

# KUNHARDT **FILM** FOUNDATION

KHALIL MUHAMMAD INTERVIEW  
*A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Historian and professor**  
**Harvard Kennedy School**  
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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Khalil Gibron Muhammad  
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## **Introduction to Gordon Parks**

01:00:15:18

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I knew of his photography as a child because of my father's career, and had seen his work in photo books that my father owned, but I didn't have any awareness of his significance or legacy. Other than that, like my dad, he took these amazing pictures. I mean, I grew up literally surrounded by pictures. And so I'd say somewhere in pretty early childhood.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So, probably in my early twenties, I attended a film screening at the Newark Museum where Gordon Parks was there to do a kind of talk back. And it was a screening of *The Learning Tree*, a 1969 film. And that was the first time I met him. And I certainly knew then that this was a big, big deal. I can't precisely remember the year, but it was probably in the late 1990s, and— and the thing that's most striking both in meeting him, but also what I'd seen in photographs of him prior to that was just how dapper he was. He is just such an incredibly striking figure, poise and dignity and pride. And I remember that later when I ran the Schomburg Center in Harlem, probably within the first year or two, we put on a Gordon Parks show. And at that point I got a better sense of his actual body of work that we have at the Schomburg Center, in our archives

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

He conveyed a sense, not just of personal dignity, but also a sense that he wanted the space to be important. You know, a lot of people can dress snazzy and draw attention to themselves. I mean, that's not unusual. And for someone like himself who spent his entire career on the other side of the camera, particularly in terms of fashion and portraiture, he was well aware of what it meant to be seen. And I think— I think what I took away in that meeting was that his visibility was a collective sense of ownership over the space. It wasn't to draw attention to him as some kind of special person, because he didn't convey a sense of narcissism. He conveyed a sense of care and concern and community, and that's an odd thing to witness and the way

that one's own personal affect and the way they carry themselves, it's not easy to do. I mean, we- we know the word charisma and charm of which certainly fits him, but this was something more.

**Impact**

01:03:20:03

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Yeah, I think that Gordon Parks had a sense that, not only in his humble beginnings and his own migratory pattern, which was not an uncommon one, I mean, it was more traditionally from south to north and here was more like Midwestern to the global stage, you know, as a really important photojournalist. But I think he had a sense that he was bringing people with him. And he came of professional age at a time when- when the idea of heroic working class people coming on the heels of the Great Depression and the New Deal and all the investments in the arts through the Federal Government's Works of Progress Administration and other programs. Gordon Parks was part of a fervent moment that people clearly understood and he was influenced by others that the power of the image, the power of the self image, the power of portraiture, all can make a huge difference in shaping a different world, a better world.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Yeah. I mean, I think– I think Gordon Parks understood as a– as a photographer of daily life and also of our collective experience that one, he wasn't surprised by the diversity and the great mixture of humanity within the Black community. It wasn't-- He didn't need convincing that Black people got up and went to work every day, that people who were dirt poor saved that special dress for one day a week to go to church or to pay respects to the dearly departed. He clearly understood, both out of his lived experience and the bounty of experiences that he gathered as he moved through the world as a photographer, that the problem wasn't Black people not knowing how to live full and rich lives in spite of their poverty. The problem was that the White world didn't care to look. And so when he got behind this camera, he was translating. He was capturing scenes of Black life that he knew in both the elegant interplay of bodies with buildings, with material objects, with expressions.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I mean, he was well trained in the sense and influenced by others who had brought that craft like Dorothea Lang or–or Stryker, et cetera. But he was focusing on Black people. And so that translation work was really about taking what he might have seen on any given day in the *Chicago Defender* or the *Pittsburgh Courier* or the *New York Amsterdam News*, all Black dailies and weeklies to a bigger audience, to a bigger stage, to *Life* magazine. And I think that's the glue that held his entire career together. Which was to say that, yes,

I'm aware of a White gaze, but I'm not going to diminish who we are to accommodate that White gaze. I'm going to challenge it.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Photography is both the real and the artificial. It is something that is true in front of you and something that needs interpretation. The best example I could give of this in a world of 19th century photography, a lot of photography was put to the surface of proving Black people's inferiority by using the realism of a photographic image to show the body in ways that many White people had never dared to come close enough to see in this way. And so the— the relationship between what a technology like photography can do, in terms of damage and perpetuating racism, or dignity and attacking racism, Gordon Parks clearly understood the camera was neutral.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And so, when you ask the question: What difference do Black eyes make? They make all the difference. Because what he was looking for wasn't the discovery of some essential Black difference. What he was looking for was the multitude of examples of Black humanity. And that's why his plate was so full because he didn't have to look very far to see it if that's what you were looking for.

***Life Magazine***

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So I don't know as much about the professional relationship, which I'm sure he wrote about but I haven't read. But... the raw material, so to speak, of what Gordon saw and what Gordon wanted others to see was never entirely his own. Because working within *Life* magazine meant he was subjected to not just what an editor thought was the actual shot, the— the— the nut graf of the story, the meaningful moment to be captured. Which of course really means in our contemporary language all the implicit biases of an overwhelmingly White editorial staff magazine at *Life* and others means that he was constantly rubbing up against his intent and their own. And of course, cropping a shot means, fundamentally, that you can literally change what is seen. This is where the artifice of photography comes into play.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

This is where the notion of a picture's worth 1000 words is true, but not necessarily is the truth. And I think for Gordon Parks, while he certainly settled into that relationship and he gained more authority and authorial control over his work from the 1940s when he began at *Life*-- I guess, in 1949 or so-- until he retired from there, it wasn't always easy. Because trying to translate the meaning of a body of work when I look at *The Atmosphere of Crime* series, for example, clearly, the notion that crime on its own is a national crisis of pathological behavior, which the police are here to save us, was not-- was not what Gordon saw. And what Gordon Parks saw

was the relationship of the state as an apparatus of repression of the Black community, whether or not it was Black people in the frame or not.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

That he didn't entirely trust the police because the police that he'd known, both as a child and as a citizen of these many cities that he lived in, was that police could not, by definition, be trusted. And that the line between police corruption and something akin to justice was a very blurry one. Which is why what I think is so remarkable about that series is the photographic technique. Quite at odds with a lot of his work was to— to blur the shots, to slow down the frame, to create a sense of instability and who's right? Who's wrong? Who's the criminal? Who's the cop? What's going on here? Are we really achieving what we want? And to that end, I think *Life* magazine had a different vision of what that series was about.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Which was a kind of, "We have this national crisis of crime, we're going to show you what it looks like, you should be very afraid. We should trust J. Edgar Hoover and law enforcement to solve this problem." And what you got in the end, with Wallace, the writer collaborating, was a lot of questions, a lot of really important questions. And I think that's what makes that particular series so incredible in 1957, at a really— a real turning point. I mean, for someone like myself who is a historian of this, I could talk about it forever.

