

# The Renaissance Across Difference:

Engaging African American, Latino and Mainstream High School Students in the Italian Renaissance and a Tribute to Gordon Parks

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Last week in an urban high school, a young, white teacher came into the faculty area of a small urban conversion high school and plopped down. She was disgusted. Her seniors, all of whom were African American were uncooperative, if not outright defiant about learning about the Italian Renaissance. Her response was to leave them to read a two-page contract she had written. Her students were to come and get her when they finished reading her contract and had decided how they were going to behave in her English class. In other words she was doing her job. The students were being uncooperative. The students needed to change.



© Gordon Parks  
*American Gothic*, 1942, G. Parks

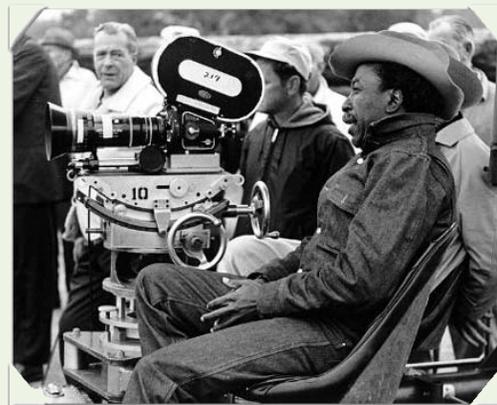
On Tuesday, March 7, 2006, Gordon Parks, a giant of a man, a Renaissance man by all counts, died. Gordon Parks was an acquaintance of mine and a person my daughter, who worked at the Time Photography Lab in NYC, got to know and treasure on a personal level. We are both saddened by his death. My favorite picture is of my daughter with Gordon Parks.

In my classroom, we used the internet, Gordon Parks' vast

work, and his movies, his videos and particularly his latest work "Half Past Autumn," to discover what it means to be a Renaissance man and to explore the notion of a Renaissance.

We used this in-depth study of Gordon Parks to bridge to the Harlem Renaissance and then to study the Italian Renaissance. My students and I now had a lens to use, a reason and a will to look at the Italian Renaissance.

How do I, as an African American school Coach, help a young, white teacher and other teachers both black and white discover how to engage African American students in wanting to learn about the Italian Renaissance? I learned as a teacher how to surround myself and my students with the cultures of our heritages; the African American, Asian and Latino heritages. We used that cloak of personal cultural knowledge to bridge to the dominant European culture. This is the only way I know to engage students who do not look like the dominant American culture in learning about the European culture. Without using a similar approach



## Gordon Parks

November 30, 1912 - March 7, 2006  
African American Renaissance man

- First African American photographer hired by Life magazine
- Author of over 15 books
- Essayist
- Poet
- Director of more than 11 films, including "Shaft"

"I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, racism, against all sorts of social wrongs...From that day on, I began singing a song called Hope. I still sing it loud- Above the waves, fire, darkness and mud."  
- excerpt from "Come Sing With Me!"

with high school students who represent cultures other than the dominant culture, you get compliance at best and/or classroom management issues with disruptive, defiant behaviors.

I feel privileged to have been able to explore deeply the life and works of Gordon Parks with my students. I will miss Gordon Parks' presence, but I will always be grateful for having known him, grateful for his works and grateful for the time I spent with my students exploring his genius. ■

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