

KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

JELANI COBB

A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS

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Jelani Cobb

Historian and Writer

The New Yorker

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Interviewed by John Maggio

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Jelani Cobb

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Speaker 2:

Let's turn off all the phones, please.

John:

All phones off.

Photographing African-Americans in the 20th century

01:00:17:15

JELANI COBB:

I think, one thing that you have to keep in mind is that for all of these people who are witnesses to what's happening in the 20th century, for people who are, particularly as it relates to Black people, for people who are concerned about what they would've called racial uplift back in those days, they're all phenomenally sensitive to how African Americans are depicted.

01:00:46:03

JELANI COBB:

And there's a very practical reason for that. They recognize the connection between what they have seen, the images that have been depicted of African Americans, and the ways in which it facilitated the things that were being done to African Americans.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, there's this connection. There's some sort of ratio between the number of times you show the Black community as criminal or ridiculous or uncivilized or as an object of humor and comedy, and Jim Crow, the number of times someone is denied a job, denied the ability to vote.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, it's like the images become the PR campaign for racial subjugation. No one can get past-- I think, no one can look at this and not conclude that

there's a relationship between the two. You find early on, I mean, the late 19th century, beginning of the 20th century, where there are these questions about how will we be depicted? How will we be shown? W.E.B. Du Bois wants to sponsor images, you know, with the *Crisis Magazine*. He makes a point of putting images that would humanize the race on the cover of each one.

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JELANI COBB:

The early African American filmmaker, Oscar Micheaux, has the same sorts of- of motivations. As a matter of fact, he sees *Birth of a Nation* and recognizes how that imagery works as propaganda for racism and says, "I have to actually go out and start producing the counter images." And so, there is this sense, you know, there's the aesthetic possibility of photography as a new field. You know, there is the idea of kind of witnessing the world in a way that hadn't been, you know, previously. And then there's this very specific thread of African Americans who are looking at the emerging medium of photography, and seeing a means by which they make the argument for Black humanity.

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JELANI COBB:

To show you how early this sensibility around the image as it relates to African Americans is, you know, one of the most iconic photos we have as it relates to Black people is that image of Gordon the slave. Very well-known is the picture of him and that lattice of scar tissue on his back, bearing witness as a testament to the suffering he had experienced in slavery. We see that

image. We never see the corresponding image, interestingly enough. Like, that image was produced as kind of documentary evidence of the brutality of slavery. But it's also paired with an image of Gordon in his uniform as a Union soldier. And so, the idea of this is what Black people had been and this is the possibility in the course of this war for what Black people can be. And so that really sets a dynamic of saying, "We have to be able to show not just the degraded, not just the ridiculed, not just the abject and diminished aspects of our lives.

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JELANI COBB:

I think there's a corresponding impulse. You know, the one— there's the need to show exactly how savage and terrible slavery had been. But then also a realization that you cannot simply be the sum total of what wrongs have been inflicted upon you. And that's why I think you see the emphasis, you know, with early Black photography, especially people like James Van Der Zee, to show these really dignified, humane, intriguing aspects of who Black people are, why there's a reason, you know, that you tend to have significant numbers of photos of middle-class Black people, even though that's a kind of fragment of what the Black population was then. But they wanted to be able to depict the entire spectrum of what this community was and what the possibilities for their lives were.

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JELANI COBB:

And I think that when you look at--or even when they were showing, you know, the difficulties and poverty, to do it in a way that didn't diminish the people, that really talked about the circumstance and not the uh... the flaws or the- the degraded aspect of the person who's experiencing poverty. And so, I think that's one of the things that you see with Gordon Parks in his early documentary photography, when he believes that the camera can make a difference, that you can actually prick people's consciences to expose the conditions that African Americans have been living under. He takes pains to always, kind of, bestow the humanity on the people who are in those images in a way that you really, really can't take for granted.

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JELANI COBB:

And I also think it's kind of the best of, you know, what the social documentary tradition of American photography had been. If you were talking about Walker Evans or Dorothea Lange, and the photography that they were well-known for and the ways in which it captured, you know, really... the kind of undimmed... fortitude of people who were living in difficult circumstances that is lauded. Gordon Parks is saying, "Wait, there's this whole community whose experience has really been defined by the struggle to retain their dignity in the face of the constant infliction of difficulty and racism and discrimination and so on, and- and where do they get their images that show who they are as people?" And I think that's one of

the central things, especially with his early work when he's emerging, that's one of the central things that just leaps out at you when you look at his work.

The impact of Gordon Parks' work on Black Americans

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JELANI COBB:

One of the um... pernicious aspects of-- one of the most pernicious aspects of having your story told by other people is that it tends to flatten the details that may be extremely important to you, but are almost invisible to this person who doesn't belong to your community, who doesn't know your community very well. And that's why I think the kind of mundane or quotidian aspects of life take on such exaggerated possibilities, you know, especially in the photography from that era, because if you think of a prom, the default assumption is young White kids, you know, in the flower of youth and idealism and all these kinds of things. But wait, there's this whole Black corollary that people don't associate Black people with this. If you think about weddings, your default image is of this beautiful, blushing, White woman in a white dress and a handsome man in a tux. We don't think about what was that experience like for Black people, or even just the kind of day to day life of, you know, children playing or the kids in the hallway or...

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JELANI COBB:

All these things that kind of go, "Oh, this is how our lives are lived. These are the actual moments that cumulatively represent this part of our lives." That's invisible to the outside world. But it's very legible to us. We know these things happen. And so there's this disconnect. There's what we see of ourselves in the world and then what we know ourselves to be, and that presents a whole pallet of possibilities for the person who comes into that world and goes like, "Oh, wait. There's all this subject matter that has never been conveyed. There are all these stories that have never been told." It's, you know, a kind of limitless possibility. It's a paradox that, you know, kind of Jim Crow flattened out the representations of what this community was, and at the same time created this incredible set of opportunities for Black artists and writers and intellectuals and people who were— and filmmakers who were interested in depicting the realities of Black life.

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JELANI COBB:

I think there's a parallel between Gordon Parks and Richard Wright. You know, Richard Wright obviously is best well, excuse me. Richard Wright is obviously best known for his fiction, but he's a Mississippian, you know, who comes to Chicago and then later to New York. And, you know, Parks is a Kansan who comes to Minneapolis, you know, Chicago, and, you know, New York eventually. And, you know, what they understand is that transition from the predominantly rural environments that the majority of the Black population had been in, to the difficulties that greeted those people as they met their new lives in the city. And I think that's why their depictions of the

city are so jarring. Parks and photography and Wright and- and literature, they are so stunning and so... indelible because they are really talking about an ongoing and evolving experience, the shock of what urban life has been. You know, if you look at the people who are in these pictures, if you look at the people that Wright is talking about in his literature, none of those people have been where they are for more than a generation.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, this is the... documentary evidence of what this attempt to flee the exploitation that they faced in the south or in the midwest, in the rural environments where there were a kind of dearth of opportunities, and they invest all their hope in the cities. And then we see through their work what actually was waiting for them as they arrived in those cities.

Gordon Parks' early life

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JELANI COBB:

There's a kind of curious state of affairs in Kansas, because, you know, there's not Black equality there. At the same time, this is not Mississippi. It's not Georgia. It's not Alabama. And there's a kind of tiered relationship, but also, you know, possibilities that are maybe a little bit—provide a little bit more breathing room. There's also, you know, the fact that the Black population of Kansas, there's a significant number of Black people who migrate to Kansas

in the late 19th century, specifically because they want to get out of the south. The people who go there are attempting to become homesteaders and so on. And so it's a little bit of a different relationship to being in the midwest than there is. That said, you know, he's the youngest of 15 children in a rural environment. There's not a great deal in terms of resources in his life. But one thing that you get, and he talks about his early life in his various writings in a number of different contexts, but the one thing that you do get clearly across all of those writings is a very firm sense of community.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, he's not a kind of atomized individual. His family doesn't exist, just kind of out of nowhere, but they're very much interconnected with other African Americans who were there at the time. Even the fact that there's a possibility for Parks to begin to learn piano, you know, the rudiments of piano that he learns as a young person, and then later talks about in his adolescence becomes the means by which he can feed himself when he's a piano player in a brothel as a teenager. But he learns that in that community back in Kansas. And so, I think that there's a kind of blend to it. There's the deprivation that comes with being Black in America, but there's also a real possibility that is- that is furnished by the close-knit community and the close-knit family that he is developing in.

