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Gordon Parks: "Homeward to the Prairie I Come" Digital Exhibition Catalog


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"Homeward to the Prairie I Come"

Gordon Parks

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gelatin silver print, 18 x 12 1/4 in., Kansas State University, gift of Gordon Parks and the Gordon
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"Homeward to the Prairie I Come"

Gordon Parks

Edited by Aileen June Wang

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Foreword

Linda Duke and Karin Westman

Foreword

Linda Duke and Karin Westman

Gordon Parks put his artistic gifts in service to change. Throughout his career he remained focused on making American society more equitable and compassionate, more decent. When we asked art historian and exhibition curator Aileen Wang to summarize her sense of the artist's intentions in selecting the photographs that are the focus of the exhibition *Gordon Parks: "Homeward to the Prairie I Come,"* she wrote:

[Parks's] selection of photographs for K-State [in 1973] challenged his audience to imagine a more inclusive culture than the one they knew: a world where Black skin represented ideal beauty, where an African American athlete can be the modern face of the hero as conceptualized in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, and where an African American artist has a place in the lineage of excellent artists in Western art history.

Dr. Wang further noted Parks's relationship with Kansas, the state of his birth and a place where he suffered cruel racism in his youth. Both the exhibition and the larger Gordon Parks Project explore the artist's complex feelings about his home state. These photographs, along with a careful study of the archives at Kansas State University and the Gordon Parks Museum at Fort Scott Community College, which document the making of Parks's film *The Learning Tree*, help us appreciate his autobiographical novel and wide-ranging work.

Dr. Wang's colleague and exhibition co-curator, Collection Manager Sarah Price, has been caring for two unique collections of Parks photographs at the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art for the past ten years. Ms. Price noted that the project has allowed a deep examination of connections and laid the groundwork for making the photographs and the research accessible to the public. Department of English faculty member and K-State Digital Humanities Center director Mark Crosby agreed. In an exchange about the project, he commented, "The more people we can expose to great art, art that's transformative, the better for our species!"

Department of English faculty colleagues Cameron Leader-Picone and Katherine Karlin consider this work a valuable chance to look at Gordon Parks in the larger context of American visual art, film art, and literature. For Dr. Karlin, the exhibition and larger project present a rare opportunity to see how an author translated his own writing into the medium of film. Noting *The Learning Tree's* historical importance, she writes that it "serves as a record of Black life in early twentieth-century Kansas, with all the contradictions of its free-state legacy and creeping racism."

As Dr. Leader-Picone explains, “Gordon Parks’s complex relationship to his childhood in Kansas and his early life in the Midwest (whether Fort Scott, Minneapolis/St. Paul, or Chicago) highlights the breadth of Black life and expression across the nation.” We hope this publication brings into sharper focus Parks’s relationship with Kansas and the influence it had on his artistic vision.

We thank and congratulate the scholars who have given so much thoughtful effort to the collaborative Gordon Parks Project and to this publication. The fact that their work coincides with a moment of change and hope in our country adds significance to the endeavor.

Linda Duke

Director, Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art

Karin E. Westman

Head, Department of English

Introduction

Aileen June Wang

Introduction

Aileen June Wang

This open-access digital exhibition catalog is part of the Kansas State University (K-State) Gordon Parks Project, initiated by the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art in collaboration with K-State English. The Gordon Parks Project grew out of the realization that institutions and people in Kansas were rich sources of primary material that shed light on the work of renowned artist Gordon Parks. Although he made New York his home after joining *LIFE* magazine in 1948, Parks renewed and forged new relationships with people and institutions in Kansas later in his career. His efforts began in earnest in 1968 when he did location shooting for his first Hollywood studio film, *The Learning Tree*, in his hometown of Fort Scott, bringing business to the town and hiring many African American residents. Afterward, Parks regularly returned to Kansas for other projects and activities. He visited K-State to receive an honorary Doctor of Letters degree in 1970. Three years later, he was again at K-State to deliver the university's convocation speech and open the first K-State Gordon Parks Festival, which featured an exhibition of photographs donated to the university by the artist.

This book presents new research on Parks and his activities in Kansas, which has received less attention in scholarship than other periods in his career. The scholarship herein debunks the myth that Kansas was merely the place where he was born before moving on to greatness elsewhere. As Parks looked back on his life, Kansas figured prominently as a point of reference and source of inspiration for his creative endeavors. Although at one time Parks expressed his refusal to be buried in Fort Scott, eventually he did choose his hometown as his final resting place.¹

Archival materials related to the making of *The Learning Tree* reside in several Kansas institutions, including Special Collections at K-State's Hale Library, the Gordon Parks Museum at Fort Scott Community College, and Wichita State University Libraries' Special Collections and University Archives. Gordon Parks Project team members from K-State English—Mark Crosby, Katherine Karlin, and Cameron Leader-Picone—established the website *The Learning Tree: A Gordon Parks Digital Archive* to bring together archival materials housed at K-State and the Gordon Parks Museum. In addition, Karlin, Leader-Picone, and their students conducted interviews with people involved in the filming of *The Learning Tree*. All these materials are available to the public at thelearningtreearchives.org.

The Beach Museum of Art owns 128 photographs donated by Parks to K-State in 1973, as well as seventy-three photographs created by the artist during two residencies in Manhattan, Kansas, in 1984 and

1985. Collections Manager Sarah Price and I conducted research on the photographs and co-curated the exhibition *Gordon Parks: "Homeward to the Prairie I Come."* Focusing on the 1973 gift as the first step in a long-term research plan, the exhibition was on view at the museum between September 2021 and May 2022 and available indefinitely on the museum's virtual exhibitions website, mkbma.org.

"Homeward to the prairie I come" is the first line of a poem Parks wrote for a special insert in the *Manhattan Mercury* newspaper, which sponsored Parks's 1984 residency in Manhattan. Published to celebrate the newspaper's centennial, the insert features poems and photographs by Parks of people and places in and around the town. The newspaper also worked with the Manhattan Arts Council in 1985 to organize Parks's second residency, with assistance from local residents. The photographs from these two residencies offer visual evidence of how Parks reconnected with his home state and reconciled his bitter feelings about Kansas through new friendships and a new perspective. Research on the Manhattan residency photographs promises to yield fresh insights.

A renowned photographer, writer, poet, musician, and composer, Parks was born and raised in segregated Fort Scott, in southeast Kansas. He went on to become the first African American staff photographer at *LIFE* magazine and the first African American to produce and direct a Hollywood studio film. He also directed two commercially successful action films in the 1970s featuring a Black detective. These opened the door for other African American directors and served as a catalyst for more films with African American protagonists. The recipient of over fifty honorary doctorates, Parks published numerous books, composed symphonies and film scores, and directed and produced a ballet film about Martin Luther King Jr. In 1988, he won the National Medal of Arts. Many of Parks's works were groundbreaking at the time of their creation, and they have retained their edge and relevance to this day. Parks deployed his creativity in various artistic mediums to illuminate the topics he cared deeply about—poverty, racism, social and cultural marginalization—and to instigate social reform and cultural change. In the convocation speech he delivered at K-State, Parks said: "This is, in a sense, what I am attempting to do, to go on revealing my experiences, each time in a different way, through poetry, photography, writing, music and now film. All of which have made the pain of those early years worthwhile."²

Kevin Willmott, award-winning filmmaker and professor of media studies at the University of Kansas, told his audience at the K-State

screening of his film *Destination: Planet Negro* that reading *A Choice of Weapons* by Parks at the age of thirteen inspired him to become an artist and filmmaker.³ Artists such as jazz musician and composer Terence Blanchard and multimedia visual artist Andrew F. Scott have also credited Parks for inspiring their artistic trajectories.⁴ In 2021, the Kunhardt Film Foundation and HBO released the documentary *A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks*, which examines the ripple effects of Parks's work through renowned contemporary artists, including filmmakers Ava DuVernay and Spike Lee and visual artist LaToya Ruby Frazier.⁵

Parks was advocating for antiracism decades before Ibram X. Kendi introduced the term in his 2019 book *How to Be an Antiracist*. In all of his works, Parks told stories that emphasized the universality of human concerns and values. He urged his audience to remember their bonds with fellow human beings and to consider a person as an individual, instead of stereotyping those with different ethnicities or skin colors as “the other.” The first paragraph of his article on the Fontenelle family in *LIFE* magazine eloquently expresses his views, and he repeated it in modified form in his speech at K-State seven years later:

What I want America, what I am, what you force me to be, is what you are. For I am you staring back from a mirror of poverty and despair, of revolt and freedom. Look at me and know that to destroy me is to destroy yourself. You are weary of the long hot summers. I am tired of the long hungered winters. We are not so far apart as it might seem. There is something about both of us that goes deeper than blood or black and white. It is our common search for a better life, a better world. I march now over the same ground you once marched over. I fight for the same things you still fight for. My children's needs are the same as your children's. I too am America. America is me. I intend to share in its survival. So take a good look at me. Listen to me and know that I will fight to death against racism. Let us not destroy the chance to live in peace.

I have learned many things from Gordon Parks in the process of my research for the “*Homeward to the Prairie I Come*” exhibition and this book. I cherish most the example he set in the ways he lived and recounted his experiences, recognizing the nuances in life and people that resist easy categorization. He took note of love and kindness encountered. He did not feed hate by keeping score of the injustices he suffered. His words from his memoir *Voices in the Mirror* echo in my mind often: “Madeline Murphy. Alexander Liberman. Roy Stryker. The memory of them prevents my looking

at all white faces with the same set of eyes. During those early years when I was inclined to loathe all whites, one would invariably emerge to prove me wrong.”⁶

The Gordon Parks Project team offers this book in appreciation of Gordon Parks.

1. Gordon Parks's grandniece Ella Parks recalled attending a speech by Parks sometime in the early 1990s, in which he said that he refused to be buried in Fort Scott. Ella Parks to the author, October 8, 2021. Ella Parks, who could not recall the details of this particular memory, may have been referring to an appearance by Parks either at a news conference in Wichita or at the commencement ceremonies of Wichita State University in 1991, or at a lecture he gave at the University of Kansas in Lawrence in 1993; see Sarah Price, "Gordon Parks and Kansas: An Annotated Timeline," in this volume. Ken Lunt, mayor of Fort Scott 1998–2004, also recounted hearing Parks make a similar statement; see, "Gordon Parks Warms to Changes Made in Hometown Fort Scott," *Lawrence-Journal World*, March 30, 2003, https://www2.ljworld.com/news/2003/mar/30/gordon_parks_warms; Ken Lunt and Mike Hogard, "Eyes That Could Read Your Soul," *Little Balkans Review: A Southeast Kansas Literature & Graphics Journal* 5, no. 4 (2009): 2.
2. Gordon Parks, "A Look Back," 1973, MS 2013-01, box 34, folder 53, Gordon Parks Collection, Special Collections and University Archives, Wichita State University Libraries.
3. Presentation and screening of *Destination: Planet Negro* by Kevin Willmott at Kansas State University's Student Union, February 2018.
4. Terence Blanchard and Andrew F. Scott, "Presence of Absence: Gordon Parks Through an Empathic Lens," *Kansas State University Calendar*, https://events.k-state.edu/event/terence_blanchard_the_e-collective_and_andrew_scott_in_concertat_the_mccain_auditorium#.YhaqrBPMLs0. Part of the artists' statement about this performance reads: "Empathy was the superpower at the center of Gordon Parks's life and interactions with his subject matter and craft. His ability to see the world critically with humility, grace, and curiosity allowed him to capture the essence of the human experience in all of its facets. Empathizing is the starting point of any design process or creative endeavor. As a collaborative group of musicians, multimedia designers, and art students, we have adopted this attitude as the founding principle, theme, and attitude for this project. The artwork we create is a thoughtful consideration of the subjects and their relationship to each other and the wider society. Using a synectic framework, we hope to bring the work of Gordon Parks and of ourselves as artists into a broader consideration through deep connections that are relevant to our time."
5. Kunhardt Film Foundation, "A Choice of Weapons: Inspired by Gordon Parks," *Interview Archive*, <https://www.kunhardtfilmfoundation.org/film-interviews/a-choice-of-weapons-inspired-by-gordon-parks>.
6. Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 95-96.

Gordon Parks and Kansas:
An Annotated Timeline
Sarah Price

Gordon Parks and Kansas:
An Annotated Timeline
Sarah Price

When Gordon Parks came to Kansas State University in Manhattan in 1970, he had rarely returned to his home state. For the next thirty years, Parks would continue to reconnect to Kansas and develop relationships with communities and key supporters that would last for the rest of his life. Several archival collections scattered around Kansas document Park's activities, but there has never been one central reference of his Kansas-related events. For instance, Parks interacted for many years with Kansas State University and the college town of Manhattan, most significantly through two artist residencies sponsored by the local newspaper *Manhattan Mercury*, the Manhattan Arts Council, and community members. Information about such activities is currently scattered among archival collections at Kansas State University and in public and private institutions throughout the state. Examining these sources and combining them with findings from other collections, including Wichita State University Libraries Special Collections and University Archives and the Gordon Parks Museum, this timeline records and summarizes Parks's significant moments of connection with people and places in Kansas.

Yellow text indicates selected events not related to Kansas but provide context.

- | | |
|------|---|
| 1912 | Gordon Roger Alexander Buchanan Parks is born in Fort Scott, KS. |
| 1928 | Parks leaves Fort Scott for St. Paul, MN, following his mother's death on May 9. |
| 1933 | Parks marries Sally Alvis. |
| 1937 | Parks buys his first camera, a Voightlander Brilliant. ¹ |
| 1939 | Parks is a photographer for the <i>St. Paul Recorder/Spokesman-Recorder</i> newspaper in Minnesota. Parks works as photographer for St. Paul YWCA and the International Institute. |
| 1940 | Parks photographs Marva Louis, wife of boxer Joe Louis, who encourages Parks to go to Chicago. Parks begins fashion photography, including for <i>Vogue</i> . |

In May, a funeral service is held in Fort Scott for Parks's father, Andrew Jackson Parks; Gordon Parks is listed as a pallbearer.²

1942 Parks is awarded the Julius Rosenwald Fellowship to pursue photography and is hired to work under Roy Stryker at the Farm Security Administration Washington, DC.³

1947 Parks's first book, *Flash Photography*, is published.

1948 *Camera Portraits: Techniques and Principles of Documentary Portraiture* is published.

Parks is hired as full-time staff photographer by *LIFE*'s executive editor Wilson Hicks; he works with Ralph Ellison on a photo essay for '48: *The Magazine of the Year* on Lafarge Clinic, the first nonsegregated psychiatric clinic in Harlem, NY; Ellison was three years into writing *The Invisible Man* at the time.

1949 Parks sails to Paris, France, along with *LIFE* fashion editor Sally Kirkland to photograph the French collections; the story was published in April 1949. He travels to Rome for the magazine because Ingrid Bergman invited him to visit her on the island of Stromboli. After leaving Stromboli, Parks immediately returns to Paris.

1950 In the summer of 1950, Wilson Hicks assigns Parks to the Paris bureau for two years; Parks prepares to move to Paris with his family.⁴

Parks returns to Fort Scott before starting his post in Paris because *LIFE* assigns him a feature story on segregated schools. Kansas was then part of the national debate on segregation. Parks chooses to approach the story of school segregation through the lens of his own childhood. He decides to track down 11 of his schoolmates (class of 1927) from the all-black Plaza School in Fort Scott. He also travels to Kansas City, MO, St. Louis, MO, Detroit, MI, Columbus, OH, and Chicago, IL, to interview all but two of his former classmates.⁵ The article was never published. This was Parks's first endeavor to author both the text and images of a story. A typed manuscript is in the Gordon Parks Collection, Wichita State University Libraries Special Collections and University Archives.

- 1952 Parks and Ralph Ellison work together to create “A Man Becomes Invisible” for the August 25, 1952, issue of *LIFE*, with text by Ellison and photos by Parks.
- 1955 Publication of “A Great Day for a Great Jazzman” in “A Look at the World’s Week,” *LIFE*, July 25, 1955. Parks goes to Ipswich, MA, to photograph Louis Armstrong. The photo in the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum collection (which appears cropped) shows Armstrong seated next to Mrs. John Alden Carpenter, one of the sponsors of the two summer concerts that Armstrong played at Crane Estate in Ipswich. Another photo by Parks shows Mrs. William Phillips, wife of the former US ambassador to Italy and another sponsor of the Armstrong concert series, seated on the other side of Armstrong.
- Parks returns to Kansas to do a photo essay on Saint Benedict’s Abbey in Atchison for a special *LIFE* issue on Christianity published on December 26, 1955.
- 1961 Parks travels to Brazil to photograph Flávio da Silva and the da Silva family for the essay “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” published in *LIFE* on June 16, 1961. The feature includes select diary entries written by Parks while in Brazil. This is the first time that Parks’s writing appears in the magazine.⁶
- 1962 Parks starts writing *The Learning Tree*, based on his early childhood in segregated Fort Scott.
- 1963 *The Learning Tree* is published; the book is later translated into multiple languages and published in paperback. Parks travels to Fort Scott on assignment for the photo essay “How It Feels to Be Black,” which appeared in *LIFE* on August 16, 1963, as an introduction to his novel. Parks also authored the text and photographs of the article immediately following it, “How It Feels to Be Black.”
- 1964 The documentary *Flavio* is released.
- 1966 *A Choice of Weapons*, a nonfiction autobiographical sequel to *The Learning Tree*, is published.⁷
- January 15–February 27: Exhibition of *The Works of Gordon Parks*, Time-Life Gallery, New York;⁸ the press release for

the exhibition and related events was found in the artist file alongside Kansas State University's plans for a Gordon Parks Festival in 1973; this exhibition probably influenced the series of events held for the festival.

- 1967 Parks writes and photographs the essay "A Harlem Family" for "The Cycle of Despair," published in *LIFE* in March 1968, about the Fontenelle family in Harlem, NY. Parks quotes the first paragraph of this essay in his Kansas State University convocation speech on November 8, 1973.
- 1968 Parks writes, directs, and composes the music for *The Learning Tree*. Parks and crew film on location in Fort Scott. Gordon Parks Jr. documents the filming in photographs.
- Film documentary Diary of a Harlem Family and The World of Piri Thomas are released.*
- A Poet and His Camera is published by Viking Press.*
- 1969 *The Learning Tree* film opens in New York.
- 1970 Parks receives an honorary Doctor of Letters degree from Kansas State University in Manhattan. University president James McCain approaches Parks about a gift of his photographs to the university art collection.
- 1970–73 Parks works as editorial director of *Essence* magazine.
- 1971 *Shaft* (film) is released.
- Born Black* and *In Love* are published.
- 1972 Parks is awarded the Spingarn Medal by the NAACP in Detroit, MI.
- 1972 Kansas State University president James McCain writes to Parks regarding a Gordon Parks Festival to be held in Manhattan; Parks responds favorably by letter.⁹
- 1972–73 Parks selects a collection of 128 photographs as a gift to Kansas State University. Under his direction, Modernage Photographic Services, Inc., prints images and mounts them on hardboard in New York and delivers them to Kansas State University in the summer of 1973.¹⁰ This gift includes black-and-white prints made from negatives dated between 1949 and 1970 and stored in the *LIFE*

magazine archives; the donation also includes color photographs printed from negatives in the artist's private collection. Parks entitled the group "Moments Without Proper Names."¹¹ In 1975 a selection of photographs from this gift was shipped to New York City for exhibition and later traveled to other venues. Over time, during travel, the photographs were damaged. The photographs came into the care of the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art when it opened in 1996 on the Kansas State University main campus. Wear and tear on the photographs and deterioration caused by the mounting adhesive motivated the Beach Museum of Art, under the leadership of Director Linda Duke, to consult the Gordon Parks Foundation in 2016. The foundation and the museum agreed to exchange the damaged prints for authorized prints from the original negatives housed in the foundation archives. The new prints are now in the museum's permanent collection.

1973

November 4–11: The Gordon Parks Festival is presented by Kansas State University Festival Committee, which includes Faculty Chairman LouAnn Faris Culley, Department of Art; Student Chairman Bernard Franklin, BSU; and Mrs. Pat Hagan, Department of Art Assistant Faculty Chairman. From the festival brochure text: "Special thanks to Kathryn M. Hill of United Air Lines for her suggestions and support; to Janet Ayres and all the members of the Alumni Creative Arts Board who have helped greatly in promoting the Festival throughout the state, and to all those others on the University campus, in the City of Manhattan, and throughout the state who contributed time and talents to the project."¹²

Kathryn (Hill) Strickler, a Kansas native and graduate of Kansas State University, went to work for *Vogue* in New York City around 1969. One of her first projects was working with Parks, and the two struck up a friendship as fellow Kansans. Strickler was surprised that Parks was not better known in his birth state and sought to become a liaison between the artist and local institutions and individuals who wanted to bring Parks's work to Kansas. She was instrumental in advocating for the gift of the Parks photograph collection and the Gordon Parks Festival

at Kansas State University in 1973. She was also Parks's guest when he received the National Medal of Arts at the White House in 1988.

On November 8, Parks presents a lecture for the University Convocation Series. A recording of this lecture, as well as the question-and-answer session that followed, is in the Morse Special Collections at Kansas State University. The recording includes an introduction by Bernard Franklin, chairman of the Black Student Union. Parks's speech and answers are audible, but the audience's questions are not.

Other festival events included an exhibition of photographs from the Parks gift to K-State at the Student Union Gallery; showings of the films *The Learning Tree*, *Shaft*, and *Shaft's Big Score*; and a display of photographic and motion-picture direction materials from *The Learning Tree* and the books *Choice of Weapons*, *Whispers of Intimate Things*, *Born Black*, *A Poet and His Camera*, and *In Love*, hosted by Farrell Library.

On November 10, a concert presentation of music and poetry by Gordon Parks was presented by the Kansas State University Speech and Drama Department, with oral interpretations from *Choice of Weapons*, *Whispers of Intimate Things*, *A Poet and His Camera*, and *In Love* by Joel Climenhaga, in the Kansas State University auditorium. In the university auditorium, a musical composition by Parks, "Symphonic Set," was performed by the Kansas State University Orchestra, featuring Terry Walker as piano soloist.

1974 *The Super Cops* is released.

1975 *Moments Without Proper Names* is published.

September 27–November 11: A selection of photographs from the Kansas State University collection is exhibited at the International Center of Photography (ICP) with the title *Moments Without Proper Names*. The exhibition includes 70 to 75 works from the Kansas State University collection.¹³ During transit to this location, crates containing the collection were damaged and the condition was noted upon their arrival in New York. Kansas State University

president Duane Acker writes to Parks and Jerrold Maddox, head of the university's Art Department, regarding the damage and action steps to be taken.

In February 1976, a meeting of ICP staff is held at Globe Storage to assess the damage, per correspondence to Maddox and Parks. Funding for reprints and repairs is provided by Nicolas Ducrot, director of Visual Books, Inc., New York. In June, the damaged Parks Collection photographs are taken by Modernage to reprint 45 photographs, touch up others, and return everything to Kansas State University.

In the late 1970s, archived correspondence in the Beach Museum Parks artist file shows that the entire 128 Kansas State University photo collection was offered for traveling exhibition opportunities. Between 1982 and 1993, smaller groups of photos traveled to multiple US sites and to at least one international site (Rouen, France, in 1993).

- 1976 *Leadbelly is released.*
- Parks travels to Brazil to photograph and interview Flávio da Silva in preparation for writing a book about him.¹⁴*
- 1978 *Flávio is published.*
- Ca. 1978 Wichita architect Charles McAfee becomes a link between Wichita State University and Parks. McAfee first encountered Parks at a national tennis tournament in New Orleans. He mentioned that he was from Wichita and knew some of Parks's family. He later had dinner with Parks and Parks's grandson Alain. McAfee said in an interview that he had just finished designing the museum at Wichita State University and that Parks should organize a show there.¹⁵ Parks replied that he would never return to Kansas. McAfee called university contacts, including Martin H. Bush, about an exhibition and was given the green light. Parks questioned McAfee about wanting to, but did later go to Wichita. The two men remained good friends from then on.
- 1978 January 31–February 3: Parks is an artist in residence at Wichita State University.

February 1: Parks attends the opening reception for an exhibition at the Ulrich Museum of Art of his poetry and photographs from the Kansas State University collection titled *Moments Without Proper Names*. The exhibition runs February 1–26.

February 2: Parks gives a lecture titled “Creativity” at the Campus Activities Center Theater and later holds an “informal hour” at the Ulrich Museum of Art. *The Learning Tree* film is shown that evening in the theater.

February 3: Parks speaks to 300 high school students on campus for the Kansas Scholastic Press Association’s regional contest.¹⁶

1979

June: Parks travels back to Kansas to visit the Konza Prairie Biological Research Station, the cities of Council Grove, Strong City, and Cottonwood Falls, and the proposed land for the future Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve with artist and activist Patricia DuBose Duncan. Duncan was asked by a *LIFE* editor to host and guide Parks; during this visit, Parks stated to Duncan that he was trying to promote the preservation of the prairie as he remembered it from his time in Fort Scott. Parks met with Elaine Shea and Larry Wagner, both founders of the prairie park preservation movement in Kansas.

August: Parks returns to Kansas to continue his prairie preservation documentation. His goals were to photograph fall grasses and a stormy sky. Parks created C-prints and dye-transfer prints from this expedition. He is also interviewed by *Wichita Eagle Beacon* reporter Dorothy Belden, who had met Parks in 1978.

1979

To Smile in Autumn is published. *Shaft’s Big Score* is released.

1981

Shannon is published.

Fall: Exhibition of Parks photographs from the Kansas State University collection is held at the Union National Bank in Manhattan, KS.

1982–83

Kansas State University begins traveling groups of 20–50 photographs from its Parks collection to multiple venues.

November 10–January 16: *The Photographs of Gordon Parks* exhibition at the Ulrich Museum of Art.¹⁷

1983 Parks is a featured speaker in the Dillon Lecture Series at Hutchinson Community College in Hutchinson, KS.¹⁸

Wichita State University publishes the catalogue *The Photographs of Gordon Parks* by Martin H. Bush. The exhibition *The Photographs of Gordon Parks* travels to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO; San Jose Museum of Art, CA; New Jersey State Museum, Trenton; and Photography at Large, Frances Wolfson Art Gallery, Miami, FL. It later travels to Corpus Christ, TX, in 1985.

1984 Parks is inducted into the NAACP Hall of Fame.

Solomon Northup's Odyssey is released.

Parks is commissioned by the *Manhattan Mercury* to create photography and poetry for a special insert celebrating the newspaper's 100th anniversary. He spends nearly two weeks photographing Manhattan, its residents and surrounding community, and Kansas State University, resulting in the publication of "In This Huge Silence."

1985 Parks returns to Manhattan for 10 days, sponsored by the Manhattan Arts Council and the city of Manhattan, to create a more in-depth view of the Kansas town; 100 photos are printed (according to the exhibition labels), with 33 selected for an exhibition titled *From the Huge Silence: A Century of Life in a Small Kansas Town*.

1985 Parks is named "Kansan of the Year" by the Native Sons and Daughters of Kansas (Kansas Historical Society) and is awarded the Governor's Medal of Merit (ADA Hall of Fame).

1986 October: An exhibition of *From the Huge Silence: A Century of Life in a Small Kansas Town*—with selections of photographs from the Manhattan, KS, residencies—is shown in the public library of Fort Scott.¹⁹

October 11: Parks attends "An Evening with Gordon Parks" at Fort Scott Community College.²⁰ Parks's film *Moments Without Proper Names* premieres there. The public screening is held October 12 at Fort Scott High School's auditorium.

- 1987 *Moments Without Proper Names* is released. The film was released under the title *Visions* in later released formats.²¹
- June: Exhibition of *From the Huge Silence: A Century of Life in a Small Kansas Town*—with 33 photographs from the Manhattan, KS, residencies—is shown at various locations, including the Cherokee Strip Museum in Arkansas City, KS; the Euprates Gallery in Kansas City; and the Parsons Public Library in Parsons, KS.
- February–March: *Gordon Parks: A Retrospective* exhibition is held at the New York Public Library. It is organized by the New York Public Library, the Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University, and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.²²
- 1988 Parks is presented the National Medal of the Arts by US president Ronald Reagan.²³
- 1989 Parks directs the ballet film *Martin*, for which he wrote the libretto and music to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
- The *Learning Tree* is placed on the Library of Congress National Film Registry Classics of the top 25 important films.²⁴
- 1990 Parks is the subject of a four-day seminar at Wichita Heights High School and interacts with the students,²⁵ speaking, taking photos, signing autographs and accepting an honorary diploma.
- Voices in the Mirror* is published. *Martin* ballet premieres on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday.
- 1991 May 18: Parks receives the President's Medal from Wichita State University and speaks briefly at the commencement ceremonies. At a news conference the day before, Parks said that the award “means an awful lot. It's another step forward in my making peace with Kansas and Kansas making peace with me.”²⁶
- Kansas City Star* runs a series of five excerpts from *Voices in the Mirror* autobiography.
- 1993 April 24: Parks gives the first Frances and Floyd Horowitz Lecture, titled “Creativity,” in Woodruff Auditorium,

Kansas Union at the University of Kansas. On the same day, he speaks at Lawrence High School to coincide with the opening of *The Photographs of Gordon Parks*, an exhibition at the Spencer Museum of Art. This exhibition represents 50 years of Parks's work, many from his time at *LIFE* from 1948 to 1972.

February 1–19: An exhibition of photos from the Kansas State University Parks Collection is held at the Kansas State Student Union Art Gallery in celebration of Black History Month and the anniversary of Parks's gift to the university. The exhibition is sponsored by the Department of Art and the art committee of the Union Program Council.²⁷

May 6–23: *The Gordon Parks Collection: Moments Without Proper Names* exhibition of selected Parks photographs from the Kansas State University collection is on display in Rouen, France, for the third annual Rencontres Photographiques de Normandie (group exhibition of international press photographers).²⁸

Parks is featured as the annual Kansas State University Friends of Art guest artist to commemorate his 80th birthday. The photograph *Mrs. Lucy Jefferson* is produced as the 1993 gift print available for purchase by Friends of Art members.

November: Anniversary of the 1973 Gordon Parks gift and festival at Kansas State University.

1994 January 9, 1994: *Wichita Eagle* publishes a special insert titled "Gordon Parks: A Passionate Vision, a Precious Talent."²⁹

March 26: Parks speaks at "An Afternoon with Gordon Parks" at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, MO, to celebrate the exhibition *Songs of My People* (March 27–May 29).³⁰

Arias in Silence is published.

1995 Parks donates an archive of his films, photographs, and writings to the Library of Congress.

1996 *Glimpses Toward Infinity* is published.

Parks is awarded the “Outstanding Kansas Citizen of the Arts” from Independence Community College, Independence, KS. He visits the college as well as the Fort Scott Community College during his visit.³¹

1997

Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective is published.

Half Past Autumn: The Art of Gordon Parks exhibition is held at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, from September 1997 to January 1998. It features a selection of black-and-white and color photographs representing Parks’s major series from 1940 through 1997, combined with his books, music, film, and poetry.

Ca. 1997–99

Ken Lunt, mayor of Fort Scott, KS, meets Parks during his visit to speak at Wichita State University and learns about Parks’s past negative experiences in Fort Scott, especially his disappointment over the neglect of the gravesites of his parents and other African Americans in the segregated burial area. During his tenure as mayor, Lunt coordinates resources and volunteers to add landscaping and to repair and straighten tombstones, giving them the same care as those in the rest of the city cemetery. Parks and Lunt remain friends after that visit.³²

1998

Parks gifts a collection of 227 photographs to the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and establishes the Gordon Parks Collection Archives there.³³

1999–2000

In celebration of the traveling exhibition *Half Past Autumn* and the museum’s 25th anniversary, the Ulrich Museum of Art acquires four of Parks’s photographs, which are unveiled in the presence of the visiting artist to patrons and friends in April 2000.³⁴

1999–2001

Half Past Autumn exhibition travels to nine other venues.