But the 1950s was the last decade when you really could see in big cities the face of the White urban criminal.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And the question that was being asked was: How much of these last generation of White tufts and gang members and White ethnics living in parts of New York who didn't flee to the suburbs when the levee towns were built was-- The real question that was being asked was, how much is this Black people's fault? The proximity of these new Black migrants who've come into the cities to these White folks, are they the corrupting influence? And I think that's the counter narrative that Gordon Parks brings to that series. No, this is not Black people's fault.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

This is a society that is broken. This is a society that produces poverty. This is a society that makes violence both in how it perpetuates it against its own citizens and how it breeds and encourages within its own citizens. And you see all of that at play in the imagery and ultimately in the writing, which begins to question whether the statistics that drew the audience in the first place were actually accurate. Which I think is a wonderfully advanced critique. It wasn't the first time in the 1950s, but it was advanced compared to where we are today.



*The Atmosphere Of Crime*

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So there's this really incredible image of two White officers, they're detectives so they're in suits. And you could imagine in any given street on any given day, they look like respectable businessmen. But in fact, here they are doing some kind of drug raid and they are kicking in the door but he captures a moment where at least one of the officers legs is at like, you know, a 70 degree angle above his waist. And there's such physical meanness that-- and physicality in it, that they look like the criminals breaking into someone's home intending to do harm.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

This is a moment where the legal underpinnings of what would come to be known as no knock warrants or no knock raids are part of the package of legal bills in the 50s and 60s that will eventually make these things lawful. And from that moment to now, they've created tremendous harm because innocent people have gotten killed in the process. And so Gordon is seeing that the ability of police officers to, what we could say, behave criminally in the name of public safety is part of the problem. That's what that image is capturing.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Well, if I have this correct, it was really the first major photographic essay on American crime. And part of what makes that unique in this moment is because you've got two things that preceded it in 1957 with regard to this photo essay. You've got the long tradition of mug shots and documenting criminals, which was very scientific, it was considered a way of both identifying people who were wanted, in what in a typical station house, would have been the rogues' gallery where these photographs, these portraits were put up, so people can keep up– keep up with these people. But you also have this antihero tradition, which is playing out in Hollywood.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And it's also playing out in the daily press. There's a dysfunctional... symbiotic relationship between daily news reporting on crime, if it bleeds it leads, and the actual victimization that goes along with it. So the media sensationalism along with Hollywood, the gangster films of the 1930s and James Cagney are all black and white. They're– they're all part of the 19th century historical arc that brings us to that moment. And so people are accustomed to seeing these film noir versions of the bad guys, and then these anti heroic versions, which in the work of John Dillinger, and Bonnie and Clyde all of which is part of the 1930s.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Al Capone is both the most wanted man in America and also a kind of folk hero for people who are pushing back against the inequalities of their time

and participating in underground economies. So I think what we see in this moment is a shift in tone, a shift away from that. A new language through color to try to say something different about what's going on in crime in America. Because any other version of that, in black and white, would have been sitting within those earlier frames and would not have challenged. So I think it wasn't just the color. I think if he had done the color in the same way that the... in the kind of static shot that we were accustomed to, we might not have read into it or seen as much as he was trying to convey.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So the contrasting black and white frames that capture darkness and light, the shadowy nature of crime. And it wasn't-- it was a very common thing to have this brilliant flash over a deceased person who's been killed in the street, right? I mean, that- that- that was almost a genre unto itself. And yet here with the red and blue hues that create this orange glow to this series, again, suggests the kind of indeterminacy and ambiguity that it's not just bad guy and good cop. It's not just the bright flash of capturing the death scene. But in fact, there's a liminal space, a trajectory along a range here of things happening and things in motion. I think that's also what you get in colors. You get this sense that there's something in motion. And maybe it's in that in motion that it's not a foregone conclusion that any of this has to happen. That if we can see things unfolding and the interplay of color of new kinds of shades of possibility that we, collectively, society can actually do something about all this.

**Post World War II America**

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So in the 1950s, the United States was coming off of the traumatic experience of World War II. The nation had experienced the worst economic calamity in its history, and now that the war is over, two things are unfolding. One, there's this explosion of economic growth, and home building, and jobs in manufacturing. The 1950s was truly a remarkable decade of economic growth for the country. And so there are a lot of good things happening. But these things are also happening in a context where the transition between a generation of children who'd grown up without their fathers, men who had gone off to war, these are baby boomers who are born essentially in 1940 and for the next decade. And there is this great sense that this generation of young people are not necessarily as well cared for as generations before.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

There's anxiety about urbanization and technological change, meaning that kids are now being exposed to... corrupting influences from jazz, to television, to new drugs, and maybe even most particularly-- So the 1950s emerged as a kind of counterculture and heroin emerges called smack. Then there's this migration problem. So the problem of African Americans relocating to the north by the millions in the 1940s also raises this question

about the future of the city. And the combination of the migration, the counter cultural change, the anxieties about exposure to corrupting influences like jazz, and dance and... In the 1930s, they produced this anti marijuana film to scare White children to never use the drug, but the vehicles for the fear, the soundtrack is jazz music and the potential of Black people who are the vectors of that corrupting influence.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So this is- only gets worse, by the time GI'S come back home and have to figure out what to make sense of these changes. And so I think in that context, crime is both increasing, you do have those teenagers born in 1940s by the mid 1950s, who are finding their way in an uncertain time. And you also have a kind of racialized sensationalism about the changing nature of urban life. And it's those two things that creates this national concern as a National Crime Commission. There's an investigation into the Italian mob, which is kind of the last moment for essentially blaming Italians for all that- that is bad in society, even though there really were Italian mobs and there really were shootouts, and there was the numbers racket, and the drug market that emerges after alcohol.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I mean, so a lot of this is both true but a lot of it also were predictable social forces that were the interplay of limited opportunities for young White ethnic, first second generation, Italian American or third generation Irish

American and African Americans all kind of duking it out. This is a moment or decade that follows *West Side Story*, the film to depict the ongoing tensions between Puerto Rican gangs and White gangs. *Blackboard Jungle*, featuring Sidney Poitier, will appear in the early 1940s. A story about a Black teacher who goes into, what we would call today, an inner city highschool and tries to keep the kids on the straight and narrow. And it's partly a story about what these White kids are facing as they increasingly live amongst Black people, which Sidney Portier's presence in that school is meant to signal, that's all happening. And so Americans have, in their heads, a mixture of fact and fiction. But what's most consistent in their head is that the sooner they get away from these cities, the better off they'll be.

