JACK **SHAINMAN** GALLERY

"Half and the Whole" by Jelani Cobb

The half million minutes that made up 2020, each of them a timestamp for a period of travail, of plague, of conflict, and of reckoning, seemed somehow longer than a single year—as if some cosmic focus group had decreed that a single trip around the sun was insufficient to cover the catalogue of human occurrences and had slipped extra days into the calendar. But in fact, we needed only nine of those minutes—or to be more precise, eight minutes and forty-six seconds extracted from May 25, Memorial Day—to convey to future generations everything they need to understand what it was like to live through that year.

The images of George Floyd, forty-six years old, unemployed, and black, and the agonizing collection of moments in which his life was extinguished have become an indelible shorthand for a familiar form of American tragedy. A travail so enduring as to almost be predictable. Floyd migrated to Minneapolis, hoping for a better life. He survived COVID-19 but met his end on Chicago Avenue, in front of the Cup Foods store, as a white police officer kneeled on his neck. A deadly metaphor turned literal. In life Floyd was identified as an African-American but his death attested that a void, not a hyphen, separated those two words.

The Void has always been with us. Few knew or chronicled that fact better than Gordon Parks, another black man who migrated to Minnesota in pursuit of opportunity but found scarcity and struggle. Parks lived to tell the tale and, more compellingly, to slice it into fractions of a second and show its contours to the world as an eyewitness. To fill the Void with so much humanity that it might act as a bridge. The images in this exhibition are a sliver of a near infinitude of Parks' work in chronicling a world whose technology, fashion, and characters have changed in the ensuing years but whose fundamental struggles are as familiar as they were at the moment he snapped the photos.

In photographs that span from 1942 to 1970, we see Parks performing the same service for ensuing generations—rendering a visual shorthand for bigger questions and conflicts that dominated the times. Bearing witness. Of particular note is the prominence of his photography of protests relating to incidents of police brutality. In two photographs from 1963 he contrasts the visuals of a black outcry for justice with the seeming blitheness of white passersby. In another photograph, protesters hold signs saying "Liberty or Death"—all but shouting that the nation was indicted by the ratio of the latter to the former in the lives of black people.

Those pictures were taken in the wake of a police raid on a Los Angeles Nation of Islam mosque in which seven Muslims were shot. Parks captured the images while working on a photo essay about the group and its charismatic, fiery prosecutor, Malcolm X. The keen observer would have recognized that Malcolm had essentially been articulating verbally the contradiction—the Void—that Gordon Parks had rendered visually two decades earlier with American Gothic, the scalding photographic portrait of Ella Watson, her broom, her mop, and her national flag.

Yet Parks was also aware that no group of people, no culture, was simply the sum of its worst tragedies. Always, there is a glimpse of the joy that perseveres even in the most hostile circumstances, the glint of light peering through foreboding clouds. The snatched-from-the-headlines quality of these images attest to the fact that our conflicts have not changed, but neither has the willingness to confront them. There is nothing in Parks' body of work that includes the phrase "Black Lives Matter," but it didn't need to. He'd already shown that they do, minute after minute, across the void from his time to our own.

ArtReview

The Quiet Resistance in Gordon Parks's Photographs of Black America

Mark Rappolt Reviews 23 July 2020 artreview.com

Gordon Parks, ‘Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama’, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

The pioneering photographer’s documentation of discrimination, violence and a system that forced compliance, presages today’s prison industrial complex

Jacques Gallery in London's genteel Fitzrovia has taken on added relevance in the context of the recent Black Lives Matter protests and the self-isolation (which at times seems like it might slip into various forms of segregation) imposed in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The exhibition is an absolute gimme for an art critic (or gallery) wishing to assert their awareness of societal struggles surrounding race, inequality and the systemic suppression of peoples considered other. This past weekend *The Sunday Times* art critic Waldemar Januszczak dutifully (if clumsily) opened up his review of the show by remarking that he could feel 'a powerful wind blowing across the land'. 'It could be the wind of change…' he continued, presumably channelling memories of rocking to The Scorpions and the events of 1989. 'What it certainly is is the wind of pertinence,' he went on, starting to row back, to hedge his bets, before noting that 'the most important and best art being made right now is being made by black artists' (no further details given) and that it had been an effort not to 'blub' once he had encountered Parks's works.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Mobile, Alabama*, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Parks, who died in 2006, was a photographer, writer, musician and filmmaker. The first African American to direct a major Hollywood movie (*The Learning Tree*, 1969, which was based on his own novel, from 1963), he went on to inspire a new genre (blaxploitation) with the release of *Shaft* in 1971. He first rose to prominence, however, as a photographer, originally working for the Farm Security Administration photography project, based in Washington, DC. The photographs on show in London were commissioned as stories for *Life* magazine: *Segregation in the South* in 1956 and *Black Muslims* in 1963. Despite Januszcak's highly attuned sensitivity to shifts in the weather, they were as 'pertinent' then, if not more so, when they described the lived reality of their subjects. There's no doubt that part of the point of Parks's colour photographs of the segregated South and black-and-white portraits of Malcolm X was to document and assist the whipping up of a wind.

Gordon Parks, *The Atmosphere of Crime*, originally published in *Life*, 9 September 1957. © Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Simultaneously with the exhibition, Steidl has published *The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957*, documenting another of Parks's series for *Life* (the photographs themselves are now in the

weekly magazine. The book documents his contribution to the 9 September 1957 edition of the magazine, titled 'Crime in the U.S.', featuring first the photographs themselves and then reproductions of the pages on which they originally appeared. The cover illustration, 'A New York Street Gang', looks like a scene from *West Side Story* (the first Broadway production of which opened later that month), suggesting the feature's status as standing somewhere between reporting and entertainment. 'On the surface, the world of crime is much like the world of honest men…,' the Chandleresque text that introduces Parks's contribution begins. 'But underneath, this world has its own dark atmosphere.' Sandwiched among adverts for Haggar Slacks, Bayer Aspirin, Metropolitan Life Insurance, Band-Aid plastic plasters, Gleem toothpaste, Fitch dandruff remover shampoo and Ford's Edsel automobiles, there's a sense of the feature titillatingly lifting the curtain on a life that *Life*'s largely white, middle-class, urban and suburban readers do not know. It's no great stretch to imagine that a white-cube commercial art gallery opposite a posh hotel in gentrified London offers a similar audience a similar service today. Though it is also good, of course, that Parks's work is being seen – this is the first solo exhibition of his work in the British capital in 25 years.

Gordon Parks, *The Atmosphere of Crime*, originally published in *Life*, 9 September 1957. © Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Back in the book, a blurry nighttime shot of a group of men hanging out on a street corner is captioned, 'A furtive poker game whiles away a hot summer night on a tough sidewalk in New York. The beat cop has just passed, and the youths have time for a few more hands before he returns to break up the illegal game.' Given that it's hard to tell what exactly is going on, Parks's image gently suggests a conflation of suspiciousness and crime, boredom and crime, a lack of places to go and crime. There are images of the aftermath of crimes – people being taken into ambulances, rooms being searched, but no images of crimes themselves (albeit the images not used by *Life* include a sequence showing a man shooting up – his arms at the moment of injection neatly mirroring other images of men's arms in handcuffs).

Gordon Parks, *The Atmosphere of Crime*, originally published in *Life*, 9 September 1957. © Courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Taken on their own, Parks's photographs document a world of poverty, drug addiction and violence, the last being more apparent in images of cops gleefully kicking down doors and

knock,' reads the caption (presumably written by reporter Henry Suydam, who worked with Parks on the assignment) that accompanies one of the photographer's more dramatic images. When they're not breaking in, the cops in Parks's images are booking in criminals, doing paperwork, hanging around and looking out for suspicious rooms and people. Policework, as Parks records it, is a matter of bureaucracy, a symptom of a system. The *Life* feature ends with a shot of prisoners going into lockdown in San Quentin, a burly guard dominating the foreground.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Alabama*, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

According to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), a shocking one in every three Black males born today in the US can expect, at some point, to join the prison population, which has itself increased by over 700 percent since 1970. (The figures for Latino males are one in every six, and for whites, one in every 17.) These days US prisons are part of an $80-billion industry, with the prison phone industry alone raking in $1.2b of that. There are even dedicated prison trade fairs. It is, as Roger Ross Williams's 2018 documentary *Jailed in America* (more pointedly titled *American Jail* for those of you looking it up in the US) argues, an industry that has become too big to fail. It's an industry that, in nascent form, Parks seems to have identified in *The Atmosphere of Crime* (a subject further explored in essays by Nicole R. Fleetwood, Sarah Hermanson Meister and Bryan Stevenson in the Steidl publication).

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama*, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Like Parks, Williams is something of a pioneer, being the first African-American director to win an Academy Award (for *Music for Prudence*, 2009, best documentary short). In a sense, *Jailed in America* feels like an extension of the sensibilities and some of the methods that Parks deployed in his own work, documenting personal stories (in this case the imprisonment and subsequent suicide of one of Williams's childhood friends) and the expansive bureaucratic system that leads young African Americans to jail and then keeps them there as the levers of power are used to grease the cogs of an industry that in turn supports those invested in maintaining their power.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Nashville, Tennessee*, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

That discrimination and violence are woven into the fabric of US society is something that Parks's photographs of Black life in the South amply demonstrate. As with *The Atmosphere of Crime*, his Alabama photographs document scenes that are apparently ordinary and everyday: people sitting on porches, people talking to neighbours, people buying ice cream. Yet the bodies are Black, the houses are rundown and the ice-cream shoppers are standing at the 'Colored' window or drinking from the 'Colored Only' water fountain. What's remarkable is the dignity apparent in the three families Parks shot. The fact that they seem to be getting on with their lives despite the restrictions on how they are permitted to do that. A form of quiet resistance that seems all the more obvious when paired with the photographs from the *Black Muslims* series, which in itself attempts to record its subjects as a community as much as a movement or an existential threat to the US. What seems most remarkable now is that anyone put up with the shit that Parks recorded in Alabama. But flick back to *The Atmosphere of Crime* or open a newspaper today and you better understand the system that forced this compliance. And continues, in various less visible forms, to do the same today.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Harlem, New York*, 1963. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Gordon Parks: Part One *is on show at Alison Jacques Gallery, London, until 1 August.* Gordon Parks: Part Two *will run from 1 September to 1 October.* Gordon Parks: The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957 *is copublished by Steidl and the Gordon Parks Foundation, in collaboration with MoMA ($40, hardcover)*

Mark Rappolt Reviews 23 July 2020 artreview.com

CULTURED

A NEW BOOK OF GORDON PARKS PHOTOGRAPHS ILLUSTRATES A LONG HISTORY OF AMERICAN POLICE BRUTALITY

PUBLISHED THIS SUMMER BY STEIDL AND THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION, IN COLLABORATION WITH MOMA, THE ATMOSPHERE OF CRIME, 1957 INCLUDES 47 NEVER-BEFORE-RELEASED PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GORDON PARKS'S SIX-WEEK JOURNEY ON THE STREETS OF NEW YORK, SAN FRANCISCO, LOS ANGELES AND CHICAGO.

JACOBA URIST

07.10.2020

UNTITLED, NEW YORK, NEW YORK, 1957. COURTESY OF AND © THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION.

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Indeed, amid protests over the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and others—and a national reckoning with police brutality and institutional racism—the work of mid-century photographer Gordon Parks, who died in 2006, feels pressing, with a newly released monograph that depicts racial injustice with urgent, aesthetic power. A self-taught artist and humanitarian, Parks captures subjects that are often dismissed and marginalized, in their nuanced full-throated humanity. For "The Atmosphere of Crime," he used color film and natural light, though other stories for Life were usually shot in black and white; at the time of this series,

UNTITLED, SAN QUENTIN, CALIFORNIA, 1957. COURTESY OF AND © THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION.

In February, MoMA acquired the set of modern color prints of the plates Meister selected and sequenced for the book from the Gordon Parks Foundation. The museum planned to display a sample of these images, alongside works from other artists, in a dedicated fourth-floor gallery as part of the next phase of the reinstallation of their permanent collection. "The dividing lines between photojournalist and artist at that time in the history of photography were considered clear and absolute," explains Meister. "But an important aspect of Parks's legacy is that he ignored those boundaries, and that's what makes the work equally at home on the walls of a museum as the pages of a magazine."

UNTITLED, 1957. COURTESY OF AND © THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION.

In fact, the series inspired the museum to look more closely at the history of how crime has been documented by American photographers, placing Parks's work on a trajectory so that viewers could appreciate his radical departure. "I can only hope that having such a compelling historical marker, against which we can compare what is happening today, encourages the recognition that this is a very seated, long standing problem," furthers Meister. Published this summer by Steidl and The Gordon Parks Foundation, in collaboration with MoMA, the volume, titled *The Atmosphere of Crime*, 1957 includes 47 never-before-released images from the photographer's six-week journey on the streets of New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago, where the magazine sent him to document urban crime.

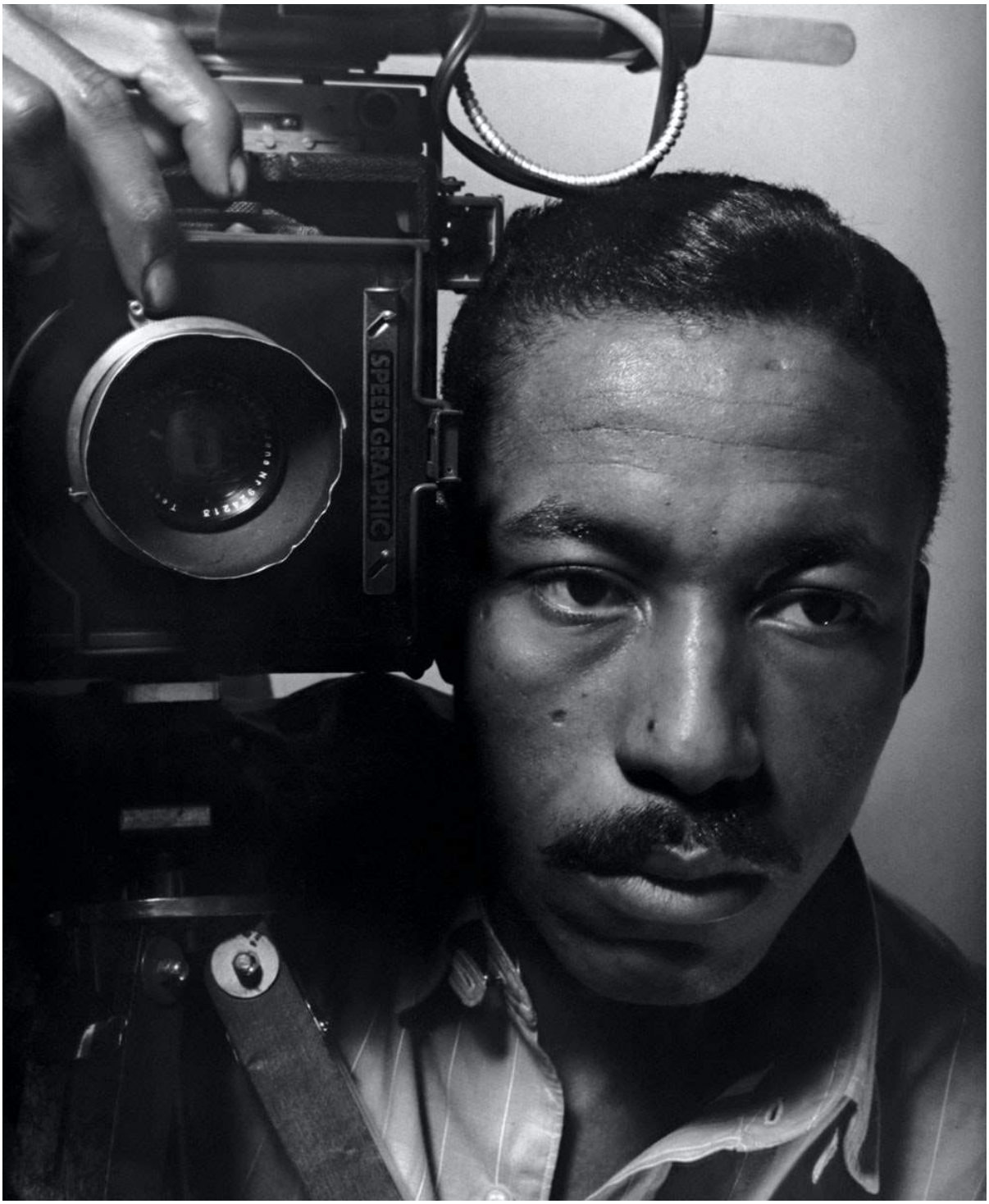
UNTITLED, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS, 1957. COURTESY OF AND © THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION.

“Parks manages to capture with his camera incredibly complex ideas about the state of policing and the backdrop of what leads to so-called ‘criminal behavior,’” says Meister. “Through a variety of technical and artistic choices, he destabilizes our sense of what a criminal looks like.” For example, by cropping and blurring his natural light pictures, Parks—part advocate, part documentarian—creates intense, intimate tableaux that preserve the anonymity of the accused yet sharply illuminate the faces of law enforcement. According to Meister, the photographer believed his impact would be greatest working for such a widely circulated magazine. “There were some who critiqued him for selling out to white editors and a white audience,” she describes. “But I think Parks felt that these were the very people that he wanted to be able to teach to see the world through his eyes.” This particular series, he well understood, straddled two, fraught worlds; the images had to resonate with a mainstream, and therefore largely white, readership, yet also endure as exquisitely composed artworks that would continue to command viewers to look more closely at the realities of our society, well into the present.

THE BROOKLYN RAIL

The Enduring Spark: The Work and Legacy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

By Yínká Elújọba
OCT 2020



Gordon Parks, Untitled, 1941. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Two men; colleagues, collaborators, and friends for several decades. One a photographer, filmmaker, and humanitarian; the other a writer, editor, documentary producer. They met while working together at *Life* magazine, and despite a 16-year age difference, became confidants. In his early 90s, the photographer, having lived a rich life making some of the most important images of his generation, decided to speak with his writer friend about the possibility of creating a

foundation that would continue his work and legacy. Consulting the writer was an obvious choice for the photographer: In 2002 he had been entrusted with the enormous task of preserving his own family's collection of photographs starting from the time of the American Civil War. The collection, which is now known as the Meserve-Kunhardt Collection and housed at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, included incredible rarities, like glass negatives of Abraham Lincoln by the wartime photographer Mathew Brady. The writer, Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., agreed to work with his friend the photographer, Gordon Parks, on developing a foundation that would carry on the immense work of Parks. The foundation was established in 2006, the same year that both men died, two weeks apart in March.

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His name is Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks. Date of birth: November 30, 1912, the youngest of 15 children. He knows as he moves around the world where he was born, Fort Scott, Kansas, that he is a child in a segregated town. He is a pupil in a segregated school. It is illegal for him to play sports or attend school social activities. His teacher thinks that his desire to go to college would be a waste of money. By age 11 he is already used to being the smallest, the most unworthy, the underdog. One day, three white boys throw him into the Marmaton River, knowing he cannot swim. He gasps. He struggles. He ducks. He survives.

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When Kunhardt, Jr. and Parks began contemplating the Gordon Parks Foundation in the mid-aughts, and trying to figure out the best place to locate the massive archive, New York City real estate proved too expensive. Since Parks had lived for a long time in White Plains, New York, just north of the city in Westchester County, it seemed sensible (and cost effective) to locate the foundation not far from his home. They eventually found a building in Pleasantville at 48 Wheeler Avenue, ten minutes away from where Parks lived.

The early days were spent exploring, discovering, moving, organizing, and digitizing Parks's archives. He had been the kind of artist that worked tirelessly, producing much more than he cared to show, so he had so much material he had never put into a body of work structured for the public. He had always been on the move, hardly having enough time to look through his own archive. Much of his oeuvre, although decades old, burst with such freshness that the foundation had to grapple with how best to present it going forward.

Gordon Parks, *Philip B, Kunhardt, Jr. and Gordon Parks, Chappaqua, New York, ca. 2000.* Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

"It was a huge question for us," says Peter W. Kunhardt, the current Executive Director of the Gordon Parks Foundation and grandson of Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr. "There was just so much of his work, we knew we had to get it right."

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He is 14 years old and his mother has just died. The night is quiet, hollow. He falls asleep beside her coffin, battling his own fear of death. Afterwards, he makes it to St. Paul, Minnesota, to live with one of his sisters and her husband. He and his brother-in-law do not get along. They fight all the time. He is turned out into the streets at 15. Homeless, Gordon Parks turns towards brothels, searching for a job, for a life. He is a singer. He is a piano player. He is a waiter. He is a semi-pro basketball player. He is a bus boy. He is a boy.

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In 2012, the year when Parks would have been 100 years old, the Gordon Parks Foundation undertook a publication to celebrate its origins, as well as Parks's centennial birthday. They decided not to partner with any institution to do a museum show but instead chose to create a roadmap for Parks's photography career. The project, an exhaustive five-volume collection published by the renowned German publisher Steidl, entitled *Gordon Parks Collected Works*, assessed Parks's entire career from start to finish. The books garnered much attention, and by extension, interest in the young foundation, which was suddenly inundated with requests from museums. "They were asking, how can we get involved with the foundation? How can we do exhibitions?" says Kunhardt. The foundation began to work with institutions on focused exhibitions around Parks's career. The idea of a retrospective was not on the table. "We aren't interested in the idea of a retrospective at the moment," notes Kunhardt. "A retrospective has a life and then is over. That's not what we currently want for Parks."

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Gordon Parks is 25. He stumbles upon a magazine with photographs of migrant workers. He cannot sleep; he keeps thinking about photographs from that magazine. So, in 1937, he saves his money and buys a Voigtländer Brilliant—his first ever camera—for $7.50 at a pawnshop in Seattle, and he teaches himself to make photos. He feels alive. Within his camera's frame everything becomes possible. He befriends the clerks at a photography shop and they develop his first roll of film. They applaud his work and convince him to seek a role as a fashion photographer at a clothing store. His photographs catch the interest of Marva Louis, wife of American heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis. Marva encourages him to move with his wife, Sally Alvis, to Chicago. When he arrives in the city, Gordon Parks sets up a portrait business. He photographs society women. He starts to make a steady income. Life becomes easier.

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After the publication of *Gordon Parks Collected Works*, the Gordon Parks Foundation collaborated with the Studio Museum in Harlem on its first, focused exhibition of the photographer's works. "We received the best advice from Thelma Golden who was the Director and Chief Curator of the museum," says Kunhardt. "She advised us to go deep, not wide. To go deep into the archive. And to really think about what could be done with Gordon's work, not the generic blockbuster shows. So we did that, and Thelma curated a beautiful show on Gordon's 1967/68 [series] *A Harlem Family*."

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, New York, New York, 1963.* Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

On November 11, 2012, *Gordon Parks: A Harlem Family 1967* opened at the Studio Museum and ran till June 30, 2013. It featured about 30 black-and-white photographs of the Fontenelle family, whose lives Gordon Parks had documented as part of a photo essay for *Life* magazine, who published it in 1968. The exhibition contained all the images from the

original essay as well as many unpublished images, some of which had never been on show publicly. It proved to be both a critical and commercial success, and a great complement for the five-volume set of books.

"Going straight to a retrospective would have limited the inherent possibility of looking at Parks's work," says Thelma Golden. "But the other reason I advised them to go deep into each body of work was because I knew that would exponentially increase the audience and create a continuous conversation that would make Parks relevant longer than a retrospective would. It's been amazing to watch it all develop."

The foundation decided to stick with the method. Every year since 2012, it has published a new monograph and partnered with a museum for a show based on a distinct body of Parks's work. "The partnerships have usually been organic," says Kunhardt, "a new body of Gordon Parks's work is released to the public and a museum show happens to be in concert with the work."

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His life in Chicago is filled with experiences, with responsibilities, with possibilities. Gordon Parks soon recognizes the need to engage in more than one mode of photography. He keeps on with his fashion photography, but extends into documentary work. He traverses the city, memorizes it, knows it like the center of his palm. His hand is strong upon the camera, his gaze is sharp as he walks the streets. He scrutinizes the everyday, picking up anomalies. He begins to capture the diverse experiences of African Americans across the city. Hidden stories reveal themselves to him.

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"The first obstacle for the foundation was that Gordon Parks's audience was generally limited to the generation he was part of," observes Kunhardt. By the time of the release of *Gordon Parks Collected Works* in 2012, Parks had been dead for six years. How could the foundation introduce his work to newer generations? How could his legacy and work be protected, perpetuated?

"We're trying to preserve the narrative surrounding his life and what he represented," Kunhardt says. "It is important to continue to draw the thread, to show that there are many artists today whose work and thinking were heavily influenced by Gordon. Artists who couldn't have gotten to where they are today without the knowledge and history of what he represented. Our response was to focus a lot on students."

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The year is 1941, and he has been making work in Chicago for 11 months. He submits his photographs of African Americans across the city to the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. He wins it, receiving a $200 monthly stipend. The spotlight is on him now. Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks, winner of the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks, invited to join the Farm Security Administration. Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks, rolling with the big leagues now.

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Recognizing how instrumental a fellowship had been to Parks's career, the foundation began a scholarship program in 2009 to help fund students across diverse disciplines. It was arranged such that students could use the funds to attend tuition-based programs, to purchase cameras, and acquire art supplies. Since then, the foundation has worked with educational institutions across America, including New York University, Harlem School of the Arts, Ghetto Film School, Columbia Graduate School of Journalism, Harvard University, and Pratt Institute, among others, to confer prizes and scholarships to more than 100 candidates. The process has been that deans and chairs of departments or programs elect scholarship recipients and send their nominees to the foundation. The initiative began as a $2,500 grant to each student, and has now increased to $5,000.

About five years into the scholarship program, the foundation realized that there was a whole demographic—working artists of a certain caliber—who didn't fit the criteria of students but were also not yet superstar artists, and who needed support for their work. The Foundation imagined that this support would not only help increase the scholarly approach to these artists' work, but would also reinforce elements from Parks's work with which they were already engaging. So in 2017, the foundation began awarding The Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship. Two fellowships of $20,000, awarded annually, are given to photographers, artists, filmmakers, or musicians to "support the development of new or ongoing projects that explore themes of representation and social justice in historical dialogue with Parks' creative work and vision," according to the Foundation's website. Artists usually have to apply by submitting their work for consideration. A board examines all submissions and collectively decides the winning fellows. Eight artists have received the award so far, including Deana Lawson (2018) and Hank Willis Thomas (2019).

"We are a small non-profit like so many, but we're fortunate to have the support of a great community of patrons," Kunhardt says. "We have a small gala every year. We're also very lucky that the market prices for Gordon's work has continued to increase. It has helped us be able to fund our work."

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He is with the Farm Security Administration now, training under Roy Stryker, head of the Information Division, to report and document the plight of poor farmers and to provide educational materials to the American public. In the mornings, as Gordon Parks walks into the FSA's building, he notices a woman with her head low, cleaning the floors. She is slim, tall,

hair parted neatly to the side, glasses resting gently on her face. Hidden stories have always revealed themselves to him, but he knows the greatest ones are right there in your face. He walks up to the woman, asks her for her name.

"Ella," she says, resting on her broom, "Ella Watson."

Gordon Parks, *American Gothic, Washington, D.C., 1942.* Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

He spends the day thinking about how he will photograph her, and remembers one of the most striking paintings he's ever seen. It is Grant Wood's *American Gothic*, painted in 1930, and housed in the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. The man in the painting, holding a pitchfork, reminds him of Ella and her mop and her broom. The next day, armed with his camera, he convinces Ella to stand in front of a large American flag. Broom to her right, mop to her left. Both erect, like the pitchfork in Wood's painting. Her jaw is slightly tilted the minute when he clicks the shutter. Above her head, the stars of the flag pour like snow on a winter night.

His photograph of Ella, *American Gothic, Washington, D.C.* (1942) is haunting. His boss, Roy Stryker, thinks its indictment of America is unshakable, its unvarnished depiction of menial workers so potent. The photograph becomes one of the most iconic images to come out of the Farm Security Administration. He continues to work with Ella. Goes to her home. Photographs her living condition, her family. But nothing from the series trumps the first photograph.

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"The work of the foundation is not just about memorializing Gordon Parks," says Kunhardt. "Much of our thesis is really about the arts and social justice and where those two meet. We are using his name and work as a platform to advance these causes."

In 2020 the foundation launched a new project, a book prize in partnership with Steidl known as The Gordon Parks Foundation/Steidl Book Prize. Conceived by Kunhardt and Gerhard Steidl, it will serve as a publishing platform for artists whose practices reflect and extend Gordon Parks's legacy. Steidl will publish and distribute a book that will feature new work by a contemporary or mid-career artist. The inaugural recipient of the prize, LaToya Ruby Frazier, whose work uses photography as a tool for advancing social justice, will have her next book published by Steidl in 2021. The plan is for each book resulting from the Prize to have an accompanying exhibition, and programming that will help further Parks's legacy of how art can perpetuate social, cultural, and political change.

Together with the launch of the prize, The Gordon Parks Foundation set up a new library, called the Steidl Library, at their headquarters in Pleasantville. The library encompasses more than 3,000 Steidl art and photography books, a collection that includes out-of-print, one-of-a-kind, and limited-edition publications, rare materials that will now be accessible to scholars and to the public.

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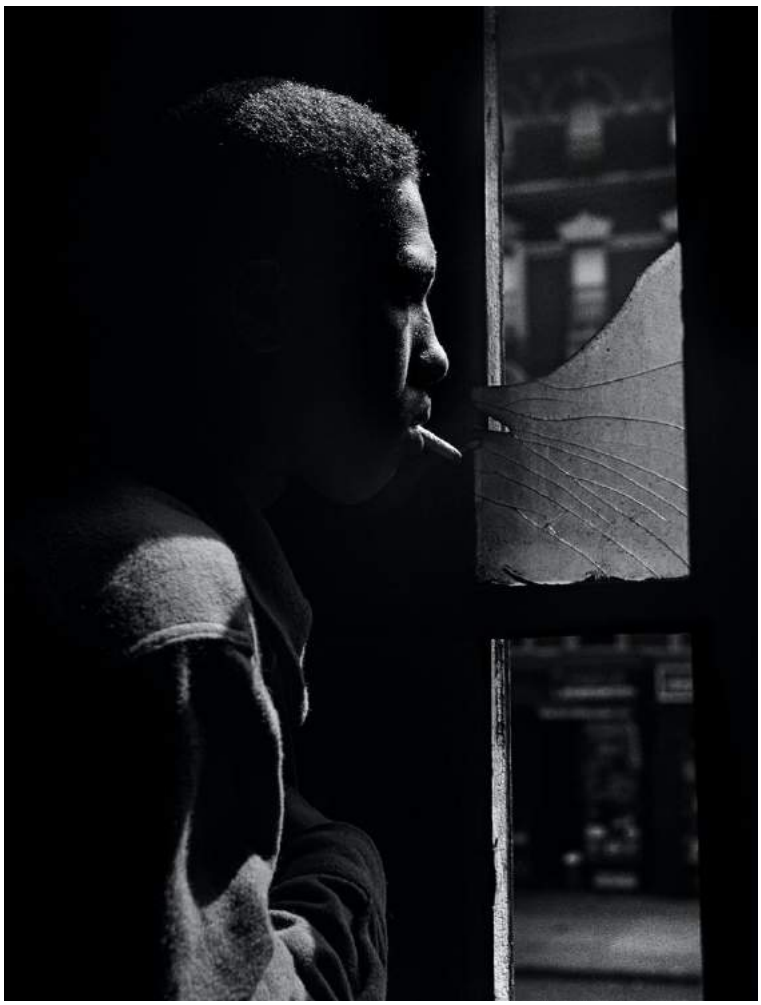
He decides to move to New York in the late 1940s. He gets a gig as a freelance photographer for *Vogue*. The industry is insidiously racist, mostly shunning Black photographers, but his editor succeeds in getting him hired to shoot evening gowns for the magazine. Gordon Parks spends years developing a unique style of fashion photography. He photographs his models in motion, rather than in static poses. At night he puts materials together, makes notes, works on book projects. He publishes *Flash Photography* in 1947 and *Camera Portraits: Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture in* 1948.

All the while he keeps his ear to the streets. He has heard of a gang, one of many in Harlem, called The Midtowners, led by 17-year-old Leonard "Red" Jackson. He introduces himself to Red, and spends two weeks gaining his trust. Then, for six weeks afterwards, he follows the gang leader around, making a series of photographs about the Midtowners, with a focus on Red.



Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson, Harlem, New York, 1948.* Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Red working as a dishwasher in a restaurant.
Red as a janitor.
Red laying in bed, reading a newspaper.
Red adjusting his tie before an outing.
Red, shirtless, wrenching open a hydrant for neighborhood kids.

One day, during the project, he is together with Red when a fight breaks out. They both run, chased by a rival gang. They end up hiding in an abandoned building, both of them out of sight. Red stands beside a window and knocks out a pane—enough space to point his .38 pistol through. Red lifts a cigarette to his mouth, places his right hand on his chest. Red's eyes are watching the street. Red will soon start firing. Red's face is consuming light. The photographer recognizes the

weight of the moment. He hides in a corner. He lifts his camera, and takes the shot. The resulting image, *Red Jackson, Harlem, New York* (1948), is terrifyingly beautiful. It is iconic for life.

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In 1948 when Parks shot the series, publishing it as a photo-essay with *Life* magazine had proven to be more contentious than he initially imagined. The editors, after they had provided an ominous subtitle to the article ("Red Jackson's life is one of fear, frustration, and violence"), proceeded to select mostly photographs from the series that depicted a turbulence, aggression, and lack of hope. Parks had hoped for a rounder, fuller story, one that included several pictures of the intimate, humane, and joyous moments of the street life in Harlem that he had also captured. Most of these kinds of pictures were rejected by the *Life* editors and they remained in Parks's collection. Even the accepted pictures were edited and enhanced to show the editors' bias towards depicting only the violence. It was so bad that Parks had to destroy the negative of a picture of Red holding a smoking gun, to prevent it from making the cover of the magazine.

In 2013 the Gordon Parks Foundation, together with the New Orleans Museum of Art, organized an exhibition titled *Gordon Parks: The Making of An Argument*, which traveled to the Fralin Museum of Art at the University of Virginia the following year. *The Making of An Argument* sought to re-examine Parks's story of Red Jackson and the Harlem gangs.

Gordon Parks, Untitled contact sheet. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Photographer Lyric Cabral (American, born 1982) sought out Red in 2007, one year after the death of Parks. She began making photographs of Red, age 76 at the time, following him to the barber's, to the hospital where he waits to be seen by one of his primary care doctors, and other ordinary occasions of a senior citizen's daily life. The photographs are from the other side, just like those excluded from the *Life* magazine essay in 1948. With *The Making of an Argument,* the Gordon Parks Foundation was able to bring together the earlier images rejected by the magazine editors, the original unedited contact sheets of the photographs by Parks, and the more recent work of Cabral, ensuring a proper historicization. The full picture was now revealed, 65 years after the original publication in *Life*.

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By 1948, he is a full-time staff photographer for *Life* magazine, the first African American to achieve such a position. He will remain at the magazine for the next 24 years. He continues to produce fashion photographs, and also branches out into sports. He visits Broadway and makes theater photographs. A major chunk of his life is spent documenting poverty, racial and economic segregation. He befriends and photographs celebrities, activists. Malcolm X. Stokely Carmichael. Muhammad Ali. Barbra Streisand. His still-segregated hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas, continues to haunt him. Gordon Parks returns there, makes a photographic document of the community and the lives of his classmates from middle school, now grown, hoping to get the work into *Life*, but the magazine never publishes it. In the meantime, he wins an award for "Photographer of the Year" by the American Society of Magazine Photographers. Lee D. Baker, Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Sociology, and African and African American Studies at Duke University, even ventures to describe him as "one of the most provocative and celebrated photojournalists in the United States." Nine years after his death, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts finally exhibits his Fort Scott images for the first time.

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Gordon Parks has often been misconstrued as simply a lifestyle or fashion photographer. "That was one of the major obstacles we were facing and still continue to rethink as a foundation," says Kunhardt,

> He was really a Renaissance man. Part of the mission of the foundation in keeping him relevant today is showing him as a really important American artist who was successful in bridging the gap between creating work that educated but was at the same time artistic, regardless of the medium. I think that the fact that all these really big museums and institutions—the Museum of Modern Art, The National Gallery of Art in Washington, The Art Institute in Chicago, The Getty in Los Angeles—have had exhibitions and worked closely with the foundation to really document Gordon as he should be has changed all of that to a good extent. My guess is that without a
>
> foundation he would be thought of right now as a photojournalist that worked with *Life* rather than as the phenomenal artist that he was.

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All his life, Gordon Parks has always been more than one thing at once. Now, when he is not photographing, he is writing, painting, making music. He becomes the first major Black Hollywood director when he directs *The Learning Tree* in 1969, an adaptation of his semi-autobiographical novel. Now it is 1970 and he has helped establish *Essence Magazine*, with a focus on African American women, and serves as its first editorial director. He has worked as a consultant for Hollywood productions. He has directed a series of documentaries commissioned by National Educational Television on Black ghetto life. Then in 1971, he directs the film *Shaft*. It becomes a blockbuster and cements his name as a movie director.

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The Gordon Parks foundation hasn't yet engaged much with the other genres in which Parks worked. His paintings (he had a show at the Alex Rosenberg Gallery in New York in 1981, of abstract oils), films, writing, and music for example, haven't had much consideration.

"We're a small team," Kunhardt says. "We have really tackled and gone deep into his photographic work. There is so much material but again we're limited by funding and time, so his films and other mediums are still to be more focused on. As the years progress we will definitely do something with these."

The foundation's work has obviously followed the advice Golden gave when preparing for the 2012 exhibition. As an entity, it has primarily concerned itself with how it can become a parallel for Gordon's ideas and life. After the murder of George Floyd in St. Paul this past spring for instance, the same town where Parks had moved as a teenager after the death of his mother, the foundation began working with a school in the city, the Gordon Parks High School, to create programs based on Park's life that would be inspirational to students. "We're always thinking about more than just legacy, but also about how we can advance the plight of humanity itself," notes Peter Kunhardt. He mentions another of Parks's humanitarian engagements. "The fact that his work could contribute to saving Flavio's life, and to help his family out of poverty is a pointer for how we constitute ourselves as an institution."

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He had gone to Brazil in 1961, on assignment for *Life* with the aim of documenting the situation of Latin Americans living in extreme poverty. In the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro he stumbles upon a slum, Catacumba Favela. He notices a 12-year-old boy, the eldest of eight children, suffering from severe asthma. The photographer thinks to himself, "Death [is] all over him, in his sunken eyes, cheeks, and jaundiced coloring." Parks begins to photograph the boy and his family. He learns the boy is not afraid of death, but he is afraid of what will happen to his family after he dies. *Life* publishes the photographs and readers respond to Parks's haunting images with more than $100,000 in donations for the boy's treatment. His name is Flavio and he survives.

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At the Fort Scott Community College in Kansas, there is a museum dedicated to Gordon Parks. It is a small space, holding some of Parks's photographs (most of which he donated in 2004) and many of his personal effects together with other memorabilia. Although he had endured Fort Scott's racism and segregation, Parks had expressed his wish, before he passed away, for this museum, at this community college, to hold these materials. The Gordon Parks Foundation has worked with and supported the Gordon Parks Museum in Kansas. "It's not an academic institution," says Kunhardt. "But I'm glad it exists."

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He is 93 now, ripe as corn in the harvest. He has many emotions about Fort Scott, about Kansas. It is where he was first spat at for the color of his skin. But it is also where his mother rests. He chooses to be buried there, beside his mother, when he dies.

His body is moving now. Moving in the air. Moving across the country. Moving till it gets to Fort Scott. Moving till it gets to his mother's side, where it all began.

Contributor

Yínká Elújọba
is a writer and art critic.

Photographer Gordon Parks Captured a Changing America in the Midst of the Civil Rights Era for Life Magazine—See Images Here

As galleries and art institutions around the world begin to slowly reopen, we are spotlighting individual shows—online and IRL—that are worth your attention.

Caroline Goldstein (https://news.artnet.com/about/caroline-goldstein-596), July 3, 2020

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama* (1956). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation, NY and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.

As galleries and art institutions around the world begin to slowly reopen, we are spotlighting individual shows—online and IRL—that are worth your attention.

"Gordon Parks: Part One (https://www.alisonjacquesgallery.com/exhibitions/186/overview/)"
through August 1, 2020
Alison Jacques Gallery, London

What the gallery says: “Born into poverty and segregation in Fort Scott, Kansas, Gordon Parks was a humanitarian with a deep and life-long commitment to social justice. He rapidly developed a deeply personal style of photography with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life. Parks left behind an exceptional body of work; a legacy that documented American culture and everyday life from the early 1940s to the 2000s, with achievements encompassing writing (fiction and nonfiction), composing, and filmmaking, having directed several feature films, including *Shaft* (1971).

He created some of his most pivotal pictures at *Life* magazine during his two-decade tenure at the internationally renowned news magazine.

