

## The New Negro Movement in Lincoln, Nebraska

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Full Citation: Jennifer Hildebrand, "The New Negro Movement in Lincoln, Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 91 (2010): 166-189

URL: <https://history.nebraska.gov/sites/history.nebraska.gov/files/doc/publications/NH2010NewNegro.pdf>

Article Summary: From the 1890s to the 1930s the New Negro Movement encouraged African Americans throughout the United States to shape their own self-image. John Johnson, a Lincoln photographer who knew and understood the people in his pictures, showcased Nebraska African Americans at their best.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: John Johnson, Ruth Talbert (Ruth Greene Folley), William Brown, Alain Locke, Aaron Douglas, Langston Hughes, W E B DuBois, Oliver Burckhardt, Anna Burckhardt, Allie Elder Harding, Cora Thomas, J T Zealy, Maude Hancock Johnson, George W Butcher, Dakota Sidney Talbert, Addison N Scurlock

Place Names: Lincoln, Nebraska

African-American Organizations in Lincoln: Quinn Chapel AME Church, Mt Zion Baptist Church, Semper Fidelis Club, Good Templar Lodge, Abraham Lincoln Afro-American Voters' League, Knights of Pythias, Knights and Daughters of Tabor, Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, Order of the Eastern Star, Daughters of Isis, Prince Hall Mason Grand Lodge, Lincoln Urban League

Keywords: New Negro Movement (NNM); Harlem Renaissance; John Johnson; Great Migration; racism; Jim Crow; University of Nebraska (NU); African Americans; segregation; Race Relations Committee (Lincoln); Ku Klux Klan (KKK); lynching; Survey Graphic; The New Negro: An Interpretation; Birth of a Nation; Maude Hancock Johnson; T J Zealy; Ruth Talbert (Ruth Greene Folley), George W Butcher, Dakota Sidney Talbert

Photographs by/attribution to John Johnson: "Leona Malone Dean"; "Ethel and Charles Smith with Anna Hill at Salt Creek"; "Maude (Hancock) Johnson"; "Church Group at the Home of Reverend Oliver and Anna Burckhardt"; "Cora (Hancock) Thomas and a Friend"; "Allie Elder Harding, her sister Jenny Elder, and elderly relative"; "The Talbert Family: Reverend Albert, Dakota, Mildred, and Ruth"; "Woman Reading"; "Women Posing in Front of Little White House"; "Wedding Couple"; "George W Butcher and Friend"; "Young Woman with Three Puppies"; "Dakota Sydney Talbert, about 1915"; "Aerial View of Downtown Lincoln"; "Street Paving Crew Posing"; "Evacuation for the Miller and Paine Department Store, 1914"; "Costumed Girls Posing with Cards and Bottle"; "Mother and Laughing Child"

Other Photographs / Images: Sojourner Truth; Addison N Scurlock (self-portrait), 1920; "Aspiration" (1936 painting by Aaron Douglas, de Young Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

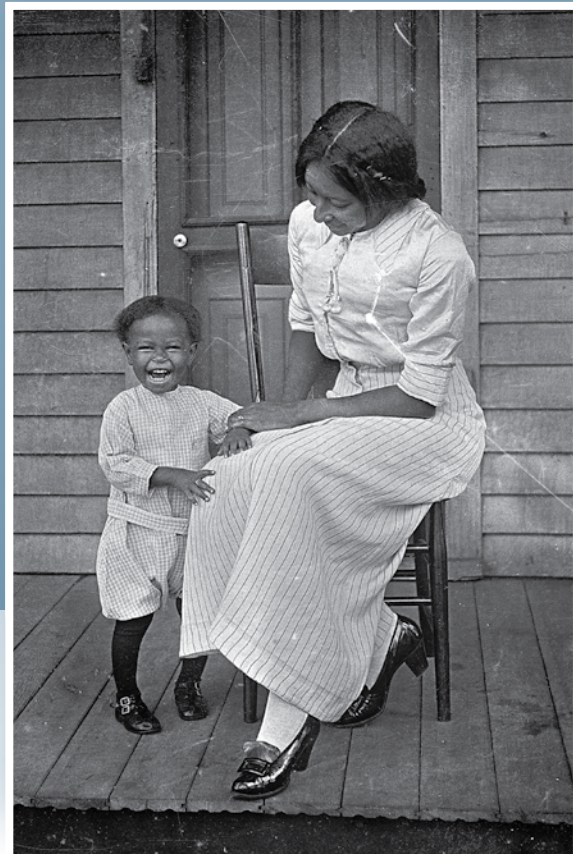
Date: 1/24/2019



# THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT

## IN LINCOLN, NEBRASKA

BY JENNIFER HILDEBRAND



We are possessed, you know, with the idea that it is necessary to be white, to be beautiful. Nine times out of ten it is just the reverse. It takes lots of training or a tremendous effort to down the idea that thin lips and a straight nose is the apogee of beauty. But once free you can look back with a sigh of relief and wonder how anyone could be so deluded.

— **AARON DOUGLAS**<sup>1</sup>

Why do not more young colored men and women take up photography as a career? The average white photographer does not know how to deal with colored skins and having neither sense of the delicate beauty or tone nor will to learn, he makes a horrible botch of portraying them.

— **W. E. B. Du Bois**<sup>2</sup>

The New Negro Movement (NNM)—a term that I use purposefully in contradistinction to “Harlem Renaissance”—occurred not just in Harlem, and not just in large metropolitan areas. The NNM occurred across America, even in small Midwestern cities such as Lincoln, Nebraska. Certainly it took a different form than the renaissance so frequently spoken of in Harlem. From roughly the 1890s to the 1930s, however, Lincoln’s African American population began to assert itself socially, politically, economically, and culturally. In part because of both the quality and quantity of work done by literary critics, the NNM or Harlem Renaissance is often associated with literature, but New Negroes often turned to other media as they strove to control their own image: painting, sculpture, and music often allowed for a form of self-expression that resonated with some individuals in a way that the writing of an essay or an autobiography did not. Photography also provided a useful way to recreate the image of blackness in the United States. Photographs from roughly 1912 to 1925, attributed to John Johnson, provide powerful testimony of the presence of a New Negro mentality in the relatively small but urban Midwestern city of Lincoln, Nebraska.

### **Lincoln During the “Nadir”**

The artistic creations of the NNM cannot be properly understood if they are discussed in a historical vacuum, and Lincoln and Nebraska generally have more of an African American past than is often recognized. Nebraska had a small number of black slaves before the Civil War; the first African American settler arrived in the summer of 1868. By 1870 Lincoln had its first black barber. However, African American settlers did not always feel welcome in the state. A group of 150 black immigrants from Mississippi arrived in 1879, intending to make Nebraska their home; ultimately they were forced out of the state. At the turn of the century, however, as Nebraska grew and the Great Migration of black Southerners began (a relative trickle until the floodgates opened during World War I), the black population began to increase. The packing plants and railroads of Omaha and Lincoln attracted a significant number of black workers from the South.<sup>3</sup> From 1904 to 1920, Lincoln’s African American population grew by more than 58 percent.<sup>4</sup>

While the new settlers found opportunities not available in the South, they did not so completely escape racism and Jim Crow as they must have hoped. In the historical period often referred to as the “nadir” of African American history (1890s–1920s), Nebraska’s African American population

enjoyed the privilege of voting, but faced racial restrictions in other areas. At the turn of the century, “both custom and state law prevented racial intermarriage.”<sup>5</sup> While the ban could be interpreted as a limitation on whites as well, it was clear at the time that such restrictions, like the rules governing the segregation of the races, were meant to communicate black inferiority. Other restrictions emerged as well. In 1913, Nebraska changed its state law defining a person with one-quarter African American blood as legally “black.” Under the amended law, a person with one-eighth African American (or Japanese or Chinese) heritage became legally “non-Caucasian.” Though black athletes participated in sports at the University of Nebraska (NU), in 1917 the school announced that the practice would end, as some teams in their collegiate division objected to playing against African Americans.<sup>6</sup>

Housing segregation in Omaha appeared in 1902, and Lincoln’s developers began to place racial restrictions in property deeds by 1916.<sup>7</sup> Though a 1933 report by the Race Relations Committee of Lincoln found that blacks were “general[ly] distribut[ed] . . . throughout the city,” the chart which accompanies the committee’s findings suggests that the distribution of African American families was “general” only in comparison to Southern cities that practiced extreme forms of segregation. Sixty-two percent of Lincoln’s black families lived in three of the twelve wards (the first, third, and fifth). Almost 30 percent of Lincoln’s African American population resided in the third ward, described by the report as “ill-kept,” and “congested.” The twelfth ward contained not a single African American.<sup>8</sup>

