



Exhibition Guide for High School Teachers

Assembly Hall

Theaster Gates

Walker Art Center
September 5, 2019–January 12, 2020
Gallery B

WALKER

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INTRODUCTION



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“How do we deal with abandonment, ruin, and decay? How do we start to imagine ourselves and caretakers of the things that exist in the world?”

—Theaster Gates

This guide is for teachers who are bringing their students to the exhibition *Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall*. It includes an overview of the presentation, discussion questions, and a list of additional resources to learn more about Theaster Gates, his artistic practice, race and racism in America, and black art and culture.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

American artist Theaster Gates (b. 1973) was born in Chicago, where he still lives and works today. Starting out as a ceramicist, he soon expanded his practice to include sculpture, installation, performance, and architectural interventions. An important facet of his work includes urban planning and revitalizing buildings—often through the use of recycled materials—in historically black neighborhoods across Chicago’s South Side. These include the Stony Island Arts Bank and Dorchester Projects. Gates is a trained urban planner and started his own nonprofit organization, [Rebuild Foundation](#), to focus on these projects. Bringing people together, the spaces he creates serve as galleries, libraries, and performances venues and have become catalysts for a variety of cultural activities and communal gatherings. They also serve as repositories for thousands of objects that the artist has collected.

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition is divided into four distinct sections. Included are selections from the University of Chicago Glass Lantern Slides Collection of 60,000 images; periodicals, furniture, and other materials from the 15,000-piece Johnson Publishing Company Collection; a range of objects from the Ana J. and Edward J. Williams Collection of “negrobilia,” displayed in antique cases; and ceramic pots and other wares that the artist has made or collected over the past decade. Seen together, these items speak to Gates’s “deep belief in the objects and histories of African American material culture” and capture moments of celebration and inspiration, exclusion and marginalization, renewal and invention.

Assembly Hall considers what Gates refers to as “resurrections,” or the act of bringing old objects and spaces back to life, while examining the historical and social contexts in which they were made. His poetic interventions, which take the form of sculptural and moving image works, highlight ways that collecting is at once a personal and a universal activity. By taking things that have been abandoned, discarded, or overlooked—whether a single object or a group of 15,000—Gates asks us to consider what it means to invest things with new meaning through the simple acts of conversation, conservation, creation, and care.

Cover: View of the Johnson Publishing Company Collection in the exhibition *Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall*, Walker Art Center, 2019
Photo: Bobby Rogers, Walker Art Center

1: Theaster Gates Photo: Gene Pittman, Walker Art Center

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO GLASS LANTERN SLIDES



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“I am interested in not only found objects but also discarded knowledge.”
—Theaster Gates



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In 2009 Theaster Gates became the custodian of thousands of glass lantern slides that had been used for decades to teach art and architectural history at the University of Chicago. The slides, which the school was planning to throw away as it moved to a digital platform, are now housed in Gates's [Stony Island Arts Bank](#) on the South Side of Chicago. The artist oversees the preservation of their visual and physical information.

Gates's initial interest in this collection stemmed from his desire to learn art history and share these resources with a new community. As he began to dig through the collection, however, he became more interested in the story that emerged about how universities once taught the discipline. The collection mainly holds imagery of Western (mainly European and American) art, from medieval tapestries to modern architecture, rather than a representation of art from around the world. A case in point: of the 60,000 slides, fewer than 50 depict examples of African art, which were originally labeled “primitive art,” an outdated and derogatory term.

In response to this Eurocentric narrative, Gates presents the material in a way that critically and creatively highlights its problematic omissions. The artist's video, which combines images from the slides with photographs of 20th-century black culture from the Johnson Publishing Company Collection, is a gesture toward “reading blackness” into the canon of art history. The slides on view in the light box focus on what he calls “minority arts,” or works made by non-Western makers, and “minor arts,” featuring pottery, woodworking, and other craft traditions long considered to be outside of the realm of fine arts.

