

“captured” things

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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 DANTO, *The Body/Body Problem*

Moving from Romare Bearden’s collage work as signifying the interplay of things over against efforts to foster racialized boundaries and modes of confinement, this chapter presents the second of three scenarios in which the racialization of certain naming-things is used to foster the illusion of culturally coded boundaries over against the openness exposed by religion as a technology. In this instance, these are boundaries resting on racial narratives of distinction; but it should not be forgotten that boundaries impact both those who seek to establish them and those against whom they are drawn. Hence, attention to racialization of boundaries does not assume one-directional activity, nor is this push toward (and against) confinement to be understood over against some pure and universal sense of the human.

The Situation

How do the once despised and subjugated enter into (and interact within) places in ways that alter those spaces and give new depth and vitality to blackened naming-things? I explore the nature and significance of blackness as

a categorization of certain naming-things in relationship to this question. In so doing, I am committed to sketching particular examples of blackened naming-things in a way that involves loose movement through periods and locations, ultimately coming to rest on the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat—explored in connection to the politics and production of art in response to race as a cultural sealant applied to naming-things.¹

Basquiat's work and bodied history mark out the movement between Africa and the American hemisphere in ways that speak to elements of a shared experience of the world framed by a politics of whiteness. Put differently, I use Basquiat to mount a push for openness that does not respect national boundaries but instead cuts across cultural geographies and constructions of naming-things. That is to say, the diasporic, as so many scholars have remarked, has a quality of openness played out that can be just as vital as its political and economic markers.² In a sense, and I reference this phrase rather frequently, the art under consideration here involves a smashing of idols (as Alain Locke described the work of the Harlem Renaissance) in that it entails a working against staid depictions of the blackened naming-thing—its cultural shape and physical significance.³

Connection One: African Aesthetics and the “Saving” of Western Art

The postcolonial environment involves a struggle over ontology as well as the meaning of aesthetics as once racially subjected naming-things seek to reconstitute themselves through an alternate cultural reading. 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.⁴ Without doubt, cultural discourses and related geographies of interaction were played out and housed for observation in so many galleries and museums. In the words of Rasheed Araeen, “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.”⁵ 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 naming-things in comforting ways—to control, display, “own” them—had to involve more than verbal discourse and accompanying written regulations and justifications.

Cultural production—visual and expressive dynamics of creativity—also played a role in that through it, 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 naming-thing, but could instead involve demonstration of power through the ability to manipulate cultural production of the “other” and put it into service for the validation of a certain Western aesthetic sense of the proper and properly positioned naming-thing (read white). Think, for example, of the manipulation of African aesthetics represented by the mask and co-opting of this style of artistic presentation by Picasso, or the accumulation of things from the “other” found 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.⁶ The racialized naming-thing 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 bodied naming-things, the march of South African workers, and the display of blackened naming-things within the work of contemporary artists all speak to this preoccupation with the materiality of existence. The intention of such display is to access the dynamics of this materiality and trouble the openness of black naming-things—for example, the ability to relate to other things.

There are ways in which fascination with an African aesthetic marked an effort to address the angst of aggressive industrial and technological advances in the Western world.⁷ I should provide a note of context here: While the use of African art shifted 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 versus interest in the implications of the art vis-à-vis angst regarding Western culture—and more concerned with the manner in which African art is utilized within the larger framework of twentieth-century colonialism as a general conceptual paradigm.⁸ And I am 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—including 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.⁹ It was an aesthetic, an artistic, consumption of the “other”—that is, racialized naming-thing—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—and have that naming “matter.” This was done through reconstruction (consumption) of the African continent along colonial lines as well as similar processes in the Americas, and through developments within the context of the gallery and museum matrix of expressed and displayed cultural (and political) coding.

Europeans and Americans sought to signify, if not enliven, Western modes of interplay through the energy of an African aesthetic unleashed within the imaginaries of Western artistic expression. In this way, this aesthetic 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. The initial meaning or purpose of things—such as masks—was consumed by the exotic quality bestowed on them by their new arrangement and a “Western” gaze. And they were to be fixed, or tamed, by means of this gaze. Furthermore, capture of these items marked 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 by racialized naming-things intends. An item is emptied of one code and given another through its circumscribed location. It can then be marked by display not interplay. But all of this takes place within the confines of certain language games, marked out by a set of signs and symbols drawing on, while also critiquing, the queue of modernity.

