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Figure 1. Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson, Harlem Gang Leader*, gelatin silver print, 1948. © Gordon Parks. Courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.

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Looking Up: The Child and the City

Alan Marcus

This article examines the work of four documentary photographers: Gordon Parks, Helen Levitt, Walter Rosenblum and Jerome Liebling. During the late-1930s and 1940s, they photographed, in unique ways, the children and adolescents living in New York City. Their distinctive forms of street photography explore a sub-terrain of attitudes about child behaviour in an urban environment. The study is based upon interviews conducted by the author and a close examination of the work of the photographers.

Keywords: *urban photography, representations of children, New York City, Gordon Parks (born 1912), Helen Levitt (born 1918), Walter Rosenblum (born 1919), Jerome Liebling (born 1924)*

From its inception, documentary photography has placed the experience of children at the centre of the urban frame. In the late nineteenth century, Jacob Riis (1849–1914) caused a sensation with his images of destitute families; early in the twentieth century, Lewis Hine (1874–1940) exposed the scandal of child labour. The esteem of this early social documentary photography was later celebrated by public events such as Lewis Hine’s retrospective at the Riverside Museum in 1939 and Jacob Riis’s exhibition at the Museum of the City in New York in 1947. This study examines the work of four photographers who carried on the legacy of these distinguished practitioners. Gordon Parks, Helen Levitt, Walter Rosenblum and Jerome Liebling, during the late-1930s and 1940s, photographed the children and adolescents of New York City. Each of the four worked from different life experiences and used different formal and conceptual approaches to the subject. Based upon interviews conducted by the author and a close examination of the work of the photographers, this essay explores how the photographer’s role as either witness or participant-observer informs the visual frame.

Gordon Parks

The city is a place of danger for many children and adolescents. The portrait of *Red Jackson, Harlem Gang Leader, 1948* (figure 1), by Gordon Parks gives an immediate sense of an urban youth exposed to danger. Though Red has already reached the dominant role of a gang leader at the age of sixteen, the cloak of darkness suggests an older man. His stance is brooding, guarded, his right hand clutching a possible weapon. He peers out at the night through broken glass. Much of the glass has already fallen away, and what is left is cracked — the dirty, translucent fragments providing a tenuous shield. A dangling cigarette implies his cavalier toughness and links him to contemporary iconic images of youthful, troubled anti-heroes, such as James Dean and Marlon Brando.

1 Gordon Parks was born in 1912, the youngest of fifteen children to a poor 1
 farming family in the small town of Fort Scott on the Kansas prairie land. He
 lost his mother at the age of fifteen and found himself on the road shortly
 afterwards. In his revealing autobiography, *Voices in the Mirror* (1990), Parks
 5 recalls the conflicts of childhood and of growing up in a segregated society 5
 endemic with racism and prejudice. ‘I realize that, even within the limits of my
 childhood vision, I was on a search for pride’, he states.¹ After leaving home, he
 was subjected to a series of violent experiences and periods of deprivation while
 supporting himself as a hotel busboy and as a piano player in a brothel. ‘I
 10 consider myself lucky to be alive – especially when I remember that four of my 10
 close friends died of senseless brutality before they were twenty-one’.²

Gordon Parks went on to become a leading photographer and composer,
 and one of the first African-American film directors to work for a Hollywood
 15 studio. Parks published his first novel, *The Learning Tree* in 1963, based on his 15
 Kansas childhood. The next year he directed his first documentary, *Flavio*
 (1964), about a boy growing up in a slum in San Paolo, Brazil. After several
 more documentaries, Parks was asked by Warner Brothers to direct the movie
 20 adaptation of *The Learning Tree* (1968); his book having sold over a quarter of 20
 a million copies. This project was then followed by the highly successful cult
 film, *Shaft* (1971), for MGM. He made further feature films and documentaries
 and also continued to compose music, write poetry and books and photograph.

I interviewed Gordon Parks over a two-day period at his Manhattan
 25 apartment about his long and varied career. Following his appointment as a 25
 staff photographer for *LIFE*, Parks completed 297 assignments for the magazine
 between 1948 and 1970, culminating this career with photo essays on Black
 Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver and boxer Muhammad Ali. A listing of the
 30 assignments is carefully documented in Martin Bush’s *The Photographs of 30
 Gordon Parks* (1983).³ A conversation Parks had early in life, with his
 terminally ill brother Leroy, left a lasting impression on Parks and fuelled his
 drive to succeed. His brother advised him that, ‘I couldn’t whip the world with
 my fist, but that my brain was a much stronger weapon, and I remembered
 those words a long while’.⁴

This theme of using photography and other creative pursuits to channel his
 35 rebellion and anger at American society’s injustices was taken up in Parks’s 35
 book, *A Choice of Weapons* (1966).⁵ In one passage he recounts the period when
 he worked as a bellboy in an exclusive men’s club in Saint Paul, Minnesota: ‘To
 most of them, I was invisible and unhearing, a sort of dark ectoplasm that only
 40 materialized when their fingers snapped for service’.⁶ Overcoming bigotry, 40
 Parks obtained a job photographing fashion models in Saint Paul before going
 to Washington in 1942, where he got the opportunity to work for Roy Stryker
 at the Farm Security Administration (FSA) during the last year of its operation.
 A New Deal government agency formed during the Depression, the FSA was
 45 responsible for nurturing and commissioning much social documentary 45
 photography.

