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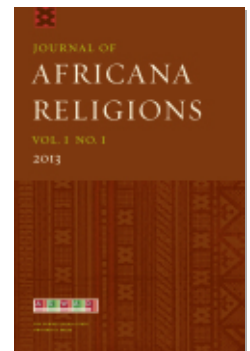
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Aesthetics of Black Bodies Reconstituted

Anthony B. Pinn

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## “Why Can’t I Be Both?”

### Jean-Michel Basquiat and Aesthetics of Black Bodies Reconstituted

ANTHONY B. PINN

*Rice University*

#### *Abstract*

This essay explores the nature and significance of blackness in relationship to an aesthetics of meaning, a method that offers insights into how religion, or the quest for complex subjectivity, is articulated through the visual arts. The essay sketches particular examples of blackness in relationship to aesthetics in a way that involves loose movement through particular periods and locations, ultimately coming to rest on the work of one particular artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat. I explore Basquiat’s work in connection to the politics and production of the aesthetic language of identity formation, examining how artistic production articulates or chronicles particular attention to this quest for complex subjectivity. And I offer a sense of this theory of religion’s applicability within multiple contexts.

If there is anything universal about human beings, it is that given a largely identical biology, they will represent the world differently from stage to stage of the histories in which they participate.

—ARTHUR C. DANTO, *The Body/Body Problem*<sup>1</sup>

I have argued for some time that religion’s fundamental nature and meaning is not captured in the institutional frameworks, doctrines, creeds, ritual structures, and so on that dot the landscape of African American communities. Rather, these are the historical manifestations of a deeper and more elemental impulse—a quest or desire for complex subjectivity—that is in fact

what is meant by religion. And that which we do and think in relationship to this quest constitutes religious experience. This theory of religion suggests that we need new approaches to studying Africana religions, and this includes greater attention to the mundane as well as greater sensitivity to cultural domains such as the visual arts. What one finds through attention to these sources is the manner in which this quest involves, on some level, articulating a more robust identity in aesthetics terms. And this identity is guided by a more formidable, affirming response to the central questions of human existence—who, what, when, where, and why are we? For the purposes of this essay, I frame the response to this quest for life meaning qua the religious as follows: How would the once despised and subjugated enter into aesthetically defined places in ways that altered those spaces and gave new depth and vitality to black bodies? This question links the present study to larger issues regarding the primitive or savage in the study of the embodied black body as a religious concern. In other words, positioning the embodied black body as ontological other—aesthetically and epistemologically marked off as the savage—invokes the quest for complex subjectivity because this query signifies and undermines such understandings, offering in their place a sense of the embodied black body as vital, vibrant, and meaningful.

In this essay I use artistic expression to explore the nature and significance of blackness in relationship to an aesthetics of meaning, and I suggest this method offers insights into how the quest for complex subjectivity (that is, religion) is articulated through the visual arts. I do not aim to chart the historical progression of art, nor do I focus on particular schools and approaches. Rather, I aim to sketch particular examples of blackness in relationship to aesthetics in a way that involves loose movement through particular periods and locations, ultimately coming to rest on the work of one particular artist, Jean Michel Basquiat, which I explore in connection to the politics and production of the aesthetic language of identity formation. What remains consistent, however, is the underlying concern for how artistic production articulates or chronicles particular attention to this quest for complex subjectivity. And I offer a sense of this theory of religion's applicability within multiple contexts.

Basquiat's work provides an interesting case study because his art and embodied history delineate the movement between Africa and the American hemisphere in ways that speak to elements of a shared experience of the world in the context of black bodies framed by a politics and aesthetics of whiteness. Structures of meaning do not respect national boundaries but instead

cut across geographies in ways that both reify and explode constructions of black bodies. That is to say, the diasporic, as so many scholars have remarked, has an aesthetic quality that can be just as vital as its political and economic markers.<sup>2</sup> On some level, and I reference this phrase rather frequently, the art under consideration here involves smashing of idols, as Alain Locke described the work of the Harlem Renaissance, because it entails working against staid depictions of the black body—its cultural meaning and physical significance.<sup>3</sup>

### Connection One: African Aesthetics and "Saving" Western Art

The postcolonial environment involves a struggle over ontology as well as the meaning of aesthetics as once subjected bodies—the embodied black body as savage for instance—seek to reconstitute themselves through an alternate cultural meaning. Involved in this process is a signifying of the rules and assumptions of the art world, tied as they have been to dominant discourses of European superiority.<sup>4</sup> Without doubt, cultural discourses and related geographies of meaning were played out and housed for observation in so many galleries and museums. In other words, "art institutions in the West . . . have not yet abandoned the concept of art history and its 'Grand Narrative' that was established as part of the colonial world view."<sup>5</sup> Markers of inferiority extended from the verbal to the visual because the art world served as a mechanism for bestowing aesthetic significance on philosophical and political notions of difference as negative. The need to fix black bodies in comforting ways—to control, display, "own" them and their power—had to involve more than verbal discourse and accompanying written regulations and justifications. Cultural production—the visual and expressive dynamics of cultural production—also played a role, in that through these means aesthetics became the handmaiden of political, economic, and social arrangements privileging whiteness. This, of course, did not require a complete erasure of the African/African American but could instead involve exercising power by manipulating the cultural production of the "other" and placing this into service for validating a certain Western aesthetic. Think, for example, of the manipulation of African aesthetics represented by the mask and Picasso's co-opting of this artistic style. Or consider the accumulation of artifacts from the "other" within British museums: the colonial power artistically inspired by the colonized—"Modernist Primitivism." In this regard, the museum and/or gallery might be

said to have replaced the colonial government agency as the symbol of control and power.<sup>6</sup> The body had long been a subject of aesthetic concern—arranged, studied, displayed so as to investigate its nature and meaning. In this regard, the display of enslaved bodies, the march of South African workers, and the display of physical bodies within the work of contemporary artists all speak to this preoccupation with the materiality of existence. The intention of such displays is to access the dynamics of this materiality and trouble the value/beauty of black bodies' physicality over against the unarranged (by humans) materiality of the world and the creations of human technology that undergird human life.

