

Gatherings Spotlight: _____

The Lynn Johnson Collection

2021





Photo by James Year/Ohio University Libraries

About the cover:

National Geographic: “Village on Edge of Time,” May 2008.

In Dimen, a small village in Southeast China, most adults work in nearby cities and return only during festival days, [writes Johnson](#). The National Geographic caption for that story reads: “Toughened by a lifetime of fieldwork, the hands of a grandmother provide loving care for her grandson, who wears a traditional hat adorned in silver. Many young adults now live elsewhere for their jobs, leaving their Dimen children to be raised by grandparents.”

Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson’s personal collection.

From the Dean of University Libraries

As we look forward to the bright days ahead in 2022, we highlight the past in this new online publication with the work of notable photojournalist and former Ohio University Knight Fellow, Lynn Johnson. The Lynn Johnson Collection, donated to University Libraries in 2011, documents the everyday moments of ordinary people including the difficult and challenging parts of life, such as sickness, pain and cultural inequities. Her photographs also capture the resilience, courage, spirit of survival and the innovation of human beings.

The text in this publication is taken from a May 2021 interview with Lynn, in which she talks about her 40+ years as a female photojournalist in a male-dominated profession. The photos in this publication are from University Libraries’ [Lynn Johnson Collection](#)—the cornerstone of our Documentary Photography Archive—and Lynn’s personal collection, much of which are found on her [website](#).

The Lynn Johnson Collection supports visual literacy education across multiple disciplines at Ohio University, the study of documentary photography and photojournalism, and engagement with social and political issues impacting the world today. The collection spans the 1970s to the 2000s and stems from Lynn’s work with the Pittsburgh Press, LIFE, Sports Illustrated, National Geographic, her on-set (and off-set) photography with Fred Rogers of the childrens’ television show, “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood,” and much more. The collection includes working drafts, handwritten notes and other personal commentaries from Lynn on her work.

It is an honor to highlight and steward such a significant collection, which supports students, faculty and global scholars in their teaching, learning and research. I do hope you enjoy exploring Lynn’s work here and on our [website](#).

Wishing you all the best in 2022.

Dr. Neil Romanosky
Dean of Ohio University Libraries



Illustration by Irina Kruglova

“I think of myself as a journalist with a camera, a documentary photographer, and as a person who is increasingly interested in photography and photographic projects that live on the spectrum of visual storytelling from pure documentary work, to work created with an activist intention.

...When I started as a photographer 40 years ago or so, the lines and labels that designated the kind of photographer one is were well defined and people tended to stay inside the lines. Today, that is changing, which I think is good. I do like this idea of a spectrum. I believe I’ve been influenced by how many spectrum-based stories I’ve been involved in: the gender spectrum, the autism spectrum... so, I decided I was going to be a photographer on the spectrum also.”

—Lynn Johnson, May 2021

“[My] photos focusing on children just being children are, among other things, about innocence, which is lovely, and when you can find it—let’s celebrate it.”

—Lynn Johnson

National Geographic: “The First Year.”

According to child development experts, the early years of life are critical. “Upon birth, a baby has a larger environment to explore, and by age four the actual physical structure of the brain will reflect how he or she has been formed by family, language and surroundings,” [writes Johnson](#). Pictured are seven-month-old twins Felix and Viva Torres.

Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.





Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.

National Geographic: "The First Year."

Nature versus nurture is an age-old argument, without any one prevailing school of thought, but today, "Brain scans can [now] show whether a child has been bathed in affection or scarred by neglect. Amazingly, ... even in a child who has been damaged, proper nurturing can create positive new neural pathways," [writes Johnson](#).



“It is so amazing looking at some of those prominent female figures in our lives from my generation. I love seeing the young girls, too. Who were they? Where are they today? What are they doing? How did being present at that time in history transform their lives? I would love to know.”

—Lynn Johnson

Black Star, 1986.

