

The Power of Images:  
The Confrontation of Violence and the Construction of Black  
Manhood in the Films of Gordon Parks

By

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## Abstract

### The Power of Images: The Confrontation of Violence and the Construction of Black Manhood in the Films of Gordon Parks

This dissertation studies the life and art of American filmmaker Gordon Parks, Sr., to argue that four of his films, all centered on black men, explore how black men in America might attain greater agency through self-awareness, particularly in the context of racialized violence. The films under consideration are *The Learning Tree* (1969), *Shaft* (1971), *Leadbelly* (1976), and *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984, a television feature). The study opens with the author's reflections on the intersections between his own life narrative and the model for black masculinity that Parks presents. A review of the literature reveals that past studies of Parks' work have primarily centered on his photography, and discussions of his films have rarely sought to understand them as a coherent body of work. Based on an analysis of these films as a coherent body, as well as on Parks' continuous self-examination through his memoirs, the dissertation proposes understanding Parks' model for black masculinity in America as a cycle in three

parts: *invisibility*, *emergence*, and *ascendance*. *Invisibility* is characterized as a state in which black men may be utterly repressed yet may seek peace from violence; *emergence* denotes a condition of struggle and self-reflection during which black men may seek creative self-expression; and *ascendance* describes the status of a fully self-actualized black man who values himself and his familial sources, successfully navigates his social context, and aims to “teach what he knows” to his community. The motion through these phases is complex: individualized, incomplete, socially conditioned, cyclical, non-sequential, sometimes regressive, and sometimes progressive. In articulating these possible spaces for black manhood, Parks seeks to demonstrate through his films that positive change is tied to honest evaluation of racism, personal strength through reflection and creative self-expression, and non-violent action. The dissertation attempts to demonstrate that Parks’ black-centered films were an extension of his autobiographical writings and another method to communicate to black and white audiences his vision of a positive expression of black manhood.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Mapping the Odyssey:

*Invisibility, Emergence, Ascendancy*

Whatever else we were, we knew we were black men. And there in all its glory, that was our weird double confinement: we were to be black—and what did it mean to be black? We were to be men—and what did it mean to be men?

—Henry Louis Gates<sup>1</sup>

#### Introduction

In the summer of 2001, I went with my friend Mark Hoyer<sup>2</sup> to visit the Oakland Museum of California to see *Half Past Autumn*, a retrospective of Gordon Parks' work. This was a first for me—to see Parks' work in one place—and to see just how magnificent, and diverse, his work was. I felt humbled by my contemplation of writing a dissertation on some aspect of his life and work. I knew I wanted to do my research on an African American male who was involved with film, and I

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man* (New York: Random House, 1997).

<sup>2</sup>Mark Hoyer, at the time, was on the faculty at St. Mary's University in Moraga, California.

wanted that individual to have a Midwest, specifically Kansas, connection. It did not take long to come up with Gordon Parks as a potential subject.

Instead of just photographing bigotry and racism, or only showing the indignities of oppressive conditions, Parks depicted survivors, individuals who refused to totally give in to their condition. All of these photographs touched a sensibility with the black American experience between 1942 and 1969—from the strength and dignity of Ella Watson to the dignity and defiant posturing of Malcolm X or the Black Panthers.

I was more than halfway through the exhibit and had already decided I would attempt to do my dissertation on Gordon Parks, when I came upon a particular photograph—which became the seal of encouragement. It was of a group of several black men standing at a Malcolm X rally in Harlem, and right in the center of this photograph of unidentified black men was William Watkins, my mother's uncle, my Uncle Willie. I excitedly called Mark over to share in my discovery. I had had no idea any of my family had been captured by the lens of Gordon Parks. To me this synchronicity was the exclamation point on my decision to do my dissertation on Gordon Parks.

While Gordon Parks is known primarily as a photographer, he has practiced many forms of creative expression. For some the perspective of Parks as a Renaissance man is a mark of respect, of admiration for all that he achieved; for others it has generated slight derision: Parks as jack of all trades, master of none. In fact, prior to seeing the retrospective in 2001, my primary awareness of Gordon Parks was as the director of *Shaft* (1971). However, the more I learn about Gordon Parks as a result of my research for my dissertation, the more moved I am by his audacity, his boldness, his courage and imagination, and his determination to innovate. Parks aimed to do no less than shift our awareness of cultural forces.

This dissertation will demonstrate how Gordon Parks takes up the medium of film—one of the twentieth century’s most powerful forms for engagement with cultural issues—to produce a counternarrative to received notions of black masculinity. Through his own assertion of agency, Parks pursues this narrative from the position of an organic intellectual, as one intimately connected to and concerned with the community from which he arises. I argue that Parks’ films, taken as a coherent creative venture, articulate black

masculinity as an odyssey through three overlapping cyclic phases of identity formation: *invisibility*, *emergence*, and *ascendance*. The dissertation limits its analysis of this odyssey to consideration of four key films: *The Learning Tree* (1969), *Shaft* (1971), *Leadbelly* (1976) and *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984). His entire work as a filmmaker covers the years from 1964 to 1989 and included additional films; however, my focus will be on these four black-centered feature films that he directed between 1969 and 1984. These films best represent Parks' cinematic vision of black manhood.<sup>3</sup>

In structuring this first chapter as an introduction to Parks' vision of how black manhood evolves toward greater agency, I have chosen to juxtapose certain formative experiences from my autobiography with the four films. My intent is to demonstrate the rich and healing associations between Parks' themes and the experiences of one particular

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<sup>3</sup>Other films of Gordon Parks include several documentaries beginning with *Flavio* (1964), *Diary of a Harlem Family* (1968), *The World of Piri Thomas* (1968), *Moments Without Proper Names* (1987), *Martin* (1989), and two other feature films, *Shaft's Big Score* (1972) and *The Super Cops* (1974).

black man as he has sought to understand himself and achieve greater agency in his own life. Through his creative work, Parks sought to understand himself and his times, by delving into autobiography as a wellspring. bell hooks (1993) and others (Kamler, 2001) have argued that personal stories have a crucial role to play in scholarly work. For instance, hooks suggests that if we are to reach people from poor and working class backgrounds, then “telling of one’s personal story provides a meaningful example, a way for folks to identify and connect.”<sup>4</sup> Charles Altieri in “What is at Stake in Confessional Criticism” adds, “telling stories about one’s own past is probably our culture’s richest way of characterizing the effects of social injustice and developing what it takes to become sufficiently

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<sup>4</sup>bell hooks, “Keeping close to Home: Class and Education,” in *Working-class Women in the Academy: Laborers in the Knowledge Factory*, edited by Michelle M. Tokarezyk, and Elizabeth A. Fay (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts, 1993), 103.

empowered to resist various kinds of victimage.”<sup>5</sup> One risk to this autobiographical approach to scholarship is the potential to pretend to speak *for* the experience of others. That *I* reacted to film or television in a certain way does not mean other black men of my time reacted in a similar way.

I take my inspiration for this approach from Parks himself. Aware of such limitations, I share the philosophy of those who believe that there is value in acknowledging our subject positions, where we are coming from. Locating ourselves is particularly appropriate in cultural criticism to help avoid the arrogant assumption that one position is purely rational and unbiased by our experiences or status. Stuart Hall and other cultural theorists emphasize this political nature of culture. For Hall the evaluation of culture is a major site of ideological struggle among various subject positions “where

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<sup>5</sup>Charles Altieri, “What is at Stake in Confessional Criticism,” in *Confessions of the Critics*, H. Aram Veenser, ed., (New York: Routledge, 1996), 56.

hegemony is to be won or lost.”<sup>6</sup> In part, Parks was working to achieve awareness of the internal psychology of this struggle over meaning, as well as to suggest new meanings—new possibilities—especially for black men. He was among the first studio backed filmmakers to place black men and their subjectivity at the center of the story, and thus as a possible positive point of identification for viewers. He was not always self-conscious and overtly intentional regarding this aim, but in his effort to connect with his subjects and bring out something special about them, whether through his photographic portraiture or his cinematic projects, he was attempting to disrupt prior images or understandings of his subjects.

In my analysis of Parks’ vision for black manhood, I identify three defining phases of identity formation—invisibility, emergence, and ascendance—which are rooted in Parks’ films materially and symbolically in the racialized body as the conduit for experience. Parks’ films forge a link between life

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<sup>6</sup>John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2000), xiii.

experience and meaning, as expressed in several key themes, including:

a. Violence, *against* and *by* subjects, enabling violence to operate both as a form of repression and an expression of willful resistance, thus complicating and potentially subverting our interrogation of violence through a form of double exposure.

b. The ability, or failure, to connect with family and community. Attention to this theme leads to a sense of family and community as a foundational site of development (*The Learning Tree*), a sense of homelessness and homesickness (*Leadbelly* and *Solomon*), and a sense of homes as territories to negotiate (*Shaft* and *Leadbelly*).

c. Creativity/artistic production as a space for expression of agency. In *Leadbelly* this space is where the main character resists confinement, in particular through his employment of the blues. In *The Learning Tree* it is the development of an ethical foundation upon which a creative and productive life can spring. In *Shaft* it is the creative expression of the “cool pose” displayed by the main character through his body, language, and ability to negotiate his autonomy among several



conflicting spaces. In *Solomon Northup* it is the ability of the main character to survive with dignity—through the use of music, memory, and self-fashioned narrative—his loss of freedom.

I set up my discussion of Gordon Parks within this framework in three acts: *invisibility*, *emergence*, and *ascendance* to form a script of empowered agency. These acts are dynamic, revolving, cyclic, and at times overlapping and intersecting, and they occur within the *collective* experience of black men as well as, potentially, *individual* black men, like Parks. This structure is an effective way to look at Parks' productivity, especially his films, during the fifteen years from 1969 to 1984. The foregoing framework worked as an accurate characterization not only of Parks' life, but the life of many *invisible* black men after World War Two, as blacks *emerged* into the powerful Civil Rights movement and *ascended* into the even more aggressive, although not always more progressive, Black Power movement.

In my schema, *invisibility* is characterized by black men's a) precarious relationship to violence as recipients and victims of violence, b) lack of direction, c) invisible humanity—even to

black male subjects, and d) constricted opportunity to fully express their humanity, and e) dormant sense of self-awareness. *Emergence* is characterized by a) proclamation of manhood, b) courageous readiness to confront violence, c) assertive acts of black manhood, d) awakened self-awareness, and e) commitment to live by humanistic life-enhancing values. *Ascendance* is characterized by a) power to effectively direct or deflect violence, b) recognition of violence as weapon of last resort, c) agency over definition and representation of their masculinity, d) heightened visibility, and e) operating from a set of foundational values.

In presenting this reading of Parks' descriptions of black masculine subjectivity, I argue that Parks' four black-centered films should be viewed as a coherent body of work whose function is to challenge and negotiate the terrain of violence, especially racialized violence, that serves to disrupt and disempower assertions of a constructive black manhood.

I suggest that this understanding calls for the reevaluation of a neglected arena of inquiry in the critical assessment of Parks. Discussions of his films generally center on *Shaft* and its relationship to the Blaxploitation genre. Other

films, like *The Learning Tree*, are discussed in relationship to other films from the same period that are outside of the Blaxploitation genre. *Leadbelly* and *Solomon Northup*, if discussed, are generally seen as individual productions. What is missing in this is Parks' cinematic throughline, *the logical organization of ideas and images that run throughout his work*.

While some scholarship has documented the facts concerning Parks' work as a director, most literature on Parks' films has been journalistic rather than critical, a major gap that this dissertation seeks to fill. The scarcity of critical writing concerning Parks' work in general has been duly noted.<sup>7</sup> Although some visual culture critics have discussed Park's photography or single films, no critical study has yet considered these four crucial films as a coherent body of work. The tendency to consider Parks' films in isolation from one

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<sup>7</sup>See Erika Doss, "Visualizing Black American: Gordon Parks at *Life*, 1948-1971." in *Looking at Life Magazine*, edited by Erika Doss. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 221-241. See John Edgar Tidwell, "Gordon Parks and the Unending Quest for Self-Fulfillment," in *John Brown to Bob Dole*, edited by Virgil W. Dean (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 293-305.

another has limited discussion of Parks' unique contributions and has enabled a cursory or even, at times, a dismissive critical response. This dissertation aims to read the four films as episodes, or scenes, in the sustained effort of one filmmaker to re-vision black masculinity.

The discussion then theorizes that Parks' "visual insurgency" (a term borrowed from Nikhil Pal Singh),<sup>8</sup> his lifelong project of critiquing existing images of African Americans and deploying alternative visualizations to restore agency to them, had its roots in Parks' life experiences. In order to establish a more deeply meaningful relationship between my own subject position as a cultural critic and the insights Parks provides in these four films, I devote the remainder of this chapter to a consideration of my autobiography in relation to Parks' themes. To that end, I examine how my life narrative formed my black male identity.

Relevant to Parks' challenge to the stereotype that black manhood is only reactive or passive, Marlon Ross's position

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<sup>8</sup>Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

that “black manhood should be understood as a peculiarly instituted identity formation with a particular history of its own”<sup>9</sup> is central. As Ross insists, and Parks demonstrates in his films, black men experienced the violence of slavery, lynching, castration, and terror, and racialized and sexualized stereotyping aimed to emasculate and dehumanize them via such images as Sambo, postcards of lynching, and the lawn jockeys widely circulated in twentieth-century America. In Ross’s conceptualization of black male bodies under Jim Crow, the body is not only a visible material object but also a “body in motion,” and it is through an analysis of this motion that we get a closer sense of “Jim Crow violence, coercion, and exclusion as well as the sense of black manhood as a moving target that cannot be situated in only one static place, behavior, or image.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time, Ross’s study is a testament to his view, which I share, that self-making

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<sup>9</sup>Marlon B. Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

autobiography is “central to understanding black manhood identity.”<sup>11</sup>

I first explore the influence of my family members (relevant to *The Learning Tree*). Second, I examine how my responses to visual media like movies and comic books shaped my concept of black manhood (relevant to *Shaft*). Third, I discuss tensions with my father in acknowledging the dominant culture’s devastating—yet seductive—images of black manhood (relevant to *Leadbelly*). And, finally, I consider how my disenchantment with blackness and subsequent recovery of a sense of race-inflicted identity brought me to a space where I found creative self-expression in writing (relevant to *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey*).

Consistent with this awareness of contextualized selfhood, Parks operates from the point of view of the “organic intellectual.” Antonio Gramsci theorizes that “everyone is a

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 7.

philosopher”<sup>12</sup> and that individuals he terms “organic individuals” rise from emerging social groups, much like Gordon Parks rises from the African American community. Gramsci writes that “[e]very social group, coming into existence...creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.”<sup>13</sup> This passage is important to the discussion of Parks for two reasons. First, Gramsci identifies the development of the organic intellectual as a creation of the social body, a creation which then contributes to the definition of that social body—it’s a mutual, dialectical relationship between the organic intellectual (Parks, for example) and his or her community (Fort Scott, Kansas, for example). Second, Gramsci identifies the organic intellectual’s work: to provide the social group, as Parks seeks to do, with a

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<sup>12</sup>Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. eds. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971) 323.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid, 5.

sense of unity or cohesion, a self-awareness within the larger society in all its dimensions. These two aspects of the “organic intellectual” reveal Parks to be a quintessential example.

Furthermore, as did Parks, organic intellectuals attain their authenticity from their biographical situatedness; and notions of experience and autobiography are also important when considering Parks’ work to nurture social change. For Parks, experiences, even under oppressive conditions, yield opportunities to exercise individual and collective autonomy.

So “autobiographical subjectivity” or “lived experience” are important terms in any discussion of Parks’ films, terms I discuss further in Chapter Two. Parks’ own lived experience, his autobiographies, are also part of the fabric of all these films, especially *Learning Tree*. While Parks may have fictionalized and revised his own life story, certainly both his self-fashioned autobiographical texts and his films were all subject to the political, social, and cultural realities of his experiences as a black man living through the U.S. historical moment of Jim Crow, Civil Rights, and Black Power.

Donna Haraway, feminist historian of science and author of “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” once said in an interview that



“What motivates us as adults in terms of politics, art, scholarly work, and teaching is shaped by childhood—my having lived out these histories.”<sup>14</sup> What do I see when I interrogate my childhood? A little black child learning about the exceptional qualities of being an American. A child taught to believe, “All Men Are Created Equal,” in the greatness of Jefferson and Lincoln. A child placing his hand over his heart when reciting the “pledge of allegiance.” How did this child learn about himself, as an individual, as a member of the black community, as an American? In the following passages, I examine how my family, especially my father and my grandfathers, influenced my learning process.

### **A Tree Grows in Harlem**

No single individual can be representative of a group as diverse as African Americans. Nevertheless, I find it interesting

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<sup>14</sup>Donna Haraway, *How life a Leaf: An interview with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 12.

how my personal history overlaps with a strong throughline of black history in the twentieth century; I am hard-pressed not to make associations with my family history. My childhood was as influenced by external forces as by my family. However, in direct contrast to my imaginary domain and my interpolation through popular media stands the material reality of three black men: my father, my paternal grandfather, and my maternal grandfather. Three strong black men. Let me begin with my grandfathers, both of whom I knew into my twenties. My maternal grandparents migrated from Georgia to New York City in 1928. My grandfather, Henry James Watkins (Papa) was a Baptist Minister from Sparta, Georgia, the town where Jean Toomer lived briefly and drew some of his characters for his 1923 novel *Cane*.

Although I saw him as kind, he was clearly a patriarch. I don't recall him being political in a direct sense; I have no knowledge of his involvement in the civil rights movement. When I think of my maternal grandparents I don't get a sense of Africa, but I do get a sense of the South, of their status as descendants of slavery and migrants to New York. I think of the tradition of the black church in the survival and liberation of

Africans in America. My grandfather preached, grandma sang in the choir. Although he did not quite fit the definition of “race man,” Henry James was a strong black man. But I have no doubt, however, of his commitment to helping people, materially and spiritually. I can’t say that I knew him very well, but what he represents for me is one model of a strong black man, afraid of no one, humble before the lord, a farm owner, a businessman (convenience store), and a family man. It was his brother, Willie, whom Parks captured at a 1963 Malcolm X rally.

My paternal grandparents came from Barbados and migrated to the United States prior to World War I when my grandfather, George Augustus Bryan (Dada), was nineteen. He worked for many years in the garment district as a pressman. He was self-conscious about Africa being the homeland of black people. Today we would call him Afrocentric, a political “race man.” His maternal grandparents came to Barbados from East Africa. When I think of Dada, I always think of his involvement with the Ethiopian Federation, a political and cultural organization focused on the liberation of Africa. Images of Haile Selassie and other black images were all over his apartment.

After I went to college I learned he was Garveyite, a member and shareholder in Garvey's North Star line. Dada was a proud black man, what would be referred to as a "race man." It was from him I first heard of the name George Padmore and of the Pan Africanist movement. For George Bryan, Ethiopia as an actual place was important, but he also saw Ethiopia—the only African country not to be colonized—as a metaphor for a liberated Africa.

My father was born and raised in Harlem. My father is neither a political activist nor spiritual. bell hooks (1992) says of her own father, "We were afraid of his power, his physical prowess, his deep voice, and his rare unpredictable but intense rage."<sup>15</sup> This rings true for me as well. When I think of my father I always think of being confronted with what's wrong with the world, what's wrong with whites, with governments, even what's wrong with black folk. Although never at a loss for political opinions, unlike his father he did not participate in

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<sup>15</sup>bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 88.

any political organizations. On the other hand, my father was fierce consumer of the arts, of music in particular, from Beethoven to Basie. From him I too developed a passion for the arts and the role the arts can play in enhancing one's life, not just as a form of simple entertainment, but also as a means of transcending and transforming pain into pleasure through appreciation of human creativity.

Much of my internal dialog and negotiation to fashion myself as a black man is influenced by all three men. I am not the Christian that Henry James was, although I very much believe in a spiritual force greater than human beings. Following George Bryan's lead, I have long identified with the ideology of Pan Africanism and have felt an affinity with men like DuBois, Padmore, and Nkrumah who helped create the conditions for African independence and tried to create a sense of unity among Africans throughout the Diaspora. The battle to face the material realities of being black in America and a desire to escape from those realities is not an uncommon struggle. I have much to learn from my engaged examination of these three black men.

## Mediated Subjects

Beyond my identity as a product of my family's upbringing, I am a product of visual media culture. I was born in 1949, in Harlem, New York, in what some would call the black cultural capital of the United States during the first episode of the televised civil rights movement. Equally important in my developing sense of self, however, was the fact that I grew up during the classic days of entertainment television. Although I was aware of Martin Luther King, and could see him on television, I was far more intimately involved with Steve McQueen's Josh Randall of *Wanted: Dead or Alive*, or Richard Boone's Paladin from *Have Gun Will Travel*.<sup>16</sup> On Sundays I would watch the "Million Dollar Movie" after church,

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<sup>16</sup>My favorite shows were Westerns and the heyday of the TV Western was 1957. The season opened with 20 Westerns, 11 of them new, the following year the total was 26, and in 1959, there were 27. The following year there was a conscious decision to limit the number of Westerns, and the total dropped to 20 in 1960. (Stephen Hofer, *The TV Guide Book: The Official Collectors Guide: Celebrating an Icon, Bangzoom: Braintree, MA: 2006*), 108.

my attention more riveted by the Sunday flick than the sermon my grandfather had just preached.

I cannot say exactly when I began watching, but living in New York and with both my parents working, we were exposed to television fairly early in the fifties. By the time I was five (1954) and during the heyday of TV westerns, (1957), television had become a regular companion.

Television was like a third parent. Along with my parents it nurtured me and provided me with positive and negative lessons about how to live; I was exposed to racial, gender, sexuality and class issues on television. We were presented with models of American Manhood. Watching *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Gunsmoke*, *Wanted Dead or Alive*, and *Trackdown* was critical in the issuing of identification papers of masculinity. Paladin was cool because he was in control, and he was cultured (he could quote Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde). Josh Randall was cool because of his swagger, his unique sawed-off shotgun, and his independence. Matt Dillon was the man. Dodge was his town. These were men! We were presented 'realistic' fantasies like Davy Crockett and Daniel Boone. As Faludi reports in *Stiffed*: Crockett and Boone "were men judged

by their ride out into the wasteland, not their return, they were measured by the control they achieved over their environment through gunplay, not husbandry. The essential question to resolve, in episode after episode, sequel after sequel, was not whether our hero had been socially engaged and useful, but whether he had maintained control and survived.”<sup>17</sup> These fantasies (contributed) to the construction of my desires, to my desire for control of my environment, to my desire to “be a man,” a man alone and independent. I was completely oblivious, particularly in those early years of viewing, that I was being constructed and instructed in my masculinity. I just liked, and more importantly, *identified* with these men. But it was in that identification that the mold of how to be a man was being formed.

As suggested above, probably the most complex and insidious lesson of television was in the area of race. For years, every day, every week, very few black images appeared on the

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<sup>17</sup>Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the Modern Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1999), 12.



programs I watched regularly. Black characters were either absent, minor, or caricatures like *Amos 'n' Andy*. What I continue to find intriguing is that I had no problem identifying with the white characters. Surely I was aware these white characters looked different from me, my family, and my neighbors—although they did look like my teachers and that might have some significance. Yet, my identification with several of them was without rupture. I *was* Steve McQueen's Josh Randall, I *was* Hugh O'Brien's Wyatt Earp, and I *was* Richard Boone's Paladin. To this day, McQueen's race remains irrelevant to me so strong and powerful is "my" construction of McQueen as a cool "black" cat, in "white face."<sup>18</sup>

Adopting a 'cool pose'<sup>19</sup> is part of youth culture generally, and, it could be argued, of black youth culture in particular.

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<sup>18</sup>I am not suggesting that McQueen was black in any "real" sense, only that he had a style that could be appropriated by a young black male that could be seen as constructed as a "black" performativity.

<sup>19</sup>By cool pose we mean the presentation of self many black males use to establish their male identity. Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully

Cool was part of gender construction, one's idea of being a man. Boys want to be cool.

Generally cool is associated with masculinity. Is it also associated with race? White men could be cool, but in order to be granted that status did they need to have a certain style? John Wayne might be considered cool, but in a different way than a Robert Culp might be, at least in the days of *I Spy*, as he adopted a more cool pose, taking on a style that had the sense of looseness associated with Bill Cosby's evolving character Scotty. Among my peers, if a white man was considered cool, he would be given an honorary black passport, he was one of "us." McQueen certainly fit that definition. I practically worshipped his early films and of course his Josh Randall character in *Wanted: Dead or Alive*. McQueen was cool; he had a swagger in his walk, in his manner. He did not cower to authority. He was a lone wolf. He did things his own way. I

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crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control." See Richard Majors, and Janet Mancini Billson. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

wonder if, in some way, my close affinity with him, and the lack of black alternatives, led me to “make” McQueen “black.” He had an urban feel to him, which certainly connected with my sense of my self as a New Yorker. He was never quite part of the pack. Did this relate to my sense of alienation? What did I feel alienated from? My blackness? Family? Life generally?<sup>20</sup>

However, I find another function for the cool pose. Blacks were clearly an oppressed group, especially in the 1950s and 1960s while I was growing up. Overtly in the South and—although hidden from my young New York eyes for the most part—present in the North as well. Oppression demands a response. One response, one way to transform that experience is to “play it cool.” Being cool gives one a sense of protection

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<sup>20</sup>A principle argument of Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) is that much of the debate and competing claims over “authentic African American identity is largely a result of deep anxiety over the status of African American masculinity” (ix). He cites Ossie Davis speech at Malcolm X’s funeral, “that was why Malcolm was no longer a Negro. Malcolm was a man, a black man,” as an example of Black identity and masculinity being conflated, rolled into one (68). This was an unfortunate feature of the black power movement.

from the variety of oppressions life imposes. It provides a sense of control. No matter what happens, one can deal with it with a 'cool pose.' It lends a way of translating experience, of transforming experience, an ability to minimize the oppressive aspects of experience; in fact, it can even seem to turn oppression on its head. "Being cool invigorates a life that would otherwise be degrading and empty. It helps the black male make sense of his life and get what he wants from others. Cool pose brings a dynamic vitality into the black male's everyday encounters, transforming the mundane into the sublime and making the routine spectacular."<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the possibilities in the "cool pose" was the usual invisibility of blacks in the media at that time. Blacks were generally absent from commercials, family sitcoms, and drama and variety programs. Exposure to the civil rights struggles on television fueled my rage toward the Bull Connors of the world, which I turned against myself. I wondered what was wrong with me to cause all these people to hate people who

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<sup>21</sup>Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*, 2.

looked like me. I wondered why I was born black. Why was I given this badge of dishonor? In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon (1952) undertakes a deft analysis of the psychological impact of colonialism and the effects of internalized oppression:

*As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin, or else I want them to be aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad....in order to terminate this neurotic situation, in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual solution...I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged round me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal.* <sup>22</sup>

Fanon's remarks clarify how devastating racism is to a child. For myself, the media was one force at play in this process; my family, especially my father and grandfathers, were another. The commonalities between these key figures and those Newt Winger relies on in Parks' film *The Learning Tree* are threefold. First, as adults involved in my upbringing, these men instilled in me many of their values. Just as Newt learned from

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<sup>22</sup>Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 197.

his mother the importance of honesty and bravery, I learned from my father's father the importance of understanding the intersection between race and history. Second, these men also inspired me to resist them. My father's critical tone, for instance, caused me to be more intent on pursuing those interests he found trivial; in *The Learning Tree*, Newt similarly resists his peer, Marcus, who tries to change Newt's behavior by being critical of him. Third, these men's views shaped many of my responses to the world outside my family, which included those mid-century staples of visual culture: television, movies, and comic books.

As I outline in the following section, my encounters with visual culture continued to be an important part of my emerging sense of who I could grow up to be. I find specific links between these experiences and the masculine qualities Parks explores in Shaft. Like the other characters I found so enthralling on screen and in comic books, John Shaft captured the imagination of a generation of young black men who were struggling to find viable role models in media imagery.

## **From Batman to Shaft**

Besides absorption in televisual images during my formative childhood years I participated in the consumption and trading of comic books, especially the Justice League heroes of DC Comics. A few comic book heroes stood out above others. *Green Lantern*, with his magic ring and through it his ability to *will* real objects into being through his thoughts alone; *Flash*, who could move fast enough to become invisible; and *Wonder Woman*, with her Amazon strength, magic lasso and invisible plane. However, unquestionably, the one who was consistently my favorite, my top power dog, was *Batman*.

Bruce Wayne (a.k.a. Batman), orphaned as a child by the murder of his parents, had no accidental access to a superpower. He, more than any of the others, interpolated through his own voice and vision, was the one I could most easily imagine becoming. As a youth he “simply” devoted his intellectual and physical life to the fullest degree to fighting injustice and the kind of criminal activity that had led to the death of his parents. Besides, what a cool outfit *Batman* had. Long before the Black Panthers, but following the tradition of

Zorro, we had this masked man dressed in black with a cool cape, who couldn't fly but could fight, who had a cool Batmobile and other handy devices to aid him in his effort to protect Gotham (a.k.a. New York) from the bad guys. I wanted to be a superhero. I wanted to fight crime and injustice even if at the time I had only a vague notion of what either of those might be. I wanted to be Batman, to make myself from my own image. I wanted to look into a mirror and say, "Hey You--- Batman!"<sup>23</sup>

For a long time I prayed for an accident that would give me some superpower, a power that would enable me to fight crime, injustice, and evil. I find it suggestive, however, that my two favorite comic book heroes were Batman and Green Lantern, the former a product of self-transformation, the latter

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<sup>23</sup>As Evans and Hall (1999, 4) suggest, "...visual culture always provides a physical and psychical place for individual spectators to inhabit". I not only read about Batman, Superman, or Green Lantern, I became them. Images nurture and help construct our imaginary selves. What we see "externally" does not exist separate from ourselves, from our internal mechanisms. As Stuart Hall (1999, 310) observes, "The subject is, in part, formed subjectively through what and how it 'sees' how its 'field' of vision is constructed.



possessing a ring that allowed him to materialize his visions through his own will power. I connect these fascinations now with both Parks and Shaft. Shaft was Batman, Parks was Green Lantern. Shaft walked against traffic, in the cold wind of January in New York, with his long brown leather coat hanging open and loose, akin to Batman's cape. As a filmmaker, Parks materialized his vision, and the Black Panthers too were Green Lanterns in real life, attempting to materialize their visions of a better more just society, and they did it in the style of comic heroes, not camp, not a joke, but with an understanding of the power of images. Going to Sacramento, to the steps of the California Capitol dressed in black with bandoliers and rifles, they knew they would capture not only the media, but also the black spectators of the media. They knew their visual insurgency would or could rally people to join them, to take action of some sort. Parks captured this visual spirit, if not overtly political spirit, in his portrayal of Shaft, a man, like Batman, who made himself, independent, assured of his skill in a variety of racialized and gendered settings, and very much exuding a sense of black power.

