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Gordon Parks' Photography: Breaking Down Racial Barriers with Real Life Stories

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Rationale

The day I announced to my seminar (Photographing America: a Cultural History) that I planned to write my unit on the photographs of Gordon Parks, I learned on the evening news that he had died that very day at 93. I was saddened to learn of his death, but he had left a rich and diverse body of work: full-length films he had written and directed, as well as paintings, musical compositions, poetry, both fiction and nonfiction literature, and above all photographs of subjects ranging from millionaires and fashion models to the disenfranchised. "Renaissance man" appeared more than once in the titles of articles about him during the weeks following his death.

In this diversity of work, I am focusing on about a dozen of Parks' black and white photographs taken during the 1940's through the 1960's, a tumultuous time of war and civil strife in our history, when Parks shot with a .35 millimeter camera that he said he considered to be "more powerful and permanent" than a .45 semi-automatic rifle. ⁽¹⁾ It is for these and many other photographs that he was labeled "a one-man wrecking crew of racial barriers." ⁽²⁾ These photographs all appear in Parks' retrospective *Half Past Autumn* ; hence I will refer to this book as *HPA* .

I have devised what I will call a *way of looking through the lens* that Gordon Parks looked through, ultimately, to sharpen my students' visual skills, understanding, and communication skills, as they interact with the photographs of Parks from World War II through the Civil Rights Movement. The at-risk high school students I teach at Wilbur Cross Annex are most comfortable with clear expectations and a format usually in the form of a handout to begin their activities. From the safety of this structure with which they seem most familiar students will, almost unwittingly, move beyond it and enhance their skills. Sometimes I refer to this strategy as "backing in," trying new things before one even realizes it.

The Essential Questions

One of the skills that I want to teach students is to be able to look at a photograph and, ultimately, answer the question, "What is this person's story: socio-economic, cultural, and historical?" To answer this, it will be helpful and usually necessary along the way to answer several questions such as: "What is the **composition** of the photo: Is it made up of verticals/horizontals, borders, open/closed (are there walls blocking the view or is it open?" "What **props** are visible in the photo, including pictures or posters on walls?" "What is the **condition** of the room and items?" "How are the subjects clothed and what is the **condition** of the clothing?" "What do you think is the **significance of the proximity** of items and people to one another?" "What is the approximate **historical time** of the photograph?" "What **emotion** is **expressed** in the faces and body language of the subjects?" "If you were to write a **caption** for the photo, what would it be?" "If the person or people in the photo were **speaking** or having a **conversation**, what would they say?" And last, (the riskiest and most subjective), if you were to describe **what you feel** looking at this person or persons, what would you say?"

Once students have recorded their answers to these questions on a graphic organizer (see Appendix A), using their answers, they will write the story to go with the photo, including the **socio-economic**, **cultural**, and **historical** context of the person or persons. They will have practiced this in the modeling activities explained in the following section, and will use their *practice process* as a rubric for Parks' photos. As they write the story, they will include their reasons using the information they gathered on their graphic organizers. Once they have answered the questions and filled out the graphic organizer, they will have done a lot of preparation for the story they will write. Their response to each photo, including their graphic organizers and stories, will comprise a portfolio for each student.

Beginning with familiar photos

To meet the challenge of how to begin a unit on photographs, some taken half a century ago, I will ask students to bring in photos of themselves, of social gatherings, and photos taken of them in their homes; some have children of their own, so I will encourage them to bring in photos of themselves with their children. From these, I will select a few to copy onto transparencies to show the class on the overhead projector. I might add to this a transparency of a teenager dancing while listening to an Ipod, or someone taking a picture of him- or herself or others with a cell phone, or someone savoring (if such a thing is possible) a burger at a fast food restaurant. Because students love looking at photos of themselves and their peers, we will start to practice our *way of looking through the lens* skills with these familiar, contemporary photos. This is one of the strategies for "backing my students in" to learning new skills.

Using a couple of these photos, I will model this process with the help of my students, and then after practicing it on photos of themselves and their contemporaries, they will move one step beyond themselves and practice the process on a September 19, 2005 *Newsweek* photo (p. 30 - 31) from hurricane Katrina of an African American father clutching his children on a concrete bridge, waiting to be rescued by helicopters overhead; and then on a photo in an advertisement, in the same issue (opposite p. 40), of a Euro-American father in a lawn chair, cuddling his three little girls in matching dresses, in a leafy suburban backyard, waiting,

perhaps, for pork ribs to finish cooking on the grill. These photos will also set the stage for questions about discrimination and disenfranchisement that are inevitable when viewing these two real-life photographs and many of Parks' photos from the 1940's through the 1960's.

Testing the process on Parks' famous "American Gothic"

Now ready for the photos of Gordon Parks, we will begin the process with what many consider his most famous photo, "American Gothic" (*HPA* , p.33), shot in 1942 on his first day of work at the Farm Security Administration in Washington D.C.. Parks said he had been discriminated against three times that day, and somewhat out of anger, he created this photo of a cleaning lady he had met in the building, Ella Watson, a weary, spare black woman holding a large mop in one hand and a broom in the other, standing before a huge American flag hanging on the wall. Students might go on the Internet and find out just what was going on in this country in 1942 that might add to the poignancy of this photo. For example, Blacks were mounting the "Double V" campaign for democracy at *home* as well as abroad. Blacks in the military and at home, even those who had fought in the War for democracy abroad, were severely discriminated against. This "Double V" campaign (victory for democracy at home and victory for democracy abroad) gained tremendous support. Students will not be able to study the photographs of Gordon Parks from the '40's through the '60's without having an understanding of his use of irony - a weary black woman holding a large mop and broom before a huge symbol of equality and justice for all.

