

A Portrait of African American Photography: Through The Eyes of Gordon Parks

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*The guy who takes a chance,
who walks the fine line between the known and unknown,
who is unafraid of failure will succeed.*
~ Gordon Parks

INTRODUCTION

Can anyone tell me who Gordon Parks is? Or who wrote the theme song and directed the movie *Shaft*? Finally, can you name any 19th and 20th century African American photographers? If you answered no, you're not alone. If you ask the average individual on the street, they would not be able to answer these questions correctly, which leads me to this discussion: While researching online one night, somehow I came across a school named Gordon Parks Elementary School. As I read more about the profile of this school, I became curious. I decided to email the principal of the school, to see how the school got its name. Much to my surprise, the school was named for Gordon Parks. It was dedicated in his honor as a cultural center depicting the life's work of this great photographer. Students who possess photographic or artistic abilities are selected to work at the center. She stated Mr. Parks got to view the center several times during his lifetime. I also was extended an invitation to attend the school if an opportunity presented itself.

From the development of this conversation, I was approached by a colleague about writing a curriculum unit. This curriculum unit is the result of my participation with the Houston Teachers Institute's seminar course entitled *Photography: Steps toward Visual Literacy*. This seminar allowed me an opportunity to visit several Houston libraries, one of which was the University of Houston Architectural Library. The other benefits, through research and time, enabled me to attend a digital photography workshop at the Rice School of Continuing Studies. Through these experiences, I was immediately drawn into the world of photography with a passionate spirit. It was later that I discovered the rich legacy of African American photography. With thoughts in mind, I wanted to view the life's work of Gordon Parks. I felt it was important to see how Mr. Parks accurately documented the black experience through exhibitions and images. I wanted to know how he used his "creative genius" to influence his view of the world through pictures behind the camera.

In his autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*, Parks stated, "My experience – though I would never wish it upon anyone else – has helped me make whatever I am and still hope to be ... I have come to understand that hunger, hatred, and love are the same wherever you find them, and it is that understanding that now helps me escape the part that once imprisoned me."

I must admit that my seminar class discussions on images and pictures by far were the most memorable of each of the seminar sessions. Participants were very energetic in bringing in old

photographs, pictures, antique frames, and various other artifacts. These items connected a picture to a story or a particular experience.

Since photography is a reflection of a person's life and times, there are several reoccurring themes that will be highlighted in my unit. The first will be the importance of who Gordon Parks was and the contributions and achievements he made during the early years. Secondly, students will be able to document 19th and 20th century African American photographers and their roles that helped to improve the lives of many Americans during that time. Third, the students will be taught the basic concepts of writing quotations when capturing images. By learning to apply these strategies to their work in the classroom, such an experience like this may change a student or affect how he or she looks at the world. It will even help enhance my teaching curriculum and take learning to a higher level of critical thinking.

ACADEMIC SETTING AND CURRICULUM OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this curriculum unit is to develop a unit based on the life and works of Gordon Parks, with the element of photography as the focal point of the unit. It has often been stated that "a picture is worth a thousand words." In order to appreciate what this implies, one must have an understanding of what a photographer is and how he relates his story to the rest of the world.

I teach Technology Applications at Ortiz Middle School in Houston, Texas. There are approximately nine hundred and fifty students enrolled in school. The ethnic breakdown is 70% Hispanic, 30% African American, 1.3 White, and 4.7 Asian/Pacific Islander. Sixty five percent of the students are At Risk, 20% Limited English proficient (LEP), and 9.4 receive Special Education services. At Ortiz Middle School 90% of the students are considered as economically disadvantaged, and 25 are classified as Gifted and Talented. The students that I work with are a diverse population of students from 6th-8th grade, as well as Special Education handicapped. All of our students have different needs and capabilities.

I am particularly interested in students learning about this topic, "A Portrait of African American Photography: Through the Eyes of Gordon Parks."

Students will begin this project by visualizing images in silence. The teacher will create a classroom discussion and invite students to imagine what the images are saying through the photograph. Outside class readings of Parks' poetic works will be emphasized. The focus of the unit is to write with visual emotion.

The examples of special education modifications for the student include the following: extended time on their assignments, tests, and modified assignments. Pacing and change of seating arrangements are also included. Re-teaching a lesson is a criterion for developing proficiency in comprehension. There will be an added component where parental involvement will be used to assist those students needing individual instruction.

