviously controversial, especially in regions where land was designated as “marginal”; to rally public support for these initiatives Tugwell created the Historical Division. It was charged with the task of publicizing the Resettlement Administration’s efforts to help farmers, but also to alert Americans to the extent of the ecological damage that had occurred in rural America, and, by implication, to justify the government’s intervention in the agricultural sector. This division was placed under the direction of Roy Stryker, who studied under Tugwell as a graduate student at Columbia University. Stryker was very interested in the power of photography to illustrate or dramatize ideas; he regularly used photographs in his own teaching and had assembled the illustrations and photographs for American Economic Life. Both Tugwell and Stryker believed that the potential of photography to build consensus had yet to be fully realized: Stryker was commissioned to assemble a team of photographers whose mandate would be to travel throughout America collecting photographic evidence of economic and environmental damage, and also to document the ways in which the Resettlement Administration was meeting these challenges.5
In organizing this unit, Stryker took a strong hand in directing the photographers he hired. The project was based on a very developed theory of the nature and function of documentary photography. Stryker later wrote the entry on “documentary photography” for The Encyclopedia of Photography, where he explains the kinds of truths that he understood documentary photography as being capable of communicating. Here he asserts that documentary photography is distinguished by a concern with actuality as opposed to illusion: “the ‘documentarians’ differ from strictly pictorial photographers chiefly in the degree and the quality of their love for life. They insist that life as it is being lived daily everywhere... is so exciting that it needs no embellishment” (1364). The documentarian accordingly was a “realist rather than an escapist” (1368). The reality that they are to document—what Stryker terms the “truth” of documentary photography—does not consist in their correspondence to a situation, but rather in their capacity to reveal a larger truth that informs the situation that is itself only intermittently apparent. In discussing documentary techniques, Stryker refers to this truth as a “fleeting face” (1372)—that is, a momentary revelation of the larger reality of which a particular image constitutes an instance.

In order for the photographer to create such an image, it is of course necessary that he or she possess a thorough knowledge of the social reality that is being photographed. To this end, Stryker assigned all members of his division lengthy reading lists that included studies of North American culture, history, geology and economics, which focused primarily on the regions to which photographers were to be assigned. He also provided them with very detailed instructions, or, as he called them, “shooting scripts,” describing the kinds of photographs in which he was interested.6 These scripts were based on Stryker’s assumptions about rural and small-town life generally, as well as upon his own academic study of American economics.7 For the Midwestern photographs, Stryker was especially interested in images of drought and soil erosion, which would provide evidence of land mismanagement. Such images were intended to help to make the government case that the land was being destroyed by over-farming and that agricultural practices needed to be drastically overhauled. He assigned Arthur Rothstein, one of the most prolific photographers to work for the Historical Division, to photograph the Midwestern region for this purpose.

In South Dakota, Rothstein took the steer skull photos, and sent five negatives, each showing the steer skull in different locations, to the Resettlement Administration offices in Washington. Of the photographs that were taken, the published version most clearly exemplifies the agricultural and ecological conditions that Stryker instructed his photographers to document. The image consists of the skull perched upright on parched and cracked earth, its eye sockets facing the viewer. The skull occupies the mid-left section of the photograph, and its shadow, which is larger than the skull itself, is cast over the center of the image. The skull
itself is an image of death—its shadow extending over the ruined land renders it apocalyptic in implication, showing the earth to be under the dominion of death (figure 3.1).

The steer skull photograph makes a powerful visual argument that strongly accords with the policies of the Resettlement Administration: it illustrates in vivid detail the devastation caused by farming agriculturally marginal areas, and asserts the need for a fundamentally different approach to agriculture in America. In addition to following Stryker’s directives for the photographers working for the Historical Division, this image also exemplifies Rothstein’s own principles of documentary photography. In an article on documentary photography that Rothstein later wrote for *The Complete Photographer*, he echoes Stryker’s remarks on the power of photography to render the truth of situations, and argues emphatically that photographs are uniquely capable of communicating complex narratives and conveying precise meanings. He also discusses some of the ways in which the working photographer should approach particular assignments.

