



## LESSON FIVE

# THE CAMERA AS A WEAPON AGAINST INJUSTICE

Art as an Instrument for Social Change

*“When I started documenting the Mike Brown protest, we were standing with Ferguson. That’s when I really realized the camera really is a weapon because the work was able to show people that Baltimore is standing with you, but also allowing people see their self and others through a photograph.”*

**Devin Allen, *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks***



### Essential Questions

- How did Gordon Parks use his camera as a weapon against injustice?
- How can photographs support narrative change?
- What is the role of artists in the work of social justice and cultural change?
- Can photography and visual art be a tool and platform for social change? How?

In this lesson, students will explore how visual arts can be a tool to advance social justice and cultural change. Students will use a critical media literacy framework to closely examine the 1956 Gordon Parks *Life* magazine photo essay, “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” and explore other unpublished photographs Parks took during this assignment. Students will then explore how current artists such as Devin Allen continue to be inspired by Parks’ work to illuminate injustices through the visual image. Students will see the power of visual art to break down barriers of understanding, bring individuals closer to injustices occurring in their communities, and solidify the historical record for future generations.



### Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Discuss how Gordon Parks’ identity as a Black man in America informed his art and his work to further social justice
- Explore several photographic essays and discuss their historical and artistic significance
- Apply a critical media analysis to a photo essay
- Reflect upon the ways current visual artists, such as Devin Allen, play an important role in advancing social justice and cultural change



### Materials

- Equipment for viewing film clips and for projecting high resolution photographs
- A shared online space where students can access additional resources
- Camera (phone or digital camera)
- Access the archived *Life* magazine essay “The Restraints: Open and Hidden” [here](#). The essay begins on page 96.
- Handout 1
- Handout 2

There are two additional photo essays by Gordon Parks that are exemplary of Parks’ use of his camera to document injustice: “The Atmosphere of Crime” (1957) and “The Harlem Family” (1967). These photo essays are available on The Gordon Parks Foundation [website](#).

All photographs by Gordon Parks courtesy and copyright of The Gordon Parks Foundation.



# THE CAMERA AS A WEAPON AGAINST INJUSTICE

## ACTIVITIES

### 1 OPENING

Organize students into small discussion groups.

Have students discuss these prompts and be prepared to share out to the class:

- What is your definition of social justice?
- How can photography and visual art be used as a tool to advance social justice?
- What is a recent image or piece of art you saw seeking to advance social justice?

Have groups share a summary of their discussion and cite the images they identified.

#### **Watch Film Clip 1: Framing the Importance of Narrative Work (2:30)**

*Access in "Film Clips"*

In this clip Bryan Stevenson offers an explanation of the power of changing the cultural narrative and using narrative tools as an effective way to fight against injustice. Through storytelling, Stevenson believes, "Gordon Parks was able to change hearts and minds."

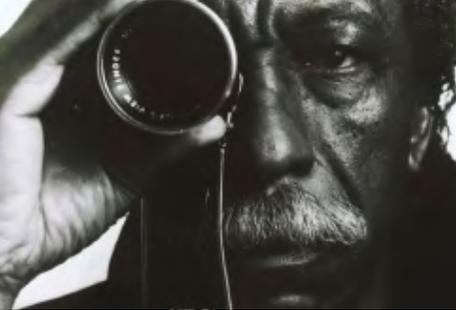
#### **Distribute Handout 1: Quotes**

- Choose one quote that you feel best reflects your point of view.
- Pair/share and discuss your understanding of this quote's meaning and why you

### 2 BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

**Teacher Note:** Have students read this background information independently or in their small group.

In the summer of 1956, *Life* sent photographer Gordon Parks and writer Robert Wallace to Alabama to gather material for a series on segregation. As with many of his photo essays, Parks sought to tell the story through the experience of one family. In this instance it was Mr. and Mrs. Thornton of Mobile, Alabama, who had nine children and nineteen grandchildren. The finished work, "[The Restraints: Open and Hidden](#)" was published on September 24, 1956. Parks and Wallace, both Black men, took considerable personal risk to create this essay as did the entire Thornton family. *Life* originally published 26 photographs, and several were exhibited in Parks' lifetime. It wasn't until 2011, five years after his death, that the bulk of his photographs for this assignment were discovered. Today these images are some of Gordon Parks' most memorable and provocative photographs.