‘Gordon Parks: Part One’ focuses on two defining stories, *Segregation in the South* (1956) and *Black Muslims* (1963), both of which initially appeared in *Life*. This period formed a critical moment in Parks’ career, coinciding with the burgeoning civil rights movement. The visionary images that constitute both these series offered visibility to often marginalized, anonymous families and misrepresented figures in American society at large. Parks’ interest in taking photographs stemmed from a desire to create meaningful change. As he commented, ‘I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs.’”

Why it’s worth a look: A pioneer in the fields of photography and cinema, Gordon Parks created work that remains as poignant today as it did when it originally appeared in the pages of *Life* magazine. In the two series highlighted in this show, Parks turned his lens on seminal aspects of America’s changing social and political landscape.

In *Segregation in the South*, Parks captures life in Alabama; his work was markedly different from other images of the civil rights era, which often documented violent clashes. Parks, for his part, focused on the everyday grace and dignity of African American families in the 1950s.

The second series, *Black Muslims*, is an insider’s view of a burgeoning political and social movement. Parks befriended Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, and was granted access to an otherwise close-knit community. Parks captured the peaceful protests and full-hearted idealism of the group instead of depicting members as combatants. As he said, “I felt it is the heart, not the eye, that should determine the content of the photograph.”

What it looks like:

Installation view, “Gordon Parks: Part One” courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

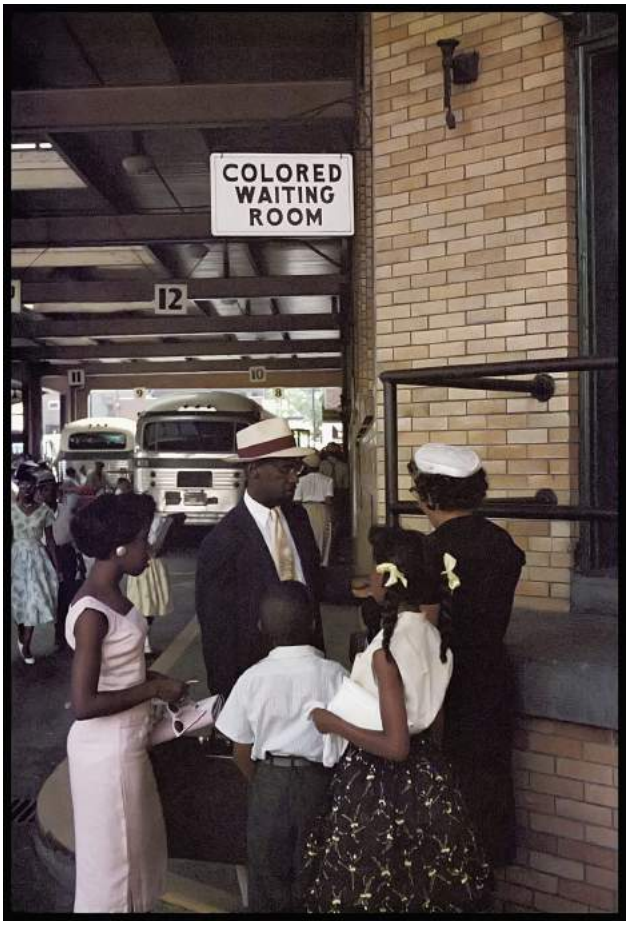
Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Alabama* (1956). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation, NY and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Mobile, Alabama* (1956). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation, NY and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Installation view, “Gordon Parks: Part One” courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

Installation view, “Gordon Parks: Part One” courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama* (1956). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation, NY and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.



Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Nashville, Tennessee* (1956). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation, NY and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Installation view, “Gordon Parks: Part One” courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Alabama* (1956). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation, NY and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.

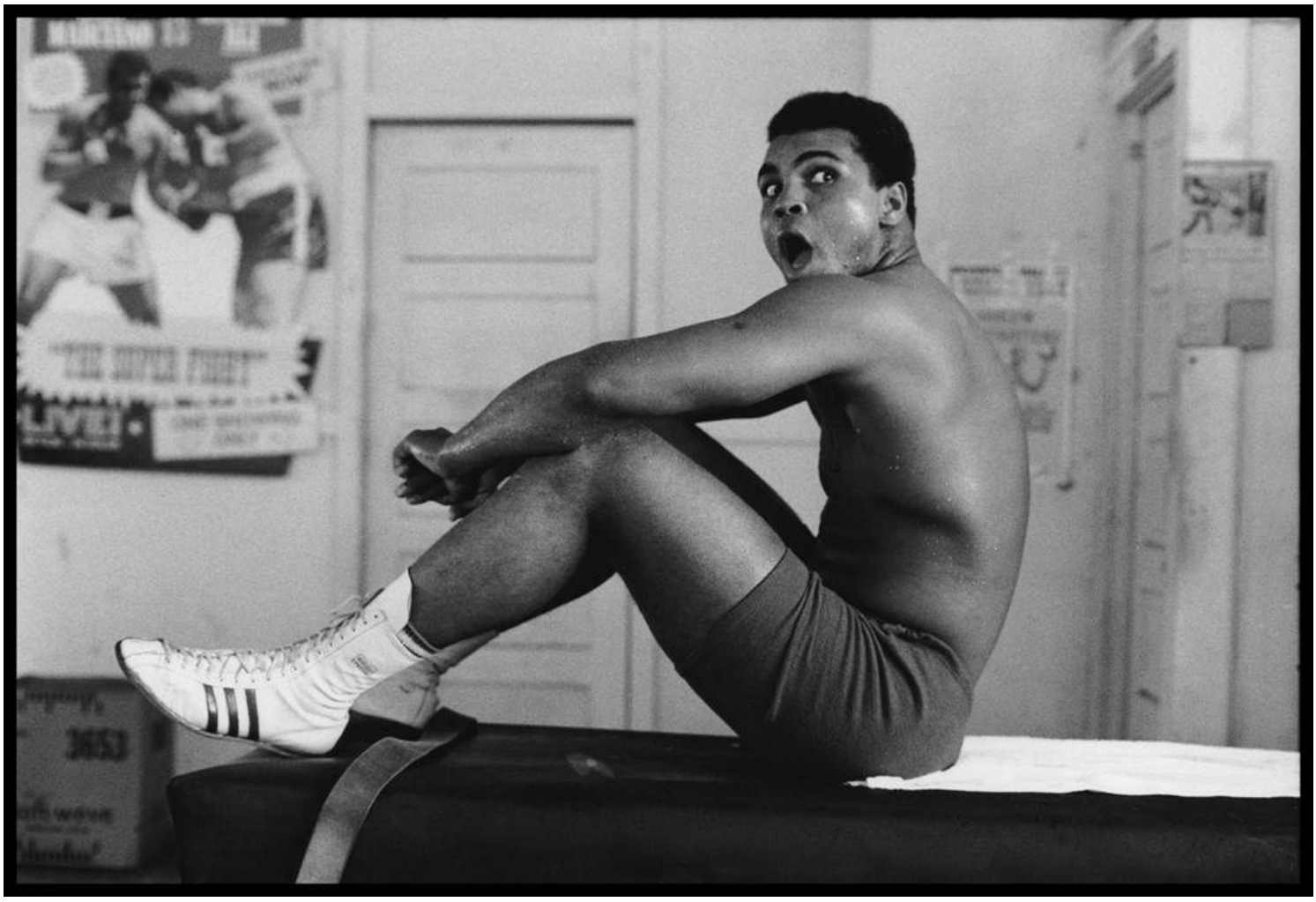
Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Harlem* (1963). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation, NY and Alison Jacques Gallery, London. © The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Installation view, “Gordon Parks: Part One” courtesy of Alison Jacques Gallery, London.

AnOther

How Gordon Parks Captured a Different Side of Muhammad Ali

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY / IN PICTURES



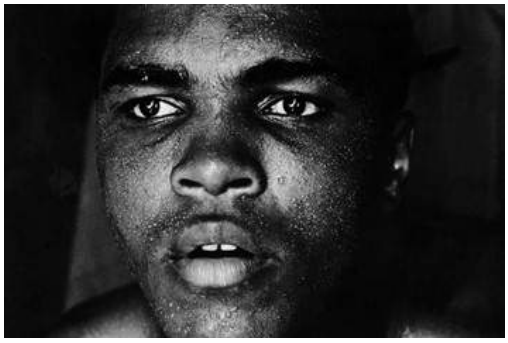
Gordon Parks, Untitled, Miami Beach, Florida, 1970
Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

SEPTEMBER 02, 2020

TEXT Belle Hutton

"A revealing and personal encounter between a famous photographer-author and Muhammad Ali," wrote *Life* magazine in 1966, introducing **Gordon Parks**' profile of the boxing champion. By then, Parks had been at *Life* for over a decade – he was the first Black image-maker on the magazine's staff – and was an established photographer, known for also writing the features alongside his photo stories. At the same time, Ali had gained international prominence not only for his prodigious boxing talent, but his recent conversion to Islam. "I felt free to tell him quite directly that I had come to Miami to see whether he was really as obnoxious as people were making him out to be," said Parks at the time. Parks' profile of Ali was titled *The Redemption of the Champion*, and led to a change in public opinion in favour of Ali, as well as an enduring friendship between the two men.

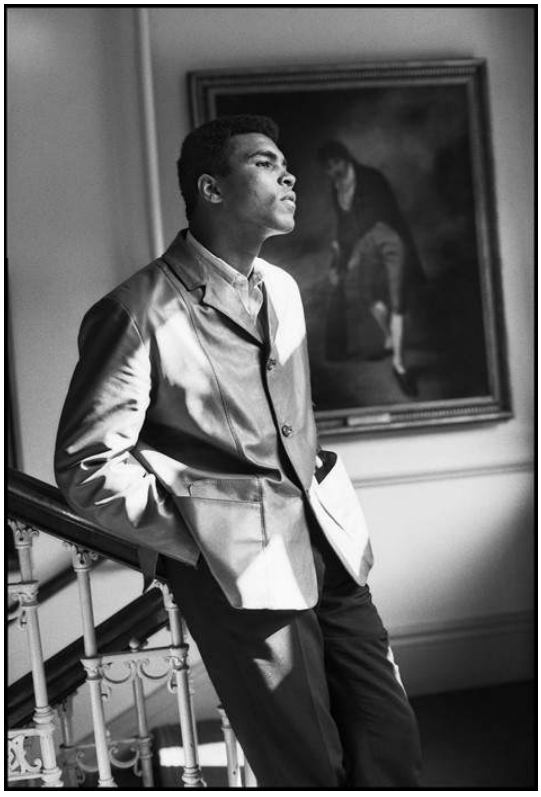
A new exhibition at Alison Jacques Gallery, London, presents a selection of Parks' photographs of Ali, "intimate and nuanced portrait of the legendary athlete and human rights advocate", according to the gallery. Entitled *Gordon Parks: Part Two*, the show follows *Part One*, staged in July, which focused on two of Parks' earlier series for *Life*: *Segregation in the South* (1956) and *Black Muslims* (1963).



GALLERY / 16 IMAGES

Gordon Parks: Part Two

For the latter report, Parks spent months with core members of Nation of Islam, the African American movement that Ali aligned himself with for a number of years. “In fulfilling my professional and artistic ambitions in the White Man’s world, I had had to become completely involved in it,” Parks wrote in the accompanying article, reckoning with the movement on a personal and public level. “At the beginning of my career I missed the soft, easy laughter of Harlem and the security of Black friends around me … Many times I wondered whether my achievement was worth the loneliness I experienced, but now I realise the price was small. This same experience has taught me that there is nothing ignoble about a Black man climbing from the troubled darkness on a white man’s ladder, providing he doesn’t forsake the others who, subsequently, must escape that same darkness.” A prolific photographer, filmmaker, writer, poet, painter and composer, Parks addressed racial and social injustices throughout his career.



Gordon Parks, Untitled, London, England, 1966
Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

Many of the photographs in *Gordon Parks: Part Two* are unpublished and have not been previously exhibited in the UK, and come from both the 1966 *Life* story and a later one published in 1970. Parks captured an unseen side of Ali when he photographed him: the boxer is seen fresh from the ring after a fight; during quieter moments of contemplation; in the middle of training; engaging with fans; and about to eat with family. For an athlete with a complex reputation attached to him, Parks' warm, intricate and insightful profile marked a significant moment. Early on in his report, Parks wrote: "At that point I began to feel a certain sympathy for him … Muhammad was a gifted Black champion and I *wanted* him to be a hero, but he wasn't making it. I also felt, however, that he could not possibly be quite so bad as he was made out to be in the press."

By the end of a lengthy and revealing profile, Parks was hopeful: "For, at last, he seemed fully aware of the kind of behaviour that brings respect. Already a brilliant fighter, there was hope now that he might become a champion everyone could look up to," he wrote, with a warmth that hints at the long friendship the two would share. "If

frieze

Gordon Parks and The Politics of Colour

The late US photographer challenges perceptions of African Americans in a two-part series

BY **CANDICE NEMBHARD** IN **REVIEWS** | 04 AUG 20

Following the successful launch of Kodachrome in 1935, Kodak dominated the colour film industry globally. Yet, the colour-reference images they used from the mid-1950s – known as ‘Shirley cards’ after the original model – carried implicit racial bias, since the film was designed to favour lighter-toned subjects. As Lorna Roth notes in *Looking at Shirley: the Ultimate Norm* (2009), it was only when Kodak received complaints from furniture and chocolate manufacturers in the 1970s that the company expanded its colour calibration.

In his 1956 series ‘Segregation in the South’, commissioned for *Life* magazine, Kansas-born photographer Gordon Parks captured intimate images of Alabama in living colour. Now showing at Alison Jacques Gallery, in collaboration with the Gordon Parks Foundation, these portraits depict three rural African-American families against the backdrop of ‘coloured only’ public spaces.

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Alabama*, 1956, colour photograph. Courtesy: The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Parks's keen eye for colour, particularly red, offers a counter-narrative to the popular greyscale depictions of police brutality under Jim Crow laws. In *Untitled, Mobile, Alabama* (1956), a family enjoys the contents of a red-bound book on the veranda. Elsewhere, a red plastic cowboy hat adorns the head of a doe-eyed boy, curious children pose in front of a sleek red car and girls in red skirts shop for treats at the 'coloured' counter of a hot-dog stand (all *Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama*, 1956).

By opting to shoot in colour, Parks aesthetically liberates his subjects from the black/white segregationism of the Deep South, foreshadowing the changes that the 1964 Civil Rights Act would institute. In Parks's Alabama, segregated wastelands appear as florid playgrounds amidst the warmth and charm of hand-painted signs and rising consumer culture. Black women are free agents, proudly wearing turquoise-blue dresses in the sweltering heat following Sunday service. Kids, unsupervised and spirited, play barefoot in the earth-red clay and explore green pools of uncharted waters in a world seemingly devoid of violence and race-based injustices.

Parks's nuanced project continues in the achromatic series 'Black Muslims' (1963), also commissioned by *Life*, which chronicles the message and messengers of the Nation of Islam. *Malcolm X at Rally, Chicago, Illinois*, showing the minister with his hand raised, is juxtaposed with *Harlem Rally, Harlem, New York*, in which protestors hold placards declaring 'Liberty or Death' and 'We Are Living in a Police State', and *Untitled, Chicago, Illinois*, depicting a group of white-clad Muslim sisters attending a religious service. The nuance of these portraits lies in the delicate balance Parks achieves between black and white tonalites. Here, his greyscale palette helps focus our attention on the fine divide between civility and the fight for civil rights.

Given its ambition to challenge how we frame Black visual narratives, the exhibition would have benefitted from an accompanying selection of Parks's extensive writings to provide a more nuanced account of the artist's wider artistry and activism. Nonetheless, the curation does prompt viewers to consider Black independence in an otherwise oppressive period of US history.

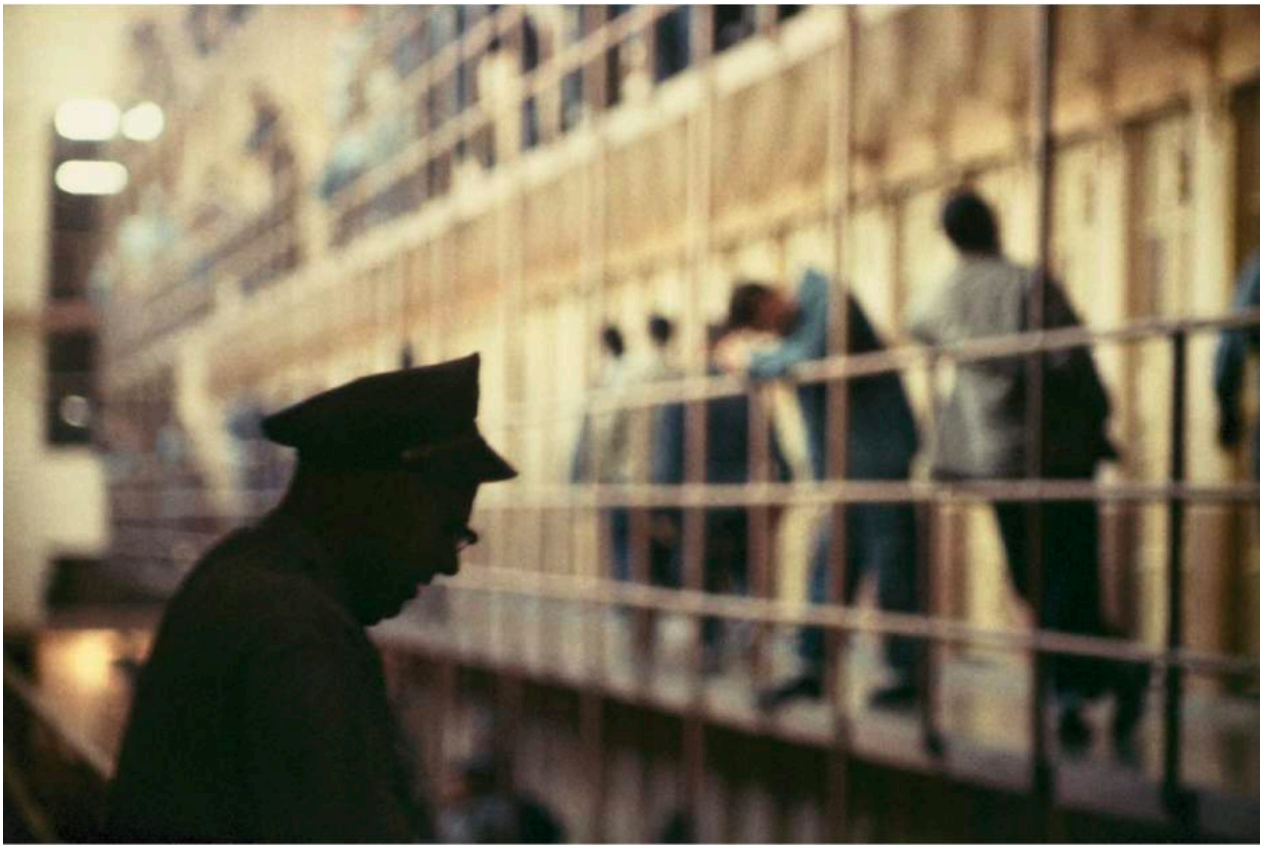
Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Mobile, Alabama*, 1956, colour photograph.
Courtesy: The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery,
London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation

These images have a life that extends far beyond both the magazine pages in which they originally appeared and the white cube in which they now hang. This resonates most strongly, perhaps, in *Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, Mobile, Alabama* (1956), wherein the sepia tones of an old family photograph hanging on the wall meet the colourful near future of the crimson couch upon which the subjects perch. Here, Parks's decisive use of colour speaks to the ongoing struggle African Americans face to attain true self-advocacy.

'*Gordon Parks: Part One*' *is at Alison Jacques Gallery, London, until 1 August 2020.* '*Part Two*' *runs from 1 September to 1 October 2020.*

Main image: Gordon Parks, Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama*, 1956, colour photograph. Courtesy: The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London; © The Gordon Parks Foundation*

The Washington Post



With his camera, Gordon Parks humanized the Black people others saw as simply criminals

In 1957, Gordon Parks accepted an assignment from Life magazine, where he had been a staff photographer for a decade — the first African American to hold such a position — to explore crime in America. An interesting gig. How to tackle it?

Parks traveled for six weeks, visiting Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New York. Many of his photographs were taken at night and on the street. He photographed crime scenes, police stations and prisons. He captured the dramatic moment when detectives kicked down a door in a raid. He took close-ups of a man injecting himself with drugs. And he captured the fingerprinting of drug addicts arrested after forging prescriptions.

Some of his pictures dwelled on the aftermath of violence. One showed a homicide victim splayed on the ground. Another was of an elderly White nurse dressing the wounds of a bloodied Black victim.

Other photographs were at once humdrum and macabre. One indelible image was of a short, stocky worker in a morgue, a cigarette dangling from his mouth, bending down to retrieve a shooting victim covered in a white cloth.

Some of the photographs are the more disturbing for the absence of bodies. Parks zoomed in, for instance, on a pre-execution order on a prison clipboard. And in the next shot, we see a uniformed guard, through the threshold of a half-closed door, sitting by an empty electric chair, arranging the leather straps.

At the warden's invitation, which he regretted accepting, Parks witnessed a man being executed in that chair. He also took photos inside San Quentin prison and showed Alacatraz across the water at night.

None of these images is crude or cliched. A few, it's true, are brutally direct, in the spirit of Robert Lowell ("Yet why not say what happened?") or Walker Evans ("If the thing is there, why there it is."). But others are oddly — and arrestingly — tentative. They're optically blurred, obscured by visual impediments, as if filtered through the artist's melancholy, his pity, his black-of-night bewilderment. Looking at them, you feel that something others might rush to — judgment, sentencing, finality — has been deliberately withheld.

A selection of these photographs appeared alongside text by staff writer Robert Wallace as an eight-page photo essay in a 1957 issue of Life. At the time, Life was one of the most popular and influential publications in the nation. It was aimed at a mass market, which meant that its readers were middle class and mostly White, as the tenor of the magazine's advertising attests.

So even though Parks, who once described himself as "an objective reporter with a subjective heart," brought to bear his deeply artistic and compassionate sensibility on the subject of American crime, its presentation in the magazine was subtly skewed to fit a preexisting, politically loaded narrative about crime. Where Parks's camera captured, for instance, his subjects' vulnerability, the captions tendentiously described "known criminals." Other images were described in terms of impending violence, to stoke sensation.

Thanks to the Gordon Parks Foundation, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the great German photography publisher Steidl, we can now see Parks's photo-essay in expanded form, shorn of Life magazine's prejudicial framing, in a new book, "Gordon Parks: The Atmosphere of Crime, 1957." Images from the series also can be seen as part of an online presentation of Parks's work on the MoMA website.

The presence of the word "atmosphere" in the title is apt. It captures both the cumulative impact of the imagery and the complexity of crime's causes and effects. Park's use of blur, his unexpected vantage points and his embrace of pooling darkness all elevate his feeling for complication and suffering over the usual simplistic story lines that crowd to the subject of crime.

Where did Parks's pity, his feeling for injustice, come from?

Born in 1912, the youngest of 15 children, Parks grew up in Kansas, where he suffered, he said, "all the indignities of being a Negro in Kansas in those early days, and I had lots of problems." Three of his friends died before they were 20.

A National Gallery show examines Gordon Parks's early years

It was an era of racial terror. Bryan Stevenson, the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative (and author of "Just Mercy"), writes in the lead essay of the Parks book that in 1920, when Parks was just 7 and living in racially segregated Fort Scott, a man named Albert Evans — described in the local press as a "Negro tramp" — was falsely accused of assaulting a White girl (the White man who accused him later admitted to the crime). Just 25 miles from Parks's home, Evans was imprisoned, pulled out of the jail window, and tortured and lynched by a mob of more than 1,000 White people.

Four years later, Stevenson writes, Parks was thrown into a river by three White boys who knew he couldn't swim. He would go on to become one of the 20th century's greatest photographers, as well as a groundbreaking filmmaker, writer, choreographer and composer. But first he had to learn how to defeat what he called "the elaborate conspiracy of evil that once beckoned me towards such a death," meaning the state execution he had witnessed in 1957. The statement attests to Parks's instinctive identification with his subjects. He didn't witness that execution as a pitying observer. He looked at it with horror, imagining that the executed man could have been him.

By then, Parks had many extraordinary photo-essays under his belt, including "Segregation Story," which focused on race and poverty in the South, and his famous photo-essay on Leonard "Red" Jackson, who was presented by Life magazine as a "notorious Harlem gangster."

Parks refused to subscribe to old, prejudicial narratives about crime. According to Stevenson, he "consistently humanized people who were meant to be objects of scorn and derision."

Gordon Parks went back to Rio to save a boy's life. What happened next was a lot more complicated.

Stevenson's essay is a brisk and eloquent snapshot of the history of American crime as seen through the lens of race. He notes the screeching dissonance during the slavery era of laws against kidnapping that did not protect Black people, and laws against sexual assault and rape that did not protect Black women. He notes equally egregious discrepancies in 19th-century punishments and sentencing: A White man who killed or raped a Black woman might get a fine of $100, whereas a Black man convicted of the same crime against a White woman could expect mandatory execution.

After the Civil War, Whites continued to commit violence against Blacks with impunity. In Memphis in 1866, for instance, White mobs killed 46 African Americans over three days. Fear of Black criminality, Stevenson writes, was used to justify “crime control” strategies — such as laws against assembling after dark or in groups of more than five people — that authorities enacted whenever Black people succeeded or asserted their independence. Fines and other draconian penalties created spirals of dependency that could be “worse than slavery.”

Between 1880 and 1950, lynchings were committed in open defiance of the law, terrorizing a Black population that proceeded to escape to the ghettos of the North in massive numbers.

A powerful memorial in Montgomery remembers the victims of lynching

If all of this were mere history — a series of episodes confined to the past — it would be one thing. But Parks’s photographs are alive to the many ways in which crime in the 1950s was a continuation of this legacy. Sixty years after he took these photographs, it’s difficult to deny the conclusion that today’s crime-related inequities, from mass incarceration to police brutality, are likewise an extension of this racist legacy.

Big-city street crime has been in steady decline for three decades now. And yet the complexities and inequities of American crime still hinge on race and are still crudely narrated in the media.

Parks’s photographs present a more insightful, delicate and disinterested view. They remind us that an atmosphere is not the same as a narrative. One is complex, pervasive, inchoate and, like a fog, it can lift. The other is linear. Like an obsession, it keeps corkscrewing ahead, leaving all kinds of damage in its wake.

ELEPHANT

Gordon Parks, Untitled, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Gordon Parks Used the Camera as a "Weapon" Against Poverty and Racism

The multitalented Gordon Parks used photography in a bold new way that celebrated the realities of everyday life, confronting racism by documenting his subjects' inner lives. Words by Emily Gosling

It's a pertinent time to be celebrating the work of pioneering photographer Gordon Parks. His photographs combine a lyrical beauty with a keen documentarian's eye in revealing the narratives bubbling beneath the surface of American life.

A new exhibition of his work, created in collaboration with the Gordon Parks Foundation, was scheduled to take place at London's Alison Jacques Gallery back in March; forced to postpone with Covid-19, it has only recently opened. But with the current spotlight on the Black Lives Matter movement—and a palpable sense that people are collectively realising just how far things have to change, and how urgently—it's vital to maintain that energy. It is through work like this that art can help keep that momentum.

Divided into two parts, one on show over summer and one in the autumn, the exhibition is the first of Parks' work in London for more than a quarter of a century, and will showcase his photo essays for Life magazine that highlighted issues including race relations, social justice and civil rights, as well as broader explorations of urban life.

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Yet Parks had a fascinating career outside of his photography, too: not least, he’s frequently credited as one of the main creators of the blaxploitation film genre, having directed Shaft in 1971, as well as The Super Cops (1974) and Leadbelly (1976), a biopic about the blues artist. His film work came about as a result of his writing career, which began in the late 1940s when he penned pieces about the art and craft of photography. A couple of decades later he moved into fiction writing, such as poetry books that he illustrated with his photography, as well as a series of memoirs. In 1970, he cofounded a magazine aimed at African-American women, Essence.

Parks was also a successful musician and composer, and he brought together this side of his practice with his filmmaking in composing the music and a libretto for television ballet tribute to Martin Luther King, Martin, which was screened on national television on King’s birthday in 1990.

Gordon Parks, Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1963. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

His body of work as a whole provides a fascinating and incisive commentary on American life from the 1940s right up to his death in 2006, aged 93. Parks was born in 1912 in the markedly segregated area of Fort Scott, Kansas. Following the death of his mother when he was 14, Parks moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, and was fending for himself at 15 by working a wide variety of jobs, from singing and piano playing to bus boy, traveling waiter, semi-pro basketball player and brothel work.

His love of photography was sparked when he was 25 and saw a magazine's images of migrant workers. Soon after, he bought himself a Voigtländer Brillant for $7.50 at a Seattle pawnshop—his first camera—and taught himself the craft. He proved both a hard worker and a natural, and in 1942 won the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship. This landed him a job in the photography section of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in Washington, D.C., and then the Office of War Information (OWI).

Gordon Parks, Untitled, Mobile, Alabama, 1956 (left). Untitled, Alabama, 1956 (right). Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

It was these agency roles that saw him focus on documenting US social conditions, and he quickly honed a distinctive personal style, highlighting the impact of poverty, racism and other forms of discrimination. From 1948 he began to shoot images for Life magazine, working with the publication for two decades.

The two series on display in Part One of the Alison Jaques exhibition, Segregation in the South (1956) and Black Muslims (1963), were taken as photo essays for Life. Like much of his work, they set out to make marginalised and misrepresented people and communities more visible. In doing so, he hoped to bring about real change in how society perceived them.

“I felt it is the heart, not the eye, that should determine the content of the photograph”

His intensive approach to photography saw him spend weeks on each location getting to know his subjects. The resulting images eschewed representations of violence or other perceived problems in society: they spotlighted the dignity and community that was rarely made visible, let *alone printed in magazines. “I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs,” Parks has said.*

Segregation in the South sees Parks turn his lens on 1950s Alabama and subtly spotlight the racism rife in the state through measured shots of three related African American going about the banalities of daily life. The idea behind the serene style of the images was to inspire empathy: “I felt it is the heart, not the eye, that should determine the content of the photograph.” Parks said.

The other series on show, Black Muslims, was shot across New York and Chicago. Parks had gained access to the usually-insular group, having gained the trust of the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, and his images show scenes of peaceful protests and families at prayer. These are positioned next to his portraits of Malcolm X and Ethel Sharrieff, “all of which stood in opposition to typical media portrayals of the group as a contentious force,” says Alison Jaques gallery. “Parks’ depictions helped to question preconceived and prejudiced attitudes towards the Black Power movement.

“Considered together, these two bodies of work reveal that central to each story is an ideal that guided Parks throughout his career: to confront the challenges facing the nation by illuminating the inner lives of his subjects.”

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

HISTORY ESSAY

Why does this legendary Black photographer's work continue to resonate today?

Recent protests in St. Paul evoke the work of Gordon Parks, an influential 20th-century interpreter of African American life and culture.

BY JOHN EDWIN MASON
PUBLISHED JUNE 26, 2020

Left: This photo of Deveonte Joseph, a teenager from St. Paul, went viral during protests after the death of George Floyd. Right: Parks, center, moved to St. Paul as a teenager to live with relatives after his mother's death in 1928.

Sometimes one of the most interesting things about a photograph is what's just outside the frame. That's the case with the portrait of Deveonte Joseph that Nathan Aguirre made on a street corner in St. Paul, Minnesota a month ago during the protests after the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed black man, by Derek Chauvin, a white Minneapolis police officer.

Across the street from where Joseph stood, barely outside of the camera's view, is a building that connects him to another young black man who lived in St. Paul nearly a century ago. The building is Gordon Parks High School. Its namesake was a man who, as a photojournalist, became one of the mid-20th century's most influential interpreters of African American life and culture. The connection between Joseph and the school reveals much about the enduring nature of racial oppression in the United States and, at the same time, allows us to think about how that oppression and resistance to it have been represented in photography.

Joseph's portrait, which I wrote about soon after Aguirre made it, captured the public's imagination. It quickly went viral on social media and attracted the attention of mainstream news outlets such as CNN. It's easy to see why. In the photograph, Joseph was incongruously dressed in an academic cap and gown, stylishly torn blue jeans, and basketball shoes, as if he were ready for both a graduation ceremony and the party afterward. Although he was isolated in the center of the frame, enough commotion was visible behind and to the sides of where he stands -- men in riot gear, police cars, a large emergency vehicle of some sort -- to suggest that a civil disturbance was nearby. Joseph's outward calm belied the chaos that surrounded him. For many, the portrait symbolized a hopeful future for young black Americans "as well as our failure to fulfill the promises we make to our youth," as the writer Connie Wang put it.

The evening's chaos was all too real. Protesters, angered by Floyd's murder, took to the streets. Some smashed the windows of shops and other businesses and made off with merchandise. Arsonists, perhaps at the scene only to cause mayhem, set buildings on fire. The next day's *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported that 170 businesses were looted or burned on the evening of May 28 and the early morning of May 29. One of those "businesses" was Gordon Parks High School.

with Joseph despite the decades that separate their time in St. Paul. Both men struggled to finish high school (Parks never did), to climb out of poverty, and to live with dignity in a world where the odds were stacked against them. They also share a determination to transform the visual representation of African Americans—that is, to change what is said about them in pictures.

Joseph's backstory is at least as compelling as his portrait. He comes from a large family and is the first among his siblings to graduate from high school. Getting to that point, he told Wang, was hard. "I've fought through it, but I did it," he said. "I graduated." It's no surprise that Joseph struggled to finish school. The Minneapolis-St. Paul area has what one commentator has called some of the nation's "greatest racial disparities in housing and income and education."

Yet Joseph did graduate and was consciously making a statement when he put on his cap and gown on the evening that he was photographed. CNN reported that he dressed as he did because he wanted to challenge what he saw as the misrepresentation of African Americans. "People look at my people like we're down, like we don't have anything. I just don't think we're respected enough," he told CNN. He is also someone with ambitious plans for the future. He told the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* that his dream after high school was to study animation in art school, although his inability to afford tuition payments might prevent it. (After his portrait went viral, friends established a fundraising campaign for him.)

All of this would have been familiar to Parks. Racial discrimination in St. Paul created barriers to education and upward mobility that he fought and eventually overcame. He moved to St. Paul, from his birthplace, Fort Scott, Kansas, as a 16-year-old after his mother's death in 1928. Although his father sent him to the city to live with relatives, he found himself homeless and on his own after an argument with an older brother-in-law. For the next decade and a half, he bounced from one menial job to another. The racial discrimination in employment that he encountered in St. Paul prevented him from finding the economic security that would allow him to finish high school.

None of this stopped Parks from dreaming, nor did it blunt his ambition. When he discovered photography and found that he had an enormous talent for it, he devoured technical manuals and pored over copies of popular picture magazines such as *Life*. The photojournalism and documentary photography that he saw in magazines convinced him that photography could serve several purposes. It could be a way out of poverty, a mode of artistic expression, and a tool with which to fight racial injustice.

Although Parks would have seen a reflection of himself in the portrait of Joseph, he would also have understood the protesters who broke shop windows and carried away merchandise. He had been an angry young man. In his memoir, *A Choice of Weapons*, he acknowledged that "scalding experiences" with racism and white brutality in Kansas and Minnesota made him "quietly but dangerously violent."

Parks did not remain so volatile, of course. His memoir traces the path that led him to choose "love, dignity, and hard work" as the weapons with which he would fight racism. But he wrote that he would always "recall the elaborate conspiracy of evil that once beckoned" him toward violence and an early death.

Parks' anger connects him to the protesters who contributed to the chaos that surrounded Joseph when Aguirre made his portrait. In a recent the *New Yorker* article, Elizabeth Alexander refers to today's young African Americans as the "Trayvon Generation." This is the protesters' generation and Joseph's generation, one that has always understood the fragility of black life in America. They knew that a white policeman or private citizen might kill them at almost any moment, with impunity. They had seen it happen to Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and so many others. "They always knew these stories," Alexander writes. The stories "instructed them that anti-black hatred and violence were never far," and they "were the ground soil of their rage."

The black cohort into which Parks was born possessed a similar knowledge. We can call them "the lynching generation." Parks' birth

coincided with what Rayford Logan and later historians have called "the nadir of race relations." This was the Jim Crow era of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the position of black people in American society was at its lowest point since the end of slavery and when lynchings were near their peak. African Americans were both segregated and terrorized. The Equal Justice Initiative has

counted more than 4,000 racial terror lynchings in the period between the end of Reconstruction, in 1877, and the dawn of the modern Civil Rights era in 1950. In Fort Scott, Parks' birthplace, Jim Crow segregation was the abiding custom, if not the law. Lynchings were well known in the town and the surrounding Bourbon County. There were at least eight lynchings between the end of the Civil War and the 1930s, including one, in 1867, in which three black men lost their lives. Another black man was lynched in neighboring Crawford County, in 1920, when Parks was eight.

The knowledge that Black lives mattered little to the white community affected Parks from an early age. Two of his earliest memories involved the potential lynching of a cousin and the destruction of an entire black community. In *A Choice of Weapons*, he remembers hearing about the 1921 massacre of members of the African American community and destruction of the black business district in Tulsa, Oklahoma, 160 miles from Fort Scott. White mobs killed scores, perhaps hundreds, of African American citizens, destroyed homes and businesses, and left 10,000 people homeless. At about the same time, a cousin of Parks's narrowly escaped being lynched after killing a white man who had called him "n-----." On the run, the cousin stopped by the Parks home one night looking for food. He left that same night, and the family never heard from him again.

The incident made a deep impression on Parks. He wrote that he "would lie awake nights wondering if the whites had killed my cousin, praying that they hadn't. ... And my days were filled with fantasies in which I helped him escape imaginary white mobs." These episodes were, as Alexander put it about the Trayvon Generation, "the ground soil" of his rage. And they would have given him insight into the psychology of the protesters who turned to violence.

Parks learned to contain his anger and channel it into his work as a photographer, writer, and, decades later, a filmmaker. During the 20 years that he spent as the only African American on the staff at *Life,* he produced nearly a dozen lengthy photo essays that brought the reality of American racism home to the magazine's millions of mostly white, mostly middle-class readers. He produced one of his most effective stories specifically to answer a question that he heard so often in the late 1960s: "Why are those people rioting?"

The "riots" were uprisings against police brutality and racial injustice that erupted in the black neighborhoods of towns and cities throughout the nation during the mid- to late 1960s and that reached their peak during the summer of 1967. Scores of people lost their lives; property worth hundreds of millions of dollars was destroyed. The roots of the uprisings lay deep within America's political, social, and economic structures. Parks knew, however, that photography has difficulty making structures of oppression visible. As he said in a 1983 interview, the camera could instead "expose the evils of racism, the evils of poverty... by showing the people who had suffered most under it." So Parks answered the question "why?" by introducing his readers to members of a single impoverished family, the Fontenelles. He said that he wanted to show what their lives were like, "the real, vivid horror of it" and "the dignity of the people who manage, somehow, to live with it."

"A Harlem Family" appeared in *Life* in March 1968. It contained no photographs of protesters, uprisings, or violent cops. Instead Parks kept readers almost entirely within the walls of the Fontenelles' apartment. His black and white photographs were marked by high contrast and deep shadows. In many, the details were hard to make out. The expressions on the faces of the Fontenelles were easy to read, however, showing despair, anguish, bone-deep weariness, and a grim perseverance. The effect was impressionistic rather than conventionally documentary. Parks appealed to his readers' emotions more than their intellects.

The text that he wrote to accompany his photographs opened with a direct challenge to his readers. "For I am you," he wrote, "staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom. Look at me and know that to destroy me is to destroy yourself." White people, he implied, would have to shoulder the burden of ending the racism that they had created. But Parks also envisioned a better and shared future for blacks and whites. "I too am America," he continued. "America is me. ...There is yet a chance for us to live in peace beneath these restless skies."

Readers' responses to "A Harlem Family" were strong and immediate. I've read the hundreds of letters that they wrote to Life and to Parks himself, now housed in the Gordon Parks Papers at the Wichita State University library. Readers overwhelmingly said that the photo-essay had moved them, often to tears. Many asked how they could help the Fontenelles. Some included money that they asked

the magazine to forward to the family. *Life* added funds of its own to the readers' contributions and bought a house for the family in a middle-class African-American neighborhood in Queens. Heartache followed the Fontenelles out of Harlem, however, and what should have been a blessing turned to tragedy when the house burned, killing Norman Fontenelle, the father of the family, and one of his sons.

There was no easy resolution to the Fontenelles' story—just as there has been no resolution to the racial injustice that Parks faced and that sparked the nationwide uprisings in the 1960s and this year. Racism persists, protest endures, and photography continues to play an important role. It can't solve our problems, but it can keep them in our line of sight and encourage us to act.

John Edwin Mason, who teaches African history and the history of photography at the University of Virginia, is working on a book about Gordon Parks.

CREATIVE REVIEW

Why the photography of Gordon Parks still resonates today

The exhibition of Gordon Parks' work in London aims to reposition him as more than a photojournalist, and instead as an artist against social injustice

Born into poverty and segregation in Fort Scott, Kansas, Gordon Parks took photographs that focused on race relations, poverty, civil rights and urban life. He was the first African American staff photographer and writer for photography magazine, Life, and through this position, Parks documented American culture and early life from the 1940s to the 2000s.

