

HBO ORIGINAL

A CHOICE OF WEAPONS

INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS

THE NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS SHAPED BY A LEGEND

DISCUSSION GUIDE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3 DISCUSSION GUIDE OVERVIEW

3 USING THIS GUIDE

4 ENGAGEMENT GOALS

5 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

5 FILM SYNOPSIS

6 FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

7 GORDON PARKS BIOGRAPHY

8 BEFORE SCREENING: PREPARING FOR A MEANINGFUL DISCUSSION

8 PLANNING YOUR EVENT

8 CREATING AN INVITING SPACE FOR DISCUSSION

9 INTRODUCING THE FILM

10 AFTER SCREENING: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO A POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION

11 DOCUMENTING INJUSTICE

15 NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION

18 THE PHOTOGRAPH AS DOCUMENT AND SYMBOL

23 THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S PRESENCE

26 THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S POINT OF VIEW

29 ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

DISCUSSION GUIDE OVERVIEW

USING THIS GUIDE

This discussion guide for ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*** supports creative and dynamic conversations about Gordon Parks and the ways his trailblazing work continues to inspire artists and filmmakers today. With background information, screening tips, discussion questions, and opportunities to engage more deeply with topics and images included in the documentary, the content is appropriate for adult learners, school-age classrooms, museum programs, and youth arts organizations.

Groups seeking deeper engagement with the life of Gordon Parks and contemporary artists in the documentary will find enriching materials in the Lesson Plans on kunhardtfilmfoundation.org. All photographs by Gordon Parks courtesy and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation.

“Gordon Parks’ photography demanded that America look at itself. His work did what art does at its very best. It makes the viewer engage deeply in the subject and see narratives about life, about our history. So, when you look at those beautiful photographs, what you saw was dignity in the face of remarkable discrimination and bigotry.”

—Darren Walker
President, Ford Foundation
*A Choice of Weapons:
Inspired by Gordon Parks*

Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, London, England, 1966



Gordon Parks, *Self portrait*, 1941

ENGAGEMENT GOALS

Gordon Parks was one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century. Known widely for his work in photography, including two decades as the first Black staff photographer for *Life* magazine, Parks was also a composer, writer, and filmmaker. As a young man he applied his artistic talents to support and express himself and quickly discovered the power of his creativity to shift mindsets and spark cultural and social change. From the 1940s up through the 2000s, Parks used images in magazines, books, and feature films to tell the stories of individuals and communities, the injustices they experienced and fought, and the dignity and humanity they maintained.

As you think about how, where, and why to screen and discuss this documentary with your group, consider your goals, which may be to:

- * **Introduce** new audiences to Gordon Parks
- * **Celebrate** and recognize Gordon Parks as a photographer, author, filmmaker, and composer
- * **Recognize** the artistic legacy of Gordon Parks through the work of contemporary artists
- * **Examine** the power of representation in the media and understand the evolution of the still image
- * **Strengthen** your group's facility and fluency with understanding photo essays
- * **Explore** the capacity for art to create change

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

FILM SYNOPSIS

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks explores the enduring legacy of photographer, writer, composer, activist, and filmmaker Gordon Parks, and spotlights his visionary work and its impact on artists working today. Gordon's legacy comes to life through three contemporary photographers: Devin Allen, whose photograph *Baltimore Uprising* of the 2015 Freddie Gray protests was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine; LaToya Ruby Frazier who for five years documented the Flint, Michigan water crisis and in 2020 photographed Breonna Taylor's family for *Vanity Fair*; and Jamel Shabazz, whose New York City photographs of individuals and groups form a visual history of cultural shifts and struggles across the city.



Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson*, Harlem, NY, 1948

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

A camera is not in itself political, but it carries with it the potential for awareness, reform, and revolution. Contemporary protests are propelled by images and cell phone videos circulating across social media, broadcasting in plain sight the systemic injustices and atrocities still inextricably linked with racism in America.

For decades, Gordon Parks brought this human struggle for dignity, justice, and the end of segregation, isolation, and alienation of the Black community out of the shadows and to the predominantly white audiences of *Life* magazine. When he started at *Life* in 1948, the magazine was read by over twenty million Americans, and Gordon Parks was their only Black staff photographer. And for Gordon, his camera became an instrument of change – “a weapon,” as he called it – to challenge the systems of racism and poverty – and to empower Black Americans with images that conveyed honor, resilience, and beauty.

In this film, I wanted not only to highlight the remarkable life and work of Gordon Parks, but also honor his memory through the stories of artists and activists like Devin Allen, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Bryan Stevenson, Jamel Shabazz, Ava DuVernay, Spike Lee, and others who use their work as a weapon to fight for social justice. Sadly, many of the same conditions that plagued Black America throughout Gordon's career are still with us. I hope to underscore the power of images to inspire a new generation to work for social change.