Artists involved in this process are not involved in a turn to postmodernism; they appreciate the subject too much for that. However, they want to strip the blackened naming-thing down to the most basic precepts and assumptions. It is a manipulation of time and space, one that hopes to draw new codes and boundaries for and placements in both so as to revitalize the European bodied (and cultural) naming-thing. This goal involves effort toward integration for certain (whitened) naming-things as opposed to isolation *for* others (blackened naming bodies) and *from* troubling dimensions of world. 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 without being consumed by it. This was a seek-and-rescue mission, a concern with the preservation of the subject as aesthetic entity over against the mechanical nature of modern life. Coming as no surprise, this turn to African art was also meant to free European culture to a fuller embrace of a less “managed” (but still controllable) energy of life over against restrictive modalities of reason.¹⁰

By posing with African art, by using it as an artistic hermeneutic, they “went native.”

These masks (thing-things), for instance, could be owned and presented in a manner consistent with the nature of power within the more explicit dimensions of twentieth-century colonialism. Efforts to hide this connection served only to reinforce 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.¹¹ Are these pieces representations of art or artifact?¹² Whether they were in museums or less public spaces, the ability to move between these possibilities entailed some of the power to proscribe significance inherent in the claiming, displaying, and use of African art—that is, racialized things—and the sensibilities entailed by that art. In some ways, however, this co-optation of African aesthetics served to promote a less brutal stylized use of blackness and black naming-things marking the colonial enterprise. After all, it was the 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 sense of meaning and purpose and as a way of revitalizing Western aesthetics. With the former, Africanness needed the service of a redeemer (i.e., embrace of Western Christianity), and 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.¹³

Not only was aesthetics, the nature and meaning of creativity, “saved,” but attention to blackness in the form of an African artistic aesthetic was also consumed by individuals and groups outside the confines of galleries and museums. Take, for example, 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, “only rarely are black people depicted in this world. They and their mystique are the invisible presence.”¹⁴ The concern, rather, was the place of white bodied naming-things in time and space deeply damaged by war and marked by the penetrating signs

of optimism gone wrong. The dangers associated with colonial and imperialistic impulses that eventually destroy are covered over by the materials of artistic production, and what remains is a type of hopefulness that does not deny the colonial processes but seeks to redeem the West (e.g., 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.¹⁵

There are two sides to modernism—content (economics/politics of colonialism) and form (Western versus African aesthetics). Regarding either side, there was a sense of superiority over Africanness and the accompanying racialized naming-things in various configurations and incarnations. For instance, it was uncommon in the “art world” for there to be surprise that this aesthetic comes from the “dark” continent—the implication being a “colonialized” take on the capacities of the colonized for intellectual greatness and artistic depth. Yet this very conversation was couched in manipulation of the achievements of the very peoples disparaged. For the colonizer, the benefits were many—including economic expansion and cultural voyeurism.¹⁶ Western artists imagined and romanticized a certain simplicity of expression over against the suffocating environs 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 consumption of African art (i.e., thing-things) 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 became something of a talisman for the Western viewer, housing a certain type of power—a power to rethink the Western world. But it was a confined and limited power in that it did little to change or significantly alter the discourse of belonging or sociopolitical and ontological coding of blackened naming-things. These things were rendered visible, although those creating them were 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.”¹⁷ History—the events, meanings, and so on associated with things—is lost, and replacing it are signs of a “fantastic” cultural trans/figuration.

Those who embody this blackness (as racialized naming-things) are 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 something to be consumed or worn at will.¹⁸ In short, the African masks, for instance, authorized a certain covering 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 the blackness of naming-things, the exotic persisted as a creative alternative to the cultural death that is modernity. “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.”¹⁹

Desire to “Be” the Other: Bridge Ideas

Movement is the paradigm of significance in the above presentation of blackness coding certain naming-things. 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 bodied blackness—black material bodied naming-things. African Americans signified depictions of African-ness 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. This cultural matrix of movement is played out across various locations and has a significant role in the relationship of Africa, Europe, and the Americas. 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. Blackness became a critique of particular aspects of modernity in the West—the nastier elements of colonialism, for example.

My concern does not rest with the “negritude” debates, but rather with the manner in which artistic expression wrestles with existential and ontological issues raised by appropriation of an African aesthetic (aesthetic as wholeness and beauty). While there are a variety of ways to tackle my interest, 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 interplay within the context of shifting, coded geographies?

