



Gordon Parks

BEAUTIFUL IMAGES OF AN UGLY HISTORY

By Andrew Dickson
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Gordon Parks documented deep, wounding issues that have long been a part of the US story. Andrew Dickson explores the work of a man who compared his camera to a weapon, yet shot his photos with the eye of a poet.

Were it not for the officer's old-fashioned uniform, you could be forgiven for thinking that the picture was taken at one of the protests that tore through the US after the death of George Floyd last summer. All it needs is a couple of face masks and we could be in the centre of New York or Minneapolis in the turbulent and agitated days of mid-2020.

In fact this image, captured by the photographer Gordon Parks, is nearly 60 years old. Entitled simply Harlem Rally, we know little more than that it was taken in this predominantly black New York neighbourhood some time in 1963, during one of the protests about civil rights that roiled the US that year, too.

In June 1963, George Wallace, the notorious

segregationist governor of Alabama, attempted to prevent black students registering at the state university, a stand-off that resulted in the National Guard being mobilised. In August, Martin Luther King gave his rhapsodic "I Have a Dream" speech in front of 250,000 people in Washington, DC. But the message about African Americans "living in a police state" still resonates now.



The photograph is one of more than 50 Parks images currently on show at Jack Shainman Gallery in New York – in fact two galleries, because the exhibition spans both Shainman locations in Chelsea. Entitled Half and the Whole – a title taken from an eloquent accompanying essay by the critic Jean Cocteau – it picks two contrasting sides to Parks's, one of the most significant black photographers of his era.

On West 20th Street, there are photographs drawn from his famous Harlem series Invisible

Man, a virtuosic reimagining of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, and another series depicting life in Alabama under Jim Crow a few years later. A few blocks north on West 20th Street, portraits of protest documenting the civil rights movement through the 1950s and 60s are on display. The thread that binds them is Parks's great subject: what it feels like to be both American and black, and what Cobb describes as the searing "void" between these two words.

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One of the earliest photographs to make Parks's name, American Gothic (1942), is included in the show. Taken when he was working for the FSA, it was inspired by Grant Wood's much-reproduced painting of the same title, which depicts a forbiddingly respectable white farmer and his daughter standing in front of their forbiddingly respectable white-painted Midwestern house.

Or clues as to why, she suggests, you only need look at Parks's life story. Born in the small rural town of Fort Scott, Kansas, he was the youngest of 15 children. The family were dirt-poor, and schools were segregated. Once, when he was 11, a gang of white boys hurled him into the local river, believing he couldn't swim. It seems he recovered when he resisted the town in 1963, capturing a boy's hand reaching eerily out of the water. Following his mother's death when he was 14, he was orphaned – like so many African Americans of his generation – to the north. In the bustling city of St Paul, Minnesota, Parks earned his first wage playing piano in a burlesque.

After taking a job as a railroad porter, he bought a camera in a pawnshop in 1937, inspired by photos by the great documentary photographer Dorothea Lange. Despite being entirely self-taught, within a few years he was working alongside many of the leading photographers of his era (including Lange) in the Farm Security Administration's photography section, documenting America's landscape and its people through a time of tumultuous change.

Commissions for Vogue, the black-focused magazine Ebony and Life magazine followed. Parks soon became the first African American photographer to be taken on as staff at Life, one of the biggest magazines of its day. In the 1970s, he turned his attention to movies, directing the pioneering Blaxploitation film Shaft. He also composed music and wrote indelictably, including poetry and several memoirs. His last poetry collection was published just months before his death in 2006.

"My father put himself in the middle of these things, but he would be off to the side, somehow.
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There was almost nothing her father couldn't do if he wanted, says Leslie Parks with a laugh: he had the kind of energy that burned up the room. "There was always this moving forward with him," she says. "No giving up or doubt."

Parks gave this icon of rural Americana a sardonic racial twist: his subject is a black cleaner, Ella Watson, shown holding a mop and broom and standing solemnly in front of the Stars and Stripes (the composition was artfully posed by Parks). The image seems trinkier than ever in the aftermath of the attack on the US Capitol in the dying days of Donald Trump's reign – where black cleaning staff

were left to clear up afterwards. "If that doesn't hit you, especially in the last couple of weeks," says Leslie Parks, "then I don't know what you're looking at."

Again and again in these images, Parks shows a fascination with hands – a preacher's lifted in benediction, hands in a crowd lifted in acclamation or joy, reaching for togetherness. Togetherness is arguably the theme of these civil rights photos, which are less outraged and more optimistic than we might expect. United we stand, they seem to say. Together we can achieve anything.

In another image there are two black boys, one brandishing what could be a real pistol and pretending to fire it, but alongside them is a white boy, a mop of blond hair grinning for the camera – apparently a friend. We see Willie Casey and his wife on their front porch, a well-tended garden behind them, the sea-green of Mrs. Casey's spotless apron matching precisely the colour of his rocking chair.

magazine picture-story format and the moulding of white editors. Having produced a thoughtful and surprisingly tender series on a black gang leader in Harlem in 1948, Parks was appalled when his editors at Life rejected nearly all the most intimate images in favour of sensational shots of street fights, shootings and the like, brutally cropping his frames for maximum scarring impact. ("Red Jackson's life is one of fear, frustration and violence," read the sub-heading). After kicking up a fuss, he was told his assignment would no longer make the magazine cover. Parks repeatedly compared his camera to a weapon. One

version of the line ran, "You have a 45mm automatic pistol on your lap, and I have a 35mm camera on my lap, and my weapon is just as powerful as yours". The image goes both ways: yes, he chose to pick up a camera instead of a firearm, choosing to document the situation rather than reach for violence, but cameras shoot too. Elsewhere, Parks expressed the thought eloquently: "I picked up a camera because it was my choice of weapon against what I hated most about the universe – racism, intolerance, poverty."