FSA photographers, such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans, rigorously
 embraced the agency’s mandate for using photography to create images
 documenting the state of America’s rural and urban poverty. Parks’s first
 50 photograph for the FSA, *American Gothic* (1942), depicted a black charwoman, 50
 Ella Watson, who worked in a federal building in Washington, D.C., standing
 with her mops in front of the American flag. It became one of his best known
 images. His photograph of Ella Watson’s children (figure 2), *Children with Doll*
 (1942), confronts us with the irony of a black family living in poverty in
 54 the nation’s capitol. In this multicultural world, a large-sized white doll is 54
 befriended and embraced by the two children.

1 – Gordon Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, New York: Harlem Moon 2005 [1990], 12.

2 – Ibid., 12.

3 – Martin H. Bush, *The Photographs of Gordon Parks*, Wichita KS: Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art 1983, 128–134.

4 – Gordon Parks, personal communication, New York City, 9 June 2001.

5 – Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, New York: Harper and Row 1966.

6 – Ibid., 48.

1 Figure 2. Gordon Parks, *Children with Doll*,
 5 gelatin silver print, 1942. © Gordon Parks.
 Courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery,
 New York.



25 On an assignment with the Office of War Information, where Helen Levitt
 found work as an assistant editor in the Film Division, Parks photographed an
 African-American US Air Force squadron, and then moved to New York, where
 he embarked on a career as a fashion photographer. His first approach was to
Harper's Bazaar magazine, where the art director, Alexey Brodovitch, informed
 him that, 'there is a very inflexible rule here in the Hearst organization that
 30 forbids our hiring Negroes'.⁷ Roy Stryker put him in touch with legendary
 photographer, Edward Steichen, who gave him a contact at *Vogue* magazine.
 There Parks found a more receptive audience, and for the next five years he
 photographed top fashion models.

35 He then took his portfolio to the notoriously competitive offices of *LIFE*
 magazine. Wilson Hicks, *LIFE's* picture editor, asked Parks if he had a first
 project in mind. The young photographer suggested covering a gang war taking
 place in Harlem, and Hicks approved the idea, offering him five-hundred
 dollars. It was this photo essay that launched his career as a photojournalist and
 gained him a staff job. 'I shot that image (figure 1) with my 35mm camera and
 40 a sort of a long lens from the back of the room'.⁸ Parks explained his approach
 when photographing Red and his gang: 'I tried to get lost, so they were not
 aware of my presence. I felt they would show more of their true feelings if I
 wasn't intruding upon them . . . at that point he'd forgotten that I existed'.⁹
 Red was the same age as Parks when he had to fend for himself and survive a
 series of dangerous and violent encounters. As he explained:

I could understand the desperation of the gang members in the first big story I
 did for *LIFE* — Red Jackson and his gang. I could understand their
 frustrations and their need for somebody to befriend them and explain to the
 rest of the world that they had problems. They didn't have anybody to back
 them up, or a mother or father, and they felt they were protecting themselves
 from death from another gang.¹⁰

45 For the next two decades, Parks continued to straddle two worlds,
 photographing the idealised beauty of high fashion while documenting the
 harsh realities of urban destitution. In one of his last photographic essays for
LIFE, published in 1968, Parks documented the plight of the Fontenelle family

7 – Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 120.

8 – Gordon Parks, personal communication,
 New York City, 10 June 2001.

9 – Ibid.

10 – Parks, personal communication, 9 June
 2001.

(figure 3), who survived in a Harlem tenement building. The picture evokes New York urban images of white poverty from the previous century as seen in Jacob Riis's work, such as *The Man Slept in This Cellar for about Four Years* (1890). As with Riis's picture of *Baxter Street Alley in Mulberry Bend, New York* (1888), the alley walls which surround and oppress the Fontenelle children, underscore their poverty, and the unforgiving bleakness of their environment. This is not a site of hope or prospect. Parks found a subject to help explain the social, economic and political frustration of many African-Americans at the time of the 1968 race riots, following the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Seeing this family's circumstances as a way of objectifying African-American anger at the time, conferred 'upon photography a guarantee of realism', as Pierre Bourdieu defined it, such that 'society is merely confirming itself in the tautological certainty that an image of the real which is true to its representation of objectivity is really objective'.¹¹ In all three of these images, Gordon Parks has cast and visualised the city in terms of how it can harbour

11 – Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Social Definition of Photography', in *Photography: A Middle-brow Art*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu, et.al. Cambridge: Polity Press 1996, 77.

