



How Gordon Parks Became Gordon Parks

Deborah Willis in Conversation
with James Estrin

Gordon Parks,
Untitled, 1941
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Foundation

At the beginning of the 1940s, Gordon Parks was a self-taught fashion and portrait photographer documenting daily life in both St. Paul and Chicago. By the end of the decade, he was photographing for *Life* magazine. While his career has been examined closely, both by himself and by others, this formative decade has attracted less attention than his experiences as the first black staff photographer at *Life* and later as a groundbreaking Hollywood filmmaker have.

Deborah Willis, who is a noted photographer and author and the chair of the Department of Photography and Imaging at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University, knew Parks well. In 2018, she spoke with James Estrin about Parks and his legacy for the *New York Times*.

James Estrin: **What I find extraordinary is Parks’s range and all of these different things during the period from the 1940s to the 1950s.**

Deborah Willis: Gordon was comfortable with knowing—and making different images about different communities. He understood what it meant to be an American in different forms and different ways. At the black newspaper that he worked at in St. Paul, he demanded a byline. He understood what it meant to have his name imprinted on the newspaper when he was making photographs of gorgeous ladies, college students, women who wanted to be models. He’s actually part of their dream. He’s documenting their dreaming of their lives outside of domestic work—opportunities that were broader.

JE: **The photographs he made for Standard Oil are mostly of white people working. But if you look at the family scenes over dinner you see the composure that he must have had to make them as comfortable as they were.**

DW: I believe that he was able to make people feel at ease. You know, he was just a good soul.

JE: **How did you meet him?**

DW: I was studying photography at the Philadelphia College of Art, and there were no black photographers in the history books. I was working on a paper for one of my teachers and asked, “Where are the black photographers?”

I remembered seeing Gordon’s work in *Life* magazine when I was a teenager and was curious about why he was not in the history of photography. I wrote a letter, in purely undergraduate language, that said, “I’m writing a paper on black photographers, I’d like to meet you and talk to you about your work.” He sent a letter back and said, “Yes, come and meet me.” I met him, and he opened his door, and you know, he’d been in my life ever since.

JE: **So how would you describe him?**

DW: Generous. One word, generous. He listened closely. He understood what I needed, and he offered support. He loved his work. He understood that he had a legacy. And the fact that his photographs were organized, the fact that he knew he wanted his collection to be preserved and his story told by himself and by others.

Gordon Parks (1912–2006)

“Parks was always looking at beauty. Not in terms of sentimental beauty, but understanding beauty in life.”

many other people. Is there something that you think is not often considered but is pivotal to understanding him?

DW: I found that he was always looking at beauty. Not in terms of sentimental beauty, but understanding beauty in life, beauty in living. And I think that that’s something that he was in search of in all of his photographs, about life and beauty in that simple sense. And that’s something that people don’t talk about often.

JE: What was the relationship between him and Langston Hughes?

DW: He was in the environment of all the Harlem writers, and he worked closely with Langston when Langston moved to Chicago to present his play *The Sun Do Move*. They met in rehearsal time, and they made photographs while he was in Chicago. They had a strong bond and a real playful relationship. Gordon was also close to Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison.

JE: And I can see his deep involvement, not just as someone who took the pictures, but as someone who is part of that.

DW: And you see that sense of theatricality in his work. The way that Gordon created the narrative for the *Invisible Man* photographs—not only the manhole cover, but the underground scene with the light bulbs. He’s reading deeply into the text. He understood props as well. That’s why he could easily move right into making films.

JE: Is there anything else that you think is key to understanding him, both as a photographer and as a man?

DW: Well, he understood that his images mattered. That’s why he wanted the byline. And I think that he agreed to make a radical difference looking at black lives in Chicago or in St. Paul.

He understood what mattered. And most people don’t. They think in the moment, but he’s thinking beyond that.

JE: And why do you think that is?

DW: Absence. The absence of the stories that he probably missed when he looked at the magazines while he worked on the railroad in the 1930s. He understood the silence of African American history in terms of the larger story. And he was determined to make sure that his story was told and the breadth of his story was told from multiple perspectives, from a boy growing up in the Midwest to someone who had a dream about being a photographer. His life was complex. And it was not one-dimensional, as most people think when they see someone who is black and poor in that time period.

