

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

NICOLE FLEETWOOD INTERVIEW  
*A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Nicole Fleetwood**  
**Professor**  
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**Interviewed by John Maggio**  
**Total Running Time: 1 hour, 3 minutes and 9 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

CREW:

Rolling. Just watch her over there John.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Nicole Fleetwood

Professor

## **Black photographers**

01:00:16:07

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I teach at Rutgers in American Studies and Art History. And my area is Black visual culture, and so I've spent the greater part of 20 years thinking about the visual representation of Black people and, you know, also the- the- the... paradox is not even the word. It's the complexity of Black image makers using

techniques and tools that have historically been used against us, right. So it's just a really rich complexity. And it's also one of those topics or areas that just like never... fails to get media and public attention. Like, there's a way that our nation is obsessed with representations of Black people. Obsessed. Right?

01:01:12:09

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And I think that's one of-- actually if I think about like, part of the kind of our aesthetic legacy as a nation and by nation I mean like a settler colonial nation right, and not-- not erasing our histories, right, the kind of violent histories, but from the beginning of the founding of this nation is like a representation of Black people as non-human. A representation of indigenous people as non-human. And you have abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, like Sojourner Truth, understanding the power of representation and both Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglass were committed to self-representation. And so, they're two of our earliest sitters in the nation for portraiture.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

You know, and they realized the importance of creating another archive of how-- of Black life, of Black experience, of Black humanity, of Black excellence. People talk about Black excellence with the-- you know, this is a long history of freedom struggle tied to representational power,

representational practices. And so, Gordon Parks is, in the 20th century, one of our, you know, greatest image makers.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

It's so interesting when people talk about Gordon Parks as photographer, they often say, "Oh he's a photojournalist," or "He's a documentarian," but some of his most remarkable works are his portraits, especially his portraits of everyday Black people, but also Black celebrities, and also gorgeous portraits of White stars, right. So we know that he has like-- his-- his work in portraiture is really amazing. And I love the work he did with Eartha Kit, which is both atmospheric and also like a kind of portrait study of this rising incredible star in the 50s. But what I think is so important in terms of what he's doing, especially in the 40s and onward, is individuating, like thinking about Black subjecthood in ways that offer visually and aesthetically really rich nuance.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Like in terms of the actual technique of photographing Black subjects, Black sitters, but it's also creating a new narrative about Black interiority. And that to me is extremely important because of the history of anti-Black racist image making that has completely dehumanized Black people, that portrays Black people as unthinking, as criminal, as reactive, as impulsive right? And so, all

of his portraits are like these deep, like kind of psychological interior studies of people often in the moment of having to make hard choices, like the Fontenelle Family, right, or Red Jackson. Like you see-- or Malcolm X or Muhammad Ali. Right, so it's like everyday Black people and these stars who are grappling with the complexity of living in a deeply racist and violent society.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Gordon Parks is part of a generation of especially early to mid 20th century Black photographers, often men, who are like walking around with their camera. And like Charles Teenie Harris is another one of those men with his camera, you know, like picture taking men. Of course Gordon Parks becomes this international star and is seen as an art photographer and all of these other things right, but he's part of this generation of early 20th century Black photographers who are often on the street with their camera, and get-- and just interacting with everyday Black people.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And often taking pictures that end up in the Black press. Charles Teenie Harris is another person. He had a really long relationship with the *Pittsburgh Courier*. And I think it's important to see him in his exceptional, incredible oeuvre, but also seeing him as part of this generation of people, who are-- especially in urban environments right, in taking pictures of

everyday Black life, everyday Black beauty, everyday Black celebrations, graduations, proms, you know, talent shows and the like. And if you look through the *Pittsburgh Courier*, like I want to mention Charles Teenie Harris again, you'll see all of these like everyday celebrations, and you see like the complexity of also Black living in the 30s and 40s, like you know there's, for example, people who are like cross gender dressing in some of these images, right.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So it just really explodes our idea of the simplicity of life in the 30s. It's like there's so much complexity, and so much celebration that's happened in the midst of all kinds of struggle. So I think that that work is very important for us to go back to because I think we often have a very reductive idea about what struggle and freedom looks like, to also see that celebration and practices of survival taking place at every moment in- in Black existence here on this continent. And I think Parks is really important for documenting that. I think his work of everyday Black folks celebrating, walking on the street, dressed in their best fashion, right. Those are highly symbolic images of, not just struggle, but a kind of joyous embodiment, right.

