Framing the Photographer: Discourse and Performance in Portrait Photography

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Abstract

_Framing the Photographer: Discourse and Performance in Portrait Photography_ reconsiders photographic criticism, theory, and history in terms of the photographic event. I argue that discursive frames—whether formed through art history, juridical language, technological format, or otherwise—inform and interact with the formal composition of photographs, the channels through which photography circulates, and the attitudes and performances of the photographers themselves. Rather than representing a moment, fixed in time, I argue that photography is an event characterized largely by contingency and the relationships between players; these include the photographer, subject, viewer, and critic.

This project expands the parameters of the discursive definitions of portraiture to allow for what might be considered the portrait’s opposite – indecorous representations, photography used as a tool for violence or torture, and the act of hiding one’s face before a camera. I therefore consider photographic performances that clash against, or overlap with, conventions of portraiture, a genre defined largely through its ability to confer some form of personhood through the act of looking. In drawing a more inclusive discursive frame, I create space to consider the value of critical models that pay attention to the way viewers experience photography throughout their bodies, rather than simply emphasizing vision. My study of portraiture not only considers faces, then, but also bodies and body language, tears, textured surfaces of skin, memory, haptic qualities of touching or feeling, and the relationship between sound and vision.

Each chapter is organized around a central term that reappears across various discursive frames: “Invisibility,” “Intimacy,” “Circulation,” and “Sharing.” Built around these terms, my project establishes the ways in which the various discourses overlap and interact. As a whole, this project combines the study of rhetoric and theory with analysis of the visual and material properties of photographs in order to parse out the histories, theories, rituals, and beliefs that frame body, word, and image.

**Keywords:** photography; portraiture; event; invisibility; intimacy; circulation
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“when I complained, or when I boasted, or even sometimes when I said nothing at all.”
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Introduction

When news spread of unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown’s shooting at the hands of police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, the community of Ferguson—and soon, communities well beyond—mobilized in protest. News, anger, and debate about the shooting of another black teen by a white police officer spilled beyond the borders of the city. Over the days and weeks that followed, images of subsequent protests, arrests, and riots were distributed through news outlets and social media. One image that has circulated widely is a single photograph of a black man standing with arms raised before three policemen (with at least one more police officer approaching, judging by the tip of the boot and barrel of the gun edging in at the side of the frame). The photograph must have been made from a vantage point either on or across the street, and the camera is pointed toward the sidewalk, where police are closing the gap between the unarmed man and themselves. As they approach with machine guns pointed at him from point-blank range, the man seems to halt in mid-step. The photograph was made in Ferguson in the first days of protest. With the policemen’s camouflage pants and heavy artillery, and the blue and red lights of active police cars glowing in the background, the image is easily recognizable as an image from a state of emergency. On first glance, this could be an image from the supposedly bygone era of segregation, or a contemporary war zone.¹ This observation is quickly followed by the uneasy recognition that this photograph is not made in a distant place or time, but in the United States of 2014.

¹ This particular image appeared as part of a meditation on the new trend toward then vs. now Ferguson/civil rights comparisons published in the August 14, 2014 edition of The New York Times, pictured alongside a version of Bill Hudson’s notorious photograph, Walter Gadsen Attacked by K-9 Units, Birmingham, Alabama, May 3, 1963. The Hudson photograph is nevertheless misleadingly titled “a police dog attacked a civil rights demonstrator in Birmingham, Ala., in May 1963” in the New York Times despite the fact that, by Gadsen’s own account, he was not a civil rights demonstrator but rather a curious if unlucky bystander there “to check up on his protesting schoolmates” (Berger, Seeing Through Race 37).
In one of the most interesting visual trends in social media of recent years, a diptych is employed to show photographs of two events side by side (with a clear, guiding title hovering above them) in order to put the past and present into dialogue. These juxtaposed photographs offer a visual parallel between present-day events and archival images from civil rights protests of the 1960s. Versions of twinned photographs and captioned images invoke archival imagery and repeat it through Twitter and Facebook feeds and on popular news sites. One common trope is to take a photograph from a 1960s civil rights protest and overlay it with the leading caption “Birmingham, 1963 or Ferguson, 2014?” This equation folds decades, generations, and conflicts together, flattening them into one powerfully articulated visual frame. In these juxtapositions, a national history of conflict between black lives and white institutional violence is offered up in shorthand. Is it that social conditions have not changed in the decades that intervene between images, or is it that photographic conventions are so entrenched that photographic reporting has no other way to articulate injustice than to repeat the compositions of the past? The answer is, arguably, both. Re-contextualized in service of the conditions of Ferguson, 2014, civil rights photographs are re-framed and mobilized for their historical—and visual—similarities. When they are offered as evidence, it is not through extended analysis, but often for the purposes of quick, dramatic comparison. The analogue civil rights photographs that once traveled by way of (predominately Northern) newspapers and magazines now circulate as digital images on web pages and social media sites. They are part of a new and dynamic set of archives.

My project, in this dissertation, is to consider similar moments of connection and re-contextualization, both visual and critical. These re-imagined Ferguson/civil rights photographs are not portraits by the traditional definition. Though it maintains a foothold in conventional definitions of portraiture, however, the hierarchy that values the face—and by extension the head, and the mind—over the body has long been recognized as a limited means for articulating the embodied experience of subjects in the world. By abstracting the portrait from the naturalistic representation of thought and nobility,

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2 *The New York Times*’ article mentioned above, “Ferguson Image Evoke Civil Rights Era and Changing Visual Culture Perceptions,” is nevertheless an exception to this general rule; the article sets up the visual comparison in order to raise some of the same questions I am considering here.
portraiture has since developed the ability to “analyse historically the ways in which portrayed bodies articulated ideas and beliefs” (Woodall 12). Bodies communicate, regardless of the primacy of the face. Activists for all causes receive training in non-violent self-defence as preparation for performing interventions of nonviolent resistance, for instance. Posture and body language therefore play a practical and political function. In this case, in particular, body language is trained and conditioned; it draws on both mind and muscle memory. In other words, gestures speak and signify before and beyond the moment of the photograph. The way viewers interpret the photographed body is equally framed. To pair images depicting protest and conflict in Ferguson with those of 1960s civil rights marches and action is to call attention to both similarity and difference. The increased militarization of American police forces in 2014, due to funding available through the Patriot Act after 9/11 and the surplus of military gear available after the invasion of Iraq, for instance, is shown in relief when compared with the handguns and shirtsleeves of their earlier iterations. Nevertheless, the narratives that circulate are often over-simplified and as such they lend themselves to labels such as black and white, good and bad, now and then, them and us.

As viewing subjects, we too collapse difference. After an initially modest reception, Walker Evans and James Agee’s photo-book *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* found a second life in the hands of 1960s civil rights workers. Though the text pictures and describes a collection of poor, white sharecroppers, a new generation of black readers seemed to identify themselves, and their conditions, with those represented in the book (Crank n. pag.). The book took on the aura of a social, material, and iconic object, with its own particular cultural capital as a symbol, not for New Deal or Depression-era struggle, but rather for the plight of black Americans in the struggle for desegregation. Many civil rights workers reportedly carried copies of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with them, giving the book the force of a talisman and entry code into a common discourse. Not only does the book take on a new life and identity when re-purposed in this way, but it also articulates the importance of photographs as material objects, invested with significance and carried close to the body. While most of the civil rights-era photographs are made by white photographers and journalists with the social mobility necessary to make them, the majority of citizen journalists today control their own cameras, wielding them as both weapon and shield. This shift in the photographic
performance is particularly important to consider as it sheds light on the way earlier photographic records of protest and struggle were often made by a smaller cross-section of (often white) photographers.

This dissertation makes connections between photographic performances, from early analogue photography to the digital and social media imagery of the present day. I argue these categories are not discrete, but rather they form and change in relation to one another. My approach therefore offers the same critical, historical, and formal attention to each type of photograph, while actively seeking out points of articulation between disciplines, genres, and dialogues. In doing so, I address the critical debates prevalent to photography studies, visual culture, art history, and media studies. This project begins with the documentary photography of Helen Levitt and Walker Evans in the 1930s and moves to unconventional family photographs of photographers such as Nan Goldin, Rineke Dijkstra, Sally Mann, and Lincoln Clarkes. It moves from photographs of lynching and torture to the circulation of racialized performances in social media.

In building from one genre, period, and register, to the next, this project pays particular attention to the feelings associated with encountering the bodies involved in these performances. It maintains an investment in the subject as well as the viewer, and it opens up the conversation to regard the photographer-as-viewer as an important part in the production of the photographic event. It also requires a critical dialogue between the discourses related to, among other things, art and politics, fashion and documentary, news and advertising. The porosity of photographic migration, in particular—changes of context, blurring of categories, the juxtaposition of incongruous images—is photography’s critical strength as well as its uneasy reality. Photographs migrate from one context to the next. As mechanical or digital reproductions, they can be in more than one place at the same time. For my part, I pack them up in the form of photocopies and digital hard drives; I load up on heavy monographs that strain my back, and I keep thousands of photographs saved into my iPhone. I collect them and carry them with me from place to place. Many of these images already circulate on the Internet, whereas some image files need to be more carefully carried than others, just as some archives resist being photographed at all, despite a researcher’s resolve to record and revisit.
Photography circulates. My point of inquiry is how the affects, the politics, and the bodies related to these photographs circulate, as well.

As in the portrait and the event, “performance” is a term that encompasses a number of players, including the photographer, the subject, and the viewer and/as critic. In “Consuming Trauma; or, The Pleasures of Merely Circulating” (1997), Patricia Yaeger asks: “In making a body into a text, what investments does the cultural critic bring to her work, and when should they become visible?” (36). This question has become a touchstone for this project. Yaeger argues that, for Marx, “‘new problems and paradigms’ depend upon the dead’s borrowed names. This means that revolutionary thinking is ‘never free of anxiety’; or, in Derrida’s haunting of Marx, ‘conjuration is anxiety from the moment it calls upon death to invent the quick and to enliven the new, to summon the presence of what is not yet there’” (Yaeger 247). Upon reading her essay, Houston Baker claims Yaeger “convinces [him] utterly that some writer-critics encounter, imagine image specters—‘dead subjects’—far more nervously and hence, far more exactingly than others” (29). In their analysis of anxiety as social, rather than explicitly critical, practice, Peter Jackson and Jonathan Everts trace the concept of anxiety in the work of Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche, arguing the hallmark of “[t]he anxious person” is that they necessarily “realis[e] the relativity of all meaning and recognis[e] his or her own mortality” (2796). They define anxiety, in part, as “a physically embodied state involving mental and emotional distress, combined with a more diffuse sense of uneasiness about a coming event” and claim they “would go further to suggest that anxiety may be related to current events as well as to fears about the future” (2793). And like an event, “anxiety always announces itself to us as something new” (Jackson and Everts 2797). Not only is anxiety linked to the concept of the event, but it is also aligned with the process of criticism. The act of questioning, worrying, and negotiating one’s own relationship to criticism of images of others—particularly with respect to the dead or ideas of death—is part of a greater process of what (following Yaeger) I consider to be critically productive nervousness or anxiety.
Sharing

I am approaching my discussion of portraiture, event, and performance with the conviction that these discourses are intimately intertwined. In order to tangle and untangle these discourses, I explore four particular terms that play multiple roles in different discursive contexts. In doing so, I am contextualizing photographs and photographic practices, analyzing moments in which the interactions of performers within the photographic event (whether conscious or unconscious, willing or unwilling) demonstrate the perceived conditions of possibility for photography as a medium and practice. The central terms explored in the following chapters—invisibility, intimacy, circulation, and sharing—work together. Each can be considered “a mediation between the aesthetic and the political in a non trivial way” (Ngai, Ugly Feelings 3). These categories provide points of focus for the inevitable intersection between the aesthetic and the political, particularly as it relates to photography. They also speak to the ways in which different forms of discourse—fashion, art historical, critical, journalistic, juridical—overlap and intermingle with respect to photography. Each term is therefore examined in relation to photographic practices where it is especially charged, and in relation to the frames of discourse where it frequently appears.

My analysis watches for exchanged or stolen looks, and moments of discomfort in sharing memories, spaces, and even sounds. It is concerned with emulsions and exposures, skin surfaces, and skin colours. In it, I move from the haptic, or hapticity, and the rhetorical invisibility of modernist photography to the “unqualified visibility” (to borrow Alan Trachtenberg’s phrase) of the poor; from racialized performance to the surface of the touch screen, this project worries over borders and boundaries, things that both limit and absorb. How do we consider the intimacy of looking—the idea of touching images with the eyes and taking them into the body—when taking in difficult images? What relationship does this taking into the body have when viewers become subjects within photographs, or posed as embodied performances within social media? More pointedly, what does it mean to become intimate with images of atrocity? These are questions that critics such as Susan Sontag take on in texts such as Regarding the Pain of Others (2003) and soon after, “Regarding the Torture of Others” (2004). Mieke Bal, Peggy Phelan, Fred Moten, and Nicholas Mirzoeff all question what it means to share in looking at, and talking about, images of atrocity, just as Roland Barthes famously struggles with

In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes presents a document that is at once an extended reflection on, and theorization of, photography; it is also a lament for his lost mother, whose presence he seeks to recapture through his own relationship with photography. Barthes’s model is generated by the author’s process of mourning, and therefore it is deeply invested in the notion of “the that-has-been.” *Camera Lucida* is many things, including a reflection, a eulogy, and a performance of longing for something (or someone), for a relationship that is now gone. For Barthes and the majority of critics that follow him, the photograph is therefore intimately, indelibly associated with a moment of death. My reading of Barthes’s mode of photographic criticism negotiates the ways this past-tense model has influenced the field of photographic criticism. By theorizing photography through a wider frame of discourse, however, my reading moves away from Barthes’s *that-has-been* in order to negotiate with other models for seeing, experiencing, and theorizing photography in terms of something that—in its potential—extends beyond the metaphorical moment of death or mourning. This extension of Barthes’s productive and formative model is necessary, as I argue that photography needs to be analyzed in terms of discourse, collaboration (whether conscious or unwitting), and performance.

Barthes is aware of the personal stakes of photographic sharing. In his case, the Winter Garden Photograph, the image that finally manages to capture the essence of the author’s late mother, pains him to circulate to an audience for whom it will fail to hold the same meaning as it does for him. Though Barthes’s perspective on sharing is personal, rather than social, it calls attention to problems of context and perspective that are more widely applicable to photography in general. Through his refusal to share the photograph with others (beyond his own subjective, guiding description of it), Barthes’s omission calls attention to its opposite: the circulation and re-contextualization of photographs public and private, dear and extraneous. The notion of sharing is also in many ways made up of a combination of the preceding terms that guide this project—from the invisibility of social documentarians who move through public spaces, documenting their surroundings like “penitent spies,” to the intimacy of lives shared with a photographer and their camera (and, by extension, their viewership), or the way communal fears and
prejudices give rise to the circulation of photographs passed from one friend and family member to the next as tokens, trophies, or stories.

**Portraiture**

The term *portraiture* customarily evokes images of faces, busts, and posed figures presenting themselves for view. The purview of the portrait is, more specifically, the face. The face is conventionally accepted as the showcase for the eyes, and the supposed centre of individual subjectivity, agency, and particularity. But that particularity is also necessarily embodied, and so gesture and body are an essential part of picturing both individual particularity and the relation of individuals to other subjectivities and other bodies. If, following Hans Georg Gadamer, the portrait is “the intensified form of the picture” (131), then that “intensification” can take various forms. As art historian Joanna Woodall argues, in fifteenth century portraiture, “[t]he metaphor of the body politic meant that portraiture played a vital ideological role. By silently assimilating the real to the ideal, naturalistic portraiture enabled a particular human being to personify the majesty of the kingdom or the courage of a military leader” (3). As the genre has historically presumed an affiliation with the head of the body politic and the metaphorical “father” figure, its claims have also perpetuated historical definitions of identity and their attendant definitions of personhood.

But the performance of distilling an identity to a representation is not necessarily limited to the face. That head is still a head in relation to a body, though neck and shoulders are often figured in terms of a pedestal on which the real prize—the head—rests. Bodies and, by extension, identities and inner qualities are also represented through pose, composition, dress, and visual relationships. Like composition and (the subject’s) body language, the bodies required to prop up the subject (whether actually or symbolically) comprise part of the portrait’s history. For Shearer West, “all portraits represent something about the body and face, on the one hand, and the soul, character, or virtues of the sitter, on the other” (21). Historically, these attendant elements are lower on the hierarchy of individual representation than the head and the eyes. In the sixteenth century, for example, naturalistic portraiture began to emulate earlier conventions for representing universal figures, religious icons, and nobility. In this period, courtly
accessories such as “chairs, curtains, columns, helmets and handkerchiefs repeated in countless later works were introduced into the portrait repertoire” (Woodall 2). At the same time, “[s]ubordinate figures such as dogs, dwarfs, servants, jesters, and black attendants were strategically placed to render the sitter’s elevated status and natural authority clearly apparent” (Woodall 2). Secular portraiture is historically as dependent on iconography and context as it is on the visual subjugation of other bodies. The black attendant’s subordination, for instance, completes the portrait as it re-enforces the portrait subject’s authority and identity. If the purpose of a portrait is often ultimately “to represent sitters as worthy of love, honour, respect and authority” (Woodall 3), then these virtues are nevertheless conferred through the intrinsic, if not explicit, comparison.

This project expands the parameters of the discursive definition(s) of portraiture to allow for what might be considered the portrait’s opposite—indecorous representations, the use of picturing to depersonalize, and the act of being forced to (or needing to) hide one’s face before a camera. I argue that it is both theoretically valuable and politically necessary to consider the conventions of portraiture as they relate to the decentering of visual emphasis, and the refusal of subjective agency. The chapters that follow consider photographic performances as they clash against, or overlap with, conventions of portraiture, a genre defined largely through its ability to determine some form of personhood through the act of looking and picturing. Drawing a more inclusive discursive frame also allows additional space to consider the value of approaching photography through models that pay attention to sound and circulation, rather than resting all of the emphasis on vision. It does not only consider faces, then, but also body language, textured surfaces of skin, the haptic qualities of touching or feeling, and what Fred Moten calls the act of “listening” (In the Break 200) to the sound of a photograph as opposed to closing one’s ears to the sight before our eyes.

Qualities such as the haptic, or approaches such as “listening” to a photograph, contribute to the act of encountering photography in the present moment. Portraiture, more generally, is also in the business of keeping its subject close. As Woodall argues, naturalistic portraiture wants “to render a subject distant in time, space, spirit, eternally present” (Woodall 8). The implicit assumption is “that a ‘good’ likeness will perpetually unite the identities to which it refers” (Woodall 8). But if a “good” portrait addresses the
viewer in present tense, the notion of recognition still only extends as far as that of supposed ‘personhood.’ To further complicate the notion of the portrait, Benjamin Buchloh suspiciously eyes the portrait as a “representation of a lost subjectivity which could now be sold back as a substitute, as commodity and cult imagery to those who had never been given access to the subject’s actual political realization” (151). Not only is the “subject” of the portrait contingent upon which bodies are extended the status of personhood, but the portrait itself can function as a form of self-commodification to be purchased and sold at the expense of any actual political or economic agency.

Portraiture is also concerned with the problems of time, mortality, and the desire to re-present, or keep present. This is one important point at which the concerns of portraiture and photography overlap. Nevertheless, the flip-side to the model of a ‘good’ portrait—one that re-presents, and makes the past present—is the model of surrogacy in which performance, circulation, and re-presentation come together: the effigy. According to Joseph Roach, an effigy is usually understood as a figure “that is destroyed in [one’s] stead” (Cities of the Dead 36). “When effigy appears as a verb,” however, Roach argues, “it means to evoke an absence, to body something forth, especially something from a distant past” (36). Notably, at least one of the Oxford English Dictionary definitions of portraiture is, in fact, effigy. Effigy is at once portrait and performance. As a process, effigy “fills by means of surrogation a vacancy created by the absence of an original” (Roach 36). Performances themselves produce effigies, “fashioned from flesh”; these “[c]onsist of a set of actions that hold open a place in memory into which many different people may step . . . performed effigies—those fabricated from human bodies and the associations they evoke—provide communities with a method of perpetuating themselves through specially nominated mediums or surrogates” (Roach 36). Possible surrogates include “actors, dancers, priests . . . celebrities, freaks, children, and especially, by virtue of an intense but unsurprising paradox, corpses” (Roach 36). Roach argues this connection between surrogates and corpses explains “why the ambivalence associated with the dead must enter into any discussion of the relationship between memory, performance, and substitution” (36). The effigy is, in effect, both a portrait and the portrait’s mode of circulation, combined into one. As a “tool of memory,” the effigy actively “enables the processes regulating performance—kinaesthetic imagination, vortices of behavior, and displaced transmission—to produce memory through
surrogation” (Roach 36). Roach’s model of effigy is useful to keep in mind not only for the discussion of photographing torture and death (chapter three) or the processes of circulation enabled through social media (chapter four), but also for the way acts of surrogation occur in tension with the critical discourses that arise in response to photography, and to specific photographers (chapters one and two).

Event

Ariella Azoulay’s work on the civil contract of photography offers another, more directly applicable framework for working through issues of representation, personhood, and photography. Concerned with the power photography has to categorize and catalogue not only individual human lives, but also larger social, cultural, and legal conditions, Azoulay argues that photography should be theorized as an event, rather than as a closed (inter)action or a fixed moment in time. As Azoulay argues, “[o]ntologically . . . a photograph is never a finished product . . . Whatever is inscribed in the photograph always exceeds what its owner wished to put in it” (“Regime-made Disaster” 38). Because of this excessive quality, a photograph remains “open at all times to additional participants”—beyond the photographer or the governing body, for instance—“who will not only interpret what is seen in it as a given, but will also reshape the seen that is to be read” (Azoulay, “Regime-made Disaster” 38). Her would-be viewer (actual or potential) is therefore not a passive participant, but an active “watcher” engaging with the photograph and the social and economic structures it obscures or reflects. This ontology of the photograph as contingent and unfinished is essential to the photograph’s political power. To limit the photograph to the status of a document and frame it as belonging to a single authority, Azoulay claims, is to foreclose its political and civil potential. The larger process, or practice, is therefore greater than the individual photograph. For Azoulay, the photograph itself is an event, but as such it is only one part of the larger whole that makes up photography.

In line with Azoulay, the underlying argument for this project is that photography must be theorized in terms of an event. Each photograph includes not only the immediate factors involved in its making—the photographer, the subject, the camera, and any presumed viewer—but also the assumptions, conventions, laws, and beliefs that both contributed to the photographer’s (and subject’s) understanding of what a photograph is. This event also extends into the present with any additional viewing, quotation, or re-presentation of the photograph, whether real or imagined. This is, of course, a wide frame for photography, but—like my expanded definition of portraiture—I use it provisionally in order to create space for re-thinking photography in terms of alternative approaches and additional frames of discourse. There are multiple ways of thinking through the notion of “event.” The notions of possibility, engaged perspective, and even a kind of traumatic encounter with the real that characterize many theories of the event can be applicable to the photographic events considered in the chapters that follow. All of these models require some form of audience or (presumed) viewer to complete the event. Kaja Silverman positions the standardized account of photography as an inheritor to the emergence of “modern metaphysics—the history that began with the cogito, that seeks to establish man as the ‘relational center’ of all that is, and whose ‘fundamental event’ is ‘the conquest of the world as picture’” (“The Miracle of Analogy” 2). This narrative has discursively connected photography with the event since before photographic technology and practice, as we know it, existed.

Approaching the event through Hegelian theory, rather than in relation to photographic history, Michael Quante defines an “event” as “a spatio-temporal singular thing (occurrence) that stands in causal relationship to other events” (107). It is “the cause for an altered state of affairs in the world” . . . “a physical process,” “a deed,” “an action” (Quante 107). According to Alain Badiou, an event introduces a radical break into the order of Being: “An event is the creation of a new possibility. An event changes not only the real, but also the possible. An event is at the level not of simple possibility, but at the level of possibility of possibility” (Badiou, “Is the Word Communism Forever

\[4\] Silverman sets up this history in order to write against it, arguing instead that photography should be theorized in terms of “analogy.”
In *Event: A Philosophical Journey Through a Concept*, Slavoj Žižek introduces the term by way of an anecdote.

Agatha Christie’s *4.50 from Paddington* opens in the middle of a journey on a train from Scotland to London, where Elspeth McGillicuddy, on the way to visit her old friend Jane Marple, sees a woman being strangled in the compartment of a passing train (the 4.50 from Paddington). It all happens very fast and her vision is blurred, so the police don’t take Elspeth’s report seriously as there is no evidence of wrongdoing; only Miss Marple believes her story and starts to investigate. This is an event at its purest and most minimal: something shocking, out of joint, that appears all of a sudden and disrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernible causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation. (9)

More than that, however, “an event is thus the effect that seems to exceed its causes – and the space of an event is that which opens up by the gap that separates an effect from its causes” (Žižek, *Event* 11). As Žižek’s example demonstrates, however, the event is also intimately linked with both visuality and audience. Žižek frames the event through Elspeth McGillicuddy’s act of witnessing, which necessarily includes her repeated recounting and adamant defense of what she saw. In other words, the murder does not make the event. Instead, the event is also comprised of the act of viewing, the act of questioning, and the construction of narrative that surrounds it.

The viewing experience is a necessary part of what I figure as the photographic event. Nevertheless, the present study grew out of a nagging question as to why theories of photography, in particular, are preoccupied with the viewer’s experience as the element that completes the photograph. Rather than establishing distance from the viewer-based model, however, the studies that run throughout this dissertation ultimately lead right back to it. Even more, they expand the reach of the search right into the viewer, intersecting not only with physiological responses but also with individual and communal frames of discourse. They also engage with feelings, memories, and personal experiences. In part an attempt to re-set the critical model of photography to account for time before the photograph is made, my interest here is, and has long been, in re-tracing the routes of its conception through language, as opposed to imagining the seemingly immaculate conception of a printed (or digital) image resting in the hands of a bereaved theorist or a sceptical critic.
Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu have recently articulated what seems, in retrospect, to be one of the seeds of my earlier problem. Reacting to the emotional reflection model that Roland Barthes provides in *Camera Lucida*, Brown and Phu argue in *Feeling Photography* (2014) that “photo criticism has largely been . . . reluctant to account for feeling when it comes to photography” (2). Barthes’s work “reveals how profoundly we feel photography” (Brown and Phu 2). The publication of *Camera Lucida* precedes important critical contributions such as Victor Burgin’s *Thinking Photography* (1982) by only a few years. For its part, *Thinking Photography* is emblematic of “another influential line of inquiry” that “established a different approach. Insisting upon the necessity of ‘thinking’ photography, critics established the dominance of a rubric of thinking – largely by disavowing feeling” (Brown and Phu 2). In emphasizing thinking, Burgin’s text therefore encourage a break with art historians and critics such as Barthes, “who relied on ‘personal thoughts and feelings’ to explain photographic meaning” (Brown and Phu 2). Approaches such as Burgin’s suggest “feelings . . . cloud the critic’s thoughts, making him vulnerable to the ideology of the (art) market” (Brown and Phu 2). Though thinking and feeling might have been presented in stark opposition, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, the two are not mutually exclusive.

This tension between thinking and feeling surely troubles my own reading of Barthes, who remains ubiquitous in photographic discourse and theory to this day. His emphasis on personal, subjective feeling displaces more potentially productive, or even relevant, content and subjects of photographic criticism. By Burgin’s logic, “[i]nstead of serving as an analytic approach for understanding photography, feeling (on the few occasions that it explicitly surfaces in photo theory) has instead been perceived as a hindrance to this critical task” (Brown and Phu 2). But for Brown and Phu, in sacrificing feeling at the altar of thinking, we miss out on one of the most central elements of photographic history. By unpacking the bias against feeling, Brown and Phu provide a diagnosis for my own discomfort with pillars of subjective photographic criticism such as *Camera Lucida* and Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*. And through the course of this project, my own research seems to parallel theirs insofar as I have also come up against the limits of the materialist “thinking” approach to which I am nonetheless deeply indebted.
Moving forward, moving inward

Among other things, *Feeling Photography* exemplifies one of the important ways that the field of photography studies has already begun to shift during the time I have been researching and writing this dissertation. Other recent texts such as *Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism* (2012), edited by Meg McLagan and Yates McKee; Azoulay’s *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2012), and T.J. Demos’s *The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary During Global Crisis* (2013), to name a few, demonstrate the ways in which photography studies is now increasingly paying attention to discourses of event, affect, and circulation. Like Brown and Phu, McLagan and McGee are part of a recent movement in photographic criticism. They each approach the type of discursive and contextualizing study I began this project hoping to develop, and represent a critical movement of which this dissertation is now a part. In *Feeling Photography*, the circulation of feelings is tied to the circulation of photographs, whether within intimate circles, across large populations via mass media, or within the discomfort of one’s personal mourning process. Brown and Phu introduce the collection by cogently situating their own project in relation to the longer history of photographic criticism. Although their focus is more specifically on feeling and affect, they are arguably working from a critical narrative parallel to the one from which this study emerged.

While images of bodies call attention to the necessity for asking ethical and critical questions, images of atrocity tend to bring these questions to a point of crisis as they foreground the fraught responsibilities invested in the very acts of looking at and (to borrow Mieke Bal’s term) “citing” (“The Politics of Citation” 217) photographic images. Further, Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, “Insofar as that dispute concerns the visual, necessarily interfaced with the other senses, this politics of the sensible is visual culture” (“Invisible Empire” 38). McLagan and McGee pick up the “politics of the sensible” in their edited collection, *Sensible Politics*. As they argue, “[p]olitics revolves around what can be seen, felt, sensed. Political acts are encoded in medial forms—feet marching on a street, punch holes in a card, images on a television newscast, tweets about events

5 In “The Politics of Citation,” Bal argues that in quoting images we always run the risk of reproducing and normalizing the colonial gaze.
unfolding in real time—by which the political becomes manifest in the world” (McLagan and McKee 9). Sensible Politics is concerned with the “modes of circulation and of making public” by which images circulate; the authors claim these forms “are forms of political action in and of themselves,” as they “shap[e] people as subjects and constitut[e] the contours of what is perceptible, sensible, legible” (McLagan and McKee 9). As a result, networks and forms of circulation require political attention; these forms both “define the terms of political possibility and create terrain for political acts” (McLagan and McKee 9). Modes of circulation are interdependent with politics and aesthetics.

Circulation is not limited to technological communication tools but takes different forms. This is where elements such as the haptic come in. Among other things, the attention to affect, sound, and the haptic helps to push thinking about photography beyond a simple privileging of sight. It brings image and body together at a common border. In The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study (2013), Fred Moten and Stefano Harney explore the notion of “hapticality,” which, though giving credit to Laura Marks and her discussion of the haptic in cinema, draws primarily on critical race theory and a consideration of African American history and theory. On hapticality:

This form of feeling was not collective, not given to decision, not adhering to or reattaching to settlement, nation, state, territory or historical story; nor was it repossessed by the group which could not feel as one, reunified in time and space . . . a way of feeling through others, a feel for feeling others feeling you. This is modernity’s insurgent feel, its inherited caress, its skin talk, tongue touch, breath speech, hand laugh. This is the feel that no individual can stand, and no state abide. This is the feel we might call hapticity. (Moten and Harney 97-98)

Hapticality is, in other words, a “capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you” (Moten and Harney 97). This relationally-determined model is, importantly, “not regulated;” rather, “to feel others is unmediated, immediately social, amongst us, our thing . . . we feel (for) each other” (Moten and

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7 See “hapticality” <http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=516>
The “we” in Moten and Harney’s theory is, of course, central to the theory’s figuration; though their model is one for touching, feeling, and thinking through black lives, black bodies, and black histories, this model offers alternate ways of critically navigating through and feeling photography that become particularly useful in the chapters that follow.

*The Undercommons* builds on earlier explorations of photography, including Moten’s *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (2003). With *In the Break*, Moten argues that in order to adequately theorize photography, and perhaps racialized photography in particular, it is essential to acknowledge the relationship between sound and vision. Moten’s discussion of “black mo’nin” (or “black moanin[g]”) argues that it is not adequate to look at the photograph; in order to fully take it in, we must also listen for it (200). As Shawn Michelle Smith demonstrates in her consideration of “black moanin(g)” (with respect to her own analysis of—her own process of “listening to”—a Booker T. Washington photograph), to pay attention to touch and sound is to acknowledge the essential contingency of photography as a medium that circulates (both the object itself and the subjective experiences of its makers and viewers).

Moten’s model offers a counter to the model of that-has-been which Barthes presents in *Camera Lucida*. Like Brown and Phu’s call to pay attention to feelings, Moten pushes against Barthes’s model for its refusal to acknowledge its potential to keep the past present. Part of the impulse in “listening” is to de-centralize vision, following a tradition of choosing sound as an alternate form of knowing within critical race theory. As Mirzoeff argues, “visuality” is “both a medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority, and a means for the mediation of those subject to that authority” (*The Right to Look* xv).

As Moten explains, the different sensory experiences need not be so discretely segregated. “You have to keep looking” at a photograph “so you can listen to it” (210),

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8 “How would you recognize the antiphonal accompaniment to gratuitous violence – the sound that can be heard as if it were in response to that violence, the sound that must be heard as that to which such violence responds?” (Moten and Harney 95-96)

9 Smith “listens to” a photograph of Booker T. Washington, but instead of hearing moanin(g) in the image of the Washington, onstage, she claims “[t]he sound of this photograph is the crackle of an electric energy generated by the famous orator, delivered to his audience, and circulated back again” (*Pictures and Progress* 269). The process of “listening” does not necessarily produce a stable, consistent result.
he suggests. What Moten calls “black mo’nin” therefore mobilizes mourning in order to performs an act of improvisation that “disrupts the temporal framework that buttresses that opposition such that an extended, lingering look at—aesthetic response to—the photograph manifests itself as political action” (210). By dis-placing the hegemonic power of vision, Moten’s “black mo’nin” brings forward questions of visibility and invisibility through the act of refusal.10

Invisibility, Intimacy, Circulation, Sharing

My first two chapters follow a number of photographers whose work can be found within the canons of art history or documentary photography. These include Helen Levitt, Walker Evans, Sally Mann, Rineke Dijkstra, Nan Goldin, and Lincoln Clarkes. Chapter one (“Invisibility”) considers the photographic performances of Levitt and Evans, both in terms of their own physical, embodied practices, and the ways in which the bodies, genders, and biographies of the two photographers are treated through decades of photographic criticism. This chapter takes on the relationship between modernism and social documentary’s preoccupation with portraiture. It does so in order to analyze the ongoing critical concern with establishing a definitive portrait of Helen Levitt, whose own social and critical invisibility is brought to bear on the reception of her work, from its emergence in the late 1930s to the present day. This chapter is therefore concerned with the relationship between the (female) body and the machine, and the pitfalls of critical desire. Levitt’s invisibility is brought into greater relief in relation to Evans’s problematically visible body. Chapter two (“Intimacy”) focuses on the photographer’s embodiment in its attention to Nan Goldin’s self-portraiture (in many ways a precursor to the so-called “selfies” and personalized memes in digital media explored in chapter four). More specifically, however, chapter two shifts its focus to the exposed bodies of photographic subjects, and the relationship between these bodies and their photographers, and later, the viewers. Chapter two traces the relationship between

10 In the Break: Moten explains that “the aesthetic and philosophical arrangements of the photograph—some organizations of and for light—anticipate a looking that cannot be sustained as unalloyed looking but must be accompanied by listening” despite the fact that “what is listened to—echo of a whistle or a phrase, moanin(g), mourning, desperate testimony and flight—is also unbearable. These are the complex musics of the photograph” (200).
intimacy and portraiture by focusing on maternity—as photographic subject matter and as photographic theory. The treatment of female bodies in chapter two also calls attention to the necessary invisibility of the new fathers, for instance, or the way the uniform works on the soldiers the same way bared skin works on the mothers. In different ways, Rineke Dijkstra’s photographs of New Mothers and Lincoln Clarkes’s photographs of women on the streets of Vancouver’s Downtown East Side both call attention to the problems of entitlement that go along with any notion of “democratic” viewing. Intimacy speaks to the relational nature at the heart of portraiture and the notion that good portraits communicate, and therefore make someone present (for the viewer) rather than simply depicting something (or someone) as past. It also suggests the intimate ambivalence that can cloud the perspectives of viewers, including the historians and critics who take it upon themselves to frame the work.

One way of dividing the chapters might be to read the first half of the dissertation as chapters preoccupied with female bodies (Levitt’s invisible woman in chapter one and the maternal figures of chapter two) and the second half as focused on male subjects (the supposed masculinity of lynching victims and the proliferation of black men such as Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and others whose bodies are called up in protests and memes). Nevertheless, these two categories work in dialectic. The repetitive visibility and scapegoating of male bodies in chapters three and four, for instance, occurs largely in relation to the banalization of images of violence against women. In fact, the absence of recognition—the refusal or invisibility of subjectivity within certain images—makes them especially relevant to the discourses of portraiture. In chapters three and four, my attention shifts primarily to historical and vernacular photography—from the lynching photography made by local practitioners in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to personal and activist photography circulated through social media. In these chapters, I explore the notion of surrogacy and the way it functions in social and/as photographic performances. Chapter three (“Circulation”) troubles the definition of portraiture by moving on from the signification of individualism, genealogy, and national identity, and turning attention instead to the dark underside of each of these concepts. It asks “How does, or how could, a body experience photography?” Photographs of lynchings and torture photographs such as those made at Abu Ghraib prison shed light on the double edge of portraiture—the bodies that are carefully posed, framed, and
pictured in order to argue that they are *not* worthy of love, respect, or value. In images such as these, white lynch mobs are supposed to be enhanced by the black (attendant) bodies hanging between them; or white American soldiers offer their own images as legitimizing details to make the photographs of tortured prisoners more like trophies. All the while, critics and historians wring their hands over the critical and ethical anxieties these photographic events set into play. Chapter four ("Sharing") considers the contemporary signification of the genre as it relates to the digital "selfies." This chapter turns its focus to the material, economic, and embodied life of photographic objects and photographic labourers in the present day. It marks another kind of critical anxiety, the problem of trying to theorize the present as it slips past. From street photographs that mark bodies and faces within their social and economic context (rather than as artificially isolated or posed representations) to images of torture and violence showing the grim underside of both decorously posed portraits, family albums, and vernacular snapshots, this project considers portraiture in its various faces.

**Process**

In order to establish the four discourses that form the basis of this study, my research extended through photographic collections and archives, particularly those in the Department of Photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the exhibition archives, curatorial files, and promotional materials of The Museum of Modern Art; the library of the Whitney Museum of American Art; and the art and architecture collections, rare book archives, and photography collections of the New York Public Library. In order to develop a better frame of reference for African American photographic history, I consulted newspaper article materials, biographical files, photographic archives, rare books, archived guest books, manuscript drafts, legal documents, and audio recordings of town hall meetings in the Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library (MARBL) at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. The research process also included scanning Facebook, dipping into the clipped interactions of Twitter, Instagramming with personal, if not academic, fervour, and enlisting younger millennials to initiate me into the ephemeral urgency of Snapchat.
In the words of Joseph Roach, “[t]he pursuit of performance does not require historians to abandon the archive, but it does encourage them to spend more time in the streets” (Roach xii). Fluid movement between genres, disciplines, and departments is as central to this project as the crossing of lines between interior spaces and city streets. The act of walking through the city is also inherently connected to what I am figuring as the related concepts of both circulation and sharing. These questions of mobility are in turn related to the theory of intimacy, with all its ambivalence. Many of the photographers and artists whose work I consider intersect in important ways with life outside the shelter of homes, museums, and archives. Lincoln Clarkes photographs women whose lives are lived out on the streets of Vancouver; Vito Acconci’s Following Piece recounts the narratives of long and short walks made in pursuit of his subjects; Walker Evans points his camera at subjects as they walk, unaware, on city sidewalks; and Kara Walker’s A Subtlety tracks the passage of bodies, time, and sugar while encouraging visitors to wind their way through her installation at the Domino Sugar Factory. Even the lynching postcards I discuss in chapter three travel through the mail, and thus are transported from one locale to the next inside the carrier bags of postal workers whose paths cross the United States, moving up and down city streets.

My project was paced and photographed into being through a process of traveling back and forth between the United States and Canada. As a researcher whose study shifts from the archives to “the streets,” my methodology includes long walks and lengthy subway rides spent photographing strangers from Harlem to the Bowery to Coney Island, stalking Levitt’s solo path on New York city streets, and physically exploring the nuances of movement along with other photographers in Queens. It also includes sitting in a pew near the back of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta listening for traces of Martin Luther Kings Junior and Senior in the form of audio recordings of church services from the past. Layered over these recordings are the lively responses of other present-day church visitors who respond—in moans of agreement and emphatic “amens”—to the resounding call of preachers whose bodies are long dead; these 11 The full title of the exhibition is A Subtlety: or the Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant.
responses are both severely belated and undeniably present, and they double those pronounced from within the space and time of the recording. In this sense, they are a little like the photographic events I study in the chapters that follow. They are renewed and re-performed in the present while nevertheless drawing on (and drawing out) traces from the past.
Chapter 1.

Invisibility

1.1. Setting a Course

In May of 2012, I relocated to New York to conduct research. I went to study the curatorial files from the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, visit the photographic archives at the New York Public Library and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and spend time at any institution who would give me a chance to poke into its filing cabinets and peer behind its otherwise locked doors. To connect the space between libraries, museums, and my Brooklyn apartment, I spent many long afternoons and late nights walking up and down the streets of Manhattan, Harlem, and Brooklyn, retracing the old neighbourhoods of Helen Levitt's photographic history. Levitt is gone now, and though already wary of the desire to place her body back in relation to the work, I trailed the sites of past footsteps, half hoping to draw some more personal understanding of her work from the preserved façades and city streets. What I often found in the places of photographs past was something closer to the absence of answers or acknowledgment that so frustrated Levitt’s interviewers and critics; the neighbourhoods have changed over the past decades, in appearance and demographics and, as Levitt herself noted (as early as the 1970s) the children of New York no longer play in the streets. (And the graffiti is no longer scratched out in politely ephemeral white chalk.)

The city itself has changed. In the words of Susan Leigh Foster, “Do not all records of human accomplishment document the motions of bodies?” (11). A scholar of dance and choreography, Foster speaks from experience when she notes the transience of embodied performances: “The dancing body,” she says, “in the relentlessness of its motion and the inevitability of its evanescence leaves in its wake so little from which to
reconstruct its presence, either in the imagination or in history” (11). Despite the difficulty of tracing embodied performance, in studying Levitt I wanted to follow Joseph Roach’s advice to spend more time pursuing the study of performance outside of the archives, and into the streets. Foster’s reflections on performance are particularly appropriate for Levitt, who is often described in terms of the dancer’s grace with which she navigated New York City streets. Nevertheless, Alan Trachtenberg claims discussion of “Levitt’s work calls for measured delicacy and reticence, a balance between description and speculation” (“Seeing What You See” 1). It is important, he counsels, to value “what remains unseen in [Levitt’s] pictures,” as “it too has a place in the field of the picture, the way the city as a whole is present though unseen in every picture of a street” (“Seeing What You See” 1). Though speaking more generally, Rebecca Solnit addresses a similar tension: “There is a very practical sense in which to trace even an imaginary route is to trace the spirit or thought of what passed there before,” she claims; “[a]t its most casual, this retracing allows unsought memories of events”—or, perhaps, of photographs viewed—“to return as one encounters the sites of those events. At its most formal it is a means of memorizing” (76). While an emphasis on physical location can trigger recollection, help commit information to memory, or bring about a different understanding or perspective, it can also feed into a kind of fetishization of space, aura, and place. In the same way, interviews of artists can fall into the traps of intentional fallacy and hero worship.

In “Street Haunting: A London Adventure,” (1927) Virginia Woolf walks the reader through the joys of “rambling the streets of London” on a winter evening. In the process of stepping outside, she says, “we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s own room” (177). Woolf is part of a long tradition of creative, philosophical, and literary walkers. In “Walking in the City” (1984), Michel de Certeau also draws a path.¹² De Certeau walks the reader through New York City, mapping a trail of thought from his position up on the 110th floor of the World Trade Center building, down to the level of the street, where the footsteps of the pedestrians “down below” form sentences comprised of street names strung together in an unlikely narrative. “To walk,”

¹² Translated to English, de Certeau’s notion of “place” is commonly understood as “space.”
he says, “is to lack a place” (De Certeau 103). De Certeau also notes, however, that the streets are filled with “pedestrian speech acts” performed by those “whose bodies follow the thick and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it” (93). The movement of bodies is connected to the progress and development of narrative, as well as to the writing of history, both in words and through bodies. Roach’s *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (2006) thematizes the process of walking through New Orleans, exploring the way memory inscribes itself on bodies through space, action, repetition, and forgetting.

More recently, Solnit’s *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (2000) shows the histories of walking and of thinking as inseparable. From the Sophists to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Søren Kierkegaard, to Charles Dickens, and Marina Abramović to Teju Cole; literary, philosophical, artistic, social, and economic practices have been theorized peripatetically. But tied to this public history is a tenacious sense of masculine ownership over the act of walking. In television and movies, a woman walking is often an obvious trope for dramatic irony; a lone woman walking is an ominous sign (she really should, as we do, know better). Though Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin helped make the figure of the flâneur famous, modernist authors such as Djuna Barnes, Jean Rhys, and Woolf add complications to the claim that walking the city is reserved for men. Though heavily gentrified cities such as Manhattan have now mobilized police presence to the extent that a woman can conceivably walk alone throughout the city for hours on end without the threat of (physical, if not verbal) violence, this was not necessarily the case in the Manhattan of the early twentieth century. Then, as now, the habitual male walker remains more common, or less precarious, than his female counterpart.

Part of the appeal of the walk is the moving, and part of the appeal is in looking. Tourism and traveling involve a lot of walking, and these walkers often carry cameras. After Kodak popularized the snapshot, hand-held cameras such as the Leica made the mobility of photography possible. When, in the 1930s, camera clubs began to form—one of the most notable of these is the Photo League in New York City—the new practitioners, both male and female, were encouraged to carry their cameras out into the streets and photograph what they saw. These favoured what they called “features”: groups of “related pictures that explored in depth broader social conditions, particularly in distinct neighbourhoods where they could uncover interrelationships among people,
buildings, institutions, and social activities” (Raeburn 220). This type of photographic work required that photographers take to the streets.

Like these walkers, this chapter makes moves of its own through the city in order to map questions of movement and perception in modernity, and the discursive values attributed to documentary. As Jeff Allred argues in *American Modernism and Depression Documentary*, “One must trace the itineraries of images as they move through darkrooms, editors’ studios, archives . . . consider the alternating currents of desire . . . summoned up by the production of all documentary texts” (20). I am, for the most part, focusing on a particular, extended moment in 1930s and 1940s New York that represents a locus of activity – in terms of the creation of camera clubs, the development of art historical institutionalization (the Museum of Modern Art especially), and the notable convergence of different cultures, countries, and communities in one confined social and geographical space. Early twentieth century New York is often considered a height of modernity, with ubiquitous skyscrapers and subways, cars and cameras. Noting a proliferation of New York pedestrians, de Certeau says that “intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together” (161). The same can be said for performances. Critics, too, clear their own paths: “The staging of a promenade in a past, or, better yet, imagined space, reveals the historian in her strategic (and studied) act of composing a history” (Hammergren 56). A pedestrian myself, I weave across discourses, connecting the publications, streets, signs, and subways of Evans’s and Levitt’s urban spaces to articulate the material, embodied, and theoretical nature of their performances, as well as marking some of my own contingencies.

This chapter considers the work of photographers Walker Evans (1903-1975) and Helen Levitt (1913-2009). My aim in establishing this comparison is to consider the role that invisibility plays in the photographic discourses of documentary and street photography. I argue that Levitt’s work, and the body of criticism that frames her, deserve more critical attention than they have been given to date. While Evans is accepted as a foundational figure in the history and development of documentary photography as we know it, Levitt, a New York art-world insider, positions herself on the peripheries of “art” and “documentary” (from social affiliation to theoretical approach, and beyond). Unlike groups such as the Photo League, she focuses on people rather than social “conditions” and denies that her work is “documentary” at all. Evans and Levitt are
directly connected; he influenced her work, and she, for her turn, assisted him with printing and shooting. Both claim a peripheral relationship (or an indifferent attitude) to politics despite their affiliations with groups such as the Photo League, the Federal Art Project, the Film Division of Office of War Information, and the U.S. government’s Farm Security Administration Project. The intersections between Levitt and Evans make their differences all the more productive. Levitt resists narrativization, criticism, theorization, and categorization; Evans, in contrast, employs these both skilfully and strategically. In order to contextualize the definitions of documentary practice with the conditions of their emergence, paying attention to their persistence over time, I look at the photographs, interviews, writing, and statements of Levitt and Evans (or the notable lack thereof, in Levitt’s case). I am specifically concerned with the role that invisibility plays not only in Levitt’s photographic performance, but in the critical performances that—from the 1940s to today—allow a more complete view of Levitt’s work to essentially remain invisible. I am therefore considering the work of Levitt and Evans in the context of both their contemporaries and the previous work that influenced them. I am also locating them in other discourses, including print and publishing practices, corporate advertisement, and academic (art) historical productions, to consider the ways in which photographic art and documentary work is practiced, performed, and received. In doing so, I am situating Levitt’s work, in particular, in the social, historical, aesthetic, and geographic specificity of her most prolific period. By at once engaging in dialogue with, and actively resisting, the definitions of documentary set out by its most vocal and prolific proponents, my attention to Levitt and Evans makes it possible to articulate the convergence of many of these discourses both in their contemporary moment and in the years that follow. At the heart of my analysis of both Levitt and Evans is the question of mobility versus stasis. This question is central to the way we, as critics, interpret the photographers’ relationship to their subjects. It is also important to the way we understand both Levitt and Evans, both as physical presences within the specific spaces they photograph, and as discursive figures whose work travels and evolves (or conversely, whose work stays still) throughout its critical life.
1.2. MoMA and Documentary

In 1940 the Museum of Modern Art developed its Department of Photography, a landmark for American museums. The MoMA is a major institution and a founding figure in terms of modern art historical discourse; their contributions help to inaugurate the discourse of photography as art. Beaumont Newhall championed the creation of MoMA’s first department of photography and became its first director. Despite the centrality of Newhall’s contribution to the MoMA and to photographic discourse more widely—not least of which is his ability to further position photography within the realms of fine art and aesthetics that are central to the museum—much of the early department of photography’s influence seems to settle in belatedly.

Newhall was actively setting down the groundwork for photographic discourse. In a 1938 article, “Documentary Approach to Photography,” Newhall explains the history and argues for the significance of documentary photography, where—in documenting material facts (for instance, photographing medieval architecture and structure)—the photograph also registers the photographer’s emotion in viewing the subject. Documentary, which has its roots in “to teach” (4), is a “direct record” that achieves “an artistic result” (3). One important element that the photographers Newhall values share is that they produce “simple, straightforward photographs of great technical excellence interpreting not only the world nearest to them, but also its social significance” (3). The Farm Security Administration, formed in 1935 (then named the Resettlement Administration) and headed by Roy Stryker, provided what Newhall considers the first organized centre for this emergent documentary aesthetic, which holds onto its primary sociological imperative while still “deserv[ing] the consideration of all who appreciate art in its richest and fullest meaning” (B. Newhall 4). Documentary, Newhall warns, “is an approach rather than an end” – the documentary photographer “puts into pictures what he knows about, and what he thinks of, the subject before his camera” (4). In order to be successful as a documentarian, the photographer must therefore weigh the positive and

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13 For more on MoMA’s history, see Haidee Wasson’s Museum Movies: MoMA and the Birth of Art Cinema.
negative of their subject matter, suggesting an ethos that assumes such neutral, objective presentation is possible. They must never retouch in the darkroom or intervene in the printing of their images in their full detail; they must be proficient in using their camera so that their photographs may be both skilful and spontaneous; and the photographs must be presented as documents offered “in relation to the beholder’s experience” (6). Such an approach fetishistically disavows the acts of selection and editing that take place. Nevertheless, the tensions between art and document, intention and effect, are central to Newhall’s formulation of documentary as art that depicts something that actually existed, and does so in a way that teaches the viewer (in this, Newhall anticipates Barthes’ discussion of the “that-was-there” decades later in Camera Lucida). What is also important is the emphasis on skill and quick intuition, rather than calculation and theorization. Though Newhall identifies Evans as an exemplar of the documentary method, Evans reserves a more tentative approach to the term. Though “pure record” is something to aspire to, Evans admits that his own post-production—the selection and editing of his photographs—is a calculated and necessary part of his photographic process.

In Documentary Expression and Thirties America (1973), William Stott renders a thorough picture of documentary, its influences, and its applications at that time. Stott is most interested in the document as it represents the abbreviation of a phrase frequently used in the 1930s: he is thinking about a “human document” (6). Building on earlier definitions, such as Newhall’s, Stott explains, “A document, when human, is the opposite of the official kind; it is not objective but thoroughly personal” (7). This document includes factual, impersonal information, and is considered historical for the information it provides. But that is not all. What is “unique and primary” about a human document is “the glimpse it offers of an inner existence, a private self” with which someone else might identify (Stott 7). Following Newhall, Stott argues that documentary “trades chiefly in emotion” (8). More specifically, however, Stott distinguishes between the wider definitions of the human document to “social documentary”:

When people in the thirties spoke of documentary, they usually meant social documentary—and so we do today. Social documentary educates one’s feelings as human documents do, but with this difference. Human documents show man undergoing the perennial and unpreventable in experience, and what happens to all men everywhere: death, work,
chance, rapture, hurricane, and maddened dogs . . . Social documentary, on the other hand, shows man at grips with conditions neither permanent nor necessary, conditions of a certain time and place . . . One might say briefly that a human document deals with natural phenomena, and social documentary with man-made. (19-20)

Social documentary—the mode of documentary Newhall also seemed to have in mind—seeks social improvement. One could go so far as to call it propaganda as much, or more so, than art.

As John Tagg explains, the “moment” from which Evans emerges is “the second New Deal in the United States: precisely a moment at which new technologies of photomechanical reproduction enabled a further quantum leap in the proliferation and social dispersion of photographic images, crossing a threshold that marked the emergence of a new economy—visual, social, and political” (“Melancholy Realism” 3). Photography is essential to this political, social, and aesthetic moment. It is embedded in multiple discourses, processes, and agendas. “[I]n this economy,” photography itself “constituted a particular knot, threading together those dreams of transparency, efficiency, and accelerated exchange that marked the instrumentalization of photographic meaning, in social administration as in commercialized communications, in the documentary archive as in the photojournalistic picture file” (Tagg, “Melancholy Realism” 3). Like Stott, Tagg links documentary photography at this time with the development and popularization of photographic magazines such as Dime and Life (both started in 1936). Life, in particular, was meant “to take a broad perspective in tackling its subjects, to be, in [publisher] Henry Luce’s words, ‘simple and naïve’” (Tagg, “Melancholy Realism” 6). Part of the simplicity and supposedly universal appeal of the photographic magazine is to give the viewer a compelling object to search, with the essential object being the human face. The face is “[a]n object for a subject and a subject for an object, joined by the ‘message’: Life is a mirror and a window, a screen and a frame. In its pages, readers cannot help but find themselves looking and looking” (Tagg, “Melancholy Realism” 7). Further, Tagg explains, Life functions as a “conduit to an imaginary integration, national in horizon, yet founded on fantasized interactions and relations whose locus was the individual, for whom this fantasized field increasingly served as compensation for a displaced, divided, and hollowed out social life” (“Melancholy Realism” 7-8).
Life also benefits from framing the photographers themselves as celebrity-like personas. The reputation of a photographer such as Margaret Bourke-White—someone who offers a sharp contrast to Levitt—develops in tandem, and becomes synonymous with, the mission of Life. “For Bourke-White,” Tagg says, “the viewpoint [of the photograph] and the choice of lens were, with the manipulation of lighting, fundamental to the didactic structure of the image, to the message” (“Melancholy Realism” 12). By extension, “the physical positioning of the camera certainly also signalled the heroics of what Luce liked to call the ‘crack photographer,’ the shaping of whose persona was, for Bourke-White, a second, parallel work hardly separable from the photographic work itself” (Tagg, “Melancholy Realism” 12). Bourke-White is everywhere in this photograph, from the signature angles and points of view she applies, to the primacy she gives to getting the shot she wants. She would, for instance, set up her tripod in the middle of a street for as long as was necessary to get the image she wanted, and in doing so simply expected that traffic would stop and wait for her (it did). This constructed persona held commercial value, as “the antics of the ‘crack photographer’ were central to the glamour and modernity of Life. The photographers were the stars” (Tagg, “Melancholy Realism” 12). Fostering her public persona was of benefit to both Bourke-White (socially and financially) and the editors who made money from selling her image, and her photographs. Though Bourke-White is in many ways exceptional and enjoys a level of status not available to many of her fellow photographers, stories constructing her daring, diva-like persona became part of what Tagg calls “an expected performance” that accumulates over time and throughout succeeding issues of Life magazine (“Melancholy Realism” 13). The biographic and performative narrative of Bourke-White’s persona becomes part of the “aura” of the photographs, regardless of whether the images themselves are autobiographical or not. Despite the fact that these images “arrive home like postcards” from the jet-setting Bourke-White to her public ‘family’ back home, “in the magazine spread, the photograph is anonymous. The photographer’s name does not appear until the contents page, all but lost in a column of narrow type with page numbers and names” (Tagg, “Melancholy Realism” 13). In other words “[t]he camera’s viewpoint is, therefore, only belatedly personified” (Tagg, “Melancholy Realism” 13). What this means is that the viewpoint of the photograph is essentially structural; it encodes the image with a degree of detachment that is at odds with, or offers a form of corrective to, the rhetorically situated first-person seeing of “documentary” photography of that time.
Where Bourke-White lends herself to her own mythologizing however, Helen Levitt actively resists becoming a commoditised, if celebrated, “crack photographer.”

This shift in point of view extends to the evaluation and exhibition of photographs within the museum. As Christopher Phillips argues, in the late 1940s it became apparent that Beaumont “Newhall’s exhibition program failed equally to retrieve photography from its marginal status among the fine arts and to attract what the museum could consider a substantial popular following” (39). The MoMA defensively replaces Newhall with Edward Steichen in 1947. Steichen’s exhibition style tends toward the aesthetic of magazines such as 
Life and promises to appeal to a wide audience. As Phillips explains, “Newhall’s insistent championing of photography as fine art drew the open hostility of that section of the photographic press that claimed to speak for the nation’s millions of amateurs: the department was called ‘snobbish,’ ‘pontifical,’ and accused of being shrouded in ‘esoteric fogs’” (40). But with Steichen at the helm, photography becomes a tool for appealing to the everyman. Shifting the focus from the “peripheral status of art photography” to the techniques of photography within advertising media, Steichen “capitalized on photography’s demonstrably central role as a mass medium that dramatically ‘interpreted’ the world for a national (and international) audience” (C. Phillips 45). Rather than compiling exhibitions that aspire to the look of painting and sculpture, Steichen’s photography exhibitions more closely resemble the ethos and aesthetic of the day’s “glossy picture magazines,” including the appeal to “emotional

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14 This imbalance, what Phillips calls “[a] striking index of photography’s marginality,” is exemplified by the “1941 MoMA showing called ‘American Photographs at $10,’ which offered for sale limited-edition prints by the photographers who figured most prominently in Newhall’s emerging canon – [Alfred] Stieglitz, [Edward] Weston, and [Ansel] Adams, among them” (40). Rather than emphasize the modernism or art of the photography, these photographs are reframed in terms of their reproducibility and collectability.

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immediacy, graphic inventiveness, avoidance of difficulty” (C. Phillips 52). Like the magazine layout, where the photographer’s identity is subsumed within the greater frame of the page spread (and, by extension, the overall editorial vision), Steichen’s photographic exhibitions tend to downplay individual identities of photographers. They reframe and at times even crop and alter photographic work in order to accommodate the overall vision of the exhibition. In this case, as Phillips argues, the curator is not unlike the magazine editor. The curator steps into the authorial role that might otherwise be inhabited by individual photographers.

Magazines such as Life reflect a changing ethos for documentary, and one to which the museum is also subject. Documentary concepts such as truth and objectivity cannot be separated from advertising and the appeal to mass audiences. In a more recent analysis of documentary, T.J Demos considers the relationship between documentary and migrancy. Demos’s The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis, provides a critique of the earlier mode of reading documentary work. In the process, Demos also offers a method that ties together a form of documentary that challenges truth-value while at once devising new aesthetic methods to represent global conditions. Demos argues that certain artists have the ability to “creatively recalibrate representational conditions and challenge dominant orders of visibility and invisibility” (31). One of the ways this challenge is posited is through modes of “aesthetic construction” that “join[s] documentary and fictional modes into uncertain relationship” (31). Levitt’s work arguably also accomplishes something similar; part of it strength is in its generic fluidity. While Levitt does not claim her work is “documentary,” however, it is nevertheless applied that way, both in her contemporary moment and in the years that follow. Because Levitt is photographing lives and moments

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15 Phillips summarizes Steichen’s role within MoMA’s photographic legacy: “At a time . . . when most American art museums still considered photography well beyond the pale of the fine arts,” Steichen was able to “establish MoMA as the ultimate institutional arbiter of the entire range of photographic practice. In dissolving the categories by means of which Newhall had sought to separate fine-art photography from the medium’s other applications, Steichen undermined the whole notion of the ‘cult value’ of the fine print. In the process he attracted a wide popular following for photography as a medium, and won for it (and for himself) the regular attention of the mass press. The price exacted at MoMA was the eclipse of the individual photographer and the subordination of his or her work to the more or less overtly instrumental demands of illustration” (52-53).
that are perhaps less well represented (both in quantity and in quality) than others, the images will often be categorized as documentary due to their subject matter and lack of staging, regardless of the photographer’s intention. Similarly, other photographers, such as James VanDerZee, were at one point or another labeled as documentary, despite the staging and selection involved in the images.\footnote{VanDerZee's stylization is often explicit; he uses double exposures in work such as \textit{The Harlem Book of the Dead}.} In many cases, the photographs that are reclaimed or represented as “documents” or “documentary” are simply those images that depict minority subjects or underrepresented ways of life.

1.3. “You Don’t Like Talking, Do You?”

In the 1943 \textit{Minicam Photography} magazine article “The Art of Poetic Accident: Photographs of Cartier-Bresson and Helen Levitt,” author, critic, collector, and MoMA Department of Photography Committee member James Thrall Soby defines Cartier-Bresson and Levitt in terms of their choice of photographic technology. For Soby, the type of camera a photographer uses is tied to their intentions. There are photographers who use “the view camera” – a formal mode of expression, to “record relatively fixed objects or scenes with forethought and the maximum technical dexterity” (28); and there are those like Cartier-Bresson and Levitt, who use the “hand camera,” where the aesthetic is "concerned with spontaneity and motion, with the recording of the unforeseen and the quick" (28). I want to bracket Soby’s argument, and shift attention instead to the areas both connected to and visually cordoned off from the text of the article. Couched within the layout of the printed pages of \textit{Minicam} are two inserted sections. The second page features an aside with a playful headshot of photographer Cartier-Bresson (his face is partially obscured and the focus rests appropriately on his eyes), with a brief summary of his life and work. This biography acknowledges his greatness, lists his influences, describes his personal innovations and successes, and ends with the phrase: “His influence on Helen Levitt is unmistakable” (Soby 30) (Figure 1.1).
On the following page is a section set aside for Levitt to pick up where Cartier-Bresson leaves off. Her section begins not with a photograph, but with a name. And in place of a declaration of greatness is a plea for relevance, deferring to the experts: “The Museum of Modern Art, New York, feels that Miss Levitt’s photographs are important enough to deserve a one-man show” (Soby 31). Addressing the absence of her artist’s portrait (an omission made all the more conspicuous by the discussion that replaces it), the editorial remarks:

17 MoMA describes Levitt in similar terms in 1943 (Soby may or may not have had a hand in this press release). See “For Immediate Release: Museum of Modern Art Opens Two Exhibitions of Photography,” Cur 221, in the MoMA Archives.
Miss Levitt, being a particularly sensitive and modest person, prefers not to have her own photograph published, rather to let her photographs portray her, as they must, inexorably, for any serious photographer. We ask our readers not to judge Miss Levitt’s photographs in terms of their own work or any other photographer they have ever seen. Try to discover the intangible qualities and poignant image of humanity which she has caught with her lens.