With "American Gothic" on the overhead projector, I will guide students through *the looking through the lens process* they have practiced on photos of themselves and their contemporaries, and on the photographs of the African American and Euro-American fathers holding their children in vastly disparate settings.

The first question on the graphic organizer, "What is the **composition** of the photo?" is objective, relying on facts. In "American Gothic" there are verticals for the most part, with Ella Watson dead center flanked by the mop and broom she is holding, standing almost as tall as she, in front of the vertical stripes of a huge American flag hanging on the wall behind her. Her somber expression and direct eye contact with the photographer and hence with the viewer could be construed as an indictment, depending on who's looking. But I am ahead of myself if I am to follow the process I have set out. Adding to the composition of the photo, the broom head, itself, is nearly as large as Ella Watson's torso, perhaps a condemnation of a democracy that expects hard labor from this lean black woman.

The second question, "What **props** are visible in the photo?" includes the mop, the broom, and the American flag. As to "the **condition of the room** ," it is difficult to discern except to note that the wall behind Ms. Watson is large enough to hold a large American flag that reaches upward and out of the frame. The condition of the room and the mop and broom is unremarkable. But, Ms. Watson's simple housedress, while neat, seems to be missing two front buttons and may be pinned shut, possibly indicative of her economic plight. But this interpretation comes later in the process. As to "the **significance of the proximity of items and people** to one another," we could make the observation that while the flag is behind Ella Watson, it nearly overpowers this diminutive cleaning lady in a housedress with missing buttons holding the tools of her labor: a mop and broom. We might speculate on Ella Watson's plight in our democracy represented by the giant flag. To help us with this, we need to study her expression and body language. Her facial expression is somber and her gaze is directly on us.

To answer the question, "What **emotion is expressed** in Ella Watson's face?" some students may perceive that she is resolved to take up her mop and broom and do her job with what strength she has. Others may note resignation in her demeanor, that there is no joy, no optimism for a better future for her, posed here in this real-life photo as an individual on the one hand, and, on the other, as a representative of humanity that democracy left behind or forgot.

I will remind my students of the presence of irony in photographs that I will have introduced in the photos of the African American urban father and the Euro-American suburban father holding and hoping for the well-being of their children in vastly disparate settings. What may be perceived as ironic in "American Gothic" is a middle-aged, spare, African American woman standing before the American flag, symbol of equality and democracy, with her symbols of her government's discrimination and neglect, a mop and a broom. Then of course there is the historical irony that in 1942 we were in the midst of WW II in which African American soldiers were fighting and dying for democracy abroad, and, those who weren't killed, coming home to racism and discrimination.

Having made our way through most of the graphic organizer's questions, students will now **write a caption** for this photo, followed by a **monologue or dialogue** , respectively: the cleaning lady alone or the student, more or less, interviewing the cleaning lady. To build the confidence of my students, we may need to work on this as a team, modeling it.

Perhaps most difficult is the last question on the graphic organizer, " **What do you feel** looking at this person and this photo?" The class might brainstorm possible feelings that the photo elicits, again to jump-start this process and give students prompts, because some of my students don't have a range of vocabulary to express all of the possible feelings that this photo might elicit. Confidence and success are important at the outset so my students don't become intimidated by trying "something unfamiliar."

Armed with the answers on their graphic organizers, their captions, monologues or dialogues, and their own emotional responses to "American Gothic," students will write the **story to go with the photo** . They must include as much as they possibly can of the **socio- economic , cultural** and **historical** context for Ella Watson as she stands before the American flag with her mop and broom. It might build confidence and generate ideas if students worked in pairs or teams of not more than three for this story-writing activity. The make-up of the class might dictate the strategy for this activity.

Ella Watson at home

Parks became very interested in Ella Watson's life story after making that initial photograph and visited her family at home where he developed a photo essay about her and her family. Two of these photos, "Ella Watson and Her Grandchildren ," 1942, (HPA, p. 34) and "Children with Doll ," 1942 , (HPA , p. 35) are among those on which the students will practice their skills that are part of *looking through the lens* .

"Ella and Her Grandchildren," 1942

"Ella and Her Grandchildren," 1942 , is an effective complement to "American Gothic ," 1942 , because it features Ms Watson at home in her private life and actually contributes considerably to our understanding of her pictured as the cleaning lady in a Federal building in our nation's capitol in "American Gothic," 1942.

Parks seems to have positioned his lens in such a way that it almost appears to be two photographs separated by a door frame that runs vertically through the center. As in "American Gothic," there are many vertical lines in the composition: to the far left of the door frame, a gauze curtain running the length of the left side of the photo, a door, a refrigerator, and an open door leading out into the backyard where trees and sky are visible ~ all verticals. This row house or apartment is old and has had hard use from the appearance of the worn wallpaper, cracked plaster, and the rather banged-up doorframe.

The left side of the photo is very domestic, featuring Ella seated in her crowded kitchen on a hot summer evening with her three young grandchildren. They appear to have just finished a meal and she is holding the youngest grandchild on her lap. Just as I noticed the buttons missing on her dress in "American Gothic," I am drawn to the gauntness of her naked arm and her lean body clad in a housedress and apron. The door frame is another expression of her lean, impoverished figure. Items stacked on the refrigerator and on the counter and the absence of kitchen cupboards indicate that this is no up-to-the-minute kitchen. The spareness of the scene is almost reminiscent of the photos of sharecroppers taken by Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange in the South of the 30's. One can scarcely imagine Ella Watson trying to provide for the three grandchildren on her cleaning lady's salary. No wonder she is gaunt, but there are traces of a smile on her face as she gazes down on the grandchild in her lap, and the empty plates on the table in front of her grandchildren are a sign that, at least, there was a meal.

