The Hampton Album
Some eighty years after the Civil War, artist Lincoln Kirstein was browsing an old bookstore when he got his hands onto a “plump, anonymous, leatherbound album” in poor condition. What he had found was an invaluable collection of photographs taken of students at the Hampton Institute by Frances Benjamin Johnston—an album that was used as a part of the larger American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. Twenty years following this discovery, after being privately circulated between a number of historians and photographers, the Department of Photography of the Museum of Modern Art published the collection for public consumption in 1966 under the title, *The Hampton Album.*

These images, and certainly the revelations they contain, cannot be viewed in a vacuum. These photos should be seen in the context of imperialism, Social Darwinism, and the negative depiction of African Americans in visual media during the 20th century’s dawn. This juxtaposition brings *The Hampton Album* to life, revealing that the photos found within represent the strivings of the entire black race to excel in a society in which the odds were stacked against them, struggling to find confidence where it had been systematically erased.

As the Age of Imperialism approached its zenith at the turn of the century, the majority of Americans celebrated the benefit. Possessing political and economic influence on an international scale, the United States had become a competing rival among the great nation-states of Europe. Following suit with their rivals, as African American historian John Hope Franklin notes in *From Slavery to Freedom,* “[b]efore the end of the century... the United States had acquired an empire composed primarily of darker peoples....” “In so doing,” he continues, “the leading power in the Western hemisphere was conforming to the prevailing pattern of

---

imperialism that had swept the world: the injection of the spirit of industrialism into a program to dominate the backward peoples.” Nations such as Great Britain, France, Belgium, and the United States were giddy at the boom of industry and promise of financial prosperity that would continue to flow as they commandeered the dark New Worlds.

The only concern, as Franklin later asserts, seemed to be the “inclination of business combinations to increase to unmanageable proportions and to exploit the people.” He likewise observes that despite the subtle nagging of this concern—concern that the desired financial increase would come with exploitation of the dominated “darker peoples”—the conviction was mostly written off as “natural” and “inherent pains of growth.” An important influence on this justification was the emergence of the pseudo-science of Social Darwinism. White supremacy was not a new idea in 1859 when Charles Darwin published the first edition of *The Origin of Species*, but what social theorists like Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner did find in the book though was a new language to strengthen their racist presuppositions. These theorists interpreted Darwin’s biological theories as confirming a “survival-of-the-fittest” racial hierarchy, with the white European male ranking as the epitome of the human species. This type of language was exploited in order to justify vicious capitalism abroad by classifying the world’s “darker peoples” as inferior, making their abuse palpable to their oppressors.

As could be expected, besides justifying vicious capitalism abroad, Social Darwinism strengthened the mistreatment and dishonoring of African Americans at home. This sort of social and racial ideology was vividly apparent in visual culture. Posters, advertisements,

---

2 Ibid, 433.
3 Ibid, 433.
5 I do not intend to say that African Americans were the isolated victims of this ideology.
postcards, cartoons, sheet music, movies, and more depicted African American men and women as “Uncle Tom,” “Jim Crow,” or “coons.” Even the black porters who worked on the Pullman cars—one of the more prestigious employment opportunities for black men—were dressed up and forced to act the part of a dumb country bumpkin. These visual depictions of Afro-Americans as helplessly foolish imbeciles certainly contributed to a collective hopelessness.

It was reasonable for the majority of white Americans to expect to benefit from the great national wealth potentially following imperialism, as nearly every institution favored them. But even the black community, facing this bitter racism that was justified by Social Darwinism and trumpeted by visual culture, found hope. This hope was in the ascendance of a new Negro image—an image that confronted the kooky “coon” with an image of self-worth, wealth, and full integration into white society.

The ascendance of this image had much to do with the ascendance of charismatic leaders such as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Especially in the years following Reconstruction’s end, African Americans saw education as the primary hope of escaping the bane of racism, and Washington’s seemingly new philosophy of incorporating book learning with industrial education, along with his confidence that the conciliation of the South would come through humble service and good works, significantly fanned that hope’s flame.\(^7\) He vigorously encouraged a strong work ethic, self-help, and starting from the bottom of the food chain, so to speak, in the industries and agriculture, and argued that financial prosperity and

---

\(^7\) I say “seemingly” new, as Washington was not the first to advocate any one of these initiatives. He was however, aptly energetic in combining them.