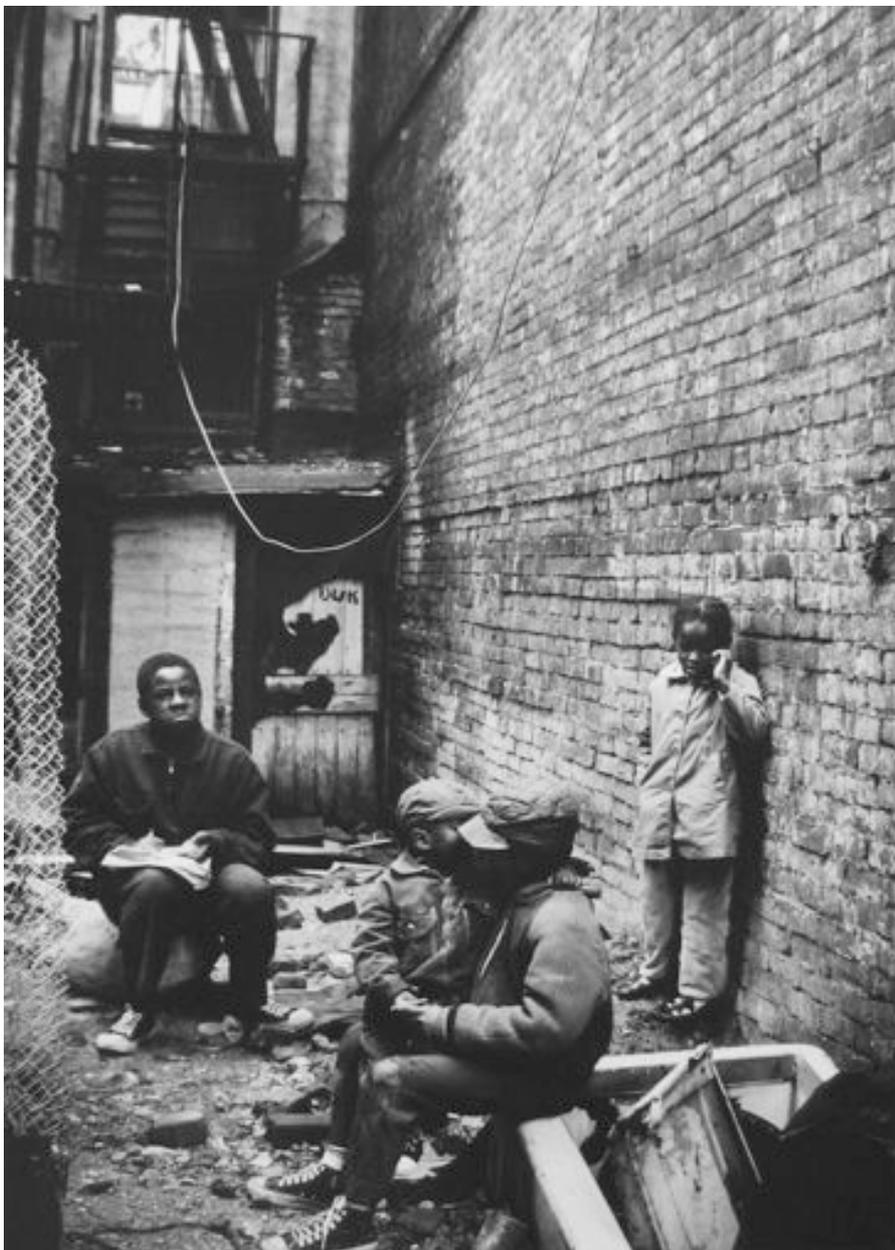


Figure 3. Gordon Parks, *Fontenelle Children outside Their Harlem Tenement*, gelatin silver print, 1967. © Gordon Parks. Courtesy of Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York.

poverty, close-off people from avenues of opportunity and impoverish the human spirit.

Jerome Liebling

Jerome Liebling's photograph, *Boy and Car, New York City, 1949* (figure 4), offers a poignant image of a boy of perhaps seven or eight, standing on a patch of urban pavement. The pavement's circular, slightly raised form suggests a kind of pedestal. The pedestal is ragged at the edges; like an island it provides and defines the child's territory. The concrete is cracking and one of the cracks leads directly to the boy's dilapidated right shoe. Though laced up, the shoe has come loose from its sole, its moorings. Liebling suggests that this boy's position is tenuous despite his efforts to appear composed. The background tableau of a black car, with its stylish, sweeping fender and white wall tyre, provide the context of a capitalist, consumerist society, which the boy can aspire to, but which he is unlikely to succeed in, or even survive. Unlike Red Jackson, this boy confronts the camera directly, engaging our gaze. He looks proud but bewildered, as if imploring us to provide answers, clues and perhaps sustenance.

Jerome Liebling was guided by the view of Walker Evans that documentary photography 'must evoke a sense of the photographer's personal values and his or her distinctive insight'.¹² Although the photograph provides limited clues to indicate whether this setting is urban, or simply a small town, Liebling chooses to dismiss any doubt by adding the place to his title. The image recalls the photographs of Dorothea Lange, made during the Great Depression in rural America, of families living in poverty, such as *Damaged Child* (1936). In Liebling's photograph the viewer is struck by the odd juxtaposition of a man's hat on the boy's small head. The hat is too big for him, but it provides

12– Caroline Hartwell, Foreword, in Jerome Liebling, *The People, Yes*, New York: Aperture 1995, 4.



Figure 4. Jerome Liebling, *Boy and Car, New York City*, gelatin silver print, 1949. © Jerome Liebling. Courtesy of Jerome Liebling.

1 protection and status. He is not man enough for it and we feel he has little
 choice but to grow up rapidly if he wishes to thrive. With its rumpled band, the
 hat looks like the kind you would see worn by a gambler to a racetrack. The
 notion of leisure pursuits is also emphasized in the boy's shirt, which has
 5 hockey motifs on it. The unusual juxtapositions include the child wearing a
 pair of shorts, yet carrying a heavy coat. 'Liebling reveals an extraordinarily
 practiced eye', observes historian Estelle Jussim, 'for the touching foibles of
 humanity'.¹³

10 I interviewed Jerome Liebling at his home in Amherst, Massachusetts
 where he taught for years at the unconventional Hampshire College, where
 students receive no grades. I suggested to him that the image of *Boy and Car*
 inspires a variety of interpretations. He responded: 'What is the more powerful
 photograph — one that has the most direct, least complicated message, or one
 15 that has triggered the most narrative possibilities?'¹⁴ There is a lively dynamic
 between subject and photographer in this image. 'He is curious about me',
 explains Liebling.¹⁵ The viewer, too, squirms under the directness of the boy's
 gaze and curiosity.

