

REGEN PROJECTS

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BLACK PROGRESS: Portfolio

By Theaster Gates

There is a tremendous richness in Black and brown communities, even where the financial resources aren't always immediate. Sometimes in order to find that richness, you have to look in unexpected places. Where is the good stuff of our cultures? Does it live in basements and attics and, after loved ones pass, garbage cans? And who should care for our people's things? Large institutions? Local ones? If all we get is a B version of our culture thrown at us through the media, what happens to all this richness that defines our lives but seems not to be evident elsewhere?

Johnson Publishing Company has been a major artery for Black knowledge in my life. Growing up in the '80s, I crafted my hairstyles and determined which relaxer to use based on the cuts and advertisements in *Ebony* and *Jet*. I got all of my celebrity knowledge from these analog devices. Later, probably in college, I discovered *Negro Digest* and *Black World*, which were more literary-leaning periodicals published by Johnson. Johnson magazines featured radical essays with unbelievable titles like "Black Power at the Polls" (*Ebony*, January 1968) and "How Blacks Fare in the Whitest States" (*Ebony*, December 1987).

The Johnson editors created a whole image ideology, a way of showing how Black people saw themselves. The presentation was loud, strong. The mark-ups and cropping lines on the *Ebony* and *Jet* production images are, for me, indications not just of design intelligence but of that image philosophy. They constitute a kind of second work of art. The photograph—and the selection of everyday women to become models—is the first work of art, and these markings become another form of story-telling. Is it possible for me to add a third, fourth, and fifth life to these images? After Linda Johnson—the daughter of the Johnson Publishing founder, John Johnson, and his wife, Eunice—licensed twenty thousand of the archive's images to me in 2017, I've been trying to demonstrate to the world the value of these images. I have displayed them in installations and incorporated them into prints for exhibitions like my "Black Madonna" project at the Kunstmuseum Basel last year. My exhibition opening at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis this month will have a section of Johnson material as well.

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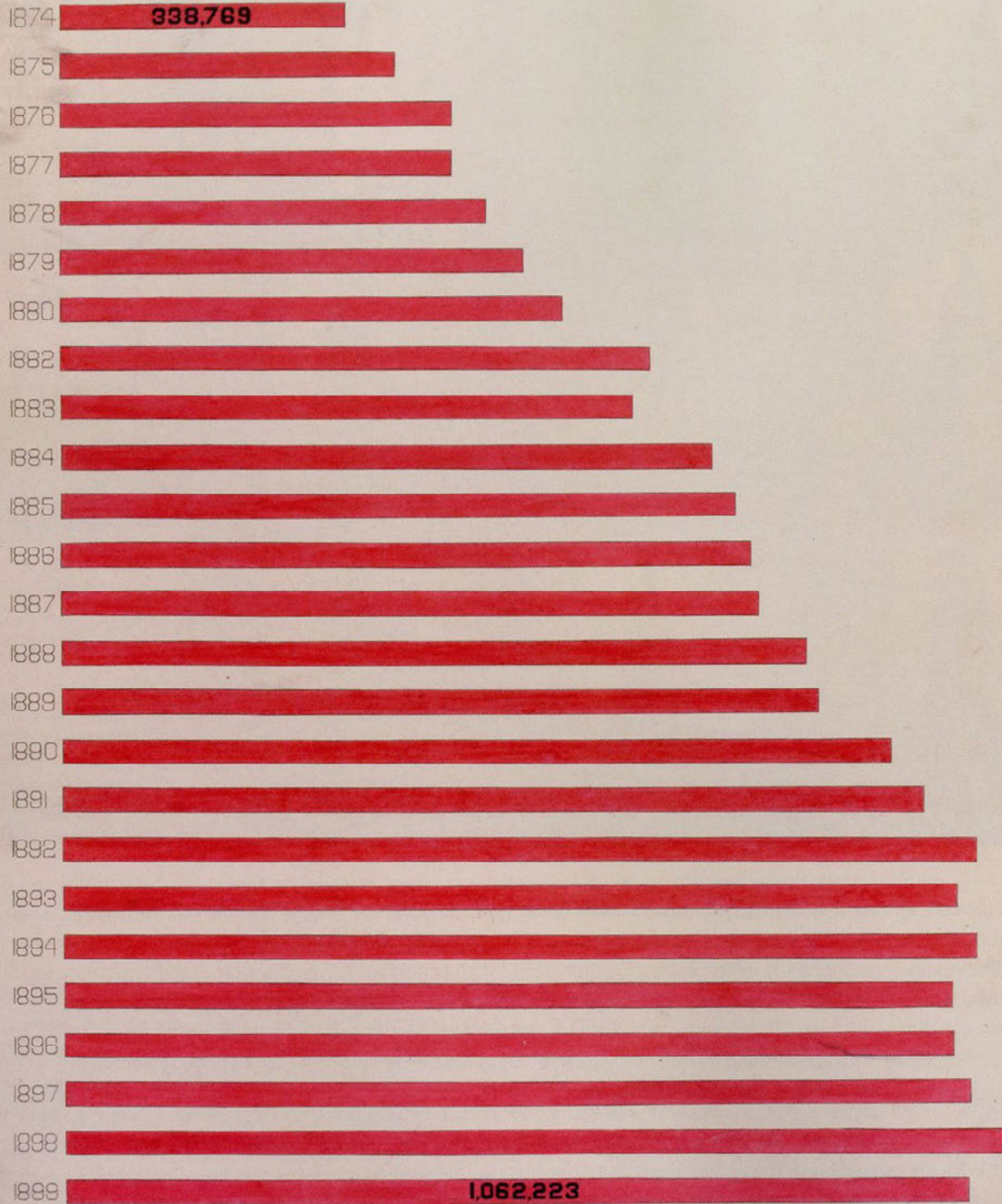


