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Reading Between the Pictures: Documenting Economic Hardship in a Neoliberal Age

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ABSTRACT:
This thesis is interested in the ways that documentary photojournalism of economic hardship has changed in response to a neoliberal context. Analysis is centered on photographer Anthony Suau’s photo essay “Struggling Cleveland,” captured for TIME magazine in 2008. Suau’s photographs of economic hardship break from a tradition of photojournalism that focused on drama and emotion. I consider what appears and does not appear in the photographs, with particular attention to how the neoliberal context influences the content and mode of address of the photos. The photographs are analyzed independently for the ways that neoliberalism appears within each frame and collectively, allowing for a critical viewer to gain an understanding of how discrete events might be connected via an interactive reading practice. Suau’s sociological and narrative approach for covering the housing crisis allows the viewer to construct their own meaning and judgment of the event.
Reading Between the Pictures:
Documenting Economic Hardship in a Neoliberal Age

By
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Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of the Arts in Communication and Rhetorical Studies

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Chapter 1: Documenting the Housing Crisis

The look of documentary photographs of economic hardship has changed. As one commentator noted of the most critically acclaimed image to emerge from the housing crisis of the mid-aughts expressed it, the image looks like it could have come out of Iraq. That is, it resembles contemporary war photography more than it recalls earlier, iconic images of economic hardship. This thesis describes how the appearance of economic hardship within the frames of documentary photography has changed of late. It explores what this shift in appearances (what can appear, how it appears, and what cannot appear) reveals about changing concepts of citizenship and corollary changes in civic modes of address. The study focuses these intellectual pursuits through the case of Anthony Suau’s interactive online photo essay on the housing crisis in Cleveland, Ohio. His work breaks with precedent both in terms of how he pictures economic hardship and his mode of address. Within the frames of his photos and, indirectly, through his mode of address (which invites viewers to read between the photos) the viewer has access to models of citizenship that depart from those we are accustomed to seeing in documentary photographs of economic hardship from the twentieth century. Ultimately, I argue that changes in the appearance of economic hardship within the frames of documentary photography and corresponding shifts in civic address, which invite viewers to read between the pictures, are attributable to major historical shifts in how Americans understand the relationship between economics and governance, from the welfare state model of the twentieth century to neoliberalism in the twenty-first century. This chapter will first unpack the limits of the housing crisis and introduce the object of study, Anthony Suau’s photo essay “Struggling Cleveland.”
then explore how shifting contexts can change photographic meanings. Finally I conclude by comparing a previously famous photograph of economic hardship, Migrant Mother, to an award winning photograph from Suau’s essay.

What is the Housing Crisis?
As I began research for this project, I was struck by the distinct lack of powerful images. A quick google-images search of “the housing crisis” reveals many political cartoons, but few documentary images. The photographs of the housing crisis that are available appear mundane, ordinary, even boring at times. The few images that did appear in my search were of suburban houses with real estate signs in the yard featuring words like short sale or foreclosure. There was nothing iconic about the photos. Many of them seemed trivial. After digging further into the photojournalism of the crisis, I discovered that the context of the photographs was most often understood not by the images themselves, but in the information offered in the accompanying captions or between the frames of individual photographs. I further struggled to find photos that captured the housing crisis alone, and not also the global Great Recession.

Nailing down a precise, one sentence definition or date range of the housing crisis proves difficult. It was a long, drawn-out process that was marked by a series of events that together constitute a national crisis. I have more questions than answers when it comes to defining the beginning of the crisis. For instance, does the crisis begin the first time someone defaulted on their subprime, adjustable-rate mortgage? After 10 people did? After 200? At what point should the crisis be considered a crisis? Some investors predicted the crisis as early as 2005, and event bet against the big banks (as famously depicted in the movie ‘The Big Short’). Did the crisis begin when those investors recognized there would be one? When they cashed in on the banks losses?
I have the same difficulty in identifying an end date. This is largely because the Housing Crisis rolled right into the Great Recession. However, in my opinion they are two are distinct events that require independent analysis, with the acknowledgment that they did influence each other. There is more of a consensus that the Great Recession began in mid-2008. However, defaults and foreclosures of mortgages on a large scale continued well into 2010. Does this mean that the housing crisis was happening concurrently with the Great Recession? Did the Great Recession subsume the housing crisis? After 2008, the housing crisis becomes entangled with the Great Recession in a way that makes it difficult to distinguish between one crisis and the other. For this reason, in my thesis, I have attempted to locate the housing crisis and my objects of study in 2008 and prior. Important events happen in 2007 that signal a significant number of journalists understood the crisis before the Great Recession of 2008/9. In August of 2007, Countrywide, the number one provider of mortgages at the time, narrowly avoided bankruptcy by taking an emergency loan from the Federal Reserve. The crisis was severe enough in 2007 to warrant Presidential action. In December of 2007, President Bush gave a speech announcing an emergency freeze on the rates of qualifying adjustable rate mortgages.

The housing crisis is a complex series of events that together constituted a national crisis. The housing crisis cast doubt on the real estate industry which had been previously understood as a fundamentally American and relatively low-risk investment. The effects of the housing crisis led to the global Great Recession which had far-reaching impacts. It is critical the aim of this thesis to describe and understand how the complex series of events that constitute the housing crisis were visually recorded, with attention to what appears and does not appear in the pictures.
My analysis for this thesis is covers one photo essay for *TIME* magazine by Anthony Suau, “Struggling Cleveland.”¹ The photographs were captured in Cleveland, Ohio in March of 2008. Suau is one of the early photographers to document the housing crisis. His photos are taken in early 2008 before the effects of the global Great Recession become entangled with the effects of the housing crisis. Suau’s photographs are of only the housing crisis, and his approach allows a more complete understanding of the event because of the diversity of subjects and places photographed.

A renowned photographer, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1985 and the World Press Award Photo in both 1988 and 2009, Suau has experience documenting numerous world events over the past 30 years, spanning from protests to war to famine to genocide. His diversity of experience gives him a variety of visual strategies. In many ways, Suau is an innovator of visual storytelling for the neoliberal age. His sociological approach covers a variety of different scenes, people and moments across the city of Cleveland to provide a comprehensive understanding of how people are living with and responding to the crisis. It is up to the viewer to do interpretive work to understand Suau’s photography. A viewer can accept the law-and-order solution presented or a more critical viewer can consider the ramifications of viewing the housing crisis from a similar perspective as a war or crime. His photographs are able to be understood as both indicative of the neoliberal context, but also questioning the neoliberal context, by highlighting how problems are framed and the types of solutions that get generated as a result.

Neoliberalism can sometimes hide its effects because of compartmentalization. The delinquent

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¹ I choose to call these photographs despite the fact that they first appear online on *TIME’s* website. These are documentary images taken for photojournalistic purposes, despite how they are circulated. I recognize that this is likely a form of re-mediation of photography as described famously by Bolter and Grusin.
borrower does not attend a foreclosure auction, and a buyer at a foreclosure auction never sees an eviction performed by a police officer. However, Suau’s photographs allow for a reading that is not confined to one photo frame, but instead is read across and between the images allowing for a more critical perspective on neoliberalism. This ability for photographs to collectively allow judgement can help us develop more robust public criticism of neoliberalism.

**From the Welfare State to Neoliberalism**

Susan Sontag has written about the importance of context when looking at photographs.\(^2\) She points out that a photo alone cannot provide an interpretation or make an argument. There has to be an historical context already in place that supports receiving an image one way or another. I would go even further than Sontag and contend that a photograph’s mode of address can only be understood within the context of the time that it entered circulation. Because their meaning is tied to the time of production (on the side of address and reception), historic photographs can tell us something about the contexts in which they were made and circulated. For example, the photograph of *Migrant Mother* is closely tied to the context when it was first produced, indeed the welfare-state government funded the FSA and the photographers who captured the moment. This context invites a specific civic relationality, a relationship between the viewer and the photographic subject, that is based on sympathy, a recognition of another’s feelings, and a desire to help, a practice which the government followed. In this thesis, I will demonstrate how photographs of economic hardship made and circulated within a neoliberal context differ in terms of mode of address, argument, and models of civic relationality.

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The welfare state is an approach to governance that suggests that citizens deserve to be protected and cared for by the state. The welfare state requires a sentimental public. It assumes people should and do care. This public is likely to want to help the migrant mother, but only because the images hold people up as different from them. They have failed to meet the standards set by society, but that can easily be fixed through state welfare programs. Government solutions, like the New Deal or the Great Society are seen as solutions to large scale problems such as unemployment and poverty. The assumption that governmental solutions are needed to fix these structural problems requires the public to feel connected to the people of such circumstances.

Photography has been used to activate sentimental publics in a variety of historical settings. The historical context that these photos were taken in influence their modes of address and model of civic relationality. A number of scholars have studied sentimental publics that have been moved to action by images that evoke sympathy or empathy in viewers. Very early photographs of slaves were used by abolitionists to demonstrate the inhumanity of slavery. Rachel Hall explores how abolitionists deployed images using the trope of “the suffering slave” to increase sympathy for slaves so as to move Northern audiences to fight for the abolition of slavery. Jacob Riis captured photographs of the urban poor in the late 19th century in his book *How the Other Half Lives*. Riis’ photographs of poor and working class people in New York City

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3 I understand sympathy as a recognition of another person’s feelings and emotions. Empathy also requires a recognition of the other person’s feelings but additionally requires understanding and an attempt to imagine those feelings within yourself
documented their lives and struggles for middle- and upper-class people to read and view. The book has been criticized for its moralizing rhetoric that created distance between the middle-class viewer and the poor and/or minority subject. Reginald Twigg writes that Riis’ photos helped to further establish social class stratification by helping the viewer feel that they had figured out a better way to live. In the early twentieth century dramatic images inspired collective action by generating support for governmental programs and social reforms. The FSA Photos helped to document the welfare state as it was being created. During the Great Depression, *Migrant Mother* showed a struggling mother and children in need of help and, thereby, provided a visually and emotionally appealing rationale for a federally funded social safety net.

In each of these cases, the photographs depict a subject who can be “saved” from their current condition via political movements, social reforms, or governmental programs. As John Tagg points out, the persuasive power of documentary images relies on a double move made by the photographer. The photographer captures images of people who are suffering or struggling, which simultaneously subjectifies and objectifies them. They become the subject of the image, an image which can be used to help others sympathize with them. And indeed, these images might have spurred that kind of emotional response, but they also objectify their subjects. The images other their subjects by highlighting the ways in which these individuals have been abandoned by society and/or government and ask the viewer to rescue them. This is what Tagg

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calls “the burden of representation.” It highlights that the subject has failed to meet the standards that society has set, thus allowing the viewer to consider themselves a better and perhaps more capable citizen—capable even of supporting programs or movements that might help alleviate the photographic subjects’ suffering.

The historic photographs discussed in this section addressed an affluent and predominantly white audience with the power to create change. But those calls for change were issued within a sentimental public culture in which such appeals were not only legible but also persuasive. An image like *Migrant Mother* also benefits from the institutionalization of a sense of social responsibility in the welfare state. This is the historical and political context in which Hariman and Lucaites concept of the individual aggregate works. The notion that a large-scale problem is fixable via an individual solution makes sense only if the imagined interpersonal encounter between a particular viewer and the woman pictured in the photograph indexes broader, centralized governmental programs which mediate between “the haves” and “the have nots.”

Even if the problem of unemployment during the Great Depression is too large and complex, surely the family pictured in the image can be spared. It is this reformer’s desire to improve and socially reintegrate those suffering from institutionalized violence, urban poverty, and widespread economic hardship that is indicative of photographs of political and economic crisis taken in the 19th and early 20th century. The photographs model civic relationality as articulated to social movements, social reforms, and governmental aid programs and legislation, respectively. According the individual aggregate, individuals come to symbolize whole

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8 ibid
communities or demographics in need of assistance, thus allowing the encounter to feel personal and impactful. So, while an individual pictured bears the burden of representing the problem, the publics addressed by the photographs were tasked with finding the solution(s).

But the photos of the housing crisis do not picture suffering people that deserve to be “saved,” bettered, or reintegrated. This can be explained, in part, by the fact that some photographers working today are familiar with the critique of the older model of well-meaning condescension in historic documentary photographs of poverty and economic hardship. Indeed, many contemporary photographers choose not to photograph the people of the housing crisis, instead showing the aftermath of abandoned houses or the police re-establishing order after an eviction. In the cases where the displaced are shown, the images do not carry that same kind of emotional power as the aforementioned images of abolitionist photos of slaves, or Riis images of poverty in New York City, or the Great Depression FSA pictures. In contrast, Anthony Suau’s photo essay does not form an emotional connection between photographic subjects and viewers. Instead it includes a disorienting photos that communicates a vague sense of danger. But what accounts for this shift from emotional, empathetic photographs of economic crisis, to cold, disorienting ones?

One possible explanation is a shift in context. The nation today is no longer under a welfare state model and instead functions in a neoliberal context. The neoliberal context values individuality and personal autonomy. No longer is the state the protector of rights and wellbeing. David Harvey writes that neoliberalism “holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human
action into the domain of the market.”

Moral authority is not derived from the state but instead from the individual and the market. As well, neoliberalism seems to conflate democratic society with capitalism, leaving citizens as members of the economy rather than of a democratic society. Lack of economic success is a sign of personal (perhaps even moral) failure. The individuals who no longer fit the affluent social mode do not need to be helped, but rather contained and fixed. Solutions are based on a model of law and order rather than a model of care and refuge.

