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## Create Space—Create Communal Change: An Exploration of Tactics Used by Augusta Savage and Theaster Gates

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Create Space—Create Communal Change:  
An Exploration of Tactics Used by Augusta Savage and Theaster Gates

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts  
of Bard College

by  
Ardel'Paschal 'A'P' Sampson

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023



## **Dedication**

I first want to dedicate this project to my greatest supporter and helper and savior Jesus Christ, “The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed”(Deut 31:8). I truly believe that He helped me write every word of this paper. I want to dedicate this project to my parents, my grandmother, Jeremiah, my siblings, and my community. Thank you for your support and prayers and encouragement, I could not have accomplished all that I have without you all. I also want to dedicate this project to the late Dr. Shellie Sampson, an icon and one of my biggest inspirations, I love you so much DaddySamps.



## **Acknowledgements**

I first acknowledge my mom for teaching me how to read, write, helping me create my midway poster, and for inspiring me to put more of myself into this project. With equal importance, I want to acknowledge my dad for teaching me how to advocate for myself, all about black history and our personal family history. Thank you for being willing to talk for hours about this project. I love and appreciate you both and I am so grateful and proud to have you both as my parents. I want to acknowledge with immense emphasis, my advisor Susan Merriam for always keeping it real with me, for dedicating so much time to me and for always being willing to meet and talk things through with me. Thank you for pushing me. I want to acknowledge Katherine Boivin for being my first advisor and always providing me with amazing advice. I want to also acknowledge Olga Touloumi, who made the Methods course so much fun, which helped me solidify my love for Art History and being a nerd. I want to acknowledge Julia Rosenbaum for always making herself available to meet and discuss anything. Lastly, I want to acknowledge my best friend and sister at Bard Amanda Derell. God knew, I wouldn't have made it through these last four years without you. Words cannot capture the gratitude I have for every single one of you.



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## Introduction

My life and experiences tie very much into my motivation behind this project. I grew up going to a predominantly white private school on the Upper West side of Manhattan. I was accepted into the school because of a standardized test that I took at five years old. I stayed at the same school my entire adolescence from kindergarten until I graduated high school. This was a very unique situation for me in comparison to the rest of my family. Not only was I going to a PWI but I was also surrounded by individuals in a high tax bracket. Everything about my peers seemed to be different. In high school after being confronted with racism many, many times from teachers and other students, I started to join clubs and groups that brought awareness to racism and the experiences of the people of color in the school, regardless if I wanted to be a part of these clubs or not. I was always seen as if I was in the clubs, mostly because of my skin color but also partly because I learned how to advocate and speak up for myself.

However, initially I didn't want to be a part of the clubs and groups because it made school very hard to be in. Instead of focusing on learning and having fun and making connections, I always had to be aware of what someone was saying and if it was offensive (and there was always someone saying something offensive). I became hyper aware of what I was doing and conversations I was having, along with being the spokesperson for Black people in almost every class and among the administration. Everyday felt like a fight to get people to recognize their preconceived notions and for them to see me, when I know mostly they just saw another Black girl, one out of the 4 other girls in the grade out of a class of 200. This was tiring and after reflecting over the summer I realized that I did not want my college experience to be the same way. I came in just vowing to be myself in every situation and to do and say what I

wanted. I did experience some of the same incidents that I faced in high school but I feel that not only was I used to it, but I also felt that I did not have to let it affect me, in a lot of ways I did not care.

In college I did not join the same groups or clubs that were a part of a “movement” to help create a less racist campus. This was beneficial to me; I was able to enjoy classes and not endure the pressure that is often put on us to be activists. This pressure is one brought on by being the only or one of a few Black persons in a space, but it is also furthered by other Black people who seem to be working and constantly fighting with “the movement.” This idea of the “movement” for me describes whatever current fight is being talked about or actively being pursued to dismantle within the community or in larger groups. During the time of Covid, the “movement” was for one to be a part of marches and Black Lives Matter protests. If you weren't a part of these things then it can seem that you aren't doing anything to further dismantle the oppression of Black people. But I always knew that fighting for change does not always look the same. Through classes and reading, I realize that some political activists are the most prominent and remembered for their change making. There are also other writers, artists, and thinkers that made an impact and a change in society.<sup>1</sup> When I came across the term fugitivity, in my junior year of college, I felt as if a name was placed on an alternative form of activism, that in some ways is not even activism at all. Fugitivity described the subversive nature that change can be

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<sup>1</sup> My way of addressing oppression and lack of race inclusivity in college was to use my writing to promote Black history and stories. Every chance I had to be able to write or present or do a project about race or Black history especially in relation to Black women I took it. This helped me make a difference by being able to have Black voices and stories present in my academic life.

and it highlighted the importance of different forms of resistance and the power that one mindset can bring. I realized that it does not always take being a part of the “movement” to be a part of creating change.

Although I could understand that there were different forms of resistance, creating a visually imaginative understanding made my ideas have concrete clarity. The visualization of the wall theory came to my mind. I realized throughout history there have always been ways in which those who are oppressed have found different tactics and measures to dismantle or break down oppression. In order to help visualize and concretize these ideas I wanted to think of oppression as a wall. This is not just any wall but it is a strong industrial wall that is thick but not indestructible. On one side of the wall are those who are affected by oppression, specifically Black people within America. Just by breaking through the wall it does not mean that you have broken through and ended oppression but it means that you are able to make a difference in society. In a way those who are able to get on the other side of the wall are those who break through societal noise in order to lessen oppression. Since we have been enslaved we have been working to break down the wall fully in order to overcome the effects of oppression. For years we as a people have developed many ways to chip at or help dismantle the wall. This means we have found ways to dismantle certain systems that have placed us in spaces of exploitation.

In order to further these ideas I want to think through ways different notable people within Black history have gone through or broken down different parts of the wall or how they have created change. I am studying these figures in relation to how their tactics to create change may be seen as figurative battle strategies of breaking down the wall. I want to draw attention to the explicit differences in changemaking from different changemakers in Black history. Dr. King,

James Baldwin, the Black Panthers, and Black Lives Matter all approach and address oppression and the wall in different ways. Firstly, I want to think about arguably the most notable changemaker, Dr. Martin Luther King. Dr. King, an undeniable activist, was someone who gathered masses of people to join in the fight with him. King started by using grassroots activism that accumulated to mass support and exposure across the nation and eventually the world. In doing so he was able to break down many layers of the wall in a public and institutional way. King's non violence stance as well as his ability to lead and exemplify powers in numbers is what he is remembered for. However someone like James Baldwin is recognized and strategizes in a different way. James Baldwin is not someone who gathered people in a physical way or helped in any physical way. But Baldwin used language in order to help break down the wall but he did so from farther away. His act of moving to France was a way of helping himself escape the wall in order to pursue a peace and freedom that fell impossible within America. Yet when looking back we still recognize his contribution of language and literature to the cultural foundation of America. In many ways Baldwin helped give fuel to those fighting by providing them with the language to convey what they were experiencing. In contrast, the Black Panthers were not a one person entity but a group that worked collaboratively to obstruct the wall. The Black Panthers had an impact on the wall by working within the system and laws that were in place in order to support their community. The "10 Point program" was used to not only tell the world what they needed to succeed in this country or what it would take for the wall to fall down completely. But it helped other Black individuals know what they were supporting when joining their cause. The Black Panthers did not wait for the country to give them their demands; they gathered the community in order to feed, educate and provide protection for those who were in need.

I want to also briefly think through the ways in which the organization Black Lives Matter has played a crucial role in helping to break down the wall. Black Lives Matter was started by three women, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, after the murder of Travon Martin. As the unnecessary murders of more Black people were increasingly publicized through the help of social media the movement grew and in many ways transcended the organization. What made the “Black Lives Matter” so monumental was that it involved anyone and everyone who wanted to be a part of it. Essentially almost any person could start a march or a rally in support of Black lives and many people gathered their own communities to bring awareness to police brutality and other injustices. Although in a lot of ways common tactics for activism have stayed the same since the time of the Civil Rights movement, the means of media have greatly increased the effects that movements can have because of their ability to reach a large variety of audiences. By bringing attention to the injustices of our justice system, the BLM movement also caused there to be more attention and recognition of those who work within these systems to obtain rights for those who are oppressed. During the height of the movement in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd, there was a nationwide call to include Black culture regularly in our societal culture. Museums, film productions, fashion designers and others started to become apparent of their support for Black lives and culture by becoming more inclusive in their productions.

This idea of identifying different ways that people have fought the wall of oppression is important to me as a Black person because oftentimes there is an immense pressure to always join “the movement” and be an activist by always trying to change the systems we live within. Activism is often thought of as joining rallies or marches or gathering people together, signing

petitions to show that there is power in numbers. This type of activism is often seen as the only successful way because it was the way in which Dr. King operated and we tend to think of King as the most successful change in Black history. King's language was also one that did not indicate threat and in many ways people thought he was safer than other figures of the time. The Black Panthers on the other hand prioritized the direct needs of the people and used the systems in place to their advantage without trying to receive sympathy from the public. The Black Panthers created change for those in their specific location by feeding and educating, but because they were deemed as a terrorist group and believed in protecting themselves, they are often seen as failures because their change didn't last.

All of these examples are either furthered by or attacked by the public view of them through different forms of media that tracked and analyzed their opposition to the wall. This project seeks to focus on other forms of resistance that are not necessarily focused on breaking down or changing systems but exploring how two artists used systems for their advantage by working through them and establishing their own spaces outside of exclusive spaces. Fugitivity is another way that the marginalized are able to break down the wall of oppression. This idea empowers them not to fight but to go and dig their way under the wall enabling those who follow to use their same pathways.

This project will focus on two artists, Augusta Savage and Theaster Gates. Both of these artists work to move through systems of oppression, have had similar goals, and have created similar structures that exist outside of white run institutions. This project is not for the reader to gain a full and complete understanding of the biography of Augusta Savage and Theaster Gates. This project is really a call for the reader to rethink the ways we traditionally think about

activism through changing laws, practices and confinements. The term activism implies reactively working to create change in opposition to the system in place. As I go through the life of these artists I want to challenge the reader to think about the ways the artists worked through the systems of their time (and the limitations of their time ) to still rise above oppression and create spaces for their communities to thrive. These spaces both physically, relationally and through their artwork, are ones that allow black people in their communities to be free without the stress or pressure to be released from certain laws to do so. I want black people to know by reading this project that, yes, many systematic changes need to be made. But we can still find purpose, success, legacy and freedom in spaces that have already been created for us by us; and by using the arsenal of tools that are available to us on a day to day basis for our advantage. And we don't always need laws or systems to change before we create change in our communities ourselves by meeting a need that the system is not meeting. I believe that fugitivity plays a crucial role in placing concrete language and understanding on this idea, however it is not essential.