The three-week unit I have chosen to teach will focus on Gordon Parks' life's work of photography and the richness of the culture and accomplishments made by individual African American photographers who lived during those times. The unit is designed to give students in-depth reading about Gordon Parks' life and a dramatic feel for the way he captured images.

IMPLEMENTATION

My first strategy will be to introduce the students to some of Mr. Parks' photographs and images. I know that they are unfamiliar with his work because in talking to my students I have found that their knowledge of famous and influential African Americans is limited to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Most of my students do not realize the depth of the African American culture and the many contributions made by African Americans. Additionally, students are unaware of the

photographers who pioneered and influenced the photography industry. Without Gordon Parks, or Roy De Carara, much of the work created by other notable African American photographers would not have been possible. It is vital that they understand the past to appreciate the future.

Secondly, my next strategy with regards to my curriculum unit will have the students to view an online biography of Gordon Parks. Utilizing the computer as a tool, the students will be able to create a time-line depicting important events and accomplishments that occurred in his life. Students will find it necessary to research the early years of this great photographer. It would enable them to understand his style and vision as a major photojournalist, and document how African American photographers played an important role in visual creativity from the 1840s to the present.

A final strategy would involve an interactive “Drama Field Trip to Kansas” to catch a glimpse of a Kansas portrait and to examine a portion of Parks’ childhood as an African American from the Harlem Renaissance through the time of the civil rights movement. In order for students to value and appreciate photography, they must be shown the relevance and the profound impact it has had or will have on their lives.

BIOGRAPHY

Gordon Parks was born in 1912, the youngest of 15 children, and raised in Fort Scott, Kansas. He was an accomplished author, composer, and filmmaker, and internationally renowned and award winning photographer. Parks worked as a piano player, busboy, dining car waiter, and professional basketball player.

Gordon Parks became interested in photography while working on the railroad. His first pictures were taken in Seattle, Washington, in 1937 after he finished a train run from St. Paul, Minnesota. He bought his first camera, called a Voigtlander Brilliant, which cost \$12.50. It was a brand name camera that he could not resist. Mr. Parks took his first pictures on Seattle’s waterfront. He fell off a pier trying to photograph seagulls in sight. Later he would drop his film off at Eastman Kodak Co. The pictures were so good that Eastman Kodak gave his first exhibition.

In St. Paul, Parks began working on fashion photography making a name for himself. He took pictures of famous people, for example, Joe Louis, heavyweight champion. On the advice of Mr. Louis’s wife, he moved to Chicago where he could make more money in fashion.

Later, after leaving the fashion industry, he went to Washington D.C., to work in the photography section of the Farm Security Administration. He did so well he earned \$200.00 a month. On Mr. Parks first day in the national’s capital, he took one of his most significant photographs. He called it “American Gothic, Washington D.C.,” a portrait of Mrs. Ella Watson, a black woman who mopped floors for the government. Ms. Watson posed with a mop and broom in front of an American flag.

In 1941 Parks was the first black to receive the Rosenwald Fellowship for photography. During 1942 he was also the first black to work for the United States Farm Security as a photographer and the first in 1943 to work for the United States Office of War Information (as a photojournalist and war correspondent). He worked as a photographer and writer for *Life* magazine for over twenty years and was named the *Life* magazine’s photographer of the year in 1961.

While working for the Farm Security Administration, it was customary for him to take documentary photographs of everyday life. He spoke of his camera as if it were a weapon, “I had known poverty first hand, but there I learned how to fight its evil – along with the evil of racism – with a camera” (“Gordon Parks”). After the Farm Security Administration disbanded in 1943, he

worked as a correspondent for the Office of War Information where he taught himself about “writing to the point” (“Gordon Parks”). His former boss offered him a job with Standard Oil of New Jersey in 1944. He stayed with this company until he joined *Life* magazine as a photojournalist.

Gordon Parks was regarded as a major photojournalist and the first black on the staff of the *Life* magazine. Parks took a photograph, which he considered a favorite of his most important images. This image depicts a black cleaning woman holding a mop and a broom in front of an American flag. This pose was used as an ironic counterpart to Grant Wood’s famous, *American Gothic*. Gordon Parks’ picture is in response to Grant Wood’s 1930 painting of a farmer, holding a pitchfork, and his daughter. It was the touching photo essay that documented the taxing life of Ella Watson, a government housekeeper.

Gordon Parks’ extraordinary essay on Flavio da Silva, a poverty stricken Brazilian boy, whom parks found dying in the slums above Rio de Janeiro in 1961, is an unforgettable story. As told by reading many of his books, he was not able to document poverty and despair without becoming involved in the lives of people he photographed.