What was the appeal of my comic book absorption? Did they provide a means for me to *identify* with a heroic individual? With role models who either had control over their environment, or at least possessed the skills, with fist, gun or other device, to not be oppressed? Did it allow me to identify with individuals who in some way fought for justice? Or did these cultural practices primarily allow me to escape from myself? To enter an imaginary domain where I was on top, subject neither to the dictates of parents nor the “invisible” yet increasingly felt tentacles of white privilege? Fanon, in his conception of collective catharsis, understood and articulated a role comic books and television, especially TV Westerns, could play for children: “in every society, in every collectivity, exists,... a channel, an outlet through which the forces accumulated in the form of aggression can be released. This is the purpose of games in children’s institutions,...and...illustrated magazines for children.”<sup>24</sup> And this was the outlet that *Shaft* and later films of the

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<sup>24</sup>Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 145-146.

Blaxploitation era provided to other black youth raised on white media culture ready to fill that white space with black space.<sup>25</sup>

Does film play a similar role in this process? In some ways, film may be the most powerful source of identification in my life.<sup>26</sup> This is particularly demonstrated when I hear the soundtracks of Enio Morricone's *A Fistful of Dollars* or *For A Few Dollars More*, starring Clint Eastwood. I saw both of these

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<sup>25</sup>See Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. The Black Panthers “were, you see, the fashion plates of black insurrection. They had the kind of long black leather coat that is now sold by J. Peterman, which they wore with matching pants and gleaming black boots; and their jaunty black berets were pushed down so that their carefully coifed Afros would poke out just over the ears....the Panthers were...the revolution made visible, right down to the ankle length of their leather overcoats. *Henry Louis Gates, Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man (1997), xii.*

<sup>26</sup>As analysis of the gaze demonstrates, visual culture is the site of cultural contestation where subjectivity can drown or thrive, and where battles over meaning are waged. Popular culture generally and visual culture specifically are sites of cultural contestation where subjectivity can drown or thrive. They are sites where battles over meaning are waged. There is general agreement among interpreters of visual images that there are three sites at which meanings of an image are made: production of an image, the image itself, and audiences.

films when they came out in 1964 and 1965 respectively. And they have lodged a place in my imagination ever since. I am “the man with no name.” A solitary man who, even when he, reluctantly, takes a partner in *For a Few Dollars More*, does so contingently.

In retrospect, it seems obvious how elements of the film could appeal to a young black teenager who was already constituted, by early comic book readings and early Westerns on television, to want to forge an heroic path, a solitary path, a path of service, on his own terms, that made a difference on his environment, and contributed to the destruction of the bad and ugly in the world. But why such a strong identification?

Because Eastwood, like other Western heroes, had a superior skill that allowed him to defend himself against the forces of opposition. Although not totally clean cut, (antihero) he was basically a good man. He appeared to live by his own rules, was emotionally self-sufficient and intelligent. Although he employed his capacity for violence out of self-interest, he ultimately made a positive difference upon his environment.

Popular culture icons like Clint Eastwood are complex phenomena, however, and embedded within some of the self-

affirming aspects of these images were many messages that were violent to my psyche. First, and perhaps foremost, all the images were white, consequently, even as I imagined myself a fighter against injustice—and perhaps some part of my child psyche saw me fighting racism, certainly one form of injustice—another part of that same psyche envisioned the hero fighting racism as white, for only heroes were white, blacks were only victims. As Fanon (1952) wrote:

In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil...the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary 'who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes.'<sup>27</sup>(p. 146)

Although I did not realize at the time how infected the Black Power movement was by masculinist ideology, it did serve as a powerful antidote to the persistent poison of racism. The Black Panthers, for example, became “Batmen” fighting the unjust system of racial oppression. And, although not nearly enough, there were images of strong black (“Wonder”) women—

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<sup>27</sup>Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 146.

Kathleen Cleaver, Angela Davis—associated with the Black Panthers who at least partially represented a nascent secondary front in a fight against patriarchy and sexism. In the urban centers, particularly New York, many respected Dr. Martin Luther King, but revered Malcolm X, particularly his self-assurance, his articulation of black pride, his posture of taking no quarter from anyone, his ‘cool pose.’<sup>28</sup> We might not be ready to take up the gun like the Black Panthers, but we knew we were no longer willing to turn the other cheek.

### **Nomadic Identities**

Gordon Parks was fifteen when his mother died, his known world erupted, and he was forced to begin anew up North in Minnesota. My wall came tumbling down with my family moving to Queens, a move that ripped me apart in a

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<sup>28</sup>The key is not competition between Dr. King and Malcolm X, but to note the fact that Malcolm did speak to a Northern urban sensibility that was, at the time, different than a southern rural sensibility. Segregation was real in both places, but played out differently.

number of ways—taking away my sense of home, of security, of oneness between school and neighborhood—a move, ultimately, that began a process of racial self-consciousness.<sup>29</sup> During my first ten years, Harlem was a solid, stable world, a primarily black world. Racial issues were not part of my daily awareness. I have no recollection of the Civil Rights movement making a significant impact upon me while I lived in Harlem. I was forced to leave PS156 in the middle of the fifth grade. I left friends and teachers I had known all my life, and was forced to create a new life for myself in a strange land. In PS 156, all my fellow students were black; our teachers were white.

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<sup>29</sup>Rosi Braidotti, in *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* offers an intriguing approach to identity with her concept of “nomadic consciousness.” Braidotti contrasts the notion of nomad with that of migrant and exile and describes why she prefers the former. In Braidotti’s notion the nomad is not homeless, is able to travel with her identities, with no need for a fixed identity. “Nomadic consciousness,” she says, “consists in not taking any kind of identity as permanent. The nomad is only passing through; s/he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help her/him to survive, but s/he never takes on fully the limits of one rational, fixed identity. The nomad has no passport—or has too many of them.”

The first incident I recall was a march to protest the lack of black workers during the construction of Rochdale Village, a housing development in our area. My parents wanted me to participate. I didn't want to go. I was uncomfortable with the idea of having to stand up to proclaim our rights. Perhaps my discomfort was in part due to the growing rupture of fiction and reality. The fiction that I wanted to believe, from Disney programs like Swamp Fox and Johnny Tremain and other Americana programs, was that we were all free, that we were all citizens of this America. Somehow, I missed that other men who looked like these men were enslaving people, and that these slave masters were in collaboration with the non-slave masters to forge a new country—a new country that did not consider people who looked like me to be human beings, or subjects, let alone, citizens. Like Solomon Northup I had to learn that having citizenship papers that proclaimed one was free was insufficient to guarantee that freedom.

### **Nomadic Consciousness**

As a young boy I was exposed to the picture of Emmett Till. When I think of Emmett Till, a very significant experience



in my black male psychic sensibility, I didn't know much beyond what I heard in the news and got from my parents. But I got enough to know that in certain areas it is dangerous to look or speak or whistle to a white woman in any way that could be taken wrong. Black males, even at six years old, got the message. What happened to Emmett Till could happen to me. The pictures of the battered body that circulated in *Jet* magazine and other vehicles in 1955 served as a lesson to black men that not only might we be killed for merely looking at a white woman; we could be killed for no reason at all.

Nevertheless, I held onto the fiction of America in a relatively uncontested manner for ten years. When things began to unravel, my relationship to my self took on a new dynamic. On the surface, it might appear that not much had changed. I continued to watch television dominated by white images, but now those white images became a toxic refuge for me to escape the pain of blackness. That is why, in part, a program like *I Spy* had a power beyond itself, for now I could hold onto my old viewing self when there was no rupture between fiction and reality—when Robert Culp played a bounty hunter in the Western series *Trackdown*—and reconcile it with

an *emerging new self* that needed black images. With the prominence of Bill Cosby, *I Spy* reconciled my troubled double consciousness.

One day at the kitchen table my father informed me that Hannibal was black. Hannibal looked like Victor Mature, didn't he? How could he be black? That's who I saw playing Hannibal, and, for a child, images do not lie. Only words lie. Why was my father lying to me? Although it was Hollywood that had been false, my resentment was directed toward my father. I did not want to face the truth. At some point in the conversation, I cried, "I wish I was white." I did not want to be part of a group I was seeing on television getting beat up for just standing up. I did not want to believe that my companions, my friends from earliest childhood (television and movies) were false—and that they had been lying to me all this time.

I was devastated. I resented my father for reminding me that I was black. My father became the symbol for the harsh realities of race. It seemed to me that my Jewish friends did not have to worry about their race, did not have to prove their worth to anyone. I turned inward and became angry at my being black. I wanted an unencumbered life like I imagined my

Jewish friends had. Needless to say I was totally ignorant of anti-Semitism, and its history, of the Holocaust, and how much more I actually had in common with my Jewish friends than perhaps either they or I knew at the time.

What I find most interesting about my father's attempt to educate me was how devastating his information was and how it resulted in a cry to be different than I was, a desire to be 'the Other' who seemed to be a safer, more powerful, less victimized subject. That was the position I wanted. That was the position I had come to identify with in my popular imaginary cultural landscape. Media and popular culture help construct our desires, and our desire to be 'the other' becomes a form of identification. My father was telling me I was not Tarzan. I wasn't even Jane; instead, I was one of the supporting casts of inferior natives. My father was telling me I was not the Lone Ranger, but his sidekick, Tonto – a member of a defeated people. My father shattered the mirror of desire I had been holding up. By challenging my desired identifications, my father participated in splitting my identity, leaving a fragile, confused child searching for a safe haven. This state was a form of invisibility.

As Fanon describes, I began to subject myself to the hegemonic thought of black being bad and white good. It wasn't that I hated everything black; too many of my loved ones were black. But what I began to hate was that *I* was black. At first I began to want to be white. That shifted eventually, but what remained was a desire not to be black. Unlike Newt Winger in *The Learning Tree*, race did begin to torture me, especially after we moved to Queens. I didn't want to have to fight to be recognized as a worthy being. I wanted to be, and feel, like I thought my Jewish friends did. But what did I know of their feelings, or the feelings and experiences of their parents and grandparents? I don't recall having any knowledge of the Holocaust, or the anti-Semitism and discrimination that existed in the United States against Jews. What I *thought* I knew was that they, unlike the "Negroes" I saw on television and in the neighborhood, did have to march to be free, they didn't have to cry out, I AM A Man, we exist. They were free, I thought, and that's what wanted.

In my struggle against accepting the material realities of racism as I experienced it, I find common ground with Parks' protagonist in *Leadbelly*, a character whose circumstances

emerged from his rage-filled reactions against similar realities. For me, my anger may have originated in that disruptive move our family made from Harlem to Jamaica, Queens. After that point, my educators were almost exclusively white, a fact that implicitly communicated my inferiority as a black child. Parks' Leadbelly repeatedly found himself in confrontation with the unrelenting message of racial inferiority—in his encounters with officers of the law, who were all white; in his community of fellows in prison, who were all black; and in his meeting with John Lomax, the white researcher who collected Leadbelly's songs with an audio recorder ("Like butterflies?" Leadbelly asks), as if they are the artifacts of a quaint but lesser culture than his own.

Countering such inescapable representational systems is a lifelong effort that requires determination and resourcefulness. For me, the creative imaginary life made possible by the visual media my father despised was a helpful fictional space. My identification with Batman and Steve McQueen was a form of protection against the terror behind Emmett Till's image. But my father was merely skeptical, sometimes even derisive, about these characters I cherished.

Without positive images to replace my fantasies, I deeply resented that my father ripped down that projection screen.

### **Teach Them What You Know**

I arrived in Ottawa, Kansas in September 1967, accompanied by a loud chorus of cicadas, a new and strange sound, in a new and strange town. I knew of Ottawa University because my cousin Diane had graduated from there two years earlier. I didn't know much about it and had never visited her there, but it was in my consciousness. Ottawa was a laboratory. In the four years I would spend at OU, I experienced death, love, separation, alienation, thoughts of suicide, thoughts of exile, racial pride and alienation, pain, pleasure, and the fear of going to war. It was there that I developed an ambition to write. I began my first diary, did my first journalistic work for the campus newspaper, and edited the journal of the civil rights organization I belonged to. Ottawa also enabled me to study in England for a semester, which allowed me to look at America off shore for the first time and thus see it, and me, in a new way. Ottawa University also provided many opportunities for me to exercise leadership, and

gave me my first real taste of what being an intellectual might look like in practice.

In the midst of my time there, the fall of 1969 was a difficult semester for me. My sense of existential order was breaking apart. This was due, in part, to the increasing militancy in Ottawa and elsewhere, and my own loss of faith. And then on February 3, 1970, I learned that my cousin, her two-year-old daughter, Lisa, and my uncle had been killed by Floyd Scott, my cousin's estranged husband, who then turned the shotgun on himself. Diane and Floyd were both OU alums.

I had flown that day to New York to be with my family before my study abroad experience. When I arrived at the airport and called my family, I was informed of the deaths. This was supposed to be an item one read about in the daily news, happening to someone else; it wasn't supposed to be happening to us. I've never been able to find out why Scott did what he did. I don't know how one ever does. But what I do suspect is that below the surface Scott had some rage and perhaps self-hate about life as a black man in the United States. Like Gordon Parks, he was from Kansas, a football star at Ottawa

University. I think of Leadbelly without the blues, the guitar, or the voice. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Fanon wrote:

At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of his inferiority complex, of his contemplative or despairing attitudes. It makes him intrepid, rehabilitates him in his own eyes.<sup>30</sup>

### **Conclusion: Meeting Parks**

Parks' main aim, as he formulated contributions to this growing body of filmic work on the black experience, was to argue against received ideas that limited black masculinity and to create viable alternatives that would foster agency. By transforming cinematic images of black men, Parks hoped to engage young black men in a critical internal dialogue that would help them make choices outside the boundaries violence would impose upon them. In a conversation I had with Gordon Parks on August 13, 2004, Parks noted the importance of providing role models to black youth. Unfortunately, the critical literature on Gordon Parks' films has thus far failed to

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<sup>30</sup>Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 70.



explore the extent of his positive representation of role models to empower blacks, to promote a positive black male subjectivity to counter the environment that places black men at risk. In tracing the recursive loop of invisibility, emergence, and ascendancy, Parks' films provide instruction in *how to be a black man*—a visibly creative subject as well as an empowered agent of social change in America.

When I met Gordon Parks at his home that summer day, I made notes about my impressions:

Late afternoon. A baby grand in the living room. Books all over, on the floor, on shelves. A disordered arrangement. Photographs of family everywhere, and a great view of the city and the East River. It's a lovely apartment—I can see why he's been here for years.

Parks is a slender man in blue sweater and pants, walking slowly after a recent hernia operation. He's recovering from the anesthesia. "Leaves you disoriented," he says. His speech is slow and deliberate, sometimes mumbling. He can't hear well, so sometimes he doesn't understand me.

"Do you want some wine?" he asks. We talk about a book he has due out in the fall, and about a volume of poetry he's working on. He shows me his study where he composes. Lots of equipment for his music. He talks about his mother and father, how the faith his family had in his abilities sustained him as a creative person. He tells me about how important it is to keep models of success in front of people, especially black folks, but not just us. Admirers from all over the world, he tells me, have said "You've changed my life."

Back outside, on the street, I find it's raining hard—although there's no thunder or lightning. "You must love what you do," Parks had said to me, "love the writing, the photography..."

### **An Afterword**

Parks directed the four black-centered films of my study between 1969 and 1984. When *The Learning Tree* came out in 1969, I was in my third year at Ottawa University in Ottawa, Kansas, less than two hours from Ft. Scott, Kansas, where Parks filmed his autobiographical study. His next film, *Shaft*, came out the year I graduated from Ottawa University.

It is challenging to discuss the 1960s because so much was happening. The nonviolent civil rights movement continued to push for full equality for black citizens. But the intense resistance and antiblack violence that continued pushed many younger blacks away from the nonviolent strategy. The Viet Nam War and its escalations and disproportional impact on black communities also contributed to the escalation of violence as a viable response to America's racism. Then in 1968 with the assassination of Dr. King especially and two months later, Bobby Kennedy, the

foundation for nonviolence took a devastating blow. Over a hundred cities erupted in response.

Gordon Parks negotiated this terrain with a film that drew from the perspective of nonviolent integration (*The Learning Tree*) and one that manifested the tenets of black power (*Shaft*), which emphasized black people taking charge of defining who they are without benefit of white input. Like Parks I walked between these two paths during this time, on the one hand wanting to believe in an old American dream in which all are free citizens, and on the other feeling the anger and rage of a society that rejected me and my kind merely on the basis of skin color. During this period I floated between a kind of underground, invisible existence, trying to stay below the racial radar, and emergence, through involvement with issues on campus or community issues after graduation. However, it wasn't until several years later, in 1986, that I ascended to become a professional in affirmative action at a couple of higher education institutions and made my living keeping race and racial equality in the forefront.

In the last two black-centered films of my study Parks provided models of individuals who faced the inhumane

violence perpetuated against blacks, who confronted the systematic effort of society to make blacks invisible, and who had the strength, spirit, and determination to escape from their conditions and through song and story sought to influence the liberation of others similarly situated. As the 1970s came to a close and we entered the 1980s there was pressure, beginning with President Reagan's administration, to dismiss the unfinished battle to end discrimination and racism. As economic conditions for some worsened, a growing sense of despair developed. At the beginning of this fifteen-year period, there still existed optimism about the potential for freedom for blacks. Despite heightened violence, there were more blacks in films, blacks getting elected to office, and some economic uplift. Parks added his voice to the discourse of the Black Power and post Black Power period. And by leaving us his powerful message, he provides us with a map for how we might move from invisibility, into emergence, and to ascendance.

Having developed these relationships between Parks' films and my own autobiography, in the next chapter I explore the particulars of Parks' life, as set forth in his memoirs. In his writings, he presents a tidal ebb and flow between experiences

and interpretations, balancing violent events with contemplative responses, and detailed portraits of the people around him with admissions of his own frailties. His life was a deep well that supplied him with a lifetime of creative projects and a commitment to the work of shifting representational practices to make room for black men to gain agency. In subsequent chapters, the focus of my study will be my reading of Parks' films as a visual site for transforming the dominant cinematic imagery of the black American male into a positive one. I identify ways in which Parks critiques the majority culture's "signifying devices," a term I borrow from Kirk Savage's discussion of African American figures in nineteenth century sculpture.<sup>31</sup> These devices accumulate as a tradition of racist representations (visual and otherwise). In turn, Parks constructs a new set of "signifying devices," a sort of visual lexicon or vocabulary that results in positive constructions for black male subjectivity.

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<sup>31</sup>Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves. Race, War and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 67.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Talkin 'bout Parks

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anybody else, these pages must show.

—Charles Dickens from *David Copperfield*

The plunge into the chasm of the past is the condition and the source of freedom.

—Fanon (Paris 1956)

In the previous chapter I connected formative events and influences in my life narrative to my historically situated subject position as an audience for Gordon Parks' films. My intent with Chapter Two is to highlight significant, interconnected themes in Parks' autobiographical experiences, especially the themes of racialized violence and of personal strength. My awareness of these patterns, in subsequent chapters, serves as a foundation for my view of the films he produced over the 15-year period of 1969-1984 as consistent with his sustained and coherent effort, across all the media in which he worked, to take a positive position on the complex question of how to be a black man in America. Contrary to the

positions of the militant black power movement that was so influential at the beginning of this period, Parks offers a vision of black manhood that strives to meet racial violence (black on black and white on black alike) with non-violence and self-restraint; that takes its lessons from previous foolish and uncontrolled reactions to violent provocations; and that views black women as exemplars of the strength, non-violence, and self-restraint that black men need to survive the perils and indignities of racism.

Parks led a long and rich life, and while there is a distinct need for a full blown critical biography of Parks, this chapter can only skim the surface. I want to avoid simple regurgitation of events highlighted in almost every article that discusses his life and often repeated in interviews with Parks. To demonstrate that Parks' work ties the confrontation of racialized violence with the constitution of black manhood, I intend to focus my biographical description to those thematic patterns that helped shape Parks' attitude toward violence.

Parks was no stranger to violence and in his work recognized the unique place of violence in African American subject formation. In *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks talks about

violence and his life: “I did suppress layer upon layer of rage during my youth and adulthood—most of which was provoked by whites who held me inferior because I was black. But the energy I might have burned to sustain animosity toward my tormentors was used instead to prove them wrong.”<sup>1</sup> Parks recognizes that in order to attain full agency black men must move out of the cycle of violence by choosing non-violence and self-restraint. Violence might not be eradicated, but it could be addressed from a position of inner strength that would facilitate emergence from the cycle.

Part I of this chapter will be a review of the literature on Gordon Parks. As I and others have noted, the literature on Parks is primarily journalistic or documentary, most often focusing on specific works or photography exhibits. In depth scholarly articles are rare. Biographical materials are most often interspersed in the journalistic articles, documented through interviews or written for children or young adults. In

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<sup>1</sup>Gordon Parks, *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography* (New York: Doubleday, 1990) xv.



Part II I will attempt to tease out some general themes that are most relevant to Parks' self-construction in his memoirs, to guide my analysis of his films, and assist in my demonstration of the narrative structure Parks uses to journey through the arc of *invisibility, emergence, and ascendance*. In a sense, the arc describes *both* the critical reception of Gordon Parks *and* his own framing of his life. And in his memoirs that arc is traced especially during his struggles with the temptation of self-destructive violence.

## **Part I**

### **Review of Literature**

Gordon Parks wrote five autobiographical books and granted numerous interviews to talk about his life experiences. He incorporated autobiographical elements in his four filmic representations of black manhood, and revisited autobiographical themes several times throughout his books and films, even in his most seemingly commercial. Parks saw a crucial connection between his personal experiences and his

artistic production. In fact, he explicitly links his various artistic projects to his autonomy as an artist. When he discusses his photography, films, and music in his autobiographies he replays again and again—sometimes with new emphases, sometimes with lesser and greater degrees of self-satisfaction—his own personal power in constructing those products.

The progression of his autobiographies, and the interesting discrepancies between historical fact and autobiographical narrative, suggest that Parks may at times have embraced the newspaperman's advice from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*: “When fact becomes legend, print the legend.” Parks’ self-image may sometimes be overly heroic; However, overall Parks utilizes his autobiographies to fashion an image of himself that confesses his flaws, insecurities, and contradictions, as well as constructing a powerful and courageous role model for a generation that, perhaps, does not always see his camera as sufficiently radical.

Relatively little critical commentary exists on Parks' life and his full body of work, a lack traceable perhaps to the confusion of would-be commentators who cannot easily place

him within an existing movement or to the failure of critics to see the tension and commitment of his work. Some “read race out of his pictures,”<sup>2</sup> while others dismiss them as mere political tracts. Viewers and readers have failed to appreciate the depth of Parks’ motivation in his work; that failure presumably contributes to the lack of robust critical commentary, though his defenders credit him with sophisticated artistic vision and a strong critical self-consciousness.<sup>3</sup>

Parks’ work is an interrogation of his own life, but that interrogation is informed by more than a naïve autobiographical impulse. Parks’ memoirs and films confirm the writer-director’s conscious hand in constructing the relationship between art and life. Through his work, Parks’ is seeking to create and shape a self by actively participating in modifying autobiographical subjectivity through scrutiny of the

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<sup>2</sup>Erika Doss, “Visualizing Black America,” 228.

<sup>3</sup>John Edgar Tidwell, “Gordon Parks and the Unending Quest for Self-fulfillment.”

recurrent themes of his life. Those personal themes include: fear of death, need to negotiate violence, an abiding desire for independence, a deep value for family—all in the context of surviving in an often hostile, always racist world.

These pages attempt to capture the crux of the critical comments regarding Parks' fashioning of his self. The chapter then examines Parks' own articulation of his life and his art, particularly the relationship between the violence he faced in his life as a consequence of being a black man and the function of violence in shaping the representation of the male protagonists of his films. A review of this literature tells us what we, and Parks, have already learned: in a period of robust and contested discourse about the meaning of race in America, expectations placed upon the story of the life of a black man who broke barriers in the worlds of photography and film-making are inevitably politicized. We can certainly perceive this pattern in the changing tenor of commentary from the three, arguably distinct periods of Parks' creative life: 1948-1970, 1971-1989, and 1990-2000.

# I

## 1948-1970

We can see in the early period of response to Parks' novel *The Learning Tree* (1963), and his memoir *A Choice of Weapons* (1966) perhaps less critical concern about Parks himself and more about the contemporary discomfort about how to talk about the intersection of race, art, and culture. Critics of this early period address that discomfort variously: by lauding Parks' refusal to relinquish his individuality in the face of pressure to conform to a particular notion of what blackness means; by emphasizing Parks' quintessential democratic and American values;<sup>4</sup> by reassuring readers, white and black, that reading Parks will not be a disruptive experience;<sup>5</sup> or by ignoring the reality of black life in the first half of the 1960s

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<sup>4</sup>Saunders Redding, "In America," Review of *A Choice of Weapons*, by Gordon Parks, *New York Times Book Review*, February 13, 1966.

<sup>5</sup>*Time*, "Armed with a Camera," Review of *A Choice of Weapons*, by Gordon Parks, February 18, 1966.

when *The Learning Tree* appeared.<sup>6</sup> The underlying implication here is that Parks' determination to define himself is a familiar American story that need not be limited by color. Positive or negative, reviews of Parks tended to steer clear of piercing incendiary questions, reflecting mass media tendency to avoid the responsibility of confronting the harsh realities of race in American society. Parks, particularly through his photographic work at *Life* magazine, had been productive for several years, but his work, although admired, was not generally considered controversial; consequently, critical commentary of his work during this period was sparse.

## II

### 1971-1989

This period sees a significant shift—and increase—in the critical responses to Parks' life and work. Critics seem to take Parks more seriously both as a person with an individual

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<sup>6</sup>David Dempsey, "Witness to a Killing," Review of *The Learning Tree*, by Gordon Parks. *The New York Times Book Review*, September 15, 1963.

psychology and as a black artist operating within a changing structure and regime of representational practices. That said, although commentators during this period take the reality of Parks' presence more seriously, several responses are also more critical of how he positions himself within contemporary discourse about the role of the black artist within a white hegemonic society.

If the dominant approach in preceding decades was to marginalize the role of race in Parks' work, the mood of some critics in this second period is to cast him as too conciliatory, not sufficiently radical, a view that fails to account for Parks' careful articulation of the need to meet violence with non-violence. Parks is thus criticized for self-distancing in his work from gritty, painful contemporary reality and charged with being "a homegrown American esthete dreaming of ageless beauty but caught up half-unwillingly and thrust by time and circumstances into the greatest social revolution of his age."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Gene Thornton, "Photojournalism—How Does it Stand Up as Art? *New York Times* , October 19, 1975.

Critics of this stripe wish to box Parks into revolution or nothing, into a constraining definition of blackness that requires one to meet violence with violence, in order to be authentically black.<sup>8</sup>

Another group of critics, more open to Parks' right to define his own life, his own experience of being a black man, and his own relationship to his art, are also, interestingly, more likely to quote heavily from Parks' autobiographies and interviews in the course of contextualizing Parks' work and contribution. These critics variously describe Parks as a "door opener" for many young black filmmakers, who was motivated by the need to survive; as an artist whose work is dominated by both anger and empathy; as a man with competing needs to protest and to fit in; or as a man who struggles with feelings of homelessness and alienation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., Thornton 1975; Kalama Ya Salaam, "Three Recent Photo Books." Review of *Whispers of Intimate Things* by Gordon Parks. *Black World*, August 1973:80-86.

<sup>9</sup>Walter Dean Myers, "Gordon Parks: John Henry with a Camera." *Black Scholar* 7, (January/February 1976): 26-30; Hilton Kramer, "Art: Empathy of Gordon Parks." *New York*



Significantly, these claims are not exactly “critical,” since the evidence for them does not typically come from analysis of Parks’ creative work of, but from uncritical reprinting of Parks’ own statements, in interviews or autobiographies, about his need to succeed, or his need to survive, or his recollection of advice from his family. Thus, the support for the assertion that Parks’ work itself is about survival comes from Parks’ own statement that “as a kid I used to think about the idea of somehow surviving . . . That’s what it’s all about.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise the claim that Parks’ work reflects the dominant emotions of anger and empathy is supported by Parks’ assertion that “I was born to a black childhood of confusion and poverty. The memory of that beginning influences my work today.”<sup>11</sup> Parks’

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*Times*, October 4, 1975; Andy Grundberg, “Living a Life of Talent in a Land of Prejudice.” Review of *Voices in the Mirror* by Gordon Parks. *New York Times Book Review*, January 8, 1991; Carol DiGrappa, “Inner Visions.” *Camera Arts 2* (March/April 1982): 20-24, 105-106.

<sup>10</sup>Myers, “Gordon Parks: John Henry with a Camera.”

<sup>11</sup>Hilton Kramer, “Art: Empathy of Gordon Parks.”

statement leads this particular critic to conclude that Parks' work is best "where the subjects are most vulnerable."<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, these critics do not ground their assessments primarily in Parks' artistic production, a practice that could be more properly called "critical" attention; on the other hand, they do not dismiss Parks' contribution. And at least one notes how infrequently Parks comes up when names of black achievers are mentioned.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, a thread of prescriptivism weaves through even these generally positive responses. Ultimately, the uncertainty about what precisely to do with Parks and how exactly to talk about his work persists here.

Nonetheless, these critics seem to intuit the importance of Parks' autobiography as a context for his work. Other critics during this period more directly acknowledge (again predominantly through Parks' own words rather than by critically engaging with his films and other artistic production)

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Myers, "Gordon Parks," 1976.