The concept of fugitivity emerged within Black historical discourse across multiple disciplines. Tina Campt, an art historian, has focused much of her work on fugitivity, and much of my argument will be informed by her understanding of the concept. Campt focuses on the idea of escape in her definition as well; she says that “fugitivity highlights a tension between acts of flight and of escape and a creative practice of refusal.”<sup>2</sup> I would be remiss, however, if I didn't

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<sup>2</sup> Tina Campt, “Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity,” Barnard Center for Research on Women, Barnard College lecture, October 7, 2014.

<https://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/tina-campt-Black-feminist-futures-and-the-practice-of-fugitivity/>



acknowledge the contribution Fred Moten, a music, performance, and Black studies theorist, made to Campt's thinking. Moten writes, “Fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always already improper voice or instrument.”<sup>3</sup> Although Moten writes about fugitivity in terms of music, his definition captures the essence of the concept: “a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed.”

Campt employs fugitivity to describe a mindset that the diaspora of Black people have historically used as a mode of resistance; it is a way of resisting oppression and discrimination. Fugitivity according to Campt is an existential reality of mental, social and cognitive refusal, not allowing cultural stereotypes of Black persons to define you. To Dr. Campt, “Fugitivity is a quotidian practice of refusal...it's nimble and strategic practices that undermine the category of the dominant.”<sup>4</sup> As Black people, we have to practice elasticity and stay ready to move or flow; we can't get set or stuck. Having the mindset of fugitivity is an everyday “practice of refusal” in your day-to-day life. It's refusing to be confined in a space of rejection or a space of limitation. In *Listening to Images*, Campt defines refusal “as an extension of the range of creative responses Black communities have marshaled in the face of racialized dispossession. In this context, refusal is not a response to a state of exception or extreme violence.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, fugitivity is a daily praxis, equipping individuals to live out their own agency. Campt notes that “like the

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<sup>3</sup> Fed Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Campt, “Black Feminist Futures and the Practice of Fugitivity,” October 7, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

concept of fugitivity, practicing refusal highlights the tense relations between acts of flight and escape, and creative practices of refusal.”<sup>6</sup> This nimble and strategic practice may not appear impactful initially, but eventually this unconventional refusal will act as an off kilter algorithm against predictable resistance. People who practice fugitivity will be like wildcards for those who are trying to control through predictable resistance. Campt is saying that fugitivity is a mindset that allows Black people to withstand and counteract the continual everyday hardships that come with being Black. This is not activism, which is a counter reaction to events or situations, but instead this is a proactive approach that allows one to live in a way that is not in a continual response to violence or discrimination. This idea of proactiveness within fugitivity is also made clear when Campt states that fugitivity is “Practices honed in response to sustained, everyday encounters with exigency and duress that rupture a predictable trajectory of flight.”<sup>7</sup> Having the mindset of fugitivity is a continual “practice” rather than a specific response to situations that are present. Having a fugitivity mindset really means an everyday refusal to accept rejection by living a life that will ensure a successful Black future; a successful future for yourself and maybe even for your community. If you have a fugitive mindset you're constantly moving towards betterment, even in ways that don't necessarily look like mainstream acts of resistance.

In Chapter 1 fugitivity will play a crucial and central role in analyzing Augusta Savage’s life to emphasize the impact she was still able to make as a non activist. The chapter includes biography but mainly it is written as a form of analyzing her life through a series of moments when she uses fugitivity. This is to highlight and exemplify how fugitivity can be seen in a

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<sup>6</sup>Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32.

<sup>7</sup>Campt, *Listening to Images*, 10

person in contrast to the way that Savage was previously assessed as an activist. This chapter also highlights a few of her works as a sculptress and the way those pieces represent her change in independence at the time. A major part of the chapter is dedicated to exploring her works or creating an art school and creating the Contemporary Negro Salon, which were two of her major accomplishments during her career.

In the second chapter, fugitivity plays a role, but not as directly as in Savage's case. Instead I will focus more broadly, without a strict theoretical frame, on how Theaster Gates has used his art work and his revenue to reinvest into his community. This chapter does include biographical elements in order to explore how Theaster Gates found his interest and place within the art world. The chapter investigates his motivations and tactics in order to discover how he creates these places for his community. It will discuss the establishment of the Dorchester Projects. This is a series of abandoned houses, in the southside of Chicago, that Gates bought and transformed into creative artists spaces. Additionally it will explore the Stony Arts Saving Bank. This is a bank that was nearly demolished before Gates petitioned and invested in it in order to save it from being destroyed. Gates bought the bank from the city of Chicago and turned it into a creative and cultural hub with unique archives that are open to the public. Lastly this chapter will discuss Gates's most recent exhibition: *The Young Lords and Their Traces*. This exhibition, held at the New Museum in New York City, features not only Gates's work but also personal archives and mementos from key relationships that he has built over the years.

In the conclusion of this project I will reintroduce the concept of fugitivity. There are many striking similarities between Savage and Gates that will be explored in relation to and outside of fugitivity. And although fugitivity is not present in the Gates chapter, I believe it's

important to at least think through ways in which he may be connected to fugitivity. It's important to keep in mind that not all Black people who make a difference for their communities are activists and this project is meant to highlight the ways in which two artists who have created similar spaces have made a difference within the system.

## Chapter 1: Augusta Savage

June 7, 1939: the opening night of the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art in Harlem, the first gallery to exhibit and sell work by African American artists. Augusta Savage stands in the center of the crowd depicted in the black and white photograph sporting a beautiful dress featuring a sweetheart neckline and an enormous bow (Fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> The rest of the dress is simple, covered in small and rhythmically placed polka dots. A bouquet of flowers--an indication of the special occasion--lies next to the bow on her shoulder. This is a monumental moment in Savage's career, for she is the power behind the gallery, its creator and curator.

Augusta Savage is surrounded by influential individuals of that time all dressed in black tie attire. She is smiling at W.C Handy, who is recognized as the grandfather of jazz music—a critical aspect of American culture. Max Eastman, one of Savage's financial supporters and a supporter of Black art and culture, is standing behind her. To the left of Max Eastman is Channing Tobias, a key political figure who was known as the Booker T. Washington of his day. Beside W.C. Handy is Selma Burke, one of Savage's students, who would later open her own sculpture school. Marvin and Morgan Smith, also known as the "twin M. Smith" brothers, photographed the group.<sup>9</sup> The Smith brothers are exemplary of Savage's power as a teacher; even though they knew they wanted to focus on photography, they attended her school. By exhibiting

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<sup>8</sup> “Photograph by M. Smith,” *Augusta Savage Portrait Collection*, Graphic, 1925, Sc MG 731 Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photography and Prints Division, The New York Public Library.

<sup>9</sup> The identity of the individuals and the photographer is known because the back of the photo identifies them all and has M. Smith brothers stamped logo.

the art of her former students, she is investing in their artistic success, ultimately, gifting them an opportunity to exhibit their work in public. A gallery space is a perfect example of what it means to put arts education into practice.

The people featured in this photograph were all important to the New Negro Movement (also known as the Harlem Renaissance).<sup>10</sup> The Harlem Renaissance had a huge impact on Black history in the United States because it represented a period of flourishing creativity in the arts. It is particularly worth noting that the Harlem Renaissance took place during America's Jim Crow era, a time of immense discrimination towards Black people. Savage was a major figure during this period, and is often viewed as an innovator because she created powerful works of art, started a successful art school, and opened a thriving gallery. Scholars frequently describe Savage, as they do other figures of the Harlem Renaissance, as an activist or a "renaissance woman." In contrast, I want to move beyond the somewhat general framework of activism or "renaissance woman," and explore how Savage's work and actions demonstrate ways in which she was not necessarily an activist but an innovator. Savage did not seek to change the system she was a part of ( the system being the Jim Crow laws and other distinctly discriminatory spaces) instead she sought to use the system to create a space for her community. She was able to use her mindset and day to day opportunities to create works of art, an art school and a gallery using her agency and independent mindset.

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<sup>10</sup> It was known as the New Negro Movement at the time because of writer and art critic Alain Locke.

## Augusta Savage's Life and Work

I want to turn now to the story of Savage's life and look at it from her perspective as well as from the perspective of scholars. Highlighting the different perspectives serves as a groundwork for my interpretation of moments of Savage's life. Augusta Savage grew up during Reconstruction in America, meaning that her grandmother or great-grandmother was likely enslaved. This was a time of the creation of Jim Crow laws which caused repressive discrimination and racial tension. It is important to emphasize that during this time Savage was likely afraid of violent discrimination toward her on the basis of her race. She likely feared or may have experienced trauma relating to lynchings or other vicious acts of aggression.

Augusta Savage, nee Fells, was born on February 29, 1892, in Green Cove Springs, Florida. During this year, one-hundred-and-sixty-one Black people were lynched, making it the most in a single year in U.S history.<sup>11</sup> Savage was the seventh child of a family of fourteen children. In her childhood Savage was often drawn to sculpture, which she discusses in an unpublished interview in the Schomburg Center for Black History and Culture Archives. She recalls shaping the red clay earth of Florida "into forms,--especially ducks" and "track[ing] this red clay into the house, all over the white pine floor."<sup>12</sup> Savage and her siblings would often be

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<sup>11</sup>“Jim Crow Era–Timeline,” Jim Crow Museum, Ferris State Museum, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/timeline/jimcrow.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> “Interview at studio June 20,1935 by (F.A.C.),” Unpublished , Augusta Savage papers, Sc MG 731, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.

punished for making a mess within the house and she reports that she would often skip school in order to make her sculptures. Her mini clay figures were looked down upon and not approved of by her parents, who thought they were “graven images.”<sup>13</sup> Despite the fact that according to Savage, her parents “practically whipped the art out of” her she continued to make sculptures.<sup>14</sup>

In 1907, at the age of fifteen, Augusta Fells married John T. Moore about whom not much is known. They had a daughter named Irene Connie Moore, but, soon after her birth, John Moore passed away. In 1915, Savage married James Savage, a carpenter, whom she divorced before she went to New York in 1921. Within her first moments of being in New York Savage met with a man at the American Academy of Arts and told him that she “had just arrived in New York with exactly \$4.50, [and] a determination to become an artist, and a successful one, in six

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<sup>13</sup> “Interview at studio June 20,1935 by (F.A.C.),” Unpublished , Augusta Savage papers, Sc MG 731, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library.

<sup>14</sup> Stacey Patton, *Corporal Punishment in Black Communities: Not an Intrinsic Cultural Tradition but Racial Trauma*, (American Psychological Association), <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2017/04/racial-trauma>. Although her parents' reaction to her art making may seem extreme, this may not be seen as extremely unusual and cruel for this time. Historically the practice of “beating” as punishment within American households overall is evident and found across historical and sociological studies. Scholars have used this report by Savage to over dramatize her childhood without considering the culture of the time.



months.”<sup>15</sup> This was the start of Savage’s career as she was able to finish the four-year Cooper Union program in three years. She started sculpting and completing commissions. In 1923 Savage applied to the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts in France and was one of 100 American women artists to be accepted and receive full financial support to travel to France and study art. However, her acceptance was rescinded when other awardees complained about being expected to travel with a Black woman.