Severely circumscribed employment opportunities also made it difficult for Lincoln’s African American families to achieve any level of equality. A survey of 100 wage earners found a total of twenty-nine different vocations, but concluded “[t]hese consist largely of unskilled, semi-skilled, and personal service jobs. The men are employed largely as laborers, porters, waiters, janitors. The women are engaged in the most part as maids, char-women, and laundress[es].” While noting that positions with the state or federal government represented the “most lucrative jobs” held by Lincoln’s black citizens, a table describing those jobs shows that they generally fit into the same categories: of the eighteen individuals with these “lucrative” jobs, six were janitors and four were charwomen. At the time the study was completed, NU employed no African Americans. As the report noted, limited employment opportunities presented a serious

problem for Lincoln's African American community, because it meant that the town "affords little incentive for Negro children to pursue high education. The opportunities open to the High School graduates are similar to those who have little to no education." Ruth Greene Folley, who appeared (as Ruth Talbert) in one of Johnson's photographs as a child, experienced these limitations: she completed her teaching certificate in 1926, but found that it "was not a passport to employment; Lincoln schools did not hire African American teachers until the 1950s."<sup>9</sup> The consequences were severe for Lincoln's black community. "Most of the ambitious boys and girls who have completed the high school and university courses leave the city, in quest of employment. Consequently the city loses many of its potential leaders in the Negro group."<sup>10</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) also posed a significant threat. Composed of 1,100 members in the summer of 1922, Nebraska's KKK had 45,000 members by 1923 in the wake of an organizational drive. By 1924, "klan demonstrations, parades, and cross burnings had become common" in many parts of Nebraska, and Lincoln's "klavern, with an estimated 5,000 members, was the largest and most vocal in the state." In 1924, the KKK held its statewide convention in Lincoln, and more than a thousand klansmen paraded openly through the streets. "One mounted klansman stirred the imagination of the crowd by carrying an electric cross," noted historian Michael Schuyler.<sup>11</sup> Although the klan cannot technically receive the blame for the lynching of William Brown in Omaha in 1919 (the klan was not officially organized in Nebraska at that point), the close proximity, both temporally and spatially, of a brutal lynching and the rise of a group vocally promoting white supremacy surely did not escape the consciousness of Lincoln's African American population.

### Who Was the New Negro?

Nationwide, African Americans faced similar, and often more severe, forms of discrimination. Despite the constant threat of physical violence posed by lynching and the emergence of the KKK, African Americans fought back, trying to achieve the equality that the Civil War's end had seemed to promise. Those individuals who tried to wrest the power to control the black image from the hands of whites—who often shaped that image in stereotypical ways that supported the doctrine of white supremacy—are the New Negroes. They aimed to demonstrate that African Americans already possessed equality of capability and intellect, and they began, quietly at first, to demand equality of opportunity.

Philosopher Alain Locke's writings helped to shape the NNM; Locke's role as one of the founders of the movement was cemented when he was asked to edit and contribute to a volume of writings on the New Negro in a special edition of *Survey Graphic*, published in 1925. Anticipating its popularity, two months before the issue appeared on newsstands, publishers arranged to have Locke incorporate the existing *Survey Graphic* material (with some significant new contributions) into a book-length collection, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*.<sup>12</sup> He provided working definitions of the Old and New Negro, and put into words the feelings of many regarding the need for a revised image of African Americans. The Old Negro "had long become more of a myth than a man." He—or, as Locke failed to note, she—"has been a stock figure perpetuated as an historical fiction partly in innocent sentimentalism, partly in deliberate reactionism." To the image of the Old Negro white society had pinned many of the negative stereotypes that remain with us today; introduced to justify slavery, they proved equally useful in the justification of Jim Crow society in the twentieth century and racial inequality in the twenty-first. African Americans were lazy, childlike, unintelligent, incapable of self-rule, and governed by their passions, proclaimed books like *The Negro: A Beast* (1900) or *The Negro: A Menace to Civilization* (1907).<sup>13</sup> The visual image accompanying these fictions appeared frequently on the minstrel stage and in widely viewed films such as *Birth of a Nation*.

New Negroes, on the other hand, were "vibrant with a new psychology." They felt "the new spirit" that was "awake in the masses," and enjoyed "renewed self-respect and self-dependence" as well as greater "self-expression."<sup>14</sup> The New Negro fought back against racism, refusing to accept second class citizenship even when the threat for resistance could be lynching. He or she proclaimed—and proved, through their everyday actions—that African Americans were equal to white Americans, and deserved equal opportunities on constitutional and moral grounds. New Negroes wrote books and articles rejecting the stereotypes found in contemporary scholarship, and they picketed outside theaters showing *Birth of a Nation*. They shared several goals, the most important of which was improving the image and reputation of African Americans in society in the hope that more accurate representation would result in the extension to blacks of the rights and privileges enjoyed by whites.

Contributors to the NNM represented an extremely diverse group: black and white, young

"Leona Malone Dean," attributed to John Johnson. This young woman appears "relaxed, confident, and almost saucy," which makes her an excellent representation of the New Negro spirit.<sup>15</sup>



and 'mature,' radical and moderate. They came together to remake the image of African Americans by drawing upon their own special talents and perspectives: they were painters and sculptors and writers; soldiers; members of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); middle class and working class; intellectuals trained in colleges and intellectuals educated by real life. They sometimes clashed over methods, but they kept their eyes focused on the ultimate prize of greater inclusion and equal justice as American citizens.

African Americans from a variety of backgrounds with a myriad of skills joined together in the New Negro Movement. New Negroes were also geographically diverse, which is one of the reasons that the term "Harlem Renaissance" does not reflect the full story of the widespread activity of the 1910s-1930s. Undeniably, Harlem became a nexus for social, political, and artistic activity during this period. However, many important contributors to the NNM did not have close ties to Harlem, or developed such ties only after they had established their artistic style. As independent scholar Steven Watson noted, Harlem housed many

cultural spaces which were open and sympathetic to the arts, and especially to discussions about an emerging black aesthetic—places like the Savoy Ballroom or "The Dark Tower" (A'Lelia Walker's "parlor-cum-nightclub-salon") for a somewhat more elite crowd, and rent parties on "strivers' row" for "the laundresses and cabbies, numbers runners and domestics."<sup>16</sup>

On the other hand, Sterling Brown, a "Harlem Renaissance" poet and literary critic, rejected the notion that Harlem was the central location of the movement—indeed, he wrote a convincing argument in favor of the term "New Negro Movement" instead of "Harlem Renaissance" or even "Negro Renaissance."<sup>17</sup> Many important figures in the NNM had tenuous ties at best to Harlem. Locke lived and studied in the environs of Harvard, Oxford, the University of Berlin, and the Collège de France in Paris; he taught at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and never lived in Harlem. Sociologist and historian W. E. B. Du Bois grew up in Great Barrington, Massachusetts; he also studied at Harvard and Berlin, and in *The Souls of Black Folk* he detailed a very important period that he spent traveling in the South. Writer and poet Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri. He spent most of his childhood in Lawrence, Kansas, living briefly in Lincoln, Illinois, and Cleveland, Ohio, where he attended high school and began writing poetry. He traveled to West Africa and Europe before finally settling in Harlem in 1929—well after the NNM had begun. Aaron Douglas similarly enjoyed a Midwestern upbringing, living in Topeka, Kansas City, and Lincoln, Nebraska (while attending NU) before removing himself to Harlem. Art historian David Driskell noted that on "numerous occasions" Douglas reminded him "that he and his artist colleagues from all creative disciplines did not call this burgeoning movement the Harlem Renaissance. He noted that they saw the creative revolution under way as being more inclusive and dubbed it the Negro Renaissance, thereby giving it wider boundaries beyond New York; nationwide, if you will, extending into all of Black America."<sup>18</sup>

More recent scholars are beginning to emphasize the far-reaching geography of the New Negro Movement. Historian Davarian Baldwin's monograph focuses on the NNM as it occurred in Chicago, and several important essays and articles highlight the contributions of the West and Midwest to the movement.<sup>19</sup> As historian Kennell Jackson pointed out, the "Harlem Renaissance . . . was only one of multiple black renaissances [to occur post-World War I] in places like Havana, Paris, London,



"Ethel and Charles Smith with Anna Hill at Salt Creek," attributed to John Johnson. This image communicates a significant theme of the New Negro Movement—the beauty and respectability of African Americans. Taken in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the period between 1912 and 1925, it also demonstrates that the New Negro desire to control representations of blackness existed far beyond the limits of Harlem.

Germany, Accra, Lagos and South Africa."<sup>20</sup> Literary critic Cheryl A. Wall opined that "labels such as 'New Negro Renaissance' or 'New Negro Movement' . . . are in fact more accurate historically," although she also noted, quite correctly, that "no term has come close to displacing 'Harlem Renaissance.'"<sup>21</sup> Lincoln's activist African Americans, many of them pictured in John Johnson's photographs, demonstrate the widespread nature of the New Negro Movement.<sup>22</sup>

### Lincoln's New Negroes Organize and Agitate

"[T]here was agitation in the age of accommodation," wrote Shawn Leigh Alexander in his study of the Afro-American Council in Kansas.<sup>23</sup> Lincoln's African American community definitely proves Alexander's statement true. The fight against racism certainly occurred in Harlem, but black Lincolmites also waged the battle, as did blacks living in hundreds of other towns often not associated with the NNM. Black newspapers were crucial to this movement throughout the African American West in a number of ways. They "provid[ed] information on protest struggles and leaders elsewhere, articulately expressing indignation, defending their small communities and the race, and encouraging responsible challenges to discrimination and exclusion."<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, these papers "served to

establish an African American identity in the communities [of the American West] that countered the stereotypes perpetuated by the communities as a whole, which were often fostered by the white-owned press."<sup>25</sup> In other words, African American newspapers disseminated the attitudes and tactics that New Negroes employed in their own communities and across the nation.