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JELANI COBB:

So, when- when Gordon's mother dies and he goes to Minnesota to stay, to live with his sister, one, that's a transition, a huge transition, you know, an emotional shock, the loss of his mother who he's very close to. He's only 15 years old. And then the shock of geography, going to a completely different place. And, you know, he talks, especially in his memoir, *A Choice of Weapons*, he talks about the winters there, and everyone knows St. Paul is known for being really cold. Minnesota is known for its winters. But he talks about it metaphorically, like the winter there comes on-- the winter there comes to take on this much bigger significance. It's a metaphor for the coldness of his brother-in-law, who turns him out into the street just after a few months, him sleeping on trolley cars, the coldness of the school system that he's trying to matriculate through, but ultimately has to leave.

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JELANI COBB:

The coldness of a lack of opportunity there, the hunger, the actual, physical hunger he experiences, and he constantly talks about that, because one of the ways that you know this is a different kind of subject is that it gets pretty cold in Kansas in the winters, too. But he's talking about an entire set of affairs there, and so the life that he takes, you know, kind of tap dancing on the various lines of the law, you know, and finding himself in the company of places that could've sent his life down a very different path is not at all atypical for what happens when people migrate to the north. And if he were a younger person, they would've thought of it as kind of the life of a truant, you know, or truancy. What happens when you have really no formative

institution that can help you make your way in the world. St. Paul is the scene in which every institution he comes in contact with fails him, including his family, including the school system. And that's, I think, where the narrative of Parks, to the extent that we would call him a self-made man, there are complications about that idea, but to the extent that we would call him that, that narrative takes place--to the extent that we would call him that, that narrative takes root in St. Paul.

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JELANI COBB:

So, I mean, Parks working on the trains, you know, on the subject--on the surface, it just seems like a form of employment that he gets, and even in his own discussion of it, he talks about it really as part of his youthful exploits and the place where he's first exposed to photography significantly in reading magazines and so on. But it- it- it really does have a kind of broader significance for one reason, which is that it allows him to travel, one, and see places other than Kansas and Minnesota, the two locales that he'd lived in, but two, there was this long tradition of African American men who were working on trains. You would come in contact with--you could easily come in contact with college educated men, you could easily come in contact with men who had professional degrees, who, because of Jim Crow, were not allowed to enter those professions. And so, you have highly educated people, people of a variety of backgrounds, who would be working with you in these environments. And so, it becomes not exactly a university, but something close to it. As much as the school system in St. Paul had been, those trains

become an educational environment, you know, for Gordon, outside of the photography.

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JELANI COBB:

You know, he talks about this narrative of him reading the magazines that people left behind on the trains and becoming fascinated with the photos that he sees in there, so much so that during one layover, he goes into a pawn shop and- and purchases a camera and decides to try his hand at it, as almost, the way he describes it is almost as a lark. But that decision is not made in a vacuum. You know, it's the context of him being in motion, and the context of him seeing other cities and the context of him talking with the people who were there and kind of the beginning rudiments of Gordon Parks' worldliness. You know, this is what people know him for down the line, this person who seems to have been everywhere and met everyone and done all these interesting things. That begins with these small, kind of, local trips that he's taking while he's working on these trains.

Gordon Parks' origins

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JELANI COBB:

Yeah, I think that there's an interesting, kind of, point of this, that we have a narrative, a very well-established narrative of people coming from the outer reaches of small, rural communities, almost always in the south, and, you

know, coming to Chicago, coming to St. Louis, coming to New York, Philadelphia, and so on. Not so much with the Midwestern kind of aspect of it, and, you know, Parks I think is one of the central representatives of this, and, you know, people would also say Miles Davis. The very significant difference is that Miles Davis came from a very well-established, middle-class family, where Parks really has no resources to fall back on. And so, he refers to himself, throughout his life, you see this, he refers to himself as a Midwesterner, and it means different things in different contexts. We kind of traditionally think of Midwesterners as more staid, more reserved. You know, he certainly has that kind of self-possessed quality about him.

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JELANI COBB:

But I think what I take from his references to himself as a Midwesterner, is also a kind of durability and inner toughness of dealing with harsh circumstances without complaint and kind of making your way in the world. And that is really at the beginning, I'd say the first quarter, the first third of Gordon's life, that is all he's doing is encountering obstacle after obstacle and then just very methodically, you know, working his way around it. And even-- the other thing I think is notable is there's a... you know, a distance, you know, between, you know, Gordon and his father. It comes to be a kind of distance in his relationships, his familial relationships, especially around, um you know, him being thrown out when he gets to St. Paul. You don't get a great deal of, kind of, overall expression of emotion about that from him. He

seems a very kind of straightforward person. Even when you go back and read his letters, you know, about some of the more difficult things in his life, and it is kind of conforms to the stereotype we have of Midwestern people in that way. Now of course, I don't want to put too much on that. A lot of this is his personality, his family, particular dynamics of it. But he really does have that- that... kind of, internally solid perseverance kind of quality to him.

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JELANI COBB:

You know, with any art form, you know, there are the kind of familiar mistakes that people make, you know, uh anything that you do, like if you teach a kid to play baseball, there's probably a 60% chance that they'll, first time they pick up a bat, they'll hold it cross-handed. Like, the things that you just know when you're starting something out, you know, the kinds of mistakes people are prone to make. One of the things that is remarkable about Gordon Parks, is kind of going through his early photography, the extent photography that you have, is just how phenomenally quickly he gets good. So, you're seeing him, you know, with these kind of basic images, oh, okay, this is an interesting photograph. Then a year later, you're looking at the work of a really intriguing eye, and a year after that, you're looking at someone whose work you're going like, "This is a veteran photographer." He matriculates through the craft at a really strikingly fast rate, in terms of learning what photographers are doing and so on. And this is even more notable, because Parks is not, unlike many photographers, Parks is not a well-off person.

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JELANI COBB:

He's not a middle-class person. It costs money to develop film. It costs money to purchase film. It costs money to purchase all the accoutrement that go with, you know, creating a photo shoot. And, you know, every single image that he takes has to be something that he learns from, and it just [snaps fingers twice] like that, he begins to pick it up.

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JELANI COBB:

Chicago was important for a few reasons: one of which is... Well, first, it's a bigger city uh and, you know, that has both positives and negatives. The harshness that he might've encountered in St. Paul or Minneapolis is nothing compared to what Chicago is. You know, it is a much different kind of animal than, you know, the smaller Midwestern cities. At the same time, and also Chicago has this entrenched Black poverty, has a much bigger Black population than there is in St. Paul and a really significant presence of what people then called ghettos. You know, um... And so, Parks was getting, you know, exposed to this and living, you know, in these communities. The other part of it, though, I think is significant is that this is the first time that he gets a community of like-minded artists, and that's really essential. Especially with that kind of lifelong relationship that he develops with Charles White, and, you know, their friendship as he is beginning to do the really stunning artwork that he does. And so, he and Charles White are both these young men

with artistic ambitions, and not a whole lot in terms of resources, in terms of to be able to realize those ambitions.

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JELANI COBB:

You know, you have him, you have Charles White, you have the whole set of people who were connected to the Chicago, kind of, artistic renaissance that people know about at that point, and-- you know, there's opportunity that comes out of that. You know, the- the fact that he is able to get his first significant grant from the Rosenwald Foundation that Alain Locke sees fit to write a grant for them for Parks at that point is not insignificant.

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JELANI COBB:

So, Chicago is important, and there are a few reasons, just geographically, it's important. It is a much bigger city than St. Paul, it has a much bigger Black population than St. Paul, and it has a much deeper and much more entrenched kind of network of poverty for lack of a better phrase. In Chicago, there are well-known and entrenched, what they would've called ghettos at that time, where Black people are living. It's a very different beast from St. Paul. And so, when Parks gets there, this is his first real exposure to what Black urban existence is. At the same time, there are possibilities. Because there's this bigger population, it's more likely for him to actually find like-minded people, which he does, the most formative relationship he develops is, you know, with Charles White, the artist. And, you know, we

should think for a minute just about- about how wildly idealistic it is for these two young men at a point where there is really widespread Black poverty, there is discrimination, there's Jim Crow, there's a dearth of opportunities.

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JELANI COBB:

They are pursuing a line of employment that is tenuous even for White people, even for young White people. And so, it requires either a great sense of idealism or naivete or outright foolishness to go down the road that they are attempting to travel. And then, even within this dynamic, there's a distance between Charles White and... Excuse me. Even within this arena, there's a difference between what Charles White is trying to do as a visual artist and what Gordon Parks is trying to do as a photographer. You know, visual art has been around since the time of people sketching on caves, but photography is not really thought of as an art form at this point. People are kind of figuring out where photography fits. We understand it as a documentary medium. We understand it as something that, you know, people may have a family portrait as a kind of creation of artifacts of your personal life. But photography as art is still being established. And so this is a wildly idealistic gamble that Parks is taking at this time.

