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The politics of place: photographing New York City during the New Deal

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BOSTON UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Dissertation

THE POLITICS OF PLACE:

PHOTOGRAPHING NEW YORK CITY DURING THE NEW DEAL

by

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B.A., University of Rochester, 2011
M.A., Temple University, 2014

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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THE POLITICS OF PLACE: PHOTOGRAPHING

NEW YORK CITY DURING THE NEW DEAL

LAUREN GRAVES

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2021

Major Professor: Kim Sichel, Associate Professor of History of Photography & Modern Art

ABSTRACT

My dissertation contemplates the role that New Deal era photographs played in developing a sense of place particular to New York City's environs. I argue that photographers used the camera as a tool to cultivate the relationship between people and the urban landscape by focusing their lens on liminal and collective spaces within the metropolitan environment. My first chapter examines Helen Levitt's survey of African-American, Latinx, and Italian children in East Harlem, sponsored by the Federal Art Project. My second chapter reviews a series produced under the same Project—Arnold Eagle and David Robbins's study of the Jewish and Italian sections of the Lower East Side. My third chapter turns to Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn's chronicling of Irish and Italian second-generation immigrants in Chelsea, supported by the Photo League. In each chapter, I contend that the prominence of communal spaces within these images results in documents that can be read as an effort by photographer and subject alike to define their place within the contested sites of the urban street. Through this focus on vernacular spaces, these surveys disrupt ideals of belonging and work to document processes of place-making distinct to each occupier.

Employing analytical lenses of cultural geography and phenomenology, I theorize the role of collective spaces within each series. These vernacular sites, propelled by their indistinct physical and social dimensions, hold slippery identities, shifting boundaries, and a collection of potential "owners." Due to this ambiguity, these spaces hold an opportunity for collective emergent action. Throughout these series the photographers show neighborhood dwellers engaging collective spaces of the city to satisfy their quotidian needs. My dissertation examines how inhabitants, through acts of play, ritual, and embodied remembrance, transform these interstitial spaces into place. I consider the photographer's role as folklorist, sociologist, and archeologist—as they survey how their subjects engage, occupy, and transform the local and ordinary spaces of their metropolitan landscape into places created and claimed by city-dwellers. In attending to the spatial dimension, I consider how photographs register and explore the lives of marginalized communities within the contested landscapes of New York City's streets.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iv

ABSTRACT vii

TABLE OF CONTENTS ix

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS x

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE
"Inheritors of the Street:" Helen Levitt Documents Children's Play 56

CHAPTER TWO
Arnold Eagle and David Robbins Find Place in the Everyday 123

CHAPTER THREE
The Photo League Deconstructs Chelsea: Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn's Embodied and Elevated Views 189

CONCLUSION
Walker Evans Collects Yorkville's Streets 247

ILLUSTRATIONS 292

BIBLIOGRAPHY 393

CURRICULUM VITAE 416

List of Illustrations

Figure 0.1 Helen Levitt, 51/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 0.2 Arnold Eagle, *Street Scene – Children*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.20.

Figure 0.3 Sid Grossman, *Cut Contact Street – New York*, photograph, 1940s, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2018.620.

Figure 0.4 Sid Grossman, *New York*, photograph, 1940s, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2009.1447.

Figure 0.5 Percy Loomis Sperr, *Avenue C at 13th Street and East side to Southeast, Manhattan*, photograph, 1939, New York Public Library, 485998.

Figure 0.6 Charles Von Urban, *160 East 92nd Street*, photograph, 1932, Museum of the City of New York, 33.173.399.

Figure 0.7 Unknown Photographer, *Debris & Rubble in a Vacant Lot*, photograph, 1935, New York Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, photo no. 02.001.0148.

Figure 0.8 Berenice Abbott, *Fourth Avenue, No. 154*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 40.140.110.

Figure 0.9 Berenice Abbott, *McGraw Hill Building*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 49.282.48.

Figure 0.10 Aaron Siskind, *Harlem Boys in Empty Tenement*, photograph, date unknown, International Center of Photography, 89.1981.

Figure 0.11 Aaron Siskind, *Harlem Kitchen Scene*, photograph, ca. 1937, International Center of Photography, 97.1981.

Figure 0.12 Dorothea Lange, *Plantation Owner, Mississippi Delta, Near Clarksdale, Mississippi,* photograph, 1936, Art Institute of Chicago, 2016. 341.

Figure 0.13 Sherwood Anderson, *Hometown*, 1938, 7.

Figure 0.14 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Tenants*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M4.

Figure 1.1 Helen Levitt, Untitled, photograph, circa 1940, New York Public Library.

Figure 1.2 Berenice Abbott, *Brownstone Front and Skyscraper*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York 49.282.8.

Figure 1.3 Arnold Eagle, *Courtyard with Children on Fire escapes*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.6.

Figure 1.4 Philip Johnson, *Toy Wagon*, watercolor, pen and ink and gouache on paper, 1935/1942, National Gallery of Art, 1943.8.7802.

Figure 1.5 Helen Levitt, 93/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.6 Helen Levitt, 51/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.7 Helen Levitt, 124/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.8 Helen Levitt, 89/160, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.9 Helen Levitt, 88/160, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.10 Helen Levitt, 149/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.11 Helen Levitt, 154/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.12. Helen Levitt, 155/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.13. Helen Levitt, 49/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.14 Sid Grossman, *Swimming in the Olympic-size pool in Colonial Park, Harlem*, photograph, 1939, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.9.64.

Figure 1.15 Jacob A. (Jacob August) Riis, *Street Arabs – Night, Boys in Sleeping Quarter,* photograph, ca. 1890, Museum of the City of New York. 90.13.4.124.

Figure 1.16 Unknown photographer, *Children in Carnegie Playground, 5th Ave., New York City [holding hands in circle]*, photograph, date unknown (possibly 1911), Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Lot 10832-2.

Figure 1.17 "Street Scenes in New York," *Look,* November 9, 1937, 9, photographs by Lewis Hine.

Figure 1.18 "There are no Bad Boys," *Look* March 14, 1939, 19, photographs by the Federal Art Project, WPA.

Figure 1.19 Helen Levitt, 117/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.20 Aaron Siskind, *Harlem Boys in Empty Tenement*, photograph, date unknown, International Center of Photography, 89.1981.

Figure 1.21 Helen Levitt, 123/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.22. John Guttman, *The Artist Lives Dangerously, San Francisco*, gelatin silver print, 1938, The National Gallery of Art, 2001.67.91.

Figure 1.23. Brassaï, *Graffiti,* Gelatin Silver Print, 1945-45, The Museum of Modern Art, 892.2016.

Figure 1.24 Helen Levitt, 158/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.25 Helen Levitt, 133/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.26 Helen Levitt, 122/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.27 Helen Levitt, 16/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.28 Helen Levitt, 140/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.29 Helen Levitt, 36/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.30 Helen Levitt, 125/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.31 Helen Levitt, 111/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.32 Union Pacific Advertisement, *Life*, April 12, 1937, 86.

Figure 1.33 Union Pacific railroad advertisements from 1937, https://www.periodpaper.com/products/1937-ad-union-pacific-railroad-horse-riding-ranches-original-advertising-054877-ftt9-1898.

Figure 1.34 Helen Levitt, 142/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.35 Helen Levitt, 37/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.36 Helen Levitt, 21/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.37 “Movie of the week,” *Life*, January 4, 1937, 66.

Figure 1.38 “A Terrible Blunder puts Japan’s Ambassador on the Anxious Seat,” *Life*, December 27, 1937, 10, Photographs by Acme and A.P.

Figure 1.39 Helen Levitt, 9/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1 The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.40 “A new photographer discovers New York,” *PM’s Weekly,* August 11 1940, 37, Photographs by Helen Levitt.

Figure 1.41 “A new photographer discovers New York,” *PM’s Weekly,* August 11 1940, 38, Photographs by Helen Levitt.

Figure 1.42 “Wall and Sidewalk Drawings show what goes on in the minds of New York Children,” *PM’s Weekly,* March 2, 1941, 48-49, Photographs by Helen Levitt.

Figure 1.43 Helen Levitt, *New York*, photograph, c. 1940, Museum of Modern Art, 46.1942.

Figure 1.44 *Fortune*, July 1939, 77.

Figure 1.45 Helen Levitt, 119/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.1 Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-208, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.2 Arnold Eagle, *Scholar at Table*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.10.

Figure 2.3 Arnold Eagle, *Scholars at the Table*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.9.

Figure 2.4 Arnold Eagle, *Scholars with Spectacles Studying*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.23.

Figure 2.5 Arnold Eagle, *Blowing the Shofar*, photograph, 1935, International Center of Photography, 544.1987.

Figure 2.6 Arnold Eagle, *Third Avenue El, Window of 18th Street Station*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 2015.18.1.

Figure 2.7 Arnold Eagle, *Passengers*, photograph, 1943, International Center of Photography, 483.1987.

Figure 2.8 Walker Evans, *Subway Passengers, New York City*, 1938, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971.646.20.

Figure 2.9 Arnold Eagle/Sloane, NYA Radio Workshop, negative no. 1005-1, photograph, 1939, National Youth Administration, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.10 Arnold Eagle, Jose Limone Dance Group, photograph, 1954, Box 1, Folder 2, New York Public Library Arnold Eagle Dance Collection.

Figure 2.11 Arnold Eagle, *Stowe, VT for standard oil*, job 1028, photograph, 1947, 1.38, New School, Arnold Eagle Archive.

Figure 2.12 David Robbins, *Waterfront (on a dock),* photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.10.61.

Figure 2.13 David Robbins, 759-139, photograph, 1937, Box 2, Folder 13, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.14 Unknown photographer, Street scene on the Lower East Side, New York City Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, photograph, June 14, 1937, photo no. 02.007.02206.

Figure 2.15 Unknown photographer, *109 St. Marks Place*, New York City Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, photograph, February 1, 1939, photo no. 02.006.2601.

Figure 2.16 Arnold Eagle, *Street Scene – Children*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.203.

Figure 2.17 Arnold Eagle, *Small Business*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.192.

Figure 2.18 Arnold Eagle, *Courtyard with Children on Fire Escapes*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.6.

Figure 2.19 The Federal Writers' Project, *New York city guide; a comprehensive guide to the five boroughs of the metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond*, New York: Random House, 1939, 172.

Figure 2.20 Arnold Eagle, *Stickball Team*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.14.

Figure 2.21 Arnold Eagle, *Boys Playing in a Ditch*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.296.

Figure 2.22 Arnold Eagle, *Boys Gathering Wood from Wreckage*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.252.

Figure 2.23 Arnold Eagle, *Littered Vacant Lot*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.84.

Figure 2.24 Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-288, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.25 Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Seville, Spain*, photograph, 1933, The Museum of Modern Art, 692.1943.

Figure 2.26 David Robbins, *Arnold Eagle Photographing One Third of a Nation*, photograph from *At Home With God,* 1992.

Figure 2.27 Arnold Eagle, *WPA Work Project*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.85.

Figure 2.28 Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-33, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.29 Unknown Photographer, *203 Lewis Street*, photograph, circa 1940s, New York City Municipal Archives, Collection of Manhattan 1940s tax Photos.

Figure 2.30 Unknown Photographer, *An Empty lot on the Corner of Rivington and Lewis Streets, Manhattan*, photograph, ca. 1934, New York City Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, Photo no. 02.015.14862.

Figure 2.31 Arnold Eagle, *Street Corner*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.91.

Figure 2.32 Arnold Eagle, *Woman Dressing Child*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.425.

Figure 2.33 Arnold Eagle, *A Greek Immigrant with her Children*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 125.1989.

Figure 2.34 Arnold Eagle, *Weekly Bath*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 511.1987.

Figure 2.35 Arnold Eagle, *Tenement Kids*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 136.1989.

Figure 2.36 Arnold Eagle, *Wash Line between Two Tenements*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.108.

Figure 2.37 Arnold Eagle, *Mother and Son at Table*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.123.

Figure 2.38 Arnold Eagle, *Kitchen Interior, Woman Ironing and Man with Small Child*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.11.

Figure 2.39 Arnold Eagle, *Boys Studying the Talmud*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.6.

Figure 2.40 Arnold Eagle, *New York Life*, photograph, ca. 1936, International Center of Photography, 526.1987.

Figure 2.41 Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, *Boys Around Base of a Lamppost*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.270.

Figure 2.42 Arnold Eagle, *Man in Front of Maps on Wall*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.21.

Figure 2.43 Arnold Eagle, *Little Girl with Doll and Tricycle and Front of a Shabby Exterior*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.236.

Figure 2.44 Arnold Eagle, *Little Girl with Doll and Tricycle*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.234.

Figure 2.45 Jacob Riis, *"Minding the Baby," Cherry Hill*, photograph, ca. 1890, Museum of the City of New York, 2008.1.25.

Figure 2.46 Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-40, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.47 Irving Spellens, *Federal Theatre presents "… One-Third of a Nation" A living newspaper about housing*, poster: silkscreen, color, 1939. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LC-USZC2-5393.

Figure 2.48 Charles Von Urban, negative no. 2785-1, photograph, 1938, Box 27, Folder 4, Exhibitions, 1938, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.49 Eiseman, Federal Art Exhibitions, Gallery 7 East 38th Street, negative no. 2321-2, photograph, 1937, Box 26, Folder 13, Art Exhibitions, 1937 April-July, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.50 Aubrey Pollard, Federal Art Exhibition, Union Settlement 231 East 104 Street, negative no. 2357-3, photograph, 1937, Box 26, Folder 13, Art Exhibitions, 1937 April-July, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.51 Installation print from *Photography 1839-1937*, photograph, 1937, The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 2.52. Installation print from *Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children*, photograph, 1943, The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 2.53. Sol Horn, Berenice Abbott Exhibition, Museum of Art, negative no. 2563-2, photograph, 1937, Box 26, Folder 14, Art Exhibitions, September -

December, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.54 Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-1, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art

Figure 2.55 Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-2, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.56 Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-3, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.57 Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-4, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.58 Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-5, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.59 Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-6, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.60 *Let's Look at Housing*, Citizens housing council, 1939, Box 151, Folder 16, Citizen's Housing Council Archive, New York.

Figure 2.61 Peter Sekaer, Installation view of the exhibition *Houses and Housing, Industrial Arts*, gelatin silver print, May 10–September 30, 1939, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Exhibition Records, 87–88.5, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

Figure 2.62 Zoomed in Figure 2.55.

Figure 2.63 Arnold Eagle, *A Child of the Tenements*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 128.1989

Figure 2.64 Arnold Eagle, *Girl with Dollhouse*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.25.

Figure 2.65 Zoomed in Figure 2.54

Figure 2.66 Arnold Eagle, *Across Stuyvesant Town Development*, photograph, 1939, International Center of Photography, 524.1987.

Figure 2.67 Arnold Eagle, *Boy Looking in a Bakery Window*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.209.

Figure 2.68 Cyril Mipaas, *United Wholesale Employees, The Bible House, 4th Avenue*, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 18, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection. Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.69 Charles Von Urban, Symposium United Wholesale and Warehouse Employees 104 East 9th Street, negative no. 3507-2, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 5, Lectures and Symposium, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection. Archives of American Art.

Figure 3.1 Sid Grossman, *Chelsea (cityscape)*, photograph, 1938, Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jeffrey Hugh Newman.

Figure 3.2 Sid Grossman, *Playground in Vacant Lots, Harlem*, photograph, 1939, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.9.89.

Figure 3.3 Sid Grossman, *Two Men on a Harlem Stoop*, photograph, 1939, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.9.33.

Figure 3.4 Sid Grossman, *Untitled (man in spectacles*), photograph, 1940, Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Simon and Bonnie Levin.

Figure 3.5 Sid Grossman, *Chelsea*, photograph, ca. 1939, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2013.549.

Figure 3.6 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.7 Sol Libsohn, *Fulton Fish Market: Captain and Dealer*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.6.198.

Figure 3.8 Sol Libsohn, *Lunch Room*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.6.84.

Figure 3.9 Sol Libsohn, *Bronx Terminal Market*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.6.3.

Figure 3.10 "Photo Hunt Party," *Photo Notes*, June 1942, 6.

Figure 3.11 *US Camera* 1946, 26.

Figure 3.12 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.13 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.14 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.15 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.16 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.17 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.18 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.19 Federal Art Project, Must we always have this, Why not housing? Poster: silkscreen, color, 1936, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LC-USZC2-5629.

Figure 3.20 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.21 Alfred Stieglitz, *From the Shelton, West*, photograph, 1935, The Museum of Modern Art, 55.1950.

Figure 3.22 Berenice Abbott, *Wall Street, showing East River from roof of Irving Trust Building, Manhattan*, photograph, 1938, New York Public Library, 482666.

Figure 3.23 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.24 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.25 Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-2, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19: Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 3.26 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.27 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.28 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.29 Berenice Abbott, *Rockefeller Center 30 Rockefeller Center (foreground excavation), completed 1933; Radio City Music Hall (background construction), completed 1932*, *New York*, photograph, 1931-32, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001-62-9.

Figure 3.30 Andrew Herman, *6th Avenue Subway Construction, 17th Street*, photograph, ca. 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.13.39.

Figure 3.31 Lewis Hine*, Men at Work*, 1932, n.p.

Figure 3.32 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.33 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.34 Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.35 Arnold Eagle, *Girl Looking Out Window*, photograph, 1939, International Center of Photography, 459.1987.

Figure 3.36 Walker Evans, *Four 35mm Film Frames: View Down Subway Car with Seated Passengers, Seated Subway Passengers, Helen Levitt on the Subway, New York City*, photograph, 1938, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.253.479.

Figure 3.37 Berenice Abbott, *El Station: Sixth and Ninth Avenue Lines, Downtown Side*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 40.140.72.

Figure 3.38 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.39 Sid Grossman, *Woman at the 23rs Street IRT Station*, photograph, 1938, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 81.5.

Figure 3.40 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.41 Sid Grossman, *Union Square, NYC (from the series "Chelsea Document")*, gelatin silver print, printed c. 1938-39, Howard Greenberg Gallery.

Figure 3.42 Weegee, *Installation view of "Weegee: Murder is My Business" at the Photo League, New York*, photograph, 1941, International Center of Photography, 19967.1993.

Figure 4.1 Paul Strand, *Blind,* platinum print, 1917, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 33.43.334.

Figure 4.2 Unknown, *Bank Square, "Five Corners," Fishkill-on-Hudson, N.Y.* postcard, 1900s-1930s, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994.264.107.611.

Figure 4.3 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A Street scene*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006713-M3.

Figure 4.4 Walker Evans, Installation *View of Walker Evans: American Photographs* Exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, film negative, 1938, Walker Evans Archive, 1994, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.254.635.

Figure 4.5 Walker Evans, Untitled photo, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006717-M2.

Figure 4.6 Walker Evans, Untitled photo, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M2.

Figure 4.7 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. House fronts*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006712-M4.

Figure 4.8 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. House fronts*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006712-M5.

Figure 4.9 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A tenant*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M3.

Figure 4.10 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A fruit and vegetable vendor stand*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006721-M2.

Figure 4.11 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Apartment houses from the rear*, nitrate negative, August 23,

1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006716-M4.

Figure 4.12 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A shop window*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M1.

Figure 4.13 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Tenants*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M4.

Figure 4.14 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Garbage cans*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006714-M2.

Figure 4.15 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006712-M1.

Figure 4.16 Rudy Bruckhardt, *Pedestrians, New York City: Woman in White Collarless Jacket; Man and Manhole in Foreground; Young Man Carrying Shoe Boxes; Taxicab, Three Women, and Lamppost*, gelatin silver print, ca. 1939, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972.585.20a–d.

Figure 4.17 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Newspapers for sale*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M5.

Figure 4.18 Walker Evans, *New York, New York, 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A tenant*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006721-M4.

Figure 4.19 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Flowers in a Window*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M2.

Figure 4.20 Walker Evans, *New York, New York, 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A tenant*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006722-M3.

Figure 4.21 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Children playing in the street*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33-006714-M1.

Figure 4.22 Helen Levitt, 117/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 4.23 Walker Evans, *Graffiti on Door, Christopher Street, New York City*, photograph, 1938, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.254.617.

Figure 4.24 Walker Evans, Untitled photo, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M2.

Figure 4.25 Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 4.26 Arnold Eagle, *Courtyard with Children on Fire escapes*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.6.

Figure 4.27 Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Apartment houses from the rear*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006716-M3.

Figure 4.28 Ben Shahn, *Untitled (Lower East Side, New York),* photograph, 1936, Harvard Art Museum, P1970.2831.

Figure 4.29 Ben Shahn, *Main Street Scene, Lancaster, Ohio*, Nitrate negative, 1938, Library of Congress, LC-USF3301-006416.

Figure 4.30 Walker Evans, *Subway Passengers, New York City*, photograph, 1938, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971.646.18.

Introduction

> Provinciality breeds a determinism of its own, and the provinciality of New York in the thirties, which tended to regard a temporary meeting of ethnic cultures and social crises as if it were an unalterable fact of history, led us to suppose that only here, in New York, could one bear to live at all.
> – Irving Howe

A chalk drawing of four wild-haired human figures, one labeled "sister," decorates a stoop's concrete railing (figure 0.1). In this photograph, framed by Helen Levitt, the figures exist within the bounds of the stoop's composition—a crack toward the bottom of the railing creates a boundary between the two lower figures and the railing's edge cuts off the figures' heads of hair. Rather than allowing spatial and architectural constraints to impede creative impulse, an anonymous child artist worked along and within the span of the stairs, transforming the arm rail from a space with a structural use into an active family album. While these figures exist within the concrete stoop, their chalked presence constructs a world that knows no bounds, an alternative reality, an imagined landscape inscribed within the urban street. Levitt's photographic process, a collaboration between herself and the young artists of East Harlem, highlights how the mostly African-American and Hispanic neighborhood children use acts of play and creative labor to transform the liminal space of the stoop into a place for their imaged and imagined family.

Traveling south to the Jewish section of the Lower East Side, a second photograph, created by Arnold Eagle, reveals how a stoop is transformed from an anonymous space into a place of work (figure 0.2). Eagle's photograph shows a man occupying the concrete front yard of a residential building. The yard, adjacent to a stoop,

is bound by an iron railing. Next to the low fence that separates the private building's front area and the public sidewalk, the man displays a sign advertising cold drinks for sale. The man's freezer cart takes over half of the yard, and his business extends to the building's windowsill that promotes the variety of drinks for purchase. This space is not zoned for selling or buying, but, as determined by the man's occupation, he transforms this space into a business. Three young children stand to the man's side, and two sit on the stoop, a space adjacent yet visually outside the fence, perhaps his business associates or potential patrons of his makeshift bar. While the children's roles remain murky, their presence and spatial proximity to the shop suggest they share ownership of this collective space. The man converts the space into a place of business while the children, sanctioned by their potential buying power, create a social place.

Moving north-west, a third photograph by Sid Grossman reveals a similarly occupied stoop in Manhattan's Italian and Irish Chelsea neighborhood on the West Side (figure 0.3). Three boys, wearing crisp shirts tucked into their tailored pants, stand around the intersecting point of a stoop and sidewalk. Two of the boys stand with one foot on the sidewalk and one foot planted to the stoop's first step. The middle boy, head framed between his two friends, stands with both feet on the sidewalk, leaning along the stoop's railing. Hands clasping her hair, a young woman descends the stairs above the group of boys, just moments from sharing their space. To their left, a younger boy walks down the stairs, his body hugging the railing in a clear effort to avoid the space occupied by the young men, an admission of the older youths' authority over this shared space. Two of the young men look directly at the photographer; one smiles, and the other looks

inquisitive, marking the scene's staged nature. A cropped version of Grossman's photograph zooms in to focus on the four young people's gazes and postures (figure 0.4). This distance between the original and cropped print highlights the photographer's presence and participation in constructing this scene, producing an embodied view of the stoop. With this subjective exploration dictated by the subjects and the photographer, the stoop turns into a distinct place, created and remembered by its owners.

These three photographs serve as an introduction to the different racial and ethnic studies of New York City neighborhoods captured during the New Deal as explored in this dissertation. Through examining these case studies, this work explores the role that New Deal era photographs play in constructing notions of a sense of place and shaping city dwellers' relationships to their streets and homes. As these photographs were produced at a time when the people and spaces of New York City were becoming ever more regulated, I argue that photographers used the camera as a tool to cultivate the relationship between people and the urban landscape. Throughout these series, the photographers show neighborhood dwellers engaging liminal and collective spaces of the city—such as sidewalks, stoops, and alleyways—to satisfy their quotidian needs and desires. In each chapter, I examine how the prominence of interstitial and communal spaces within the photographs results in surveys that reveal the effort by photographers and subjects alike to define their own place within the urban street's contested sites. This place-making effort is two-fold: first as performed by the occupier, and second, as captured by the photographer—reiterated in the photographic frame. Through this focus

on vernacular spaces, these surveys offer landscapes of emergence that dissent from narratives of belonging.

My first chapter examines Helen Levitt's documentation of African-American, Latinx, and Italian children's chalk drawings located on the sidewalks, stoops, and façades of East Harlem. Sponsored by the Federal Art Project, Levitt photographed as a folklorist, revealing how child artists, through acts of play and creativity, renovate contested city spaces into their own imagined place. My second chapter reviews a series produced under the same Project—Arnold Eagle and David Robbins's study of the Jewish and Italian sections of the Lower East Side titled *One Third of a Nation*. Approaching the neighborhood as sociologists with cameras, the survey chronicles a landscape activated by the disenfranchised class, augmenting neighborhood inhabitants' roles as space-shapers and place-makers. The series explores how actions of the everyday—occupation, patronization, and routinization—performed in tenement alleyways, backyards, and sidewalks, shape space into place. The third chapter reviews Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn's chronicle of Irish and Italian immigrants in Chelsea titled the *Chelsea Document*, supported by the Photo League. Photographing the developing city from elevated and suspended perches within the built environment, the photographers worked as archeologists, excavating the various spatial and temporal layers of the neighborhood. Through mining the spaces of elevated train lines, skylines, and stoops, the photographs disclose a neighborhood in the process of becoming and vanishing, subverting the municipally imposed collective memory of the city and rather emphasizing the role of embodied and experiential vision within place-making. The

extended conclusion examines a Farm Security Administration series captured by Walker Evans produced on and within the streets, stoops, and facades of the Italian section of southern Yorkville. Evans, documenting the streets as a collector, created a neighborhood study that distills place into placelessness, indexing the Yorkville blocks as universalized urban locales. In each chapter, I read the photographer's practice, informed by their relationship to the neighborhood, as an effort to work in tandem with occupiers' place-making strategies.

Within this discussion, I propose a new method through which to analyze photographs as historical documents by interrogating their spatial dimension. Building on the spatial turn in photographic history, I engage theories of space and place to consider how spaces nearly invisible or in-between in nature reveal ignored histories and disclose the politics of the urban street.[1] Working at the time when institutions, private and public,

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[1] As seen in Kate Bussard *Unfamiliar Streets: The Photographs of Richard Avedon, Charles Moore, Martha Rosler, and Philip-Lorca DiCorcia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). In this book, Bussard reconfigures the canon of street photography to be situated within *the street,* allowing room for the cultural, social, political, and economic histories of the street to be read, or illegible, within photographs. Ute Eskildsen, *Street & Studio: An Urban History of Photography* (London: Tate Publishing, 2008) theorizes that photography, above any other medium, is intrinsically tied to the place in which it is was created. Comparing work produced in the studio to the street, Eskildensen contends that the street is where performativity is most apparent, proposing a more balanced relationship between photographer, subject, and space. Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003) reviews how photography, since its invention, has been used as a tool to organize and categorize the things of the world. The photograph functions as a "tool of the geographic imagination, informing and mediating engagement with the physical and human world" (3). Kerstin Schmidt and Julia Faisst, eds., *Picturing America: Photography and the Sense of Place* (Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2019) proposes that photography is part of the "perpetual production and reproduction, negotiation and renegotiation" of place (212).

were attempting to clean up the city and code public spaces for particular, regulated uses, the photographs examined in my dissertation work in opposition to these edicts; instead, they show city inhabitants engaging and using communal and liminal spaces beyond what was "appropriate." The resultant photographs, created as a collaboration between photographer and subject, uncover how inhabitants, through acts of play, ritual, and embodied remembrance, create and shape places that defy the built environment's social and physical limits. Turning to oft-ignored, ambiguous, and unownable spaces within the urban landscape, these photographers used their cameras to picture synergetic performativity between these liminal and communal sites and their occupiers. While many of the actions dwellers performed could be and most likely were also performed in private, my study argues that their execution in public transformed them into an emergent act—an effort by dwellers to claim their right to the city.

I consider the photographer's role as folklorist, sociologist, archeologist, and collector—as they survey how their subjects engage, claim, and transform the local and ordinary spaces of their metropolitan landscape. These images reveal and bolster the city inhabitants' identities as space shifters, showing the interdependent relationship between subjects, photographers, and places. I theorize the photographic practice and the resulting image as a part of this place-making effort, as these photographs play a role in the negotiation and remembrance of place. Together, these three chapters and conclusion use photographs to reveal alternative histories and narratives within these contested urban landscapes. Through this alternative reading of photographs' ability to produce, create, and claim place, the photographic series give a voice and secure a place for the

disenfranchised classes within New York City's contested urban landscapes during the New Deal.

The contributions of this dissertation are not limited to photographic theory but span across the humanities, including histories of urbanism and vernacular architecture, while also participating in broader dialogues in ethnic and critical race studies. Through reading images for their spatial politics, photographs can offer alternative and emergent histories that oppose and possibly subvert the dominant culture. Through attending to the spatial dimension, I consider how photographs register and explore the lives of marginalized communities within the contested landscapes of New York City's streets. The images and case studies reviewed in my dissertation participate in a centuries-long visualization of aggregate spaces. This display of how contested, communal spaces can be recycled to create a place that acts as a platform for connection, political action, and dissent makes this dissertation especially timely.

Theorizing Space, Place, and Photography

As a cultural art historical inquiry, this dissertation seeks to answer how the city street and its residents are portrayed in New Deal neighborhood studies of New York City. Following the writing of Nicholas Natanson, I read photographs as more than mere illustrations and instead consider the historical framing of images:

> Despite its limitations, historical framing, when performed with sensitivity to *multiple connotations* in a given image...can at least begin to draw out

> the richness of the photographer's encounter with place and person, and, through that richness, the play of cultural ideas.[2]

The spatial element, an understudied aspect within the history of photography, is particularly important to discover the cultural work of a photograph. Through applying tactics of close looking and visual analysis, I explore how photographs structure, configure, and unveil space. This investigation uncovers how spaces, particularly those nearly invisible or in-between, expose the politics of the urban landscape. By attending to the spatial dimension, these photographs, often read for their consolidating or homogenizing work, can offer alternative histories that oppose dreams of national unity and work to establish place for those on the margin.

My dissertation's interdisciplinary approach relies on phenomenology and cultural geography to theorize photography's spatial dimension. The photographs were produced when New York City's public and private spaces were becoming ever-more contested, particularly for lower and working class city dwellers. As a result, many of the photographs in my dissertation focus on the collective, communal, and liminal spaces of the city, such as doorways, stoops, and curbs, as these were the zones that many city inhabitants could access. Architectural historian Dolores Hayden, writing about the politics of space, notes how groups in power limit marginalized people's access to space in an effort to contain their economic and political rights.[3] Such limitations occurred throughout the New Deal, as institutions, governmental agencies, and municipal powers

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[2] Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 10.
[3] Dolores Hayden, *Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 120.

attempted to code city streets for restricted use. Diverging from these limitations, the neighborhood surveys examined in my dissertation show city citizens occupying, using, and claiming regulated spaces as their own, beyond what was deemed "acceptable." These spaces were claimed through quotidian actions, such as walking, playing, and sitting—routinized acts that also occur in interior, private spaces. My study argues that their execution in public turns these quotidian undertakings into emergent acts that reveal dwellers' efforts to claim their place within the city.

Attending to that spatial power, Hayden notes the important role of spaces of the threshold, between private and public life, "[a] world of shared meanings builds up, couched in the language of small semiprivate and semipublic territories between the dwelling and the street that support certain kinds of typical public behavior."[4] In his phenomenological approach to reading architecture, architect Christian Norberg-Schulz also identifies the boundary between public and private life as the site where identity is most fervently crafted, "in general the conception of the private inside becomes manifest in the 'threshold' or boundary which separates it from and unifies in with the outside. At the same time the boundary gives the public outside its particular presence."[5] Subverting the expectation that occupying the margins or spaces in-between necessarily limits people's power, my dissertation rather explores how these interstitial zones, due to their reciprocal and unstable boundaries, can be read as sites of emergence, resistant to hierarchical power structures.

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[4] Ibid., 35.
[5] Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 183-184,

To understand the potential of these in-between spaces, I apply the work of postmodern political geographer Edward Soja. In his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places,* Soja conceptualizes space as beyond the bounds of perceived, conceived, and representational space, as theorized by Henri Lefebvre.[6] Soja urges that to truly understand space, we must study what he calls a thirdspace, or "an other" space. According to Soja, the thirdspace is transformed through everyday life, from physical and mental space into a practiced space. The thirdspace defies dualisms of "subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable."[7] Due to its shifting boundaries, Soja identifies the thirdspace as, "a strategic meeting place for fostering collective political action against forms of human oppression."[8] Applying this theorization, liminal spaces within the urban landscape, the thresholds between private and public life—such as stoops, windowsills, and alleyways—can be read as thirdspaces.[9] As noted by Hayden and Norberg-Schultz, the ownership, boundaries, and existence of these sites are themselves unstable and reciprocal. Thirdspaces exist beyond liminal zones and

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[6] Henri Lefebvre and Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 2009), 1-68.
[7] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2014), 56.
[8] Edward W. Soja, "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination," ed. Alan Read *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22.
[9] The idea of liminality was first used in psychological and anthropological contexts to explain an interstructural situation including a transition between social states. The British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner defined the period of margin, or the "liminal period," as a person who is betwixt and between being and becoming, in the midst or within the threshold of transitioning states. Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 93-94.

encompass spaces that resist singular ownership and boundaries, such as the street or sidewalk. Coded as "public and parochial," these spaces too hold slippery borders and identities and host a collection of potential "owners."[10] These liminal and collective spaces only exist through acts of everyday life, as they are transformed from psychical and mental space into a practiced space, as determined by the occupier and user. Following the theorization of Soja, these spaces then exist as sites with the potential for emergent action.

Cultural theorist bell hooks conceives of these marginalized spaces, or thirdspaces, as similarly holding an opportunity for collective political action. In these spaces, those marginalized by the dominant culture have the opportunity to create a redeeming space: a space untamable by the culture of domination and resistant to that domination.[11] In these collective and liminal spaces, city dwellers, forced to live on the margins, display and perform their identity, and through those actions, create and propel a sense of place. These newly created places dissent from the ideals of belonging propelled by New Deal rhetoric and rather create what Marxist literary critic Raymond Williams has termed a culture of emergence. Landscapes of emergence are created and continually recreated through relationships that are alternative or oppositional to the dominant culture. This emergent culture creates new values and social forces that transform and break-down the dominant culture. Through the lens of emergent culture, I theorize these

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[10] Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Renia Ehrenfeucht, *Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation over Public Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 6.
[11] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014), 234.

spaces as newly created *places*—sites of emergence, alternatives to the dominant structural spaces that comprised New York City's urban landscape.[12]

This landscape of emergence holds power in its potential to transform city space into place, two concepts that are interrelated and cannot be understood as independent of the other. Space is abstracted and unbounded, based in the physical realm. Place transcends the physical and is created through senses beyond the tangible, such as sound, taste, touch, experience, memory, and sociality. Place is the result of an amassing of social interrelationships rooted in the connection of spatiality and sociality in everyday life. Place is never static or passive but is constantly produced, something created and evolving.[13] Employing ideas of Doreen Massey's anti-essentialist theory of space and place along with the writings of Yi-Fu Tuan and Kim Dovey, I theorize place as intrinsically linked to the practice of everyday life, as something physical, emotional, and experiential that is constantly changing and becoming, as beholden and determined by one's bodily experience.[14] In this sense, thirdspaces, due to their social, experiential, and

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[12] Raymond Williams, "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent" in *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 121-127.
[13] Kim Dovey, *Becoming Places: Urbanism/Architecture/Identity/Power* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 3.
[14] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Saint Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 12-18. The concept of place, especially as it relates to space is debated in scholarship. Edward Casey (*The Fate of Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)) proposes an ontological understanding of space as preconceived, abstracted from the everyday. Norberg-Schulz (*Genius Loci: Toward a Phenomenology of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980)) proposes the idea of place as a spirit, or 'genius loci,' working off Heideggerian ideas of dwelling. Responding to these notions, geographer Doreen Massey centers the ideas of place as open, provisional and unfixed, based on multiple histories (Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Saint Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1994)). Gaston Bachelard *(The Poetics of Space* (New York: Orion Press, 1964)) likens place to a bodily experience.

practiced nature, are places. Places are embedded with emotion, imagination, and memory, and they become familiar due to experience and practice.[15] With this, space can be transformed and transmuted into multiple places, as determined by the dweller. In each chapter, I explore methods and strategies that show how photographers, working with their subjects, create documents that chronicle this place-making effort.

Furthermore, I contend that the photographic medium itself functions as a part of place-making as the photograph can act as a retelling or remembering of a place.[16] The making of a photograph, in the 1930s, was a corporeal and embodied experience—the photographer needed to be situated within the space they were capturing.[17] In this sense, photographs are indexical referents back to a real time and space from which the photograph was taken. The photograph can then act as a replacement for a place and ideologically function in the creation and remembrance of a place. Through the making of a photograph, an additional value becomes tied to that place, as the photograph plays a role in the negotiation and renegotiation of place.[18] In my dissertation, through visual

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[15] Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy, eds., *Urban Space and Representation* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 6.

[16] Helen Westgeest and Thomas E. Crow, *Take place: photography and place from multiple perspectives* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2009).

[17] This assertion is in conversation with Kate Bussard's 2014 book *Unfamiliar Streets* that argues photography, specifically the genre of street photography, is beholden to "a specific urban site as a cultural political economic and social environment," 2. Bussard argues for this reconsideration of the genre through recalling early sources that meditate on the practice's relationship to space including Orborne Yellott's "Street Photography" that, as a guide, reinforced the immediacy of the city and photograph's role in acting as replacements for places and the medium's ability to collapse distance (*Photo-Miniature: A Magazine of Photographic Information* 2, no. 14 (May 1900): 49-88).

[18] Katharina Fackler, "Introduction and Remapping the Geography of Class: Photography, Protest, and the Politics of Space in the 1968 Poor People's Campaign" in

analysis of singular photographs and their subsequent use in exhibitions and publications, I analyze how the photograph functions as a part of place-making.

Throughout this dissertation, I examine contemporaneous writings and criticism on the photographic medium and the relationship between documentary photography and the New Deal's, particularly the FAP's, reinvigoration and appropriation of the tradition of folk art. Leaders of the FAP, such as Holger Cahill, employed the idea of the folk/naïve/primitive artist to explore the roots of American art as well as the modern movement in art during the late 1920s and through the 1930s.[19] Folk art, in its many iterations was celebrated as the work of untaught artists, innocent of European "fine art" teaching. These artists, according to Cahill, produced "untutored expression[s] of the common people made by them, and intended for their use and enjoyment."[20] This emphasis on the untaught, expressionistic, and the artists' connection to community were also common refrains used by writers and critics such as Elizabeth McCausland, James Agee, Lincoln Kirstein, and Sid Grossman to describe the work of documentary photographers of the 1930s.[21] With photography's innate technological ability to explore

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Picturing America: Photography and the Sense of Place, eds. Kerstin Schmidt and Julia Faisst (Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2019), 212.

[19] As seen in Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936).

[20] Holger Cahill, "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition," *Parnassus* (New York, N.Y. 1929) 4, no. 3 (1932): 1-4, 2.

[21] Elizabeth McCausland, in her essay, "Documentary Photography" references the history of the medium, identifying the first news photographers of the nineteenth century as the precursors to this documentary tradition, calling them "primitives or folk artists." McCausland continues to explore the character of photography as a folk art, "plainly photography is not just another game, like crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzles, mah-jongg, and ping-pong. It represents a real folk movement a real drive of popular energy and impulse." (Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," Syllabus and readings

the texture of everyday life, revealing and establishing culture, the cultural critics of the day intertwined the folk and the medium of photography, as photographers produced an American folk vision.

Furthermore, the photographers investigated in my dissertation attend to vernacular spaces within the urban landscape and the localized occupation of those spaces. In interrogating the relationship between these two traditions, folk art and photography, and their role within the New Deal's effort to construct a lineage of American art, we can better understand the efforts of Levitt, Robbins, Libsohn, Grossman, and Evans.[22] These photographers, working for the FAP, Photo League, and

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for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey, n.p.). James Agee claims Levitt's photographs as possessing near "the pure spontaneity of true folk art" (Agee, *A Way of Seeing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), viii). In Lincoln Kirstein's epilogue to *American Photographs*, the writer equates Evans's process to a "disembodied burrowing eye," likening this photographic style to Civil War photographer Mathew Brady's unflinching, pure, and direct documentation of American history. Kirstein finds a naïve authenticity in the works of Evans, harkening back to the era of "New Bedford ship-builders" (Lincoln Kirstein, *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 195-199). In a transcript from a 1950 class held in Sid Grossman's Chelsea loft, Grossman describes the camera as a device "almost of folk expression," (Grossman Transcript, 1950, Bob Shamis Archive, New York, New York).

[22] At this moment, both photography exhibitions and folk-art exhibitions were exploding in popularity (*American Ancestors: Masterpieces by Little Known and Anonymous American Painters, 1790-1890*, downtown gallery/American Folk Art Gallery (1931); *American Folk Sculpture: The Work of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Craftsmen*, Newark Museum (1931); *American Photography: Retrospective* Exhibition, Julian Levy Gallery (1931); *Provincial Paintings of the Nineteenth Century* Whitney Museum of Art (1932); *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man*, Museum of Modern Art (1932); *Walker Evans: Photographs of Nineteenth-Century Houses*, Museum of Modern Art (1933); *Documentary Photographs from the Files of the Resettlement Association: A College Art Association Exhibition*, Federal Art Gallery (1936); *Berenice Abbott's Changing New York*, Museum of the City of New York (1937); *Walker Evans,* Museum of Modern Art (1938).

Farm Security Administration, produced photographs that discover and communicate the authentic experience of the everyday, merging the tenets of folk art with the photographic medium. Through this integration, the photographers created documents that transformed city spaces into authentic, localized places within each neighborhood.

The Contested Landscape of New York City During the New Deal

The photographs I examine were produced between 1935-1939, a time of great political and social unrest, with a stagnant economy and over a quarter of the nation's population unemployed. To combat this instability, President Roosevelt launched the New Deal—a series of projects, programs, and reforms designed to stimulate the economy, create jobs, fix the country's infrastructure, and boost morale. The New Deal was intended to strengthen the country fiscally and politically, and also culturally and morally. Adhering to Keynesian economic theory that posited the deficit spending required to create these agencies and employment would, in the long run, restore the economy, the New Deal created over twenty million jobs (over eight million as a part of the WPA) during its first three years of implementation.[23]

Rather than provide only monetary relief, administrators of the New Deal believed that gainful employment was superior to a "hand-out." The program's ethos followed that employment would allow for "a more abundant life" while also quelling the fear that the unemployed workers' idle time could produce passive and inert citizens or

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[23] John P Deeben, "Family Experiences and New Deal Relief: The Correspondence Files of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, 1933-1936," *Genealogy Notes* Fall 2012, vol. 44, No. 2, n.p.

possibly increase American's susceptibility to radicalism.[24] Gainful employment would then restore citizen's confidence in American democracy. With this, employment was transformed into a civic right, but a right reduced to those deemed "employable."[25] While overall, the New Deal created many new jobs, it also, to a degree, excluded certain members—mothers, senior citizens, children, immigrants, and minorities—from the employable class, thus limiting their civic rights and disallowing their participation in the American citizenry.[26] New Deal policies also set rules that restricted immigrants' eligibility for WPA jobs as priority was given to American citizens at an exceedingly high margin.[27] My dissertation restores the voices, visions, and places of the children, women, minorities, and working classes who were excluded from the larger labor discourses of the New Deal.

Simultaneous to the establishment of New Deal programs, local and federal governments enacted laws and regulations that homogenized cities and limited immigrant populations. The photographic projects examined in this dissertation at times reveal those

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[24] Arthur Krock, "More Abundant Life: President's Final Goal," *New York Times*, January 7, 1934, E1. Sharon Ann Musher*, Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 24.
[25] Lauren Rebecca Sklaroff argues in her book *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era*, that Federal Project Number One (Federal Writers', Art, Theater, and Music Projects), a subsection of the WPA, in fact hired a number of Black intellectual leaders and that these "middling" figures were able to fight (successfully and unsuccessfully) to include Black culture within the New Deal art programs (Sklaroff, *Black Culture and the New Deal: The Quest for Civil Rights in the Roosevelt Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2009)).
[26] Sharon Ann Musher*, Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 14.
[27] Donald Stevenson Howard, *The WPA and Federal Relief Policy* (New York 1943), 307.

limiting efforts while also underscoring immigrant and marginalized classes' efforts to push against those limitations, making and marking their place within their streets and homes. This immigrant population was already in decline since the 1924 passage of the Johnson-Reed Act, a bill that set quotas for immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, effectively shutting off American ports. By the 1930s, more Jews, Italians, Lithuanians, Poles, Japanese, and Chinese left the United States than arrived on its shores.[28] The immigrant population was particularly affected in New York City, as the city's foreign-born population between 1930 and 1940 declined by 5.3% compared to the national increase of 1.8%.[29] Immigrants who remained in New York City faced laws and regulations that limited their employment options and aimed to relocate their homes and businesses. By the 1930s, neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side, home to majority Italian and Jewish residents, had populations decline by half due to efforts by reformers and investors who intended to create a downtown purged of an immigrant presence.[30]

One of these efforts to re/move populations was partly due to the work of the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) that was created under the passage of the Wagner-Stegall Act. Established in 1937 to fix the city's decades-long housing problem, NYCHA managed public funds and federal aid to build or refurbish housing to meet a

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[28] Steven G. Koven and Frank Götzke, *American Immigration Policy: Confronting the Nation's Challenges* (New York: Springer, 2010), 133

[29] Arun Peter Lobo and Joseph J. Salvo, "The Newest New Yorkers: Characteristics of the City's Foreign-born Population," (New York: The City of New York, Department of City Planning, Office of Immigrant Affairs, 2013), 10.

[30] See Donna Gabaccia, "Little Italy's Decline: Immigrant Renters and Investors in a Changing City," in *Landscapes of Modernity,* eds. David Ward and Oliver Zunz (New York, Russel Sage Foundation, 1992), 235-251.

new standard. This agency, along with the Public Works Agency (PWA – a New Deal Agency), aided in the construction of public housing in New York City during the Depression, accounting for thirty-five percent of the total housing built in New York City between 1934-1938.[31] These projects replaced and refurbished old law tenements that made up much of Lower Manhattan's urban landscape.[32] Boasting communal living for its inhabitants, including stores, schools, child-care facilities, and greenspaces, this new housing priced out the truly poor and unemployed, the people whose homes were replaced by this new construction, as the new rent averaged between $6.05 - $12.50 per room per month.[33] Commenting on the new Knickerbocker Village (located between the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges) in the 1939 Federal Writers' Project's *New York Guide*, the researchers note that the average older rental elsewhere in the district was nearer to five dollars, forcing the "former occupants of this site [to move] to other

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[31] Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 12, no. 4 (1986): 353-9, 354.

[32] Old Law Tenements, also called Dumbbell Tenements were established after the passage of the New York State Tenement Act of 1879 that attempted to regulate new tenement construction in New York City. This act mandated that all tenement rooms have a window and enough toilets so that that one was shared by only two families (as opposed to upwards of twenty families the shared a single facility in previous construction). This new construction was largely seen as an inadequate solution to the housing problem as the city's population and density continually increased. Often times the laws were not fully enforced and windows, meant to bring light and air into the apartment, opened to dim, dank airshafts. Additional tenement construction reforms were continually passed throughout the twentieth century, but were largely ignored as landlords refused to pay for necessary renovations/new construction. For more information see Andrew Dolkart, "Tenements" in *Affordable Housing in New York,* eds. Nicholas Dagen Bloom and Matthew Gordon Lasner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020).

[33] Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 12, no. 4 (1986): 363.

slums."[34] This new housing, expected to remedy the housing crisis, did not address the needs of the city's poorest inhabitants. Along with new construction came an increase in demolition and vacancy in many neighborhoods. In the Lowest East Side alone, demolitions, the majority of which were undertaken by NYCHA, resulted in well over a million square feet of idle land.[35] These laws, along with establishing a greater subway system and zoning regulations, attempted to limit certain populations' access to the city, shrinking immigrant and lower class neighborhoods.

In many of the photographs discussed in this dissertation, particularly those included in *One Third of a Nation* and the *Chelsea Document*, inadequate housing, or lack thereof, was commonly photographed. While these projects argued for governmental intervention to solve this housing crisis, the photographs do not necessarily disclose the governmental body as the only option for housing improvement. When examined spatially, the photographs also offer narratives that explore and expose how inhabitants make homes within the contested and marginalized spaces "on the edge" within the neighborhood's urban landscapes. While portraying the possibility of government-sponsored intervention as a positive and necessary development, the projects also show city inhabitants as agents of change, not idle dwellers but citizens that activate the streets

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[34] The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 115.
[35] *East Side Chamber News*, no. 5 (August, 1938), 7. In a further effort to remove immigrants and improve housing, the PWA's Suburban Resettlement division of the Resettlement Administration promoted the transition from city tenement housing to collective living in the suburbs. One such project was the Jersey Homestead, located in a small rural town near Highstown, New Jersey, that constructed new housing as well as commercial and educational spaces to promote a communal way of life.

on which they live, work, and play. These projects picture the reciprocity between spaces and actors and how through and perhaps despite governmental mediation, intervention that attempted to control and regulate the lives of city dwellers, these citizens could and would continue to make their own place.

Furthermore, racist and segregationist policies plagued public housing. The Harlem River Houses, located in the West 150s, was the first development that would house Black residents—a part of the city's population experiencing some of the worst housing shortages.[36] Policies dictated that other projects such as the First Houses (located in the East Village) and the Williamsburg Houses (located in Brooklyn) only allow white occupants as developers feared that Black residents would decrease the neighboring land value. The PWA's greater goals drew on progressive understandings of the relationship between the environment and citizenship—that desirable housing would facilitate the development of a national citizenship. But this national citizenship was not necessarily inclusive and pluralistic. By enforcing strict eligibility standards that required proof of continuous employment and also assessed a candidate's character and material prospects, many residents were not qualified to apply for this housing.[37]

The issues of race are prevalent in the case studies examined in my dissertation. Helen Levitt's chalk drawing series shows how Black and Latinx children of East Harlem employed creative labor to build housing that existed outside of the racist policies of the

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[36] For more information see Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," *Journal of Urban history* 12, no. 4, (1986): 353-390.
[37] J.J. Butts, "Writing Projects: New Deal Guidebooks, Community, and Housing Reform in New York City," *The Space Between,* 2:1 (2006), 124.

decade, crafting dream homes of their own making. The photographs of Grossman and Libsohn in Chelsea and Eagle and Robbins of the Lower East Side do not describe similar racial issues, as the photographs tend to ignore the presence of African American occupiers. The photographers instead turned their camera to the fate of immigrants—people whose immigrant, religious, and ethnic identity was usually shared by the photographer. This choice to ignore certain racial inequities within the landscapes of Chelsea and the Lower East Side discloses the photographers' attempted erasure of racial hierarchies within housing accessibility debates. While I argue these photographic series, when read for their spatial narratives, offer alternative histories that restore the agency and identity of city dwellers typically removed from city histories, this rehistoricizing remains limited and exclusive.

Along with new housing policies that limited certain classes, races, and ethnicities admittance to affordable housing, Mayor LaGuardia implemented new policies during the 1930s that heightened regulation and restricted access to the public streets and sidewalks. In an effort to uphold middle-class values of "street decorum," city-wide bans on pushcarts and sidewalk amusements that typically populated lower income neighborhoods were enacted throughout the decade. Such bans reflected politicians' desire to promote newly constructed enclosed markets, spaces controlled by the municipality, and viewed as more sanitary and respectable shopping options. Concurrently, Mayor LaGuardia's "war on noise" expanded the definition of noise and increased police authority to control street sounds. The enforcement of "noise" decrees reveals how sound was determined based on observers' social, class, and cultural

backgrounds and not defined by tone or decibel.[38] Due to this inherent subjectivity, enforcing new sound restrictions enabled control of the lower classes' private and public lives, coded as an effort to maintain public propriety. These bans limited access by members of the lower and working class to the city's communal outdoor space throughout the 1930s.[39]

The decade also marked a concerted effort by child-reformers and New Deal politicians to regulate city children's play—to take play off the street and only permit it in regulated and bounded play spaces. FAP administrator Holger Cahill describes the Project's art education department's important work as, "a widening arc of social influence has been created by the classes for under-privileged children, taking them off the street and providing fresh and natural outlets for expression."[40] Cahill emphasizes the essential step of this education, writing that only once children are taken *off the street* and welcomed into the structured classroom can they truly express themselves. Writing in 1939, Mark McCloskey, the director of recreation for the New York City Board of Education, comments on the necessity for children to enjoy government-supervised recreation programs that "give them as much freedom as possible with a maximum of

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[38] Hillel Schwartz, "Beyond Tone and Decibel: The History of Noise," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 44, no. 18 (1998): B8.

[39] See Daniel Bluestone, "'The Pushcart Evil': Peddlers, Merchants, and New York City's Streets, 1890-1940," *Journal of Urban History* 18 (November 1991): 68–92; Lilian Radovac, "The "War on Noise": Sound and Space in La Guardia's New York," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 733–760; and Clare Corbould, "Streets, Sounds and Identity in Interwar Harlem," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 859–894.

[40] Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 23.

safety to themselves and to property," enforcing the idea that regulated play was better for children as well as for the greater city environment.[41] Working at this time when institutions were attempting to clean up the city, limit ubiquitous occurrences such as noise, and code public spaces for particular, regulated uses, the photographs examined in my dissertation reveal opposition to these decrees. Instead, the photographs show city inhabitants engaging and using communal and liminal spaces beyond what was "appropriate." My study argues that the execution of these routines and rituals in public can be read as emergent acts, an effort by dwellers to claim place and their subsequent right to the city.

Photographic Surveys of New York City

This dissertation analyzes urban photographic views produced under the FAP, Photo League, and Farm Security Administration in New York City. Scholarship of New Deal photography typically focuses on rural or small-town photographic studies, though urban documentary surveys were also common during the 1930s. This decade marks a time when the camera was increasingly used as a tool to study and document society—both rural, urban, and sites in-between. Historian Warren Susman identifies the 1930s as the decade in which Americans turned inward to locate and define a concrete American culture, creating a society of "belonging" that attempted to garner security.[42] This can be

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[41] Mark McCloskey, "For City Children at Play, Variety is the Spice of Life: In Shaping a Recreational Program the Aim is to Provide Good Exercise and an Outlet for Talents of Many Different Kinds," *The New York Times,* April 9, 1939, D8.
[42] Warren Susman*, Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 154-160.

seen in the renewed attention to the social sciences of cultural anthropology and sociology that gathered data on the American "everyday" to make the world comprehensible.[43] This emphasis on social sciences also heightened the use-value of the camera as it was employed as a tool to identify and map the American way of life, intertwining art and the categories of the ordinary. The photographic medium was used to introduce and reintroduce American audiences to ideas, peoples, and spaces. This audience continually grew as the medium became increasingly democratic—photographs were published in countless magazines and books, and exhibited in municipal buildings, department stores, and train stations, blurring the already unstable boundaries between art and documentary.[44]

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[43] Such as the study on Muncie Indiana by Robert and Helen Lynd published as *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (1929) and *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts* (1937). In 1937, *Life* magazine sent staff photographer Margaret Burke-White to pictorially record the same Middletown as studied by the Lynds. While the Lynds' second study on Middletown discusses how the economic difficulties of the Great Depression had affected the psyche of Muncie's citizens, Burke-White's photographs and the accompanying article rather detailed a citizenship that still believed in the American Dream (Margaret Bourke-White, "Muncie Ind. Is the Great 'U.S. Middletown,'" *Life* vol. 2 no. 19, May 10, 1937: 15-25). For more information about the two studies, see Claude Cookman, "Life Visits "Middletown": Trying to Repair America's Social Contract with Margaret Bourke-White's Photographs," *Visual Communication Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2011): 204-222.

[44] Photographs were published in countless periodicals such as *Life, Look, Fortune* in the late 1930s and the decade is widely considered the "golden age" of the photobook. Similarly, photography exhibitions were becoming more popular in art museums (Newark Museum, Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Federal Art Gallery) and also traveled to schools, department headquarters, and civic buildings. See John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 1-18. For more information about the complicated meaning of documentary photography and its unstable relationship to "art," see Sarah M. Miller, "Inventing Documentary in American Photography, 1930-1945," PhD Diss., (University of Chicago, 2009). Miller argues against Alan Trachtenberg and more recently John Raeburn's consensus that documentary

The popularization of photographs in the service of studying society is witnessed in multiple photographic surveys of New York City produced throughout the decade, such as those by photographers Percy Loomis Sperr and Charles Von Urban. These photographers typically captured subjects from a distance, a strategy that caused inhabitants to blend into the streets and buildings or be altogether removed from the scene, creating an image of an unindividualized metropolis. In 1925, Percy Loomis Sperr was named the official photographer for the City of New York and was funded, in part, by the New York Public Library to make over 30,000 city views beginning in 1925 and lasting until the end of WWII. While very little is known of Sperr and his institutional partnership, his descriptive photographs explore the space of Manhattan's docks and harbors, the dismantling of an elevated train line, and the Belt Parkway construction.[45] In his survey, Sperr centers on the interplay of structural and decorative elements in land and sea, focusing on the built environment's construction and surface.[46] In this photograph of the corner of Avenue C and Thirteenth Street, Sperr pictures the well-lit

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photography was understood to be transparent in the 1930s. Miller rather contends that the theorization and implementation of the term documentary was still being written, with an unstable and nebulous meaning.

[45] Sperr wrote and photographically illustrated the 1937 book *Island Scenes: Pictures of Staten Island, its beauty spots, historic houses, parks, bridges, public buildings and other points of interest* (P.L. Sperr, 1937). His business card boasted, "A growing collection of over 30,000 views of: New York Harbor; Ships, old and modern; Skylines, Dock Scenes, Harbor Craft, Sunsets, Bridges, Naval Vessels, New York City, all five boroughs; Street Scenes, Skyscrapers, Old Houses, Foreign Quarters, Pushcarts, Farms, Old New York Scenes." A.J. Pulso, JR "Percy Loomis Sperr," *Maine Antique Digest*, October 1999, 42-C-43-C.

[46] Percy Loomis Sperr's at the New York Public Library (https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/collection-of-photographs-of-new-york-city-1931-1942#/?tab=about&scroll=21), Ralph Blumenthal, "Take 2: A Photo Archive of City Streets," *The New York Times*, March 14, 2000.

street and sidewalk as vacant and unmoving (figure 0.5). The building on the corner occupies the center of the image and is photographed at eye-level. The print reveals the urban landscape's layered structures comprised of geometric, parallel lines as seen in the sidewalk curb, the window sills, the fire escape platforms, the beams traversing the vacant lot, and the buildings' cornices. Sperr presents the corner and buildings from a detached, neutral view, far removed to ignore the practice, occupation, or socialization of the streets, sidewalk, and buildings.

Charles Von Urban's sweeping cityscapes of New York, made in part for the Historic American Building Survey during the 1930s, are similarly descriptive and titled by their location in New York City's grid (figure 0.6).[47] In this photograph of East Ninety-Second Street, Von Urban captures a three-story building from the opposing sidewalk. The street, sidewalk, and home seem vacant, and the curtained windows are closed. The photograph's main actor, Number 160, looks inactive, almost tucked in by the taller buildings on its left and right side. The street, sidewalk, and driveway are spotless, the building's façades also appear newly washed and unblemished. Von Urban emphasizes the material and structural details of this address but does not indicate the space's sociality. If not for the descriptive label, the viewer would have no understanding

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[47] Charles Van Urban at the Museum of the City of New York (https://collections.mcny.org/CS.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=24UAYW532EFPU), See Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.ny0366.photos/?sp=5. Von Urban also produced a limited number of photographs for the Index of American Design (a part of the FAP), see collection at National Gallery of Art, (https://www.nga.gov/collection/artist-info.8172.html).

of this scene or its placement within the greater city as Von Urban instead pictures the quaint space as removed of context—socially, historically, and environmentally.

As explored in these photographs of the corner Avenue C and Thirteenth Street, and the small domicile nestled on Ninety-Second Street, Sperr and Von Urban typically captured their photographs from a distance. Documents prepared by the New York City Housing Authority that surveyed the more everyday life of tenement housing comparably show sterile views of the city, rarely including glimpses of occupiers, offering no comprehension of the relationship between inhabitants and space (figure 0.7). In these New York City studies, the photographers' and institutional goals were to make descriptive and historical views, focusing on the built environment. Diverging from this documentation, Eagle, Robbins, Levitt, Grossman, and Libsohn turned their cameras on the occupied and activated city.

Documentary Photography During the New Deal

This dissertation breaks new ground as the first study to examine the 1,000 plus photographs produced under the creative section of the FAP, particularly the work of Helen Levitt, Arnold Eagle, and David Robbins.[48] The FAP, a subset of the Works

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[48] Francis V. O'Connor's *Art For the Millions* (1973) offers a historical overview of the program, summarizing the fine and practical art production of the project, with only a few pages dedicated to photography. Francis V. O'Connor, *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973). Merry A. Foresta's essay "Art and document: Photography of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project," in *Official Images: New Deal Photography,* eds. Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange and Sally Stein (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987) offers a brief overview of the Federal Art Project photography division.

Progress Administration (WPA), was created in 1935 to employ out of work American artists during the Great Depression.[49] The FAP, contextualized with the progressive cultural ideals of John Dewey, Constance Rourke, and Van Wyck Brooks, among others, aimed to create a nationalistic art accessible to the common man.[50] Overseen by national director Holger Cahill, the FAP destabilized the divisions between high and low art. Within the project, formal qualities were secondary as art was judged on its ability to communicate, produce knowledge, and strengthen the relationship between artist, viewer, and the greater population.[51] The art produced under the Project was not judged solely on artistic merit, but on its ability to express a true portrait of America.[52] Though a government agency, the FAP placed importance on the artistic vision of the artists it employed, not only its governmental agenda. Levitt, Eagle, and Robbins, employed by the FAP, followed this edict, picturing an authentic and local study of the racially and ethnically diverse population in one of America's urban centers.

Analyzing the FAP ambitions, art historian Jonathan Harris argues that the Project used art to promote citizen participation, community involvement, and patriotism.[53] The

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[49] The Works Progress Administration was renamed the Work Projects Administration in 1939.

[50] For more information on John Dewey's influence on Holger Cahill see "The Art of Experience" in Victoria Grieve's *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 11-35.

[51] Merry A. Foresta, "Art and document: Photography of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project," in *Official Images: New Deal Photography,* eds. Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange and Sally Stein (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), 150.

[52] Holger Cahill, "Frontiers of American art," Frame 511, Reel 1107, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

[53] Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 21-23.