[“His programme of industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights, was not wholly original; the Free Negroes from 1830 up to wartime had striven to build industrial schools, and the American Missionary Association had from the first taught various trades; and Prince and others had sought a way of honorable alliance with the best of Southerners. But Mr. Washington first indissolubly linked these things: he put enthusiasm, unlimited energy, and perfect faith into this programme, and changed it from a by-path into a veritable Way of Life.”]
gradually earned respect from southern whites would result. Du Bois on the other hand was the champion of the liberal arts and humanities, calling for the black educated elite to charge the high hallways of intellectualism, and to then reach down from their lofty vantage point and pull up the remaining majority.\(^8\) Though Washington and Du Bois disagreed in philosophy and strategy, both men held in high esteem the picture of the educated, fully integrated black man and together sought to propagate this image at home and abroad.

There may not be a single event that better displays the whole tapestry of tensions previously discussed than the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris. First of all, the World Fairs themselves were designed to build national prestige and encourage competition. The Paris Exposition in 1900, like the other World Fairs, was a chance for the United States and other imperial powers to display their industrial and architectural achievements as well as their wealth. Likewise, Social Darwinism, the pseudo-science that in part justified the profit, was explicitly showcased in the event. In the midst of the exhibits, the strolling visitor could find “Living In Madagascar.” “Living in Madagascar” was literally a human zoo displaying African “savages” in a diorama with animals, strengthening the supposed position of Europeans at the pinnacle of racial superiority. In such a sense the negative image of the African American was profoundly pronounced in this international venue.

This visual depiction of inferiority did not go unchallenged, however. The visitor to the World’s Fair would not only have experienced “Living in Madagascar,” but would have likely seen the “American Negro Exhibit:” a direct effort to contend with this negative image by

\(^8\) Du Bois, chapter VI,
["progress in human affairs is more often a pull than a push, surging forward of the exceptional man, and the lifting of his duller brethren slowly and painfully to his vantage point."]

In other words, as Du Bois earlier explains in ch.VI, progress towards healthy reincorporation into the South largely depended on a small percentage of capable African Americans who were trained in the Liberal Arts and Humanities –“the end of which is culture.”
displaying the progress of the Negro in American society. Du Bois, who played a large role in curating the exhibit, explained in *The American Monthly Review of Reviews* that the exhibit represented a “carefully thought-out plan, according to which the exhibitors have tried to show: (a) The history of the American Negro. (b) His present condition. (c) His education. (d) His literature.”

The main collaborator and designated special agent to the exhibit was Mr. Thomas J. Calloway, a classmate of Du Bois’ at Fisk University and close colleague of Washington. Due in part to Calloway’s kindred desire with both men to contend with the degrading racial stigma, his leadership in the *exposé nègre* resulted in thorough representation from each. Pictures of Afro-Americans attaining to middle class and professional statuses lined the walls, which gave rest to bookshelves filled with Negro literature, patents, and medals-of-honor, “hardly squar[ing] with conventional American ideas”, as Du Bois put it. The progress of the Afro-American in all realms of education was “illustrated in the work of five great institutions—Fisk, Atlanta, and Howard Universities, and Tuskegee and Hampton Institutes,” including the album found by Lincoln Kirsten over forty years later.

Thus, within the boundaries of the Exposition Universelle, the imperialism, Social Darwinism, and racist propaganda that plagued the Western world in 1900 was thoroughly represented, and right in the midst prevailed the *exposé nègre*. To open *The Hampton Album*, as Kirsten did, is to step into this world. Consistent with the Negro exhibit, the album is in its very nature persuasive, intending to specifically praise the effectiveness of Hampton’s learn-by-doing model of industrial and agricultural education in reforming the Negro. The photos within the 1966 published edition do not represent the complete collection, housing what seemed to be the

---

10 Miles Everett Travis, “Mixed Messages: Thomas Calloway and the “American Negro Exhibit” of 1900” (Montana State University, April 2004) 4.
11 Du Bois, 577
best 44. Although the captions accompanying these pictures—which are the work of the photographer, not the late publisher—mildly suggest Francis B. Johnston’s support of the institute’s program and philosophy, whether or not Johnston was a true advocate of Hampton or simply a skilled photographer who fulfilled an assignment to portray Hampton in positive light is unclear from the source.