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JELANI COBB:

And, I guess, one of the reasons that you have so few Black photographers at that point in time is that, I think, most people would not have liked the odds. They would've looked at the odds of becoming successful at this and said, "No, there's no way that I'm going to undertake this." And Parks, with his kind of bullheaded clarity about where it is he was trying to go in the world, continues right along.

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JELANI COBB:

There's the responsibili- the dawning responsibilities of family life that are resting on Gordon's shoulders. You know, he's married at this point. His first child has been born at this point. And... the reasonable- reasonable reaction would've been to try to find just stable employment, maybe you'll be a person who has this sideline or, you know, hobby of taking photos and live out the rest of your life. That's not what Gordon does. You know, he has a kind of single-minded focus that he's going to pursue, you know, this craft with the camera. And for good and- and for nil, like later in his life, there are personal relationships that people feel like Gordon's drive as an artist kind of consumes all the oxygen, that the only thing and the primary thing that holds his interest in life to the detriment of other relationships. But what you also see is that that is the only reason he's able to succeed at this point, you know-- dealing with the economic difficulty of being a Black person on the South Side of Chicago, of being a person that does not have a high school diploma, who's left school, of being someone who has not only no resources, but an increasing number of responsibilities, and here he is at the Art

Institute of Chicago, or trying to glean what he can from photography as a craft.

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JELANI COBB:

And then even, you know, I think the idea that with all that Black people were confronting at that point, it requires a great deal of temerity to say that you're going to change that with your camera. You can imagine how that conversation would go over, and you come home and say, "I don't have any money, but I took some great pictures." You know? Um, and Parks continues on that track, and- and I think by the time he winds up in Washington, D.C., that is-- under the, kind of, tutelage of Roy Stryker, that is the first time you begin to see that maybe this wild idea of making your way through the world as a photographer, and not simply doing studio photography, the kind of transactional, bring your new baby, bring your children and sit down for a family portrait kind of imagery, but aiming for a much broader set of parameters and saying that I'm going to actually document the world and be part of this ongoing dialogue about democracy in the United States. That begins to have maybe a sliver of a possibility of actually happening by the time he gets to D.C.

Gordon Parks' creative drive

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JELANI COBB:

I think it's hard to understand. I don't know if you can put your finger on what exactly the creative impulse is, you know, for- for Gordon Parks. It might be like trying to explain exactly why you fall in love with a person. You don't. You can say things about the experience, but you can't say exactly what it is that makes this feeling emerge. And I think that his creativity is part of that, is not dimmed by the lack of opportunity, is not dimmed by the obstacles that he confronts in pursuing it. Like, nothing really gets in the way of it, and even it kind of flows out of him in all these directions, that having become this really amazing photographer, he also wants to write. He wants to compose music. He eventually becomes a filmmaker. It's as if this is the way that he really digests the world around him, that he sees prompts for creativity in- in everything that he does.

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JELANI COBB:

And, you know, I think with most artists... there's some ratio of what you produce that's great to things that you produce that you hope never leave your top drawer in your desk. And, you know, with Gordon, he wrote poetry, he wrote prose, you know, he composed music and so on, and people will say, "Okay, well, in those regards, he wasn't as good as he was with his camera." But then he becomes a filmmaker and instantly produces, right out of the gate, an iconic American film, just experimenting in that medium. And I think there's always that kind of... trash to treasure ratio, and with any artist, any

kind of thing anyone produces, and with Gordon, I think what's notable is that there's so much treasure that's spread out over so many years and in different formats.

Life in Washington, D.C.

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JELANI COBB:

Washington— Gordon's relationship, his experiences in Washington, D.C. were strange, and that's because Washington, D.C. was a strange city. It is the nation's capital, has a significant Black population. It is southern-ish in its orientation between Maryland and Virginia, specifically chosen because they did not want a nation's capital that would be too far in the south or too far in the north. And that kind of geographic ambivalence is part of Washington's personality as a city. But one of the things, I think, in Gordon's relationship is that he is shocked by the segregation he encounters there. Now, this is not the first time he's been in segregated environments. But Washington, D.C. is different; one, because it's so small. In Chicago, you know, there's racism, there's discrimination, there's segregation. But Chicago's a big place. And it's very possible for you to be a Black person in that city who only interacts with other Black people. You can wake up in the morning and the first person you see is Black and the last person you see before you go to bed would be Black. But Washington, D.C., because it's so small and because it is so political, there are lots of different people and different types of people who are coming into

contact with each other, and it's very important, if you are trying to maintain some sort of hierarchy, then you have to really adhere, you have to really be serious about how segregation is imposed.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, he talks about Roy Stryker sending him out with his camera when he first gets there, and, you know, him encountering just a really overt kind of racial hostility, and he still hasn't been to the deep south. But this is the closest to the south he's been. And that's what his relationship is in Washington, D.C.. I mean, in- in--going back to the Washington, D.C. history part, if you want to kind of put this in. I mean, it's notable that D.C. has this weird civic personality. You know it's--Up until 1850, the nation's capital still had slave auctions. You know, The Compromise of 1850, which allowed California to enter the Union, one of the things that it did was outlaw slave auctions in the nation's capital, because people thought that it would be an embarrassment, you know, for diplomats or foreign officials to come to the citadel of democracy and see someone trying to sell a human being on the street. Uh, but it's right across the river from Virginia. And so, this is kind of reflective of this. In- in 1862, Washington, D.C. abolishes slavery before the rest of the country does, but then they then do this weird thing; they compensate all the people whose chattel had been emancipated.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, the one time in American history where the United States actually paid reparations, they gave money to White slaveholders in Washington, D.C.. The city that Gordon Parks arrives in in 1944 is very much reflective of that history. And so, you have this person who has gone through a certain portion of the world, understands some things about how race operates, but has not been in the peculiar kind of laboratory that Washington, D.C. is. And Roy Stryker knows that. He knows who he's talking to when he sends Parks out with his camera. I think that's the second day that he's in the city. And Parks goes out and is just shocked by- by what he sees there, and that really begins to frame the work that we see from him subsequently.

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JELANI COBB:

So, all of that history contextualizes the city that Parks comes to in May of 1942. That is what he's walking into, the backdrop of Washington, D.C., a city that has been shaped very much by, you know, its Southern legacy as well as being kind of close to the Mid-Atlantic states and all those dynamics, you know, the segregationist senators and congressmen who were there in the capital, the growing Black population, a significant portion of which are domestic workers who actually work for these families. Like, that's the environment that Parks is walking into, and you can really understand why someone with his particular set of experiences feels like he doesn't know what hit him when he gets to D.C.

Roy Stryker

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JELANI COBB:

Roy Stryker does a couple of notable things in- in Gordon Parks' life and career. The one is the-- the first is this story that Parks told again and again about Stryker sending him out with his camera and telling him to document what he sees in Washington, D.C., and of course, he just runs into wall after wall because what he runs into is segregation and a different kind of rigidly enforced, overt, and strictly adhered to segregation than what he might have experienced in other places. And Parks really credits that with opening his eyes about who he was dealing with and what kind of world he was operating in.

01:40:59:07

JELANI COBB:

If you wanted a microcosm of how race was going to operate in the United States, there's no better place to look than in the nation's capital. This is where all of it emanates from. And so, this is eye-opening to him. At the same time, it's tremendously presumptuous and more than a little condescending on Stryker's part. He's sending Gordon Parks out, this Midwesterner, new in town, to document segregation, or sends him out knowing that he's going to encounter the kind of segregation that there is in Washington, D.C.. He's also putting him at risk. You know, it's not inconceivable that Parks could have wound up in a jail cell or Parks could've wound up being brutalized by one of

the police in Washington, D.C., or he could have wound up getting himself killed.

01:41:55:23

JELANI COBB:

There's a great deal of temerity and, I think, entitlement, presumptuousness, for Stryker to give that kind of assignment to Parks. And, you know, Parks is shaped by it, you know, by especially given the second thing that Stryker does, which is that he introduces him to a woman named Ella Watson. Uh, and, you know, Parks gets to know her, gets to know her family. She works there in one of the federal offices where the FSA is, and you get out of that connection that first iconic image that Gordon produces, and that's the American Gothic photo.

01:42:39:16

JELANI COBB:

So he produces this image of Ella Watson, which is obviously a riff on the painting, American Gothic, by Grant Wood, but here you have a solitary Black woman as opposed to the kind of farm couple that are standing there with their implements. You have a solitary Black woman standing in front of an American flag, holding her mop. And it is as overt and heavy-handed a commentary as you could imagine coming out of this. It also is one of the first images where you see Parks expressing, without any compunction, his real anger about the state of affairs. You have the documentary evidence— you have the documentary film that he does, excuse me.