FAP, while headquartered in Washington DC, had offices throughout the country and established art galleries and education centers in places that lacked museums and other cultural institutions.[54] Through bringing art out of cities and producing work that spoke to more localized audiences, the Project hoped to expand the typical art-going audience beyond collectors and academics, garnering a genuine art movement.[55] The FAP worked to record and create a culture of American art, as this art patronage was meant to employ those out of work and to "restore national confidence in American forms of capitalism and democracy."[56] With this goal in mind, the art produced under the Project, while local in execution, ultimately served a national goal—to shape national identity and strengthen the public's acceptance of the government's central role in American life.[57]

In examining the artistic production under the FAP, the imagery reinforces hierarchies of labor between white- and blue-collar workers. While manual and blue-collar labor was lauded, these painted and drawn figures, almost always men (as women were rarely represented as "working"), were anonymous, stereotyped, and eroticized while their white-collar counterparts were personalized and engaged in intellectual

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[54] For more information about the prolific community art centers of the FAP, see "The Federal Art Project and the Making of Middlebrow Culture," in Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 60-83.
[55] Archibald MacLeish, "Unemployed Arts: WPA's Four Arts Projects, Their Origins, Their Operations," *Fortune.* vol. 15 (May 1937), 115
[56] Virginia Tuttle Clayton, Elizabeth Stillinger, Erika Doss, and Deborah Chotner, *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 65.
[57] Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1.

activities. This pictorial representation furthered the class divisions in the United States.[58] While Cahill and other administrators may have lauded the Project's production as representative of the "common man," the imagery could be used to negatively reinforce class, race, and ethnic divides. In examining Levitt, Eagle, and Robbins' creative photography production, they structure city space in an attempt to destabilize those hierarchies and transgress from the Project's homogenizing, nationalistic intentions. Their studies show personalized and local investigations into city spaces, and citizens efforts (along with the photographers themselves) to push against the top-down decrees that were in place to limit the use of shared spaces within the urban landscape. Additionally, their projects highlight the creative labor and rituals of racial and ethnic minorities that structured these shared spaces, classes that were typically excluded from the greater WPA workforce, and the Project's painted citizenry.

The arts were divided into three categories—fine arts (easel, graphic, mural, and sculpture), practical arts (the Index of American Design, poster, craft, diorama, and photography), and art education (teaching art, the establishment and administering of community art centers, and research).[59] The photography section in the practical arts division was dedicated primarily to documenting the program's work—such as artists at

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[58] For more information see Erika Doss, "Looking at Labor: Images of Work in 1930s American Art," *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*, 2002 vol. 24: 230-257.
[59] Merry A. Foresta, "Art and document: Photography of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project," in *Official Images: New Deal Photography,* eds. Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange and Sally Stein (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), 151.

work, FAP-sponsored exhibitions, and adult and child art classes.[60] In many cases, these photographs were used to illustrate government reports, as illustrations for press, and used in education exhibitions as evidence for the productive deeds of the departments. The total production boats over 450,000 negatives, 38,000 made in New York City, and many prints expose the photographer's aesthetic expertise.[61] In certain states, and most successfully in New York City, the section also permitted photographers to invent a "creative assignment." It is unclear precisely how many creative assignment prints were produced in New York City, but at least thirteen photographers worked in a creative capacity, including Helen Levitt, Arnold Eagle, David Robbins, George Herlick, Andrew Herman, Sol Horn, Leo Lances, Sol Libsohn, Cyril Mipaas, F. Allen Morgan, Mark Nadir, Berenice Abbott, and Aubrey Pollard.[62] According to FAP documents, the creative

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[60] Undated New York City Federal Art Project Report, Reel 90, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA.

[61] In "Exhibition catalog operations and functions of the Federal Art Project, 1939" Cahill notes that around 38,000 photographs have been made for the New York City project, including as part of the service function, creative assignments, and also, "produced photomontage studies and series of architectural, racial, scenic and genre subjects, and produced photomurals for public allocation." Holger Cahill, Exhibition catalog operations and functions of the Federal Art Project, 1939, Reel 1210, Frame 184089, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA. Holger Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts" in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project,* ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 39.

[62] In my research I have been able to find evidence of creative assignments in the states of Pennsylvania, Oregon, California, and Florida. In Pennsylvania Jack Delano produced a series on Pittsburg coal miners in 1938 or 1939 (see Jack and Irene Delano, interview conducted by Richard Doud, June 12, 1965, AAA, accessed May 1, 2019, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-jack-and-irene-delano-13026#overview). In Oregon Minor White produced a series on downtown Portland (see Foresta, *Official Images,* 152). In Florida, Florence Randall completed a series on Seminole Indians (see Foresta, *Official Images*, 174), possibly with the help of

assignments surpassed the evidentiary expectations of photography and were created "from the sensitive lens of the camera by a man with the eye of an artist," producing images that were artistic and socially useful.[63] Cahill, while writing sparingly on the function of photography within the FAP, wrote convincingly on the role of art as a conduit of knowledge: "In a genuine sense, [art] should have use, it should be interwoven with the very stuff and texture of human experience, intensifying the experience, making it more profound, rich, clear, and coherent."[64] With this, the FAP mandated that art serve as a mediator between citizens and their lived experiences.

Much of the scholarship that examines the photographic work of the FAP focuses on Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York*. This project was conceived by Abbott in the early 1930s and officially sponsored by the FAP in 1935. The series was published

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Cyril Mipaas (see Reel 93, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA). And in California, centered in Southern California but with members spanning from San Francisco to San Diego, a group of photographers with a "founding purpose [that] was self-expression" produced a variety of studies. These include Edward Weston, Chandler Weston, Sonya Noskowiak, Sybil Anikeyev, Nacho Bravo, Hy Hirsh, William Abbenseth, and Leroy Robbins (see Paul Hoffman, *California New Deal Art* (Santa Clara: de Saisset Art Gallery and Museum, University of Santa Clara, 1976), 48-49).

[63] Letter from Thomas Parker to Donald Thompson, Box 2116, Records of the Work Projects Administration, 1937, Work Projects Administration Central Files, New York City, 1935-1944, The National Archives, College Park, Maryland. "Creative photography, which produces photographs of artistic merit subject to allocation and exhibition in the same manner as graphic prints sculpture and easel paintings constitutes the other part of the division's work. Assignments of this nature are naturally limited due to the heavy demand for service photography." In Holger Cahill, "The New York City WPA Art Project Activities and Accomplishments, New York City," 1941, Reel 90, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA.

[64] Holger Cahill quoted in Belisario R. Contreras, *Tradition and Innovation in New Deal Art* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1983), 171.

throughout the decade and was presented in a 1937 exhibition held at the Museum of the City of New York.[65] The project was published as a book in 1939, accompanied with captions by Elizabeth McCausland, heavily edited by the publisher. Keeping the name *Changing New York*, the photobook was promoted as a companion guide to the city for those visiting to attend the World's Fair.[66] Abbott's intent, in line with the greater goals of the FAP, was to capture the city's dynamism and realism, exploring multiple temporalities and experiences—producing art that communicated and connected with the community. The singular photographs do glimpse this reciprocity between city spaces and their occupiers, but when examining the photographs in the final book form, the volume's layout and Abbott's strikingly formal and static photographs reinforce the urban landscape as unmovable. McCausland, an amateur graphic designer, originally proposed a varying, dynamic page design to supplement her historical and, at times, critical captions, but the publisher insisted on a traditional guidebook format and edited McCausland's captions to exclude their caustic edge.

Organized geographically and following a standard guidebook progression, the book's pages move from the southern tip of Manhattan to the north, undulating from east to west throughout this northward trip, and concluding in the outer boroughs. The

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[65] Bonnie Yochelson, *Berenice Abbott: Changing New York* (New York: New Press and Museum of the City of New York, 1997), 20.
[66] The 1930's were a decade during which photography exploded in popularity in America. E.P. Dutton was trying to profit off this increased appetite for images in making *Changing New York.* For a historical examination of this phenomenon see John Reaburn's "The Rebirth of Photography in the Thirties," in *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 1-18.

location typically served as the title of the photograph, and the series itself remains accountable to the city's grid and planned/structured spaces.[67] In Abbott's photographs, ranging from empty buildings in Brooklyn to the McGraw Hill skyscraper in midtown Manhattan (figures 0.8 and 0.9), the buildings, rather than their environmental context, are emphasized. Much more dynamic than the city-sponsored views produced by Sperr, these photographs offer glimpses into human inhabitation but are taken from a distanced remove. The McGraw Hill building's windows and the four-story corner structure in Brooklyn are closed-off, overlaid with wood, or so reflective as to appear impenetrable from the exterior. While presenting the city's mutability, Abbott's photographs remain unengaged and unoccupied, unlike the FAP work of Levitt, Eagle, and Robbins.[68]

Art Historian Terri Weissman has convincingly argued that Abbott's adherence to realism within her photographic practice, a realism also present in McCausland's writing, mandated "a communicative interaction with an audience, an interaction intended to establish an open, civic space of dialogue," an aim aligned with the FAP artistic ethos.[69] To fulfill this communicative goal, Abbott and McCausland produced stoic and distanced views and descriptions that more easily allowed the viewer to insert themselves within the urban plane. In this sense, the photographs chronicle the city's spaces and disregard

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[67] Sarah M. Miller, *Documentary in Dispute: The Original Manuscript of Changing New York by Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), Part 1 "*Changing New York* reconstructed," 1-118.
[68] John Raeburn, "Lost in the City: The New York of Abbott and Hopper," in *The American Metropolis: Image and Inspiration,* eds. Hans Krabbendam, Marja Roholl, and Tity de Vires (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2001), 173.
[69] Terri Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.

place beyond the built environment, place that has been constructed by anonymous city occupiers. Levitt, Eagle, and Robbins rather produced engaged views that suggest an active collaboration between subject and photographer.

Most recently, Sarah M. Miller's book *Documentary in Dispute* published the original photographs, captions, and layout of *Changing New York* as proposed by McCausland and Abbott. Miller argues that this layout, contrasting the realized published version, displays the two collaborators' interest in interrogating documentary of the 1930s as not prescriptive but "multiple and multivalent."[70] Miller explores how the photographer and writer employed methods of "dynamic equilibrium" as strategies for visualizing the cityscape in terms of the invisible forces that shape it, "producing vigorous, undulating, and literally 'changing' images."[71] While these images, in conversation with the captions, were meant to move within and off the page, the photographic, textual, and design methods remain adherent to exploring and prioritizing the built environment. Miller and Weissman examine how Abbott and McCausland's photographs and text, as originally submitted, study the morphology of the city, historicizing scenes, and explore how the past is inscribed within the present and possible future. In contrast, my dissertation examines the neighborhood studies produced by Levitt, Eagle, and Robbins that produced localized, communicative folk studies, exploring individualized, rather than city-wide, responses to limited urban space, imbuing the city dweller with a sense of agency. These studies are more beholden to the past's

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[70] Sarah M. Miller, *Documentary in Dispute: The Original Manuscript of Changing New York by Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2020), xvi
[71] Ibid., xix.

present, exploring personalized memories and individual inscriptions within the urban landscape.

The Photo League, an amateur photography organization founded in 1936 and headquartered on East Twenty-First Street in Manhattan, shared many members with the FAP—including Arnold Eagle, David Robbins, Sol Libsohn, and Sid Grossman. Both organizations were dedicated to probing the medium's communicative potential.[72] The Photo League's history begins with the Workers Film and Photo League (WFPL), a radical organization dedicated to promoting film and photography as weapons in the class struggle.[73] The WFPL was founded in New York City in 1930 as an affiliate of the Communist Workers International Relief. Members, many politically motivated and aligned with the Communist Party, wanted to develop film as a vehicle for mass communication to better reach the working class.[74] By 1936, a wedge developed at the WFPL between filmmakers and photographers as members prioritized film as the ideal medium for the masses.[75]

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[72] The League was located in a loft at Thirty-One East Twenty-First Street, moved its headquarters to Twenty-Three East Tenth Street close to Union Square Park, and then its final location was in the Hotel Albert.

[73] Fiona M. Dejardin, "The Photo League: Aesthetics, Politics and the Cold War," PhD diss., (University of Delaware, 1993), 194. For more information on the Film and Photo League's connection with the Photo League see Lead Ollman, "The Photo League's forgotten past," *History of Photography* 18.2 (July 1994): 154-158. For more information about the communist roots of the WFPL see William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931-1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), and Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982).

[74] Carl Chiarenza *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1982), 15.

[75] Maurice Berger, "Man in the Mirror: *Harlem Document*, Race, and the Photo League," in *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League 1937-1951*, eds. Mason Klein and

The organization's photographers, led by Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, broke away and created an autonomous group named the New York Photo League. The Photo League was an organization dedicated to teaching and propagating the social role of photography.[76] The League was a self-supported collective and pedagogical space that viewed photography as an expressive medium that could garner social change. In an August 1938 issue of *Photo Notes,* the League's semi-monthly newsletter, the League published a mission statement, titled "For A League of American Photographers," declaring, "Photography has tremendous social value. Upon the photographer rests the responsibility and duty of recording a true image of the world as it is today. Moreover, he must not only show us how we live, but indicate the logical development of our lives."[77] There is a clear linkage within this discourse of photography's social and political function, as the League's members took on the duty of recording a "true image of the world today." The passage's emphasis on "us" and "we" reveals that photographers of the League turned their camera onto people with whom they had a personal affinity, as an effort to explore "the logical development" of their life. Photo League board member and writer Elizabeth McCausland pushed this communion further, equating the vision of these photographers with that of "folk artists." McCausland identified, inherent within the photographic medium, its ability to discern and excavate the local, producing an authentic

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Catherine Evans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 11.
[76]Anne Tucker, "A history of the Photo League: The Members Speak," *History of Photography* 18, (Summer 1994), 177.
[77] *Photo Notes*, August 1938, 1.

study of a place.[78] In this sense, the Photo League, comparable to the FAP, bolstered the use of photography as a communicative medium with the potential to build community.

The aesthetic and political nature of the photographs produced by Photo League members remains an understudied part of photographic history, an oversight my dissertation seeks to correct.[79] Most scholarship on the League focuses on the *Harlem Document*, a neighborhood survey led by Aaron Siskind and his subsection of the League called the Feature Group. The *Harlem Document* was a photographic, socio-economic study of contemporary Harlem life meant to provide evidence of a community in peril and advocate for improved conditions.[80] The *Harlem Document*, as witnessed in a close

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[78] Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," Syllabus and readings for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey, n.p.

[79] Anne Tucker's 2001 book *This Was the Photo League,* chronicles the League's commitment to social betterment through photography but fails to consider the photographers individually or formally, Anne Tucker, *This was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War* (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2001). More recently, Elizabeth VanArragon's 2006 dissertation "The Photo League: Views of Urban Experience in the 1930s and 1940s" is the most pertinent work of scholarship that offers in-depth visual analysis of the work produced in the Photo League but does not engage with the social, political, or spatial context in which the photographs were made. Elizabeth VanArragon, "The Photo League: Views of Urban Experience in the 1930s and 1940s," PhD diss., (University of Iowa, 2006).

[80] The project was initially conceived by Michael Carter, a Black sociologist who approached the Feature Group with an interest in documenting and detailing Harlem's social conditions. The Feature Group, comprised of Siskind, and his students (Lucy Ashjian, Harold Corsini, Morris Engel, Beatrice Koslofsky, Richard Lyon, Jack Manning, and Sol Prom Fabricant) met weekly from 1938-1940 (Deborah Martin Kao and Charles A. Mayer, *Aaron Siskind: Toward a Personal Vision* (Boston: Boston College Museum of Art, 1992), 15). The project was initially intended to be a book divided into eight chapters—labor, health, housing, religion, recreation, society, youth, and crime—with text by Carter and photographs by the Feature Group. The book never came to fruition, but the photographs and text were exhibited at the Harlem branch of the YMCA and the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library in 1939. The images were also used

analysis of the project's photographs and the subsequent scholarship on the project, exhibited a reformed approach to documentary. The Feature Group split from the Photo League's commitment to documenting "reality" and rather created photographs that emphasized the importance of form through a modernist approach. Through examining the *Chelsea Document* and its collaborators Grossman and Libsohn, my work aims to resituate the work of the Photo League within a political and social context, beyond the aesthetic discourse (and the subsequent problematic aestheticization of black bodies by a white photographer) that surrounds the scholarship on the *Harlem Document*. In examining how space is structured throughout the *Chelsea Document*, I underscore how Grossman and Libsohn show inhabitants (and themselves through their occupation of shared space) enliven, engage, and empower their spaces, altering their urban discourse and landscape.

In the *Harlem Document* series, subjects' bodies are likened to objects, examined formally rather than framed to insinuate a psychic presence, foreshadowing how Siskind would work in the postwar era. While there is a clear interest in foregrounding occupiers and accounting for their presence within city streets throughout the *Harlem Document*, Siskind and his students do not disclose that presence through a sense of embodiment or communion, as present in the more personalized *Chelsea Document.* In Siskind's photograph of children attempting to enter an abandoned Harlem building, the scene lacks animation and movement (figure 0.10). The image centers on the backs and profiles

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in *Look* magazine's article by Michael Carter, "244,000 Native Sons," published in May 1940, 8.

of the young children, and their bodies are presented as silhouetted statues. In another image from the Document, the viewer looks into the kitchen of a woman's apartment as she mends a piece of fabric (figure 0.11). The doorframe between the rooms operates as a threshold that Siskind (and in turn the viewer) must cross to enter Harlem, underlining the distance between subject and viewer. In these two examples of disparate events, the built environment is shown as one of the scene's main actors—it overtakes, frames, and divides its occupiers, showing space as acting upon and structuring the inhabitants' lives. Siskind was certainly interested in exploring Harlem's social spaces, but his frames disclose his inability to enter, psychically and physically, those spaces. In contrast to Siskind's distance between subject and viewer in the *Harlem Document*, the *Chelsea Document* partially disregards aesthetic concerns and works to animate scenes to explore how subjects act upon their urban landscape. Formal concerns were secondary as the *Chelsea Document* followed the League's greater ethos to use photography for its social, communicative, and educational potential.

The FAP and Photo League's effort to employ photographs to connect with the greater community was parallel to the approach and ambition of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), though the FSA was more limited in who it considered a part of the great American "community." The FSA held more nationalistic goals, with headquarters in Washington DC, while the Photo League remained beholden to local issues within New York City, the city in which its membership lived and worked. The FAP, while also a national organization, held smaller branch offices and centers throughout the country. These offices worked for and responded to issues within their

community, creating locally responsive art that did not necessarily subscribe to the same national narratives produced through the FSA.

Originally titled the Resettlement Administration and founded in 1935 during the height of the Great Depression, the organization was renamed the Farm Security Administration in 1937. The FSA, led by economist Rexford Tugwell, was created to help farmers and other workers in economically perilous positions by organizing resettlement and/or other forms of aid. Tugwell was well aware of the struggle of gaining and maintaining funds for this New Deal agency. In response to that difficulty, he created the Historical Section, a subsection of the agency that photographically documented department deeds in order to prove the agency's value. Tugwell hired his former student Roy Stryker to be the chief of the Historical Section. While not trained as a photographer, Stryker believed in the persuasive and communicative potential of photographs in supplementing abstract economic and social concepts.[81] Stryker's Historical Section became a prolific photography agency of the New Deal, producing over 170,000 prints, archived in the division's files, later preserved at the Library of Congress. To prove the agency's worth, Stryker worked to place images in periodicals and exhibitions each month, including a number of exhibitions at the Photo League.[82]

The majority of the FSA photographers were residents of New York City or other large cities. They rarely turned their lens onto their community; instead, agency

[81] Stryker selected the photographs to be included in Tugwell's *American Economic Life and The Means of Its Improvement* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co.), 1925.
[82] These exhibitions at the League were accompanied with lectures by Stryker about the role of documentary photography. *Photo Notes,* August, 1938, 1; April 1939, 1; March-April, 1940, 1.

photographers typically traveled by car to rural communities to photograph, for only a few days, the “worthy poor”—typically white and decidedly American. This movement away from imaging their city/community is unlike the case studies examined in this dissertation where photographers pictured their own city. By the later 1930s, the FSA turned its attention away from concentrating on the Depression’s causalities and instead focused on the peoples and spaces that comprised America’s small towns. Stryker devised an extensive shooting script, listing sites and characteristics of small towns to guide his photographers’ lenses in documenting this slice of Americana. This new subject was meant to generate a nation-wide dialogue that could “introduce America to Americans.”[83] This turn in photographic subject was brought on with the awareness that small-town life was slowly disappearing due to the rise of mass culture, consumerism, and an increasingly industrial economy. Stryker, and the greater FSA, believed that focusing on this type of American life would pictorially reinforce dreams of American democracy at a time of great change and act as a patriotic antidote to the ever-growing current of Fascism triumphing overseas.[84]

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[83] Brannan, “To Make a Dent in the world” in *FSA: The American Vision,* eds. Beverly Brannan and Gilles Mora (New York: Abrams, 2006), 14. Much early scholarship has focused on the overbearing treatment of Stryker on the photographers he employed. John Raeburn’s makes a thoughtful case, using primary documents, to dispute this idea and rather considers the relationship between Stryker and photographs as a collaboration, not beholden to the shooting scripts that he argues were not prescriptive but suggestive. John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 160-166.

[84] John Raeburn, *Ben Shahn's American Scene: Photographs, 1938* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 1-4.

These photographs were published in the decade's newspapers and popular presses, presented in many exhibitions, and filed in the agency's picture archive housed in its headquarters in Washington, DC.[85] The FSA archive's sophistication and use-value, contemporaneously and historically, was in the photographs' multivalent meanings as they were employed to reflect and produce a limited, unambiguously American history. Post-war trauma, as well as the economic and agricultural crisis of the Great Depression marked the 1930s as a decade of uprootedness and uncertainty. According to Alan Trachtenberg, in his seminal essay on the FSA archive, the file, while in production and as a complete entity, functioned as evidence of America's existence, settling and securing a place for America. He notes, "the project was perhaps the greatest collective effort (though not the first) in the history of photo to mobilize resources to create a cumulative picture of a place and time: in Roy Stryker's words, 'to portray America.'"[86] With the destruction of rural culture due to the new industrial nation, the FSA archive could stand in for what was changing, pictorially garnering a sense of place that attended to the nation. Only twenty-five percent of photographs taken for the FSA depict towns with a population of fifty-thousand or more, though the majority of Americans lived in cities and towns at this time. This "portrait of America" chose to exclude certain ways of life

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[85] There was also a duplicated file of many FSA photograph at the New York Public Library that included over 41,000 prints, 1,015 that are not included in the FSA's archive. For more information see Mary Jane Appel, "The Duplicate File: New Insights into the FSA," *Archives of American Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (2015): 4-27.
[86] Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," in *Documenting America, 1935-1943,* eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988), 58.

from its files.[87] Formed within New Deal discourses that feared the dissolve of American culture, the FSA images functioned in a living archive that documented the past, present, and potential future of everyday American life.

In examining photographs exhibited and published from the FSA archive, there is a clear emphasis on a rural, white point of view, unlike the projects examined in this dissertation that are ethnically diverse and chronicle urban environments—revealing an America different than that conceived within the minds of FSA (and FAP) administrators and their audiences. Sherwood Anderson's *Home Town*, illustrated with FSA photographs, is centered around this singular perspective. Within the book, the minimal glimpses of African Americans, rather than asserting diversity, equate their presence to background scenery.[88] Similarly limiting, Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* erased racial commentary in the agency's images as seen in MacLeish's cropping of Dorothea Lange's photograph of a Mississippi overseer that excludes four of the five Black individuals present in the print (figures 0.12 and 0.13). With this edit, MacLeish makes clear the limited number of people in America entitled to the singular independence and liberty that his poem espoused.[89] Comparably, the FSA photographs published in *Survey Graphic* and *US Camera* (among others) typically ignored racial tensions, and popular agency exhibitions (organized by the College Art Association or the Museum of Modern

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[87] Laurence Levine, "Historian and icon," in *Documenting America, 1935-1943,* eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988), 29.
[88] Sherwood Anderson, *Home Town* (Mamaroneck: P.P. Appel), 1975.
[89] John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 175. And Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York: Da Capo Press, reprint 1977), 8.

Art) analogously included a homogenous perspective.[90] This affirmation of a rural, white, Christian America reinforced this perspective as representative of American consciousness. This continual negotiation of America's identity in the creation of the FSA file worked to discount other consciousnesses from entering the pictorial record of America, just as New Deal efforts were organized to mostly benefit white Americans.[91]

This is not to say that all FSA photographers always participated in this effort. The work of Russell Lee, Edwin Rosskam, John Vachon, and Jack Delano in Chicago's Southside, used to supplement Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices*, offered a dissenting voice to the assumed landscape of unity. Wright's book tells the story of Black Americans living in Chicago, refusing to allow a singularly white point of view to stand in for the New Deal's documentary production. The book's layout and the photographs' dark backgrounds formally reveal the tensions in Black Americans' place-making effort throughout the American landscape. Wright's book successfully exposed a previously ignored history of America, while the pictorial and graphic language uncovers the difficulty in destabilizing that dominant history.[92]

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[90] The Farm Security Administration Photographs in the First International Photographic Exposition, *How American People Live*, April 18-19, 1938, traveled to Gimbel's department store in Philadelphia and the Department of Agriculture's exhibition space in Washington, D.C.

[91] In New York City the unemployment rate for Black Americans was fifty percent, double that of whites. See Deborah Martin Kao, Laura Katzman, and Jenna Webster, *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 27.

[92] Maren Stange, *Bronzeville: Black Chicago in Pictures, 1941-1943* (New York: New Press), 2003.

Centering around the New Deal, this is the first study to examine, in-depth, the relationship of the FAP, Photo League, and the FSA, three organizations that shared participants and practices.[93] While the FAP was formed under correspondingly nationalistic goals to the FSA, the FAP's creative assignments lacked shooting scripts, and there is no evidence of creative oversight implied by the project administrators. The FAP photographers remained in their city and were beholden to making work that could speak to and for *their* community. Additionally, the archive of the FAP was employed for local uses, as photographs were typically presented in city-based exhibitions or settlement houses, with the potential to reach the audience that it pictured. Comparably, the Photo League, as expressed in their self-implicating language, viewed their documentary practice as an alliance with their subjects, working directly with settlement houses and local agencies to produce neighborhood surveys. These studies were correspondingly exhibited for a local audience. While singular photographers or even larger productions

[93] Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange, and Sally Stein's *Official Images: New Deal Photography* (1987), was the first published work to expose the photographic work of other New Deal artistic agencies, offering only a historic overview of the varying programs. These include the Farm Security Administration, The United States Department of Agriculture, Civilian Conservation Corps, National Youth Administration, and the Federal Art Project. Maren Stange's *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) does discuss urban views in relation to the rural FSA studies, but proposes an overarching thesis that aligns documentary photography practices to the capitalist's interests of varying United States corporations. Most useful as a model for my study is cultural historian John Raeburn's 2006 book *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of 1930s Photography* that attempts to correct the assumption that FSA photography was the only work produced in the 1930s and surveys the west coast's f.64 group and New York's Photo League as well as industrial, fashion, and commercial photography of the period. Raeburn chronicles a decade that created a picture hungry audience primed to understand photography espoused as the ideal medium to capture the modern environment.

under the FSA may have held parallel intentions to those working for the FAP or Photo League, the FSA's archive typically assailed those more nuanced or subjective approaches. This dissertation examines how the work for the FAP and Photo League remains accountable to the community. These local surveys resulted in authentic folk studies of New York City's environs, discerning place as distinct to dwellers.

Chapter Summaries

In my first chapter, I examine Helen Levitt's series of chalk drawings created by African American and Latinx child artists of East Harlem, produced during her tenure at New York City's FAP in 1937. In this chapter, I read Helen Levitt as a socially and spatially conscious photographer and her effort to document a sense of place within Harlem's city streets. Levitt's photographs dissent from normative representations of the urban child that show youngsters as passive and endangered. Working as a folklorist, her photographs honor children's individual artistry and attend to their place-making ability. I argue that through her continued attention to collective and marginal spaces within the urban landscape—sidewalks, stoops*,* façades*,* and doors—Levitt offers an empowering reading of children's ability to create, define, and transform space into their own. In Levitt's photographs, her subjects typically take ownership of this space through acts of play, disclosing the disruptive potential of this spirited ritual. Through a close look at the objects, subjects, and ideas that populate the chalk drawing series, the child's effort to create and inhabit their own imagined landscape, a landscape woven into the collective space of the urban street is revealed. Through this creation, activation, and socialization

of space—real and imagined—the children of East Harlem created a place for themselves within the contested city streets.

Subsequently, Levitt, through her photographic act, participated in this place-making effort, presenting these transcriptions of the children's visions as something that could not be co-opted by forces in power but rather remained owned by the young artist. Enhanced by the context of the FAP's goal of creating and preserving American art, Levitt framed these chalk drawings as fine artworks, instances that uncovered Harlem's folklore and what goes on in the minds of children whose voices are otherwise ignored. The final section of the chapter examines how this chalk drawing series was published in the period's popular presses, as the photographs were contextualized with captions and narratives that bolster the appropriating power of these acts of decoration. As the images work within the greater archival effort of the FAP as well as live on in their published form, the images continually show how liminal and collective spaces are transmuted into places distinct to the will of the children of East Harlem.

The second chapter looks at a series by Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, *One Third of a Nation*, that surveyed the housing conditions of primarily Jewish and Italian communities in Manhattan's Lower East Side. Sponsored by the FAP, Eagle and Robbins commenced work on this series in the winter of 1938. Containing photographs that travel from city streets to the dinner table, *One Third of a Nation* uncovers city dwellers' hand-crafted marks—the hanging of laundry between buildings, amateur construction of commercial edifices, and the personalized decoration of tenements. This series presents a landscape activated and shaped by the disenfranchised class's presence, and the prints

augment the neighborhood inhabitants' roles as space-shapers and place-makers. The series explores how actions of the everyday—occupation, patronization, and routinization—shape space into place.

Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* suggests quotidian acts, such as walking, reading, talking, dwelling, and cooking, are, in practice, trajectories, tactics, and rhetorics that allow the disenfranchised class to create a network of antidiscipline. These efforts counter the hegemonic forces that structure space and rather allow occupiers to direct and create their place.[94] Working as sociologists, Eagle, a fellow Jewish man, and Robbins's, whose religious association is unknown, picture the quotidian activities of the Jewish and Italian community members of the Lower East Side. Engaged in everyday activities of eating, bathing, shopping, walking, and dwelling, this project shows the photographers' effort to document how users, particularly women, shape space. These subjects commit daily acts of resistance that are a part of their greater place-making effort. These places are crafted, engaged, and overseen by the users themselves, and when presented as a series, the prints strengthen the neighborhood dwellers' right to their city.

The chapter concludes with an exhibition analysis of *One Third of a Nation's* presentation at the Federal Art Gallery of New York City. The montaged exhibition design bolsters the communicative potential of the photographs. The photographs, singularly and serially, can be read as place-making tools that help viewers and subjects

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[94] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xviii–xxiii.

decipher and cement their place within the undulating and modernizing streets of New York City. This section also examines the history and exhibition design of the FAP Gallery, uncovering the space's mission to reach an audience of city-dwellers. Eagle and Robbins did not produce a top-down survey of immigrants to exist in governmental files, but a series meant to reach the greater public to uncover place in a new (literal) light.

The third chapter examines a photographic series produced by Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, completed while both were members of the New York Photo League. Formally titled the *Chelsea Document*, the series includes over 300 images that chronicle the societal conditions of Italian and Irish immigrants living in New York City's Chelsea neighborhood, where Grossman lived. The survey visually and textually argues for improved housing conditions for the neighborhood's underserved and disenfranchised immigrant community. The *Chelsea Document* includes a multiplicity of views such as elevated vistas that emphasize the diversity of the landscape as well as scenes of destruction and demolition that meditate on the city's moment of unbecoming. These views disclose the photographers' agility in presenting a uniquely subjective perspective.[95] This chapter argues that by photographing the developing city from elevated, suspended, and street-level perches within the built environment, the series subverts the city's municipally imposed collective memory. Instead, the series

[95] Janet Donohue uses the idea of the palimpsest to explore the relationship between body, place, and memory. Janet Donohoe, "Introduction," *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 9-18.

emphasizes the role of embodied and experiential vision of photographer and subject within memory and place-making processes.

Grossman and Libsohn employed a photographic practice that stressed their role as makers through cropping, editing, and engaging with their subjects. This chapter explores how embodied views of the city street work to re-inscribe the photographer's and subject's presence to reveal how space, time, history, and memory coalescence to create place. Grossman and Libsohn approached the neighborhood as photographic archeologists, producing a collection of outlooks that dig through the neighborhood's innumerable layers of space and time. Grossman and Libsohn's excavation, commencing with macro, aerial shots, progressing to more localized, slightly elevated perches, as well as subjective street-views, underscores the creation and recreation of place as determined by the observer. Through this individual approach, the photographers highlighted how presence and occupation transform city space into personalized place, for themselves, as well as their subjects. With this vision, I argue that Grossman and Libsohn created photographs to secure their place and the place of their community within the contested streets of New York City.

My extended conclusion examines a series by Walker Evans completed when he worked for the FSA. I use this series by Evans as a foil to extrapolate how some street studies were created to disclose space rather than discover place, as explored in the three main chapters. On a summer day in 1938, Evans, working within and pushing beyond the expectations of FSA work, walked the streets of southern Yorkville. Producing a series of fifty photographs of the block housing a primarily Italian immigrant population, Evans

studied the city streets to produce a neighborhood study that distilled place as defined by placelessness. Evans's series exhibits a cool distance, producing a place shaped not by its inhabitants but by its universalized urbanity. Evans approached this survey as an aesthetic study, reminiscent of Abbott and Siskind's methodologies and unlike the human-centric place studies of Levitt, Eagle, Robbins, Grossman, and Libsohn. The project's abstract framing accentuates the urban fabric's ordinary features, such as pavement cracks, windows, and signage, showing the city as repetitive and almost unmoving. Shared spaces, such as sidewalks, alleyways, and stoops, are framed from a remove, as abstracted, and shaped by geometrical dimensions rather than practice or occupation. Evans foregrounds the unmoving built environment and, through this emphasis, transforms the city's dwellers into objects.

Informed by his own collecting practice as well as his adjacent participation in the construction of the FSA's photographic archive, Evans conceptualized space as bounded, collectible, and placeless. Employing his camera to gather the American landscape, Evans disregarded the locality and specificity of practiced place, and rather captured the ubiquitous space of the nation. Evans's study focuses on materiality, conceiving of space as it is structured—as the built environment, rather than inhabitants, shapes space. Evans employs the tropes of urbanity to show place, a place that is placeless, that is omnipresent, a place that transcends the local and embodies the nation. In this Yorkville series, as in his contemporaneous *American Photographs* exhibition and catalog, Evans

collects space, but through this practice, his lens does not give room for his subjects to make their own place.[96]

Conclusion

Returning to the space of the stoop as explored at the beginning of this introduction, this photograph by Walker Evans tells the photographer's focus on surfaces and the design of the urban landscape in exploring liminal and communal sites within the city (figure 0.14). In this photograph, two older city-dwellers stand and sit on their stoop. On the left side of the image, a man sits, holding a paper in his lap, legs crossed, with his right arm and knee intertwined with the stoop's railing. On the right side of the print, a woman stands, arms crossed at her stomach, leaning along the railing. Both subjects look to their right, unaware of or ignoring Evans. Their body language is closed off; extremities are crossed to not allow the camera to engage with their presence. The door behind them, while open, leads into a hallway of darkness, underscoring the photographer's lack of access to these subjects. Through their poses, the figures attach themselves to the construction of the stoop, becoming a part of its structure. Furthermore, their closed-off posture mimics patterns found within the urban environment, such as the folding chair's crossed legs and the diamond shape pattern of the tiled floor in the building's vestibule, linking their presence to the unyielding construction of the stoop. Evans transforms the man and woman into objects, attending to and accentuating the

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[96] Evans himself noted, "I've noticed my eye collects." Jeff Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture postcard* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 17.

stoop's algorithmic space. This photograph serves to index the stoop as related to his larger series and Evans's greater collecting process.

In conversation with the three photographs examined at the beginning of this introduction, this photograph reveals the photographers' role in arresting (or disregarding) the transformation of space into place. Levitt works as a folklorist, attending to the stories that drive and decorate the urban landscape. Eagle and Robbins contemplate the stoop as sociologists, determining the space's social structure as related to commerce. As archeologists, Grossman and Libsohn excavate the stoop to uncover the creation and recreation of place as determined by the subject and photographer. Evans studies space as a collector, attending to the spatial structure as imposed by the built environment, examining space as geometrically organized rather than practiced or physically experienced. In each case, photographers used their camera collaboratively to bolster, supplement, and cultivate their subject's place-making strategies, showing the emergent and transformative potential of the photographed urban landscapes.

Chapter 1
"Inheritors of the Street": Helen Levitt Documents Children's Play

> [Levitt's] children of the poor are not starched and supervised. Roaming in tribes through the streets and empty lots, they inherit to the full the magic and terror of the inscrutable world.
> – Nancy Newhall

Introduction

Three young African-American boys stand, crouch, and lie across the steps of a Harlem stoop, looking suspiciously to their left and right for trouble that seems to be on its way (figure 1.1). Behind them, a secret message in scrawled writing appears on the bottom half of the front door, perhaps an outline of a past battle plan. The most timid-looking boy, with his back to the home's door, crouches in the corner, nervously biting his nails and looking to another boy in the hopes of protection. The boy below him lies across two stairs and peers past the end of the brownstone stairway to catch a glimpse of their enemy. The third boy stands with his gun in position, knees bent in a defensible stance, prepared to leap off the stoop and protect his land. The children, in the midst of a game of their own imaginative making, transform the stoop and the adjoining sidewalk into a battleground. In this collective space, a space that they make into their own through the element of play and their shared coded language, the boys prepare to face the world, (toy) guns at the ready.

As witnessed in this image, Helen Levitt's photographs disclose much about the dynamics of occupying urban space while maintaining a sense of secrecy and wonder. This subtlety of revealing yet concealing has perplexed critics and art historians since Levitt's arrival on the New York photography scene in the late 1930s. Nancy Newhall,

working as the interim photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943, was one of the first to write at length regarding Levitt's work, finding an "uncanny, poetic sense" within her early photographs.[97] James Agee's 1946 introduction to Levitt's first photobook, *A Way of Seeing,* published in 1965, praises Levitt as possessing a pure "way of seeing":

> At least a dozen of Helen Levitt's photographs seem to me as beautiful, perceptive, satisfying, and enduring as any lyrical work that I know. In their general quality and coherence, moreover, the photographs as a whole body, as a book, seem to me to combine into a unified view of the world, an uninsistent but irrefutable manifesto of a way of seeing, and in a gentle and wholly unpretentious way, a major poetic work.[98]

This lyricism and poeticism attributed to Levitt's work, cementing it in an essentially artistic reading, has prevailed within the art historical and critical discourse surrounding her work. However, this limiting discourse disregards the social context during which Levitt was photographing, ignoring the implicit social, spatial, and political readings of her work.

Recent scholarship has pushed Levitt out of this "photographer's photographer" box and into the realm of social documentary. Art historian Elizabeth Gand's 2011 dissertation worked to trace the initial reception of Levitt's photographs in the popular press, exposing how critics observed social and political tensions within her photographic frame. This effort suggests that Levitt's practice aligned itself between the documentary record of the 1930s and the emphasis on subjectivity of the 1940s.[99] Alan Trachtenberg's

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[97] Nancy Newhall, "Four Photographs," *Magazine of Art* 36, no. 4 (May 1943): 182.
[98] James Agee, *A Way of Seeing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), viii.
[99] Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 87.

2012 essay about the photographer furthers the point that Levitt held a distinct way of seeing. Rather than reading her vision as lyrical and poetic, Trachtenberg reads her photographs as socially conscious and inherently democratic: “without the least sign of pedantry or dogmatism Levitt shows these charged streets to be sites of daily resistance. How else to understand the children at play except as an avant-garde, and Helen Levitt’s ‘way of seeing’ as her own act of resistance and self-assertion?”[100] Most recently, the Albertina museum’s 2018 retrospective on the photographer discusses how Levitt’s surrealist and cinematic approach to street scenes defamiliarizes the everyday, making the spaces and peoples that she photographed incongruous with the “highly capitalized urban modernism” of her time.[101]

In this chapter, I further expand the recent readings of Helen Levitt as a socially and spatially conscious photographer, her choice to make images within the racially and ethnically mixed streets of East Harlem, and her effort to document a sense of place within those city streets. Examining Levitt’s series of children’s chalk drawings produced during her tenure at New York City’s FAP in 1937, I argue that her continued attention to collective and marginal spaces within the urban landscape—such as sidewalks, stoops, facades, and doorways—heightens the recalcitrant nature of her work.[102] These

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[100] Alan Trachtenberg, “Seeing what you See: Photographs by Helen Levitt” *Raritan* 31, no. 4 (2012), 4.
[101] Walter Moser, “Role-Play, Technique of the Body, Silent Film Gesture: on Helen Levitt’s Performative Strategies,” in *Helen Levitt* (Berlin: Kehrer, 2018), 24.
[102] This chapter is limited to the collection of 159 photographs taken by Levitt while she worked as a creative photographer for the FAP in 1937. These photographs reside in the files of the National Archives at College Park, Maryland in their Still Pictures branch divided into two folders (record group 69). Folder one holds eighty photographs and folder two holds seventy-nine with number ninety-one missing. This is also not to say

vernacular sites, propelled by their indistinct physical, psychological, and social dimensions, hold slippery identities, shifting boundaries, and a collection of potential "owners." Levitt's photographs showcase her subjects actively exploiting this ambiguity and taking ownership of these spaces through acts of play, revealing the disruptive potential of their spirited rituals. Displaying children's play beyond the realm of regulated recreation spaces, Levitt's photographs rather celebrate the children's ability to create and amend norms within these interstitial spaces. In all instances, the children Levitt photographs are not endangered or swallowed up by their surroundings, but rather, through their play, they take possession of both the physical and imaginary spaces of the city. Through this endeavor, the children resist progressive expectations and reformers' rubrics, becoming the new makers and owners of these spaces.

To complete this series, Levitt worked as a folklorist, not in training, but in practice, to record and preserve the children's vernacular culture that decorated and transformed the East Harlem streets. Levitt produced this series contemporaneously to the Federal Writers' Project and Federal Theatre Project's (two other branches of the WPA) effort to preserve aspects of vernacular American culture, such as oral traditions, folk

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that these files represent the complete set of Levitt's photographs of chalk drawings. Her 1987 book *In The Street* published other chalk drawings that could have been a part of this series or could have been funded independently. For example, on page eighty-three of *In The Street*, there is a photograph of the same column that appears in photo number 124 in the FAP series (Robert Coles, Alex Harris, and Marvin Hoshino, *In the Street: Chalk Drawings and Messages, New York City, 1938-1948* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 83). Also, a photograph from the collection of Martin Z. Margulies, published on page 175 of the Albertina museum's 2018 catalog *Helen Levitt*, is a photograph of the same child in front of their same chalk drawing pictures as in photographs 154 and 155 of Levitt's FAP series (Walter Moser, Astrid Mahler, and Caroline Schmidt, *Helen Levitt* (Berlin: Kehrer, 2018), 175).

songs, and children's rhymes, through folklorist practices.[103] Similarly, Levitt's series attends to the transient, fleeting moments that produce and shape everyday culture, recording these chalked worlds as an effort worthy of preservation. Going beyond the collective spaces where these chalk drawings are located, a close analysis of the objects, people, places, and ideas that are visualized within the sketches reveals the children's endeavor to transform the urban landscape into their own. I argue that through the youngsters' artistic labor, visualized within collective and liminal spaces, the urban landscape is developed into a site with meaning, memory, and identity. Through acts of play, we can see the children's effort to create and inhabit their own imagined landscape, a landscape they weave into collective spaces of the urban landscape. The children's creation, activation, and socialization of space—real and imagined—creates place within the anonymous city street.

Subsequently, Levitt, through her photographic act, participates in this place-making effort, collaborating with the artists and presenting these transcriptions of their visions as something that cannot be co-opted by forces in power but rather remain owned by the child artist. Enhanced by the context of the FAP's goal of creating and preserving

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[103] Ralph Ellison, while employed by the Folklore section of the Federal Writers' Project collected stories and children's songs in Harlem, treating this folklore not as a remnant of the past but dynamically engaged in the present. See Robert Baron, "I saw Mrs. Saray, Sitting on a Bombalerry": Ralph Ellison Collects Children's Folklore in Harlem," In *New York State Folklore Reader: Diverse Voices,* eds. Elizabeth Tucker, Ellen E. McHale, Elizabeth Tucker McHale, Edith Bills, Dee Britton, and Varick Chittenden (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 2013. Herbert Halpert, while employed by the Federal Theatre Project, also recorded songs and spirituals in New York City from January 1938-November 1939. Herbert Halpert, "Coming into Folklore More than Fifty Years Ago." *The Journal of American Folklore* 105.418 (1992): 442-57, 451.

American art and culture, Levitt frames these chalk drawings as fine artworks, instances that uncover Harlem's folklore and what goes on in the minds of children.[104] The final section of the chapter examines how this chalk drawing series was published in the period's popular presses, as the photographs were contextualized with captions and narratives that bolster the appropriating power of these acts of decoration. As the images work within the greater archival effort of the FAP as well as live on in their published form, the images continually show how liminal and commuunal spaces are transmuted into places distinct to the will of the children of East Harlem.

Record Keepers: The Federal Art Project's Folk Effort to Document the Everyday

Born in Bensonhurst, New York, in 1913 to a family of Jewish immigrants, Levitt began her photography career at age eighteen, working for the professional portrait photographer J. Florian Mitchell in the Bronx.[105] Through this apprenticeship, Levitt learned darkroom and printing techniques. As her interest in photography and film grew, so did her artistic circle as she began frequenting the film screenings and photography classes offered by the Film and Photo League in Manhattan. While Levitt did not

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[104] Throughout this chapter, I do not call these chalk drawing graffiti to avoid the racial and criminal connotation of the term, especially as related to African American youths. Graffiti as a popularized subculture does not emerge in New York until the 1960s and while the term was in use during the 1930s, neither Levitt or contemporary critics used the term to describe the children's work, rather calling them "chalk drawings." For more information on the racialized history of graffiti in New York City, see Maggie Dickinson, "The Making of Space, Race and Place." *Critique of Anthropology* 28, no. 1 (2008): 27-45.

[105] For more information about Helen Levitt's upbringing see Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," in *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 45-63.

officially join the League, her informal participation allowed her to take advantage of the new photographic techniques and styles that the League was promoting. Through these connections, Levitt became acquainted with Henri Cartier-Bresson and felt a deep connection to his work, as his pictures revealed mystery and fantasy within daily life.[106] In 1936, Levitt purchased a 35 mm Leica—the same camera used by Cartier-Bresson—that was small, silent, and rapid in response.[107]

In 1937, Levitt, seeking employment, applied to be a children's art teacher in East Harlem for the FAP. The FAP, a subset of the WPA, was created in 1935 as a way to employ out of work American artists during the Great Depression. The "arts" of the Project expanded beyond fine art and also included practical arts, art education as well as the administering of community art centers. The arts, fine and practical, were not limited to purely aesthetic explorations but were expected to express "social meanings, the experience, history, ideas and beliefs of a community," emphasizing art's communicative nature.[108] Along with her educational employment, Levitt worked under the "practical" art section as a photographer, the same section as Eagle and Robbins (to be discussed in chapter two).[109] During her tenure at the Project, Levitt became enchanted with the chalk

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[106] Ellen Handy, "Helen Levitt: Childhood as Performance, City as Theater," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 25, no. 2 (April 2001): 206-225, 216.

[107] Sandra S. Phillips "Helen Levitt's New York" in *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 28.

[108] Virginia Tuttle Clayton, Elizabeth Stillinger, Erika Doss, and Deborah Chotner, *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 70.

[109] Levitt confirms that she did know of Eagle and Robbins when they both worked at the FAP. See Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 39.

drawings that decorated the streets of her daily commute as she walked from her apartment in Yorkville to the school.[110] In certain states, and most successfully in New York City, the section also permitted "practical" photographers to invent a "creative assignment." Creative assignments were not distributed to photographers but were determined and developed by the photographers independent of the Project. Armed with her Leica, Levitt produced a self-directed creative assignment for the FAP, making a series of 159 chalk drawings done by children of East Harlem that was published in popular periodicals throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s. With this, we can understand Levitt's interest in exploring everyday urban spaces and their chalk decoration as a subject fostered and explored independently of program administrators.

While it is unclear precisely where in the neighborhood Levitt was working, due to the heterogeneous racial and ethnic groups of children she photographed, it appears she was working along the borders of the Italian, Puerto Rican, African American, and "foreign-born" Black communities of Harlem.[111] The neighborhood's informal boundaries range from 178th Street to Ninety-Sixth Street north to south and from the East and Harlem Rivers in the east to the Hudson River in the west. At the turn of the twentieth century, a plunge in Harlem's real estate market and segregationist housing policies marked its shift to a neighborhood plagued by overcrowding, poverty, and high

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[110] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," in *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 52.
[111] For more information about the different ethnic and racial group of Harlem see Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, *Or Does It Explode? : Black Harlem in the Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Robert Anthony Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920–1990," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1992).

rents. According to historian Robert Weisbrot, "unsuitable housing structures, disease, high mortality rates, family instability, crime, delinquency, truancy, and vice" added to Harlem's ongoing social and economic frustrations.[112]

Similar to the other creative assignments produced under New York City's FAP, Levitt's project focused on the street life of city dwellers, though Levitt's project remains an anomaly for its thematic specificity. Berenice Abbott's series *Changing New York,* the most well-known and longest-running creative project of the FAP, surveyed the mutable landscape of New York City. In this image (figure 1.2), Abbott captures the city in flux, using a large-format camera to emphasize stasis rather than action, prioritizing built structures over the people that inhabit them. As will be discussed in chapter two, Arnold Eagle and David Robbins's FAP creative assignment *One Third of a Nation* similarly focused on the built environment (figure 1.3). Witnessed in this image, Eagle and Robbins emphasize the reciprocal relationship between the metropolitan landscape and city dwellers, and through this narrative, underscore the abysmal housing, living, and playing conditions of the city's inhabitants. In these examples, the photographers use their camera to tell a specific story about city life in New York City, but Levitt's series remains the only project that presents the built environment as acted *upon*, thereby offering greater agency to the inhabitants of her (imagined and real) city streets.

Levitt's choice to document chalk drawings as her own creative assignment within the FAP revealed her interest in preserving the artistic practice through which

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[112] Robert Weisbrot, "Harlem" in *Encyclopedia of Urban America: The Cities and Suburbs*, ed. Neil L. Shumsky (ABC-CLIO, 1998), 335-336.

children decorate and thereby alter, change, and occupy their environment. The drawings that Levitt documented were a part of the greater social and cultural life of the block, a part of the street that's presence shaped the daily lives of city inhabitants. Levitt's project to record the drawn folklore that adorned, if only fleetingly, the streets of the neighborhood connected with the greater goals of the FAP—to produce art that served as a mediator between citizen and their lived experiences, exploring the artistic practice through which children enhanced and inhabited their environment. Levitt did not preserve drawings done on pieces of paper within the enclosed environment of the school, but only the outdoors and transient drawings that decorated the children's urban collective spaces. In this series, Levitt put great thought and care into the framing of the final drawings, making them appear grand, emphasizing the ability and the artistry of the child. The authorship of these images, in most instances, is unknown as Levitt preferred to frame these drawings as instances of anonymous folk art, emphasizing their more nascent nature.[113]

These closely-cropped images resemble the work produced for the Index of American Design (IAD), a subsection of the practical division of the FAP, led by national coordinator C.A. Glassgold and national editor Constance Rourke. The Index produced pictorial and graphic portfolios recording, according to Glassgold, "the history of

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[113] In examining contemporary writings, critics described folk art variously as "primitive" or "naïve." Throughout this chapter I will use period terms in discussing the artwork of the FAP. Cahill, Holger. "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition," *Parnassus* (New York, N.Y. 1929) 4, no. 3 (1932): 1-4, Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," Syllabus and readings for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey, n.p.

American decorative and utilitarian design from colonization until the late nineteenth century."[114] The goal of the Index was to preserve the folk and craft tradition of America, and through that preservation, produce examples proving the centuries-long presence of American culture, creating a heritage of American design and folk art that contemporary American designers could use as inspiration. Though this Index was exclusive, as Native Indian and Eskimo crafts were ruled out for inclusion as project leaders believed they did not express the roots of American (re-Anglo-Saxon) culture.[115] The Index initially considered using photographic processes to create these object portfolios, but instead chose the medium of watercolor, as the color photographic processes of the 1930s were not "cost effective, sufficiently permanent or accurate enough in recording color to meet the Index goals."[116] Regardless of medium, FAP head Holger Cahill demanded the works of the Index uphold "the highest contemporary standards of documentary."[117]

In examining a work from the IAD in New York City, the renderings closely adhere to a documentary approach, presenting the work as objective—free of outside interpretations (figure 1.4). In this plate that illustrates a toy wagon from the early 1860s that also acts as an advertisement for the Philadelphia Toy Company, this documentary

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[114] C. Adolph Glassgold, "Recording American Design," in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project*, ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 167-172, 167.
[115] For more information regarding the racist policies of the Project see Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 120-124.
[116] Virginia Tuttle Clayton, Elizabeth Stillinger, Erika Doss, and Deborah Chotner, *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 12.
[117] Memo from Cahill to Kiplinger dated 9 September 1942 (AAA, Cahill Papers, reel 1107, frame 1073).

approach is applied to rendering this folk object for the Index.[118] The wagon floats within the space of the page, with great detail attributed to its materiality and design enhanced by its neutral presentational perspective. Levitt's closely framed photographs of chalk drawings employ a correspondingly documentary lens (figure 1.5). In this photograph, Levitt documents a horse-drawn laundry service, similarly detached floating in a blank background, focusing on the true to life details of the transient business. Levitt's prints are similar to the drawings of the IAD that disclose objects as suspended within the paper, void of context and time. While in the Index watercolor, the artist attribution is recorded, the original maker of the object is typically unknown, just as in Levitt's images, while photographed by her, the original artist remains nameless, furthering the link of naïve folk art documented by the Index and this creative assignment. In this case, an Index artist records an early American toy-design convention, just as Levitt's series preserves the child's folk-art tradition that decorates urban spaces.

As various scholars have noted, Levitt, similar to her contemporary Walker Evans, was avowedly uninterested in politics and saw her work as politically neutral.[119] In fact, Levitt, having met Evans in the late 1930s after being taken by his work in Cuba, credits Evans as the reason why she moved away from social documentary.[120] As this

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[118] Virginia Tuttle Clayton, Elizabeth Stillinger, Erika Doss, and Deborah Chotner, *Drawing on America's Past: Folk Art, Modernism, and the Index of American Design* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 194.
[119] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 59-60.
[120] Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 66. Levitt eventually worked as Evans darkroom assistant, making prints for his MoMA exhibition *American Photographs* in 1938.

project was funded by federal and state governments and held institutional goals to create a heritage of *American* art and design, Levitt's work under the Project cannot be read as apolitical. Furthermore, as I have argued, Levitt's attention to the spatial politics of the city street—where and how she took her photographs—places them within a New Deal discourse that is inherently political. Levitt's photographs are unlike the progressive work of Eagle, Robbins, Grossman, and Libsohn, to be discussed in chapters two and three, respectively, which used photography as a weapon to call on the need for governmental intervention to improve societal conditions. Instead, Levitt's photographs are individualistic, anonymous, lack narrative or prescription. Her photographs are flat, abstracted at times, and highlight the artistry and individuality of the chalk artist. Levitt's creative assignment and the IAD advocate the paradigms of New Deal liberalism that upheld, above all else, the integrity of the individual—in this case, the individual maker.[121] Rather than relying on progressive reform to save the city, Levitt shows off the individual ability of the maker to change the fate of the city street.[122]

This formal and ideological link between the IAD portfolios and the photographic series of chalk drawings emphasizes the FAP's greater goal to use fine art, vernacular places, and utilitarian objects to preserve, explore and expose the everyday, to understand and depict the pulse of American culture and provide evidence of a distinctly American art. Though in examining where these documentary projects lived, the different resolves

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[121] Erika Doss, *Benton, Pollock, and the Politics of Modernism: From Regionalism to Abstract Expressionism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 334.
[122] Sandra Phillips described Levitt as having a "genuine liberalism." Sandra S. Phillips "Helen Levitt's New York" in *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 32.

of this greater preservation effort are evident. The Index of American Design surveyed these objects as a way to construct and reinforce a cultural authority and unite a nation and its people. These efforts were advertised in multiple exhibitions at cultural institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and at multitude of department stores such as Macy's, cementing the work as a part of a fully capitalistic enterprise. Levitt's project, while funded by the same organization, was conceptualized independently. Her works, to be explored in a later section of this chapter, were published in magazines such as *Look* and *PM* and framed as documents that reveal and express a folk-art tradition with the potential to resist authoritative forces.

The liminal and the collective: Spaces of the street

All of the chalk drawings pictured in Levitt's FAP photographs appear within liminal spaces (including facades, doors, columns, streets, and sidewalks) that mark the transition between private domiciles and the public world of the street.[123] The idea of liminality was first used in psychological and anthropological contexts to explain an interstructural situation, including a transition between social states. The British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner defined the period of margin, or the "liminal period" as a person who is betwixt and between being and becoming, in the midst or within the threshold of transitioning states.[124] Later in the twentieth century, urban theorists such as

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[123] I am indebted to the scholarship of Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011) who first wrote about the prevalence of liminal spaces in Levitt's early work.
[124] Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell

Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja began to conceptualize liminality in the social sense, as more than spaces on and of the threshold. Soja urges that to truly understand space, scholars must go beyond perceived and conceived space and rather study the thirdspace or "an other" space, an expansion of Lefebvre's theories of the trialectics of space (perceived, conceived, and representational space).[125] The thirdspace is a liminal space that is transformed through acts of everyday life from physical and mental space into a practiced space. Due to its shifting boundaries, Soja identifies the thirdspace as "a strategic meeting place for fostering collective political action against forms of human oppression."[126]

The series shows youngsters benefiting from the unknowable and unownable transitional space of the threshold, employing chalk drawings to transmute and thereby claim that space. In this photograph of a chalk drawing that shows heads, all with different styles of hair, lining the brownstone banister of a stoop, this transformative labor is activated (figure 1.6). Though all of the descriptive characteristics are different, this is most likely a family portrait as the head closest to the door is labeled "sister." In this instance, the child is able to work in this transitional space—a short distance between the private home and the public street. Within the hierarchy of neighborhood play spaces, young girls were typically not allowed to stray from the stoop. From an elevated vantage

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University Press, 2014), 93-94.

[125] For more information regarding Lefebvre's trialectics of space see Henri Lefebvre and Donald Nicholson-Smith, *The Production of Space* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2009), 1-68.

[126] Edward W. Soja, "Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination," ed. Alan Read *Architecturally Speaking: Practices of Art, Architecture and the Everyday* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 22.

point, the “little mothers” could watch over the neighborhood while remaining safely close to home.[127] Boys were permitted to wander within a larger radius from home, playing on the sidewalk and street. Rather than allowing spatial constraints to impede creative impulse or corporeal movement, the child artist, most likely a girl, works along the span of the stairs, transforming the arm rail from a space with a structural use into an active family album. Through this revision and invasion of the liminal space of the stoop, it becomes owned by the real family and occupied by the imaged girls. The young girl may not have control of the private or public realm, but she creates a place within this transitional space for her multi-dimensional family.

Within this collection of liminal spaces, Levitt’s series focuses on drawings made within the entryways to buildings (figure 1.7). In this instance, drawings adorn a pilaster that marks the first-floor entrance to a building. The post is constructed of a mixture of concrete and iron and is centered upon an elevated slab of concrete, distinguishing it as an area separate from the public sidewalk. It is positioned on the edge, between private and public worlds, and, similarly to a stoop or a doorway, marks itself as a transitional space between those two realms. Rather than fighting over these two possessed plots—the public sidewalk and the private interior store—the creators worked in-between those two regulated spaces. Returning to the photograph, this urban fixture is decorated and amended by children’s drawings. The column is dotted with scenes of fantasy and intrigue as two wizards duel above a bizarre figure composed of the head of an

[127] David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (New York: Anchor Books, 1985), 110–124.

unidentifiable animal and the body of a human. Adding detail to the scene, the child uses the texture and construction of the column to their advantage, employing the horizontal molding as a scene break and the cracks at the bottom of the column to add texture to the hem of the fantastical figure's skirt. The entire column is filled with old transcriptions of numbers, games, messages, and illegible marks, transforming the column from a passageway into a living time capsule of children's visions.

Throughout Levitt's series, forty-four photographs show chalk drawings on sides of buildings, doors, and boarded-up windows. In another image, we see a building's brick façade with a metal door that appears impenetrable from the outside as it lacks a doorknob (figure 1.8). Over the top of the door is a sign written in a distinctly adult script that reads, "Street cleaner is not allowed to place cans, tools, etc. in front of this space…any person caught doing so is liable to arrest." This sign marks the area in front of the door as private—claimed land. Unbothered by any sort of surveillance or ownership that this sign implies, a trio of girls have instead decorated this forbidden threshold with stacked bodies and heads of women with long curly hair and large eyes. Taking advantage of the smooth, canvas like surface of the door, this artwork transforms the doors' inaccessibility and hostility into a place owned and occupied by these wild-haired girls. Preceding this photograph in the series is a print of three young girls smiling next to what we can presume to be their work (figure 1.9). In this artist-portrait, the heads of the creators, presented in a clean row, meld into the scene on the door. Through this framing device, Levitt cements the link between these makers and their artworks, highlighting their ability to transform and construct place.

Beyond spaces of liminality, the series holds 103 frames of boys and girls working in collective spaces. These more steadfast public spaces, such as the sidewalk, of which there are twenty-six photographs in the series are themselves "public and parochial," open to all yet under the jurisdiction of some.[128] Due to these spaces' slippery borders and identities, they host a collection of potential "owners," be they the property owners, home and store renters, pedestrians, or city bureaucrats. Beyond the un/official proprietors of liminal and communal spaces, public space was becoming more contested at this time in New York City as legislation was readily passed to limit the lower and working classes' access to shared space. In an effort to uphold middle-class values of "street decorum" and promote new municipally constructed indoor food market, city-wide bans on pushcarts and sidewalk amusements that typically populated lower-income neighborhoods were enacted throughout the decade.

Concurrently, Mayor LaGuardia's "war on noise" increased police authority to control street sounds, a prejudiced enforcement as "noise" was determined based on observer's social class and cultural background, not defined by tone or decibel.[129] Clare Corbould notes how noises, such as music, speech, and applause, among others, deemed "cacophonous and atavistic" to white New Yorkers, were, to Black New Yorker's, mostly residents of Harlem, a way to claim space.[130] Due to this inherent subjectivity, enforcing

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[128] Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Renia Ehrenfeucht, *Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation over Public Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 6.
[129] Hillel Schwartz, "Beyond Tone and Decibel: The History of Noise," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 44, no. 18 (1998): B8.
[130] Clare Corbould, "Streets, sounds and identity in interwar Harlem." *Journal of Social History*, vol. 40, no. 4, (2007), 861.

new sound restrictions enabled control of the lower classes' and particularly Black city residents' private and public lives, coded as an effort to maintain public propriety. These noise ordinances prohibited the playing of musical instruments and radios on sidewalks or stoops and criminalized the presence of street hawkers and orators on New York City streets. Activist Richard B. Moore was arrested in Harlem in September of 1926 on the charge of "speaking without a permit" and disturbing the peace.[131] These bans worked to further limit members of the lower and working classes' access to the city's collective outdoor space throughout the 1930s. They also underscored reformers, politicians, and police fears' of the collectivizing power of these communal spaces.[132]

The subjects of Levitt's photographs would be particularly vulnerable to these decrees as their young age, lack of monetary means, and position on the periphery of the island of Manhattan worked to diminish their prospective possession of city spaces, forcing them to live, work, and play in the margins. Cultural theorist bell hooks conceives and revises these marginalized spaces, where the dominant class has forced the "other" (a label as prescribed by the oppressor) to inhabit, as holding an opportunity for collective political action. Though in these spaces, the "other" has the opportunity to create a redeeming space: a space untamable by and resistant to the dominant culture. According

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[131] Irma Owens-Watkins, *Blood Relations: Caribbean Immigrants and the Harlem Community, 1900-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 107.
[132] See Daniel Bluestone, "'The Pushcart Evil': Peddlers, Merchants, and New York City's Streets, 1890-1940," *Journal of Urban History* 18 (November 1991): 68–92; Lilian Radovac, "The "War on Noise": Sound and Space in La Guardia's New York," *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 733–760; and Clare Corbould, "Streets, Sounds and Identity in Interwar Harlem," *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 859–894.

to hooks, these spaces can be real and imagined, “spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice.”[133] Working within these advancing limitations, Levitt’s series shows children actively occupying and appropriating the city’s collective spaces.

