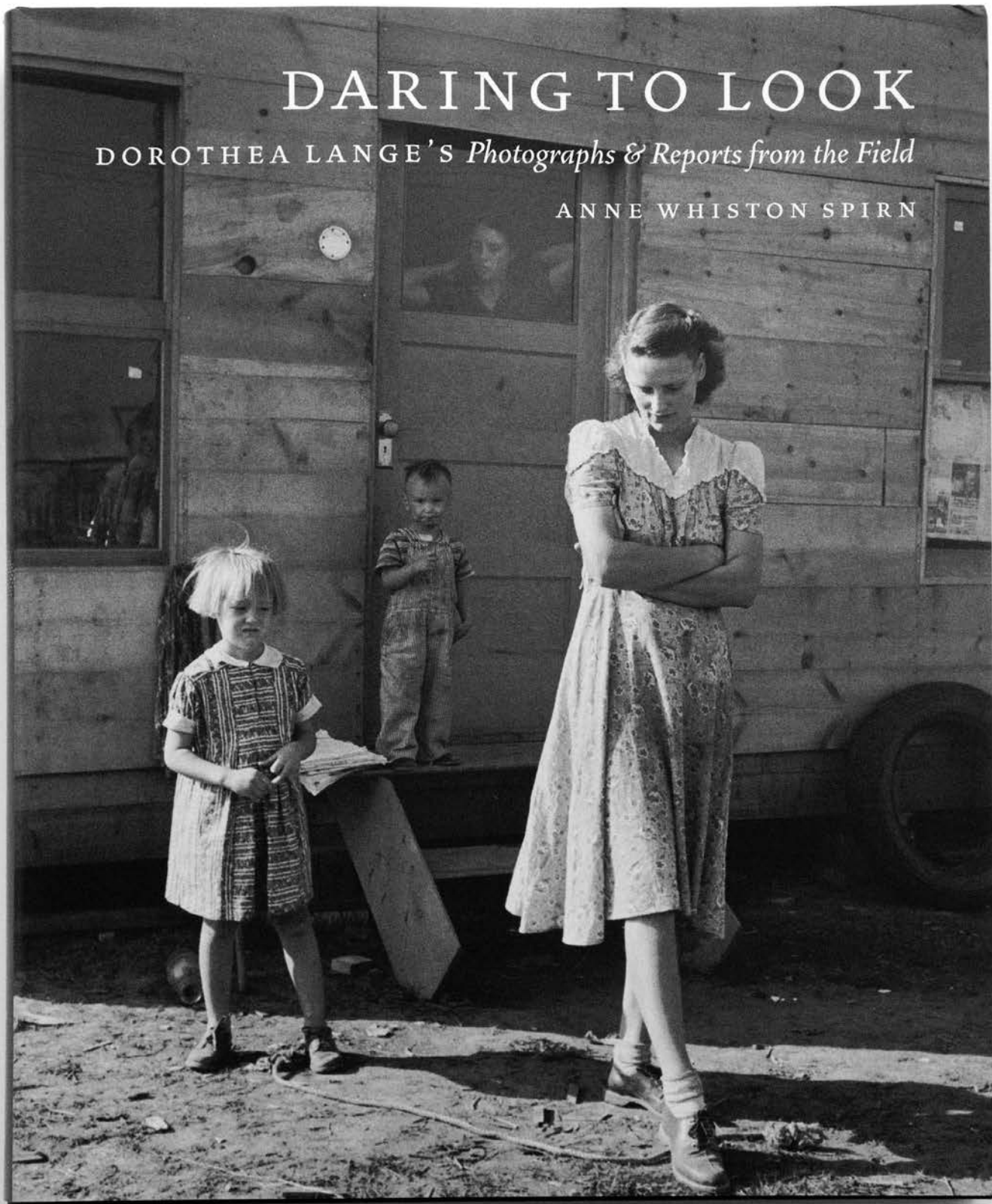


DARING TO LOOK

DOROTHEA LANGE'S *Photographs & Reports from the Field*

ANNE WHISTON SPIRN



2008

Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field

Honor Award,
American Society of
Landscape Architects,
2011

**Great Place Book
Award,** Environmental
Design Research
Association, 2009

**John Brinckerhoff
Jackson Book
Prize,** Foundation for
Landscape Studies, 2009

**Finalist, Art Book
Award,** Art Historian
Association, 2009

**Honorable Mention,
PROSE Award,**
American Association of
Publishers, 2008

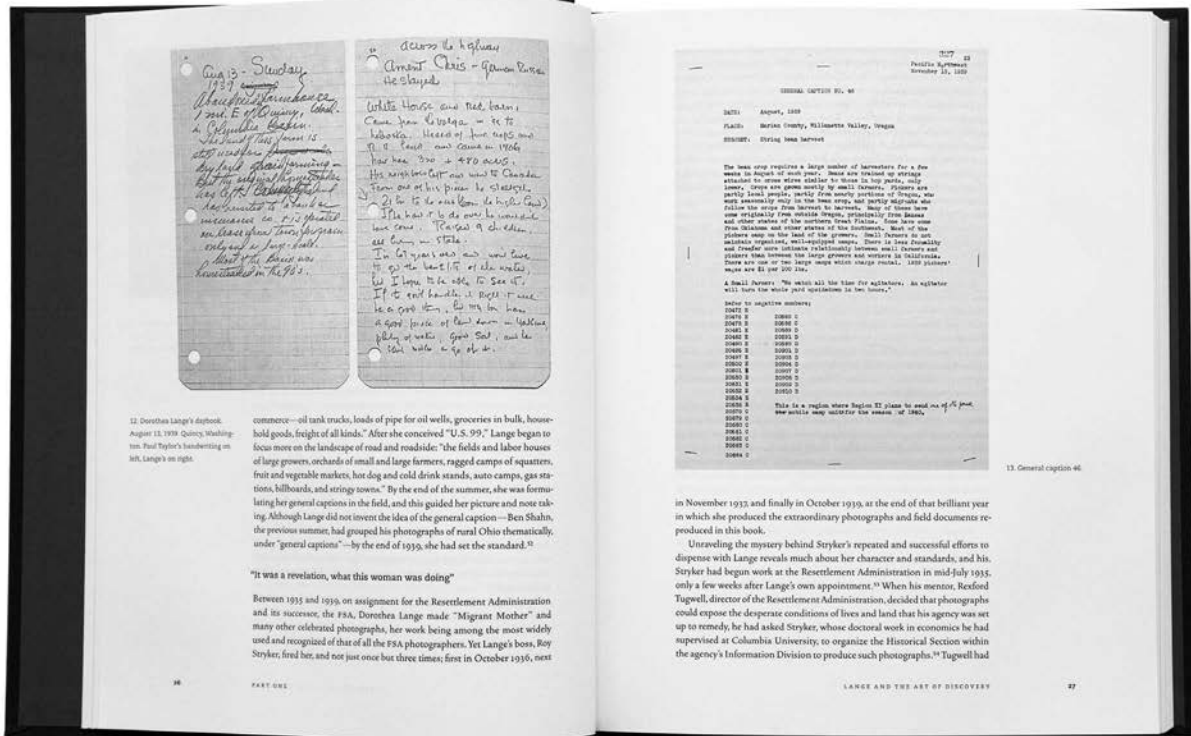
"*Daring to Look* exemplifies Spirn's particular combination of genius, hard work and humility. The idea of following up on Dorothea Lange's field notes, and revisiting and re-photographing the places Lange made into icons of the depression years is ingenious, so simple that one wonders why no one thought of it before, and brilliant because no one has... By mobilizing the passage of time in *Daring to Look*, the book brings out the artistic power of Lange's eye for the landscape and the society shaping it, and the continuing relevancy of Lange's insights as refocused through Spirn's own lens."

KENNETH OLWIG, Professor, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Daring to Look presents never-before-published texts and photographs by the great American photographer, Dorothea Lange. Her images and words of 1939 are a mirror that reflects who we were, how we came to be, and what we were in the process of becoming. In them, one can perceive practices and policies of the past as the roots of today's environmental challenges. "No country has ever closely scrutinized itself visually," Lange said at the end of her life, "I know what we could make of it if people only thought we could dare look at ourselves." Lange did dare to look, and she raised questions that demand answering, still.

Lange ranks among the greatest American photographers, but, until now, her rich architecture and landscape material was virtually unpublished. She has been known almost solely as a photographer of people. Yet, in almost half of the photographs Lange took in 1939, no people appear at all. "Nobody ever gave me any credit for making any landscapes," she declared in 1964. "I did make landscapes, loads of them!" Lange photographed landscape in the original and most profound sense of the word, in the mutual shaping of people and place.