Unlike Cartier-Bresson, Levitt requires editorialization, explanation, and support (drawing on the MoMA as reference, for instance) in order to establish her critical weight. The shaded tones of the photographs rhyme with the rectangular biographical sections, visually equating the photographers’ personal narratives (including Cartier-Bresson’s portrait) with the photographic work itself. The body of the essay, in contrast, is left floating on the white page. The layout of the first page of Soby’s article features two photographs by Levitt. The second page features a half-page photograph by Cartier-Bresson. On the final page (the right hand side of the image above), Levitt’s biographical excerpt shares the page with one of her own photographs and one by Cartier-Bresson. Placing the two images together on the page in this way encourages direct comparison between Levitt and Cartier-Bresson’s photographs; it asks the readers to note their similarities. Making the comparison more overt, the first complete sentence on this page claims “It is no injustice to Miss Levitt’s brilliant photographs to say that they are inspired by the work of Cartier”; and then, speaking on behalf of Levitt, it explains that “[s]he is the first to say so herself” (Soby 31). Though the article tries to bring in Levitt at every possible opportunity, its efforts to do so underline her refusal. By not appearing (for the article, at the request of the critic, or for the reader) Levitt apparently leaves her photographs vulnerable to potential misunderstanding. Unattended, the value of these often-ambiguous images can be too easily discounted. Levitt’s absence foregrounds the question: Can, or should, a work speak for itself? The editorial says yes, it can (for any serious photographer, it must), yet the author’s hedging and pleading suggest otherwise. My own question takes a slightly different form: What happens to Levitt criticism—and to Levitt’s critics—when (as in this *Minicam Photography* article) the photographer fails, or rather refuses, to appear? How does the performance of gender and of mastery affect the reception of Levitt?
1.4. Invisible Woman

The practice and study of photography is necessarily embedded in its larger sociological, economic, and social context. In her introduction to *A History of Women Photographers* (1994), Naomi Rosenblum attributes her decision to devote a monograph to women to her conviction that “[w]omen have consistently been scanted by the general histories of the medium” of photography (8). This disservice includes disproportionate representation in anthologies as well as historical and critical literature. In a claim that is now out-dated, but still worth noting (this was only two decades ago), Rosenblum claims “[w]omen seem nearly invisible in photographic criticism and theory” (8). Rosenblum’s study is concerned with the way women are represented (or not represented) in the history of photography and her study pays attention to female photographers’ opinions and claims about their own work.\(^\text{18}\) She situates Levitt’s work in terms of its political and social frame—the co-incidence of Levitt’s photography with that of the Photo League, for instance—and the fact that the photography of children is in vogue as Levitt is practicing. Despite the easy tendency to feminize Levitt’s choice of subject matter, Rosenblum explains, in the 1930s and 40s children function as symbols of “cultural harmony” and “energy” and offer ripe photographic subjects for both male and female photographers (Rosenblum 226). Even in Rosenblum’s revisionary photographic history, Levitt doesn’t feature prominently, nor does the photographer (or the historian) offer any clear or definitive answers.

Levitt, who lived from 1913 to 2009, “was born in the Italian-Jewish neighbourhood of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn; her family came from both heritages” (Rosenbum 311). Levitt worked under a portrait photographer right out of high school and would visit the Photo League dark rooms to print photographs in the 1930s. In addition to making her own photographs, and attending “museum exhibitions, dance performances, and foreign films,” Levitt “[t]aught art to East Harlem children under the Federal Arts Project in 1937, around which time she also “began photographing children

\(^{18}\) Rosenblum raises questions about female photographers’ own attitudes regarding their work. One of the questions Rosenblum asks is “Why . . . after initially enjoying being considered particularly well suited for photography because of their ‘intuition’ and ‘sensitivity’ did women photographers deny that their gender was gifted with any special vision?” (8).
“at play” (Rosenblum 311). Levitt first exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in 1939 (at the age of 26) and had her first solo photography exhibition (titled “Children: Photographs by Helen Levitt”) there in 1943. Levitt is often aligned with photographers such as Cartier-Bresson, Ben Shahn, and Walker Evans. Despite this history, Levitt scholarship is surprisingly thin, and as Sandra Phillips from the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art claims, there is very little early criticism of her work. In addition to the Soby article, there is an essay by Edna Bennett and one from Nancy Newhall, all from 1943. These, Phillips claims, “comprise the only critical writing on Levitt until the 1970s” (40), at which point Levitt scholarship began to flourish. As this chapter will demonstrate, however, these are not the only pieces of criticism that address Levitt’s work during that thirty-year period. In limiting the scope of early Levitt criticism to three articles, all from similar sources, Phillips’ treatment is symptomatic of a greater tendency to underestimate the larger scope and context of Levitt’s work.

There are plausible explanations for this assumed gap in Levitt scholarship. Levitt is notoriously evasive, and critics and reviewers seem to find her difficult and unresponsive. Though her self-effacement is generally explained as a function of her shy personality, it is also partly a product of a larger discursive tendency; for many documentary photographers, the practitioner’s invisibility is valuable. It is a mark of authenticity and truth in representation. In addition to Levitt’s professional persona, there are complications that contribute to the supposed gap in her photographic output. Levitt’s photographic work was not her only activity. Upon returning from a trip to Mexico, an attempt to photograph outside of her comfort zone, Levitt “took a job as assistant film cutter with director Luis Buñuel, who was making pro-American propaganda films sponsored by the Museum of Modern Art” (Rosenblum 311). For more than a decade, Levitt had a career in the film industry. She “[w]orked as assistant editor in Film Division of Office of War Information, 1944-45,” and collaborated on films such as In the Street (1945-46), and The Quiet One (1946-47) (Rosenblum 311). When she returned to still photography in 1959 (making the switch from black and white to colour), she did so with the support of Guggenheim fellowships. When Levitt suffered a robbery around 1970, however, many of her negatives were stolen. This loss has had a real, material impact on her output and no doubt limits the kinds of archival materials left for posterity.
In this chapter, I pay particular attention to Levitt’s persistent invisibility in its various forms: through documentary discourse and the history from which her work emerges; regarding her physical place as a white woman walking and photographing on the streets of Spanish Harlem; and with respect to the technological advances of her contemporary moment. I also consider Levitt’s invisibility in relation to the conventions of attribution in the film industry (as much of Levitt’s film work goes uncredited) and in terms of the way art criticism tends to downplay writing that addresses Levitt’s film work. The notion of “invisibility” is also relevant to critical discourse surrounding Levitt when she asks critics to let her photographs speak on her behalf. Like the ambiguous gestures in her photographs, Levitt’s photography remains largely defined in terms of what we do not know, what she would not tell.

This is the same line I negotiate as I consider her work and legacy. My hope is that, in challenging the ways in which her body is unquestioningly evoked within history and criticism, we might add nuance to the way we consider her photography, as well as being mindful of the ways in which critics project their own desires into the interpretations of artists who refuse to offer an authoritative account of their work. While articles such as Soby’s champion Levitt’s sensitivity and seriousness, and include analyses of her photographs and her personality, for instance, not every writer takes such a diplomatic approach. Consider the thinly veiled frustration of Levitt’s 2004 New York Times interviewer, Sarah Boxer. Boxer introduces an interview with Levitt with a warning: “You might get the wrong impression about Helen Levitt from her photographs. They are dying to talk. She is not.” Levitt responds to Boxer’s prompts and questions with brief, unhelpful replies. The interview ends abruptly, and in the same tone it begins: “‘You don’t like talking, do you?’ [Boxer] asks. ‘No,’ [Levitt] says. ‘I sure don’t’” (n. pag.) In the end, we are left with a few memorable lines from Levitt, but even these are framed within the article as evidence of the interviewer’s struggle, rather than unpacked or offered as insight into the photographer’s work.

In their 1991 exhibition catalogue entitled Helen Levitt, perhaps the most influential and comprehensive account of Levitt's career, Sandra Phillips and Maria Morris Hambourg fill in much of the historical, social, and aesthetic context Levitt withholds. As Phillips also explains, for an artist to have an intrusive presence or personality was, in the 1930s, “an affectation to be avoided” (34). (This bias is
nevertheless contradicted in the discourse around Margaret Bourke-White, whose career offers a counter-model—the celebrity “crack” photographer.) In addition to showing in the MoMA, and being awarded the museum’s first-ever photography fellowship in 1946, Levitt is situated within the greater context of photography in New York from the 1930s on, particularly the emergence and popularization of social documentary photography. She shared darkrooms and rubbed elbows with members of the Photo League, yet refrained from sharing their political commitments. Following Cartier-Bresson, she makes photographs of “people,” she says, rather than social “conditions.” Levitt’s photographic aesthetic, though seemingly “artless,” is not unstudied – she went to art galleries, attended shows, worked with other photographers, looked at photographs, and studied films (often watching them repeatedly). Phillips explains that Levitt’s “style of anonymity is . . . an accurate reflection of her own personality, which has always, and rightly, put the attention on the pictures rather than on the person who made them” (16). In making this claim, however, Phillips echoes the same approach Soby offers when he presents Levitt’s work as an outcome of her shy personality, and Cartier-Bresson’s work as a result of his unique aesthetic mastery. Even if Levitt, like Woolf’s walking narrator, successfully ‘sheds the self her friends know her by’ when she steps out into the streets with her camera, Phillips’s personality-based description of Levitt echoes one of the central tropes of Levitt criticism, which tethers her work to her person. Like much of the work dealing with street photography, Levitt criticism is preoccupied with the performance of the photographer’s body. Rather than allow Levitt to disappear from the work, critics draw her back in by emphasizing her physicality, her dancer-like manoeuvring through the city, her athletic sense of timing and movement.

One of the earliest examples of Levitt criticism is Nancy Newhall’s 1943 curatorial statement, written on the occasion of Levitt’s first solo exhibition. The first sentence of Newhall’s statement, presented alongside one of Levitt’s now iconic photographs, remains characteristic of descriptions of Levitt. “Helen Levitt seems to walk invisible among the children,” Newhall announces. “She is young, she has the eye of a poet, and she has not forgotten the strange world which tunnels back through thousands of years to the dim beginnings of the human race” (N. Newhall 8). Though Newhall’s characterization does not acknowledge this, both Levitt and the children pictured are hard at work—the serious work of play—and of practice. By attributing Levitt’s
photography to a fundamental connection with “the dim beginnings of the human race,” Newhall unwittingly establishes a precedent for discounting the time she spent, her long walks and careful observation, her contemporaneity, and the physical and historical specificity of her practice. While readers are often offered accounts of Walker Evans at work (and there is a book by that very name), Levitt is figured as moving, or dancing, through the streets, showing what passes naturally into her field of vision. Her practice is not presented as hard work, but rather seems to remind her critics of the childhood play Levitt photographs (thus calling into question the seriousness of her work).

Yet, despite this focus on the particularity of Levitt’s bodily performance, one way that critics are able to situate Levitt is to contextualize her within a greater photographic history. Roberta Hellman and Marvin Hoshino are not alone in placing Levitt as the successor to a genealogy that includes Cartier-Bresson and Evans, as well as Bill Brandt, André Kertész, Brassai, and Ben Shahn. (They also suggest the influence of Cocteau’s films on Levitt’s vision) (729). For Hellman and Hoshino, these photographers share the fact that they all “made pictures which blur the difference between people and things” which suggests an “irreverence toward subject matter . . . matched formally by a wilful indifference to distinctions between stillness and stop-motion, flatness and depth, and negative and positive space” (729). This blurring is central to the thirties style they characterise as “white style,” and of which, they claim, Levitt is the “purest example” (731). They define this “white style” as the kind of fully automatic, active collaboration with chance to which photography has apparently aspired since its inception – that is, it is “a photography of near perfect transparency” (731). Its intangibility seems to extend beyond form and content, into criticism. Noting the long-standing debate between documentary and pictorialism, Hellman and Hoshino explain that “[p]hotographers such as Walker Evans have been needlessly shuffled from ‘concerned documentary photographer’ (Genus FSA) to ‘Modern Artist’ (albeit a devious one for having hidden his Art so long)” (723). Whereas Levitt, in contrast, “[n]ever having been subjected to such critical scrutiny . . . has been admired by both sides simultaneously—without anyone noting a contradiction” (Hellman and Hoshino 732). Lacking a tradition of rigorous criticism, Levitt’s work is viewed as either a “social realist committed to the examination and documentation of urban life, especially among the minority poor with all its attendant liberalisms, and only incidentally interested in the beautiful photograph” or else as “a
‘photographer’s photographer,’ astonishingly sophisticated about formal issues and only indirectly concerned with subject matter” (732).19 As far as Hellman and Hoshino are concerned, however, as Levitt’s work includes “some of the most complex pictures in all of photography,” the jury is still out; Levitt does not fit neatly on one side or the other. In their words, “The ‘white style’ has yet to yield its point of view” (Hellman and Hoshino 732). Like Levitt herself, the work remains inconclusive. Though they note the lack of critical scrutiny for Levitt’s work, however, Hellman and Hoshino don’t question it; it seems to be presented as a natural consequence of the “purity” of her style. They also fail to acknowledge the striking double meaning that “white” plays in the “white style.” The kind of invisibility Levitt is allowed results in part from her technique, and in part from the privileged ‘invisibility’ of her white, female person.20 The automatism of the “white style” also suggests a hangover of the intuitive, pedagogical, anti-intellectual stance of the MoMA’s Department of Photography in the 1940s.

In 1939, Fortune magazine published a special “New York”-themed issue. One of Levitt’s photographs is included on the spread of a page with a number of others, organized in a style that recalls an informal scrapbook. Levitt’s photograph is visually underlined by the title “It Takes Fifty Nations to Make a New Yorker”. The line of capitalized text mimics the cropped-out windowsill of the woman’s tenement apartment (Figure 1.2). As the copy explains, “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 . . . betray the beginnings of an interracial type” (New York 77). The explanation seems designed to denote a form of progress, marvelling at the now antiquated anti-Irish sentiment against which New Yorkers once designated the term “100 per cent American”; it speaks to the complicated identity of the American/New Yorker, and the way it is tied with immigration and therefore has changed, and will continue to change, over time. As the same issue of Fortune explains, “New Yorkers are not Americans at all . . . To the real Americans there is one New York

19 Hellman and Hoshino were writing in the late 1970s, though this point is arguably still true today.
20 Peggy Phelan calls attention to a problem of identity politics that runs parallel to this suggestion of the photographer as invisible: representation does not equal power (Unmarked 10). On one hand, this formula undercuts the notion of Levitt’s power. On the other, it complicates the politics inherent in her representation of others.
Figure 1.2. Helen Levitt. New York Special Issue. Fortune magazine (July 1939)

Note: Helen Levitt photograph included as part of the "It Takes Fifty Nations to Make a New Yorker" page spread (77). [Image in public domain per Copyright Act R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.]
statistic that incontrovertibly isolates the city from the rest of the country: immigrants and the sons and daughters of immigrants, who make up 31 per cent of the population of the U.S., make up 73 per cent of the population of New York City” (New York 73). The editors of Fortune use this question of Americanness almost ironically, noting that if the immigrants and the city’s “440,000 Negroes” were all to leave, “whole cities within New York—including most of its slums—would be deserted” (New York 73). Fortune’s characterization represents New York’s confused identity that both depends upon (even awkwardly celebrates) and resents its immigrant population. It also betrays a distinction between the perception of immigrant-versus-American identity, as well as the persistent uneasiness about accepting African American identity as American, rather than immigrant.

Despite the page spread’s claim of “100 per cent American,” the way the photographs are arranged also undercuts any straightforward reading of unqualified racial harmony. The way the collage of photographs is arranged creates a sequence of broken sightlines; none of the figures in the photographs meet the eye lines of the people in the other images. Levitt’s portrait of the woman in the windowsill (with the small girl hiding her face beside her) provides an interesting counter-point to this phenomenon: though some of the figures on the page are presented facing the direction of the camera, Levitt’s is the only one that gazes directly out at the viewer. Rather than presented as caught in the shuffle of faces, shapes, and textures of a crowd (and the collage), the woman in Levitt’s photograph is outlined by the flat, black space that surrounds her. She leans out the window, as if out onto the street, and seems to look directly at us.21 The collection of snapshots, like the short article, culminates in a large photograph of the Coney Island subway. The subway itself “was a setting that prompted meditation on the common experience of the common man. It many ways the subway became a symbol of the 1930s” the way the skyscraper was for the 1920s; instead of dizzying expanse and optimism, the concern and sobriety of the subway reflects the tone

21 This use of Levitt’s subjects as the “face” of New York continues up to the present day. After the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, the New York Public Library designated certain books with special 9/11 commemoration bookplates; the texts are marked as examples of New York’s pride and heritage. Levitt’s Ways of Seeing features one of these commemorative bookplates.
and the sense of limbo more characteristic of the decade that follows (Greenough 17-18). Rather than building up, it also suggests a retreat underground. The form of mass transit also visually highlights the large quantity of people mixing—both physically and genetically—within such a small space.

In addition to having her photography pressed in the service of illustrating New York immigrant identity, Levitt’s work lends itself to discussion regarding the representation of children. It also suggests that her work had a truth-value that gave it the status of evidence for medical discourse. On the occasion of Levitt’s first solo show at the MoMA, Soby wrote to the Psychiatric Division of Bellevue Hospital in New York to suggest to the hospital’s Dr. Lauretta Bender that she might be interested in seeing the exhibition. According to Soby, Levitt has a particular skill for photographing children without their knowledge. In doing so, she creates an essential document of not only the children’s games, but also the psychology of children in low-income neighbourhoods (Letter, March 17, 1943, Cur 221, MoMA Archives, NY). Here, as with the 1939 Fortune page spread, the children of immigrant neighbourhoods are foregrounded as central to the sociological or documentary value of Levitt’s work.

Despite the general absence of distinct New York landmarks and the sense of timeless or indistinct space often attributed to her photographs, Levitt’s preferred locations present what Alan Trachtenberg perceptively re-frames as “the unqualified visibility of poor people, a predominantly nonwhite underclass on the margins of mainstream white society. Signs of class division appear everywhere on these streets,” he notes (“Seeing What You See” 3). What Trachtenberg offers, then, is an alternative to the common reading that both class and labour are nonexistent in Levitt’s photography. Rather than seeing Levitt’s photographs as fantastic moments, plucked out of space and time, Trachtenberg recognizes that, “[w]ithout explicit commentary Levitt’s pictures are dense with signs of a specific urban political economy” (“Seeing What You See” 3). Though Phillips characterizes Levitt’s work as imaginative, joyful, and rarely discordant, a number of Levitt’s critics register the darkness milling around the edges of her photographic frames. As a result, Levitt’s work is not only a record of certain

22 This same fallacy (the notion that race is visible) underwrites Fortune’s scopic gaze.
neighbourhoods at specific moments in 1930s and 1940s New York. Levitt’s photography lends itself to some combination of documentary, sociological, aesthetic, and performance-based studies. Looking at it today, we can begin to re-frame her practice in terms of questions of visibility and invisibility that are central not only to the way we see Levitt, but also the way (and the fact that) we can also see her subjects. In this sense, Levitt’s work offers a model of documentary that includes sociology and the particularity of embodied gesture (both for her subjects and the photographer herself); it traces a history of the discursive and aesthetic values of both the art museum and its critics.

For a photographer such as Lewis Hine, the “sensitivity to infinite regress of the referent”—the sticky position that photographic reference inhabits between a factual medium and one that “fail[s] to convey a fixed message due to the polysemy of the physical trace”—leads the photographer to “anchor photographic meaning” (Mansoor 90). Hine does so using narrative, informational “captions and . . . carefully situating the individual image in an archival institution or context: the parameters of the survey, the space of the courtroom, the page of a flyer” (90). Levitt’s representation of the poor does something different. Rather than refer back to institutional structures (both architectural and compositional), Levitt eschews didactic captions and titles; when she incorporates formal compositions and architectural structures into the focus of her photographs, these are often deployed in surprising ways. The particular ethos of her photographs might be more appropriately situated in gesture and movement than in imposed compositional structures.

According to Rosenheim, one of the reasons Levitt’s photographs are frequently populated by children is that Levitt was afraid of the adults in the predominately poor, immigrant neighbourhoods where she photographed. Similarly, Roy Arden claims that, “[a]lthough she [Levitt] mainly pictured children, it is clear both from the photographs and interviews that she didn’t especially like children but instead saw them as people who were more accessible and less guarded than adults” (103). Rosenheim’s comment, in particular, sheds light on Levitt’s use of the right-angle viewfinder that allowed her what Trachtenberg calls “functional invisibility,” and enabled her to be hidden yet still “present and active in the scene of the picture” (“Seeing What You See” 5). This combination of presence and reticence, or distance, is evident in the very photographs that critics tend
to qualify as showing a sense of dignity for (or respectful distance from) the subjects whose lives Levitt has sidled upon.

Photographs where adults touch and engage in conversation (such as *New York*, 1939) are celebrated for their tenderness and for their respectful distance. In this photograph, (what appears to be) two women stand on the sidewalk near the base of a subway platform. There is a boy negotiating with a small, wheeled vehicle on the sidewalk past them. His gaze looks out of the frame toward something or someone else. The women seem to be engaged in conversation. The taller of the two looks over toward the child, even as she holds her right hand reassuringly atop the other woman’s shoulder. The woman on the right looks up toward the other, and it is hard to tell – by her upturned gaze, her waiting expression, and her clasped hands – whether she is trying to regain the other woman’s attention in order to make a plea, or to thank her. The photograph suggests a simultaneous occurrence of thoughts, words, actions, and events. It shows the way multiple factors and players interconnect. The photograph also suggests that this otherwise private moment is penetrated by more than the distraction of a child’s activity in the corner of the frame. Levitt is there, too, and she approaches distracted subjects unnoticed. Framing the affection of touch and attention, her subjects are surrounded by advertisements, worn city structures, and at least one precarious-looking puddle. Not only are we privy to a moment of personal, private discussion, but viewers are able to see the social and economic locations and conditions that play into those personal lives. More telling than the appearance of the sidewalk on which the women stand, Levitt’s camera leads the viewer right along the split seam and right into the torn pocket of the taller woman’s coat. Paired with the ripped cloth, then, both the steadying hand that would dig into this pocket and the gestures of the clasped hands beside it, seem particularly telling. Levitt’s gaze keeps its distance, albeit necessarily; this private moment could not exist if she were known to be a part of it. She shows the affection of touching and interaction. In doing so, however, she claims a level of “dignified distance” that does not necessarily extend to the conditions (the various torn pockets, lifted skirts, and unguarded expressions) of her subjects.

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23 *New York*, 1939, is available for viewing in the Metropolitan Museum of Art digital photography collection <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/267347> (Accession number 1996.2.7) and is reprinted in a number of Levitt’s photobooks.
The MoMA’s official press release for the exhibition *Children: Photographs by Helen Levitt* (which opened March 10, 1943) presents Levitt in terms of her photographic process (see “For Immediate Release: Museum of Modern Art Opens Two Exhibitions of Photography,” Cur 221, MoMA Archives, NY). According to the MoMA, Levitt’s ambling is relaxed and quiet; it allows her to remain along the periphery of the action. This is a characteristic description of the photographer, who is also situated in terms of the neighbourhoods in which she photographs and the specificity of the technology she uses. In the MoMA press release, Levitt is framed in terms of her own unobtrusive movement, and as a point of contrast to the “vivid action” of her mixed-race subjects. Levitt’s mobility is not simply based in her movement from one neighbourhood to the next, then, but is also figured in terms of her own ability to navigate the city and its spaces as a modern, urban actor. She is therefore distinguished from her subjects, as her sympathetic, invisible movement is something that can be put on, performed, and focused at will.

According to Jeffrey Rosenheim (the current Curator in Charge in the Metropolitan Museum of Art Department of Photographs, and a personal friend of Levitt’s), Levitt—whose work is frequently described for its dignity and respectful sense of distance—particularly enjoyed watching people touch in public.24 She chose to photograph in immigrant neighbourhoods such as Spanish Harlem because there (as her early MoMA curatorial statements acknowledge) she could find people moving, acting, living, playing, and congregating in the streets. Rosenheim claims she even had secret pet names for her subjects, though she kept these to herself. These nicknames are nowhere to be found in the titles or her formal discussions of the work. Levitt’s subjects remain anonymous; even if she felt enough of an attachment to individuals, or images, to name them, she maintains both their privacy and her own by deciding that not

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24 Rosenheim’s account is drawn from a lecture entitled “Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Helen Levitt” he presented at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on November 9, 2012 as part of the “Photography: Beginnings” lecture series. The talk was intended for a local audience, likely with the aim of fostering an advanced sense of ‘art appreciation,’ rather than criticism. Nevertheless, Rosenheim offers a rare, privileged, perspective on Levitt’s photographic practice.
Figure 1.3. Helen Levitt, New York, 1940.

everything needs to be seen, said, or shared. With few exceptions, her photographs are made within the domain of public space, not inside private homes.

Levitt's 1940 photograph *New York* (Figure 1.3) is fitted with a characteristically nondescript title. Here is a scene that seems to have been staged just for her camera. For Rosenheim, the oblivious bystanders in the background highlight the fact that Levitt alone recognizes the magic of this moment; she is the only one looking in the exact right way at just the right time. Rosenheim’s assumption echoes Walter Benjamin’s characterization of the flâneur, the walker who looks and moves at cross-purposes to the “hurried, purposeful” masses of the modern city (Hammergren 56). For Benjamin, the flâneur’s movement and vision are such “that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning” (qtd. Hammergren 56) In other words, he suggests, ‘only the flâneur who idly strolls by . . . receives the message” (qtd. Hammergren 56). Like the flâneur, Levitt is apparently privy to the secret images lost on those around her. This flâneur’s ‘strolling,’ associated as it is with privileged receptivity, is also figured in terms of idleness. Nevertheless, Benjamin’s flâneur is necessarily masculine, and so these parallels do more to highlight Levitt’s difference than to suggest her similarity.

Levitt is a woman from a working class background, and her movement through city streets is generated as a form of her labour; it is not idle strolling. Of *New York, 1940*, Rosenheim suggests that, even though we recognize that the glass—the remnants of a mirror—is scattered on the sidewalk and being collected up by the children, we still feel the image might somehow be real. This sense is heightened by the mixture of innocence and darkness, the precarious combination of small hands and sharp glass. But I argue we see the boy on the tricycle because of the shattered mirror, not in spite of it. He is reflected to us through, and because of, a different mirror – that of Levitt’s camera.

As in the Soby article, here is yet another frame in which Levitt refuses to appear, performing her invisibility instead by disappearing before a broken mirror. Rather than reading this photograph as a magical occurrence, as some critics suggest, the elements of this scene could be acknowledged for the participation, teamwork, and the timing they require. It takes multiple hands and various players to hold up the unstable frame that makes this photograph possible. There are hands clutching the various bicycles – one
riding toward the expanse of the broken mirror, and one riding alongside it. There are also two sets of hands holding up the frame of the mirror, as their owners gaze absently in either direction. There are hands held up in a gesture of empathetic reflection or instruction (the boy on the far left) and hands obscured by being stuffed into pants pockets (the boy on the far right). Behind the children is the storefront for a laundry, where, inside, there will be hands at work folding and washing. The teamwork and labour on display on the sidewalk also suggests the work that takes place in the businesses behind the children. The image takes place within a larger frame, and so asks that we place the moment, and the picture, within a wider context. We must consider Levitt's presence, and her camera’s presence, in relation to both the subjects pictured and the wider socio-economic frame. Rather than simply providing a metaphor for Levitt’s so-called “unique way of seeing,” New York, 1940 calls attention to the ways in which Levitt's practice is dependent upon her position in a specific place and time. Her work is therefore place and time-specific, and it requires a particular convergence of social, technological, and economic conditions. Levitt’s aesthetic emerges, in part, from an intersection between the photographer and the particular social and historical moment in which she is working. Indeed, some years later, when the neighbourhoods change and families move inside to watch television instead of playing in the streets, Levitt loses her subject matter. She finds herself roaming New York’s districts in search of new subjects to catch her eye.

1.5. The Woman, The Machine

In “The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” (1981) Rosalind Krauss defines “Camera-seeing” as “an extension of normal vision, one that supplements the deficiencies of the naked eye. The camera covers and arms this nakedness, it acts as a kind of prosthesis, enlarging the capacity of the human body” (Krauss, “Photographic Conditions” 32). Carol Armstrong takes up a similar idea in “Biology, Destiny, Photography: Difference According to Diane Arbus” (1993), where she contrasts the emphasis of the machinic apparatus of the camera in the photography of Lee Friedlander and Garry Winogrand with the role of the camera within the work of Diane Arbus. Both Friedlander and Winogrand, “in their different ways, stress the role of the
camera in the capture of the world – as a prosthetic, if not phallic, extension of the body” (Armstrong, “Biology, Destiny” 47). Both, she argues, repeatedly “identify themselves with their monocular viewing machines, and they consistently produce a kind of street-shot framing that helps to characterize their photographs as the immediate products of their moving, viewing, machinic/phallic bodies” (Armstrong, “Biology, Destiny” 47-48). Their 35mm Leicas—the same camera Levitt uses—are well suited to this type of work. Arbus, in contrast, “emphasizes her discontinuity with the camera” by selecting a camera—a Rolleiflex—“whose operation typically involves a much less one-to-one relationship between bodily movements, decision-making, and image production, and between the eye and the (reversed) image on the ground glass” (Armstrong, “Biology, Destiny” 48). Formally, Arbus’s photographic framing tends to “point up the relationship between her subjects and the edges of the images that they inhabit much more than between her eye/body and the world” (Armstrong, “Biology, Destiny” 48). This has the effect of turning Arbus’s camera into her “Other” (48). Arbus’s photographs are therefore the products of “subtle intersections (that occur between her and others) rather than seize-the-chance interventions (of the camera/body in the world)” (Armstrong “Biology, Destiny” 48). They are also “meetings between the internal reproductive workings of the camera, on the one hand, and the equally internal process of what Arbus calls her ‘identity’ on the other” (Armstrong, “Biology, Destiny” 48). It is in this “margins-of-physicality zone,” Armstrong claims, that Arbus locates the “femininity” of her practice (“Biology, Destiny” 48-49). In other words, by adopting an off-centre relationship with the camera, Arbus de-centres notions of the gendered body and its performance, demonstrating the instability of gendered models and flattening the notion of gender into a collection of other flaws and peculiarities. She does so formally and through her physical engagement with the machine. But how does Armstrong’s distinction between Friedlander and Winogrand’s phallic engagement and the off-centre relationship Arbus performs with her camera speak to a performance like Levitt’s?

Levitt shoots with a Leica, and her Leica has a trick right-angle viewfinder, which makes it nearly impossible for her subjects to know they are being photographed. When she seems to others to be pointing her camera forward, her lens is actually looking to the side. Despite this deception, critics are in no rush to accuse her camera of being invasive. Her ambulation is not called predatory. In Levitt criticism, the immediate
products of the photographer’s moving, viewing body are neither machinic nor phallic. Instead, her movement is characterized in terms of grace and athleticism. Levitt’s body is that of a dancer, her eye a metaphor for a uniquely humanizing vision. The machine is a tool for, and an extension of, her humanity—she informs it, not the other way around. The physicality the Leica demands is integral to any understanding of Levitt’s work. Even Levitt’s celebrated “invisibility” is conspicuous in that her restraint and tact are considered instrumental to the success of both process and production of her work. Indeed, though she moves through public streets, Levitt’s status as a female and a former dancer seems to protect her from criticism. This status goes unquestioned. If Levitt criticism is to engage the subject of her body, however, that body—including its relationship to its subjects, environment, and its critics—must be taken seriously, and addressed in terms of location, gender, race, and class. By situating the choreography of Levitt’s steps, I will shed additional light on the implications of the terms within which Levitt criticism circulates; doing so will help reveal more about her photography itself. My initial reaction was that the characterization of Levitt’s movement as dancerly is symptomatic of the way in which Levitt’s critical reception responds to Levitt’s work, and her gender, by dismissing her labour as dance. This reading betrays my own set of biased assumptions, however, as dance itself is, of course, a form of laboured movement. Rather than discard the language of “dance,” then, why not ask this persistent metaphor to do more than simply drape the language of grace and athleticism overtop of it, obscuring the conditions of Levitt’s practice?

25 We can also contextualize the contradictions inherent to the discussion of Levitt’s celebrated physicality by looking at responses to the work of documentary pioneer Lewis Hine. In his Empire State (1930) series, in particular, Hine uses his physicality as a pedagogical tool within his work. Suspended in the sky alongside the construction workers risking their lives to build what was then to be the world’s tallest building, Hine’s physical positioning is undeniably present in the work. Nevertheless, Hine (like Levitt, and unlike Friedlander and Winogrand) is not trailed by accusations of “phallic” or machinic viewing. In fact, the instrumentality of Hine’s body is often described in ways similar to that of the work of Margaret Bourke-White or Levitt. Hine’s humanizing, empathetic embodiment is arguably coded in ways linked with the feminine—a phenomenon which may contribute to his work being consistently and summarily overlooked by the same contemporaries who nevertheless sought to make work that did something similar to what Hine had arguably accomplished with his own.

26 This aspect of her biography is generally offered anecdotally as a point of entry into her personal history (and as a guiding term for viewing her photography).
1.6. Dance

In *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Felicia McCarren claims that, with its proliferation after the First World War, “Taylorism” must be counted as a central choreography of the machine age” (129). McCarren explains:

> With the single goal of maximum ‘productivity,’ Taylorist scientific management focused on two elements also found in contemporary reflection on dance: first, the essential gesture, calculated to help the worker work at his ‘best speed’; and second, group coordination. Both depended on a kind of anonymity, with the worker’s body being subsumed by the rhythm of his own gesture and that of the group, and the effect of both was an erasure of individual identity. (129)

This erasure of identity, what McCarren calls the “anonymity or anti-individuality imposed on workers by Taylorism and their characterization as ‘natural’” (130), pervades numerous forms of dance and theatre in the early 1900s. In fact, many styles of dance adopt machine-like movement—they “internaliz[e] the machine into the body”—with the aim to both mimic and mock the machine, or idealise it (McCarren 130). The preoccupation with machinic, or synchronized, movement is not limited to choreography itself. In his poem “Among Schoolchildren” (1926), W.B. Yeats famously asks, “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” McCarren offers Yeats’s line as having “been read over the course of the century as both idealizing and challenging the unity of dance and dancer, the fusion of artist and art work made possible by dance, the modernist code in which ‘the thing is what it does’” (138). Nevertheless, the poem was written at a time when there was active debate about the choreography of labour. Based on the personal and historical context of Yeats, and the poem, this question is then arguably posed as a response to the rise of industrialized labour and the erasure of identity required for maximum productivity and factory work (McCarren 138-9). Dance approaches the discussion of machine/body choreography from yet another perspective, weaving its way through one of modernism’s most recognized poems (one made possible, notably, by the poet’s experience with the subway system). With his poem “In a Station of the Metro”

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27 Frederick Taylor published *Principles of Scientific Management*, his formula for developing maximum productivity, in 1911.
(1913), Ezra Pound creates rhythm and meaning through words and spacing, while nevertheless leaving out any verbs that would indicate action, or “doing” (McCarren 78). In fact, McCarren suggests, the new poetics, ushered in with poems such as this one, “are not doing anything, moving in a ghostly way through the poet’s memory, blurring, soaking through onto the page. This implied movement of images,” she argues, “re-created by the reader who connects them, relies on methods of direct presentation and of abstraction recalling, if not borrowing from, dancing” (79).

The discourse of dance is not limited to performance and literature. Jane Jacobs’ landmark study, The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961), offers another model for applying the language of dance to the discussion of city planning. Jacobs details the intricacies of sidewalk use as the mark of a successfully homogenous city. There is an order to a functioning city sidewalk economy, she explains, “all composed of movement and change, and although it is life, not art, we may fancifully call it the art form of the city and liken it to the dance” (50). Jacobs’ dance is not a mob of uniform movement, but rather “an intricate ballet in which the individual dancers and ensembles all have distinctive parts which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole” (50). The ballet is not frenetic or stressful; instead, its “general effect is peaceful and the general tenor even leisurely” (Jacbos 54). The urban choreography Jacobs describes is necessarily unique to each city street, and its key component is its constant, organic, improvisation. This complementary choreography relies on a complex order, a combination of regular neighbourhood members and anonymous passer-by, all engaged in a negotiation of movement, space, and function. While Levitt’s own movement can be tied to different histories of gesture and dance, she is also subject to (and dances her part in) the “sidewalk ballet” Jacobs describes.

1.7. Labour and Movement

Ellen Handy, former curator for the International Center of Photography, makes a case for the significance of the gesture and movement apparent within Levitt’s photographs. Describing a Levitt photograph of two children on a city street, Handy argues the scene contains “elements of a game, an improvisation, and an impromptu dance lesson. But who is to say that these children were playing?” she asks (207). “Their
concentration is palpable; in fact, they are at work, and their work is performance” (Handy 207). Handy also notes the importance of Levitt’s own photographic performance—the fact that she is attentive, present, and yet removed enough to identify and record the moment without interrupting it. She is, importantly, “an unobtrusive observer rather than participant” (Handy 207). Here, the children are at play, but play itself is a form becoming. It is hard work. And, as Handy explains, the children’s gestures are not simply casual or random; their “continuing performances render the streets as not only a theater but also a factory of identity in which they labor to form themselves through their engagement with the world” (207). I want to linger on Handy’s statement for a moment, particularly because I am interested in her change of analogy, from theater to factory. We might further consider the relationship between body and industry through reading the tension between gesture and the machine in the work of Antonio Gramsci.

As Gramsci explains, in the early twentieth century, industrialists control their workers’ movements within the factory, but their influence also extends to the labourer’s private lives; employees labour under contingencies regarding “morality” and lifestyle. Gramsci suggests these attempts at extended control, though they fail, are significant because they are symptomatic of a concerted attempt in America to develop “a new type of worker and of man” (290). Though Taylor’s notion of the factory worker as a “trained gorilla” suggests a level of cynicism about the American worker,

Taylor is in fact expressing . . . the purpose of American society – developing in the worker to the highest degree automatic and mechanical attitudes, breaking up the old psycho-physical nexus of qualified professional work, which demands a certain active participation of intelligence, fantasy and initiative on the part of the worker, and reducing productive operations exclusively to the mechanical, physical aspect. (Gramsci 290)

This process is not new, but rather represents a more recent phase within the history of industrialism. What Gramsci calls “puritanical” initiatives of industrialists such as Ford requires that the humanity, spirituality, creativity, and humanism of the worker be snuffed out. These are to be replaced by the worker, with a “certain psycho-physical equilibrium” which will help prevent their exhaustion and collapse from their work (291). For industrialists, then, the worker must necessarily reach an external and mechanical equilibrium, but the only way this balance can be truly internalized is if the worker takes it
on themself, rather than having it imposed upon them. “American industrialists are concerned to maintain the continuity of the physical and muscular-nervous efficiency of the worker,” Gramsci explains. It is in the interests of the industrialists to keep “a stable, skilled labour force, a permanently well-adjusted complex, because the human complex (the collective worker) of an enterprise is also a machine which cannot, without considerable loss, be taken to pieces too often and renewed with single new parts” (Gramsci 291). The extent to which a worker is intellectually engaged with their work can be measured by the amount of mistakes they make. No mistake means that the worker is uninterested; it also, therefore, means that they are ideally fitted to the mindless industrial task in question. In other words, the worker’s “qualification is commensurate with his lack of intellectual interest, i.e. the extent to which he has become ‘mechanized’” (Gramsci 295). Reading the discourse of dance and gesture in and around Levitt’s work through Gramsci, it is apparent that concerns and theories of industrialism and mechanization are not only interrelated with the formal language of dance, and the form and rhetoric of modern poetry and film (from the Lumière Brothers to Chaplin and beyond), but also to social life, leisure, and developing conceptions of the body in a capitalist society. Levitt’s grace and organic movement, for instance, and her intuitive ability to improvise, present an important contrast to the mechanisation of the body at this time. Levitt’s use of the camera (a machine) actually foregrounds this very tension between body and machine.

Like the discourses of choreography and gesture, body and machine are central to the history of photography as well as the history of film. These histories are also equally intertwined with the industrial development of labour parallel with the social and economic influence of Taylorism. In this sense, we can speak of the same “beginnings of the human race” remembered through the most basic human movements, traced across millennia with the sparseness of simple lines and basic gestures. This model of “beginnings” ties to the origins of photography and film. The human body in motion is most often exemplified by photographic pioneers Eadweard Muybridge and, more importantly for my purposes, Étienne-Jules Marey (both lived 1830-1904). I have mentioned the importance of Taylorist philosophy to the discourse of movement in the

28 The Leica (Leitz/Camera) “grew out of the apparatus of the motion picture” (Ferguson 26).
early twentieth century. Though Taylor himself was not initially aware of (his contemporary) Marey's experiments, Marey's photographic work shows evidence of similar experiments with efficiency of gesture and movement (Braun 340). These experiments often reduced the representation of the body to reflective lines and lights worn or carried by the subject (and photographically registered where the rest of their body was not). For Marey and Taylor (whose philosophy was not centered on photographic experimentation) the aim was to explore efficiency of movement. When possible, this reduction extended even to the photographic erasure of the body, and even, as in the work of later motion study photographers such as Frank and Lillian Gilbreth (1868-1924 and 1878-1972, respectively)—after Marey—the body's invisibility.

The language, labour, and politics of the interdependence of dancing bodies with machines, particularly in the early decades of the twentieth century, ensures that the reference to Levitt's body as a dancing body, in particular, is technologically ambivalent. With the dance of poetry and the poetics of dance so actively intertwined, it stands to reason that Levitt's work would be characterized with respect to her supposedly dancerly movement, as well as in terms of the lyricism of the photographs themselves. In his introduction to Levitt’s A Way of Seeing (1965), James Agee echoes Newhall's claim that Levitt has “the eye of a poet.” For Agee, the photographs combined in A Way of Seeing “seem 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” (viii). Levitt, he claims is “like most good artists . . . no intellectual and no theorist” (A Way of Seeing xi). In fact, Agee goes to great lengths in order to place Levitt on the side of anti-intellectualism. Levitt’s work—and, by extension, Levitt herself—is necessarily “uninsistent,” “gentle,” and “unpretentious.” The woman, like the work, is anti-theory. In place of intellectualism and theory, Agee aligns Levitt with poetry and improvisation. In other words, Levitt is a jazz artist. With “a few complicated exceptions, our only first-rate contemporary lyrics have gotten their life at the bottom of the human sea,” Agee claims, and “aside from Miss Levitt’s work [he] can think of little outside the best of jazz” (A Way of Seeing xii). (What does he mean by “the bottom of the human sea”?) According to Agee, Levitt’s subjects necessarily “embody with great beauty and fullness not only their own personal and historical selves but also . . . a natural history of the soul” (A Way of Seeing xii). In his introduction to A Way of Seeing,
Agee presents Levitt’s project with his characteristic heavy-handed romanticism. Based on his formulation, it is difficult to untangle the work from the photographer, and the photographer from their subjects. Though he offers many of the common tropes for “lyric” photography at this time, it is unclear whether Agee is more preoccupied by Levitt’s intuitive, improvisational photographic style, or the people she employs that style in order to photograph.

In discussions of Levitt’s “strange world,” public space is most often conceived as a kind of living room, where the neighbourhood’s otherwise internal plays are turned inside out. These performances dramatize what Jürgen Habermas describes as the domain of the private developing in the semipublic domain (just as, correlatively, public discourse develops within private homes). Speaking in similar terms, Agee sets the stage for the preface to his cinematic collaboration with Levitt and Janice Loeb, a short film entitled In the Street. “The streets of the poor quarters of great cities are, above all, a theater and a battleground. There, unaware and unnoticed, every human being is a poet, a masker, a warrior, and a dancer, and in his innocent artistry he projects, against the turmoil of the street, an image of human existence” (Agee, In the Street n. pag.). Despite the masculine pronoun, this line seems to turn Levitt—the “poet,” “masker,” “warrior” (“warrior” is the only term here that might give me pause), and “dancer” who goes “unaware and unnoticed” through the streets—into a figure of the everyman (thus, it seems, the need to make the pronoun “neutrally” masculine, though simultaneously evoking and erasing Levitt in the process). This passage aligns the photographer with their subjects, presenting their play in the public streets as one and the same.

As tempting as it might be to see a dancing body as moving outside of the system of industrialization, with privileged access to “a natural history of the soul,” or Newhall’s “strange world which tunnels back through thousands of years to the dim beginnings of the human race,” this connection also places Levitt’s dancing body within discourses of race, as well as gender. McCarren explains that, “like athletes, dancers

29 See Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society. I discuss the relationship between Habermas’s model and the discourse of intimacy in greater detail in chapter two.

30 Including the strategic invisibility Hellman and Hoshino’s “white style” takes for granted.
are often read as moving unconsciously, or naturally, with a kind of animal speed or grace – as if their movement were driven by instinct” (3-4). By this reading, the dancer’s “use of movement for expression connects [them] to the realms of the pre-linguistic or pre-technological, the animal or the ‘primitive’” (McCarren 4). These characteristics are commonly attributed to African dancers, who are characterized as primal, sensual, and emotional, for instance. Levitt is moving through the streets with her camera at a time when qualities such as sensuality, emotionality, and certain forms of improvisational movement are valued above cerebral, cultural, or intellectual forms. In this sense, Levitt is compassionate to her subjects in both her visual treatment of them, and in her sympathetic movement itself. At the same time, she mediates “others” for her white audience, offering them up to be looked at.

1.8. Alertness and “Automobility”

The reconfiguring of heterotopic space that comes with the street-as-theatre also acts on (or writes itself onto) the performers themselves. More than domestic spaces and public theatres, however, these are also city streets, and Levitt literally moves in the place of the automobile as she makes her way along the urban grid. The inversion is temporary, however, and Levitt (like the children of the neighbourhood) will have to step aside if a car drives through. How, then, do we think about Levitt’s place as a street photographer? Remaining mindful of the difference the machine can make, I suggest we seek Levitt’s brand of “decisive moment” within a material history that also includes, but is not limited to, discourses that connect the technology of her camera with that of the car.

It is not uncommon to find 1930s-era advertisements for cars that also feature cameras, or vice versa. One argument for buying a car is the freedom and leisure its mobility will afford. What better way to signify that leisure and mobility than by suggesting that you take your family out for a drive and photograph the trip? Both cars and cameras are marketed as tools for making memories. When women are featured in these ads, however, they are often depicted as passengers. These passengers often sit on the passenger side, or stand next to the car, camera in hand. In this case, the woman represents the designated family photographer, the keeper of domestic souvenirs. But
as a lone woman, and a pedestrian, Levitt’s relation to the car is more complicated. A photographer, Levitt is valued in part for her decisive command of body and machine, her quick, improvisational manoeuvring with the camera. This emphasis situates her firmly within the time in which she is photographing.

Like the subway, modernity is deeply affected by the invention and dissemination of the automobile. In *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*, Enda Duffy describes the unsettling impact the automobile had on human perception. The so-called “camera obscura in motion . . . the moving automobile . . . demand[ed] that the driver deploy her whole body, and every one of her senses” (193) connecting the sense of sight with the movement of the body. With “new discoveries such as adrenaline” Duffy also explains, came “a subtle, improvised, but nonetheless radical imaginative rewiring of the human sensory and decision-making processes” (Duffy 195). By this formulation, the “best person” was no longer the one who “thought out the choice rationally . . . but the one who left the least possible time between seeing, choosing, and acting, whose response was speediest” (Duffy 195). In other words, “alertness” replaces thoughtfulness, contemplation, theorization, and intellectualization. These same changes in value are evident in photographic criticism in the early twentieth century. Read in light of these values, the tension between the human, organic (and especially female) body and the machine also highlights the graceful movement of Levitt’s body. Her mastery over the machine, and the fluidity of her movement in relation to it, serves to highlight her athleticism and physicality. It also emphasizes her figure as an embodiment of decidedly modern values. This tension between the human and the machine also underlines the importance of the technology Levitt requires to complete her particular dance. The camera is integral to Levitt’s embodied performance, and it is the contrast with the machine that offers her movement greater social and critical value.

Despite Levitt’s apparently fluid mastery of the machine, Kaja Silverman (following Jonathan Crary) would likely warn against accepting Levitt’s camera as an uncomplicated extension of her body, one that simply reflects her instinctive wishes and desires. Taking up the line of argumentation that suggests human vision can not be unproblematically folded together, Silverman wants to “[worry] the idea that the camera serves as a tool, rather than a machine,” and challenge the assumption that the camera always “works to the credit of human vision” (*Threshold of the Visible World* 131). Even
at the time of Levitt’s early photography, there is an impetus to distinguish between what a human eye or body can do that a machine cannot. The photographer’s kinetic movement foregrounds new values of speed and alertness, tied to ways of seeing adapted to and through new technology; but Levitt’s graceful choreography is also articulated as counterpoint to the machine, ‘worrying’ anxieties about the body’s relationship to automatism and modernity.

1.9. Moving Pictures

Levitt’s connection to moving images is not limited to her photography – she is also a filmmaker. Like her still photography, Levitt’s film work avoids narrative, and this refusal is arguably more marked in her film work because of the filmic conventions it resists. Jan-Christopher Horak’s article “Seeing with One’s Own Eyes: Helen Levitt’s Films” (1995) credits Phillips and Hambourg as key to advancing the study of Levitt’s work. In suggesting there is a thirty-year gap in Levitt criticism, Phillips and Hambourg are effectively ignoring another body of Levitt criticism, the writing on her film work. Their study is limited by disciplinary oversight, and art history generally pays little or no attention to Levitt’s film career, which actually earned her a 1949 Academy Award Nomination for screenwriting. As Horak demonstrates, Levitt is active in filmmaking, yet she downplays her own involvement in the work, referring to herself as “amateur” for instance, or working without credit. Horak suggests Levitt’s work is further obscured by a tendency in film history to downplay the contributions of female filmmakers. Levitt is able to disappear within collaborative filmmaking in a way her individual still photography does not allow. Nevertheless, reviews of her films appear in magazines, newspapers, and film journals in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, the supposed gap years of Levitt criticism.

Siegfried Kracauer’s Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality (1960), a foundational text in film theory, features a relatively rare moment of critical attention for In the Street, a collaborative film project that features Levitt’s editing and camerawork.31 Kracauer addresses the observational quality of In the Street (arguably a filmic extension

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31 Helen Levitt, Janice Loeb, James Agee, In the Street (shot 1945-6 and released in 1953). Levitt later publishes a book of chalk graffiti photographs, also titled In the Street.
of Levitt’s own photographic practice) and its openness to the contingency of accident and “street incidents” (202). Kracauer suggests the “matter-of-fact account” of the work is at cross-purposes with the film’s inherent “emotional intensity” (202). At times, the film might “yield to an urge to picture reality in the light of [the filmmaker’s own] views and visions,” at which point ‘his’ “formative impulses will . . . prompt him to select the natural material according to his inner images, to shape it with the aid of the techniques available to him, and to impose upon it patterns which would not be fitting for a reportage (Kracauer 202). If the filmmaker’s “imagination is kindled by the given objects,” Kracauer suggests, “his film will more likely than not realize potentialities of the medium. Veracious reproductions are thus superseded by pictorial penetrations or interpretations of the visible world” (202). In other words, the photographer’s subjective vision is a productive tool for activating the medium, as long as it is developed in relation to “the given objects” of the material world. Kracauer marks a point of tension between documentary film (though the terms of his discussion apply to photography as well) and the seemingly lyrical process described above.

As In the Street suggests, the same qualities and themes that distinguish Levitt’s photographic work are evident in her films. Horak claims these elements include her “ability to blend into the environment . . . into the fabric of life around her, to become invisible” (69); as well as the emphasis on children, gesture, and ambiguous street scenes, and her tendency to position the viewer in an unfamiliar point of view. Films that bear the hallmarks of Levitt’s stylistic themes, perspective, and content, include The Quiet One (from 1948, where Levitt is credited as writer, editor, and documentary photographer) and An Affair of the Skin in 1963, where Levitt was a producer and an assistant director. Horak notes both films feature black protagonists, and like many of Levitt’s photographs, they do so without seeming to foreground issues of race. At the time of the films’ production, however, to feature a black actor, particularly in the role of protagonist, is a political statement in and of itself. Writing on the topic of “The Negro in American Films” in 1965, Albert Johnson claims that “[t]he part of Janice could have been played by any actress of any race, which makes Diana Sands’ work in An Affair of the Skin of chief interest”; in fact, Johnson argues, “It is because she is a Negro that her behaviour breaks all the stereotypes established from the days of Madame Sul-Te-Wan through Dorothy Dandridge” (22). In casting a black actress in one of the lead roles, An
Affair of the Skin offers a complicated, if mysterious, character engaged in “a kind of a psychodrama previously withheld” from black actors “on the American screen” (Johnson 24).

Comparing An Affair of the Skin with other Levitt films (films where, Horak convincingly argues, Levitt has made more of a mark than she acknowledges), Horak finds traces of Levitt not only in style and composition, but also in the fictional film’s content. “While Levitt seems to have contributed very little to the film’s overall conception and design,” Horak argues, “she is very much a part of the picture through the character of Janice”—a black, female photographer—who, as a self-effacing figure, preoccupied with photographing children in Harlem, “seems to have been written as Levitt’s alter ego” (82). Further, in An Affair of the Skin, when the character, Janice, looks at one of her own photographs, it is actually a Levitt photograph that is pictured. Horak argues Janice and Levitt are interchangeable; the character seems to offer a view of the (‘real-life’) Helen Levitt. Even Horak, who clearly recognizes the value of reading work against its “authorial” account, still needs to fill in the gaps Levitt leaves by drawing connections to a (fictional) embodiment of her. He seeks Levitt’s body until he finds it in Janice.

Levitt’s own discourse consists of a series of refusals: she rejects categorizations such as “portraiture” or “documentary,” and produces work that straddles discourses and disciplines. In interviews, she downplays or misdirects, and any narratives she presents are open-ended or inconclusive. As inconvenient as they might be for her critics, these strategies hold a mirror up to Levitt’s photographic and film work. Levitt’s photographs emphasize the continuum rather than the singular moment, just as she dismisses a single, authoritative narrative or title or caption. As a result, Levitt poses a stark contrast to the show-and-tell, directive nature of much of the documentary and

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32 Johnson characterizes the gaps in Janice’s depiction somewhat differently: “Maddow as writer-director is so intent upon having his audience think for themselves that he never tells us much about Janice. From all that we observe, however, it is apparent that she is ashamed and resentful about her parents and her background” (22-23).

33 To add further complication to the task of teasing out Levitt’s professional history, there is another Helen Levitt (Helen Slote Levitt) of a similar age (born 1916) who is also active in filmmaking and screenwriting at this time. Helen Slote Levitt, along with her screenwriter husband, Alfred Levitt, is politically active and outspoken. These Levitts are blacklisted for their communist ties and later play an active part in the 1988 writer’s strike.
overtly political work of her contemporaries. In his discussion of In the Street, Kracauer—who makes no reference to Levitt or her involvement with the film—refers to the work as being “nothing but a reportage pure and simple” with “shots of Harlem scenes . . . so loosely juxtaposed that they almost give the impression of a random sample” (202). At the same time, however, Kracauer recognizes in “this reporting job” an “unconcealed compassion for the people depicted: the camera dwells on them tenderly” (202). In a move that both articulates a major source of Levitt’s “compassionate” way of seeing and suggests Levitt’s claim for her own work is legible to the critic, Kracauer claims the film’s subjects “are not meant to stand for anything but themselves” (202). This model of compassionate, unobtrusive acceptance extends to the level of uncertainty involved in the photographs. As Trachtenberg attests, “often it isn’t at all clear—precisely what [the people in Levitt’s photographs] are doing. Most often uncertainty about what’s going on is exactly what the picture shows, what it is about” (“Seeing What You See” 3). Her eye, he says, “accepts what is withheld and hidden as part of what is there” (“Seeing What You See” 16).

Consider one of the few anecdotes Sarah Boxer is able to draw out of the Levitt interview; this story tells of Levitt’s contribution to the Walker Evans Many Are Called series. It is a story that appears almost exclusively in Levitt criticism and is only rarely acknowledged in Evans scholarship.34 In 1938, Evans sits in the New York subways photographing strangers—un-posed and unselfconscious subjects—on their daily commute. Evans uses a 35mm Contax camera hidden in his coat in order to capture the inner essence of his fellow passengers, triggering his secret machine by tugging at a cable release concealed in his right coat sleeve. Rather than working as a lone man, sitting on the subway for long periods of time, Evans realizes he must find a way to make himself inconspicuous. “Walker needed someone to go with him in the subway,” Levitt explains (Boxer n. pag.). Evans asks her to join him. She says: “I would just sit next to him, so we were just two people in the subway, so people wouldn’t stare at him” (Boxer n.pag.). Evans realizes: if anyone can be invisible, it’s Helen Levitt.

34 Belinda Rathbone’s 1995 Evans biography, Walker Evans provides a notable exception. In her account of their friendship and collaborations, Rathbone offers both Evans’s perspective and Levitt’s (170-171).
1.10. What a Photograph Can Contain

On my first visit to the archives at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, I climbed the grand staircase bright and early, produced my photo ID, answered security questions, and let my bag be subject to search and check-in. One short, security staff-accompanied elevator ride later, I was sitting at the long, heavy wooden table tucked away within in the Department of Photographs. Sitting across from me was another researcher. We had apparently both requested the same sections of the Walker Evans archives for that day, and would therefore have to share. Evans died in 1975, and his extensive personal archives were endowed to institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum and the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas in Austin. Art historians, critics, and graduate students visit these archives to read through his daybooks, look over his contact sheets, and comb through the copious working drafts of his essays. In order to garner some additional insight, we pay attention to marginalized personal notations and make amateur attempts at handwriting analysis. We do so because Evans has been established as a central figure in photographic history. In fact, if we take Maria Morris Hambourg at her word, Evans is “the poet laureate of the documentary style. Consciously or not we have absorbed his iconic images which have worked on the chromosomes of our consciousness to become a blood heritage” (Unclassified 7). And, “for visual artists who have matured since the 1960s,” Hambourg explains, Evans “has been so often a model that his photographic idiom is virtually an artistic lingua franca” including “his social surveillance method, cool detached vision, and interest in vernacular culture” (Unclassified 7). Photographic pilgrims seek the sites of this photographic heritage. Those with a sense for space turn from the archives to the next, most tangible connection – the locations of the photographs themselves.

My new archive partner had the kind of casual and easy relationship with “Walker” and his work that results from the combination of a naturally confident personality, years of research, and plenty of practice stepping into his subject’s footsteps, including studying and attempting to recreate the photographs that result from
those steps.\textsuperscript{35} He was preparing for his next trip to Havana to continue an ongoing project; to map the steps and retrace the photographs of Evans’s (“Walker’s”) Cuba series. Like Levitt, Evans is easily connected to both image and place. Just as Rosenheim located the few discernable landmarks in Levitt’s photographs as a point of entry for his keen Metropolitan Museum lecture audience, the study of psychogeography seeks to enable a defamiliarized understanding of a space. The modernist dérive was and is practiced by photographers, writers, and researchers who wish to be at once immersed in the urban environment and separate from the city (Kent 329). “In the words of Charles Baudelaire,” modernists such as Evans “sought ‘to be away from home, yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the center of the world, yet to remain hidden from the world’” (Kent 329). A psychogeographer seeks, in a sense, to be “at home” with the journey itself. If, as Tagg suggests, the language of the “documentary” genre demands “the enactment of the viewpoint as a psychic space, a point of identification at which the viewer is interpellated into the dramaturgy of the image” (“Melancholy Realism” 13), then the psychogeographer adds an additional element to the viewpoint, making it psychic, embodied, and literal. It seems the aesthetic quality of the Cuba of Evans’ 1933 visit is, still today, relatively preserved. Walking through the streets of Havana, the psychogeographer is generally able to piece together the routes Evans would have taken, even to the point of re-viewing and re-photographing sites of photographs made, as well as mapping out the photographer’s project and the spaces it traversed.\textsuperscript{36}

Unlike these movements through little-updated streets and somewhat static architecture of Havana, however, the series of portraits Evans made of seated subway portraits in the late 1930s and early 1940s are difficult, if impossible, to recreate. (After over a year of riding the New York subways—both with and without a concealed camera—I cannot claim a first-name basis with Evans.) Even assuming a psychogeography is in some way traceable, the critic is unable to access the object of

\textsuperscript{35} This process seems to resemble an art apprentice’s process of copying a master’s painting, for instance. In that case, the aim is to sort out the order, layer, and logic of the master’s brushstrokes, by sight and by feel.

\textsuperscript{36} Ken Gonzales-Day’s \textit{Lynching in the West}, 1850-1935, for instance, follows the artist/writer as he travels throughout the West of the United States researching and photographing sites of lynchings history had since forgotten or discounted.
their desire by descending the steps of the New York subway, though most of the same routes, stops, and subway lines are preserved in constant use today. Evans’s 1940s subway portraits are embedded in a social, economic, and technological moment—and a relationship to visual culture—that no longer exists. Changes in technology have made cameras ubiquitous on the subway (usually in the form of smartphones) as elsewhere. The same conditions of change also complicate the legalities of photography on the subway (which was, in fact, illegal as Evans was making subway portraits in the 1940s, though that did not stop him and others from bringing their cameras below ground). Today, New York Metropolitan Transportation Authority advertisements posted along the ceiling remind bus and subway riders that surveillance cameras are being installed “to improve safety.” Even without rehearsing the references to Jeremy Bentham’s concept of the panopticon, surveillance video promises protection and preservation through constant documentation, and through instilling in travellers the awareness of being constantly watched and perpetually photographed. In 1940, however, this was not the case. Rather than a constant stream of photography in the subway (though photographing in the subway was not entirely unheard of), Evans had to keep his camera concealed.

Even in 1940, before the ubiquity of cameras, Evans lays bare his theory of looking. As he states: “Stare. It is the way to educate your eye, and more. Stare, pry, listen, eavesdrop. Die knowing something. You are not here long” (qtd. in Walker Evans At Work 161). As if to dramatize that point, in an entry in one of his daybooks from February 4, 1937, Evans describes entering a Negro camp while on an assignment to photograph an Arkansas flood. Here, he stood above the bed of a black woman and photographed her as she slept. Despite a sense of unease at what he considered a breach of decorum, Evans persisted in making the photographs. As with Jacob Riis before him, he gives primacy to the act of photographing, valuing the product of his looking above a sense of decorum. This process of looking is central, and the subjects seem to be important insofar as they exist within the photograph. Phillips claims that Evans’s photographs tend to be “formal” or “meditative” and would not be considered voyeuristic. But whether we consider the more extreme and problematic example of making photographs of the sleeping sick, or imagine Evans standing on the elevated train to point his camera down to a subject on the sidewalk, however, there is
nevertheless “an apparent interest in photographing what is not meant to be seen, a kind of invasiveness, however dignified” in which Evans took pleasure (Phillips, Exposed 21). Many of Evans’s photographs are taken surreptitiously in the streets (like Levitt’s), or while peering down from above with a hand-held camera. Whereas Levitt’s photographs avoid the complications of overly still or actually private spaces, Evans flirts with questions of privacy even when photographing outside of home. “[T]hough made in public circumstances, [his photographs] bear the hallmarks of a private view, and reflect the abstraction of such a view that interested European modernists” (Phillips, Exposed 21).