Nine of Levitt’s photographs within the FAP series capture children oddly situated on the sidewalk as they add a detail or a final flourish to their creation.[134] In this study, a small boy lies on the sidewalk adjacent to an old box, sprawled out between the sidewalk cracks (figure 1.10). The boy holds his piece of chalk in his right hand and is drawing what appears to be a hat or a head on top of his unknown figure. Chalked dust on his left sleeve near his wrist alludes to the fact that this child has been at work for a time, as the medium became a part of his street uniform. Furthermore, the boy has laid his mask aside as he commences his very serious labor. The crouching boy appears to be in a state of meditation, in his own world, oblivious to the photographer snapping his picture and fully invested in his creation. These images work to conflate the bodies of the crouching and standing children and the motion of their hands with the physical environment of the street, further connecting the child to the street. The creator is not regulated and contained by the street but actively engaging in and changing his urban fabric. To capture this moment, Levitt must have been crouching close by the child, exposing the reciprocal relationship between photographer and subject and further

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[133] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 152.
[134] Elizabeth Gand, “The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work,” PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 30.

emphasizing the play, process, and labor of the child.

It is possible that Levitt was using her right-angle lens to make this photograph (an accessory she probably learned to use through her friend Ben Shahn), but it is unclear if she used this tool in the making of this series. This attachment permitted Levitt to stand close to the action she was photographing but appear to be shooting something a quarter a turn away.[135] By 1938 Levitt was more consistently using her right-angle lens as her photographic subject matter turned from chalk drawings to play, emphasizing the physicality of children playing on and within the streets (figure 1.1).[136] As this FAP series predates this change in subject matter, it is unlikely Levitt used this right-angle lens. Also, oftentimes these images of youngsters in the midst of action, not looking at the photographer, precede or are followed by photographs of Levitt's direct connection with the eyes of the maker (figure 1.11 and 1.12). In this series, oscillating between direct contact and more oblique angles, it appears as if the children have invited Levitt to examine their creations, acting, at times, the part of the shy or humble artist.

Transitioning to adjacent terrain that is more lawfully public, twenty-one studies in Levitt's series show drawings on the street itself, and, within this subset, eight images show children in the act of drawing on the street.[137] The urban road was intended for cars,

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[135] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 54.
[136] Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 45-48 and Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 54.
[137] In the series there are a number of photographs of chalk drawings that could be located on the sidewalk or the street. Due to Levitt's close cropping, it is impossible to tell for certain where these drawings live within the urban landscape.

busses, and perhaps the occasional horse-drawn carriage, but in all instances, a site meant to transport goods and to move people. Rather than witnessing movement, these exposures show children in the act of creating, nearly stationary in their meditative attention to their drawings. In this photograph, we witness the artistic transgressions of three boys who kneel, stand, and crouch on the road (figure 1.13). Aligning the backdrop of this scene is a tall wooden fence, bordering the sidewalk, that holds chalk alterations. The three youngsters are the stars of the scene as the kneeling middle boy carefully adds a chalked bolo tie to the shirt of his street cowboy. The boy behind him licks his piece of chalk as he gazes intensely at his compatriot's work. The boy in the center of the photograph stands with hands in his pocket, shirt and jacket neatly clasped, gazing into the face of the photographer and viewer with a look of attention. The makers here are armed with their chalk and use this accessory to alter their landscape and take over the very public street.

Sociologists and writers Oliver and Ethel Hale observed and wrote at length on the culture and creation of sidewalk games of children on the streets of New York City in the late 1930s and declared chalk to be the most common instrument through which children liberated their ideas and energies and constructed and managed their play. The Hales go as far as to compare a soldier and his field marshal's baton to a child and their piece of chalk. This association attests to the very real power of chalk as an artistic tool

that can be used to construct, maintain, and survey the street as a place owned by the children.[138]

In examining these photographs of collective city spaces, one commonality is the series' lack of geospatial/temporal context—there are no street signs, large advertisements, or home addresses. It is clear that these children are producing within the collective spaces of the street, but it is unclear exactly where that is located. This absence of context eliminates distractions and rather encourages the viewer to focus on the labor and place-making effort of the children. Levitt photographs specific places that live within the minds of the children, attending to their ability to create complete worlds in which external contexts are superfluous to their effort. Furthermore, the street address and location within the grid of Harlem is unimportant to the child's effort, and Levitt's cause as these are imagined places that remain unmappable—in part where their strength lies.

Comparing Levitt's effort to the work of fellow FAP photographer Sid Grossman (to be discussed in greater detail in chapter three), who also created a series on street life in Harlem in the late 1930s, his series emphasizes government-sponsored buildings and recreation sites within the neighborhood.[139] Grossman produced many views of kids

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[138] Ethel and Oliver Hale [Esther and Oscar Hirshman], "From Sidewalk, Gutter and Stoop: Being a Chronicle of Children's Play Activity," unpublished typescript date 1955 (though internal evidence suggests much of it was collected in the 1930s), The New York Public Library, Manuscripts Division, Box 26, Folder 1, 544.

[139] It is important to note that Grossman's files do not live in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland but rather the Museum of the City of New York that also houses the FAP series. In Grossman scholarship there is an agreement that these photographs were produced while he was working for a short time under the FAP in 1938. Additionally, the majority of the Museum of the City of New York photographs are

playing at Colonial Park pool, a site constructed by the New York City Parks Department using WPA funds (figure 1.14).[140] His series shows the pool and its surrounding architecture, cementing it to the Harlem neighborhood and the greater governmental effort to redevelop and revitalize the neighborhood. While Grossman's series certainly exhibits a carefully attuned eye toward his subjects, his photographs are easily read as part of an effort to bolster the efforts of the WPA, whereas Levitt's photographs encapsulate places invented and created by the child. The play Grossman captures lies in a domain delimited by federal and city organizations, while Levitt captures play that exists beyond those regulatory bodies.

These drawings of imaged people, fantasy animals, and modified landscapes would lack power if they were completed and then preserved on a transitory piece of paper or even an easel in the child's home or school. It is because of their placement in the liminal and collective space—the stoop, the column, the wall, the sidewalk, the street—that they are able to transform space. It is through their placement on and within the margin that this amendment becomes an emergent action.

Reforming children's play: The dangers of Harlem's street

Levitt's attention to the city child is unsurprising as innumerable photographers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries turned their lenses to document the urban poor or

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duplicates from the files of the National Archive collection. This leads me to believe that Grossman's photographs were produced during his tenure at the Project and also that the National Archives collection are not complete.

[140] Press Release, Department of Parks Arsenal, Central Park, August 7, 1936.

working classes.[141] These images typically focused on the terrible living and playing conditions of the children of the poor, as their situation was seen by the reformers as particularly dire. Contrasting these images, reform legislation and ephemera was characteristically illustrated with sterile images of children playing in newly constructed city play-spaces, reinforcing the effectiveness of *regulated* play as training sites where poor and working class children learned the boundaries and expectations of genteel society. Levitt's photographs, rather than showing children in grim situations or playing in newly created city play and educational spaces, underscored children's play within and throughout the city street. These photographs celebrate the latent power of children in altering and possibly defacing their urban landscape.

In his seminal publications *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) and *The Children of the Poor* (1892), New York City journalist and reformer Jacob Riis offered early representations of city children. Working primarily on the Lower East Side in the later nineteenth century, Riis surveyed the derelict conditions of the lives of New York's immigrant population with a focus on street life and the environment of the tenement. He devoted much of his work to describing and visualizing the lives and conditions of New York's street children or "street Arabs." Writing on the sleeping habits of these children in *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis noted, "like rabbits in their burrows, the little ragamuffins sleep with at least one eye open, and every sense alert to the approach of danger."[142] The photograph he chose to accompany this text showed three children

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[141] Hambourg and Phillips, *Helen Levitt*, 48.
[142] Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), 149. Chapter thirteen of this book discusses the color line in New York and includes a

feigning sleep, wearing dirty clothing, and pitifully exaggerated expressions to highlight their dreadful circumstances (figure 1.15). The children were meant to appear as if they were ostensibly defenseless and innocent victims of their parents' depravity.[143] Riis takes up this vulnerability again at the end of his chapter on the street Arab when he reaches out to the hearts and pockets of reformers, urging them to save the children from these conditions so as to prevent them from living on the streets and becoming drunks and menaces to society as they grow from boys to men.

Turn of the century urban reformers axiomatically associated the street with child-labor and physical danger, deeming it especially problematic for recreation.[144] As the century progressed and child-labor laws were enacted, children became increasingly valued for their "sanctity" and emotional value rather than their economic potential.[145] This change in significance increased the importance of educational and play facilities, as they could combat the potential dangers of the open and unregulated street. According to architectural historian Marta Gutman, "as the sheltered model of childhood took hold among the urban middle classes, child savers inserted themselves into the play culture of working class children; they were determined to direct, control, and contain it—to draw a

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limited number of pictures of African American life in New York City.

[143] Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Knopf, 1986), 208.

[144] Abigail Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 46.

[145] Vivian Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 3-21. In the introduction the author explains change in the economic and sentimental value of children as they transformed from earners, contributing to family wealth, to objects of sentiment, deeming them economically worthless.

physical boundary around play as they drew a social boundary around childhood."[146] Progressive reformers insisted on the need for controlled and enclosed playgrounds for children, with the hopes of containing the children of the poor, in a space carved out and defined by the middle-class. Therefore, regulated and controlled play could prepare children to enter American adulthood as productive citizens that would remain in their proper place.

Organizations such as the Outdoor Recreation League, founded in New York City in 1898, advocated for the importance of playgrounds, especially in parts of the city where parks were difficult to access.[147] These playgrounds would provide controlled spaces for children to unleash their enthusiastic spirits and competitive nature while preventing their intrusion on the city streets—a space prescribed for adult use.[148] Yet the Outdoor Recreation League (later renamed the Playground and Recreation Association of America) focused its advocacy on the interests of its white community members, as public space was assumed to be a place for white, middle-class occupants. It was not until 1919 that the organization began to address the needs of African American communities, promoting segregated play spaces that reinforced racial and class divides.[149]

The Outdoor Recreation League promoted images of organized play through

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[146] Marta Gutman, *A City for Children: Women, Architecture, and the Charitable Landscapes of Oakland, 1850-1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 222.
[147] Kelsey Gustin, "Picturing Reform: Ashcan Women and the Visual Culture of the Progressive Era in New York City," PhD diss., (Boston University, 2020), 25–29.
[148] David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and at Play* (New York: Anchor Books, 1985), 21–23.
[149] Jeffrey J. Pilz, "The Beginnings of Organized Play for Black America: E.T. Attwell and The PRAA," *The Journal of Negro History* 70, no. 3/4, (1985): 66.

illustrations in pamphlets, exhibitions, magazines, and newspapers of the era. A circa 1911 photograph of the Carnegie Playground on Fifth Avenue, for example, documents a group of white children participating in multiple levels of organized and surveilled play (figure 1.16). A tall fence and the backside of a building clearly defines the playground's boundaries, marking this grassy space as separate from the adjacent urban terrain. Children play on a slide and seesaw in the background, while another group of children—varying in age—hold hands to create a circle of play in the midground. A man's head towers over the group of children in the leftmost section of the circle, a beacon of authority within this play space. A sign reading, "Playground open to all children *when adult play leaders are present*" (emphasis added), hangs behind a basketball hoop at the image's edge. The space of the playground can only exist with the presence of an accredited adult, prohibiting play without regulation or supervision.

The study of children and advocacy for their play continued through the 1930s. Throughout the decade, the plight of the city child in poor neighborhoods such as Manhattan's Lower East Side and Harlem was a common subject. In reviewing the pages of *Look,* a popular illustrated magazine that published many photographs by Levitt, children and the negative effects of their environment remained a popular trope. A November 9, 1937 article titled "Street Scenes of New York" shows and describes the slum conditions of New York City and includes one photograph by Lewis Hine of a small girl centered behind a glass door (figure 1.17). The photograph, bolstered by the accompanying article that uses words such as "escape" and "prisoner," alludes to the child being helplessly trapped in the doorway, stuck within her unyielding

environment.[150] The article also discusses how these slums host diseases, making the death toll of blighted areas high and, therefore, the future of the photographed child very grim. The *Look* articles “Build more Playgrounds and get Fewer Criminals” and “There are no Bad Boys,” published in 1938 and 1939 respectively, proselytize the importance of regulated play spaces to induce a positive fate for the child, especially a minority child. In “There are no Bad Boys,” the author begins the article, “Boys aren’t born bad. But bad environment and enforced idleness make youthful criminals,” printed alongside an unattributed photograph, framed from below, of three young boys throwing rocks at a large building that extends beyond the edge of the exposure (figure 1.18).[151] The article continues, “not inherent viciousness, but lack of playgrounds and someone to teach them to play, allows children to develop such anti-social instincts,” cementing the author’s link of a bad environment to a child’s delinquent behavior.

The need to monitor children’s play seemed especially dire in New York City’s poorest neighborhoods—particularly in Harlem where Levitt was photographing. Writing on the built environment of the neighborhood, the Federal Writers’ Project’s *Guide to New York City* concludes, “built up solidly with tenements, old apartment houses, brownstones converted into flats, and occasional small frame residences, Harlem is a poor man’s land.”[152] The neighborhood lacked adequate educational facilities and

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[150] “Street scenes of New York,” *Look*, November 9, 1937, 9
[151] “There are no bad boys,” *Look*, March 14, 1939, 19-20.
[152] The Federal Writers’ Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 253. The oldest and most decrepit buildings typically remained uninhabitable. According to Simone Cinotto in “Italian Americans and Public Housing in New York City, 1937-1941: Cultural Pluralism, Ethnic

playgrounds, especially compared to less ethnically and racially diverse neighborhoods in Manhattan.[153] These frustrations, along with soaring unemployment during the Great Depression and police mistreatment, culminated in the Harlem riot of 1935. With all this unrest, the streets of Harlem were deemed unsafe, especially through the eyes of white outsiders.

In an effort to make city streets safer, New Deal agencies invested in educational facilities to get children off the street and create spaces where they could productively release their "energies." The FAP and the National Youth Administration used their funds to create art education programs and facilities. FAP director Holger Cahill was most proud of the art education department of the FAP, describing the work as providing the underserved community of children, most of whom were minorities, with an outlet for creativity.[154] But, as emphasized by Cahill, this education could only happen *off the street* and within the enclosed and controlled environment of a FAP school classroom. These FAP community art centers, where art education was taught, were celebrated for their ability to garner social unity between children of all races through celebrating

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Maternalism, and the Welfare State," in *Democracy and Social Rights in the Two Wests*, eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and Maurizio Vaudagna (Turin: Otto, 2009), "While the worst dwellings remained vacant and rapidly decayed, some experienced extreme overcrowding, providing the ideal conditions for the spread of disease," 290.

[153] The "Complete riot report bared," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1936, makes the claim, "Therefore, one may conclude that juvenile delinquency in Harlem is due primarily to the lack of adequate recreational facilities and to social disorganization resulting chiefly from the poverty of the community," 110.

[154] Holger Cahill describes the important work of the art education department of the FAP as, "a widening arc of social influence has been created by the classes for under-privileged children, taking them off the street and providing fresh and natural outlets for expression." Holger Cahill, *New Horizons in American Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 23.

differences. Nevertheless, many of these centers were segregated, and Black artists and teachers for the FAP were paid less than their white counterparts. In these and other ways, the FAP's centers reaffirmed the "race based distinctions and hierarchies in the art world" and within New Deal ideology.[155] The government became the decade's preeminent art education sponsor—harnessing children's creative energies to produce improved future citizens within segregated and controlled spaces.[156]

Levitt's photographs show children's play literally embedded into city "property"—using chalk that was most likely stolen from their public-school classroom.[157] In a 1935 letter to the editor published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a citizen-writer complains, "one of the many petty nuisances which contribute to the borough's present unkempt appearance is the chalk marking of the city pavement and sidewalks."[158] Furthermore, a 1914 report on juvenile crime in New York City notes, "the

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[155] Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on America Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 160.

[156] Venues as diverse as the Museum of Modern Art, the Federal Art Gallery, and various department stores hosted multiple exhibitions of children's artworks. The Museum of Modern Art hosted multiple exhibitions of children's artwork such as *Children's Work,* April 4 – April 22, 1938 and *Creative Growth, Childhood to Maturity* November 1939 – January 1940). The Federal Art Gallery also hosted multiple exhibitions to advertise the work produced by children in their community art centers, *Children's Paintings*, Federal Art Gallery January 1937 and *Children's Murals*, Federal Art Gallery, 1938. Settlement houses, such as the East Side Settlement house and the Russel Sage House also hosted exhibitions and various department stores, theatres, and movie houses also presented children's work. For more information see Lillian Semons, *40 exhibitions at New York's Federal Art Gallery: A Preview of the Future* (New York: Federal Art Project), 1939.

[157] "The chalk is usually taken from the public schools by children, probably by lack of ordinary supervision, and it soon means annoyance to the vicinity." In "Says Children Who Mark Sidewalks With Chalk Should Be Disciplined," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 28, 1935, 20.

[158] *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 28, 1935, 20.

arrests for gambling and for chalk games alike are treated as cases of street obstruction."[159] The chalk drawings that Levitt documented, while impermanent, still made their mark on the urban landscape, as her photographs showcase children disregarding the expectations for the use of the city street.

Race and Photographic Representation

In one print from Levitt's chalk drawing series, a young African American boy looks bashfully yet confidently up to the camera, sitting on a stoop and presenting his chalked picture to the viewer (figure 1.19). In this photograph, Levitt has produced a contemplative portrait of a young boy, framed between the steps of the stoop and the adjoining sidewalk. The boy's back is to the building, and he appears to the photographer and viewer as open to and welcoming of the possibilities that come with the space of the unstructured urban street. Furthermore, he is crouched atop a chalk drawing of a geometric figure in the midst of "stating" something indecipherable. While we are unsure what this figure is saying, the drawn image offers words for the boy, presenting him as a physical and vocal presence on the street. The boy does not read as a damaged, vulnerable icon or an object decorating the urban environment, but instead as a boy who lives, and through his artistic actions, owns the urban space. In a common framing technique of Levitt's, the boy is photographed at eye-level, challenging the hierarchical relationship between photographer and subject. In this picture, Levitt exposes herself as

[159] John Collier and Edward M. Barrows, *The City Where Crime is Play: A Report by the People's Institute* (New York, 1914), 18.

beyond a voyeur, or even observer, but as someone with permission to enter the world of the child.

Comparing this work-portrait to the photographs of Aaron Siskind, a contemporary of Levitt's who also photographed Harlem in the late 1930s as part of the Photo League's *Harlem Document*, we witness a photographer more interested in capturing a particular aesthetic moment rather than the personhood of his subjects. The *Harlem Document*, initially conceived by sociologist Michael Carter, was meant to provide evidence of a community in peril and to advocate for improved conditions.[160] In this photograph from the series, four African American children are perched on the thresholds of a building (figure 1.20). Defying the conventional entryway (labeled in a child's script, "Dange [sic]. Keep out"), two children attempt to enter the structure through a boarded-up window. While this image may attend to the resourcefulness of the children, the photograph exhibits no sense of movement or liveliness. Siskind rather focuses on the statuesque backs of the children, as their silhouettes take formal precedence. This lack of connection imbues the photograph with a leering quality, making the viewer question if the photograph was taken with the collaboration or even consent of the subject. The audience perceives the children as Siskind intended, not as the subjects chose to be represented.[161]

Siskind's formal choice of this framing technique works to limit the potential

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[160] Maurice Berger, "Man in the Mirror: *Harlem Document*, Race, and the Photo League," in *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League 1937-1951*, eds. Mason Klein and Catherine Evans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 30.
[161] Joseph Entin, *Sensational Modernism: Experimental Fiction and Photography in Thirties America* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 369.

visual and physical space of the children. Siskind's modernist approach and attention to the frame in this image works to objectify and distance the person within the photograph. Scholar Hazel Carby writing on normative presentations of Black men during the 1920s and 1930s in America notes that photographers often accentuated subjects' bodies and downcast gazes rather than the emotional or intellectual potential of the sitters. This emphasis on body rather than mind "contained" subjects, reinforcing a hierarchy of power between white artists and their Black subjects.[162] There is a distance or "containment" present in this photograph between the white photographer and the Black subject. This distance is recycled throughout interior scenes present in the series that typically include a clear spatial marker to indicate the distance between the photographer and their subject.

While this distance could be read as signs of respect, in comparing the two approaches to engaging photographic subjects, Levitt's work offers a much greater communion between subject and photographer. Eye contact and the subject's proximity acts as a sort of invitation to the photographers as they capture place—physically, socially, and emotionally. According to literary scholar Sara Blair, Levitt "came to make images in and about Harlem that tested or resisted foregone conclusions about race, progress, and modernity as they evaded unitary politics and critical accounting."[163] Levitt does not photographically frame the effects of the environment on her child artists. Rather she shows how boys and girls, within their social and economic limitations, craft

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[162] Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 62.
[163] Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 10.

and create their own play-place in resistance to the dominance of middle-class culture and expectations.

In seven of Levitt's seventeen formal portraits of young street artists with their work (such as figures 1.9, 1.11, 1.13, and 1.19), subjects make direct eye contact with the photographer. Typically the child is photographed at eye level and presented with their shoulders squared to the viewer. As noted earlier, this framing technique, or as art historian Max Kozloff has described it, "unassuming directness," works to usurp the hierarchal relationship between photographer and subject.[164] In the additional ten instances where Levitt's subjects do not look directly into the lens (figure 1.10), the subjects stand or crouch close to their work, in the midst of drawing or posing for their artist-portrait. As discussed previously, these images may have been made using a right-angle lens, though these photographs still appear planned, posed—a collaboration between photographer, subject, and the artist's drawn folk art. In scholarship regarding Levitt's use of the right-angle lens, an accessory that is typically coded as voyeuristic or inducing surveillance, writers still treat Levitt's work as collaborative. Kozloff, commenting on Levitt's signature "affirmative" distance from her photographed figures notes, "after having advanced in order to visually comprehend the people of the street, the photographer receded to let them be themselves and to speak."[165] In this sense,

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[164] Max Kozloff, "A way of seeing and the act of touching: Helen Levitt's photographs of the forties," *Observations,* ed. David Featherstone (Carmel: The Friends of Photography, 1984), 70.
[165] Ibid., 79.

distance—physical or as mediated through the camera's right angle lens—does not equate to unengaged or unsympathetic surveillance in Levitt's oeuvre.

In Levitt's photographs, she cautiously attends to the will of the makers, carefully frames their works, and is situated within a meditated distance so as to not fully intrude into their play-world. Levitt's work reveals her practice as a participant observer, teetering between her reality of the street and the imagined play-place of the children, rather than the more conventional view of an observer-artist staunchly persisting in her own reality.[166] At the time this series was produced, Levitt was a children's art teacher, perhaps not the teacher of the children in these frames, but of children that lived in the same neighborhood. She came to this project as a neighbor, a user, and occupier of the streets.

While I have argued that Levitt's portraits defy racial stereotypes of the decade, her choice to document *children's* artwork and show the East Harlem neighborhood as relating to juvenile practices and what contemporaries would have termed primitivist folk art reveals the inherently problematic nature of a white woman photographing the children of a racially-mixed neighborhood. Levitt's photographs, while celebrating children's creativity and defiance, also offer a potentially limiting and condescending reading of the neighborhood, an understanding intertwined with segregationist and racist ideologies of the decade (as followed, in part, by the FAP). Levitt's photographs focus on the primitive forms of chalk drawings, showing the children's production as anonymous

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[166] Alan Marcus, "Looking Up: The Child and the City," *History of Photography* 30, no. 2, (2006), 129.

and spontaneous. This work was produced in East Harlem, a heterogeneous neighborhood home to many Black and Brown children (as witnessed in Levitt's artist portraits). This emphasis on the primitive and unskilled nature of the children's artwork can prompt a one-dimensional appraisal of art produced by minorities, and the representative space of East Harlem, especially when considering the work within the larger discourses of the FAP. FAP Assistant Director Thomas Parker vocalized a simplistic evaluation of the work produced by Black artists of the New Deal in a 1938 speech at Tuskegee Institute where he stated, "Negro Art has always been attuned to the rhythmic expression of a people deeply sensitive to the poetic values of life."[167] While it was an anomaly at the time to even discuss art produced by Black Americans, Parker recycles common tropes—that art produced by African Americans was primitive, "authentic," but also not academic, not "fine art."

At the time of Levitt's series, primitive and folk art had been popularized within the United States art market. Folk art had been readily collected in America since the mid-nineteenth century, and countless exhibitions of the 1930s presented "naïve" art as its theme, including *American Folk Art* (1932) and *New Horizons in American Art* (1936), both exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art. Writing on folk art's place in the American tradition, Cahill likened folk artists to "primitives." Cahill accentuated folk artists' inability to absorb influences of European art as their defining trait, celebrating

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[167] Thomas C. Parker, "WPA/FAP and Negro Art" (lecture presented at the general conference of the thirty-eighth annual meeting of the American Teachers' Association, Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, AL, July 29, 1938), ser. 3.1, reel 1105, frame 617, Cahill Papers, AAA.

the artists' production as the "untutored expression of the common people."[168] While this folk art was aesthetically appreciated, it was celebrated for its lack of technical finesse, demeaned of context, and evaluated within a milieu that was antithetical to its production. Similar descriptors were used in primitivist and African art exhibitions of the decade.[169] Celebrated for authenticity and a naïve outlook, this discourse essentially others and debases these artists and the folk art tradition.

Similar descriptors were used by early critics to describe Levitt's photographs, or more precisely, the subjects of Levitt's photographs. Levitt's first one-woman exhibition, *Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children*, was held at The Museum of Modern Art in 1943 and curated by Nancy Newhall. The press release for the exhibition highlights the race, neighborhood location, and physicality of the youngsters, "Harlem, with its mixture of races – negroes, gypsies, Latins – is where she finds the most vivid action."[170] This statement follows dangerous and racist stereotypes that minorities, particularly Black children, are more physically capable rather than psychologically or intellectually adept. Similarly, in James Agee's introduction to *A Way of Seeing* (written in 1946), he notes

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[168] Holger Cahill, "Folk Art: Its Place in the American Tradition," *Parnassus* (New York, N.Y. 1929) 4, no. 3 (1932): 1-4, 2.

[169] Wanda Corn writes, "Folk art enthusiasts used a mythologizing vocabulary similar to that of the primitivists, celebrating the supposed freedoms of the untrained artist and romanticizing preindustrial communities. When Americans pictured the art of their ancestors as charming, naïve, intuitive, and childlike, they infantilized folk artists and pictures them as without culture, or at least without a superior culture like their own. They treated folk artists as 'other.'" See Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 326.

[170] The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records, Helen Levitt: Photographs of children, MoMA exh. #221, March 10-April 18, 1943, Sarah Newmeyer, "Photographs of children by Helen Levitt."

that Levitt's subjects are all "poor," and because of this positionality, they embody "a natural history of the soul." Agee repeatedly calls Levitt's subjects "pastoral," likening them to "wild vines." While these are Agee's words, we cannot discount the possibility that Levitt may have held a similarly naturalistic reading of her subjects. Though in contextualizing her work, examining her collaborative process, desire to preserve these artworks, and framing techniques, Levitt clearly interpreted and photographed these works as multifaceted.[171]

In a catalog to accompany the 1938 exhibition of children's drawings made by Spanish children during the Spanish Civil War, exhibited at the Lord & Taylor department store in New York City and other venues throughout the United States, the child artists are called "little geniuses," and their artworks appreciated for their "sense of color," "decorative invention," and "original pattern."[172] Children's artwork of the decade had been apprised for its aesthetic and fine art merits, but this standard is not applied to the drawings within Levitt's photographs, which are instead evaluated for their physicality, and their makers compared to wild-vines rather than geniuses. This emphasis on nature, as described in *A Way of Seeing* and the exhibition's press release, removes Levitt's subjects from owning the city streets on which they inhabit, as they rather occupy the pastoral landscape that is at odds with the metropolis. These passages reiterate

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[171] James Agee, *A Way of Seeing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), xii. Levitt and Agee were collaborators for many years, working together on the film *In the Street* (1946) along with Janice Loeb and *The Quiet One* (shot between 1946 and 1948).
[172] Aldous Huxley, *They Still Draw Pictures! A Collection of Sixty Drawings Made by Spanish Children During the War* (New York: The Spanish Child Welfare Association of America for the American Friends Service Committee, 1938), accessed online, https://library.ucsd.edu/speccoll/tsdp/frame.html, n.p.

the problematic folk art discourses that infiltrated American art throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

Despite these problematic tendencies and the inherent power dynamic between Levitt and her subjects, the spatial politics Levitt reveals through focusing on artworks created *on the street* offer multidimensionality to the neighborhood. The photographs capture sounds, narratives, and memories of and from the streets, prohibiting them, and their occupiers, from being seen only for their physicality or "authenticity." James Agee, while offering a partially imperialist view of the photographer, also goes as far as to claim Levitt's own photographs as possessing near "the pure spontaneity of true folk art," aligning her practice with that of the artists she was photographing.[173] This assertion and Levitt's attention to the folklore of the neighborhood suggests a sort of communion that destabilizes the condescension inherent with the racial and power dynamic at play in this documentation project. Levitt's photographs reveal the complexities of how child's play and communal spaces interact to create a place within the urban fabric, presenting another avenue through which to appreciate this primitive folk art, possibly removing it, in part, from its problematic discourses. Levitt pays close attention to the intricacies of the final chalk drawings, framing them as works of art. When asked why she made these photographs, the photographer responded, "I felt they should be preserved," a pure yet complex statement that reveals the photographer's respect for the folklore she was documenting.[174] Through this preservation process, Levitt instills the subjects of her

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[173] James Agee, *A Way of Seeing* (New York, Horizon Press, 1992), viii.
[174] Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 26.

photographs with a sense of agency, showing the children not as pastoral youths but as makers and laborers who unleash their psychic and spatial creativity within the city streets. With this, Levitt preserves the chalked drawings and also the imagined landscapes the children create and re-create throughout the neighborhood streets.

A Child's Place: The meeting of the real and imagined

The year after Levitt created this series of chalk drawings, Johan Huizinga published his seminal work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture,* offering a reading of the nature and significance of play as a cultural phenomenon and producer of social order, not limited to the realm of childhood. While it is unclear if Levitt ever read or saw this book, the author's theorizations regarding concepts of play permeated American culture. Play, as Huizinga defines it, "is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility."[175] Play creates a new world where "inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count."[176] This play mode, while creating a world of pretend, proceeds with the utmost seriousness.[177] In this analysis, Huizinga roots play to its social function and construction, calling attention to the fundamental seriousness of play in the making of human culture. Through this theorization, these new places that play creates exist

[175] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955), 132.
[176] Ibid., 12.
[177] Ibid., 8.

between reality and the imagination, constructed by the players and resistant to external forces.

The subjects and narratives crafted within Levitt's photographic series of chalk drawings attest to the inventive power of the children's play as they create their own clandestine world. These indexes of their fancies, or as fellow photographer Ralph Steiner phrased it, "what goes on in the minds of children," often present imagery of fictional people, fantasy animals, and secret messages that works to convert the urban landscape into a surreptitious universe inhabited by the child.[178] Sociologists Oliver and Ethel Hale wrote convincingly on the poetic ability of children to transform and interrupt space through their imagination and play-labor. Their records are worth quoting at length:

> But when children believe, pretend or imagine, they do so as poets, relating tales or interpreting them, or flashing their sharp lights of wit and scorn upon the acts and conduct of their elders and their guardians. For like the poet who is the ultimate realist seeing the world plain and the whole rather than the parts, children have an instant eye which is never blind to the pretenses of adults…Hence they are indeed realists, accepting the world and changing it according to their moods and then changing back into it again.[179]

Huizinga continues to explore the very realness of children's play worlds noting, "once played, it endures as a new-found creation of the mind, a treasure to be retained by the memory. It is transmitted, it becomes tradition."[180] Moreover, anthropologist Arjun

[178] Ralph Steiner, "Wall and Sidewalk Drawings show what goes on in the minds of New York Children," *PM's Weekly,* March 2, 1941, 49.
[179] Ethel and Oliver Hale [Esther and Oscar Hirshman], "From Sidewalk, Gutter and Stoop: Being a Chronicle of Children's Play Activity," unpublished typescript dated 1955 (though internal evidence suggests much of it was collected in the 1930s), The New York Public Library, Manuscripts Division, Box 43, 97.
[180] Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 9-10

Appadurai more recently argues that imagining has become a part of social practice, a form of work, “the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact.”[181] With this, the children’s drawings can be read as transcriptions of their social agency, altering the street into a site with meaning, memory, and identity. The urban landscape, comprised of concrete sidewalks, brownstone stoops, iron columns, bricked walls, and paved roads, becomes a space with its own narrative and local culture, as dictated by the child.

Through their play-labor and artistic practice, the children transform this space into a place.[182] Space is abstract, based in the physical realm. Place transcends the physical and is rather created through emotions and experiences. It goes beyond the tangible and engages senses of touch, experience, and sociality. Place is built through an amassing of social interrelationships. These relationships, connected spatially, continually evolve, beholden to and determined by the occupier. Levitt’s process of documentation then is also a part of this place-making struggle as her photographs preserve the fictional and evanescent places of and on the street.[183]

Within the series, many pictures zoom in to focus on text, revealing rude messages, slurs, and insults, the score of baseball games, secret love messages, and even

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[181] Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (Spring 1990), 5.
[182] Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy, “Urban space and representation” in *Urban Space and Representation,* eds. Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 6.
[183] The idea of photography as being part of the “perpetual production and reproduction, negotiation and renegotiation” of place is explored in greater detail in *Picturing America: Photography and the Sense of Place*, eds. Kerstin Schmidt and Julia Faisst (Leiden and Boston: Brill/Rodopi, 2019), 212.

instructions on how to use certain parts of a building's façade. Taking the form of gossip, a form of communication that thrives in marginalized, liminal, or uncertain social spaces, these messages uncover the clandestine world of the child, a world with its own distinct form of communication, unknowable to others.[184] In one photograph, the author writes, "Betty Fox loves every boy in the world" overtop of the façade of a brownstone that already holds the stenciled message "Keep off" (figure 1.21). The viewer does not know who Betty Fox is, or even if she is a real girl who actually does love every boy and/or the implications of this statement. This cryptic message is unknowable to an outsider and remains distinct to the social realm of children who are not only constructing their own physical world through an amendment by chalk drawing, but using this medium as a way to gossip and build a community.

This message, along with others in the series such as the insult "Pancho stinks" and the warning, "This is a tough block" are examples of the children negotiating different iself-dentities and policing their buildings and blocks. These communications were very real warnings to outsiders and insiders coming to different localities within the neighborhood. Robert Orsi, in his historical work on East Harlem, argues that due to the diverse demographic and economic adversity of the neighborhood, drawing and defending boundaries based on race and ethnicity was a reality in the daily life of

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[184] Adam Jaworski and Justin Coupland, "Othering in gossip: 'you go out you have a laugh and you can pull yeah okay but like…'", *Language in Society* 34 (2005). In this article, the authors also discuss how gossip, "is part of our experience of building relationships, sharing with others, and ultimately becoming and being human," 668.

inhabitants.[185] Different neighborhood facilities such as the limited number of playgrounds, pools, and recreation facilities were self-policed to segregate the play of white, Black, and Puerto Rican children of the neighborhood.[186] By using this form of gossip that decorates the public spaces of the contested street, the children are able to patrol their boundaries and flaunt their accusations as they yet remain anonymous.

Levitt was not the only photographer during the 1930s that documented this drawn folklore that decorated city streets. John Gutman in San Francisco also completed a series of photographs on children's chalk drawings, taken in the late 1930s (figure 1.22). In Paris, in 1933, Brassaï began his two-decade-long undertaking documenting the city's graffiti, a project that was published in multiple periodicals, exhibitions, and in a 1961 photobook *Graffiti*. Brassaï directly referred to this work, which was drawn and carved into the city's facades, as graffiti, a term Levitt did not use to refer to the chalk drawings she photographed. Also, unlike Levitt, Brassaï only photographed complete works. The finalized image was typically centered within the photographic frame, excluding any material context (figure 1.23). Brassaï did not include (ignored,

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[185] Robert Anthony Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920–1990," *American Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (1992), 319-323.

[186] See Marta Gutman, "Race, Place, and Play: Robert Moses and the WPA Swimming Pools in New York City," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 67, no. 4 (December 2008) for an analysis on how WPA public pools in Harlem (Colonial Park and Jefferson Park) that were built to meet modernist standards remained segregated by neighborhood social practices, "Whites routinely beat up blacks and Puerto Ricans in East Harlem when they tried to swim at Jefferson Pool; on occasion whites swam at Colonial Pool, although others felt unwelcome," 545.

discounted?) the presence of the makers, preferring to handle the graffiti as anonymous artworks.

Brassaï's photographs were published in the surrealist journal *Minotaur* in 1933 and later shown in the Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Language of the Wall: Parisian Graffiti Photographed by Brassaï,* on view from October 24, 1956 to January 13, 1957 (presented thirteen years after Levitt's solo show at the Modern).[187] The press release for the exhibition notes how these instances of graffiti are "preserved" by Brassaï, following the lineage of "archeologists," or folklorists before him that identified graffiti as a cultural artifact reflective of the everyday culture of "the man on the street."[188] Brassaï and Levitt, within a handful of years of one another, commenced their exploration of decorated city streets, observing and preserving this folk art, framing it as a permeating and significant tradition worthy of careful, close study.

Kissing, Homesteads, and the Wild West: Children Recreate the Adult World

In numerous photographs in Levitt's series, the subject matter of the chalk drawing typically mimics the behavior of adults. These images show the child artists' attempts to enter the realm of adulthood through their ritual of play, performance, and imitation, just as the gossiped messages are instances of children "trying on" various identities. This is seen in drawings of adults kissing within a heart, a woman smoking a

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[187] The exhibition was curated by Edward Steichen. Brassaï, "Du Mur des cavernes au mur d'usine," *Minotaure* 1.3-4 (December 1933): 6-7.
[188] MoMA Press Release, 1956, 1. https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_press-release_326070.pdf?_ga=2.169127905.1984634681.1612484843-184670410.1612484843

cigarette while holding a sign that reads "STOP," and a woman holding a wine glass (figures 1.24-1.26). In many instances, the figure's traits are hyperbolic—the women have very curly hair and long eyelashes, and the figures' lips overwhelm their faces. These are exaggerations of peoples and ideas that populate the imagined "adult world" of the makers. With this, the artists are able to envision and project a future for themselves that holds potentials outside of the average realities of their everyday street. These drawings show the boys and girls of the neighborhood not necessarily fitting into the expectations of adulthood but altering them, just as they alter the sidewalk landscape, into an invented reality to fit their desired future. This imagined space, distinct to each creator, cannot be reached and inhabited by the outside world but remains a privileged space—constructed and occupied by the child.

Peppered among visions of adults, the series contains multiple depictions of houses. In all instances, these are single-family homes, many with a pitched roof, chimney, front door, and windows. Each home is slightly different, as the child architects chose to have decorative windows, an off-center front door, or even a space for a car in the front driveway. In the majority of these drawings, the house is surrounded by trees, and occasionally the children have drawn a family to go inside the home. While it is true that a home is one of the simpler shapes that a child can draw, within this subseries, the level of detail lavished on these homes remains unparalleled throughout the series. Within these scenes of domestic bliss, the trees' leaves almost sway in the breeze, the sun's heat radiates through the windows, and smoke billows out of the chimneys (figure 1.27). In this image, within the grassy landscape two stick-figures tend to their garden of

flowers and trees. The artist has even made an effort to draw a border around this serene scene, protecting their homestead from any other encroaching drawings. Under the bottom border is the word "conty [sic]" which we can assume means "country"—labeling this place as separate and other from the city sidewalk on which it lies.

These homes do not resemble the dilapidated brownstone tenements that the children were themselves inhabiting, but rather imaginary single-family homes, perhaps a "dream home," beyond what was available to them in their neighborhood. The issue of housing would have certainly been on the minds of neighborhood dwellers and discussed within the popular press as inadequate housing had been plaguing the neighborhood for decades. In a commissioned report from July 1936 leaked in the *New York Amsterdam News*, a local Harlem newspaper, the report claimed "wretched housing, inadequate and inefficient schools and other public facilities, unemployment, unduly high rents, [and] the lack of recreation grounds" were the main ignitors of the Harlem riot of one year past.[189] In response to these issues, Mayor LaGuardia and the PWA commenced construction of the Harlem River Houses (located approximately forty blocks north of where Levitt's photographs were taken) to offer affordable and livable housing to residents of Harlem.[190] The Harlem River Houses was the only project at the time that was built to house African American residents.[191] Further south, construction had begun on the integrated East River

[189] "Complete riot report bared," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 18, 1936.
[190] Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," *Journal of Urban history* 12, no. 4 (1986), 369.
[191] The other projects such as the First Houses and the Williamsburg Houses were slated for white occupants only with fears that Black residents would decrease the neighboring land value. For more information see Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," *Journal of Urban history* 12, no. 4 (1986): 353-390.

Houses, though early occupants were primarily white (Italian) residents.[192] Furthermore, through strict eligibility standards that required proof of continuous employment and also assessed a candidate's character and material prospects, many of Harlem's residents were not qualified to apply for this housing.[193]

Rather than waiting for government-sponsored, segregated housing to open, the boys and girls of the street took it upon themselves to metaphorically create their own homes, weaving their idyllic domicile into their urban fabric, if only for a few moments. Decorating the spaces of sidewalks, walls, and fences, these drawings transform the urban landscape into an imaginary place, a home, to be occupied only by the child builder. They present invented futures, a creative building solution, potentials for what could be to come in the life of the children who play in the street. The drawn homes do not contain the New Deal politics of discrimination, segregation, and "community" that plagued the Harlem and East River houses. Instead, they are homes for occupants of the child's choosing, which exist within the chalked borders of their own making.

Speckled throughout Levitt's series are nostalgic images, dreams of a rural America of the past that portray a place beyond what the makers would see in their

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[192] Simone Cinotto, "Italian Americans and Public Housing in New York City, 1937-1941: Cultural Pluralism, Ethnic Maternalism, and the Welfare State," in *Democracy and Social Rights in the Two Wests,* eds. Alice Kessler-Harris and Maurizio Vaudagna (Turin: Otto, 2009), 279-305, discusses the issues of housing and race relations in East Harlem. "Italian Americans in Harlem started to reclaim a white identity, largely for attrition with American tales of racial entitlements to citizenship, economic competition for scarce resources with Puerto Rican and African American newcomers and in a desperate, and often violent, effort to distance themselves from their 'darker-skinned' neighbors," 298.
[193] J.J. Butts, "Writing Projects: New Deal Guidebooks, Community, and Housing Reform in New York City," *The Space Between,* 2:1 (2006), 124.

everyday life, perhaps glimpsed from popular movies, comics, magazines, or advertisements. These include scenes of mountains, a figure playing baseball in a tree-filled field, a tractor, and even a windmill (figures 1.28-1.31). One main goal of the FAP, and specifically the IAD, was to preserve (but in actual practice construct) a folk-art tradition native to America.[194] This was centered on a nostalgic portrait of America before industrialization—a time when art was more aligned with and served as an expression of the everyday. Through the FAP's creation of the Index, Project administrators could illustrate an idealized view of American culture that did not reveal difference and tension but rather portrayed a country with a "mythical, nostalgic national unity."[195] There was an effort within the FAP and greater American culture to eulogize and romanticize pre-industrialized America.[196]

It is curious that in Levitt's series, all the mountain scenes also include an image of a train speeding along the jagged landscape (figure 1.28). In one drawing that is particularly detailed, a five-car train, with its front light illuminating its path, barrels down a lattice patterned bridge. The scene is centered within the parameters of a concrete slab of sidewalk as well as a five-peaked mountain range that is lit from above by a blazing sun. To the right of the mountains are three tall evergreen trees, placing this train scene perhaps in the western frontier, but certainly not within the Harlem neighborhood

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[194] Index artists were considered "archeological pioneers," Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 65.
[195] Victoria Grieve, *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 120-124.
[196] Such as the work of Constance Rourke, Van Wyck Brooks, and Lewis Mumford among others.

on which it lies. Looking closely at the mountain that is third from the left, it appears as though a person is scaling its terrain, showing a citizen's effort to unite with or conquer nature. Under the locomotive tracks, the bridge is clearly labeled "Union Pacific R.R.," marking this path as one constructed and owned by that particular railway company.

In turning to advertisements and ephemera that would have lived in the pages of popular presses or been plastered on the walls of neighborhood buildings, the "progressive" Union Pacific Railroad was advertising their services as a way to see the western "wonders of the world" at the fifteen National Parks that its pathway served. More specifically, its patrons could "go 'dude ranching' this summer," transported via the airconditioned cars of the Union Pacific railroad (figures 1.32 and 1.33).[197] In the accompanying pictures that illustrated these advertisements, there are no signs of an actual train. In its place are mountains and a tree-filled terrain traversed by men, young and old, on horseback. The drawing by the youngsters does not mimic this exact advertisement but presents a scene merging advertising imagery and the child's individual imaginings. Their scene reveals the hypocrisy of what the train company was selling, that to visit the west, to return back and reunite with nature, one must use the very method by which the American landscape was permanently altered. This drawing destroys the romantic notions of a pre-industrialized America that the IAD and FAP were trying to sell, and rather shows a scene constructed within the child's mind that in actuality offers a more truthful representation of American history and ideology.

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[197] Seen in *Life* magazine April 12, 1937, 86.

Imaginings of the western frontier also include drawings of adult characters that inhabit that romanticized landscape—the cowboy and the Indian. This subseries includes the conceptions of a fantastic and more violent adulthood compared to those earlier musings of adults drinking wine, kissing, and ordering commands. Rather, in the eleven images of the cowboy, he smokes a cigarette, challenges fellow cowboys to duel, and is in the midst of slinging a smoking gun (figure 1.34). Within the series, there are two instances when Native Americans are shown wearing their "traditional" garb and smoking a "peace pipe" (figure 1.35). In one chalk drawing, a Native American figure appears on the left side of the frame, clearly identified by his feathered headdress, with a speech bubble emitting from his lips (figure 1.36). In this staged scene, the Native American addresses his cowboy counterpart to the right of the frame, stating, "I'm a cowboy." This drawing reveals these chalk imaginings not as static moments in time, but rather scenes of dynamic action, movement, and speech—dramas invented within the collective spaces of the city street. Furthermore, the speech bubble reveals the child's authority to determine what characters do and say in these spectacles of their own making, including a role reversal of stereotypical western life. The cowboy in the right of the photograph is barely legible over remnants of an earlier erasure, alluding to the possibility of an altered future for the characters that inhabit this scene.

The trope of the cowboy and Indian was common throughout 1930s popular culture, as seen in advertisements, comic strips, and popular movies. In 1936 the western movie *The Plainsman* was released that tells the story of the capture and eventual escape of "Wild Bill" Hickok and "Calamity James" from the Cheyenne tribe. The movie was

featured in *Life* magazine's January 4, 1937 issue as their pick for "Movie of the Week." The article included a seven-page spread of film-stills accompanied by text detailing the film's plot (figure 1.37). This spread comprises the capture, torture, and eventual escape of the characters, with one page detailing the amazing speed at which "Wild Bill" could draw his gun, an action scene similar to those depicted within the chalk drawing series. Beyond the realms of popular culture, the leaders of the FAP espoused a singular, romanticized vision of the lives of the "common men" of America.[198] The Project celebrated these "living, working, loving, and not infrequently drinking and brawling" men who populate the non-industrialized landscape of the American west as they represented the ideal American citizen that was shaped by and a part of the masculine frontier.[199] Mimicking the actions of these fictionalized heroes, the child's cowboy defends himself and his (urban) land, producing a fictionalized western landscape and drama within the borders of the metropolitan street.

Many of the cowboys in this series are shown with great detail attended to the accessories that undeniably mark the figure to be a cowboy (figure 1.34). In this image, the cowboy, presented to us in profile, sports wide pants, cowboy boots with stirrups, a bulky belt, and a handkerchief tied around his neck. He wears a very wide, flat-brimmed

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[198] In the January 4, 1937 issue of *Life* (the same that held the film stills from *The Plainsmen*) there is a feature on page 36 on the mural work of artists under the FAP, specifically George Biddle's *Washington Murals* that decorate the new Justice Department building with scenes of cowboys "surveying new lands."

[199] Jonathan Harris, *Federal Art and National Culture: The Politics of Identity in New Deal America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 95 and Francis V. O'Connor *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project* (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 25.

hat that is nearly identical to the one worn by "Wild Bill" Hickok in *The Plainsman*. His lips are pursed, eyes squinted. His stance exhibits a stoic machismo underscored by the prominent position of his smoking gun clasped in his left hand. Examining the image in greater detail, we notice that he is ascending a set of rickety stairs. With this, the cowboy occupies a similar space to the one on which he has been drawn, a space on the margin, as he transitions thresholds. This cowboy is perhaps ascending the stairs of a stoop to challenge a foe to a duel, heightening the reality of this imagined being. In some sense, we can understand the children (most likely boys) to be acting out their masculinity through their drawn characters, a masculinity that they may have witnessed on the movie screen.[200] These boys, through their drawings, are imitating a character and a revered adulation of white masculinity, creating and auditioning an idealized future that remains (at least for the moment) within his imagined domain.

Occurrences of the gun-slinging cowboy are not the only occasions of violence in Levitt's series. Within this group, there are ten scenarios of war, violence more aligned with the reality of the everyday life of the children. These drawings were made while the Spanish Civil war was waged across the Atlantic Ocean, during the commencement of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the escalation of German military tactics. Scenes of violence across the ocean, as well as the general feeling of fear and anxiety that overtook the American psyche during the decade of the Great Depression were felt and witnessed by these child artists. Images of war and advancing troops often dominated the pages of

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[200] LeRoy Ashby, *With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture Since 1830* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 259.

the popular press, as seen in almost every issue of *Life* magazine in the year 1937.[201] On December 27, the magazine published a five-page spread documenting a Japanese bombing of a ship that had patrolled the Yangtze—the US Panay.[202] Page two of the spread shows the ship before the attack, a multi-tiered vessel with an erect deck-gun and two smokestacks (figure 1.38). The third page in the spread includes a photograph of the US Augusta, a similarly well-manned ship. The photographs notably emphasize the power of these ships while the text describes the US Panay, personified as a woman, in her last mighty moments before sinking.

The political climate as reported in the pages of *Life* is clearly referenced in the chalk drawings series that includes multiple scenes of violence and war (figure 1.39). This photograph of two ships sketched on separate panels of a door details a three-level ship (similar to the US Panay) labeled US Tiger (the name of a real American submarine). The ship is depicted with multiple windows and smokestacks, and a soldier manning a gun sits on the vessel's deck. To the US Tiger's right is another ship, similarly three levels, labeled USCG (United States Coast Guard) that also hosts a soldier on deck manning a gun. On the port side of the ship's deck is an American flag and above that flag's mast on the upper-most level of the boat stands another sailor. Both ships sail on choppy waters and navigate under empty skies. These ships resemble the photographed and drawn battleships that adorned the pages of *Life* as well as other contemporaneous

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[201] Scenes of war are present in every issue of *Life* in 1937 except March 15, May 17, May 24, June 7, and September 20.
[202] The October 11 issue of that year included a five-page spread detailing the increased funding for the United States Merchant Marines and on October 25, *Life* published aerial photographs chronicling Naval fleets testing their strength on the Pacific.

periodicals. This direct reference to popular culture and current events blurs the lines between fiction, reality, and the imagined landscapes authored by the boys and girls. Within this drawn battle scene, along with the other instances of violence from the series, it is always the United States ship, plane, or tanker that is on the attack—Levitt did not document instances of the US forces being acted upon. Through their drawn creation, the artists were able to assuage their real anxieties by constructing an imagined landscape in which they were always the victor.

These chalk drawings uncover a place in flux—between the urban street and western frontier, childhood and adulthood, and war and peace. Within this series, Levitt employed careful and conscientious framing that empowered the labor and ability of the child artist. This framing device mimicked the children's effort to create and inhabit fictional landscapes of their own making. We do not see mere imitations of reality, but rather, in each instance, alterations of reality. Children are able to gossip, inhabit single-family homes, protect their nation, and create places of potential for their presents and futures. This series displays the power of play and imagination to disrupt and subvert progressive expectations and reformers' rubrics that mandate how streets ought to be used, revealing children's ability to occupy and modify these contested spaces.

Levitt's Place-making Endeavor: The Popular Press

These images of chalk drawings were not relegated to the files of the FAP but were also included on the very public pages of *PM*. In examining much of the text and captions that surround the original publication of these photographs, it is clear that early

critics and fellow photographers viewed this series of photographic chalk drawings as more than instances of children's play, but as socially and politically motivated efforts on the part of the children.[203] *PM* ran from June 1940 through 1948 and was the brainchild of Ralph Ingersoll who had been trained under the publishing empire of Henry Luce, the mind behind *Life* magazine. *PM* was a daily paper and also had a weekend edition known as *PM's Weekly* that focused more critically on the culture of New York. This weekend edition was where most of Levitt's photographs were published under the eye of photography editor Ralph Steiner. *PM* was quite clear about its progressive political and social intention and printed a journalistic statement with many of its issues:

> We are against people who push other people around, just for the fun of pushing, whether they flourish in this country or abroad. We are against fraud and deceit and greed and cruelty and we will seek to expose their practitioners. We are for people who are kindly and courageous and honest. We respect intelligence, sound accomplishment, open-mindedness, religious tolerance. We do not believe all mankind's problems are now being solved successfully by any existing social order, certainly not our own, and we propose to crusade for those who seek constructively to improve the way men live together. We are Americans and we prefer democracy to any other principle of government.[204]

PM, through its articles and accompanying photographs, attempted to be a voice for the disenfranchised. According to historian Paul Milkman, *PM* was committed to fighting against religious and racial prejudices, prejudices the writers and editors found to be inherently against American democracy (and prejudices that they saw on the pages of

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[203] Elizabeth Gand's dissertation is the first scholarly work to consider the context of how Levitt's first photographs were published. See chapter one, Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011).

[204] Paul Milkman, *PM: A New Deal in Journalism, 1940-1948* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 41.

other magazines such as *Life*).[205] The writers, editors, and contributors pursued this fight through images, complicating the definitions of high and low art, or, as Jason Hill writes, "flagging the art work of journalism."[206] Through this interrogation of the visual medium, the periodical pushed viewers to question journalism's visual representations and how they, as viewers, consumed the news. The text and images within the pages of *PM* asked readers to not be passive receptacles of the news but rather active metabolizers of reporting. Within the tabloid, photography editor Ralph Steiner published articles that instructed readers on how to read an image and decipher photographic rhetoric.[207] This instruction of the viewers and expectation that they, through the news page, could become fastidious consumers, was part of *PM's* larger push against complacency.

Levitt's photographs were first featured in the magazine's August 11, 1940 issue.[208] Rather than working on commission for the magazine, Levitt sought the magazine out herself and brought her work to Ralph Steiner on spec. Levitt, unknown by Steiner at this time, must have been confident in her artistic practice and felt that her

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[205] For more information regarding PM's crusade against injustice, see Paul Milkman's chapter "Crusading against Prejudice" in *PM: A New Deal in Journalism, 1940-1948* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 146-167.

[206] Jason Hill, *The Artist as Reporter: Weegee, Ad Reinhardt, and the PM news picture* (Oakland: University of California Press), 2018, xiv. In the introduction, Hill lays out his argument, that *PM's,* "single contribution both to journalism and to the histories of art and photography, was as committed to granting visibility to the various investments brought to that encounter – those of the photographer, the illustrator, and the newspaper that was their pictorial support – as it was to providing through their constellation the world picture upon which its readers might thereby democratically act," 10.

[207] Ralph Steiner, "What is Truth in Photography?," *PM*, February 2, 1941, 47-9. For more information see Jason Hill, "Artist as Reporter: The *PM* News Pictures, 1940-1949," (PhD Diss., University of Southern California, 2010), 279-285.

[208] Author unknown, "A new photographer discovers New York" *PM's Weekly* August 11, 1940.

work would align with the political and social ethos of the publication. In writing about Levitt's work in a March 1941 issue of *PM's Weekly*, Steiner appreciated her ability to focus with "true humility [on] the 'little' subjects." Steiner may not have read Levitt's work as overtly political, yet he noted her ability to see "that such commonplace material was full of life and interest," and that through attending to the small things and the little people, Levitt's work could create space for the children of the street.[209] Steiner, who had published previously on the socially charged work of Lewis Hine and FSA photographers, underscored in Levitt's work her attention to the will of her subjects.[210] Noting Levitt's attentiveness to "how wonderful the world is," Steiner points to Levitt's collaborative spirit, prioritizing the vision of her medium to record children's place-making strategies on the street rather than emphasize her *own* vision.

In the August 11, 1940 issue of *PM's Weekly,* eight photographs by Levitt were published alongside the article penned by an unknown author titled "A new photographer discovers New York," which introduced Levitt's work to the *PM* audience. All of the images in the spread focus on liminal and collective spaces within the neighborhood. Five of the images show people occupying the more publicly accessible spaces of the neighborhood—one focuses on a father and his daughters rushing along a sidewalk. In another, an older man stares into the lens, sitting on a makeshift chair adjacent to a

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[209] Ralph Steiner, "Wall and Sidewalk Drawings Show What Goes on in the Minds of New York Children," *PM's Weekly* March 2, 1941, 49.

[210] Ralph Steiner, "Lewhine's Camera Is a Weapon in Fight for Social Justice," *PM*, June 16, 1940; Ralph Steiner, "Miss Lange's Pictures Prove 'Garbage Can School' Wrong," *PM* , June 22, 1941, 48-9; Ralph Steiner, "Rothstein Pictures Make Sociology Come Alive," *PM*, April 6, 1941, 46-7.

sidewalk cellar door. In another, an older woman pulls a hose across a fenced-in front yard, seemingly watering the grass in the cracks at the meeting of the stoop and sidewalk. In the remaining two photographs, boys play across the lintels of a building and within the neighborhood's street. The final three images show people inhabiting the stoop: eating a popsicle and overlooking the street.

The sixth photograph in the series is of a young girl leaning on the cast-iron newel post at the end of a stoop's arm rail (figure 1.40). The girl is completely engrossed in her comic as she rests her chin on the top of the post and her arms on its cornice. The girl appears as an extension of the stoop, and she cements herself to this liminal space. The accompanying caption reads, "In Harlem, people live *on* and *around* their houses, not just inside them. If the literature is absorbing enough, comfort doesn't matter."[211] The caption of the photograph further links the girl's body to her environment and calls attention to her ability to create life outside of her home, "on" and "around" it, on the margins. The girl transforms this space into what she needs it to be in order for her to go about her daily life in the manner she sees best.

The following photograph in the spread furthers links people to architecture as it shows five boys spanning from young children to young adults playing/fighting on the frame of a tall doorway adorned with Tuscan stone columns (figure 1.41). The caption reads, "Third Ave, Upper East Side, offers no trees or cliffs for kids to climb, but the porch of an abandoned building is an excellent substitute."[212] In this image, the viewer is

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[211] Anonymous, "A new photographer discovers New York," *PM's Weekly,* August 11 1940, 37 (emphasis in the original).
[212] Ibid., 38.

drawn to the lone boy on the right, embracing the pillar and bashfully looking from behind it at the photographer. The viewer is left to question how the boy will reach the top of the lintel to join his friends. To the right of the boy's head is a sign that reads "post no bills," alluding to the potential illegality of the children's play. The child on the far-left side of the picture, ignoring the sign, climbs up the column with ease, almost reaching its peak and meeting his three compatriots. The two boys standing atop the lintel throw punches and blocks, offering a choreographed fight to the viewer who may read a potential for danger in the picture, but the children appear immune to that threat. Alan Marcus writes, "here the children are transgressing acceptable physical boundaries, placing themselves at odds with society's efforts to protect and control children."[213] These five boys are transforming the closed doorway into their personal playground, a place that cannot be regulated by reformist eyes and remains untouched by middle-class expectations. Through the act of photographing, Levitt flaunts their transgressions and shows them as fearless and resourceful.

The March 2, 1941 issue of *PM's Weekly* featured seven photographs of chalk drawings by Levitt that explore the secrecy, glamour, and toughness of the worlds the drawings create (figure 1.42).[214] The first two photographs host the messages "Button to secret passage press" and "A decetive [sic] lives here," alluding to the mysterious and

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[213] Alan Marcus, "Looking up: The child and the city" *History of Photography* 30, no. 2 (June 2006): 119-133, 128.
[214] Ralph Steiner, "Wall and Sidewalk Drawings Show What Goes on in the Minds of New York Children," *PM's Weekly* March 2, 1941. These chalk drawings are not a part of the FAP files that are housed by the National Archives in College Park, Maryland but seeing as they show similar subject matter and are taken within the same time period of the FAP series, I read them as a continuation of the series.

surreptitious landscape that the children create and inhabit. The third exposure pictures a man in profile, wearing a cap and smoking a cigarette. In his left hand, he holds a smoking gun that he has just fired, as scribbles of clouds and lines allude to the sound and smoke produced by the gun. The figure, resembling the folk-heroes from the decade's popular gangster films, remains stoic, attending to his defense with the utmost seriousness. The fourth image in the article offers the viewer a glimpse into the female world and shows a woman with quaffed hair, rouged cheeks, and large eyelashes. Under her head, the child has labeled her as "no good," suggesting she, as the caption proposes, is a "shady lady." The fifth image turns gender expectations on their head as a long-haired female figure wearing a skirt plays the part of a cowgirl. The caption describes this figure as the wife of a cowboy who "pulls" her gun on her husband, furthering the violent readings of the images and also the possible role reversals and mutable feminine expectations within these imagined scenes. The sixth image depicts a scene of a male and female cowboy kissing with their arms wrapped around each other, a rare glimpse into a scene of adult intimacy. The seventh image similarly shows instances of violence, as a muscular boxer, turning to his right, extends his gloved hand to make contact with an invisible figure or object. Illegible text appears below the boxer's glove, perhaps a verbal taunt. The captions under the photographs suggest these drawings mimic the reality of the child's world as they render the gangsters that populate their neighborhood and well as scenes from their favorite comic books and movie screens. These chalk drawings show the child artists amalgamating their imagination and real life to create their own place on the city street.

The article includes two photographs of children at play on the sidewalk, showing how the imagined worlds transcribed on the two-dimensional surface of the sidewalk are then acted out by the children. The photograph in the top right corner of the article shows three boys on a Harlem stoop, the same image discussed in the introduction to this chapter (figure 1.1). The boys have their toy guns in their hands and are poised, ready to protect their stoop and sidewalk. Their stance, weapons, and even their hats mimic the two gangsters in the third and fifth photograph of chalk drawings. The photograph is captioned, "The drawings at the left come from sidewalk jungles like this. Kids draw a thin line between make-believe and blood-letting. Their gang battles are *serious* business. 'Here they come, fellers!'"[215] The author, Ralph Steiner, reads the children's play as "serious" business, a ritual that has consequences that go beyond fun. Through their play, the boys have transformed their environment into an imagined battleground, a place that is fully their own.