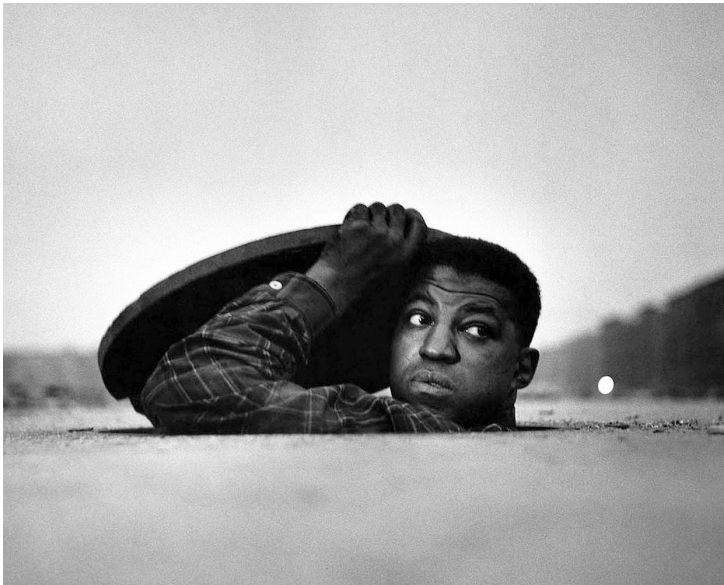
This was a time when *The American Negro Exposition* was in Chicago in 1940, and he was traveling back and forth with a young family. Those experiences probably left an impact on him, especially when he started going to the Art Institute of Chicago to look at art and tried to place himself within that framework of art-making and art-creating.

JE: His life has been widely examined—by himself in three memoirs, and in the last few years by

James Estrin is the coeditor of the *New York Times*’ “Lens” section. This conversation was first published by the *New York Times* on October 1, 2018.



American Gothic, Washington D.C., 1942



InvisibleMan, Harlem, New York, 1952



(Untitled) Doll Test, Harlem, New York, 1947



Department Store, Mobile, Alabama, 1956





Multiracial Shirley Card, 1995
Courtesy Dr. Lorna Roth, Concordia University, Montreal

Racial Bias and the Lens

Sarah Lewis

Can a photographic lens condition racial behavior? I wondered about this as I was preparing to speak about images and justice on a university campus.

“We have a problem. Your jacket is lighter than your face,” the technician said from the back of the one-thousand-person amphitheater-style auditorium. “That’s going to be a problem for lighting.” She was handling the video recording and lighting for the event.

It was an odd comment that reverberated through the auditorium, a statement of the obvious that sounded like an accusation of wrongdoing. Another technician standing next to me stopped adjusting my microphone and jolted in place. The phrase hung in the air, and I laughed to resolve the tension in the room then offered back just the facts:

“Well, everything is lighter than my face. I’m black.”

“Touché,” said the technician organizing the event. She walked toward the lighting booth. My smile dropped upon realizing that perhaps the technician was actually serious. I assessed my clothes—a light beige jacket and black pants worn many times before in similar settings.

As I walked to the greenroom, the executive running the event came over and apologized for what had just occurred, but to me, the exchange was a gift.

My work looks at how the right to be recognized justly in a democracy has been tied to the impact of images and representation in the public realm. It examines how the construction of public pictures limits and enlarges our notion of who counts in American society. It is the subject of my core curriculum class at Harvard University. It also happened to be the subject of my presentation that day.

It is what my grandfather knew when he was expelled from a New York City public high school

“It took complaints from corporate furniture and chocolate manufacturers in the 1960s and 1970s for Kodak to start to fix color photography’s bias.”

had decided that my body was somehow unsuitable for the stage.

Her comment reminded me of the unconscious bias that was built into photography. By categorizing light skin as the norm and other skin tones as needing special corrective care, photography has altered how we interact with each other without us realizing it.

