HIST 209 WALTER GREASON FINAL PROJECT

# CAPTURED

## CIVIL RIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY IN MINNESOTA AND BEYOND

Karsten Beling|12.17.21

# Contents



# INTRODUCTION

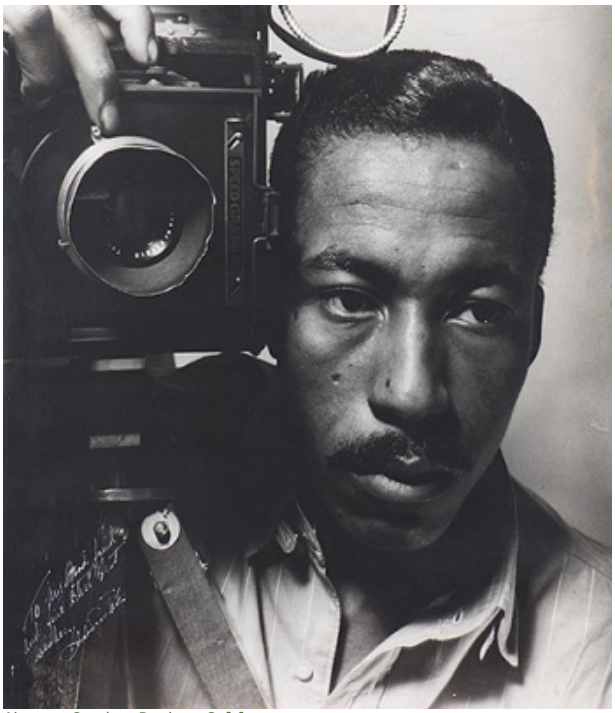
What follows is an analysis of three photographers (John F. Glanton, Gordon Parks, and Charles Chamblis) from different moments and places in Civil Rights history. They all take photos of the same subject: everyday African Americans. Glanton took photos of the Black community in the highly segregated Twin Cities. Parks, perhaps the most famous Civil Rights photographer, took photos of the Black Working Class and pivotal Civil Rights moments from the 1940s and throughout the rest of the Twentieth Century. Chamblis took photos of the Black communty in the 1970s and 1980s, when the Minneapolis Sound was emerging.

Analyzing these photos and their photographer helps to show a more complete story of this era for Black people as the Civil Rights Movement was rapidly evolving. Together, these three photographers show the struggle of Black people during this era, as well as the moments of joy and success that were created through resiliency and protest.

“Rondo Fence,” Karsten Beling, 2021.
This is the fence that separates the Rondo neighborhood in St. Paul and I-94.

# THE CAMERA AS A TOOL

The camera is powerful. It has the ability to capture moments in time that can shape a person's perception of reality. The photographer behind the camera is honored with the privilege to be the one to shape that perception of reality. This multimedia project will begin to analyze the ways in which the camera was used in American popular media during the Twentieth Century Civil Rights Movement that helped to build the movement's momentum.



Above: Gordon Parks, Self-Portrait, 1941, gelatin silver print, 50.8 × 40.64 cm (20 × 16 in.), Private Collection.

The ability to shape perception should not be taken lightly. The ways in which African Americans had been portrayed by popular culture during the early to mid-Twentieth Century led to myths and stereotypes about an entire group of people. Their portrayal "as subservient, ignorant, menacing, and ugly" were "presented as stereotypical caricatures from sambo and picaninny to mammy and sapphire" (Burnside 41).

These stereotypes are in reflection of a highly racist America and led to dangerous and violent outcomes for Black people as well as lack of access to opportunities that were available to white people. It was the role of photographers such as Gordon Parks and John F. Glanton that helped to dispel these stereotypes and contribute to the fight for civil rights through their own visual mediums.