EXPERIENCING THE ROOM

Invite students to experience the video projected on the walls of the room and listen to the audio featuring clips from art history lectures and artist talks.

Provide an overview of the room for them, explaining where the glass slides are from and how they were used. Make sure to point out that of the 60,000 images in the University of Chicago's collection, fewer than 50 depict examples of African art.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Why do you think there were so few examples of African art in the University of Chicago's glass lantern slides collection?
- What might be the result of only teaching the history of Western (European/American) art in art history classes?

The images projected on the walls of this room are a video work that Gates made by combining a selection of pictures from the glass slides collection with photographs from the Johnson Publishing Company Collection (publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines). Take a closer look at the projections on the walls and the glass slides in front of the light box.

- How would you describe some of the types of artwork you're seeing in these projections and in the glass slides light box?
- Gates has said this video work is a way of “reading blackness” into the history of art. What do you think he means by this?

Views of the University of Chicago Glass Lantern Slides in the exhibition *Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall*, Walker Art Center, 2019

2, 3: A selection of glass slides displayed on a light box in the gallery

4: The artist's film is projected on the walls, with seating for visitors in the center of the space

JOHNSON PUBLISHING COMPANY COLLECTION



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“John H. Johnson and Eunice Johnson understood that image-making goes hand in hand with identity formation, which goes hand in hand with nation-building.”
—Theaster Gates



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Founded in Chicago in 1942, the Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) soon became known internationally as the preeminent African American publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines. John H. and Eunice Johnson created publications and products that directly addressed the lives of black Americans. From its in-depth reporting on the civil rights movement to its lifestyle articles and fashion photography, the company helped shape the identity of a black middle class during its 76-year run. For generations of readers, JPC stood for self-invention, self-empowerment, and self-determinism.

In 1971 JPC opened its new headquarters in downtown Chicago. A city landmark, the building was the first and remains the only high-rise in the area designed by a black architect, John W. Moutoussamy. Through its 11 custom-made floors—reflecting the pinnacle of what the company referred to as midcentury African modernism—the building represented the Johnsons’ bold, experimental ethos and an overall celebration of black excellence.

The company sold the historic building in 2011, but its original furnishings and iconic publications, totaling 15,000 objects, have been preserved by Gates at his [Stony Island Arts Bank](#). The artist’s interest in architectural spaces is evident in this gallery, which features JPC furnishings that he has restored or reimagined with new fabrics and colors, along with a sampling of artworks by African and African American artists. Also on view are bound copies of *Ebony*, *Jet*, and other Johnson publications.

A SPACE FOR READING

In the center of the room, visitors are welcome to take a seat and read the magazines on display. Please do not touch the furniture, books, or other objects elsewhere in the gallery.

Give students a few minutes to look around the room and encourage them to flip through the magazines on the center table.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would you describe the feel and style of this room? What does it say about how the Johnson Publishing Company presented itself?
- What other companies or individuals would you associate with delivering a message about the celebration of black excellence? How do they deliver this message?

5–7 (top to bottom): A selection of *Ebony* magazines and furnishings from the Johnson Publishing Company Collection in *Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall*, Walker Art Center, 2019

ANA J. AND EDWARD J. WILLIAMS COLLECTION



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“I love archives in much the same way as I love thrift stores: they represent the truth of the everyday of people.”

—Theaster Gates



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This collection was shaped by Edward J. Williams, a now-retired businessman who grew up on the South Side of Chicago and became the first African American male employee of Harris Bank. In the 1970s he found his first item of “negrobilia”—everyday consumer objects that feature racist stereotypes of black people—in an antique shop in Indiana. Initially, his aim was to take these types of offensive items out of circulation. However, Williams soon began to amass a collection with different intent: “The more I collected, the more I realized the range of stuff that had derogatory black images was endless. I don’t want people to forget.” Searching secondhand stores around the country, he eventually acquired some 4,000 objects.