01:07:20:18

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Because when we think about Black life in the United States, or Black life on this continent, or Black life post-- sorry, Black life from slavery on, we often think about struggle.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I think Parks's images of Black everyday life, and celebration, and Black everyday fashion. They're such important works for us to think about Black joy, Black celebration, and that happens in the midst of other large struggles for rights, for access, for-- against housing segregation, against employment discrimination but... that we don't frame all of Black lived experience through a narrative of White supremacy, right? So, he's very aware of White supremacy, and the power of White supremacy to limit, to squash, to even kill Black people, right but he's also focusing on something that I think is bigger and more powerful than any oppressive structure and that is like the...

01:08:41:22

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So much of his work is around like family connection, around practices of belonging, of endurance, of resilience, of kind of dreaming, of aspiration, so there's so much-- even in Red Jackson, it's kind of framed as like this story of someone who's like-- the narrative that *Life* has, the textual narrative that accompanies the photographs is kind of dooming, but the images are of this... young boy who has endured a lot, but wants something better, who hopes for something better. Some of his images of incarcerated people,

there's even framed by despair. There's a kind of hopefulness, a will, a desire, a drive that cannot be completely dampened or killed by the forces of oppression, the forces of racism, the forces of labor exploitation and the like.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Like my very first book that was like-- I was working on over ten years ago, I wrote an entire chapter on Charles Teenie Harris and I did that because he was working during... one of the most epic social movements of the 20th century across the globe. And that's what we see as the-- come to see as the United States Civil Rights Movement right? And we have so many iconic images of the Civil Rights Movement, and you have Charles Teenie Harris who is very much involved in Black freedom struggles doing these like everyday photographs of people in their homes. He has this series on...

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Muhammad Ali as Cassius Clay before he became Muhammad Ali, and they are the most ordinary looking images. He's in like a motel with his mom and dad. He's there for like a regional boxing match. They're like hugging. They're like the most non-iconic, but they were so wonderful, because you see him in this kind of domestic sphere with his mom and his dad before he becomes this global icon. And I think that, you know, there-- Gordon Parks and this generation of Black photographers, working in the early and mid 20th century understand the power of everyday Black life and they understand it

especially because there's very few outlets for that work to have a national audience, right?

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And so the Black press becomes a really important avenue for Black photographers to represent Black humanity and Black everyday life in its complexity, in its joy, and kind of silliness, and also just like mundane, you know, a group of people at a dining table, right. So there's things that seem mundane. Black travelers. We know that Black traveling-- traveling might seem like a mundane thing, getting in your car and driving to another city, but for Black people, they had to really plan that, like, in really excruciating ways because of segregation, right. And so we know the history of the green book and things like that. So you see them documenting what seems like these just kind of everyday ordinary things that we do, but there's also a lot of care and thought that has to go into it because of all of the structures and strictures of anti-Blackness.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Isabel Wilkerson has done incredible work on how and why Black people end up in Urban centers, especially in the North and Midwest. And I like to tell my students this, and they're always really shocked. We often now think of Black people-- We think of Black people as urban. You know, and we-- Urban music is a euphemism for Black music, right. Urban studies, you know, in- in



academic departments often is a euphemism for studying Black and other non-White populations, but for most of our existence on this continent, especially in the United States, Black people have been southern and fairly rural or living in mid size towns.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So this urban experience is one of like a century, a little over a century where you see this kind of mass migration of Black people from rural communities, mainly southern communities to urban centers, and so Parks is so important for actually documenting that migration right, without necessarily making it really explicit or looking-- or sociological, I would say. It's not a sociological documentation of this-- of mass migration and the urbanization of Black populations. It's through the everyday, it's through being in the home of the Fontenelles, who are also, you know, that's another type of migration, you see the Black Diaspora because they're from the West Indies right, they're from the Caribbean.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I think we take for granted that Black people have always been 'quote' Harlem, or Brooklyn, or Detroit...

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

But relative to our existence on this continent, like, the urban experience en masse, is relatively new, and it's something captured beautifully by Gordon Parks, and some of my favorite works by him is actually his works on Harlem, and I live in Harlem, right, and the way that he's captured Harlem, especially the mid-century Harlem is incredibly powerful, it's so nuanced. You know and it's also like you see a kind of subjecthood, a Black subjecthood like in some ways newly experiencing this kind of urban environment, but also dealing with the forces of Northern racism and class oppression and labor restrictions and the like.