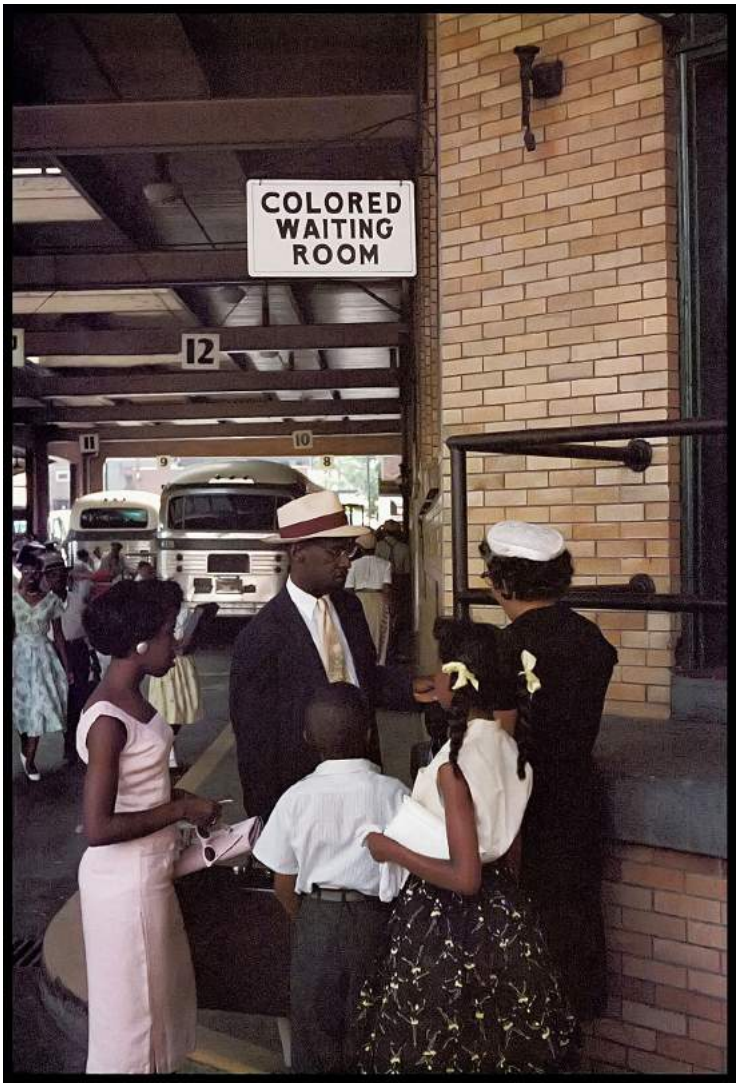
Some of this legacy is on show now at the Alison Jacques Gallery in London, in the first of a two-part exhibition of his work. The exhibition was originally scheduled to run in March, but due to Covid-19 it wasn't only delayed, but split into two parts, with Gordon Parks: Part One on now until August 1, and Part Two opening September 1. The exhibition is the first solo show of his work in London for 25 years.

"Until recently, Gordon Parks was seen predominantly as a photojournalist, and people didn't fully understand everything about him as an artist," explains Alison Jacques, founder of the gallery. "The Gordon Parks Foundation has been actively revisiting his work and looking to put Parks out there in the right way, which is that he is one of the most important artists, rather than only a photographer."

Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

His newly-shaped reputation as an artist is solidified by his other creative achievements including writing – both fiction and non-fiction – composing and filmmaking, having directed several feature films including Shaft in 1971. But if you're looking for an introduction to Parks, his photography is the perfect place to start. Part One offers a chance to see two defining series, Segregation in the South (1956) and Black Muslims (1963), while Part Two will see his thought-provoking portraits of boxer and activist Muhammad Ali from 1966-1971 go on display.

The words 'groundbreaking' and 'radical' are often touted when talking about Parks' images, and what Jacques sees as unique about his work was his creative process. "In the case of the series Segregation in the South, when he went to Alabama, Parks didn't just go and photograph people, he got to know them, he lived with the families," explains Jacques. "That's something he did throughout his life and [was] how he made his work. He got to know the people, as opposed to just photographing them objectively, so it became subjective."



Untitled, Nashville, Tennessee, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Segregation in the South is one of Parks' seminal series and it saw him return to a community where segregation was the norm. The particular beauty of this series lies in the non-confrontational way the photographer captured this reality. "You have these beautifully composed, breathtakingly colourful images such as the one of a family queuing up to buy ice cream," says Jacques. "But slowly, you realise what actually is going on. At the main entrance to the ice-cream kiosk hangs a sign saying 'White', and then there's a sign at the side, saying 'Colored', where the family stands."

The personal, more humanised way he captured discrimination was of course intentional. But the work feels even more moving when you understand the background to those images. "If you read Gordon Parks' diaries, there's a section in there from 1956, which talks about what he encountered when he was in Alabama. When he got there, the person who was assigned to him to show him around the different areas of the town, was actually informing a group of right wing white men who were looking to pursue and potentially lynch him," explains Jacques.

"So while he was taking these beautiful photographs, there were nearby Klu Klux Klan members burning people for their colour. That was the brutal reality, but in the photographs he's not confronting it head on, which I think makes it all the more powerful."

Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956. Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation, New York and Alison Jacques Gallery, London © The Gordon Parks Foundation

Parks' series Black Muslims provides insight into the Black Muslim movement that had started to gather momentum in the US at the beginning of the 1960s. Parks gained unparalleled access and captured scenes of peaceful protests and families at prayer, as well as powerful portraits of Malcolm X and Ethel Sharrieff.

Again, through his personal style, Parks was able to question preconceived and prejudiced attitudes towards the Black Power movement. Together, these bodies of work highlight his determination in illuminating the inner lives of his subjects and, in some cases, completely changing the nation's opinion.

This year has been one of incredible change and upheaval, and with the Black Lives Matter movement gaining more momentum in the last few months, Parks' images – though they're over 60 years old – somehow carry even more weight now. It's uncomfortable to admit, but Parks' images are both a reflection of the past, and hold a mirror up to our present.

"The timing of this [show] is very poignant, although it is absolutely not intended and is in no way opportunist," clarifies Jacques. "The most important thing, when you look back at the date of these photographs in the current show, is that whatever it is you're seeing and understanding from that time, is that the voice of Gordon Parks is as loud and as relevant as ever."

For Jacques, the enduring power of Parks' photography is that you learn something through each series and each story he told – whether it's about a period of history, a movement or an individual person.

"It's astonishing that there has not been a solo exhibition of Gordon Parks in London for 25 years," she says. "There's a lot of change in the air right now, and all of it for the better, hopefully this is a small contribution."

COLLECT

The Understated Mastery of Gordon Parks

By **Abby Schultz** June 15, 2020 8:00 am ET

At Segregated Drinking Fountain, Mobile, Alabama, 1956
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Editor's note: *The annual Penta Changemaker's issue featuring Gordon Parks on the cover was produced in the weeks prior to the racial injustice protests witnessed across the U.S. and around the world. It's clear that the conversations Parks initiated with his poignant photographs documenting the black community's struggle for civil rights in the U.S. are continuing today.*

Earlier this year, the Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired 56 photographs from the 1957 Gordon Parks essay for Life magazine, "The Atmosphere of Crime," including 55 limited-edition prints purchased from the Gordon Parks Foundation and a single black-and-white gelatin silver print the foundation gave to the museum.

The gift, *Untitled, Chicago, Illinois,* 1957—a portrait of a man's left hand holding a cigarette through prison bars while the right one grasps the bars below—was apt considering Parks himself had gifted a companion photograph to MoMA in 1993. *Raiding Detectives, Chicago, Illinois,* 1957 is a dramatic image of two white, plainclothes detectives kicking down a door in a dimly lit, scuffed hallway of an apartment building.

Cropped, color images of both pictures appeared in the Sept. 9, 1957, Life essay, telling a nuanced story of lives intertwined with crime and criminality through blurred nighttime images, silhouettes, and street scenes.

MoMA curator Sarah Meister was drawn to this particular body of Parks' work because of its connection to *Raiding Detectives,* but also because "The Atmosphere of Crime"—although published more than 60 years ago—"speaks to our contemporary moment," and "adds a historical marker against which we can examine and challenge where we are today."

Parks, who died in 2006 at age 93, joined Life in 1948, becoming the first African-American photographer in the magazine's history. His understated mastery in evoking the humanity of everyday people navigating their lives, often amid poverty and racism, told powerful stories, revealing truths visible in America seven decades later.

This connection to the present was made by the rapper Kendrick Lamar in 2017, when he drew from several iconic images by Parks, bringing to life photos of three children—two black, one white—with one holding a toy gun, and of a boy balancing a "June bug" tied to a string on his forehead, in the dreamy video for his song "ELEMENT."

Parks' understated revelations of the black experience also speak to why rapper Kasseem Dean (Swizz Beatz), and his wife, Alicia Keys, began working with the Gordon Parks Foundation not long after Keys was one of the organization's annual gala honorees in 2012 (a distinction Dean received a year later).

"They said, 'We want to build the largest collection of Gordon Parks photographs to be part of our culture,'" says Peter W. Kunhardt Jr., the foundation's executive director.

The couple acquired 85 photographs, creating the largest private collection of Parks' work. These are images that spoke personally to the Deans, but they are also images the couple is committed to sharing through public exhibitions—a wish of the foundation's.

Kunhardt has a special connection to Parks, who, he recalls, would sign notes "Love, Uncle Gordon" to him when he was a boy growing up in Westchester, N.Y. Parks and Philip B. Kunhardt Jr., his grand-father, and a former managing editor of Life, were "nearly inseparable" until they both died, two weeks apart, in March 2006.

The younger Kunhardt remembers Parks showing up in a Jaguar, smoking his pipe, "always looking so regal," and telling stories of the making of *Shaft,* the groundbreaking 1971 film he directed.

The foundation, established at Parks' death, began by gathering existing material Parks had produced in his lifetime, and, over the course of several years, working with archivists to organize tens of thousands of negatives and prints, many of which hadn't been widely seen in the photographer's lifetime.

Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, "Mobile, Alabama, 1956."
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Today, Kunhardt oversees Parks' legacy as a filmmaker as well as a photographer, painter, poet, and writer. In 2012, six years after Parks' death, the German publisher Steidl, along with the foundation, produced a five-volume boxed set edition—*Gordon Parks: Collected Works*—designed to be a road map for scholars to view thephotographer's work in depth, Kunhardt says.

Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, was among the first to dig through the volume before deciding to curate an exhibition on the Fontenelle family in Harlem—the focus of a sad and disturbing photo essay. Life magazine's March 8,

1968, cover featured an image of a 5-year-old girl, a tear streaking down her face, beginning a story, with text written by Parks, that unmasked the distress of ghetto life through Norman Fontenelle, a jobless British West Indies immigrant, and his wife, Bessie, who didn't have the money to provide heat or food for their nine children.

Golden's decision to study a single body of work for the museum's exhibition instead of offering up a retrospective proved inspiring, opening the door to "deep, not wide," explorations of the many facets of Parks' work, Kunhardt says. Ever since, the foundation has worked with one museum a year—MoMA being the most recent—to develop an exhibition focused on a different aspect of Parks' career, an approach that has led to new scholarship, he says.

The foundation also wanted to ensure Parks was seen as an artist, not simply a documentary photographer, so it approached noted contemporary art dealers including the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York—which has worked with stellar

African-American contemporary artists for decades—and the Alison Jacques Gallery in London, which has represented photographer Robert Mapplethorpe for 20 years. "It gives Gordon this legitimacy that he fits within the canon of important 20th-century art," Kunhardt says.

Alison Jacques knew Parks more for his films and writing, including his semiautobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree*, but was "blown away" by his photographic work. "There's that push and pull between the way he shoots, which was quite incredible, and the really brutal subject matter at times," Jacques says.

Untitled, Alabama, 1956
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

The gallery is planning an exhibition later this year featuring three of Parks' stories: "Segregation in the South," 1956, "Black Muslims," 1963, and "Muhammad Ali," 1966 to 1970.

Parks' photographs range in price from $12,500 to $70,000, including lifetime prints—made when Parks was alive—and new limited edition prints, which usually are made in editions of 15, 10, or seven, according to the foundation. Sales support the Gordon Parks Arts & Social Justice Fund, which provides annual scholarships, fellowships, and prizes to students and artists across the country.

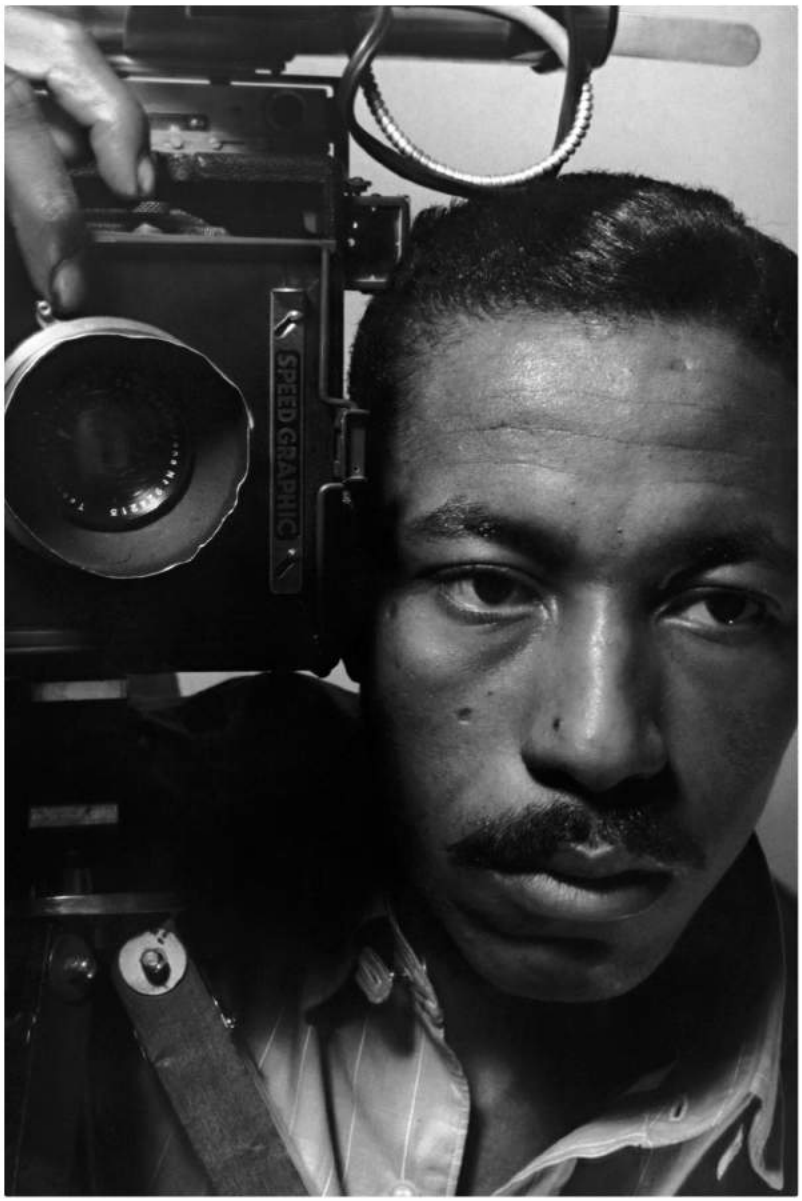
Bob Rennie, owner of a marketing real estate firm in Vancouver, has worked with Shainman for years on his collection, including in-depth assemblages of works by major

African-American artists, such as Kerry James Marshall and Lorna Simpson. Rennie recently began adding Parks, recognizing a symbiosis in his subtle, documentary approach to other artists he collects.

One photograph in Rennie's collection is from Parks' "Segregation" series, an image of

a “beautiful family, beautifully dressed,” Rennie says. As a girl drinks from a “colored-only” fountain, the sign is obscured, leaving visible the “white-only” sign on the next fountain.

“It’s a poignant way to get [a] message across without screaming social injustice,” Rennie says. “We think we’ve moved a long way, and sometimes we just haven’t. His works bring out that conversation.”



Untitled, 1941.
Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

artnet news

Art World

What Art Defined the Civil Rights Era? We Asked 7 Museum Curators to Pick One Work That Crystallized the Moment

Curators from across the country share the works that capture the ethos of the era.

Katie White, January 20, 2020

Gordon Parks, *Department Store* (1956). Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

In honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, we tasked curators across the country with the difficult task of choosing a single work of art that they feel defines the ethos of the Civil Rights Era. Their choices present a kaleidoscopic and occasionally surprising group of works that span continents and centuries—from iconic photographs to ritual sculptural objects.

See the works and read the curators' insights below.

Gordon Parks's *Ethel Sharrieff, Chicago, Illinois* (1963)

Gordon Parks, *Ethel Sharrieff, Chicago, Illinois* (1963).

No other visual medium defined the Civil Rights movement than documentary photography, particularly the black-and-white images of male leaders, cordons of marchers under turbulent skies, or black children in their Sunday best blasted with G-forces by the Birmingham fire department. Gordon Parks, one of the great chroniclers of the era, made the important decision to equally document black people in their communities, often in moments of peace and self-sufficiency. His "Black Muslims" series for *Life* magazine was a wake-up call for many non-black Americans who were fascinated and alarmed by the group. Park's portrait *Ethel Sharieff* for the magazine feature stands as an iconic image of the series and the Civil Rights era. A single woman set against an army of sisters encapsulates all the resolve, communitarianism, and new consciousness the moment was brewing, without falling back on any proscribed clichés.

—Naomi Beckwith, senior curator, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

The Washington Post

What Gordon Parks Witnessed

The injustices of Jim Crow and the evolution of a great American photographer

Tenement residents in Chicago in 1950. (Courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation)

Story by **David Rowell**

DECEMBER 3, 2018

Photos by **Gordon Parks**

When 29-year-old Gordon Parks arrived in Washington, in 1942, to begin his prestigious job as a photographer at the Farm Security Administration, his first assignment was to shoot: nothing. The government agency, which was born of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, had originally intended to highlight rural suffering and the plight of farmers, but that mission quickly expanded to producing a vast visual record of American life. Overseen by Roy Stryker, chief of the photography unit within the agency's historical section, the collection was a stunning, often sobering artistic vehicle for depicting the ways the government was both serving and failing its citizens. Parks had come to the FSA on a fellowship after being a staff photographer for the St. Paul Recorder newspaper and doing commercial freelance work, but he also hadn't bought his first camera until 1937, and Stryker knew the photographer still had much to learn.

First, as Parks recounted in his 1966 memoir "A Choice of Weapons," Stryker had Parks show him his cameras — a Speed Graphic and a Rolleiflex — and promptly locked them in a cabinet. "You won't be needing those for a few days," the boss said. Instead, he asked his new photographer — who was raised in Kansas but also lived in Minnesota and later in Chicago — to eat in some restaurants, shop in stores, take in a movie. "Get to know this place," he told him.

This was hardly what Parks had in mind for his first day, and, deflated, he set off on foot. It took no time for Parks, the first African American photographer to join the FSA, to collide with the reality Stryker knew awaited him. When he stopped in a drugstore for breakfast, a waiter, at the very sight of him, snapped, "Get off of that stool. Don't you know colored people can't eat in here?" Soon after, still shaken by the encounter, Parks wandered up to a movie theater to buy a ticket — and got a similar admonishment. "Colored people can't go in here," the attendant told him. "You should know that."

A 1942 portrait of cleaning woman Ella Watson. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

Harlem in 1948. (Courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation)

Next, Parks strolled into the famed department store Garfinkel's, and by now he understood he was likely in for more of the same. He was right: Not one of the salesmen would sell him a camel-hair coat.

Stryker wouldn't be shocked by any of this, but he was surprised to see Parks stalk back just a few hours later. "I want my cameras," Parks announced. Stryker asked what he intended to do with them.

"I want to show the rest of the world what your great city of Washington, D.C., is really like," Parks replied. It was the right impulse, but first Stryker wanted him to study the department's file photos by the photographers who'd come before him — and who were already well on their way to becoming some of the most important documentary photographers of the 20th century: Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, John Vachon and Russell Lee among them. So Parks spent a few weeks poring through the massive archives. The panorama included train yards, hamburger stands, city slums, burlesque houses, dust storms, funerals, employment agencies, public beaches, parades, pool halls, state fairs, swimming holes, front porches, as well as cotton pickers, factory workers, fishermen, beggars, Salvation Army musicians, medicine salesmen, miners, mayors, farmers, car salesmen, protesters, rodeo clowns, schoolchildren, teachers and preachers. Black and white and immigrants. The well-heeled and penniless. The proud and the broken.

When Parks finally began roaming Washington with camera in hand, he would prove that not only were his skills on par with the agency's roster of astounding talent, but also that, as a black photographer, he would be a uniquely qualified witness to the daunting struggles of black Americans, as well as to their resiliency and grace. In this way, he would be a crucial interpreter.

A self-portrait in 1941. (Private collection)

Rooftops in Harlem in 1948 (National Gallery of Art/Courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation)

actress Ingrid Bergman in Italy in 1949; drugstore “cowboys” in Alberta, Canada, in 1945. (Courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation; National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection/Gordon Parks Collection/Courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation)

A family says grace before dinner in an Anacostia housing project in 1942. (Museum of Fine Arts, Houston)

At the National Gallery of Art, the exhibition "Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950" reveals the budding development of one of the most influential artists of the 20th century. The exhibit's startling breadth of images includes disquieting scenes of societal neglect and inequity alongside lyrical street photography, plus formal portraiture of such towering figures as Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes and Ingrid Bergman amid pictures of fashion models and haute couture.

The 1940s would usher in a series of firsts for African Americans — in 1945 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. became New York's first black congressman; Jackie Robinson broke the Major League Baseball color line in 1947— but when Parks landed in Washington the Jim Crow laws of the South were in force in all corners of the capital. When black soldiers returned home from World War II, the reception was often disgraceful. The race riots of 1943 in Detroit; Mobile, Ala.; and Beaumont, Tex., the continuance of lynchings, just to name a few of the rampant injustices, would test anew the will of black Americans. Now that he was in D.C., Parks — who had suffered his own assaults, insults and harassment because of the color of his skin — was about to show that he had a particular mastery for creating pictures of the black community that were at once haunting and hauntingly beautiful.

From the beginning of his brief tenure with the FSA, Parks demonstrated a cinematic drama and narrative tension in the way he composed his pictures. In one of those early images, Parks presents a boy, seen from behind, who has lost a leg after being hit by a streetcar, as two girls study him from across the street. The boy has taken the first steps from the shadows of his house into the sunlight, but how far can he go?How hard will his journey be in the minutes ahead? In the years to come in segregated Washington?

A boy stands in the doorway of his home in Northwest Washington in 1942. He lost his leg after he was hit by a streetcar. (Courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation)

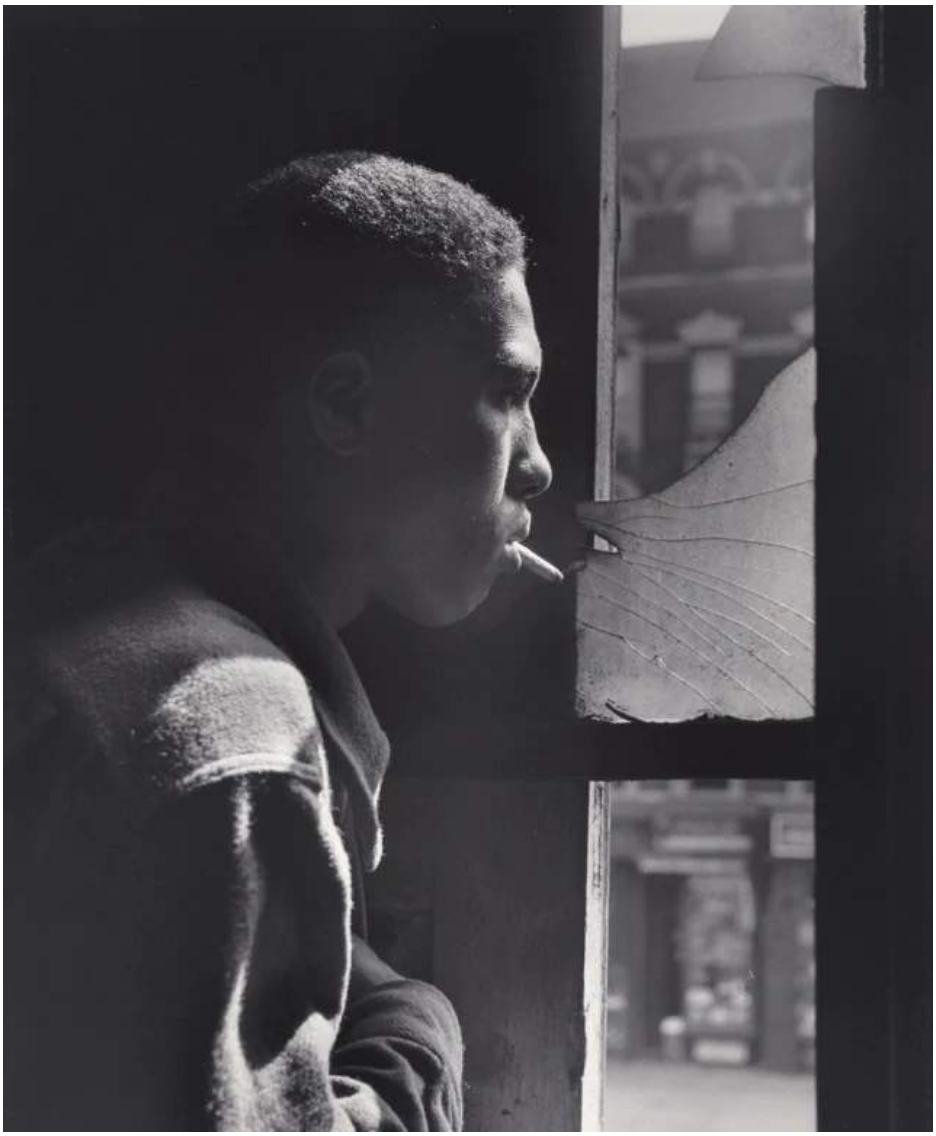
A portrait of a woman in her bedroom in Southwest Washington, taken in 1942.
(Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

After Parks had shot for a few weeks, Stryker encouraged him to go deeper into a subject. As it turned out, he didn't even have to leave the building. Stryker suggested he talk to the cleaning woman working her evening shift, to see what Parks could learn about her life. The woman's name was Ella Watson, and her story, as he would write later, was wrenching: Her father was killed by a lynch mob; her husband was accidentally shot two days before their daughter was born. That daughter had two children by the time she was 18 and died shortly after the second birth. Watson, who'd been denied a chance for advancement, lived on an annual salary of $1,080 while raising an adopted daughter. Parks quickly created a somber portrait of her holding a broom, with a mop positioned behind her, in front of an American flag turned vertical. It would go on to be Parks's signature shot, and one of the most iconic of the era, but Stryker was uneasy with the droll irony of the picture — the thick stripes of the flag resembled bars on a cage. He urged Parks to go deeper, to document. So Parks spent weeks following Watson around at work, sitting in her home, following her to church.

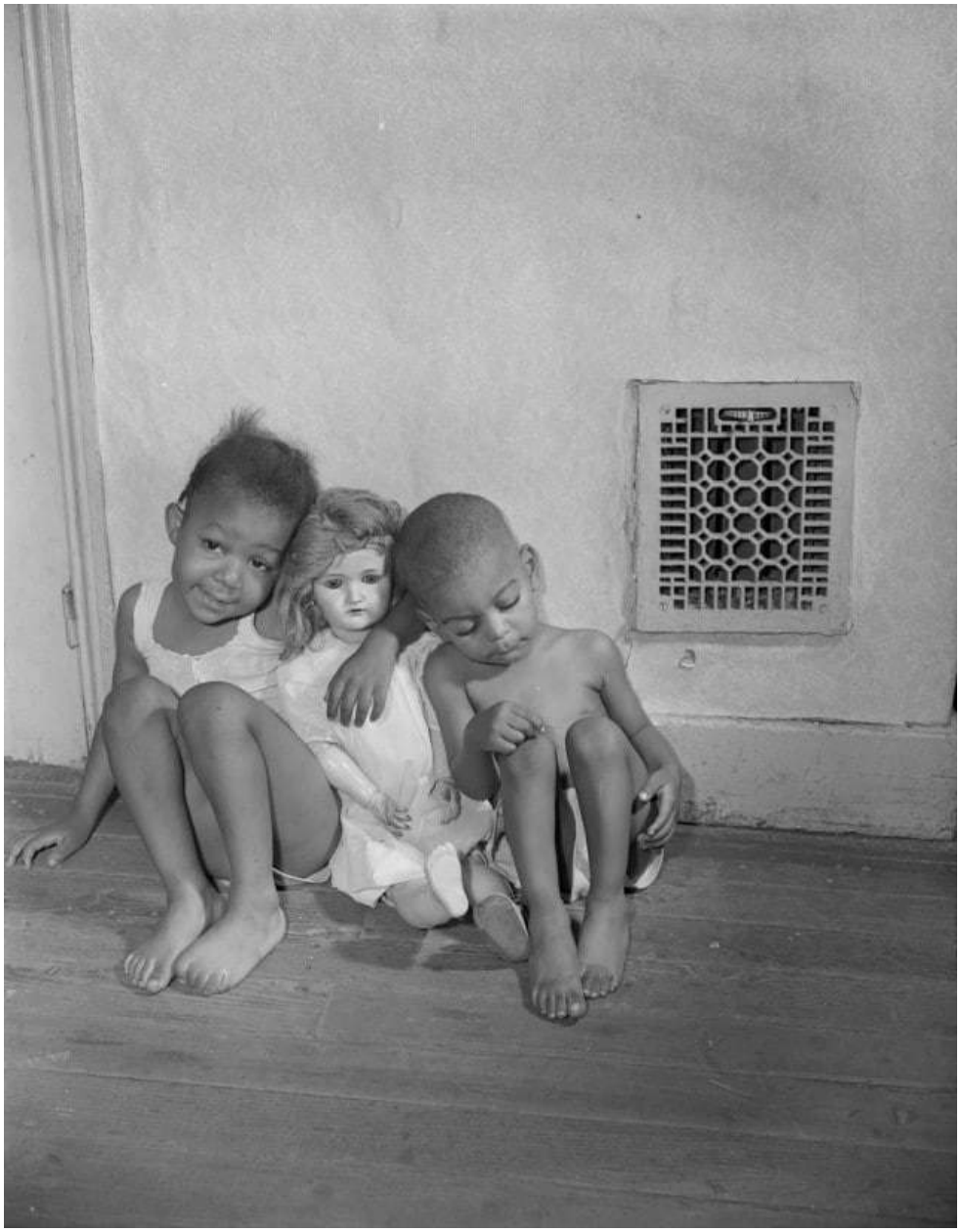
That intensely focused and intimate project would be a useful foundation for the first photo essay he did for Life magazine in 1948. (He'd be the first black photographer hired there, a year later.) This time, Parks spent weeks shadowing a 17-year-old Harlem gang leader named Leonard "Red" Jackson.

But the teen was no straightforward hooligan. He was a former Golden Gloves boxer — skills that came in handy in gang fights — and he kept the activities of his gang, the Midtowners, 20 blocks from his mother's neighborhood, according to the essay's text, so she could walk her dog in peace. Parks attended gang meetings, observed a gang rumble, watched Jackson cleaning up the kitchen at home and duking it out with his "war counselor" for leadership. He followed along as Jackson met with a detective who was mentoring the teenager, and Parks was there, too, for a publicity stunt that saw Jackson — who had been named, oddly enough, "boy mayor of Harlem" for a day — waving to a crowd from a convertible.

The shoot wasn't without its dangers: When Jackson and some fellow Midtowners spotted a group of boys Jackson believed was coming after them, they took refuge in an empty house, relying on bricks strewn about the floor for their defense and waiting out their enemies. In one of those images, Jackson gazes through a window's remaining shards of glass, surveying the chances of getting out safely, but in the way Parks frames his weary face mostly in shadow, Jackson could just as easily be surveying his seemingly dark future. (In fact, he lived until 2010.)



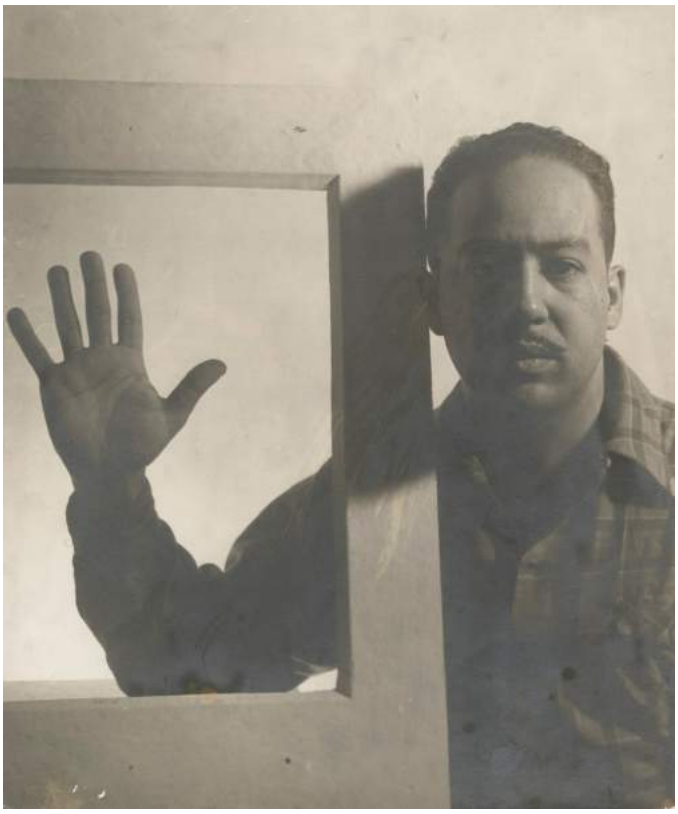
In this 1948 portrait, Leonard "Red" Jackson ponders his next move after he is trapped in an abandoned building by other boys. (National Gallery of Art, Corcoran Collection/Gordon Parks Collection/Courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation)



Ella Watson's grandchildren in 1942. Gordon Parks spent weeks following the cleaning woman as she went about her life. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)

Throughout the 1940s, Parks kept honing his documentary approach: He worked for the Office of War Information after it absorbed the FSA, and later for Standard Oil Co. (New Jersey), in addition to freelancing for such publications as Ebony and Glamour as he began to focus more extensively on fashion photography. In 1950, Life assigned him to oversee its photo bureau in Paris for two years. And in the 1960s, book writing and filmmaking would become part of his growing oeuvre. In 1971, Parks would direct "Shaft," which helped launch the blaxploitation era.

But the seeds of all that work and vision are here in the images from 1940 to 1950. The defeat of Germany in World War II brought profound change to much of the world, yet in America change for people of color came at an excruciating pace. As U.S. soldiers returned stateside, settled back into their work and tried to resume the old rhythms of their lives, the civilian's camera aimed at the sins of inequality became a chief weapon of consequence.



Clockwise from top left: A portrait of a woman in New York from 1950; poet Langston Hughes in Chicago in 1941; a photo titled “Off on My Own” from 1948. (Photos courtesy of and © the Gordon Parks Foundation)

Children in Harlem look in a car window in 1943. (Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

David Rowell is the deputy editor of The Washington Post Magazine.

Credits: Story by David Rowell. Photos by Gordon Parks. Designed by **Christian Font**. Photo Editing by Dudley M. Brooks.

The New York Times

LENS

How Gordon Parks Became Gordon Parks

A new book examines Gordon Parks's transformation over the formative decade before his time as the first black staff photographer at Life magazine.

By James Estrin

Oct. 1, 2018

At the beginning of the 1940s, Gordon Parks was a self-taught fashion and portrait photographer documenting daily life in both St. Paul and Chicago. By the end of the decade he was photographing for Life magazine. While his career has been examined closely, both in his own words and by others, this formative decade has attracted less attention than his experiences as the first black staff photographer at Life, and later as a groundbreaking Hollywood filmmaker.

A new book, "Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950," published by the National Gallery of Art, The Gordon Parks Foundation and Steidl, examines this transformation. It is timed to accompany the exhibit of the same name at the National Gallery from Nov. 4, 2018, to Feb. 18, 2019. The exhibit was curated by Philip Brookman, who is also the book's author. The book features photographs that have never before been published, as well as additional essays by Sarah Lewis, Deborah Willis, Richard J. Powell and Maurice Berger, who writes the Race Stories column for Lens.

Ms. Willis, who is a noted photographer, author and the chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, knew Mr. Parks well. She spoke with James Estrin about Mr. Parks, and their conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

The book and the exhibition cover Gordon's work photographing for the Farm Security Administration, the Office of War Information and Standard Oil as well as his time in Chicago and St. Paul in the beginning of the '40s. It's an incredible leap from 1940 to 1950. How do you think the 1940s shaped him as a photographer?

I was really excited that Philip Brookman focused on the first 10 years.

While writing that essay I had an opportunity to go back into some of the work I only knew peripherally, and what excited me was the Smart Woman magazine that he worked on as a photo editor. I started looking at the black middle class of Chicago that he photographed but no one knew about. He focused on fashion in Chicago, of course in St. Paul, but he was very active with the black press during that time, very interested in black migration from the South to the Midwest and the North. But he was focusing on who was living there and what opportunities black people had who were artistic, who had businesses, who were educated. It is a totally different realm than what he focused on in D.C. So that early part was crucial for my reintroduction to Gordon's work.

Drug store "cowboys." Black Diamond, Alberta, Canada. September 1945. Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

In the Frederick Douglass Housing Project in In Anacostia, Washington D.C., a family says grace before their evening meal. June 1942.
Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

Dinner time at Mr. Hercules Brown's home in Somerville, Maine, 1944. Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

What I find extraordinary is his range and he did all of these different things during this period.

And within different communities, Gordon was comfortable with knowing — and making different images about different communities. He understood what it meant to be an American in different forms and different ways. At the black newspaper that he worked at in St. Paul, he demanded a byline. He understood what it meant to have his name imprinted on the newspaper when he was making photographs of gorgeous ladies, college students, women who wanted to be models. He's actually part of their dream. He's documenting their dreaming of their lives outside of domestic work —opportunities that were broader.

The photos he made for Standard Oil are mostly of white people working. But if you look at the family scenes over dinner you see the composure that he must have had to make them as comfortable as they were.

I believe that he was able to make people feel at ease. You know, he was just a good soul.

How did you meet him?

I was studying photography at Philadelphia College of Art, and there were no black photographers in the history books. I was working on a paper for one of my teachers and asked, where are the black photographers?

Charles White in front of his mural "Chaos of the American Negro" 1941.
Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

I remembered seeing Gordon's work in Life magazine when I was a teenager and was curious about why he was not in the history of photography. I wrote a letter, in purely undergraduate language, that said, "I'm writing a paper on black photographers, I'd like to meet you and talk to you about your work." He sent a letter back and said, "Yes, come and meet me." He was living at the U.N. Plaza then. I met him and he opened his door and you know, he'd been in my life ever since. Until the day he died. I interviewed him about three months before he died. He called me up to talk about the last book,
"Hungry Heart."

So how would you describe him?

Generous. One word, generous. He listened closely. He understood what I needed, and he offered support. He loved his work. And like he said, he did not get up early. You could not visit him before 2 p.m. He was a neat, meticulous man in terms of his style of dress.

He understood that he had a legacy. And the fact that his photographs were organized, the fact that he knew he wanted his collection to be preserved and his story told by him and by others.

And why do you think that is?

Absence. The absence of the stories that he probably missed when he looked at the magazines while he worked on the railroad in the 1930s. He understood the silence of African-American history in terms of the larger story. And he was determined to make sure that his story was told, and the breadth of his story was told from multiple perspectives, from a boy growing up in the Midwest, to someone who had a dream about being a photographer. His life was complex. And it was not one-dimensional, as most people think when they see someone who is black and poor in that time period.

Bettina Graziani and Sophie Malgat at Coney Island. 1950. Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

This was a time when the World's Fair was in Chicago in 1939 and he was traveling back and forth with a young family. Those experiences probably left an impact on him, especially when he started going to the Art Institute to look at art and tried to place himself within that framework of art making and art creating.