At times, cultural surveyors also embodied this Western angst and African corrective—for example, the fixing of blackened naming-things so as to preserve the integrity of white naming-things through the illusion of boundaries. 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,” writes Archer-Straw, “rejected civilized bourgeois values, 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.”²⁰ The self and “other” are altered, creating something along the lines of a new aesthetic ontology: the other self, blackened and different. Others also saw the benefits in this process in that the “African” represented the “other” for whites and many African Americans. 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—and with “limited,” so to speak, anger. And while I find the work of Douglas compelling—pieces that demand one linger—more to the point of this chapter is the short but intense period of naming offered by Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Basquiat draws on the mindset and posture toward the world promoted by the emergence of hip-hop culture and uses it as a conceptual paradigm and language. There has been attention given to a blues aesthetic and a jazz aesthetic—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 racialized naming-things in the nadir of civil rights rhetoric and the birth of crack cocaine.²¹ For those seeking performance of life in this particular age, the construction is along the lines of a labyrinth. By pulling viewers through this existential maze and by forcing a confrontation with a thick and complex association of codes, Basquiat promotes a messy and alternate depiction of blackness—one not easily borrowed by whites to the extent it seeks to maintain a sense of openness over against racially formed boundaries. That is to say, Basquiat’s arrangement of things involves a depiction of interaction, of overlap, and engagement chaotic

and intense—words written and crossed out, figures drawn with jagged lines to depict intensity, vibrant colors spilling out beyond outlines. Embedded in and oozing out is a rebellious aesthetic through which an awareness of dominant social codes (e.g., beauty, agency, and meaning) is known but undone. While I have some difficulties with the terminology of primitivism, there is something in the following 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.²²

Thomas McEvelley, from whose analysis of Basquiat the above quotation is drawn, believes Basquiat's engagement with notions of the artistically "primitive" serves to do deep damage to the colonial holdovers in the art world. It does so by denying ontological distance between black and white. Basquiat's art, McEvelley argues, serves to foster exchange (i.e., interplay on a grand scale) between worlds, to signify both the nature and meaning of whiteness and blackness through a process of artistic double-talk based on a language marked by a grammar of fluidity.²³ He sees justification of his position in an image of Basquiat. And in unpacking this image, McEvelley suggests a poetic and noble quality, but he also betrays 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.²⁴

He continues, and this makes the point:

This ambiguous or double self—image-barefoot in Armani—embodies the paradox that W. E. B. DuBois described.²⁵

I think McEvilley's 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 of twoness or double consciousness. McEvilley assumes falsely that one can artistically toy with twoness without suffering long-term consequences; this assumes that the discourse of power and *being* is rearranged and modified artistically without effect for those promoting the effort. He seems to believe one can step outside this twoness and describe, revise, and play with it. However, the demons haunting Basquiat—struggles with identity and meaning as artist and as blackened naming-thing who names while also being named for the benefit of collectors—would suggest otherwise. His struggle with the notion and attainment of fame speak to the damaging consequence of twoness within the art world, a doubling that both exposes and seeks to hide the power of naming. Basquiat is aware, deeply lucid regarding this process but without the ability to break free, so to speak. He is no longer a tagger working outside the recognized art world; now he is captured by the gallery space as a type of confinement despite his wild life as an attempt to live beyond that space.

I argue a different read of Basquiat, one that is not as postmodern in that it does not reject the naming-thing as it names. Instead, it simply troubles the ability to know or hold the naming-thing even within the context of artistic production. Basquiat questions the West; on this point I agree with McEvilley. However, he does so from within the West—hopelessly tied to the West—loving and hating that binding together, and speaking this love/hate using the tools given him by the Western art world. 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.”²⁶ Perhaps there is something of negritude or Haiti's indigenist in Basquiat's work—an effort to reconstitute blackness and bodied blackness for racialized naming-things 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.²⁷ In this regard, hip-hop serves as a type of signification—an exposing and manipulation of social practices and codes through a poetic turn, and by poetic I mean the destruction of signs and symbols so as to free them to make alternate claims. This effort to tame if not dismantle racism-laced primitivism and its kin 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,

provide a rather interesting dimension of this challenge to modernism. Is his alleged primitive aesthetic *their* primitive?

In some ways, it might be said that I am attempting to trace a particular line of coding through artistic production involving the African American artist signifying blackness, signifying the question above, and doing this through a re-presentation of the bodied naming-thing exposed. More to the point, with Basquiat one gets a graphic example of an effort to re/constitute the naming-thing as an act of art-based rebellion. But he does so not through an effort to jettison the discomforts of life that seek to reify the blackened naming-thing as idea. This effort is apparent in the work of figures such as Henry Ossawa Tanner with his *The Banjo Lesson*, through which he seeks to give visual representation to the affective quality of the narrative (written) 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 Lorraine Hansberry.²⁸ In Hansberry's writing, subjectivity does not involve fixity, by which I mean a sense of being associated with full distinction from other things; rather, a sense of self is determined through connections forged over against social forces seeking to pull things apart.