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*Figure 3.1* “The bleached skull of a steer on the dry sun-baked earth of the South Dakota Badlands” Library of Congress, FSA/OWI Collection LC-DIG-fsa-8b27761.
One important quality of a good documentary photograph, he argues, is to focus the viewer on the essential elements of a scene to convey a specific, lucid understanding of the situation being represented:

The seemingly non-objective use of the camera is better appreciated when one realizes that the lens of the camera is, in effect, the eye of the person looking at the print. This means that the photographer must understand how the person looking at a picture will react to the subject.... With proper direction, a camera can remove the superfluous and focus the attention of the spectator in such a way that only the significant and characteristic aspects of a situation are seen. Provided the results are a faithful reproduction of what the photographer believes he sees, whatever takes place in the making of the picture is justified. (1357)

In his discussion of the ways in which a photograph can be made to communicate a precise meaning, Rothstein also notes the importance of using objects or "props" to convey a specific message:

Props are often essential in producing a picture that has story-telling qualities. In this case, I apply the term "prop" to a landscape as well as a small object. Backgrounds used with proper direction create visual images requiring a minimum of explanation and carrying a clear and definite meaning. This becomes particularly important in the illustration of an abstract idea. (1358)

The skull and the parched terrain in the steer skull photograph are "props" that provide the image with a clear illustration of the dangers of soil erosion, which an audience could be expected to easily grasp. The presence of a steer skull in such an inhospitable setting suggests that the land had once been grass-covered, but had been brought to its present condition through overgrazing, thereby presenting an unmistakable argument regarding the consequences of inappropriate use of ecologically sensitive geographies. As such, it constitutes one episode in the comprehensive thesis being constructed by the Resettlement Administration.

The initial reception of the photograph was very positive. Stryker congratulated Rothstein on the image, and it appeared in numerous newspapers as illustrative of the drought conditions in the Midwest. The image also, however, became a focal point for critics of New Deal initiatives. The authenticity of the photograph was first questioned in an editorial in the Fargo Forum. The Forum editor, Happy Paulson, was unaware at that time that a series of photographs existed showing the skull in different locations. His objections instead focused on the fact that the photograph depicted the conditions in the Dakotas as being worse than they actually were. The paper specifically charged that the photograph was misleading on two accounts. First, the steer skull was photographed on an alkali flat,
which is a topographical feature common to the region and not indicative of drought. The editor wrote: "[t]here was never a year that this scene couldn’t be produced in North Dakota, even in years when rainfall levels were far above normal" (quoted in Curtis 73). Secondly, Paulson argued, such skulls were also common features in this region, that cattle died from a number of causes, and that it was again in no way indicative of drought. He described the skull as "a movable prop, which comes in handy for photographers who want to touch up their pictures with a bit of the grisly" (quoted in Curtis 75). These charges were soon picked up by other newspapers and amplified. As the Chicago Tribune commented:

Now, “Happy” Paulson has spent his life on the range and he knows a bovine skull when he sees one. [...] He noted at once that this whitened skull was not that of a cow that died in this drought or any recent drought or perhaps any drought at all. It was just one of those skulls with which the range has been littered for decades. (quoted in Finnegan, “Naturalistic Enthymeme” 138)

Paulson’s reactions to the photograph here are significant because they illustrate the grounds upon which it was being challenged. The justification for the Resettlement Administration’s policies was its expert understanding of American horticulture, geography and ecology. Paulson, however, claimed first-hand, experiential knowledge of the region, which he considered more accurate than the scientific expertise of government officials. These attitudes informed the different evidentiary standards that the Resettlement Administration and its critics each expected to be applied both to the agricultural crisis and its photographic documentation. Stryker’s photographers were supplied with a general thesis regarding American agricultural practices and the regions to which they were assigned, and then instructed to seek images that would substantiate that thesis. From this perspective, the truth of the photograph consisted in its ability to reflect the larger realities informing the situation. For the opponents of these initiatives, however, who rejected the Resettlement Administration’s overarching thesis, the photograph was evaluated according to how exactly it reflected existing realities. Paulson’s objections to the photograph were based upon personal observations: that it did not factually document drought conditions, and that therefore its assertion was false.\footnote{11}

