GORDON PARKS
B. 1912, Fort Scott, KA
D. 2006, New York, NY

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2018
- *Never A Lovely So Real: Photography and Film in Chicago, 1950-1980*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago IL
- *Now You See Me! Muhammad Ali (1942-2016)*, Bildhalle, Zurich, Switzerland
- *I Am You*, Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON, Canada
- *Travelogue*, Jack Shainman Gallery – The School, Kinderhook, NY
- *The Flavio Story*, Ryerson Image Centre, Ryerson University, Toronto, ON, Canada, traveled to J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, CA (2019)
- *A Beautiful Ghetto, Three Years Later: A Conversation About Healing*, The Institute for Integrative Health, Baltimore, MD
- *O Caso Flavio*, Pequena Galeria, Instituto Moreira Salles at Gávea, Rio de Janeiro
- *Family Pictures*, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio, traveled to Milwaukee Art Museum, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- *Beneath These Restless Skies*, Harriet Dedman, The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, NY
- *Gordon Parks: I Am You / Part 2*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY
- *Gordon Parks: I Am You / Part 1*, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, NY

2017
- *Southern Accent: Seeking the American South in Contemporary Art*, Group Exhibition, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY
- *Segregation Story*, Mount Dora Center for the Arts, Mount Dora, FL
- *Partisan Views and Public Opinion: Engaged Photography in and Beyond the Twentieth Century*, Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ
- *Third Space / Shifting Conversations About Contemporary Art*, Group Exhibition, Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, AL
- *The Great Food Markets of the World*, Red Rooster, Harlem, NY
- *Gordon Parks: I Use My Camera As A Weapon*, Zacheta National Gallery of Art, Hosted by U.S. Embassy, Warsaw, Poland

2016
- *I Am You; Selected Works 1942-1979*, C/O Berlin, Berlin, Germany, traveled to Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation, Frankfurt, Germany; Foam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Versicherungskammer Kulturstiftung Foundation
- *Invisible Man: Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem*, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
- *Back to Fort Scott*, Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, KS
- *Higher Ground*, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, CA
March Madness, Group Exhibition, Fort Gansevoort, New York, NY
Back to Fort Scott, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
Fifty Years After: Gordon Parks, Carrie Mae Weems, Mickalene Thomas, Latoya Ruby Frazier, Group Exhibition, James Barron Gallery, Kent, CT
Framing Beauty: Intimate Visions, Grunwald Gallery of Art, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
The Photography of Gordon Parks, Veterans Museum of Balboa Park, San Diego, CA
Segregation Story, Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA

2015 Gordon Parks: Back to Fort Scott, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
Model Citizen, Robert Klein, Gallery, Boston, MA
Segregation Story, Salon 94 Freemans, New York, NY
The Making of an Argument, The Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, Vassar College, Poughkeepsie, NY
An American Story: Gordon Parks Arts Hall, University of Chicago Laboratory Schools, Chicago, IL
A Harlem Family, The Gordon Parks Foundation, Pleasantville, NY
Gordon Parks: Segregation Story, Sheldon Museum of Art, Lincoln, NE
Ali, Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA
Segregation Story, Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON
The Making of an Argument, Faulconer Gallery, Grinnell College, Grinnell, IA
American Champion, Arnika Dawkins Gallery, Atlanta, GA
Segregation Story, Jackson Fine Art, Atlanta, GA
Segregation Story, Adamson Gallery, Washington, D.C.

2014 Gordon Parks: Segregation Story, High Museum of Atlanta, GA
The Making of an Argument, The Fralin Museum of Art, Charlottesville, VA
Segregation Story, Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, LA
Gordon Parks: Portraits, Band Gallery, Contact Photography Festival, Toronto, ON
Gordon Parks, Nicholas Metivier Gallery, Toronto, ON
An American Story, Novij Mange, Moscow, Russia

2013 A Living Legacy, Mill City Museum, Minneapolis, MI
An American Story, Palazzo Incontro, Rome, Italy
Une Historie Americaine, Magasin Electrique, Arles, France
Una Storia Americana, Forma, Milan, Italy
The Making of an Argument, New Orleans Museum of Art, New Orleans, LA
An American Lens, Adamson Gallery, Washington D.C.
Gordon Parks Centennial Exhibition, Jenkins Johnson Gallery, San Francisco, CA

2012 The Segregation Portfolio, Jackson Fine Art and Arnika Dawkins Gallery, Atlanta, GA
A Harlem Family 1967, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, NY
Contact: Gordon Parks, Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York, NY
100 Moments, The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, NY
At 100, Martin Weinstein Gallery, Minneapolis, MN

2009 Portraits, Hermès Gallery, New York, NY

1999 Manhattan, Kansas Revisited, Manhattan Arts Center, Manhattan, KS

1997 Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

1970  *This Thing Called Jazz*, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.
1960  Limelight Gallery, New York, NY
1953  The Art Institute of Chicago, IL
1945  *Industrial Photographs from the Standard Oil Company*, New York Public Library, New York, NY

**AWARDS**

Lifetime Achievement, Anisfield-Wolf Book Award, 1998
National Medal of Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, 1988
Hall of Fame Award, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1984
Spingarn Medal, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1972

**SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS**

Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD
Calder Foundation, New York, NY
Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA
Cincinnati Art Museum, Cincinnati, OH
Portland Museum of Art, Portland, OR
Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI
George Eastman House, Rochester, NY
Grand Rapids Art Museum, Grand Rapids, MI
Hewitt Gallery of Art, Marymount Manhattan College, New York, NY
Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York, NY
International Center of Photography, New York, NY
Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS
Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Marianne Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University, KA
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA
New York Public Library, New York, NY
Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, FL
St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO
The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL
The Capital Group Foundation / Iris & B. Gerald Cantor Center for Visual Arts at Stanford, CA
The Gordon Parks Museum, Center for Culture and Diversity, Fort Scott Community College, Fort Scott, KS
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY
The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY
The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO
The Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS
The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA
University of Louisville Photographic Archives, Louisville, KY

**FILMOGRAPHY**
Flavio, 1964
Diary of a Harlem Family, 1968
The World of Piri Thomas, 1968
The Learning Tree, 1969
Shaft, 1971
Shaft’s Big Score!, 1972
The Super Cops, 1974
Leadbelly, 1976
Solomon Northup’s Odyssey, 1984
Moments Without Proper Names, 1987
Martin, 1989

SELECTED CATALOGUES AND PUBLICATIONS


*Gordon Parks: In Love*. Philadelphia: Lippincott
*Born Black*. Philadelphia: Lippincott


Ella Watson: The Empowered Woman of Gordon Parks's 'American Gothic'

Gordon Parks's photograph “American Gothic” afforded rare attention to a black female subject who was not a celebrity or entertainer, but a mother and a worker.

