



LESSON TWO

THE IMAGE AND AGENCY

Making People Be Seen

“Looking through that viewfinder allowed me to look into another world. I called it having a third eye, and I was able to see things that a lot of people weren’t seeing. It gave me a voice and now a purpose.... I became the camera man at my junior high. I always had a camera with me and a lot of my peers wanted their photographs taken, and it made them feel special because again, nobody was doing it at that time.”

Jamel Shabazz, *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*



Essential Questions

- How can images tell stories about individuals and communities in new ways?
- How can a photograph communicate or reveal something about an individual or a community that was previously hidden?
- How can photography give both the artist and subject a greater sense of personal agency?

In this lesson students will explore how the processes and relationships developed through photography can nurture a unique sense of personal agency for both the photographer and the subject. Students will learn and discuss the important role Parks played in making Black life in America more visible to the primarily white audience of *Life* magazine, how his work played a positive role in Black representation in American life, and how this approach continues to inspire the work of current photographer Jamel Shabazz. As Kareem Abdul Jabbar stated in the documentary, “Gordon’s photography forms a foundation for a visual narrative of Black Americans seen through Black eyes.”



Lesson Objectives

Students will:

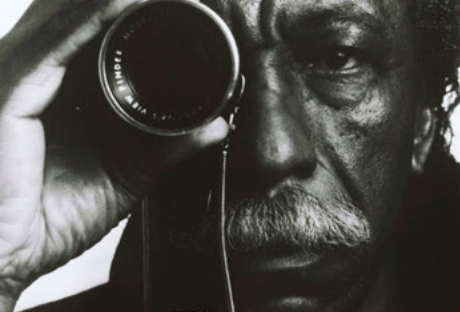
- Discuss how taking photographs can strengthen an individual’s sense of agency
- Strengthen critical media literacy skills through analyzing portraits of Black Americans made by Gordon Parks and photographers he inspired
- Reflect on the role Parks’ images played in representing Black life in America to the primarily white audience of *Life* magazine
- Explore the relationship of Parks’ photography to his activism
- Experiment with composing a photograph that portrays an individual or a community in the ways that they want to be seen and portrayed



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 The Gordon Parks Foundation.



THE IMAGE AND AGENCY

ACTIVITIES

1 OPENING

Write the word agency on the board and offer an example of agency in a sentence. For example: "I want to choose my educational and professional path and have agency over my life."

Have students come up with a working definition of the word, and the term "an individual's sense of agency." Explain to students that they will be exploring the relationship between agency and photography through the work of Gordon Parks and Jamel Shabazz.

2 BUILD BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Watch Film Clip 1: "Image and Agency" (less than one minute)

Access in "Film Clips"

Revisit these two quotes. Ask students to select a phrase from either quote they see as speaking to this idea of agency, turn to a classmate, and discuss why they chose it.

"When Black photographers began capturing African-American life, they created a new relationship for Black people to their own identity. When Gordon Parks came along, he found value and interest and art in the lives of ordinary people."

—Bryan Stevenson

"Gordon put a lens and a light on us, for ourselves and allowed us to see the elegance of the lives that we live and the places where we are."

—Ava DuVernay

Show the students these two Parks portraits (the photographs of the women under the headlines "The Duchess of Glamour" and "She Graduated") that appeared on the front pages of these local newspapers in 1939.

Ask: How do these newspapers demonstrate the reflections in the quotes above?



Watch Film Clip 2: "Jamel Shabazz" (3:20)
Access in "Film Clips"

Photographer Jamel Shabazz discusses the power and energy he experiences as a photographer, how he uses his camera to "build people up" and empower them in the world, and the important role Gordon Parks played in his artistic development.

Watch Film Clip 3: "Through Black Eyes" (1:20)
Access in "Film Clips"

In this clip we listen to reflections on how important it was for the Black community to have Gordon Parks, a Black American, chronicling their lives and building a visual narrative.