To the right of the center door frame, a large bureau or chest of drawers with a framed mirror mounted on the back takes up nearly the entire right side of the photograph. To add to the geometric shapes, a rectangular picture frame stands on the bureau. Reflected in the old and imperfect bureau mirror, we see Watson's adopted daughter (Parks tells us in the text accompanying the photo that her biological daughter died shortly after giving birth to her second child.), seated in what appears to be the bedroom, smiling and looking somewhat nostalgically at the photo of Watson's parents in the frame on the bureau, making this a multi-generational and very atypical portrait of Ella's parents, her daughter, and Ella and her grandchildren, each framed in separate spaces within the frame of one photograph. Parks has used his lens to tell a multi-layered story in the juxtaposition of the generations of African Americans: the stark domestic reality of Ella and her grandchildren in the left half of the photo, and the other-world quality of Ella Watson's daughter as she reminisces about the photo of her by-gone grandparents in the right half of the photo.

Once students have completed the questions on the graphic organizer and written their **caption** and **dialogue**, it should be challenging to write the family's **socio-economic**, **cultural**, and **historical** story. If they do some research on the Internet for the year 1942, they will discover that rationing of many food items had been imposed by the Federal government as the result of shortages due to the war. Shortages of many food items would only have made it more difficult for Ella Watson to provide for her family. We are left to imagine how she managed the logistics of cleaning government buildings and caring for three young children at the same time.

"Children with a Doll," 1942

Two of Watson's grandchildren, a five year-old girl and a three or four year-old boy, scantily clad, sit on the floor, up against a wall that bears signs of years of hard use and neglect. They are leaning into a white doll, classic in this time period, with fine (china-doll) facial features, a thick mane of flowing hair, and what once must have been an elegant dress. This photo brings to mind that sarcastic rhetorical question, "What is wrong with this picture?" implying something is terribly wrong with a situation, or an expected outcome. In this case two marginalized African American children wearing the barest of clothing, sit on the floor, "up against the

wall," of a decrepit room, snuggling up to a white doll. A photo of children with a doll should radiate with innocence and whimsy, but on the contrary, this is fraught with a kind of pathos.

Parks created symmetry in the composition of this photo by nearly filling up the frame with the trio of children and doll slightly left of center, and added balance to the right of center by including a large square heat grate mounted in the wall just over the little boy's shoulder. The plaster around the grate is dingy and chipped as is the molding or mopboard running along the bottom of the wall. With Parks' attention to detail, the condition of the wall, plaster, and mopboard are all part of the children's story. There is something other-worldly about this slightly dog-eared white doll that, even as they clasp it, represents a society and lifestyle out of reach of these disenfranchised children.

Just as there was irony in "American Gothic" as a spare, elderly African American cleaning woman stands with mop and broom before a huge American flag, symbol of equality and democracy, irony is present in this photo of two children living on the periphery of the social and economic mainstream keeping company with what must have been a classy white doll when new, a symbol of the world to which these children have no access. This shop-worn doll with one shoe missing may be as close as they come. What's more, in 1942 black dolls were probably a rare commodity. I want my students to ponder and explore why Parks took this shot.

An excerpt from Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes* would be provocative as students work with "Children with a Doll . " Pecola, the eleven year-old black protagonist, believes with all her heart that if she had blue eyes she would be beautiful and beloved. It is the one wish she has above all others. Morrison asks the reader to excavate the conundrum of how white society can practice racism so caustic that it causes a little black girl to believe her only avenue to beauty and love is blue eyes. While it is inescapable to feel pity for Pecola, society that wreaks this devastation is the compelling subject.

Black Fighter Pilots Fight to Fly in WW II

By 1943 Parks had been reassigned from taking photos for the Farm Security Administration, documenting migrant workers, to a war correspondent for the Office of War Information, covering the training of the black 332nd Fighter Group that included the Tuskegee Airmen. The photo of five black pilots in full battle gear absorbed in a game of cards in what is known as the Ready Room belies the struggle against racism that they experienced to become fighter pilots and the discriminating practices they endured even after they had successfully completed their training.

It is common knowledge that in WW I blacks were relegated to roles as cooks, cleaners, and laborers. By WW II, Congress was bucking the War Department over a long-standing military policy of racism. Out of this stand-off, the "Tuskegee Experiment" was born, giving blacks a "separate but equal" opportunity to prove themselves, meeting the highest standards, to become fighter pilots.

In "Pilots Gambling in the Ready Room" (*HPA* , p. 67), Parks has captured the success of this "Experiment," as five black fighter pilots in full flight regalia gather around a table playing a hand of cards while waiting for orders. Their posture and game are casual but their gear - - inflatable life-vests, parachute packs, helmets and goggles - - testifies to the highly skilled and courageous work they do.

In the foreground, adding interest, contrast, and perspective, is the photographer's black cap that is part of his war correspondent's uniform (*HPA* , p. 68). Also in the foreground on the table are two ashtrays full of cigarette butts, a sign of a popular habit in the '40's that no doubt relieved the stress of being a fighter pilot. The pilot who is shuffling the cards is smoking.

The backdrop for this photo is the horizontals and verticals of two large windows, one through which the out-of-doors is visible, flanking a large blackboard across the back wall that reads "Flight Operations" at the top. This blackboard, which serves as a backdrop for the pilots, lends a lot of interest, not only because of the vertical and horizontal geometry behind the group of men, but because on the blackboard some of the columns and subheadings can be seen, reading: Pilot / Land / Mission / and Remarks. We actually can read the pilots' names chalked in on the board.

