

# Screenplay for an Exhibition

A JOHNSON PUBLISHING STORY // REBUILD FOUNDATION

By Patrick Lanford Stephenson

JET



[ THE SEEN ]

In an interview printed by the Kunstmuseum Basel, Theaster Gates—in regard to the value of the Johnson Publishing Company (JPC) archives featured in his exhibition, *Black Madonna*—stated, “The value is that the world wants to know more complex understandings of Blackness in the same way it is coming to know more complex understandings of gender.” He continued by saying, “I am bringing race to Kunstmuseum Basel. But I am bringing these politics to celebrate Black ingenuity, fashion, gender complexities, everyday Black life.” *Black Madonna* is centered around this idea of celebrating Blackness and everyday Black life in America, doing so by utilizing archival practices.

For Gates, organized information holds power—it has to do with not just the past, but the future as well. He asks, “...what remains important over time and where does a thing have to live in order to survive time? At some point, families become foundations and corporations become museums and sometimes, things die, and the contributions made to culture or society are interwoven more than they are explicit.” Using browsable slides from the archives of the Johnson Publishing Company, the legendary publisher of *Ebony* and *Jet*, Gates is determined to preserve Black images—over 13,000 images of Black women—and to ascribe them institutional value for years to come.

In Chicago, I was able to experience *A Johnson Publishing Story*, a dreamlike recreation of the JPC’s iconic headquarters and its interior design at Gates’ Rebuild Foundation. Located in the Stony Island Arts Bank, the displays feature John H. Johnson’s own desk, neon wall pieces, African and African inspired artwork, sculptures, publications, the Johnson library collection, office supplies, and furniture. It is this collection of archives that are the focus of this feature. What follows are my own reflections on my visit to *A Johnson Publishing Story* in the form of an experimental screenplay.

*A Johnson Publishing Story*, curated by Theaster Gates at the Rebuild Foundation’s Stony Island Arts Bank, runs through September 30, 2018.

FADE IN:

EXT. 67<sup>TH</sup> STREET AND STONY ISLAND AVENUE/  
CHICAGO-DAY

The white exterior of the Stony Island State Savings Bank catches the sun in such a way that it lobs a blinding glare across the street, causing small tears to well up in the eyes of pedestrians and motorists alike.

VOICE(V.O.)

(Over series of shots)  
11 stories. In 11 stories on the south end of Downtown, an entire generation's purveyor of stories was housed. Stories incepted and edited and cut and packaged and printed and sold; every possible stage of transforming an idea into a story contained neatly within 11 stories.

BEGIN SERIES OF SHOTS:

A. A desk sits in front of an orange wall, it is made of a deep brown wood as well as alligator skin-dyed red. The curves of its design are simple and sleek, but abrupt.

B. A neon sign, presumably a contemporary art piece, hangs on the same orange wall. The tubes are arranged such a way that the resulting image resembles a wheel with 6 spokes. The outline glows a bright white, while the spokes are a piercing red. It hums softly.

C. The leaves of a tropical species, possibly a variety of palm, lay silently against a tan leather backdrop.

D. A clock with a white face sits alone on a white wall, its outline is red with plastic.



E. The stone faces of the gods stare outward among an endless wall of books.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

EXT. 67<sup>TH</sup> STREET AND STONY ISLAND AVENUE/  
CHICAGO-DAY

The Sun is lower in the sky now, but the white walls of the Stony Island State Savings Bank continue to glisten. The building sits unmoving, as is the case with most buildings. Things are still.

VOICE(V.O.) (CONT'D)

I use 'story' here of course to mean both floors of a building as well as simply tales, a recounting of events. It seems an apt word for both meanings, every story of a building has a history, a story.

INT. STONY ISLAND STATE SAVINGS BANK/  
CHICAGO-DAY

The foyer of the building is small, there is a doorway leading to a staircase on the right, an elevator that looks much newer than the rest of the building to the left, and a small welcome table in the center.

VOICE(V.O.)(Over series of shots)  
And stories are important. When exercising control, stories can be a tool for documenting the past, understanding the present, and if you're clever, writing your own future. A really good story can do it all at once. But stories are not always written or told fairly, or at all. Sometimes stories become old, and they die. And sometimes it takes a group of people in an 11-story building to make something worth rebuilding. Imagine a story factory so strong and so efficient, that it changed the course of a generation. Imagine growing up without a single story for you.

BEGIN SERIES OF SHOTS

A. A waiting room full of sleek mid-century furniture sits mostly deserted, save for the god-like sculptures gazing into the distance.

B. Flickering in the dimly lit basement, a neon sign resembling a musical note hums on the wall.

C. A full bar-any liquor imaginable-sits tucked away across from a small stage and a small crowd of chairs. A haze fills the air, perhaps cigarette smoke.

