



Gordon Parks's American Gothic, Washington, D.C., which captures government charwoman Ella Watson at work in August 1942. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

The Hard Kind of Courage: Labor and Art in Selected Works by Langston Hughes, Gordon Parks, and Frank Marshall Davis

by John Edgar Tidwell

When and in what sense can art be said to require a “hard kind of courage”? At Wichita State University’s Ulrich Museum, from September 16 to December 16, 2012, these questions were addressed in an exhibition of work celebrating the centenary of Gordon Parks’s 1912 birth. Titled “The Hard Kind of Courage: Gordon Parks and the Photography of the Civil Rights Era,” this series of deeply profound images offered visual testimony to the heart-rending but courageous sacrifices made by Freedom Riders, the bombing victims at the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, the energized protesters at the Great March on Washington, and other participants in the movement. “Photographers of the era,” the exhibition demonstrated, “were integral to advancing the movement by documenting the public and private acts of racial discrimination.”¹ Their images succeeded in capturing the strength, fortitude, resiliency, determination, and, most of all, the love of those who dared to step out on faith and stare down physical abuse and death. It is no small thing that all this was done amidst the challenges of being a black artist or writer seeking self-actualization in a racially charged era. The laws, prevailing social practices, and racial attitudes that shaped black life in the years leading up to the modern-day civil rights movement influenced and served as motivation for artists and writers, who struggled to make sense of their times and places.

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1. Quoted from the online description of the program, “The Hard Kind of Courage: Gordon Parks and the Photographs of the Civil Rights Era,” September 16–December 16, 2012, Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, webs.wichita.edu/?u=ulrichmuseum&p=/Art/Exhibitions/CivilRightsPhotographers/.

In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court officially eroded the so-called “citizenship amendments” to the Constitution with an interpretation that supported discriminatory social practices and authorized legal segregation. Close to sixty years later, after the court cases consolidated under the umbrella *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, signaled the Supreme Court’s reversal of legalized Jim Crow in 1954, American society slowly, often begrudgingly, accepted the symbol but not the substance of the decree that the nation was no longer “separate but equal.”² Given this political ferment, to be an artist or writer of color, rather than a propagandist or polemicist, required a dedication to the principles of art, a commitment to aesthetic excellence, and a willingness to pursue the best that defined the human condition. Achieving these noble goals was even more demanding because the world of white cultural dominance often identified black racial matters as inconsequential, unimportant, or undeserving of recognition. In his 1963 pontification about Topeka-born black poet Gwendolyn Brooks, the white critic Louis Simpson gave voice to the thinking of many when he observed: “Brooks’s *Selected Poems* contains some lively pictures of Negro life. I am not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro; on the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important. . . . Miss Brooks must have had a devil of a time trying to write poetry in the United States, where there has been practically no Negro poetry worth talking about.”³

Writers of color seeking to emerge in a climate of condescension and outright repudiation required “a hard

kind of courage.” Knowing that the world of American art did not necessarily reify for them personal and aesthetic affirmation, they concluded that the strength to express their own artistic vision had to come from within, not without. In reaching this conclusion, they resolved to remain true to their own principles of aesthetic development, which meant defying partisan politics and resisting the need for critical approval, especially from those who did not understand their creations. Part of this new resolve was rooted in an engagement with the actual labor of art. It meant embracing the idea that great art is the result of a process of making, selecting, shaping, rethinking, and reworking. The final product, they determined, was formed in the crucible of hard work, not in the wistful idea of “inspiration” or “spontaneity.” In the mantra well known among creative writers: “All writing is *rewriting*.”

While many outsiders have urged the notion that Kansas is hardly a land that has contributed significantly to the American cultural landscape and is little more than a Sahara of artistic development, a careful consideration of literary history reveals this claim to be specious and unsupported.⁴ Despite Kansas’s legacy as a region of contradictory, enigmatic, ambiguous, and arbitrary racial politics, three artists/writers of color emerged to represent arguably the best aesthetic production of this state: Langston Hughes, Gordon Parks, and Frank Marshall Davis. A brief exploration of the nature and function of their aesthetic labor in selected works reveals an abundant creative output that not only brings distinction to Kansas but also indicates achievements gained against overwhelming odds.

2. The literature on this subject is quite extensive. The following, however, are among the most useful treatments: Robert J. Cottrol, *et al.*, *Brown v. Board of Education: Caste, Culture, and the Constitution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003); Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality* (New York: Legal Classics Library, 1994); and Waldo E. Martin, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, Mass.: Bedford/St. Martin’s Press, 1998). For an impressive collection of primary materials see the Charles S. Scott Collection, Kansas Collection, RH MS 1145, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries, Lawrence, available online at etext.ku.edu/view?docId=ksrlead/ksrl.kc.scottcharless.xml&doc.view=print;chunk.id=

3. Quoted in Abraham Chapman, ed., *Black Voices: An Anthology of Afro-American Literature* (New York: Mentor Books, 1968), 42. His review originally appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in 1963. The comment seems especially odd because Brooks had previously won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950. A younger group of black writers used the observation made by Simpson and others to fuel their own insurgency in art, which culminated in the black arts movement of the late 1960s. One of their tenets was to refute the pervasive claims of Simpson and so many others by urging the necessity of a black aesthetic that would be free from the artistic vision propagated and controlled by white writers and artists.