There is an urgency in the details of this photo: a parachute pack lying on the table, inflatable life-vests that the pilots are wearing around their necks, helmets and goggles ready to secure in place. Even though they seem relaxed playing cards, they are ready to run out the door to their fighter planes.

Parks' unprecedented and historical photo is a tribute to these men who had to fight their way out of military kitchens and laundry rooms to fight in flight against Adolph Hitler's Luftwaffe. Background information about the irony of this double struggle for democracy, both at home and abroad, will enrich the students' interaction with this photo, especially when they come to writing the **caption**, **dialogue** and **story** part of their activities.

Students might explore on the Internet this double struggle for democracy to which I referred in my discussion of *American Gothic* as the "Double V" campaign for democracy at home and abroad, and they might also explore the 332nd Fighter Group on the Internet where there are photos of the airmen, their planes, and many accounts of their ascent out of military laundry rooms into the sky.

"The Black Panther Headquarters," another Ready Room

Fast-forward twenty-five years to another "ready room," that of the "Black Panther Headquarters in Berkeley, California," in 1969 (*HPA* , p. 259). Just as the five pilots gambling in the Ready Room in 1943 are revolutionaries fighting for their civil rights, so the five Panthers in Parks' photo are waging a revolution for the rights and very lives of black people in this country. Parks said he spent about three weeks with the Black Panthers, shadowing them and often risking injury and death, to learn and document through photos what life as a Panther was like and to show solidarity.

The Black Panther Party was born out of the civil rights groundswell of the 60's to protect local communities from police brutality and racism. Formed in 1966 by Bobby Seale and Huey Newton, the group also ran medical clinics and provided free food for school children, feeding over 10,000 children every day before they went to school. ⁽³⁾ But they were widely seen as militant revolutionaries who stood up to the white patriarchal establishment over injustice long perpetrated on Blacks in this country. I was there when the Black Panthers came to New Haven and the National Guard rolled in with tanks and turned the New Haven Green and outlying streets into a war zone. My church, First and Summerfield United Methodist, at the corner of Elm and College, on the New Haven Green, served as a refuge for the Panthers.

The Black Panthers became a target for police harassment and raids that led to shoot-outs in which the Panthers lost twenty-five of their members in cities such as Chicago and Oakland. The more one reads about the assaults planned and perpetrated on the Black Panthers, one comes to understand the tension and suspicion in the faces of the five Panthers in Parks' photograph, "Black Panther Headquarters , Berkeley,

California", 1969. They had evidence to believe that at any given moment the police or the FBI might come bursting into their offices or their apartments and homes and open fire on its occupants. It had happened in Chicago. J. Edgar Hoover described the Panthers as " the greatest threat to the internal security of the country," and he wanted them crippled. ⁽⁴⁾

Unlike the fighter pilots focused on a game of cards, the five Panthers in the photo all have their eyes trained on us as if "we" are players in "their" game. And it is a serious one. Or, they see the lens as an inconvenience, distracting them from their work. Unlike the blackboard that is the backdrop behind the fighter pilots with names and missions spelled out in orderly columns, there is something spontaneous or make-shift about the posters and scraps of paper taped and tacked to the walls behind the Panthers. One poster reads, "REVOLUTION, REVOLUTION, Eldridge Cleaver." On another there is a photo of a man, probably a Panther, but I cannot make out who it is. Behind the men and between the cluster of three Panthers on the left and the two on the right, a wrap-around counter is stacked with piles of papers and perhaps a portable copy machine, the tools necessary to their labor. Both the fighter pilots and the Panthers are gathered around a table. The table around which the Panthers are gathered contains an ashtray and a pack of cigarettes, an aluminum container that might hold baked-goods, a drink cup and more papers. There is no "office furniture" in the Panthers' headquarters, no fancy equipment.

In order to write a **caption** , **dialogue** and **story** for this photo, students will need to do some research on the Internet, where they can find a wealth of information.

"Drinking Fountains in Birmingham," Separate and not Equal

Unlike the Ella Watson photo essay, and those of the 332nd Fighter Pilots in training and the Black Panthers, with whom Parks stayed for three weeks, some of his photos were taken on the spur of the moment, "Drinking Fountains in Birmingham," 1956, (*HPA* , p.175), seems to be one of these taken from the window of a car, the window frame making up the lower left corner of the photo. And while it's just an ordinary Dairy Queen in Birmingham with posters plastered on the plate glass window advertising butter pecan and butterscotch sundaes, foot-long hot dogs, and banana splits, it is the bold face letters, COLORED ONLY, displayed on the front of a water fountain where a black woman in a white party dress is drinking in the center of the lens that rivets my attention. Next, almost simultaneously, my eyes take in her young daughter with her back to me, in a flouncy, gauze, white or pastel party dress and a bow in her hair. She may be standing at a take-out window just out of sight of the lens. And then I spy, partly hidden behind the woman's skirt the bold face letters, WHITE ONLY, prominently placed on the front of the *other* fountain.

The **composition** , **props** , **significance of proximity** of people to items, **historical time**, etc., even the irony in a mother and her child "dressed to the nines" coming, as anyone would, to enjoy an ice cream sundae, and being blatantly and obviously systematically discriminated against - - all this makes me think back to my discussion of the innocence assumed and the irony found in the photo "Children with a Doll."