This film is a testament to that awesome power.

John Maggio

Director

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

GORDON PARKS BIOGRAPHY

Gordon Parks, one of the greatest photographers of the twentieth century, was a humanitarian with a deep commitment to social justice. He left behind an exceptional body of work that documents American life and culture from the early 1940s into the 2000s, with a focus on race relations, poverty, civil rights, and urban life. Parks was also a distinguished composer, author, and filmmaker.

He opens his autobiography *A Choice of Weapons* (1965) with this description of his childhood years:

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.

Born in Fort Scott, Kansas in 1912, Parks was drawn to photography as a young man after seeing photographs by [Farm Security Administration \(FSA\)](#) photographers in the pages of magazines. The FSA was a government agency that employed a group of photographers to document, among other social topics, the effects of the Great Depression on rural America. After buying a camera at a pawnshop, he taught himself how to use it. Despite his lack of professional training, he won a [Julius Rosenwald Fellowship](#) in 1942; this led to a position with the photography section of the FSA in Washington, D.C., and, later, the Office of War Information (OWI). Working for these agencies to chronicle the nation's social conditions, Parks quickly developed a personal style that would make him among the most celebrated photographers of his era. He broke the color line in professional photography by creating remarkably expressive images that consistently explored the social and economic impact of poverty, racism, and other forms of discrimination.

In 1944, Parks left the OWI to work for the Standard Oil Company's photo documentary project. Around this time, he was also a freelance photographer for *Glamour* and *Ebony* magazines, which expanded his photographic practice and allowed him to further develop his distinct style. His 1948 photo essay on the life of a Harlem gang leader won him widespread acclaim and a position as the first Black American staff photographer for *Life* magazine. Parks would remain at the magazine for two decades, covering subjects ranging from racism and poverty to fashion and entertainment.

In the late 1960s Gordon Parks turned his talents to film becoming the first Black American to write and direct a major Hollywood studio feature, the semi-autobiographical *The Learning Tree* (1969), followed by the commercial and critical hit *Shaft* (1971). Parks published many books, including memoirs, novels, poetry, and volumes on photographic technique. In 1989 he produced, directed, and composed the music for a ballet, *Martin*, dedicated to the late civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr.

Parks spent much of the last three decades of his life honing his style, and he continued working until his death in 2006. He was recognized with more than fifty honorary doctorates, and among his numerous awards was the National Medal of Arts, which he received in 1988.

BEFORE SCREENING

PREPARING FOR A MEANINGFUL DISCUSSION

PLANNING YOUR EVENT

Watch the film in advance so you'll have time to create a meaningful agenda for your event. You will likely want to discuss Parks' photographs and films, as well as forge connections and bring attention to contemporary Black artists he inspired. With this in mind, consider the best way to share any materials.

- * **If your event will take place in person**, it is critical to secure a space and include supportive tools to ensure that it is accessible to all.
- * **If your event will take place online**, send out resources and specific instructions for how to participate prior to the scheduled time.

CREATING AN INVITING SPACE FOR DISCUSSION

This documentary and the body of Gordon Parks' art address race, violence, discrimination, injustice, and inequality and may evoke emotional reactions. Keep in mind that group members may respond differently to the film based on their life experiences and may have a range of comfort in talking about these sensitive topics. Review these tips for moderating a discussion to help everyone feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas.

- * The facilitator's role is to **guide the conversation** and ideas that arise. Introduce questions, topics or engagement exercises, and then step back to elicit responses.
- * Ask participants to speak **one at a time** and to introduce themselves before speaking.
- * Invite your group to **get curious** about one another's responses and encourage them to use "I" statements, as in "I think Gordon Parks' images say..." rather than "Everyone knows Gordon Parks meant..."
- * Pay attention to **giving everyone a chance to speak**. Invite individuals to step forward if they haven't participated, or step back if they have already contributed.
- * Offer **multiple ways** to participate in the event, including encouraging individuals to reflect and write down thoughts first, presenting discussion prompts to pairs or small groups before opening up to the larger group, taking polls, and using the chat box (if online).

INTRODUCING THE FILM

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks artfully weaves together episodes from Gordon Parks' life with his development as an artist and connects his influence to the lives of contemporary photographers and filmmakers. The film was executive produced by Alicia Keys and Kasseem "Swizz Beatz" Dean, who hold the largest private collection of Parks photographs. The Gordon Parks Foundation was also a key collaborator and provided unprecedented access to its archives. The feature documentary includes archival footage and images interspersed with recent interviews with academics, art historians, and influential filmmakers sharing their knowledge of and insights on Gordon Parks.

In addition to sharing this background information about the film and its scope, you can warm up the group by gathering some information about their background knowledge of Gordon Parks.