Although Lincoln did not have a black paper of its own, its inhabitants almost surely availed themselves of national magazines as well as local papers from neighboring communities. If they read the *New Era* of Omaha at the time of the lynching of William Brown by some of Omaha's white citizens, they would have seen that rather than cower in the face of violence, the black community declared that it would "not stand for any intimidation or imposition from the KKK or any of their sympathizers."<sup>26</sup> In October of the same year, the *Omaha Monitor* ran an ad for the NAACP, which was holding a membership drive. The NAACP had established its first Nebraska chapter in Omaha in 1914, and the Rev. John Albert Williams, "an outstanding figure in social leadership among the Negroes of Nebraska" and the first president of the Omaha branch of the NAACP, owned the *Omaha Monitor*. He used his paper to fight "tirelessly for the improvement of the social and economic status of the Negroes."<sup>27</sup>

Kansas City's black newspapers might also have infiltrated the Lincoln community. One, the *Kansas City Sun*, caught the attention of at least one Lincolnite; the paper "claimed a foreign correspondent in Lincoln, Nebraska."<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Odessa Price, who married photographer John Johnson, hailed from Kansas City.<sup>29</sup> She was probably one of many in Lincoln's black community with a Kansas City connection. Charles Coulter, opinion page editor at the *Kansas City Star*, describes the editors of the two major black newspapers of Kansas City (the *Sun*, edited by Nelson Crews, and the *Call*, edited by Chester A. Franklin) as "progressive-minded," adding that "both were what would be called 'race men.'"<sup>30</sup> Cheryl Ragar noted that the *Call* was "one of the largest-circulation black newspaper[s] in the country."<sup>31</sup> In the papers of Kansas City, Lincoln's African American population might have learned about the turn of the century efforts of black Kansans to organize and fundraise in order to build a hospital for black patrons; the fundraising efforts included a benefit reading by Paul Laurence Dunbar, who would become a leading poet in the New Negro Movement. If they followed those same papers, they also read about a fundraiser to build a second hospital in 1917, one that would not only serve black patients but allow black doctors to practice. In promoting the second hospital, readers were asked, "Don't you think we deserve better treatment . . . ?" They could have learned about Marcus Garvey's visits to Kansas City, or about black Kansan Citizens' contributions to Governor Walton, given to support "his war against the Ku Klux Klan." In September 1923 they might have read about the NAACP's fourteenth annual convention, and in October 1923 they could have read about the National Urban League's national conference, both held in Kansas City.<sup>32</sup>

In other words, black newspapers were crucial to building a sense of community, communal resistance to racism, and a sense of identity as "New Negroes"—and they would have been available to Lincoln's African American community. We know absolutely that Aaron Douglas, one of the leading visual artists in the New Negro Movement who spent several years in Lincoln in pursuit of his degree at NU, regularly read "the progressive black press from his hometown of Topeka."<sup>33</sup> Professor of Ethnic Studies Richard M. Breaux's study of New Negro-era black students at NU, the University of Kansas, the University of Iowa, and the University of Minnesota demonstrated that they benefitted from both local and national black news: "Newspapers such as the *Topeka Plaindealer*, the *Iowa*

*Bystander*, and the *Omaha Monitor*, along with *Opportunity* and *Crisis* magazines [the national voices of the National Urban League and the NAACP, respectively] artistically and politically inspired black students . . . to behave, dress, and research issues relevant to black people like never before."<sup>34</sup> Douglas testified to the importance of the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*: "[t]he poems and other creative works were *by* Negroes and *about* Negroes. And in the case of one poet, Langston Hughes, they seemed to have been created in a form and technique that was in some way consonant or harmonious with the ebb and flow of Negro life."<sup>35</sup>

Lincoln's New Negroes marked their association with this emerging mindset in the same way that African Americans throughout the West did. Historian Quintard Taylor explains:

Despite their small numbers, black urban westerners usually established churches, fraternal organizations, social clubs, newspapers, and literary societies. These fledgling nineteenth-century institutions and organizations immediately addressed the spiritual, educational, social, and cultural needs of the local inhabitants. But such 'race' organizations also provided African Americans with respite from a hostile world, a retreat where blacks could lose their anonymity and gain some control over their lives. While these desires were hardly unique to black westerners, the small size of the region's population, the vast distances between black communities in the West, and from the South, increased the importance of these organizations.<sup>36</sup>

Through a variety of groups formed to promote fraternal ties, religious dedication, social uplift, political participation, and education, Lincoln's African American population developed a sense of worth and belonging in their community as well as in their nation. Members of Lincoln's Quinn Chapel A. M. E. and Mt. Zion Baptist churches, especially those members representing "the more substantial citizens of the community," worked together to sponsor "activities which . . . attracted city-wide interest." In 1925, the Semper Fidelis club emerged "to provide some social and recreational outlet for students of the University. Of late, their activities have been directed toward increasing interest in Negro literature, art, and music."<sup>37</sup> A small listing of the fraternal groups organized by Lincoln's citizens includes the Good Templar Lodge in 1874 and the Abraham Lincoln Afro-American Voters' League in 1879.<sup>38</sup> Other organizations formed in Lincoln include the Knights of Pythias, the Knights and Daughters of Tabor, and the Benevolent and Protective Order

of Elks. Lincoln also hosted the Order of the Eastern Star and the Daughters of Isis, women's auxiliaries to the Masons and the Elks, respectively.<sup>39</sup> The report produced by the Race Relations Committee found that in 1933, roughly 27 percent of Lincoln's African American community participated in these sorts of communal organizations.<sup>40</sup>

Prince Hall Masonry brought a number of Lincoln's African Americans together to establish fraternal ties and to work for the betterment of their community. "Blue" (subordinate) lodges had been established in Lincoln, Omaha, Hastings, Grand Island, Alliance, and Scottsbluff by the turn of the century. The Lincoln branch boasted sixty-nine members in 1912, and as the population increased as a result of American involvement in World War I, the state of Nebraska was able to form the independent Prince Hall Mason Grand Lodge in 1919. Although some have argued that membership in the Masons was reserved for middle class African Americans and could cause socioeconomic rifts in the black community, historian Dennis N. Michelich's study of Prince Hall Masonry in Nebraska found that the comparatively small black population and the shared desire to swell the ranks in order to merit a "sovereign grand lodge" led to significant openness to members from various backgrounds, resulting in "a multi-class fraternity consisting of individuals who accepted a Christian code of values . . . who demanded moral and ethical conduct, and who promoted 'self-help' and 'racial uplift' for the entire black community."<sup>41</sup>

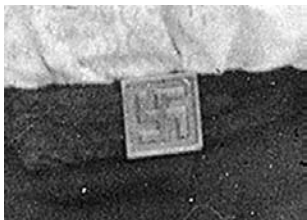
The prevailing stereotypes surrounding African American women—that they were "low and sluttish," as literary critic Gloria Hull phrased it—meant that one of the primary goals of the Order of Eastern Stars and other women's groups had to be a rebuttal of such charges.<sup>42</sup> But women's contributions went beyond simply challenging these misrepresentations (which will be discussed more fully below). Historians Shirley Ann Wilson Moore and Quintard Taylor observed that in the West, African American women's clubs promoted "racial uplift" and fed a need for "cultural and intellectual improvement, self-help, and mutual support." In the process, such groups provided their female members with "opportunit[ies] for self-expression and informal education while linking them to an emerging national network of black women's organizations," ultimately allowing club women to take "charge of their collective lives and fates" while avoiding "victimization by the world around them." Nebraska's club women affiliated in 1905; like those in many other states who followed that path, they



**"Maude (Hancock) Johnson," attributed to John Johnson. The satin and pearls communicate respectability.**

hoped to "strengthen their standing and influence both locally and regionally."<sup>43</sup>

John Johnson's photograph of Maude Hancock Johnson preserves the image of the first Worthy Grand Matron of the Order of the Eastern Star. Mrs. Johnson also directed the Fraternity Group, the branch of the Prince Hall Masons organized to serve teenagers.<sup>44</sup> Her sister, Lizzie, was married to William Woods, who was both "a leading member" in Quinn Chapel and one of the founders of the Masonic Lodge.<sup>45</sup> Recalling his mother, John Reed said, "I tell you what, she was a real Eastern Star Sister! Sister Maude Johnson, everybody respected her. And nothing would do her but we had to join the Masons." Reed obliquely explained why the fraternity and social leadership provided by such organizations was of great importance in Lincoln, recalling that "back in those days . . . [t]here were restaurants and things that we couldn't go into." He remembered the presence of the Klan, and noted that in the South "you expected . . . you knew what was going to happen, but in Lincoln they just kind of snuck things in on you." Faced with a ban from public recreational facilities, Mrs. Johnson joined several men and women in the black community in scouting a location and fundraising for an African American social center; the efforts of these individuals ultimately led to the establishment of the Lincoln Urban League, first headed by



Top, "Church Group at the Home of Rev. Oliver and Anna Burckhardt," attributed to John Johnson. Rev. Burckhardt stands to the far right. A detail of the photo, above, shows a swastika belt buckle. Before the Nazis used the swastika, it signified friendship, good luck, and good health.