"Black Muslim Schoolchildren," 1963

In the late '50's scenes like the one in Birmingham fanned the flames of the Muslim Movement that promoted education as the means to independence and success in pursuit of being a true follower of Allah. Boys and

girls were educated separately. Also, segregation was self-imposed by black Muslims who believed it was the only way for them to succeed in this racist society.

Parks' photo, "Black Muslim Schoolchildren," 1963, (*HPA* , p. 246), masterfully frames eager young boys dressed in suits, dress shoes, white shirts and ties, carrying books and school supplies, looking up to an adult, probably their teacher, who seems to be greeting them and keeping them in order. The lens and consequently the viewer is located to the side and behind the teacher whose body, dressed in slacks and a sports jacket, takes up the left one-third of the photo while his arm sweeps across the top. The children appear as little ducklings, hovering under the protective wing of father duck.

The youngest boy, perhaps five, front and center, and flanked by six slightly older boys, stands out because he is wearing a light-colored suit and bow tie; he is craning his neck to look up into his teacher's face, and he is carrying a briefcase half his size that may as well have "education," "education," "education" written all over it. As an educator, I can't help wondering what has become of the boys in this photo who are now about fifty.

In **proximity** to one another, the boys are snugly bunched as ducklings under wing. This could be seen as a reflection of the Muslim religion that protects, frames, and structures the experience of its children, bringing them close together, a contrast with "Children with Doll" and with the next photo, "Norman Jr. Reading in Bed." One detail that I noticed after I had been looking quite a while is that one of the boys standing behind the youngest has his hand on the youngest boy's shoulder. I will want to know from my students the significance of this.

"Norman Jr. Reading in Bed," 1967

In 1967 Parks was asked by *Life* magazine for whom he worked to do a photo essay on why black people were rioting and why they were so discontented. He located the Fontenelle family in a tenement in Harlem and visited them daily, becoming involved for years in their struggle. One of the photos he took of Norman Jr. reading in bed is a provocative complement to "Black Muslim Schoolchildren."

The title of this photo , " Norman Jr. Reading in Bed," (*HPA* , p. 233), sounds promising: a boy reading in bed. But what we see is a joyless adolescent, under a grey blanket, wearing his jacket, most likely because there is no heat, lying on a mattress against a wall with three large holes in the plaster that exposes the lath underneath. It is not clear whether there are sheets on the bed or whether the striped fabric is pillow-ticking, the covering over the mattress.

"Black Muslim Schoolchildren" conveys optimism that books and education will be the answer for the children in the photo, but I have a sinking feeling, looking at Norman Jr., that his book is not enough to lift him out of the morass of his poverty. Even in the composition of the photo, Norman is horizontal, lying on the bed against a decrepit wall with holes in the plaster, signifying emptiness; in a sense, he is already down. In "Black Muslim Schoolchildren," verticals make up most of the composition and the bright-eyed boys are about to move forward into their future.

Parks photo essays include Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam

Life magazine also wanted Gordon Parks to cover Malcolm X, a lightning rod in the Black Muslim Movement in the '60's. Like his coverage of the Black Panthers, this was a place he could never have gone had it not been for his race and his commitment to photo journalism and frankly to his commitment to the subjects he composed through the lens. It was necessary for him to meet twice with Elijah Mohammed, the head of the Nation of Islam in this country, before he was given the go-ahead. Parks relates that even Malcolm X questioned his employment for the "white devils" that owned and ran *Life* magazine. Once Parks met with the approval of Elijah Mohammed, he traveled with Malcolm X almost exclusively and his access to the Nation of Islam was extensive.

The composition of the photo, "Malcolm X Addressing Black Muslim Rally in Chicago," 1963, (*HPA* , p. 241), reveals Malcolm X in a dark suit, white dress shirt, and tie, in the spotlight. The background is black, setting off his figure. The only visible prop is the microphone in front of him and a folded handkerchief he holds in his raised left hand, perhaps a gesture to quiet the crowd. He is wearing the same glasses he was given in prison, where he did seven years for burglary, prior to his conversion to Islam.

Excerpts from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* would add a rich and engaging backdrop to flesh out this photograph for the students. Three chapters in particular, "Caught," "Satan," and "Saved," cover his life as a hustler and his capture, his outrageous behavior in prison that relegated him to long stints in solitary confinement, and his recovery and metamorphosis through Islam. Malcolm X says, in his autobiography, that he had a vocabulary of about two hundred words as a hustler. In prison he read and copied the entire dictionary, and became an eloquent, compelling debater and speaker.

Students will learn a great deal by studying this background as they complete their graphic organizer, write a caption, a monologue, and write Malcolm X's story. By the time they study this photograph or the following one of Red Jackson, either of these might serve as an assessment of the skills they have learned in this unit.

Red Jackson, 16 year-old gang leader in Harlem, 1948

In 1948 Parks screwed up his courage and took his photographs to *Life* magazine to look for work. As he tells it, he was nearly thrown out since he had no appointment and just walked into the picture editor's office, unannounced. But his photos were so well received that, on the spot, he was given two assignments: a feature on gang warfare in Harlem, and a fashion show of Paris collections. By this time he had worked for *Vogue* magazine for a few years, and fashion photos were part of his portfolio.

On a visit to a precinct station in Harlem, Parks ran into Red Jackson, the gang leader of a notorious gang in Harlem, the Midtowners. By offering Jackson the use of his car as a limousine service, Parks gained access to many of the gang members while he ferried them around town.

One result is the photo of "Red Jackson," (*HPA* , p. 81), that profiles his broken nose and cigarette dangling from his mouth, as he looks through a broken window. The light coming through the broken window sets off his facial features and shoulder, creating a contrast with the darkness behind him. The broken window is

fractured in horizontal waves; the glass is missing at both the bottom and top.