4. Sadly, Kansas is widely associated with being backwoods or backwards. As “evidence” of such views, critics turn to the fiasco generated in the recent creationism-evolution debate. Or they cite the campaign of Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church congregation against homosexuality. Others simply point to the imprimatur of the Eastern press, which has been known to characterize Kansans as a bunch of “hayseeds.” Robert Smith Bader, *Hayseeds, Moralizers, and Methodists: The Twentieth-Century Image of Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 48–56, 70–80. There are those who see the title of Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2004) as an indictment of the state. To break the tension, some outsiders invoke Dorothy of the *Wizard of Oz* and playfully click their heels in a poor imitation of her effort to make her mantra come true: “There’s no place like home! There’s no place like home!” Thomas Frank, *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* See also Thomas Fox Averill, “Flyover Country: Images of Kansas,” *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 34 (Spring 2011): 90–101.



Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, February 1, 1902, into a family that was deeply rooted in the tradition of black social and political protest, including abolitionism. As a young man he traveled extensively—as indicated in the titles of his two autobiographies: *The Big Sea* and *I Wonder as I Wander*. Before his death on May 22, 1967, his poetry, plays, and nonfiction prose had already contributed much to African American literature. Photograph of Hughes at work at the Grand Hotel in Chicago in 1942 courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, and the Langston Hughes estate.

For Langston Hughes, Kansas was as crucial to his coming of age as was air for breathing. From 1903 until 1915 in Lawrence mainly, but in Topeka and Kansas City too, young Hughes had many of his personal values and perspectives on life shaped by his grandmother, Mary Leary Langston, who taught him about the family’s heroic tradition in the absence of his peripatetic mother, Carrie Hughes Clarke. Looking retrospectively on his life in his memoir *The Big Sea*, Hughes paid one of the highest compliments to his experiences in Kansas: “I wanted to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas.”⁵ He came away with a deep and abiding love for “the low down folks,” as he reverently called the lowest class of African Americans. He also learned to see white people, not as an undifferentiated group, but as individuals. And it was in Kansas that he developed

5. Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940; reprint, New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 303.

a foundational appreciation for the blues, jazz, spirituals, and folk speech that would form the aesthetic vision guiding his poetry, fiction, and playwriting throughout his lifetime.

Part of this vision can be traced back to when, as a youngster, for example, Hughes had an informal, experiential encounter with the blues, which culminated in an enviable proficiency with the art form. As he recounted it, his discovery of the blues occurred when, as a six year old visiting his uncle in Kansas City, he heard a verse that haunted him until years later when he wrote a poem incorporating it. In “I Remember the Blues,” Hughes recalled being “on a Charlotte Street corner near [his] uncle’s barber shop” and hearing “a blind guitar player moaning to the long eerie sliding notes of his guitar.”⁶ He reiterated the remembered lines in *The Big Sea*: “I got de weary blues / And I can’t be satisfied. . . . / I ain’t happy no mo’ / And I wish that I had died.”⁷ The precise location of

Hughes’s experience is undoubtedly less important than the fact it places Hughes firmly in the region at a time when different kinds of music were playing against each other and seeking definition. In the words of music historian Jurgen Grandt, who quotes the legendary Sidney Bechet, “Jazz in the Jazz Age [that] was indeed still ‘waiting to be the music.’” It was a music “that was only just beginning to gel from the collision of myriad styles, genres, and regional influences.”⁸ At the epicenter of the aesthetic ferment was the blues, a form the young Hughes would retain in his inchoate memory until years later, when he transformed it into meaningful poetry and fiction. From these rather humble roots emerged a lifelong engagement with the form.

Aside from his actual experiments with blues form and spirit that found their way into his impressive body of

6. Langston Hughes, “I Remember the Blues,” in *Missouri Reader*, ed. Frank Luther Mott (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1964), 152.

7. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 215.

8. Jurgen E. Grandt, *Kinds of Blue: The Jazz Aesthetic in African American Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 47.



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creative work, for about forty years Hughes consistently reworked definitions of blues, which ultimately became variations on a theme. In his poetry collection *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), his "A Note on the Blues" provides an attentive audience with a brief description of the genre's poetic pattern ("one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two") and a statement about its mood ("almost always despondency, but when they are sung people laugh").⁹ In *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (1932), his collection for younger readers, Hughes provided a distinction between the blues, sung by individuals, and spirituals, sung by groups: "Whereas the Spirituals are often songs about escaping from trouble, going to heaven and living happily ever after, the Blues are songs about being in the midst of trouble, friendless, hungry, disappointed in love, right here on earth."¹⁰

9. Langston Hughes, "A Note on the Blues," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001), 1:73; and Hughes, *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (New York: Knopf, 1927).

10. Quoted in Langston Hughes, *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Dianne Johnson (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 4:59; and Hughes, *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1932).