The final image in the spread centers on the sidewalk play of a diverse group of white, Black, and Hispanic children (figure 1.43). The children play near the curb of the sidewalk and the street's gutter. Along the sidewalk, two boys hold up the border of a mirror, literally creating a threshold, migrating from the façade to the curbside, for a young boy perched on the seat of a tricycle, to ride through. Two other boys crouch down by the gutter, building or crafting something within the pocket of space created by the meeting of the curb and street. These two child architects may be crafting a new landscape for their compatriot to "live" in once he commences his travels. To

[215] Ibid., 49.

contemporary eyes, the diversity and desegregated play of these children is noteworthy, and the inclusion of the photograph is inherently political. The imaginative worlds that are created and lived in by the children through their chalk drawings are able to exclude or at least ignore the period's racial tensions. The caption, paying no attention to racial or ethnic difference, reads, "this weird street scene typifies the crowded, confusing life around the slum children—the soil which nourished the drawings on this page."[216] This text asserts that the reality of the lives of the slum children nourished, or fertilized, their chalk drawing creations, necessitating their real and imagined place-making effort.

Conclusion

The first published photograph by Levitt, printed in *Fortune* in July of 1939, presents a rare occurrence of Levitt photographing an adult. In one of the many pictures printed for the article "The Melting Pot" and captioned by the short article "It takes fifty nations to make a New Yorker," a young mother and her child are shown at a window (figure 1.44). The mother, with her lips pursed and elbows firm on her windowsill, leans out of her window, meeting the gaze of the photographer and viewer. Her young child leans on her right side, firmly placed behind the sill and the left hand of her mother. This image shows a moment of protection between a mother and child as the mother takes on the role of defender of her child. The woman's position on the sill, between the inside and outside world offers a sense of possibility of physical and emotional movement, the mother is acting on the possibility that she could move from the private sphere of the

[216] Ibid., 49.

home to the public sphere of the street. As the viewer scans the accompanying text below the picture, the image takes on a racial and exclusionary discourse:

> Seventy-five years ago the Irish of New York, being the city's poor, led the three-day insurrection known as the Draft Riots. In the politics of those days, the term "100% American" meant anti-Irish.... Seventy-five years from now the Syrian, Czech, Polish, German, Jewish, Russian and other faces on this page will look as native to New York as the average Irish cop looks today. The New York born sons and daughters of immigrants already outnumber their parents and intermarry three times as often. Already the faces of any Coney Island subway crowd (below) betray the beginnings of an inter- racial type.[217]

This text accompanying the photograph in the *Fortune* article reads the woman as a social type, as an object lacking personhood. Levitt, as a young emerging photographer, certainly had no control over how her prints would be used once they were purchased for use in a publication, but the woman's position in the liminal space of the windowsill offers the possibility for her to be read as more than what the caption mandates. Through her composition, Levitt's photograph encourages an opportunity for transformation and movement for this woman. She does not need to be defined and regulated by the surrounding text as she makes her own space in the world.

This photograph of Levitt's mother and child at a windowsill formally mimics an image from Levitt's chalk series that shows the boarded-up remains of what was once a window, set into a brick wall of a building (figure 1.45). Surrounded by scribbled gossip and the remnants of a chalked tic tac toe game, the boarded-up window holds a portrait of a woman with wild, curly hair. Her head is cocked, leaning on her left shoulder as her eyes meet the gaze of the viewer. Due to her tilting head, she appears as though she may

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[217] Anonymous, "The Melting Pot," *Fortune*, July 1939, 77.

be leaning over the windowsill, engaging both the private and public realms of the home and street. With this, we can see the children are employing glimpses of their real-life within their imaginings, as this figure mimics the stance of the women that pop in and out of their neighborhood windows. Yet, this woman, with long eye-lashes, painted lips, and wild curly hair holds an air of glamour, unseen in Levitt's image of a real woman in a window. This imagined woman is shown alone, not assumed to be a mother, a protector, but rather as acting independently. This woman, with her coiffed hair and enhanced features, explores possibilities outside of what Levitt's *Fortune* scene depicts, as the figure tempts the divide between the private and public, and also acts beyond societal regulations and expectations. The children used their artistic agency to place a person in this (what we can assume to be) vacant building, altering their urban landscape. This shows the children's attempts to edit the physicality of their urban spaces and who inhabits them, proposing a different world of possibilities, dictating their own way of seeing.

Recalling the theorization of the margins as proposed by bell hooks, the author notes how living and working in a marginalized space and place empowers the other to develop a particular way of seeing reality. hooks described this as "a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggle to transform poverty and despair, strengthened our sense of self and our solidarity."[218] In this picture of an imagined woman occupying an abandoned window, the artistic effort of the child artist, reinforced in Levitt's photographic frame, transforms these urban spaces

[218] hooks, *Yearning,* 149.

into imagined landscapes of potential. Perhaps this way of seeing, the ability to transcend reality, to use their imaginings to construct a real place, is what James Agee identified as Levitt's particular way of seeing, her photographic poetry, or her lyrical pure vision. Levitt, through photographing and later publishing these altered spaces and moments on and within the margin, was able to show the transformative and creative ability of her subjects, allowing her to give space, place, and therefore a voice to the children of the streets of New York City.

Chapter 2
Arnold Eagle and David Robbins Find Place in the Everyday

I see one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.
– Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Four young boys sit around a circular wooden table that holds a jug of milk and half a loaf of bread (figure 2.1). The boy furthest to the right scribbles in a notebook, and the boy second to the left reads, book resting in the crook between his hands and the edge of the table. The boys are seated in differing poses—two look directly at the photographer as they lean their elbows on the table. The other two boys remain engaged in their schoolwork and do not look up or acknowledge the camera. An adult woman stands to the left of the table, hand resting on the back of a boy's chair as she reads over his shoulder. Behind the table is another room, piled with linens. Spilling out through the open interior window dividing the two rooms is a stripped mattress spotted with dirt. The table looks clean and neat, but the bulging mattress and heaped linens expose this space as cramped, small, and musty—the space of an old law tenement.

Upon further inspection, in the photograph's top left corner, the viewer can see a small sliver of a photographer's lamp. This lamp, and its inclusion in the printed photograph, is curious as it uncovers that this scene has been staged and professionally lit. While the subject's postures and actions do not reveal themselves to be purposely posed, the artificial light marks this view as contrived. This evidence of planning brings up questions regarding the authenticity of the photograph. Does this photograph depict a real scene of everyday life, or was it staged for the photograph? What is the relationship

between the photographer and the subjects? Who provided the equipment and the funds to make this photograph possible? Why was this photograph made?

This chapter will seek to answer these questions, among the others brought to life when examining the remainder of the *One Third of a Nation* photographic survey. Taking their subject matter as the "one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished" as described in President Roosevelt's second inaugural address, photographers Arnold Eagle and David Robbins worked as sociologists, turning their camera on the social conditions of the Lower East Side and Chelsea neighborhoods of New York City.[219] Sponsored by the FAP, the same relief program that employed Helen Levitt, Eagle and Robbins commenced work on this series in the late winter of 1938.[220] Intended as a survey to demonstrate the need for improved housing, the series comprises approximately 447 photographs centered around the daily life of the peoples and spaces in the Jewish and Italian Lower East Side and multi-national Chelsea neighborhoods of New York City.

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[219] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Second Inaugural address, January 20, 1937, Washington, D.C. This phrase had significant cultural currency as seen in the FTP 1938 play *One Third of a Nation* and O. Louis Guglielmi's 1939 painting *One Third of A Nation* made while he was a member of the FAP (now in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (43.47.10)) and Walter Quirt's 1938 FAP mural (now lost) also titled *One Third of a Nation*.

[220] The dating, identification, and authorship of *One Third of a Nation* are at times unclear as the series' prints and negatives do not live in one archive. The set in the National Archives, the repository for the FAP Photography collection, is comprised of fifty-seven photographs that credit both Eagle and Robbins. The backs of the photographs are labeled "One third of a nation series" and dated May-August 1938 and begin with the negative number 2329. What we see in the photographic frame does not always support this date range as in many instances subjects are wearing heavier coats that would appear unnecessary for the summer weather. Also, in one photograph, we see an older man reading a newspaper with the headline, "Roosevelt ousts Dr. Morgan, Rebel Chairman of TVA," dated Wednesday March 23, 1938. Assuming this man was not reading an old issue of a paper, it appears that the series commenced at least as early as March, 1938.

These neighborhoods, similarly heterogeneous compared to the streets where Levitt was photographing, were more self-segregating than East Harlem, as the WPA guide notes the Bowery as the dividing line between the Jewish and Italian sections in the Lower East Side.[221] Containing photographs that travel from city streets to the dinner table, *One Third of a Nation* uncovers the hand-crafted marks of city dwellers—the hanging of laundry between buildings, amateur construction of commercial edifices, signage in Yiddish, and the personalized decoration of tenements—presenting a landscape activated and shaped by the immigrant class's presence.

Throughout the series, Eagle and Robbins focus on the space of the stoop, the concrete front yard, the vacant lot, and the fire escape—spaces similar to those explored in Levitt's series of East Harlem. While Levitt acted as a folklorist, exploring how play and creative labor renovate space into place, Eagle and Robbins's photographed as sociologists, exploring how actions of the everyday—occupation, patronization, and routinization—shape space into personalized place. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* suggests quotidian acts, such as walking, reading, talking, dwelling, and cooking, are, in practice, trajectories, tactics, and rhetorics that allow the disenfranchised class to create a network of antidiscipline. These efforts counter the hegemonic forces attempting to limit working and lower classes' access to city spaces and rather allow occupiers to direct and create their own place.[222] Employing the theorization of de

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[221] The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 119.
[222] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xviii–xxiii.

Certeau, Eagle and Robbins's attention to everyday activities—eating, bathing, shopping, walking, and dwelling—can be read as their effort to document how users, particularly women and children, shape space. These subjects commit daily acts of resistance within the liminal and collectives sites of the city, and these acts are a part of their greater place-making effort.

Furthermore, Eagle and Robbins, themselves living on the border of poverty as they were on the FAP's relief rolls, came to their subjects with an empathetic eye. A hallmark of the FAP creative assignments was the photographers' ability to picture their city. This is glimpsed in Levitt's chronicle of East Harlem, a neighborhood adjacent to her home and where she worked as an art teacher. While Robbins's background remains murky, Eagle held jobs in the Lower East Side and had chronicled the Jewish community that worshipped in the neighborhood in previous years (to be discussed later in this chapter). While Levitt held an insiders' knowledge of the East Harlem streets, she was a white woman, chronicling blocks occupied by mostly Black and Hispanic children. Eagle himself was Jewish, a familiarly that perhaps granted him greater access to the intimate and interior spaces within this partially Jewish landscape. This connection is translated into a compassion, distilled in Eagle and Robbins's photographic practice of embodied observation and their union of aesthetics and documentary. Through this approach, the photographs in *One Third of a Nation* make space for their subjects to gaze or speak back.

This chapter concludes by examining this photographic series within the greater context of New Deal art projects, such as the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) and the

exhibition section of the FAP. Examining the script, stage-design, and contextual programming of the FTP's play *…One Third of a Nation*, which served as inspiration for Eagle and Robbins photographic series, as well as the series presentation at the Federal Art Gallery's exhibition *East Side West Side,* reveals the FAP and FTP's focus on producing socially-conscious documentary works that could speak to and educate the public. Rather than showing the urban landscape as acting upon its occupants, these two iterations—play and exhibition—highlighted the reciprocal relationship between subjects and their city spaces. The personified backdrop of the play and the montaged narrative of the exhibition bolsters the project's communicative potential and informs how we analyze the singular photographs of the series. Through this contextualization, the photographs can be read as place-making tools that help viewers and subjects decipher and cement their place within the undulating and modernizing New York City streets. *One Third of a Nation* augments the neighborhood inhabitants' roles as space shapers and the photographer's role in propelling place.[223]

The Documentary Photography Practices of Arnold Eagle and David Robbins

Arnold Eagle was a prolific photographer, but his place in the history of photography has been unacknowledged and even ignored. His career began in the early

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[223] These photographs were published in *Shelter Magazine,* November 1938, *The American City*, July 1939, The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939). Part of the series was also exhibited in *East Side West Side* (Federal Art Gallery, 1938), *How New York Lives* (Museum of the City of New York and New York Public Library, 1939) among other venues.

1930s and spanned until his death in 1992. Within secondary literature that does discuss Eagle's work, his photographs, especially his most well-known images from *One Third of a Nation*, tend to be viewed as a continuation of the reformist's eye of Jacob Riis or used as a lesser-quality foil to illustrate the more "thoughtful" work of Helen Levitt, Sid Grossman, Aaron Siskind, and Roy DeCarava who also completed projects on New York City street life in the early- to mid-twentieth century.[224] Examining Eagle's earlier documentary practice reveals his attention to peoples and spaces on the margins. Throughout his career, Eagle created intimate, collaborative studies of sitters' interior lives, an approach he employs in *One Third of a Nation*.

Arnold Eagle was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1909 and spent his high school years training at a private art academy in the capital city. Born of Jewish parents, the photographer felt the effects of Hungary's anti-Semitic policy, causing him to be thrown out of school and leave the country "with a not very friendly feeling."[225] He immigrated to the United States in 1929, settling in Brooklyn. Seeking employment, Eagle began

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[224] Sandra S. Phillips "Helen Levitt's New York" in *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 33; Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," in *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 53 and Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 153. The only scholarly work that reviews Eagle's oeuvre is a short essay by Christopher Phillips that accompanied the photographer's 1987 exhibition at Yeshiva University's art gallery (later republished for Eagle's 1990 retrospective at the International Center of Photography). Continuing in the vein of Phillips's essay, this chapter aims to reassess Eagle's role within the history of photography (Christopher Phillips, *Arnold Eagle: Photographs 1930-1950* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1987)).

[225] Interview by Kay Reese and Mimi Leipzig in 1990 for the *American Society of Media Photographers*, See https://www.asmp.org/resources/about/history/interview-founders/arnold-eagle/.

working as a re-toucher at the Rappopart photography studio on Second Avenue in the Lower East Side. While working at the studio, he accompanied his employer on late-night photographic expeditions to the flourishing Jewish theater district, located on the East Side between Houston and Fourteenth Street. It was on these excursions that Eagle learned the fundamentals of lighting, camera technique, and how to build and capture rapport between subject and photographer. In 1932 Eagle purchased his first camera—a bulky second-hand Graflex for twenty-five dollars, and he continued to work as a re-toucher and portraitist at Aridnoff, Whelan, Rhoan, and other photography studios during the decade.[226] Through his studio work, Eagle became acquainted with the left-leaning Film & Photo League, similarly located downtown, and became a member in 1932. Later in the decade, Eagle joined its brother organization, The New York Photo League, an organization dedicated to teaching and propagating the social role of documentary photography (to be discussed in the following chapter).[227]

Dissatisfied with retouching work and seeking more steady pay, in March of 1936, Eagle applied for relief with the WPA's FAP photography division. Upon employment, Eagle began making $24.80 a week and, according to Eagle, gained "all the freedom to do what you like, all the film and processing provided."[228] While working for the FAP, Eagle photographed the work of fellow project artists in the painting, mural, and

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[226] Christopher Phillips, *Arnold Eagle: Photographs 1930-1950* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1987), 1. "Education and Experience Record," Application for WPA employment, 1939, Arnold Eagle Collection, Tenement Museum, New York City.
[227] *Photo Notes*, June 1939, 4.
[228] Christopher Phillips, *Arnold Eagle: Photographs 1930-1950* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1987), 2.

sculpture division (among others) as well as the FAP's art classes and exhibitions. Later in his Project employment, Eagle began working on creative assignments of his own design, the first of which was titled *Sabbath Studies*, photographing the religious East Side Jews of New York and their synagogues. Eagle approached this group with an appreciation for their traditions, the same traditions that he had been persecuted for only a few years prior. In Eagle's own words, the goal of this personal project was "to record a group of people of a special culture and tradition which seemed to be vanishing at that time in America."[229] Using a 5 x 7 view camera and a 4 x 5 Speed Graphic camera, Eagle photographed men, women, and children of the Lower East Side celebrating holidays, praying over the Torah, and reading other religious texts (figure 2.2).[230] The series focused on the pious as well as their makeshift religious spaces, showcasing the handmade nature of prayer shawls, hand-written texts, and hand-carved Arks (figures 2.3 and 2.4). Eagle heightened the drama of sacred moments by enhancing the light and dark tones of prints as men read their prayer books under candlelight (figure 2.5).

Remaining on the East Side but broadening out from studying the familiar community of Jewish culture, Eagle's subsequent FAP creative assignment was a photographic survey chronicling the newly-disappearing East Side elevated train line, a theme similarly explored in Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn's *Chelsea Document*. This series focused on the details of station interiors and windows, the dramatic shadows and lighting of the elevated tracks, and the relationship between buildings and transportation,

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[229] Ibid.
[230] Ibid.

as opposed to the *Chelsea Document*'s emphasis on the destruction of the train lines (figure 2.6). Eagle also photographed people riding the trains, a popular subject as seen in the contemporaneous work of Walker Evans and Helen Levitt, though Eagle's work exposes a different approach (figures 2.7 and 2.8). Rather than focusing on the anonymity of public transportation, Eagle tended to show riders engaging with each other and the world around them. In the summer of 1938, Eagle continued to keep his camera on the pulse of East Side living, collaborating with David Robbins to commence *One Third of a Nation*.

The slow demise of the WPA art programs in the later 1930s prompted Eagle to seek monetary support elsewhere. In the summer of 1939, Eagle began teaching Elementary Photography at the American Artists School, where he taught until the school closed in 1941.[231] Concurrent to this teaching position, Eagle became involved with the National Youth Administration (NYA), working with fellow Photo League members such as Harold Crosini, teaching photography to young adults. In this position, Eagle completed a photographic survey on the NYA's radio workshops and music classes in New York City that employed similar dramatic lighting as his earlier FAP work (figure 2.9).[232] In 1942 Eagle embarked on a decade-plus long working relationship with Martha Graham, taking photographs of her and her dance company. This collaboration introduced Eagle to the dance world, and he spent over three decades working with such

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[231] Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, "The American Artists School: Radical Heritage and Social Content Art." *Archives of American Art Journal*, vol. 26, no. 4 (1986): 17–23, 21.
[232] Jacob Deschin, "For the Photographer; NYA student camera men learn the trade by carrying out work assignments," *New York Times*, January 4, 1942, 7.

prominent companies as the Joffrey Ballet Company, the Sophie Maslow Dance Company, and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. In these dance photographs, Eagle reveals his ability to capture action and artistry as dancers jump, leap, and spin around their respective studios (figure 2.10).

In 1945 Eagle was hired to work for the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey's (SONJ) photography division under the leadership of Roy Stryker, producing photographs created in a similar documentary style as his work under the FAP. The goal of this photographic outfit, arranged by SONJ's public relations firm, was to improve the company's image by documenting its role in the war and post-war effort. The photographers, mostly former members of the FAP, FSA, and the Photo League, traveled to foreign communities and countries to profile how oil and industry were beneficial to the common man.[233] While working for Standard Oil, Eagle traveled locally and internationally, profiling communities ranging from Stowe, Vermont to Havana, Cuba (figure 2.11). Under Stryker's direction, and similar to his sociological approach in *One Third of a Nation*, Eagle traveled to communities, staying there for months at a time to better understand the culture and people of those places in order to capture a true community portrait.[234] While employed by SONJ, Eagle also worked as a photographer

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[233] Fellow Standard Oil photographers included John Vachon, Harold Crosini, Edwin and Louise Rosskam, Ester Bubley, Gordon Parks, Sol Libsohn, Charlotte Brooks, Marth McMillan Roberts, Todd Webb, Russell Lee, Charles Rotkin, and John Collier Jr.. For more information regarding the Standard Oil photography effort see Roy Plattner, *Roy Stryker: USA 1943-1950* (Austin: University of Texas Press), 1983.

[234] Interview by Kay Reese and Mimi Leipzig in 1990 for the *American Society of Media Photographers*, See https://www.asmp.org/resources/about/history/interview-founders/arnold-eagle/. It is noted that in the SONJ project, the photographers had great freedom and did not work from a shooting script (unlike Stryker's FSA photographers).

and cinematographer for acclaimed documentarian Robert Flaherty during the filming of *The Louisiana Story*. Prior to this relationship, Eagle worked as a cameraman with Hans Richter on his 1947 film *Dreams that Money can Buy*.[235] Simultaneous to his budding film career, Eagle took a post as a full-time professor at the New School, teaching photography, film-making, and cinematography until his death in 1992.[236]

Born in New York City on December 11, 1911, David Robbins came to be employed by the FAP in September of 1935.[237] Very little is known about Robbins beyond that he was a white American citizen. Robbins lived in Brownsville, Brooklyn, and later in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood (next door to the Photo League's Sid Grossman) while employed by the FAP.[238] Robbins was a prolific photographer for the

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[235] In a 1973 interview Eagle stated that Flaherty helped him, more than anyone, to became a filmmaker himself. While he was on location in Louisiana working with Flaherty on *The Louisiana Story* Eagle made his own film, with the encouragement of Flaherty titled *The Pirogue Maker*, a documentary film depicting life among the Acadians and the craft of building a canoe like boat from a single Cyprus tree. Reminiscences of Arnold Eagle from the Robert J/ Flaherty Project, interview with Arnold Eagle, conducted by Bruce E. Harding and sponsored by International Film seminars Inc. New York City, April 11, 1973, Reminiscences of Arnold Eagle in the Robert Joseph Flaherty papers; Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library.

[236] Arnold Eagle continued to exhibit his *One Third of a Nation* work through the early 1990s and would always state that some of the work was a collaboration with David Robbins but there is no evidence that Robbins' work was shown along with Eagle's or that he ever attended any of the exhibitions.

[237] David Robbins, Citizen Affidavit, Record Group 146: Records of the U.S. Civil Service Commission; National Archives, St. Louis, MO. David Robbins, Identification number 319488, Record Group 146: Records of the U.S. Civil Service Commission; National Archives, St. Louis, MO.

[238] In his personal records for the WPA, Robbins signed a Citizen Affidavit identifying himself as a citizen of the United States. He started off his tenure at the program living at 391 Sutter Avenue in Brooklyn, and eventually moved to Chelsea, residing at Twenty-Five West Nineteenth Street and Six West Twenty-Four Street (next door to Sid Grossman).

Project, working on the "creative" section and also as a service photographer, documenting fellow artists at work. Similar to Helen Levitt, Robbins also worked as an art teacher for the FAP.[239] Robbins' first creative assignment in 1937 was titled *Along the Waterfront* and comprised establishing shots of the New York harbor, scenes of people unloading fish from boats into the dock's barrels, and portraits of people working the docks (figure 2.12).[240] A number of the portraits are taken from an angle looking up towards the workers, making them appear almost larger than life (figure 2.13). Many action shots are captured from more oblique angles, rarely with the action appearing to the viewer straight on. In more stationary portraits, figures rarely pose; instead subjects seem to be captured in a fleeting moment of reprieve. This series presents group portraits that focus on the feeling of camaraderie between the workers and between Robbins and his subjects. In the following year, Robbins began his collaboration with Eagle for *One Third of a Nation* that captures a similarly undirected and communal rapport between subjects in the Lower East Side and Chelsea neighborhoods. After working for the FAP,

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[239] Throughout his project tenure Robbins was a member of the Arts League, United Photographic Employees Union, and the New York Photo League. Due to his participation in these "red" organizations, Robbins and his fellow FAP photographers Cyril Mipaas, Dora Rappaport and Joseph Stasheff were given the pink slip in 1937. In response the four photographers filed a complaint against the WPA's Labor Policy Board in August of 1937 with the support of their union (United Photographic Employees), on the basis of union discrimination. Robbins was then reinstated as an employee of the FAP in spring of 1938 and subsequently dismissed from the project February 15, 1939 due to federal statues regarding the length of time allowed to be employed on relief. David Robbins, Citizen Affidavit, Record Group 146: Records of the U.S. Civil Service Commission; National Archives, St. Louis, MO. David Robbins, Identification number 319488, Record Group 146: Records of the U.S. Civil Service Commission; National Archives, St. Louis, MO.

[240] The nation Archives hold ninety-one prints from this series and The Museum of the City of New York holds an additional forty-one.

Robbins taught photography classes at the Photo League for several semesters while working for *Fortune*. He concluded his career by working in documentary film and television.[241]

The Federal Art Project's Creative Assignments

Eagle and Robbins, employed on the relief rolls of the FAP, commenced their multi-month creative assignment photographing where "one third of our nation" lived, worked, and played in the winter of 1938.[242] This one third was described by President Roosevelt in 1937 as the third living without access to the necessities of American life, such as housing, clothing, and food.[243] Inspired by the FTP play *One Third of a Nation* that dramatized the corrupt history of New York City housing, as well as the efforts of the Citizens' Housing Council to build improved housing for the city's lower classes, the photographers turned their camera to the streets and homes of New York City's Lower East Side and Chelsea neighborhoods.[244] Unlike the Photo League's *Chelsea Document*

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[241] Anne Tucker, "A History of the Photo League: the members speak," *History of Photography* 18, (Summer 1994), 181.
[242] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Second Inaugural address, January 20, 1937, Washington, D.C.
[243] Ibid.
[244] According to the *East Side West Side* exhibition catalog where these prints were first exhibited, Eagle and Robbins were, "inspired by the current WPA Federal Art Project play'…*One Third of a Nation*," 3. It has been stated that Eagle and Robbins knew, "of the efforts by the Citizens Housing Council (CHC) [of New York City] to find or build adequate shelter for the poor" and that they worked in tandem with the CHC effort (Merry A. Foresta, "Art and document: Photography of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project," in *Official Images: New Deal Photography,* eds. Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange and Sally Stein, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), 148-193, 151), but I have found no evidence of that collaboration.

that chronicles neighborhood housing conditions and also pictures new construction (highlighting the ineffectiveness of private and public builders in creating adequate, socially inspiring housing), *One Third of a Nation* sparingly includes photographs of new construction. Eagle and Robbins's series oscillates between exterior street views, interior portraits, and backyard play, all located within the Lower East Side and Chelsea neighborhoods of Manhattan. While the series externally focuses on housing conditions, rarely does the series include an evidentiary photograph that focuses solely on housing structures. Instead, images reveal how people live within those spaces, and how their daily rituals turn those spaces into a home. In this series, ninety percent of the photographs include people. In the photographs that do include people, over half are portraits or subject studies—the photographers zoom in to capture the subject's character, pose, and physiognomy.

Many prints do not include geographical markers, making the location of the images at times unclear, parallel to Levitt's series. In this chapter, to fully engage with the spatial politics of the street, I am limiting my study to photographs that were captured on the Lower East Side.[245] Similarly unclear is the authorship of many of the images, as they are identified in exhibition catalogs and archives as created by Arnold Eagle and David Robbins. However, some prints have been archived as the singular work of Arnold Eagle. Regardless, I treat the prints as a collaborative effort and consider how Eagle and

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[245] As noted by information within the prints and also in caption information from the collection of the Tenement Museum and the International Center of Photography.

Robbins, as employees of the FAP, capture the interdependence of space, place, and subjects.[246]

As discussed in chapter one, the FAP, a subset of the WPA, was created in 1935 to employ out of work American artists during the Great Depression. The arts were divided into three categories—fine arts, practical arts, and art education.[247] The photography section was dedicated primarily to documenting the program's work—such

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[246] In looking through collections at the Archives of American Art, The Museum of the City of New York, the Tenement Museum as well as the International Center of Photography, there are at least 390 additional prints/negatives that can be identified as part of the original photo project. In a number of cases, multiple archives have the same photograph in their collection. In the prints from the Archives of American Art and the Museum of the City of New York, the same four-digit code attributed to the set in the National Archives, 2329, is present at times, on the back or surrounding the contact print. The collection at the International Center of Photography does not include this same number, but the backs of the prints are labeled "one third of a nation." The fifteen prints from the Tenement Museum are also labeled "one third of a nation" as identified in the hand of Eagle himself. In both the collections of the Tenement Museum and the International Center of Photography, credit is given solely to Arnold Eagle. In examining photographs from all four sources, we see scenes with the same subjects, wearing the same clothing, shown in a variety of poses on city streets and in tenement backyards and homes. With this, we can assert that the photographs were taken at the same time and as part of the same creative assignment. The collection at the National Archives may represent what Eagle and Robbins considered the final set of the series (printed after the *East Side West Side* exhibition), what the Federal Art Program administrators took to be a conclusive set, or simply what remains in the Nation Archives after many years of research. The finding aid for the box lists that there are sixty-four photographs, but in the year 2019, when I first examined the file, there were only fifty-seven. It is possible people have taken photographs from the folders (we know that one print is missing from Helen Levitt's collection of 160 photographs that reside in the same box as the Eagle Robbins series), or perhaps the number was originally recorded incorrectly.

[247] Merry A. Foresta, "Art and document: Photography of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project," *Official Images: New Deal Photography,* eds. Pete Daniel, Merry A. Foresta, Maren Stange and Sally Stein (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1987), 148-193, 151.

as laboring artists, FAP sponsored exhibitions, and adult and child art classes.[248] While the majority of the over 450,000 negatives produced under the auspices of the Project are purely evidentiary, many of the frames disclose formal qualities that expose the photographer's expertise.[249] In New York City, Project photographers could create their own "creative assignment," such as Helen Levitt's series on children's chalk drawings and Eagle's and Robbins's *One Third of a Nation*. These creative assignments were created "from the sensitive lens of the camera by a man with the eye of an artist,"[250] producing works with "artistic merit" that were socially useful.[251] This combination of artistry and documentation aligns with contemporary critics' and practitioners' understanding of the medium as seen in the synchronous work of the New York Photo League (to be discussed in greater detail in chapter three). Critic Louis Aragon, writing for *Art Front* in 1937, comments on photography's unique ability to uncover the immediacy of life:

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[248] Undated New York City Federal Art Project Report, Reel 90, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA.

[249] Holger Cahill, "American Resources in the Arts" in *Art for the Millions: Essays from the 1930s by Artists and Administrators of the WPA Federal Art Project,* ed. Francis V. O'Connor (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1973), 39.

[250] Letter from Thomas Parker to Donald Thompson, Box 2116, Records of the Work Projects Administration, 1937, Work Projects Administration Central Files, New York City, 1935-1944, The National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[251] "Creative photography, which produces photographs of artistic merit subject to allocation and exhibition in the same manner as graphic prints sculpture and easel paintings constitutes the other part of the division's work. Assignments of this nature are naturally limited due to the heavy demand for service photography." In Holger Cahill, "The New York City WPA Art Project Activities and Accomplishments, New York City," 1941, Reel 90, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA.

> It has so happened that, thanks to the technical perfection of the camera, photography, in its turn, had abandoned the studio and lost its static, academic character – its fixity. It has mixed into life; it has gone everywhere taking life by surprise: and once again it has become more revealing and more denunciatory than painting. The photograph, on the other hand, today stops at nothing. It is discovering the world anew.[252]

By the 1930s, photography was embraced as the ideal medium to document the conditions of the world, in turn unveiling the human experience.

This innate ability of the camera to disclose the world anew through producing works that blend artistry with utility follows the approach of what cultural historian William Stott has termed "social documentary." Photographers and institutions alike working during the New Deal employed the camera as the archetypal tool to identify and map the American way of life. Rather than simply transcribing reality, photographers framed scenes to emphasize the mortal element of their external world, "putting [the audience] in touch with the perennial human spirit."[253] This mixing of fact with feeling worked to engender an emotional response within the audience that would allow viewers to better connect with and read the photograph. As explored in the previous chapter, Levitt's photographic series that recorded the drawn folklore adorning the streets of East Harlem connected with the greater goals of the FAP—to produce art that served as a mediator between citizen and their lived experiences. The drawings that Levitt documented were a part of the greater social and cultural life of East Harlem; their presence guided dwellers' experiences of their metropolitan landscape. Eagle and

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252 Louis Aragon, "Painting and Reality," *Art Front*, January 1937, 9.
253 William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 18.

Robbins similarly employed their creative assignment to uphold the communicative value of photographs in an effort to pictorially demonstrate the need for state and federal support in requiring and implementing city-wide housing improvements. Through mixing fact with feeling in transcribing the "very stuff and texture of human experience," the photographers produced a series that prioritized photography's role as a communicator, crafting a portrait of a place that speaks for itself.

Evidenced within the frames is an intimacy between photographer and their Italian and Jewish subjects of the Lower East Side. As Eagle and Robbins established rapport with their subjects, working as sociologists, the images are framed as if neighborhood residents invited the photographers to explore the streets, homes, backyards, and the places in-between that comprise the community. Writing on Eagle's empathetic eye, art historian Christopher Phillips notes, "his photographs are stamped with the same social curiosity, human compassion and historical awareness."[254] Examining the photographs singularly and serially, the specificity of time, place, and an intimacy between photographers and subjects is felt. Levitt, a fellow FAP photographer, also approached her subjects with a similar intimacy, yet she rarely serially photographed her subjects, a trope Eagle and Robbins return to throughout their series to garner rapport between themselves and their subjects. Rather than simply depicting clichéd scenes that overemphasize dreadful conditions, Eagle and Robbins synthesize their artistic eye with a social purpose. Through this synthesis and repeated attention to liminal and interior

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[254] Christopher Phillips, *Arnold Eagle: Photographs 1930-1950* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1987), 1.

spaces of the neighborhood, the photographers highlight the imagined and real spatial transformations occurring daily on and within those collective sites. Furthermore, Eagle and Robbins are themselves co-conspirators or allies in this place-making act. Coming to their subjects as equals, an immigrant (in the case of Eagle, Robbins's heritage is unknown), a Jewish man (shared by some subjects), and as workers in need of and on relief (both Eagle and Robbins), Eagle and Robbins's produce photographs that cement their own, as well as their subjects' place (literally and figuratively) within the transitioning spaces of the city.

Housing One Third of the Nation

At the moment of *One Third of a Nation's* production, impoverished housing conditions were part of the American zeitgeist, politically and culturally. Countless politicians, especially in New York City, had used housing as a campaign platform, such as New York City's Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia and Manhattan Borough President and former United Neighborhood Houses president Stanley M. Isaacs. Within New York City, organizations had dedicated their mission to changing legislation to obligate local and federal funds to support the building of new public housing as well as reform and rebuild old law tenements.[255] While this type of legislation had been proposed for decades, by the 1930s, "New York City alone still counted nearly 65,000 old-law tenement buildings in 1936 (down from 87,000 in 1909) containing 517,831 apartments

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[255] These includes the Citizens' Housing Council, The Henry Street Settlement, the United Neighborhood Houses, and the Tenants League, among others.

housing two million people."[256] The issue of housing was taken on with great zeal during the later years of the Great Depression as a moral cause, as it was believed that a bad environment bred bad citizens, and as a way to modernize New York City. This modernization process was often promoted for its capitalistic advantages as it could combat unemployment and provide jobs and funds for the profitable housing industry.[257]

The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) was created in 1937 in an effort to fix the city's decades-long housing problem by managing public funds and federal aid to build or refurbish housing to meet a new standard.[258] This agency, along with the PWA, aided in the construction of public housing in New York City during the Depression.[259] These projects replaced and refurbished old law tenements that made up much of Lower Manhattan's urban landscape, though this new housing priced out the true poor and unemployed, the people whose homes were replaced by this new construction. This new housing, expected to remedy the housing crisis, did not address the needs of the city's poorest inhabitants. Along with new construction came an increase in demolition and vacancy in many neighborhoods. In the Lowest East Side alone, demolitions, the

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[256] Nicholas Dagen Bloom, Gregory Holcomb Umbach, and Lawrence J. Vale*, Public Housing Myths: Perception, Reality, and Social Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 76.
[257]R. Woudstra, "Exhibiting Reform: MoMA and the Display of Public Housing (1932–1939)," *Architectural Histories*, 6(1), 2018.
[258] Mark Naison, "From Eviction resistance to rent control: tenant activism in the great depression," in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984,* ed. Ronald Lawson (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984) discusses how the grass-roots tenant movement, spurred on by the housing shortage, allied with the New Deal agencies and liberal reformers to try to bring in more public housing as it was seen as the only possible remedy to the housing issue.
[259] Peter Marcuse, "The Beginnings of Public Housing in New York," *Journal of Urban History* 12, no. 4 (1986), 354.

majority of which were undertaken by NYCHA, resulted in well over one million square feet of idle land.[260] These laws, along with the establishment of a greater subway system and zoning regulations, attempted to limit certain populations' access to the city in an attempt to shrink immigrant and lower class neighborhoods. By the 1930s, neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side, home to majority Italian and Jewish residents, had populations decline by half due to reformers and investors who intended to create a downtown purged of an immigrant presence.[261]

While the series advocated for improved housing conditions, it did not show this improved housing for an idle and passive population, but instead people who made their own place. Rather than waiting for the vacant land to be refurbished into new construction that could potentially exclude these dwellers from their neighborhood, *One Third of a Nation* reveals how place and home are created within and in spite of the dwellers' positionality on the margins. As witnessed in Levitt's photographs that reveal how children create imagined landscapes, building their own potential homes inscribed within the streets of East Harlem, *One Third of a Nation* reveals how Lower East Side occupants transformed vacant, idle, and debris-covered land—the liminal spaces between old and new housing—into their place. With this, Eagle and Robbins solidified their

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[260] *East Side Chamber News*, no. 5 (August, 1938), 7. In a further effort to remove immigrants and improve housing, the PWA's Suburban Resettlement division of the Resettlement Administration promoted the transition from city tenement housing to collective living in the suburbs. One such project was the Jersey Homestead, located in a small rural town near Highstown, New Jersey, that constructed new housing, commercial, and educational spaces to promote a communal way of life.

[261] See Donna Gabaccia, "Little Italy's Decline: Immigrant Renters and Investors in a Changing City," in *Landscapes of Modernity,* eds. David Ward and Oliver Zunz (New York, Russel Sage Foundation, 1992), 235-251.

subject's role as place-makers and their subsequent right to remain in the neighborhood and live with improved housing.[262]

The transformative spaces of One Third of a Nation

Similar to the series produced by Helen Levitt for the FAP that chronicles the production of children's chalk drawing in Harlem, Eagle and Robbins' project concentrates on the marginal, liminal, and communal spaces within the urban landscape. While Levitt's work focuses on the imaginative labor employed to transform these spaces into places, *One Third of a Nation* portrays how occupation, construction, and routinization works to transform space into a place. Space and place are interrelated—one cannot be understood as independent of the other. Space is abstracted, unbounded, based in the physical realm, while place is created through senses beyond the tangible, such as sound, touch, experience, and sociality.[263] Place is the result of an amassing of social interrelationships rooted in the connection of spatiality and sociality in everyday life. Place transcends the physical and is emotional and experiential. Place is constantly changing and becoming, as beholden and determined by one's bodily experience. Places

[262] Deborah Moore, "On City Streets," *Contemporary Jewry* 28, no. 1 (2008): 84-108, 103.

[263] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Saint Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 12-18. Doreen Massey centers the ideas of place as open, provisional and unfixed, based on multiple histories (Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Saint Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1994)). Massey's anti-essentialist theory of space and place along with the writings of Yi-Fu Tuan and Kim Dovey has shaped my understanding of place as intrinsically linked to the practice of everyday, as something physical, emotional, and experiential that is constantly changing and becoming.

are embedded with emotion, imagination, and memory, and they become familiar due to experience and practice.[264] With this, space can be transformed and transmuted into multiple places, as determined by the dweller. *One Third of a Nation* is centered around sociality, profiling the narrative of the neighborhood as its spaces are transformed—physically and psychologically—into a place distinct to each occupier.

The majority of the survey is comprised of street scenes captured from the opposing sidewalk, presenting daily life at eye-level. The sidewalks, storefronts, and tenement façades, liminal and collective spaces within the city, are rarely presented straight on, but are rather framed at a slight angle to give the illusion of the streetscape continuing beyond the photographic frame. Rarely do views exclude people, and rarely do the streets overflow with people. In streets that do appear vacant, typically a person is glimpsed through a window, a curtain is shown in the midst of opening, or a fire escape bursts with laundry and mattresses—actions peppering the landscape's thresholds so it appears animated. Comparing this to other housing surveys, typically, the photographers employed extremes—either overcrowding or a barren landscape—to emphasize the city's abysmal conditions and its effect on city residents (figures 2.14 and 2.15). In this sense, *One Third of a Nation* never framed space as overwhelming or acting upon inhabitants, but rather as sites controlled by the tenants.

Throughout the series, the stoop, the concrete front yard, the vacant lot, and the fire escape, spaces that host collective ownership shared by city residents, store owners,

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[264] Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy, eds. *Urban Space and Representation* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 6.

and governmental codes of conduct, are transformed into places to meet their inhabitants' needs. In one instance, a man has turned the fenced-off space in front of a building into a beverage store. A homemade sign pasted to a wooden post advertises cold soda for five cents. Behind the sign and standing proudly on display on the sill of an open window are six soda bottles (figure 2.16). Three children stand next to the businessman, and two sit, with bored expressions, on the adjacent stoop. As noted in the introduction, groups in power oftentimes employ spatial politics to limit marginalized people's access to space within the city in order to contain their economic and political rights.[265] At this moment in New York City history, Mayor LaGuardia had begun to enforce laws limiting sidewalk use, such as the abolishment of pushcarts and sidewalk amusements.[266] *One Third of A Nation* highlights people's ability to access these spaces and their ability to transform them into a place. In this instance, the stoop and adjoining privatized, fenced off yard becomes a place of business and also a place of socialization as the children have an animated conversation while enjoying a cold one.

Beyond the transformation of a front yard into a place of business, we also see shanties constructed in empty lots that advertise themselves as "Al's Auto Repair" and "J Szucs Welding and Brazing and Cutting" (figure 2.17). The two single-story storefronts are surrounded by four- and five-story tenements, a store for rent, and are situated

[265] Dolores Hayden, *Urban Landscape History: The Sense of Place and the Politics of Space* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), 120.
[266] Daniel Bluestone, "'The Pushcart Evil': Peddlers, Merchants, and New York City's Streets, 1890-1940." *Journal of Urban History* 18 (November 1991): 68-92; Lilian Radovac, "The "War on Noise": Sound and Space in La Guardia's New York." *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 733-760.

underneath a laundry pole. Perhaps this formerly vacant lot marks the space of a tenement that has been torn down, and due to a lack of funds, the space has yet to be reconstructed.[267] Taking advantage of this empty space between old and new construction, neighborhood residents ("Al" and "J") constructed their own storefronts and workshops to advertise their wares, transforming this temporary vacancy into a commercial space with the potential for private profit. While Al and J's stores appear run down, this appearance does not deter their potential to be a profitable space.

The sidewalk in front of the storefronts is occupied by four young boys playing a game of dice and two men conversing—perhaps the stores' proprietors. Reviewing the files of NYCHA's photographic archive, there is no evidence of this type of homespun structure in the agency's files, as prints of vacancies typically present empty lots as overflowing with debris and absent of people. While this view could be read as one of dilapidation, the photographers' continued attention to the stores (they were photographed multiple times) and choice to photograph the sidewalk and vernacular construction as one structured by neighborhood inhabitants emphasizes the capability of community dwellers to transform space into places of business.

The transformation of space also occurs in backyards throughout the neighborhood. In four photographs from *One Third of a Nation,* a group of boys climb

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[267] Often times it would take years for new construction to take place once a building had been demolished. According to an article in the *East Side Chamber Ne4.25*
ws from August 1938, "For the first time in more than half a century the Lower East Side boasts of idle land of 1,293,789 sq. ft. If this land were assembled, instead of being widely scattered throughout the district, it would comprise an area of 1 blocks of average size." *East Side Chamber News*, No. 5, (August 1938), 6.

out of the back windows of a tenement and play on the platform and ladder of a fire escape (figure 2.18). The fire escape acts as a boundary and extension of space between the private home and the more public space of the tenement yard. As tenements were constantly overcrowding, this occupation of the fire escape would have been witnessed by countless tenement dwellers that shared the same view into the shared yard. The positionality of the fire escape in the rear of the building makes it no less public than neighboring front-facing structures. The boys, spanning in age from young children to pre-teens, relish in the prospect of being seen by neighbors, staking their claim to the fire escape. They fight for space on the balcony, help each other hold on to the ladder, survey the actions of their co-conspirators, and tease the photographers. This photograph is one of two images from the series published in the Federal Writers' Project's *New York Guide* (figure 2.19).[268] Framed with the melancholic language that the children of the Lower East Side have no place to play, readers are expected to read this photograph and the space of the fire escape as one of limitation and potential danger.

Looking at the multiple photographs of this group of boys in the series and their occupation of the fire escape, feelings of unease or danger are pushed aside by the boys' confidence and ownership of the space. Throughout the survey, the boys are shown in different poses on the fire escape, framed in front of the entrance to a backyard basement, and posed in front of a door—stickball accessories at the ready (figures 2.20 and 2.21).[269]

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[268] The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 173.

[269] According to Jack Weiss, tenement dwellers typically had "a little piece of the basement – a little cubicle – where they kept their things" We can assume the boys are at

They are pictured as a gang of adventurers, surveying their land for ideal spaces of play. Former Lower East Side resident of 111 Garrick Street, Jack Weiss, reminisced, in "summertime, the fire escape was the playground. We'd rig up blankets like tents and that was our place where we'd fantasize everything."[270] In this photograph, the fire escape is physically transformed into a playground and also creatively imagined as a place exclusive to the boys—a western frontier. Furthermore, the background of the yard has also been transformed into a laundry room, a space managed and surveilled by the women of the neighborhood who were typically forced to inhabit the neighborhood's interior spaces. This washroom acts as an extension of the home and represents the women's ability to transform interstitial space into a commercial workroom, as many women took in laundry to contribute to their family's income.[271] In a single photograph, the fire escape is transformed into a vertical playground and a laundry room.

As witnessed in this photograph and others, the backyards of vacant and inhabited tenements were typically filled with rubble and rubbish. In the Lower East Side, many of the old law tenements were torn down to make way for new buildings that would meet

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the entrance to their building's basement entrance. New York University Department of History Oral History Class Collection, Interview with Jack Weiss, February 21, 1994, Box 6, CD 3.

[270] Jack Weiss Lived in the Lower East Side until 1939. New York University Department of History Oral History Class Collection, Interview with Jack Weiss, February 21, 1994, Box 6, CD 3.

[271] For information about how laundry practice reproduced the gender and class relations of labor see Sophie Watson, "Mundane Objects in the City," *Urban Studies* 52, no. 5 (2015): 876-90.

the newly designated standard of housing.[272] When the demolition was concluded, mounds of debris were left piled on the sidewalks, alleys, and empty lots of the neighborhood, leaving them suspended between old and new construction.[273] In *One Third of a Nation*, rubble piles transform the vacant lots, already on the cusp of becoming new spaces, into treasure chests as children and adults play and search through the trashed materials of tenements past. In this photograph, two young boys and an older man are framed within the remains (figure 2.22). One boy, centered to the frame, smiles, leaning into a pile of debris as he holds some of his finds. His accomplice grasps a cluster of long, wooden planks that appear too big for him to carry. Like the subjects in Levitt's series, these two children could be using their found materials to construct a new place, a new home to occupy the unending stream of vacant lots that dotted the Lower East Side. The children and man are slightly blurred, giving the impression that they are actively moving and searching within this backyard. The children look fit and happy, and the adult's presence provides an added layer of safety for their audacious deeds.

Piles of debris are pictured as potential treasure chests and, through the frame of a camera, transformed from a landscape of trash into shared places of agency between subjects and the photographers. This photograph reveals a vacant lot's receding space,

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[272] In both the oral history of Jack Weiss and Judith Sapperstein, both comment on the amount of vacant spaces in their neighborhood. New York University Department of History Oral History Class Collection, Interview with Jack Weiss, February 21, 1994, Box 6, CD 3 and New York University Department of History Oral History Class Collection, Interview with Judith Epstein Sapperstein, May 13, 1993, Box 5, CD 6-7.
[273] The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 113 and *East Side Chamber News*, No. 5, 6 August 1938.

engaged from the back and looking out towards the street (figure 2.23). A lone boy walks through the littering of trash in the left-hand side of the photo, balancing himself with the aid of the brick wall to his right. While this lot is certainly an unfriendly place that seems to be a jungle of trash, the straight photographic frame flattens the debris (that must have been dangerous), transforming the print into an abstract canvas. Within the lot's puddles are reflections of buildings across the street. Through this inclusion, the built environment is represented in multiples iterations, as vacant, as occupied, and as dreamed or imagined within the puddles. As noted earlier in the chapter, both Eagle and Robbins were members of the Photo League, an experience that colored their understanding of photography's employment as a tool of communication and social justice. Throughout the League's lifetime, there was a constant struggle regarding the role of aesthetics within documentary photography (to be discussed in greater detail in chapter three). That push and pull of the meeting of documentary legibility and aesthetic distinction are present throughout *One Third of a Nation*. In this photograph, that meeting is explored to explicitly tell the living conditions of this child, projecting the landscape in a way that is a study in light, shadow, and texture—reinterpreting abysmal conditions into a positive dream image.

A major figure in this debate was Photo League member Aaron Siskind. Writing for the League's publication *Photo Notes*, he makes a case for artful documentation:

> We learned a number of things about the form and continuity of a picture-story; but, mostly, we came to see that the literal representation of a face (or idea) can signify less than the fact or idea itself (is altogether dull), that a picture or a series of pictures must be informed with such things as order, rhythm, emphasis, etc, etc, – qualities which result from the

> perception and feeling of the photographer, and are not necessarily (or apparently) the property of the subject.[274]

In examining another print of the same image, it is clear the photographers retouched the negative to create greater contrasts—the bricked walls that border the photograph are now a deeper black, opposing the almost bleached sidewalk that abuts the darkened lot (figure 2.24). The print is cropped, so the sky above the neighboring tenements is erased—the world becomes more condensed, and the vacant lot's dream-like world is prioritized as the all-consuming subject. This print is similar in subject to Henri Cartier-Bresson's surrealist studies of children playing in the ruins of Seville, Spain (figure 2.25). Though Cartier-Bresson's print supplies no narrative context, engendering, as argued by Peter Galassi, a personal reading by the viewer of timeless and endlessly ruined space.[275] Unlike *Seville,* Eagle and Robbins's print contains context (within the print and related to the other prints in the series), remaining beholden to the Lower East Side lot within which it was composed. Due to the print's rhythmic composition and formalist structure, the lot's dream-like world of possibilities becomes real, inscribed within the lot's social and political landscape. This spatial linkage works to offer agency to the young subject

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[274] *Photo Notes*, June 1940, 2-3.

[275] Peter Galassi, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Early Work* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1987). "Some viewers (including André Breton) have mistaken the latter picture, or the famous photographs of children playing among ruins in Seville, as documents of the devastation of the Spanish Civil War, which did not begin until three years later. The error, however, is merely technical, for the pictures – like Luis Buñel's harrowing film *Land Without Bread* (1932) – do express the grim circumstances that already prevailed in Spain in the years before the war…Nevertheless, the very bluntness of the pictures, the absence of narrative incident of explanatory details, shifts their weight from the political to the personal," 27.

and photographers as their presence and occupation transform the vacant space into a place secured within the neighborhood's history.

Furthermore, unlike Cartier-Bresson's photograph that does not include shared ground between photographer and subjects, Eagle and Robbins situate themselves within the trash-filled landscape. In the Tenement Museum's archives, there is a photograph of Eagle, captured by Robbins, while photographing *One Third of a Nation* (figure 2.26). In this image, Eagle, dressed in a suit, holds two cameras and stands atop a stack of rubbish in a tenement backyard. While Eagle's dress may separate him from the typical neighborhood resident, the photograph is framed so that Eagle is centered within this pile of wood and metal debris, integrated and a part of the landscape. A. D. Coleman, reviewing an exhibition of Eagle's work in 1989, notes, "his involvement in the physicality of the world is reflected in the tactility of his printing style."[276] Eagle himself was familiar with the neighborhood, having worked on Second Avenue on the East Side for many years. His comfort with neighborhood vacancies and his ability to co-opt these collective spaces with murky ownership is witnessed in his full immersion into the backyard debris as he becomes an embodied observer, a part of the neighborhood space and action. Standing atop this mound, Eagle witnesses the transformation of trash into treasure and subsequently photographs this space as a place of potential.

Throughout the subset of exterior views, signs—whether homespun or commercially produced—are portrayed as important markers that identify and dictate the

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[276] A.D. Coleman, "At 'Tenement Museum' a View of 30s Squalor," *New York Observer*, February 27, 1989, 12.

arrangement and use of the spaces of the street. This textual landscape goes beyond space allocation as people use façades (vacant and occupied) to host advertisements for films and political campaign posters, as well as instructions that regulate the use of the street and sidewalk. In one image filled with signs, advertisements, and notices, Eagle and Robbins capture the multiple temporalities and conflicting interests that competed for ownership of the street, sidewalk, and buildings (figure 2.27). On the right side of this image, men unload lumber from a truck onto the sidewalk and into a passageway covered in scaffolding. Above the threshold to this construction site are two signs reading "USA Work Program WPA" and "Demolition Work, New York City Housing Authority," marking this construction and demolition site as designated and overseen by city and federal housing efforts. On the far left of the picture plane, doorways are filled with residents or storekeepers. They look on curiously at the construction. Above their heads reads a sign "3 & 4 rooms for rent" that boasts steam heat and other improvements. To the left of the rental sign is another advertising the store "J Blooms fancy grocery."

These signs mark different ownerships and overseers of the modernizing landscape. As new construction, mandated by the government, lives on in the photograph's background, the foreground advertises homegrown businesses and apartments for rent. Witnessed are the different people in charge as well as the different temporalities (past, present, and future) for which the signs and, therefore, spaces serve. FAP photography division supervisor Ralph Gutieri comments on the particular trait of the camera as "possess[ing] an inherent capacity unrivaled in the pictorial arts for documentation of the changing world and for communication to future ages of the

ephemeral aspects of the vanishing present."[277] This photograph witnesses the modernization of the city as its older buildings turn to ruins. Within this landscape of change, the space between the old and the new, the people that darken the doorways appear more permanent, looking at the camera and marking their place as their own. The *New York Guide* notes that the buildings of the Lower East Side "still seem defiant" in the face of change.[278]

Within the survey, religious markers and symbols are passively framed compared to contemporaneous works that more overtly documents Jewish spaces of the Lower East Side, such as the projects produced by Ben Shahn in 1934 and NYCHA's photographic documentation of the neighborhood. Within *One Third of a Nation,* smaller handmade signs, not centered within the frame, advertise a kosher butcher shop. The photographers, through this furtive documentation, present the residents of the East Side district as New Yorkers, not as only othered immigrants.[279] Moving inside, the tenant's calendars and decorations—pasted to the walls—slowly reveal themselves as holding religious significance. Scenes of the crucifix hang above a young child's bed (presumably an Italian Catholic family), and tablets in Hebrew adorn the walls of an older couple's kitchen, both families residing in the Lower East Side. One photograph in the series that holds quiet, religious significance is of a Jewish graveyard. This photograph, devoid of

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[277] Ralph Gutieri, *East Side West Side: Exhibition of Photographs* (New York: Federal Art Gallery, 1938), 3.
[278] The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 113.
[279] Deborah Dash Moore, *Urban Origins of American Jews* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 115.

people, includes multiple headstones of differing shapes, heights, and colors (figure 2.28). Interspersed between the headstones are large trees, almost transforming this lot into a bucolic field. The photograph's background is filled with tenement backs of three- and four-stories, identifying this as a space of respite within a bustling city.

Graveyards were uncommon in the densely populated Lower East Side, leaving this site to undoubtedly be the first Shearith Israel Graveyard, also called the Chatham Square Cemetery or the New Bowery Cemetery. This was the first cemetery of the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue Shearith Israel in the City of New York, in use from 1656-1833.[280] This photograph of the graveyard coupled with a group of prints that frame the entrance to a Jewish Monuments store located on 304 Houston, one mile northeast from the graveyard, cements the inevitability of death as an actor within the narrative of the series, framed as part of daily life. This small, hidden place, owned by residents of centuries past and future, acts as a memorial to the history of the Jewish presence in the neighborhood—and as a site that will persist for centuries more to come. Levitt captures similarly small and hidden spaces within and throughout East Harlem, preserving those imagined, transient, and fleeting spaces. Eagle and Robbins turn their camera on the sociality of the built environment, disclosing the neighborhood's tenements—run-down yet unwavering—and the city dwellers—tired yet steadfast—as a place that will persist.

Within *One Third of a Nation* it is typically difficult to pinpoint exactly where we are in the city, as street signs and addresses are rarely pictured. While this makes views

[280] Arthur Settel, "Oldest Jewish Burial Ground, Established in 1656, is now shut out by buildings of Chatham Square; once outside New York City limits," *Jewish Daily Bulletin*, September 10, 1933, 6.

less specific and descriptive, it also disables their use as evidence to classify certain streets or intersections as vacant, unusable, or dangerous, as seen in NYCHA's housing surveys and the WPA Tax surveys of the 1930s and 1940s (figures 2.29 and 2.30). The FAP project holds only two examples that include legible street signs which anchor the viewer to a specific intersection within Manhattan's grid and only a handful of instances where landmarks give way to a specific address. In this photograph, the viewer glimpses the sparingly populated street corner of Lewis and Third Street on the Lower East Side, a few blocks west of the waterfront (figure 2.31). The photograph, captured from the opposing street corner, is framed so that street signs, attached to a tall lamppost, engage the frame's middle. Leaning against the lamppost is one of seven figures that occupy the scene. This leaning man has turned his attention to his right and watches two young boys play some sort of paddle game. On the sidewalk, one boy is winding up to throw something to his partner who stands in the street, racquet at the ready. To the left of the lamp post, everyday activities continue to appear. Two people share a stoop, a woman tends to her baby carriage as she traverses the sidewalk, and a man walks toward the street corner. Adjoining the sidewalk, behind the lamppost, is a tall wooden fence that encircles the vacant corner lot. The fence is decorated with old peeling posters advertising shows at the Lowes Theater on Avenue B. Behind the fence are three- and four-story tenement buildings that overwhelm the top half of the composition.

This street sign labeling the intersection of Lewis and Third Street identifies this space as the future site of the Lilian Ward House, a public housing unit that would boast

sixteen buildings holding more than 1,805 individual apartments.[281] Plans for the Ward House were cemented in November of 1944, and by the mid-1950s, almost all of Lewis Street would be demolished to make way for the Riis and Baruch public housing units. Prior to new construction, this area, as noted in the photograph, was the site of decaying old-law tenements. Eagle and Robbins commemorate this place as quiet, peaceful, and almost deserted. While demolition had already overtaken the corner lot, the buildings that endure stand proud, filling the top half of the composition with their curtained windows, gridded fire escapes, and crumbling stoops. Returning to the descriptions of the Federal Writers' Project's *New York Guide*, in the Lower East Side, "great slums die hard."[282] Certainly, the buildings housing primarily Jewish or Italian immigrants do not appeal as ideal residences, but they are shown in use with laundry spilling out of windows and stoops hosting gossip sessions. Even the vacant lot's fence is used as a billboard advertising the neighborhood's culture and entertainment.

Eagle and Robbins captured this space, vacant and engaged, from an oblique angle as the homes' addresses and quality are not what is important in this scene. The indirect framing of the intersection emphasizes the neighborhood's spaces—empty, developed, and occupied—interacting to craft a narrative of the neighborhood and its residents as a place that refuses to give in to its inevitable fate. Throughout this series, the categories of spatial duality—of inside and outside, of self and other, of vacant and

[281] "Plans are filed for Wald Housing; Sixteen Units Containing More Than 1,805 Apartments to Be Built on Lower East Side," *New York Times*, November 14, 1944, 35.
[282] The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 113.

occupied—that work to "naturalize the symbolic order of the city, reproducing social divisions and power relations" are not included.[283] Rather than presenting the neighborhood as dictated by spatial hierarchies and segregation, Eagle and Robbins focus on how social relationships mold space into place.

Tactics, Trajectories, and Rhetoric: One Third of the Nation makes place in the everyday

Moving from the streets, sidewalks, and backyards to the hallways, kitchens, and bedrooms that comprise the other half of *One Third of a Nation*, intimate scenes of the subject's everyday lives are uncovered. This movement inside, to interior and more intimate spaces within the neighborhood does not appear in Levitt's photographs in East Harlem or Grossman and Libsohn's photographic series in Chelsea. In explaining his photographic practice, Eagle noted that he "always took care to introduce himself and explain his intentions to those whose dwellings he wished to photograph," working as a sociologist rather than a surveyor.[284] That introduction and subsequent permission to enter and photograph people in their homes is evident within the photographs. This rapport is also glimpsed in photographs of exteriors, as Eagle and Robbins come to each neighborhood space with this sociological approach.

Highlighted throughout interior scenes are daily rituals—preparing children for bed, forcing children to cooperate at bath time, the eating at the kitchen table, and the

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[283] Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy eds., *Urban Space and Representation* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 11.
[284] Christopher Phillips, *Arnold Eagle: Photographs 1930-1950* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1987), 2.

organization of never-ending lines of laundry (figures 2.32-2.36). The photographers' choice to not simply capture generic interiors with subjects framed by squalor, but rather expose how tenants live within their space presents subjects as active makers of their lives. Within these interior scenes, the photographers capture and surpass the emotional, and at times physical threshold that typically acts as a barrier between photographer and subject. Furthermore, within the sequence, these interior and exterior spaces are not presented as dialectical but instead, when viewed serially, they create a discourse, building upon one another in telling a narrative of the neighborhood. Eagle and Robbins transcend the duality of exterior and interior and the boundary between subject and photographer to expose how rituals and routines structure people's lives and transform their interior space into place.

Place is created over time, through repetition and routine, as experiences develop and relationships build.[285] Through *One Third of a Nation*'s focus on routine and traditions, typically shown in multiples, the photographers' picture place being shaped and created on a daily basis. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* suggests processes of the everyday are, in practice, trajectories, tactics, and rhetorics that allow the disenfranchised class to counter the hegemonic forces in place that shape and direct their space.[286] De Certeau views everyday rituals such as walking, reading, talking, dwelling, and cooking as tactics that work together to create a network of antidiscipline. Eagle and

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[285] Yi-fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Saint Paul: The University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 5-12.
[286] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xviii–xxiii.

Robbins's attention to everyday activities of eating, bathing, shopping, walking, and dwelling, shows their effort to document how users, especially women, shape space. These subjects commit daily acts of resistance that are a part of their greater place-making effort.

Returning to the first photograph examined in this chapter, a woman, presumably a mother, feeds four young boys a snack of milk and bread as they complete their schoolwork (figure 2.1). Lower East Side resident Jack Weiss remembered from his childhood on Garrick Street, "everybody was in the same situation, and you never locked your doors. If your mother wasn't there, someone else would take you in and feed you"[287] This photograph is one example of fourteen shots taken of this table that show the woman and boys in varying poses. The woman feeds the boys, offers a warm embrace, and surveys the competition of schoolwork. In the collection of the International Center of Photography, Eagle wrote on the back of this print "an all purpose (sic) kitchen," identifying the room's use beyond its structural dimensions. As noted earlier in the chapter, in the left-hand corner of the frame, we can see the employment of a photographer's lamp to light the scene. While this marks the photograph as staged, it also evidences the time and care Robbins and Eagle took to photograph interior spaces. This is not a quick snapshot of subjects taken unaware, but a composed meditation into this woman and boys' daily activities. Robbins and Eagle lit the room to capture interior squalor, and show the seemingly small acts of daily resistance, or place-making, that

[287] New York University Department of History Oral History Class Collection, Interview with Jack Weiss, February 21, 1994, Box 6, CD 3.

occur around the table. Within this subseries profiling the kitchen table, a number of prints move close to the table, focusing on a boy who wears a hat and dark jacket. In one photograph, the woman protectively and warmly places both of her arms around the boy as he squints toward the camera (figure 2.37). The photograph is framed as if Eagle and Robbins, and in turn the viewer, were invited to sit at the table and partake in the tradition of milk and bread.