Although Parks took this photo in 1948 and he took Malcolm X in 1963, these two photos of black men, both powerful in their own right, provoke a dialogue *between* them. Malcolm X is dressed in a suit with a white shirt and tie; some sort of lapel pin is visible, and he has a pen in his pocket. He is a literate man, addressing an audience with a microphone. His arm is raised as if to quiet the crowd. Jackson is wearing a flannel or fleece shirt, peering, stealthily, out through the broken window, surveying the street from the shadows.

Here too, the three chapters from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* seem appropriate, as Malcolm X was himself once a hustler who lived on the street, just as Red Jackson did.

Gordon Parks on location directing his film *The Learning Tree*

This last photo in the unit is not taken by Parks but rather is taken by his son, Gordon, Jr. of Gordon Parks on location in 1965, (*HPA* , p. 253), directing *The Learning Tree* , a film based on his autobiographical novel.

Because I have explicated this photograph in Lesson Plan # 2, I will not go into great detail here but to say that in this, the only color photo in the collection, Parks veritably soars in the blue sky, having been lifted along with his assistant and the camera man on a platform, over the scene that he is directing. He holds a megaphone, a symbol of his role as director, and in a way, an extension of his camera.

This photograph is also a powerful contrast with "Children with Doll," Lesson Plan # 1.

Final class project

Ideally, students would complete the unit by looking through the lens of their own cameras and taking photos that are stories. If this is not possible, they might use photos from all kinds of magazines and create their own collage/photo, fill out a graphic organizer on it following the process they have learned, and write the story that they want it to tell, including the socio-economic, cultural, and historical elements that we have been looking for in the Parks' photos. They will present these projects to the rest of the class. Obviously once completed, they will make a great visual display in the classroom. This final project will also serve as another means of assessment for the skills they have learned in this unit.

Lesson plan # 1: Answering the Essential Questions for "Children with a Doll," 1942

Objective: Students will practice making observations that answer the Essential Questions laid out on the landscape graphic organizers (see samples of these in Appendix A.) Where appropriate, they will record the evidence that supports these observations. Since the focus of the unit is to sharpen students' visual, understanding, and communications skills by looking through Gordon Parks' camera lens, this exercise will challenge them to practice on one of his photographs so that ultimately they will be able to write the story of the subjects in the photograph.

As students describe the **composition** of the photo, they will note that there are three forms, (two children and a doll), on the left side, balanced by the rectangular heating grate on the right, over the little boy's shoulder. If they squint, they will see that the forms become a blur and the balance in the photo is more evident. The children and doll are clustered, sitting on the floor, up against the wall that in a way serves as a barrier to whatever might lie beyond. Parks has obviously crouched to take this photo, for the angle of the lens is just slightly above the children. Therefore, as we view them, they are further tucked into the corner created by the floor and wall.

The outstanding **prop** in this photo is the white doll with fine facial features and long, flowing hair, a white or pastel dress, and one shoe missing.

The **condition of the room** is decrepit with chipped paint, and dingy, chipped plaster around the heat grate in the wall. The wooden floor has had hard use and there are no rugs. The **condition of the doll** is best described as dog-eared. Its hands look dirty, the sole of the one remaining shoe seems cracked. What once must have been an elegant doll is now somewhat marginal.

The children are scantily **dressed** indicating that it must be summer, but the little girl's tank top looks as if it may be too small and somewhat threadbare around the edges. Their quasi-naked little bodies against the dingy wall and floor convey an over-all impression of disenfranchisement.

It may be challenging for my students to wrestle with the **significance of the proximity** of the children to the doll. While the children are leaning into the doll that, juxtaposed to them, seems somehow other-worldly, and the little girl has her arm around it, possessing it physically, this may be as close as these children get to the lifestyle and society that the white doll represents. Here students are being challenged to consider symbolism and irony that is also present in "American Gothic," the first Parks' photograph we will view and study.

Because Parks tags this photo with the year he took it, 1942, and because the photo prior to this one includes these same children with their grandmother, and they will have done some research on what was happening in this country in 1942, it will only be necessary here to review what they have learned about **this historical period** in this country.

As to what **emotion is expressed in their faces and body language** students may observe that the little boy is looking down and his head is slightly tilted down as well. He is not smiling. The little girl is looking at the camera as she cuddles the doll, but her vague smile seems tentative. There is something old or resigned in her facial expression. Their bodies seem huddled in the corner.

The next two entries on the graphic organizer are to: **write a caption** for the photo, and **write a brief dialogue** between the children, (this could also include a student asking them questions).

Finally, students are asked **what they feel** looking at this photo, especially after completing the entries prior to this one. This should allow for a wide range, from emotions to comments, and questions.

Once students have completed this organizer, they will be ready to **write the story to go with the photo** , including the socio-economic, cultural, and historical context of the children. The final challenge will be to reflect on and discuss how this photograph breaks down racial barriers.

Lesson plan # 2: Answering the Essential Questions for "Gordon Parks directing The Learning Tree," 1965

Objective: Students will practice making observations that answer the Essential Questions laid out on the landscape graphic organizers (see samples of these in Appendix A.) Where appropriate, they will record the evidence that supports these observations. Although the focus of this unit is to sharpen students' visual, understanding, and communication skills by looking through Gordon Parks' camera lens, in this exercise students will actually be looking at Parks, *himself* , in a color photo taken by his son, Gordon, Jr., but they will follow the same process that they are using for all of Parks' photographs to prepare them to write the story of the subjects in the photo.