Consider posing these opening questions:

- * What do you know about Gordon Parks?
- * What does the title suggest about the scope of the documentary? Based on the title, what are some of the ideas and themes you think it might cover?
- * Outside of Gordon Parks' work, can you think of any art that addresses social issues? Consider the full tapestry of public art including murals, as well as photographs, films, sculptures, and paintings.

"The more you observe, the more you understand what's going on around you."

—Adger Cowans

Photographer and Friend, A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

LEARN MORE

For additional background information about Parks' life experiences and family, and to further contextualize the film, consider taking a look at these outstanding resources:

- [The Gordon Parks Foundation](#)
- [Gordon Parks Museum](#)
- International Center of Photography: [Gordon Parks](#)
- Library of Congress: [FSA Collection](#)
- National Gallery of Art: [Uncovering America](#) exhibition
- The Museum of Modern Art - [Gordon Parks](#)
- *Life* magazine - [The Photography of Gordon Parks](#)

AFTER SCREENING

A CREATIVE APPROACH TO A POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION

Gordon Parks' art and work elevated our understanding of the lives of everyday Black Americans in the United States by compassionately demonstrating the power of an image or a film to tell a story and to use a camera as a tool for social justice. He inspired generations of photographers such as Devin Allen, Jamel Shabazz, and LaToya Ruby Frazier and opened the doors for Black filmmakers such as Ava DuVernay and Spike Lee.

To keep the post-screening conversation focused on ***A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks***, use the resources and selected topics in this section to enrich your event. Quotes from the documentary, discussion questions paired with photographs taken by Gordon Parks, and other featured artists aim to deepen engagement and discussion.

Feel free to adapt this process to meet your goals:

- 1 Choose one Discussion Guide **topic** and introduce the opening prompt to your group.
- 2 Next share the related **quotes** from the documentary either by reading them aloud or distributing them as a handout, and invite participants to discuss them.
- 3 Use the **discussion questions** for pairs or small group conversation.
- 4 Transition to **Look Closely**. This final section is an opportunity to explore, discuss, analyze, and compare and contrast Parks' photographs with the work of contemporary artists featured in the documentary.



“Documentary photography” or “Social documentary photography”

A term to describe a wide range of photography approaches that includes images of people, places, objects, and events over a period of time. It is critical to keep in mind that documentary photography is never objective. A photographer's point of view is always present; their biases, individual identity, access to content will always play into what is captured in a frame. Today, with the rise of digital technology and social media, this photographic genre is woven into the fabric of everyday life and

TOPIC: DOCUMENTING INJUSTICE



Opening Discussion Question

Read the selected quotes and discuss how Gordon Parks documented injustice and how this was explored in *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*.

Quotes

"I've tried to use the camera to sort of correct the things that I experienced as a young Black man coming up in America."

—Gordon Parks

"What Gordon Parks' legacy in life has shown me is that I am visually representing people like how a lawyer represents the plaintiff and their client. And that is a real fight."

—LaToya Ruby Frazier, Photographer

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

"Gordon spoke about the power of photography and imagery, and how you could use the camera as a weapon. It's through the photography that I want to really express myself. That gave me a voice, 'cause prior to that I was lost. I fell victim to the streets, but once I picked up the camera it became my compass. I have a tool that I can use not only to document the community but to save lives at the same time."

—LaToya Ruby Frazier, Photographer

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

"For the first time, I understood what Gordon was talking about, that the camera is a real weapon. I realized how powerful I am with a camera in my hand."