Perhaps Hughes was untroubled by these easy distinctions of blues and spirituals because his audience for the poems in *The Dream Keeper* consisted of children. His definitions clearly simplify a much more complicated set of claims. But he did seem to redeem himself. Over the years, he would continue to educate readers about the nature of the blues and their significance for his own aesthetic development in brief autobiographical reminiscences such as "Songs Called the Blues" (1940), "Jazz as Communication" (1958), and "I Remember the Blues" (1964).¹¹ Finally, he also used an installment in the life of his fictional character Jesse B. Simple to remind observers of his own engagement with the music. Framed around the idea of memory, the colloquy between Simple and his rather droll friend Boyd is a debate over the relative merits of Bessie, Clara, and Mamie Smith

and whose recall of the singers is greater. In an ultimate coup, Boyd invokes the name Ma Rainey. Simple's reply echoes the high esteem Hughes no doubt held for her: "Great day in the morning! Ma! That woman could sing some blues! I loved Ma Rainey. . . . Yes, I heard her! I am proud of hearing her! To tell the truth, if I stop and listen, I can still hear her."¹² The recollections of the street-smart Simple testify to the enduring power of Rainey's vocal talent as well as her songs. In comparing her body of work to that of three other obviously sterling performers, Simple credits Rainey as being their superior. Thus the brief reference not only distills Rainey's continuing historical resonance; it restates Hughes's idea of her place

11. The following represents a partial listing of reminiscences: Langston Hughes, "Songs," *Phylon* 2 (Summer 1941): 143-45, reprinted in *The Langston Hughes Reader* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1958): 159-61; and Hughes, "Jazz: Its Yesterday, Today and Its Potential Tomorrow," *Chicago Defender*, July 28, 1956, retitled and revised as "Jazz as Communication," in *Hughes Reader*, 492-94. See a fuller list of titles in Steven C. Tracy, *Langston Hughes and the Blues* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 138n227.

12. Langston Hughes, "Shadow of the Blues," in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, ed. Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 7:325.

in the pantheon of blues queens. Rainey, therefore, is not just a memory; she is *memorable*.

These criteria form the bases of literary critic Sterling Brown's praise for the marvelous achievement of "Dance," a chapter in Hughes's 1930 novel *Not Without Laughter*. Arguably Hughes's finest piece of fiction, "Dance" is one of those chapters the likes of which had never appeared in previous African American fiction. In a clear departure from the rest of the book, Hughes takes the form and practice of the blues to another level of sophistication. Although this claim might be mitigated by later critics who asserted that jazz and blues as musical forms in 1931 were "waiting to be the music," it would be difficult to deny the artful use to which Hughes put them in this novel.¹³ This chapter easily dramatizes the meaning of the blues as poetic or philosophic communication in its capacity to speak to the lives of black folk. This chapter is set in a juke joint in Stanton, Kansas—a town that in Hughes's description bears a remarkable resemblance to Lawrence in 1915 or so. The house band consists of four "homeless, plug-ugly [Negroes] . . . playing mean old loveless blues in a hot, crowded little dance-hall in a Kansas town on Friday night." Hughes wrote:

It was true that men and women were dancing together, but their feet had gone down through the floor into the earth, each dancer's alone—down into the center of things—and their minds had gone off to the heart of loneliness, where they didn't even hear the words, the sometimes lying, sometimes laughing words that [band leader] Benbow, leaning on the piano, was singing against this background of utterly despondent music. . . . Playing the heart out of loneliness [was] a wide-mouthed leader, who sang everybody's troubles until they became his own.¹⁴

This passage can be traced to an idea Hughes articulated in the sociological survey he researched as a student at Lincoln University; from it we can infer the potential of the blues to conduct existential inquiry. In the foreword to his project, Hughes wrote: "In the primitive world, where people live closer to the earth and much nearer to the stars, every inner and outer act combines to form the



Instead of propagandizing and critiquing racial misrepresentation in his work, Hughes moved readers to a deeper and more profound engagement with African American life. Hughes is captured here in a photograph by Gordon Parks courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., and the Langston Hughes estate.

single harmony, life."¹⁵ The poetic form and feel of this quote seem unrelated to the sociological character of his study; however, the philosophical insight provided by his poetic expression aptly explains the substance of the blues he articulates in "Dance."

His is not a self-conscious or deliberate use of an acknowledged philosophical thought or tradition. Rather he explored via the *poetry* of the blues the nature of existence. To conduct this existential inquiry, he drew upon the artful components of the blues to inquire into the human condition, with its "odors of bodies, the stings of flesh, and the utter emptiness of soul." Using personification, he made the music "scream and moan.

15. Hughes, *The Big Sea*, 278. For a thoughtfully written essay on this passage's significance, see Joan Stone's "Circles of Liberation and Constriction: Dance in *Not Without Laughter*," in *Montage of a Dream: The Art and Life of Langston Hughes*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell and Cheryl R. Ragar (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), 259–83.

13. Grandt, *Kinds of Blue*, 47.

14. Langston Hughes, "Dance," *Not Without Laughter* (1930; reprint, New York: Scribner Paperbacks, 1995), 104–5.



Gordon Parks, born the youngest of fifteen children in Fort Scott, Kansas, November 30, 1912, lived in Kansas until his mother died when he was a teenager. Having quit high school before graduation, Parks took up various jobs, including one as a railroad porter. At work one day in 1937, Parks saw a photography spread in a magazine and, interest piqued, bought himself a camera at a local pawn shop. Photograph of Parks in October 2004 by Bill Sneed for the Lawrence Journal-World.

of a people who were often denied their harmonious nature by being reduced to caricatures and stereotypes. Instead of propagandizing and critiquing racial misrepresentation, he moved readers to a deeper and more profound engagement with African American life. Inscribed in this concept is a point of view that tends to resist the reductiveness of either/or simplicities or logic. This gesture not only preserves the dignity and authenticity of a people; it also sets forth the virtues of the blues as a racially specific art form. One chapter, then, in a revisionist gesture, implicitly counters the myopia that John Lomax, a prominent white folklorist, claimed as the one feature that characterized all of black life—that is, the self-pity that results from living as victims.¹⁸ Hughes rebutted this claim by masterfully asserting a strength of character that Lomax denied black folk.

