

Matt Black

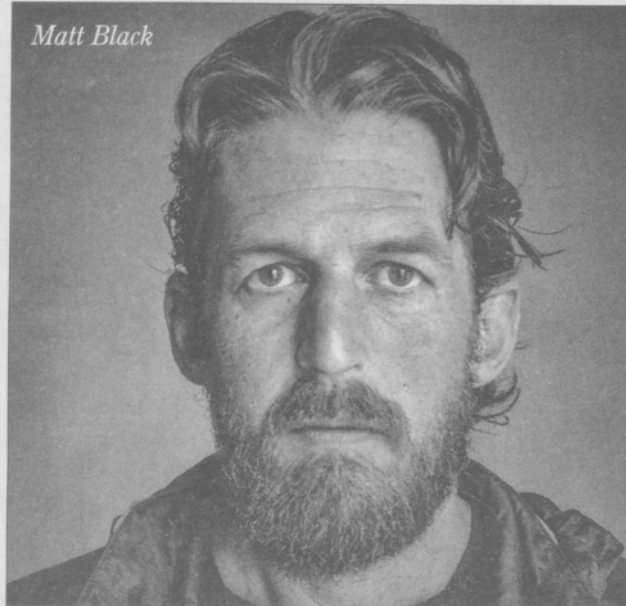


PHOTO BY MATT BLACK

The universal geography of poverty

The photographic journey of Matt Black

BY JOANNE ZUHL
STAFF WRITER

Like many professional photographers, Matt Black reached the point where he set aside the trusty film on which he'd built an award-winning reputation and embraced the digital world. That was 2012.

One of his first steps was to set up an Instagram account, a place where he could test how his work, values and goals would translate to other media. Those values and goals are a direct product of where he grew up, amid the abject poverty of California's Central Valley. The landscape and humanity there dominated his work and became the first installment of *The Geography of Poverty*, an Instagram project that earned him Time magazine's award Instagram Photographer of 2014.

This summer, Black took the project nationwide, traveling more than 18,000 miles, coast to coast, to nearly 70 communities experiencing extreme poverty. Every community had 20 percent or more of its population living in poverty. The journey lasted nearly four months. Through photos and interviews, he documented the towns and lives of the people who lived in them, many under extreme conditions. He delivered all of it through Instagram, coupled with a blog and a mapping feature allowing viewers to step into each community through his pictures and reflections. The culminating project was published by MSNBC, was featured in Time and The Huffington Post, and was the subject of several online exhibits and gallery presentations.

He is back home in the Central Valley now, but the journey isn't over. Next year, he intends to go on