Parks' very central struggle with defining himself as a man, and as a black man.<sup>14</sup> DiGrappa, who, though looking to Parks' own words to characterize his emergence as a black man who is an artist and a "universalist," uses those words in an attempt to understand rather than to contain.<sup>15</sup> Lauerman points out that Parks went through a period of wondering to God why he had made Parks black: "I once even dreamed that I was white but my skin seemed flabby and loose, so I kept trying to pull it into shape—trying to make it fit."<sup>16</sup> And Shepard recounts Parks' recollection of going to films as a youth and responding to the dominant representation of blacks as menial:

I was demeaned by this theory that that's the way blacks should be shown. I came out of there with my head tucked between my legs, ashamed of being black. That's the thing it did, it ruined, it ...a lot of young black people.

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<sup>14</sup>DiGrappa, "Inner Visions"; Connie Lauerman, "Author Gordon Parks: At 68, the Best Is Yet to Come," *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1981; Thom Shepard, "Beyond the 'Black Film': An Interview with Gordon Parks." *Cineaste* 8 (1977): 38-40.

<sup>15</sup>DiGrappa, "Inner Visions."

<sup>16</sup>Lauerman, "Author Gordon Parks: At 68."

It made them feel worthless to a certain extent. So a great hue and cry went up when they saw Shaft kicking ass---white ass, too.<sup>17</sup>

This is a well-chosen example of Parks in dialogue with a hegemonic discourse about who blacks are. He was in argument with a prevailing representation, and although things had changed from his childhood to the time he made *Shaft* (Stepin Fetchit would no longer be tolerated), there was still a long path to travel. That Parks himself indeed traveled that path was not always a journey critics have been quick to acknowledge.

### III

#### 1990-2006

Since 1990, the commentary on Parks has been more broadly positive, welcoming him into a comfortable space in the pantheon of American cultural icons. The dichotomy persists, however, between those who view his contribution as lightweight and scattered and those who view his career as

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

serious and coherent. A 1991 review of *Voices in the Mirror*, for example, charges that Parks “lacks a clear center. His forays into music, film and writing are discussed, but the psychological needs they fill are not.”<sup>18</sup> Where some critics still charge Parks with insufficient militancy, others, like Bohlen (2000), appreciate the subtle cues of historical timing. Bohlen relates the response of photographer St. Clair Bourne, who encountered Parks at a civil rights march: “‘He educated white people about the black experience, and as an artist he used his skills to do that,’ Mr. Bourne said. ‘Today, it would be harder; the lines, political and cultural, have hardened. But when Gordon came along, there was a great deal of ignorance about the real experience of black people.’”<sup>19</sup>

Ultimately, and somewhat appropriately, the critical reading of Parks' work remains inextricably linked to

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<sup>18</sup>Andy Grundberg, “Living a Life of Talent In a Land of Prejudice,” Review of *Voices in the Mirror*, by Gordon Parks, *New York Times Book Review*, January 8, 1991.

<sup>19</sup>Celestine Bohlen, “Portrayer of the Black Experience Reflects on His Own,” *New York Times*, November 26, 2000.

interpretations of his life. Michael Eric Dyson's enthusiastic praise of *Voices in the Mirror* embodies this linkage:

Mr. Parks records with unsparing candor the material deprivations, psychic thrashings, and moral agonies wrought by his initiation into maturity. It is amazing that he never allowed the ubiquity of racial animosity to obstruct his exploration of the mystery of life or wither his reverence for imagination and experience. Such reverence only fed his appetite for intellectual and artistic pursuits, executed without benefit of a high school education.<sup>20</sup>

While this link between Parks' life and his art is crucial, the trouble with all these critical responses is that they rarely take the next important step of studying how Parks' self-definition takes shape in his creative work. Overall, the scarce, half-hearted, and shallow critical response to Parks in the early years speaks to what has been the ongoing problem of his invisibility. In the second period of response to Parks work (1971-1989) we have seen more engagement with Parks' actual products but still, or perhaps even more, an attempt to be

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<sup>20</sup>Michael Eric Dyson, "Prometheus in Motion," Review of *Voices in the Mirror*, by Gordon Parks. *New York Times Book Review*, December 9, 1990.

prescriptive. Finally, the third period of criticism casts Gordon Parks as a kind of iconic figure, the grand old man of the arts. What's absent in the critical discourse, however, is the effort and the struggle to penetrate deeper into Park's achievement—there's confusion, as Tidwell has pointed out, and mystification.

## **Part II**

### **Self-Fashioning and Confrontations with Violence**

Parks' memoirs explore a web of themes, from the loss and alienation that followed him from Fort Scott in 19xx to Minnesota in 1928, to the art and action characterizing his work with FSA and *Life*, to his final confidence and achievement as filmmaker and organic public intellectual. A consistent motif is the question of violence: the temptation to do violence and its self-destructive results. Parks also contends with internal issues such as the need for intimacy, the importance of "home" (especially in his strong loyalty to his parents—particularly his mother), and his even more pressing

desire for independence (played out in Parks' careful discussions of his marriages and affairs).

Most relevant to this study, however, are his explorations of those instructive events that involve his encounters with violence. Several of these moments bear scrutiny in the context of this interrogation of Parks' construction of black manhood in the four films *The Learning Tree*, *Shaft*, *Leadbelly*, and *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* I will be discussing in this dissertation. These moments reverberate throughout his writings and in the films, and Parks places them into a context that reaches across the confines of a specific film produced during a specific time. Violence, particularly racialized violence, serves as a throughline for black male subjectivity in Parks work. Regardless of the historical moment in twentieth century America, Parks' work implies, black men had to confront and come to terms with violence as they came to their black manhood.

## I

In *A Choice of Weapons*, *A Hungry Heart*, and *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks provides accountings of his life. Parks had experienced poverty as a boy in Fort Scott, but of a different



sort from what he confronted in Minneapolis as a young man. And he had experienced racism as a boy, as well, but, as he notes, his family's love had "eased the burden of being black".<sup>21</sup> Indignities of segregation, beatings, racist epithets became part of the fabric of his life, but, he says, "I always fought back"<sup>22</sup>—against the brutality that surrounded him as a young boy growing up in Jim Crow Kansas:

Our parents had filled us with love and a staunch Methodist religion. We were poor, though I did not know it at the time. . . . 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.<sup>23</sup>

Ironically, though these indignities combined in a very *visible* process of being othered, excluded, rejected, and terrorized,

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<sup>21</sup>Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1965), 2.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

they also erased the humanity of child experiencing them, casting him into a sort of *invisibility*.

Incidents were not confined to verbal violence. In his memoirs, Parks tells us of his slain childhood friends and the murderous cop Kirby. His accounts establish a clear connection with *The Learning Tree*, and, in the juxtaposition with that novel's message of hope and emergence, they emphasize even more strongly how close he came to that violent erasure:

Johnny, my best friend, writhing in a pool of blood after being shot by a jealous rival. Buster, knifed to death after a dispute over a bag of marbles. Emphry, gone after a fatal razor slashing. Then there was Kirby, the brutal White cop who carried two big guns on his hips, who earned the title "murderer" by sending a number of Black people to their graves"<sup>24</sup>

Parks written account, in fact, is a direct refusal to allow erasure of those events. He adds, in *Choice of Weapons*, "Now I considered myself lucky to be alive; three of my close friends

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<sup>24</sup>Gordon Parks, *A Hungry Heart: A Memoir* (New York: Atria Books, 2005), 3.

[dead] of senseless brutality, and I was lucky that I hadn't killed someone myself."<sup>25</sup>

While these tragic deaths were key to Parks' lifelong experiences with violence, some of his equally alarming memories stemmed from within his own family. In Parks' consideration of the early period of his life, when he is struggling within the void of invisibility, one early and often repeated memory involves the story of his expulsion from his sister's home in St. Paul, thrown out into the cold underground of winter by his brother-in-law on an evening when Parks wished to go out to a party, and his brother-in-law did not want him to go. In his first memoir, *A Choice of Weapons*, Parks tells us that he resisted his brother-in-law's order that he return to his room primarily because of how his sister was being treated:

Perhaps if he hadn't shoved my sister against the wall, I would have gone to my room. But, when that happened, I rushed toward him, swinging for his belly before he knew what was happening. But he was a powerful man. My blows only angered him. He pounced on me,

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<sup>25</sup>Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 2.

crushing me to the floor beneath his 230 pounds. His hands were groping for my throat and, while my sister and Crystal screamed at the top of their lungs, he began choking me and banging my head against the floor.<sup>26</sup>

In this rendition, Parks is rescued by the umbrella-wielding Crystal, and he ends up outside with his belongings cascading around him. In the memoir written twenty years later, *A Hungry Heart*, Parks retells the story. The recounting of “our confrontation” spares the detail of the earlier one, but, despite discrepancies, the crucial facts remain. With Christmas looming and temperatures at “thirty-five below zero,” he writes:

I had been invited to a party by my schoolmates and for some reason David objected to my going. I insisted, and soon our words turned to blows, and I had him on the floor.

“Get out,” he commanded, and pushed me out the door.<sup>27</sup>

Once in the snow, Parks tells us, the voice of his brother came to him: “Try using your brain, Pedro. It’s more powerful than

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>27</sup>Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 6.

your fists.”<sup>28</sup> Significantly, that insight did not make it into his earlier memoirs. Perhaps in the details of the first version, Parks leads us indirectly to the conclusion that fists are not powerful (his brother-in-law overcomes him and he has to be rescued by a woman with an umbrella). Similarly, in the later memoir, Parks succeeds in knocking his brother-in-law flat, but still fails to prevail and finds himself in the snow. But when, in the later recounting, Parks articulates the impact his brother’s advice had on his interpretation of this event, he demonstrates a notion that would ultimately surface as a recurring theme in his films: that a man’s self-awareness could lead him to choose non-violent solutions. The crucial lesson is the same as the one he draws from his friends’ deaths: to survive and achieve one must choose one’s weapons (and one’s battles) carefully, and violence is not the weapon of choice.

He pushes this theme as he relates incident after incident of his youthful “invisibility” period. One striking account of an incident on a trolley brings together the

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

dominant themes of violence, alienation, and the importance of family; themes that dominate his interrogation of his youth. Soon after his expulsion from his sister's house, Parks finds himself riding the trolley between Minneapolis and St. Paul trying to stay warm. He is hungry and hopeless, and one night, his birthday, he comes close to committing robbery when he sees the conductor who wakes him at the end of the line with a handful of bills:

At the sight of them, my hand tightened about a switchblade in my pocket. I rose slowly, looking through the windows to see who was about. We were alone. His back was toward me as we walked to the rear of the car. Perspiration rolled from my armpits, and the anxiety of evil-doing must have shown on my face. I pressed the button, and the long blade popped out.

“Conductor!”

“Yes.” He turned and looked calmly at the blade. I looked at him, trembling now, with all my mothers’ teaching coming hot at me.

“Conductor,” I said, “would you give me a dollar for this knife? I’m hungry and I don’t have any place to stay.”<sup>29</sup>

The conductor rejects the knife, but offers him money; Parks refuses, and, ashamed, he jumps off the trolley and hurries

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<sup>29</sup>Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 13-14.

away. This story raises in him the memory of his mother, and her faith in him, and her hope that he would become a man of integrity. Parks suggests that perhaps the violence of his brother-in-law and his own subsequent experience of uncaring poverty and the lure of violence served a necessary purpose, since they helped him define what integrity meant to him.

A little later in the memoir, he recounts an abortive trip north for a job which doesn't materialize and which results in a confrontation with racism and a night in jail. He has an epiphany in the truck in which he hitchhikes back to St. Paul: "I made up my mind, there in the cab of that truck, that I wouldn't allow my life to be conditioned by what others thought or did, or give in to anyone who would have me be subservient."<sup>30</sup> After this event, and the first cold, lonely winter in St. Paul, continues Parks, "I could no longer consider myself just a boy. I knew that youth as it should be at seventeen was not for me, and that full manhood must come quickly."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>31</sup>Parks, Ibid., 46.

Manhood in this context meant making the right choices for himself.

During this youthful period Parks often has little choice but to use violence to force others to notice him, but there is no reward in the violence; redemption comes only from constructive, humanizing sources, never from the destructive, dehumanizing (and self-obscuring) violent act. A clarifying event occurs when his boss refuses to give him his wages. Parks is in Chicago living in a flophouse and earning his keep by sweeping. He goes to get his wages from Big John, the drunken proprietor, whose response is: "Get outa here, you black bastard! Don't you see I'm busy!" Parks describes his own response of rage and the resulting violence:

Everything blurred and my body shook with rage. I looked around for something to hit him with in case I had to fit. He was too big to take on otherwise. . . . I knew I should have backed away but my temper was out of control and I foolishly challenged him. "Give me my money, you lousy dog! I'm quitting!" He charged me like a bull, pummeled my face and body, slammed me into the wall and kneed me through the floor.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 73.



Parks heads up the stairs to clean himself up and get the gun he'd obtained. He pulls the gun on Big John, demands his wages, and ends up throwing whisky into his eyes and pistol-whipping the man. Parks runs all the way to the train station—and is almost miraculously rescued by his Uncle Pete, whom he hasn't seen in years. Once again, and in an even more extreme situation where Parks has almost killed someone, his choice of violence is interrupted by an example of humanity, unexpected and unearned. Melvin Van Peebles describes the mature Parks as a model of graciousness and self-control:

There's the graciousness that comes from ignorance, from being unaware of the dangers of the world around you. But there's also the graciousness where, even when faced with the onslaught of slings and arrows, one never stoops to the crudity of the human condition on a bad day. That's Gordon."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Melvin Van Peebles, Introduction to the new edition of *Voices in the Mirror*, xi.

We can see in Parks' critical descriptions of his brushes with violence the moral foundation for what Peebles observed.

In addition to relating these various violent incidents, Parks refers often to his fear of death, and his eventual coming to terms with his fear. The fear he describes is due to earlier moments when he saw black men brutalized and killed. In *A Choice of Weapons*, he focuses on the horrible childhood experience of diving in a muddy river to find the body of a black man who had been shot by Sheriff Kirby. "My buddy, Johnny Young, was swimming beside me; we swam with ice hooks which we were to use for grappling. The two of us touched the corpse at the same instant. Fear streaked through me and the memory of his bloated body haunted my dreams for nights."<sup>34</sup>

In *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks considers his response to both violence and death in the context of that existential crisis of a parent's death:

Gone now, Emphry Hawkins, shot; Johnny Young, shot; Doc Allison, shot; Captain Tuck, shot; all my friends and all dead by the gun. I had already lived so close to death

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<sup>34</sup>Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 3.

in my young life, having witnessed two drunken women knife each other to death in front of Joe's pool hall. So, quivering with those memories, I had lain beside the coffin, hoping that in sharing my mother's final presence, I could draw on her love and strength and somehow cut the bond between blood and fear.<sup>35</sup>

One of his most moving anecdotes involving death concerns his spending the night next to his mother's coffin. Together, the death of his mother and the direct experience of the corpse were powerful. As Parks thus consciously tapped his mother's memory, the fear of death may diminish after that night by the coffin, but the violence continues. One of Parks' early jobs in Minnesota, playing piano at Pope's brothel on the north side of Minneapolis ends "abruptly at the dawn of the new year. Someone plunged a butcher knife through a customer's neck and pushed him three stories down into the alley. As the police, arrived, I escaped through a rear exit. Running out, I saw the bloody corpse sprawled in the snow; his face looked very young."<sup>36</sup> That dead youth is an important figure,

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<sup>35</sup>Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 25.

<sup>36</sup>Parks, *Choice of Weapons*, 28.

representing the young dead black men strewn throughout his texts and his life---insistently crying out for validation of some kind. Parks provided them with this validation here, as well as in his films.

During this early period of his manhood, I suggest, Parks carries his fear of death and his increasingly intimate knowledge of violence in a shroud of invisibility, as he recalls in *Voices in the Mirror*: “In St. Paul I met a wall of indifference—raised by blacks as well as whites. I never really expected much from the whites; to them I seemed to be invisible”<sup>37</sup> A little later during this same era, Parks recalls, he worked in the Minnesota Club, which boasted such members as “Frank Kellogg, Justice Pierce Butler and Jim Hill of the Great Northern Railway [who] sat about smoking long cigars and ornate pipes in the overstuffed high-back chairs of the mahogany-paneled library.” The obvious signs of these club members’ social status are the visual backdrop for their dismissive behavior regarding blacks. To most of them, I was

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<sup>37</sup>Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 40.

invisible and unhearing, a sort of dark ectoplasm that only materialized when their fingers snapped for service”<sup>38</sup>

With death an obvious potential result of violence and with violence all around, Parks considers the options that have been modeled for him by his brothers-in-law and his mother. His brother-in-law David, who kicked Parks out of the house after an argument that turned to blows, is a negative model: “I had never met my brother-in-law, but his very first handshake told me that I was to be tolerated rather than accepted. Nearly white, big and fierce-looking, he seemed formidable and unfriendly. His only words to me that first evening were about things I was not to do in his house”<sup>39</sup> We learn in *Choice of Weapons* that David is violent with his wife as well as with Parks.

His mother offers an alternate response to violence. Boissy, another brother-in-law, Parks tells us, had for years returned home violently drunk on payday, threatening to kill

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<sup>38</sup>Parks, *Choice of Weapons*, 48.

<sup>39</sup>Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 27.

his wife and three children. And each time, Parks' mother would disarm him:

It was always thrilling to watch her meet boozed-up Boissy midway down the path, gently take that shotgun from him and make him get to his knees to pray. It happened like that for years until the night she died. It was on that night that Boissy finally let go with a blast that blew the frame off the door and ran to hide in an adjoining cornfield. It was pouring rain at the time, and Kirby, a heartless sheriff with a posse of two, was itching to turn his guns on that cornfield. It was then that my dying mother lifted herself into heroism. With the help of two women neighbors she left her bed and went, beneath an umbrella, to the edge of the cornfield. With the same gentleness she had shown for so many years, she called for him to come out and pray. Frightened, rain-soaked Boissy came out and put his gun at her feet. Warily she waved Kirby off and meekly her son-in-law followed her into the house—to let her pray over him for the last time. The morning my mother was to be buried, he took his shotgun and flung it into Marmaton River.”<sup>40</sup>

Regardless of the actual facts of this story, Parks' mother represents his model of the heroic, a model of fearlessness, of one's ability to disarm a situation of violence. It would be some years yet before he could truly follow this model, but it remained his ideal. Significantly, his model for manhood, which

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 20.

is non-violent (and in that sense anti-Black Power) is derived from the example of a woman.

Given the conditions under which Parks develops, his eventual value for self-control seems to be miraculous. One night in St. Paul, exhilarated by his musical success with his song “No Love” that is played by the orchestra of the hotel where he works, Parks is heading home, when he’s attacked by three white men who are distributing pamphlets of some kind. Parks tells them to go to Hell, and the fight that ensues lands him in jail with his three assailants, who continue to harass him: “You black son-of-a-bitch—we’ll kill you the next time—goddamn dirty nigger—black bastard—wait till we git you on the street again.’ Now one of them was urinating through the bars onto my floor . . . . It was hard to regard them as human beings; they seemed only a shadowy white mass—one so unbearable that even to hate it seemed futile.”<sup>41</sup> Perhaps at this point in his life, Parks begins to emerge as an agent,

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 64.

*choosing* how he will define himself and act as a black man faced with danger and humiliation.

Parks recalls his reflections on the inhumanity of the whites he encounters, as he waits in jail after the pamphlet incident.

“I did a lot of thinking about the white man and about his brutality—realizing that it was nudging me into a hatred of him. . . . I was overwhelmed by the many injustices already fastened to my memory. I had sort of limped through the early years, accepting as normal a scar for a scar. Now I felt a permanent anger after each clash. And I was becoming more sensitive to any situation that revealed a white man’s attitude toward me. I never feared him or stood in awe of his achievement. “If a white boy can do it, so can you,” Momma used to say, “so don’t ever give me your color as a cause for failing.” She made everything seem possible, even during the bleakest year, by feeding my young mind with all the things one could do in spite of the color of one’s skin. . . . [but] I was suffering with the others now—those imprisoned in slave ships from Africa hundreds of years before, those strung up by their necks in hatred-filled Delta bottoms, those gunned to death for “looking the wrong way” at some Southern white lady, those bent, gnarled and burned to black crispness under the white-hot sun, in the white man’s field, so that the white man might live a white man’s life on a white man’s land.”<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 66.



Again, his mother emerges as the moral exemplar; and Parks begins to make empowering associations between the particulars of his life and the historical conditions for blacks in America.

Not surprisingly, the injuries of white supremacy's values and history required a lifetime of healing that perhaps was never complete. In the fullness of his years, having made peace with the temptation of violence by choosing the camera as his weapon, Parks tells us still:

I have one formidable, overwhelming and justifiable hatred, and that is for racists. Thorn-wielding is their occupation and I can attest to their proficiency. Throughout my childhood they kept their eyes glued to my tenderest parts, striking me, impaling me, leaving me bloodied and confused—without my knowing what had provoked their hostility. I came at last to think of them as beasts with cold hearts; of lost souls impassioned with hatred, slithering about in misery, their feelings severed of all humaneness and spreading over the universe like prickly cloth.<sup>43</sup>

These last passages represent a shift in Parks' lens—instead of seeing himself as *they* see him, he is seeing *them seeing him*. His experience is shared by all targets of racism. As a writer,

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 104.

photographer, and filmmaker, he derives strength from the knowledge that his story could help others facing similar struggles.

## II

From St. Paul to Chicago to New York to the Civilian Conservation Corps and back to Minneapolis, to his break into fashion photography, and ultimately to the Julius Rosenwald fellowship, and internship with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) which ushers Parks into a new period of possibility. Parks' mentor, Roy Stryker, at the Farm Security Administration, urges Parks into new insight and new combat with his camera. Parks learns to confront violence through a lens. His most lasting legacy of this lesson is his portrait of Ella Watson in *American Gothic*, 1942.<sup>44</sup> Ella Watson stands, strong and defiant, as if she were saying, "I will not be defeated, despite your relegation of my mind and body to a broom and a

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<sup>44</sup>See Figure No. 1., 217.

mop.” Still looking into the camera, Watson gazes off to the left. The broom is in sharp focus, the mop a little less so, and the Stars and Stripes are a touch out of focus. The flag looms above Watson, in a sense dominating her, but at the same time her stance refuses to be that of a victim. In one sense she is oppressed, is part of the so-called *underclass*, but she is not defeated; she will not fall victim to nihilism and despair. Like Parks’ mother, she exemplifies the heroism Parks offers as a space of agency for black men in America.

The image grew from an autobiographical moment. After sending Parks on an odyssey through the racism of Washington, D.C., Stryker suggests that Parks talk with the charwoman in their building. Parks recalls finding the suggestion strange, and remembers an awkward beginning to the conversation, once he had found her.

At first it was a meaningless exchange of words. Then, as if a dam had broken within her, she began to spill out her life story. It was a pitiful one. She had struggled alone after her mother had died and her father had been killed by a lynch mob. She had gone through high school, married and become pregnant. Her husband was accidentally shot to death two days before the daughter was born. By the time the daughter was eighteen she had given birth to two illegitimate children, dying two weeks after the second child’s birth. What’s more, the first child had been stricken with paralysis a year before

its mother died. Now this woman was bringing up these grandchildren on a salary hardly suitable for one person.<sup>45</sup>

To the violence of lynching and guns, Ella Watson's story adds the violence of racialized poverty—but this time, instead of losing control, Parks can do something transformative about it. He asks her if he can photograph her, and it is a crucial turning point for him. As Stryker tells him after viewing the photographs: “You’re showing you can involve yourself in other people. This woman has done you a great service. I hope you understand this.” I did understand.”<sup>46</sup> And in that understanding Parks begins to emerge from the shroud of invisibility that enveloped his early life and sets him firmly on a path to visualize the conditions of blacks and the poor in America.

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<sup>45</sup>Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 239- 231.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, 231.

Although black men are not the sole subject of his gaze, it is a portrait of a black man, the gang leader Red Jackson<sup>47</sup>, that lands him his staff position with *Life* magazine. Later, his association with *Life* gives him the opportunity to meet and photograph Red Jackson, Malcolm X, Muhammed Ali, The Black Panthers—and to view the violence of an execution at the request of the condemned man. As Parks emerges into his own manhood, he interrogates the violence that black men face in a new way—with the camera.

In Parks' interactions with Red Jackson, Parks making an early attempt to offer his perspective on black manhood as a way to help a young black man. He tries to reach Jackson, to steer him away from the life (and death) he seems headed for. He offers Red Jackson a ride in his car to discuss his desire to photograph him for an important story. Jackson asks him what makes the story important. Parks replies:

“You—and a lot of other black kids are knocking one another off for some stupid reasons. Think of

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<sup>47</sup>See Figure No. 2, 220.

yourself as brothers, then you'll see that it doesn't make any sense."

The light changed and we drove off.

"That sounds like some of that sergeant's bull we fell for. Tells me to lay back. Said he'd take care of things. Then wham, a Midtownner's pulled out of the river with four slugs in his head. I know who did it and their asses belong to the Midtownners, man"

"So you go on killing one another?"

"You have to kill to live in this fucking place, man. Don't you understand?"

"I'd hate to find out tomorrow that you'd got it."

"I would, too, but you have to expect to take the lumps."

We were approaching 116<sup>th</sup> Street and time was running out. "I want to help you get rid of those lumps."<sup>48</sup>

In the 1948 photograph Parks developed, we see Jackson in profile looking out of the window, presumably aware he was being photographed. Yet it also seems that this pose would not change much had he not known. There is a rawness to this photograph that suggests a spontaneity, or at least not posing for the camera—his pose as gang leader was so set that it would be present despite the gaze of the camera. While the picture does not overtly refer to the fact that he is on the run, a viewer's awareness of his plight only strengthens the sense of

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<sup>48</sup>Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 133-134.

his inner determination, his sometimes violent defiance against his neighborhood enemies, and his refusal to be a victim—at least in his own mind.

Parks would seem to have succeeded in persuading Red Jackson to take a non-violent path; he runs into him many years later—the fact that Red is still alive is a significant victory:

Thirty-odd years had passed. . . . “Mr. Parks!” A solidly built middle-aged man stood grinning at me. “Well, how you doing, Mr. Parks? Remember me?” Suddenly his red hair and pugnacious chin opened a door to the past. “Red Jackson! I can’t believe it!” “That’s me and I’m still around.” He motioned toward a hot-dog stand. “Want a bite to eat?” “Thanks, Red, but I’m late for an appointment.” Hurriedly I scribbled out my phone number and gave it to him. “Be sure and call me.” “I will...I want’a go up to Harlem with you someday. Maybe we can help some of those kids up there. Anyhow, that’s a dream of mine.”<sup>49</sup>

Parks continues to process his understanding of the role of violence in the lives of black men, in his response, intellectual and aesthetic, to the men and lives he encounters. After viewing the execution of Joe Hudson in San Quentin,

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<sup>49</sup>Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 123.

Parks reflects: “It was over. Without reason he had murdered dispassionately; his judgment was served dispassionately. As I looked at him slumped in death I failed to distinguish the profanity of one act from the profanity of the other. One evil, cloaked in cold judicial morality, had just fed upon another.”<sup>50</sup> Parks remembers, too, the coarse ugly humor of the young guard who related the story of another execution of two black men, one who fought and screamed, the other who laughed to the end. “As I left the prison compound that small blotched part of my own past leaped out before me. Life, so priceless, seemed, for the moment, so unreasonably cheap.”<sup>51</sup>

On the other hand, in his desire to deny violence ultimate superiority over life, Parks found fellowship in some of his photographic subjects. In presenting in writing his interactions with Malcolm X, Parks seems to imply that he has an ally in the man Malcolm X became in his last days, the man who eschews violence in the name of Islam.

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<sup>50</sup>Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 216.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, 216.



I talked with him two days before his murder. He appeared calm and somewhat handsome with his new goatee and astrakhan hat. He was still confident, still full of fire, but he seemed less bitter, less hostile, than when he had spent his days and night damning the white devil. “Those were hours of sickness and madness—I’m glad to be free of them. We need martyrs now—that’s the only thing that can save this country. I learned it the hard way.”<sup>52</sup>

His 1963 photographic portrait of Malcolm X in Harlem, however, captures the man still under the influence of the Nation of Islam. Although this photograph suggests a speech that is serious, you can also sense a touch of irony—or lightness about it. Malcolm was deadly serious, but he was not morose--and this photograph captures his joy of life even in the midst of intense struggle. Malcolm’s left hand is raised over a crowd we cannot see. A handkerchief is held in his hand. You can almost hear him making one of his inspiring speeches. Malcolm X spoke to something deep within the black male in America, especially in the urban communities. He spoke with an eloquence that came from the streets. There is animation about this portrait, a sense of movement, of action taking place

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 143.

within the picture frame—a fiery pulse. Malcolm always made us think—and made our minds move. In this image, we see a man in control, self-directed and free. Parks’ portrait insightfully captures these positive qualities to emphasize personal characteristics that aligned this image with Parks’ desire to honor black men’s agency, rather than dwelling on the popular image of Malcolm as violent revolutionary.

### III

Regardless of the powerful increase in personal agency Parks enjoyed in pursuing his career in photography, his memoirs reveal that racism and violence continued to haunt him, both as part of his personal experiences and as a necessary point of debate in his political perspective. After an interaction in the South with racists who object to Parks’ greeting a white woman friend with a kiss, Parks purchases a pistol. “Frankly, I hate guns, and that one proved an endless source of unrest to me during my stay at Los Alamos and on my flight back to New York. My wife shuddered when she saw it on my bed as I unpacked. I called the police chief at White Plains, asking if I should turn it over to him. He wanted to

know how it came into my possession. When I told him he laughed. ‘Bury it!’ he said. ‘Throw it into the river, but don’t tell me about it!’<sup>53</sup> Ultimately, Parks almost kills an intruder with it, mistaking a wrench in the man’s hand for a gun. “Back in bed I made a resolve to get rid of that gun. I’d come too close to killing someone.”<sup>54</sup>

On a political level, as well, Parks reflects further on the challenges black men face—and on his own position of ascendancy—after a discussion with Eldridge Cleaver of the Black Panthers. Parks ultimately rejects Cleaver’s absolutism—and his invitation to become the minister of information of the Black Panther Party—by explaining “that my interests went beyond those of the Black Panthers, to other minorities and factions of the black movement who also wanted change.”<sup>55</sup>

Then Parks adds:

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<sup>53</sup>Parks, *To Smile in Autumn* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 53.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>55</sup>Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 355.

