

The Learning Tree

By Maurice Berger

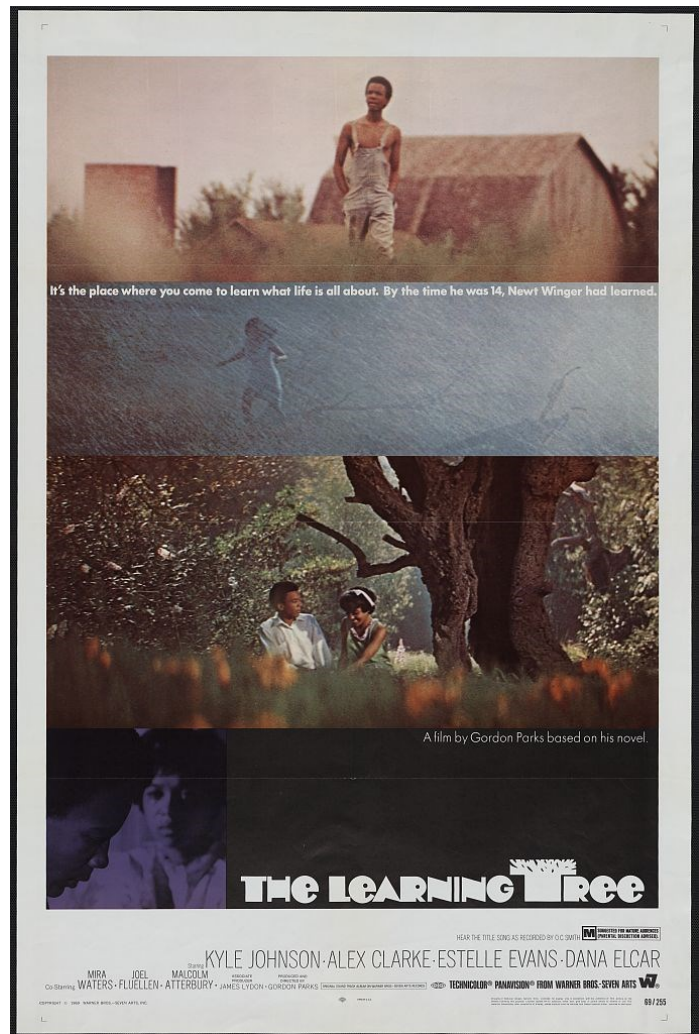
This essay is a revised excerpt from “The Weapons of Gordon Parks,” in *Gordon Parks: Collected Works* (Steidl, 2012). Reprinted by permission of the author.

By the late-1960s, a new generation of black filmmakers was challenging the stereotypical or compromised black characters then customary in Hollywood pictures. With calls for diversity growing, and a larger black middle class demanding to see itself represented, social, political, and economic pressures inside and outside the commercial film industry helped create opportunities for black directors. As early as 1969, Warner Bros. financed the production of Gordon Parks’s drama “The Learning Tree,” a semiautobiographical, humanistic recounting of black life in Depression-era America. The film established Parks as the first black director of a major Hollywood studio film.

“The Learning Tree,” an adaptation of Parks’s semi-autobiographical novel of the same name, is set in the 1920s in the fictional town of Cherokee Flats, Kansas (and filmed in the director’s hometown of Fort Scott). It follows the coming of age of Newt Winger, a poor African American teenager. Newt and his family live in a Midwestern border state in which black people are no less the victims of segregated accommodations, lynching, substandard housing, inferior schools, and unrelenting racist epithets than they were in the South.

Despite the adversity around them, the Winger family is upstanding, optimistic, and even, at times, rebellious. Newt’s father is honest and hard-working, his terminally ill mother nonetheless emotionally strong and nurturing, encouraging her son’s passion for learning. As the teenager dreams of a better life outside of Cherokee Flats, he suffers unspeakable adversities—from witnessing the police killing of a defenseless, unarmed friend to being encouraged by a matronly white teacher to forego his dream of going to college, since he, like nearly all black children, is predestined to be a cook or a porter. “You just hate us colored kids,” Newt defiantly responds. “Well, we hate you, too, every last one of us.”

The courage and focus that Newt demonstrates throughout the film suggest that he will survive. It is this bravery—and the sense of fairness and honesty handed down to him by his elders—that leads him, in



Original release poster. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection.

the film’s dramatic climax, to exonerate a white man wrongfully accused of murdering his white neighbor. Newt does this knowing that his eyewitness testimony incriminating a black farmhand might endanger the young man’s life and further inflame white racism. The teenager’s experiences do not defeat him; rather, they prepare and fortify him for what will hopefully be a brighter future as he ultimately leaves his family to live with relatives up north.

The film’s effectiveness as a statement against racism was enhanced, as well, by its dualistic approach to its audience. For African American viewers, unaccustomed to seeing complex and humanistic depictions of black life in popular culture, it was undoubtedly a source of pride and inspiration. It was also historic, an African American milestone in the history of Hollywood films: “His victory . . . in directing “The Learning Tree,” was a victory for all of us,” observed the director Melvin van Peebles of the movie’s seminal role in African American culture. For white

filmgoers, it appealed to another response, one critical to the undoing of racial prejudice: empathy.

Throughout his career, Parks helped his audience, white and black, to understand and share the feelings of others. He accomplished this by reminding them that the hardships of poverty and discrimination were not limited to one group. In “Moments without Proper Names,” for instance, his photo-essay about the nation’s underclass, Parks affirms that the proper names denied African Americans, all-too-often represented as nameless stereotypes in the culture at large, have also been denied other groups, including millions of impoverished and despairing white people who live at the margins of society. Similarly, in his second novel, “Shannon” (1981), he explores the intertwined fates of two families, one African American, the other Irish immigrant, both experiencing discrimination in New York at the turn of the 20th century.

The honesty and nuance of Parks’s work not only allows his audience to feel compassion for the victims of racism—who, like their white counterparts, embody a full range of human attributes, both good and bad—but also to empathize with, and perhaps acknowledge in themselves, the irrational fears and vulnerabilities that motivate its perpetrators. This point is driven home by one of the most exceptional characters in *The Learning Tree*: a thoughtful white school principal who shares Newt’s distain for the undercutting remarks of his teacher, but also explains to the teenager the long history of white anxiety and insecurity that informs her words.

Over his long and eminent career, Parks inspired millions of people, of all races, and through a range

of media, from photography to television, to rethink their attitudes about race. His view of prejudice in America was as candid and uncompromising as any writer or artist of the period. But Parks was also an activist with “an established career in the white world,” to quote the photo historian Max Kozloff, an artist so well-known that when he “photographed a religious soapbox speaker in Harlem, listeners were looking everywhere.” Even as he photographed and expressed sympathy for militant groups, such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers, Parks had reservations about black nationalism: “To me their cry for separatism gave credence to the same Supreme Court ‘separate but equal facility’ ruling that had weighed heavily on black self-respect for over fifty years,” he later observed of his reticence. He acknowledged, too, the consequential role that white people had played in the modern struggle for racial justice, including those who “gave their lives for the movement.”

In the end, works like “The Learning Tree” remind us of the extent to which Parks actively reached out to all people through his extraordinary work, inspiring them to examine their attitudes about each other. In

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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