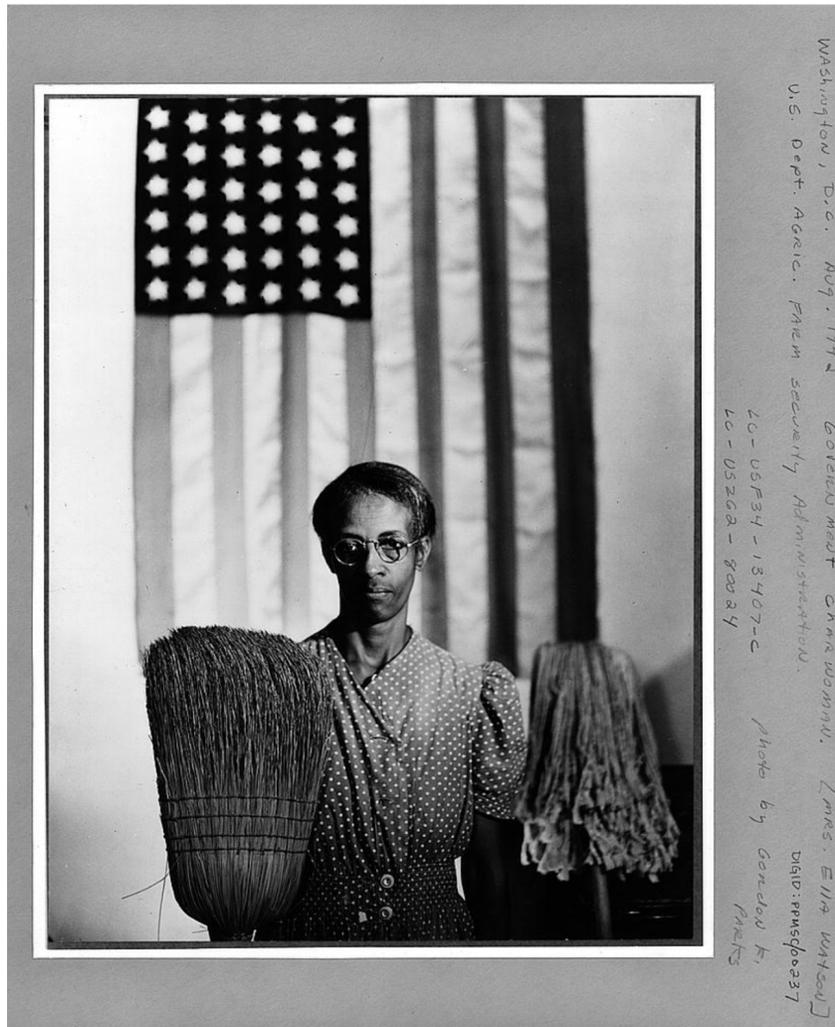
—Devin Allen, Photographer

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

Discussion Questions

- 1 How do you understand Parks' use of the camera as a corrective to injustice?
- 2 How can his published imagery function as a call to action?
- 3 How has the use of documentary photography evolved for this purpose?
- 4 What role does documentary photography play in social justice movements today?
- 5 Consider the context of how documentary photographs are shared—Parks worked for a government agency, then published in *Life* magazine. Devin Allen used Instagram and then had a photo selected for the cover of *Time* magazine.
- 6 How has social media and new modes of distribution affected the impact a photograph can have?

GORDON PARKS



Gordon Parks, *American Gothic*, Washington, D.C., 1942

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1 Observe each photograph. Notice the composition, color, and subject matter.
- 2 What injustice is documented? How is it documented?
- 3 Explore and analyze the images from Gordon Parks, Devin Allen, LaToya Ruby Frazier and Jamel Shabazz. What do they have in common? How do they differ?
- 4 Is a photograph's ability to reveal injustice different from that of other forms of creative expression? If so, how? And why do you think that is true?
- 5 How do images of an individual or family (vs. anonymous people), act as protest? How does their sense of agency make a difference?



Devin Allen, *Baltimore Uprising*, for *Time* magazine, March 25, 2015

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Observe each photograph. Notice the composition, color, and subject matter.
- 2** What injustice is documented? How is it documented?
- 3** Explore and analyze the images from Gordon Parks, Devin Allen, LaToya Ruby Frazier and Jamel Shabazz. What do they have in common? How do they differ?
- 4** Is a photograph's ability to reveal injustice different from that of other forms of creative expression? If so, how? And why do you think that is true?
- 5** How do images of an individual or family (vs. anonymous people), act as protest? How does their sense of agency make a difference?



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Shea brushes Zions teeth*, from the series "Flint is Family," 2016

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Observe each photograph. Notice the composition, color, and subject matter.
- 2** What injustice is documented? How is it documented?
- 3** Explore and analyze the images from Gordon Parks, Devin Allen, LaToya Ruby Frazier and Jamel Shabazz. What do they have in common? How do they differ?
- 4** Is a photograph's ability to reveal injustice different from that of other forms of creative expression? If so, how? And why do you think that is true?
- 5** How do images of an individual or family (vs. anonymous people), act as protest? How does their sense of agency make a difference?

TOPIC: NARRATIVE AND REPRESENTATION



Opening Discussion Question

Read the selected quotes and discuss how Gordon Parks told stories through one photograph or photo essay. Compare a photo essay as a story with the written word. What is different?

Quotes

"Narrative work is how Parks changed hearts and minds. You can change laws, but if you don't kind of 'work on people' and the psychology behind bigotry and exclusion, then you're not going to make any progress. Parks understood early that he had a role to play if we were going to kind of shape the things that people believe about equality."

—**Bryan Stevenson, Equal Justice Initiative**
A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

"We think of photography, I think, as like a solitary art practice. It's the photographer and their camera, but really they're in relationship with their subject. When I look at his work, I think God, how'd he get that? The ease and the intimacy that comes through in so much of his work. The process with actors is you're trying to achieve the same ends of intimacy, of a connection, of an understanding of the material and each other so that you can get to those true places."