Looking back to that moment I find myself displeased with my answer. I should have said: Both of us are caught up in the truth of the black man's ordeal. Both of us are possessed by that truth, which we define through separate experience. How we choose to act it out is the only difference. . . .If I were twenty years old now I might well be a Black Panther. Then maybe not. I remember as a kid I was taught to take the first lick before I fought back. But a fist is not a bullet. I, too, would shoot a cop, or anyone else who forced his way into my house to kill me. You will be risking everything to go back to challenge a system we both dislike. I will continue to fight also, but on my own terms. I prefer to change things without violence—providing violence is not thrust upon me. If this is your position, too, then your weapons and mine are not irreconcilable as you might think. (p. 355)

Taken as a body of work, Park's memoirs construct an impressionistic foray into the violence he confronted in his early life, and they assemble interpretations of experiences that in turn served him in his treatment of violence in his films. *The Learning Tree* is his first feature, and it was in this film that he introduces us to a thimbleful of the violence he faced and how he felt about it. The memoirs articulate values that would sustain him in his own life's encounter with violence and that he weaved throughout his films in an effort to dialog with multiple audiences. Perhaps, recognizing how important his

family's teachings were to him, Parks hoped to serve the same purpose through his films, offering young black men the sort of guidance he received from his family. In the following pages I will explore in more depth, albeit not exhaustively, Parks' dialogic engagement with violence, blackness, and the transformative space within his black film cycle.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Emerging Man<sup>1</sup>

#### *The Learning Tree*

The seasons of the plantation no longer dictate the lives of many of us; hundreds of thousands of us are moving into the sphere of conscious history. We are with the new tide. We stand at the crossroads....Print compels us. Voices are speaking. Men are moving! And we shall be with them.

—Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices*

Gordon Parks' autobiographical film *The Learning Tree* cinematically introduces the lifelong message Parks intends to share with his audience. In this chapter, I suggest Parks is exploring the nuances of the cycle of empowerment—invisibility, emergence, and ascendance—in black men's subject formation, as his main character, Newt Winger, learns what is necessary to become a man (especially in the growing militant context of the 1960s) and how to negotiate that

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<sup>1</sup>The title is taken from Parks' photograph used for an edition of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. See Figure No. 4.

maturity in the context of blackness threatened by anxiety, fear, and death. In this film, Parks demonstrates the role courage may play for a boy striving to become a man. Aware that not everyone survives, Parks is curious about why some do and others do not. *The Learning Tree* is one attempt to examine factors that aid survival into manhood. Among these factors is Newt's mother, a figure who is stronger in the book than in the film. Perhaps we could interpret Parks to be saying, at least in this first feature length cinematic project, that black manhood relies on support from a strong nurturing woman (or parent) to confess and confront the fear that necessarily comes with being a black man in a racist society, constantly prey to terrorism, humiliation, and violence. It is interesting, however, that this message is either absent or muted in Parks' later films.

*The Learning Tree* was unique among the black films that came out in 1969, a significant year in the development of black films. For Donald Bogle (2001), five films of that year, *Uptight*, *Slaves*, *The Lost Man*, *Putney Swope*, and *The Learning Tree*, ushered in a new-style black film on American screens. All of these films, Bogle notes, in some way "were indictments

of the system.”<sup>2</sup> Several of these films focused on some aspect of the militant mood of the time. Jules Dassin’s *Uptight* spotlights black separatist militants and participates in violence versus nonviolence discourse at this time. In this film, set shortly after Dr. King’s assassination, one of the militant group’s members turns informer. He is tracked down and killed. *The Lost Man* is a Sydney Poitier film about black militants preparing to take over Philadelphia through a payroll robbery.<sup>3</sup> Herbert Biberman’s *Slaves* is a remake of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Robert Downey’s *Putney Swope* is a farcical look at blacks taking over an advertising agency on Madison Avenue. *Uptight* and *Slaves* had modest success. Bogle appreciates that

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<sup>2</sup>Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, (1973; repr., New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 223.

<sup>3</sup>The hero is involved with a white society girl. This harkened back to Poitier in *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* and his involvement in that film with a wealthy white woman. Intense debate about black men dating white women was a major discourse during this period of black consciousness. In positioning Shaft in opposition to Poitier representations, Parks alters the race of Shaft’s white girlfriend in the book and makes her black.



these films “acknowledged the violence and cruelty of the white American way of life,”<sup>4</sup> but believes their modest box office success suggests that, although the films were accepted by black audiences, black moviegoers were looking for stories and cinematography with higher quality or audience appeal, especially in terms of acknowledging the heightened violence, emerging militancy, and ascending visual insurgency of the black subject in the late sixties. Gordon Park’s *The Learning Tree*, in its own way also an indictment of the system, specifically Jim Crow segregation, with its pastoral narrative of a young black boy emerging into manhood, seemed to hit the right chord. Of all the black films that came out in 1969, only *The Learning Tree* has entered the National Registry, a testament to its historical significance in the history of American and specifically black American cinema.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup>Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 226.

<sup>5</sup>The National Film Registry is the registry of films selected by the U.S. National Film Preservation Board for preservation in the Library of Congress. It attempts to preserve up to twenty-five “culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant films” each year, showcasing the full range and diversity of American

following factors may have led to the critical and popular support of *The Learning Tree*: its sensitivity to the contemporary mood within the black community to speak up in the face of injustice; the demonstration of courage to face of to face incredible odds; and the marshaling of strength to do what might not be popular. Parks employed these values within the context of a coming of age story set in a rural environment. In one sense, because of the emerging dominance of the urban environment in the American imagination after the urban uprisings of 1967 and 1968, it might seem that such a film would not touch a resonant chord; but many blacks, through historical imagination if nothing else, were still connected to a rural environment; so it is not difficult to imagine how this film might find an audience. *The Learning Tree* anticipated the power of the black film with a crossover appeal. And while the

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film heritage. *The Learning Tree* was inducted in 1989, the first year of the Registry, along with such films as *Dr. Strangelove* (1963), *Casablanca* (1942), *Citizen Kane* (1941), and *Star Wars* (1977). As of 2006, there were 450 films preserved in the National Film Registry. It was the only black-centered film inducted that year. *Shaft* was inducted in 2000.

film did indict whites, it still represented a strong mutual plea and desire among blacks and whites for an integrated society. With this film and especially with the addition of his next film, *Shaft*, Parks negotiated the tense cultural terrain between the objective of integration (civil rights) with its reliance upon nonviolent tactics and the objective of self-determination (black power) and its explorations of militant activism.

### **Opening Doors**

A few months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., actor John Cassavetes called Parks to set up a meeting between Parks and Kenny Hyman of Warner Brothers. Without much fanfare Hyman told Parks he wanted to make a motion picture based on *The Learning Tree* and that he was comfortable with Parks' directing it. He encouraged Parks to write the screenplay, do the score, and produce the film. Hyman wanted Parks to have complete creative control. "Single-handedly, and in less than thirty minutes, Kenny

Hyman had broken Hollywood's unwritten law"<sup>6</sup> which had blocked African Americans from directing films for a major motion picture studio. Parks stated: "I had no problems with *The Learning Tree*. It was my book. I wrote the screenplay. Kenny Hyman said, 'This is Gordon's film. I don't want anybody fooling with it. Let him do what he wants.' And that's the way it was, even down to the last cut. It was pretty much the same way with *Shaft*. There were a few compromises on both ends, but in the end, we came out with what we wanted: a tough, hard picture."<sup>7</sup> The studio provided the necessary support and guidance Parks needed on his first film without limiting his opportunity to learn and successfully bring to the screen his experience as a youth in Kansas.

True to his commitment to presenting life stories as a medium for inspiring social change, Parks decided to film *The Learning Tree* on location in Ft. Scott, Kansas. When he went

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<sup>6</sup>Parks, *A Hungry Heart*, 277-278.

<sup>7</sup>James P. Murray, *To Find an Image: Black Films from Uncle Tom to Super Fly* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1973), 65.

there in advance to get things set up he ran into old prejudices. He had trouble finding a place to stay and was verbally threatened by a farmer who threatened to fetch his shotgun. It wasn't until Parks approached the town mayor that things opened up and eventually several townspeople even volunteered to be extras. *The Learning Tree* was a \$3 million production. Parks was able to get several blacks involved in the production. "There were black guys in just about every department." Parks said. "And I insisted on this, and MGM backed me up."<sup>8</sup> Guerrero compliments Parks for taking the opportunity with *The Learning Tree* to open up opportunities for black participation "at all levels of production....It was a fight because the Hollywood unions are all white."<sup>9</sup> This is an example of Parks' commitment to change. Nothing forced him to take this position. And it was what marching was supposed to be about: getting an equal shot at getting jobs. In small and

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>9</sup>Guerrero, *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 81.

large ways, Parks opened doors for other blacks. “Reporters are constantly trying to make me out a nonmilitant, and I’m beginning to resent it. I’m extremely militant—with my camera, with my pen. Just because I’ve made it in the white establishment doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten my black brothers.”<sup>10</sup>

Parks resented being boxed in or confined by other people’s ideas of how he should act or speak. Parks had learned to be successful within the establishment, but that fact did not render him silent or inactive. As he says above, his primary avenue of action was through his pen and his camera, and, as his integration of the film crew suggests, through his strength of character. Parks’ alternative to militance was to empower black men within rather against existing structures in dominance. Parks noted in a conversation he had with a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* that when kids from universities ask him: ‘How did you make it in a white world?’ He tells them, “Well, if you think it’s a white world, you’re

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<sup>10</sup>Patricia Bosworth, “How Could I Forget Who I Am?” *New York Times*, August 17, 1969.

already licked. It's *your* world."<sup>11</sup> Parks recognized that for militancy to have true value it must be more than rhetoric. This idea is reflected in the actions of his film protagonists as well as the subjects he chose to photograph.

### **Two roads: Newt and Marcus**

*The Learning Tree* is the coming-of-age story of a black boy, Newt Winger, as he emerges into manhood also suggests Parks' moral position regarding black manhood. It is a story of courage: the courage to tell the truth regardless of consequences, the courage to push through the fear of death, the courage to live by one's values, and the courage to travel the solitary path. Through a number of experiences, which often parallel events in Parks' autobiography, Newt learns about becoming a man and about what it means to be black. Like Parks, throughout the film Newt encounters opportunities to learn about his responsibilities to his family and community, his relationship to violence, and his relationship to himself.

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<sup>11</sup>Connie Lauerman, "Author Gordon Parks: At 68, the best is yet to come," *Chicago Tribune*, September 21, 1981.

Most significant to this discussion is Newt's emerging relationship with violence, on a personal level as well as its effect upon him as a member of a black community. This close attention to the workings of a boy's mind and his character development draws on Parks' personal history to challenge Hollywood's historic propensity to stereotype. This close attention also marks the importance of life narratives in Parks' overall work on black masculine subjectivity. We see this operating in Parks' photographs as well. A viewer must acknowledge the humanity of Parks' photographic subjects because of his care to portray contexts, surfaces, details, and the whole-person. Parks refuses to allow oversimplification, which is *both* a key dynamic of prejudice *and* deadly to personhood.

In several scenes, Parks' acknowledges that black men face racial terrorism and the threat of death; that they must cope with fear, and that they would not allow fear to overwhelm their humanity. Newt and several of his friends are confronted with violence and death early in the film after they have gone for a swim in a local creek. A group of older men are playing craps nearby. Sheriff Kirky comes to the creek looking for the



boys because they had been spotted stealing apples from Mr. Kiner, a local white farmer, who was also beaten up by one of the boys, Marcus Savage. Kirky hears the men at the crap game and scatters them, but it is the one black fellow, Tuck, whom he chases and shoots in the back. “You didn’t have to kill him,” one of the boys said to the Sheriff. Kirky feels no remorse at all. That night Newt has a bad dream in which he recalls finding Tuck’s dead body at the bottom of the stream. “I’m scared of death, Mama,” he says, when she comes to comfort him.

Understanding our relationship to death is an important way in which we become fully human. And learning to face the fear of death opens up the ability to take full advantage of life’s opportunities. This scene also illustrated for Newt how precarious life is for a black man. Parks depicts this fact not simply for descriptive value—this is the way it is—but as a jumping off point to confront and transcend a sense of fear and fragility of life. This is a lesson Parks knew well in his life (e.g. being thrown out of his brother-in-law’s house in the dead of winter; being mistaken for a drug dealer by police; facing a shotgun on more than one occasion). Mrs. Winger provided

Newt the comfort he needed as he worked through his fears. Without such support the full impact of his fears might remain invisible, and without such a mirror, emergence into a mature, self-aware man would be stifled.

Parks sharpens his point that black manhood draws strength from the family by developing a contrast between the story of Newt and that of another boy, Marcus Savage, and shows how different are their paths to manhood, largely due to differences in their personal resources. Marcus, unlike Newt, is motherless, and his father is a violent drunk. Marcus is angry about his circumstances and falls victim to destructive behaviors that alienate him from his potential friends and eventually land him in a reform school. It is Marcus who suggests to the other boys stealing Kiner's apples. Kiner catches up to Marcus when Marcus slips and begins hitting him with a whip. Marcus is able to get the whip from Kiner and hits Kiner several times while he is on the ground. The camera focuses on Marcus' face to show the rage he is feeling. The lack of family support prevented Marcus from facing his fears. This blindness influenced his acting out, his lashing out against

friends, and his resentment of those who seem to have more advantages than he did.

Parks' offers the case of Marcus to support the path of nonviolence. Marcus represents for Parks the path he could have taken himself. In Parks' mind, his ability to survive and resist the path of violence was due to the strong influence of his mother and his family. Although they played together at times, Marcus is an outsider to this small band, and he has a particularly conflicted relationship with Newt, for whom Marcus operates as a foil. Immediately after the apple stealing incident, Newt chides Marcus for beating Kiner when he's on the ground. Newt says, "Kiner ain't so bad." Marcus focuses on the fact that Kiner had been hitting him first. Marcus attempts to solicit support from the other three boys. "You with us or not?" he directs his question toward Newt. "I'm always with the fellows here." At the point of Marcus' question, the three boys happen to be standing behind Marcus, but with Newt's response, they intentionally move in back of Newt. Although it would have made the story more complex, and in some ways more interesting, to have Marcus come from a similar home environment as Newt and still head toward violence, Parks was

more interested in a straightforward statement that family may be a critical component to success. At least as Parks interrogates his own life, he felt the strength of his family, and in particular the centrality of his mother within his family, was an essential factor that kept him away from the path Marcus took.

As opposed to Marcus, Newt is able to exercise choice in his response to violence and as a result to retain his freedom in a social setting that is predisposed to imprison him. One symbolic scene has Newt visiting Judge Cavanaugh's younger son. Newt looks at his collection of butterflies with pins stuck in them. The boy invites Newt to look through his microscope, a symbol of the boy's affluence as well as of the scientific, objectifying eye. The camera takes us into a close up of an eye, on the wing of a butterfly, in turn a symbol of the object looking back at its observer, returning the gaze. The shot fades away to a close up of one eye of Marcus Savage as he is being sentenced to reform school. "If you don't rid yourself of this evil you will rot in jail for rest of your life," says Judge Cavanaugh to Marcus. This scene is suggestive of a scene in *Leadbelly* when Leadbelly voices his determination not to have his songs

killed by collectors, but to have his songs sung openly and freely. Parks does not elaborate on the butterfly motif in this parallel scene in *The Learning Tree*, but it does serve as a link between these two films and as testimony to Parks' attitude toward freedom. That freedom comes with the ability to move, the ability to choose where we wish to move and travel. Freedom is not static, collected, or pinned; freedom is motion. Thematically, the implications are clear: Marcus Savage is sent to reform school, a place of containment and confinement; Newt Winger represents freedom and liberation.

In pitting Newt Winger, the "butterfly," against Marcus Savage, the "ex-con," with his pent-up rage, Parks skims the surface of the impact racism and violence (racialized and economic) might inflict upon blacks. Parks does not explore in depth the impact of internalized oppression, the outward expression of self-hate, or the deep resentment toward American society and its racial contradictions. Nevertheless, these complex forces lie beneath the double exposure of Newt and Marcus; Parks is highlighting two roads that could be taken, one toward freedom, autonomy and agency; the other toward containment, restraint and invisibility. Parks makes it

clear at the end of the film which road he embraces. In reality, life does not break down in such simple binary options, and this could be viewed as a flaw of this film; unfortunately, Parks' binary construction also reflects how the discourse around black life was at times polarized during this period. Parks expands the discourse by providing representations of manhood not generally represented on the screen, but at times he relied on oversimplified contrasts.

An example of this practice of challenging received representations can be found in a pivotal scene in which Parks demonstrates the moral bankruptcy of unexamined white liberalism—an attitude Parks increasingly addressed in his 1960s *Life* photojournalism essays (e.g. his essay on the death of Martin Luther King)—when Chauncey Cavanaugh, the elder son of Judge Cavanaugh, for whom Sarah Winger works, sees Newt and Arcella walking. He offers them a ride. Newt says, “No thanks,” but Arcella asks why not. Chauncey invites them to the drug store on the way to get a coke. The camera shows Chauncey eyeing Arcella. Shortly after, he says: “You never told me where you found this pretty girl, Newt.” The waiter, Bert,

comes over and tells Newt and Arcella they will have to take their cokes to go. “They’re friends of mine,” Chauncey says. “I’m paying for this stuff and we’re staying right here.” But Bert insists, so Newt and Arcella leave. Neither Chauncey, who had offered to give them a ride home earlier, nor his brother, who was also at the drugstore and called Bert a “Slob,” left with Newt and Arcella.<sup>12</sup>

Parks’ film is an homage to his mother and to the importance of family in providing an individual with an internal compass to employ when faced with difficult decisions and confusion regarding the path one should take. Newt’s mother in the film figures as the dominant supportive force, just as Parks saw his own mother’s influence in his life. We see Mrs. Winger speaking “truth to power” when the sheriff curses the boys he is after for stealing and beating up on Kiner. Mrs. Winger says with authority and raised voice: “You watch your

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<sup>12</sup>Parks gets his revenge on this incident in his next film, *Shaft*, in a scene in which John Shaft impersonates a gay white bartender, hits a white mobster over the head with a whisky bottle, has the mobster taken down to police headquarters, and goes home with a white woman.

tongue, Kirky.” The sheriff walks away. While walking one afternoon, Sarah Winger tells Newt the importance of being able to love when you feel like hating, to tell the truth when you feel like lying, and to understand that people are just like fruit on a tree, some good, some bad. She encouraged Newt to look at Cherokee Flats as his “learning tree.”

This language serves as the dominant metaphor for his life, a metaphor that Parks employed throughout his own life by attempting to judge people “by their deed and not their color.” In a discussion with his blind Uncle Rob, Newt is exposed to his Uncle’s insightful characterization of our color privileged society. Reminiscent of Dr. King’s “I have a Dream” speech of 1963 during the March on Washington, Uncle Rob imagines a better world where everyone is “colored” and no one is privileged because of their color. Rob tells Newt that his interest is not in the color of a person’s skin, but in how he conducts himself. “I don’t figure his color; I figure his deed.” This foreshadows a character Parks would portray in *Solomon Northup*, Bass, the white carpenter, who tells Solomon he is only interested in the work a man does, not his color.



## **I Am A Man**

Through the experience of his mother's passing, Newt is able to confront death in a more personal way than he had previously, and through that experience he is able to come to terms with his own fears of death. His mother has taught Newt that courage is not the absence of fear but the ability, and willingness, to go through it, to face it and take a stand. This lesson finds its fruition in his coming forth to tell the truth about what he has seen at Kiner's farm. In addition to courage, this risk demonstrates, too, the value of truth, that we should not hide the truth no matter what we fear the consequences might be, especially if someone's life is at stake. This dilemma provides an opportunity for Newt to act with an idealized level of courage and altruism that Parks held up as a goal for himself in his own life.

The climax of the film is the murder of Jack Kiner. Newt witnesses the killing and recognizes Marcus's father, Booker Savage, as the murderer. But another man, Silas Newhall, a white man, has been accused of the crime. Newt isn't sure what he should do, especially after hearing his father say, "Sure glad a black man didn't do it. There'd be trouble if a

black man had done it.” Newt is further frightened into silence when his brother Pete tells him about a nearby town that lynched a black man who had shot a white man and then burned down half the Negro homes. “I’m glad you don’t know anything about it; that way you don’t need to open your mouth, understand,” says Pete. Finally, Newt gains enough courage to tell his mother what he knows. Mrs. and Mr. Winger encourage Newt to tell on the witness stand what he knows.

When the truth comes out, Booker is in the courthouse. Booker’s face takes on a look of defeat and his head drops when Newt tells his story on the stand. He knows he’s finished. The whites in the crowd start yelling to get him, to string him up. Booker runs away, grabs Kirky’s gun, and kills himself. Judge Cavanaugh delivers an admonition to the crowd, saying that they frightened Savage out of his right to be judged fairly. “Have you forgotten already that it took courage for a black boy to save a white man despite his fears of racial reprisals. Your actions justified his fear.” The judge’s voice resembles Parks’ voice in his memories when he looks back on events as opportunities to draw lessons for himself and others.

Two critical moments at the end of the film demonstrate how Newt's consciousness shifts in response to demands upon him. The first moment occurs after Marcus Savage hears of his father taking his life. Marcus goes looking for Newt with the gun of his employer, Chappie Logan.<sup>13</sup> He finds Newt, but after a couple of shots the gun is out of bullets. Marcus pulls a knife, but in the tussle, Newt gets the better of Marcus and takes Marcus's knife and lifts it, saying, "I ought to kill you.... But I can't." They hear Kirky coming. Newt lets Marcus up and he runs into the woods, but Kirky hears Marcus trying to escape and shoots him in the back.

With no remorse or thought of what he has just done, Kirky offers Newt a ride home. "Get on the back; I'll give you a lift home."

Newt looks at him up and down. "I can make it by myself."

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<sup>13</sup>Chappie Logan is played by Jimmy Rushing, a great blues singer out of Oklahoma City who sang with Count Basie's Band for a number of years. One of his classic tunes was "Good Morning Blues," which Parks uses in *Leadbelly*.

“Okay by me—boy.”

The film ends with Newt walking along the road by himself. This scene appears representative of Parks’ declaration of independence, from his mother and family, and from the white power structure. Visually he links this film with his next film, *Shaft*, when he has Newt walking alone along the path away from the violence of Kirky and the death of Marcus. We see later in *Shaft* Parks’ declaration of independence when he has his protagonist, John Shaft, walking against traffic as that film opens. These two moments, I suggest, represent Parks’ interest in exploring both rural and urban heroism. It certainly represents the twin environments in which Parks, and blacks historically, have had to negotiate; and it could be seen as representing Newt Winger’s move from emergence into ascendance, with his heightened sense of himself and a deeper understanding of his relationship to violence and his environment.

### **Critical Response**

At one level *The Learning Tree* depicts a period remote from 1969. But Parks’ depiction of violence and racism, and

the growth he has his hero experience, aptly positioned the film within the contemporary discourse of black subject formation. For a short time, in the parlance of the time, the film had even been dubbed, “Learn, Baby, Learn.” Bogle notes that Parks’ “film presents a boy who is black but not tortured by his blackness....But unlike other black characters in the late 1960s (most notably the brute protagonists of *Uptight* and *Slaves*), he does not suffer consciously. Nor does he cheaply parade his discontent.”<sup>14</sup> Bogle continues in his appreciative assessment, suggesting that “at first glance it is an innocent time when the picture’s hero, Newt, can do cartwheels in a field of flowers or steal apples from a vineyard with his buddies. But it is also an age polluted by violence and racism. A creek where Newt swims suddenly turns red from the blood of a black man senselessly shot by a bigoted white sheriff....on second glance. Newt’s age is not so remote from the late 1960s after all.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 226.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 226.

Barbara Lupack suggests that *The Learning Tree* succeeded “not because it was progressive but rather because it was sentimental, in the best sense of that word.”<sup>16</sup> Lupack sees the film as displaying an emotional intensity that truthfully records lived experiences of young black men of that historical moment. She also argues that the film is universal. “A film about race that paradoxically almost transcends race, it presents, simply and sensitively, a boy who [is]...poised precariously on the brink of manhood.”<sup>17</sup> Lupack, however, reads the drugstore scene very differently than I do. She suggests that Chauncey Cavanaugh is challenging the segregation laws by inviting Newt and his girlfriend, Arcella, for Cokes at the local drugstore where the young blacks are forced to get their drinks to go. But Chauncey knew what they would run into. And his staying in the drugstore and allowing Newt and Arcella to leave on their own suggests to me that his intent

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<sup>16</sup>Barbara T. Lupack, *Literary Adaptations in Black American Cinema: From Micheaux to Morrison* (Rochester, New York: University of Rochester Press, 2002), 328.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

was far from altruistic and was more likely designed to shame Newt, or put him down in front of his girl, a means for Chauncey to demonstrate his privileged power over Newt specifically and blacks generally. Later, Chauncey seduces, impregnates, and abandons Arcella. This was an act of white male privilege and power. There was no challenge to the system at all. Chauncey uses the segregation practices to his advantage, to have his power serve as a source of attraction. He employed it, he did not challenge it.

In contrast to the fair insights Bogle and Lupack develop, Vincent Canby mistakenly refers to Newt's life story in *The Learning Tree* as the "largely uneventful [experience of], normal, middle-class black youth in the Middle West."<sup>18</sup> In categorizing Newt's family as "middle class," Canby erases the harsh conditions of Newt's childhood and thereby trivializes the significance of Newt's advancement into maturity. In describing his life as uneventful, Canby denies the importance of Newt's trials in the formation of his character. The film presents

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<sup>18</sup>Vincent Canby, *New York Times*, 1969.

indiscriminate killing, a murder trial, and fears of setting off a race riot. The Wingers live off the land in Jim Crow Kansas.

Arnold (1969) wrote a more balanced although critical review of *The Learning Tree*. In comparing the book to the film, Arnold finds himself disappointed with the loss of some of the power demonstrated in the book; the strength of Sarah Winger, for example, he finds diminished in the film. “Having met Parks and read the original novel, I regretted the softness even more, because it seemed flatly misleading. There’s vigor in the man and in the book that is missing on the screen.”<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Arnold finds *The Learning Tree* “ingratiating.” “It’s the sort of picture that touches you even when you know that the images of childhood and the past are growing excessively tender and the melodramatics have been used a thousand times too often. ...The movie has a nice feeling, and Parks’ limitations are, at least, human ones. Everyone shares this tendency to romanticize his past, to recollect everything in tranquility. It

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<sup>19</sup>Gary Arnold, “Family Tree” *Washington Post*, September 27, 1969.



makes us feel good. It just doesn't happen to be the whole truth."<sup>20</sup>

Criticism about the relationship between the book *The Learning Tree* and Parks' film is fairly commonplace, but it seems misplaced in view of the fact that Parks himself took on the role of interpreter of his own book. However, I find myself, almost reluctantly, agreeing with Arnold's disappointment in the film's translation of the book. While a film cannot and should not be a carbon copy of the original text, it should ideally capture the same tone. The problem I have with some of Parks' film work is the choice of actors. The parents in *The Learning Tree* fail to convey the outward strength of the mother and quiet strength of the father that are captured in the book. Part of what makes *Solomon* and *Leadbelly* more powerful in some respects is the performances of Avery Brooks and Roger Mosley, respectively.

*The Learning Tree's* production in 1969 made room for later films that continued to take up the important task of

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

developing more subtle understandings of black masculinity. Understandably, *The Learning Tree* is often compared with *Souder* (1972), for several reasons. For one, both were set in similar periods and rural regions, Louisiana of 1935 in comparison to Kansas of the later 1920s. Jim Crow segregation reigned in both states, although manifested differently in some respects. Both films depicted a strong black family, with a particular focus on one son. In the case of *Souder*, it was the eldest child of three; in *The Learning Tree*, the youngest. In *Souder* we get a fuller sense of the mother and the father, in part due to the performances of Cicely Tyson and Paul Winfield. And although Kevin Hooks was new to the screen, as was Kyle Johnson in *The Learning Tree*, Hooks' father, Robert Hooks, was an accomplished actor and Kevin Hooks' subsequent film career as actor and director suggests that, even at an early age, he had an ability to engage an audience. Parks preferred working with less experienced performers. This habit not only helped to keep production cost down but also allowed him more freedom to shape the performances according to his vision.

The story of *Souder* concerns a black sharecropping family in Louisiana in 1935. They face some similar obstacles to those faced by Newt's family, and parental figures provide crucial moral support to their children in both films. The father feels a great responsibility to feed his family and a sense of shame that he isn't able to provide for them more adequately. One night in desperation he poaches meat from a neighbor. The sheriff comes for him the next day, and he is sent off to an undisclosed prison farm for a year. The day the father is taken away, Souder is shot by a guard as he chases the truck. Souder disappears. The mother and the children get the crops in without the father. The son goes on a long unsuccessful journey trying to find the camp where his father is incarcerated. But the father returns home in less than a year, wounded physically but determined to help his family escape the shackles of Jim Crow. He is supportive of his son's going to a school he discovered during his journey where a black teacher provides him lessons from black leaders in history. The son had been going to school, but it was predominantly white and he had to sit in the back. While *The Learning Tree* casts Newt's mother as the critical role model, *Souder* emphasizes

the father-son bond. Another critical difference between the two films is that Martin Ritt, who directed *Souder* and is white, had several films behind him, including *The Long Hot Summer* (1958), *Paris Blues* (1961), and *Hud* (1963). By contrast, *The Learning Tree* was Parks' first feature film.

