



Invisible Man: Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison in Harlem

By Michal Raz-Russo, Jean-Christophe Cloutier, John F. Callahan

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Parks and Ellison collaborated on two historic photo-essays, now published in full for the first time

It is relatively unknown that the photographer Gordon Parks was close friends with Ralph Ellison, author of the acclaimed 1952 novel *Invisible Man*. Even less known is the fact that their common vision of racial injustices, coupled with a shared belief in the communicative power of photography, inspired collaboration on two important projects, in 1948 and 1952. Capitalizing on the growing popularity of the picture press, Parks and Ellison first joined forces on an essay titled "Harlem Is Nowhere" for '48: *The Magazine of the Year*.

Conceived while Ellison was already three years into writing *Invisible Man*, this illustrated essay was centered on the Lafargue Clinic, the first non-segregated psychiatric clinic in New York City, as a case study for the social and economic conditions in Harlem. He chose Parks to create the accompanying photographs, and during the winter of 1948, the two roamed the streets of Harlem, with Parks photographing under the guidance of Ellison's writing. In 1952 the two collaborated again on "A Man Becomes Invisible" for the August 25 issue of *Life*, which promoted Ellison's newly released novel. This is the first publication on Parks' and Ellison's two collaborations, one of which was lost, while the other was published only in reduced form.

Gordon Parks was born in Fort Scott, Kansas, in 1912. In addition to his storied tenures photographing for the Farm Security Administration (1941–45) and *Life* (1948–72), Parks found success as a film director, introducing Blaxploitation through his film *Shaft* (1971). Parks died in 2006.

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma City in 1913. He enrolled at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Macon County, Alabama, as a music major and later turned to writing essays and short stories for publications such as *New Masses*, *The Negro Quarterly*, *The New Republic* and *Saturday Review*. *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award in 1953. Ellison published two collections of essays: *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986). He died in

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Editorial Review

Review

brings together the important collaboration between two artistic geniuses...the relevance of social change has never rung so true. (Liz Ronk *Time, Best Photobooks of 2016*)

Gordon Parks and Ralph Ellison, two of the 20th century's most celebrated artists, shared a vision of what it meant to be black in the US. Parks, a photographer and filmmaker, and Ellison, a novelist and essayist, collaborated twice on projects that revealed, through words and images, what they believed to be essential aspects of the African American condition. Although the collaborations differed in form, the sensibility that animated them was the same, and so was the setting ? Harlem. (John Edwin Mason *Hyperallergic*)

...captures the rich expressiveness of their work in an austere designed format that honors both the imagery and the prose and invites the reader to linger over the page. (Michal Raz-Russo *On the Seawall*)

Illuminating both the parallels and divergences between Parks's and Ellison's work, this show promises a new perspective on the pair's joint use of photography during the civil rights movement, a period of heightened attention to the rhetoric of images. (Solveig Nelson *Artforum*)

Users Review

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Mary Davis:

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Kristy Taylor:

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Linda Mays:

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Ronald Johnson:

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