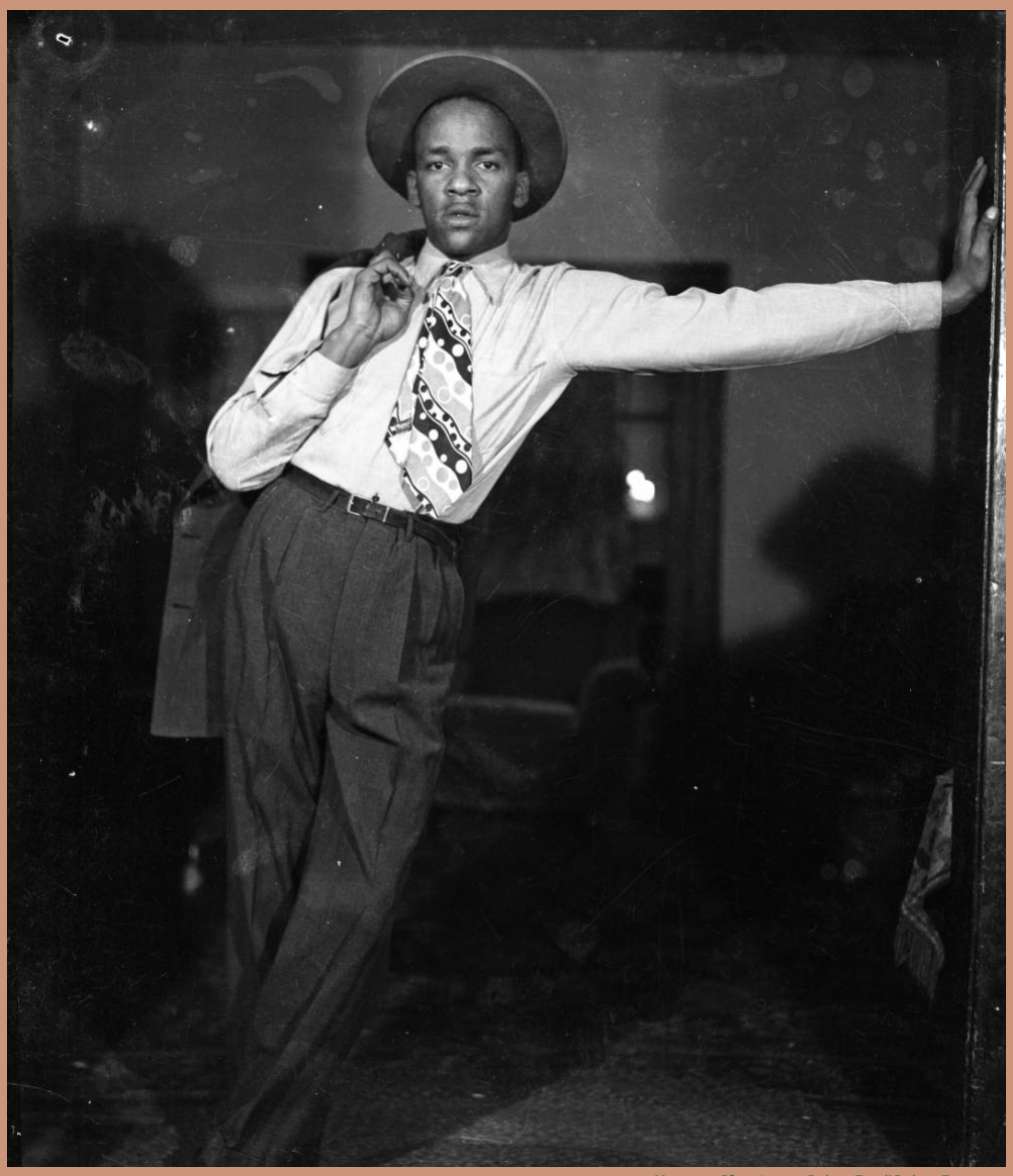
# “PHOTOGRAPHERS USE THEIR CAMERAS TO CAPTURE THESE MOMENTS TO TELL THE STORIES OF PEOPLE AND PLACES. IN THIS WAY, PHOTOGRAPHERS BECOME THE EYES FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.”