## **Influence**

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So the thing about Gordon Parks, given the sensibilities that he had as a professional, we know that the world of the late 30s and 1940s just as he's becoming a photographer of record, is that the NAACP, for example, and the National Urban League both publish magazines. The NAACP is called *The Crisis* and National Urban League's is called *The Opportunity*; both of which, in their own way, used art like the work of Charles White, for example. Jacob Lawrence were often commissioned to contribute to these magazines in a way that was quite sociological in its intent. In fact, the Urban League in its opportunity magazine commissioned social surveys as a regular part of its

practice, which included photographs because part of what they were trying to do was to make a case for White reformers.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

That by showing the conditions of Black people they could appeal to their moral sensibilities and sense of fairness. And *The Crisis* did it but more with words. DuBois had long been the editor from about 1910 to 1934. And so Parks, whose own awareness of the social condition both from lived experience but also from being part of a broader community, which of course included some of the most incredible thinkers and artists of the time from Langston Hughes and Ralph Ellison to so many others, means that he was thinking about what contribution he would make to these influences. And DuBois, of course was, best I know, not known for using photography of his own. But there were essentially baby photo contests published in *The Crisis* magazine for decades.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And these were essentially baby portraits that were meant to show both the beauty, innocence and superiority of Black children, and not so much superiority in relation to Whites. It wasn't reversing it, it was a kind of superiority that these are our best babies. This is how they put it and it's kind of flawed and jacked up in a way. These children over indexed, they'd be light skinned and so on and so forth. But in an era where racial hierarchy and racial science to support racial hierarchy were overwhelmingly anti Black.

The idea that Black people would borrow those same weapons to try to push back against those ideas. Images played a huge part in all of that.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

In visual art, of course, the influences that Jacob Lawrence would have been contemporaneous alongside would, of course, Jacob Lawrence who used his own sense of history to tell Black history stories that were meant to be heroic, meant to celebrate Frederick Douglass, meant to celebrate Harriet Tubman. Which were influences that ultimately, for him, the power of visual art as a way to re narrate the Black story in the same way that the 1619 Project today essentially as the exact same tradition, both in text and in imagery. They were all part of that. And, of course, with the role of the federal government and supporting artists beginning of the 1930s. So my hometown of Chicago, what came out of that federal work was the South Side Community Arts Center, where Gordon Parks himself was part of that community. These were all intersecting points of influence that marry text and imagery to tell new stories about who Black people were, what they were capable of and to challenge the falsities of White supremacists.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I think that... Gosh, Langston Hughes, such an incredible person. I think that the-- being in those spaces creates a multiplier effect of creativity. And, of course, Langston Hughes made images through poetry, that was his great gift. But not only that, we can see in Gordon Parks' writing the references to, say,



Langston Hughes's 1935 poem, *America... To me. Or "Let America be America again,"* I think is the name of it. I want to get that right. You can see him using the concepts in his photo essays. You can see him centering his sense of the individual in a broader landscape of a country that denied the right that he-- denied his right to exist. Those poetic framings of the Black condition are direct borrowings from-- from Langston Hughes. He also-- he also borrows from James Baldwin. His work around *Red* and the *Harlem Gang Leader*, his work around the fontanelles.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I mean, you could hear in his critique of racism as a White people problem. The way that Baldwin had come, by the 1950s, to articulate that this race problem wasn't what Black people had created. This was what White people needed to justify their hypocrisies and contradictions, and that's showing up in Gordon Parks' prose. So I think there's an absolute through line, not just in the relationships he had with these other writers and artists, it's showing up also in the influences of their body of work.

***Invisible Man***

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

There's a moment when he actually describes his own invisibility, and you can tell that Gordon Parks knows that he's a badass, right? He has no

question about how accomplished he is as a photographer. Certainly by, you know, kind of the middle of his career at *Life* Magazine. And I think that what he understood in Ralph Ellison's work and what he understood in the collaboration between the two of them was that the invisibility that was Whites' unwillingness to see them wasn't the truth of Black people's lived experience. They were quite visible. And so there's an irony in the metaphor. For example, my best line from *Invisible Man* is the story of the protagonist working at Liberty Paints. And he has to go into this basement, and he's told this is the formula to make our best selling paints, the whitest paint, nobody makes this paint whiter than anybody else. But the key is, you've got to get the perfect amount of this black dope into the paint. That's the secret to making this paint optic white. And that inside and Ellison in that moment in the story is the story of America. You can't understand this country without Black people at the center of it. Gordon Parks knew that, Langston Hughes knew that. Ralph Ellison knew that, Romare Bearden knew that, they all knew that, but White people didn't know it. And so in that sense, Kenneth Clark knew it and Mamie Clark his wife.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

In that sense, the great excellence of that generation and the great tragedy of it is that they could not have given any more of themselves or their art to telling White people that this is who we are in real. This is your problem and you can't really live without us. But they didn't entirely succeed. I mean, you

know, to take it to where we are today. But that didn't mean that they didn't use their brilliance and their genius to try.

**Red Jackson**

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Yeah, so in that first series with— with Red Jackson as essentially the anti hero of that story. I think Parks was fully aware that those images would cut both ways. That they could simultaneously stir the conscience of readers and viewers to action on behalf of fighting poverty in America, particularly in Black ghettos, and at the same time, reinforce long standing stereotypes and racist myths that this was the natural condition of Black people. I think what's telling about that work and the early body of work, looking at his firm's securities administration work, is that he also was a first hand witness to the New Deal and the lionization of White working class men of all backgrounds. The fact that so many of those men themselves were either foreign born or first generation Americans and then benefiting from this heroic era of a federal investment in their futures.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

He, himself, had worked for the Civilian Conservation Corps and sort of had first hand experience of what that was like. So if we take those experiences within the context of the New Deal, he was well aware of the power of images

that cut both ways to lead to political change. So it- it-- while the danger was all already there, the example in front of him, the youthful example, the hopeful example. As he talks later about his series on the Nation of Islam, he still wanted to have faith in an America that could see him and could respect his sons. Well, he has a lot of that faith on the front end of his life and so he's coming out of the 1930s, coming out of the Great Depression, coming out of the New Deal, saying, "Wow." Photographs, portraiture, visual art, murals, Charles White's murals that again, the Black version of a kind of Aeneid Iliad story playing out on a huge canvas is exactly what he hoped for in spite of the danger or the risk.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