In another photograph from *One Third of a Nation* that focuses on domestic activities, a man, woman, and young child sit and stand within a kitchen with a linoleum floor (figure 2.38). Framed between two curtained windows, a woman irons while a man pulls a child up to his lap. While the domicile is cluttered, the room is clean, the laundry looks bright and white, and the curtains ruffled edges look well cared for. The room holds a multi-purpose use as the kitchen table has been recalibrated as an ironing board, and the ceiling light becomes a laundry line post. Just behind the man's shoulder is an oval mirror that reflects a bright light, perhaps another photographer's lamp, as the room appears to be lit from the front due to the heavy shadows that reiterate the subjects' actions. In other photographs from the series focusing on kitchen activities, a woman uses the sink as a washbasin, and children convert the top of a stove into a kitchen table. In these three examples, dwellers, particularly women, alter spaces and objects to meet their quotidian needs. In this sense, the occupiers' daily efforts mold their interior space, physically and psychologically, to meet their needs, transforming space into a place—their home.

The survey's intimate scenes of routine are formally similar to Eagle's contemporaneous *Sabbath Studies* (figures 2.2-2.5 and 2.39) that documented the

vanishing life of the Orthodox Jewish immigrant community on the Lower East Side. In this series, subjects practice their faith, pore over religious texts, and transform spaces into places of religious worship.[288] Eagle similarly photographs these activities from a close vantage point, almost inserting himself into the action. Within both *Sabbath Studies* and *One Third of a Nation,* figures, while not typically moving, are posed as active, using similarly homemade and handspun items to aid in religious practice and daily routine. Instead of surrounding a Torah Ark, a mother and four boys sit around a table with milk and bread. In place of lighting candles, a mother bathes her baby in a makeshift sink. In both series, the practices (whether religious or secular) are highlighted, framed, and upheld as activities that warrant closer inspection and ought to be preserved.

While *One Third of a Nation*'s views of daily traditions vary in their formality and distance between photographer and sitter, many of them appear as portraits, as the subject's face and body are the most descriptive part of the photograph. As the Federal Art Gallery catalog for the exhibition *East Side West Side* notes, "New York is a city of many faces, not all grim and defeated," and this project illustrates the array of faces.[289] In the majority of these portraits, subjects look directly at the camera—smiling, making a silly face, and stoically staring into the shutter (figures 2.40-2.42). In reviewing similar surveys of housing such as Jacob Riis' profiling of the other half in New York's Lower

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[288] Ken Koltun-Fromm in *Material Culture and Jewish Thought in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010) discusses Eagle's 1992 photobook *At Home With God* and reads the photographs as a nostalgic look back east side Jews. For more information see Chapter six, "The Material Gaze: American Jewish Identity and Heritage Production," 225-269.
[289] Ralph Gutieri, *East Side West Side: Exhibition of Photographs* (New York: Federal Art Gallery, 1938), 3.

East Side and also the Photo League's *Harlem Document*, subjects rarely return the gaze of the photographer. Both Robbins and Eagle, themselves living on the border of poverty as they were on relief, come to their subjects as equals, as compassionate and understanding of their situation and with the desire to let them gaze back, or speak back, to their camera. The photographers move in closer than Levitt, who remained teetering on the edge between her reality and the reality of her subjects. Eagle and Robbins are invited in to shares the spaces and places of their subjects.

Revealing that invitation, this image shows a young girl in a dress and coat, posing by her tricycle while she squeezes her arms around her baby doll (figure 2.43). The girl is standing on the sidewalk or a concrete floor of a back alley, framed in front of a door and window. As discussed in chapter one, this space, adjacent to the home, was where little girls of the neighborhood were permitted to play, close enough to the home to stay safe, but far enough from the reaches of their mothers so as to gain a sense of independence. This space between the private home and public world of the street envelopes the girl, herself between childhood and adulthood, as her baby doll acts as a toy and training tool for her (presumed) destined motherhood. The girl looks to her left, towards a man with a camera. The photographer (unclear if it is Eagle or Robbins) leans over the view-finder on his waist-height camera. This image discloses the photographic practice employed to create *One Third of a Nation*. The photographer's presence is known and he is a part of the scene—leaning down to meet the eye of his younger subjects. Through this communion and intimacy, Eagle and Robbins were able to chronicle the quotidian activities of women and children, their tactics, and trajectories of

daily resistance that transform interior, anterior, and interstitial spaces into a place. Another photograph of this young girl shows her mouth agape, with a friend behind her making a similarly silly face (figure 2.44). The frame cuts off the arm of another compatriot, standing to the girl's right. This addition of bodies enhances the photographer's animating and collaborative practice.

This embodied and compassionate communion between subject and photographer is unusual in documentary photographs that survey derelict conditions, as seen in the oeuvre of Jacob Riis. In this photograph by Riis of a young child caring for a baby, the photographer positions himself to look down at the subject, presenting a condescending and detached view (figure 2.45). The image's vacant foreground is emphasized through this perspective, underscoring distance, literal and figurative, between the photograph and its subjects. In comparison, Eagle and Robbins's print of a young child caring for a (toy) baby captures a photographer engaging with their subject. The photograph is cropped just above the soles of the girl's shoes, emphasizing the shared space of the tenement and the collaborative space of the photograph. The young girl is framed by less than ideal conditions—the building's paint peels, and the ground is comprised of broken concrete. These environmental conditions do not overtake the subject, and the girl is presented as apart from her environment, having created a place of play bounded by her tricycle. Abutting the building is the young girl's baby carriage that is clean and neat, holding a blanket meant to embrace the girl's baby doll. In Riis's image, the subject sits adjacent to a dirtied dresser that holds an unstable stack of old mattresses. Rather than offering

glances of comfort or presenting a landscape with room for potential, Riis presents the young subject as cornered within a dank environment.

The Federal Theatre Portrays …*One Third of a Nation*

Three photographs from *One Third of a Nation* show a young boy in a neat, double-breasted coat leaning against a building's front column (figure 2.46). His feet are planted on the sidewalk, facing the street, while his body is presented towards the viewer. His left hand is in his pocket, and his face holds the expression of a man beyond his years. Framing the young child are layers upon layers of posters advertising events such as a boxing match between Henry Armstrong and Barney Ross and screenings of the film "Merrily We Live" staring Constance Bennet and Brian Aherne at the Lowe's Lincoln Square. The dilapidated posters are hung above and inside an evacuated storefront with a hollowed out front door, peeling paint, and dirty floor. Curiously, along the storefront's entrance and above the head of the boy, is a familiar phrase, *One third of a Nation,* printed atop a graphically depicted aerial view of tenement streets. Upon closer inspection, the scene reveals itself as the poster advertising the FTP's play *One third of a nation* (figure 2.47).

One third of a nation opened on January 17, 1938, at the Adelphi Theater to rave reviews. Critics called it "brilliantly produced," "a real triumph of realism," and "a dynamic production of force and honesty."[290] The play, written by Arthur Arent, ran for

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[290] Brooke Atkinson, "The Play: Living Newspaper of the Federal Theatre reports the housing situation," *The New York Times*, January 18, 1937, 27 and Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Living Newspaper," *The Nation,* 146 January 29, 1938, 137.

nine months and was seen by 211,458 viewers, and eventually traveled to seven cities throughout the United States.[291] Dramatizing the corrupt history of housing and the rise of slums in New York City, the play goes as far back as the early eighteenth century when midtown was still farmland.[292] Using techniques of vaudeville and an omnipresent narrator, the play revealed a housing system in which, investing on speculation, the rich got richer, and the poor were forced to pay increasingly high rents for less than adequate housing. The play's conclusion suggests that the present-day federal budget ought to be recalibrated, transferring funds for the military to housing organizations. The play topically responded to the political and cultural agenda of the time as the Wagner-Steagall bill would be passed in the Senate one month after the play opened. Quoting statistics and projecting photographs, the play attempted to call the audience to action, stressing how the housing crisis affected their communities.

Hallie Flanagan, the FTP director, believed that the stage could and ought to be used to educate and inform the public about contemporary issues. Like the FAP, the FTP believed that incorporating art into citizen's daily lives would lead to an enriched and enlightened citizenship, creating the culture of abundance sought in the New Deal. With

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[291] Memorandum Irving Mendell, Living Newspaper Department Head, to Hallie Flanagan, Director Federal Theatre Project, 23 January 1939, Box 549, RG 69, Records of the Work Progress Administration Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Living Newspaper Research Materials for *Injunction Granted* and *One Third of a Nation,* The National Archives, College Park, Maryland. The show traveled around the United States to Detroit, Cincinnati, Portland, Hartford, New Orleans, Seattle, and San Francisco. Sharon Ann Musher, *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015),107.

[292] Arthur Arent, *One Third of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 1938), Act 1, Scene 3.

this intention, the FTP and FAP produced art that served as a mediator between citizens and their lived experiences. Prior to her work in the New Deal, Flanagan, a theater director, traveled abroad to learn foreign theater practices and was particularly drawn to the Russian workers' theater vibrant and affecting work.[293] Inspired by the theater's commitment to producing plays that dramatized daily experiences and social conflicts, Flanagan sought to create a "living theater" that would similarly engage with the essence of life in the United States. Hired by Harry Hopkins, head of the WPA and a former classmate from Grinnell College, Flanagan took up her post as the director of the FTP, headquartered in New York City, in 1935. Hopkins promised Flanagan the authority to direct an "uncensored" Project. Throughout her tenure with the administration, Flanagan produced plays that warned Americans of their susceptibility to anti-Semitism and racism and revealed systemic inequalities in housing, power, and agriculture. The FTP's social goals, surpassing the FAP, were rooted in education and also sought to move audiences to advocate for social change. Many times Flanagan tempered the overtly political statements of the Project's plays to manage administrators' expectations and prevent censorship of the project.[294]

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[293] Flanagan was the first woman to win a Guggenheim fellowship in 1926. Funds from the fellowship enabled her to travel abroad to study other theaters.

[294] The FTP's *Ethiopia* and *The Cradle Will Rock* were never allowed to open. For more information about the FTP and Flanagan see Sharon Ann Musher, "Art as a weapon" in *Democratic Art: The New Deal's Influence on American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 100-145. Due to the project's continued dealings with controversial topics and occasional integrated casting, the FTP was shut down in 1939, though administrators claimed the project was shuttered due to budget issues.

One Third of a Nation dramatized the social issue of inadequate housing—revealing the centuries-long inequitable housing policies at the root of the federal housing crisis. The play was part of the FTP's Living Newspaper series, a genre that combined journalistic investigations of the newspaper and the artistry of the theater in order to educate the audience about a social problem. Functioning as a big city daily, the FTP's Living Newspaper section staff members were assigned to research the history of housing in New York City to support the play's plot.[295] This included gathering evidence from books, newspapers, pamphlets, and slum-dwellers themselves to confirm the centuries-long housing issues in New York City. This investigation went beyond the written word, and researchers, reviewing the archives of NYCHA and their own files, turned to photographs to serve as evidence to illustrate the terrible housing conditions.[296] In the

[295] The researchers worked for over a year preparing for this production. John E. Vacha, "The Federal Theatre's living newspapers: New York's docudramas of the thirties," *New York History* 67, no. 1 (1956): 67-88.

[296] Letter from George Kondolf (director for New York City's FTP) to Miss. Hazel R. Mittelman, April 28, 1938 states "But the few reprints remaining most of our slides and photographs have been returned to the original source from which obtained; the New York Housing Authority on Centre Street." (Box 610, RG 69, Work Progress Administration Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Living Newspaper Research Materials for *Injunction Granted* and *One Third of a Nation,* The National Archives, College Park, Maryland). In examining the FTP photographic files at the National Archives, there are forty-three prints labeled "taken for *One Third of a Nation*," that we can assume make up part of the photographs that were used as research for the play (the photos are also, at times, labeled "Taken for the Federal Theatre Project's play ...*One Third of a Nation* Adelphi Theater"). The prints are dated from 1937 and one outlier is dated January 22, 1936 (negative 391A). This photograph is the only one in the project that identifies a photographer – in this case FAP photographers Cyril Mipaas and Andrew Herman (Both Mipaas and Herman have files showcasing their creative assignment for the FAP, Andrew Herman's East Side Market scenes and Sewing Project and Mipaas Music scenes, see The National Archives Still Pictures Record Group 69.) We are unsure of the authorship of the outstanding forty-two photographs and I am doubtful that the

playbill for *One Third of a Nation*, designed to resemble a newspaper, the writers described the photographic research employed in preparation for the play:

> Photo proves facts: on some of these slumming trips a member of the federal theatre project photographic staff accompanied the research worker. This made possible a pictorial record of tenement conditions which may be shown to skeptics who might doubt the story presented on stage.[297]

Photographs were used to authenticate the written play and as source material for stage designer Howard Bay as he transformed the stage into a city block, constructing an authentic, four-story tenement stage-set. A number of the photographs were also projected during the play to transport viewers to different parts of the city.[298]

The authenticity of the stage design was important visually and also drove the play's plot and character development. At the beginning of act II, the tenement itself is given a voice, proclaiming:

> Well, I'm still here. There's been a lot of water under the bridge. We've had a few new presidents and a Civil War – but I'm still here. You're curious, aren't you? You don't know where I am. Well, I'm here – inside the house. I AM THE HOUSE!
> Scene direction: There is a pause. A spot picks up odd corners of the interior.[299]

With the house itself having written lines, the scenic designers and playwrights attempted to make the house a true character within the play. The tenement is disgruntled as it

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remainder of the group was captured by FAP photographers but more likely a staff photographer from the FTP or taken from the files of New York City Housing Authority.

[297] *One Third of a Nation* Playbill, 1938, Box 39, Folder 154, RG 69-TC Work Progress Administration prints: Federal Theatre Project 1935-39, The National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

[298] Milton Meltzer, *Violins and Shovels* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 37.

[299] Arthur Arent, *One Third of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 1938), Act 2, Scene 1.

remains in the same horrible conditions throughout the decades, even as the housing laws change. As noted earlier in this chapter, Eagle and Robbins were inspired by this play to commence their own housing survey.[300] This personification of space, portraying the built environment and an active, living character, informed Eagle and Robbins's treatment of the spaces they photographed. Their photographs portray the built environment as a subject in itself, not simply a backdrop or composed of unmoving structural elements. In the play and photographic series, these spaces are captured to literally talk back to the photographers and, in turn, the viewers.

The transformation and humanization of spaces were not limited to the stage during the production of *One third of a Nation*. The lobby of the Adelphi was transformed into an exhibition that hosted paintings of the slums by the children that inhabited those spaces (taught by FAP instructors) (figure 2.48). The exhibition, titled *One Third of a Nation's People* also included posters designed by the WPA advocating better housing.[301] Flanagan wrote of the power of the play and its accompanying exhibition in 1938:

> In the lobby of the Adelphi Theatre in New York, where since last January a hundred and fifty-one thousand people have paid to see the Living Newspaper on housing, there is an exhibit of paintings by children of the slums. Here in terms the more devastating because unconscious, American children have made their own record of the squalid rooms and alleyways which to one-third of our nation mean home. The pictures are a part of the play, the play a continuation of the pictures, and both at once a part of the

[300] Ralph Gutieri, *East Side West Side: Exhibition of Photographs* (New York: Federal Art Gallery, 1938). It continues that "its value as documentation is further indicated by the use made of the photographs in building the sets for the movie version of …*One Third of a Nation*, now in the process of production," 3.
[301] Letter from Ethel Aaron of the Living Newspaper to Mr. Barber subject re: Exhibit in Lobby of Adelphi dated November 24, 1937.

> life of the audiences pouring nightly into the Adelphi and a force galvanizing that audience to some sort of action. People leaving the theatre sign petitions to speed the housing developments; they write to their Congressmen; they join renters' leagues.[302]

Flanagan's phrase, "the pictures are a part of the play, the play a continuation of the pictures, and both at once a part of the life of the audiences pouring nightly into the Adelphi," reveals how the play was meant to become a part of a viewer's life—blurring the line of their reality and the drama of the play. This blurring of fiction and reality, stage and street, motivated and moved viewers to act.[303] The effort to blur the line between art, documentary, and reality in an effort to educate an audience and move people to act is also present in the gallery exhibition of Eagle and Robbins's photographic yet equally dramatic version of *One Third of a Nation*.

Exhibiting One Third of a Nation

The education division of the FAP provided art education for children and adults and hosted a variety of outreach programs to solidify the connection between the Project and the general community.[304] One of the most vital of these ventures was the exhibition

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[302] Hallie Flanagan, "Theatre and Geography," Magazine of Art xi 31 (August 1938): 464.

[303] In a note from November 30, 1937 from Mr. Edward Rowland to Ethel Aaron the original plan for the lobby was to host housing photographs mounted in two glass cases. Mr. Rowland goes as far as to "suggest the use of tumbled down building next door to Adelphi for promotion scheme." RG 60 Records of the Federal Theatre Project, Living Newspaper Research Materials for *Injunction Granted* and *One Third of a Nation*, Box 610.

[304] This included the Creative Home Planning Section, the Industrial Design Laboratory, and the Art Gallery Tours Section. The Art Gallery Tours not only showcased work produced by Project artists, but also provided tours through New York City that explained architecture and city design, teaching city-dwellers how to read and understand

division that sponsored an ambitious schedule to endorse the art produced by Project artists and students. Through this promotion, the exhibitions validated the FAP's role as a productive and essential relief organization. The exhibition division followed the greater ethos of the FAP with its inclusive objective to bring art to the people, "to integrate the fine with the practical arts, and more especially, the arts in general with the daily life of the community."[305] The Project achieved this goal by creating a "vista to new horizons in American art" through their gallery, which attempted to generate a different audience of art enthusiasts that superseded the private collector.[306] The gallery, located at Seven East Thirty-Eight Street and later 225 West Fifty-Seven Street, called itself "an art gallery for the people," advertising exhibitions that went beyond the boundaries of what an average gallery or museum would show, highlighting the connection between art and daily life.[307] In this gallery, Eagle and Robbins's photographs from *One Third of a Nation* were displayed, greatly increasing the series' audience.

According to a review of the Project displays, "these exhibitions offered a welcome respite from humdrum routine to office workers, businessmen and women, department store clerks, shoppers, and a vast variety of garment workers from the nearby factories," boasting a diverse crowd.[308] The gallery attempted to be accessible and

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their homes and urban landscape. (Press Release, Library exhibition of Greenwich Village life includes Federal Art Project Work, November 9, 1938, Reel 5293, Frame 1389, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA).

[305] Lillian Semons, *40 Exhibitions at New York's Federal Art Gallery: A Preview of the Future* (New York: Federal Art Project, 1939), 2.

[306] Ibid., 4.

[307] Ibid., 1.

[308] Ibid., 3.

comprehensible to a large portion of the public, not only the museum-going audience. In a 1941 summary of FAP activities penned by Cahill, the director boasts of the exhibition division's important role in cementing the relationship between audience, artist, and American culture and history:

> Through the Exhibition Division, the fine arts program of the Project reaches a diversified and varied audience and is assured of an intelligent and warm reception. Strengthening the relationship between the artist and those who see his work, the Division promises the country's future a fuller, deeper understanding of art. New interests are given to leisure hours by the hundreds of exhibitions presented by the WPA Federal Art Project, broadening the scope of its cultural program and breaking down the restrictions which isolated the artist from the public. By establishing on a firm foundation, the country's knowledge and familiarity with the art of today and of the past, it is making possible the future development of art in America…It is significant of the widespread function of this Division that since its inception it has organized 733 exhibitions for single showing in New York and more than 1,000 shows altogether for exhibition throughout the city.[309]

In reviewing the internal weekly reports of the New York City FAP, officers recorded the number of exhibitions on display (locally and out of state), the number of people who attended the exhibitions, and the events (lectures, symposiums, and tours) that were planned in conjunction with current exhibits. Within one week, there could be as many as fifteen local exhibitions and thirty out of state shows on view.[310]

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[309] Holger Cahill, "The New York City WPA Art Project Activities and Accomplishments, New York City," 1941, Reel 90, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA.

[310] Weekly Reports, May 7, 1937-July 11, 1939, Reels 89-92, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA.

The first major exhibition presented at the Federal Art Gallery dedicated solely to the photography division was exhibited from May 12, 1937, through the end of the summer.[311] This presentation included a series on the daily rituals of Orthodox Jews living in the Lower East Side by Arnold Eagle and a chronicling of Manhattan's waterfront by David Robbins (figure 2.49). The show was also exhibited at the Union House Settlement at 231 East 104 Street, bringing images of Jewish culture and the lives of the docks further uptown (figure 2.50). The Federal Art Gallery printed photographs at a uniform size, hung at eye-level, and the prints were matted with white paper and framed along the top and bottom edges. This type of installation design was also used in the Federal Art Gallery's presentation of paintings, watercolors, and posters, cementing its use as an emblematic design strategy of the exhibition division.

Looking beyond the Federal Art Gallery, exhibitions of photography increased in number and popularity throughout the 1930s and into the 1940s. Curator Beaumont Newhall's *Photography: 1839-1937* (1937) exhibition presented at the Museum of Modern Art, a common photography exhibition venue throughout the era, varied the display of photographs, including montages, enlarged, and precious prints, variously pinned to the walls of the museum or framed and matted. As this exhibition was a survey, Newhall emphasized the historical and technical advances of the medium, rather than its documentary potential (as the FSA, FAP, and Photo League were mostly excluded) (figure 2.51). In 1938, in the same venue, Walker Evans's exhibition *American*

[311] The exhibition was slated to close in June but was kept open through the end of the summer due to popular demand.

Photographs (1938) also employed a dynamic installation, as prints were sized down, enlarged, and affixed directly to the museum's walls (figure 4.4). By the early 1940s, MoMA photography exhibitions became more standardized, as seen in Helen Levitt's 1943 exhibition *Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children,* where her photographs were hung in a singular, uniform style (figure 2.52). The press release to accompany the exhibition underscored Levitt's poetic approach, and the standard, unobtrusive display of prints emphasized each print's singular ingenuity.

The main venue for Eagle and Robbins's *One Third of a Nation* was the Federal Art Gallery exhibit *East Side West Side* that ran from September 20 through October 11, 1938 (figure 2.54).[312] Diverging from standard Federal Art Gallery design and applying a more dynamic approach, reminiscent of the Museum of the City of New York's exhibition of Berenice Abbott's *Changing New York* (1937) (figure 2.53), MoMA's *Photography: 1839-1937* (1937), and *American Photographs* (1938), *East Side West Side* presented a stimulating display as photographs were printed in a multiplicity of sizes and hung at varying heights. The images were printed to bleed to the paper's edge, pasted as a group to white or grey cardboard, and then mounted to the gallery wall (figures 2.54-

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[312] The catalog to accompany the FAP 1938 exhibition *East Side West Side,* presented at the Federal Art Gallery for three weeks, lists the inclusion of eighty-three prints from *One Third of a Nation* and notes that the series took four months to complete. After studying the earlier photography exhibitions of the FAP, there is no evidence (in exhibition stills or catalog text) that *One Third of a Nation* was exhibited in an earlier iteration. In examining installation shots from the show, there are photographs that do not live in the files of the Nation Archives but that are in the files of the Tenement Museum and the Museum of the City of New York (Ralph Gutieri, *East Side West Side: Exhibition of Photographs* (New York: Federal Art Gallery), 1938, 5).

2.57). Exhibited in an almost montage-like fashion, the photographs directly touch one another and are stacked in rows and columns that vary in height and width. The photographs are intermittently linked to form a L or staircase pattern as they cascade down their cardboard mount. The shapes are printed alongside, above, or adjacent to a handful of captions (author unknown), creating a unique relationship between text and image that went beyond mere illustration. As opposed to presenting the prints as singular instances, separated by white mounts and frames, the images intersect, mimicking the intertwined relationship of the photographic subjects and their city spaces.

Eagle and Robbins's photographs vary in dimensions from life-size to diminutive. The large prints envelop the viewer as they gaze at a subject presented as their physical equal, while the smaller prints require the viewer to move closer to the wall to adequately view the subject. This diversity of sizes encourages the viewer to engage with the prints and exhibition space, both visually and corporally, transporting visitors further into the world of the print and the reconstructed space of the street. In looking closely at the *Subway Construction* project created by Andrew Herman and the *American Guide* series, also presented as components of *East Side West Side*, the photographs are similarly arranged, though the size of the prints remains smaller and more uniform (figures 2.58 and 2.59). With this display distinction evidenced in the exhibition itself, it is clear *One Third of a Nation* was exhibited as an anomaly, as its design more precisely reiterates the intentions of the photographic portfolio.

Examining the multiple panels to which the photographs are affixed, it is curious that the installation designers did not use a singular mount to host the continuous,

complete series. Rather, the eighty-three images are divided among four rectangular cardboard mounts within the show. These mounts are peppered between black and white lines applied directly to the gallery's walls that further geometrically divides the exhibition space. This design mimics the city's gridiron layout, transforming the space of the gallery into a gridded, metropolitan neighborhood. At times, prints dissent beyond the rectangular border, imbuing this geometrical design with the possibility for undulating movement, realistically simulating the space of a city block.

New York Times critic Edward Alden Jewell, reviewing the exhibition, singled out Eagle and Robbins's *One Third of a Nation* for being an approach that was "quite frankly propaganda" but "propaganda that with positive splendor of affirmation [that] justifies its use of art as a vehicle." He praised the "power and searching thoroughness" of the work produced by Eagle and Robbins, noting "the horrible slum conditions of New York are revealed by way, at once, of crying aloud, in pictorial language that does not flinch or mince, a shame that exists, and of reminding us that reform is energetically afoot."[313] The catalog for *East Side West Side* written by photography division director Ralph Gutieri furthers this propagandistic reading of the photographs, "in any legislative program for better housing, the photographic material included in this exhibition should play an important part. They portray with full documentary evidence the need for further progress."[314] First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt also wrote of her visit to the exhibition in her

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[313] Edward Alden Jewell, "Camera: Aspects of America in Three Shows," *New York Times,* October 2, 1938, 169.

[314] Ralph Gutieri, *East Side West Side: Exhibition of Photographs* (New York: Federal Art Gallery, 1938), 2.

weekly column "My Day," encouraging city citizens to view the exhibition.[315] As these comments and critiques were published in city newspapers, printed with the FAP files, and notarized by the First Lady, *One Third of a Nation* upheld its activating, political intent. The *Chelsea Document,* too, holds this persuasive and political resolve as the prints were exhibited in settlement houses and at the politically invested Photo League (to be discussed in chapter three). In both cases, the ethos of the exhibition site colors the presentation and reception of these prints. Levitt's prints also held a political currency in their exploration of how children make a place for themselves within East Harlem's contested city streets, and her decision to photograph in this politically charged and heterogeneous neighborhood in the north of Manhattan. Levitt's prints, as published in *PM* and *Look,* support this socially and politically charged reading of her work, though the writing to accompany her photographs do not go so far as to equate Levitt's work to propaganda. These three projects—Levitt's series, *One Third of a Nation*, and the *Chelsea Document*—share spatially charged intentions, but the publication strategy and exhibition venue of the prints nuance how readily political the photographs become.

Exhibitions on housing were common throughout the decade of the Depression as institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of the City of New York addressed the topic with great fervor. The Museum of Modern Art hosted a 1934 show titled *Housing Exhibition of the City of New York,* co-sponsored by NYCHA. In 1937

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[315] Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, September 23, 1938," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017), accessed 1/14/2020, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1938&_f=md055066

NYCHA also sponsored two housing presentations, one at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and the other at the North American Homes exposition at Madison Square Garden. Multiple periodicals such as *Shelter*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and NYCHA's *Public Housing* published ardently and often regarding housing and architecture issues.[316] While these installations mixed models, plans, and photographs to argue for improved housing conditions, the photographs of bad housing were typically banal and mundane to show that poor housing was a ubiquitous problem.[317] In exhibitions and publications, the "before and after" or "compare and contrast" technique was often utilized as prosaic examples of bad housing were often juxtaposed with examples of "good" housing (figure 2.60). *East Side West Side* did include examples of both good and bad housing, but the montaged narrative and dynamic exhibition enlivens the comparisons. In the Museum of Modern Art's "Houses and Housing," a subsection of the 1939 show *Art in Our Time*, the architecture curator John McAndrew devoted much gallery space to architectural plans and schematics, producing an installation that could only be read by a group limited to those trained to read architectural campaigns (figure 2.61).[318] These strategies worked to emphasize the pervasiveness of the housing problem while diminishing the photograph's lucidity and potential to form a legible narrative. The photographs also worked to "other"

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[316] For more information see R. Woudstra, "Exhibiting Reform: MoMA and the Display of Public Housing (1932–1939)," *Architectural Histories*, 6, no. 1 (2018).
[317] Elizabeth Avery, "New Deal Photography and the Campaign for Public Housing," PhD diss., (University of Chicago, 2002), 50.
[318] While this exhibition focuses on architecture, the aim of the exhibition was to show argue for the necessity of well-designed public housing, an aim similar to *East Side West Side* and also the *Chelsea Document* exhibition (to be discussed in Chapter 3). Elizabeth Avery, "New Deal Photography and the Campaign for Public Housing," PhD diss., (University of Chicago, 2002), 2.

and sensationalized the living conditions of the lower class. These exhibitions were intended to be read not by future inhabitants of public housing but by the taxpayer who indirectly contributed to the projects.[319]

While these housing exhibits certainly demonstrated the need for better housing and offered potential solutions for the problem, *East Side West Side* presents a convincing argument, through the familiar language of the city-dweller, for requisite legislative changes to housing policies. Robert U. Godsoe, the head of the FAP exhibition division, notes that the Federal Art Gallery's overarching installation design was most closely allied with "interior decoration and window display," engaging methods of advertising.[320] Designer Herbert Bayer writing on display strategies in 1939, notes, "the modern exhibition should not retain its distance from the spectator, it should be brought close to him, penetrate and leave an impression on him, should explain, demonstrate and even persuade and lead him to a planned reaction."[321] *East Side West Side* attends to this call, employing photographs to advertise, communicate, and persuade by producing an enveloping and heuristic exhibition. Employing these tactics, the message of the show becomes that much more impressionable to a gallery visitor.

The presentation's sequencing reinforces the exploratory story-telling aspect inherent within *One Third of a Nation*. As witnessed in the exhibition layout, subjects are repeated in multiple prints, acting as tour guides as they lead viewers to different places

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[319] R. Woudstra, "Exhibiting Reform: MoMA and the Display of Public Housing (1932–1939)," *Architectural Histories*, 6, no. 1 (2018), 6-7.
[320] Robert U. Godsoe, "A Project for the People," *Art Front*, May 1937, 10-11.
[321] Herbert Bayer, "Fundamentals of Exhibition Design", *PM*, vol. 6 no. 2 (December 1939/January 1940), 17.

within their neighborhood (figures 2.62-2.64). In one instance, a young girl in a floral dress sits on a ladder in a littered hallway, perhaps on her way to the building's roof. The image is printed at poster size, and directly to the right of the girl's head are eight lines of (now illegible) text. Next to this caption is a smaller, horizontal print of the same girl standing before a dollhouse. In this image, the girl's right arm is over the top of the house, almost embracing the miniature structure. The dollhouse is made of six rooms—a kitchen, dining room, living room, two bedrooms, and a bathroom. Everything is neat and tidy and has its own place. Each window includes nicely tailored curtains, the walls are decorated with paintings, and the couch appears plush. Through this sequencing, the young girl is transported from her less than ideal tenement home into her dollhouse's neat rooms. This juxtaposition offers a story of possibility as the young girl, engaging the camera, imagines and creates a new place for herself within her tenement landscape.

One Third of a Nation's presentation within *East Side West Side* includes multiple scenes highlighting the communal spaces of the city streets and buildings, such as sidewalks, hallways, and storefronts (figures 2.65-2.67), spaces similarly emphasized in Levitt's FAP series and seen in the *Chelsea Document*. In one example, a sequence of three prints meditates on the role of the threshold within the urban environment. The first presents an establishing shot of a building's façade and adjoining sidewalk, the second an entryway into a tenement building, framed from the interior hallway looking out towards the street, and the third a close-up of a boy standing in the entrance to a store, as glimpsed through the storefront's projecting window. In this sequence of photographs, there is a distance between the photographer and the subject, as necessitated by the scene's spatial

organization. While many views in the series show the photographer as an embodied observer, a participant in the sociality displayed within the frame, these images chronicle a different relationship between photographer and subject—one of reserved distance. This sequence profiles the space of the threshold as a place of protection, guarding the subjects against the photographer's intrusion. In this way, *One Third of a Nation* cannot be read as a narrative offering full access into the subject's lives, but rather a subjective portrait of a place, as dictated and guided by the profiled subjects.

In describing the photographs from *One Third of a Nation* in the *East Side West Side* catalog, Gutieri calls the photographs "productions," linking this series to other creative endeavors of the WPA. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Eagle and Robbins took on this creative assignment after the popularity of the FTP's production *One Third of a Nation*. Knowing Eagle and Robbins were certainly thinking of the play and its message while producing their project, the photographs can be read as a continuation of the play itself. The series then hosts two mediums of communication, the referenced performance of the play, and the medium of the exhibition, reinforcing the decipherability of the photographs. This play-like presentation reiterated in the montaged exhibition design of *East Side West Side* reinforces the overarching chronicle of *One Third of a Nation*, offering a neighborhood narrative centered around subjects' place-making ability in city streets and homes.

Exhibiting these images as a series, rather than publishing the photographs in periodicals as evidence of poor housing or framing the works as singular examples of artistic achievement, offers citizens a more participatory venue to experience and view

the art produced under the FAP. Comparing this exhibition to Levitt's 1943 exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, where photographs were uniformly printed and hung, reinforces this FAP exhibition design as inclusive, active, and propelling. According to photography historian Olivier Lugon, "better than any other medium, the exhibition could thus…draw spectators out of their supposedly passive and distanced contemplation and turn them into active and dynamic participants."[322] He continues, the experience of moving through an exhibit, itself a cultural ritual, "was an imaginary foray in participatory democracy" for viewers.[323] The medium of exhibition engenders a greater connection between the artist-laborer, audience, and the governmental body that funded this program. Also, as these photographs resemble a population of immigrants—those typically ignored in city histories and pushed to the margins through new zoning and housing policies—these photographs give this population visibility, and therefore a place within the greater federally mandated cultural and social sphere.[324]

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[322] Olivier Lugon, "Dynamic Paths of Though. Exhibition Design, Photography and Circulation in the work of Herbert Bayer," in *Cinema Beyond Film: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era,* eds. Francoise Albera and Maria Tortajada (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), 119.

[323] Ibid.

[324] Michel de Certeau argues that in order to treat immigrants as beyond "others," culture must "give them the means of constructing a *positive image* of themselves, to give them a *visibility* in our cultural and social space, other than in the features of negative stereotypes," (emphasis in original). Michel de Certeau, "The Immigrant as a social figure of communication," reprinted in *Strangers: The First ICP Triennial of Photography and Video* (New York: International Center of Photography, 2003), 128-129.

East Side West Side received a great deal of positive press, advanced by the First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt's visit to the show.[325] In response to this publicity, *One Third of a Nation* made its exhibition rounds. One of the exhibition division's continuing goals was to tour their shows among diverse city venues such as union headquarters, congregation halls, and other spaces with adequate room for exhibits. In this photograph, FAP sponsored paintings are backdrops to men playing ping-pong at the United Wholesale and Warehouse Employees Headquarters (figure 2.68). This allocation of artwork encourages the interaction of people and art, casually and continually. In a Press Release detailing the operations and functions of the FAP, the information division notes the important role the exhibition department plays in placing FAP shows in venues beyond museums:

> The spectator begins to wonder why the public should go to art out of a self-conscious sense of cultural development. The Federal Art Project seems to leave the suggestion that art should freely and gayly move on to the public, or to the places where the people pass or congregate. Here is a cultural institution with the efficiency of a factory, prepared to service an ever-widening public with prints, pictures, sculpture, murals, it seems, on a mass production basis. As such it is a typical American achievement.[326]

Through the efficiency of the FAP, described as a distinctly American trait of the Project, the public was able to freely and openly interact with and experience art, allowing it to shape their everyday spaces and, in turn, improve their taste for art. Through this

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[325] Eleanor Roosevelt, "My Day, September 23, 1938," *The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Digital Edition* (2017), accessed 1/14/2020, https://www2.gwu.edu/~erpapers/myday/displaydoc.cfm?_y=1938&_f=md055066

[326] Holger Cahill, Exhibition catalog operations and functions of the Federal Art Project, 1939, v Reel 1210, Frame 184089, Holger Cahill Papers, AAA.

intervention, the public interacted with the FAP in a familiar setting, strengthening the relationship between artist, audience, and government.

With this connection in mind, *One Third of a Nation* was included in the *New York Housing* exhibition on view from December 16-January 9, 1938-1939 at the United Wholesale and Warehouse Employees Headquarters located at 104 East Ninth Street at Fourth Avenue.[327] As part of this presentation, the United Wholesale and Warehouse Employees held a symposium titled "The Community looks at the City Housing Program" on the evening of December 16, 1938 (figure 2.69).[328] The exhibit and symposium were presented just north of where many of the series photographs were captured, uniting these photographic scenes of the everyday with the neighborhood's actual quotidian spaces. The specific word choice of the symposium, "the community *looks at itself*," alludes to the idea that the photographs and the subsequent programming worked to encourage the relationship between the artwork and the community, as the city-citizen could use the photographic series to better understand their place and their rights within the changing neighborhood streets. Furthermore, the verbiage alludes to the people's opportunity to change the outcome of what the photographs may uncover. In alliance with the government, the people themselves have the opportunity to fight for and

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[327] According to a 1939 press release from the Federal Art Project, "*One Third of a Nation*, a series of forty prints documenting slum conditions in New York City, has gone into five editions and received numerous prizes awarded by housing and social agencies." Press release from Department of Information dated November 1, 1939, Reel 90, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA.
[328] "The community looks at the city housing" symposium program, December 16, 1938, Arnold Eagle Collection, Tenement Museum, New York City.

potentially change their housing and way of living. *One Third of a Nation* continued to be exhibited in diverse spaces such as the lobby of the Brooklyn Paramount Theater and the New York State Labor Relations Board, bringing this artwork calling for better housing to an audience of unexpected viewers, further reinforcing the series demonstrative potential.[329]

Conclusion

Writing on the use of photography in 1937, fellow FAP photographer Berenice Abbott comments on the medium's role as a correspondent, "photography had then a double range of communication, speaking to the present, but speaking also to the future and telling what sort of world it was."[330] *One Third of a Nation* emphasized photography's intuitive nature as a medium of communication—commenting on the present to inform the future. The photographs exhibited within the Federal Art Gallery walls act as stand-ins or replacements of the neighborhood spaces. In this sense, Eagle and Robbins's place-making portrait is twofold—as their initial transcription of neighborhood tenants' ability to shape space into place, and also the transformation of the *East Side West Side*'s gallery wall into a city street and home.

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[329] Letter from Eleanor Kerr to Paul Edwards, March 21, 1939, reel 90, Selected Federal Art Project of the Work Projects Administration records from the United States National Archives (microfilm), 1935-1948, AAA. See photograph State Labor Relations Board, 5/17/1939, photographer unknown, Box 27, Folder 1, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, circa 1920-1965, bulk 1935-1942, AAA.
[330] Berenice Abbott, "Photography 1937-39," *Art Front*, May 1937, 25.

One Third of a Nation revealed the prevalence of poor housing conditions in the Lower East Side but did not portray neighborhood residents as victims of this circumstance. Through embodied observation and the union of aesthetics and documentary, the prints augment the neighborhood inhabitants' roles as space shapers and place-makers as the series explores how actions of the everyday—occupation, patronization, and routinization—shape space into place. These places were crafted, engaged, and overseen by the users themselves, and when presented as a series, the prints strengthen the neighborhood dwellers' right to their city. The montaged exhibition presentation bolstered the photographs' communicative potential as a narrative, read by viewers and subjects alike. The photographs decipher and cement subjects' place within the undulating and modernizing streets of New York City.

Chapter 3
The Photo League Deconstructs Chelsea: Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn's Embodied and Elevated views

> The general characteristics of New York architecture are the huge square blocks of buildings; these blocks are fairly square, flat and regular as seen from the street level, but are ragged and rather ugly from roof level. The camera does not see a row of houses, but a row of assorted doorways. We know that inside a given building there is a separating wall. But outside the lens sees different kinds of brick and stone and slightly different types of architecture. We must not only be aware of the external aspects, but of the factors which have determined the particular type of architecture, the gaping spaces between houses, and the boarded-up fronts of condemned blocks of houses.
> – Syllabus, Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, The New York Photo League, 1938

Introduction

A 1938 Sid Grossman photograph of Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood affirms the island's size, density, and diversity (figure 3.1). Unlike the views of Arnold Eagle, David Robbins, and Helen Levitt that remain close to the city street, this view, captured from an elevated vantage point at the juncture of Ninth Avenue and Nineteenth Street, looks north-east of the intersection, cutting through Chelsea to the bordering Hell's Kitchen and Midtown neighborhoods. Smaller buildings, most likely tenements of three to six stories, are presented clearly in the photograph's foreground. The buildings, home to the neighborhood's working class population, have backyards filled with trees, facades adorned with gridded fire escapes, and roofs that host an occasional clothesline. Chimneys, water towers, and set-backed pillars easily greet the viewer's gaze in the midground. The spires of Saint Paul's church on Twenty-Second Street further differentiates the skyline and orients the viewer to the more commercial midtown neighborhoods. Recognizable and quintessentially New York buildings take up the more

distanced portion of the photograph, yet remain legible, further anchoring the viewer to the cityscape. The Chrysler Building's spire rises in the center of the image, hugging the photograph's top. To the building's left stands the Empire State Building, its pinnacle cut off, emphasizing its great height. The photograph's bottom right is obscured by the shadow of a geometric structure with setback features, perhaps the building from which the photograph was captured. This image presents a cacophony of lines and angles that construct diminutive buildings, skyscrapers, and the spaces in between. By revealing the landscape's structure and construction in this image, the photographer secures his outlook as contextualized within the city space.

This chapter examines a photographic series produced by Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, completed while both were members of New York's Photo League. Formally titled the *Chelsea Document*, the series includes over 300 images and chronicles the societal conditions of New York City's Chelsea neighborhood on the west side of mid-Manhattan. The survey visually and textually argues for improved housing conditions for the neighborhood's underserved and disenfranchised immigrant community. The series focuses on similarly liminal and collective spaces such as stoops, alleyways, and sidewalks, as studied in Eagle and Robbins's *One Third of a Nation* and Helen Levitt's documentation of children's chalk drawings. Unlike the work reviewed in chapters one and two, the *Chelsea Document* includes a multiplicity of views, such as those taken at street level, from the elevated train, and aerial scenes that explore the city from above (as seen in figure 3.1). Within this range of views, anomalous to the previous two case studies, Grossman and Libsohn's series focuses on the city as it is being constructed and

destroyed, disclosing a neighborhood in the process of becoming and vanishing. This chapter argues that by photographing the developing city from elevated, suspended, and street-level perches within the built environment, the series subverts the municipally imposed collective memory of the city. Instead, the series emphasizes the role of embodied and experiential vision of photographer and subject within memory and processes of place-making.

Chelsea was a unique neighborhood as it had been known for centuries to hold stark economic contrasts. The neighborhood varied from nineteenth century mansions that lined millionaires row to tenements quickly constructed to house the impoverished class employed by the neighborhood's factories. By the mid-1930s, the neighborhood experienced difficult economic times, and grand spaces transformed into places of elegance lost.[331] This middle-west section of Manhattan was notorious for holding one of the worst slum districts, occupied by a heterogeneous population of Irish, Italians, Spanish, and Greeks.[332] The WPA Writer's Guide of the neighborhood notes how assimilation and the slowing down of immigration had transformed the Chelsea neighborhood into a "native American community."[333] The *Chelsea Document* reveals a landscape structured to fit the needs of the neighborhood's diverse inhabitants, Grossman being one of them as he moved to West Twenty-Fourth Street while working on the

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[331] Jeff Kisseloff, *You Must Remember This: An Oral History of Manhattan from the 1890's to World War II* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989), 479-485.
[332] Ibid., 492-493
[333] The Federal Writers' Project, *New York City Guide: A Comprehensive Guide to the Five Boroughs of the Metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond* (New York: Random House, 1939), 145. In this context "native American" means American-born.

project. Within the series, photographs picture a Hebrew National sausage co., an international grocer, an Italian society, facades of churches, and a union headquarters. The series emphasizes what unites these dissimilar occupants—their abysmal housing conditions, as well as their effort to weave their unique place into the greater city environment.

Grossman and Libsohn approached the neighborhood as photographic archeologists, producing a collection of outlooks that dig through the neighborhood's innumerable layers of space and time.[334] Grossman and Libsohn's excavation, commencing with macro, aerial shots, progressing to more localized, slightly elevated perches, as well as subjective street-views, underscored the creation and recreation of place as determined by the observer. Through this individual approach, the photographers highlighted how presence and occupation transform city space into place, for themselves, as well as their subjects. This approach differs from Helen Levitt's role as a folklorist of East Harlem. Levitt studied chalk drawings from the vantage point of a participant observer, permitted into the imagined reality of the Black and Brown child artists as they reinvented their Harlem streets, yet distanced so as to not fully submit into their curious, flat worlds. Grossman and Libsohn's views also diverge from the sociological perspective of Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, who intimately and serially photographed their immigrant neighbors to allow their voices and self-created places to

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[334] Elizabeth McCausland referenced the work of *Changing New York* (original layout) as, "the photographic excavation of the archeology of contemporary life." From Elizabeth McCausland "Outline For *Changing New York* Commentary," January 23, 1938 in Berenice Abbott Archive, Ephemera collection, Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto. Republished in in Sarah M. Miller, *Documentary in Dispute*, 128.

speak for themselves. Unlike Levitt, Eagle, and Robbins, Grossman and Libsohn employed a photographic practice that stresses their role as makers through cropping, editing, and engaging with their subjects. With this emphasis on the maker, Grossman and Libsohn evoked their presence, acting as photographic archeologists, producing an embodied and subjective neighborhood review.

Grossman and Libsohn were cofounders of the Photo League, a group that promoted photography's role as an artistic and socially useful medium. Throughout this chapter, I argue that the League's pedagogical ethos that promoted a photographic "folk-vision," as shaped and fostered by Grossman, Libsohn, and other group leaders, is witnessed in the photographers' approach to Chelsea. The Photo League emphasized the relationship between photographer and subject, mandating a referential connection between the two. With this communion, the photographer could produce a direct, engaging, and communicative photograph, creating images that emulated the work of historical and contemporary "folk-artists." Applying this "folk-vision," a vision similar to Levitt's as seen in her study of East Harlem, the League's photographers aimed to capture the authentic, the local, an approach that emphasized their here-ness within the neighborhood and study. With this vision, Grossman and Libsohn created photographs to secure their place within the community, producing, in part, an autobiographical study of the neighborhood.

In the *Chelsea Document*, we witness Grossman's and Libsohn's agility in exploring many city perspectives that present the neighborhood as chaotic yet

organized—as layered, structured, and orienting.[335] The Document includes elevated views that emphasize the diversity of the landscape, as well as scenes of destruction and demolition that explore the city's moment of unbecoming through a uniquely subjective perspective. Embodied views of the city street that re-inscribe the photographer's presence reveals how space, history, and memory coalescence to create place. Working as photographic archeologists, the photographers prioritized the experiential—exploring the development, construction, and structure of place as determined by the occupier (photographer and subject). Both Grossman and Libsohn reiterate this place-making process through their photographic practice, teachings, and exhibition of the *Chelsea Document*, capturing and preserving Chelsea as a place that is beholden to and created by its inhabitants.

The Founders: Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn

Both Grossman and Libsohn were politically minded from a young age, an interest that resonates in their photography in terms of subject and form. Eagle and Robbins tangentially participated in political activism while Levitt remained apolitical as related to her photographic practice. Grossman, a native New Yorker born of Polish parents, spent his childhood in Manhattan's Yorkville neighborhood. After his father abandoned the family, Grossman, along with his mother and sister, moved to the Jewish

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[335] Janet Donohue uses the idea of the palimpsest to explore the relationship between body, place, and memory. Janet Donohoe, "Introduction," *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 9-18.

section of the Bronx. Ill-health, financial insecurity, and a lack of confidence in his artistic and intellectual ability plagued Grossman during his youth and into his adult years. This insecurity is perhaps the basis for Grossman's life-long devotion to the American worker, concretized by his membership to the Communist Party of the United States at the age of twenty-six.[336]

Grossman attended City College at night, where he taught himself photography and met fellow New Yorker and similarly artistically driven student, Sol Libsohn. Together, Grossman and Libsohn self-published the magazine *Naiveté*, a sort of literary magazine described by Libsohn as unconsciously inspired by *The New Yorker*.[337] Though the publication had a short print run, it showcased Grossman and Libsohn's early interest in radical politics, socially progressive ideals, the intellectual avant-garde, and their commitment to publishing and proliferating these ideas through a self-produced mode.[338] In the mid-1930s, Grossman, accompanied by Libsohn, became involved in the Film and Photo League of New York (FPL), where they were exposed to the decade's avant-garde and worker-oriented films. Growing tired of the League's treatment of photography as a second-rate medium compared to film, Grossman and Libsohn broke off from the FPL

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[336] Keith Davis, *The Life and Work of Sid Grossman* (New York: Howard Greenberg Gallery, 2016). Much of this biographic information, unless otherwise noted, is from Keith Davis's 2016 monograph on Grossman, the only book length study on the photographer. The Sid Grossman Archive at the Archives of American art only holds a few documents from the early 1930s and Grossman's post-war work such as his photography school in Cape Code in the 1950s. The Center for Creative Photography holds a Grossman archive that has limited material on his Photo League life.

[337] Sol Libsohn, interview by Gary Saretzky for the Monmouth County Library, January 28, 2000.

[338] Sidney Grossman papers, 1933-1981. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

and founded the Photo League in 1936. Grossman remained a leader of the Photo League until the late 1940s, at which time he rescinded his membership due to political reasons.[339]

In the mid-1930s, Grossman, unable to find paying work that fed his artistic interests, became a pickaxe team member for the WPA. While working as a pickaxe man, Grossman found the occasional paid photographic work such as an assignment under the FAP to document Harlem residents' daily lives.[340] The series, titled "Negroes in New York," was a collaborative element to supplement the Federal Writers' Project assignment that shared the same name.[341] In this sequence, discussed in greater length in

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[339] A monograph on the Photo League has yet to be published, and the group's inclusion in general histories of photography focuses on the League's political perspective and its eventual listing as a "subversive" organization during the Red Scare of the post-war period. More thorough scholarship of the League exists in great part due to the fastidious archival work of photo historian and now retired museum curator Anne Tucker. Tucker's scholarship offers an excellent historical account for the League's transformation from an organization dedicated to the use of photography for social betterment, to its postwar work highlighting the creative role of the photographer. Yet, as witnessed in the *Chelsea Document*, there was an earlier effort by the League to merge photography's social aims with the photographer's personal, creative expression. Elizabeth VanArragon's 2006 dissertation "The Photo League: Views of Urban Experience in the 1930s and 1940s" is the most pertinent scholarship that offers in-depth visual analysis of the work produced in the Photo League. My dissertation continues the work of VanArragon by going beyond visual analysis and reinserting the cultural context of neighborhood history and city-wide housing debates as related to the work of the League.

[340] This is the same organization that supported the work of Helen Levitt, Arnold Eagle, and David Robbins as reviewed in chapter one and two but this project is not labeled a "creative assignment." I believe this is because it was part of a Federal Writers' Project manuscript that was already in the works and Grossman was assigned to document Harlem rather than conceive of a photographic series independent of Project instruction (as structured in the creative assignment section).

[341] The project was shelved and remained unpublished until the 1960s. Anne Tucker, "Sidney Grossman - Major Projects," *Creative Camera*, nos. 223 and 224 (July-August 1983), 1011-1041.

chapter one compared to Levitt's project produced under the same relief program, Grossman focused his camera on the new neighborhood additions funded by the PWA, such as public pools and housing developments. Conversely, Levitt turned her camera to the smaller, in-between spaces of the neighborhood and avoided including landmarks or contextualizing information that would reveal the location of the project as East Harlem. Grossman came to Harlem as an outsider and typically photographed neighborhood dwellers from a studied and respectful distance (figure 3.2). In the limited number of images that were captured close to subjects, the figures typically look into the camera lens, as if giving consent to the photographic process, unlike Levitt's portraits in Harlem that are mostly candid (figure 3.3). Grossman habitually pictured space as structured, as controlled by the municipality, while Levitt, photographing where she taught, captured space as created and shaped by the neighborhood occupants, particularly its children. Simultaneous to this project, Grossman began to work collaboratively with Libsohn on the *Chelsea Document*, the focus of this chapter. During the *Chelsea Document's* production, Grossman moved to a loft in the neighborhood at Four West Twenty-Fourth Street, where he remained until his death in 1952.[342]

In the late Summer of 1940, Grossman, along with his first wife Marion Hille, and her brother, the musicologist Waldemar B. Hille, traveled to the border of Arkansas and Oklahoma to collect songs and stories for the People's Song Book.[343] This archival effort,

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[342] Keith Davis, *The Life and Work of Sid Grossman* (New York: Howard Greenberg Gallery, 2016), 32. It is unclear where Grossman lived before this move to Chelsea.
[343] *Photo Notes*, December 1940, 4. "Sid Grossman, the League's executive secretary has just returned from a trip through Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma. While in the Arkansas hills, Sid did a complete picture story on a Farmer's Union."

in tandem with Federal Project Number One, aimed to record, preserve, and promote this vernacular American "folk-style" music indigenous to the country.[344] While on this trip, Grossman met members of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and photographed union activities and union members' rural lives.[345] During this documentarian sojourn, Grossman photographed the union leader Henry Modgilin on his front porch (figure 3.4). This photograph is read by Grossman scholars Keith Davis, Lili Corbus Bezner, and Anne Tucker as exemplary of the early moment in which Grossman turned from straight documentation to a subjective focus on the physicality and personality of subjects.[346] According to Davis:

> These photographs of Modgilin seem particularly significant to Grossman's artistic growth, in part, for their celebration of a purely physical sense of presence. From this point on in Grossman's work, we see a more consistent and pointed emphasis on the language of the body—the energy, the curious geometry, and the physical expressiveness of the human figure.[347]

While I agree with this evocative reading of the photo of Modgilin, this chapter argues that Grossman's turn to subjectivity and "presence" is evident within frames from the *Chelsea Document*, produced two years before this image. This photograph from the

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[344] Federal Project Number One includes the Federal Art Project, Federal Music Project, Federal Writers' Project, and the Federal Theatre Project. For more information about their folk efforts see "Inventing a Usable Past" in Victoria Grieve's *The Federal Art Project and the Creation of Middlebrow Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

[345] After a tip off from a mail-carrier, the FBI began surveying Grossman's activities as he was photographing known communist party members.

[346] Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal Into the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 81.

[347] Keith Davis, *The Life and Work of Sid Grossman* (New York: Howard Greenberg Gallery, 2016), 41.

Chelsea Document of three children and a doll posed in front of movie advertisements reveals similar attention to the intricacies of posture and bodily expression (figure 3.5). In this photograph, a cropped version of the original negative (figure 3.6), Grossman shares the debris-strewn ground that the children occupy—photographer and subject are united in space. Two of the three children look directly to the photographer, while the littlest child, along with the baby doll, glance to their right. One of the children is crouching, smiling, with his left hand on his knee, and in his right hand, he holds a toy airplane. Both the plane and boy look as if they are set to "take-off," reiterating their liveliness and animation of space; a similar presence on the verge of action that we witness is Grossman's later portrait of Modgilin.

Photo League cofounder Sol Libsohn was born in Harlem soon after his parents immigrated from Poland. Moving from Harlem to the Bronx during his childhood, Libsohn, raised Jewish, lived on an ethnically and financially diverse block. Living a somewhat fiscally secure life, Libsohn remembers his family's political involvement as his father was a union member and a staunch supporter of socialist Eugene Debs. While a teenager, Libsohn fixed a broken camera he had received as a gift and taught himself how to take photographs.[348] By seventeen, Libsohn had dreams of an artistic future and moved downtown to work as an artist-model and photographer. Libsohn began taking night

[348] There is very little archival or secondary information available on the work and life of Sol Libsohn. I have found one published interview from January 28, 2000 between Sol Libsohn and Gary Saretzky. I have also located an unpublished conservation between Ramona Javitz and Sol Libsohn in 1958 (New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archive's Picture Collection) as well as one interview between the photographer and art historian Steve Plattner on March 31, 1979, Sol Libsohn Archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey.

classes at City College, where he met fellow photographer Sid Grossman. Libsohn described himself as less intellectual than Grossman, but that he relished in their artistically and politically driven conversations that eventually led to the production of *Naiveté*. During the 1930s, Libsohn, following in his father's politically and socially conscious ways, became a member of the Artists Union and the United Photographic Employee Union (the same Union that David Robbins and other FAP photographers had joined).[349]

Always in need of paying work, Libsohn found employment as a photographer for the FAP. While working for the Project, Libsohn produced a creative assignment self-titled "Food for New York" that chronicled how food was dispersed within the city—traveling from the docks to the lunch counter (figures 3.7 and 3.8).[350] The sequence oscillates between portraits of dockworkers and abstracted scenes of food objects such as a close up of a fish's body and a still-life of a market (figure 3.9). Libsohn balances sociological studies of people and place with equal attention to forms and shapes, disclosing a photographic interest beyond social documentation, incorporating a studied interest in compositional and aesthetic questions. While working for the FAP, Libsohn became involved with Grossman in breaking from the FPL and organizing the Photo League's beginnings.

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[349] Sol Libsohn Archive, Roosevelt New Jersey.
[350] This project is filed under one of the eleven creative assignments discussed in greater detail in chapters one and two of this dissertation. There are ninety-nine prints at the MCNY and 117 prints at the National Archives of this series.

Both Grossman and Libsohn were Jewish, born in the United States to immigrant parents. Though Levitt and Eagle were also second- and first-generation Jewish immigrants and Robbins's background remains unclear, Grossman and Libsohn's upbringings were more influenced by their ethnic and religious minority status, as evidenced in their involvement in leftist political movements such as socialism and communism.[351] Neither Grossman nor Libsohn were devout Jewish men, but examining the ideology of the Jewish Labor Bund provides a helpful lens through which to consider how Grossman and Libsohn, as well as their Photo League contemporaries, conceptualized the idea of place and its political currency within their image-making.

The Jewish Labor Bund, a socialist organization founded in 1897, employed the concept of doikayt to drive its philosophy.[352] Using doikayt, meaning here-ness, now-ness, the Jewish Labor Bund, rather than supporting the creation of a geographically specific Jewish statehood, promoted the conception of a viable Jewish community in any space.[353] The Bund advocated for a nationalism not based on geographical borders but created through lived experience, through promoting a sense of history, time, culture, and

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[351] "The kind of photography taught and exhibited at the League was relevant particularly to the immigrant experience." Anne Tucker, Claire Cass, and Stephen Daiter, *This was the Photo League: Compassion and the Camera from the Depression to the Cold War* (Chicago: Stephen Daiter Gallery, 2001), 12.
[352] Post-World War II, the term's evocation in the Bund's ideology became more resounding and popularized as part of the Bund's anti-Zionist mission. David Sluchi, "here-ness, there-ness, and everywhere-ness: The Jewish Labour Bund and the Question of Israel, 1944-1955," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* Vo1. 9, No. 3 (November 2010): 349-368, 349.
[353] For more information about the fight between Bundists and Zionists see David Slucki, "Here-ness, There-ness, and Everywhere-ness: The Jewish Labour Bund and the Question of Israel, 1944-1955," *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 9, no. 3 (2010): 349-368.

belonging in any space. The Bund used the term politically to advocate for the Jewish people to demand and create a better "here," "now," rather than waiting to go elsewhere—the people must improve the community *now*, wherever it may be.

Scholar Madeline Cohen has examined the term as related to Yiddish literary works, noting authors' effort to textually "[illuminate] the rootedness of East European Jews in the local, physical spaces of the city" exploring a lived, Jewish space.[354] Cohen, examining the ethnographic approach of spatial description in Sh. An-sky's novella *In shtrom*, notes how the descriptions "present the complexity and 'rootedness' of Jewish life in a particular urban space and historical moment and in doing so allow both author and reader to contemplate the political and social challenges of improving the conditions for poor and working Jews in the spaces of Eastern Europe."[355] That same rootedness is witnessed in Grossman and Libsohn's *Chelsea Document* as well as the League's employment of a "folk-vision," as they promoted a sort of photographic doikayt.[356] While Libsohn and Grossman may not have been participants in the Bund's socialist cause, they were employing their photographs to advocate for better living conditions for the people

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[354] Karen Auerbach and Nick Underwood, "Yiddish in the City," *East European Jewish Affairs*, vol. 50 (2020):1-5, 2.

[355] Madeleine Cohen, "Do'ikayt and the Spaces of Politics in An-sky's Novella *In shtrom*," *East European Jewish Affairs*, 50 (2020): 6-20, 13.

[356] There is abundant scholarship, specifically in the realm of urban studies, that studies the interrelationship of Jewishness and space. For an enlightening examination of this history of urban spaces, specifically in relation to the creation of Tel Aviv, see Barbara E. Mann *A Place In History: Modernism, Tel Aviv, And the Creation of Jewish Urban Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), specifically the introduction and chapter one, and Lawrence J. Kaplan, "Time, History, Space, and Place: Abraham Joshua Heschel on the Religious Significance of the Land of Israel." *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies* 17, no. 4 (2018): 496-504.

of Chelsea, here and now. With this, the idea of doikayt—to make room and create a place within urban spaces for the Jewish people—aligns itself with the photographer's effort. Throughout the Document, Grossman and Libsohn root themselves to the city streets and elevated perches to locate and secure authentic views of the city as descriptive of the lived space of photographer and subject, creating and promoting a literal here-ness within New York City streets. Evoking doikayt, a here-ness, the *Chelsea Document* revealed how occupiers transform the contested urban landscape into a place for themselves.

The images in the previous two chapters displaced the role of the photographer, attending to the place of their subjects, while the *Chelsea Document* instead emphasizes the role of the photographer and their collaboration with the subject to make place and secure a here-ness within the neighborhoods streets and sites. By employing doikayt as a lens through which to examine these photographs and the League's work, this chapter explores the theoretical understanding of the reciprocal relationship between photographer and place, evaluating the photographs of the *Chelsea Document* as related to its makers. Writing on the history of photographing New York City, Meir Wigoder contends, "the photograph yields us information attesting to the way social space participates in the construction of subjectivity and determines the practice of artistic creativity."[357] With this, the photograph can provide visual evidence to understand how spaces structure and orient artistic exploration. In examining Photo League writings and

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[357] Meir Wigoder, "The 'Solar Eye' of Vision: Emergence of the Skyscraper-Viewer in the Discourse on Heights in New York City, 1890-1920," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 2, (2002), 167.

teachings, it is evident that the structure and place within the neighborhood inscribed itself into the photographers' lived experiences and, therefore, how they imaged the particular spaces of the street.