Mrs. Johnson's nephew Millard Woods and later by Leona Dean's brother Clyde Malone. (The organization continues in Lincoln under the name Malone Center).<sup>46</sup> In the face of prejudice, Maude Johnson taught her son that "we just as good as anybody," and institutions like the Masons and the Eastern Stars helped to convey that message to black and white citizens of Lincoln.<sup>47</sup>

Johnson's photograph "Church Group at the Home of Reverend Oliver and Anna Burckhardt" depicted more of Lincoln's African American activists. The photograph is believed to show the Stewardess Board of the Church of Christ Holiness; Mrs. Burckhardt chaired the board for sixteen years. In addition to the innumerable contributions to the community which would have been demanded of a minister's wife, Mrs. Burckhardt established herself as a talented artist, well known for her oil and watercolor painting, and nationally recognized for her china painting.<sup>48</sup> She won "numerous

awards at fairs and exhibitions throughout the country." In her private studio she taught classes to white and black children. Noting her skill, the state hired her to touch up "some valuable paintings in the State Capitol." A 1940 survey of African Americans living in Nebraska concluded that she "has brought much credit to the group."<sup>49</sup>

Looking closely at the image, one might note the swastika on the belt buckle of one of the women. Before the Nazis used the swastika, it signified friendship, good luck, and good health. The decision to wear it for the photograph is significant. As an ornament, it conveys a sense of individual personality (amid a group dressed uniformly in white blouses and dark skirts); recall Moore and Taylor's observation that women's groups fostered self-expression. The other accessories donned by these women—scarves, belts, rosette hair ornaments—communicate similar messages. All of these items, and particularly the swastika, if understood in the

proper historical context, suggest that the group looked forward to a period of uplift—of good luck and good health—for those in their church as well as those of their race. Of course there is no way to know, today, what this object really signified to its owner, but it is this sort of thoughtful analysis of *possibilities* that the photographs invite and allow.

The 1940 survey also commented on the contributions of the Rev. Burckhardt, who in addition to his responsibilities as a minister also worked as a porter for the Burlington Railroad and a waiter at the Lincoln Hotel, calling him a “leader” in the field of “Negro progress.”<sup>50</sup> He was one of the founders of the Lincoln branch of the NAACP in 1918.<sup>51</sup> Lincolnite David J. Lee, Sr., recalled that “Uncle Ollie stopped by often on Sunday nights. He, Uncle George and Aunt Kid would discuss civic and political affairs affecting the Negro community late into the night.”<sup>52</sup> In both photographs, we can see the efforts made by these individuals to present themselves as upstanding members of a vibrant community—as decorous New Negroes rather than as the contemptible stereotype of “Old Negroes.”

The establishment of separate institutions such as the social, religious, and fraternal clubs discussed above represents one response to racism and segregation. Where possible, Lincoln’s African



**“Allie Elder Harding (right), her sister Jenny Elder, and elderly relative,” attributed to John Johnson.**



**“Cora (Hancock) Thomas and a Friend,” attributed to John Johnson.**

American community similarly developed separate economic institutions. In a smaller community like Lincoln, opportunities for employment were limited, and many blacks had little choice but to accept an unskilled or semi-skilled service job. However, a few followed a pattern that became more attractive to many African Americans in the 1920s and 1930s: they established their own businesses and appealed to local African Americans to patronize them. Allie Elder Harding ran a dressmaking business out of her home. With her husband, Cora Thomas operated a grocery store in the front room of their home at 715 C Street. It would be easy—but historically incorrect—to dismiss such businesses as nothing more than the only opportunity available to African Americans when white society made it clear that they were not welcome in the mainstream. Historian Darlene Clark Hine writes that “[a]dmittedly, this was forced agency, the best hand in an all-around bad deal.” But construing the establishment of separate black-owned businesses as a result of white exclusion from the larger society privileges the perspective and agency of whites. Hine explains that when African Americans developed “parallel institutions” in their own communities, they created a “private space to buttress



**"The Talbert Family: Reverend Albert, Dakota, Mildred, and Ruth," by John Johnson, shows a strong family controlling the representation of their image.**

battered dignity, nurture positive self-images, sharpen skills, and demonstrate expertise. These safe havens sustained relationships and wove networks across communities served.<sup>53</sup> Historian Earl Lewis has similarly observed that *segregation* by white folks promoted the *congregation* of black folks.<sup>54</sup> By "buttress[ing] battered dignity" and "nurtur[ing] positive self-images," parallel institutions created a breeding ground for the New Negro mentality.

### **Recovering the New Negro Image in Lincoln**

As New Negroes took action to improve their social and economic conditions, they also aimed to recreate the public persona of African Americans. Here, John Johnson's efforts were crucial. The image of the Old Negro had been embedded in the American psyche since the early days of slavery; it served to justify that institution as well as the unequal treatment afforded to African Americans post-slavery. In 1849, Frederick Douglass commented on the inability (or refusal) of white artists to represent African Americans with any amount

of accuracy: "It seems to us next to impossible for white men to take likenesses of black men, without most grossly exaggerating their distinctive features. And the reason is obvious. Artists, like all other white persons, have developed a theory dissecting the distinctive features of Negro physiognomy."<sup>55</sup>

Indeed, the "natural" (i.e., biological) inferiority of African Americans was so thoroughly embedded in the "scientific" minds of many white Americans that in 1850, anthropologist Louis Agassiz tasked photographer J. T. Zealy with creating some of the earliest photographs of black slaves. Agassiz wanted to find certain physical traits in the slaves that he could use to support his belief in polygenesis, a theory (steeped in the scientific racism of the day) that asserted that blacks did not belong to the same species as whites. Many pro-slavery Americans would have welcomed such "proof" as Zealy intended to provide, as it would allow them to justify the enslavement of Africans and their descendants based on the theory that they belonged to a different species that could never—and should never—expect to equal whites. Zealy posed the slaves "nude to point up anatomical details in which the scientist had shown special interest," a technique which bolsters Douglass's observations regarding the visual dissection of African American bodies.<sup>56</sup> The images, some of which can be viewed online, present individuals subjected to harsh lighting; many of the subjects' faces are partially shadowed. They "convert individuals to tokens of a type—a different order of humanness."<sup>57</sup> Since the early relationship of African Americans to the camera, usually controlled by a white photographer, was generally negative, the importance of a technique that showcased the beauty and dignity of African Americans cannot be underestimated.

In the minds of many New Negroes, the best way to convince Americans to shift their paradigm was to confront them with a reality that in no way matched the stereotypes that had long been accepted as reality. Images of self-confident, responsible, intelligent, well-dressed African Americans, whether created visually or linguistically (in poems, novels, essays, and newspaper articles), confronted white Americans with two irreconcilable versions of reality. The hope was that this sudden shock might convince white Americans to reconsider their longstanding conceptions of African Americans. As a recent monograph has shown, W. E. B. Du Bois's work as editor of the *Crisis*, the voice of the NAACP, provides a very useful example of New Negroes' attempts to juxtapose conflicting images.<sup>58</sup> Since we know that Aaron Douglas was



Though she was illiterate, Sojourner Truth (c. 1797-1883) used the careful placement of a book in this portrait to convey intellect. Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division

reading the *Crisis*, it is relatively safe to assume that others in Lincoln's African American community had come into intellectual contact with such an attempt to shift the public paradigm.

Many New Negroes, including Du Bois, wanted the new images of African Americans to serve as propaganda. Though some of his younger colleagues would later disagree about the image that New Negroes should create, Du Bois wanted an image that portrayed black conformity to all middle class American standards—with the obvious exception of the belief held by many middle class whites that black could not be beautiful. Facing segregation and even lynching simply for racial difference, many looked at integration as a worthwhile goal. From our vantage point today, it might be tempting to suggest that such a goal was too timid, but at a time when many white Americans believed strongly that white values were American values, and that their skin color barred African



"Woman Reading," attributed to John Johnson, Digital Image Rendering © Douglas Keister.

Americans from the full privileges of citizenship, it could be quite radical—and dangerous—for an African-descended person to lay claim to *any* vestige of Americanness. Nonetheless, several of John Johnson's images demonstrate black Lincolnites' desire to present themselves as respectable members of American society.

Few images do a better job of communicating strength and decency than "The Talbert Family: Reverend Albert, Dakota, Mildred, and Ruth." This, one imagines, is precisely the sort of image that Du Bois envisioned. It presents a virtuous and stable family; they are well-dressed and carefully coiffed. The expressions on their faces, and particularly on the Rev. Talbert's face, convey a sense of dignity and pride in their station. The photograph communicates the message that the Talberts were worthy of documenting on film. It also demonstrates that family was of vital importance in the African American community and that in this regard, the Talberts were similar to many other typical American families. Ruth Talbert (who would become Ruth Greene Folley) remembered that her family was very active in the community, attending church, prayer meetings every Tuesday, and a "debatin' organization once a month on Thursday." She described the town's celebration of Freedman's Day, recalling that it consisted of "a big program . . . where everybody said a speech and sang songs." She added that her father's church had pictures of Frederick Douglass and Abraham

Lincoln. Folley remained in Lincoln, and when she was interviewed in 2002, she provided the crucial identification of John Johnson as the person who took her photograph.<sup>59</sup> Whether through literature, visual arts, essays, or numerous other forms, these messages—the beauty of the black race and the shared goals and aspirations of white and black Americans—were at the heart of the NNM.

New Negroes also wanted to demonstrate that African Americans were the intellectual equals of white Americans. The writings of New Negroes, especially those adopting an academic tone, represented one way to accomplish this goal. Photographs such as “Woman Reading” also convey the cerebral capabilities of African Americans.<sup>60</sup> The book that the well-dressed woman holds in her hand plays a central role in shaping the image that she wished to project. As Professor of Photography Deborah Willis has observed, props were often used in photographs as “a source of empowerment” that could convey “status, wealth, and intellect.” Positioning a book in the photograph was clearly

intended to communicate the latter; indeed, books have served that role in imagery throughout the history of portraiture. Sojourner Truth similarly resorted to the careful placement of a book in a famous picture of herself that now graces the cover of Pat McKissick’s *Sojourner Truth: Ain’t I a Woman*. That the book was consciously placed in the image to signify on intellect is revealed by the fact that Truth remained illiterate throughout her life.