Evans is perhaps best known for Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a collaboration of photographs and text with writer and film critic James Agee. In 1936, Evans and Agee traveled to the rural American South and photographed the lives, homes, and portraits of sharecroppers. The very existence of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, where the author and the photographer follow three families, depends upon the hospitality, collaboration, and a mutual relationship between Agee, Evans, and their subjects. The months Evans and Agee spend rooted in the surrounding area become part of the story. According to Social and Cultural Geographer Tim Cresswell in On the Move: Mobility in the Modern West, twentieth-century conceptions of space can be categorized into two main categories: “sedentarist metaphysics” and “nomadic metaphysics” (26). “Sedentarist metaphysics” views “mobility through the lens of place, rootedness, spatial order, and belonging,” where “mobility” is considered a “morally and ideologically suspect” aberration (Cresswell 26). “Nomadic Metaphysics,” in contrast, prioritizes mobility over “attachment to place” and values “notions of flow, flux, and dynamism” (Cresswell 26). According to Jeff Allred, Let Us Now Praise Famous Men fits within Cresswell’s rubric of ‘sedentarist metaphysics’; it “valorizes people and things that stay in place and vilifies movement, both on the literal level of bodies in motion and the more abstract level of the ‘movements’ associated with mass reproduction and circulation of culture as well as readers’ habitual modes of speedy, distracted, and inattentive cultural consumption” (97). Let Us Now Praise Famous Men makes little mention of cars, and Evans and Agee seem to “take pains” to exclude “perhaps the most important social and cultural emergence in interwar rural America: that of new forms of automobility” (Allred 103). The text associates its rural subjects with stasis, focuses on
homes and dwelling places, and presents the austerity of its rural families as beautiful. Their bare aesthetic seems in line with the authors’ own ‘high modernist’ aesthetic—“[s]carcity, in other words, begets sensibility, an appreciation for the integrity of each object” (Allred 97-98). As we shall see, Evans’s subway photographs also deal with the tension between visual scarcity and the ‘nomadic metaphysics’ of mass transit. When Evans brings his camera into the subways of New York, he is on a secret photographic mission, but he does so without forming a relational contract. The anonymous urban subjects of Many Are Called (1966) are completely unaware of being photographed.37

1.11. Many Are Called

Over and over, in the years between 1938 and 1941, Evans sat in the subway, with Levitt accompanying him as his invisibility cloak. She was at once accessory—in both senses of the word—distraction, and alibi, as he surreptitiously photographed the people across the aisle from them. Often, he made multiple exposures of the same person. He could only control depth of field (trial and error, and multiple trips determined the settings needed to accommodate the distance across the aisle) and timing, not framing. The quality and exposure of the photographs arguably reflects this set of limitations. Agee, Evans’s former Let Us Now Praise Famous Men collaborator, provides the introduction to Many Are Called (written in New York in 1940 and published in 1966). Agee’s frame is worth quoting at length:

The simplest or strongest of these beings has been so designed upon by his experience that he has a wound and nakedness to conceal, and guards and disguises by which he conceals it. Scarcely ever, in the whole of his living, are these guards down. Before every other human being, in no matter what intimate trust, in no matter what apathy, something of the mask is there; before every mirror it is hard at work, saving the creature who cringes behind it from the sight which might destroy it. Only in sleep (and not fully there), or only in certain waking moments of suspension, of quiet, of solitude, are these guards down; and these moments are only rarely to be seen by the person himself, or by any other human being . . .

37 And even then, Evans would photograph his otherwise willing subjects without their knowledge, or go into houses when the families were away and photograph the spaces in intimate detail (down to focusing on the fleas on the bed).
But it has almost never been used in art; and it is almost never seen in life. (2)

It seems neither Evans nor Agee trusts the photographic subject to be honest with themselves or with others; the work is preoccupied with the pose, or the “mask” of the modern subject. The new and modern state of limbo in which the passengers are suspended within the frame of mass transit is, for Agee, essential to the formula for breaking through that mask; a new, modern problem requires an equally modern solution. Of course, Levitt plays no part in the theory or discussion of the work; the heavy thinking is left to Evans and Agee. It seems as though the type of viewing Agee describes—the kind that aims to unmask its subject—is the kind of incisive photographic looking Susan Sontag has in mind as she writes On Photography some years later (1977). Sontag is concerned with what she considers the predatory nature of taking photographs. “To photograph people is to violate them,” she claims, “by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed” (On Photography 4). Sontag’s worry seems in line with the blurring of people and objects that Hoshino and Hellman nevertheless consider essential to Evans and Levitt’s “white style.”

The impetus behind Evans’s subway portraits, as articulated by Evans and Agee, is also reminiscent of an earlier photographic discourse (though one they would likely not have been familiar with), Walter Benjamin’s discussion of aura in “A Little History of Photography.” Benjamin suggests that the early (daguerreotype) portrait subjects were left with their aura (and innocence) “intact,” because they were still ignorant of the camera’s effects (512). This state, prior to the awareness of photography, can no longer be recreated. The rare view Evans attempts in Many Are Called leads him to hold the photographs from immediate publication and exhibition. When these portraits finally do appear in print, more than a decade has passed since Evans brought his camera into

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38 Agee articulates some tension between the secret camera and the uncertain role of the critic, or the photographer, in unpacking their process: “The effort, as always, has been to keep those who were being photographed as unaware of the camera as possible. To anyone who understands what a photograph can contain, not even that information is necessary, and any further words can only vitiate the record itself. Because so few people do understand what a photograph can contain, and because, of these, many might learn, a little more will, reluctantly, be risked.” (Many Are Called ii).
the subway. Eight of these initially appear in the March 1956 issue of *The Cambridge Review* as “Rapid Transit: Eight Photographs” along with an introduction written in 1940 by James Agee; in March 1962, *Harper’s Bazaar* publishes a series from the subway project with an introduction by Evans (Greenough 21-25). Even after such an interval, when the photographs are finally published in book form as *Many Are Called*, Evans accompanies the photographs with a disclaimer: “The portraits on these pages were caught by a hidden camera, in the hands of a penitent spy and an apologetic voyeur. But the rude and impudent invasion involved has been carefully softened and partially mitigated by a planned passage of time” (“The Unposed Portrait” 120). He held publication until the subjects would no longer be recognizable as those that appeared in the photographs. This decision to withhold the photographs until the subjects become anonymous suggests that Evans saw in them an invasion of privacy—a successful invasion, but one that complicates their distribution nonetheless. It also suggests that in order for the “truth” in these faces to have its full force, the moment (including the faces themselves) must become a thing of the past.

As Lincoln Kirstein notes, Evans has the ability to depict even inanimate objects such as “bureau drawers, pots, tires, bricks, [and] signs,” with a directness that made them “seem waiting in their own patient dignity, posing for their picture” (qtd. in Vanderlan 87). Here, subjects seem inanimate as they sit in the speeding subway car. They are pictured sitting under the stencilled names of the departure and terminus points of the respective subway lines. The street names and numbers hover above the passengers’ heads. As if branded, the sitters are overwritten with urban locations and public service announcements as opposed to personal names. It is if they are themselves named by the city space under which the subway tracks circulate. In fact, early titles for *Many Are Called* include “The Passengers” and “Lex. Ave. Local”; the latter, in particular, would speak to the way the subjects are in large part overwritten by the location and the social and geographical identity of one of Manhattan’s longest subway lines (and therefore one that stretches across multiple neighbourhoods, spanning a variety of different lifestyles and social and economic groups). In the way the

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39 See Sarah Greenough for a thorough and detailed analysis of these different selections, including their similarities and differences.
photographs are variously selected, cropped, and edited for publication, however, the
Many Are Called portraits also recall a preoccupation with graphics and signage that
weaves throughout Evans’s work. One of the hallmarks of the Evans “style” is to include
signs, billboards, posters, and graphic text in the frame of the photograph. This stylistic
tendency, along with the early title of “Lex. Ave. Local,” reinforces the importance of the
text itself.

Evans is famously careful about controlling composition and framing, yet this
series represents an effort to sacrifice control at the altar of secrecy. The way the
photographs are printed and published, however, also calls to mind the parameters of
the project (the fixed focus and speed) through the near-uniformity of its presentation
(the photographs are not all the same size and shape, though they are all generally
rectangular). Therefore, the composition of the photographs is partly determined by
chance, and partly determined—after the fact—by choice. The first photograph in Many
Are Called features a blonde woman, sitting next to another passenger. All we see of the
other person is the edge of a shoulder. As they appear in Many Are Called, the
negatives have been cropped to focus in on the faces of the subjects. Rather than sitting
in the expanse and distraction of a wider frame, these subjects are generally presented
as faces sitting atop black clothing, with blackened windows behind them. As in Levitt’s
Fortune photograph of the woman looking out at us from her window, the faces of many
of Evans’s subway passengers are lent primacy by their isolation on these flat, black
backgrounds. The original negatives or earlier draft prints are set aside in favour of
higher contrast, tighter focus, which suggests a greater emphasis on the psychology of
the portrait subject. In the opening image of Many Are Called, a blonde woman seems
pensive as she appears beneath the stencilled name of the train line. In the cropped
photograph of Many Are Called, however, the woman seems more consequential than
she might if left in a context that includes her relationship to others. Figure 1.4 provides a
point of contrast, however. Here, the woman must also be understood in relation to the

40 Of Evans’s work in American Photographs, Lincoln Kirstein nevertheless claims “[i]t is ‘straight’
photography not only in technique but in the rigorous directness of its way of looking” (198).
41 One element that tends to break up this background is the regular appearance of a newspaper
(shocks of white with graphic black text), advertisements, or the sign stencilled with the name of
the train line written in white on a black background.
man next to her. In the man’s presence (right next to her) situates the woman as one of many riders on the subway car, and suddenly rather than reading her gaze as inward (as in the *Many Are Called* version), the viewer might be tempted to follow the direction of her gaze; it seems as likely that her gaze is looking outward, and toward another person on Evans’s side of the car. The weight of the photograph shifts to the woman’s social (rather than psychological or interior) identity when the other distractions are allowed to surround her and remain within the frame.

![Figure 1.4](image)

*Figure 1.4 Walker Evans. [Subway Passengers, New York City]. 1938*  
Note: Gelatin silver print. 13.9 x 20.5 cm Walker Evans Archive, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accession Number 1971.646.20. [Image in public domain per Copyright Act R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.]

The lone woman on the black background is one of many individual portraits included in *Many Are Called*. The series also contains a number of portraits of pairs sitting together, women and children, or men reading the newspaper. One of these pairings features an elderly woman, who seems to look directly at the photographer, and a younger man who reads the newspaper (Figure 1.5). In *Many Are Called*, this image is kept much the same as it is here, apart from the heightened contrast that casts deeper
shadows into the faces, shielding their eyes further from our view. Here, the man’s newspaper functions graphically, like the stencilled subway sign, adding layering and content into the frame. The newspaper headline, “Pal tells how gungirl killed,” is evocative. It suggests crime, betrayal, and the somewhat spectacular image of a young woman whose life took a tragic turn. The “gun” precedes and subsumes, “girl” in the headline’s neologism. As a point of contrast (or perhaps in an appropriate response to) to the dramatic headline, the man reading the newspaper seems curious, if unmoved. This pairing—of man and “gungirl”—becomes more interesting when the gaze returns to the woman on the left who, somewhat out of focus, seems to fade slightly into the distortion on the left side of the frame. Her direct gaze becomes like a silent appeal (for what, I’m not sure), and one more powerful for its juxtaposition with the man and his newspaper. The photograph sets the subjects in relation to each other, and in relation to a wider context of place (the subway line names stencilled above them, the local newspaper) and time (the daily publication of the newspaper, the juxtaposition of the visible woman and the absent “girl” whose face seems to appear below the paper’s headline). Built into all of these distinctions, of course, is the added layering of time and space – the distance between it and us (as readers and viewers) in the moment of looking, the time between then and now, and even the time between the moment the photograph was made and when Evans finally decided it would be appropriate to publish. In both form and content, the subway portraits are characterized by repetition. They develop a seemingly neutral archive, numbering, turning people’s most ‘naked’ distracted personal ‘private’-in-public faces into social types. But the “neutral” archive is not as objective a cross-section as it might seem. Perhaps more importantly, what does it mean to assume that Evans can see a stranger’s face on the subway and subsequently know some truth in them that they cannot otherwise access themselves? Agee’s introduction suggests that, though we all lie to our own faces in the mirror, Evans’s camera can show something more. Indeed, this is just the kind of invasion Sontag is afraid of. Such a project, and such a claim, assumes a strong belief in the power of the camera, suggesting that the machine can be objective, but only if the photographer successfully removes themself, and their interaction with the subject, from the process.
As Allred argues, Many Are Called effectively “inverts the logic behind nearly every image found in [Let Us Now Praise] Famous Men” (116). It does so in a number of ways:

Technically, through the substitution of an anonymous and nearly aleatory relationship between photographer and subject for the ethics of co-operation and mutual regard in the production of an image; thematically, in the shift from the hinterlands and ‘folk’ stasis to the artificially lit, subterranean, and mobile zone of the subway, a place that compresses spaces and time; and formally, with the contrast between the sculptural, finely drawn, and carefully framed ‘folk’ figures and the often rakish, off-center orientation and awkward cropping that the subway environment demands. (Allred 116)

Nevertheless, the two projects are not as opposed as they might seem. For Allred, what is important for distinguishing between the two projects, for instance, is the necessity of “insist[ing] upon the static, face-to-face encounter as the normalizing site for the ‘responsible’ representation of the other” and then “examining this ethics in dialectical tension with the spying that lies at the heart of documentary” (116). Though Evans’s two projects adopt different photographic modes, each foregrounds the technical apparatus and process that produces them. Let Us Now Praise Famous Men employs “an increasingly old-fashioned photographic mode that recruits subjects as collaborators in the production of an image” and Many Are Called signals “an emergent practice in which life is caught unawares by a ‘spy’ probing the publicity of the subway in order to catch the privacy urban crowds confer” (Allred 116). Both in content and in form, then, a project such as Many Are Called has a pedagogical function; “it teaches its consumers to attend to the way spaces and times are caught, split, duplicated, and disseminated in modernity” and it “provides a window into the way movements like these beget new kinds of fame, of family, of belonging, and of longing” (Allred 116). As Greenough suggests, Evans’s subway encounters anticipate the future of American photography following the Second World War (17). They also contain the story of Evans’s photographic process as a central element of their narrative and meaning.
Evans is—or at least sees himself (with “penitence” and “apology”) as—an agent of photographic truth. One distinct difference between his surreptitious subway portraits and Levitt’s secret street photographs is that Evans’s subjects are static. They are captured by Evans’s camera in a state of distraction. The subway moves, but the people within it sit still. In George Baker’s “Between Narrativity and Stasis: August Sander, Degeneration, and the Decay of the Portrait,” Baker defines stasis as opposite to narrativity, “encompassing primarily the petrification of motion, the freezing of time, and . . . the fixed or repetitive motif” (72). For Baker, stasis is logically “linked to the antihistorical, and even to the spatial zone of the unconscious” (72). As such, it is “a force of repression itself, as an imposition of the monolithic and unmoving” (Baker 74).
As Baker argues, “[t]he defining characteristic of the photographic medium, is its dependency on stasis alone” as opposed to, for instance, the narrative sequencing of the cinema (74). Baker’s analysis of stasis centers on August Sander, whose “photographic editing of society” in his *Faces of Our Time* project Evans himself perceived as a “cultural necessity” (Evans, “The Reappearance of Photography” 188). In fact, Evans shows a similar editorial impulse in *Many Are Called*, where a cross-section of various types of people is present and can be documented uniformly. *Many Are Called* even sees Evans setting for himself specific criteria, which he then maintains in order to achieve some form of humanist or photographic truth. Evans forfeits a large part of his individual control (aside from timing, which as Levitt’s work demonstrates, is not to be discounted) by using standardization to actively try to eliminate one important variable in the work: the subject’s (conscious) pose. Like Sander, Evans develops a seemingly objective, uniform system for his subway portraits that would belie his author function (the kind of subjective viewing his would-be-anonymous photographic persona aims to shed).\(^42\) Work such as Sander’s, Baker claims, inaugurates the model of the “archive” in photographic work; as the formulaic quality of the series suggests, “the logic of the archive is the logic of loss and control” (Baker 82). This performative and strategic loss of control is also central to the narrative of Evans’s *Many Are Called*. In the case of Evans’s “Labor Anonymous” portraits, which I will discuss shortly, Evans’s interest in abandoning measures of control extends to the photographs’ final presentation – “Labor Anonymous” is presented in the form of a grid. Like Evans’s well-known photograph, *Penny Picture Display, Savannah* (1936), his interest in standardization and the anonymity of formal repetition anticipate the work of Robert Frank, Andreas Gursky, Dan Graham, and others. The archive is also regulated by the logic of circulation, or (to use Allan Sekula’s term) traffic. Both Sander and Evans make photographs that claim relevance as a cross-section of society. They presume the status of a valuable sociological document. For each project, the narrative that frames them is also defined in large part by issues of circulation. In Germany, the Nazi party censors Sander and many of his prints and negatives are destroyed. Evans, in contrast, imposes a form of self-

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\(^42\) What Rosalind Krauss calls the “repetitive rhythm of accumulation” characteristic of Neue Sachlichkeit in “Photography’s Discursive Spaces,” *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (131-150).
censorship. He keeps the subway photos, but holds them from publication until years later.

Sekula’s “The Traffic in Photographs” calls attention to the legitimating function of discourse, which he defines as “the forceful play of tacit beliefs and forceful conventions that situates us, as social beings, in various responsive and responsible attitudes to the semiotic workings of photography” (15). Discourse contributes to and is formed and constrained by “larger’ cultural, political, and economic forces” and it is the discourse from the voices of capital and the state that most often prove the ones that are endowed with the most pervasive authority (Sekula, “The Traffic” 15). One simple but important reason for considering Walker Evans and Helen Levitt together is to juxtapose the discourses that both overlap and converge with respect to their work. These discourses include the photographers’ genders. They also speak to their respective attitudes to the process and purpose of archives – including the role that bodies and biographies play in the theory and process of both recording and record keeping. Evans presented himself as railing against politics, and against the state, for instance, but he also worked for the government, and for the business-oriented Fortune magazine. His aim was to change discourse from within (and to make a living). Part of the reason we can continue to debate Evans’s roles and opinions is because of the copious archival materials (drafts, publications, letters, telegrams, negatives, contact sheets, daybooks, and more) he left behind.43 The proliferation of information encourages a developing discourse, one that is particularly alive with the increased digitization of photographic and archival materials. One of the biggest issues with Levitt (and by extension Levitt’s legacy) is that her photographs continue to circulate, as does her refusal to offer her critics a dynamic, open, and productive archive.

43 Robert Vanderlan’s 2009 essay “Walker Evans at Fortune” provides a valuable counter-point to the popular argument that Evans’s work (particularly his later commercial work) is devoid of politics.
1.12. Labor Anonymous

The subway portraits are not the only series Evans has made of subjects unaware of his camera’s presence. Between 1941 and 1946, Evans made three series of photographs of pedestrians on city streets of Bridgeport, Detroit, and Chicago, respectively. The second of these, “Labor Anonymous” (1946) (Figure 1.6) is a piece for Fortune magazine that satirizes the reduction of a diverse mass of working Americans to the abstract category of “labor” or “laborers”. To make the photographs for this piece, Evans “positioned himself on a street corner facing a blank wall in downtown Detroit and made pictures of pedestrians as they passed before his lens” (Rosenheim, Unclassified 186). Like Many Are Called, “Labor Anonymous” features subjects within public space, in transit from one location to another. Both series work within pre-set parameters. Here, Evans “framed the scene, gauged the exposure, and preset the lens’s focus. Then he simply waited for pedestrians to pass by a predetermined position on the sidewalk” (Rosenheim, Unclassified 186). Unlike Many Are Called, with its self-imposed time sanction built into its publication, “Labor Anonymous” was shot in August, 1946, and published shortly after in November of 1946. Whereas the “photographs of subway passengers were made underground and undercover [and] unconsciously recorded the claustrophobia and anxiety of a nation caught between the Depression and World War II,” this later series of photographs showed Evans exposing “his procedure to the light of day, fixing on each of his subjects’ signature gaze, gait, and gesture in the open and for the record” (Rosenheim, Unclassified 186). In this case, this metonymy of the modern American work force travels on foot along the city sidewalk, rather than sitting static in the subway below.

As I noted earlier, Jacobs’s formation of city “sidewalk life” (her “sidewalk ballet”) presents the sidewalk as a site of diverse social contact and multiplicity. There is an “almost unconsciously enforced, well-balanced line . . . between the city public world and the world of privacy” that regulates sidewalk life (62). This line can be maintained due to “the great plenty of opportunities for public contact in the enterprises along the sidewalk, or on the sidewalks themselves as people move . . . no strings attached” (Jacobs 62). On the Detroit sidewalk, Evans’s subjects move freely, with “no strings attached.” These are ostensible strangers to the photographer and his camera and due to the placement
of the photographer and his camera, these pedestrians do not even realize they are being photographed. Evans stands along the edge of the sidewalk and “hiding’ close to his body at his waist was the camera”—a Rolleiflex—“which he did not need to put to his eye” (Rosenheim, Unclassified 186) (they might turn to look at Evans himself, but their gazes meet the man as opposed to his waist-height camera lens). In an unpublished draft for the text of “Labor Anonymous,” Evans refers to unknown workers as “your anonymous producers” (Walker Evans Archive WEA 1994.250.17 [7]). In the published article itself, the author replaces the name “anonymous producers” with “The American Worker.” The idea of the anonymous/American worker is especially poignant as this series is set in Detroit, the home of the Ford Motor Company and therefore the heart of Fordism, Taylorism, and Industrialism in the United States at that time. In this sense, it is nearly impossible not to imagine the cars, in their absence, when considering Evans’s anonymous pedestrians.


Note: Photographs by Walker Evans. © Time Inc. [Image in public domain per Copyright Act R.S.C., 1985, c. C-42.]

“Labor Anonymous” offers a grid, or an archive of the cross-section of the American labourer. The tone of the article (and of Evans’s notes) suggests the
importance of visual multiplicity. Though the aim of the series is a show of diversity, the anonymous labourer is predominately male; it seems there are mostly men that pass by Evans’s lens on the city street, though there are more women in the proofs that were not selected for publication. Evans has set himself up so that he is facing the pedestrians in a manner that will capture their movement toward the sunlight. The effect is that many squint into the light, or have their eyes covered in shadow. They walk toward the light. Their limbs swing away from their bodies as they move by the force of their own locomotion; in the act of smoking pipes or cigarettes, arms bend and shift as the walkers propel themselves forward on their walk. The lowered position of Evans’s camera lens is functional—it makes it possible for him to hide his camera—but it also has the effect of aggrandizing the subjects. The viewer is put in the point of view of the camera, rather than that of Evans, and so we look up at the figures as they walk past. Whereas the subway portraits are taken straight on, placing the viewer in the position of a fellow rider on the subway, here, the photographer stands still. Both camera and photographer are static, and the subjects are the ones moving with the regularity of a pedantic, choreographed march. The page layout features the individuals’ portraits arranged in a uniform grid, playing on the necessary repetition and mass production central to Fordist production. Taking the standardization of the factory out into the streets, Evans’s project recalls Gramsci’s argument for the way Fordism extends into the personal lives of labourers; the pedestrians’ anonymous identities (labourer) show industry’s reach as it bleeds outside the workplace and extends beyond working hours. Though Evans can arguably be implicated in the claustrophobic consumerism and static, passive nature of the subway—even as a secret agent within it—here, he calls attention to the ubiquity of the systems of industrialism, and rhetorically humbles himself before the “anonymous laborer.”

1.13. Anonymous American

In both Many Are Called and “Labor Anonymous,” as in Levitt’s street photography, the subject of the photographs is the anonymous American. Of American Photographs, the book produced from Evans’s first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (1938), poet William Carlos Williams reflects: "It is ourselves we see,
ourselves lifted from a parochial setting. We see what we have not heretofore realized, ourselves made worthy in our anonymity.” Williams almost echoes Woolf’s welcomed escape of the ‘self’ of home and personal setting; anonymity is presented as nobler and more desirable than individual daily life. In his analysis of American Photographs in Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans, Alan Trachtenberg observes the way the recurrence of the word “anonymity” “lies at the heart of the book, of its view of both ‘America’ and ‘photographs’” (Reading American Photographs 277, 279). In the same year, John Crowe Ransom published an article entitled “A Poem Nearly Anonymous,” which claimed anonymity as “a condition of poetry,” where a work of art “intends . . . to lose the identity of the author” and representing him as an “eye-witness . . . freed from his juridical or prose self and taking an ideal or fictitious personality” (qtd. in Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs 279). Ransom, like Evans, embraces the “modernist ideal of the selflessness of art, the disinterested surrender of the personality of the artist to craft, to the identity of the artwork itself” (Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs 279).

As is also evident in Nancy Newhall’s characterization of Levitt’s photographic identity as ‘anonymous’—and the synonym she offers for anonymous is “invisible”—there is a continuity to the discourse circulating in the United States at this time. Trachtenberg later points to “anonymity” as the “great theme” of Evans’s American Photographs, which positions “anonymity as the true character of the American” (Reading American Photographs 283). According to Trachtenberg, Evans thematizes anonymity “by adopting the manner of the naïve and straightforward camera eye. He [Evans] returns ‘photographs’ to ‘American’ by evoking the nameless craftsmen of the past, and by making their crafts his own” (Reading American Photographs 283). In this sense, the “naïve” vision of Evans’s camera bears some resemblance to the immediacy and grace attributed to Levitt. Nevertheless, Evans’s evocation of the “nameless craftsman” is both functional and temporary. Unlike Levitt, he would rather not leave his work unattended. Rather, he writes essays, compiles records, and organizes photographic books into precise narrative sequence that make it possible to piece together the shifts and changes in his train of thought. In an unpublished comment on American Photographs, for instance, Evans claims cameras should concentrate on “anonymous people who come and go in the cities and who move on the land . . . what it
is in their faces and in the windows and in the streets beside and around them; what they are wearing and what they are riding in, and how they are gesturing” (Thompson 151). In American Photographs, America is configured as a “series of acts and gestures toward the making of a place”; it is “less a place and a creed than . . . a process of becoming” (Trachtenberg, Reading American Photographs 284). In this sense, Evans’s “process of becoming” echoes the continuum (the gesture often shown mid-movement) and the absence of a clear, delineated narrative in Levitt’s photography.

Like Evans’s figuration of ‘America,’ anonymity itself is less a fixed state than a relation to identity that can be strategically adopted and maintained, or an absence that can be imposed; this is evident in photographs where the individual identities of the subjects are not identified, and no names are provided. Anonymity holds the potential for neutrality, whether that potential can be fully realized or not. The idea of the anonymous photographic subject supposes that the visual image of the person—their skin, clothing, setting, and posture—separates the actual individual pictured from the way their image is marked for the viewer because they remain unnamed. Anonymity can also provide protection from persecution or bias (there is a functional anonymity that protects informants, for instance, as well as the long history of female authors who adopted pen names to protect their reputations and enable their work to be published and read). Evans himself claims: “I’m not interested in people in the portrait sense, in the individual sense. I’m interested in people as part of the pictures and as themselves, but anonymous” (Cummings n. pag.). As previously noted, Evans aligns faces with “the windows and streets that surround them” and shares relevance between what people “are wearing, and what they are riding in, and how they are gesturing.” This is an interesting order – from the clothing, to the automobile, back to the movement of their bodies. As Greenough’s analysis of Evans’s subway photographs argues, this unpublished statement, written around the same time Evans was considering bringing his camera into the subway, is applicable to both American Photographs and the project that became Many Are Called (19). In addition to making photographs, Evans collected road signs as an obsessive accumulation of what he called “anonymous” art/objects (Hambourg, Exposed 11). When he adopts what Trachtenberg calls “the manner of the naïve and straightforward camera eye,” anonymity (and thus the “true character of the
American”) is, again, associated with automatization and the supposed objectivity of, or partnership between, body, object, and machine.

1.14. Conclusion

Like others before me, I have aligned myself with the active movement of walkers, rather than the passive inaction of subway riders (though of course I am—and have been—both). This chapter follows a trail of intersecting paths of discursive history in order to demonstrate why Levitt’s work is characterized as lyrical, embodied, compassionate, and dancerly. Whereas discursive history shows why these terms are initially attributed to her work, however, my account of narrative desire further shows why the application of these terms remains fundamentally unchanged since the late 1930s. Levitt’s anonymity is bound in both the masculine/’neutral’ discourse of documentary history, and in the kind of invisibility that comes with her gender and the classes, genders, races, and ages of the subjects she photographs. Because of the suggestion of sympathetic movement inherent in the way she depicts her photographic subjects, Levitt is given a free pass to photograph whomever and wherever she sees fit. At the same time, her refusal to offer a stable narrative for her own biography and practice leads to critical frustration and stagnation. But if Levitt is connected with primitive beginnings of the world, then in the discourse of her contemporary moment she is also connected with complicated perceptions of race, dance, poetry, and grace; with the fantasy of democracy her modern walking seems to embody, with the infantilization of women, and the complicated views about what makes a “true American” in New York neighbourhoods populated by African-Americans and immigrants.

For Walker Evans, the notion of the “true” American is built into ideas of anonymity drawn from surveillance and from the mode of looking endowed to a (white) man with a camera and the power to record. If, as Roach suggests, celebrity is public intimacy (It 16), then the avoidance of intimacy that comes from voyeuristic (secret) looking suggests something akin to wilful anonymity. Evans retains a belief in the primacy of the camera, and his own ability to negotiate an objective relationship with it. Furthermore, if walking generates thought and reflection, then sitting on the subway, for instance, seems (as Evans and Agee suggest) to produce a passive, if naked reflection
of one’s ‘true’ self. Yet his body seems to get in its own way. On the subway, he needs Levitt around to help him seem inconspicuous, and even then he is required to tug inelegantly at the cable release in his coat sleeve. In Levitt’s case, however, the photographer’s body is defined in relation to—it is understood in step with—the machine in her hand.

Evans’s cataloguing portrait work is seductively positivist in its central idea, as it suggests the possibility of learning something universal, basic, human, and true, simply by looking at a person’s face (particularly once these faces have been ‘unmasked’). Levitt, in contrast, embraces public masks. She makes a point of shooting on Halloween because she seeks out masking as motif. Levitt’s photographs seem to ask that we see her subjects in context (however imprecise the location) and in action. Both of these elements are susceptible to contingency, accident, and fragmentation – thereby suggesting the impossibility of knowing everything. Evans, a prolific writer, offers his words to keep some control over his work, whereas Levitt’s method of ‘control’ mutes critical discourse when she refuses to speak. These are two fundamentally different approaches to photography, and two fundamentally different approaches to posterity (for their work, and for their own personal or historical records). The result is that, with few exceptions, Levitt discourse does not move forward in the course of decades, whereas Evans discourse spreads, feeds on its own momentum, reproduces itself, and grows. My aim here has been to suggest that Levitt’s work, and the body of criticism that frames her, deserves a closer look. The contemporary critical discourses are important for our understanding of the work itself. They are also valuable for exposing the different paths of critical reception, as well as the “values” of the critics and archives.
Chapter 2.

Intimacy

2.1. Intimate Projects

“I know very well what Diane Arbus means when she says that one cannot crawl into someone else’s skin,” Rineke Dijkstra explains, “but there is always an urge to do so anyway. I want to awaken definite sympathies for the person I have photographed” (Grundberg 87). Like Dijkstra, Nan Goldin expresses a desire to transcend corporeal boundaries. On her relationship with her friend Cookie Mueller, Goldin says: “Part of how we got close was through me photographing her—the photos were intimate and then we were. I was outside of her and taking her picture let me in” (Cookie Mueller 1).

Photographing the women he encounters as he rides his bicycle through downtown Vancouver, Lincoln Clarkes explains, “Usually when you see pictures of heroin addicts or prostitutes, they’re ashamed to be who they are. But – but these women, I’m not ashamed of who they are. I don’t want them to be ashamed of who they are” (Photographic Obsession). Goldin, Dijkstra, and Clarkes all draw on documentary and fashion photography, genres that assume “vices and virtue, character, abilities – a person’s very being – are written on the skin” (Stallabrass, “What’s in a Face” 85), yet their photography explores more than just flesh. Their practices focus the camera in places unconventional for portraiture: into bedrooms, bathrooms, and back alleys; staring at battered faces and bruised or bleeding bodies. Goldin, Dijkstra, and Clarkes all evade ethical questions through a structure of disavowal in the production and discussion of their work. In each case, their reception tends to be polarized, falling on either side of a supposedly clear line between empathy and voyeurism – an ethical debate that hangs over nearly every depiction of human bodies, particularly those of women.
“There is a popular notion that the photographer is by nature a voyeur, the last one invited to the party,” Nan Goldin claims, “but I’m not crashing, this is my party” (Ballad 6). Goldin’s definition of voyeurism is wilfully naïve.\(^{44}\) Regardless of whose party it is, once she is allowed in with her camera, anyone can follow. The fact that Goldin feels she must speak to the question of voyeurism indicates a worry integral to the conversation in which her work is located.\(^{45}\) For their part, critics often pre-empt accusations of voyeurism in photographic work by relying on accounts of the photographer’s biography or personality – Goldin is often referred to as charming, brash, and honest, for instance. Framing her in this way acquits her of suspicion or judgment, suggesting she has earned the trust of her subjects (and, by extension, deserves our own). Nevertheless, Liz Kotz claims art enthusiasts use biography as an alibi for looking at, and trading on, these photographs (“Aesthetics of Intimacy”). Similarly, Clarkes’s standard biography suggests, as he is a man with “two grown daughters” (Heroines 136) who always enlists a female assistant, women are safe in front of his lens. His work draws out some of the most interesting and problematic aspects of photographic portraiture, raising questions about voyeurism, race, class, gender, and representation. These questions call attention to issues more easily taken for granted in Dijkstra’s seemingly benign artistic photographic practice. Dijkstra’s large-scale portraits claim a level of neutral observation, and they have the ability to offer every vein and hair of the subject’s flesh to the viewer. In fact, all three photographers make work that shows what are often bare female bodies.

Visually exposed or damaged flesh calls attention to the surfaces of the body as well as that of the photograph. Though the question of indexicality is complicated by contemporary digital photography, photographic theory is historically rooted in the notion that light bounces off skin and is registered on the negative or the plate; it makes a mark that becomes the photograph. Skin itself is a boundary that both protects the body from,

\(^{44}\) Jonathan Weinberg argues: “Despite what Goldin herself implies about her role as an insider, one can be a voyeur at one’s own party, experiencing personal acts and relationships as if one were witnessing the self through a keyhole. To be a voyeur is not to occupy a stable category of being. Likewise, the very concept of ‘other’ changes depending on the context and who is doing the looking” (24).

\(^{45}\) She is still playing on the idea of voyeurism (fourteen years later) when she names an exhibition of her work Scopophilia.
and enables it to connect with, that which is outside of it. Skin is at once inside and outside. Adrienne Rich describes the female body in similar terms: "[f]ar from existing in the mode of ‘inner space, women are powerfully and vulnerably attuned to both ‘inner’ and ‘outer because for us the two are continuous, not polar" (Of Woman Born 63). Rich’s discussion centers on the maternal body – a body that calls attention to the difficulties of distinguishing interior and exterior, intimate and public. The maternal body provides a site from which to consider issues of production and is particularly evocative in discussions of photography’s history of both social and mechanical reproduction. According to Lauren Berlant, "[q]uestions of intimacy, sexuality, reproduction, and the family . . . are properly interrelated with . . . questions of identity, inequality, and national existence” (Queen of America 8). The relationship between the surfaces of skin, and representations of maternal bodies in photography—instances of blurred boundaries between inner and outer, private and public—are examples of intimacy at work in photography. Thinking through the work of skin and the pregnant body in portraiture offers an opportunity to explore the ways the discursive foundations of portraiture are intertwined with those of intimacy. I will center my discussion on selections from Goldin’s The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, Dijkstra’s New Mothers photographs, and Clarkes’s Heroines series. Rather than define this work in terms of voyeurism—the ethical debates are already well rehearsed—I argue this work can be best explored by shifting terms and focusing on the question of intimacy.

The term intimacy is in many ways constitutive of photographic history. In the 1850s, the photographer Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) champions what he calls the “instant understanding” that allows the portrait photographer to get a sense of the model’s “habits, his ideas and his character” in order to “produce . . . a really convincing and sympathetic likeness, an intimate portrait” (qtd. in Tagg, Burden of Representation 53). Photography’s relation to indexicality makes it particularly suited to discourses of truth, immediacy, and intimacy; though it is not completely unchanged, this language of intimate portraiture still echoes, over one hundred and fifty years later, in the words of photographers Nan Goldin, Rineke Dijkstra, Lincoln Clarkes, and their critics. This chapter therefore begins by situating the notion of intimacy both theoretically and historically. Following a contextualization of the term, I will consider Sally Mann’s photograph New Mothers (1989) in order to outline the thematic role of intimacy in the
discourse of photographic portraiture. My discussion of Mann’s controversial family portraits then leads me to Jane Gallop. As Gallop explains in *Living With His Camera*, she has been co-habiting with a Leica, and the man behind it, for decades. What Gallop’s photographic analysis offers, then, is a critical vocabulary for articulating the point of view of the photographed subject. These initial readings of Mann and Gallop lay the groundwork for my discussion of photographers Nan Goldin, Rineke Dijkstra, and Lincoln Clarkes. My concern in highlighting these respective photographic practices is to think through the workings of intimacy and its relationship to the persistence of inside/outside binaries, most frequently applied in discussion of the dynamics of the photographer/subject relationship. More specifically, however, my interest in the photography of Goldin, Dijkstra, and Clarkes points toward the way intimacy is represented through—the way it works on and with—the surfaces of skin and the pregnant or maternal body.

### 2.2. Intimacy

“Intimacy” is defined as close relations or familiarity: psychic, physical, and/or sexual closeness. It also characterizes a closeness of observation or knowledge. To intimate is to communicate, to declare or make known. Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and Julia Kristeva, among others, classify intimacy as a distinctly modern phenomenon. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Habermas explains that the discourse of intimacy, connected with notions of private property and patriarchal laws, develops in correlation with social, economic, and ideological distinctions between public and private in the eighteenth century. By his account, emerging domains of the public, the private, and the intimate are necessarily intertwined. Public discourse, for example, can take place within the setting of private homes, making the public sphere internalized within the private. Similarly, the “discovery of intimacy is correlative to the development of a public domain” and “the discourse of intimacy tended to develop in a semipublic domain” (Sjöholm 182). Letter writing, epistolary fiction, and the novel (exemplified in, though not invented by, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* or the published correspondences of Goethe) play out the
blurring of boundaries, where the sense of intimacy lent by reading seemingly “personal” correspondences gains popularity among a reading public (Habermas 49).

According to Hannah Arendt, unlike the “private,” intimacy “has no objective tangible place in the world, nor can the society against which it protests and asserts itself be localized with the same certainty as the public space” (*The Human Condition* 39). Rather, the private is transformed into the intimate, and intimacy is aligned with a preoccupation with individual subjectivity. As Seyla Benhabib explains, the modern age isolates individuals, “forcing them into the confines of anonymous public activities like the exchange and commodity market” which therefore “also brings forth the cult of individuality, the preoccupation and concern with uniqueness, authenticity, and psychic harmony of the self” (106). The valuing of individuality and intimacy brings about “worldlessness” in human relations, distinct from private space; this accompanies the belief that authentic individuality can no longer be located or displayed in the public or social sphere (Benhabib 106). Benhabib cites Arendt’s claims that “the four walls of one’s private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world” and that “[a] life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow . . . it loses the quality of rising into sight from some darker ground which must remain hidden if it is not to lose its depth in a very real non-subjective sense” (Benhabib 107). This claim for the importance of “home” (in Benhabib’s terminology) and of private space takes on additional force when read in relation to massive occurrences of contemporary homelessness. In Arendt’s work, the home “provides that space that protects, nurtures and makes the individual fit to appear in the public realm. The homeless self is the individual ready to be ravaged by the forces of the social against which it must daily fight to protect itself” (Benhabib 107).

Building on, and in many ways departing from, Arendt’s theorization of intimacy, Julia Kristeva adopts a psychoanalytic and aesthetic perspective. She mobilizes the concept of the stranger, the wanderer, or the figure of the homeless in her re-thinking of intimacy (Keltner 169). “Uncanny, foreignness is within us,” Kristeva explains; “we are our own foreigners, we are divided” (*Strangers to Ourselves* 181). Unlike Arendt, who names Jean-Jacques Rousseau (*Confessions*) the original “explorer” of modern
intimacy, Kristeva declares a debt to psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud. Freudian psychoanalysis represents “a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself” (Kristeva qtd. in Keltner 167). Kristeva “grounds the originary formative experience of modern intimacy, as articulated by Freud, in the problematic of racialized nationalism” (Keltner 169). As Stacey Keltner explains, German nationalism “foregrounds the intimate as an interiority of what is most familiar as the organizing principle of modern social and political reality,” which accounts for German Romanticism’s preoccupation with that which “is most strange in language, culture, and tradition” (167). The relationship between intimacy and space is therefore one of a connection to an embodied, nationalistic imaginary, rather than a specific exterior space.

Shifting registers, Berlant offers a rhetorical discussion of intimacy. For Berlant, “[i]ntimacy involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others . . . the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. People consent to trust their desire for ‘a life’ to the institutions of intimacy” (Intimacy 1). In modern discourse, therapy and confessional discourse have also “become internal to the modern, mass-mediated sense of intimacy” (Berlant, Intimacy 2). The discourse of intimacy is therefore built up of strata including: a relationship to patriarchy, the development of the bourgeois sphere, inflections of private space, the making-public of ‘private’ thoughts, and the regulation and racialization of the body. Berlant is quick to defend the study of intimacy from theorists who dismiss the political

An unfixed temporality, Kristeva’s “intimacy” combines Freud’s Zeitlos, Marcel Proust’s “lost time,” Henri Bergson’s notion of “duration” and Martin Heidegger’s “temporality”; it is not a physical place, but rather lost time, sensible time, a time outside death, a time outside time.

Keltner elaborates: “involution” is “interiorization of a social [and] . . . moral demand of intimacy that cannot be accomplished by a Jew, which makes of Freud a wanderer. The Freudian revolution emerges as an involution of a social and political reality. Psychoanalysis thus is witness to the experience of a socially and historically nonintegratable self” (169).

In Intimacies, Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips argue against the effectiveness of psychoanalysis for thinking through intimacy. Hoping to develop new techniques and “a new story for intimacy,” they argue that “psychoanalysis has misled us into believing, in its quest for normative life stories, that knowledge of oneself is conducive to intimacy, that intimacy is by definition personal intimacy, and that narcissism is the enemy, the saboteur, of this personal intimacy considered to be the source and medium of personal development. Psychoanalysis tells us, in short, that our lives depend on our recognition that other people – those vital others that we love and desire – are separate from us . . . despite the fact that this very acknowledgment is itself productive of so much violence” (viii).
relevance of “intimacy crises . . . as disconnected from more important and public questions of equity, justice, and violence in political life in general” as “they have been misdirected by a false distinction between the merely personal and the profoundly structural” (*Queen of America* 10). She demonstrates the ways in which politics and the intimate public sphere are concerned with that which would be considered the most private – the subconscious, and the inner workings of the body (particularly the female and maternal body). 49

In contemporary discourse, intimacy is often uncritically presented as an alternative, or antidote, to voyeurism. What too few photographic critics acknowledge, however, is that intimacy can be volatile, even ambivalent. Within emotional (or intimate) allegiances, for instance, feelings of love mask feelings of hostility, hidden in the unconscious (Freud 80). Freud defines ambivalence as “the sway of contrary tendencies” (49). The term is central to Freud’s concept of taboo, an ancient prohibition passed down from one generation onto the next, imposed on actions for which there exists a strong desire. As he explains, the inheritors of a taboo “would like nothing better than to transgress . . . but they are also afraid to do it . . . just because they would like to transgress, and the fear is stronger than the pleasure” (44). They therefore assume an ambivalent attitude toward the prohibited action. Ambivalence becomes connected with fears of contamination. Individuals can become marked by taboo by having the ability to spur the desires of others – whether this means tempting others to follow a negative example (to have broken taboo oneself, and so by example potentially “awaken ambivalent conflict” in others), or by tempting others to break taboo through one’s own helpless susceptibility to being acted upon. Freud suggests the dead, the newly born, incapacitated women, and newly sexually mature young people are considered particularly tempting. Nearly all of these types of figures will be represented in the photographs that follow. I am interested in the notion of ambivalence insofar as it concerns the co-existence of contradictory tendencies—the hostility that hides behind love, for instance—as well as the central role that contact or contagion, specifically touch (“délire de toucher”), plays in the prohibition of taboo.

49 See Berlant’s *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, Intimacy, and The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, though these are concerns that generally appear throughout all of her work.
Ambivalence lies at the heart of “intimate” photographic projects, where explicit depictions of the body are shared and criticized as art. Despite their similarities, Goldin and Dijkstra approach the photographer/subject relation in ways that seem directly opposed. Where Goldin’s work is predicated upon familiarity, Dijkstra’s practice mobilizes the emotional distance between photographer and subject. Goldin’s portraits foreground her privileged knowledge of her subjects: these include her friends, her lovers, and herself. Her use of snapshot aesthetic suggests the immediacy of the work underscoring her role as a direct participant in the milieu she photographs. In contrast, Dijkstra’s large-scale, long-exposure portraits feature strangers and acquaintances. Her young, naked, or vulnerable subjects are removed from the context of their personal lives; the portraits call attention to photographic mediation by offering their subjects, as images, to the viewer. Like Goldin, Lincoln Clarkes is interested in the roles that fashion and costuming play in the performance of daily life. He has distinguished himself by photographing women, many of whom live precarious lives in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada. Whereas Goldin often photographs her own milieu, her homes, and her family of friends, Clarkes enjoys an economic and social mobility not available to his female subjects. His claim to membership in the Downtown Eastside is based on his address, as well as the considerable amount of time spent, and personal connections he has made in that community.

The photographic practices of Goldin, Dijkstra, and Clarkes inevitably raise questions of viewership and materiality. Can we discuss intimacy without thinking about ‘taking’ a portrait in more than just the common sense of the word? What about taking it with you, travelling with it, being ‘taken’ by or with a photographic image – something that holds some personal, political, or historical meaning? In other words, the notion of performative intimacy that takes place (or fails to occur) between the photographer and their subject is not limited to the moment the photograph is made. In fact, some of the most interesting and politically effective modes of photographic intimacy take place between viewers, or subjects, and photographs. In interrogating the photographer/subject relationship, I find myself as intrigued with the suggestion of women carrying photographs in plastic bags around their necks (a form of safekeeping for those without the security of albums, cabinets, and glass frames) as I am captivated by Dijkstra’s practice of having women stand, naked and bleeding before her camera.
Photographs, held close, become their own moving archives as they are worn on, and pressed against, the body. Unlike art photographs that often circulate independently of both photographer and subject—stored in frames and crates, or displayed on walls—personal photographs might hang in homes, or rest against flesh, sitting in wait for private viewings and to offer material (and often fetishistic) reassurance.

2.3. (Photographically) Imagined Communities

Some contextualization of the archive is necessary to understand the significance of the surfaces of the body in portraiture. The idea of outer appearance as the best means of representing a person’s character is one that exists well before the invention of the camera. By the nineteenth century, Allan Sekula explains in “The Body and the Archive,” “a single hermeneutic paradigm had gained widespread prestige. This paradigm had two tightly entwined branches, physiognomy and phrenology. Both shared the belief that the surface of the body, and especially the face and head, bore the outward signs of inner character” (Sekula, “Body and Archive” 10-11). Catalogues of “essential facial types” were “integral to the production of a racialized middle-class identity over the course of the nineteenth century. Various forms of photographic practitioners, from artists to amateurs to scientists, “utilized the photographic archive to inscribe the body’s surface with an imagined depth – an ephemeral essence, a gendered and racialized character” (Smith, American Archives 5). Though the notion that a person’s essential and interior qualities are supposedly discernable from the shape and look of their exterior precedes the camera, this hermeneutical paradigm becomes particularly and effectively instrumentalized with its widespread use.

Nevertheless, by the mid-nineteenth century “photography’s initial promise to provide each subject with an iconic likeness” had already “been proven to be fraudulent” (Buchloh 150). Despite any best intentions of its earliest practitioners, photography, as a medium, was not independent of the society that employed it. In the United States, “state-sponsored institutional archives such as the rogues’ Gallery of criminal offenders and scientific archives of racial others created a normative space that delimited the bounds of ‘true’ national belonging” (Smith, American Archives 5). The visual archives therefore play a part in constructing conceptions of the nation, as well as enforcing
emerging categories of race and class. Nineteenth-century archives were perhaps most effectively employed in visually “mark[ing] the limits of white middle-class American identity” and they “encouraged constant surveillance of the social body for ‘deviant’ outsiders” (Smith, American Archives 5).

Like police records and institutional archives, the seemingly private family photograph album has a public function of its own. Nineteenth-century family albums provided individuals with “a colloquial space in which to display practices of national belonging” (Smith, American Archives 6). The nuclear family therefore practices nationalism while protected within the private sphere (as in Habermas’s account, the public takes place even within private space). In her discussion of nineteenth century photography, Smith aligns American amateur photographers with the anonymous newspaper readers detailed in Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. As she explains, through the performance and repetition of common “photographic technologies and tropes”—the use of standardized props, poses, and codes of dress—“individuals could mutually affirm their places in an imagined community rooted in discursive fantasies of national character” (Smith 6).

These dominant discourses also articulate models of representation individuals could resist, transform, or undermine. Echoing the connection between intimacy and nationalism that Kristeva identifies, portraiture is embedded in the histories of the nineteenth-century middle class and in constructions of national identity.

Recognizing that notions of middle-class interiority are played out and constructed in the domain of codes and representations within the realm of mechanical reproduction, middle-class photographic subjects worried about the disappearance of “aura” (heralded by Walter Benjamin in “A Little History of Photography”) that ensured the sympathetic interpretation of one’s portrait. The “bonds of intimacy” bring about the kind of responsible viewing Smith characterizes as “the sentimental labor of portrait

50 “The photographic sign invited one to participate in a leap of faith whereby the body might serve as an index to an imagined essence. And by this same leap of faith, by the same process of metonymy, individuals could imagine themselves linked to others similarly represented, and thereby mutually affirm an imagined essence. Photographic self-representation, then, enabled one to claim a visible, tangible, representable space in a community that could now be imagined in new ways, through new technologies of vision” (Smith, American Archives 5).
viewers and owners" (American Archives 53). One’s inability to control the circulation and interpretation of one’s own mechanically reproduced portrait, or the uses it may be put to if circulated outside of those bonds “fueled new visual discourses that aimed to delineate sanctified middle-class identities in opposition to cultural others” (Smith, American Archives 54). There needed to be a new discourse, one not dependent upon “the protective, reverent gaze of intimacy” (American Archives 54) for legitimizing the subject. In response, an “exteriorized discourse of interiority” arose as a means for demonstrating and maintaining a hegemonic “middle-class superiority” (Smith, American Archives 54). The act of looking and differentiating others based on their visual representations became an increasingly important means for regulation.

This “exteriorized discourse of interiority” is played out in the struggle to define the terms of portrait photography as a genre. Definitions of portraiture, as a genre, are embedded in discourses that delimit democracy, maternity, and race, just as related ideas of privacy, interiority, and aura are tied to eighteenth-century notions of private property, class, and patriarchy. Engaging in a debate as long as the history of photography itself, nineteenth-century American middle-class discourse regarding “high art” distinguishes art from likeness. A “likeness” is concerned with capturing the external features of the person pictured in a recognizable manner. Historically, a portrait must be able to render the subject’s features in a recognizable way (West 22). Nevertheless, likeness can be negatively associated with simple, artless duplication, or the “slavish imitation of reality” (West 22). The photographic likeness was therefore “considered a second-rate, superficial photograph, an image that represented only the body” (Smith, American Archives 56) and not the “real” person. In contrast, what Smith calls the “true” (auratic, middle-class) portrait,” requires an “inner likeness” beyond a faithful representation of the subject’s exterior (56). Part of the tension that exists between the two terms is the problem of distinguishing individual from group, or the particular from the type – a conflict inherent in, and necessary to, portraiture.

The interior, auratic, high art “portrait” had privileged access to discern a person’s character; further, it claimed to “render visible the very soul of the (middle-class) subject” (Smith, American Archives 57). In contrast, the “likeness” was simply concerned with poses and external, material qualities. The distinction between exterior and interior is
central to the discursive history of portraiture. The seeming arbitrariness of the definition—the exterior likeness and the exterior/interior portrait—highlights the rhetorical heavy lifting needed to create an otherwise intangible hierarchy between the intrinsic quality of photographic subjects. But what the debate also distils is the aspirational discourse related to the photographic practitioners themselves. The debate itself is steeped in questions (that precede it) about whether the machine-made photograph can be considered art. The argument for the interiority of the portrait subject, then, is also an argument for the interiority and the individual creativity, or genius, of the photographer. If we recall Habermas’s suggestion that intimacy arises, as a concept, with the discursive separation of public and private spheres, the distinction between portrait and likeness takes on added significance. Drawing on earlier notions of the public versus the (middle-class) private sphere, some critics even suggest it is within the realm of the middle-class “private” sphere that one’s essence, character, or spirit is most easily accessible.

Smith's study of the photographic archive demonstrates some of the ways in which the “nation” is as much an embodied, imaginary concept as it is a geographical place. Similarly, Kristeva’s notion of intimacy shifted the discussion from private physical space to embodied, sensory space. I am interested in these instances where the borders between inside and outside are most in crisis, particularly in the body of the photographic subject. Skin functions as a border and a boundary; it is also porous and receptive. Skin is an organ, but it touches both one’s insides and the outside world. Skin also marks the subject, one way or another, in visual representations, providing external marks tracing one’s personal history (scar, wrinkles) and markers of one’s internal, genetic makeup (or, in the case of “passing” for a different race, it hides that makeup, something equally important to constructed notions of race and representation). If intimacy is in many ways predicated upon a blurring of boundaries between inside and outside, then maternity straddles a similarly hazy line. Not only is pregnancy an intimate (internal, personal) state made visible to the public, but as Heather Latimer argues, “the divide between public and private life” is also “especially collapsed for pregnant women, who face a particular set of biopolitical considerations, and whose private behavior is routinely scrutinized and made a matter of public concern” (156). The pregnant body presents a visual representation of the processes of familial, racial, and socio-economic
reproduction. As such, it also calls to mind issues of mechanical reproduction (as I will discuss with respect to Barthes).

2.4. Sally Mann’s New Mothers

Sally Mann’s series *At Twelve* (1988) is a collection of portraits of twelve-year-old girls. These portraits draw on the subjects’ transition from childhood and adulthood, dramatizing a precarious age in their upbringing. The girls’ mix of innocence and knowingness (including poses mimicked without a full awareness of their potential implications) combines with the viewers’ projection of adulthood onto young bodies, creating what Mann considers to be a tension not available to portraits of adults. One day, while she was working on this project, Mann’s young daughter appeared with a bee-stung eye. As the story goes, the drama of Jessie’s bruised and swollen face reminds Mann of Dorothea Lange’s “Damaged Child.” She suddenly realizes that, not simply material for snapshots, her children could be subject matter for her art. Shifting her focus from other people’s daughters, then, Mann achieves notable financial success (and considerable critical and popular notoriety) when she makes and exhibits black and white photographs of her own children. The first, and most famous, of these series is *Immediate Family* (1992).

Playing in the yard, floating in the water, hanging from a hayhook, Mann’s children are often depicted naked and in what some consider precarious or suggestively sexualized poses and situations. What adds to the concern about Mann’s depictions of her children is the combination of beauty (the children’s striking beauty as well as the aesthetic skill and attention to composition Mann employs) and hints of danger (from the deep shadows that appear in many photographs, to the depictions of cuts and bruises that show up on the otherwise smooth white skin of the children). The mixing of codes, registers, and modes of discourse causes generic confusion for the viewer. Many

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51 Rineke Dijkstra’s portraits of adolescents draw on related themes.
52 The resulting photograph is Mann’s “Damaged Child, 1984.” Parsons discusses the photograph briefly in her essay and Mann explains the story herself in the documentary *Blood Ties: The Life and Work of Sally Mann.*
viewers are unsettled and unsure of how to interpret a mother’s ambiguous depictions of her own children, for they are unconventional family photographs. As Janet Malcolm explains, these “are not your usual pictures of the children to send to the grandparents; they are pictures to send to the Museum of Modern Art” (7). The photographer is a professional rather than an amateur, and instead of letting private moments of nudity and ambiguity pass unacknowledged, she restages or highlights them, photographs them, and shares the display of vulnerable bodies with viewers outside the immediate family. Sarah Parsons argues “the anxieties about Immediate Family are anxieties about the way photography often refuses, or perhaps confuses, the division between public and private,” both in their choice of subjects and spaces depicted and by the physical spaces and ideological contexts in which the photographs circulate (124). For Parsons, Mann’s “photographs and their circulation are heretical to the most sacred fantasies about innocent, happy childhoods, singularly protective mothers, and the privacy of the middle class nuclear family”; these fantasies are “usually represented by the family album” (124). Mann’s work pushes the subject/photographer intimacy discussion to perhaps its furthest logical extent.

*New Mothers* is included in *Immediate Family* (Figure 2.1). The photograph features two young girls – Mann’s daughters, Jessie and Virginia. Rather than placing this photograph on a single page, it is privileged within the *Immediate Family* photobook, printed as a two-page spread where the line of the binding literally separates the girls from the stroller, itself angling away from the camera (as is the toy child sitting in it, its face turned away from the camera’s gaze). Both of the girls’ bodies are angled, facing the camera but with one foot moving inward and away from the lens. The younger, Virginia, holds a Cabbage Patch doll whose small hand mimics the small hand clutching it. Virginia’s other hand rests coolly on her hip. Because of her sunglasses, it is hard to tell whether she is looking down or toward the camera; the heart-shaped glasses both enable her to appear more serious by hiding her eyes, and highlight the childishness of the masquerade.
In this photograph—in its staging and horizontality, perhaps more tableau than portrait—the girls’ props, poses, and costumes allow them to try on different roles. Here, they are both playing with their mother and playing the role of the mother. In *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch characterizes Mann’s (and arguably any mother’s) self-reflection in the image of her children as a kind of self-portraiture. “Mothers are always exposed by and through their children,” (165) Hirsch adds. Indeed, though she is not pictured in these portraits with her children, the familial resemblance between Mann and her children is striking. *New Mothers* self-consciously toys with Mann’s role as mother and the criticism she has received for photographing her children. Though Mann’s children are often depicted naked, here...
Mann’s daughters—defiant and alarmingly young ‘new’ mothers with attitudes, sunglasses, and a candy cigarette—are fortified by ready poses, dresses, and props. Their brazen, one-handed depiction of motherhood mirrors Mann’s own public image back through her camera, reflecting it out to the viewer. In a *New York Times* profile of Mann, Richard Woodward articulates part of the inherent problem with a photograph such as *New Mothers*:

By posing Jessie with a candy cigarette and Virginia in Lolita glasses . . . Mann gives them props whose dark associations they can't begin to understand. Rather than preserving their innocence, the photographs seem to accelerate their maturity by relying on the knowingness of the viewer. (Woodward 36)

In this sense, the viewer completes the photograph. As David Levi Strauss proposes in “Eros, Psyche, and the Mendacity of Photography,” Mann knew (and, more contentiously, he also suggests “her children knew”) that “they were conspiring to test these boundaries, [taboos about child nudity] and that it was important enough to take the risks.” In that way, the *Immediate Family* images are not just records but enactments of the social dynamics of ‘growing up,’ of becoming social” (Levi Strauss 180). By this logic, Mann is the one pushing their development forward.

The subjects’ interaction—the aim of Jessie’s steely gaze, for instance—is for the “camera” and the photographer. Hirsch notes this confusion of familial and public roles is part of what makes Mann’s photography contentious; her work offers an unapologetic intersection of maternal and photographic gazes (as well as the unblinking gazes of the children themselves). “For all it suggests about childhood,” Parsons notes, “*Immediate Family* can also be read as an ambivalent meditation on motherhood” (129). Rather than inhabiting the role of either protective mother or opportunistic photographer, Mann’s photography demonstrates her insistence on blurring boundaries between the two. She takes photographs of her children, which feature nudity and are generally made in and

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53 According to Sarah Parsons, even before Mann’s *At Twelve* and *Immediate Family* projects gained widespread notoriety, “several photographs from ‘Family Pictures: A Work in Progress’ were included in an exhibition called ‘Taboo’ at the Greg Kucera Gallery in Seattle” (126).
around their private home, then sells, publishes, and exhibits them. She makes them, and her self, public.

In changing the context of family photographs, Mann’s work circulates within debates surrounding consent. Although they trust and participate with their mother, Mann’s children, especially when photographed at these young ages, have no control over the ways in which their photographic representations circulate or are interpreted. In Malcolm’s words, “Mann offers an illustration of the medium’s innate exploitativeness that is like an impatient manifesto” (7-8). Indeed, as Woodward cautions, Mann’s photographs can be misleading. If Mann was initially innocent to the complex layers of response to the photographs of her children, she was soon made aware, and she continued to shoot the series over a span of seven years. Mann later acknowledged the need to consciously negotiate making photographs that balanced both the darkness and the whimsy of childhood. Many of Mann’s images of innocent scrapes and cuts—by-products of days spent playing out in the woods—frequently take on suggestions of abuse or sinister violence when decontextualized, stilled, and framed in black and white. By showing the children often nude and playing out of doors, Woodward argues, the photographs make the children seem poor, though in reality they are not. Mann’s photographs (intentionally or not) at once romanticize rural poverty and make use of the codes and aesthetics that mark it (nudity, dirt, cuts and scrapes, a suggestion of isolation, knowingness, feralness, and a seeming lack of supervision) in order to create tension within the work.

Mann’s family participates in making the photographs, though they have little control over the conditions and poses of the work (interviews with Mann’s children often attest to their simultaneous sense of total agency and their frustration with their mother’s tendency to make them freeze in mid-play, or mid-movement, in order to capture their initially spontaneous action in a photograph). They are accustomed to being photographed day and night; this process is part of their family life (despite, or along with the dark cloth cover for the photographer’s head, and the cumbersome format of Mann’s camera). As Mann asserts, the children have been taking part in these portraits since
infancy. The instances where their faces seem strained, intense, and piercing beyond their years are disavowed by both Mann and her children themselves as incidental, and perfectly real—it can be painful or annoying to hold a certain pose for as long as required, for instance—but the children follow their parents in shrugging off the evidence of tension and frustration, dismissing it as a necessary part of the process. The children give thoughtful and articulate interviews that make it easy to suspend disbelief and assume they are, in fact, as worldly and mature as their expressions and poses make them seem.

2.5. Writing With His Camera

Jane Gallop is a well-known Lacanian feminist, a Distinguished Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and the author of Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment, an account based on her experience of being investigated for allegations of sexually harassing two of her female students. Throughout her work, Gallop feels a personal and professional imperative (indeed, the two are inseparable for her) to write her body into her work, making her own biases, desires, and preoccupations evident to her audience. In Living With His Camera, Gallop reflects on the role that photography plays in family life, writing from the point of view of the subject rather than the photographer. Gallop pivots her readings of influential texts on photography around sets of intimate black and white photographs made of her family by her photographer-partner, Dick Blau. The text represents what she characterizes as collaboration between the couple, where Gallop’s writing is both catalyzed and illustrated by Blau’s photographs of her and their children. According to Gallop, “Living with Dick means living with his camera” (1). She explains: “Domestic life is about dailiness . . . but it’s also about the body, intimacy, and nakedness. Living with a camera means that both the domestic and the intimate are available to the camera’s gaze” (Living With 3). Interspersed with what she calls the “cozy nouns” of home life are, therefore, “another set of nouns, a hard,

54 Despite the obvious complications in terms of power dynamics, age, and familial roles, Woodward claims the Mann children are argumentative and participatory agents in the making of photographs, and in family decisions regarding the selection of work. When asked what kind of portrait their mother should have accompanying her New York Times article, they yelled “Shoot her naked, shoot her naked.” And Mann obliged (34).
technical lexicon: lens, aperture, focus, Leica. Technology in the bedroom, technology at the breakfast table” (*Living With 8-9*).

What is perhaps most important about Gallop’s study—and most useful for my present discussion of intimacy—is the critical voice she offers on the part of the photographed subject. Like Mann’s children, Gallop considers her role as subject to be one of collaboration with the photographer. Taking on the perspective of the mother-as-subject, or mother-as-subject-becoming-object, however haltingly, Gallop places herself in dialogue with the photographs made of her. She is concerned with the ways in which photographs, accurate as they may be, also bracket the truth. They only tell part of the story (it is possible to see this claim as another version of Arbus’s “gap between intention and effect” [1-2] or Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick’s notion of threshold). Writing on the heels of her sexual harassment case, with photographs from that period of her life actually discussed and included within *Living With His Camera*, Gallop’s analysis is persistently preoccupied with misunderstandings, misreadings, and with her own need to tell her side of the story. Here, instead of recounting her participation in the sequence of events that lead to, and precipitate from, a sexual harassment case, Gallop employs *Living With His Camera* as a means to foreground her complicity in the making of Blau’s photographs.

