

# GORDON PARKS

## THE FLÁVIO STORY

In March 1961 *Life* magazine sent photographer Gordon Parks to Brazil with a specific assignment: to document poverty in Rio de Janeiro for a series on Latin America. Parks turned his attention to Catacumba, a working-class neighborhood known as a favela, and focused on one resident in particular—an industrious, severely asthmatic twelve-year-old named Flávio da Silva. Images of Flávio, his family, and their impoverished existence formed the foundation of Parks’s photo essay “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” published in summer 1961 in *Life*.

Within days of its appearance, this story emerged as a blockbuster. Moved by Parks’s heartbreaking coverage, *Life*’s readers spontaneously donated money to support the da Silva family and revitalization of the favela. Parks then returned to Brazil when the magazine commissioned a follow-up report. This intervention affected many people and ultimately redirected the course of Flávio’s life.

*Life*’s coverage of this story sparked controversy in the Brazilian media. The magazine *O Cruzeiro* attacked *Life* for representing poverty as if exclusive to Brazil, instigating what amounted to a war between the publications. Though interest in the story eventually waned, Parks considered it one of his most important assignments and periodically revisited Flávio as a subject. This exhibition traces the complex history surrounding the original photo essay and the extraordinary chain of events it set in motion.

This exhibition has been organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, Canada, in collaboration with The Gordon Parks Foundation and Instituto Moreira Salles.



Non-flash photography and video for personal use are welcome in the exhibition.



# THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT FOR *LIFE*

Shortly after President John F. Kennedy announced the Alliance for Progress—an initiative intended to promote democracy and economic cooperation across Latin America and to stave off the spread of communism in the region—*Life* magazine launched a five-part series called “Crisis in Latin America.” For the second installment, *Life* sent Gordon Parks to Rio de Janeiro to “find an impoverished father of eight to ten children . . . show how he earns a living . . . explore his political leanings.” Parks disregarded this directive and concentrated instead on Flávio da Silva, a boy who lived in a one-room shack in the hillside favela of Catacumba with his parents and seven siblings.

Over the course of several weeks in spring 1961, Parks photographed Flávio’s daily activities—such as making the bed and entertaining his brothers and sisters—which were punctuated by severe asthma attacks. As someone who grew up in abject poverty in Kansas, the photographer sympathized with his subject and forged an emotional bond with the boy. He also urged editors at *Life* to publish an extensive piece about Flávio, his family, and their living conditions. Despite initial resistance, *Life* ultimately dedicated a comprehensive twelve-page spread to Flávio’s story, complete with diary entries written by Parks.



# THE MAKING OF THE PHOTO ESSAY

Parks alone was credited in print for “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” but a team of people worked on the photo essay, common practice at picture magazines like *Life*. First assigned to the story by editor Timothy Foote, Parks received assistance in Rio from local bureau chief George Carvalho and office manager José Gallo.

Parks claimed that he reviewed his negatives before the *Life* editors saw them and envisioned how the essay would look when published. Whether or not this is true, editors reduced the story to a single image; in response, Parks purportedly threatened to resign. Soon afterward, Secretary of State Dean Rusk made headlines by claiming that sustained aid to Latin America was essential to counter communist influence in the region. This convinced *Life* to publish a longer photo essay. Magazine staff quickly reshaped Parks’s material, particularly art director Bernard Quint, who selected, cropped, and sequenced photographs for the final layout.

The proofsheets displayed here, adjacent to the images featured in them, reveal decisions made by Parks or the *Life* editors. Crayon marks indicate how the image of Catacumba was cropped to suit reproduction in the magazine as well as a book. Another contact sheet, filled with frames showing Flávio waking before his family, suggests the ways Parks sometimes directed his subjects to perform for the camera.



# THE SECOND ASSIGNMENT FOR *LIFE*

Within days of its publication on June 21, 1961, “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty” inspired hundreds of *Life* readers to send letters and unsolicited donations. The magazine’s publisher remarked, “I have never seen any reaction from readers quite as spontaneous as this one.”

As mail continued to pour in, Parks and magazine staff scrambled to respond. In the July 7 issue, *Life* announced the creation of the “Flavio Fund” and published selected letters from readers, among them an invitation for Flávio to receive treatment at the Children’s Asthma Research Institute and Hospital (CARIH) in Denver. Drawing on the nearly \$30,000 (about \$250,000 today) it eventually raised, *Life* helped move the da Silva family from Catacumba to the nearby suburb of Guadalupe and improved infrastructure in the favela, among other initiatives.

In early July *Life* sent Parks back to Brazil to assist with the relocation of the family, which included “rescuing” Flávio and accompanying him to the United States. Until summer 1963 Flávio lived at CARIH in Denver, and with the encouragement of his weekend host family, the Gonçalveses, adjusted to life in America. The July 21 issue of *Life* showcased these events and provided eager magazine readers with a welcome update on Flávio.