Savage responded to this discrimination in the *New York Amsterdam News*, stating, “I hear so many complaints to the effect that Negroes do not take advantage of the educational opportunities offered to them. Well, one of the reasons why more of my race do not go in for higher education is that as soon as one of us gets his head above the crowd there are millions of feet ready to crush it back again to that dead level of commonplace thus creating a racial deadline of culture in our Republic. For how am I to compete with other American artists if I am not to be given the same opportunity?”<sup>16</sup> Savage's words here are powerful: they reveal her determination to break into the world of American artists. When she referred to "other" American artists," she meant white ones. In response to Savage's story, newspapers across the

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<sup>15</sup> “Interview at studio June 20,1935 by (F.A.C)” Unpublished , Augusta Savage papers, Sc MG 731 , Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

<sup>16</sup>Theresa A. Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 171.

country wrote of the committee's decision in favor of Savage and this helped Savage gain notability among Black activists of the time.

The next few years for Savage were filled with much loss and sorrow. In 1923 Savage married Robert L. Poston, who died six months after their marriage. In 1929, after the death of her brother, her family was forced to move into her two bedroom apartment. She not only took care of her paralyzed father, but she also worked as a laundress to support the household. Remarkably, these years of sorrow and difficulty did not prevent Savage from working on sculptures and fulfilling commissions. In 1929, however, the Julia Rosenwald Fellowship was granted to Savage and she was able to fulfill her dream of studying abroad in France for three years. This opportunity was a pivotal moment for Savage because of her dream to study abroad. This was a time when Savage was able to develop her agency as a woman and as an artist.

In 1932, Savage officially opened the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts in Harlem, New York City. She offered free classes to youth and adults and even supported them with free materials. She received governmental funding and as the classes grew, she allowed her students to teach. A few of her students became well-known individuals within as well as outside the art world. Her students most known as artists were Norman Lewis, Gwendolyn Knight and Jacob Lawrence. Eventually in 1936, Savage became the assistant supervisor of the WPA (Works Progress Administration) Federal Arts project and was able to expand her school in Harlem, which became the Harlem Community Arts Center. In 1937, Savage was the only Black woman to be commissioned to create a sculpture for the 1939 New York World's Fair. In 1939, Savage also opened the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art in Harlem, where over 500 people attended the opening night. Savage continued to lecture and host exhibitions until she moved to

Saugerties, NY, in 1945, where she continued to teach school children. While battling cancer, she moved in with her daughter in the Bronx until her death in March of 1962 .

### **Scholars' Reception of Savage's Life and Work**

Scholars often describe Savage's creative life and work as reflecting an activist approach. Although I don't disagree with this claim in a general sense, the words "activist" or "activism" don't help us think in complex ways about Savage's specific circumstances, and her reaction to those circumstances. Scholars typically begin with her childhood, emphasizing the obstacles she had to surmount in order to become a sculptor. In Augusta Savage's "Renaissance Women," Jeffreen Hayes writes,

When her father, a minister, discovered her work, he beat her severely for what he thought were 'graven images.' What makes her story so significant to us today is the strength of her character in selflessly championing not only her own opportunities but those of the next generation. Her father could not 'beat' the art out of her and neither could our imperfect world and society. <sup>17</sup>

This assertion that Savage had to overcome an abusive childhood is taken out of context and not considered deeply. But it is one that is repeated across literature regarding her life. Howard Dodson writes "Her father—a carpenter, fisherman, and farmer—was also a Methodist minister.

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<sup>17</sup> Jeffreen M. Hayes et al., *Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman* (London: GILES, 2018), 7.

This quotation may help readers understand the challenges that Savage may have faced as a kid, but this neglects the culture of discipline in Black families and it asserts this idea that Savage had no support. Leaving readers with only this information about Savage may still leave the impression that Savage was not supported by her family.

He discouraged Augusta's early interest in art making, viewing her clay sculptures as "graven images" frowned upon by the Bible. As Savage later exclaimed, he and her mother "practically whipped the art out of me."<sup>18</sup> When going to on to explain Savage's rejection from the the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts, Hayes describes Savage's response in a way that aligns with activism:

Savage did not take the rejection lightly; her act of protest laid the foundation for her role as a race woman and public intellectual. The unfortunate incident was reported in various newspapers, such as the *New York AmsterdamNews*, *Negro World*, *NewYork Herald Tribune*, *New York World*, and the *New York Times*. Some of the headlines, reflecting the racism Blacks endured during the Jim Crow era—"Negress Denied Entry to French Art School," "Famous Artists Draw Color Line against Student," and "The Color-Line in Art"—illuminate what often goes unspoken, even in contemporary times: racism and sexism are pervasive in the arts, a space believed to be equal and democratic for all.<sup>19</sup>

Savage's response the rejection are described in a similar manner. For Hayes this was "an example of her activism for the Black community, Savage's statement was a significant act of resistance, reflecting what Cooper defines as the race woman's role: to give shape and meaning to the Black body in a social and political climate."<sup>20</sup> Hayes goes on to say that Savage's activism "challenged the expected place of Black women socially in America: to be quiet and subscribe to the male-created notion of womanhood in the domestic sphere"<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Earnestine Lovelle

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<sup>18</sup> Hayes et al., *Augusta Savage*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Hayes et al., *Augusta Savage*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Hayes et al., *Augusta Savage*, 21.

<sup>21</sup> Hayes et al., *Augusta Savage*, 21.

Jenkins assesses this moment in Savage's life stating "as a 'race woman,' Savage protested the injustice by writing a letter that was published in the May issue of the *New York World*."<sup>22</sup>

Although I agree with Scholars that this moment of Savage life can certainly attest to her being an activist, to apply this term from her action from childhood throughout her entire career and life is not conducive to the specificity of her actions and mindset. To me it was an act of resistance because Savage was in the mindset of trying to achieve the same opportunities as other Americans, essentially other white artists. Savage makes an excellent point about citizenship rights and American rights but she's saying that Black artists should be given the same opportunity. Rather than accepting this refusal Savage kept on fighting. The ideas Savage presents here are not necessarily reminiscent of fugitivity. Fugitivity is seen through "nimble and strategic" actions, whereas Savage's actions in this moment are moments of activism that are drawing attention in order to create change.

### **Savage in France**

In Black history we often promote people who have engaged in powerful acts of resistance resulting in change. Before Savage's time, figures who would have fit this description are Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. These freedom fighters or activists did not necessarily embody fugitivity. Their acts were not text book quotidian occurrences, according to Camp's definition; however, microaggressions and aggressions by the dominant culture created a mindset of independence. Facing daily microaggressions can activate

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<sup>22</sup> Earnestine Lovelle Jenkins, "Augusta Savage in Paris: African Themes and the Black Female Body," in *Black Artists in America: From the Great Depression to Civil Rights* (Yale University Press, 2022), 97-119.

a more antagonistic posture that results in the desire to make overt change. Fugitivity produces a contrasting response, seeking results that better an individual's life.

I want to argue that “outward activism” was not Savage's primary goal. When Savage travels to France and returns to America with a passion to open and operate a school and an art gallery, you see the ways in which she changed her mindset of one that sought to create a space for her community. As Campt states, “fugitivity highlights a tension between acts of flight and of escape and a creative practice of refusal.”<sup>23</sup> Her practices were “creative” and “undermined” the “dominant,” defying the idea of how Black people should live and what they could own or operate. Savage's circumstances, including being rejected by the Fontainebleau scholarship, going to France and officially starting her school, bringing ideas from France and ideas from the “white artist’s world,” all while using Black figures and culture in her artwork accentuates her resistance and shows the ways she strategically thought about using what she had access to. In order to be able to create new spaces for her community to have an art world of their own.

This tension is seen throughout Savage's work and travel in France, beginning with the way she obtained her passport. While applying for her passport Savage changed her date of birth to appear nine years younger.<sup>24</sup> Her passport in the Schomburg Center Archives reflects this change while the funerary program for her celebration of life, also within the Schomburg Archives, indicates her accurate date of birth. The exact reasoning for changing her birthday on her passport may never be known. However, I would like to argue that the act of applying for and receiving a passport was historic for Savage: finally, after six years she was able to travel.

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<sup>23</sup> Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017), 32

<sup>24</sup> Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 179.

Here is a literal example of Savage's "acts of flight and of escape" while still upholding a "creative practice of refusal."<sup>25</sup> By changing her date of birth Savage could have been trying to reclaim her agency through reclaiming lost time, a means of self reinvention and "undermining the category of the dominant" through falsifying government records. This set of actions illustrates the specific way she thought about her identity and how others understood her identity. Her mindset when she was preparing for France must have shifted to take into account how she wanted to be seen, as a young talented traveling artist. In France she was not burdened with societal demands nor concerned with obtaining money and caring for a family. Savage took this opportunity to start a new life and identity without carrying the weight of her family and finances; it was her chance to be free and create art.

Savage's artistic production in France (1929-1932) is another important example of her mindset and goals. During this period people in the United States considered France as more accepting of Black people and culture.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, it was thought of as an artistic center that produced great artists in all media. Savage may have been drawn to study in France because its reputation suggested she might prosper in her career. She would not have been the first Black female artist, or even Black female sculptor, to make this trip: others, such as Edmonia Lewis and Meta Warrick Fuller preceded her, and may have functioned as models.<sup>27</sup> However, her experience was largely different in that she left her assigned teachers to carve her own path and create her own artistic style. Savage was abandoning one of her reasons for coming to France for

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<sup>25</sup> Tina Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32.

<sup>26</sup>Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, xv.

<sup>27</sup> Amy Helene Kirschke, *Women Artists of the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), xvii.

the purpose of autonomy; this was an act of agency. In other words, this was an act of fugitivity not because she went to Paris, but because she would soon leave the dominant expectation of mentorship. Savage had the space and ability in France to think concretely in specific, nimble, and strategic ways and she refused to not take advantage of her living in her dream artist location.

When Savage arrived in France, she started work at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière (founded 1904), a school focused on teaching painting and sculpture. Savage worked closely with the sculptor Félix Benneteau-Desgrois, who won the Grand Prix de Rome in 1909.<sup>28</sup> But a few months later Savage decided that she wanted to have her own practice and develop her own style. This decision resonates with the idea that fugitivity is, as written by Campt, “not a response to a state of exception or extreme violence.” From what scholars know about this time period in Savage’s life she did not face any “extreme exception or extreme violence” that would lead her to leave her mentor. This decision seems to be one entirely fueled by an unconstrained independent mindset that Savage was establishing for herself. By committing to pursue her craft instead of being subjected to fulfill the standard of the “dominant,” Savage was enacting her own agency and independence and refusal.

Savage describes this shift herself when she states, “I have lately been trying to develop an original technique . . . but I find that the masters are not in sympathy as they all have their own definite ideas.”<sup>29</sup> This “original technique” is seen through the themes that Savage had not previously explored in her work. Savage started to invest in her own methods as a sculptress. In

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<sup>28</sup> Jenkins, “Augusta Savage in Paris, 97-119.