## - BRUCE PALAGGI


Above: Photo of the Pilgrim Baptist Church, a site of civil rights organizing in Rondo. Karsten Beling, 2021.

*The 1940s and early 1950s in the Twin Cities*

# JOHN F. GLANTON



Above: Glanton, John F, "John F. Glanton," 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.

During the 1940s and early 1950s, Minneapolis and St. Paul (the Twin Cities) were highly segregated. John F. Glanton, who was born and raised in Minneapolis, took photos during this time that document and celebrate African American life. Because, contrary to what popular culture showed about Black communities at the time, Black life was thriving in certain pockets throughout Northern cities.

The majority of African Americans in the Twin Cities during this time lived in certain areas of St. Paul and Minneapolis that were segregated due to racist housing policies. While Black people in Minnesota did face mass adversity due to racism and segregation, that was not the main focus or purpose of Glanton's work.

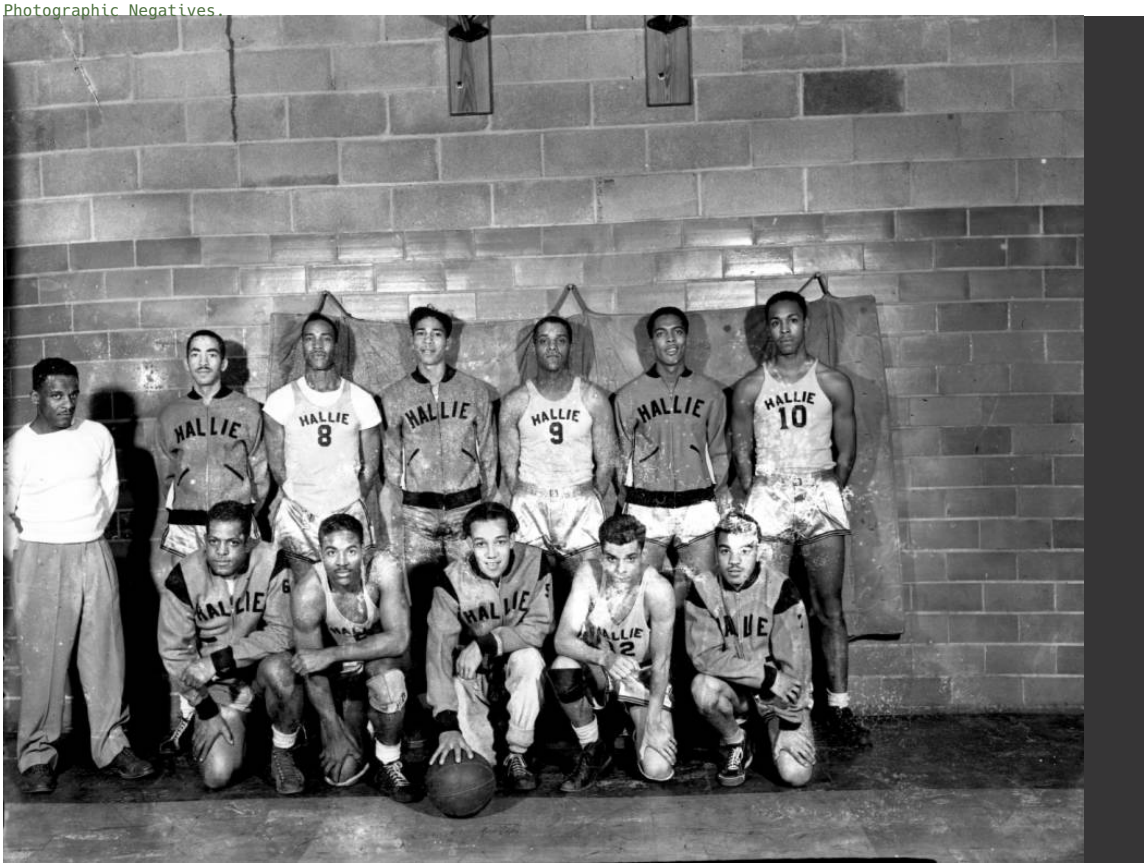
Glanton documented the lives of a large portion of the Black Minnesota community during their celebrations, achievements, and moments of joy. His collection is comprised of 800 individual photos and at the time they were taken, Black people "represented only about one percent of the population of the Twin Cities" (Hathaway, viii). Thus, his photos represent the stories of a large portion of the Twin Cities African American community.