# ARTISTIC INTERVENTION

Parks recognized that he “was perhaps playing God,” as he later wrote in his book *Flavio*, by digging “deeper and deeper into the privacy of these lives, hoping . . . to reshape their destinies into something much better.” His reporting for *Life* brought profound change for both Flávio and the da Silva family: *Life* sent Parks back to Brazil to “do a sequel and to bring Flavio to America” so that the boy could receive medical treatment for his asthma. As part of that follow-up assignment, Parks was charged with moving the family from the favela to their new home in Guadalupe, a district on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro, and with buying clothes and toys for the da Silva children.

Recognizing that Parks’s return to Brazil was a new chapter in the story that would appeal to readers, *Life* hired Brazilian photographer Paulo Muniz to document Parks’s visit, which included a shopping trip with the da Silvas and ended with Flávio’s departure for the United States. Parks emerged as an integral character in the narrative that surrounded Flávio.

## FLÁVIO IN DENVER

After seeing the devastating images of Flávio in *Life*—some of which depicted his severe suffering from bronchial asthma—the president of the Children’s Asthma Research Institute and Hospital (CARIH) in Denver offered to treat Flávio as a patient, free of charge. The magazine staff, Parks, and Flávio’s parents all recognized this as essential to Flávio’s survival. On July 5, 1961, Parks and Flávio traveled from Rio to New York City. From there Flávio continued to Denver, where he resided for the next two years under the care of CARIH.

Anticipating a compelling story about Flávio’s medical progress and acculturation, *Life* assigned a local photographer, Hikaru “Carl” Iwasaki, to document the boy’s arrival in Denver and admission to the hospital. Published in July 1961, the photo essay “The Compassion of Americans Brings a New Life for Flavio” (on view nearby) features images by Iwasaki, shown here, and others by Parks and Brazilian photographer Paulo Muniz. Iwasaki subsequently photographed Flávio at school, but *Life* did not run another follow-up story.

# THE GONÇALVES FAMILY

José and Kathy Gonçalves, a Portuguese-speaking couple who had three sons, hosted Flávio at their home on weekends through much of his stay at the hospital in Denver. Hired to tutor him in English, Kathy was committed to Flávio's broader education. The Gonçalves family involved Flávio in their lives, introducing him to American middle-class activities—baseball, picnics, camping—and including him in holiday gatherings. José often documented these occasions: his snapshots, some displayed here, appeared in Parks's 1978 book *Flavio*.





# HENRI BALLOT AND *O CRUZEIRO*

News media in Brazil bitterly criticized *Life*'s portrayal of the Catacumba favela and its residents. Outraged and determined to retaliate, the Brazilian magazine *O Cruzeiro* sent photographer Henri Ballot to report on poverty in New York, where *Life* was headquartered. While exploring the Lower East Side in Manhattan, Ballot documented an immigrant family from Puerto Rico—Felix and Esther Gonzalez and their children—who lived in a derelict one-bedroom apartment. With Parks's coverage of the da Silvas as his model, Ballot depicted the Gonzalez family's struggle to survive in a run-down, dangerous area of the city.

To demonstrate that poverty was endemic in the United States as well, *O Cruzeiro* published Ballot's photographs in October 1961 in the photo essay "Nôvo recorde americano: Miséria" (New American Record: Misery). The war of competing accusations between the two magazines escalated when *O Cruzeiro* published an investigation in November charging Parks with staging his reportage. By the end of 1961 the battle had waned, Flávio was in Denver, and both Parks and Ballot were at work on other projects. However, until Catacumba was demolished in 1970, *Life* continued to have an impact on the favela and its various improvement projects because of donations from the magazine's readers.



## THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT FOR *O CRUZEIRO*

In summer 1961 Henri Ballot spent a few weeks scouring Manhattan for “a Flávio in New York,” as one of his acquaintances described the assignment for *O Cruzeiro*. From several impoverished families Ballot met in the city, he selected Felix and Esther Gonzalez, whose son Ely-Samuel was presented as an American version of Flávio. According to Ballot’s report in *O Cruzeiro*, the Gonzalezes “were not a special case, just a couple with ten children, living in deepest poverty. No sickness, no addiction of the parents could excuse their state. On the contrary, Felix Gonzalez, deeply religious, doesn’t smoke or drink.” Ballot spent several days with them on the Lower East Side, where they lived in a cramped apartment infested with bedbugs, cockroaches, and fleas.

In presenting Ballot’s reportage, *O Cruzeiro* admitted that it intentionally “followed the same script and pagination chosen by [*Life*] magazine” for “Freedom’s Fearful Foe: Poverty,” and it even reproduced pages from that photo essay alongside Ballot’s photographs to show readers in Brazil that “misery is not exclusive to us.” “Nôvo recorde americano: Miséria” (New American Record: Misery), the *O Cruzeiro* story that featured the Gonzalez family, is displayed here.