2000

Documentary *Half Past Autumn* is released. *A Star for Noon* is published.

2002

Parks gifts a collection of 50 photographs, 5 portraits of him made by other artists, including his son David Parks and daughter Toni Parks, and copies of his poetry in honor of his parents to Mercy Hospital (now Mercy Health

Center) in Fort Scott. The collection goes on exhibit at the hospital³⁵ and is transferred to the Gordon Parks Museum in Fort Scott in 2019.

2003 *The Sun Stalker: A Novel Based on the Life of Joseph Mallord William Turner* is published.

2004 Gordon Parks Center for Culture and Diversity (now the Gordon Parks Museum) is founded at Fort Scott Community College. The first Gordon Parks Celebration is held in Fort Scott October 6–9; Parks attends the event.³⁶

2005 *A Hungry Heart: A Memoir* and *Eyes with Winged Thoughts* are published.

Parks was so moved by the celebration events in 2004 that he decides to donate 30 photographs to the center.³⁷

2006 *The Gordon Parks Foundation is cofounded by Parks and his friend and LIFE editor Peter B. Kunhardt Jr. in Pleasantville, NY.*³⁸

February: Parks is awarded the William Allen White Foundation National Citation for journalistic merit by the University of Kansas, Lawrence. Since Parks cannot accept in person, the award is presented ahead of time at his New York home by Ann Brill, dean of the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas. The presentation is filmed and later shown at the university. John Frazee, senior vice president of CBS News, an alumnus and trustee of the White Foundation, arranges for CBS correspondent Byron Pitts to interview Parks at his home prior to the award ceremony. CBS prepares a video with this interview and footage from CBS's *Sunday Morning* shows about Parks in which he speaks about growing up and returning to Kansas. During the interview, Parks says, "I've decided that I want to be buried in Fort Scott, Kansas, because I don't think there's any group of people who care more about me than the people do in Kansas, black and white . . . that's my home . . . that's where I am bound to go back to."³⁹ It is his last interview.

March 7: Parks dies in New York City. He is buried in Fort Scott Evergreen Cemetery in Fort Scott on March 16, 2006.

After his death, a collection of his personal belongings and memorabilia is given to the Gordon Parks Museum in Fort Scott, according to his wishes. Additional gifts are given later by Parks family members and friends; donated items include his film camera and tripod and a collection of photographs of Parks by the artist Patricia Dubose Duncan.

2007–8 Wichita State University acquires approximately 140 boxes of Parks manuscripts, letters, photos, and papers from the Gordon Parks Foundation. The acquisition is recorded in the documentary *Roots and Branches: Preserving the Legacy of Gordon Parks*, produced by the university's Media Resources Center in 2011. Community members Mark McCormick, Pete and Mickey Armstrong, and Don Beggs, as well as Fran and Geri Jabara and Velma Lunt Wallace, contribute community support and financial assistance for the purchase.

2014 With community support, the Ulrich Museum of Art purchases 125 Parks photographs from the Gordon Parks Foundation.⁴⁰ Ted Ayres, Wichita State University's vice president and chief counsel, and Mark McCormick, *Wichita Eagle* columnist and former director at the Kansas African American Museum, had established a relationship with Parks and worked to bring a collection of his photography to Wichita. The Ulrich Museum's collection now holds over 170 photographs by Parks.⁴¹

2017 A group of 73 photographs from Parks's Manhattan, KS, residencies is transferred from the Manhattan Arts Center to the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art collection. The museum now holds 201 photographs by Gordon Parks.

Even after his death, Parks's legacy in Kansas remains firmly established through the collections and ongoing exhibitions of his work as well as his personal connections to communities throughout the state.

Notes

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- 13 Cornell Capa, “Correspondence,” Gordon Parks Artist File, Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University.
- 14 Paul Roth and Amanda Maddox, “1970–1977,” in *Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story* (Pleasantville: The Gordon Parks Foundation, 2018), 176

- 15 David Parks, "Memories of Gordon Parks: Interview with David Parks," by Charles F. McAfee (recorded interview). *TRIO Communication Upward Bound*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bIOVI2on7qU>.
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- 21 The earliest known news article about this film with the new title is from 1991; "Black History Six-Pack," *Daily News*, July 2, 1991.
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- 26 Susan L. Rife, "Artist Struggles to Reconcile Past, Present," *Wichita Eagle*, May 19, 1991.
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A Self-Portrait as a Gift

Aileen June Wang

A Self-Portrait as a Gift

Aileen June Wang

In 1970, Kansas State University (K-State) honored renowned artist and Kansas native Gordon Parks with an honorary Doctor of Letters degree, for which he visited Manhattan, Kansas. According to Charles Stroh, chair of the Department of Art between 1980 and 1997, then–university president James McCain discussed a donation of photographs to the university with Parks.¹ In 1972, McCain wrote to Parks about organizing a Gordon Parks Festival in the fall of 1973. Parks responded that he would be “delighted and honored” and promised to be at the festival for at least two days.² None of the existing papers and letters in K-State’s archives mention a gift of photographs, but documents at the Wichita State University Libraries indicate that Parks and his wife at that time, Genevieve Young, worked as early as April 1973 with Ralph Baum at Modernage Photographic Services in New York to select and print photographs for a “Gordon Parks Exhibit.” A note on Baum’s office stationery records instructions for sending receipts for contact sheets and prints to “U of Kansas.” On November 4, 1973, the Gordon Parks Festival launched with the opening of an exhibition of photographs by Gordon Parks at the (Student) Union Gallery.³ Extant installation photographs confirm that the exhibition indeed displayed Parks’s donation (Pl. 1).

This gift is the earliest known set that Parks personally assembled and donated to a public institution. It coincides with an important moment in his career: the end of his stint as staff photographer at *LIFE* magazine and the beginning of a period of intensifying creativity in other areas, such as film, music, and poetry, paired with photography. Parks’s last photo-essay in *LIFE* was “Look Out, Here Comes Ali!” which appeared in the October 23, 1970, issue. It was the last one with a *LIFE* assignment number.⁴ While assembling his gift, Parks was preparing to embark on the next chapter of his career. Art Department Chair Charles Stroh, who organized a K-State Gordon Parks traveling exhibition in the early 1980s, recalled that he asked Parks why he decided to give photographs to K-State. Parks replied that he was a Kansan and wanted the leading public collections in Kansas to have works from the *LIFE* magazine archives to document his success as a photographer.⁵ His response implies two important ideas: that Parks continued to see himself as having ties to Kansas, and that he viewed the gift to K-State as a statement of sorts. Having the agency to select photographs and determine their message was a departure from his situation at *LIFE*, where magazine editors held that power, rather than staff photographers and writers.⁶ Parks paid close attention not only to the distribution of subjects, as demonstrated by the

contents of the gift, but also to cropping, tone, and size. A letter from July 1973 addressed to Ralph Baum mentions a previous discussion about framing specifications for the color photographs. In addition, Parks writes:

I would like deep pictorial printing with emphasis on form rather than detail, with strict following of the cropping I have indicated. I realize that the dimensions will vary according to the problem each print presents.⁷

For this reason and others, I argue that Parks conceived of the gift as a self-portrait, using it to convey what he wanted viewers to know about him. He also gave it a title: *Moments Without Proper Names*.⁸ Most of the scholarship to date, including commentary during Parks's lifetime, focuses on his photographs within the framework of documentary photography. One exception is a 2001 essay by Erika Doss, which points out Parks's efforts to combine journalism and artistic vision through technical experimentation and "irregular angles, dramatic lighting, high tonal contrasts, and provocative subjects."⁹ Doss cites Parks's photograph of Bessie Fontenelle and her children at the Poverty Board, published in *LIFE* in 1968, as an example of how Parks alluded to an iconic historical work—Dorothea Lange's iconic Depression-era photograph *Migrant Mother*—to draw a parallel between history and the present.¹⁰ Recent scholarship by Deborah Willis calls attention to how Parks manipulated light and shadow, camera angles, and the symbolic potential of dress to elevate fashion photography to statements of African American identity and meditations on consumer desire.¹¹ In a 2021 lecture organized by the Beach Museum of Art, Willis demonstrated how Parks used the motif of domestic space and domestic objects such as a mirror to illustrate and define African American culture across several photographic series.¹² My study of the Parks gift explores his work along the same vein and shines a light on his artistic concerns beyond photojournalism.

The gift develops an agenda important to Parks but that had hitherto gained little notice in mainstream media and art criticism. His photographs challenge iconic images of beauty and human excellence to expose the biases of a dominant white culture. His selection of photographs demonstrates the breadth of his artistic vision in order to assert his right to be included within the lineage of excellent artists in Western art history. Doing so in different ways, many of the photographs propose a more inclusive modern American culture than the one that

Parks's viewers knew. A critical examination of print sizes reveals an organizational plan: within a group, one or two large photographs serve as headlines, while others, in a cascading hierarchy of sizes, flesh out a story. Counting the frequency in which a topic appears provides insight into the collection's main ideas.

Philip Brookman, co-curator of Parks's 1997 retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, notes that Parks was conscious of how printing and size could affect a viewer's perception of a story and points to Parks's experience with exhibitions at the Office of War Information and Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) in the 1940s. Brookman points out in particular the significance of the exhibition *The Family of Man*, organized by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, in which Parks participated in 1955.¹³ Curated by renowned photographer Edward Steichen, director of MoMA's department of photography from 1947 to 1961, it was the most ambitious museum exhibition of photography to date. In a call for submissions in 1954, Steichen wrote that the exhibition's goal was to give "further emphasis and scope to this recognition of photography as an art."¹⁴ Installation views show photographs of various sizes displayed in a cluster at various heights and grouped under common themes.¹⁵ Some photographs hung from the ceiling or lay flat on the floor, a strategy echoing the first exhibition of the Pop Art movement at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in London in 1953, which displayed photographic panels. Such unorthodox installations disrupted conventional ideas about how an exhibition should look and offered a distinct contemporary aesthetic. *The Family of Man* toured globally for eight years and attracted nine million visitors. In *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks cites Steichen as one of the "revered photographers' names" he had seen on the pages of *Vogue* while working as a waiter on the North Coast Limited train. Parks also credits Steichen for introducing him to Alex Lieberman, then editor of *Vogue*, who mentored Parks in fashion photography at *Glamour* and *Vogue*.¹⁶

Poverty and Death

Parks selected five photographs to be the largest in his gift and serve as "chapter headings," highlighting the most significant topics. The largest and third-largest photographs belong to the same series, *Freedom's Fearful Foe: Poverty*. The largest, *Flávio Amuses Smaller Brothers and Sisters*, measures 39 by 60 inches (Pl. 12); the third-largest, depicting

Flávio sick in bed, measures approximately 46 by 30 inches (Pls. 2).¹⁷ Through the lives of Flávio da Silva and his family, the series shows what poverty is like and how social marginalization deprives the poor of opportunities to improve their circumstances. In his memoirs, films, and interviews, Parks makes the issue of poverty personal, telling numerous stories of being hungry as a boy in Kansas and of surviving the harsh winter of Minneapolis while homeless and cold. In the manuscript of his convocation speech at K-State in November 1973, he frankly discussed the racial bigotry that led to the suffering of the poor:

[I]n the ghettos of many large American cities, in the bigoted towns, cities and hamlets of the south . . . Blacks, Puerto Ricans and other minorities are caught in the immoral and archaic economic ways of our system. They see no hope; they dream no dreams.¹⁸

Parks's photo-essay on Flávio and his family was part of the magazine's series on South America, which aimed to provide context for President Kennedy's plan for strengthening political and financial relationships in the region to discourage the spread of Communism.¹⁹ Parks recalled that he spent some of his days in the da Silva family's shack.²⁰ The June 16, 1961, photo-essay became one of Parks's best-known works, inspiring letters and unsolicited monetary donations from *LIFE*'s readers. The Children's Asthma Research Institute and Hospital in Denver, Colorado, offered free treatment for Flávio, so *LIFE* sent Parks back to Brazil to escort Flávio to the United States. In 1964, Parks made a documentary film about Flávio using his photographs and followed up with a book in 1978 (*Flavio: An Evocative Statement about Love, Pain, Hunger, and Despair—and at Last about Hope*). In total, Parks included nineteen photographs from this series, making up 15 percent of the collection. Three images averaging 29 by 42 inches provide a sense of the setting, illustrating what the da Silva family's life looks like from a bird's-eye view and within the walls of their home (Pls. 5–6, 9). The rest of the images belong to either one of two groups of smaller dimensions (Pls. 3–4, 7, 10–11).

In addition to the series about the da Silvas, Parks also included twenty photographs about economically struggling African Americans in the New York neighborhood of Harlem. Three originate from the *Harlem Gang Leader* series (1948), Parks's first publication in *LIFE*. Eight were created through a collaboration with writer Ralph Ellison, "A Man Becomes

Invisible” (1952), inspired by Ellison’s novel *Invisible Man*. Nine belong to another famous *LIFE* photo-essay, with text written by Parks, titled “What I Want, What I Am / What You Force Me to Be Is What You Are” (1968, on the Fontenelle family). Fleshing out the two main groups are photographs from Estoril, Chicago, and Alabama. During Parks’s 1949 *LIFE* assignment about exiled royalty in Portugal, he captured the image of a young beggar woman carrying a child (unpublished, Pl. 21). There are four from the series *Metropolitan Baptist Church*, about an African American megachurch in Chicago with its congregation of “oppressed people who . . . barely made ends meet.”²¹ (Pls. 53–54, 61–62) Two are from *LIFE*’s September 24, 1956, issue, “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” illustrating the conditions of segregation in Alabama and how they deprived African Americans of opportunities for upward mobility²² (Pls. 43–44).

In addition to the subject of poverty, the two largest images of Flávio illustrate a related topic: children and youths prematurely confronting death. *Flávio Amuses Smaller Brothers and Sisters* depicts Flávio holding up a two-page magazine spread with two images of the French Catholic saint Vincent de Paul, a priest active in the seventeenth century who dedicated his life to serving the poor and who was canonized in the eighteenth century²³ (Pl. 12). The image of the priest’s effigy lying in repose takes up half the spread on the left. The right half features a reproduction of a painting of the saint in life. On each image, Flávio punched two holes for his eyes. In this moment captured by the camera, Flávio hides his face behind the page. Nothing indicates that the child was aware of the irony of using the visage of a dead person as a mask, but it is clear that Parks recognized its poignancy.²⁴ He made the image of Flávio lying on his bed the second largest in the group (Pl. 2). Also published in *LIFE*, it was accompanied by a caption that reads: “Sick and exhausted from week’s care of the family, Flávio rests on Sunday when his mother is free to look after brothers and sisters. ‘I am not afraid of death,’ he explained earnestly to Parks. ‘But what will they do after?’” In the magazine, the image of Flávio lying in bed is opposite that of the corpse of his neighbor and the caption: “Dead neighbor of Da Silvas lies with vigil candles awaiting burial. Pillow for her head and linen sheets used for shrouds are amenities few *favelados* receive in life. When Gordon Parks asked one *favelado* about his six children, he replied, ‘There were nine. The other three are with God. He was good enough to take them’” (Pl. 8). The main text accompanying the photographs, written by *LIFE* assistant editor Tim Foote and his writers in New York, reinforces the impression

that death overshadows Flávio's life by informing readers that the boy was dying when Parks met him: "And disease has touched Flávio. Wasted by bronchial asthma and malnutrition he is fighting another losing battle—against death."²⁵

Two photographs that Parks included from his 1948 series *Harlem Gang Leader* illustrate the same idea and present compelling evidence that Parks conceived a thematic group within the K-State gift about poor, marginalized children encountering the specter of death (Pls. 13-14). Parks's first publication in *LIFE*, the November 1, 1948, issue, follows Red Jackson, the leader of a prominent gang in Harlem called the Midtowners, for several weeks. The first page identifies lack of opportunity and security for Harlem youths as the main driver for them to join a gang:

When he was about 12, Red got tired of getting beaten up by older boys on the block and of paying "protection" in order to get to school. And when he was hungry, which was often, he needed a little help in stealing apples from the sidewalk stands. So he joined a gang for self-protection and for a chance to express his own personal defiance.²⁶

One photograph, showing Red Jackson and a friend standing over the coffin of another friend, illustrates what may happen when one belongs to a gang. The accompanying caption in *LIFE* reads: "In mortuary Red and Herbie Levy study wounds on face of Maurice Gaines, a buddy of theirs who was found dying one night on a Harlem sidewalk." Herbie was from a gang called the Nomads. The photo-essay noted that the two were examining Herbie's wounds to confirm if a rival gang had attacked him and caused his death.²⁷ As they came out of the funeral parlor, they saw members of the rival gang coming up the street toward them, and they ran into an abandoned building to hide. Parks's second photograph in the collection depicts a moment during that incident, with Red looking out of a broken window, scoping out their enemies on the street below. All feared for their lives. The article quotes Red as saying: "We ran into an old house that was empty and went upstairs to hide out. . . . Herbie's dog, he ran out on the ledge and we was scared he would give us away. . . . We sure wasn't ready for a fight that day."²⁸ Recalling this assignment for *Half Past Autumn*, the catalog for his retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Parks writes:

Despite their show of bravado the gang members seemed to sense that death was lurking around every corner. Their families also lived in constant fear. . . . Hostility claimed the lives of four boys during that brutal period.²⁹

The motif of young people confronting death also features in one other photograph. It documents a moment during the funeral of professional baseball player Babe Ruth, who died in August 1948 (Pl. 15). Parks covered the public viewing for *LIFE*. The camera's position behind the casket reveals where Parks's interest lay, focusing on the faces of a white woman and boy as they gazed down at the deceased sports celebrity. The child's face, mouth agape, projects a wordless contemplation of mortality. In this instance, the white boy comes face to face with death during a special occasion, in contrast to the experiences of Red Jackson and Flávio da Silva.

The dominance in numbers of photographs addressing poverty illustrates a major theme in the gift. The variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds represented underlines the idea that poverty is a universal problem. Parks's photographs vividly demonstrate that no matter the color of their skin or their nationality, people suffer similarly under racial and social discrimination. The photographs also expose the mutual motivations that link people in power around the world, those who benefit from marginalizing others.

Dialogues with Art History

Several of Parks's photographs in this collection engage in dialogues with well-known artists and artworks. They demonstrate Parks's knowledge of art history and his belief that photography is a fine art medium on par with painting and sculpture. Such a viewpoint was still a matter of debate in the mid-twentieth century. As I discussed previously, Edward Steichen organized *The Family of Man*, the first major museum exhibition of photography, to argue for the medium's merits as fine art. Parks's efforts to draw common themes across photographs from different periods indicate that he saw them as more than reportage.

Indeed, Parks creates a photograph engaged with an iconic work of art as early as 1942. His now famous image of the charwoman working at the Farm Security Administration offices, Ella Watson, reinterprets

the iconic painting *American Gothic* by Grant Wood.³⁰ The painting is in the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, a museum that Parks mentions frequenting in his memoirs. In Parks's portrait, Watson faces the camera, with an upright broom in her hand and an American flag and a mop on the wall behind her. Parks took this photograph soon after he arrived in Washington, DC, to start his Julius Rosenwald Fellowship at the Farm Security Administration. His optimism about living in the nation's capital turned bitter after he explored the city for a day, as his new boss Roy Stryker had instructed him to do. He found racism at every turn: restaurants, a drugstore, a movie theater, and a department store. According to Parks's own accounts, he made this photograph in response to those experiences.

Parks recounts his encounter with Ella Watson in all but one autobiography, as well as in the short essay published in the catalog of his exhibition *Half Past Autumn*. In the earliest account, Parks writes about what he did after Stryker suggested that he talk to Ella Watson:

My first photograph of her was unsubtle. I overdid it and posed her, Grant Wood style, before the American flag, a broom in one hand, a mop in the other, staring straight into the camera. Stryker took one look at it the next day and fell speechless.³¹

In the third memoir, he reveals what he was thinking at that time: "Washington could now have a conversation with her portrait." He acknowledges with some satisfaction that he "had found a little justice in that sea of bigotry."³² The absence of *American Gothic* from the gift is likely due to Parks's intention to focus on the photographs created during his time at *LIFE* to document his success as a photographer.

Parks writes in his memoirs about regular visits to art museums and galleries and learning from what he saw. In *Voices in the Mirror*, Parks identifies the works of past painters that he had seen at the Art Institute of Chicago as sources of inspiration for his fashion photography:

Foremost was consideration for what the designers were attempting to express with their creations, and the settings I selected had to be complementary to their efforts. Equally important was the need for good taste in blending the clothes and the backgrounds into graceful compositions. Renoir, Matisse, Reubens and others I had studied at Chicago's Art Institute between layovers were recalled from that time, and they came to my aid.³³

Around 1960, Parks prepared notes for an unpublished book on fashion photography, which offered advice on how to photograph fashion, using his own experience as an example:

This assignment to Paris proved a great stimulus and enlarged my vision of the medium and purpose of fashion photography. While there I studied and admired the Old Masters at the Louvre and some French contemporaries and found them exciting. Most important, I realized there were so many variations to the classic form of most art, and that one need not resort to meaningless abstraction to obtain notice of his work; that one can work a lifetime, and in good taste, without ever having fear of repeating himself.³⁴

Parks's notes here could explain why the second-largest print in his gift is a photograph of four models in gowns by the French designer Jacques Fath (Pl. 16). With large-scale dimensions of 37 by 44 inches, it evokes the grand portraits of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries created by such artists as Peter Paul Rubens, Anthony van Dyck, Frans Hals, Diego Velázquez, Francisco Goya, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Thomas Gainsborough. However, even closer in concept to Parks are the paintings of American expatriate John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), who studied those earlier artists.

Parks's group photograph of Jacques Fath gowns exhibits an affinity to such Sargent portraits as *The Wyndham Sisters: Lady Elcho, Mrs. Adeane, and Mrs. Tennant* from 1899, part of the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection in New York since 1927 (Fig. 1), and *The Misses Hunter*, which entered the collection of the Tate in London in 1926 (Fig. 2). During his time, Sargent was celebrated for his ability to imbue his sitters with not only the monumentality of traditional portraits but also a sense of immediacy and casual elegance.³⁵ Parks's models wear their precious designer gowns with the same informality as Sargent's subjects: one of them puts her gloved hand into a pocket in her skirt; another fiddles with her gauzy wrap. His camera remains close enough to capture the models' individuality. The viewer can see the subtle smile of the one on the far left, for instance. She and the central, seated figure pose with their arms akimbo, an assertive gesture commonly associated with portraits of men from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. By the nineteenth century, however, Sargent portrayed women posing in this way in such portraits as

*Mrs. George Swinton (Elizabeth Ebsworth) at the Art Institute of Chicago and Mr. and Mrs. I. N. Phelps Stoke at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.*³⁶ Women in fashion photographs from the 1930s also posed with arms akimbo.



Fig. 1 John Singer Sargent, *The Wyndham Sisters: Lady Elcho, Mrs. Adeane, and Mrs. Tennant*, 1899. Oil on canvas, 115" x 84 1/8". Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection, Wolfe Fund, 1927 (27.67), © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art Resource, NY



Fig. 2 John Singer Sargent, *The Misses Hunter*, 1902. Oil paint on canvas, 90" x 90 1/2". Presented by Mrs. Charles Hunter through the Art Fund "in memory of a great artist and a great friend" 1926, N04180, © Tate

Parks also kept the focus on his figures by making the setting sparse, a strategy employed by Sargent and earlier artists such as Hals. In contrast, for example, a group photograph of Charles James gowns in 1948 by Cecil Beaton, who photographed for British and American editions of *Vogue* from the 1920s to the 1940s, presents his figures from a distance. Through Beaton's lens, the women appear as types rather than individuals. The gowns and the setting's opulent architectural features are the focus.³⁷ Parks names Beaton as someone whose works he studied while he was a waiter on the North Coast Limited train.³⁸

The photograph of Fath gowns has another interesting feature. On the lower right of the composition, the edges of the felt panels covering the studio floor are visible. In contrast, *LIFE* editors chose to publish a different moment from the same session for "A Hectic Week of Paris Showings," in the March 5, 1951, issue.³⁹ The published image shows the two women standing on the left and right, reversed in position compared to the image in the gift. Positioning the woman with a less voluminous gown on the right allows the cropping of the photograph on that side, thus eliminating from view the edges of the felt panels. In contrast, the photograph chosen by Parks exposes the illusion of glamour. He selected the same image for his book of poetry and photographs *Moments Without Proper Names*, published in 1975, just a few years after donating photographs to K-State. The choice signals a conception of the image as something more than a straightforward fashion shot.

Another fashion photograph that Parks includes, depicting the Comtesse Alain de la Falaise, is part of a photo-essay about women of European nobility in the fashion world that appeared in the April 25, 1949, issue of *LIFE* (Pl. 18). The countess, Maxime de la Falaise, was an English woman married to a count and a prominent figure in society. As with the image of women in ball gowns, the choice made by *LIFE*'s editors differs from Parks's. The magazine shows the countess sitting on top of a bureau, cigarette in hand. In contrast, the photograph selected by Parks shows her standing in *contrapposto* in a three-quarter view, her right hand gripping the back of a chair behind her.⁴⁰ The differences telegraph differing motives. Whereas the magazine's primary goal seems to be presenting a flattering portrait, Parks's pick invites comparison with Sargent's famous *Portrait of Madame X* (Fig. 3). Maxime de la Falaise's twisting pose, her bare neck and shoulders, the flexed muscles of her right arm, and the gathering of her skirt with her left hand resonate with Sargent's painting, suggesting that the viewer consider the photograph alongside traditional portrait painting.



Fig. 3 John Singer Sargent, *Portrait of Madame X* (Madame Pierre Gautreau), 1883–84, oil on canvas, 82 1/8" x 43 1/4", Arthur Hoppock Hearn Fund, 1916 (16.53), © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Art Resource, NY

Sargent's subject Madame Pierre Gautreau, like Maxime de la Falaise, was a society figure known for her distinct fashion style. An American from New Orleans married to a wealthy Parisian banker, Madame Gautreau was celebrated by her peers for her graceful, seemingly effortless movements and head turns and for her striking alabaster skin tone. In Sargent's depiction, she appears to be a self-aware, assertively posed woman in makeup (the reason for her unusual skin color). The painting caused a furor at the 1884 Salon in Paris, the official annual art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, the French learned society for artists.⁴¹ Sargent kept the painting in his collection and continued working on it after its public display. When he offered it for sale to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1916, he described it as the best thing he had done.⁴² The direct gaze at the camera of Maxime de la Falaise in Parks's photograph

advances female assertiveness and self-awareness further than Sargent's *Portrait of Madame X*. In general, Parks's fashion photographs display an absorption and synthesis of Sargent's ideas without resorting to imitation of any particular composition.

For another fashion photograph from 1950, of a model wearing designs by Cristóbal Balenciaga, Parks appears to have turned to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century genre painting for inspiration (Pl. 17). The subject stands next to a basket filled with fruit, a prop not commonly seen in contemporary fashion images. However, some paintings of everyday activities produced in the Netherlands and Italy in the second half of the sixteenth century did feature a female vendor or a kitchen maid with fruits or vegetables. Dutch artist Pieter Aertsen, for example, carved a niche for himself by specializing in market scenes.⁴³ "Balenciaga sheath cocktail dress" was not published, but it likely belonged to the same group that Parks took for the feature "Spanish Fashions" in the issue dated August 21, 1950. Those published in *LIFE* featured models with a cat or lapdog, which George Philippe Lebourdais in *Gordon Parks: Collected Works* rightly connected to a practice established in fifteenth-century Flanders and popularized in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Spanish painters Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya.⁴⁴

In 1907, Pablo Picasso famously reinterpreted the association of fruits with working women in his painting *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)* by bringing into the open what those seventeenth-century paintings implied. In the foreground, an assortment of fruits lies on a table in front of five nude women. The title, which translates to "The Young Ladies of Avignon," refers to a street in Barcelona famous for its brothels, thereby associating prostitutes with fruits. Parks mentions Picasso's works in his memoir *To Smile in Autumn* when he wrote about taking advantage of the many opportunities to experience art while he was living in Paris. He recounted that he spent his Saturdays in "galleries rich with the art of Degas, Braque, Bonnard, Picasso, Van Gogh, Chagall."⁴⁵ In any case, Parks would not need to venture far to see *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J.)*. It was already in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, by the time he moved to that city. Archival photographs show the painting displayed in the galleries as early as 1936.⁴⁶

Although it may seem incongruous to apply a visual motif traditionally associated with working women to a glamorous fashion model, the parallel suggests that Parks was aware that some industry insiders regarded models as utilitarian "objects." In *To Smile in Autumn*, he

repeatedly refers to them as “mannequins.” In one journal entry recounting a viewing session hosted by designer Elsa Schiaparelli for the Duchess of Windsor, Parks wrote that Schiaparelli told the duchess that a model was “ugly as sin” but had “gorgeous legs and feet” while the subject of her criticism was standing in front of them.⁴⁷

Fashion photography was not the only occasion when Parks engaged with seventeenth-century Dutch art. The composition of *Political Meeting, Paris* (1951, Pl. 24), taken during the same period as his European fashion photographs, while he was based in Paris, makes reference to a group portrait by Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (Fig. 4). Its composition was novel for group portraits produced before and during Rembrandt’s lifetime, thereby making this particular example stand out in its genre.⁴⁸ Depicting several members of the surgeons’ guild, the painting has been on public view at the Mauritshuis in The Hague, Netherlands, since 1828 and is widely reproduced in literature. Its composition is characterized by crossing diagonal lines. One starts from the open book at the lower right corner and ends with the figure at the back of the room and at the apex of the pyramidal grouping. Another diagonal follows the direction of light streaming from the upper left of the painting to the illuminated face of Dr. Tulp in the center.



Fig. 4 Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632. Oil on canvas, 85 15/64” x 66 47/64”. Mauritshuis, The Hague. © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

Political Meeting, Paris is characterized by diagonal lines that echo the composition of Rembrandt's guild portrait. Parks photographed meeting participants from the end of a long table. A diagonal starts at the upper right corner and cuts across the frontal plane of the composition, with sunlight illuminating three standing men and a boy; it continues through a seated man and terminates at a still-life grouping made up of a glass carafe, a bound volume of papers, and a leather bag. Another diagonal recedes from front to back through a group of men clustered on the right side of the composition, with the same three men bathed in sunlight on one end and the heads of men and a back wall covered in wallpaper on the other end. The edge of the table in the foreground creates a third, short diagonal starting from the table's corner and ending at the figure of a seated man leaning on the table. With *Political Meeting, Paris*, Parks creates a group portrait that imagines Rembrandt's work in modern terms and draws a parallel between painting and photography.

A later portrait by Parks that channels Sargent's approach to portraiture is that of Muhammad Ali at Lord's Cricket Ground in London, taken in 1966 (Pl. 34). Not included in the story published in *LIFE*, it shows the boxer standing in a relaxed pose—slightly slouched against a balustrade—in the pavilion of a celebrated venue for cricket whose history dates back to 1814. Ali had remained in London after winning his much-hyped fight against British boxer Henry Cooper on May 21, 1966, and was training for his next fight against Brian London. Parks returned to London in June to cover Ali's training and accompanied him to Lord's Cricket Ground, where they attended a match between England and the West Indies. In Parks's photograph, sunlight streams from a window and shines on Ali's face and torso. Hands in his pockets, Ali wears well-fitting dark pants, a shirt unbuttoned at the collar, and a tailored leather blazer. With nothing in the photograph to indicate Ali's profession, he appears as a modern, fashionable gentleman. The portrait conveys a freshness achieved by a sense of immediacy akin to Sargent's portraits. The camera seems to have caught the boxer in a brief, unguarded moment, not projecting bravado or power, as was his wont. Such casual elegance characterizes the portraits by Sargent (see Figs. 1–2). Although formally dressed in beautiful gowns, Sargent's sitters lean back against their chairs with their legs extended, or have a dog lying on top of their skirts, or are perched precariously on the back of a couch.