When multiple photographs showing the steer skull in different locations were subsequently discovered in the Resettlement Administration archives in Washington, the question of government fakery took on added urgency—especially as one of them showed a grassy field and grazing cattle behind the barren flat that frames the skull, which seemed to confirm the charge that the photographers working for the Resettlement Administration were indeed selecting images that were not objective nor representative, but which were intended to substantiate the Administration’s
arguments regarding problems with American agricultural practices. As the controversy grew, the supposed trickery involved in the photograph was argued to be symptomatic of larger deceptions that were endemic to the New Deal itself. Expanding upon the criticism of the *Forum*, the Erie, Pennsylvania *Dispatch-Herald* wrote:

The revelation that Dr. Rex Tugwell’s "Resettlement Administration," the principle socialistic experiment of the New Deal, has been guilty of...flagrantly faked "drought" pictures, designed to give the public an exaggerated idea of the amount of damage done by the lack of rainfall, is a highly instructive but not especially surprising development.

The whole resettlement program is a ghastly fake, based upon fake ideas, and what is more natural than that it should be promoted by fake methods similar to those used by ordinary confidence men. (quoted in Hurley 90)

Rather than merely questioning the authenticity of this single photograph, then, the paper used this image to suggest that the New Deal initiatives themselves were fraudulent, and specifically that the Resettlement Administration was taking advantage of the economic and agricultural crises to institute reforms that, in its view, were socialistic in inspiration and went far beyond immediate needs.

In this debate, the question of land use and the government's role in directing development became a central point of contention between the Resettlement Administration and its opponents. Much Resettlement Administration policy was based on the idea that the condition of the human population was intimately tied to that of the land, and Administration literature generally underscored this relationship. As briefly noted above, Tugwell's *American Economic Life* ascribes the dismal condition of American rural life to the nation's commitment to heroic individualism:

One fundamental ideal or principle of social philosophy which influences legislatures and the general public in considerable degree is that of freedom—individual liberty. This ideal is particularly in accord with our American traditions and it is surrounded by no small amount of emotional glamour; in fact it have been identified closely with patriotism and ideal itself. (639)

He argues, however, that this ideal was developed in the eighteenth-century, when "outworn and irksome regulations...hampered industry" (639). In the present age, this ideal is no longer relevant: "individualism is inconsistent with the whole mechanizing movement of the age" and advanced industry "demands, in short, the development of a social machine coordinate with the development of machines of steel" (644). Reliance on such notions is "fundamentally a surrender to the blind forces of nature. It
is an admission that man is, so far, incapable of directing economic and social progress as a whole" (646).

The human costs of this individualistic approach to development, moreover, are argued to be high. As the informational pamphlet Resettlement Administration maintains, life in ecologically impoverished areas results in an equivalent intellectual and cultural poverty:

The worst areas of submarginal lands are rightly called rural slums.... Housing is poor—old log cabins or ramshackle frame build-
ings with leaky roofs. Modern sanitary conveniences are unknown. The food supply frequently consists merely of corn products and pork, with a little sirup [sic] for sweetening. Tattered and worn cloth-ing and the lack of sufficient furnishings are further evidence of sub-
marginal living. Children are weak and undernourished. They lack normal educational and recreational opportunities. (13–14)

Because the health of both the people and the land is a matter of national urgency, however, it is necessary for the government to take a stronger role in shaping development. In the context of this debate, the image of the steer skull represents the ultimate failure of this whole system of economic development. It stands as a warning of the kind of ecological and cultural decline that would be produced by continued reliance on outmoded models of growth.