01:43:31:19

JELANI COBB:

You have the documentary photography that he does in Chicago, and we know what the subject matter there is. But when you first see American Gothic, that really hits you square between the eyes in terms of what he's saying. And one of the reasons I think that that photo remains so popular to this day, we're talking about something that is more than seven decades old, that photo. And it still registers. People look at it, they see this Black woman, they see the mop, they see the American flag, and they see the interconnection between those three things.

01:44:06:04

JELANI COBB:

There's something else about Gordon that I think really facilitates much, if not most, of what he does subsequently, which is that you begin to see this, some in St. Paul and- and more in Chicago, but he never lets an environment go by without absorbing it, figuring out what it is, what he can take from it, what he can learn from it, and I think one of the reasons that he, you know, in his later years is known as this really worldly figure is that he really does take a piece of each place that he is and assimilates it into his personality or into his knowledge of the world. Uh, you know, he's like a sponge, whereas a person who lived a different life would've immersed themselves in a library and just voraciously read everything they could find about all sorts of different subjects.

01:45:03:21

JELANI COBB:

Gordon Parks is doing that, except his library is the world and he's interacting with different people, he's interacting with high culture, low culture, and he just becomes this person who absorbs all of these things and is able to... kind of dissect and understand what this portion of the world is about. And I think that's one of the reasons why... he has, when we think about it, this very wildly contradictory niche in American society, which is that he is both this person who photographs the most exploited and degraded corners of American life, and a person who comfortably moves in the circles of millionaires and elites and elected officials and presidents, and everyone who he interacts with thinks he's one of them.

01:46:16:21

JELANI COBB:

And so, there's no real artifice about it, but he's just Gordon Parks. He's just this person who translates into all of these different languages. You know, he's here with Muhammad Ali, he's here with the Black Panthers, he's here with Gloria Vanderbilt, you know, he's here with this apartment, you know, right in the UN Plaza. And you ask, "Who is this person occupying all these different spaces? Or what person really could occupy all these different spaces?" And the only answer you come up with reasonably is Gordon.

01:46:47:23

JELANI COBB:

I think... the Ella Watson relationship is important because it's the first time that we see what becomes the template for how Gordon works. You know, he meets someone, he goes home with them, he interacts with them, he gets a feel for who they are, and then he photographs them. He does that time and time again, you know, when he does the Fontenelles, the Harlem family, when he does the photo essay on the Harlem street gang, when he does the story Flavio in Brazil. All these really identifiable and iconic photo essays that he puts together... Excuse me. All these really identifiable and iconic photo essays that he creates follow that same sort of example, that he doesn't pick up the camera until he has a sense of who the person is. And can thereby give what he feels to be the most honest rendering of this person's life. And the first time we see that is in that image with Ella Watson.

01:47:58:02

JELANI COBB:

The other thing that's important about that relationship with Ella Watson, is it is the first time we see what becomes the template for how he approaches his work. He meets her, he interacts with her, he goes to her home. He meets her family. He gets a sense of who she is and what context she lives in. And then he photographs her. And he doesn't know that at the time, but that becomes a real--the real methodology for his work, not picking up the camera until you've spent time with the person, come to understand the person's environment, the person's world, and you have a real sense of who this person is.

Red

01:48:48:16

JELANI COBB:

Parks' decision to create a photo essay on this young man, Red, he was a member of a gang in Harlem, it's important for him, personally. It's important societally, socially at the same time. It's certainly important for *Life Magazine*. And all those things are bound up in, you know, where photography is and what's happening in the 1950s. First, there is this broader concern with truancy and gangs, not in the way of common thought of it now would be like this is about race or what's going on with Black youth. There's a bigger context, when you look at the film *Rebel Without a Cause* and there's a societal worry about where the youth are headed. And so, Parks is kind of tapping into this bigger narrative and saying, "Here is the Black corollary of this and here's what's happening in Harlem."

01:49:58:11

JELANI COBB:

Also, Harlem has not really become like the community it is a decade later, where we think of it as marred by Black poverty and as an example of, you know, what has gone wrong in terms of urban policy, racism, the treatment of African Americans. It's on its way to becoming that, but in the 1950s, it's still a much more diverse community than it is, you know, a decade later. And so, when Parks shows up with his camera and wants to document this slice of

life, he's really calling attention to an evolving problem, as you'll see. It's the same sort of thing that says in Chicago--it's the same sort of thing that motivates him in Chicago, where he's really at the outset of the development of these ghettos, you know, on the South Side.

01:50:56:06

JELANI COBB:

Uh and... He's looking at, you know, the problem as it develops and saying, "This is what's happening here." There's not a whole lot, you know, of attention that is being given to the question of African American delinquency, of African American youth, where they're going to the extent that people are talking about it. It's the kind of sort of dismissive thing that the people are saying about Black people at large. And Parks sets out to do, you know, what has at this point is beginning to become a trademark for him, which is look at the people behind this question and bestow a degree of humanity upon them. And, you know, of all the images that you get in that photo essay, I think one of the most significant is just the one of the young man, Red, smoking a cigarette and looking pensively out the window.

01:51:53:13

JELANI COBB:

That could be anyone with any set of questions in any community trying to figure out any problem. And I thought that that really captured the point that Parks is making about who lives here, what's happening here, the fact that

this is a young person who goes to a funeral for one of his peers, which is an experience, at that point, that would be shocking and novel and has, unfortunately, become something that we're familiar with in the landscape of American society. And Parks is highlighting that that happens. And so, it's difficult 60, 70 years later to look at that work and realize how revolutionary it was at the point, um, that Parks did it. These were people who were music more-- it was much more likely that they would be talked about than it would be for them to be talked to, and Parks actually goes there and talks to people and then starts saying, "Well, this is what I've understood. This particular slice of American life to be on the basis of these experiences."

Life Magazine

01:53:10:10

Jelani Cobb:

I- I don't know what motivated Gordon Parks to go to *Life Magazine*, but I know it took a lot of audacity to do it. Uh and... so it- it--For one thing, there was a real distance between the Black magazine world and the White magazine world. And, you know, he was getting work in Black publications by this point, and had not been in the mainstream White publications. The other thing is that it's difficult for us to imagine now, at a point where print publications might be on the way to extinction and where the news stand is divided up into all sorts of different outlets that, you know, have each micro niche that if you like gardening, here's this. If you like sports, there's that. If

you like politics, there's this, you know, curating to, you know, specific, particular interests. In that context, it is very difficult for us to appreciate just the gargantuan impact that *Life* Magazine had in the 1940s, 1950s United States.

01:54:25:15

JELANI COBB:

It was really the cornerstone of the entire loose franchise of publications. *Life* is it. It was literally the title was self-explanatory. If you were trying to understand a significant portion of American life, it would be chronicled in those pages. And so, you would say, like, maybe the *New Yorker* or *The Atlantic* or *Vogue*, you know, would be, I guess, the closest parallel you would get to it, but even at their highest circulation I think that they probably are a fraction of what *Life* Magazine had managed to garner. And so, when Parks approaches *Life*, it's not—he's not dipping his toe into that world. He is walking into the pinnacle publication in American periodicals and saying, "I think that I have the skill to work and operate on this level, and I have this idea I want to bring to you."

01:55:50:11

JELANI COBB:

It's a very common sentiment for, you know, those people of that generation, and subsequent ones, to feel like they had to be twice as good as their White counterparts. And the other damning part of it is that people will say you have to be twice as good to get half as far. And so, Parks was really thinking

that he had to be quadruple the talent level of his White peers just to get to the position that they occupied. And so, you know, that's where you walk in. And to some extent, he was right. You know, when you look at the first staff photographer– the first Black staff photographer for *Life* Magazine, it's not this Black dude who was okay. It's Gordon Parks, who was this person who is a cornerstone American photographic artist and filmmaker.

Introduction to Gordon Parks' work

01:56:47:02

Jelani Cobb:

So, my introduction to Gordon Parks came as a high school student, when we read *The Learning Tree*. And, you know, I read it and thought, "Oh, this is interesting," and kind of didn't put together the bigger connections to it. But it was years later when I saw the Half Past Autumn exhibit that I got--Actually, let me say this. Then, you know, I guess I encountered Parks again when I was in my later teens and in college and saw *Shaft* (1971), you know, which we'd seen as a young person or whatever, but watching it again as an adult you got a sense of kind of what he was doing as a filmmaker and like, oh, okay, this is interesting. I got some of the references and knew who Bumpy Jonas was really referring to as the Harlem gangster, Bumpy Johnson. I understood the film better.