This book is the first to restore Lange's work to its full context by reproducing the text of her field reports (which she called general captions) together with the images she captured on film. Collectively, Lange's words and images reveal her ambition: to document "people in their relations to their institutions, to their fellowmen, and to the land."



Lange made notes in the field, then transformed them later into stories, which she linked to her photographs.

Daring to Look has won awards from diverse organizations: EDRA recognized it as a book that “advances critical understanding of place and helps foster the design of excellent environments”; the Foundation for Landscape Studies honored it for its basis “on original research” and for “breaking new ground in method or interpretation,” and the American Association of Publishers for its excellence in scholarship. The book has reached a broad audience, including the entire freshman class of Bryant University who read it for a course required of all freshmen.

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214147 October 13, 1939
Walheur County, Oregon
Mrs. Clower, is raising 7 boys on new Walheur County farm.
See Office Note in File.

214155 October 13, 1939
Walheur County, Oregon
George Clower, who is trying to develop 177 acres of raw land. Has 7 sons. See Office Note in File.

21416 Subject
21417 "
21418 "
21419 "
21420 "

21422 October 14, 1939
Tyssa, Walheur County, Oregon
See GENERAL CLIPPER St. Po. Sign on old bank building which now houses the office of the Bureau of Reclamation.

214222 Same as 214212

214232 October 13, 1939
Walheur County, Oregon
One of the younger Clower boys. See Office Note in File.

214242 Subject
21425 "

214262 October 13, 1939
Walheur County, Oregon
See GENERAL CLIPPER St. Po. Side of the Clower's new house.
See Office Note in File.

21427 Subject
21428 "

214297 October 13, 1939
Tyssa, Walheur County, Oregon
Storage cellar on Clower farm. Note inscription on top step.
See Office Report in File.

21430 Subject
21431 "

214322 October 13, 1939
Tyssa, Walheur County, Oregon
Interior of Mrs. Clower's storage cellar. 800 yards of "feed for the winter." "I miss my children so but we're just not used for children or boys yet." See Office Report in File.

214332 October 13, 1939
Tyssa, Walheur County, Oregon
Mrs. Clower arranging her storage cellar. See Office Report in File.

214342 Subject

214352 October 13, 1939
1 mile north of Tyssa, Walheur County, Oregon
Country summer house for use of farmers.

In 2006, I revisited all the places that Lange worked in 1939 and met some of the people she photographed. I assembled notebooks that contained all 3,000 of the photographs Lange took in 1939, along with her captions, and carried these with me in the field.

Lange used her camera as "a tool of research." To accomplish this, she grouped photographs by subject, then cross-referenced and "buttressed" them with words. She first developed the general caption in 1939 as a framework within which to cross-list individual photographs and field notes and give them context. Each stands as a portrait of a moment, a place, a group of people, a theme; together, they paint a portrait of rural land and society in America and of the forces transforming them at the height of the Great Depression. In all these places, Lange saw and recorded the processes reshaping American lives and landscapes.

Daring to Look has three parts: an analysis of Lange's innovations and methods and their significance, Lange's groupings of images and words, and an account of my own journey to all the places she portrayed in 1939 and what I found there.



175 October 14, 1939. Nyssa, Multnomah County, Oregon. Sign on old bank building which now houses the office of the Bureau of Reclamation.

174 May 17, 2005. Nyssa, Oregon. Building is now office of the Owyhee Irrigation District. Anne Whiston Spong.

In Nyssa, Oregon, I found the faded mural that Lange had photographed in 1939. But where businesses were thriving in 1939, many were failing in 2005.

Lange's words and photographs speak eloquently to the present, for the forces she saw and recorded in 1939 are still in play, of that particular moment, but not of a moment only. In my travels to the places she photographed in 1939, I found much that was different, but also much that was the same. Her images have past sources and future manifestations. They reveal the heartrending consequences of shifts in jobs and decline in industry and their impact on the environment, the human stress of migration and resettlement. They show that all large-scale events, policies, and plans have a human face. 'If you see mainly massed human misery in my photographs and decry the selection of so much suffering,' Lange wrote, 'I have failed to show the multiform pattern of which it is a reflection. For the havoc before your eyes is the result of both natural and social forces. These are my times, and they, too, are my theme,' she said. They are mine as well, which is what drew me to Dorothea Lange, to her "lost" photographs and texts, and led me to revisit all the places where she worked in 1939: to discover what the changes between then and now might reveal about the nation.

