



LESSON ONE

BECOMING AN ARTIST

An Introduction to Gordon Parks

“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, *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*



Essential Question

- How did Gordon Parks’ early life experiences inform and shape his artistic point of view?

In this lesson students will be introduced to Gordon Parks and gain background knowledge on his childhood in segregated Fort Scott, Kansas; learn how coming of age in Jim Crow America shaped his identity; meet individuals who informed his point of view as an artist; and explore how his early years shaped his career as a professional photographer.



Lesson Objectives

Students will:

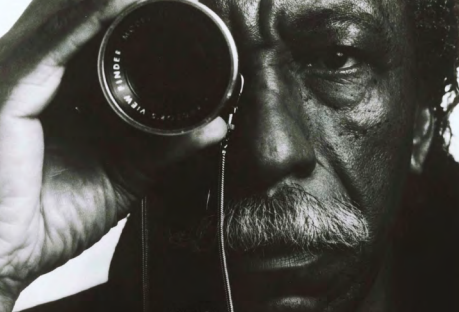
- Gain background knowledge on the early life experiences of Parks through reading selections from his autobiography
- Learn how growing up in segregated America shaped Parks’ artistic point of view
- Compose and photograph a self-portrait



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)
- Handout 1

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



BECOMING AN ARTIST

ACTIVITIES

1 OPENING: INTRODUCTION TO GORDON PARKS

Project the image *Self-Portrait*, 1941.



Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, 1941

Have students discuss the definition of *self-portrait*.

Teacher Note: A self-portrait is a portrait of the artist, by the artist.

Ask students to analyze this self-portrait using context clues and discussing these questions:

- What do you see?
- How is the image framed by the artist?
- As a self-portrait, what is being communicated?
- What information can you infer from the date of this self-portrait?
- What information can you draw from all the information in the caption to inform your analysis?
- What more information is the caption giving us that we have not already discussed in the previous questions?

Extended Learning: To engage students in a deeper understanding and discussion of the importance of photography in Black life have them read bell hook's essay "[In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life](#)" in [Art on My Mind: Visual Politics](#).

2 BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Teacher Note: The readings, film clips, and interviews included in the next three sections build a foundation for students to learn about Gordon Parks. Explain to students that they will read three short excerpts from his autobiography, watch several film clips from the documentary *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*, and watch several collections of interviews about Parks that have been created for this lesson.

Read this biographical overview from [The Gordon Parks Foundation](#)¹ together as a class.

Ask students:

- Who was Gordon Parks?
- What details about Parks' life and career stood out?

Have students discuss and chart details they learned about Gordon Parks' life and any questions that surface on a shared online document, whiteboard, or in their own notes.

Distribute Handout 1: Autobiography Excerpts

Teacher Note: Depending upon the reading level of your students, assign this reading independently or create a jigsaw exercise for triads to complete together.

Have students read these autobiographical excerpts and underline significant details they see as being formative to Parks' career as an artist.

Return to their notes and continue to add to Gordon Parks' portrait.

3 ANALYZING FILM AS TEXT

Watch Film Clip 1: “The Beginning” (3:32)

Access in “Film Clips”

*Content Note: This film clip contains violence and racist language against a young Black man.

In Film Clip 1 we are introduced to Gordon Parks; his early years in segregated Fort Scott, Kansas; and the important role photography played in his life.

After watching the clip, have students continue to add new information about Gordon Parks onto their shared classroom document.

Discuss and Reflect

Teacher Note: Read aloud Bryan Stevenson’s reflection on Gordon Parks, which he shared in the documentary.

“Growing up in Kansas, to be proximate to lynching and racial terrorism, [is] to understand the weight that people of color felt in these spaces where you had to basically be two people—one person around white people that would keep you safe and another person with your family—I think just gave him [Gordon Parks] an insight to the Black narrative.”

- Ask students to discuss their understanding of this statement and what “Black narrative” means in the context of this quote.

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, is included in each lesson to provide additional insights and scholarship to deepen students' learning.

Two interview threads were created for Lesson One and can be accessed in "Interviews"

Early Life and Family (13:00)

Access in "Interviews"

- Watch and listen to Philip Brookman, Maurice Berger, and Adger Cowans share additional background on the biography of Gordon Parks.

Extension: There are many inferences to the racial terror that Gordon Parks experienced early in his life. For a deeper look at the history of racial terror in America, see the Equal Justice Initiatives work "[Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror.](#)" Note that this website contains images of lynching and other forms of racial terror and violence.

Beginning His Career (5:00)

Access in "Interviews"

- Watch and listen to Khalil Muhammad, Jelani Cobb, and Michal Raz-Russo discuss how Gordon Parks began his work as a professional photographer.

Small Group Discussion:

After watching and listening to the interviews, ask the class:

- What additional insights did scholars and friends of Gordon Parks share that deepens your understanding of Parks' early life and experiences?
- What did you learn about the historical context in which Gordon Parks was beginning his career? What was going on in America, and the world, in the 1940s?

Closing Discussion:

Reflecting on what they have learned and discussed about Gordon Parks, return to the essential question for this lesson.