Documentary's Folk-Vision: The History of the Photo League

In examining the Photo League's history and roots, it is clear that the ethos of the League informed and reinforced Grossman and Libsohn's photographic practice. Founded in 1930, the Workers Film and Photo League (WFPL), an affiliate of the Communist Workers International Relief, was headquartered on Lexington Avenue in Manhattan. The WFPL was a radical organization dedicated to promoting the use of film and photography as weapons in the class and political struggle.[358] Members, many politically motivated and aligned with the Communist Party, wanted to develop the role of film as a vehicle for mass communication to better reach the working class.[359] According to Photo League historian Fiona Derjardin, the WFPL, renamed the Film and Photo League (FPL) by 1932, had three aims:

> The making of still photographs and motion pictures—primarily newsreels—which would advance the cause of the worker; the promotion of revolutionary Soviet film, such as those made by Dziga Vertov and

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[358] Fiona M. Dejardin, "The Photo League: Aesthetics, Politics and the Cold War," PhD diss., (University of Delaware, 1993), 194. For more information on the Film and Photo League's connection with the Photo League see "The Photo League's forgotten past," Leah Ollman. For more information about the communist roots of the WFPL see William Alexander, *Film on the Left: American Documentary Film from 1931-1942* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), and Russell Campbell, *Cinema Strikes Back: Radical Filmmaking in the United States* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982).
[359] Carl Chiarenza *Aaron Siskind: Pleasures and Terrors* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1982), 15.

> Sergei Eisenstein; and the critique and expose of commercial—primarily Hollywood—and right-wing films.[360]

By 1936, a wedge developed at the FPL between filmmakers and photographers as members prioritized film as the ideal medium for the masses.[361]

In 1936, the organization's photographers, led by Grossman and Libsohn, broke away and created an autonomous group they named the New York Photo League. The Photo League was an organization dedicated to teaching and propagating the social role of photography.[362] The Photo League was a self-supported, collective, and pedagogical space that viewed photography, similarly to the ethos of the FPL, as an expressive medium that should promote social change. The League was not as propagandistic as the FPL, but it remained loyal to pro-labor and leftist values. Its membership was comprised of mostly young, first- and second-generation, Jewish-American men and women (women made up about one third of the membership).[363] In an August 1938 issue of *Photo Notes,* the League's semi-monthly newsletter, the League calls itself a "League of American photographers," and preached, "photography has tremendous social value.

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[360] Fiona M. Dejardin, "The Photo League: Aesthetics, Politics and the Cold War," (PhD diss., University of Delaware, 1993), 195.
[361] Maurice Berger, "Man in the Mirror: *Harlem Document*, Race, and the Photo League," *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League 1937-1951*, eds. Mason Klein and Catherine Evans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 11.
[362]Anne Tucker, "A history of the photo League: the members speak," *History of Photography* 18, (Summer 1994): 177. The League was located in a loft at Thirty-One East Twenty-First Street, moved its headquarters to Twenty-Three East Tenth Street close to Union Square Park, and then its final location was in the Hotel Albert.
[363] For more information about women's involvement in the League see Catherine Evans, "As Good as the Guys: The Women of the Photo League," *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League 1937-1951*, eds. Mason Klein and Catherine Evans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 46-59.

Upon the photographer rests the responsibility and duty of recording a true image of the world as it is today. Moreover, he must not only show us how we live, but indicate the logical development of our lives."[364] As evidenced in this passage, the League saw the social and political value of photography as a medium that could reflect and produce the future. The passage's repetition of "us" and "we" underscores that photographers of the League documented people with whom they had a personal and social affinity, as an effort to explore "the logical development" of their own life. The affinity between subject and photographer is also explored in the FAP photography division, as seen in the work of Helen Levitt, Arnold Eagle, and David Robbins (as examined in chapters one and two). In this sense, the Photo League bolstered the use of photography to communicate the everyday and foster a sense of place, as it is related to the photographer's personal experiences. According to cultural theorist Deborah Dash Moore:

> These Jewish photographers no longer portrayed American Jews as immigrants; now they were New Yorkers, with all of the toughness and resilience the city was famous for. The postures, dress, movement and drama of their lives played out against a rough backdrop of brownstone and steel, iron railings, and paved streets.[365]

A noted by Moore, Photo League members understood the importance of identity as it was linked to a place, presenting their subjects as a part of their city, as marking their shared place within the "backdrop of brownstone, steel, iron, and pavement."

The League held classes, published a semi-monthly newsletter, sponsored lectures, symposia, and produced photo essays. The League also held rotating exhibitions

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[364] *Photo Notes*, August 1938, 1.
[365] Deborah Dash Moore, *Urban Origins of American Judaism* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014), 140.

of documentary photography, making it the only gallery in New York City where photography was always displayed. The gallery space was, according to *Photo Notes,* "for [members] encouragement and stimulation."[366] The League was a space in which to learn, observe, create, and socialize—a multi-use space in every sense. Membership dues, rarely enforced, remained nominal at $3.50 a year.[367] Most importantly, the headquarters housed a small darkroom available for members to use during evenings and weekends. Raising funds to supplement membership dues, the League would host parties or "Photo Hunts" every six months. These parties exemplify the League's energy and reinforce how photography had become an encompassing way of life for members (figures 3.10 and 3.11).

As founders of the Photo League, Grossman and Libsohn also worked to establish the Photo League school. Simultaneous to this effort, Grossman served as the League President, and Libsohn acted as Chairman of the Exhibition Committee.[368] By 1938 the Photo League had professionalized their photography school, offering three classes that met for fifteen-week periods. Tuition was around six dollars a class and included lectures by prominent members of the field, such as Elizabeth McCausland, Leo Hurwitz, Berenice Abbott, and Paul Strand.[369] Working with the League's Advisory and School

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[366] *Photo Notes,* September, 1940, 2.
[367] John Raeburn, *A Staggering Revolution: A Cultural History of Thirties Photography* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 221.
[368] Correspondence in Libsohn's archive between the photographer and Lewis Hine identifies Libsohn's apartment as "The Photo League Household" noting the union between life and work that was practiced by Libsohn. Sol Libsohn Archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey.
[369] Syllabus and readings for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey. Teachers were typically not

Board, Grossman and Libsohn produced a mimeographed syllabus to accompany the Documentary Photography class (taught by Sid Grossman) and Workshop in Photo-Technique (taught by Sol Libsohn).[370] This syllabus, admired by the Museum of Modern Art and later collected for its library, included the writings of critic Elizabeth McCausland, photo historians Beaumont Newhall and FD Klingender, and photographers Paul Strand, Ansel Adams, and Berenice Abbott. As explored in these readings, the Photo League championed photography as a form of realism, espousing virtues of "directness, honestly, and individual agency."[371]

In reviewing the Photo League's writing in *Photo Notes* and class syllabi, the importance of a photographer's intimate knowledge of their subject to fulfill this new spirit of "realism" is continually emphasized. Strand's article, "Correspondence on Aragon," contends that art only results from "the artists direct and actual involvement with the real world."[372] In an interview from 1973, Libsohn notes the importance of connection within a photographer's practice, believing that you should only photograph if

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paid for teaching at the League. See Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal Into the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 76.

[370] The Photo League advisory board was comprised of Berenice Abbott, Lionel Herman, Leo Hurwitz, Elizabeth McCausland, and Paul Strand and the School Board included members Lucy Ashjian, Max Drucker, M.H. Nicholls, Sol Libsohn, Sid Grossman, and Alvin Wolfson. Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey.

[371] Keith Davis, *The Life and Work of Sid Grossman* (New York: Howard Greenberg Gallery, 2016), 25-26.

[372] Paul Strand, "Correspondence on Aragon," Syllabus and readings for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey, n.p.

"you feel an involvement with people, with the human condition."[373] Art historian Lili Corbus Bezner further explains this reciprocal relationship between photographer and society within the Photo League's teaching as "the student is taught to see himself in relation to photography, photography in relation to society."[374]

As written in Photo League literature, this mandate that photographers feel a communion with those they photograph, picturing a shared reality, is witnessed in the *Chelsea Document*. Many photographs include a neighborhood occupier's seemingly accidental presence, as residents are cut off at the frame or coincidentally centered within the image (figures 3.12 and 3.13). This framing works to emphasize the series' snapshot quality, and it marks these street subjects as proxies for the photographer and viewer. Using these stand-ins as an alternative representation of the photographer augments the proposition that Photo Leaguers saw themselves in relation to their photography, and photography in relation to society. These images underscore the authenticity of the photographer's vision, acting as a witness, through the making of the photograph, to their participation in the block's social life.

Grossman, a leader of the Photo League school for over a decade, espoused the role of photography as a mode through which to interrogate oneself and one's reality.[375] Grossman led over 1,500 students, many of whom recall Grossman's cutting critiques and inspiring classroom conversations. According to Grossman's student and later Photo

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[373] Time-Life Books, *Documentary Photography* (New York: Time-Life Books, 1972), 90.
[374] Lili Corbus Bezner, *Photography and Politics in America: From the New Deal Into the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999), 76.
[375] Grossman continued to teach out of his Chelsea loft after he left the League in 1949.

League President Walter Rosenblum, "one's personal growth, the influence of other art forms, our relationship to the world in which we lived—everything was open for discussion."[376] Grossman was described as a difficult yet extraordinary teacher, earning the nickname "El Cid," alluding to his questionable tactics that forced students to find their artistic center. In a transcript from a 1950 class held in Grossman's Chelsea loft, the teacher elaborates on how to capture "reality":

> Telling your story, they are devices almost of folk expression…as a photographer when you tell a story, you have to use art, but here we assume you are interested in becoming a specialist—an expert at telling stories. But what is lost sight of in art to such a large extent, that is a story that we are telling, that it is to be important to other people, it has to do something to them, it has to have an effect upon them, there has to be some emotional response, there must be some change in their personalities as a result of this experience, it must be important enough for them to listen to the story, to look at this picture.[377]

Writing on this same need for photographs to have an emotional effect on viewers, Advisory Board member Elizabeth McCausland, in her essay from the Documentary Photography syllabus, notes that photography is a tool of creative expression as well as a "spokesman of human experience and life."[378] As followed by the Photo League, the documentary tradition was not without creative or personal expression but rather evolved with the two tenets' alliance. Through this union, the photographer could create a more honest image of the world.

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[376] Walter Rosenblum, "Lewis Hine, Paul Strand, and the Photo League," *Witness in our Time* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 29.
[377] Grossman Transcript, 1950, Bob Shamis Archive, New York, New York.
[378] Elizabeth McCausland, "Documentary Photography," Syllabus and readings for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey, n.p.

Throughout her essay, McCausland references the history of the medium, identifying the first news photographers of the nineteenth century as the precursors to this documentary tradition, calling them "primitives or folk artists," using the same term "folk" that Grossman evoked in his 1950 class. McCausland continues to explore the character of photography as folk art, "plainly photography is not just another game, like crossword puzzles, jigsaw puzzles, mah-jongg, and ping-pong. It represents a real folk movement a real drive of popular energy and impulse."[379] Returning to the work of Helen Levitt, an informal participant in the League, critic, and writer James Agee claims Levitt's photographs as possessing near "the pure spontaneity of true folk art."[380] It is curious that in examining the contemporary writing of the League as well as the reception of their work, practitioners and critics alike referred to their specific approach as folk art, a complicated term with loaded meaning. As discussed in chapter one, Holger Cahill, Director of the FAP, devoted his career to chronicling American folk art to reinforce the lineage and history of uniquely American art and promote American art as distinct and equal to its European counterpart. Simultaneous to this creation of markedly American art, Cahill noted the unique role of the folk artist in capturing the "sense and sentiment of a community."[381] By equating the documentary photographer with the folk artist, we can understand the Photo League's overriding goal of producing photographs that discover

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[379] Ibid.
[380] James Agee, *A Way of Seeing* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), viii.
[381] Andrew Hemingway*, Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 152.

and communicate the authentic experience of one's every day as related to the greater community.

Grossman and Libsohn Document Chelsea

In 1938, Grossman and Libsohn collaborated with the Hudson Guild and Chelsea Tenants League, an affiliate of the City-Wide Tenants League, and commenced work on the *Chelsea Document*.[382] During the survey's production, Libsohn and Grossman worked closely with neighborhood residents to learn about the neighborhood's issues.[383] The survey's goal, completed over the following two years, was to photograph the conditions of the declining Chelsea neighborhood to show the need for public housing.[384] This type of housing survey was not atypical at the League. During the League's first five years of existence, members created multiple housing and neighborhood surveys that explored the streets and peoples of New York City. Most well know was the *Harlem Document*, produced under the leadership of Aaron Siskind's Feature Group. The Feature Group also dedicated time to documenting the Bowery, a Manhattan Tenement, the Catholic Worker Movement, and the wealthiest and most impoverished sections of Park

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[382] "Fire Protection Urged," *New York Times*, July 22, 1937. *Photo Notes*, February 1938, 2.

[383] Elizabeth VanArragon, "The Photo League: Views of Urban Experience in the 1930s and 1940s," PhD diss., (University of Iowa, 2006), 166.

[384] The Sidney Grossman archive at the Center for Creative photography has contact prints of what they claim to be the entire series, 308 in total. While Libsohn was a co-collaborator for this project, I have found no evidence in his archive of *Chelsea Document* negatives. There are also thirty-eight prints from the *Chelsea Document* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and six at the Art Institute of Chicago, a number of which do not have corresponding negatives in the CCP collection making it clear there is not a complete set of the series.

Avenue.[385] Other League projects include the Housing Group organized by Sol Libsohn and Lucy Ashjian that covered Pitt Street in the Lower East Side and Brownsville, Brooklyn and the Neighborhood Group, led by Consuelo Kanaga.[386] Among these projects, the *Chelsea Document* remains the most well-preserved neighborhood study in photographic, archival, and exhibition evidence.[387]

The 1938 documentary class, discussed in the preceding section, followed the creed, "photography has a social function, this function has a historical and cultural basis, photographs should have a personal as well as a social and aesthetic significance."[388] To meet these tenets, Grossman and Libsohn asked students to contemplate the best ways to photograph the city:

> Problems involved in photographing city streets. The general characteristics of New York architecture are the huge square blocks of buildings; these blocks are fairly square, flat and regular as seen from the street level, but are ragged and rather ugly from roof level. The camera does not see a row of houses, but a row of assorted doorways. We know that inside a given building there is a separating wall. But outside the lens sees different kinds of brick and stone and slightly different types of architecture. We must not only be aware of the external aspects, but of the factors which have determined the particular type of architecture, the

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[385] Throughout the years, the group dedicated it's time to documenting the Bowery, a Manhattan Tenement, the Catholic Worker Movement, and the wealthiest and poorest sections of Park Avenue. Maurice Berger, "Man in the Mirror: *Harlem Document*, Race, and the Photo League," *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League 1937-1951,* eds. Mason Klein and Catherine Evans (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 30.

[386] *Photo Notes*, February 1938 and June 1939. It is unclear what neighborhoods Kanaga's group focused on. The group is mentioned in the February 1938 issue of *Photo Notes* stating their slogan as "We cover New York," 2.

[387] The *Harlem Document* is the only other neighborhood study that remains mostly intact.

[388] Syllabus and readings for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey. Libsohn Archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey.

> gaping spaces between houses, and the boarded-up fronts of condemned blocks of houses.[389]

As the syllabus was assembled contemporaneous to the *Chelsea Document's* start, we can assume Grossman and Libsohn were contemplating these questions in their own *Chelsea Document* project. In this exploration of "problems," we can apprehend how the photographers understood the city as a site with different forces impeding one another, rather than a causal relationship of the built environment acting on city-inhabitants and users. Also, as demonstrated in this statement, the photographers underscored the importance of marginal spaces, of the spaces between buildings and boarded-up thresholds. The *Chelsea Document* reveals the photographer's personified views into these oft-ignored spaces and how, through the photographer's perspective, the spaces become unique and personalized, embedded with their own perception and memory, not generalized or representative.

Grossman and Libsohn, in making the *Chelsea Document,* contend with density issues by picturing the city from elevated posts, such as on the roof and through a raised window. In this subsection of the sequence, the city is revealed through embodied perches, alluding to space through the photographer's presence rather than photographing the space itself as occupied. This approach differs from Levitt's photographs of chalk drawings as well as Eagle and Robbins' housing study of the Lower East Side in the series' focus on how people and their creativity occupy space. Levitt's photographs center on the stoop and sidewalk, disclosing how chalk drawings alter and inscribe

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[389] Ibid.

themselves within those collective spaces, transforming the space into an imagined place. Eagle and Robbins photograph neighborhood dwellers playing and creating within oft-ignored spaces such as a basement or a tenement backyard, converting these sites into place through routinized and quotidian use. Unlike those series' emphasis on the inhabitation (physical or creative) of liminal and communal spaces, the *Chelsea Document* alludes to interstitial pockets through personified and experiential views.

This photograph presents a dizzying view looking down toward the space between buildings (figure 3.14). The expanse of neighboring roofs occupies the top third of the frame, and this image must have been made from an adjacent roof. The lower-left portion of the image is shadowed by the building from which the photograph was captured, reiterating the built environment's presence and the post from which the photograph was made. Another figure from the series that reveals the city's multi-level rooflines, creating a city within the city, more clearly makes apparent from where the image was taken (figure 3.15). The lower edge of the print is consumed by the roof's edge, as Grossman or Libsohn was perhaps lying or crouched down to take this image from a flattened perspective. These views looking down or looking out towards the city reinforce the subjective and modifying view of the photographers, reiterating their presence and status as makers of these images.

Other images throughout the series underscore the site from which each picture was captured. In many photographs, the window frame or windowsill is echoed in views that look down to the street from the roost of a second or third story window and/or out towards parallel windows across the street (figures 3.16-3.18). Through these more

abstractly cropped views, the photographers reiterate the constructed nature of the photographic image and also their role in making the image, literally evoking their presence. It is only through the photographic medium that these images chronicling the life of the neighborhood could be made, and only through the perspective of the photographer. These images are not objective, authorless, but are clearly composed from and dictated by the vantage point of the photographer. Through repeatedly using more ambiguous and complicated viewpoints, as opposed to the more straightforward perspectives as employed in the studies of Harlem and the Lower East Side, Grossman and Libsohn show Chelsea through a personalized view, evoking their own presence. Through these personalized views, the physical and psychological authority of the photographer is reiterated, as these sites are constructed and remembered through the photographer's presence. Visualizing the city as occupied through its imaging counteract the problems, as suggested by Grossman and Libsohn, of photographing a city as dense and block-like as New York. Through these personified views, the *Chelsea Document* explores space beyond its geometrical dimensions. Instead, it reveals its symbiotic relationship to the occupier, embedding the space with memory and personality—transforming it into a place that is distinct to the photographer's experience and inhabitation.

As discussed in chapter one, during the New Deal, federal, state, and local governments debated how best to repair the housing shortage which was elevated in dense, urban districts. In response, the federal government established The United States Housing Authority. This agency was charged with granting federal loans to local

subsidiaries to help with housing costs and stimulate privately and publicly funded construction. With this new construction, spurred on by governmental interest in a previously private industry, urban planners and architects habitually published on the "right" way to house those in need. As seen in the writings of cultural critic Lewis Mumford and public housing advocate Catherine Bauer, among other city planners, housing was not limited to buildings but considered a total human environment—built with intangible elements.[390] The idea of a total environment is visually translated in this poster, promoting NYCHA (figure 3.19). In this image, the concept of housing includes human, animal, atmospheric, and architectural elements, as well as structures that enable movement within the city.

Writing on the ideal inhabitant for this new, governmentally subsidized housing, Mumford called for:

> Healthy and well-balanced and alert people, capable of expressing themselves effectively through their work, their arts, their communal and family relationships: people who are in a state of active and sympathetic intercourse with their immediate neighbors, their fellow workers, and with the larger world around them.[391]

With this description, Mumford noted the multiple relationships between family and neighbors as structured by space and mobility that comprise a home, block, and greater neighborhood. To create a housing survey that would benefit the neighborhood inhabitant, Grossman and Libsohn were tasked, similarly to Eagle and Robbins, with

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[390] Lewis Mumford, *Roofs for 40 Million: An exhibition on Housing* (New York: Sheridan Square Press, 1938).
[391] Lewis Mumford, "Social Imperatives in Housing," *Americans Can't Have Housing* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1934), 16-17.

creating a portrait of a neighborhood and its dwellers to oppose the familiar sentiment that people, not buildings, make slums. Grossman and Libsohn needed to show themselves and the occupiers of Chelsea as "active and sympathetic," with fellow neighborhood dwellers as well as with the larger world around them. Grossman and Libsohn, through these dizzying and elevated views that foreground the occupation of space by the photographer, show themselves as owning the views of the city, as the city's presence comes into light only through their frame. In this way, we see them in an active and activating state within their world, not as the environment acting upon them. Working with the Chelsea Tenants League that offered a tenants' perspective on public housing, the *Chelsea Document* shows a portrait of a neighborhood as experienced and owned by its inhabitants.[392]

Chelsea's Lofty Views: Translating and Anchoring the Mutable Landscape

Turning to additional lofty scenes within the *Chelsea Document*, the diversity of prospects is notable. The elevated view is one of the most ubiquitous outlooks, occurring thirty-two times in the survey. The inclusion of scenes from above highlights the embodied view of the photographers and Grossman and Libsohn's effort to offer to themselves and observers an entryway to understand how the neighborhood functions as an element within the greater cityscape (figure 3.1). The aerial view is not anti-humanistic or detached from the environment. Rather, this perspective offers an outlook

[392] Mark Naison and Roland Lawson, *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 122.

of the city that is as specific and embodied as that explored at street level.[393] In this aerial vista from the *Chelsea Document*, the observer is oriented to a particular site within the cityscape, aligned by the Empire State Building's looming placement centered within the photographic frame and the hint of the gridiron plan below (figure 3.20). The image is captured at a rational height, adequately elevated to offer a broad vista of the city but not so extreme that it dehumanizes the urban plane. The glimpses of clotheslines drying, cars on the road, and pedestrians traversing the sidewalks allude to the presence of human activity, too small to explicitly uncover, yet activities that incise themselves within the city.

Through this entrance into the city, the photographer and viewer alike can own the aerial-scape. This photograph structures the urban plane to include all the moving parts—the private, communal, commercial, and iconic spaces of the city in one comprehensible image.[394] Presenting the neighborhood at a macro-level, Grossman and Libsohn offer their city-citizens an avenue through which to comprehend and claim their place related to the entire cityscape, revealing the dialectical relationship between the privileged viewer above and the pedestrian below.[395] In this way, the photographers share the lofty dream of ascent with the lower classes that comprise this neighborhood.

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[393] Douglas Tallack, *New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 129.
[394] Ibid., 161.
[395] Meir Wigoder, "The 'Solar Eye' of Vision: Emergence of the Skyscraper-Viewer in the Discourse on Heights in New York City, 1890-1920," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 61, no. 2, (2002), 167.

In discussing the abstracted canvases of John Marin and other Ashcan artists of the early twentieth century, art historian Douglas Tallack offers a humanizing reading of abstraction, "abstraction, in these skyline pictures is not an autonomous pattern on a canvas or even a tendency towards autonomy. It is the sign of a search for a point of view and for urban knowledge in new circumstances and, as such, it is as much a part of the human dimensions…as figurative realism."[396] I read that same effort to humanize the city within the *Chelsea Document's* aerial perspective. It forms an establishing shot of the city, translating an inclusive view into an individualized measurement. The user and photographer are embedded into the big picture through this aerial-scape, orienting themselves within the skyscrapers, tenements, blocks, stoops, and windows.

This elevated view of the city was popularized by the 1930s following the early twentieth century pictorialist movement and the interwar explorations of New-Vision artists.[397] Emphasized in the Photo League's teachings and writings was the importance of understanding the medium's history. With this knowledge, practitioners could become more articulate photographers and more fully unite social purpose with aesthetic distinction, cementing their work within an artistic discourse.[398] The League followed the greater movement of photography of the 1930s in building a history of the medium to

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[396] Douglas Tallack, *New York Sights: Visualizing Old and New New York* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 154.
[397] The Photo League held exhibitions that went beyond the social document including the first American exhibition of the work of John Heartfield and also an exhibition of the work of Moholy-Nagy.
[398] Sol Libsohn, interview by Gary Saretzky for the Monmouth County Library, January 28, 2000, Commenting on the history of the League Libsohn notes, "we were very conscious of the history of photography and its usefulness."

legitimize its status as fine art.[399] In a statement from the April 1938 issue of *Photo Notes*, the writers call on the straight photographic traditions of Stieglitz, Strand, Abbott, and Weston. The League continually attempted to create an ancestry based on straight photographic practice, linking their political agenda to the past's revered photographic tradition.[400]

With this historicizing of the medium, we can consider how these elevated views differ from the "straight" aerial depictions of the city produced by Alfred Stieglitz.[401] Grossman and Libsohn were personally familiar with Stieglitz as they visited the impresario at his gallery during their time at City College and later reviewed an Eliot Porter photography exhibition shown at Stieglitz's An American Place.[402] While Stieglitz

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[399] "The work of Hill, Barday (sic.), Atget, Stieglitz, Strand, Hine the FSA photographers and others, has laid the basic foundation for photography as an art in itself," *Photo Notes,* December 1939, 5. It is important to note that the League was emphasizing the role early practitioners, exemplified in the work of Matthew Brady, played in creating a lineage for their documentary approach. This emphasis on lineage was simultaneous to the work of Beaumont Newhall in his *Photography 1839-1937* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and is preceded by the efforts of Lincoln Kirstein in his 1930 *Photography* exhibition at the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art. Both exhibitions mark Brady as the exemplary forbearer to the documentary tradition (see Beaumont Newhall, *Photography 1839-1937* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1937) and Sarah M. Miller "'Inventing 'Documentary' in American Photography: 1930-1945," PhD diss., (University of Chicago, 2009)). Perhaps the League's dedication to profiling and writing the history of the medium is linked to the greater cultural movement to create a history of American art and design as seen in the production and exhibition of the FAP.

[400] Elizabeth VanArragon, "The Photo League: Views of Urban Experience in the 1930s and 1940s," PhD diss., (University of Iowa, 2006), 27.

[401] Christopher Linder identifies Stieglitz's urban work as an effort to "legitimize New York's vertical architecture as a subject of artist study," Christoph Linder, "After-Images of the High-rise City: Visualizing Urban Change in Modern New York," *The Journal of American Culture* 36.2, (2013), 78.

[402] Sol Libsohn, interview by Gary Saretzky for the Monmouth County Library, January 28, 2000. *Photo Notes,* February, 1939, 4.

began his illustrious photography career as a pictorialist, his later work employed crisp lines, turning to straight photography to record the exterior world as related to his interior being (figure 3.21). In this image, a part of Stieglitz's series *From the Shelton*, captured from the window of his West Fortieth Street home, Stieglitz depicts the elevated cityscape as a sea of contrasts—light and dark, old and new, soaring and dwarfed. Stieglitz attempts to use the city to assess his psychological experience as a city dweller, "proclaim[ing] an emotional equivalence between himself and the urban incidents he photographs."[403] While the *Chelsea Document's* elevated views are not as formally composed, they share a similar desire to investigate how personal consciousness connects to the transmuting skyline.

Employing a similarly vertiginous height to capture her adopted hometown of New York City in the FAP sponsored project *Changing New York*, Berenice Abbott attempted, through stopping time, to show the ever-changing movement and chaos that is so characteristic of the city (figure 3.22). As seen in this photograph, Abbott rarely offers a visual entryway for her viewer, preferring to attend to the dynamic forces of the city's architecture, offering views that seem to change within the arrested visualization. Grossman and Libsohn create a subseries in dialogue with these elevated views, attempting to anchor the viewer to the place of the neighborhood. Abbott depicts the city from a dizzying height, while the *Chelsea Document* dissects the skeleton of the city, excavating the urban landscape (figures 3.1, 3.20, and 3.23). These bones include the

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403 Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 75.

sightlines offered by the sidewalk, the el, the row houses, mid-size skyscrapers, and the soaring Empire State Building that continually orient the viewer.

An imposing section of the *Chelsea Document* exhibition was the neighborhood panorama—comprised of sixteen photographs that detail the newly constructed London Terrace apartment building (figures 3.1 and 3.24).[404] The images are taken from approximately ten stories high on another building in Chelsea, four blocks southeast from the London Terrace. As seen in this image, the accompanying western view of the panorama chronicles Ninth Avenue and the westernmost portion of the London Terrance (figure 3.24). This photograph's easternmost border offers a dark, cavernous view into Ninth Avenue, shadowed by the elevated train that traverses the street. Hugging the elevated trainway to the west are multiple blocks of housing. Similar to other sections of the panorama, the foreground and midground are filled with shorter tenement buildings, constructed with a range of materials, and appearing in a range of colors. Captured from an elevated vantage point, the buildings' roofs encompass the majority of the print and house a range of chimneys, laundry lines, and shadows, creating a varied, elevated landscape that presents a new section of the city for the viewer to contemplate. Contrasting this variety is the newly constructed and exceedingly horizontal London Terrace, looming over the tenement blocks.

According to the Federal Writers' Project guidebook *New York Panorama*, "more than any other American city, New York pitches high against low, rich against poor, the elegant against the squalid. All occur juxtaposed, with scarcely a buffer and rarely a

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[404] Elizabeth McCausland, "Chelsea Document," *Photo Notes*, May 1940, 4-5.

disguise."[405] Many of the buildings in Chelsea were rooming houses or tenements, with no privacy or technological comforts that new housing (public or private) was expected to offer. In an effort to modernize the neighborhood, developer Henry Mandel and the architectural firm Farrar & Watmough commenced construction on the London Terrace apartment complex in the late 1920s. The complex's construction was the largest in the world at the time of its erection. The project destroyed hundreds of Chelsea's nineteenth century domiciles, such as the older London Terraces and London Cottages that were once prized for their quaint architecture.[406] By the late 1920s, the land on which these older buildings were constructed "had become so valuable that it became entirely disproportionate compared to the low rental earning of the once fashionable buildings."[407] Mandel, seeing a promising investment, leased the land, demolished the small buildings, and displaced their occupiers, many of whom were laborers who worked in the neighborhood's warehouses and factories, workers who relied on the building's inexpensive rents. Instead, the London Terrace was meant to provide efficient, modern, and luxurious housing for New York's white-collar workers.

The London Terrace is pictured as repetitive and monotonous compared to the more rhythmic and varying structure of the shorter buildings in the photograph's foreground. This photograph tells a narrative of the disparity of wealth in New York—

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[405] *New York Panorama: Essays from the 1930s the Federal Writers' Project* (New York: Dover Publications, 2018), 203.
[406] "Apartments Doom Old Chelsea Homes," *The New York Times*, Wednesday, March 6, 1929, 14.
[407] "London Terrace in Modern Garb," *The New York Times*, Sunday, November 16, 1930, 6 RE.

specifically Chelsea, and ambivalently describes this new housing as an alternative to the existing tenements. The apartment acts like a massive wedge that seems to hinder the rest of the neighborhood's growth—blocking sunlight and offering no sort of architectural diversity, perhaps creating homes but not offering the total environment necessary for dwellings as espoused by Lewis Mumford. This vantage point emphasizes the contrasting urban landscape and the apartment's uniformity, leaving the viewer unable to root themselves within the mammoth and repetitive construction. While the smaller tenements remain monotonous, there is enough rhythm to the structures so that the landscape is portrayed at a human level instead of a constructed level.

Both the *Chelsea Document* and *One Third of a Nation* were produced to document the living conditions of two neighborhoods in New York City and used as evidence for the need for governmental support to create better housing. *One Third of a Nation*, in its exhibited form, examines two neighborhood views to compare inadequate housing with new construction. The contrast is stark, and the message is clear—good housing enables a good life for the city's disenfranchised class (figure 3.25). The *Chelsea Document* appears to be less literal than these comparisons and instead shows off the newly constructed buildings as not necessarily the answer to housing woes, revealing the building's composition as only one of the many narratives within the neighborhood's built environment. Through framing the new construction as monotonous and imposed, the building appears passive, submissive to the rhythms and dynamics of the surrounding buildings that reveal themselves as the truly vibrant and active place-makers/markers in this built environment. By including these extensive, panoramic views, the *Chelsea*

Document critically presents comparative living within one frame, further challenging the attempted, imposed collective memory of the neighborhood, as told through a developer's eyes. The Document instead reinforces a personalized experience as the sturdier narrative of the neighborhood. Rather than a side-by-side, close-up image of old versus new housing, the Document's panorama offers a more nuanced view, discrediting the simple assumption that new housing equates to a more prosperous city landscape and life. In these views, the London Terrace is an addition that reinforces the neighborhood's inequality, casting doubt on the "progress" that comes with mass destruction and construction of housing, challenging the actions and imposed historicizing of city-wide and privatized housing forces. This distinct view that presents a vacillating prospectus of the city would only be possible in the elevated, embodied views that reoccur within the *Chelsea Document*.

This interrogation into the sequence's aerial outlooks necessitates a review of other worm's-eye and bird's-eye views of the urban landscape (figures 3.26 and 3.27). When comparing the *Chelsea Document* to *One Third of a Nation*, we see how the Document employs extreme views, montaged within the frame itself. *One Third of a Nation* invites viewers to read a more linear narrative of the neighborhood while the *Chelsea Document*, perhaps informed by the New Vision photographers' practice (most likely introduced to the Photo League by Berenice Abbott), presents abstracted and borderline distorted perspectives.[408] Employing this framing, as discussed earlier in this chapter, Grossman and Libsohn highlight the constructed nature of the photographic

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[408] Sarah M. Miller, *Documentary in Dispute* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2020), 193.

series, not claiming the work to offer a universal view of the city but emphasizing that the survey is a personal, subjective, and embodied interrogation of *their* city. This photograph looking up toward the Empire State Building's spire reveals a fully inscribed view of the dizzying city. While this view emphasizes the city's verticality, it is presented from an individual vantage point, looking up, aligning a human's eye line with the size of the city (figure 3.27). This worm's-eye view, along with the aerial-scapes, reveals the city as layered and experiential, not something that can be glanced and consumed. These particular and subjective views show how the city can and must be explored and experienced from above and below, as seen by the occupiers and photographers.[409] The photographers underscored the constructed nature of the photograph and the city, and through this accentuation, they offered their viewers a humanized entryway into the neighborhood.

The Elevated's view: The Collective Memory of Deconstruction

The *Chelsea Document's* recurring scenes that detail the dismantling of the Sixth Avenue elevated train line also work to humanize the cityscape. By the late 1930s, New York City's elevated trains had become an antiquated technology ridden by few New Yorkers as the subway was the preferred form of rapid transportation by daily

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[409] Discussing his photographic process, Libsohn notes, "You become part of your story or your play. You see something, you become a critic, you watch it for a moment, and at the moment when it has the most meaning for you, you take it. The meaning here is the Photographer's meaning," Interview between Ramona Javitz and Sol Libsohn in 1958, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archive's picture collection, 12.

commuters.[410] By the time of the Document's production, the elevated train, particularly the shadowed streets under the raised railway, had become a clichéd city scene. Diverging from this passé shot, Libsohn and Grossman documented the disassembly of the Sixth Avenue elevated line.[411] In scenes from the Document, Grossman and Libsohn show the methodical dismantling and destruction of a city mechanism and portray workers removing singular spikes and beams through a repetitive, meticulous system (figure 3.28). In devoting a large section of the survey to this unraveling, or elimination of this particular city space and its resulting locus of social relationships, we witness Grossman and Libsohn's attention to the role time, history, and memory play in creating and dictating place within the evolving cityscape. In a 1939 review of the New School exhibition *Photographing New York*, Elizabeth McCausland comments on the prevalence of the scenes of destruction of the elevated train lines within the show (prints most likely from the *Chelsea Document*), naming obsolesce as the leading "physical and spiritual" characteristic of the city environment.[412] The *Chelsea Document's* inclusion of scenes of demolition adds another dimension to the city's embodied views, as these views

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[410] The subways were faster and cheaper than the elevated trains by the 1930s and more New Yorkers preferred to travel via this efficient system. See Clifton Hood, "Subways, transit politics, and metropolitan spatial expansion," in *Landscapes of Modernity*, eds. David Ward and Olivier Zunz (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 195.
[411] The Sixth Avenue elevated line took its last ride on December 4, 1938 and the demolition of the line began about a week later (see "gay crowds on last ride as sixth ave. elevated ends 60-year existence," *New York Times*, December 5, 1938, 1). The Ninth Avenue lines was not demolished until midway through 1940. As the Chelsea Document was made between 1938-1939 it is most likely it pictures the destruction of the Sixth Avenue line.
[412] Elizabeth McCausland, "Young Photographers Show New York City," *Springfield Republican*, September 25, 1939, 6E.

complicate time and collective memory. McCausland's treatment of these occurrences, noting their participation in the physical and spiritual make-up of the city, is inflected in Grossman and Libsohn's repeated inclusion and attuned framing of scenes of destruction within their Document.

In these photographs of obsolescence, Grossman and Libsohn act as photographic archeologists, uncovering the street's multi-decade history and possible future. In one instance, scenes of city de/construction are paired with quotidian acts as pedestrians traverse the busy sidewalk (figure 3.28). The street, flanked by two rows of buildings that exceed three stories, is filled with construction equipment. Beams are piled high, and debris fills the street that would typically be occupied by cars. Dominating the middle foreground of the image is the skeleton of the elevated railway. Countless men move about, disconnecting spikes from metal beams as what looks like a crane is in the process of lifting a beam. Men perform their individual and collective tasks, and the routinized, slow work is emphasized as only one beam, part of an infinite sightline, is removed. This image transfixes and underscores this moment of change. By exemplifying how builders, pedestrians, and dwellers witness this change, we observe how the literal creation or destruction of a place informs collective memory.[413] In closely chronicling a moment of change, Grossman and Libsohn uncover the city's past, present, and future. With this revelation, the street's unbounded space is inscribed with history, memory, and meaning, creating a place owned, occupied, and shaped by neighborhood dwellers.

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[413] Janet Donohoe, *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 4.

In focusing on demolition or destruction, the *Chelsea Document* chronicles the neighborhood at a time of great change—things are being built and destroyed, making way for "progress" to come. According to art historian Max Page, "New York's particular 'sense of place' [is] precisely this sensation of vertigo amid the dynamism of a bustling commercial center packed with an overwhelming diversity of peoples."[414] To account for this ever-changing environment, Page suggests that people in power attempted to impose a collective memory into the city's space. In closely chronicling this moment of visual change that influences how viewers understand their relationship to the city street and the traversal of the urban environment, the *Chelsea Document* remains beholden to this precise moment in time. Rather than allow forces beyond those in the street, such as the municipality or private construction companies like the builders of the London Terrace narrate the neighborhood's collective memory, the *Chelsea Document* explores change through the perspective of the photographer and dweller. The series chronicles unique, personalized memory as superseding collective, imposed memory, presenting memory as inscribed to a specific time within the neighborhood dwellers' changing metropolitan landscape.

In many documents produced during the New Deal, photographers turn their cameras to new construction. Grossman's FAP survey on Harlem focused on the new construction of public housing. Berenice Abbott's early views of New York City chronicle the construction of Rockefeller Center as seen in this photograph that centers

[414] Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7.

on the bedrock foundation of the skyscraper (figure 3.29). This image links the building to the land on which it lays, conjoining the present construction to the city's almost fossilized past.[415] The photograph foregrounds the city's materiality, organic and constructed, while its human presence is virtually ignored. Working for the FAP, photographer Andrew Herman completed a survey of fifty-four scenes documenting the Sixth Avenue subway line construction. The majority of the images reveal closely cropped scenes of laborers at work. While Herman's images do not have the dramatic advantage of being conducted in the elevated or subterranean airspace of the city, the photographer works with steam, shadow, and light to almost romanticize these work portraits, disconnecting the actual labor from the worker (figure 3.30). In reviewing the entire subway construction series, no prints offer context to this construction, presenting a general work portrait of the construction of a subway system that could be on any avenue in any city.

Lewis Hine's photographs from his project *Men at Work*, comprised of over 700 prints that document the construction of the Empire State Building, reveal a different approach to documenting the building of a cityscape that highlights the presence of

[415] Peter Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 166. Sarah M. Miller also discusses this photograph as emblematic of Abbott's interest in dualism and dialecticism within the photographic medium, discussing Abbott's, "sustained attention to how darkness conceals sources of power and controls visibility and, conversely, how photography may illuminate the city's physical and psychological substrate." Sarah M. Miller, *Documentary in Dispute* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 2020), 210.

labor.[416] One photograph accentuates the height at which the laborers work, as the man at the center of the frame looks down to the street (figure 3.31). The man at the front right of the frame looks up, and these two disparate glances accentuate the great vertical expanse of the new building. While it may not include literal motion, this scene of labor does show the collaborative process between man and machine within construction. Neither the laborers nor the construction technology overtakes the other within this frame, nor does the new building overtake the surrounding neighborhood buildings; instead, the new folds into the old. The work of Lewis Hine would have been well known to Grossman and Libsohn as the Photo League revered Hine's social documentary approach.[417] A similar framing of the laborers' bodies is seen in both the *Chelsea Document* and *Men at Work*, as the projects emphasize the importance of human effort in the construction or destruction of the city vistas.

Grossman and Libsohn's series, unlike Hine's, Abbott's, and Herman's, did not concentrate on new construction. Instead, it surveyed the dismantling of New York City, disclosing the city's moment of unbecoming through a uniquely subjective perspective. Through the Document's concentration on the dismantling of the elevated train, the city

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[416] For more information about this series see Julia K. Dolan, "'I Will Take You Into The Heart of Modern Industry': Lewis Hine's Photographic Interpretation of the Machine Age," PhD Diss., (Boston University, 2009).

[417] The League had considered exhibiting Hine's work at the headquarters around 1938, simultaneous to the commencement of the *Chelsea Documents* series. Elizabeth McCausland papers, 1838-1995, bulk 1920-1960. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 22, Folder 15, Frames 46-47. In correspondence between Hine and McCausland, Hine notes that many Photo League members had come by the Riverside Museum to see his exhibition. McCausland papers, 1838-1995, bulk 1920-1960. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Box 22, Folder 15, Frame 75.

revealed itself, its structures and systems, its bones and veins, to the city citizens.[418] These images uncovered the mystery of the mammoth New York City transit system, allowing the viewer to more easily understand how their city runs. In a July 1939 article published in *Fortune,* in preparation for the New York City World's Fair, the authors write about the Elevated and subway trains, equating the transportation systems to the human circulatory and nervous system.[419] The *Chelsea Document* similarly anthropomorphized technology, as seen in this photograph that discloses the subway below while the elevated railways above are being torn down (figure 3.32). These two technologies promised to expand Manhattan and connect the city's boroughs, one newly built and the other past its use-value. In this image, the workers are in the process of disassembling the tracks, and two men walk along the sidewalk, passing by this site of destruction. Within the boundary to the subway's entrance, a make-shift newspaper stand has been erected. In this frame, we see what Max Page has termed the "creative destruction of Manhattan," as the new meets the old, creating a unique space between the two where occupiers can conduct commerce.[420]

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[418] I have used Max Kozloff's writing about the work of Weegee, a Photo League Member, to inform my thinking of how Grossman, Libsohn, and their contemporaries were evaluating the spaces of the city, those spaces perhaps ignored or on the margins, as spaces of dynamic, unfolding, human-centric action. Kozloff's description of Weegee's practice as picturing the underbelly of the urban landscape, anthropomorphizes the city street, "a vision of the city emerges in which flesh and its entanglements become the chief, unauthorized subject…the city was like a strip show gone bananas," *New York: Capital of Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 33-34.
[419] "Under the Asphalt," *Fortune*, (July 1939), 126.
[420] Max Page, *The Creative Destruction of Manhattan, 1900-1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7.

In scenes that do not center on demolition, the elevated railways work to organize the open, interstitial airspace between the sidewalk and the top of skyscrapers. The elevated train has a unique horizontal and vertical position within the city. From its perch, offering sweeping views of the urban landscape, the rider becomes a sort of master of their small, elevated domain. The train lines structure the open, cavernous spaces of the city (above and below) and also create a liminal space between the seemingly public space of the train car and the private apartments that the trains windows peer in to. According to Sunny Salter, "the Els anachronistic visuality collapsed binaries between distance and intimacy, public and private space, past and present."[421] This intimacy is illustrated in a passage from D. Howell's 1889 *A Hazard of New Fortunes* where characters share and enjoy the "suggestion, drama, and infinite interest" glimpsed between the newly connected space of the train car and second and third story apartments.[422]

The *Chelsea Document* includes photographs of the interior of the elevated trains and train stations, the social space created by this transportation technology, as well as photographs of the view looking down to the city street from the elevated perch of the train (figures 3.33 and 3.34). During the 1930s, photographers increasingly captured passengers riding public transportation.[423] Both Arnold Eagle and Walker Evans (with the

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[421] Sunny Stalter, "Farewell to the El: Nostalgic Urban Visuality on the Third Avenue Elevated Train," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3, (2006), 871.
[422] William Dean Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1889), 103.
[423] Trains and buses became the most popular method of travel during the Depression because they were so inexpensive. David Ward and Olivier Zunz, *The Landscape of*

help of Helen Levitt) chronicled the social spaces of the elevated and subterranean trail ways. At the same time, Abbott's *Changing New York* captured the architectural details of the slowly disappearing elevated train stations (figures 3.35-3.37). These images of the interiors of the trains and the glanced views that result from this elevated or underground post explore how this bordering space—public yet private, anonymous yet social—is transformed into a place distinct to each user. It is a space or view that is continually changing; the only consistent point of reference is that it is experienced from the photographer's body. In including these scenes of slight elevation, Grossman and Libsohn accentuate a neighborhood dweller's embodied experience, a personal experience that remains unique to each individual. Through this emphasis on the body, the phenomenological experience of space, the *Chelsea Document* highlights the critical role of the subject in creating and experiencing the place of the neighborhood.

The Cropped View: Re-inscribing the Photographer's Eye

Space is explored and revealed phenomenologically throughout the *Chelsea Document*, in scenes beyond those captured from and within an elevated perspective. In comparing the Document's contact prints to singular enlarged prints in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston collection, it is clear that many negatives were cropped and altered (figures 3.5-3.6, 3.38-3.39, and 3.40-3.41).[424] This cropping makes evident that the

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Modernity: Essays on New York City, 1900-1940 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1992), 206.

[424] The work of Grossman is collected in much greater abundance compared to Libsohn. I have not found prints of the Chelsea Document attributed to Libsohn or even Grossman and Libsohn including in the Libsohn Archive (that is admittedly sparse). I am optimistic

photographers did not produce unmanipulated images and calls attention to the photographer's presence and participation in constructing these scenes. The cropped views follow the theorization of the urban artist's role as posited by art historian Marsha Meskimmon in her book *Engendering the City*.[425] In this book, Meskimmon considers how women artists, artists who lacked control of the city's modern, masculine spaces, explore and capture space experientially. Rather than the city's masculine viewer, typically described as a flaneur, a disembodied eye who sees without being seen, women take on the pedestrian's role, exploring space through bodily experience.[426] While Grossman and Libsohn were both men, their ethnic and religious minority status excluded them from a role of power in the modern city, resulting in their need to capture and embody the spaces of their city experientially.

Libsohn himself compares the role of the photographer to that of a walker "who digs around in the street for pennies," underlining the physical relationship between photographer and place, far beyond that of an uninterested observer.[427] By getting closer to spaces and subjects through framing and cropping, the *Chelsea Document* emphasized how bodily interactions, both physical, visual, and psychological, orient the street's

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that in reviewing the Grossman and other Photo League archives at the CCP I will be able to identify and answer authorial questions/issues in regard to the series.

[425] I am indebted to the scholarship of Elizabeth VanArragon who links this theory of the pedestrian to the work of the Photo League. Elizabeth VanArragon, "The Photo League: Views of Urban Experience in the 1930s and 1940s," PhD diss., (University of Iowa, 2006).

[426] Marsha Meskimmon, *Engendering the City: Women Artists and Urban Space* (London: Scarlet, 1997), 21.

[427] Interview between Ramona Javitz and Sol Libsohn in 1958, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archive's picture collection, 2.

experience. The bird's-eye and worm's-eye views discussed in the preceding section, as well as these instances of cropping, reference the subjective place and glance of the photographer. This diversity of views exemplifies the constructed nature of a photograph and punctuates the photographer's role within the picture- and place-making process. The series investigates the specificity of the place of Chelsea and how that place is constructed—experientially and photographically.

In examining an instance of cropping in the Document, the resultant drive towards the locus of action within the photographic frame accentuates the ever-increasing connection between subject and photographer—and between photographer and site. This literal and metaphorical inward movement allows the viewer to seize and occupy the particular space described in the image. Challenging typical notions of space and place as established purely through sight, this movement toward cropping discloses how experience, sociality, and identity coalesce to produce place. In this contact sheet print, a woman rests her left elbow on the entrance to an uptown subway station (figure 3.38). Relaxing in a contrapposto stance, she looks to her right, lips pursed, as if the photographers have caught her in a moment of anticipation or expectation. An older woman to her left stands, similarly waiting and leaning against the structure. The two women, while standing along the same entryway, are separated by lines in the sidewalk and posts within the subway entrance. The urban structures and throughways dissect the print, marking a distance between the two bodies that share and wait within the same space. Behind the younger woman is a store window displaying foodstuffs for sale. The

wares are almost indecipherable as the window reflects the woman's back, the subway entrance, signs that advertise neighboring stores, and scenes from the parallel sidewalk.

Returning to the insights of Moore, the practitioners of the Photo League "made it possible for public acts of perception to reveal themselves with graphic particularity. Some of these pictures manifest the evanescent, dancing matrix of sightlines and body language that organize social awareness on city streets."[428] When examining the cropped version of this print, the photographers cut out the sidewalk and the older woman, zeroing in on the stance, look, and space that surrounds the younger woman (figure 3.39). While this photograph does not reveal a specific space but instead an anonymous corner in Chelsea, the place becomes specific and infused with history and memory as created through the presence and perception of this foregrounded woman. The print is dissected by the vertiginous figure of the woman—to her right is the active living city, and to the left is the city as reflected and repeated in the window. Through this dissection, the woman's presence is echoed and referenced multiple times within the photograph. In this cropped print, the multidimensionality of the city, history, and actions occur on the street and are then echoed within the reflective surfaces of the city. In moving closer to the figure, cropping out the sidewalk and extraneous figures, the photographers attempted to enter the psyche of their subjects, showing and playing with how personalized the space of the city can become. In this instance, the sightlines of the city were seen and determined by this subject, and the photographers offered an embodied vision that stands for (without overtaking) the subject.

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[428] Deborah Dash Moore, "On City Streets," *Contemporary Jewry* 28, (2008), 102.

This same exploration into the relationship of space, subject, and photographer is also seen in photographs of identifiable sites within the city. In this photograph taken in the middle of Union Square Park, men sit on steps that lead to the Liberty Flag Pole (figure 3.40). The contact print provides context to the park as the print's left corner includes the backs and sides of a congregation of men. The print's foreground is filled with empty flagstone squares, and a cloudless sky, blocks of buildings, and blooming tree branches occupy the uppermost register. The cropped version of this photograph focuses on the men that sit on the stairs to the flag pole, three of whom look directly at the photographer (figure 3.41). In the final print, the photographers transform a typical street scene into a study of postures and glances that interact to structure this open space. The two men most centered in the image look directly out to the viewer, their elbows resting on their bent knees. Behind them, a man holds his head in his hands, the fellow to his left reads a newspaper, and the dapper gentleman to his right reaches for something in his pocket. These figures exist singularly yet are forced to interact within their shared photographic space. Their bodies, entirely situated within the stairs, are similarly sized to the stone frieze behind them, further uniting their bodies to the space of the park. With this, the collective space of the park, a space that is public to all, is occupied and owned by the men that haunt these steps.

In considering the history of this space, the implication of the union between subject, space, and photographer can be pushed further. While the biographies of the men in the photograph remain unknown, the historical and political significance of this space is well documented. Union Square has a centuries-long reputation as a collective space

where city citizens gather to display signs of patriotism as well as protest working conditions and wages.[429] The square was a hotbed of socialist and communist demonstrations and anarchist riots, challenging the ideals of democracy. In 1932, the Tammany Society donated the pictured Liberty Flag Pole to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in an (unsuccessful) attempt to depoliticize the space of the park. Grossman and Libsohn would have been aware of the history of political factions fighting for space and representation within the square. Through this image and the subsequent cropping, the photograph works to inscribe the space's history into the bodies and imagined biographies of the subjects. This framing unites their bodies with the allegorical figures representing the original thirteen colonies, creating a historical lineage for their presence. The historical significance, as well as the formal similarities between subjects and their stoned counterparts, work to create a permanent place for the men who convene on the stairs. In this way, the photographers bolster the physical, psychic, and historical place surrounding their subjects, securing their present and presence as it relates to the neighborhood, city, and country.

The Union of Photographs and Text: Exhibiting the *Chelsea Document*

The *Chelsea Document* was first exhibited at the League in February 1940 and was also presented at neighborhood tenant organizations such as the Hudson Guild and

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[429] For more information about the history of Union Square see Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, "Patriotism and Protest: Union Square as Public Space, 1832–1932," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 68, no. 4 (2009): 540-59.

the Chelsea Tenants League.[430] Prints from the project were presented in the New School exhibition *Photographing New York* (1939) as well as the Rockefeller Center exhibition *Roofs For 40 Million* (1938).[431] While I have been unable to locate installation photographs of the *Chelsea Document* as it was displayed, Elizabeth McCausland wrote a review of the Photo League exhibition, published in *Photo Notes*, describing the show as effectively combining text and photographs on five four by eight-foot panels, offering "an expressive witness against the chaos and brutality of housing in New York City today" (figure 3.42).[432] The exhibition employed language to describe abstract concepts that could not be explained photographically. Within the review, McCausland notes photography's general inability to record repetitive problems, as it is only apt to record singular instances. Despite and perhaps because of this limitation, viewers read the images for their individuality as mediated by the photographer, rather than viewing the

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[430] I have been unable to secure the specific dates for the Hudson Guild and Chelsea Tenants League exhibition. The *Chelsea Document* was reviewed in *Photo Notes* in May 1940 (4-5) by Elizabeth McCausland and *Roofs for 40 Million* was exhibited at Rockefeller Center from April 9 – May 1,1938. See Lewis Mumford, *Roofs for 40 Million: An exhibition on Housing* (New York: Sheridan Square Press, 1938). Photographs from the *Chelsea Document* were included in the New School's exhibition *Photographing New York* organized by the Photo League in 1939. See Elizabeth McCausland, "Young Photographers Show New York City," *Springfield Republican*, September 25, 1939, 6E.

[431] Reviewing this exhibition, McCausland, writing under the pen name Elizabeth Noble, noted that the photographs, compared to paintings and lithographs, were the most effective medium within the exhibition as they were more "concrete and tangible," Elizabeth Noble, "Housing Exhibit and Harriton's Art," *New Masses* (April 19 1938), 26.

[432] Elizabeth McCausland, "Chelsea Document," *Photo Notes*, May 1940, 4-5. Figure 3.42 is an installation view of a Weegee exhibition at the League in 1941. I include this figure to provide contextual information regarding what the exhibition space looked like and potential installation strategies that may have been used for the *Chelsea Document* exhibition.

images as general statements of conditions. Concluding the review, McCausland writes, “here esthetic snobbery is vanquished, and art speaks not only to the people but, for the people,” calling this graphic exhibition a work of art, allying the concepts of art and documentary that had been discussed at the League.[433]

The first panel proclaims “We Live Here” with a panorama contrasting the new London Terrace apartment building with old law tenements. The third panel asks, “why…why do we live this way? We don’t have to… if we organize to fight for…” The exhibition continues, “the government has already built model apartment houses in Williamsburg, Harlem, Red Hook, Queensbridge. Why not Chelsea next?” Through this accusatory language, the exhibition calls on the failures of New York City to attend to the needs of its citizens. The repeated use of the word “we” places the need for change within the hands and abilities of the photographers, exhibition designers, exhibition viewers, and neighborhood dwellers. The *Chelsea Document* attends to this call, employing photographs linked with text to demand improved housing for neighborhood residents.

Exhibiting these images as a series offers citizens a more participatory venue to experience and view the work produced under the Photo League. The exhibition merged photography and text while using a graphic approach, incorporating “symbols, arrows, guidelines, in black and color” to fully engage with viewers.[434] While the League was a dedicated art space, its teaching and exhibitions were involved in the political discourses of the decade, exhibiting photographs with a social function, such as the work of Lewis

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[433] Ibid.
[434] Elizabeth McCausland, “Chelsea Document,” *Photo Notes*, May 1940, 4-5.

Hine, the documentary work of the FSA and FAP, and politically motivated photomontages of John Heartfield and Barbara Morgan.[435] As discussed earlier, the Photo League membership was involved with the communities they were photographing, producing work that would participate in a multitude of venues—social, political, and artistic. As the work of Libsohn and Grossman was not solely viewed as "fine art," the photographers involved other mediums to produce a more evocative and persuasive exhibition that could better speak to and for the neighborhood dwellers.

Exhibiting this Document at the Hudson Guild (436 West Twenty-Seven Street) and the Chelsea Tenants League (430 West Twenty-Five Street) reveals the League's dedication to producing works that were meant to directly engage with the subjects of their photographs, through exhibiting in neighborhood institutions and promoting change that would directly affect the neighborhood's social conditions. The Hudson Guild and Chelsea Tenants League had devoted their missions to improving the neighborhood's social conditions, advocating for better play spaces and housing since the early twentieth century. These venues were a part of the neighborhood's sociality and hosted memberships comprised mostly of neighborhood dwellers, increasing the potential for the photograph's subjects to see themselves within the exhibition, literally uniting art with occupiers' daily experiences. In this way, the Document was comprised of art that was

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[435] *Photo Notes*, October 1938, 1 (John Heartfield Symposium); February 1939, 4 (Federal Art Project Feb 3-28, 15 housing photos at CCNY Social Hall); April 1939, 1 (Exhibition of "Rural America" – prints by the Farm Security Administration); June 1939, 2 (Barbara Morgan to lecture at Photomontage class); December 1939, 1 (Lewis Hine at the League); January 1940, 1 (Barbara Morgan on "Photo-Montage in the Modern World).

affecting and effecting, creating an exhibition that could, according to McCausland, "[speak] for the people" and to the people.[436]

This effort and need for images to speak for, to, and of the people is witnessed in the publication of Levitt's FAP photographs and the exhibition of Eagle and Robbins's *One Third of a Nation.* In all three examples, the photographs were supplemented with text to further the point of the exhibition or spread. In the case of Levitt's images published in *Look* and *PM,* the photographic layout and text emphasized the ability and agility of city children. While the photographs singularly could have ambiguous meanings, the text made clear to readers that these children were autonomous space shapers. *One Third of a Nation*'s heuristic presentation within *East Side West Side* at the Federal Art Gallery created an exhibition that necessitated people, look, read, and experience photographs in order to argue for improved housing conditions. The *Chelsea Document's* exhibition similarly emphasized a graphic layout, expansive text, and expressive images to argue for increased funding for housing within Chelsea. These spreads and exhibitions added another layer of place-making to the photographs, increased the chance of the images being seen by neighborhood dwellers, and also heightened the communicability of the photographs, a fundamental aim of the FAP and Photo League.

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[436] Elizabeth McCausland, "Chelsea Document," *Photo Notes*, May 1940, 4-5.

Afterlife of the *Chelsea Document*

The *Chelsea Document*, in singular prints, as a series, and in its exhibited form, reveals a study of a total environment. Unlike Levitt's photographic series on chalk drawings in East Harlem or Eagle and Robbins housing survey of the Lower East Side, Grossman and Libsohn offer a multiplicity of views into their neighborhood. The photographers more directly engaged with their subjects, as evidenced within the series' frames, presenting an embodied portrait of a place, shared between themselves and the streets' inhabitants. Both Grossman and Libsohn, speaking decades after the survey's production, noted the critical role of the photographer in exploring place. Returning to the transcript from Grossman's 1950 class, he professed the role of the photographer as "somewhat larger than a sightseeing director…your job is to take them to the house and get them to understand something new about this house that they have not understood before."[437] In 1958, Libsohn, in conversation with Ramona Javitz, the curator of the New York Public Library Picture Collection, spoke at length of the photographer's job in capturing, what he calls, the incisive moment: "what fascinates me is the texture and quality of the row of booths and what these qualities do in relation to the people inside and outside of them, what people look like reflected in the glass and steel…It is so alive and real that it is almost unreal, in a sense."[438] Grossman and Libsohn bolster the photographer's role as one who uncovers space through methods that go beyond visual

[437] Grossman Transcript, 1950, Bob Shamis Archive, New York, New York.
[438] Interview between Ramona Javitz and Sol Libsohn in 1958, New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archive's picture collection, 7.

perception, as the photographer is tasked to expose what is below the surface of objects and reality.

In the survey, both photographers, informed by their relationship to the neighborhood and their practiced folk vision, embedded within the history of the medium, were able to image the neighborhood past the bounds of geometric space. The Document's inclusion of elevated views that emphasize the diversity of the landscape, scenes of destruction and demolition that explore the city's palimpsest of places, as well as embodied views of the city street that re-inscribe the subjective presence of the photographer, reveals how space, time, history, and memory coalescence to make place. Working as photographic archeologists, the photographers prioritize the experiential—exploring how place is created, constructed, and structured from within. Both Grossman and Libsohn reiterated this place-making process through their photographic practice and subsequent exhibition of the *Chelsea Document*, capturing and preserving Chelsea as a place that is beholden to and created by its inhabitants.

Conclusion
Walker Evans Collects Yorkville's Streets

> I'm glad for us that the pictures are of America instead of being just good pictures, because being so particularly of that place makes them universal. Gives them currency. Permits us to some extent to deal with all places.
> – William Carlos Williams

> I had already seen the whole American desert in New York, where space, the great factor of separation between people and between things, has crept in.
> – Jean-Paul Sartre

The photographers examined in these three chapters produced local studies of Manhattan neighborhoods. Focusing their lenses on liminal and collective spaces within the metropolitan environment such as stoops, sidewalks, and alleyways, they used the camera as a tool to cultivate the relationship between people and the urban landscape. In the case studies I've examined, both in the FAP and the Photo League, the prominence of interstitial and communal spaces within these images results in documents that can be read as the photographer's and subject's effort to define their place within the contested sites of the urban street. This place making effort is two-fold, first as performed by the occupier and then reiterated in the photographic frame, as captured by the photographer. As a result, the photographic practice and the resulting image are a part of this place-making effort, as these photographs play a role in the negotiation and remembrance of place. Furthermore, it becomes clear that each photographer's practice, informed by their relationship to the neighborhood and institutional support, works in tandem with the occupier's place-making strategies. The photographers collaborate with their subjects to create and picture an active place. Through this focus on vernacular spaces, these surveys

disrupt the New Deal's ideals of belonging and instead work to document unique processes of place-making.

However, this activist and radical collaboration of photographer, subject, and photograph cannot be ascribed to all urban street studies created during the New Deal. A survey completed by Walker Evans, a photographer who engaged with parallel photographic discourses, reveals another aspect of the complicated role that photographs played and play in producing or shaping place. A comparison to the photographs of Walker Evans and the archive of the FSA, both bodies of work typically evaluated as representative of 1930s image-making, uncovers how these case studies function as contemporaneous deviations to documentary photography practices of the New Deal. This extended conclusion functions to outline a network of New Deal photographic practices and consider the intertwined institutional and social ethos of the FSA, the FAP, and the Photo League. Through outlining this network, I aim to destabilize the archetypal role that the FSA and Evans hold within this discourse and make space for the humanizing practices of Levitt, Eagle, Robbins, Libsohn, and Grossman.