Most of the stump farms Lange photographed in 1939 are second-growth forest now. Many lasted thirty years or less. Driving north in remote northern Idaho, from Sandpoint to Bonner's Ferry, I pass many guest ranches, including one near where Mr. Denchow, a former mill worker, was clearing stumps in 1939 (figure 135). This transition from farming to vacation spot began in the early 1940s. Nelle Portey Davis reported in *Stump Ranch Pioneer* that, by 1942, few drought refugees remained here; many had abandoned their stump farms for jobs in munitions factories and shipyards. Others came and bought land, but they were mostly middle-aged city folk, "mechanics, truck drivers, office workers, and miners," who bought, then returned to their city jobs with the prospect of retiring some day to this new land. When Davis and her husband sold their stump farm in the 1940s, they moved further north, near the Canadian border, and bought a guest ranch.¹⁶ Even before I reached Sandpoint, former home of the Humboldt Lumber Company and now looking relatively prosperous, I noted that the shores of Lake Pend Oreille are lined with large vacation homes. Sandpoint is a tourist destination, and Priest Lake, north of where the Halleys cleared their farm, is "a premier vacation destination" with "spectacular scenery, unlimited recreational opportunities, a true year-round resort region for both business and pleasure," according to the Priest Lake Web site.¹⁷ Signs in Sandpoint list the town's population as 6,835 and caution: "Sandpoint is a walking town. Please stay for people in crosswalks."

In Michigan Hill, Thurston County, Washington, where the Arnolds cleared their stump farm back in 1939, the woods are at least thirty years old, possibly forty (figures 123–125, 184, 185). There are few farms now, and I saw no guest farms like those in the Idaho panhandle. Trees have sprung up around barns; old trailers, ramshackle houses, and sheds remain. Dozens of No Trespassing signs are posted, sometimes three or four in a single driveway, perhaps to warn off hunters (there is also a No Hunting sign). There are lots of for sale signs too: land for sale, old farm houses, and a few new houses. Despite Michigan Hill's location, about twenty-five miles south of the state capital in Olympia, it does not appear to be thriving. Lending money to people to resettle on infertile land or on farms too small to support a family did not abolish rural poverty.

Down the road from the former sites of government-sponsored family labor camps, such as the one Lange photographed in Oregon's Yamhill County, are modern-day rural shacks with dilapidated cars parked alongside decrepit shacks (figure 116). Building labor camps with improved housing, medical clinics, and day care had met the immediate emergency but failed to address the causes of problems migrant agricultural workers faced; hence, unpredictable and short-term employment, hazardous work, and child labor persist today.¹⁸ As Lange observed in the early 1960s, the conditions of "migratory labor" she photographed in the 1930s persisted twenty-five years later: "I might have made [these photographs] yesterday. This is a mighty interesting thing. Not many things don't change in twenty years, not many things."¹⁹



184. August 14, 1939, Michigan Hill, Thurston Co., Western Washington. 184. Shows land which the Arnold family have cleared and planted in strawberries, fence which they have built, unexcused land adjoining.

185. May 15, 2005, Michigan Hill, Thurston County, Washington. Land reclaimed by forest. Anne Whiston Spirn.



Above Farms that had been laboriously cleared and planted in the cut-over forests of eastern Washington in 1939, were reclaimed by forest by 2005.

Following pages Lange is regarded as a photographer of people, but I discovered that, in 1939, almost half of her photographs were of architecture and landscapes, with no people at all. These three photographs of northern Idaho are part of a much longer series.

"Dorothea Lange is one of America's greatest documentary photographers. *Daring to Look* is a very important book. It provides a fascinating insight into her FSA photographs and writings during that time. Ms. Lange's photographs, especially the work she did for the FSA were a great inspiration for so many photographers, including myself." **MARY ELLEN MARK**, photographer

"As a historian, the first aspect of the book that leaps out at me is the thorough and imaginative research in a variety of sources and the broad contextualization in both public policy and social and economic history. The other aspect that leaps out simultaneously ... is just how beautifully it is produced. It is such a pleasure just to hold and look through. Anne Whiston Spirn's introduction makes Lange come alive, places her in her time, and just skewers those who would diminish her achievements.... And the end, returning to find the places she photographed, was a brilliant idea, and Spirn draws the circle with great sensitivity."