He has earned considerable distinction as a writer, poet, and novelist. He directed and wrote the script for both *Shaft* and *Leadbelly*.

There are other aspects to Parks’ work. Among other works he published an autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*, in 1966, and an autobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree*, in 1963. He has been the subject of film and print, *Half Past Autumn* (2000). His last works, before his death, include the following: *A Hungry Heart* a (memoir), and *Eyes with Winged Thoughts*, a book of poems.

GORDON PARKS’ CAREER

Working for *Life* magazine, Parks provided readers with a unique view of the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. Parks’ first assignment was the profile of a Harlem gang leader named Red Jackson. Phil Kunhardt Jr., assistant managing editor of *Life*, stated about Parks, “At first he made his name with fashion, but when he covered racial strife for us, there was no question he was a black photographer with enormous connections, and access to the black community and its leaders” (“Gordon Parks”).

In 1961, he was on an assignment in Brazil to begin a documentary on poverty. Much to Parks’ surprise, he met a young asthmatic boy named Flavio Da Silva who was dying in the hills of Rio de Janeiro. As a result of this now famous image of Flavio, thousands of dollars were donated to bring this boy to a clinic in the United States for treatment.

CINEMATIC CAREER

The Learning Tree was Parks’ first film in 1963 based on an autobiographical novel and featured romanticism. This was Gordon Parks’ first published book of fiction. The story is about a black family in a small Kansas town. I remember reading this book in college. I enjoyed the book because, the family is portrayed as a normal American family whose culture on being black, is not portrayed as cultural pain and degradation. The book contributes to a positive view of black people.

Gordon Parks later directed some highly dramatic films, including *Shaft* (1971), *Shaft’s Big Score* (1972), and *Super Cops* (1974). The big commercial success of the *Shaft* films placed MGM studios back on its feet financially.

ACHIEVEMENTS

In 2002, Gordon Parks, who was 90 years old, was inducted into the International Photography Hall of Fame and Museum in Oklahoma City. He also received the Jackie Robinson Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award.

Accomplishments

1937-1942	Freelance photographer
1948-1968	Photojournalist with <i>Life</i> magazine
1943-1943	Staff photographer with the U.S. Farm Security Administration
1944	War correspondent with the U.S. Office of War Information
1963	Published <i>The Learning Tree</i>
1968	Directed the movie version of <i>The Learning Tree</i>
1945-1948	Photographer for Standard Oil in New Jersey
1990	His ballet <i>Martin</i> was shown on television

OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHERS

In the creating of this unit I have chosen to spotlight other African American photographers during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that are not generally mentioned in the pages of history.

Jules Lion (1810-1866)

Lion started producing daguerreotypes in New Orleans in 1840, just one year after the invention of the process. It's evident through my readings that these artists immediately understood the power to create a comprehensive visual legacy. I discovered that Lion's work was the starting point. It was the beginning development phase of African American photography through its first one hundred years. Photographers used newly invented techniques, including daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, stereotypes, composite printing, and flash photography to create images that formed a pictorial history of African American life.

James Presley Ball (1825-1905)

Ball was a free black abolitionist who photographed the construction of the Manhattan state capital building. It was noted that thousands of highly prized photographs were produced for the black middle class families in Helena, Montana.

Daniel Freeman (1868-)

Mr. Freeman was a painter and photographer who opened a studio in Washington D.C., where he taught photography and started an Amateur Art Society.

Arthur P. Bedou (1881-1966)

Bedou was a New Orleans native, who rose to fame by creating portraits of jazz musicians. Mr. Bedou is better known for documenting the life of activist and educator Booker T. Washington.

Florestine Perrault Collins (1895-1988)

Collins was woman photographer who owned and operated a studio in New Orleans from 1920-1949. She photographed families and visiting World War II soldiers. She was one of Louisiana's respected photographers.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ARTS

African American photographers were always instrumental in motivating cultural change, all the while documenting the beginnings of the civil rights and black power movements in the late 1950s and early 1960s. During this time the marches, meetings, and rallies were started by leaders such as Malcolm X, H. Rap Brown and Thurgood Marshall.

Photographers sought to be “graphic historians,” which means they collected biography of African American people that would stand in their struggle for civil rights, while at the same time provide evidence of diversity for their individual histories, values, and goals. It was determined specifically that all these men were the leading photojournalists of their day.

Some of the photographers included in this section are:

Jonathan Eubanks (b. 1927)

Mr. Eubanks is from Oakland, California. His documentary style chronicled the activities of the Black Panther Party.