That's what he was shooting for. And- and I think- I think partly what we have to do is historicize the optimism that Red could be seen as a victim of circumstance, could be seen not as a bigger Thomas character, as Richard Wright had portrayed the danger of racism to produce a monster, but in fact, that Red was never a monster to begin with. That the rats in his community or the poverty that he experienced was not his creation; didn't deserve it. And that anything that he and those young men got involved with were based on a very limited set of choices. Kid could not get a job, kid had decent influences, but even his-- the man who ministered to him at St. Philip's Church or the cop, who was the cop named Jimmy who was kind of a counselor to him, even they, as I think Gordon says, gave him real advice.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Meaning it wasn't a moral condemnation of all the terrible things that we're doing, but saying, look, stay alive, try to be a good person and we're going to try to help you. I think Gordon Parks recognized that if he put his best effort forward, he might be able to achieve what Jack Delano had achieved, or what Dorothea Lang had achieved, or what so many White New Deal artists had achieved in order to create a new country coming out of the New Deal that was more generous, more egalitarian, more respecting of working class people.

**Ella Watson**

01:38:18:17

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Yeah so that-- So, the image coming out of the FSA work of Ella Watson, who cleaned the offices at the building. So, you know, here he is in Washington, D.C., uncertain exactly of what he's going to do with his assignment and he's struggling a bit to figure that out. And meets the woman who works in the offices and realizes that the answer to his question is right in front of him. But he also recognizes that in-- within the context of an FDR administration, in the context of at that point, the first Black cabinet, people like Mary McLeod Bethune working for the National Youth administration in the FDR administration. At a time when Eleanor Roosevelt is visiting Tuskegee

Airmen and she's at the Schomburg in Harlem doing visits with the curator at the time, a man named Lawrence Reddick.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

This is a moment when this is the best president and first lady and- and White House administration that Black people have had since Abraham Lincoln. This is the moment when Black people really switched parties, particularly for Northern Blacks, and become Democrats. They give up voting for the Republican Party. And yet, he's in a city that is rife with anti Black racism and segregation and discrimination. And I think it was that contradiction that he rubbed up against in being in DC at that moment that he thought, "Hmm, I've got to tell the truth here. All is not well, in this moment. And if I'm going to get at the conditions of people in the war effort, there's another layer here that isn't being seen."

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

This isn't just about Black people being grafted on to the war effort and making a contribution. This is also about Black people working within a racialized hierarchy, even within the federal government. Even within a moment of where we're making great progress, we are still being reminded that we're second class citizens. And I think he wanted, in borrowing the American Gothic image and then naming this image of Ella Watson holding a broom and a mop with the American flag in the background, wanted to show that, America, here is the fight that you're not yet willing to take on. Here is

the face of America that you're still ignoring. This isn't just about what's happening in Germany or Japan. This is also about what's happening right here in our backyard.

*Segregation Story*

01:41:13:22

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

The moment when the Supreme Court essentially strikes down Plessy v. Ferguson changes the calculation for the nation and particularly for Black folks who, by then, 15 years of organizing in the wake of World War Two, A. Philip Randolph had been threatening massive demonstrations against FDR's administration on the mall. Black GI's we're coming home, they're coming home to Alabama, they're coming home to Harlem, they're in uniform. They're challenging the conventional norms of Black deference to White authority, and there are skirmishes happening everywhere, all over the country, north and south. Some of that, essentially, creates the conditions where local organizers, as in the case of the McGovern Improvement Association, are basically like, "This is our moment, we're going to build capacity, we're going to start to organize so that we can challenge segregation in this community." And anti segregation organizing had been going on for decades, I mean, going back to Plessy, which was the original case in Louisiana which led to formal segregation on rail lines and streetcars, et cetera. There had been continuous local legal challenges to those laws as unconstitutional because they were.

01:42:37:00

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Okay. So in that sense, the context of a generation of young people, Martin Luther King is born in 1929. I think Malcolm X is born... Let me just say that again. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X and James Baldwin are all born in the 1920s in the mid 1920s, and they're going to come of age exactly in the midst of all of this. So their sense of what's possible, their sense of being able to stand up and say, "We just fought against the Nazis, are you kidding me?" All swirls around in ways that both allow Black people to walk with a little bit more confidence and also begin to generate the kind of violent backlash and desperate sense of losing control over the south that create the volatile conditions that consume Emmett Till's life.

### **Emmett Till**

01:43:50:16

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Emmett Till is a teenage boy who's accustomed to visiting his family in Money, Mississippi for the summers. This was a very common pattern and practice for migrants in Chicago was essentially Mississippi north. For all intents and purposes, my own family, half of my--maternal side of the family are Mississippi. Both great grandparents were born in Mississippi. So-- Emmett Till, as a teenager, is heading to the south, shows up in the south. He's got a vivacious personality, known to be spirited and outgoing. And that



spirited outgoing ness created an interaction with a White woman, Carolyn Bryant, in a local store that to this day is shrouded in mystery as to what exactly he did or said. Whatever he did or said, it did not involve touching this woman nor did it involve any real threat, but that didn't matter. She reported that he had assaulted her, and several White men came to his uncle's home in the middle of the night and took Emmett Till from his home. He was discovered days later having been beaten to death, shot and an attic fan attached to his body and thrown into Tallahatchie river with the intent that his body would not be discovered.

01:45:23:18

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

When his body was in fact discovered, and news of what happened to him spread throughout the South, this-- Locally, this was a line that had been crossed a bridge too far for people because, again, the fact of the killing either by vigilantes or by the state of young Black boys or men and in some cases women was not a surprise, was not new. What was new was the conditions of Black consciousness. What was new was the sense that this is not going to happen for our generation. And, of course, both the end of formal segregation and the Montgomery bus boycott as national news also encouraged a sense that we don't have to put up with this and so they didn't.

01:46:23:08

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And the fateful decision of Mamie Teal- Till, that's my own Southern accent showing up. the fateful decision for her to allow *Jet* magazine, which was the

most-- it was the Reader's Digest of Black America-- to publish open casket photos of her son. It's hard to... it's hard to imagine any parent doing that under any circumstance. I mean, I know Black parents right now whose children have been subject to police harassment who don't even want to tell other members of the community what happened to their child, let alone to show the face of your child after it's been decomposing, after having been murdered. And so, that was a political act on her part because she was no different than the others of her generation who had decided that this can't stand.