By Deborah Willis | May 14, 2018

The first time I saw Gordon Parks’s photograph “American Gothic” — during a slide presentation in an undergraduate art school class in the 1970s — I was awe-struck.

I wanted to hold fast to the memory of that image of Ella Watson even as the professor moved to the next photo. Her polka-dot dress with puffed sleeves and two missing buttons, her wire-rimmed glasses half in shadow. The inverted tools of her trade, the straw curve of the worn broom and the curl of cotton mop, made me curious.

Parks met Ella Watson in 1942, when he had a Rosenwald fellowship with the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C. She was a cleaning woman in the offices there, and he went on to photograph her at work, at home with her family, in her
neighborhood, and at St. Martin’s Spiritual Church.

“American Gothic” — a reference to the famous Grant Wood painting — is a construction that afforded rare attention to a black female subject who was not a celebrity or entertainer, but a mother and a worker. In this photograph, Parks formed an image of Mrs. Watson at work, her loosely fitted work dress pinned closed, allowing the viewer to link the necessity of her role as a family provider with the harshness of her existence. The American flag that hangs behind her frames her with the tools of her labor.

Ever since that moment in class, I have remained curious about the photograph and about Ella Watson herself. I was impressed by the solemnity of her pose and the expression on her face as she looks at the camera, yet beyond the photographer. Her gaze allowed me to enter into the picture and wonder — was she a willing model, did she satisfy the request of Parks, who undoubtedly directed this unconventional pose? Whatever their exchange about patriotism, inequality and commitment, Ella Watson took her role seriously as the artist’s muse.

This week I had the opportunity to chat with Ella Watson’s great-granddaughter Rosslyn Samuels. She was a child when her great-grandmother came to live in her family’s home in Washington, and they shared a bedroom. Ms. Samuels’s mother, granddaughter to Ella Watson, and her father had asked her to stay with them after Mrs. Watson’s last daughter had moved out of the family home. Ms. Samuels said Mrs. Watson spent her life taking care of family — her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren — and caring about others’ welfare and comfort.

Ms. Samuels also told me that she had never seen her great-grandmother at work outside the home nor heard her speak of “American Gothic.” She was about 12 or 13 when Mrs. Watson died, but her grandmother Lauretta talked about the photograph, which Ms. Samuels saw for the first time when she was 18.

Ms. Samuels shared stories about the special intimacy and great understanding that the two women experienced with each other in search of comfort and joy. In their shared bedroom was a tall, lace-topped chest of drawers that displayed framed family photographs. Ms. Samuels combed, brushed
and braided her great-grandmother’s hair every weeknight before she said her prayers: Ella Watson was a devout Christian. She read the Bible every day, and church was an essential part of her spiritual and social life.

I had often thought of Ella Watson as an empowered woman who understood what it meant to be responsible for others. Ms. Samuels agreed, and said she had an extraordinary heart and an extraordinary faith: “She lived according to her faith and did not sway from it,” she said. “She prayed every morning as well as every night and would instill in her family to be giving, kind and forgiving.”

In looking again at Parks’s photographs of Ella Watson — he made at least 90 — I am reminded of other people’s readings of the images over the years, ones that stressed the struggles in her life, her long working hours, and I searched for those readings in the various portraits of her.

But Ms. Samuels offered another way of seeing Mrs. Watson — she explained that her great-grandmother often spoke of the delight she took in caring for the family’s children. She loved cooking, and Ms. Samuels recalled a story about a meal that she tried to avoid eating by poking a hole in a bag of black-eyed peas. When the peas spilled onto the floor, she was certain that she would not have to eat peas that night. She was surprised when her great-grandmother said: “Oh, this is a great opportunity. We can pick these up, wash them and cook them for dinner.”
Curious about her Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, I asked Ms. Samuels about Ella Watson’s clothing, her sense of style. Ms. Samuels described her as neat and meticulous, a modest and humble woman who wore house dresses at home during the week and her best clothes on Sunday. She never wore pants and would stay in her bedclothes as she prepared for church. She wore monochrome dresses and kitten-heeled shoes that she polished weekly, and she never allowed her great-granddaughter to style her hair for church. She had her style for Sunday!

In my quest to confirm my perception of the personality I had imagined for this stoic black woman in the photograph, I asked Ms. Samuels a final question. How would you describe your great-grandmother to someone today? Ms. Samuels responded immediately that she was a “Proverbs 31 woman!”

As that Old Testament passage says: “She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness ... Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.”

Three of Ella Watson’s descendants will be recognized at the Gordon Parks Foundation’s Awards Dinner and Auction on May 22 in New York City. Ms. Samuels, and Ms. Watson’s granddaughters Sharon Stanley and Audrey Johnson, will receive a print of the “American Gothic” photograph. Other honorees include Ava DuVernay, Ronald O. Perelman; Ta-Nehisi Coates; Sherrilyn Ifill; Sally Mann and Jamel Shabazz.

Deborah Willis, Ph.D, is chairwoman of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. A MacArthur and Guggenheim fellow, she is the author of “Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers — 1840 to the Present” and “Posing Beauty: African American Images From the 1890s to the Present,” among others.
At Jack Shainman Gallery, the Softer Side of Gordon Parks

JANUARY 12, 2018 6:30 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).

“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).

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.”

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.

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.

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.

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 scrambled 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.
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 noted as a trailblazer in film, documentary, music, and literature.
Gordon Parks Foundation Shares Their Reaction to Kendrick’s "ELEMENT." Video

By Elijah C. Watson, Posted: June 29

Kendrick Lamar recently dropped the music video for his song “Element” and many viewers noticed how several of the video’s scenes are inspired by Gordon Parks’ photography. The video’s beautiful shots contrast against its narrative where themes of poverty and violence are displayed throughout the almost four-minute long video. However, director Jonas Lindstroem (alongside the Little Homies) humanizes these moments to where they don’t feel exploitative or glamorized, but rather an unfortunate inevitability — a commentary on problems that are inescapable.