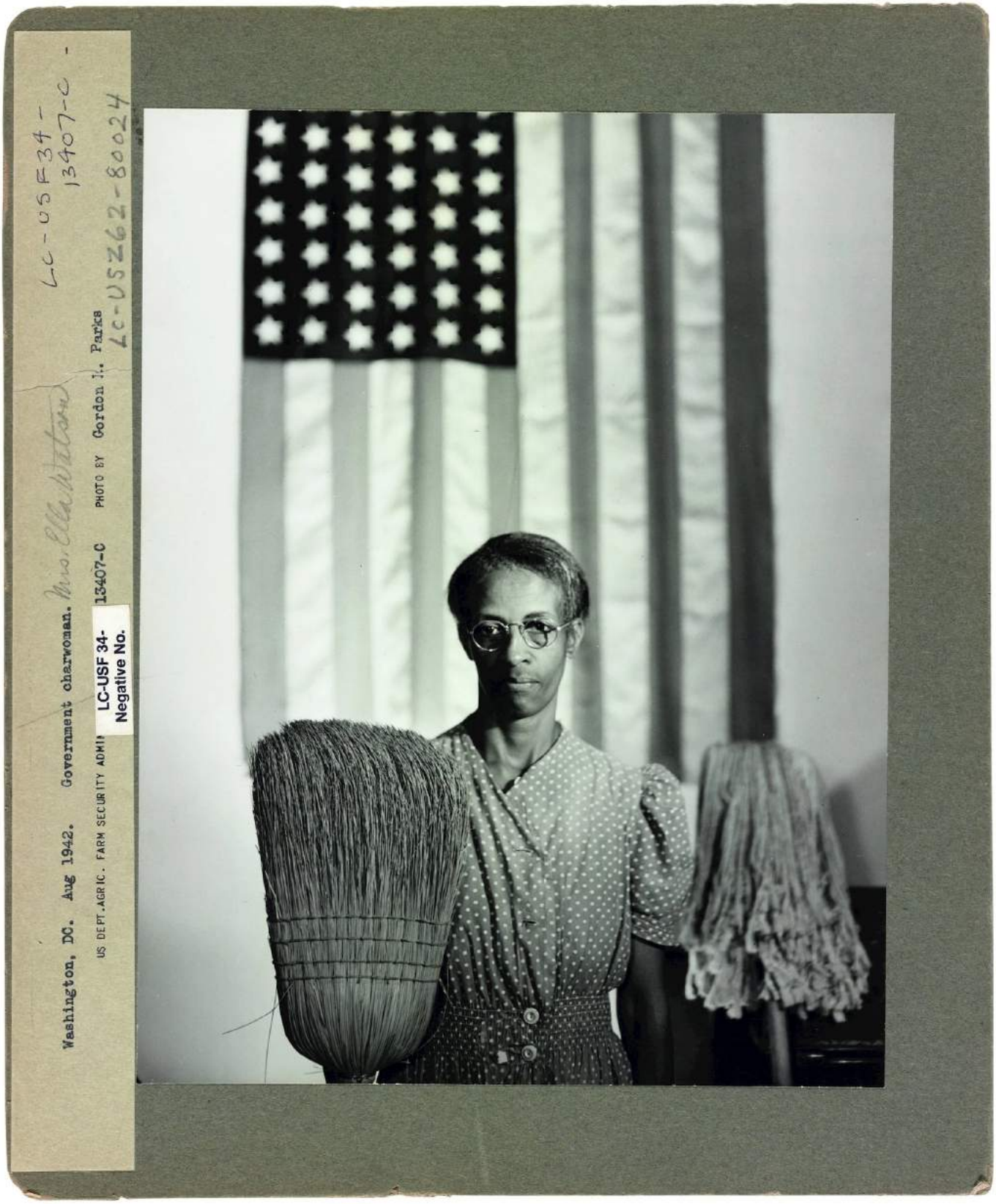
His life has been widely examined — by himself in three memoirs, and in the last few years by many other people. Is there something that you think is not often considered but is pivotal in understanding him?

I found that he was always looking at beauty. Not in terms of sentimental beauty.

But understanding beauty in life, beauty in living. And I think that that's something that he was in search of in all of his photographs, about life and beauty in that simple sense. And that's something that people don't talk about often.

That's interesting, and it goes beyond fashion.

Yes, beyond fashion. It's a kind of inner turmoil of how we appreciate life and how do we give back. When I look at his photographs I see Gordon as a generous person. I see that exchange that happens when he's in an environment of that family at a table or with the cowboys outside of the store. He's not allowing barriers to stop him. He's completely there.



Washington, D.C. Government charwoman, July 1942. Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

But what really fascinated me is that they were so cool with him. You can see it in the photo.

I just want to sit at that table and listen to what they are talking about.

It's obviously part of his gift.

And that's a relaxed gift. It's not forced. A kind of a way of reading — understanding humanity. He understood humanity. I still feel like he's with us in a sense. I'm so happy that he made the decision to create the foundation, and understood that his photographs would open up a whole new reading of photography to another generation of photographers.

What was the relationship between him and Langston Hughes?

He was in the environment of all the Harlem writers and he worked closely with Langston when Langston moved to Chicago to present his "Shakespeare in Harlem" play. They met in rehearsal time and they made photographs while he was in Chicago. They had a strong bond and a real playful relationship. Gordon was also close to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

And I can see his deep involvement, not just as someone who took the pictures but someone who is part of that.

And you see that sense of theatricality in his work. The way that Gordon created the narrative for the "Invisible Man" photos — not only the manhole cover but the underground scene with the light bulbs. He's reading deeply into the text. He understood props as well. That's why he could easily move right into making films.

Is there anything else that you think is key to understanding him, both as a photographer and as a man?

Well, he understood that his images mattered. That's why he wanted the byline. And I think that he agreed to make a radical difference looking at black lives in Chicago or in St. Paul.

He understood what mattered. And most people don't. They think in the moment, but he's thinking beyond that.

WIDEWALLS

Early Examples of Gordon Parks Photography at the National Gallery of Art

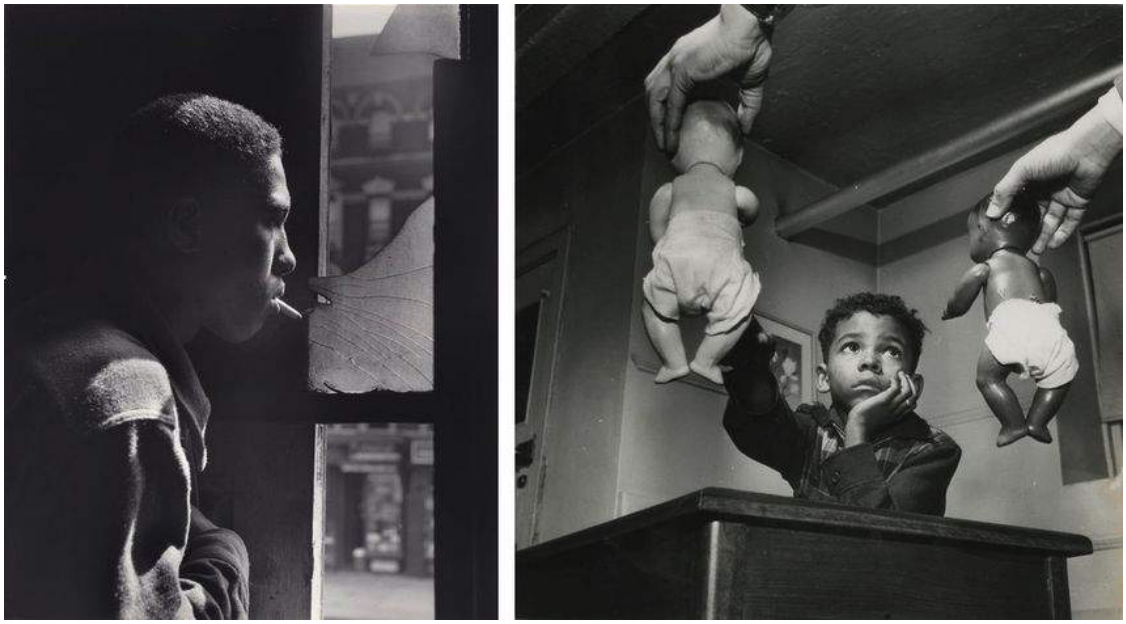
December 3, 2018

Elena Martinique

One of the most renowned photographers of his age, who alalsoorked in music and film, **Gordon Parks** is celebrated for images which consistently explored the social and economic impact of racism. Chronicling the African American experience through the fullest range of subjects, he created a powerful and poetic body of work which communicated difficult truths to a mainstream audience. He once said:

> *I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs, I knew at that point I had to have a camera.*

The current exhibition on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington explores the lesser-known yet incredibly formative period of Parks's long and illustrious career. Titled *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950*, the showcase provides an insight into the early evolution of **Gordon Parks photography** through **around 150 photographs**, as well as a rich archive of rare magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, and books. It also highlights **the mutual influences** between him and a network of creative and intellectual figures such as Charles White, Roy Stryker, Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison.



Left: Gordon Parks – Trapped in abandoned building by a rival gang on street, Red Jackson ponders his next move, 1948. Gelatin silver print; Image: 49.21 × 39.69 cm (19 3/8 × 15 5/8 in.), sheet: 50.64 × 40.8 cm (19 15/16 × 16 1/16 in.). National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (The Gordon Parks Collection). Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation / Right: Gordon Parks –Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1947. Gelatin silver print; Image: 17.78 × 17.46 cm (7 × 6 7/8 in.), sheet: 20.32 × 18.42 cm (8 × 7 1/4 in.). The Gordon Parks Foundation. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Photography as a Tool for Fighting Oppression

In 1949, Gordon Parks became the first African American photographer at Life magazine. He also worked as a visionary professional in New York for Ebony and Glamour. However, the foundational first decade of his life as a photographer has never been explored in such detail as in this comprehensive exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. As the executive director of the Gordon Parks Foundation, Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., explains, these images are "the foundation of his storied career and vision."

> *For Parks, creativity brought with it a fuller, more poignant understanding of humanity that is now our responsibility to share.*

Born into poverty and segregation in Kansas in 1912, Gordon Parks began his artistic career in music, starting out as a brothel pianist and traveling with a jazz band. He became drawn to photography as a young man while working as a waiter on the Northern Pacific Railway's North Coast Limited, a luxurious train that ran between Chicago, Saint Paul, and Seattle. A fellow waiter gave him **a magazine featuring images of migrant workers** by such photographers as Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein, changing the course of his life. Realizing that photography might be a tool for fighting oppression he had experienced for much of his life, he bought his first camera, a Voigtländer Brilliant, teaching himself how to take photographs.

Left: Gordon Parks – Crude oil, fuel oil, gas oil, range oil and gasoline pipelines leading from the waterfront to the Everett refinery. Everett, Massachusetts., May 1944. Gelatin silver print; Image: 23.18 × 19.05 cm (9 1/8 × 7 1/2 in.), sheet: 23.18 × 28.26 cm (9 1/8 × 11 1/8 in.). Standard Oil (New Jersey) Collection, Photographic Archives, University of Louisville. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation / Right: Gordon Parks – Pittsburgh, Pa. The cooper's plant at the Penola, Inc. grease plant, where large drums and containers are reconditioned, March 1944. Gelatin silver print on board with typed caption; Sheet: 23.9 × 19.1 cm (9 7/16 × 7 1/2 in.), mount: 29 × 24 cm (11 7/16 × 9 7/16 in.). Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

The Formative Years

Studying photography manuals and magazines while consistently taking images, Parks began to make a name for himself by photographing and publishing portraits of glamorous women. After working briefly as a staff photographer for the *Recorder*, in September 1939 Parks returned to working for the railroad, this time as **a porter** traveling between the Twin Cities and Chicago. Honing his craft and developing a keen eye, he was dedicated to connecting with people and tackling a range of issues he saw across his travels in the United States. What mattered to him was **the humane side of all people**, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or religious beliefs. Among the first of his exhibitions on view was a show on Chicago's South Side black ghetto and in 1941.

In 1942, he began working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which was then chronicling the nation's social conditions in the wake of the Great Depression. After the agency closed, he began working as a freelance photographer, balancing his practice between fashion photography and the humanitarian issues which concerned him greatly. In 1948, he produced a compelling photo essay on the Harlem gang leader Red Jackson, depicting his existence as one that was shaped by senseless violence and thwarted dreams. This compelling series won him widespread acclaim and a position as the first African American staff photographer and writer for Life magazine. In 1969, Gordon Parks wrote, directed, and scored the first major Hollywood film to be directed by a black American, The Learning Tree.

Left: Gordon Parks – Washington, D.C. A young girl who lives near the Capitol., June 1942. Gelatin silver print; Image: 13.02 × 10.16 cm (5 1/8 × 4 in.), sheet: 13.02 × 10.16 cm (5 1/8 × 4 in.).The Gordon Parks Foundation. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation / Right: Gordon Parks –Washington, D.C. Government charwoman, July 1942. Gelatin silver print; Sheet: 24 × 19.3 cm (9 7/16 × 7 5/8 in.), mount: 29 × 24.2 cm (11 7/16 × 9 1/2 in.). Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Exhibition Highlights

The exhibition Gordon Parks: The New Tide is divided into five sections.

Titled A Choice of Weapons (1940-1942), the first section opens with the high society portraits that established Parks's career as a professional photographer in Saint Paul and Minneapolis. It also includes his portraits of the city's middle- and upper-class African American community, as well as images which documented activities of the South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, where he was given access to studio space and a darkroom in 1941. These include the images of influential figures such as SSCAC director Peter Pollack, renowned poet and playwright Langston Hughes, philosophy professor and architect of the New Negro movement Alain Locke, and opera singer Todd Duncan.

The second section of the exhibition, titled Government Work (1942), features his images produced for the FSA. He was assigned to photograph the Frederick Douglass Dwellings—quality public housing recently constructed in DC's Anacostia neighborhood for black defense workers. The section also features other images which were aimed at improving conditions for African Americans, such as Washington, DC. Government charwoman, featuring Ella Watson, a cleaning woman who worked for the government. The woman and her family soon became a subject of an extended series which chronicled their daily lives.

The third section, The Home Front, features examples of Park's projects for the Office of War Information, such as depictions of children living in substandard housing slated for removal, fishermen in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and the Fulton Fish Market in New York City, children on the streets of Harlem, and the first fighter groups of African American pilots.

Titled Standard Oil (1944-1948), the fourth section features the rarely seen archive of work Parks produced for Stryker while working for Standard Oil Company (New Jersey)(SONJ). Over the course of four and a half years, he photographed coal workers, roughnecks, refinery operators, pipefitters, railroad workers, grease makers, drilling crews, and miners, as well as the cities, towns, schools, shops, farms, and transportation networks that depended on petroleum.

The final section, Mass Media (1945-1950), features his work for major fashion and lifestyle magazines, such as Ebony, Circuit's Smart Woman, and Glamour, in addition to his freelance work and early photo essays for Life, such as the aforementioned Harlem Gand Leader. While working for Life, he documented a range of subjects, from couture fashion in Paris to segregation, street life, and poverty around the world.

Gordon Parks Photography at the National Gallery of Art

The exhibition Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950 will be on view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art in Washington until February 18th, 2019. It is curated by Philip Brookman, consulting curator, department of photographs, National Gallery of Art, Washington. There will be a series of related programs accompanying the show, such as the Retrospective of Films by Gordon Parks and Related Subjects between January 5th and February 17th, 2019, John Wilmerding Symposium on American Art and Community Celebration: Artists and the American Community on February 8th and 9th, and much more.Editors' Tip: Gordon Parks: The New Tide: Early Work 1940–1950First starting his career in music, Gordon Parks evolved into one of the most acclaimed photographers, but also film makers. Focusing on new research and access to the forgotten archive, The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950 documents the importance of these years in shaping Gordon Parks' passionate vision.

Left: Gordon Parks – Untitled, Puerto Rico (Inauguration of Luis Muñoz-Marín), January 1949. Gelatin silver print; Image: 26.2 × 27.1 cm (10 5/16 × 10 11/16 in.), sheet: 26.2 × 27.1 cm (10 5/16 × 10 11/16 in.). Philadelphia Museum of Art: Purchased with funds contributed in memory of Magda Krauss, 2001. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation / Right: Gordon Parks – Washington (southwest section), D.C. Negro woman in her bedroom, November 1942. Gelatin silver print; Image: 35.56 × 27.94 cm (14 × 11 in.). Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

The book, produced and published by the Gordon Parks Foundation and Steidl in association with the Gallery, brings together photographs and publications made during the first and most formative decade of his 65-year career.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

ART REVIEW

‘Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950’ Review: Young Talent in Black and White

Early in his career, the photographer was portraying racism, reality—and fashion

Gordon Parks, ‘Washington, D.C. Government charwoman,’ July 1942. LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, D.C

By William Meyers
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Washington

Ella Watson dutifully stands her post at the entrance to "Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950," at the National Gallery of Art. In the poster-size blowup of Parks's best-known image, Watson, an African-American charwoman for the federal government in Washington, holds her broom, straw head up, as if it were her staff of office. Her dress is secured at the waist with two buttons, but buttons are missing above the waist and the top is held by a pin, a sign of her limited means. She faces forward, her eyeglasses giving her an intelligent look. She is not staring directly at the camera, though; her eyes are shifted slightly to the left, perhaps because this unaccustomed attention is a bit unnerving. Behind her, out of focus but unmistakably recognizable, hangs an enormous American flag, symbol of the government that promises her equality, although it is 1942 and the nation's capital is a racially segregated city. Watson has worked as a charwoman for 26 years with no chance of advancement.

A 1941 Parks self-portrait. **PHOTO:** PRIVATE COLLECTION

Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950

National Gallery of Art, West Building, through Feb. 18, 2019

Gordon Parks (1912-2006) was born into a large, black, close-knit family in Fort Scott, Kan. At age 6 he taught himself to play piano on the family's upright as he would later teach himself, at 25, how to take photographs with a used camera he bought in a pawnshop. Living alternately in St. Paul, Minn., Minneapolis and Chicago, he developed a clientele in the black community for his portraits, fashion photography and coverage of events. In 1942 he won a prestigious Julius Rosenwald Fund Fellowship that paid his salary when he went to Washington to work at the Farm Security Administration (FSA) under the direction of Roy Stryker. When Parks first arrived, Stryker insisted he spend a few days roaming around Washington without his camera to accustom himself to life in a segregated city. Then Stryker helped in the development of Parks's talent, the progress of which is the theme of the 151 pictures in this exhibition.

Parks was assigned to cover housing developments and other facilities the government built for blacks to encourage their support for the war raging in Europe and the Pacific. Stryker taught him to verbalize his objective before setting out to photograph a project, so he would know what to look for and could produce a compelling narrative. When he wasn't out shooting, Parks pored through the FSA files, studying the work of the great photographers who had documented the Depression: Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Lee Russell, Arthur Rothstein. Parks also photographed the constricted lives of the city's blacks, which is what brought him to Ella Watson.

'Washington, D.C., Mrs. Ella Watson, a Government Charwoman, With Three Grandchildren and Her Adopted Daughter' (1942) **PHOTO:** LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The National Gallery is displaying seven prints from Parks's documentation of Watson's life. Following Stryker's advice, he befriended her so he could shoot her at work in the halls and offices of the buildings she cleaned; at home with her adopted daughter and the daughter's two young nephews and a niece; at the church that was an important part of her story. The Watson pictures show Parks's growing sophistication with artificial light, composition and the use of symbolic details, and also his insistence on presenting African-Americans in ways that defied stereotypes. In his autobiography, Parks describes his determination to master the camera as his "choice of weapons," weapons he would use to fight segregation, bigotry and poverty. Stryker immediately recognized the brilliance of the picture of Watson with her broom, but knew the FSA could not use it. It was not published until 1949, when it ran in Ebony magazine.

Parks's 'Paris Fashions' (1949) **PHOTO:** THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION

Parks was an enormously versatile photographer. There are portraits throughout the show, particularly of black luminaries, many of whom were close friends: Alain Locke (1941), Langston Hughes (four pictures, 1941), Todd Duncan (1941), a self-portrait (1941), Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune (1943), several black fighter pilots in training (1943), Ralph Ellison (1948). And workers—black and white—in diverse fields. Parks followed Stryker from government work to Standard Oil and took industrial photographs, many in a modernist style. Throughout his career he took fashion pictures; he had a natural instinct for what made women and their clothes look good. But always he documented the condition of his race.

Life magazine published Parks's debut photo essay, "Harlem Gang Leader," in 1948. Typically, of the hundreds of pictures Parks took for the gang story, none of the positive images ran, only ones that reflected poorly on the subjects. The museum shows pictures the editors did and did not use in the article, and it is instructive. The next year Life hired Parks as a staff photojournalist, the first black photographer on staff at the influential magazine, and sent him off to France on the Queen Mary to cover the Paris fashion shows.

Chester Higgins, born in 1946, an African-American who became a staff photojournalist for the New York Times, told me: "Gordon led the way by example for every black photographer. We all aspired to be like him. His work caused us to believe in ourselves."

AnOther Magazine

The Mid-Century Fashion Photographer Who Broke the American Colour Line

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY / IN PICTURES

Untitled, Coney Island, New York, 1950 Photography by Gordon Parks, Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Looking back at the early work of Gordon Parks, the first African-American photographer at LIFE magazine

NOVEMBER 06, 2018

TEXT Miss Rosen

Gordon Parks (1912–2006) was a singular figure in every sense of the word, transcending every boundary foisted upon him as a black man coming of age in Jim Crow America. Now, *Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940–1950*, a new exhibition in Washington, looks back at the groundbreaking first decade of his career, during which he rose to become the first African-American photographer at *LIFE* magazine.

Hailing from Fort Scott, Kansas, Parks decided to become a photographer while working as a waiter in a railroad dining car and looking through discarded copies of magazines like *Vogue* and *Look*. At the age of 25, Parks purchased a Voigtländer Brilliant, which he later called his "choice of weapon", and taught himself to become a professional portrait photographer and photojournalist.

"Having a camera gave him access to tell different stories," says Dr Deborah Willis, who wrote an essay titled 'Gordon Parks: Haute Couture and the Everyday' for the exhibition catalogue published by Steidl.

"We have to keep in mind that at the time, black people didn't have that sense of freedom to walk into spaces and expect the respect that he received. That's what I find fascinating about Gordon: the boundaries weren't there for him. He understood that he had an eye. He believed in his sense of understanding of the depths and complexities of life that he wanted to pursue work and develop the work."

With this inner faith, Parks set forth, launching his career when he walked into a local department store in St Paul, Minnesota, where he was living in 1939. Parks told the owner, Frank Murphy: "I'd like to shoot fashions for you, sir." His inquiry was declined until Murphy's wife, Madeleine, made her support known.

Untitled, New York, New York, 1950
Photography by Gordon Parks, Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

It was here that Parks honed his talent for fashion photography, combining his finely crafted observations of its masters with an intuitive understanding of the viewer's mind. "By looking at the images in *LIFE* and *Look* magazines, Gordon starting to think about how we create a narrative about the fabric of life," Dr Willis says.

"I believe that he looked at those images and began to place stories in his own imagination about the condition of women and others. He had this sense of inside/outside flexibility. He could also see inequality and find a way to equalise it in a sense. Through fashion, that happened."

The genesis of this perspective began with an old photograph dated circa 1890, in which his mother Sarah Ross Parks stands tall in her finest gown. Parks, who was the youngest of 15 children, was only 14 when his mother died. "I imagine Gordon understood his mother through the lens of that image, his mother outside of raising children," Dr Willis observes.

Paris Fashions, 1949, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (The Gordon Parks Collection)
Photography by Gordon Parks, Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

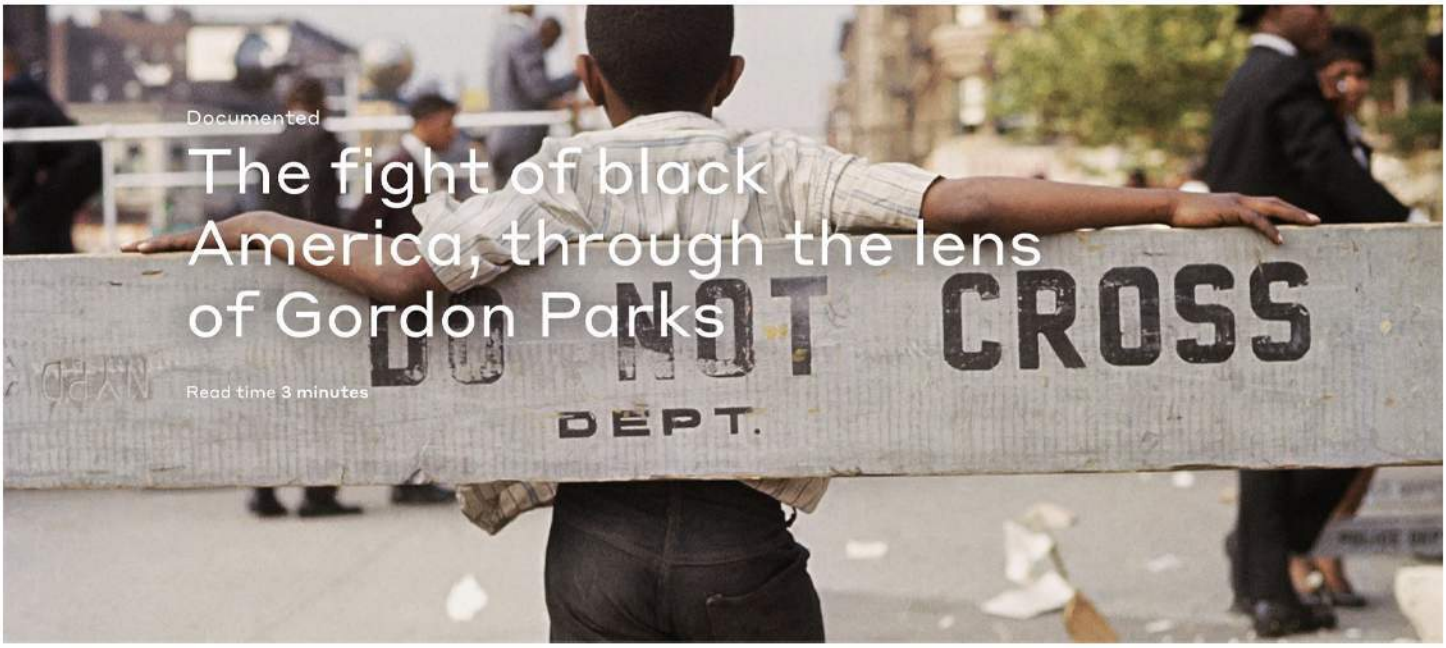
"I see this image as pivotal of what it meant to have a portrait made at that time. It allowed Sarah Ross Parks to create the personality and character of a woman who, within a 30-year period after Emancipation, and how she is using this space as a place to acknowledge not only her femininity and her sense of self as a free woman."

The spirit of self-determination, pride, and personal agency passed from mother to son, and Parks would pay it forward in his work. "Gordon was placing these women in this clothing in these high powered places like New York or Chicago – and seeing these spaces, they had a right to dress and be in these environments."

Bettina and Frances McLaughlin-Gill, 1950
Photography by Gordon Parks, Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Gordon Parks: The New Tide, Early Work 1940-1950 is on at National Gallery of Art, Washington until February 18, 2019.

DOCUMENT



Documented

The fight of black America, through the lens of Gordon Parks

Read time 3 minutes

Text by
Gordon Parks

Photography by
Gordon Parks

Posted
October 31, 2018

For Document Fall/Winter 2018, The Gordon Parks Foundation contributed an exclusive portfolio of his photographs from that watershed moment in 1963, accompanied by his own words.

Gordon Parks (1912—2006) was first drawn to photography by a photo essay of migrant workers he saw in a magazine, which prompted him to buy a camera and teach himself to wield it as an instrument of social justice. The photos in this portfolio, taken in 1963 and previously unpublished, capture the spirit of Harlem when community members regularly gathered to rally for change. Here, in his own words, Parks describes his experience as a black man documenting the fight against racism.

Covering some of these stories was like reporting from the darkness. During that period, I saw men in incomprehensible actions against their fellow men. I witnessed jagged moments of brutality and terror. I came to understand the implications of bigotry, poverty, and war. During some unbelievable hours, I doubted that another morning would arrive; each day seemed sufficient to bring the world to a stop. Nonetheless, I have been in awe of what remained to be admired. For while evil and corruption suited certain men, there were others inclined toward greatness, good men who refused to be squashed under the heels of others. These were men who, when the sky threatened to fall upon us, raised their voices and guaranteed another sunrise.

In 1963, the turbulent black revolution was steadily building, and *Life* magazine wanted to cover it. The Black Muslims and Malcolm X, their fiery spokesman, had become the magazine's first target. Other forces were slowly gathering—the Black Panthers, Huey [P.] Newton, Stokely Carmichael, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale would come later to stridently berate racism throughout the nation. Infiltration into their volatile camps by a white publication that was held suspect seemed impossible. Whatever attempts the magazine had made had fallen flat.

It seems reasonable that at the time, *Life*'s editors would question my ability to report objectively about black militancy. I was black, and my sentiments lay in the heart of black fury sweeping the country. I came to each story with a strong sense of involvement, finding it difficult to screen out my own memories of a scarred past. But I tried for truth...through the careful sifting of day-to-day emotions that white America whips up in black people. My own background has enabled me, I hope, to better share the experiences of some other black people. I do not presume to speak for them. I have just offered a glimpse, however fleeting, of their world through black eyes.

ARTFORUM

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Gordon Parks, *Government charwoman, Washington, D.C.,* August 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

EVEN NOW, decades later, it retains the power to mesmerize. Spare and emblematic, the image has the concision of a single-verse hymn: a woman, standing at center, mop and broom on either side of her; a few pieces of office equipment appearing at left and right; an American flag hanging in the background. Yet there is just enough ambiguity to elicit

closer attention. Note the woman's gaze: Some have described her as staring straight into the camera, while others assert she is looking down and to the side. I believe it's the latter, but the angle of her eyeglasses, along with that sliver of shadow below her eye, like the track of a tear, make the precise direction of her glance unclear. And the photographer took care to adjust the depth of field so that, while the woman is in focus, the flag behind her is hazy and indistinct.

The image, arguably Gordon Parks's best known and most widely circulated, is one in a remarkable series of pictures resulting from an extended collaboration between the photographer and federal worker Ella Watson. Over several weeks in the summer of 1942, Parks captured Watson at work, at home, and at her church. He also documented her immediate milieu: the view from the window of her apartment, the shoppers at her neighborhood market, the workers at her local laundry. A closer look at their collaborative endeavor brings to light the scope and ambition of Parks's artistic vision, while also offering the opportunity to revise our understanding of Watson's role in the creation of these photographs.

Gordon Parks, *View from the bedroom window of Mrs. Ella Watson, a government worker, Washington, D.C.,* August 1942 Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

Parks arrived in Washington, DC, that spring, the recipient of a fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Fund. Among its many philanthropic enterprises, the Rosenwald Fund helped build rural schools for African American children across the South and awarded grants for travel and creative activity to a range of black artists, including Elizabeth Catlett, Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and Augusta Savage. The support Parks received from the fund helped to secure him a position working under the tutelage of Roy Stryker, the legendary chief of the Historical Section of the Farm Security Administration, who oversaw a wide-ranging project to document American life—one that produced some of the twentieth century's most enduring photographs.[1] Parks was the FSA's first—and ultimately only—African American photographer.

In a profile published in the July 1946 issue of *Ebony*, Parks recalled arriving in the nation's capital full of energy and optimism.[2] "I was like a kid about Washington— excited, thrilled. I was dumb enough to regard it as the symbol of everything wonderful in the United States." [3] Parks had spent most of his adult life in Minnesota and Illinois, and Stryker, who at the time was more cognizant ofthe city's deep-seated racism, sent the young photographer out to explore. "Go get yourself a good meal, buy a hat, take in a movie, go for a bus-ride," Parks recalled him saying. "Leave your camera with me—then write up what you saw, and how you want to go about photographing this town."[4] Whether intentionally or otherwise, Stryker had sent him to run the city's Jim Crow gauntlet. Once Parks was alerted to the realities of segregation in Washington, having been refused service at stores, theaters, and restaurants, he sat down to record his response: "Man, I pounded that typewriter so hard it almost melted. I wrote for two days. I wanted to photograph every rotten discrimination in the city, and show the world how evil Washington was."[5] As the story goes, Stryker eventually suggested to Parks that Watson, who was cleaning the FSA offices, might be a suitable photographic subject.

Gordon Parks, *A dance group, Frederick Douglass housing project, Anacostia, Washington, D.C.,* June 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

There are photographs Parks took that summer that portray "every rotten discrimination": a boy on crutches in a doorway, his leg lost in a streetcar accident; a young girl in bed with an infection caused by a rat bite. Yet others are aspirational, even joyful, like his images of the commencement exercises at Howard University, and of a line of pint-sized dancers practicing ballet positions. He also captured portraits of influential figures in the African American community, such as Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP, and famed entertainer and activist Paul Robeson.[6] Other pictures by Parks, however, are not so easily categorized.

Soon after I began poring over Parks's FSA negatives, available in digitized form on the Library of Congress website, I came across one image that continues to haunt me. According to Parks's notes, he took the picture near the site of the Frederick Douglass Dwellings, a housing project built for African American workers during World War II.[7] In the dozen or so scenes he captured at the Douglass Dwellings, he focused on recording slice-of-life moments, including the photo of the aforementioned young dancers as well as one of boys playing leap-frog, and another of a mother watching her children while she prepares dinner. When he took the image in question, however, he turned his attention to a scene devoid of human presence: In a brush-filled lot, a weathered wooden sign advertises a real-estate opportunity for a "colored" development. By including that sign in the foreground of his image, Parks put the fact of segregation front and center. Behind the placard looms a single tree—dark, blasted, its limbs sawn to jagged stumps—silhouetted against a cloud-filled sky. Its presence can't help but evoke the shameful history of racial violence in the United States; in the decade prior, artists had often used such denuded trunks to symbolize lynching trees.[8] In stark contrast to the gnarled, desiccated trunk, young plantings dot the terrain in Parks's views of the Douglass Dwellings, conveying the promise of new beginnings. What caught my attention was that, in the midst of capturing shots that served the FSA's general purposes, Parks was compelled to create something different: an uncanny tableau, its subject less easily defined, that delivers an unsettling jolt.

Titles possess a strong magic. They function like binding spells, restricting an artwork's meaning, its available range of references. That's no less true of Parks's iconic image of Watson, which is now commonly referred to as *American Gothic, Washington, D.C.* Applying that label, the photograph is read as a politically charged transfiguration of Grant

Gordon Parks, *Playing in the community sprayer, Frederick Douglass housing project, Anacostia, Washington, D.C.*, June 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

Wood's indelible American Regionalist painting: An African American laborer replaces Wood's dour white Midwesterners, the farmer's pitchfork supplanted by her mop and broom. However, the association with Wood's picture came later.[9] Parks's original caption, following standard FSA practice, was *Government charwoman, Washington, D.C.*—a title that places the emphasis on its subject's profession.[10] In fact, there are numerous images of both Watson and another woman working, suggesting that Parks may initially have had a different purview in mind—perhaps a series on cleaners at work—before focusing solely on Watson.

Certain elements in the photographs Parks made that summer highlight a simple, easily overlooked fact: These are wartime images. Watson standing before the American flag, mop and broom at her side, should be understood within the context of the African American experience of discrimination and segregation during World War II. Even as

Gordon Parks, *Sign on Alabama Avenue, Frederick Douglass housing project, Anacostia, Washington, D.C.*, June 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

military enlistment created a shortage of labor on the home front, entrenched racism hindered the employment of qualified African Americans. By the summer of 1942—precisely as Parks was setting out to photograph for the FSA—this issue had become a major topic of public discussion. In a July address at the University of Virginia, Brigadier General Frank McSherry, director of operations for the War Manpower Commission, asserted that "employers can no longer afford to discriminate against Negroes and workers of other minority groups. . . . We cannot afford to permit any preconceived prejudices or artificial hiring standards to interfere with the production of tanks, planes and guns." [11]

By mid-June, African American leaders were calling for a national campaign to protest the Army, Navy, government agencies, war industries, and labor unions. They planned rallies in New York and Chicago, and threatened a large-scale march on Washington if these inequities were not addressed.[12] Historian Carol Anderson, who has documented how labor problems rooted in racism and discrimination politicized the African American community during the war, quotes two leaders who used language that resonates strongly with Parks's image of Watson:

At the NAACP's national convention [in 1941], *Oklahoma Black Dispatch* editor Roscoe Dunjee challenged the American government to come up with something more original than the idea that African Americans were supposed to fight Hitler's army with only "a mop and a broom." Black government official Robert Weaver echoed that sentiment when he intoned that, "We cannot stop tanks with squads of janitors. We cannot blast the enemy with buckets of charwomen."[13]

If the visual rhetoric of Parks's photo echoes wartime debates about African American labor, it also draws on a long-standing iconographic tradition: The personification of the nation in the form of an allegorical female figure often wielding two staves or implements, accompanied by (or at times costumed in) the flag. Typically labeled "Columbia" or "Liberty," these characters circulated widely in popular culture from at least the nineteenth century and through the World War I era. By World War II, Uncle Sam had largely supplanted Liberty, but in July 1942—the month Parks was likely taking many of his photographs of Watson—the cover of *Vogue* revisited the tradition by featuring a model posed between two flagpoles, Old Glory billowing behind her. Parks's portrait of Watson takes the popular allegory and racially recasts it, transforming the symbol of a unified national identity into an exemplification of those who have been excluded from it.

Gordon Parks, *Government charwoman, Washington, D.C.*, August 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

But what of Watson's own role in the creation of these images? Looking at the entire body of photographs she made with Parks reveals the extent to which she was actively performing for his camera. Although the ostensible purpose of these pictures was to show the subject at work (a common FSA aim), one notes that Watson is often captured not working at all. There are a number of images of her sweeping or wetting a sponge at a sink, but in the most memorable examples, she's posing—more like a professional model in an artist's atelier than a worker busy on the night shift. While there are many reasons why Parks may have chosen Watson as a subject, one likely factor was her apparent willingness to collaborate with him. It's easy to imagine that others would have quickly tired of the exercise, not wanting to interrupt their long night's work to give the photographer time to set up, arrange the shot, and take his pictures. Watson was probably sympathetic to his goals. The two conversed at length, as is indicated by Parks's later recollections, as well as the captions he wrote at the time, which include information about her salary, work history, family, and daily routines.

Watson's posing was met, in turn, by Park's composing. In more than a few images, the photographer made choices regarding lighting and other details that call attention to the artifice of these scenes, perhaps in a bid to undermine their claims to documentary veracity. In one picture of Watson pushing a broom, a beam of light shoots across the floor at a dramatic and improbably low angle.14 In others, Parks leaves his lighting gear in frame: a bulb is propped against a trash can, or a lamp cord snakes along the carpet. Indeed, Parks foregrounds the workings of photography throughout his collaboration with Watson, casting it as a highly mediated form.

A series of four photographs Parks took at the apartment Watson was then sharing with her adopted daughter and three small children reveals the extent to which he was carefully staging his pictures. These images—three shot in a horizontal format, one shot vertically—capture the family at mealtime. Considered in sequence, the photos show how Parks arranged and rearranged the room to achieve the compositions he desired: The children's small table is moved; a framed picture on the dressing table changes position; the teenager, reflected in the mirror, shifts her pose.

Gordon Parks, *Government charwoman, Washington, D.C.*, August 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

One photograph in this sequence stands out, achieving what Parks was, I think, truly after. To my mind, it should be as well known and as widely reproduced as the iconic image of Watson standing before the flag. In it, Watson and the children are framed within the kitchen doorway, the baby squirming on her knee. Either because of a shift in the photographer's position, or due to an adjustment of his lighting setup, there is a subtle yet consequential difference between this and the other versions: The light bounces off the mirror in such a way as to make the teenager's reflection appear fogged, less distinct. The result is a composition containing three separate framing elements—the doorframe, the mirror, and the picture on the dressing table—each conveying a different mode of pictorial representation. Watson and the children are viewed directly through the doorway; the teenager appears as a reflection within the mirror, its hazy surface lending the impression of a memory or dream; and the studio portrait of an African American couple in their Sunday best (variously identified either as Watson and her husband, or as a portrait of her parents) is presented as a picture within a picture.

Gordon Parks, *Mrs. Ella Watson, a government charwoman dressing her grandchildren, Washington, D.C.,* August 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

Parks's image offers not only three modes of depiction but also three corresponding distinctions in the subjects' address to the photographer. In the framed photo, husband and wife face the camera and adopt formal poses, as is customary in studio portraits. Their deportment contrasts with both that of the seated teenager, who looks down as if lost in thought, and of Watson, who, caught up in her caregiving responsibilities, directs her attention to her young charges. If the picture functions as a complex meditation on the workings of photographic representation, it also raises questions about the role of authority and consent in the practice of photography in general: What exchange or agreement between photographer and subject led to the image? To what degree were the depicted individuals allowed to determine how they presented themselves to the camera? That such concerns were on Parks's mind is made even more evident when we consider that, in capturing Watson and the children within the doorway, his photograph reiterates

the figural grouping of another iconic FSA image that he surely knew: Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* of 1936. In both cases, a woman is flanked by two small children as she holds a baby on her lap.

Lange has been criticized for maintaining the anonymity of her subject, who is cast not as an individual but as a symbol—of poverty, of suffering, of maternal concern. Indeed, Lange would later confess, "I did not ask her name or her history." (Decades later, the woman was identified by a journalist as Florence Owens Thompson.[15]) Spending time with Watson and her family and including her name and other pertinent details of her life in his captions were ways for Parks to avoid rendering Watson similarly anonymous, and thus to challenge some of the presumptions implicated in the FSA's brand of documentary photography. Another way to accomplish the latter was to compose an image that, as we've seen with his picture of her household, interrogates the codes and conventions of photographic representation from within.

Gordon Parks, *Mrs. Ella Watson, a government charwoman and her grandchildren, Washington, D.C.,* August 1942. Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI Collection.