20 Jerome Liebling was born in Brooklyn in 1924, the son of poor immigrants.
 'His mother had come from a small shtetl near Warsaw; his father from some
 anonymous town in the fluid Austro-Hungarian Empire'.¹⁶ After serving in the
 army during World War II, he studied art at Brooklyn College under the
 guidance of Walter Rosenblum. The image of *Boy and Car* was emblematic of
 25 the kind of photographs which members of the Photo League, with its remit for
 social documentary photography, were encouraged to explore. The League was
 founded in the early 1930s in New York City, dedicated to advancing the use of
 photography in a socially conscious way.¹⁷ The League played an important
 formative role in the work of Jerome Liebling, Helen Levitt and Walter
 Rosenblum, becoming for Liebling his 'ethical and artistic crucible'.¹⁸ Liebling
 30 took *Boy and Car* while enrolled in Paul Strand's (1890–1976) documentary
 photography class at the Photo League. During our interview, Liebling proudly
 produced a document and began to read it aloud:

The League's Statement of Beliefs state that, 'Photography has tremendous
 social value, upon the photographer rests the responsibility and duty of
 35 recording a true image of the world as it is today. The Photo League's task is to
 put the camera back in the hands of honest photographers who will use it to
 photograph America'. Now that really intrigues me.¹⁹

40 Liebling, along with Levitt and Rosenblum devoted much of their efforts to
 photographing people in poor neighbourhoods, which mirrored the League's
 call to use photography to advance social change. The Photo League soon ran
 foul, though, of Cold War domestic politics and in 1947, the year that Jerome
 Liebling became an executive officer of the League, the Attorney General of the
 United States listed it, along with more than three-hundred other organisa-
 45 tions, as 'subversive and un-American'. The Photo League was formally
 dissolved in 1952; however, its influence on Jerome Liebling's development as a
 photographer was tangible in the way he was inspired by both Paul Strand and
 Walter Rosenblum. Liebling recounts:

[I] was impressed with the ideas both men represented. Rosenblum led me
 through the streets and helped me to establish where my sympathies would lie.
 50 Strand had such extraordinary integrity and meaning in his vision [and both
 gave me] a deep concern for the tension created in combining plasticity and
 meaning.²⁰

54 In contrast to the other three photographers, Liebling often chose to engage his
 subjects in the process of photographing them. As in *Boy and Car*, Liebling
 makes no attempt to obscure or deny his presence. He is not pretending to be

13– Estelle Jussim, 'The Photographs of Jerome Liebling', in *The Eternal Moment: Essays on the Photographic Image*, New York: Aperture 1989, 210.

14– Jerome Liebling, personal communication, Amherst, Massachusetts, 6 June 2001

15– Liebling, personal communication, 6 June 2001.

16– Jussim, *The Eternal Moment*, 207.

17– See Anne Tucker, 'A History of the Photo League: The Members Speak', *History of Photography* 18: 2 (Summer 1994), 174–184.

18– Caroline Hartwell, Foreword, in Jerome Liebling, *The People, Yes*, New York: Aperture 1995, 4.

19– Liebling, personal communication, 6 June 2001.

20– Jerome Liebling, *The People, Yes*, New York: Aperture 1995, 16.

invisible or to be simply recording or capturing some objective truth. In this approach he follows his mentor Paul Strand. In Strand's photograph, *The Family, View II, Luzzara, Italy* (1953), the eyes of the central figures are fixed on the camera. We accept that photographer and subject are complicit in the representational process. Alan Trachtenberg elaborates on the nature of this relationship, finding that in Liebling's approach to his work, 'pictorial power arises from the desire to be with the world, not merely to record but to register the fact of one's own presence, to project one's self in the act of capturing a scene'.²¹ Liebling took this stance of the unflinching gaze to a different level in his later works when he photographed abattoirs and human cadavers and in mental hospitals. As Trachtenberg reiterates, 'Liebling's pictures are often difficult to look at, not easy to take'.²²

21 – Alan Trachtenberg, 'How Little Do My Countrymen Know', in *Jerome Liebling Photographs*, Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press 1982, no page.

22 – Ibid.

Helen Levitt

Born in Brooklyn in 1913 where she lived until the age of eighteen, when she started work for a photographer in the Bronx, Helen Levitt had her first solo exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1943. In June of the same year she exhibited 'Pictures of Children' at the Photo League. Books of her photographic work include *A Way of Seeing* (1965), *In the Street* (1987), *Helen Levitt* (1991), *Mexico City* (1997), *Crosstown* (2001), and *Here and There* (2003).

Helen Levitt and Gordon Parks are approached the subject of children in the city using different methods. As a photojournalist, Parks would establish a rapport with the individuals and families featured in his photographs, spending time with them and ensuring a degree of trust before bringing out his camera. In contrast, Helen Levitt occupies an uninhibited, fragile, dance-like space to avoid imposing on her subjects and risk altering their natural behaviour. Parks explicitly creates a negotiated space, whether working with models or ordinary people, who invite his camera into their lives. In their own distinctive ways, both photographers achieve the elusive transparency of the observer, allowing us a privileged perspective of childhood candour.

