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# *Photos and Phantasms*

HARRY JOHNSTON'S PHOTOGRAPHS  
OF THE CARIBBEAN



The British Council  
Royal Geographical Society

[WITH THE INSTITUTE OF BRITISH GEOGRAPHERS]

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# Photos and Phantasms: Harry Johnston's Photographs of the Caribbean

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The recovery of a cultural heritage with a literary and historical tradition not entirely derived from colonial roots is a powerful symbol of the Caribbean's independence. The region's scholars are revisiting sites of 'discovery', slavery and emancipation and finding a history that better represents those who live here now. The region's countries are creating national heroes, myths and legends that challenge and counter colonial perspectives and inspire the creation of a collective consciousness with a sense of unity, nationhood and history.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the deconstruction of that inherited literature, our visual perception of the past remains vague. Till now, that perception has been reliant on literary stereotypes, where the 'native' is either a savage or merry, mischievous child.<sup>2</sup> In these histories black societies are more often described negatively in opposition to white civilisation as barbaric and chaotic. Such stereotypes are held in the mind's-eye, and loom in the imagination, filling the gaps that our visual ignorance of the past creates.<sup>3</sup>

The photographs of Sir Harry Johnston<sup>4</sup> in this exhibition may help recover a visual heritage that discards those stereotypes. Johnston's archive provides evidence to show how the Caribbean's post-emancipation peasantry lived. A compelling feature of Johnston's photography is the way he captures everyday life in the Caribbean at the turn of the century.<sup>5</sup> His scenes, of

markets, farmers and workers in rural settings depict a vivid and accurate record of a lifestyle that has changed considerably in this century. Johnston researched that lifestyle thoroughly, along with the Caribbean's history, environment and society for his book *The Negro in the New World*, where many of these photographs were first seen.

Not everyone will view these images comfortably. Johnston's photography confronts us with a view of the past that may be too intimately revealing. These photographs defy post-independence political ideas that present the region as polyglot, multi-cultural and hybrid. Instead, we find a Caribbean community that is predominantly black. The images also indicate more clearly than can be discerned today, that the peasantry was tied to an African heritage and the land. Till now, the absence of this type of imagery allowed those in the Caribbean to cultivate a 'self-hate' that created new personas or what could be called a 'colonial self' that is 'coloured' rather than 'black'.

Others may object to colonial photography taken in support of Johnston's questionable theories about race in the Caribbean. Johnston combined his avid reading of colonial history and Darwinist evolutionary theories to document what he called 'the inferior races of the world.' He established clear hierarchies based on racial characteristics, using the white European male as

the standard. To disown these images in *Photos and Phantasms* because of this context is, however, to lose sight of their value. To judge the subjects of these photographs as innocent or complicit, or to paint Johnston as a typical 'colonial', short-changes a larger discussion about how whites and blacks negotiated each other's identities during this era. Discomfort is an inevitable consequence of really 'seeing' these images and the complex investigation they provoke.

This essay exposes biases, past and present, to make the subtleties that informed Johnston's photography more visible. It also questions our need today to refashion the past and retell history by constructing our own vision for the 'New World', as Johnston called it.<sup>6</sup> A creolised history recognises the interrelatedness of ideas whether originating in Europe or Africa. Within the Caribbean, our understanding of ourselves is seen in the way the two dominant cultures of Europe and Africa interacted and accommodated each other. As the image on this catalogue's back cover illustrates, even as blacks assert themselves in the camera's frame, Johnston's shadowy presence intrudes unwittingly. This essay is about what is revealed on both sides of the camera's lens.<sup>7</sup>

The voyeurism in this photograph has another side. Anonymity is inherent in this type of colonial photography. Including Johnston's biographical detail in this essay helps the viewer to understand how the colonial vision was shaped and opens up more general discussions about the colonial mentality.

The Jamaican writer H.G. DeLisser referred to the Englishman as a 'negrophilist', a lover of black people. It is hard to reconcile Johnston's racial theories with such a term. At the turn of

the century, Johnston's interest in people from Africa and its Diaspora would have been progressive, liberal and peculiar for the period. After abolition, few championed the black cause, albeit in such a patronising manner. *Negro in the New World* gives a detailed account of the white man's atrocities against blacks between 1770 and 1840 and is critical of the treatment of blacks. Johnston later noted that because of its 'plain speaking' the book was 'unpopular in England, and almost tabued [sic] in the United States, though its writer sought to tell nothing but the truth'.<sup>8</sup>

Today, we might presume that Johnston's work was unpopular because of its racism. More likely, it was unpopular because of its pro-black sentiments and its judgment on colonial history. Discussing British historical writers of the period, Caribbean historian Eric Williams says that most were unrepentant imperialists who believed that West Indians were on racial grounds unfit for self-government. Johnston, on the other hand, believed that they had experienced an accelerated development and proved themselves capable of governing their own affairs.<sup>9</sup> The images in *Photos and Phantasms* are intended to support Johnston's theories about New World blacks. They demonstrate a self-reliance that would prove prophetic as their nations moved towards self government and independence.