. . . The earth rolls relentlessly,” his speaker proclaimed, “and the sun blazes for ever [sic] on the earth, breeding, breeding. But why do you insist like the earth, music?”¹⁶ In asking questions of the earth, the sun, and the music and in plumbing for understanding and seeking answers, Hughes essentially turned the entire dance scene into a forum on the nature of existence.

In “Dance” Hughes articulated the novel’s definition of the blues. It is, at once, a metaphoric confrontation, a transcendence, and a triumph over experience. In his hands, it possesses transformative power, what critic Maurice Bryan discussed in another context as a “creative endeavor [capable of transforming] . . . the internal and external oppression of violence.”¹⁷ By highlighting in this chapter the ability of the blues to communicate simply the extremely complicated lives of a people, Hughes artfully deployed language that testifies to the very humanity

Gordon Parks’s rootedness in Kansas soil would define his personal growth and anticipate his understanding of the rather severe demands of art. As recounted in his autobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree* (1963), Parks confronted a Kansas that was no more than “a plateau of uncertainty.” The law, education, interracial dynamics, sexual politics, religion—all those institutions and more that sustain society—were consumed with contradiction and conflict. Fort Scott, reprised in the novel as Cherokee Flats, was situated just west of the Missouri state line, close enough to embrace the historical border tensions that existed between both states well before the Civil War. In this environment, Parks’s double, Newt Winger, strives to navigate his way through the complications of adolescence. Sarah Winger provides her son Newt with a great deal of advice, including the meaning of place: “I hope you won’t have to

16. Hughes, *Not Without Laughter*, 100–1.

17. Maurice Bryan, “Good Morning Blues,” in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture*, ed. Tony Bolden (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 140.

18. John A. Lomax, “Self-Pity in Negro Folk-Songs,” *Nation* 9 (August 1917): 141–45.



Parks's "education" in photography took place at the Farm Security Administration in Washington, D.C., during the Great Depression. His initial assignment was simply to walk the city streets, where he found rampant poverty and the direst forms of racial segregation in the shadow of the monuments that symbolized the nation's creeds. In his effort to create empathy, not sympathy, through his work, Parks captured images such as this one, showing a boy in the doorway of his home after losing his leg to a streetcar as he was playing in the street. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

stay here all your life, Newt. It ain't a all-good place and it ain't a all-bad place. 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. . . . No matter if you go or stay, think of Cherokee Flats like that till the day you die—let it be your learnin' tree."¹⁹ It is this sense of learning that gives the novel a

19. Gordon Parks, *The Learning Tree* (New York: Crest Book, 1964), 26, 35–36.

didactic feel and also appropriately designates it a Bildungsroman, or "coming of age novel."

As Newt develops an awareness of love, sex, birth, religion, racial dynamics, and more, he also receives instruction about how not to let bitterness and hatred dominate and therefore constrain his life. Newt's Uncle Rob, physically blind but philosophically a visionary, provides the avuncular wisdom that guides both Newt and Parks out of the morass of defeatism and victimization. Following Newt's verbal battle with a white woman and her son, in which racial insults are exchanged, Uncle Rob chastises his nephew by imparting this advice: "Take the rest of your anger out on the piano." The suggestion is that one need not ignore or try to forget the racial slurs and dynamics, but also that one has a choice of weapons with which to fight them. Later, in his poem "Kansas Land," Parks described all he would miss about the state, including the land, the rivers, the blooming flowers, and the birds: "Yes, all this I would miss— / along with the fear, hatred and violence / We blacks had suffered upon this beautiful land."²⁰ Turning this Kansas ethos into an aesthetic treatment of the human condition would be Parks's personal challenge.

In its own way, Gordon Parks's aesthetic labor was arguably more complicated than either Davis's or Hughes's. The reason for this claim, quite simply, was that he engaged in a much wider variety of artistic expressions. Without question he excelled as a documentary photographer and fashion photographer; music composer; filmmaker, producer, director, and screenwriter; and fiction writer, poet, and autobiographer. When Parks was asked why he sought success in so many different

arts, he replied: "For a long time I passed it off as a sort of professional restlessness. But, in retrospect, I know that it was a desperate search for security within a society that held me inferior simply because I was black. It was a constant inner rebellion against failure. . . . As it

20. Gordon Parks, *Half-Past Autumn: A Retrospective* (Boston, Mass.: Bulfinch Press, 1997), 26; for another look at Parks and his career see John Edgar Tidwell, "Gordon Parks and the Unending Quest for Self-fulfillment," in Virgil W. Dean, ed., *John Brown to Bob Dole: Movers and Shakers in Kansas History* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 293–305.



In its own way, Parks's aesthetic labor was arguably more complicated than either Davis's or Hughes's because, quite simply, he engaged in a much wider variety of artistic expressions, including documentary and fashion photography, composing music, and making films. Here Parks (seated left) shoots his film *The Learning Tree*, based on his memoir of the same title, in 1968.

happened I tried several fields. In case one failed me I could turn to another one."²¹ Arguably, the artistic mode of expression that sustained Parks more than the others was photography, which allowed him to probe the different ways meaning can be conveyed through pictures.