# THE CAMERA AS A WEAPON AGAINST INJUSTICE

## **Watch Film Clip 2: Photographs from Alabama (5:06)**

Access in “Film Clips”

In this clip we learn about the context of Parks’ 1956 photo essay “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” on the lives of Black Americans in Alabama. He created it for *Life* magazine soon after the murder of Emmett Till.

### **3 ANALYZING PHOTOGRAPHS: CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY**

**Teacher Note:** Students will practice critical media analysis skills—a process of engaging with media through an analysis of representations, systems, structures, ideologies, and power dynamics that shape culture. Students will view, discuss, and analyze a selection of Parks’s photographs published in *Life* magazine in 1956, and photographs from the same series but only discovered five years after his death in 2011. Students will engage with the images on their own before discussing their interpretations in small groups.

#### **Distribute Handout 2: Critical Media Literacy Framework**

Review the Critical Media Literacy Framework in Handout 2 with students and clarify any questions. Read over Handout 2 with students and clarify any questions. Explain that for this exercise, the term “text” is defined broadly to include individual photographs, photo essays, and the captions created for the publication.

Next, have students go online to access the archived *Life* magazine essay “The Restraints: Open and Hidden” [here](#), pages 98–109.

Students should view the images selected, read the captions, and enlarge the magazine to read the article.

*Note: This essay was the fourth installment of a four-part series on segregation in the magazine.*

### Discuss: "The Restraints: Open and Hidden" series

- How do you interpret the title of this photo essay "The Restraints: Open and Hidden"?
- How does Gordon Parks' decision to shoot in color present the experience of race in America differently than it would be in black and white? How and why?
- What narrative(s) about Black life in America is being told in this essay?
- Does Gordon Parks' identity as a Black photographer offer an insider point of view in this series? Why is this important to acknowledge?
- Considering the title of the essay, the photographs, and their captions, what is Parks communicating about racism in America?
- What role does art play in making visible experiences such as racism in America that Parks references?

### Watch Interview Thread: Mr & Mrs Thornton (2:30 mins)

Access in "Interviews"

- Project or direct students' attention to one photograph in the magazine titled "Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton."
- Watch and listen to Maurice Berger expanding on the significance of the Mr. & Mrs. Thornton photograph.



Gordon Parks, *Mr. and Mrs. Albert Thornton*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956

Transition from “The Restraints: Open and Hidden” discussion and explain to students this remarkable story. In 2012 The Gordon Parks Foundation discovered a duct-taped box at the bottom of another box in their archives. Inside were slides from “The Restraints: Open and Hidden” assignment that up until then, had not been made public.

Have students read a more in depth background on this collection from [The Gordon Parks Foundation website](#) on this collection that is now titled “Segregation in the South, 1956.”

After reading, have students focus their attention on six images from this discovered archive using the critical media literacy questions in Handout 2.



Gordon Parks, *Airline Terminal*, Atlanta, Georgia, 1956



Gordon Parks, *Ondria Tanner and Her Grandmother Window-shopping*, Mobile, Alabama 1956