01:47:30:13

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

We're not, you know, we're not going to walk away meekly and put our heads down. And so that image broadcast to the world, generated a funeral with hundreds of people coming to worship and to pay respects to Emmett Till. And the- the- the story of so many people who then became activists in that moment who had been teenagers like Ann Moody, who writes about in her coming of age story. It was- it was the story of Emmett Till, it was the learning about it, it was the image of it that said, I want to be part of something different. John Lewis, himself, the recently departed Congressman, I want to be a part of something different. I want to help change this country. And- and so that's the story in many ways that also proceeds Gordon Parks' own journey to the south for *Life* Magazine in 1956. He's walking into a situation of uncertainty, but also of great possibility.

**Rural America in the 1950's**

01:48:42:02

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So here Gordon Parks is with a Black reporter in rural... Well, not in ties in Mobile, so... But- but any city in Alabama in 1950 is one turn around the corner as rural America. And it's absolutely dangerous. It's dangerous because any outsider is perceived as a threat to the racial order of the South. And the South had already, for decades, been adjusting to the presence of Northerners, whether progressives or missionaries trying to set up schools in the South. By the 1930s, the Communist Party is organizing in the South, the Scottsboro Boys had occurred in 1933 when nine Black men were accused of raping two White women, falsely, and created a huge international scene in Alabama. So, Alabamians were very keen to keep an eye outside for their outsiders because they didn't want their Negroes to be upset in any way to cause trouble.

01:49:44:09

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So, the fact is that by 1956-- also, while what we think of the Civil Rights Movement as this linear thing that one event after another ended in success, for them, they didn't know where this thing was going. The bus boycott is still unfolding, and so there's a lot of trouble in terms of what is happening. The White Citizens' Council, for example, emerges in the 1950s as a kinder, gentler, more respectable face of White supremacy. It's a mashup of political and business elites in the South who want to manage segregation in a way

that is still good for business. Does it bring too much attention? Eisenhower is kind of a no nonsense president. And so while he's not going to send the troops into the South until a year later, he had signaled that he wanted order and stability in the country.

01:50:59:18

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And so... bottom line is, for anybody who was 1, perceived as an outsider or 2, was a Black person with talent and resources and 3, an attitude and a comportment like Gordon Parks. No question people were aware of his presence, no question he had every reason to be afraid for his life. And a good thing is that, you know, he had done dangerous things by then for at least a decade. And so his own courage and fearlessness as a journalist, by that time, meant that, you know, he knew how to keep– keep an eye on things.

01:51:43:13

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So the dispatches coming out of the South are news reports of various back and forth skirmishes and legal suits related to what's happening in Montgomery. There's also the usual reporting on racial violence that occurs wherever and whenever it is occurring. So, if you think about what is the typical Southern story being reported, particularly in a national media, like *Life* Magazine, and what you get is a kind of 'Southerners are racist' and 'Look at this terrible thing that's happened' or 'This Black person committed this terrible crime, it's unfortunate that the Southerners took the law into their own hands', or 'There's this Civil Rights Movement with these new leaders

between Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Improvement Association, and we're keeping a close eye on things.'

01:52:46:14

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

There wasn't a sense of the humanity of the people behind the headlines. And again, continuing the tradition of documentary photography coming out of his experience in the thirties, what he sees as an opening, is to say like, who are these people? What are they experiencing? What are their hopes and dreams? I don't want to make it sound like it was unoriginal, but it was unoriginal for Gordon Parks by that time to point his camera in that direction and to do for them what he'd already been doing in so many places outside of the South. And to his everlasting credit, the point of it all was to say that, "I want to be here at the beginning."

01:53:39:20

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

He knew something was happening in the South. He knew there was a story to be told before it would become obvious what all this was about. And I think in that sense, like in the crime series, he wanted to use color to challenge the conventional media narratives and the conventional visual photographic frame of what to say about these people. It wasn't, again... There was nothing novel about images of dirt poor Black sharecroppers. There was nothing novel about the wordplay of describing the abject poverty of Black Americans in the segregated South of that time period. What was novel was putting poetry to the photographic image. What was novel was

finding those shades of beauty that get lost in the shades of gray, but pop and come to life in the greens and the reds. Something that would draw you to those people. Again, I can't help but think about the Dorothea Lange pictures of the poverty of rural Americans in the 1930s.

01:54:56:21

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Gordon Parks was already editing, in a sense. He wanted to say, "What I've been doing hasn't been enough. I got to try something new here." The image of the Thorntons, for example, sitting on their couch, the parents of the family that he profiled, and then the image of their parents over their head... was another iteration of a theme that, to use our contemporary language, these are hardworking real Americans. You need to see them exactly for who they are. The image of the group family of the Causeys on the porch, their Alabama rural home was, in the best tradition of documentary realism, was a way of saying, this is the Heartland of America. And because it hadn't worked in so much of his work prior to that point, in terms of changing the country, right? I'm not saying it hadn't worked in terms of changing hearts and minds, but I think what he wanted to try with color, in this sense, was to shift the visual landscape altogether and just say, I'm going to hit you with everything I've got, to show you that these people are as deserving as any human beings, anywhere on the face of the earth. To bring truth and justice to them, to have their dreams come true.

01:56:35:07

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And, I mean, the image of the mother and daughter shopping in Mobile, both looking at the images of the White dolls in one frame and then standing outside of the store underneath the electrified colored entrance signs. It's just... I don't know that there's anything like it and the history of photography of the Jim Crow South. I don't think there's anything else like it. 1, because it's so new in that moment and 2, because I'm not sure anyone has bested it since. The thing I also like about this image is not just the— the kind of dignity embodied in this mother and daughter that defies every single possible expectation of what it meant to be Black in Alabama at that time. All the stereotypes, all the ways in which DuBois had said 50 years before that, a Black person in Philadelphia to a White person was more deserving of charity than a job. That the sense whether you were Northern liberal or a White Southern conservative, the idea was that Black people were always needing. And the only question was whether they were deserving or undeserving and this image just said no, that's not what's the story here. That's the White gaze that we're disrupting.

01:58:06:17

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

These folks are living their lives in spite of everything. And in that moment, that electrified colored entrance sign, for me, the way that Gordon sees both is that the technology of oppression is as vivid and as raw and illuminated as is the realness of the dignity fighting against it. These are almost like counter forces. I also think about all the images and iconography we know of the Whites only or colored only signs, all of which are black and white for this

period. And yet again, there's something beautiful about this colored entrance sign. There's something magical about the idea that a store owner would make such a rich investment in literally like the symbolic and the technological infrastructure of segregation. And the obvious answer is because in that space, black people's money was still green. And so he still wanted Black people to come through the colored entrance to spend their hard earned money in that business. And I think... If I could imagine being there in that moment after Gordon Parks saw the image that he took, I could imagine him laughing out loud about the absurdity of it all. Literally the absurdity of it all.