01:57:47:12

JELANI COBB:

But I didn't really get an appreciation or even really a grasp of his staggering contributions until that exhibit Half Past Autumn, which I saw at the museum of the city of New York in the Upper West Side– Upper East Side of Manhattan. I literally left that exhibit stunned. You know, I remember standing outside and trying to process it, because, you know, two things really occurred to me: One was that this person--this is an example of what it means to live your entire life in pursuit of a particular craft. That if you could find someone who had been a shoemaker or a carpenter or any kind of trade and then lay out everything they had ever done from their 20s to their 90s and said, "This is what this person's life looks like." And in the case of Gordon Parks, we had that in his photography. The other thing, I think, that really struck me about this was the refusal to be pigeonholed into just one aspect of that art. So, we saw his portrait photography. We saw his documentary photography. We saw his fashion photography.

01:59:20:20

JELANI COBB:

Uh, we saw kind of the- the shoots from-- the photography from his film shoots that he had lived his life with this camera at his side. It had become the mechanism by which he had expressed himself. He wasn't really concerned about genre. You know, he was, having mastered his ability to use this piece of equipment, then able to pick and choose which formats he would operate in in a particular time. That's a tremendous testament to his artistic ability. It's also a testament to the fact that he's a Black person, and he is

operating in a world in which, quite frankly, you don't know which one of these things you might have to do in order to make it that particular week. And I remember a professor of mine, Jeff Donaldson, who was an artist, told me that no Black artist ever really survived by being able to only do one thing. You know, he told me this as a teenager, as a freshman in college. And I really think that applied to Gordon, that if circumstance required a fashion photographer, yeah, he could do that.

02:00:50:22

JELANI COBB:

Uh, if circumstance required for him to be a portrait artist, he could do that. If he needed to go out and shoot documentary, he could do that. If he needed to give you a photo essay, yeah, he's on that. If he is--any kind of thing. The only thing that he did not get to do, which he talked about, you know, lamenting and- and really wondering if there was racism involved in it, was that he wanted to be a war photographer, and he was not able to secure permission to shoot in World War II. And, you know, that eluded him. Everything that was within his grasp, he really went after, and did even the industrial photography, catalog photography that you have, and when you see the work that he's doing, it really... He's sent out to do this industrial photography about- about oil rigs and oil production in the 1950s. Sounds like the most tedious thing that anyone could ever be assigned.

02:01:59:12

JELANI COBB:

And then you see the work from there, and it's just stunning. Like, this is not just catalog photography. This is art, and Parks, you know, was able to do that, too, and was like, "If you give me a dry, industrial assignment, I'll give you memorable art out of that." And I think that that's partly, it's a creative facility, but it also is recognizing a very real, practical principle, which is that as a Black artist, you need to have a lot of different tools in your toolkit if you're going to actually survive.

Gordon Parks in Black culture

02:02:38:17

JELANI COBB:

I mean, it's interesting because I was thinking about this actually, because Parks' age is a little bit weird. You know. He's younger than the Harlem Renaissance people, but he's older than all these other people who come into prominence later, you know so in, you know, the 1950s. I guess you have Melvin Van Peebles, you know, who was tremendously influential in terms of Parks' decision to begin making films, and those two, you know, Van Peebles was younger than- than Parks as well, but he-- it's really a kind of strange timeframe. You know, he's- he's younger than the oldest and older than the youngest, and he's kind of like the- the middle child of these American artistic movements.

02:03:34:02

JELANI COBB:

Uh, and by the time he's interacting with Muhammad Ali, he is a middle-aged man talking to a young man. By the time he's interacting with the Black Panther party, he's a kind of Black senior statesman, you know, who is an envoy from the publication world and can chronicle people's stories. Uh and uh, you know it doesn't- I don't think his age gets in the way of him forming a rapport with these younger people, but it's hard to classify him in terms of who's nearby.

Harlem Gang Leader

02:04:18:18

JELANI COBB:

Uh, Harlem Gang Leader photo essay was indicative of a- of a double-edged sword of being accepted in mainstream media. One is that, you know, there's the prominence that comes with this, there's the opportunity and resources that come with this, and there's the ability to tell a story in a much, much bigger venue than the ones he'd previously been afforded. The other side of it is that their agenda, as a publication, did not necessarily fit with what his agenda was as a photographer. And so, while he was seeking a kind of intimate, humanizing portrait of the communities he covered, particularly when he's talking about Red Jackson, the Harlem gang leader, that is not necessarily what the higher ups at *Life* Magazine are interested in. And the other part of it is that they know the particulars and the quirks of their audience. It's their job to know that. And they may or may not be interested

in these more nuanced and complicated ideas about who Black people are or about who gang leaders are or what life in this community is. There's a reason why tabloid media has come into existence and remains so profitable for so long.

02:05:43:23

JELANI COBB:

Uh, you know, the flat, distilled caricatures of particular aspects of life or particular communities or particular groups sell. And so, the actual photo essay, the entire photo essay that Parks produces, has much more depth and layering than the portion of it that is reproduced in *Life Magazine*. And you kind of-- you looked at it, people think it's kind of more reductive, parts of it. And you do wonder what Parks thought at that point. You know, was this a trade off? You know, had he sold out? Was this a devil's bargain? You know. Or like any other person, you know, artist or not, wondering if you can find some middle ground between paying your bills and preserving your integrity, and I think that comes up. And that's not something he had to question in that way prior to that, but that comes up in that first photo essay in *Life Magazine*.

The influence Paris had on Gordon Parks

02:07:02:14

JELANI COBB:

I think, you know, Parks going to Paris was significant. You know, he--One, he brought his family with him. Uh, you know, he is out of the country, and in the same way that as a young man those kind of short trips on working overnight on the trains broadened his horizons. He's now outside of the US. He has an international vantage point on what America is. And there's a long tradition, you know, of Black artists obviously going to- to Paris. His friend Richard Wright had done so. Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, you can kind of go through a whole long list of people who made these pilgrimages to Paris. And I think part of it is that they were looking for a less restrictive environment, a place where they could be more creatively free without worrying about the same sorts of strictures of race. Now of course, that's a particular kind of bargain. You know, France has its own long colonial history and very significant and severe racism inflicted upon the people and their former colonies and Haitians and so on. But they have this... fascination um or... I guess they kind of grant this waiver to Black Americans and they have a particular kind of curiosity about them, particularly as artists.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, when, you know, Parks arrives there, that's the real kind of history that contextualizes him getting there. One of the other things that happens, and at a kind of later points in Paris, is that, you know, he connects with Melvin Van Peebles there, and that is the point where they both begin talking about the possibilities of cinema. And, you know, Van Peebles is a real

influence on him. He had just done his first film, *Three Day Pass*, and he sits Parks down for a screening of it and, you know, Parks was looking at this and thinking, "Maybe this is the next venue that I'm going to pursue." And when people talk about the rise of African American cinema of the 1970s, you know, they really talk about Melvin Van Peebles and Gordon Parks. And so, you know, that's where we- we, kind of get this.

Emmett Till

02:09:56:07

JELANI COBB:

So, if there was any debate about the centrality of images to how people understood the world, or more specifically, to how people understood race in the United States, then Emmett Till resolved it. Famously, he was a 15-year-old African American boy who, like very many teenagers in Chicago, was sent to visit relatives in Mississippi over the summer, 1955. There's an incident outside of a store in Money, Mississippi where Emmett Till was accused of having whistled at a White woman. There was subsequently some dispute about whether or not that had actually happened. And he left, went home to the uncle he was staying with. Later in that evening, he is visited by a group of White men, including the husband of the woman who was in the store, and they took him by force and he was not seen again alive. We later learned that he was murdered and hung, well, drowned rather, with a cotton gin engine tied around... I'm just going to say farm equipment.

02:11:32:23

JELANI COBB:

He was drowned, later found that he was drowned, the piece of heavy farm equipment tied around his neck to weigh him down. His mother, Mamie Till, sees the ruin of her 15-year-old son's body. And does two things that are kind of etched into history and into the memory of anyone who witnessed it, who lived at that time or was aware of it. She holds a open casket funeral for him in Chicago, and given the extensive damage to his body, embalming was difficult. And so, people talked about just the horrendous stench, and that was a metaphor for what America was. And she allowed the photo of his body to run in *Jet* Magazine, John H. Johnson's publication that was headquartered in Chicago.

02:12:56:00

JELANI COBB:

That image goes out, and for anyone who's seen it, they know it looks like something from a horror movie. And it really unsettles... I mean, there's an entire generation of Black people that you talk to who person after person after person talking about their lives really being defined by how they lived before they saw that photo and how they lived after. You know, Muhammad Ali talks about that, as a young person seeing that picture and realizing that he could be Till. Till was his peer. And this is what America could potentially

do. It became a generational experience. It really defined how a generation of people came to understand their relationship to this country.