A New Civic Visual Discourse

Suau’s photographs of the housing crisis are indicative of this new, neoliberal context. The photographs capture the way that the properties were commodified and sold at auction and the way that police and private security firms instill order when the house is unoccupied. The photos also show citizens seeking community solutions outside of the system, finding housing at Catholic Charities, or avoiding foreclosure through assistance from a local non-profit. The neoliberal context changes how the problem is understood, the point of intervention and what counts a solution. Poverty shifts from a temporary experience of economic hardship to a timeless state and a personal failing. The point of intervention shifts from the structural level of economic crisis to the individual and local level of particular boarded-up houses or dilapidated neighborhoods. Law-and-order and market-based solutions appear to be the only options and governmental assistance is not part of the picture. The burden of representation works differently. Victims go from individuals pictured as in need of help to austere images of people

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seeking solutions to their problems in ways that demand little to nothing of the federal government.

In this thesis, I will provide an analysis of Anthony Suau’s photo essay as a means of exploring how the content and civic address of photos of economic hardship has changed. I will pursue this question by means of an analysis of the unique strategies the photographer develops to cover the issue and how these differ from historic appeals made by iconic photographs and images of poverty. I suggest that there is a new civic visual discourse that exists when photographing economic hardship. This new civic visual discourse is possible because of the shift away from emotional appeals derived from depictions of suffering individuals to a more sociological approach that requires viewers to read between the pictures to understand the housing crisis. Suau’s mode of civic address empowers the viewer to co-construct the meaning of the photographs not through a single frame, but across the photo essay, leaving the viewer capable of rendering judgement about the crisis, its management and those affected. I do not intend to make a claim that Suau’s approach is necessarily good or bad, but instead hope to show how the collection of photographs are reflective of the neoliberal context and further help to justify neoliberalism if not viewed in isolation and uncritically.

Civic visual discourses have been described by a number of scholars, most famously Ariella Azoulay. Azoulay discusses the “civil contract of photograph” using Migrant Mother as an example of how citizenship relies upon and is performed through and with the medium of photography.¹¹ Her civil contract of photography acknowledges the way that photography as a

medium privileges the photographer, and the subject of photographs often receive no compensation for their images. The civil contract of photography is between the subject and the spectator, who will likely never meet, and yet they have a relationship. Although they will likely never meet face to face, a civic relationality is possible via the medium of photography. This connection between the subject and spectator is vital to comprehending the types of understanding or judgement enabled by photographs. It is important to point out that much of Azoulay’s work has to do with the case of Palestinians and other state-less people. I by no means intend to suggest that the photographs of the housing crisis feature stateless individuals. The people impacted by the housing crisis retained their status as citizens throughout the housing crisis. Some individuals did feel abandoned by their government as they received little support for their situation, in the form of reduced interest rates or bank bailouts, and may qualify as “failed citizens” as I discuss in Chapter 3. While some governmental action was taken to avoid total collapse in 2009, on the whole the response was slow and unhelpful to foreclosed homeowners. The US Government’s response is indicative of a context in which preference is given to corporations and markets over people. Thus, photographing the people impacted by the housing crisis is unique, their citizenship has not been revoked, and yet they do not feel supported by their government. This unique context is what makes the images of the housing crisis rich and the relationship between the photographed subject and spectator particularly significant. My analysis will focus on how civic relationality is fostered in the photo essay by Anthony Suau. I am especially interested in how Suau’s essay, which relies neither on pathos nor

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12 Ibid, 105-114.
the illusion of a personal encounter, still forges a sense of connection between the subjects and spectators of his photographs.

This new civic visual discourse has two primary implications. First, it changes the mode of address. As a rhetorician by training, I do not intend to do viewer response surveys to understand how the photographs were received. Instead I intend to analyze the photographs composition, framing, content, and pathos (or lack thereof) to understand exactly how it can be understood as work that addresses viewers firmly situated within a neoliberal context. And second, it changes the strategies that a photographer uses when photographing economic hardship. The model of civic relationality invited by these photos is not based on sympathy and the individual aggregate, but instead on a sociological perspective and the logistics of foreclosure.

My work is modeled on the work of Eric Jenkins “Seeing Katrina: Perspectives of Judgment in a Cultural/Natural Disaster” essay in *Visual Communication Quarterly*. In the essay, Jenkins tracks the ways that photographs of Hurricane Katrina resulted in judgement because of the different *modes of seeing made possible* from four distinct viewpoints. Jenkins unpacks how the victims of Hurricane Katrina are understood by the strategies used to capture them. I aim to do similar work by looking at how judgement is enabled not only at the level of the single frame but also across the photo essay. My analysis is guided by the following questions: What social problems appear within the frames of Suau’s photographs. How do they appear? What cannot

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appear? For example, how does Suau deal with the problem of depicting the scale of the crisis? Who or what is pictured as having been directly affected by the housing crisis? How are those directly affected pictured? And at what point in the process of eviction, homelessness and finding alternative housing are they pictured? Finally what do the solutions to the housing crisis look like? With these questions guiding my analysis, I demonstrate how Suau’s visual discourse works within and against the ideological frameworks of neoliberalism, thereby cultivating a mode of civic relationality in which viewers might do the same.

In the remainder of this chapter, after briefly explaining the overall structure of this thesis, I engage in a discussion of iconicity. I compare and contrast *Migrant Mother* to Anthony Suau’s photograph *Extreme Caution*. While both photographs are of economic hardship they position the viewer differently and allow different types of judgement. While *Migrant Mother* relies on Hariman and Lucaites’ concept of the individual aggregate to connect with a viewer using sympathy, *Extreme Caution* does not form the same connection with the viewer. While *Migrant Mother* highlights the people impacted by the crisis, *Extreme Caution* shows a police officer attempting to restore order. These two photographs are of distinct and different economic events, but they highlight the ways that context influences the civic relationality made possible by each image.

Chapter 2 explores how the physical structures of the houses are documented in Suau’s photo essay. The houses are personified in the images and evoke sympathy from the viewer. The individual aggregate is applied to explain how the photographs emotionally captivate the viewer by suggesting a specific course of action: renovating/updating the dilapidated house. However, this sympathy is short-lived and does not extend when photographing in other contexts. Then I
explore how law-and-order solutions, such as police and private security firms, were brought inside of the houses to help restore order and control. Finally, I explore photographs of auctions, where affluent investors buy foreclosures on the cheap, without having to see the houses in context. This chapter reveals that while these photographs might temporarily tap into a viewer’s sentimentality vis-à-vis boarded-up houses, a critical viewer might read these photographs as revealing how neoliberal frameworks position exchange of properties on the free market as the way to solve the crisis.

Chapter 3 explores the people that Suau photographed. Suau’s photographs do not feature “victims” as we are traditionally used to seeing them, staring into the distance looking helpless. Instead these photographic subjects are actively seeking solutions by looking for financial documents that might improve their situation, or checking into a shelter after being evicted. The photographs of people directly affected by the housing crisis are analyzed for the way that they depict people facing difficult realities. Many of these photographs are not visually captivating but perform important documentary work, capturing the everyday, un-heroic aspects of financial crisis. This potentially allows for a civic relationality to be formed between photographic subjects and viewers based on not on emotional appeals but on information relayed regarding the logistics and practice of trying to prevent foreclosure and adapt after being evicted. While depicting those affected by the housing crisis as agents is preferable to depicting them as victims (at least in some respects), this picture of citizenship is entirely consistent with neoliberalism, which shifts the responsibility for public welfare from the federal government to individuals and families, who are encouraged to practice do-it-yourself governance. Given that
DIY solutions to the housing crisis do not lend themselves to dramatic action shots, I consider the role of drama (or the lack thereof) in documentary photographs of economic hardship.

**Migrant Mother**

Before we can see what is different about Suau’s photographs of the housing crisis, we must first look back at how economic hardship appeared within twentieth-century frames of documentary photography. I turn to Dorothea Lange’s iconic photograph, *Migrant Mother*, for historical comparison. It is one of the most recognizable images of economic hardship, and took place in a context of national economic crisis. The Great Depression of the 1930s represented the single most devastating economic reality the United States had seen up to that point. Unemployment and poverty were staggering common. President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Farm Security Administration (FSA) created a photographic division that was dedicated to documenting what was happening around the country. Thousands of images were collected by numerous photographers who traveled the country trying to capture the moment and its effects. While many of these photos are powerful and moving, one image eventually stood out from the rest.

Dorothea Lange photographed *Migrant Mother* in California in 1936. The image features a mother looking out at the distance as two children lean on her shoulders looking away from the camera. A baby rests on her lap, sleeping and unknowing of the struggles the family faces. The woman’s hand touches her face as she appears contemplative as she looks toward the future. It is a simple yet powerful image that has been both critically analyzed and popularly reproduced over the past 70 years.
Cara Finnegan has explored the FSA photographs closely in her book *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs*. In the book, Finnegan works to understand how the FSA photographs were received and if they should be understood as documentary or art. Ultimately she concludes that the images can function both as artistic photographs, valued for their aesthetic qualities, in addition to recognizing the power that the photographs possessed as historical documents.

Finnegan makes an important observation about the *Migrant Mother* photo, specifically. She notes that the image:

> enacted the visual trope of Madonna and Child.....the photograph resisted being abstracted into an icon of maternity because it was anchored to the material world with a caption describing the family’s situation and it appeared within a text that focused on the specific government solutions to poverty.

That is, when viewed alone, the photograph could be taken to be a timeless image of motherhood, but the context of the photo’s circulation in *US Camera* and its captioning helped substantiate the photo’s message of governmental means of addressing economic hardship. In

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my study of photographs of the housing crisis, I have found a similar dynamic at work. Taken alone, the images are open to multiple interpretations, but the captions anchor them to the housing crisis. Of course, all images are subject to multiple interpretations, but I speculate that there is something unique about economic problems that leave such images open to interpretation.

Economic crises surely have visual effects, but the significance of those visual effects is based on scale. The economic problem does not stem from one person unemployed, but rather thousands. In other crises, like natural disasters, people are geographically located in the same place. For example, you can see the entire city of New Orleans flooded, or the refugee tents that span for miles along the Syrian border. Economic problems are described in terms of the effect on the individual, and the crisis comes from the fact that a large number of individuals are facing the same problem. For example, the problem is not one foreclosed house, but rather thousands located not next door to each other, but rather all over the country. Capturing the geographically dispersed visual scale of the crisis is what makes an economic crisis unique. This raises questions about the particular difficulty that photographers face when documenting an economic crisis. The captions and context are essential for helping the viewer locate each image within its historical context and within the broader scale of a national crisis.

Photography’s ability to capture a historical moment defines the medium\(^\text{16}\), but Finnegan goes on to acknowledge that it is likely the aesthetic qualities of *Migrant Mother* that

helped it become iconic. The composition of the photo, the use of shadows, and the emotion captured in the woman’s face all resonate strongly with the viewer. Indeed, this photo has had a life that extends far beyond the 1930s. Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites study iconic images in their book *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy*. Hariman and Lucaites do not provide a compact definition of what an iconic photo is, but instead spend their introduction identifying the key elements of iconic photographs. Of these, the most important quality is that the images help us [Americans] establish a “more or less idealized sense of who we are and what we ought to be....” Iconic images are familiar and significant to the broader American culture. Their book explores nine iconic photographs from the last century; the first iconic image that they write about is none other than Lange’s *Migrant Mother*.

Hariman and Lucaites identify this image as an icon because of its ability to resonate with viewers on an emotional level. The image creates a powerful emotional connection, they contend, because it asks the viewer to take on a paternalistic, provider role. In the image the woman and her children are victims of the current economic reality, and the public is cast in the role of the family provider. This realization leads Hariman and Lucaites to theorize the concept of the individual aggregate. They write “the impetus for action comes from acting as if an

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20 Ibid 2.
21 Ibid 53-67
22 Ibid 57-58.
23 Ibid 87-92.
aggregate is an individual. The problem of poverty may seem intractable, but surely we can help this woman.” The photograph is able to move people because the person pictured is both specific enough to allow a connection to form, but ambiguous enough for the viewer to extrapolate the content of the photo to a larger societal situation. The photograph not only allows the viewer to see the problem, but suggests that collective action is possible. The image of Migrant Mother positions the viewer as part of a potential solution. Hariman and Lucaites explain that this “allows one to acknowledge the paralyzing fear at the same time that it activates an impulse to do something about it.” Of interest to me is the fact that photojournalistic images of the recent housing crisis do not inspire this same type of response. The images fail on both counts: they have not reached iconic status, and they fall short of evoking a humanitarian response.

**Extreme Caution**

While there is not a singular photograph to emerge as iconic of the housing crisis, one image, in particular, has received critical acclaim. Anthony Suau’s *Extreme Caution* earned the World Press Photo Award in 2009, which is an award intended to recognize an image that captures human history and illustrates the power of visual storytelling. Suau took the photograph in Cleveland, Ohio in March of 2008. The image features a police officer walking through a foreclosed home with his weapon drawn. The room is cluttered with abandoned items and empty boxes left haphazardly behind. Natural light illuminates the room pictured, but the doorways to other

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25 ibid 59.
rooms in the house appear dark and mysterious. The police officer leans forward and points his gun ahead of him as he walks toward the threshold that leads into the next room. Commissioned by *TIME* magazine, the photograph was featured in an online photo essay entitled “Struggling Cleveland.”