D. A dark skinned hand drags a computer mouse back and forth across a glass desk.

E. A red typewriter sits on a yellow surface.

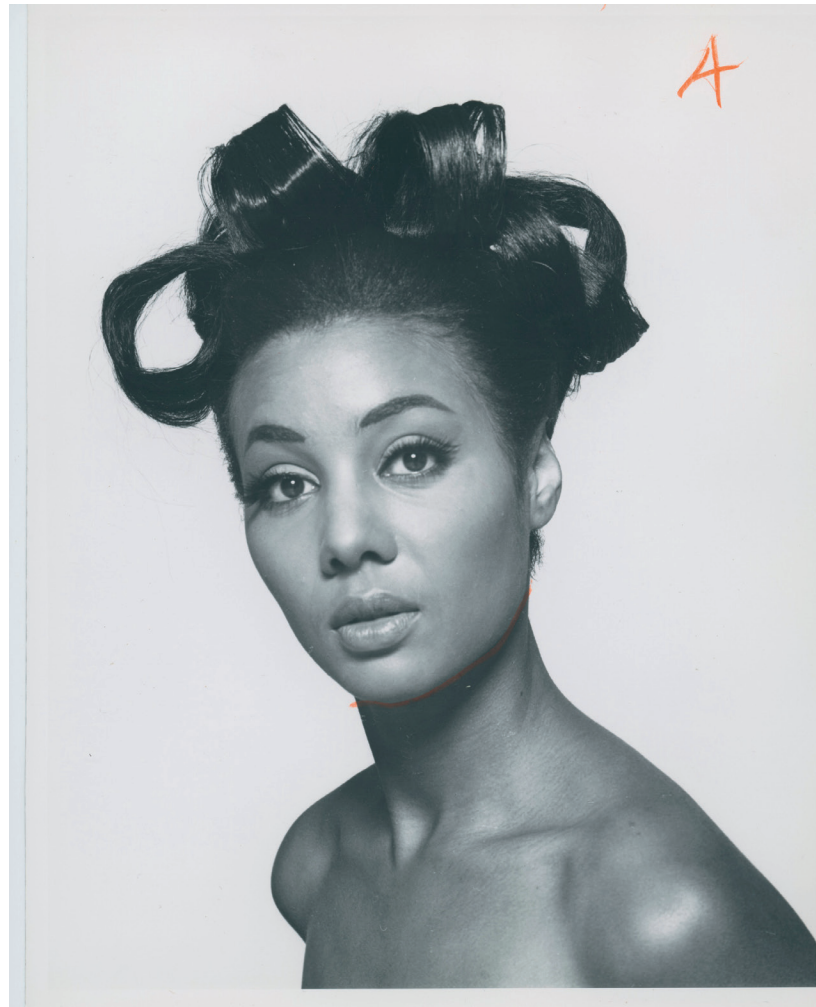
END SERIES OF SHOTS

EXT. SOUTH LOOP/CHICAGO-DAY

The building stands 11 stories tall, easily countable due to the blunt horizontal stripes that define each floor. At the very top stands a sign which reads "EBONY JET," its exterior is bland at first glance yet intriguingly bare for a Michigan Avenue property.



Walter Churchill and Carole Red



VOICE(V.O.) (CONT'D)

This is a kind of story too. One that echoes within another. This story is about rebuilding, reviving, and retelling. See, there was once a publishing company, and it was called Johnson, after John H. Johnson. This is not the story of how the Johnson Publishing Company shaped the future of visual, political, and popular culture in Black America, or how it paved the way for other Black media companies to empower Black voices. Those are great stories, but this one is about the revival of Johnson's 11 story building on the south end of Downtown.

INT. JOHNSON PUBLISHING HEADQUARTERS (STONY ISLAND RECREATION)-DAY

A PEDESTRIAN, 27, white with slouchy shoulders, a wide frame, and glasses, enters the Stony Island State Savings Bank. After signing the visitor sheet, the pedestrian makes his way to the staircase and ascends into the recreation of the Johnson Publishing Company.

INT. JOHNSON PUBLISHING HEADQUARTERS (STONY ISLAND RECREATION)/UPSTAIRS-DAY



The pedestrian makes his way around the space, taking in the archives. To his right sits John H. Johnson's desk, made of wood and red alligator skin with a neon ship's wheel hanging authoritatively on the wall behind it. To his left an entire wall of card catalogs, with topics ranging from Ancient Egypt to Gothic architecture. If the mid-century sensibilities do not give away the time in which this space is frozen, the card catalogs surely do. As if in response to the catalogs, the pedestrian lets out a soft exclamation,

PEDESTRIAN  
Jesus...

On top of the card catalog cabinets sit a series of small stone sculptures, all figurative. The pedestrian moves forward, past the desk, stopping for a moment to look at a large abstract painting. He finds himself in the middle of what looks like a waiting area. The furniture, a couch and two chairs, is sleek and angular, but also curved and soft. The coffee table is a solid block of presumably granite, maybe even marble. On top of its polished stone surface sit several editions of *JET*. As he moves further throughout the space, he finds larger, life-size sculptures similar

to the ones guarding the card catalog, although these made the building's library their home. And in the Library behind a glass wall, sits more vintage furniture, more copies of *EBONY* and *JET*, and John H. Johnson's entire library collection. The pedestrian moves towards a shelf and reaches for a book, just as he grips the spine, the voice of a MAN—40, tall, with a soft yet firm voice—echoes down from a catwalk-like upper level of the library, accessible by a ladder on the far end of the room.