*Variety* was just one of many avenues of critical praise for *Souder* acclaiming it as “an outstanding film.” Bogle suggests that it “marked a significant new depiction of the black family. Gone was the old matriarchal setup of such films as *Imitation of Life*, *Pinky*, even *Raisin in the Sun*. Nor was the family in tendentious conflict with itself....And never before had audiences seen a black father and son talk in such personal and intimate terms.”<sup>21</sup>

Lupack touches on how *Souder* was embraced by the black community for its positive depictions, but it was also criticized as an attempt to emasculate the new powerful black male image that was being portrayed in such films as *Shaft*.

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<sup>21</sup>Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*, 249.

The level of black box office support for *Sounder* did not come close to matching *Shaft*.

*The Learning Tree* represents Parks' vision of the importance of producing images of a good family and the positive, empowering values that may come from such a background. These values, which Parks envisioned as critical for black male success, included courage to tell the truth regardless of consequences, the value of facing the fear of death, and the value of refusing to submit to a destructive path of violence. *The Learning Tree*, although set in the 1920s, was paying homage to the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s and the emerging black community that was determined to stand and fight. On a more personal note, *The Learning Tree* also represented Parks' commitment not only to social justice but also to his vision of himself as an independent reporter and artist, willing to be schooled by role models he respected (mother, Uncle Rob, Richard Wright), but rejecting the assistance of those he did not respect (Kirky, his brother-in-law).

The post-World War II civil rights movement moved black Americans from *invisibility*, in which their plight was ignored,

tolerated, or at times thrown a bone, to the *emergence* of a televised civil rights revolution that removed the shackles of legal segregation. The heightened sense of self-definition among black people, and the intense white resistance that followed, led to the even more visible insurgence of the black power/black consciousness movement. Within the first three-quarters of the twentieth century, African Americans went from colored (invisible), to Negro (emergence) to black (ascendance). Newt Winger served Parks both as a representation of Parks' own self-defined narrative of black consciousness and as an individual representation of a collective black narrative.

In the next chapter I examine *Shaft*, a film that arguably helped launch a surge of black films in the early seventies and which, I contend, presents a more assertive and yet nuanced representative space for expressions of black manhood. *Shaft*, certainly, is an important element in the continuum of Parks' oeuvre, a film that further attests to Parks' lifelong commitment to assisting and inspiring African American men as they advance toward full ascendancy.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A Complicated Man

*Shaft*

By cool pose we mean the presentation of self many black males use to establish their male identity. Cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control.

The cool front of black masculinity is crucial for preservation of pride, dignity, and respect. It is also a way for the black male to express bitterness, anger, and distrust toward the dominant society. Cool pose works to keep whites off balance and puzzled about the black man's true feelings.

—Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson<sup>1</sup>

Parks' next film, *Shaft*, (1971), placed him squarely in the midst of the black power discourse on black manhood while maintaining careful distance from it. On the one hand, Parks developed a character that embodied many of the conventions

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<sup>1</sup>Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose*.

of masculinity that supported the nationalist themes of the movement—an assertion of power by black men, a fierce sense of anti-racism and anti-colonialism, an espoused reverence for the black community, and an opposition to governmental rhetoric and practices that are perceived as doing harm to the black community. On the other hand, Parks avoided placing black nationalism at the film's center. Instead of making explicit and direct links between his protagonist, John Shaft, and black power discourse, Parks created an alternative version of the popular culture private detective icon, a version that was firmly rooted in black urban language, imagery, gesture, and symbolism. The link between Shaft and black nationalist/power imagery was further strengthened by Shaft's dark turtleneck shirts and his leather coats. The distinction between John Shaft and members of the Black Panther Party (who wore leather jackets, turtle-neck shirts, and berets) was visually blurred.

*Shaft* is about a black man in his ascendancy asserting his power. John Shaft is a black hero unlike any seen on the screen before that time. Although Sydney Poitier and Jim Brown made several films before Parks placed Richard



Roundtree on the screen, neither Poitier nor Brown conveyed an image that fully resonated with the growing movie-going population of urban youth. Poitier, especially with *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), remained, to use Donald Bogle's term, "a hero for an integrationist age"<sup>2</sup>; and Jim Brown, although displaying intelligence, still remained stuck in the stereotype of the superior athlete or black buck. The settings and narrative of both Poitier and Brown films were lodged in an integrated visual milieu.

*Shaft* was altogether different. Although not overtly political, Shaft conveyed or communicated a connection with the visible and audible black power sensibility of this period. Shaft was his own man; he moved with ease in black and white worlds. He stood up against whites and blacks alike. Shaft differed in both looks and action from prior black male representations and portrayed a lifestyle that challenged prior representations. While working successfully within the confines of the private detective action film genre, Parks skillfully used it

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<sup>2</sup>Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks*, 175.

to represent an empowered black manhood. Shaft not only possessed courage, he held himself to his own code of behavior, his own self-defined commitment to helping others; he was ready to use violence when necessary and displayed his comfort with his sexuality. This representation of a self-empowered, and perhaps self-actualized, black man touched a nerve among blacks and whites alike.

Coming off the critical success of *The Learning Tree* (1969), Gordon Parks was high on the list when the studios looked around for a director for a new kind of film that would appeal to black audiences. Parks was looking over several film scripts when he agreed to sign on for the *Shaft* project. In addition to a \$50,000 fee, the contract stipulated that he would receive 5% of gross profits.<sup>3</sup> At Parks' suggestion, Joel Freeman, whom Parks had met casually when Parks was with *Life* magazine, was brought onto the project as a producer.

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<sup>3</sup>Eric Charles Pierson, "The 1970s as Hollywood's Golden Economic Age: A Critical Interpretative Analysis of the Blaxploitation Cinematic Movement." PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urban-Champaign, 2000.

Freeman had been involved with over twenty-five films and had a reputation for getting films done on time and under budget.<sup>4</sup>

The screenplay was taken from the novel by Ernest Tidyman, who eventually won an academy award for his screenplay adaptation of *The French Connection* (1972). Freeman brought in John D. F. Black to rewrite the script. Parks had several concerns regarding the script: he wanted the name of the Harlem crime boss changed from Knocks Person to Bumpy Jonas, and he wanted the dialogue reworked with fewer obscenities. In the novel, Shaft's girlfriend was white; Parks made her black. These concerns arose from his deliberate attempt "to protect and interpret the roles in a way that [would] no longer be offensive to blacks."<sup>5</sup> According to Parks, he also expanded the role of the militants. In the book the militants were mere props against which Shaft performed the rescue. "I protected the part of the militant. I made it generally a stronger

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 65.

part to make it more reasonable in a more viable situation, and generally uplifted the parts of the militants in *Shaft*.”<sup>6</sup>

Several black actors were considered for the role of John Shaft, including Bernie Casey, Billy Dee Williams, and Fred Williamson. But again Parks wanted someone who was relatively unknown. He and Freeman both immediately thought Richard Roundtree the right person for the role. Although he had been in a couple of movies before, and was a model for several products that advertised in black magazines, he was not a household name. Parks said he “wanted Shaft to emerge as an original, rather than someone who could more or less take the role and mold it to his own way of acting. We want to create Shaft through some brilliant young actor.”<sup>7</sup> After the studio approved the script and Roundtree, shooting began on January 18, 1971.

The primary challenge Parks had with the studio came through one executive, Herbert Solow. He was against the

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<sup>6</sup>Murray, *To Find an Image*, 67.

<sup>7</sup>Pierson, “The 1970s,” 67.

mustache and side burns that Parks wanted Roundtree to grow. And he had tried to get the film production moved to California because he was anxious how filming during the winter in New York would impact the budget. Just about the time shooting was to begin, Parks and Freeman traveled to California to convince Jim Aubrey, the studio head, that this film must be shot on location. Parks was determined that if he could not shoot it on location, to get the actual feel and smell of Harlem, he would take himself off the project. Fortunately they were able to convince Aubrey that they would be able to meet their deadline and keep the film under budget. The studio left them alone after that, and, according to Parks, “once given the green light, the studio backed me all the way. They didn’t give me any problems.”<sup>8</sup>

*Shaft* opened in New York in June, 1971, and was a phenomenal success commercially and culturally. Not only did it make a significant profit, it also helped inform the studios that there was an untapped market in the black community.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., “The 1970s,” 69.

According to James Murray (1973), “an estimated eighty percent of the audiences were blacks.”<sup>9</sup> A black-owned public relations agency, The UniWorld Group, helped market it. In addition, spinoffs of *Shaft*, from suits, watches, belts, leather coats, night shirts, and several other items from the film, were successfully marketed.<sup>10</sup> By the end of 1971, *Shaft* grossed more than \$15 million, before international distribution, and helped pull MGM out of fiscal difficulty.

One factor contributing to *Shaft*'s success was its sex appeal. Not only did Parks have an *Ebony* magazine model play the lead, he asked Isaac Hayes, coming off his hit album, *Hot Buttered Soul*, which had gone platinum, to score the film. This was Hayes' first effort at scoring a film.

Gordon Parks, Sr., the director, and Joel Friedman [sic] the producer, sent me a 16 mm copy of three scenes. One was the opening scene of *Shaft*, where he came out of the subway and crossed the street. The next scene was a montage that shows *Shaft* in Harlem searching for a militant. The third was a love scene, when *Shaft* and his lady, Ellie, made love. ...The first thing to do was the

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<sup>9</sup>Murray, *To Find an Image*, 68.

<sup>10</sup>Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 97.

main theme. I knew the character was very relentless and he was always on the move. I had to come up with something that denoted continual movement.<sup>11</sup>

Hayes was consciously influenced by what was happening in society at the time, “the civil rights struggle, the Vietnam issues, and so forth influence me....There were a lot of musical influences that were in the score for the film. I had jazz influences, and there was some blues influences.... ‘Soulsville’ had some gospel influences. ‘Soulsville’ was a social statement about the times, because it depicted the conditions in the inner city.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, like other soul artists at the time, Hayes’ recordings were steeped in sex and sexual innuendo. The choice of Hayes added to the construction of Shaft as a black man with Soul, with sex appeal, with power. The flip side of this collaboration between Parks and Hayes demonstrates the ideology of the times. Women were too often seen as sex objects, serving at the pleasure of men. This view would appear

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<sup>11</sup>Gerald Martinez, Diana Martinez, and Andres Chavez, *What It Is... What It Was!! The Black Film Explosion of the ‘70s in Words and Pictures*, (New York: Hyperion, 1998) 152.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

to be inconsistent with Parks' deep admiration for his mother and the central role she played in his life, and yet it's consistent with his representation of women in *Shaft*, and, to a degree, his less than flattering representation of Arcella in *The Learning Tree*. The Isaac Hayes soundtrack of *Shaft* was an immediate hit. Within a few weeks of release it went platinum, earning \$2 million playing in a number of venues.

### **I'm Talkin' 'bout Shaft**

*Shaft* opens in New York City's Times Square. The camera zooms from above down onto the street. We hear traffic noise as the camera pans across several movie theater marques showing *The Scalphunter*, *He and She*, and *School for Sex*. The soundtrack begins when "Shaft" is flashed onto the screen. Shaft emerges from the subway and crosses the street against heavy traffic of cars and taxicabs. Although Shaft is clearly going against the light, his giving the finger and saying "up yours" to a driver who almost hits him conveys Shaft's assertion that *he* has the right of way. Shaft is wearing a long unbuttoned brown coat, brown turtleneck shirt, brown sport jacket, and brown pants with his hands in his pockets. It's



obviously cold; people have their winter coats on, buttoned up. Shaft's coat is open. He is well groomed with a short Afro haircut and mustache.<sup>13</sup>

After an instrumental interlude, Isaac Hayes begins to sing the theme song, "Who's the black private dick that's a sex machine to all the chicks." "Shaft!" responds the female chorus. "Damn right!" says Hayes. "Who is the man who would risk his life for his brother man?" And later, "He's a complicated man but no one understands him but his woman." Visually and lyrically we are introduced to John Shaft's independent character, his sexual prowess, his determination to forge his own path—to go against the mainstream and to do it with style.

We observe more of his character during an interaction with two white cops. One, Vic, appears to have a prior relationship with Shaft, and, we see later, some rapport and

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<sup>13</sup>There had been an effort to have Roundtree cut off his mustache, but Parks said No. "Richard Roundtree was about to become the first black leading man who would wear a mustache on the silver screen. It was another one of those unwritten laws lurking within the minds of Hollywood's film barons. A mustache on a black leading man was just *too macho*." See Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 1990, 307.

respect exists between them. Still, in this early scene, we see an unintimidated Shaft talking back to the police. “That boy’s got a lot of mouth on him,” Tom, the younger cop, says. “And he’s man enough to back it up, too,” says Vic. “You’ve got to lean on that kind,” Tom says, “You don’t *lean* on that kind,” Vic responds. The exchange claims an oppositional role for a black man in a detective film. Rather than being the perpetrator of petty crimes or the subject of police vigilance or violence, John Shaft is “man enough.” One is reminded of the opening of *In the Heat of the Night* in which Virgil Tibbs (Sidney Poitier), despite his appearance (shirt, tie, and suit jacket), is assumed to be a possible suspect in a murder just because he is black.

The basic plot of *Shaft* involves the kidnapping of Bumpy Jonas’s daughter. Jonas is a Harlem crime lord who is engaged in a power struggle with the mafia. They want to take over Harlem rackets. Jonas wants to hire Shaft to recapture his daughter. Although there is tension and great distance between these two men, Shaft agrees to take the job. Shaft connects with a former acquaintance, Ben Buford, who is now a leader

in a black revolutionary movement, with access to men who could help Shaft recapture Bumpy's daughter.

The detective genre practice of having the woman serving as support to the hero (Frank Bullitt's girlfriend in *Bullitt* [1968], James Bond's women, Sam Spade's secretary, Evie, or his love interest, Bridget O'Shaunessey, in *The Maltese Falcon* [1941]) is one of several expressions of sexism that remains embedded in the masculine expression John Shaft embodies. Several frames pass before we meet a black female on screen. She is a girlfriend, an ex-wife, or kidnap victim. We never get a sense of her as an individual character. In our first introduction to a black woman, Shaft is lying on the couch at his girlfriend Elle's place. He appears to be nude when she comes in; "You all right, baby?" she asks. They make love on the couch. We see her hands caress his naked back as she makes sounds of sexual pleasure. Later, Shaft is on the phone with her, and after she says, "I love you." Shaft responds, "Yea, I know."

One significant aspect of this scene is the introduction of physical embrace between a black man and a woman. Before this time, the leading black actor, Sidney Poitier, did not make

love on screen; even in *Paris Blues* (1961) where there was a love scene between Paul Newman and Joann Woodward, Poitier and Diahann Carroll were not allowed to display their intimacy. Although still phallo-centric and masculinist, Parks shattered the asexuality of the filmic black male, without resorting to the same level of hyper-sexual representation we get with Jim Brown in *100 Rifles* (1968), or even Melvin Van Peebles in *Sweet Sweetback Baadasssss Song* (1971). Nevertheless, to maintain Shaft's rendering of a "cool pose" Shaft remains somewhat aloof when presented with an opportunity to return Elle's intimate expression of love. Even in the love scene the camera has us gaze at Elle's hands as she experiences orgasm. We are unable to directly observe Shaft's response, thus maintaining Shaft's immunity from the gaze, at least during this potentially vulnerable moment.

Another example of Shaft's comfort with his sexuality is demonstrated in a scene at the No Name Bar in Greenwich Village. Shaft deftly handles multiple negotiations in this scene. Rollie, the man who is the actual bartender, pats Shaft

on his behind; Shaft doesn't flinch.<sup>14</sup> Rollie tells Shaft about Linda, a white woman who eyed Shaft as he walked in, who is interested in getting together with him. Before acting on this, Shaft poses as a bartender to mask his identity from two mobsters who are waiting to see his apartment light come on. Shaft makes light conversation with the mobsters who do not know Shaft by sight. Shaft calls Vic on the phone, acts like he's talking to a girlfriend, speaking in code to get some cops down to the bar. After Shaft pulls a gun and introduces himself, one of the men spits in Shaft's face. Shaft hits him over the head with a bottle. One is reminded of another scene in *The Heat of the Night* when Virgil Tibbs, after being slapped by Endicott, a white southerner nostalgic for old plantation days, slaps him back. A very dramatic scene, played with intensity and assertiveness by Poitier. But then the power of that act is soon taken away when Tibbs' passion to bring down Endicott is interpreted by Sheriff Gillispie as prejudice. He says to Tibbs, "You're just like the rest of us." Tibbs looks at him in silence

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<sup>14</sup>In Ernest Tidyman's novel Rollie is not gay.

with a guilty look of acknowledgement. In *Shaft*, in the early 1970s, the stakes of violent response were higher than a facial slap would suggest, and there was no hint of remorse from John Shaft.

The next scene with Linda further established Shaft's aloofness and distance from intimacy. We see Shaft and Linda in the shower, and then the next morning, Shaft says "Party's over. You've got to split." When Linda says, "You're really great in the sack, but pretty shitty afterwards," he responds: "I'm trying to take care of some business, okay, baby." True to form for heroes of this genre, John Shaft expresses indifference for the woman, who is a mere distraction from the real business of the day. While Shaft's interactions with his black girlfriend are also marked by his verbal indifference, his gestures with her are generally more caring. And the fact that he returns to Elle's house when injured indicates that Shaft's relationship with her is not entirely distant. In fact, the contrast between his relationship with Elle and his dismissal of the white woman may be a conscious part of Parks' broader project of providing uplifting images of black people, especially since Parks changed

the character of Elle in the novel from a white woman to a black woman.

And take care of business he does. The film ends at night in a dramatic shootout with the famous scene of Shaft, dressed in a short black leather jacket, crashing through the window. This image was placed on a poster to market the film. Shaft and Buford's team of black revolutionaries safely recapture Bumpy's daughter from the Mafia. Several mobsters are killed; most of the blacks get away in a fleet of taxis provided by Bumpy Jonas. Shaft walks coolly across the street to a phone booth and calls Vic to come and clean up. Shaft recycles Vic's previous words, uttered earlier in Shaft's hallway, after Linda had pronounced Shaft a "shitty" lover and left the door hanging open. When Shaft had called after her to shut it, She said, "Shut it yourself!" Vic later repeated those word in a mocking tone. In this final scene, Shaft laughs into the phone and says, "You'll have to shut it [the case] yourself." The conversation brings a white man and a black man together in a socially equalized exchange in which their banter has sexual overtones.

## **Insurgent Visibility**

Why did a film like *Shaft* have the phenomenal impact that it had? What were the conditions that facilitated its success? Several elements came together to set the conditions for this renaissance in black film production. The civil rights movement brought great visibility to the plight of blacks in the South. Now Northern blacks were demanding to be seen and heard. In 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. Many blacks considered Kennedy sympathetic to political black interests. In the summer of 1966, Stokely Carmichael articulated the cry for black power. It resonated with the mood emerging in black communities across the nation. Although a contestable discourse began regarding what black power means, diverse individuals and groups were able to connect with the term and draw inspiration from its attempt to direct the flow of power into the black community.

This political movement was expressed in terms of nation building. During the early days of the civil rights movement desegregation was linked with integration, which in practice most often took the form of blacks integrating into white



institutions, schools, public facilities, and so on. It was, to some extent, an attempt to have blacks join the melting pot and assimilate into the dominant white society. This effort was met with great resistance, especially in various state and federal institutions (e.g. FBI); it eventually led to frustrations, anger, rage, and withdrawal from an integrationist emphasis; and it led to the call for blacks to maintain and create their own institutions and avenues of cultural expression. One aspect of the cultural movement of black power was manifested in the black arts movement, giving rise to theater groups, literary publications of fiction and poetry, and black-centered political activism.

Although not directly influenced by the black arts movement, the pressure upon Hollywood for its misrepresentation of blacks had been mounting for some time. Hollywood was aware of the potential market in the black community, but Hollywood had no compelling reason to focus its interests in that direction. With the fiscal crisis Hollywood was experiencing in the late 1960s it felt compelled to look for new markets. To appeal to this new market, something new

would have to be added to the familiar Hollywood genres. That new thing would be *blackness*.

Keith Harris notes how:

Inherent in the Civil Rights versus the Black Arts debate is a class debate, a debate about the urban working class, the then defined underclass, and the social and cultural disenfranchisement of urban blacks; furthermore, the Civil Rights versus Black Arts Movement can be configured as a debate about masculine difference, as seen in the visual rhetoric of Sidney Poitier versus that of *Sweetback*, *Shaft*, or *Superfly*.<sup>15</sup>

For several years Sidney Poitier dominated black cinematic representation. Nineteen sixty-seven was a particularly big year for him, with three commercially successful films: *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, *To Sir with Love*, and *In the Heat of the Night*. All three films were cinematically lodged in a white world; the world of his white fiancé in *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, the white working-class of London in *To Sir with Love*, and the white world of Sparta, Mississippi, in *The Heat of the Night*. In this last film

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<sup>15</sup>Keith M. Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media. Studies in African American History and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 71.

Sidney Poitier plays a cop from Philadelphia. What kept that film from having the kind of impact that *Shaft* would have four years later? Was Virgil Tibbs not cool enough? Was the mood of the country, especially within the black community, significantly altered by the two assassinations in 1968?

Virgil Tibbs was not cool in the way that would necessarily cause the young black urban male to want to emulate. Several critics (e.g. Guerrero, 1992, Reid, 1993, Lipsitz, 2001, Bogle, 2002,) have noted how Poitier's image no longer spoke "to the aspirations or anger of the new black social consciousness that was emerging," and these critics, black and white alike, "reading the import and pressures of the historical moment were becoming ever bolder in their negative assessments of Poitier's image, portrayals, and narratives."<sup>16</sup> First, the name of Poitier's character in this film is emasculating. Sheriff Gillespie even jokes about his name, "Oh we aren't going to have any trouble with you, are we Virgil?" Tibbs' dress was neat and quite middle class. Tibbs was polite.

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<sup>16</sup>Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 72.

He was in a predominantly white southern town. He was helping a white sheriff solve a murder of a white man. Perhaps one of the most aggressive actions Tibbs took in the film that could relate to the mood of many young black audiences at this time, and especially in a few years, was slapping a wealthy white man who had just slapped him. "Poitier's characters were often counter to the toms and coons tradition in that they were doctors, teachers, ordinary workers, or rebellious youth or race conscious clergymen or the black detective. However, Poitier's characters were always 'saint like' in that their constructions as characters isolated them from the filmic black community."<sup>17</sup> Poitier attempted to overcome this rupture between his image and black audiences, first with *The Lost Man* (1969), a film where Poitier played a revolutionary attempting to finance a black takeover of Philadelphia by robbing a bank; but more successfully with *Buck and the Preacher* (1972) where he cast himself as a man of physical

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<sup>17</sup>Harris, *Boys, Boyz, Bois*, 62.

strength and courage, who had a loving, sexual relationship with his black wife.

Criticism of Poitier was not unanimous. James Baldwin attempted to make a distinction between Poitier and the racism of the country and the Hollywood industry. Baldwin noted that Poitier, like other black actors, is trapped:

The industry is compelled, given the way it is built, to present to the American people a self-perpetuating fantasy of American life....And the black face, truthfully reflected, is not only no part of this dream, it is antithetical to it. And this puts the black performer in a rather grim bind. He knows, on the one hand, that if the reality of a black man's life were on that screen, it would destroy the fantasy totally. And on the other hand, he really has no right not to appear, not only because he must work, but also for all those people who need to see him. By the use of his own person, he must smuggle in a reality that he knows is not in the script.<sup>18</sup>

One of Parks' achievements with *Shaft* was that John Shaft asserts his own reality openly, without resorting to "smuggling it in"; and perhaps one of the film's shortcomings is the fact that the "reality" of Shaft's life is not part of the picture. Between Poitier and the black film renaissance of the

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<sup>18</sup>Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 74.

1970s, a revised representation of the black buck was smuggled into Hollywood's limited assortment of black male images. This was most clearly seen through the early film career of Jim Brown. More intelligent than prior portrayals, Brown's characters had brains as well as brawn, although the latter still dominated the representation. Brown's characters were situated in relatively non-black environments (World War II in *The Dirty Dozen*, [1967] Mexico in *100 Rifles* [1968]). Brown made nine films in 1969 alone. His screen persona, according to Guerrero, "seemed to reflect an emergent assertive, sometimes violent, black manhood, and to exude a sexual expressiveness long denied blacks on the screen."<sup>19</sup> Scholars of this period generally agree that the black male image as manifested in Brown offered only a variation of old stereotypes, and Donald Bogle even suggests that Brown's characters were "nothing more than the black buck of old."<sup>20</sup> And, as Guerrero suggests, "For all the new potent force,

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>20</sup>Guerrero, 80.

sexuality, and assertiveness expressed in the images, bodies, and portrayals of the macho men, their strength was almost always either at the service, or under the control, of white institutional power and authority.”<sup>21</sup>

Brown and other black athletes like Fred Williamson, Bernie Casey, and Woody Strode served as forerunners to the “formulaic Blaxploitation superheroes that were soon to appear.”<sup>22</sup> Even though Brown’s characters had their limitations, as an actor Brown was able to transgress limits in ways that gave social meaning to his work. As Guerrero further notes, “Brown’s breakthrough success in articulating the Hollywood moneymaking codes of sex and violence placed him, and all the athlete heroes, in emergent dialectical opposition to everything that Sidney Poitier had stood for on the screen.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 79.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 79.

To this restricted expression of blackness in the context of Hollywood, Gordon Parks brought a personal history of achievements of surpassing similar restrictions in other contexts. He already had a name as a premier photographer for *Life* magazine and was developing a reputation as a successful writer. The critical success of *The Learning Tree* placed Parks high on the list for other potential film projects. Parks had already demonstrated, in his photography and essays, that he was a sensitive and sympathetic reporter of the civil rights and black power movements. He had done profiles of Dr. King, Carmichael, and The Black Panthers. Before that he had done a pictorial report on Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam. As I discussed in chapter three, Hyman of MGM was prepared by the time he read *The Learning Tree* to have an African American direct a major studio film.

*Shaft* was essentially an action film, in the genre of James Bond or Bullitt. And despite limitations of the genre, Parks infused this film with his own vision of black power. He positioned Shaft in opposition to Poitier and Jim Brown representations. Shaft was someone who successfully negotiated white *and* black spaces. It was very important to



Parks to have this film shot in New York, to have Harlem, symbolically one of the most readily identifiable black communities in the United States, featured prominently in the film. This had already been done with *Cotton Comes to Harlem*. But in *Cotton* the two detectives are assigned to Harlem alone, and, to some extent, were outsiders to the community. Shaft presented a character that moved with ease through Harlem, Greenwich Village, and midtown New York. That *Shaft* was filmed in a well known urban space figured prominently in its success. But it wasn't just New York, it was Harlem, a black community that spectators could identify with as someplace they knew, someplace that seemed familiar, or someplace that addressed their cinematic desires. Shaft appealed to a number of desires. Whites could identify with it as it very much fit within the mode of a successful genre of detective action films. Blacks could identify with it because they were seeing a black individual who could fill an imaginary space in a way that met their fantasies, a "Batman" of sorts for viewers like myself.

Demographic shifts also participated in *Shaft's* success. Whites began leaving the center cities in part as a result of the riots of the late sixties. Blacks began to occupy more of the

downtown spaces. As Paula Massood has noted in her work on the cinematic representation of the city in black films of the 1970s:

Such large-scale demographic shifts, combined with white flight from the cities to the newly emerging suburbs, changed many metropolitan areas, with the African American population reaching . . . near majority numbers in some cities. The result of this continuing migration was that African Americans became increasingly identified with urban spaces in the national imagination.”<sup>24</sup>

Massood asserts that the city is an active presence in many of the black films of this era and plays as central a role as any other character in the films. Massood argues that the employment of the city was not just to add local color or background for the narrative but to demonstrate the city’s influence on events unfolding onscreen. Massood borrows from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin especially with his emphasis on distinguishing “the world *outside* the text and that *created* by

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<sup>24</sup>Paula Massood, *Black City Cinema: African American Urban Experience in Film*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003), 82.

the text.”<sup>25</sup> Making this distinction is important particularly in our efforts to understand the impact of this black film explosion. In one sense, there was great reliance on setting these films with familiar black environments, spaces that many of the audience were familiar with in some fashion. At the same time, these films spoke more to desires, fantasies, and psychological needs than to actual socio-economic conditions of the black community.

### **Visualizing Violence**

During the 1970s, violence seemed to be dominating the cultural scene. On film, in some ways, it became a form of therapeutic release for blacks, perhaps even a form of working out of revenge. Stuart Hall (1997) observes that *Shaft* and other films of this period could be seen as “revenge” films, an attempt

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<sup>25</sup>Massood, *Black City Cinema*, 6.

to allow blacks to win for a change, to triumph over “whites” and get away with it. At a deeper level, Hall suggests, these films placed blacks at the center of popular cinematic genres of crime and action films. It was also a time when a great number of blacks found work. The bad news is that many of the films promoted negative images of blacks, glorifying pimps (e.g. *Superfly*) and gangsters (e.g. *Black Caesar*). 15)

This renaissance in black films was tagged as Blaxploitation. Although credit is variously assigned to *Cotton*, *Sweetback* or *Shaft* for the beginning of this era, that these three films together began the renaissance is incontestable, though Matthew Henry, in his 2004 article about Singleton’s 2000 re-make of the film, calls the Blaxploitation label “a slight misrepresentation of the original *Shaft*.”<sup>26</sup> *Sweetback* is particularly significant in this history for the fact that it was independently produced and demonstrated to a number of individuals that black independent films could be produced

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<sup>26</sup>Matthew Henry, “He is a “Bad MotherS%@!#”: Shaft and contemporary black masculinity,” *African American Review*, Spring 2004.

and find success. Parks' son, Gordon Parks, Jr., demonstrated this with his own successful *Superfly* the following year.