A potential travesty spurred the attention that is currently being given to Johnson Publishing. The company had gone bankrupt, and the fate of its image archive was in question. A consortium of foundations—Ford, Mellon, Getty, and MacArthur—pulled together thirty million dollars to purchase it. I wish I could have played a more significant role in the company during its lifetime, but in some ways, it had to die before the mechanisms of preservation could kick in. This is the moment when I think my practice is most alive and confounding. In such a moment, no one is sure what the right apparatus is for maintaining the life of the thing at hand. No one knows how best to engage because the models for doing so are complex and never fully visible.

The process of working with the Johnson imagery has made me realize how powerful publishing is. Producing images and bodies of knowledge using that medium is becoming a bigger aspect of my practice, through, for instance, Black Madonna Press, my record label and publishing house. Moving forward, after having spent a lot of time making work in the vein of heavy sculpture by white male artists, I plan to use such print platforms to show current progress in the Black community. —>

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ACRES OF LAND OWNED BY NEGROES IN GEORGIA.



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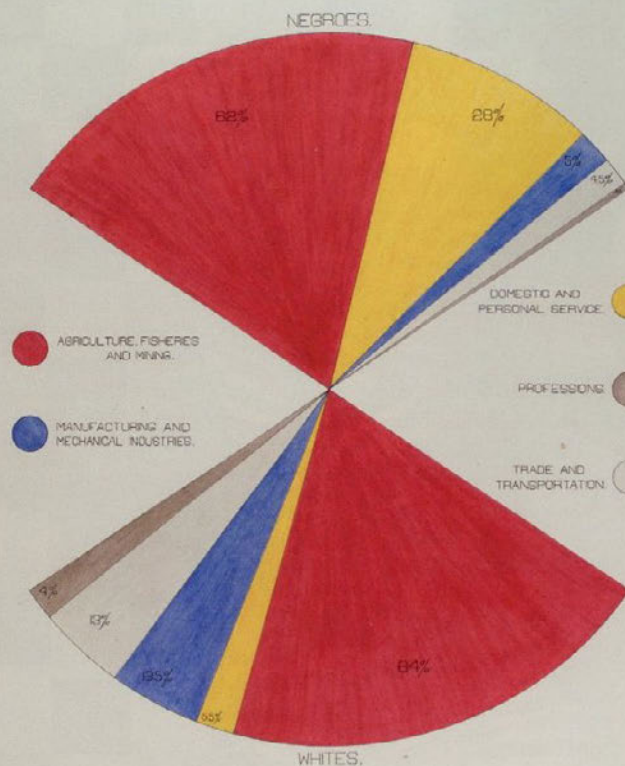


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OCCUPATIONS OF NEGROES AND WHITES IN GEORGIA.



