



LESSON FOUR

THE IMAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Who Tells What Stories

“It goes back to Gordon. You need to be present and talk to people for as long as it takes.... To guide me through the landscape that they inhabit. This was, you know, a real lesson about not only empathizing but listening and taking the instructions and allowing the images to be authored by someone else. Like that’s a real collaboration.”

LaToya Ruby Frazier, *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*



Essential Questions

- What is the relationship between a photographer and their subject?
- What artistic issues are critical to consider between artist and subject?
- Why is Gordon Parks’ approach to building relationships with the people he photographed so important?

In his early years Gordon Parks realized the importance of establishing authentic relationships with the subjects and individuals he wanted to photograph. He used this approach—getting to know his subjects, being in their presence and in relationship with them—consistently throughout his career. This practice continues to inspire artists working today.

A photo essay is a collection of images that when curated side-by-side in a series, tells a story visually. In this lesson, students will explore several of Parks’ photo essays, in which the relationship and trust he built with his subjects allowed every photograph to reveal a powerful sense of beauty and intimacy. Students will apply this idea as they explore the current work of another of the artists featured in the documentary, LaToya Ruby Frazier and her five-year-long photography series, *Flint is Family* (2016–2021).



Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Discuss why building a relationship between photographer and subject is essential
- Explore how building authentic relationships was foundational to Gordon Parks’ work and remains a central part of his legacy today



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)

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

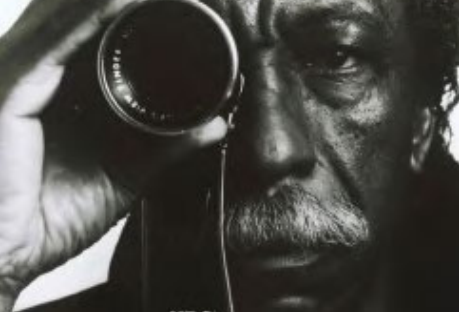


IMAGE AND OBSERVATION

ACTIVITIES

1 OPENING

Have students discuss in pairs, small groups, or as a class:

- Describe the relationship between a photographer and their subject.

Share with students that in 1948 Gordon Parks was hired as a staff photographer for *Life* magazine. *Life* magazine was the most popular magazine in America in the twentieth century. At its peak it had a circulation of over 8 million and was read by roughly 10% of the population. Gordon Parks spent over twenty years there until it stopped circulating as a weekly in 1972.

2 BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Watch Film Clip 1: *Life* magazine (2:30)

Access in “Film Clips”

Teacher Note: This short film segment offers a brief introduction to *Life* magazine, how groundbreaking it was for Gordon Parks to be hired as a staff photographer in 1948, and how significant the publication was in American culture in the 20th century.

After watching the film clip, revisit this reflection from Gordon Parks and ask students to share reactions.

“When I walked into *Life* magazine that, eighteen years ago, you see, a negro—put it like this, a negro builds up a double defense. When you are a kid, you have to prepare to be able to do much more than a white boy, so that if the time comes where your talent is pitted against a white man, you will get the nod because they can’t afford to lose you. The term ‘living in a white man’s world’ is one I don’t particularly like. A lot of negroes use it, a lot of whites use it. But I consider this my world.”

Watch Interview Archive Thread: *Life* magazine (11:00)

Access in “Interviews”

- Watch and listen to Maurice Berger, Paul Roth, Khalil Muhammad, and Michal Raz–Russo expand upon Gordon Parks’ work at *Life*.

3 A CLOSER LOOK: ANALYZING PHOTOGRAPHS

Divide the class into small discussion groups.

Explain that you will be guiding the class through four photographic essays, three by Gordon Parks and one from LaToya Ruby Frazier.

- Introduce the essay with the film or interview segment.
- Have small groups discuss the photo essays using the questions provided.
- Each essay has an Extended Learning reading. If time permits, have students read these additional materials and discuss how these resources enrich their analysis of each essay.

(1) Essay One: Gordon Parks, “Harlem Gang Leader” Series, *Life*, November 1948.

Have students read background.