Such was Parks’ work. The iconic black photographer used his eyes to tell the stories of black people across America, as well as Americans who were poverty-stricken. In his black and white (and sometimes color) photos, you see the humanity in faces young and old; black and white; famous and everyday people. The realism in the images are beautifully poignant, and it is incredible to see Lindstroem and the Little Homies bring some of Parks’ pictures to life.

“The Gordon Parks Foundation is pleased to see Kendrick Lamar recognize Gordon Parks’ important photography while working at life magazine and honoring his legacy,” Peter W. Kunhardt, Jr., the Executive Director of the Gordon Parks Foundation, said. “The Gordon Parks Foundation uses Gordon’s creative work to educate and inspire young artists.”

As for Kunhardt’s favorite scene that recreated one of Parks’ photos? The scene of the boy with a ladybug crawling on its forehead, which is inspired by Parks’ “Boy with June Bug.” Taken by Parks back in
1963 while visiting his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas, the child is given a name, Newt, in Gordon’s semi-autobiography The Learning Tree (which would later be adapted into a film by Parks, which resulted in him becoming Hollywood’s first major black director.)

“That was one of Gordon’s photos he did while he was working on [semi-autobiography] The Learning Tree,” Kunhardt said. “So, to see a contemporary artist like Kendrick see and understand the importance of that work spoke the most to me. It was so important to Gordon.”
‘I Am Not Your Negro’ Laces James Baldwin’s Prescient Words with Potent Images Including Segregation-Era Photographs by Gordon Parks


THERE IS TRUE ARTISTRY in “I Am Not Your Negro.” Inspired by the writings and profound insights of James Baldwin (1924-1987), Raoul Peck’s seminal film manages to synthesize more than 50 years of America’s woeful racism and dogged inhumanity into 93 minutes. Built with Baldwin’s prescient words and fortified by powerful images, it’s a tour de force.

“I Am Not Your Negro” is nominated for an academy award in the documentary feature category. It is the first Oscar nod for Peck and his co-producers, Rémi Grellety, and Hébert Peck, the director’s brother.

The film envisions the book Baldwin began, but never finished. He left behind a 30-page manuscript for “Remember This House.” The book was intended to be a revolutionary examination of the lives, leadership, and violent deaths of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., who were assassinated in the space of five years (1963-1968).

“These three men were black, but it is not the color of their skin that connected them. They fought on quite different battlefields. And quite differently. But in the end, all three were deemed dangerous. They were unveiling the haze of racial confusion,” Peck writes in his director’s statement for the film. “James Baldwin also saw through the system. And he loved these men. These assassinations broke him down. He
was determined to expose the complex links and similarities among these three individuals. He was going to write about them.”

In Baldwin’s absence, Peck took up the quest with the blessing of Gloria Karefa-Smart, Baldwin’s sister and executor of his estate. She gave him the rights to the writer’s entire body of work—published and unpublished. Peck used it unsparingly to create “I Am Not Your Negro,” a black history primer and thoughtful examination of race in America. Every word in the film is Baldwin’s, harvested from his books, essays, interviews, speeches, broadcasts, and films. Archival footage of Baldwin is supplemented with voiceovers by Samuel L. Jackson. The message is all Baldwin, but the film is unmistakably Peck.

“Every word in the film is Baldwin’s, harvested from his books, essays, interviews, speeches, broadcasts, and films. Archival footage of Baldwin is supplemented with voiceovers by Samuel L. Jackson. The message is all Baldwin, but the film is unmistakably Peck.”

AN AWARD-WINNING DIRECTOR of many films, Peck is most recognized for “Lumumba” (2000), a documentary about Patrice Lumumba, the first democratically elected leader of the Congo. “Sometimes in April” tackled the Rwandan genocide. Following his work on “I Am Not Your Negro,” he recently finished shooting a feature called “The Young Karl Marx.” Informed by his experience working on these complex political portraits, Peck confidently takes creative risks with Baldwin’s material and pushes experimentation with words, music, and images.

Stills by more than two dozen photographers are laced throughout the narrative. Images by Gordon Parks, Richard Avedon, Bruce Davidson, Leonard Freed, Danny Lyon, and Flip Schulke are immediately recognizable.

Production notes describe the film as primarily visual and musical, and detail its approach to images: ‘I Am Not Your Negro’ uses archival images from private and public photos; film clips, Hollywood classics, documentaries, film and TV interviews, popular TV shows, TV debates, public debates and contemporary images. It is a kaleidoscope, featuring a frantic and poetic assemblage (a medley), all in Baldwin’s very own, peculiar style.
The images punctuate the words and the music and vice versa. By revisiting the traditional ‘Black’ iconography, with its clichés, the unspoken, the fundamental errors of interpretation and even, at times, the paternalistic prudery, I Am Not Your Negro redefines their meaning and impact.

Peck changed not only the framing of his images, but their traditional use and their ‘editing’ as well. He changed the backgrounds, detached portions, enlarged a smile, scratched out a tear. The goal was to deconstruct original intentions and thus expose a new meaning to accepted iconography, unveil buried secrets or unknown truths of the time. Familiar B&W images were colored, actual current images were transferred to B&W.”

About 20 minutes into the film, there is footage of James Baldwin debating William F. Buckley at Cambridge University in 1965. The topic: “Has the American Dream Been Achieved at the Expense of the American Negro?” Indeed, it has, Baldwin believes. But it is a loaded question, he said. The answer depends on one’s point of view, one’s sense and system of reality, where one finds himself in the world.

In the excerpt that appears in the film, Baldwin said: “It comes as a great shock around the age of five or six or seven to discover the flag to which you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. ...It comes as a great shock to discover the country that is your birthplace, and to which you owe your life and your identity, has not in its whole system of reality evolved any place for you.”