For her, the act of ‘posing’ for a photograph can be as simple as not changing what she was doing before Blau pointed the camera at her. Describing a photograph Blau made of her while they were engaged in an argument, for instance, Gallop explains: “[W]hile I could easily have disrupted the photo, I posed for it” (*Living With 60*). She clarifies: “By ‘posed,’ I don’t mean this wasn’t how I was already looking at him, but I held my gaze as he picked up the camera, held it for the camera. Even while fighting, we were collaborating in the making of this picture, in the making of an image of our fight . . . this picture of my unhappiness” (*Living With 60*). By Gallop’s account, within this shared understanding, her inaction signals consent. Blau reads Gallop’s stillness (correctly, she claims) as tacit agreement. She describes the photograph as something they make together. Gallop and Blau disagree about the outcome, or meaning, of their quarrel, but even in the midst of that conflict they hold a common belief that each of their perspectives (her pained expression and his active framing of it) is worth recording. Like the driving force behind *Feminist Accused*, the impetus of Gallop’s *Living With His
Camera can be interpreted as an argument for the right of consenting adults to make their own decisions. As she explains in Feminist Accused, there are two camps of feminist educators: those who want to protect women, and those who want women to have the opportunity to learn, discuss, and share openly, regardless of what is contentious or controversial. Gallop’s preference is for the latter. Gallop’s ethos relies on the belief that female agency—and sexuality—must be upheld above the worry of over-sharing or offending. Without explicitly articulating this formula within Living With His Camera, she nonetheless applies it philosophically to her study of photographic collaboration. Here, as in her other work, Gallop offers her personal model as the rule. Gallop’s reading of Blau’s photographs is therefore both personal and political. Intent on demonstrating her own agency (and by extension the agency of women in general), Gallop claims she addresses her pose to Blau’s camera, rather than to the man himself. The camera is a tool, or presence, that mediates their conflicting perspectives, and serves—later, once the photograph has been developed and printed, or once they have had some time and distance to consider and discuss it—as a conduit for assessing each other’s point of view. The antagonism of intimacy and distance is also important for developing, practicing, and reinforcing shared values.

In writing and reading the photographs as both a subjective participant and as a critic, Gallop articulates the ways in which living with Blau means a decades-long cohabitation that includes Gallop, Blau, his camera, and their children (in this way, echoing interviews with Sally Mann’s family, and also giving some hint of perspective into Nan Goldin’s photographic subjects). In the same way, she suggests, living with Gallop means living with her writing and criticism. His point of view is articulated through her voice, and her feelings are recorded and investigated in his photography. Whereas Goldin disavows the camera’s mediating presence (as I will discuss), Gallop calls attention to it. For Gallop and Blau, photographic practice always runs the risk of becoming the kind of predatory practice Susan Sontag describes in On Photography. Nevertheless, Gallop suggests her personal and critical collaboration in the extended life of the photographs enables a space for engaged discussion on personal and professional, as well as visual and discursive levels. This is the same kind of space of open discourse and equal opportunity Gallop argues for within the university. Rather
than an aid that comes to usurp, Gallop suggests, the camera (like pedagogy) can mediate.

In addition to elucidating the role of wife-as-subject, Gallop suggests what it might mean to be photographed as a mother, particularly in terms of the mother-as-archetype versus woman-as-individual. Gallop discusses one specific photograph Blau made of her (Figure 2.2). This photograph shows the author with her young son Max. Both Gallop and her son are naked, and they are lying facing each other on their living room couch. Gallop is uneasy with the photograph’s potentially shifting context; Blau is planning to show the photograph in a public gallery where her parents might see it, and she thinks they will be ashamed at her exposure. “The family photo,” she says, “is intended to induce pride by showing a private life for public admiration, but the family photo can also produce shame by exhibiting privates that shouldn’t be seen in public” (Gallop, Living With 34). The private nature of their nudity is at issue with the photograph in question, as is the public display of their bodies in relation to each other. Further, “to

Figure 2.2. Dick Blau. Untitled. From Living With His Camera (32).
Note: © Dick Blau. Courtesy of Dick Blau.
the generic problem of seeing the Mother naked,” Gallop says, “this photograph adds the
shame of [her own] individual body, its particular weight” (Living With 36), specifically
when placed in direct contrast of the lightness of her slender son.

Beyond the more predictable Oedipal connotations of the photograph—mother
and son together—Gallop eventually attributes her sense of shame to the appearance of
her own reclined body. Any concern regarding the public representation of her child’s
naked (although not fully exposed) body is overshadowed by Gallop’s self-
consciousness about her own. She dislikes how heavy she looks in the photograph.
Taking no pride in her large belly, she explains she is not pregnant at that moment. But
by nevertheless “[i]nterpreting the body’s excesses as generically maternal,” Gallop is
able to “[t]emper the shame [she feels] about the specificity of that body as [her] own”
(Living With 36). In fact, she claims, “[r]educing my body to that of the Mother makes it
easier for me to bear its heaviness” (Living With 36). Without this abstract identification
with maternity, Gallop feels she “suffer[s] from the comparison” (Living With 37) with her
beautiful young son. She shrinks from the dissimilarities between her full, rounded flesh
and the child’s smooth, taut figure. Gallop prefers photographs that stress the visual
similarities between herself and her children—visual markers of their personal and
biological intimacy—rather than those that call attention to their differences.55

55 Like Gallop, German photographer Thomas Struth is interested in the intimacy of familial
resemblance. Struth also considers the camera a tool for mediation and analysis. In “Family
Life,” Struth recounts his experience working with friend and psychoanalyst Ingo Hartman.
Hartman would encourage patients to bring photographs as illustrations of family life into their
sessions with them, as tools for analysis. Struth joined Hartman in compiling and analysing
Hartman’s collection of family photographs, dividing them into motifs and exhibiting them as
“Family Life.” In the process of studying these images of family life, Struth says, “we uncovered
an immense compendium of different intentions and behavioural patterns, and its truth content
both amazed me and also told me a lot about photography’s potential and limits” (19). For
Struth, the photograph is something that can be excavated. Goldin, as we will see, makes
photos to remind herself of the dynamics of her relationships with others. Struth—in a
sentiment that echoes Gallop—makes photographs to see and learn within the fleeting
moment, what happens between subjects.
2.6. Birthing Barthes

Gallop's reading shows a vested interest, as she is both critic and subject. The personal relationship of the viewer to the portrait is, nevertheless, tightly intertwined with the political and generic history of portraiture. Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* is perhaps the most famous, and most heavily referenced, example of a personal engagement with photography. *Camera Lucida* opens with Daniel Boudinet's *Polaroïd*—an image of a pillow and a drawn blue-green coloured curtain. This first image in the book is underlined by both its privileged position and the fact that it is the only colour reproduction included in the text. The only photograph that benefits from more strategic placement is the infamous Winter Garden Photograph, the photograph of Barthes' mother that so tenderly captures her essence, for him, that he refuses to reprint it in the book (if, in fact, it actually exists). While the absent Winter Garden Photograph is discussed at length, *Polaroïd* is featured but never mentioned. The natures of both images—photographs that withhold or are withheld—suggest a measure of control essential to Barthes's text. Read in this light, Goldin and Barthes can both be seen to control what they show and say in an effort to protect their selected photographs from the narratives of others. Unlike Goldin, however, Barthes realizes the limits of what another (what a disinterested viewer) can offer to an intimate interaction with the image of a loved one. Rather than offer the show of precious skin, he screens the interior with a curtain, a piece of drapery that at once obscures and suggests both the surface of the photographic film and the smooth folds and curves of flesh. As Beryl Schlossman suggests, this “voluptuous textured curtain scene” (what could perhaps be characterized as “haptic,” following Laura Marks), coloured “blue-green, like this mother’s eyes” covers, or hides the maternal body (149). “Intimate and yet impersonal, the image of curtains, light, and large cushions on a bed is empty of movement and of human subjects . . . The darkness of the image maps out the space of an intimacy with no story; its subjects are absent” (Schlossman 149).

Though it is his own mother’s likeness that seems to concern him most, Barthes also explores his own distaste for being photographed. Within her exploration of intimate family photographs, Gallop speaks to Barthes's discomfort as a photographic subject; she also explores the potential significance of metaphors for (and references to)
maternity that appear throughout his now canonical photographic text, *Camera Lucida*. *Camera Lucida* itself takes the form of an intimate reflection made public (the semi-private made public). Because *Camera Lucida* is by now ubiquitous to photographic theory (Barthes’s theory of the “studium” and the “punctum” has become shorthand in any discussion of photography), Barthes’s treatment of maternal reproduction also deserves particular attention.

At the center of Barthes’s reflections on photography is the author’s mourning for his mother. At multiple points throughout the text, he makes claims and connections that liken photography to maternity. As Gallop explains, although *Camera Lucida* does not make an explicit connection between Barthes’s own sense as a subject becoming an object in the process of being photographed, this transition from subject to object can be interpreted as a parallel for the mother in the process of giving birth. According to Gallop, “something has been lost in the published English translation” which reads:

‘An image—my image—will be generated: will I be born from an antipathetic individual or a “good sort?”’ . . . Finding a birth image in Barthes’s description of having his picture taken, the translator makes Barthes himself the baby, whereas Barthes in fact imagines himself as giving birth. The French here is idiomatic and difficult to translate . . . Whatever the best English equivalent, it is clear that by using a verb that means giving birth (*accoucher*) Barthes places his first-person pronoun in the position of the birthing body. (*Living With* 21-22)

By Gallop’s translation, what Barthes actually says is: “An image – my image – is going to be born: will I give birth to an antipathetic individual or to a ‘good guy’?” (*Living With* 21). In other words, Barthes “imagines himself in the position of the mother” (22). Despite the suggestive nature of Barthes’s wording—he claims to be ‘giving birth’ —he phrases the statement in such a way as to make “the maternal body a passive object. The unnamed obstetrical agent is the operator who brings forth an image from Barthes’s passive body” (*Living With* 22). “Perhaps,” Gallop offers, “it is the sense of himself in the position of the mother, the passive mother, that makes Barthes abandon the perspective of the photographed subject. And perhaps it is the sense of the position’s maternity that makes him pass it on to his mother as the book progresses” (*Living With* 22).
As a point of contrast, consider Mann’s active maternal body. Hers is one that both ‘gives birth’ and brings forth the image from her obedient offspring. The model of maternity Barthes celebrates (for his mother, not for himself) is one of passivity, whereas Mann’s model is problematic, complex, and contradictory. Her maternal practice is ambivalent and nuanced. Barthes’s mother never commented, as he says. And unlike Barthes, his mother—he says—“lent’ herself to the photograph” and “did not struggle with her image” as he does with his (Barthes, Camera Lucida 67). Barthes is a resistant subject, whereas his mother, the ideal photographic subject, remains silent and presents herself to be seen (Gallop, Living With 26). Gallop does not control the image in the same way Mann does; her mode of ‘action’ within the photographic frame is one of implied consent. Though she ‘lends’ herself to Blau’s camera, she does struggle with her own image. She disavows her own “heaviness” by casting her body as that of the mother, and in doing so fetishizes the maternal. If, as Barthes suggests, the ideal photographic subject is one who passively ‘lends’ themselves to be seen, what can we make of a photographic subject who acts? What happens when the subject and the photographer are one and the same?

2.7. Goldin’s persona

Nan after being battered, 1984 (Figure 2.3) is from Goldin’s The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, a slide show made over the course of several years (from approximately 1977 to 1986—though the now-formalized work holds the potential to be updated for each subsequent exhibition, even up to the present day—and published as a book in 1986). As this photograph suggests, Goldin was severely beaten by her lover, Brian, who is also frequently pictured in The Ballad. In this work and elsewhere, Goldin claims conventions of normative heterosexuality and popular notions of romance cultivate unreasonable expectations about how intimate, romantic relationships should look and feel. The subsequent inability to accept the ambivalence—the coexistence of contradictory impulses, such as varying degrees of hostility and love—at the heart of romantic relationships leads to frustration and the eruption of violence (Ballad 7). In this context, Nan after being battered, 1984 articulates the volatility of intimate relationships,
making the photograph a productive symbol for both Goldin’s photographic practice and the discussion of intimacy more generally.

Figure 2.3. Nan Goldin. *Nan after being battered, 1984*
Note: © Nan Goldin. From *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (83).

Her self-portrait foregrounds the photographer’s conscious offering of self-as-subject. The care Goldin gives to her appearance—her curls are tamed, and she wears jewellery and makeup—undercuts the convention of offering the ‘best image’ of oneself to a portrait encounter, as this portrait troubles the effects of that ritual with blood and bruising. The red of her lipstick establishes a theme that accentuates her eye, a rhyming of reds that suggests the thin line between beauty ideals and damaged states. It also calls attention to the importance of makeup and masquerade in her work. The camera flash shines off of raw, bruised skin; its light seems aggressively bright when pointed onto the broken vessels of Goldin’s damaged eye. The photograph is striking for not only its subject matter, but also its visceral effect. The section of the book titled “Sweet Blood Call,” from which this portrait is drawn, thematizes violence toward women. The 1964 Louisiana Red song for which this section is named features an abusive and potentially
murderous (and presumably) male voice, putting a particularly violent spin on the notion of phallus as gun or gun as phallus, and presenting at least one kind of sexual relationship in terms of violence. This sub-series features only women; men are only represented by the marks they leave on female bodies.

Originally, *The Ballad* existed only in the form of an ever-changing and ephemeral slide show. *The Ballad* was defined by sociality and the immediacy of improvised, personal narration and accompanying music. But *The Ballad*'s somewhat mythologized origins (a party among friends) are far behind it, and have been for the greater part of the piece’s over thirty-year life. To take in Goldin’s *Ballad* slide show now—to hear the shift and click of the projector, and notice the silhouettes of strangers shuffling about from the corner of the eye—means that, instead of an informal gathering in a local haunt with Goldin’s friends and main players (what would have to be equivalent to a trip back in time, when the Bowery was “the Bowery”), would-be viewers are at the mercy of the exhibitions schedules of museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art. Goldin’s slide show is more nostalgic than later, more obviously digitized, slide shows such as the one she employs in her *Scopophilia* exhibition (Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, 2012). For *The Ballad*, the viewing experience is contained within a walled-off section of the exhibition area. Strangers sit on folding chairs, together, in the dark, as museum security staff stand in for the bar bouncers and friendly hosts of the piece’s earliest iterations. Instead of a DJ, there is a set soundtrack, and in place of playful banter and artist narration, the audience sits in politely enforced silence. There is no longer any of the pausing, stopping, or returning to give a second look to certain slides or stories that characterized the initial showings of *The Ballad*. In its most recent exhibition at the Whitney Museum (in the 2013 *I, You, We* exhibition), the show started at quarter after, every hour, and ran its scheduled forty-five minutes. Goldin’s interest in the darkened room of the slide show ties the medium to the darkened theatres of film (Westfall 31). It asks the viewers to immerse themselves within the environment of the work and to engage themselves with the story she is sharing.

56 The Whitney Museum of American Art was the first museum to purchase a copy of the work, after showing it in their 1985 Biennial.
Working in what Abigail Solomon-Godeau terms the “confessional mode” (“Inside/Out” 53), Goldin relies on the ethos of the act of showing, as insider, confessor, participant, and subject. Her use of the hand-held Leica—the camera of Henri Cartier-Bresson’s “decisive moment,” of documentary, and of street photography—situates Goldin within a photographic history that emphasizes speed, dexterity, and timing. It implicates the photographer’s body in the process. Goldin aims her Leica at still, moving, and strewn bodies, as well as the detritus of cluttered rooms and relationships. Like Blau, Goldin’s Leica comes to the table, or steps into the shower with her subjects. The Ballad’s relational model of portraiture speaks to the conditions and relations of social production and re-production, both in friendships and in a society that produces the power structures between men and women. The Ballad is an accumulation of multiple people and images that shifts over time. One exhibition, The Family of Nan, 1990-1992, makes explicit allusion to the model of photographic humanism famously championed by Edward Steichen in his 1955 Museum of Modern Art exhibition The Family of Man. Malcolm’s similarly titled article “The Family of Mann” suggests potential commonalities between Mann and Goldin. These puns are telling; they call attention to the attempt at humanism and universality assumed within Steichen’s landmark exhibition. They situate Mann and Goldin within a particular photographic and art historical legacy. The puns also imply, however, that Nan herself is—like Mann—a maternal figure. She is the one who controls the representations of the family. Heredity, like the ballad form itself, is repetition with a difference. With both Mann and Goldin, however, the possession has been shifted from the ‘man’ to the matriarch.

This particular self-portrait has carried at least two titles: Nan after being battered, 1984 and Nan one month after being battered, 1984. Both titles point to public time (the year 1984) highlighting the evidential quality of the photograph. With this offering of evidence, however, is the signification of the time elapsed. The “one month” situates the event in personal and public time, and it also speaks to off-scene time put in

57 Printed as part of the larger series in the book form of The Ballad of Sexual Dependency, this photograph is listed as Nan after being battered, 1984 (83). As a stand-alone cibachrome print within the Tate Museum collection (reference no. P78045) or as an individual silver dye bleach print in the Museum of Modern Art collection (reference no. 48.2006), the photograph is listed with the titles Nan one month after being battered, 1984 and Nan One Month After Being Battered, 1984, respectively.
for Goldin’s battered face to heal. If this is one month after, it is difficult to imagine how the day of, or one day after, might have appeared if photographed. The photograph’s built-in delay suggests the necessity of control and construction in Goldin’s narrative. It complicates the suggestion of immediacy in the self-portrait, allowing Goldin a measure of self-protection (a month to heal) built into her direct, frontal photograph. The inclusion of “one month after” therefore also shows the specificity of this moment in Goldin’s personal experience of time. And so Goldin links the blurring of the lines between public and private time with the intertwining of public and private narratives, engaging in a relationship where photographic practice extends across multiple moments of viewing.  

Though much of its interactivity is lost when adapted to book format, Goldin’s evolving slide show and the multiple re-printings of _The Ballad_ photographs also indicate her desire to keep the project fluid and maintain some semblance of collaboration between herself and her subjects (the friends who would attend and interact with her at the early slide shows in bars and at private homes). Nevertheless, the work gestures toward a desire to remain unfixed (what Michel Foucault calls “inventiveness”) that is directly opposed to the prohibitions of predetermined categories (Foucault, “Friendship” 139). Of this self-portrait, Goldin says: “I photographed myself so I would never go back to that man” (Schaefer 52). Her photography is invested with a talismanic force; her present and future self are included as part of its audience.

This portrait positions _Nan_ as a persona for Goldin, and by extension, her community as a whole. In Roland Barthes’ notion of the “reality effect,” the “camera-made” image “effaces the marks of its making (and maker) at the click of a shutter,” making the photograph appear “as though it had created itself” (“Who’s Speaking” 180). Though we know there had to be a photographer, Abigail Solomon-Godeau explains, this fact “serves as a further guarantee of the image’s truth . . . the photographer is manifestly absent from the field of the image. Instead, we are there, we are seeing what the photographer saw at the moment of exposure” (Solomon-Godeau, “Who’s Speaking” 180). But here the photographer is effaced in another sense. Though an uninitiated

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John Tagg suggests Goldin’s _Nan after being battered, 1984_ is a citation of two earlier portraits: the promotional image for the film _Love Before Breakfast_, featuring a full-faced, black-eyed Carole Lombard, and Walker Evans’s photograph “Houses and Billboards in Atlanta, 1936” (the Evans photograph quotes the film’s promotional billboard within the image).
viewer might not recognize this as a self-portrait, Goldin’s frontal stare still signals her awareness and complicity as a subject. As the shutter clicks, she is looking into the camera (not through it) making the photograph seem immediate, as if she were addressing the viewer directly. Rosalind Krauss notes the “paradox” of “supplementary devices”—“the very thing that extends, displaces as well” (“Photographic Conditions of Surrealism” 33). In this self-portrait the camera is hinged; Goldin regards it as both part of, and other than, herself. “It’s as if my hand were a camera,” she says (Ballad 6), suggesting a chain of connections that includes her intimacy with her camera, her intimacy with her subjects, and the viewer’s subsequent intimacy with the photograph. But as Kotz explains, Goldin’s “persistent naturalization” of the photographic activity “further repress[es] the mediation of the technological apparatus, [and] the camera is refigured as bodily extension, of human sight, of touch” (207). Despite Goldin’s personal relationship with her subjects, Solomon-Godeau argues, “the very presence of a camera . . . instates a third term, even as [she] wishes to disavow it” (“Inside/Out” 55). All the same, Goldin’s camera is conspicuously absent from self-portraits in The Ballad, even those made in mirrors.

In Self-portrait in blue bathroom, London 1980 (Figure 2.4), Goldin presents herself as a picture mounted, matted, and framed on the wall. The photograph alludes to portrait history, self-reflection, and her role as photographer, while still leaving the machine out of the frame. The camera is implicit but often invisible, like the contract between Goldin and her subjects. Jonathan Weinberg claims that Goldin censors the camera (from her self-portraits); she downplays its mediation as a signal of her wish to become one with it. That desire is also demonstrated by the strangeness of the fact that such an essential and ubiquitous part of her ‘person’ would be so frequently absent from her self-portraits.59

59 Both the narrative quality and the presence of the storyteller in the work are essential themes in Goldin criticism. Goldin shows the power of using costume and makeup within her images as means to depict and complicate representations of gender and identity (her subjects are shown in mid-dress, makeup smudged, clothes torn and strewn), so why not allow the camera this same functionality?
Goldin’s self-censorship can be articulated using psychoanalytical theories of negation. Slavoj Žižek outlines Freud’s four main forms of negation:

In *Verwerfung* [foreclosure/rejection], the content is thrown out of the symbolic de-symbolized, so that it can only return in the Real (in the guise of hallucinations). In *Verdrängung* [repression], the content remains within the symbolic but is inaccessible to consciousness, relegated to the Other Scene, returning in the guise of symptoms. In *Verneinung* [denial] the content is admitted into consciousness, but marked by a denial. In *Verleugnung* [disavowal] it is admitted in a positive form, but . . . its symbolic impact is suspended, it is not really integrated into the subject’s symbolic universe. ([Less Than Nothing](less_than_nothing) 859)

Goldin’s interviews demonstrate a tendency to skirt from “Verneinung” to “Verleugnung” in her discourse. She shifts from outright denial (that her work could be considered voyeuristic, for instance) to disavowal (naming a 2012 New York exhibition of her work *Scopophilia*). Similarly, Goldin’s invisible camera is necessarily present, and not strictly hidden, yet still carefully shifted from the visual field. (Mann’s *The New Mothers* makes a
similar move when it stares directly into the issue of the maternal gaze, yet does so while representing the children as Cabbage Patch dolls, playing on their status as toys or props). Goldin is aware of the complications inherent to her work, but she must navigate around its problems in order to keep making, and showing, her photographs.

Though the camera is left out of most of her photographs, other references are retained. Goldin’s photographs feature bedrooms, hospital beds, and living room settings where her own prints are taped to or framed on the walls. Within these images, private areas are often carved out and nested into otherwise public spaces such as hospital or hotel rooms. Photographs tacked onto walls, taped to furniture, or strewn on the floor transform the spaces. Like makeup or clothing, the photographs dress up the spaces and layer public areas with private images. *The Ballad* also incorporates popular culture, making use of familiar songs for slide show soundtracks as well as the book’s section titles. Structurally, the book (in particular) places photographs of men and women in stereotypical opposition to each other in order to highlight their predetermined roles in “romantic” relationships. Goldin organizes *The Ballad* into sub-sections ultimately designed to demonstrate the necessity of what she calls a “third gender” – an alternative position outside gender binaries that she suggests “wins the game by refusing to play it.” And “to the extent that such work is ‘about’ sexual lives or sexual activities,” Solomon-Godeau explains, it also “intersects with the sexuality of the viewer” (“Inside/Out” 58) who brings their own desires, preferences, and prejudices into the viewing experience. Goldin refers to her photographic practice as a kind of “safe sex,” a comparison that calls to mind the added significance blood takes on after AIDS and implicates the viewer in the sexual / photographic act, as well as its social and political effects. Many critics (eagerly) respond to what they see as Goldin’s invitation to bring

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60 “But the idea of a program of proposals is dangerous. As soon as a program is presented, it becomes a law, and there is a prohibition against inventing. There ought to be an inventiveness special to a situation like ours and to these feelings, this need that Americans call ‘coming out,’ that is, showing oneself. The program must be wide open. We have to dig deeply to show how things have been historically contingent, for such and such reason intelligible but not necessary” (Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” 139).
their own stories and desires into conversation with hers.\textsuperscript{61} Nevertheless, Goldin often invites and repels her critics, audiences, and viewers. Because of the intimacy involved in the work, and in the attentive critic's relationship to it, the ambivalence of intimate relationships extends to viewers and critics as well.

Viewers bring desires to the work through more than their narratives. Considering theories of embodied spectatorship, in *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Laura Marks suggests that “[i]f one understands film viewing as an exchange between two bodies—that of the viewer and that of the film—then the characterization of film viewer as passive, vicarious, or projective must be replaced with a model of a viewer who participates in the production of the cinematic experience” (149-50). In theories such as this, the spectator-film relationship is mimetic.\textsuperscript{62} Marks's study of film centers on what she calls a process of “haptic visuality” where the gaze roams or “grazes” along the surface of the image or object. The emphasis here is on discerning texture, as opposed to depth or form. Perhaps most importantly, haptic visuality involves the body. As Marks says, “[t]ouch is a sense located on the surface of the body: thinking of cinema as haptic is only a step toward considering the ways in which cinema appeals to the body as a whole” (162). While both haptic and optical visuality are necessary, Marks claims, “[t]he haptic image forces the viewer to contemplate the image itself instead of being pulled into narrative” (163). Leaning on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Marks argues that “vision, by virtue of being a distance sense, allows us to ‘flatter ourselves that we constitute the world,’ whereas tactile experience ‘adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object. It is not I who touch, it is my body’” (Marks 148). Each viewing experience leaves its unique impression on the work of art, as well as on the viewer. In looking, the viewer does not simply experience film (or, bending the definition somewhat, photography) with our eyes. Our sense of vision is inextricably connected with memory,

\textsuperscript{61} Weinberg argues that Goldin’s diaristic, confessional approach inspires critics to respond with confessions of their own, whether about themselves, about her, or about themselves with her. One notable offender is Jean-Luc Hennig’s “An Evening With Nan Goldin,” which presents an unapologetically uncritical approach intended to capitalize on even the most fleeting connection with Goldin.

\textsuperscript{62} “[T]he meaning is not solely communicated through signs but experienced in the body” (Marks 149).
which the body then experiences through all the senses, not only vision. The idea that an embodied form of looking resists mastery is useful for considering the experience of sitting in the darkened rooms of Goldin’s slide shows. The notion of the embodied viewer is also important to consider with respect to the experience of interacting with Dijkstra’s New Mothers photographs.

2.8. New Mothers

Unlike Goldin, Dijkstra’s photography is not characterized as personal or “confessional.” Dijkstra’s carefully constructed, posed portraits feature strangers and acquaintances. Interviews and artist statements offer little to no detail about her—or her subjects’—inner lives. Her photography foregrounds the surfaces of skin and subtleties of posture and posing, and she leaves the intimacy of shared narratives to be swept to the edges of the frame. Yet, I follow Foucault in suggesting that “confession” is not always offered voluntarily; it can be “extracted from the body” (History of Sexuality 59). As Sven Lütticken notes, “[p]eople who are photographed these days do not have to physically suffer in the way they did in the mid-nineteenth century, when the body had to stay frozen in a rigid pose for a considerable time because of the long exposures” (“Framed and Frozen” 96). Dijkstra asks that her subjects “concentrate” for the photograph, recalling Walter Benjamin’s famous claim that “the procedure” of long-exposure photography “caused the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it” and “the subject . . . grew into the picture” (Benjamin, “Little History” 514). But the result, Lütticken explains, is that “photographs such as Rineke Dijkstra’s make the violent side of photographic portraiture explicit” (96) and “[i]t is no wonder” her subjects appear uncomfortable, he suggests; their only agency is self-presentation, yet they do not know “how to behave in their image-prison” (Lütticken, “Framed and Frozen” 96). Despite—or perhaps due to—the logic of her avowed desire to “awaken definite sympathies” for her subjects, Dijkstra’s photography extracts its confessions from bodies whose self-command has been severely compromised by exhaustion and discomfort. These otherwise fleeting, private states are made visible and public.
Dijkstra’s New Mothers portraits frame an entire body, drawing the focus from the subject’s individual interiority to their full physicality.\textsuperscript{63} Julie, Den Haag, Netherlands, February 29, 1994 shows the subject one hour after giving birth to her first child. The blank white walls and even lighting hint at Dijkstra’s training in fashion photography while also making the space appear institutional. Julie and her husband (who, unlike her baby, is not included in the frame) have admitted Dijkstra, a casual acquaintance, into their home. Rather than make use of the intimate nature of the space, Dijkstra has emptied it of all furniture and personal items.

Dijkstra’s work is frequently characterized in terms of empathy.\textsuperscript{64} The \textit{Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective} exhibition and catalogue features Dijkstra’s initial portrait test—a self-portrait as a precursor for her now-famous beach portraits. Dijkstra had her assistant photograph her right after swimming laps as part of her rehabilitation for a broken hip. The \textit{Retrospective} makes use of this portrait. Printed in a slightly different format than her other portraits, it is a pendant to the rest of the work in the exhibition. The inclusion of her own (much smaller) portrait in the Guggenheim retrospective allows the curators to narrate Dijkstra’s own physical exertion and self-experimentation, linking her with her subjects. This evidence of Dijkstra’s personal trial—having turned the camera on her own body while exhausted and in the process of healing—seems to function as the most pervasive ‘proof’ of her empathetic nature. The portrait suggests that Dijkstra, like Goldin, does not submit her subjects to a kind of picturing she is not willing to undergo herself.

Despite the museum’s framing of her work, Dijkstra complicates the claim to empathy when she describes photographing Julie. Dijkstra explains setting up her lights

\textsuperscript{63} The fourth New Mother is described as a “pendant” diptych. In the Guggenheim Museum’s \textit{Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective} exhibition, the \textit{Tia} portraits were displayed on a separate wall, in between the rest of the \textit{New Mothers} and Dijkstra’s \textit{Bullfighters}. \textit{Tia, Amsterdam, Netherlands, June 23, 1994} and \textit{Tia, Amsterdam, Netherlands, November 14, 1994} are large bust-length (rather than full-body) portraits of a new mother at two different periods after giving birth.

\textsuperscript{64} In September 2012, for instance, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum hosted a panel discussion entitled “Empathy, Affect, and the Photographic Image.” The panel featured presentations by Jennifer Blessing, Johanna Burton, Carol Mavor, Peggy Phelan, and George Baker. With the notable exception of Burton, the participants (and the museum) argued for the importance of empathy to Dijkstra’s photography.
as sounds of Julie’s home birth carried over from the other room. An hour later, Julie stood for her portrait. The fact that Julie is made to stand one hour after birth shows Dijkstra’s interest in aestheticizing the postpartum state, rather than its objective reality (I am assuming that under normal circumstances Julie would still be reclining). Of photographing Julie, Dijkstra has stated: “The atmosphere was very intimate. But once you start photographing with a flash, all that intimacy vanishes” (van Adrichem 49). By intimacy, Dijkstra seems to mean an emotional connection or shared experience, something that can live within the shadows of an interior domestic space. In changing the nature of the space – isolating the subject (asking her to stand, composed, one hour after labour), then pointing a camera, and shining a light – Dijkstra actively makes that shared experience disappear. Under her lights, details emerge.

Her choice of a 4x5 camera suggests her sympathy with older technology, coded in terms of stillness and concentration, as well as “objectivity,” rather than spontaneity or movement (making it easy to take her neutrality for granted). The large format and long exposures also draw connections to photographers such as August Sander. Like Sander’s portraits, the frontality of the work underlines the subjects’ awareness of the camera and shows their participation in making the photograph. Though representations of pregnancy have become increasingly common since the 1960s and 1970s, depictions of the pregnant body are particular within the genres of art and documentary photography. According to Sandra Matthews and Laura Wexler, though documentary photography often makes strategic use of representations of women who are economically disadvantaged, art photographs of pregnancy customarily feature middle-class women (27). As Matthews and Wexler argue, “[w]hen a pregnancy is understood to be taking place with a marriage and in an economically self-sufficient family, the pregnant woman is carefully depicted as protected, isolated, static and idealized” (27). Commonly pictured outside of specific social relations, these women represent a

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65 Both Michael Fried (in Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before) and Julian Stallabrass (“What's in a Face?”) consider Dijkstra’s use of long exposure photography and her rejection of shadow and gradation in relation to Walter Benjamin’s discussion of aura.

66 Because of the problem of voyeurism, however, it requires some manoeuvring to say Dijkstra is both “objective” and “empathetic” (see Claire Bishop, and Sandra Phillips’s Guggenheim Retrospective essay). The violence inherent in her claim to objectivity complicates claims for her empathy.
“general, idealized concept of pregnancy rather than an individual’s specific experience” (Matthews and Wexler 28). Pregnancy is therefore “celebrated as a private universe of personal fulfillment, premised on the luxury of withdrawal from everyday concerns” (Matthews and Wexler 28). The “protected private space” that visually surrounds the woman becomes a symbolically womb-like space.

Following this convention, Dijkstra’s New Mothers are isolated within privileged private spaces. As Matthews and Wexler’s analysis of pregnancy portraits suggests, the pregnant subject’s isolation works ideologically, as it suggests the ‘clean’ simplicity of the subject’s married, financially secure status as a middle-class mother. In this sense, both the woman’s separateness and the invisibility of her relationship to personal and social life are marks of luxury. Though (relatively) isolated within white spaces, Dijkstra’s mothers at once call attention to and undermine their middle-class status. Their standing bodies are not static. Rather, the temporality of the photographic moment is specific as the physicality of maternal labour is allowed within the frame – the presence of streaming blood and fresh scarring appears within the supposedly protected visual and symbolic space.

Consider, as a comparison, one of the few representations of pregnancy in Goldin’s *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (in its book form): *Ectopic Pregnancy Scar, New York City, 1980* (Figure 2.5) crops the body down to the bare genitalia and contextualizes it within the rumpled folds of used bedding. Goldin situates the cropped post-pregnant body in a location that suggests sex and the everyday rather than placing it within a sanitized space. What *Ectopic Pregnancy Scar* and the New Mothers have in common is their emphasis on the postpartum. Taking as their subject the de-romanticized aftermath of pregnancy (training the camera on the post-labour maternal

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67 The inclusion of both whole and small number of fragmented bodies, like this one in *The Ballad* – as violent and problematic as they might be individually – follows the logic of the composite portrait project Goldin aims to create. The cropping of images also speaks to the fact that the photographs are part of a series; the individual images are not necessarily invested with the responsibility of telling a story all on their own. The sub-sections, the evolving *Ballad* slideshows to the multi-section book, and the overall remixing and revision of Goldin’s photographs into other series (and other books with other titles), combined with her almost ever-present narrative voice (and its own practice of self-quoting) places each image within a system of overlapping narratives.
body and the visual surprises of blood and bandages rather than emphasizing the other product, the infant), these photographs are concerned with the effect that pregnancy and motherhood have on the female body.

Figure 2.5 not reproduced due to copyright issues.

Figure 2.5    Nan Goldin. *Ectopic Pregnancy Scar, New York City 1980*
Note:  © Nan Goldin. From The Ballad of Sexual Dependency (86).

For Goldin, this effect materializes as one of the many marks and scars imposed on women’s bodies as a result of their relationships with men. Dijkstra’s New Mothers make no such pointed claim. Like Gallop’s uncomfortably round (because no longer pregnant) belly, the New Mothers photographs live at the boundaries of the brief, specific, and conditional temporality in which female (maternal) excess is ‘allowed,’ even encouraged. In the context of postpartum photographs, the woman’s segregation from the father of the child also highlights the isolation of the woman within the experience of pregnancy and labour, rather than simply the remoteness of the middle-class mother from the rest of society. The temporality of pregnancy plays a number of parts within the New Mother series. According to Johanna Burton, Dijkstra’s New Mothers series is characterized by a “decelerating factor” – a slowing that creates or acts with exhaustion,
also subject to the language used to frame the photographs (n. pag). With the photograph of Julie made one hour after labour, the photograph of Tecla one day later, or Saskia one week after, the narrative becomes about the time elapsed as well as the moment of exposure itself. In this way, their discursive framing recalls Goldin’s Nan [one month] after being battered, 1984. It places the mothers in relation to each other as elements in a series, as well as connecting them within systems of production and reproduction, just as their placement in a cleared white room suggests the aesthetic inheritance of their socio-economic class.

Within the frames of the portraits, the colours and lines of the floor ground each subject within the space of the photograph, though the mothers’ feet just fail to line up with the patterns of flooring. The backgrounds are variant shades of white, like the skin of the mothers themselves, and the otherwise blank surfaces of the walls are interrupted by banal details such as light switches, heaters, and electrical sockets.68 These small aesthetic interruptions, or “flaws” draw attention to details in the landscape of the women’s bared skin.69 Elements such as Julie’s sanitary pad and her exposed veins, or the single stream of blood that runs down Tecla’s leg, might seem like over-determined markers of motherhood. But like the discursive framing and the narrative of time elapsed, the visibility of blood situates the subject within a post-partum moment (one day after, still bleeding). Julian Stallabrass argues Dijkstra’s work belongs within a tradition of recent large-scale portrait photography that places a premium on the amount of information it provides. These details add up, accumulating museum wall space and cultural and economic capital (Figure 2.6).

68 According to Stallabrass: “While in Dijkstra there is a surrender of composition, overt identification, and artistic expression, other compensations are on offer. No contemporary practice that I know of goes all the way toward ethnographic blankness and objectivity of presentation while presenting subjects that may be presumed to be of similar status to the assumed audience” (“What’s in a Face?” 82).

69 See Carol Armstrong’s discussion of “the flaw” in “Photography: Difference According to Diane Arbus.”
Interpreted in this way, the portrait’s white walls suggest a blank fashion portrait backdrop. They offer simulacra of both the artist’s studio wall and the white walls of the museum. Even inside their own homes, then, the mothers’ positioning visually anticipates their future as images mounted for display and exchange. But as willing participants, Dijkstra’s subjects are not “innocent of photography’s effects” (Stallabrass, “What’s in a Face” 85). In a statement that calls to mind the confident gaze of Virginia Mann, Stallabrass says “they have been saturated in them since birth” (“What’s in a Face” 85). He suggests Dijkstra’s ethnographic portraiture is embraced by the art world because it “depicts subjects who are not strongly differentiated from” or who are “of similar status to” (Stallabrass, “What’s in a Face” 72, 82) the audience (an assumption that calls attention to, yet never mentions, the questions of race and class in the work).
“As images,” Stallabrass claims, “we all participate, willingly or not, in the chain that ties people’s appearances to exchange value” (“What’s in a Face” 88).

2.9. The Skin and the Uniform

In this series, the naked, unromanticized postpartum body appears naturalized. The women are overwritten using the terms of biology and reproduction, and are offered as a series of quasi-ethnographic portraits, suggesting the tension between the individual and the type, the private and the public. And yet, the fact of their nudity (complete with bandages and scars) is constitutive of a kind of uniform. It becomes their battle dress, factual and depersonalized, pushing the viewer to compare the intimate details of their bodies in a fairly detached way. The New Mothers are typically compared with Dijkstra’s portraits of Matadors, but I offer her series of male Israeli Soldiers as a more productive counterpoint. Rather than reinforcing a model of weaponized masculinity, portraits such as Tamir, Goli Brigade, Elyakim, Israel, May 26, 1999 (Figure 2.7) call attention to the disjuncture between the soldier’s awkward stance and what is coded as ‘natural’ around him. Both the New Mothers and the male Israeli Soldiers frame the body within an enclosed space. They let the face and eyes, and the entire body—the pose, posture, and environment, however seemingly neutral—inform our reading of the subject. Both series are printed in cool, rather than warm or yellowish, tones. In the former, the coolness sets off the fragility of the woman’s skin and calls attention to the blue of her exposed veins. Like the post-partum Saskia, Tamir’s face is flushed, and there is a glint in his watery eyes.

70 The Guggenheim’s 2012 exhibition Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective exhibits the New Mothers and the Matadors on opposite walls, so the portraits are literally facing each other. In the Retrospective exhibition catalogue, the two series are also presented together.
Figure 2.7  Rineke Dijkstra. *Tamir, Golani Brigade, Elyakim, Israel, May 26, 1999*

Note:  *Israeli Soldiers* series. Chromogenic print. 140 x 112.5 cm (frame 179 x 150.5 cm). Editions of 10. © Rineke Dijkstra. Courtesy of Marian Goodman Gallery.
According to Peggy Phelan, Dijkstra is “a war photographer” ("Empathy and Returns" n. pag.) As such, the New Mothers allude to both the trial of labour and a battle for the future. Dijkstra’s full-length photographs of soldiers represent subjects with little agency, despite their weapons. Their bodies are almost indistinguishable within their military uniforms and their guns overwhelm them. In both of these series, the subject’s body is focal point and frame, creating the context for the baby, or gun, in their arms. Both represent models of (social and discursive) reproductive labour. They also offer an example of the visual coding of gendered bodies. According to the Guggenheim Museum, on the occasion of the recent Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective exhibition, the portraits of male Israeli soldiers are “produced life-size so that the viewer may observe and differentiate among them as closely as they would other people” (198). The New Mothers are framed in similar terms and, like the soldiers, they are exhibited as large-scale prints hung on the museum wall; as such they invite the viewer into an embodied engagement. Whereas the soldiers are fully dressed, however, the New Mothers are naked as they engage the (presumably dressed) museum audience members. Viewers are positioned nearly face to face with the mothers. This can also arguably have the effect of resisting the viewer’s possession, as these large photographs cannot be held in the hand, but must be encountered on the wall.

Dijkstra claims the ability—we might even say the right—to look closely at these bodies. Others accept it as a gift bestowed on them by the photographer and their subject. The Retrospective catalogue suggests Dijkstra is providing a service by offering rare access to view a post-partum body (106). It explains that “Dijkstra’s decision to make portraits of women after labo[u]r originated in a desire to photograph people who embodied a range of simultaneous emotions . . . printing her images at large scale,

71 Lincoln Clarkes likens himself to a war photographer when he describes photographing in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver: “It’s a war zone down there. It’s completely surreal. It’s like watching a movie, a movie with drama, action, romance, horror, sex, panoramic sound. It’s so colourful, it’s so vibrant that I can’t help but notice it” (Clarkes, Photographic Obsession).

72 As Craig Owens notes, the baby can also be considered a kind of phallus. Owens describes the frontispiece image of Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document, an artwork as “archaeology of everyday life” Kelly “clings to “in order to disavow separation from her child” (9). In this photograph, Owens remarks, “the child – upright in his mother’s lap, entirely contained within the silhouette of her body – . . . appears to serve as maternal phallus” (9). Dijkstra’s mothers also frame their babies and the women hold fast to their new infants.
Dijkstra and her subjects offer viewers a rare opportunity to examine details of the postchildbirth body that are rarely seen” (*Retrospective* 106). The museum credits Dijkstra with providing access to a traditionally private body; its rarity is stressed, as is the ability to not only view the postpartum body, but also to examine it in detail. In this context, the standardisation of Dijkstra’s portraits also recalls the conventions of documentary and archival imagery. For Claire Bishop, however, Dijkstra’s portraits “possess a naked immediacy which creates a new aesthetic from the conventionally ugly and ungainly, and which feels entirely contemporary” (88). Presumably, a large part of what makes these “ugly and ungainly” subjects feel so contemporary is the lack of privacy their surfaces now enjoy. Dijkstra says it is important for her “not to show any specific details of her [subject’s] surroundings, such as the décor of the apartment. If you leave out the details, the viewer has to look for much subtler hints . . . you really have to read the image to get clues” (Jaeger 139). The lack of “privacy” offered to the physical surface of the women’s bodies still arguably highlights the privileged location within which the middle-class maternal body is photographed, protected as it is within the bare, white space of a private home.

By Dijkstra’s logic, however, this process of reading for the details makes the act of looking “equal for everybody. I like it,” Dijkstra says, “when photographs are democratic” (Jaeger 139). Set aside (for the moment) the flaw in her logic (the act of viewing can never be equal for everybody – each viewer brings something different to the experience). In making her photographs “democratic” and nudging her viewers to seek out the subtle hints within the detailed, large-scale portraits, Dijkstra invites a process of viewing that intentionally stills the subject, asking them to concentrate themselves into the long exposure, and enabling their image to be offered up to a kind of

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73 Dijkstra says: “If you show too much of a subject’s personal life, the viewer will immediately make assumptions. If you leave out the details, the viewer has to look for much subtler hints . . . for me it’s all about subtlety and the fact that you really have to read the image to get clues . . . That makes it equal for everybody. I like it when photographs are democratic” (Jaeger 139). Another photographer who makes large-scale work, Jeff Wall, claims (after Walt Whitman): “democracy involves imperfection” (Stallabrass, “Museum” 96).
looking Diane Arbus calls ‘scrutiny’ and Dijkstra calls democracy. With the New Mothers, Dijkstra shows an arresting experience, complete with the trappings of bodily labour: blood, nudity, unforgiving lighting, mesh diapers, and discoloured newborns. This series highlights a valuable feminist impulse to de-sublimate femininity – it puts pressure on the idea of a pure Madonna, unsullied by sex and labour. It demands the maternal body be acknowledged.

2.10. Heroines

Lincoln Clarkes’s book, *Heroines: Photographs*, is drawn from a series of over four hundred photographs made over approximately five years. Circulating through the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Clarkes makes portraits of local women, mostly street and sex trade workers he has befriended over the years. Clarkes’s *Heroines* project, which spans a distribution including exhibition in art galleries, films, newspapers, and more. From the beginning, *Heroines* provides a locus for division. As Kelly Wood explains, “[t]he photographs have . . . incited numerous dialogues, none of which are in agreement about the full import of the work. This has left the series in a kind of indeterminate state of being” (219). *Heroines* is at once a product of the Vancouver documentary photography scene and apart from it. It demands political and ethical discourse, and yet it arguably does not adequately engage with its own inherent political project. According to Wood, “*Heroines* forced viewers and respondents to take sides in an uneasy ethical dialogue that does not acknowledge the series’ uncanny ability to perform against viewers’ expectations of certain visual categories”; in its complexity, it suggests “how these expectations might preclude photography’s ability to enact or incite political change” (219). This generic and ethical confusion “therefore demonstrates the limits of certain methodologies of understanding and interpreting documentary photography in relation to other historical and contemporary photographic practices” (Wood 219).

74 In this sense, Dijkstra’s work can be (and has been) likened to 17th century Dutch painting. “Rather than positing a privileged beholder outside the painting gazing on a theatricalized scene from afar, it placed the viewer inside the scene as an ambulatory presence. It was thus far less hierarchical in its refusal to privilege deep focus over surface texture, far more ‘democratic’ in its equal attention to the entire canvas” (Jay 61).
Though many of Clarkes’s portraits seem as though they could have been photographed in any urban center, the methodology and discussion of the project bears a specific connection to place.\textsuperscript{75} Vancouver is a famously beautiful city. Year-round rain keeps the landscape lush and green, and oceanic waterfalls wind around a large part of the perimeter. The city’s affluence, and its displays of cleanliness, cold politeness, and visual beauty are most striking, however, as a point of contrast for the poverty and homelessness apparent throughout the urban space. Phoenix Winter calls attention to the sensory nature of this juxtaposition in her poem “Savour the Taste” from V6A: \textit{Writing from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside}. Calling up the aromas of cigarettes and cherry trees, and the sensation of grit that seems to permeate every surface, Winter’s poem feels through the texture of the space:

There’s dirt on my tongue

teeth gritty

with flavours

of the Downtown Eastside

.. . . . . . . . . . . . . .

We are the expendables

in our reality show,

‘Star Track’ lives.

Feel the grains beneath

our hands

as we squat

on sidewalks. (V6A 15-16).

The Downtown Eastside neighbourhood, in particular, stands in stark relief against the picturesque landscape of the city. The most dramatically impoverished section of the neighbourhood (one of the lowest income neighbourhoods in Canada) has been

\textsuperscript{75} In this sense, Clarkes’s project resembles that of Helen Levitt and her at once indeterminate yet oddly specific New York City spaces.
corralled between the business districts of downtown and Gastown, a waterfront area comprised of cobblestone streets lined with tourist shops, art dealerships, trendy restaurants, overpriced boutiques, and (in the spring) lingering cherry blossoms. As in the poem, lived realities blur the lines between inside and outside.

Jacques Lacan’s notion of “extimacy” offers a way to understand this spatial phenomenon in theoretical terms. Not simply the opposite of intimacy, “extimacy” instead shows the ways in which “the intimate is Other – like a foreign body, a parasite” (Miller n. pag.). In other words, the exterior is present within the interior – and vice versa. The intimate is opaque. Lacanian “extimacy” problematizes binary distinctions such as “outside-inside, truth-fiction, man-woman, departure-arrival, signifier-signified, container-contained, subject-object, being-appearance, and past-future” by rendering them topological (Kingsbury 246). Bringing Lacan’s extimacy (or Žižek’s concept of the neighbour) into the conversation further complicates the definitions of intimacy I have already discussed. It allows for the ways in which intimate, internal emotions can be projected onto, or delegated to, external objects or individuals. Inside/outside binaries are further blurred in the ambiguous boundaries between the woman and the fetus, and the woman and the outside world (or, in Barthes’s case, the stranger within is the representational image, the “hopefully-a-good sort of guy” extracted from his passive body at the click of the shutter). Ideally, through this process, the “mutual recognition of limitation opens up a space of sociality that is the solidarity of the vulnerable” (Žižek, “Neighbors and Other Monsters” 139).

Clarkes is both of, and not of, the community he depicts in his *Heroines* photographs. He is a neighbour, so to speak, or a “‘participant observer’ – a local with insider knowledge” (Wood 236). Applying Azoulay’s model of the civil contract, Wood claims that “the subjects of *Heroines* can be said to have participated in a situation that defined and limited them – as many critics of the series have suspected” (237). By acknowledging the subject’s participation in the making of the photograph in all its contradiction and complexity, we are better able to approach questions of subjectivity through a critical lens. Nevertheless, even in making this claim, most “[c]riticism of this work has tended not to take into account the photographed women as participants in their own political inscription” – it reads them as passive, victimized participants and
forecloses any potential agency of their own (237). The crux of Wood’s argument is that there is an imperative to consider complicated, contentious work such as this. The creation, the photographs, and the reception of *Heroines* all “suggest that the political potential for photographic vision not only has not been exhausted, but that there remains an ethical imperative to pursue it; since the potential invisibility of its subjects has a literally violent and not merely metaphorical dimension” (237). Perhaps most significantly, Wood turns the responsibility of looking at these photographs back onto, and into, the critic-as-viewer. “These images call for us to focus on our practices of viewing,” she says; “[t]hey call for us to inhabit their visual space of politics rather than analyse them from without” (Wood 237).

2.11. Empty lot, 62, East Hastings St. Vancouver, March 22, 1998

Of all the portraits published in Clarkes’s *Heroines* series, only one features a visibly pregnant woman. In contrast to the conventions of social documentary depictions of low-income pregnant women laid out by Matthews and Wexler, the unnamed subject of *Empty lot, 62 East Hastings St. Vancouver, March 22, 1998* (Figure 2.8) is shown standing out in public, rather than sheltered within the privacy of her home.76 Of course, this distinction is not entirely straightforward. Placed in context with the rest of the series, the photograph necessarily raises the question of whether this woman has a home at all, as many of the women Clarkes photographs are homeless. *Empty lot, 62 East Hastings St. Vancouver, March 22, 1998* emphasizes this possibility. The woman’s place on the street is highlighted by the bisection of the frame of the photograph. There is a solid brick building and a shopping bag on one side (shelter, structure, commerce, and possessions) and the woman, her exposed belly, and the alley (empty but for the garbage bins and parked car) on the other. The word “PUB” floats above her head. Her

76 Goldin’s precursor, Larry Clark, has a haunting photograph of a pregnant woman in his *Tulsa* series. The woman sits indoors, touched by the soft light streaming in from the window beside her – as per pregnancy photograph convention – but the fact that the photograph adheres to these codes for (artistic or middle class) pregnancy portraiture makes the realization that she is injecting a needle of heroin into her arm that much more jarring. The narrative built into the printed book shows the disturbing suggestion of cause and effect: the photograph that follows *Pregnant Woman Shooting Up* features an infant in a casket.
baseball cap shades her downcast eyes, but she seems to gaze down on the plastic bag that sits on the ground in front of her. This parcel mimics the rounded flesh in her hands.

Figure 2.8 Lincoln Clarkes. Empty lot, 62 East Hastings St. Vancouver, March 22, 1998

Note: 19.05 x 19.05 cm on 20.32 x 20.32 paper matted in 40.64 x 50.8 cm frame. © Lincoln Clarkes. This photograph appears in Lincoln Clarkes' Heroines: Photographs (43).

Paul Ugor insists “authorities represent the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver and its inhabitants as a social space where crime, addiction, and poverty are [in Mary Warner-Marien’s words] ‘constructed as choices; as the results of personal will, rather
than as faults in the social system” (n. pag.). In this photograph, the presence of vice is pervasive (as suggested by the hovering presence of the pub), as is the sense that this pregnant woman is excluded from the structures on the other side. In this representation of pregnancy, the question of public versus private is particularly loaded. What is privacy when one’s life is lived in public space?

2.12. Architectural Degradation

According to Ken Dietrich-Campbell, Clarkes’s “professional reputation comes mostly from photographing women and famous celebrities although environmental landscapes and architectural degradation are also part of his practice” (111). In her foreword to Clarkes’s Heroines, Barbara Hodgson explains the history of drug abuse in the Downtown Eastside, paying particular attention to its effect on women in the community. “Women addicts openly beg for money, sleep in bus shelters, and shoot up in the alley behind schools, shops and homes,” she says; “[a]t these disturbing sights many of us rush blindly past, unable or unwilling to recognize the human being behind the degraded façade” (Hodgson xiii). Hodgson is rehearsing a predictable response to depictions of precarious individuals. By referring to the women as “degraded façades,” however, Hodgson falls into her own trap. She performs the very objectifying act she describes. Too often, the heavy-handed rhetoric of Clarkes criticism seems to erase the individuals entirely from the conversation. In this case, Hodgson likens the women to buildings (the wording also suggests their ‘degrading’ status as sex trade workers). A few lines later, Hodgson performatively “sees” the women she passes by, identifying them as follows: “some of them beautiful, some plain, some young, some old, all ravaged by the drug they’re chained to” (xiv). Again, then, even in “seeing” the women of the Downtown Eastside, the only level of individuation available is ‘beautiful, plain, young, or old.’ These terms could as easily be applied to buildings as to individual women. And it is not at all uncommon to discuss Clarkes’s portraits in the same breath

77 The danger of misrecognition lurking within Mann’s photographs of her children—the possibility of assuming the Mann children are poor, based on their dress, isolation, and environment—takes on its full significance in relation to the Heroines series. The stakes are different for the two projects, however.
as his interest in architectural photography. Clarkes makes these same connections himself. With this comparison in mind, I want to suggest two things. First, aligning Clarkes (or Clarkes aligning himself) with architectural photography has the discursive effect of making the women he photographs disappear; they gain object value when likened to buildings. Second, this architecturalization of Clarkes’s portraits can be cast in a new light when read alongside Denise Oleksijczuk’s use of architectural desolation in Stan Douglas’s photograph of West Hastings Street. Rather than evacuate women (literally or metaphorically) in order to call attention to the buildings, Oleksijczuk proposes that the isolation of empty streets surrounding photographed buildings can body forth these invisible women.

Benjamin Buchloh’s essay “Portraits/Genre: Thomas Struth” sheds some light on the relationship between bodies and buildings in Clarkes’s work. The essay discusses photographer Thomas Struth, not Clarkes, but Buchloh’s criticism of Struth is instructive. Buchloh has a number of concerns about portraiture. Most importantly (for my purposes), he makes the following claims about the relationship between portraiture and architecture in Struth’s work:

[O]ne should recall that the social transparency in Struth’s topological archive of the vanishing public spaces of architectural urbanity could only be constructed (with few exceptions) by eliminating the actual inhabitants of these spaces. By contrast, the social and architectural space within which his portrayed subjects are now presented, is always the private space of the ‘family’ and the ‘home.’ (159)

According to Buchloh, photography such as Struth’s either naturalizes the nuclear middle class family when it includes human subjects within the confines of private space, or it successfully achieves social transparency, but it can only do so by evacuating human subjects from the urban architectural spaces they inhabit. This type of

78 Central to the issue with Struth’s family portraits, for Buchloh, is that Struth’s “archive constructs a compendium of globalized middle class identities, contained in nuclear family units” (159); this has the effect of naturalizing subjectivity and presenting it as ontologically and biologically determined. This bias demonstrates the “voluntarily accepted limitations of class matrix” in Struth’s choice of photographic portrait subjects; his choice of sitters does not seem to leave “any room . . . for those who have chosen to construct their identities outside of the parameters of a compulsory heterosexuality and its attendant nuclear family formations” (Buchloh 160).
evacuation is common to architectural photography. Like Struth (as Buchloh describes him), Clarkes is interested in establishing a “topological archive of the vanishing public spaces of architectural urbanity.”

In the documentary film Heroines: The Photographic Obsession of Lincoln Clarkes, Clarkes explains he likes to “photograph the environment, because the environment is changing. The buildings are being torn down, everything’s being fixed or renovated somehow. And the past is being slowly swept away in the rubble. And the women are slowly disappearing” (Photographic Obsession). At another point in the film, the camera follows Clarkes as he photographs and interacts with one of his subjects. Noting that “Chinatown is going through a metamorphosis right now,” Clarkes then explains part of his philosophy to the woman he is photographing (who, by her own account, would rather see Chinatown stay the way it is). “Well, they'll renovate it,” he says:

[A]nd fix it up all and clean it up and change it so much that it won’t even look like the old Chinatown that it is now. So it’s really great to document that, that look. And like you’re changing, too. I mean, you’re not going to look like this forever. Chinatown’s not going to look like this forever. So it’s really important to photograph things that are in change. (Photographic Obsession)

Clarkes approaches his human subjects with what seems like a surfeit of objectivity. On the one hand, he claims the desire to humanize his subjects, for the viewer. On the other, he makes statements like the one quoted above, where it is “that, that look” he is aiming to show, the fleeting moment, and not the women themselves. In the most extreme case of objectification (it seems to be an easy trend in Clarkes criticism, to compare women to construction), the general desire to simplify the ‘problem’ of the Downtown Eastside by de-humanizing it and reducing its discourse to those of buildings and streets (substituting “degraded façades” for real faces) becomes most apparent.

Heroines was co-awarded the 2002 Vancouver Book Award with Stan Douglas’s Every Building on 100 West Hastings, also about Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. As the title of Douglas’s Every Building on 100 West Hastings suggests, the work is literally a composite photograph of every building on the 100 block – perhaps one of the most infamous city blocks in Canada. In Oleksijczuk’s essay “Ghost Spaces” (published as
part of the *Every Building* publication), she suggests the unnatural perspective created by the composite nature of Douglas's digitally stitched, carefully produced photograph “resists viewers’ attempts to incorporate only ideal images of the city” (97). In destabilizing the access to perspective, the composite photograph “allows observers a chance to reconsider their relationship to this space and, by extension, to the socially undervalued” (97). Oleksijczuk notes the emptiness of the city street in *Every Building*. Rather than reading the desolation as a convention of architectural photography, she suggests Douglas’s intentionally desolate depiction of the street at night calls to mind the rising number of women who have gone missing from that space. Thinking through Kaja Silverman’s theory of idealization, Oleksijczuk aims to “conjure up a metaphorical neighbourhood,” one that will enable *Every Building* to “engag[e] spectators in an active rather than passive form of looking, which may, in turn, also involve us in a process of idealization crucial to the act of identifying with others” (97). Quoting Silverman, she says: “We need aesthetic works which will make it possible for us to idealize, and, so, to identify with bodies we would otherwise repudiate” (100). What Oleksijczuk has in mind is more than simply evoking empathy, but further, for spectators to “consciously and corporally implicate themselves in that which is disavowed” (100). The emptiness within the photograph also:

provides an opening in which to contemplate the fate of Vancouver’s missing women. Considering the mounting numbers of missing and murdered sex trade workers is one way to fill the picture’s void. From this perspective, the image can be appropriated to suggest that the denial of the missing women never be complete. Its emptiness can be mobilized to evoke a space haunted by the socially disprized and unloved. (Oleksijczuk 110)

Rather than objectifying or addressing the women of *Heroines* on superficial terms, Oleksijczuk offers a model for bringing those objectifying erasures to light.

Berlant’s definition of intimacy as a shared “story about both oneself and others,” where “the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness” (and her correction of the “merely personal as profoundly structural”) suggests another kind of discursive structure with which the women Clarkes photographs might negotiate. The relationship between the photographer and their subject provides one important aspect
of intimacy in the photographs. The practice of photographic intimacy also includes the relationship the women have to the photographs as material objects and personal artefacts. Clarkes’s *Heroines* portraits have a tangible personal value for those outside of the system of economic and cultural exchange of the art world who are actually acquainted with the individuals pictured. Removing the subjects from the realm of the type, or the abstract, some viewers are able to look at the photographs and acknowledge them in terms of the particular. They do so in part by attaching the individual subjects’ personal names and combining photographs with personal stories. A local audience can take their personal relationship with the subjects Clarkes has pictured and extend it to a personal relationship with the photograph. Viewers often ask to keep the photographs, to carry or display. Those who actually know, or knew, the women he depicts add to the photographs by ignoring the official titles and referencing the subjects’ personal identities instead; that is, they add the very information Clarkes’s titles (characterized by public street names and calendar dates) withhold. They add intimate (often shared) narratives to accompany the photographs in private viewings and discussions. This is like the kind of narrativizing experience most museum viewers seek vicariously through viewing, re-viewing, and re-considering work such as Goldin’s large oeuvre of repeating photographs, subjects, and overlapping texts. Perhaps, then, intimacy has as much to do with how viewers interact with photographs as it does with the process of making them.

bell hooks explores a related question with her essay “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life.” Recognizing the power of photographs within the field of representation, hooks traces the history of the snapshot photograph in black life, from pre- to post-segregation American, to the present day. Figuring the spaces of family portrait walls (within black homes) as non-institutional, self-curated sites of resistance and self-valorization, hooks provides an alternate history of image and identity making. Much of the significance of family snapshot photography lies in the fact that, “[f]or black folks, the camera provided a means to document a reality that could, if necessary, be packed, stored, moved from place to place” (hooks, “In Our Glory” 391). In other words, these photographs provide “documentation that could be shared, passed around. And ultimately, these images, the worlds they recorded, could be hidden and discovered at another time. Had the camera been there when slavery ended,” hooks suggests, “it
could have provided images that would have helped folk searching for lost kin and loved ones. It would have been a powerful tool of cultural recovery” (“In Our Glory” 391).

Elaine Allan, who ran a drop-in shelter in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, attests to the power photographs hold for the women she encountered. Echoing hooks’s emphasis on the material, portable quality of personal photographs, and Goldin’s faith in the talismanic force of images, Allan explains that the women of the Downtown Eastside “cling to photographs as one of their last remaining ties” with lost or estranged family and friends” (125). Many, she claims, “wear photographs close to their bodies, using plastic bags as protective casings. Usually the photos are of children, or themselves, and serve as important mementos while surviving on the streets” (E. Allan 126). “Street mothers,” older women without children, or women who had their own children taken away from them often practice the custom Allan describes. In this way reminiscent of Goldin’s role within the “family of Nan,” “street mothers” protect and control precious photographic documents. These worn archives are a means for keeping time in perspective. For women who are high, disoriented, or enduring horrific experiences, looking at a photograph of a loved one—or of oneself—provides tangible reassurance about the existence, and persistence of time.79 Photographs situate and anchor their viewers in time (if that much time has passed since the photograph was taken, then it is possible that today is not the end, that the future might yet hold more). Looking at photographs also provides an anchor for identity at moments when the self seems otherwise unrecognizable and untethered.

