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Cecil Johnson

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THE GRIOT



Preserving
African American
History in Maine

University of Southern Maine

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From the Editor's Desk

They say “pictures don’t lie,” but I know that my pictures have been lying for years. Sure, there were some good photos at first: baby pictures, kindergarten snapshots, and some elementary school class pictures. Then, like someone trapped in a Kodak moment gone terribly wrong, I started a run of over a decade of bad pictures, from the sixth grade all the way into graduate school. And if I had a dollar for every time I looked at a fresh-from-the-lab photo and was less than impressed, I would be wintering in my ancestral home of Barbados.

Pictures “don’t lie,” but doesn’t the camera “add ten pounds”? In my opinion, adding weight where it is not technically there is the worst kind of lying. Due to this well-established pattern of photographic disillusion, I have developed a phobia of the camera and of its evil cousin, the camcorder. At the sheer mention of either of these devices, I search the room for a place to hide, try to make a rapid yet discreet exit, or fake having to call someone, anyone.

But regardless of my own personal experiences in front of it, I am intrigued by the photographic process and by the power of the photographic image. The photograph has an ability to illustrate the beauty of persons not considered to fit mainstream society’s standard of beauty. The photograph’s power to

document moments in the lives of people who have been marginalized or otherwise excluded from popular studies of place and time is equally important. This edition of *The Griot* is devoted to “Re-membering Maine’s Past: African American Portraiture as Historical Text, 1885-1925,” an exhibition that features selected photographs from the African American Archives of Maine at USM. It runs from February through May on the USM Portland and Lewiston-Auburn campuses.

Cultural critic bell hooks writes that to remember or *re-member* is to bring together disparate fragments in the construction of a whole. Consistently concerned with issues of representation, hooks describes how photographs of African Americans have operated as “sites of resistance,” challenging well-entrenched myths of racial inferiority and creating “positive, radical identities.” Examining the studio portraits of African Americans in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Maine, we may find clues about the membership and interests of the Black community. Using hooks’ theory of re-membering, we also explore the importance of the photograph in documenting this population and in empowering African Americans then and now.

Maureen Elgersman, assistant professor and faculty scholar for the African American Archives of Maine, University of Southern Maine Library

**Don’t miss
Summer Session course,
African American Cultural
and Intellectual History of
the Twentieth Century**

A Place in Time: Cecil Johnson, Bangor, Maine, b. 1894

Photo 5-5-77 in the African American Archives reads “Cecil Johnson, Earl Johnson’s brother of Bangor.” No date is given nor is a studio indicated anywhere on the photo. Drawing on the similarity between the photo and others in the collection, as



Cecil Johnson of Bangor, Maine

Drawing on the similarity between the photo and others in the collection, as well as on census-based research on African Americans in turn-of-the-century Maine, it is possible to create a brief sketch of who this young man was.

well as on census-based research on African Americans in turn-of-the-century Maine, it is possible to create a brief sketch of who this young man was. According to the 1910 census, Cecil Johnson was born in Maine in 1894 and was then living in Bangor. His father was William A. Johnson and his mother was Edith M. Johnson. Coincidentally, the collection contains the photo of a woman identified as Edith Johnson. She is pictured with a young child and the photo carries the inscription “Edith Johnson, Earl Johnson’s mother.” This photo was taken at Heath Studios, Bangor, Maine. The child in this photo bears a striking resemblance to a young man found in another picture, also taken in Bangor, this time by George Sansil. This may be Earl Johnson, Cecil’s brother. An inventory of African Americans in Maine census records indicates that Cecil’s mother was from the West Indies and that his father was from Virginia, the state from which most of Maine’s non-native Black population emigrated according to 1870 and 1900 statistics. Given Johnson’s date of birth and an approximation of his age, this photograph was probably taken between 1907 and 1911. His clothing and the attention to detail (notice the tie clip) suggest possible membership in Maine’s emergent African American middle class.

Re-membering Maine’s Past: African-American Portraiture as Historical Text, 1885-1925

The word *remember* (re-member) evokes the coming together of several parts, fragments becoming a whole. Photography has been and is central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using these images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye. —bell hooks¹

In 1880, the African American population of Maine was 1,451, indicating a decrease of 9.7% since the census returns of 1870. In 1890, this population had declined by a further 18% to 1,190 and constituted the smallest African American presence in the state since 1830. From 1900 to 1920, the population was able to maintain some small gains as it averaged approximately 1,330 over the twenty-year period.² By the last two decades of the nineteenth-century, Bangor and Portland had emerged as centers for the Black population, with