Regarding the latter, there are ways in which the fascination with an African aesthetic marked an effort to address the angst of aggressive industrial and technological advances in the Western world, in part by capturing and pacifying the exotic and/or primitive.<sup>7</sup> I should provide a note of context here: While the use of African art shifts over the course of the twentieth century, I am less concerned with these various points of use as discrete markers—use of the formal art vs. interest in the implications of the art vis-à-vis angst regarding Western culture.<sup>8</sup> Rather, I am more concerned with how African art is utilized within the larger framework of twentieth-century colonialism as a general conceptual paradigm. I am also intrigued by the ways in which late twentieth-century artistic production by the “children of Africa” works over against this early manipulation of cultural forms. Whether through the medium of painting, sculpture, or photography, art became a means by which to explore both existential and ontological issues not disconnected from sociopolitical developments. This included both the strength and decline of colonial power and authority as the marker of collective, national identity as well as individual and communal identity formation within the context of a changing world in which the power of racial dynamics is growing less fixed and certain.<sup>9</sup> It was an aesthetic, an artistic consumption of the other in ways meant—whether conscious or not is of little consequence—to fix a certain type of superiority couched in the ability to create and name. This was done through reconstruction (consumption) of the African continent along colonial lines as well as a similar process in the Americas, and through visual consumption as artistic production within the context of the gallery and museum matrix of expressed and displayed cultural (and political) meaning.

European and American artists used a variety of methods and mediums to express dissatisfaction with both certain dimensions of the art world and

also the general patterns of life. They sought to signify if not enliven Western modes of being through the energy of an African aesthetic unleashed within the imaginaries of Western artistic expression. In this way, an aesthetic represented in African artistic production was remade in the image of the colonizer, to the extent the colonizer controlled the location and context for display—as well as the interpretation of the items displayed. So arranged, blackness was rendered docile, a type of device through which the primitive loses its negative difference and becomes a tool for a new “white” ontology. The initial meaning or purpose of the items—masks and so on—was consumed by the exotic quality bestowed on them by their new arrangement and a “Western” gaze. The capture of these items marked out a certain type of fascination with them, but the altered purpose and place assigned them also demonstrates a certain type of discomfort with them: they cannot be what their initial creation intends. They are emptied of one meaning and given another through location and display within the context of an-other. But all of this aesthetic play takes place within the confines of certain language games, rendered by a set of signs and symbols that draw on while also critiquing the queue of modernity. Theirs is not a turn to postmodernism; they appreciate the subject too much for that. However, they want to strip the subject down to the essential self, to the most basic precepts and assumptions of thought and embodied life. And these artists see the ability to do so offered through a turn to an African aesthetic. It is a manipulation of time and space, one that hopes to draw new meanings for and placements in both so as to revitalize the European embodied (and cultural) body. The goal in certain respects involved an effort toward integration as opposed to isolation from the self, from others, and from the world in which artistic work took place: connections over against well-appointed loneliness. This is not a surrender to an other; an African aesthetic could not be given that type of importance without jeopardizing the inner workings of European superiority. One needs, however, to be able to touch the markers of this aesthetic without defilement: one had to use Africanness, to parade it about proudly, without being consumed by it. A postmodern turn would bring into question the subject, the author, but not yet. Art, and the artist, had not died yet; the crisis was not that. Rather, it was a “seek and rescue” mission, a concern with preserving the subject as aesthetic entity over against the mechanical nature of modern life. Yet, this is not Thoreau’s call for simplicity, not his attempts toward the deliberate life.

Coming as no surprise, from some Western artists, this turn to African art was also meant to free European culture to embrace more fully the energy of life over against reason—an alternate imaginary of the primitive. Because people of African descent are typically viewed as being more emotional, as expressed in the context of their worship for example, many within the art world sought to instill in Western sensibilities some of this openness to feeling by embracing African art, an African aesthetic tied to a certain epistemology of life meaning.<sup>10</sup> By posing with African art, so to speak—by using it as an artistic hermeneutic, and so on—they “went native.” These masks and other artifacts could be owned and presented in a manner consistent with the nature of power within the more explicitly economic and political dimensions of twentieth-century colonialism. Money, and what it makes possible, is always present. Efforts to hide this connection serve(d) only to reenforce it, to demonstrate the inevitable linkage between sociocultural politics and artistic production. Museums and other containers for artistic production displayed are not devoid of such considerations, and the works they hold are also charged in the same manner and with the same cultural-political dilemmas.<sup>11</sup> Are these pieces representations of art or artifact?<sup>12</sup> Whether in museums or less public spaces, the ability to move between these possibilities entailed some of the power to proscribe meaning inherent in the claiming, displaying, and use of African art and the aesthetic sensibilities entailed.

In some ways, however, this co-optation of African-associated aesthetics served to promote a less brutal style of using blackness and black bodies to mark the colonial enterprise. It was, after all, globalization marked by colonial endeavors and American empire that gave occasion for more contact with African art and its underlying stylistic qualities. Whereas missionary interest in Africa and similar efforts in the American context were meant to exercise the otherness of African related approaches to thought and action, artists consumed this otherness as a way of enlivening their own sense of meaning and purpose and as a way of revitalizing Western aesthetics. In the former instance, Africanness needed the service of a redeemer (that is, embrace of Western Christianity). With respect to the latter, Africanness in particular and otherness in general as an aesthetic served to “save” Western art from/to itself while also damaging its epistemological connection to its context of origin.<sup>13</sup>

It was not only aesthetics, the nature and meaning of creativity, that was “saved” but also attention to blackness in the form of an African artistic

aesthetic that was consumed by individuals and groups outside the confines of galleries and museums. Consider Paris during the early twentieth century, drawing from France's colonial contacts. "Blackness," writes Archer-Straw, was a sign of a Parisian's "modernity, reflected in the African sculptures that scattered their rooms, in the look of natural furs that fringed their coats, and in the frenzy of their dancing that mimicked the black bottom." But as should come as no surprise based on the logic of colonialism, "[o]nly rarely are black people depicted in this world. They and their mystique are the invisible presence."<sup>14</sup> The concern, rather, was the place of white embodied bodies in time and space deeply damaged by war and marked by the penetrating signs of optimism gone wrong.