—**Ava DuVernay, Filmmaker**
A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

Discussion Questions

- 1 How do you define "narrative work"?
- 2 What role do you believe photographs and other visual representations play in shaping hearts and minds and/or attitudes and behaviors?
- 3 What narrative about 1956 America is Gordon Parks exploring in his photograph?
- 4 What narrative is Jamel Shabazz exploring about America in 1980?



Gordon Parks, *Department Store*, Mobile, Alabama, 1956

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Observe the photograph. Notice the composition, color, and subject matter.
- 2** What narrative or narratives is being told through this image?
- 3** What does this photograph reveal about America?

JAMEL SHABAZZ



Jamel Shabazz, 1980's Latinos

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Observe the photograph. Notice the composition, color, and subject matter.
- 2** What narrative or narratives is being told through this image?
- 3** What does this photograph reveal about America?

TOPIC: THE PHOTOGRAPH AS DOCUMENT AND SYMBOL



Opening Discussion Question

Read the selected quotes and reflect on how Gordon Parks' photography shaped American culture and opened up new ways of seeing one another.

Quotes

"Ellison actually writes a manifesto for Gordon Parks titled *The Pictorial Problem*. He wants the photographs to function as both document and symbol. And this phrase becomes a kind of guiding principle for Gordon Parks' entire career. This idea that photographs can transcend what is just being depicted."

—**Michal Raz-Russo, Art Historian**

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

Discussion Questions

- 1 Discuss Raz-Russo's observation: When is a photograph functioning as a document? When is it functioning as a symbol?
- 2 How did Parks' photographs work as both?
- 3 In what ways can a photograph transcend what is actually depicted in an image?

GORDON PARKS

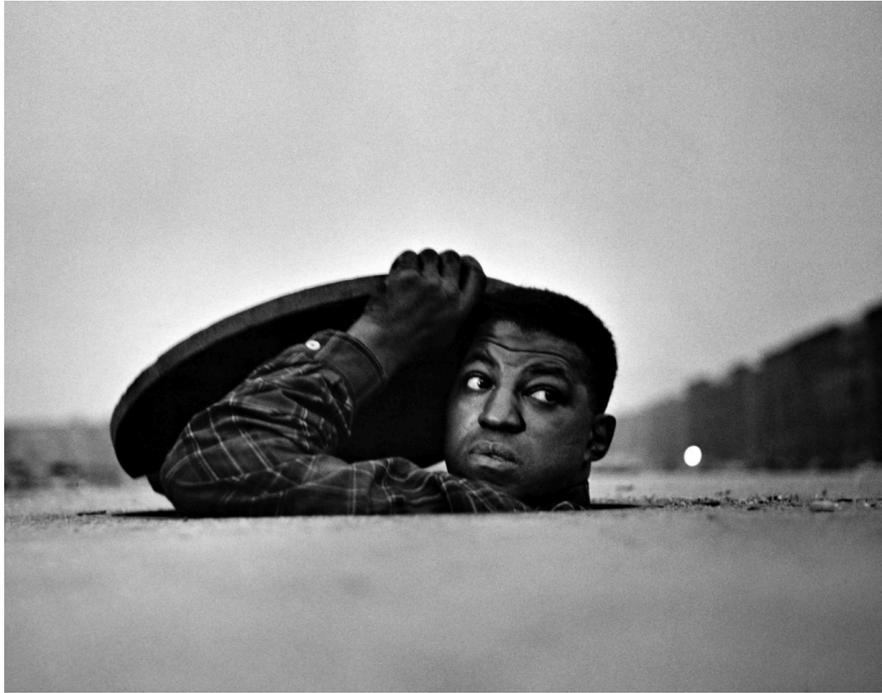


Gordon Parks, *Untitled*, Chicago, 1957

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Gordon Parks rarely titled his photographs with more than the place where they were taken. Rather, captions were later given by *Life* writers. How does the presence of a caption inform your understanding of what is being communicated?
- 2** This photograph was one of twelve selected to accompany *Life* essay *The Atmosphere of Crime*. For six weeks Parks was assigned to capture “urban crime” in four big American cities. The caption for this image read, “The left hand of a man who knows the ropes nonchalantly dangles a cigarette through the bars of a Chicago prison. But the man’s right hand, grasping the bars below, betrays him: he is frustrated and locked in.” How do you interpret this image within the larger idea of the essay’s title, *The Atmosphere of Crime*?
- 3** *The Invisible Man* image was included in the larger *Life* magazine [photo essay](#) *A Man Becomes Invisible* (1952). Using an actor Parks staged a series of images on the streets of Harlem to evoke passages from Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking novel.
- 4** Read the short description of the photo essay and explore the larger essay from the link provided. In what ways does this series reveal something different from Gordon Parks?
- 5** Compare the 1992 photograph by Jamel Shabazz and the 2020 image by Devin Allen in relation to Gordon Parks. These images represent and express many different emotions and meaning and could be included in other sections of this guide (e.g., Documenting Injustice.) In the context of this section, think about how these images transcend what is actually being depicted in the photograph.