Parks was drawn to confluence or synthesis. The process began with his interactions with the painters who spent a great deal of time at the Chicago Southside Community Center in the late 1930s. They had been seeking answers to similar aesthetic issues by experimenting with various modes of representations of their subjects: graphic protest, grim realism, and merciless satires. "In purpose, and execution," Parks wrote, "the two kinds of expression tended to oppose each other." Mike Bannarn, a friend who was both a painter and a sculptor, helped Parks resolve the contradictions. "I get just as riled up over preserving the beauty of things as I do about destroying the ugliness

21. Quoted in "Gordon Parks," *Black Literature Criticism*, ed. James P. Draper (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1992), 3:1552.

of them," he said to Parks.²² The same aesthetic impulse or emotional engagement that motivates destruction also inspires preservation. These questions came to him in the waning years of the Great Depression, an era in which the nation sought to understand and preserve on film its devastation. Books such as *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937) and *Let Us Now Praise Great Men* (1941) did more than capture graphic images of lives wasted by the Depression. Their images took viewers into the heart and soul of people dispossessed by nature and often forgotten by the federal government. For Parks, refining his documentary or journalistic photography posed challenges that differed from those raised by his fashion work. The documentary work forced Parks to rethink the potential of protest and propaganda to shock people into action, a response that was often irrational, versus the power of art to move viewers. The most

effective photographs created empathy, not sympathy. Parks would learn the difference from one of the nation's greatest photographic minds: Roy Stryker, director of the Information Division of the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Having won the first Julius Rosenwald Fellowship for Photography, Parks continued his education in Washington, D.C., at the FSA, beginning in January 1942.²³

Parks's initial assignment from Stryker was to walk the streets of Washington and get to know the area. What he found, of course, were rampant poverty and the direst forms of racial segregation right in the shadow of the monuments that symbolized our national creeds. Angered, he reported his findings to Stryker, who told Parks to "go home . . . and put it on paper. You can't take a picture of a white salesman, waiter, or ticket seller and

22. Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons* (1966; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1986), 194–95.

23. Tidwell, "Gordon Parks and the Unending Quest for Self-fulfillment," 299–301.

just say they are prejudiced. . . . You've got to verbalize the experience first, then find logical ways to express it in pictures. The right words too are important; they should underscore your photographs. *Think in terms of images and words.* They can be mighty powerful when they are fitted together properly."²⁴ From this, Parks learned that using his camera effectively against intolerance would not be easy. Through Stryker's guidance, he began to understand what the other FSA photographers had learned: how to create photos that revealed the depth of their subjects' humanity and dignity, which, in turn, severely indicted the sources of their subjects' oppression. Through this, Parks began to see how he could make his camera a weapon of social protest against injustice and, at the same time, a means for affirming human life.

This practice stood Parks in good stead through his tenure as *Life Magazine's* first black photographer. After his work with *Life* ended in 1972, he underwent a dramatic shift in his theory and practice of art. He began combining art photography, musical composition, and poetry in new, experimental, and expressive ways. The result was an expansion of the weapons that enabled him to confront the world and represent his emotional responses to it. Through his intermittently appearing autobiographies, Parks invited readers into his inner sanctum, into the interrogation of the self that is revealed in the confluence of his poetry, painting, classical music, and more. To be sure, this aesthetic shift from overtly social to more private concerns did not signal abrogation or surrender; instead, it simply announced a more intensely personal art. This revised, almost confessional, voice probed more searchingly the autobiographical impulse that compelled Parks to strive, to seek, to discover what lay over the next horizon that was the future. In so doing, he conducted experiments that result in an inescapably distinctive aesthetic vision. It is found in such books as *Whispers of Intimate Things* (1971), *Moments Without Proper Names* (1975), *Arias in Silence* (1994), *Glimpses Toward Infinity* (1996), and the remarkable retrospective *Half-Past Autumn* (1997).²⁵

The highly respected poet Stephen Spender once observed that Parks "is a poet with his camera as well as with his pen."²⁶ In making this claim, Spender introduced

what he perceived to be one of the most important features of Parks's books combining poetry and artwork: a concentration on the image. There's little question that Spender's analysis represents a culmination of sorts. Prior to winning his Rosenwald fellowship, Parks spent time talking aesthetics with the famous artist Charles White and others who worked out of the Southside Community Center in Chicago. Through these interactions, he came to understand the importance of image in art. Roy Stryker wisely counseled Parks to focus on making the image communicate the idea. The impression these interactions had on Parks is made clear in Spender's conclusion that his "photographs nearly always leave a single, strong, clear image in the mind, or else contrasted images." To become masterful at this, Parks engaged in years of practice and experimentation—in other words, the labor that yields great art.²⁷ Philip B. Kunhardt, Jr., a friend of the artist and a fellow *Life* photographer, was almost lyrical in defining the poetry in Parks's book *Gordon Parks: A Poet and His Camera* (1968):

The poems, both words and pictures, continue, gentle mostly, many idealistic in theme and highly romantic. . . . Words and pictures meld, free themselves from one another, meld again. Soon it becomes clear that it is the image that counts, not whether that image is displayed in photographs or words.²⁸

Parks himself had much to say about his aesthetic practice. In one of his most compelling statements, in the foreword to *Arias in Silence* (1994), he wrote:

The pictures that have most persistently confronted my camera have been those of crime, racism and poverty. I was cut through by the jagged edges of all three. Yet I remain aware of imagery that lends itself to serenity and beauty, and here my camera has searched for nature's evanescent splendors. Recording them was a matter of devout observance, a sort of metamorphosis through which I called upon things dear to me—poetry, music and the magic of watercolor. . . . Paint, music and camera came

24. Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*, 227; italics added.