“In (July) 1948, after stints at *Glamour* and *Vogue* magazines, Gordon Parks set his sights on a staff job at *Life* Magazine. One morning he brought his portfolio to Wilson Hicks, the picture editor at *Life*. Hicks is surprised that Parks had managed to make it as far as his office, agreed however reluctantly, to look at the portfolio. After doing so, and in consultation with two other editors, John Dille and Sally Kirkland, Hicks decided to give Parks a chance, asking him if he had a story in mind. Parks proposed to cover the gang wars in Harlem, suggesting that ‘such a story might help Black kids realize the folly in murdering one another.’ Hicks was skeptical but ultimately he relented.”¹

Watch Film Clip 2: Harlem Gang Leader (3:36)

Access in “Film Clips”

This clip explores the relationship Gordon Parks built with Red Jackson for the *Life* magazine photo essay “Harlem Gang Leader”. Introduce the clip by sharing these framing quotes:

“I didn’t take pictures in the beginning. I just sat with him on the stoop in Harlem on the hot summer days and listened to their talk. One day he just said, ‘When are you going to use your camera?’ And I said, ‘Oh when something is going to happen.’”

—Gordon Parks

“His [Gordon Parks] aim was to create a story from an insider point of view.... The idea that he is fully invested in every one of his subjects.”

—Michal Raz-Russo

¹ Russell Lord, *The Making of an Argument*, pg 28.



Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Harlem, NY, 1948



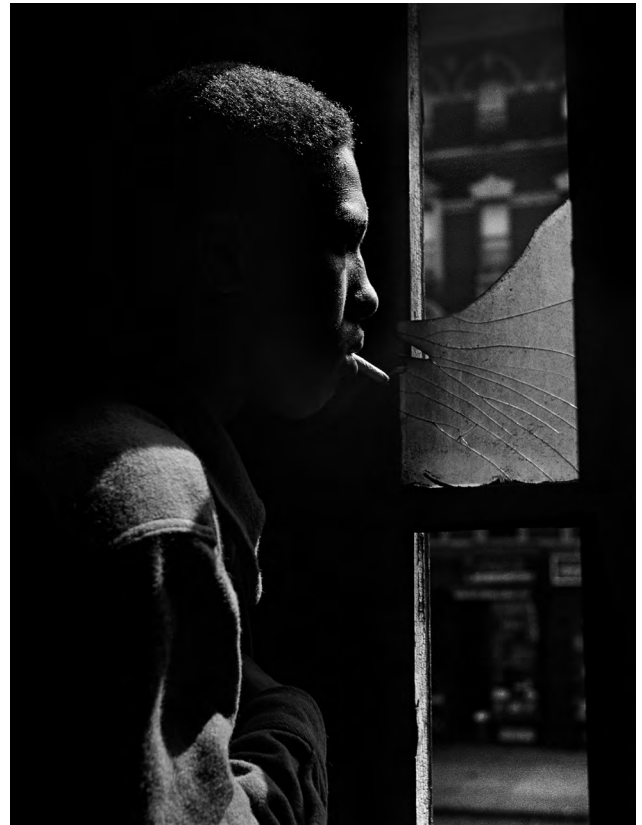
Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, 1948



Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson with His Mother and Brother*, Harlem, New York, 1948



Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson with Child*, Harlem, New York, 1948



Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson*, Harlem, New York, 1948

Discuss: The Relationship Between Gordon Parks and Red Jackson

- What narrative(s) about Red Jackson's life and America are being told through the "Harlem Gang Leader" series?
- Philip Brookman points out that Gordon Parks and Red Jackson "spend a lot of time together before he ever photographs Red.... In some ways this is what he learned from the Farm Security Administration project he does with Ella Watson. He knows that he has to get to know somebody really well and spend time with them and photograph his family."
 - How does knowing that there was a strong relationship established between Red Jackson and Gordon Parks inform how you view and understand these photographs?
- How might Gordon Parks have needed Red Jackson's trust in order to compose such intimate photographs?
- Do these photographs reflect an insider point of view? What evidence supports this?

Extended Learning

Years later Gordon Parks wrote *The Making of an Argument*. In this book he shared that there was a great deal of conversation at the magazine about which images of Red Jackson would be published, how captions would be written, and how the narrative would be laid out. Of the hundreds of images Parks took for this essay, only twenty-one were published.