As students record the **composition** of this color photo, they will see, slightly to the right of center, an airborne platform holding two men and a huge movie camera that dominates the center, with a third man barely visible behind it. Arching over the man on the right, the camera man, and the camera is a large patio-size umbrella, I assume to protect against bad weather. The entire background behind Gordon Parks is brilliant blue sky brushed with wisps of cirrus clouds. Gordon Parks, Jr. took this photo standing on the ground, enhancing the elevation of the platform and men.

Students will make observations about the colors that appear in this photo, noting that red shows up on the megaphone, on the camera stand, and in the stripes of the umbrella, perhaps not intentionally but adding interest to the photo. The men are wearing light tan pants and Parks' collar on his sheepskin jacket is light tan. The other visible man is a white man, wearing a navy sweater, similar in color to the other color in the umbrella. Men, camera, and umbrella stand out, and appear to soar, in the royal blue sky.

While the massive movie camera in this photo is an impressive **prop** and states clearly the business of these men, the megaphone that Parks is holding to his mouth at that moment testifies as to who is in charge. And the open space of sky to the left of Parks gives him room, using his megaphone, to direct whoever is on the ground. While this is actually part of the composition of the photo, it plays into the dynamics of the story. Another prop, while it is part of Parks' clothing is the cowboy hat he holds in his other hand, adding to his overall image, along with his muddy cowboy boots.

The **condition of the items** from the platform where the men are perched high in the air, to the actual movie camera, striped umbrella, and the megaphone, seems first-rate.

The men's **clothing** is in **excellent condition** , Parks in a sheepskin jacket, tan jeans, brown cowboy boots with a cowboy hat in his lap; the other visible man wears tan khaki pants, a navy blue crewneck sweater over a shirt, and low-cut rubber boots over his shoes. Both men's boots are muddy. All that is visible of the third man's clothing behind the camera is a royal blue jacket.

The **significance of the proximity** of the men and items to one another seems pretty clear. While three men are clustered on the compact platform of what must be a crane, and one of the men is running the camera, the man with the megaphone, Parks, is in charge, while the other fully visible man may be assisting him.

The **historical time period** of this photo is shortly after the publication of Parks' autobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree* that was published in 1963, during the racially turbulent '60's. There were no black movie directors at the time, making Parks' undertaking as film director of his own novel unprecedented.

Students may notice that the **emotion expressed** by the men's body language is one of seriousness. Their lofty position of responsibility requires that they are attentive and observant, and that they also instruct and guide, especially Parks, with his megaphone.

Students are now ready to create a **caption** for the photo. It is not out of the question that someone might suggest, "Gordon Parks soars as director of his movie, *The Learning Tree* ."

When students write the **monologue** or **conversation** they might create what Parks is shouting through his megaphone. Because Parks has commented on his autobiographical novel in interviews, students might research a few of these on the Internet to find out what *The Learning Tree* is about and get some ideas what Parks is saying to his actors. In fact, someone might be willing to read the novel for extra credit and make a presentation to the class.

As to **what they feel** looking at the photo, students might think about what they felt looking at the children huddled on the floor with the doll, and then think how this photo makes them feel. They might even go back and look again at the children with the Doll to remind them how they felt about that photo, and then revisit this photo.

Once students have completed the graphic organizers for this photo, they will be ready to **write the story** of the people in it, including the socio-economic, cultural, and historical context. Once they have written their story, the final challenge will be to reflect on and discuss how this photograph breaks down racial barriers.

Lesson Plan # 3: Answering the Essential Questions for "Pilots Gambling in the Ready Room, "1943

Objective: Students will practice making observations that answer the Essential Questions laid out on the landscape graphic organizers (see samples of these in Appendix A.) Where appropriate, they will record the evidence that supports these observations. Since the focus of the unit is to sharpen students' visual, understanding, and communication skills by looking through Gordon Parks' camera lens, this exercise will challenge them to practice on one of his photographs so that ultimately, they will be able to write the story of the subjects in the photograph.

As students describe the **composition** of the photo, they will observe five figures clustered around a table in the foreground and in the background the horizontals and verticals of two large windows, flanking a blackboard across the back of the wall that reads "FLIGHT OPERATIONS" at the top. The blackboard, separated into columns and subheadings can be seen, reading: Pilot / Land / Mission / and Remarks.

Some of the writing under the subheadings is legible. While the blackboard serves as a backdrop and a barrier to a degree, the windows open up the room to the outside.

Among the **props** in the photo, Parks' dark hat that is part of his war correspondent's uniform, rests on the table in the foreground, adding interest, contrast, and perspective (*HPA* , p. 68). Also on the table, there are ashtrays, and matchbooks. One pilot is shuffling cards. Perhaps the card game serves as a diversion for the men whose real mission is written on the blackboard behind them. Three men are wearing leather flight helmets with goggles atop their heads, and inflatable life vests. One appears to be wearing a pilot's jump suit. In the foreground to the right of Parks' hat there is a large knife in a sheath resting on a parachute pack. Some of the pilots' names are legible chalked in on the blackboard behind the men. Even though the men are playing cards, there is an urgency in the details of the photo: a parachute, the pilots actually wearing their helmets, goggles, and inflatable life-vests.

The **condition** of the ready room, as it is called, seems stream-lined for its purpose: blackboard and table. If there is furniture besides the chairs in which a couple of men are seated, it is not visible. Through the window on the right, a cross is visible on the side of what might be an ambulance, further clarifying the danger the men's mission.

The men's **clothing** is clearly that of military pilots. Three are wearing leather flight jackets and two have on what must be flight fatigues. Their regulation clothing and gear appears in top-notch condition.