MICHAEL KATZ, Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History, University of Pennsylvania





130. October 22, 1939. Bonner County, Idaho.
Shows character of land which new settlers
are buying in the Priest River Valley.

132. (Facing, bottom) October 22, 1939.
Priest River Peninsula, Bonner County,
Idaho. Shows log home. Farm established
6 years ago.

131. (Above) October 21, 1939. Bonner County,
Idaho. This farm has been occupied by four
different families since 1936:

Claude Sargeant '36-37 failed
Lenny Davis '38 failed
Roy Silton '38-39 failed
Davy Walker '39

The soil is sandy and the effort of clearing
has been wasted.



Interactive online maps display the locations where Lange took her photographs of 1939. Other pages permit visitors to compare views of then and now.

A website, www.daringtolook.com provides a window into Dorothea Lange's 1939 work and the fate of the places she photographed. "Lange" offers audio clips of Lange discussing her approach to photography. "1939" shows photographs for every day Lange was in the field during that year. "Stories" displays a selection of Lange's General Captions about places and families, along with my stories of those families and places today. "Then and Now" compares Lange's photographs of 1939 with the same people and places today. The website has expanded the audience further, especially among youth, like the high school junior from Maryland who emailed on January 31, 2011:

"I was so moved by this website that I had to write to you. I just wanted to say thank you so much for doing such important work. It is really inspiring—this website is beautiful and was incredibly helpful for my research project on social boundaries and quandaries during the thirties. I was surprised to read that we share all of these interests—photography, but also environmental design and urban design. I am considering both as a major for undergrad!
Your fan, Zane"

DARING TO LOOK

DOROTHEA LANGE's *Photographs & Reports from the Field*

[LANGE](#)
THE PHOTOGRAPHER


[1939](#)
A FORTUNE TELLER


[STORIES](#)
FROM THE FIELD



[THEN & NOW](#)
WHAT REMAINS

[SPIRN](#)
THE AUTHOR

THEN AND NOW

[FOLLOW THE MAP](#) 

[VIEW GALLERY](#) 

What became of the places and the people Lange portrayed in 1939?

I decided to see for myself. The journey took me to places I might never have gone, to people I would never have met.

My discoveries are described in the book **DARING TO LOOK** what I found, whom I met and what they told me, what happened to families Lange photographed, what has and has not changed over the intervening decades, and what significance Lange's work of 1939 holds for the present day.

Here are some of the photographs I took, alongside those Lange made of the same places in 1939.


To see the photographs side by side, select view all. To explore the photographs on a map, choose a region.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view image gallery.

[CLICK HERE](#) to view images located on a map.

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NOW

ANNE WHISTON SPIRN
IN THE FIELD

DATE: May 17, 2005

LOCATION: Nyssa, Malheur County, OR

DESCRIPTION: Across from the vacant Hotel Western, I spotted a sign Lange photographed on the side of the Owyhee Irrigation District Office. The office is still here, but the boxes that once displayed the names of local merchants are blank. Many buildings in Nyssa are vacant, yet well maintained, like the Hotel



The book was widely reviewed in print (e.g. *LA Times*, *New York Review of Books*), online (e.g. *New Yorker*, *Bookforum*), and on radio (e.g. NPR's "All Things Considered" and "Here and Now"). The book has reached a broad audience: the hardcover edition (5,000 copies) sold out within nine months, and the paperback has sold more than that.