Parks wrote:

“Trapped...” When readers opened their November 1, 1948, issue of Life magazine to the article titled “Harlem Gang Leader,” this was the first word that greeted them, part of a caption under a compelling portrait of a young black man who gazed out a broken window. The word echoes across the darkened pages, reinforced by the ambitious graphic layout of the title-page spread, in which the portrait is superimposed on an urban landscape. As the text explains, the tower in the upper right corner of the picture “belongs to New York City’s famous Riverside Church. Stretching off to the left of it are the classic buildings of Columbia University and the elegant apartments of some of the city’s leading citizens. Nestled just below these, under the smoke and haze, are the crowded tenements and the cluttered, dreary streets of Harlem.” The portrait is of seventeen-year-old Leonard “Red” Jackson, leader of a Harlem gang called the Midtowners,... This is a bleak view of Jackson’s existence among the shattered buildings and smoking landscape of post-World War II Harlem, a visual parallel for the equally despairing subtitle: “Red Jackson’s life is one of fear, frustration and violence.”

“Harlem Gang Leader” was Gordon Parks’ first major project for Life and therefore the first photo essay in the magazine by a Black photographer. He had proposed a series of pictures about the gang wars plaguing Harlem at the time, believing that if he could draw attention to the problem then perhaps it would be addressed through social programs or private intervention. Parks gained the trust of a group of gang members and their leader, Red Jackson, and produced a series of pictures of them that are artful, emotive, poignant, touching, and sometimes shocking. From this larger body of work, which numbered hundreds of images, twenty-one pictures were selected for reproduction in Life. At each step of the selection process—as Parks chose each shot, or as the picture editors chose from his selection—any intended narrative was complicated by another editorial voice. When readers opened the pages of the magazine, the addition of text, and the readers’ own biases, further rendered the original argument into a fractured, multilayered affair. The process raises questions: What was the intended argument? And whose argument was it?²

Close View of Interviews: Red Jackson (8:00)

Access in “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](https://www.kunhardt.org/) 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.

- Listen to Philip Brookman, Maurice Berger, and Jelani Cobb expand upon Gordon Parks’ groundbreaking photo essay, “Harlem Gang Leader.”

² <https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/publications/gordon-parks/the-making-of-an-argument>

(2) Essay Two: Gordon Parks, "Black Muslims" series, *Life*, 1963.

Read Background:

Life magazine sought to gain access to and report on the influence of the Black Muslim movement in America in the early 1960s. When several white reporters were denied access, Parks—the only Black member of the magazine staff—was asked to try. After hearing Malcolm X give an impassioned speech in Harlem, Parks introduced himself and found that Malcolm X already knew who he was. Malcolm X took Parks to Arizona and introduced him to the head of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, who later agreed to work with Parks. Parks documented the daily activities within the Black Muslim community, among them, self-defense drills, prayer gatherings, classroom sessions, and family meals. He also created piercing portraits of Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad.

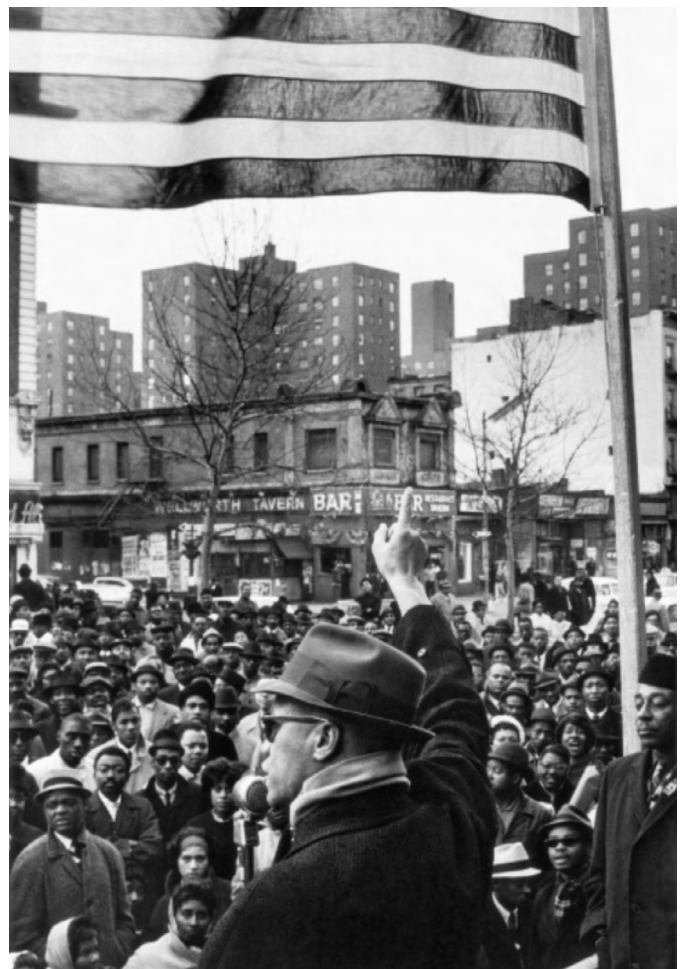
Close View of Interviews: Malcolm X (6:00)