Whatever the depth of his collaboration with Watson, there was still a point at which Parks had to pack up his equipment and go home. So who was she, apart from these photographs? Until recently, the generally available public record of her life has been limited to Parks's recollections and the information included in his captions. To learn more about Watson, I turned to the National Archives and Records Administration, which retains official personnel folders of federal workers employed between 1850 and 1951, and holds three employment files for her: one from the State Department, where she served as a temporary employee around 1919; one from the Post Office Department, where she worked in the 1920s; and one from the Treasury Department, her place of employment from 1929 through 1944. Various documents list her birth date in late March of 1883, which means that she was fifty-nine years old when Parks photographed her.[16] They also tell us that she was born in Washington, DC, that she left school in 1898, when she would have been about fifteen, and that same year went to work ironing at the Frazee Laundry in Washington.[17] The files also contain a photograph of Watson, likely a picture she submitted with an employment application. On the back of the photo, she inscribed her name in careful, looping cursive.

A recent interview with several of her surviving relatives—two granddaughters, Audrey Johnson and Sharon Stanley, and one great-granddaughter, Rosslyn Samuels—has provided additional information about her later years.[18] Her family members spoke of her strong religious beliefs, which were evidenced in Parks's pictures of her worshipping at St. Martin's Spiritual Church, as well as in the devotional imagery displayed in her home. They talked of her daily habit of reading the newspaper, documented in a Parks photograph of her with the paper spread out on a bed. And they described her as a loving, nurturing presence, the matriarch of several generations of an extended family.

A household flood destroyed most of the family's photographs of Watson, but fortunately a few survive. One shows her at a church event, wearing the white robes of a deaconess. She sits at a table, a half-filled glass of water before her. She appears lost in thought, unconcerned with the goings-on around her. An intimate family snapshot, it offers a view of her later in life, decades after her encounter with Parks. On Monday, April 7, 1980, the *Washington Star*, a now-shuttered daily newspaper, published two notices of her death; she had passed away the previous Thursday at Prince George's Hospital convalescent home. She was survived, it was reported, by six grandchildren, twenty-one great-grandchildren, and one great-great-grandchild. According to the record preserved in her family Bible, Ella Watson was ninety-seven years old when she died.

Gordon Parks, *Dinner time at the home of Mrs. Ella Watson, a government charwoman, Washington, D.C.,* August 1942.
Credit Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA/OWI

In the course of a life lived for almost a century, the time she spent with Gordon Parks was but a momentary episode. Nonetheless, the two of them, working together, managed to create something noteworthy, a body of profound and purposeful images that continue to reveal themselves to us.

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NOTES

1. For a chronology of the FSA Historical Section, see Annette Melville, *Farm Security Administration Historical Section: A Guide to Textual Records in the Library of Congress* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1985), 9.

2. "Reporter with a Camera," *Ebony*, July 1946, 24–29.

3. "Reporter with a Camera," 28.

4. "Reporter with a Camera," 28.

5. "Reporter with a Camera," 28.

6. Robeson's visit to Washington, DC, was prompted by the nation's involvement in World War II, as he was there to perform for the Russian War Relief drive, one of a number of efforts to raise funds for medical supplies to be sent to the Eastern Front. "Diverse Groups Pool Effort for Russian Relief," *Washington Post*, June 28, 1942.

7. Parks's original caption, from the typed list held by the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, indicates that he captured this photo of a sign "on *Alabama* Avenue, near Frederick Douglass Housing Project." However, in the FSA editing process, the word *near* was removed.

8. See, for instance, images by Hyman Warsager and Julius Bloch, and the cover to the 1935 exhibition catalogue *Struggle for Negro Rights*, as reproduced in Helen Langa, "Two Antilynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 10–39. Other examples include Jacob Lawrence's *Another cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching, the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this. There were lynchings.* panel from his 1940–41 "Migration" series, and Lamar Baker's 1936–37 etching *Fright*.

9.The earliest published instance of the *American Gothic* titling for Parks's photo I've been able to find is from 1980. See, for instance, Marian Christy, "A Date with Fame," *Boston Globe*, January 27, 1980. On at least one earlier occasion, Parks did mention Woods's painting in relation to his portrait of Watson (although not by name), when he described how he stood [Watson] up with her mop hanging down with the American flag hanging down Grant Wood style and did this marvelous portrait, which Stryker thought it was just

about the end." Oral history interview with Gordon Parks, December 30, 1964, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

10. This is the phrasing used in Parks's original caption, from the typed list held by the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division. Other instances, including the current Library of Congress online entry, list the title as *Washington, D.C. Government charwoman.* 11. Frank J. McSherry, "Manpower Problems and the War Effort," July 7, 1942, quoted in *Vital Speeches of the Day* 8, no. 22 (1942): 702, in "Preventing Labor Discrimination During World War II, 1942," History Now, Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/world-war-ii/resources/preventing-labor-discrimination-during-world-war-ii-1942, accessed July 18, 2018. See also "War Industry Will Induct 20 Million During 1942–43," *Washington Pos*t, July 8, 1942.

12. Led by such figures as A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the movement was supported by the NAACP, the National Urban League, the Harlem branches of the YMCA and the YWCA, and other organizations. See "Negroes to Fight Employment Bias," *New York Times*, June 13, 1942, and "10,000 Negroes Hear Appeal to Ban Color Line," *Chicago Tribune*, June 27, 1942.

13. Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 11.

14. The scholar Nicholas Natanson quotes African American photographer Robert McNeill commenting on Parks's unconventional approach to lighting: "Gordon was doing so many things that were different [in 1942–43]. I remember seeing him covering a Howard University commencement, and even the other black photographers who were there were saying, 'Who is that crazy [guy]?' I mean, Gordon would use four flashbulbs for a single shot, outdoors where he could have gotten away without using any. He wasn't content just to stand up and take shots from a position that was comfortable for him—he lay on the ground, he shot up, he shot down." Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 266.

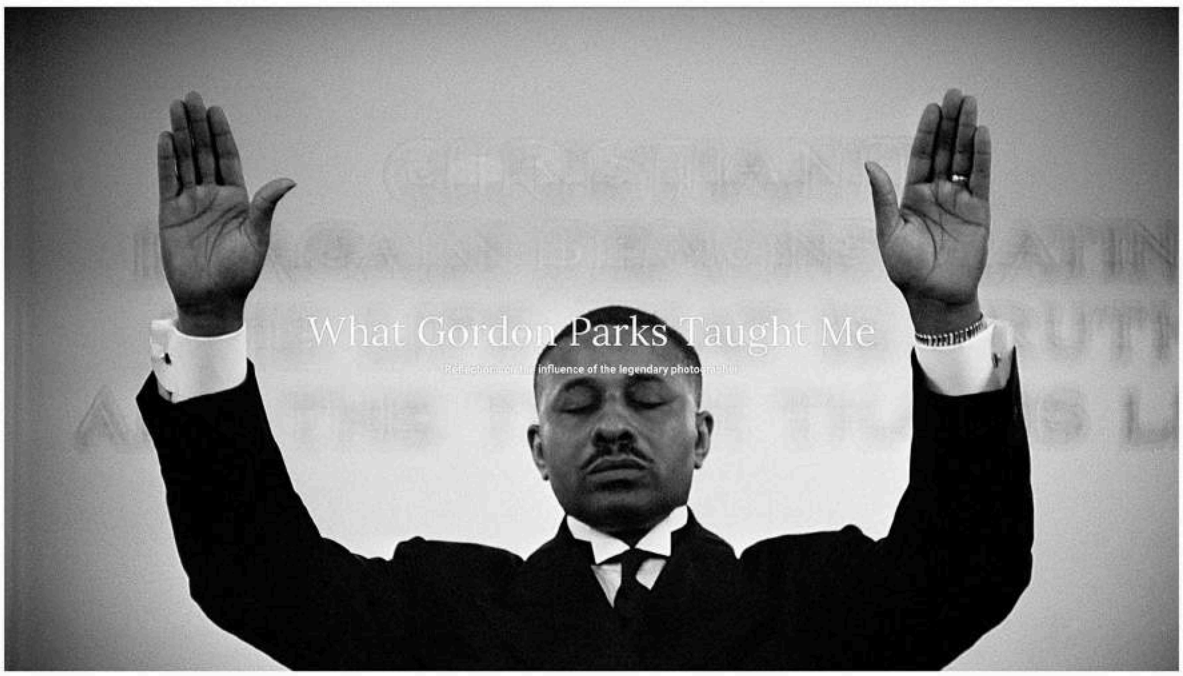
15. Dorothea Lange, “The Assignment I’ll Never Forget: Migrant Mother,” *Popular Photography*, February 1960, 42–43, quoted in Colleen McDannell, *Picturing Faith: Photography and the Great Depression* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 1. On the identification of Florence Owens Thompson, see “Never Saw a Cent from Photo: ‘Migrant Mother’ Feels Exploited,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 17, 1978.

16. There is some ambiguity in the files about Watson’s actual date of birth; at times it is given as March 27, 1883, at others as March 29. Letters in her Post Office and Treasury Department employment files also indicate a lack of clarity about the year, which was variously cited as 1882, 1884, or 1885. A letter sent by the US Civil Service Commission explains that the record of her birth was not preserved in any official documentation but rather in a family Bible. The letter, dated to May 2, 1927 and signed by John T. Doyle, commission secretary, states: “You are advised that on a personal visit to this office Mrs. Watson presented a family Bible, showing that she was born March 27, 1883. The Commission’s records are being changed to show that this is the date of her birth instead of 1884 or 1885 as previously given by her.” Ella Watson Official Personnel Folder, US Post Office Department, National Personnel Records Center, Archival Programs Division, National Archives at Saint Louis. A later (1936) letter from the Civil Service Commission in Watson’s Treasury Department file cites her birth date as March 27.

17. Application for Employment, August 28, 1940, Ella Watson Official Personnel Folder, US Department of the Treasury, National Personnel Records Center, Archival Programs Division, National Archives at Saint Louis. On the application, Watson indicated that she had an earlier course of employment at the Treasury Department, from 1919 to 1922.

18. Interview of Audrey Johnson, Sharon Stanley, and Rosslyn Samuels by ~~Michael Lobel~~ and Philip Brookman, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, August 31, 2017.

TIME



What Gordon Parks Taught Me

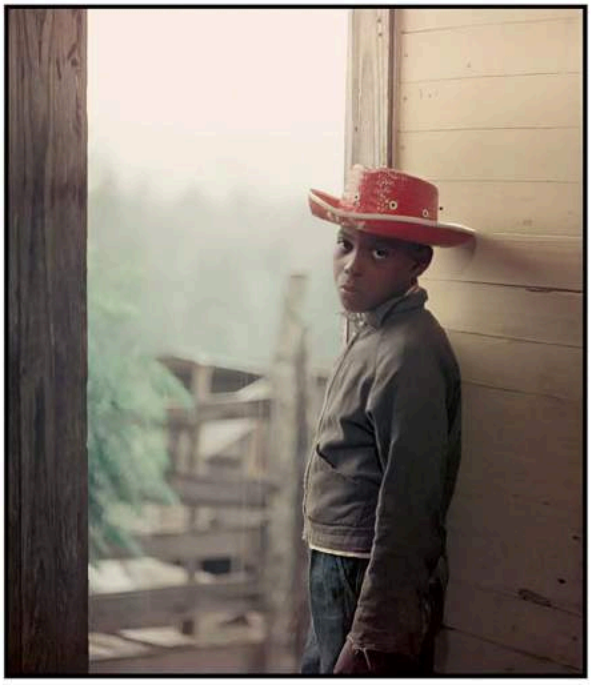
Reflections on the influence of the legendary photographer

The opening of a new exhibition of work by the late photographer Gordon Parks offers a chance to reflect on some of Parks' most iconic imagery relating to civil rights. In collaboration with the Gordon Parks Foundation, 'I Am You | Part 2' opened at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York on Feb. 15 and focuses on work from the late 1940s through the '60s. TIME asked Andre D. Wagner, a contemporary artist and photographer who has been influenced by that work, to discuss how Parks affected his own path.

By **ANDRE D. WAGNER**

During my freshman year of college, I was looking for easy classes to take so I could spend the maximum amount of time on the basketball court. Among them was a film photography course. After barely getting through the class, I thought I'd never think about a 35mm camera again.

That is, until six years later, after I moved to New York City to pursue my master's degree in social work. Since I was from Omaha and had gone to college in Iowa, the energy of the city turned my world upside-down. Even though I was oblivious to the history of photography and the potential power of the medium, I was drawn to pick up a camera.



Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956. Gordon Parks/Courtesy of and Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Untitled, Washington D.C., 1963. Gordon Parks/Courtesy of and Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

One day, a friend gave me an old beat-up library copy of *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography* by Gordon Parks. As soon as I started reading, I couldn't put it down.

Chapter after chapter, I continued to relate to Parks' story and struggle. His path of falling into photography and wanting more out of his life than what was thought to be possible resonated with me immediately.

Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948. Gordon Parks/Courtesy of and Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Red Jackson, Harlem, New York, 1948. Gordon Parks/Courtesy of and Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Parks, as a photojournalist, chronicled the civil rights era among countless assignments for *LIFE*. His photographs are documentary by nature, but a lot of the beauty in his work comes from his recognition of what's hidden in plain sight. It's the dignity of the people that he was able to capture and his ability to get below the skin that made his pictures undeniable. Parks gave us something only he could give us, and that's been a huge lesson and revelation for me on my path.

Through Parks' work and life, I started to understand my own strength and potential. And, maybe most importantly, I realized that if my photography were going to mean anything it would be on the basis of how intelligently it could engage with current times.

Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2014. Andre D. Wagner

Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2014. Andre D. Wagner

I've only been photographing seriously for about six years, the same amount of time I've lived in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick. As a black man in dialogue with this community, and given my social work background and Midwest upbringing, I understood that I had a responsibility to the people who had already been here.

I may not follow Parks' photojournalistic approach, but my commitment to communicating through pictures is informed by the documentary aesthetic. My images showcase the movement of everyday life, and the people and places within that flow. But my subjectivity is part of the work as well.

Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, 2014. Andre D. Wagner

Bushwick, Brooklyn, 2016. Andre D. Wagner

Parks was and always will be in a league of his own. Making history in photography is a feat for anyone, let alone a black man in his era. He broke down barriers and cemented himself in books and museums without pause. When I think about Parks' story and his life's work, I'm inspired to keep going.

As a black artist, I'm working on paying my dues and will hopefully move the bar forward—building on the legacy of his brilliance, dedication and commitment to social justice. At times, the path of artistic pursuits may feel unclear, but Gordon Parks has proven that it's a life worth living.

By the time I finished the book, the camera in my life started to make sense when I thought about it the way Parks did: I could use it "as a weapon."

The camera became more than a tool to make ends meet, and photography became more than just pretty pictures—it was a way to be defiant and to speak about society. It's not lost on me that it was through his own humanity that Parks found his way. More than 20 years later, his words encouraged me to find my own.

Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn, 2016. Andre D. Wagner

Andre D. Wagner is a contemporary artist and photographer, based in Brooklyn. Follow him on Instagram @photodre.

ARTFORUM

Gordon Parks, *Untitled, Harlem, New York*, 1952, gelatin silver print, 20 x 16". © Gordon Parks/The Gordon Parks Foundation and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Gordon Parks

JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY | WEST 20TH STREET

In an untitled photograph from 1978, the model Iman casually rests her elbows on two tall stacks of ancient African artifacts. In another, from 1966, a young Muhammad Ali leans against a stairwell bannister in London, gazing intently toward the upper right-hand corner of the frame. In another still, from 1960, we see Duke Ellington through the television monitors of a recording studio. In 1957, the photographer Gordon Parks made a vivid color portrait of the painter Helen Frankenthaler, vamping for the camera on a drop cloth in her studio. In 1952, he shot the hand of Alexander Calder, reaching from the shadows to adjust one of his mobiles. A year earlier, he photographed Alberto Giacometti at work on his sculptures in his Paris atelier. Two years before that, he captured the eternal sadness of Ingrid Bergman, at a beach on the Italian island of Stromboli.

This show was the first in an ambitious two-part series of exhibitions delving into Parks's lesser-known works. It offered a tantalizing sampler of celebrity portraiture, theatrical fashion photography, gritty photojournalism, and, thanks to a pair of color composites from 1995, *Evening* and *Travelers*, a surprisingly formalist approach to almost total abstraction. More than a decade after his death, Parks is still best known for his documentary work with the Farm Security Administration and for the drama he captured in the emotional midcentury struggle for civil rights. In 1948, he was the first African American to be hired as a staff writer and photographer for *Life*, but well into the 1970s he was also working as a freelancer. He took all kinds of assignments on the side. Much of his freelance work was successful, such as his fashion photography for *Vogue*, for which he often used the architecture of New York as a prop—evinced in *Cocoon Cape, New York, New York,* from 1956, of a model posed between two men in tuxedos in front of the Flatiron Building. A few of Parks's extra assignments, however, ended in disaster. In 1948, he began a fruitful collaboration with the novelist Ralph Ellison. They worked together on "Harlem Is Nowhere," among other projects. But the magazine that had commissioned the piece went bankrupt before it was published. Ellison managed to wrestle back the rights to his essay, which ran in *Harper's Magazine* almost two decades later. But Parks never retrieved the full set of his photographs. They were most likely lost or destroyed in the legal dispute that followed the magazine's closure. Two photographs here—the abstract circles of *Sewer Pipes, Harlem*, from 1946, and *Untitled, Harlem, New York*, from 1952, showing an evocative row of abandoned shoes in the foreground, serve to memorialize that loss.

Later on, Parks wrote a novel, *The Learning Tree*, which was published in 1963. At the urging of John Cassavetes, he turned the book into a film, which premiered in 1969. It is considered the first Hollywood movie made by a black director, and it paved the way for *Shaft* and Parks's essential invention of the blaxploitation genre. When *The Learning Tree* came out, *Life* ran an excerpt with a series of photographs, including *Boy with June Bug, Fort Scott Canvas,* from 1963. The color image of a child lying in tall grass, holding on to a string tied to

an insect that sits on his forehead, is quiet and elusive and unlike anything else in the artist's oeuvre. Though less theatrical than, say, his black-and-white picture of young black Muslims praying in Brooklyn, *Boy with June Bug* is so full of narrative potential, so suggestive of cinematic time, that it seems to move like a dream, a premonition, a memory. It is a reminder of how well Parks could write, and how often his words went without credit in *Life*. The two-part show was named "I Am You" for the opening lines of an essay that ran with his pictures in 1968: "What I want. What I am. What you force me to be is what you are. For I am you, staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom. Look at me and know that to destroy me is to destroy yourself. You are weary of the long hot summers. I am tired of the long hungered winters. We are not so far apart as it might seem."

—*Kaelen Wilson-Goldie*

CNN style

Gordon Parks' cinematic photos captured the injustices of the civil rights era

Published 21st February 2018

Written by
Allyssia Alleyne, CNN

Credit: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

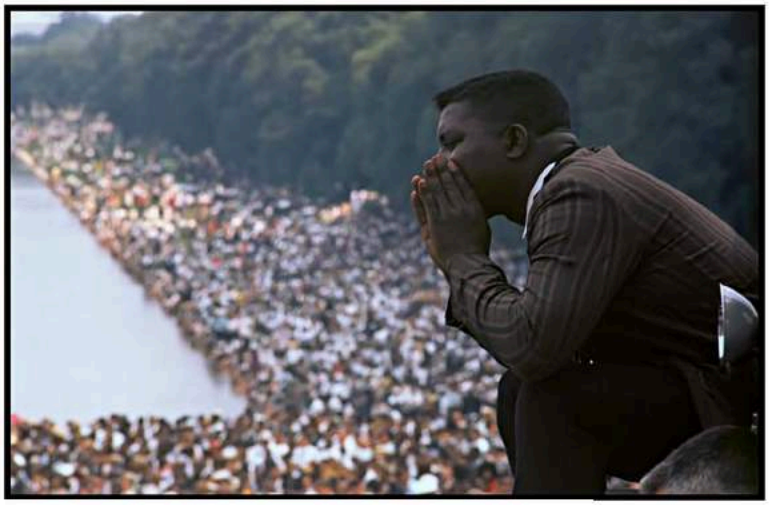
He photographed fashion for Vogue, directed the 1971 blaxploitation film "Shaft," composed orchestral scores, and wrote memoirs, novels and poems. But it was with his sensitive, insightful documentary photos of black America that Gordon Parks made himself one of the 20th century's most important cultural figures.

It's this contribution that New York's Jack Shainman Gallery is revisiting with "Gordon Parks: I am You | Part 2." The exhibition follows a month-long look at look at the photographer's lesser known work with portraiture and fashion photography.

"Department Store, Mobile, Alabama" (1956) Credit: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

Born in Fort Scott, Kansas, Parks worked his way from advertising and portrait gigs in Saint Paul, Minnesota and Chicago to an apprenticeship with the Farm Security Administration and, in the mid-1940s, a post as Vogue's first black photographer.

In 1948, he made history again when he became the first black staff photographer at Life magazine, a position he would hold for two decades. He would go on to fill the magazine's pages with photo essays of black life in the segregated south as well as northern states. Eventually, he would photograph the great leaders of the civil rights era, including Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X and Eldridge Cleaver, and those who rallied behind them.



"Untitled, Washington, D.C." (1963) Credit: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

"(Parks) went through so much scrutiny as a African-American photographer and as an African-American in general, and wanted to have his voice heard," Peter W. Kunhardt Jr., executive director of the Gordon Parks Foundation, said in a phone interview. "He felt that, by picking up a camera and using his creative works, he could tell a story and show the injustices of America."

It would seem that, in the current political moment, his work has taken new urgency. According to Kunhardt, the foundation has "absolutely" seen an increase in requests related to both exhibitions and education opportunities recently. (The Foundation offers scholarships and fellowship opportunities, and hosts education programs.)

"Gordon's now been dead for 12 years, and I'm certain that if you were still around he would say that that that dialogue has to continue on today, and that's what we're doing with the foundation," said Kunhardt.

"His fight was never over and his struggle to end racial segregation and the ability for everyone's voice to be heard would be louder right now given what's happening in this country right now. This struggle is not over."

"Doll Test, Harlem, New York" (1947) Credit: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

Last summer, 12-time Grammy-winner Kendrick Lamar reinforced the point when he recreated scenes from some of Parks' most memorable photos in the video for his single "ELEMENT." For two and a half months, stills from the video were on displayed alongside the images that inspired them at the Gordon Parks Foundation headquarters in Pleasantville, New York.

Kunhardt, who considers Lamar a "friend of the foundation," called the rapper's appropriation a work of "pure genius and creativity." (Lamar will host the Foundation's annual awards gala with Alicia Keys and producer Swizz Beatz later this year.)

"Untitled, Harlem, New York" (1963) Credit: Courtesy Jack Shainman Gallery

"What he did in his appropriations, you couldn't have commissioned someone to do that. He was taking Gordon as a legendary figure in the African-American historical context and using him in such a contemporary way that brought millions and millions of eyes to him that would not necessarily have ever known who Gordon Parks was," Kunhardt said.

"There are so many contemporary artists -- and I don't just mean painters and sculptors, but I also mean musicians and choreographers to poets and writers -- who are doing their work today because of what Gordon was able to pave the way to. And they feel so strongly that that Gordon needs to be honored and recognized for having a voice at a time where that voice was much harder to have heard."

"Gordon Parks: I am You | Part 2" is on at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York until March 24, 2017.

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Lesser-Known Photos of Gordon Parks, from Fashion to Artists' Portraits

A two-part exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery sheds light on relatively obscure works by the master photographer, from colorful fashion imagery to portraits of Muhammad Ali, Helen Frankenthaler, and others.

Ilana Novick Feb 5, 2018

Gordon Parks, "Untitled, San Diego, California," (1959), archival pigment print, 20 x 16 in, edition 2 of 15, + 3 APs
(all images courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation unless indicated otherwise)

A perplexed giraffe peers from behind a woman bundled in a purple printed headscarf. She's holding an umbrella, whose pattern of brown shapes framed by yellow borders mimics that of the animal. Photographer Gordon Parkscaptured the giraffe mid side-eyed glance, as if it's thinking, "who is this woman and why is she stealing my look?" In a nearby image, a woman

wearing a tiered wedding cake of a red ball gown, her diamond barrette like frosting, nestles into her date. They're standing in the middle of busy Park Avenue, but they might as well be the only two people in the world.

Parks, who was the first black photographer on staff at both *Vogue*and *Life* magazines, is best known for the photo essays he shot for the latter, where, wielding the camera that he referred to as his "choice of weapon," he created searing portraits of black life in the years before and during the Civil Rights movement. The aforementioned photos — "Untitled, San Diego, California" (1959), and "Evening Wraps" (1956) — are just two examples of a lesser-known facet of Parks's practice, one that included fashion and event photography, as well as portraits of artist friends that were as slyly funny as they were intimate. All of these are included in *Gordon Parks: I Am You*, a two-part exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, the first installment of which showcases Parks as fashion and fine art photographer.

The same incisive eye that captured, in saturated color, the indignity of waiting in line to drink from a water fountain, while another, labeled "white only" sat unused, infuriatingly out of reach, also shot fashion editorials and portraits of artist friends like Alberto Giacometti and Helen Frankenthaler. Parks also did street style photography long before the current crop of influencers could hold a camera. His camera-weapon could document it all, with intimacy, sharpness, and occasionally, humor.

The show begins with playfully, with black-and-white glimpses of Giacometti interacting with his long-limbed sculptures. In "Falling Man, Paris, France" (1956), a single, seemingly disembodied hand reaches out to Giacometti's skeletal, sculptural figure, evoking Michaelangelo's "The Creation of Adam." Parks uses the sculptures' outstretched limbs to frame Giacometti, who sits beneath them. He looks in awe of, and dwarfed by, his creations. His 1959 portrait of painter Helen Frankenthaler follows a similar pattern. Frankenthaler sits in between her giant canvases, smaller and out of focus, where her work is bright and colorful, commanding the space.

By contrast, nothing overshadows Eartha Kitt. In “Eartha Kitt Performs at The Blue Angel” (1952), Kitt, in shimmering satin, sings, one hand on her hip, the other held up as if to say “stop.”The audience is hidden, but there’s no doubt they’re entirely under Kitt’s control.

Parks is a master of angles, conjuring emotion through geometry, whether it’s Kitt, or the anonymous woman in “Untitled, Chicago, Illinois” (1950). She leans at a window, holding a cigarette and leaning toward the street, face directly in the light, arms bent. Her eyes are pointed toward something we can’t see. Parks leaves just enough mystery to make me long to know what the smoking woman was looking at and thinking about, and wondering how she got in the perfect frame.

The same attention to position at framing is on display in “Toni Riddleberger Talks About a Boyfriend” (1951). In it, Riddleberger hangs off an armchair, enveloped in a blanket of black and white light, while she talks on a rotary phone. She’s facing downward, so her expression is hidden; only the sculptural waves of her hair are visible, her body framed by the back of the chair, and the white light streaming from the french doors next to her. The pose felt achingly familiar, conjuring memories of perching on my own teenage bed, toward a landline on the floor.

The photo captures intimacy without intrusion, a through-line of Parks’s practice that connects the seemingly different sides of his work, from fashion and performance photography to his photojournalism. That work taught America uncomfortable lessons about itself, bringing the realities of racism and poverty into the living rooms of people who would have preferred to bask in the glow of post-World War II American supremacy. Parks’s fashion photography, while less well-known, is just as revealing.

Gordon Parks, I Am You, Part 1 *runs through February 10 at Jack Shainman Gallery (524 West 24th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan).* Gordon Parks, I Am You, Part 2 *opens February 15 and runs through March 24.*

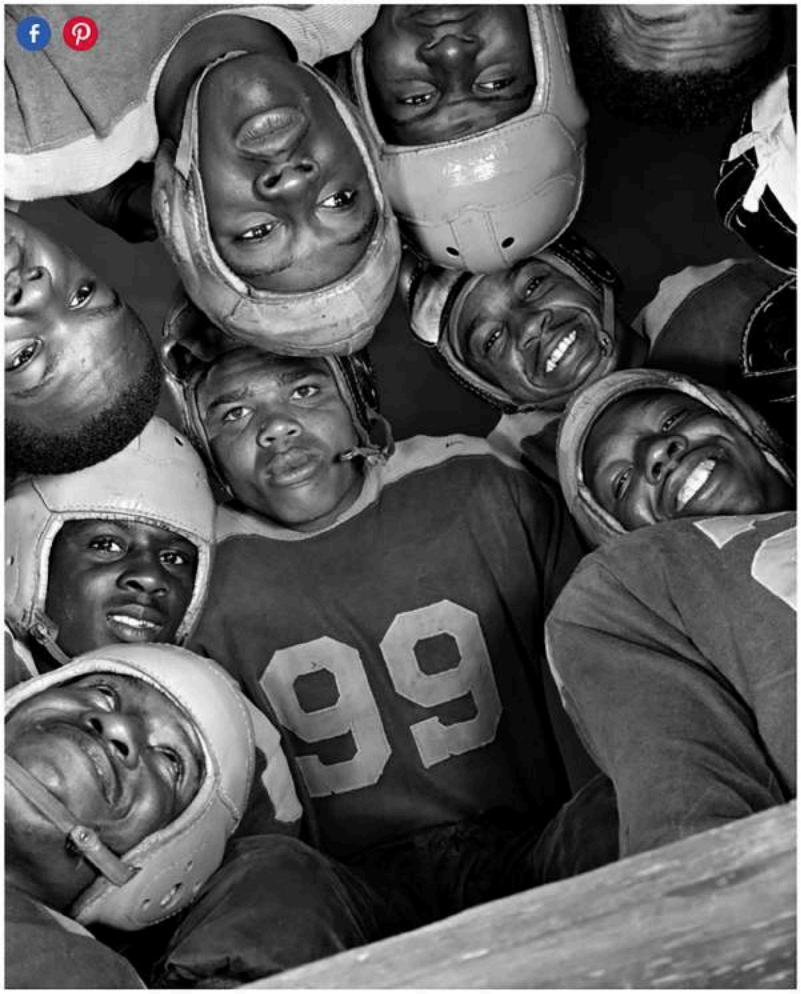
BLACK HISTORY MONTH

Gordon Parks's Pictures Run Through the Subconscious of Black America

The late Harlem photographer Gordon Parks never shied from puncturing a black cultural stereotype or a black American icon. When Muhammad Ali died in 2016, the *New York Times* in their obituary ran not the famous photo of the champ standing in triumph over a fallen opponent, but Parks's intense, vulnerable close-up of Ali's sweating face during a training session—a champ, and a man, in progress. When Parks made his 1971 film *Shaft*, some dismissed it as "blaxpoitation," but its empowered black action hero was trailblazing, not to mention that Parks was the first black director to make a Hollywood movie. These images and many more that are now iconic—think of the Harlem photographs of the Fontanelle family in *Life*, a deliberate provocation of racist white America, or his portraits in the Deep South—are part of black history now because Parks embedded himself deep in it. Here, revisit some of Parks's famous images in honor of Black History Month. But, really, they're always there right beneath the surface waiting to bubble up, as they did in Kendrick Lamar's 2017 music video for "ELEMENT.", which recreates slides 1 and 9—and the entire essence of Parks's work.

by Wmag
February 1, 2018 2:52 pm

1/14 Black Muslim Women, Chicago, Illinois, 1963. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

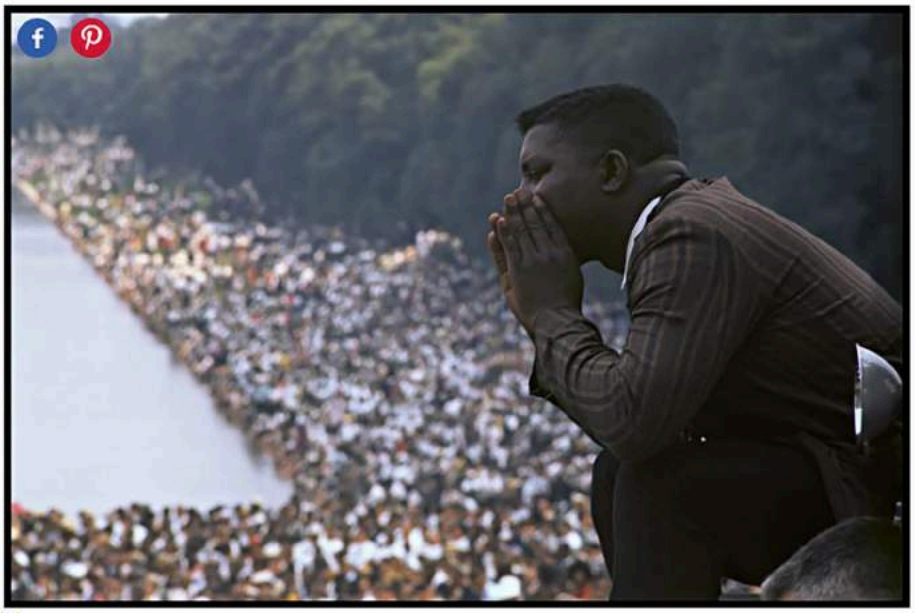


2/14 Football, Bethune-Cookman College, Daytona Beach, Florida, 1943. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

3/14 Home Economic Students Learning to Make Good Bread, Bethune-Cookman College, Daytona Beach, Florida, 1943. Photograph courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation.

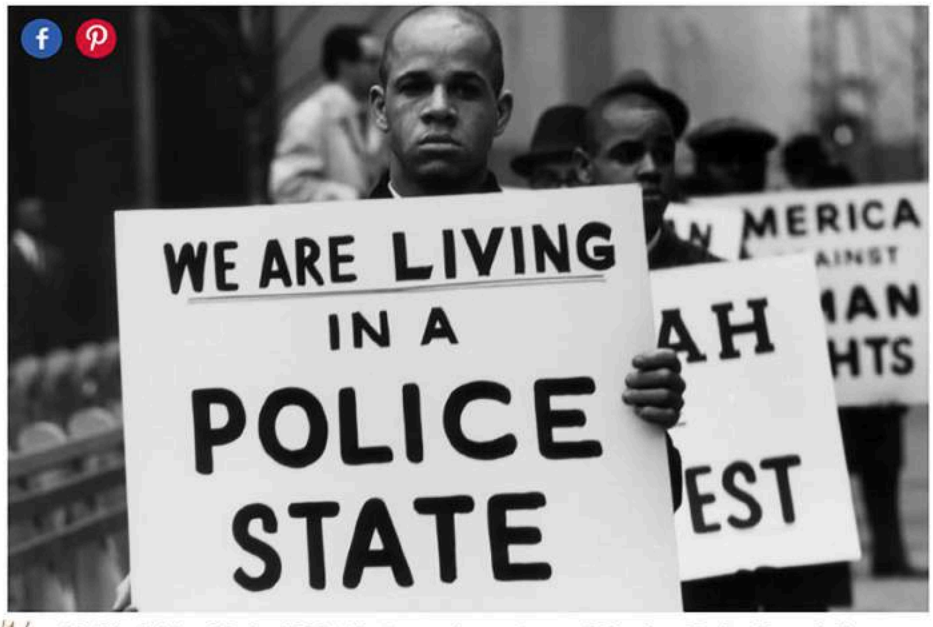
4/14 Mess Call, Southfields, New York, 1943. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

5/14 Uncle James Parks, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.



6/14 Untitled, Washington D.C., 1963. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

7/14 Tenement Dwellers, Chicago, Illinois, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

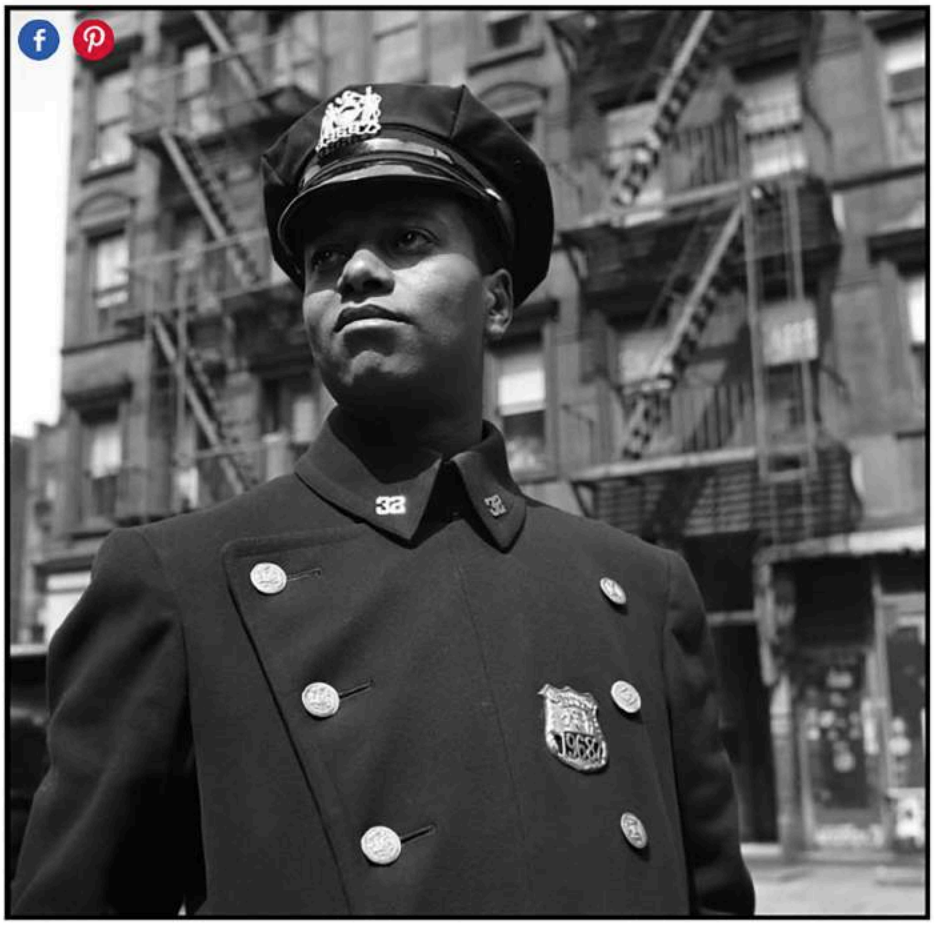


8/14 Untitled, New York, 1963. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

9/14 Black Muslims Train in Self-Defense, Chicago, Illinois, 1963. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

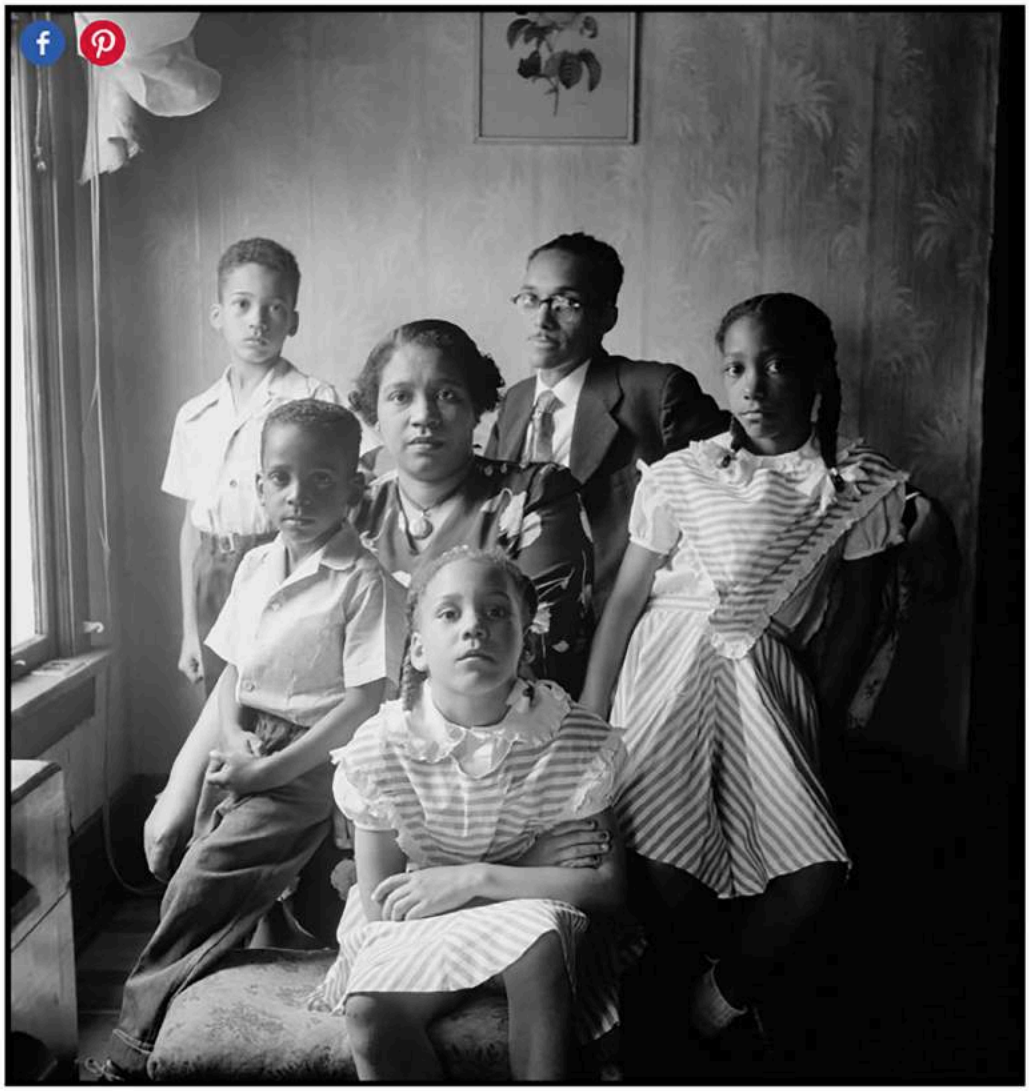
10/14 Neighborhood Children, Washington D.C., 1942. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

11/14 Woman and Dog in Window, Harlem, New York, 1943. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.



