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## Book Review: *Gordon Parks*

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*Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story*, edited by Paul Roth and Amanda Maddox. Pleasantville, NY: The Gordon Parks Foundation, 2018. 304 pages. Hardcover, \$65.00. Reviewed by Beatriz E. Balanta.

“I always look at things closely, and I look at a lot of details because all of a sudden there is something I never saw before” (291). This is the answer Flávio da Silva offers when asked if he ever reads, quoted in “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” the photo essay the famed photographer Gordon Parks made about him and his family for *Life* magazine in 1961. Flávio’s retort also encapsulates the ways *Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story*, the companion book to a travelling exhibition by the same name, brings into sharper focus the sketchy details of how Flávio’s life became a founding metaphor in a tale meant to illustrate the dangers of Castroism and communism in Brazil and Latin America. The main contribution of the book is to underscore the editorial, geopolitical, and ideological conditions behind the production of Parks’s photo essay. Of particular interest is the manner in which Paul Roth, one of the contributors to the book, describes the magazine’s investment in visualizing the counterinsurgency imperatives of President Kennedy’s Alliance for Progress. Roth’s introductory essay also maps how the unprecedented outpouring of sympathy on the part of American audiences was managed and channeled into a self-help development schema set up to improve conditions in Catacumba, the *favela* (settlement of shacks) that was home to Flávio and his family.

Further chapters discuss both the precursors and affects of this famous photo essay. Beatriz Jaguaribe and Maria Alice Rezende de Carvalho summarize the historical emergence of the favela in Rio de Janeiro and discuss the aesthetic treatment of that marginalized space in literature, film, and photography during the 1950s and 1960s. Sérgio Burgi details the “editorial battle” between *Life* and *O Cruzeiro* that ensued after the publication of “Freedom’s Fearful Foe.” Amanda Maddox delves into the afterlives of Flávio’s story. In her essay, we discover that Parks made a film and wrote a sort of ethnographic memoir about Flávio. Maddox argues that “the repetition and

mutation of this story—in various versions, formats, contexts, and historical moments—arguably becomes its defining characteristic, distinguishing it from nearly every other assignment or project Parks undertook” (211). Her essay alerts us to the highly artificial nature of the documentary genre and the visual and textual fictions on which realism depends. As a whole, this collection of essays sheds new light on the manner in which *Life*, a premier cultural institution, and Parks, one of the most important photojournalists in the United States, framed, pictured, manufactured, and put into circulation a series of images about subaltern life in a favela that was razed to smithereens in 1970.

Indeed, this book allows us to return to Parks’s photo essay with a sensibility attuned to the geopolitics of its production. *Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story* reminds us once again that (1) photography is an exercise in artifice and creative composition; (2) representation is a tense process of revelation and dodging, and (3) photography is an excellent tool for cultivating a bewildering range of political sentiments. And yet there are aspects of this new version of the story of the photo essay and its repercussions that require further analysis. The book argues that the magazine’s editors used the series “Crisis in Latin America” to support Kennedy’s foreign aid and development agenda. Yet very little space is given to a consideration of the sentimental work text and image must perform in order to meld the desires of readers with the new political ambitions of the United States.

“Freedom’s Fearful Foe” opens with a two-page photographic spread. The image is arresting: it pictures a dark room where a gaunt man with sunken eyes lies motionless on a bed. His body—a lump of undivided matter, arms and legs are not apparent—is concealed by a wrinkled blanket. Who is this man? Is he dead? Is he an example of the “hundreds of thousands” that exist in Latin America “wasted by disease and malnutrition,” as the

introductory note soberly states? Beside this lifeless body, a disheveled girl child cries. The viewer is told, via the caption, that “in the shadowy slum world into which she was born in Rio de Janeiro, 3-year-old Isabel da Silva cries to herself after vainly seeking comfort from her exhausted father, José.” The visual and psychological tactic of the photo is to teleport the viewer down to the level of subaltern subjects who live in desperate squalor in a place “worse even than Africa.” The photograph and the caption work together to exhort the viewer to protect the child, to offer the comfort her father is incapable of giving.

On the following page, the reader’s attention is captured by Mario’s wide open mouth. According to the caption, he “howls” after being “bitten by a neighbor’s dog.” The central image of the following section, entitled “A Boy Burdened with a Family’s Care,” features Flávio feeding his seventeen-month-old brother, Zacarias, with his fingers. “Freedom’s Fearful Foe” closes with a remarkable portrait of Parks. Camera in tow, he holds baby Zacarias while tenderly caressing his tiny foot. In a rare turn of events, the photographer becomes subject of the lens and thus a character in the landscape of suffering he documents. This is also the first time we see baby Zacarias, who now resembles a cherubic baby, content and happy. In this baffling closing image, Parks appears as the embodiment of the mythological white savior of colonial dreams *and* as a male version of the black (female) nanny who, for centuries, has nourished white babies. This is an outstanding image, an image that begs for an analysis of how Parks may have negotiated his racial identity and class position in Brazil. Yet, these issues are sidestepped

by the authors of this new collection. The “howls,” “the jumble of squatter’s huts,” the pile of rubble which functions as a stove, and the dirty fingers are some of the signifiers—textual and visual—that awakened the philanthropic spirit of *Life*’s readers. These signs also function as sentimental sutures that bind US citizens to the fight against poverty, which as the magazine’s editorial makes clear, is a fight to stave off communism. Taken together, the photos and the words that frame them function not only as evidence of poverty but as a visual reinforcement of Kennedy’s inaugural address, when he encouraged Americans to help “those people in the huts and villages of half of the globe struggling to break the bonds of mass misery” (92).

In addition to a more nuanced interpretation of the affective and racial registers of the complex imagery, the book could have benefited from further contextualization of Parks’s life in Rio de Janeiro. Whom did he visit with? Did he establish relationships with local artists? Did he participate in the cultural life of the city? Did he make other photographs while in Rio, and how did those photographs compare to portraits and landscape views he made of the favela? Furthermore, is there an aesthetic relation between Parks’s portrayal of poverty in Brazil and his depiction of a poor black family in Harlem in 1948?

*Gordon Parks: The Flávio Story* provides a much-needed examination of the photographer’s work in Latin America. It should be required reading for students of the geopolitics of visual representation, the history of documentary photography in the United States, and the politics of representation.