**Red Jackson**

01:15:03:12

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Great scholars like Elizabeth Alexander have written about Black interiority and just the importance of our interior lives and that also being like kind of reflected in the importance of domestic space, because home has always been a struggle, especially for working class and working poor Black people. Having home as a haven against the forces of racism is very important. But it's also been something that's very fragile... that's fragile given, like, you know, Jim Crow segregation and White mobs pulling people out of their homes, and also the North with housing segregation, housing projects and the various ways that Black people get surveilled even in their most intimate

spaces. So, the interior lives of Black people-- Black scholars and activists have always, you know... privileged that as a really sacred space.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I think you see, sometimes, that coming together like a collectivity, in like Black church and like Black sacred circles. And also I think you get that sense in Gordon Parks's photographs of like Black Muslims, like there's some really beautiful photographs of groups, but it's also a really intimate kind of interior... kind of atmospheric mood that's happening there. That there's something really sacred and also something very quiet happening. And I think we can also think of interiority as a kind of quietness. And so, I want to refer to the Red Jackson portrait because it's incredibly powerful, and I think that it rubs up against the narrative that *Life* is telling us of Red Jackson, even labeling him a Harlem Gang leader and not by his name: Red Jackson.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And in one of his most well known images of Red Jackson, you see him looking out the window, you see the light partially illuminating his face. And you see a person who's in deep contemplation, right. And that type of interiority, while he's being framed by this narrative of criminal, of thug, of, you know, quote bad subject, right? The richness of that, I think, is one of the things I love so much about Gordon Parks. And I think it really like-- the power of that photograph supersedes and lives longer than that textual

narrative, that dated narrative that is trying to describe Red Jackson as something other than a human being struggling on this planet.

**Multigenerational photos in Gordon Parks's work**

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I'm from the midwest and I'm going to say one of the things I love about Gordon Parks is my own midwestern bias.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I do think it's really important to not just think of Gordon Parks as from the midwest, but also carrying on some midwestern traditions, right, and I think that's one reason he's so approachable and he's so-- He's approaching people, right. There is something about-- especially midwestern Black life that I think, you know, is very much around a type of communal experience, and being able to even commune with strangers. You know, I grew up in the midwest and you just say hi to everybody. And coming to New York And saying hi to people. They would look at me like what do you want? And I actually lived in Europe for a while, and I would say hi to every Black person I saw before like, what are you doing? So, there is something about the midwest that is a kind of like disarming way of just approaching strangers, right, that I think Parks takes with him everywhere he goes, right. And people fall in love with him like symbolically and quite literally, right. He is a person

who is quite captivating and people are drawn to him. And I do think so that's some of it.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And--but I also think that he's-- he's come from a multi generational family. He has fifteen-- there's fifteen siblings, right? Fifteen? His mother had fifteen children. He's the youngest. So, his older siblings are of another generation, right, and there's a way in which like Black survival--Black family life is one that's about multi generational cohabitation; that Black people, you know, for centuries have lived in settings where you have everyone from a newborn to a great-grandparent, and I grew up like that. I had a great-grandparent living in a house with me and my grandmother and my mom and cousins, right. So it is kind of a multi generational experience, and I do think that he's really interested in finding interesting ways of documenting that.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So sometimes you do have him like having the family line up for a photograph, you know, out in front of a-- you know, a... shotgun house, right, in part of the segregation series, but then you have these other really nuanced ways of doing it where someone is preparing something in the kitchen--a mother figure or maybe a grandmother and there's young children laid out across the bed. So, there's all these ways of showing a type of multi generational intimacy and kinship that I think is really... very much about a

Black family life and it's a kind of experience that has often been framed as a negative thing that, you know, we have this really narrow idea about the nuclear family and-- we as in dominant American society, and that White American society and that idea of the nuclear family actually leaves out the ways that most families come together, most families help to support each other; Black, indigenous, latinx, you know, where you have most immigrant families of all races--they come to this country and they're often, out for the very necessities of survival, they're living together.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So I think that he is showing actually what family life looks like, not the kind of idealized 1950's--what's on tv, you know, Leave it to Beaver or... you know, these shows that are showing this kind of suburban, White, nuclear family that's also being propagated by the federal government, but that is actually not how most people are living in apartments and homes and sharecropping fields.