<sup>29</sup> Kirschke, *Women Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*, 159.



order to accomplish this new goal she explains “I have been working alone for the past three or four months only calling in a critic for suggestions which I have found better for me if I am to develop along the line that I have decided on for myself.”<sup>30</sup> From her work, we can infer that Savage's idea of “originality” meant to sculpt more Black women in empowering forms. A primary example of this “originality” is in Savage’s series, titled by Theresa Leininger-Miller, as the *Amazon Series*.<sup>31</sup>

Two pieces in particular, *The Amazon* and *Mourning Victory*, demonstrate Savage's thinking in terms of her independence and in the way she was using her artwork to depict strength and empower Black women (Figs. 2 & 3). I have chosen these two pieces because I see how they both represent different aspects of Savage's mindset. *The Amazon* depicts a bare-breasted figure tightly gripping a spear. The spear is taller than the woman’s head.<sup>32</sup> It is clear that Savage intentionally crafted her arms to illuminate the women's strength by sculpting the curves of her muscles and the broadness of her shoulders. Additionally, Savage made this woman's features, including her coily, curly hair and the curvature of her nose and mouth, to accentuate her African heritage. *The Amazon*’s head is tilted up high and she is staring into the distance; this countenance produces a look of pride and courage. The loss and struggle Savage experienced up to this point in her life can be seen in another piece in this series, *Mourning Victory*. This piece represents a woman with hair, facial features, and broad shoulders similar to *The Amazon*. Where this woman differs is in her contrapposto stance, fully naked, over the head

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<sup>30</sup> Kirschke, *Women Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*, 159.

<sup>31</sup>Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 190.

<sup>32</sup> Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 186.

of her victim, which was sculpted to appear cut off from his body. Although she stands tall, her head is bent forward as if she is staring right into the man's eyes. Unfortunately, because the piece has been lost it cannot be seen in its entirety, and exists only in photos. However, it appears that the woman doesn't have a weapon in her hands. The muscles in the figure's legs, calves, and arms all emphasize the themes of fortitude. Perhaps this piece represents what Savage felt within herself: a soldier through adversity and discrimination who was finally able to overcome through her travel to France.

Before traveling to France a large part of her identity was framed by an act of discrimination. To the world she was still the "Negress Denied Entry to French Art School," but now she had made it and fulfilled her dream. How would she make her mark now? These pieces may indicate how Savage felt at this point in the midst of fulfilling a long term goal for her artistic career. *The Amazon* represents her new identity of (practice honed in response in order to sustain) as Campt states, "everyday encounters with exigency and duress that rupture a predictable trajectory of flight" and *Mourning Victory* represents her "quotidian practice of refusal" that are "nimble and strategic practices."<sup>33</sup>

This series is monumental in documenting Savage's shift because she depicts distinctly Black women in forms that emphasize their strength and womanhood. Leininger-Miller believes that Savage was inspired by Archibald Dalzel's book, *The History of Dahomey, an Inland Kingdom of Africa published in 1793*.<sup>34</sup> Dalzel's writing specifically describes the "Amazons" as African female warriors who fought, with bare breasts, for the kingdom of Dahomey.

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<sup>33</sup> Campt, *Listening to Images*, 10.

<sup>34</sup> Archibald Dalzel, *The History Of Dahomy: An Inland Kingdom Of Africa* (Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2009).

Being in France after facing much loss may have caused Savage to mentally and emotionally fortify herself in order to create work she had always dreamed of making. In France She experienced the death of several of her siblings, her father, two of her husbands, and her second child. Additionally, she suffered loss through divorce and through leaving her first child behind as she pursued her career. Traveling to Paris may have been a bittersweet “victory” for her. Since first being denied travel to Paris though the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts, Savage had saved and prepared for her travel. Her travel opportunity came right on the heels of her family moving in with her and her father’s death. Although Savage would be fulfilling her dream by traveling, she would also be leaving behind her family once again.

I believe that since Savage knew that she was going to be able to travel to France that she decided to adopt a fresh outlook and identity. Leininger-Miller writes that Savage's works during this time “bespeak a strong sense of agency and strength....are notable for their bold originality, their implied violence, and their significance for Savage’s expanding vocabulary of figural types.”<sup>35</sup> These figures in the Amazon series are a result of Savage forsaking the tutelage of her masters in a pursuit of an “original technique.” Savage's reasoning for “escape” was because “the masters are not in sympathy as they all have their own definite ideas and usually wish their pupils to follow their particular method.”<sup>36</sup> The act of leaving and developing her own methods was “nimble and strategic practice that undermines the categories of the dominant.” It is helpful to use fugitivity in this capacity because it specifically captures the evidence of Savage’s thinking.

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<sup>35</sup> Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 164-165.

<sup>36</sup> Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris*, 186.

## The Art School

Savage's return from France was the start of a continuous journey with a mindset that manifested into the creation of her art school and gallery. On one level the creation of a permanent space that eventually attracted governmental funding may contradict ideas arbitrarily associated with fugitivity because of its root word "fugitive." A fugitive is defined as a person who flees or tries to escape; this suggests that someone with a fugitivity mindset cannot settle down, especially if settling would be connected to an authority that has continued to marginalize its people. However, Savage created her school, initially without the benefit of government funds, and it was not intended to perpetuate systematic structures already in place. Instead, her school was established based on a need that she saw within her community. As the school expanded, Savage saw the opportunity to, as Campt states, "undermine the category of the dominant."<sup>37</sup> Using government funds to produce her own school and teach children to think about possibilities through art work is an example of "undermin[ing] the category of the dominant."<sup>38</sup> Prior to her creation of the school there were no free art classes for children or adults in Harlem. Savage used all her training and provided her people with a free education that she herself had to fight for. The same government that had marginalized Savage through Jim Crow laws was now funding her and aiding her in the advancement of her community. In an interview in the Schomburg Center archives, Savage states:

I came back to New York in the very midst of the depression of 1932 and took a little studio, and all my old pupils found me out. I had always had pupils who tried to find those children with talent and help them develop it. I had six pupils when I went to Paris. These pupils came back to me and brought their friends to me, and pretty soon I had more

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<sup>37</sup> Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Campt, *Listening to Images*, 32

than I could possibly handle. They could not pay me, and they had no money to buy materials, so they used my materials and soon I had no materials with which to work.<sup>39</sup>

Savage was not formally taught art practices until she started to receive an education at Cooper Union. Yet throughout her time in New York it is clear that she taught anyone who wanted to learn. This organic attraction to teaching is an important aspect of Augusta Savage's character. Savage's actions reflect the "grammar of black fugitivity and refusal" which Camp describes as "the expressiveness of quiet, the generative dimensions of stasis, and the quotidian reclamations of interiority, dignity, and refusal marshaled by black subjects in their persistent striving for" a higher quality of living.

The establishment of an art school with this intentionality and creativity is not the only part of Savage's art school that provides evidence of her fugitive nature. Savage's pedagogical practice included teaching art specifically designed to uplift her students. Savage's life made it possible for her to acquire knowledge about art and the power that art has in the world across many cultures. In a "creative practice of refusal" Savage gave her knowledge back to the community for free.

This action should be defined as fugitivity because Savage shows her students that they can achieve whatever they want in life despite their circumstances or the systemic injustices that they will inevitably have to encounter. The creation of her art school was a form of resistance, but more specifically it is more nuanced because it is a way of using a system and creating a

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<sup>39</sup> Interview at studio June 20, 1935 by (F.A.C.) Unpublished, Augusta Savage papers, Sc MG 731, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

space for her community. Fugitivity doesn't look like an aggressive act against the “dominant” or in Savage's case it may not look anti government. As Savage exercised a certain subversiveness she did not pursue systematic change but instead she worked through the system to produce an amazing outcome for the community that would have a lasting impact. Throughout her life Savage had a goal elevating her community's value or worth. Having the school showed her students and their community that art was of high value and could make someone be viewed as valuable by society. When something is taught it means that it is valuable because it is being passed down or shared.

### **The Art Gallery**

Opening a Salon of Contemporary Negro Art designed for her community was not just an act of resistance: it was a way of creating a space for Black art to have a powerful platform and to be seen with the same appreciation as white art galleries. Before Savage, the idea of constructing a museum-like space designed to elevate Black artists may have been imagined but it had not been realized. Black artists instead sought validity from white exhibition and education spaces by trying to have their art accepted there. Not only did Savage create spaces of education but she also created an opportunity for agency among Black artists. She was able to make a space for a range of artists, all representing different styles, to express Black excellence through exhibitions. In the Salon and in Savage's schools there was not a demand to conform to white standards of Art. This freedom from societal pressure of standards of success allowed her students to thrive in the community she created as well as outside of the community she created, in the corporate world. Additionally by allowing her students to showcase their art inside the Gallery she was subversively allowing them to be seen as professional artists even if they were

not viewed in that same way in the industry. By giving her students this professional opportunity she was allowing her students to gain experience and confidence as tools to help them continue to pursue their careers in the artist world or beyond.

One of the reasons Savage wanted to create the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art was because she was giving Black people the opportunity to include Black art within their homes. This is fugitivity because it aligns with Camps definition of a “creative practice of refusal.”<sup>40</sup> She was creative in changing the way that she wanted Black art to be valued because she wanted Black people to see immense value in their art, and include this art in their homes. This idea popularizing Black art within Black homes would promote the mindset that Black art is a worthy investment. Savages’s desires resonated with ideas of agency and being proud of one's culture. It's clear that Savage was trying to help her community find the value of their culture rather than finding validation from an outside dominant culture. Unfortunately by this time it was the Great Depression, which made it really hard for people to afford to buy the artwork that was in the Salon. However, this was still a success for Savage because she became more prominent even during the Great Depression. She was able to start this gallery; and in the midst of challenges throughout America, she still had her voice known. I believe that if Savage was able to accomplish her goal of integrating Black art within the households she could have elevated the monetary value of Black art.

As I have evaluated Savage’s work, career, and legacy, I believe this to be a more precise approach to evaluating her sense of agency than the approach adopted by most scholars, which has emphasized her efforts as activism. Her work in France, her school and her gallery, all attest

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<sup>40</sup> Camp, *Listening to Images*, 32.

to Savage's independence and intuitive subversive nature of thinking and working within systems. However, I would argue that fugitivity is a concept that can not only be used for Savage's life, but for the lives of many other figures. In fact I would encourage the use of fugitivity when looking at the life of other figures particularly those who have been in spaces of oppression. How do we respond to oppression today? How do we find success and freedom without looking to dismantle the systems in front of us? I would also encourage people in oppressed communities to think about how they currently fight acts of oppression. There are multiple ways to break through the wall of oppression and to work through systems of oppression. Sometimes it does not take a Dr. King or a Black Lives Matter protests, but it takes small actions of resistance in strategic ways that still amount to great success.