When describing the photo, NPR correspondent Alex Cohen noted “you look at it and think that it might be, you know, Iraq, and then all of the sudden, it clicks in and you realize this is a financial story.” This quote is essential to understanding the shift in the mode of address from *Migrant Mother* to *Extreme Caution*. Rather than using the individual aggregate strategy of “putting a face” on the crisis, this photograph disturbs viewers’ sense of genre. *Extreme Caution*

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defamiliarizes viewers, who think they know the difference between documentary photos of war, crime, and poverty. As Cohen puts it: the viewer assumes he is looking at a photo of a house raid in a context of war, when in fact the viewer is looking at something else entirely. Nothing about the photograph indicates that it is related to the financial crisis. The photo is subtle in this way, allowing the viewer to consult the caption, then return to the photograph in order to come to the realization that what appears within its frame is one aspect of the housing crisis. A viewer might be able to venture guesses as to the context of this photo, but the captioning is essential for the viewer to contextualize what it is that he is seeing in this photo. To the extent that other viewers experience *Extreme Caution* the way that Cohen did, in a manner that induces defamiliarization via the blurring of once distinct genres of documentary photography, reception of the photograph potentially raises the question: why does the housing crisis appear like a military raid on a house in Iraq? *Extreme Caution* tells us that armed police officers handled the housing crisis, and evictions more specifically, in a manner that makes those events visually indistinguishable from military occupations or crime scenes.

While *Migrant Mother* ideally allows the viewer to experience the fear of poverty while still inspiring a sense that action is possible, *Extreme Caution* does not. Instead of instilling a sense of duty to help, as is the case with *Migrant Mother*, *Extreme Caution* evokes a feeling of fear and uncertainty in the viewer. The image’s dark shadows and black-and-white tone make it feel like a crime documentary, which positions us as voyeurs passively watching action that is unfolding without us. The image does not feature an individual impacted by the housing crisis, portrayed in a manner that calls for public empathy, a recognition of others feelings and an attempt to understand those feelings, and assistance. Rather, it shows a police officer trying to
restore order at a property that has been reclaimed by the bank. The difference in the subjects depicted in the two photographs—persons undergo economic hardship and an armed police officer sweeping a foreclosed home—is perhaps the most significant visible distinction between *Migrant Mother* and *Extreme Caution* and indicative of a larger change in the way that economic struggle is covered in photojournalism in the early twenty-first century. We see a model of intervention based on the welfare state or government aid programs in *Migrant Mother*, whereas we see a law-and-order solution enacted in *Extreme Caution*. The title of the first photograph makes economic hardship about those suffering it. The title of the second photograph makes economic hardship about those managing it as a problem of disorder. In the first image, Lange depicts the photographic subject as a member of “the deserving poor.” In the second image, Suau documents how a police officer manages the risk of entering a potentially hostile territory. The first image asks us to identify with a representative of all those suffering economic hardship. The second image asks us to identify with a police officer who is concerned about squatters hiding in the rooms just off of the living room through which the officer moves as if he were conducting a drug bust.

While the World Press award is designed to recognize a powerful image, it does not mean that the image moved people emotionally or prompted them to political action. David Friend, the editor of creative development at Vanity Fair spoke to the British Photography Journal about this photo’s win. He commented

“it’s not an obvious winner. Part of the definition of the World Press award is that it should recognize a significant subject from the year. The world economic crisis is a very subtle subject to cover as a Photojournalist. One of the judges - photographer Olivier
Culmann - called it low intensity story photojournalism, it's difficult to take dramatic pictures. You have to read the caption to understand the photograph, but I think that's a positive.”

This observation is essential to understanding the significance of this photo. This photo is not an image that will haunt you throughout the day—unless, that is, you bother to read the caption.

Interestingly, the caption of this photo changed from when it was commissioned by Time Magazine, when it appear on Suau’s personal Webpage and when it was submitted for the World Press Photo award.

The Caption for Suau’s personal webpage read:

Delivering warning and final eviction notices Detective Robert Kole of the Cuyahoga County Sheriff’s Department enters every situation with caution. When the residents are at the home he must assure that all is final and that the home is clear of weapons and that the residents are indeed moving out. If no one is there, then he must authorize that the door be forcibly open. He then enters and clears the house at gunpoint in hopes that there are no squatters or inhabitants threaten himself or the movers [sic]. He also clears the house for weapons. All emotions and fears are on the surface as some residents greet him by crying on his shoulder while others can threaten him with a weapon.

The caption for TIME Magazine is very similar, but shortened for length: “When Detective Cole finds a home that is already abandoned or vacant, he enters with his weapon drawn, to guard

against squatters.” The caption from *Time* Magazine and on Suau’s personal website positioned the reader with the police officer. Its associations with the officer’s extreme caution and actions make the police officer the touchstone of the photograph. Only briefly is the potential occupant of the home mentioned (in the last line) by suggesting that residents “greet the officer differently.” We do not see the person who called this room home, instead we are only left to imagine how they respond to the officer’s eviction notice. The caption was updated for the World Press Photo award, to provide additional context about the crisis:

Detective Robert Kole of Cuyahoga County Sheriff’s Office enters a home in Cleveland, Ohio, following a mortgage foreclosure and eviction. He needs to check that the owners have vacated the premises, and that no weapons have been left lying around. Officers go in at gunpoint as a precaution, as many of the houses have been vandalized or occupied by squatters or drug addicts. Towards the end of 2007, the severity of losses to US banks incurred over sub-prime mortgages was beginning to emerge. In the first months of 2008, rising interest rates together with increasing unemployment and a slowdown in the housing market, meant that many borrowers could no longer afford payments on their homes. Banks involved in such debts were threatened with collapse. In the following months the financial crisis spread worldwide.

This caption explains the crisis in further detail, the first caption from *Time* didn’t even mention the financial crisis, foreclosure or sub-prime mortgages. The caption for the World Press Photo does more work to provide the context and background necessary for understanding this picture’s place in a larger historical moment. This makes sense on a practical level because the

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World Press Award photo typically goes to a photo that depicts a major event in the past year, so a caption modification to show the relevance of the photo is appropriate. However, the caption works to further secure the photo’s historical significance. The caption from *TIME* only indicates that the police officer was there for an eviction, an event that occurred before the housing crisis and has continued after the housing crisis. The significance of the eviction is that it was a regular occurrence during the housing crisis, the event became newsworthy because of the number of times it occurred. The captions are vital to understanding the image as an index of the magnitude of the problem pictured.

It is the argument of this thesis that the difference in the way that economic hardship appears across *Migrant Mother* and *Extreme Caution* can be explained, at least in part, by a paradigm shift in how U.S. society addresses economic crises, from the welfare state to neoliberalism. The difference in how these photographs address viewers can be explained by a corresponding shift in public culture, from sentimentality to austerity. The remainder of this chapter explores the parameters of the crisis, the shift from the welfare state to neoliberalism, and from sentimentality to austerity. These broad historical shifts make it difficult to tell the story of the housing crisis within a singular frame or via the rhetorical device of the individual aggregate or a sentimental public address. I read Suau’s work as innovating visual strategies for promoting civic address about economic hardship, while working within the historic and ideological confines of neoliberalism. I understand his photographs to be an effect of the neoliberal context in which he works. When read in isolation, the photos appear to justify neoliberal solutions to economic problems. But when read together, as a web of photographs, Suau’s sociological perspective provides information about a variety of different aspects of the
housing crisis and its varied human actors. Read as a collection, Suau’s photographs of the housing crisis invite a critical viewer to construct meaning across the images, piecing together otherwise isolated moments of neoliberal abandonment and control. It is up to the viewer to re-construct a narrative of the housing crisis by reading between the frames of individual photographs. The chapter concludes with driving questions for the project and a brief overview of the chapters.
The Pain of the Houses: Photographing the structures impacted by the housing crisis

The house sits quietly on the street. It looks rather unremarkable, yet at the same time, there is something happening within the frame that is visually stunning. Its windows are covered with plywood boards and the boards are decorated with graffiti. For sale signs are stapled to the upper and lower windows of the structure, clearly marking this house as available. The brick exterior appears aged and discolored. A tree droops its branches across the roofline, as if to hide the home from the view of judgmental onlookers. The trunk of the tree that fills the foreground of the photograph is affixed with a ‘For Sale’ sign. The details on this sign reveal that the property is being owner financed, meaning that a third-party financer, or mortgage broker, will not be necessary to purchase the property. The sign indicates that for only $500 down and $375 per month it can be yours. The camera captures the house from the street using a canted frame, which makes the house appear as if it is tipping over. It is an old, decrepit home in need of assistance. This house is captured in the photograph *Boarded Up* by Anthony Suau in his photo essay, “Struggling Cleveland.”

Like many other photojournalists documenting the housing crisis, Suau used the tactic of documenting the foreclosed houses as a way of putting a “face” on the issue. The housing crisis, and the Great Recession that followed, produced many photographs of houses left behind, abandoned, and boarded up. These images became a conventional way of representing the housing crisis in news reports and magazine articles. In Suau’s photo essay, about half of the images are related to the structures effected by the crisis. This chapter explores the way that Suau photographed the houses featured in his essay. I first explore the exterior shots of the houses, which allow a powerful emotional appeal through the individual aggregate. These
exterior shots are the most similar to previous images of economic struggle, as they focus on a subject that can be rehabilitated. Significantly, the subject of the photograph is a foreclosed home that deserves sympathy and care, rather than a person who lost his or her home, which helps distance viewers from the humans affected by the crisis. Second, I explore photographs taken from inside foreclosed properties, where the sympathy evoked by exteriors does not extend to the interiors of the structures. In this section, I show how foreclosed houses are protected and controlled by police and private security firms. Finally, I explore photographs taken at foreclosure auctions to explore how the houses were commodified and sold to the “winners” of the housing crisis: investors. Suau’s attention to each of these discrete moment’s in the economic cycle of the housing crisis repossension (foreclosed homes), management of properties (interiors brought under control), and the redistribution of properties (auctions)—reveals a webbed or sociological approach to the housing crisis. Viewers must read between the pictures in order to come away with a story about the crisis and the story available between frames operates at a structural, rather than an individual, level.

**Exteriors of Houses**

Suau understands himself as a documentary photographer. He has worked domestically and internationally covering times of crisis and war, winning a Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of famine in Ethiopia. His experience covering the housing crisis in Cleveland led him to rethink how his home country of the United States was being documented. Inspired by what he had seen, he helped found a non-profit collective of journalists called Facing Change: Documenting America (FCDA). The FCDA “is a non-profit organization inspired by the iconic photography of the Farm Security Administration (FSA).... mobilizing to document the critical issues facing our country,
creating a visual resource with the goal of raising social awareness, expanding public debate and creating an historic record in partnership with the Library of Congress.” While Suau has since left the collective, he is engaged in a contemporary photographic practice in the spirit of the mission of the FSA photographers.

The influence of the FSA photographs on Suau’s work comes through in his mode of civic address, or the emotional appeal of his photographs. FSA photographs, such as *Migrant Mother*, rely heavily on pathos, an appeal to emotion. *Migrant Mother* and other famous icons produce powerful responses in viewers in large part because they picture “the deserving poor.” As Lucaites and Hariman have argued, the photograph pictures individuals who might be helped through government aid programs funded with the tax dollars provided by their fellow citizens. These images allowed for well-meaning liberals to sympathize with the people impacted by economic hardship. I read Suau’s photographs of boarded up houses as mobilizing an emotional appeal not so different from the pathos of *Migrant Mother*. But in this case, we are invited to feel sympathy for the boarded-up house, or devastated neighborhood, rather than its former residents.

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In the photograph *Boarded Up* the house is pictured as the loser of the housing crisis. The photograph depicts the dilapidated house almost hiding from view, covered by plywood and a tree. Seeing the house as a loser allows for a powerful emotional connection between the viewer and the photograph. It allows the viewer to imagine the house and its history, character, and needs. Who lived in this house? When was it built? Has it ever been updated? What did it look like when it wasn’t run down? How many families called this place home? How long did they stay? The imagination is left to run wild. The house surely used to be a place of significance and refuge to people, but now sits empty, its secrets locked away. Importantly, this questioning of the house’s past, allows for a consideration of its future. It is this potential to “rescue” the house that becomes the strongest opportunity for an emotional connection with the image.

As I discussed in Chapter 1, the persuasive appeal of *Migrant Mother* was its combination of pathos with a sense that something could be done to ameliorate the sad situation pictured. Working with *Migrant Mother*, Hariman and Lucaites develop the concept of the individual aggregate to help explain this phenomenon in photographs. The individual aggregate functions because “the impetus for action comes from acting as if an aggregate were an individual.....They are neither individuals nor abstractions, neither everywoman and everyman nor specific persons
with names and stories, neither unique characters nor a literary type.” That is, the image needs to be specific enough that the viewer can recognize the subject, but not so specific that they are unable to make a generalization about the subject.

The images of the houses that Suau captures can also be read in terms of what Lucaites and Hariman have named the individual aggregate. That is, the house is specific enough for the viewer to recognize it as a particular structure, but generic enough for the viewer to draw a connection to the housing crisis, broadly conceived. Hariman and Lucaites write that the individual aggregate “always implies a specific direction for collective action.”

*Boarded Up* invites at least two primary readings. One is to recognize the structure as forsaken and therefore regrettable but not inspiring action. Or it might trigger the renovation bug popularized by HGTV, suggesting a forsaken structure in need of adoption and restoration to its former glory. Indeed, HGTV has premiered numerous programs in recent years, such as *Flip or Flop* and *My First Flip*, centered on buying abandoned and foreclosed homes and renovating them to meet modern aesthetic standards. In the second reading, the house comes to stand in for the humans impacted by the housing crisis and encourages gentrification rather than social aid programs. This house has fallen on hard times, but it could be restored and updated to current standards of beauty. The boards could be removed and replaced with new energy-efficient windows. The brick could be repaired and painted white to reflect a fresh, modern style. The tree could be trimmed and manicured to accentuate the house, rather than hide its features. In either case, human suffering is not part of the picture, nor the problem to be addressed. Rather, the problem

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34 Ibid, 89
of economic hardship appears as blight, which suggests new ownership, investment, and renovation as solutions. In other words, it is the dilapidated aesthetic of the house or neighborhood that makes us feel sad, rather than the persons displaced by the housing crisis.