This particular portrait of Ali also shares a kinship with Sargent's portrait of the French gynecologist Samuel Jean Pozzi, from 1881 (Fig. 5). Titled simply *A Portrait*, Sargent's large painting, measuring over 79 inches high and 40 inches wide, depicts Pozzi in a relaxed pose, leaning back on his left leg. Situated in a red interior, he wears a matching red dressing gown and looks off into the distance. Nothing in the painting indicates Pozzi's status as a renowned doctor, although one could interpret his pale hands against the crimson of his gown as a clue. Dressed in a robe and embroidered slippers, items usually worn in private at home, Pozzi conveys an air of ease and informality.⁴⁹



Fig. 5 John Singer Sargent, *A Portrait* (Dr. Samuel-Jean Pozzi), 1881. Oil on canvas, 79 3/8" x 40 1/4". The Armand Hammer Collection, Gift of the Armand Hammer Foundation, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. © HIP / Art Resource, NY

The photograph of Ali includes an element similarly employed in several of Sargent's portraits. In the background hangs a large painting, its frame surrounding Ali's profile like a mandorla. Depicting a cricket player dressed in the kind of Regency period attire worn by men of the upper class in imperial Great Britain, the painting serves as a synecdoche for Lord's Cricket Ground's collection of portraits of players, prominently displayed throughout the venue's pavilion. Placing Ali's profile against a nineteenth-century painting of an elite cricket athlete of Caucasian descent, the portrait draws a parallel between that figure and Ali as the twentieth-century equivalent.⁵⁰

Using a painting in the background to add a layer of meaning was a strategy that Sargent also used. For instance, a painted portrait of the sitters' mother appears in the background of *The Wyndham Sisters*. It is not, however, common in works by Sargent's contemporaries. Parks may have learned this device from Sargent or from seventeenth-century Dutch paintings that he saw in the United States and Europe.⁵¹ Dutch group portraits often include a setting that displayed the portrait or portraits of ancestors or predecessors—for example, *Family Portrait* by Jan Miense Molenaer at the Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem.⁵² Johannes Vermeer, a Dutch seventeenth-century artist popular in the twentieth-century United States, used the same strategy to add religious meaning to his 1664 painting of a woman holding a balance and weighing her jewelry. On the back wall hangs a painting of the Last Judgment, depicting the final and eternal judgment by God of all nations as predicted in the Bible. Parks would have seen Vermeer's painting in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, where he lived and worked between 1942 and 1944.⁵³ Later in 1970, we see a portrait of Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver, published in the issue of *LIFE*, February 6, 1970, with a portrait of Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party, positioned above their heads on the wall behind them (Pl. 65). That image within an image provides information about the Cleavers' political affiliation.

Though unpublished in *LIFE*, the photograph of Muhammad Ali at Lord's Cricket Ground would have been a fitting illustration for the magazine article authored by Parks. In the conclusion, Parks notes Ali's desire to be regarded as a "gentleman," narrating the story of Ali going to Parks's tailor on Savile Row, a street in London famous for traditional bespoke tailoring for men. Ordering six suits with vests from the "happy" tailor, Ali tells him: "I'm a gentleman now, I've got to look like one." Later in the article, Parks quotes Ali as saying, "The public likes pretty gentlemen

fighters. So it looks like Muhammad has to stay pretty and be a gentleman forever and ever.”⁵⁴

The seven photographs of Ali in the gift form a suite that makes a statement about Black representation in art and American culture, headlined by a bust-length portrait of Muhammad Ali, the fourth photograph among the five largest (Pl. 29). Only two of the seven are comparable to images in the magazine, but they differ significantly in composition. *LIFE* cropped the close-up of Ali’s sweat-drenched face to omit his neck and upper torso. Parks’s version includes those elements and follows the traditional portrait-bust format established in ancient Roman art and continued in European art from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. The images of Ali with a girl are different in the magazine and gift as well (Pl. 35). In the magazine, Ali’s profile is bathed in light while the face of the girl is in shadow. The K-State photograph, by contrast, treats Ali and the little girl equally; light illuminates Ali’s profile, but the girl draws the viewer’s eye with her direct, outward gaze. The printing of the photograph enhances the whites of her eyes and the spots of light reflected in them.

The bust-length portrait of Ali and three other photographs—of him seated with his head bowed and his hands resting on his thighs, a detail of his bruised hands, and a close view of his back covered in sweat—constitute an ensemble that engages with ancient Greek and Roman sculptures conceptually (Pls. 30–32). As noted, the largest photograph of Ali follows the format of ancient Roman portrait busts. A high contrast of light and shadow emphasizes the lines formed by Ali’s collarbones and pectoral muscles. Parks composed the photograph of the boxer’s back similarly, highlighting the linear patterns formed by muscles. This approach echoes the style of an ancient Greek sculpture type that art historians call *kouros* (male youth), produced between the seventh and fifth centuries BCE. Typically life-size or larger, the *kouros* represents a standing male nude in a frontal pose, with a foot forward, arms to the side, and weight distributed evenly (Figs. 6–7). Common to all examples of this type is carving that exaggerates the lines of the collarbones and muscles to create linear designs on the figure’s surface. In ancient Greece, the *kouros* represented an athlete-hero ideal, beautiful, symmetrical, and balanced. It served a variety of purposes: as statues of gods, votive offerings, and funerary monuments presenting a perfect version of the deceased.⁵⁵ The idea that Parks adds is a reimagining of the ideal male as African. The medium of photography creates an opportunity to manipulate light and shadow for tonal effect, making Ali’s dark skin glow and showcasing his physical beauty through linear patterns made by different parts of his body.



Figs. 6 and 7 Kouros (front and back views), ca. 590–580 BCE. Marble, 76 5/8" x 20 5/16" x 24 7/8", Fletcher Fund, 1932 (32.11.1), © The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The image of Ali seated with his arms resting on his knees recalls the iconic bronze sculpture of a seated boxer from the Greek Hellenistic period, now in the collection of the Palazzo Massimo alle Terme, Rome (Fig. 8). Similarly posed, both figures are in a pensive, quiet moment, although the pronounced muscles signal their readiness to fight at a moment's notice. The luminosity of Ali's skin resonates with the surface glow of the Seated Boxer, achieved through its bronze patina. Seated Boxer depicts an athlete in prime physical condition, who has nevertheless suffered bodily damage. Wounds mar his face, and drops of blood rendered in copper inlay appear on his arm and thigh. The resulting image presents a noble athlete who sacrifices himself for his profession.⁵⁶



Fig. 8 Statue of a Seated Boxer (Terme Boxer), late fourth to second century BCE. Bronze with copper inlays, height 4 1/2'. Museo Nazionale Romano - Palazzo Massimo alle Terme (inv. 1055). © Vanni Archive / Art Resource, NY

“Seated Ali” and photographs of different parts of Ali’s body convey a comparable idea. Beads of sweat on his face and back demonstrate the physical exertion involved in training. The close-up of Ali’s fists after his fight with Henry Cooper, with swollen knuckles, cuts, and bruises, vividly illustrates the physical toll of achieving excellence. These three detail photographs appear like the sculptural fragments from ancient Greece and Rome that have survived to the present day, as exemplified by the famous so-called Belvedere Torso (ca. 100 BCE–100 CE) and the head, hand, and foot of a colossal statue of the emperor Constantine (312–315 CE).⁵⁷

Parks, a self-confessed frequent visitor of art museums around the world, would have seen examples of ancient Greek and Roman art in the cities where he resided and those that he visited. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where Parks established residence after getting employment at *LIFE*, owns the Archaic Greek *kouros* previously discussed.⁵⁸ Other examples abound in Rome and Paris, where Parks spent extended time between 1949 and 1951 when he was in *LIFE*’s Paris bureau.

The purpose of Parks's photographs in evoking iconic ancient sculptures does not seem to be simply to re-create in another medium. The differences between the ancient works and Parks's creations establish a point of reference from which to engage with and challenge established cultural notions. From the Renaissance in fifteenth-century Europe to the twentieth century in the United States, such ancient sculptures as the *kouros*, the Belvedere Torso, and the Seated Boxer symbolize physical beauty and spiritual qualities associated with gods, athletes, and warriors. They convey the idea that the physical form, represented by the male Caucasian body, reflects an assumed inner intellectual ideal.⁵⁹ In the 1930s and during World War II, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy held up ancient Greco-Roman sculptures of male figures as exemplars of humankind at the highest level physically, intellectually, and spiritually. According to the aesthetic and political ideology of the Third Reich, all bodies could be categorized as either Classical (pertaining to ancient Greece and Rome) or non-Classical types. Nazi Germany used this ideology as justification for its program of bodily eugenics and the subsequent genocide of Jews and people with disabilities and "non-Aryan" features.⁶⁰ Parks's photographs of Ali challenge this perverted standard, daring to imagine an athlete of African descent as the embodiment of the ideal human. Deborah Willis has shown that Parks was addressing Black self-representation and African American beauty as early as the beginning of his career as a photographer, when he worked primarily in fashion and portrait photography. Doing so, he participated in a movement that started in the early 1900s, in which African Americans asserted themselves through studio photography and the Black press to define beauty for themselves and counter the stereotypes imposed on them by mainstream white culture.⁶¹

The portrait of Malcolm X is another photograph that can be interpreted as engaging in a dialogue with ancient art and Western notions of the ideal (Pl. 57). Appearing in *LIFE*'s article about the Nation of Islam on May 31, 1963, it shows Malcolm X at half-length, his left arm raised, the palm of his hand facing outward as his thumb grips a folded piece of paper. The composition echoes famous ancient sculptures of leaders addressing the audience, images that in antiquity offered a visual template of ideal leadership. An example is the statue of Aule Meteli, depicting an Etruscan (native Italian) magistrate, made in the late second century BCE, during the period of the Roman Republic (Fig. 9). Another example is the Prima Porta Augustus (first century CE), a version of a widely reproduced official portrait of Rome's first emperor, Augustus, found in 1863 in a Roman imperial villa in Prima Porta, Italy (Fig. 10). Richard Brilliant's research demonstrates that the

gesture of Aule Meteli originates from a well-established tradition among statues of divinities but is the first known example of the gesture applied to a mortal being.⁶² Subsequently, Roman emperors appear in sculpture and coins similarly.⁶³



Fig. 9 Portrait of Aule Meteli, 125–100 BCE. Bronze and copper, overall size 70 1/2" x 27" x 40". Soprintendenza per i Beni Archeologici della Toscana (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Firenze). © Scala / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 10 Augustus of Prima Porta, first century CE Marble, height 6'8". Vatican Museums (MV.2290.0.0). © Vanni Archive / Art Resource, NY

Associating Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali with Greco-Roman idealizations of athletes and political leaders, Parks's photographs challenge viewers to imagine an expanded, more inclusive American culture, one in which Black skin could represent ideal beauty and African Americans can be the embodiment of greatness. Ultimately, by engaging in a dialogue with iconic works and celebrated Western artists, the photographs present two arguments. First, photography can be a fine-art

medium on par with traditional mediums such as painting and sculpture. Second, an African American artist such as Parks deserves to be counted among the excellent artists of Western art history.

Artist at Work

The fifth-largest photograph is an unpublished portrait of Alexander Calder, which Parks took as part of a *LIFE* assignment published on August 25, 1952 (Pl. 26). Taken at the artist's studio in Roxbury, Connecticut, the photograph's size telegraphs its significance. It stands out as the only one among three artist portraits in the gift that shows an artist working: Calder tinkers with one of his sculptures, both hands reaching for wires. His upturned face, with eyes fixed on his mobile, the name he used for his works, appears awkwardly foreshortened. His facial features are difficult to discern. In contrast, the view of his hands is clear. Their placement makes Calder look like an orchestra conductor. In the book *Moments Without Proper Names*, published just two years after the K-State gift, a portrait of Calder illustrates the poem "Beauty Is What Beauty Is." This version shows only the artist's left hand emerging from the darkness.⁶⁴

One could interpret the Calder portrait as a stand-in for Parks. The image of Calder assembling and manipulating wires and geometric elements to create a sculpture presents an analogy to Parks's process of selecting and organizing his photographs to compose a self-portrait of sorts. The contents of the collection reveal a broad range of creative output. Although he continued to do assignments for *LIFE* on a contractual basis until 1970, he was actively pursuing other interests, such as film and literature.⁶⁵ The gift portrays Parks as more than a documentary photographer, and his photographs as more than literal. One can see this artistic approach clearly in the book *Moments Without Proper Names*. Photographs of various origins mix together to create new contexts and new stories. For instance, the poem "The Shadow Searcher" appears with three disparate images, which Parks also selected for the K-State gift: the color image *The Stranger*; a black-and-white bird's-eye view of Harlem from "Harlem Gang Leader"; and a chromogenic still life of a desk with framed pictures and other objects⁶⁶ (Pls. 76–78). We may recognize the landscape "Harlem Rooftops" from the "Harlem Gang Leader" story, but here it illustrates a poem that makes no mention of Harlem. Instead, it establishes the atmosphere of a story about a mysterious man who appears to the narrator and seems to be in constant search of something

unknown. *The Stranger*, featuring a figure in an ambiguous setting awash in a hazy red color, is a composite created from multiple exposures whose source images are yet unknown.⁶⁷ Research to date has not identified *Still Life, New York* as part of a series either.

To illustrate another poem, “Kansas Land,” photographs from several series—most from the unpublished *Fort Scott Revisited* (1950) and the published *The Restraints: Open and Hidden* (1956)—mix together.⁶⁸ Many of those images are in the K-State gift as well. For instance, Parks juxtaposed a photograph of a dilapidated classroom for Black schoolchildren in Alabama with *Pool Hall*, depicting a group of longtime Fort Scott residents who are regulars of the town’s Black pool hall (Pls. 37, 43). *Fort Scott Revisited* originated from a *LIFE* assignment that Parks received to cover segregated schools, a topic regularly in the news at this time. (The Supreme Court made its landmark decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954; the case involved four states, including Kansas.) It seems to have been Parks’s idea to tell the story through the lens of his segregated school in Fort Scott, which he attended from age six to fifteen.⁶⁹ The assignment gave Parks a reason to return to his hometown for an extended period after leaving at the age of sixteen.⁷⁰ Parks tracked down almost all of his classmates to find out what had happened to them after graduation and took their portraits. The project brought Parks to several Midwest cities, including Kansas City, St. Louis, and Columbus. Parks also visited and photographed people he knew who were still living in Fort Scott, and he wrote an essay to accompany his photographs. It was the first time Parks authored both images and text. According to historian John Edwin Mason, had *LIFE* published “Fort Scott Revisited” as planned, it would have been an important eyewitness account of the aftermath of segregation and the Great Migration.⁷¹

Parks chose to include in his gift only two photographs from the story “The Restraints: Open and Hidden,” about African Americans living under segregation laws in Alabama: *Stove Occupies the Center of Auditorium in Shady Grove School* and a group portrait of Willie Causey and family. These two alone do not adequately convey the story’s main theme as well as others in the series do. In *LIFE*, a well-known image bears the caption “At a bus station, Professor Thornton comes face to face with segregation, which he accepts passively but with hurt pride.” The viewer sees the Thornton family standing under a sign that reads “Colored Waiting Room.”⁷² However, if one considers them with the photographs from *Fort Scott Revisited*, as they are presented in the book *Moments Without*

Proper Names, they work well in fleshing out the story of Fort Scott. The photograph of the dilapidated classroom in Alabama aptly stands in for the Black school of Parks's childhood, which Parks was unable to photograph. The portrait of Willie Causey and family, not published in *LIFE*, could represent a family like the Parkses (Pl. 44). Causey was a farmer with many children, as was Parks's father. Although everyone in the family is dressed in clean and pressed clothes, Mr. Causey's shoes with holes, visible in the bottom center of the composition, signal economic hardship. Parks described his family in similar terms in his first autobiography, *A Choice of Weapons*, and in the prologue of the book *Moments Without Proper Names*. He talked about experiencing the pain of hunger as a boy in Kansas in "A Look Back," his commencement speech at K-State. In contrast, none of the family photographs in *Fort Scott Revisited* tell such a story. Instead, they depict well-dressed members and well-appointed domestic interiors.

The mood of the Causey family portrait is ambivalent. At first glance, all members seem to be relaxing on their porch. Mrs. Causey mends a dress while the younger children look on. One of the two daughters stands in the doorway next to her. On the opposite side of Mrs. Causey, one boy leans against a post while the other stands behind her in *contrapposto*, one hand on his waist. A close examination, however, reveals differing body languages. Willie Causey and his elder daughter in the foreground appear on guard. Although he is leaning back in his chair, his body is not completely relaxed. He directs his gaze towards the distance beyond the porch, arms akimbo and both feet planted squarely on the floor, ready to spring up to a standing position. His daughter in the foreground stands straight at a doorway, her facial expression stoic and her eyes directed toward the far distance as well.⁷³

Parks's notes for this assignment in Alabama corroborate the impression of wariness projected by the Causey photograph. The book *Half Past Autumn* includes a diary entry that Parks wrote, describing the tension he felt:

I'm in Shady Grove, a black section of Choctaw County, Alabama. . . . Night has fallen in this dusty countryside where I just escaped a band of hostile white men who are searching for me. I backed away from several situations earlier after being warned that these men were awaiting my arrival. . . . I'm lying in the darkness of a shanty owned by black woodcutter Willie Causey, whose family I've chosen as the centerpiece of this assignment. . . . Just a few miles down the road Klansmen are burning and shooting blacks and

bombing their churches. Southland is afire, and lying here in the dark, hunted, I feel death crawling the dusty roads. The silence is spattered with fear.⁷⁴

According to Parks, after he returned to New York, *LIFE* sent two editors back to Choctaw County to get back Willie Causey's property, which white citizens of the county had seized after Parks left. During the confrontation at the property, one of the Choctaw County men issued a warning: "That nigger that took those pictures is mighty damn lucky. If we'd caught him he woulda been tarred and feathered."

A compelling clue that supports the argument that Parks intended the two photographs from "The Restraints: Open and Hidden" to be part of the Fort Scott group is his choice to print them in black and white, like the Fort Scott photographs. Parks shot the Alabama series in color, and *LIFE* published the photo-essay in color as well. In printing those images differently, Parks gave them new meaning within a different context. For instance, seeing the image of Willie Causey and family and *Pool Hall* together shows how they resonate with each other: the subjects locate themselves at the threshold between their space and an outside, possibly hostile realm, their gazes directed beyond the camera lens.

All in all, eighteen independent photographs are part of the gift, showing Parks experimenting with composition, color, and techniques.⁷⁵ Thirteen of the eighteen are in color, distinct from the predominantly black-and-white documentary photographs. Eight are large in size, measuring approximately 26 by 37 inches or 37 by 26 inches, including the aforementioned Harlem landscape, *The Stranger*, woman and child in Blind River, Ontario (1955), and a chromogenic print from 1958 featuring an outdoor dining set covered in snow (Plates 76, 78, 80-81). Parks's son David identified the latter as the backyard of their home in White Plains, New York, expressing nostalgia for the many parties that took place there.⁷⁶ The Blind River woman and child image does not illustrate a story about that mining town in this collection—it is the only one from the series included—but headlines a group of five thematically related compositions depicting a woman and a child.⁷⁷

African American Stories

Within the gift, photographs that tell African American stories make up almost half: 52 of the total 128. Many are from Parks's best-known *LIFE* stories: "Harlem Gang Leader," 1948; "A Man Becomes Invisible," 1952; "The Restraints: Open and Hidden," 1956; "What Their Cry Means to Me," 1963; "The Redemption of the Champion," 1966; "What I want / What I am / What you want me to be is what you are," 1968; "Black Panthers" and "Eldridge Cleaver," 1970. Also included are unpublished photographs: eight from *Fort Scott Revisited* and four from *Metropolitan Baptist Church*, a series about an African American church in Chicago.⁷⁸ These two unpublished works were Parks's earliest attempts at authoring both image and text for a story. Their presence in the gift signals their significance to him. Parks breathed new life into them by using them in his 1975 book and 1986 film of the same title, *Moments Without Proper Names*.

A noteworthy characteristic of the group about African American life is the dominance of black-and-white photographs. Only one image is printed in color, that of a raised hand above a crowd, an unpublished photograph from the photo-essay "What Their Cry Means to Me" (*LIFE*, May 31, 1963) (Pl. 63). The choice suggests purpose because, as previously argued, Parks deliberately made black-and-white prints out of two color negatives from the *Restraints: Open and Hidden* series in order to repurpose them to tell a story about Fort Scott. This image from a Black militant rally in New York was printed in a large size relative to the others in the gift, with dimensions around 26 by 39 inches. The image's size and colors make it stand out from the rest and function as a kind of exclamation mark.⁷⁹

I discussed earlier that Parks's selections suggest his desire to share his lifelong passion to expose and combat poverty and its roots in racism and social marginalization. The group of photographs about African American lives is central to this storyline and underline how the artist's Kansas roots defined his artistic perspective. The photographs about the poor do not simply illustrate their hardships, however. Those from *A Man Becomes Invisible*, for instance, express a simmering rage in response to racial oppression. Parks collaborated with Ralph Ellison, who had just published *The Invisible Man*, to create this photo-essay visually evoking the novel. Unsmiling African Americans stand or sit and appear to be waiting, but what they wait for is unclear (Pls. 50, 52, 74). In 1975, some of those photographs reappeared as illustrations for Parks's poem "If I Were an Old Man Dying Now." The image of Black women dressed impeccably and sitting or standing on the sidewalk outside a store appears with the lines:

Of judgments that defile holy commandments
Of ancient rivers drying up before me
As idly I watched their sandbeds
Kneaded into tall steel and stone
That slowly rose and imprisoned me.⁸⁰

The images of a man in a suit, sitting on a broken wooden crate and staring into space, and of Harlem gang leader Red Jackson appear with another section of the poem:

If I were an old man dying now, I would tell of black jungles
Where on asphalt meadows
Stood my prison home, crumbling
In mortal chaos around me.

The largest photograph from this series is an image suggestive of magical beliefs or mysticism, displaying a cross, a crucifix, bottles, Buddha figurines, and other things⁸¹ (Pl. 49). The caption published with this image in *LIFE* explains the subject: “Mysticism that the hero finds in Harlem is represented by objects—both religious and superstitious—seen in a store window. . . . hero is sickened by the window displays of ‘oinments guaranteed to produce the miracle of whitening black skin.’”⁸²

On the other side of simmering rage are visual stories of positive aspects of African American life, of how Black people band together to provide spiritual support and self-empowerment. The *Fort Scott Revisited* photographs depict the strength and resilience of the town’s longtime Black residents through dignified portraits of elders such as Mrs. Jefferson and “Uncle James Parks” (Pls. 38, 42). Their profiles follow the established convention for depicting rulers and social elites on ancient coins and in European art. Other Fort Scott photographs place residents in context. One shows Mrs. Jefferson keeping vigil at the bedside of a dying “Mrs. Rivers,” an example of the care a neighbor provides⁸³ (Pl. 39). Another group image depicts men standing together outside a pool hall, keeping one another company. Among them are Parks’s uncle Ed Parks and the owner of the establishment, “Peaches” Jenkins (Pl. 37).

Another subgroup illustrates how religion provides a safe haven and a sense of belonging. Four photographs belong to the *Metropolitan Baptist Church* series, about a church in Chicago that would now be considered a megachurch. Parks sets this story in the context of his preparation “for the fire that was smoldering in the black, big city ghettos across the country” and wrote that it “helped set the pattern for my best work during the next fifteen years.”⁸⁴ In the first paragraph of his unpublished essay, Parks described the church as “a temple of hope to thousands of Negro people caught in the backyard of this vast city. . . . a haven in a world of unending trouble. . . . It offers leadership and a powerful-preaching minister. . . . It administers to the sick and needy.”⁸⁵

Parks characterizes the members of the congregation as “oppressed people who, according to their pastor, barely made ends meet each week.” Despite their financial hardships, they were “a proud lot and, being mostly laborers, had fashioned their church into a remarkably beautiful place of worship.” The visual linchpin, measuring approximately 30 by 40 inches, is the photograph of Pastor E. F. Ledbetter leading Sunday service⁸⁶ (Pl. 53). Impeccably dressed in what his son called his “Prince Albert longcoat suit,” the pastor raises his hands in prayer, his eyes closed. Pastor Ledbetter Jr. recalled that this was his father’s signature gesture, performed at the beginning of every Sunday service. According to him, the church building seated 2,000, and every Sunday it was fully occupied. On religious holidays, there would be more attendees. The church building originated as a Christian Science church and was acquired and adapted in 1939 by an African American congregation comprising people who had immigrated to Chicago from the South. Pastor Ledbetter Sr. was one of them, having moved to Chicago from Arkansas.

Pastor Ledbetter Jr. noted that during the late 1930s in Chicago, African American Baptist congregations took over several Christian Science church buildings. Parks’s photograph of Reverend Ledbetter Sr. reveals the church’s origins. On the wall behind him faintly appear words from the book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by the founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. The complete quote reads: “Christianity is again demonstrating the Life that is Truth, and the Truth that is Life, by the apostolic work of casting out error and healing the sick.” (The text is part of the chapter on Christian Science versus Spiritualism.) In *To Smile in Autumn* and the unpublished essay, Parks recounts how the pastor spent his hours during the week comforting and providing spiritual succor to his flock, “getting them fit to go back to work for the white man instead of killing him.”⁸⁷

Another series, *Black Muslims*, shows a different kind of religious community. Five out of the ten photographs present large gatherings of Nation of Islam members. Two depict a crowd of women in uniform white garb. In one, Ethel Sharrieff, daughter of founder Elijah Muhammad and the organization's top female leader, stands at the pinnacle of a triangular formation of women, epitomizing their strength within the community (Pl. 60). Standing up straight, she clasps her hands behind her while looking squarely at the camera. Three other photographs show crowds of Black men assembled in a rally (Pls. 58, 64). The largest photograph in the group, acting as a focal point by virtue of its size and colors, is the aforementioned image from a Black militant rally (Pl. 63).

Lastly, Parks illustrated African American empowerment by political organization through his double portrait of Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver from the February 6, 1970, *LIFE* story "Black Panthers: The Hard Edge of Confrontation" (Pl. 65). Although the photograph was shot as a color negative, Parks chose to print it in black and white for the gift. (It was also published in black and white in *LIFE*.) I argue that he did so to enhance the coherence of this subgroup. The black-and-white printing enhances the drama of the portrait, casting parts of the subjects' faces in deep shadow and enhancing illuminated parts of the composition, such as Kathleen Cleaver's hand on Eldridge's shoulder and the picture of Huey P. Newton, the founder of the Black Panther Party, hanging on a wall behind the couple. Here again Parks employs the visual device of a portrait within a portrait to convey something about the sitters, a strategy he employed in 1966 in one of his portraits of Muhammad Ali (see Pl. 34). As I discussed, Parks most likely learned this from studying the paintings of the nineteenth-century artist John Singer Sargent or from seventeenth-century Dutch art, also consulted by Sargent.

Conclusion

The K-State Parks collection suggests that Parks took the donation as an opportunity to construct a statement about how he wanted to be known as an artist. His roots in Kansas feature prominently. The photographs express his lifelong passion for speaking up against poverty and exposing the terrible consequences it inflicts, such as hunger, violence, and death. The ones about Fort Scott, mixed with two from his story on segregation in Alabama, illustrate his own experiences with poverty and racial discrimination. In other words, the gift shows that who he became as an artist stems from his Kansas roots.

The picture that he creates of Kansas is far from negative. In autobiographies and poetry, Parks talks about the ways in which the bounties of Kansas land mitigated the bitterness of poverty. He began his K-State convocation speech with the words:

I would miss this Kansas land. . . . The great prairies filled with green and cornstalks; the flowering apple trees, the tall elms and oaks bordering the streams that gurgled and the rivers that rolled quiet. The summers of long, sleepy days for fishing, swimming and catching crawdads from beneath the rocks.⁸⁸

Further into the speech, he continued:

As a boy in Kansas, I eased the pain of hunger by turning to a mulberry tree, digging a turnip from the earth, plucking an apple from a tree. When a homeless Black boy in the hostile worlds of Harlem or Chicago's Southside is hungry he can turn only to the garbage can. To[o] often the knife or the gun become his means of survival, or brings about his death or imprisonment.

Similarly, Parks portrayed the love of his Kansas family as the strong force that enabled him to transcend the darkness of racial injustice and hatred. In that same convocation speech, he stated:

I was fortunate. The love of my mother and father proved greater than the oppression and bigotry that surrounded me. And it was the love of my family that spared me the tragedy that claimed so many others. It was that love that eventually influenced my choice of weapons with which to fight.

The photographs of Fort Scott and of the various types of African American communities communicate the positive effects of love and fellowship. Others, such as those taken in Europe and Brazil, convey the importance of acknowledging the humanity of all people regardless of skin color. Parks sums up his antiracist perspective most eloquently in *Voices in the Mirror*: "Madeline Murphy. Alexander Liberman. Roy Stryker. The memory of them prevents my looking at all white faces with the same set of

eyes. During those early years when I was inclined to loathe all whites, one would invariably emerge to prove me wrong.”⁸⁹ Stryker was a Kansan like Parks in the racially hostile environment of Washington, DC.

Related to the notion of treating all people justly is the photograph of Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini huddled together under an umbrella, taken early in his career in 1949 (Pl. 19). I argue that its inclusion signals a personal significance. In *To Smile in Autumn*, Parks narrates how he was invited by Bergman to visit the island of Stromboli, Italy, where she was working on a film directed by her lover, Rossellini. Their affair was a scandal because both were married to other people. Parks knew that a photograph documenting a romantic moment between the two would be a big score, but when he accidentally walked in on the couple embracing, he decided to respect their privacy and turned away. Parks guessed that Bergman must have seen him because the next day, she invited him to take a walk with her and Rossellini and asked him to bring his camera.⁹⁰ The photograph and the story behind it illustrate Parks’s belief in doing the right thing by people, regardless of the personal cost, and in the positive outcome of such actions.

Photographs taken outside the United States make up almost half of the gift. Thirty-four prints, 27 percent of the total number, provide evidence of Parks’s travels in Europe, from the period of his post at *LIFE*’s Paris bureau between 1949 and 1951 to the 1960s. In addition to the European images are nineteen photographs of Brazil, from his series about Flávio da Silva and his family, and a handful of independent images from Brazil, Peru, and Canada. The numbers tell the story of Parks as a Black Kansan who succeeded far beyond the boundaries of the segregated small town where he started life. Returning home, Parks brings stories from those faraway places to his fellow Kansans.

Finally, the care with which Parks selected the photographs suggests that it was important to show himself as a multifaceted artist with wide-ranging ideas extending beyond documentary photography. The ways in which he recontextualized some photographs, such as those from the *Restrains: Open and Hidden* series and the Blind River, Ontario, story, demonstrate that he did not regard his images literally. In his mind, they are not bound to their original stories. His books combining poetry and photographs and films, such as *Moments Without Proper Names* and the prologue to the ballet film *Martin* (1991), exemplify how he remixed images. Likewise, his curation of thematic subgroups within the K-State gift, such as the fashion photographs and the portraits of Muhammad Ali, show

how he conceived his photographs as tools advancing broad ideas and cultural change. Through them, Parks challenges his audience to imagine a more inclusive culture than the one they know: a world where Black skin represents ideal beauty, where an African American athlete embodies the consummate hero, and where an artist of African heritage has a place within the lineage of excellent artists in Western art history.