## Chapter 2: Theaster Gates

As I move to think more concretely about the artist Theaster Gates, you will find that there are many similarities to Savage. I chose to include Gates in this project for the reason of these similarities. By including Gates I also wanted to contrast the differences of this time period in order to highlight the growth of our country's systems and to simultaneously bring attention to the lack of growth. However, I will not assess Gates's life and work with the concept of fugitivity in the same way. Although it may not seem logical in a traditional essay sense to write and argue so heavily for a concept in one chapter and not in another, I am strategically omitting the concept to build a stronger argument. Ultimately my goal in this project is to show the reader how a mindset or acts of fugitivity and acts of strategic use of systems in place can empower someone to conquer their goals and create change. If I were to highlight Savage and Gates in the same way the reader may take away the idea that fugitivity is the one and only thing needed to succeed in this manner. So instead I want to approach Gates slightly differently by taking fugitivity out while he is the focus to create a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding for this project. In this chapter I will focus on the ways in which Gates uses his circumstances to create Black communal spaces and the strategies he uses to do so.

### **Theaster Gates Life and work**

In *Creed 3*, released on February 9th, 2023, Michael B. Jordan plays Adonis Creed, a heavyweight boxing champion of the world gearing up to fight in the ring (fig. 4). Throughout

each Creed movie Adonis at some point is featured in America's signature colors: red, white and blue. The color scheme reinforces the theme's idea of nationalism and pride throughout the film especially when he is fighting against international opponents. However in this scene, where Creed is getting ready to fight his opponent, the approach to nationalism is different and is represented through a striped boxing robe with ribbed blue edges and white stars around the cuffs. This robe, although featuring the same American colors and same stars that appear on the national flag, is different because the tones of the colors are not as stark as the American flag colors. This robe was made with the intention of identifying Adonis Creed as an American with a sense of American pride while simultaneously acknowledging the struggle that young Black males in America often face. How can a robe's color represent the struggle a realistic character was facing by being a young Black man in America?

In order to convey these ideas the designers sought inspiration from interdisciplinary artist, innovator and professor Theaster Gates (b. 1973). The designers used Gates's work *Civil Tapestry, Flag Series* (fig. 5) as a basis for their design of the robe and collaborated with Gates to receive some of the iconic materials of the piece to imbed within the outfit. What makes this piece by Gates so renowned is the use of decommissioned fire hoses that speak to a moment within the civil Rights Movement history. In Birmingham, Alabama in 1963, when school children and students were marching for civil rights, fire hoses were violently used against them as a way of inflicting harm and stopping the protest.<sup>41</sup> Theaster Gates has taken decommissioned fire hoses sourced in Chicago and has placed them on a wooden panel as a way of recalling this disturbing moment in American history. To see the same materials and colors embedded in a

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<sup>41</sup> Henry, Carmel. "A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States." Accessed February 28, 2023. <https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>.

Hollywood film featuring a majority Black cast and debuting a Black director connects to the ways in which Theaster Gates has produced a body of work that transcends the art world and has a multidisciplinary impact.

In this chapter I argue that what makes Theaster Gates unique is the way he has amalgamated his artistic practice with his pursuit of creating spaces, specifically for artists and his Southside Chicago community. Systematically, America has been built to the detriment of Black people. Incarceration rates, red-lining, gerrymandering, income and job accessibility inequality, and education systems work together to perpetuate the systems put in place since slavery. This ultimately singles out Black African-Americans and descendants of those enslaved because the effects of the system were created to debilitate us specifically. What makes Theaster Gates unique is his motivation and entrepreneurial mindset that guides him to take advantage of racial capitalist systems within the art world. Gates is driven to accumulate funds for the purpose of establishing more accessible creative spaces to aid his Chicago community in the long term. He continues to maintain his identity as an artist while establishing spaces for other artists to gain their own recognition and platform. In some ways Gates is devoted to his work in his studio but he is still in service to his community; he maintains his capital and relevance as an artist by holding exhibitions in multiple spaces but he repurposes that financial and relational capital into his community based investments. Gates works within white spaces and systems in order to use these resources to upgrade and innovate more accessible Black spaces within Chicago. Specifically, he broadened his practice to draw more attention to his work and eventually gained funding from the art world.. This chapter will investigate Theaster Gates's artistic practice

through his Dorchester projects, the Stony Arts Bank and his most recent exhibitions in order to analyze his strategy and process of making a difference in his community.

Theaster Gates was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1973, where he was raised in East Garfield Park. In 1963 Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley started new projects geared toward public housing funded by the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) and the federal Public Housing Authority (PHA). Although there were public protests against the construction of high rise public housing the project still proceeded to take place.<sup>42</sup> These buildings forever changed the landscape and environment of the southside of Chicago and the history of these buildings is evidence of how the local and federal government valued the neighborhood and its people. Although this happened before Gates was born the effects were lasting enough to impact his family and community.

Gates's father, Theaster Gates Sr., owned many rental properties where Gates grew up and spent his childhood. Theaster Gates's mother, Lorine Allen Gates, worked at an electric company and later as a nursery school teacher. Gates had eight older sisters and was the ninth and only son his parents had. During his childhood he spent his summers working with his family in Mississippi at his grandparent's farm. Gates also practiced singing with his local church choir. Gates often speaks with great pride and joy about the impact that the Black church and choir had on him growing up.<sup>43</sup> Throughout his childhood Gates often thought about his neighborhood and governmental systems that caused its buildings to be demolished. He states "I

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<sup>42</sup> Brown, Marisa Angell. "Integration by Design: Bertrand Goldberg, Stanley Tigerman, and Public Housing Architecture in Postwar Chicago." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 76, no. 2 (2017): 218–38.

<sup>43</sup> Art21, "Theaster Gates in "Chicago" Season 8, Youtube Video, 15:28, March 20, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQEihxIIGOY>.

had had this anxiety all my life that my neighborhood was being torn down— systematically it felt and that there was nothing I could do about it.”<sup>44</sup> This awareness that his Black neighborhood as he had known it could not escape systematic dismantling may have sparked curiosity about the systems in place. As a way of calming his anxiety he found solace with his connection and community in the Black church. Music specifically drew him to feel protected and was a big initiator of his creativity. He says, “There was this kind of hedge of protection that I felt was around me and my family through the Black church. I gravitated toward the gospel choir...It was kind of like my first encounter with creativity.”<sup>45</sup> This awakening to creativity birthed a new way of thinking and seeing for Gates. This caused a new vision of his neighborhood to form: “the Black church allowed me more space to dream, to imagine the probable, to imagine that the world was not a series of abandoned buildings but, in fact, just a world waiting to be restored.”<sup>46</sup> Gates's childhood played a role in the way he viewed community architecture and restoration and this continued to shape his journey into higher education.

After attending a majority white elementary school and high school, Gates went on to graduate from Iowa State University in 1996, where he majored in Urban Planning. Additionally he later studied African religions at the University of Cape Town and did a residency with ceramic masters in Tokoname, Japan. In 2005, he received a multidisciplinary masters degree in ceramics, urban planning and religious studies from Iowa State University. What Theaster

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<sup>44</sup> Art21, “Theaster Gates in “Chicago” Season 8, Youtube Video, 15:28, March 20, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQEihxllGOY>.

<sup>45</sup> Art21, “Theaster Gates in “Chicago” Season 8, Youtube Video, 15:28, March 20, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQEihxllGOY>.

<sup>46</sup> The HistoryMakers, “Theaster Gates’s Biography.” TheHistoryMakers, Accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/theaster-gates>.

learned in MFA programs limited him because it did not allow him to see the use of himself and his practice outside the studio (because that was not what was being taught). But he had a moment when he realized that “This is not about clay. This is not about painting. This is actually about a set of tactics that would allow me to be effective in the world. I don't know where that came from. But it definitely didn't come from a professor who was trying to teach me how to game out the art world.”<sup>47</sup> Gates also worked as an arts planner for the Chicago Transit Authority and as a director of education and outreach at the Little Black Pearl Art and Design Center. Theaster states that he “really wanted to be a potter full time;” however the cost of using the kiln to complete his work was too high for him to maintain.<sup>48</sup> In the interim of figuring out what he wanted to do instead of pursuing pottery he remembered that his dad taught him how to build and he started using “found materials” to create pieces. Using found materials became integral for Gates in his artistic works as well as a basis for his artistic projects and building developments. The process of using found materials caused a big shift for Gates in terms of his recognition and success. He recounts, “as soon as I stopped using clay the contemporary art world became interested in my work.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> The New School, “*Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School*,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

<sup>48</sup> The New School, “*Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School*,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

<sup>49</sup> The New School, “*Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School*,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

## The Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative

The use of found materials became a staple in Gates's practice and he often takes and repurposes materials to create art pieces that reflect Blackness in some way. Works that Gates produces have a way of referencing black history or even speak to restoring a holistic future for black people. Gates will ask himself, “how do you make discarded things beautiful? How do you give those newly beautified things the right platform so others can recognize their beauty?”<sup>50</sup> This trope of restoration is deeply ingrained in Gates's work not only as an artist but as an entrepreneur and innovator. Seeing the ways that America continues to devalue Black spaces and people systematically, Gates cultivates a plan to revitalize his neighborhood by restoring abandoned houses and buildings.

In 2006, Gates purchased an abandoned house on Dorchester Street in Chicago and began restoring the house using salvaged materials from places such as an old bowling alley. Eventually, collected 14,000 art and architecture themed books from a local bookstore that was closed down.<sup>51</sup> He used the books to create a library within the abandoned house. This continual practice of reusing materials is not original; however Gates intention is not to be unique. He wants to draw attention to the possibility of what is already there and how to transform it into something that others can see the value in. As more abandoned houses were made available on the block, Gates would purchase and restore them into different cultural and artist spaces using repurposed materials. Gates termed these collections of spaces the Dorchester Art and Housing

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<sup>50</sup> Art21, “Theaster Gates in “Chicago” Season 8, Youtube Video, 15:28, March 20, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQEihxllGOY>.

<sup>51</sup> “Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative (DAHC) - Project Items - Theaster Gates,” *Theaster Gates*, Accessed March 23, 2023. <https://www.theastergates.com/project-items/dorchester-art-and-housing-collaborative-dahc>.

Collaborative, or the Dorchester Project.<sup>52</sup> This project has been one of Gates's greatest successes and is one of the most notable aspects about Gates's work at large.

A big part of Gates's motivation for this project was his pursuit of answering the question: “Why don't Black people want to live around Black people?”<sup>53</sup> Gates is referring to the historic idea among all people that once one is able to afford to live in an area with upgraded housing, more safety and more opportunities for their children then they are likely to move. Those who are Black and living in underprivileged and economically deprived areas who get this opportunity to move often move into white populated areas with those benefits. This is not because they are hoping to not live around other black people. However because of historic underfunding in areas with a high Black population due to redlining, neighbors with a historically white population offer more of these benefits.<sup>54</sup> This causes many black people to leave for more white populated areas. Gates is not necessarily criticizing those people for wanting to live in favorable conditions; he just believes that rather than leave, they should build up their homes and other community spaces. It is possible that Gates believes that if those who took the same money from moving to different non-Black spaces and invested in their current Black spaces they could rectify the factors that may have led them to leave. Ultimately the answer to Gates’s question lies in the systemic poverty in Black neighborhoods.

