Reflection on Gordon Parks: A Choice of Weapons

Ken Ries

M.A. Education: Educational Leadership

ED507 Diversity in Education, Professor Kasya Whillhite

Concordia University, St. Paul
Reflection on Gordon Parks: A Choice of Weapons

As an amateur photographer and a long-time resident of the Minneapolis St Paul area, I chose this book to explore not only issues of race, but issues of local history as well as the story of a photographer’s journey. I have structured this paper in the format of a book report summarizing the general theme of the story and highlighting some of the issues related to race, culture, socio-economic status and other topics related to the material we have discussed in class.

In his autobiography, Gordon Parks details his early life beginning with the death of his mother when he was a mere 15 years old. Parks detailed his early years as being full of love and religion. Although the family was very poor, Parks never longed for material things and was comforted by the love that “eased the burden of being black (2)”. While things were buffered by his home life, his early years were marred by prejudices and violence. Taunted by racial slurs, forced to sit in the Negro section at the theatre, and not allowed to drink a soda in the drug store, Parks began to accept the realities of his life as normal. While Parks suffered in this environment, he was secure and felt the power of his family. Racism existed, but it was outside of Parks’s inner circle of work and family. Death existed, but it was balanced by love and the caring of his mother. Matching Parks’s conditions to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs shows that his immediate needs were met. Parks felt safe, loved, and confident, and believed that he was on track for doing what he wanted to do.

Arriving in St. Paul, Parks took up residence with his sister and brother-in-law. Their relationship was contentious from the start. Parks described his brother-in-law as nearly white in color, big, and fierce looking. Parks related his brother-in-law to the whites who “pushed him to the edge of violence (8)”. He goes on to describe a fight with his brother-in-law just because he was lighter skinned. Throughout the book, Parks separates people by their shades of blackness.
Later, where Mice Titty was judged the lightest, Parks describes another situation where the shade of white became an issue of contention. Clearly color was the pivotal factor in Parks’s cultural identity. Poor was normal. Living on the street at 15 was a challenge but not a problem. Being black was the single factor that influenced everything; the one thing he couldn’t change, the single factor that created “one emotional crisis after another (8)”.

Soon after settling in St. Paul, Parks enrolled in Mechanics Arts High School. Not much later, a fight with his brother-in-law left him homeless. Riding the trolley between St. Paul and Minneapolis, Parks was tempted to rob the conductor of his roll of cash. Remembering the teaching of his mother, he backed down and ran from the scene. I wondered here how different everything would have been had he made the wrong decision, and how easy it would have been. The morals instilled through his mother served him well. Many times throughout this book, Parks is put into a situation where he has an easy opportunity to make the wrong decision, and, other than instances where displaced anger interfered, he made the right choice.

Parks highlights several incidents where displaced anger interfered with this ability to make good decisions. Examples include the argument with his brother-in-law, choosing a showdown with Miss Jenny, his loss control in a Bemidji restaurant, and his decision to collect pay at gunpoint from Big John. Parks makes it clear in each example that he understood his actions were inappropriate. As the reader progresses through Parks life, the frequencies of his outbursts diminish.

Things started looking up for Parks. His three older sisters, a brother, and his father came to live in St. Paul. He took a job at the Minnesota Club, and fell in love. Parks took his job at the Minnesota Club as a learning experience. Rather than feeling belittled or dejected, he read, observed, learned, and built connections. Unfortunately, Parks’s good fortune came to an end in
November of 1929. Laid off, unable to find work and lacking a support structure, Parks quit school. Sadly, this is still the case for many American students. Poverty, homelessness, chemical abuse, and other issues are still major barriers to school success. While Parks became a success, most people in his situation do not. The streets of Harlem, Chicago, and Minneapolis are filled with people who never had the opportunities that Parks did. While reading a book like this can give one hope, it doesn’t mean that everyone has the opportunities that Parks had. I still meet people who think welfare should be eliminated because “those folks should just go out, get a job, and take care of themselves”. It’s not that easy when the odds are stacked against you.

After hopping a freight train to Chicago, Parks found a room and a job cleaning in a flop house filled with the derelicts of the city. Living in squalor among poor, alcohol-addicted white men, Parks learned that “degradation was no respecter of color (69)”. It was here that Parks injected the issue of homosexuality into the anthology of issues he faced. Being black was a barrier that he was destined to live with. Other people had their own barriers. Things are complicated. Parks realized that everything bad that happened wasn’t simply because he was black. Poverty, sexual preferences, gender, language, ethnic heritage and other barriers exist. Although segregation is gone, the web of issues that Parks portrays hasn’t otherwise changed much.