Notes

- 1 Charles Stroh, introduction to *The Gordon Parks Collection: Kansas State University* (Manhattan: Kansas State University Department of Art, 1983), 2.
- 2 Gordon Parks, "Correspondence, 1972," Gordon Parks Artist File, Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University (hereafter Parks File, K-State).
- 3 Gordon Parks, "Articles and Clippings, 1973," Parks File, K-State.
- 4 Reference courtesy of Professor John Edwin Mason, University of Virginia. I am grateful to him for sharing his research on Parks with me.
- 5 Charles Stroh, email message to the author, September 9, 2020, "Correspondence, 2020," Parks File, K-State.
- 6 Several publications have documented the lack of control and agency of *LIFE* staff photographers, most notably Russell Lord, *Gordon Parks: The Making of an Argument* (Göttingen and Pleasantville, NY: Steidl and The Gordon Parks Foundation, 2013); and *LIFE* editor Wilson Hicks, *Words and Pictures: An Introduction to Photojournalism* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952).
- 7 Ralph Baum and Gordon Parks, Kansas State University, Modernage Photographic Services exhibit notes, 1973, MS 2013-01, box 31, folder 23, Gordon Parks Collection, Wichita State University Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives, (hereafter Parks Collection, WSUL).
- 8 Jessica Reichman confirmed that Parks gave the title *Moments Without Proper Names* to the K-State photographs. She was curator of the university art collection before the Beach Museum of Art existed and worked with Parks to organize a traveling exhibition of select photographs in the early 1980s. Jessica Reichman, email message to the author, September 1, 2020, Beach Museum of Art archives.
- 9 Erika Doss, "Visualizing Black America: Gordon Parks at Life, 1948–1971," in *Looking at Life Magazine*, ed. Erika Doss (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 227–8.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 234.
- 11 Deborah Willis, "Gordon Parks: Haute Couture and the Everyday," *Gordon Parks: The New Tide: Early Work, 1940–50*, ed. Philip Brookman and Anjuli Lebowitz (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2018), 267–75.
- 12 Deborah Willis, "Home: What Does It Look Like? Gordon Parks Responds," *Let's Talk Art: Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G2xVqpXxbwg>.
- 13 Philip Brookman, email message to the author, April 19, 2021, "Correspondence, 2021," Parks File, K-State.
- 14 Edward Steichen, press release, January 31, 1954, "The Family of Man: January 24–May 8, 1955, MoMA: 52 Exhibitions," Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2429?>

- 15 Installation views are available on “The Family of Man, MoMA: 52 Exhibitions” page. Parks participated with his photograph of a woman gambling at the Caribe Hilton, San Juan, Puerto Rico (1949). For a critical discussion of the exhibition, see Fred Turner, *The Democratic Surround: Multimedia and American Liberalism from World War II to the Psychedelic Sixties* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 181–212. I am grateful to Philip Brookman for this reference.
- 16 Gordon Parks, *Voices in the Mirror: An Autobiography*, (1990, repr., New York: Anchor Books, 1992), 93-94. Citations refer to the Anchor edition.
- 17 Titles in italics are captions published in *LIFE*, are known to be by Parks, or are from *Half Past Autumn*, the book he wrote for his 1997 retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Titles not italicized are descriptive titles provided by the author for discussion purposes.
- 18 Gordon Parks, “A Look Back,” 1973, MS 2013-01, box 34, folder 53, Parks Collection, WSUL.
- 19 Paul Roth and Amanda Maddox, eds., *Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story* (Germany and Pleasantville, NY: Steidl and The Gordon Parks Foundation, 2018); John Edwin Mason, “Gordon Parks and Flavio da Silva: Rio de Janeiro, 1961,” *John Edwin Mason: Documentary, Motorsports, Photo History* (blog), June 27, 2014, https://johnedwinmason.typepad.com/john_edwin_mason_photogra/2014/06/gordon-parks-rio-brazil.html.
- 20 Gordon Parks, “A Great Black Photographer Remembers,” interview by David Hoffman, n.d., video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xYq0M5cZBWs&list=RDCMUC6wBro4B4pf9xnBh9Xi2zcQ&start_radio=1&rv=xYq0M5cZBWs&t=50. In this interview, Parks stated that he had worked for three months in Brazil. In fact, he was there for 20 days; see Paul Roth, “Saving Flávio: A Photographic Essay in Context,” in Roth and Maddox, *Gordon Parks*, 94–101.
- 21 Gordon Parks, *To Smile in Autumn* (1979, repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 93-94. Citations refer to the University of Minnesota edition.
- 22 Parks wrote an essay to accompany his photographs about the Metropolitan Baptist Church, but the project was not published by *LIFE*. Gordon Parks, “Metropolitan Baptist Church,” 1953, MS 2013-01, box 18, folder 78, Parks Collection, WSUL.
- 23 I am grateful to Beach Museum of Art Associate Curator of Education Kathrine Schlageck and her student intern for identifying the subject. The saint’s effigy is at the Church of the Lazarist Mission, Paris, France.
- 24 None of Parks’s published diary entries about his assignment in Rio de Janeiro discuss this particular image.
- 25 “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” *LIFE*, June 16, 1961, 93. For information on the authors of the text, see Roth, “Saving Flávio,” 94.
- 26 “Harlem Gang Leader,” *LIFE*, November 1, 1948, 97.
- 27 Parks provides more details in *To Smile in Autumn*, 43. He observes that Red put his hand behind the corpse’s neck to feel for wounds. In this version, Parks mistakenly identified Red’s gang as the Nomads.
- 28 “Harlem Gang Leader,” 101.

- 29 Gordon Parks, *Half Past Autumn: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (New York: Little, Brown, in association with the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1997), 80–81.
- 30 The image of Parks’s *American Gothic* is widely available online, including in “Washington, D.C., and Ella Watson, 1942,” The Gordon Parks Foundation, <https://www.gordonparksfoundation.org/gordon-parks/photography-archive/washington-d-c-and-ella-watson-1942>. It is also in the book of poetry by Parks, published shortly after the K-State donation, *Moments Without Proper Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 6. A reproduction of Wood’s *American Gothic* is on the website of the Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/6565/american-gothic>.
- 31 Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (1966, repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2010), 231.
- 32 Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 83.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 94, 117–118.
- 34 Gordon Parks, “Fashion Photography,” ca. 1960, MSS83761, box 2, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, DC. My gratitude goes to Deborah Willis and Philip Brookman for directing me to this reference and sharing information about this manuscript.
- 35 Richard Ormond and Elaine Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent: Complete Paintings* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 1:4–5, 2:12.
- 36 *Mrs. George Swinton* entered the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1922. *Mr. and Mrs. I. N. Phelps Stoke* was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1938.
- 37 The photograph, in the archives of Condé Nast, depicts models wearing Charles James gowns in the interior of French & Co., New York. Beaton produced it for *Vogue*.
- 38 Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 94.
- 39 My thanks to Amanda Smith, former Assistant Director at the Gordon Parks Foundation, for this reference.
- 40 In a *contrapposto* stance, the body twists asymmetrically along the vertical axis, with one foot supporting the body’s weight and the other foot at rest. The arm diagonally across the active leg is also in action, while the other arm is at rest.
- 41 Susan Sidlauskas, “Painting Skin: John Singer Sargent’s ‘Madame X,’” *American Art* 15 (2001): 12, 14. This publication includes a photograph taken by Sargent of the painting as displayed in the 1884 Salon, as well as a later one of Sargent in his studio, standing next to the portrait after it had been reworked.
- 42 Dorothy Mahon and Silvia A. Centeno, “Revealing Madame X,” *150th Anniversary: Conservation Stories, The Met*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/conservation-and-scientific-research/conservation-stories/2020/madame-x>.
- 43 Margaret Sullivan, “Aertsen’s Kitchen and Market Scenes: Audience and Innovation in Northern Art,” *Art Bulletin* 81, no. 2 (June 1999): 236–48. For Italian market scenes, see Sheila McTighe, “Foods and the Body in Italian Genre Paintings, about 1580: Campi, Passarotti, Carracci,” *Art Bulletin* 86, no. 2 (June 2004): 301–23.
- 44 George Philippe Lebourdais, “Notes,” in *Gordon Parks: Collected Works*, ed. Peter W. Kunhardt Jr. and Paul Roth (Göttingen and Pleasantville, NY: Steidl and Gordon Parks Foundation, 2013), 2:333.

- 45 Parks, *To Smile in Autumn*, 66.
- 46 See “Pablo Picasso, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon,” *MoMA: Art and Artists*, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79766?>.
- 47 Parks, *To Smile in Autumn*, 47, 74.
- 48 Walter Liedtke, “Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669): Paintings,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000–), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/rmbt/hd_rmbt.htm. My thanks to Frima Fox Hofrichter for pointing out the similarities in composition between *Political Meeting, Paris*, and Rembrandt’s group portrait of surgeons.
- 49 For a discussion of Sargent’s portrait of Dr. Pozzi and how it flouts the conventions of male portraiture, see Juliet Bellow, “The Doctor Is In: John Singer Sargent’s Dr. Pozzi at Home,” *American Art* 26, no. 2 (2012): 42–67.
- 50 April M. Watson argued that the juxtaposition reinforced the idea that Ali was a legend who belonged “firmly within sporting history”; see “The Image of Champions: Gordon Parks and Muhammad Ali in *LIFE*,” in *Gordon Parks x Muhammad Ali: The Image of a Champion, 1996-1970* (Pleasantville, NY: The Gordon Parks Foundation, 2019), 120.
- 51 On the influence of seventeenth-century Dutch art in Sargent’s works, see Ormond and Kilmurray, *John Singer Sargent*, 1:5.
- 52 Seymour Slive, *Frans Hals* (London: Phaidon, 1970), 1:124.
- 53 Vermeer’s painting has been in the collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, since 1942.
- 54 Gordon Parks, “The Redemption of the Champion,” *LIFE*, September 9, 1966, 84.
- 55 Michael Squire, *The Art of the Body: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33–35. My gratitude to Alison Poe for her assistance in identifying references for my discussion on ancient Greek and Roman art.
- 56 Jens M. Daehner, “Statue of a Seated Boxer (Terme Boxer),” in *Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World*, ed. Jens M. Daehner and Kenneth Lapatin (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015), 223.
- 57 For more examples of Greek sculpture fragments, see *ibid.*, 190–302.
- 58 It entered the museum’s collection in 1932.
- 59 Squire, *Art of the Body*, 8.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 19–21.
- 61 Deborah Willis, “Gordon Parks,” 267–75; and *Posing Beauty: African American Images from the 1890s to the Present* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), xix–xxv.
- 62 Richard Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank in Roman Art: The Use of Gestures to Denote Status in Roman Sculpture and Coinage* (New Haven: The Academy, 1963), 30–31, 40, 57; Giuseppina Carlotta Cianferoni, “Portrait Statue of Aule Meteli (Arringatore),” in Daehner and Lapatin, *Power and Pathos*, 256–7.
- 63 Brilliant, *Gesture and Rank*, 67–68. On the gesture’s significance, see Gregory S. Aldrete, *Gestures and Acclamations in Ancient Rome* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 45–46.

- 64 Parks, *Moments Without Proper Names*, 138–9.
- 65 Watson, “The Image of Champions,” in *Gordon Parks x Muhammad Ali*, 121.
- 66 The still life was titled *Still Life, New York*, in *Half Past Autumn*, the book accompanying Parks’s first retrospective. Because the artist worked with curators Philip Brookman and Deborah Willis on the project, I assume that he assigned or approved the titles of works.
- 67 James Jordan, Archive Manager, Gordon Parks Foundation, email message to the author, September 10, 2021. Jordan confirmed that Parks titled the work *The Stranger* in his book *Half Past Autumn*.
- 68 Parks also included a few photographs from his work with the Farm Security Administration in the early 1940s and from his story about the mining town of Blind River, Ontario, Canada. One photograph belongs to his story about Benedictine monks in Atchison, Kansas (*LIFE*, December 26, 1955).
- 69 For the most complete information on *Fort Scott Revisited*, see Karen E. Haas, *Back to Fort Scott* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2015), exhibition catalog. However, there are two photographs mistakenly identified by Haas as part of the series. Labeled with Gordon Parks Foundation accession numbers GP04630 and GP02620, they depict the interior of a house, which Haas identifies as rooms in the home of Mrs. Rivers in Fort Scott. In fact, the photographs document Goodnow House, a historical home in Manhattan, KS. Parks visited and photographed the museum in 1984 as part of an artist residency in Manhattan sponsored by the local newspaper the *Manhattan Mercury*.
- 70 Parks returned to Fort Scott in 1940 but only briefly, to serve as pallbearer at his father’s funeral; see the annotated timeline by Sarah Price in this volume. We are grateful to Prof. John Edwin Mason for sharing his research on Andrew Jackson Parks’s funeral.
- 71 Mason addresses the significance of this project in his forthcoming book about Gordon Parks’s *LIFE* publications and their impact on modern American culture.
- 72 *LIFE*, September 24, 1956, 109.
- 73 I benefited from a discussion of this image with Director Linda Duke, in which she pointed out its ambiguous mood. She noted that her discussions with audience members in several museum programs revealed varied interpretations. White participants interpreted the image as a family relaxing on the porch. African American participants, on the other hand, saw the family as partially on guard.
- 74 Parks, *Half Past Autumn*, 168.
- 75 There are eight independent photographs with dimensions approx. 26 by 37 in. or 37 by 26 in.: Harlem rooftops, *The Stranger*, a black-and-white woman and child taken in Blind River, Ont. (unpublished but part of Parks’s story “Blind River Uranium” published in *LIFE* on August 1, 1955), and the chromogenic prints *Leopard, Brazil* (1947, Pl. 82), Backyard of Parks Home, Brooklyn Bridge (1958), *Western Dawn* (ca. 1959, Pl. 85), and Girl, Peru (1960, Pl. 83). One scale down in size are ten more self-contained photographs with dimensions approx. 19 by 14 in. or 14 by 19 in. Chromogenic prints include *Still Life, New York*, Nun Passing Store Window, Brazil (1947), Jets (1959), Still Life with Pipe and Pocket Watch (1971), and Flower and Leaf (1971). In addition are three chromogenic photographs taken in Europe in the 1960s: *Chimney Pots, Paris* (1964, Pl. 84), another multiple-exposure image; *Paris Race Track* (1965); *Still life, Paris* (1965). In addition are two gelatin silver prints: Woman and Child, Puerto Rico (1949, Pl. 79) and Men with Railroad Car, New York (1957).

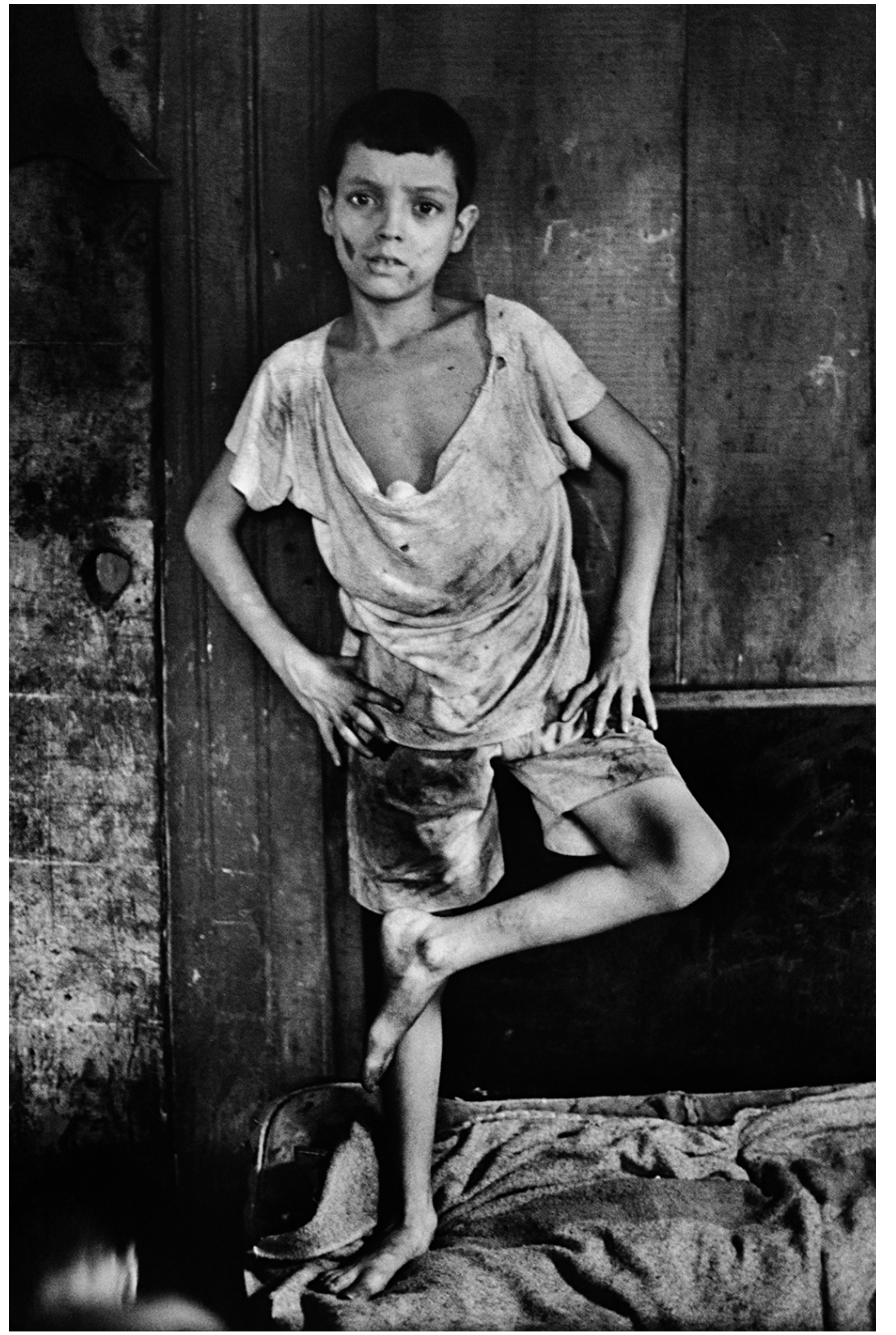
- 76 David Parks identified the photograph during a visit to the Beach Museum of Art on September 26, 2019, part of an itinerary that included a public lecture at K-State.
- 77 For the image of mother and child in Blind River, see *Moments Without Proper Names*, 133. Other compositions are Puerto Rico (1949, Pl. 79); Estoril, Portugal (1950, Pl. 21, unpublished in *LIFE*); Babe Ruth's funeral (Pl. 14); one from *Freedom's Fearful Foe: Poverty* (Pl. 11); and *Bessie and Little Richard the morning after she scalded her husband*, from the 1968 story of the Fontenelle family in Harlem (Pl. 65). See *Moments Without Proper Names*, 114, for the Puerto Rico image.
- 78 The title appears in the heading of Parks's manuscript; Gordon Parks, "Metropolitan Baptist Church," 1953, MS 2013-01, box 18, folder 78, Parks Collection, WSUL.
- 79 The same image cropped differently appears in the exhibition catalog *Half Past Autumn* with the title *Black Militant Rally, New York*.
- 80 Parks, *Moments Without Proper Names*, 44.
- 81 The 1973 print measures 31 1/8 × 25 1/2 in.
- 82 *LIFE*, August 25, 1952.
- 83 Gordon Parks identifies the two women in his annotated draft for "Fort Scott Revisited." The unpublished manuscript at the Wichita State University Libraries is reproduced in Haas, *Back to Fort Scott*, 129–36.
- 84 Parks, *To Smile in Autumn*, 93.
- 85 Parks, "Metropolitan Baptist Church," 1953, MS 2013-01, box 18, folder 78, Parks Collection, WSUL.
- 86 Parks identifies the pastor as "Reverend C.H. Ledbetter" in his unpublished manuscript, but the reverend's son identified his father as E. F. Ledbetter. Pastor E. F. Ledbetter Jr., phone interview with author, August 18, 2016.
- 87 Parks, *To Smile in Autumn*, 94.
- 88 Gordon Parks, "A Look Back," 1973, MS 2013-01, box 34, folder 53, Parks Collection, WSUL.
- 89 Parks, *Voices in the Mirror*, 94–95.
- 90 Parks, *To Smile in Autumn*, 49.







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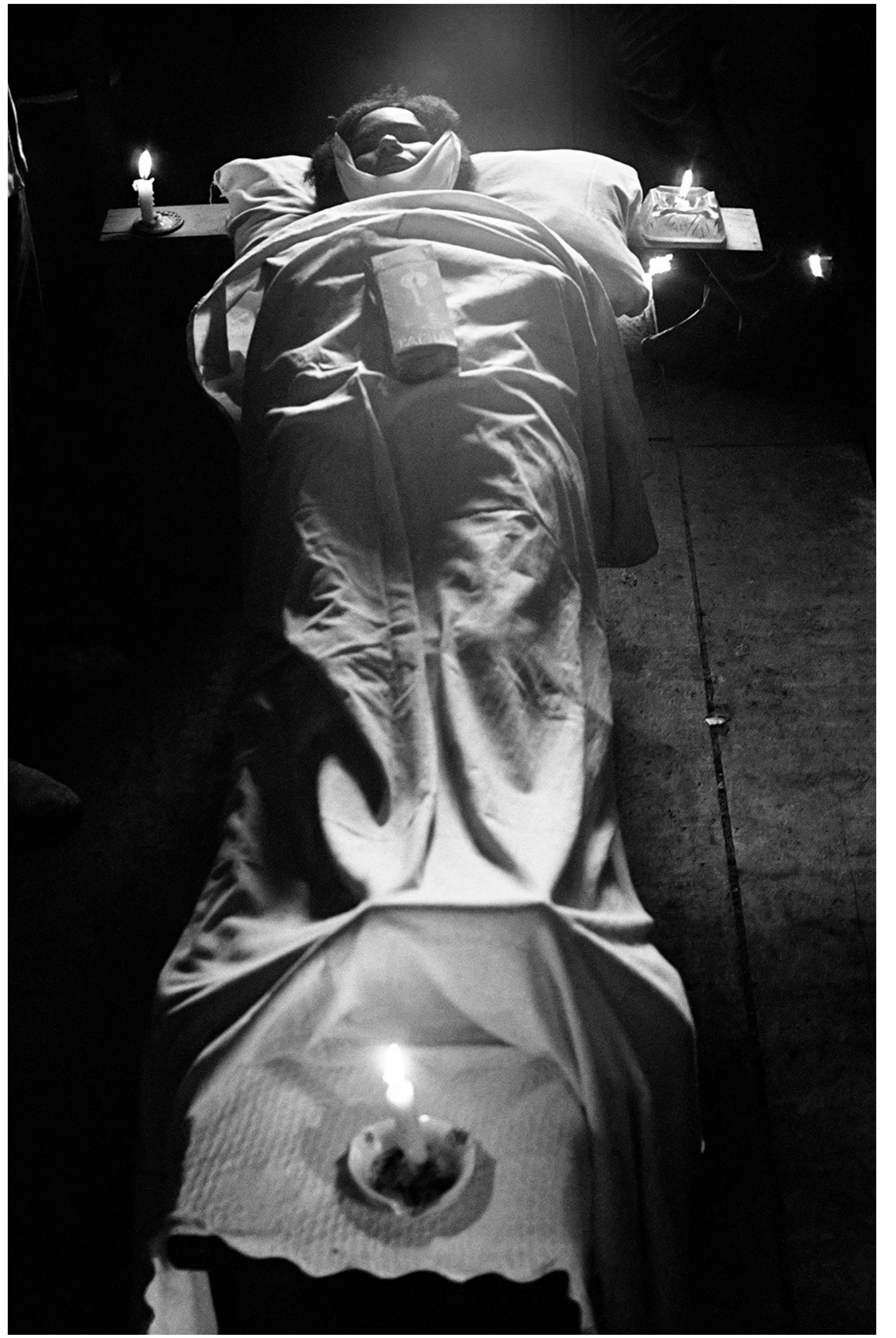


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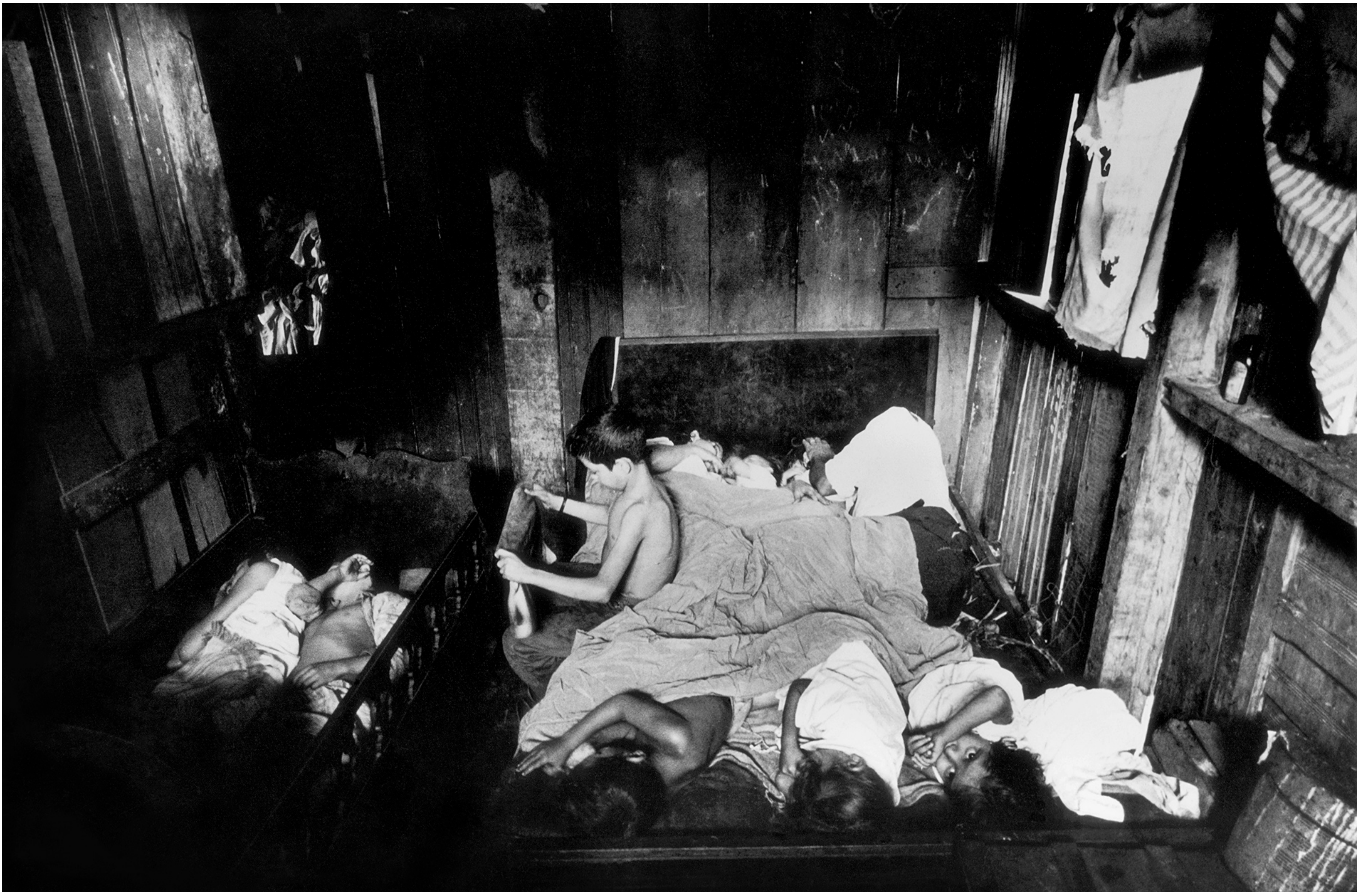


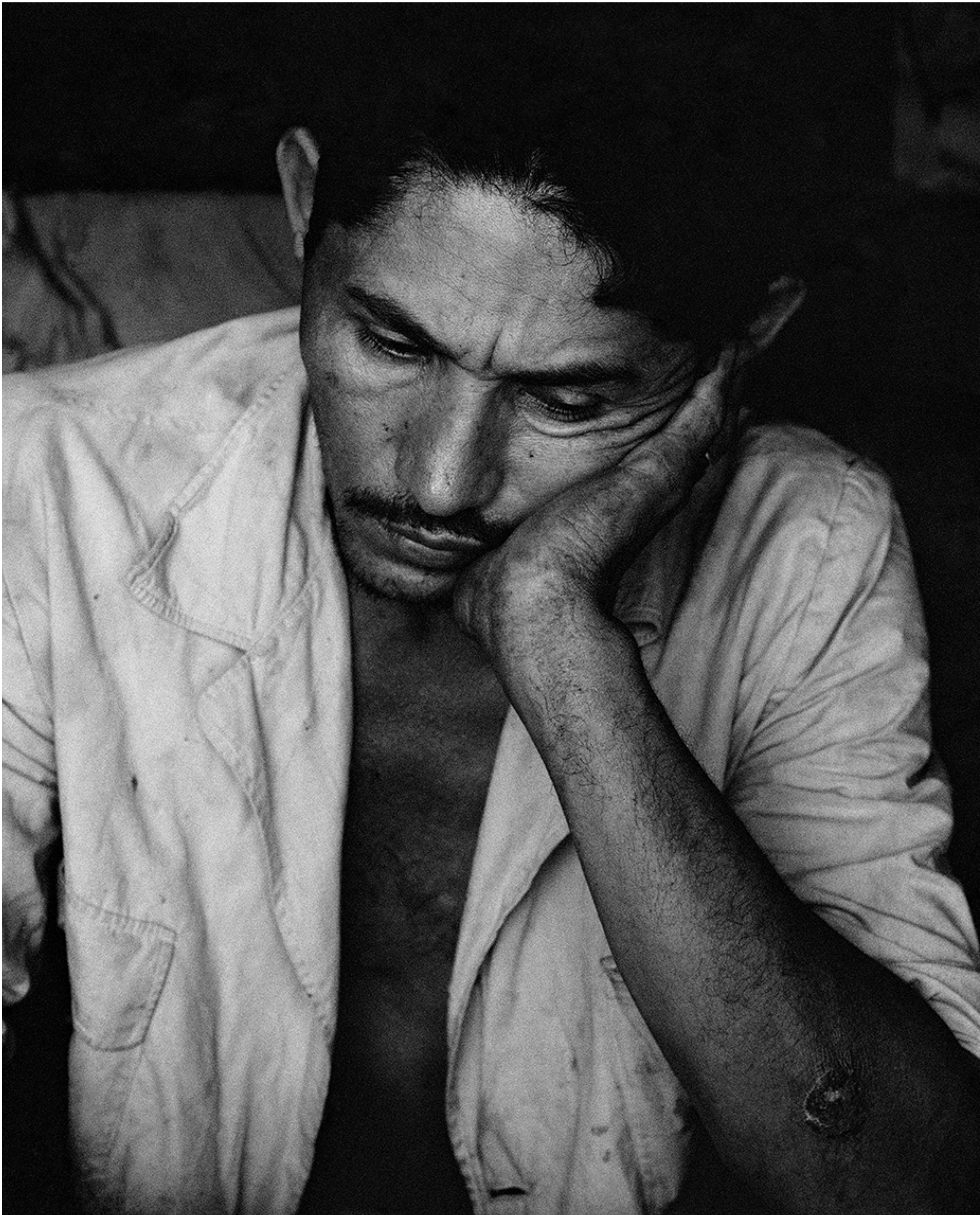


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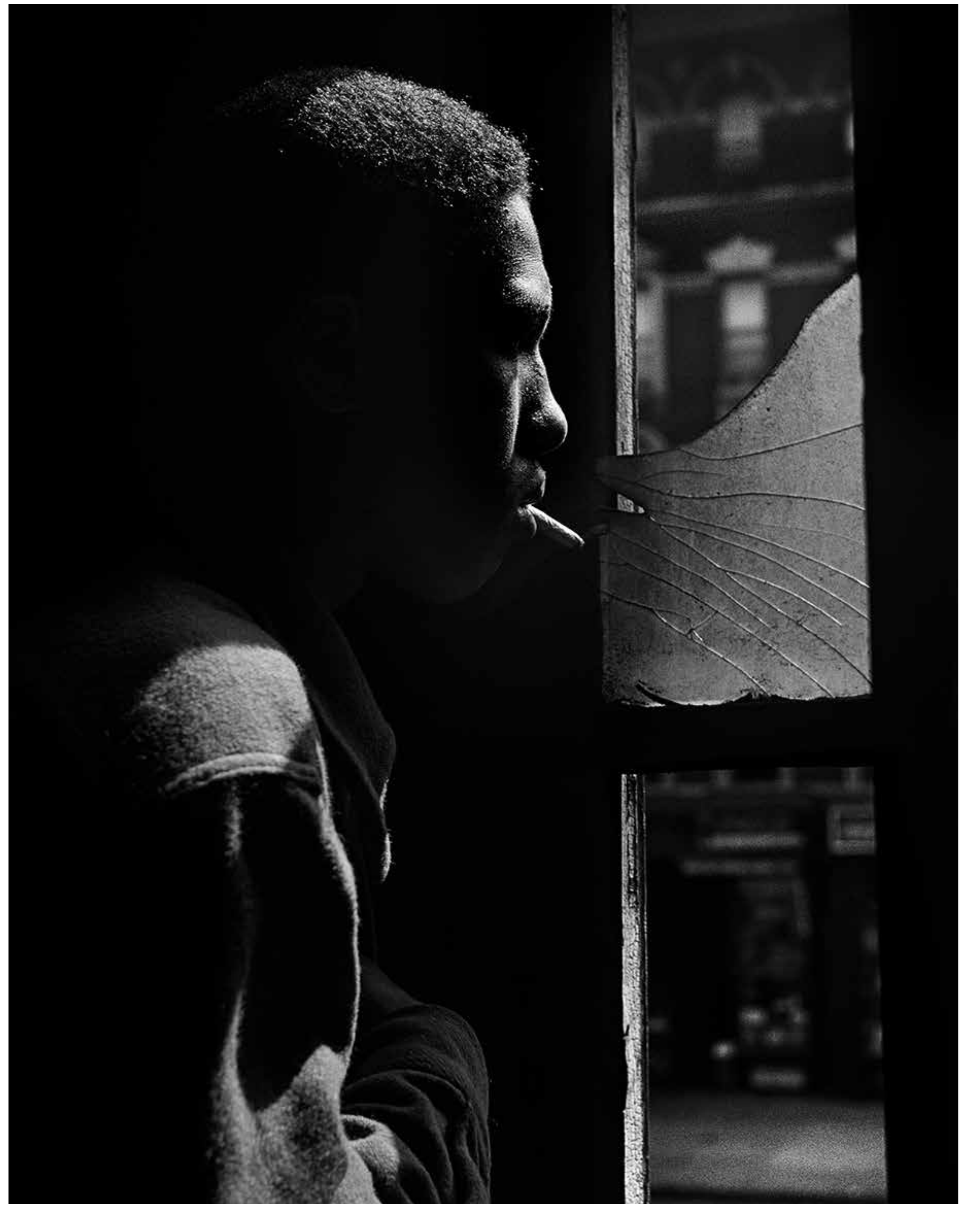