If one controls for colonial location, the fear and anxiety marking literature related to the impact of Africanness on Western sensibilities and civilization as found in, for example, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, are not repeated in full in the artistic manipulation of African aesthetic sensibilities. The dangers associated with colonial and imperialistic impulses that eventually destroy are covered over by the materials of artistic production. What remains is a type of hopefulness that does not deny the colonial processes but instead seeks to redeem the West (for example, Western art). Africa is not the source of fear in this case, but rather a means by which to enliven the aesthetics of the West.<sup>15</sup> As a result, we see two sides of modernism—content (economic/politics of colonialism) and form (Western versus African aesthetics). Regarding either case, there remained a sense of superiority over Africanness in its various configurations and incarnations. For instance, it was uncommon in the "art world" for there to be surprise that this aesthetic came from the "dark" continent. This implied colonial presumptions of the capacities of the colonized for intellectual greatness and artistic depth. Yet this very conversation is couched in a manipulation of the achievements of the very peoples disparaged. For the colonizer, the benefits were many—including economic expansion and cultural voyeurism.<sup>16</sup>

These Western artists imagined and romanticized a certain simplicity of expression over against the suffocating environ of modern technology, economic expansion, and the delicate nature of twentieth-century political arrangements. Whether through photographs displayed, museums, galleries, private collections, and so on, this artistic flirtation with African art as a source of a "fresh" aesthetic said something about the creativity of Africa (either as art or craft), but it said more concerning the reach of colonial intent and need.



Yet in other ways, the art becomes something of a talisman for the Western viewer—housing a certain type of power, a power to rethink the aesthetics of the Western world. But it is a confined and limited power in that it does little to change or significantly alter the discourse of belonging or sociopolitical and ontological meaning of blackness. These objects are rendered visible, although those creating them are invisible—rendered irrelevant in the same way colonialism as an economic and political project makes the labor of the colonized visible but denies their depth of meaning beyond this one dimension. “Museums,” writes Svetlana Alpers, “turn cultural materials into art objects. The products of other cultures are made into something that we can look at. It is to ourselves, then, that we are representing things in museums.”<sup>17</sup> History—the events, meanings, and so on associated with the objects—is lost and replacing it are signs of a “fantastic” cultural transfiguration.

Those who embody this blackness are perhaps restricted to what one interpreter calls “a history of silent meaning,” but even this realm of ontology was marked by a persistent sense of blackness-as-other to be consumed or worn at will.<sup>18</sup> In short, the African masks, for example, authorized a certain masking process whereby the benefactors of cultural colonialism (and racial-difference philosophies) could critique the arrangements of modernity from inside its structures without having to fully acknowledge the contradiction. Moving from African art to blackness as embodied body, there are ways in which the idea of the exotic persisted as a creative alternative to the cultural death that is modernity.

At times cultural surveyors also embodied this Western angst and African corrective. A clear example of this is found in the work and life of Dada artists such as Man Ray—who played a major role in the presentation of blackness as corrective—in Paris during the early twentieth century. “They rejected civilized bourgeois values,” writes Archer-Straw, “and styled themselves instead as primitives.” And what is more, “Dada’s instinct for the regressive, and its open display of hostility, were the outward expressions of negative artistic sentiments that were already an undercurrent of modernist thought.”<sup>19</sup> The self and “other” are altered—creating something along the lines of a new aesthetic ontology: the other self, blackened.

Numerous figures, including Aaron Douglas, turned at some point to an African aesthetic as a way to reconfigure African American artistic production and the “rhythm” informing it. Yet they seem to have done so in ways that still reflect a somewhat respectful glimpse at modernity—limited anger, but also a

rethinking of the discourse of the primitive embodied. And while I find the work of artists like Douglas and Romare Bearden to be compelling—pieces that demand one linger—more to the point of this issue for me is the short but intense period of reconstruction offered by Jean-Michel Basquiat. He draws on the mind-set and posture toward the world promoted by the emergence of hip-hop culture and uses it as a conceptual paradigm and language for the transformed subjectivity. There has been attention given to a blues aesthetic and a jazz aesthetic<sup>20</sup>—with the latter often used in reference to Basquiat—but I suggest a hip-hop aesthetic, one that draws from these others but invests them with a unique restlessness that was only possible for children coming of age in the nadir of civil rights rhetoric and the birth of crack cocaine. For those seeking an aesthetic of life in this particular age, the construction is along the lines of a labyrinth—one that weaves through the cartography of despised black bodies now rendered subjects of history flowing with meaning.