On a summer day in 1938, as Evans was preparing for his solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art titled *American Photographs*, he photographed southern Yorkville's streets, a neighborhood comprised of primarily Italian immigrants. Although Evans had been let go by the FSA in late 1937, Stryker gave him this small assignment to help improve his precarious financial situation.[439] Producing a series of fifty photographs,

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[439] In correspondence between Evans and Stryker, Evans asks Stryker for an update regarding the possibility of FSA work (May 26, 1938). In response, Stryker writes that finances are in turmoil at the FSA but he would send an update in ten days (June 3,

Evans explored the city blocks at a correspondingly spatial level, focusing his lens on collective spaces similar to those explored in the previous case studies. Yet Evans produced a neighborhood study that distills place in a rather different dimension, as placelessness defines these Yorkville streets. Unlike the photographic projects discussed in the first three chapters, Evans's series exhibits a cool distance, producing a place shaped not by its inhabitants but by its universalized urbanity. The project's abstract framing accentuates ordinary features of the urban fabric such as pavement cracks, windows, and signage, showing the city as repetitive and almost unmoving. Contested spaces, such as sidewalks, alleyways, and stoops, are framed from a remove, as bounded and abstracted. Evans chronicles space as shaped by its geometrical dimensions rather than social practice or human occupation, foregrounding the unmoving built environment and turning the subjects of the city into objects of decoration—urbanity's accouterment. Evans's conversion reveals his disinterest in the local inhabitants, erasing the

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1938). Roy Stryker Papers, University of Louisville Archives. While the survey has been published in various Evans monographs and FSA histories, the lot's authorship has been questioned. (The series has been published in Beverly Brannan and Carl Fleischhauer, *Documenting America*, 128-145; John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans,* 146*;* Jerry L. Thompson, *Walker Evans at Work*, 148; Birgit Mayer and Michael Brix, *Walker Evans America*, 112; Beverly Brannan and Giles Mora, *FSA: The American Vision*, 72; and John T. Hill, *Walker Evans: Depth of Field,* 164). A number of scholars attribute the grouping to Evans's colleague and friend Ben Shahn, while John T. Hill has suggested Ed Locke completed the series. My correspondence with Professor Laura Katzman (*Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (2000)) and Library of Congress photography curator Beverly Brannan and Library of Congress project coordinator Carl Fleischhauer have supported my opinion that this project was completed by Evans. (The date of the series is from August 23, 1938 and Ben Shahn was most likely in Ohio during the time this series was made).

neighborhood citizens' sense of agency, and turning their presence into an aesthetic study.

Like the other series explored in this dissertation, Evans's sequence was produced on the street, and the photographer operated as a voyeur, flaneur, or bystander.[440] Evans considered himself a "voyeur by nature," a "tinkerer and spy," preferring to arrest scenes from more of a distance than the other photographers in this study.[441] In this self-identification, Evans admits his own lack of interest in social engagement or collective presence/communal practice. In the past three chapters, I have argued for an expanded view of the street photographer, considering the photographer's role as a folklorist, sociologist, and archeologist. In these practices, rather than arresting views from an unengaged distance, the photographers are firmly situated as inhabitants within the scene they are imaging, conceptualizing undetermined energies, rather than manufactured, structural forces, as shaping space. Turning to oft-ignored, ambiguous, and unownable spaces within the urban landscape, the photographers use their cameras to picture synergetic performativity between these communal sites and their occupiers. Neighborhood dwellers, by their presence and occupation, are able to actively live and transform space into place in these interstitials. The photographs then reveal how inhabitants create and shape place, a place that dissents against the built environment's

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[440] See Max Kozloff, *New York: Capital of Photography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), Clive Scott, *Street Photography: From Atget to Cartier-Bresson* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), and Colin Westerbeck and Joel Meyerowitz's *Bystander: A History of Street Photography* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2017).
[441] Walker Evans, "Photography," *Quality: Its Image in the Arts,* ed. Louis Kronenberger (New York: Athenaeum, 1969), 171.

social and algorithmic limits. These images reveal and bolster city inhabitants' identity as space shifters, showing the interdependent relationship between photographer, subject, and place.

Evans approaches Yorkville differently—as a collector, determined to gather urbanity so as to create a portrait of "a city." Informed by his own collecting practice as well as his adjacent participation in the construction of the FSA's photographic archive, Evans conceptualizes space as bounded, collectible, and placeless. Employing his camera to gather the American landscape, Evans disregards the locality and specificity of practiced place and rather captures the ubiquitous space of the nation. Evans's study focuses on materiality, conceiving of space as it is structured—as the built environment, rather than inhabitants, shapes space.[442] In this effort, Evans underscores American vernacular culture's transformation from the local and handmade into the national and factory-produced. Evans employs the tropes of urbanity to show place, a place that is placeless, that is omnipresent, a place that transcends the local and embodies the nation. In this Yorkville series, as in his contemporaneous *American Photographs* exhibition and catalog, Evans collects space, but through this practice, his lens does not give room for his subjects to make their own place.[443]

Yorkville's streets were comprised of mostly Italian immigrants who rented the block's apartments for ten to fifty dollars a month, the average on the higher end of the

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[442] Throughout this conclusion, I use the term materiality to evoke Evans's attention to the mere matter that constructs the neighborhood spaces, not in an economic or social sense.
[443] Evans himself noted, "I've noticed my eye collects," Jeff Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 17.

scale, a rent much more expensive than rooms for rent in Harlem, the Lower East Side, and Chelsea as explored in the previous three chapters.[444] In examining Evans's photographs, marks of ethnicity are obfuscated, especially when compared to Eagle and Robbins's capture of Italian stores and residents on the streets of the Lower East Side. Evans tends to focus on vernacular advertisements, such as signs for the neighborhood's storage company Byrnes Brothers and political posters, rather than smaller, Italian-owned businesses in the area.[445] The sequence's focus on apartment buildings aligns with contemporaneous housing surveys, though the photographs do not interrogate the social or political circumstances of the streets. Evans, and therefore the resultant photographs, remains disinterested in digging through the multivalent layers of the neighborhood, as Evans avoids mining the ethnic diversity of the blocks.

Evans himself rented an apartment on East Ninety-Second Street, just thirty blocks north from where the photographs were taken, choosing to turn his lens on a community not so removed from his own domestic life. Regardless of geography, these neighborhood dwellers were different in class, religion, and ethnicity from Evans, himself a self-proclaimed aristocrat.[446] The other photographers in this dissertation engage with the social and historical layers of the neighborhoods they picture, working as a folklorist, sociologists, and archeologists. Evans preferred to work on instinct and most likely did

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[444] C.-E. A. Winslow, Savel Zimand, and Milbank Memorial Fund, *Health Under the "el": the Story of the Bellevue-Yorkville Health Demonstration In Mid-town New York* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1937), 21.
[445] One photograph includes the awning of De Lesi Bros & Delluvio: Manufacturers of Macaroni & Bread.
[446] Bill Ferris, "A Visit with Walker Evans," in *Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans* (Memphis: Center for Southern Folklore, 1977), 36.

not know or care to learn about the economic and social conditions of Yorkville's streets.[447] Furthermore, just as he treated the spaces of the street as transcending the local and standing in for the nation, he treated the subjects of the streets as part of that general space, accentuating their universality rather than their specificity, disregarding any sort of ethnic or religious difference. These differing aims and empathies are translated into Evans's detachment and spatial distance, as he approached the neighborhood dwellers as an outsider, spatially and psychologically.[448]

Evans as Collector

Walker Evans was born in the Midwest, educated in New England and Paris, and settled in New York City in the later 1920s. Envisioning a career as a writer, Evans quickly realized his creative skills were better applied behind a camera. Lacking a formal artistic education, Evans often found inspiration in other photographers' work displayed in New York's galleries and published in the decade's photobooks. In the oft-quoted story, Evans, perusing the files in the New York Public Library Photography Room, came across a photogravure of Paul Strand's *Blind Woman* from 1917 (figure 4.1). Reportedly taking the print from the institution, Evans left the library's halls overstimulated, having identified in the print the "stuff" of photography.[449] I review this story for its mythical

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[447] "Walker Evans," in *Documenting America, 1935-1943,* eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988), 128.
[448] Birgit Mayer and Michael Brix, *Walker Evans America* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 10. As the Yorkville series had no shooting script from the FSA's Roy Stryker or accompanying captions, the images' intended use remains unknown.
[449] James Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 75.

quality and to note that this formative experience occurred within the filing system of New York's Public Library. Under the stewardship of Ramona Javitz, the Photography Room was organized as an index of places, people, and objects. The goal of the collection was to put images to work, to allow visitors to see "and re-see the world."[450] While appreciating the artistic approach of Strand's image, this interaction informed Evans's understanding of the descriptive and indexical potential of photographs.

Conceiving of photography as the ideal mechanism through which to document and collect the world and its objects drove Evans's early work. During the first ten years of his career, the photographer's most common source of income was photographically cataloging objects exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art or creating an index of American everyday life while employed by the FSA.[451] Evans, himself a collector of vernacular photography, began amassing an impressive collection of picture postcards during his childhood.[452] By the 1930s, Evans had begun to organize his collection,

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[450] Mary Panzer, "Pictures at Work: Romana Javitz and the New York Public Library Picture Collection," *The 'Public' Life of Photographs,* ed. Thierry Gervais (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016), 110.

[451] One of Evan's earliest and most fruitful collaborations that dealt in the "past" was with early photography and art critic Lincoln Kirstein. Kirstein hired Evans to work with him on a project to record Victorian architecture in New England, exhibited at MoMA in 1933, *Walker Evans: Photographs of Nineteenth Century Houses* (1933). In that same year Evans photographed objects that were displayed in MoMA's *American Sources of Modern Art* (1933) organized by Holger Cahill and also photographed canvases of American Folk Art collected by Edith Halpert in her downtown gallery (Virginia-Lee Webb, *Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 29). Returning to the payroll of MoMA in 1935, Evans photographed over 500 objects that were included in the exhibition *African Negro Art* (1935).

[452] Jeff Rosenheim, "Folk Documents" *Walker Evans,* ed. Clément Chéroux (Prestel: Centre Pompidou and DelMonico Books, 2017), 21.

categorizing his ephemeral compendium by searchable terms. Curator Jeff Rosenheim has argued that Evans's deep interest in the picture postcard informed his photographic style as Evans emulated "the anonymous, antiesthetic, documentary quality" of the medium in his work, attempting to "duplicate [the] spirit" of the picture postcard.[453]

As evidenced by this practice, Evans's collection informed how he approached space, conceiving of one of his most popular tropes—the street—as it was rendered within a postcard. As the postcard functions as a pictorial representation of a place, Evans's collection is ephemeral proof of the artist's belief that space could be graphically captured and place could be collected and indexed. Evans himself had equated his photographic practice to the tradition of the collector, likening his capturing of streets and faces to the cataloging of the American experience.[454] Writing on a postcard that illustrates Bank Square in Fishkill-on-Hudson, New York, Evans noted the postcards' utilitarianism in subject, execution, and mood, concluding "indeed, transcending place, it rings a classic note on the theme of small-town main streets" (figure 4.2).[455] This postcard of a street corner exemplifies a strict spatial formula of frontal views, sparsely populated with townspeople and horse carriages. Evans's photograph of the corner of Sixty-First Street and First Avenue from his Yorkville series is reminiscent of this view (figure 4.3). The stores are illustrated directly, the central section of the intersection vacant, and the edges of the street are occupied by people and cars. In this graphic

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[453] Jeff Rosenheim, *Walker Evans and the Picture Postcard* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009), 19.
[454] Ibid., 17.
[455] Ibid., 82.

approach, as evaluated by Evans's own rubric, the Yorkville intersection similarly transcends place, offering a view of an archetypal intersection. Evans's desire to create images that "ring" with typicality is witnessed throughout the photographer's survey of Yorkville streets.

Evans's collecting participated in the nation-wide desire of the elite classes to collect art and culture in the post-war era.[456] Within this urge, a new group of collectors emerged who focused on the genre of American folk paintings. Historian Laurence Levine recognizes the decade of the Great Depression as a unique moment when Americans turned to the folk past, identifying the genre's simple forms and lines as an antidote to the current traumatic moment.[457] In contrast, Evans's collection did not laud the handmade (like contemporary collectors of folk painting) but rather upheld American culture of skyscrapers, movies, tabloids, postcards, and factory-made, mass-produced objects. Evans's collection evaded nostalgia and rather focused on the contemporary moment. By amassing the present, Evans recognized the United States as it turned from a rural to an industrial nation.[458]

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[456] "The Folk Art Idea" in Elizabeth Stillinger, *A Kind of Archeology: Collecting Folk Art, 1877-1976* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 3-53.
[457] Lawrence W. Levine, "The Historian and the Icon: Photography and the History of the American People in the 1930s and 1940s," *Documenting America, 1935-1943,* eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988), 28.
[458] Evans continued to collect into his last years of life, calling himself in 1971 "an incurable and inveterate collector," as his new collecting interest had turned, literally, to trash (Rosenheim, *Picture Postcard,* 35).

Collecting the United States: The Historic Section of the FSA

Evans's attention to American vernacular culture is glimpsed in his photographs produced under the Historical Section of the Resettlement Administration (renamed the Farm Security Administration in 1937), headed by Roy Stryker. The agency hired Evans in 1935, and he worked under its purview for eighteen months, except for a six-week hiatus in the summer of 1936.[459] The FSA, led by economist Rexford Tugwell, was created to help farmers and other workers in economically perilous positions by organizing resettlement and/or other forms of aid. The Historical Section was created to document the department's deeds to prove the agency's value. Stryker's Historical Section became a prolific photography agency of the New Deal, producing over 170,000 prints, archived in the division's files, later preserved at the Library of Congress. Stryker, steeped in John Dewey's progressive values and informed by the pictorial systems managed by Ramona Javitz and other information scientists of the era, considered the medium of photography as "art, as museum object, as archive, as visual history, as storytelling, and as document."[460] Cognizant of multiple photographic styles, Stryker began to assign informal shooting scripts, directing his photographers to picture certain subjects, actions, and traits within the towns and communities they were documenting,

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[459] During the summer of 1936 writer James Agee and Walker Evans traveled to Alabama to report on the lives of sharecroppers to be published in *Fortune*, most likely as part of the magazine's "Life and Circumstance" series. What resulted was an unwieldy text and series of images that were not suitable for magazine publication. The collaboration concluded in the book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

[460] Beverley Brannan, "To Make a Dent in the World," *FSA: The American Vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006), 16.

creating a nationwide dialogue that could "introduce America to Americans."[461] These images proved the necessity for relief and the worth of the agency, crafting a careful tension that documented need and hope.

The FSA production and archive were never neutral, working to identify who and what did *not* belong in America, particularly when legislation limiting immigration was enforced and governmental relief limited.[462] Post-war trauma, as well as the economic and agricultural crisis of the Great Depression, marked the 1930s as a decade of uprootedness and uncertainty. According to Alan Trachtenberg, the file, while in production and as a complete entity, functioned as evidence of America's existence, settling and securing a place for America.[463] By the later 1930s, the FSA turned its attention away from concentrating on the Depression's causalities and instead focused on the peoples and spaces that comprised America's small towns. This turn in photographic subject was brought on with the awareness that small-town life was slowly disappearing

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[461] Ibid., 14. According to Alan Trachtenberg, "the project was perhaps the greatest collective effort (though not the first) in the history of photo to mobilize resources to create a cumulative picture of a place and time: in Roy Stryker's words, 'to portray America." In "From Image to Story: Reading the File," *Documenting America, 1935-1943,* eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988), 58.

[462] These laws most directly affected the immigrant population of the city, a population already in decline since American ports were shut off to immigrants due to the 1924 passage of the Johnson-Reed Act which set quotas for immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. By the 1930s, more Jews, Italians, Lithuanians, Poles, Japanese and Chinese left the United States than arrived on its shores. Steven G. Koven and Frank Götzke, *American Immigration Policy: Confronting the Nation's Challenges* (New York: Springer, 2010), 133.

[463] Alan Trachtenberg, "From Image to Story: Reading the File," *Documenting America, 1935-1943,* eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988), 58.

due to the rise of mass culture, consumerism, and an increasingly industrial economy. Stryker, and the greater FSA, believed that focusing on this type of American life would pictorially reinforce dreams of American democracy at a time of great change and also act as a patriotic antidote to the ever-growing current of Fascism triumphing overseas.[464] With the destruction of rural culture due to the new industrial nation, the FSA archive could pictorially garner a sense of place to stand in for the nation. Formed within New Deal discourses that feared the dissolve of American culture, the images of the FSA functioned as a living archive that documented the past, present, and potential future of everyday American life.

As discussed in the introduction, the FSA's intention to produce a universalized notion of a sense of place to represent the nation was explored through different avenues as practiced by the agency's photographers. Not every Project photographer was as beholden to the ethos of the FSA as Evans—each photographer brought their own experience, vision, and ambitions. The Project employed photographers, the majority of whom were residents of New York or other large cities, to travel to rural communities to photograph the "worthy poor"—typically white and decidedly American. The photographers of the FSA were normally outsiders to the communities they were tasked to document. In contrast, the photographers of the Photo League and FAP turned their cameras to their city, if not their neighborhoods/community. This universalizing and potentially obliviating view is also witnessed in Evans's Yorkville series, taken in the

[464] John Raeburn, *Ben Shahn's American Scene: Photographs, 1938* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 1-4.

photographer's own city, that prompted a similarly typical and generic treatment of space that disregarded the individuality of the city's occupiers. The FSA archive's sophistication and use-value, contemporaneously and historically, is in the photographs' multivalent meanings as they were employed to reflect and produce a limited, largely Caucasian, decidedly American-born history. The New York projects studied here, in contrast, celebrate, to a degree, the diversity of the non-white and immigrant communities in America—African-American, Hispanic, Eastern European Jewish, and Italian and Irish Catholic.

Evans's *American Photographs*

This effort to identify, document, and uphold a sense of rootedness was a driving force dictating Evans's work for the FSA. Evans, perhaps the most established of the FSA photographers before his appointment with the agency, claimed to have informed Stryker's own understanding of photographic language while Stryker insisted his shooting scripts shaped Evans's documentary style. As seen in archival and visual evidence, Evans and Stryker's relationship was a collaboration, as Evans's photographs demonstrate what Stryker hoped the file *could* do, produce a universal panorama of America.

As hinted in this debate, Evans was a difficult employee and was let go from the agency in late 1937. After his dismissal, Evans kept in correspondence with Stryker. Their discussions were often vexed, though mutual respect underlines the curt writings. Evans, in need of a job in the summer of 1938, several months after his release from the

agency, took on a small assignment for Stryker's FSA—to document a number of blocks in Yorkville.[465] Simultaneous to this project, Evans was conceptualizing *American Photographs,* an exhibition and catalog that was shown and published by the Museum of Modern Art that centered around his FSA work.[466] In an analysis of the exhibition, the lesser considered realization of *American Photographs*, art historian Jessica May discusses how Evans arrested visual clues that were repeated throughout the American landscape, producing images that reinforced the national vocabulary of the FSA, "steadily building into the argument that the nation's culture was experiencing a historic transformation from local to national."[467]

This transference of local to national is also discussed in Lincoln Kirstein's epilogue to *American Photographs*, where he states, "the power of Evans work lies in the fact that he so details the effect of circumstances on familiar specimens that the single face, the single house, the single street, strikes with the strength of overwhelming numbers, the terrible cumulative forces of thousands of faces, houses and streets."[468] Equating Evans's process to a "disembodied burrowing eye," Kirstein notes how Evans employed this ghostly sense to discover America, with all its vulgarities. Kirsten also likens Evans's disembodied eye to that of Civil War photographer Mathew Brady's

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[465] *Documenting America, 1935-1943,* eds. Carl Fleischhauer and Beverly W. Brannan (Berkeley: University of California Press in association with the Library of Congress, 1988), 128.
[466] The exhibition was on view from September 28-November 18, 1938.
[467] Jessica May, "'The Work of an Artist': Walker Evans's *American Photographs*," *American Modern: Documentary Photography by Abbott, Evans, and Bourke-White* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 74.
[468] Lincoln Kirstein, *American Photographs* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 199.

unflinching, pure, and direct documentation of American history.[469] Kirstein and Evans were both enchanted with Brady's chronicling of America in crisis and identified a similar turmoil in the scenes Evans was tasked to photograph during the 1930s. Kirsten's text endeavors to align Evans's production, in subject and style, to the practice of the preeminent documentary photographer of the nineteenth century. By evoking Brady's documentary approach, Evans reemployed an American folk vision, photographically discovering a naïve authenticity in the country's contemporary spirit that harkened back to the era of "New Bedford ship-builders."[470]

As espoused in Kirstein's text and Evans's images, this dual effort attempted to canonize documentary photography that transcended progressive values (as seen in the work of Lewis Hine) and rather cemented documentary photography as a medium of vernacular expression. Through the unconscious eye of the camera, the photograph could mechanically reveal America's cultural exceptionalism. The folk paintings that Evans was cataloging and the collecting practices of his contemporaries informed Evans's photographic practice, as he engaged the folk's "anonymous, primitive and genuine self-expression," producing works that were beholden to his own vision, as well as the nation itself.[471] Evans's (and Kirstein's) use of the "folk" diverges from the use of the term as

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[469] Ibid., 195, "Walker Evans is giving us the contemporary civilization of eastern America and its dependencies as Atget gave us Paris before the war and as Brady gave us the War between the states."
[470] Ibid., 199.
[471] Sarah M. Miller, "'Simplicity and Directness' How Documentary Photography was Born from Writing Photography's History in the 1930s," *Subjective Objective: A Century of Social Photography,* ed. André Zervigón (New Brunswick: Zimmerli Art Museum, 2017), 64 and Sarah M. Miller "'Inventing 'Documentary' in American Photography, 1930-1945," PhD Diss. (University of Chicago, 2009), 153-198.

related to the other photographers examined in this dissertation, particularly to the "folk" practice of Grossman and Libsohn. As I argued in my third chapter, in the Photo League's ethos and practice, inducing the idea of the folk augmented a photographer's effort to produce images that discovered and excavated the authentic experience of the local, as photographs were valued for their communicability and specificity. The *Chelsea Document* attended to that call to discover, excavate, and unveil the authenticity of a place distinct to its occupiers, while Evans's Yorkville series employed a folk vision to produce culture as representative of the nation. The Photo League, as well as the work produced under the FAP, used their photographs to discover the *local* while Evans employed a folk vision to discern a universalized vision of the *nation*.

Writing on Evans's oeuvre in 1971, Museum of Modern Art curator John Szarkowski notes, "individually, the photographs of Walker Evans evoke an incontrovertible sense of specific places. Collectively, they evoke the sense of America."[472] This evocation, particular to Evans's approach, was explored in the 2017 retrospective on Evans that identified the photographer's style as rooted in his passionate search for vernacular culture. In the accompanying catalog, curator Clément Chéroux reviewed the origins of the term "vernacular," as rooted to "function, place and spirit."[473] In this sense, the vernacular of the 1930s would no longer be homemade but factory-made, bound to the place of the nation, supplanting the local. This attention to vernacular

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[472] John Szarkowski, *Walker Evans* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1971), 20.
[473] Clément Chéroux, "The Art of the Oxymoron: The Vernacular Style of Walker Evans" *Walker Evans,* ed. Clément Chéroux (Prestel: Centre Pompidou and DelMonico Books, 2017), 9.

is witnessed in Evans's concentration on photographing amorphous space, anonymous faces, and mass-produced, factory-made objects as hosted in and on *American Photographs'* pages and walls (figure 4.4). In this installation view from the exhibition, posters and graffiti patterns proliferate the brick and concrete walls that bordered streets and towns across America. This shot of the exhibition, captured by Evans, also discloses the photographer's likening of his photographic practice to that of folk-expression. Evans's negatives are cropped, enlarged, and permanently affixed to the museum's walls—beholden to the space of the exhibition and functioning as views revealing the nation's spirit. Art historian Svetlana Alpers argues in the 2017 catalog, "Evans photographic style matched the aesthetic style of his world. It is not individual vernacular objects, but the look they shared—in other words, it is the vernacular aesthetic of America that he attended to."[474] Evans used the camera as a producer of vernacular-documents, to create his inventory of the nation, a nation comprised of anonymous space and people. Evans's decades-long collecting habit informed his attention to the vernacular "aesthetic" of New York's city streets, capturing spaces as untethered and unembodied. The photographs ring with typicality, transcending place to reveal a nation.

On Yorkville Streets

Examining this Yorkville survey produced in August of 1938 reveals Evans's attempt to use his Leica to collect the spaces of the city street. In this process, Evans

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[474] Svetlana Alpers, "Evans' Eye," *Walker Evans,* ed. Clément Chéroux (Prestel: Centre Pompidou and DelMonico Books, 2017), 54.

frames the built environment and its occupiers to emphasize the street's ubiquity, its placelessness—producing a space that embodies American urbanity as opposed to an experienced place. The series was created in Manhattan's southern Yorkville district, East Sixty-First, Sixty-Second, and Sixty-Third Streets, between First and Third Avenues, just thirty blocks south of Evans's Upper East Side apartment. The photographer's interest in capturing a city street predates this review by at least four years, as seen in an unsent letter penned by the photographer, intended for his agent Ernestine Evans. In the letter, Evans, a compulsive list-maker, details his interest in producing a picture book on the "typical" American city street. Evans was after:

> People, all classes, surrounded by bunches of the new down-and-out.
> Automobiles and the automobile landscape.
> Architecture, American urban taste, commerce, small scale, large scale, the city street atmosphere, the street smell, the hateful stuff, women's clubs, fake culture, bad education, religion in decay.
> The movies.
> Evidence of what the people of the city read, eat, see for amusement, do for realization and not get it.
> Sex.
> Advertising
> A lot else, you see what I mean.[475]

In the Yorkville group, Evans attends to these themes: magazines, toys, shops, cars, people sitting, walking, talking, political and movie posters, and shop signs, among other subjects and objects. While this list includes intangible concepts and ideas, it reveals Evans's impulse to catalog all that is present on a typical city street. This compulsion, coupled with Evans's collecting instinct, tells Evans's assumption that space could be comprehensibly captured. The topics Evans lists could stand in as classification cards for

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[475] Jerry L. Thompson, *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 98.

his own postcard collection and also act as an index to the FSA's photographic library, underscoring the archival nature of Evans's photographic practice and vision.

While Evans's interest in documenting city spaces was not unique, as witnessed in the many city surveys produced during the decade, photographers typically approached the city with a less programmatic methodology. Examining Berenice Abbott's work plan to capture New York City reveals the very literalness of Evans's approach. Abbott deliberated, "What tangible and visible sign of [the city's] life shall be seized on and transmuted into the permanent form of the photograph?"[476] Abbott's questions of the street reveal her less formulaic approach as she was after "city life" in all its forms. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn's 1938 documentary photography class held at the Photo League (concurrent to their study of Chelsea, the production of Abbott's "Changing New York," and Evans's Yorkville series) similarly discussed what a photographer ought to picture while producing a street study. Following the creed, "photography has a social function, this function has a historical and cultural basis, photographs should have a personal as well as a social and aesthetic significance," the League's students were pushed to contemplate the best ways to photograph the city.[477] Grossman and Libsohn urged, "We must not only be aware of the external aspects, but of the factors which have determined the particular type of architecture, the gaping spaces between houses, and the

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[476] Abbott quoted in Terri Weissman, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 123.
[477] Syllabus and readings for a workshop in Photo Technique and Documentary Photography, Sol Libsohn archive, Roosevelt, New Jersey.

boarded-up fronts of condemned blocks of houses."[478] This conceptual approach solicits practitioners to break down borders and approach space beyond its formal dimensions.

Evans's more objective and object-based list is less organic and linked to a preconceived idea of American vernacular space and culture as defined by *the photographer,* creating what John Tagg identifies as Evans's "unflinching inventory."[479] Evans's formulaic, controlled approach catalogs the city as beholden to a set configuration as determined by the photographer, creating an orderly catalog that disregards collaboration or reciprocation between photographer and subject, and photographer and space, as seen in the projects of the FAP and Photo League explored in the past three chapters. This inventory is witnessed in the photographs of Yorkville and the series shooting sequence—commencing with wide views of the neighborhood and progressing to more focused shots of peoples and storefronts. Evans, while traversing the eastern edge of the block, captured scenes of the opposing side, implicating himself in a practice of distanced surveillance. Evans observed that same spatial organization and approach when he traversed the street. This script lacks spatial spontaneity as Manhattan's grid guided Evans—the lattice framework dictated his stance within the urban landscape. With this approach, we see Evans's focus on the *spaces* of the city, but due to the photographer's programmatic methodology, the socially lived place is lost.

Turning to the images, the sequence oscillates between large, panoramic shots of the urban landscape, spanning sidewalks, the street, and urban structures, to street signs

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[478] Ibid.
[479] John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 326.

labeling the particular block (figures 4.5 and 4.6). The establishing shots oftentimes structurally and pictorially resemble the picture postcards Evans collected that were exceedingly frontal and static. Eventually, the survey moves from establishing shots to focus on details of the façades of apartments, shop windows, and the religious frontages of the urban environment—sites that structure daily life. While these establishing shots could be read as inscribing a specificity of place within the series, I read them as prescribing the street as bounded and defined by the geometry of the New York City grid.

This photograph centered around an East Sixty-First Street street sign includes additional signs requiring one-way vehicular traffic and outlawing parking on a certain side of the street (figure 4.6). Below these restrictions are mass-produced signs that identify the regulator of this space, the city's police department. The police department oversaw the street and controlled the street's structure—the grid, implemented by the hegemonic powers of the municipality. New York City's grid was known for its latent, destructive power as its continued growth north ignored previously settled areas and disregarded the topography of Manhattan Island.[480] Framing these streets as classified by their assigned latitude presents the landscape as managed by intangible powers rather than neighborhood occupiers. The inclusion of street signs, reinforced in Evans's

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[480] For more information about the commissioners plan of 1811 for the New York Grid see Hilary Ballon, *The Greatest Grid: The Master Plan of Manhattan, 1811-2011* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). Planning has been anchored to this grid in continuously destructive methods as seen in the Regional Plan of New York and its Environs (1929-1931) that aimed to transform all of Manhattan to an industrial downtown and remove all immigrant neighborhoods. See Robert Fishman "The Regional Plan and the Transformation of the Industrial Metropolis," *Landscapes of Modernity,* eds. David Ward and Oliver Zunz (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1992) 106-126.

procedural vision, reveals the blocks as dictated and inscribed by city planners. Writing on his experiences in what he termed the Manhattan desert in 1946, Jean-Paul Sartre commented on the directional power of the city's network, "in New York you never get lost; a glance suffices to show that you are on the East Side, at the corner of Fifty-Second Street and Lexington. But this spatial precision is not accompanied with sentimental precision. In the numerical anonymity of the streets and avenues I am simply anyone."[481] This grid's inherent anonymity, as evoked by Sartre, is graphically present in Evans's review that prioritizes the labeled street and disregards the "sentimental precision" that encapsulates those labeled spaces.

This anonymity, focus on structure, and lack of sentimental place is accentuated in Evans's inventory of the surfaces and materiality that form the urban landscape. Many photographs in the series capture buildings' façades, emphasizing the monotonous nature of construction, such as the recurring rectangular shape of bricks and the gridded, iron fire escapes. In this photograph, the interplay of the fire escapes and their shadows is overlaid on an apartment buildings' bricked surface, creating a geometric pattern that collapses the built environment into two-dimensions, a flatness that is echoed within the photograph's similarly horizontal surface (figure 4.7). The windows' triangular curtains are opened, creating a conversation with the building's windows' squared and rectangular panes. Irregularities of potted plants and laundry are common enough occurrences that their arbitrary placement creates a design within the geometric façade. The following image in the sequence is a continuation of these façades, broken up with the presence of a

[481] Sartre, "Manhattan Desert," 104.

woman with her head and elbows leaning out a third-story window (figure 4.8). The ladder of the fire escape again repeats the rectangular shapes of the urban environment, its shadows tracing the bricks of the buildings, collapsing the multitude of textures and depths into a planar surface. The woman's existence is incapable of preventing this collapse of dimensions, as her presence is unengaging and disregarded by the photographer. Evans's work foregrounds the abstraction of space, collecting the rectangular bricks, gridded fire escapes, designed shadows, and patterned light of the urban landscape, making these spaces abstracted and itemized. The photographs foreground the space's materiality and structure as the block is defined by its urban character. By disregarding presence, Evans measures and registers the spaces of the block, framing the neighborhood as a pictorial space and disregarding its lived places.

Evans's attention to surface and materiality is also present in images that focus on the neighborhood's citizens. In these stills illustrating people perched on a stoop, window, or enclosed within a sidewalk square, Evans rarely images subjects in movement—children tend to hold their play-things, adults are oftentimes shown alone, storefronts are bounded and separate, and outdoor markets are not manned or patronized (figures 4.9 and 4.10). Within the survey, Evans typically emphasizes distance between the subjects themselves and also between Evans, his subjects, and the landscape. Viewers seldom make eye contact with the photographer, and Evans often frames his images to include physical boundaries—a wall, a fence—to reiterate his distanced looking (figure

4.11).[482] In this photograph of a storefront, the window acts as a barrier, reflecting the nondescript buildings from across the street rather than suggesting the continuation of space in the store's interior (figure 4.12). People sitting on apartment stoops hold open doors that lead into voids of darkness, visually reinforcing the photographer's unwillingness to discover the subjects' interior lives (figure 4.13). The block's trash can lids are shut, the newspapers tightly folded, the elevated train lines unoccupied—Evans is unable to excavate place within the street (figures 4.14 and 4.17). While a dilapidated poster for mayoral candidate Jerimiah T. Mahoney offers a hint of action or change, the photographic object exists as a fossilized remnant of a time that is past, already tattered, as soon as the sun moves along the sidewalk (figure 4.15). The block is unyielding, impenetrable to its inhabitants' social activities, and rather persists as generic, urban, open space.

Examining a project produced by Rudy Burckhardt, Evans's contemporary, on midtown streets, reveals that a photographer need not be socially minded or "of the people" to produce studies that interrogate the interplay of space, place, and occupiers. This type of shared dimensionality and attention to the emotional experience of urban space remains uninvestigated within Evans's series as he rather defines space as unfeeling and unyielding. Burckhardt, a New Yorker by way of Switzerland, came to the city during the height of the Great Depression. The artist was enamored with the action

[482] Tagg discusses this distance as, "in Evans's image, meaning is held back, seemingly less by the photographer than by the objects themselves, from which the viewer is cut off by an uncertain distance that reintroduces the presence of the lens between the eye and the scene," (John Tagg, *The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 173).

and spontaneity of New York's streets, compared to his aristocratic upbringing in Basel. After a number of years observing the pedestrian dance of traversing blocks, Burckhardt, working independently, took his camera to the streets to capture this choreography. Self-published in a photographic album titled *New York, N. Why?*, accompanied with poetry by American critic and poet Edwin Denby, Burckhardt produced photos that abstracted the city street, capturing rhythmic performativity inherent within the collective spaces of the sidewalk and crosswalk.[483] Denby's poetic language bolsters Burkhardt's meditation on city occupiers, displaying how their serendipitous actions shape the urban landscape, revealing the reciprocal relationship between place and subjects. This page from the 1939 album includes four photographs of pedestrians standing and walking. Burckhardt frames himself as united with the peoples he images, in occupation and use of the city (figure 4.16). The photograph on the lower left of the page is captured from a lowered vantage point, intensifying the connection between bodies and space, while the remaining three images, captured from eye-level, underscore Burckhardt's existence and persistence on the city street. While Burckhardt does not offer portraits of the street's occupiers (many heads are cut off), his instinctive images illustrate how bodies, their presence and posture take up space as they act upon and within the urban landscape. Burckhardt's association with the streets reiterates a city subject's role as an actor, a shaper of place. While it is

[483] According to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the full title of the album is, "New York, N. Why? Photographs by Rudolf Burckhardt. Poems by Edwin Denby, ca. 1939", accession number 1972.585.1–.29. Phillip Lopate and Vincent Katz, *Rudy Burckhardt* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2004), 17.

unclear exactly where Burckhardt is making his photographs, the place he captures is nonetheless unique, felt, and emoted, beyond geometric dimensions.

The placelessness inherent in Evans's study is emphasized when we turn to Yorkville stills that concentrate on the people that inhabit the neighborhood. Evans oftentimes turned his camera to window sills and the junction between buildings and sidewalks. Levitt transformed these areas on the edge into spots of imagination. In Eagle and Robbins's *One Third of a Nation*, these thresholds were transformed into places of communication while Grossman and Libsohn's *Chelsea Document* employed the site of the in-between as an embodied perch from which to view the city. In contrast, Evans's survey offers closely cropped views of these spaces, accenting the stillness and objectification of the threshold, the edge of the "in-between." In this photograph, Evans images a row of tightly lidded trash cans that stand adjacent to a basement entrance bordering a building's wall (figure 4.17). Later in the series, a woman is photographed sitting on a wooden chair with legs, along with her own, resting on an uneven basement door (figure 4.18). The woman is shown still, holding a handkerchief to her face (perhaps shielding herself from the camera). Her arms and legs are crossed, correspondingly closed off to the photographer as the tightly closed lids of the trash cans. Evans, approaching the woman from the same vantage point as in his photograph of the trash cans, aligns her posture with that of the metal barrels—objectifying and distilling her personhood and likening her to an object of urbanity. This similar objectification occurs in the series that discloses the space of the windowsill. In one photograph, a windowsill is decorated with overflowing potted plants (figure 4.19). Proceeding that view is a

photograph of a woman on a windowsill, occupying the boundaries of that same space (figure 4.20). This sequence unites the woman's body with the window decorations, objectifying, or fossilizing her presence. In inspecting how Evans pictures the thresholds demarcated within the urban landscape, we witness Evans's transference of person to object. Evans's camera chronicles how the subject's presence alters the structure of the space, the sidewalk or the sill, rather than how their occupation of that liminal space transforms the sill or sidewalk in a social or practiced sense.

As witnessed in the proceeding pairings, Evans's survey chronicles similar spaces as those explored in the previous chapters, such as windowsills, thresholds, and sidewalks. But within Evans's series, the urban fabric is underlined. Photographs attend to the concrete street, the iron stoop banisters, the brick buildings, rather than the social occupation of those urban spaces. The Yorkville series holds many photographs of the neighborhood's stoops, yet Evans focuses on its structure and materiality. In this photograph, a young Italian boy leans against the stoop's banister, standing at the meeting point of the stoop and the sidewalk (figure 4.21). He stares intently at the photographer while a younger boy behind him, sitting on the stairs, holds a magazine and shares the same look with the photographer. Another friend is cut off within the frame, standing on the sidewalk, while the imposing body of the main subject obscures the final compatriot. While this centered boy is certainly gazing back, his posture allies his body with the structure of the city, literally embedded it into its construction.

Young boys similarly occupy the stoop in Levitt's photographic series of chalk drawings (figure 4.22). In this photograph, a young boy looks up towards the

photographer making eye contact with the camera's lens, though with a less intense gaze than that of Evans's subject. Rather than presenting the boy as stationary, Levitt frames the boy in action as he transforms the sidewalk into his own imagined landscape. In this sense, Levitt's subject persists in a reality that expands beyond the literal matter of the flagstone sidewalk and concrete stoop. While Evans's subject may oversee the stoop, he practices that surveillance by aligning with the built environment, echoing the street's urbanity. In examining Levitt's treatment of space, she framed her subject as a place maker, as he transcends the urban reality of the street and endures in a landscape of his own making.

As discussed in chapter one, Levitt and Evans were friends, co-workers, and neighbors in the late 1930s. Levitt initially became familiar with Evans's work from his photographs that illustrated Carlton Beaton's *Crimes of Cuba* (1933) and sought out Evans in late 1937 to show him her work.[484] In one meeting in Evans's Ninety-Second Street apartment, Levitt also met James Agee, who was excited by her photographs and later wrote the forward to her photobook *A Way of Seeing*. This group of artistically minded friends also opened the door for Levitt to meet art historian, MoMA employee, and film-maker Janice Loeb.[485] Through these relationships and with Evans's encouragement to work for the FAP, Levitt became more acquainted with the art world

[484] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 54.
[485] Eventually Levitt, Agee, and Loeb collaborated on the 1952 (shot in the late 1940s) film *In the Street* that focused on children's play on the street.

and advanced her maturity as an artist.[486] By the late 1930s, Levitt and Evans were photographing the streets of New York together, and Evans hired Levitt as a darkroom assistant, paying Levitt with access to his enlarger and darkroom.[487] The evidence of this relationship is seen in the Evans archives that misattributes a number of Levitt's chalk drawing prints to Evans (figure 4.23). As his assistant, Levitt printed many of Evans's photographs for his 1938 exhibition *American Photographs*, and the two began photographing the subways together, Levitt acting as model multiple times through the subterranean sojourn and also taking her own photographs.[488]

Comparing their work to that produced by the Photo League and other members of the FAP, it is clear Evans and Levitt were united in their apolitical stance and concern in relating their photographic practice to modernist art discourses of the time. In attending to the formal qualities of their surveys, both were interested in flattening or abstracting city spaces. Concentrating on its materiality and repeated shapes and rhythms, Evans's Yorkville series compressed the city space. This leveling made the entrance into the world of the street more graphic and less three-dimensional, diminishing the street's presence as a multifaceted place and accentuating its spatial planeness. In contrast, Levitt's study is more humanistic. She typically focused on singular chalk drawings, exposing the sketches as curious, flat worlds that she framed as places and thresholds of

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[486] Maria Morris Hambourg, "Helen Levitt: A Life in Part," *Helen Levitt* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 55.
[487] James Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 382-83.
[488] Helen Levitt, David Campany, Marvin Hoshino, and Thomas Zander, *Manhattan Transit: The Subway Photographs of Helen Levitt* (Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König, 2017).

action (imagined and real), offering a social dimensionality to her photographs. Evans's series rather continually focused on urbanity's spatial materiality, as he transformed people into objects, attending to and accentuating algorithmic space.

Evans's interest in flattening the dimensionality and transience of the block is clear in his photographs that reveal the elevated train line that traversed Second Avenue (figures 4.24 and 4.6). Evans captured these photographs by looking up towards the tracks, spotlighting the path's veined existence, superimposed atop a cloudless sky. In the survey, the tracks are empty, with no sign of the train or humans that the tracks transport. They reveal a quiet skeletal overpass that shadows the city streets. Within the images of the elevated, the lines and stripes of its structure are intensified, again prioritizing construction. Returning to Sartre, the author describes New York's planar structure as "all of New York is thus stripped with parallel, uncommunicable meaning."[489] The literal lines of the elevated train path, like the city's grid, may orient the viewer within the island (the entire island, not the neighborhood), but they preclude the potential to communicate space. These parallel lines could be anywhere and nowhere, anonymous space, structured by unknowable stripes.

Comparing this structure to the elevated as it appears in the *Chelsea Document* reveals how Grossman and Libsohn inscribed their dedication to personalized history and memory, the embodiment of place, within the technologies that structure the city. In their series, they photograph the train as moving, as well as the tracks in the process of removal. The photographers took snapshots from the train, looking down into the street,

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[489] Sartre, "Manhattan Desert," 104.

as the photographers and riders are suspended in limbo (figure 4.25). In this photograph, Grossman and Libsohn chronicle the demolition of the elevated tracks as they photograph obsolescence in the making, calling on their role as city archeologists, discovering the multiple temporalities of the street. This image transfixes and underlines this moment of change, as it remains unclear in this singular image if the train line is being built or leveled. This change is witnessed by builders, pedestrians, and dwellers underscoring how the literal creation or deconstruction of a place informs memory.[490] With this revelation, the street's unbounded space is inscribed with history, memory, and meaning, creating a place that is owned, occupied, and shaped by neighborhood dwellers and photographers. The *Chelsea Document* photographs humanize the elevated system shown as a living, breathing presence within the neighborhood, a developing and moving feature of urban space that dictates how people understand and travel through their environment. In instances where the tracks are being removed, the human element of construction is reiterated. The images that are taken from aboard the train, looking down to the city, re-inscribe the human vantage point from which the elevated city is examined. Evans's series focuses on the structural, material value of the train, while in the *Chelsea Document,* the elevated is anthropologically assessed.

Evans also removed the human element of the urban landscape when depicting the neighborhood's alleyways. Evans framed these interstitial spaces as closed, bounded by a door or a wall that obfuscates the interior spaces from view. Comparatively, Eagle

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[490] Janet Donohoe, *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), 4.

and Robbins framed the omnipresent alleyways in *One Third of a Nation* to express the transformative potential of the marginal space, converting it into a humanist treasure chest, a labyrinth, as well as a modernist study of rhythm, shape, lightness, and darkness. In this photograph from *One Third of a Nation*, the photographers fully insert themselves into the space between buildings as they photograph a group of young boys hanging out of windows and playing on fire escapes (figure 4.26). The boys are in the midst of action, precariously perched, but their strength in numbers eradicates the danger of their play, empowering their presence. Multiple prints from the survey capture the boys in various stages of play in this backyard theater, posed in front of a building's open doorway and at the threshold of a basement entrance. These numerous prints and the shared gazes between the children and the photographers create an established rapport, as the boys permit the photographers to capture their imagined playground. The boys' play transforms the gridded fire escapes and debris-strewn yard into a western frontier. Furthermore, the presence of the laundry in the background of this photograph alludes to the fact that this space, the alley between the back of buildings, is already in use by the women of the neighborhood. The children and women of the neighborhood have granted the photographers access to this ignored pocket of New York City so that they may witness how space is transformed into a playground and washroom.

In contrast to Eagle and Robbins, Evans's images in Yorkville have removed and discontinued any potential to understand these spaces in human terms, as Evans has stressed the psychological distance between himself and the space he depicts. This photograph is framed on three sides by the brick walls of buildings and a fence (figure

4.27). Evans used the structure of the built environment to create a physical barrier between himself and the interior space, advertising his exclusion from the backyard. Looking up from the partition, a blank sky overlain with laundry lines occupies the majority of the print. This photograph emphasizes absence, as the laundry, while hung by a person, resembles disembodied ghosts floating in the cloudless sky. The photograph, frontally framed, reveals the building's windows and fire escapes from an oblique angle, precluding any potential action that would be viewed in those liminal sites. The most pronounced line of wash in the lower register of the image holds clothing that progresses from dark to light as the image moves from right to left, transforming this print into a formal exploration of gradients. With this quality, the shapes and colors of urbanity are foregrounded while the people and places are obstructed or prohibited from view. Evans's attention to the spatial structure as imposed by the built environment reiterates his exploration of space as geometrically organized rather than practiced or physically experienced. In this sense, these walls that hide the interior spaces of the neighborhood continually keep the viewer from entering the neighborhood's real place, rather persisting in the anterior space of the street.

In the work of Arnold Eagle and David Robbins under the FAP as well as the production of Grossman and Libsohn for the Photo League, the practitioners were beholden to their progressive and leftist political aims, believing the photographic medium, their labor, could be employed to change policy. Holger Cahill, the head of the FAP, espoused similar beliefs to the progressive values of John Dewey that identified art as an ideal medium through which to communicate the experience of everyday life. Both

Eagle and Robbins, informed by Cahill's leadership, were also members of the Photo League, ascribing to Grossman and Libsohn's leftist agenda. League members saw in their photographs an ethical duty to reveal the world to those who refused to see its truths. Grossman and Libsohn, as well as their fellow League members, identified a similar approach and ambition in the work of the FSA photographers, demeaned by Ansel Adams as "sociologists with cameras."[491] The League exhibited the work of the FSA, including Evans's work, hosted lectures by Roy Stryker, and collected *American Photographs* in its library.[492] While it is unclear if Evans visited the Federal Art Gallery to see Eagle and Robbins's photographs of the Lower East Side or the Photo League to view the documentation of Chelsea, Evans was aware of the work of the League and knew photographers from the FAP.[493]

Ben Shahn, a fellow FSA photographer and former studio-mate of Walker Evans, also turned his lens to document New York City streets, including a series on children's play in the first half of the 1930s.[494] While typically focused on the lower classes, Shahn's photographic work tried to avoid stereotypes and instead brought a humanist perspective to his subjects. Often making un-posed, animated images, Shahn used a right-angle viewfinder that hid where he was focusing his lens (similar to Helen Levitt). Shahn never spoke on the potential deception of this lens, believing that his photographs were

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[491] Beverly Brannan and Gilles Mora, *FSA: The American Vision* (New York: Abrams, 2006), 168.
[492] *Photo Notes,* October 1938, 2; August, 1938, 1; April 1939, 1; March-April, 1940, 1.
[493] Jerry L. Thompson, *Walker Evans at Work* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 107.
[494] Elizabeth Gand, "The Poetics and Politics of Children's Play: Helen Levitt's Early Work," PhD diss., (University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 45.

for the greater social good.[495] While Shahn's photographs emphasize action, his New York City subjects are framed, their presence reanimated, by the built environment. This photograph from 1936 shows the interplay of subjects, space, and social conditions (figure 4.28). Focusing on the front window of a kosher chicken market on the Lower East Side, Shahn shares the same psychic and physical space as his three subjects. There is a suggestion of direct engagement with these figures, as the man furthest to the right looks at the camera lens. Motion and movement are suggested in the middle figures blurred face, and action is insinuated in the interior of the store. The figures' placement in front of the store links their identity to the space of the shop, but we see the sites as symbiotic, as the scene is structured to relate the store, the subjects, and the photographer.[496]

Shahn's later FSA work is similarly humanistic as his New York City street scenes, particularly a series he made in Ohio, contemporaneously to Evans's study of Yorkville. This study, an anomaly in FSA production in that Shahn visited the area for an extended time (most photographers only photographed sites for a few days), adhered to Stryker's shooting script in focusing on the life of small-town America.[497] Shahn's series

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[495] Laura Katzman, Deborah Martin Kao, and Jenna Webster, *Ben Shahn's New York: The Photography of Modern Times* (Cambridge: Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, 2000), 23.
[496] Sara Blair and Eric M. Rosenberg, *Trauma and Documentary Photography of the FSA* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 92.
[497] It is debated if Shahn actually was following Stryker's small town script (described in the introduction) as he denies having any type of strict guidance. John Raeburn in *Ben Shahn's American Scene* argues persuasively that Shan's Ohio survey corresponds very closely with Stryker's script, making it seem as though Shahn was at least familiar with the prescriptive documentary method (even if he used it to rebel against). *Ben Shahn's American Scene: Photographs, 1938* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 8-13.

reveals the town as strong and durable, emphasizing not abundance but a sense of comfortability. In scenes of comfort and routine, Shahn carefully frames the everyday activity of small-town life in a manner that prioritizes respect for subjects and space. Even in glimpses of the townspeople's impoverished lives, Shahn garners a sympathetic yet respectful handling of his subjects. In this photograph of a man selling pencils along Main Street in Lancaster, Ohio, Shahn meets his subject (figure 4.29). The man is sitting on the ground, at the meeting of two buildings. Yet, Shahn captures him from nearly eye-level, avoiding the patronizing downcast gaze so frequently employed in social documentary photography of the decade. The man is framed between stores that boast goods for sale with windows that advertise photographs of lovely women and children. The man is dressed neatly, a would-be patron of those stores if not for the unfortunate economics brought on by the Depression. Shahn's subject is a victim of circumstance, able to improve his position under the proper conditions.

Evans dissented from these discourses that attended to the photograph's social value and staunchly considered his FSA work as beyond propaganda. In negotiating his government position, Evans demanded, "never [to] make photographic statements for the government or do photographic chores for gov or anyone in gov, no matter how powerful—this is pure record not propaganda. The value, and, if you like even the propaganda value for the government lies in the record itself which in the long run will prove an intelligent and farsighted thing to have done. NO POLITICS whatever."[498] Evans saw the social value of his work within his role as collector or archivist, not in the

[498] James Mellow, *Walker Evans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 256.

propagandistic use of the images at the moment they were produced. Evans prioritized a documentary style indebted to the work of Brady and the qualities of his picture postcard collection above communicability, the hallmark of the photographic production under the FAP and Photo League.

The difference in Evans's approach and intent compared to the other three case studies examined in this dissertation in terms of their historical, political, and artistic meanings is further complicated when considering the afterlife of the Yorkville project. Since its production, the photographs have lived in the files of the FSA at the Library of Congress, refiled under the new system imposed by Paul Vanderbilt as Lot 962.[499] In Levitt's photographs, the spatial and political dimensions of her photographed imagined landscapes are underlined in the text surrounding her works, published in *Look* and *PM*. Arnold Eagle and David Robbins's *One Third of a Nation* was exhibited at the Federal Art Gallery, used to augment union meetings, published in *Shelter* magazine, and illustrated congressional reports that argued for improved public housing. The *Chelsea Document* was exhibited at the Photo League as well as neighborhood settlement houses, similarly arguing for an increase in the neighborhood's public housing. In all three cases, the surveys were employed for local purposes, potentially seen by the image's subjects, a possibility that reinforces the role of the photograph itself as a shaper of place. The

[499] For more information about the initial filing system of the FSA and Paul Vanderbilt's reassessment of the file in 1942 see "The FSA-OWI collection," *Documenting America*, 330.

images from Yorkville remained unused for any social or political pursuits and are typically discussed as relating to Evans's photographic practice and oeuvre.[500]

In this Yorkville sequence, Evans's attempted to capture and collect the spaces of New York City streets as a facsimile of an American city. Evans's attention to the built environment's materiality, the repeated shapes and patterns, worked to collapse the street from an inhabited place into a two-dimensional, collectible space. Evans used repeated configurations of spatial patterns to transform the street's occupiers into objects of decoration, attending to how space is structured rather than how occupiers are able to

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[500] This series is not the singular example of Evans's interest in depicting the lives, homes, and streets of city citizens. In 1934 Evans's assisted New York City Housing Authority's Lyman Paine to select photographs for the Museum of Modern Art Exhibition *Housing Exhibition of the City of New York* (R. Woudstra, "Exhibiting Reform: MoMA and the Display of Public Housing (1932–1939)," *Architectural Histories*, 6(1), 15.) The photographs Evans chose, as reviewed in Chapter one, were typically evidentiary and focused on the built environment rather than its occupiers. (Also, in 1937, while employed by the FSA, Evans collaborated with photographer (and former studio-mate) Ben Shahn to propose a plan to produce a documentary film on the greenbelt housing projects of the WPA.) Falling in this same vein, Evans and Agee had planned (after producing *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) to create a text/photograph document project that focused on the plight of the urban poor (a similar goal of *One Third of a Nation* and the *Chelsea Document*). We can see what may have been the beginning of that project in an article published in an August 1939 issue of *Harpers Bazar* titled "2196 families are living in the Williamsburg and Harlem river housing projects" written by Katherine Hamill and illustrated with five photographs by Evans. The project documents two families living in public housing and stresses the inequities of the Public Housing system as it was exclusionary to the city's most poor. The photographs are posed, mostly taken from inside the homes. Many of the images focus on objects within the house—particularly decorations on walls and tables. In one image, a young girl proudly shows off her poster of Joe Lewis, marking the spaces as individualized by the occupants. But the sterile text that details incinerators and vermin protocol is underscored by stiff and stoic images of the building's inhabitants. Even in published images, Evans's photographs do little to reveal the personhood of the subjects and livability of the spaces, as an indifferent glance is shared between the subjects and the photographer and the homes remain generic.

shape and create place. Furthermore, the attention to boundaries, structures, and distance within the series exemplified Evans's preoccupation with dimensionality rather than sociality, as his survey showed a typical, ubiquitous city space that transcended place so as to reveal the nation. This transfer of dimensionality is then reiterated in the photographic process and its decades-long participation in the FSA archive as the images continually reinforce the flatness of city space.

Afterthoughts

This is not to say that Evans had no interest in the cultural context of his photographs of New York or America. Writing on *American Photographs* in 1938*,* The Museum of Modern Art's Executive Director Thomas Mabry commented on the omnipresence of Evans's photographs as witnessed in a view of a Pennsylvania small town. Mabry noted, "look across the river, down into Easton, PA. I think it is a spring day. The whole town lives there, I was not born in Pennsylvania, nor in a city, and yet I think I must have been born here."[501] William Carlos Williams similarly identified the traversal between the exacting and the collective so apparent in Evans's work, "because being so particularly of that place makes them universal."[502] In this sense, Evans's photographs evoke a place, a place that can be a home to each viewer. Through exposing

[501] Thomas Mabry, "Walker Evans' Photographs of America," Book review of *American Photographs. Harper's Bazaar* 71 (Nov. 1, 1938), 85.
[502] William Carlos Williams, "Sermon with a Camera," Book review of *American Photographs. New Republic* 96 (Oct. 12, 1938), 282.

the commonplace and the vernacular, Evans captured a place distinct to all, prompting a connection that linked viewers to their literal birthplace.

The photographers I examined in the first three chapters of my dissertation focused on the city's liminal and communal pockets as those oft-ignored spaces were open for occupation by the disenfranchised and marginalized classes. The ambiguity of these spaces allowed the occupiers to claim ownership in a contested landscape. The photographers' continual attention to these spaces revealed the interplay of the landscape and its inhabitants as contested space was transformed into practiced and remembered place. My first chapter explored Helen Levitt's documentation of children's chalk drawings located on the sidewalks, stoops, and façades of East Harlem. Levitt's photographs revealed how child artists, through acts of play and creativity, renovated contested city spaces into their own imagined landscapes, places undiscoverable and unmappable to others. This effort underscored the potential of play to disrupt codes of public decorum as set by reformers and city officials. My second chapter detailed Arnold Eagle and David Robbins' survey of the Lower East Side that revealed the daily habits practiced by neighborhood dwellers in in-between spaces. Their work in *One Third of a Nation* presented an urban landscape activated by the immigrant class. The occupation and routinization of these spaces, acts that dissent from zoning regulations, transformed anonymous space into shaped place. The third chapter detailed Sol Libsohn and Sid Grossman's survey of Chelsea. Photographing the developing city from elevated and suspended perches within the built environment, the photographers revealed a neighborhood in the process of becoming and vanishing. Through these idiosyncratic

views, the series subverted the imposed collective memory of the city and rather emphasized the role of embodied and experiential vision within place-making.

These case studies are complicated when compared to the New York City work Evans produced for the FSA. By making the space of the city street appear both universal and placeless, Evans allowed its commonplaceness, its anonymity, to be representative of the entire nation. By collecting the city street as a formal series of patterns, Evans disregarded the immigrant and ethnic essence of the Yorkville neighborhood, and he was unable to truly reveal place as distinct to the Italian occupants of the area. As seen in his "list" detailing what to collect within the city, Evans came searching for a city street that he had already defined. Evans relied on the structure of the street as it dictated and marked space, unlike the imagined places chronicled by Levitt, the hidden/interior places discovered in *One Third of a Nation,* or the inscribed and embodied places of Chelsea. I have argued throughout this dissertation that liminal, communal, and interstitial places are sites of radical potential, but that potential is only discovered when the photographer is allied to that place-making strategy.

The detachment that persists in Evans's Yorkville series is also present in the photographer's 1938-1941 exploration of subterranean New York City, which commenced the winter following this Yorkville study. During those three years, funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship, Evans (aided by Helen Levitt) hid his camera under his overcoat and photographed the New York City subway and its passengers. In this transient, serpentine, and liminal space, Evans was able to capture people's interiority as they established their place within the stuffed cars of the underground train. In comparing

the subway and Yorkville projects, we can see Evans's interest in façades (of space and of people) and of distance (between buildings and bodies). Evans captured the space inside the subway car as ordinary, as a common place that consistently envelopes and structures its riders. In photographing such an impartial space, Evans's portraits, taken from a distance and framed by the car's neutral space, exposed a person's individuality. James Agee, writing of the project in 1940, noted that in the posture of the sitters, their signatures were revealed.[503] Through the integration of presence within the objective space of the subway car, a person's individuality, a person's signature, could be conceived, presented, and captured.

In this photograph of a woman and man on the Broadway subway line, Evans's distance from his subjects is predetermined through the width of the car (figure 4.30). The photographer's reliance on intuition and chance is revealed as the right side of the woman's face recedes further into shadows, and the man's newspaper similarly retreats, creating a depth of focus and suggesting a blur of movement within the frame that could not have been preconceived. The woman looks past the photographer while the man is entranced with his newspaper, the two completely ignore the other's presence. The subway car panes frame their torsos and faces, and the window's flatness contrasts with the depth of the subjects' shadowy character. It is only in the subway's anonymous space, what Agee cited as a "moment of suspension," that people are able to reveal, and Evans capture, their true selves.[504] These two subjects may be limited spatially, but perhaps

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[503] James Agee, "Introduction" *Many Are Called* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 15.
[504] Ibid., 16.

because of that limit, they establish their place in the anonymous subterranean world through exhibiting their individuality. In the space of a subway car (which by definition is never in one neighborhood), Evans discovered what the other photographers in this dissertation revealed within the liminal and communal spaces of their above-ground, urban landscape. The many frames of the subway group uncover Evans's capacity to chronicle how people claim their individuality and make place within this shared, anonymous city space. Perhaps it was only after his dissociated exploration of Yorkville's streets that Evans was able to socially and emotionally explore the interplay of people and space in the subways. Evans, aided by the guise of pure anonymity, camera hidden behind a cloak, in a fully democratic, universal, and shared non-place, was able to reveal the symbiotic relationship of people and space. His camera's swift yet careful attention to people's posture, their literal occupation of space, reveals their interiority, their place.

Conceiving of the distance within the Yorkville series as relating to the subway portraits complicates the detachment persistent in Evans's street study. This distance can be read as Evans's acknowledgment of a limitation within his practice, as his medium, driven by his own collecting habits and folk vision, could not reveal interiority (spatially, intellectually, or emotionally) beyond himself. Evans's refusal to intrude into the communal places of the city that persist above ground, the sustained distance present in the Yorkville views, can perhaps be understood as his small effort to make place for his subjects. The other photographers in this dissertation transcended what Evans viewed as the medium's limit through translating space as reflective of people's interiority, of

themselves and their subjects. Levitt was able to surpass that limit by capturing imagined places that exist beyond spatial constraints; Eagle and Robbins resisted that limit by discovering places that endure through ritual and routine—practiced space that transcended boundaries. Grossman and Libsohn confronted the medium's edge through inhabiting and embodying subjective views into their layered world. Through conceiving of space as it was practiced rather than structured, as it was endured rather than indexed, Levitt, Eagle, Robbins, Grossman, and Libsohn created photographs that gave a voice and secured a place for the disenfranchised classes within New York City's contested urban landscape.

Illustrations

Introduction

Figure 0.1. Helen Levitt, 51/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 0.2. Arnold Eagle, *Street Scene – Children*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.20.

Figure 0.3. Sid Grossman, *Cut Contact Street – New York*, photograph, 1940s, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2018.620.

Figure 0.4. Sid Grossman, *New York*, photograph, 1940s, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2009.1447.

Figure 0.5. Percy Loomis Sperr, *Avenue C at 13th Street and East side to Southeast, Manhattan*, photograph, 1939, New York Public Library, 485998.

Figure 0.6. Charles Von Urban, *160 East 92nd Street*, photograph, 1932, Museum of the City of New York, 33.173.399.

Figure 0.7. Unknown Photographer, *Debris & Rubble in a Vacant Lot*, photograph, 1935, New York Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, photo no. 02.001.0148.

Figure 0.8. Berenice Abbott, *Fourth Avenue, No. 154*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 40.140.110.

Figure 0.9. Berenice Abbott, *McGraw Hill Building*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 49.282.48.