Glanton, who took photos for local African American newspapers such as the Minneapolis Spokesman, was helping to bring light to the experience of being Black in Minnesota (Author, Xv-xvi). Jonathon Palmer, the modern Executive Director of the Hallie Q. Brown Center (a historic community center in the Rondo neighborhood of St. Paul), explained that Glanton's "photos are important in combating racism." They are important in showing a fuller story of what life was like for Black people during this time in the Twin Cities and even more importantly, they are made with the eyes and perspective of a Black photographer, not a white one.

"PEOPLE NEED TO SEE THE ADVERSITY WE HAD TO DEAL WITH, AND EVEN THROUGH THAT, WE ROSE. WE CAME OUT OF THE DARKNESS AND THE LIGHT IS SHINING ON OUR COMMUNITIES, AND WE ARE REFUSING TO ALLOW THINGS TO GO BACK"

- JONATHON PALMER

Below: Glanton, John F., “Hallie Q. Brown Basketball Team,” 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.




The photos that Glanton took dispel the racist stereotypes in American popular culture, that were historically dangerous to the lived experiences of Black people. By photographing Minnesota’s African American community in a way that shows their proudest and happiest moments, he is saying that Black people are enduring and thriving in certain ways while, of course, facing great adversity through racism.

Glanton was passionate about taking photos of everyday people and of their lives. His photos are from a wide variety of occasions and contexts, but what they all have in common is that they are the highlights of Black life in Minnesota. They depict celebrations such as weddings, contests, dancing, and they show local Civil Rights leaders, like Cecil E. Newman and Anthony B. Cassius.

There are photos of people in their Sunday best, enjoying sunny picnics, and pageant queens. All of these moments showcase the different aspects of African American life in the Twin Cities.

His work is crucial to bring to light a more holistic picure of black life, for black eyes, in a highly segregated era in American history that fights against those racist stereotypes and narratives that have seemingly put Black Americans into discriminatory boxes. Glanton, however, shows that this is quite the opposite, and the community held a great amount of control in how to define their lives. The ability for Black people to show their lives in the way they want to in a highly segregated society is a form of resistance in its own right.

*“Glanton’s photographs of women in elegant ball gowns with corsages, men decked out in tuxedos and bow ties, and mothers and daughters sharing a precious moment refute these racial stereotypes.” 41*

# MOMENTS OF CELEBRATION AND JOY

Above: Glanton, John F, “Bill and Johnnie Wade Wedding,” 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.

Above: Glanton, John F., “Patrons at Cassius Bar,” 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.

Right:

# LOCAL CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS

Below: Glanton, John F., “Cassius Smile of Victory,” 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.


Left: Glanton, John F, “A.B. Cassius, Jimmy Slemmons, Cecil Newman, Clyde Williams, and Arthur Briggs,” 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.

# GORDON PARKS

Above: Parks, Gordon, “Self-Portrait,” 1948. From the Gordon Parks Foundation and HBO.

Perhaps the most well-known photographer of the Civil Rights Movement is Gordon Parks, who was the first African American photographer at Life magazine. His impact as part of the Civil Rights Movement is immeasurable, and, he was often the “first” Black man in a many majority white artistic spaces. Those spaces include the United States government’s Farm Security Administration, Vogue, Life magazine, and as movie director in Hollywood.[1] In all of these spaces, Parks was groundbreaking. This analysis will focus on the stills he created for Life magazine as a photojournalist.

Right: Beling, Karsten, “Snow,” 2021.