Unlike Parks, some of Levitt's early photographs were featured in *Harper's Bazaar*, but she never published a picture in *LIFE*, electing instead to have her work reproduced in the magazines *Minicam* and *PM's Weekly* (whose editorial social reformist outlook extended to banning the use of advertisements).²³ As Sandra Phillips observes of Levitt, in what is one of the most astute and comprehensive introductions to a photographer's published portfolio: 'Although Levitt has chosen the active city streets as her prime subject and has had a special attraction to the uninhibited play of children, her photographs reveal an appreciation of privacy'.²⁴ The photograph, *Untitled, New York, 1939* (figure 5), shows the cautious stance of small children who have ventured out of their home wearing Halloween masks. Levitt has managed to capture their timidity as they enter the cusp of public space and the uncertainties of the urban street. James Agee in his forward to *A Way of Seeing* (1965) suggests that this photograph is 'a definitive embodiment of the first walk into the world's first morning'.²⁵ Intended to mark a festive occasion and provide entrance to its engagement, the masks introduce an additional shield from the unwanted urban gaze of the stranger. In their neatly dressed attire the children exhibit a tacit understanding that the marginal space they occupy is still an extension of the family home. The stoop, outside the front door, allows them a raised vantage point from which to survey 'the active street'. In images such as these, Helen Levitt seeks and captures the nuance of city street life.

Manhattan neighbourhoods, such as Spanish Harlem, the Lower East Side, and the western edge of the mid-town, and the children resident in them, are the primary terrain of Levitt's photography. Unexpectedly, Adam Gopnik in his

23 – Sandra Phillips, 'Helen Levitt's New York' in *Helen Levitt*, ed. Sandra Phillips and Maria Morris Hambourg, San Francisco CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 1991, 24.

24 – Ibid., 15.

25 – James Agee, Introductory essay, *A Way of Seeing*, Durham NC: Duke University Press 1989 [1965], xiv.



Figure 5. Helen Levitt, *Untitled, New York, 1939*, gelatin silver print. © Helen Levitt. Courtesy of Laurence Miller Gallery, New York.

forward to *Here and There* (2003), cites Helen Levitt as saying: ‘People think I love children, but I don’t, not more than the next person. It was just that children were out in the streets.’²⁶ In the photograph, *Untitled, New York, 1940* (figure 6), a group of children hold the frame of an oversized mirror, whose broken shards lie at their feet. One of the young boys, sitting atop his tricycle, is framed within the larger frame. The boy becomes the subject of a picture within a picture, as the other children serve as assistants, holding up the frame, which serves to focus our attention on him and isolates his captured pose from those on the periphery of the looking glass. We discern that it is a summer’s day and the boys are from different ethnic groups. The white boy on his tricycle is neatly clothed, the boy holding the frame is naked from the waist up, and an African-American boy wears a badly torn shirt. They appear oblivious to difference and are united in their multicultural interaction. This meditative image is emblematic of the way ‘Levitt’s photographs reveal children of various ethnic and racial backgrounds in harmonious play’.²⁷ Although at the time the photograph was taken sectors of US society were still heavily segregated, this picture and others like it, offered an alternative multicultural ideal. Levitt enters as one of the new modernists, who, as Susan Sontag asserted, ‘want a camera eye that is not piercing but democratic’.²⁸

In this photograph a tableau of shops and signs are seen behind the children, advertising a laundry, soft drinks 7Up and Coca Cola, kerosene, ice, coal and a shoe repair store. The adults stand to the side, against the store front facades, almost entirely oblivious to the children’s activities. These symbols of consumerism and the role of the adults appear benign. They neither comment on nor interfere with the group’s activity. The actions of the children, although given prominence by virtue of the discrete intimacy of the photographer to her subject and the quirkiness of their activity with the mirror, are harmoniously integrated within the urban life of the street. The youngsters are not aware of the photographer standing beside them. The boys are at ease in their neighbourhood environment. These children are not at risk and there is no suggestion that they are insecure about their task with the mirror, or their status on the street. Their near invisibility, as the broken mirror has become invisible, promotes a sense of the children’s organic, integrated role within the urban setting.

26 – Adam Gopnik, Introduction, *Here and There*, New York: Powerhouse Books 2003, 8.

27 – Phillips, *Helen Levitt*, 17.

28 – Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, New York: Penguin 1977, 99.

1 Figure 6. Helen Levitt, *Untitled, New York, 1940*, gelatin silver print. © Helen Levitt. Courtesy of Laurence Miller Gallery, New York.



Helen Levitt's subtle and curious images of childhood are never sentimental or nostalgic, and she avoids turning her subjects 'into noble heroes of poverty and desolation'.²⁹ The photograph, *Untitled, New York, 1940*, was taken in Yorkville on the Upper East Side of Manhattan, where Levitt lived, as did her friend Walker Evans. She agreed to an interview which took place in her New York City Greenwich Village apartment. I began by asking her about the profound influence of Henri Cartier-Bresson on her work. After attending his 1935 exhibition at the Levy Gallery in New York City, she recalls 'being stunned by its originality and beauty', and for all of that year she decided to take no photographs. The following year she purchased the same small Leica he used.³⁰ The camera's inconspicuousness, coupled with a specially attached right-angle viewfinder was vital to her new strategy for photographing on the street. On occasion she accompanied Cartier-Bresson while he was photographing, and his interest in photography and surrealism was to infuse the approach to her own work.³¹ For Cartier-Bresson, the camera was 'a

29 – Francine Prose, Introduction, *Crosstown*, New York: Powerhouse Books 2001, 6.

30 – As cited by Phillips, *Helen Levitt*, 26.

31 – Maria Morris Hamburg, 'Helen Levitt: A Life in Part' in *Helen Levitt*, ed. Sandra Phillips and Maria Morris Hamburg, San Francisco CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 1991, 48.