Suau photographed boarded up houses individually and in rows. *Bad Block*, for example, gestures toward the scale of the housing crisis in a way that differs from the individual aggregate strategy. While the individual aggregate works by showing one person or house in the frame to represent the larger crisis, *Bad Block* attempts to show the widespread nature of the problem within the single frame. Suau documents one “bad block,” but the row of houses extends away from the viewer to a vanishing point in a manner that makes it feel like the abandoned houses could continue onto the next block. As I’ve discussed previously, widespread economic crises are not based on one house being in foreclosure, but rather thousands of houses. *Bad Block* shows an urban street with a series of row homes. The street is full of cracks and potholes and devoid of people. Melting snow and ice on the sidewalk adds a feeling of the bleakness and indeterminacy of winter. A lone truck is parked at the end of the street. The houses are dark and do not feature any signs of human activity or life. The image’s caption reads, “Every home on this street has been boarded up or abandoned.” The image depicts a forgotten and left behind (almost apocalyptic) street in the city. The image is reminiscent of photographs published in Dan Austin and Sean Doerr’s book *Lost Detroit: Stories*
Behind the Motor City’s Majestic Ruins which captures the decline of the city. Dora Apel has explored images of Detroit, suggesting that the continued decline of cities and documentary images of the ruins “feeds a pervasive cultural pessimism that foresees violent disintegration and collapse.” And indeed, Bad Block could be viewed from a pessimistic perspective, of capturing the last decline of these houses. While these house could be seen as capturing the decline, the viewer is also able to distance themselves by viewing the image outside of the current timeframe. What makes these photos so fascinating is that they don’t look like today, they look like the past. These photos highlight the temporality of our communities or how quickly a space for living can become a space of the past. It can be disheartening to watch a city in decline, but you can also begin to view the spaces from an outside perspective. Because these photographs look so different than what affluent viewers expect, it allows the privileged viewer to interact with images of poverty as if touring a “bad” neighborhood. The tourist looks quickly and perhaps with morbid curiosity or aversion, but most importantly without judgement because they are there to visually consume the sight/site and then leave.

The Bad Block photograph works the same way that nineteenth and twentieth photographs documenting poverty worked. Those images relied on a dual move of both othering the individuals pictured, while at the same time creating sympathy. For example, Migrant Mother showed a woman in a workers’ camp, not currently a “proper” member of society, and

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37 I choose to use sympathy here, not empathy. Empathy requires an understanding and an attempt to emotionally connect with the subject. Sympathy allows for the person to recognize the pain that the photographic subject is feeling without personally feeling such pain themselves. Sympathy occurs from a quick look that invites pity rather than empathy which invites understanding.
yet she has the potential to be “saved.” In the case of Bad Block, this street does not live up to the standards affluent viewers have for a residential street, and yet there is the potential for it to be restored. Just as documentary photographs of “the other half” framed those pictured for viewing by members of the middle class touring their presumed misery, Bad Block might read as a promise: this street would likely be altered if taken up by a flipper. This is the othering that occurs when looking at this photograph: a securely middle-class viewer sees this block as “bad” (as indicated by the title of photograph), and, therefore, in need of rehabilitation to promote the aesthetics of economic prosperity and financial fitness. Indeed, gentrification is a common side effect of renovating residential and commercial neighborhoods, while well-intentioned it often drives original families and cultures out of the neighborhood.

These dilapidated houses, rather than their former owners, are the real “losers” of the housing crisis: the poor, the neglected, the left behind. Previous scholars have done significant work on how human victims have been represented via indirection through depictions of buildings. Carrie A. Rentschler wrote about the Oklahoma City bombing, finding that memories of victims “appear to be concentrated around clusters of death’s magnitude while also residing in the physical, artefactual remnants of the bombings destroyed architecture.” That is, architecture and buildings have been used to represent victims of national traumas. However, these photos of the housing crisis do not just feature houses standing in for the victims, the houses are pictured as victimized without reference to their former owners.

Barbie Zelizer looked at how the twin towers were used to stand in for the victims of 9/11 because the buildings softened the response, by allowing “the sense that time might have thwarted death’s intention.” Zelizer describes two types of images to emerge in media coverage of 9/11: first-order and second-order about-to-die images. First-order about-to-die images literally showed individuals in the moment before death. These were the images of people jumping from the windows of the Twin Towers. These photographs quickly became unpopular in the public sphere because they were provocative and death was unavoidable when viewing the video stills. Thus, second-order images became more common, such as images of the Twin Towers collapsing. These images were more generally accepted to represent the trauma of 9/11 because they were less disturbing. The building provides a buffer by not showing human suffering or death. Second-order images allow the viewer to consider the implications without having to actually see human bodies in peril.

I think that photographs of the housing crisis can also be understood to function on a first-order and second-order, albeit with a significant difference. The result of the housing crisis is homelessness, and first-order images would show families being kicked out of their homes, moving in with relatives and friends, finding space in shelters, or living on the street. But second-order images capture the boarded-up houses left behind, such as Boarded Up or Bad Block. These second-order photographs make it easier for people to look at the housing crisis, as they don’t have to see the faces of the people affected, but can still feel saddened by the look of an abandoned house. It allows the viewer to shed responsibility and create distance. The house

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might ultimately be ignored, razed, or renovated. Its former residents do not appear within the frames of photographs of second-order images, instead depicting the housing crisis via the strategies of the individual aggregate or the vanishing point. Significantly, images of boarded-up houses and “bad” neighborhoods further obfuscate human suffering by severing the connection between the buildings pictured and the people affected altogether.

The Interior

Anthony Suau didn’t just capture the exteriors of these houses, he also documented what happened inside those exteriors. Whereas the exterior images of houses convey emotion and document structures in need of repair, the interior shots of foreclosed houses show destitute scenes that appear to require law-and-order solutions. The sympathy that was visible when looking at the exterior of the houses is not maintained when the viewer is permitted to peer inside.

Interior shots of homes are not commonly featured in “hard” news photographs. Rather, they tend to appear in the style and real estate sections of magazines and newspapers or as accompaniment to human-interest stories or biographical portraits of or interviews with important persons. For this reason, interior spaces of houses are not commonly photographed by photojournalists. It is more common for photojournalists to capture people in public settings. These people are out and about, participating in society and local events and thus considered to have given reasonable consent to being photographed. When it comes to covering crises such as natural disasters or war, photojournalists typically photograph people forced out of their homes, in temporary tent communities after being displaced from a nearby war, or running away from
danger. All of these images are captured in public or semi-public spaces, spaces the photographer could walk into without fear of being told that they don’t belong there. To photograph inside of a home requires permission. An invitation must be extended by the homeowner or by an authorized occupant. While it is possible to get into a house without this permission, it is not considered to be good journalistic practice. The *Extreme Caution* photo discussed in the introduction was taken from inside the house. In Chapter 1, I unpacked its meaning in a neoliberal context, but its significance for understanding interior shots of the housing crisis should not be understated.

Abandoned houses exist in a liminal space, marked by the uncertain period between home foreclosure and new ownership. As I argued in Chapter 1, this liminal period appears to call for regulation and control in the neoliberal context, as *Extreme Caution* demonstrates. During this period former residents might linger behind or come back to retrieve items. Or squatters and drug users might seize on the liminal status of these properties to seek temporary refuge. The fact that Suau photographs the interior of the abandoned houses alongside a police officer should not be overlooked. The police are acting as an intermediary, attempting to restore order and control at the property, and this police action grants Suau access to the interiors of foreclosed homes. *Extreme Caution* positions the viewer with the police officer through the image, title, and caption. The photograph is focused on the police officer, and our eye follows his gun toward the next room. The title, *Extreme Caution*, suggests the disposition that the police officer should have when entering the home, and the caption tells the story of what the officer is doing and why. What is able to appear in the photos and what is not allowed to appear is dictated, in part, by the police officer’s charge. Suau, embedded himself with the police officer
for the day. The practice of journalistic embedding, especially in war zones, has been criticized because it limits and influences the way that journalists understand and cover the situation. No doubt Suau’s photograph would have been very different if he had been invited into the home by a squatter.

The photograph features a police officer securing the property with his weapon drawn in the final step of an eviction. Unlike the photographs of the houses I described above, this is not a sympathetic photo. It invites viewer identification with the police officer as a manager of disorder. It communicates uncertainty, caution, and power. The police officer works to reestablish order as various items and trash left behind by previous owners and/or looters cover the floor. The dark doorways emphasize the uncertainty and tension in the air as the police officer works to establish dominance over the situation. The viewer can feel the fear and uncertainty that the officer faces as he approaches the next dark room. All of this dramatic tension is achieved via the suggestion that the property is potentially inhabited by vaguely dangerous persons, without alluding to the former residents of the house, per se.

The type of control communicated by *Extreme Caution* is distinct from that displayed in another photo from the collection. *Security* features a house that is geographically and economically distinct from the house in *Extreme Caution*. *Extreme Caution* is an urban home located in close proximity to other houses. In contrast, the house in *Security* is valued at over $300,000, according to the caption, and appears to be in a suburban environment, where the houses are on larger lots and have ample yard space between them. The photograph shows a large kitchen with an island, large windows and a sliding glass door to let in the natural light and a brick fireplace on the far wall. While *Extreme Caution* feels dark and mysterious, *Security* is
bright and glossy. The trash and abandoned items visible in Extreme Caution are not present in Security, which features clean floors and barren, freshly painted walls. But make no mistake, this property is in foreclosure. And there is a man standing near the window in the living room to ensure the property’s safety for the bank that now owns it.

The man is dressed in a rather unremarkable light colored dress shirt with dark pants. From the caption, we learn that the man is employed by a private security company, Safegaurd Properties, to “keep homes like this one from being vandalized or damaged.” His job is to protect high-end foreclosures as bank investments. The private security guard is completing a similar task to the police officer in Extreme Caution, ensuring that the foreclosed property is safely vacant. However, their difference in approach and technique illustrate different working assumptions about urban and suburban houses and neighborhoods. While the urban home required an agent of the law in uniform to enter the house with his gun drawn, the suburban home features a private contractor in business casual clothing providing a presence at the property and looking out for trouble. The differences in dress, stance and occupation are significant. The suburban house is worth more monetarily, and thus is deserving of increased attention from a private firm to ensure its value is not lost. And such security can be done in a subtle way, so that the neighbors living nearby might not even
notice. One might speculate that these differences also reflect distinct approaches to the policing of predominantly black and predominantly white spaces in the United States.

While both of these photographs show very different types of houses, they do help demonstrate the ways that interior, private spaces can be captured during times of economic crisis. But in capturing the space, the imperative of control becomes apparent. The interiors of these properties are to be tamed, managed, and secured. In both photographs, an external actor has been called in to help mediate the process of the property changing ownership. In an ideal sale of a house, the seller and buyer exchange keys at a loan closing appointment or after funds have been transferred. The new owner and the previous owner, or their realtors and mortgage brokers, are able to facilitate the transfer of ownership seamlessly. However, when a foreclosure occurs, there is a time lag. The previous owner is no longer able to secure and live in the home, thus leaving the home vulnerable until the bank can find a new buyer for the house. This lag-time necessitates a third party to come in and mediate the period between private owners. While the bank deals with the financial end of selling a foreclosed property (more on this momentarily), the police or private security firms are necessary to maintain order and control of the house itself.

The Auctions

In a neoliberal context, solutions to a problem are either based on law-and-order solutions or money and finances (i.e., “let the housing market solve it”). While police secured the houses as they transitioned between owners, housing auctions helped facilitate the transfer of the properties to new owners. The auctions allow banks to sell the houses for less than their
actual value in order to cover the delinquent mortgage taken out on the property. These auctions have grown in popularity since Suau first documented them in 2008. Housing auctions are a popular place for flippers, as they can buy run-down houses on the cheap, renovate them, and make a profit when reselling the home after a short time period. Several popular television shows, such as *Flip or Flop* and *My First Flip*, have been created following people who take on these flipping projects. One of their most successful shows, *Flip or Flop*, is based around a married couple, Tarek and Christina El Moussa, that used to be realtors. After the housing market crashed, they started a new business flipping houses in Southern California. They buy incredibly cheap houses, sometimes at auctions and other times direct form the seller. Many of these houses are abandoned when they purchase them, requiring a lot of renovation to make them desirable places to live. In just a 30-minute episode the home is transformed and sold for a typically hefty profit.

While the show is centered on the houses, there is no mention of who owned the house previously, nor who will purchase the home from the El Moussa’s. They make “generic” design choices that would appeal to a majority of potential buyers. Programs like *Flip or Flop* help to normalize the harsh realities of the housing crisis. Instead of considering the ramifications of subprime mortgages and their impacts on families, these programs allow viewers to comfortably sit back and watch the house be transformed. This type of programming is in stark contrast to other home renovation shows, such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, which is focused on volunteerism and designing a personalized home for a “well-deserving” family. *Flip or Flop* is not about a deserving family getting a new home, instead it is about the profits one couple can make renovating foreclosed properties. Programs that focus on flipping foreclosed homes
unquestioningly embrace neoliberal solutions to the crisis. In a neoliberal context, markets and individuals are valued above the community, and programs like *Flip or Flop* show the market slowly, but surely, working to fix the abandoned homes created by the housing crisis.