At the same time, an understanding of this moment in film history requires that we understand how *Shaft* participated in the representational habits of popular culture, as manifested in the detective drama genre. We can turn to Kirk Savage's discussion of nineteenth-century memorial sculpture for a parallel link between representation and culture. Savage describes sculpture's conventions as a "repertoire of signifying devices"<sup>27</sup>—in other words, a set of visual cues that reveal the meaning of a sculpture to viewers familiar with those cues. Together, those familiar cues have a sort of "logic." Savage notes "that the *logic* of commemoration imposed heavy constraints on the subject of emancipation" (my emphasis, p. 87). In other words, the cues that viewers expected in memorial sculpture limited the ways in which sculptors could represent the declaration of freedom for black

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<sup>27</sup>Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves. Race, War and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 67.

people. For instance, a president (e.g., Lincoln) had to be a dominant figure in sculpture that commemorated his declaration, necessitating (by the same logic) that figures of freed slaves would have to be shown as submissive relative to the figure of Lincoln. Savage discusses another more complex example related to John Quincy Adams Ward's 1863 bronze statuette entitled *Freedman*, in which Savage identifies the figure's "heroic nudity" as a key representational signal that "elevated the work in critical circles as a representation of "sculpture's classical tradition" (53). But in the peculiar dynamic of representing emancipation at that time, that "very nudity—its most conspicuous and celebrated feature—becomes a double sign, pointing at once to vulnerability and to heroism" (57). The dual effect of the nudity maintained, in visual terms, the subordination of the black figure. In addition, the sculpture represented a perfect body, unmarked by trauma, the signs of slavery erased.

In the same way, it could be argued that the *logic* of Hollywood detective action films similarly imposed constraints on the representation of African-American masculinity. The visual vocabulary for the genre's heroes included conventions

such as physical attractiveness, indifference to the affections of women (combined with full attention to their bodies), and mysterious silence. One problem with such limits on these heroes is the fact that the result was often shallow, sexist, and inarticulate. But another problem, one that is potentially racialized, had to do with the exploitation of such heroes for the pleasure of viewers. Just as Ward erased the signs of slavery in his 1863 sculpture, detective action films--including *Shaft*--tended to erase the histories of their protagonists. John Shaft appears before us with no indication of his personal story, a fact which makes him a unique protagonist in all of Gordon Parks' works, regardless of medium. The only indication that John Shaft had experienced racism is his rage at racist epithets. Without the baggage of a lived experience, he could engage mixed audiences in his adventures without evoking white guilt. In addition, they were vulnerable to the exploitation of their black male bodies as sexual objects, vulnerable to scopophilic pleasure (Mulvey).

On the other hand, black audiences in the late sixties and early seventies were starving for images that nurtured their growing sense of assertion and aggression. The success of

the civil rights movement only served to make the desire for complete and unadulterated freedom more intense and the patience to wait for it more frayed. “What do we want— Freedom. When do we want it --- Now.” This hunger could be seen at the box office. Bogle notes how Shaft “looked to black audiences like a brother they had all seen many times before but *never* on screen,”<sup>28</sup> a measure of Parks’ success in designing Shaft as a way to bring black men out of invisibility, acting as an organic intellectual on behalf of his community.

The music by Isaac Hayes was a key contribution to the success of the film. The pulsating rhythm, the charged language, the dialogue between the aural and visual, all added to the presentation of a unique character on screen. For instance, in the early call and response exchange between Hayes and the chorus, he says:

That Shaft is a mean mother...  
Watch your mouth!  
I’m Talking about Shaft.

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<sup>28</sup>Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*, 239.



As Lev points out “this exchange suggests first, a sense of fun, and second, that the film will push the limits of polite discourse, but not too far.”<sup>29</sup>

The film’s resonance with the public resulted in crowded theaters: “Outside the old silver-screen palaces on New York’s Times Square, along Chicago’s Loop, in downtown Detroit, the crowds are young, mostly black and bigger than they’ve been since Scarlett O’Hara ran off with Rhett Butler.”<sup>30</sup> However, the reception was complicated by conflicting opinion. Several members of the black community voiced concerns about the spate of Blaxploitation films that were being produced. Bogle cites Junius Griffin, the head of the Hollywood branch of the NAACP.”<sup>31</sup> “We must insist that our children are not constantly exposed to a steady diet of so-called black movies that glorify black males as pimps, dope pushers, gangsters and super

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<sup>29</sup>Peter Lev, *American Films of the 1970s: Conflicting Visions*, (Austin: University of Texas, 2000), 130-131.

<sup>30</sup>*Newsweek*, October 23, 1972.

<sup>31</sup>Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks*, 242.

males,” An attentive audience to all these responses was Gordon Parks himself. He wrote:

There’s a place for John Shaft. I was overwhelmed by our world premier on Broadway. Suddenly I was the perpetrator of a hero. Ghetto kids were coming downtown to see their hero, Shaft, and here was a black man on the screen they didn’t have to be ashamed of....We need movies about the history of our people, yes, but we need heroic fantasies about our people too. We all need a little James Bond now and then. <sup>32</sup>

With this passage Parks identified perhaps the most important contribution of the film: the assertion of a scopophilic pleasure of identification (Mulvey)—identification with a powerful black man—specifically designed for black audiences.

### **Critical Response**

Some critics have voiced approval for *Shaft*, citing its innovative creation of a popular culture hero who was black. Guerrero writes: “Shaft was generally applauded by the critics, both black and white, as being a breakthrough production in terms of expanding black representation in

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<sup>32</sup>*Newsweek*, October 23, 1972.

commercial cinema. Gordon Parks himself reveals the film's intent when he says that he made the movie as a 'fun film,' which people could attend on Saturday night and see a black guy winning."<sup>33</sup>

Some critics, however, were quite harsh toward *Shaft*. Clayton Riley of the *New York Times* identified areas of concern of this film in particular and the developing genre generally. Riley, in "Shaft Can Do Everything---I Can Do Nothing," first raises the narrative's "containment of black social and political aspirations."<sup>34</sup> Riley particularly perceives the images in *Shaft* and others that soon followed as merely reworkings of old stereotypes and white expectations that do little to nothing to raise political consciousness. Parks objected to Riley's review titled "A Black Film For White Audiences?" In his critical review of *Shaft*, Riley attacked Parks' direction and the script; Riley said *Shaft* was 'an extended lie, a distortion that simply grows larger and more unbelievable with each frame.' Interestingly, in

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<sup>33</sup>Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 93.

<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, 93.

a comparison to Van Peebles' *Sweetback*, Riley clearly sided with *Sweetback*; "*Sweetback* wins in a walk."<sup>35</sup> For Riley, *Sweetback*, in content and production values, better represented the independent, new black man, than the studio-backed, comparatively apolitical *Shaft*.

Parks was in Paris at the time of this review. He sent a telegram response addressing many of Riley's concerns. He noted the positive review by black critics like Maurice Peterson (*Essence*). Parks concluded: "I will hold Riley in higher esteem when he gains more experience as a reviewer of all filmmakers—not as a self-appointed executioner of blacks who have survived the purgatorial haunts of Hollywood to become directors and producers. Sheath your borrowed sword, Mr. Riley. Your brother is not the enemy."<sup>36</sup>

Another harsh assessment made by Joan Mellen is critical of Shaft's sexuality, his attitude toward militants, and even his comparison to white heroic models.

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<sup>35</sup>Murray, *To Find an Image*, 68-69.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 69.

Shaft remains little more than a black man's Bogart, less assured if more violent. If his woman is black, she is also light-skinned, as Shaft reaffirms, this time with a black director, the notion that the attractive black woman is she who is closest to being white. And despite the sincerity of its black militants, Shaft sees revolution for the blacks as merely a vendetta against "whitey" rather than as a revolt against a dehumanizing society that inflicts unemployment on whites as well as blacks....Shaft recedes into its many fantasies: of white women lusting after the supercool Shaft, of Shaft as James Bond. Shaft does indeed win, taking on the entire Mafia with the aid of a handful of militants and the white police in an "integration" of forces. He is slick, clever, and physically strong. These paltry elements alone account for the success of the film among young blacks still anxious for a brief, vicarious release from their own frustration."<sup>37</sup>

Mellen's comments, given the great success of the film, suggest that she missed, or dismissed, the significance of this psychological desire for a hero. Even if only psychic, black-centered heroes were crucial during a time when the black psyche was assaulted on a regular basis.

Greenspun (1971), although lukewarm about *Shaft*, recognizes that "it has a kind of self-generated good will that makes you want to like it even when for scenes on end you

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<sup>37</sup>Joan Mellen, *Big Bad Wolves: Masculinity in the American Film*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), 334.

know it is doing everything wrong.”<sup>38</sup> Greenspan continues, “Shaft really is wish-fulfillment: the pad, the girls (whom he treats none too well), the fancy leather clothes, the ability to put down absolutely everybody and be paid back in admiration, the instinct of danger, the physical prowess, the fantastic recuperative ability that has him up and around and feeling no pain an hour after taking three machine gun slugs in the chest.” I agree with much of this, and that sense of power is why it captured so much of the black imagination. It was part of what blacks needed in 1971, a sense that they could win, could beat not only the man, but other blacks who were, they felt, out to get them. It was a way of being cool, and being cool was a way of masking or transcending the pain of being black in America.<sup>39</sup>

Parks places *Shaft* squarely within the black power movement of the sixties, a time of heightened black masculinity

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<sup>38</sup>Roger Greenspun, “Gordon Parks’s [sic] ‘Shaft’ Begins at 2 Theaters,” *New York Times*, July 3, 1971.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

discourse and display. Filmmaker John Singleton notes the effect Shaft had on him:

I wouldn't term a film like Shaft exploitation. It was detective film. Shaft is the film that I look at as a benchmark in American film. The Black hero was strong; he didn't take no shit off nobody. John Shaft's image came straight out of the Black revolutionary period sweeping the country; the Panthers, the free love, hippies, and what not....up until that time, you really only had Sidney Poitier, who portrayed the characters Hollywood view as acceptable for Black men. Shaft was both an inspiration and influence in my own work. Mind you, it's not a perfect movie. But Gordon Parks' images and the way in which he shot them; what he was able to do, just with pictures. You have a whole generation totally influenced by the image of a Black man walking down the street in a leather coat, walking through Harlem."<sup>40</sup>

In *Shaft*, whose intent is largely entertainment, Parks instills an underlying sense of serious purpose. Shaft is a stand-in for the lone artist who must fight against hegemonic forces of constraint. Shaft is a black representative of independent nations of Africa, fighting against the forces of colonialism and neo-colonialism. While Parks, like Dashiell Hammett, employs the genre of the "Saturday Night Flick" and taps into the

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<sup>40</sup>Martinez, Martinez and Chavez, *What It Is . . . What It Was!!*, 77.

pleasure principle of audiences attracted to this new representation of black subjectivity, he elevates the genre. He places John Shaft within the contemporary discourse of black male subjectivity that surrounded the black power movement of this period, especially notions surrounding black masculinity, power, and agency. He emphasizes Shaft's independence, his self-sufficiency, his willingness to use whatever means necessary to accomplish his task, his ability to talk back to cop and mob alike. He is at ease with his own sexuality and transcends the historic restrictions of racial sexual boundaries. This transgression was still relatively new on the silver screen, and *Shaft* certainly handled it as if it were commonplace.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### Good Morning Blues

*Leadbelly*

Here, at least, I could try to think things out in peace, or, if not in peace, in quiet. I would take up residence underground. The end was in the beginning.

—Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man*

*The screen fills with the orange red hue of twilight. In soft focus, silhouetted against the red, a muscular black man, naked to his waist, lifts his pick ax to strike a pile of rocks. The saturated color gives way to the unaltered image of the quarry, where other figures walk with prison stripes and chains on their ankles. The year is 1933; the place, the Louisiana State Penitentiary, Angola, named after the African homeland of the former slaves of this one-time plantation.*

Gordon Parks' 1976 film *Leadbelly* opens with a song and scene that embody what Michel de Certeau terms “transverse tactics,” a notion that people demonstrate and gain

agency when they “manipulate the spaces in which they are constrained.”<sup>1</sup>

This film captures the raw energy of rebellion, the refusal to submit to authority within the oppressive boundaries of Jim Crow, and the importance of human creativity in sustaining a sense of dignity and agency through that struggle. The film’s opening sequence, outlined above, frames the film as a narrative about frustrated heroism, akin to the story of John Henry and his hammer. Almost certainly, the sequence refers to a 1945 documentary footage of Leadbelly edited by Pete Seeger in which Leadbelly plays guitar in front of a red velvet curtain. A few bars into the song, Leadbelly adds a chopping gesture that Parks then reinscribes into the film as the rise and fall of Leadbelly's pick ax. In describing a nineteenth-century sculpture entitled “Freedman,” Kirk Savage writes that “the figure... breaks clearly from the emblematic image of the slave kneeling in abjection. Yet neither does the figure stand erect, as

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<sup>1</sup>Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 43.

the classical figure would."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, this opening sequence shows Leadbelly in the paradoxical space I name invisibility—displaying great physical power, yet shackled to punitive labor.

In Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, his nameless protagonist's words, quoted in this chapter's epigraph, imply that his invisibility is a refuge from violence and oppression, a space where he can begin the work of interpreting his experiences. "Mediated through memory and language, 'experience' is already an interpretation of the past and of our place in a culturally and historically specific present."<sup>3</sup> In a parallel way, Ellison's protagonist calls up the biblical phrase, "in the beginning was the word," confirming the importance of both memory (story) and language in the project of coming to terms with his life.

Parks had briefly met Leadbelly a couple of times and had interviewed him in 1949, shortly before he died. When producer Mark Merson came to him, Parks was interested in

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<sup>2</sup>Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, 55.

<sup>3</sup>Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 24.

doing the film. Financing was difficult to acquire until television personality David Frost became interested after listening to old Leadbelly records. Once Frost came on board, Paramount agreed to get involved. No screenplay had been written at the time, so Merson got Ernie Kinoy to do the writing.

Parks began shooting *Leadbelly* in the fall of 1975 near Austin, Texas. Parks and Merson chose Roger Mosley to portray Huddie Ledbetter, on whom the film is based. They worked on a 45-day shooting schedule, though Parks would have preferred 10 to 12 weeks. Parks cited, for example, a twilight scene in the beginning that lasted only five minutes, but which took three nights to capture, because he only had a half hour of appropriate light daily during which to shoot.<sup>4</sup> Shortly before Thanksgiving Parks finished shooting *Leadbelly*, and he spent the next several months in postproduction work. To appeal to contemporary audiences, Parks changed his

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<sup>4</sup>Roy Campenella, Jr. "Gordon Parks Interview," *Millimeter* 4, April 4, 1976.

interpretation of Leadbelly's life for the film. "There were still some things I knew black people wouldn't go for today."<sup>5</sup> One of Parks biggest alterations was to have Leadbelly engage in violent confrontations with whites. According to several witnesses, this behavior was not characteristic of Leadbelly.

Despite the film's energy and the importance of its message, its power was truncated before it began by studio shortsightedness and misguided marketing. When *Leadbelly* was released in 1976, leadership at Paramount studios had changed from Frank Yablans to Barry Diller, and Diller withdrew the studio's support for the film. Barbara Kevles, a former journalist, author, educator, who in her article on the marketing of *Leadbelly* describes Parks' deep frustration and anger toward Paramount's marketing strategy of *Leadbelly*:

Paramount was peddling Parks' art film as the story of a brawling, brothel-loving murderer who played the twelve-string guitar and Parks was furious. The ad was illustrated with a large, bare-chested black man, standing shackled, holding a powerful sledge hammer in one hand, guitar in the other, flanked by a lascivious-looking prostitute in low-cut dress, and a fight.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

Paramount was emphasizing the basics of Blaxploitation--sex and violence. Parks had blasted the Paramount ad in a published interview in *The Detroit Free Press*.<sup>6</sup>

Despite Paramount's misrepresentation of *Leadbelly* and refusal to get fully behind the film, *Leadbelly* still in less than a week "had outgrossed every film in Detroit except *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*" during its test run in that city.<sup>7</sup>

Paramount also decided to premier the film in several cities around the country, ending with New York City. Parks was not pleased with this. 'Ninety-nine percent of the films open in New York first,' he said, 'it's the hub: the rest of the country judges a film by its New York success.'<sup>8</sup> Based on the promotional images, it seemed that Paramount was traveling along the same path as the Lomaxes had during their audiotaping sessions with *Leadbelly* for the Library of Congress, in attempting to make *Leadbelly* conform to an outlaw,

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<sup>6</sup>Barbara Kevles, "The Marketing of *Leadbelly*," *Cineast* (Fall 2003), 34.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

“Blaxploitation” embodiment of black manhood. This was in opposition to what Parks had hoped to achieve in the film—where he had some control—and in its reception, over which he had little control. Parks admired *Leadbelly* a great deal, and *Leadbelly* served as a role model for him. “He proved that in spite of hardship, you can do your art.”<sup>9</sup>

Although poorly advertised, promoted and distributed, the film still won first place at the Dallas Film Festival, and Charles Champlin gave it a strong review in the *Los Angeles Times*. Nevertheless, it was a commercial failure, and for many years the film remained almost invisible in the lexicon of Gordon Parks’ accomplishments. Despite its lack of success at the box office, Parks himself considered *Leadbelly* his “strongest and most ambitious film.”<sup>10</sup> The biopic genre gave Parks more room to experiment, to play with his imagination. He was not constrained by his own biography or the intimidation of a first film, as in *The Learning Tree*. Nor was he

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 35.

<sup>10</sup>Parks, *Hungry Heart*, 323.

restricted by genre, as in *Shaft*. Although constrained, to a degree, by the biography of Leadbelly, the facts and the legend allowed room for Parks to construct his image of Leadbelly in accord with his own vision. Parks was able to employ more of his photographic aesthetic. Throughout *Leadbelly*, beginning with the opening shot, Parks showers us with rich shots of color and composition. In addition, *Leadbelly* gave Parks the opportunity to share his passion for music and communicate his path of taking up art as a weapon of choice. Parks was able to let some of his own rage find voice through the experiences of Leadbelly as he was reminded of his own childhood during the making of this film on location in Texas. He noted parallels between himself and Leadbelly: leaving home at 15, having to make it on their own, loss of childhood. “I think I was subconsciously carrying around this parallel in my mind as I worked on the film each day.”<sup>11</sup> In Parks’ own estimation, a major aspect of this film was showing the

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<sup>11</sup>Charlayne Hunter, “Leadbelly Speaks for Every Black Who’s Catching Hell,” *New York Times*, July 4, 1976.



“Herculean efforts” Leadbelly made in order to survive.

“Leadbelly,” Parks says, “was no moral giant.... [but] he sure had strength and endurance.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Ramblin Man**

The film tells the story of a rambling black man, Huddie Ledbetter (alias, Leadbelly), a musician, a singer, and guitar player. The film opens with the aging Leadbelly in a chain gang. In *Leadbelly*, Parks makes use of the black body. In the opening scene we see Leadbelly, naked to the waist, wielding a pick ax. We get a sense of brute strength, a John Henry mythical figure. With the lava red hue of the shot we also get a sense of the connection between the black body and blood. Mosley’s body is not unlike prior images of blacks as brutes, but Parks turns this stereotype upside down, first by inscribing some black resistance into some of Leadbelly’s violent acts, and later by carefully articulating Leadbelly’s delight in the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

intellectual and creative—and physical—experience of playing and singing the blues.

Leadbelly is summoned to meet with two gentlemen from Washington, Professor John Lomax and his assistant, Tom.<sup>13</sup> They have heard about Leadbelly's music and they have come to collect his songs for the Library of Congress. As he plays he tells them his story. We flashback to see Leadbelly playing his guitar at a dance. A fight over a woman breaks out between Leadbelly and a rival for her attentions. He fires a gun at his rival, who escapes harm. But the sheriff comes looking for Leadbelly at the family farm. When the sheriff leaves, Leadbelly comes out of hiding. During Jim Crow, as during slavery, blacks found spaces, no matter how small, to live within a modicum of dignity. We see this in *Leadbelly* in the representation of Leadbelly's father, Wes Ledbetter. In this scene, when the sheriff says something about how Wes is

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<sup>13</sup>In actuality it was his son, Alan, who accompanied him; however, in the film the name of this character was altered. Alan Lomax was still living, and I suspect this circumstance may have caused Parks to change the name.

raising his boy, the father retorts, “You have no right to tell me how to raise my boy.” The sheriff, to a degree, backs down. To avoid the consequences of Jim Crow justice and to avoid the father of his pregnant girlfriend, who wants Huddie to marry his daughter, Huddie’s parents send him away. Wes Ledbetter says he will provide some care for the girl and tells his son he should consider doing that, too.

Leadbelly travels to Shreveport, to Fannin Street, “a mecca for those musicians who flocked to Shreveport’s red-light district, hoping to make it big.”<sup>14</sup> He finds himself under the wings and in the bed of Miss Eula, a madam of a house of prostitution, who mentors him about the blues. “You’ve got to feel the blues,” Miss Eula says. “It’s goin to cost you dear to learn the blues.” Eventually Leadbelly feels constrained by her attention and control and leaves her to play his music to an enthusiastic audience at a tavern. “It’s time to come on home, honey,” Miss Eula says. He brushes her off, and she retorts: “You’re born for trouble. You ain’t never going home. You’re

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<sup>14</sup>Parks, *New York Magazine*, 1976.

going die, alone and a million miles away.” Leaving home, mobility became important to Leadbelly. He doesn’t want to be with any one person for too long. Nor does he want to stay in one place for too long. He’s a rambling man, ready to move with the freedom of his music, ready to move with the freedom of his imagination. Like the shifting self-portrait Parks creates in his memoirs, Leadbelly is a subject who is “contextual, provisional, [and] performative,” in Smith and Watson’s terms.<sup>15</sup>

Before he leaves Shreveport, however, he proclaims himself King of Fannin Street and challenges anyone to out-pick him on the guitar. We see an old man at the bar fetching something out of jug. He’s drunk, leaning unstable at the bar. Leadbelly bets \$10 he can out-pick anyone. The old man takes him up. Leadbelly thinks this will be easy pickins, but is surprised when the old man stays with him and even surpasses him with a 12-string guitar that Leadbelly had never seen before. Parks shoots this scene in the mode of a Western

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<sup>15</sup>Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 81.

gun fight between a young Turk with his six shooter versus an old man with a 12-gage shotgun. The old man wins the duel, but soon after loses the 12-string guitar to Leadbelly who had his instrument smashed as they all ran out to escape a police raid.

Leadbelly's relationship with Eula introduces him to new elements of his emerging blues aesthetic. This shootout scene introduces him to the instrument (weapon) that will be his companion as he further explores the frontiers of the blues. In setting up this scene like a western gunfight, Parks was able to draw on the western genre to represent elements of black manhood. Parks was interested in illustrating elements such as competition between father and son and the need to assert one's independence by going off alone; the importance of mastery, of being good at what you do; the importance of declaration of manhood, of proclaiming within a public space that I am a man. The traditional western genre, especially through the gunfight, represents those values, and Parks employs the generic outline to fill in his own representation of a black man choosing his instrument and going off into the frontier ready to sing the blues. Prior to his incarceration,

Leadbelly was in his musical apprenticeship, and the blues as an expression of the rawness of black life led him to mentors who had experienced this rawness---a madam, a drunkard, and soon a blind man---and who could communicate these experiences for Leadbelly to absorb.

Leadbelly takes off again, and we see him meeting Blind Lemon Jefferson, a blues singer whose fame was spreading. They perform and drink together until they find themselves playing for a group of white confederates. A confederate flag is prominently displayed on the wall. They are ready to quit playing. It's 2:00 a.m. and they were only hired to play until midnight. Their drunk employer who wants them to keep playing calls Leadbelly boy and nigger. At one point Leadbelly just stares hard at this fellow, with a strong assertion of defiance. Leadbelly then smashes his guitar over the white fellow's head and a fight breaks out.

It is difficult not to read this particular scene as wild and unthinking, almost suicidal. Leadbelly and Jefferson were the only blacks at this dance. Jefferson is blind and would be of no help in a fight. There are several burly white men in the hall. Perhaps Parks wanted the viewer to experience the potential

deadliness of unrestrained violence in the face of overwhelming power. Perhaps he recalls the rage he felt during those many youthful encounters with white racists, when he sometimes lost control and lashed out in spite of impossible odds. Perhaps he had in mind the young Black Panther he once spoke to who thought his gun was more powerful than Parks' camera. The lesson is clear. Unrestrained violence is costly, and often works against one's own interests. (Less than two weeks after this conversation the Black Panther was killed in a violent confrontation with the police.) Later, in jail, Leadbelly thinks all he has to pay is a fine, until Blind Jefferson informs him that he is on his way to the chain gang at Harrison State Farm. Fortunately he is able to escape before he is transferred. He finds his way back to the woman he met earlier in the cotton fields and hides out for awhile under the name Walter Boyd. Invisibility here is strategic and allows Leadbelly to remain free.

After another night of heavy drinking Leadbelly gets into a fight with a friend and ends up shooting him. This time he is sent to Sugarland Farm, Harrison County, Texas. Parks takes this opportunity to visualize Leadbelly's strong defiant nature, his refusal to bend, his fearlessness within a deadly racist

environment, his employment of de Certeau's 'traverse tactics.'

When a guard tries to whip Leadbelly, Leadbelly picks up a hoe, as if he were going to swing at the guard, and despite several shouts and a warning shot at his feet, Leadbelly is slow to put down the hoe. He is whipped. Later, after a failed attempt to escape with a fellow prisoner, Dicklikker, who slips and, to avoid getting beat, yells to the guards that Leadbelly went into the woods. Later, the prisoners bang their plates in solidarity with Leadbelly's escape. A guard fires in the air, telling them to stop banging their trays, and when one of the inmates begins banging again, we are shown how precarious the lives of these prisoners are when the guard shoots him. Leadbelly is eventually captured and placed in a solitary box above ground. Through the slit Dicklikker tries to talk with him and explain his actions, but Leadbelly throws his food back at him. Dicklikker, who saved himself from a whipping, says:

Times like this you've got to live the way you've got to. White men don't care if I live or die. Fact is he just soon I die....I aint going to die. When they wants to kill ya, just living is winning. You must bide your time. That's the way you live. You suit yourself to the situation.

Dicklikker functions as the pastoral hero Cripps described whose interest is to endure; Leadbelly works to



surpass that role, moving from endurance (which could be a form of invisibility) to something further along the arc of empowerment, more energizing toward greater ascendance and agency. It is in this sense that Parks transgresses the borders of Cripps' depiction of the film as a pastoral representation and crosses over the border into a more urban hero sensibility. Although employing the geographic of a pastoral production, Parks borrows from his experience with *Shaft* and his sensitivity to the mid-seventies, to instill Leadbelly with an urban defiance.

Clearly "Dicklikker" is so named to emphasize—and criticize—his choice of self-preserving compliance. Parks means to resist this demeaning solution, even though he carefully acknowledges the terrible difficulty that produces it. Under the oppressive cloud of Jim Crow, black men were easy targets for a variety of white violence. Separate water fountains were benign next to the possibility of prison, lynching, or castration. Black men were seen, when they were seen, as a symbol of the lost way of life in the south, and Jim Crow was a system of neo-slavery. The prison system was one site in

which the perceived threat of black men was repressed and contained.

Through his contrasting representation of Huddie and Wes Ledbetter, Parks participated in the debate over what a black man is, how a black man should act, and whether some older black men were weak and out of touch. Parks demonstrates Wes Ledbetter's moral strength and his agency, despite failing health, when Wes attempts to get Huddie out of prison. Through the slit of the solitary box, Leadbelly sees his father coming into the prison. This long shot suggests perhaps, the distance between father and son, and the son's inability to fully see and appreciate his father. Wes Ledbetter wants to give money to the warden to get his boy out. He is consumptive, not the picture of strength we experienced in the earlier scene when the sheriff came to the farm. Nevertheless, his will and dignity have not faltered. In this scene, after the warden said, "You take your money and run on home, you hear, Uncle?" Ledbetter responds, "I ain't no kind of kin to you, Captain." Like the sheriff earlier, the warden backs down a little and even shows a little kindness. "You want me to bring him in so you can see him," the warden says gently. Ledbetter says no, but

asks the warden to take some money to buy the kind of guitar he likes. “All right Ledbetter. Anything you want me to tell him?”

Wes Ledbetter leaves without seeing his son and without leaving a message. Leadbelly watches him through the slit. The father turns, but there is no indication that he knows that Huddie is watching him. This is a close shot, perhaps anticipating Leadbelly’s effort to be more a man like his father, to find his strength from within and not just with his physical strength. This close shot attempts to bring father and son closer together. After Ledbetter leaves Leadbelly bangs his head several times against the side of the box. He, like his father, knows it will be the last time they will see each other. Parks is able to capture these spaces of agency throughout his films. Leadbelly, who in the early part of the film is young and on the wild, does not possess the quiet strength of his father.

### **Suit yourself to the situation**

Leadbelly is singing “Goodnight Irene.” He’s smiling and enjoying his music. The prisoners are listening intently but with somber faces. The camera lingers over the men,

individually and in small groupings, to highlight their uniqueness as human beings, much as Parks' photographic portraits do. Even music at this moment can't lift their spirits and help them forget where they are. A guard comes to fetch Leadbelly to sing for Governor Neff. This scene opens with a close up of a little boy, dressed in white, with short pants. He is eating an ice cream cone. He is behind barbed wire. The camera pulls back and we see several prisoners tilling the dirt, a juxtaposition that exposes the prison system as little more than a legal extension of the institution of slavery. The boy looks to his left as we see Leadbelly coming into view with the guard. The camera pulls back more and we see a large house and a formal lawn party. The camera moves in for a closeup of the governor sitting on the porch with the comfort of a King. "Hey you," he says, after being told Walter Boyd's (Leadbelly) name, "You sing me a song now, ya hear." At first Leadbelly isn't smiling as he normally does when he sings. He stares at the white guests all dressed up in formal Sunday attire. He sings a line about Governor Neff letting him go back home.

I am your servant compose this song,  
Pleas Governor Neff, lemme go back home,  
I know my wife will jump and shout,

Train rolls up, I come stepping out.

Please, Honorable Governor, be good an' kind,  
If I don't get a pardon will you cut my time?

Had you, Governor Neff, like you got me,  
Wake up in the morning and I'd set you free.

When he sees the Governor respond with a chuckle at his lines, Leadbelly moves a little closer, and as he sings, his face transforms, about three lines into the lyrics, from anger to minstrel-like cheer, he dances a little in place and tries to work his charm on the Governor. The camera cuts to the inmates and we hear one of them say: "Look at that. Playing darky for the white folks." The prisoners may be particularly offended to see Leadbelly offering up his songs in such a self-exploiting way because they have sat listening with such rapt attention to him during their endless hours in the prison. In any case, one effect of the comment is to confront the audience and Leadbelly with the parallel between this moment and the earlier scene in which Dicklicker explains his behavior as survivalist, and Leadbelly rejects his explanation as cowardly.

