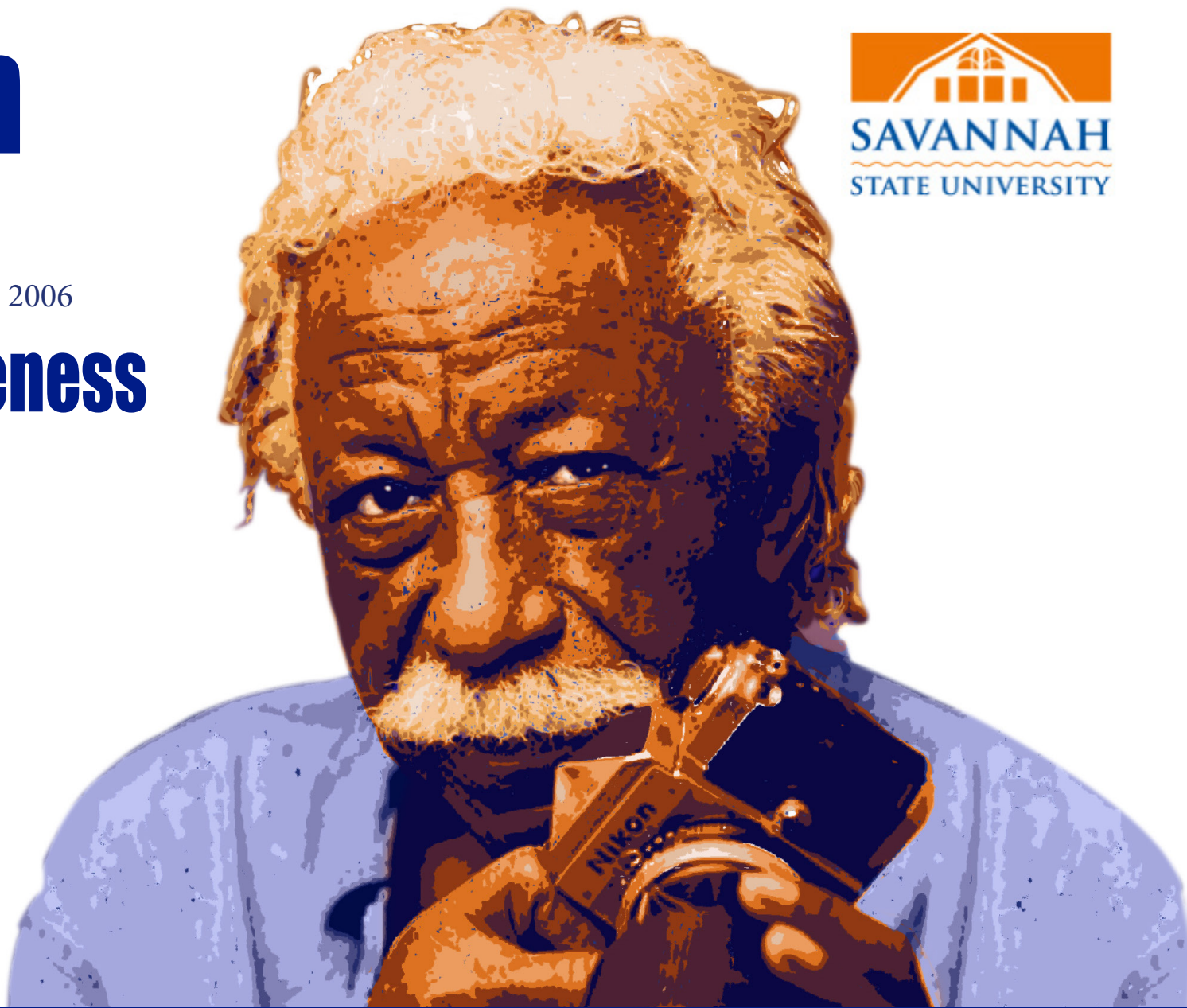


Gordon Parks

November 30, 1912 – March 7, 2006

Cultural Awareness



“I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs. I knew at that point I had to have a camera.” Gordon Parks

Gordon Parks was the first African American photographer for *Life Magazine* in 1949. He was also the first African American Hollywood director of a major film, *The Learning Tree*, in 1969. His breadth of skills afforded him success as a photographer, filmmaker, writer, choreographer, composer, and poet.

Parks' documentation of a 17-year-old Harlem gang leader became an instrument to engage social programs within the community. Parks documented the *Civil Rights Movement* from behind his lens. In 1971, Parks directed *Shaft*, a successful film upending stereotypes through his character John Shaft, an African American detective focused on eliminating white criminals.

On November 30, 1912, Gordon Parks was born the youngest of 15 children into poverty and segregation in Fort Scott, Kansas. After his mother died when he was 15, Parks moved in with his sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. The move did not provide an escape from poverty, but instead exposed him to an attempted lynching and even a period of homelessness. In spite of all odds during these young years, he managed to compose a radio hit, worked as a waiter, played in an orchestra, toured with a basketball team and planted trees for a conservation effort, and finally became a father.

Parks' **super skill of cultural awareness** merged with the power of photography as a young man by seeing magazine images of migrant farm families and their struggle that reminded him of his own. These images changed his life as he became aware of a photograph's ability to emotionally connect with the viewer. It was after that encounter, convinced him of the power of great photography, that he purchased his first camera from a pawn shop and taught himself how to take photographs.

Throughout Gordon Parks career, he amassed a photographic library of the most difficult aspects of our society's undeniable racism struggles throughout the 1950s-1970s. He forever captured violence against impoverished African American residents and the criminalization of that poverty by police. This truth remains a struggle today, but Parks was acutely aware that photography prevents denial or the ability to ignore the injustices captured. As we reflect on Parks' photography today, we are forced to face these difficult truths of our culture, allowing us his harsh vantage point with an opportunity to embrace his plea for cultural awareness as a grounding point for change.

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How are you becoming more culturally aware at SSU in preparation for your future?