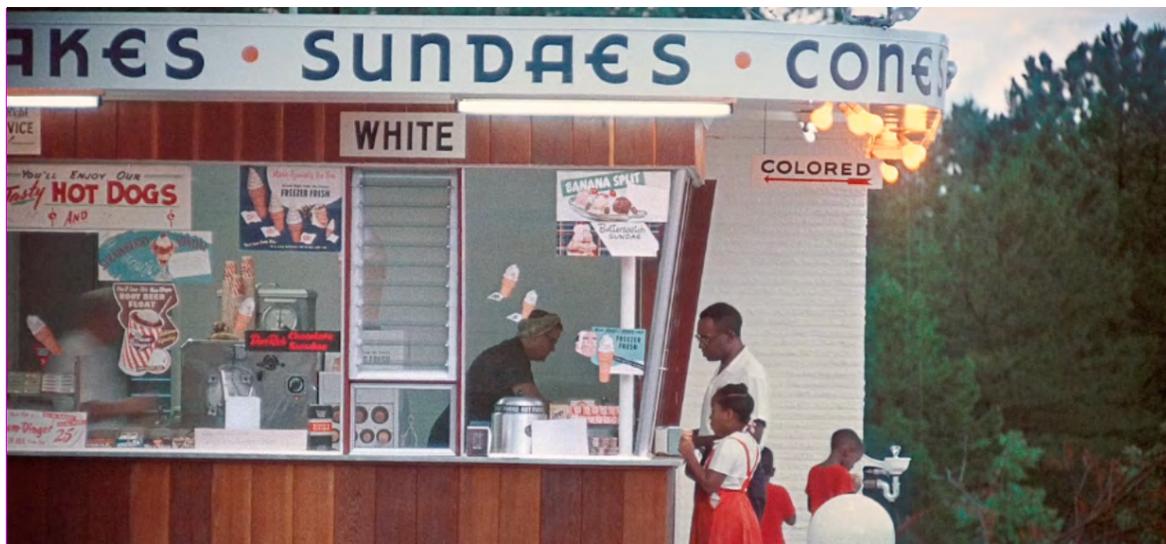
Gordon Parks, *At Segregated Drinking Fountain*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956



Gordon Parks, *Department Store*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956



Gordon Parks, *Outside Looking In*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956



Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Shady Grove, Alabama, 1956

## 4 CLOSE VIEW OF INTERVIEWS

**Teacher Note:** The filmmakers conducted numerous interviews to produce ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks***. The full interviews are accessible in the Interview Archive on the [Kunhardt Film Foundation](#) website. A selection of these interviews, edited and curated together here to create interview threads, are available to deepen students' learning and provide access to new scholarship.

### Watch Interview Thread: Segregation Story (20 min)

Access in "Interviews"

Watch and listen to Maurice Berger, Bryan Stevenson, and Khalil Muhammad expand upon the work of Gordon Parks and this photo essay.



# INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS

Read this reflection from Devin Allen as an introduction to his work.

"I took pictures of everything. I didn't understand how important it was. I just looked at it like it was just making art, something that brings me joy, something that helps me deal with my social anxiety and depression from all of the things that I've been through. So it started off as just a personal journey, you know, trying to understand who I am, digesting my community, my own trauma, but you know as I got deep into my career I was asked to document a protest. I never understood the power [of photography] until I was able to document a protest and document peers, people [who] passed away.... I was able to tell these stories and that's when I really started realizing how powerful an image can be. You know it can make or break a person. It can change a person's life or it can destroy that person's life but at the same time, you're locking in history and you become a part of it. And that's when I really started to realize how important my imagery was to my city.

I fell in love with just being in the moment. You know when I'm doing street photography, it's just me, my camera, and the world."

### **Watch Film Clip 3: Devin Allen (3:08)**

*Access in "Film Clips"*

In this clip we meet Devin Allen, a photographer living and working in Baltimore, who shares how Gordon Parks inspired him in his current work and how he came to embrace the idea that his camera can be used as a weapon for social justice and political change.

Learn more [here](https://devinallenphotography.com/).<sup>1</sup>

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Devin Allen, *Baltimore Uprising* for *Time* magazine, 2015



Devin Allen, *Justice for George Floyd*, 2020



Devin Allen, BLM names of those killed, 2020



Devin Allen, Anti violence movement, 2015

### Small Group Discussion: The Camera as a Weapon

- How do you understand Devin Allen's relationship with photography?
- How does he use the camera as a weapon?



# PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

## THE CAMERA AS A WEAPON AND THE PHOTOGRAPH AS A PLATFORM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CULTURAL CHANGE

### Sample Educator Script

“Devin Allen, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Jamel Shabazz all reference how Gordon Parks showed them the power of the camera as a tool and a weapon to document injustices and make visible issues and individuals that are ignored, neglected, or intentionally silenced.

Look around your community, your school, or beyond to identify an issue you care about. In this exercise, you will be telling a story about this issue using your camera. Your subject doesn't have to be as large as a Black Lives Matter protest or as severe as lead poisoning. It just needs to be an issue that matters to you that you can convey through your own visual images.