In her description of this faith in photographs, Allan notes that many of the women she works with are “quite sentimental” (125), suggesting a susceptibility to attaching themselves to ideas or objects. In “Photography and Fetish,” Christian Metz points to the ease with which photography (a stubborn, still record of “what was but no longer is”) can become fetishized (Metz 83). Though rich, Barthes’s reflections on photography are unapologetically steeped in his own subjective experience. While Barthes effectively theorizes the perspective of the viewer, his work does little to advance our understanding of the photographer’s performance. In his discussion of

79 I am indebted to Duncan Hickey-Cameron, from the Portland Hotel Society, for his insights on this subject.
portraiture, Buchloh is wary of photography’s potential influence on viewers, particularly those who engage with photographs of themselves. Buchloh criticizes Walter Benjamin’s celebration of the radical potential of photography. He claims Benjamin “failed to recognize” the dialectic inherent to the supposed democratic potential of photography (150). That is,

the seemingly emancipatory practice of the photographic dissemination of the image of subjectivity and the concomitant loss of the auratic uniqueness of the subject’s individual features, would bring about its opposite: a hypertrophic representation of a lost subjectivity which could now be sold back as a substitute, as commodity and cult imagery to those who had never been given access to the subject’s actual political realization. (Buchloh 150-51)

The representation of subjectivity stands in place of its reality. Similarly, Smith suggests that portraits, even more than other photographs, “function as particularly problematic objects in this paradigm of cultural consumption, collapsing the already tenuous oppositional distance between subject and object, identity and commodity, owner and owned” (American Archives 95). Echoing Buchloh, she claims, “[w]ith a portrait one can procure a commodified image of one’s own self” (Smith, American Archives 95). But if, as Rachel Bowlby argues, “commodities possess their owners, then portraits become the keepers of their consumers, body and soul” (qtd. in Smith, American Archives 95). If this is the case, then the women of the Downtown Eastside are ‘kept’ by their portraits of lost family and friends. It also means, however, that we as viewers are ‘kept’ by Clarke’s portraits of them.

2.13. Conclusion

To return to the notion of skin as uniform, Monica Miller takes up Frantz Fanon’s claim that “the black man’s livery will be a permanent uniform”; in Fanon’s words: “The real leap consists in introducing invention into existence” (Miller 245). “[I]t is this ‘invention,’” Miller explains, that “opens up a space between skin and uniform, transforming the body from a cliché into an interrogation” (245). This space of invention, or the performance of repetition, with a difference, also characterizes Nan Goldin’s deployment of the ballad form from which her project takes its name. Its cyclical nature
calls attention to the elements that change; it pushes the viewer to take note of that which is left out. This attention requires that the viewer become intimately acquainted with the series, as well as with the subjects pictured. This is where Goldin’s politics lie. Goldin’s work actively plays on the themes of home, family, and motherhood, offering alternative models that undermine both the expectations inherent in romantic relationships and, more widely, heteronormative images of family. While Goldin’s use of makeup, masquerade, and narrative invention foregrounds tensions in the spaces-between, Rineke Dijkstra’s deployment of skin-as-uniform is left largely un-interrogated. Consciously or not, Dijkstra’s mothers illuminate questions of race, invisibility, archival history, and commodification. The mothers’ nakedness suggests intimacy by calling attention to Dijkstra’s proximity to, and the viewer’s visual access to, these bodies, yet Dijkstra undercuts her unveiling of the indecorous postpartum body by transforming it into flash-lit, high-resolution data. As Berlant, Latimer, and others have argued, and as is painfully apparent, the maternal body is already a site for “democratic” scrutiny. Its susceptibility to being photographed—inside and out—is already contested within the political realm. Indeed, the fetus’s status as an ideal citizen has, in many ways, been deployed as a symbol of democracy even come so far as to “become a marker of democracy” (Berlant, Queen of America 83-144).

The work of Sally Mann, Nan Goldin, Rineke Dijkstra, and Lincoln Clarkes complicates ethical questions while mobilizing the ambiguities of genre and intimacy. Rather than choose subjects who are in a position to exchange intimate gazes with them, both Dijkstra and Clarkes’s photographic relationships are unabashedly predicated upon a power dynamic that distinguishes the role of photographer from that of subject. More than the sight of bare skin, the display of her subject’s uneasiness is what makes Dijkstra’s photographs intimate. Rather than train the focus on herself, Dijkstra asks her subjects—in this case, women—to bare themselves, instead. This is how she means to lead us (as she says) “into the skin” of her subjects. Dijkstra’s work (and her words) suggest we have some right to stare at these bodies, but her claim to democratic viewing is as much a fantasy as Goldin’s invisible camera.
Chapter 3.

Circulation

3.1. Sugar

“No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” — Susan Sontag Regarding the Pain of Others (7)

I waited, with hundreds of others, in a line that extended four blocks down Williamsburg, Brooklyn’s Wythe Avenue to the former Domino Sugar factory. As I reached the front of the line, Creative Time volunteers handed out waivers for visitors to sign upon entry. We were about to enter a condemned building scheduled for demolition, after all, and the document both served a judiciary purpose as the first hint there might be something dangerous about the space (although perhaps not the sort of danger the lawyers had in mind).80 Near the door of the factory was a sign encouraging photography within the installation and asking visitors to share their photographs online using the tag #karawalkerdomeino.81 Kara Walker’s A Subtlety: or the Marvelous Sugar Baby (subtitled an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant), a temporary installation, features a monumental white sugar sculpture of a woman/sphinx, a number of young boy sculptures made of

80 Hilton Als explains: “Located in Williamsburg, the Domino Sugar Factory was built in 1882; by the eighteen-nineties, it was producing half the sugar being consumed in the United States. As recently as 2000, it was the site of a long labor strike, in which two hundred and fifty workers protested wages and labor conditions for twenty months” (“The Sugar Sphinx,” The New Yorker, 8 May 2014).

81 For future collation and re-organization into what will be a collaborative digital 3D model.
brown sugar and molasses, all within a vast, dramatic space heavy with an overwhelming aroma of hot sugar.  

Creative Time commissioned Walker to create a site-specific installation for the Domino Sugar Factory. Walker’s installation is designed so visitors have to walk through the expansive open space of the factory floor before they reach the sphinx at the end of the room. On the way, fifteen five-foot sculptures of boys—some of them made of sugar, others constructed with resin and covered with molasses—are placed throughout the room. Their presence improvises a number of possible paths, encouraging viewers to weave from one side to the next, pausing to view the smaller sculptures on their way to the monumental sugar sphinx. Small landmarks distributed throughout the space, the boys slow the visitors’ walk from one end of the building to the next, building in time for viewers to work up to an encounter with the sphinx herself. The sphinx remains partially visible from everywhere in the room. But first, we are asked to pay attention to the small, brown, sugar limbs and the pieces that fall off the boys and are subsequently carried in the baskets of their fellow sculptures. Viewers might notice the way their rich, reddish-brown surfaces gleam in the beams of light that come in through the windows near the ceiling (one reviewer described the sugar boys as life-size Jolly Rancher candies) or the way layers of visitors leave occasional footsteps in the sugared ground where the sculptures leak and melt. I slowly wove my way through other visitors gathering around the sugar boys, peering into baskets, taking photographs (always taking photographs), talking with their partners, and pointing out puddles of abject molasses pooling around the boys’ bare feet and seeping out onto the open floor.

I was overwhelmed – first with the sugar that hung heavy in my lungs, and then with the surprise of recognizing myself within the piece. The unexpected combination of sweetness and heat transported me to my great-uncle’s sugar cane field in Trinidad, where I had visited as a child. My paternal grandmother was the daughter of a British plantation overseer and his indigenous Caribbean wife; members of my family have lived and worked with sugar cane until very recently, as Trinidad and Tobago has now all but

82 http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/
stopped producing and exporting sugar. On one visit, my great-uncle cut pieces from the raw canes and handed them to us, to taste. My brothers and I chewed away, marvelling at the novelty of sugar as a plant. As we prepared to leave, I remember my father surprising us by padding back to the car in his bare feet, socks in hand: “When your uncle says he wants your Nikes,” he said, “you give the man your shoes.” Like Kara Walker’s boys of sugar and resin, with their ever-melting base, I can’t seem to separate the taste of cane from the surprise of my father’s suddenly bare feet. Like so many of the other lives, histories, and photographs I research and write about, I might argue the Domino Sugar Factory of Kara Walker’s A Subtlety is not, strictly speaking, my history. I study other people’s faces, and read about social and political histories, and strangers’ lives, and try to make some sense of it for myself. It is easier, seems less fraught, for me to locate myself in the flat landscape of the prairies than it is to connect my easy, suburban upbringing, and my pale skin, to lives I know only through photographs, especially the kinds of images I discuss in this chapter. It is more tangible, perhaps, to hear my colloquial Saskatchewan accent mirrored back at me than it is to understand the moaning Fred Moten hears when he looks upon a photograph of Emmett Till. With A Subtlety, however, I found myself deeply unsettled by the layered aroma of intangible past lives (some that intersect with my own) and the pungency of my immediate surroundings.

And then there was the sphinx. The sculpture was, indeed, monumental, and its colour the bright, ostentatious white of refined Domino sugar. Hilton Als describes the sculpture, which is over 35 feet high and 75 feet long, as “a mammy-as-sphinx made out of bleached sugar, which is a metaphor and reality. Remember, sugar is brown in its ‘raw’ state” (n. pag.). As Als explains, Walker’s work tends to draw on the notion that artwork should complicate our assumptions and our understanding of history; in this case, the sugar Sphinx “has ‘black’ features but is white? Has she been bleached—and

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83 This is a simplified account of what is really an (fairly typically) unstable, heterogeneous, and largely unrecorded Trinidadian, and later Canadian, lineage.
Figure 3.1. Kara Walker. A Subtlety… Installation. Domino Sugar Factory. Williamsburg, Brooklyn. 2014.

Note: iPhone photograph made by the author, May 2014.
thus made more ‘beautiful’—or is she a spectre of history, the female embodiment of all the human labor that went into making her?” (n. pag.). This is a chapter about photography, yet I am writing about a sculpture; but the fact is, this is a sculpture about photography. The Sphinx is presented—offered, even—to the audience as the center of a photographic event. It is representative of the ubiquity of photographic events today, and the way photography now interacts with and (in the case of the 3D rendering that comes from compiled social media photographs) creates other forms. To consider photography in all its various practices is to consider it as event, and installation, and in the ubiquity of photographic seeing, whether cameras are physically present or not. Though seemingly benign—an installation made of a condiment, located in what is a now gentrified Brooklyn neighbourhood—A Subtlety (the title itself refers to the edible European sugar sculptures known as “subtleties”) provides the impetus for a photographic event that is both distinctly of the current moment (the Sphinx is an Instagrammer’s dream) and one that echoes older, historically and racially loaded, photographic events.

What is perhaps most striking about A Subtlety is neither the massive white sugar sculpture, nor the melting sculptures of boys with baskets. Rather, it is the audience itself. The largely white crowds circle around immobile (coded as black) sculptural bodies, bodies that are literally melting before us as viewers wait in line, en masse, to pose and smile. Many young adults, mostly in their twenties, grin automatically and pose for “selfies,” gesturing with thumbs-up before the sphinx’s large bare breasts, which fill the photographic frame behind them. ALS calls the kerchief-wearing sphinx, “Cleopatra as worker: unknown to you because you have rarely seen her?” (n. pag.) He suggests “Walker has made this servant monumental not only because she wants us to see her but so the sphinx can show us—so she can get in our face with her brown sugar underneath all that whiteness” (n. pag.) But some suggest Walker actually modeled the sphinx’s face after her own (adding another layer of complication in terms of features and colour, and the relationship of the artist to her

84 I explore the phenomenon of the “selfie” in greater detail in chapter four.
As massive as the sphinx is, and as aggressively present as the sculpture is meant to make the black-featured, female-coded body whose invisibility it negotiates, its meaning is easily obscured through the crowd, and the complications of the cultural, social, photographic event. I made my way through the room, eventually circling to the back of the sphinx. The sculpture is notable for its monumental size as well as its raised, exposed underside; “[t]he sphinx crouches in a position that’s regal and yet totemic of subjugation—she is ‘beat down’ but standing” (Als n. pag.), visually accessible, yet stoic. The sphinx is, of course, also symbol of the unknown, the keeper of riddles. As Als notes, by including visible genitalia as part of the sculpture, “Walker shows us the mystery and reality of female genitalia while calling our attention, perhaps, to all those African women whose genitalia have been mutilated because they are ‘slaves’ in blackness, too” (n. pag.). As I gazed up at the sphinx’s raised bottom and exposed genitalia, I heard another visitor—a tall, lively, stylish, white man in his early twenties—call out to his friend, who was also gazing up at the sculpture. “I’m going to hashtag this: business in the front, party in the back!” he laughingly yelled atop the heads of fellow audience members, and pointed his iPhone up at the Sphinx’s vulva.

I left the exhibition soon after, feeling strangulated by the shift in atmosphere. I needed the release of open air to begin to articulate, to myself, what felt wrong about this event. Some sense of discomfort within A Subtlety was not uncommon, as it turns out. As Francey Russell and others have noted (even early into the short run of A Subtlety), for the audience, the question—who is “we”? —is integral to the way A Subtlety does, or does not, work. Upon reading Virginia Woolf’s treatment of war photographs in Three Guineas, Susan Sontag reflects that “No ‘we’ should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people’s pain” (Regarding the Pain 7). From the beginning, “much of the public conversation surrounding Walker’s current work has concerned the dynamics of spectatorship. In a sense, this was intentional: Walker and Creative Time [who commissioned the installation]. . . actively encouraged visitors to share their photographs with a #karawalkerdomino hashtag, all of which will be

85 Like Kara Walker’s A Subtlety, which made many viewers uncomfortably aware of their status as part of a mixed audience, Carrie Mae Weems’s piece, From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, engages with the imagery of a problematic archive.
aggregated and rendered as an interactive 3D sculpture” (Russell n.pag.). In other words, Russell explains, from its inception, the experience of “seeing the Marvelous Sugar Baby was always going to involve seeing it through the eyes of others. And with a piece like this, and with an artist like Walker, any conversation about seeing and spectatorship is a conversation about seeing and not seeing race” (Russell n. pag.). The double-consciousness inherent in the photographic event—and a social event at that—is part of the piece even before the sculpture itself has been constructed.

This always-already quality is part of what Ariella Azoulay identifies (and what Susan Sontag laments, decades earlier) about the fact that photographic seeing has changed both the photographic event and mediated our general perception of the world around us. Regardless of whether or not there is a camera in the room, we have become accustomed to gazing upon the world photographically. But another way the photographic event is complicated is through the dynamics of the installation’s audience itself, including what they see when they look at images, and what they see when they look at these images in the company of others (how the sphinx’s genitalia signified differently for me when viewed with my own eyes as opposed to when it was realized through Instagram filters on a young man’s iPhone, for instance). The audience members’ subjectivity comes into play in terms of questions of race and desire, but also in the way viewers are socialized to look. By positioning an installation like A Subtlety in terms of the photographic event, I am underlining the ways in which the installation itself relies on the viewers’ photographic performances in order to do its work, both in the moment and after the fact. I am also suggesting that the cameras and smartphones are a necessary and anticipated component of the piece’s audience engagement. In order for the installation pieces to do their work, the visitors-as-photographers (and other visitors who respond to them) must do theirs.

86 The 3D model of A Subtlety: <http://creativetime.org/karawalker/digital-sugar-baby/ >
87 As a response to the volatile dynamics of mixed-race, mixed-audience viewing, the unofficial The Kara Walker Experience: We Are Here Facebook group formed. The group describes themselves as follows: “A gathering for people of color at Kara Walker’s art installation in the Domino Sugar Factory. Invite your friends – and your friends’ friends – so that we can experience this space as the majority.” (The Kara Walker Experience: We Are Here: <https://www.facebook.com/events/656753121061038 >)
The Walker installation is about atrocity as well – the atrocity of slavery, of the sugar cane industry, and the race-class relations it brought to the sugar factory. Like the sphinx’s complicated presence within The Domino Sugar Factory, images of atrocity are often excessive and overwhelming. Our reaction to them can vary widely. The subjective response to difficult images is likely part of the impetus for persistent questions about why we look at difficult images, whether or not we should look at them, and show them, and how images of atrocity and suffering function differently, or signify differently, in different contexts. Difficult images raise questions of ethics and propriety, empathy and voyeurism. In this chapter, I argue that it is necessary to consider processes of viewing, including instances where heterogeneous audiences are viewing together. I will consider discourses of viewing, not just in terms of artistic installations such as A Subtlety, but more specifically the way the dynamics of installations such as this one might echo of the audiences of black and white viewers who stood together to look at the photographs of Without Sanctuary (2000), an exhibition of lynching postcards. My discussion of the re-contextualization of images of atrocity into the bracketed spaces of art galleries and museums, is meant, in part, to help consider processes of viewing that call back (albeit much more safely) to the terms of the original lynchings themselves, which were social events attended by large crowds of (white) viewer-participants. We must then also consider what it means to be an audience to difficult images and events in terms of the reception of the photographs of torture such as the photographs made at Abu Ghraib. These are worth considering both for the subjects of the photographs, whose process of “viewing” the photographs is through the threat of their being made and shown, the other victims (am I next?), the soldiers themselves, those who made the photographs, those who stood on the sidelines and watched, and others, like Lynndie England, who smiled automatically and posed with their thumbs up, oblivious to the implications of a displaced, re-contextualized gesture … and more.

To consider these processes of viewing and shared viewing together is not to say these events are all the same. I am not equating the Instagrammed thumbs-up “selfies” I witnessed in front of a sugar sculpture in Brooklyn with a white man grinning before another man’s broken body so he can send a photographic souvenir home to his mother. Rather, what I want to suggest is that we need to consider these processes in dialogue. We should look at them both for their similarities and their differences, and for the way
they shape and challenge our understanding of what it means to share and discuss images, and more widely, what it means to look at human beings, to look at photographs, and to look at human beings as the subjects of photographs.

Central to question, then, is the idea of the event itself. In *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Azoulay argues that the photograph represents an event. According to Azoulay, acts of ‘watching’ the image—viewing critically and reflecting upon the conditions of its production—actively renew the temporal force of the event, allowing it to remain in the present, rather than vulnerable to simply dismissed as the past. The photographic performance, Azoulay suggests, is composed of a combination of subject, photographer, and spectator (or ‘watcher’). This “three-pronged” event resides in multiple temporalities through the variability of every potential viewer (Azoulay, *Civil Contract* 18). Azoulay calls attention to photographs that address the viewer; where the subject is not treated as a refugee, but as an agent. These articulate a relationship within the photographic event. For Azoulay the photographic event no longer requires a camera to be physically present; it is enough, now, that it might be present (or that we might think there is a camera watching us, whether that is actually the case or not).

### 3.2. “What do photographs do?”

This chapter responds (sometimes directly, and often indirectly) to the work of Peggy Phelan and Judith Butler, and draws primarily on models offered by Fred Moten, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Ariella Azoulay in order to think about images of atrocity and their relationship to their own circulation and audience. Azoulay is concerned with the discourse of the viewer’s responsibility to act with the photographic image. The redemptive strategy, such as Azoulay’s theory of “watching” a photograph, is echoed in other senses (and with important differences) in artist Thomas Hirschhorn’s dramatic if less rigorously theorized invocation of “touching,” and in Moten’s call for what he

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88 Azoulay’s essay “The Ethic Of The Spectator: The Citizenry of Photography,” provides a succinct (albeit earlier) definition of the civil contract.

89 In this case, something like Walker’s *A Subtlety*—as both aesthetic installation and social experiment—represents an intentionally more extreme version of the daily photographic event.
suggests is a mode of actively “listening” to images, utterances, and performances. Part of what makes images of atrocity so contentious is certainly the way they circulate, particularly now in the age of rapid digital communication. What becomes quickly apparent, however, is that beyond a concern with the way images—whether paper postcards or digital photographs—travel from one context to another. These modes of physical interaction with photographic images are also figured through models of affective, anatomical, systems. For Azoulay, Moten, and others, the term circulation speaks to issues of distribution while simultaneously calling attention to the various routes the photographs take as they make their way through the viewer’s body. Critical acts of touching, watching, and listening pass through the viewer in the forms of different sensory experiences, and at different registers. This chapter asks why models of embodied and empathetic viewing become particularly important to these kinds of images. These models of criticism grapple with the problem of what to do with, or how to deal with, images of atrocity in an ethical or responsible way. What does it mean to be not only a viewer, but also a critic for these kinds of images? In various ways, these critics are trying to fight the problems of guilt exhaustion and empathy by bringing the experience of the image into the body. This push to internalize images of atrocity reflects anxieties about a failure to see, about the limits of empathy, and about the problem of making empathy the issue at all. To take it into the body is, in a sense, an attempt to skip that step entirely, rendering it unnecessary and therefore less of a threat.

Azoulay, Moten, T.J. Demos, Mieke Bal, and others also show the necessary folding together of aesthetics and politics. As critics, artist, and writers such as Saidiya Hartman, Moten, Sontag, Butler, Azoulay, Mark Reinhardt, and others have done before me, I have to ask: to show or not to show? What are the stakes of making “beautiful” photographs of atrocious events? What is the relationship between the formal elements of a photograph and its moral, ethical, or social obligations? Part of the exploration in this chapter is an attempt to work through these questions, which, now more than ever, refuse to lend themselves to any single, stable answer. Reinhardt describes this question more generally as the “problematic of withholding and display” (“Picturing Violence” 20). It is a question that “stands at the center of both the critique of aestheticization and the anxieties that . . . shape that critique in ways that can obscure the ethical and political problems of and possibilities in the representation of human
suffering” (20). Because images of atrocity are marked by their dangerous excess and their depiction of abjection, the photographic models I find most productive are the ones that try to negotiate difficult images by engaging with them, rather than leaving them out. Nevertheless, in this chapter I have been sparing in my inclusion of photographs – I’m still negotiating. Like the form of the essay itself, designed as an attempt to work through an issue or a question, this chapter tries to build some space to tease out negations, contradictions, and negotiations. It builds time for criticism and contemplation, in keeping with many of the theories of responsible, ethical, or civic engagement with images of atrocity that are outlined by the other theorists in this chapter.

As important as it is to re-consider the ways in which these two particular photographic events—lynching photography and the Abu Ghraib photography—are connected, I am also interested in exploring the critical discourse that negotiates how to talk about these photographs, including the question of whether or not to show them in the first place. Regardless of their similarities and differences, both the photography of lynchings (mostly in the United States in the late nineteenth century and twentieth century) and the photographs of American soldiers torturing and humiliating their detainees at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq) belong to the general category of atrocity photography. Ariella Azoulay provides a working definition for “the conventional atrocity photo,” which, she claims, has broken down to three main characteristics:

The first relates to that which is seen in the photograph: an intentional crossing of a certain threshold of the intact body which has been trespassed by various degrees of harm, possibly even becoming a dead body. The second is related to the manner in which the atrocity image is made public – accompanied by a mediating text emphasizing that the event portrayed is extraordinary, and the material scandalous, a journalistic scoop or a sign of moral degradation. The third characteristic is related to the generation of the horror described in the photograph; it lacks the typical features of the ‘inevitable price,’ shows superfluity, and cries out that this is something that could have – even should have – been prevented following international law, society’s moral norms or the nature of the regime. (Azoulay, “The Execution Portrait” 249-50)

Though Azoulay goes on to complicate and build on this basic definition in her own discussion of atrocity, this model provides a productive launching point for understanding the type of discourse in which these images are expected to circulate. The “atrocity image” is one that often ‘leaks’ out into “to the public sphere through agents
who thus wish to warn of deviation from routine ‘operational’ activity” as opposed to being identified as “a photograph that expresses the essence of this same ‘operational’ activity” (Azoulay 250). In other words, the atrocity photograph is one that is defined, in large part, by a sense of exposure, “leaking,” or being unearthed. As Julia Kristeva explains, a “corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object,” something which does not “respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”; abjection, for Kristeva, is something “shady,” “a hatred that smiles” (4). The photographs of Abu Ghraib leak out and are all the more disturbing for their thumbs up and their shady smiles.

Azoulay’s writing raises its own questions regarding the definition, distribution, and reproduction (the ‘leaking’ and re-presentation) of images of atrocity. As she explains, “[t]he question facing [her] again and again was whether or not to reprint photographs that show the photographed persons in situations so harsh as to entail humiliation or to cause injury to them” (Civil Contract 493). In a separate, dedicated section near the end of The Civil Contract of Photography entitled “A Comment on the Photographs,” Azoulay offers another practical description of her working definition for images of atrocity. The question of whether or not to reprint photographs “cannot be answered through the adoption of any single inclusive principle or generalization. It is imperative to scrutinize each individual case separately” (Azoulay, Civil Contract 493). In order to make that decision, “[t]he conditions in which the photograph was produced need to be reconstructed as exhaustively as possible, as do the circumstances of its

90 “Two weeks ago, 60 Minutes II received an appeal from the Defense Department, and eventually from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, gen. Richard Myers, to delay this broadcast – given the danger and tension on the ground in Iraq. 60 Minutes II decided to honor that request, while pressing for the Defense Department to add its perspective to the incidents at Abu Ghraib prison. This week, with the photos beginning to circulate elsewhere, and with other journalists about to publish their versions of the story, the Defense Department agreed to cooperate in our report” (60 Minutes). See also: “The Reach of War; In a Soldier’s Words, an Account of Concerns,” New York Times May 22, 2004. “Specialist Joseph M. Darby left an anonymous letter and a disc with photographs of abuse at Abu Ghraib with investigators on Jan 13.” http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/22/world/the-reach-of-war-in-a-soldiers-words-an-account-of-concerns.html
dissemination and the specific conditions enabling its role as an emergency claim, a
demand for ceasing the horror to which it testifies” (Azoulay, Civil Contract 493).

“Oh these grounds, one should then make a careful attempt to assess the
damage that the photograph might cause the person portrayed in it
(damage that will compound the injury already caused to her or to him in
the degrading situation itself and through previous dissemination of the
photograph) and to gauge this possible damage against the photograph’s
potential contribution toward realizing the address of the photographed
subject or of those who speak on their behalf. No less important is trying
to assess the photograph’s perception within the cultural milieu of the
photographed subject. Also to be taken into account is the possibly
weakened line of argument within this discussion, when it substitutes a
verbal description for the photograph itself” (Azoulay, Civil Contract 493).

Though the victims of lynchings are (almost by definition) no longer around to be
further injured, or humiliated by the dissemination of lynching photographs, James
Allen’s Without Sanctuary, an exhibition-turned book and web project based on the
Allen/Littlefield Collection of lynching postcards, represents an earlier form of circulation
for a specific genre of images of atrocity. The lynching postcards are photographs of
atrocity printed as material postcards, supplemented with handwritten commentary,
photographers’ stamps, and postage information, and then delivered through the
postage system. The postcards use images of murder and extralegal violence as a
means of connection and communication that passes from one location, and one set of
hands, to the next; they trace lines across the country as they pass from hand to hand
across the United States. In their original form, lynching photographs were mobilized as
documents to be shared between perpetrators and their sympathizers. They were also
effective tools for advertising lynchings to potential victims. Like images of lynching and
torture, what mobilizes the discussions around the Abu Ghraib images is their fitful,
tangled, controversial distribution across the United States and the world,
simultaneously, via the web, and the fact that these images are unearthed at the same
time that American soldiers are still deployed at war.

91 When selling and sending these postcards become illegal, some senders still resort to placing
the postcards inside envelopes in order to send them invisibly.
In both the case of Abu Ghraib and the lynching postcards, the reception of the photographs is variable to the audience as well as the historical context in which they are shown, uncovered, or re-discovered. The lynching postcards gain momentum and force as atrocity photographs when James Allen first exhibits his previously private collection at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York in 1999. This collection, in particular, becomes an image of atrocity when it is shown in the public sphere. The provenance of Without Sanctuary is particularly relevant because of the way it shifts in circulation and audience; the importance of pedagogy in terms of the exhibitions themselves; the conference; and for the general, ongoing discussion of images of atrocity. In contrast with the ability to share and discuss images from the comfort of one’s own computer, however, the gallery exhibitions highlight the tension involved in showing, and looking at, lynching postcards in a public and necessarily relational manner. There is a distinct difference between shared viewing in a gallery (with visitors of different races and backgrounds sharing the physical space and standing side by side as they look at the same images) versus within the imagined privacy of one’s own computer screen. The website’s multiple encouragements for viewers to comment, criticize, contribute, and participate, also highlight something the book form cannot do. The book offers privacy. It is a fixed form and does not invite engagement in the same tangible way (“send in pictures, tell us what you think”) as the website or the gallery exhibition.

Atrocity photography is a story, and one that is often expected to affect the public through which it circulates. Unlike the shameful photographs one might hide away in a secret box, the digital photographs of Abu Ghraib are made for sharing (Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others” 132). Here, the photographers are not photojournalists or documentarians. Instead, the soldiers themselves make the photographs with their own digital cameras; their own photographs of sex and torture (and, importantly, sex-as-torture) are shared amongst themselves and e-mailed to encouraging friends and family back home (Sontag, “Regarding the Torture of Others” 133). This chapter weaves together histories as seemingly disparate as extralegal violence in late nineteenth and early twentieth century the United States, torture and media frenzy from Abu Ghraib prison to the world wide web, sugar sculptures in Brooklyn, video installations in Manhattan, and photographs of self-inflicted burn wounds in Tunisia. Like Butler, I want to think about which bodies are visible, and which are made invisible, or whose pain is
counted as less interesting, productive, or affective, than others. Whose suffering circulates more freely? There is another common thread that often ties the violence together, however. I can’t help but think about the banality of violence against vulnerable bodies, and too often—as Walker’s *A Subtlety*, for instance, demonstrates (and as critics such as Azoulay explain)—the social, legal, and civic precarity that is itself too often connected with being female.

### 3.3. Framing

In “Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking With Sontag” (*Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*), Judith Butler places herself in conversation with Susan Sontag’s writing on photography. Butler’s argument foregrounds the stakes of her study, pointing out that “whether and how we respond to the suffering of others, how we formulate moral criticisms, how we articulate political analyses, depends upon a certain field of perceptible reality having already been established” (64). Throughout this chapter, and this dissertation as a whole, I am “thinking with” Butler as I am interested in a similar process of interpretation—one that thematizes the mechanisms of restriction and repetition enacted through patterns of discourse—to actively make the process of framing a “part of the story.” According to Butler, the study or critical viewing of a photograph requires the viewer to acknowledge the structures of power that are “‘embedded’ in the frame” of the photograph (71). Considering contemporary practices of embedded war reporting, and particularly the anxieties about the role of photography of war following Abu Ghraib, Butler argues “interpretation is not to be conceived restrictively in terms of a subjective act. Rather, interpretation takes place by virtue of the structuring constraints of genre and form on the communicability of affect—and so sometimes take place against one’s will or, indeed, in spite of oneself” (Butler 67). In addition to the photographer and the viewer, then, “the photograph itself becomes a structuring scene of interpretation – and one that may unsettle both maker and viewer in its turn” (Butler 67). The political background of a photograph is therefore at once formulated and renewed by the photograph’s contextual and ideological frame; the invisible frame functions as both “a boundary to the image” and “as structuring the image itself” (71).
The image acts upon the viewer and, by extension, the photographer. According to Butler, “[a]s a visual interpretation, the photograph can only be conducted within certain kinds of lines and so within certain kinds of frames – unless, of course, the mandatory framing becomes part of the story; unless there is a way to photograph the frame itself” (71). This notion of “photographing the frame” is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida’s discussion of *parergon*, the discursive frames that comment upon, criticize, describe, and ultimately “give rise to” (Derrida 9) photographs. Though the structuring scene, or framing, is rarely composed of what is actually seen or explicitly stated, by considering the structures of power we are better equipped to “interpret the interpretation that has been imposed on us,” allowing viewers to turn analysis into social critique (71). Butler also emphasizes the importance of considering both what the image shows (or does not show) and how it does so. For her, “the ‘how’ not only organizes the image, but works to organize our perception and thinking as well” (71). However, that this emphasis on the “how” seems at odds with Butler’s dismissal of the composition of the photograph – though she calls attention to the need to analyze the make-up of the photograph, Butler does not reproduce any of the images she discusses within her text – a tendency that appears throughout a number of texts dealing with images of atrocity.

Instead, Butler suggests that “we might think that our norms of humanization require the name and the face, but perhaps the ‘face’ works on us precisely through or as its shroud, in and through the means by which it is subsequently obscured . . . affirming this cognitive limit is a way of affirming the humanity that has escaped the visual control of the photograph” (95). For Butler, the emphasis is on what narrative frames can be (re)constructed, rather than on claiming some right to need to see the image (see the victim’s face, know the victim’s name). “To expose the victim further would be to reiterate the crime,” Butler claims, “so the task would seem to be a full documentation of the acts of the torturer, as well as a full documentation of those who exposed, disseminated, and published the scandal – but all this without intensifying the ‘exposure’ of the victim, either through discursive or visual means” (95). Despite the arguments against seeing and showing the photographs, however, Butler’s overall

92 “The critical image . . . must not only fail to capture its referent but show its failure” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 146).
argument nevertheless relies on the circulation of images of atrocity—and their subsequent aftermath—to call attention to the ideological problems that give rise to them. This is where the work of opposing these problems begins.

Though not invoking Butler in direct dialogue, Eduardo Cadava's essay “Trees, Hands, Stars, and Veils: The Portrait in Ruins,” articulates a similar understanding of what is at stake when dealing with photographs, and portraiture in particular. It is “not only the possibility of casting a light on those whom history has sought to reduce to silence, whom history has deprived of a voice and a face,” at issue here, “but also the chance that the traumas they have experienced can be given expression” (Cadava 9). Cadava is suggesting that a photograph cannot be reduced to or theorized as simply a printed image, but rather the photograph retains “the traces of a photographic event” (9).

Any attempt to reconstruct the photographic event requires more than the ability to see what is included in the photograph. The viewer must take part in “an act of engagement, an act of interpretation, which also responds to the several histories that, together, form the contexts within which the photograph was produced” (9). Echoing Butler’s argument that we must seek out what is invisible in the photograph, Cadava claims that, for photographs, “what is visible always threatens to become invisible and what is presently invisible is what needs to be read” (10). For both Cadava and Butler, the notion of visible/invisible is both contingent and politically loaded. If, as Butler argues, “norms are enacted through frames—and I believe they are—then it is important to negotiate the fact that the frame at once includes and forecloses. “Indeed,” Butler claims, “there are deaths that are partially eclipsed and partially marked, and that instability may well activate the frame, making the frame itself unstable. So the point would not be to locate what is ‘in’ or ‘outside’ the frame, but what vacillates between those two locations, and what, foreclosed, becomes encrypted in the frame itself” (75).

What ‘reading’ a photograph means, then, is actively accounting for the various “histories and contexts sealed within it, to respond to the innumerable experiences commemorated, displaced, and ciphered by it, to seek to reconstruct the circumstances in which it was produced or, better, of those it names, codes, disguises or dates on its surface” (Cadava 10). This kind of reconstructive work is arguably evident in aspects of the projects by James Allen (his collecting, cataloguing, and public engagement of lynching postcards) and artist Ken Gonzales-Day, whose research and reflections on
otherwise unnamed and unrecognized lynching victims in the American West seeks to “reconstruct” the sites, circumstances, and victims of lynching in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Cadava, “[i]f the structure of an image is defined in relation to what remains unseen, this withholding and withdrawing structure prevents us from experiencing the image in its entirety” (10). This impetus to bring to light unseen and invisible elements asks “us to recognize that the image, bearing as it always does several memories at once, is never closed” (10). Part of what makes images of atrocity so volatile is the way both the photographs and their affects are reframed and recontextualized; their mobility is problematic (as in the case of images of torture and humiliation) as well as potentially powerful (when those images are deployed and bring about some kind of hope or change, or when those images are allowed to circulate in place of the subjects who cannot).

3.4. Thinking With Phelan

I have been returning to Phelan’s essay, “Atrocity and Action: The Performative Force of Abu Ghraib Photographs,” both consciously and unconsciously throughout the course of writing this chapter, as her argument contains a number of well-rehearsed worries about the potential for photography to mobilize action or empathy. Of course, this worry about photography’s potential for change doesn’t belong to Phelan exclusively. Susan Sontag argues the initial shock of a traumatic image wears off, and the passing of a fleeting feeling does not necessarily result in political or social action. We might call the inaction in the face of images of suffering complacency, callousness, “compassion fatigue” (Keenan 438), the inability to recognize others as human, or the mark of too great a cultural and historical distance. Nevertheless, Phelan’s take on images of atrocity is particulary interesting for the way Phelan articulates her mistrust of repetition—the ability for an image to bring about change after multiple viewings, or beyond the first, traumatic impression—using J.L. Austin’s model of performative speech acts. What Phelan cautions, and what I will take up throughout the course of my discussion, is the persistent fear that “[l]ooking at an atrocity photograph repeatedly can transform the image from a performative to a constative expression” (54). Constative, in this case, speaks to photographs of war and violence that are “absorbed by history” (53).
These photographs “describe or document actions that have become attached to narratives” (53), therefore losing their performative force. Phelan attributes part of this problem to the passage of time, and to historicity. “Atrocity photographs depicting current ongoing crises . . . do not proceed from contemplative and affective mourning, but rather from the urgency of the present tense. In this sense,” she argues, “they are close to performative speech acts. Atrocity photographs that have been absorbed by history have a different force than those that are continuous with the moment of looking” (Phelan 53-4). Part of what this chapter puts into question, however, is what constitutes the so-called “moment of looking.”

Like Phelan, Ariella Azoulay would have the photographic moment extended. This extension requires, among other things, a rhetorical shift from looking to “watching.” In Azoulay’s formulation, the act of watching a photograph is one that allows the photograph to remain something akin to a performative, rather than constative, expression. Both Phelan and Azoulay are suggesting that to accept an image as history is to bankrupt its potential force for action in the present. Rather than make use of empathy as a marker of potential success, as it does in many other formulations, Azoulay asks to “shed terms such as ‘empathy,’ ‘shame,’ ‘pity,’ or ‘compassion’ as organizers of [the] gaze” (Civil Contract 17). Turning instead to the language of law and citizenship, Azoulay employs the term “civil contract” in order to “rethink [her] relation to and attitude toward these photographed individuals beyond guilt and compassion—outside of the merely psychological framework of empathy, of ‘regarding the pain of others’—on the basis of civic duty and the mutual trust of those who are governed” (Civil Contract 88-89). Both Azouay and Phelan return to the specter of Sontag and the notion of “regarding the pain of others.” Whereas Phelan mistrusts the cooling, historicizing effect of narrativization, Sontag mistrusts photography’s reliance on renewed and repeated viewings. As one critic notes, “Sontag still faults photography for not being writing: it lacks narrative continuity and remains fatally linked to the momentary” (Butler
In each of these cases, questions of narrative and history are central to any notion of the extended moment.

I revisit the question of whether photographs function differently within the moment of looking than they do once they have become familiar to the viewer (“absorbed by history”) and re-work the terms of this question throughout the course of this chapter. I begin with Phelan’s critique because it has been sitting on my shoulder as throughout my own extended moment of writing this chapter, and because it actively engages in both practicing and criticizing the kind of “coherent narrative” that connects the Abu Ghraib photographs to historical lynching photography. Despite Phelan’s objections, I am guided by the fact that these two photographic performances have been—and therefore are now—unquestionably, discursively connected. Phelan claims “the fear that photographs dull one’s responsiveness, an argument that the sheer ubiquity of photography lessens or diffuses its emotional impact, is often the result of an implicit shift in a viewer’s encounter with the photograph” (Phelan 54). She is likely responding, at least in part, to Sontag’s noted fear of the power of a photograph to incite any kind of political action beyond the affective moment of viewing (despite Sontag’s own affection for the narrative, rather than the visual).

Despite being officially categorized as interrogation tactics, the purpose of the Abu Ghraib photographs was ostensibly to demoralize the prisoners. “Designed as theatres of humiliation, the Abu Ghraib photographs enact the fundamental erasure performed by the act of making visible” (Phelan 55). Following intellectual work

93 In Butler’s words: “The specific question that concerned Sontag . . . in both On Photography and Regarding the Pain of Others, was whether photographs still had the power – or ever did have the power – to communicate the suffering of others in such a way that viewers might be prompted to alter their political assessment of war. For photographs to communicate effectively in this way, they must have a transitive function: they must act upon viewers in ways that have a direct bearing on the kinds of judgments those viewers will formulate about the world. Sontag concedes that photographs are transitive. They do not merely portray or represent – they relay affect. In fact, in times of war, this transitive affectivity of the photograph may overwhelm and numb its viewers. She is, though, less convinced that a photograph might motivate its viewers to change their point of view or to assume a new course of action” (Butler 68). Sontag later revises her claim (in Regarding the Pain of Others), claiming that in order to evoke a moral response photos must “not only maintain the capacity to shock, but also appeal to our sense of moral obligation” (Butler 69). Sontag also suggests that narrative lengthens the moment (Regarding the Pain of Others 122).
recognizing the effects of Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (most notably by Michel Foucault), Laura Mulvey’s work on the male gaze in Hollywood film, and criticism addressing colonial and racist gazes, for instance, Phelan suggests it is potentially useful to consider Abu Ghraib in terms of the now-familiar notion “that looking is often a mode of violence, an act embedded in regimes of power” (55). Furthermore, the potential meaning of Abu Ghraib photographs “shifts as they perform in different genres and contexts. Nevertheless, some images “resist historicity” and retain performative force… like some aspects of the psychoanalytic account of trauma (Phelan 54). The Abu Ghraib photographs, for instance, continue to return and to trouble viewers in new and often unexpected ways – from fine art exhibitions to street art, representations in popular culture, and beyond.

Though some of the critical work following the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs manages to “side-step” the “failure-to-see-the-other” that Phelan recognizes in the viewer-based study of photographs of atrocity, many of these do so by likening the Abu Ghraib photographs to “lynching photographs of African-American men in the South in the early twentieth century” (55). Not long after the wide release of the photographs, commentators and critics began to draw connections between Abu Ghraib and lynching photography. Phelan argues that the move to compare the two events betrays the critic’s desire for a coherent narrative, making the conversation inherently suspect. She claims that the desire to align the Abu Ghraib photographs “with a historical taxonomy” (such as a history of lynching) is “a symptom of critical defensiveness – a way to blunt or mitigate the present-tense force of these [Abu Ghraib] photographs” (55). More forcefully, even, Phelan conflates what she calls this urge toward “historical taxonomy” with other “metaphorical sleight of hand,” where instead of addressing the subjects and their conditions, discourse on the Abu Ghraib photographs reflects American exceptionalism; critics want the photographs to speak to, or be “‘about’ ideology, sadism, racism, the ethics of the encounter with the other, the pornography of
war and so on” (Phelan 55). By fixing Abu Ghraib within an established history of lynching, then, writers expose their own critical blind spots, forfeiting the performative potential of the images to their own desire for a coherent narrative.

Despite these warnings, I am confident my account will not provide the kind of coherent narrative that would endanger or limit active engagement with these images. There is too much uncertainty. Opinions about these photographs are so deeply subjective. Like Phelan, I am interested in finding critical strategies for maintaining the “present-tense force” of photographs while still addressing the real subjects and their conditions. But this is where we part ways. I want to explore this present tense without ignoring the productive potential of pursuing the connections that place separate photographic events such as Abu Ghraib and lynching photography in discursive and structural relation to each other. Not only do these events end up connected through discourse (the very critical trends Phelan so disdains) but the Abu Ghraib and lynching photographs are also structurally connected. The structural legacy of slavery that still frames race relations in the United States has since been transported, transplanted, and re-enacted in Iraq. In demanding that certain photographic events be considered as completely discrete critical models, Phelan forecloses the possibility for tracing systemic violence as it appears—or disappears—within the photograph, both in its production and its reception. By considering these photographs together, and extending to them the same formal and critical attention I apply to art, documentary, and vernacular photography, however, I am resisting the push to understand these photographs as radically separate from other forms of photography. Many of the same conventions that contribute to touristic photographs, for instance, also contribute to the making of photographs of atrocity.

Like Sontag and Hito Steyerl, Bal seems wary of emphasizing formal beauty or aesthetic value. Whereas Steyerl chooses “copy” (“In Defense of the Poor Image,” November, etc.), Bal favours the term “citation”. In “The Politics of Citation,” Bal argues

94 Like Sontag, Phelan connects the acts of looking at, showing, and making connections between images of atrocity in terms of manipulation, or “sleight of hand.” By this logic, the swiping hand in Thomas Hirschhorn’s Touching Reality dexterously performs actual sleight; like a magician at work, Hirschhorn simultaneously obscures and draws attention to the techniques he employs to affect the viewer.
that in quoting images we always run the risk of repeating, rather than challenging, the colonial gaze (“The Politics of Citation” 217). She therefore disputes the use of citation for difficult or problematic images, including those re-produced for academic or cultural purposes. In doing so, Bal frames the problems with the scholarly re-contextualization of contentious images in a manner that could give almost any researcher pause. She calls for critics to be self-aware, self-reflective, and to avoid falling into the trap of using scholarship as an alibi for adopting the same ideology or gaze they claim to want to abolish; indeed, she claims, “the reproduction . . . of objectionable images is a gesture of complicity, no matter how critical the text that accompanies them” (Double Exposures 217). To illustrate her point, Bal considers Malek Alloula’s treatment of postcards in The Colonial Harem. Of The Colonial Harem, Reinhardt explains: “if these images belong more obviously in the territory of sexual fascination than (the sometimes overlapping) domain of staged violence, they do not escape the problem of pain and picturing, either” (“Painful Photographs” 36). In putting together the text, “Alloula’s premise is that their making and circulation not only reflect but also enact a form of dominance over those pictured, the dominance of colonizers over colonized and men over women” (Reinhardt, “Painful Photographs” 36).

As part of the solution to the problematic re-appropriation of the colonial gaze, Bal suggests the need to address and analyze every photograph that is reproduced (“cited”) within the frame of the book or essay. Too often, she claims, critics fall back on the desire to include the most beautiful or the most dramatic illustration. If a critic wishes to include an image of atrocity within the context of their own work, for instance, then it is their responsibility to avoid the gratuitous quotation of problematic photographs, to adequately unpack the image within critical discussion, and to justify its inclusion. As important, Bal argues, is the need not to be seduced by the most beautiful or dramatic image, but to instead find and draw on the discourses of those photographs that work to show the cracks, rather than blindly reproducing, the dominant or colonial gaze.

Political and aesthetic judgments are therefore not mutually exclusive but brought about and defined through the same forces and ideologies. At this point, we might

95 See Reinhardt (“Painful Photographs” 36) and his discussion of Mieke Bal’s reading of the “colonialist gaze” in Alloula.
consider Judith Butler’s question: “How does one object to human suffering without perpetuating a form of anthropocentrism that has so readily been used for destructive purposes?” (*Frames of War* 76). She explains:

Wherever there is the human, there is the inhuman; when we now proclaim as human some group of beings who have previously not been considered to be, in fact, human, we admit that the claim to ‘humanness’ is a shifting prerogative. Some humans take their humanness for granted, while others struggle to gain access to it. The term ‘human is constantly doubled, exposing the ideality and coercive character of the norm: some humans qualify as human; some humans do not. (Butler, *Frames of War* 76)

As in the national identity built upon inclusion and exclusion, Butler suggests the binary itself calls attention to the artificiality of, and the movement between, the categories. Rather than embodying “the norm”—the notion of the “human”—Butler suggests we regard it instead as “a differential of power that we must learn to read, to assess culturally and politically, and to oppose in its differential operations” (*Frames of War* 77) while at the same time making use of the term in order to de-naturalize and complicate it. In racialized photographs such as the ones I have been discussing, the homogenous field of visuality, “as well as the perceptual, economic, and political values that organize it instantiate ‘a hostile realm of significance’ for African Americans, the sight (site) of whose bodies invalidates their claims to value” (Barrett 109). Non-white populations are not privileged in this visual economy. One result of this foreclosure is the need for African Americans to make what Barrett calls “compensatory and strategic investments in ‘the less privileged sense-making medium of sound’” (Chaney 109-110).96 This is one potential mode of opposing (by de-privileging) the visual field. The auditory and the phonic provide alternative sites and strategies for resistance such as music, singing, and dance. Sound is, therefore, not simply an alternative to visuality, but also a form that strategically rejects modes of relation that actively bar certain actors from seeing themselves as legitimately visible, or human.

3.5. Touching Feeling

“The moment when a feeling enters the body is political. This touch is political.” — Adrienne Rich, “The Blue Ghazals,” 1969

Thomas Hirschhorn’s piece Touching Reality (2012) is hard to watch. Exhibition promotions anticipate this difficulty; Touching Reality is often represented with a still image captured from the video: a close-cropped, crude digital photograph of a dead man’s head. The skull is broken open at the top, and what was presumably once inside of it is now a smear of reddish material bared across the right side of the frame. I first encountered Touching Reality as part of the International Center of Photography’s 2013 Triennial exhibition, A Different Kind of Order. In order to see the piece, viewers had to duck behind a heavy black curtain and enter into a darkened, enclosed viewing area. The video, projected onto one wall of the square space, features a close up of an iPad screen. Only the iPad touchscreen and the hand that controls it are visible within the frame of the video. The camera’s framing remains constant as the hand within it swipes to change from one image to the next – sometimes back and forth, pausing on specific images to zoom in (pressing thumb and index finger apart), passing over or calling attention to and enlarging details of the images on the screen.97 Touching Reality is, in many ways, a digital slide show of images of atrocity; the images shift from one gory, violent photograph to the next. The photographs are not all from the same photographer, place, or event, but what they have in common is that they are photographs of war, brutal suffering, and death. These are, in Hirschhorn’s words, digitized “images of destroyed human bodies” (Hirschhorn, “Why is it Important” n. pag.). Though the video’s ‘narrative’ mimics the format of a slide show (or rather more aptly, it enacts the process of scrolling through the “Camera Roll” within the iPad, calling attention to the specificity of viewing images using digital technology), this is a video rather than a pre-set, evenly timed slide show. Still digital images are shown on the iPad screen, yet Touching Reality is not an exhibition of still photographs.

97 See Mika Elo’s "Digital Finger: Beyond Phenomenological Figures of Touch."
In *Touching Reality*, the viewer is subject to the whims of the hand (the unknown other ‘viewer’). Standing in the darkened space, the viewer is both uncomfortably complicit in, yet powerless in front of, the hand’s pace of swiping and refocusing. The video itself carries on, controlling and unapologetic. Believing that the viewer cannot be trusted to direct their own gaze (the gaze they would avert when given a chance), Hirschhorn’s video controls the movement, turning an otherwise static viewing experience into pre-determined movement through a series of images. The video presents progression viewers are more likely to follow than if they were entrusted with the choice to look at still images. The hand’s owner changes their mind; they pass a picture and move onto the next before inexplicably swiping back to the image before.

I emerged from *Touching Reality* and, after stepping out into a nearby corridor to collect myself, returned to the larger exhibition space. As I carried on through the ICP galleries I began to notice the other visitors. The people who had spent time behind the dark curtained walls of *Touching Reality* were easy to distinguish from the rest – they were the ones who (like me) moved about the gallery quietly wiping tears from their eyes. We all strained to re-focus and move on to other works, but the impact of *Touching Reality* is difficult to shake off. Like forcing your head underwater and holding your breath until it feels as though your lungs will burst, to remain submerged in Hirschhorn’s installation requires an act of will set against what *feels like* survival instinct. In there, I felt the urge to squeeze my eyes shut, to escape; at the very least I wanted to restrain that projected hand, to keep it from brushing against and carrying my gaze onto (and into) the bloodied, broken bodies.

Hirschhorn’s piece is not simply important because of my own supposed feat of endurance in the face of its difficulty, nor is it most remarkable for the bleary eyes of my

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98 See Hal Foster’s “The Archival Impulse” for his discussion of Hirshhorn’s archival model as one of “ramification”—like a Deleuzian rhizome—“mutations of connection and disconnection, a process that this art also serves to disclose” (5-6).

99 Jennifer Doyle acknowledges a similar problem in her introduction to *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*. “Critics have limits,” she begins, stating what is both obvious and often ignored. “We can be willful and stubborn . . . We all have limits that look pretty uncritical from most angles, and we rarely know these limits until we encounter them” (1). What Doyle calls a “limit,” Peggy Phelan, too, characterizes as “a limit within the act of seeing,” “a blind spot” (“Atrocity and Action” 51).
fellow visitors at the ICP. When thinking about images of atrocity, it is often too easy to think solely about oneself, rather than the person whose atrocity we could be actively witnessing. But if not just about the subjects, then who is *Touching Feeling* for? Whose touch? Whose feelings? And how do we deal with the fact that Hirschhorn has taken real images of suffering and atrocity, photographs of real “broken bodies,” and re-presented them as a video within an art gallery? As Mark Reinhardt warns, “commentators on contemporary visual culture sometimes seem so preoccupied with the critique of specific styles or instances—or even the very act, as such—of picturing pain, that they are in danger of forgetting the most important problem is the suffering of those pictured” (Reinhardt 34). While an essential part of the ontology of the atrocity photograph, the tendency to privilege the personal response (both in my own experience, outlined throughout this dissertation, and also in the tendency of other viewers and critics) can threaten to drown out other aspects of the photograph and the real conditions of its subjects. Setting aside for a moment the potentially productive sense of solidarity that comes from sharing one’s tears with strangers, viewer response falls short if applied as the sole means for discussing our interactions with difficult images. Concerns regarding the ethics, or efficacy, of looking at difficult photographs are often communicated in tandem with discussions of form; this question is particularly fraught when dealing with photographs of suffering and atrocity that have been deployed (or re-deployed) as art. In this chapter, I argue for the need—and, in fact, the necessity—to acknowledge both the personal and affective responses as well as the formal elements and the contextualized, historicizing, more obviously social and “political” responses to difficult images.

*Touching Reality* asks “Why Is It Important—Today—To Show and Look at Images of Destroyed Human Bodies?” This query, the title of an essay by Thomas Hirschhorn, presupposes the question viewers will ask of his work and the question that, in part, drives this chapter. The essay’s title also antagonizes the stakes of Hirschhorn’s project. Under bullet point number five, entitled “Reduction to Facts,” Hirschhorn declares that “Truth,” with a capital T, “is irreducible; therefore the images of destroyed human bodies and irreducible and resist factuality. . . I want to oppose the texture of facts today. The habit of reducing things to facts is a comfortable way to avoid touching Truth, and to resist this is a way to touch Truth” (Hirschhorn, “Why Look” n. pag.). Here,
Hirschhorn connects looking with touching, and touching with knowing. The use of a touch screen iPad highlights the tactile interest in his project. The iPad itself also alludes to privilege, aesthetics, and a disavowal of political engagement (who made that iPad, and under what conditions?). As is also common for Hirschhorn’s work, Touching Reality sets up a contrast between “art” and activism. In bringing twice-removed, found images of atrocity into the gallery space, Hirschhorn claims the discourses of art and not-art simultaneously. What Hirschhorn’s essay ignores, however, is something akin to Edouard Glissant’s notion of “opacity,” or simply the inability for an image to capture Truth. By claiming the paradoxical ability to find one singular model of truth—by ignoring facts—Hirschhorn arguably mutes the potential of Touching Reality itself. Touching Reality denies the subjects in the photographs of any opportunity to be named, or any chance for their plight to be placed within context. The images are presumably mixed up in a way that bunches various events, locations, and subjects all together, their ostensible individuality or uniqueness levelled in the process. Touching Feeling rejects the historicity of the images, as well as the individuality of the parts that make up the collection of “broken bodies” it represents. In doing so, the piece reduces the very real subjects to interchangeable tools in the search for some irreducible Truth even as Hirschhorn deploys them as evidence of their structural relation to each other, the universalization or democratization of broken bodies. Nevertheless, as Azoulay notes, the process of naming or categorizing individuals in terms of their situation (to identify a person as a “refugee,” for instance) is to define the individual and their situation in terms of their national status (or lack thereof). The Truth of Hirschhorn’s “broken bodies” occludes the personal and political specificity of the subjects whose bodies are placed on display.

Hirschhorn’s question is not new. The premise of Touching Reality and its accompanying essay assumes a place within a long-running conversation about images of atrocity that, for many, begins most meaningfully with Sontag’s On Photography, but

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100 “The camera defines for us what we allow to be ‘real’—and it continually pushes forward the boundary of the real. Photographers are particularly admired if they reveal hidden truths about themselves or less than fully reported social conflicts in societies both near and far from where the viewer lives” (Sontag, “Photography: A Little Summa” 125).

101 Sontag suggests that each community or individual’s suffering wants to think of itself as unique; we all want our personal atrocities want to be recognized as personal, not universal.
then extends through the work of Allan Sekula, Martha Rosler, Victor Burgin, Judith Butler, Allen Feldman, Susie Linfield, Elspeth Brown, Thy Phu, Phelan, and others. In “Painful Photographs: From the Ethics of Spectatorship to Visual Politics,” Mark Reinhardt asks: “Why consider images of pain? Why this facet of suffering? Why now? Why has the relationship between pain and picturing become so significant in discussions of visual culture today?” (33). Rehearsing a common set of worries, Reinhardt asks whether “we tend to focus on ways of picturing pain only when unwilling to confront, because unable to affect, the events or circumstances to which the pictures respond? (“Picturing Pain” 34). According to Phelan, “[m]ore than other genres of photographs, atrocity photographs ask us to consider: what do photographs do? What actions do they prompt? What actions do they prohibit?” (“Atrocity and Action” 51). More aggressive than many other types of photographs, “atrocity photographs provoke questions about reception; to an unusual degree, the significance and meaning of an atrocity photograph depend on what viewers understand, feel, and do upon encountering it” (Phelan, “Atrocity and Action” 51). Touching Reality provokes these questions while at the same time showing the way images are also things viewers can touch, manipulate, and (in some cases) swipe aside.

When the photographs depicting the torture and humiliation of Iraqi detainees at the hands of U.S. troops in Abu Ghraib prison were first made public in 2004 (photographs made by the U.S. soldiers themselves) the general outcry that followed was often framed in terms of the viewer’s experience in encountering the images. The concern, in much of the American media especially, was with the way the Abu Ghraib photographs caused an uneasy recasting of American self-image. After seeing evidence of what appeared to be the shameless, sadistically ‘playful’, and arguably fully sanctioned torture of prisoners by American soldiers, many claimed the country’s
popular imagination of itself had to be reconsidered. In the United States, discussions around the photographs demonstrate a prevailing idea that the way Americans can know and think of them selves, and the way they can be viewed and recognized by the rest of the world, necessarily changes in the face of this photographic evidence. Phelan’s take on the Abu Ghrab photographs challenges viewer response as an appropriate lens for viewing the images. Instead, she offers a withering critique of the impulse to make an image of torture about the viewer rather than the subject. Phelan puts a fine point on it: “The obsessive focus on what the photographs said about viewers in the United States context obscured the pain the prisoners endured. Thus the act of looking at these photographs extends and is consonant with the original failure-to-see-the-other that the photographs frame so dramatically” (“Atrocity and Action” 55). Though I agree with Phelan’s claim, this failure-to-see is precisely what makes it all the more important to interrogate, and challenge, viewer response. As Susie Linfield suggests, we should pay attention to the messy, disappointing, complicated, or ‘ugly feelings’ (following Sianne Ngai) that come out in our responses to difficult images. What can a piece like Touching Reality actually tell us about the way we relate to each other? Rather than ignore the questions being asked, one important answer is that we must allow the critical conversation to lead us back to the subjects of the photographs themselves.

But this return to anonymous subjects can also get complicated along the way. In his essay “Mobilizing Shame,” Thomas Keenan defines the idea of “mobilizing shame”—common parlance in human rights movements and organizations—as a “weak form of enforcement” driven by the idea that knowledge (of atrocity and violations) generates “action (reaction)” (437). Keenan argues the attempt to “mobilize shame” “suggest[s] a

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102 In the exclusive April 28 2004 60 Minutes II expose of the Abu Ghrab torture and photograph scandal, reporter Dan Rather asks Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, deputy director of coalition operations in Iraq, “What can the Army say specifically to Iraqis and others who are going to see this and take it personally?” and Kimmitt replies (in just the kind of characteristically self-centered, inadequate response Phelan outlines): “The first thing I’d say is we’re appalled as well. These are our fellow soldiers. These are the people we work with every day, and they represent us. They wear the same uniform as us, and they let their fellow soldiers down.” Though I doubt the Iraqis are particularly sympathetic to this aspect of the torture – how it makes American soldiers feel... Nevertheless, Kimmitt also asks makes the following appeal (to the Iraqis but more specifically to “the American people): “Don’t judge your army based on the actions of a few” (60 Minutes).
wilful fusion of an Enlightenment faith in the power of reason and knowledge with a realistic pessimism that retreats to the shame appropriate to the unenlightened” (437). In the contemporary media climate, “the enjoyment or the exposure is now, at least often enough to consider it nonaccidental, on the side of those who appear on camera” (Keenan 439). While Keenan’s suggested model does not apply to the specific atrocities this chapter explores, his question “what role can publicity, the expose, and shame (still) play?” (439) is applicable. This question seems to haunt Hirschhorn’s work from conception to execution. These are, after all, found images and Hirschhorn’s iPad has likely inherited its vast collection of (digital) images of war, violence, suffering, and atrocity through the public forum of Google search.

Nevertheless, it is emotion that delineates the boundaries between individuals, just as the black curtains draw the so-called space of Hirschhorn’s installation. As Jennifer Doyle explains in *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, “[t]he sense of interiority that seems to come with emotion should be thought of as one of emotion’s effects. Work that openly explores emotion as a surface effect upends our ideas of what comes first, feeling or expression. This can in fact be the very thing that makes an artwork moving” (Doyle 108). Indeed, Sara Ahmed traces the origin of the word “emotion” back to Latin, *emovere*, which means, “to move, to move out” (10). Doyle’s project is to reconsider critical engagement with contemporary artwork, questioning the way general audiences and critics approach, and write about, art. Her argument echoes the same ideas of circulation, affect, and even *t* that Butler’s outlines in her discussion of framing. Doyle’s discussion takes place within a different context, however, when she argues that emotions are both mediated and social. Doyle is drawing on Ahmed’s claim (from *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*) that emotions are relational, rather than isolated. “Emotions,” Doyle explains, “are profoundly *intersubjective*. They do not happen inside the individual but in relation to others” (Doyle 109). According to Ahmed, “[e]motions shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time, as well as through orientations towards and away from others” (Ahmed 4). Ahmed’s notion that objects of emotion circulate runs counter to much of the discourse on emotion, which, Doyle suggests, “treat[s] it as something we have, as something that rises up from inside . . . or as something that ‘sinks in’ from the outside – as the outside world makes us ‘feel bad’ (Doyle 109). Emotion is, Ahmed
argues, “not simply something ‘I’ or ‘we’ have. Rather it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces and boundaries are made” (qtd. in Doyle 109). In the process, emotions “allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects” (qtd. in Doyle 109). This interplay between subject and object provides a useful lens through which to look at mediated forms.

Consider how this process works in literature. As Jacques Derrida suggests, a novel “could be moving exactly because the ownership of emotion is troubled and displaced from the reader onto someone else. The reader doesn’t always experience her reactions to novels as proper to her;” instead, the feelings themselves give the sense of residing “within and around the novel, belonging to the author, to characters, to scenes, situations, and other readers” (Doyle 109). Emotions are mediated. Derrida “suggest[s] that we feel not to the extent that experience seems immediate, but to the extent that it doesn’t; not to the extent that other people’s experiences remind us of our own, but to the extent that our own seems like someone else’s” (Doyle 109). Hirschhorn plays on this same sense of emotional mediation, or detachment, when he leads the viewer by a hand that could almost be, but is decidedly not, our own. Like the images of atrocity themselves, the hand is the one acting. We can tell ourselves we are just the ones watching something that would seemingly go on with or without us (the video was already playing when I ducked into the room, and I assume it kept playing after I left). While the viewer has to forfeit control of the movement to this hand, the video also enables them to feel absolved of any responsibility or guilt in moving through, and looking at, the photographs.