GORDON PARKS



Gordon Parks, *The Invisible Man*, Harlem, New York, 1952

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis Questions

- 1** Gordon Parks rarely titled his photographs with more than the place where they were taken. Rather, captions were later given by *Life* writers. How does the presence of a caption inform your understanding of what is being communicated?
- 2** This photograph was one of twelve selected to accompany *Life* essay *The Atmosphere of Crime*. For six weeks Parks was assigned to capture “urban crime” in four big American cities. The caption for this image read, “The left hand of a man who knows the ropes nonchalantly dangles a cigarette through the bars of a Chicago prison. But the man’s right hand, grasping the bars below, betrays him: he is frustrated and locked in.” How do you interpret this image within the larger idea of the essay’s title, *The Atmosphere of Crime*?
- 3** *The Invisible Man* image was included in the larger *Life* magazine [photo essay](#) *A Man Becomes Invisible* (1952). Using an actor Parks staged a series of images on the streets of Harlem to evoke passages from Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking novel.
- 4** Read the short description of the photo essay and explore the larger essay from the link provided. In what ways does this series reveal something different from Gordon Parks?
- 5** Compare the 1992 photograph by Jamel Shabazz and the 2020 image by Devin Allen in relation to Gordon Parks. These images represent and express many different emotions and meaning and could be included in other sections of this guide (e.g., Documenting Injustice.) In the context of this section, think about how these images transcend what is actually being depicted in the photograph.



Devin Allen, *Justice for George Floyd*, 2020

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis Questions

- 1** Gordon Parks rarely titled his photographs with more than the place where they were taken. Rather, captions were later given by *Life* writers. How does the presence of a caption inform your understanding of what is being communicated?
- 2** This photograph was one of twelve selected to accompany *Life* essay *The Atmosphere of Crime*. For six weeks Parks was assigned to capture “urban crime” in four big American cities. The caption for this image read, “The left hand of a man who knows the ropes nonchalantly dangles a cigarette through the bars of a Chicago prison. But the man’s right hand, grasping the bars below, betrays him: he is frustrated and locked in.” How do you interpret this image within the larger idea of the essay’s title, *The Atmosphere of Crime*?
- 3** *The Invisible Man* image was included in the larger *Life* magazine [photo essay](#) *A Man Becomes Invisible* (1952). Using an actor Parks staged a series of images on the streets of Harlem to evoke passages from Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking novel.
- 4** Read the short description of the photo essay and explore the larger essay from the link provided. In what ways does this series reveal something different from Gordon Parks?
- 5** Compare the 1992 photograph by Jamel Shabazz and the 2020 image by Devin Allen in relation to Gordon Parks. These images represent and express many different emotions and meaning and could be included in other sections of this guide (e.g., Documenting Injustice.) In the context of this section, think about how these images transcend what is actually being depicted in the photograph.

JAMEL SHABAZZ



Jamel Shabazz, *A Time of Protest*, 1992

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis Questions

- 1** Gordon Parks rarely titled his photographs with more than the place where they were taken. Rather, captions were later given by *Life* writers. How does the presence of a caption inform your understanding of what is being communicated?
- 2** This photograph was one of twelve selected to accompany *Life* essay *The Atmosphere of Crime*. For six weeks Parks was assigned to capture “urban crime” in four big American cities. The caption for this image read, “The left hand of a man who knows the ropes nonchalantly dangles a cigarette through the bars of a Chicago prison. But the man’s right hand, grasping the bars below, betrays him: he is frustrated and locked in.” How do you interpret this image within the larger idea of the essay’s title, *The Atmosphere of Crime*?
- 3** *The Invisible Man* image was included in the larger *Life* magazine [photo essay](#) *A Man Becomes Invisible* (1952). Using an actor Parks staged a series of images on the streets of Harlem to evoke passages from Ralph Ellison’s groundbreaking novel.
- 4** Read the short description of the photo essay and explore the larger essay from the link provided. In what ways does this series reveal something different from Gordon Parks?
- 5** Compare the 1992 photograph by Jamel Shabazz and the 2020 image by Devin Allen in relation to Gordon Parks. These images represent and express many different emotions and meaning and could be included in other sections of this guide (e.g., Documenting Injustice.) In the context of this section, think about how these images transcend what is actually being depicted in the photograph.

TOPIC: THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S PRESENCE



Opening Discussion Question

Read the selected quotes and share the ways you think Gordon Parks approached the responsibility of a photographer to their subject.