On March 9, 1986, the National Organization for Women held simultaneous marches in Washington, D.C., and Los Angeles. Over 120,000 demonstrators were in attendance in Washington, D.C., to fight for women’s right to choose. This group of women includes journalist and activist Gloria Steinem (second from left) and members of the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights.

Source: [National Organization for Women](#)

Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mohr Center, University Libraries.



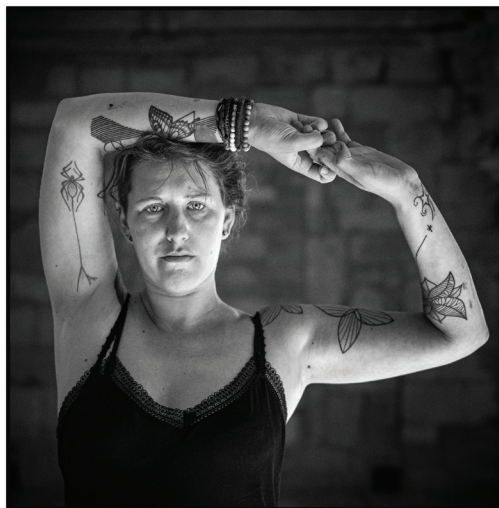


Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.

“As a woman, I feel it is important to do projects that reveal the lifelong impact of gender-based abuse and sexual violence. Several of the women whose images are included in the [Kennedy Museum’s Van Gogh](#) exhibit have been victims of such trauma. Violence against women in every form is a global crisis that harms all of us, and yet, we seem to be incapable of addressing this crisis. Can photographs be a catalyst to open this conversation?”

—Lynn Johnson

*National Geographic:
“Visible Women,” 2019 and “The Van Gogh Affect” exhibition, 2020-2024.*

In 1996 National Geographic assigned Johnson to capture black & white images for a story, titled “A Lullaby in Color,” focusing on Vincent Van Gogh’s life. In 2018, Johnson, and curator Patricia Lanza, traveled to France, where Van Gogh painted until his death, to produce the 2020-2024 traveling exhibition, “The Van Gogh Affect.” The women pictured here are patients living in St Paul’s asylum, where Van Gogh lived for one year. They also use art to stabilize and heal their mind and body.

“These stories were done many, many years ago, when I was a young photographer. But I do not think much has changed in terms of how I love to be in the presence of strong human emotions and complicated human lives. Sometimes, I’m just in someone’s daily life, and I’m looking for subtle moments that explain their personality, or a relationship that one person may have with another, or within the natural world.”

—Lynn Johnson

National Geographic:
“Village on the Edge of Time,” May 2008.

Coffin trees dot the rugged hills for the ethnic Dong people in Southeast China—a tradition tying the past to the present and to the uncertain future, [writes Johnson](#). The National Geographic caption for that story reads: “Wu Lianlian shares a laugh with her mother beside her coffin tree, chosen for her at birth. If she follows tradition, she will have the tree cut down and carved to order when she reaches old age.”

Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.





Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.

National Geographic:
"Village on the Edge of Time," May 2008.

In Southeast China the Dong people rely on each other, bound by hard work, traditional gender roles and modest comforts, [writes Johnson](#). The National Geographic caption for that story reads: "On a trip home to celebrate the new year, television star, Wu Qinglan, screens a recent performance for her grandmother ...Her family's TV, the first in town, inspired her ...to leave Dimen to find fame."

LIFE Magazine, 1992.

In Nov. 1992 on assignment for LIFE Magazine, Johnson trekked across northwestern Nepal with five women to the city of Lo Manthang photographing village life and the impact of tourism on the region. Pictured from that assignment is this woman spinning yak's wool into yarn. The image was originally captioned, "The lives of women in Lo is to spin, care for the children and prepare meals." Although this image was not published by LIFE, others from the assignment were published the following year in the Feb. 1993 article, "The Last Days of Shangri-La."





Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mahn Center, University Libraries.

Sightsavers, ca. 1997.