From the perspective of New Deal critics, the real danger confronting the nation resided precisely in the solutions being proposed by the Resettlement Administration. Images such as the steer skull were propaganda designed to create a false sense of urgency that would compel the public to support government incursions into the economy which were unnecessary and which would prove harmful. In its coverage of the steer skull scandal, the Fargo Forum directly addressed concerns that these images were being used to justify massive changes in the American society and economy:

It [is] difficult to accept the extremist view that thousands upon thousands of people in the Middlewest must be resettled, and that a vast acreage in hitherto great producing States should be retired permanently from agricultural use. It has been a costly theory to experiment with as the records thus far show. (quoted in Finnegan, “Naturalistic Enthymeme” 139)

The issue of contention in the states affected was that government-sponsored solutions effectively required the dismantling of the economic infrastructure of much of the Midwest. Removing farmers and converting farmland to parks or recreational areas would, of course, damage the economy and culture of the Midwestern states, and as such obviously threatened the inhabitants of the affected regions in fundamental ways.
Moreover, such recommendations were generally believed to be motivated less by immediate agricultural and ecological concerns than by a political desire to force the nation to adopt collectivist practices that were more socialistic than most Americans would normally accept. By making the photograph the focal point in their attacks on the administration, New Deal opponents attempted to redefine the narrative context of the image, changing its meaning by challenging the Resettlement Administration’s larger narrative construction. Rather than substantiating assertions of soil erosion due to land mismanagement, critics made it part of a counter-narrative of political conspiracy, in which farmers would be removed from their properties and compelled to follow strictly mandated land-use policies. In this context, the steer skull photo was viewed as evidence of what many inhabitants of troubled regions saw as a general assault on the traditional, rural way of life.

Political events prevented the steer skull debate from reaching any conclusion. To a large extent, the campaign against the photograph and the Resettlement Administration was made an election issue, and Roosevelt’s reelection in 1936 dulled attacks. Following the election, institutional changes within the government also reassured some New Deal critics. The Resettlement Administration, which had been created as an independent agency acting under presidential order, was incorporated into the Department of Agriculture; the organization itself was renamed the Farm Security Administration; and Tugwell, who had been the target of great deal of suspicion and criticism, resigned. As well, Stryker’s Historical Division managed to contain damages from the negative publicity: Stryker successfully persuaded the influential New York Tribune that his Division did not routinely fake photographs, and it in turn retracted its charges of fraud (although other newspapers did not follow suit). Finally, later editorial treatments of the controversy further blunted specific criticisms. One editorial cartoon showed Rothstein as a comical figure traveling the country with the steer skull, photographing it on golf course greens filled with divots and in front of the Grand Canyon, and as presenting these places as examples of soil erosion (Rothstein, “The Picture that became a Campaign Issue” 42). This humorous representation depicts Rothstein as opportunistic and foolish, but by doing so minimized the claims of government conspiracy—the photograph is made the result of one man’s misunderstanding of complex problems, not part of any larger plot. Other commentators tended to interpret the whole episode as indicative of the state of the nation. While reiterating the charge that the photograph was deliberately faked, the conservative columnist Westbrook Pegler, for example, contextualized this fakery as typical of the generally low state of politics in America: “It wasn’t the photographer’s fault that we demand hokum in our pictures as well as in our oratory and politics and it probably was no fun to go clattering around the country lugging a cow skull along with his suitcase and all the gadgets and traps which a photographer has to carry in his line of work” (quoted in Rothstein, “Campaign Issue” 79).
Despite diminishing in political importance, the debate generated by the steer skull photographs had a lasting impact on those involved. Although Rothstein avoided commenting while the image of the skull was the subject of national attention, he did address the controversy on several occasions many years later. His various accounts of the image’s origin further complicate the photographs’ historical and cultural significance. In a 1961 interview with *Popular Photography*, Rothstein provided an explanation that confirmed his assignment to the Dakotas—the documentation of soil erosion:

After leaving the Dust Bowl I went north to the Dakotas where I took the picture that was to figure in the election campaign of 1936. It was dry there too, for there had been little snow and even less rain. The Federal Government was buying the Bad Lands for a national park. There was no water for livestock, and the bones and skulls of many animals could be seen around dried-up water holes on the parched pasture lands. (43)