1 sketchbook, an instrument of intuition and spontaneity’, for he felt that 1
 ‘photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the
 significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give
 that event its proper expression’.³²

5 Some observers have referred to Helen Levitt’s ‘style uncoloured by style’,
 which, if true, is of course a style in itself.³³ Like in Cartier-Bresson’s *Sunday*
on the Banks of the Marne (1938), we observe the quiet transparency of the
 photographer. Levitt achieves a similar anonymity, but her images instil
 candour through their undemonstrative character. Levitt also discussed the
 10 importance of ‘capturing the moment’ in the context of urban street
 photography, a genre she had pursued for almost seventy years, and also in
 her experimentations in film. Her lyrical short documentary film, *In the Street*
 (1952), made primarily in East Harlem with her close friends, the painter and
 art historian, Janice Loeb, and the novelist, poet, screenwriter, film critic, James
 15 Agee. The following is a partial transcription of that conversation: 15

AM: How important is the moment?

HL: It’s the essence of the photographic aesthetic.

AM: And how does that differ from capturing the moment in documentary
 20 film, or is it the same? 20

HL: The thing is that in photography it’s reality, it has to be reality. If you
 make it up yourself, that to me is no longer an interesting photograph.

AM: How do you approach photographing children in a documentary way in
 25 the street? 25

HL: I see these kids playing in the lot, to me there’s a potential there, so I’ll go
 and hang around with them and see what they’re doing. I’ll look through the
 camera maybe, or maybe I won’t. I’m waiting for the one split second when
 it’s going to come together. Now, I might have walked by and seen this and
 30 got it, but you don’t generally walk by and see that. You have to hang around
 and wait for them to create something that you capture. 30

AM: In doing street photography and sometimes when things may happen all
 of a sudden, is it a challenge being aware of your four corners of the frame in
 composing the shot?

35 HL: I don’t think you think of the corners, you quickly try to get the essence of
 the image in the viewfinder and the corners take care of themselves. And very
 often you miss, and the corners come in too soon because it’s so quick, you
 don’t have time to fool around with it.³⁴ 35

In Levitt’s photograph, *Untitled, New York, 1939* (figure 7), five young
 40 boys, aged roughly seven to fourteen, play around the frame of a tall
 commercial doorway, adorned with Tuscan stone pillars. As in an earlier
 illustration (figure 6), a frame is created within a frame. The pillars and pedestal
 isolate the two large battered metal doors in the centre of the picture,
 underscoring, as with the ‘Post No Bills’ notice and barred windows, that this
 45 space is not intended for entertainment. Although we witness one boy hoisting
 himself to the top, it is hard to ascertain how the other three have managed to
 reach the cornice. A fifth boy is aware of their being watched. Hiding behind a
 pillar, he looks out at the photographer with a smile, rather than a sense of guilt
 at being caught engaging in dangerous behaviour. His expression indicates the
 50 innately pleasurable quality of their activity. 50

Our reaction to the scene is conditioned by the fact ‘that children either
 occupy designated spaces, that is, they are placed as in nurseries or schools, or
 they are conspicuous, by their inappropriate or precocious invasion of adult
 54 territory’.³⁵ Here the children are transgressing acceptable physical boundaries,
 placing themselves at odds with society’s efforts to protect and control children. 54

32 – Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Mind’s Eye*, New York: Aperture 1999, 15, 42.

33 – Phillips, *Helen Levitt*, 16.

34 – Helen Levitt, personal communication, New York City, 9 June 2001.

35 – James, *Theorizing Childhood*, 37.

1 Figure 7. Helen Levitt, *Untitled*, New York, 1939, gelatin silver print. © Helen Levitt. Courtesy of Laurence Miller Gallery, New York.



The viewer is instantly put in a position of concern for the children's safety, as two of the boys engage in a fight or mock fight on the slender cornice. With little to cling to, the boys could plummet to the concrete sidewalk, fifteen feet below. The children seem oblivious to the dangers of their urban setting.

The photographer has set out to 'shatter everything we think we know about conventional ideas of child safety'.³⁶ The youths and the photographer have blurred the distinctions of urban space and its intended uses. Their confident engagement has transformed the architectural purpose. The tenuousness of their survival may be apparent to the viewer, but not to the boys. As in the two previous examples of her work, the children have taken ownership of the urban space and dominant that space.

Levitt's images of children stand in contrast to those presented by Jerome Liebling. He has no wish to catch the child unawares. The boy in his photograph (figure 4) can take possession of how he wishes to be seen or

36 – Prose, *Crosstown*, 9.

1 whether he wishes his picture to be taken at all, but the general effect is 1
is uncomfortable to the viewer, as it is intended to be. In Liebling's photograph
we gaze down at the boy, arguably objectifying him in the process, whereas
Levitt either positions herself on their level or gazes slightly up at them in
5 wonderment. The effect is immediate. At no time is the viewer greeted with the 5
suggestion that Levitt is a moral or social judge to her subjects. Her camera
becomes organic to the scene, casting her either as sympathetic observer, or as
the confiding gaze of her subjects implies, that of participant observer.

10 Levitt places her child subject at the heart of the image. The photograph 10
Untitled, New York, 1938 (figure 8), features a scene of two masked children and
a tree. The surreal picture 'confuses the usual status and conventions of a
photographic image with respect to reality. It introduces fantasy'.³⁷ Unlike in
the previous picture, the children gaze upon the photographer, their faces
15 hidden from view by white handkerchiefs. Their identities are masked to the 15

37 – David Bate, *Photography and Surrealism*, London: I.B. Tauris 2004, 29.