12/14 Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1943. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

13/14 Husband and Wife, Sunday Morning, Detroit, Michigan, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.



14/14 Family Portrait, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1950. Photograph courtesy of Gordon Parks Foundation.

whitewall

NEW YORK
ART, JANUARY 29, 2018

Gordon Parks, Judy Chicago, Anthony McCall: Must-See New York Shows

By Whitewall

"Gordon Parks: I Am You | Part 1" at Jack Shainman
January 11—February 10
524 West 24th Street
Jack Shainman presents "Gordon Parks: I Am You | Part 1" in collaboration with the **Gordon Parks Foundation**. Known for his documentation of the Civil Rights Era, this first half of what will be a two-part show begins with images that are perhaps less familiar to Parks' oeuvre—portraits of artists in their studios like **Helen Frankenthaler** and **Alberto Giacometti**, as well as fashion editorials shot in the 1950s and 60s.

Gordon Parks
Evening Wraps, New York, New York
1956
Archival pigment print
20 x 16 inches
Photograph by Gordon Parks

MUSÉE
VANGUARD OF PHOTOGRAPHY CULTURE
JAN 16

Gordon Parks: Then and Now

FEATURES

By Frances Molina

Yesterday, Musée Magazine reported on Gordon Parks' I am you exhibit which opened late last week at the Jack Shainman Gallery. In late recognition of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and in early celebration of Black History Month, Musée would like to take a moment to recognize Gordon Parks as a true vanguard, a revolutionary artist with one eye fixed on the mounting and mourning invisible masses.

Born into the poverty and unbridled racism of rural Kansas at the start of the 20th century, Parks navigated a bleak landscape of loss and violence with the guidance of his mother who taught him to value "love, dignity, and hard work over hatred" (*A Choice of Weapons*, Parks). At sixteen, he left for his sister's home in St. Paul, Minnesota, the last wish of his dying mother. The next few years saw Parks working a variety of unsatisfying odd-jobs and side-hustles. One such job, working as a server on a railroad dining car, brought him face-to-face with his destiny in the form of a coworker's photography magazine and a portfolio of striking photographs of migrant workers.

These photographs resonated deeply with Parks, who had never seen an image communicate so much with a single shot. They hummed with humanity, reaching out from a wellspring of emotion that inspired Parks to pick up a camera and teach himself the craft. Despite his lack of professional training, Parks pursued photography with a dedication and ambition that quickly landed him a spot alongside his photography heroes at the Farm Security Administration. He began his creative career as both a photojournalist and fashion photographer, working freelance for high profile glossies such as *Vogue* and *Ebony*.

Credit: Photograph by Gordon Parks. Copyright: Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Even with his freelance work in the high-fashion world Parks captured a signature aesthetic, shooting models in luxe, haute couture gowns and evening wear against the gritty backdrop of the city, an innovative approach to fashion photography that we recognize today as “street style”. But it was his time on staff at Life magazine that helped cement Parks as a photographic visionary and a cultural icon synonymous with a national black consciousness struggling and surviving in the face of systemic racism.

Credit: Photograph by Gordon Parks. Copyright: Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

Parks photographed what he knew - the truth of the poverty and destitution that plagued Black America, the strength and resilience of their communities, the lives of those rendered invisible by a country reluctant to face its horrors, past and present. His work was a challenge to mainstream America, a subtle call for action and empathy, a fearless declaration of an unpleasant truth. At a time when our country is reeling from corruption and continually subjugated by racial and sexual violence, Parks creative legacy of compassion and social justice is immensely relevant.

In his Life editorial “A Harlem Family”, Parks begins with a prose-poem, speaking in a voice that transcends his time and his medium, reaching audiences today with urgency: *“For I am you, staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom. Look at me and know that to destroy me is to destroy yourself...There is something about both of us that goes deeper...it is our common search for a better life, a better world.”*

Credit: Photograph by Gordon Parks. Copyright: Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

BuzzFeed NEWS

These Powerful Photos Capture Life For Black Americans During The 20th Century

"Look at the times that we're living in today; some of these pictures look like they could have been taken last year."

Posted on February 28, 2018, at 5:54 p.m.
Gabriel H. Sanchez, BuzzFeed News Photo Essay Editor

"Department Store in Mobile," Alabama, 1956
The Gordon Parks Foundation

Gordon Parks is a photographer whose name is synonymous with artistic genius and unwavering perseverance amid an era of bigotry and hate. Parks rose to prominence as one of the nation's preeminent photojournalists, hired to be the first black staff photographer for Life magazine. While his pictures expertly depict a wide range of topics, some of his most iconic photographs show aspects of African-American life that many of his white colleagues simply did not have access to. Because of this, Parks became the voice of a generation, able to capture and contextualize the African-American experience at a time when many sought to silence black voices in the US.

A two-part exhibition of his work titled Gordon Parks: I Am You, *on view now at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City, brings together some of his most iconic pictures. On the occasion of this exhibition, BuzzFeed News spoke with Peter W. Kunhardt Jr., the executive director of the Gordon Parks Foundation, on what Gordon Parks accomplished during his long life of 93 years. His legacy can still be felt today:*

What Parks did was transcended all barriers. Gordon Parks was the first African-American photographer to work on the staff of Life magazine. He didn't allow racism and discrimination stand in the way. He knew he had a creative calling as a young boy growing up in the prairie land of Kansas, in a small town called Fort Scott.

"Doll Test," Harlem, New York, 1947
The Gordon Parks Foundation

"Segregated Drinking Fountain," Mobile, Alabama, 1956 (left); "The Invisible Man," Harlem, New York, 1952 (right)
The Gordon Parks Foundation

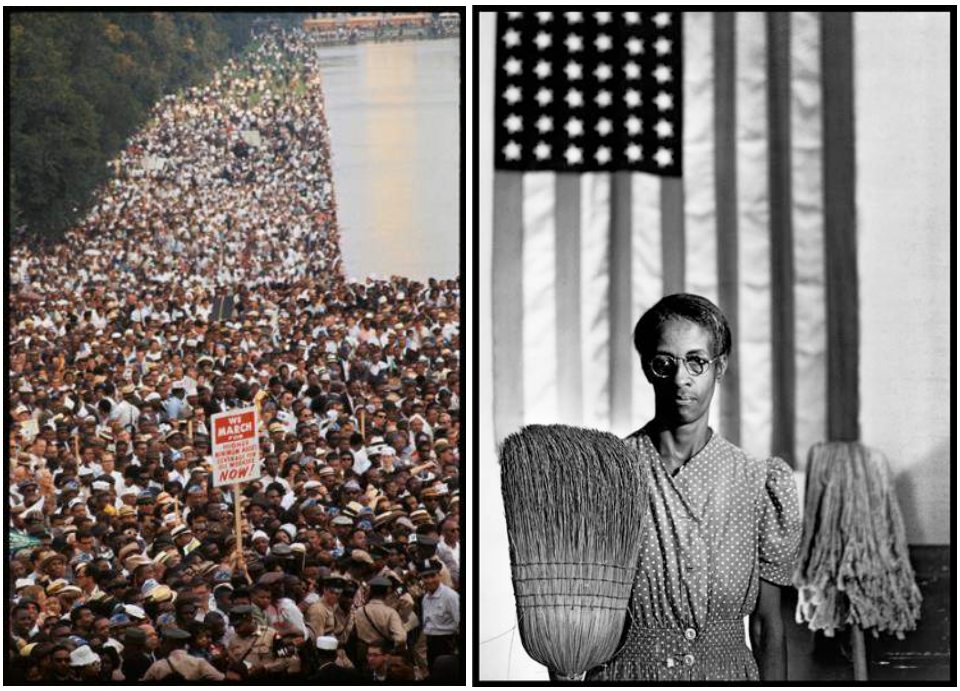
"Drinking Fountains," Mobile, Alabama, 1956
The Gordon Parks Foundation

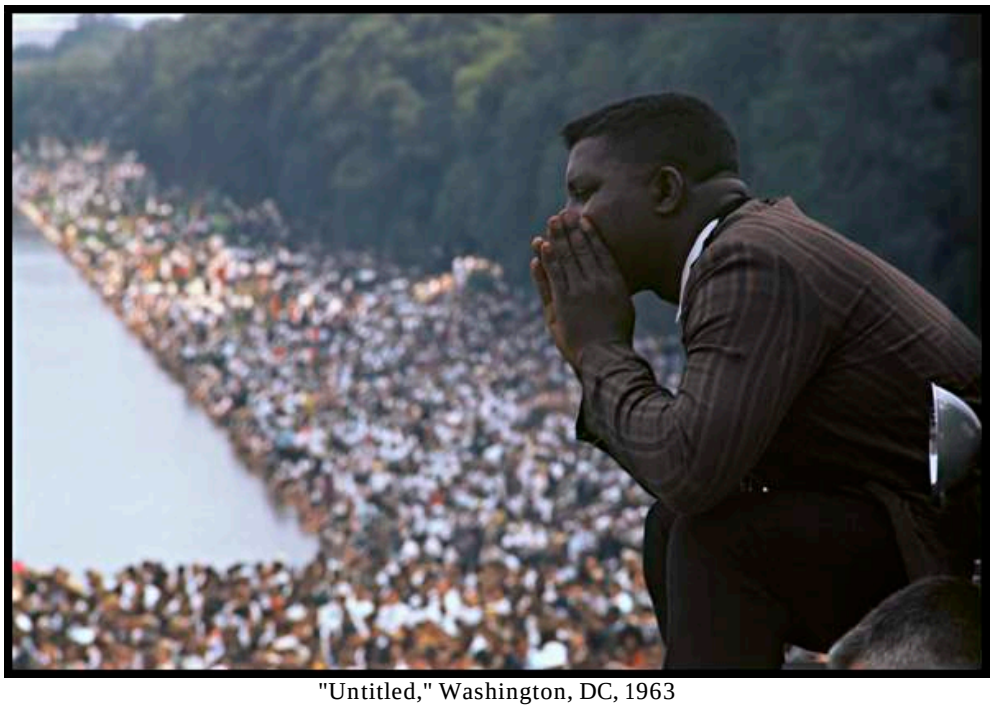
He was the youngest of 15 children and knew that he had to have an education, though he actually never finished high school. Looking back on his life as an older man he realized that the best thing that he did was pick up a camera. His choice of weapon was a camera. He had to express himself in other formats.

Before Life [magazine], his mother died when he was 15 and he was sent to live with his sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. There, he got into a big fight with his brother-in-law and was eventually kicked out onto the street. He was homeless at the time and ended up moving to Chicago to work on the railroad. That's where he found his calling, photography.

He worked at the Southside Community Art Center, processing his photographs in the darkroom after hours. In 1941, he was awarded the Julius Rosenwald Fund, the first photographer to receive this grant. That's as prestigious today as winning a MacArthur Genius grant, for example.


"Martin Luther King, Jr." Washington, DC, 1963
The Gordon Parks Foundation


"Untitled," Washington, DC, 1963 (left); "American Gothic," Washington, DC, 1942 (right)
The Gordon Parks Foundation


"Untitled," Washington, DC, 1963
The Gordon Parks Foundation

Gordon had this explosion of creativity when he went to Washington, DC, to work for the Farm Security Administration under Roy Stryker. That's where he took many of his most famous photographs. From there, he moved to New York and worked for a period of time for Vogue, before he was hired full-time for the staff of Life.

What's so interesting about his time at Life was that he not only had to prove himself as a photographer, but also a black man. As I said before, he was the only African-American on the staff. So they used Gordon to go into places that they didn't think a white photographer could go — and he'd always come back with really strong material.

"Untitled," Mobile, Alabama, 1956
The Gordon Parks Foundation


"The Fontenelles at the Poverty Board," Harlem, New York, 1967
The Gordon Parks Foundation

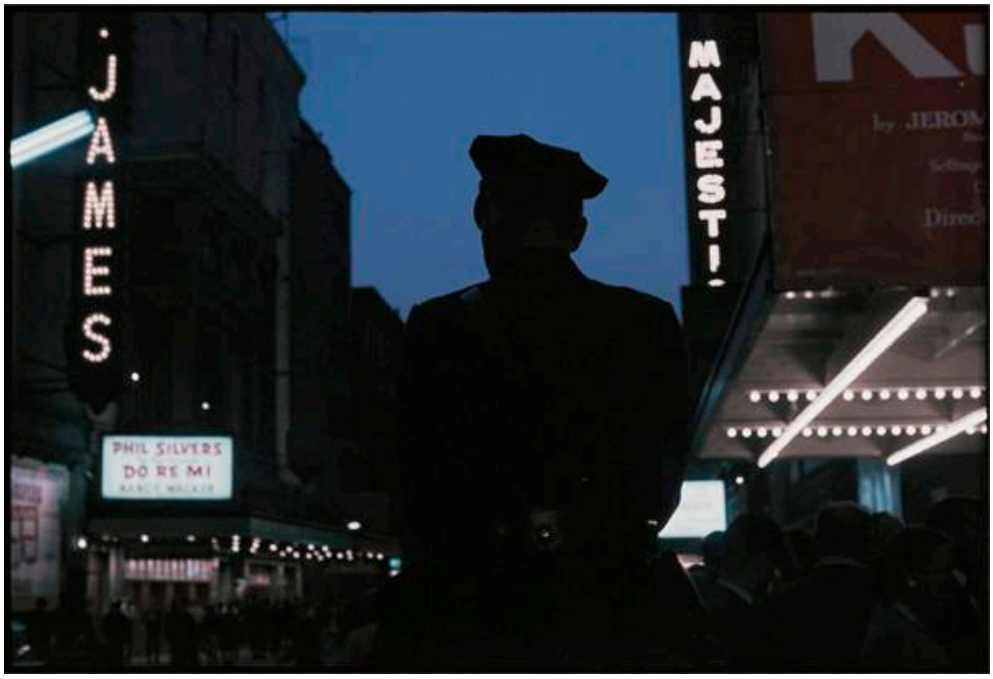
When Gordon went to photograph gangs in Harlem, those were relationships that he had built and would continue to relish over the course of his entire life. Red Jackson was a gang member in Harlem and probably one of Gordon Parks' most important stories. Parks befriended him and his family, and this was all prior to taking a single photograph. This was something none of the other photographers at Life could possibly pull off.

Later in his career, when photographing Muhammad Ali, Parks took pictures of the boxer when he was leaving the ring and his face was all battered and his eyes were bruised. Gordon simply destroyed the negatives after he took the pictures because it was such a disservice to Ali that he figured, "I can't let these be out in the world." He was a humanitarian and had such a respect for all of his subjects in a way that this wasn't just the day's news; it was a Life story — no pun intended.

Suddenly Life realized that this guy really knows what he's doing. He can shoot fashion, gangs in Harlem, artists, everything. As Gordon became more established in the Life community, he began to write for them as well, becoming a writer for the magazine as well as a photographer. That led him to really take on a senior role within the ranks of the magazine. He continued to do that for several decades then went on to become a filmmaker, producing an autobiography, The Learning Tree. Then he directed the film Shaft in the 1970s. Gordon Parks' life was multifaceted and he continued his writing, filmmaking, and photography all the way up until the end of his life.

"Black Panther Headquarters," San Francisco, California, 1970
The Gordon Parks Foundation

"Untitled," New York, 1957 (left); "Untitled," Chicago, 1957 (right)
The Gordon Parks Foundation



"Untitled," New York, 1957
The Gordon Parks Foundation

I knew Gordon very well. My grandfather was the managing editor of Life magazine and worked with him on many of his assignments, so I grew up as a kid knowing Gordon very well as a family friend. All of his books sitting in my office are signed "Uncle Gordon." He was a fixture in our lives.

Unfortunately, he and my grandfather died two weeks apart from each other. It was really a hard time because they were both so important in my life. With that, running this foundation has been important to me for so many reasons, because this is something that I promised would work for Gordon.

The foundation was formed shortly after to preserve his life's work — his photographs, his films, his music. Since then we've built the foundation around all of his creative works and spent the last decade preserving and cataloguing the material. We've preserved approximately 30,000 negatives, 10,000 prints, not including his other mediums. We probably have 15,000 contact sheets as well.

With Gordon, you have to remember that he also lived a very long time and he kept everything! As well as the boxes upon boxes of film, writing, and outtakes — it's a vast archive.

"Untitled," Harlem, New York, 1963 (left); "Harlem Neighborhood," 1952 (right)
The Gordon Parks Foundation

So many of the contemporary artists who are working today, especially African-American artists, feel like Gordon Parks paved the way. He was able to bring social justice to life and to show that an African-American voice can and should matter. What Gordon was able to do was break down those boundaries.

On that level, having him become a metaphor for what came before and what people can do today is really important, but I also think on a more historical level to see that times really haven't changed is also significant. So many of Gordon's pictures from the crime series have a lot to do with police brutality. Look at the times that we're living in today; some of these pictures look like they could have been taken last year. There's such a relevance to his work, not only from his personal story but also his subjects.

That's why so much of his work fits so well within museums and educational institutions, because it crosses so many disciplines — you could be studying African-American history, US history, photography, race, gender, English.

Gordon is a slice of everybody.

Gordon Parks: I Am You is on view now at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York City.
To learn more about the Gordon Parks Foundation, visit its website at gordonparksfoundation.org or follow them on Instagram.

aperture

The Other Side of Gordon Parks

featured

January 12th, 2018

A new exhibition reconsiders the legendary photographer's fashion and portrait work.

Gordon Parks, *Cocoon Cape, New York, New York*, 1956 © and courtesy the Gordon Parks Foundation

"Even from the beginning, Parks challenged prevailing rules about how to photograph fashion, including objects, group poses and streetscapes that beckoned with the allure of a desired lifestyle or career," writes the photography historian Deborah Willis of Gordon Parks. A new exhibition at Jack Shainman Gallery, *Gordon Parks: I Am You, Part 1*, displays Parks's fashion work from the 1950s and '60s along with portraits of artists in their studios—Helen Frankenthaler, Alexander Calder, and Alberto Giacometti, to name a few. Parks, who is best known for his velvety black-and-white photographs of the civil rights era, was also an innovative fashion photographer, often taking to New York's streets for his atmospheric shoots. His artist portraits, however, are quiet and considered, letting the artists disappear into their creations.

Gordon Parks: I Am You, Part 1 is on view at Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, through February 10, 2018.

THE CUT

A *Vogue* Photographer Who Joined the Civil-Rights Movement

By Carolyn Twersky

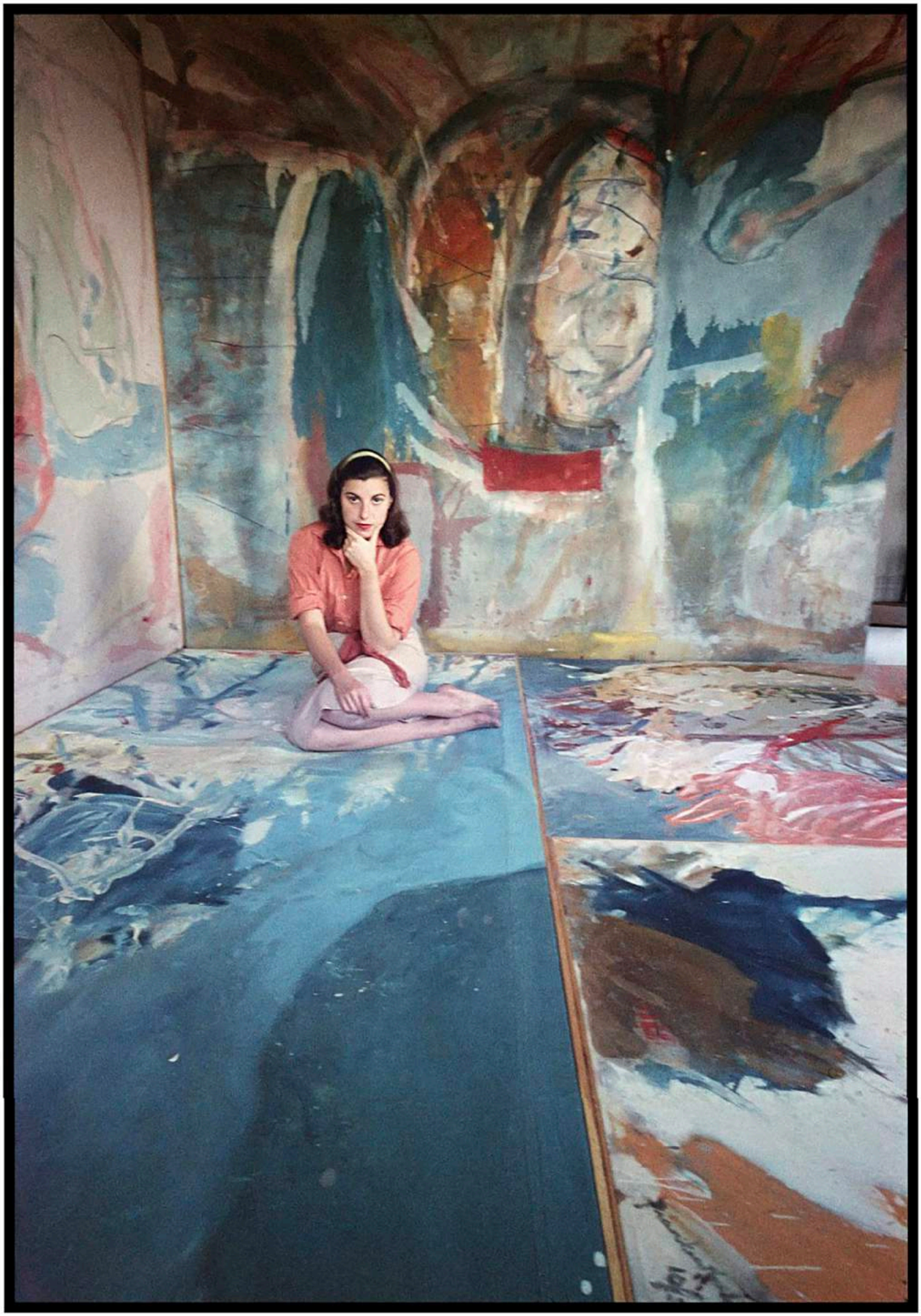
JANUARY 10, 2018
5:30 PM

Untitled, 1962, by Gordon Parks. Photo: Gordon Parks/Courtesy of and Copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Every photograph taken by Gordon Parks tells an intimate story: a private glimpse of Malcolm X during a rally, for example, or a woman draped in fur on a deserted Park Avenue. A new exhibit in New York celebrates some of the late photographer's lesser-known images, such as portraits of artists at work in their studios and street-style shots from the 1940s and '50s. The show opens January 11 at Jack Shainman Gallery.

Born in Kansas in 1912 and self-taught, Parks became the first African-American staff photographer for *Vogue* and *Life* magazines. Throughout his career he took black America as seriously as he took fashion, documenting Harlem residents and the Jim Crow South while producing glamorous fashion spreads. He addressed stark differences between those worlds in a moving 1968 photo essay for *Life* titled "A Harlem Family," writing, "There is something about both of us that goes deeper than blood or black and white. ... I too am America. America is me. ... Look at me. Listen to me. Try to understand my struggle against your racism. There is yet a chance for us to live in peace beneath these restless skies."

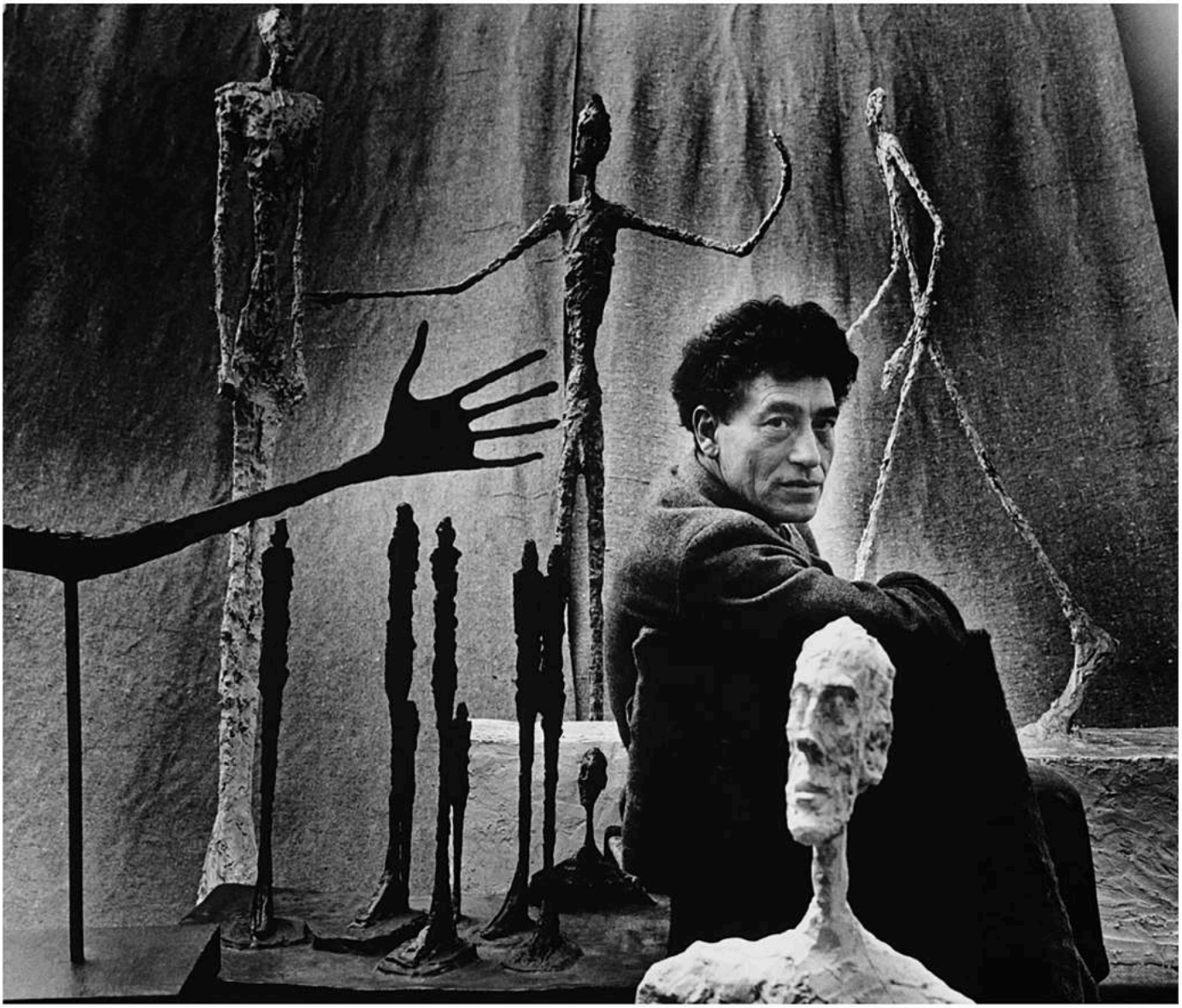
The gallery show titled "Gordon Parks: I Am You | Part 1," features fashion shots along with photos of artists Helen Frankenthaler and Alberto Giacometti, among others, in their studios, surrounded by their art and lounging on canvases. Part two of the exhibition opens February 15, just after part one closes. Scroll ahead for a preview of part one.



Helen Frankenthaller. Photo: Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright the Gordon Parks Foundation.

Evening Wraps, New York, New York, 1956. Photo: Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright the Gordon Parks Foundation.

Untitled, 1978. Photo: Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright the Gordon Parks Foundation.



Alberto Giacometti and His Sculptures, Paris, France, 1951. Photo: Photograph by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright the Gordon Parks Foundation.

"Gordon Parks: I Am You | Part 1," will be on view from January 11 to February 10 at the Jack Shainman Gallery.

VOGUE

CULTURE > ARTS

At Jack Shainman Gallery, the Softer Side of Gordon Parks

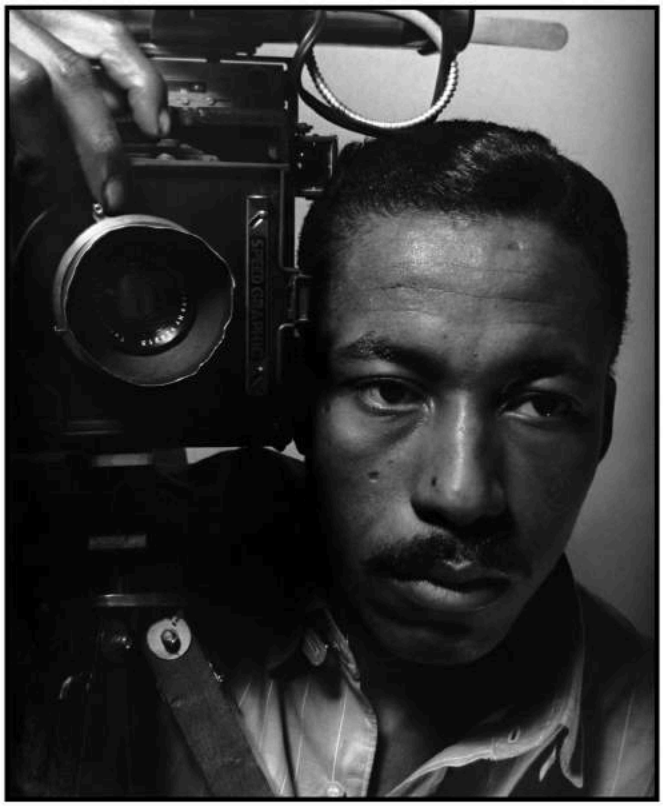
JANUARY 12, 2018 7:30 AM
by JULIA FELSENTHAL

Jeweled Cap, Malibu, California, 1958

Photo: © Gordon Parks / Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

Gordon Parks, who died in 2006 at 93, is best remembered as a filmmaker (*The Learning Tree*; *Shaft*) and as a photojournalist who wielded his camera—his "choice of weapon," as he put it—against social injustice. He was also a painter; a talented pianist and composer; a fiction writer, an essayist, and a serial memoirist; and a breaker of glass ceilings ("One marvels that he has been able to find the time to write about his life while he has been busy living it," quipped *The New York Times* in 1991). Born in Ft. Scott, Kansas, in 1912, the youngest of 15, into a poor tenant farming—rural Kansas, Parks would say, was technically Northern but functionally Southern in its institutionalized racism—he grew up to become one of the first major black filmmakers and the first black photographer to shoot for *Vogue* and *Life*.

He made his name at *Life* publishing searing photo essays that exposed the struggles of black Americans during the decades surrounding the Civil Rights movement. But he also shot portraits and fashion spreads for both *Life* and *Vogue*. Those lesser-known images are now at the center of "Gordon Parks: I Am You, Part 1," a new show opening tonight at the Jack Shainman gallery in Chelsea (a second chapter will open in February, and will focus on his better-known photojournalism).



Untitled, 1941
Photo: © Gordon Parks / Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

"I wanted to show first the things that people don't really know of him," Shainman told me when I came by earlier this week to check out the work as it was being installed. "The range is so extraordinary." The gallerist, whose roster of artists reads like a Who's Who of the black contemporary art world, says Parks's name comes up often as an influence. "I've sold works that are based on Gordon Parks for so many years," Shainman goes on, mentioning Carrie Mae Weems and Hank Willis Thomas. An assistant proffers an iPad so that I can compare a piece by Thomas to the Parks photograph it quotes: *American Gothic, Washington, D.C.*, taken in 1942 during a stint working for the Farm Security Administration. It shows an African-American janitor wielding her mop and broom in front of an American flag (Parks, of course, was quoting Grant Wood).

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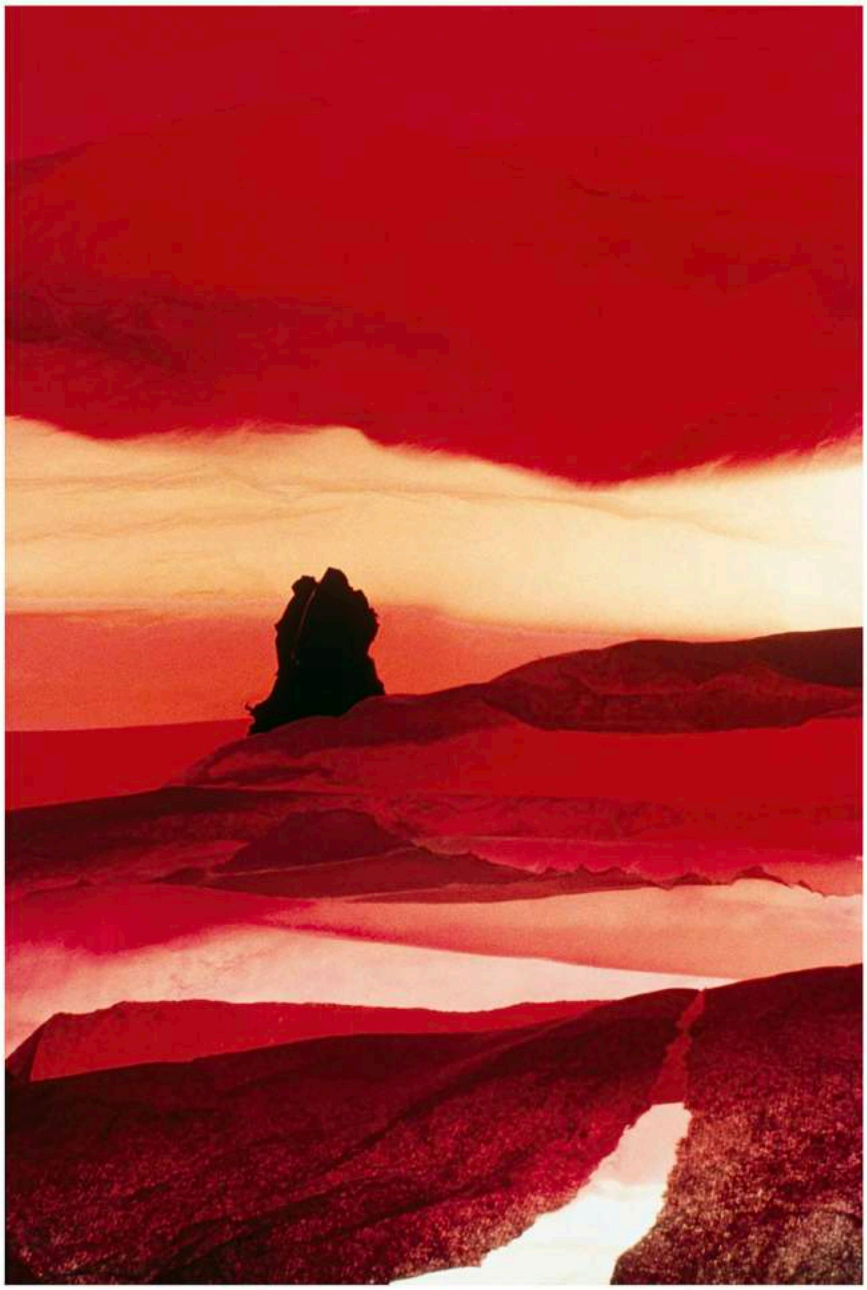
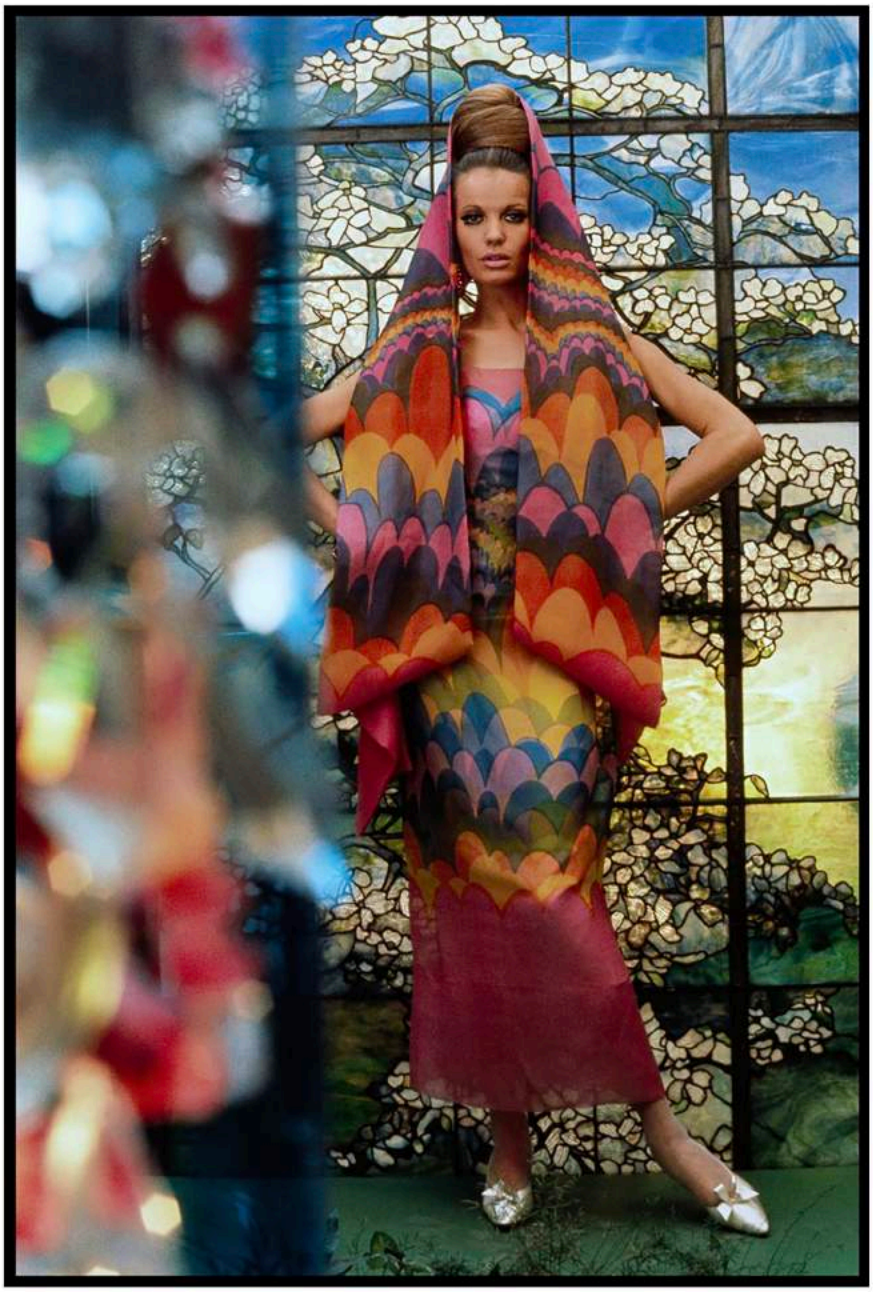
Shainman's exhibition takes its title from text the artist penned to accompany a 1967 project on the Fontenelles, the down-on-their-luck Harlem family Parks photographed as a way of illustrating the squalid, systemic poverty that was contributing to race riots in cities across America. In his essay, he wrote: "What I want. What I Am. What you force me to be is what you are. For I am you, staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom. Look at me and know that to destroy me is to destroy yourself."



Travelers, 1995
Photo: © Gordon Parks / Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

Much of Parks's work demands that sort of visual confrontation. This show does not. "I Am You, Part 1" is about the pleasure of looking, about Parks as a seeker and creator of beauty, an "incredible artist," says Shainman. Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., executive director of the Gordon Parks Foundation, puts it more bluntly: "We've strategically been working on Gordon Parks as a 20th-century master photographer." He indicates two abstract images that hang near the front of the gallery, the type of otherworldly landscapes that dominated the artist's attention near the end of his life. He made them by photographing assembled objects against painted backgrounds, and he would be "thrilled," asserts Kunhardt, to have them in the show.