## THE SECOND ASSIGNMENT FOR *O CRUZEIRO*

In October 1961 *Time* attacked Ballot's story, "Nôvo recorde americano: Miséria" (New American Record: Misery), claiming that the photographer paid people to appear in his photographs and placed cockroaches on the sleeping body of Ely-Samuel Gonzalez. In response, *O Cruzeiro* accused Parks of manipulating his reportage on the da Silva family. For a story titled "Henri Ballot desmascara reportagem americana" (Henri Ballot Unmasks American Report), which appeared in *O Cruzeiro* on November 18, Ballot interviewed José da Silva, some of his children, and a former neighbor of the da Silva family in the favela. Accompanied by colleagues from *O Cruzeiro* and TV Tupi, Ballot recorded statements given by the da Silva family and residents in Catacumba, who reported that Parks had staged certain scenes.



# CATACUMBA AND *LIFE*

With financial contributions from the readers of *Life*, Time Inc. established a trust in 1961 to support improvements in Catacumba, one of more than two hundred favelas around Rio de Janeiro. Working with local authorities and favela residents for just under a decade, *Life* helped establish the Society of Residents and Friends of Catacumba (SOMAC), which funded projects such as a community center and a plumbing system. Ruth Fowler, assistant to the publisher of *Life*, diligently monitored and assisted this operation from afar while local *Life* staffer José Gallo, who had guided Parks during his time in Brazil, reported on its progress from Rio. Selected letters from Gallo to Fowler, replete with updates on the efforts in Catacumba, are shown here.

Despite documented improvements, state governments in Brazil began eradicating favelas in the mid-1960s, arguing that they stood in the way of profitable construction and drew ongoing negative attention as hotbeds of poverty and crime. By 1970, SOMAC had disbanded, Catacumba was obliterated, and more than thirteen thousand residents of that favela were forcibly resettled in makeshift housing complexes outside Rio's city center.



# THE REUNION OF GORDON PARKS AND FLÁVIO DA SILVA

In 1963, the year that Flávio returned to Brazil, Parks published his first memoir, *A Choice of Weapons*. Under contract to deliver two additional manuscripts, Parks began to draft his next book, *Flavio*, as early as 1966. Though five years had passed since *Life* published the photo essay, Parks believed public interest remained strong and would lead to robust sales.

Various projects delayed the book—including Parks's work on two films, *The Learning Tree* and *Shaft*—but the photographer finally returned to *Flavio* in 1976, when fulfillment of his publishing contract grew urgent. Parks saw the book as an opportunity to update the story for the public, and he returned to Brazil to interview and photograph Flávio, now twenty-seven. He also spent time with Flávio's family members: his wife, Cleuza, and their two sons; his mother; and his various siblings, many of them still residing in the home in Guadalupe that *Life* had purchased for them with money donated by its readers.

Parks saw Flávio again in the late 1990s, a visit arranged in conjunction with a film about Parks and his career. It would be their last meeting; Parks died in 2006.





# FLÁVIO'S RETURN TO BRAZIL

The Children's Asthma Research Institute and Hospital officially released Flávio in summer 1963. He had adjusted to life in America and wanted to stay, pleading with many people to adopt him, including the Gonçalves family, but for various reasons this could not be arranged. Flávio's return to Brazil proved difficult; he attended boarding school in São Paulo but struggled to reassimilate and was expelled in 1966. He then went to Guadalupe, where his parents still lived in the house purchased with funds from *Life*, and continued his schooling there.

From 1963 to 1976—the year Parks returned to Brazil to see Flávio for the first time since 1961—there was little correspondence between Flávio and most of his contacts in the US, save a handful of *Life* readers who continued to write to him. During this period he remained in Brazil, worked various jobs, married and had two children. In 1970, when he turned twenty-one, he received the final installment of the “Flavio Fund,” a trust established with the money donated by *Life* readers.



# FLÁVIO DA SILVA AS SUBJECT

Journalists in Brazil and the United States have periodically revisited Flávio's remarkable story for television or print media. They have asked him to recount his childhood illness, his memories of life in the favela, and his recovery in the United States. On rare occasions, reporters sought out both Flávio and Parks to describe their remembrances of their initial encounter.

In 1997, in conjunction with a feature for the *Los Angeles Times*, Parks and Flávio spoke by telephone for the first time in many years, and in 1999 Parks decided to make one more journey to Rio de Janeiro while filming the documentary *Half Past Autumn: The Life and Works of Gordon Parks* (see excerpt, adjacent). At the time, Parks was eighty-seven years old and Flávio was fifty; it would be their final encounter. The photographs on display here date from that visit.

Since Flávio last saw Parks in 1999, he has retired from his job as a security guard. He continues to reside in Guadalupe, the town where his family relocated in 1961 when they left Catacumba. When asked about his experiences recently, he reflected: "You have a story. Everyone has a story. Some people's stories are good. Others are plagued by problems. That's life. [My story] is not a movie, but it was shot on film. [Gordon Parks] chose me. Now people know more about my life than I do. I'm glad that I'm alive as a result. . . . this story never made me feel either better or worse than anyone else."

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