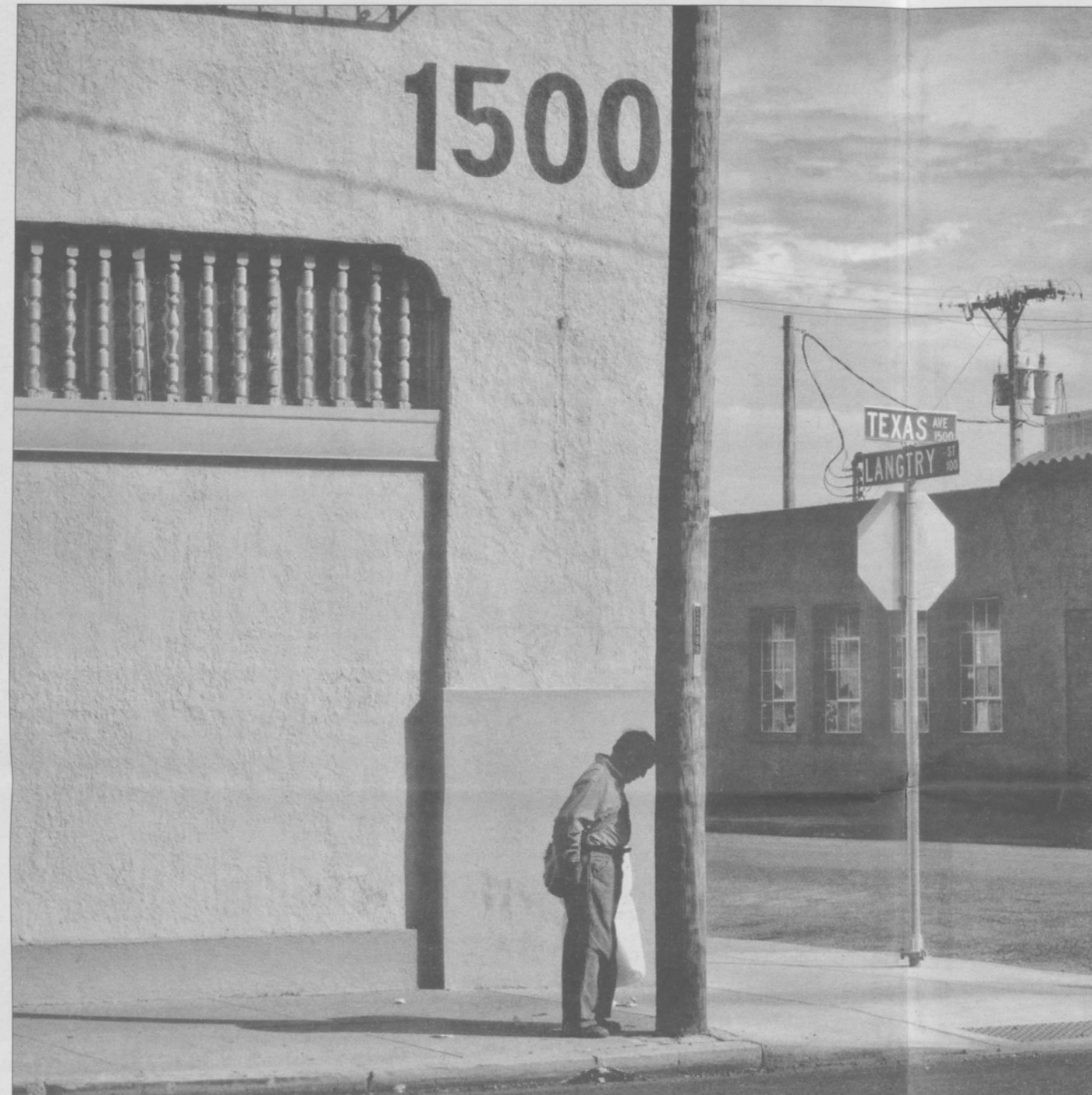


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Above, *The Warehouse District in El Paso, Texas. The population is 649,121 and 21.5 percent live below the poverty level. At right, Shepherd's camp, Mendota, Calif.*

another venture, this time through the middle of the country, rather than around it. "There are some pretty important places that remain to be covered," he said.

Joanne Zuhl: Why do you frame this study of poverty from the standpoint of geography?

Matt Black: The starting point is where I'm from, which is the Central Valley of California, and the many years spent documenting this place. Here you just can't escape the idea of isolation – and being separated from the rest of the state – as being the dominant factor. It is literally hidden. It feels hidden, it feels isolated, it feels cut off. It's right in the middle of California. Just on the other side of those hills is Silicon Valley.

That became a starting point – this idea that through my work, and by creating this mapping concept, to make these communities known. And so the *Geography of Poverty* is just explicitly putting them on the map.