The **proximity** of the men to one another and to the items is very close, with everything at the ready for the moment they must run out the door to their planes. Even the fact the one man is sitting on the table and two are leaning into the table, actually standing, implies that they expect to leave momentarily. This is hardly a casual, laid-back game of cards.

As to the **historical time** of this photo, we know from Parks that it was taken in 1943, in the throes of WW II, and with some research, students will learn that this was the first time black men were trained as fighter pilots, albeit, segregated. Students will discover that these Tuskegee airmen were part of the famous "Tuskegee Experiment," giving black men a "separate but equal" opportunity to prove themselves as fighter pilots. As I pointed out in my narrative, they had to fight for the opportunity to train as pilots so they could fight for democracy abroad. Ironically, it was denied to them at home.

The **emotions expressed** in their faces and body language seem serious, and while they are playing a game of cards, they are anything but relaxed. Their serious facial expressions and tentative body language are consistent with the ambulance through the window and the fact that these are fighter pilots at the ready.

A **caption** for this photo might be, "Black fighter pilots in WWII gambling on more than cards." One might say that they were gambling that they were as good as any white fighter pilot, and they were gambling with their very lives.

Students will write a brief **dialogue** among the men, perhaps a card game interspersed with talk of the mission they are about to fly. This could also be an opportunity for a student to interview these men.

Finally, students will respond to the most subjective questions; **what do you feel** looking at this photo, now that you know about these men and their double mission of fighter pilots and trail-blazers for equality?

Armed with the responses and information on the graphic organizers, students will **write the story of these men** , including the socio-economic, cultural, and historical context. These stories and the graphic organizers will prepare the students for the challenge of reflecting on and discussing how this photo breaks down racial barriers.

Appendix A: The Essential Questions for Parks' Photos

Composition : Describe the make-up of the photo: vertical and/or horizontal lines, borders, open/closed; are there walls blocking the view or is the view open?

What **props** are visible, including: posters, writing or pictures on the walls; items that people are holding.

What is the **condition** of the room, the walls and floor; and the condition of the items?

Describe the people's **clothing**, its details and **condition** .

What do you think is the **significance of the proximity** of people and items to one another?

What is the **approximate historical time** of the photograph? (Your teacher may give you some clues and/or you may have to do some research on the Internet.)

What **emotion** is **expressed** in the faces and body language of the subjects and why?

Write a **caption** for this photo.

Write a brief **monologue** or **conversation** among the subjects in the photo.

Describe **what you feel** looking at this person or persons in the photo.

Appendix B: Language Arts Standards addressed in my unit.

Language Arts English Standard 5.0 Viewing

Students will develop strategic viewing skills by interpreting and constructing meaning from visual sources.

While students will read supplemental material and write routinely in this unit, it focuses on viewing photographs and most of the skills that come into play in this Standard. For example, students will establish a purpose for viewing the photographs and they will develop questions prior to viewing the photographs taken by Gordon Parks that are featured in this unit. Students will use graphic organizers to organize information while viewing the photographs. While viewing, they will construct meaning through initial understanding and interpretation of the photographs. After viewing, students will construct meaning through analyzing, elaborating and responding critically. They will compare and contrast similar topics, themes, characters and problems.

Websites

www.answers.com/topics/332nd-fighter-group

A brief but informative piece about the rigorous standards to which the 332nd Fighter Group was held and their success.

www.ebsqart.com/Artmagazine/za_264.htm

A summary including images of the life and development of Parks as a renowned photographer.

www.edhelper.com/ReadingComprehension/35406.html

An account of the struggle of black men to be accepted into the military as pilots and the "Tuskegee Experiment."

www.gale.com/free_resources/bhm/bio/parks_g.htm

An extensive biography of Gordon Parks.

www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5250990

A short feature on the life and death of Gordon Parks appearing on "Morning Edition," March 8, 2006.

www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USApantherB.htm

An in-depth biography of the Black Panthers and its individual members.

Working Bibliography

Malcolm X and Alex Haley. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1964.

Malcolm X and Alex Haley collaborated to create this book that tells the profound metamorphosis of a young black boy ripped from his home and the care of his parents, turned hustler as a young adult, served seven years in prison, became a Muslim in prison, and educated himself to become the most powerful voice for the Nation of Islam in the United States before his assassination in 1965.

Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eyes*. New York: Plume, 1994.

Toni Morrison's first novel, set in her hometown of Lorain Ohio in the early 1940's, the eleven year-old black protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, longs for blue eyes in the hope that she will be beautiful and beloved like the blue-eyed children of America.

Newsweek, Volume CXLVVI, No. 12: New York: September 19, 2005.

This issue focusing largely on Katrina, contains the two photographs of fathers with their children featured in the section of my unit titled, Beginning with familiar photos.

Parks, Gordon. *Half Past Autumn, a Retrospective*. Boston: Bulfinch Press, 1997.

This collection of approximately 300 photographs, accompanied by Parks's reflections and recollections about his life and development as an artist, contains all of the photographs that I feature in this unit.

Puente, Maria and Jym Wilson. "Gordon Parks' unique American Perspective." *USA TODAY* . Wednesday, March 8, 2006.

An overview of the range and richness of Parks' life and work.

Wranovics, John."Weapon of Choice." *The New York Times Book Review* . New York: January 8, 2006.

Wranovics very favorably reviews Parks' newest memoir, *A Hungry Heart* , in which Parks reflects more about the many and diverse people in his life than about his photography.

Endnotes

(1) Parks, p. 261.

(2) Wranovics, p. 15.

(3) www.spartacusachoolnet., p. 1.

(4) www.spartacusschoolnet., p. 2.

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