Suau documented a housing auction held in Cleveland in March 2008 that was organized by the Cleveland Police Department. The auction being organized by the police department is a complete blending of neoliberal solutions. The photograph entitled *Auction* shows a collection of people with various papers and file folders at a table. The table creates a barrier between the buyers and the officials managing the auction. One buyer points at the document a woman has pulled out and set on the table. They appear to be trying to communicate about a property. The tables look generic and temporary, or easily taken down and rearranged for the next event in this conference center. The overhead recessed florescent lights on the ceiling are visible, as is the accordion divider, currently collapsed to allow for a larger space. This space is filled with the activity and bustle of the auction, but the following day the room will be reconfigured to accommodate a new group. The people pictured in the images of the auction are mostly white.
From a cynical perspective, the auction participants are looking to make a profit off of the misfortunes of others. Naomi Klien has called this “disaster capitalism,” where a disaster is used to promote market solutions or entrench the class system.\footnote{Naomi Klien, \textit{The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism}, Macmillan, 2007.} This house would not be so cheap had a different family not defaulted on their subprime mortgage. What is most striking about the housing auctions is that they are bureaucratic and cold. There is nothing personal about the auction pictured in the photos from Suau. The auctions take place away from the actual homes, and far from what we can see. Many don’t even include pictures of the properties, only numbered details like the house number and street, number of bedrooms and baths. In \textit{Studying}, a lone businessman stares at a wall with the “reads,” the list of properties that will be up for auction that day. Here the houses have literally been reduced to a line of text that can help the buyers to distance themselves from the people who previously owned these houses. Indeed, Suau shoots this prospective buyer from a distance that creates a sense of alienation between the viewer and the man pictured. The emotion and character of the houses evident in the photographs of the homes discussed at the beginning of this chapter fall away in the photographs of the auctions. Instead, the photographs feel distant and unremarkable. They capture a systematized process, one that is meant to restore order and
ownership to the abandoned properties. The anonymity of the process makes this version of disaster capitalism palatable for its practitioners and perhaps also for viewers, or maybe not if they draw lines of connection between Studying and Extreme Caution.

The auction is a temporary event: here today, gone tomorrow. The generic quality of the event makes clear the temporary nature of the function. The conference space almost functions like a temporary store front. There is nothing fancy about the occasion, just the bare minimum in terms of the logistics needed to conduct business. There is something kind of tawdry about it, almost shameful. The event is asking to not be remembered, to be taken down and forgotten. But Suau is there, to capture the visual details of the auction with his camera. His photographs expose the ineffectual and anonymous character of an event that lasted for a mere day. The event seems to want to make the practices of disaster capitalism less visible by hosting the event in a temporary and stale environment that can be easily cleaned up and interchanged for the next temporary event. Yet Suau’s photographs bring the cold, florescent-lit reality to visibility and keep it visible long after the event is over.

The investors who bought houses at the auction could be interpreted as the “winners” of the housing crisis. They profited from the misfortunes of others. Investors were not the only profiteers of misfortune. Later in 2009, many real estate companies started hosting “Foreclosure Tours,” where potential buyers could ride a bus around town to visit the foreclosed properties available for sale. Again, what makes this “winning” possible and palatable is the distance created between the those foreclosed upon and future buyers. Investors never have to face the people who previously lived in these properties. They look on from the safe distance and enclosed space of the bus, touring devastated neighborhoods like so many hungry vultures.
Emotion and Photographs

While these images from Suau help us to understand the housing crisis more completely, they also work hard to remove those adversely affected from the scene. Other photographers after Suau worked to document the items left behind at foreclosed properties, as a way of alluding to the people who previously occupied the homes. David H. Wells started documenting the housing crisis in his 2009 photo essay, “Foreclosed Dreams: Empty Homes and Foreclosed Dreams Across America,” which was featured in numerous news outlets.41 Wells’ photographs function differently than Suau’s, using a different mode of civic address. Wells’ works to cultivate a sentimental public by showing the human items left behind by families. I’d like to briefly look at two of Wells’ photographs. The first photograph (figure 8) taken by Wells is focused around a birthday card that has been left behind on a wooden table or dresser. The camera is positioned looking down at the card, a perspective similar to if the viewer was actually standing in the house. The card is signed by two people and reads: “Happy Birthday Mom We luv you!!!
Jim and Debra” To the left side of the dresser, a swath of the floor and part of an arm chair is visible. The floor is slightly out of focus, but the viewer can make out a large amount of items left behind. A laundry basket and a sofa chair are the most distinguishable items on the floor. The items on the floor

work to remind the viewer that the house was abandoned quickly and without regard to taking every item. Like an image of a ghost town, the items left behind suggest that the former residents left in a hurry and didn’t have the luxury of coming back. But the card on the wooden surface works to humanize the previous owners via an emotional appeal. It provides clues about the people who previously called this structure home. There was a family with a mother, and they celebrated birthdays. They got each other greeting cards. All of these details help to make the family seem familiar and relatable and, therefore, worthy of empathy.

The second photograph (figure 9) also allows the viewer to draw their own conclusions about the family that previously lived in the house, but it takes a slightly different perspective and functions like a critically reflexive family portrait. The shot is taken almost at ground level, with the camera very close to the floor. The linoleum floors of the home are scuffed and stained. In the foreground is a print of a family picture, with four kids posed in a studio. Its edges are faded and tattered. A single flip flop is in the middle of the frame, behind it an Advil bottle knocked over on its side. Behind these three items is a larger collection of things left behind that almost fades into the background. While the people who previously called this place home are not actually in the picture, a print of them is, and the items left behind function as clues about the previous owners and their use of the space. The casual
disregard of a family portrait left on the floor with so many other unnecessary items alludes to wider social disregard for families affected by the housing crisis.

David Wells told the *New York Times*, “I stay away from people on purpose.....I think keeping it anonymous let’s people put more of their own ideas about home and what they would do in these circumstances into the picture.”42 The pictures from Wells offer an emotional appeal. They encourage viewers to feel empathy for the family that previously lived in these foreclosed homes by placing viewers among the items left behind in the rush to meet the charge to vacate the premises. The various items left behind and the manner in which they are arranged invite study and speculation. Who were the people who lived here? What did they do for work or for fun? How much time did the family have to get out of the house? Where did they go next? The process of asking these unanswerable questions allows viewers to empathize with the family. These photographs are filled with emotion not because of the people they show, which might trigger a sense of pity, but rather through the emphasis on the house as the setting in which its former residents had to scramble to get out on time. His photographs are reminiscent of the forensic perspective in disaster photography, which captures abandoned items and uses them as traces that help capture the life of the people who called these structures home. His photos are less emotionally and physically distant than Suau’s photographs. They provide viewer’s with an opportunity to contemplate what eviction feels like for families who have lost their homes to subprime lending practices.

Wells’s photos capture both a different moment of the crisis and also a different mode of civic address from Suau’s. It should not be overlooked that Wells’ photographs are taken over a year later than Suau’s, which might account for the more nostalgic feel of these images. Further, Wells is working to cultivate a sentimental public, one that empathizes with the families that once called these structures home. However, their sentiments are mobilized without the chance of helping because these images are taken long after these families have left. These photos do a good job of cultivating empathy for displaced residents, but there is nothing that can be done after viewing these photos except to feel sad, sorry, or outraged.

By contrast, Suau’s photographs are not based on emotional appeals. His perspective is not experiential. Rather, it is sociological. Suau’s photos work to tell the story of the housing crisis in networked moments that are often overlooked, and/or treated as disconnected from one another. The liminal status of a foreclosed home makes it often overlooked, but Suau works to show the exterior, the interior and the way the house is purchased by the investor. All too often we only see the image of the abandoned house without pictures of the interior spaces. Or we see the auction, but not the houses themselves, as they get reduced to lines of text on an auction spreadsheet. Taken together, Suau’s images begin to help viewers understand what happens to a house after its owner is evicted. This work is narrative and documentary, attempting to help the viewer gain a more complete understanding of foreclosure, repossession, and sale as a process for redistributing properties up the financial ladder.
Chapter 3

Seeing the People Impacted: Civic Relationality in economic crisis

An African-American couple gathers around a dining room table, but not to eat a meal. The dining room table is haphazardly covered with papers. The couple, Reginald and Michelle, are looking for a document regarding their tax abatement. The man, Reginald, fills the right half of the frame and is shot in profile in medium-close up range. His wife, Michelle, works at the other end of the table. He flips through a stack of papers, resting the ones he’s already viewed on his chest. His face is studious and focused as he attempts to find the proper documentation. She holds a collection of documents in her right hand, while inspecting a different document currently in her left hand. Behind Michelle is a doorway leading into what appears to be the family’s kitchen. Natural light floods into the dining room from the kitchen. Also visible is the house thermostat in the middle of the wall. This is the Paperwork photograph from Antony Suau’s “Struggling Cleveland” photo essay.

This is not an exciting photograph, but it is familiar and relatable. This photograph shows the everyday interaction that people have with bureaucracy. Most people have experienced this moment before, the moment where you’re searching for the one right form or document needed to accomplish what you want or need to do to maintain good standing with a particular
business or organization. It is this familiarity that helps viewers connect with the subjects in the photograph, despite its rather mundane composition.

**Visual Recession**

While the housing crisis was a major public event, I have not found any scholarship specifically on the photography of the housing crisis. However, in their new book, *The Public Image*, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites explore the way that photography can be used to understand “the world as it is observed and imagined within a modern society.” Specifically, they are interested in how photographs can capture the ways that the world is changing. The authors explore one image of a female impacted by the housing crisis, who has just been evicted and removed from her home. Her belongings are littered on the front lawn and a Ford Explorer with a trailer is parked on the street. The woman is shot in profile but from a long distance. Her face is invisible behind her long hair, which is swept forward at a dramatic angle by what appear to be high winds, given the angle of her stance and some trees in the background. Pictured thus, the woman appears to be at the mercy of forces larger than herself.

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Hariman and Lucaites make several important observations about this image which bear repeating here. First, for an image of poverty, this photograph does not portray a lack of items which we commonly associate with poverty. They note, “the focus is on dispersion rather than insufficient accumulation.” Thus, the interesting thing about the photograph is not the lack of items, but rather the way that the items have been arranged on the lawn by the eviction crew. I would point out that much of the imagery coming out of the FSA project featured migrants moving and camping with their belongings out-of-doors. Thus this picture of poverty is not as unique as might be suggested. Second, Hariman and Lucaites describe the woman as exasperated, unable to do anything except turn her back to the wind and look at her trash bag. I find analysis like this to be disempowering to the photographic subject and insincere. The photograph is one frame of one moment where the photographic subject braces herself against the wind. It is a moment of pause. This photograph is different than others that Hariman and
Lucaites have explored in the past, in part because it’s not iconic, but more because the photographic subject is obscured. The hair covering this woman’s face makes the image visually eloquent and powerful, and yet it also appears ambiguous and confusing. The lack of detail that can be captured from the photographic subject leaves the viewer to find visual interest elsewhere, notably in the items cluttering the front yard. It seems dangerous to attribute any intention to the woman, since there is no guarantee that as soon as the photograph was taken she was not placing items in the trash bag. This woman functions as a subject of history, but because the viewer is unable to see the details of her face or interpret her actions, she remains somewhat inaccessible. Perhaps this led Hariman and Lucaites to write “Recession may require not only cutting back on luxuries but also cutting back on visual extravagance of dramatic action shots, decisive moments, and iconic images.”

Hariman and Lucaites present the idea of a visual recession; that is, when times get tough, the photos get less interesting and contain less dramatic moments. I have no doubt that context (such as the recession) influences the ways that photographs are both made and received, a concept I explored extensively in chapter one. However, I find it imprudent to dismiss the photos as lacking visual interest simply because of the context of the Great Recession or because they doesn’t measure up to a standard that Hariman and Lucaites have previously identified as a marker of a powerful image. Instead of evaluating the eloquence of the image by reference to a rather narrow set of standards, I suggest exploring images taken during times of economic hardship in terms of whether and how they can help us understand relationships

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between the viewers and photographic subjects, or what Azoulay has called the “civil contract of photography.”45 By modeling relations between photographic subjects and viewers, documentary photographs can reveal insights into how the economic crisis is understood in its historical context. This chapter explores the way that Suau creates the conditions for civic relationality between his photographic subjects and viewers of his images. I argue that Suau’s photographs create the possibility of civic relationality through choices the photographer makes in terms of the framing, composition, and content of his photos. Understanding the way that civic relationality was established through the photographs provides an opportunity to consider mundane or ordinary images as still containing drama. I draw on Kenneth Burke’s pentad to explain how human drama can be accessed beyond the confines of a singular photographic frame.

Civic Relationality in Photographs

Megan Foley’s work on the housing crisis is foundational for how I understand visual representations of the people impacted by the housing crisis.46 Foley explores the way that risk and responsibility were rhetorically constructed during the housing crisis. In early public discourse of the crisis, she writes, homeowners were depicted as “childish, incompetent citizens unable to measure up to their economic and civic obligations...the mainstream media exhorted delinquent borrowers to take responsibility for missed loan payments.”47 However, as the crisis unfolded and its impact became larger, a recognition of the subprime mortgage crisis as a

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systemic problem emerged. The realization that many sub-prime mortgages were targeted at minority and poor communities lead to the realization that “the subprime mortgage crisis was fueled by institutionalized racism unchecked by regulatory oversight.” This realization required a reconsideration of the homeowners as responsible, and resulted in the troubled child metaphor being applied instead to the banking institutions, notably Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Foley writes “as this metaphor of economic infantilization shifted, so too did the rhetorical attribution of responsibility for the mortgage crisis.”