Much of his work is in reflection of his deep hatred for racial and social injustice that existed and that he experienced growing up in the United States. He, grew up in Minneapolis after his mother died in 1927. Parks worked as a bus boy at the ritzy Minnesota Club where he could eavesdrop on wealthy white people go on about their luxurious lives while he was barely making ends meet. They were indifferent, and that angered him.

Much of his work, in turn, became about highlighting the lives of the Black working class. Just as with Glanton, this was crucial because this group was overwhelmingly misrepresnted and on the receiving end of discrimination and segregation. These stories were not being told by the press in full reality.

Parks’ set of still photographs dispelled this misrepresentation by taking photos of Black people in almost every setting. Some of his most famous work reflects the sadness, tragedy, and frustration of this era that was felt among Black people towards the United States government and white people. However, this same work also showcases the hope, resilliency, and joy felt during this era as Civil Rights were being fought for and won.

1 Johnson, Charles, The Photographs of Gordon Parks, VIII.

# GLANTON & PARKS

Glanton and Parks, in many ways, have similarities, but the ways that their work differs is important. Both genres of work proved crucial for the Civil Rights Movement.

## Background

Parks was a decade younger than Glanton

Glanton was born in Minneapolis, Parks spent some time living there though these were some of his most formative years

Both grew up in the era of segregation and took photos during this period.

## Their Work

Both were able to take photos of the Black community in a vulnerable and evocative way because they were Black and had deep connections with the community

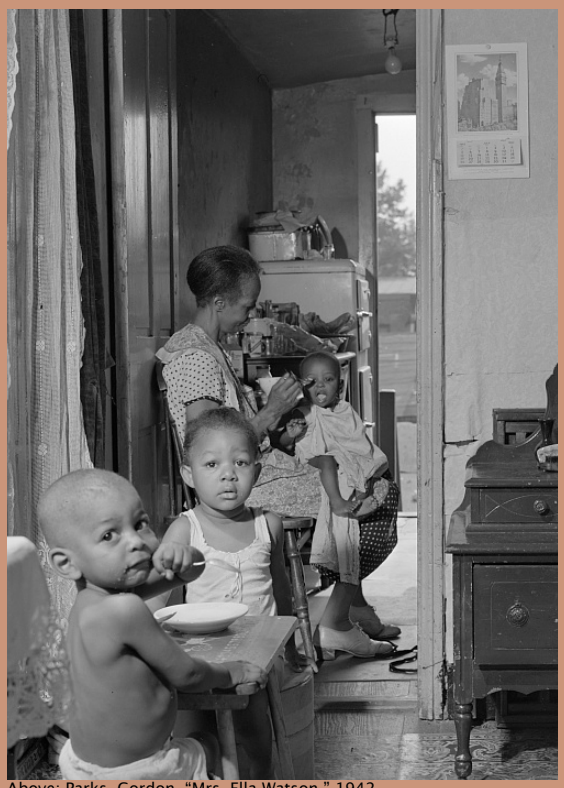
While Parks tended to take photos of Black struggle, Parks tended to take photos of Black celebration.

While Parks and Glanton grew up in the same timeframe and took photos of the same era, they chose to photograph different perspectives of Black life.

Parks shows the struggles in Black Americans had to face, while Glanton shows the highlights and triumphs. Parks helped to bring conversation to the white public about the struggles the Black working class had to face while Glanton, whose audience was majority Black, showcased the ways in which they were thriving.

Together they showcase a more complete story of Black life in the United States, that depicts adversity, resilliency, and success.

Above: Parks, Gordon, "American Gothic," 1942. Gordon Parks Foundation.