#### AN ENGLISH MAN IN THE NEW WORLD

The photographs in this exhibition were taken between 1908–09, when Harry Johnston travelled through the Caribbean with his companion Arthur Greaves.<sup>10</sup> They took over 250 photographs on the last leg of a longer journey through the Americas.

The trip grew out of Johnston's friendship with the United States President Theodore Roosevelt. Both shared interests in imperial expansion, the new sciences of geography and anthropology, and Africa. Roosevelt invited Johnston to America to discuss Roosevelt's forthcoming expedition in Africa.<sup>11</sup> Roosevelt was also keen to learn more about negroes in the Caribbean and asked Johnston for information about the political stability of Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica and Panama.<sup>12</sup>

Johnston arrived in the Caribbean on the eve of America's departure from Cuba and in the wake of its military occupation of Haiti.<sup>13</sup> Fresh from talks with Roosevelt about the plight of North American blacks and hints about the possibility of a 'Liberia type' home<sup>14</sup> in the Caribbean, Johnston conceived a working trip to further his comparative studies of blacks in Africa and extend it to the New World. While in America he had consulted with black scholars such as W.E. du Bois and Booker T. Washington about the conditions African Americans were experiencing there.<sup>15</sup> Johnston began his investigations in the Caribbean by looking at the conditions of negroes under Spanish, British and French rule. As an anthropologist, Johnston was eager to prove his theory that the Caribbean negro was more highly developed than the African negro because of colonialism,<sup>16</sup> and that there were even more subtle distinctions between negroes of the Caribbean resulting from different forms of colonisation. Johnston's botanical and environmental interests also fuelled these concerns: climate, natural resources, diseases, agriculture and island infrastructure affected his assessment, each island presenting a different ecosystem.

Johnston's writing shows that he firmly believed that a rational methodology could be applied to his project. His search for negro types in the Caribbean was systematic, and consistent with his need to make comparisons. Earlier photographs taken in Africa vividly demonstrate his approach to the task. Johnston shows naked blacks positioned beside measuring instruments or posed front side and back before the camera, almost as if he were examining another species.<sup>17</sup> Fortunately, such imagery is not a feature of his work in the Caribbean. But this earlier methodology is evident in his consistent positioning and framing of negro men and women in rural settings (cat.47, 37 and 53) and the disconcerting image in Haiti of a black man and an agave (cat.28).

Johnston did not have a traditional public school education, so he was unschooled in the classics. Education was not urgent for him because his family was reasonably well off. His liberal arts education at Stockwell Grammar was an early sign of his modernity. At seventeen, he studied languages as an evening student at King's College, and art at South London Art College. A year later he was admitted to the Royal Academy of Arts. His interest in zoological specimens gave him a lucrative part-time income, illustrating books for the new sciences of biology, geography, anthropology. The combination of art, languages and a developing interest in the sciences marked Johnston as a new breed of scholar whose skills met colonialism's need for exploration, expansion and documentation.<sup>18</sup>

Johnston's first expedition was to Portuguese Angola where he recorded the flora and fauna en route and documented species peculiar to the region.<sup>19</sup> More significant missions followed, including the Kilimanjaro Expedition in 1886.

Even more important than his linguistic and scientific abilities were his diplomatic skills, which the British used frequently. It suited them to send Johnston on these expeditions, ostensibly as a geographer / naturalist. But as he became more familiar with Africa's peoples and their power structure, he was given greater freedom to negotiate on the colonial power's behalf.<sup>20</sup>

Johnston thrived on the responsibility, and was zealous to learn more about these newly acquired territories.<sup>21</sup> By the 1880's, Johnston had become a career diplomat specialising in Africa. He was appointed Vice Consul for the Cameroons and Niger Delta in 1885 and by 1893, Commissioner of Nyasaland, the new British protectorate, later called Rhodesia.

Johnston developed a reputation as a trouble shooter, renowned for his affability in diplomacy. Europe's presence in Africa had shifted in half a century from the wide-eyed explorations of missionaries such as David Livingstone to more calculated conquests. The scramble for Africa was underway and 'new men' like Harry Johnston were the major players in European rivalry. Johnston had a good working knowledge of African territories and negotiated a number of treaties on behalf of the Colonial Office.