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<sup>52</sup> Megan Guerber, “Dorchester Projects / IPA,” *Institute of Public Art*, Shanghai Academy of Fine Arts, Accessed March 23, 2023.

<https://www.instituteforpublicart.org/case-studies/dorchester-projects/>.

<sup>53</sup> The New School, “Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

<sup>54</sup> Redlining is not the only cause of the imbalance in a ‘better’ life, over policing and lack of government funding also play a role in creating this harm.



The Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative seeks to be a space of “intervention for other artists.” This idea of intervention is based on Gates’s motivation and plan for space and his goal to restore his neighborhood. Gates addresses the reasoning for these creative liveable spaces:

Impact to me is about action. It is hard to understand that in an area where there is abject poverty, simply choosing to stay becomes a radical act, even if you didn’t intend for it to be radical. It is easy when there is a tipping point in a place to consider change as negative... Consisting of 32 units made for those who receive affordable and low-income housing support with an amazing space for theater and dance, the mission is to first share culture with the folk residing in those 32 units. The work is quiet and sincere and beautiful.”<sup>55</sup>

The Dorchester Project has morphed and branched into different projects, within his neighborhood in Southside Chicago, that have a primary goal of supporting artists. Through the help of funding from partners of various organizations the project has expanded into Dorchester Industries, a manufacturing platform that uses sourced materials from Chicago to create objects, furniture and spaces. The goal of this platform is to “to create beautiful things well and to train our employees to pursue careers in the building trades and creative industries. The objects produced through the collaborative creative process are sold under the Dorchester Industries brand, with proceeds supporting the mission to promote culture-based, artist-led, neighborhood-driven community revitalization.”<sup>56</sup> The Dorchester project has also led to the Black Artist’s Retreat (BAR), which was started in 2013 by Gates and Eliza Myrie, a visual artist

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<sup>55</sup> “Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative (DAHC),” *Theaster Gates*, Accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.theastergates.com/project-items/dorchester-art-and-housing-collaborative-dahc>.

<sup>56</sup> “Dorchester Art and Housing Collaborative (DAHC),” *Theaster Gates*, Accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.theastergates.com/project-items/dorchester-art-and-housing-collaborative-dahc>.

from Chicago. The BAR is a retreat, primarily held in Chicago, with the goal of collectively bringing Black artists of different types of forms and mediums together to create a rejuvenating creating environment.

### **The Stony Island Arts Bank**

The Stony Island Arts Bank is known as one of Theaster Gates notable achievements (fig 6). This is largely due to the size and the positive advance notice the project has before it was completed. Gates chose this project because he felt that there was value in keeping and transforming a place that was once beautiful into a new historic place that people could continue to recognize as beautiful. Historically the Stony Island State Savings Bank was built in 1923, and at a highpoint in the neighborhood's history, many African Americans had the pleasure of being customers at the bank.<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately in the 1970's many families moved away due to decline in investment into the neighborhood from and the city and the rising rise in violence. The Bank closed in the 1980s and sat empty for around three decades. After experiencing a flood and continual degradation, the building was scheduled to be torn down after it was determined that tearing the building down would be a more profitable investment in its renovation.

Continuing in his desire to save his neighborhood from constant destruction Gates was determined to save the bank. The Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel sold Gates the bank for \$1 yet only after Gates pledged to put \$500,000 toward stabilizing the building for renovation.<sup>58</sup> When

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<sup>57</sup> Reedus, Glenn. "Stony Island Arts Bank Opens; Library Dedicated to African American History." *Library Journal*, Library Journals, LLC, January 1, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> The New School, "Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School," YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

asked about the bank Gates explains that he was “different from other developers, didn't come with the other conventional kinds of resources that a city would make available to a developer. I got the building and that was it... because the building doesn't offer a financial upside... either enter the dummy Theaster Gates, or enter a person with an ideology that imagines that there's something other than currency that's the upside.”<sup>59</sup> This idea of imagining that there are some things more valuable than currency is an important part of Gates's practice and strategy as an artist. The process of using reclaimed materials has the proclaims that there is value within the discarded and the old, or even the trash. Gates recounts, ““I was really determined to see this project happen... Everyone around me had anxiety about its scale. And the friendly advice I got from everybody was to walk away.”<sup>60</sup> Although the renovations took around \$4.5 million, some of the money came from Gates’s personal savings; but mostly Gates raised money and by using his artistic practice. For example, marble that was a part of the original bathroom was used to create “bank bonds” with the words “In ART we trust” inscribed within the rectangular shape. Only 100 bonds were made, each sold at 5,000 each.<sup>61</sup> Gates used his knowledge of the art world

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<sup>59</sup> The New School, “*Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School*,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

<sup>60</sup> Chicago Tribune, “First Look inside Theaster Gates’ New Stony Island Arts Bank,” September 4, 2015. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-harris-theaster-gates-arts-bank-0906-biz-20150904-column.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Chicago Tribune, “First Look inside Theaster Gates’ New Stony Island Arts Bank,” September 4, 2015. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-harris-theaster-gates-arts-bank-0906-biz-20150904-column.html>.

and knowing what sells and where by selling the bonds at Art Basel, an international art fair annual that occurs annually in Switzerland, in 2013.

The bank bonds were “really exciting” to Gates because “the bank bond was a work of art, but what made it a work of art was that Swiss Bankers were bailing out a bank underwater.” This being exciting to Gates continues to show that he finds joy in renewal. Gates also used his strategy of repurposing to gain wealth and means for his community. In another example of ingenuity, Gates held a gala, the Rebuilds Benefit Dinner, each seat costing 5,000 per person. “It was intended to get all the rich people in Chicago to come and support the bank,” says Gates, “To join me in supporting Black culture in a Black neighborhood.” But Gates received backlash at first about how much each seat cost, Gates noticed that “there's this issue about value in the hood and what limits wealthy people had around where they imagined posting their cash.” Thankfully for Gates and the project a change occurred when “a couple of the folk in Chicago, but then a lot of outside folks started buying \$50,000 tables. And then people were interested in being at the Gala not because they believed in Black culture but because they wanted to be around [ famous prominent people].”<sup>62</sup> Although Gates's target audience didn't share his vision and motivation to support Black culture and uplift the neighborhood, his idea of a gala in order to raise funds for his vision was successful.

Obtaining the building and gaining the money was a large part of the struggle for Gates because he already had a plan and the archival material in place for the building. Inside Gates created a cultural center dedicated to public programming that educates and uplifts

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<sup>62</sup> The New School, “*Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School*,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

its visitors about Black culture. Inside, the archives of the project consists of DJ Frankie Knuckles's entire vinyl collection, as well as the book and magazine collection of *Ebony* and *Jet* founder John H. Johnson. In addition, there are around 60,000 glass lantern slides of art and architecture donated by the University of Chicago and the Art institute of Chicago.<sup>63</sup> A gallery space is also included and the bank continues to hold exhibitions from local Chicago artists as well as other notable artists. Gates states that the bank is “part of an evolving way of reimagining that culture should be central to the way our cities and neighborhoods work... a repository of African American culture and history, a laboratory for the next generation of Black artists... a space for neighborhood residents to preserve, access, reimagine and share their heritage, as well as a destination for artists, scholars, curators, and collectors to research and engage with South Side history.” There is no doubt that this bank has an impact on Gates's community and it is an important cultural artifact that will hopefully continue to make history. However this bank also represents Gates's growing success as an artist. Even though he creates and maintains Black spaces physically, he has not neglected his practice of making studio art and his showing his work at exhibitions. The combination of these aspects helps him to continue helping his community, and his process of being a part of exhibitions keep him relevant as an artist.

### **The Black Monks and the Young Lord's and Their Traces Exhibition**

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<sup>63</sup> Is There an Art to Urban Regeneration?” The Guardian, November 3, 2015, sec. Cities. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/03/theaster-gates-assemble-art-urban-regeneration-chicago>.

Theaster Gates continues to exhibit his work in shows across the country and internationally. In combination with exhibiting his own art works and collections, Gates also created a musical group called the Black Monks. The Black Monks perform music seeped in blues and gospel traditions, hoping to convey to their audience “that the Black voice is a specific voice – even if the subjectivities of those voices are universal subjectivities.”<sup>64</sup> The Black Monks will sometimes perform in the same spaces where Theaster is currently exhibiting his work. They also perform in other galleries and art spaces. Particularly at the end of his most recent exhibition at the New Museum in the winter of 2023 Gates and the Black Monks performed consecutively for three days. These performances were powerful and added to Gates's goal of transformation. As the Black Monks sang to the audience they encouraged their audience to let go and experience the music in a new way, not just as a passive audience but as an engaged audience. Additionally Gates worked directly a part of the Monks, playing a gong-like instrument, directing the vocalists as well as the other musicians who were playing traditional African instruments or using found objects to create unique sounds. Gates wanted the uniqueness of the sounds to transport the audience to experience vocals and instruments in a new way.

Theaster Gates's New Museum exhibition, *Young Lords and Their Traces*, is his most recent, and it featured many objects that are not necessarily works of studio art but are representations of his practice as an artist. Many of the exhibition pieces were from his personal archives or came from some of his notable friends. Gates was the one to choose the title of the exhibition, which refers back to an activist group started in 1968 by Jose Jemenez and modeled

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<sup>64</sup> Gagosian, “Theaster Gates: *Black Vessel* | Artist Spotlight | Gagosian,” Youtube Video, 7:03, June 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OWRGkXaQi0>.

after the Black Panthers. The Young Lords organization, although primarily Puerto Rican, was open to all minority ethnic groups and was specifically advocated for healthcare, education, housing, and employment to be provided to communities in Chicago. The group expanded to other major cities and was especially known for their help in impoverished areas. Through the title of the exhibition Gates is speaking to a history within Chicago as well as drawing a connection between the activist's group and the prominent people he honors throughout the exhibition.

One of the most archival aspects of the exhibition is the recently deceased individuals that are honored through objects in the exhibition. For Gates, one of the most important people he honors is his father. This is not the first time he has honored his father in one of his exhibitions but his recent death gives his father a special commemoration. Gates's father, whom he was named after and with whom Gates often worked under as a child by helping his father with his roofing business, was honored through multiple roofing and tar-created pieces.