Multiple images created during this photo shoot reveal that the subject of “Woman Reading” and John Johnson worked together to compose an image that communicated a precise message. Although it is not uncommon for a photographer to take multiple pictures to ensure that the captured image was satisfactory to himself and his client, several existing photographs testify to the performative aspect of her self-presentation. In one image, she stands, ramrod straight, on the same porch at an almost 90-degree angle to the camera; her head is turned back towards it, but she does not look directly at it. All props have disappeared:

**“Women Posing in Front of Little White House,” attributed to John Johnson, establishes New Negroes as financially responsible American homeowners.**



the hat, purse, and book have been abandoned. In a third image, the experiment with self-creation continued. Standing on the same porch at the same angle, the woman now holds the purse and wears the hat, but the book does not appear.<sup>61</sup> Impeccably dressed and carefully positioned, the subject used her clothing and props to perform the middle class socioeconomic standing that she may or may not have enjoyed.

Indeed, Lincoln's African American citizens portrayed middle class status in several of the photographs despite the fact that discrimination in employment may have prevented them from fully achieving such status, at least by the conventional measures of the majority community. Clothing provided an excellent opportunity to either reveal or conceal identity, as fashion historian and theorist Joanne Entwistle observed.<sup>62</sup> Willis observed that clothing was "a key signifier" for New Negroes seeking to shape a new representation of blackness.<sup>63</sup> The image of Maude Hancock Johnson (p. 173) provides an excellent example. Wearing a string of pearls, an intricate bracelet, and an "elaborate dress with lace and net insertions and beaded satin," Ms. Johnson may have been photographed to commemorate a special occasion, such as high school graduation.<sup>64</sup> Equally important, the image was intended to communicate the status she held—or wished to hold—in Lincoln.

Several of the photographs attributed to John Johnson picture African Americans in front of their homes. These images, such as "Women Posing in Front of Little White House," convey the black community's embrace of middle class domesticity and stability by showcasing the subjects as property owners. Viewers should note the "luminous backlighting, the surface textures of surrounding buildings, and the posed figures," all of which "lend a formal dignity to both dwelling and occupants." Images depicting individuals on "their estates" were common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>65</sup> In pictures like "Women Posing," black families claimed a position within this American tradition. Professor of English Anne Elizabeth Carroll noted that the *Survey Graphic* issue edited by Locke contained several essays emphasizing New Negroes' "financial achievements" as measured through the ownership of property, observing that James Weldon Johnson's essay particularly "connect[ed] the accumulation of property to Americanization."<sup>66</sup>

As mentioned above, as some New Negroes tried to reshape the black image in accordance with the standards of white middle class America, a special need existed to remake the image of



**"Wedding Couple,"**  
attributed to John  
Johnson, emphasizes  
the respectability of  
the New Negro.

African American women. Two stereotypical images held powerful sway in white society: 'Mammy' and 'Jezebel.' Mammy was usually fat, older, sexually unattractive, and thrilled to serve her white family, while Jezebel was often young and possessed of an unquenchable sexual appetite. Mammy made it comfortable to have a female domestic, whether during or after slavery—neither



**"George W. Butcher and  
Friend,"** by John Johnson.  
Digital Image Rendering  
© Douglas Keister

wives nor abolitionists need worry that white men might make sexual overtures to Mammy. Jezebel, on the other hand, relieved white men from any blame when they raped or in other ways took advantage of their black house slaves or (post-war) servants; they could not help it if they were seduced by these ravenous animals. In 1895, John W. Jacks, president of the Missouri Press Association, verbalized his own prejudiced views of black women (which matched the views of many other individuals at the time): he said that black women had “no sense of virtue” and were “altogether without character.” They were, in other words, “wholly devoid of morality . . . they were prostitutes, thieves and liars.”<sup>67</sup> Much of the writing, especially the academic writing, about the New Negro assigns a male gender to the figure, yet African American women were quite active in the campaign to remake the black image. Comments such as Jacks’s make it quite clear why they put forward a significant effort.

Johnson’s images reveal women who in no way conformed to these vicious stereotypes. The identity of the individuals in “Wedding Couple,”



**“Young Woman with Three Puppies,” attributed to John Johnson, shows another attempt to control the representation of blackness.**

attributed to John Johnson, is not known, but their clothing suggests the occasion; the relationship is also implied by “the proprietary way the man grasps the arm of the woman’s chair.”<sup>68</sup> Focusing specifically on the woman in this photo, we see someone who is beautiful (unlike mammy) and respectable (unlike Jezebel)—this is a ‘real’ African American woman. Her long sleeves and high collar quite literally clothe her in respectability.

Of course, the use of clothing to communicate status and respectability was not a tactic confined to women. As cultural historian Robin D. G. Kelley observed, “[s]eeing oneself and others ‘dressed up’ was enormously important in terms of constructing a collective identity based on something other than wage work, presenting a public challenge to the dominant stereotypes of the black body, and reinforcing a sense of dignity that was perpetually being assaulted.”<sup>69</sup> “George W. Butcher and Friend” provides an excellent example of this phenomenon at work. Butcher (believed to be the taller of the two men; the “friend” has not been identified) worked as a general laborer for the Burlington Railroad and as a porter for the Chicago and Rock Island Railroad.<sup>70</sup> His work as a laborer was likely quite physically demanding. The job of a porter was regarded with respect in the African American community, and was one of the better jobs open to black men. But it was still a service job; porters would have been expected to carry travelers’ luggage and to see to their comfort generally. Their white passengers most likely conveyed prejudice and disrespect on a daily basis. Yet the image that Butcher and his friend created, in concert with Johnson, does not suggest subservience or wage labor. Dressed to the nines, pocket watch, tie chain, and walking stick ostentatiously visible, these gentlemen exude the New Negro’s confidence, pride, and self-worth. Literary critic Monica Miller observed that “a smart three-piece suit, a hat, gloves, and maybe even a pocket square” could communicate “self-respect [and] community pride.”<sup>71</sup> The gloves have been replaced by other ornaments, but the message remains clear.

The proper styling of one’s hair was yet another way to convey beauty and to allude to middle class standing. In “Young Woman with Three Puppies,” the woman’s hair signals her desire to control the presentation of her image. She appears to have “coiled her braided hair into the buns over her ears, or her hair may have been styled by one of several African American hairdressers” in town (perhaps Leona Dean on p. 170).<sup>72</sup> This woman clearly cared about her appearance, and within the African

American community (especially among women), styling one's hair was an important form of nonverbal communication.<sup>73</sup> Although the rough, broken boards of her porch do not necessarily convey a middle class image (perhaps Johnson intended to crop them out), the painted backdrop elevates the formality of the portrait, suggesting parallels to "classical art."<sup>74</sup>

Finally, the presence of the puppies in the image may have been another way to signal middle class standing. Art historian Paul Staiti noted that in English and early American portraiture, King Charles spaniels, spaniels generally, hounds, and greyhounds communicated one's elect standing because in England, ownership of these breeds "was restricted by law to the aristocracy." Though such laws were not applied to colonial American dog owners, the "nonutilitarian" King Charles spaniel was, in the 1760s, "a potent emblem for elite American women who sought ways to declare their privileged and leisure status through images that spoke of pampering and training animals."<sup>75</sup> Perhaps the subject of this portrait chose to include



**Addison N. Scurlock's self-portrait, 1920. Scurlock Studio Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.**



**In "Dakota Sidney Talbert, about 1915," attributed to John Johnson, the expression on Talbert's face and his shoes, prominently displayed, communicate his New Negro identity.**

her puppies simply because she considered it part of her family—but it is just possible that the idea that pets conveyed social status influenced her decision. Though not King Charles spaniels, her puppies seem equally "nonutilitarian," and their presence suggests both her domestic desire to care for those who cannot care for themselves and her financial ability to do so.

While many New Negroes demanded equality by demonstrating that they were worthy equals who shared middle class America's values and refinement, there was also another message found in the New Negro image. New Negroes evinced pride in self, in their African heritage, and in the color of their skin. Often the images that they shaped convey a great sense of confidence, strength, and determination. In "The Talbert Family: Reverend Albert, Dakota, Mildred, and Ruth" (p. 176), the look on the Rev. Albert's face, in particular, communicates a determined sense of self. In a different way, "Ethel and Charles Smith with Anna Hill at Salt Creek," (p. 171) sends a similar message. Though it was set in a "casual, sleepy atmosphere," we should not let the casual setting fool us into thinking that the representation of these individuals was inadvertent, the mere coincidence of the shutter's snap.



