



PICTURING CHINATOWN

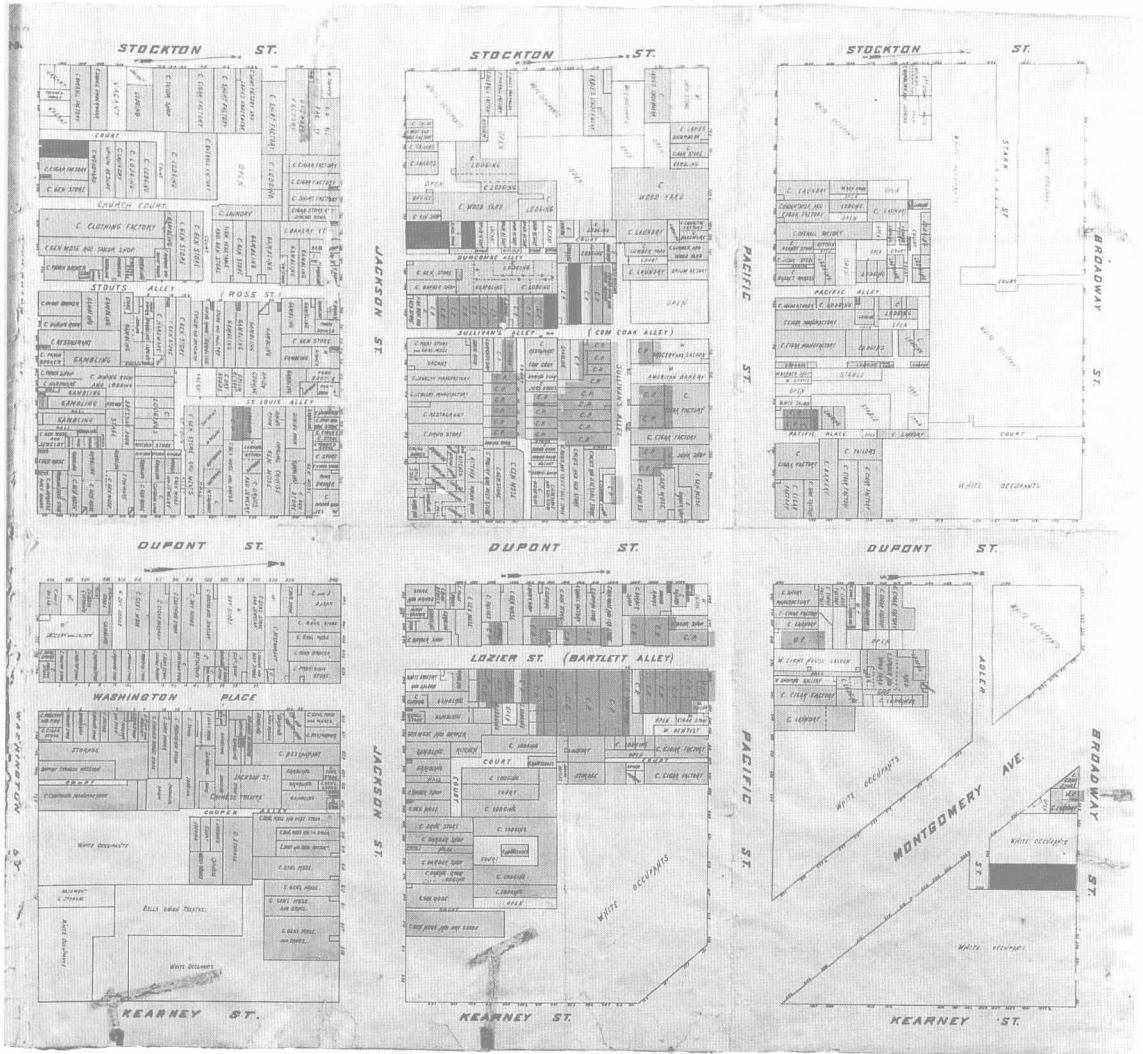
*Art and Orientalism
in San Francisco*

Anthony W. Lee

PICTURING CHINATOWN

Art and Orientalism in San Francisco

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PICTURING CHINATOWN

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INTRODUCTION

In her famous account of her conversion to documentary photography, Dorothea Lange remembered observing the depressing life on the streets from her studio window and suddenly feeling the need to take the camera off its tripod and down to the scene below. It happened one day in San Francisco in 1933:

I remember well standing at that one window and just watching the flow of life. Up from the waterfront it came to that particular corner, that junction of many different things. There was the financial district to the left, Chinatown straight ahead, and the Barbary Coast and the Italian town. The unemployed would drift up there, would stop, and I could just see they did not know where next. . . . The studio room was one flight up and I looked down as long as I could and then one day I said to myself, "I'd better make this happen," and that started me. I made a print and put it on the wall to see what reaction I would get, and I remember well the customary, common reaction was, "Yes, but what are you going to do with it?" I hadn't the slightest idea. . . . Things are very often apt to be regarded as a vehicle for making a name for yourself. But the way it happened with me, I was compelled to photograph as a direct response to what was around me.¹

The picture she shot and put on her wall, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco* (fig. 1.1), is now equally famous. She had wandered down to the waterfront and stood behind the mass of unemployed men who "did not know where next," and she captured something of the aimlessness she saw in them, in the sea of hats and the line of broad, flat shoulders. Although she professed that the picture was not an attempt to make her reputation, in fact it quickly did just that. In most accounts of her life and work, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco* is a dramatic turning point: it changed Lange from an un-