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Reflecting Baldwin’s observations, segregation-era images by Parks appear in the film following the debate footage. In 1956, Parks traveled to Shady Grove, Ala., where he spent time photographing an ordinary African American family enduring the indignities of the Jim Crow South. America had grown
accustomed to black-and-white images of the race divide when the legendary photographer published his “Segregation” series, a color portfolio in Life magazine.

The film’s images are as pointed, political, and poetic as Baldwin’s words. Spoken and written in decades past, it is both discouraging and empowering to realize how relevant Baldwin’s insights are to our contemporary context.

“There are days when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it. I can’t be a pessimist because I am alive,” Baldwin says in the film. “The question you’ve got to ask yourself, the white population of this country has got to ask itself, is ‘Why it was necessary to have a nigger in the first place?’ Cause I am not a nigger. I am a man. But if you think I am a nigger, means you need it and you’ve got to find out why. And the future depends on that.”

Lost in the Archives: Key projects from James Baldwin and Gordon Parks almost went undiscovered. Raoul Peck was given access for a decade to Baldwin’s entire body of work. According to the production notes for “I Am Not Your Negro,” it wasn’t until after several unsuccessful attempts to get a Baldwin project into development that Peck received the 30-page manuscript for “Remember This House.” Baldwin’s sister “gave him a pile of neatly (and partly crossed out) typewritten pages and a letter. ‘You’ll know what to do with this,’ she said.” Those pages formed the basis of “I Am Not Your Negro.”

According to the catalog description, Parks’s full portfolio of Segregation images almost didn’t see the light of day: “While 26 photographs were eventually published in Life and some were exhibited in his lifetime, the bulk of Parks’ assignment was thought to be lost. In 2011, five years after Parks’ death, The Gordon Parks Foundation discovered more than 70 color transparencies at the bottom of an old storage bin marked ‘Segregation Series’ that are now published for the first time in ‘Segregation Story.’”

*Outside Looking In, Mobile, Alabama, 1956* (above left). *Untitled, Alabama, 1956* | Courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation, (above right).*
In 1956, two years after the Supreme Court’s Brown v. Board of Education ruling deemed unconstitutional the Jim Crow ethos of “separate but equal,” Life magazine sent Gordon Parks, its first African-American staff photographer (who would later distinguish himself as a film director, memoirist, composer, and a founder of Essence magazine), down to the deepest South to document how things had or had not changed. Parks photographed four generations of the Thornton family based in and around Mobile, Alabama, and Nashville, Tennessee, and found that their lives remained separate and very much unequal. Although Albert Thornton, the family’s 82-year-old patriarch, himself the son of a slave, had managed to send four of his nine children to college, their fortunes remained constrained by systemic injustice. Family members who lived near Mobile had access only to squalid housing in segregated neighborhoods where the roads remained unpaved. One daughter, a teacher, could land a position only in a school that lacked basic necessities like indoor plumbing. Their children played in separate, lesser playgrounds and drank from different water fountains than white children. And no matter where they lived, their professional opportunities were limited: One son-in-law, a woodcutter, turned down a lucrative contract in the face of threats from his white competitors; one son, a college professor and department head, wasn’t allowed to socialize with white peers or travel with whites on buses.

Twenty-six of Parks’s images appeared alongside an accompanying article in a late September 1956 issue of Life. And those images, along with several others from the same project, are now the subject of “Segregation Story,” a show at Salon 94 Freemans in New York City. Though the series has been displayed publically before—including last year at Atlanta’s High Museum of Art—this is the first time this collection of photographs has been shown in New York, the city where the Kansas-born, Minnesota-bred Parks lived on and off for years.

“About a year ago, Marilyn Minter texted me from Atlanta,” I’m told by Salon 94 curator Fabienne Stephan, who gave me an early peek at the show ahead of its official opening tonight. “She was there for Thanksgiving, and she had just visited the Gordon Parks show at the High Museum. She kept texting me images. She said, ‘Look! I can’t believe this existed! I had no idea. They were shot in color. They’re so powerful. I grew up in the South, in Florida. It’s the quiet everyday life of my era.’” Stephan pointed to
an image on the wall of six black children hanging on a fence and gazing at the wonderland of a white playground. “She really saw herself, maybe as one of the children inside this playground. It was very personal, obviously.”

At Minter’s suggestion, the gallery contacted the Gordon Parks Foundation (Parks himself passed away in 2006) to look into bringing the body of work to New York. “[The foundation] loved the idea of giving a stage to those images in a setting that’s not a photography gallery but a place where a dialogue about contemporary art happens,” Stephan told me. “It’s very important for them that Gordon’s work lives in the eyes of young artists, is being seen in that context. If you’re not being seen by the younger generation who are making work inspired by you, your work sort of dies.”

Stephan gave me a tour of the show, which hangs in a single gallery, in a space nestled, ironically, between two stalwarts of retro nostalgia: Freemans Sporting Club boutique and barbershop, and Freemans restaurant. That tension between the contemporary and the antiquated reverberates throughout the exhibition. At the time they were originally published, Parks’s photographs revealed to Northerners the entrenched racial injustice of the mid-20th-century South. Now his photographs are appearing, 60 years later, in a Northern city, at a time when the entire country is facing the persistent legacy of that racism. “The history of the Civil Rights movement is largely told in black-and-white,” Stephan reminded me. Parks’s photographs, by comparison, are in vivid color. They painfully juxtapose technology that feels relatively modern with an era that we would like to pretend is ancient history.

The first photograph, hanging just to the left of the gallery’s entrance, depicts a billboard rising out of an overgrown empty field that reads “For Sale: Lots for Coloreds.” “The idea is it’s almost like walking through the city. You arrive at the edge of town,” said Stephan, “and then you go through the landscape.” Working our way around the room, we look at images of boys in overalls fishing, kids playing with toy guns, a girl gazing at a sea of white dolls in the window of a store. One particularly captivating photograph depicts a pretty young woman in a blue dress standing with a younger girl outside a movie theater. Parks, Stephan told me, was also a fashion photographer (he shot for Vogue in the Alexander Liberman era). His perfectly composed image, its subjects dressed to the nines, could easily be mistaken for a bit of fashion editorial—but, of course, for the neon sign that ominously hangs overhead, declaring “Colored Entrance.”