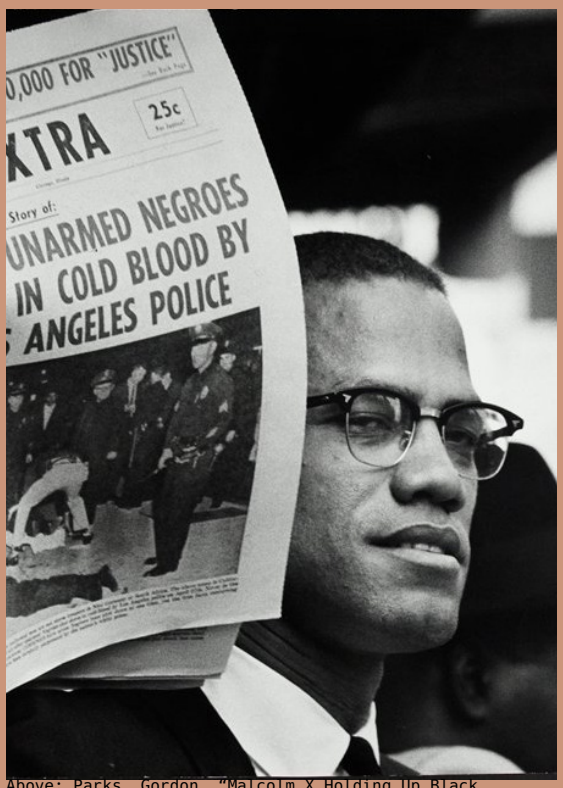
Above: Parks, Gordon, "Mrs. Ella Watson," 1942, Library of Congress.

The above photographs are the work of Parks and are both of Ella Watson. These photographs, both taken in the early 1940s, showcase the hardships of being both Black and working class.

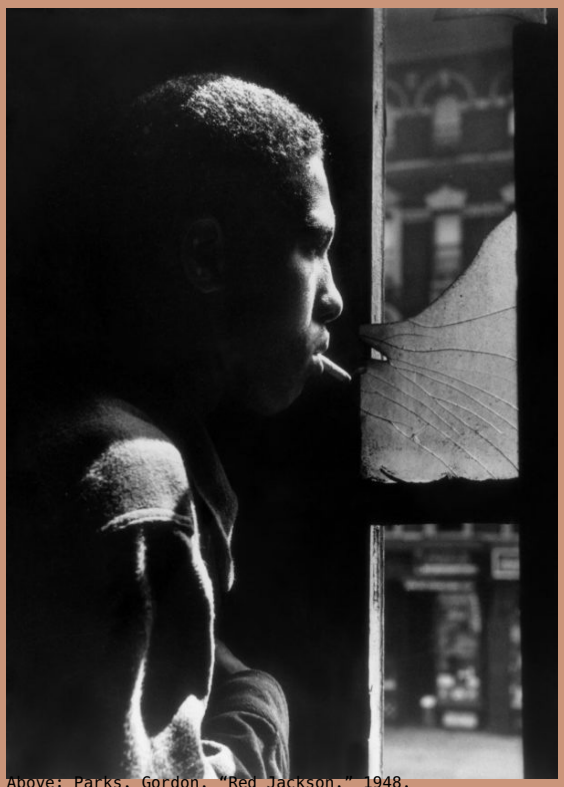
The below photographs are the works of Glanton. On the left is a beautiful portrait of Juanita Nevils and on the right is a photo of Glanton's daughter and wife celebrating a birthday. Glanton's eye for capturing joy and obvious beauty can be seen here.

Above: Glanton, John F., "Juanita Nevils," 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.

Above: Glanton, John F., "Joan Glanton and Dozie Lee Glanton," 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.