02:13:52:20

JELANI COBB:

A lot of really political Black people talk about seeing that picture and just being like, "That's it." You know? And so, for me, an interesting kind of point, which is that it wasn't Emmett Till, but when I was about 15 years old, a friend of mine had this book, it's called the Black Book, which was edited by Toni Morrison, and it's just this kind of collection of Black memorabilia, is the best way to explain it. And you turn it-- it's like a scrapbook of Black American life. And you get to a particular page and there's an image from a lynching. And I had never seen-- I think I may have had a vague awareness of what lynching was, but I certainly had no frame of reference for understanding that people used to murder Black people, barbecue them in public, and then gather around and take celebratory photos to demonstrate to the world what they had just done, that they-- that there were people who would be depraved enough to be proud and joyful, just committing this obscene act, you know, this abomination.

02:15:11:03

JELANI COBB:

And that changed my understanding right there. It was like that photo of the lynching was part of how I came to understand that being a Black person in this society was a very political thing to be. I think... We have another

generation of people who will probably say that they saw George Floyd be suffocated, and that kind of triggered something in how they understood themselves. It's terrible, but if you look deep enough, you can find images associated with these horrendous acts of violence that subsequent generations, each one of them has their own kind of frame of reference, to say, "I saw this and then realized exactly what the nature of my relationship to the country was."

Documentation of lynchings

02:16:08:15

JELANI COBB:

Amy Louise Wood, whose book I'm always praising, wrote this book, because there had been a lot of books written about lynching, but she wrote this book *Lynching and Spectacle*, which took--which seems to be the most obvious angle that no one would think to take. She took it from the angle of the photography. She talked about the reason that we have so many lynching photos was that Kodak had just produced what was really the first point and shoot camera, basically, around the same era, and had sparked this photography craze with people documenting every kind of mundane part of their lives. And lynching became part of it, you know, it was one of the first things that people began to document...

02:16:55:14

JELANI COBB:

With these affordable cameras, they went out and documented this. But she also makes this really compelling point that just made me, like, smack myself in the forehead when she said, "This belongs to a genre of photography. People think that the lynching photo is a particular thing." She was like, "No, it doesn't, it isn't. It belongs to a bigger genre of photography, and once you make the connection, you can't unmake it." She said, "These are hunting photos." And I said, "Holy shit. She's right." It's like the holding up the fish that you caught, you know, holding up the buck that you shot. Like it's the same thing. And I was like... [Jelani snaps his fingers].

02:17:42:11

JELANI COBB:

So, there's a guy, and I don't know what became of this project, but he went back and photographed the locations of, I don't know, it was like 50 lynchings. And in some places, because of the location, you could find the descendants of the people. So one of them was outside this general store, and the same family owned this general store like 70 years later. I think now it's a hardware store or whatever it is. But he got people to talk to him. They didn't want to talk about the lynching, you know. They didn't want to talk about the relative who was in the picture. But, you know, they were-- they are implicated and, you know, it's like oh okay, yeah, this is what my fucked up Uncle Charlie did back in 1947.

Segregation Story

02:18:35:05

JELANI COBB:

Gordon Parks in-in-in the segregation story is embodying the exact thing that the South did not want, you know, which is the outside agitator. You know, granted he was a Black version of it. I think they usually thought of White people or communists coming. But Gordon Parks was this person with this camera who was going to kind of expose the world, and so I think the thing about it--like he does two things in that essay of the collection of photos that- that stand out. One is that he implicitly contrasts the- the fact of segregation with the reality of Black people living these lives entirely in this world unto themselves, lives that were fulfilling, in some sense kind of normal, um, lives that contained happiness and love and all the kinds of things. It just happened in this community that was excluded from this other part of the world.

02:19:50:20

JELANI COBB:

Uh and I think that's kind of typified when you see the very dignified picture, a kind of glamorous picture of the mother with her daughter, and you realize they are in a segregated environment, but the segregated environment is secondary to it. The first thing that you notice is this amazing composition and really this beautiful picture of this beautiful woman and her beautiful child. And so, it- it kind of makes segregation recede into the background. And at the same time, it does something which seems to be obviously a

contradictory undertaking, but exposes segregation for its arbitrary cruelty, ridiculousness, and injustice. And I think all of that is in that collection. One of the other points about it is that the Civil Rights Movement, brilliantly-- The Civil Rights Movement brilliantly used national media to its own ends. People who were in Bessemer, people who were in Montgomery, people who were in Georgia and Mississippi had benefited from the fact that they lived in really this hermetic world, that their affairs were their affairs, and the injustices that they imposed upon Black people there were their own business.

02:21:33:17

JELANI COBB:

The Civil Rights Movement upended that, because now you had national media coming in and subjecting the realities of the deep South to the public opinion of people across the country. And things that looked normal to Southerners, to White Southerners, looked barbaric to people in other parts of the country, even as these other places had their own racial issues. So Gordon is really doing-- Gordon is really part of that narrative with the segregation essay that he does. And, you know, he is doing this, kind of exposing, you know, what segregation is to the readers of *Life* Magazine, which is a kind of mainstream, middle-class, White readership. But he's also kind of giving them this other window into the lives of the people who live under the heel of the segregation system and saying that they had not totally been defined by the subordination that had been imposed upon them.

02:22:47:14

JELANI COBB:

I mean, it's a strange photo in some other ways because the colored only sign, if you were a person that didn't know what you were looking at or didn't read it, or if Gordon had chosen a different approach and made it a softer focus in the background, you would've thought that she was standing in front of a movie marquis. You know, it's that bright, neon lettering, the most cheerful way of describing what is an abysmal and unjust system. But you have that pink lettering, "Colored Only." It almost seems like it's something that's inviting you in, like oh yes, come into this segregated facility. And I think that the really, you know, distinguished dress, the really elegant way that the mother and daughter are dressed in that photo, are kind of a stark contrast to it. I think that's also one of the reasons why that photo remains popular now. You can go on social media at any given point in time and-and not be surprised to see someone posting that picture, and a few Gordon Parks' pictures that I think have even superseded his name, that people recognize that image, but don't necessarily know that Gordon Parks took it, and that's one of them.

Malcolm X

02:24:18:11

JELANI COBB:

So, I think that the relationship with Malcolm was really intriguing. Obviously they were very close and they developed a rapport very quickly. Notable,

because Malcolm was famously skeptical and reserved, especially around media people. So I think there's a couple of levels of um... of rapport between Gordon and Malcolm. One is off the bat these are these two Black Midwesterners. Uh, you know, Gordon from Kansas and Malcolm from Omaha, and both of them have matriculated to other places since then, but these two realities, Black Midwestern men. The other is, I think, they have obviously this kind of fierce concern with racism and the subordination that comes with it. But I think there's a kind of rapport that the two have in maybe seeing a bit of each other--a bit of themselves in each other. Uh, you know, Gordon admires the fact that Malcolm is one of these people who speaks completely without any euphemisms or any... need to dilute or sugarcoat his anger and contempt for racism and the White people who have imposed it upon his community.

02:26:07:12

JELANI COBB:

You know, when you see Gordon, he writes about himself, you know, he talks about seeing the world in a light that's very similar to what Malcolm does, and so he doesn't have that kind of central ideology the Nation of Islam has or whatever, but they are both very keenly aware of how things came to be the way that they are. And, you know, quite frankly there's a kind of virility, you know, that the two of them have just as part of their character and persona as well. And I think even they shared a kind of dark sense of humor in matters of race, and you can really pick that up in the correspondence that you see between Malcolm and um--you could really pick that up in the

correspondence you see between Malcolm and Gordon. Uh, and, you know, even some points where Malcolm makes a kind of off color racial joke that would land wrongly, certainly you would never make that joke with a White person, and there are very many Black people that you wouldn't make the joke with.