The photograph exemplifies why the series was so quietly yet powerfully revolutionary. “Instead of choosing to document very shocking images or images of extreme poverty, he very smartly chose to take images that brought the subjects of the photographs closer to the middle-class families who were reading the magazine up North,” Stephan remarked. “Children playing, children going with their mom to shop for a nice dress, children going to the ice cream parlor, to the cinema, to school. It’s all the same, and yet it’s completely different.”

The tactic may have endeared its subjects to Northern Life subscribers, but it did the opposite in the eyes of their Southern white neighbors. Allie Lee Causey, the Thorntons’ teacher daughter, was quoted in the article saying, “Integration is the only way through which Negroes will receive justice. We cannot get it as a separate people.” Those words cost her dearly: The Causeys were hounded by angry whites in their home of Shady Grove, Alabama. Allie’s husband, Willie, a woodcutter, had his truck seized. Allie was fired from her school. They were forced to flee town, and eventually they divorced.

Parks also booked it out of town as soon as his assignment was done. While in Alabama, the magazine hired a local African-American man, Sam Yette, to help Parks navigate the thorny customs of the racist South. “He was obviously not welcomed by the white community,” said Stephan. The pair suffered
harassment and threats. And in an essay published in the catalog that accompanied the High Museum show, the critic Maurice Berger wrote of Parks: “His work complete, the photographer fled from the town with Yette via a back road: ‘After reaching Birmingham at dawn,’ ” Berger quoted Parks saying, “‘I took the first plane to New York. Not until it roared upward did I breathe easily.’”

Back in New York, Stephan and I paused at a photograph that did not appear in the Life story, a favorite of the curator’s. On the left of the image, taken in an airport waiting lounge, is a white woman wearing a black hat and a large turquoise necklace. In the middle of the frame is a black baby nurse wearing a white uniform and carrying a blonde white baby, presumably the first woman’s child. Dominating the right third of the image, well in the foreground, is a fuzzy sliver of a black person’s cheek.

“It’s totally a stolen image,” said Stephan, acknowledging that in the Jim Crow South, an African-American man would never have been allowed to take a photograph of a white woman. “You see from the shadow here”—she referred to the out-of-focus face—“he aimed it. It was obviously prior to digital camera, so he didn’t know what the final result would be.”

Was that blurry person in the foreground Parks, making this, Stephan and her assistant Jonathan Gardenhire joked, an early example of a selfie? Or was it a decoy subject, another black man also allowed into the integrated lounge at the airport, a privilege that would have been afforded Parks only because he was a Northerner who hailed from an unsegregated city?

We can’t say for sure. But the final result is quite extraordinary. “He wasn’t allowed to take this picture,” elaborated Gardenhire. “But he took it anyway. He risked his life to do it.”

“Segregation Story” by Gordon Parks opens tonight and runs through December 20 at Salon 94 Freemans. Salon94.com for more information.
After growing up surrounded by prejudice, Gordon Parks fought against injustice with the camera as his weapon of choice.

By William Meyer, Posted: March 3, 2015

While looking at the “Gordon Parks: Segregation Story” exhibition at the High Museum in Atlanta, I overheard an elderly white docent standing in front of a 1956 picture of a Dairy Queen in Mobile, Ala., explaining to a cluster of African-American schoolchildren the significance of the two water fountains, one labeled “White Only” and the other “Colored Only.” When the picture ran in the Sept. 24, 1956, issue of Life, it was intended to show the magazine’s 20 million weekly readers the realities of contemporary black life in the Deep South; now the picture is evidence of a painful history so alien the details have to be explained. Gordon Parks would be pleased—pleased there are no more segregated water fountains, and pleased his photograph still has utility.

Parks (1912-2006) was a complex, high-voltage sort of a man who before he died had distinguished himself not only as a photojournalist, but also as a fashion photographer, a composer, a writer and a movie director. He was born in Fort Scott, Kan., the youngest of 15 children; his father was a tenant farmer, his mother a maid. The family environment was so loving that Parks later said he realized they were poor only after leaving home. He had a great affection for the land and for the people of Fort Scott, but a good part of “A Choice of Weapons,” his autobiography, deals with his experience of segregation; “I was stoned and beaten and called ‘nigger,’ ‘black boy,’ ‘darker,’ ‘shine.’” He became interested in photography while working as a railroad porter and reading through the magazines the white passengers left behind. Pictures of the Depression by the great Farm Security Administration photographers—Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Arthur Rothstein—inspired him in 1937 to buy a used Voigtländer Brilliant in a pawnshop and to teach himself how to use it. A decade later he became the first black photographer on staff at Life.

In “Gordon Parks: Back to Fort Scott,” the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is showing 42 black-and-white and one-color photographs from an article Life assigned the photographer in 1950 but never published. The magazine sent him back to his hometown to document the effects of segregation. The civil-rights movement was gaining media attention, and Kansas was an important center; the Brown v. Board of Education lawsuit that would be filed in 1954 originated in Topeka, not that far from Fort Scott. Although it is the business of a photojournalist to take pictures that illustrate a story, it is hardly ever his own story, yet that was Parks’s assignment. He decided to track down the 11 classmates who graduated with him from the Plaza School in 1927 and see what had become of them.

First there are pictures to give a sense of Fort Scott: a shot of young men hanging around outside the pool hall and pictures of the railway station. There is a portrait of 98-year-old Mrs. Jefferson, noble in profile, sitting on her porch, and another picture of her sitting at the bedside of a dying friend. The only classmate still in town was Luella Russell, now married and with a 16-year-old daughter. The audience for Life was predominantly white and middle class, so Parks’s strategy was to present his subjects in ways that would be comprehensible to them; he shot Luella and her husband, both neatly dressed, standing with their daughter as she plays their upright piano. Another photo shows the daughter and
her boyfriend standing under the marquee of the Liberty theater debating whether to see William Powell in “Dancing in the Dark” in the theater’s “buzzards’ roost,” the section reserved for blacks.