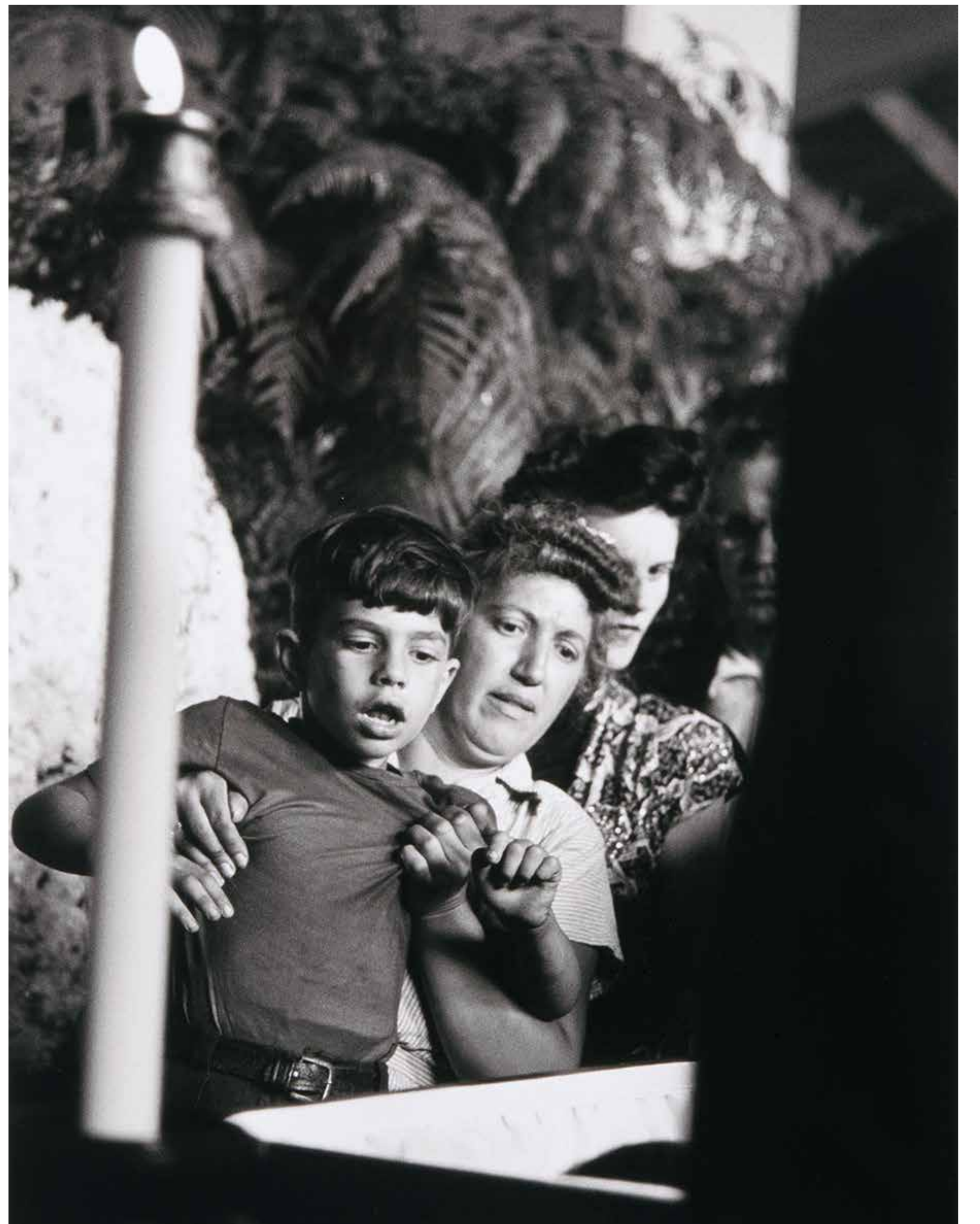








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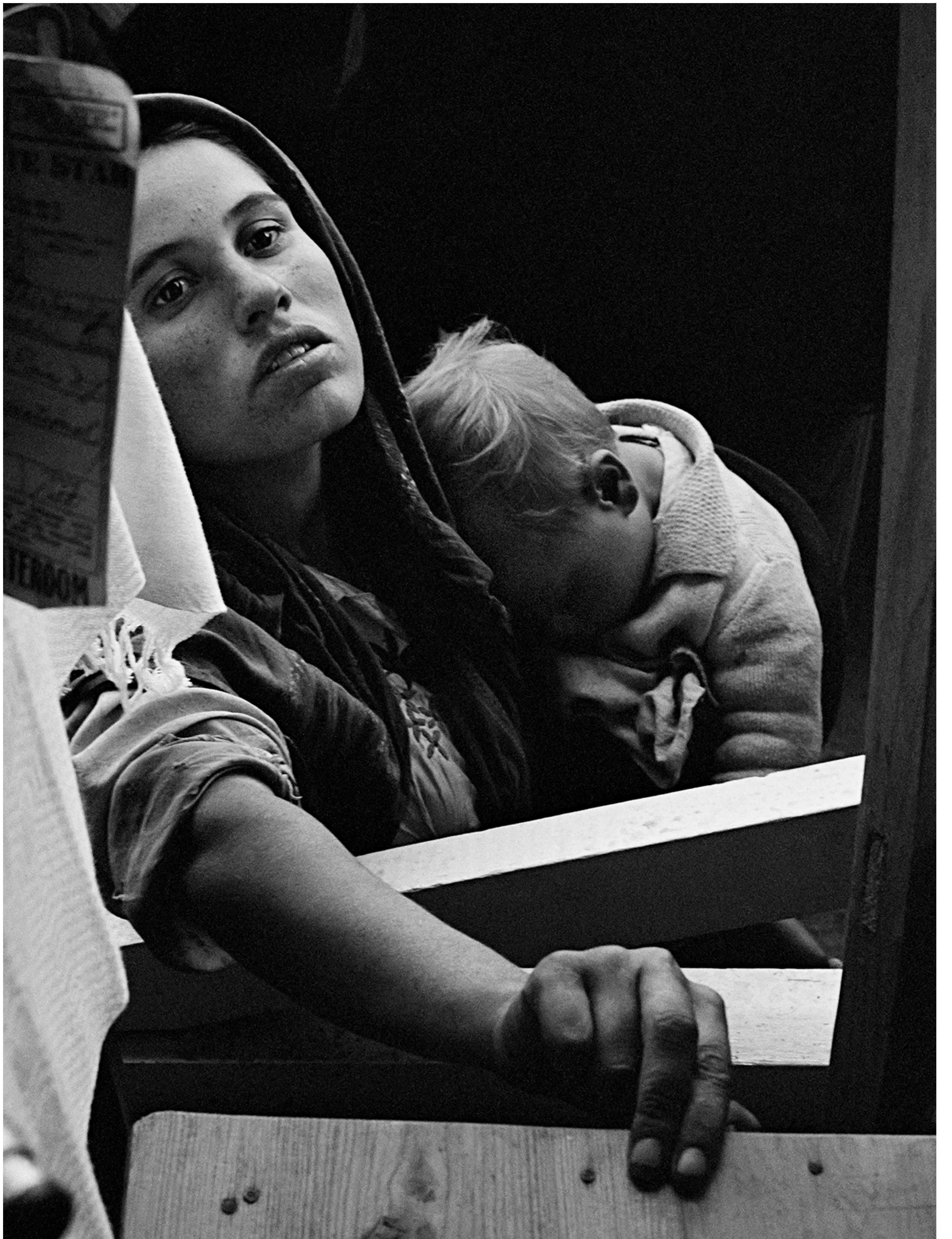














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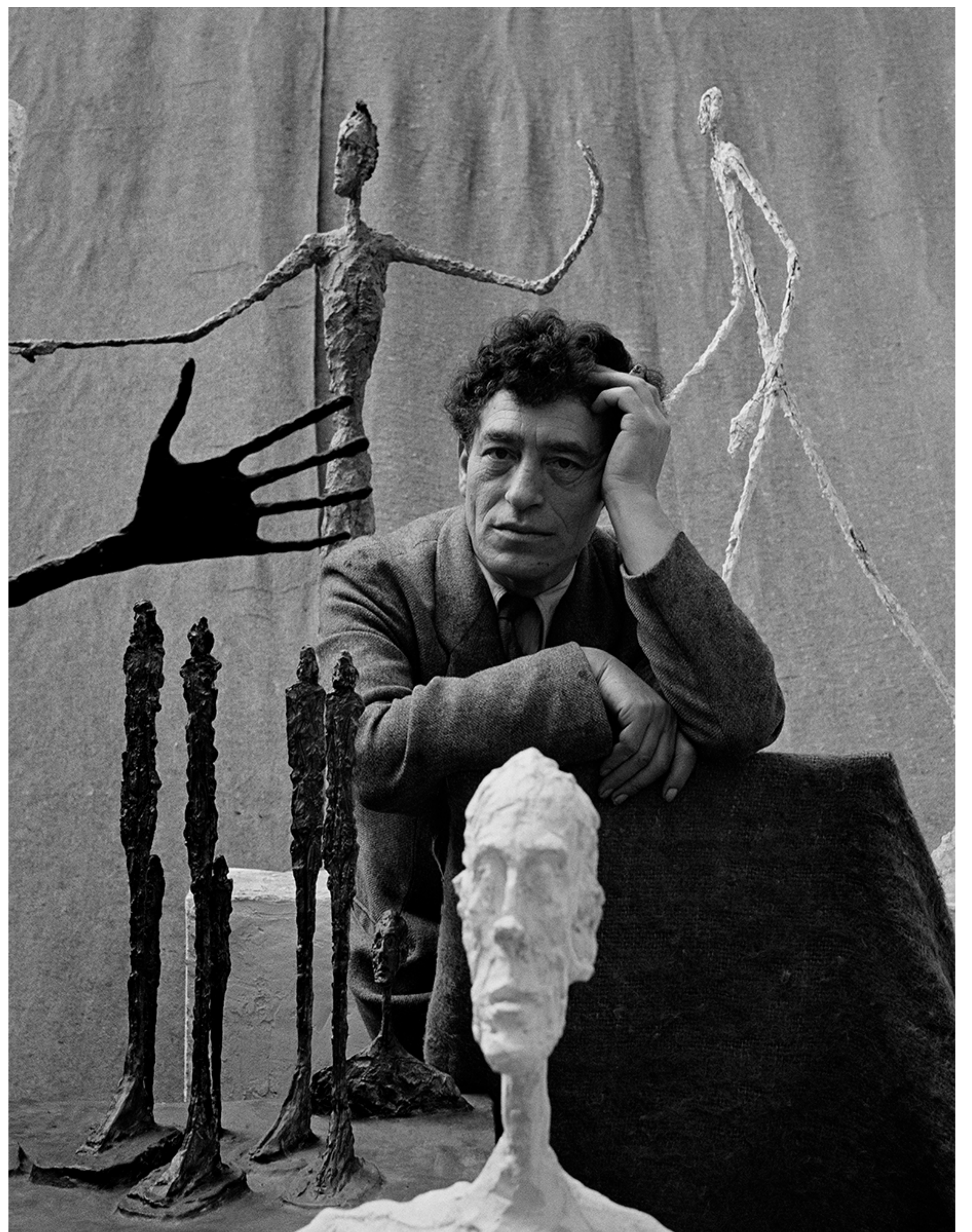


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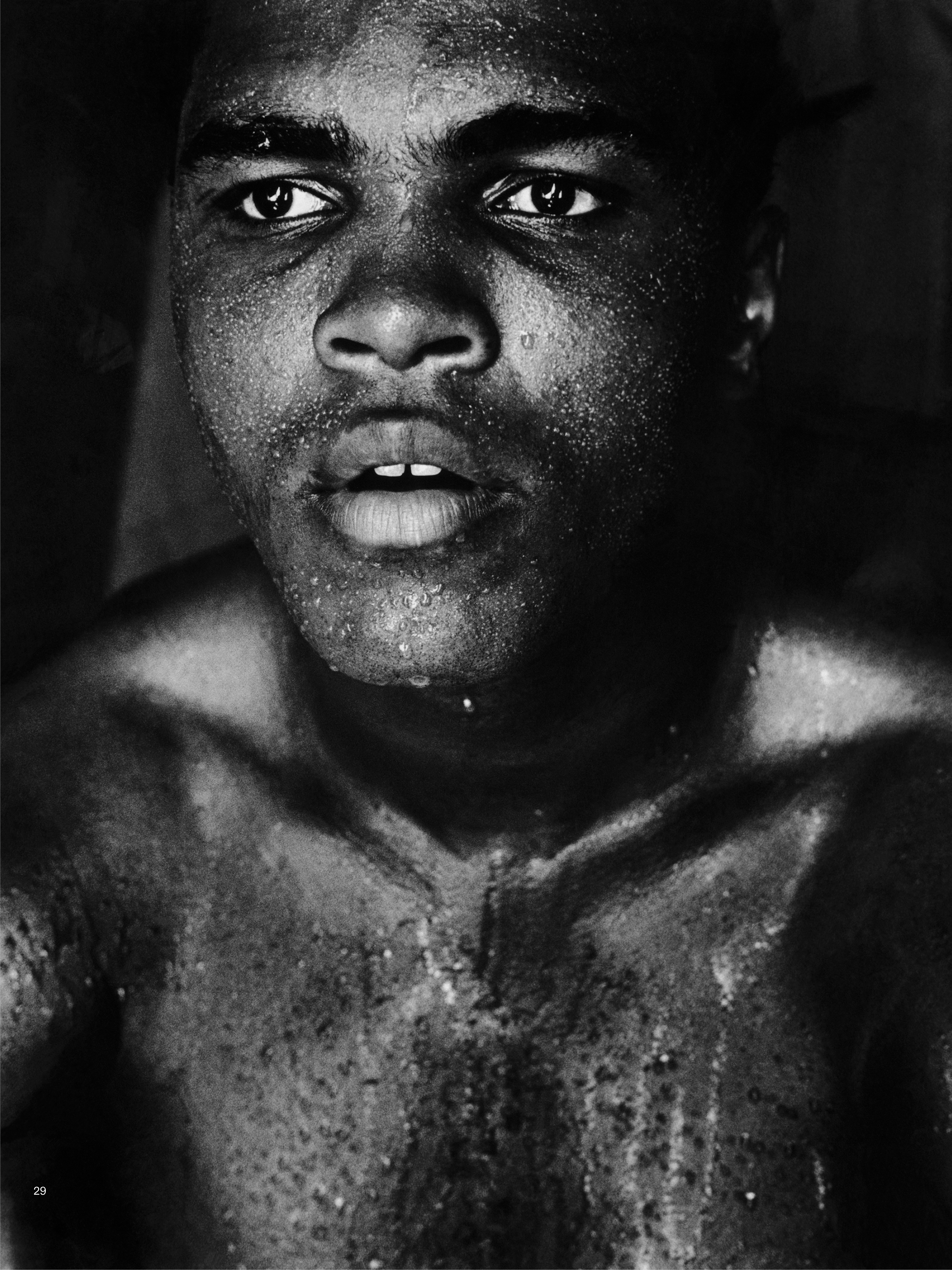




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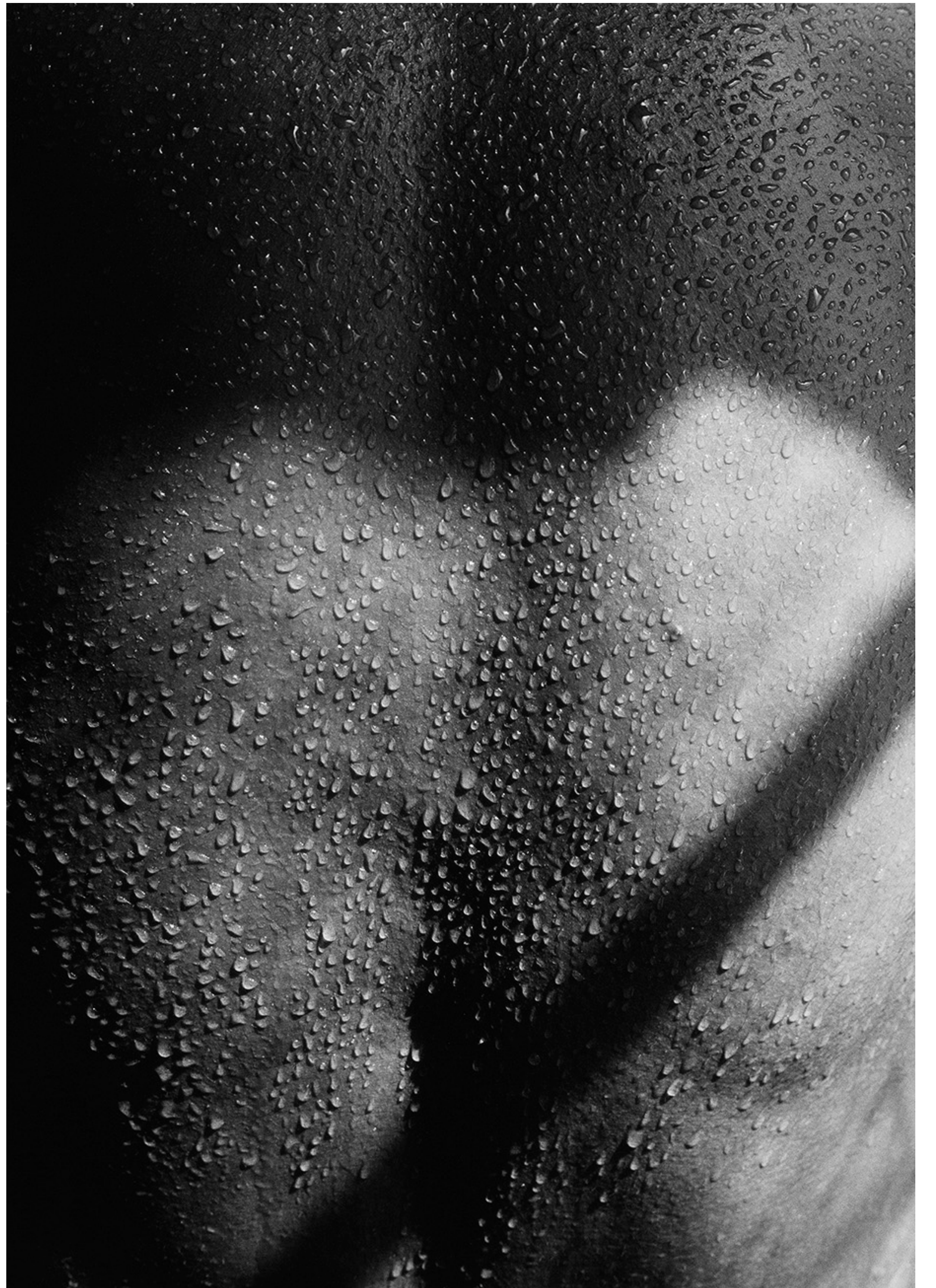
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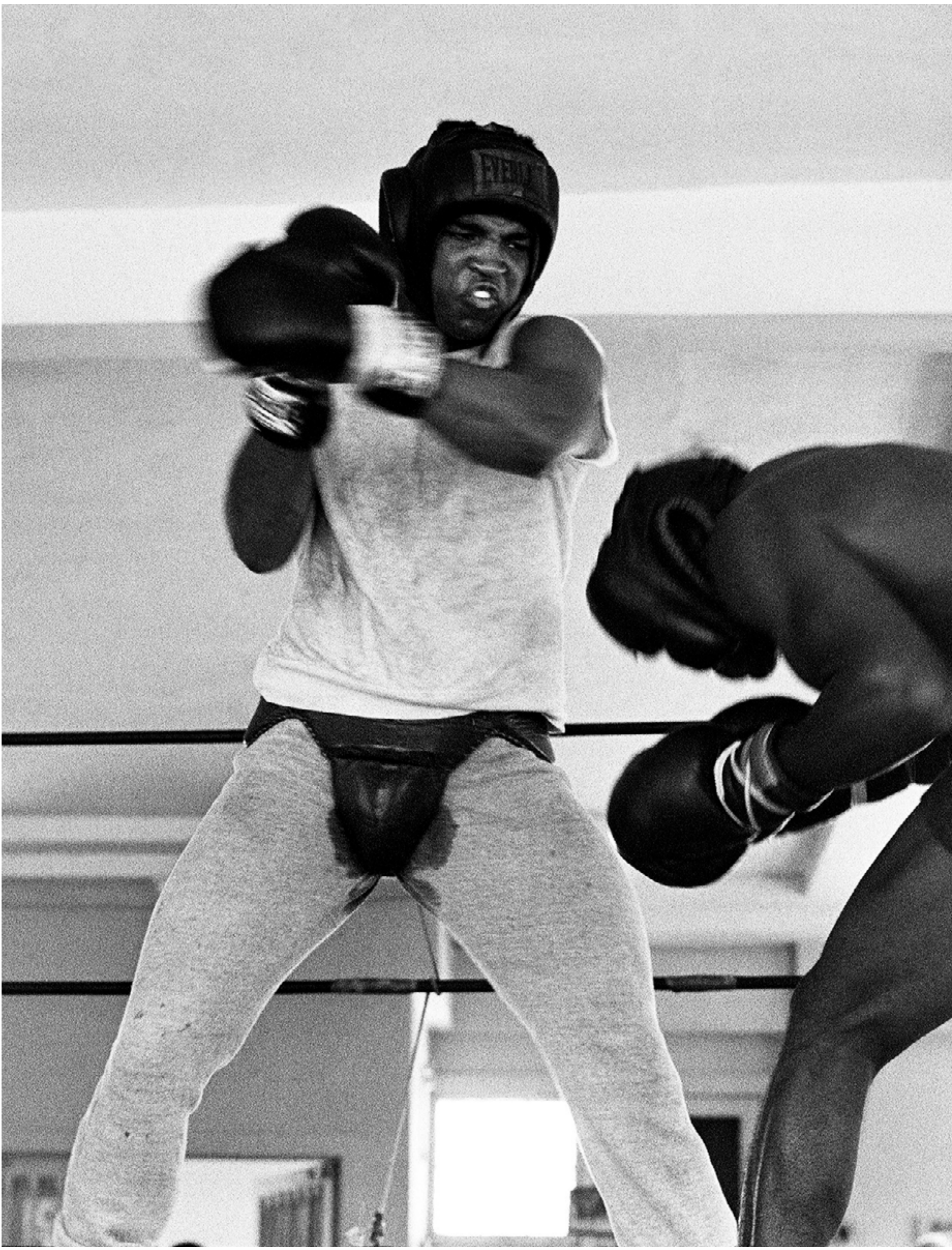




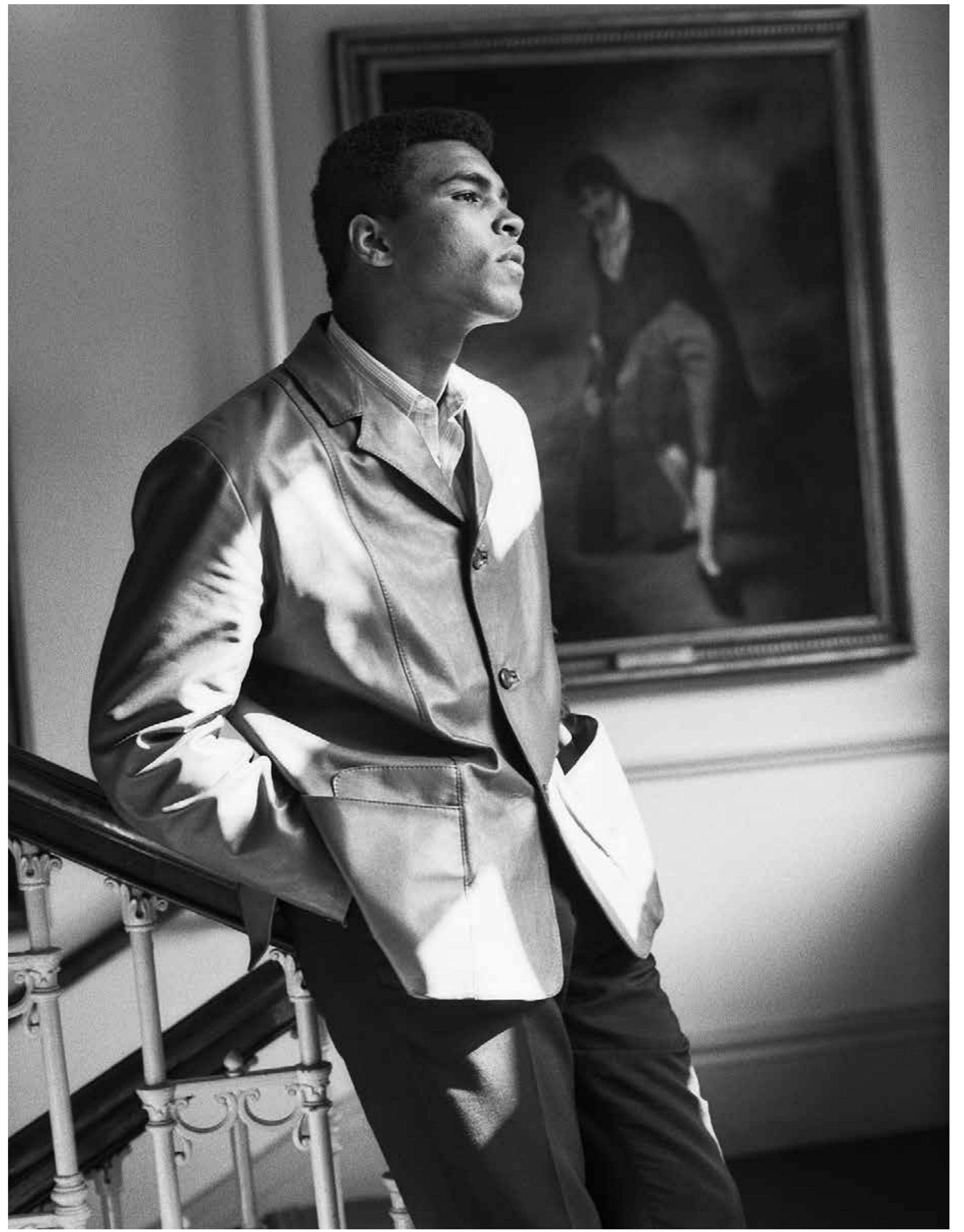
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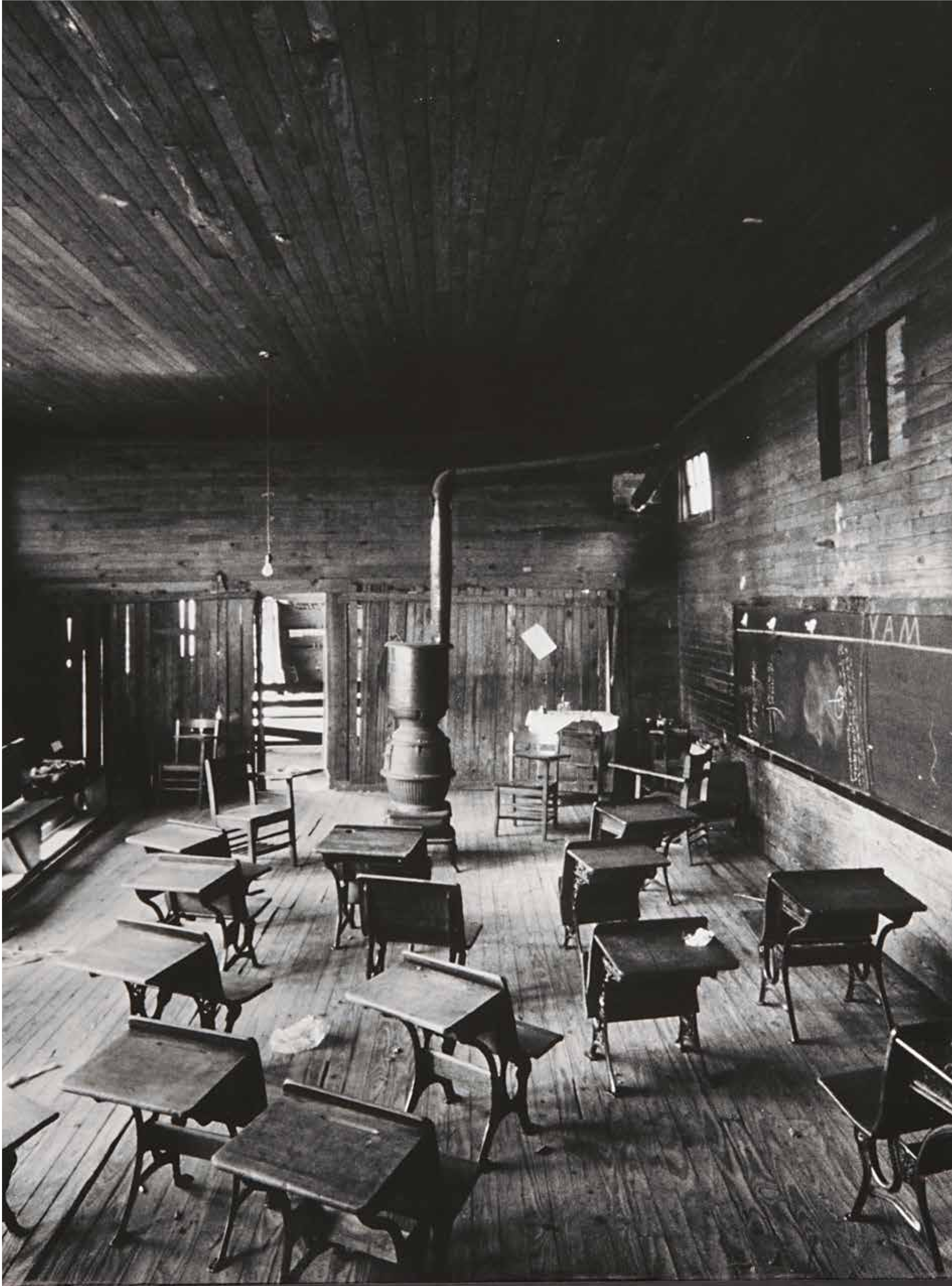