Discuss:

- How were white audiences represented through photography in America?
- How were Black audiences represented through photography in America?
- What is significant about the differences or the similarities?

3 A CLOSER LOOK: ANALYZING PHOTOGRAPHS

Teacher Note: Adapt these media literacy questions, or use them in their entirety, to guide students through an analysis of each image.

- What decisions is the photographer making to compose this image?
- How is the point of view of the photography conveyed through these images?
- What do you think the photographer is trying to communicate?
- Does the caption add or take away from your understanding of the photograph?
- How might different people or communities interpret these images?



Gordon Parks, *Harlem Newsboy*, Harlem, New York, 1943



Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Harlem, New York, 1943

4 CLOSE VIEW OF INTERVIEWS

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](#) website. A selection of these interviews, edited and curated together here to create interview threads, is included in each lesson to provide additional insights and scholarship to deepen students' learning.

Two interview threads were created for this lesson.

Visibility and Agency (16:00)

- Watch and listen to Jamel Shabazz, LaToya Ruby Frazier, and Khalil Muhammad expand upon the power that art, especially photography, can empower individuals and communities.

Media, Race, and Representation (22:30)

- Watch and listen to Maurice Berger and Bryan Stevenson discuss how Gordon Parks negotiated his role and responsibility as a Black artist within the context of Jim Crow segregation laws and the Civil Rights Movement.



INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS

Share with students that in each “Inspired By” section in the lessons, they will have the opportunity to connect what they have learned about a practice, approach, or technique of Gordon Parks to an artist working today.

Students will:

- Take a deeper dive into one or more current artist discussed in the documentary
- Explore how Gordon Parks influenced their work and connect it to the topic of the lesson
- Complete a photography assigned based on the lesson topic
- Write an artist statement to accompany the assignment

JAMAL SHABAZZ PHOTOGRAPHS

Sample Educator Script

“As we have learned, Gordon Parks’ legacy lives on in vibrant ways. Many current artists have been inspired by Parks’ approach, his techniques, and the values and ethics he brought to his work.”

Introduce Jamel Shabazz: Image and Agency

Here is Jamel Shabazz’s biography, in his own words:

“Jamel Shabazz was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York. At the age of fifteen, he picked up his first camera and started to document his peers. Inspired by photographers Leonard Freed, James Van Der Zee, and Gordon Parks, he was marveled with their documentation of the African American community. In 1980 as a concerned photographer with a clear vision he embarked on a mission to extensively document various aspects of life in New York City, from youth culture to a wide range of social conditions. Due to its spontaneity and uniqueness, the streets and subway system became backdrops for many of his photographs.”²

Jamel Shabazz Photographs: Image and Agency



Jamel Shabazz, *Brooklyn*, 1983



Jamel Shabazz, *Rolling Partners*, Downtown, Brooklyn, 1982



Jamel Shabazz, *Soros for Life*, *Soros for Life*, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, NYC, 1981



Jamel Shabazz, *Summer in the City with the XMEN*, c. 1980



PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

IMAGE AND AGENCY

Sample Educator Script

“For this photography exercise you will be exploring on your own the power photographs have to give individuals and communities greater agency. Ava DuVernay says, “Gordon put a lens and a light on us, for ourselves and allowed us to see the elegance of the lives that we live and the places where we are.”

To prepare for this assignment, take some time to discuss these questions:

- How do they feel that their community is portrayed by someone outside the community?
- Does that align with what is actually being experienced by members of their community and neighborhood?
- What unseen parts of their community so they want the viewer of their photography to learn?
- How do they want photography to positively impact their surroundings and empower them individually?
- Finally, how do they think they can accomplish that sort of storytelling?

Transition from the discussion to having students choose an aspect of their community, such as family, friends, or faith group, and offer to photograph them in the ways that they want to be seen and portrayed.

After completing this assignment, have students reflect on their process by writing an artist statement. 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 to guide this artist statement:

- How did you decide what to photograph?
- How did you approach this opportunity with your subjects?
- What did you notice about yourself in the practice of photographing

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