MAN

Excuse me sir, if you would like to handle this part of the archives, you'll have to come back for an orientation.

PEDESTRIAN

(embarrassed)

Oh, gosh sorry, I didn't realize—

MAN

It's alright, you're free to browse the shelves in the next room if you like.

PEDESTRIAN

Oh okay, cool, thanks.

The pedestrian makes his way out of the library, on his way out he starts to notice the signs littered about, which read, "These objects are sacred, please be respectful."

#### BEGIN SERIES OF SHOTS

A. Inside some sort of glass case, an old sign can be read, "We Serve Colored Carry Out Only."

B. On a shelf full of books, one series of volumes stands out. A dry, old, and bland looking collection of books, the title reads, *The Biology of the Negro*.

C. A portrait of the Black patriot, Crispus Attucks sits alone on a white wall.

D. A vintage Lil Abner comic strip advertises Cream-of-Wheat with racist imagery and dialogue behind a pane of glass.

#### END SERIES OF SHOTS

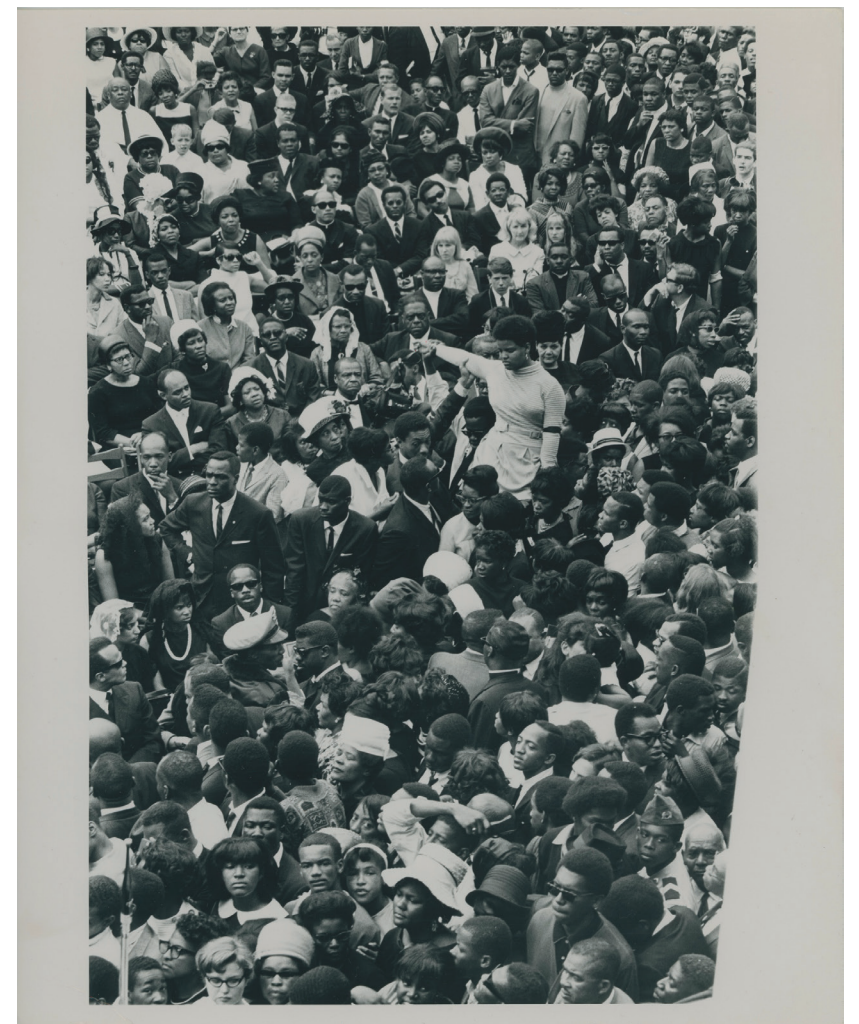
VOICE(V.O.)

(Over series of shots)

Sacred. Respect. Two defining features of this visual story. Scattered around the space, these tiny notecards are meant to be observed but not seen. In fact, the pedestrian making his

voyage through the Johnson Publishing Story, did not even consider the words printed on them beyond the main point of "don't touch." But these notecards do something else for this story. They remind us that this story is not a fiction. That these objects are sacred because they have histories that are real. They are tied inextricably by time and place and concept to the Johnson Publishing era, to an era of great progress for Black Americans. These individual objects indirectly shaped the culture of a generation. Please come see for yourself, and please, be respectful.

FADE TO BLACK.



TITLE PAGE, PAGE 66, ABOVE

Theaster Gates, installation view of *Black Madonna*, Kunstmuseum Basel. April 9 – October 21, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Kunstmuseum, Basel.

PAGE 64-65

Theaster Gates, installation view of *A Johnson Publishing Story*, Stony Island Arts Bank, Chicago. June 28 – September 30, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Rebuild Foundation.

DESIGN

Framing for background of the layout is sourced from the verso markings of the Johnson Publishing Archive.

by Howard Moreland