### **Segregation**

01:59:51:00

**KHALIL MUHAMMAD:**

Well, he's making a statement that segregation is not a function of Black pathology. That segregation is a societal, political choice. And within that structure, Black people are living their lives. He's not- he's not presenting a rose colored picture in a way that we might say, things look pretty good. That's clear, but he's also saying that these people are not animals, these people are not caged in the sense that they are responding simply to a primal need. Because, again, if you think about a learning curve for an artist like Gordon Parks, I mean, he's constantly pushing up against the limits of what his photography communicates. The great thing about art is that the artists can't control how others will receive it, for good or for bad. And so, Gordon



Parks is quite aware of this. So, his best intention in this moment, is to go inside of spaces, the interiority of Black life and to offer... I think the editorial-ness of the realness is the color itself.

02:01:10:16

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And the forms of leisure that are articulated, the form of family, that of course, in all of the received conventional wisdom of the past was that the broken Black family was a function of the pathologies born in slavery. But here we're multi-generational families, going about their business and enjoying life, love and leisure. And that was all very deliberate and all... In a sense, we call it political, but in some ways the politics of it were meant to make something that might appear extraordinary, quite ordinary.

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

02:02:00:17

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I think that for Gordon Parks, he wanted his subjects to know their worth. And it's true even to this day. You show up with a camera. I mean, maybe less so in 2020 than even 15 years ago because of the ubiquity of smartphones and video, but you could show up anywhere with a big enough lens and people would say, "Hey, what's going on here?" Black people craved the same kinds of visibility to- to know that someone knew they were here, just like any other person anywhere else in the world. And I think Gordon Parks

wanted his people to feel like active participants in these photo sessions, wanted them to know that, no, no this is real. This is not drive-by sociology or drive-by media or journalism.

02:03:01:05

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I'm not stealing a shot of you to appropriate it for some other purpose. I'm going to sleep on your porch, I'm going to spend time with you, I'm going to be part of your family. To me the most incredible... I mean, he did two things that I think are really incredible with regard to how he brought his subjects into the frame and then turned that picture into something that they could take great pride in. One, he totally, totally wiped out the line of objectivity and he just stomped all over it. I mean, in ways that any pretense of objectivity that one might expect of a typical journalist with regard to the people that they're covering or the subject, it just wasn't there for him. I don't know this, but it's probably a remarkable story to hear someone talk about that choice and how that sit within his reputation professionally.

02:04:11:14

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

But what's remarkable is that he's building trust with his subjects as an outsider, as a professional, as an exceptional Black person for that moment. In ways that are meant to close the gap, rather than to widen them in the way to say, actually, yeah, I have this fancy camera. Yes, I am a famous photographer. Yes, I worked for this magazine that White people run and like, really you're here to do us? And yes, and guess what? We're more alike

than we're different. That's- that's one part of his genius. The other part is that, talk about blurring the line, then he's- he's literally saving lives. From Flavio, to the Causey's family, to the Fontenelles. I mean, just... It's just incredible. And I think that's another kind of Black sensibility that I think has made Black art more complicated in a mainstream culture, where certain rules have been barriers to Black full participation.

02:05:24:11

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

What a scholar I know, who's written about objectivity, says that the practice about-- of objectivity, whether it's in scholarship, whether it's in science, whether it's in journalism, is itself a performance. And I think that Gordon Parks realized that that wasn't a part he wanted to play. That it would stand in the way of bringing his full self to his work.

## **Malcolm X**

02:05:57:00

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I think that the Nation of Islam, by the early 1960s, was the most compelling new story of the nation, short of the Kennedy election and the Bay of Pigs and the unfolding civil rights movements. That pushed them about fourth in line, in terms of geopolitics. And- and- and why? That's the question because, as I've said, the trajectory of a generation of African Americans born in the

1920s, whether they were born in the north, the west or the south and living with forms of segregation, for them coming of age in WWII and then after, just set off an entirely different set of possibilities. And so, for Gordon Parks to see in Malcolm X something very different, in a person not that much younger than him, less than a decade, also meant that it was his moment to figure this out for himself.

02:07:12:00

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

What you find in that relationship, what you find in the body of work captured by *Life*, is that he's not only covering the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X and interviewing the Elijah Muhammad and members of the Fruits of Islam. He's also trying to figure out, like, am I missing something here? Do I need to join the nation? Do I need to become part of this movement? And that's where I think the— the first person narrative reporting that comes to define Gordon Parks' work as a writer, by this time, is so compelling because it's not just look at the nation from the perspective of how the nation would want you to see it, which is essentially what he does. I mean, he doesn't pull any punches, but he gives them the right to tell their own story. He is not doing gotcha journalism.

02:08:18:02

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

He's not finding ways. I mean, the story of Ronald Stokes, which frames that photo essay, who was one of several Nation of Islam members that tried to keep police out of mosque, from raiding it, gets killed by police officers and

several are shot, but he's the one who dies. Gordon Parks is as outraged by this latest episode of police violence as anybody else. That it happened to happen to a member of the Nation of Islam, only raises another question about the Nation of Islam's own legitimacy in terms of how they understand this moment as compared to what is happening with wanton state violence directed towards civil rights activists. And then, this real question of like, "Do these folks have something that the rest of us are missing? Have they figured out something?" And in that sense, I think he understood Malcolm X's role in Harlem as the most prominent... I mean...

02:09:27:15

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So by 1963, when this-- when they meet and this relationship is unfolding, Malcolm X is already the most popular minister. He's already controversial. He's already positioned himself, rhetorically, against the old, tired Negro leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. And so, Gordon Parks was walking into this relationship, to this professional assignment with a lot of stuff in his head. So I come away from that thinking that the images that he takes are meant to show the legitimacy of a mass movement, that he himself says the NAACP and the National Urban League can't match.