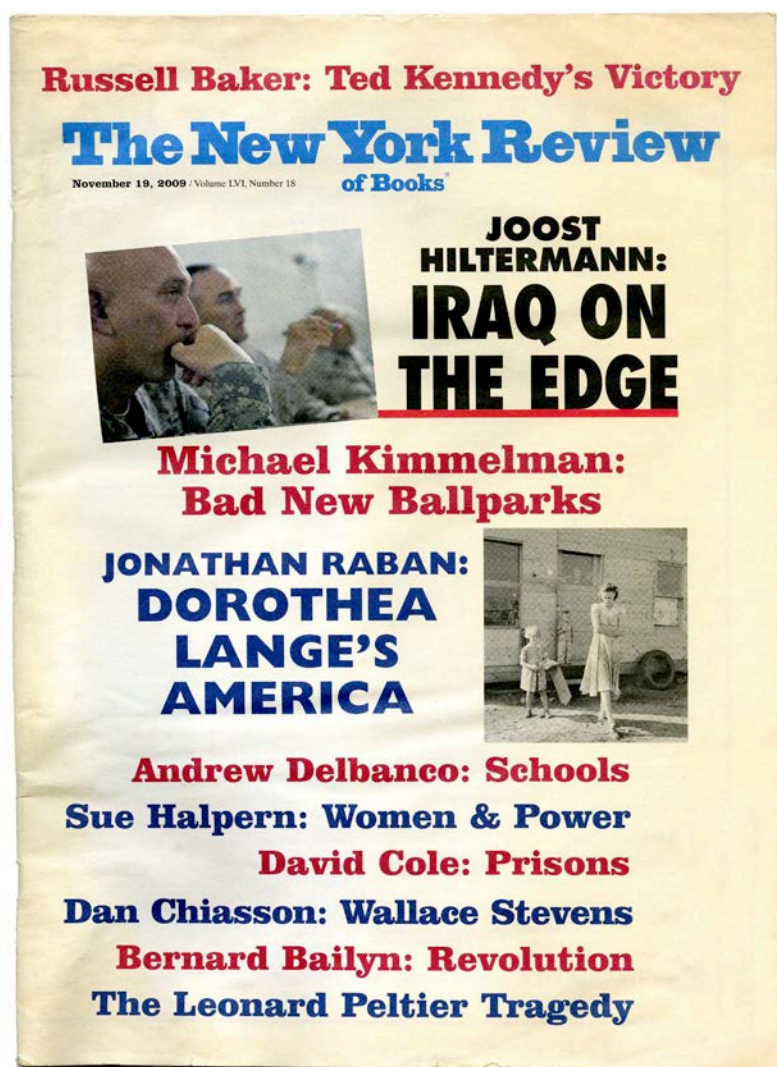
The screenshot shows the NPR website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with the NPR logo, links to 'Hourly News Summary', '24-hour Program Stream', and 'Schedule', a search bar, and links to 'PROGRAMS', 'STATIONS', 'TRANSCRIPTS', 'ARCHIVES', 'NPR SHOP', 'ABOUT NPR', 'CONTACT US', and 'HELP'. The date 'July 20, 2008' is displayed. On the left, a sidebar contains 'LOCAL STATIONS' (support public radio) and 'BROWSE TOPICS' (News, Politics & Society, Election 2008, Business, People & Places, Health & Science, Books, Music, Arts & Culture, Diversions, Opinion, Blogs). The main content area features a large image of a vintage car with a person sitting on it, titled 'Dorothea Lange: 'Daring To Look'', with a quote from the Library of Congress. Below this is a section 'IN CHARACTER' featuring Henry Fleming. To the right, there's a news story 'Barack Obama Tours Afghanistan' and a 'Sunday Soapbox' section. A sidebar on the right lists 'AP NEWS STORIES' and 'available now' books. At the bottom, there's a 'RADIO' section with links to 'PODCASTS', 'NEWS FEEDS', 'TOOLS / API', 'DESKTOP', and 'MOBILE'. A 'BOOKS' section highlights 'Daring To Look' by Anne Whiston Spirn. A 'MOST VIEWED STORIES' section lists several news items.

"Dorothea Lange is known as one of the greatest American photographers, but she was also a remarkable observer whose field notes have largely remained unpublished until now. In *Daring to Look*, Anne Whiston Spirn, a landscape architect, photographer, and writer herself, has edited Lange's field notes, adding her own interpretative essays on Lange's work, and rephotographing some of Lange's sites. This is a very important book deserving wide readership because it provides a wonderful combination of the socially-conscious work of two gifted artists and writers."

DOLORES HAYDEN, Professor of Architecture, Urbanism, and American Studies, Yale University

"As a lifelong friend of Dorothea Lange, I was absolutely astounded and thoroughly pleased with *Daring to Look*. Anne Whiston Spirn has hit the nail on the head: she knows the secret of understanding good photography—and of understanding Dorothea Lange's life as well. An astonishing book."

RONDAL PARTRIDGE, photographer and former assistant to Lange



"What a *sui generis* and beautiful imagination (and manifestation) of a book: paean, recontextualization, historicizing, rediscovery, documentation, investigation and collaboration. It is its own genre, and so lavishly produced; the writing is sharp as a bird's beak, poetic and exacting. And Spirn's own photographs make good company beside those of Lange. I loved reading her notes, feeling the picture take on even more weight that way. My wife and I both lived in this book those last weeks of summer."

FORREST GANDER, poet and Professor of Comparative Literature,
Brown University