Above: Parks, Gordon, "Malcolm X Holding Up Black Newspaper," 1963, The Christina N. and Swan J. Turbblad Memorial Fund



Above: Parks, Gordon, "Red Jackson," 1948, Gordon Parks Foundation

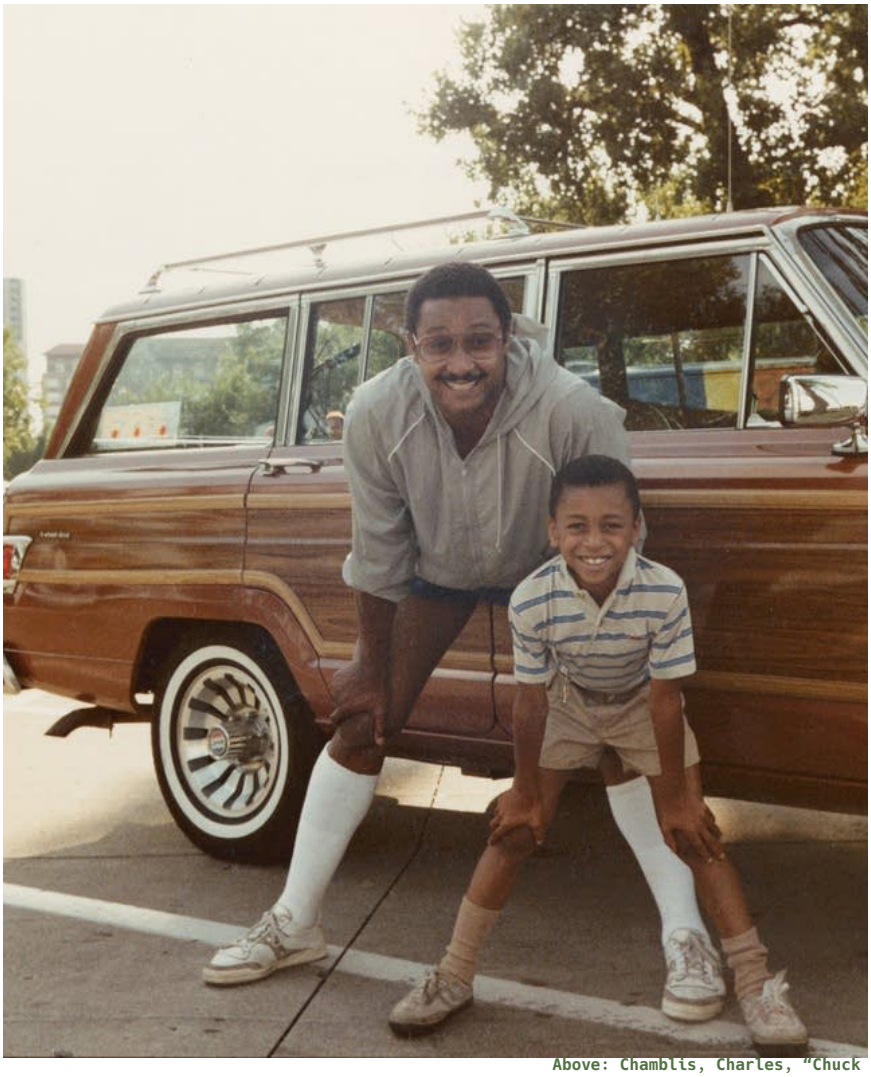
Parks' above photographs are of two Black leaders, on the left is Malcolm X, and on the right is gang leader, Red Jackson. These photos give these men a more human narrative than other media representation.

Glanton's photos below are of local Civil Rights leaders in the Twin Cities. Glanton's work is capturing the moment, on the left is a more solemn occasion, while on the right the parade is full of celebration.

Above: Glanton, John F., "Ames Elk Lodge," 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.


Above: Glanton, John F., "Elk Cars in Aquatennial Parade," 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic Negatives.

# CHARLES CHAMBLIS



Above: Chamblis, Charles, "Chuck and Jay Foreman," 1983, Minnesota Historical Society.

Another prominent Black photographer from Minnesota was Charles Chamblis. Chamblis, who was born in 1927, was approximately the same age as Glanton. However, he moved to Minneapolis during the mass migration of Black people from the South to the North between the 1950s and 1970s. During this time, Minneapolis's Black population grew 436 percent.[1]

The era in which Chamblis took photos were the 1970s and 1980s. In comparison, with Glanton, Black people in Minnesota had significantly more freedom and autonomy than the era in which Glanton was taking photos. Viewing their work is representative of viewing the impact of the Civil Rights Movement in the Twin Cities.

