

## Gordon Parks, “A Harlem Family,” and the Limits of Empathy

### Bio

John Edwin Mason teaches African history and the history of photography in the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia. He co-directs the university's Holsinger Portrait Project, a multimedia initiative which explores the neglected history of black Virginians through studio portraits of them that were made a century ago.

His work-in-progress, a book about the twentieth-century African American photographer, writer, and filmmaker Gordon Parks, will be the first extended critical analysis of Parks' crucial Life magazine photo-essays on race and poverty.

Mason has published two books on South African history, *Social Death and Resurrection: Slavery and Emancipation in South Africa*, and *One Love* *Ghoema Beat: Inside the Cape Town Carnival*, in which he brought together history, ethnography, and his own documentary photographs.

He writes about photography for publications such as *The New York Times*, *Time*, and

*Hyperallergic* and continues to be an active documentary photographer.

### Abstract

Gordon Parks' 1968 Life magazine photo-essay, “A Harlem Family,” was a public triumph that became a private tragedy.

The photo-essay, one of nearly a dozen on the subjects of poverty and race that he created during his 20 years at the magazine, introduced Life's millions of white middle-class readers to the Fontenelles, an impoverished African American family.

Like much of his work for Life, “A Harlem Family” married a highly subjective text to photographs that relied on the well-established rhetoric of documentary “objectivity.”

The photo-essay opened a poem in which Parks spoke as a black man, challenging his readers to acknowledge that they were responsible for the inequality that African Americans faced and the poverty that many of them endured.

The body of the text reinforced the poem's overt subjectivity. Parks' photographs of the family, on the other hand, derived much of their strength from their embrace conventions of documentary truth.

Shot in black and white, with subjects who seemed unaware of the photographer's presence, they styled themselves as transparent windows on the squalor and deprivation that trapped the family in the ghetto.

Parks' words and images proved to be a powerful combination. Hundreds of readers wrote letters to him and the magazine to express concern for the Fontenelles. Many included money that they hoped would help them.

Additional contributions from Life allowed the family to move out of Harlem and into a new home.

This very success, however, set the stage for tragedy. The father's carelessness, after a night of drinking, caused a house fire that killed him and one of the children.

In subsequent years, the streets of New York City claimed the lives of the survivors, one-by-one.

While Parks' photo-essay had indeed created an empathetic bond between the family and his readers, the Fontenelles needed more than charity.

His emphasis on a shared humanity had done little to help readers understand how segregation and structural racism shaped the destinies of this family and the millions of other black families for whom they were a proxy.



**John Edwin Mason**  
Professor of History  
University of Virginia

## Reflections on Ubuntu Philosophy and the Historical Geography of Pan Africanism in South Africa

### Bio

Dondolo holds D Litt et Phil in Social Science (History). His area of interest is the 19th and 20th centuries history thematic areas of the then Cape Province. His field of specialisation is public history with specific focus on heritage studies, museology, Pan Africanism scholarship, racism and identity.

He was a Fulbright Scholar based at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania (US) for 2016/17 academic year conducting research on African American heritage scholarship. He is also the former Rockefeller Scholarship holder and as such studied at Emory University in Atlanta, US, to further his understanding on African history, public history, museums and heritage studies.

During this period, he did his summer internship at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC, particularly at the Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in Alabama, US.

Dondolo and Morakinyo recently published a book, *Afrocentric Turn in African Heritage Studies in Africa: Epistemology of Alterity*, which advocates for decolonisation of heritage studies in Africa. Dondolo's book, *There is Only One Race - The Human Race: Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe –Great Son of the Soil*, is in press.

Dondolo has published a number of journal and book chapters. He has also presented numerous academic

articles in various international and national conferences.

He has 21 years of work experience in different universities in South Africa and abroad, research institutions, heritage sector and local government. Presently, he is the Director of the Centre for Transdisciplinary Studies, University of Fort Hare.

He was also the Council Member of the Gauteng Provincial Heritage Authority, the Nelson Mandela Museum and the former Chairperson of the National Museum. Currently, he is the Chairperson of the Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe Trust.

### Abstract

In recent times, the concept of Ubuntu has been oversimplified and improperly used to embrace and sustain the national reconciliation and rainbowism in post-1994 South Africa. In this populist discourse, the philosophy of Ubuntu is not intellectually engaged with.

Rather, it is employed for political advancement as has been experienced. It is in this context that Ubuntu is used in a romanticism manner. This sociology of the use of Ubuntu philosophy, illustrates simplification, cultural appropriation and aesthetics of the subaltern people.

Some aspects of the legacies of colonialism and apartheid such as spatial, social and economic justice, coloniality of being, of culture and of knowledge which facilitated the phenomenon of 'recognition by assimilation' (Spivok, 1987);

have yet to be dismantled or reconfigured. Thus, the present reality in South Africa - the outlook and attitude, social values and behaviour and national consciousness- is an antithesis of the philosophy of Ubuntu.

Ubuntu as social accord is linked to humanity with equality, respect, ethics, and socio-cultural, political, economic, historical and spiritual dimensions, amongst others.

Due to colonial and apartheid effects, and inhuman or degrading behaviour and lack of morals, there is Ubuntu deficit in the present both at the Constitutional and societal behavioural levels.

In Ubuntu philosophy a human being in the world of the living must be umuntu in order to give a response to the challenge of the fundamental instability of being (Ramose, 2005: 46).

The lack of morality, prevalence of children and women abuse or violence against women and children, and the levels of corruption in the present, racialised inequality demonstrate the disturbance of the 'cosmic harmony' (Ramose, 2005) and the end of Ubuntu amongst South Africans.

In exploring the historical geography of Pan Africanism in South Africa within the framework of Ubuntu through the windows of space and time, the study examines the historical evolution of the former; the meaning of Ubuntu philosophy, and

the link between the two conceptions. The Link between the philosophy of Ubuntu, African-ness and Pan Africanism has its own history and sociology.

Central to the concept of Pan Africanism within the framework of Ubuntu, is the quest for decoloniality of being, of knowledge and of education through re-Africanisation as articulated by Edward Wilmot Blyden, and later Kwame Nkrumah and Robert Mangaliso Sobukwe through their concepts of 'African Personality' and 'Africa reborn' respectively.

The historical markers of Pan Africanism underscore self-definition, physical and mental liberation, and map out the future that does not intend to oppress and exploit anybody, one human race.

Generally, Pan Africanism has been understood as to do with African identity and recognition, and the essence of being African – African-ness. In its historical geography it cannot be separated from Ubuntu and humanity (human race).



**Luvuyo Mthimkhulu Dondolo**  
Director: Centre for  
Transdisciplinary Studies  
University of Fort Hare