Johnson's work has extended to assignments with numerous organizations and foundations including Sightsavers, an international organization that works to prevent avoidable blindness and other conditions. In this photograph, two students, Khadija Mohammed and Alfred Ayewolto, follow the pointer of their instructor, Hayford Duodo, as they read a book in Ewoku, Ghana.

Source: [Sightsavers](#)

“It doesn’t matter where in the world people are. Photography serves this desire to be immersed and to try to understand people more deeply. What motivates [them]? What saves them? What inspires them? The answers to all of those big questions are made up of minuscule fragments of time and space. I have one editor who calls me a hunter/gatherer, and I think, many photographers are.”

—Lynn Johnson

LIFE Magazine, November 1984.

While on assignment for LIFE Magazine, Johnson photographed Bahamian folk artist Amos Ferguson, his wife, Bloneva "Bea" Ferguson, and others at the Ferguson home in Nov. 1984. Ferguson, a house painter by profession, started painting and selling his works of art after his nephew dreamed that God had given Ferguson this gift. As a self-taught artist, Ferguson is recognized for his “outsider art” depicting religious themes and Bahamian folklore.

Source: [National Art Gallery of the Bahamas](#)

Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mohn Center, University Libraries.





Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.

Lasting impressions
felt by Johnson:

"I never forget. I do not throw food away. I keep even the smallest morsel of leftovers. I think in the developed world, we are so spoiled, not everyone of course, but we have great privilege. We do not have to walk three days to get water, and then when we have the water, it is poisoned."

—Lynn Johnson

National Geographic: "Water Warriors."

A simple fact known worldwide: without water, we die. Yet many African women are destined to be the carriers of this life-sustaining nutrient—often at great risk. Like Gale Deyknto, many women will walk long distances "...to find water, a woman may have to walk 2 hours or 2 days, up and down mountainsides, across deserts, risking attack by men who do not want her water, but her body," [writes Johnson](#).

“There are times when I have been out on assignment in Asia or an African nation, and come back [to the US], and I look at everybody, and I am just so angry at each and every one of them, because they do not know what it is like. They are complete strangers, of course, but I think, ‘How dare they take for granted the resources that are at our fingertips.’”

—Lynn Johnson

National Geographic: “Water Warriors.”

Many African women are faced with the difficult task of hauling water in carriers sometimes weighing 80+ pounds over miles of harsh environments. “The women in these photographs live in Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia but share this fate with females all over the developing world. Women and girls are the water carriers, and because of that they are at risk for injury, disease and attack,” [writes Johnson](#).



Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.



Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.

“I think this is a time of transition, where everyone is being challenged. So, for me, the germane question is, ‘Can photography help us to understand each other?’ and therefore, reduce the barriers—the emotional, psychological and often cynical barriers we feel and construct to keep us from truly getting to know each other.”

—Lynn Johnson

National Geographic: “Blast Force: The Invisible War on the Brain,” February 2015.

Thousands of soldiers returning home from the battlefields, like Marine Gunnery Sgt. Aaron Tam, experience traumatic brain injury from the detonation of an explosive device. Among traditional care, is the alternative treatment of art therapy. The National Geographic caption for that story reads: “...I was right there in the blast seat. I got blown up...nobody ever thought that they [blast events] were very harmful, and so we didn’t log them in.”

“Who do you know who is struggling with mental illness? Who do you know who has been bullied and suffered isolation and depression? ... Who do you know who may have committed suicide? Do you want to talk about it? Can we create a space for that?”

—Lynn Johnson

*National Geographic:
“Women’s Health: An Endless Battle.”*

“There are many reasons why women have a higher rate of mental health problems than men. As primary caregivers, women often experience stress, anxiety and isolation, and yet they can’t impact their own social position, financial status or treatment in society. Ironically, staying healthy requires balancing scarce resources, and such decisions are made primarily by women,” [writes Johnson](#).

Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson’s personal collection.





Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mohn Center, University Libraries.

