Twitter Thread by John Edwin Mason



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How about a New Year's Eve thread about Gordon Parks & the photo world's deeply entrenched culture of white supremacy? Ok? Let's go.

We celebrate Gordon Parks as one of the most significant photographers of the 20th century. Rightfully so. His photos were more than exquisite aesthetic objects. They also profoundly shaped the way that white people saw & understood poverty & race. BUT...

But we rarely talk about *why* Parks was able to achieve so much in the photo world.

The answer is simple & clear: He -- alone among Black photographers of his & earlier generations -- received the same kind of mentoring & opportunities that as promising white photographers.

During most of photography's history, the single most important predictor of mainstream professional success was the possession of a white skin.

It didn't matter how talented you were or how accomplished you were or how hard-working you were. If you weren't white, you didn't have a chance of entering the mainstream. The white photo world was just as commuted to white supremacy as the rest of American society.

When Parks began his photographic career, in the late '30s, there were no Black photographers on the staffs of white newspapers and magazines. Black freelancers had the door slammed in their faces. The same was true in fashion & commercial photography.

None of this stopped Black photographers from making pictures. Many achieved greatness working within the Black community as photojournalists, portrait photographers, & art photographers. You should know Thomas Askew, P.H. Polk, James Van Der Zee, Teenie Harris, & so many others.

Talent, skills, artistic vision were out there in abundance among Black photographers. But white photographers, editors, & curators maintained a culture of white supremacy. When you think about your white photo heroes & heroines, ask yourself what they were up to at the time.

Before Parks got his big break -- a Rosenwald fellowship that took him to the FSA in 1941 -- he couldn't imagine success in the white photo world. He imagined a future running a portrait studio in the Black community, working for the Black press, & perhaps teaching at a HBCU.

There were exceptions to the prevailing racism, & Parks always acknowledged the white men & women who opened doors for him -- Roy Stryker, at the FSA, Alexander Lieberman, at Vogue, Wilson Hicks & Sally Kirkland, at @LIFE. They helped to make his career possible.

All of these people saw Parks' astonishing potential & his fierce will to succeed. They gave him a chance and, in doing so, stood up to the pervasive racism of the photo world,

Parks came along at just the right time. In the years immediately after WWII, opportunities slowly opened to Black people, despite Jim Crow being the law or custom throughout the country. Parks was one of a number of "firsts" in business & the professions.

Call him the Jackie Robinson of photography.

A handful of other white people in the photo world also bucked the racism of the day. Edward Steichen, Eugene Smith, Harold Feinstein, the women & men of the Photo League. They were exceptions. (If you know of others, tell me what they did to fight racism in the profession.)

Parks himself long remained an exception. It might be overstating it to call him the Jackie Robinson of photography. Within ten years of Robinson breaking the color line, virtually all major league baseball teams had a Black player. Parks was still alone in the white photo world.

Even Parks's contemporary Roy DeCarava, the first Black photographer to receive a Guggenheim & the first to publish a photo book, saw his career languish from the mid-'50s until the '80s.

Racism hasn't disappeared from the photo world. Far from it. Understanding how deeply it's embedded in the culture of photography is one step toward rooting it out.

There's a lot of writing on this, of course. If you haven't reading everything that Deborah Willis has written, start there. Seriously, read it all. It's almost impossible to overstate the importance of her work on photo history.

Aperture's <@aperturefnd> Vision & Justice issue, brilliantly edited by @sarahelizalewis, is still available as a free pdf download: https://t.co/zI7Bn9LLBA

For a quick start, take a look at Siddhartha Mitter's extraordinary piece on the Kamoinge Workshop. Their story reflects everything that I've said in this thread, but approaches that history from a different angle. https://t.co/0PJa2jbVis