One series titled *Seven Songs for Black Chapel* (2022) was made using “industrial oil based enamel, rubber torch down, bitumen, wood, and copper.”<sup>65</sup> This series (fig 7) captures a part of the legacy left to Gates by his father. The piece consists of three rectangular panels. Each panel features a unique brick-like pattern. The panels do not have any bright colors; instead, it is made of different tones of beige, gray, and silver (non-metallic) shades. These pieces appear simplistic in form; clear lines add to the pieces brick like illusion. The lines that present the appearance of

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<sup>65</sup> This text taken from *The Young Lords and their Traces* Exhibition Label at the New Museum in New York City. It was curated by Massimiliano Gioni, *Edlis Neeson Artistic Director*, and Gary Carrion-Murayari, Kraus Family Senior Curator, with Madeline Weisburg, Curatorial Assistant. The exhibition was held from November 10, 2022 until February 2, 2023.

separate “bricks,” are defined by wooden planks. These wooden planks that were made to fit perfectly across the width of each panel, are outlined with black shading. However the shading does not mimic the perfectly linear stature of the wood and it is more defined in some areas than others. Over all the fine lines and wrinkles of the panels show the depth and bumpy nature of the piece. The wrinkles seem to be made from intentional air bubbles and these details add to the appearance of the brick-like structure. There are also varying random obscure lines that give the appearance of “cracks” in the “bricks.”

Gates uses roofing materials and techniques to create a visual representation of a brick-like structure. What makes the piece so complex despite its minimalist appearance is the knowledge that is needed in order to use the materials that the piece is made from. Industrial oil based enamel is typically applied using a spray gun which requires precision and special protective equipment.<sup>66</sup> Tar is a highly dangerous substance that requires violent heat and extreme attentiveness.<sup>67</sup> Roofs are meant to last; this piece visually showcases the strength of the materials and the maker. Those who work in spaces of construction, building, and workshopping are not often valued for their strength and courage for taking on the dangers that come with those roles. Written on the wall label on this piece is a quote from Gates that states, “I wanted to take on the idea that being a roofer was good enough for painting, that in a way I could bring something of my history to this genre and to this field. I could use a mop like one might use a brush. I could use the copper roofing nail the way one might secure canvas.”<sup>68</sup> Gates is honoring

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<sup>66</sup> MasterClass, “What Is Enamel Paint? 6 Tips for Applying Enamel Paint - 2023.” Accessed April 27, 2023. <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-enamel-paint-guide>.

<sup>67</sup> It is also interesting that Gates is using a material that is historically known for being used as a method of torture within black history.

<sup>68</sup> This text taken from *The Young Lords and their Traces* Exhibition Label at the New Museum in New York City.



his father for his ability to handle the challenges that come with building your own career as a Black man coming from the south as well as the challenge of being in a business that requires the use of harsh materials. I think for Gates this piece is a symbol of what his father taught him: how to create and make use of tools that others recoil from using, how to reuse materials that others overlook as meaningless or useless, and how to stand firm and build up a career that allows you to be able to take care of those you care for.

In this exhibition Gates also took the time to highlight other scholars and artists who have now passed away, such as bell hooks, Okwui Enwezor, Virgil Abloh, and Robert Bird. bell hooks (1952-2021) was a renowned black feminist scholar and professor.<sup>69</sup> Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019) was a Nigerian curator, writer and art historian.<sup>70</sup> Virgil Abloh (1980-2021) was a Ghanaian-American fashion designer icon.<sup>71</sup> Robert Bird (1969-2020) was an English born author, curator, and Professor of Russian literature and film at the University of Chicago.<sup>72</sup> These people of whom Gates refers to as his friends and mentors all have a special aspect of the

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<sup>69</sup> bell hooks died at the age of 69 from kidney failure.

“Bell Hooks, Pathbreaking Black Feminist, Dies at 69 - The New York Times.” Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/15/books/bell-hooks-dead.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Okwui Enwezor died at the age of 55 from a form of cancer.

“Okwui Enwezor, Curator Who Remapped Art World, Dies at 55 - The New York Times.” Accessed May 1, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/obituaries/okwui-enwezor-dead.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Virgil Abloh was the Founder and CEO of the brand “Off White” and became the Men’s Artistic director of Louis Vuitton. Abloh was actually also from Chicago like Theaster Gates. Virgil Abloh died at the age of 41 from a rare form of cancer.

Nast, Condé. “A Brief History of Virgil Abloh’s Meteoric Rise.” Vogue, March 28, 2018. <https://www.vogue.com/article/virgil-abloh-biography-career-timeline>.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Bird died at the age of 50 from colon cancer.

“Robert Bird, Prolific Scholar of Russian Literature and Film, 1969–2020 | University of Chicago News,” September 23, 2020. <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/robert-bird-prolific-scholar-russian-literature-and-film-1969-2020>.

exhibition in reference to their relationship with Gates. For Gates, “this show is about the people who I’ve lost and the things that they have left for me or people who I love and the monument of love that I want to show for them.”<sup>73</sup> Gates and bell hooks connected publicly in an interview with the New School. In an interview bell hooks stated that she admired Gates for “using his imagination to bring renewal and restoration to suffering Black communities. Black people in this society are in states of collective suffering and pain and part of Theaster’s work has been doing with his work is ‘how do I create an intervention, how does art create an intervention?’”<sup>74</sup> This statement from hooks is powerful in that it captures an impact of Gates’s work. It’s not clear if Gates actually asked this question, it is meaningful that this is the perception of Gates’s work, from such a legendary scholar such as hooks. I would agree with hooks that Gates’s work makes a direct intervention, not necessarily all of his studio work but most certainly his work within his Chicago community. hooks also addresses this country’s history of erasing Black people stating, “This system that we live within can erase people, to disappear people, no matter how much art or how much writing they produce.”<sup>75</sup> She makes this point in order to emphasize how Gates’s work leaves a legacy that will continue to preserve his community rather than himself. That is one of the biggest parts of intervention that is unique to Gates’s goal, the idea that he has thought of from childhood, not letting his neighborhood disappear or be erased. He used this exhibition

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<sup>73</sup> New Museum, “*Relational Moves | Theaster Gates: Young Lords and Their Traces*,” Youtube Video, 3:28, January 11, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xa1PApSgvpl>.

<sup>74</sup> The New School, “*Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School*,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

<sup>75</sup> The New School, “*Bell Hooks with Theaster Gates and Laurie Anderson: Public Art, Private Vision /The New School*,” YouTube Video, 1:12:14, October 7, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZ3WJoNC4IU>.

to continue to speak to those ideas and to call attention to himself and work in order to further his goals.

This idea of monument is special in Gates's practice because he often speaks about not just his own art work and legacy building but his love for community building. Rather than creating a standard exhibition, Gates wanted this exhibition to be on the “edge of something familiar” to make the exhibition more “interesting.”<sup>76</sup> Meaning that he wanted this to reflect the qualities of a standard exhibition, yet he wanted the contents and the set up to be less predictable and more surprising. This purpose behind making the exhibition unconventional, by using a collection of archives and unique writing and materials, also speaks to his need to keep up his relevance as an artist. This is essential in order for him to continue to fund his own community-based projects. For Gates, being relationally deep with individuals was a huge part of this exhibition and in many ways is a reflection of interest in his projects. He wanted to find ways to show the “evidence” of his relationships with these individuals through these museum objects and through written words. Relationality is a big part of Gates's work and through this exhibition he shows the audiences through objects, works, and sounds that being relational and seeing yourself as a part of a community that working together can help you to achieve your goals and create connected spaces of inclusion. Relationality for Gates is also about preservation and a way to work through the systems is by knowing who is a part of them. Gates promotes the preservation of your history and legacy, as well as of your works and community, or even more simply your interests. Gates overall embodies the ideas of building, he builds artwork by using tools that are traditionally used in construction. He builds spaces physically for his community to

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<sup>76</sup> New Museum, “*Relational Moves | Theaster Gates: Young Lords and Their Traces*,” Youtube Video, 3:28, January 11, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xa1PApSgvpl>.

dwell within, through his Dorchester Projects. He builds space relationally for people in his community to connect with him and with each other.

## Conclusion

### Why talk about Gates and Savage?

Through reading and researching about Augusta Savage and Theaster Gates, I was surprised by their striking similarities in their lives, ambitions, and achievements. I want to now take the time to compare the ways in which their life and mindset were similar. The purpose of this comparison is to address their differences and what may have led to the individuals that they became. Some of those differences are apparent: success, wealth, gender identity, education, and access to resources. It's also productive to think of the changes in the art world in the 100 years that separate Savage and Gates. In many ways it has changed and progressed for Black artists, but in some ways it has remained the same. I now want to take time to reflect both on what unites Savage and Gates and the small nuances that distinguish them from each other.

I started this project by visualizing a wall, which has helped me think about how changemakers have worked through oppression. This theory coincides with the way that I ultimately see Savage and Gates. In Savage's time there were not many holes in the wall and in many ways she had to be a pioneer. Theaster Gates has had more opportunities and advantages due to his time period and due to his gender. Yet they ultimately had the same goal of creating communal artistic spaces for their communities. Both Savage and Gates started off as being extremely interested in pottery making. Theaster Gates uses his start of clay making or using clay as a way of defining the rest of his career, and I think it's the same for Savage. Additionally they both grew up with religious backgrounds and even though religion is not a role seen throughout Savage's life, her personal archives document her work on religious materials, such as Sunday school magazines. The most striking similarity between both Savage and Gates is the way that I

believe they define community building. Both in inner cities stuck in poverty and racial housing injustice, they both felt a need to transform their communities by creating spaces where their community could gather and learn through art. I think Gates and Savage have the same definition of community building: establishing physical spaces where the community is artistically and educationally enriched. For them a communal space must exist outside of the constraints of systems already in place, especially for aspiring artists.

Augusta Savage created a specific gallery space, the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art, and I find it interesting that even Gates created a salon of sorts by reconstructing the Stony Island Savings Bank into a gallery, archive, and musical/ artistic gathering space for the community. For both of them, gathering physically in the context of art was important and for Savage she also wanted to use her gathering space as a way to get a wider appreciation for black art and artistry. Although there is a wider appreciation for Black creatives in our culture today, Gates space is also getting people to appreciate a legacy of black art through the archive and through the future of black art by exhibiting black artists. During Savage's time within the Harlem Renaissance there was a call for an input and creation of all forms of black media, from art to music to theater, because there was a lack of emphasis in the world on these forms. In Gates's current time there is a greater emphasis on Black art and artists; however, the different levels of success that Black artists and white artists enjoy are still varied.

Both Savage and Gates wanted to create spaces that their communities would be proud to support and appreciate. For Savage this hope stemmed from the Great Migration that she herself was part of in her move from the south to Harlem. Harlem became the center for Black people in New York and although there was great economic disparity and housing inequality many Black

people found a way to establish their own businesses and residences. The Southside of Chicago also was a center for Black people; however, many are seeking to establish lives and own property outside of this area because of the lack of equity in housing and business development. This troubles Theaster Gates, who has asked, “Why do Black people always want to move away from Black people?” For Gates the establishment of the physical spaces for his community was an answer to this problem. By providing these spaces he hopes to inspire people to stay within the neighborhood and to invest back into the neighborhood. For Savage and many other Black people of her time Harlem was one of the few places they were allowed to live within New York. She invested back into the community by building spaces that would enrich the growth of the community and make their living there the best that it could be with the resources she had.

