

# The Objectivity of Strangers, Seeing and Being Seen on the Street: A Response to Deborah Dash Moore's "On City Streets"

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I begin with an image and then a text. The photograph is not one from Moore's paper but another print from the Photo League. As you look at this picture, I hope that some of what I have to say might resonate with your reading of Moore's essay and reaffirm some of what she has written. I want to take my cues from Moore and see what images show us as we attempt to rethink the relationship between social science and the work of documentary photog-



Outdoor Meeting, New York, 1940, photograph by Morris Huberland, PR 194, Morris Huberland Photograph Collection, negative number 74732. Collection of the New York Historical Society.

raphy. Stay with the photograph before reading on. Look at the collection of people who inhabit this urban gathering. Think about the relationships the intimacies and distances portrayed in it. How are these people connected? How are they distinct and distant from each other? What does Huberland ask you to consider by calling this photograph “Outdoor Gathering?”

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And now, I want to offer a text.

An overly simplified dichotomy between truth and fiction is at the root of our difficulty in thinking about the truth of documentary. The choice is not between two entirely separate regimes of truth and fiction. The choice, rather, is in strategies of fiction for the approach to relative truths. Documentary is not fiction and should not be conflated with it. But documentary can and should use all of the strategies of fictional construction to get at truths.” (Linda Williams)<sup>1</sup>

I believe that this powerful statement from an essay that echoes, or mirrors, some of Moore’s own language captures an important aspect of her argument.<sup>2</sup> Like Williams, I believe Moore suggests that the photographs of the New York Photo League are documentary but, as such, refuse as well the dichotomy between truth and fiction. Moore knows that documentary is not a fiction but is willing to address the strategies and mechanisms these photographers used to approach a range of truths. This notion of relative truths becomes visible as we begin to notice the art of photography, and it is part of what Moore shows us. These street photographs offer us glimpses, individual takes, on the intimacy of those who share the same urban streets. As in Williams’ depiction here too imagination and craft help shape engaged and artistic versions of the truth and, in so doing, help us see in a new way what we might mean by objectivity as a critical stance.

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Moore helps us honestly appraise images like Huberland's in order to better appreciate the whole notion of photographic or ethnographic objectivity in other ways. She urges us to deny the dichotomy between objectivity and advocacy, as well as what we commonly think of as the relationship between truth and fiction. What these photographs and her essay help us see is that our notions of connection, belonging, and community are all tied up in often unhelpful assumptions about the ways we think that photography works. Photographs do not so much mirror truth as craft it. In other words, photographs are not self-evident but are always interpretations, performances, and enactments. As Williams suggests in order to be "documentary"—to offer some take on, in this case, life on the streets—these photographers carefully deploy many of the strategies of fiction to make their truths visible.

Moore enables us to see that life on the streets of New York as depicted in the photographs of the Photo League are messier than we might have believed. Despite the clean and simple language of much of their work, these photographers did not simply hold a mirror up to the world around them. They used their imaginations, their relationships to specific people and places to make visible certain truths about the city, the interplay between its people and its streets.

Moore shows us that they always had a role to play in the very complicated social relations they depict. Their work does not reflect these engagements as much as it produces them. In other words, these photographers are not separate from these scenes, but active participants in them. Like the attentive listener whose very act of listening helps us hear narratives that might otherwise have gone unrecounted, these photographers enable a kind of visual telling of certain truths. Their presence makes it possible for us to perceive some of these stories, engagements and practices.<sup>3</sup> Let me offer an example.

Moore argues in her reading of one of Lee Sievan's striking street photographs that what is important is that this photograph was sympathetically taken at "eye level but from a certain distance." As such, it captures Sievan's commitment to photography as "a social and artistic tool" as well as "her enthusiasm for straight photography." Moore suggests that the stance Sievan takes, not unlike that taken by some of the other Photo League artists she

discusses including Levitt and Huberland, is complicated visually. Despite the language of “clean, clear and straight” photography, these photographers bring their love of the streets to their work. It is this love that interrupts the presumed straightforward presentation of the streets offered in their works. It also complicates what scholars like those of the Chicago school meant when they talked about objectivity.<sup>4</sup>

What Moore asks us to see in these photographs as a reflection of this kind of social science is not Wirth’s notion of the intimacy and freedom of the ghetto that is overcome, but instead, something less neat or simple. In both instances the stances are carefully crafted, artful and engaged revealing the intimacy between the photographer, the ethnographer and those they encounter on the streets of New York City.

Moore links these practices, explaining that these images bring to mind Simmel’s insight about the *objectivity of strangers*, and it is from this account that I take the title for these remarks. Citing Simmel in her reading of Sievan’s photograph, Moore argues that Sievan’s presence is “simultaneously near and far, part of the group and apart from it.”<sup>5</sup> This is not unlike what we see in Huberland’s “Outdoor Meeting.” Quoting Simmel at length, Moore continues, “The stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people.”<sup>6</sup> This is the stance Moore associates with the Photo League’s commitment to making “‘honest’ photographs, images of New Yorkers who did not live in some promotional imaginary, but in the give and take of actual, complex engagements.”<sup>7</sup> I believe that this is what Moore means when she argues for being men and women *of* the streets.