Figure 8. Helen Levitt, *Untitled, New York, 1938*, gelatin silver print. © Helen Levitt. Courtesy of Laurence Miller Gallery, New York.

viewer and we sense in this back lot that we have stumbled across a private act. In its surrealism, the image assumes the form of a ‘disquieting pantomime’, in which the scenes are ‘fragments of a play whose first and last acts are elsewhere’.³⁸ Given the height of the lone tree, and the child attached to its upper reaches, we should feel a sense of peril for the children. Yet, the two figures comfortably inhabit the space.

As the children observe us from behind their ghost-like masks, we are the ones made to feel alien. The boy clings to the tree as if it were a last totem to the natural world, which otherwise eludes them. This is a place of bricks, dirt and refuse. The impoverishment of the setting underscores our alarm that this is not a safe haven for children. Their masks powerfully comment on a world many viewers would find antithetical to notions of childhood. The meditative intimacy of Levitt’s photographs prompted poet James Agee to advocate that ‘the artist’s task is not to alter the world as the eye sees it into a world of aesthetic reality, but to perceive the aesthetic reality within the actual world’.³⁹ In turn, Helen Levitt’s unobtrusive and meditative approach to photographing children uses the urban setting to offer the viewer cleverly transcendent images of childhood.

Walter Rosenblum

Awarded the Purple Heart, the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, five battle stars and the Presidential Unit Citation, Walter Rosenblum was the highest decorated photographer in the US Army to serve in World War II. Assigned to the Signal Corps and working as a photographer and film cameraman, his images taken on the first assault on the Normandy beaches, such as *D-Day Rescue* (1944), and upon liberating Dachau concentration camp, are some of the most poignant documentary photographs of the war. ‘I grew up in a poor family on the Lower East Side, the youngest of five children. My father was a very orthodox Jew whom I couldn’t get along with, I had to go to the synagogue all the time. That was my life’.⁴⁰ Born in 1919, Rosenblum lost his mother at the age of sixteen during the height of the Great Depression, and shortly afterwards joined a camera club and enrolled in evening classes at New York’s City College.

His new-found enthusiasm for street photography was vitalized through his association with The Photo League in the late-1930s. The League was devoted to encouraging social documentary photography, which it actively advanced through exhibitions and lectures. ‘Our teacher was Paul Strand’, Rosenblum recalled, ‘and when I got involved with the Photo League, the aesthetics of photography had been largely obscured by the fact that we thought of ourselves as social photographers’.⁴¹ Using the League’s darkroom facilities and hired as the organization’s office secretary, Rosenblum became editor of its in-house publication, *Photo Notes*. When I interviewed him at his New York home, Walter Rosenblum, then in his 80s, was still enthusiastic about the role of the League. He explained the immediate attractions of joining the organization: ‘The Photo League was unique, it made my life. \$5 a year to join, 10 cents when you used the darkroom, and people around eager to help you’.⁴² In 1941, not long before going off to war in Europe, he was appointed president of the Photo League.

At the League’s headquarters in a run-down manufacturing district of New York, Rosenblum came into contact with the leading photographers of the day, including Bernice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, W. Eugene Smith, Paul Strand, Edward Weston and Weegee.⁴³ The education he received through these interactions, particularly with Lewis Hine, who became his mentor, had a profound impact on his

38 – Gopnik, *Here and There*, 6–7.

39 – Agee, *A Way of Seeing*, viii.

40 – Walter Rosenblum, personal communication, New York City, 12 June 2001.

41 – Ibid.

42 – Ibid.

43 – Shelley Rice, ‘Walter Rosenblum: Paying Homage through Photography’, *Walter Rosenblum*, Dresden: Verlag der Kunst 1990, 7.

1 photographic life. It was under the tutelage of Sid Grossman, as head of
 the Photo League's school and at a workshop he taught on documentary
 photography, that Rosenblum embarked on a project which became the Pitt
 Street Series, which he described as, 'the most important six months of his life
 5 as a photographer'.⁴⁴

The photograph *Girl in Swing*, 1938 (figure 9) illustrates a refreshingly
 different attitude towards photographing children. The alienating element of
 danger, explored in the work of the other photographers, finds its place in this
 image only in the concern the viewer might have for the girl's safety, standing
 10 up while swinging precipitously high. The subject, though, shows delight and
 passion. The swing has reached its most extended height, her body is thrust
 forward, as if a bird taking flight, and her white dress symbolises her angelic
 weightlessness and grace. Set against the stark and dark architectural forms of
 the city, with the Manhattan Bridge towering above, the girl's engagement with
 15 the urban is one of exuberance and promise. The city becomes a source of
 amusement, and in the child's exhilaration the photographer witnesses and
 celebrates her transcendence over her environment. She has taken flight, while
 still tenuously bound to the city's existence.

Seeing the city as a site for positive childhood experiences is a theme
 20 projected by many of Walter Rosenblum's New York photographs, including
 the picture simply entitled, *Friends* (figure 10), taken on 105th Street in 1952.
 The model of the parked car and the backdrop of the black sweep of its fender
 evokes Jerome Liebling's *Boy and Car* (figure 4), taken just a few years earlier.
 That is where the similarity ends. Instead of being placed on a ragged pedestal,
 25 these boys slouch against the car, transforming its role as a symbol of
 unattainable consumerism into that of a useful prop. The boys are engaged in
 looking at an object, oblivious to the presence of the photographer who situates
 himself close to their height. In place of the threatening city, a new urban
 environment emerges, one which welcomes a multicultural union between a
 30 white boy and black boy, uncaring of their racial differences. The city provides
 the backdrop for their interaction and friendship, as the title of the picture
 confirms.