For Savage, investing in her community meant making space for the next generation to be able to gain skills that would help them be successful in the future. She specifically had a heart out for the next generation for children because she didn't have that same opportunity growing up. Savage didn't receive any formal training until her move to New York and her acceptance into Cooper Union, but she created an art school where Black kids and adults could learn for free. For Gates, it seems that he thinks more holistically about Black people in general by providing a space where they can learn for themselves by looking through the archive or any current exhibitions.<sup>77</sup> He additionally has the Dorchester Apartments, which is housing specifically for artists to be able to connect and learn together in communal creative spaces such

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<sup>77</sup> Like Fred Moten, Gates includes music into the holistic nature of art and believes that the auditory is just as important and visual. Fred Moten writes that “fugitivity, then, is a desire for and a spirit of escape and transgression of the proper and the proposed. It’s a desire for the outside, for a playing or being outside, an outlaw edge proper to the now always improper voice or instrument.” Quote from Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

as the theater within the building. He also started an artists retreat for artists to rejuvenate and be inspired by coming together physically. By having a broader approach to community and influence at every age he hopes that he is helping the community at large.

So how do Gates's endeavors relate and compare to fugitivity? During the time of the Great Migration, Black people who chose to escape were able to flee the trauma and burden of Southern living by pursuing more job opportunities in northern states. Harlem was in many ways a city of escape. In our current time some of those same cities can be seen as traps for enclosing people, preventing them from moving and keeping them in cycles of systemic poverty due to numerous injustices. So Savage used fugitivity to escape and establish a life for herself by cultivating a career built on developing spaces for the community. Gates did not necessarily need to or want to escape from his community physically, but he wanted to provide a secure place of escape for his community. Savage exemplified fugitivity primarily in relation to her art work and to helping herself, which consequently helped her community. Gates exemplifies fugitivity in relation to his community by providing the neighborhood with places of escape. Savage's work as an artist helped herself which in turn helped her community and Gates's work in his community has in turn helped his career as an artist. This is almost adjacent to or inverted fugitivity.

In terms of the wall Gates has ignored it, not seeking to gain from getting across to the other side but instead providing an escape, a place of restoration, for those who are trying to break down the wall. In relation to Savage, she had no choice but to burrow under the wall because there was no one who went through the wall before she did, and she had to make sure she could survive. During Savage's time being blocked by the wall meant a life of working as a



house cleaner. Without the move to pursue her dreams she would have not engaged with the wall at all and would have been complacent to continue working without fulfilling her dream.

Burrowing under the wall rather than blasting through the wall where it would definitely be noticed allowed her to live a survivable life from teaching and creating. In our more modern era, becoming an artist is easier in that the art world is more open to people of diverse racial backgrounds and ethnicities.

And now a Black artist can go to any white school, be in any white museum, even if it's more difficult, the possibility is there and strong. In Savage's time there were laws and systems in place that often prevented Black people from being a part of those spaces. But now the systems are different and the tunnels under the wall have been built. Theaster Gates knows and learned what white people like to see in museums as the "Black perspective" but he uses the funds and relationships to escape and create and establish Black spaces. I'm reminded of the Savage photo with Max Ernst present and known as a benefactor of Black art. Savage in some way was similar to Gates in that she used white funding to support her own Black-owned gallery.

This brings me to an important aspect of fugitivity that I am still thinking through: its relationship to money. Gates is an example of a wealthy artist who uses his money in a Savage-like way. Savage is an example of an artist who found a way to create a space of escape for herself and for her community despite not having wealth. Fugitivity itself is a means of escape. However, when you have a large amount of financial wealth you have the ability to be mobile and escape in a large number of ways. Theaster Gates doesn't need fugitivity for himself to escape because in a way he already escaped by having more opportunities through status and money. The tunnel has already been built for Gates. But he's using this idea of fugitivity to help

out others by creating a way for them to escape. Maybe he used fugitivity in the beginning of his career to help himself. However, unlike Savage, we have the ability to interview Gates to find out more information and inquire thoroughly about his childhood, in order to better make the assessment. These specific questions have not yet been published about him, nevertheless, we can see the ways he has transformed aspects of his neighborhood in order to create a means of escape for others.

Examining the use of non-activist tactics to create change for one's community furthers my hope that all people can see the usefulness of fugitivity. This means of escape can be used for yourself and your community in order to enable you to thrive and prosper without the weight of relying, fighting, and waiting for systematic change. You don't have to fight the system to create change. You can go through a system, and you can create your own means to go under the wall or and follow other people's tunnel of the wall to make your own way. Going through other tunnels can be defined as learning from the ways that people have established their own forms of escape without being activists in a protest-like way. That is not going to work for everybody and not everyone will want to even go about life in that way. Sometimes that won't always lead to great change for every person or in the time or in the manner that you are looking for. If you spend your whole life fighting for systematic change but you never actually live with what you have that can make your life better, you'll always spend life wanting and trying to get somewhere rather than enjoying and preserving your own sanity and helping others come behind you. I really want people to think about their own lives and their own ways to use their art or their words or their mindset to create change for their community and their own futures

## **Coda**

In the summer of 2022, I had the amazing opportunity to work within the Archives of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture through the Schomburg Carnegie Mellon Fellow program. Through this program I was able to hear from different scholars within multiple fields across Black studies and I was able to study Augusta Savage's archives in depth. Being in the archives made me feel close to Savage; in a lot of ways I could relate to who she was. I wanted to give Savage a platform and a complexity in a way that many other scholars had not. Fugitivity is not the beginning of who Savage is and it is not the end; it is just a lens and one outlook into her life. Although I only recently discovered Theaster Gates, seeing what he has done and the way he both relates to and differs from Savage has allowed me to think through this project and present it in a unique unconventional way. I had the chance to meet and briefly talk with Gates before writing this project (fig 8). I specifically asked him about his thoughts on fugitivity. He told me that he “thinks a lot about fugitivity in his work.” He emphasized to me that he has “found solace by hiding in place.” Theaster Gates may have been referring to the threats on his life and the change in his reception from the Chicago community. But this idea of hiding in place really speaks to the ways that someone can create change for an entire city without changing any of the city laws and with gathered resources. For me this project is a way of creating an understanding with others who want to make a difference but are not the ones to start a rally or protest. This project is for the ones who want to think about small acts of resistance that they can make every day to create change.

## Figures



Figure 1. Left to Right: Channing Tobias, Augusta SAVage, Max Eastman, Selma Burke and W.C Handy- Opeining Salon of Contemporary Negro Art, June 7, 1939 Photo By M. Smith  
(Restricted)



Figure 2. Augusta Savage, *The Amazon*, ca. 1930, clay, dimensions and location unknown. Fisk University Library Special Collections.



Figure 3. Mourning victory, ca. 1930 clay, dimensions and location unknown, Fisk University Library Special Collections.



Figure 4. Photo of Michael B. Jordan playing Adonis Creed Photo: Eli Ade/Metro Goldwyn

Mayer

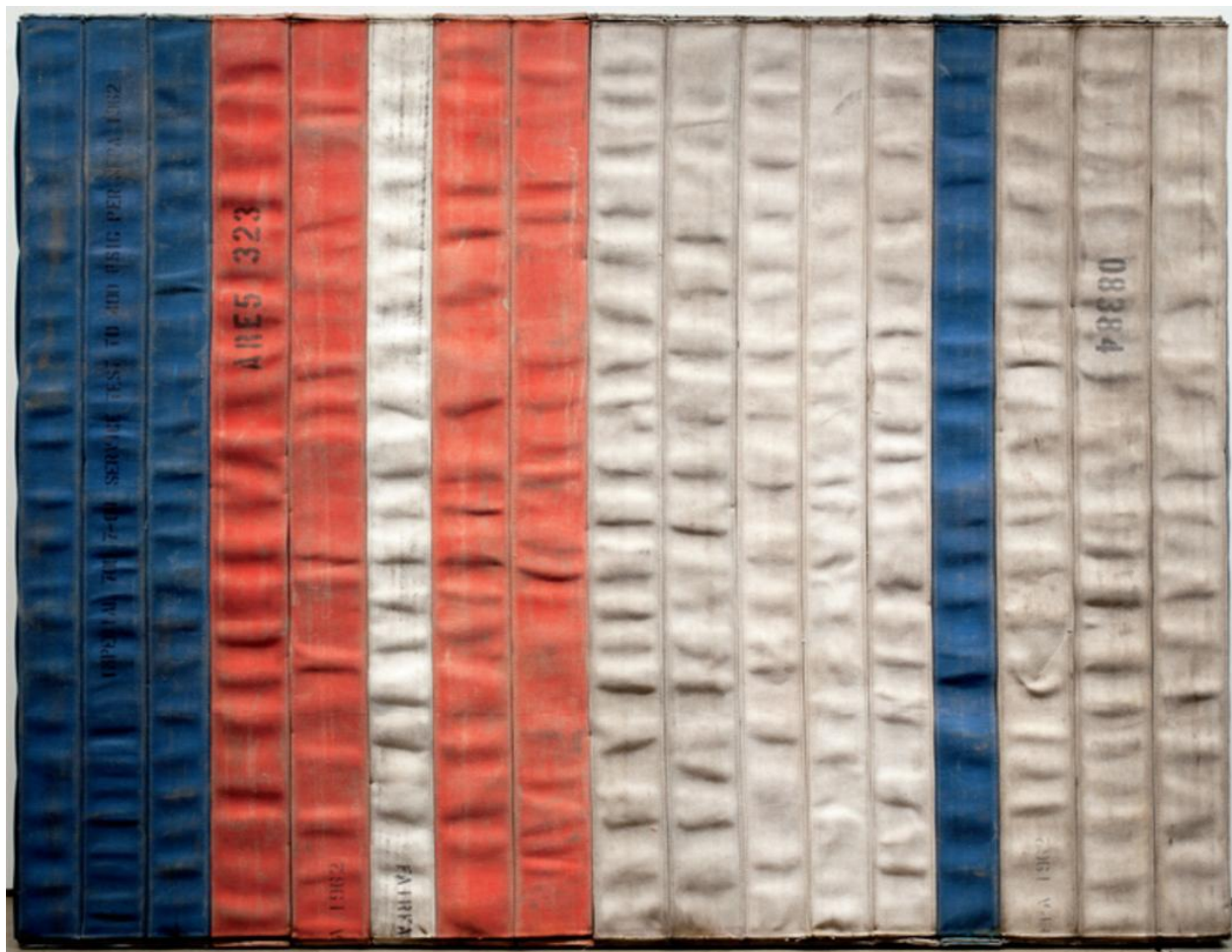


Figure 5. Theaster Gates, *Civil Tapestry, Flag Series*, 2012, decommissioned fire hoses, wood, 66 x 84 x 4 1/2". From the series "Civil Tapestries."





Figure 6. Stony Island Arts Bank Photo: Tom Harris. © Hedrich Blessing. Courtesy of Rebuild Foundation



Figure 7. Theaster Gates, *Seven Songs for Black Chapel #1-3*, 2022, industrial oil based enamel, rubber torchdown, bitumen, wood, copper, size unknown, Seven panels within the series.



Photo with Theaster Gates (figure 8.)

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