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NAMING MOMENTS PROPERLY

Gordon Parks (1912–) is one of the most provocative and celebrated photojournalists in the United States. His gripping images of such celebrities as Duke Ellington, Gloria Vanderbilt, Muhammad Ali, Ingrid Bergman, and Malcom X helped to make these famous people into enduring elements of American iconography. An icon in his own right, he is perhaps best known as the pioneering director of the 1970s blockbuster *Shaft*, and his overriding legacy is probably *Essence* magazine, which he helped launch during the turbulent Black Power movement. The subjects of some of his most moving and poignant images, however, were everyday, hard-working “people without history” who would have been erased from the historical record had he not artfully and thoughtfully crafted their images on gelatin silver prints. He first shot these subjects for the Farm Security Administration during the 1940s, and Parks often wrote “crafty” and pointed editorial commentary that he appended to these photographs as rather lengthy captions or titles for his work. In Parks’ own words, he was trying to document “moments without proper names” (Parks 1975:128).

Gordon Parks was born in Kansas in 1912, the youngest of fifteen children. Parks’ terminally ill mother arranged for him to stay with his oldest sister in Minneapolis when he was 15 years old (Moskowitz 2003:102). Talented on many fronts but desperately poor, Parks worked hard to support himself by doing everything from playing the piano to playing basketball. At the age of 25 he began to seriously consider photography as a career and talked his way into photographing models for Frank Murphy’s, a fashionable women’s boutique in St. Paul. He was “discovered” by none other than Marva Louis—wife of the famous boxer Joe Louis—who convinced him to move to Chicago to hone his craft and make more money.

It was in Chicago where he became part of the legendary South Side Community Arts Center, which birthed the so-called Chicago Renaissance during the 1940s. Rivaling in historic import Harlem in the 1920s, it was an important period when luminary artists and scholars such as Katherine Dunham, St. Clair Drake,

Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Catlett, Richard Wright, and Nat King Cole flourished amid one another’s creative genius. Parks’ artistic expression was quickly recognized, and the Julius Rosenwald Foundation awarded him one of their prestigious fellowships. As a Rosenwald Fellow, Parks joined the ranks of some of the twentieth century’s most influential artists and intellectuals: Marian Anderson, Augusta Savage, Katherine Dunham, James Baldwin, John Hope Franklin, Jacob Lawrence, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ralph Bunche. By 1942, he was working closely with Roy Stryker, who headed the historical section of the Farm Security Administration. He joined Stryker’s impressive team of photographers who captured thousands of stunning images of everyday life during the Depression and the early years of World War II (Norton Museum of Art 1999).

The image on the cover of *Transforming Anthropology* was shot during one of his first assignments for the FSA, and it has endured as one of his signature images. Purposefully posed as an ironic counterpart to Grant Wood’s famous *American Gothic*, it is part of a touching photo essay that documented the textured and taxing life of Ella Watson, a government charwoman (housekeeper). According to Gordon Parks,

In one of the government’s most sacred strongholds, I set up my camera for my first professional photograph. On the wall was a huge American flag hanging from the ceiling to the floor. I asked her to stand before it, placed the mop in one hand, a broom in the other, then instructed her to look into the lens. After placing her photograph on Stryker’s desk two days later, I nervously awaited the verdict. He looked at it and shook his head. “Well, you’re catching on, but that picture could get us all fired.” Washington now had a black charwoman, standing erectly with mop and broom before the American flag. Her title: *American Gothic*. (Parks 1997:32)

Available online through the American Memory project of the Library of Congress, his photos of Ella Watson serve to document the socially rich and economically poor life of a working-class Black woman in the nation’s capital. He photographed Ms. Watson at church and with her grandchildren and adopted daughter. He included pictures of her neighbors and friends, and numerous stills of her small but immaculate apartment. He punctuated his images with pithy captions that

Comments about the cover of Volume 13(1): “Ella Watson,” Gordon Parks, photographer, 1942, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, FSA-OWI Collection [reproduction number LC-USF34-013407-C]

emphasized the long hours she worked and the insidious exploitation she faced. For example, he chose to include specific details such as “charwoman cleaning after regular working hours” and documented what time she left for work and what time she returned home. In one photo, with a war bonds poster as the backdrop, he included this pointed caption: “Washington, D.C. Government charwoman who provides for a family of six on her salary of one thousand and eighty dollars per year. She puts ten percent of her salary in war bonds.” In the end, Parks documented the dignity, devotion, and indeed patriotism of Ms. Ella Watson, who contributed to the government’s efforts to fight for democracy abroad while it denied her of her civil rights at home.

After the historical section of the Farm Security Administration folded into the Office of War Information, Parks was asked to follow Stryker and document the 332nd Fighter Group, better known as the Tuskegee Airmen. Although he documented their initial training, the government refused to grant him clearance to follow them to Europe. He summarily quit working for the government. Parks’ career took off after that, and he freelanced for *Vogue* magazine and became one of the staff photographers for *Life* magazine, where he did spreads on gangs in Harlem, Black Muslims, Muhammad Ali, the Black Panther Party, and various celebrities. He wrote books, poetry, and a ballet; he scored music, wrote and directed films, and provided editorial leadership for *Essence*. Amazingly, the nonagenarian continues to produce evocative prose and moving images.

With all of his successes, however, he never lost the desire to document moments without proper names and everyday people in their struggle to scratch out some dignity and respect for their lives, circumscribed by desperate poverty and virulent racism. For example, in 1956 he documented the impact segregation had on three generations for “Willy Causey and Family, Shady Grove, Alabama”; in 1961 he photographed “Flavio,” which was the moving story of a young boy and his family in the slums of Rio de Janeiro; and in 1967 he produced “The Fontelle Family,” a personal essay documenting the social drama and struggles of a family of ten in their fourth-floor walk-up during a cold winter in Harlem (Norton Museum 1999; Parks 1971:113–131; 1978).

In this volume, Susie McFadden-Resper and Brett Williams write on “Washington’s ‘People without History,’” so I thought it would be fitting to have Gordon Parks’ “Ella Watson” grace our cover. Gordon Parks documented Ms. Watson’s life, dignity, and life’s labor and made her an indelible part of American history. By naming moments properly, Parks captured moments when regular folks made their own history,

rendering otherwise invisible people visible and vivid historical agents.

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