The selections on view are just a subset of the Williams Collection, now under Theaster Gates’s care. They include toys, advertising, kitchen items, and books, ranging from the 1800s to the present. Together, the items demonstrate ways in which, through mind-numbing repetition and widespread distribution, black identities have been essentialized into damaging and dehumanizing caricatures. In viewing these objects, we are confronted by what Gates describes as “the problem of fetishization and desire” and the fact that similar racist representations still exist today.

Gates chose to exhibit the objects in antique cases from an anthropological museum, an academic institution that tends to study artifacts from non-Western societies. In many such museums, objects were acquired and classified according to colonialist theories. Through this gesture, the artist challenges how institutions have shaped our understanding of different peoples and cultures through their collecting and display practices.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Many of these mass-produced racist objects are ordinary household items, such as salt and pepper shakers or a brand of pancake syrup. How might these objects have strengthened racism in the United States?
- The objects in this room are just a small sample from a collection of more than 4,000 items. Why do you think Gates would want to preserve this large collection of racist memorabilia? Do you agree that this collection should be preserved? Why or why not?
- In planning the exhibition, the artist specifically placed this collection directly after the Johnson Publishing Company room. Why do you think he wanted visitors to experience these rooms together?

8, 9: Views of the Ana J. and Edward J. Williams Collection in *Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall*, Walker Art Center, 2019

10: Selected items of racist memorabilia include a dancing minstrel figure with tap board from the Williams Collection. Photo courtesy the artist and Rebuild Foundation

CLAY STUDIO FACSIMILE



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“You should never think about the pot independent of those who might gather with it. A thing without people is not really a thing.”
—Theaster Gates



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Theaster Gates trained as a potter in the United States, South Africa, and Japan. His work with ceramics—and his interest in African religious rituals and Asian social traditions such as the tea ceremony—have influenced the importance of creating gathering spaces in the context of his larger artistic practice. Whether shaping a bowl from clay or building an architectural structure with bricks, Gates draws our attention to the concept of making space. “The goal,” he has said, “is to allow the person who’s the user of the vessel, big or small, to have a really simple experience.”

For one of his first projects in 2007, the artist hosted a performative gathering in Chicago that entailed serving soul food on ceramic plates he made, which were inspired by Japanese tea ware. The merging of African American and East Asian traditions allowed for what the artist called a “plate convergence,” in which, as he describes, “people came from all over to discuss issues of race, political difference, and inequity.” Since this time, he has focused on how a single tea bowl or an entire collection of objects can spark conversation and communal assembly.

The shelves and seating in this gallery have been constructed using salvaged wood from the artist’s studio to reflect his practice of recycling materials. The ceramic wares were created by Gates and his studio team. The artist invites you to take a seat and spend as much time in the space as you wish.

A SPACE FOR GATHERING/ POP-UP TEA

The artist invites you to take a seat in this room and use it as a space to assemble. Invite students to have a seat on the wooden seating on the perimeter of the room and reflect on the exhibition.

On Thursday nights, join us for a free cup of tea and share conversation with other visitors.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Describe what it’s like to come into this space from the Williams Collection room.
- Gates is interested in the ability of ceramics, including bowls, plates, cups, and pitchers, to help create a space for people to gather. In what way can something like a plate bring people together?
- All of the ceramics in this room were made by Gates and by other artists who work in his studio. How does this space differ from the other three rooms in the exhibition? How is it similar?
- Why do you think Gates wanted this to be the final room of the exhibition?

11–13: Views of the Clay Studio Facsimile, including ceramic dishes, display shelves, and seating, in *Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall*, Walker Art Center, 2019

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Visitors to the exhibition are invited to peruse a selection of books, provided in the ceramics room, which relate to themes that Theaster Gates explores in his work.

To further support engagement with this exhibition, we recommend the following references for teachers and students:



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ALSO ON VIEW

In the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, Theaster Gates's outdoor sculpture *Black Vessel for a Saint* (2017) serves as a sanctuary, a place open to all for gathering and reflection.

A playlist of the artist's moving image works is available in the Bentson Mediatheque, located in the Walker's Main Lobby, during the run of the exhibition.