*Touching Reality* actively draws on “found” images. Hirschhorn has videotaped and shown them in the gallery, setting down layer after layer of mediation. In the process, his work necessarily speaks to the ways images circulate and change context. As Doyle explains, and not unlike the notion of skin Vivian Sobchack and Laura U. Marks offer in their discussions of the haptic, beyond “mark[ing] the boundary between the self and the other . . . Emotion brings those boundaries into being” (Doyle 109). Emotion is therefore “not communicated so much as it is circulated, transferred, modulated, and amplified. An expression does not represent an already existing feeling,” Doyle explains; rather, “it is the very thing that makes emotion happen, or, more nearly, it is the thing that sets emotion into motion. Tears migrate” (109). With *Touching Reality,*
Hirschhorn’s dark, curtained area creates a separate environment within the exhibition. There is no verbal commentary included in the room with or as part of the video. In this space viewers are overwhelmed by the screen and by their relation to it. Hirschhorn’s piece seems contained within its own controlled environment, but part of what makes photographs of atrocity so volatile is that we cannot control their contextualization and viewing. Like photographs sent via mail or email, or posted online, affect circulates. And like the sensitized gallery visitors shuffling around, drying their tears in front of other artworks, the images and affects—the emotions and tears—of Touching Reality spill out beyond the curtained off area, through the exhibition, out the front doors of the ICP, onto Sixth Avenue, and beyond.

3.6. Circulation

There are a number of ways we might think about the circulation of images. In The Migrant Image: The Art and Politics of Documentary during Global Crisis, T.J. Demos offers “migrancy” as a productive model for thinking about mobility and citizenship in the current age of globalization and neoliberalism. Contemporary mobility is marked by a proliferation of stateless individuals and communities, reduced, as they say, to what Giorgio Agamben refers to as “bare life” (xiv). Embedded within the term migrancy, then, are the terms statelessness, exile, refugee, as well as mobility, and circulation. Demos singles out artist Hito Steyerl’s 2004 video essay November, an extended reflection on and a kind of eulogy to her martyred friend Andrea Wolf. November weaves through a number of themes, including the extralegal execution of Wolf (and Steyerl’s mix of mourning and survivor’s guilt), the mobility of images (via printing press, tape recording, and the Internet), and Steyerl’s articulation of the disjunctions between fiction and fact. Demos describes November as a “fascinating tale [that] reveals the emerging conditions of globalization’s image-regime to be one of virtual drift and endlessly shifting contexts, as much as geographical displacements and post-Cold War political realignments”; in other words, he claims, “by drawing on those circulatory flows Steyerl invents an innovative modeling of documentary on the basis of the uncertainty of meaning owing to the unstoppable mobility of images” (xviii). In this context, the term “circulation” articulates an idea important to the current generation of
documentary scholars such as Michael Renov, who suggests “it may just be that the representations of the real have more rather than less power to shape our world than heretofore, that the production and control of the flow of historically based images is increasingly the arena of social power that matters most” (qtd. in Demos xvii). Indeed, by documenting and re-deploying images of historical struggle, artists and documentarians are able to animate and re-animate political solidarities, while calling for remembering as well as action (Demos xviii).

Following both the images and their subjects, this discussion of migrancy is valuable for its attention to how digital images, as well as people, circulate. In doing so, Demos also critiques the notion of a stable truth-value by drawing on the production of affective relations that destabilize the documentary image. Philip N. Howard and Muzammi M. Hussain demonstrate the importance of migrancy with respect to population and technology. Howard and Hussain attribute the increasing importance of social media as a tool for civil action and civil disobedience to a number of factors. These include greater financial availability of Internet access, the changing demographics of Internet users, and more. Certainly one of the most important factors in this case, however, is that information and images can flow across borders—both in and out—where people so often cannot.103

Hito Steyerl also has this international flow in mind when she suggests the political potential of the low-resolution, migratory image. In her essay, “In Defense of the Poor Image,” Steyerl describes “the poor image” as “a copy in motion” (1). The idea of movement, here, is key; unlike valuable objects and massive digital files loaded with information, “poor images circulate” (Steyerl, “Poor Image” 6). By “poor images,” Steyerl means low-resolution images, jpgs, images that are compressed to a size that makes them easy to send through text messages and emails, images small enough to post easily on websites, or images printed and posted as analogue copies. “Poor” images are uncounted, unregulated, and unlimited. “Poor” in the commercial or economic sense, these images “are not assigned any value within the class society of images – their status as illicit or degraded grants them exemption from its criteria” (Steyerl, “Poor

103 Lynching photographs, in contrast, are sent by those who have freedom of mobility and ownership to others who share that same freedom.
Formally, the images are poor because they lack the high resolution and technological sheen that comes with expensive technology and attention to composition and colour. In other words, “[t]heir lack of resolution attests to their appropriation and displacement” (Steyerl, “Poor Image” 6). But their mobility also renders these images ambivalent; they flow across borders with ease, and yet they do so largely in response to the commodification of art and image within capitalist and neoliberal systems. In contrast to the fetishization of detail and authenticity common to film aesthetics (high definition, remastered), television and high-end visual technology—values the decomposition of the image within visual art and film protests—the poor image prizes mobility over appearance. This is a system driven by “another form of value defined by velocity, intensity, and spread. Poor images are poor because they are heavily compressed and travel quickly” (Steyerl, “Poor Image” 7). Like a small plane that has to unload extra weight in order to lift off, poor images “lose matter and gain speed” (Steyerl, “Poor Image” 7). Steyerl suggests that the trade-off for image quality is the capacity to construct “anonymous global networks just as it creates a shared history . . . By losing its visual substance it recovers some of its political punch and creates a new aura around it. This aura is no longer based on the permanence of the ‘original,’ but on the transience of the copy” (“Poor Image” 8). The power of the copy is essential to Steyerl, as it offers a direct challenge to truth-value based on the representational aspects of an image. Like Steyerl, Sven Lütticken is concerned with the potential power of repeated images, though Lütticken’s interest is more specifically on the way these images might travel. As Lütticken explains, the “rephotographing” of movies and copies made of copies makes it “hard to keep the migration of moving images—their physical movement—under control” (“Viewing Copies” n. pag.). As a result, copies, or poor images, have the potential to circulate through different systems of exchange and value than those of the market economy. The fact that these images have no “authenticity” or “legitimate” economic value means that their movement evades regulation and control.

Steyerl emphasizes the idea of the “copy” with her interest in VHS tapes, her rephotographing (and re-filming) of videos on her television screen, and more. In Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag also weighs in on the debate regarding the anti-art, anti-aesthetic biases as they relate to discourses on images of suffering and atrocity. “For the photography of atrocity,” like documentary, “people want the weight of
witnessing without the taint of artistry, which is equated with insincerity or mere contrivance,” Sontag claims (Regarding the Pain 26). More specifically, “[p]ictures of hellish events seem more authentic when they don’t have the look that comes from being ‘properly’ lighted and composed, because the photographer either is an amateur or—just as serviceable—has adopted one of several familiar anti-art styles” (Sontag, Regarding the Pain 26). Amateur photographs (or photographs that seem, formally, to have been made by an amateur, or by one whose skills of composition are not considered to be more refined than those of the viewer) are considered to be more trustworthy than those made with recognizable formal and rhetorical skill. Because all photographs of suffering and atrocity are now generally subject to suspicion, aesthetically weak images are less suspicious than other more skilfully or carefully composed photographs; they are “welcomed as possessing a special kind of authenticity” (Sontag, Regarding the Pain 27). As Sontag notes (in a sense aligning the ethos of photography more widely with that of images of atrocity) photography deals in chance, and therefore inherently favours “the spontaneous, the rough, the imperfect” (Regarding the Pain 28). In this case, the “poor” image is not necessarily a copy, but it is an image made with an aesthetic deficit of some kind. Its lack of pretension suggests immediacy and authenticity.

The poor image’s ability to shrug off both aesthetic and geographical constraints makes it a useful vehicle for citizen journalism, as evidenced through the use of cellular phone imagery and social media in the Arab Spring uprisings and beyond. Like T.J. Demos’s notion of the ability of documentary work to “animate and reanimate political solidarities,” Steyerl’s ‘copies’ move and fly in part because they are unhinged from economies that demand visual quality, or a clearly established location (these are not priceless murals that demand to be visited where they reside, on the homes of cathedral walls, for instance, but rather migratory, homeless mechanical reproductions). In her case for the potential of poor images, Steyerl plays on Dziga Vertov’s notion of a “visual bond,” a connection brought about through shared viewing that can “not only inform or entertain, but also organize its viewers” (“Poor Image” 8). Steyerl suggests Vertov’s theory of “visual bond” has in fact been realized through the vast circulation of digital and low-tech imagery (but perhaps not the way Vertov, who sought a mass communist collective, had intended it). Viewers from across the world can become affectively linked
through the process of watching the same movies, seeing the same images, and listening to the same music that circulates.

For Steyerl, however, the copy also extends into the viewer’s body. In the voice-over for her 2004 film November, Steyerl describes her own early explorations in filmmaking and posturing (leading up and into making her first film, which featured a man-fighting band of Marxist-Feminist martial artists). Like much of Steyerl’s work, November is preoccupied with the way images are copied, repurposed, and circulated. As young women, she and her friends watched television and movies, searching for role models. What they found were a small subset of films featuring powerful, yet hyper-sexualized, women who took it upon themselves to battle and dominate violent, antagonistic men. Steyerl inter-cuts scenes of leather-clad Amazonian she-warriors with scenes from her own early martial arts film, as she supplies a voice-over narration. “[T]echnically reproduced pictures travel around the world and spread heroic postures” she says. “We copied those postures.” The copied gesture therefore travels in much the same way as the copied image. Steyerl calls on Giorgio Agamben’s model of gesture, which claims gesture is the “intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular text execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as the moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis.” Agamben’s discussion of “gesture” suggests isolated aesthetics are insufficient. The circulation of image and gestures is an integral part of their performative power of photography.

The force of the fast, mobile, digital image is its ability to communicate affects and emotions. The citizen journalism of the Arab Spring uprisings “organized its viewers” not only through the repurposing of pre-existent social media platforms – dedicated

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105 “November is not a document about Andrea Wolf. It is not a film about the situation in Kurdistan. It deals with the gestures of liberation after the end of history, as reflected through popular culture and travelling images. This project is a film about the era of November, when revolution seems to be over and only it’s [sic] gestures keep circulating” (ubuweb, November description). The Ubuweb summary quotes from Agamben “Notes on Politics” Means Without End Theory Out of Bounds v. 20 Trans Binetti, V. and Casarino, C. U of Minnesota Press, 2000)
Facebook pages and Twitter hashtags and feeds—but also through the circulation of affect. As Steyerl suggests, rather than being about “the real thing—the originary original,” the poor image “is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities. It is about defiance and appropriation just as it is about conformism and exploitation” (“Poor Image” 8). The images are about the channels and methods through which they exist and move, as much as they are about the visual content of the images themselves—content that, if prioritized too heavily, Steyerl’s evaluation suggests, leads back to dangers of commodification and aestheticization. Though Steyerl’s model does not see circulation itself as the end point, the logic of her model might nevertheless support Hirschhorn’s de-contextualization of images in Touching Reality. By calling attention to the moving, anonymous, de-contextualized image—one whose digital quality is doubled as it is shown on an iPad, then copied on video—however, Hirschhorn forces his anonymous subjects to speak to the channels of circulation through which their images circulate (often at the moment soon after the broken bodies themselves ceased to move).

Though the poor image seems exemplified, or exaggerated, through digital imaging and the Internet, we can also consider an earlier model of circulation built around issues distance, disjuncture, and temporal and spatial disconnect. Jacques Derrida’s The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond offers an analogue model of missed connections. Derrida “analogizes the ontology of postcards to Freud’s fort/da game, for De-rrida views postcards as objects circulating within a flawed postal economy that can both transmit and simultaneously lose information” (Alexandre 53). It represents a model of displacement characterised by interstitial nature—the postcard is never more at home than when it is in transit. One of the most startling examples of postcards that travel, change, and move over time is lynching postcards. Photographs of lynchings are most frequently recognizable as images of dead or dying black men, often strung up in a tree or on a pole, surrounded by their ostensible lynch mobs—an audience of predominately white faces. For many, the inaction of the photographer is itself a form of participation and consent. Butler, too, looks at the photographer’s role in Abu Ghraib, where the photographic frames are clear and unimpeded and the subjects gaze directly (sometimes gesture with a thumbs up) directly into the frame. In other words, the photograph had to come from somewhere, and in the case of the Abu Ghraib
photographs, and many of the lynching photographs (where members of the crowd face or turn toward the camera), the photographer's presence was likely acknowledged. The subjects were addressing someone and apparently felt comfortable enough to do so. Nevertheless, with either photographic event, it is difficult to say with any certainty why exactly the photograph was made.

Despite its initial purpose, and the intentions or circumstances under which the photographer was working, the photograph does (eventually, ultimately) end up functioning as a form of evidence. Furthermore, though “[w]e, as viewers, occupy the photographer’s viewing position . . . most of us reject the complicity thereby implied. There is a much different issue at stake today in this legacy of representation, namely, the responsibility of historical witnessing” (Apel, Imagery of Lynching 7). In other words, Apel suggests, though the photographer must have been complicit to the extent that they were allowed in the lynching crowd, uninhibited, with the addition of time, “[t]he photographer now renders a service to history” (Imagery of Lynching 7). The idea of “historical evidence”—the atrocity photograph as at once a piece of damning evidence and a historical contribution—might provide cold comfort for viewers and critics, however, and it is more productive to think about the photographer’s complicity as part of the frame that gives rise to the image than to exonerate the camera and its operator as neutral servants to history.

To take the photograph in is to acknowledge the subjectivity of viewing and interpretation, and its potential future effects. There are no guarantees for the way a viewer will interact with a photograph, even those that depict human suffering. Leafing through an envelope full of war photographs, Virginia Woolf (in Three Guineas) claims that photographs alone “are not an argument; they are simply a crude statement of fact addressed to the eye” . . . “the eye is connected with the brain; the brain with the nervous system. That system sends its messages in a flash through every past memory and present feeling” (Sontag, Regarding the Pain 26). Woolf’s interpretation figures the photograph interacting with the eye and, by extension, with not only the interior workings of the body (the brain, the nervous system) but also with the history, and present—and arguably, the future—of the subject them self. As Sontag remarks, “[p]hotographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or
simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen” (Sontag, Regarding the Pain 13). Of Woolf’s suggestion that photographs act as flash messages, Sontag argues “[t]his sleight of hand,” the connection that circulates a photographic image from the surface of the eye to a person’s memories and feelings, “allows photographs to be both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality” (Sontag, Regarding the Pain 26). This recalls the model of “touching” –the sleight of the videotaped hand—Hirschhorn adopts in Touching Reality as he plays with multiple models of touch simultaneously: the photographic information that touches the viewer’s eyes; the hand on the touch-screen, onscreen; and the feelings that “touch” the viewer when looking at the awful photographs, to name a few.

What touches the eyes circulates throughout the mind and body. As Sobchack suggests (discussing film, though the claim applies in its own way to photography as well), we, as viewers, do not experience the work “only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel . . . with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium” (Sobchack 63). The sense of vision also ties to memory and imagination. Marks argues that an embodied form of looking resists mastery, and the viewer becomes not voyeur or passive observer, but a participant or co-producer within the viewing experience (Marks 149). When the photographic image is beheld on the surface of the eye, moves through the optical systems, travels through the body, and makes its way into the viewer’s imagination, this process of convergence is both formal and personal. In the words of Adrienne Rich, “This touch is political.” 106

Like the process of viewing, processes of reading also involve a change in attitude that can be experienced bodily. Calling on Melanie Klein’s model of reparative reading, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduces a distinction between what she calls reparative and paranoid reading strategies. “[T]o read from a reparative position,” Sedgwick claims, “is to surrender the knowing, anxious paranoid determination that no

106 Quoted in the epigraph above, from the poem "The Blue Ghazals."
horror, however apparently unthinkable, shall ever come to the reader as new; to a reparatively positioned reader, it can seem realistic and necessary to experience surprise. Because there can be terrible surprises, however, there can also be good ones” (146). This, Sedgwick suggests, is where the notion of hope comes in. Though Sedgwick is not speaking of images of atrocity specifically, her discussion of different modes of interpretation is instructive.

Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did. (Sedgwick 146)

If looking at a photograph means encountering the past (that-has-been or otherwise), then it also means encountering the present moment (the moment of viewing and interpretation) and the future (interpretation, but also the possibility for action). Rather than accept the experience of photographic viewing as a look that gazes upon something past, however, I want to argue against Roland Barthes’ notion of the that-has-been (like Azoulay and Fred Moten). By limiting photography to a past moment, a moment of death, something that was and is now over—remember Sontag’s claim, even, that “[e]ver since cameras were invented in 1839, photography has kept company with death” (Sontag, Regarding the Pain 24)—we are limiting photographic interpretation to one that sees both photographs and history as past, rather than as something fluid, potential, or even hopeful. The notion of “watching” a photograph asks the watcher to make witnessing an ongoing action. To “watch” a photograph is to take it into oneself, and to make it both present and future in the process.

3.7. Political Aesthetics

In their introduction to Sensible Politics: The Visual Culture of Nongovernmental Activism, Meg McLagan and Yates McKee outline what it means to discuss “political aesthetics”: “Attending to political aesthetics means attending not to a disembodied
image that travels under the concept of art or visual culture or to a preformed domain of
the political that seeks subsequent expression in media form" (10). Instead, this
conversation “demands not just an examination of the visual forms that comment upon
and constitute politics, but analysis of the networks of circulation whereby images exist
in the world and the platforms by which they come into public prominence” (Mclagan
and McKee, Sensible Politics 10). Similarly, (recalling Agamben’s model of gesture),
Azoulay challenges the notion of dividing the political from the aesthetic. In Civil
Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography, Azoulay argues against any simple,
neutral distinction between the aesthetic and the political. The relation between these
two categories, she claims, “serves as a kind of filter ensuring that what can be seen is
already an object worthy of inclusion in the field of art. This filter itself is complicit in
preserving what [she terms] the paradigm of art” (43). The paradigm of art is, for its
turn, steeped in the narrow disciplinary discourses of art history and art criticism, and
therefore cannot accommodate the kinds of questions that must be asked of the political.
The categories themselves must be recognized as mobile, or migrant.

Whereas the Abu Ghraib photographs are poor images, the discourse can
become particularly complicated when the images of atrocity are aesthetically beautiful.
Azoulay calls attention to the privileged mode of looking that academics (in this case, art
historians) bring to photographs. This question is, in many ways, at the heart of my

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107 Sontag also addresses the question of political aesthetics” in Regarding the Pain of Others. Part of our anxiety upon encountering images of atrocity and suffering is the realization that nothing can be done, Sontag suggests.

108 Azoulay’s essay “Regime-Made Disaster: On the Possibility of Nongovernmental Viewing” also appears in Sensible Politics.

109 David Levi-Strauss discusses the controversy around Susan Sontag’s decision, with On Photography to write about photography without herself being a trained expert in photography or photographic theory. Levi-Strauss calls on Edward Said’s discussion of specialization and ingenuity as support for his own defense of Sontag: “Specialization . . . means losing sight of the raw effort of constructing either art or knowledge; as a result you cannot view knowledge and art as choices and decisions, commitments and alignments, but only in terms of impersonal theories or methodologies . . . In the final analysis, giving up to specialization is, I have always felt, laziness, so you end up doing what others tell you because that is your specialty after all” (from Said 1993 Reith Lectures for BBC, Representations of the Intellectual, qtd. in Words Not Spent Today Buy Smaller Images Tomorrow 84). Levi-Strauss attributes some of Sontag’s success to her choice to reject “specialization and expertise (and the specialized language that necessarily results from them)” (84) and focus instead on following her own personal interests. Viewed in this light, Azoulay and Levi-Strauss are both attentive to the nuances and affect of language, and critical of the constraints of traditional disciplinary boundaries.
current study. According to Azoulay, art historical discourse requires training in order for
the viewer to get to the point where they can look with the power to privileging the formal
qualities of the work over the real lives pictured.

The power of artistic discourse (both in flattening out the presence of
various participants in the act of creation so as to render them mere
shadows, as well as its attitude toward the artist’s gaze or to his touch as
bearing the exclusive traces of his presence in the work) is so strong that
it sanctions its devotees to look at . . . photographs, without knowing
anything whatsoever” about the individuals they represent. (Civil
Imagination 53)

This professional gaze has its limits. Azoulay claims that when “the aesthetic” becomes
synonymous with style and form, “the political” is ushered off into the discourse of
political agendas and governance (Civil Imagination 41). When someone speaks from
the “paradigm of taste” to claim a work is “too aesthetic,” Azoulay argues that, rather
than inhabiting a position of political militancy, for instance, the speaker is in fact
committing a political act of their own. The viewer who dismisses a photograph on the
grounds of aestheticism

disregards the violence that her gesture implies for the photographed
persons themselves. Her intervention erases the fact that she is their
addressee and expels them not merely from her field of vision and from
the field of other spectators, but also from a certain political or civil space
– the citizenry of photography- within whose borders the photographed
subjects fight for their rightful place by means of the photograph and the
space of appearance that it opens before them. (Azoulay, Civil
Imagination 51)

The distinction between aesthetic and political seems to be one for determining
which work is worthy of regard, and in what context. Jacques Rancière rejects any initial
split between politics and aesthetics. Instead, he claims, aesthetics itself “is a
delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, or speech and noise,
that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of
experience” (The Politics of Aesthetics 13). On a somewhat more modest scale, Azoulay
argues “every image results from the actions of multiple participants who play various
roles in its production and dissemination. It is the relation between such participants in
the world of action that creates a political space” (Civil Imagination 55). Importantly,
however, Azoulay claims that the model she offers “is incompatible with the paradigm of
art. It belongs to a different paradigm altogether, which may be termed, at the risk of generalization, the paradigm of visual culture” (*Civil Imagination* 55). This distinction sets Azoulay up in opposition to art, favouring instead a claim for visual culture. Nevertheless, though the marriage of aesthetics and politics applies to visual culture, it also arguably applies to art, and more.

Rather than emphasizing the relationship between politics and aesthetics, Mark Reinhardt articulates the circulation of difficult images in relation to which treatments of, or critical responses to, images justify their distribution or “traffic”. In “Picturing Violence: Aesthetics and the Anxiety of Critique,” Reinhardt discusses the tendency of certain forms of photography to “traffic in pain” (24). Reinhardt’s use of “traffic” is, of course, indebted to Allan Sekula’s influential essay, “The Traffic In Photographs” (1981), which situates photography in tension between the discourses of art and science, and debunks (traces the rhetorical and historical baggage of) the idea of a “universal language” as it is applied to photography. Reinhardt notes Sekula’s claim that, while documentary photography provides material evidence, it also, historically, supplies material for “terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world” (Sekula, *Photography against the Grain* 57). If there are to be images of atrocity—photographs of broken bodies, degraded states, suffering, and pain—then there ought, Reinhardt suggests, to be some critical understanding to come out of them.

Reinhardt’s analysis productively addresses the critique of the aestheticization of suffering central to the work of the first great wave of critics I have been considering throughout this chapter. Like Sontag (the anti-aestheticist par excellence) in her later rethinking of *On Photography, Regarding the Pain of Others*, Reinhardt applies pressure to the now widespread notion that photography cannot be trusted on its own, without accompanying text to adequately frame it. He also challenges the popular assumption that the “aesthetic” is necessarily at odds with the political. Reinhardt effectively argues that “aestheticization” is, itself, too vague a concept to be critically effective. Too often, the “beautiful” and the “aesthetic” are folded into one, and critics tend to slip into the rhetorical stance that the “formal features of a photographic image blunt critical engagement with the social dynamics of the scene depicted” (Reinhardt, “Picturing Violence” 21) in the photograph. In this case, the “aesthetic” becomes what Reinhardt calls “an overly blunt tool for getting at what is most troubling about certain photographs.
of suffering people” (Reinhardt, “Picturing Violence” 22). Rather than addressing the relation between language and the image, or the viewer’s inability to transcend formal elements of a photograph, a large part of the anxiety around images of suffering and pain is “anxiety” about “the formal choices and rhetorical conventions, and the resulting transformative work, of representation itself” (Reinhardt, “Picturing Violence” 22). In other words, the inability to fix the meaning of the photographs through language (as Susan Buck-Morss points out) is as likely to cause anxiety as the formal make-up of the images themselves.

Actively engaging with Reinhardt’s argument, David Levi-Strauss suggests that hiding or denouncing images of suffering is a counter-productive exercise. While not the only important factors in critical engagement, Levi-Strauss offers the importance of empathy and compassion. “To say that compassion is only the first step in responsibility to social justice is one thing; to say that it is destructive to social engagement is quite another. One needs to first feel the pain of others before one can begin to act to alleviate it. And one of the ways humans recognize the pain of others is by seeing it, in images” (Levi-Strauss 132). While this emotional response or attachment could be manipulated, to censure images of suffering outright is to cause viewers to not simply distrust images, but to fear them (Levi-Strauss 132). Following philosopher Stanley Cavell’s theory of “acknowledgement,” Reinhardt claims that to “acknowledge” suffering is not to simply ignore it (as Sontag would suggest), but rather acknowledgment is a process of taking something into one’s own identity, and recognizing one’s own relation to it. In other words, to feel compassion when looking at a photograph (Levi-Strauss), or to see and acknowledge the suffering of others (Cavell, Reinhardt), is not necessarily to acquit oneself of the suffering in the photograph. To take that suffering into oneself—as a form of identification that establishes a relation between the viewer and the subject—is nevertheless to provide a potential first step into political action, or something else. The “traffic in pain” in this case can be a productive form of movement and not simply an economy or commodification of visualized suffering.
3.8. Lynching and Invisibility

James Allen built a substantial portion of his photography collection on images that others failed, or were unwilling, to see. “I am a picker,” Allen declares. “It is my living and my avocation. I search out items that some people don’t want or need and then sell them to others who do” (Allen 203). Allen, a collector, spent twenty-five years surreptitiously picking and building the collection of lynching postcards. This collection led to Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America (2000), accompanied a travelling exhibition displayed first at the Roth Horowitz Gallery, then the New York Historical Society (both 1999), the Andy Warhol Museum, the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, and Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. In 2002, Emory University hosted a related conference. The project currently exists in both the book and what is meant to be the dynamic form of a website where visitors are encouraged to contribute photographs as well as responses to the image and discussions on the site. As Salah M. Hassan, Brett de Bary, and Cheryl Finley acknowledge in a special issue of Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art dedicated to the discussion of lynching, the “exhibition, its companion book, and the public reaction to both have spurred an entirely new area of scholarly inquiry that looks at lynching photographs, and their circulation and display” (10).  

One of the images included in Without Sanctuary is the lynching of Will James, November 11, 1909 (Figure 3.2). As the photograph’s caption explains, “[t]his image was taken moments after the rope broke and Will James’ body fell onto the unpaved street. Under magnification a small group of suited men peer down as if into a well” (Without Sanctuary website Image 11). Will James’s body is invisible. The crowd is a dense mass of clammy hat-rims and slack elbows bared below rolled-up shirtsleeves. Despite the sheer volume of light – the impressionistic haze that nearly creates a visual

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110 This special issue of Nka is responding specifically to a group of essays drawn from, among other related essays, the proceedings of Strange Fruit: Lynching, Visuality and Empire, “a two-day symposium on Lynching Violence and the Politics of Representation held at Cornell University” from March 11-12, 2006 (Hassan, Bary, and Finley 10).

111 This isn’t the only postcard or photograph that addresses the lynching of Will James. The images are even combined, along with a portrait of James in the center, to create a composite; his face is retroactively framed by the events surrounding his death.
hush, the collection of conversations, murmurs, and rustlings that emerge from it would nearly consume the scene of the photograph. The horizontal (power?) lines throughout the image situate the crowd clearly within the scaffolding of an existing place, as well as a social system. The site of the actual hanging is a triumphant archway—reminiscent of a rainbow—that provides its own illumination rather than relying on a light to flash out from the hands of the photographer behind the assembly.

Figure 3.2. LeBlock. Lynching Scene. Commercial Avenue jammed with spectators below the electrically lit Hustler’s Arch. November 11, 1909, Cairo, Illinois.

Note: Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard 5 ½ x 3 ¾. “Etched in negative: “LeBlock.” Addressed to “Mrs. Jake Petter, 2057 Broad St, Paducah Ky.” From Without Sanctuary website Image 11. Without Sanctuary book, Plate Number 49. Photograph courtesy of the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Atlanta, GA.

What this particular photograph also articulates, then, is the way the lynched subject is always-already an absent figure within a larger arena of spectacle; the victim’s very real and individual body is nevertheless treated as a ritualistic place-holder for, or embodiment of, the perpetrators’ communal fears and anxieties. Despite the possibility of being killed quickly, the death and torture of lynching victims is often over-determined through repeated pre- and post-mortem knife and gunshot wounds, castration, stripping,
and macabre costume and pageantry. Many victims of lynchings “were stripped, chained, burned, shot, mutilated, and blow-torched” (Gonzales-Day 111). Because the ritual overtakes any individual identity (for the victims as well as—to a drastically lesser extent—the crowd comprised of “hands unknown”) there are numerous accounts of members of the lynch-mob often lynching the “wrong” person, highlighting the objectification of black subjects, who are treated as essentially interchangeable and disposable.

The photographer, LeBlock, has signed his name onto the print. Despite claiming ownership of the image, LeBlock’s vantage point offers the perspective of a distanced observer—part of the crowd, to be sure, but not necessarily a direct participant in the action. He’s too far to have seen the blood or sweat on Will James’s body, or to have watched the rope fray before the body fell. (Perhaps, if the crowd was hushed enough, he could make out the sound of the body’s thump, or slump, as it landed unceremoniously at the feet of James’s assailants.) LeBlock’s periphery status is further marked by the pole that cuts through the center of his photographic frame, both literally and symbolically barring him from a complete, coherent view and suggesting the inadequacy of the crowd member’s own individual understanding of what is happening within their ranks. In a sense, it does not matter whether LeBlock had a good view of James. As this image shows, scenes of lynching (and, by extension, the photographs that depict them) often end up being a crowd without a spectacle (specter)—the crowd becomes the picture, the event. Here, the structure of the city’s archway illuminates the crowd’s faces and the hanging body’s space above the crowd—its level above the masses, high on the visual plane—is replaced, in its absence, by the two men near the right of the frame who are each confident enough that the current volatility of their community excludes any danger to their own bodies to distinguish themselves by climbing a pole to get a better look.

Though they seem to prefigure an eruption of violence, lynchings were rarely spontaneous or “random events: they were sometimes publicized in advance in the newspapers or on the radio, and the crowds’ actions were patterned, routinized, we

112 See Amy Louise Wood’s Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940 for detailed descriptions of the most common lynching photograph conventions.
might even say scripted” (Reinhardt, “Painful Photographs” 41). According to Allen’s account, lynchings typically take place at “bodies of water, bridges, and landmark trees” (Allen, _Without Sanctuary_ website Image 11). The careful choice of location has symbolic significance. Allen explains “[t]he lynchers sought, in the conscious selection of these sacrificial sites and in their participation in these ritualized murders, their own salvation and passage to a safer place without sin and evil - both of which, in their minds, were physically embodied in the "offending" victim” (Allen, _Without Sanctuary_ website Image 11). Treated as abject, the subject is expelled within symbolically protected ‘sacred’ sites. Orlando Patterson situates this mode of sacrifice, the scapegoating of bodies, with the famous goat sacrifice in _The Bible_. In Leviticus, Aaron confesses all the sins and transgressions of Israel onto the goat, so that “the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat into the wilderness” (Leviticus 16:21-22). Likewise, Patterson explains, for the communities of lynch mobs, there was a belief that “[i]n expelling ‘the Negro,’ all that was most evil and sinful and black and iniquitous and transgressing would be sent away” (Patterson 222).

While lynching is an extreme form of violence, it also functions as a form of both spectacle and erasure. In their work on re-imagining lynching narratives and imagery, Peggy Phelan’s _Unmarked: The Politics of Performance_ (as well as “Atrocity and action: The Performative Force of the Abu Ghraib Photographs”) and Kaja Silverman’s _Threshold of the Visible World_, and Shawn Michelle Smith’s _At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen_ (2013) all engage with the stakes of erasure and invisibility. Phelan, Silverman, and Smith each theorize the politics of invisibility in performance and in photography, specifically. Smith highlights the relationship between photography and the unseen, or the un-seeable. Describing the first Niepce heliograph on exhibition in the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, Texas, Smith offers: “I am interested in this faulty start because it underscores, at the very heart of photography, both an intense desire, and a failure, to see” (Smith, _Edge of Sight_ 2). At another point, Smith ties her own sense of “failed photographic window”/“failure to see” to the words of James Elkins, in _What Photography Is_. “For Elkins, photography is characterized by failed looks, images of ‘imperfect visibility’ ‘stunted seeing’ reminders that ‘something cannot be seen’” (Smith 217). This sense of failure refers us back to both Derrida’s _The
Post Card and its pervading sense of a temporal or visual rift. Like Phelan, Silverman, and Smith, Evelyn Simien and Ken Gonzales-Day address questions of invisibility, looking specifically at those subjects whose lynchings often go unacknowledged.

Many lynching victims are left out of historical accounts. Ken Gonzales-Day’s Lynching in the West: 1850-1935 addresses the victims who remain essentially invisible to the dominant history of lynching in the United States. Lynching in the West includes historical research with images from his earlier photographic series, Erased Lynching, interwoven within the text, often in the form of a visual epigraph for the chapters. In the Erased Lynching series, the artist manipulates historical photographs of lynchings in order to remove the victim’s body, leaving only trees and assembled masses that – like the crowd in “The Lynching of Will James”—seem to be looking at each other, rather than at anyone, or anything, in particular. East First Street (St. James Park), 2006 (Figure 3.3) shows a crowd with their backs mostly turned from the camera. There are a few exceptions – three men whose notice seems to have been caught by the flash, and the man who appears to be walking a woman past the group of men, away from the site of interest. Their movement creates distortion as they pass in front of the camera’s gaze. The woman is blurred, and her face is turned in such a way that she seems nearly faceless; it is as though the man is ushering a ghost (with uniformly curled hair and doll-like hands) in the corner of the scene. What is missing here is, of course, the person who would have been hanging from the tree. Gonzales-Day has carefully erased them. Rather than being struck by the sight of a corpse, the dark cloths that circle the men’s hats and the faceless woman’s carefully ordered curls take up the bulk of the visual interest. Here, the photographer seems like an outsider, an interloper, interrupting a scene so private that we can’t even see what it is. Gonzales-Day’s erasures call to mind not only the historical erasures of lynching victims, but also the ways in which study of the images often focuses on the perpetrators, rather than on the systems that allow the gruesome event to come to pass, and the life that is being taken in front of them (and in front of the lens). Mark Reinhardt suggests Gonzales-Day’s digital “act of erasure” functions as “an imaginative undoing of history’s violence, and expression of the political wish that things could be otherwise” (“Painful Photographs” 50). If, as Adrienne Rich suggests, to look, and let something touch us through the eyes is itself a political action, then the opposite is equally true: these erased images accentuate the difference.
between looking and not looking, seeing and not seeing, showing and not. What the
altered photograph effectively articulates is the way in which the victim of the lynching
was already erased, in more than one sense of the word. By actively performing that
erasure, Gonzales-Day shows the victim’s place in the frame. The artificial absence in
the center of Erased Lynchings “is not merely a psychic mechanism for gaining some
distance from the pain of encountering that violence” but also “a way of allowing us to
see such a mechanism at work and, thereby, of deepening our encounter with a history
of violence and its bearing on the present and our possible futures” (Reinhardt, “Painful
Photographs” 50). For once, the viewer is really looking for the fissure or fault line that
marks (what can suddenly be acknowledged as) a missing body.

In addition to selections from Erased Lynchings, Gonzales-Day’s Lynching in the
West features the artist/author’s own performative process of traveling throughout the
American West to seek out and photograph the sites of as many lynchings as he could
locate. Gonzales-Day records his movement from centuries-old oak trees to California’s
sole official historical marker, located in Placerville (otherwise known as “Hangtown”) –
the “Hangman’s Tree: Historical Landmark No. 141, which is commemorated by the less
official site, The Hangman’s Tree Bar (Gonzales-Day 14). Retracing the steps of lynch
mobs and their victims, Gonzales-Day uses his photography, and his experience of
making the photographs, as a record of both his own journey and the often-
unrecognized identities of lynching victims. He explains:

In my own journey, the photographs have come to symbolize points of
resistance in a vast landscape, both physical and historical, over which I
have no control. A solitary figure on a solitary journey, I have documented
the empty space that lies between the historically unseen body of the
lynch victim and my own unseen body. (Gonzales-Day 16).

Lynching in the West shows the way these erasures remain relevant to present day. He
describes his process of searching (often walking) from one potential site to another.
This would have been a grim pedagogical exercise for Gonzales-Day; similarly, the
artist’s search calls to mind African Americans visiting the same trees decades earlier,
checking not to find the tree, but to discover whether someone was hanging from it or
not.
Figure 3.3. Ken Gonzales-Day. *East First Street (St. James Park)*, 2006.

Despite the dominant readings of lynching as a crime perpetrated against black men, the discussion of these photographs also calls attention to complicated issues of gender, race, and spectacle. In *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, Elkins suggests, "[t]o the extent that any fascination with images of the body is evidence of an unsettled anxiety about the self, it is bound to have a sexual component" (169). Discussions of lynching are repeatedly re-deployed in terms of fear of black male, exacerbating the invisibility of suffering of females and men or women of other races. In this case, the body’s absence highlights its simultaneous centrality and its particular invisibility. According to Evelyn Simien, the image of the lynched man “has overshadowed the equally representative experience of African American women who were similarly tortured and mutilated, as well as raped and killed, by angry mobs” (3). In the American South, at least 150 women were lynched between 1880 and 1965; 130 of those before 1930 (Simien 3). Despite the smaller number of female lynching victims in comparison to men, the women’s stories can nevertheless be mobilized to “challenge previous interpretations and dominant conceptualizations of lynching as a justified protection for white women from Black male rapists” (Simien 3). Simien emphasizes the need to study cases of black women “robbed of dignity, respect, and bodily integrity” because by “including women centrally within the historical narrative of lynching, we not only avoid reinforcing the rape/lynch myth (i.e., the emasculated Black man as the only visible victim) but, in doing so, also reveal a more complete understanding” of lynching as a social and political practice (Simien 3). In allowing the image of the African American man to stand as the only representation of lynching, she claims, critics allow the injustices committed against women to remain invisible.\(^{113}\)

### 3.2 Looking at Lynching

Unlike the photograph from “The Lynching of Will James” or the contemporary photography of Gonzales-Day, the majority of lynching photographs printed on postcards are not, strictly speaking, photographs of absence. Instead, the most popular printed photographs are those where the camera’s focus has elbowed its way through a crowd

\(^{113}\) As with Simien and Smith: The question of invisibility/women’s suffering is central to Azoulay’s discussion of the invisibility of rape in *The Civil Contract of Photography*. 
and wrapped a composition around the figure of a hanging body. In “Charred corpse of Jesse Washington suspended from utility pole. May 16, 1916, Robinson, Texas,” as in many other photographs of its kind, the human body is both literally and figuratively treated like a piece of meat (Figure 3.4).\(^{114}\)

This sunlit photograph was taken the day after Washington’s murder, which is listed in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918* statistics as the May 15, 1916, lynching of “Jess, [sic] Washington” in Waco, Texas (99). According to the NAACP investigation, “Jesse Washington, a defective Negro boy, of about nineteen, unable to read and write, was employed as farm hand in Robinson, a small town near Waco, Texas. One day, the wife of his employer found fault with him whereupon he struck her on the head with a hammer and killed her. There is some, but not conclusive, evidence that he raped her” (NAACP 23-24). With all of the odds seemingly stacked against him, Washington was rapidly “arrested, found guilty, and sentenced to death by hanging within ten days of the commission of the crime” (NAACP 24). Even after this charade of desire for legal justice, Washington was not allowed to suffer the court’s decision. Right after the verdict was offered, a mob (euphemistically) “fear[ing] the law’s delays, broke into the courtroom and seized the prisoner. He was dragged through the streets, stabbed, mutilated and finally burned to death in the presence of a crowd of 15,000 men, women and children” including the city’s Mayor and Chief of Police (NAACP 24). Of course, the ritual does not end there. “After death what was left of his body was dragged through the streets and parts of it sold as souvenirs. His teeth brought $5 apiece and the chain that had bound him 25 cents a link” (NAACP 24). We must add to the list of souvenirs (extracted teeth and separated chain links) this photographic postcard.

\(^{114}\) On the *Without Sanctuary* website, Allen notes: “Lynchers often paraded their victim down the main street, through black neighborhoods, and in front of “colored schools” that were in session. Jesse Washington, seventeen years old, was the chief suspect in the May 8, 1916, murder of Lucy Fryer of Robinson, Texas, on whose farm he worked as a labo[u]rer. After the lynching, Washington’s corpse was placed in a burlap bag and dragged around City Hall Plaza, through the main streets of Waco, and seven miles to Robinson, where a large black population resided. His charred corpse was hung for public display in front of a blacksmith shop. The sender of this card, Joe Meyers, an oiler at the Bellmead car department and a Waco resident, marked his photo with a cross (now an ink smudge to left of victim)” (Allen, *Without Sanctuary*. web).
In this photograph of Jesse Washington and the surrounding mob, what might have at one point been a crucifixion-like suspension has become a disturbingly mock-heroic pose; the dead man’s limbs have burned and disappeared, leaving the scorched body to hang in a manner that seems as if it is flexing its muscles. The assembled audience looks past the body and toward the camera – their relationship in this moment is with the photographer. The charred torso makes up the center of the frame, and the man’s identity, the fact of his being there, seems secondary. The victim is reduced to burnt flesh, and he is no longer recognizable. They look right past him. The men’s heads and bodies form the landscape of the photograph, and the rims of their many hats improvise a new horizon line.

Figure 3.4.  Charred corpse of Jesse Washington suspended from utility pole.  May 16, 1916, Robinson, Texas.
Note:  Gelatin silver print. Real photo postcard. 5 ½ x 3 ½” Without Sanctuary. Without Sanctuary website, Image 22. Without Sanctuary book, Plate Number 24. Photograph courtesy of the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Atlanta, GA.

According to Sally Alexandre in The Properties of Violence “lynched bodies set outdoors help to consolidate a clear definition of race in spatial terms. Those spectators among the mob who can return to the inner sanctums of their homes make for a stark
contrast to those who must remain – hanging on the tree limbs, left to the vagaries of the weather” (36). Like the body hanging from the tree or pole, the circulating postcard itself “reaffirms the public nature of the lynching as capable of being observed by anyone and enacted in any place” (Alexandre 36). As a material form and social document and cultural practice, postcards highlight the ways in which “we might understand the lynching to circulate within an inner circle of the addressed—those persons lucky enough to be landed upon the land either standing on solid ground looking up at the victim or at home enjoying the experience vicariously via a miniaturized panoramic view of the lynching in a snapshot” (Alexandre 65). Beyond simple callous, clueless correspondence between like-minded viewers, then, lynching postcards also “work to further underscore the distinction between the homeless black lynched victim, literally and figuratively out on a limb, and the mostly white consumers of these postcards safely at home (addressed) awaiting the vicarious thrill of ogling the lynching event in the tranquility and sanctuary afforded inside their houses” (Alexandre 65). Unlike the stable, sanctified, domestic setting from which the (often) white viewer observes the image, the postcard itself, which travels bare and in plain sight through the mail, is—like the exposed body it depicts—defenseless and “vulnerable” or “‘open’ to viewing” by anyone who encounters or possesses it (Alexandre 36, 65). By setting the lynched bodies out of doors, and locating them at the “crude address” of a common lynching tree or site, the lynching postcards “help to consolidate a clear definition of race in spatial terms” (Alexandre 36). Lynching postcards therefore effectively “demonstrate how indistinguishable both the racial and social divide are from the spatial divide . . . outsider status (both literal and symbolic) becomes figured as the province of blacks while insider status . . . becomes the province of whites” (Alexandre 36).

If, as Alexandre convincingly argues, lynching is about property, ownership, and citizenship—showing their citizenship, ownership, or landedness—then this photograph visually reinforces the importance of proprietorship. The mob is the ground, and by extension, the nation. The horizon of hats (re)defines the ground. The two men on the front address the camera directly and take up a large amount of visual space within the photograph. One leans casually against a pole, though his arms are crossed we are still aware of his hands. The other, on the right, has his body angled to face the corpse, open to the rest of the crowd, but his gaze turns to the camera. His arms on his hips, his
stance is wide – both he and the other man with the crossed arms manage to project much of the frame’s attention in their direction. Beyond establishing an artificial horizon, the proliferation of hats worn by the crowd also calls attention to the hanging man’s own bare head. Though this victim is not outfitted in a hat, the fact that hats were often used as mocking props placed after the fact onto the heads of lynched corpses, points to the significance of the hat as a sign of respectability and status (therefore the push to ridicule the subject by presuming their own pretension of such a status while hanging their body). The body in the center of the frame is naked, except for a light cloth draped around him. Beyond the removal of any hat, he has been divested of clothing, limbs, and life.

Like a sculpture, a postcard asks to be looked at from front and back – the image has to be turned over to reveal the inscription on the reverse. The handwritten text supplements the printed photographic image in order to convey a unique message. As Apel explains, “When lynching photos were transformed into souvenir postcards, they were sent to friends and family with the senders’ proud boasts of having been in the mob, making blackness an exotic spectacle and privileging the ‘look’ of whites over blacks” (“Torture Culture” 92). As Alexandre’s discussion suggests, paying attention the “crude” or absent address of the black man and the lynched victim “must necessarily call our attention to the back of the postcard where ‘real’ addresses are to be found” or at least implied (36). Unlike many circulating postcards, however, this one does not include an address. By the time this particular postcard was sent (1916 or later), it would have been illegal to send lynching postcards through the US postal system. This historical legal detail suggested, for me, two potentially important ideas: one, social and political systems began to catch onto the problems inherent in the lynching postcards (they banned them as a means for curtailing their potential to become contemporary images of atrocity); and two, despite the injunction, this postcard’s sender chose to purchase and mail the postcard anyway, likely having to go to the effort (more symbolic effort than actual exertion) of putting the postcard into a stamped and addressed envelope in order for it to be transferred to the preferred destination. But the basic premise of my theory was wrong. The section 3893 of the Revised Statutes of the United States, approved May 27, 1908, was a ban that “prohibited ‘lewd, obscene, and lascivious’ materials to be sent through the mail” (Smith, Photography on the Color Line 197) and the circulation of
all “matter of character tending to incite arson, murder, or assassination” (Postmaster General 71). The ban was arguably created in order to address fallout resulting from con artists and fake doctors circulating advertisements for medication through the mail. The inclusion of lynching postcards under this umbrella appears to be an afterthought. An article entitled “No Post Cards of Lynchings” printed in the August 19, 1908 issue of The Washington Post explains, “Souvenir collectors of postal cards will be forced to fill their albums with other views than those depicting a Southern lynching, according to instructions received from the Postoffice Department at Washington yesterday,” (more than two months after the ban was created); “Postmaster Breathitt was officially informed that post cards mailed out of Hopkinsville and other towns recently, showing the four bodies of negroes lynching at Russellville, August 1, should not have been allowed to pass through Uncle Sam’s hands” (Washington Post 1). Here, the question is framed in terms of legality (and, interestingly, in the case of the law itself, it is worded in terms of the danger for retaliatory violence) rather than presented as a matter of visual sensitivity, ethics, or morality.

In the case of this particular postcard, the photograph of Jesse Washington’s lynching, perhaps the added level of privacy simply enabled the sender to speak more freely in his remarks on the back of the card. Perhaps the necessary envelope shaded the image of the card from outside viewers; the sender sensed his words would be safe from the gazes of anyone but their desired recipient. The inked inscription on another copy of this postcard describes the photograph with the haunting phrase: “This is the Barbecue we had last night” (Allen, Without Sanctuary Number 25). Here, the idea of barbecue culture as “Southern” trope and symbol of communal identity and shared experience takes a ghastly, cannibalistic turn. Online, Allen’s commentary accompanies the postcard with an explanatory note: “Repeated references to eating are found in lynching-related correspondence, such as ‘coon cooking,’ ‘barbecue,’ and ‘main fare’ (Allen, Without Sanctuary [web] 22).

Without even a piece of punctuation to separate the two thoughts, “Joe” implicates himself further within both the event and the photograph. “My picture is to the left with a cross over it,” he explains. “Joe” has added his hand to both the front and the back of the postcard, and he has both visually and verbally marked his presence within the moment of the photograph itself. X marks the spot. For “Joe,” what is important is his
participation in the event, and the chance to share this experience with (presumably) his mother. The charred body marks another spot within the photograph, but “Joe” has chosen to impose on the photographer’s framing. He has tried to re-focus the photograph onto himself. Interestingly, “Joe’s” smudged identifier has since faded; the image of Washington’s body is what remains. Like most of the other faces in the crowd of this photograph, he poses for the photographer; in this case, the photographer represents the subjects’ ability to proudly, and rapidly (“yesterday”) share his experience with others. The camera is a conduit for communication yet the fact of the lynching murder, and of Jesse Washington himself, is disturbingly, euphemistically, ignored.

The lynching-mob and spectators are not alone in their complicity. “The photographer is implicated by rendering a service to the lynching community, supplying the images for commemorative postcards that record the race-color-caste solidarity and lethal ‘superiority’ of the white community” (Apel 7). Reflecting on the lynching postcards he has compiled, James Allen claims:

I believe the photographer was more than a perceptive spectator at lynchings. Too often they compulsively composed silvery tableaux (natures mortes) positioning and lighting corpses as if they were game birds shot on the wing. Indeed, the photographic art played as significant a role in the ritual as torture or souvenir grabbing – creating a sort of two-dimensional biblical swine, a receptacle for a collective sinful self. Lust propelled the commercial reproduction and distribution of the images, facilitating the endless replay of anguish. Even dead, the victims were without sanctuary. (Without Sanctuary 204-205)

Allen suggests the lynching victims are repeatedly violated, even after death, through the aestheticization and commercialization of these photographs. Allen recognizes is that photography contributes to the ritualistic dimension of lynching. As Reinhardt notes, “[b]oth taking and viewing the pictures were important ways of elaborating lynching’s conventions and meanings” (“Painful Photographs” 41). Perhaps more insidiously, in the words of Amy Louise Wood, for many white audiences, photographs of lynchings "served to normalize’ its brutality, making it ‘socially . . . even aesthetically acceptable’" (qtd. in Reinhardt, “Painful Photographs” 41). What might be supposed as the “photographer’s ostensible neutrality at the lynching is thus compromised by his apparent inaction . . . and implicit sanctioning of the act he records” (Apel 7). These recordings themselves follow clear conventions (generally avoiding action shots, for
instance, and opting instead for a deliberately posed group portrait after the fact) (Reinhardt, “Painful Photographs” 41).

The night images where the camera’s flash would have been necessary for making the photograph emphasize the photographer’s lack of intervention to stop the killing itself. As Gonzales-Day explains, “Recognized but unseen . . . it is the presence of the photographer’s flash which will go unnoticed by most viewers, and yet, it is the most striking feature” of images made in the late 1890s to the early 1930s is the fact of their illumination because they would have required the use of dangerous magnesium flash powder (from the 1880s on) (Gonzales-Day 57). Though the illuminated photographs display both the crowd and the lynched body in great detail, “the flash provided a view of the lynching that would not have even been available to the mob itself, because prior to the use of the photographic flash, the scene would have had to have been illuminated by torches, flashlights, flares, and later, by car lights” (58-59). As Gonzales-Day suggests, in these early decades of photography, “the use of the photographic flash would be almost as integral to lynching photography as the mob itself” (59). The flash is essential, both symbolically and in terms of the camera’s role as part of the lynching ritual. Photographers were “[f]requently present throughout the proceedings,” and indeed, “part of the script” (Reinhardt, “Painful Photographs” 41). The flash itself also plays a practical function in the moment. The photographer’s only intervention is the way their flash lights up everything it touches, providing a proliferation of otherwise inaccessible information, both for the audience in the moment, and in the photograph itself. The flash also deepens visual contrast; white skin becomes a brighter white, black skin a deeper black. Eduardo Cadava takes Gonzales-Day’s emphasis on the force of the flash even further when he claims: “To say there can be no war without the production of images, is to say there can be no war without the flash of the camera” (Cadava, Words of Light 51). Cadava offers Ernst Junger’s notion that images function like weapons; “modern technological warfare gives birth to a specifically modern form of perception organized around the experience of danger and shock” and, as a result, “the moment of danger can no longer be restricted to the realm of war” but rather seeps out as an “increased incursion of danger in everyday life” (Words of Light 52). What the flash formally offered to lynching photography as the ability for the photographer “to capture the last traces of life they leaked from the convulsing, pissing, dangling shells which swayed before the
camera’s lens” (Gonzales-Day 60). Echoing Kristeva, Gonzales-Day claims that, “In such images, there can be no youthful smile, no innocence, no eternal return, only eternal death. In such cases, the photographic flash is less a tool than a weapon which symbolically strips its victim of all humanity” (60). As Gonzales-Day acknowledges, his reference to the ‘leaking’ body is itself “a not-so-subtle reference to Julia Kristeva’s concept of the ‘abject’ from which she explored the delicate boundary between ‘I’ and ‘other,’ self and nonself” (Gonzales-Day 60). This idea of “leaking” also returns us to Azoulay’s discussion of the nature of atrocity photographs. These images are mobilized in part because they embody the abject, the excessive. As Apel suggests, “When we look at lynching photographs today, we try not to see them. Looking and seeing seem to implicate the viewer, however distanced and sympathetic . . . as if viewing itself were a form of aggression. Most of us would prefer not to look” (“On Looking” 7). Even the belated act of looking seems to have an excessive quality to it; it threatens to inhabit or implicate the viewer.

Nevertheless, the rituals of lynching (including lynching photography) are predicated upon the assumption of some form of excess. Shawn Michelle Smith argues that photographs of lynchings—and postcards of lynchings, in particular—actively create a spectacle of whiteness, as well as blackness. Photographic frames feature white audiences/perpetrators crowded together in the hundreds, even thousands. Lynchings constitute an attack on black communities and black bodies, while at the same time working to actively consolidate white identity and white supremacy. Postcards, in particular, help to circulate that ritualistic performance to white audiences across the country; senders use the image of white crowds and black corpses as a token through which to appeal to the senders’ friends and relatives, and include them in the event—and, by extension, the construction of whiteness, and white community. Lynching, though “extralegal,” is nevertheless systematically related to law and institutionalization.

Postcards, though in many ways public documents, also “convey a terrible intimacy” (Smith, Color Line 122). They circulate openly but can be viewed privately; they are held in the hand, brought into private homes, and placed into albums and collections. As Smith notes, “postcards function as memorial souvenirs by which one claims ‘I was there.’ But they also serve as mementos with which individuals mark sentimental bonds with others – ‘I was there and I thought of you while I was there’”
Beyond connecting one’s experience to their feelings about the recipient, postal correspondence also “assumes a return” (Smith, *Color Line* 122). One letter, or postcard, suggests the expectation that another will be sent back in response, continuing a correspondence of which the lynching postcard is presumably just one part. Beyond encouraging individual exchange, “[i]ndividuals perform community by sending postcards, and they enlarge community in the same act, for these images symbolically expand a community’s claim on time and space by connecting static individuals to distance places” (Smith, *Color Line* 122). In this sense, postcards do nation- and community-building work as they travel across state lines. This nation is necessarily built on exclusion. “Postcards function as fantasy sites of desire for distant viewers; the sender weaves family and friends at home into larger spatial territory by sending images from afar” (Smith, *Color Line* 122). This is, Smith argues, a part of how they function to construct a sense of white community. By establishing bonds and sharing the experience of lynching as a community—both with fellow lynch mob actors, audience members (if the two can be clearly distinguished), and with friends and family afar—they extend affect and ideology, as well as drawing connections between the viewer (or sender’s) actions, and their feelings about the postcard’s recipient. Of the inscription on the back of the postcard of the lynching of Jesse Washington, in particular, Smith suggests, “by sending the postcard, Joe perhaps demonstrates to his mother how he participates in upholding the mythology of pure white womanhood that fueled so many lynchings; he ‘protects’ white womanhood, he ‘defends’ his mother” (*Color Line* 122).

### 3.9. Tourism

Like the postcard depicting Jesse Washington’s charred corpse, the photographed detainees at Abu Ghraib are used as objects; their bodies are the locus around which the soldiers circle in order to keep ties with each other. As Janina Struk attests in *Private Pictures: Soldiers’ Inside View of War*, “as long as it has been technically possible for soldiers to take pictures at war, the same subjects reoccur time and time again – touristy pictures, pictures of colleagues and social occasions, a fascination for indigenous, military brutality and the dead” (Struk xv). Private photo albums from the Boer War (1899-1902) already evidenced “elements of the incongruous
juxtapositions of jaunty social pictures alongside cruel and brutal images” (Struk xvi). Though the images themselves are often disturbing, the fact that “this unnerving combination is found in a format generally reserved for the niceties of family life is all the more disconcerting. Soldiers’ war time albums like family albums, are not intended for public scrutiny” (Struk xvi). Similarly, the snapshots from Abu Ghraib are frequently referred to as souvenirs meant for sharing with like-minded friends, family, and peers.  

Salah M. Hassan, Brett de Bary, and Cheryl Finley accurately note “lynching was and is not a geographically bounded phenomenon particular only to the US south. Rather . . . it must be understood within the broader context of the dehumanizing and oppressive practices perpetuated in the US and globally” (10). According to Doral Apel’s “Torture Culture: Lynching Photographs and the Images of Abu Ghraib,” the photographs made at Abu Ghraib illustrate another blurring of boundaries: the soldiers’ confusion between sexualized torture and their own sexuality. “Spectacle Lynchings,” like lynching postcards, “relied on the look of the crowd to reaffirm notions of superior white ‘manliness’ over the stereotype of the hypersexual black male, even as many white men in the mob acted on repressed homoerotic desires and many white women found vicarious pleasure in the mob’s exposure and penetrations of the black body” (Apel, “Torture Culture” 92). Although Apel’s analysis pays attention to tensions with male black bodies almost exclusively, she argues:

[The pornographic function of the torture scenarios serves a larger political function. The pleasure in the extreme pain and degradation of others relies on a process of dehumanization that depends in large part on constructing Arabs and Muslims as an undifferentiated mass, just as black men were stereotyped en masse by white supremacists. (Apel, “Torture Culture” 93)

The “thrills of sexualized violence became less veiled and more explicit than in lynching photos, to the point where photographs and videos of torture and the sexual abuse of

115 Sixty Minutes II April 27, 2004. Correspondent Rebecca Leung: “Abuse of Iraqi POWs by GIs Proved: 60 Minutes II Has Exclusive Report on Alleged Mistreatment”: http://www.cbsnews.com/news/abuse-of-iraqi-pows-by-gis-probed/ “It was American soldiers serving as military police at Abu Ghraib who took these pictures. The investigation started when one soldier got them from a friend, and gave them to his commanders” (60 Minutes)

116 They co-edited a special issue on Lynching Violence and the Politics of Representation.
prisoners were interleaved with images of American soldiers having sex with each other” (Apel, “Torture Culture” 93). Like the heterogeneous “family” albums of the Boer war, the photographic files of the Abu Ghraib soldiers often conflate their own amateur pornographic images with the torture they inflict on their detainees.

Like the lynching photographs, the snapshots the soldiers made at Abu Ghraib presuppose a kindred audience while at once constructing and reinforcing their reception. Structures of feeling are ideologically constructed through the frame of a political context where images circulate and work. They also appear through media and discourses of war and otherness that at once produce and assume the particular climate in which the photographs are produced, and in which they appear. Circulation is central to this process of construction and normalization. “At Abu Ghraib,” for instance, “compact discs, videos, and computer files of digital images performed the role of postcards, and were meant to circulate only within the community of American personnel, their families, and friends” (Apel, “Torture Culture” 93). In addition to functioning as a mode of sharing and communication between photographer/sender and the intended, or imagined, recipient the Abu Ghraib photographs “established the right of the soldiers to ‘look’ at the nude and brutalized bodies of their victims, even to pose with their corpses, while effacing the look of the prisoners through hooding and other forms of degradation” (Apel, “Torture Culture” 93). These same structures of circulation and normalization are at work in lynching postcards. In Luc Sante’s May 2004 op-ed for The New York Times, “Tourists and Torturers,” the author describes his first encounter with the photograph of Specialist Charles A. Graner and Pfc. Lynndie R. England posing, thumbs up, with their victims. “There was something familiar about that jaunty insouciance, that unabashed triumph at having inflicted misery upon other humans,” Sante explains; “[a]nd then I remembered: the last time I had seen that conjunction of elements was in photographs of lynchings” (Sante n. pag.). Sante sees the triumphant, unabashed expressions of the lynching crowds echoed in the American soldiers’ faces. In both cases, he claims, they “felt free to parade their triumph and glee not because they were psychopaths but because the thought of censure probably never crossed their minds . . . a collective frenzy perhaps overruled the scruples of some people otherwise known for their gentleness and sympathy” (Sante n. pag.). According to Sante, what the American soldiers are showing is not hatred, but rather contempt. Rather than investing
their prisoners with strong emotion, they view these ‘others’ as objects. Contempt itself is not so simple. Nevertheless, “it is striking how, in wartime, a fundamental lack of respect for the enemy’s body becomes an issue only when the enemy is perceived as being of another race” (Sante n. pag.). In the sense that “Arabs” were systematically constructed as subhuman “cave-dwellers” leading up to the war, in order to allow for such a lack of respect, what the photographs reflect is the product of an official perspective; the fact that the soldiers took them and circulated them shows that they “felt free” to do so. The fact that one set of postcard-like photographs is made in contemporary “wartime” and the other is made in late nineteen and early twentieth century United States also sheds some light on the banalized, prosaic state of “war” in American society in both periods.

As a result of the rhetoric of self-protection and misdirected “outrage,” what most often gets lost in the mix is the trauma of the victims themselves. Slavoj Žižek’s in “What Rumsfeld Doesn’t Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib,” argues that when the Abu Ghraib prison was under Saddam Hussein’s regime, “the accent” of torture “was on direct infliction of pain, while the American soldiers focused on psychological humiliation” (n. pag.) The very fact of “recording the humiliation with a camera, with the perpetrators included in the picture, their faces stupidly smiling beside the twisted naked bodies of prisoners, was an integral part of the process” (Žižek, “What Rumsfeld” n. pag.). Žižek further distances the conversation from the pain of the victims by shifting to a more abstract concept by claiming, “What we get when we see the photos of humiliated Iraqi prisoners is precisely a direct insight into ‘American values,’ into the core of an obscene enjoyment that sustains the American way of life” (“What Rumsfeld” n. pag.). But as Apel and others have noted, these initiates don’t have a choice in joining this ‘sorority’ nor do they have the invested opportunity of carrying/passing this experience of pain and suffering on to others (Apel, “Torture Culture” 94).

3.10. “Sexual Exploitation”

As scholarship on both America’s history of lynching and, more recently, Abu Ghraib demonstrates, there are a number of convincing arguments for the way anxieties about black bodies, particularly black men’s bodies, are manifested in both examples of
spectacular violence. This is just as much the case as the fact that the violence done to black women’s bodies is also conspicuously set outside the visual frame of these photographs. These blind spots (to use Phelan’s term) appear in criticism of both lynching photographs and the Abu Ghraib images. Within Salon.com’s extensive album of Abu Ghraib photographs is a section entitled “Sexual exploitation.” This section includes some lesser-known photographs from Abu Ghraib, ones not widely cited and studied in scholarship on the photographic event/scandal. In a photograph made at 10:30pm on October 28, 2003, “SPC Harman poses for photo with female who was thought to be a prostitute. Unknown person taking photo” (Figure 3.5). In the photograph, Harman smiles and stands next to the pixelated detainee. Her arms are crossed against her body in a slightly self-protective gesture; her leg seems to be up on a chair, suggesting (the attempt at) an air of casualness. Both Harman and the prisoner lean their bodies in toward each other, as people tend to do for snapshots when they’re not quite sure of the parameters of the photographer’s framing (Am I being cut off? Should I go in closer?). Nevertheless, the woman’s pants are darkened – it is unclear whether this is from tie-dye pattern or from urine. Like Harman, she seems not to know quite what to do with her arms. Why take this photograph? Its composition and posturing makes it seem as though it wants to be a shared souvenir.