Glanton and Chamblis by and large took photos of the same subject, just twenty years apart from each other. Chamblis was notable in taking photos of "churches, nightclubs, city lakes, well-groomed yards, hotel rooms, event centers, and street scenes."[2] Just like Glanton, his photos contribute to pushing back against hurtful racial stereotypes against Black people.

His photos reflect a community that was in control of itself too, with clean streets and groomed lawns, and those subjects were intential to push back against the harmful narratives. As Chamblis puts it, "There is only one game in town... and that is reality."[3] His photos reflect a time in which, while the Black community of the Twin Cities was emerging with new music and racial movements, they were still under attack by racism and discrimation through such things as urban renewal tearing down their duneighborhoods.

1 Chamblis, Charles, and Davu, Seru, Sights, Sounds, Soul, 3.

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Ibid., 6.

Left: Chamblis, Charles, “Larry (Spider) J. Hamilton,” about 1980, Minnesota Historical Society.

# THE MINNEAPOLIS SOUND

Just like other American cities during the mid to late Twentieth Century, Black communities developed their own characteristic type of music. Chamblis took photos during this time period of Minneapolis generating their own “sound.” Chamblis and his photos capturing this sound is the primary subject of the book and museum exhibit “Sights, Sounds and Soul: Twin Cities Through the Lens of Charles Chamblis.”

The creation of the Minneapolis Sound occurred at nightclubs in the predominantly Black neighborhood, the Northside. While the scene was small, it was competitive, and Minneapolis generated its own unique sound.

This sound, however, was lost in part due to the urban renewal projects that took place during the 1960s. In particular, the building of I-94 West tore right through the main strips where these Black clubs were that created the Minneapolis sound.

Minneapolis continued to have a notable music scene; however, as it generated artists such as Prince who left a tremendous mark on American music history.

Below: Chamblis, Charles, Minnesota Historical Society.

Left: Chamblis, Charles, Minnesota Historical Society.


# HAPPINESS

These photos of women, show groomed lawns and moments of organized celebration. Chamblis had a passion for the people in his community, and was even called the "Pictureman" by people in his neighborhood. He was seemingly always around with his camera.[1]

He was a man who was able to capture his subjects' joy through his own character. He would often to tell his subjects, who were not used to having their photos taken, to smile with their eyes.

Chamblis was  a man without a lot ofwealth, but who was incredibly caring and constantly gave back to the people in his community. He was also well-known at local photography stores as a person with a chronic inability to pay for development services.[2]

1 Helal, Liala, "Photographer Charles Chamblis depicted the soul of his north Minneapolis neighborhood, 2014

2 Helal, Ibid.

Right: Chamblis, Charles, Minnesota Historical Society.

Above: Glanton, F. John., “Hallie Q. Brown Basketball Team,” 1940s, John F. Glanton Photographic NEgatives

# CONCLUSION

This analysis of these three Black photographers highlghts their contribution to dispelling racist myths and stereotypes about Black people that were perpetuated by the largely white media news and popular culture.

They each contributed their own artistic eye and generated their own photographic stories about their communities. That in itself is powerful.

The three photographers in conversation with each other humanize Black people through telling more of the story of how discrimation affected them (Parks), and also how they persevered through the adversity and were able to make these moments of happiness (Glanton and Chamblis). That depiction of resilience and adversity through moments of joy and success is crucial in telling the narrative and is a more accurate representation of what life was like for Black people during this era.

All three of these photographers had the same passion for photographing people. Glanton and Chamblis took photos of the people in their own local communities. Parks took photos of all kinds of people too, particularly in the South, but also around the country. Some people were more famous than others, but they all showed their reality.

Photography can bring the everyday moments in history to the forefront by the simple capture of light. This is the power of a photographer, and the power that Glanton, Parks, and Chamblis effectively harnessed.

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