

**Book Review: The Woman Whose Photos Troubled *LIFE* Magazine Editors**

Carol Zuegner, Creighton University

czuegner@creighton.edu

***Women, Workers and Race in LIFE Magazine: Hansel Mieth's Reform Photojournalism 1934-1955.*** Dolores Flamiano. Ashgate Publishing Co., 2016, 288 pp. \$149 hardback.

The life of German-born photographer Hansel Mieth reads like fiction—from traveling through Europe as a teenager under a boy's disguise, to working as a fruit tramp, to being the second woman hired at *LIFE* magazine (after Margaret Bourke-White). Mieth's life was all too real. In "Women, Workers and Race in *LIFE* Magazine: Hansel Mieth's Reform Photojournalism 1934-1955," Dolores Flamiano highlights the boundaries and borders Mieth continually encountered and often crossed: gender, nationality, class, and race. An in-depth cultural exploration of Mieth's photographs, buttressed by her unpublished memoir and oral histories, the book raises questions about gender, documentary versus photojournalism, and the power of the photojournalist (versus the power of magazine editors) to frame a story.

Flamiano divides Mieth's career into four phases: an apprentice photographer in the early 1930s, when she was a migrant farm worker and a photographer with the San Francisco Public Works Administration; her professional career with *LIFE*, which started in 1937 in New York; freelance photography and farming in California beginning in 1941; and, after the 1973 death of her longtime companion and husband Otto Hagel (also a photographer), a period of renewed interest in Mieth's work.

Mieth had no formal training as a photographer, but she had a deep interest and experience in the causes of social reform and change. She came to *LIFE* reluctantly because she was more interested in social reform photography than photo stories on celebrities. Flamiano says *LIFE* magazine wanted Mieth's ability as a candid photographer, especially her skill with visual storytelling and the photo essay. In the heart of the book, Flamiano examines a series of photo essays—including one called "Garment Workers at Play" and featuring women union workers—aiming to contrast Mieth's motivation in taking the pictures with what actually appeared in the magazine.

Mieth developed an interest in science stories, and "embraced scientific progress as a vehicle for social change," Flamiano writes. That part of Mieth's career at *LIFE* is illuminated by a photo essay on a rhesus monkey colony on Puerto Rico. One photo she took on that assignment became a Picture of the Week – and one of her most famous photos, reprinted and even mentioned in her *New York Times* obituary.

But it was the stories about social reform that drew Mieth. Her work targeted the intersection of gender and race. She published a *LIFE* photo essay in 1938 called "Negroes: The U.S. Also Has a Minority Problem," and went to a predominantly African-American community in South Carolina in 1940 for a photo essay that she thought would center on an

African-American nurse. But the magazine editors recast the story (titled “Birth Control: South Carolina Uses It for Public Health”) in a different light that left Mieth appalled and disenchanted both with *LIFE* and her editors’ story choices.

The most compelling chapter of Flamiano’s book shows some of the photos taken by Mieth that never appeared in *LIFE*. An especially interesting example is a photo essay about Heart Mountain, a Japanese internment camp of 11,000 in Wyoming. *LIFE* killed the story in 1943, but Mieth’s photos of the camp have emerged in various collections and exhibitions.

Mieth’s career at *LIFE* declined during World War II, when she and Otto Hagel moved to a California farm, photographing a few social reform stories. Mieth claims the two were blacklisted during the Cold War because they refused to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Though that claim is disputed, Hagel and Mieth’s work was clearly marginalized in the post-war climate.

Flamiano’s examination of Mieth’s life, work, and the culture in which she worked offers a fascinating exploration of the constraints and treatment of gender, race, and class in the context of magazine photojournalism. The books would have a place in both undergraduate and graduate courses on magazine history, cultural influences on media, and women’s studies.