One classmate lived too far away for Parks to get to, and one unfortunate woman was in a mental institution, but the other eight were located in Kansas City, Mo. Detroit, Columbus, Ohio, St. Louis and Chicago. Mazel Morgan was photographed in a run-down transient hotel in Chicago. The least successful of the group, she sits in a chair by the window looking morose; her husband lies on the bed bare-chested and smoking a cigarette. The others were getting by, although a recurring complaint was that their ambitions were thwarted because the jobs they wanted were not open to blacks. Parks photographed several with their families standing in front of their homes, a typical Life format used to establish location and class. In Kansas City, Peter Thompson, a postal clerk, stands between his wife and daughter with the rusticated stone piers of their porch behind them; all three look confident. In Detroit, Pauline Terry clutches her husband’s arm as they resolutely head to church on Sunday morning.

The pictures of these old friends are filled with affection and insight. Why the photo-essay never ran is not known, but it was not unusual for Life to cancel projects. In 1956 they sent Parks to Mobile, Ala., where he shot “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” a published article that included 26 color photographs spread over 12 pages; the High Museum has those pictures and about a dozen more on display. The article documents the ways in which prejudice against “Negros” affected the lives of three generations of the Thornton family—Mr. and Mrs. Alfred Thornton, 82 and 70, their nine children and 19 grandchildren.

The article begins with a full-page, rather formal portrait of the elder Thorntons sitting on the sofa in their living room under a framed picture of their younger selves. Daughter Minnie Louise Causey is a schoolteacher; Parks photographed her cooking a meal of collards and onions in her cramped kitchen, and also the potbelly stove in her dilapidated school. (When she was fired for participating in the article, Life sent $25,000.) Daughter Virgie Lee Tanner is married to a mechanic with a civil-service job that pays well and is immune to discrimination, but a picture shows her children looking through a cyclone fence at a playground they cannot enter. Another picture shows a beautifully dressed child and grandchild under a neon “Colored Entrance” sign outside a department store. Son E.J. Thornton has degrees from Tuskegee and the University of Massachusetts; a department head at all-black Tennessee State University, he is shown with his family at a bus station outside the colored waiting room.

There are three stunning portraits at the High that were not included in the article but show Parks at his sensitive best. One is of a handsome young woman who, warily, looks straight at the photographer; her dress is frayed at the shoulders. Another sequence that was not used shows two boys fishing in a stream, something Parks loved to do when he was their age. There are the pictures of the separate water fountains, and there are pictures of a women’s choir, all dressed in white, singing in church. In an image laden with portent, Willie Causey, 16, sits in a chair holding a rifle in his lap, while his mother reads to his brothers on a bed behind him. Gordon Parks suffered from segregation and discrimination when he was growing up, but he struggled to understand them and keep them from determining his life. The camera was his weapon of choice to combat prejudice, but he learned his tactics from his mother, “who placed love, dignity and hard work over hatred.” Life sent the right man south.

Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. His photo book “Outer Boroughs: New York Beyond Manhattan” was published this year by Damiani.
In 1950, the Life magazine photographer Gordon Parks returned to his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas, to create a photo essay on segregation in American schools. Parks was the only African-American photographer on the staff at Life and he was no stranger to the subject. The youngest of 15 children born to a tenant farmer and a maid, he had attended the segregated Plaza School, where an all-black student body had been taught by an all-black faculty. For the young Parks this had seemed quite normal, as had the black Main Street that existed on one side of the railroad tracks and the white Main Street that existed on the other. But by 1950 this forced separation was starting to splinter and Kansas was at the center of a growing national debate over segregation: in 1954 the Supreme Court decision, Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, would order schools to desegregate, kick-starting the civil-rights revolution.

Parks’ idea was to personalize the story of segregation by tracking down his former classmates from the Plaza School. The photographs he took are now on view in a precise and powerful show at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. By the time he began work on the project, many of them had left Fort Scott and so his commission became a quest that followed the Great Migration of African-Americans out of the rural southern states to the urban Midwest. In St Louis, Chicago and Detroit, Parks caught up with and photographed his old schoolmates in an almost identical manner. He would stand them shoulder to shoulder with their spouses or children, with their apartment blocks or houses behind them (above). This was by no means incidental. In fact this seemingly simple composition held within it a powerful message.
At the time, Life was the most popular news magazine in the United States. It had a weekly readership of some 20m, drawn primarily from the urban and suburban white middle classes. Parks realized that in telling his story he would have to counter many of the unfavorable preconceptions that the magazine's readers would have about African-Americans. He needed to normalize his subjects in the eyes of his audience. But how? His answer was to appropriate what might have been the United States' most beloved artwork at the time—Grant Woods' “American Gothic” (1930). In Woods' original painting a gaunt, bespectacled farmer holding a pitchfork stands shoulder to shoulder with a woman in an apron. Both look grimly out of the picture. In the background sits a small white clapboard house with an ornate Gothic window. To the majority of Americans this image spoke of a pioneer spirit and grit in the face of the Great Depression. Parks chose to replicate this painting's composition in the photographs of his schoolfriends not as a pastiche or satire, but as a subliminal signal of normalcy, a connotation of Americanness.

He had, in fact, quoted Woods' painting in one of his earliest photographs from 1942. In “American Gothic, Washington DC” he had photographed a charwoman in the Farm Security Administration building where he worked at the time, holding up a mop in front of the American flag. It was a polemical piece that criticized a deeply segregated city, but Parks' quotation of the painting in his Fort Scott photographs was softer and less controversial. He simply wanted to show his classmates as couples defined by something other than the color of their skin, and as modern American pioneers, travelling north from their hometown, foreheads creased with worry (like the Iowa farmers of Woods' image) but similarly united in their pursuit of the fundamental American rights of life, liberty and property. It was not just an aesthetic equivalence that Parks was drawing, but a moral one too.

He supplemented these portraits with depictions of his schoolmates and their families going to church, saying grace before a meal or playing pianos—an expensive status symbol—in order to further shorten the distance between them and Life's readership. But he didn't sugarcoat his story. Some of his classmates had been successful—we see one of them smoking a pipe on the porch of his house with his family, the epitome of suburban content. But others had fallen on hard times. Parks can't hide the suffering in one of his old schoolmates' eyes as she stares out of the window of her transient hotel while her abusive husband lies on a bed next to her (above). Shortly after the picture was taken he would rob Parks of his money. By mixing the good and the bad in equal measure Parks was trying to show that his classmates suffered the same everyday tragedies and worried about the same things—house payments, schools for their children—that white people did. A further emotional heft is added to this show by the painstaking curation of Karen Haas, who has found the yearbook photos of Parks' subjects and displayed them next to the portraits. Their chosen mottos (“To be young forever; to be a Mrs.”, “Tee hee, tee ho, tee hee, ha hum; Jolly, good natured, full of fun”) are as optimistic and silly as those of any young person of any color.

