

**THE POLITICS OF PLACE: PHOTOGRAPHING
NEW YORK CITY DURING THE NEW DEAL**

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ABSTRACT

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

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