***The Atmosphere of Crime***

01:22:05:00

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Let me say, the ads of *Life* are telling a very different story than what Parks' photographed, photo essays and photo series really are revealing. And so, for example, *The Atmosphere of Crime*, his-- that photo series from 1957 is

incredibly powerful for, not only showing how the nation and cities use crime as a narrative of--to create fear in population, especially White populations, but his photos are showing actually the kind of labor of policing of bringing people into, what I say is the criminal legal system--like how actually over policing produces crime, and how often what is getting labeled as crime or criminal behavior are people with--who are struggling with poverty, you know, what we might call crimes of survival; people are struggling with public health issues like drug dependency; people who are doing economic work for survival like sex work in the like, right.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So these are all much broader social economic issues and issues about racial ethnic class inequalities than about, you know, criminal minded or criminal, you know, criminal types of people, and I think that his work is--his photos are doing something that's, in some ways, antithetical to what the ads in *Life* are propagating, which is like this kind of ideal White America that does not exist. It's a fiction of a nation, right. So, the ads are literally creating a fiction of the nation and- and- and Parks' photos are often these really complex character profiles or complex kind of atmospheric images of urban life or rural or southern life or, you know, wherever he's choosing to photograph, there's always a kind of nuance and a real sophistication. So we're looking through the world through the sophistication of his eyes, and we know that

he's someone that's thinking richly and complexly about everything he encounters.

***Life Magazine***

01:24:26:06

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I believe that Parks was working with *Life* for several reasons. One, you know, it's his oppor-- he's the first Black photographer on staff. That in itself is like he's aware of the historic implications of that. He's aware of the long history of representational violence against Black people. And he says he's weaponizing his camera. He uses that language. His camera is literally a symbolically a weapon for him. I also believe that he is challenging the idea of who is the public and who's audience.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So *Life* assumes its reader to be White--like a White middle class or upper middle class learned person, right? And I think that he's actually challenging *Life* readers and kind of expanding that readership to a broader constituit. I-- I-- I think that he's very aware of that.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I think he's challenging the idea of who the reader of *Life* is. I really believe that that's part of his mandate and the struggles that he continues to endure.



Like, he's struggling with the editor, you know, the editorial staff there, right, and he's willing to stay in that struggle for that time period because they do think he's challenging-- like *Life* is "the magazine of America" or American life or mid-century life, right. This is how it imagines itself to be. And he's using his platform to challenge who that readership is.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And not only who the readership is, but how a subject enters the pages of *Life*; whose photograph, how that story--how that person's photograph or, you know, what is being photographed, and he changes the way that we see it.

01:26:32:22

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I think that he's deliberate in terms of his work with *Life* and, you know-- and an expansion of the public. The readership for *Life* but also, who is the public? Whose stories were worthy of the pages of *Life*? And how that story gets narrated. And you know, he moves more and more into doing--and writing alongside some of his essays--some of his photographs later in his time at *Life*. So, yeah.

**Ella Watson**

01:27:11:16

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

His photograph of Ella Watson, *American Gothic*, is one of the most reproduced photographs, I imagine, cause I see it all the time, right--and, but it's an image that we should never tire of and it's an image that I love to actually--for me, it's a great pedagogical tool. Not that, you know, I would wanna reduce the power of Parks to just pedagogy, but I do think that it's really great photograph to have students study, to think about a time period to also just really do a close reading of symbols. And so, I am very grateful to have that kind of work and I think that this is a period, you know, that when he's making these works where symbols are so important for Black image makers and activists to reanimate.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

To deconstruct and to kind of think about the contradictions and, you know, all the "ideals" of the nation and the actual experiences of Black people and the kind of, you know, the complexities of living in a place that doesn't match its ideals in any kind of way, right? So I think that he's working, you know, with symbols and really--I think in some ways, it's his most... indexical type of work, where he's indexing the contradictions of the nation, but he's then providing--but they're great historical documents. I mean, they're beautifully composed. They, I think, for some people--they don't have the nuance of some of his later works.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

But I would argue that he's actually working on the level of the symbolic, especially with Ella Watson. Especially--also with his work on doll preferences, right? And like the kind of-- the way that Whiteness as standard of beauty gets indoctrinated at a very young age. He's working on the level of the symbolic, and I think it's very powerful to think of that work in that context.

***Doll Test***

01:29:47:18

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

In 1947, Parks worked with *Ebony* Magazine to photograph the doll study--the doll test, which was a project and experiment by Dr. Kenneth Clark and Dr. Mamie Clark to really look at the impact of racism on children by focusing on Black children, presenting them with Black dolls and White dolls and seeing which dolls they preferred. And overwhelmingly, the children preferred the White doll. And so, Parks has some powerful photographs.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

A really powerful image of a young boy, you know, kind of focusing on his eyes and you can see his eye in the moment of like decision making and almost looking torn, you know, having a preference towards one, but, you know, an allegiance maybe towards another, right. There's just a way that you

see this sort of complex negotiation that's happening. Again, that's kind of a representation of a kind of interior life that I think Parks can capture in such compelling ways. The doll test becomes really important for legislation, right and the Civil Rights Movement, and so, in the 1954 ruling by the Supreme Court, *Brown v. Board of Education*.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Actually, the doll test becomes important--becomes an important evidence, right, for ruling against segregated schools. So it becomes actually really important as well as his photographs to a Supreme Court ruling. I find the doll test--the photographs, you know, there's also now--pause. So, historians and scholars now look back at the doll test and they have, you know, they can in some ways pull it apart, nuance it a bit more and wonder, for example, how much are the children's decisions about their performing to the expectations of adults? How much of it is about their awareness, that representation of Black people as often as subjugated subjects as people in servitude as people who are subjected to forms of violence?