After struggling with school again, Parks found a job as a bus boy at the Hotel St. Paul. Here he focused on his music and eventually met Larry Duncan, a band leader engaged by the hotel. Duncan recognized Parks’s talent and orchestrated several of his songs. Soon Parks found himself on the road as a member of the band. Infatuated with the idea of pursuing his musical career, Parks overlooked the band’s organizational problems.
The band was scheduled to make a big appearance in New York City when, unbeknownst to Parks, they broke up. Stranded at New York’s Park Central Hotel with nowhere to go and no money to get there, Parks rode the A train to 145th street - the heart of Harlem.

Life here was worse than anything he had experienced so far. Poverty and squalor filled the city. Police brutality ran rampant. Jobs were advertised for whites, nothing for blacks. Parks described how a “big heavy-fisted man had worked the crowd into a fever” shouting about helping to bury Mister Ofay. Parks had a difficult time understanding the rant. While Parks understood the brutalities of whites, he became scared when he found himself being caught up in the crowd. Parks clearly saw danger in crowd mentality and peer pressure. Parks’s dialog in this section indicates that he did not support fundamentalism and that each individual should be judged on their own merit. He highlighted this point by exploring anti-Semitism through a relationship with his tailor.

Unable to sell his songs or find work, Parks and his friend Bill set off to join the Civilian Conservation Corps. Bill turned out to be a natural leader and through the use of compassion, hard work, and integrity, he became a popular foreman. Parks used this story to demonstrate what being a leader meant. Leading isn’t about power, but rather respect springing from ethical behavior, hard work, and insight. While Parks didn’t consider himself a leader, he knew what one looked like. Many managers would be well served by reflecting on this chapter in Parks’s life.

While serving in the CCC, Parks befriended a young recruit wounded in a dynamite blast and bandaged from head to toe. Their conversations revolved around religion, family, and common experiences. It wasn’t until later that Parks learned that his friend was white. Both had assumed that they were of the same race. The description of this incident demonstrated Parks’s
core belief that everyone was the same and skin color was simply a tool leveraged by those who wished to divide and control.

The following year, Parks took a position as a photographer at the Southside Art Center in Chicago. Parks and Sally moved to a brownstone home in a neighborhood Parks described as an area in social limbo – a place where the whites were moving out and the blacks were moving in. Parks described the architecture as being influenced by the generations of immigrants: the Irish, Italians, Jews, and Poles that had proceeded. Here Parks suggested that the blacks were not the first group to suffer ethnic prejudice. While skin color created an obvious criterion for division, others also suffered injustice. Reflecting on Parks’s story makes it clear that things have improved dramatically. However, we still have a long way to go. Color still provides a criterion for division. Years and years of segregation still influence culture. Actions of the past influence actions of the future: for some they justify them.

The arrangement with the art center worked well. The demand for Parks’s work continued to grow. Soon he decided that he “wanted to strike at the evil of poverty” and he began documenting everything he saw. Parks applied for a Julius Rosenwald fellowship and arranged a show at the Art Center to feature his new work. The event was a success. Parks took special pleasure in the integration he experienced at his opening. In a deeply segregated city, Parks’s show made it possible for poor and wealthy, black and white to find and share common ground.

Parks’s ability to bring people together within the framework of shared experience outlasted his death in 2006. Kansas City and St. Paul are homes to schools named in Parks’s honor, Fort Scott Community College is home to the Gordon Parks Center for Cultural Diversity, the College of New Rochelle is home to the Gordon Parks Gallery and Cultural Arts Center,
Wichita State houses a collection of Parks personal papers, and museums around the world house pieces of his collection.

While reading this book will not make me a better technical photographer, it has broadened my viewfinder. The historical context of Parks’s autobiography helps the reader to understand the context of the struggles of the African Americans in the mid-20th century. Parks’s body of work makes this struggle personal. While the struggles of African Americans are unique, there is a common thread that can be applied wherever people interact.

I do fear that the uninformed reader will see Parks as a reason not to change his or her practices. After all, Gordon Parks beat the odds to become successful without, as some might state, a government handout or societal concern for the issues of class and race. This attitude misses the point. The land of opportunity isn’t just a place where people have chance to win the lottery; to beat the odds and get lucky. Rather, it is a place where everyone is valued for their contributions, their ideas, their time, and their talent. Whenever I reflect on diversity, it always comes back to integrity and respect. It’s okay to feel uncomfortable when you are in a situation that is outside of your normal environment. It’s how you react that makes a difference.
References