Then the governor says, "You know I could give you a pardon," with an air of power that needs no acknowledgement. "But then I wouldn't have you to sing for me when I visit next

time.” Still feeling the power to dispense freedom, he says, “The last thing I do in office I’m going to set you free.” The governor throws his used cigar down on the ground, inviting Leadbelly to pick it up. Leadbelly picks it up, turns his back to the governor as he starts back to the prison barracks, and crushes the cigar in the palm of his hand. The scene closes with the little boy kneeling behind a wooden fence looking at Leadbelly leave.

Parks wanted to shoot this scene differently than he was able. “I knew I was going to shoot from an elevated platform, and I knew there must be some dramatic way to start that scene so that it would really grip the audience.”<sup>16</sup> He wanted to go in close on the little white boy eating a strawberry ice cream cone, pull back, revealing the prisoners, then eventually Leadbelly. Parks continued:

Well it’s hard to beat that opening. Because it is a beautiful move. If it looks the way I want, I’ll never cut

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<sup>16</sup>Dan Georgakas and Lenny Rubenstein, “Gordon Parks: Beyond the Black Film” in *The Cineaste Interviews on the Art and Politics of the Cinema* (Chicago: Lake View Press, 1983), 173-180.

into it. I'll never cut until I got that yard, you see. I've been thinking about that for about a week and I tried to get a crane to do it. We couldn't get the crane so we had to do it from the platform. This meant that I had to change lenses. The crane could have taken me over the fence separating the little white boy from the prisoner and dipped me down and then above the fence again to include the lawn party, another plateau, but we couldn't get the crane so I had to do it with lenses.

Parks wanted to create greater contrast among the social levels in this scene and is disappointed he couldn't get yet "another plateau," to further emphasize that hierarchy. The opening shot of significant scenes is often very consciously composed to convey a complex but instantaneous visual message, kind of like a pictorial haiku. These opening moments are the element in *Leadbelly* that demonstrates (for me) Parks' heightened level of intentionality with this film—they clarify the fact that he was exercising his artistic will—they emphasize an artistic design which is less consistently obvious in the other films.

In a discussion about the scene with the governor, when *Leadbelly* is shuffling and then smashing out a cigar, Parks says he was trying to make up for the many times he saw blacks in film do shameful things, as directed by white directors. "I felt I had a certain responsibility....And so what

Leadbelly was doing was not only destroying that cigar, but punishing himself for having committed the act of Uncle Tomming. That was my idea. Take the torture, man, without wincing. You know? And walk out.”<sup>17</sup> Parks’ interpretation of the governor scene differs from my “preferred” reading. I suggest he was lashing out at the governor. It was the governor’s cigar. That’s what he was smashing in the palm of his hand. It might have been some self torture, but I suspect it was also a symbolically aggressive act against the governor and all that he stood for. And as I will discuss later in my discussion of Hazel Carby’s analysis of Leadbelly, Parks may have also been placing himself in opposition to Alan Lomax’s representation of Leadbelly.

The governor keeps his word and sets Leadbelly free just before he leaves office. Leadbelly returns, on his way back home, to Fannin Street, which he finds all boarded up now. He runs into Miss Eula. She is frail looking, walking slow, dressed almost in rags. They have a brief but tender reunion. Miss Eula

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<sup>17</sup>Hunter, “Leadbelly Speaks.”



gives Leadbelly two of his favorite guitar picks that she had kept for him. He kisses her on the cheek, touches her shoulder, then leaves. They look on at each other. “Good Morning Blues” plays in the background, allowing us to recall Miss Eula’s comment about the cost of playing the blues. Leadbelly returns to his old farm, now owned by whites. His reputation as a “bad nigger” precedes him, and three white men attack him and pull a knife. Leadbelly is able to stick one of them, and they flee. He lies on the ground comforted by the daughter.

The camera cuts back to Leadbelly and Lomax. “You collect songs like butterflies?” Leadbelly asks. “Then ya kill them. Songs must fly free like butterflies. You’ve got my whole damn life there. You aint going stick no pins in my songs. They be dead for sure then.” As he leaves, he pauses in the doorway and announces that “I’m going to sing my songs,” vowing to take them to Chicago, New York—the urban destinations of musicians seeking fame. He returns to the rock pile. A guard catches him daydreaming for a moment, cries out, “Hey, you...move your ass.” Leadbelly stares at him for a moment in defiance. But he has learned the value of art over violence. He returns to picking. Six more months and he is free. “And after 7

years you aint broke my body, you aint broke my mind, you aint broke my spirit.” The film ends with a still of Leadbelly’s body, naked to his waist. The lava red color again fills the screen. This forms a kind of double frame or double exposure—the visual frame of the red/Vulcan mythic being at the beginning and end, and the narrative frame of the ethnomusicologists at the start and end.

### **Leadbelly seeks an audience**

In *Leadbelly*, Parks explores black manhood in its struggle to move along the arc of empowerment through invisibility, emergence, and ascendance. Huddie Ledbetter and other men in the film wrestle with how to be a black man during Jim Crow segregation in the South. as the main character strives to overcome to find his voice as a blues musician. In looking at the film from a black generic perspective, Thomas Cripps (1978), one of the most significant historians of black cinema, postulates that *Leadbelly* is a story about survival. In discussing black genre films, Cripps contrasts the pastoral hero with the urban outlaw. “The black genre rests on heroic figures, either urban or pastoral, each

reflecting a different focus of black experience.”<sup>18</sup> Cripps argues that the pastoral hero, although standing apart from society, uses the family as an anchor and “wins not by prevailing but by enduring.” In the case of *Leadbelly*, the desire to return home eventually becomes his anchor, but in contrast to Cripps’ description, I find that *Leadbelly*’s music is his means of prevailing and achieving triumph. The urban hero, Cripps states, is more alone, more prone to violence, characterized at times by a commitment to professionalism, rebellion, or revenge. Cripps places *Shaft* in the urban hero category. He places *Leadbelly*, along with *The Learning Tree*, in the pastoral film genre. *Leadbelly*, I suggest, instead falls between these two genres. Although set in a pastoral environment, Parks infuses the protagonist with characteristics that were being nourished during the black film explosion of the 1970s. Parks was attempting to bridge the gap between a real life figure of the Jim Crow period during the first quarter of

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<sup>18</sup>Thomas Cripps. *Black Film as Genre* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 11.

the twentieth century and the life and needs of spectators during the middle 1970s. One part of that bridge is an explicit acknowledgement of racialized violence. Although Jim Crow was officially outlawed by 1976 (e.g. *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* in 1954; Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965), its effects, its aftermath, and its psychological impact were far from over. Black life remained difficult. Poverty ran rampant. Blacks were in need of heroes, of people who triumph over their environment—not literary figures who simply fulfilled a pastoral fantasy of “enduring.” Parks, for himself and for others, wanted to present *Leadbelly* as a role model, as an example of a black man who survives, who uses his art to aid in that survival and to overcome the dominance of violence in his life. By the end of the film, *Leadbelly* moves from “the pastoral ideal of endurance” to a desire to triumph and prevail. This was the path Parks himself took. Parks did not expect everyone to be an artist, but he did promote (advocate) a path of creative sublimation, a transformative engagement with violence. This was the path he continued to advocate in his books, his photographs, his films, and in the many interviews he granted.

Films allow us to engage and exercise our fantasies, our desires. Laura Mulvey calls this “identification,” one of the gazer’s indulgences. Part of the appeal of a black man surviving in a film is its appeal to the actual pain and struggle in the lives of black men off screen. Black youth, one audience Parks was addressing, was still under the impact of the black power period and was being challenged and disappointed by the changing 1970s. The civil rights era had failed to yield promised economic changes and substantial social equality; bell hooks talks about this moment in *We Real Cool*. This audience would likely not tolerate any hint of a servile black man in the face of white oppression and bigotry. Parks recreated *Leadbelly* in his own image and with the conscious intent to appeal to multiple audiences in 1976. Parks also did not see *Leadbelly* just as a black film. He saw it as “a human drama that will appeal to all audiences.” Although he did not use the language of the gaze, he was aware of film’s power to elicit multiple racial and gendered gazes. This awareness was in part a product of his years working as a photographer at *Life* magazine. Kozol writes, “*Life* photographers used a variety of formal visual strategies, such as point of view and composition,

to align the viewer's gaze with the camera's and/or the subject's gaze."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in *Leadbelly*, we see his father through the tiny opening in the locked solitary box from Leadbelly's viewpoint. And, conversely, we are first led to see Leadbelly's simpering performance from the governor's elevated viewpoint on the porch, underlining Leadbelly's subordinated position. When the governor throws down the cigar (the gauntlet), the point of view of the camera shifts to remind the viewer of the assumed position for black men during this period. Leadbelly's crushing of the cigar enacts black men refusing to accept this position and suggests, to me at least, a willingness to accept the pain of this oppositional stance. As Kozol notes, the gaze depends on the "social location" of spectators. While the white audience was not necessarily Parks' first order audiences, he wanted them involved in the dialogic discourse of his filmic representations.

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<sup>19</sup>Wendy Kozol, "Gazing at Race in the Pages of *Life*: Picturing Segregation through Theory and History," in *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001) 160.

Despite the film's strong cinematography and complex treatment of social justice themes, several commentators have noted that Parks' treatment of the details of Leadbelly's life conflicts with the facts. Music historian Frederic Ramsey Jr. "pointed out that Leadbelly never struck out at a white man despite his violent temper and the oppressive conditions under which he lived. However, in the film, Leadbelly is shown beating up a white railroad guard while escaping from a bordello raid, and later breaking his guitar over the head of a drunken white man at a party where he has been hired to entertain." John Henry Faulk,<sup>20</sup> who played Governor Neff and knew Leadbelly, suggests that "Leadbelly's survival depended on his not revealing his anger, as he does repeatedly in the film." Faulk says: "his anger never took on the sullen, defiant way it was depicted in the movie. Instead, he was very

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<sup>20</sup>John Henry Faulk was born in 1913, a year after Gordon Parks in Austin, Texas. He was a storyteller and radio talk show host. After being blacklisted in the late 1950s, he eventually succeeded in his lawsuit against McCarthy blacklists. His suit helped bring an end to the Hollywood blacklist.

solicitous, very eager to please. A threatening gesture at a white man would have indeed cost him his life.”<sup>21</sup> Parks argued that the director has the prerogative to make his own interpretations. Parks knew what he was attempting to achieve and whom he was targeting as his primary audience. Parks’ own experiences and observations led him to believe that film was a powerful means to reach his targeted audience: “the black kid in Harlem or Watts or any ghetto, who knows adversity so well, can gain a lot of inspiration from the guy, if he wants to. ‘This guy had it a hell of a lot worse than I did, and he made it.’ That kid could say....Leadbelly is speaking for every black who’s catching hell—on his job, or anywhere he’s at.”<sup>22</sup>

In the assessment of Peter Lev, Professor of Electronic Media and Film at Towson University in Maryland, and contributor to the University of Texas Film and Media Studies Series, Leadbelly was the embodiment of black resistance. “He

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<sup>21</sup>Hunter, “Leadbelly Speaks.”

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.



fighters back, he perseveres, and ultimately he wins his freedom....*Leadbelly* has its share of sex and violence, but it is also about black-white relations, the suppression of black men by the prison system, destructive behavior within the black community, the economics and culture of the black South, the role of music in black culture.”<sup>23</sup> Peter Lev makes a case that Parks’ film is an attempt to recapture the music of Leadbelly and bring it back to the community. “These recordings sparked a great deal of interest in Leadbelly, the Blues, and folk music generally. According to Michael Paris, most of the interest came from the white middle class, and John Lomax presented Leadbelly’s music as ‘folkloric’ to fit the needs of this cultured audience. Gordon Parks’ film recognizes the importance of Leadbelly’s ‘discovery’ but also critiques the Lomaxes’ motivations and reclaims Leadbelly as an exemplary figure for the black community.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Lev, *American Films of the 1970s*, 138.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

Although Parks drew on the legend and the image of Leadbelly in part constructed by John and Alan Lomax, Parks' embodiment of black manhood as depicted in his *Leadbelly* was set in opposition to the image promoted by the Lomaxes.

The political project of the Lomaxes was to cast the black male body into the shape of an outlaw. John Lomax intended to recover an unadulterated form of black folk music, and in the process actually invented a particular version of black authenticity. The Lomaxes worked not only with many unquestioned assumptions about what constituted black cultural authenticity, but they also hoped to locate black people in what they imagined to be their natural environment. John Lomax characterized the relation between cultural form and the site of its production as analogous to that between an animal and its habitat: '[Black] folk singers render their music more naturally in the easy sociability of their homes and churches and schools, in their fields and woodyards, just as birds <sup>25</sup>sing more effectively in their native trees and country.'

Hazel Carby makes an interesting suggestion when she draws together John Lomax's words regarding black folk singers, birds singing more effectively in their native trees and country, and the fact that John and Alan spent much of their

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<sup>25</sup>Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 103.

search for “authentic” folk songs visiting prisons and penitentiaries. “One can only ask whether John Lomax regarded prisons and penitentiaries not only as sites which were isolated from the influence of white culture, a dubious and somewhat ironic assumption, but as a part of the native habitat of black people.”<sup>26</sup> The legend of Leadbelly was carefully constructed and marketed and reflected the complex and contradicting twins of white desire and fear. Drawing on his premise that black people were part of nature in opposition to civilization, Carby suggests that Lomax likened Leadbelly to a volcano “which could appear benign on the surface while it held an unlimited potential for power and destruction underneath.”<sup>27</sup> Lomax believed this double-edged image would attract the public to Lomax’s project of promoting what he viewed as authentic black folk music, that is, music, as Carby suggests above, free of white influence, as opposed to the

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 104.

“inauthentic” music of Paul Robeson’s proper and respectable European influenced style.

Lomax promoted an account of how Leadbelly came to be employed by him that perpetuated this idea of Leadbelly as a threatening force and “outlaw against whom constant vigilance is required.”<sup>28</sup> According to Lomax, Leadbelly came to him in September 1934 looking for work. Lomax asked him if he had a gun. Leadbelly said he did not but that he had a knife. Lomax mentioned anxiety about his family should Leadbelly want to do him any harm. According to Lomax, Leadbelly said he would catch a bullet for Lomax if anyone tried to shoot him, “so Lomax employs a man whom he acknowledges to be a danger to his person...an ex-convict, a waiting time-bomb who becomes a faithful retainer.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 106.

Carby also describes a February 1935 *March of Time*<sup>30</sup> newsreel which is difficult to believe escaped Parks before he made his film. *March of Time* newsreels combined actual filmed events and studio enactments. “This particular newsreel opens with Angola, LA! Followed by a scene of actors posing as black convicts, in uniforms with broad stripes, gathered into a circle at the feet of John Lomax and Leadbelly, the latter playing his guitar and singing ‘Goodnight, Irene.’ Leadbelly is standing center-screen, and Lomax sits beside his recording equipment.” In this newsreel the voiceover announces Lomax going to Louisiana State Penitentiary as a Library of Congress collector of American folksongs. Lomax speaks first, telling Leadbelly to sing one more song, thus establishing his authority and his control of the situation. “I have never heard so many good nigras songs,” he says.

This backhanded praise is reminiscent of the governor saying “darkies.” Specifically, this sequence reminds me of the

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<sup>30</sup>Leadbelly—*March of Time* footage, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PUIJfC4JxU&mode=related&search=> (added October 6, 2006).

governor scene in Parks' film, which begins with Leadbelly singing "Goodnight Irene" to convicts sitting with despairing faces listening to him. So later, when Parks has Leadbelly smash out the cigar in his hand, could it also be Lomax's construction of Leadbelly as "nigra" entertainment that Parks is stamping out?

As the newsreel continues, in another scene in a hotel, we see Leadbelly seeking work. "You can't work for me, you're a mean boy. You killed two men." Carby notes how Leadbelly's second imprisonment, for assault, "is transformed into murder to make the potential threat to Lomax's life even more plausible."<sup>31</sup> The newsreel ends with Leadbelly telling Lomax, 'I'll drive you all over the United States and I'll sing songs for you. You'll be my boss and I'll be your man.' This is not the Leadbelly we see in Parks' film. In Parks' film, Leadbelly rejects Lomax the collector; refuses to let his songs be contained like pinned butterflies. In the *March of Time* newsreel "the creative reconstruction of the relationship between Lomax and

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<sup>31</sup>Carby, *Race Men*, 108.

Leadbelly imaginatively resolves some social and cultural anxieties of masculinity: anxieties about whether white men can effectively control black male bodies, and anxieties arising from the struggle of white men to control their own fear of black male bodies.”<sup>32</sup>

Parks turns this upside down, as he did with his portrait of Ella Watson and the inverted American flag draped behind her with mop and broom. Parks turns the newsreel’s depiction of Leadbelly’s music entering in the Library of Congress “with the Declaration of Independence” on its head. Parks’ Leadbelly declares his independence by hammering his words: “You ain’t broke my body, you ain’t broke my mind, you ain’t broke my spirit.” In fact, as Parks envisions the scene, one of Leadbelly’s final statements to Lomax is that, once he completes his prison term, he’ll be autonomous. “I’ll be my own man,” he says, in direct contradiction of his words to Lomax in the newsreel.

Parks’ film is more than a critique of the white establishment’s exploitation of African American cultural

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

genius. More importantly, with *Leadbelly*, Parks designs a mythic figure, a hero, someone whose art—an *Everyman's creativity located in the blues*—is not containable in Smithsonian recordings. Instead, Leadbelly's art is imbedded in the material and symbolic circumstances of his life—his autobiographical subjectivity. Only in that context can we fully understand Leadbelly's struggle to surface from the depths of invisibility. James Monaco believes that:

Like most mythic stories, this biography of Huddie Ledbetter—"Leadbelly"—the master of the twelve-string guitar, potentially verges on cliché. It takes someone of Parks' particular talents to avoid those pitfalls. He does so by confronting the mythic material head-on rather than apologizing for it. The film has a classic narrative structure: strong, simple, direct, and pointed....It opposes that oppression with the elemental politics of survival....Ultimately, *Leadbelly* is a triumph of will....*Leadbelly* provides a legitimate historical high of the sort we seldom get any longer from mainstream American movies, made by people who have lost (or never had) a sense of the vitality and meaning of the politics of existence.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>James Monaco, *American Film Now: The People, the Power, the Money, the Movies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 198.



Monaco believes *Leadbelly* “was just the sort of film Parks was meant to make. His experiences as photographer, musician, and novelist combine to create a film that works well on all three levels.”<sup>34</sup> Monaco, like Parks, saw *Leadbelly* as the culmination of his filmic talents thus far. I would agree. It was his fifth film. As Monaco suggests, Parks was able to employ his novelistic imagination to construct a character that could represent the kind of black hero Parks wanted to present. *Leadbelly* was a survivor, like Parks, who ultimately adopted the weapon of art to emerge out of invisibility and, for a time, escape the trap of untempered violence.

However, film critic Vincent Canby is not appreciative of Parks’ and Kinoy’s imposing “their own very particular kind of order on the *Leadbelly* story. It’s as if the film were a recollection of the legend, rather than of the man....This *Leadbelly* is bigger than life—and serenely removed from it. Which is why, I think, one attends to the film carefully and is

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

never very moved.”<sup>35</sup> In Canby’s view *Leadbelly*’s music provided a modicum of order to his life; however, the overall lack of order was due more to his “terrible temper than because of the kind of black militancy that *Leadbelly* suggests.” Canby goes on to suggest that the film “is less a failure in execution than a mistake in conception. For if you accept this conception, you must go along with its more or less immaculate vision of triumph over degradation.” Canby oversimplifies Parks’ conception, and then oversimplifies the vision. One of Canby’s main methodological strategies here is to ignore the broader social causes of the “lack of order” in *Leadbelly*’s life—so Canby, I submit, is revising history more grievously than Parks revises *Leadbelly*’s biography.

In any case, Parks’ aim was not to render a factual representation of *Leadbelly*. Parks was presenting his imagination of *Leadbelly*, rooted in the actual, but to serve the needs, as Parks saw them, of the middle 1970s. As such, given

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<sup>35</sup>Vincent Canby, “The Screen: Parks’s Elegiacal ‘*Leadbelly*.” *New York Times*, May 29, 1976.

the waning of the 1960s and the failing hope for real change that was being challenged by the brutal realities of the 1970s, Parks was committed to presenting a hero who could serve as a model.

Although several commentators who knew Leadbelly suggest that he was not a militant in the way the film represents him, that shared point of view should not detract from the use Parks was attempting to make of Leadbelly's life. And even if Leadbelly did not engage in violence with whites, underneath Leadbelly's temper might have been a spirit of resistance and rebellion against the oppressive Jim Crow system he was living under. Canby may have misjudged Parks' view of Leadbelly's anger in the same way black anger was misunderstood during the riots of the late 1960s. But the film suggests more than black militancy—it also suggests that the stranglehold of white supremacy constituted a threatening environment that was itself doing violence to black people, and against which a violent response might be justified, not merely a matter of having a bad temper. Parks, in his photography of the 1960s, and in a different way in *Leadbelly*, was trying to show people how and why certain conditions might lead to

anger and violence. But Parks does not stop with a sociological description. Parks is interested in stimulating or providing a prescription for how to deal with the anger, the rage, and the violence that often comes with being a black man in America.

In *Leadbelly*, Parks attempted to represent the fruitlessness of undirected violence, of the necessity of rebellion and resistance to partner with *something* more effective than violence. For Parks this *something* was art. In the case of *Leadbelly*, the best partner was music, specifically the blues, an art form that emanates from the people—a democratic self-expression of both individual and community. For other black men it could be whatever *creative* means necessary to transform the internal and external oppression of violence. Although hinted at but not shown in the film, we know *Leadbelly*'s music moved from the invisibility of Fannin Street and prison farms to emerge on the concert halls of New York, Washington, D.C., and Paris. As he did in *The Learning Tree* and later in *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, Parks employs and negotiates with the past in order to comment on the violence of racism and offer a prescription in the present for a creative and expressive hero.

Although Leadbelly's emergence on the world stage was a function of Lomax's appropriation, which Parks was working against, Leadbelly's eventual fame represented an effective move out of the constraints of invisibility. In the context of my use of the term *emergence*, Leadbelly's visibility may not be insurgent, nor fully autonomous, but it would be misleading to still relegate this man to *invisibility* and the confined space of prison yards. Leadbelly's movement along the arc of empowerment was not fully autonomous, nor free of compromise; nevertheless it allowed for a transversive employment of agency, enabling the voice, spirit, and soul of Leadbelly to break through the confining gates of Lomax's 1930s representation and offering an opportunity for Parks in 1976 to reposition Leadbelly for a new audience.

In Parks' final scene, Leadbelly refuses help from Lomax, recalling with anguish the psychic cost of owing his first pardon to Governor Neff. Leadbelly's key insistence, that *he is his own man*, resonates through the history of blacks in North America. The connection between masculinity and the theme of agency is foundational to the historic beginnings of black people's assertion of their will. As Savage notes, Frederick

Douglass proposed “masculinity as the structural opposite of slavery, an understanding that inevitably gendered emancipation as well.”<sup>36</sup> Savage quotes Douglass as saying in 1865 that “the fact of my being a negro is far less important in determining my duty than the fact that I am a ‘man,’ and linked to all mankind as a man and a brother”<sup>37</sup> In *Leadbelly*, Parks provides audiences with a protagonist who demonstrates the masculine will and resourcefulness that make Huddie Ledbetter a compelling representation of the blues artist. However, in *Solomon Northup*, Parks constructs a far more complex version of agency, one in which wit and resourcefulness in the face of violence are balanced with deep compassion for others and with a strong commitment to advancing the agency of his people. Like Douglass, the Solomon Northup of Parks’ film asserts universal kinship among human beings as the decisive argument for emancipation.

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<sup>36</sup>Savage, *Standing Soldier, Kneeling Slaves*, 118-119.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

## CHAPTER SIX

### Assume the Position

*Solomon Northup's Odyssey*

Identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves in, the narratives of the past.

—Stuart Hall

*Every black man, then, has had his own gauntlet to run. Each has been asked to assume the position.*

—Henry Louis Gates<sup>1</sup>

Passion is not friendly. It is arrogant, superbly contemptuous of all that is not itself, and, as the very definition of passion implies the impulse to freedom, it has a mighty intimidating power. It contains an unspeakable hope.

—James Baldwin

I have suggested looking at Gordon Parks and his films through the constructed lens of *invisibility*, *emergence*, and *ascendance*. In this schema, I have defined *invisibility* as a

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<sup>1</sup>Gates, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*,<sup>1</sup> (1997, xix.)

dynamic stage characterized by a precarious relationship to violence, a lack of direction, and a dormant sense of self-knowledge; *emergence*, as a stage of awakened self-awareness, a readiness to face violence, and a commitment to live by humanistic life enhancing values; and, finally, *ascendance* as a state in which visibility is heightened; one is free to exercise independence; one operates from a set of foundational values and recognizes violence as a weapon of last resort. As Parks fixes his eye on black men's movement from invisibility, to emergence, to ascendancy, he shares with us his complex vision for black masculine agency. With this final chapter, I argue that Parks' final film, *Solomon Northup's Odyssey*, was a culmination of this vision.

I have employed this tripartite schema as a structural strategy to aid my analysis of the films of Gordon Parks. I have argued that Gordon Parks, in his life and in his films, traveled through this dynamic triptych, and that employment of this schema enables us to see the coherence among his films and common characteristics of his main protagonists. I further argued that the engagement and negotiation of racialized violence serves as a throughline in Parks' films and that the



successful encounter with this violence serves as fuel to move the protagonists through the cycle of empowerment.

Violence is a midwife to the birth of African American male identity. Frantz Fanon writes about the violence of being made an object, which robs the subject of agency:

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!”  
I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.<sup>2</sup>

Here Fanon describes how the “fact of blackness” asserts itself as a limiting social construct. His voice is lyrical and insightful, exposing the lie of racism. Like Fanon, Parks spoke back to the world that would contain him, acknowledging the violence of prejudice, and seeking meaning. Unless we shut ourselves off from history or are totally disconnected from the world, the legacy of slavery lives on in the psyche of black males. How big a role it plays, how much space it occupies, varies with the individual, but its absence is inconceivable,

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<sup>2</sup>Franz Fanon, *Black Skin: White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.

although like a photographic negative it may not be fully legible to the individual. A person may never or rarely think about slavery, may even live a decent, comfortable life, but again unless one is somehow totally isolated, the realization cannot fully escape one's consciousness that *what happened to Emmett can happen to me*. The pictures of the battered body of Emmett Till that circulated in *Jet* magazine and other vehicles in 1955 served as a lesson to black men that not only might we be killed for merely looking at a white woman; we could be killed for no reason at all.

Parks places himself in all of his films. He is the classical violinist kidnapped into slavery, forced to use his wits in very different ways in order to avoid getting killed, and, at the same time, avoid losing his internal dignity and sense of self. He is Leadbelly, full of anger, full of song, ready to fight at a moment's notice, and ready to give the world his gift of blues. Blues is about resistance; it's about walking that thin line between oppressive forces and liberation. It's a dialog between oppression and freedom. Parks projects himself in this character. The most self-consciously autobiographical of these films of course is *The Learning Tree*, in which Parks tells the

story of his youth in Kansas through the story of Newt Winger and his family. And in many ways John Shaft was as much Gordon Parks as Sam Spade was Dashiell Hammett. was.

Newt Winger in *The Learning Tree* (1969) represents for me an individual already moving into emergence at the beginning of the film. He is introspective and has a sense of himself, has a desire to go to college to further his education, has a growing foundation of positive values, and recognizes the futility of violence as a choice. “I ought to kill you” he says to Marcus toward the end of the film, “but I can’t.”

By the end of the film Newt moves a fair distance along the continuum of emergence into ascent. His visibility is heightened when he takes the stand in the trial that frees an innocent white man and sends a guilty black man to his death. With the last shot, in his refusal of a ride from Sheriff Kirky, Newt actualizes his independence and his move away from violence as a viable option.

*Shaft* (1971) provides the most difficult challenge to Parks’ tendency toward bildungsromans. All his protagonists, save Shaft, could fit into the bildungsroman genre of self-education. The detective, action genre did not lend itself easily

to such a progressive narrative; consequently, we come upon John Shaft already, to some degree, in a state of ascendance. He is fiercely independent, insurgently visible, and clear about who he is. Violence is not necessarily his weapon of choice, but he has the ability to face it and triumphantly return it to its source. At the same time, however, movement, even along the ascendance continuum, is minimal. Of all these protagonists, Shaft travels the least distance, perhaps because we know the least about this character's past, and thus cannot map his path.

In *Leadbelly* we observe Huddie Ledbetter's precarious relationship to violence, his relative lack of self-awareness, his blindness to his own humanity, and his relative lack of direction. However, as *Leadbelly* travels through the experiences of prison and performance, his sense of direction, his sense of self, his attitude toward violence all shift to allow him to move into emergence as he chooses art as his weapon of choice.

*Solomon Northup's Odyssey* (1984) was the last film Parks made and happens to be the one that best demonstrates the full range of characteristics in the journey through the

tripartite passage toward full agency. At the film's opening we experience the invisibility trait through his naiveté regarding slavery and lack of awareness of his own relation to the institution of slavery. His relationship to violence is fiercely precarious and out of his ability to direct. Before his confinement he thought he knew where he was heading, and had his family and skills as an artist and artisan to keep him moving forward. After his kidnapping he was thrust deeply into invisibility with the loss of his name and of his humanity to a system where he "cannot believe" what he was seeing.