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And so how much of their preference or picking of the White doll is about claiming a type of power or claiming some resistance against that? So these are some of the more recent kinds of ways that scholars go back and just nuance the study. I find it compelling to present to students as these

historical documents, you know, as also photographs and thinking about the power of photography and how Parks is actually framing these decisions, right? And so, in his choice, often to focus--sometimes you see the back of the dolls and you see the face of the-- the kind of the interior life, again, of the child in this moment. So, foregrounding the child over the dolls and then you see--and then there's another famous one where a child is sitting with the dolls on both sides. Am I?--

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

It's hard for me when I'm not looking. I'm a visual person so, if I'm not looking at the images right--and it's almost like a kind of intimate type of fictional kinship that this child has. You know, in some ways I feel it compels us to think in more complex ways than like a preference, you know, and I think, you know, the idea of racial preference is something that we also just need to complicate. So for--Parks is someone who is very much--he writes and talks about dreams and his own interior and psychic life, and I think that you see that work in his--that kind of attention to psychic life in his photograph. So for me what is really compelling about the doll study is thinking about how race enters our psychic life at a very young age. Whether the children are making choices because of expectations of adults or because of the power of being overwhelmed with ideal Whiteness is something that I think scholars and writers and activists can debate. But I think what we can

agree on is that-- the power of race over one's psychic life at a very young age.

**Documenting the impact of poverty**

01:34:28:22

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I write a lot. I just finished a book on mass incarceration. So, my work in Black visual culture is often at the intersection of race, gender and in poverty. And really-- And I think it is also just like a kind of mid-western, growing up in a respell town and with laboring people and unions. And so I'm very tuned into class, and Parks is so tuned into class, right? And he--the way he represents lab--even when he was working for Standard Oil, when he was commissioned to do that, the way that he portrays labor.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And I don't think it's with romanticizing-- the dignity, you know, he's not romanticizing the labor, but he's showing us the... kind of the richness of a skill set, the body at work, the body in relationship to technology, a kind of like-- the environmental kind of devastation also of these rising industries, right. So there's so many things that are happening in his work on laboring people that I think we could-- we could look at him through the lens of environmental racism or labor in- in technology and labor--right, so there's that. And he-- what I find so compelling, for example, in *The Atmosphere of*

*Crime* or going back to Red Jackson, or the Fontanelle-- His- his 1967 series on the Fontanelles, which is a family--a Black immigrant family living in Harlem and the devastation of poverty. And the way that poverty not just impacts one's access to goods, but how it seeps in and causes utter devastation on one's psychic life, one's family structure, one's sense of purpose, and possibilities right.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So, we see this family that like... maybe the highlight of the family is when he's photographing them because we know what happens to them after that--it's just utter devastation. The *Life* readers respond as do gooders. Middle class, upper middle class people--they move the family to a home on Long Island and then a few months later, the father is still struggling with the toils of alcoholism and just the... the brutality of not being able to get work that kind of brutal-- the beating up of--the feeling of just being... destroyed by one's inability to get access to the basics that your family needs for survival, right?

01:37:34:04

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And how does he take that out? He takes that out through drinking and abusing the family. And that house that the *Life* readers actually get for him, the house ends up burning down when the husband comes home drunk with a cigarette, right. And kind of sets the--and from there, he dies. The husband

dies, one of the children die, and the mother is now a single mom with several children back in Harlem and from there--and Parks continues to be in touch and find out what's going on with them, but it's just litany of tragedy, of suffering, of trauma; children end up in prison, they end up drug dealing, they end up in sex work.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

When she dies in '92, not long after two of her children die of AIDS. So, his-- it's kind of a--he's looking at the long duration of the impact of poverty on working poor and poor Black people, but also other groups of people, right. So he's, you know--one of his, I think, most--one of his stories that people most respond to is his story of Flavio in Brazil, right. And so thinking about also like he's very concerned and very thoughtful about the- the- the toll of racism and poverty and class oppression, housing segregation, environmental devastation. In a global-- There's a global reach to his concerns and his cameras and commitment.

