

Theaster Gates, Jr. at Chipstone
Looking, Listening, Making, and
Singing the Brightness of Our Common Dark Future

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What is the logic that brings the performance, installation, and research work of an artist of inner-city origins and African-American southern ancestry into dialogue with a renowned collection of decorative objects, long recognized as one of the world's finest, originally assembled by a northern white couple made wealthy through a retailing fortune? The threads of meaning against which the project *To Speculate, Darkly* takes place begin with the old complications of race, class, and material culture in working class African-American and bourgeois European-American histories, and end with the pressures and opportunities that artists and art institutions face in the present.

Having survived forced marches from the interior and a murderous ocean journey from the West African ports to land on the auction blocks of Charleston or New Orleans, enslaved Africans arrived in groups disconnected from each other by mother tongue. The antagonistic relationship with the slave masters defined the social experience from the beginning. The enslaved peoples needed a communicative medium good for both unity and resistance. Sound and

performance, for reasons of malleability and rapid mutation, minimal material requirements, and an hour-to-hour pace of reproduction, became the most useful media for this collective endeavor. The creolization of the oppressor's language was an immediate project, second only to physical rebellion. Drumming bridged both distance and linguistic gap, and was employed as an instrument of both cultural retention and periodic uprising. Performed language, dance, and song embedded day-to-day survival with rebellious notes of pleasure, healing, humor, and, in relation to the overseers, defiance, stealth, and coded speech. Work songs and spirituals fused individual feeling with collective life, making each participant an author of black culture. As the product of a resistance against an overwhelmingly dehumanizing system, and a whole creation of a self-defined culture, most immediately in relation to the slave-owning planter classes, but also in relation to American society generally, black culture was the original American counterculture, with sound and performance as its building blocks. The density of forms that constitutes "black noise" persists to this day as history's greatest incursion by the subaltern into the cultural hegemony.

By contrast, African-American material culture is thinner, beginning with the literal fact that relatively few objects used and owned by slaves have survived. Archaeologists only started excavating sites of slave living quarters in earnest in the late 1960s and 1970s, finding mixed collections of functional objects that include obvious slaveholder castoffs, tools, dishes, and other functional items that the slaves were given or very occasionally bought, small personal belongings such as buttons and trinkets, and modest collections of ritual objects that were invested with retained West African spiritual symbolism. While enriched with meaning and playing a role in cultural retention (various West African motifs and ritual applications were adapted into the material culture of the enslaved African Americans, as seen in basketry and quilting, for example), it is safe to say that African American life, beginning in the years of slavery but lasting into the period beyond, was not primarily expressed in its material culture, with the possible exception of objects made of clay.¹

Thus, the material culture of African Americans—what objects they made, acquired, and used, from the years of slavery forward—is less consistently autonomous, self-sufficient, and more contradictory. To begin with, it is a fact

that African-American antebellum material production mostly was channeled into the making of furniture, soft goods, metal works, and other types of objects for the slaveholders. Their compensation for this work was essentially zero, just like the countless hours of unpaid field labor the slaves performed. In other words, the same economy that rendered them the property of others imposed an extreme form of alienated labor in which their hours of labor and artisanal skill went to the production of things predestined for another's use. In this sense, the material culture of African Americans evolved under the limits established by conditions of extreme scarcity.

This basic frame within which African-American material culture existed was not disrupted in any major way until the Great Migration pulled large numbers of blacks into the industrialized cities. As African Americans made their way into the northern wage labor economy and discovered themselves being shaped as consumers, they were faced with a material world invested with meanings inflected if not defined by the established bourgeois class. As they joined the ranks of the gradually deskilled urban laborers of America, they adopted the overcompensated status object as their own material marker. The gap between bling and economic reality is a key unresolved contradiction, signifying the insinuation of bourgeois status values, processed through attitudes of defiance and longing, without the accompanying power of real wealth. The contradiction symbolizes the crisis of values in African-American society that result from severe class stratification, itself a product of the porous but still exclusionary character of the modern bourgeoisie. Thus, the class tensions within African-American society, often sparked around discussions of labor, self-reliance, dependency, gender roles, and education, also revolve around the relationship between black people and their material things.²

The same capitalist geoculture that made slaves of African Americans also produced another people, the urban bourgeoisie, not through bondage but rather a kind of release from bondage. The ascendancy of capitalism unshackled the merchant classes in Europe from the constraints of the old structures of nobility and church, supplanting the earlier aristocracies with a competitive meritocracy

that eventually resulted in the production of a whole new stratum. This class broke from its European past most cleanly, and asserted itself most creatively, in the northern United States.

Its greatest inventions were of a material and economic nature. The talents of its people went into harnessing and organizing resources, and creating incredible wealth. As businessmen, they saw, cultivated, and served the appetites of the consuming masses, profiting from the expanding markets. As the tastemakers of a new elite, they introduced conspicuous consumption as an expected behavior of the wealthy. As both producers and consumers, the urban bourgeoisie perfected the material culture of possession and display; they related to life, and to themselves, through objects. I see the invention and spread of two institutions, one profane and one sacred, as corresponding to these tendencies, distilled as retailing, on the one hand, and collecting, on the other: the department store and the art museum, respectively. The contemporaneous proliferation of these two institutions in the late nineteenth century signaled the arrival of the urban bourgeoisie as a class poised for cultural dominance through its material culture.