Regardless of her support or lack thereof, the latter is certainly true. The first group of photos represents an intentional binary effect: the old Negro versus the new, post-Hampton Negro. “The Old Folks at Home,” for example, features an elderly couple eating around an unfinished, raw wooden table.\(^1\) The male figure evokes a similar feeling to that portrayed in James Van Der Zee’s “The Barefoot Prophet,”\(^1\) with suggestions of a tired, aged, and simple man who has labored much in body and mind. He wears what appears to be once-stylish yet soiled clothing and a gray-white beard—one can imagine his bare feet under the table, much like the “Prophet.” The woman pictured in “The Old Folks at Home” reflects similar qualities of quiet weariness, and is clothed in a peasant-style dress and bonnet. The Gestalt principle accounts for the last of the four deteriorating walls holding up what seems to be a tiny shack of a house, where the couple resides by meager means at best.

In opposition to this image, we see “A Hampton Graduate at Home.” Pictured is a family of five—mother, father, and three children—also postured around the table at mealtime.\(^1\) The photograph evokes a sense of all-around sharpness that is not present in the soiled clothing and unfinished materials that characterizes the “Old Folks.” Likewise, all members of the family

\(^{13}\) Pictured in Hine et al., 448.
are dapperly fit in what one would expect to be their finest outfits. An oil-painted scene of the
Rockies overlooks the dining table, which is clothed in white linen and adorned with fine china.
Just to the left, a staircase seen through the doorway artistically suggests that the house is much
larger than what the camera frame can grasp, as opposed to the intentional framing of the
previous photo to suggest tight quarters.

If “A Hampton Graduate at Home” were a painting, the observer would be hard-pressed
to interpret that the artist intended to portray anything other than a rigidly still, nervous
atmosphere. A sense of silence permeates the image, but silence of a different sort than that of
the previous scene. The silence feels tense; the kind of silence that follows a heated
conversation. The parents wear sobriety as if it were in fashion. The child pictured in the
middle, with hair parted and an outfit mirroring his father’s, looks intently at the camera, as if
employing every ounce of his strength to remain still. One child gazes with suspense at the
father, while another stares at her mother with wonder, as if supposing her thoughts. Most
revealing though, are the eyes and faces of mother and father: weary, like the “Old Folks,” but
again distinctly different. Gazing into the stark face of the mother, one could almost see the
mystery of dissatisfaction and the weariness of discontent amid the material wealth. It is
however, not a painting. These observations are potentially potent revelations, but are also
subject to the eyes of the viewer. It should be noted that a multiplicity of factors is sure to have
contributed to the atmosphere on the abnormal occasion of a photographer coming to the house
at the turn of the century.

Even so, transcending my own subjective observation is the overt theme expressed by
this well-fashioned binary, and indeed thoroughly displayed by the album in its entirety. Kirstein
describes it best as “...the helpless but not hopeless discrepancy in concept of the white Victorian
ideal as criterion towards which all darker tribes and nations must perforce aspire.”¹⁵ Herein lies the tension of *The Hampton Album*—the struggle to simultaneously confront and conform. In other words, these still-frames capture with timeless accuracy the inner strivings of Afro-Americans to claim their own image of worth, which is paradoxically the image of worth through the lens of the “white Victorian ideal.”

“[H]elpless but not hopeless,” the curators of the *exposé négre* planted their feet amidst the imperialism, Social Darwinism, and debased depictions of “blackness” on display at the Exposition Universelle in 1900, striving to propagate a positive image of the American Negro. In like manner, *The Hampton Album* represents the African American community at the 20th century’s dawn, struggling to find self-worth within the very society that defiled it.