Photography is not just a system of calibrating light, but a technology of subjective decisions. Light skin became the chemical baseline for film technology, fulfilling the needs of its target dominant market. For example, developing color-film technology initially required what was called a Shirley card (see p. 55). When you sent off your film to get developed, lab technicians would use the image of a white woman with brown hair named Shirley as the measuring stick against which they calibrated the colors. Quality control meant ensuring that Shirley’s face looked good. It has translated into the color-balancing of digital technology. In the mid-1990s, Kodak created a multiracial Shirley Card with three women, one black, one white, and one Asian, and later included a Latina model, in an attempt intended to help camera operators calibrate skin tones (see p. 52). These were not adopted by everyone since they coincided with the rise of digital photography. The result was film emulsion technology that still carried over the social bias of earlier photographic conventions.

It took complaints from corporate furniture and chocolate manufacturers in the 1960s and 1970s for Kodak to start to fix color photography’s bias. Earl Kage, Kodak’s former manager of research and the head of Color Photo Studios, received complaints during this time from chocolate companies saying that they “weren’t getting the right brown tones on the chocolates” in the photographs. Furniture companies also were not getting enough variation between the different color woods in their advertisements. Concordia University professor Lorna Roth’s research shows that Kage had also received complaints before from parents about the quality of graduation photographs—the color contrast made it nearly impossible to capture a diverse group—but it was the chocolate and furniture companies that forced Kodak’s hand. Kage admitted, “it was never Black flesh that was addressed as a serious problem at the time.”

Fuji became the film of choice for professional photographers shooting subjects with darker tones. The company developed color transparency film that was superior to Kodak for handling brown skin. Yet, for the average consumer, Kodak Gold Max became appealing. This new film was billed as being “able to photograph the details of a dark horse in low light,” a coded message for being able to photograph people of color. When I first learned about this history, I finally understood why my father went, almost obsessively, to the camera store down the street from

our apartment in Manhattan in the 1980s to buy Kodak Gold Max film.

Digital photography has led to some advancements. There are now dual skin-tone color-balancing capabilities and also an image-stabilization feature—eliminating the natural shaking that occurs when we hold the camera by hand and reducing the need for a flash. Yet, this solution creates other problems. If the light source is artificial, digital technology will still struggle with darker skin. It is a merry-go-round of problems leading to solutions leading to problems.

Researchers such as Joy Buolamwini of the MIT Media Lab have been advocating to correct the algorithmic bias that exists in digital imaging technology. You see it whenever dark skin is invisible to facial recognition software. The same technology that misrecognizes individuals is also used in services for loan decisions and job interview searches. Yet, algorithmic bias is the end stage of a long-standing problem.

Award-winning cinematographer Bradford Young, who has worked with pioneering director Ava DuVernay and others, has created new techniques for lighting subjects during the process of filming. Ava Berkofsky has offered her tricks for lighting the actors on the HBO series *Insecure*—including tricks with moisturizer (reflective is best since dark skin can absorb more light than fair skin). Post-production corrections also offer answers that involve digitizing the film and then color correcting it. All told, rectifying this inherited bias requires a lot of work.

What is preventing us from correcting the inherited bias in camera and film technology? Is there not a fortune to gain by the technology giant who is first to market?

In the meantime, artists themselves are creating the technology for more just representation. We are hearing more about issues with race and technology as we consider the importance of inclusive representation with the success of films from *Black Panther* (2018) to *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). Frederick Douglass knew it long ago: being seen accurately by the camera was a key to representational justice. He became the most photographed American man in the nineteenth century as a way to create a corrective image about race and American life.

Yet, for many, the question is still: Why does inclusive representation matter so much? The answers come through viral examples such as the image of a young two-year old Parker Curry gazing up at Michelle Obama’s portrait by Amy Sherald at the National Portrait Gallery, her mouth dropped open, convinced that Mrs. Obama was a queen. Former White House photographer Pete Souza has captured an image of a young boy, just five years old, who wanted to know if his hair texture really did match that of the president. You can’t become what you can’t accurately see.

Shirley Card, 1978
Courtesy Hermann
Zschiegner



I often wonder what would have come of more time to talk with the technician. Her eyes were glassy as she said goodbye. Mine were, too, grateful for her vulnerability. The exchange was the result of decades of socialization that we often don’t acknowledge has occurred whenever we look through the lens.

Race changed sight in America. This is what my grandfather knew. This is what we experience. There is no need for our photographic technology to foster it.

Sarah Lewis is assistant professor of the history of art and architecture and of African and African American studies at Harvard University.