As Foley aptly points out, there is a moment of transition between viewing the borrowers as responsible for their own suffering to the culpability of banking institutions in the crisis at large. Suau’s photographs, captured in March 2008, are taken in this moment of transition that Foley identifies. The transition from blaming individuals to blaming the financial institutions happened later in 2008, after Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac failed. But as I pointed out in chapter 1, the crisis was understood at the end of 2007, and its magnitude expanded in 2008 as the impacts tipped into the Great Recession. Thus, the people impacted by the crisis in Suau’s photos almost carry a double burden of representation. They are simultaneously responsible for their situation but also beginning to be seen as victims of circumstance. All photographs represent a moment of pause, a singular moment forever frozen in a singular frame. This is what leads Azoulay to suggest that “watching” a photograph is more ethical than “looking” at a photograph, because it acknowledges the life that the photographic subjects are leading both before and after the camera’s shutter clicks. The photographs of the housing crisis from Suau

48 Ibid, 393.
49 Ibid, 394.
certainly represent a moment of pause in the subject’s lives, but they also represent a pause in the larger narrative of the US housing crisis as it was unfolding, and a significant moment of transition in terms of the attribution of blame.

Suau’s photographs document this larger transitional moment, revealing how civic relationality is cultivated (or not) in documentary photographs of economic hardship. By civic relationality I mean way that the viewer understands and connects to the photographic subject, the result of the “civil contract of photography” that Azoulay defines.\(^5^0\) Traditionally, photographers have used pathos—an emotional appeal—and empathy—the ability to imagine oneself in another’s situation—to connect photographic subjects and viewers of images. This can be true even in cases where the photographic subjects are not pictured, as is the case with the photographs of the items left behind by former home owners in David H. Wells photographs discussed in Chapter 2. Emotional appeals become even more powerful when the person impacted by the crisis appears within the picture.

Suau’s images of the housing crisis use emotion differently than past photographs of economic hardship. In Chapter 1, I unpacked how *Extreme Caution* evokes uncertainty and fear in the viewer and positions them with the police officer in stark contrast to an image like *Migrant Mother*. In Chapter 2, I looked at houses pictured as subjects deserving of sympathy, similar to *Migrant Mother*, on the surface of things, but, I argued, sympathy for houses rather than people is indicative of a neoliberal context because it highlights market-based solutions to the problem of houses that appear abandoned rather than foreclosed upon. I explored the cold and generic

nature of the photographs of the auctions, which allowed viewers to distance themselves from the houses and people. I used Barbie Zelizer’s concept of first-order and second-order about-to-die images to consider the abandoned houses as a second-order image of the housing crisis. I made the observation that second-order images of the housing crisis make no allusion to former residents. In this chapter, I explore Suau’s photographs of people at risk of losing their homes and/or people already displaced. Suau shoots the people affected by the housing crisis without resorting to pathos or endeavoring to make empathic appeals to viewers. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in exploring how civic relationality can be cultivated in photographs that do not mobilize primarily emotional appeals.

To more fully unpack how this civic relationality can be created beyond an emotional framework, I need to step back momentarily to discuss the first word of that phrase, civic. To be writing about civic relationality, I assume that the viewer relates to the photographed subject in some way, but I also assume that the relation is from one citizen to another, or from one version of citizenship to another, given that citizenship is not a universal experience and a person’s citizenship status can change over time. As this chapter explores, civic relationality does not need to be expressed as an emotional connection. There are many additional ways that civic relationality can be formed, and all bring with them different opportunities for judgement. Civic relationality based on empathy happens by recognizing difference but trying to imagine what it is like for the other person. Civic relationality based on pity is established by difference but instead of feeling for the other person, one feels pity toward the person and a condescending attitude is

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taken. All of these civic relationalities require engagement, an acknowledgment that there are other people with experiences different from the viewers’. The way that the viewer chooses to engage allows for, or closes down, the opportunity for different types of judgment or understanding.

I understand those impacted by the housing crisis to fit the “flawed citizen” title that Ariella Azoulay described. She writes,

...flawed citizens are more exposed than ‘proper’ citizens to hazards and risks, and their vulnerability is systemic....the disaster that strikes such groups is conceived as part of routine, not as an exceptional event, and the situation is emptied of an dimension of urgency.52

I view the people impacted by the housing crisis as flawed citizens because they were often targeted for sub-prime mortgages, a systemic problem. The communities and populations targeted for sub-prime lending practices were largely people of color living in poorer communities.53 The housing crisis was not immediately seen as an exceptional event, it was only understood as a massive crisis after it was understood to be affecting not only those readily dismissed as flawed citizens but also the entire global community: “The Great Recession.”

Azoulay is interested in people who exist as flawed or non-citizens for extended periods of time, particularly female Israeli’s and Palestinians. A homeowner’s or renter’s status as a flawed citizen is temporary and can be rectified if that individual or family is able to secure new and stable

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housing. While there are certainly government policies that make it advantageous to own a home, the status of being a non-homeowner is largely a problem of social standing. Society, at least in the United States, values and promotes home ownership as a marker of success. Thus, while those directly impacted by the housing crisis can be understood as flawed citizens, their full citizen status might be reclaimed if they change their relationship with the society by securing housing and stability, a feature that is not possible with Azoulay’s application of the term to Israeli women or Palestinians. However, given that the housing crisis disproportionately affected people of color and poor people based on institutionalized patterns of racism and classism, flawless citizenship status may be harder to come by for members of these communities regardless of their status as homeowners or former homeowners.

And, yet, it is the photographic subjects’ temporary status as a flawed citizens that has the potential to make civic relationality between those subjects and viewers of their images fraught, yet potentially powerful. Because the viewer can imagine, or fear, that they too could end up in a situation like this. Barbara Ehrenreich notes the impactful way that the middle class is an organizing principle of American identity. She writes that there is “...a tendency to see the middle class as a universal class, a class which is everywhere represented as representing everyone.”\textsuperscript{54} So most of the viewers of Suau’s photos are likely to assume a middle-class status. Importantly, this middle class is constantly afraid of falling to a lower class rank. Ehrenreich writes,

it [the middle class] is insecure and deeply anxious...it is afraid....there is another anxiety:
a fear of inner weakness...of failing to strive of losing discipline and will....Whether the
middle class looks down toward the realm of less, or up toward the realm of more, there
is fear, always, of falling.55

That is, the middle class is always aware of the precarity of their status. The photos of the
housing crisis look down at the realm of less, allowing the viewer to see those who have become
flawed citizens because they are no longer homeowners. The anxiety that the middle class feels
may prompt viewers to avert their eyes so as to avoid even the suggestion of falling, or it may
help to create civic relationality in the empathic mode.

Before I unpack the difference in the way that Suau’s photographs construct civic
relationality in the empathic mode and without resorting to pathos, I want to briefly explore the
work of Adres Kudacki, whose photographs were featured in TIME Magazine in 2015 and at the
Visa Pour l’Image photojournalism festival in Perpignan, France in 2015. The photographs
document the housing crisis in Spain from 2013-2015. While there are significant differences
between the US housing Crisis and the Spanish crisis, this project does not allow me the space to
fully explore those differences. By providing a comparative analysis of these photos, I am merely
trying to explore how other modern photographers have covered similar economic problems
through different modes of address than Suau’s and to learn by comparison what is unique to
Suau’s approach.

Kudacki covered the evictions as they happened and in the moments shortly thereafter. He was on site at the houses or apartment buildings when the eviction notices were delivered and/or enforced. Kudacki captures the dispossessed in moments of despair and emotion that allow the viewer to empathize with the photographic subject. While all of Kudacki’s photographs display these qualities, I will briefly describe two of them to highlight the way that civic relationality can be created through empathy. Of course, this empathy is open to interpretation of the viewer, with the potential to relate to the photographic subject but also for the potential to other them. The photos have the potential of being seen as voyeuristic, capturing a dramatic moment that would otherwise be inaccessible.

The first photograph (figure 12) captures a middle-aged woman crying as her family is evicted from their home. The emotional despair is apparent on her face, but also through her hands, which are outstretched as if looking for something to grab ahold of for stability. The woman is being comforted, or perhaps moved to a different location, by another woman in the photograph who has grabbed her upper arm. Behind the woman is an open door which shows two people walking past the home. This photograph is dramatic because of the action that is happening in the frame. Unlike the image of the windswept woman about which Hariman and Lucaites write, this image gives us full, frontal access to the face and body of a woman wracked with grief. The photograph is shot in close proximity to the subject, allowing her
emotions to be captured in crisp detail. From the caption, viewers learn that she is being forcibly evicted from her home.

The image above features a woman still in her home, but on the receiving end of orders to vacate the property. Kudacki also photographed people after evictions to show how they responded to their precarious situations. In Spain, many of these individuals stayed outside of their houses because they had nowhere to go after being forcibly evicted from their homes. Camping outside their homes, former residents are photographed surrounded by all of the belongings they were able to remove from their homes before the police sealed the doors. In one photograph, Kudacki captures a father and daughter waking up outside their former home (figure 13). At first glance, this photo does not appear to be taken outside because the two figures are surrounded by domestic furnishings and objects. The girl is asleep on a bed, her face burrowed into the pillow and her body covered by blankets. Her father sits on the edge of the bed in a posture of despondency, shielding his face with one hand and propping himself up with the other. In this way, the photographic subject refuses to give the photographer full access. Instead of his grief being on full display as in the first image, the man shields himself from the photographer’s (and viewers’) gaze. The embarrassment that this father feels is evident from his expression and may...
help the viewer to empathize with his situation. Even without the caption, this photograph works to make the viewer feel empathy for a family in this situation. Empathy is created not through the promise of total access to these individuals, but through the subjects’ gestures and positions. The caption reinforces that these are people deserving of empathy, as they are in the process of waking up “outside of their former home.”

But empathic appeals are not the only way to create civic relationality. Suau’s photographic subjects reveal a different model of civic relationality. I do not intend to claim that Suau’s photographs are devoid of emotion, but that emotion functions differently than in photos like Kudacki’s. Suau’s work allows civic relationality to be created on a foundation other than empathy. The viewer can imagine: what if I were in their situation, but this imaginative effort is not primarily emotional. Rather, it locates opportunities for connection in the logistics and practices of preventing home foreclosure, finding shelter if ousted from one’s home, and relying on community resources to learn how to advocate for one’s self and one’s family. Empathy derived from the concrete circumstances and practices depicted, rather than the emotional displays of photographic subjects positions those subjects as earnest, agentic, and subject to the broader political and economic circumstances in which they are struggling to sustain themselves and their families. This way of picturing those directly impacted by the housing crisis suggests that there is a systemic explanation for their predicaments.

The Simple Reality
Suau’s photographs of the people impacted by the crisis do not create civic relationality through an emotional appeal in the photographic frame. Rather, they promote understanding
and judgment through the details provided in the captions, relying on viewers’ knowledge of the context, and the co-creation of meaning across different photographs. In this case, civic relatiornality is created through the establishment of a shared understanding of the constraints within which civic actors and organizations work to ameliorate their situations, rather than through sharing in the feeling of the experience captured. Just like Kudacki, Suau also photographed homelessness. Homelessness is not a problem that is unique to a housing crisis, however it is a very direct result of it. As such, the captions help ground the photographs in the events. The captions help remind the viewer that the subject is homeless as a direct result of the housing crisis. Suddenly Homeless shows a father, Darin, and his two daughters: Denise, who is 20 years old, and an infant daughter who is not named in the caption, in the office of Catholic Charities Emergency Center. The family is bundled up in their winter hats and coats, necessary for the Cleveland winter. The photograph itself is visually cluttered, the desk is covered with various items, a printer and additional files sit along the back wall and a single chair is visible to the right of the family. The walls are bare except for a small Catholic Charities sign and a grass doll. The room is rather unassuming, an ordinary office with no personal embellishments. Darin, the father, is holding his infant daughter and comforting his older daughter by putting his hand on her shoulder. She grips the stroller that is holding some of their belongings.

Because the image is shot from a distance, the viewer is denied close-up access to the photographic subjects faces, which might encourage empathic identification. Instead, the photographic subjects are pictured as being processed by Catholic Charities Emergency Center. If viewers want to know more about their story, they must consult the caption. From the caption, viewers learn that this family paid their rent on time. It was their landlord who defaulted on the
mortgage on the apartment building in which they were living, which resulted in his tenants being ousted from the property. The caption also reveals that the family has just learned that they will have to be split up in order to enter the shelter system: Darin will go to a men’s shelter, and Denise and the infant daughter will go to a women’s shelter. Through the caption the viewer begins to understand the unforgiving logistics of homelessness. The viewer may be unfamiliar with the practices of entering a homeless shelter, not realizing that families can be split up along gender lines. This realization has the potential to prick the viewer into a fuller and perhaps more poignant recognition of the family’s situation.

Suau also documented the family at a hotel that same evening. After spending time in the Catholic Charities office, where they learned they would be separated, the family was obviously upset. As the caption indicates but the photograph does not reveal, Denise, the older daughter, was crying. As a result, Catholic Charities paid for the family to have one night together in a hotel room. Suau captured them sitting in the hotel lobby, an ATM visible in the background. He titled the image Reprieve, which captures the feeling Darin likely has as his
young daughter sleeps on his chest. It seems significant to me that the photo essay includes both images of the Roseberry family: one as they learned hard news that they would be split up, and another in a quiet moment before the harsh reality hits. While Catholic Charities requires them to be split up into separate shelters, the organization offered the short-term reprieve of a night together at a hotel. Often the bureaucracy seems too big and too complicated for humane solutions to be reached. But here we see a case in which a private charity acknowledged the unintended cruelty of its rules of operation. This short reprieve is granted not by the neoliberal state, but instead by a private, religious charity, which provides an indication of the neoliberal context in which the Roseberry family must find ways of sustaining itself.