02:27:21:17

JELANI COBB:

But, you know, he sees a musician with a kind of organ grinder with the monkey, and he kind of sees that as a parallel between the relationship of the White world and Black people who are forced to dance to the tune, you know, that's being called. And you're reading that and saying like, "Oh, these are two men who have had these conversations and had this kind of implicit understanding of how this works in the same way." And the same sort of thing I think with Gordon, you know, you have someone that he legitimately admires and is intrigued by, and at the same time, you know, a person who he wants to get to know in order to photograph. Uh and, you know, with Malcolm I think he gets a whole lot. There's a lot you need to understand if you're going to actually photograph this person and get a compelling um... rendition of who he is. I think also the--

02:28:25:16

JELANI COBB:

The images of the Nation of Islam are some of the most striking ones, certainly from that phase of Gordon Parks' career. I think this is probably the

first image of Gordon's that ever captured my attention, you know, where I saw it. And it's partly for the composition of it, you know, this kind of pure middle standing. We have the Muslim woman in front and the kind of very neutral expression, and then she's surrounded, you know, this kind of bokeh shot that he takes with these slightly gauzy images of a dozen more than a dozen women, who are in the background. And one, I think we don't have anything else that looks like that. And it's interesting because you see a kind of confluence of what Elijah Muhammad was trying to do, and what Gordon Parks was trying to do.

02:29:34:02

JELANI COBB:

It's interesting, you know, because outside of the composition of the photo, there's the actual subject matter, and in that we see a confluence between what Elijah Muhammad was trying to do and what Gordon Parks was trying to do. And what I mean by that is that one of the central tenants of the Nation of Islam was to produce Black people who were respectable in a particular light. Um, you know, that was why there was the emphasis on formality, you know, people being called by their whole names and not nicknames, men wearing suits and ties, women wearing conservative dress, men not having mustaches or beards, being clean shaven. And this very conservative almost personal bearing, and that being meant as a specific corrective to how African Americans had been seen previously, you know, as louche, degraded, slouching, slovenly, all the stereotypes that were associated.

02:30:42:07

JELANI COBB:

And so, Elijah Muhammad was trying to produce this cadre of Black people who visually defied all the stereotypes that had been imposed upon us. That is what Gordon Parks has been doing with his camera since he picked his camera up. And when you see-- this picture, it is exactly kind of like the crossroads where those two ideas would meet. Uh, and I think that that's part of why I think I've never been able to get this image out of my head since I first saw it as a young person.

The Black Panthers

02:31:25:10

JELANI COBB:

You know, I think as the photographer, um, you know, or any kind of journalist, you know, you are drawn to the current event, the thing that is happening that people are talking about, the story that hasn't been told. And because of Gordon's credibility, you know, he's able to gain entre and begin photographing the Black Panthers. Now, that doesn't mean that this-- that he has a kind of passport, you know, he has carte blanche there. This is one of the instances you encounter where people are very suspicious of him. He talked about that, actually, and there's an element of danger. You know, he's photographing these people who are very committed to what they believe in. Everyone is armed and here's Gordon, and there's not as much as there would

be subsequently, but there's a great deal of suspicion even then within the ranks of the party.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, you know, Parks talks about there being difficulties and actually having to smooth things over when people are not sure what he's doing, and he's showing up and following people around with a camera. And there's a real kind of sense, and also I think Parks is a generation older than these people, even though he shares very many of their sentiments. Parks was kind of a man outside of his time. He was generally probably a little bit more militant than most of his generation. And--But that's not certainly known to these younger people who are suspicious of people from his age range and his background. He's a representation, excuse me. He's a representative of, ironically, you know... Let me say that again. There's an implicit irony, which is that it takes such a long time for Parks to accept-- be accepted by mainstream publications. But by the time he's photographing the Black Panthers, he's now a representative of the White publishing establishment. And so, that heaps another layer of suspicion on the work that he's doing when he's out in California with them. And so, I think that's one of the more, I think, interesting situations that Parks comes into, you know, when he begins doing his work--his photographic documentary work.

Celebrity status

02:34:06:22

JELANI COBB:

I-I mean, I think there's an interesting trade off that Gordon makes, you know, as he becomes more prominent. Certainly, not as prominent as he would become--not as recognizable as he would become after his major films come out. But, you know, he is a recognizable figure in the mid-1960s, and the trade off is this: he had previously been able to observe uninterrupted with his camera and capture the unguarded moment, to be this person who's maybe kind of an enigma, this Negro man with a camera who's going around taking images. Well, that's different. You can't quite do that when everyone knows you, when you've published these landmark photo collections in *Life* Magazine, where you're showing up on television, where even at this point, Gordon's personal bearing begins to become much more distinct and distinguished, you know, uh the mustache that people know. And, you know, he looks like a fashion model at this point in his life. You didn't know what he did. If someone said, "This is a diplomat who's here from France to negotiate a treaty," you'd be like, "Sure." You'd think that that was just as well. And so, that both opens up avenues for him and closes some of them, is now not just that you're going to be photographed, you're going to be photographed by Gordon Parks.

02:36:00:18

JELANI COBB:

Um, their expectations, it's harder to get at who someone is when they know who the photographer is. It's more difficult to have an honest exchange. It impacts his personal relationships certainly, and his relationships with his children, and a kind of more complicated undertaking of Gordon Jr. beginning his own photography and his own interests in cinema. You know, It's kind of trying to build a rapport with his father in those ways. But, you know, he's this outsized person, and at the same time, you probably can't say there's anybody who was better suited to it. Uh, I mean, if celebrity was a language, Gordon spoke it fluently. It was all sorts of things about him, you know, that facilitated him being able to move through these very rarefied circles, to be able to have a sense of who he was, a sense of himself. Also, I think the fact that he really got famous in the second half of his life, you know, helped. He wasn't a young person who didn't know these things about himself before someone...

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JELANI COBB:

He wasn't a young person who was really still trying to figure out who he was. You know, when the public became aware of Gordon Parks, he was well aware of his own--the dimensions of his character as a person. But everything, his style, the green jaguar, you know, um his personal connections, his romantic dalliances, which would legion all of that that kind of goes into the person who remains intriguing to the public. Yeah. He was- he was adept at that.

02:38:09:23

JELANI COBB:

It's the same thing that Gene Young said in that conversation, you know, that... he was kind of obsessively self centered in a way that benefited him as an artist, but really did not benefit him as a husband or as a father in-in, you know, some regards as well. And so it's... I-I do think that it was less likely that Black men could function in that way-- be given the leeway to function that way simply because they weren't the same sorts of payoffs. There weren't the same sort of opportunities to pursue art. But the idea of being selfishly concerned primarily and overwhelmingly, you know, with your artistic development and creativity, you know, it's been a prerogative of patriarchy. Men have been able to operate like that. You don't-- I think there's a reason why there are, you know, lots of prominent female artists who've never had children because we don't afford women the same sort of leeway in saying that I'm going to pursue this particular thing that requires that my family not be the first and only focus of my attention.

02:39:42:22

JELANI COBB:

And so, I think Gordon's... And also I wonder, quite frankly, if there were even other models of living your life, you know, as an artist. Uh... did Gordon know? You know, about how you navigate balancing what would this all-consuming desire to be creative with creating these enduring relationships and sustaining other people and so on. So it's not surprising that there would be a conflict where-- that their respective responsibilities

and their respective priorities would lead Gordon to Venice and lead his wife to the kitchen to fry up potatoes for his children. And that's fairly predictable and the outcome of that is fairly predictable too.

Music

02:40:57:10

JELANI COBB:

Gordon um, you know, produced competent, you know, scores. You know, it wasn't like... His music wasn't the thing that kind of grabbed you in the same way that his photography did or that his cinema did. But I also think that it... I tend to not think of it as either or. I think that Parks was first and foremost a creative spirit and that he was always looking for outlets for that creativity. And some outlets favored-- circumstances favor their cultivation more than others did and happened to be that the photography was the one. Now, the curious thing is that with music, with African-Americans, there were probably many many more avenues to develop that skill set and that creative facility than there were for photography, but he was swimming-- he was swimming in different waters. And so he pursued the thing I think that had the least... He kind of went down the place that was the unpaved road, and took that as far as he could take it. I think and after he had really become a master of photography... Excuse me, I think after he really became a master photographer, he felt comfortable to really pay more attention to these other

aspects of his creativity. Which has always been there, but hadn't been doted upon and honed and cultivated in the same way as the photography had been.

The Learning Tree

02:42:47:09

JELANI COBB:

With Parks directing *The Learning Tree* (1969), it's really kind of a hallmark. One, in cinematic history. It was the first African American director who's doing this major studio film, but also is based on a story that he wrote, you know, and you don't really have that route to adaptation in the same way. Like, you know, you have a book and then there's a screenplay, and then somebody else writes a screenplay and somebody else directs it. And Parks is kind of like the guy in the band who's going to play all the instruments. And that still— that would still be a pretty uncommon thing to see one person do all of those things, but I also think it falls into the same sort of um... maybe paradox of his career, which is that in order to be the first Black person to do something you have to be this exceptional talent. And so, this is a person who's ambidextrous and, you know, there's ways he can shoot the photos, he can write the memoir, he can then direct the film and so on. It takes all of that in one package for him to be able to do that. And that really kind of dawning part of Black cinema of the 1960s, 1970s is connected to his ability to open that door.