Discuss as a class: How did Gordon Parks' early life experiences and childhood inform and shape his artistic point of view?



INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS

LaToya Ruby Frazier Photographs

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks features several self-portraits taken by LaToya Ruby Frazier in her series *The Notion of Family*. Observe these images and their captions closely and use the discussion questions below.



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Self-Portrait*,
from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2009



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Mom and Me*,
from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2008



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby and Me*,
from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2005



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Huxtables, Mom, and Me*,
from the series *The Notion of Family*, 2008

Discuss:

- What do you notice about each of these photographs?
- What may have LaToya Ruby Frazier been trying to express about herself?
- What artistic decisions did she make to express those things?
- How did she physically or technically execute these images?
- Are there aspects of any of these self-portraits that you would like to apply to your own work?



PORTFOLIO ASSIGNMENT

COMPOSING A SELF PORTRAIT

Teacher Note: This is the first of five photography projects included in this suite of lessons. Explain to students that each lesson will focus on a different technique, approach, or subject matter that Gordon Parks employed. At the end of the five lessons, students will share a final portfolio photograph with the class or with the public.

Sample Educator Script

“Today, taking pictures with cell phones and documenting your everyday life is not so unusual. In fact, you may take dozens of selfies a day—that’s a form of self-portrait. Remember, this lesson began by closely analyzing a self-portrait Gordon Parks composed in 1941 just as he was beginning his career as a photographer.

To celebrate how powerfully one photograph can reflect and communicate who you are, take some time to compose your own self-portrait. Rather than just quickly clicking a snapshot with your phone, consider the following:

- What do you want to communicate about yourself?
- Think about location, time of day, what you want to wear, and if you will include any props or other people.
- What do you want the viewer to think about you?
- What do you want the viewer to know about your experience?
- What do you want the viewer to experience about your community, family, and life through the self portrait?

After completing your self-portrait, write a brief artist statement reflecting upon 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 sentence starters to guide your first artist statement:

- I believe a self portrait _____.
- In creating my self portrait I _____.
- What you cannot see in this self portrait is _____.

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

HANDOUT 1: INTRODUCTION

The readings in this section provide a general overview of Gordon Parks from two points of view: from The Gordon Parks Foundation and Gordon Parks' autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*. The film clips and interviews included in this lesson are excerpted from the documentary film ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*** and from the interviews produced in the making of the film.

HANDOUT 1: SECTION 1

From *A Choice of Weapons*, Gordon Parks²

Content note: The text includes racist and derogatory terms for Black people.

The full meaning of my mother's death had settled over me before they lowered her into the grave. They buried her at two-thirty in the afternoon; now, at nightfall, our big family was starting to break up. Once there had been fifteen of us and, at sixteen, I was the youngest. There was never much money, so now my older brothers and sisters were scraping up enough for my coach ticket north. I would live in St. Paul, Minnesota, with my sister Maggie Lee, as my mother had requested a few minutes before her death....

Our parents had filled us with love and a staunch Methodist religion. We were poor, though I did not know it at the time; the rich soil surrounding our clapboard house had yielded the food for the family. And the love of this family had eased the burden of being black. But there were segregated schools and warnings to avoid white neighborhoods after dark. I always had to sit in the peanut gallery (the Negro section) at the movies. We weren't allowed to drink a soda in the drugstore in town. I was stoned and beaten and called "nigger," "black boy," "darky," "shine." These indignities came so often I began to accept them as normal. Yet I always fought back. Now I considered myself lucky to be alive, three of my close friends had already died of senseless brutality, and I was lucky that I hadn't killed someone myself. Until the very day that I left Fort Scott on that train for the North, there had been a fair chance of being shot or perhaps beaten to death. I could easily have been the victim of mistaken identity, of a sudden act of terror by hate-filled white men, or, for that matter, I could have been murdered by some violent member of my own race. There had been a lot of killing in the border states of Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri, more than I cared to remember.

I was nine years old when the Tulsa riots took place in 1921. Whites had invaded the Negro neighborhood, which turned out to be an armed camp. Many white Tulsans were killed, and rumors had it that the fight would spread into Kansas and beyond....

As the train whistled through the evening, I realized only hours before, during what seemed like a bottomless night, I had left my bed to sleep on the floor beside my mother's coffin.... Yet, as the train sped along, the telegraph poles whizzing toward and past us, I had a feeling that I was escaping a doom which had already trapped the relatives and friends I was leaving behind. For, although I was departing from this beautiful land, it would be impossible ever to forget the fear, hatred and violence that Negroes had suffered upon it.

It was all behind me now. By the next day, there would be what my mother had called “another kind of world, one with more hope and promising things.” She had said, “Make a man of yourself up there. Put something into it, and you’ll get something out of it.” It was her dream for me. When I stepped onto the chilly streets of St. Paul, Minnesota, two days later, I was determined to fulfill that dream. (1 – 7).