“When I look at my older work, which was super interesting, I see work that is so far in the past from my perspective today. It brings me back to some of those amazing moments and challenges to what it was like to get into some of those locations—into those Russian police stations, or homes and classrooms in China.”

—Lynn Johnson

D – La Repubblica delle Donne, 1996.

In 1994, Johnson went on assignment to document "runaway" Russian children impacted by social, political and economic turmoil seeking better lives in Moscow. Often, these children were caught and held by police at train stations before being returned home. Children whose families were unable to care for them were sent to Children's Warehouse #1 outside the city center where their heads were shaved, and they were assigned a number. This image is of two runaways being held in a graffitied room at the Kiyevskaya railway station.

“China had just opened [to the West] when we did some of the older China material. These older images remind me that I am still basically doing the same thing. I see a situation, or I read about a story, or I get to know a person—and I am completely captivated by the complexity of their lives. And, I want to know more, and I want to be in the presence of those individuals or that situation.”

—Lynn Johnson

LIFE Magazine, ca. 1995.

After construction began on the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River, Johnson was sent on assignment by LIFE Magazine to photograph its early progress. The original LIFE caption accompanying the image reads: “Though there is some heavy earthmoving equipment, the Chinese are doing this project as they have done every great project in their history. They are using the resource most abundant, the sweat and blood of the common ‘man’...”

Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mohn Center, University Libraries.





Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mahn Center, University Libraries.

LIFE Magazine, 1999.

On June 7, 1998, James Byrd, Jr., an African American man, was dragged to death behind a pickup truck by three white supremacists in Jasper, Texas. Johnson was assigned by LIFE Magazine to document the hate crime trial for the article, "Southern Justice," which was never published because of the nation's attention shift to the Columbine High School shooting on April 20, 1999. Johnson later included the story in her Ohio University master's thesis, "Hate Kills," which focused on the impact of hate crimes on society. Shown in this image are the five sisters of James Byrd, Jr. standing in birth order next to his grave.

“Starting as a newspaper photographer, many years ago— I worked at the Pittsburgh Press for seven years—[which now] impacts all the assignments that I do, as they are done in relationship to that beginning. When one is a newspaper photographer, as a rule, you are working very fast, and moving from place to place quickly on deadline. Working for National Geographic is the other side of that time spectrum, where, ideally, one has the opportunity to get to know people and to think deeply about the subject matter that is the focus of the story. Essentially, I see myself as an educator.”

—Lynn Johnson

Black Star, October 1982.

Johnson, a Pittsburgh-based photojournalist, started her career at the local newspaper, The Pittsburgh Press, before moving into freelance work that has sent her on assignments around the world. Taken in October 1982, this image of construction in Pittsburgh near the PPG Place, a five-and-a-half-acre complex within three city blocks, was part of an early freelance assignment with the photo agency, Black Star.

Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Main Center, University Libraries.





Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mahn Center, University Libraries.

“I think photography is so accessible today. I would just encourage people to be thoughtful. A camera, a phone is not just a toy. A visual image put out into the world has power. It doesn’t matter who is in the photograph or where you took the picture, it has power and energy and carries your intention.”

—Lynn Johnson

Sightsavers, ca. 1997.

Photographed by Johnson for Sightsavers, an international organization that advocates for the prevention of blindness, disability rights and education, the image depicts Pius Oppong, age 18 from Ghana in West Africa, casually holding a stack of books, one of which reads, “Never Lose Hope.”

Source: [Sightsavers](#)

“I believe that photography has great power... But I think you cannot just put it out into the world, you have to be, and this is where activism comes in, you have to actually shepherd the material out into the world. It has to be accompanied by thoughtful dialogue and an invitation to others to gather around the photographs and talk about what is depicted and [how] that makes one feel.”

—Lynn Johnson

National Geographic: Landmines

Some of Cambodia’s deepest scars are sown inches below the earth’s surface—thousands of landmines still buried from decades of civil war. Today, that terrain continues to be treacherous, and mine blasts continue to explode and disfigure men, women, children and wildlife in its aftereffects. Sadly, worldwide, “...there are perhaps 110 million active landmines in 70 countries—enough to kill or wound a person every 20 minutes,” [writes Johnson](#).