Quotes

"Roy Stryker was the one who taught me that when you are doing a story, it's not for you to accept the people, but the people to accept you. Because you are going into their presence asking them to help you."

—Gordon Parks

"I think it goes back to Gordon. You need to be present and talk to people for as long as it takes. I get to know the person that is the main subject of the work, and I learn to empathize and also allow their feelings to guide me through the landscape that they inhabit. This was, you know, a real lesson about, not only empathizing but listening and taking the instructions and allowing the images to be authored by someone else. That's a real collaboration."

—LaToya Ruby Frazier, Photographer

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

"Gordon come in, light up a room. Gave everybody respect. No matter if you were Gloria Vanderbilt or some bum on the street. It's only when people feel safe that they open themselves up, and then the camera will capture the essence. At least with the films I'm doing, especially more for documentaries I think, you gotta ask people personal questions about very painful moments in their life. It's the job of the artist to have your subject comfortable. And Gordon had that gift."

—Spike Lee, Filmmaker

A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

Discussion Questions

- 1 Describe Gordon Parks' approach to his subjects and his subject matter.
- 2 How did Parks' identity as a Black man in America shape his presence as an artist?
- 3 How does having a close relationship with the people they are photographing affect an artist's work? How does it affect the artist?

GORDON PARKS



Gordon Parks, *Red Jackson with His Mother and Brother*, Harlem, New York, 1948



Gordon Parks, *The Fontenelles at the Poverty Board*, Harlem, New York, 1967

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Compare these images. Discuss their similarities and differences.
- 2** Is the relationship between photographer and photographed apparent in these photographs?

LATOYA RUBY FRAZIER



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Portrait of Mr. Smiley with Shea and Zion*, 2019



LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Breonna Taylor Family*, 2020

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1 Compare these images. Discuss their similarities and differences.
- 2 Is the relationship between photographer and photographed apparent in these photographs?

TOPIC: THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S POINT OF VIEW



Opening Discussion Question

Read the selected quotes and describe Gordon Parks' point of view as you understand it.

Quotes

"His goal was to create a story from an insider's point of view."

—**Michal Raz-Russo, Art Historian,**
A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

"Time has taught me that it is not enough to look, condemn, or praise. To be just an observer, I must attempt to transcend the limitations of my own experience, by sharing as deeply as possible the problems of those people I photograph."

—**Gordon Parks**

"One of the things about Mr. Parks that has been really inspiring and informative is the idea that if I pick up my camera, I can say something and show something and that I will be heard, and that it will be seen, and a story will be told. The thing for Black filmmakers is for far too long we've been relegated to one set of tools if any. One of the things about Mr. Parks is the ability to work within many boxes and to use many tools."

—**Ava Duvernay, Filmmaker,**
A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks

"His whole thing was to be there and have a point of view.... about Black liberation, Black freedom, white oppression, fashion, but not to impose that in the environment, to be able to be there and find those moments."

—**Nelson George, Writer and Filmmaker,** *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*

Discussion Questions

- 1 The camera lens itself provides a point of view, in that it captures a scene from a particular distance and angle and provides a frame and boundary of an image. How did Gordon Parks express a point of view through his images?
- 2 Share an example of a memorable photo in the film and the point of view it communicated.
- 3 Do the contemporary artists in the film share a point of view with Gordon Parks?



Gordon Parks, *Evening Wraps*, New York, New York, 1956

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Compare these images. Discuss their similarities and differences.
- 2** How do these photographs reflect the diversity of Parks' point of view?
- 3** How does reflecting on the photographer's point of view inform your understanding of a particular picture?



Gordon Parks, *Malcolm X Gives Speech at Rally*, Harlem, New York, 1963

Look Closely: Inspired by Gordon Parks and Image Analysis

- 1** Compare these images. Discuss their similarities and differences.
- 2** How do these photographs reflect the diversity of Parks' point of view?
- 3** How does reflecting on the photographer's point of view inform your understanding of a particular picture?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

WANT TO STAY INSPIRED?

Explore the artists and their projects that were included in the documentary.

Gordon Parks

[The Gordon Parks Foundation](#)

Devin Allen

[“The Story Behind TIME’s George Floyd Protest Cover,” time.com](#) June 10, 2020.

Recipient of [The Gordon Parks Foundation Fellowship](#), 2017.

Read and Watch [“How he became ‘The Eyes of Baltimore,’”](#) Chris Boyette, CNN, January 19, 2016.

LaToya Ruby Frazier

[“Flint is Family”](#) the full photographic essay.

Watch [“Flint is Family.”](#) the video portion of LaToya’s time in Flint.

[“Flint is Family.”](#) Mattie Kahn, [elle.com](#), August 8, 2016.