Access in "Interviews"

- Watch and listen to Michal Raz-Russo expand on the Malcolm X images and the importance of this relationship in Gordon Parks' life.



Gordon Parks, *Malcolm X Holding Up Black Muslim Newspaper*, New York, NY 1963



Gordon Parks, *Malcolm X Gives Speech at Rally*, Harlem, New York, 1963

³ Michal Raz-Russo, *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*



Gordon Parks, *Ethel Sharrieff*, Chicago, Illinois, 1963



Gordon Parks, *Malcolm X Leads Muslims in Prayer*, Chicago, Illinois, 1963

Discuss: The Relationship Between Gordon Parks and Malcolm X

- What do you see?
- What do you think the photographer is trying to communicate?
- What questions do you have about the photographs?
- What photograph stands out to you?
- What photograph shows a point of view of the Nation of Islam that you believe only a Black photographer could have taken?
- Gordon Parks said, "I never separated myself from them in terms of being a reporter. I felt frankly, like a Muslim. Malcolm and I really felt like brothers. He was not the fiery monster that he was on the street corner. He was a gentle, sweet guy."
 - What does this sentence say to you about Gordon Parks as a human? As a photographer?
- Given the relationship that Parks developed with the Nation of Islam, and specifically Malcolm X, what visual narrative do you see emerging in this series?
- Was Parks' point of view as an insider or an outsider in this series? Explain your reasoning.

Extended Learning

When *Life* magazine published the story on the Nation of Islam with Gordon Parks' photographs, the headline read, "Black Muslim's Cry Grows Louder. 'The white devil's day is almost over,'" incorporating some of Elijah Muhammad's own words. Gordon Parks penned his own article to accompany this photo essay entitled "'What Their Cry Means to Me'—A Negro's Own Evaluation."

Michal Raz-Russo explains: "The text is quite critical: It presents what was the popular view of the Nation of Islam at the time—as an outsider group, as a somewhat violent group. What's fascinating is that Gordon Parks actually contributes his own separate text saying these are systemic problems across the United States. These are problems that are relevant to everyone's life. These are problems that you should see from this point of view, and that's where he becomes an activist."³

Have students read Gordon Parks' essay "[What Their Cry Means to Me](#)" from *Life's* May 31, 1963 edition. Compare his piece to the sections of the "Black Muslims" series written by *Life's* other journalists. (Refer to the [Gordon Parks Foundation site](#) for helpful framing, and use links to the *Life* magazine archive.)



INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS

Share with students that following in Parks' footsteps, artist LaToya Ruby Frazier uses her photographs as a platform for social justice and cultural change, to tell counternarratives, and to empower the subjects she portrays to be the change that they need.

Read Background:

In 2014 Flint, Michigan switched its drinking water supply from Detroit's system to the Flint River as a cost-savings move resulting in inadequate treatment and testing of the water. Foul-smelling, discolored, and off-tasting water was piped into Flint homes for 18 months causing skin rashes, hair loss, and itchy skin. For months government officials ignored, overlooked, and discounted the communities complaints. Later studies revealed that the water also contained sometimes triple the amount of lead in the water, gravely imperilling the children in the community.

LaToya Ruby Frazier spent five months living in Flint, Michigan to document the community during this crisis. She photographed the city's inhabitants, their protest and organizing, and became deeply immersed in their everyday lives. She met Shea Cobb, an artist, activist, poet, and school bus driver who became a central subject of [Flint is Family](#), along with her mother, Ms. Renée, and her then-eight-year-old daughter, Zion. After those five months, LaToya photographed Shea and Zion in Mississippi, where they'd moved to be with Shea's father.