By pulling viewers through this labyrinth, by forcing a confrontation with a thick, complex association of meanings, Basquiat promotes a messy and alternate depiction of blackness—one not easily borrowed by whites. While I have some difficulties with the terminology of primitivism, there is something of this statement that speaks to my point:

Primitivism as practiced by Pablo Picasso and other white artists early in this century, in the late-colonial heyday of Modernism, was a matter of white culture imitating the products of non-white culture. To white Europeans and Americans of the time, generally speaking, white culture was the norm and nonwhite cultures were aberrations. To borrow from them showed not the impoverishment of white culture, its need for vital input from outside, but its imperial generosity in recognizing the nonwhite. This was a kind of royal slumming, as it were, like the visits of downtown white esthetes to upper Manhattan during the Harlem Renaissance. Basquiat’s practice of primitivism was an ironic inversion of all that.<sup>21</sup>

Thomas Mcevilley, from whose analysis of Basquiat the above quotation is drawn, believes Basquiat’s engagement with notions of the artistically “primitive” seriously undermines the colonial holdovers in the art world; it does so by denying an aesthetic and ontological distance between black and white. His art, Mcevilley argues, serves to collapse worlds, to signify both the nature and

meaning of whiteness and blackness through a process of artistic double-talk.<sup>22</sup> He sees justification of his position in an image of Basquiat. There is a poetic and noble quality to his words, but they betray a misperception:

His feet were bare. Yet he wore an expensive Giorgio Armani suit—which, however, was soiled with paint. The dirty Armani brought up the cliché of the primitive who comprehends use value but not exchange value, the bare feet similarly suggested a denizen of preurbanized culture. . . . Carelessly yet carefully enthroned, he evoked the mood of *spressatura*, the feigned or studied casualness cultivated by the Italian nobility of the Renaissance.<sup>23</sup>

He continues, and this makes the point, “This ambiguous or double self-image—barefoot in Armani—embodies the paradox that W. E. B. Du Bois described.”<sup>24</sup>

I think such a stance is both existentially and ontologically naive in that it fails to grasp the troubled and troubling nature of what W. E. B. Du Bois understood as twoness or double consciousness. Mcevilley assumes falsely that one can artistically toy with twoness without suffering long-term consequences. This assumes the discourse of power and be-ing can be rearranged and modified artistically without damage to those promoting the effort. He seems to believe one can step outside this twoness and describe, revise, play with it. However, the demons haunting Basquiat—his struggles with identity and meaning as artist as black man—would suggest otherwise. His struggle with the notion and attainment of fame speaks to the damaging consequence of twoness within the art world. I suggest a different reading of Basquiat captured on film, one that is not as postmodern in that it does not reject the author or subject. Instead it simply troubles the ability to know or hold the subject even within the context of artistic production. Basquiat questions the West. On this point I agree with Mcevilley. However, he does it from within the West, hopelessly tied to the West—and both loving and hating that bond—and speaking this love/hate using the tools given him by the Western art world.

There is a picture of Basquiat in his New York City studio dated 1987.<sup>25</sup> Like images from an earlier period, pictures of artists taken by Man Ray, Basquiat is situated next to his art supplies—brushes, paints—as well as an African statue and African drums. Perhaps they speak to a sense of aesthetic

and historical origin, or perhaps inspiration as with the types of artists noted earlier. However, what is telling is not so much these items or the blank look on his face but, rather, the wooden cutout of a gun he holds to his head without emotion. For white artists and white patrons of the arts, one might argue, the presence of African items suggested a certain critique of modernism, an embrace of the exotic that spoke to one's reaction to the nature and meaning of the West. But for Basquiat the image is more demanding and less romanticized. The pulling of this blackness out of him, placing it beside his body for visual consumption and artistic use, is damaging: it threatens to kill or end his life meaning, to kill identity and to kill the body. What is the price of belonging to the West? This image of Basquiat offers a different take on blackness and an African aesthetic within artistic production. It affords another, less pacifying look at identity formation when race cannot be ignored, and it pushes to the forefront the dilemma of existence. There is something political about much of his work, both as an overt discourse on the history of human engagement and also as the mandatory rhythm of life in a black body in a racialized and racist society. This is, in part, the legacy of hip-hop culture within his artistic production.

Certain forms of artistic production—and I would include the fascination with an African aesthetic or the artistic appeal of “blackness”—were meant to enliven, to maintain the meaning of embodied and thought life over against its draining away. But the late twentieth century removed some of the allure, prevented—through its offerings no better than the trauma of earlier moments—some of the optimism. Postmodernism contravened the assumptions of modernity's sense of inevitable progress of the subject. This raises a question, one borrowed and placed in a different context, that I believe the work of Basquiat seeks to answer. “What,” writes Peter Halley, “could fill the role once served by art as vanquisher of death, as beacon in the void?”<sup>26</sup>

## Connection Two: Basquiat and the Signifying of Aesthetics

In some ways, it might be said that I am attempting to trace a particular learning of meaning making through artistic production. Here it involves the African American artist signifying the primitive aesthetic as blackness, signifying the question above, and doing this through a re-presentation of the embodied self exposed. We learn something of the dilemma of blackness as a sign of modern

difference recast as that symbol desired. More to the point, with Basquiat one gets a graphic example of the quest for meaning, the effort to reconstitute oneself existentially and ontologically as an act of aesthetics. But he does so not through an effort to jettison the discomforts of life that seek to reify the embodied body as idea. One gets this effort more clearly with earlier African American artists such as Henry Tanner with his *The Banjo Lesson*, through which he seeks to give visual representation to the affect of the narrative tradition whereby black life is reconstituted as mimetic. Instead, with Basquiat, one gets a visual representation of subjectivity much more akin to the writing of the embodied black body offered by figures such as Richard Wright, Nella Larsen, and Lorraine Hansberry.

He felt the lure and fear draining him in like manner to the push and pull experienced by earlier symbols of blackness. One had to be able to see and read in order to unpack Basquiat's work. By this I do not mean the ability to decipher letters and arrange them into words that signify certain actions or ideas. Instead, I mean having a sense of the sociohistorical, political, and economic context informing his struggles with identity—to understand the implications of the age of crack on perceptions of life and death. And I mean the ability to gather in the hidden, to decode the various signs and symbols embedded within signs and symbols: this requires a hip-hop sensibility to the extent that codes artistically arranged are the hallmark of “tagging”—graffiti. His identity, his presence in the world of visual language, is first tied to graffiti:

Henry Geldzahler: Did you work in the streets and subways because you didn't have materials or because you wanted to communicate?