As it was the feature never ran in Life. It appears to have been bumped to one side as more important news events thrust themselves into the magazine's pages. Parks would go on to become a composer, a poet, a novelist and the first African-American to direct a Hollywood studio film (as well as the ground-breaking black action movie “Shaft” in 1971). But despite these achievements and an increasingly globe-trotting life, it was to Fort Scott that he felt consistently
drawn: “This small town into which I was born, /has, for me, grown into the largest, /and most important city in the universe. /Fort Scott is not as tall, or heralded as New York, Paris or London—/or other places my feet have roamed, /but it is home.”

Gordon Parks: Back to Fort Scott Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, to September 13th
“Harlem Gang Leader” introduced Gordon Parks to America. LIFE magazine, which published the photo essay in its Nov. 1, 1948, issue, had every reason to be proud of the man it called “a young Negro photographer.” He had, it said, spent “four hectic weeks” exploring the world of Red Jackson, the 17-year-old leader of the Midtowners, a gang in Harlem, making hundreds of photographs. Most of the 21 pictures that LIFE’s editors chose for the story evoked the deep shadows and pervasive anxiety of classic film noir. Parks’ field notes provided the raw material for a narrative that mirrored the photographs’ sense of foreboding. The photo essay, while largely compassionate, ultimately depicted Jackson’s existence as one that was shaped by senseless violence and thwarted dreams.

In many ways Parks viewed “Harlem Gang Leader” as a success. Years later, in a memoir, he recalled that “[s]ympathetic letters, along with a few vitriolic ones, poured in” to LIFE’s offices and that Henry Luce, the magazine’s founder, sent him “a congratulatory note.” When Wilson Hicks, LIFE’s longtime photo editor, offered him a position as a staff photographer soon afterwards, he happily accepted, making him the first, and for many years only, African American photographer at the magazine.

Yet it is unlikely that “Harlem Gang Leader,” with its emphasis on violence and pessimistic conclusion, fulfilled the hopes that Parks brought to the project. In 1946 Ebony, a magazine similar to LIFE that catered to an African American audience, reported that Parks had been looking for an opportunity to work on a photo essay about juvenile delinquency among black youth for some time. He believed that gang members were simply “good, poor kids gone wrong,” Ebony wrote. He felt that if he could “show enough of the kids’ home background on film, he can . . . show the way out of juvenile crime to any social agency which wants to wipe it out.”

A year later Ebony offered Parks the chance to produce a story that was, in effect, a trial run for “Harlem Gang Leader.” (See slides 19 and 20 in the gallery above.) For a photo essay about Harlem’s Northside Testing and Consultation Center, a mental health clinic founded by African American psychologists Mamie and Kenneth Clark, he employed amateur models to create a number of “hypothetical cases” to illustrate the therapy that the clinic offered to troubled youth. Among Parks’ case studies was “Bob,” a young gang leader. A series of photographs showed “Bob’s” transformation under Dr. Kenneth Clark’s care, from a rough gang leader in the first of Parks’ photographs to an obedient son and eager student in the last.

The narrative arc from delinquency to redemption was crucial for Parks. He had lived it. His own impoverished childhood in Kansas, a series of dead-end jobs in Minnesota and a brush with petty crime in Harlem had left him near despair. Photography had been his salvation—and LIFE, his inspiration. Discarded issues of the magazine and a chance encounter with photographer Robert Capa, who often worked for the celebrated weekly, prompted him to buy his first camera. Talent, an enormous capacity for hard work and generous mentors propelled him to a position with the Farm Security Administration’s heralded documentary project, during World War II, and, in the years immediately after the war, to success as a freelance photographer in New York. Vogue, like Ebony, was among his regular employers.
The possibility of redemption is all but missing from “Harlem Gang Leader.” Instead there is a sense of futility. In the photograph that LIFE’s editors chose as the story’s final image, Parks isolated Jackson on an empty Harlem street that stretched far before him into the distance. As Jackson walked away from the camera, tenement buildings, shrouded in shadows, towered above, threatening to engulf him. The story’s closing words reflected the photograph’s gloom. “When all was said and done,” the magazine wrote, “Red could count the people—white or colored—who were seriously and practically interested in his troubles on the fingers of one hand.”

Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument, which opens on Sept. 19 at the University of Virginia’s Fralin Museum of Art, examines the tension between Parks’ vision of what “Harlem Gang Leader” could have been and the photo essay as LIFE’s editors shaped it. In the exhibition’s catalog, Russell Lord, the show’s original curator at the New Orleans Museum of Art, notes that from the moment Parks turned his exposed film over to LIFE he “had little control over the use (or misuse) and presentation of his pictures.” Editorial decisions resulted in a story that emphasized the “fear, frustration and violence” in what the magazine called Jackson’s “unhappy life.”

Lord contends, however, that in “the vast collection” of Parks’ “rejected images and out-takes a more complete portrait emerges of Red Jackson as a complex and conflicted teenager.” These photographs, many of which are a part of the exhibition, illustrate that the juvenile delinquent was also a normal teen: opening a fire hydrant on a hot summer’s day so that neighborhood children could cool off in its spray; sweeping the floor of his mother’s apartment; adjusting his tie in front a mirror for a big night out. An alternative photo essay resides, latent, in these pictures, one in which Jackson, like “Bob,” has the potential to leave gang life behind.

The editorial process that created “Harlem Gang Leader” was far from unique. All of LIFE’s photo essays were the products of a collaboration between photographers, editors, writers, layout artists and darkroom technicians. Parks was well aware of the compromises that he would be required to make at LIFE, and he made them willingly. The magazine provided him with a platform that he coveted—one that allowed him to place issues of social justice in front of tens of millions of largely white, middle-class readers. The photo essays that he produced on issues relating to race and poverty during his long career at LIFE made him one of the most significant interpreters of the African American experience in the mid-twentieth century.