02:20:20:08

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Malcolm X is touching hearts and minds and changing behavior. He's the strictness with which the Nation itself requires conformity to the tenants of the teachings, as Malcolm X would say, of the honorable Elijah Muhammad, is

arresting to Gordon Parks. The conversation he has with the cab driver who picks him up after spending time during one of his interviews with the Nation... is amazing because he asked him, "Do you not drink?" He's like, "No, I don't drink either, but I do- I do like women." And maybe it's not the drinking, I don't want to get that wrong. Anyway, he asked the cab driver, do you follow all the strict rules? And the guy basically says, "Not all of them, but I do like- I do like women." And you can see that Gordon Parks is releasing himself from any judgment on the part of the Nation for choosing the path that it chose. And so, the only thing he has to decide for himself in writing this essay is that it's not exactly the right path for him. He cannot separate the influence of White people in his life, from Wil Haygood and the Julius Rosenwald Fund and Jack Delano and others, from where he's ended up in life. He sees something possible in White allies, a term that they didn't use then, but we would recognize today, that the Nation is rejecting.

02:11:33:23

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

But short of that, you know, I say maybe the best way to put this is like an 80, 20 thing. Gordon Parks is like, I'm 80% with you, but the 20% means I can't quite join a Black separatist nation and so I'm going to hold back, but I have great respect and admiration. And I think, what he wanted other readers to see was that, faced with the conditions of life that most of us have lived with as Black people in this country, ask yourself what choice you would make.

**Muhammad Ali**

02:12:13:02

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I mean, it's almost within... What? Two, three years that he connects with Muhammad Ali and begins to tell that story, both in terms of spending time with Muhammad Ali, who had by that time already shed his slave name as Cassius Clay. But the link between Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X, prior to Malcolm X's assassination in 1965, so by the time they meet, Malcolm X has already been killed. But he opens that photo essay with a story of Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X meeting for the first time in Miami, which is where they are in the 1966 photo essay.

02:12:56:22

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

It's clear that Gordon Parks understands that the Muhammad Ali, who is being vilified for his resistance to Vietnam when Gordon Parks' son is also participating in Vietnam, is a person whose voice in the world is also partly influenced by Malcolm X. That the hubris, and the confidence, and the hyper-masculinity of Muhammad Ali were personality traits that were essentially harnessed into a new religious faith that made him far more disciplined as—as an artist athlete. As someone who, to use a Gordon Parks way of thinking—ism, was the choice of his weapon was his boxing talent to tell a story about putting down all the great White hopes that could be thrown at him, including the Black ones who were the proxies for White people. From Sonny Liston to Floyd Patterson, even to George Fra-- I'm sorry, to Joe Frazier.

02:14:25:16

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

These, in Gordon Parks understanding of Muhammad Ali, was the continuation of being in the presence of a genius whose art was just his hands and his attitude, as compared to Langston Hughes or Richard Wright or Ralph Ellison, or anyone else that he had come to know and admire over the years. This was, in that way, that was the Malcolm X story. too. I mean, Parks could see in these people a version of himself, and in seeing a version of himself who was also trying to say, if you can see me, then you should also be able to see them as well.

***The Fontenelle Family***

02:15:24:15

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So the Fontanelle story in 1967 comes at a pivotal time in the nation. The most proximate crisis that precedes that photo essay is that the Civil Rights Movement had crested with two legislative victories, The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and The Voting Rights Act of 1965. And yet, within a matter of weeks of signing The Voting Rights Act, Watts explodes.

02:15:57:09

Watts, which is an area of South Central Los Angeles, historical Black neighborhood of African American migrants who--many of whom had been there since World War II, when a lot of war jobs brought Black folks to Los Angeles in significant numbers, explodes. It is a massive uprising tied directly



to an instance of police brutality, and the city-- parts of the city go up in flames. For the nation, this is a shocking outcome in the summer of 1965, when all of this work had finally culminated and... really bringing to a head of the final conclusion to what people understood to be the goals of the Civil Rights Movement.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And so you can't really understand the loop that Gordon Parks is in, having started *Life* Magazine in Harlem, looking at the intersection of poverty and youth culture and violence within that culture, to then coming full circle to poverty, youth culture, and violence within that culture, and the moment after the Civil Rights Movement had allegedly fixed all of this. I mean, the thing about Parks is that he's not fooled. It's not as if he had been absent from Harlem or Chicago or Detroit all this time and not recognizing, I mean, he'd just been in Harlem as recently as covering Malcolm X in 1963. So why we ended up with the Fontanelles is that Parks, yet again, is staying true to his roots. This is a structural racism and economic problem, and the national discussion about the Watts riots, which would lead to smaller uprisings.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I have a-- The estimates are that 150 riots or rebellions occur in the mid to late 1960s, leading to a national convention on disorder that Lyndon Johnson empanels and puts at the head of Otto Kerner, who is then governor of Illinois. The circumstances that will create this dissonance between the Civil

Rights Movement and these uprisings, is the gap between Northern racism that is structural, that is not about voting, it's not about Jim Crow signs. It's simply about ensuring that Black people will be the last hired and the first fired. Will be subject to red lining and segregated communities that when they try to move beyond the constraints of those segregated red lined, urban ghettos, police officers will be there to remind them of their second class citizenship. These are the circumstances that Martin Luther King, himself, comes up against when in 1966, after the Civil Rights Movements victories, he goes to Chicago to fight housing segregation.

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KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Essentially, everybody knows that housing is, in many ways, the linchpin of educational segregation, of the lack of job opportunities for African Americans because the manufacturing base of the nation is starting to relocate, first to suburbs, following the route of highways that have been cut literally through the heart of Black communities and decimated the existing Black business districts of those communities. And then those same jobs will leave suburbia and head to the South. And Black folks are not interested in heading back South, not yet at least. They'll do that starting in the 70s and 80s. So, by the time Parks is coming back to Harlem to look at poverty, he's got a sense that something still isn't working. The— the narrative of seeing in Black people the struggle and strife against the structures of inequality that he attempted to do earlier are not working. And so with the Fontanelles, he

basically returned to the scene of the crime to try yet again, to add something.

02:20:45:01

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And I think here what he's doing is speaking to a new generation. I think he's speaking to a generation of technocrats who are not the lefties, you know, the kind of old left of the popular front period of the 1930s that gave rise to all of the New Deal ferment. He's talking to people who are more committed to a kind of liberal democratic notion that mostly this is a problem of individual effort and output. That yes, there are a few rotten apples in policing that beat Black kids up in a little bit too heavy handed and a little too quickly triggered, but by and large, this is not a systemic racism problem in the North. That's exactly the context in which Lyndon Johnson thinks that his great society programs are all working and the Kerner Commission report comes back.