Jean-Michel Basquiat: I wanted to build up a name for myself.<sup>27</sup>

There are ways in which the painting, the act of creating visual representations, speaks to the rhythm of his life. Artistic expression chronicles or maps his movement through the world, not as disconnected from his embodied experience of the world but, rather, as static moments within that larger arena of engagement.

Henry Geldzahler: Do you feel a hectic need to get a lot of work done?

Jean-Michel Basquiat: No. I just don't know what else to do with myself.<sup>28</sup>

In some instances there is a minimal quality, a way in which Basquiat seeks to more directly capture the tone and “feeling” of embodied thought and movement. Less paint, more direct, the idea expressed with fewer filters. Life is layered for him, and this is represented in the layered quality of his work (before dealers more interested in sales than finished work would move them before he was done). In certain ways, the presentation of skeletal figures, innards exposed, speaks to life closer to the core.<sup>29</sup> Thoreau also recognized the significance of life close to its inner core, but for him this is where it is sweetest. For Basquiat, such comfort is not possible. Near the core, with the layers of imposed meaning stripped away, is where life is intense and graphic but also unstable and macabre. No transcendentalism in Basquiat, just the existential angst of the rebel.<sup>30</sup>

Henry Geldzahler: Is there anger in your work now?

Jean-Michel Basquiat: It’s about 80 percent anger.

Henry Geldzahler: But there’s also humor.

Jean-Michel Basquiat: People laugh when you fall on your ass. What’s humor?<sup>31</sup>

He consumes the culture—history books, anatomy books, other artists, guide books, and so on—that are symbolic of the constructions of the West that worried the consumers of African aesthetics.

Henry Geldzahler: I like the drawings that are just lists of things.

Jean-Michel Basquiat: I was making one in an airplane once. I was copying some stuff out of a Roman sculpture book. This lady said, “Oh, what are you studying.” I said, “It’s a drawing.”<sup>32</sup>

He consumes this culture (its dread and possibilities), signifies it, and produces an alternate perspective and perception of the embodied self. In this regard he is both scapegoat and conjurer, with the signified and signifier revolving in certain ways around the category of race as anti-meaning. Others had promoted the ordinariness of life but in ways that rendered it extraordinary, a marker of something more significant and meaningful behind

and underneath the object. This is still to be encapsulated in the yearning for grandeur. Basquiat breaks through this, allowing the ordinary to shift locations but remain simply mundane. The meaning is not found in the transformation of the ordinary into something else, but rather it is lodged in the ordinary as it is—defiant, boundary questioning, and also docile and proscriptive. His images, from my perspective this is particularly true with respect to his first phase, are not easily divested of their intensity, are not easily rendered neutral and accessible. How are you prepared to view it<sup>33</sup> is a central question with respect to the impact of aesthetics on the picture and content of embodied and thought life. Like others would do after him, Basquiat calls “attention to slippery relationships between revelation and concealment, visibility and invisibility, and presence and absence.” In the process, there is an act of subversion, “trick and play with audience expectations to challenge tendencies toward objectifying black female and male bodies.” He, again like others after him, takes “the juxtaposition of text and image of earlier artists even further to invert power dynamics and foreground the relationship between black bodies and erasure.”<sup>34</sup>

The trope of race was ever present, and not even his acceptance in the art world could prevent the impact of racism on his sense of self and his sense of belonging. It is this that, at least in part, accounts for the intensity of his images—the energy of the skulls and the bodies turned inside out within his work. Lodged in his paintings over the nine years of his career is a public/private wrestling with embodiment in a troubled world, where identity is unstable and all has something to do with economics and politics cast within the language of culture. According to Robert Farris Thompson, Basquiat forced an aesthetic confrontation with the felt nature of urban life. “His,” he writes, “is a quest for a sharper, ecumenical assessment of the troubling—yet promising—configurations of our urban destiny and predicament.”<sup>35</sup>

There is a thickness to this process. “The very sense of modernism’s beginning in a Western primitivism, an alterity that also allowed modernism to declare itself an alternate to modernity,” writes Will Rea, “is denied to the African modern artist, a denial entirely based upon Western appropriation of the notion of the ‘primitive’ which is simultaneously coupled to a total denial of the people and culture of Africa.”<sup>36</sup> My concern does not rest with the “negritude” debates but rather with the manner in which artistic expression wrestles with the existential and ontological issues that result when Europeans appropriate an African aesthetic (aesthetic as wholeness and beauty).

While there are myriad ways to tackle this concern, I want to use this as an opportunity to interrogate this process from within my own context—one indebted to Africa and Europe, fueled through a centuries-long blending of both within the Americas. My question is something along these lines: What is the look of artistic production that seeks to acknowledge, signify, and restructure identity within the context of shifting geographies of meaning? Pop art and other modalities of visual expression had brought the nature and production of art into question, challenging assumptions concerning what constitutes art.

Basquiat's work added to this destruction of artistic sensibilities by also critiquing the racial assumptions embedded in both artistic production and the spaces housing this art. He ripped apart the assumptions of how and what one knows about embodied life by unmasking blackness as subtext—bodies inside out, bodies as both text and context. It had been the case earlier in the twentieth century that Western artists found blackness—particularly Africanness—appealing, but they wanted it sanitized, comforting, and comfortable. Basquiat's work signified such safeness. But in an ironic twist, he as an embodied being fed off this voyeuristic desire, and the effort to model his life accordingly was deadly. Perhaps he sought, as artist historian Robert Ferris Thompson remarked, to achieve a type of existential and ontological wholeness through his work, an identity in opposition to Western desire to rip apart and consume blackness.<sup>37</sup>

Movement is a significant paradigm in the above presentation, which renders blackness as an aesthetic source and framework. One would expect this to be the case in light of the nature and meaning of colonialism and conquest. In this regard, movement—the fluidity of epistemological and ontological geography—is not limited to the nature and function of art and aesthetics, but it also says something about the general identity of embodied blackness—black material bodies and what they house. African Americans signified these depictions of Africanness in particular and blackness in general. According to some scholars, the Harlem Renaissance's push for a new aesthetic encapsulates one of the early and clear efforts of African Americans to recast the cultural world and production of the African continent as their own and as something other than the visual residue of colonial politics.