When you have finished the photography assignment, take a moment to write an artist statement on your process. An artist statement helps the audience understand your artistic process and vision. It is written in the first person and can include key ideas, inspiration, resources, goals, challenges, or other insights you want to share. An artist statement is usually brief and concise, generally a short paragraph.

Here are some suggested questions and ideas to guide this artist statement:

- How did you decide which issue to photograph?
- What did you want to communicate to the world about this issue through your photographs?
- What do you hope audiences see in your photographs?
- Is there something you hope your audience will do as a result? ”

Special thanks to the educators who contributed their experience and insight to these lesson plans: Kristen Dreher, Jessica Hunsberger, Myron Long, Brady Shoemaker, Sonnet Takahisa, Liliana Wolking.



To request the full film for an educational screening, visit [www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org](http://www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org)

## HANDOUT 1: QUOTES

- Choose one quote that you feel best reflects your point of view or aligns with your experiences.
- Pair/share and discuss your understanding of its meaning and why you chose this particular quote.

“Photography was the way in which I could express my own feelings about racism in America, about the downtrodden. And somehow or another I might transcend my own experience. I live off of my emotions perhaps, you know. And so I had turned those emotions into some mercenary thing by which I could survive.”

— *Gordon Parks*

“The hold of white supremacy on the Black psyche was profound, and it was when we started to see the images that lifted us up, that made us feel that we were worthy, that we began to really demand justice. And so, Gordon Parks was a warrior for justice.”

—*Darren Walker, A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*

“I knew how my city was and the energy that was like kinda vibrating. So I just took to the streets... I remember uploading the image while all of this was going on saying “We’re sick and tired.”

—*Devin Allen, A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks, in reference to the Time magazine cover photograph he shot after the 2015 murder of Freddie Gray in Baltimore.*

“If it wasn’t for Gordon Parks using his camera as a weapon against intolerance, poverty, and racism it wouldn’t have been possible for me to use the photograph—today in the 21st century—as a platform to generate resources to tell these counternarratives; to empower the subjects that are portrayed; and to use those photographs as a catalyst to create the change, and to allow the people to create the change they need who are actually in these images. What’s really important is the transition from a camera as a weapon to a photograph as a platform for social justice and cultural change.”

—*LaToya Ruby Frazier, from a conversation with Bryan Stevenson at the Museum of Modern Art, New York City, November 11, 2021*

“Narrative work is how Parks changed hearts and minds. You can change laws, but if you don’t kind of work on people and the psychology behind bigotry and exclusion, then you’re not going to make any progress.”

—*Bryan Stevenson, A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*

**HANDOUT 2: CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY FRAMEWORK<sup>2</sup>**

**CRITICAL MEDIA LITERACY FRAMEWORK**

**CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDINGS  
AND QUESTIONS**

**CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING**

**1. Social Constructivism**

All information is co-constructed by individuals and/or groups of people who make choices within social contexts.

**2. Languages / Semiotics**

Each medium has its own languages with specific grammar and semantics.

**3. Audience / Positionality**

Individuals and groups understand media messages similarly and/or differently depending on multiple contextual factors.

**4. Politics of Representation**

Media messages and the medium through which they travel always have a bias and support and/or challenge dominant hierarchies of power, privilege and pleasure.

**5. Production / Institutions**

All media texts have a purpose (often commercial or governmental) that is shaped by the creators and/or systems within which they operate.

**6. Social & Environmental Justice**

Media culture is a terrain of struggle that perpetuates or challenges positive and/or negative ideas about people, groups and issues; it is never neutral.

**QUESTIONS**

**WHO** are all the possible people who made choices that helped create this text?

**HOW** was this text constructed and delivered / accessed?

**HOW** could this text be understood differently?

**WHAT** values, points of view, and ideologies are represented or missing from this text or influenced by the medium?

**WHY** was this text created and/or shared?

**WHOM** does this text advantage and/or disadvantage?

<sup>2</sup> <https://guides.library.ucla.edu/educ466>