**"Aerial View of  
Downtown Lincoln."  
Digital Image Rendering  
© Douglas Keister**

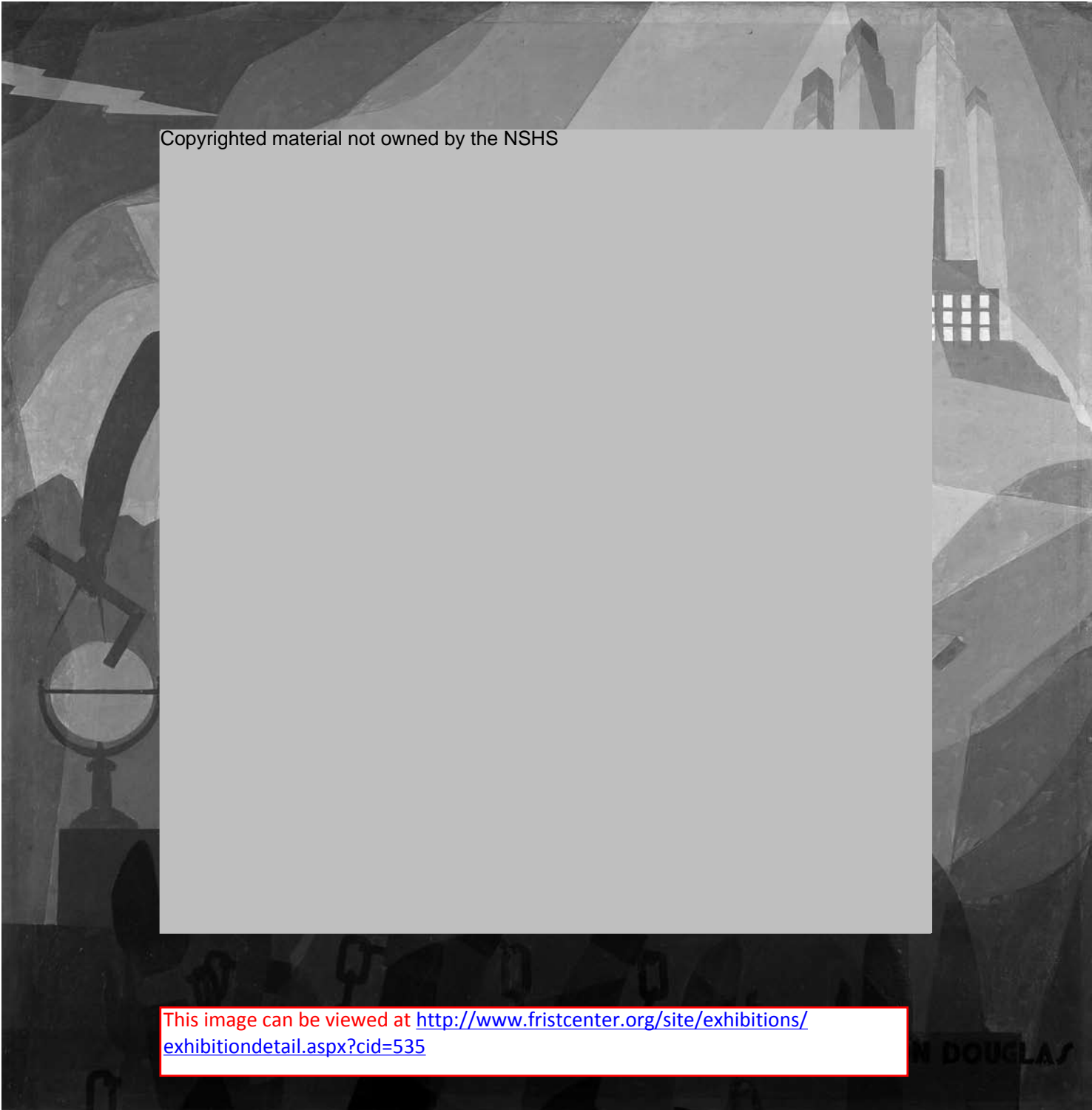
"[T]he careful subject placement evident throughout the photographer's work suggests that this, too, is a highly structured photograph and anything but accidental," the "Notes to the Photographs" tell us.<sup>76</sup> Charles Smith's pose becomes quite interesting, then: the tilt of the hat and the expression on his face, a sort of half-smile, almost a smirk, suggest a positive self-possession reminiscent of New Negro attitudes. Whether playfully confident or

determinedly serious, the expressions on the faces of Charles Smith and Rev. Talbert capture the poise and assurance of the New Negro.

"Dakota Sidney Talbert, about 1915" communicates a similar sense of self-confidence. Born in 1898 to the Rev. Albert and Mildred, Talbert was approximately seventeen when Johnson took the photograph. Talbert served in World War I, so this picture was very likely taken at a pivotal point in Talbert's life—legally, he was about to become a man, and he was about to assert his masculinity by providing potentially dangerous service to his country.<sup>77</sup> Almost certainly he was also aware that as a soldier, he would be representing his race. In this photograph, Talbert's prominently displayed shoes reveal the careful construction of the image. They resemble "Patent Leather Button Shoes" and "Patent Leather Cloth Top Button Evening Shoes, without toe-caps," made by Brooks Brothers, shoes described as "formal footwear."<sup>78</sup> Talbert did not choose to wear these shoes for his photo shoot casually, and it seems unlikely that either subject or photographer was unaware of their extreme visibility. The expression on his face hovers near a serious one—he does not smile—but there is something in his eyes, the slope of his hat, and the edges of his mouth that hints at irreverence, as if he is only

**"Street Paving Crew  
Posing," attributed to  
John Johnson, conveys  
the respectability of hard  
work while subtly suggest-  
ing who the real architects  
of modernity were.**





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This image can be viewed at <http://www.fristcenter.org/site/exhibitions/exhibitiondetail.aspx?cid=535>

"Aspiration," 1936 painting by Aaron Douglas. For both John Johnson and Aaron Douglas, the large buildings found in the heart of the city symbolized modernity, and both were eager to claim the New Negro's place within it. De Young Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



**"Excavation for the Miller and Paine Department Store, 1914," attributed to John Johnson. Digital Image Rendering © Douglas Keister**

barely concealing a full or perhaps a mischievous smile. Like the New Negro of his era, Dakota Sidney Talbert was self-assured, self-possessed, and comfortable in his own skin.

Comparing the photographs attributed to John Johnson to other photographs of the New Negro era demonstrates that Johnson was, consciously or subconsciously, in lockstep with the aesthetics of the New Negro. Consider photographer Addison Scurlock's self-portrait. His talent positioning studio lighting created an effect that came to be known as the "Scurlock look," special because of the way that "soft lighting evenly illuminated the features of the face."<sup>79</sup> When one considers W. E. B. Du Bois's lament (which serves as an epigraph to this essay) that the "average white photographer does not know how to deal with colored skins" and therefore tended to make "a horrible botch of portraying them," the appeal of the "Scurlock look" becomes apparent: despite the fact that he wore a hat, Scurlock's face was lit brightly. Of particular interest is the attitude that Scurlock communicates in this photograph. The slight angle of his hat and his direct, insistent eye contact with the viewer communicate the confidence and self-possession that became hallmarks of New Negro images. Considering the image of Dakota Sidney Talbert alongside that of Addison Scurlock, there is nothing in their self-presentation that suggests the rather different lifestyles that Talbert (in Lincoln) and Scurlock (in Washington, D.C.) must have lived.

In addition to asserting their equality, fighting back against racism, and striving to create a

new representation of blackness, New Negroes attempted to define their relationship to modernity. Especially in the years before the Great War, America as a whole put much faith in progress, believing that expanding scientific knowledge and technological improvements guaranteed an ever-improving future. The skyscraper became a symbol of modernity, and Aaron Douglas, among others, frequently employed it in his art. "Most of Douglas's work suggests a forward-looking stance," Professor of Philosophy of Education Audrey Thompson noted, relying in part upon his use of skyscrapers and "the smoking chimneys of modern industry" as evidence. Susan Earle, curator of European and American Art at the Spencer Museum of Art, similarly noted Douglas's use of "that modernist icon the urban skyscraper."<sup>80</sup>

Though Lincoln did not provide any skyscrapers for John Johnson to photograph, the works attributed to him show a sincere interest in the city, its development, and his own place within it. There was much for him to document: in the 1910s and 1920s, the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce adopted the slogan "A New Skyline Every Morning."<sup>81</sup> Consulting *Lincoln in Black and White, 1910-1925*, one is greeted by pictures taken on city streets and pictures of icons like Nebraska's capitol building. Johnson even photographed the fourteen toilets newly installed in the mail carriers' toilet room.<sup>82</sup> But the most striking images in this first chapter are those showing construction work in progress. Consider "Aerial View of Downtown Lincoln." Taken from an eight-story building, the photographer looks down upon the city, symbolically taking possession of it, the proverbial "master of all that he surveys." By capturing the city's evolution on film, Johnson entwines its history with his own; its modernity is his modernity.

This view is communicated just as forcefully in "Excavation for the Miller and Paine Department Store, 1914." The viewer does not see the alley in which the photographer stands; this creates the illusion that we are not standing back observing the construction so much as we are inside the scene, a part of the action. Again, Johnson did not present himself as a passive observer. Instead, he proclaimed his place within the history of Lincoln. This perspective gives particular import to several other pictures associated with Johnson.

Though many of the images of the New Negro portrayed middle class African Americans (or at least African Americans depicting themselves according to middle class standards), several of the Johnson photographs help to shatter the Old



Negro stereotypes through their focus on working class subjects. "Street Paving Crew Posing" makes black workers central to Lincoln's development. The workers have paused to pose for the camera; the black workers stand in the foreground, tools in hand, showing that they have taken only a momentary break from their labor. Just behind the black workers, a white man quite literally "lies down on the job." The image stands in stark contrast to the stereotype that blacks were lazy. In fact, construction provided an opportunity for blacks in Lincoln, a few of whom ultimately owned their own businesses. Ironically, it is possible that the workers were paving an area that would have racial restrictions (often referred to as covenants), a new development for the Lincoln area.<sup>83</sup> The great-niece of Arthur Hurd (on the far left) recalled that despite being a child dressed in her "Sunday best," she was sent around back to the freight elevator when she went to meet her great-aunt at the Lincoln Hotel, where the aunt worked, and she remembered witnessing a Klan parade through Lincoln.<sup>84</sup> Juxtaposing images of black workers with images of the burgeoning, modern city allows Johnson to paint a

very different picture. While not denying the prejudice that Lincoln's blacks encountered, he claimed for them not simply a place within modernity, but a role as the *builders*, the *creators*, of modernity.