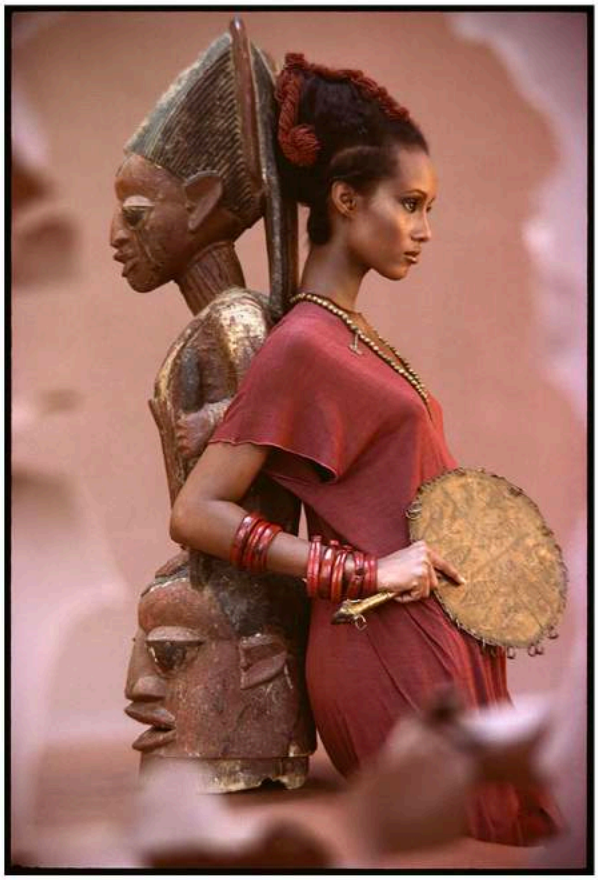
There are excerpts from some of Parks's harder-charging projects: a photo essay on the Nation of Islam (the photographer was close with Malcolm X, and godfather to one of his children); one about a black family living in the segregated South; a diary of a trip back to Kansas to revisit the home he had endeavored to escape; a collaboration with his friend Ralph Ellison, illustrating *The Invisible Man*. But divorced from context, they only gesture at their broader story. When we see Harlem, it isn't a gritty photo from the Fontenelle series, it's a lovely filmic image—think *Newsies*—of a boy in a captain's hat, resting against the window of a car.



Veruschka, photographed by Gordon Parks, *Vogue*, March 1965

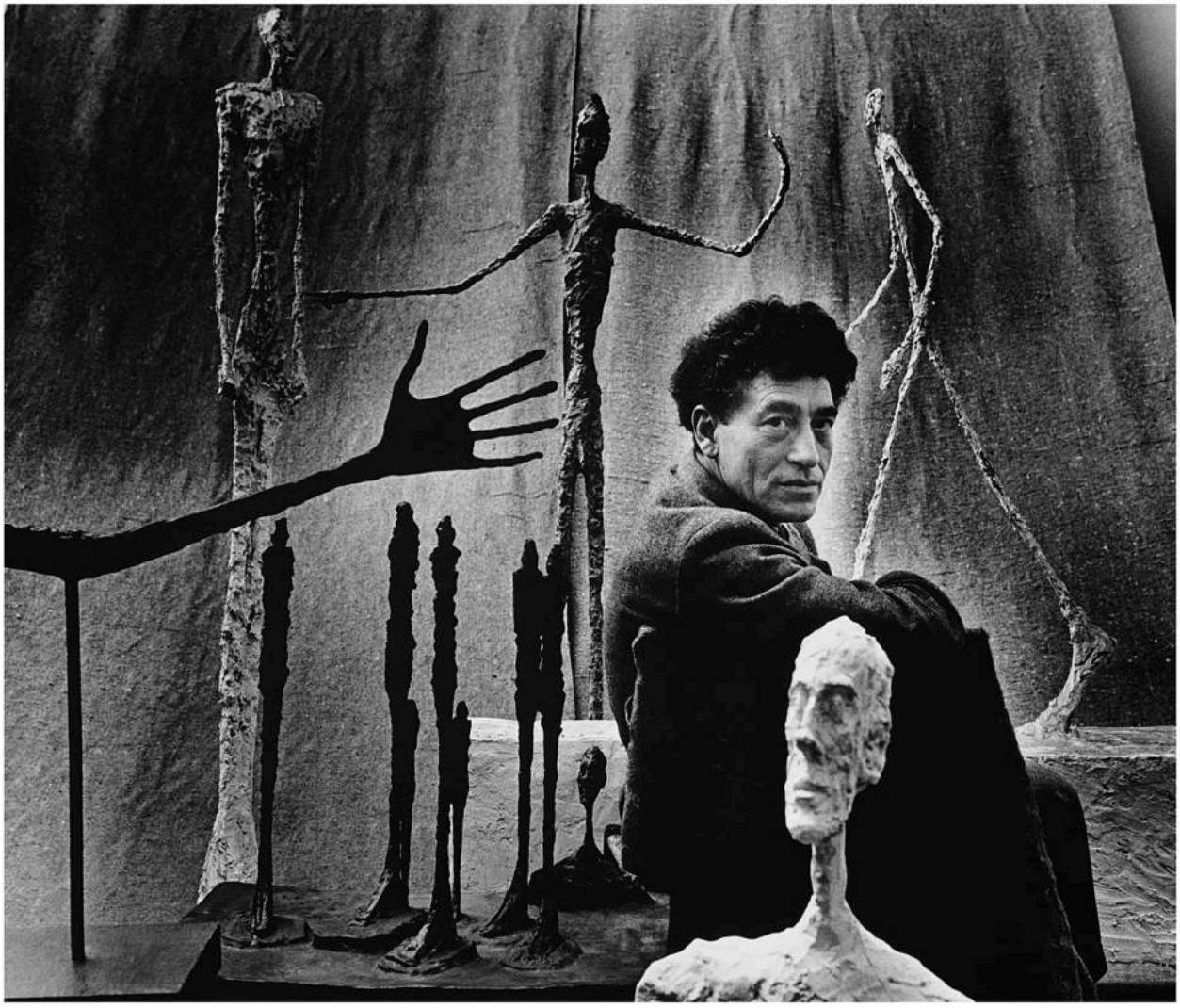
Parks first imagined a future in fashion photography when he was a young man working as a waiter on the North Coast Limited rail line, and devouring the magazines that travelers left behind. He wrote in his 1990 autobiography, *Voices in the Mirror*, about *Vogue*: "Along with its fashion pages, I studied the names of its famous photographers—Steichen, Blumenfeld, Horst, Beaton, Hoyningen-Huené, thinking meanwhile that my own name could look quite natural among them." First, he needed a portfolio. He pitched his services to a high-end St. Paul department store (he'd moved to Minnesota after his mother died when he was 15), and was granted an unlikely audition that ended in near disaster: After developing his film, he realized that he'd double exposed almost everything. But the one image that survived was strong enough to win him a do-over.

In the mid-1940s, *Vogue* Art Director Alexander Liberman hired him. Only two of his images for this magazine, both from a 1965 shoot with the model Veruschka, made it into the Shainman show. There are many more from *Life*: fantastically glamorous shots of women wearing evening wraps for a 1956 story set on the empty streets of Manhattan; one of a lady in a giraffe-print coat standing in front of an actual giraffe, at what must be the San Diego Zoo ("something he did a lot was merging the background and the female figure," says Marisa Cardinale of the Parks Foundation); and a set of photos taken in Malibu in 1958, of models in beachwear, framed as though the photographer was surveilling his subject with a telescope—very *Rear Window*. There are also a couple of outtakes from a 1978 Revlon shoot with a young Iman.



Untitled, 1978
Photo: © Gordon Parks / Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

In most of his fashion images, Parks was photographing white models, and one can infer the extra layer of complication that must have accompanied these shoots, particularly in the early days, an era when black men weren't free to stare at white women, much less to instruct them on how to pose for the camera. But his accounts of those times focus less on the subversion of the white gaze than on his irritation with his preening, entitled subjects. "My work in *Vogue*," he wrote in his 2005 memoir, *A Hungry Heart*, "brought me into contact with the industry's most dazzling models. But coping with their moods and whims wasn't easy. The finest ones demanded big money, and some arrived weighted with troubles. Soured love affairs and monthly female problems prevailed. At times the first hour was given to tales of woe. But ignoring those problems amounted to tossing big money into the rubbish." He groused about the same issue in 1990 in *Voices in the Mirror*: "The sensual wink of an eye or a mischievous smile could reduce the gown they wore to insignificance. That the wink or the smile failed to contribute to the mood I was creating seldom crossed their mind. It then became my responsibility to lull them into expressions more fitting to the clothes they were wearing. This consumed time—expensive time."



Alberto Giacometti and His Sculptures, Paris, France, 1951
Photo: © Gordon Parks / Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

Parks's photographs of the artists and luminaries he shot for *Life* are as compelling as his fashion photos. In this show there are portraits of Muhammad Ali, Eartha Kitt, Duke Ellington, Helen Frankenthaler, Ingrid Bergman, and Gloria Vanderbilt—with whom Parks, who married and divorced three times, maintained a decades-long relationship. ("Sometimes she would send me a little poem, which encouraged me to start writing poetry," he told the *Times* in 2000.) There's a fantastic series of Alberto Giacometti, as eerie as his art, frolicking among his metal stick sculptures, and a pair of photos of a ghostly Alexander Calder playing god with his mobiles.

Boy with June Bug, Fort Scott, Kansas, 1963
Photo: © Gordon Parks / Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

When I ask Kunhardt and Cardinale for their favorite pieces, he points to *Boy with June Bug, Fort Scott, Kansas*, a staged 1963 photo of a young black boy laying in a field, holding a piece of string that's tied to an insect scrambling on his forehead. "It's more than just a picture," Kunhardt says. "It's Gordon's life story." Cardinale chooses a 1941 black-and-white portrait of a young Langston Hughes, taken in Chicago at the South Side Community Arts Center. Hughes faces down the camera, his head nestled against a wooden picture frame, his hand jutting through the empty space the frame boxes out. "When this was taken these were two unknown young artists, totally obscure, and they went on to be legends in their fields," she says. "I find that really fascinating."

The portrait mirrors another from 1941 which hangs toward the entrance, so similar that it's likely they were taken at the same time: it's Parks, in his late 20s, face expressionless (no wink, no mischievous smile), fingers curling over his shutter release. His gaze has drifted off to the side—something, perhaps, has caught his eye—but the eye of his camera is staring right back at us.

office

— Art

Gordon Parks: I Am You - Part 1

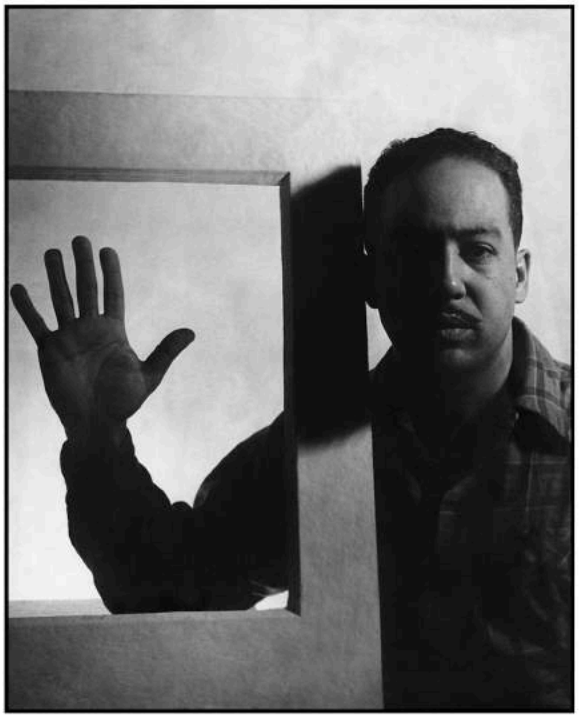
January 12, 2018

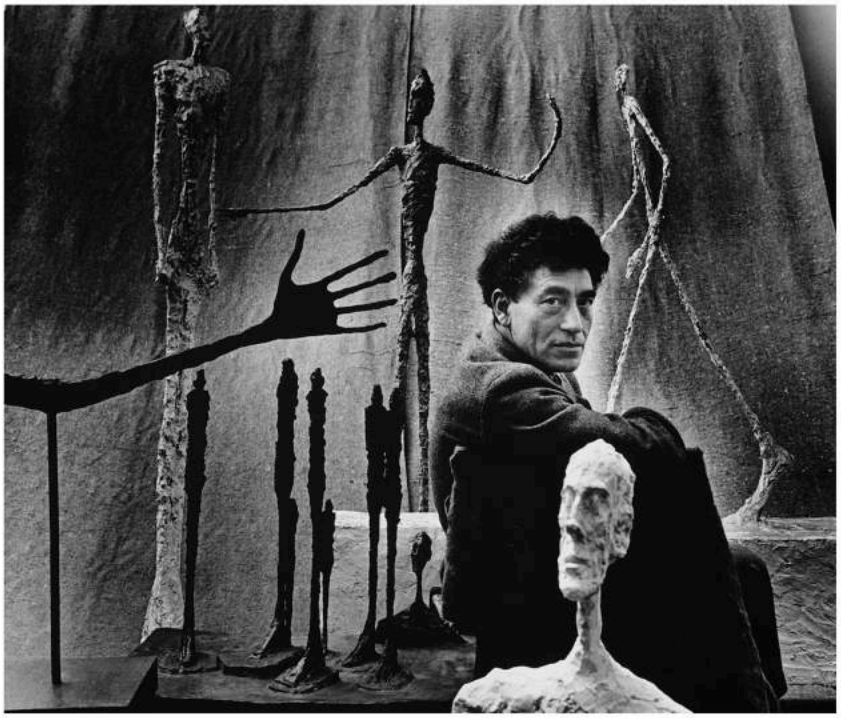
Gordon Parks documented America: its pride and beauty, its brutality and prejudice.

Few artists have accessed the ability to take a concept akin to Civil Rights era culture, something so clearly revolting, and generate something as graceful as Gordon Parks' photographic archive.

Text by Julius Frazer
Photographs courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation

Today, the multi-faced artist's impact is as manifest as ever, an evident influence across infinite aspects of American society, from art to activism. In a new exhibition at Jack Shainman in New York City, titled, *I Am You,* Parks' lesser-known images will be presented to the public, bringing together a wide variety of work from various stages throughout his career, from a series of artist portraits in their studios, to a flushed-out offering focusing on his fashion imagery. Not only will Parks' photographs always hold a heralded place in history, but they have already begun to bravely lay the groundwork for a future full of great and active artists.






ONE WAY

Gordon Parks: I Am You - Part 1 will be on view at the Jack Shainman Gallery through February 10th.

Gordon Parks: I Am You

Gordon Parks, American Boys' Feet on Street, Paris, France, 1951, Courtesy The Gordon Parks Foundation

Jack Shainman Gallery is pleased to present Gordon Parks: *I Am You* | *Part 1*. As a photographer, film director, composer, and writer, Gordon Parks (1912-2006) was a visionary artist whose work continues to influence American culture to this day. In collaboration with the Gordon Parks Foundation, this first half of a two-part exhibition focuses on Parks' lesser-known bodies of work, such as his elegant compositions of artists in their studios, as well as his timeless fashion photography.

Read more at **www.jackshainman.com**

Information

Jack Shainman Gallery
524 West 24th Street, New York 10011, USA
11 January - 10 February

The New York Times

Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation

Using Photography to Tell Stories About Race

By Maurice Berger Dec. 6, 2017 2

I stood in the lunchroom doorway with my friend Kevin, bewildered. It was our first week at the High School of Music and Art, a West Harlem public school, and we had become instant friends. Still, I did not know where I belonged in a room that had casually self-segregated into racial camps where "minority" teens gravitated to one side, whites to the other.

Apparently, in 1971, the choice was simple for most of our classmates. But less so for me. I knew I wanted to sit with Kevin. But while we both lived in low-income housing projects, we differed in one significant way: Kevin was black and I was white. After a white student told us we did not belong on her side, my mind was made up: We headed to the "Black Side," as we called it, where we ate until the lunchroom gradually integrated during our freshman year.

This story comes to mind whenever I'm asked why I write about race and photography. I return to it because where I sat in that divided lunchroom says a lot about my relationship to race and my lifelong fascination with it. My sister and I were among the few white kids in our predominantly black and Puerto Rican housing project on the Lower East Side. Except for a harrowing stint at a Jewish day school, where I was tormented for being poor, my classmates and my young neighbors and friends, were all people of color. They allowed me into their lives, and I learned a lot from them.

But it was the prejudice they experienced, and I observed, that provided my most eye-opening lesson.

As a Jew, I have known anti-Semitism. As a gay man, I have known homophobia. But neither has seemed as relentless as the racism I witnessed growing up — a steady drumbeat of slights, thinly-veiled hostility and condescension perpetrated by even the most liberal and well-meaning people. It was painful to watch, and as my friends let me know, considerably more painful to endure.

Continually observing this reality shaped how I understood racism: When people told me they had experienced prejudice, I believed them. I had rejected the liberal tendency to defensively dismiss the victim to protect the accused.

My childhood also exposed me to cultures and histories that most white people were oblivious to, even if they lived in an international city. I learned about these things from my friends, classmates, teachers and my socially conscious father. As my activism and passion grew, so did my solidarity with the Lower East Side. But my enthusiasm was dampened at Music and Art, where my poverty again alienated me from some of my teachers and classmates.

"I am amazed at the emotional depth of Dawoud Bey's diptychs of people the same age as the victims of the 1963 Birmingham church bombing — both at the time of the bombings and the present day had they lived. His meditation on the tug between past and present helps us to grasp the enormity of the loss of six innocent lives." Dawoud Bey

Out of embarrassment, I hid my background and interest in race.

My freshman advisor at Hunter College, certain that the study of race was inconsistent with my "cultivated mind," as she put it, persuaded me to focus on art history. My studies in college, and later in graduate school, completed my transformation from Project Boy to Cultured White Man. I was conditioned by my art history professors to believe that only the work of white people mattered. I engaged a mainstream art world — museums, galleries, collectors, and publishers — that viewed artists of color as sentimental or irrelevant at best, but more often as inept and dull. I eventually accepted these racist myths, even as I continued to live in the projects.

But I also experienced another awakening: I learned how to see.

My mentors in art history were rigorous and demanding, teaching me to visually analyze paintings and photographs, both to appreciate their aesthetics and to grasp their underlying cultural meaning. I was trained to "deconstruct" images, to evaluate the ways they advanced an agenda or manipulated or inspired viewers. But my teachers were oblivious to artists and photographers of color and work about race, a deficiency I inherited from them.

Yet my roots tugged at me as I started to miss the ardor and conviction of my youth. The art world that once seemed glamorous and exciting now was insufferable in its casual and deeply ingrained bigotry, elitism and allegiance to wealth. I picked up books by intellectuals ignored by my professors — brilliant race writers, like W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, and Frantz Fanon, who were deconstructing the world years before the scholars I had been assigned to read in school. I engaged new colleagues and researched new artists. And I began doing projects about race, relearning how to see and comprehend it through pictures.

In the summer of 2012, after a quarter century of publishing articles and books and curating exhibitions that reconciled the insights of my formal education with those of my life, I started writing Race Stories. I think of it as a learning experience, for me and the reader, fostering the racial and visual literacy denied me by my teachers.

My relationship with the art world remains tenuous. While some things have changed — art history has become more inclusive, for example, and a few artists of color have become superstars — the problem of racism persists. Recently, I attended a dinner in an expensive restaurant celebrating a friend's New York museum retrospective, and the scene was typical and dispiriting: A sea of affluent white people dressed in black.

These days, I rarely go to events like this. In their segregation, they bring me back to the contentious lunchroom where, as a bewildered teenager, I pushed beyond the imposed limitations of my race. But in situations like this dinner, there is no "black side" to which I can retreat, no haven that even remotely resembles the life I lived or the one I live now.

In the slideshow above, the author selects and writes about some of his favorite photographs explored in the Race Stories series.

Maurice Berger is a research professor and the chief curator at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

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NTS

VOGUE

"I Thought It Would Be Better for You": A Mother, A Daughter, and Racism in America in 2017

NOVEMBER 8, 2017 2:10 PM
by BRIT BENNETT

Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, Photographed by Gordon Parks. The author's mother moved from Louisiana to Washington, D.C., the following decade.

artnet®

Exhibitions

Kendrick Lamar Made a Video Homage to Civil Rights Photographer Gordon Parks. Now the Gordon Parks Foundation Is Returning the Favor.

Lamar's clip for his song "Element." recreates classic Parks images.

Taylor Dafoe, December 8, 2017

Gordon Parks, *Boy with June Bug* (1963). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation.

Earlier this year, rapper Kendrick Lamar released the video for "Element.," a standout track from his recent album *Damn.* Twitter was quick to point out that some of its striking imagery was familiar. Indeed, the entire video is a tribute to renowned photographer Gordon Parks (1912-2006), known for his depictions of African-American life in the 20th century and for documenting the Civil Rights movement.

Now, seizing the moment, the Gordon Parks Foundation in Pleasantville, New York has opened "Element.: Gordon Parks and Kendrick Lamar," an exhibition that unites Parks's images with those from the video.

Directed by Jonas Lindstroem and The Little Homies (the name under which Lamar and his childhood friend Dave Free direct), the *DAMN.* video brings to life some of Parks's most famous photos in live-action recreations. Its opening shot, for instance, depicts a hand emerging from a shimmering body of water—a nod to Parks's untitled 1963 photo of the same subject.

The clip goes on to reference several others, including Parks's shot of a young boy dragging a June bug down his face (*Boy With Junebug*, 1963), and his picture of a row of boys standing at a barbed wire fence, one pointing a toy gun (*Untitled*, 1956).

Parks first made his mark in the 1940s, when an exhibition of his works in Chicago led to a fellowship with the Farm Security Administration's photography program. There, he joined the likes of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange as photographers tasked with chronicling the lives of poverty-stricken people in rural America. In 1943, after the onset of World War II resulted in the downsizing of the FSA, Parks took up freelance fashion and editorial work—a path which eventually led to a staff photographer role *at LIFE* magazine.

He would go on to work for two decades at *LIFE*, producing the majority of his best-known work during that time, including all of the photos alluded to in Lamar's video.

"Gordon Parks' work is continuing to have a great impact on young people—and particularly on artists like Kendrick who use the power of imagery to examine issues related to social justice and race in our country," said Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., the foundation's executive director, in a statement. "With the "Element." music video, Kendrick has helped to call attention to one of the most important artists of our time."

Below, see some of the images from the exhibition, with the corresponding images from the video:

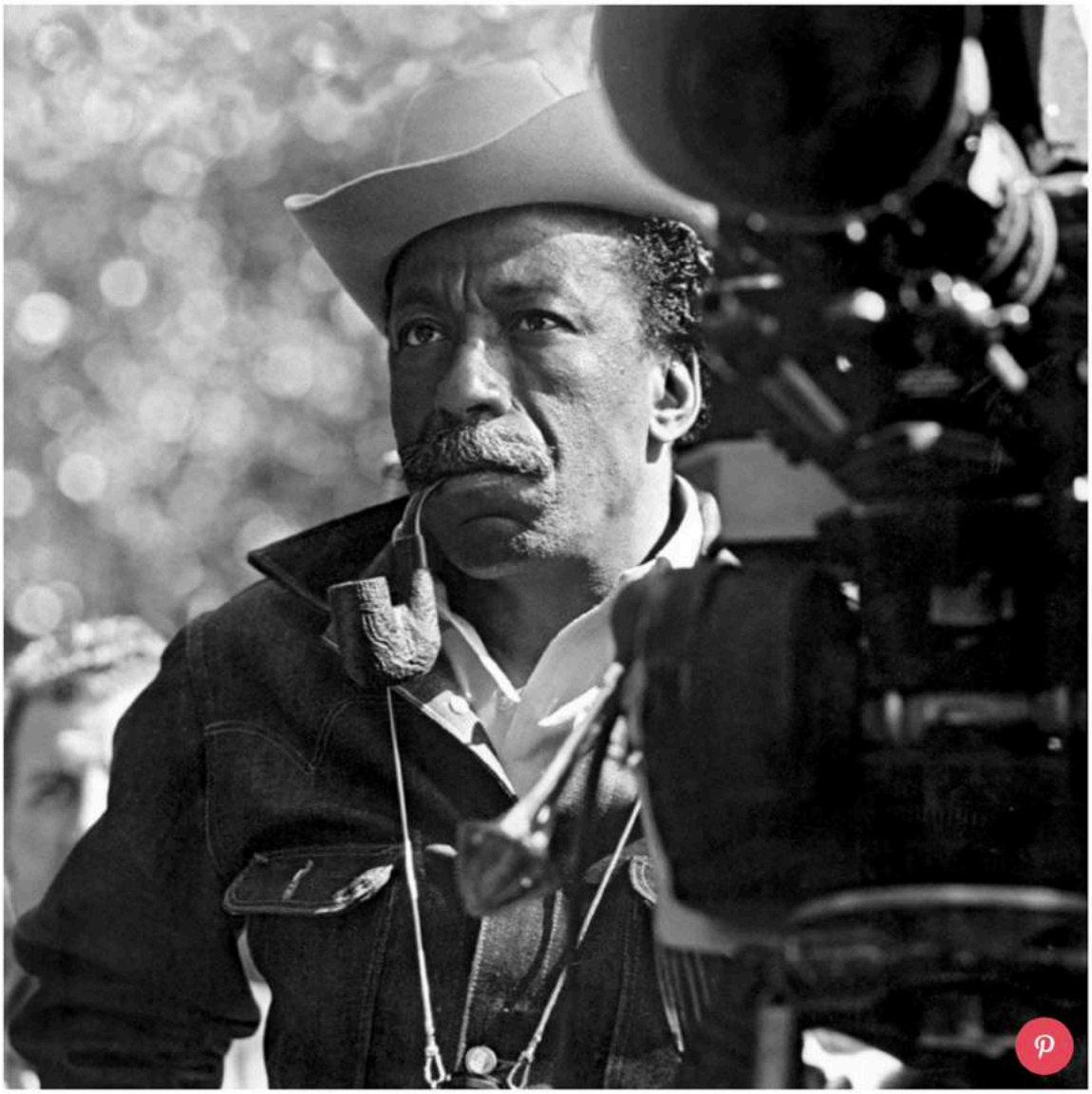
Self-portrait by photographer Gordon Parks. Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation.

Top: Gordon Parks, *Untitled* (1957). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation.
Bottom: A screenshot of the music video for Kendrick Lamar's "Element."

Top: Gordon Parks, *Untitled* (1956). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation.
Bottom: A screenshot of the music video for Kendrick Lamar's "Element."

Top: Gordon Parks, *Black Muslims Train in Self-Defense* (1963). Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation. Bottom: A screenshot of the music video for Kendrick Lamar's "Element."

ESSENCE



John D. Kisch/Separate Cinema Archive/Getty Images

RACHAELL DAVIS Dec, 02, 2017

The visual for Kendrick Lamar's single, "Element" from his Grammy-nominated album, *DAMN*, was nothing short of groundbreaking and a new exhibit from the Gordon Parks Foundation is shining a spotlight on some of the images that gave birth to the video's impactful concept.

The "Element" music video was heavily inspired by the extraordinary work of iconic photo journalist Gordon Parks, and included several of his pieces that humanized the struggle, beauty, strength and resilience of African-American life and social justice issues affecting Black communities. The Gordon Parks Foundation is hoping to bring the powerful messaging in both the photos and the music video to the forefront yet again, by way of a new exhibit titled after the song itself.

Gordon Parks Foundation Executive Director Peter Kunhardt spoke highly of Kendrick's conscious effort to expose a new generation to Parks' historic work.

"Gordon Parks' work is continuing to have a great impact on young people," Kunhardt said in a statement. "And particularly on artists like Kendrick, who use the power of imagery to examine issues related to social justice and race in our country. With ELEMENT the music video, Kendrick has helped to call attention to one of the most important artists of our time."

The ELEMENT exhibit will be on display from December 1 - February 10 at the Foundation's exhibition space in Pleasantville, NY.

Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks, Evening Wraps at Dawn, New York, New York, 1956.

Gordon Parks documented America: its violence, its beauty, its pride and its prejudice. During the mid-20th century, his fashion photography and celebrity commissions were tempered with reportage that exposed the nation to its injustices. Many of the themes that concerned him—racism, marginalization, poverty—remain as charged and complex today as they did then.

–

Some artists create with a sense of purpose that extends beyond making something beautiful. American photographer Gordon Parks is a consummate example. Over a nearly seven-decade career, he used his camera to document "all the things I dislike about America—poverty, racism, discrimination." And he was consistent: consistently prolific, inspired and committed to fighting inequality. According to his daughter Leslie Parks, "He always wanted to show injustice. That's all he knew, so that's what he took photographs of."

Most people know Parks for his firsts: first African-American man to work at ***Life*** magazine, first to write and direct a Hollywood film (***The Learning Tree*** in 1969)—or for a single iconic photograph or film. Few are aware of the breadth of his creativity, that he was also a self-taught pianist, composer and author of memoirs, poetry, novels and plays. Fewer still appreciate how he brought to the American mainstream the truth—ugly and beautiful—of people rendered invisible because of an unprivileged station in life. A child of those hidden truths, Parks compelled a reluctant America to account for them through images that mesmerized and seemed to ask: "Now that you've seen me, what are you going to do about it?"

Words:
Sala Elise Patterson

Photography:
Courtesy of The Gordon Parks Foundation

Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956.

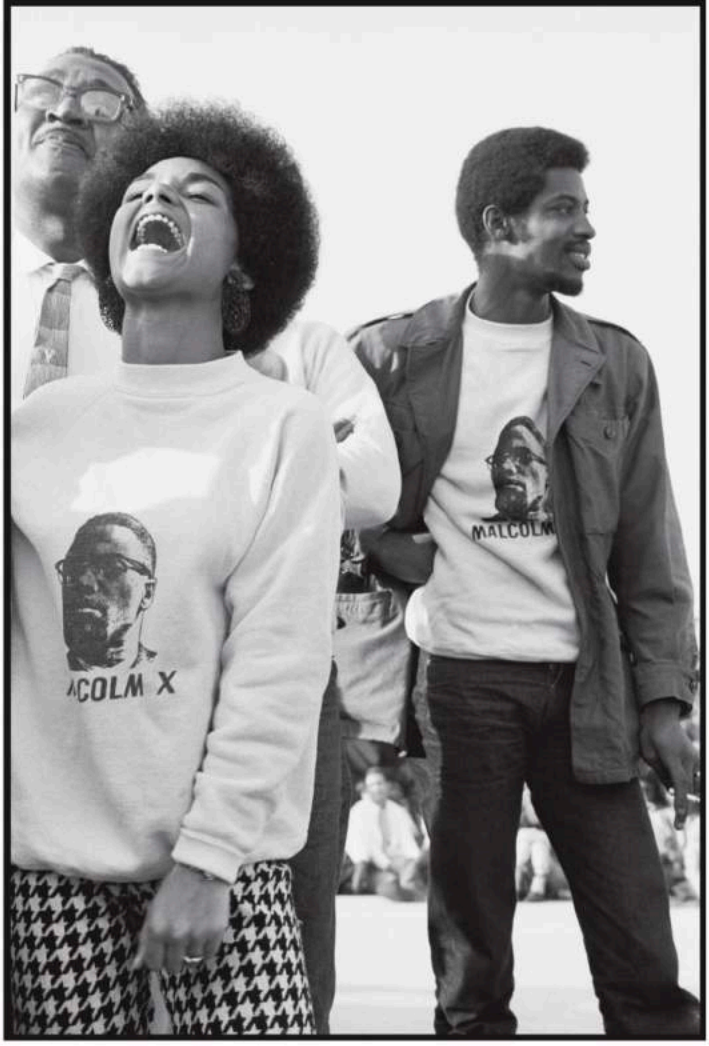
Gordon Parks was born into a poor farming family in rural Kansas, the youngest of 15. His childhood was shaped as much by the stunning natural landscape as it was by the fear, hatred and violence he experienced as a young black man. Despite the hardships of living in segregated America, Parks' mother had great plans for him, placing "love, dignity and hard work over hatred," as he described in his autobiography, ***A Choice of Weapons***. A young Parks responded by approaching life with ambition and purpose. Following his mother's instructions from her deathbed, at 16 he went to live with a sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. "[Go know] another kind of world, one with more hope and promising things," she implored. With the prairies of Kansas in his mind and her words in his ears, he set out.

That love, expectation and a religious upbringing served as a moral compass for Parks in the precarious years right after he left home. These values also eventually defined him as an artist. Even though he began his career as a fashion and portrait photographer, and later shot for major glossies, he never stopped pointing his camera at what was wrong in the world. "He did them concurrently," explains Amanda Smith, assistant director at The Gordon Parks Foundation. She points to two stories Parks shot in 1956: one of a family living in Alabama under Jim Crow segregation, and another, a lush fashion feature. "It's amazing that the same photographer was able to use his camera so effectively for such different things."

"Parks was consistent: consistently prolific, inspired and committed to fighting inequality."

Untitled, ca. 1948 (one of Parks' many self portraits):

Untitled, New York, New York, 1952 offers a behind-the-scenes look at some of Gordon Parks' fashion commissions in the 1950s.



Untitled, Watts, California, 1967, is one of many photographs Gordon Parks shot at civil rights rallies around the USA.

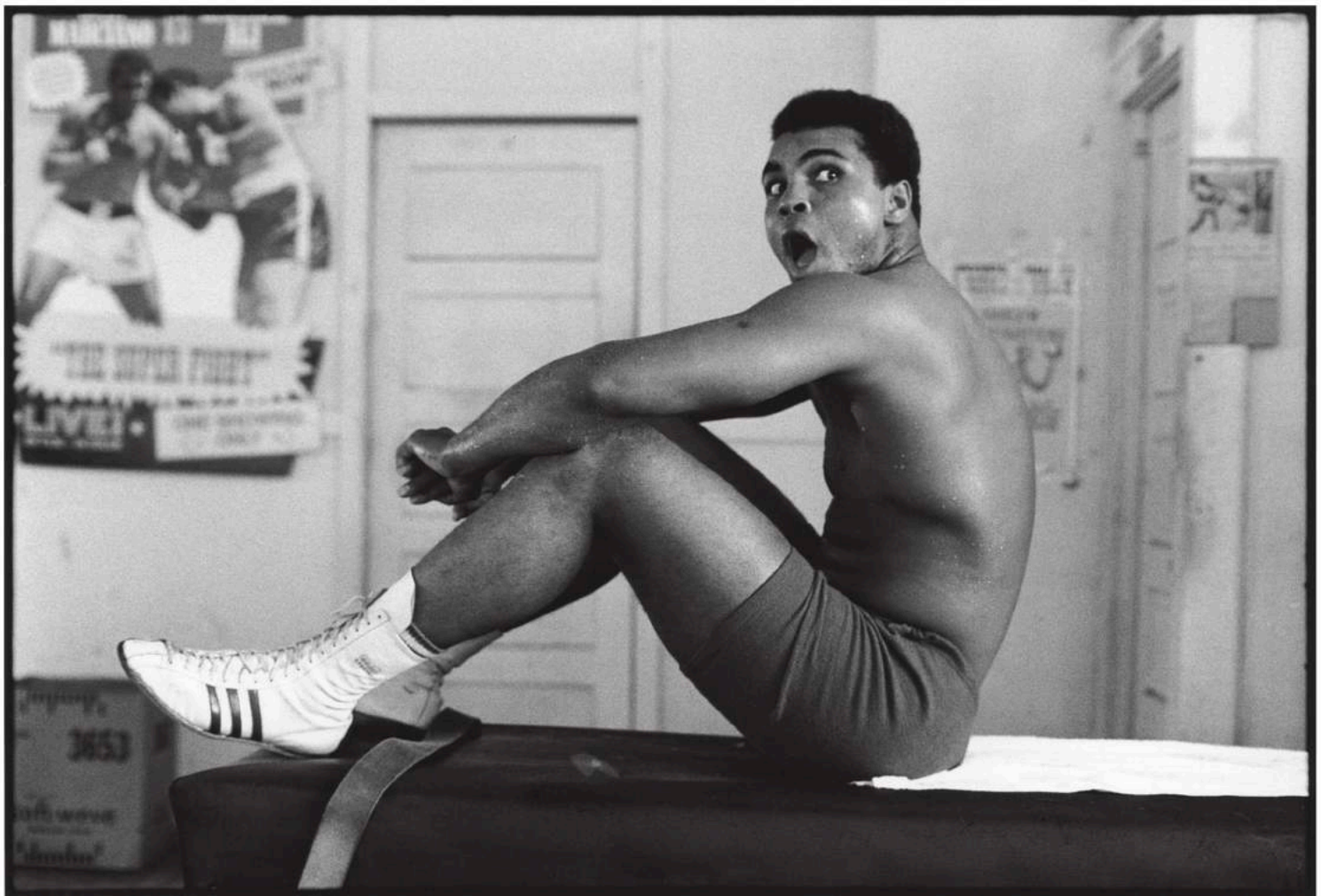
This agility is especially remarkable given that Parks was self-taught. That is not to say he didn't study or approach his work with rigor. Rather, he educated himself into a skilled practitioner, reading "every book on art and photography I could afford." It is difficult to appreciate what it meant for a black man to break color barriers in 1950s America without the benefit of formal education. It is evidence of his determination, ingenuity and the staying power of his mother's words.

Parks' road to photography was circuitous. After leaving home as a teenager, he spent a long decade eking out a living at largely ungratifying jobs. But while working as a waiter on a railroad dining car at the age of 25, he thumbed through a magazine left by a co-worker. "There was a portfolio of photographs in it that I couldn't forget; they were of migrant workers. Dispossessed, beaten by dust, storms and floods... scrounging for work," he wrote. Parks was as mesmerized by what the images documented as by what they communicated —the depth of the subjects' humanity and their misery. He had never experienced so much in individual photographs.

For months, Parks studied the pictures and the names of the photographers who took them: Russell Lee, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and others. They were working for the Farm Security Administration on an initiative that photographed the lives of poor American farmers to "introduce America to Americans," as program director Roy Stryker would say. Little did Parks know that within seven years he would join them at the FSA and lay the foundation for a remarkable career as a documentary photographer.

Ultimately Parks committed to photography because he realized its power to raise the social consciousness of the viewer, even—perhaps, especially—those who saw the world as flawless and fair. After months studying that FSA photo essay, he entered a pawnshop in Seattle and purchased his first camera (a Voigtländer Brillant), some film and a handbook on exposure. Parks started shooting: fashion and portraits and then a series on Chicago's impoverished South Side. Those early efforts won him his first big break in 1942—the prized Julius Rosenwald Fellowship and an invitation from Stryker to train with his idols at the FSA.

"Parks committed to photography because he realized its power to raise the social consciousness of the viewer, even—perhaps, especially—those who saw the world as flawless and fair."



Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956, is one of the scenes of Americana for which Parks is celebrated.

Walburga, Baroness von Friesen, Estoril, Portugal, 1951.

While at the FSA, Parks gained "discipline and a sense of direction." It is where he took one of his most celebrated photographs, ***American Gothic*** (1942), which played in image and title on American painter Grant Wood's 1930 painting of the same name. He shot Ella Watson, a black woman who cleaned the FSA offices, broom in hand, mop and American flag in the backdrop. That image came to symbolize the thrust of the then nascent civil rights movement—confronting America's broken promise to its black population.

Parks and his FSA colleagues fed the American imagination with images of African-American life that sharply contrasted with negative stereotypes prevalent at the time. When the FSA closed in 1943, Parks moved briefly to the Office of War Information where he photographed the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African-American military pilots in the US armed forces.

That period was followed by several years as a freelance fashion photographer, most notably for ***Vogue***. There, he showcased a signature aesthetic, which photo historian and Gordon Parks Foundation board member Deborah Willis calls street style. "He situated models in haute couture dresses and stylized suits within the lively city. Readers could imagine themselves in the clothing, either waiting for a bus on Fifth Avenue or experiencing a flat tire on the way to a ball." She adds, "Gordon understood the importance of beauty in everyday life. He recognized desire and found a way to express it in many forms."

In 1948, Parks received the offer of a lifetime: to join Life magazine as a staff photographer. It was at ***Life*** that he cemented his reputation as an extraordinary photojournalist. He shot luminaries (Alexander Calder, Alberto Giacometti, Leonard Bernstein, Ralph Ellison, Muhammad Ali, Ingrid Bergman), religious and social movements (Black Panthers, the civil rights movement, Benedictine monks), fashion and reportage. But perhaps his greatest contribution to the national consciousness was exposing everyday moments in the lives of ordinary black and poor people in rural and urban America.

"America has never fully reconciled the racial injustices Parks captured with his camera."

At ***Life***, Parks became known as a champion of social causes and an authentic public photographic voice about blackness and deprivation. Aaron Bryant, curator of photography at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture says Parks was about more than just civil rights. He was about human rights, using photography to comment on many kinds of discrimination—gender, class, socioeconomic, race, as well as regional. "He makes incredibly clear distinctions between the kinds of oppression that one can be subjugated to, and he can do it all in one photograph or series of photographs," Bryant explains.

Parks' sensitivity and compassion for his subjects allowed them to reveal their most honest selves. "He was always able to make his subjects feel comfortable. He was very charming," Leslie Parks says. Whether shooting Red Jackson, a young gang leader in Harlem; Flavio, a sickly boy living in a favela in Rio de Janeiro; the Fontenelle family, fraying at the seams in Harlem; or segregation in the South, his photos captured the intimate consequences of societal dysfunction. That was critical in 1960s America, Bryant explains, when mainstream media propagated ideals of a universally accessible middle class. "Parks becomes the photographer that defines a genre that interrogates this other America and the myth of the American dream," he says.

Parks would stay at ***Life*** for more than two decades. The impact of that period on his legacy cannot be overstated. He worked for the magazine during its most influential years, which meant his photographs had a large American audience. For many, his stories offered a first-ever look at how stifled fellow Americans were by racial segregation, violence and poverty.

And Parks was shooting at ***Life*** before the era of Photoshop, as photographer Wing Young Huie writes in the foreword to Parks' autobiography, when "photographs were embedded with notions of truth." That extends equally to the suffering displayed and to the dignity of his subjects. Thus, ***Life*** readers took Parks' images at face value, as indisputable, even if they did not connect the human condition on display with the political landscape that made it possible. At its most effective, that kind of photography makes empathy possible and intervention feel necessary.