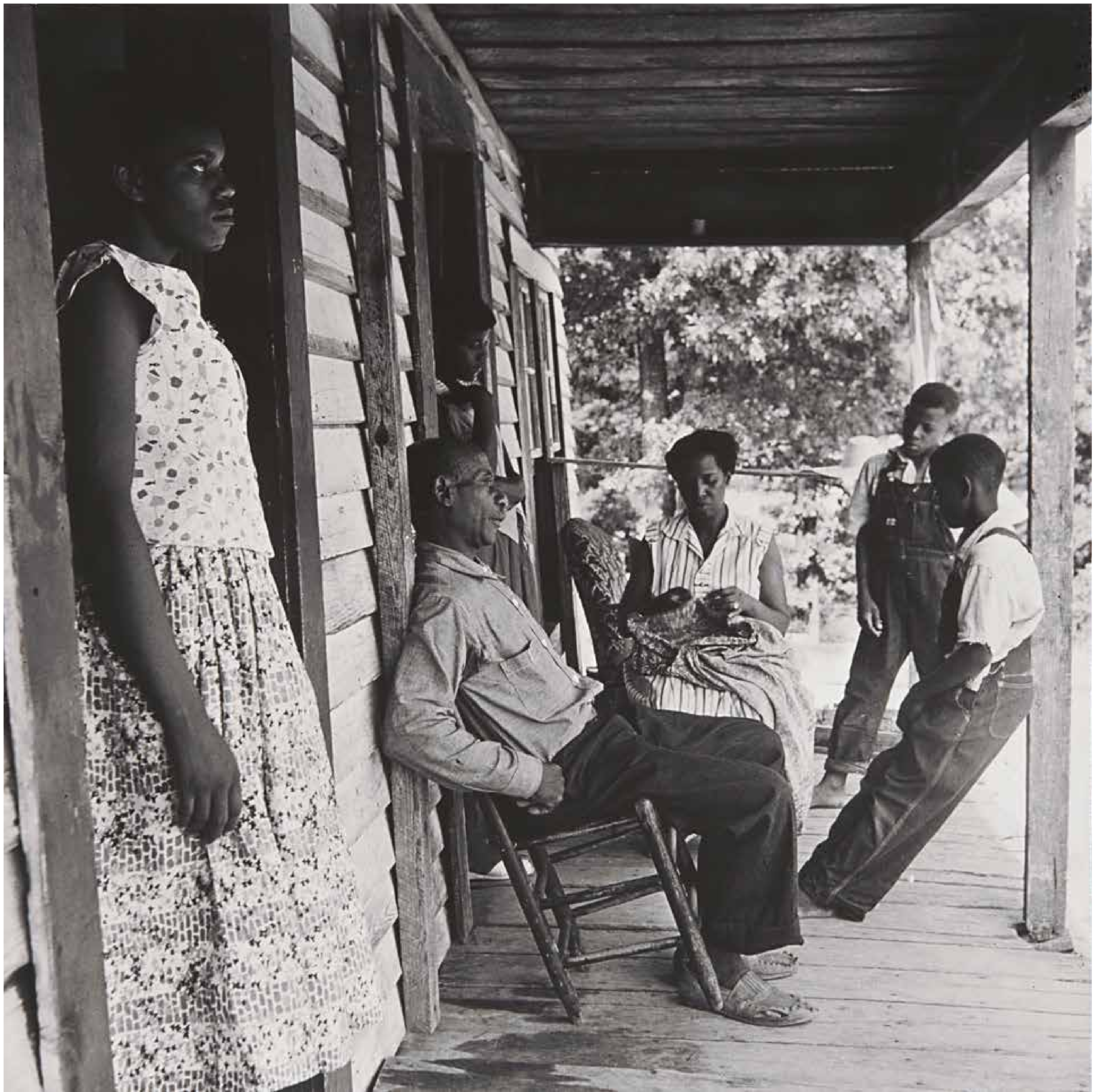
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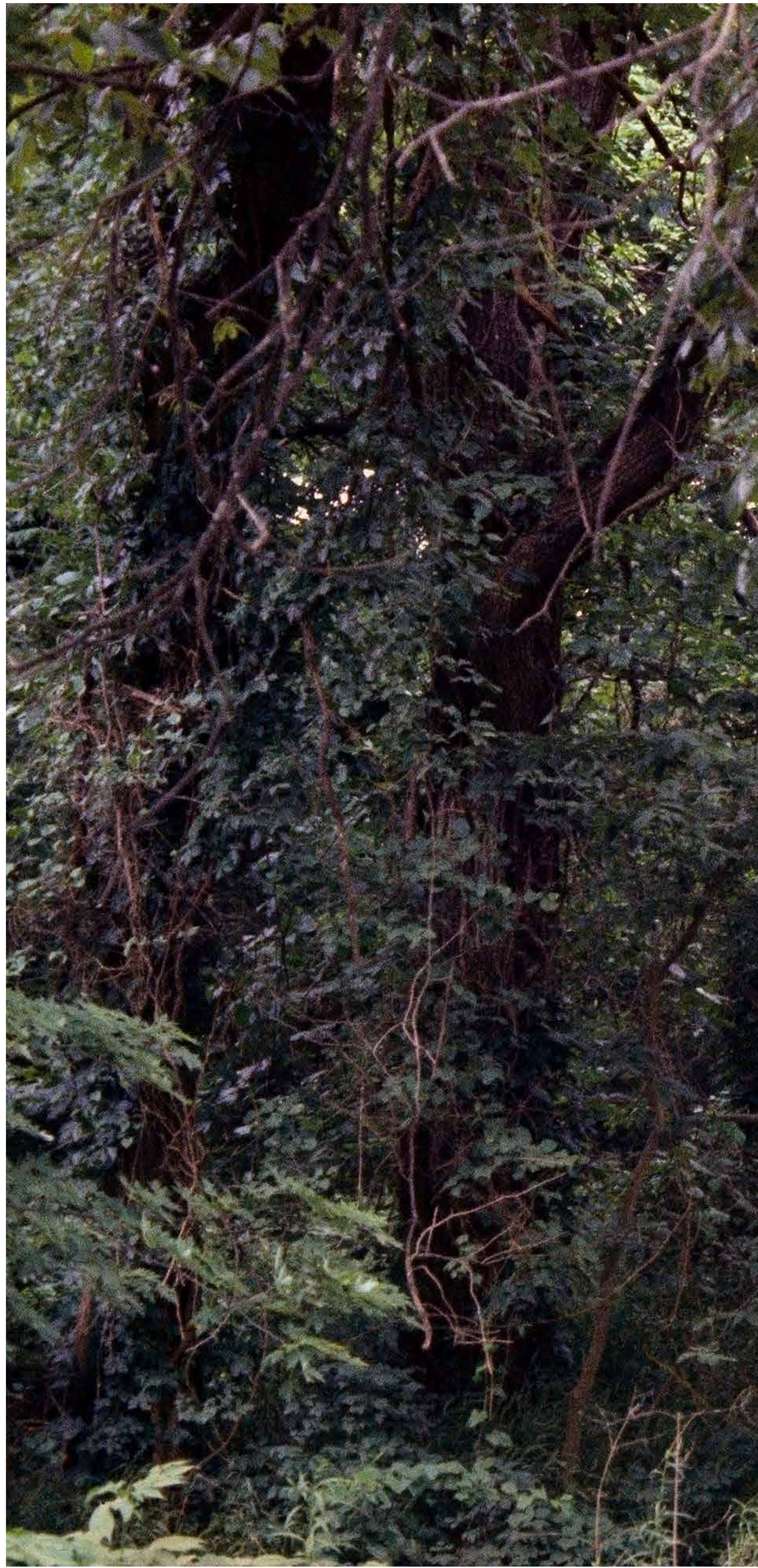


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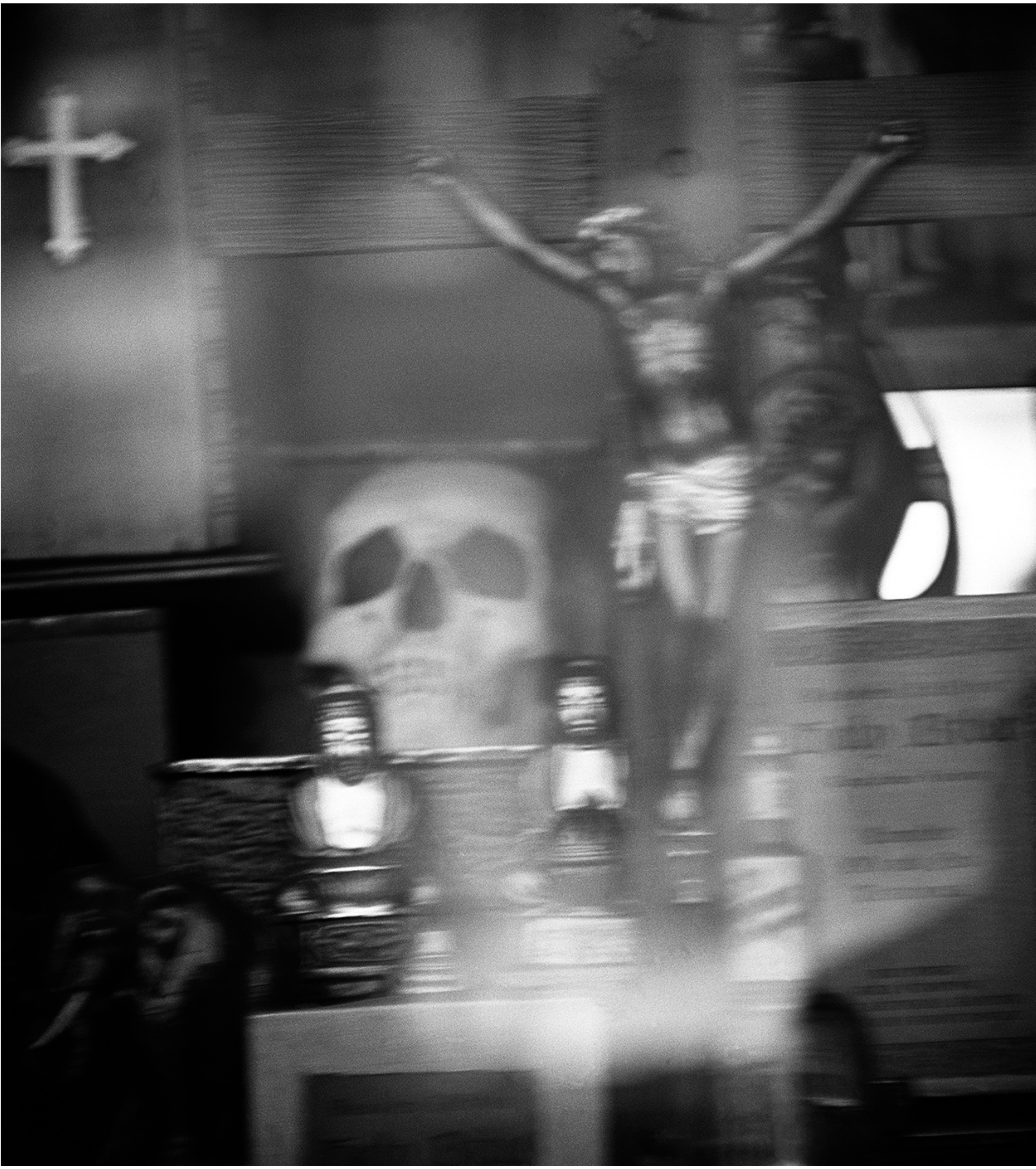
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Ante Missam
Cum Sacerdos lavat manus, dicat :
Da, Dómine, virtútem mánibus meis
ad abstergéndam omnem mácular
ut sine pollutióne mentis et córporis
váleam tibi servire.







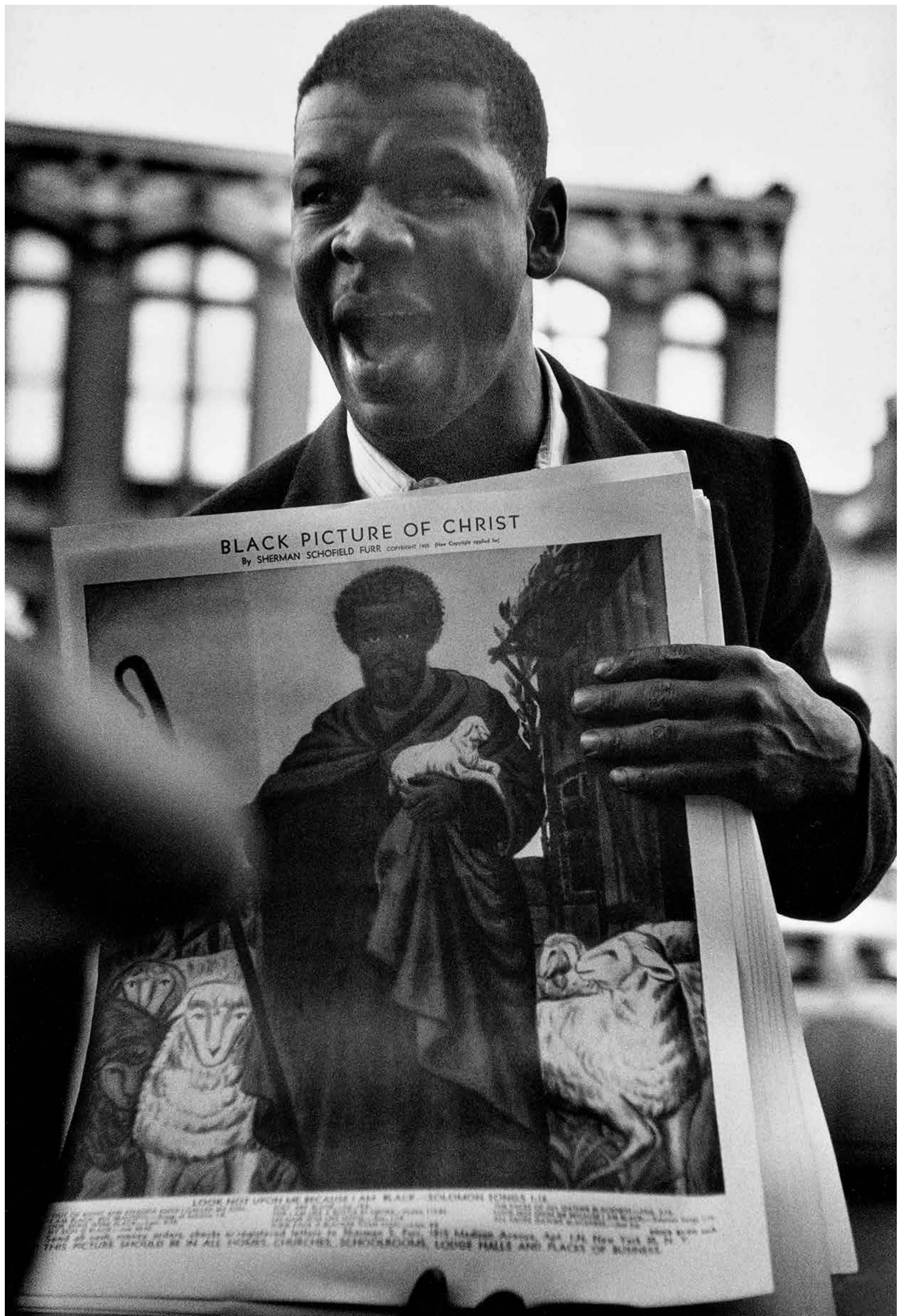
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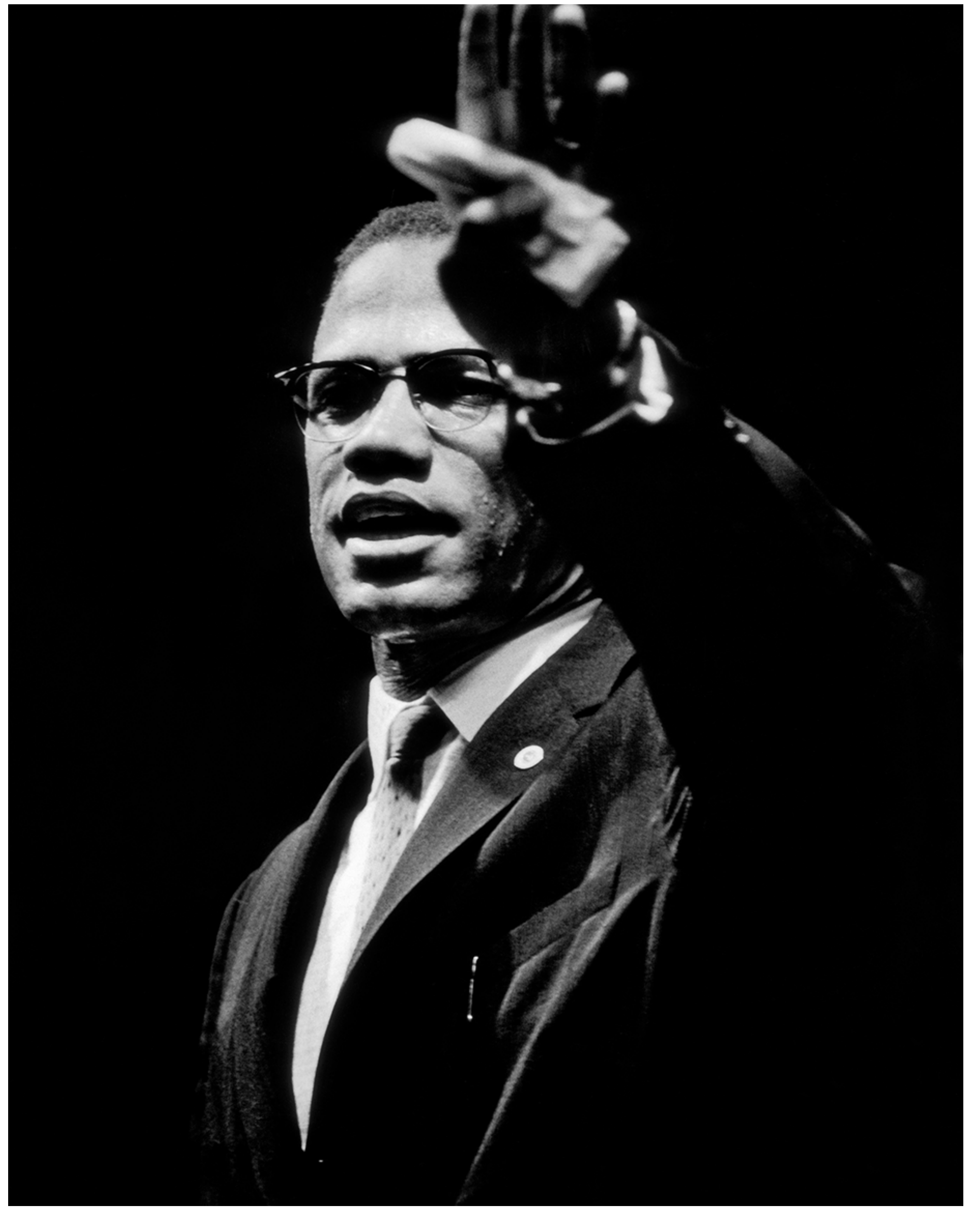








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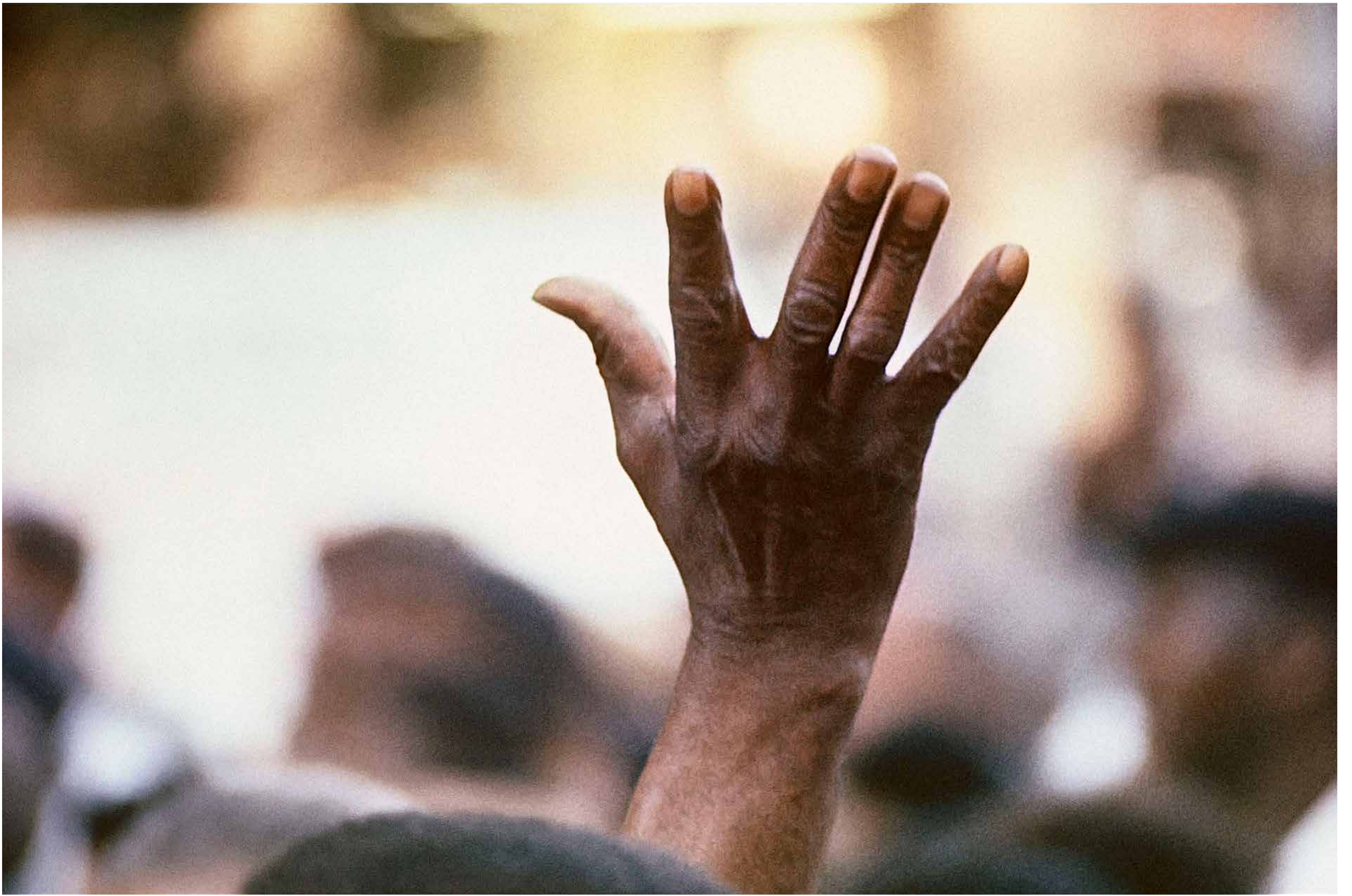


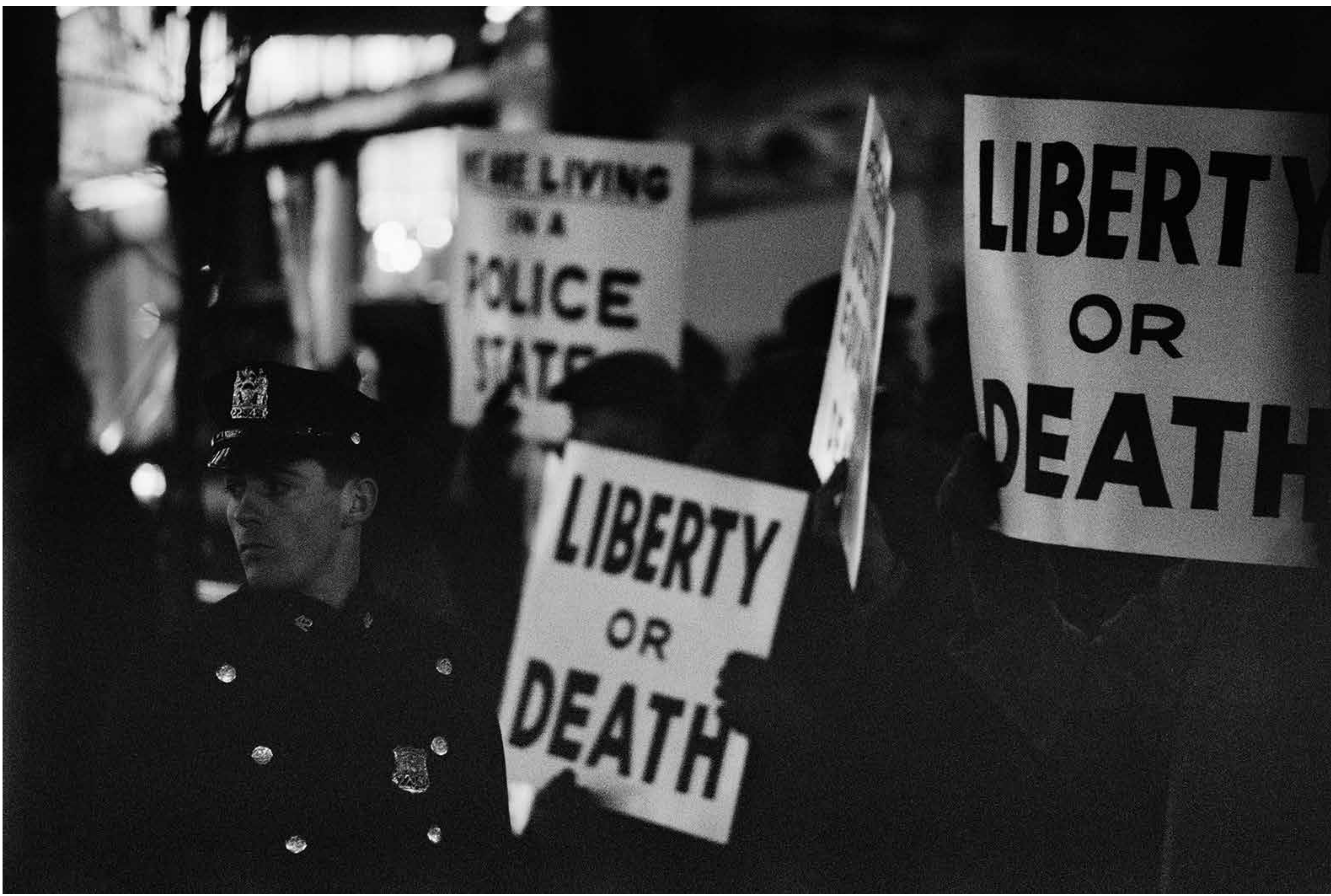


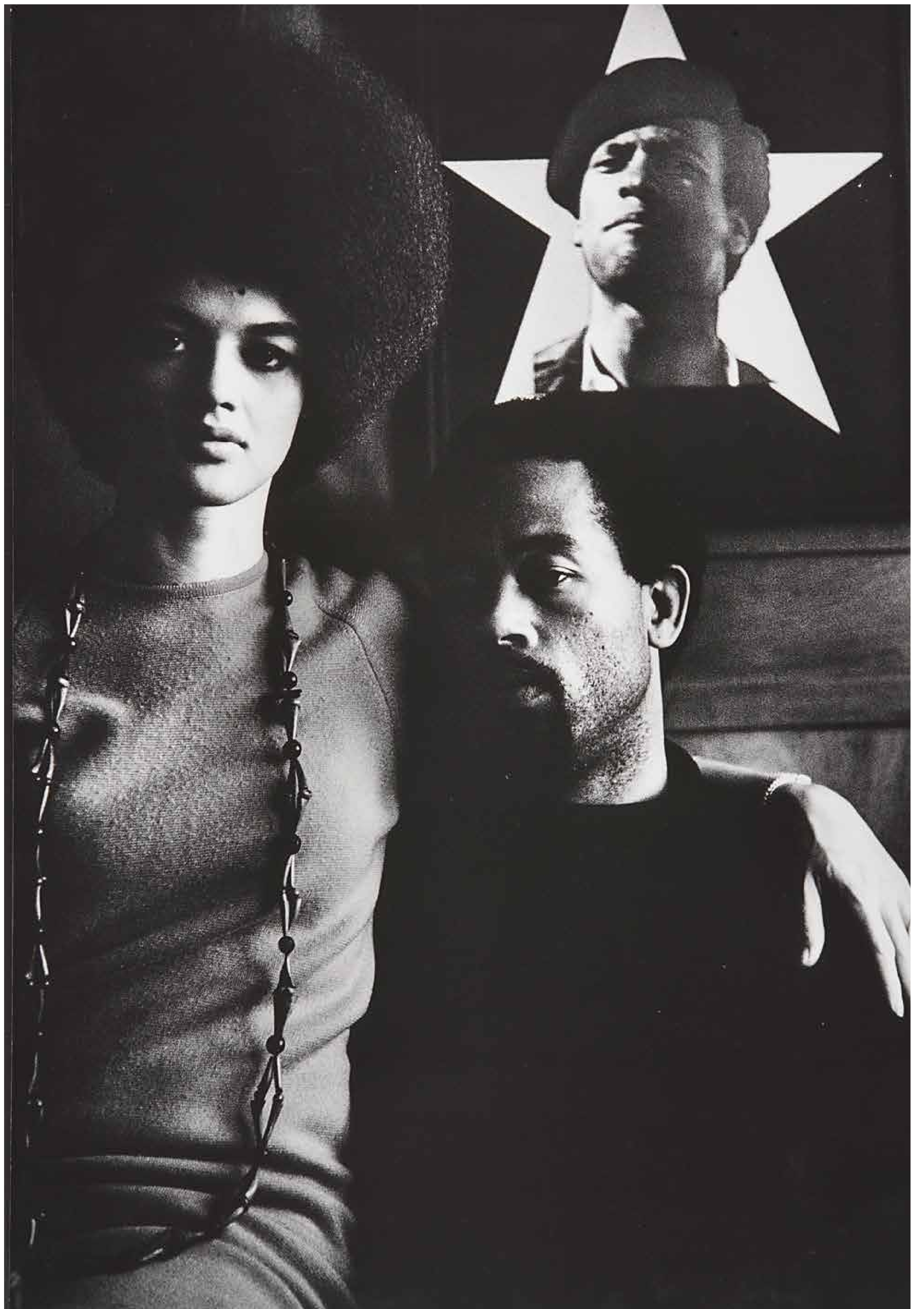
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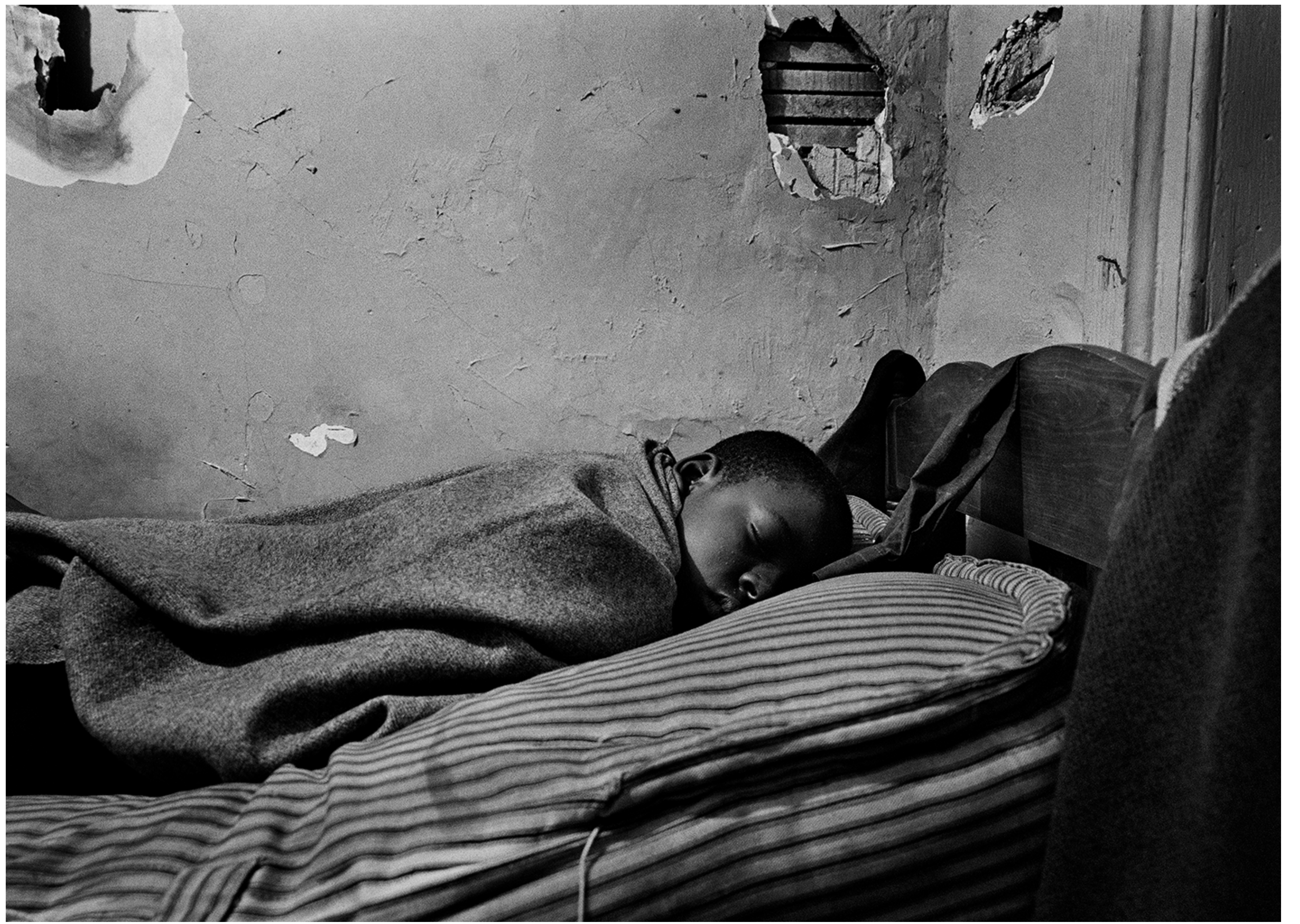