Finally, leaders like Du Bois believed that black art should serve as propaganda, and that in order to be effective as propaganda, it must appeal to middle class standards. According to artist Romare Beardon and essayist Harry B. Henderson, both New Negroes, many of the "academic artists" of the NNM shunned any work "that did not present black people as well-dressed citizens, charmingly preoccupied in comfortable surroundings."<sup>85</sup> Other New Negroes, especially those of the younger generation, differed. Writer and poet Langston Hughes asserted that those who shared his mindset "intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. ... If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within our-

**"Costumed Girls Posing with Cards and Bottle," attributed to John Johnson.**



**"Mother and Laughing Child," attributed to John Johnson.**

selves."<sup>86</sup> New Negroes who embraced this mindset did not seek to use their art as propaganda, and so they began to embrace images of black life that showed it in its totality, depicting the good, the bad, and the sublime that eluded such easy classifications. The concentric circles which show up in so much of Aaron Douglas's paintings, for example, provide a visual translation of the rhythms of jazz.

Though most of the images attributed to Johnson would seem to follow the precepts of Du Bois rather than Hughes, there are just a few images that suggest that he and a small group of his subjects were interested in pushing the boundaries. Several of the photographs depict young women playing some form of dress-up, often wearing men's clothing and using props that suggest a rather risqué side of life: cigarettes, a bottle of alcohol, or playing cards. No information has been uncovered about any of the individuals who posed for these pictures, so there is no way to know with certainty why such images like "Costumed Girls Posing with Cards and Booze Bottle" were made. One tantalizing possibility is that these young women, in concert with Johnson, were signifying upon the middle class trope of the New Negro.<sup>87</sup> "[I]f Booker T. Washington, besuited and resplendent in the rectitude of his Victorian garb, and the nattily dressed and urbane W. E. B. Du Bois were at one end of the sartorial


spectrum" during the New Negro era, theorized historians Shane White and Graham White, "the other end was occupied by a more colorful urban *demi-monde* that broke the rules, or set new ones, with a rainbow-like abandon." Among this *demi-monde* one might find "pimps, prostitutes, gamblers, hustlers, numbers runners, bootleggers, and drug dealers."<sup>88</sup> The props selected for these images certainly allude to an atmosphere quite different from the one envisioned by the elder statesmen of the New Negro Movement.

In the available information about Lincoln's African American population, the activities of the middle class and those striving to become middle class dominates. But the report produced by the Race Relations Committee of Lincoln did reveal (without in any way dwelling upon it) that among the black-owned businesses numbered a billiard parlor and a dancing and club house.<sup>89</sup> Breaux's study of black Midwestern college students found that "students and community people usually did not formally engage in jazz, blues, or folk discourses in the classroom, but at dancehalls and house parties one would be hard pressed to hear anything but jazz coming from the phonograph." Drawing upon "a small number of sources," he concluded that black students did not all strive to project "a middle-class front." He felt certain that NU's black students, especially, "demonstrated an affinity for the blues and blues musicians," noting that NU's students "were by many accounts more working class than their contemporaries at KU, UI, and UMN."<sup>90</sup> Though such pictures were a distinct minority in the collection of photographs attributed to Johnson, and though the girls' costumes and props hint that they are playacting, they also suggest that there might have been another New Negro—a younger, more rebellious New Negro—in Lincoln.

## Conclusion

*The camera was the central instrument by which blacks could disprove representations of us created by white folks. For black folks, the camera provided a means to document a reality that could, if necessary, be packed, stored, moved from place to place. It was documentation that could be shared, passed around. And, ultimately, these images, the worlds they recorded, could be hidden, to be discovered at another time.*

— bell hooks<sup>91</sup>

New Negroes aimed to create “real” representations of African Americans, ones free from the taint of the stereotypes associated with slavery and the minstrel show. While individuals like Du Bois and Hughes provided very useful theoretical discussions about who the New Negro was and who he (and she) ought to be, John Johnson took pictures of “real” African Americans. Black photographers developed a special awareness of the techniques, both technological and stylistic, that might be used to showcase African Americans at their best. Perhaps most importantly, photographers like John Johnson were in a position to enter into a partnership with their subjects. Coming from the same neighborhood, sharing the same experiences, Johnson understood the history of the people that he photographed. The cooperation between artist and subject led to the creation of a large body of images that allowed Lincoln’s African American population to shape their own representations of selfhood. As actors in the creation of these images, Johnson and his subjects had the opportunity and power to decide for themselves what the black image should look like. Ultimately, however, few images of the New Negro era get any more “real” than “Mother and Laughing Child,” a spontaneous moment captured when the subjects let down their guard. In some ways, this, too, was a goal of the New Negro Movement: to reach a level of equality in society that freed African Americans from the sense that they had always to look over their shoulders, censoring their behavior according to their understanding of white expectations. Ceasing to perform a stylized image, this woman and child simply lived for a moment; it was possible because the mother knew, and the child sensed, that they could trust the skill and the communal values of the man who was there to record their image. 

## NOTES

Many thanks to Arthur McWilliams, Jr. and Doug Keister for allowing me to reprint these beautiful photographs attributed to John Johnson. John Carter of the Nebraska State Historical Society and Ed Zimmer of the Lincoln/Lancaster County Planning Department have also been instrumental in shepherding this article into fruition, and their generosity with their time and ideas is greatly appreciated.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Deborah Willis, “The Sociologist’s Eye: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Paris Exposition” in *A Small Nation of People: W. E. B. Du Bois & African American Portraits of Progress*, The Library of Congress (NY: Amistad, 2003), 51. Du Bois’s comment originally appeared in the *Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in October 1923.

<sup>3</sup> Workers of the Writers’ Program of the Nebraska Works Progress Administration, *The Negroes of Nebraska* (Lincoln: Woodruff Printing Company, 1940), 8, 11, 12.

<sup>4</sup> J. Harvey Kerns, “The Study of the Social and Economic Status of the Negro in Lincoln, Nebraska” (Lincoln: The Race Relations Committee of Lincoln, 1933), 2. In the holdings of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

<sup>5</sup> Bertha W. Calloway and Alonzo N. Smith, *Visions of Freedom on the Great Plains: An Illustrated History of African Americans in Nebraska* (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 1998), 11, 31.

<sup>6</sup> Workers of the Writers’ Program, 45, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Calloway and Smith, 62; John Carter, Abigail Davis, and Edward F. Zimmer, “Recovered Views: African American Portraits, 1912-1925—Notes to the Photographs,” *Nebraska History*, 84:2 (Summer 2003), Photograph 33.

<sup>8</sup> Kerns, 4.

<sup>9</sup> “Recovered Views,” *Nebraska History*, Photograph 21.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Michael W. Schuyler, “The Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska, 1920-1930,” *Nebraska History* 66: 3 (Fall 1985), 235, 238, 236.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Elizabeth Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro: Representation and Identity in the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, [2005] 2007), 156. Describing Locke solely as a philosopher does not do justice to his role in the NNM; art historian David Driskell observed that Locke “carried the twin banners of aesthetician-philosopher and historian-critic for the New Negro Movement” (“The Flowering of the Harlem Renaissance: The Art of Aaron Douglas, Meta Warrick Fuller, Palmer Hayden, and William H. Johnson” in Mary Schmidt Campbell, David Driskell, David Levering Lewis, and Deborah Willis Ryan, eds., *Harlem Renaissance Art of Black America* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1987], 106).

<sup>13</sup> Gayle K. Berardi & Thomas W. Segady, “The Development of African American Newspapers in the American West, 1880-1914,” in *African Americans on the Western Frontier*, ed. Monroe Lee Billington and Roger D. Hardaway (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 1998), 221.

<sup>14</sup> Alain Locke, “The New Negro,” in *The New Negro*, ed. Alain Locke (NY: Simon & Schuster, [1925] 1997), 3-5.

<sup>15</sup> “Recovered Views,” Photograph 20.

<sup>16</sup> Steven Watson, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 6.

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<sup>17</sup> Sterling Brown, "The New Negro in Literature (1925-1955)" in *A Son's Return: Selected Essays of Sterling A. Brown*, ed. Mark A. Sanders (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 184-203. Brown said, "I have hesitated to use the term Negro Renaissance for several reasons: one is that the five or eight years generally allotted are short for the lifespan of any 'renaissance.' The New Negro is not to me a group of writers centered in Harlem during the second half of the twenties. Most of the writers were not Harlemites; much of the best writing was not about Harlem, which was the show-window, the cashier's till, but no more Negro America than New York is America. The New Negro movement had temporal roots in the past and spatial roots elsewhere in America, and the term has validity, it seems to me, only when considered to be a continuing tradition" (185).

<sup>18</sup> David C. Driskell, "Some Observations on Aaron Douglas as Tastemaker in the Renaissance Movement" in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, in association with the Spencer Museum of Art, The University of Kansas, 2007), 87.