Even with the pressures of travel and diplomatic work, Johnston was able to continue his visual documentation of Africa and interest in photography. His use of the camera was prolific and, although used initially for the practical purpose of recording the rare or difficult to render, Johnston already demonstrated an artistic sensitivity to subjects. His interest in detailed work, difficult angles and unusual juxtapositions, undermined his own theories of objectivity, demonstrating a combination of realism and

romanticism that is never entirely documentary or ever frivolous. This tension between two photographic forms adds rather than detracts from the image represented. Simple images are ennobled and / or shrouded in nostalgia as Johnston tries to preserve his visions of the region. Because of his early fine art training, there is an ever present contradiction between art and science in his approach, which softens the inherent racism of some images, or alternatively lends a botanical eye to his floral photography.

Photography in Johnston's time was still an experimental practice of cumbersome equipment, light sensitive instruments and a cocktail of chemicals and metals. Along with the skill to manage these tools, good photography required a discerning eye and artistic sensitivity. Johnston mastered all these variables. His photographs are well composed within the frame. They are bold and incisive. Light is controlled rather than accepted, sometimes subtly to suggest mood and nuances, at other times dramatically, to define and enrich images. Johnston also favoured stereographs, a photographic form that when viewed through a stereoscope seemed three dimensional. Even without these tricks of the eye Johnston's images have a depth and resolution that enhance their realism.

Johnston took hundreds of photographs, presumably to accompany his numerous Royal Geographical Society lectures. As a geographer, Johnston wanted to give an accurate picture of the countries he visited and his archive is a visual travelogue. Johnston's photography also demonstrates his environmental concerns. He wanted to capture aspects of Caribbean wildlife and nature that he believed to be threatened with extinction or by the negative effects of urbanisation. Rape

of the mountains for fuel burning woods, indiscriminate shooting of endangered animals and birds, and what he saw as the lack of sensitivity and knowledge that Caribbeans had for their own environment are discussed in *Negro in the New World* and other texts.<sup>22</sup>

Johnston journeyed around the islands by boat, and through each island by road and railway. He travelled routes that were becoming increasingly popular because of developing tourism and an agricultural economy in the Caribbean. Although the time Johnston spent in each island varied, what he sought from each appears to have been the same; to flesh out his understanding of the negro. As a naturalist, Johnston examined the relationship of Diaspora negroes to their new environment. He believed that the Afro-Caribbean was adapting quickly and becoming better suited to the terrain and climate than other races. Images such as *Cactus House* (cat.3) evoke this kinship between the Afro-Caribbean and the land. Johnston was particularly interested in how negroes in the Caribbean withstood diseases. He saw health management, drainage and mosquito control, as markers of civilisation. Disease, inadequate water facilities, poor drainage, and unsanitary conditions were signs that the islands could still lapse into chaos and barbarism. Johnston measured their economic development to see if ex-slaves could function in modern industry. He studied their attitudes to work to determine whether they could be integrated into the increasingly mechanised production of bananas, cane, tobacco and coffee.

#### BLACKS IN A BRAVE NEW WORLD

At the turn of the century, photography in the Caribbean was still the preserve of the wealthy,

who were hardly excited by images of the rural peasantry. Images taken by family business photographers such as the Duperleys in Jamaica,<sup>23</sup> and the Valdezes of Cuba<sup>24</sup> show a colonially cultured and upwardly mobile bourgeoisie anxious to keep formal memories of themselves, a narrative far different from Johnston's. In Jamaica, Duperley's hatted, suited colonial subjects inhabit artificial studio settings, perhaps the verandah of a lavishly plant strewn colonial mansion, or with the prop of an automobile.<sup>25</sup>

Johnston's photographs display none of this artifice. They document the peasantry outdoor, using techniques that were arduous and totally public.<sup>26</sup> Along with portraiture, we see dramatic landscapes, bustling market scenes, sparsely populated country roads. The photographer's interests allow us to view their lifestyle in period detail. The images in *Photos and Phantasms* capture a mood that defies both the colonial and contemporary historians' reading of the period and people.<sup>27</sup> They are bold, assertive images that speak about post-emancipation settlement, industry, camaraderie, resistance and independence. The images present an alternative to the social historians' view that this era was one of planter disillusionment and peasant resentments. They show people coping, hustling and challenging the system to secure their own economic viability.

The last half of the nineteenth century saw the dismantling of the slavery 'machine'<sup>28</sup> and the transition of Caribbean people from the institution of slavery to free status. Although emancipation came sporadically through the region, most islanders had shed slavery and plantations for small farming and subsistence holdings by the turn of the century. Historians still argue whether

post-emancipation apprenticeship schemes were a significant economic shift from slavery.<sup>29</sup> Despite the ex-slaves desire to have greater control over their free time and labour, there were restrictions on mobility, tenancy and use of plantation property. Their small wages also limited their options. What is clear is that the plantation system remained at the hub of economic life.<sup>30</sup> Although the psychological advantages of freedom were significant, the economic benefits for the peasantry were negligible in the turgid economies of these small islands.