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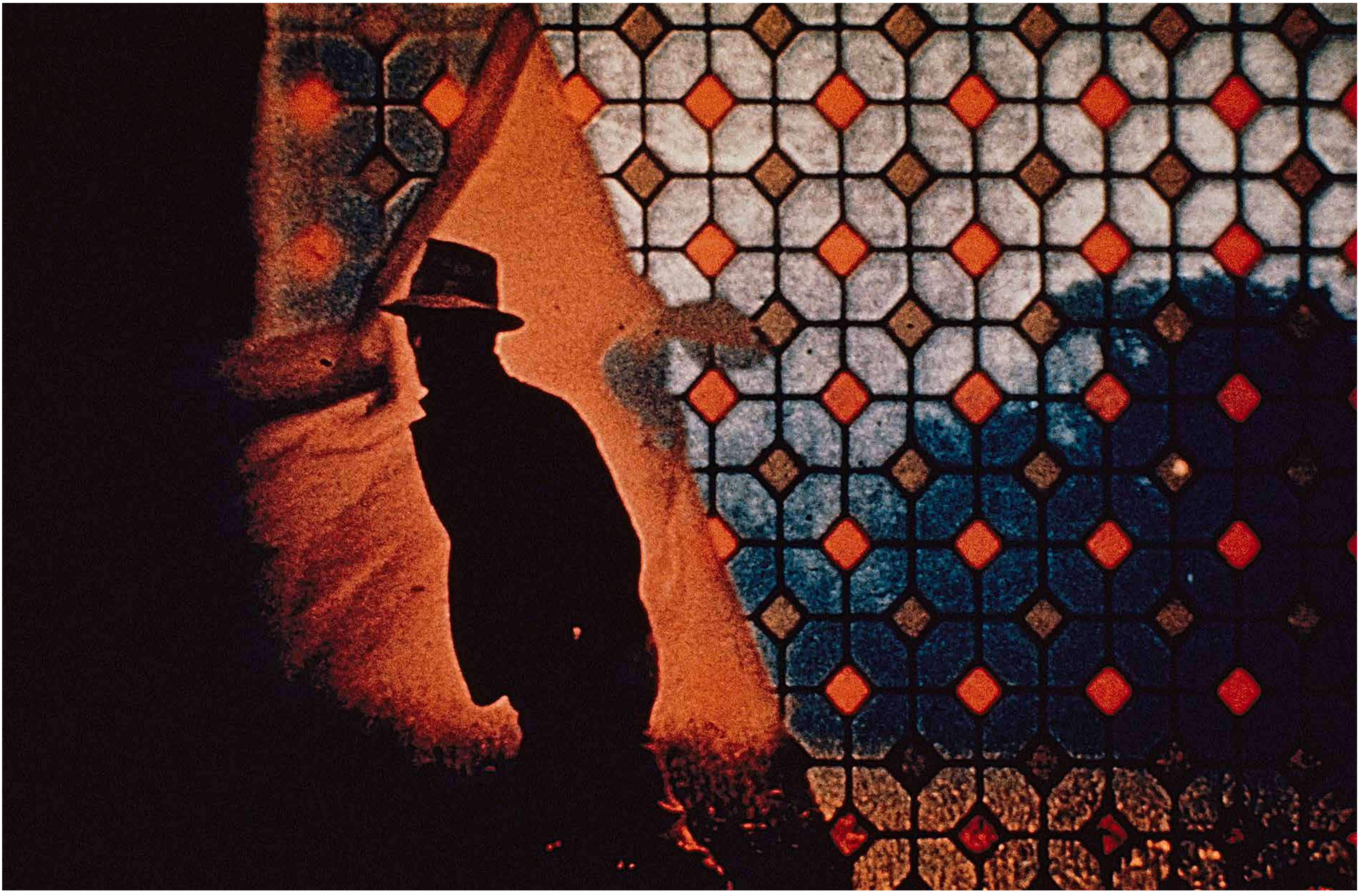


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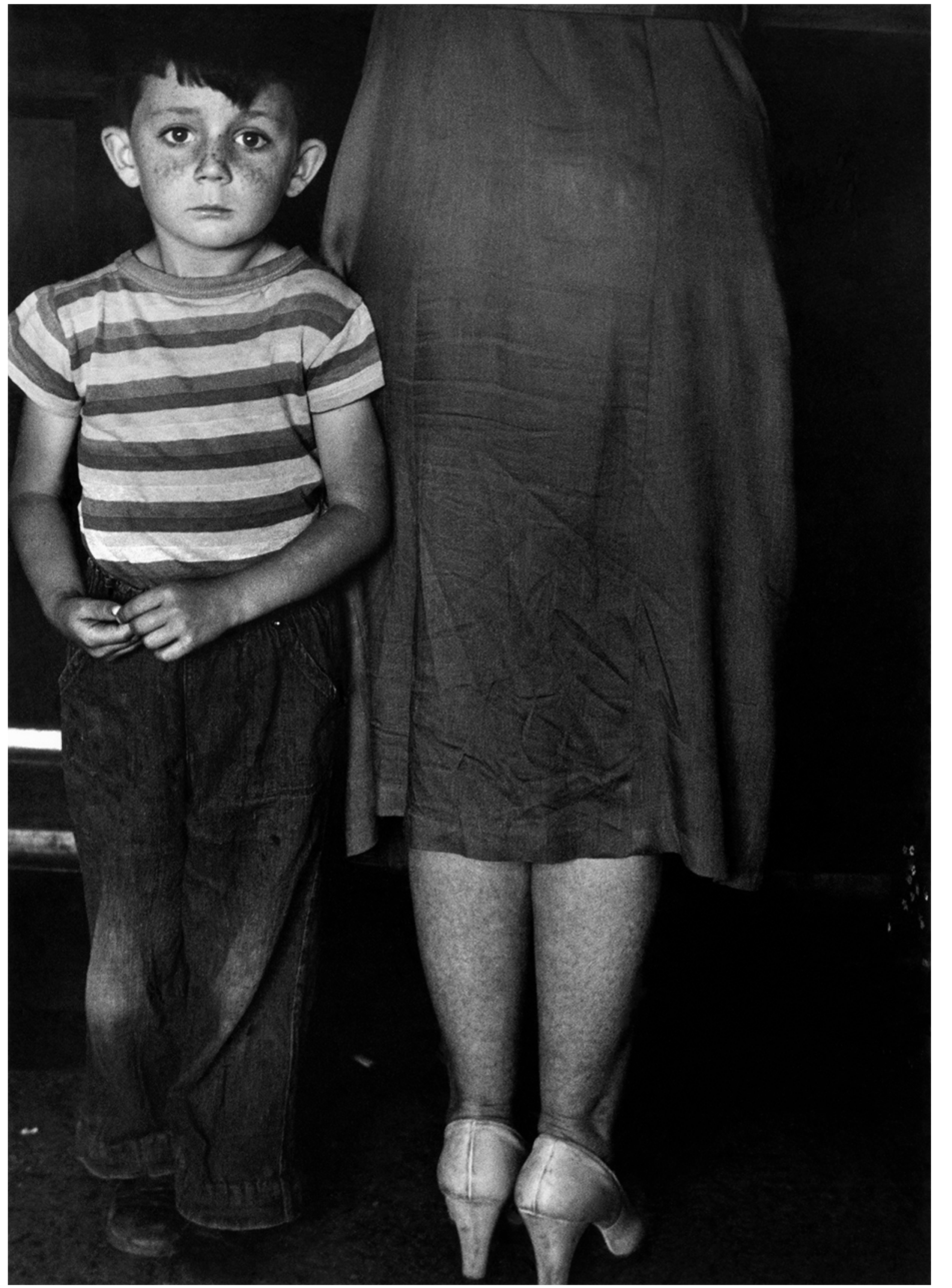
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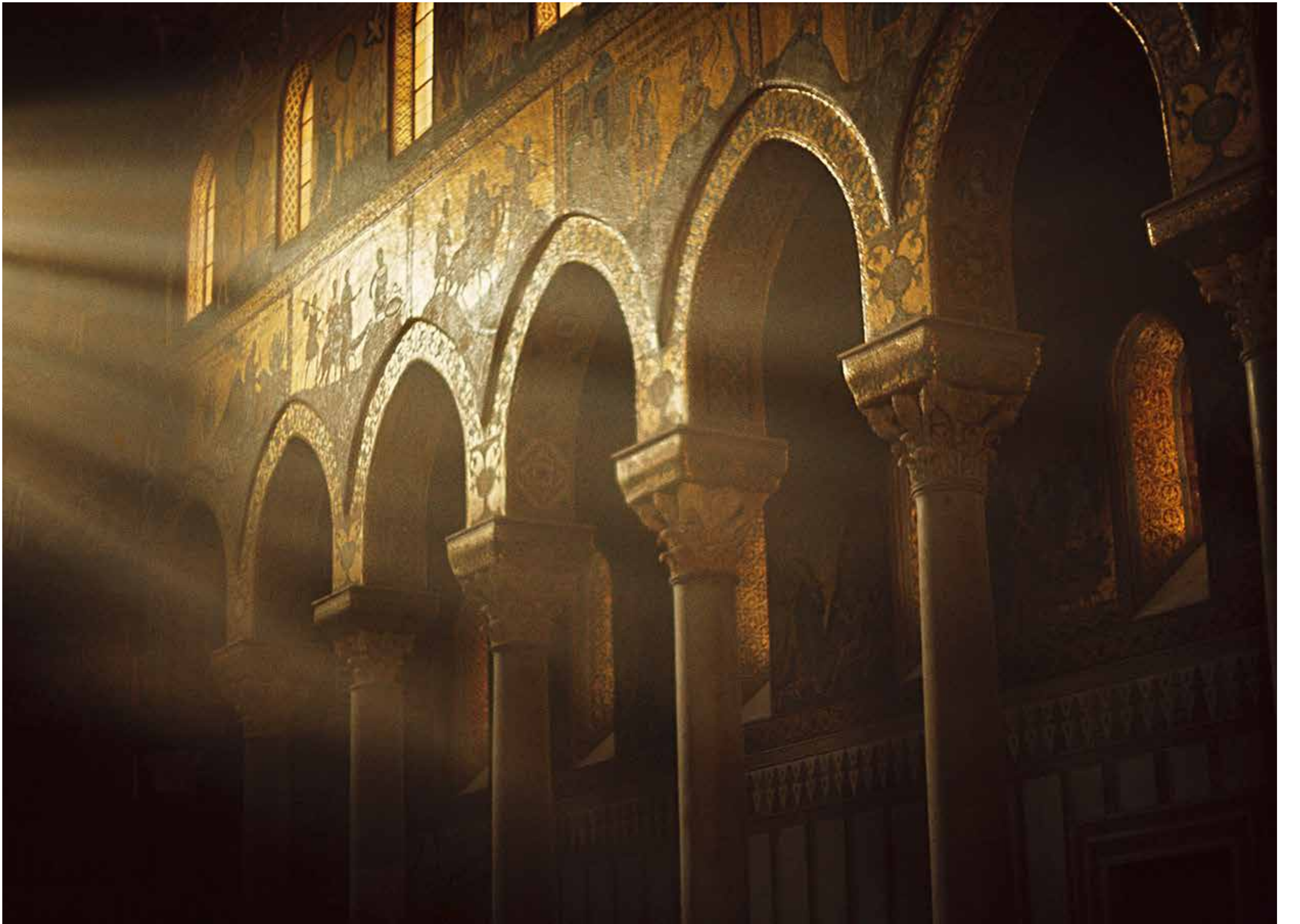
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**Beyond The Learning Tree:
Contextualizing Gordon Parks's Literary Work
Cameron Leader-Picone**

Beyond The Learning Tree:
Contextualizing Gordon Parks's Literary Work
Cameron Leader-Picone

“Images and words images and words images and words—I fell asleep trying to arrange an acceptable marriage of them.”

—Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*

“My lack of education had also helped perpetuate the fear, and perhaps this is why I eventually tried so many different things to stay alive.”

—Gordon Parks, *To Smile in Autumn*

In a 1976 article for *The Black Scholar*, the children’s and young adult writer Walter Dean Myers talks to Gordon Parks about the release of his poetry and photography collection *Moments without Proper Names*. Myers begins with the kind of paeon reserved for the truly exceptional: “Call them legends, or giants, or geniuses. Call them what you will, but occasionally there come along men with such rare and diverse talents that we are as amazed with the sheer quantity of their production as we are by the heights of their creative achievements.”¹ Yet, even in the midst of this piece, which focuses on the breadth of Parks’s accomplishments and was published on the release of his poetry collection, Myers barely mentions Parks’s prose works. This essay concurs with Myers’s claim that Parks has been underdiscussed as an artist but asserts the additional need to take him seriously as a significant writer of both fiction and memoir.

Words and Images

It is rare to read any writing on Parks that doesn’t do two things: first, mention that he was an artistic renaissance man, operating in nearly every artistic medium; and second, go on to focus on his photography as his greatest accomplishment. There is logic to this approach. Parks was indeed one of the most accomplished and well-rounded photographers of the twentieth century, producing work that touched on photojournalism, fashion, and many other genres of the medium. Indeed, the exhibition *Gordon Parks: “Homeward to the Prairie I Come”* underscores his photographic talents, offering a curated selection chosen by Parks himself during residencies at Kansas State University in the 1970s. That said, in this essay I want to center Parks as an author whose literary works assume a major part of his legacy. I will focus more on Parks’s fiction than his autobiographical work, but I would argue that the latter, as well as his poetry, would well reward further study.²

In his interview with Myers, Parks recalls a question posed by his own mother that motivated his curiosity and artistic searching: “What are you bringing to blackness?”³ With this question, Parks suggests the contradictions at the heart of coming-of-age narratives for young Black people in a world that continually negates their agency and personhood. How does one maintain the motivation to keep working, to keep creating?⁴ Across both of his major novels, *The Learning Tree* (1963) and *Shannon* (1981), Parks balances motivational optimism with a more cynical realism, culminating in their paired stagings of the failings of the American justice system. After all, both novels pivot on classic characteristics of the American striver—*The Learning Tree*’s protagonist Newt’s honesty and desire for justice, and *Shannon*’s protagonist Kevin O’Farrell’s hard work and ingenuity—but such portraits of the American dream are necessarily leavened with a clear-eyed recognition of the country’s limitations. In this way, Parks’s words join with his images to create a thematically consistent corpus. He emerges as theorist of American democracy writ large, a man whose constant contention with his Kansas origins represents the central role of Black people in defining a region too often used as a stand-in for the nation’s white “heartland.”

Coming to Terms with Kansas: Parks’s Autobiographies

Parks’s first autobiography spends little time depicting his childhood in Kansas. Instead, the memoir starts with his mother’s death, a fictionalized version of which functions as part of the climax to *The Learning Tree*. By page six, Parks is leaving for St. Paul, Minnesota. As he travels north, he offers a crystallization of the ambivalence he feels about his home state:

Yet, as the train sped along, the telegraph poles whizzing toward and past us, I had a feeling that I was escaping a doom which had already trapped the relatives and friends I was leaving behind. For, although I was departing from this beautiful land, it would be impossible ever to forget the fear, hatred and violence, that Negroes had suffered upon it.⁵

Despite focusing on his ability to “escape” the “doom” in these lines, Parks returned to Kansas again and again throughout his life. A photoshoot to accompany excerpts from *The Learning Tree*, published in 1963 in *LIFE* magazine, followed an earlier trip back to Fort Scott to trace the lives and migrations of the people he grew up with. Those images were revived in 2015 as a touring exhibition that opened at the Museum of Fine Arts in

Boston titled *Back to Fort Scott*. When Parks wrote and directed the film version of *The Learning Tree*, becoming the first Black director to make a film for a major Hollywood studio, he chose to do so in Fort Scott.

This ambivalence about Kansas animates Parks's writings, even those not directly about the place of his young childhood. In the nonfiction essay that accompanies the excerpts published in *LIFE*, Parks revealingly says that "the pain I experienced growing up in Kansas was small" and that "until my mid-teens, I lived in fear," which led him to "consider myself lucky I didn't kill someone."⁶ This balancing of relative personal security and familial love alongside an atmosphere of segregation, extralegal violence, and pervasive racism underscores the degree to which Parks's literary writings attempt to work through his youth and his relationship to larger social structures. Even when he transplants his narratives of striving to an Irish immigrant protagonist in *Shannon*, Parks continually foregrounds the question of belonging and its costs.

As both filmmaker and writer, Parks repeatedly returned to his own life story as a template, much as his work returned to Kansas both literally and representationally. Within his autobiographies, Parks quotes himself liberally, taking his own writing as a kind of sample, using his own narratives to create a pastiche of twentieth-century culture and politics. This process of continual reinvention parallels his capacious artistic practice as well as the narrative focus in his fiction on the bildungsroman genre and the striving figure. Indeed, many have read *The Learning Tree* as a thinly veiled self-küntslerroman (borne out by multiple details in his autobiographies), in which Parks depicts his childhood development leading up to his move to Minneapolis, where his artistic practice began.⁷

More generally, the Black coming-of-age tradition that arose from autobiographical narratives written by former enslaved Africans interrogates the viability of self-making (or even self-writing) for those legally marginalized within American society.⁸ Parks's tripartite autobiography interrogates the nexus between his literary process of self-making, despite a lack of formal education, and his recognition of the maintenance of institutions promoting structural exclusion. Echoing Frederick Douglass's three autobiographies, Parks frequently quotes himself and, with his third book, *Voices in the Mirror* (1990), attempts a synthesis of his life's work and meaning. In its thematic focus on the perils and possibilities of American society in the twentieth century, as well as its incessant return to a series of tropes and scenes, Parks's self-writing

mirrors his fiction in its attempt to imagine what it means to “stay alive,” offering a consistent portrait of the process of becoming American in all its complexity.⁹

The Possibilities and Limitations of American Democracy: Parks’s Fiction

Turning to Parks’s fiction, it is critical to situate *The Learning Tree* in both its post–World War I setting and its early 1960s publication date.¹⁰ Parks writes about his parents’ generation of Exodusters, among the first organized groups of migrants in what would become the Great Migration. The Exodusters settled in Kansas in search of a location that would allow them to use their agricultural skills on land that they had the possibility of owning. In the novel are hints of the violence that Newt’s family fled in the earlier years of his parents’ lives.¹¹ For the protagonist Newt Winger, however, Cherokee Flats, the text’s stand-in for Fort Scott, is not a space of possibility. Instead, it is an occasionally idyllic, if stifling, backwater. Newt idly dreams of bigger cities but also revels in his status as a relative big fish in a small pond.¹²

Though his parents don’t seem to fully understand the desires he expresses, they inculcate the value of education and recognize that Newt’s generation may have opportunities that theirs did not, even if that means ultimately leaving Cherokee Flats. In an early scene that gives the novel its title, Newt’s mother, Sarah, seeks to reassure her son about the death and violence that haunt the novel and their small town. Rather than merely restating her own Christian faith, Sarah instructs Newt to think of the town like a “learnin’ tree,” a place that offers him important lessons for his future, but not necessarily the limit of his world.¹³ In not using this, or other, conversations as opportunities to tell Newt what he should think or believe, Sarah demonstrates her wisdom and faith that the scope of Newt’s destiny will ultimately supersede her own, and that the lessons he can and should take from his childhood are perhaps beyond her understanding. The novel underscores this futurity only at its ending, as Sarah’s death leads Newt to leave town and head to Minnesota, much as his own mother’s death did for Parks. The novel’s coming-of-age plot culminates in Newt’s maturation and flight from the place of his birth, anchored by the wisdom of his mother but with access to opportunities far beyond those his parents had.

The context of the novel’s publication date highlights that its coming-of-age narrative is also a broader portrait of education as an institution. Early in the story, Parks outlines the liminal position of Kansas

as a “borderline state” in which “freedom loosed one hand while custom restrained the other.”¹⁴ Parks elaborates, saying that though the “law books stood for equal rights,” such laws were not necessarily enforced or reflective of reality.¹⁵ These lines mirror arguments made in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, the landmark 1954 case that led to the judicial invalidation of racial segregation. In that case, Topeka similarly lacked laws mandating segregation, instead enforcing the practice through facially neutral policies.

In *The Learning Tree*, Parks points to the history of the civil rights activism in Kansas that led to the *Brown v. Board of Education* case while simultaneously echoing the specific arguments made in *Brown* through an extended plot line built around Newt’s matriculation from junior high to high school.¹⁶ In the town, there are separate schools for Black children and white children until high school, at which point both races attend the same school. As Newt graduates from junior high, he gives a speech declaring his pride in being Black and his insistence that his “class does not expect life to be easy. We only expect it to be better.”¹⁷ The school board then uses overcrowding as an excuse to delay Newt’s class’s entry into high school until their sophomore year. This action prompts Newt’s mother to organize the parents and challenge the board.

The civil rights era context reveals *The Learning Tree*’s investment in the meaning of integration as a concept. Sarah Winger’s fight for educational justice, and its simultaneous prefiguration of and echoes in *Brown v. Board of Education*, parallels the novel’s climactic courtroom scene, which functions as an interrogation of the law as an instrument for justice. Newt, having gone to work for free for Jake Kiner after he and his friends steal peaches from the white man’s farm, witnesses a physical confrontation between Jake and his employee Silas Newhall. As part of the confrontation, Jake knocks out Silas and is then attacked by Booker Savage, who had been stealing peach wine from Jake’s barn and who is the father of Newt’s sometime friend and rival Marcus. Though Booker, who is Black, kills Jake, Silas, who is white, is discovered with the body and charged with murder.

Parks sets up the conflict between American ideals and reality explicitly in this concluding section of the novel. Newt is reluctant to come forward precisely because he understands that the legal system offers no justice for Black people. To bear witness in any official way against Booker is to sign Booker’s death warrant, as Newt well knows. Newt

reflects on this “harsh dilemma,” imagining the town’s “blacks and whites . . . fighting each other,” leading to the terrorizing of his own family and friends, both Black and white.¹⁸ Still, Newt recognizes the injustice of Silas being punished for something he did not do, especially because Silas is incapable of defending himself, having been incapacitated by alcohol even prior to being knocked out. Placing Newt in this position, Parks forces his character to consider the ultimate meaning of justice and to recognize the fundamentally social character of the law. Newt is well aware that the law is not some abstract ideal but rather a set of practices that are incapable of offering justice in this situation.

Knowing all this, Newt ultimately takes the information to his mother and father, who then bring him to his mother’s employer, Judge Cavanaugh. Legal improprieties aside, Judge Cavanaugh serves a critical role in the story. He represents a sort of enlightened white liberal, much like the new school principal, who seeks to make the law that he loves live up to its ideals. In addition to being a kind employer to Sarah Winger, Judge Cavanaugh represents civic leadership that is at least superficially friendly to Black advancement, though he does little to further such opportunities. Cavanaugh’s intervention generates a Perry Mason–style courtroom accusation in which Newt, finally called to testify, publicly fingers Booker Savage as the one responsible. This leads Booker to flee and, eventually, to take his own life in the hallway rather than face the wrath of the mob.

The scene is important for several reasons. First, Parks underscores that Newt’s instincts were right and that there is no justice possible in the case. (As Booker flees, Newt thinks, “it’s started . . . I knew it would happen.”¹⁹) This fact is further underscored as Marcus comes to consider Newt responsible for his father’s death and attacks him near the lake before being killed by Sherriff Kirky, the novel’s representation of corrupt, violent, and racist law enforcement. However, by having Booker die by his own hand, Parks offers fodder for Judge Cavanaugh, who gives a stirring courtroom speech reimagining Newt’s actions as a sort of social redemption:

In less than five incredible minutes you judged him and screamed for his black life, because you assumed he had killed a white man—forgetting, in your senseless moment, that a black boy had just saved a white man’s life—right here before you. It took courage, a lot more than those of you who shouted have, for him to do it. It was what this boy feared of you that kept him from divulging earlier the information that might well have prevented this second tragedy.²⁰

Notwithstanding Cavanaugh's naiveté about the underlying white supremacy in the town, the judge exhibits an intense faith in the law, seeing its proper exercise as a testament to the possibility of American governance. Newt testifying despite knowing the consequences is, for Cavanaugh, a marker of the nation as it should be. What remains unclear is whether Parks's novel echoes Cavanaugh's optimism. On the one hand, Parks undercuts traditional courtroom representations by having Newt testify and serve as the decisive truth teller, showing a participation in legal proceedings systemically denied to Black people. Given that the novel appeared in 1963 in the wake of judicial decisions like *Brown*, Newt's testimony suggests a legal path forward for integration if Black people are able to retain their faith in the justice system. On the other hand, Newt's vision of racial conflict and violence as a result of his testimony is absolutely accurate, and Cavanaugh, who functions as a relatively benign character, is also blind to the racism and sexual predation around him, including by his own son, who gets Newt's girlfriend Arcella pregnant.

With this scene, Parks manifests his broader ambivalence over what Newt's future will look like after the novel ends. Characters like Sarah Winger embody a faith in survival and self-realization that mirrors Parks's own stated motivations in his autobiographical writing. Yet the deaths of Booker and Marcus, despite Newt's best attempts to save his age-mate by deceiving the sheriff, undermines the effect of Newt's impulse toward the social good. Indeed, the murder of Marcus at the hand of Sheriff Kirky carries horrifying resonances with the murders of Black boys and men at the hands of law enforcement in the twenty-first century, further undermining the future orientation of the novel's coming-of-age plot.

Parks clearly struggled with the question of justice for Black people in America across his literary oeuvre, choosing to end his second novel, *Shannon*, with another courtroom scene. Now out of print and largely forgotten, *Shannon* was published by Little, Brown in 1981, some eighteen years after *The Learning Tree* and a decade after the height of Parks's directorial career with *Shaft*. The text is undeniably messier than the already fairly sprawling *Learning Tree*. Here Parks crafts a historical melodrama—encompassing everything from the entirety of World War I, the shift toward Fordist mass production, labor unrest and radicalism, and the rise of communism—all while telling a sweeping love story full of tragedy and violence. In other words, the book doesn't really work as a coherent whole. Indeed, many things about *Shannon* feel anachronistic. Although it presents a panoramic portrait of the World War I era, it doesn't feel like the

“historiographic metafiction” that, as Linda Hutcheon has argued, defined the postmodern literature more characteristic of its publication date.²¹ Much of its plot focuses on a young Irishman, seeming to mark the novel as the kind of underread “marginal” or “anomalous” work within African American literature that focuses on non-Black protagonists.²² That said, its messiness is deeply compelling, with the more clichéd melodramatic elements frequently in service of Parks interrogating many of the same principal themes as in *The Learning Tree*.

Shannon is bluntly cynical. The panoramic tragedy tells the linked stories of Kevin O’Farrell, a young Irish engineer striving to achieve the American dream, and Hannibal Jones, an underemployed Black man whose Fisk degree gets him nowhere except shipped off to Europe for the war. Kevin’s storybook romance with Shannon Sullivan, a classic tale of the young striver marrying the boss’s daughter over the man’s objections, seems to offer the economic security that he desires until tragedy strikes: he dies in a horse-riding accident some sixty pages before the end of the novel. It is there that Hannibal, who disappears from long stretches of the plot, becomes the focal point, but only so that he can avenge his wife’s brutal rape by Kevin’s brother Dennis, face trial for murder, and die by execution.

With its portrait of American society in all its racist brutality, *Shannon* resembles nothing so much as Charles Chesnut’s *Marrow of Tradition*, the canonical 1901 novelization of the successful 1898 white supremacist coup in Wilmington, North Carolina. But where that novel culminates in the political urgency of the line “There’s time enough, but none to spare,” Parks offers little hope for American society and government.²³ Once again, he employs a courtroom scene to demonstrate his feelings about the possibility of justice in America. *The Learning Tree* evidenced ambivalence, ultimately endorsing Newt’s decision to finger Booker Savage as a killer, and with Judge Cavanaugh’s liberal institutionalism pointing forward to the legal and legislative strategies of the Civil Rights era. By contrast, *Shannon*’s Reagan-era retrospection uses melodrama to construct a near-parody of American justice.