Basquiat does something similar, though his work bridges Africa, Europe, and the Americas in a way more reflective of the hip-hop era in which he lived. As Michael Harris remarks, "Like the hip-hop expression he emerged from,



Basquiat sampled fragments from a variety of sources, and his own identity suggested hybridity with its roots in Puerto Rico, Haiti, and lived middle-class experience in Brooklyn.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps there is something of negritude or Haiti's ethnic consciousness or nationalism in Basquiat's work—an effort to reconstitute symbolic blackness and embodied blackness as a rejection of the tragedy of modernism's proclamation of the primitive—filtered of course through the pulse and texture of hip-hop culture.<sup>39</sup> This effort to tame, if not dismantle, primitivism does not begin with Basquiat—such a qualification should not be necessary. But there are ways in which Basquiat's cultural ontology, combined with his hip-hop posture, provides an important dimension of this challenge to modernism. Is his alleged primitive aesthetic *their* primitive?

He paints and draws skulls that have a hint of the African mask. But whereas advocates of a primitivism meant to capture an African aesthetic for the sake of a revitalized West seek to pacify the African mask, to wear the mask, to touch and hold it in ways meant to comfort the anxious artists of the West, Basquiat invests these skulls—the postmodern mask?—with a wild energy that cannot be tamed. The colors are vibrant, pulsing outside any lines that might serve as boundaries. These skulls have a piercing look that renders the viewer uncomfortable and controlled by the skull. The energy that earlier white artists sought to take away from the African aesthetic—as represented, say, by the mask—in order to make them tame is reinscribed by Basquiat through his presentation of skulls. He—and this is also reflected in the urgency of his painting—assumed the tragic nature of life, as did the characters such as Cross Damon and Bigger Thomas from the work of writer Richard Wright.<sup>40</sup> Basquiat, then, was to the visual arts what Richard Wright was to literature—both maintained a sense of realism, an understanding of the consequences involved in claiming time and space, while recognizing that racial dynamics always shape these decisions and the content of our life stories.

With Man Ray, for example the mask is subdued, becoming the thing dominated by the photographer and the white body holding it. There was an effort to remove the tragic to the extent it served as a reminder of modernity's failures. Yet with Basquiat this is not possible: only a comparably wild energy can maintain contact with this energy, passion, angst, and discomfort that is the untitled skull image. However, while he sought to be in thought and action, there are still ways in which he reflects earlier, modern sensibilities: How could this not be the case, considering the influence of figures such as Picasso on his painting? He drew inspiration and ideas from what he labeled the “masters” as

well as from other sources of identity discourse that shape our understanding of our human embodiment—*Gray’s Anatomy*, etc. Yet, he projected them through the turmoil and pleasures of blackness, and he folds them upon themselves through a rhythm he associated with the irreverent creativity of jazz.

Basquiat pulls the human body apart to uncover and discover its cultural meaning. In this way, he seeks to articulate differently the nature of the culturally constructed body. In the process, Basquiat does not discount the material body, insofar as his deconstruction of his own body (for example, drug use) directly impacts what can be captured artistically of the cultural body. All this work—this wildness—entails contradiction, an effort to deny (and in the process reinforce through the romanticization of the “streets”) his middle-class roots.

It is both the framework for the artist and the makeup of the artist in some instances—the artist presents and is otherness. One of the most compelling examples of this in the late twentieth century has to be hip-hop culture. This triadic (rap, dance, art) mode of expression spoke to the sociopolitical and economic conditions of postindustrial life, signified the angst undergirding postmodernity, and reached across national boundaries to mark out deep cultural connections. Basquiat’s paintings are deceptive; they are not easy to read or comfortable to feel. They require work, an unraveling of the layers in the same way identities are layered, marking life meaning from within overlapping realms of interaction and exchange.

This raises another important question: How did Basquiat signify this depiction of blackness or the black body as marker of the savage? And how did his alternative depiction render more depth and meaning? Blackness was a container for a particular aesthetic that many in the Western world considered salvific. In this way, blackness was a complex signifier—both negative and positive, desired yet feared. Basquiat’s work, influenced as it is by hip-hop, signifies this framework. Rather than examining blackness from outside in, he conceptualizes and presents it inside out. As Jennifer Clement records in her book *Widow Basquiat: A Love Story*, “Everything was symbolic to him. How he dressed, how he spoke, how he thought, and those with whom he associated. Everything had to be prolific or why do it and his attitude was always tongue-in-cheek. Jean was always watching himself from outside of himself and laughing.”<sup>41</sup> By so doing, he also speaks to the fractured and overlapping nature of identity—unfixed, fluid, troubled, and thick. “A frequent motif in Basquiat’s work—the ‘see-through’ man—not only responded metaphorically

to this period's fascination with exposé and destroying people's facades," writes Richard Powell, "but also spoke to the notion that anatomy had a theatrical quality that, when paired with blackness, was a radical attack on society's superficiality and deep-seated racism."<sup>42</sup> That is to say, Basquiat repositions black bodies in a way that pushes against stereotypical discourses by articulating them differently, in an energetic and dismissive manner, employing what some have called neo-expressionism.