Despite a system designed to keep blacks in a state of dehumanization, Solomon is able over his twelve years of captivity to carve out a space of agency within the system, through his art, his craft, his values, and his openness to relationships. Solomon, although confined and constantly battered down, is able to emerge with his humanity. This quiet triumph is illustrated when he tells the carpenter Bass his real name. Although legally freed at the end of the film, Solomon has learned that freedom is not simply about the law and legal papers. He knows freedom comes from another place. Solomon's move into heightened visibility occurs beyond the

frame of the film when we are told that he wrote a narrative about his experiences. But then, to further demonstrate the cyclic nature of my schema, Solomon returns to the invisibility of lost history after the publication of his narrative. We know nothing of his life afterward, not even enough to infer what kind of life he might have led. We can only be assured that he would “make out, but I’ll never be my old self again.”

Unlike *Shaft*, in which Gordon Parks presents the audience with a man at the height of ascendance, in *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey* (1984), Gordon Parks narrates the full cycle of *invisibility*, *emergence*, and *ascendance* to provide a culminating representation of black critical consciousness. The film’s subject, Solomon Northup, author of the slave narrative, *Twelve Years A Slave* (1853), becomes Parks’ model of the values and ideas necessary to black critical consciousness, and through Northup’s autobiographical narrative, Parks conveys those values and ideas to his audience. Through each scene, Parks guides viewers toward what Lisa Bloom describes as “a more embodied subjective viewing process that takes into

account questions of difference, sexuality, and power.”<sup>3</sup> The director’s aim is to demonstrate the power, ultimately, of *shared agency* in Northup’s life, while also—through his cinematic vision—sharing agency with his audience. As in *The Learning Tree*, family returns as a source of strength. Other critical motifs include freedom through mobility, giving back to the community, independence of thought, self-empowerment, and creative expression. All are infused into this story of a free black man kidnapped into the restriction and violence of slavery.

*Solomon Northup’s Odyssey* is Parks’ only feature film for television, which perhaps accounts for the lack of critical discussion about this film, since until recently television features have not been given as much scholarly attention as theatrical films. For their American Playhouse series PBS approached Parks to direct a story about Solomon Northup, a free born black fiddler and carpenter, living in Saratoga

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<sup>3</sup>Lisa Bloom, *With Other Eyes, : Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 3.

Springs, New York with a wife and three children when he is kidnapped by slave traders in 1841. Parks thought the project too important not to do. It was the mid-1980s, the era of Ronald Reagan. Voices within American culture were beginning to reconsider the importance of difference. Cultural critics were changing their ideas about diversity; in some circles, the "melting pot" was out, and "multiculturalism" was in, an ideology that acknowledged the uniqueness and integrity of cultures that happened to live alongside one another. The eruption of black films of the early 1970s had been dormant for nearly a decade, yet, despite these conditions, Parks brought a consciousness and ethic that spoke across several African American historical moments: abolitionism, the New Negro movement, the Negro Renaissance, Civil Rights, and Black Power.

Samm-Art Williams and Lou Potter based their script on Solomon Northup's narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*. It became a best seller and helped serve "as an influential tool for



abolitionists in their crusade against slavery.”<sup>4</sup> After the point when his narrative was published, very little is known about Northup. The script was closely patterned after the book; however, due to limitations imposed by time constraints and PBS executives, who wanted to mute the original work’s confrontational narrative, Parks had to gloss over aspects of the story, since, unlike his previous film projects, Parks had overseers on the project.:

I tried to remain fair in my reporting and not go overboard, although it’s very difficult not to when you know so much happened, that so much happened that was so bad to so many people. But there were things I had to change.... There were at least five historical advisers advising American Playhouse, and one of them stayed on the set all the time. They were always there, breathing over your shoulder. I was asked in certain areas to keep it toned down. I would say, ‘But these things happened.’ But the thing is to try to get it done and get it out. I can’t say I don’t like the film; I think it’s a powerful film, but it could have been stronger.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>John Corry, “Solomon Northup’s Odyssey; Story of a Slave,” *New York Times*, February 13, 1985.

<sup>5</sup>Leslie Bennetts, “TV Film by Parks Looks at Slavery,” *New York Times*, February 11, 1985.

Nevertheless, Parks' aims and treatment of *Solomon Northup's Odyssey* are consistent with his prior films.

In this chapter, I examine Parks' aims in three phases of this film: First, I consider the opening scenes as the establishment of Solomon as a human being traumatized by the sudden violence of slavery and called to a critical black consciousness. Second, I demonstrate Parks' development of Solomon's identity in terms of his relationship with two characters (Noah, an elderly black man who has been released from his labor as a slave; and Jenny, a young black woman whom Solomon loves), and in terms of Solomon's possession of a creative mind. Third, I explore how the resolution of Solomon's enslavement connects this film with other works by Parks as they express the fluid and dynamic relationships among invisibility, emergence, and ascendance. Again, there is little critical discussion available concerning this film, so I will couch this chapter's analysis in visual culture analysis and a close reading of important scenes.

## **A Season in Hell**

Parks begins by introducing his audience to a protagonist whose life is an expression of a human being engaged in the ordinary and universal struggles of his family life and relationship with community. We are introduced to Solomon's artistic talent with the fiddle, his skill as a carpenter, his commitment to family, and his naiveté and lack of perception of his true situation as a black man in America. "I'm a free man and I plan to stay that way," he says when two white men suggest that he go with them to Washington, D.C. "Nobody can bother you down there. We'll look out for you." He is flattered by these two men who want to take him to Washington, D.C., to play his fiddle. He allows himself to trust them and feels secure that his freedom papers and these gentlemen would guarantee his safety. Solomon agrees to take this trip to Washington while his wife is gone for a few weeks. In the carriage they offer Solomon a toast and, unbeknownst to him, this begins his twelve year long season in hell.

Solomon awakens to discover that he is in chains. He struggles in a bewildered rage and a fellow captive tells him it is useless to try to escape. "It won't do you no good," the

prisoner says. Solomon is beaten severely several times when he refuses to call his captor, Birch, “Master.” He struggles and cries out that he is a free man. In his innocence he is unaware that his “guilt” is being a black man in America at this time, a nation with a system of chattel slavery.

Solomon is introduced to the conditional nature of freedom, the reality that papers, or laws, are insufficient to guarantee freedom, that they can also be used to constrain and enslave. Parks is depicting on screen a conditional aspect of being a black man in America, the inevitable encounter with racialized violence. It may come in the form of real chains as in *Solomon Northup* and *Leadbelly*; of living in a community where a trigger happy sheriff could shoot you in the back over a crap game without remorse or consequence, as in *The Learning Tree*; or it may come in the form of watching police dogs attack innocent and peaceful black demonstrators in Alabama or looking at the battered face of a black boy who was lynched for speaking to a white girl in Mississippi. During Northup’s era, violent representations of blackness were often founded on “typological systems” that pretended to use scientifically objective methods to demonstrate the supposed inferiority of

blacks to whites. Louis Agassiz's slave daguerreotypes were among these representations (Wallis, 2003).

Solomon Northup is thrust into a voyage of emasculating invisibility, his freedom snatched from him, and he loses his family, his ability to move, and his name (he is given the name Plat). Solomon disappears into the invisible underground of chattel slavery, forced to "assume the position" that black men have historically been assigned in slavery. His humanity as a black man is invisible to his captors; his existence becomes invisible to his family.

Family is crucial to Solomon Northup. On the voyage to New Orleans from Washington there is a moment when Solomon gazes at the sea. After a close-up of his face, the screen fills up with the sea and we participate in Solomon's gaze as he remembers his family, his wife, Ann, and his children. We see him with Ann and his children at a picnic. Everyone is having a good time. We already know, however, from an earlier scene, that their family life was not free of struggle. Ann and Solomon had some tension regarding her going to work at Sandhill, a nearby village. Solomon said he

disapproved. He did not want her to be away for several weeks cleaning up for others.

“No, straight out no,” he says. “I’m not going to have you work in somebody else’s kitchen. I won’t have it.” Solomon is standing while Ann remains seated.

In the bedroom later, he says, “I don’t want our children behind a plow for the rest of our lives.”

Ann: “I won’t do anything to hurt your pride.”

Solomon: “If you want to go to Sandhill I think it’s all right.”

Ann: “So I’ll do it.”

They laugh. “You sure know how to handle me don’t you.” he says.

Solomon’s capture and forced relocation to Louisiana, his loss of human standing, and his craving for a return home force Solomon to develop a critical sense of his current status as slave and the tenuous nature of his former status as a free black man. By the time Solomon arrives at the Louisiana plantation, he has gained a new and inescapable awareness of his vulnerability—the social meaning of his black man’s body.

### **Consciousness Forged Through Trials**

Now Solomon finds himself being forcibly handled by others, a state which produces unmitigated pain until Solomon learns strategies for preserving an internal sense of integrity and dignity.

The scenes that compose the majority of the film develop the nuanced character of Solomon's new consciousness in relation to three major forces: Noah's mentorship, Jenny's affection, and Solomon's own creative mind. He is placed in a situation requiring him to find a means of handling himself in new ways.

Secondary characters often play a critical role in Parks' films, such as *Leadbelly* (in which his first patron is a madam who defines the blues for him), or *The Learning Tree* (in which Marcus serves to demonstrate the alternative path Newt might have chosen), or *Shaft* (in which the white police detective affirms John Shaft's authenticity as a powerful man). In *Solomon*, one in particular, Noah, stands out. He is a source of wisdom, but after three failed escapes he has trouble believing in his becoming free. We first see Noah as he walks leisurely across the grounds. The camera is placed inside the window of the cabin Solomon occupies. Noah moves into view across this pastoral frame where we see workers behind him, a green pasture framed like a still shot. Noah is smoking his pipe. The camera pans to the left and we come upon Solomon's back and then see Solomon meet Noah as Noah comes back into the scene. We learn that Noah is "retired" and has been given a

brier patch on Master Ford's property. We look at these two men; there is immediate rapport between them but two different experiences and understandings of freedom. Noah has been able to carve a bit of autonomy and freedom within this window frame of oppression. Solomon, however, knows this is not freedom and that there are wider opportunities of choices beyond this confine. "Settle in boy. Master Ford ain't that bad. Accept it," he tells Solomon. Noah creates *freedom* within the system.

Though Solomon's memory of home causes him to distance himself from Noah's full resignation to a permanent loss of freedom, Solomon learns from Noah that enslavement involves more than acknowledgement of one's institutional cage. Noah teaches Solomon that men must be examples to other men, whether enslaved or free, and that Solomon has responsibilities to his peers, even when he is locked in struggle with them. Invisibility, as I suggest in my schema, is a state characterized by a reactionary relationship to violence. Depending upon the nature of the violence that confronts us, we might react by submission, by suppression, or by sublimation. The latter describes Solomon's response to his



fellow enslaved, Jacob, when he smashes a bed that Solomon had taken two months to build. Jacob resents Solomon because he feels Solomon thinks he is better than the others. He smashes Solomon's bed to put him at the same level with him and the other slaves. Solomon knocks Jacob down and they fight on the ground, with Solomon quickly emerging the victor.

Solomon: "If you don't want to talk to me that's your business. If you want to hate me that's your business."

Noah comes over and tells Solomon he's disappointed in him after the fight with Jacob.

Noah: "Jacob needs talking to. Teach them what ya know. White folks never know what I'm thinking. Be smart."

What Solomon knows is freedom. The others know of it and seek to have it, but Solomon, we are led to believe, may be the only one who has actually experienced freedom, actually lived it. By his example, he can teach them what it means to have choices and avoid the trap of dehumanization that is part of the system of slavery. Solomon repeatedly hears the disempowering advice that he should not try to escape. This message comes from Jenny, another captive on the ship to New

Orleans. Jenny has already been sold three times since she was twelve years old. She no longer believes in the possibility of being free; her goal is survive. Solomon tries to tell Jenny that she doesn't have to accept her condition: "You don't have to accept, you've got a choice." What Solomon knows is the freedom that comes with having choices. As Solomon learns from Noah that dignity is largely a state of consciousness about one's relationship to violent persons and institutions, he learns from Jenny that his humanity is nurtured in the context of affection. Solomon's prior status as husband, as well as Jenny's status as victim of their white owner's sexual demands, complicate their relationship. As a husband forcibly separated from his wife, Solomon's bond with Jenny is founded on grief. As Epps' victim, Jenny's access to agency is even more restricted than is Solomon's.

Parks visually links Solomon and Jenny at Ford's with his own life in Kansas, a "free" state that operated under a segregated system. This link is made through a scene in which Jenny is lying down on the ground, a shot very much like Parks' "June Bug" still shot of a young boy lying face up in the grass, holding a string tied to a June bug's leg while it creeps

up his forehead. The image of the boy is almost stately in the way it is composed, with the boy's calm profile making a strong horizontal, and his raised hand lifting one's eye slightly upward, so we follow the string back to the profile and find the gentle humor of the insect he's converted into a toy. Parks turns a very tender eye to his subject in images like this one, and the same tenderness shows in the scene in *Northup* one day as Solomon is walking across the first plantation.

As the scene opens, the frame encloses the young woman, lying back in the grass, eyes closed, a meadow and maybe some trees at the horizon. For that moment, Parks sets up a photographic still within his film. *Northup* begins striding across the meadow in the middle distance. She calls out to him that she is lonely, as she knows he is, and he approaches. Parks seems to be seeking to build a heightened sense of Jenny's and Solomon's embodied humanity in this scene, to communicate the extraordinary circumstances under which Solomon finally acquiesces to the relationship. Parks' direction has Solomon then drop so that his profile is directly above the young woman's. They pause, and the double-figures in the frame create an image that is in direct conversation with the

previous image with the young woman's single profile. Parks pictorially replaces her lonesomeness with communion. The lighting and color in the scene are arranged for visual unity, to make the two figures visually pleasing and to reveal them in their highly specific and human detail—there's a gesture just then when Solomon makes a light touch down her ribcage, and her shirt just starts to open, representing for Parks that correspondence between the erotic and human agency.

While Solomon's relationships with Jenny and Noah are important opportunities for developing Solomon's consciousness, his creative mind is a constant throughout the story, the foundation upon which his emerging agency as a fully conscious being is built. Solomon's creativity is expressed in his inventiveness as a worker and his talent as a musician.

Throughout his captivity, Solomon attempts to emerge out of conditional invisibility. In one instance, he tells Ford how floating logs down river would save time. They can do it with rafts. Solomon will build them. It is an opportunity to exercise his craft, and to communicate, to Ford himself and others, that he is a human being and has a contribution to make to society. Ford is grateful, almost giddy about this accomplishment, but

shortly thereafter he hires Solomon out to Tibeats, an uneducated but propertied white neighbor. Tibeats resents Solomon's humanity, his intelligence, his strength, his imagination. He, I suspect, feels Solomon is better than him and that is a source of intense resentment. He attempts to horsewhip Solomon. Solomon gets the whip from Tibeats, hits him a couple of times, realizes what he's done, and flees into the woods trying to escape into a self-inflicted and safe invisibility. He runs into Noah who is able to convince him that he should return to Ford's. Here we have an example of how Solomon's visibility as a powerful human being thrusts him into a risky position, and his failure to remain in submission forces him to seek invisibility through escape—which brings with it the kind of notoriety, ironically, that could actually get him killed. Ford cannot afford to keep Solomon, nor can he continue to protect him; so he sells him to Epps, an up and coming plantation owner to whom he had already sold several slaves, including Jenny.

At various moments throughout his captivity Solomon is able to play the fiddle. Through his art, Solomon is able to keep his spirits up, to physically hold on to the memory of his free

days, when he could play without constraint. Music is its own master and those who are its captives remain free. At moments this link to freedom and ascent is taken away from Solomon. One particularly emasculating scene occurs when Solomon is playing his fiddle for Jenny. Jenny had been sold to Epps before Solomon. Epps wants Jenny for himself. He is resentful of Jenny's lingering affection for Solomon. Solomon and Jenny are sitting on a log by a fire as he plays softly. Epps comes into the scene and sits between them. Epps tells Solomon he doesn't like how he talks. Epps: "You know I don't like your way of pronouncing words. You got an uppity way of speaking and I want you to do something about it, you hear." Solomon: "Yassa, Massa." The confrontation establishes a relationship between Solomon's musicality and his sexuality when Epps attempts to crush both simultaneously with the material and symbolic act of stripping Solomon of his voice and instrument when he destroys his fiddle. Epps aims to crush Solomon's Self, implicitly understanding that Solomon's sense of himself as a man is fundamental to his eventual emancipation, and Epps' unconscious but cultural indoctrination that *his* manhood is built upon the emasculation of black men.

## **Free Mind to Free Man**

Throughout Solomon's trials, Parks develops a nuanced picture of how critical consciousness develops and prepares his audience for the ultimate act of agency: Solomon's eventual writing and publication of his story as an argument for abolition. The remaining events of the film, from Solomon's acquaintance with a visiting abolitionist sympathizer to his liberation from the plantation, show Solomon to be a man governed by discipline, intelligence, and compassion.

Solomon meets the man who would eventually facilitate Solomon's ascent back to freedom. Bass is a jovial carpenter from the North whom Epps has hired for a special project. The Bass scene opens with a shot looking up at Epps house; it closes with the same shot and Epps and Bass saying goodbye with Bass obliquely referring to Epps not being pleased with him in two months.

On the porch, Solomon is trimming the bushes below while four men, including Bass, are talking. Bass asks Solomon if he would "have" slaves, given the opportunity, and Solomon says no. Solomon refuses to define himself by exerting power over others. During Bass's "joking" and address to

Solomon, the camera keeps the point of view on Solomon, with a close up shot when the camera faces Solomon; the point of view is from below upward when the camera faces Bass. Bass, an abolitionist, shares Solomon's values. When he learns that Solomon is a carpenter, Bass rises to his feet, stretches out his hands to shake Solomon's hand and says "fellow builder." Solomon must come up a couple of stairs to reach Bass's outstretched hand. They exchange looks of quiet respect.

They work side by side for several weeks. As Savage contends, often representations of abolitionists have cast them as rescuers of passive victims. For instance, Savage describes a Randolph Rogers sculpture from 1866, in which Lincoln is shown raising a kneeling black woman by her wrist—a gesture typical of assisting a child"<sup>6</sup>. In the relationship between Solomon and Bass, Parks maintains their equality through the use of mutually respectful dialogue, shots that visually frame the two men as equals, and a narrative sequence that demonstrates their shared trust.

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<sup>6</sup>Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves*, 77.



Shortly before Bass is to leave, Solomon, who has been living as Plat ever since New Orleans, lifts the veil and reveals himself to Bass, telling Bass his real name. Solomon asks Bass to take a letter out to his family to tell them where he is. The day Bass is to leave he presents Solomon with a new fiddle made of fine wood. He had heard that Epps had destroyed Solomon's.

Northup resists the notion that there is no chance of escape and that he should accept his condition. The memory of freedom is too strong for Solomon to give into resignation. Although he learns to "last and survive" he continues to seek opportunities to regain his freedom. At the time Henry Northup, the white man Solomon was raised with, arrives with papers to free Solomon, he is overseeing the cotton fields. Although Epps is resistant to Solomon leaving he has no recourse to go against the law. As he leaves, Solomon says goodbye to Noah. "You made it out." Noah says. "These folks in your hands now. You tell somebody about us. You tell them to send help. Don't you let me down now, boy." Solomon responds, "I promise you. As long as I'm alive." In the carriage as they are nearly home, Henry says, "Well, you survived,

Solomon.” “Yes,” Solomon replies, “That’s what it’s all about--- lasting and surviving.” Henry adds, “You should consider writing your story.” “That is a fine idea,” Solomon says. Much like W.E.B. DuBois, who wrote at the opening of the Twentieth Century that his autobiography was meant to do more than merely record an individual’s life, Solomon Northup went on to tell of his experiences. Northup hoped to raise consciousness among whites and to give voice to blacks who faced slavery. In much the same way, Parks told his own life story in an effort to raise consciousness. With *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey*, Parks extended his devotion to the idea that telling stories—narrating the lived experiences of black men—is a liberating form of social action.

### **Solomon’s Wisdom: Parks’ Vision**

As we step back from the events of the film to examine *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey* in the context of Parks’ oeuvre, it becomes clear that this film represents a zenith of sorts. While Solomon’s moment in history placed restrictive boundaries on his political agency, his sudden loss of freedom and long struggle to regain it establish Solomon’s internal agency as

substantial and empowering. Ascendancy is characterized in part by an ability to direct one's life, to fashion a life in accord with one's desires. It may be characterized by heightened visibility, a relationship to violence that is free of oppression and reactionary suppression, an ability to meet violence on equal terms, but also an ability to refrain from violence, a recognition that it should be choice of last resort. Ascendancy is also characterized by an elevated spirit, by an ability to express oneself fully. Solomon, too, will emerge into ascendancy, off screen, with the publication of his narrative, *Twelve Years A Slave*. He keeps his promise to Noah and tries to tell the world what is happening.

I have also noted, however, that this movement of invisibility, emergence and ascendancy is not static, not made up of a set of fixed stages into which one moves and then remains. They are fluid, mobile, recursive. Solomon travels through the arc and then, after the publication of his best selling narrative, falls into invisibility again.

Solomon Northup spends twelve years surviving in an environment for which his educational background and temperament have not prepared him. He is subjected to

physical and psychological violence. But he learns to use his inherent strengths to outlast his twelve year ordeal and survive to emerge back into freedom. He relies on his intellect, his cunning, and his masking to survive and bide his time. To maintain his dignity and sense of himself as a free man he has to avoid revealing too much of himself to his white masters; he has to remain strategically invisible to survive. In this sense, the film explicates the dual nature of invisibility for black men, both as a perverse denial by whites of black men's humanity, and as a refuge for survival. Gordon Parks' *Solomon Northup* illustrates one pillar of Parks' blueprint for black manhood. First, one must endure and survive; but those who survive have a responsibility to tell not only their story but also the stories of others who are trying to survive. Stories have ascendant power and, through their telling, liberation is made possible.

Parks' works suggest that regardless of differences, real or imagined, we are all human beings, endowed with gifts and opportunities that should be fully encouraged. Given Parks' ultimate optimism it seems ironic that contemporary discourse on black men is engaged in the debate of whether they are an

endangered species. Regardless of where one might fall on the continuum of this debate, it is certainly still a risky proposition to be a black male in this nation. Parks experienced some of these risks personally, and he has his subjects experience many of them. And it's how he presents these black men on screen and the lessons they provide that gives power to Parks' legacy.

Part of the appeal of Parks is that, despite his focus on black male subjects, his lessons have universal appeal; they are not strategies exclusive to one group. All of his films reveal the oppression and futility of violence, and the importance of art to combat this assault. We can learn about ourselves in these portraits, in how rage and self-negation serve to destroy agency. Parks' innovation was to locate these very universal themes in black lives, making these themes black while also asserting the humanity of black people, men especially. This panoramic view of Parks' life's work recalls those protest signs in Memphis in 1968: "I AM A Man."

While Parks' exploration of black masculinity may not be inexhaustible in its complexity, there are multiple new directions for investigating his work. Further research could

focus on how Parks' women characters support the men in their quest for agency, as well as on how these women struggle toward and even embody empowered subject positions. A critical study of his photography as well as a full-length biography would add greatly to our understanding of Parks' work. As the twenty-first century attempts to emerge out of its constraining views of race, gender, and social equality, we will find among our necessary resources the voice and vision of this American artist, Gordon Parks.

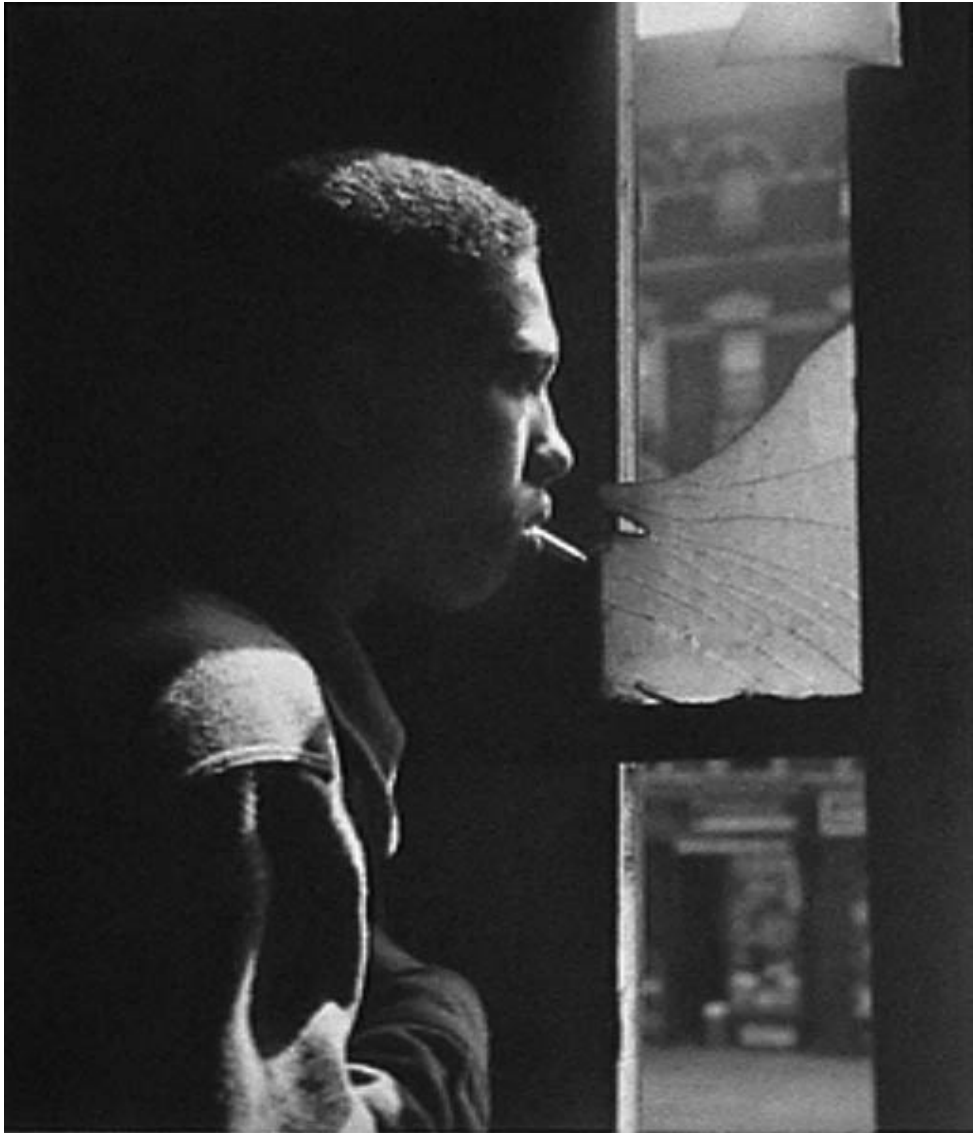
## Illustrations

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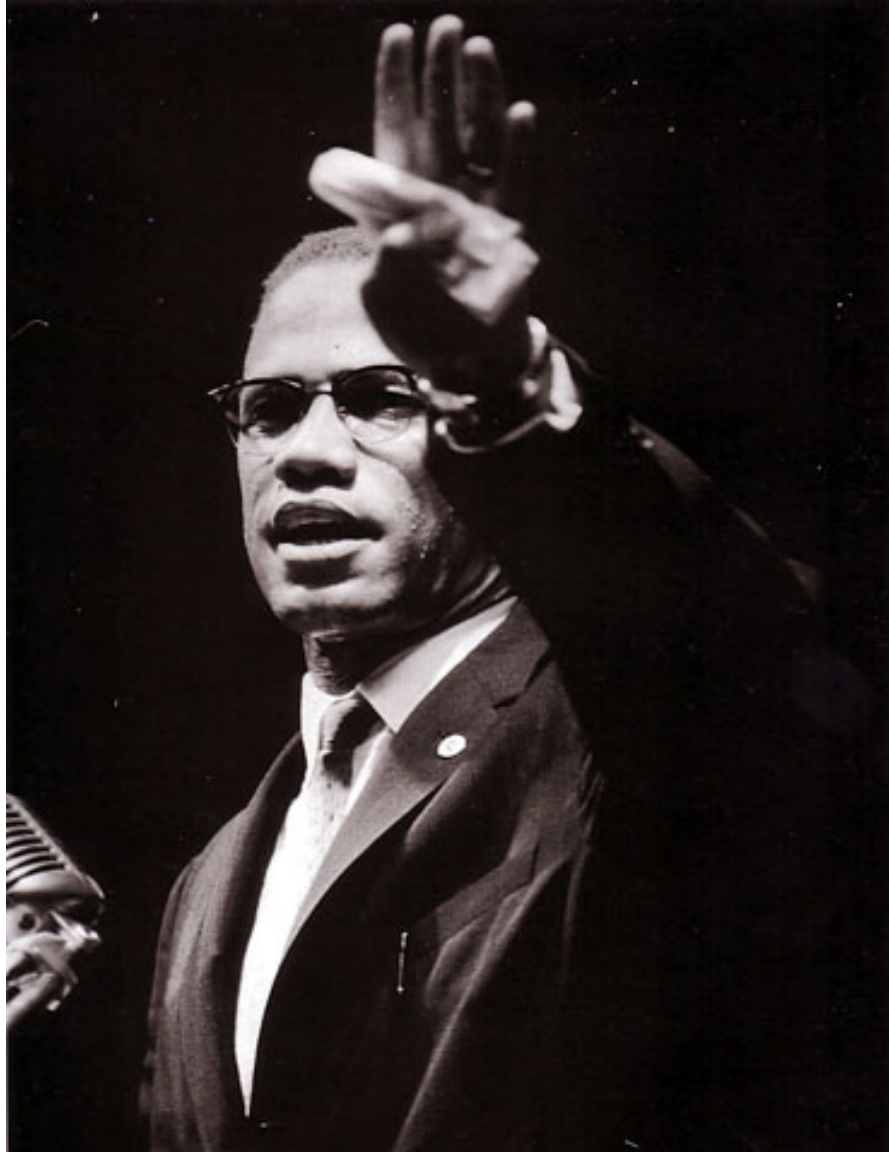


**Figure 1. American Gothic. Gordon Parks, photographer (1942).**





**Figure 2. Red Jackson. Gordon Parks, photographer (1948).**



**Figure 3. *Malcolm X*. Gordon Parks, photographer (1963).**



**Figure 4. *Emerging Man*. Gordon Parks, photographer (1952).**

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