Photo courtesy of Lynn Johnson's personal collection.





Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mahn Center, University Libraries.

“In the last five-to-ten years, the long form [documentary] is a little bit more truncated... I am [now] on that journalist-documentary-photographer-activist spectrum because a number of stories I have worked on recently, I felt, didn’t go deep enough. ”

—Lynn Johnson

GEO Wissen, 1989.

Johnson spent four years in the late 1980s and early 1990s photographing burn victims seeking treatment and healing at the West Penn Hospital Burn Unit in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Johnson’s work with the West Penn Burn Unit was published in *GEO Wissen*, a German magazine, in a story titled, “Der Fluch der Guten Tat,” and again in 1997 in a special 20-year publication featuring some of the magazine’s best published photographs from around the world. Pictured is a doctor treating a child with a newly developed tissue-engineered skin therapy called Living Skin Equivalent.



Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Maim Center, University Libraries.

Newsweek: "The Healing Touch," March 23, 1992.

In 1989, Johnson sought grant support to share stories of burn victims she photographed at the West Penn Hospital Burn Unit, writing: "What better way to help the public understand the power of photography than to utilize the medium to educate...[and] touching lives in a positive and hopefully lasting way. Never before have I cared so deeply about a project or been so impressed by the courage of a group of people, both [the] rescued and [the] rescuer." In this image, a young girl steels herself for the return to school after her accident at the age of five.



Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mahn Center, University Libraries.

The New York Times, ca. 1994.

A harpist with The Chalice of Repose Project eases the emotional pain of loss that accompanies the onset of death. The project, a music-thanatology program, provides prescriptive voice and harp music as part of the patient's palliative care. Johnson photographed several "harp ladies" in Missoula, Montana, where the project was based. The New York Times story, "For the Dying, Music Can Be More Than Just a Requiem," was published May 10, 1998. Images from that assignment were later published by LIFE in "A Song for the Dying" in Dec. 1998.

Source: [Chalice of Repose Project](#)

“I encourage people to be thoughtful... [Images] can cause damage and they can do good and a lot of that depends upon how the image starts and the intention of the photographer—be it a casual image or a thoughtful long-term document.”

—Lynn Johnson

GEO Wissen, ca. 1993.

Johnson has worked on several stories throughout her career documenting AIDS and its impact, including individuals seeking alternate treatments. Pictured is Thomas Avena undergoing an alternative underground therapy in San Francisco, California. Soaking and meditating in a healing mixture of clay and colloidal oatmeal, Avena visualizes that his tumors are dissolving. This photograph was twice published by GEO Wissen in their March 1993 articles, “Aids-Therapie: Die andere Kraft” and “Aids-Selbsthilfe: Aufstand der Patienten.”

Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mohn Center, University Libraries.





Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mahn Center, University Libraries.

LIFE Magazine, 1992.

Johnson first photographed Fred Rogers of the children's television show, "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," which was filmed locally at WQED studios in Pittsburgh, while working for The Pittsburgh Press. She continued to photograph Rogers in later assignments, including an extensive story for LIFE magazine titled, "The Good Life – and Works – of Mister Rogers." In this image, Rogers is being taught how to seesaw by Marilyn Barnett, a physical education teacher on the program.

“In many ways, historically, photography has been a privileged voice for basically white men and finally in recent years, women, [who] are doing some very powerful work, but we need more diversity still... I think the professionals working in the field now need to mentor diverse others, if anyone wants that help. I think that is one of our responsibilities.”

—Lynn Johnson

LIFE Magazine, ca. 1990.

On an assignment about “glass ceilings” for LIFE Magazine, Johnson photographed AT&T executive Dory Yochum, a single mother working in a male-dominated industry, from January through April 1990. At the time, Yochum was the only female on the AT&T executive team—an opportunity made possible only after AT&T was charged with discrimination in 1973. Pictured is Yochum working at her desk while a woman of color sweeps her office.

Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Malm Center, University Libraries.





Photo courtesy of the Lynn Johnson Collection, Documentary Photography Archive, Mahn Center, University Libraries.

“To me, what is interesting in the world of photography today is that these issues [bullying, violence and death still] need to be addressed by a very diverse group of photographers. We need Black photographers; we need Asian photographers; we need all kinds of photographers along the gender spectrum.

We need every perspective working from behind the camera because we are not neutral in the work. We come with our culture, our gender, our gender expression, our sense of who we are, our age, our race and our languages—so we are a kind of stew of complexity and characteristics, and we create from those unique perspectives. We need all kinds of people telling stories today.”

—Lynn Johnson

Hate Kills, ca. 2001.

On Sept. 22, 2000, Anna Sparks and her partner, Sue Stroud, were present at the Backstreet Café, a gay-friendly bar in Roanoke, Virginia, when Ronald Gay opened fire—killing one and injuring six. Johnson, who published this image in her photo documentary master’s thesis, “Hate Kills,” wrote this accompanying caption: “Talk of the upcoming trial sets Anna on edge. She is torn between her fear of looking Ronald Gay in the eye and her need to look him in the eye... Even innocent teasing from her nephew, Sean, prompts a gush of anger...”

The Lynn Johnson Collection

By Laura Smith

Origins

The collection arrived at the Libraries in the original filing cabinets that Johnson had kept and organized throughout her career. Within the cabinets were hundreds of folders containing assignments published in magazines such as LIFE, National Geographic, Newsweek, Smithsonian and Sports Illustrated. There were also assignments from newspapers including The Pittsburgh Press, where Johnson started her career, and projects with numerous foundations and organizations.

The assignments often contain a mix of photo formats: negatives, slides, contact sheets and prints, as well as research, correspondence, business records and tear sheets related to the images. Within the material is evidence of Johnson's ability to make connections with individuals across the globe – particularly those facing difficult social, political and economic challenges – and to document and share their stories.

The Collection in Action

Following Johnson's vision, the collection enables students from multiple disciplines across Ohio University to interact with the collection, not only during on-site classroom instruction sessions, but virtually as well. These student activities strengthen visual literacy skills, enhance understanding of the processes involved with taking an image from the original negative to publication, and engage students in discussion about issues from across the world. Students connect, question and examine the material from a variety of perspectives, whether they are curious about technique and image composition, connect their personal situations to a story, or observe the ways in which the world has both changed and stayed the same.

A New Way to Connect

As the Libraries continues to preserve and process the collection, opportunities to further engage with new audiences increase. This year, the Libraries launched the Lynn Johnson digital collection, a growing selection of digitized material, through a collaborative effort between the Libraries' Digital Initiatives unit and the Mahn Center. This effort has opened opportunities to further connect with students and align the digital collection in support of Ohio University's curriculum and programming.

Growth

As the digital collection expands, the physical collection is expected to grow as well. Scattered throughout this publication are images from Johnson's current work. These images will soon find a new home here at University Libraries.

We look forward to growing the Lynn Johnson Collection and seeing her vision come to life on the OHIO campus and beyond.

Give today to help support University Libraries'
The Lynn Johnson Collection Fund

Special Thanks

to Lynn Johnson for her support, the staff at University Libraries' Mahn Center and Digital Initiatives—and to the many people who made this publication possible.

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Photo by Annie O'Neill, alumna and former Knight Fellow

In the 1970s, Lynn Johnson was the first woman staff photographer for The Pittsburgh Press before starting her lifelong passion as a freelance photojournalist.

In 2011, Johnson gifted her archive of nearly two million images to Ohio University Libraries, where the collection continues to grow and mirror her active career and engagement with OHIO students. In 2017, Johnson's distinctive work was recognized with the Medal of Merit awarded by the Ohio University Alumni Association.