Present in his work are bodies, recognizable but troubling—pulled apart and put together again—modern and postmodern in their arrangement in time and space. His work has been known to make both whites and blacks uncomfortable, one would assume for different reasons: embodied positionality with respect to stereotypes of blackness as aesthetic. Created in both his personal embodiment and in his aesthetic choices, writes Clement, "he tried to make people notice him, wake them up, by using a symbol out of context. This occurred in his paintings and in his actions."<sup>43</sup>

But perhaps it is this shared discomfort that pushes against the assumptions that initially framed the capture of blackness as salvific item and idea: do these images, often inside out, speak a wholeness or beauty, a simplicity, that challenges the grand narratives of modernity? Do these images (at first glance somewhat crude) speak to a necessary simplicity or primitivism, or does Basquiat mock the modernist desire for such a thing?

At times, Basquiat approached the Western art world and its "sacred" spaces (for example, museums) in ways that pull at the diasporic threads of life in the Americas, in the process shaving away at the integrity of these spaces—redirecting their energy and signifying their meaning through what his body can do and produce: "At the museum [MoMA] Jean-Michel takes a bottle of water out of his coat and walks through the halls sprinkling the water here and there around him. 'I'd piss like a dog if I could,' he says, as they wander past paintings by Pollock, Picasso, Kline and Braque. Suzanne [his girlfriend] does not even ask what he is doing. She knows this is one of his voodoo tricks."<sup>44</sup> There is in his response some recognition of the distinctions between himself and these other figures and the manner in which race and class shape the construction and reception of his body and what it produces. "But, in the end," one writer says, "the differences between Picasso and Basquiat—the different relations they adopt to the ethnographic gaze leveled from the West on traditional African art, the different investments they make in the construction of their own celebrity—are more pronounced than any formal affinities

in their work."<sup>45</sup> His action in the MoMA manipulates a creation of the "New World"—sensibilities of the new world—to tame the impulse of the museum, removing its sanctity and in the process shifting the perception of what can take place in that space. Blackness is not on display as he moves through the halls, but instead blackness taints the space and troubles the racial profile of comfort within a race-based world.

And for blacks viewing these same images, a different question: is there anything of me in this? There is a bit of the tragic in this situation, as Michael Harris insightfully notes. Basquiat, Harris reflects, "had to assume a particular social position to play to the bright lights. As happened with the primitivist fascinations in France in the first three decades of the twentieth century, and those in Roaring Twenties' New York, white interest in black expression came at a price for Basquiat. His works were colored by these realities, and his life was stained by them."<sup>46</sup> I believe there are ways in which Basquiat as artist is also trickster, the figure who moves between worlds, crosses ontological and existential geography and in the process allows them to open new meanings that suggest the texture and contours of what we have called the religious. This involves forcing a different set of questions and presuppositions: What is the place of this blackness? What new meanings emerge? What is the materiality of identity?

Segments of the art world during the twentieth century positioned blackness as a custom of sorts that could be adorned and displayed, and in this way both express a certain type of ontology while denying another. So done, blackness became a critique of particular aspects of modernity in the West—the nastier elements of colonialism, for example. Basquiat plays on the plastic nature of blackness as alternate aesthetic and uses this to tell an alternate existential and ontological story. He signifies the signifier and exposes the complexity of blackness as aesthetic, a thickness of meaning denied by an early appropriation by the likes of Man Ray and others. As many interpreters have noted, there are ways in which Basquiat seeks to critique modernist art. The language of colonialism and otherness is signified, shifted, and transformed through a new ownership and use. Yet this process is never complete, the discourse on blackness and power accommodates the change and restores balance through embrace. Basquiat merged the visual image and the written text—positioning both with respect to bodies. In this way, he brought into play, challenged and affirmed, the tools of discourse in ways meant to disrupt their unity by changing their content and target.

But as is always the case, in light of the way power functions even within the realm of cultural aesthetics, Basquiat, in spite of his best efforts to signify and deconstruct, was consumed. His aesthetic, as critical as he wanted it to be, promoted a critique of modernism—and its depictions of the savage—but one that the art establishment embraced: the signifier was signified (for example, the savage as source of complex meaning). The basic conceptual paradigms were tweaked, but they persisted nonetheless: “Once the work was done, the dealers became very possessive of it, and tried to control it. Jean used to say, ‘it’s like feeding the lions. It’s a bottomless pit. You can throw them meat all day long, and they’re still not satisfied.’”<sup>47</sup> What is even more telling, however, is the lament Basquiat offered on several occasions: “I wanted to be a star, not a gallery mascot.”<sup>48</sup> Some, says Marc Miller in a 1982 interview with the artist, describe Basquiat “as some sort of primal expressionist.” Jean-Michel Basquiat in response: “Like an ape? A primate?”<sup>49</sup> Blackness was consumed, the mask—although less passive in construction and placement—could still be used to cover or shift the nature and meaning of aesthetics in relationship to blackness and whiteness. He sought, it seems, to alter the dynamics of artistic production in relationship to race and class and to do so from within the belly of the beast. But Foucault is correct: the power we seek to fight, to own, to use, is always and everywhere. It cannot be controlled in that manner to the extent it flows in and through us, makes and unmakes us, is constructed by us. The words (and erasures) within his paintings speak to the inevitability of discourse and its ability to shape time and space.

One sees a graphic example of this in “*Pegasus*,” from 1987, which consists of an overwhelming arrangement of words, phrases, and images, providing geography of expressed meaning with a quality of the labyrinth. The Griot (*Gold Griot*, 1984), for example, speaks to an ability to harness language so as to express particular meanings; but this is a matter of manipulation, not fundamental control. And it might be the recognition of this dilemma that marks for him the significance of jazz, the blues, the legacy of Mississippi (land of the blues) as a location of the tragic nature of suppressed opportunity turned into artistic triumph. Perhaps his artistic production was Basquiat’s effort, in Foucault’s language, to foster spaces for the practice of freedom—or at least spaces of exposure. But these spaces collapse quickly and consume their occupants. Basquiat died in 1988, at age twenty-seven, of a drug overdose. Aesthetics remained an arena in which to wrestle over issues of deep meaning, identity formation, and the technological shifts that mark our shrinking

world. In this regard, aesthetics provides a means by which to wrestle with and for embodied bodies occupying time and space as well as the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural ramifications of that occupation.