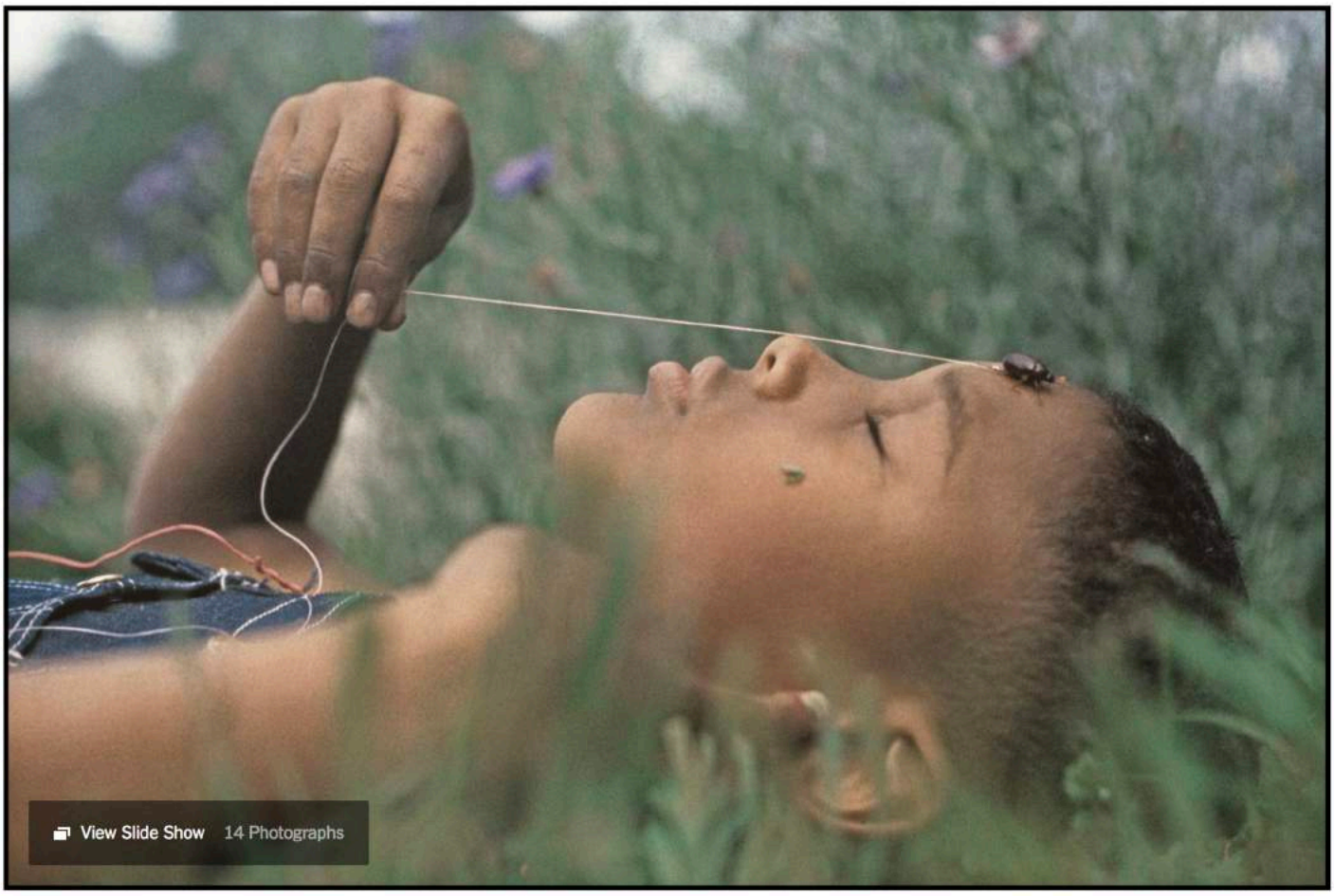
On June 27, 2017, American rap phenomenon Kendrick Lamar released the music video for his song "Element." Poignant and cinematically relentless, it recreates four classic Parks images at key moments. Lamar and his co-directors (photographer Jonas Lindstroem and manager Dave Free) have created a respectful video befitting a musician who, according to ***Rolling Stone***, raps with "cinematic precision" and "talks in colors."

There is a greater message in the gesture, however. As an artist whose music and videos tell stories that are essentially a call to action, Lamar is aligning himself with Parks around a common, aesthetically driven breed of activism. Although very different, both men speak harsh truths about America, many of them the same, even at a distance of decades.

The reality is, America has never fully acknowledged or reconciled the racial injustices Parks captured with his camera. And, it makes efforts to do so only when forced by catastrophic events—Charlottesville, Flint, Charleston, Sanford. Perhaps Parks' legacy, then, is to show us how beauty can create a narrative where words won't. Leslie Parks offers: "Let's not forget what he taught us with his photographs, what he wrote about, the lessons. It's nice to go back and look at his work—and never forget."

The New York Times

LENS
PHOTOGRAPHY, VIDEO
AND VISUAL JOURNALISM



Gordon Parks, Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

The Cinematic Images of Gordon Parks

By Maurice Berger Aug. 28, 2017 1

When Gordon Parks photographed Duke Ellington during a television appearance in 1960, he took a series of photographs as the musician's image flickered across control room monitors. These striking pictures would mark the beginning of Mr. Parks's long, if relatively forgotten, relationship with television. Over the next 25 years, he directed several television documentaries and films, including a drama based on Solomon Northup's autobiography, "Twelve Years a Slave."

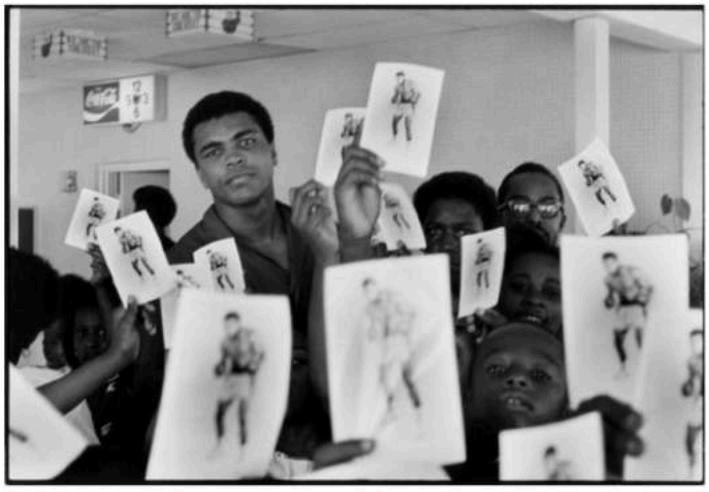
Although Mr. Parks's work in television and film was central to his oeuvre, it remains largely ignored by photo historians and curators. Yet, perhaps more than any mid-20th-century photographer, he understood how much these mediums had conditioned the contemporary eye and mind.

A new exhibition, "Gordon Parks — I Am You. Selected Works, 1942-1978," currently on view at Foam in Amsterdam through Sept. 6, explores how Mr. Parks not only made television and Hollywood films, but also employed cinematic techniques when taking and sequencing photographs. In addition to excerpts from his movies, the exhibition surveys a wide range of his innovative photographs, from editorial and fashion work to civil rights photos and portraits.

Deborah Willis, the photo historian who has written extensively on Mr. Parks, noted that he was never content with exploring one medium. Accordingly, she argues for the importance of looking beyond photography to better assess the impact of his work.

"As artists, photographers, scholars and consumers, we are used to equating photographs with the emotional experience of reading photographic images," said Ms. Willis. "Gordon found other art forms to tell stories about individuals, family life, work and injustice. Thus, he contributed to a broader conversation, exploring other media during a changing time."

The exhibition, organized by Felix Hoffmann, the head curator of the C/O Berlin Foundation, examines individual images, contact sheets and photo essays to show how Mr. Parks's "filmic thinking" challenged photography's imperative to "unite a plot, a situation, and a mood in a single frame." Some of his photographs attempted to transcend these decisive moments, as Henri Cartier-Bresson famously called them, by representing an event in a way that suggested its unfolding over time.



Muhammad Ali in Miami. 1970. Gordon Parks, Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

In the exhibition's catalog, Mr. Hoffmann cited several examples of this, like the linear, frame-by-frame sequencing of a fight scene in a 1948 Life photo essay, "Harlem Gang Leader." Perhaps stymied by the limitations of print, Mr. Parks transformed another photo essay, "Flavio," about a 12-year-old boy's struggle with poverty in Brazil, into a short film, in which he included both footage and photographs. To accentuate the artist's cinematic point of view, "Gordon Parks: I Am You" includes work typically ignored by other exhibitions: excerpts from his work for film and television, including "The Learning Tree" and "Diary of a Harlem Family." By acknowledging this work, the exhibition shows the progression of Mr. Parks's cinematic thinking and acknowledges one of his most important and enduring legacies.

During a period when the circulation of photo-heavy magazines like Life and Look was declining, film and broadcast continued to expand their reach. Mr. Hoffmann argues that Mr. Parks's multidisciplinary efforts — which besides television and five feature films included writing, music and choreography — were also intended to broaden his work's public and cultural reach.

Mr. Parks's debut feature film, "The Learning Tree," the first major Hollywood studio movie directed by an African-American, was a semi-autobiographical, humanistic recounting of black life and racial prejudice in Depression-era Kansas. Released in 1969, the film was lauded for its lyricism and powerful social commentary. "Diary of a Harlem Family," produced for public television in 1968, was similarly praised for its honest and respectful view of urban poverty through the experiences of one family.

Family Day Begins, Rio de Janeiro. 1961. Gordon Parks, Courtesy of the Gordon Parks Foundation

Although not included in the exhibition, the artist's 1971 feature film, "Shaft," was even more revolutionary. It told the story of a suave African-American private investigator, John Shaft, hired by a Harlem gangster to rescue a daughter kidnapped by Italian mobsters. The film challenged Hollywood's negative and subservient view of African-Americans, introducing the black action hero into mainstream cinema. Its violent content and what some have criticized as stereotypical black characters led some critics to dismiss "Shaft" as a "blaxploitation" film. But its empowered and confident black protagonist, as well as its heroic story line, were trailblazing.

The political content of these movies and programs was also consistent with that of Mr. Parks's civil rights photographs. From their themes of social justice and appeal to empathy — which the artist believed was vital to challenging negative stereotypes by reminding viewers of our shared humanity — to their focus on confident black characters, the films advanced the social issues explored in some of his photographs.

Peter Kunhardt, Jr., executive director of the Gordon Parks Foundation, welcomes this interdisciplinary approach, noting that over the next decade the organization will catalog the artist's films, television programs, music and writing to "help shape a cohesive understanding of his many talents and work."

In the end, to understand these works in relationship to each other, as "Gordon Parks: I Am You" has done, is to grasp the collective brilliance of the artist's work — the power of his imagery, which depicted people of all races in multiple media, to influence a broad national and international audience.

"Gordon's early work as a photographer developed his eye and transitioned him into film directing," said Mr. Kunhardt. "He is often called a 'Renaissance man' because he worked in so many different media, but I like to refer to him as a humanitarian artist who used whatever medium he could to have an impact."

Maurice Berger is a research professor and the chief curator at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

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DAZED

ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

PHOTOS

16th June 2017

Text Niall Flynn

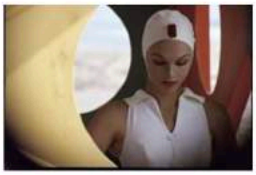
"Untitled", Watts, California, 1967 Photography Gordon Parks, courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

How Gordon Parks broke new ground for Black American artists

A core figure of America's civil rights movement, the photographer/filmmaker recognised the socially transformative power of the camera and harnessed it wholeheartedly

Gordon Parks' I Am You

5 IMAGES



Gordon Parks referred to his camera as his "weapon of choice".

Over a decade since his death at the age of 93, the Kansas-born artist remains a celebrated staple of photojournalism's golden age, his status as one of America's most important, pioneering photographers inarguable. From the moment he purchased his first camera aged 25 – a Voigtländer Brillant, for a grand total of $12.50 – Parks recognised the startling, socially transformative power an image was capable of, and set to work accordingly.

Throughout his career, the self-taught photographer employed his lens to expose injustice and marginalisation throughout America, chronicling the country's deep social, racial and economic divisions for government branches such as the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Office of War Information. A stint at *Vogue* followed, before over 20 years as a staff photographer at *Life*, and subsequent forays into filmmaking, composition poetry, painting and more.

Parks was an activist, a humanitarian and a core figure in America's civil rights movement; he routinely shattering glass ceilings for black artists, while using his platform to expose the stark realities of day-to-day inequality on the most momentous of scales. To celebrate the life and work of the famed storyteller, *Gordon Parks - I Am You. Selected Works 1942-1978* will run at Foam from 16 June – 6 September 2017. In conjunction with the exhibition's opening, here are just a few of the reasons why Gordon Parks is as important as ever.

"Department Store", Mobile, Alabama, 1956 Photography Gordon Parks, courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

HE SMASHED THROUGH RACIAL BARRIERS

During his career, Parks made a regular habit of smashing through the barriers placed in front of him. Despite operating at the height of racist attitudes in the 40s, he worked regularly as a fashion photographer for *Vogue* under the editorship of Alexander Liberman, during which he published two books (*Flash Photography* in 1947 and *Camera Portraits: Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture* a year later in 1948). A photo essay published that same year on a young, Harlem gang leader earned him a staff job at *Life* – the first time an African-American had ever held such a role – which he retained for the following two decades. In 1964, he wrote *The Learning Tree*, a semi-autobiographical novel that he adapted for the big screen five years later in 1969. In doing so, he became Hollywood's first ever major black director.

BLAXPLOITATION STARTED WITH HIM

Following the success of the *The Learning Tree*, Parks's next crack at the big screen came in the form of detective flick *Shaft*. Not only was the 1971 film – which introduced the cinema-goers to John Shaft, the 'world's first black action hero' – a critical *and* commercial hit, but it spawned and inspired a series of subsequent movies that would come to be known as Blaxploitation. While cinema had previously exploited black males with damaging stereotypes such as violence and drug use, *Shaft* – and the films that followed – operated in tandem with the empowered self-expression of the black power movement as a no-holds-barred celebration of the black body. In the film's 2000 sequel (starring a certain Samuel L. Jackson as the eponymous hero's nephew and namesake), you can catch Parks in a brief cameo, with Jackson's character greeting him as 'Mr P'.

HE WAS A TOTAL POLYMATH

As well as his photography and filmmaking, Gordon Parks was a multifaceted, cross-discipline creative. Alongside the aforementioned novel *The Learning Tree*, he authored a total of 15 books, including guides on the craft of photography, poetry collections, *Shannon* – a novel about the tribulations of a group of Irish immigrants – and three separate volumes of memoirs. On top of that, he was also a talented oil painter, piano player and composer; in, 1989, he helmed and directed *Martin*, a ballet dedicated to his friend Martin Luther King. Alongside directorial credits for *The Learning Tree* and the original *Shaft*, he also helmed *Shaft's Big Score* (1972), *The Supercops* (1974) and *Leadbelly* (1976), a Huddie Ledbetter biopic.

SOME OF HISTORY'S MOST IMPORTANT FIGURES SAT FOR HIM

Although primarily celebrated for his stark, monochromatic photojournalism, Parks's canon included a range of different colour works – as well as a number of famous, historically significant portraits. Due to his role within the civil rights community, he was able to provide stark, intimate stills of figures such as Malcom X and Stokey Carmichael, while Martin Luther King – a regular subject of his famous black and white photographs – considered him a close friend and confidant. However, perhaps the most well-known of the Kansas photographer's portraits are those of Muhammad Ali. Having met the boxing icon almost immediately afterwards his infamous draft evasion, Parks – as the only black man on *Life*'s staff – was given near-total access to Ali at a time when the famous enigma was, to the public eye, even more distant than ever. The resulting images are a brief yet mystical dive into the boxer's maundering psyche – and remain some of the most intimate images ever taken of him.

HIS PHOTOGRAPHS HELPED CHANGED THE WORLD

Gordon Parks didn't view himself as an activist first, photographer second, or vice-versa. Rather, the two were entangled; his camera was an enabler for social change and he – as a young, black man in racially divided America with the power of publications behind him – recognised the unique opportunity that he had provided for himself. Whether it was *American Gothic* – a haunting image of Ella Watson, a black cleaner, stood motionless in front of the US flag – or *The Restraints: Open and Hidden* – a 1956 photo essay of racial segregation in rural Alabam – Parks was able to enter the places his white contemporaries didn't even know to look. His lens was unflinching, his message clear: if his camera were to be his chosen weapon, then he would be using it effectively. His haunting, unequivocal stills told stories that began those conversations about radical societal change. Gordon Park's camera *was* his weapon of choice – and there wasn't a better shot in all of America.

Gordon Parks - I Am You. Selected Works 1942-1978 will run at Foam from 16 June – 6 September 2017

"Boy and June Bug", Fort Scott, Kansas, 1963 Photography Gordon Parks, courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

TIME

NEWSFEED • PHOTOGRAPHY

Kendrick Lamar Paid Homage to the Iconic Images of Photojournalist Gordon Parks With His 'Element' Video

By **CADY LANG** June 29, 2017

Kendrick Lamar's striking new music video for his track "Element" is a meditation on the complexities, struggles, and triumphs of the black experience in America, something that was further emphasized by his earnest homage to the images of legendary photojournalist and filmmaker Gordon Parks.

When the *DAMN.* rapper's video dropped on Wednesday afternoon, many people were quick to note the footage's striking resemblance to many of Parks' iconic photos of black life in America — from a touching image of a boy with a ladybug on his head that brought to mind Parks' "Boy With Junebug" to a clip of women wearing headwraps that references Parks' famed 1963 photo essay for *LIFE* about Black Muslims, "The White Man's Day Is Almost Over."

The homage wasn't lost on the Gordon Parks Foundation, whose executive director, Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., told *Okayplayer* that the music video honors the late photographer.

"The Gordon Parks Foundation is pleased to see Kendrick Lamar recognize Gordon Parks' important photography while working at *LIFE* magazine and honoring his legacy," Kunhardt said. "The Gordon Parks Foundation uses Gordon's creative work to educate and inspire young artists."

A pioneer, Parks was a noted as a trailblazer in film, documentary, music, and literature.

feature shoot

50 YEARS LATER, THE COURAGE OF GORDON PARKS

March 13, 2017 by **Ellyn Kail**

Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956. © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl

The Fontenelles at the Poverty Board, Harlem, New York, 1967 © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl

I Am You, the new book of Gordon Parks photographs published by Steidl, The Gordon Parks Foundation, and C/O Berlin, draws its title from a 1967 *Life* photo essay called *A Harlem Family*, in which the photojournalist told the story of an African American couple named Bessie and Norman Fontenelle as they struggled to feed and clothe their nine children. Parks penned the introduction himself, beginning with the following lines:

"What I want. What I am. What you force me to be is what you are. For I am you, staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom […] There is something about both of us that goes deeper than blood or black and white. It is our common search for a better life, a better world."

The book, edited by Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr. and Felix Hoffmann, spans the photojournalist's career from 1942 until 1978. Over the course of those 36 years, Parks documented the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the triumphs and heartaches of Malcolm X, and the rigorous training schedule of Muhammed Ali.

He visited the segregated school he once attended as a child and followed up on the fates of some of his old classmates. He also traveled to Jim Crow Alabama. He photographed the creations of fashion icons like couturier James Galanos, the work of cutting-edge artists, and the forbidden love between film star Ingrid Bergman and director Roberto Rossellini.

The editors of the book offer insights into eighteen of Parks's most extraordinary projects and essays. The most famous images are included, but with the addition of a few photographs published for the first time as late as 2015, this book gives them new life.

Perhaps Parks's spirit shines through most brightly in one small anecdote Hoffmann retells in the book's essay. When his editors at *Life* wondered if his photos from the Rio de Janeiro favelas were "too depressing" and cut parts of the essay because of it, the photojournalist drafted up a resignation letter. In the end, the magazine agreed to publish a twelve-page spread. In the month following its release, the public donated $30,000 for the family in Parks's essay. A boy who with bronchial asthma received treatment in Denver, and it probably saved his life.

Parks's persistence makes us proud in 2017; the photographer loved his country, the world, and its people, and he challenged us to do better. But at the same time, looking at these pictures now comes with a lingering pang and the understanding that not all has been resolved. Those evils he battled— racism, inequality, poverty, violence— remain today.

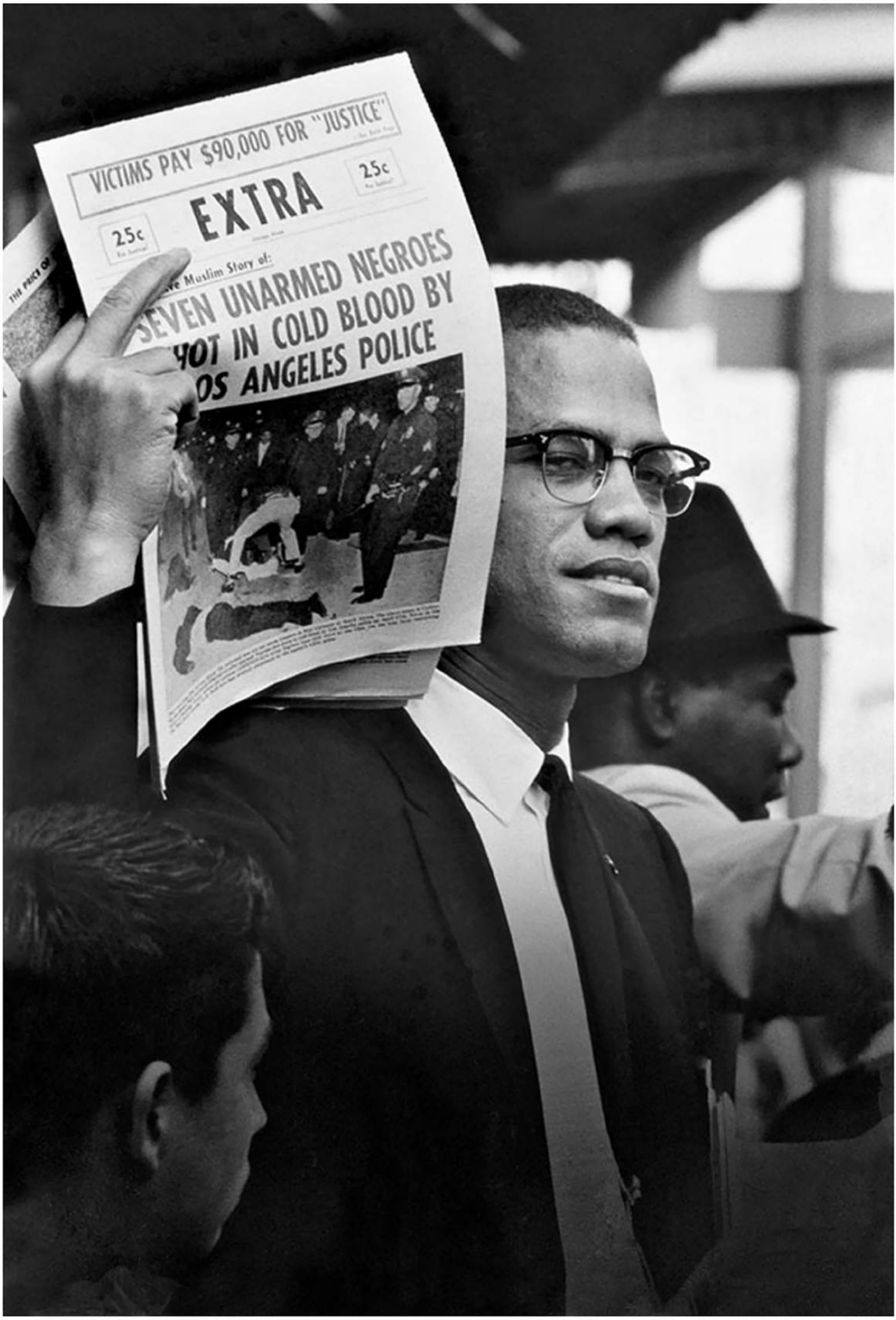
The words Parks used to conclude the introduction to *A Harlem Family* in 1967 are as relevant right now, 50 years later, as they were back then:

"Look at me. Listen to me. Try to understand my struggle against your racism. There is yet a chance for us to live in peace beneath these restless skies."

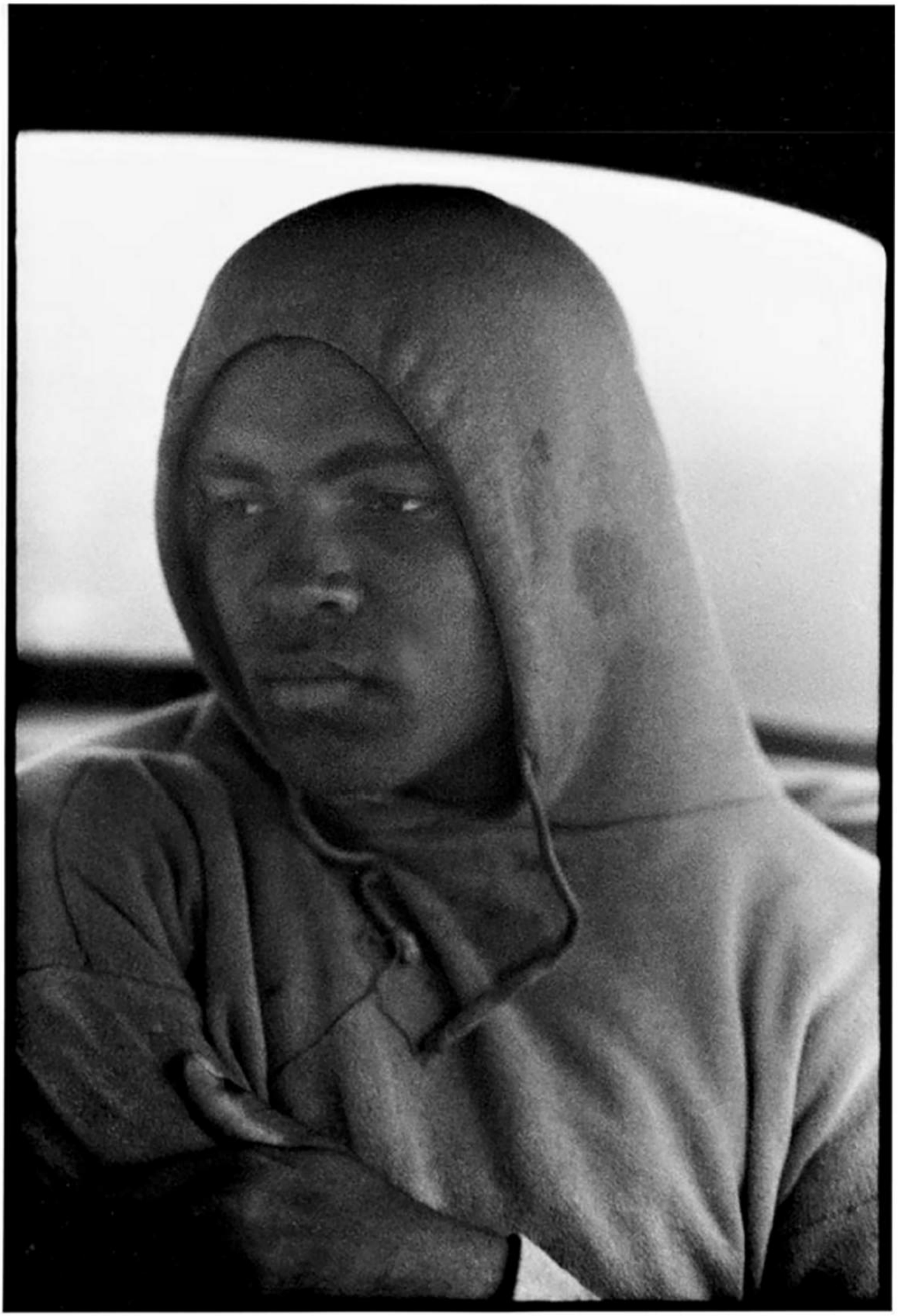
Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1950. © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl

Jeweled Cap, Malibu, California, 1958. © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl

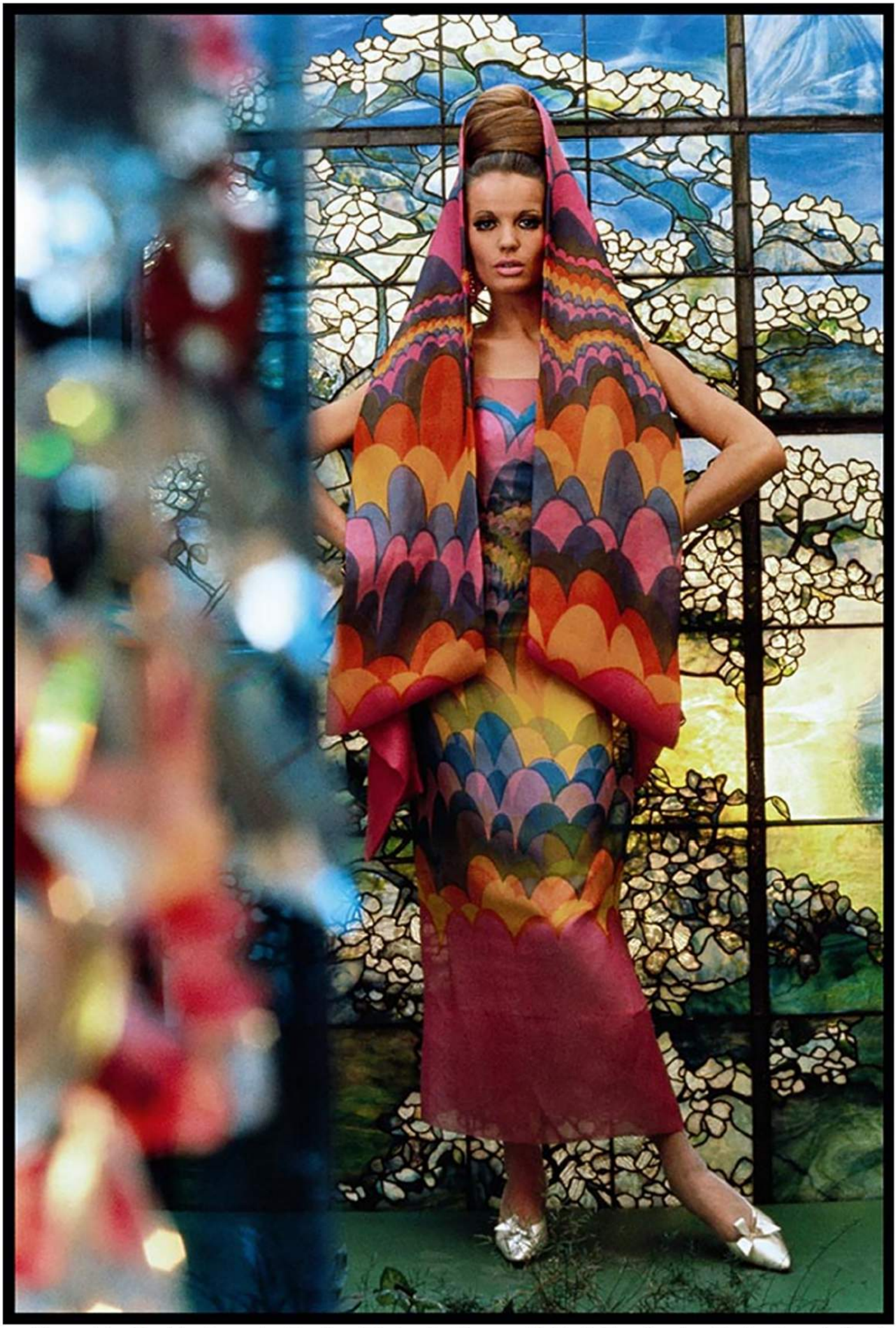
Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, Mobile, Alabama, 1956. © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl



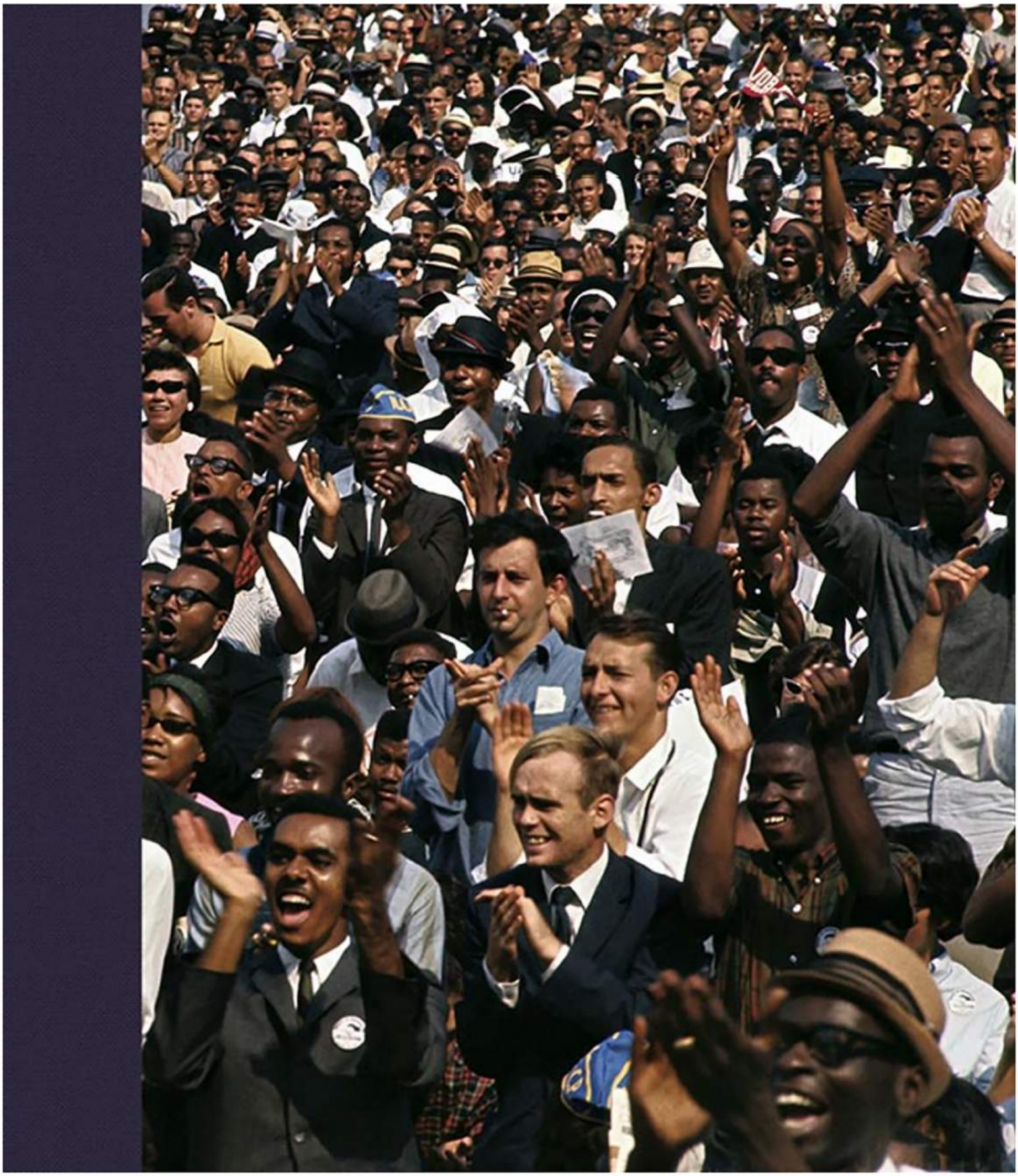
Malcolm X Holding Up Black Muslim Newspaper, 1963. © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl



Untitled, London, England, 1966. © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl



Veruschka Models Dress by Pauline Trigère for Vogue, 1965. © The Gordon Parks Foundation from the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl



Untitled, Washington, D.C., 1963. Cover of the book I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942–1978 by Gordon Parks, published by Steidl

theguardian

Photography

The incomparable Gordon Parks – in pictures

Wednesday 8 February 2017 11.52 EST

A new book celebrates the breadth of photographer and film-maker Gordon Parks's work, including his images of a racially divided south in the 1960s, his fashion work for Life and Vogue, and the heartbreaking poverty of a Harlem family. I Am You is published by The Gordon Parks Foundation, c/o Berlin and Steidl

Jeweled Cap, Malibu, California, 1958 All Photographs: Gordon Parks/Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton, Mobile, Alabama, 1956

The Fontenelles at the Poverty Board, Harlem, New York, 1967

Untitled, Washington DC, 1963

Untitled, Chicago, Illinois, 1950

Untitled, New York, New York, 1957

Untitled, Alabama, 1956

Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948

Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956

Malcolm X Holding Up Black Muslim Newspaper, 1963

ART // BOOKS

In "I AM YOU," Gordon Parks Tells It Like It Is

Steidl presents "I Am You," a collection of some of the best works from the seminal essays of master photographer Gordon Parks.

by Miss Rosen Jan 25th, 2017

Photo: From "I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942-1978 (Steidl/ The Gordon Parks Foundation/ C/O Berlin). Edited by Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr. and Felix Hoffman,

"I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapon against what I hated most about the universe: racism, intolerance, poverty. I could have just as easily picked up a knife or gun, like many of my childhood friends did," American photographer **Gordon Parks** (1912-2006) revealed.

Also: "Celebrating Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." on His 88th Birthday

Parks understood that photography possessed the power to change the way we see and understand the world by speaking a language entirely its own. Seeing is believing, as the old saw goes, which is why representation matters. But representation is only the first step; truth is the pinnacle to which great artists aspire to reach.

Jeweled Cap, Malibu, California, 1958

Parks was not only a master of the medium, he was an activist using his work to propel political and social change throughout the twentieth century. He decided to become a photographer while working as a waiter in a railroad dining car, after observing passengers read picture magazines for pleasure. At the age of 25, he purchased his first camera and began to shoot, never putting his weapon down until the Lord called him home.

For seven decades, Parks documented the world in which he lived, smoothly code switching from Conde Nast to Civil Rights before going on to take it to the big screen with *Shaft* in 1971, helping to bring black filmmakers to the forefront of Hollywood. Throughout it all, he stayed true to himself, representing African American art, culture, and politics on the world stage with grace, strength, and nerve.

Untitled, Alabama, 1956

Parks could photograph top models and socialites for *Vogue* with the same sensitivity and delicacy he brought to the story of segregation in the South. Perhaps it was Parks' dignity and self-respect that enabled him to see people as individuals first, effectively obliterating disgraceful stereotypes. His photographs reveal a man who gazed upon the world and bestowed grace and beauty upon it no matter its form.

And so it is fitting that the newest collection of his photographs is simply titled ***I AM YOU: Selected Works, 1942-1978*** (Steidl/ The Gordon Parks Foundation/ C/O Berlin). Edited by Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr. and Felix Hoffman, the book features a compelling array of highlights from seminal series made for picture magazines over four decades including *Harlem Gang Leader*, ***Back to Fort Scott***, *Alberto Giacometti, Alexander Calder,* ***A Man Becomes Invisible***, *Fashion, Segregation in the South, Duke Ellington,* ***Muhammad Ali***, *The March on Washington,* and *Black Muslims*, among others.

Untitled, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956

Felix Hoffman writes in the book's introduction, "Photojournalism was–and is—interested primarily in decisive, individual, isolable, often transitory moments. The origins of photojournalism lie in the work of photographers such as Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose published shots unite a plot, a situation, and a mood in a single frame. The notion of time that underlies such an artistic concept is linear; an image is as open to he previous moment as it is to the next. This approach can be applied easily to singular events. But what if, rather than a specific moment, a more general condition is to be represented, if a repeated occurrence is to be shown in such a way that its recurrent nature is also visible?"

This is where Gordon Parks changed the game, becoming one of the first practitioners of New Journalism decades before the genre was named. Perhaps it was his life experience that enabled him to see that it is impossible, or simply unnecessary, to isolate a single image to tell the story. The continuum of human experience and human history is simply too vast, too complex, and too interconnected to impose arbitrary rules upon it.

Untitled, New York, New York, 1957

Instead, Parks set forth to tell the story as a sequence, just as one would do with a book. While each image beautifully encapsulates a chapter, taken together, the sum of the whole is greater than its parts. Which is one of the reasons *I AM YOU* is utterly magnificent: looking at Parks' essays in sequence creates an astounding effect, one of a man who understood that the truth was far more nuanced than the mass media would have you know. That there are no simple answers to questions but we must continue to ask, to examine with great tenderness whether we are looking at the impact of crime and poverty or music and art.

"I have always felt as though I needed a weapon against evil," Parks revealed, and in the creation of an incomparable body of work he has bequeathed this need to serve the greater good of humanity.

Untitled, Harlem, New York, 1948

All Photos: by Gordon Parks. Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

***Miss Rosen** is a New York-based writer, curator, and brand strategist. There is nothing she adores so much as photography and books. A small part of her wishes she had a proper library, like in the game of Clue. Then she could blaze and write soliloquies to her in and out of print loves.*