Though the pixilation ‘protects’ her, it is the kind of fetishized, cropping gaze we are accustomed to seeing in both images of atrocity and “regular” images of women – on TV, on the Internet, in advertisements, and beyond. As Rebecca A. Adelman explains in “Pixelizing Atrocity,” pixilation is actually an enlargement of the image to the point where its original appearance is obscured; it is a kind of camouflage that theoretically protects the identity of the subject (or their various parts, depending on how the pixilation is deployed). Like Phelan’s idea that looking at it too much erases its performative force, the excessive increase in size brought about by pixilation makes the image indistinguishable instead of making it clearer. The use of pixilation also calls to mind the way too tight a focus obscures the context and view of the image. In other words, not only is the unidentified woman’s face obscured, but this expanding and decomposition is not an isolated event, but rather its artificiality evokes all the other instances of censorship and pixilation in the series (and beyond). Focusing closely on the enlarged pixels of the woman’s face therefore has the effect of also placing her into a context that
acknowledges the way she “female” “thought to be a prostitute,” like others, has had her identity obscured, hidden, erased, or simply re-defined beyond all recognition.

Figure 3.5.  Abu Ghraib prison. 10:30pm on October 28, 2003. “SPC Harman poses for photo with female who was thought to be a prostitute. Unknown person taking photo.”
Note: From “Sexual exploitation,” Chapter 3, Abu Ghraib on Salon.com

Another photograph, with what appears to be the same woman, in possibly the same room: “3:44 a.m., Oct. 29, 2003: Female poses for picture,” lifting her shirt to expose her bare breasts (Figure 3.6). The pixellation of the image both protects her identity and functions visually, like the hoods, to dehumanize her. This is not one of the infamous images from Abu Ghraib, and neither “3:44 am” nor “10:30 pm” seem to incite any kind of critical or popular outrage. What the supposed banality of these photographs suggests is that sex work and the exploitation of female prisoners (females in general) is
Figure 3.6.  Abu Ghraib prison. 3:44 a.m., Oct. 29, 2003. “Female poses for picture. It was believed that CPL GRANER took this picture in the series to follow, with the female in a number of poses.”

Note: From “Sexual exploitation,” Chapter 3, Abu Ghraib on Salon.com
acceptable—that is, not newsworthy—whereas the elaborate homoerotic fantasies and forced masturbation (predominately featuring men) is, in essence, degrading and unacceptable.\textsuperscript{117}

In “Has Anyone Ever Seen a Photograph of a Rape?” Azoulay explains that the initial release of photographs from Abu Ghraib included pictures depicting women being raped. “A short while later, these photographs vanished from the media and slipped entirely off the agenda. An authoritative source, it was said, had examined the photographs and found them to be faked” (\textit{Civil Contract} 270). These images apparently originated, instead, from a pornographic website. From that point on, the images were all but forgotten, and not featured in subsequent discussions or in the Abu Ghraib exhibition at the International Center of Photography in New York (Azoulay, \textit{Civil Contract} 270). For Azoulay, the ready dismissal of the images, whether fake or not, is a cause for concern. Unlike other now-iconic if sexualized images from Abu Ghraib that continue to circulate widely, even images that were not dismissed as fake “in which sexual injury to women is seen” and that officials have “confirmed as being part of a cache of eighteen hundred photographs from Abu Ghraib, have also been obliterated from public view” (Azoulay, \textit{Civil Contract} 274). Azoulay raises the issue of dismissed and suppressed photographs of rape in order to make the point that, though sexual injury to women is reported and recorded, “the photographs that attest to [the women] being raped are defined as pornography” (\textit{Civil Contract} 274). Whereas “the photographs of the rape of women . . . were defined as real pornographic photographs, the photographs of sexual injury to Iraq detainees can be defined as real photographs that mimic real pornographic photographs” (Azoulay, \textit{Civil Contract} 274) — these are considered images of violence.

\textsuperscript{117} The practice of using photography for the purposes of pornography is nearly as old as the medium itself. As Tagg explains, “by the mid-nineteenth century, the proliferation of photographic production was exciting anxieties about how to control and regulate the torrent of images that market forces alone would not be moved to check . . . these anxieties were manifested in movements toward censorship that focused particularly on civic concern over the sheer volume of pornography in circulation scarcely ten years after Louis Daguerre’s invention had been made public” (\textit{Disciplinary Frame} 13). Mislabeled as pornography, photographs of sexual exploitation hardly raise any new alarms.
that imitate pornography, rather than being pornographic in themselves. In contrast, photographs of women’s naked bodies are, apparently, invariably pornographic and therefore unsafe for non-sexualized viewing. This phenomenon is considered particularly problematic for those images that depict violence against those bodies.

Of the Abu Ghraib photographs, images such as the infamous “The Hooded Man” have circulated and been redeployed in countless different contexts. In *Cloning Terror*, W.J.T. Mitchell provides a thorough and compelling reading of The Hooded Man photograph and its discursive history. One premise of his larger argument is that the various iconographic features of “The Hooded Man” photograph “worked to produce a synthetic icon of the Clone and the Terrorist, reawakening in the process a host of secular and religious images that link figures of sovereignty and abjection to Christian, Jewish, and Muslim traditions” (Mitchell xv). Neither the photograph above, nor “3:44” would bring about any form of international scandal, and neither depicts what would be clearly identified as a rape, and therefore they don’t have to be locked out of sight. In fact, this is largely my point (and the reason I am including them here). The two images of women above don’t call on the iconicity of Christian crucifixion that characterizes the suffering man, with his arms outstretched, for instance. “3:44am” (Figure 3.6), in particular, is more like a pixelated screen shot from spring break’s “girls gone wild” than it is an image that we might associate with crimes against humanity. My concern here is not in the showing of flesh, or the pleasure taken in looking at sex and pain (as in Butler’s discussion of Abu Ghraib and the discourses of pornography), but rather the mundane quality of women’s subjection. This condition is exemplified by the fact that, in a series of images of torture, a woman who is presumed to be a sex worker is ‘naturally’ shown baring her breasts to her guards, and seemingly doing so without coercion – as if being in the sex trade, imprisoned in Abu Ghraib, and subject to soldiers with cameras is

118 “Although the photographs that were made public were shocking enough, it is known that there are others, including video, that involved rape of women and children, sexual assault by animals, and even death, which were shown only to members of Congress. The media and the general public in the United States accepted that they had neither the right nor the need to see these images. Needless to say, this situation is reversed elsewhere, perhaps especially in Iraq itself” (Mirzoeff, “Invisible Empire: Abu Ghraib and Embodied Spectacle” *Visual Arts Research* 2006 38).
not an example of systemic coercion in itself. What is wrong with these photographs is, in other words, how un-shocking they are.

Unlike “The Hooded Man,” these photographs of female detainees at Abu Ghraib are much less likely to circulate. In other words, “The Hooded Man” travels better than run of the mill photographs of systemic violence against women (for instance). The infamy of certain images as opposed to others calls to mind Mieke Bal’s warning that critics and media tend to select and reproduce the most beautiful or striking image rather than finding the one that actually troubles the elements of the system, or the frame, that are taken for granted the point where they seem invisible. Bal is suspicious of aesthetics, and (falsely) conflates the aesthetic with the beautiful, the seductive.

3.11. Moten: “Mo’nin’” and “Listening”

There is a responsibility to look every time, again, but sometimes it looks like that looking comes before, holds, replicates, reproduces what is looked at. Nevertheless, looking keeps open the possibility of closing precisely what it is that prompts and makes necessary that opening. But such an opening is only held in looking that is attentive to the sound—and movement, feel, taste, smell (as well as sight): the sensual ensemble—of what is looked at.

– Moten, In the Break (201)

One of the central episodes in Fred Moten’s In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition takes place in the book’s introduction. Moten begins by talking around the scene within the “Genealogy” section of the Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave. Written by Himself where Frederick Douglass narrates his experience of witnessing his Aunt Hester being whipped. Moten analyses Saidiya Hartman’s discussion of, and her subsequent decision not to reproduce, Douglass’s description of the assault in her book Scenes of Subjection. Hartman refuses to describe or cite from this particular account so that its omission will “call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body” (qtd. in Moten 3). The effect of these reiterations, Hartman claims, is that they “immure us to pain by virtue of their familiarity” and “reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering” (qtd.
Nevertheless, Moten calls attention to this claim in order to complicate it; Hartman’s “decision not to reproduce the account of Aunt Hester’s beating is,” he claims, “in some sense, illusory. First, it is reproduced in her reference to and refusal of it; second, the beating is reproduced in every scene of subjection the book goes on to read” (Moten 4). He then shifts the terms of the conversation, claiming the new question at hand “concerns the inevitability of such reproduction even in the denial of it” (Moten 4). But the question “to show or not to show?” is not as simple as Hartman’s stance suggests; in evoking the images, we either call them to mind (if the viewer or reader has seen them before) or else encourage the engaged and curious reader to seek them out themselves. These two responses are not equal – one response is in some sense imaginary and involuntary, whereas the other is based in the reader’s intention (if they actively seek out the photographs themselves, that is their choice).

Moten’s theoretical attention to sound can be interpreted in relation to “the effect of Western visuality’s excision (or cut) of black humanity, reverberating thereafter in the acoustic aesthetics of black art. For Moten, the looking relations . . . preserve agencies of aurality, listening, and embodied response” (Chaney 110). The aim, then, is to arrive at an “encounter,” or even a “scene of viewing that does not ultimately reinforce through spectacularization the disembodied, abstractable, voyeuristic ontology of the viewer” (Chaney 110). Taking issue with Barthes’ notion of the photograph as something that exists in the past, Moten remarks that “if, as Barthes suggest, that meaning or essence of noeme is death, the ‘that-has-been of the photographic object,’ then sound disturbs it in the interest of a resurrection. The content of the music of [the] photograph . . . is life, is freedom” (206). Moten therefore makes the compelling claim that becoming sensitive to sound and refusing to ignore or “neutralize the phonic substance of the photograph,” effectively “rewrites the time of the photograph” (201). Beyond music, singing, and dance, Moten often privileges the force of the auditory marker that is less strictly

119 Hartman’s challenge: “how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?” (4). To which she responds: “rather than try to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible, [Hartman has] chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned . . . By defamiliarizing the familiar, [she hopes] to illuminate the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle” (Hartman 4).
intelligible – particularly the moan. The moan is interstitial, visceral, and exists outside of language.

What Moten calls “black mo’nin” therefore “improvises through the opposition of mourning and melancholia, disrupts the temporal framework that buttresses that opposition such that an extended, lingering look at—aesthetic response to—the photograph manifests itself as political action” (210). To look at the photograph itself does not simply bring about an adequate response. As Moten explains, “You have to keep looking . . . so you can listen to it” (210). His imperative demands a repeated, extended time commitment, which places his model in contrast with Phelan, Sontag, and Bal, who are apprehensive about the ways in which repeated looking can diffuse the force of the image. Despite the challenge to Phelan, Moten, Phelan, and Azoulay ultimately want the same thing: to keep the photograph active and present (though “present” is not, in this case, equated with “immediate”). Moten’s call to “listen” to the photograph also opens the image up to draw on multiple senses.120

The stakes for “listening to” a photograph are most distinct in images of violence or atrocity. In order to “lean in” or adequately engage with difficult photographs, Moten suggests “the aesthetic and philosophical arrangements of the photograph—some organizations of and for light—anticipate a looking that cannot be sustained as unalloyed looking but must be accompanied by listening” (200). Moten argues this imperative persists despite the fact that “what is listened to—echo of a whistle or a phrase, moaning, mourning, desperate testimony and flight—is also unbearable” (200). This arrangement, imperative, and unbearable quality are all folded into one. “These,” he claims, “are the complex musics of the photograph” (200).

Nevertheless, even within this auditory model, the effect, or force, of listening to the photograph sounds at different volumes and registers, depending on the photograph

120 In a critique of the way the tapes were paused and shown in slow-motion as evidence in the Rodney King trial, Elizabeth Alexander explains that, in doing so, the silent images foreclosed the possibility for jurors to hear the actual screams (both from the victim and from horrified onlookers). Dissecting the video in this way effectively changes the frame and perception of the evidence and its narrative. But a still photograph does not come complete with a pre-recorded soundtrack and its images are already stilled.
and the conditions of its production. Analyzing an image of Booker T. Washington giving a speech, for example, Shawn Michelle Smith suggests the added layers that active listening can bring to a photograph. “Fred Moten has taught us to listen for the sound of the photograph, to hear its shattering shout and moan,” she explains (Pictures and Progress 269). But for this photograph, a celebratory image of Washington standing, surrounded by a rapt crowd, Smith acknowledges, “the sound of this photograph is not the deep cry of anguish Moten hears, not the sound that ruptures the image, this sound registers the shout of a call and response. The sound of this photograph is the crackle of an electric energy generated by the famous orator, delivered to his audience, and circulated back again” (Smith, Pictures and Progress 269). The impetus to listen is more valuable for the process and engagement it encourages than for any specific, discernable result.

Moten is concerned with the sounds of one devastatingly difficult photograph, in particular—the photograph of Emmett Till, a young black teenager whose murder is now famous as a turning point in the civil rights movement in America. The picture of Emmett Till’s corpse, made in 1955, is notable on a number of levels. This is the photograph of a fourteen-year-old boy who was needlessly murdered and it is a catalyst for the civil rights movement in the US. This is a photograph remarkable not only for its mobilization and circulation; it is also notable for the very fact that it was made, and shared, in the first place. Mamie Till Bradley requested that his mutilated body be displayed, and photographed, in an open casket, so everyone could see and recognize the violence that had been done to her son.

Like Butler, Cadava, and others who recognize the complexity of the photographic frame, Moten, too, turns the frame of Emmett Till’s post-mortem portrait inside out in order to turn an ear to the sounds that pass through it.

This is the sound before the photograph: Scream inside and out, out from outside, of the image. Bye, baby. Whistling. Lord, take my soul. Redoubled and reanimating passion, the passion of a seeing that is involuntary and uncontrollable, a seeing that redoubles itself as sound, a passion that is the redoubling of Emmett Till’s passion, of whatever passion would redeem, crucifixion, lynching, middle passion, passage. So that looking implies that one desires something for this photograph. So that mourning turns. So that the looker is in danger of slipping, not away,
but into something less comfortable than horror—aesthetic judgment, denial, laughter, some out and unprecedented reflection, movement, murder, song. So that there is an inappropriable ecstatics that goes along with this aesthetics—one is taken out, like in screams, fainting, tongues, dreams. So perhaps she was counting on the aesthetic. (Moten 200-201)

How can a photograph – specifically, in this case, the photograph of Emmett Till’s body—“challenge ontological questioning?” Moten asks (196). He demands that the viewer slip, move, turn, scream, faint, or at the very least, try to listen. In doing so, he suggests “something” will be remembered, or repeated or “transferred” – but “[t]o move or work through that something, to improvise, requires thinking about morning and how mourning sounds, how moaning sounds” (Moten 201). In other words, as a response to his question, Moten claims ontological questioning can be challenged “[b]y way of a sound and by way of what’s already there in the decision to display the body, to publish the photograph, to restage death and rehearse mo(ur)ning(g)” (106). Perhaps this sound is reminiscent of the pixelated images, distorted and trapped within the frame of the digital snapshots. Or like the emotions that oscillate in the interactions and spaces where viewers (and images) connect. For Moten (like Azoulay), the process of display, rehearsal, and restaging necessarily “includes a political imperative that is never disconnected from an aesthetic one, from a necessary reconstruction of the very aesthetics of photography, of documentary and, therefore, of truth, revelation, enlightenment, as well as of judgment, taste and, therefore, of the aesthetic itself” (196).

Complicating any reading of Emmett Till’s body even further, to search his name now means to find not only photographs of Till alive, often juxtaposed with photographs of his corpse, or photographs that lean in close to light and record his mutilated body; now, looking at Emmett Till also means coming upon images where Till’s portrait has been juxtaposed with the face of another slain black teenage boy – Trayvon Martin. As Hirschhorn’s Touching Reality suggests, the Google search itself creates an archive of its own, albeit one that is necessarily provisional. Though the portrait of Martin that currently circulates more widely is one of his smiling, living face – and not, as with Till, the boy’s swollen, broken corpse – the connection brings the sound of Till’s scream, or moan, into the present moment in a different, and unsettling, way.
Unlike Phelan’s claim that images lose their force when looked at for too long, however, Moten and Azoulay require the viewer to spend time with the image. I am compelled by Moten’s model; as Smith’s application of “listening” shows, Moten’s is not a fixed or straightforward formula. Perhaps as important as how it works is the fact that it opens up at least two things: one, the problem with privileging sight and appearance in a context where that is both the medium and the weapon of subjugation, even torture. And two, it calls attention to the excesses of the frame and the ways in which it necessarily interacts with the photograph. The context, the smells and sounds, call for engagement and attention and perhaps also empathy. They call for something to do with a sensory response, though there is still some question as to what exactly that means on a case-by-case basis. At the very least, the call to “listen” while “looking” calls for the viewer and/or the critic to build time and repetition into their viewing experience; it also demands an awareness of the ways in which we look away, and look back, and the ways in which the subjects repeatedly disappear. Furthermore, as the example of Emmett Till’s photograph demonstrates, the conditions of display and publication and subsequent criticism all play into the ongoing performance.

3.12. Arab Spring

Photographic images of the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, many of which are made on cellular phones are, by Azoulay’s logic, images of atrocity, as they are images made in a moment of conflict and subsequently disseminated in order to show expose their plight to others. Even on a more basic level, these images are made in a time and place of war or subjugation. These pictures contain the potential for action. As Azoulay suggests, when “the ‘wanted person’ commissions his own portrait or participates actively in creating it . . . it becomes possible to disrupt the visual field that frames him and the type of gaze that the spectator will direct at his photograph” (Civil Imagination 58). What Azoulay is claiming, then, is that by actively participating “in shaping the space of the photograph, as well as in fashioning his own portrait,” the active subject is ultimately able “to shift the scales of the final outcome” (Azoulay, Civil Imagination 58).

The question of agency becomes particularly important in images of atrocity. Consider the crisis of agency of Mohamed Bouazizi. On December 17, 2010, Bouazizi (a
Tunisian man described alternately as a fruit vendor, or a “recent graduate” when discussed in the media, perhaps depending on the angle the speaker chooses to take regarding his grievance, set himself on fire in the middle of the street. Bouazizi’s action was catalyzed by persistent disenfranchisement and harassment at the hands of local officials. Bouazizi’s self-immolation, and photos of his burned body, functioned to mobilize others to political action, if for a time. The images of Bouazizi—photographs made in the hospital, as he was being treated (unsuccessfully) for his burns—were mobilized and generated public outcry and action, catalyzing the political uprising in Tunisia (which, in turn, inspired and encouraged uprisings in surrounding countries). Though the time, conditions, and methods of display and circulation are different, the active response to Bouazizi’s image recalls the way the photographs of fourteen year old Emmett Till’s beaten corpse were circulated more than six decades earlier, “so that everyone could see” what had been done to him. When Till was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955, his murder is framed as extralegal punishment for apparently whistling at a white woman, the circulation of his post-mortem photograph encouraged widespread public outrage and mourning across America. The photograph, and the event of which it was a part—most importantly, the life and the injustice it represented—served as a catalyst, a rallying point, and site to generate connection and energy around the United States civil rights movement.

As Azoulay’s description of atrocity photographs suggests, part of what we expect from (the way we define) images of atrocity is as abject objects that leak out (like the Abu Ghraib photographs). Nevertheless, this process of “leaking” is not straightforward. Even before Emmett Till’s post-mortem photograph was circulated, in 1912 organizations such as the NAACP created and circulated anti-lynching pamphlets featuring the appropriated photograph of an Oklahoma lynching. By pairing it with text summoning viewers to protest, the document was deployed as an organizational tool (Reinhardt, “Painful Photographs” 44). Though each of these events and individuals are unique, the NAACP’s postcard, Till’s gruesome post-mortem portrait, and the photographs of Bouazizi, burnt and hospitalized, are all mobilized and widely circulated after the fact. As I mentioned earlier, it is now difficult to separate the online presence of Emmett Till and Trayvon Martin. Where the image that circulates of Till is one initially commissioned and initially encouraged by Mamie Till Bradley, however, the photographs
made to commemorate Trayvon Martin represent a different phenomenon, but one that also works to mobilize the image of the dead.

My intention here is not to offer a simple, uncomplicated connection between these three individuals; to conflate their personal struggles would be a mistake. What these photographic events all share, however, is the way they are mobilized and circulated, often to surprising degrees and in unexpected ways. These instances and individuals function to galvanize larger groups. They function both symbolically and as evidence and become catalysts for political action and debate. Though Phelan criticizes the notion of narrativizing, the impulse nevertheless extends beyond the critic, to the general public. After Trayvon Martin, a seventeen year old African American boy, was shot and killed following an alleged altercation with George Zimmerman in 2012, images, videos, and memes began to circulate, many of them catalogued with the tag #WeAreTrayvon. One of the forms the #WeAreTrayvon responses took is to wear a hooded sweater (with the hood up), as Martin was. At the same time, photographs began to circulate of people “Trayvoning” (the “trend” is widely condemned as “ugly,” “horrible,” “sickening,” and “disturbing”) where people—often young white teenagers—pose themselves in imitation of a slain Trayvon Martin, wearing a hoodie, carrying Skittles and Arizona ice tea, as Martin was when he was killed.121 Many of these photographs are staged as crime scene photographs, where the subjects pose as the fallen Martin, lying on the ground, with their food scattered beside them. These dramatizations, imaginings, or re-enactments of Trayvon Martin photographs are, like #karawalkerdomino, conceived to some extent with their digital circulation in mind. The subjects try to visually embody, or at the very least, to visually reference, Trayvon Martin. They perform their own surrogacy awkwardly and problematically, and no doubt with varying intentions. In some cases, they do so to demonstrate (and perhaps try on) a sense of empathy and solidarity with the slain teen, and the consequences of racialized violence he has come to represent. In others, the performance of surrogacy works to erase the black body with the dominance of the white one, the one that now controls and fills the photographic frame as a means to make a disturbing joke. Here, as in Kara

121 The social media trend is featured in the Urban Dictionary: http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Trayvoning
Walker’s *A Subtlety*, the photographic event seeks a form of embodiment even as it anticipates its life in and as social media.

### 3.13. Conclusion

I want a new kind of history.

I want a history that looks at photography, not just art photographs, a history that can speak to the complexity of the everyday (a history that is true to life)

I want a history that makes me think and could make me cry.

[.. .]

I want a history that traces the journey of an image, as well as its origin.

I want a history that doesn’t presume to know what photography is (and isn’t afraid of the contradiction).

I want a history that is not constrained by good taste, and dares to traffic in commerce.

I want a history that is aware of its own power and isn’t afraid to call itself a politics.

I want a history that begins with particular photographs and works outwards from there.

I want a history that acknowledges that photographs have multiple manifestations and are objects as well as images (I want a history that takes account of all my senses) …

– Geoffrey Batchen, *Proem*

In this chapter, I draw on Azoulay’s advocacy of visual culture and Susan Sontag’s anxiety about the potentials and pitfalls of photography and photographic practice. Nevertheless, my approach differs from theirs in a number of ways, not the least of which is my engagement with a range of images and my close attention to both the discursive and the formal elements in photography. This critical project is concerned with laying out the relationships between criticism and history, aesthetics and politics, art and visual culture, portraiture and its others. Echoing Geoffrey Batchen’s *Proem* (quoted above), I have considered critics whose work negotiates heterogeneous photographic histories and critical approaches. As the fissures between Phelan, Reinhardt, Hartman, Bal, and Butler’s models demonstrate, all this discussion has yet to produce a clear-cut,
accepted formula for dealing with the citation and reproduction of images of atrocity. One of the many things Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety* dramatizes, both in the installation itself and through the criticism, photography, and debate that surrounds it, is the messiness of these images, particularly when they must be encountered in a shared public space. Not held in the hand like a postcard, the installation asks that bodies place themselves in relation to the monumental sphinx and her decomposing molasses companions. Anticipating the contentious behaviour that would ensue, Walker had the entire run of the installation recorded on video. In addition to becoming a 3D rendering composed of crowd-sourced images, Walker’s sugar sphinx is also the setting that allows her audiences to show their responses, seemingly unobserved. By quoting not only American and Caribbean history, but also New York visitors of the present, Walker’s installation shows the present performing in dialogue with the past.

Despite chiding Hartman for refusing to cite the Aunt Hester passage directly, there is one particular image that Fred Moten discusses, describes, and alludes to without reprinting within his own text. Despite its centrality to his chapter, Moten does not reproduce the photograph of Emmett Till’s corpse (just as Butler and others refer to but do not include the images they discuss, and as I, too, have decided to omit here). Moten’s exception is striking, however, because of the centrality of the photograph, and its circulation, to Moten’s argument. Moten only addresses the photograph’s absence in a footnote that (despite the force of her now-iconic decision to have her son’s body, and its image, shown), Mamie Till Bradley later expressed regret for circulating her son’s body in this way, and so Moten sympathetically abstains from reproducing it as well. Knowing full well what it means to invoke an image, or a passage, without citing it directly, this slip in Moten’s argument suggests the adaptability of his argument, which seems to pivot on a question of intention. It is further defined through notable exceptions, and sensitivity to shifts and changes (reinforcing or re-investing in the performative potential, the force) of context.

In “Can You Be Black and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Videos” Elizabeth Alexander discusses the importance for black viewers to view the attacks on other blacks empathetically, effectively taking the image into the body as a form of self-protection and self-preparation; the implication is that, in this case, there is a vested
interest in empathy (the threat is there that you will or could just as easily be in that position yourself, and you might very well be next). Moten doesn’t take this line of thinking quite as far as Alexander does, although he encourages a model of empathetic viewing/listening that enables the viewer to become, in a sense, “the ongoing destruction of the ongoing production of (a) (black) performance, which is what I am, which is what you are or could be if you can listen while you look” (Moten 200). In her same essay, Alexander talks about the effect of the prosecutors slowing down the video of Rodney King’s beating in order to show certain parts close-cropped for the audience. Slowing the video means taking out the sound (the cries), the removal of which bankrupts what the video of what is arguably its most visceral dimension. Is it because so many viewers think they can’t be like these victims, especially the non-citizens in Azoulay’s photos, that they don’t feel, hear, or experience the images the way Azoulay (or perhaps the subjects themselves) might like? Azoulay wants to activate this bodily engagement. In his introduction to *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, Houston Baker suggests we see the blues as a category into which we can do our own play – to improvise, play with, and adapt as the need arises.

Fred Moten recognizes the mobilization of “the aesthetic” cannot be taken lightly. He articulates part of this danger with respect to imagery such as lynching photographs, warning “you have to think about the fact that an aesthetic appropriation could be said to desacralize the legacy of lynchings, precisely by way of an ‘alchemizing’ that seems to fetishize or figure on the literal, on the absolute fact and reality of so many deaths while, at the same time, continually opening the possibility of redemption in out sensuality” (Moten 197). Moten’s reference to “alchemizing” refers to an anecdote about a clever character he addresses a few pages earlier; in the story, a black man is made to feel a sharp, if fleeting, sense of regret. He had just been mentally playing with words, toying with the term “crook of the neck” when, with the sudden sound of police sirens behind him suddenly, the image instantly becomes too close, too potentially real (he can imagine the feel of a rope on his neck) so that in theorizing, and aestheticizing language, it seems as though he has brought this downfall on himself. As this anecdote suggests, there is the danger of letting the idea of the lynching slip into word play, literary language, a clever turn of phrase – even within Moten’s (or my own) readings of the images. As Bal is clearly aware, the formal or poetic runs the risk of superseding the
reality (the very real person and the life) it represents. In Moten’s formulation, as in Alexander’s, the embodied response is first and foremost one lived through an empathetic body – for instance, the black body that recognizes the proximity of the fate of the person photographed to their own potential fate. In cases where, as Butler has shown, precarious bodies are imagined as other, de-categorized, this sensory embodiment often misses its mark.
Chapter 4.

Sharing

4.1. Surrogacy

In his study of new media, Lev Manovich asks, “Does it make sense to theorize the present when it seems to be changing so fast?” (7). This question creeps through this chapter, focused as it is on both contemporary social media and on recent social and political events that play out largely through that media. There is little time for hindsight when theorizing the present. Nevertheless, critics such as Manovich argue, the new media present is all the more important to theorize because it is slipping away so quickly. For Manovich, “every stage in the history of computer media offers its own aesthetic opportunities, as well as its own imagination of the future: in short, its own ‘research paradigm.’ Each paradigm is modified or even abandoned at the next stage” (Manovich 34). In other words, the constant change and uncertainty makes the research at once rich, necessary, and contingent. But these new opportunities and imaginings do not occur within a vacuum – they require social, historical and technological context.

One of the most ubiquitous aspects of new media is the use of social media. Today, that list would generally comprise sites such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Tumblr, and Twitter, mediated forums designed as a tool through which users interact and share content. Fred Richtin argues that “[c]onfronting various forms of human behaviour, not all of them defensible, may be one of social media’s most enduring legacies—helping us to define who we are, and maybe even pushing us to become more responsible, and more responsive, human beings” (“Of Them, and Us” 47). Part of what I negotiate in this chapter is the polarization of technologically deterministic and optimistic accounts of newness, and their double, the suspicious dismissal of common mass media and popular forms. Like Richtin, I want to argue that social media helps us
to define who we are, but this claim alone is too simplistic. Social media, like other forms of representation, helps us to distil and simplify personal and public identities. While helping users define who “we” are, it also helps us to define ourselves against who we think we are not.

As anyone who has ever engaged in a contentious thread on Twitter or Facebook knows, things can escalate quickly. Social media is not simply some new form; it is a forum for older forms of communication, ones that arguably move more rapidly, and are disseminated more widely, than before. The use of the technology always tells us about the society using it, and in that sense, this form is no different. Discussions of performance and cultural identity (from Joseph Roach and Rebecca Schneider to Stuart Hall) consistently return to a notion of “play” with respect to negotiating performance, embodiment, repetition, and re-writing. The dark underside to this necessary play in terms of social media and Internet use, however, is the way negative impulses also necessarily play themselves out through the sharing of photographs—from benign and often humorous memes to the more malignant practice of posting compromising images or videos as a means for revenge, public shaming, or personal gain. Social media can mark the jarring, and therefore critically productive, moments where seemingly benign behaviour online suddenly has personal and legal consequences that extend beyond the sociality of the web. In this sense, social media allows for both an apparently democratic social conscience (one that can be mobilized when necessary) and a forum for ‘civilized’ twenty-first century extralegal justice. This combination is reflected in an odd juxtaposition of public self-policing and self-confession, with users and critics negotiating an anxious line between permanence and

122 For instance, “revenge porn” sites feature images and media that are posted online by someone other than the individual pictured; these are posted with the presumable intention of shaming or hurting the person in question – usually a woman. In the case of celebrity photographs, these are also likely distributed for personal gain. The photographs are not generally depicting anonymous individuals; they are instead accompanied by identifying information, including the pictured individuals’ social media profile information, so that the website’s viewership can connect to, and spill into, the subject’s personal/professional/social media life.
disappearance.\textsuperscript{123} While social media no doubt fosters more responsive human beings, the jury is still out on whether it will succeed in making us any more responsible.

This chapter considers the ways in which the cultural practices and social relations related to photography on social media share, rehearse, and dramatize anxieties about race, in particular. The questions of identity, mobility, circulation, and performance within portraiture discussed throughout this dissertation continue and adapt into the present. The study that follows therefore considers the way contemporary media, digital photography, and social networking tools participate in and alter the photographic event. Within these media platforms, photography and video are largely the forums in which these struggles and negotiations are played out. Despite the claims for transparency and agency in phenomena such as the “selfie” and citizen journalism, digital photography facilitates depictions of radically destabilized identity. In doing so, digital photography—and social media in particular—provides a virtual forum for practicing and adapting racialized performances. While social media lends itself to the subversion of power imbalances, photographic performances within these forms respond to and erupt in (literal and rhetorical) violence. Viewers and users navigate the fixed and transitory infrastructures of social media and negotiate social relations within the constraints of these mediated environments.

Before an examination of contemporary social media, however, I need to return briefly to analogue media: namely, the printed photograph and the hand-written guest book, in order to re-think some of the ways that commenting and archiving tie into photographic performances outside of social media. In the previous chapter, I considered the making and circulation of images of atrocity, including the lynching postcards in the collection that make up the Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America exhibition, conference, book, and website. As part of my research, I traveled to Atlanta, Georgia, to consult the Manuscript and Rare Book Library at Emory University. MARBL offers access to the Without Sanctuary exhibition archives, which includes exhibition guest books filled with commentary from museum visitors. Sifting through the

\textsuperscript{123} See Jill Lepore’s “The Cobweb: Can the Internet be Archived?” on the technical and legal issues underwriting projects such as the Internet Archive and Jeffrey Toobin’s “The Solace of Oblivion” on the legalities of deleting oneself from the web.
comments (and sometimes, drawings) in the exhibition guest books, I became preoccupied with the visitor comment books for the public exhibition of *Without Sanctuary* at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center in 2002. The exhibition was housed within the Martin Luther King Jr. Center. *Without Sanctuary* would have been exhibited within the context of the greater exhibition spaces, which also feature a timeline chronicling the life of Dr. King. As I read through the comment books, I was struck by the regularity with which visitors made a point, in their comments, to thank Martin Luther King Jr. himself for working, suffering, and dying in their place. Many visitors addressed their comments to specific individuals whose lynchings were pictured, particularly those whose names were included in the exhibition information and photographic titles, in addition to Dr. King himself. Writing to the persons pictured in the exhibition photographs, a number or visitors (most of which self-identified as African American within their comments) thanked the subjects specifically for suffering in their place (“thank you for dying so I could be free”). Many also commented in the form of a prayer to God (or in many cases—compounding the conflation of subjects pictured, or martyred, with Christ—prayers addressed to Dr. King) (Series 60 Box 3). As I argue in chapter three, lynching is, in part, a form of ritual cleansing and scapegoating. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the lynching of African Americans in the United States was used to symbolically “cleanse” the white community. When *Without Sanctuary* is exhibited in 2002, decades (sometimes even a century) later, these same individuals are—again, through their deaths—credited with freeing another community: the black visitors attending the exhibition. In looking at victims of lynching, and at iconic civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., what many viewers are seeing is some alternate version of themselves.

Back out in the heat and humidity of the world outside Emory’s secure, temperature-controlled library, another photographic archive is accumulating. The media has been thick with emerging discussions and images related to the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. These include the protests, riots, and historical analyses that emerge as part of the unrest. In all of these processes, photographers, viewers, technology, and modes of dissemination all play various parts. Rather than the carefully controlled environment of the library, these photographs circulate via hand-held devices, computers, and TV screens; they share visual (and
storage) space with headlines, advertisements, family photographs, and personal documents. With social media, we talk about sharing, liking, and following as a means for establishing statistics and determining the scope of social networks and relationships. Sharing has its roots in affective relationships. To share is to perpetuate. To like is to acknowledge and encourage. To follow a story, television show, or sports team, is to keep up to date on its news and progress.

At the same time, for a woman, to talk about “following” is to call up repeated warnings about the dangers of walking home alone or of moving through unfamiliar terrain. I have these various modes of sharing and following in mind as I write this chapter about photographic performance and social media, touched as it is by a complicated mix of stories about race, narrative, mobility, the media, and gender in North America. If sharing social media images means mobilizing them as tools for activism, pedagogy, and change, then it also means they can be made into weapons deployed maliciously and without consciousness of their implication, and in ways that perpetuate institutional violence. It is common, now, to hear about someone whose bad decisions on social media have had “real”-life consequences; a twenty-something woman who, for fun, dresses up as a victim of the Boston marathon bombing and subsequently loses her job and suffers an influx of death threats, for instance.124 There are also other instances of carelessness, such as the practice of “Trayvoning”—mostly young white teenage boys posing as a murdered black teenager named Trayvon Martin—that accumulate small bouts of criticism, but arguably don’t see the same kind of mobilized, active public outrage.

One of the performative photographic practices I consider in this chapter is the notion of surrogacy. In his study of circum-Atlantic performance, Roach defines surrogation as the process by which “culture reproduces and re-creates itself” (2). Roach explains: “In the life of a community, the process of surrogation does not begin or end but continues as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations that constitutes the social fabric. Into the cavities created by loss through death or other

124 Of course, this type of volatile online response is not limited to people who make made bad decisions. For many, simply appearing or posting online while being, for instance, female, or Muslim, constitutes a supposed invitation for trolling and threats.
forms of departure . . . survivors attempt to fit satisfactory alternatives” (2). This process, dependent as it is on subjective collective memory, “works selectively, imaginatively, and often perversely,” and is rarely successful (Roach 2). In publicly mourning the violent deaths of young black men, for instance, various members of multiple communities are working—in ways that are selective, imaginative, and at times, ethically indefensible—to make some sort of sense out of recent (and, by association, historical) events. What recent social media hashtags such as #millionhoodies, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, and #HandsUpDontShoot demonstrate is the long-recognized power of using the face and the body for activist purposes. By placing oneself as effigy for another, a notion older than, but often exemplified by, the figure of Christ, many social media users are actively negotiating (successfully and unsuccessfully) with what Azoulay calls the civil contract of photography.

This question of effigy and surrogacy sits at the heart of this chapter, which explores the way questions of race and misidentification are played out through social media encounters and interactions. If performative self-portraiture suggests a grab for agency and self-authorship, photographic surrogacy speaks to the ways in which we use social media as a means for seeing ourselves in, and through, others. Portrait photography, in particular, has always negotiated with issues of power related to representation and dissemination. With the practical ease, low cost, general accessibility, and rapid dissemination of digital photography, portraiture is a productive stage for the playing-out of different scenarios, identities, and images.

Following Richtin, I argue that digital photography works, as a medium and as a mode of distribution, “to subvert and transform power balances in the producer/viewer/subject triad, and to examine issues in ways that were previously impossible to accomplish, using a combination of sources – imagery by people holding cameras is only one of them” (Richtin, Bending the Frame 58). Building on Richtin’s argument, I would add the need to think about the way digital photography also works to practice and reinforce power imbalances. Nevertheless, the presence of a self-conscious intervention into media culture arguably manifests in the kind of sophisticated image-making that Julian Stallabrass claims for the practice of the modern “selfie” (“On Selfies” 20). Participants negotiate the gaps between truth-values in photographs; they also play with, and navigate, their own performances. Giorgio Agamben’s discussion of “gesture”
(discussed in chapter three) suggests isolated aesthetics are insufficient; gestures gain performative power through their repetition and circulation. As the layers of performed gesture, repetition, and allusion in portrait photographs demonstrate, however, the conditions that give rise to these stilled moments are neither past nor closed. Approach to embodied gesture from the perspective of performance studies, Rebecca Schneider claims “performance” is a practice that “becomes itself through messy and eruptive re-appearance” (102). Nevertheless, Schneider warns:

As theories of trauma and repetition might instruct us, it is not presence that appears in the syncopated time of citational performance but precisely (again) the missed encounter – the reverberations of the overlooked, the missed, the repressed, the seemingly forgotten. Performance does not disappear when approached from this perspective, though its remains are the immaterial of live, embodied acts. Rather, performance plays the ‘sedimented acts’ and spectral meanings that haunt material in constant collective interaction, in constellation, in transmutation. (102)

These missed or confused moments are part of what makes performance, and particularly performance that takes place within social media—itself always in tension with what remains and what disappears—so interesting.

Contemporary anxieties about the lack of control over images, suspicions about photographic manipulation, and the prevalence of portraiture in social networking sites have their roots in historical precedent. If the 1920s and 30s are a moment of increased attention to advertising and visual rhetoric, then the 60s offer, in many ways, a renewed attention to consumer culture as it relates to rights of mobility and citizenship. We are watching an increased return to these visually staged economic imperatives in our contemporary moment. Civil rights protests from the early twentieth century, through the 1960s and up until today, include sit-ins, marches, and store boycotts. The gesture and the pose become increasingly essential elements within photographs that aim for both a modern aesthetic and the ability to make a more active address to prospective viewers.

Giorgio Agamben claims gesture is the “intersection between life and art, act and power, general and particular text execution. It is a moment of life subtracted from the context of individual biography as well as the moment of art subtracted from the neutrality of aesthetics: it is pure praxis” (Steyerl ubuweb introduction to November).
Gestures, like signs, are mobile; they travel physically, symbolically, and photographically.

Moving away from earlier discussions of the indexicality of analogue photography, here I am considering the way the photograph works when conceived as a social object circulating as digital media. From holding a carte-de-visite or a postcard in one’s hand, to swiping through images of protest on Twitter using a handheld device, we frequently touch and are touched—albeit in widely divergent ways—by the photographs that make up our daily lives. Decades after lynching photographs are made, sensitized audiences look on and treat the photographed victims as martyrs (“thank you for dying so I could be free”). And now, in social media, performers frequently behave in a way that suggests a desire to become stand-ins, surrogates, and martyrs for others, whether engaging with celebrity culture or responding to those who have been killed.

4.2. Sharing Portraits, Sharing Feelings

The term “sharing” is, on first glance, a euphemistically strategic word choice, likely appropriated in some Facebook content strategy meeting to make sending links and images seem generous and friendly. The notion of sharing also pre-supposes user-generated content (and social media in general) as something always-already meant to be given and reciprocated. Before social media, however, the word share was already pregnant with meaning. The term share speaks to communal or social experience (“of something enjoyed or suffered in common with others”; “to have, take, bear one’s share in, part in, participate in”). As a verb, to share is not simply to give something away, but more specifically, to divide into parts; it is to cut or cut off. A “share” refers to one’s portion of property, or due. Sharing can also speak to religion or politics (shared belief) or a mutual experience of pain or suffering. Some anxieties about the proliferation of social media suggest social media as photographic practice seems to spread as a form of contagion or as a hijacking of social relations; this happens when contentious photographs are shared against the subjects’ wishes, or without their knowledge.

126 According to the Oxford English Dictionary.
It is impossible to discuss social media without making reference to the now ubiquitous self-portrait. Self-portraiture (not unlike portraiture more generally) speaks to the desire to humanize the viewing experience. The inclusion of a human element satisfies the desire to see the face of the person with whom we are communicating, and the self-portrait responds to the desire to place oneself in the picture, in context. When self-portraiture seems ubiquitous, however, it is easily denigrated. As Linfield argues, “Most people, after all, can’t paint a wonderful painting or write a wonderful play. But lots of ordinary people—with no training, no experience, no education, no knowledge—have taken wonderful photographs: better, sometimes, than those of photography’s recognized masters” (16). Photography is historically considered the medium of the masses. “Yet this, too—and the levelling tendencies it implies—is troubling,” Linfield suggests; “For where such egalitarianism dwells, can the razing of all distinctions be far behind? Who can admire an activity, much less an art, that so many uneducated, untrained people can do so well? Photography’s democratic promise has always been photography’s demotic threat” (Linfield 16). Mass amounts of digital images are not “precious,” capital-inducing objects.

Nevertheless, there is economic value in what social media platforms would refer to as “user-generated content” such as photographs. Asking, “what distinguishes a selfie from an artist’s self-portrait?” Jessie Wender’s initial response, the so-called “easy answer” (“[a] smartphone and a Tinder account”) equates genre with media platform (“Seeing Themselves” n. pag.). By Wender’s account, “in general, we ask more from a self-portrait than we do from a selfie: more consideration, more composition, more psychological insight and aesthetic care” (“Seeing Themselves” n. pag.). We can complicate this simple definition by noting that a smartphone selfie might be made with a different kind of aesthetic attention. Its composition (often made up of a close up of the face) often takes into account the particularities of the camera phone, and the fact that the image should presumably be eye-catching while in the form of a (small, square) thumbnail. These functional details affect composition, just as the technological limitations often affect quality. Perhaps for this reason, Julian Stallabrass cautions, “It would be easy to slip into seeing the instantly shared photographic self-portrait, along with snaps of things bought and consumed, as a register of a complete surrender to commercial image culture” (“On Selfies” 20). Not surprisingly, both Wender and
Stallabrass self-consciously default to the “easy” definitions or notions about the selfie. The blurring of popular and academic discourse, and the fact that the term emerged quite recently brings about some of this anxiety about “easy” definitions and arguments, as opposed to well-argued, well-established etymologies. In the absence of a formal definition, Stallabrass offers a fairly comprehensive laundry list of characteristics connected with the notion of this particular form of self-portraiture, including “the preening necessary to emulate commodified beauty ideals, the apeing of celebrities, the internalising of values of professional self-presentation, the erasure of experience and memory through an obsession with moment-to-moment recording, and the distribution of the results on websites that mine images and metadata for commercial value” (“On Selfies” 20). What this critical performance accomplishes, however, is something more telling than the content of the list. In his elitist dismissal of digital self-portraiture, Stallabrass also offers a window into well-rehearsed models of leftist critique of popular culture and new media.

Despite the veracity of these charges about celebrity culture copying and self-commodification, most of these claims about the selfie could be attributed, in one form or another, to traditional forms of portraiture and self-portraiture. Well before the ubiquity of digital media, artists such as Andy Warhol blurred the distinctions between art, advertising, image-making, and portraiture, shifting the focus from the individuals pictured to the audience’s relationship with their image or presentation. In one notable example, Marilyn—a serial screen-printed repetition of a single promotional image of Marilyn Monroe—“Warhol seems to deprive the portrait of much of its deeper referential content in order to suggest both the artificial confection of her public personality and the relative invisibility of the person behind the public image, the latter offered as a commodity for the viewer’s consumption” (Brilliant 49). If earlier portrait work questions the depth of psychological insight and the commodification of the image (and the person behind the image), we can’t claim these aspects as exclusive to self-portraiture in contemporary digital media. This commodification has been at the heart of photographic portraiture since the beginning. Nevertheless, contemporary digital photography incorporates a different set of invisible labourers, both in the production of images and in the workers who create and maintain the technology itself.
The drive, or compulsion, to present oneself as an image echoes the model of “confession” Michel Foucault describes in *The History of Sexuality: Volume I*. For Foucault, confession is “one of the main rituals” contemporary Westerners “rely on for the production of truth” (56). Confession is “a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 61). Although this ritual is based in a hierarchical, rather than democratic, power structure, “the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points . . . that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 60). The same impulse to disclose which Foucault discusses in relation to confession brings forth the self-portrait.

The ever-approachable “selfie”—down to the cutesy neologism itself—presents itself as popular, straightforward, and omnipresent, even democratic, in its accessibility. Anyone can take a self-portrait with a smartphone. Babies still unable to walk, talk, or hold their own head up, can (and have) made self-portraits using touch-screen iPhones. The smartphone selfie underlines the sense of ease implied by the old Kodak advertising expression, “You press the button, we do the rest.” The smartphone takes it even further, however, because the photographer has both the total control and the relative effortlessness of the old Kodak. The selfie becomes a way to stamp oneself, with relative ease, onto any place or situation. The common markers of the auto-portrait—recognizable features such as the extended arm, slightly distorted camera angle and distance, or the arm and camera visible in a mirror or reflection—bypass the need for academic discussion about authority and intention; the photograph formally advertises its self-contained authority. In doing so, it makes claims for its own transparency, simplicity, and lack of external mediation; it suggests a desire for agency, self-authorship, and self-ownership. *This is me. I am here.* Here, the user’s screen name (along with the thumbnail portrait) becomes a visual representative of the subject; it works in conjunction with the profile image (and/or other posted self-portraits). As a whole these elements work together to create something akin to a personal brand.

Names and titles make up an important part of any brand. According to Wendy Steiner, the process of naming is central to portraiture more widely. As a genre, portraits are “unique among art works because they always make specific reference to an existing element of reality – that is, to a real person” (qtd. in Brilliant 46). In this sense,
the portrait is denotative. But not all names “are proper names,” as Richard Brilliant points out; “[s]ome define a person’s roles in society, his character, his appearance, his reputation and reception, his fate and his fame, all those accretions of the self that constitute ‘a life,’ for many the only true subject of a portrait” (46). The same applies to self-portraiture, which makes a point of drawing a crude yet specific frame around the photographer him- or herself.

Despite the increased frequency of photographic sharing, for more than one hundred and eighty years, people have been exploring what it means to put oneself, as an image, into other people’s hands.127 By the late 1850s in England, small, tradeable paper portraits called cartes-de-visite had become increasingly popular. A photograph mounted on a two and a half by four-inch card, a carte-de-visite could portray any number of things, including family members, celebrities, native peoples, animals, landscapes, artefacts, buildings, monuments, and important events. The craze for cartes-de-visite was called “cartomania.” People were driven to collect portraits of others, as well as making and circulating photographs of themselves and their families. Cartes were circulating by the millions and “pictorial thinking” had “saturated the lives of ordinary people” (Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography 128). In the mid-nineteenth century, Britain’s Queen Victoria and Prince Albert broke with older taboos of not looking directly at monarchs and became the first British royals to allow their photographic images to circulate freely (Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography 128). Rather than losing symbolic power or agency by allowing herself to be metaphorically and physically possessed by others (the paper yielding her image passed

127 According to digital anthropologist Kristen Joy Watts, activity within social media photography platforms such as Instagram can be best understood in terms of the “Pictolect” – “a fluid mix of pictures and words” (Watts 13). Though pictures are not, as some fear, replacing words – “the volume of pictures being made and shared has increased dramatically of late” – Watts calls “this increase photo-madness” (Watts 13). The term “Photo-madness” is not new, however – it is as old as photography itself (Watts 22). What Watts and others argue, is that, in 2014, we are watching the emergence of a “new language online.” Despite W. J. T. Mitchell’s debunking of the more general “pictorial turn” as a long-standing fiction, photography scholars such as Robin Kelsey insist that the contemporary moment marks “a watershed time where we are moving away from photography as a way of recording and storing a past moment,” and instead “turning photography into a communication medium” (qtd. in Bilton n. pag.). Unlike Kelsey, I don’t believe photography was ever any less of a communication medium than it is today. Nevertheless, I am interested in the ways in which these methods of communication have changed, or adapted, with new technology, and new social and technological conditions.
from hand to hand by anyone, whether they had ever beheld her before or not), it was arguably to the Queen’s political benefit to allow her image (as well as other idealized, carefully composed representations of her family) to become pervasive. She accumulated more symbolic power the more her image was shared, shown, and distributed by others.

The fact that these exchangeable photographs were so popular indicates an English audience that was increasingly adept at identifying visual conventions. In addition to guiding viewers toward formal norms for how to present themselves and how to look at others, the development of photographic technology also means that portrait viewing was no longer restricted to a specific time or place. By exchanging and posing for cartes-de-visite, English viewers were both willing and able to determine at a glance whether an individual complied with, or fell short of visual norms (Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography* 128). By the 1860s, images of such individuals had been incorporated into new organizational systems. They became largely differentiated in categories determined by differences of race, class, and gender. Portraits were no longer reserved for people of birth, wealth, or prominence. In this sense, the handheld smartphone is not unlike the cartes-de-visite – the image essentially fits in the palm of one’s hand; it engages the haptic; it is portable and can be easily possessed; it can be passed around to share, or viewers can lean in close to look together.

This process of shared viewing has a clear precedent even within photographic representation. Geoffrey Batchen explains the nineteenth-century trend of dramatizing shared viewing of photographs… in photographs. Batchen describes a daguerreotype featuring a woman “staring intently at a photograph she holds in her hand, posing as if unaware of the camera, and of us, staring at her staring at it. It’s a common theme, variously photographed” (Batchen, *Forget Me Not* 10). As further evidence, Batchen offers an 1845 daguerreotype photograph of a man named George James Webb and his family. Here, Webb shows a photograph to his wife and children and they all look at it together. “Mr. George James Webb is insistent that the rest of his family stare at a small photograph he proffers in his hand; his daughter’s head is being held steady to ensure that her gaze does not wander” (Batchen, *Forget Me Not* 10) – or perhaps to ensure that her head does not move, blurring the photograph.
The whole picture is organized around this collective looking, its composition dominated by a void occupied only by Mr. Webb’s pictorial aide-de-memoire. It seems we are being invited to look at a picture that is all about its subjects looking at another picture. Why was the picture taken? Perhaps it was a way for this family to acknowledge their sustenance of memory: someone may be gone but is certainly not forgotten. The family in this picture want to be remembered as remembering. (Batchen, Forget Me Not 10)

In this case, the act of shared looking invites the viewer to become a part of the process with them. We engage in a similar act by looking at them, looking. It also allows them to perform a greater sense of identity, including their own active participation in the economy of image making and sharing, as Batchen suggests.

In addition to the visual sophistication that came with new proficiency in viewing and posing for photographs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the photograph also became a tool for assuming visual competence. Consider the desires that brought about photographic invention in the first place: inventors such as Daguerre and Talbot are hoping not only to see nature but to be able to copy, and in a sense, possess it. In other words, “photography allowed Victorians to feel they were in touch with and could negotiate, and feel comfortable in, a world undergoing modernization at an ever-increasing pace. From 1850 on, photographs themselves indicate that the rapid proliferation of new and exotic faces and figures fueled a need to receive new information in utterly familiar ways” (Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography 19). The result of this increasing desire is that the portraits’ subject matter became varied, while the type of shot and generic conventions became predictable (Armstrong, Fiction in the Age of Photography 19). With these inventions and the normalization of photographic practice, photography develops the ability to make its subject matter seem at once unique and utterly predictable.

According to Batchen, the snapshot is defined in part by the fact that each one registers a particular pose, even if in doing so it repeats the many similar, but slightly different, poses that came before (“Snapshots” 125). Like the selfie, where the social

\[128\] A more extreme version of this photographic ethos would be the group funerary portrait.
and visual conventions are clear and always easily recognizable, the technology and the practice develop together and quickly become universal. In other words, Batchen suggests, “most photographs are actually about conformity, not innovation or subversion” (“Snapshots” 125). Snapshots, in general, are “cloyingly sentimental in content and repetitively uncreative as pictures, having little value in the marketplace of either ideas or commodities”; as a result, “they don’t easily fit into a historical narrative [art history] still anxiously, insecurely, focused on originality, innovation, and individualism” (Batchen, “Snapshots” 123-124). For Batchen, it is precisely the persistent banality of snapshots that makes them worthy of study; they require researchers to think outside the parameters of art historical values.

Building on Batchen’s study of snapshots, Lynn Berger argues the snapshot is effectively “the cliché’s visual twin” (183). As she explains, the etymology of the term cliché connects it to image reproduction as well as text: “in its printing press days, the cliché referred not only to casts or moulds for the reproduction of letters and words: it could be used to print images as well” (L. Berger 182). When the term shifted from its print culture meaning to a more general parlance, the cliché became “for language what the amateur snapshot would shortly represent for photography: a symbol of the lowest common denominator, an emblem of the boring, the repetitive, and the formulaic” (L. Berger 178). Both the snapshot and the cliché are now seen as the opposite of “romantic originality and creativity, and . . . are associated with a loss of individuality” (L. Berger 183). Despite the negative connotations, however, both of these visual and linguistic practices “perform vital social and personal functions” in that, as mnemonic devices, they represent ancient “containers of memory” (L. Berger 183). The repetition inherent to snapshots and clichés is as important to the performer—or more so—than it is to the one looking, or listening to the performance.

4.3. Affect and Labour

Despite the negative connotations of the selfie as practice, Stallabrass voices a productive, if optimistic, defence of them, claiming “the daily practice of photography gives people detailed knowledge about the way standard images of beauty and fame are produced; they learn considerable sophistication in the making of images and scepticism
about their effects” (“On Selfies” 20). Kristen Joy Watts claims it is not uncommon for long-term Instagram users to scroll back through to their earliest photographs and notice a marked improvement in the composition and style of their photographs (62). The techniques get more refined—that is, more in line with the aesthetic of their fellow users—as social media photographers get more familiar with the form, or genre, and its conventions. Linked users therefore learn together, developing a shared formal visual language through the act of taking, sharing, and commenting on photographs. But the idea of learning conventions also signals a process of internalization and a naturalization of aesthetic forms. Users are indoctrinated into a specific aesthetic culture where learning the rules means being able to participate in (create content for) beauty and advertising economies. When users/viewers/makers (myself included) participate in this photographic economy, they are not necessarily doing so critically.

The flip side to the accessibility of the smartphone is easy categorization and marketability. Many users do not give sustained consideration to how the image is composed and made, or to whom it is disseminated and why. In her discussion of the emergence of Reality TV, Beverley Best lists a number of factors including institutional conditions and their influence on cultural forms. Best notes that genre or “cultural form” is a production of “political, economic, and industrial transformations that characterize advanced consumer economies after the 1970s” (195). According to Best, transformations such as “post-industrialism, post-Fordism, flexible accumulation, neoliberalism or postmodern capitalism . . . generally speaking, share a common orientation: increasing the profitability of private industrial and commercial enterprise” (195). Hand in hand with these larger economic and institutional structures is the outsourcing of labour. User-sourced labour plays a particularly important part in social media—and the Internet more widely. Like social media, Reality TV “travels” well, and is comprised of pre-fabricated forms ready to have their “cultural content” “filled” by users (Best 195). As Best observes, this form of television programming also “participates in a wider popular compulsion to public discourse . . . [it] both reflects and aids in facilitating a collective and yet individually expressed drive to make oneself publicly visible, to make oneself seen and heard by an audience of spectators” (195). The confessional mode that functions in earlier forms such as Reality TV is akin to the drive to present images of one’s own prosaic existence in the form of a self-portrait.
The “detailed knowledge” and learned “sophistication” that Stallabrass claims new media photography offers us today includes the social aspect of photography. In social media, the hashtag functions not only as an organizational tool (it tags, catalogues, and organizes images for easy searching, and suggests that everything can be named and therefore fit into the order of things) but it also functions, symbolically, as sign of the photographer or poster’s fluency, technical proficiency, and social or cultural belonging (Watts 81). The collaborative online archive is socially produced and exists in a constant state of flux. The infrastructure of social media platforms provides “a framework for users to inhabit and populate. This software framework contains a contradiction: on the one hand, social media allows for users to ‘be the media’ and thus influence mass culture; on the other hand, social media sites are rigidly hierarchical, allowing certain uses and discouraging others” (Gehl 5). With applications where photographs are experienced online, the photograph (and the act of viewing it) becomes a palimpsest, a representation of the process of mechanical photo making. As Richtin argues in After Photography, “[t]he fact that many of the subjects of photographs can now see the images, either immediately on the back of the photographer’s digital camera or as soon as they are published on the Web, means that the photographer can have a new, sometimes problematic, collaborator” (125). This notion of collaboration—with digital platforms, other users, and cataloguing tools—is essential to digital photography as well as social media.

Like the frames and infrastructures that provide the scaffolding for social media use, the formal layout of the photograph guides the way critics look at, interpret, and study social media photography. In his discussion of Dziga Vertov’s 1928 film Eleventh Year, Manovich explains that when the frames are arranged in a grid layout, Vertov’s film becomes “represented by a single image, which allows seeing patterns in content, cinematography and editing” (Salah, Manovich, et al 414). In literary analysis, critics extract various statistics or “features” to look for – including patterns of repetition, relationships, word usage, and more. In the same way, Manovich suggests, they use “digital image processing to calculate statistics about various visual properties of images; average brightness and saturation, the number and the properties of shapes, the number of edges and their orientations, key colors, and so on” (Salah, Manovich, et al 414). Considered this way, the grid format—common to social media formatting and to
the layout of smartphones and websites more generally—lends itself to a form of easy analysis and surveillance; it offers a seemingly empirical bird’s eye view for considering patterns in use of colour, composition, textural features, lighting, identifying faces and shapes, and more. It also flattens over time for easy analysis of information. This critical approach can be called “exploratory media analysis” (Salah, Manovich, et al 414). Exploratory media analysis encourages comparison and contextualization, rather than taking each image on its own terms. Formally, the grid is already industrial, formal, and repetitive. It is the pre-fabricated, the pre-packaged. What the grid does, then, is lay the raw information bare, providing not a sustained look at specific details, but an overview. Encountering a grid on a desktop, or scanning an Instagram feed on a handheld smartphone, viewers tend to take gridded images as a cross section. Our eyes search for repeating patterns or standout images, whereas the particular details are considered less important. As our hands swipe up, down, or move to enlarge, the images shift, change, and replace each other creating a layered viewing experience.

4.4. “Laborious Gestures”

Allan Sekula’s essay “An Eternal Esthetics of Laborious Gestures” speaks to the photography of work, photography as work, and the confusion of the two. Social media is

129 Consider, for instance, the Walker Evans photograph, *Penny Picture Display, Savannah 1936*. Evans has photographed a photography studio window, where two hundred and twenty five individual studio portraits are posted together in a grid. Rather than drawing attention to individual portraits, the carefully ordered collection offers a composite photograph of multiple faces.

130 With still-new technology such as Google’s reverse image search algorithm (where images are entered into the search, rather than keywords), the grid hints at the gaze of “machinic vision” (Salemy n. pag.). Some suggest the “Query by image content’ methods (QUIBC)” involved in Google’s image search technology “will gradually synthesize with and replace index-based image recognition and that machines will soon assume a greater share of the responsibility of recognizing and contextualizing images” (Salemy n. pag.).
in many ways about output and production; collaboration requires maintenance.\(^{131}\) Sekula calls attention to the structure of “dead labor” always-already embedded in the camera (“Eternal Esthetics” 18). Within social media sites, platform owners track “users’ movements and exploit users as what Tiziana Terranova has aptly described as ‘free laborers’ . . . free labor is rife with contradictions: it is freely given yet exploited; it is done for love, yet hypervalORIZATION haunts and directs it; it is work, but it is play” (Gehl 6). For Gehl, the “frames” or infrastructures set up by social media sites are both sites of freedom and exploitation and should be understood as such (6).\(^{132}\)

The “free laborer” of social media derives from the same systems that perpetuate the unwaged female labour to which critics such as Silvia Federici has long been opposed. With social media labour, however, users span a greater range in terms of gender, age, class, and geography. Re-framing “the commons” as a potentially feminist tool, Federici notes the positive qualities of the Internet as common space (after Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s *Empire* and *Multitude*): “According to this theory, as production becomes predominantly a production of knowledge organized through the Internet, a common space is formed which escapes the problem of defining rules of inclusion or exclusion” and therefore allows for a proliferation, rather than subtraction, of information and resources (142). This increased availability of resources suggests what Federici calls “the possibility of a society built on abundance,” the theoretical result of a model that “does not separate the formation of ‘the common’ from the organization of

\(^{131}\) We might also consider art and galleries, trends like #EmptyMet, #EmptyFrieze, etc. These photographic opportunities offer the chance to see public places in rare empty moments. It is a novelty. We want to see these spaces without the people (and the distraction of their glowing iPad screens) with which we have learned to associate them. It lends itself to the fantasy that these spaces, and objects, could be there just for you. Although empty installation shots are not new, now they are digitally catalogued, while earlier images are retroactively incorporated within the category.

\(^{132}\) According to Martha Buskirk, “artists are also more likely to push the envelope with respect to assertions of fair use that extend beyond prescribed terms of service, particularly when the goal is to bring a critical lens to phenomena whose legal boundaries are articulated by corporate interests. In Chicago, attempts to curtail photographs of Kapoor’s Cloud Gate prompted protests about the copyrighting of public space. It is therefore crucial to recognize the importance of being able to articulate a response to imagery or artistic expressions already in circulation. As digitized representations of the world become ever-more encompassing, and as social exchange is engineered by corporate interests in the context of branded media platforms, it is increasingly urgent that we assert our rights in the virtual commons” (“Networked Photo” 166).
work and production as already constituted, but sees it immanent in it” (Federici 142). This model is nevertheless flawed. It leaves the “question of the material basis of the digital technology the Internet relies upon” unasked and in doing so, ignores the dependent relationship between computers and economic activities such as mining, which are socially and ecologically destructive (Federici 142). By emphasising “science, knowledge production and information, this theory skirts the question of the reproduction of everyday life” (Federici 142). By Federici’s model, an active, functional feminization of the commons would come about as a result of individuals and communities becoming more conscious of the implications of both larger social and economic systems as well as the consequences of individual actions. To feminize the commons—and, by extension, one’s participation in a global community, both online and off—is to actively imagine oneself as having a personal share in it, and an individual responsibility to it. In this sense, Federici’s model of active refusal and common responsibility bears similarities with Azoulay’s civil contract (which I discuss in my Introduction and in chapter three).