### **Personal connections between Parks and his subjects**

01:39:24:09

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Parks, I mean again, going back to the photograph of Red Jackson because for me that is like, it is, in some ways-- I feel like in that image, in the portrait of Red Jackson, I see Parks' commitment, like his deep yearnings and



commitments. And he identifies with Red Jackson. He sees his own struggle through Red Jackson, and there was a moment where Parks was making a decision like Red Jackson about how he was going to move forward. And Parks writes about the fact that, you know, after his mother died he was-- at points he was basically on the streets, you know, and he experienced violence and also you know, had to make a decision about whether he was going to act out violently against the forces of violence that he was experiencing as a young Black poor person in the midwest.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And so he-- One of the things that-- As someone who writes about incarcerated people, and the impact of criminalization on Black people, he is so-- I'm so impressed by how tuned in he is, early on, to working against this narrative about Black criminality, and I say that, you know-- one might think that all Black folks would be against that narrative, but we, in fact, know that often Black middle class people and even some civil rights leaders, you know, really had this kind of... a division between good Black people and 'quote' bad Black people. And I think Parks is like really complicated, like, he sees the beauty and humanity in everyone.

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

One of the most powerful things I've ever read of him is when he's witnessing an execution. He's been invited, I think, to San Quentin for an

execution and he says, “I want to flee, but I cannot because I’ve chosen to bear witness and that could have been me in that chair,” right. And I don’t think he’s saying that in any kind of romantic over identification. I think he understands that at any moment, a wrong turn could have led him down a different route, and he also understands that racism and poverty and just a lack of options often puts people in bad situations. Like you’re choosing between bad apples. Like literally you’re choosing-- all your options are bad, so you’re trying to figure out what’s the least-- which one would cause the least amount of damage.

01:42:13:00

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And I think that he’s seeing that in the Fontanelles right when they can’t feed their children, like... every- every option it seems is a bad option right. And he’s seeing it with just such compassion and love and a desire to help, and we know that he actually is helping, he’s doing things off camera to really, to work on behalf of the people he’s-- who’s sharing their life with him.

01:42:43:06

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Parks sees himself in Red Jackson. Parks was in that situation. He talks about when he was, you know, a teenager and getting into trouble, and partly it’s just like street survival. Survival practices that a lot of young kids have to navigate. So he sees himself, but I also think like how he captures Red Jackson

in that moment of contemplation, Parks was literally in that moment, where he had to make a choice, you know, and he had to choose to find a way out of what felt like total devastation, despair, limited options. And it was a lot of struggle. It was a lot of like, back and forth. It wasn't like this kind of just aspirational like trajectory. Like he struggled all along to become the Parks that we know of him.

**Activism**

01:43:48:20

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Parks is incredible right, and, but I think it's important to frame him within a community. He's not working alone. He's a part of a movement of Black artists, activists, writers, thinkers who do not see a separation between art and politics. And they're deliberate and thoughtful and having conversations and debates and disagreements about aesthetics and social movements. They're actively working to think about like how to change the world for Black people through the camera, through the paintbrush, through the-- through writing, right, and how to actually have that legislated, how to-- they want to see that enacted as law, as practice, as you know... real impact on Black everyday experience.

01:44:37:20

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

And cities absolutely bring them together, and we often think of like these... the history of Black artistic movements, especially in the 20th century, as being centered in Chicago and New York, Detroit, later one in LA, but we often forget that these were Black migrants from the South, and from the Midwest, from the Caribbean who are coming together, and it's partly the richness of their coming together from these different regions in urban environments that allow for the proliferation and creation of such incredible art. Art that completely changes the world, not that just changes 'quote' Black America or the United States, but literally changes the world. We can think about the richness of Black music as just one example of a type of creativity that comes from Black people from different parts of the country and the Caribbean that transforms life as we know it.

***The Atmosphere of Crime***

01:45:42:02

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

In 1957, Gordon Parks worked with staff writers at *Life* for a special issue that's on-- looking at crime in the United States. And it's during a time period when news media and police departments, state officials are saying crime is on the rise. So, part of what *Life* chooses to do is a deep dive to see is crime actually on the rise? And I-- looking back on the issue, like in its entirety, I think there's a real desire to pay careful attention to what is being represented and what is happening. What is actually happening. And they

rely on like crime statistics and issues around how crime statistics get reported.

01:46:41:05

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

I want to provide this as context because I do think that they're-- *Life* is aiming to do a richer and more complex story than news media headlines and the nightly news. At the same time, *Life* is framed by an ideology of Whiteness. I mean most of the writers are White. The editorial staff is White. Gordon Parks is one of very few Black people affiliated with *Life*. So, even as they want to do a more informed, textured, thoughtful representation of crime, the writing still lends itself to sensational categories, ways of talking about criminal types, talking about poverty, talking about Black people, talking about the urban environment. And so, you have that kind of... this tension between a kind of White liberalism of wanting to--having aspirations of doing better than one's actually doing.