In a later interview with Bill Ganzel in *Exposure*, however, Rothstein provided a number of additional details, asserting that the meaning the photographs assumed in the 1936 election was an unintentional consequence of bureaucratic mismanagement:

What I had done, see, was that I was driving through South Dakota in the Badlands area and I found this place that looked so interesting—the sunlight, and the skull, and the cracked dirt—and I started playing around—you know, like an artist photographer would. And I took pictures of the skull with the light this way and the shadows this way. And I dragged it over about 10 feet to a clump of cactus and took it with the cactus, and so forth. And I did this in the spring, in May, before there was a drought. But the pictures were in the file—in the government files in Washington. In July, when there was a severe drought, a picture editor for the Associated Press by the name of Max Hill (who had never been out west) saw this picture and said, “Ah, this is the symbol of the drought.” So he sent it out and syndicated it all over the country. And of course it was wrong. It was something that you could find any time of the year. And so everyone accused me of being a fraud—a Hollywood cameraman. (3)

Here Rothstein represents the skull photographs as an artistic experiment unrelated to the project of documenting the environmental crisis affecting the Midwest. That the photograph was later used as evidence of the drought is blamed on an editor who had no first-hand knowledge of the region and who leapt to conclusions out of ignorance.14

The account in Rothstein’s *Exposure* interview is implausible on many fronts. Rothstein was clearly recorded as being on assignment to document
soil erosion in the Midwest, and it is unlikely that he would have sent photographs to the Resettlement Administration offices that were merely experimental aesthetic exercises. This is confirmed by Stryker's initial reaction to the image, which he saw as depicting drought: in a letter to Rothstein about the image, he congratulated the photographer and encouraged him "to pick up drought pictures wherever you see them" (quoted in Curtis 75); Rothstein did not correct nor protest Stryker's comments. Moreover, in his *Popular Photography* interview, he mentions that the photograph was released when, as he states, the "drought became worse" (43), implying that he was in fact deliberately photographing drought conditions. Even if the photographs were intended simply to illustrate regional soil erosion, they would still prove misleading, as the alkali flat on which he placed the skull was not created by overgrazing or drought.

Rothstein's changing accounts of the photographs can only be explained speculatively. One possibility, however, is that they were motivated by an awareness of the changing standards for documentary photography. For Stryker and Rothstein, during the time of their involvement with the Historical Division, the manipulation of subjects was considered acceptable in documentary photography, as long as the information conveyed by the final image was true. As Rothstein notes in the *Popular Photography* interview, many newspapers had used the steer skull photograph as "a symbol of the drought's effects" (43). For later documentary photographs, however, more stringent standards of accuracy were applied, and from a journalistic perspective any physical manipulation of a scene being photographed would be considered unethical. The *Exposure* interview can be read as Rothstein's attempts to align his behavior with these standards. In doing so, he paradoxically adopts many of the positions and argumentative techniques of his earlier critics. He describes himself as knowing the Badlands through personal experience and as realizing that this photograph could have been easily taken at any time in this region. Furthermore, he attributes the error to an editor without first-hand knowledge of the area, reiterating the very charges made against him and the Resettlement Administration—that many of its initiatives were based on minimal experience of the geographies they claimed to understand and were accordingly of little value. Rothstein's appropriation of Paulson's perspective parallels critiques of the New Deal project, but may in fact be motivated by a desire to align his behavior with the emerging standards of photojournalism.

While the challenges mounted by opponents of the FSA disrupted the photograph's narrative meaning, they also made its interpretive history a rich ground for surveying changing political, social and cultural assumptions. Throughout the controversy, the steer skull photographs were used to substantiate a number of multiple, competing narratives—stories of ecological devastation, government conspiracy, political turpitude, and finally bureaucratic ineptitude and misunderstood artistic experimentation. The debate surrounding the photograph itself centered on issues of visual
manipulation and the evidentiary value of photography, but underlying this were fundamentally different attitudes regarding the government's role in American economic life and the extent to which agriculture and other industries should be regulated. These narratives were also informed by the personal needs and ambitions of the figures involved. Each of these competing claims has added levels of complication and ambiguity to the stories the photographs tell. Because many of the issues involved have yet to be resolved to general satisfaction, the photographs remain controversial. That these photographs could accommodate so many competing narratives, however, exemplifies the problematic nature of documentary photography in general: a photograph is given meaning by the master narrative in which it is included, but as this narrative is challenged, revised and augmented the meaning of the photograph is as well.