25. Gordon Parks, *Whispers of Intimate Things* (New York: Viking Press, 1971); Parks, *Moments Without Proper Names* (New York: Viking Press, 1975); Parks, *Arias in Silence* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1994); Parks, *Glimpses Toward Infinity* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1996); and the visually-stunning Parks, *Half-Past Autumn: A Retrospective* (Boston, Mass.: Bulfinch Press, 1997).

26. Stephen Spender, preface to *Gordon Parks: A Poet and His Camera*, by Gordon Parks (New York: Viking Press, 1968).

27. *Ibid.*

28. Philip B. Kunhardt, introduction to *Gordon Parks: A Poet and his Camera*, by Gordon Parks (New York: Viking Press, 1968).



Frank Marshall Davis was born in Arkansas City, Kansas, December 31, 1905, and later studied journalism and writing at Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan. Davis worked as a journalist, political and labor activist, and poet in Chicago, Atlanta, and Honolulu, where he died July 26, 1987. Photo of Davis at work in Atlanta in the 1930s courtesy of the author.

More so than Hughes and Parks, poet, activist, and journalist Frank Marshall Davis was rather acerbic in his denunciation of Kansas as home and a source of creative engagement with art. He barely opened his memoir, *Livin' the Blues*, before condemning his hometown of Arkansas City as “a yawn town fifty miles south of Wichita, five miles north of Oklahoma, and east and west of nowhere worth remembering.”³⁰ It was less the relative isolation than the racial attitudes that incited his invective. Recalling the moment he stood on stage to receive his high school diploma, Davis said: “Although I am six feet one and weigh 190 at the age of seventeen, I feel more like one foot six; for I am black, and inferiority has been hammered into me at school and in my daily life away from home.” He received his diploma, recalling later that what passed for education in a Kansas school was very poor preparation “for life in a multi-racial, democratic nation. This is a mixed school—mixed in attendance, mixed-up in attitudes.”³¹

Although biographer Kathryn Takara argued that Davis literally developed an inferiority complex, a more careful

reading might consider Davis’s comments a rhetorical construct.³² Few would doubt the veracity of Davis’s confrontations with racism; however all life writers engage in a process of selecting, writing, and rewriting. The question then becomes one of divining the effect or motivation emerging from the writer’s choices. In *Blues*, Davis structured his remembrances to create a narrative of ascent. To do so he had to first show how far down his life had descended before he could demonstrate how he extricated himself from a social and racial quagmire and set himself on the path of aesthetic and political success.

In the process of finding his poetic voice, Davis had to learn to listen not only to his own instincts but to the

together like souls touching—lifting me from earth to the sky.²⁹

This self-description is what Kunhardt meant when he talked about Parks’s “poet’s sense—his eye, his ear, his soul.” For some, like art historian Philip Brookman, this shift made Parks’s formal expression more abstract. For Parks, though, his newest mode of expression represented a deepened, more intense exploration of an interior landscape. It allowed him new choices in trying to reach that something that continuously pulled him to the future. Having sacrificed himself to the loneliness of the artist, his last work enabled him to find new ways of interrogating who he was and where he saw himself going.

29. Gordon Parks, foreword to *Arias in Silence*, by Gordon Parks (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1994).

30. Frank Marshall Davis, *Livin' the Blues: Memoirs of a Black Journalist and Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 3.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Kathryn Waddell Takara, *Frank Marshall Davis: The Fire and the Phoenix: A Critical Biography* (Ka'a'awa, Hawaii: Pacific Raven Press, 2012), 10–17.

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After two stints at Kansas State College, Davis left with considerable experience as a journalist but fell one semester short of earning a degree. He began to distinguish himself as a reporter and editor at the *Gary American* and the *Atlanta World* before joining the *Associated Negro Press* in Chicago in 1934. His reputation for radical politics earned him careful scrutiny by the FBI in the mid-1940s. Undeterred, Davis added to his newspaper work by helping found the *Chicago Star* in 1946. This staunchly labor newspaper vociferously advocated for increased wages and rights for workers; it appeared at a time when labor unions were considered by many as fronts for subversive organizations. As a result of even greater pressure from the FBI, Davis chose to exile himself and his young bride to the Territory of Hawaii in 1948. Advertisement for the *Star*, picturing Davis as executive editor, courtesy of the author.

traditions of poetry too. For him, the labor of writing entailed making sense of that inner compulsion, that feeling that sought to escape from his soul into words on a page. As he would later write, that feeling was actually instilled in him when, at eight years of age, he first heard the blues. After hearing his first few bars of the blues, he wrote he "was hooked for life. . . . I knew this music

was part of me."³³ After that, his exposure to classical and operatic music left him cold and unresponsive. But the blues spoke to him in ways that Wagner, Verdi, and Chopin could not.