The story of an eviction does not end after the police officer has cleared the house. For the dispossessed, the story continues. These two photographs document what an eviction actually looks like after renters leave their property. And the two photographs work together, allowing the viewer to read between the images to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the logistics of homelessness in a neoliberal era. But these photographs lack the emotional weight and drama compared to Kuracki’s photographs. Why?

Both Suddenly Homeless and Reprieve are shot from quite a distance from the subjects. While Kuracki gets close up and documents the crisp details on their faces and/or hands, Suau steps back and captures the mundane details of the setting. Much like the setting of the auctions discussed in Chapter 2 the photos at the Catholic Charities office and the hotel are banal and ordinary. There is not much detail on the walls and the florescent lights provide an artificial sense of brightness. The locations look temporary, and, for the Roseberry family, these spaces are temporary. The office serves as a liminal space to rest for a moment while they figure out
their next place to sleep. So does the hotel, where they experienced a brief respite. Suau captures the in-betweeness of being homeless. Instead of focusing on the emotional drama, which can be found in the captions, his photographs highlight the settings in which the drama occurs. The captions still allow for an emotional connection with the family, but the photographs themselves encourage an understanding of the logistics of the situation. Understanding the logistics still creates a civic relationality between the viewer and the subject, but it is based on a different premise, coordination and details (how it functions) instead of emotions and feelings (how it feels). A civic relationality based on emotion can result in empathy or, alternatively, pity. However, when the civic relationality is based on the logistics, there is less of an opportunity for a value judgement to be made, instead inviting understanding. Instead of feeling bad or sympathetic toward photographic subjects in pictures of homelessness, a civic relationality based on logistics provides only small kernels of information about the experience. These photographs limit the viewers’ access to the situation or circumstance in which civil actors struggle to go on. This understanding through logistics because it precludes the possibility of exploitative pitying or othering to occur.

Kuracki covered the result of the economic crisis just after the “failure” has registered with the dispossessed. Suau’s photographs of the Roseberry family discussed above also show a family that has “fallen.” But Suau documents how Catholic Charities manages homelessness, rather than documenting the feelings experienced by the Roseberry family. Suau also documented families and communities trying to avoid foreclosure. In these images, photographic subjects work at menial tasks (digging through files for proper documentation), or they seek ways to advocate for themselves (attending community classes on how to avoid
foreclosure). *Paperwork*, the photograph I described at the beginning of this chapter, fosters a civic relationality based on shared experiences of bureaucracy. Dramatic emotional displays are not required for civic relationality to be formed. Instead, a relationality based on the shared experience of being subject to mysterious bureaucratic rules is cultivated.

As discussed in Chapter 2, in a neoliberal context the solutions to crisis are based in law-and-order and financial markets. Another way to understand these neoliberal solutions is through the public and private apparatuses that help maintain order and stability or, conversely, create obfuscation around their policies. Whether public or private, bureaucracies are resistant to swift changes in government made possible by elections. Instead, bureaucratic power is typically sustained despite political party changes. It is often complicated and difficult to figure out what you, the citizen, need to provide in order to navigate complex bureaucratic systems. The Fortsons, the couple pictured in *Paperwork*, appear to be having just such an experience. They are looking for the one document that will help them with their tax abatement. The power differential in the photograph is there, although it is not exactly visible. The local city government is asking for specific paperwork, demanding that the exact document be produced in order for the tax abatement to be provided. While the viewer never sees the state or agency asking for the document, the moment is relatable because of the shared experience of bureaucracy in everyday life, which becomes increasingly obscure and difficult for citizens to manage during family health or financial crises.
The final photograph featuring those impacted by the crisis from Suau’s essay that I want to discuss in this chapter is *Hard Lessons*. This photograph shows a community meeting, where a woman, who is presumably the leader, addresses a group of about 10 people. The meeting is taking place in a generic multi-purpose room, with white walls and florescent lighting. The people are sitting in metal folding chairs, around collapsible tables. The space is temporary and ordinary, but the work being done could have lasting consequences. This is a meeting of Empowering and Strengthening Ohio’s People (ESOP), a community group that helps people facing foreclosure. According to their website, ESOP has helped 35,000 people avoid foreclosure since 2005. This photograph again invites understanding, but not through emotional appeals based in dramatic displays of feeling. A meeting is a fairly ordinary event, typically with a speaker and an audience listening to that speaker. There is nothing particularly exciting about a meeting, and they are the source of many workplace gripes (“not another meeting”). This common event appears simple and uninteresting at first glance. It is only through the caption that we learn about the organization ESOP and how they are helping local residents reduce their mortgage payments. This is indeed powerful and

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important work that viewers can relate to by recognizing a meeting setting from their own experience and feel encouraged by seeing how communities are helping and responding to the housing crisis.

*Paperwork* and *Hard Lessons* depict photographic subjects that are working to find solutions to their problems. The people in these photos are not waiting for help or sitting with their emotions, like in *Migrant Mother*, or Kuracki’s photo of the father putting his face in his hands as he awakens. Instead, these people are attempting to solve the problem on their own. They have taken up a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) attitude and are taking ownership of their situation.

The government had only recently, at the end of 2007, acknowledged that the housing crisis was problematic for the nation when Suau photographed these people in March 2008, and thus governmental solutions were widely unavailable. Further the neoliberal policies of the past 30 plus years have reduced governmental programs that may have provided aid in previous decades. Given the lack of federal assistance, they are seeking their own solutions and community resources. Catholic Charities steps in to fill the void in state-sponsored support, ESOP steps up to do work at the community level that is not being performed by local, state, or federal governments on behalf of citizens affected by the housing crisis. The individuals pictured are reminiscent of Torin Monahan’s “insecurity subjects.” Monahan writes: “The insecurity subject does not depend on the government for anything, least of all for safeguarding human security in the face of disaster.”

The people that Suau photographs are not reliant on the government for support, instead they are seeking their own solutions to the problems that they face. They turn

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to community resources like Catholic Charities or ESOP; they jump through the hoops required by the neoliberal bureaucracy to avoid adverse effects.

This work of seeking solutions to problems and economic crisis is neither glamorous nor dramatic, which could lead to a conclusion that there is nothing visually interesting to capture. Indeed, Hariman and Lucaites concept of a visual recession, discussed at the start of this chapter, suggests that hard times make for less interesting photographs. But it’s not quite that simple. Banal or ordinary photographs can produce a different kind of civic relationality. But how exactly can this civic relationality be achieved if the photographs are not visually interesting according to a set of expectations informed by celebrated documentary photographs of the 20th century? Somebody needs to look at the photograph for civic relationality to occur, and understandably, people want to look at interesting pictures. Thus, I suggest a different way to understand the drama of a photograph, that allows for the photos to maintain their significance (of capturing the mundane) without losing their audience.

The Drama of Purpose and Agency
The pictures that Suau takes of the people directly affected by the housing crisis are artistically plain. And perhaps they indirectly demonstrate the elitism of the aesthetic expectations that some critics bring to documentary photography. They are largely taken in generic, unassuming interiors like a Catholic Charities office, a family dining room, or a multipurpose room. These spaces often lack visual interest, quality light, and depth. The people in the photographs are performing ordinary tasks like searching for proper documentation, or attending a community group meeting. So, while these photos show people taking ownership of
their situation and actively seeking solutions, they don’t show dramatic action. Hariman and Lucaites address the concept of banality in a blog post:

reading banality requires burrowing into what is most ordinary about ordinary life, in order to see. To see what? Perhaps how people are making do, perhaps what is being lost, perhaps the structural changes reverberating throughout the society.\(^58\)

Looking at the banality of these images allows us to see into the everyday lives of citizens, to see what solutions they are (or are not) seeking. Banality is sometimes difficult to see because it seems ordinary to a point of insignificance, however it is precisely the banality of homelessness that can offer alternative insights into the ways that people are experiencing economic hardship. Hariman and Lucaites go on to say that,

we came to this conclusion [about banality] through our experience of working with photojournalistic coverage of the economic crisis that emerged in 2007....as the economy declined and then got worse yet, it was hard to see the difference [in photographs].....ordinary people may simply look glum...\(^59\)

And while I agree that some images (including Kuracki’s) of the housing crisis may feature people “looking glum” or worse, devastated, the photographs that Anthony Suau created do not show these people. They show people unsurprised at having been taken advantage of by predatory lenders and seeking solutions to or ways of managing their situations. Instead, I think a reimagining of how drama is visually captured helps us to understand the photographs better.


\(^{59}\) Ibid.
Burke writes about dramatism as a way of understanding human relationships, explaining that comparing life to drama is the most direct way to analyze people’s motives. Burkes dramatistic pentad is used for understanding life, and thus drama, as a compilation of five key parts. The dramatistic pentad includes analysis of act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. Act is a discussion of what was done, scene is concerned with where, agent is the actor who did it, agency is about how it was done and finally purpose is about why it happened. Most importantly, a pentad analysis requires a discussion of the ratio, what two are most valued and how that helps explain a person’s motives and priorities.

The pentad is typically applied to language. However, the theory could also be applied to documentary photographs. When initially reviewing photographs, many people focus on the first 3 aspects of the pentad, the what (act), the where (scene), and the who (agent). These are the most basic pieces of information in a photograph, but also the most accessible. The photographs from Kuracki use this more common form of drama that plays up the who, the what and the where. For example, the image of the emotional woman crying as she is being evicted quickly and powerfully communicates the individual (agent) who is being evicted (act) while standing in their home (scene). All of this is accomplished visually. A quick cursory view of a photograph will reveal the place, the subject, and the act.

Suau’s photographs of the housing crisis have drama based on purpose and agency, which is a different ratio. For example, the Paperwork photograph is a photo that shows the

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Forstons (agent) in their dining room (scene) searching for the correct document (what) by combing through a collection of all their documents (agency) in order to gain tax abatement (purpose). The significance of this photograph stems from the agency and the purpose. This photo is about the process a family goes through to try and avoid foreclosure. This photo is important because it emphasizes a different kind of drama that is often overlooked. This is a tense moment as the Fortsons search for the missing document, and yet the drama is created by the urgency of purpose, which cannot be pictured per se: the couple must find a document to attain tax abatement and avoid foreclosure. The urgency and purpose of the situation is not visible within the frame, but instead is created through an understanding of the context of the photograph provided by the caption.

_Suddenly Homeless_ functions in the same way. The power of the photo is not because of who is photographed or what they are doing, but rather why they are doing it, and the process that they are using. The purpose: to avoid homelessness, and the agency: seeking out community resources, are the ratio that gives this picture drama. This drama is different because it is not visible in the image but rather must be inferred or gathered from the captions and the knowledge about the context of these photographs. The viewer may view the photo with the “fear of falling” as described by Ehrenreich,63 keenly aware that this could be them if they take the wrong steps. The impending separation of the family invokes a feeling of suspense; however, this feeling is not accessed directly through the frame of the photograph, but through the captions. Even the emotion that the daughter feels is not visible from the photo. The caption

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reveals that she has started crying. This inability to access the experiential and emotional details of the photographic subjects are what could make these images easy to dismiss on the grounds that they lack drama; however, the captions and the other photos in the collection help us to understand an alternative, purpose-agency drama.

The consideration of the purpose-agency ratio allows us to experience the photographs not as mundane, but rather as invoking a different type of drama than is typical or expected from documentary photography. This type of drama still allows for civic relationality, but it is a civic relationality based not on emotion produced by pathos, but rather civic relationality established via a comprehension of the purpose motivating civic actors (why they act thus) and their agency (how they respond). Suau’s photos suggest a kind of tentative civic relationality, one that doesn’t get too close to the people pictured, yet allows for understanding, depending on whether viewers are willing to put in the effort. However, this leaves the photographic subject in an awkward position that is neither clearly that of a victim nor an agent. For some people may view these people as agents searching for their own solutions, and yet others will view them as victims of a malicious mortgage industry. Suau’s photographs do not dictate one mode of civic relationality but instead allow the viewer to piece together this relationality through the visuals, captions, and the meaning that can be captured by reading between the photographs. The Housing Crisis does not require “visual recession,” but instead requires a reimaging of how the viewer and subject relate and the way that drama is understood in photographs. The purpose-agency ratio may be particularly appropriate for capturing the drama of economic struggle in a neoliberal context because it does not let viewers resort to the illusion of an emotional interpersonal interaction. Rather, it invites viewers to think beyond the frames of individual
photographs in a manner that tends toward structural or sociological explanations for the predicaments in which the photographic subjects find themselves. This shifts the burden from the photographic subjects, understood as representatives of whole classes of people, to viewers’ analyses of how and why the photographic subjects find themselves thus framed.
Conclusion

Reading Between the Pictures

Anthony Suau’s photo essay features 17 photographs taken from around the Cleveland area in March 2008. I have carefully reviewed 10 of them in the previous chapters, but to consider the photographs alone would not do justice to Suau’s work. The power of his photographs is not uncovered in one frame, but rather by understanding the photographs together. This conclusion begins with a discussion of how the photo essay was arranged as well as what the sociological and narrative approaches can tell us. I wrap up with how the photographs allow judgement to occur and conclude with areas for future research.