We can also consider the question of labour from another perspective. In Our Aesthetic Categories: The Zany, the Cute, and the Interesting, Sianne Ngai explicates the relationship between labour and zaniness. Building her discussion around the example of Lucille Ball’s frenetic, oddball I Love Lucy alter-ego, Ngai describes this “zaniness,” in part, as the “development of spontaneous personality” (175). It is adaptability, but it is also heavily gendered. “More specifically, as one might already discern from the strenuous performances of Lucy Ricardo (and their unique way of disclosing the artistry of Lucille Ball), zaniness speaks to a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working” (Ngai, Zany, Cute, Interesting 199). Similarly, the performance of making, and updating social media portraits blurs between play and work. There is an entire economy of merchandise built around maintaining and encouraging the practice, including tools such as selfie sticks and selfie stands – awkward, seemingly unnecessary embellishments on the old-fashioned camera timer – that want to make the self-consciously automated self-portrait appear hands-free. Devices such as selfie sticks require the viewer to acknowledge the labour involved in making the photograph, while at the same time pretending to be effortless (creating additional capital in the process). The name, “Instagram,” is itself “a conflation of
‘Instamatic’ (Kodak’s snapshot camera of the 1960s and 1970s) and ‘telegram’; therefore – like earlier applications such as the Hipstamatic, Instagram “has nostalgia built in” (Stallabrass, “On Selfies” 20). What characterizes both Hipstamatic and Instagram, and now even the built-in functions of later model iPhone cameras, is the ability to apply filters to photographs the same way you might choose different speeds, colours, or qualities of film for an analogue camera. Different filters also allow for focused dodging and burning of the image, the way one might have done manually in a dark room. By offering filtering options, Instagram and iPhone cameras allow users to simulate the look of other, earlier, forms of photography; they also offer more of a creative, even sometimes painterly, engagement with the photographs.

In his discussion of early forms of vernacular photography, Batchen describes the practice of tinting, or embellishing photographs with paint. Hybrid photographic/painted portraits are

fascinating for what we do not see – the photograph, for example. In many of them, the photographic base has been almost entirely covered by paint or, in the case of some of the backgrounds, erased through the application of acid. The resulting image was then elaborately framed and matted (giving the final object both pattern and depth). (Batchen, Each Wild Idea 62).

In other words, these early painted photographic portraits are “a strangely hybrid piece of work” — they are “part photograph, part painting, part etching, part sculpture” (Batchen, Each Wild Idea 62). These hybrid objects are remarkable for the way they complicate questions of indexicality and truth-value. With the painted photographs, the paper photograph provides both material and indexical support for layers of paint.133 What Batchen suggests is that, rather than putting the truth-value of the photograph in question, hybridity enhances the initial truth-value of the photograph. “Indeed, the epistemological presence of the photograph is made all the stronger by its perceptual absence. These images, so simple at first glance, actually exploit a complex form of palimpsest. As Derrida might put it, they offer ‘an erasure which allows what it obliterates to be read’” (Batchen, Each Wild Idea 62). Instagram also figures as a kind of palimpsest

133 This process also appears in early pictorialist photography.
of filters, each loaded with the technological and rhetorical histories to which they refer (the styles and forms they simulate). Filters, combined with text and composition, offer layers of meaning in the same way that painted photographs offer a kind of palimpsest available only to the knowing viewer.

4.5. “Double Consciousness”

In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois famously articulates what he calls “double-consciousness” as “the sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (2). Despite long-held anxieties about race and representation, as bell hooks explains, photography also has a history as a potentially democratizing medium. It holds the potential for opposition: “All colonized and subjugated people who, by way of resistance, create an oppositional structure within the framework of domination recognize that the field of representation (how we see ourselves, how others see us) is a site of ongoing struggle” (hooks, “In Our Glory” 57). Though “hashtag activism” is often considered—and can sometimes be—a substitute for tangible, political action, examples such as the recent #IfTheyGunnedMeDown campaign show an awareness of the power of selection in media imagery and the potential for publicly criticizing those patterns of representation through the field of representation. According to NPR:

The hashtag started trending on Twitter after media outlets began circulating images of Michael Brown, who had been shot and killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo. Many of the tweets containing the hashtag juxtapose two images of the same person in very different contexts – reading a book in one, say, while blowing smoke and flashing a hand gesture in the other. (LaFleur, Walker, and Roberts n. pag.)

Necessarily deployed within a popular form, these posts, which include juxtaposed images and the label that ties them together and guides their meaning, serve both a pedagogical and an activist function. Paired together, these juxtaposed images present many questions about how the media selects representative images and the ethical

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134 The notion of hashtag activism also evokes Lauren Berlant’s claims in *The Female Complaint* that the performance of “right feeling” can substitute for real action. And the “right feeling” work, like Federici’s unwaged labour, is gendered.
implications of these choices (LaFleur, Walker, and Roberts n. pag.). IfTheyGunnedMeDown mobilizes the contradictions within portraiture in order to call attention to questions of race and representation.  

Another visual campaign, HandsUpDontShoot rose in popularity along with IfTheyGunnedMeDown. Perhaps one of the most recognizable images of the movement, a photograph made and circulated by Howard University students on August 13, 2014, features hundreds of black students standing together and posed facing forward, with faces mostly stoic, and all with hands and arms raised (Figure 4.1). I first encountered this photograph on an iPhone, in a form similar to the way I have included it below. Posted by Megan Sims, the caption reads: “Powerful picture we took today at Howard University #Ferguson #MikeBrown #MyaWhite #DONTSHOOT”. Though tempted to copy the photograph and feature it in its own right, I want to call attention to the way its mediated form requires that images and captions both appear and disappear as we scroll through websites or along touchscreens to view them. 

Front and center in the Howard University photograph is a young man with his shirt tucked in and his eyes open wide. The students address the camera, and beyond, and offer their own faces, and figures, to layer in with our media saturation of images of Michael Brown (and Trayvon Martin, and many more – the deep crowd of students calls attention to the layered history of violence at issue). Hands and faces intermingle. Rather than a straightforward group portrait, the image seems to accumulate a critical mass. The sheer volume of hands and faces is accentuated by the darkened entryway to the top left of the photograph. In breaking up the crowd, the entryway shows just how

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135 NPR reports that when asked “which image the tweeters felt represented them more accurately . . . [a]lmost to a person, [the] respondents said both images were representative” (LaFleur, Walker, and Roberts n. pag.). See also Tanzina Vega’s “Shooting Spurs Hashtag Effort on Stereotypes” from The New York Times, 12 August 2014. As with any hashtag, or form that circulates through social media, however, the empowering, activist movement of what is often self-referentially called “Black Twitter” (#BlackTwitter) has nevertheless been appropriated more widely; now the conversation consists as much of debates about who can and can’t claim the tag (black users criticising white users for adopting the format, for instance, claiming they are appropriating the movement and ‘missing the point’). These debates, clashes, and parodies become as much a part of the conversation that makes up #IfTheyGunnedMeDown archive as the initial activist posts. This arena of commentary and meta-commentary is itself a productive space.

136 https://twitter.com/The_Blackness48/status/499714499688300545/photo/1
dense it is. The conspicuous emptiness also suggests the gap the group has come together in an attempt to fill.

Figure 4.1
not reproduced
due to copyright issues

**Figure 4.1.** Megan Sims. “Powerful picture we took today at Howard University #Ferguson #MikeBrown #MyaWhite #DONTSHOOT.” 13 Aug. 2014.

Note: Photo made by Howard University and Howard Student Association. Posted to Twitter by Megan Sims (@The_Blackness48). Screen shot made 31 Aug. 2014. <https://twitter.com/the_blackness48/status/499714499688300545>

This photograph was organized by the Howard Students Union in response to the killing of Michael Brown and makes up part of the subsequent protests. It was shared through re-tweets (where other Twitter users include the post on their own page or feed, along with their own posts) and presented on news outlets. This photograph represents one of the many variations on a theme—generally, groups of (mostly black) people bunched together, addressing the camera in a frontal gaze while at once holding their hands up in a gesture that quotes both potential violence and necessary compliance. When these students hold their hands up in this matter, it is to invoke a weapon at the same time as it tries to ward it off. They position themselves as recipients of aggression.
The viewer looks from the point of view of the photographer and their camera. The viewer is also simultaneously situated within the point of view of the presumed aggressor as the students address them, making a gesture that says, “don’t shoot.” This is both a straightforward reference and a more layered and complex claim, of course, as the pose has been orchestrated as a photographic opportunity. They are there precisely to be ‘shot’.

Looking at this image, I am also reminded of one of the central arguments in Martin Berger’s *Seeing Through Race: A Reinterpretation of Civil Rights Photography*. Berger’s analysis of civil rights imagery pays attention to both the photographs that become iconic and familiar and the ones that have since fallen by the wayside. In the process, he indirectly calls attention to one of the potential pitfalls of the activists’ adoption of surrogacy as a rhetorical gesture. In the United States of the 1960s civil rights struggle, images of conflict, or the controversial decision to include student marchers, for instance, provide dramatic subject matter for news media. Within the large body of spectacularized civil rights conflict photography, photojournalists often negotiated the desire to encourage sympathy, if not empathy, with their subjects (M. Berger 34). Photographs offering clear binaries, striking images, and relatable scenarios often circulate more easily and successfully than more nuanced and complex ones. As Berger explains, “the comments and reactions that [photographs of the civil rights struggle] elicited from viewers in the 1960s reveal that Americans [were looking] to civil rights photographs to see who was the victim and who was the aggressor”—in other words, viewers used the photographs as a guide to “determine whose cause was just” (35). Though images of violence and supplication may successfully appeal to the viewer’s sense of sympathy, the binary itself is limiting. It naturalizes the roles, making them seem inevitable. In selecting and framing images for public circulation based on the premise of seemingly simple, natural violence between victim and aggressor, the media—both then and arguably still today—forecloses possibilities for nuanced, complex engagement with the conditions that give rise to these photographs. This issue of identification is exasperated in the 1960s as white media representatives often neglected to interviewed black civil rights protesters, leaving the images to circulate within the frames of captions written by white photographers and editors (M. Berger 34-35). This
complicated relationship to re-contextualization and re-framing is further aggravated within digital media.

One of the civil rights movement’s most recognized photographers, Ernest Withers, contributed a number of vital images to what hooks refers to as the struggle for representation. One of Withers’ now-iconic photographs, I AM A MAN, depicts the 1968 sanitation workers strike (Figure 4.2). The proliferation of signs (and behind and beneath them, men) repeats, insistently, across the frame: I am, I am, a man. The men hold their ground in the space of the street, though their attention is divided. The vertical lines of the windows and power lines behind the group bolster their upright position. The signs add height to the group, making them seem taller. At the same time, the signs obscure faces, replacing them with the words their bodies hold to announce them. The photograph calls attention to its staging along the edges – the woman on the left, who has to move to the margins because she is not a man, for instance, or the man behind her who perhaps directs one of the men in line. Their poses repeat decades of protest signs and picket lines throughout American history. This is a struggle fought on the field of representation, about sharing space, and labour, and mobility. The utterance “I AM A MAN” is powerful for its simplicity and its gravity. Just as each sign quotes the other, adding force and urgency to the one beside it, the expression itself is an echo and revision of Josiah Wedgwood’s 1787 anti-slavery medallion, featuring a slave, on bended knee, under the words “Am I not a man and a brother?” (M. Berger 32).
Figure 4.2. Ernest C. Withers, I AM A MAN, 1968
Note: © The Estate of Ernest C. Withers.

Within the photograph itself, the signs function as part of the frame. Like a meme (or earlier, the graphic modernism of Walker Evans), the text is not peripheral to the photographic image. It is essential. Carol Armstrong warns of the ease with which even sophisticated viewers take for granted the invisible way language frames our reading of photographs. Armstrong is referring to the captions rather than the text within a photograph, but her point applies to both. The invisible influence of language “once grafted to the photograph, no longer seems to hover beneath it as something exterior to it, imported from a different semiological register. Instead it is all but swallowed into the image, interiorized within it, indivisible from it. . . . The linguistic frame is anything but neutral” (Armstrong, Scenes in a Library 1). The text frames the viewer’s reading of the photograph, both from the frame and from within. Written text helps the viewer understand the photograph, but more importantly, “the fact that it does so is immediately erased from awareness, and the reading instructions provided by the text are internalized within the image. Thus what was ambiguous in the photograph becomes clear and self-evident, as if by the evidence of the photograph itself” (Armstrong, Scenes in a Library 1). The captions make the photographs seem self-evident and their meaning
4.6. Performance

In February 2012, an unarmed black teenager named Trayvon Martin was shot and killed on his way home in Sanford, Florida. Martin was shot in an altercation with armed “neighbourhood watch” member George Zimmerman. On the final day of George Zimmerman’s murder trial coverage, news networks MSNBC and Headline News (CNN) aired a photograph of Martin’s lifeless body. Though the televised image was only on screen for a moment, apparently shown by mistake, at least one of their viewers photographed and circulated the image from the screen. From there, the image circulated rapidly across the web. With its distribution, a new social media trend called “Trayvoning” emerged. According to The Daily Mail, “Trayvoning” is a social media trend where “teens, most of whom are white,” imitate the look of Martin’s dead body, lying on the ground; these imitators “[lie] motionless on the ground with Skittles and an iced tea, often while wearing a hoodie” (Gorman, “Trayvoning”).

What brings about this kind of performance? “When teens all around the U.S. dressed up in a hoodie and laid on the ground with an iced tea bottle and Skittles, photographing themselves as Trayvon Martin, and spread the photographic word that they ‘are all Trayvon Martin,” Azoulay explains, “it can be interpreted as a mere act of identification with the victim and be criticized as patronizing” (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens” 54). Azoulay’s claim is an understatement, however, and she seems to confuse the practice of “Trayvoning” with the wider social media protests (often self-identifying under the tag WeAreTrayvonMartin) that draw attention to the social and civic
injustice of Martin’s killing. In most cases of Trayvoning, the self-surrogacy of white, often male, social media users for the deceased Martin (in some cases the substitutes are black men, females, people in blackface, digitally altered photographs of U.S. President Barack Obama, cats, or cartoons strewn on the ground with bags of Skittles and bottles of ice tea as markers) is meant as a form of play and mockery. As digital memes, these images are spreading more than just “the photographic word.” Instead, Trayvoning, specifically, employs the death of a young black man as the punch line to a joke. It is, perhaps, too generous to suggest this is a joke the teenage meme-makers don’t fully understand.\textsuperscript{137} Azoulay is more on point, however, when she claims this practice “should also be interpreted as an act of misidentification with the perpetrator . . . under a political regime where George Zimmerman was acquitted, one has to struggle to be neither a victim nor a perpetrator” (“Photography and Its Citizens” 54). She claims that “[i]n our world, where the accounts of imperialism, slavery, and colonialism have not been settled, we are susceptible to embody both these positions merely by who we are and by what we own” (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens” 54). Part of what makes the Trayvoning meme so easy to replicate is the fact that Martin’s easily identifiable possessions, a bag of Skittles and an Arizona Iced tea, offer an easy shorthand shared by imitators and viewers alike. Anyone can sprawl them self on the ground. By inserting these easily recognizable brands into the frame, imitators make the reference almost immediate. This quick reference and easy circulation suggest another aspect of the so-called democratization of photography. As Azoulay argues, “[e]xchanging, buying, collecting, hiding, reading photographs together, destroying photographs, or printing photographs on scarves or plates—these aspects are no less essential” than the moment of capturing the photograph itself (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens 54-55). In other words, with digital photography, the notion of “capturing” is now, “by definition, intertwined with connected activities—cropping, sharing, tweeting, posting, tagging. Collaboration has always existed in photography but it is usually denied or not acknowledged” (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens” 54-55). And although, in theory, photography levels the playing field by turning everyone who appears before the camera into an image, in practice, the mobilization and use of photographic imagery is anything but neutral.

\textsuperscript{137} “Trayvoning” on Tumblr: https://www.tumblr.com/tagged/trayvoning
Azoulay’s point about misidentification with the perpetrator is particularly productive when it comes to presenting oneself within the image in the place of the victim. The meme format, like the more ephemeral application, Snapchat, combines image and text. It is the visual-textual equivalent of a one-liner, meant to be rapidly shared, easily recognizable, and easily digested. As Gehl notes, one characteristic of new media is that it often tends to promote “immediacy over depth” (15). As a consequence, “new media capitalism as practiced by sites such as Facebook, Google, and Twitter” include a reduction of “interaction to binary declarations of like-it-or-not consumer choices” (Gehl 15). (Debates regarding the political efficacy of social media continue unabated.) Memes offer a sense that experience is both personalized and pre-packaged and at once surprising and banal. Rather than deferring to a small caption below the image, memes often feature photographs overlaid with text that then recontextualize the content of the image. Presented on the screen, through digital code, both photograph and the text are visual images. In a similar, but more ephemeral application, Snapchat, the image message (in the spirit of the Mission Impossible tag line “this message will self-destruct”) is accessible to the receiver only once, and even then only as long as the viewer keeps their finger pressed to the screen. If and when the receiver stops touching the image, it (theoretically) disappears forever. With both basic memes and Snapchat messages (which encourage the user to write over the

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138 Another striking example of naïve, seemingly harmless – yet deeply problematic – navel-gazing is the trend of making and sharing Nazi concentration camp Instagram images. In a photographic collection compiled by Magnum photographer Thomas Dwarazak, the “auschwitz” hashtag features a collection of “photos of European teens during class trips to the concentration camp, smiling together as they travel on trains there, or offering the now-classic ‘duckface’ pout” (Lehan 67). As Fred Richtin notes, however, “Photography is becoming more and more a weapon of war. Usually, governments and other entities engaged in a violent conflict try to have photographers show them in the best light – not as cold-blooded killers but as fighters for a better way. Now, as the photographs of the beheading show, evidently there is a value in being depicted as brutes, whether to terrorize one’s enemies or to demonstrate one’s fervor for a cause” (Richtin, “Of Them, and Us” 47). There are, of course, more aggressively disturbing trends than “Trayvoning” and Auschwitz “selfies” – such as the recent ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) severed-head “selfies,” where group members pose with the decapitated heads of their victims – but this chapter is more focused on the subtler ways various forms of photographic practice, including images of atrocity and conflict, intersect with popular practice and social media. #auschwitz is represented in one of the photographic scrapbooks compiled by Dwarazak.

139 The ephemerality of Snapchat is a convenient fiction; these ‘temporary’ images can be saved through screen shots or hacked by outside sources.
image using text or drawing), the “full” use of the form encourages the user to frame and contextualize their own product, rather than leaving the image to ‘speak for itself.’

Snapchat highlights the desire within social media for an ephemeral application of digital media. Snapchat promises what the Internet can never truly deliver — a temporary file, something fleeting and candid that cannot be re-contextualized, or re-discovered at a later date. For Martha Buskirk, however, digital photography, in general, is always-already an adaptation of earlier forms. Buskirk situates the practice of digital photography in relation to the history of photo-conceptual art. Far from seeing digital media reproduction and distribution as something fantastically new, Buskirk argues that “[t]he intersection in popular practices between taking the same pictures as everyone else . . . and simply taking someone else’s photo could be read as a large-scale realization of the critique of originality mounted by the Pictures generation” (Buskirk, “Networked Photo” 164).140 She offers examples of artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, whose work famously re-produces (often by directly re-photographing) work by the famous photographers that precede them. In addition to the art historical implications of social media photography, however, Buskirk notes that “vast networks of exchange based on ‘liking’ or other modes of affirmative sharing tend to drown out the critical dimensions attributed to earlier forms of artistic appropriation” (Buskirk, “Networked Photo” 164). We arguably see the seeds of this tendency in the knee-jerk recourse to “easy” definitions of Instagram and selfies that academics self-consciously pepper throughout their speech.141 This apparent drowning-out of critical nuance can be attributed, to some extent, to the ephemerality of popular memory. It is also partly due to the fact “that much of this dialogue [around social media] is taking place in the context of sites governed by terms of use that have been calibrated to support underlying corporate interests” (Buskirk, “Networked Photo” 164). The forms themselves suggest and constrain, in other words. The necessity for easy access and navigation means that pre-

140 As Buskirk notes, this is “suggested, for example, by the overlapping visual rhetoric in Cindy Sherman’s set-up ‘Untitled Film Stills’ series, 1977-80, and Richard Prince’s Untitled [Four women looking in the same direction], 1977, created by rephotographing advertisements” (164).
141 At the same time, however, Buskirk’s own point of reference anachronistically connects social media to earlier high art, as does my own academic study of popular media.
fabricated social media platforms don't necessarily lend themselves to nuance and critical reflection.

Writing in 1978 (responding to the Museum of Modern Art's universalizing 1955 *Family of Man* exhibition), John Berger makes a claim for developing some model of "alternative photography. Berger argues:

The task of an alternative photography is to incorporate photography into social and political memory, instead of using it as a substitute which encourages the atrophy of any such memory…. For the photographer this means thinking of her or himself not so much as a reporter to the rest of the world but, rather, as a recorder for those involved in the event photographed. The distinction is crucial. (qtd. in Richtin, “Of Them, And Us” 42)

More recently, Richtin reads Berger's call as an appeal for a visually compiled family; one that would not oversimplify and render the photographic subjects as normalized, exotic, or other, but rather one that would make the connection between viewer, photographer, and subject “integral to the reader’s experience. There would be, in effect, a shared web of relationships that would resonate today with the intimacies of social media and the hyper textual qualities of the Web” (Richtin, “Of Them, And Us” 44). This sharing would shrink the geographical and psychological distance between actors and viewers. “Rather than represented as distant, the victims of war, those who instigate it, and those watching from afar could be made more proximate and, potentially, more mutually engaged” (Richtin, “Of Them, And Us” 44). The question remains: how do participants establish some connection or engagement through the media formats at their disposal?

Fortunately, the “Trayvoning” trend is neither the only, nor the most prevalent form of social media surrogacy that appeared in the wake of Trayvon Martin's shooting. In the months after Martin was killed, many protestors made a point of wearing dark

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142 Writing in reference to the photography of violence, in particular, Richtin suggests that “[u]nlike professionals, who often tend to emulate previous iconic imagery of war, those whose lives are affected by the violence, either as soldiers or civilians, make images that can be more personally felt, diverse, and at times more perversely horrific” (“Of Them, And Us” 45). The same applies to personalized and digitally altered applications of photography, particularly those made for social media (such as memes or YouTube fan videos).
hoodies like the one Martin himself had been wearing, and carrying signs saying "We Are All Trayvon Martin”; in March 2012, A Million Hoodies march took place in New York. Images from the march, and other related images made and circulated in support of the protest, were consciously tagged as #millionhoodies. The tag WeAreTrayvonMartin also circulated widely. In this case, the action is both symbolic and pedagogical. As in the countless protest marches and demonstrations that precede it, the movement is symbolic, performative, and empathetic – both black and white marchers dress and move in a politicized show of empathy for the slain Martin (and African Americans in general). Professionals, non-professionals, and artists all draw on the tactics of protest by deploying what curator and art historian Okwui Enwezor refers to as “legible” gestures—such as written signs and hand gestures—as rhetorical tools within public, or staged, photographic events (38). They try to make their message visible, clear, and easy to read in case the viewer does not give a second look.143

4.7. Following

For twenty-three days in 1969, artist Vito Acconci left his New York home in the morning and embarked on a specific project. He would secretly select a “random” person whom he would then follow until they moved from the public space of the street to a private space, or he would follow them until they reached a point at which he was barred in some way from continuing on their trail. (In one instance, he had to wait in a long line

143 Another one of these tactics (one that seems to be increasingly common, but that draws on earlier activist movements) is the so-called “die-in.” In a die-in, demonstrators literally fill the space of a ground, floor, or street with their own prone bodies. In doing so, they disrupt any kind of traffic or functioning in that space, rendering it a site of spectacle rather than of use. “Laid out prone like so many accumulating corpses, demonstrators put forth their own bodies as both memorials to those who had already died” and those who are still at risk (McLagan and McKee 20). These are not organic, natural occurrences. Instead, these “bodily-based activities” are “irreducibly mediated at every level” (McLagan and McKee 21). These are staged “photographic opportunities” made up of body and signate, “combining a rich array of iconic and textual signification through which critiques of and demands . . . [are] made” (McLagan and McKee 21). One of the important debates within something like a die-in—especially as it relates to race-related protest, for instance—is the optics of who should appear within this scene. This is, in other words, the question is whose body functions most successfully as a sign. For many “Black Lives Matter” protests in 2014 and 2015, the body of a white supporter is often said to detract force and focus from the rhetorical mass of black bodies that surround them.
for his subject’s bus and then the bus ran out of space before he could make it on after them). According to Acconci, in “following” strangers, he is essentially selecting an unwitting leader. This practice has the added benefit of getting him out of the house and giving him something to do (he calls himself “homeless” when he is out in the streets for the day). In this work, what Acconci has titled Following Piece, the artist forfeits control over his own movements to the agenda of an unsuspecting other. He calls this connection as an “adjunctive relationship.” Acconci describes this practice thus: “I add myself on to another person (I give up control/I don’t have to control myself/I become dependent on the other person/I need that other person, that other person doesn’t need me).” (Acconci, Diary of a Body). Each addition, or “following,” varies in duration and location; some followings were only minutes long whereas at other times minutes turned to hours, and steps and locations flowed from one to the next. In theory, this passage of time, the commitment of physical movement and duration, is an important part of the process of the piece. What the (belated) viewer has access to, however, is only the post-performance documentation, which takes the form of Acconci’s narrative, notes, and photographs.

In this way, and through the act of following, or attaching one’s attention to another, Acconci’s Following Piece evokes an ethos similar to that of social media. “Following” becomes particularly important in the practice of social media – the act of subscribing or “attaching oneself to” the narratives, paths, habits, or news feeds of others who share their photographs, stories, and discussions in public or semi-private forms in order for others to follow along as they like. For Buskirk, Acconci’s Following Piece offers “a particular kind of hybrid: public yet private versions of performance with strong links to conceptual art and also to other ephemeral forms known only through documentation” (Buskirk, Contingent Object 215). Indeed, the people Acconci follows become an anonymous part of his archive. Individuals are reduced to descriptions of their basic appearance as they are subsumed into his records. Because we have nothing other than Acconci’s personal notes to stand in for the performance, the process is re-performed for photographs; the events are selected, distilled, and packaged into a square grid of images in some cases, or a vertical strip, in others (Figure 4.3). Through the process of re-performance, Acconci’s “documentation” is not unlike Jeff’s Wall’s concept of “near documentary”—it is a scene just like real people and events, but re-
staged to replicate it. In both cases, the photographs are not straight documents, but rather they are dramatizations of the earlier stage of the performance, or event, that supposedly occurred.

What the photographs offer, however, is an image of the space, rather than the time (or the sequence of time) that is supposedly intrinsic to the piece. In one version of these dramatizations, Acconci is visible from behind in one image, from the front in the next. In Figure 4.3, the first photograph is taken from an exaggeratedly safe distance down the street. In these staged photographs, the camera and its anonymous operator seem excessively cautious about maintaining the space between Acconci, his subject, and themselves. The images are impossible fictions. They mimic the look of following, as if the camera were a spy trailing the artist on his own. The photographs effectively put viewers in the position of following Acconci, rather than joining Acconci in following his imaginary subject. By his logic (but admittedly without his time commitment) Acconci’s photographs place the viewer in what would be an adjunctive relationship with him. What he offers here is Acconci himself, as an image to be followed. By the logic of this piece, doing so puts the viewer in the position of being dependent upon Acconci, and subject to his perspective, his intended path, and the scenes he wants to share. He offers himself up as a subject who, unlike his ‘leaders,’ knows he is being followed (and in fact invites us to follow him).

Preceding the thumbnail photo albums of Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms, the photographic documentation of Following Piece displayed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art is arranged in a uniform, square, grid format. In this way, the grid also calls to mind Manovich’s discussion of surveillance.144 The notion of following itself calls up the language of social media, where users select which other users they will “friend” or “follow,” and then are put in the position of (for the most part) receiving whatever information those users share with them online. Just as the borders between images function as a form of visual ellipsis within a graphic novel, for instance, documentation of Following Piece expects viewers to interpret time (and space) as if it is

144 Following Piece, as portrayed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art:
http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/283737
moving forward. Though the viewer doesn’t spend the time walking, pursuing, and following, they are offered a shorthand version of what the time *might have* looked like. In what Acconci claims as his preferred version of *Following Piece*, however (perhaps its most recent iteration and the one he has generously provided for me to include here as Figure 4.3), the images are depicted in a manner that more closely resembles a filmstrip than a digital grid. In this case, they emphasize narrative and the passage of time as opposed to a flattened plane of viewing. What both versions share is the graphic division between photographs and its use of both “absolute immediacy and significant delay” (Buskirk, “Contingent Object” 217). Here, “the immediacy is in the unscripted interactions between the artist and an unsuspecting public. The delay is in the dissemination of knowledge about the work to an audience that has access to the activity only through the accounts and documentation the artist decides to provide” (Buskirk, “Contingent Object” 217). All the while, Acconci is privy to an experience not easily (and incompletely) replicated for later viewers. The conceptual time-based work’s use of grid or filmstrip formats actively draws attention to the difference between the time Acconci supposedly spent on his project and the way we, as viewers, might experience that time. And if we think of social media presences in terms of art and performance, we also have to consider its ties to other forms—including not only documentation, but also documentary, as well as the very processes of commodification and economic exchange to which conceptual art was and is often responding.

*Following Piece* also calls attention to Acconci, the man, as a model of privileged, unquestioned mobility. Here, he is not unlike the modern, privileged social media user who can stalk ‘public’ people without their knowledge.¹⁴⁵ The only spaces barred to him are closed, private spaces – and even these seem to be barred mainly by his own conscious choice, as he opts not to approach his subjects. It goes without saying that Acconci does not feel the need to announce himself, defensively, to the person walking

¹⁴⁵ Although there are exceptions, including artist projects that mine IP addresses of viewers and in doing so interfere with their supposed anonymity, the average social media user seems to function under some level of assumed anonymity. This disavowal somehow co-exists with regular panics around content control and privacy settings that appear around every new change in Facebook’s terms of use and the regularity of cookies and user-targeted advertising throughout the web.
Figure 4.3. Vito Acconci. Following Piece. 1969.

Note: © Vito Acconci. All photos by Betsy Jackson. Photograph courtesy of Vito Acconci.
in front of him. Acconci’s mobility is up for grabs, yet he sets the terms (“I add myself to another person”), and he does so without his subjects’ knowledge or permission. In this sense, Acconci’s follower is also calling on Charles Baudelaire’s flâneur figure (which I detail in chapter one with my analysis of Helen Levitt). Acconci blithely ignores the weight of his actions, and the way their meaning varies in a real way depending on who he is following, and whether or not they realise what he has in store for his record of their movements. Despite his claims that his subjects are unaware they were being followed, the exhibitionistic quality of much of Acconci’s other ‘body’-based work (such as Seedbed, where he hid under the gallery floorboards and masturbated while gallery visitors perused the gallery—his work explores a preoccupation with objectifying the anonymous ‘object’ of his desire) suggests the artist is an excessively subjective narrator (that is, unreliable, albeit perhaps self-consciously so). Though Acconci is adamant about forfeiting his power to someone else, the radicalness of the abdication that undergirds Following Piece is tempered by the privilege it represents. At the same time, Acconci employs his notes to record descriptions of subjects, including their clothing, general appearance, and the addresses they visit. He tags them, in other words, and tracks their paths and locations. In following them, he collects them, and their routes, for his own work, his own archive.

Like Acconci, who inserts himself into the movement of another’s space and time, yet cannot cross the arbitrary threshold of the “private,” Magnum member Thomas Dworzak’s understanding of public and private rests somewhere in terms of property (when the questions extend to the distinction between physical or intellectual property, however, the lines begin to blur). Dworzak self-published nine “scrapbooks,” in editions of five, where each scrapbook is dedicated to a particular Instagram hashtag. The scrapbooks are each comprised of a set of screenshots (Lehan 67). Dworzak’s scrapbooks are made up of found images and he only copies photographs from Instagram accounts set to “public,” rather than “private.” As a photographer who wants to explore documentary practices not readily available or accessible to him and his camera, Dworzak uses “an iPhone and a computer to make screenshots of fleeting events in cyberspace, as opposed to a camera in the ‘real’ world” (Lehan 67). Dworzak’s project is largely driven by the fact that “[c]ertain hashtags” —and the practices they represent—“simultaneously offer a rather startling view of the self-absorption of” what some are
calling “the Instagram generation” (Lehan 67). This work shows that the social and the technological evolve in combination. Working from what they call the “social informatics perspective” of photographic study, Edgar Gomez Cruz and Eric T. Meyer argue that understanding how technology is used means that we “privilege neither the technical nor the social a priori,” but open ourselves up to the possibility that there is a mutual shaping between the two” (207). A clear example of this is the iPhone, which also arguably helps us to see where new and older understandings conflict and converge.

As Richard Prince notes, however, the practices central to Instagram (and Tumblr, also a primarily visual format) are not necessarily new to the younger “Instagram” generation. Narrating his introduction to social media by way of his daughter, Prince hints at his sense of social media as less a discovery than a return. Noting that “worlds collide,” Prince explains his curiosity. “I asked my daughter more about Tumbler [sic]. Are those your photos? Where did you get that one? Did you need permission? How did you get that kind of crop? You can delete them? Really? What about these ‘followers.’ Who are they? Are they people you know? What if you don’t want to share?” (Prince, “Birdtalk” n. pag.). For Prince, the photographic opportunities created by Tumblr and Instagram offer new applications for, or digital updates to, his earlier practice of portrait photography. Despite Prince’s conceit that his own re-photography “had nothing to do with the tradition of portraiture,” his model is worth reviewing:

If you wanted me to do your portrait, you would give me at least five photographs that had already been taken of yourself, that were in your possession, (you owned them, they were yours), and more importantly... you were already happy with. You give me the five you liked and I would pick the one I liked. I would re-photograph the one I liked and that would be your portrait. Simple. Direct. To the point... (“Birdtalk” n. pag.)

Anticipating the appropriation of photographs online (through screen shots, re-photographing, scanning, or saving), Prince’s 1984 experiment plays with ideas of property and of vanity – ideas that are essential to the definition and history of portrait photography. As Prince notes, many people chose early photographs of themselves for part of their five images; these portraits, he claims, function as a form of “time machine” (“Birdtalk” n. pag.). In this respect, his time portraits are not unlike the now-popular
Throwback Thursday tag (#TBT), denoting a re-photographing, or re-posting, of an old photograph.

Never fully re-adjusting after the loss of colour slide film (he’s not the only one), Prince claims to have only recently re-visited the portrait re-photography that made him famous. By his account, he doesn’t much like big, cumbersome equipment and has no interest in learning how to use a new digital camera. “The iPhone was just what I needed,” he explains. “I couldn’t believe how easy it was to point and shoot. You didn’t have to focus. You didn’t have to load film. You didn’t have to ASA. You didn’t have to set a speed. The clarity…” (“Birdtalk” n. pag.). Further to this, as Cruz and Meyer note, the iPhone is “more than a single device within which multiple technologies . . . have converged” (203). It is “the first device that combines . . . the making, processing, and distribution of images” (Cruz and Meyer 203). Regardless of their historical significance, the combination of making, processing, and distribution within one device is precisely what Prince appreciates about the iPhone, the very device that make his earlier projects possible to re-negotiate and, in his opinion, improve upon: “The photos you took were stored in the phone,” Prince notes. “And when you wanted to see them they appeared on a grid. The best part, you could send a photo immediately to a friend, to an email, to a printer… or you could organize your photos, like [his] daughter had, and post them publicly or privately” (“Birdtalk” n. pag.). Prince does not need to join the “Instagram generation” wholesale. He takes up new technology while nevertheless thinking of the photographs in terms of the prints he will make from them, the quality of paper he will use to display them, and the comments and personal screen name or avatars he will carefully crop within the printed photographic frame. Though Prince is clearly enamoured with the iPhone’s ability to make, produce, and share photographs all in one phone, he remains deeply invested in the material (paper) product of photography. Gazing longingly beyond the touchscreen, Prince regards the handheld device as a medium to get him back to photographic prints, and back to some newer,

146 Nevertheless, as Jonathan Crary warns, “[e]ven if one is inclined to approach technological history as sequences demarcated by inventions and breakthroughs, the relevance of this particular apparatus will be notably and inevitably short-lived. It is more useful to understand such a device as merely one element in a transient flux of compulsory and disposable products” (33).
better version of what he was doing before (now with smoother, more impressive lazer printer paper).

4.8. Identification

In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich argues that change happens exponentially when it comes to new media. As a result, “every stage in the history of computer media offers its own aesthetic opportunities, as well as its own imagination of the future: in short, its own ‘research paradigm.’ Each paradigm is modified or even abandoned at the next stage” (Manovich 34). This is part of his argument for the importance of studying new media in the present, as it happens. Nevertheless, Manovich’s model suggests a teleologically deterministic model of progress and technological “stages.” Stuart Hall’s description of cultural identity can lend some much-needed historical grounding to Manovich’s technologically focused model. Like Manovich, Hall is concerned with the process of (in Hall’s case, cultural) transformation. According to Hall, cultural identity “belongs to the future as much as to the past” (225). Hall explains:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere ‘recovery’ of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (225)

The notion of history, culture, and power at “play” also recalls the process of surrogation Roach articulates in *Cities of the Dead*; it is a negotiation that requires citation and repetition, but always repetition with a difference.

Positioning and identification are also central questions for portraiture. Musing on the story of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflected image, Richard Brilliant commends R.G. Collingwood, who articulates “the particular nature of Narcissus’s dilemma”—how could my reflection be so like me, and yet not the “real” me?—“when he [writes], ‘When a portrait is said to be like the sitter, what is meant is that the spectator,
when he looks at the portrait, ‘feels as if’ he were in the sitter’s presence.’ Narcissus certainly knew this at first glance and so, usually, do we” (Brilliant 45). But what does it mean for a staged performance/photograph to “feel as if” the presence or image of one sitter is equivalent to, or interchangeable with, the image of another? How does this performance work through the more general “process of becoming” that is inherent to trying out, or working through different identities?

Susie Linfield argues that feeling is essential to our experience of photography. In making this claim, Linfield is moving away from what she calls a hierarchical focus on thinking that comes out of 1980s photographic theory. Noting that most photography critics “approach photographs . . . with suspicion, mistrust, anger, and fear,” Linfield suggests it is “hard to resist the thought that a very large number of photography critics—including the most influential ones” such as Susan Sontag, for instance “—don’t really like photographs, or the act of looking at them, at all” (5). I’ve been playing Linfield’s comments over in my mind, as I notice apprehension among photography critics—myself included—when it comes to talking about, and studying, vernacular digital photography. But how does this self-consciousness affect the theory and analysis of digital photography? Like Linfield, Elspeth Brown and Thy Phu identify a marked critical divergence from earlier conceptions of feeling, toward thinking (and how that emphasis influences the way we study photography now) (Brown and Phu 9). Building on the legacy of important theoretical work accomplished in the 1980s, Brown and Phu nonetheless recognize the need to interrogate both the foundations of—and the long shadow cast by—1980s materialist photographic theory. This shift in focus from thinking to feeling enables Brown and Phu to “account for marginalized subjects such as women, queer subjects, and racialized groups, who are conspicuously excluded in approaches [to photographic criticism] that focus on thinking” (Brown and Phu 7-8). What they call “[t]he rubric of feeling” aims to blend the concerns of historical materialist study with questions of race, economy, gender, and sexuality (Brown and Phu 7-8). It wants to open up the field of study and raise questions of identification and becoming.

In her discussion of the way “young people” use social media platforms, hanah boyd seems to echo and magnify Hall’s description of cultural identification. For boyd, social media users “are networked publics, mediating interactions between members of the public and allowing publics to gather, becoming publics themselves. Instagram, like
MySpace, can be seen as a form of digital body where individuals must write themselves—or photograph themselves—into being” (13). Social media provides a platform for a variation on specific performances within which users “can express salient aspects of their identity for others to see and interpret” (boyd 13). One of the tools by which social media users offer these identity markers is through the user-generated content they share. Another, related method is through the interaction of image and text. Here, I am thinking of hashtags in particular, as this is a meta-language of its own that organizes, labels, disclaims, locates, and mediates. Of course, with every new variation on a theme (or a label), comes new meaning. Like Hall’s model of cultural identification as ever-changing and ever-renewing, boyd’s notion of “networked publics” acknowledges not only that one’s online persona is relational, but also that it requires maintenance and negotiation in order to sustain interest and, by extension, relevance. There is therefore a level of agency and self-presentation involved, as well as the consistent need to work to maintain a rolling representation of self.

Even in the earliest photographs, however, subjects “perform” their vocation, employment, gender, or station. In cartes-de-visite, or cabinet cards, sitters are labeled in terms of their vocation or employment. This information is communicated visually, in terms of pose, dress, and expression, and emphasized using titles and captions. Family photographs, too, perform roles and kinship ties through posture, pose, and labeling. As Harold Rosenberg notes, “The history of portraiture is a gallery of poses, an array of types and styles which codifies the assumptions, biases, and aspirations of the society” (qtd. in Brilliant 90). Though material photographs are often treated as magical, precious objects, many of these were also printed as cartes meant to be collected from and given to others, or as postcards printed in order to travel through the mail. Even if a postcard’s ‘final’ destination is a prized spot in the home, it still had to travel out in the world to make it there. The difference now, however, is the ease with which these performances of self are made and shared, and the quantity (and sometimes, quality) of images that are made.

Following Mieke Bal, we might choose to focusing our attention on forms and conventions, particularly the very means by which portraiture is framed as a representation of self in the first place. Bal is concerned with what she considers the dangerous connection between portraiture and “militant” or even “military individualism"
or agency, characteristic of identity politics more generally.\textsuperscript{147} Though less confident of her earlier mistrust of showing difficult images (discussed in chapter three), Bal nevertheless calls attention to one of the lingering problems of photographic display in general. That is, she claims that although intellectuals may reproduce and re-frame photographic work in order to call attention to some potential means for looking differently, or critically, individualism is itself the primary threat. For Bal, there is a dangerous complicity between portraiture and “self-promotion or self-love, visual boasting or narcissism”—what she calls “the discourse of the face,” where the face functions as “a supremely self-evident synecdoche of the human individual, a \textit{mise en abyme} of what it means to be human” (“Light Writing” 5). The fact that we traditionally accept the category of portraiture as self-evidently tied to the face, and accept the face as central to defining, categorizing, and understanding portraiture, is Bal’s point. In other words, why not question the centrality that the face is given as the category for portraiture? “Portraiture serves a purpose,” she argues, “and the less this purpose is stated, the more profoundly it is encrusted in what we take to be the genre’s ‘nature’” (Bal, “Light Writing” 5). For Bal, the so-called “mobilization of portraiture as a soldier for individualism constitutes its bond with what has turned out to be the trap of identity politics” (“Light Writing” 5). Although I am not ready to throw identity politics out the window, I take Bal’s point about the centrality of the face in portraiture and, by extension, in photographic criticism. In this way, her argument adds to my earlier claim (in the Introduction) that in order to talk about portraiture, we need to make the basic premises of the genre less self-evident.

Like portraiture, social media engagement is largely performative. In his model of “structures of feeling,” cultural critic Raymond Williams argues that our experience of the world is fundamentally mediated and therefore personal experience always exceeds the individual. Structures of feeling are “concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable” (Williams 132). Williams defines these structures as “changes of

\textsuperscript{147} According to Bal, “the heart of the cultural analysis of photography . . . involves the photograph’s simultaneous investment in the preciously private and the vulgarly public domains; hence, the way it deconstructs the flawed, illusionary, opposition, or even distinction, between those two” (“Light Writing” 3).
presence”—“not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought” (132). Rather than a fixed form, it is “a social feeling which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies” (Williams 132). This model is therefore “at the edge of semantic availability” and waits for recognition, in a sense, “until specific articulations—new semantic figures—are discovered in material practice” (Williams 134). These structures are embedded in a temporal relationship that, though based in change and difference, is also necessarily comprised of points of similarity and overlap.

The idea of “structures of feeling” itself “can be specifically related to the evidence of forms and conventions—semantic figures—which, in art and literature, are often among the very first indications that such a new structure is forming” (Williams 133). These changes are social, subtle, and emerge gradually over time. As Williams suggests, these changes are evident when we trace continuities and changes within language use. Though many factors necessarily remain consistent and easily recognizable, “no generation speaks quite the same language as its predecessors” (131). I argue that we can make the same claim for photographic practice, and for social media use. Consider Prince and his daughter, for instance. As in their respective (and shared) inter-generational exploration of social media, “[t]he difference can be defined in terms of additions, deletions, and modifications, but these do not exhaust it” (Williams 131). As Williams argues, though works of art and literature are, in some sense, fixed and articulated, it is our job to make them present by “active readings” (129). In this sense, it bears similarities to the model of the photographic event I have been discussing throughout this project. Like the technology itself, these systems are never fully closed, but rather contingent; they are re-formed and re-articulated in relation to what came before, in the presence of active viewers, users, and interpreters.

4.9. Collection

Social media is invested in accumulation or management of followers and people (or personalities, or organizations) followed. Every aspect of the social media experience
is presented as quantifiable. One’s social media history is therefore a kind of collection and both a personal and a social archive of output and interactions. Beyond its significance to social media, the archive has an increasingly popular role in wider frames critical discourse. Remarking the trend for art institutions to adopt the notion of the “archive” in banalized terms, John Tagg recalls a time when the notion of an archive could be used as a weapon to threaten the institution, as opposed to one that is carefully subsumed within it. Tagg’s archival dilemma, or nostalgia, suggests that processes of archiving, cataloguing, and categorizing are essential to the way we navigate both the structural frames and the ephemerality (and paradoxically, the permanence) of social media. For Allan Sekula, Tagg, and others “at the end of the 1970s . . . the archival mode was a political apparatus inseparable from the rationalization of information, the control of bodies, and the relegation of the photographic operator to ‘the status of a detail worker’” (Tagg, “The Archiving Machine” 26). As Tagg suggests, this process is not obviously aggressive and external, but takes place within private, even domestic spaces (Tagg, “The Archiving Machine” 26). In other words, Tagg argues the archive itself is “an instrumental machine that, in grasping and appropriating photography. . . not only absorbed the individual operator as a mere extension of its mechanism but also subsumed the camera and its peripherals, radically complicating our sense of what can be said to constitute the photographic apparatus” (Tagg, “The Archiving Machine” 26).

Tagg’s analogy for photographic archiving and the rapid accumulation of photographs is the file cabinet. In the words of Rosalind Krauss, unlike a framed space on the wall, or a display easel, “The file cabinet . . . holds out the possibility of storing and cross-referencing bits of information and collating them through the particular grid of a system of knowledge” (“Photography’s Discursive Spaces” 315). In addition to its referential purpose, the file cabinet has a rhetorical, spatial function. Tagg defers to Giorgio Agamben’s claim that “subjectification is not a singular process of concentration and condensation, but rather a process of multiplication and dissemination, enacted in third-stage capitalism as a process of nonidentical accumulation now almost commonly embraced by its acolytes as the so-called openness of post-modern identity” (“The Archiving Machine” 34). Tagg argues that, for Agamben “the proliferation and accumulation of contemporary power has accelerated and multiplied the process of capture and subjectification to the point where identity is an interminable series of
separations through which the apparatus instrumentalizes and in the same movement capitalizes being as subjection” (“The Archiving Machine” 34). In other words, the question is not whether users are correct in the way they employ “the apparatus” – that is not a solution, and to say so is to become an unwitting mouthpiece for the apparatus itself. Instead, we might do better to heed Agamben’s warning before we propose that the archive, as an apparatus, “can be redeemed and rendered pure by a civic-minded watchfulness” (Tagg, “The Archiving Machine” 34). In his softening of Agamben’s position, Tagg is proposing that we be required to “ask what we have lost of our being to archival machines” (“The Archiving Machine” 34). In other words, if the archive is “not only given but . . . the frame of knowledge production itself” it is also therefore “part of the historical and, indeed, the political problem” (Tagg, “The Archiving Machine” 34). When considering the role that archiving plays in the circulation and production of portraiture within social media, we might also consider the historical, political, and economic implications of these archiving systems. Not only does the archive provide a tool for thinking through these systems, but it also shows itself to be part of the processes by which identities are formed, relationships are simplified, and photographic events are collected and quantified.

While Tagg (via Agamben) warns against an uncritical application of the archive, Gehl considers the way new media represents “collective intelligence’ in action—at least as that intelligence is modulated within social media. However, social media companies maintain a strict division between the user/processor and memory, the other side of the computational equation” (Gehl 17). Though social media users generate content, self-interested companies managing the platforms both run the frames and collect their contents to use for marketing purposes that double as a form of interested surveillance. These companies “derive power from storing the results of users’ affective processing in archives” (17).¹⁴⁸ The result is that this affective reserve, as archive,

¹⁴⁸ From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, this formulation is inadequate; there would always be a surplus affect, an excess of affect that would resist assimilation.
‘harnessing’ of collective intelligence—can then be sold to marketers or surrendered to states. This division between the processor and the archive helps maintain the social structure of social media. (Gehl 17)

Despite the monetization of affective labour, Richtin suggests “digital platforms are nevertheless useful as a tool to “help to foster community” (Bending the Frame 58). For Richtin, the active engagement that social media requires “makes the mediation more collaborative in ferreting out any conclusions” (Bending the Frame 58). He goes so far as to argue that social media represents “a partial reinvention of the oral tradition, in which a group actively shares what may be contradictory insights as many contribute to both the narrative and its interpretation” (Bending the Frame 58). As part of this process of negotiation, the ability to negotiate symbolic language such as the hashtag helps not only to catalogue content, but also to communicate a sense of membership and commonality among users. Dexterity with the form of the language makes claims for competence belonging in online platforms such as Twitter and Instagram more generally, but also in terms of the particular communities to which the hashtag relates more specifically. It is a badge, or marker, by which the user can be recognized by other like minds (and related searches). It is also a tool for establishing a personal online identity or brand; hashtagging contributes, as a frame, to the ethos and image of the user who is curating their own online persona.

In addition to performing a form of belonging, the hashtag also performs a form of archiving, albeit one where the content and context is constantly shifting and adapting. In her discussion of the way photographs go through both formal and informal processes of archivization and labelling, Azoulay warns that we are all “invited to repeat these categories as if they designate what is in the photograph. But the violence of making someone a refugee” through the act of naming, for instance, “is reaffirmed by our spectatorship position if we continue to refer to the photograph as depicting a state (a refugee) and not an event or an action (the expulsion of a person from her homeland)” (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens” 54). The labels we use in discourse and in designating photographic subject matter come with consequences. “These kinds of political categories that we automatically project onto a photograph’s subject”—categories such as the refugee, not unlike the term selfie—“reveal how easy it is to be complicit in sovereign violence through photography. When people negotiate this subtle
invitation to collusion, we can say that they activate the civil contract of photography” (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens” 54).

Azoulay highlights the discursive consequence of filing categories in archives; categories such as “‘refugees,’ ‘torture,’ or ‘expulsion’ . . . [turn] the photograph into a representation of phenomena or situations such as ‘refugees,’ ‘torture, or ‘expulsion.’ The representation annuls the excess and lack that were inscribed in the photograph, subordinating it to one, supposedly factual point of view” (Azoulay, Civil Imagination 223). In establishing the idea that this “is” or “was” one thing or another, Azoulay argues, the photographs are allowed to make normalizing claims.

The identification between ‘this was there’ and ‘this is X’ can be thought of as a kind of paper clip, a sort of temporary office accessory used at the desk to attach things, but also to allow them to be detached time and time again, at any given moment. When the paper clip, so to speak, solidifies into a representation, anything temporary or contingent is eliminated so the photograph is reified under one stable representation that has become attached to it, and it continues to make its way in the world as such. (Azoulay, Civil Imagination 223)

It is specifically this process of reification that Azoulay believes civic viewing can challenge. “Once we suspend this identification,” the “this was there,” or “this is X,” common to photographic theories such as Roland Barthes’s, she argues, “it becomes possible to discern other relations that rival this one, and which it seeks to obliterate” (Azoulay, Civil Imagination 223). In other words, consciously “viewing photography as a non-deterministic encounter between human beings not circumscribed by the photograph allows us to reinstitute photography as an open encounter in which others may participate” (Azoulay, Civil Imagination 223). By calling attention to the various relations and tensions within the photographic event or encounter, photography enables its viewers to resist the pre-determined categories represented by the archive, and in doing so, it brings pre-determined roles and categories into question.

4.10. Conclusion

Despite the blank, unlined pages in the Without Sanctuary/Martin Luther King Jr. Centre comment book, contributors follow a relatively consistent form; they also tend to
sign and date their entries. A comment book is a genre in itself, and it encourages visitors to leave some meaningful message while still remaining mindful of the fact that their words are open to public view. The exhibition comment book in question is, of course, from some time ago. 2002 is still five years before social media monolith Facebook will go public to all university students, for instance. Social media already exists at this point, but it is not used as widely, and not with the same intensity or authority as it is today. Commenting certainly isn’t new to social media, but it becomes an active fixture in the visual frame through the rhetorical linking of image and rolling comments, normalizing both discussion and statistical information as part of the way we see (and, to a large extent, don’t really look at) photographs.

What are the effects of representing oneself as a symbol of celebrity, power, defiance, sharing, or photographic seeing? This has been one of the driving questions underlying my analysis throughout this chapter. With images such as the iterations of HandsUpDontShoot the signs themselves are a supplement to the gesture, the image of the bodies holding, marching, raising their arms, facing the camera, and making claims to public space. Rather than waiting to be framed, or written, by outside sources, protesters make bodies visible while at once trying to frame the images with their own captions as well as the comments and tags that travel as part of the photographic event. When the photographic event migrates into the arena of digital photography and social media, the conversations that they catalyze visually frame the image (consider the additional data that frames Megan Sims’ photograph – it includes a number marking how many times it has been shared on other Twitter accounts, and how many people have made the gesture of marking the photograph as a “favourite”). With the digital comes the added paratext of captioning, re-framing, and linking. The processes of embedding, tagging, commenting, and quantifying bloat the file with content (for better and for worse), drawing attention to both its devices and frames. With social media, then, sharing is about both forging and maintaining intimacy, but it also calls attention to the lack or the failure thereof.
Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have followed photographic discourse through four particular terms: invisibility, intimacy, circulation, and sharing. In doing so, I was not only following terms and ideas as they appear in photographs. My aim has also been to draw attention to the way these ideas have been treated, and considered, historically and critically. As I argue in chapter one, the history of documentary and invisibility is also the history of critical desire and frustration. In chapter two, I claim that to understand intimacy as a theoretical concept, and critical tool, is to consider the role that notions of voyeurism and empathy still play in our most basic understanding of photography. As a result of this necessary overlap, to consider various critical models of circulation within the context of a dissertation whose concern is largely discourse itself (as I do in chapter three), is not simply to embrace theories of affect wholesale, but rather to call to light the discursive and cultural frames that lead critics to the point where it is productive, even necessary, to theorize photography as something that must pass into body in order for its meaning to be fully understood. For the same reason, no discussion of photography would be complete without responding to Roland Barthes, as Barthes has played such a generative part in both reflecting and influencing photographic criticism in its current state. Finally, in chapter four, I consider the notion of sharing as at once a form of intimacy and a failure of intimacy. To consider the sharing of images requires attention to the interpersonal role that photographs play both historically and in our contemporary moment.

I opened the introduction with a discussion of photographs used to illustrate the way past and present are often folded together and flattened into one. In chapter one I argued for the ways in which the history of documentary photography is shadowed by questions of surveillance and (in)visibility. These same questions are also very much a part of photography’s present, and future. In answer to the question “What is a Document?” Hito Steyerl claims:
Now documenting has become more of a live activity and less about retroactive interpretation of objects. It is the making—live streaming, editing, encoding, encrypting, dissemination, and mediation—not only of the documents themselves but equally and maybe even more importantly of the events being documented. The event is being made across different platforms and networks, as a stack of actions, images, and feedback loops, traveling from cloud to cobblestone. Sometimes this looks rather funny: in some contemporary riots there are five masked people with a tablet device for each protestor without one. The street starts to look like a mix between an electronics fair and an Old Masters painting gallery with hundreds of glowing tablets held up high above heads. Tablets have replaced flags or protest signs. Actually, it is a very clear expression of what people are doing: they reframe and re-edit reality, in real time, out in the streets. Of course there is also a lot of silliness and danger with that, including the obvious fact that each person thus becomes perfectly trackable. (“What is a Document?” 64)

Steyerl’s response speaks to liveness and immediacy; she suggests documentary, in its current form, aspires to a form of speed, action, and circulation, rather than historicity or reflection. These glowing flatscreen tablets look nothing like the cameras carried by Helen Levitt or the Photo League photographers. And the issues of surveillance she describes claim greater stakes than those of Evans’s ‘penitent spy’ in a subway car. Nevertheless, this emphasis on speed and democratic access to representation echoes the ethos of early documentary photography, where magazines, art museums, and advertisements reflect the various platforms, networks through which photographs are made to travel. Whereas these photographers retain a certain level of invisibility, however, contemporary protest photography requires a different kind of anonymity – the kind that literally comes from masking and disguise.

If social media is a tool for capitalist ventures, it is also a space for mobilization. The ready availability of digital and social media is therefore an empowering quality, both in image creation and in action, as it necessarily alters the political and visual realm. Robert Gehl argues that, in “co-opting the Internet as a space of spectacle and image politics, antiglobalization and progressive movements have been able to transmit their messages to worldwide audiences” (3). Early “anticapitalist uses of the Web,” such as the use of online news sources to disseminate alternative news coverage, or to organize protests and rallies, were part of the so-called “struggle for the general intellect” (Gehl 4). But this struggle is now played out through the fact that “the Internet has simultaneously enabled extensions of the Taylorist domination of labor and the very means for labor to
short-circuit global capital” (Gehl 4). What this argument suggests is that while “the Internet might allow for ‘fast capitalist’ flows of commodities and value realization,” the creation of this rapid flow also opens itself up to “the fast and space-eroding coordination of protest” (Gehl 4). This multi-directional flow is one of the reasons critical reactions to social media are so polarized. The anti-capital protest can’t seem to exist without the capital-inducing structures that crowd general Internet use.

In moments of conflict, or areas of war and protest, photography and video recording devices are increasingly brandished as shields, as a form of empowerment, and even as a supposed method of self-defence. When faced with the barrel of a gun, many protestors now look back with their cameras. The potential for recording and the faith in uncovering, or providing evidence, is part of the reason it is so shocking (and “newsworthy”) when members of the media are hurt, arrested, detained, or killed. Their supposed neutrality is part of the outcry, but so is the incredulity that anyone would act out against someone who holds anything as powerful as a camera, and has the credibility, and an audience ready and waiting to hear what they have to show. Rather than maintaining the often pervasive “them” and “us” binary common to war and documentary photography, “digital media has made it easier to sidestep the usual means of production and distribution, disrupting the long-standing practice in which photographers provided images to media outlets that are then filtered by editors who decide on their use” (Richtin, “Of Them, And Us” 42). In what is apparently its most democratizing aspect, “[d]igital technology allows anyone, including both professionals and non-professionals, to make images cheaply and distribute them efficiently . . . the rapid rise of social media makes photographs that are conceived from the perspective of ‘us’ – the combatants or those caught in the conflict – at least as common as those made of ‘them’ (Richtin, “Of Them, And Us” 42). As Martha Buskirk explains, however, many new corporate protocol will enable copyright owners to “append advertisements to embedded content should it choose to do so in the future (YouTube already does this quite widely) – and to rescind the content at any point” (“Networked Photography” 162). For Buskirk, this move “drive[s] home a paradox of the Internet: the more freely images and other media circulate, the more they are met with sophisticated mechanisms to search out and control them” (“Networked Photography” 162-163). In both cases, the question of mobility is hampered by issues of surveillance; to speak out, or make
photographs, is also to create a data trail by which the protesters can be followed, and subsequently charged or detained, by the authorities.

On a fundamental level, Azoulay addresses the related notion of “civil journalism” as a photographic performance that marks the right to refuse to be a perpetrator and participant in regime-made disaster (“Photography and Its Citizens” 55). Beyond its technological concerns, Azoulay argues “ubiquity” should be thought through “in relation to myriad modes of use, distribution, and production” (54); in other words, she suggests it is productive to “read the history of photography not as a history of masters but as a practice in which many people have been involved” (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens” 54). Part of that claim of importance derives from wide dissemination through the media. The issue, then, is not only how images reach the wider public, but also which images circulate, and in what context the images are presented.

The civic journalism that seems to flourish in social media has the potential to challenge traditional models of authorship. This potential is central to Azoulay’s understanding of photography. She argues that by suspending the “privileged position of the photographer” and reframing “photography as an activity in which many participate,” other viewers are “transform[ed] . . . from passive or secondary positions to participants whose claims can no longer be automatically ignored” (Azoulay, “Photography and Its Citizens” 55). Though her model seems optimistic, it is also measured. Azoulay is not suggesting that the photographic viewers will be instantly transformed, or that the subjects will be freed through the act of being pictured. They will, however, buy a little more time, and thus a little more potential for change. Their claims will not be automatically ignored.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have negotiated with patterns in language and performance. Invisibility is an integral part of that tension, especially as it relates to photographic practice. To discuss issues of self-representation in protest, as in documentary and social media, it is also therefore necessary to account for the urge to remain invisible. We must therefore also pay attention to the pressing desire—and at times the need—to remain absent, or, if present, the need to obscure one’s face. Today, protestors all over the world cover their faces with masks (the Guy Fawkes mask in
particular), bandanas, scarves, and even, (theoretically, at least) the post-human aesthetic of anti-facial recognition camouflage (“computer vision dazzle”). Encounters with facial recognition software raise the discourses of anonymity and invisibility. In covering their faces, subjects become anonymous—a stand-in, surrogate, or figurehead free of individual identity. These performances push back against the surveillance, instrumentalization, and weaponization of the face but they also overlap with questions of identity, particularly as they relate to religious rights and so-called threats to national security. In other words, these bodies move, speak, and act while at the same time preserving the protestor’s private identities, both in the moment and for posterity; this painting and masking also functions rhetorically as a visual condemnation of legal and surveillance systems. In rendering their individual identities illegible, these figures therefore function symbolically, offering a universal—albeit de-individualized—canvas on which any willing subject could project their own self-image.

But what about the kind of visibility that tends to go unnoticed? Though much of the work in this dissertation deals with American photographers, conflicts, and histories, I am also writing from my own Canadian context, measuring other histories as they border against my own. As Houston A. Baker Jr. says, “I live in a haunted place. Thus I must come politically and memorially to terms with ghosts” (Turning South Again 32). I live and work in a city (in a country) particularly haunted by the disappearance of missing and murdered Indigenous women, though it doesn’t seem to know it. Like selfies and protest imagery, “Missing” photographs circulate online, but these are neither as visually dramatic as violent civil rights conflicts, nor as surreal as images of futuristic “CV dazzle.” Without some personal connection, most viewers have not figured out how to keep these portraits present. As Azoulay would suggest, these generic portraits of women are images of atrocity, as they reflect the wider conditions that give rise to the

149 The necessary abstraction and stylization of “CV dazzle” is in many ways as much about fashion as it is about privacy. See artist Adam Harvey’s The New York Times op-ed on the facial (computer recognition) camouflage technique: http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/12/14/opinion/sunday/20121215_ANTIFACE_OPART.html. For more information on the American National Security Agency’s use of facial recognition software to mine for faces of interest, see: http://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/01/us/nsa-collecting-millions-of-faces-from-web-images.html?_r=0

150 Denise Oleksijczuk refers to the idea of haunting, as well (as I discuss in chapter two). Do we need to re-figure women as buildings or absences in order for the haunting to succeed?
political invisibility that allows for these disappearances. The prosaic quality of portraits of missing women is therefore one of the most haunting kinds of portrait. I mention this as my final, parting thought because with each difficult choice in this project (to include or not to include, to show or not to show) comes the necessity to “come to terms with ghosts” while at once seeking a way to represent them. In considering portraiture, performance, and circulation, this dissertation makes claims to attend to the other side of questions of visibility, and showing; issues of invisibility or visibility without consent; and whose terms confer that power.
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