Crass at root and founded on mercantilist principles, the department store constructed subjectivities through the selling of lifestyles, delivered through “full service.” Customers were trained to see themselves in the mannequins and models, the attractive presentation of goods, and the seductive pictures of comfortable living found in each department. An image-making machine of print advertising, fashion shows, specialized services such as bridal consultancies, plus the sheer volume of available wares, created and channeled desires fueling the status aspirations of millions. Department stores were machines for exhibiting things, and then making them available for a price, in a perpetual seasonal flow of the latest styles.

The urban bourgeoisie established art museums as inversions of the vulgarity of the department store, as the sacred spaces to complement their secular civic lives. In them they put objects on display but out of reach, housed in an architecture designed to preserve in its functionality and announce in its aesthetics the unchanging permanence of a material culture rather than the shortness of current fashion. This was a project of monument-building, a universalized statement

of presumed timeless values, pieced together and displayed in an ultra-rarefied atmosphere, and fully purposed to outlive the collectors. The material culture of the world, as defined and selected by the museum founders, funders, and governors, was put in the museum as the crowning achievement of a class that claimed responsibility for nothing less than the stewardship of a civilization and the uplift of a society. These temples were to house the Highest Expressions of Man, exclusive of the lowbrow, the unrefined, and the countercultural.

To Speculate, Darkly is, then, an encounter between representatives of two powerful cultural streams in America, working class and bourgeois, black and white, individual and institutional. On one side of the encounter we have the Chipstone Foundation, the institutional guardian of the archetypal collection of precious objects, originally assembled by Stanley and Polly Stone, prominent Milwaukee collectors who made their fortune selling middle-class aspirations from the Boston Store. Its flagship department store anchored the downtown retailing scene for decades. The Chipstone Foundation now organizes its projects in partnership with the Milwaukee Art Museum, itself an imposing institution that stands as the city’s preeminent monument to bourgeois art patronage. On the other side, we have the artist Theaster Gates, Jr. One might presume an unequal match: against this amassed capital, a man only recently awarded his first museum shows; who grew up on Chicago’s tough West Side among extended family and a clan with direct ties to the lands and stories of Mississippi; who, as a performer, learned to sing and listen in church; who, as a maker of objects, enskilled his hands in the humble medium of clay.

But one would be wrong.

The “post-racial” may be overblown, but it is true that the old power differentials are no longer airtight. By the middle of the twentieth century, the formerly urban bourgeoisie were fully caught in the contradiction between their ideologies of meritocracy, that is to say, color blindness and class mobility, and their commitment to the status quo, which meant preserving their own preeminence and exclusivity. That and all the contradictions outlined above have over time exerted pressures that now bring to bear new factors into the calculus of power.

The Chipstone Foundation must maintain relevance as the triumphalism of American wealth fades; the old-time patrician activity of collecting no longer holds the same currency, and the former economy of prestige calcifies as the foundations of American political and economic strength dissolve under external pressures and internal reordering. Inviting Theaster Gates to perform an intervention into the collection is an act of courage, because it is simultaneously an admission that the collection as it was built could not be built the same way today, that the values that guided the establishment of the collection must be revised. With this project, the Chipstone Foundation announces to the world that it understands its place in a history of cultural dominance and now decline, and that its continued significance will be fostered, ironically, through its own deconstruction and critique. Courageous, but also the only option. For legitimacy's sake the cultures of resistance must be included, and on their own terms.

Theaster Gates, for his part, comes not alone to this project, a solitary David encountering an institutional Goliath. Instead, he arrives with a portfolio of vested relationships, cultivated with the precision of both a curator and a campaign strategist. They link his thought and practice to a set of artists, curators, writers, performers, patrons, musicians, poets, activists, scholars, museums, social spaces, and grassroots initiatives — all of whom he treats as collaborators — that stretch from Ames, Iowa, to particular sites in the Netherlands, Japan, Iceland, Mississippi, and back to his Dorchester settlement on the South Side of Chicago, and many points in between. He has built — as only an artist in the contemporary art world can — a translocal constituency across languages, colors, and cultures. As a social aggregator, the artist explodes the static identities of previous generations, and returns the imagination to the polyglot port cities of old, but installs a spirit that is utterly contemporary and global in aesthetic and agenda. This is a power base of a different kind, as will increasingly emerge now that we have reached “the end of the black American narrative,” as Charles Johnson suggests. This time the common language is that of art, half discovered and half constructed, creolized through any and all media, realized through a combination of organizational labor, design and craft work, material manufacture, performed emotions, and sincere sociability. That Gates forges this constituency partly out of a longstanding commitment to the elemental media of clay and voice

only clarifies what many of us know in our hearts: that unknotting the crises of values that plague both the museums he works in and the neighborhood block he lives on demands a way forward that also travels ancient roads.

Chipstone, which once represented the best of old material culture, now stands in danger of representing the merely old. Black noise, quietly but powerfully projected, as authored in clay by Dave long ago, and now made present through the labors of Theaster Gates, just in time for the political and spiritual challenges ahead, transforms the museum from crypt to a portal into our common future.

1 Patricia Samford, “The Archaeology of African-American Slavery and Material Culture” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Jan., 1996), 87-114.

2 For an impassioned indictment of the self-satisfactions of conspicuous consumption among financially successful African Americans and a call for renewed values of human liberation, see Charles Johnson’s “The End of the Black American Narrative,” *The American Scholar*, Summer 2008.

<http://www.theamericanscholar.org/the-end-of-the-black-american-narrative>