Chester Higgins, Jr. (b. 1946)

Mr. Higgins was a staff photographer for the *New York Times*. He has been documenting African Diaspora for more than thirty years. He is the photographer and author of several photo collections including *Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for People of Africa*, (Bantam Books, 1994).

Lewis Watts (b. 1946)

A Bay Area photographer and assistant professor at University of California, Santa Cruz, Watts documents the practices and customs of African Americans living along the West Coast.

Jean Weisinger (b. 1954)

A self-taught photographer based in Oakland, California, Weisinger documents the political activities of African American women and photographs people of color nation-wide.

Chandra McCormick (b. 1957)

A native of New Orleans and a photojournalist, McCormick has been documenting black life in Louisiana for the past fifteen years. Her work has focused on sugar cane, sweet potato, and cotton field workers, as well as cultural rituals in New Orleans such as funerals, parades, and life in the public housing developments.

HISTORICAL PHOTOGRAPHY

During the past two decades, African American artists have used their work to break down the concepts of race and gender in our culture. These artists use photographic images as documentation of their own personal histories and expressive imagery in their works.

Among the featured artists are:

Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953)

She holds a degree from the University of California in both folklore and photography. Ms. Weems creates sequential photographs and examines the experiences of black women.

Stephen Marc (b. 1954)

He created digital photographs, drawings, computer-generated imagery, and snapshots from family archives, and collects antique photographs.

Albert Chong (b. 1954)

He was born in Jamaica of African and Chinese ancestry. He uses family photographs, religious icons, and animal remains to explore rituals into art.

Keba Armand Konte (b. 1966)

He is an Oakland-based photographer. Keba has been making photographs since age 14. Keba likes to print images on unconventional surfaces, creating works of photomontage on wood.

Cynthia Wiggins (active 1990s)

She uses photographs and text to create narratives about the hard work done by men in her family. Cynthia emphasizes the difficult and dangerous nature of labor.

CONCLUSION

By the end of this teaching unit on A Portrait of African American Photography: Through the Eyes of Gordon Parks, students should have completed an online biography, researched other notable African American photographers during the 19th & 20th centuries, viewed images and films, read excerpts of poetry and novels. I hope my students enjoy the readings and the “travels” to Kansas.

My only regret is that my students did not get an opportunity to meet Gordon Parks, who was a great pioneer in photography. Perhaps through his images, memoirs, and writings, we can feel the presence of a man who made a difference in the lives of people. Most of all, I hope the students are touched in such a way that they will make a difference and become achievers for a life time.

LESSON PLANS**Lesson I*****Objectives***

Plan an online field trip for the students. Students will use problem solving and decision making skills along the way.

Students will create written and oral presentations to discuss and present there findings.

Activity

Divide the class in groups of five. As a beginner’s photography class, students are to plan a trip to Kansas City. The teacher will assign passwords and boarding passes.

Procedure

Create a map for travel. Make a list of items needed for the trip; plan how we will get there.

Source: Use map quest as an additional resource.

Assessment

Students will share stories in class and discuss their findings.

Resources

- The Gordon Parks Center for Culture & Diversity
- www.fortscott.edu

Lesson II

Objectives

- Examine how we judge others based on photographs
- Learn how stereotypes shape our views
- Learn to look beyond stereotyping

Materials

The teacher will display an array of black & white children photos (outdoors)

Procedure

Discussion

1. Who took the photograph?
2. Why and for whom was the photograph taken?
3. How was the photograph taken?
4. What do images tell us?
5. How was the photography presented?

Assessment

Depending on the grade level, students will reflect and write about the following:
How did this activity make you feel?

Reflection

- The paragraph can be for younger students or an essay for middle school.
- Students can draw a picture to show how they felt.
- www.historymatters.gmu.edu

Lesson III

Objectives

Our introduction to this unit will begin with students writing poems about autumn. A visual picture of autumn will be on display for viewing. Students will develop speaking and reading skills by reading their poems out loud.

Extended Homework Activity: Snap a photo that shows signs of autumn.

Motivation

Read Gordon Parks book of poems, *Half Past Autumn*

Students share their stories.

Materials

Book of poems, student photos of autumn, pencils, and drawing paper.

Procedure

Brainstorm a list of words to use in the poems. The words will be related to the model on how to write a poem. The style of the poem will vary depending on prior learning from the class. Poems can rhyme or should be four lines or longer.

Assessment

- Students will share pictures and poems orally with the class.
- Poems can be bound together as a portfolio book to share with others.