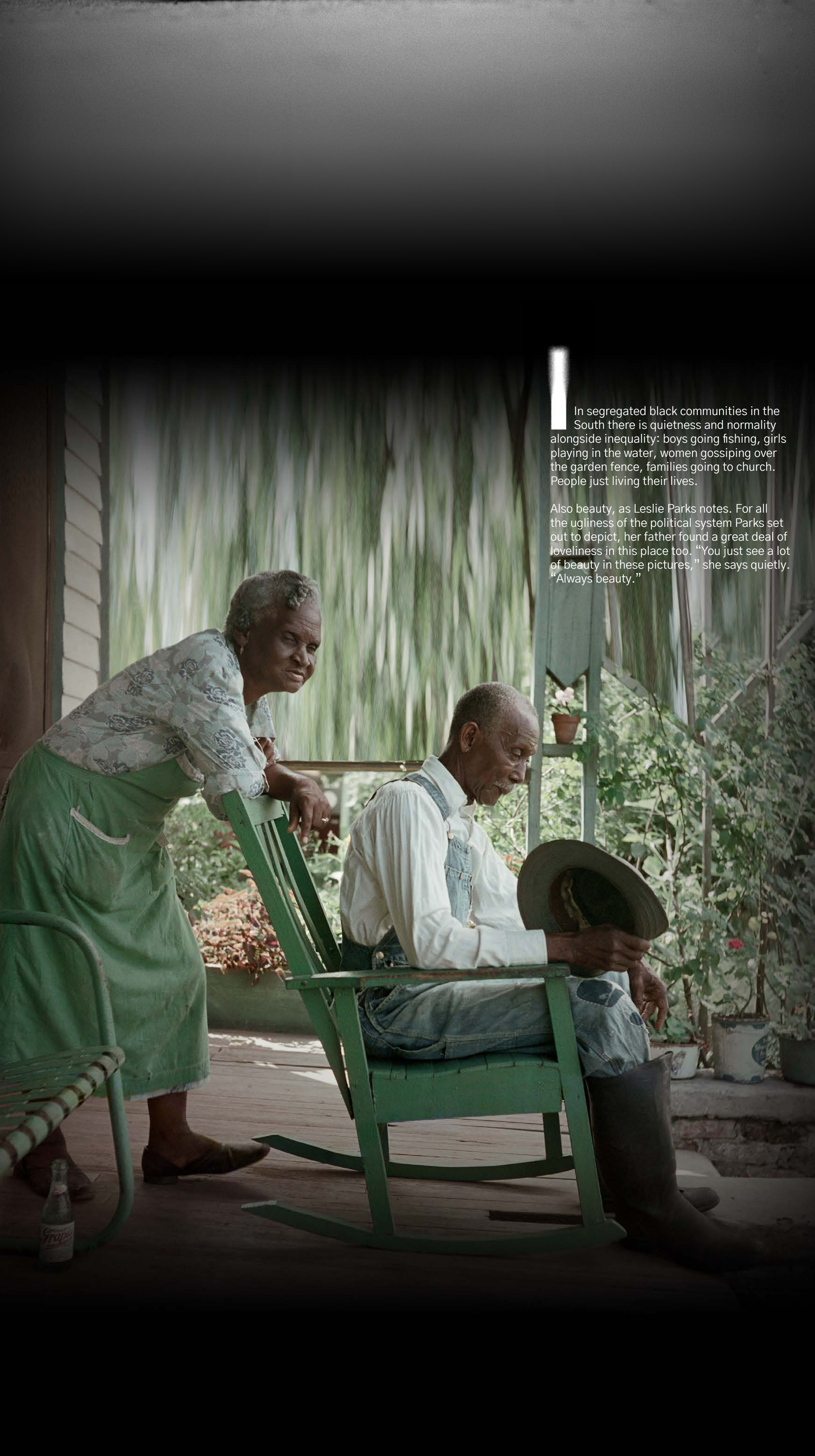
et the pictures that truly resonate, perhaps, are the



Younger ones, where he stepped away from outright activism and plowed his poet's eye to roam. Commissioned by Life to produce a series about racial tensions in the South in the aftermath of the 1955 "bus boycott" in Montgomery, Alabama – during which African Americans refused to travel on city buses in protest at segregated seating – he emerged with something quite different.

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There are hard existences here, undeniably, and you sense Parks's slow-burning anger at the federal government's policy of "separate but equal" fights for blacks and whites – a fraud everyone knew to be a fraud. Yet he also captures the ambiguity and complications of reality, genuine people rather than caricatures or headlines.



In segregated black communities in the South there is quietness and normality alongside inequality: boys going fishing, girls playing in the water, women gossiping over the garden fence, families going to church. People just living their lives.

Also beauty, as Leslie Parks notes. For all the ugliness of the political system Parks set out to depict, her father found a great deal of beauty in this place too. "You just see a lot of beauty in these pictures," she says quietly. "Always beauty."