The trial ties together the disparate strands of the narrative within Hannibal’s defense by the Jewish immigrant and communist radical Vilna, whose representation of his client echoes that of Bigger Thomas by the communist Max in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*. A parade of lurid details appears to show the bankruptcy of the prosecution. Two sex workers not

only testify and make clear that Dennis O'Farrell brutally raped Phoebe Jones, but they also out the prosecutor as a frequent client. Shannon O'Farrell herself emerges from her basement in one of her last public acts to testify against her brother-in-law. In addition, Hannibal is both a war hero and a regular hero. After having saved Kevin's life in the novel's opening scene, he receives both the Croix de Guerre and the Purple Heart for his war service.

After centering the novel on Kevin's character for so long, Parks tricks the reader into thinking that Hannibal's punishment is ever in question. The acrobatics of Vilna's stirring defense easily vindicate, or at minimum mitigate, Hannibal's guilt, but Parks swiftly quashes any hint of real justice. "The jury was out long enough to relax sufficiently and enjoy a solid lunch of sauerkraut, boiled potatoes, and boiled ham" before declaring Hannibal guilty, and the judge waits only the minimum amount of time that propriety demands before sending him to the electric chair.²⁴ Vilna's surprise contrasts with Hannibal's dignity. In a stirring speech, he "refuse[s]" the state's capacity to kill his "spirit," with Parks linking his stoicism to his heroism during the war, saying that he approaches the electric chair "like a proud soldier."²⁵

With these final scenes, Parks's use of a white protagonist reveals its true purpose. He initially seems to suggest an analogous relationship between the struggles of Black people and those of Irish and Jewish immigrant populations.²⁶ The panoramic scope of the novel, along with its melodrama, envisions a range of possible fates for its differently marginalized characters. However, the ending, and in particular Vilna's surprise at Hannibal's conviction despite his radicalism, reveals the limits that Parks places on such analogies. With Hannibal's execution, Parks makes clear that it is anti-Blackness that exists as a structural component of American society and law. Although others may be marginalized, it is not to the same extent or in the same ways.²⁷

Images and Words

As mentioned earlier, readers who purchased the August 16, 1963, issue of *LIFE* magazine would have flipped to the table of contents and found an excerpt from *The Learning Tree*, accompanied by photographs by Parks. In fact, the *LIFE* piece is two linked photo essays that the editors collectively titled "Gordon Parks: A Talented Negro Tells in Fiction, Fact, and Photograph: How It Feels to Be Black." The first essay features

photographs that Parks staged based on his novel during a return trip to Fort Scott. These images accompany the excerpts, tease the release of the novel, and precede a second set of photos, all in black and white, as well as a short follow-up essay in which the “novelist carries on the story into real life” by offering a kind of state of race relations at that moment. This story, appearing in an issue immediately prior to one detailing the “Master Plan for the Negro March on the Capital,” which Parks would also photograph for the magazine, offers an exemplary nexus for considering Parks’s importance as a cultural figure.²⁸

Through his three autobiographies and two novels, *The Learning Tree and Shannon*, Parks details the process by which marginalized individuals negotiate the tension between the social and economic terms of their exclusion, along with their desire to participate in American society as full citizens. Therefore, the conjunction between Parks’s *Learning Tree* and the March on Washington, while likely coincidental, is instructive. The novel offers the ur-example of Parks’s writing, with its portrait of growing up and navigating white society as a Black boy. It would be no exaggeration to claim that, as a writer, Parks’s great theme is that of “integration” in the broad sense of the term. In its focus, Parks’s literary work parallels the long twentieth-century political struggle by African Americans for inclusion within a true multiracial and multiethnic American democracy, a struggle that Parks both documented and participated in.

The author wishes to thank Katherine Karlin for reading a draft of this essay and suggesting further avenues of research into the civil rights history of Kansas.

Epigraphs

Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1966), 227.

Gordon Parks, *To Smile in Autumn* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 22.

1. Walter Dean Myers, "Gordon Parks: John Henry with a Camera," *Black Scholar* 7, no. 5 (1976): 27.
2. Parks appears at other key junctions in African American literary history. For example, he collaborated with Ralph Ellison on an early piece of writing, "The Need of Psychiatric Treatment in Harlem," for which he took the photographs. He also took a series of photographs based on Ellison's *Invisible Man*, which were on display at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2016.
3. Myers, "Gordon Parks," 28.
4. Robert Stepto's argument that the African American literary "quest for freedom" generates two dominant "narratives," one of "ascent" and one of "immersion," makes clear the importance of coming-of-age narratives in African American literary history; Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Literature* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 167. In such narratives, Claudia Reynaud claims, "the discovery of American society's racism is the major event in the protagonist's development and in his 'education'"; Reynaud, "Coming of Age in the African American Novel," in Maryemma Graham, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 106. In *The Learning Tree*, Parks takes this coming-of-age structure as a template to consider the meaning of American society and how a young Black boy such as Newt can possibly navigate it. In other words, Parks's novels are typical of the African American coming-of-age narrative's "subversion—and even a negation—of the American dream in terms of race relations" (109).
5. Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 6–7.
6. Gordon Parks, "Gordon Parks: A Talented Negro Tells in Fiction, Fact, and Photograph: How It Feels to Be Black," *LIFE*, Aug. 16, 1963: 80, 82.
7. See, for ex., Elizabeth Schultz, "Dreams Deferred: The Personal Narratives of Four Black Kansans," *American Studies* 34, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 25–51; and Mary Burgur, "I, Too, Sing America: The Black Autobiographer's Response to Life in the Midwest and Mid-Plains," *Kansas Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (1975): 43–57.

8. As Claudia Reynaud puts it, “For the African American writer the narrative of coming of age in America poses the problem of inscribing that fictional moment against the tradition of slavery”; Reynaud, “Coming of Age,” 107.
9. Parks, *To Smile in Autumn*, 22.
10. *The Learning Tree*, in particular, is a decisive turning point in Parks’s broader career, for his writing process led directly to his long-time marriage to his editor Gene Young, the publication of the first of his memoirs, *A Choice of Weapons* (1966), and his career in Hollywood. Parks details the origins of the novel in his memoir *To Smile in Autumn*, chap. 14.
11. As Nell Irvin Painter describes it, “farming one’s own land on one’s own account meant being one’s own master”; Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976), 6. The Exodusters left the South “on the strength of their faith in their ultimate deliverance from the terrorists and extortionists of the white South” (4). Parks gestures at this history, showing Sarah Winger’s nightmares of her sister Curtney’s rape in Georgia and the revenge and subsequent lynching of her brother Tom; Parks, *The Learning Tree* (1963, reprint; New York: Ballantine, 1989), 38.
12. Parks, *The Learning Tree*, 28.
13. *Ibid.*, 36.
14. *Ibid.*, 26. The history that Parks nods at here is interesting and complex in itself. As Cherise Cheney describes in an essay about the debates over education in Topeka leading up to *Brown v. Board of Education*, “When surveying the evolution of race-based laws in Kansas, one could argue for the state’s racial progressiveness. State law, more often than not, established formal equality for African Americans. With the passing of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, blacks had the right to vote in Kansas. In 1874, they could serve on juries” (484); Cheney, “Blacks on Brown: Intra-Community Debates over School Desegregation in Topeka, KS, 1941–1955,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 481–500. While the law allowed for some segregated schooling, as *The Learning Tree* depicts, the law “excluded high schools, where ‘no discrimination shall be made on account of color’” (484).
15. Parks, *The Learning Tree*, 26.
16. For a more detailed history of the complex battle for civil rights in Kansas, see Cheney, “Blacks on Brown,” 491–500. Jean Van Delinder details the 1902 Kansas desegregation case of *Reynolds v. Board of Education*, which served as an initial challenge to segregation in the state; Van Delinder, “Early Civil Rights Activism in Topeka, Kansas, Prior to the 1954 Brown Case,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 48–49. As Cheney explains, the Kansas Supreme Court ruled racial segregation of Black junior high students illegal in 1941 (492). Both Cheney and Delinder detail the efforts of Elisha Scott and his sons Charles and John (who would ultimately initiate the *Brown* case) in the long struggle for civil rights in the state. For more, see Van Delinder, “Early Civil Rights Activism,” 45–61.
17. Parks, *The Learning Tree*, 120.
18. *Ibid.*, 168.
19. *Ibid.*, 206.

20. Ibid., 207.
21. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
22. Gene Andrew Jarrett, "Introduction: Not Just Race Matter," in *African American Literature Beyond Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 9, 7.
23. Charles W. Chesnutt, *The Marrow of Tradition* (reprint, 1901; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 329.
24. Gordon Parks, *Shannon* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1981), 390.
25. Ibid., 391, 399.
26. In his comparative study of African American and Jewish American *Bildungsromane*, Martin Japtok argues that the relationship between the traditions is "the product of similar uses of ideology (ethnic nationalism) and literary form (Bildungsroman)"; Martin Japtok, *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005), 3.
27. Shannon's epilogue also functions as a bookend to the beginning of Parks's autobiographical writing in *A Choice of Weapons* (1966), whose prologue opens with a depiction of witnessing an execution.
28. Parks, "A Talented Negro."

The Learning Tree from Page to Screen

Katherine Karlin

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The year 2019 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the film *The Learning Tree*, Gordon Parks's adaptation of his 1963 autobiographical novel. It is heralded as the first major studio movie to be directed by an African American, but in the Parks canon it fades from memory compared to his second film, the swaggering, explosive blaxploitation classic, *Shaft*. With its Technicolor palette, decorative title font, and flat interiors, *The Learning Tree* has the look of a late-sixties television drama. Yet it's worth a closer examination. In transferring his complex and deeply felt novel to the screen, Parks arranges a pastiche of heartland movie tropes. At first glance they may seem like clichés, but there is something much more devious going on. Parks is writing African Americans back into the narratives from which they had been forcibly extracted. Inside this sweet coming-of-age story is a stealth bomb of subversion.

The story is set in the fictional town of Cherokee Flats, Kansas, a stand-in for Fort Scott, where Parks lived until his mother died when he was a teenager and he left to live with a married sister in Minnesota. Parks shot the movie in Fort Scott, winning over the locals (some of whom grouched that the novel made them look racist) by hiring them as extras and crew members. Parks's road back to Fort Scott was a long one. Since leaving, he'd had stints as a jazz pianist, a Pullman porter, and a Civilian Conservation Corps recruit. As a photographer he perfected his craft in Roy Stryker's Farm Security Administration, the New Deal-era agency that employed the likes of Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. And as a staff photographer at *LIFE* magazine, in 1950 he took on an assignment to return to Fort Scott and look up his former classmates.

The town that he found then was much changed from the one he'd left back in 1928. Fort Scott, like other towns in southeastern Kansas, was a short driving distance from Missouri and Oklahoma. It had experienced a significant arrival of formerly enslaved Americans after Reconstruction, followed by another migration in the early twentieth century. When Parks was growing up, Fort Scott's population was about one-quarter Black. But like many of his generation, in the 1930s and '40s his schoolmates had decamped for bigger cities; he tracked them down in St. Louis, Kansas City, Chicago, and San Diego. The resulting photographic essay, "Back to Fort Scott," was preempted by the outbreak of the Korean War and not published until 2015. Still, the visit stirred deep feelings in Parks, and the book *The Learning Tree* stands as his ambivalent tribute to the town and to Kansas in general. The novel and its film adaptation endure as one of the few records of Black rural life in the Midwest between the world wars.

The title itself is a metaphor for the town, which young Newt Winger, Parks's alter ego, is itching to flee. "It ain't a all-good place and it ain't a all-bad place," Newt's mother, Sarah Winger, tells him. "But you can learn just as much here about people and things as you can learn any place else. Cherokee Flats is sorta like a fruit tree. Some of the people are good and some of them are bad, just like the fruit on a tree. . . . Think of Cherokee Flats like that til the day you die—let it be your learning tree." In the novel, the town has more than good people and bad—some are confoundingly, gloriously contradictory. The poor white boy who hurls an epithet at Newt also defends Newt's right to drink a Coke in the local drugstore. The farmer, who mercilessly beats a Black boy (for the fairly innocent crime of stealing apples), regards Newt's parents with neighborly solidarity. Sarah's employer, Judge Cavanaugh, treats her with a wariness teetering between condescension and respect. And Newt's lifelong nemesis, Marcus Savage, whose father raises him with little more care than he does his livestock, inspires in the reader both tenderness and loathing.

Of course, many of these nuances were streamlined out of the film adaptation. In the movie, Parks telegraphs the paradoxes with swifter, more familiar characterizations, like the pot-bellied and sweat-stained sheriff, or the progressive-minded young principal who reprimands a racist teacher. But the flattening of minor characters, inevitable in a two-hour film, is more than compensated for by Parks's command of cinematic traditions. He is in complete control—director, producer, screenwriter, and composer. (Notably, for all his photographic experience, Parks handed over the director of photography duties to veteran cinematographer Burnett Guffey.) He engages with film history lovingly, filling the frame with Black people and their daily activities. There are piano lessons, church socials, swimming holes, picnics, and fireworks displays. These scenes recall the work of William Inge, who explored the sexual repression and hypocrisy of small-town Kansas in his plays and his original screenplay for that monument to teen angst, *Splendor in the Grass*. The comparison is apt. Inge was born one year after Parks and grew up in the town of Independence, about an hour's drive from Fort Scott. Yet although the Independence of Inge's youth had an African American population comparable to Fort Scott's, Inge omitted them from his accounts of Kansas.

Parks stakes his place in movie history in the opening frames of *The Learning Tree*, as Newt—his very name suggesting both his youthfulness and his love of nature—is so absorbed in the traffic of an anthill that he doesn't notice the tornado gathering behind him. Yes, *The Learning Tree*

kicks off, as all Kansas stories must, with a twister. (Similarly, Langston Hughes began his Kansas-set novel, *Not Without Laughter*, with a tornado.) Like Dorothy Gale in *The Wizard of Oz*, Newt risks his safety to defend animal life, throwing his body protectively on the anthill. But instead of getting whisked over the rainbow, he is dragged to the safety of an abandoned smokehouse by a friendly prostitute named Big Mabel.

The movie then takes a very un-Oz-like turn as Big Mabel strips Newt, woozy from the injuries suffered in the storm, and then herself. In the movie this is all done in tasteful soft focus (Parks was laboring in the final days of the Production Code), but the book is a little more specific. Yet everyone I know who has seen *The Learning Tree* is perplexed by that scene. Does Big Mabel rape Newt? Clearly, the consciousness of our current culture reminds us that this is a grown woman and an incapacitated boy barely in his teens. But did Parks, the creator of the sexually braggadocious *Shaft*, mean for us to read it that way?

Karole Graham, the actress who, as Carol Lamond, played Big Mabel, told me she was apprehensive about the scene and appreciated Parks's decision to clear the set of everyone except essential personnel. She and Kyle Johnson, the seventeen-year-old actor who plays Newt, had a playful, sister-and-brother relationship. She never thought of Big Mabel's seduction as rape, not until years later when she was gassing up her car at a Los Angeles service station. A stranger approached her to say, "I saw you in that movie; that's where you raped [that boy]." "I raped him?" Graham said. "I couldn't believe it! But that scene was provocative."

The book deals with the aftermath of Newt's encounter a little differently from the movie. In the book, Newt's pal Beansy asks if it's true that Newt "ain't got no cherry no more" and inquires what the sex felt like. "Come to think of it, I don't know how it felt," Newt replies. "It all happened so quicklike . . . I was hard . . . so hard it was hurtin' . . . and all at once I had a shivery feelin' . . . then I went to sleep . . . It just kind'a left me feelin' good, mighty good, that's all." The encounter is rarely mentioned again. Later, when Big Mabel is killed in an automobile accident, a "peculiar sensation tugged at Newt's innards. . . . He remembered how hot and firm Big Mabel's body had been when he lay up against it during the storm. . . . He wondered why he hadn't tried for her again and regretted not having done so."

Big Mabel is spared her tragic demise in the movie, and in fact she reappears to give dramatic testimony in the climactic courtroom scene.

But in the movie Newt seems disinclined to “try for her again” and is clearly irked when Mabel, outside the courthouse, flirtatiously taps the crown of his head. Nor does he brag when asked about losing his virginity. He refuses to answer, his face a dull mask of denial and confusion. In Parks’s tightly constructed screenplay, every significant moment in the first half of the movie foreshadows a more tragic incident in the second, including this exchange. When we see this frozen expression again, it is Newt’s girlfriend, Arcella, who is evading his questions. We later learn that she had just been raped by the spoiled white playboy, Chauncey Cavanaugh. The mirroring of their behavior, as well as Newt’s intuitive sympathy for Arcella, indicates that they share their shame.

This shift—from consensual pre-teen sex in the book to a presumption of rape in the movie—might be due to the parameters that the studio set for Parks. But it’s just as likely that Newt’s feelings of disgrace emanate from Kyle Johnson’s thoughtful, quiet performance. Events of the novel span four years, and although the duration of the movie seems shorter—more like a year—Johnson assuredly takes Newt from boy to man, the pain of each disappointment settling in his face. His spine stiffens in determination, never more so than when he talks back to a white teacher: “All the colored kids hate you. Every last one of us.” Johnson, the son of actress Nichelle Nichols (Uhura of *Star Trek* fame), had in his director the original Newt to emulate. But he brings something of his own to the character: the lively reflections of a boy with a rich interior life.

In the transfer from book to movie, Parks had to drop quite a few subplots: one about Newt’s long-suffering sister, who is locked in an abusive marriage, and another about a light-skinned cousin whose visit creates a disturbance in Cherokee Flats. These omissions do little to violate Newt’s story, although these two complex women characters would have helped round out his world. A bigger loss is a story of Black resistance. When Newt’s graduating all-Black junior high school class is held back a year and prevented from enrolling in the integrated—and more lavishly equipped—high school, his parents find themselves leading an organized protest of parents and students, challenging the lame excuse of fire hazards offered by the school board. Such protests were not uncommon in Kansas in the 1920s. Black Kansans, free of the Jim Crow regulations that encumbered their neighbors to the south, pressed for full equity as allowed under state law. Many of these fights were aided by the civil rights attorney Elisha Scott, whose sons, three decades later, would represent the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (with the elder Scott

serving as consultant). This history is not much taught, even in Kansas, and the fact that the state is the site of the nation-changing landmark school-integration case—as well as, incidentally, the first drugstore sit-ins—can be puzzling. By recording this incident, Parks reminds readers that *Brown v. Board of Education* was not an anomaly but the crowning culmination of decades of local struggles.

It's a shame that the school-integration episode was jettisoned from the adaptation. Certainly, Parks was coping with the usual time restraints as he made the film, and perhaps, by the time of the 1968 shoot, he was in a more conciliatory mood than when he wrote the book five years earlier. It's also possible that Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, which released the film in 1969, was unwilling to stoke controversy by depicting a successful civil rights movement.

But *The Learning Tree's* slyest act of rebellion is that it takes on, through imitation, not just Oz, not just Inge, but that most beloved classic of racial tolerance: *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The final quarter of the movie is dominated by a suspenseful trial, but here it is a white man who is wrongfully accused, and only a Black boy knows the real perpetrator, who is also Black. Fearful of inciting a lynch mob, Newt keeps his secret to himself until his highly principled parents encourage him to stand up for what he knows is right. The rhythms of these courtroom scenes—down to the bloviating country prosecutor in his white suit—follow those in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Except, of course, the agents of change in *The Learning Tree* are all Black people. The hero is not the white defense attorney but Newt and his parents. It's an exhilarating moment, these poor and poorly educated people showing grit and resolve. They need no savior.

The most memorable shot in *The Learning Tree* also plays with visual cliché but, like everything else in this groundbreaking movie, upends audience expectations. Newt's ideas about manhood come from his brother Pete, a World War I vet who works as a cowboy, and his father, the dirt farmer and handyman Jack. Although Jack discourages Newt's finer sensibilities—only Sarah understands his pensiveness, love of nature, and inclination for music—his father's stoicism and basic goodness provide Newt with a model of masculinity. In the book, Jack's depth of character is revealed when, without telling his family, he donates his own skin to be grafted onto a burned child. In the movie, Jack and Pete are shot as archetypal heroes, riding out to rescue Newt and Big Mabel after the tornado. On horseback, silhouetted against a rich red post-storm sunset,

they lift the boy and woman onto their mounts. The soundtrack—Parks’s own music—emulates the wide-open, Aaron Copland–esque chords of a classic Western. Except Jack and Pete do a funny thing. Instead of riding into the sunset like typical cowboy loners, they jerk on the reins and steer their horses east—to the viewer, and to family and community beyond.

That Parks’s movie includes visually stunning and eloquent shots is no surprise. The book is also beautifully written. Yet to watch the film version of *The Learning Tree* is to get a master class in cinematic history. Just as Parks loved and resented Fort Scott, he treats all of American filmhood with tender respect while insisting on correcting the record. And he should know. He was there.

Gordon Parks:
The Learning Tree Digital Archive
Mark Crosby

Gordon Parks:
The Learning Tree Digital Archive
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With love and gratitude to Shirley, Aurelia, and Elodie

“The positivity of a discourse . . . characterizes its unity throughout time, and well beyond individual oeuvres, books, and texts.”

—Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*

The Learning Tree Digital Archive was conceived in 2014 to use a digital environment to collect, preserve, and curate historically and culturally significant materials relating to Gordon Parks’s titular autobiographical novel and motion picture. While archives existed in antiquity, the modern idea of the archive and its administrative framework can be traced, like so many modern concepts, to the French Revolution. The establishment of the Archives Nationales in Paris in 1789 centralized all the public and private documents that had been seized by the sansculottes, creating for the first time an institutionally sanctioned repository of texts relating to the prerevolutionary history of France. By the mid- to late twentieth century, this notion of the archive as a conserved and curated collection of physical artifacts attesting to a sense of cultural and historical identity was challenged by the French theorist Michel Foucault, who conceived of the archive as a nexus of relationships.¹ Foucault’s emphasis on what he calls “relations” seeks to liberate the archive from institutional and interpretative stasis and anticipates the emergence of digital archives in the late twentieth century.² For preserving, curating, analyzing, and making publicly accessible nondigital cultural heritage, digital archives have grown in prominence over the last two decades, not least because the grounding logic of digital technology is the database and the relationships therein, rather than any set of narratives that may be imposed on the archive’s contents.

The term database typically refers to a collection of unordered data that can be accessed by search and retrieval functions. Narrative is, as N. Katherine Hayles observes, “an ancient linguistic technology” essential for ordering data into a series of cause-and-effect relationships.³ Narratives can be linear or nonlinear, but they always seek to impose some form of meaning onto data. The database, in its broadest sense, can be seen to defer the responsibility for the creation of meaning onto the user, although this is not always a given. The digital database, as Lev Manovich points out,

“can support a narrative, but there is nothing in the logic of medium itself that would foster its generation.”⁴

Of course, this observation should be qualified by recalling that even though databases are not generators of narrative, they are also not value neutral and objective. To access a digital archive typically requires an interface that allows users to query, organize, and retrieve the materials stored on the archive’s database. The interface implicitly and explicitly embeds, as Jerome McGann observes, “many kinds of hierarchical and narrativized operations.”⁵ Furthermore, whether human hands or artificial intelligence is responsible for creating digital archives, the process of construction has been informed and constrained by an organizing principle or set of principles. As such, the challenge for digital archives is knowledge representation. The database provides an opportunity for users to discover relationships between materials hitherto unknown or understudied, whereas the interface, along with other tools used to make the data tractable (such as metadata, TEI-conformant XML for literary texts), imposes meaning on the data. In the development of the Learning Tree Digital Archive, we have sought to balance what Ed Folsom terms the “rhizomorphous” nature of the database, allowing users to explore a multiplicity of artifacts and their relationships within the interpretative framework of the archive.⁶

The Learning Tree Digital Archive was originally conceived by a group of Kansas State University (K-State) students as their final project for the Department of English’s 2014 iteration of its Introduction to Digital Humanities course. Drawing on a cache of materials relating to Gordon Parks held by Special Collections at Hale Library, the students, assisted by faculty, identified photographs by Parks and others taken on the set of the 1969 film adaptation of Parks’s 1963 autobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree*. These photographs offer a behind-the-scenes glimpse onto the set of the first Hollywood film made by a black director. The cultural importance of this movie and its significance in the racial history of Hollywood are reflected in its induction onto the National Film Registry in 1989. The students digitized and assembled a small database containing a selection of these photographs, providing metadata structured according to the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative. These digitized images were then curated for an online exhibition that was created using the Omeka content management system and hosted by the K-State Digital Humanities Center. The Omeka exhibition was removed after a year and partially re-created in the digital book application Scalar, augmented with materials such as interviews with actors that were added to the database.⁷

In the spring of 2016, the database grew to 80 unique images through the inclusion of digitized photographs that recorded the filming of *The Learning Tree* in Fort Scott, Kansas and digitized images of script directions. In collaboration with the Gordon Parks Museum at Fort Scott Community College, which holds an extensive collection of images and ephemera related to The Learning Tree film, and with a grant from Kansas Humanities, K-State faculty worked with students to identify and digitize additional photographs as well as hours of oral histories and interviews from mini-cassettes, newspaper clippings, personal items, and souvenirs relating to Parks's childhood in Fort Scott. By 2018, the database contained approximately 2,000 digital files, made up of an assortment of photographs, videos, recorded oral histories, newspaper clippings, and Parks memorabilia. Although the physical objects are stable, many are extremely fragile or located in repositories that are often difficult or impossible to access, especially the oral histories recorded on Dictaphone cassette tapes. Having digitized these artifacts using industry-standard file formats set out in the Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative, we began to curate them into a reimagined digital archive.

With funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we were able to reconceptualize our previous iterations of the archive to account for the variety of materials that had since been added to the database. Foremost in this process of rethinking the function of the archive was the goal of providing users with multiple ways to explore and discover the relationships between the digitized artifacts. To facilitate this process of exploration and discovery, keywords were incorporated into the subject element of the metadata. These keywords link the various file types in the database based on their thematic relationship. For instance, if an artifact is a photograph of Parks shooting a particular scene or an oral history that discusses a specific scene from the movie, we have added an identifier for that scene as a keyword descriptor. These keyword descriptors link digitized artifacts to all related digital files.⁸ By semantically linking these files via metadata, users will have access to thematically related digital materials in the database.

In addition, we have incorporated Resource Description Framework (RDF) to structure the metadata into description sets and provide links, or Uniform Resource Identifiers (URIs), to create relationships beyond the content of our database and on to the World Wide Web, achieving

formal semantic interoperability and creating Linked Data. To create the graphic user interface (GUI) to access our digitized artifacts, we selected the Drupal content management system, in part because it exposes Linked Data to the Semantic Web, making the contents of our database discoverable.

Since the first iteration of the archive, we have followed best practices in the digitization process. For example, all images have been scanned and saved as 600 dpi TIFF files. For audio files, we follow the guidelines set out by the Association for Recorded Sound Collections, the Council on Library and Information Resources, and the National Preservation Board of the Library of Congress, using uncompressed BroadWave Format (BWF) files for preservation, with corresponding compressed MP3 files. For video files, we follow the Library of Congress recommendations, using either MPEG-3 or MPEG-4 formats, which many industry experts agree are best for long-term preservation. All the text files are encoded in XML following Text Encoding Initiative guidelines, and we created an XSLT file to transform our TEI-conformant XML files to HTML for display on the Web.⁹ The caveat to using TEI to encode text files and including thematic keywords in our metadata is that we are imposing a layer of interpretation onto the data. These interpretative interventions, however, will ensure that the Learning Tree Digital Archive makes discernable the relationships between the contents of the database, irrespective of document format.

Users can access this database of historically and culturally important materials through the GUI, which offers a variety of gateways to navigate the digitized artifacts and their relationships. For example, once users alight on the archive's homepage, they can navigate via a string search function that utilizes the thematic keywords in our metadata. Users also have the option to search data by media format (video, audio, text, and image) and via the relationships between data. Users seeking to explore the film's depiction of a particular scene from the novel, for instance, can access all the materials relating to that scene via the thematic relationships between the relevant digitized artifacts in the database. In addition to photographs documenting the scene, users will be able to explore audio recordings and textual transcripts of interviews with town residents about the filming of the scene, biographical information relating the scene to Parks's childhood, and so on.

While acknowledging the impossibility of presenting the contents of our database neutrally, we have sought to focus our interpretative framework on exposing some of the important thematic relationships between these digitized artifacts. We hope that the reimagined Learning Tree Digital Archive embodies in spirit if not in practice Foucault's notion of the archive as artifacts "grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations."¹⁰

Notes

1. *Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 128–9.
2. For a history of this development, see Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 1 (2004): 9–25.
3. N. Katherine Hayles, “Narrative and Database: Natural Symbionts,” *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (Oct. 2007): 1605.
4. Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 7.
5. Jerome McGann, “Database, Interface, and Archival Fever,” *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (Oct. 2007): 1588.
6. Ed Folsom, “Database as Genre: The Epic Transformation of the Archives,” *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (Oct. 2007): 1573.
7. See The Learning Tree: A Gordon Parks Archive Project in-development project at <https://scalar.usc.edu/works/gordon-parks/index>.
8. We have followed the approach taken by Alexandros Chortaras et al., “A Semantic Approach to Film Content Analysis and Retrieval,” *SETN '16: Proceedings of the 9th Hellenic Conference on Artificial Intelligence* 38 (May 2016): 1–8.
9. The Guidelines for Electronic Text Encoding and Interchange can be found at <https://tei-c.org/guidelines>.
10. Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, 129.

Acknowledgements

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The Gordon Parks Project at K-State has been an ambitious undertaking with a scope bigger than what the project team members initially imagined. The more research we did, the more we uncovered about Gordon Parks that warranted further study and documentation. These discoveries testify to Parks's expansive mind and talents and the remarkable drive he sustained throughout his life. This book and *The Learning Tree: A Gordon Parks Digital Archive* are just the first steps in the study of Gordon Parks and Kansas. Our deep gratitude goes to the National Endowment of the Humanities, whose financial support made possible the publication of this book and the digital archive, and to Kansas State University, Humanities Kansas, Karen Haas, and Kevin Willmott for supporting research for the digital archive. In addition, the project team acknowledges the tremendous support and leadership of Linda Duke, Director of the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, and Karin Westman, Head of the Department of English, Kansas State University.

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The Beach Museum of Art expresses gratitude to the Gordon Parks Foundation and Executive Director Peter W. Kunhardt Jr. for partnering with the museum to exchange the damaged prints of the 1973 K-State gift with authorized prints from original negatives in its archives. The Foundation also supported this publication by providing image files and permission to use them.

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List of Plates

All works are by Gordon Parks and in the permanent collection of the Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art unless otherwise indicated.

Titles in italics are captions published in *LIFE* or *Half Past Autumn*, the book that Gordon Parks wrote for his 1997 retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Titles that are not italicized are simply descriptive titles used for discussion. Images with descriptive titles are not known to have titles assigned by Parks.

Parks selected a Masonite hardboard backing for the photographs he donated to K-State in 1973. The mounting adhesive leached into the images over time, damaging their surfaces. In 2016–2017, the museum entered into a partnership with the Gordon Parks Foundation to exchange the original 1973 prints with a set of authorized prints from the original negatives. Some of the new prints differ in size from the originals. Captions indicate where there are discrepancies.

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Gordon Parks images courtesy of and copyright The Gordon Parks Foundation

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Gordon Parks:
“Homeward to the Prairie I Come”

Edited by Aileen June Wang

Foreword by Linda Duke and Karin
Westman

With Contributions by

Mark Crosby

Katherine Karlin

Cameron Leader-Picone

Sarah Price

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