Shaft

02:44:22:18

JELANI COBB:

Uh, it's really kind of notable. We kind of take it for granted, you know, that *Shaft* comes out, starts this whole cinematic revolution, or helps it, you know, along with um, uh Melvin Van Peebles's uh *Sweet Sweet Back*. You know, which is kind of right there as a peer film. But, we don't really think about the fact that Gordon Parks is by this point, almost 60 years old. He has an entire career, he could've stopped right there and would've been regarded as a great American photographer and one of the pivotal African American artists of the 20th century. But he is at a point where, very often, people's creative faculties begin to wane. He opens up this entire other avenue, uh, and produces a film. Not only in a- in a different genre, but creates a whole movement within that genre that he's just starting out in. Uh, and so it really is... a really- it really is a significant achievement on multiple levels for him to have done this.

02:45:37:22

JELANI COBB:

The first time I saw *Shaft* was when I was a kid and it was on TV. Uh and- and I also remember the Isaac Hayes score. And as a child, of course, the one thing caught my attention. You know, he's a bad mother and then he's like, "Hush your mouth." And so I'm like a child and I'm like, "Ooh, they're saying bad words in the song." And then I remember, you know, kind of various outtakes and snatches of the film, you know. Obviously the scene of him coming through the window on the rope, you know, which is the iconic image

associated with that film. Uh, and Richard Roundtree is this swaggering kind of figure, as they called him back then the Black James Bond. Umm... but it was later I think... And I mean, I was seven, eight years old watching this movie. It was later, I think probably a decade later, when I watched it and actually saw, you know, what this was. And the kidnapping narrative and the gangster and the militants and it was really this snapshot of what Harlem life was at that point in time. And this one person who, interestingly enough-- I didn't actually catch until I was older the significance of the fact that Shaft doesn't live in Harlem, you know, he lives downtown in the village.

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JELANI COBB:

And so, he's a different type of cat. You know, he's--It'd been very easy for him to have had his private detective office on 116th and Lenox in Harlem and never been a different kind of dude. But Shaft is like, no, he's the guy who is downtown kind of running in different worlds and still coming uptown and gets respect from people. And, you know, the--What does it say? The men want to be him and the women want to be with him. And that's who- who Shaft really embodies.

02:47:44:09

JELANI COBB:

Shaft absolutely meant, you know, multiple things to Black people watching. And I picked that up even as a child. You know, just the way that my parents talked about the movie *Shaft*. "Oh, *Shaft* is going to come on TV." That kind of

thing. Uh that it was this significant thing, and it reflected particular priorities, you know, cultural priorities, that now I think people would be much more critical of. But at that point, there was a real cultural emphasis among African Americans of wanting to see undiminished images of Black manhood. You know. If Malcolm X was a private investigator, this kind of uncompromising person tells White people-- like when Shaft interacts with the police. He talks to them the way that all Black people wanted to talk to the police at that point in time. When he interacts with the gangsters, he's not afraid of them. You know. He's a man who operates on his own terms, and you find that theme again, again and again in Black culture in those points. And even when you looked at um Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Same kind of question about Walter.

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JELANI COBB:

When you look at what Ozzie Davis said about Malcolm X in his eulogy for him. When he said Malcolm was our manhood. You know, *Shaft* is part of that. We were talking about the iconography of Black manhood of that era, *Shaft* is an outsized part of it. I mean his name is Shaft for one thing, is not the most subtle of references or allusions in- in this. And it is really meant... Is it's a kind of cultural idea the point that that film comes out. That the restoration of Black men to their rightful and patriarchal positions and the Black household and therefore in American society, is the antidote to all that has been done in Black life. All the things that have been imposed upon us. We

need to restore Black men to their position. And, you know, those things will correct themselves. And, you know, *Shaft* is kind of part of that, that's part of the idea of it. And at the same time, the other parts of that film that still catch you. The style of it, the language, the dialogue.

02:50:45:21

JELANI COBB:

Um, the creativity of saying that we have seen the- the noir genre. How many detectives have we seen, you know, from the Maltese Falcon all the way up? We have never seen it like this, you know, and Gordon Parks realizes that. And so there's actually a yearning for this kind of character. And he was right. It's still a film that we talk about 50 years later.

02:51:21:05

JELANI COBB:

Shaft is, in a lot of ways, the opposite of the Sidney Portier character, or the type of characters that Sidney Portier tended to play. And the reason for that is that, you know, Portier had this palpable cool to him. And that was a kind of demonstration of his mastery of himself. That there was nothing in the outside world, none of the kind of indignities that might be visited upon you as a Black person, none of that could ruffle him. And in other circumstances though, that appeared to be kind of detached and passive. That this was the Black person that people, that White people, would find safe. Shaft is none of those things. He is a person who has his own sense of cool, but it comes from a different source. The fact that if you say the wrong thing to him it's very

likely he will punch you in the face. And anyone dealing with Shaft knows that. And I think that it had turned... *Shaft* was really a sign that people had turned from the Sidney Portier era of Black depiction of manhood. Excuse me... *Shaft* was really a sign that people had turned from the Sidney Portier era of depictions of Black manhood into something that was kind of much more of the radical, unconcerned, defiant, zeitgeist of the 1970s.

02:52:59:09

JELANI COBB:

And I think it's also interesting, I think, that for Gordon who was a 60 year old man at the time, you know, he's making this film, nearly 60 years old, he crafts something that speaks to the attitudes and temperaments of people a generation younger than him. That Gordon is really ahead of his time in a certain way that the people who connect with him, certainly through his cinema, and I think a lot of his photography as well, are those people who were 20, 15, 20 and more years younger than him. Shaft is a hero for Black people in their twenties and thirties. And for Black people who were Gordon's age, they may or may not be uncomfortable with a dude who has-- as overtly angry, as overtly sexual, as overtly disrespectful, as unconcerned about what anybody else thinks about him, and who was completely interested in living life on his own terms. Yeah, I don't know that that resonated the same way with people Gordon's own age.

Hollywood

02:54:15:14

JELANI COBB:

There's a kind of weird arc to Gordon's career as a filmmaker, which is that the arrival of what they call blaxploitation, that genre of films that was concerned with African American life in the 1970s. The arrival of— of blaxploitation really shored up Hollywood's fortunes at a particular time is very lucrative. Those films were inexpensive to make and guaranteed really significant box offices. Um, and after being a kind of source of a great deal of revenue, there wasn't anything beyond that. When blaxploitation began to fade out, there was no avenue to say, "Okay, we want Gordon Parks to direct this narrative in which there are— are stories that happened to have White actors attached to them." Or "We want him to direct this World War II epic." Or any of the kind of natural progressions that you would've seen, especially kind of the heyday of the 1970s American director. You don't see him get entre into that.

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He does have one vehicle— he does have one vehicle that he thinks is going to be his next, really notable film that he wants to make a biopic of *Lead Belly*. And that gets caught up in a huge kind of tug of war with the studio executive who is Barry Diller. And that gets drawn out and the film never gets made. And that pretty much is the period at the end of the sentence as it relates to Gordon's filmmaking career.

The relevance of Gordon Parks' work today

02:56:04:06

JELANI COBB:

I think that Gordon resonates because life has continually reminded us of things that he tried to tell us. And, you know, we have seen in St. Paul, in Minnesota, in Minneapolis, the most brutal depictions of racism. And a city that Gordon had personal connection to. There's a high school named for him there. And we've seen just how crucial images are to us understanding our own humanity. We've seen the kind of emerging of a whole broad flowering of Black creative potential in a way that even in my lifetime, I didn't anticipate. You know, of Black photographers, Black filmmakers, poets, writers, musicians, people who were creative in all sorts of media. And lots of us-- it's a testament to Gordon that lots of us, as we kind of trace the genealogy of our influences, find him in our family tree.

02:57:37:18

JELANI COBB:

Certainly, in- in my work when I saw *Half Past Autumn*, the thing that I remember was saying, "Okay, these are the terms." If you say that this is what you're about, that you're interested in writing and that's what you do, then this is an example of what it takes to be created... This is an example of what it takes to be dedicated to a craft. And if you're not as serious about this as he was about that camera then you shouldn't call yourself that thing. And I thought that was an individual experience, but as time has gone by I found

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lots of people who had that same sort of experience or that same sort of avenue. Who saw an image that Gordon Parks produced, or saw an image that they'd seen forever and didn't know that Gordon Parks had produced it. And have found inspiration in the fact that he did so much with far less than we have access to right now. I don't think... I don't think that we really get to understand the world that we operate in, in the same way that we understand it now, without Gordon.

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