One has 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 interplay informing his struggles—to understand the implications of the age of crack on perceptions of life and death for racialized naming-things—as well as the power dynamics informing interaction. 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 coded and artistically arranged messages are the hallmark of graffiti. This style of expression is the effort of despised naming-things to maintain their ability to name despite circumstances. So from tagging through which names of naming-things are embedded in designs, to complex portraits that are layered with multiple stories and meanings, hip-hop culture's artistic language exposes as much as it hides. Mindful of this function, it is important to keep in mind that Basquiat's 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.²⁹

There are ways in which painting, the act of creating visual representations, speaks to the rhythm of his life—the performance of interplay as he understood it. He touches things, bringing them into his realm of expression, and in the process these things impact him and serve to shift his sensibilities so that the idea depicted in the work is dependent as much on thing-things as on Basquiat as the naming-thing. And to remove or reposition any of the thing-things produces consequential changes to the depiction and, by extension, response to the visual. Creativity, or creation, in this way is dynamic and multidirectional. Artistic expression chronicles or maps his movement through the world, not disconnected from his bodied 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.³⁰

Life is layered for him, and this is represented in the layered quality of his work. (More interested in sells than finished work, dealers often moved his canvases before he was done.)

In some instances, there is a minimal quality, a way in which Basquiat seeks to more directly capture the tone and “feeling” of bodied thought and movement—with less paint the more direct the idea expressed with fewer filters. In these cases, there is a type of starkness that amplifies the circumstances he addresses—less to distract the viewer, less to “cover” the fundamental interactions.

Connection Two: Basquiat and the Signifying of Aesthetics

There is a picture of Basquiat in his New York City studio dated 1987.³¹ Like images from an earlier period (e.g., 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. Things are layered upon things, situated next to other things—all playing off each other and, in this way, offering a mosaic of motion and entanglement that casts these things as more than functional

but also representational. In contrast to containers full of paintbrushes used to depict without themselves representing, as well as containers of paints with the same limitation (presenting without representing), there is an African carved figure and drums, which serve to both embody and communicate a range of meanings. Perhaps these last items speak to a sense of cultural code and historical origin, or inspiration, as they entail things that point beyond themselves both backward (e.g., the ancestors and the ability to call to them) and forward (e.g., ongoing generations of descendants within contemporary contexts). Both are of a firm substance—wood—carved so as to speak particular significance. But there is also fluidity to them in that their importance spills out through contact with other things—thoughts of eyes that have taken in these images, hands that have beaten the drum, and ears that have soaked in the sound. The naming-thing breaks free from it at points, but not fully. Basquiat, the naming-thing, is distinguishable from the thing-things around him, yet he cannot be fully understood apart from them and the work they do. There is Basquiat, who situates both things by positioning himself in relation to them, while also over against them. His flesh and the wood are physically different, yet they are things in relationship—speaking something of a common history and geography of engagement with the West. Both those wooden things and Basquiat (a naming-thing) are touched by gallery space, and in a certain way are defined by that encounter. The social meaning of the gallery as Western framing for containment is further represented by the sweater and tie worn. But the tie seems not fully tied, and the sweater is ripped around the shoulder, and Basquiat's hair defies Western standards of beauty. A stylistic limitation on the artist—in the form of a Western clothing aesthetic and grooming—cannot confine and cannot define the blackened naming-thing. Instead, this aesthetic as a boundary is exposed and negotiated. That is to say, while Basquiat's reshaping of clothing points to a type of fluidity, a form of boundary compromised, it does not wipe out boundaries and does not make openness complete and sustained. Both boundaries and openness are exposed for their limitations. The surroundings are chaotic, nothing seems arranged, and the points of contact appear random; but Basquiat's face is calm—his look fixed and without emotion. Nonetheless, what is telling is not so much these items or the look on Basquiat's face; rather, it is the wooden cut-out of a gun he holds to his head. This effort to fix him, to truncate interplay, threatens to end him by simplifying his occupation of time and space—to kill and render docile Basquiat as a naming-thing and by extension other racialized naming-things like him.³²

One might argue that the presence of African things spoke for white artists and white patrons of the arts to a certain critique of modernism, an embrace of the exotic related to the nature and meaning of the embodied West. But for Basquiat, the image is more demanding and less romanticized. For the artist, the presence of these items reflects both creativity and an effort to confine the significance of the racialized other. On one hand, these things speak to an African aesthetic, an African framing of the world in ways meant to represent themselves in the world. Yet the ability to handle these items, to rearrange them, to transport them (as Africans were transported) suggests a certain reduction of meaning shaped by the pleasure of those manipulating the items. The pulling of this blackness out of him, placing it beside his body for visual consumption and artistic use, does damage.