Extended Activity

Research how autumn is viewed by people of other cultures. Using a journal log, document your findings. Prepare for a group discussion on your end results.

Lesson Plan IV

Objective

- Examine how we judge others based on a photograph or image.
- Learn how stereotypes shape our views.

Materials

The teacher will display a collection of black and white photos.

Class Discussion

- Who took the photographs?
- How was the photograph taken?
- What do images tell us?
- How was the photograph presented?

Assessment

- Depending on the grade level, how did this activity make you feel?
- The reflective moments can be a paragraph for younger students or an essay for middle school. As a lasting visual, students can draw a picture to show how they felt.

Lesson V

Objective

Students will view character words that best describe Gordon Parks. The student will be able to circle the words that best describe his character after reading the book *The Learning Tree*.

Motivation

Read the words about the author.

Determined	Successful	Inspiration	Filmmaker
Compassionate	Humble	Remarkable	Legend
Brave	Unafraid	Creative	Writer
Accomplished	Risk Taker	Poet	Daring
Frightened			Dreamer

Procedure

Explain your answers by writing an essay on what motivates ordinary people.

Assessment

Students will share essays orally in class.

Materials

Parks, Gordon – *The Learning Tree* (Novel) and Video.

The Eyes of a Camera

*A creative genius you were,
You excelled in four fields:
Photography, Writing, Filmmaking, and Composing.
All the while you were striving to be golden,
Your cost to be the boss included
Racism, Rejection, Slavery, and Fear,
But through all of these obstacles,
You simply wanted to persevere,
I Know You're Looking Down from Heaven's Door;
As A Poet and His Camera
To Smile in Autumn
In Arias of Silence
With a Hungry Heart;
Glimpses toward Infinity
Through Eyes with Winged Thoughts;
Smiling through a Lens,
Just to View the Pearly Gates.*

~ Debra A. Fisher
Dedicated to the memory of
Gordon Parks Sr. (1912-2006)

APPENDIX A

CHRONICLE OF THE LIFE OF GORDON PARKS

- November 30, 1912 Born in Fort Scott, Kansas
Moves to St. Paul, Minnesota
- 1932 His song, "No Love" performed on national radio
- 1933 Marries Sally Alvis
- 1938 Starts fashion photography
- 1941 Receives fellowship from the Julius Rosenwald Fund
- 1942 Works for photographic division of Farm Security Benefit
Administration, the Office of War Information
- 1944 Works as staff photographer for Standard Oil
- 1949 Works as staff photographer for *Life* magazine
- 1955 Attends premier performance of his first piano concerto
- 1963 Marries Elizabeth Campbell
Publishes *The Learning Tree*
- 1966 Publishes *A Choice of Weapons*
- 1967 Produces, directs, writes, and composes score for the movie version of
the *Learning Tree*
- 1971 Directs the movie *Shaft*
- 1972 Marries Genevieve Young
- 1975 Directs the movie *Leadbelly*
- 1988 Receives the National Medal of Arts from President Ronald Reagan
- 1989 Directs the film of his ballet, *Martin*
- 1994 Publishes *Arias in Silence*
- 2000 Publishes in print profiles, *Half Past Autumn*
- 2005 Publishes a book of memoirs, *A Hungry Heart*
Publishes last publication, *Eyes with Winged Thought*

APPENDIX B

Works of Gordon Parks

Books

A Choice of Weapons (1964) (autobiographical)

The Learning Tree (autobiographical)

To Smile In Autumn (autobiographical)

Voices In The Mirror (autobiographical)

Published Compilations of His Poetry and Photography

Gordon Parks: A Poet and His Camera

Gordon Parks: Whispers of Intimate Things

Gordon Parks: In Love, Moments without Proper Names

Arias of Silence

Glimpses toward Infinity

Films

The Learning Tree (1969)

Shaft (1971)

Leadbelly (1976)

Solomon' Northup's Odyssey (1984)

Flavio, Diary of a Harlem Family (1964)

The World of Pin Thomas (1968)

Shaft's Big Score (1972)

The Super Cops (1974)

Music

Martin (1989)

Ballet about Martin Luther King Jr.

Moments without Proper Names (1987)

Documentaries About or Including Parks

Soul in Cinema: Filming Shaft on Location (1971)

Passion and Memory (1986)

Malcolm X Make It Plain (1994)

All Power to the People (1996)

Half Past Autumn: The Life and Works of Gordon Parks (2000)

Soul Man: Isaac Hayes (2003)

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