

LESSON ONE: HANDOUT 1

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.

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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.

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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 Quiggle. 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

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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....

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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).