The Photo Essay

The photo essay is online at time.com. One image appears at a time, with the ability to move forward or backward in the collection at the viewers pleasing. *Boarded Up* is faded into the background for the title slide which reads:

Prize-Winning Photos:
Struggling Cleveland

Already battered by unemployment, the city struggled to weather the housing crisis.
Photographs for TIME by Anthony Suau

There is an enter button directly under the text to invite the viewer to explore the images. Every photograph in the collection is black and white, and the photos only fill about one half of the page and require a mouse click to advance to the next photograph. The design of the page is likely indicative of when the photos were placed online, as more recent TIME photo essays have full page gallery displays that move back and forth with keystrokes. Because “Struggling Cleveland” requires the viewer to click to the next image it requiring a more thoughtful and deliberate step to view the next image. The format itself allows the viewer to spend as much or
as little time with each image as they please. This ability to change the photograph as the viewer desires is significant because it allows each viewer to interact with the collection in their own way. Additionally, if a photograph captivated them they are able to go back and look at the photograph again.

While the viewer has control of how much time they spend with each image, the initial order of the photographs can be helpful for forming interpretations of the collection as a whole. I have three primary observations about the ordering. First, the photographs of the exteriors of the houses are dispersed throughout the essay. *Boarded Up* appears on the title slide and is the first photograph of the essay. *Bad Block* is photo number six of the essay, and *Dangerous*, an image of a boarded-up house that I did not analyze in previous chapters, is photo number twelve. The dispersal of houses suggests that this problem is the most widespread, as the concept repeats throughout the essay. This is not a problem that can be viewed once and then forgotten as the essay continues; rather it persists. Second, the photos of the auctions are clustered together at the end of the essay. As opposed to the houses which were dispersed, both on the streets of Cleveland and in the essay, the auction is contained and at the end. An auction is the last step a house must go through before ownership has been restored, and thus placing the photographs of the auction at the end emphasizes the finality of the auctions. Finally, the people impacted by the crisis, discussed in Chapter 3, are clustered together in the middle of the essay. Photos eight through eleven of the collection feature people impacted by the crisis. First, clustering these together and in the middle of the essay is in keeping with Suau’s approach, which asks us to consider the photographic subjects in the context of broader forces and systemic problems. Second, these photographs of the people directly affected by the housing
crisis are most powerful when viewed together. While other photos (most notably the houses) are gripping in one image alone, the photographs of the people are not understood as dramatic, at least not as its typically understood. Thus, clustering them together can help establish a more powerful understanding of how people are responding to their circumstances.

Iconic photography has previously been understood within the context of a singular photograph, however a singular photograph cannot capture the discrete and dispersed results of neoliberalism. The internet has amplified the speed at which images enter and exit circulation, as Hariman and Lucaites note “the circulation of images on the World Wide Web can drive public response to events and mediate public debate at a radically accelerated pace.”64 The increased speed at which photographs can be shared allows photographs to become temporarily recognizable, but it quickly becomes replaced with the next “viral” photo or video. However, at the time of writing this 10 years after the housing crisis, there is no iconic photograph of the event. Perhaps as more time passes an iconic photograph will emerge. Or perhaps, one photograph is now unable to capture an economic event fully. Iconic photographs have been “highly specific objects of memory and admiration, yet also somehow abstract representations whose value was far more symbolic than referential.”65 That is, iconic photographs have come to be seen as both beautiful, artistic images but also tools for remembering national events. No doubt Suau’s photographs help to document a vital moment of US history. But they do so in a different way than previous iconic photographs had. One explanation is likely the shift in

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65 Ibid, 6.
context, from a welfare state to neoliberalism. But Suau’s photographs collectively accomplish something that a singular photograph cannot, it tells a story that is larger than a singular frame.

**Sociology and Narrative**

Suau doesn’t capture just one person impacted by the crisis or one event, instead he tries to capture a variety of people and places affected by the crisis. This intentionality in covering a variety of events allows the viewer to more completely understand the event by viewing the photos together. The photograph *Bad Block* is placed right next to the photograph *Hard Lessons* making it impossible to separate the need for financial education from the devastation of foreclosed homes. I use this juxtaposition to illustrate that Suau’s approach to covering the housing crisis is both sociological and narrative.

First, Suau’s approach is sociological; that is, it attempts to understand the way that the crisis happened by unpacking the web of actors involved. As I discussed in Chapter 1, economic crises are difficult events to cover visually because their effects are dispersed. The impacted people are often not located near each other, nor near the impacted infrastructure, such as the repossessed houses. And some events, such as the auctions, are temporary, occurring in multi-use spaces that constantly change, and thus not able to be visualized in person after the event has occurred. As such, a photo essay such as Suau’s, does a better job of communicating the visual scale of the problem. One photograph alone cannot capture the dispersed nature of the problem. Suau’s photo essay is limited to one city, Cleveland, and this does present serious limitations to understanding the housing crisis elsewhere. However, it does a good job of emphasizing the diverse impacts of the crisis and responses to the crisis in at least one major
city. The photographs almost serve as a site for solving a mystery, each photo providing an additional clue, a new actor, scene, or culprit to be examined for greater understanding. But this meaning does not come from the images themselves, but instead by understanding the connection between the photographs. For example, the viewer might connect the fact that the family at Catholic Charities in *Suddenly Homeless*, likely previously rented a home that may now look like the *Boarded Up* house, which is now for sale at the *Auction*. This meaning can only be understood when reading across the photos and considering the connections.

But the photos do more than just sociological work, they also do narrative work. Photographs can tell the stories of the people they photograph. By capturing a variety of different people in different locations and industries across town, Suau allows a multitude of stories to be told. The two photographs of *Suddenly Homeless* and *Reprieve* tell one family’s story of homeless to promote understanding of the logistics of poverty. The two images work together to show how the family navigated the complicated system of gender segregated shelters, and the compassion Catholic Charities showed by putting them in a hotel room for one night together. The photographs in Suau’s photo essay can tell these independent stories, but they can also weave the stories together. The story of the housing crisis can be understood by picturing each of the people pictured as characters in the larger story. The characters are captured in a moment of pause, which allows us to imagine their stories before and after the photographs were taken. The police officer completing an eviction becomes just one character and one chapter or moment of the housing crisis. Because of the timing of the photographs, early 2008, we can also see the dual burden that the people occupy, of both being potentially culpable for their situation while simultaneously viewed as victims of circumstance. Early 2008
represented a transitional moment for how the people were understood, and these photographs help capture that moment in pictures. Reading between the pictures allows viewers to consider how the individual stories might be woven together to create a larger-scale story of the housing crisis.

Allowing Judgement, Making Meaning
This thesis has explored the way that meaning is created via the relationship between photographic subjects and viewers through various modes of photographic address and in terms of what appears and does not appear within frame. I have discussed the differences in modes of address based on the historical context in which photographers work and the various modes of relationality made possible by documentary photographs. There are three primary implications for these ways of seeing the photographs from Suau. First, it provides insights into the neoliberal context and the way that economic crises are currently managed and controlled. Second, it challenges the power of a singular photograph and reveals the understanding made possible by reading between photographs. And finally, it provides an opportunity to reimagine the source of drama in documentary photographs in a manner that allows for alternatives to sympathetic or empathic modes of civic relationality.

First, Suau’s photographs help highlight the neoliberal context in which the housing crisis took place. *Extreme Caution* highlighted the ways that solutions are based on law-and-order, and *Auction* helped show the market-based solutions for the crisis. The photos of the houses helped show how property is valued (from the exterior) and controlled (from the interior). He also showed pictures of those impacted by the housing crisis seeking their own solutions, rather than
waiting for a governmental response, in photographs like *Hard Lessons*. I have analyzed these photos for what appears and what does not appear to gain a better understanding of how the logics of neoliberalism can be made visible and, thereby, subject to debate. This new context may require new ways of viewing and analyzing photographs, with an understanding that banal or mundane photographs can still be powerful, despite their lack of traditional aesthetic appeal.

But this interpretive work is not visible in a single photograph. A viewer can accept the neoliberal law-and-order solutions being presented or a critical viewer can question why police are needed in urban communities, yet a private security firm establishes order in the suburbs. By providing the viewer with multiple photographs, the viewer is provided an opportunity to compare and contrast the photographs and render judgment. A singular photograph can only show one moment, scene, or set of people. But having several photographs that together create meaning makes the collection more powerful as a whole. A critical viewer can question why the individuals impacted by the housing crisis did not receive governmental support and had to seek out their own DIY solutions, but no singular image asks these questions. The question arises from an understanding of who was impacted by the crisis and how the government responded, which can only be captured across multiple photos in the essay. A critical viewer can question the coldness and temporariness of the auctions by looking at several of the images, as the repetition of these qualities make them more noticeable. The critical viewer can read between the images, connecting the previously discrete moments of the crisis into one cohesive event. Meaning is not made by the questions raised by a single photograph, but rather from the connections drawn from one photograph to another. A collection of photographs is better at the documentary
function of showing the crisis, and allows for a critical viewer to engage in a discussion about neoliberalism, its assumptions, and its effects.

Finally, the role that emotion plays in creating civic relationality comes into question in these photographs. Emotion has traditionally been used to help viewers relate to photographic subjects, as is the case in *Migrant Mother*, however, Suau’s photographs reveal a new way to achieve civic relationality, based on logistics and understanding of context, rather than the appearance of direct access to the emotions and feelings of photographic subjects. The photographs of those directly affected by the housing crisis demonstrate this particularly well, as they are not visually exciting, instead requiring a relationality based on the logistics of trying to solve the problem of foreclosure and homelessness at the individual or community level, such as finding shelter at Catholic Charities, or finding a tax abatement form. This relationality based on logistics requires a reimagining of drama that is based on purpose-agency, according to Burke’s dramatistic pentad. This reconsideration of drama allows us to look at mundane images and understand the ways that civic relationality can still function within them, but it may require more work on the part of viewers.

Ultimately, this thesis has attempted to understand how what appears and does not appear in documentary photographs of economic struggle has changed in a neoliberal context. What is pictured, how it is pictured, and what modes of civic relationality are thus enabled, have all changed to work within, even as they challenge, the constraints and possibilities of visually communicating (and thinking visually) about systemic economic problems in a neoliberal context. I understand Anthony Suau’s photographs as both a product of the neoliberal context while simultaneously working to expose that context. The photographs highlight the market
solutions, the law-and-order responses, and the lack of governmental support for people impacted by the crisis. But taken together, as a collective photo essay, the viewer is given the opportunity to critically connect these otherwise discrete moments of the housing crisis. The photo essay could be used as a tool to expose the otherwise disconnected moments and aspects of the housing crisis. But this critical perspective—one that allows for a critique of neoliberalism—is only possible if viewers are willing to read between the photos.

Area(s) for future research

This thesis has raised a number of questions that are particularly relevant to a variety of visual rhetoric projects. An expanded consideration of how various contexts impact the interpretation of photographs would be prudent, as I primarily focused on the context of the welfare state compared to neoliberalism. And while this thesis explored how neoliberalism influences what appears or does not appear in photos of economic hardship, I would be interested to explore how neoliberalism could be shifting other types of photojournalism too, such as war photography or the photography of natural disasters. Further study of how meaning can be understood between the photos, rather than within one frame would also be significant. I suspect that there is something unique about the photo essay form, as I’ve discussed above, and further study of other photo essays would legitimize this claim. My project also raises questions about the difficulty of visually capturing an economic crisis, and a project exploring other financial/economic crisis would expand this conversation. I personally have two projects that I hope to continue working with after the conclusion of this thesis, the first focused on
photojournalism and meaning making, and the second focused on home ownership and memory.

First, I am interested in exploring the photography produced by the Facing Change: Documenting America. This is the nonprofit group that Suau helped found after his experience photographing Cleveland. The group published a coffee table book in 2015 that featured the work of 14 different photographers, Suau’s work was not included. The book is centered around the documentary photography of America since the election of Barack Obama in 2008. The book is not focused on one event or one place, but instead attempts to survey a wide variety of topics, subjects, and styles of photography. This project explored the ways that photojournalism helped to explain the housing crisis, specifically that a collection of photographs was better at telling the story than one image alone. I would be interested to see if this holds true for a more broad collection of photos as well. Does one common theme come through by reading between the pictures? Does the neoliberal context shape how the photos are interpreted?

The second project that I am interested in pursuing is the one that I began working on for this thesis. I am interested in exploring how the housing crisis is remembered and impacts the rhetoric of homeownership today. American homeownership is closely linked to the national ethos of the American Dream, and I’m interested in how the phrase, “the American dream,” can or cannot be used to connect with audiences after the housing crisis. This project allowed me to conduct a close analysis of one photo essay documenting the housing crisis in Cleveland, Ohio, and I think further study of how economic hardship is visually depicted would be prudent. In particular, I’d like to explore recent mortgage and real estate ads to ask questions such as: How is the American Dream linked to American values? Whose values get coded as American values?
Is home ownership presented as an individual success or a community accomplishment? Is the housing crisis mentioned, ignored, or hinted at?
Bibliography


  


World Press Photo, “World Press Photo of the Year, 2009”


Vitae
Pamela A. Barker was born in Salt Lake City, Utah and spent her childhood in Utah, Montana and Idaho. She attended Pacific Lutheran University, located in Tacoma, Washington, for her undergraduate education. There, in May 2014, she earned a B.A.C. in Communication Studies, a B.A. in Political Science and minored in Women and Gender studies. Pam competed in competitive speech and debate throughout high school and college, and has continued to be involved by judging debate tournaments on the weekends. For her masters education she attended Syracuse University where she studied Communication and Rhetorical Studies, in addition to earning a Certificate in University Teaching.