Basquiat’s work is an important reminder that the religious involves a quest for complex subjectivity, yes. But this quest has an aesthetic dimension expressed through the visual as an alternate text that both reflects and challenges constructions of black bodies as primitive or savage. There are ways in which (and by which) Basquiat decodes the symbolic markers of black otherness and forces a confrontation with the look of ontological claims made about (and by) people of African descent. He turns primitivism on its head through his capture of neo-expressionism as *b(l)ack-talk*. The implications of this for the study of Africana religions are significant and many. Perhaps the most important of them is the manner in which attention to Basquiat in particular and African American artistic production in general affords the opportunity to crack open and expose the ways in which religiosity—the expressed struggle for meaning—is lodged in non-written texts and also in the perception of balance and beauty undergirding our contemporary cultural worlds. In this way, the study of Africana religion is more intimately connected to the contours of cultural imaginaries that capture and express the poetic quality of life meaning. The visual arts such as what Basquiat offers involves a poetic mapping of the ontological subjects and concerns embedded in the mundane that emerge through reworking the ordinary—pieces of wood, signs seemingly out of context, and so on. By following this mapping, the study of Africana religions gains an important layer of complexity through recourse to a greater range of source materials, a more penetrating scale of hermeneutical questions, and a clearer sense of embodiment’s implied religiosity. “Art imitates life.” Perhaps there is more ontological and epistemological depth to this short statement than we have often assumed, and it might just be the case that some of its appealing and terrifying ramifications are played out on the geography of *be*-longing that is the black body rescued.

### Notes

1. Arthur C. Danto, *The Body/Body Problem: Selected Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 11.
2. Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Introduction: The Multiple Viewpoint: Diasporic Visual Cultures,” in *Diaspora and Visual Culture: Representing Africans and Jews*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (New York: Routledge, 2000), 1–2.

3. See Alain Locke, "Introduction," in *The New Negro* (1925; repr. New York: Athenaeum, 1968).
4. Rasheed Araeen, "The Artist as a Post-colonial Subject and This Individual's Journey Towards 'the Centre'" in *Views of Difference: Different View of Art*, ed. Catherine King (New Haven: Yale University Press/The Open University, 1999), 231.
5. *Ibid.*, 242.
6. James Putnam, *Art and Artifact: The Museum as Medium*, 2nd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2009); Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).
7. Wendy A. Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens* (Washington, D.C.: International Arts and Artists/University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 1–9.
8. *Ibid.*, 81.
9. *Ibid.*, 4.
10. Christoph Grunenberg, "Case Study I: The Modern Art Museum," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (New Haven: Yale University Press/The Open University, 1999), 30.
11. See Emma Barker, ed., *Contemporary Cultures of Display* (New Haven: Yale University Press/The Open University, 1999); and Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).
12. Elsbeth Court, "Case Study 6: Africa on Display: Exhibiting Art by Africans," in *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, ed. Emma Barker (New Haven: Yale University Press/The Open University, 1999), 152.
13. Grossman, *Man Ray, African Art, and the Modernist Lens*, 31.
14. Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 19.
15. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).
16. Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia*, 18.
17. Svetlana Alpers, "The Museum as a Way of Seeing," in *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 23–24.
18. *Ibid.*, 19.
19. *Ibid.*, 20, 87.
20. Graham Lock and David Murray, "Introduction," in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
21. Thomas Mcevilley, "Jean-Michel Basquiat Here Below," in *Dubuffet, Basquiat: Personal Histories* (New York: PaceWildenstein, 2006), 33.
22. *Ibid.*, 34.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*

25. Gianni Mercurio, ed., *The Jean-Michel Basquiat Show* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 2006), 18.
26. Peter Halley, *Collected Essays, 1981–1987* (Zurich: Bruno Bischofberger, 1988), 108.
27. Henry Geldzahler, “Jean-Michel Basquiat (1983),” in his edited *Making It New: Essays, Interviews, and Talks* (Turtle Point Press, 1994), 197.
28. *Ibid.*, 199.
29. *Ibid.*, 200.
30. See Henry David Thoreau, “Conclusion: On the Duty of Civil Disobedience,” in *Walden* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).
31. Geldzahler, “Jean-Michel Basquiat (1983),” 205. Read this remark—“People laugh when you fall on your ass. What’s humor?”—in light of Robert Farris Thompson, “Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: Jean-Michel Basquiat,” in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 276.
32. Geldzahler, “Jean-Michel Basquiat (1983),” 203.
33. Henry Geldzahler raises this question with respect to the photograph. See Geldzahler, “What I Know About Photography,” in Geldzahler, *Making It New*, 333.
34. Celeste-Marie Bernier, *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 194.
35. Robert Farris Thompson, “Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat,” in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 254.
36. Will Rea, “Finding Your Contemporaries: The Modernities of African Art,” in *Identity Theft: The Cultural Colonization of Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 137.
37. Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 80–81.
38. Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 195.
39. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 78–80.
40. Cross Damon is the protagonist of Richard Wright’s *The Outsider* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991); Bigger Thomas is the central character in Wright’s *Native Son* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
41. Jennifer Clement, *Widow Basquiat: A Love Story* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000), 75.
42. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 167.
43. Jennifer Clement, *Widow Basquiat: A Love Story* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 2000), 75.
44. *Ibid.*, 38.



45. Dick Hebdige, "Welcome to the Terrordome: Jean-Michel Basquiat and the 'Dark' Side of Hybridity," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art/Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993), 62–63.
46. Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 256.
47. Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 116.
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*, 168.