However, it was as an undergraduate at Kansas State Agricultural College in the mid-1920s that Davis took his first serious steps toward becoming a poet. In his composition class, he chose to take what he thought was an easier route to completing an assignment; he wrote a poem instead of an essay. His very excited teacher asked him if he had others. He did not. But Davis scurried over to the library, located some of the journals containing experimental poetry, and used them as models for several other poems. His instructor became so impressed that she invited him to join the campus chapter of the American College Quill Club, a national creative writing society. From this seemingly inauspicious beginning emerged seven collections of poetry, including his posthumously published *Black Moods: Collected Poems*.³⁴

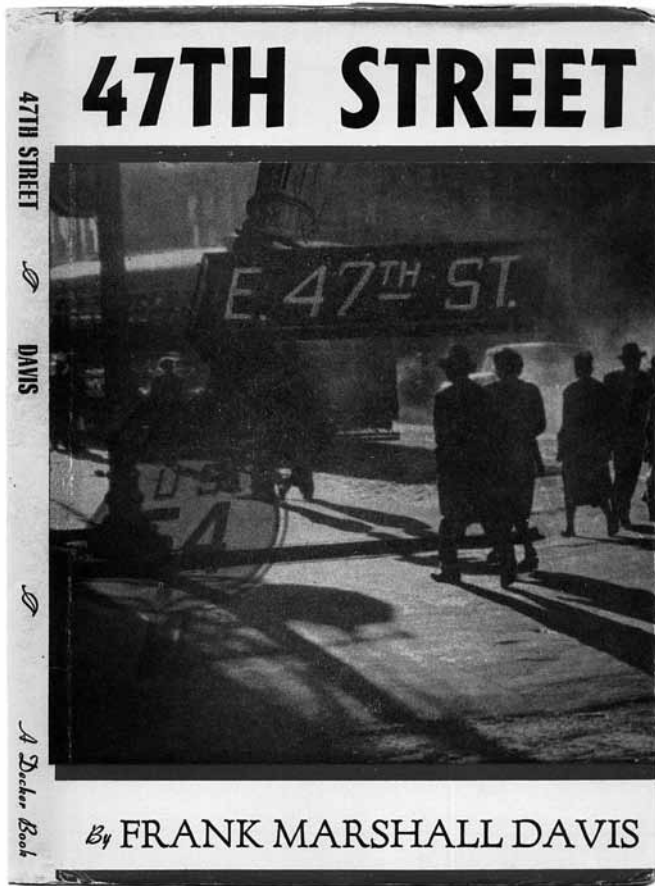
As Davis grew older, appreciation for the blues evolved into principles of art. First, he would learn that the blues, in their apparent simplicity, spoke directly and honestly about the experiences and conditions of African Americans. Even when the music's highly stylized metaphors seemed to be an indirect commentary on what African Americans felt and thought, the lyrics expressed a manner in which song became a method of confrontation, transcendence, and triumph over lived experience. Davis would later write: "Basically, [the blues] are personal songs of protest and rebellion, growing out of individual needs. They may have any subject matter, ranging through love, politics, current events, race relations, and whatnot. They may poke fun or they may be deadly serious. A true blues is always realistic; it is never maudlin or escapist."³⁵ Note the optimism of these lyrics by the 1920s jazz pianist Richard M. Jones: "Trouble in mind, I'm blue, / But I won't be blue always, / For the sun will shine in my backdoor someday." And consider these lyrics sung by Bessie Smith: "It's a long old road, but I'm gonna find the end. / It's a long old road, but I'm gonna find the end. / And when I get there I'm gonna shake hands with a friend."³⁶

33. Davis, *Livin' the Blues*, 32.

34. Frank Marshall Davis, *Black Moods: Collected Poems*, ed. John Edgar Tidwell (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

35. Davis, *Livin' the Blues*, xxv.

36. Quoted in Samuel Charters, *The Poetry of the Blues* (New York: Avon Books, 1963), 53; and for the familiar blues lyric, "Trouble in mind, I'm blue," see, among others, Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay, editors, *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 54.



Published in 1948, just before he departed for Hawaii, *47th Street: Poems* represents the culmination of Davis's development as a poet. It contains satirical, love and lyric, and some jazz-inspired poems; but these are all overshadowed by his socially real poems, which critics quibbled over. Were these poems or propaganda? In part, this collection firmly establishes Davis as an urban poet, one who had committed himself to participating in a Chicago-based renaissance, much like the one seemingly centered in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s. However, Davis probably sacrificed his best chance for an enduring reputation as poet when he left for Hawaii. Once there, he virtually disappeared from the setting and support that would have kept his name alive. Cover image courtesy of the author.

As much as Davis found the blues to be an entry into the worldview of African Americans, he also discovered that out of that musical form evolved another that would greatly influence him: jazz. Notice how the second line of Bessie Smith's blues song repeats her first line, but with a purpose. It is intended to give the singer an opportunity to compose or improvise a response to the first line. This dramatic pause, where the last line is improvised, is the birthplace of jazz. These features come together in Davis's poetry, not as classic blues lines, but as an attitude that is both blues and jazz inflected. Self-consciously not trying

to imitate the structure, say, of classic blues, some of Davis's poems reveal a blues spirit. Consider his homage to the extraordinary blues singer Billie Holiday: "Her rum-brown rope of a voice / Fastens flannel strands / Around soft sides of staid notes / Sitting properly / On their oh so proper scale / She pulls / And the notes fall / Into her molten mold / Of flaming sound."³⁷ The art that results from Davis's poetic labor recreates the sultry, sensuous sound for those who know Lady Day's music. It reminds them of her sophisticated pose and the sweetness of her signature gardenia. It recalls her power to pull the listener majestically, magically, like those staid notes, into her world. For unfamiliar listeners, well, it simply takes them there.