<sup>19</sup> Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina) 2007; see, for example, Audrey Thompson, "Great Plains Pragmatist: Aaron Douglas and the Art of Social Protest" in *African American on the Great Plains: An Anthology*, ed. Bruce A. Glasrud and Charles A. Brathwaite (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 233-55; Richard M. Breaux, "The New Negro Arts and Letters Movement among Black University Students in the Midwest, 1914-1940" in *African American on the Great Plains*, 204-32; and Blake Allmendinger, *Imagining the African American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> Kennell Jackson, "Introduction: Traveling While Black" in Harry J. Elam and Kennell Jackson, eds., *Black Cultural Traffic: Crossroads in Global Performance and Popular Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 21. For more about the global dimension of the New Negro Movement, see Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2001).

<sup>21</sup> Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1995), 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> John Johnson (1879-1953) was a lifelong resident of Lincoln who was listed in city directories as a laborer, drayman, and janitor at the post office. From about 1910 to 1925, he also worked as an itinerant photographer throughout Lincoln, especially within his own African American community. Most of the approximately five hundred images associated with Johnson survive as glass plate negatives without stamps or signatures, so with due caution they are described as "attributed" to him. *Recovered Views, Lincoln in Black and White*, and this article are based on a portion of these photographs.

<sup>23</sup> Shawn Leigh Alexander, "Vengeance without Justice, Injustice without Retribution: The Afro-American Council's Struggle against Racial Violence" in *African American on the Great Plain*, 97.

<sup>24</sup> Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West, 1528-1990* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 196.

<sup>25</sup> Berardi and Segady, 218.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Schuyler, 247.

<sup>27</sup> Workers of the Writers' Program, 29, 43, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Charles E. Coulter, "Take Up the Black Man's Burden": *Kansas City's African American Communities, 1865-1939* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 104.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Keister and Edward F. Zimmer, *Lincoln in Black and White* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2008), 55.

<sup>30</sup> Coulter, 99.

<sup>31</sup> Cheryl R. Ragar, "Aaron Douglas: Influences and Impacts of the Early Years" in *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Sonny Gibson, *Mecca of the New Negro* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Kansas City, MO: self-published, 1997), 8-16, 92, 96, 102, 107, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 8.

<sup>34</sup> Richard M. Breaux, "The New Negro Arts and Letters Movement among Black University Students in the Midwest, 1914-1940" in *African American on the Great Plains: An Anthology*, 205.

<sup>35</sup> His italics, quoted in Ragar, 82.

<sup>36</sup> Quintard Taylor, "From Esteban to Rodney King: Five Centuries of African American History in the West" *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 46:4 (Winter 1996), 13.

<sup>37</sup> Kerns, 15, 20.

<sup>38</sup> Workers of the Writers' Program, 32, 28.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 32. The report did not provide founding dates for these groups.

<sup>40</sup> Kerns, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Dennis N. Mihelich, "A Socioeconomic Portrait of Prince Hall Masonry in Nebraska, 1900-1920," in *African American on the Great Plains: An Anthology*, 144, 149, 144, 145.

<sup>42</sup> Gloria T. Hull, *Color, Sex and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 12.

<sup>43</sup> Shirley Ann Wilson Moore and Quintard Taylor, "The West of African American Women, 1600-2000" in *African American Women Confront the West, 1600-2000*, ed. Taylor and Moore (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003), 11-12.

<sup>44</sup> Exhibits USA, *Programming Guide to "Recovered Views: African American Portraits, 1912-1925"* (Mid-America Arts Alliance, c. 2004), 18.

<sup>45</sup> Keister and Zimmer, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 64; John Reed, oral history with Abigail Davis, excerpt in "Audio Component Transcript" of *Programming Guide*, 71-72.

<sup>47</sup> John Reed with Abigail Davis, 70-72.

<sup>48</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photograph 32.

<sup>49</sup> Workers of the Writers' Program, 42.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 39; "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photograph 32.

<sup>51</sup> Keister and Zimmer, 8.

<sup>52</sup> Roy Myers and Stephanie Myers, *Remembering the Path to "T" Town: Migration of an African American Family through Seven States to Lincoln, Nebraska 1720-1940*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, DC: R. J. Myers Publishing Company, 2005), 77.

<sup>53</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Professionals and Race Consciousness: Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 1890-1950," *Journal of American History* 89:4 (March 2003), 1280.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (NY: The Free Press, [1994], 1996), 45.

<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Deborah Willis, *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers, 1840 to the Present* (NY: W.W. Norton, 2000), xvii.

<sup>56</sup> "Faces of Slavery," *American Heritage Magazine*, 28:4 (June 1977). (Some of the images can be seen online at <http://www.artic.edu/webspaces/museumstudies/ms242/westerbeck2.shtml>;

a larger selection appear in Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (NY: Hill and Wang, 1989.)

<sup>57</sup> Trachtenberg, 57.

<sup>58</sup> Anne Elizabeth Carroll's discussion of "protest" and "affirmative" texts in *The Crisis* represents an important aspect of her analysis: she argued that frequently "protest" texts, which highlighted the injustice of racism and racial violence, would be juxtaposed against "affirmative" texts, which emphasized the contributions of African Americans. As an example, she presented the "Men of the Month" column, which "might come after a list of acts of violence toward African Americans; it might be followed by an NAACP report on a lynching, itself followed by descriptions and portraits of African American college graduates." The incongruity of the juxtaposed stories or images, she demonstrated, might well have encouraged a reader of *The Crisis* to adopt "a perception of a new reality" (Carroll, *Word, Image*, 26-28).

<sup>59</sup> *Programming Guide*, captions to Talbert family photos (pp. 15-16), Ruth Talbert Folley oral history with Abigail Davis, 66-70.

<sup>60</sup> This image also appears in Keister and Zimmer, 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 96-97.

<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Willis, "The Sociologist's Eye," 66.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>64</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photograph 20. The identity of the "Woman in White" was apparently established after this issue of *Nebraska History* went to print.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Photograph 6.

<sup>66</sup> Carroll, *Word, Image, and the New Negro*, 149.

<sup>67</sup> Wanda A. Hendricks, *Gender, Race, and Politics in the Midwest: Black Club Women in Illinois* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 18; Charles H. Wesley, *The History of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs: A Legacy of Service* (Washington, DC: The Association, 1984), 28.

<sup>68</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photograph 3.

<sup>69</sup> Kelley, 50.

<sup>70</sup> Keister and Zimmer, 83.

<sup>71</sup> Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>72</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photograph 29.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Juliette Harris and Pamela Johnson, eds., *Tenderheaded: A Comb-Bending Collection of Hair Stories* (NY: Pocket Books, 2001). The unsigned introductory piece underlines this point: "Our hair speaks with a voice as soft as cotton. If you listen closely—put your ear right up to it—it will tell you its secrets. Like the soothing peace it knew before being yanked out of Africa. Like the neglect it endured sweating under rags in the sun-lashed fields of the South. And even today, it speaks of its restless quest for home; a place that must be somewhere between Africa and America, between rambunctious and restrained, and between personally pleasing and socially 'acceptable'" (xv).

<sup>74</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photograph 7.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Staiti, "Character and Class," in Carrie Rebora et al., *John Singleton Copley in America* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1995), 64.

<sup>76</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photograph 34.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, Photograph 22.

<sup>78</sup> O. E. Schoeffler and William Gale, *Esquire's Encyclopedia of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Men's Fashions* (NY: McGraw-Hill Book Company,

1974). Consult the image on p. 295; the shoes are labeled 16K03 and 16K04, respectively. One significant difference is that Talbert's shoes have seven buttons, one more than 16K04, and two more than 16K03.

<sup>79</sup> "Reflections in Black: Smithsonian African American Photography – A Teacher's Guide to Selected Works from the Exhibition" (Frist Center for the Visual Arts), available online at <http://www.fristcenter.org/site/files/cm/File/pdf/ReflectionsInBlackTeacherGuide.pdf>, p. 6. Accessed 7-29-10. A significant collection of Scurlock's photographs are available online at the Smithsonian's website (<http://www.siris.si.edu/>); in the "Search all catalogs" box, type in "Addison Scurlock").

<sup>80</sup> Thompson, 245-46; Susan Earle, "Harlem, Modernism, and Beyond: Aaron Douglas and His Role in Art/History" in *Aaron Douglas*, 37.

<sup>81</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*.

<sup>82</sup> Keister and Zimmer, 18.

<sup>83</sup> "Recovered Views," *Nebraska History*, Photographs 31, 33.

<sup>84</sup> Pamona Bank James, oral history with Abigail Davis, in *Programming Guide*, 75-76.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 248.

<sup>86</sup> Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," in Angelyn Mitchell, ed., *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 59. (Originally published in *The Nation*, 1926.)

<sup>87</sup> "Signifyin(g)" refers to a wide variety of subtle modes of communication in the African American community. According to anthropologist and folklorist Roger D. Abrahams, it can refer to "the trickster's ability to talk with great innuendo, to carp, cajole, needle, and lie. It can mean in other instances the propensity to talk around a subject, never quite coming to the point. It can mean making fun of a person or a situation. Also it can denote speaking with the hands and eyes, and in this respect encompasses a whole complex of expressions and gestures." It is, in essence, a 'technique of indirect argument or persuasion' and "a language of implication." Quoted in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1988), 54.

<sup>88</sup> Shane White and Graham White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 238-39.

<sup>89</sup> Kerns, 12.

<sup>90</sup> Breau, 223, 226.

<sup>91</sup> Quoted in Willis, *Reflections*, 38.