HANDOUT 1: SECTION 2

I was born restless. As a child I would saddle a horse and roam the woods and countryside until dark, imagining myself some sort of adventurer, dreaming up situations for myself as I rode along, dressed in blue jeans and a pair of satin boots I filched from my sister Cora’s closet... And there were times when I rode along quietly, searching deep into the woods for that exceptional something that I always felt awaited me. I enjoyed the loneliness that came over me at such times, feeling it somehow set me apart from ordinary ways and lives of other people. It lulled me into dreams that could only be fulfilled far beyond the Kansas cornfields and prairies.

Now, at twenty-three, I was feeling restless again.

“I’m tired of these jobs and this town,” I said suddenly to my wife one Sunday afternoon. “I want to try something else.”

“I’ve known that for a long time,” she answered. “What have you got in mind?”

“There’s the railroad. They’re hiring waiters now. I could see other parts of the country and make money at the same time.”

“It’s okay by me. Just be sure you know what you’re doing,” she said. (169–170).

HANDOUT 1: SECTION 2, PART 2

The first days on the dining cars were exciting for me. Interesting people rode the trains, especially the Pullmans: mountain climbers, politicians, millionaires, Hollywood stars, gamblers, cattlemen. There were the added sights of the Dakotas, Montana, Oregon and Washington. The summer crews usually consisted of six Negro waiters and a white steward. And there were types of crews—those that shared unlawfully in the daily profits and those that didn’t. And you went by the way of the crew, or you got bumped the next trip. (170–171).

You got to know many characters on the road. My favorite one was a waiter named Charlie Quiggley. He was about six feet three, brown-skinned, with busy gray eyebrows, and he stuttered... Charlie used to read a lot and one day I thumbed through a magazine he had left behind. There was a portfolio of photographs in it that I couldn’t forget; they were of migrant workers. Dispossessed, beaten by dust, storms and floods, they roamed the highways in caravans of battered jalopies and wagons between Oklahoma and California scrounging for work. Some were so poor, the captions read, they traveled by

foot, pushing their young in baby buggies and carts... The names of the photographers too stuck in my mind—Arthur Rothstein, Russell Lee, Carl Mydans, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, John Vachon, Jack Delano, Dorothea Lange. They all worked for the Farm Security Administration, a government agency set up by Roosevelt to aid submarginal farmers. These stark images of men, women, and children, caught in their confusion and poverty, saddened me. I asked Charlie to give me the magazine and I took it home and kept looking at those photographs and the names of the photographers for months. (173 – 174).

HANDOUT 1: SECTION 3

Out of curiosity, one morning in December, 1937, I wandered into the Chicago Art Institute on Michigan Avenue. I had no intention of staying long, but awed suddenly by the beautiful paintings I spent several hours in this large and voiceless place. My reaction to these paintings was much the same as that I had toward the FSA photographs nearly five months before, and by now I was convinced of the power of a good picture. And I decided to visit the Institute whenever I came to Chicago.

That same afternoon I went to a movie and, during a newsreel, I saw Japanese war planes bomb the U.S.S. Panay. The photographer had stayed at his post, shooting the final belch of steam and smoke that rose when the ill fated gunboat sank in the Yangtze River. The newspapers and radio reported the bombing; but the newsreel, through its grim directness, brought me face to face with the real horror of war. "It's the same thing the FSA photographers did with poverty," I thought as I sat watching. When the newsreel ended, a voice boomed over the theater and the intercom system, "And here he is, Norman Alley, the photographer who shot this remarkable film!" Alley stepped out on the stage in a white suit amid the cheers of the audience, bowed, and after it was quiet he talked about his experience. I was enthralled. He had no way of knowing it, but he changed my life. I sat through another show; and even before I left the theater I had made up my mind I was going to be a photographer.

The very first thing I did when we reached Seattle was to go camera hunting. But the high prices of the good ones came as a shock;... But I had made up my mind to get a camera before leaving Seattle, and this determination brought me to Abe Cohen's pawnshop on a side street in the downtown area. There were probably better cameras in his shop but only one had that professional look which suited my taste, a Voigtlander Brilliant. I liked that name and when he told me it was only \$12.50, I hurriedly pulled the money from my pocket. "I'll take it," I said without bothering to inspect the camera.

"You want film?" the pawnbroker asked.

"I hadn't thought of this, but I answered, almost indignantly, "Why of course, Give me three rolls."

"What kind?"

"The best you've got" was the only answer I could give him....

Eastman Kodak developed the first roll of film.... And when I went for the prints one of the clerks complimented me on my first efforts. "Keep it up and we'll give you a show." I didn't take him seriously and he realized it. "I mean it," he said. "You've got a good eye."

"Are you kidding?"

"Nope, I'm not. I showed them to the manager this morning. He liked them too."

Still cautious, I thanked him, saying that I would hold him to his word. He kept it; and six weeks later Eastman gave me an exhibit in the window of their downtown Minneapolis store.

I lived in ecstasy for days after that, shooting skiers, clouds, women, children, old men, sand dunes, ocean fronts, famous Hollywood stars sat for me backstage at the Orpheum Theater. My wife began posing for me, and soon all the attractive young Twin City girls took their places before my camera. Though I wasn't paid for it, the St. Paul Pioneer Press ran a feature on some photographs I had taken to them. And my mother-in-law's complaints quieted down. (177 - 180).