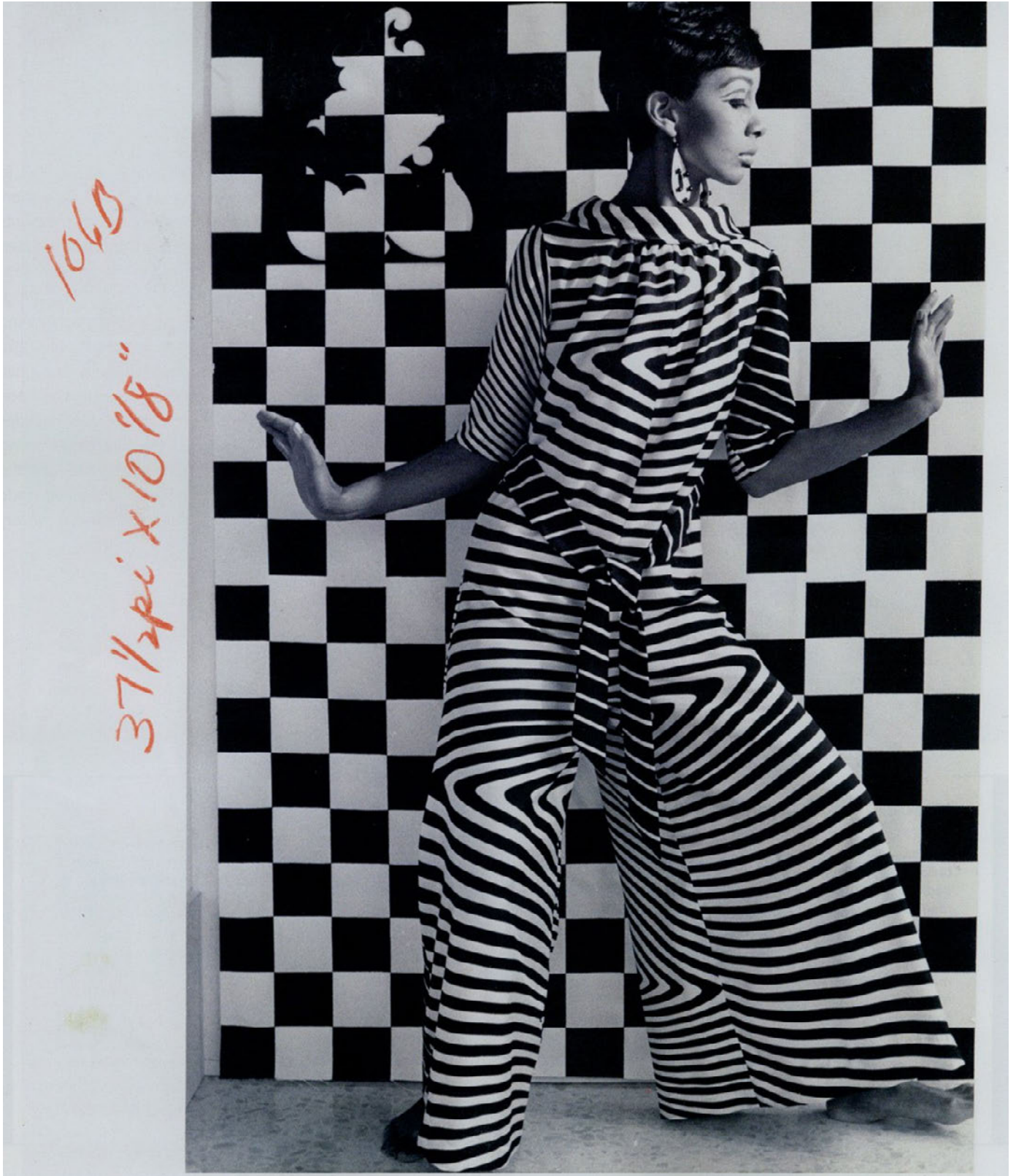
When the United States was invited to participate in the 1900 Paris Exposition, a world's fair highlighting achievements of the prior century, Congress debated whether or not there should be a separate division dedicated to Black progress alongside the one demonstrating American progress. The great sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois said there absolutely had to be, because Black people had been free in this country for only four decades and the progress they had made during that time had been substantial—and the contribution that Black people had made to American culture even during slavery was under-told. →