J.Z.: You selected cities that had 20 percent or more of

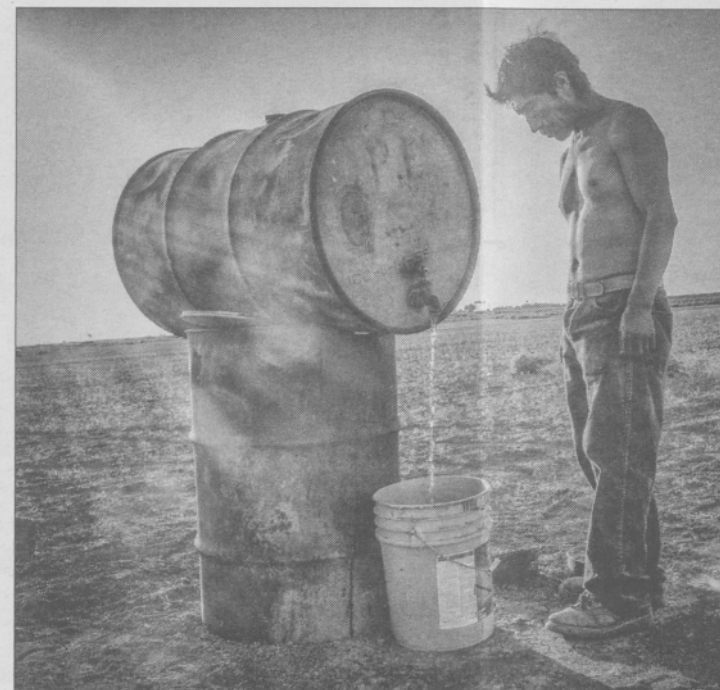


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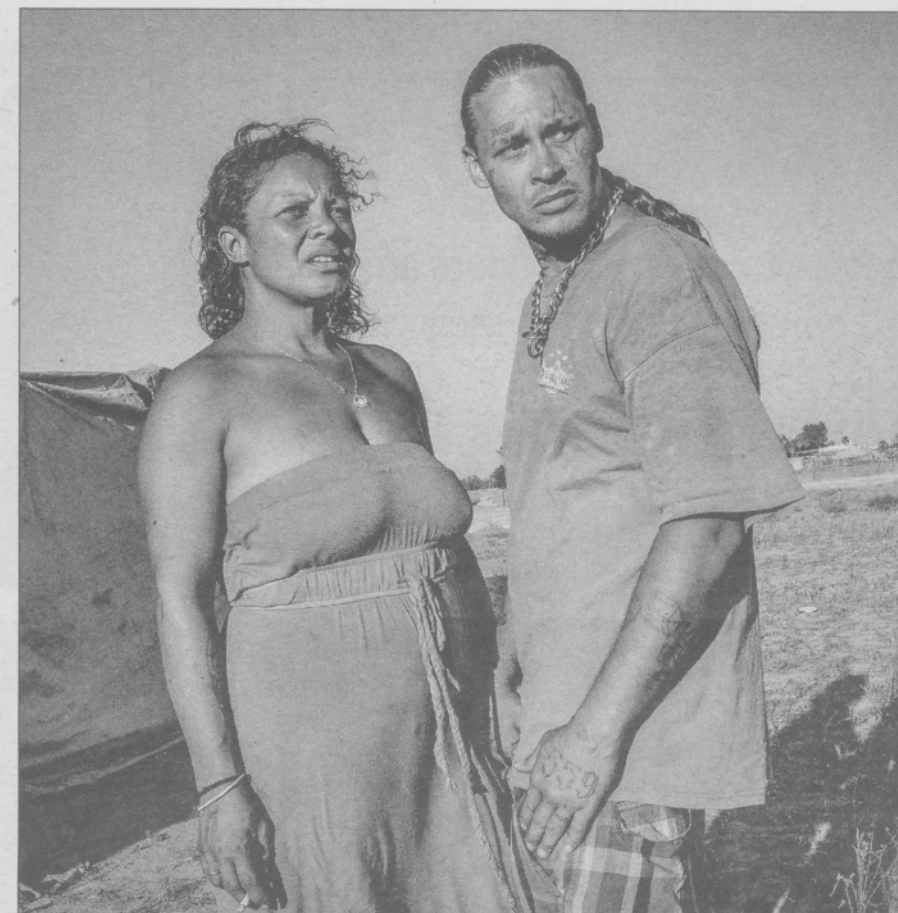


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Above, residents of California's Central Valley. At left, Shuttered train terminal in Buffalo, N.Y. Buffalo is a city in Erie County, N.Y. The population is 261,310 and nearly 31 percent live below the poverty level.