Soon after “Harlem Gang Leader” was published, Parks and Jackson lost touch with each other. They did not meet again until a chance encounter on a Harlem street corner when they were both elderly men. Parks gave Jackson his telephone number with instructions to call. By the time Jackson reached out to him, Parks was too infirm to accept visitors. He died shortly afterward, in 2006, at age 93. Jackson attended his funeral.

Red Jackson passed away in 2010. He was 79 years old.
Gordon Parks's portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton Sr., an older black couple in their Mobile, Ala., home in 1956, appears to have little in common with the images we have come to associate with civil rights photography. It is in color, unlike most photographs of the movement. Its subject matter was neither newsworthy nor historic, unlike more widely published journalistic images of the racial murders, police brutality, demonstrations and boycotts that characterized the epic battle for racial justice and equality.

Gordon Parks was born 100 years ago this year (he died in 2006). In honor of this milestone, the Schomburg Center is exhibiting 100 photographs. On Lens, previous posts discuss Mr. Parks's work:

Yet, as effectively as any civil rights photograph, the portrait was a forceful “weapon of choice,” as Mr. Parks would say, in the struggle against racism and segregation. He took the picture on assignment for a September 1956 Life magazine photo-essay, “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” which documented the everyday activities and rituals of one extended black family living in the rural South under Jim Crow segregation.

While 20 photographs were eventually published in Life, the bulk of Mr. Parks’s work from that shoot was thought to have been lost. That is, until this spring, when the Gordon Parks Foundation discovered more than 70 color transparencies at the bottom of an old storage box, wrapped in paper and masking tape and marked, “Segregation Series.”

Not all of the “Segregation” photographs are as prosaic as the Thornton portrait. Some are ominous and intense, providing stark evidence of the unjustness of segregation and the ways it endangered democracy: the “colored only” signs that marginalized one community as assuredly as they enriched another; the backbreaking labor; the squalor and overcrowding; and the unequal, ramshackle accommodations.

But most of the images are optimistic and affirmative, like the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Thornton. They focus on the family’s everyday activities, and their resolve to get on with their lives as normally as possible, in spite of an environment that restricts and intimidates: Mrs. Thornton cradling her newborn great-grandchild (below); her son, now a father himself, on a stroll with his children; a couple filling out tax returns; a Sunday church service (Slide 7); boys fishing in a creek; a woman and her granddaughter window shopping (Slide 2); teenagers hanging out in front of a country store; and mourners at a funeral (Slide 12).

These quiet, compelling photographs elicit a reaction that Mr. Parks believed was critical to the undoing of racial prejudice: empathy. Throughout his career, he endeavored to help viewers, white and black, to understand and share the feelings of others. It was with this goal in mind that he set out to document the lives of the Thornton family, creating images meant to alter the way Americans viewed one another and, ultimately, themselves.
More than anything, the “Segregation Series” challenged the abiding myth of racism: that the races are innately unequal, a delusion that allows one group to declare its superiority over another by capriciously ascribing to it negative traits, abnormalities or pathologies. It is the very fullness, even ordinariness, of the lives of the Thornton family that most effectively contests these notions of difference, which had flourished in a popular culture that offered no more than an incomplete or distorted view of African-American life.

As the writer Thulani Davis observes, white Americans, in the civil rights era, had little awareness that black people “lived in a complete universe.” In our private lives “we were whole. We enjoyed a richness that the mainstream almost never showed, but that we took for granted just as white people did.”

As the holistic depiction of black life in the rural South in the “Segregation Series” demonstrates, the aspirations, responsibilities, vocations, and rituals of the Thornton family were no different from those of white Americans. Yet, these religious and law-abiding people, and others like them, were persecuted. It is this incongruity, made visible by Mr. Parks’s photographs, which may have appealed to the empathy and fairness of some of Life’s white readers. It challenged them to reconsider both their attitudes about segregation and the stereotypes they assigned to people who were little different from them. It is the very fullness, even ordinariness, of the lives of the Thornton family that most effectively contests these notions of difference, which had flourished in a popular culture that offered no more than an incomplete or distorted view of African-American life.

The complete and positive images also helped to bolster the morale of blacks in the face of withering prejudice. This is one reason Mr. Parks’s quiet portrait of the Thorntons is an important civil rights image, demonstrating as it does the historic role of photography in black culture.

Throughout a century of oppression, photography served as a ray of light for black Americans, illuminating the humanity, beauty and achievements long hidden in the culture at large. By allowing a people to record and celebrate the affirmative aspects of their lives, the camera helped to countermand the toxic effects of stereotypes on their self-esteem. One detail in Mr. Parks’s photograph of the Thorntons underscores the medium’s restorative power: the ornately framed picture of the couple that hangs on the wall above them. The image dates to the time of their marriage in 1903, when he was 29 and she was 17. A close examination reveals that it was spliced together from two separate images. And so, what first appears to be a wedding picture is, in fact, the restitution of a lost history. The image serves as both a commemoration of the couple’s union and a poignant metaphor of the resilience and urgency of their bond against a tide spanning decades of intolerance and adversity.

Another object, the coffee table in the foreground with family snapshots proudly displayed under its glass top, underscores photography’s esteemed place in black life. These details remind us of the extent to which blacks were able to represent themselves in a positive light, requiring neither the cooperation of the media nor the work of photographers like Mr. Parks, who died at age 93 in 2006.

As the popularity of inexpensive and easily accessible cameras swept across the nation in the 1900s, black Americans, like their white counterparts, relied on snapshots to document and memorialize their lives. Millions of blacks used their own cameras (and before that patronized a nationwide syndicate of black-owned photo studios) to accomplish for themselves
what a century and a half of mainstream representation usually could not: the creation of positive, multifaceted images that could embolden a people against the forces of intolerance.


Maurice Berger is research professor and chief curator at the Center for Art, Design and Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and consulting curator at the Jewish Museum in New York. He recently curated “For All the World to See: Visual Culture and the Struggle for Civil Rights” at the International Center of Photography. He is the author of 11 books, including a memoir, “White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness.” He contributed text, along with Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Deborah Willis and others, to “Gordon Parks: Collected Works,” coming out in September from Steidl.