Watch [“A creative solution for the water crisis in Flint, Michigan,”](#) her TED Talk on the creative lengths she took to help bring free, clean water to Flint.

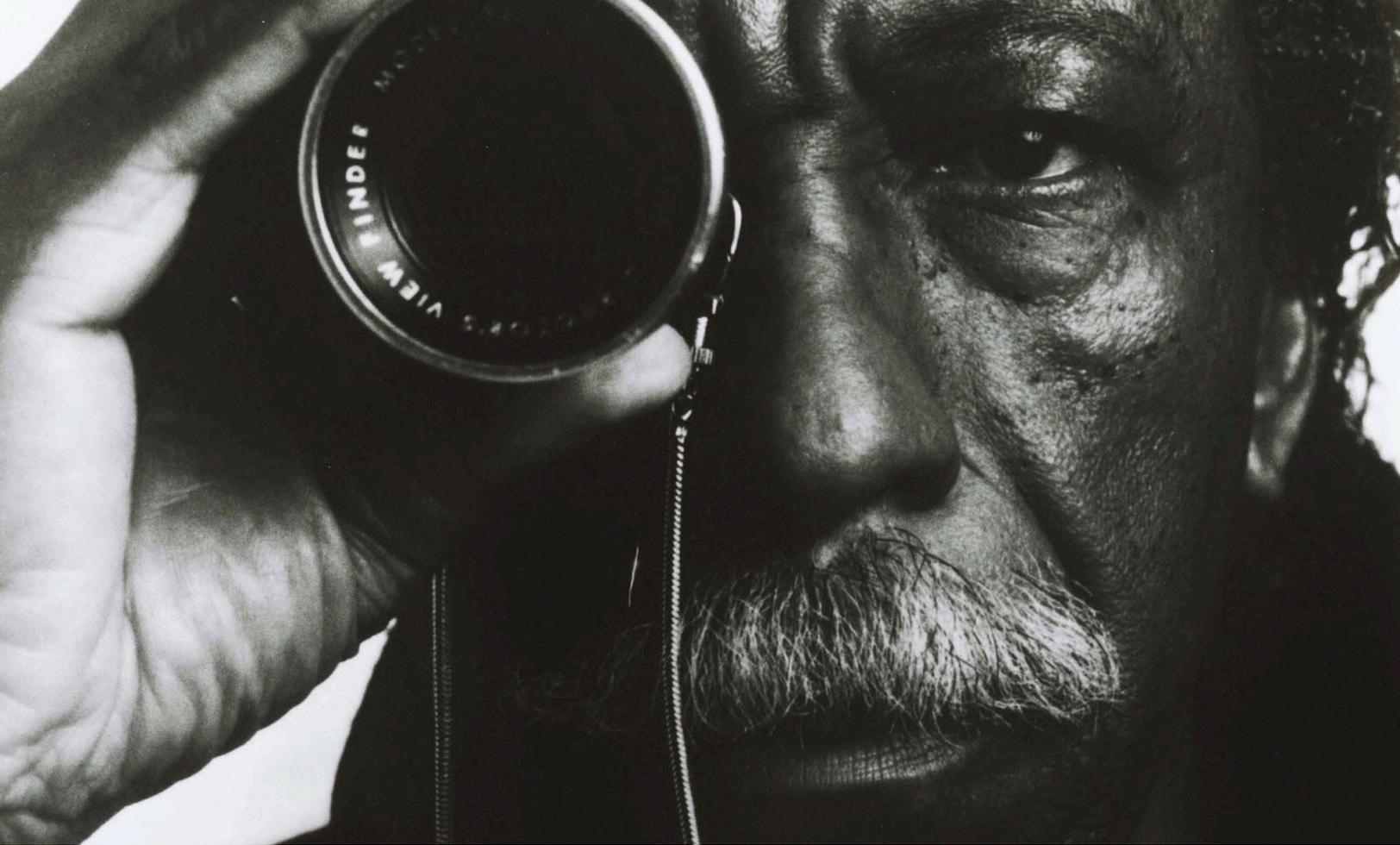
Watch [“Art x Activism – The Gordon Parks Foundation”](#) her Q & A conversation with Bryan Stevenson on *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*.

Jamel Shabazz

Jamel Shabazz [website](#)

[“Why Jamel Shabazz is New York’s Most Vital Street Photographer,”](#) Tanisha C. Ford, [aperture.com](#), March 30, 2021.

[“7 Questions for an Accidental Pioneer of Street Style Photography.”](#) Kristen Anderson, [yogue.com](#), April 12, 2016.



KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

THE KOHLBERG
FOUNDATION

HBO

THE GORDON PARKS FOUNDATION

Discussion Guide developed and written by  **Blueshift**
Education