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their population living in poverty. Were they difficult to find or difficult to narrow down?

M.B.: No, not hard to find. And that, to me, says so much – that I was able to literally cross the country, both directions, without ever leaving these communities.

J.Z.: Did you interact with the people in the photos? Were there a lot of conversations?

M.B.: Yeah, there was a lot of talk. Sometimes explicitly for the project. I did a series of portraits and interviews. I made it very clear what I was doing and carried along with me a map of my route. I explained where I was coming from. The first town on the route is the town I was born in. I just wanted to

make it very clear that it was coming from a personal place, and a sense of injustice, and that there's something wrong here that we all need to discuss. And I didn't have one person turn me down. Everyone I approached to do an interview said yes. There's a feeling in so many places in the country that this is the kind of place I'm from. This is what life is here. We're forgotten; we're overlooked; our needs aren't addressed.

J.Z.: This isn't just about money. I think one of the comments with a photo said that it's getting back to where they are treating people differently, and that racism is flaring back up again. This isn't just an economic crisis.

M.B.: No – absolutely not. I go into a lot of different directions about that personally, too. For me, I've felt since the beginning I could easily substitute the word "power" for "poverty" in the title. *The Geography of Power*, about the places that have access to power and have access to having their needs met and addressed, versus these places that don't. But within that it's very much a study of culture, and it's a culture that I'm familiar with that sums up the Central Valley as well. My intention, really, was not to find the differences so much; there is incredible diversity in the regions and histories and landscapes and populations and every little slice of America I tried to represent en route. But my point was to try to unify these places into a common portrait of what it's like to live there. The main point is to try to compel people to step over a gap a little bit and put themselves into each one of these places.

J.Z.: You mention the impacts in terms of culture, but I was also struck by a place like the so-called "cancer alley" in Louisiana, that poverty is also about health. There are life or death conditions for many people, not just because they can't afford some kind of care, but because of a lack of power. You talk about 80 percent of Louisiana's Africa-American residents living so close to those hazardous industrial facilities and the damage done to those folks. And there is the body of the unidentified migrant.

M.B.: It filters down and impacts all aspects of life – health, certainly, but also education and directly to schools being underfunded, understaffed and so on. To be born in these places is really, in so many ways, to be born with the cards completely stacked against you, in every single aspect of life.

J.Z.: The photos tell so much, and you know poverty growing up in Central Valley. But after this trip did you come away with different thoughts about it?

M.B.: I feel a little self-conscious at the kind of vagueness of this answer, but it's really the answer I have for it: The dominant feeling that I had when I pulled back in that day was the feeling that I'd never really left. That it was literally just a long drive. On the surface they were all different places, but for me there was the feeling that it was completely united. The fundamentals of it never changed.

As a photographer, you're tuned into things on a different level, and I didn't approach this at all as a sociological study. I approached it as an experience. Something to put myself through and put my photography through on a more visceral level.

I was trying to illustrate these themes, I was trying to illustrate an environmental injustice, in the case of Louisiana. And I was very interested in starting in the plains, looking at fracking and this incredible oil wealth being produced there but none of it, of course, reaching the people who were there before, particularly on the Native American reservation. And then the coastal area, looking at these local logging towns and the decline of these extractive industries – I was looking at things from that journalistic perspective. But bottom line, it was a personal experience, and a personal reaction. That's what it ended up being for me – to actually see, mile after mile of this stuff rolling by, that it's all connected. It's all united. And it all distinctly feels like one thing.

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