02:21:38:21

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

This- this conclusion happens after the Fontenelle series, but it's part of the context. The report comes back and says, "No, actually White people created the ghetto, White people maintain the ghetto and White people have a vested interest in the ghetto." This is a White people problem, which again is a language that both Baldwin is using by that time, Malcolm X is using and Parks begins to use in his photo essays. So if it's a White people's problem, then the story of the Fontenelles is a story of slumlords who have no interest in actually providing safe, affordable housing to people who are paying

exorbitant amounts in rent. I mean, this sort of notion that they're paying \$70 of rent to live in a place that they didn't create the conditions of its dilapidation. This is actually an old complaint. It may-- went back two generations before to the kitchenettes photographs that accompany *Twelve Million Black Voices*, of which was one of those early works in the New Deal.

02:22:43:21

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I mean, so-- so what Gordon Parks is seeing as an echo, and yet again, turns to this form to say, "You have to see what you have wrought in the lives of these people." When Norman Sr. beats his wife, the story for Gordon Parks is not a story of the pathologies of a Black man who is abusive. It is a story of the pathologies of a society that ensures that Norman Sr. has the lowest possible status in society and the least viable pathways to being a breadwinner. And so, while Parks doesn't say what the Kerner Commission will say when that study is finally published, he's saying it with his camera. He's presenting the same case that will come out of the Kerner Commission report when it takes stock of everything that is happening in these Northern ghettos. I mean, in that sense, it's incredible because while the Kerner Commission report is not about photo photography, what Gordon Parks can do both with his camera and with his own words, rivals a 700-page report and its intended meaning.

*The Learning Tree*

02:24:10:04

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

The quiet, beautifully rendered film, semi-autobiographical, is as much a way of using moving pictures to tell the same story of the dignity of Black people that he'd been telling with his camera. And in that sense, the film is still considered an avant-garde Black-directed film for both creating a template that others would follow. I mean, Black filmmakers, going back to Oscar Micheaux, are not novel in that sense. What is novel, to the extent that Gordon Parks is contributing to this evolving cannon, is that he takes the White gaze out of the frame altogether.

02:25:10:13

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

Earlier Black filmmakers are still conscious of both playing to and inverting stereotypes. The thing about this film is that they're nowhere present. It's not about that. And you will see him shift in *Shaft* (1971) because that sort of avant-garde approach also doesn't have the same reach as Richard Roundtree is going to have and *Shaft*. And Gordon Parks is keenly aware of that too. I think in a way, you could think of *The Learning Tree* as the aesthetic form of his practice and also the content as consistent with his documentary work. But you could see *Shaft* as something that he wasn't doing in his photography. That that opened up to him a different playing ground. And I don't know enough about the history of the relationship between the studio and the filmmaking, but it's probably much more explicitly of his work by the 1970s say after 71, where he is- he is in conversation with a larger predominantly White audience and a Black

audience that needs a hero. The *Learning Tree* is not about a hero. *The Learning Tree* is really about putting in motion and telling a story that is partly true, partly fictional. That is, it's kind of like, well, what if I took these essays and these photos put them together? What would that look like?

***Shaft***

02:27:02:11

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So John Shaft for Gordon Parks and for that moment... I mean this is the... this is Chad Boseman of that moment. We don't have-- I mean, Sidney Portier in many ways, had represented the integrationist model of the Black protagonists who was both anguished by his submerged masculinity and through his restraint is able to represent the race well. So in that sense, Sidney Portier, and to sum-- to a lesser degree, Harry Belafonte represent an older model of Black male protagonist on screen. It's with John Shaft, that it is a conversation about Black masculinity. It is a conversation to both Black and White audiences that essentially says we are both autonomous in the way that we imagine what justice looks like for our own in a corrupt system that doesn't work for us, wasn't built for us. And at the same time, I'm not going to shy away from the-- both the stereotypes and the realness of this community.

02:28:22:22

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And it was the authenticity of the balance between those two tensions that made the film classic to this day. And also a real, let me not use a cliché, fan favorite across the color line, because on one hand, people could see the primary narrative of a cop drama. And on another level, Black people could see this superhero defying the system at every turn. And it was the duality, that line that he played between those two things that I think makes the film so incredible.

**Legacy**

02:29:05:08

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

I think that Gordon Parks... if we were to teach Gordon Parks, if we were to teach visual arts period, if we were to teach art history, the lesson in that story would be that justice is a choice. That presenting the argument in favor of social change, presenting the evidence in support of the argument is never enough. And I think that when I look at this long, amazing life and the genius of a legacy, I see someone who never gave up faith and the possibilities for change through these various mediums, from the photography to the films, to the music, to the beautiful writing.

02:30:09:02

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

But I think the lesson-- So Gordon Parks' own life as lived, could not have been written any differently, as far as I can tell. But that's not the same thing

as what we ought to make of it. And what we could imagine young people who have learned about Gordon Parks' work, because you can teach everything through it. I mean, you know, talk about multiple intelligences like my colleague Howard Gardner has written about. The point of all of this creative output is to find the language that speaks to you. So we want to model that for young people. We want to imagine that some young people might not have gotten it simply by reading it in a textbook. Some young people might not have gotten it by watching *Eyes on the Prize* or some other documentary, but they might've gotten it if they had had an opportunity to see Gordon Parks' images, to read his photo essays.

02:31:16:15

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And so, the lesson, I think, the real challenge for our moment, saturated with imagery and imagery often put in the service of social change is that it's a tool. And it's a tool that produces the potential for change, but it doesn't do it on its own. And I think he learned that lesson, I don't want to say the hard way, because I don't know that he could have lived his life any other way. But I think that if he were trying to tell us something about the power of images to change, he'd say, yes, we have to use them as weapons, but we can't just assume that the viewer is going to buy what we're selling.

02:31:59:00

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

And I don't know how else to make sense of a time of video recordings of the police killings of unarmed people. And the outcomes continue to be as



disappointing as they are, which is that people are still seeing something different than what the intended filmmaker, camera phone shooter, witness is describing. And that is both, I think, dispiriting and at the same time should be empowering. Because if we know the limits of the tools we choose, then we can find better tools. We can make them better. I think Gordon Parks was constantly revising his tools and constantly revisiting his approaches. And to be honest with you, it would be a mistake to suggest that in the life that he lived from the time he started through the 1960s, that he didn't contribute to that change, he absolutely did. The fact that that change turned out to be insufficient 50 years later, going back to the 1960s is not Gordon Parks' fault.

02:33:12:05

KHALIL MUHAMMAD:

So the focus for us is to make sure that we actually teach and learn from him so that young people, whether they are social justice activists, or documentary photographers, or photo journalists or fine artists of one kind or another can take this legacy and build upon it. That they can stand on his shoulders just like he stood on those who walked before him.

END TC: 02:33:38:19