A somewhat unconventional but easy entry into Davis's work is through the late Wichita icon Irma Wassall. Born in New Mexico Territory in 1908 and passing in Wichita in 2012, she will be remembered for her enormous talent as poet, artist, fashion model, classical guitar player, and jazz correspondent for *Down Beat* magazine. Davis first met her in Chicago in 1940. In his memoir, he described her as being "in her late twenties and exquisitely lovely with an exotic, continental look that came from Hungarian gypsy ancestors."³⁸ In this brief description of Wassall lies a principle that drove Davis's poetry: the extraordinary use of metaphor, a striving for vivid images, and an effort to find a refreshing use of language. Critics were not uniformly appreciative of his poetics. Some found his work too close to his journalism and therefore lacking the freshness of innovative language. Their observations compared it to propagandistic, undifferentiated writing, since some of it was topical and addressed contemporary political events.

What distinguished Davis's poetry, though, was its variety. While he wrote a considerable number of social realist poems, these are nicely complemented by satirical poetry, lyric and love verse, and jazz poems. Each kind of poetry requires an understanding of its form, something Davis talked very little about. In one of his most poignant discussions, he remarked:

To me, poetry is a subjective way of looking at the world. All poetry worthy of the name is propaganda. . . . Since I take pride in being consid-

37. Davis, *Black Moods*, 193.

38. Davis, *Living the Blues*, 267.

ered a social realist, my work will be looked upon as blatant propaganda by some not in sympathy with my goals and as fine poetry by others of equal discernment who agree with me. But that is not to say that the craftsmanship is always equal. There may be a variation in technical skill in parts of the same poem. To me, good poetry condenses and distills emotions by painting unusual—perhaps memorable—pictures with words.³⁹

The attention Davis called to craftsmanship and technical skill presents a credible refutation to such critics as Nick Aaron Ford, who was especially vituperative in condemning Davis for supposedly violating good taste in poetry.⁴⁰ To understand that good poetry is not simply a matter of “taste” but an engagement with the formal tradition sets Davis apart from his detractors. On more than one occasion, Davis eschewed the popular preoccupation with such forms as the sonnet, rhymed couplet, and blank verse for what in 1925 he considered a revolutionary style called free verse. Free, of course, did not mean undisciplined. The form, while free from the usual rules of metered verse, nevertheless required discipline. Whether the poet used parallel lines or words, repetition, or balance, the rhythmic effect achieved resulted from the artful deployment of these features. It is this point that many Davis critics missed. They saw free verse as having no discipline, thus appearing to be closer to prose than their conceptions of poetry. The task confronting Davis, then, was summed up in one line: “I was a weaver of jagged words.”⁴¹ He had to figure a way to respond to the inanity and insanity of Jim Crow and the evaluations of his critics, while weaving his words into song, a music that paid tribute to the human condition.

The aesthetic achievements of Hughes, Parks, and Davis are important for two critical reasons. First, their success resulted from a hard kind of courage. The bravery of these writers was found in the fashioning, remaking, and rewriting that define aesthetic labor. Their pursuit often forced them to walk a lonely path in order to develop a means for giving voice to those innermost thoughts and feelings that cry out for expression. The term “hard kind of courage” is therefore an appropriate descriptor for this process, because, as metaphor, it speaks to the self-sacrifice and selflessness required by the pursuit of aesthetic excellence. But for the writers of color who drew inspiration from their people or who sought to represent them, the challenge was even greater. For they had to find some balance between the independence of the artist and the expectations of the people. Davis, Hughes, and Parks all faced and resolved this dilemma, without compromising their own integrity or sense of art.

But, second, the “art” of labor is no less demanding. The creativity that inspires ideas, emotions, and feelings is certainly just as necessary to the work of making great art. Arguably, the creative spirit is what separates the would-be artists from the accomplished ones. While critics and consumers pass judgment on the product of aesthetic labor, in the final analysis, it is what the artist brings to the enterprise that defines the “art” of labor. For example, Hughes marvelously redefined the aesthetic use of black folk or vernacular culture by first of all reinventing himself. Parks, who is often praised as a Renaissance man, envisioned an art that refused to see photography, music, and poetry as disparate aesthetic expressions; instead he blended them in new ways to achieve new aesthetic effects. And Davis’s vision redefined the nature of black poetry as it was understood in the 1930s and 1940s. Given their ties to Kansas, these three successful exponents of aesthetic innovation, it can justly be claimed, represent the best this state has to offer in contributing to that precious amalgam called “American culture.” [KH]

39. John Edgar Tidwell, “An Interview with Frank Marshall Davis,” *Black American Literature Forum* 19 (Autumn 1985): 107.

40. Nick Aaron Ford, “A Blueprint for Negro Authors,” *Phylon* 11 (4th Quarter 1950): 374–77. It bears mentioning that Ford represents a body of criticism that saw African American literature as a vehicle of racial integration, which would facilitate the social movement of people of color into an amorphous American mainstream and promote harmonious interracial relations, not exacerbate tensions.

41. Davis, *Black Moods*, 95.