Instead of the fantasy of wholeness and some uniform or even romantic version of belonging as Wirth’s argument about the ghetto suggests, Moore asks us to consider the notion of life among strangers, the urban intimacy of strangers, as a viable position. As I read it, Moore argues that the intimacy of strangers is and has been a way for Jews and many others within American society to be themselves in the urban street. Jews and others did not disappear as Jews when they left the ghetto as Wirth suggests. Instead, they

learned to negotiate the hybridity of their place on the streets of New York. These negotiations—in the form of intimacies, connections and distances—are what we see in the photographs of the Photo League. These photographers are not simply invisible behind the camera. They are a part of the interactions they depict. They themselves are players in the urban scenes they create in their work. Jewish and non-Jewish women and men, these photographers are presented as seeing and being seen.<sup>8</sup> The photographs capture both. They depict these dynamics as they were performed. The images are not separate from what they show but a part of the story. The photographers and their cameras are familiar. In these ways, the Photo League's legacy of documentary photography does not provide viewers with "mirrors without a memory" but rather performances.

Given this, Moore's essay presents a range of positions some clearly more staged than others. William Klein's images are the most extreme example of staging, virtual tableaux vivants. They are also some of the last of the images produced by the Photo League and may mark the kind of excess, the extreme example that makes visible what had been seemingly invisible in the earlier works.

The art of these works and their use of fiction to tell the truth is crucial. These photographs embody a version of objectivity that acknowledges and appreciates the craft, the labor and the art of both photography and perhaps, ethnography. They help make visible *how* the truths photographs tell are made.<sup>9</sup>

This is not, once again Yehuda Leib Gordon's "Asiatic on the Cosmopolitan Streets,"<sup>10</sup> these are Jews who are both a part of the street scene and separate at the same time. This ambivalence is something the photographers of the Photo League shared with the various other urban others they encountered. It is not an exclusive position for either photographers or for Jews. The urban stranger is not a category that only refers to Jews or, for that matter, only to photographers. It is not intrinsically or exclusively Jewish. The urban stranger may very well characterize various artists and all kinds of ethnic and racial others who live on these streets. Here the urban stranger characterizes Jews but not only Jews. To be an urban stranger is more an attitude than anything intrinsic to those who lay claim to this position. It offers an adaptive strategy perhaps created by Jews and others in the Photo League but available to many other others.<sup>11</sup>

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Given all of this, I want to conclude by addressing two implications of this way of thinking about the legacy of the Photo League. First, I think, given the suburbanization of the 1950s and 60s that follow the work of the Photo League, Moore is arguing for a different more urban vision of pluralism — a pluralism of urban strangers living among and with each other, side by side connected and yet distinct. This is not something that one could do in the isolation of the suburbs. In this sense, I think she is asking us to return to this earlier urban vision as a way of imagining, perhaps a different future.

Second, I think that she is offering us a new take on documentary photography. Although the genre is often associated with advocacy and shares with ethnography a kind of exoticizing of the others it observes, in this case, the photographers point their cameras at more familiar others. They are not looking at some distant foreign culture and its people. Instead they turn their lens on their own streets, the city streets they walk and the familiar strangers they have come to know in their own city. They are doing a kind of ethnography at home. Their subjects are the places they live and the kinds of anonymous but familiar relationships that texture their own urban lives. Given this, they offer a messy, lively vision of urban life, a world characterized by both a familiarity and a love of those depicted. These photographers affirm a gritty urban intimacy.

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By letting go of a simple notion of objectivity and seeing these photographers as part of the scenes they produce, we come to recognize their intimate engagement in these works. Photographers like Sievan or Huberland were always in the picture. As Moore shows us, these relationships between the photographers and those they portray are a part of what gets documented in their work. To take this insight to heart demands that we rethink the photographic objectivity of the Photo League's commitment to clean clear shots.

### Notes

1. Linda Williams, "Mirrors without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary," *Film Quarterly* (Spring 1993) 46.3, 20.
2. Like Moore, Linda William's also cites Oliver Wendell Holmes famous vision of the photograph. Oliver Wendell Holmes, "The Stereo-

scope and the Stereograph," in *Classic Essays on Photography* edited by Alan Trachtenberg, (New Haven: Leetes Island Press, 1980), 81.

3 Here I am reminded of the ways Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes her role in hearing her father's stories and how her active listening is itself a presence on the pages of his book, the book they created together, Mayer Kirshenblatt and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *They Call Me Meyer July: Painted Memories of a Jewish Childhood in Poland Before the Holocaust* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). Barbara discussed this active listening as her role in the process of creating this book at NYU at a forum sponsored by the journal, *Women and Performance*, "Art Across Generations: Daughters talk about Fathers, Writing and Memory, A conversation with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Laura Levitt, moderated by Ann Pellegrini," February 6, 2008.

4. This is how I first read Moore's essay. Although I saw the connection between Simmel and the notion of objectivity as not straightforward in these images, I still read the notion of objectivity into the Chicago School although, in listening to the paper performed I became less convinced that there is such a strong contrast between the photographers and the social scientists. Never the less I am convinced that the notion of a "clean, clear, and straight" photography can still be confused with the notion of some kind of unmediated practice. I am arguing for seeing more clearly the powerful role of mediation in these images and how the mediations enable them to convey truths.

5. As cited by Moore, Georg Simmel, "The Stranger," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Kurt H. Wolff. (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 402, 404.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. In this sense I am reading this account in some of the ways I have read the Jewishness of Larry Sultan's images in *Pictures from Home*. See Laura Levitt, "Photographing American Jews: Identifying American Jewish Life," in *Mapping Jewish Identities* edited by Laurence Silberstein, (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 65-96.

9. Here I wondered if Wirth's own anxieties are read back into the images.

10. As cited by Moore. The quote from Gordon comes from Michael Stanislawski, *For Whom Do I Toil? Judah Lieb Gordon and the Crisis of Russian Jewry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 17.

11. See note 8 above on this issue.