Notes

1. For discussions of the steer skull photograph that consider its validity as a documentary photograph see Becker; Curtis; Finnegar, "The Naturalistic Enthyememe and Visual Culture"; Goldberg; Huang; O'Neill and Stott. Although most commentators consider Rothstein's manipulations as acceptable within the conventions of documentary practice, some find them unethical or believe that the use to which the photograph was put by the Resettlement Administration violated the standards for documentary photography.

2. For histories of the Resettlement Administration see Baldwin and Conkin. For general discussions of the photographic project carried forward by the Historical Section see Curtis; Finnegar, Picturing Poverty; Guimond; Hurley; Lesy; Levine; O'Neal; Stange and Stott.

3. The final chapter of Tugwell's textbook focuses on the use of cooperative approaches to farming and industry as an antidote to traditionally individualistic approaches. While assiduously avoiding such terms as "collective," he discusses the possibility of formally implementing practices to be based on regulated forms of community "cooperation."

4. Curtis summarizes Tugwell's basic approach: he "believed that worn-out soil was a major source of agrarian poverty; he hoped to identify submarginal land and then resettle its inhabitants on more productive soil and in progressive agricultural communities" (9). As Curtis also notes, such an agenda obviously disturbed New Deal critics, who feared that these policies would result in the destruction of traditional farming practices and communities.

5. For more on how these images were circulated, see Trachtenberg.

6. Stryker's entry, "Documentary Photography," in Encyclopedia of Photography, elaborates upon this approach; for further description of Stryker's working methods see Hurley 56–60; Curtis 5–20; Finnegar, Picturing Poverty 36–56; and Kidd.

7. For examples of Stryker's assigned readings and shooting scripts, see Lesy, 114–27 and 224–35.

8. Finnegar describes the way the steer skull photograph corresponds to the guidelines provided by Stryker in "The Naturalistic Enthyememe," 145.

9. Curtis notes that the image of animal skulls and skeletons is anticipated in much Resettlement Administration material: a standard geographic text that Stryker assigned to all of his photographers was J. Russell Smith's North America, which included photographs of cattle skeletons on the Prairies; these images were used as an example of the cold soaking of livestock and as such illustrated the problems of adapting certain kinds farming to the prairie environment. Curtis also notes that another source for the image was the documentary film The Plow That Broke the Plains, another work completed under the auspices of the Resettlement Administration; it includes many similar images of devastation, in this case ascribed to poor farming practices.

10. For more specifics on opposition to New Deal initiatives and the Resettlement Administration, see Baldwin.
11. Huang examines the different theories of photographic objectivity that were brought to bear on the steer skull photograph in further detail.

12. In his study of Stryker’s administration, Kidd notes that a general theme was the close relationship between a people and a region: there was, he writes, the “awful clamor...of the agency that these should be taken wherever possible, showing the relationship of the land to the cultural decay” (67).

13. Baldwin observes that “the Republican National Committee accused the Roosevelt administration of sponsoring farm communities that were ‘communist in conception’ and went on to charge that, ‘President Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration is establishing...communal farms which follow the Russian pattern’” (115). Conkin’s study provides a comprehensive overview of the resettlement program from its inception to its collapse, and specifically addresses Tugwell’s collectivist orientation in some depth.

14. In *Photojournalism*, Rothstein provides a brief account of the steer skull photographs that corresponds with that supplied in *Exposure*; in *Words and Pictures* he includes an interview with Richard Doud that also reiterates his explanation in *Exposure*.

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**Works Cited**


Trachtenberg, Alan. "From Image to Story." Fleischhauer and Brannan. 43–73.