Johnston's pictures of Maroon Town in the hills of Portland, Jamaica, echo a narrative of resistance and independence. This community of slave descendants, initially called the Cimarrones (mountaineers), negotiated autonomy and separate governance of their ex-slave settlements in 1740.<sup>31</sup> It is significant that all views of this village are taken from the outside looking in; the photographer is forced to be the voyeur, and his image of the maroons is controlled by what they allow him to see. *In Maroon Country* (cat. 53), a lone figure washing in the river shields himself (?) from the intrusive nature of the camera. Covering his head with a sheet is a passive, or, at least, evasive response. But the European outsider, used to a more conciliatory approach from blacks, interprets this as hostile.<sup>32</sup> By contrast, *Haitian Woman with Children* (cat. 25) is openly challenging. Blowing her smoke straight at the camera, she frankly defies western notions of femininity while at the same time projecting a strong maternal image. A gender reading might say that these women represented the backbone of the post-colonial society: strong, unconventional, coolly competent.<sup>33</sup>

After emancipation the region became

politically unstable inviting American hegemony and intervention. Between 1908–10, the United States shadowed Cuba's political administration. In 1915, after an intimidating gunboat exercise off the coast of Haiti, the Americans eventually occupied the island. In the face of this 'guardianship', images such as *Haitian Soldiers* (cat. 20) reflect the self-determination in Haiti's history. Taken just weeks after yet another coup,<sup>34</sup> the motley military crew pose informally outside their barracks. Dressed in a way that defies the term 'uniform', they are fitted shabbily but complete. An ironic combination of pride and poverty. If resistance is registered in this image, it is in the ease that these soldiers face the viewer, totally unselfconscious and seemingly unaware of the savage stereotype the world placed on the Haitian military since the country's revolution.

The poster beside these soldiers announcing the inauguration of newly appointed president Antoine Simone,<sup>35</sup> places the photograph at a specific moment in history and defies the notion of the an idyllic, timeless and anonymous space so often imposed on Caribbean islands. Similarly, in another photograph, *The Cathedral* (cat. 19), landmark of catholicism in Haiti, dominates the cityscape, even while under construction. That image is now an important visual document for the city of Port Au Prince,<sup>36</sup> since no others of the cathedral at this stage are believed to exist. In contrast to this image of orthodox religion, *Entrance of a Vudu Shrine* (cat. 40) informs the viewer about Haiti's diversity. This shrine is devoted to the worship of the voodoo spirit Legba. But true to this assimilationist culture, the shrine of this African deity is decorated with imagery rooted in a European vernacular. Images of the white colonialists are juxtaposed with



angels from a catholic hierarchy, surrounded by icons and imagery from the voodoo pantheon. These paintings suggest a history that is fluid, accommodating, integrated and ever present.

Numerous photographs in Johnston's archive depict the Caribbean as a place of development and modernity. The market scenes of Haiti teem with energy, bearing all the signs of a frontier town hurtling towards urbanisation. Men, women and donkeys walk with a sense of urgency against the backdrop of the recently imported iron market and the new tram lines. Similarly, Trinidad and Barbadian images of market women reflect a new kind of vending and the separation of town from country.<sup>37</sup>

Modernity is registered even in the images of the countryside. In Jamaica and Cuba, we see evidence of sugar, tobacco and banana industries. The two images *Negroes at Work* (cat.49) and *Cuban Negroes at Play* (cat.48) indicate voluntary migration and regional integration. The subjects, most likely migrant job-workers from Haiti and Jamaica, convey the camaraderie between these economically motivated islanders who after 1850, worked alongside each other in the cane fields of Cuba and on the railway and construction sites of Panama,<sup>38</sup> Haiti, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua.

Johnston's trip brought a paradigm shift in his assessment of blacks. Even as he was writing *Negro in the New World* his views appeared to be changing. Johnston's tour of the New World also seems to have been a catalyst for later ethnographic and anthropological work where the Negro is viewed as a potential partner for the European rather than the 'white man's burden.' After the 1914 War, Johnston regularly wrote about the white man's responsibility to other

racess, the possibility of self-government for blacks, and the relationship between all races.<sup>39</sup> His tone changed from the condescending Bwana one finds in his assessment of Africans to that of a partner who can gain from the history and pathos of those who didn't look like him.

Johnston used his camera prolifically and judiciously to record the development of Afro-Caribbeans under colonialism. Technically, and as a research tool, it suited his purpose. Artistically, it satisfied his discerning eye for anecdotal and poignant images. Academically and professionally, it articulated a thousand times better than his writing could convey. These images are successful because they give his ideas currency today, when they might be better understood. Johnston predicted that one day black people would smile tolerantly at the crude theories of a white man like himself and consider them quaint.<sup>40</sup> While his approach to racial issues may now be outdated, the images Johnston left us are not. There is still much to learn from *Photos and Phantasms*. In this exhibition, we can recognise ourselves and others inside and outside of these frames.