01:47:48:17

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

That's White liberalism: having aspirations of doing better than-- and staying within one's comfort zone in a lot of ways, you know. So you do have that playing out in the writing and then you have these photographs by Parks that are telling completely different stories. They're some of his most textured, quiet, nuanced images. So you have this kind of sensational of like crime crime crime, headlines right: that's the textual narrative, and then you

have these very quiet images that often do not show people who've been suspected, arrested or booked on criminal activity. Instead, you'll see a partial figure, you'll see a silhouetted figure, you'll see a handcuff, but you do see, very clearly and often in sharp relief, police officers doing police work.

01:48:51:23

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So Parks chooses to frame this narrative around crime by looking at policing in 1957 and looking at the work and actual labor, because he's someone who's very attuned to labor: the booking, the arresting, the raiding. It's like a lot of activity that's taking place amongst the police and then these quiet, very nuanced, dignified images of people who have been suspected, arrested, who are standing, who are being fingerprinted and the like.

01:49:25:17

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Keep in mind that Parks is someone--Parks has been arrested. He knows people who have been arrested. He's been on the side of the person who's a criminal suspect. He understands what it feels like to have the police look at you as a wrongdoer; as someone who's up to no good; as someone who's done something bad; as someone who deserves to be in jail. He understands that, and he actually photographs the police from the perspective of someone who knows what it's like to be criminalized. And so he's looking at the way that police actually bring people into the system.

01:50:12:13

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So he's looking at the way that police--the labor of the police is to criminalize a group of people--groups of people, vulnerable groups of people. And so he's focusing on what they do, their tasks, you know, suspecting people, shaking people down, looking at needle marks on people's arms, raiding homes, putting handcuffs on people, booking people, taking mugshots, fingerprinting. So, it's a real--it's a really powerful document of what the police actually do to bring people into the fold of the criminal legal system. Of marking them as criminal subjects and the kind of--how that plays out on their lives in the long run.

01:51:05:15

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

*The Atmosphere of Crime* series is so powerful largely because it's done in color and it--we know that he's interested in cinema so in some ways, it seems cinematic. So you do have these really interesting ambient and night scenes of officers cruising and... Again, my take is that he's photographing it from the perspective of someone whose criminalized--who's been criminalized, and it almost looks like the angle is coming from the back seat of an arrested person looking out through the window of the police car cruising in an area that's being under surveillance, for example. So there's all kinds of ways that I think that he's angling--that he's using color.

01:51:55:06

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

He's using the night as also a time of mystery, this time of like... playing on the idea of shadows and shadowy figures. Who's the shadowy figure? You know, and I also think about the off-- you know, officers as the ones who are perpetuating violence. So we see the officers, you know... knocking people down, and you know, actually the ones who are the agents of violence, more so than helping people in communities.

01:52:32:10

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Parks' work is so resident and timely to the contemporary moment, I think, partly because of... all of the care and skill that he puts into all his work, right, and just like--you can just see that this is a man that's just... thinking very carefully, feeling deeply, you know, in all these moments where he's documenting whatever he's documenting. I feel like you get the weight of his emotion and his commitment in his skill, right. So he's also like working to just create these really powerful images that we can study as images, too. But his work is still relevant because we're still living through many of the issues that he documented fifty-sixty years ago.

01:53:38:12

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

We're still living through the police brutality en masse, you know, we see what gets captured on a cellphone, we see what goes viral, but we should know that, you know, people everyday in small mid size rural in large communities are experiencing that, you know, are experiencing everyday



violence from the police. We're still living through a struggle to desegregate schools.

01:54:12:05

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

We're here in New York City, some of the most segregated schools in the country. It's 2020. We still haven't desegregated schools, right. We're still living through housing segregation and forms of red lining, environmental racism, economic devastation, and discrimination, right, environment--I mean, sorry, employment discrimination. We're still living through all of that. I mean, Gordon Parks could do a Fontanelle story right now in 2020. Especially during the COVID pandemic where we have such high levels of unemployment and just rising poverty and hunger and despair. He could literally do that story now. That is shame on us. It's shame on us that we're still living through that. Not shame on the activists and Black freedom fighters, but as a nation, right.

01:55:10:16

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

The norms of a nation that we continue to allow so many millions of people to suffer in all kinds of terrible inhumane ways.