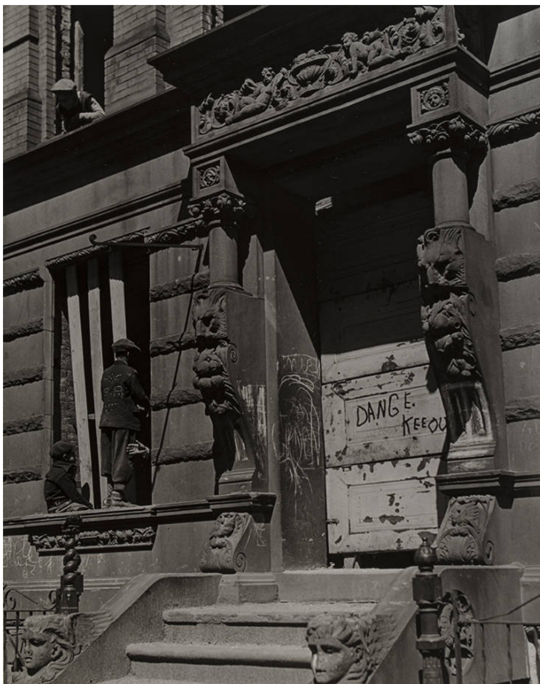
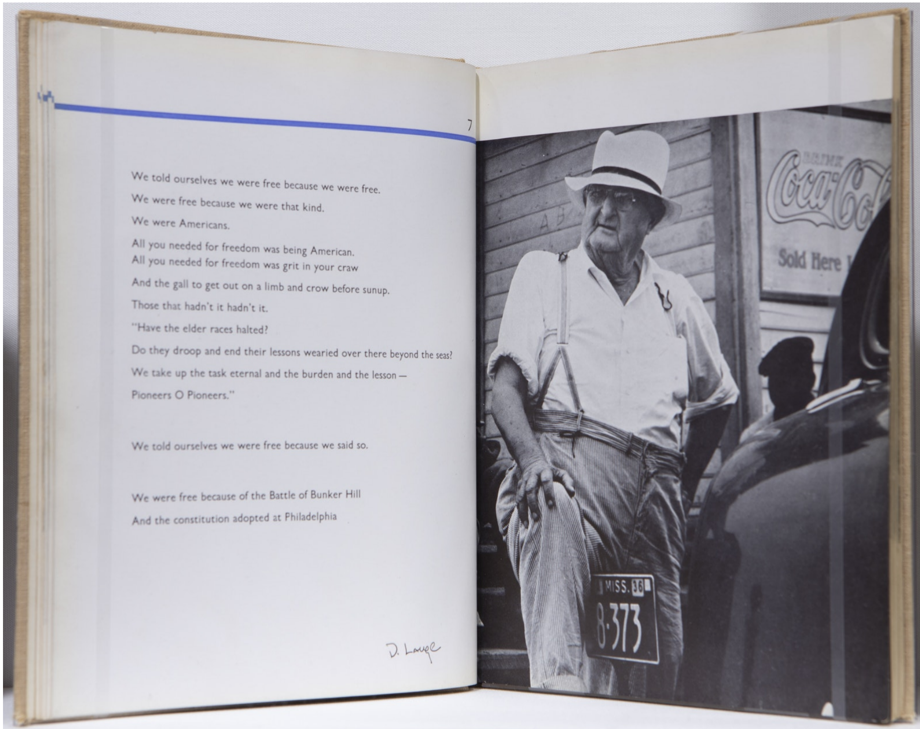


Figure 0.10. Aaron Siskind, *Harlem Boys in Empty Tenement*, photograph, date unknown, International Center of Photography, 89.1981.

Figure 0.11. Aaron Siskind, *Harlem Kitchen Scene*, photograph, ca. 1937, International Center of Photography, 97.1981.

Figure 0.12. Dorothea Lange, *Plantation Owner, Mississippi Delta, Near Clarksdale, Mississippi,* photograph, 1936, Art Institute of Chicago, 2016. 341.



7

We told ourselves we were free because we were free.
We were free because we were that kind.
We were Americans.
All you needed for freedom was being American.
All you needed for freedom was grit in your craw
And the gall to get out on a limb and crow before sunup.
Those that hadn't it hadn't it.
"Have the elder races halted?
Do they droop and end their lessons wearied over there beyond the seas?
We take up the task eternal and the burden and the lesson —
Pioneers O Pioneers."

We told ourselves we were free because we said so.

We were free because of the Battle of Bunker Hill
And the constitution adopted at Philadelphia

D. Lange

Figure 0.13. Sherwood Anderson's *Hometown*, 1938, 7.

Figure 0.14. Walker Evans, New York, New York. *61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Tenants*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M4.

Chapter 1
“Inheritors of the Street”: Helen Levitt Documents Children’s Play

Figure 1.1. Helen Levitt, Untitled, photograph, circa 1940, New York Public Library.

Figure 1.2. Berenice Abbott, *Brownstone Front and Skyscraper*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York 49.282.8.

Figure 1.3. Arnold Eagle, *Courtyard with Children on Fire escapes*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.6.

Figure 1.4. Philip Johnson, *Toy Wagon*, watercolor, pen and ink and gouache on paper, 1935/1942, National Gallery of Art, 1943.8.7802.

Figure 1.5. Helen Levitt, 93/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.6. Helen Levitt, 51/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

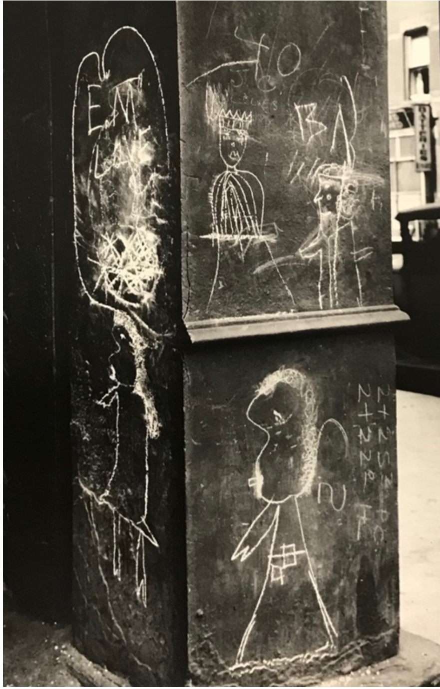


Figure 1.7. Helen Levitt, 124/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.8. Helen Levitt, 89/160, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.9. Helen Levitt, 88/160, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.10. Helen Levitt, 149/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.11. Helen Levitt, 154/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.12. Helen Levitt, 155/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.13. Helen Levitt, 49/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

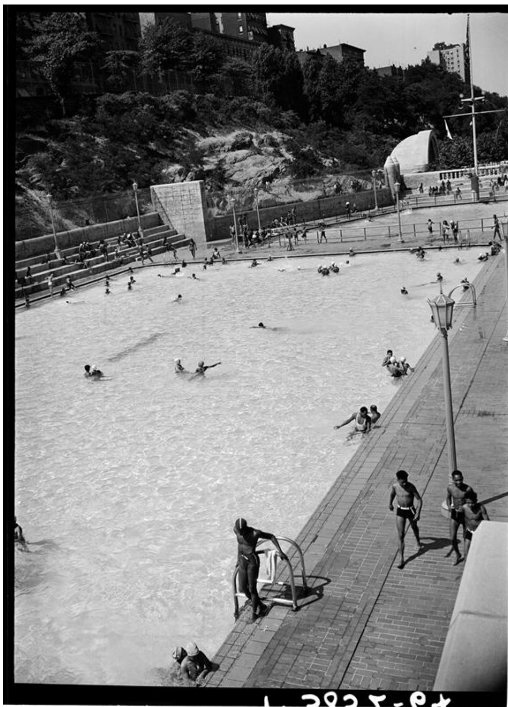


Figure 1.14. Sid Grossman, *Swimming in the Olympic-size pool in Colonial Park, Harlem*, photograph, 1939, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.9.64.

Figure 1.15. Jacob A. (Jacob August) Riis, *Street Arabs – Night, Boys in Sleeping Quarter,* photograph, ca. 1890, Museum of the City of New York. 90.13.4.124.

Figure 1.16. Unknown photographer, *Children in Carnegie Playground, 5th Ave., New York City [holding hands in circle]*, photograph, date unknown (possibly 1911), Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Lot 10832-2.

A Prisoner of Poverty. In the slums diseases take a terrific toll. The death rate is often 10 to 20 times higher than in the better parts of the same city. In one U. S. slum, tuberculosis strikes 19 persons for every one it strikes outside the slums. Crime, too, is nourished by the slums. Nearly half of the Philadelphia boys with criminal records come from one slum area. In a similar area in Chicago, one out of every four boys from the age of 10 to 17 was arrested for crimes in one year. In every U. S. town and city, it has been found that slum poverty is a leading cause of crime.

Back-Breaking, Never-Ending Work. It is often said that slum dwellers really prefer to live in slums. This is not true. The only reason people stay in slums is that they can't get out. If they don't complain, often appear stubborn, it is because they see no possibility of ever having a better home and cling desperately to what they already have. Meanwhile, because they need more police, fire, and health services than other districts, the slums cost the taxpayer dearly. In Indianapolis, for example, it was found that each slum dweller cost the city $27.29 a year. The average for the city as a whole was $4. Needless to say, tax income from slums cannot begin to pay this high cost of maintenance. The burden falls on others.

(Lewis W. Hine Photos)

Page 9—LOOK—Nov. 9, 1937

Continued on Next Page

Figure 1.17. "Street Scenes in New York," ***Look,*** **November 9, 1937, 9, photographs by Lewis Hine.**

There Are No Bad Boys!

BOYS aren't born bad. But bad environment and enforced idleness make youthful criminals. Last year 42 per cent of all arrested burglars were under 18.

The problem of providing social surroundings for youth in its formative years is acute.

Notable progress toward its solution has been made in New York City, where wholesome recreation for 75,000 boys is provided by the Police Athletic League (the PAL).

Youngsters commit the majority of petty crimes, such as window breaking.

Page 19—LOOK—March 14, 1939

Continued On Next Page

Figure 1.18. "There are no Bad Boys," ***Look*** **March 14, 1939, 19, photographs by the Federal Art Project, WPA.**

Figure 1.19. Helen Levitt, 117/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.20. Aaron Siskind, *Harlem Boys in Empty Tenement*, photograph, date unknown, International Center of Photography, 89.1981.

Figure 1.21. Helen Levitt, 123/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.22. John Guttman, *The Artist Lives Dangerously, San Francisco*, gelatin silver print, 1938, The National Gallery of Art, 2001.67.91.

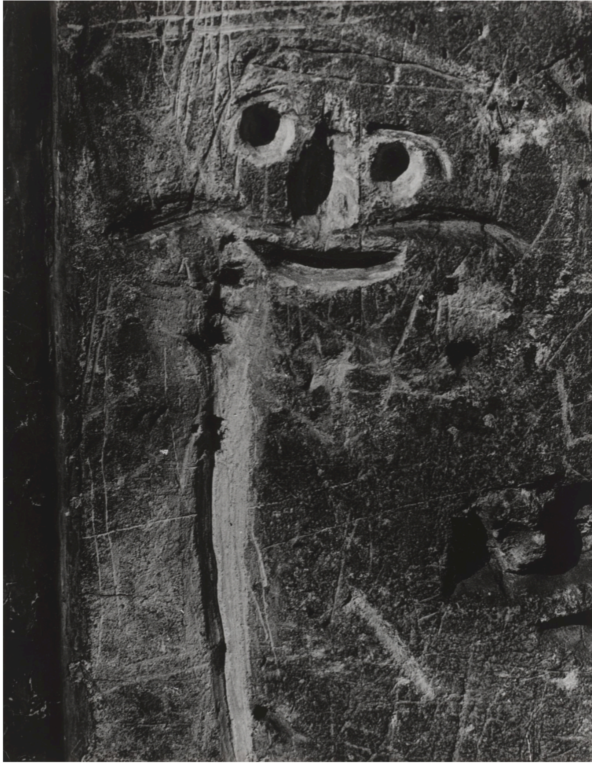


Figure 1.23. Brassaï, *Graffiti,* Gelatin Silver Print, 1945-45, The Museum of Modern Art, 892.2016.

Figure 1.24. Helen Levitt, 158/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.25. Helen Levitt, 133/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

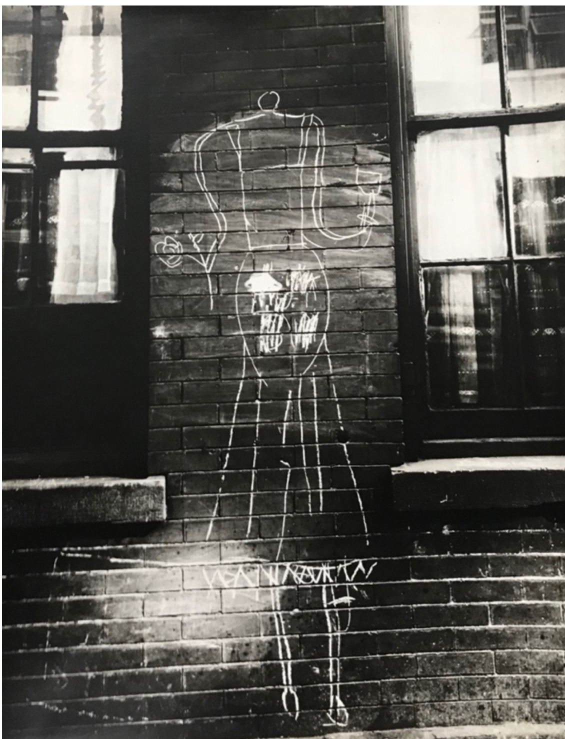


Figure 1.26. Helen Levitt, 122/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2 The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 1.27. Helen Levitt, 16/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.28. Helen Levitt, 140/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

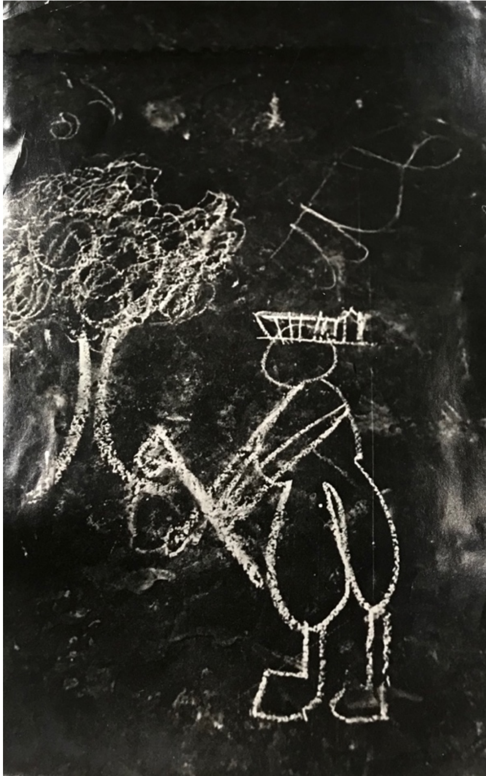


Figure 1.29. Helen Levitt, 36/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.30. Helen Levitt, 125/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

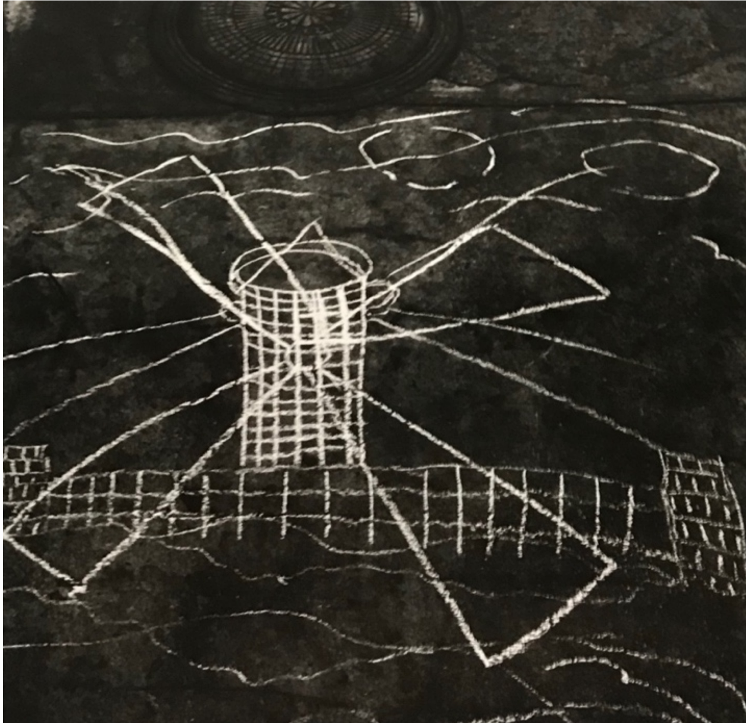


Figure 1.31. Helen Levitt, 111/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.32. Union Pacific Advertisement, *Life*, April 12, 1937, 86.

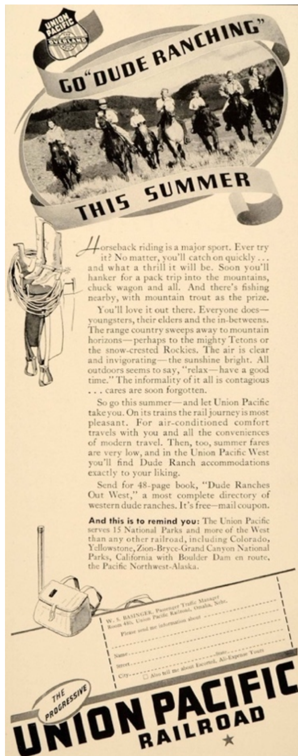


Figure 1.33. Union Pacific railroad advertisements from 1937. https://www.periodpaper.com/products/1937-ad-union-pacific-railroad-horse-riding-ranches-original-advertising-054877-ftt9-1898.

Figure 1.34. Helen Levitt, 142/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 1.35. Helen Levitt, 37/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

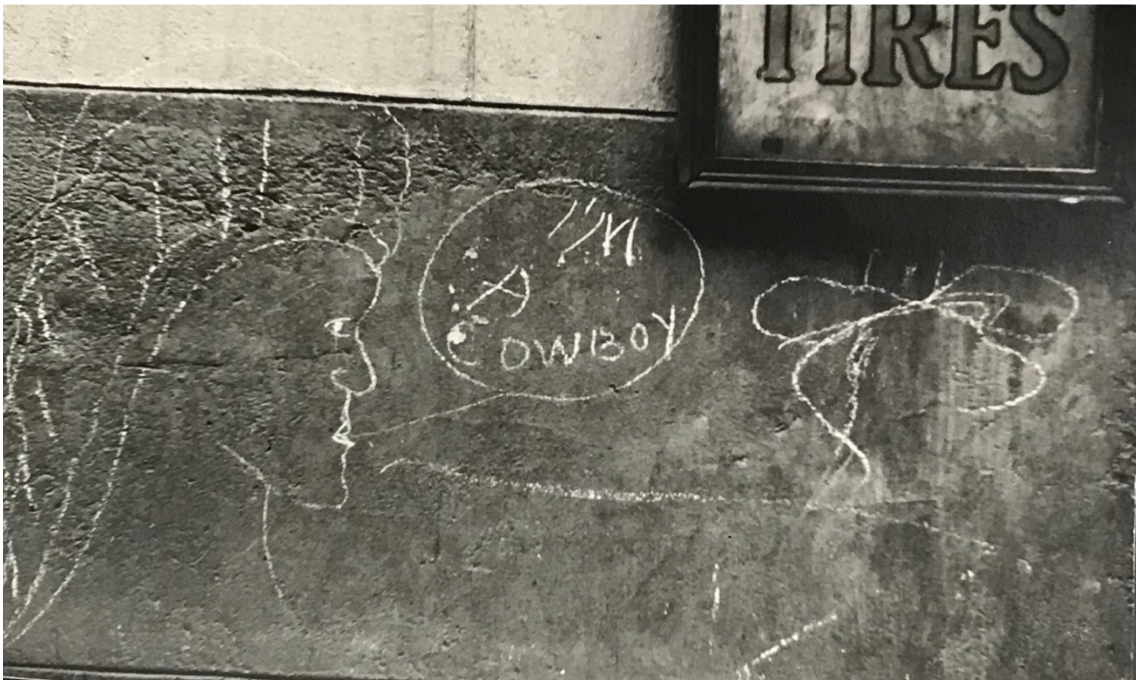
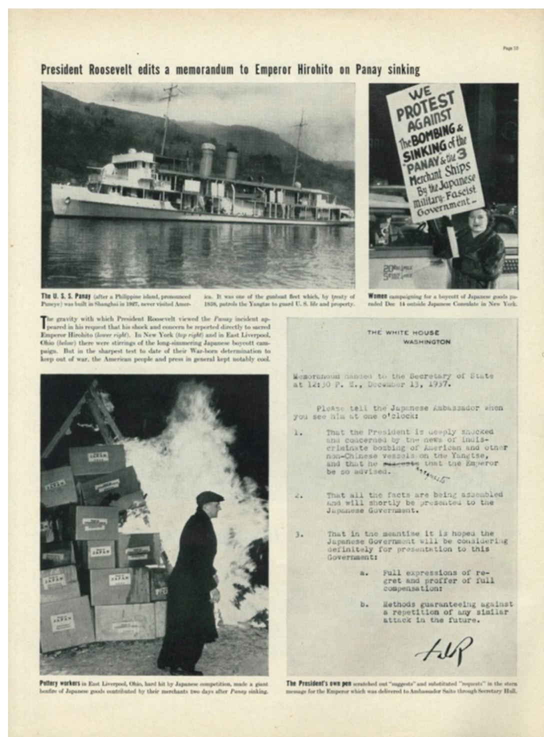


Figure 1.36. Helen Levitt, 21/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1 Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

The Plainsman

(CONTINUED)

Figure 1.37. “Movie of the week: The Plainsman,” *Life*, January 4, 1937, 66.


Page 10

President Roosevelt edits a memorandum to Emperor Hirohito on Panay sinking

The U. S. S. Panay (after a Philippine island, pronounced Pan-eye) was built in Shanghai in 1927, never visited America. It was one of the gunboat fleet which, by treaty of 1858, patrols the Yangtze to guard U. S. life and property.

Women campaigning for a boycott of Japanese goods paraded Dec 14 outside Japanese Consulate in New York.

The gravity with which President Roosevelt viewed the *Panay* incident appeared in his request that his shock and concern be reported directly to sacred Emperor Hirohito (*lower right*). In New York (*top right*) and in East Liverpool, Ohio (*below*) there were stirrings of the long-simmering Japanese boycott campaign. But in the sharpest test to date of their War-born determination to keep out of war, the American people and press in general kept notably cool.

Pottery workers in East Liverpool, Ohio, hard hit by Japanese competition, made a giant bonfire of Japanese goods contributed by their merchants two days after *Panay* sinking.

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Memorandum handed to the Secretary of State at 12:30 P. M., December 13, 1937.

Please tell the Japanese Ambassador when you see him at one o'clock:

1. That the President is deeply shocked and concerned by the news of indiscriminate bombing of American and other non-Chinese vessels on the Yangtse, and that he ~~suggests~~ requests that the Emperor be so advised.

2. That all the facts are being assembled and will shortly be presented to the Japanese Government.

3. That in the meantime it is hoped the Japanese Government will be considering definitely for presentation to this Government:

   a. Full expressions of regret and proffer of full compensation:

   b. Methods guaranteeing against a repetition of any similar attack in the future.

FDR

The President's own pen scratched out "suggests" and substituted "requests" in the stern message for the Emperor which was delivered to Ambassador Saito through Secretary Hull.

Figure 1.38. “A Terrible Blunder puts Japan’s Ambassador on the Anxious Seat,” *Life*, December 27, 1937, 10. Photographs by Acme and A.P.

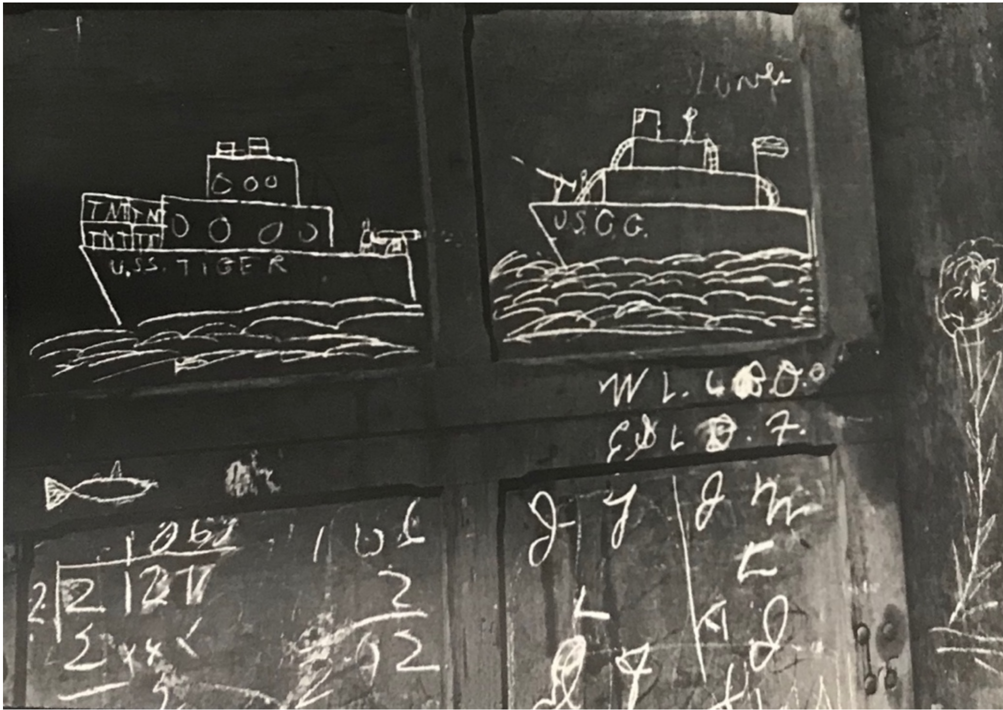


Figure 1.39. Helen Levitt, 9/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 1 The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

PM's WEEKLY, AUGUST 11, 1940 • PICTURE GALLERY 37

Escape

In Harlem, people live *on* and *around* their houses, not just inside them. If the literature is absorbing enough, comfort doesn't matter.

Figure 1.40. "A new photographer discovers New York," ***PM's Weekly,*** **August 11 1940, 37. Photographs by Helen Levitt.**

Figure 1.41. “A new photographer discovers New York,” *PM’s Weekly,* August 11 1940, 38. Photographs by Helen Levitt.

48 PHOTOGRAPHY **Wall and Sidewalk Drawings Show What Goes On in the Minds of New York Children** 49

By Ralph Steiner

Over a period of two years, as she roamed New York City looking for material, Helen Levitt collected these examples of children's wall and sidewalk drawings. Photographers will undoubtedly dismiss them as uninteresting and not creative. Human beings who have a feeling for children will think them wonderful. Note that I make a distinction between the way photographers think and the way human beings think.

Most photographers feel superior to their subjects. Too few are humble enough to photograph with true humility the "little" subjects. Most photographers use their subject matter—nature, man, man's work—as a means of showing how great *they* are rather than how wonderful the world is. No photographer with a great sense of his own importance would have taken these portraits of what goes on inside the minds of children.

As with most good ideas, the photographing of these children's drawings was very easy. The big credit goes to Miss Levitt not so much for taking the pictures—anyone who can focus and expose decently could have done them—but for seeing that such commonplace material was full of life and interest. Whether such photographs are creative art, or hard to make, is not the question—a lot of embroidered cloth which took time and effort to create would look much better plain. Remember Samuel Johnson's reply to Boswell's remark that violin playing was very difficult. Johnson replied that he wished it were impossible.

We also have on this page the photographs of the boys playing with the mirror and the mob in ambush to show something of the world out of which the children's drawings came. And these photographs happen to be representative of other work which Miss Levitt does—just about the most difficult kind of photography, but of worthwhile subjects. She has been taking pictures about five years. She once worked for a commercial photographer but has learned more by just walking around New York photographing what interests her.

Miss Levitt must keep herself and her camera almost invisible. She can't stand on the other side of the street—she must be six to ten feet away and she has no control over her subjects: she can't ask them to play their games more or less violently or to repeat something she has failed to snap.

She uses a trick device which allows her to stand and shoot her very small camera at a right angle to the photographer's normal line of fire. Even with its aid she adds to her portfolio slowly, because the "best fish" often get away and her standards are high.

But easy or hard to make, her pictures are as exciting, lively and meaningful as any snapped in these times.

(P.S.—The editor of PM's Weekly asks me to tell photographers that he will buy and publish the best photos of novel and interesting children's sidewalk drawings sent to him.)

Gangsters may replace Indians, but kids still love the secret passage that opens to the initiated as if by magic, revealing strange and dangerous adventures.

To the writer of this proud boast, "detective" stands for glamor plus much-admitted toughness.

The drawings at the left come from sidewalk jungles like this. Kids draw a thin line between make-believe and blood-letting. Their gang battles are serious business. "Here they come, fellas!"

We don't know whether this represents a moral condemnation of a shady lady, or a 16-year-old's scorn of girls who "dress up."

But he's got a wife, see, and she comes in and sees this guy in there—so, this other guy—so she pulls a gun, see, and says . . .

Note the Superman influence and the feeling for action in this drawing.

This weird street scene typifies the crowded, confusing life around the slum children—the soil which nourished the drawings on this page.

Figure 1.42. “Wall and Sidewalk Drawings show what goes on in the minds of New York Children,” *PM’s Weekly,* March 2, 1941, 48-49. Photographs by Helen Levitt.

Figure 1.43. Helen Levitt, *New York*, photograph, c. 1940, Museum of Modern Art, 46.1942.

IT TAKES FIFTY NATIONS TO MAKE A NEW YORKER

Seventy-five years ago the Irish of New York, being the city's poor, led the three-day insurrection known as the Draft Riots. In the politics of those days the term "100 per cent American" meant anti-Irish. The posters on the extreme left, directed at Governor Lehman, indicate what it meant in 1938. Seventy-five years from now the Magyar, Syrian, Czech, Italian, Polish, German, Jewish, Russian, and other faces on this page will look as native to New York as the average Irish cop looks today. The New York-born sons and daughters of immigrants already outnumber their parents and intermarry three times as often. Already the faces of any Coney Island subway crowd (below) betray the beginnings of an interracial type.

Figure 1.44. *Fortune*, July 1939, 77.

Figure 1.45. Helen Levitt, 119/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Chapter 2
Arnold Eagle and David Robbins Find Place in the Everyday

Figure 2.1. Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-208, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.2. Arnold Eagle, *Scholar at Table*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.10.

Figure 2.3. Arnold Eagle, *Scholars at the Table*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.9.

Figure 2.4. Arnold Eagle, *Scholars with Spectacles Studying*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.23.

Figure 2.5. Arnold Eagle, *Blowing the Shofar*, photograph, 1935, International Center of Photography, 544.1987.

Figure 2.6. Arnold Eagle, *Third Avenue El, Window of 18th Street Station*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 2015.18.1.

Figure 2.7. Arnold Eagle, *Passengers*, photograph, 1943, International Center of Photography, 483.1987.

Figure 2.8. Walker Evans, *Subway Passengers, New York City*, 1938, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971.646.20.

Figure 2.9. Eagle/Sloane NYA Radio Workshop, negative no. 1005-1, photograph, 1939, National Youth Administration, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.10. Arnold Eagle, Jose Limone Dance Group, photograph, 1954, Box 1, Folder 2, New York Public Library Arnold Eagle Dance Collection

Figure 2.11. Arnold Eagle, *Stowe, VT for standard oil*, job 1028, photograph, 1947, 1.38, New School, Arnold Eagle Archive.

Figure 2.12. David Robbins, *Waterfront (on a dock),* photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.10.61.

Figure 2.13. David Robbins, 759-139, photograph, 1937, Box 2, Folder 13, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.14. Unknown photographer, Street scene on the Lower East Side, New York City Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, photograph, June 14, 1937, photo no. 02.007.02206.

Figure 2.15. Unknown photographer, *109 St. Marks Place*, New York City Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, photograph, February 1, 1939, photo no. 02.006.2601.

Figure 2.16. Arnold Eagle, *Street Scene – Children*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.203.

Figure 2.17. Arnold Eagle, *Small Business*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.192.

Figure 2.18. Arnold Eagle, *Courtyard with Children on Fire Escapes*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.6.

BACKYARDS, LOWER EAST SIDE

POLICE HEADQUARTERS

TIMES SQUARE DISTRICT 173

Forty-fifth Street on the west side of the square. Headquarters and convention center of many organizations, from national political parties to beauticians' associations, it has been the scene of many picturesque and significant events.

LOEW'S STATE, north of Forty-fifth Street, is now the only theater in the square regularly presenting vaudeville. The PALACE, at Broadway and Forty-seventh Street, was until recently the nation's leading vaudeville house and headliners like Pat Rooney, Eddie Leonard, Elsie Janis, and Sophie Tucker played two-a-day here. The theater now shows motion pictures. BILLBOARD, a publication devoted to the amusement world, has offices in the building, and the street corner is still a camping ground for minor members of the theatrical profession. Owners and managers of carnival shows also meet there. In the building at 1560 Broadway are the OFFICES OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ACTORS, a union of variety entertainers.

At the base of a small triangle of pavement at Forty-seventh Street is the bronze STATUE OF THE REVEREND FATHER FRANCIS DUFFY, dressed in his uniform as chaplain of the 69th Regiment (now 165th Infantry). The figure, the work of Charles Keck, stands in front of a granite Celtic cross. Father Duffy, who died in June, 1932, was a familiar character on Broadway. His church was the Holy Cross on Forty-second Street between Eighth and Ninth Avenues.

Broadway North of Forty-seventh Street

North on Broadway a row of low drab buildings becomes at night, when the signs on the roofs light up, an extension of the Rialto. Seventh Avenue with the elaborate supper clubs and dine-and-dance palaces also stretches the white way northward; at Forty-seventh Street is the half-block marquee of LOEW'S MAYFAIR where until 1929 the Columbia "Wheel" (circuit) presented the great comedians of burlesque.

LINDY'S RESTAURANT, a contemporary landmark of black and red, set off by yellow, is at 1626 Broadway. Like the PARADISE, a night club diagonally across the street at Forty-ninth Street, it has acquired a national reputation through the Broadway columnists—Lindy's for the gossip and celebrities, the Paradise for the genuine blue-eyed blondes in the chorus line. JACK DEMPSEY'S BROADWAY BAR, near Forty-ninth Street, is the Churchill's of 1939, a favorite with the sporting crowd. The old Churchill's was near the spot in 1900, as was also Rector's after it had moved out of the square proper.

Built at a cost of more than a million dollars, the STRAND THEATRE, near Forty-eighth Street on the west side of Broadway, claimed the record

Figure 2.19. The Federal Writers' Project, *New York city guide; a comprehensive guide to the five boroughs of the metropolis: Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Richmond*, New York: Random House, 1939, 172.

Figure 2.20. Arnold Eagle, *Stickball Team*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.14.

Figure 2.21. Arnold Eagle, *Boys Playing in a Ditch*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.296.

Figure 2.22. Arnold Eagle, *Boys Gathering Wood from Wreckage*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.252.

Figure 2.23. Arnold Eagle, *Littered Vacant Lot*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.84.

Figure 2.24. Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-288, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.25. Henri Cartier-Bresson, *Seville, Spain*, photograph, 1933, The Museum of Modern Art, 692.1943.

Figure 2.26. David Robbins, *Arnold Eagle Photographing One Third of a Nation*, photograph from *At Home With God,* 1992.

Figure 2.27. Arnold Eagle, *WPA Work Project*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.85.

Figure 2.28. Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-33, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

Figure 2.29. Unknown Photographer, *203 Lewis Street*, photograph, circa 1940s, New York City Municipal Archives, Collection of Manhattan 1940s tax Photos.

Figure 2.30. Unknown Photographer, *An Empty lot on the Corner of Rivington and Lewis Streets, Manhattan*, photograph, ca. 1934, New York City Housing Authority, LaGuardia Community College, Photo no. 02.015.14862.

Figure 2.31. Arnold Eagle, *Street Corner*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.91.

Figure 2.32. Arnold Eagle, *Woman Dressing Child*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.425.

Figure 2.33. Arnold Eagle, *A Greek Immigrant with her Children*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 125.1989.

Figure 2.34. Arnold Eagle, *Weekly Bath*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 511.1987.

Figure 2.35. Arnold Eagle, *Tenement Kids*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 136.1989.

Figure 2.36. Arnold Eagle, *Wash Line between Two Tenements*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.108.

Figure 2.37. Arnold Eagle, *Mother and Son at Table*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.123.

Figure 2.38. Arnold Eagle, *Kitchen Interior, Woman Ironing and Man with Small Child*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.11.

Figure 2.39. Arnold Eagle, *Boys Studying the Talmud*, photograph, 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.12.6.

Figure 2.40. Arnold Eagle, *New York Life*, photograph, ca. 1936, International Center of Photography, 526.1987.

Figure 2.41. Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, *Boys Around Base of a Lamppost*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.270.

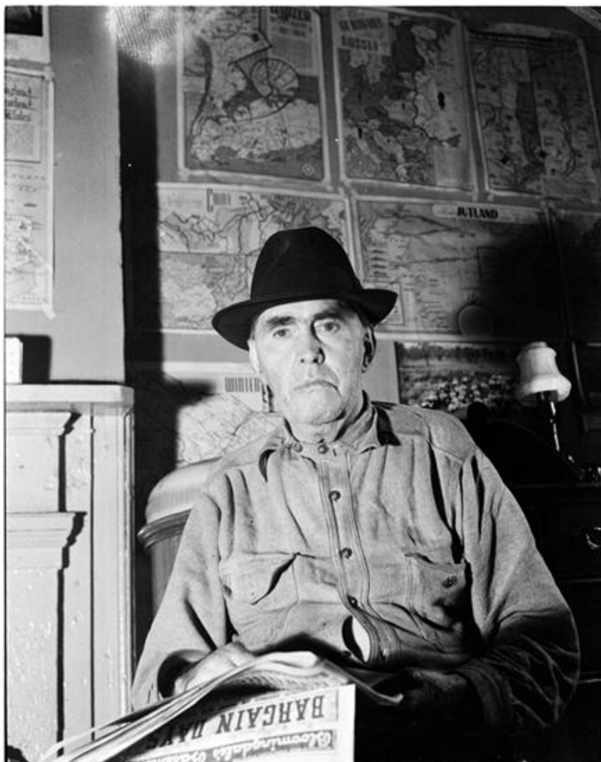


Figure 2.42. Arnold Eagle, *Man in Front of Maps on Wall*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.21.

Figure 2.43. Arnold Eagle, *Little Girl with Doll and Tricycle and Front of a Shabby Exterior*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.236.

Figure 2.44. Arnold Eagle, *Little Girl with Doll and Tricycle*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.234.

Figure 2.45. Jacob Riis, *“Minding the Baby,” Cherry Hill*, photograph, ca. 1890, Museum of the City of New York, 2008.1.25.

Figure 2.46. Arnold Eagle and David Robbins, 2329-40, photograph, 1938, Box 1, Folder 1, The National Archives at College Park, Maryland.

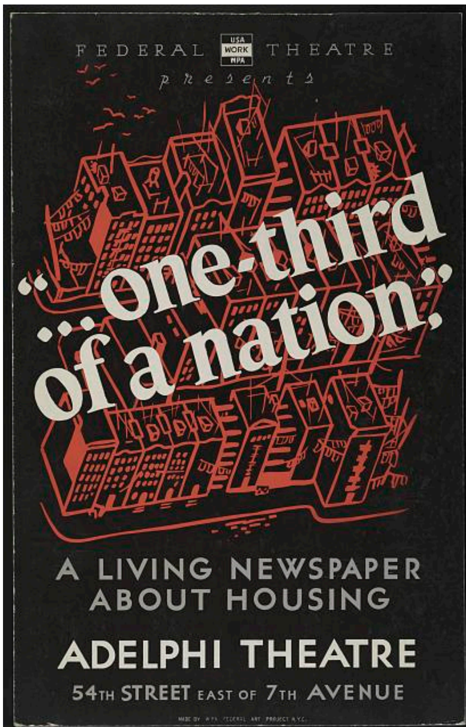


Figure 2.47. Irving Spellens, *Federal Theatre presents "… One-Third of a Nation" A living newspaper about housing*, poster: silkscreen, color, 1939. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LC-USZC2-5393.

Figure 2.48. Charles Von Urban, negative no. 2785-1, photograph, 1938, Box 27, Folder 4, Exhibitions, 1938, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.49. Eiseman, Federal Art Exhibitions, Gallery 7 East 38th Street, negative no. 2321-2, photograph, 1937, Box 26, Folder 13, Art Exhibitions, 1937 April-July, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.50. Aubrey Pollard, Federal Art Exhibition, Union Settlement 231 East 104 Street, negative no. 2357-3, photograph, 1937, Box 26, Folder 13, Art Exhibitions, 1937 April-July, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.51. Installation print from *Photography 1839-1937*, photograph, 1937, The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 2.52. Installation print from *Helen Levitt: Photographs of Children*, photograph, 1943, The Museum of Modern Art.

Figure 2.53. Sol Horn, Berenice Abbott Exhibition, Museum of Art, negative no. 2563-2, photograph, 1937, Box 26, Folder 14, Art Exhibitions, September - December, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.54. Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-1, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.55. Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-2, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.56. Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-3, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.57. Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-4, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.58. Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-5, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.59. Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, *East Side West Side,* Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-6, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.60. *Let's Look at Housing*, Citizens housing council, 1939, Box 151, Folder 16, Citizen's Housing Council Archive, New York.

Figure 2.61. Peter Sekaer, Installation view of the exhibition *Houses and Housing, Industrial Arts*, gelatin silver print, May 10–September 30, 1939, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, Exhibition Records, 87–88.5, The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

Figure 2.62. Zoomed in Figure 2.55.

Figure 2.63. Arnold Eagle, *A Child of the Tenements*, photograph, 1936, International Center of Photography, 128.1989.

Figure 2.64. Arnold Eagle, *Girl with Dollhouse*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.25.

Figure 2.65. Zoomed in Figure 2.54

Figure 2.66. Arnold Eagle, *Across Stuyvesant Town Development*, photograph, 1939, International Center of Photography, 524.1987.

Figure 2.67. Arnold Eagle, *Boy Looking in a Bakery Window*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.209.

Figure 2.68. Cyril Mipaas, *United Wholesale Employees, The Bible House, 4th Avenue*, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 18, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection. Archives of American Art.

Figure 2.69. Charles Von Urban, Symposium United Wholesale and Warehouse Employees 104 East 9th Street, negative no. 3507-2, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 5, Lectures and Symposium, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection. Archives of American Art.

Chapter 3
The Photo League Deconstructs Chelsea: Grossman and Libsohn's Embodied and Elevated views

Figure 3.1. Sid Grossman, *Chelsea (cityscape)*, photograph, 1938, Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Jeffrey Hugh Newman.

Figure 3.2. Sid Grossman, *Playground in Vacant Lots, Harlem*, photograph, 1939, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.9.89.

Figure 3.3. Sid Grossman, *Two Men on a Harlem Stoop*, photograph, 1939, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.9.33.

Figure 3.4. Sid Grossman, *Untitled (man in spectacles*), photograph, 1940, Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami, gift of Simon and Bonnie Levin.

Figure 3.5. Sid Grossman, *Chelsea*, photograph, ca. 1939, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2013.549.

Figure 3.6. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.7. Sol Libsohn, *Fulton Fish Market: Captain and Dealer*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.6.198.

Figure 3.8. Sol Libsohn, *Lunch Room*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.6.84.

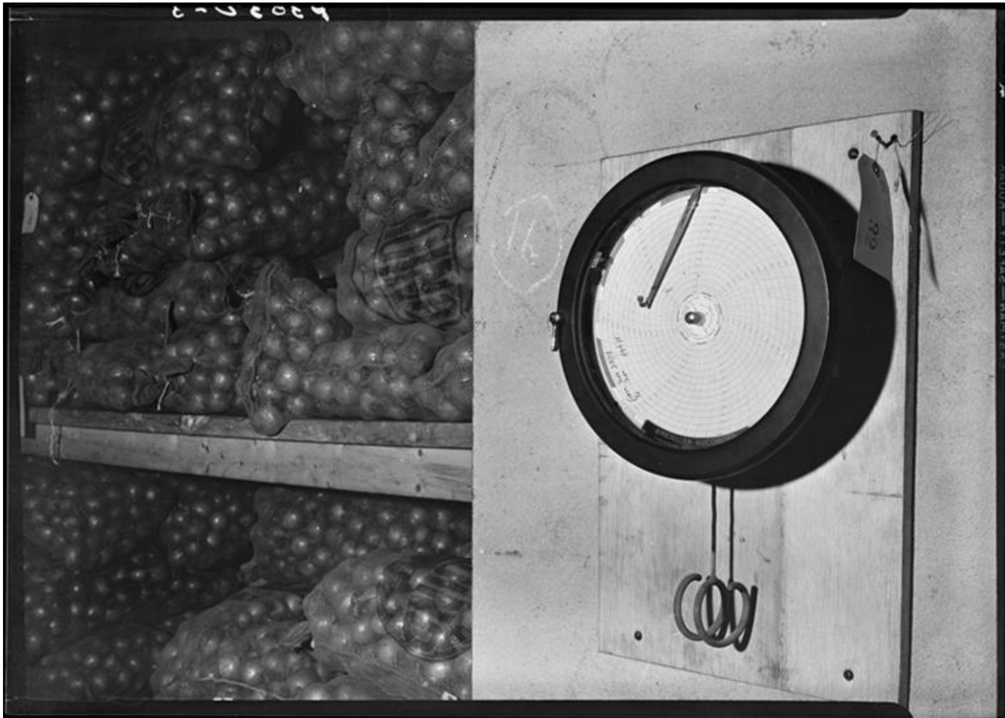


Figure 3.9. Sol Libsohn, *Bronx Terminal Market*, photograph, 1938, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.6.3.

Come along to the PHOTO HUNT and PARTY..

SAT. JUNE 20TH.

PM'S OWN RALPH STEINER..
WILL HAND OUT ASSIGNMENTS

CAMERA HUNT FOR THE MOST
- OBSCURE
- RIDICULOUS
- FANTASTIC SHOTS

PRIZES ...FOR THE MOST
- SUCCESSFUL
- ORIGINAL
- AMUSING
- PICTURES

ABBEY "VIMO" FLASH GUN 1
KALART COMPACT SPEEDFLASH
U.S. CAMERA ANNUAL 1942

IDEAS COUNT MOST.
TECHNIC SECONDARY

JUDGES
BERENICE ABBOTT - FAMOUS PHOTOGRAPHER
HERBERT GEHR - LIFE MAGAZINE
EDNA BENNET - U.S. CAMERA
LISETTE MODEL - OUTSTANDING PHOTOGRAPHER
ARTHUR BRACKMAN - FREE LANCE PHOTO GUILD
JACK DESCHIN - NEW YORK TIMES

BEER • DANCING • MUSIC • FUN!
HUNT AND PARTY SUBS 50 ¢

PHOTO HUNT STARTS AT 2 P.M. HUNTERS WILL RETURN EXPOSED FILM AT 6 P.M. VOLUNTEERS WILL PROCESS YOUR FILM HOT FROM THE CAMERA WHILE YOU HAVE A SWELL TIME AT THE GALA PARTY. PARTY STARTS AT 9 P.M. SUPER SIZE GRANDIOSE SLIDES WILL BE MADE OF YOUR PICTURES WHILE YOU LISTEN TO "SIS CUNNINGHAM" THE ALMANAC SINGER, TICKLE HER ACCORDION AND DANCE TO HOT SWING MUSIC. THERE WILL BE LOTS OF TIME TO QUENCH YOUR THIRST WITH ICE COLD BEER... AT MIDNITE WE'LL HAVE A BANGUP SHOWING OF THE SLIDES AND THE EXPERTS WILL DECIDE WHO GETS THE PRIZES...AND BOY ARE THEY USEFUL ONES...... IN CASE OF RAIN EXCITING INDOOR ASSIGNMENTS WILL BE GIVEN. PROFESSIONAL LIGHTING EQUIPMENT WILL BE AVAILABLE.

RAIN OR SHINE..THE HUNT'S THE THING.
PHOTO LEAGUE
31 EAST 21

Figure 3.10. "Photo Hunt Party," *Photo Notes*, June 1942, 6.

Figure 3.11. ***US Camera*** **1946, 26.**

Figure 3.12. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.13. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

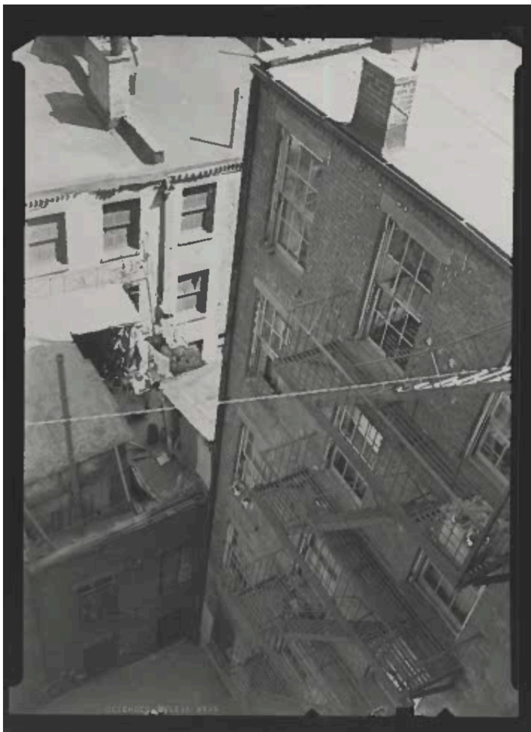


Figure 3.14. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.15. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.16. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.17. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.18. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

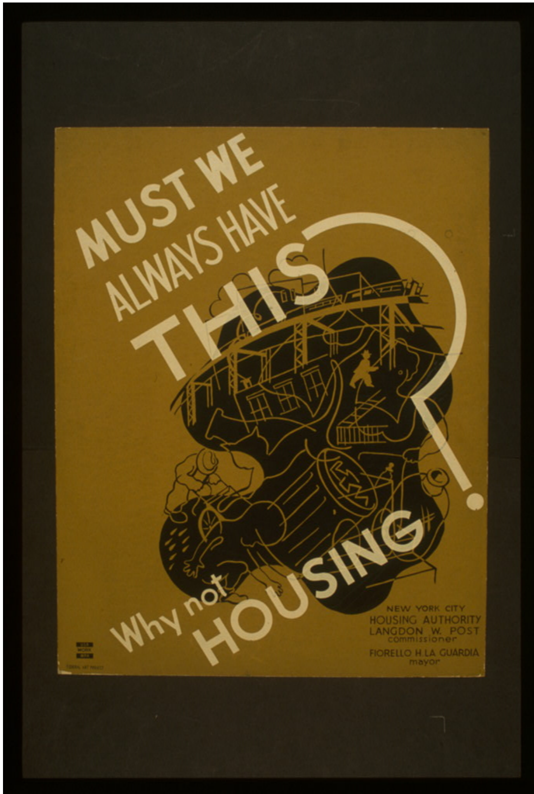


Figure 3.19. Federal Art Project, Must we always have this, Why not housing? Poster: silkscreen, color, 1936, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C., LC-USZC2-5629.

Figure 3.20. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.21. Alfred Stieglitz, *From the Shelton, West*, photograph, 1935, The Museum of Modern Art, 55.1950.

Figure 3.22. Berenice Abbott, *Wall Street, showing East River from roof of Irving Trust Building, Manhattan*, photograph, 1938, New York Public Library, 482666.

Figure 3.23. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.24. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.25. Andrew Herman, Photographic exhibition, Federal Art Gallery, negative no. 3372-2, photograph, 1938, Box 26, Folder 19, Art Exhibitions, Federal Art Project, Photographic Division collection, Archives of American Art.

Figure 3.26. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.27. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.28. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.29. Berenice Abbott, *Rockefeller Center 30 Rockefeller Center (foreground excavation), completed 1933; Radio City Music Hall (background construction), completed 1932*, *New York*, photograph, 1931-32, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2001-62-9.

Figure 3.30. Andrew Herman, *6th Avenue Subway Construction, 17th Street*, photograph, ca. 1937, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.13.39.

Figure 3.31. Lewis Hine*, Men at Work*, 1932, n.p.

Figure 3.32. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.33. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.34. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.35. Arnold Eagle, *Girl Looking Out Window*, photograph, 1939, International Center of Photography, 459.1987.

Figure 3.36. Walker Evans, *Four 35mm Film Frames: View Down Subway Car with Seated Passengers, Seated Subway Passengers, Helen Levitt on the Subway, New York City*, photograph, 1938, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.253.479.

Figure 3.37. Berenice Abbott, *El Station: Sixth and Ninth Avenue Lines, Downtown Side*, photograph, 1936, Museum of the City of New York, 40.140.72.

Figure 3.38. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.39. Sid Grossman, *Woman at the 23rs Street IRT Station*, photograph, 1938, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 81.5.

Figure 3.40. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 3.41. Sid Grossman, *Union Square, NYC (from the series "Chelsea Document")*, gelatin silver print, printed c. 1938-39, Howard Greenberg Gallery.

Figure 3.42. Weegee, *Installation view of "Weegee: Murder is My Business" at the Photo League, New York*, photograph, 1941, International Center of Photography, 19967.1993.

Conclusion

Walker Evans Collects Yorkville's Streets

Figure 4.1. Paul Strand, *Blind,* platinum print, 1917, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 33.43.334.

Figure 4.2. Unknown, *Bank Square, "Five Corners," Fishkill-on-Hudson, N.Y.* postcard, 1900s-1930s, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Walker Evans Archive, 1994.264.107.611.

Figure 4.3. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A Street scene*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006713-M3.

Figure 4.4. Walker Evans, Installation View of *Walker Evans: American Photographs* Exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York City, film negative, 1938, Walker Evans Archive, 1994, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.254.635.

Figure 4.5. Walker Evans, Untitled photo, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006717-M2.

Figure 4.6. Walker Evans, Untitled photo, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M2.

Figure 4.7. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. House fronts*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006712-M4.

Figure 4.8. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. House fronts*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006712-M5.

Figure 4.9. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A tenant*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M3.

Figure 4.10. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A fruit and vegetable vendor stand*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006721-M2.

Figure 4.11. Walker Evans, ***New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Apartment houses from the rear*****, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006716-M4.**

Figure 4.12. Walker Evans***, New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A shop window*****, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M1.**

Figure 4.13. Walker Evans, ***New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Tenants*****, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M4.**

Figure 4.14. Walker Evans, ***New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Newspapers for sale*****, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M5.**

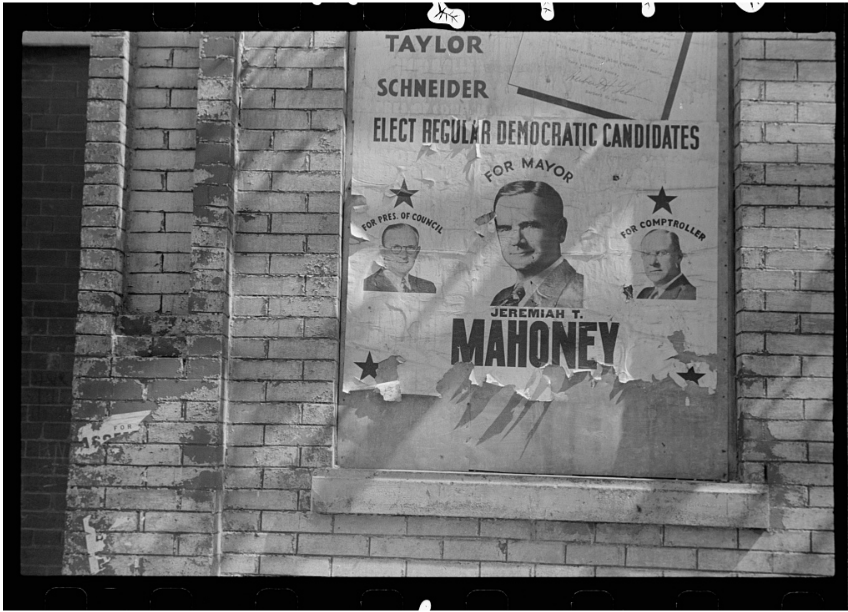


Figure 4.15. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006712-M1.

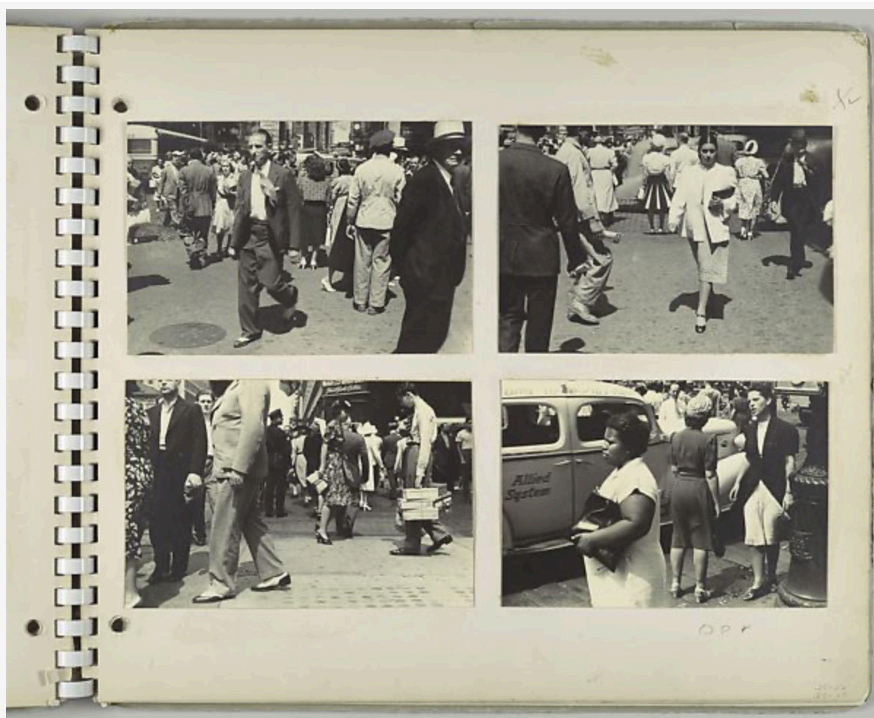


Figure 4.16. Rudy Bruckhardt, *Pedestrians, New York City: Woman in White Collarless Jacket; Man and Manhole in Foreground; Young Man Carrying Shoe Boxes; Taxicab, Three Women, and Lamppost*, gelatin silver print, ca. 1939, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1972.585.20a–d.

Figure 4.17. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Garbage cans*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006714-M2.

Figure 4.18. Walker Evans, *New York, New York, 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A tenant*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006721-M4.

Figure 4.19. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Flowers in a Window*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006718-M2.

Figure 4.20. Walker Evans, *New York, New York, 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. A tenant*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006722-M3.

Figure 4.21. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Children playing in the street*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006714-M1.

Figure 4.22. Helen Levitt, 117/159, photograph, 1937, Box 1, Folder 2, The National Archives at College Park Maryland.

Figure 4.23. Walker Evans, *Graffiti on Door, Christopher Street, New York City*, photograph, 1938, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1994.254.617.

Figure 4.24. Walker Evans, Untitled photo, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006719-M2.

Figure 4.25. Sid Grossman and Sol Libsohn, Chelsea Document, contact sheet, Sidney Grossman Archive, 1934-1955, Box 13. Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ.

Figure 4.26. Arnold Eagle, *Courtyard with Children on Fire escapes*, photograph, 1935, Museum of the City of New York, 43.131.11.6.

Figure 4.27. Walker Evans, *New York, New York. 61st Street between 1st and 3rd Avenues. Apartment houses from the rear*, nitrate negative, August 23, 1938, Library of Congress, Farm Security Administration, Lot 962, LC-USF33- 006716-M3.

Figure 4.28. Ben Shahn, *Untitled (Lower East Side, New York),* photograph, 1936, Harvard Art Museum, P1970.2831.

Figure 4.29. Ben Shahn, *Main Street Scene, Lancaster, Ohio*, Nitrate negative, 1938, Library of Congress, LC-USF3301-006416.

Figure 4.30. Walker Evans, *Subway Passengers, New York City*, photograph, 1938, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1971.646.18.

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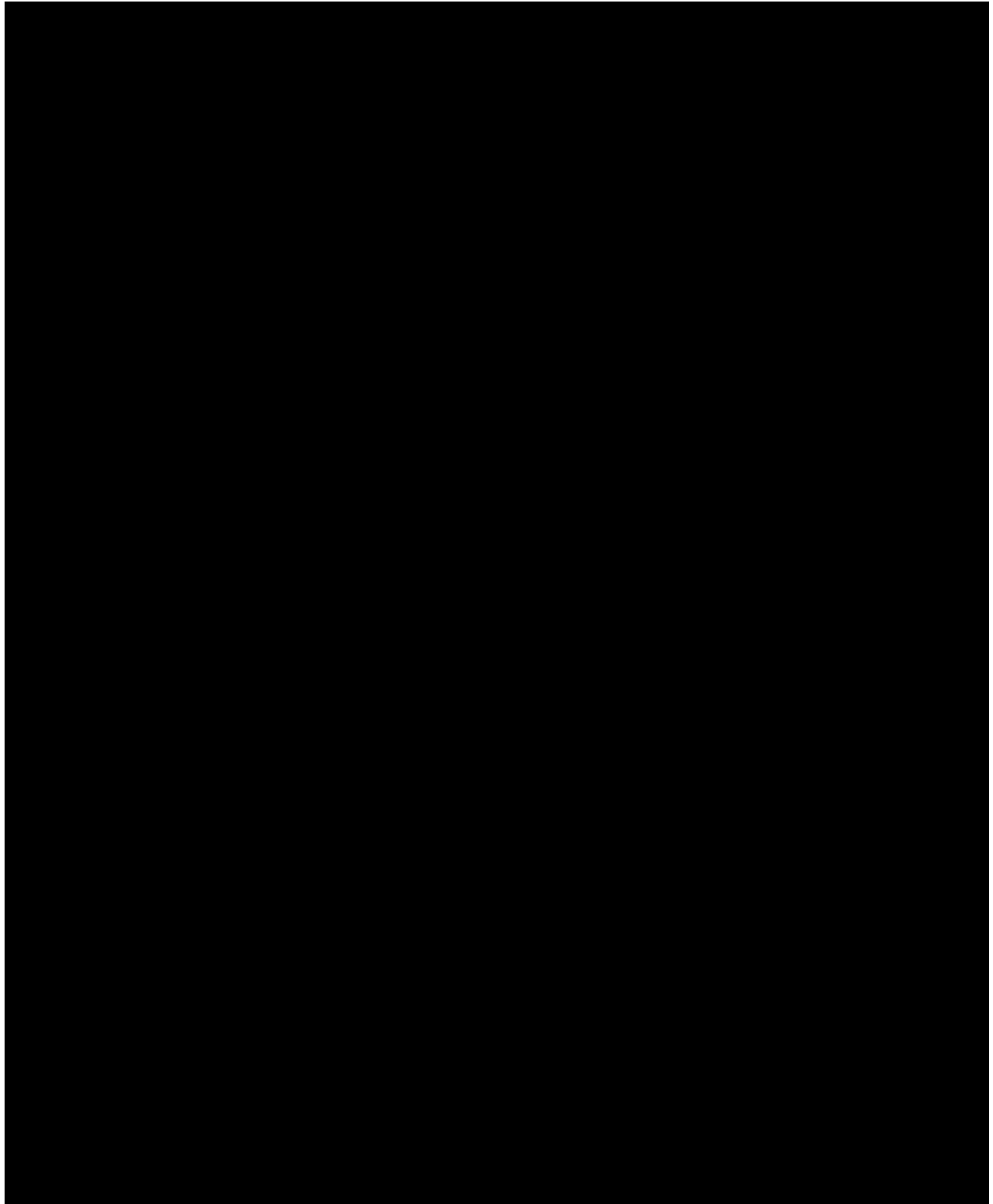

417