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Re-membering Maine's Past

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Augusta, Lewiston, Warren, and Brunswick close behind.³ Professor Randolph Stakeman offers this synopsis of African American life in Maine at this time:

By the end of the century... blacks had carved out a niche for themselves in the service occupations, but had withdrawn from the direct production of food as farmers and fishermen. It is difficult to assess how these occupations translated into income for the black community. Only a handful of blacks owned their own businesses or worked for themselves. Black people were for the most part confined to jobs which kept them at the lower end of the economic ladder. Nevertheless, there was enough of a diversity in jobs and income to allow for the formation of stratification within the black community, property ownership for many, and the accumulation of wealth for a handful.⁴

With increased stratification of the state's Black population and with developments in the production of photographic images, African American investment in portraiture seems to have grown. Frank C. Weston of Weston photography, Bangor, is the single-most identified studio in the exhibition collection, with no less than a dozen photographs bearing the business's stamp. Some photos are mounted on studio boards copyrighted in 1889; a few other photos are stamped "March 1886" and "April 1886." Social and financial investments in photographic portraiture are indicative of a middle class consciousness in which disposable income is used for the construction or preservation of an individual's or a family's image. Sitting for photographs was probably liberating for some African Americans, but those who remained firmly mired in the working class might not have had the money, time, or propensity toward this type of financial expenditure.

While African Americans may have been able to develop more of a financial base than in previous decades, it is likely that the relatively scattered physical

presence of African Americans combined with America's persistent investment in theories of racial inferiority kept many of these people invisible to other Maine residents. Inside the African American community and, more specifically, inside African American homes, photographs were critical elements in the creation of an internally defined Black aesthetic and, perhaps in a more fundamental way, in the cultural and even psychological preservation of a people. hooks explains:

When we concentrate on photography, then, we make it possible to see the walls of photographs in black homes as a critical intervention, a disruption of white control of black images.... Significantly, displaying those images in everyday life were as central as making them. The walls and walls of images... were sites of resistance. They constituted private, black-owned and -operated gallery space where images could be displayed, shown to friends and strangers.⁵

The forms that African American portraiture took reveal that photos were not confined to the home. Photographs were calling cards of sorts, as people traveled outside of their immediate communities for reunions with relatives or when making new friends. The circulation of these true-to-life images countered the degrading representations seen on cookie jars and salt shakers that were quickly becoming American icons.⁶ As photographs in the exhibition prove, pictures were printed and used as postcards, keeping family and friends in touch with personal happenings and preserving redemptive images in the minds of extended family and community.

Photography was a way in which African Americans in Maine could *member* the familial, local, and racial communities in which they lived. In reflections about photos in her grandmother's house, hooks recalls, "We would stand before the walls of images and learn the importance of the arrangement, why a certain photo was placed here and not there."⁷ For society at the dawn of the twenty-first century, these images—some of which are more than one hundred years old—help create the means to *re-member* Maine's past,

revising it so that the recuperative, redemptive memory contains African American images "not as caricatures, cartoon-like figures," but as men, women, and children "in full diversity of body, being, and expression, multidimensional."⁸

Notes

¹bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis. (New York: The New Press, 1994), 53.

² Donald B. Dodd, compiler, *Historical Statistics of the States of the United States: Two Centuries of the Census, 1790-1990* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), 39, 40. The figure 1,330 is the average of those reported for the 1900, 1910, and 1920 censuses.

³Randolph Stakeman, "The Black Population of Maine, 1764-1900," *New England Journal of Black Studies*, no. 8 (1989): 30.

⁴Ibid., 33.

⁵hooks, "Glory," 47-48.

⁶Ibid., 48.

⁷Ibid., 50.

⁸Ibid.

Calendar of Events

Re-membering Maine's Past: African American Portraiture as Historical Text, 1885-1925

Exhibition featuring 55 selected photographs from the African American Archives of Maine at USM.

February 1 to March 28:

Woodbury Campus Center, Portland
Exhibition lecture, slide presentation, and reception. February 11, 7:00 p.m., Luther Bonney Auditorium.

April 5 to May 28:

Lewiston-Auburn College, Hall Gallery

Summer Session 1999

Course offering: P1029 HTY394

African American Cultural and Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century

A study of the major cultural and intellectual developments of the century. Topics will include lynching, the Harlem Renaissance, Black popular culture, and Black feminism. Individuals covered will include Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. DuBois, Cornel West, and bell hooks. No prerequisites. 3 credits.

May 10-June 25, USM Portland campus
Mondays/Wednesdays, 4:00-6:40 p.m.

Call Professor Elgersman at
(207) 780-5239 for more information
about the exhibition or the summer
course.

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