- Learn more about her work [here](#)⁴
- Watch and listen to **Maurice Berger on LaToya Ruby Frazier (5:28)**. Access in "Interviews"
- Share these photos from LaToya Ruby Frazier's, "Flint is Family" series, published in *Elle* magazine, 2016

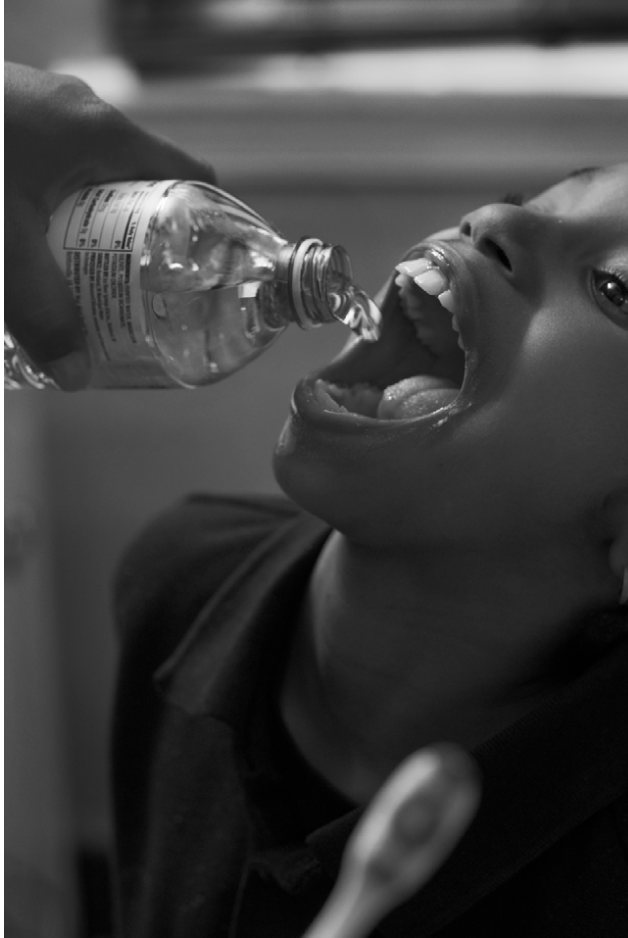


LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Shea Cobb with her daughter, Zion, and her mother, Ms. Renée, outside the Social Network banquet hall*, from the series *Flint is Family*, 2016



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Students and Residents outside Northwestern High School (est. 1964) awaiting the arrival of President Barack Obama, May 4th 2016*. 2016 / 2017

⁴ <https://latoyarubyfrazier.com/>



LaToya Ruby Frazier, Shea Brushes Zions Teeth, from the series *Flint Is Family*, 2016



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *A Sign outside the Grainery Natural Grocery*, from the series *Flint is Family*, 2016

Discuss: LaToya Ruby Frazier's Relationship with Shea Cobb and Zion:

- What do you know about LaToya Ruby Frazier's relationship with her subjects?
- What story do you think she is communicating in this photo essay?
- How do you see the influence of Gordon Parks in LaToya Ruby Frazier's work?
- In the documentary, Frazier says, "This was a real lesson about not only empathizing but listening and taking the instructions and allowing the images to be authored by someone else."
 - How do you understand the idea that an image can be authored by someone other than the photographer?

Additional Resource

[LaToya Ruby Frazier's TED Talk](#): "A creative solution to the water crisis in Flint, Michigan"



PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

IMAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Sample Educator Script

“We learned from Gordon Parks and LaToya Ruby Frazier that it is essential to be present and in relationship with the subjects you photograph. For both artists, and for Devin Allen and Jamel Shabazz, the relationships forged in the process of creation are the heart and soul of their images.

We also heard that building strong relationships took months and months of time. For this exercise, you are not expected to develop new relationships. Rather, think of someone in your close circle of family or friends who you feel would be open to sitting for a series of photographs.

Explore how you feel as a photographer and the kinds of pictures you take when you are working with someone you already know well. Be open to working in partnership with them to help frame and construct the image story you want to tell together.

After taking your photographs, write up an artist statement documenting your process and why you composed the photographs that you did. Remember, 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 who to photograph?
- What was the location you chose to take these photographs?
- One more question about relationship/collaboration
- What is one important moment that you’ll remember that occurred during this assignment?”

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