44– Ibid., 15.

Figure 9. Walter Rosenblum, *Girl in Swing*,
 gelatin silver print, 1938. © Walter
 Rosenblum. Courtesy of Walter Rosenblum.

1 Figure 10. Walter Rosenblum, *Friends*,
 5 gelatin silver print, 1952. © Walter
 Rosenblum. Courtesy of Walter Rosenblum.



The Child and the City

In the photographs of Parks, Levitt, Rosenblum and Liebling, children are observed among bricks, tall buildings, back alleys and vacant spaces in determinedly unsentimental ways. While a number of the photographs prompt a link with the title of Anne Higonnet's book, *Pictures of Innocence* (1998), these photographs break from historical painting and Victorian photography which promoted a romanticized, idealized childhood.⁴⁵ In contrast to Joshua Reynolds' painting, *The Age of Innocence* (1788), or Charles Dodgson's photograph of *Alice Liddell as the Beggar Maid* (1859), these four photographers shun notions of sentimentality. These photographers present an unvarnished street childhood. The innocent child is an enduring concept, fuelled by the romantic images of Blake and Wordsworth. Here on the street, however, 'can be found the source of public standards for our demeanour towards children and for our expectations of policy and provision in relation to them. Essentially pure in heart, these infants are angelic and uncorrupted by the world they have entered'.⁴⁶ Nor have the photographers opted to present juxtaposed images of 'the good child' and 'the bad child', the pictorial tradition

45 – Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*, London: Thames and Hudson 1998.

46 – Allison James, et. al., *Theorizing Childhood*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1998, 13.

1	for which is discussed in texts such as Anita Schorsch's <i>Images of Childhood</i> (1979). ⁴⁷	1
5	Each of the four photographers brings a unique personal history and interpretive eye to deceptively similar situations. In their views, the city street is reinvented as an impromptu playground and as the contested turf of gang warfare. As a site bearing the promise of future disappointment and penury or as a place of excitement and wonder, the sharp corners and potentially dangerous places of the urban environment provide a powerful visual backdrop for these photographs of children.	5
10	At the time that most of these photographs were taken, New York was championed as 'the city of the future', notably in exhibitions such as the 1939 New York World's Fair. The city and its architecture had been celebrated in iconic images such as Edward Steichen's <i>The Flatiron</i> (1905), Alfred Stieglitz's <i>From the Shelton Westward, New York</i> (1931–2), and Margaret Bourke-White's <i>Chrysler Building, New York</i> (1932). In contrast, the New York City of Levitt, Parks, Liebling and Rosenblum is far more intimate. This is New York as a child's playground. These images feature young people interacting in impoverished neighbourhoods during a period of unbridled racism and ethnic divisions, at a time when New York was positioned as the ultimate expression of the capitalist metropolis.	10
15		15
20	The four photographers presented in this essay make no effort to depict the New York skyline or impressive architecture. They prefer instead to investigate scenes played out in spaces where the street is invigorated by the everyday, and where dramatic physical features emerge unexpectedly — an enormous mirror, or a tall tree. The children thrive within the urban, through the intermixing of different cultures in close proximity to one another. Despite the fact that these scenes are closely observed and offer limited information about the physical backdrop of the city, they are specific to it and invite the viewer to ascribe a particular set of symbolic meanings about child development. The photographs provide an interface between an urban architectural setting and childhood informing new understandings of each.	20
25		25
30	James Agee asserted that none of Helen Levitt's photographs were intended as social documents. ⁴⁸ While Liebling and Rosenblum were deeply involved with the Photo League, Levitt attended some of the functions, but never became a member. Her interest was not in joining groups or causes, or becoming politically involved. Her intent stood in marked contrast to that exhibited by Gordon Parks in his Harlem Gang photo essay for <i>LIFE</i> , or Walter Rosenblum's ambitions for the Photo League, and the moral implications behind his selection of subjects, designed to celebrate 'commonality rather than difference, unity rather than diversity', and 'shared values and aspirations'. ⁴⁹	30
35		35
40	Parks's photograph of Red Jackson presents the adult-child, one who is placed in the position of attempting to take control of his surroundings, while confronting the predatory public space. Many of the children depicted in the other photographs in this article are seen operating in a curious, unpredictable urban chrysalis of innocence. Some are clearly engaging in what we would think was risky behaviour. The adolescent Red Jackson appears to be in the most danger, and at the time one would not have held out much hope for his survival. Yet, in the retrospective portfolio of his work, <i>Half Past Autumn</i> , Gordon Parks recounts a startling incident:	40
45		45
50	'Mr. Parks!' Forty years had passed when the gruff voice stopped me in New York's Pennsylvania railway station. A thick-set, neatly dressed middle-aged man came toward me, smiling. 'Remember me?' I observed him closely. The crooked jaw, the freckles, the reddish graying hair suddenly came together. I grabbed his hand. 'Red Jackson!' ... He had just turned fifty-six. ⁵⁰	50
54		54

47 – Anita Schorsch, *Images of Childhood: an illustrated social history*, New York: Mayflower Books 1979.

48 – Agee, *A Way of Seeing*, vii.

49 – Rice, *Walter Rosenblum*, 10, 13.

50 – Parks, *Half Past Autumn*, 85.