JOHNSON PUBLISHING COMPANY OFFICES

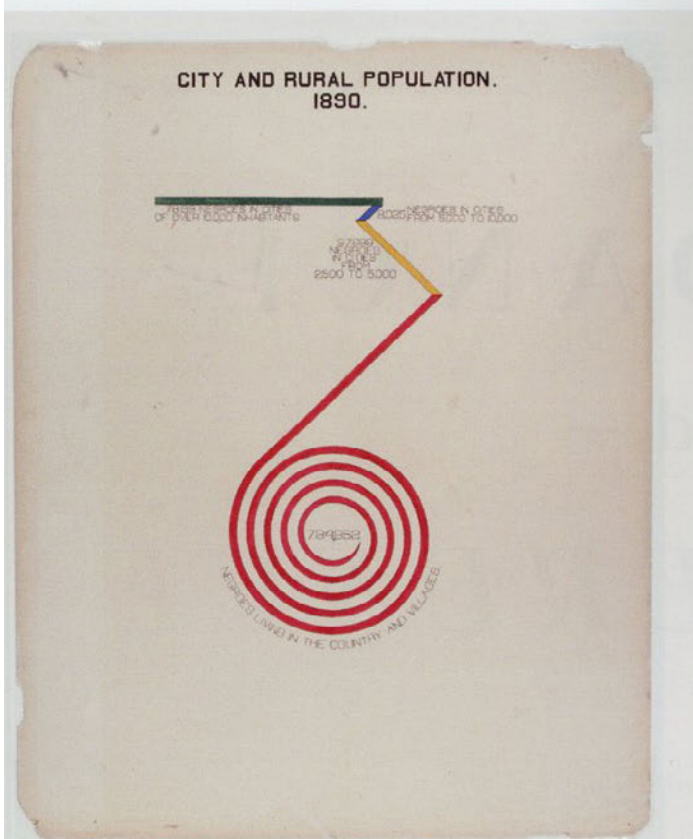
Columbia College Chicago bought the Johnson Publishing Company building in 2010. They planned to turn the top floor into a museum dedicated to John and Eunice Johnson, but they didn't raise enough money. So Linda Johnson—who in 2012 had given me the full contents of the Johnson Publishing Library, from the fixtures to the 26,000 books, to house at the Stony Island Arts Bank, a cultural space I created on the South Side—called me and asked if I could help manage the transition of the company's things from the space. So we removed all the furniture, the wallpaper, portions of the ceiling, the lighting sconces, the awards and other important personal objects. This is one of the photos we took documenting the space before that process began. It is both sad and exciting to steward these objects. For a show last year that we organized with support from the Terra Foundation, we refurbished sofas, tables, and credenzas, and created a swank '70s Johnson lounge throughout the Arts Bank.



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Du Bois organized an exhibition of photographs for the fair, and included data visualizations he'd made in collaboration with Black students in Georgia. These graphics were his early attempts to show how in the years between 1857 and 1899, no oppressed people in the world had done as much to create local societies, to own their own land, to form social groups, to become college-educated.

Du Bois and John and Eunice Johnson were Black progressives, in that they were always trying to show the world how much progress Black people were making at the same time that the world was discrediting them. This way of living in the world—to be someone who consistently articulates Black progress—appeals to me. ●

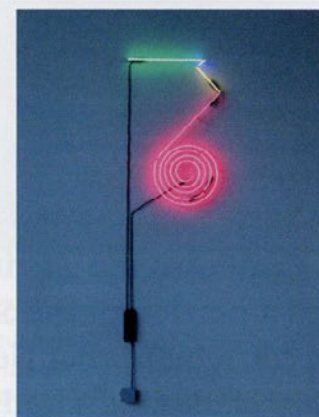
Theaster Gates:
Mountain Aura,
2018, neon, 36½ by
27½ by ½ inches.



Gates: Progress Mill,
2018, neon, 38½ by
38½ by ½ inches.



Gates: A Tussle in the House of Love, 2018, neon, 32½ by 21 by ½ inches.



NEONS

Du Bois was an artist as much as a social scientist. In various works—paintings, sculptures, and finally neons—I've removed the statistics from Du Bois's data visualizations to reveal the images' sophistication. His drawings are their own early form of modernism. That's also how we might think of the Johnson offices, as modernism gone "Black"—the spaces, with their colors and patterns, belong to the history of Black modernism, which is essentially modernism with a consciousness.