ON THEASTER GATES AND THE EXHIBITION

- Artist Talk: [Theaster Gates and Hamza Walker at the Walker Art Center](#), 2019
- ["A Spiritual Belief in the Life of Things,"](#) curatorial essay by Victoria Sung that dives into each of the rooms
- [Interview with Theaster about *Black Vessel for a Saint*](#)
- [Cultural importance of the *Ebony* photography archive](#)
- [Theaster Gates on Art21](#)
- [Theaster Gates's *Black Archive Exhibition* at Kunsthaus Bregenz, Germany](#)
- [Rebuild Foundation](#)
- [Black Vessel for a Saint: Garden Stories](#) from the Walker Art Center
- Artist's website: [Theastergates.com](#)

ON DISCUSSING RACE AND RACISM WITH STUDENTS

- ["Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism,"](#) from the Anti-Defamation League
- ["First Encounters With Race and Racism: Teaching Ideas for Classroom Conversations,"](#) *New York Times*, September 27, 2017.

ON RACIST MEMORABILIA AND THE JIM CROW ERA

- [Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia](#) at Ferris State University, Michigan
- ["Henry Louis Gates Jr. Points to Reconstruction as the Genesis of White Supremacy,"](#) *Fresh Air* interview, April 3, 2019
- ["Teju Cole on Blackface,"](#) *The New Yorker: Politics and More*, February 18, 2019
- ["Why would a Chicago library collection racially insensitive art?,"](#) *Chicago Tribune*, July 3, 2017
- [Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy, and the Rise of Jim Crow](#) (2019) by Henry Louise Gates, Jr.
- [Understanding Jim Crow: Using Racist Memorabilia to Teach Tolerance and Promote Social Justice](#) (2015) by David Pilgrim

ON BLACK ARTS AND CULTURE

- [John H. Johnson biography](#) from the National Visionary Leadership Project
- ["John H. Johnson, Founder of Ebony, Dies,"](#) *New York Times*, August 9, 2005
- ["Johnson Publishing Company, the ex-publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines, files for bankruptcy,"](#) *Washington Post*, April 10, 2019
- [The Studio Museum in Harlem](#)
- [Questioning the Canon at the Baltimore Museum of Art](#)
- [Black Artists Retreat](#), Rebuild Foundation
- ["2018: The Revival of the Black Arts Movement,"](#) *Afropunk*, December 24, 2018

14: Theaster Gates, *Black Vessel for a Saint*, 2017
brick, granite, Cor-Ten steel, concrete statue of St. Laurence covered with roofing membrane
Commissioned with funds provided by the Frederick R. Weisman Collection of Art, the Martin and Brown Foundation, the Butler Family Fund, the Justin Smith Purchase Fund, and Marilyn and Larry Fields, 2017 Photo: Walker Art Center

THEASTER GATES: ASSEMBLY HALL
SEPTEMBER 5, 2019–JANUARY 12, 2020
WALKER ART CENTER

Explore a series of unique rooms that bring the artist's work and four of his vast collections together. Providing a close look at black material culture across decades, these objects capture moments of celebration and inspiration, exclusion and marginalization, renewal and creation. For information about in-gallery experiences, visit walkerart.org.



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Theaster Gates: Assembly Hall is organized by the Walker Art Center. Major support for the exhibition is provided by the Martin and Brown Foundation. Additional support is provided by Deborah and John Christakos and Donna and Jim Pohlad.

TOURS

For questions about booking a tour, visit <https://walkerart.org/visit/tours-field-trips/>, email us at tours@walkerart.org, or call 612.375.7609.

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The Walker Art Center, located across from the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, is an interdisciplinary contemporary art center committed to supporting the creative expression of artists and the active engagement of audiences. Walker Education supports learning for people of all ages, abilities, and familiarity with contemporary and modern art.

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15: Walker Art Center, view from Hennepin Avenue, Minneapolis Photo: Floto+Warner