Gordon Parks

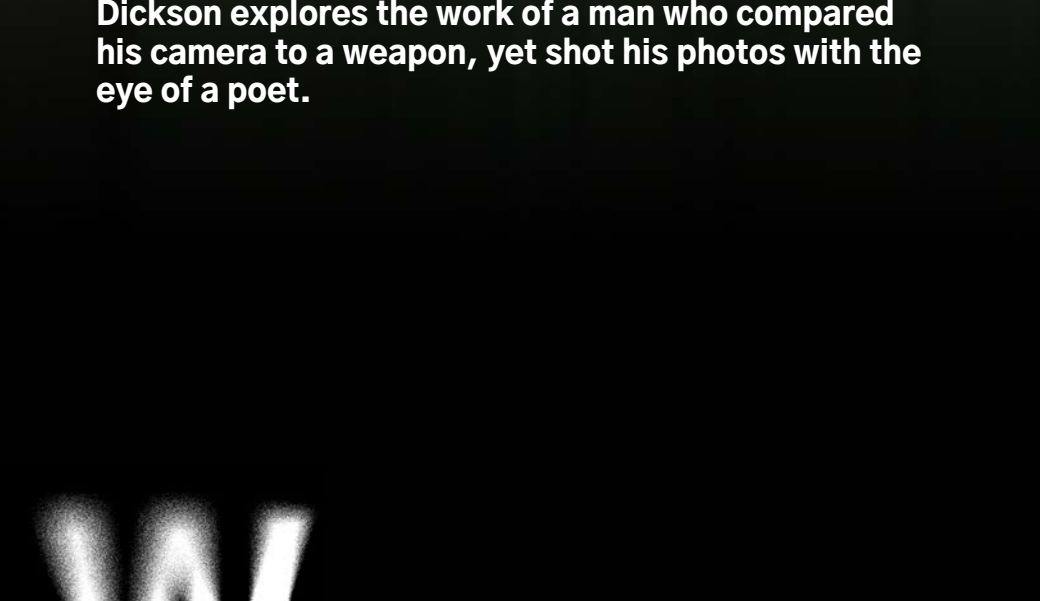
BEAUTIFUL IMAGES OF AN UGLY HISTORY

By Andrew Dickson
3rd February 2021

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

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

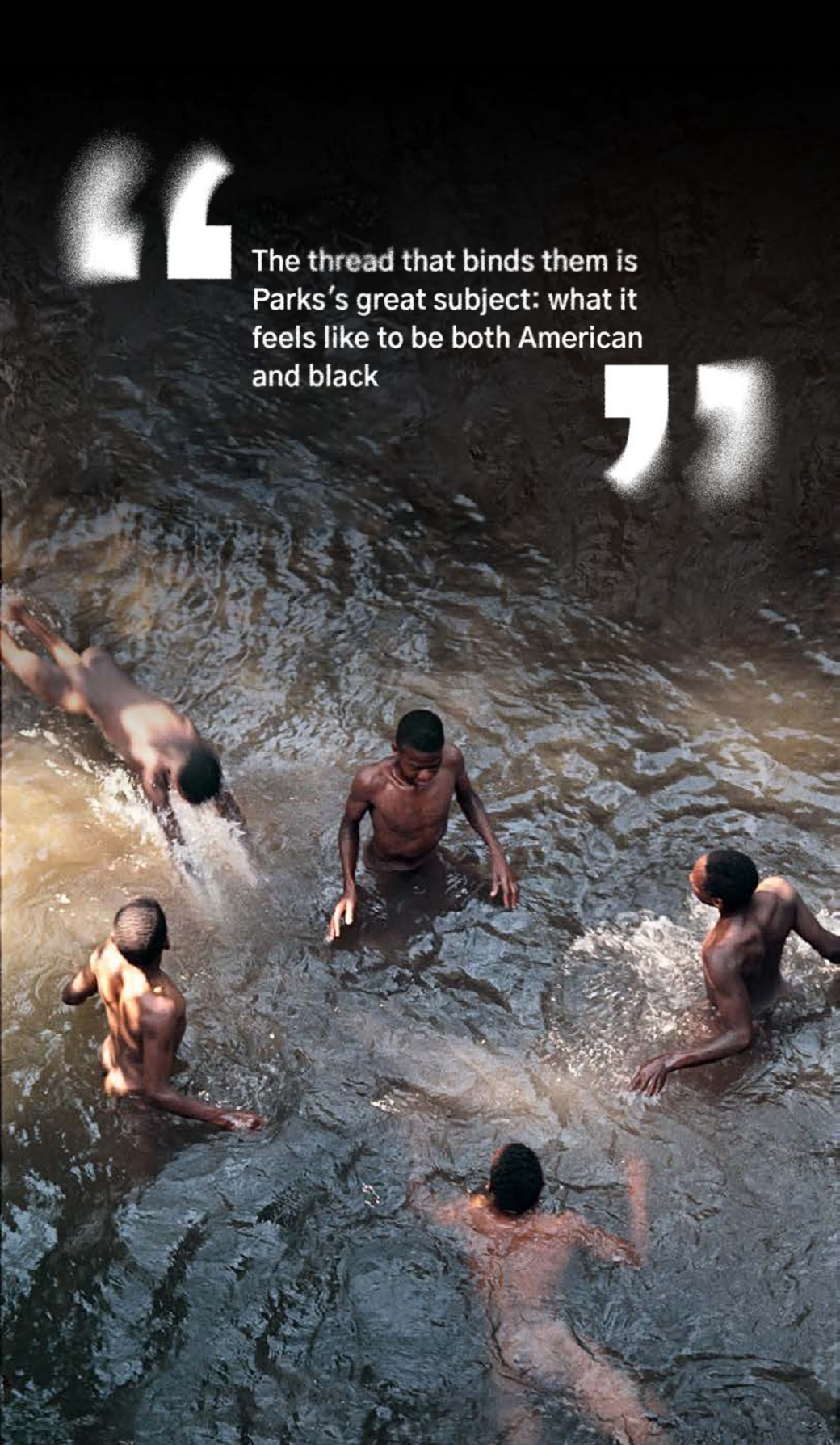
In fact this image, captured by the photographer Gordon Parks, is nearly 60 years old. Entitled simply Harlem Rally, we know little more than that it was taken in this predominantly black New York neighbourhood some time in 1963, during one of the protests about civil rights that roiled the US that year,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



In June 1963, George Wallace, the notorious segregationist governor of Alabama, attempted to prevent black students registering at the state university, a stand-off that resulted in the National Guard being mobilised. In August, Martin Luther King gave his rhapsodic "I Have a Dream" speech in front of 250,000 people in Washington, DC. But the message about African Americans "living in a police state" still resonates now.

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

> **The thread that binds them is Parks's great subject: what it feels like to be both American and black**



On West 20th Street, there are photographs drawn from his famous Harlem series Invisible Man, a virtuosic reimagining of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, and another series depicting life in Alabama under Jim Crow a few years later. A few blocks north on West 24th Street, portraits of protest documenting the civil rights movement through the 1950s and 60s are on display. The thread that binds them is Parks's great subject: what it feels like to be both American and black, and what Cobb describes as the agonising "void" between those two words.