### ***Segregation Story***

01:55:29:09

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

*Life* Magazine had asked Parks to do a series on segregation, and in part in the response to the bus boycotts in Alabama. And so, Parks goes to Alabama in the summer of 1956. He's partnered with a young Black journalist who's going--who's from the South but who's going to college in the North.

01:55:55:13

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So, he's partnered with Sam Wyatt, who's a young Black journalist, and this is a great moment for Parks also to be collaborating with a Black writer for *Life* Magazine. But to show some of the complexity of, you know, Parks' relationship with *Life*. *Life* connects with him a regional contact, someone that Parks just refers to as Freddie in his autobiography. And I bring this up because Freddie is really--he's the regional--I think he runs the regional bureau in the South, but he is trying to undermine Parks' work. Not only undermine Parks' work, but actually really endanger Parks and what Sam Wyatt's doing.

01:56:37:05

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So he partners them with a bodyguard who works for the local White citizens council, which is basically as violent as the KKK and I just bring that up to say that like, you know, his relationship with *Life* Magazine is very complex and vax and there are moments where it actually--his work is being undermined by people who are representing *Life* Magazine. So, he has to leave town, you know, there's a threat to him and Wyatt and then he's able to come back. He

makes contact with a family living who are sharecropping called the Causey's, and much of his story focuses on the Causey's and just their, you know, their--what they have to do to get by and to survive. And the kind of everyday threat of violence like you see these really powerful photographs on-- on front porches or in the home where there's a shotgun also just around just in case a White mob appears, right.

01:57:44:02

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Angela Davis is someone who's written about the importance of Black people in the South, during segregation, having access to weapons, having access to guns and firearms, and it would complicate a lot of our ideas around gun control and the Second Amendment because Angela Davis has said that her community--they had to have guns to survive because at any moment, a White mob could come and threaten them and threaten their very livelihood, right. So you see that kind of like importance of a weapon even among this poor Black family who has very little else--of else.

01:58:26:11

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So, part of the power of that series, I think, is that the-- I think it's one, for me, it's one of his... aesthetically, one of his richest series. It's so beautifully composed. One of the most iconic is the one called *Department Store*, and you see a woman and a child coming out of a segregated movie theater and above

them is a sign that says, “Colored Entrance”, and they’re immaculately dressed, right. It’s just this really gorgeous and painful image. So, it’s gorgeous in that, you know, the way that he captures this woman and child. Their self presentation, which is so reflective of, I think, like Black survival practices in terms of Black fashion, style, and self presentation with like high levels of dignity and, you know, in the face of all kinds of... horrible violence and abuse and embarrassment, right.

01:59:44:06

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

So, it’s a really beautiful image, but something that the historian, Khalil Muhammad, also said about– about that image is how aestheticize that colored entrance sign is, that it wasn’t--it’s not like a provisional sign that’s just like someone scribbled. It’s actually hard-wired into the atafess. You know, it has like--it’s something that someone deliberately made and it is meant to like actually--they want Black consumers, but they want Black consumers to know that they’re always beneath the White consumers, right. So there’s so much that’s happening in that, and that’s part of the segregation series.

02:00:29:14

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

There’s also a really powerful one in a Whites only seating area inside of a bus station, where you see a Black woman a seat or two away from a White woman, and the Black woman is holding the White baby and we assume that

she's a caregiver and I think that Parks says that the only thing he knows about the woman. He knew very little about that context, but it's like the sea of Whiteness--of White people and there's this Black woman who is sitting there (Inaudible) she's not smiling holding this White child. So--and I say all of this because these photographs were in color. And so much of the segregated South was reflected-- represented in black and white images, and it's the power of these color photographs that create, I think, a... more... kind of deeper understanding of the realities of segregation.

02:01:36:17

NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

Another powerful image from that series is where you see these Black children looking through a chingling fence into a playground where White kids are playing, right. And it's, again, this like--he, you know, Parks does a lot of really powerful social commentary through the lens of children, right. He often will frame what like-- like what he calls "social ills." He says he's using his camera as a weapon, not just as a weapon, but a weapon against racism, against poverty, and against other forms of social ills and, you know, maybe there's not enough said about how he does that often through children and through--not placing children in horrendous situations, but framing how children, especially Black children, by the very structures of racism, are placed in horrendous circumstances. And where their awareness of their dehumanization is brought to them at a very early age.

02:02:48:15

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NICOLE FLEETWOOD:

We can think of how black and white, especially in photography, is often used to memorialize, you know. And there's something about color that creates a type of urgency, I think, especially when Parks chooses to use color, right. There's an urgency that I think is embedded in the image.

END TC: 02:03:09:03