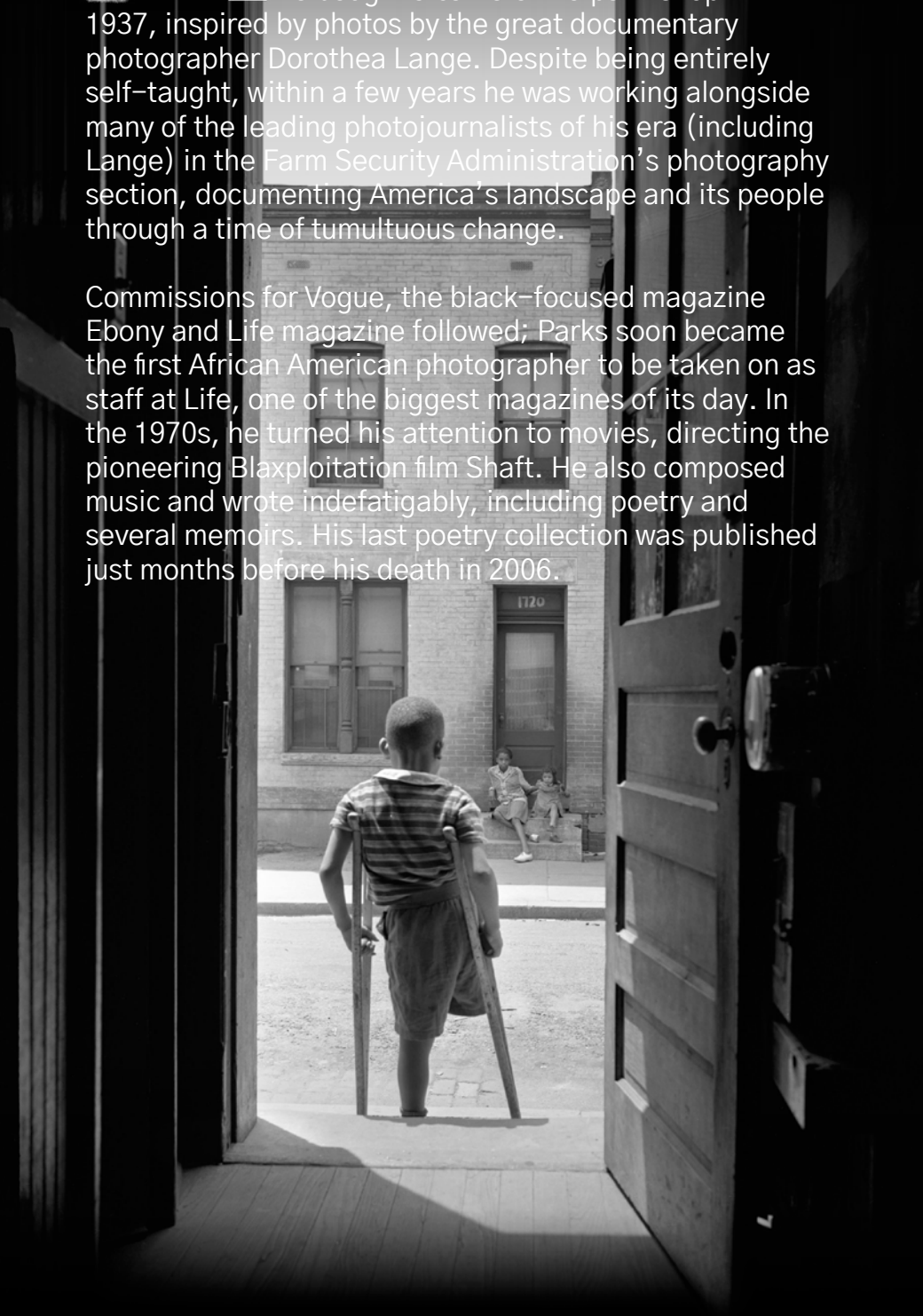
One of the earliest photographs to make Parks's name, American Gothic (1942), is included in the show. Taken when he was working for the FSA, it was inspired by Grant Wood's much-reproduced painting of the same title, which depicts a forbiddingly respectable white farmer and his daughter standing in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

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

> **My father put himself in the middle of these things, but he would be off to the side, somehow.**

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

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



There was almost nothing her father couldn't do if he wanted, says Leslie Parks with a laugh: he had the kind of energy that burned up the room. "There was always this moving forward with him," she says. "No giving up or doubt."

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

> **You have a 45mm automatic pistol on your lap, and I have a 35mm camera on my lap, and my weapon is just as powerful as yours.**

Parks's career was not without struggle itself. Despite his remarkable success, he chafed at the restrictions of the magazine picture-story format and the meddling of white editors. Having produced a thoughtful and surprisingly tender series of images on a black gang leader in Harlem in 1948, Parks was appalled when his editors at Life rejected nearly all the most intimate images in favour of sensational shots of street fights, shootings and the like, brutally cropping his frames for maximum scarifying impact ("Red Jackson's life is one of fear, frustration and violence," read the sub-headline). After kicking up a fuss, he was told his assignment would no longer make the magazine cover.

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

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

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

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