This image of Basquiat offers a different take on blackness and an African aesthetic within artistic production. It affords another and less pacifying look at identity formation when race cannot be ignored and when it pushes the dilemma of existence to the forefront. 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 as a blackened naming-thing within racialized society. Put differently, much of Basquiat's work defies easy engagement; it pushes the viewer to confront a type of creative chaos that envisions something both familiar and foreign. The presentation of familiar items such as pieces of wood, connected by common words drawn using standard things like paint and pencils, confirms a common sensibility; but then they are layered and overlapped, put in contact, in a manner that pulls them beyond what the viewer understood as first "use" and instead calls attention to new possibilities when things affect things. There is ruggedness to Basquiat's work (e.g., words written in what appears a haphazard manner, and colors spilling outside the drawn lines) by means of which he presents interaction between things as frenetic.

Particular forms of artistic production—and I would include this 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. In other words, it was intended to end pousness. But the late twentieth century removed some of the allure and prevented some of the optimism. Postmodernism did damage to assumptions of inevitable progress. 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?”³³ What is to be made of art as symbol of openness in a context marked by a push for closure—a commitment to exposure over against social-coding privileging boundaries?

In certain ways, the presentation of skeletal figures, innards exposed, speaks to life closer to the core and life as structures of interplay based on openness.³⁴ One might argue that it is a push to more fundamental circumstances based on the removal of easily recognized sociocultural codes and constructions. Henry David Thoreau, for instance, 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. There is no transcendentalism in Basquiat, just the existential angst of the rebel open to the world.³⁵

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? ³⁶

Near the core, with layers of imposed sociocultural codes stripped away, is where life is intense and graphic but also unstable and macabre. There is only a basic design that is both firm (bone) but fluid (a frenzied “something” explodes from the skeletal figures). Related to this, consider the skull images presented in works such as Basquiat’s *Untitled* (1982).³⁷

Art critic Jonathan Jones captures something of the skull’s energy, the inability to contain through traditional means of denoting space configured—for example, outlines—but also the manner in which the frenetic energy in this painting says something about the condition of certain naming-things within the sociopolitical world of the United States: “Like the work of another heroin user, William Burroughs, his art, with its feeling of being cut and hacked into the canvas rather than daubed, its electric sense of pain in every nerve, shows everyone what’s really in their lunch. He serves up American history with all the worms crawling out of it. This painting of a skull is not just about his own morbidity—it’s about being killed by America.”³⁸ There is intensity in the eyes of this skull—piercing white dots concentrated on what it views and pulling on the viewer at the same time. The eyes are focused, unlike the wildness marking the rest of the skull. Yet they look to the side, away from the viewer who approaches it head-on. The gaze seems directed at the mass of white paint blurred with shades of pink (and penetrated by a small arrangement of stripes of color emerging from it) along the far side closest to the skull. The skull is distinct from the white mass but

connected by an arrangement of thin white lines running from the top of the mass of white to the side of the skull, close to one of the piercing eyes. The two are distinct things, yet connected, engaged, attached by thick white lines that seek to blot out letters (perhaps words) and other markings. There is a roughness but also carefulness in this marking of white over words that does not fully cover a black undercoat suggesting interaction that shifts and changes perception. There is a single and thin black line farther down the image that rests on, but also serves as, a point of connection. This pulsating connection makes for difficult concentration because there is too much activity requiring movement and new thinking. Things, as Basquiat demonstrates, are not distinct in a fixed manner; they interact in both bold and refined ways. Things—whether they be acrylic paint and oil paint, or black and white naming-things—impinge upon each other often in a chaotic fashion that exposes as much as it hides.

The black lines that produce something of an outline for the skull compete and win against the white markings that also try to give some shape to this head, offering some type of framework or border that makes evident the nature of this thing. The skull is an open thing—both defining and being defined by the background. On top of the skull are markings, something resembling a game of tic-tac-toe, providing a calming effect in that the game requires some thought, a stoppage of action long enough to plan and plot moves. Yet this state of reason does not penetrate the skull and so ultimately does not distract from the graphic rage emanating from the skull. In fact, the game might just reflect language games; the relationship between marks that we “read” as words with set meanings is jumbled and manipulated. As Richard Marshall reflects, “To Basquiat the meaning of a word was not necessarily relevant to its usage because he employed words as abstract objects that can be seen as configurations of straight and curved lines that come together to form a visual pattern. The visual and graphic impact of printed letters was sufficient enough to stand alone as an artistic expression.”³⁹ The mouth is open and crowded with marks and colors as if it is about to spew out a verbal dimension of the skull’s rage. But the mouth is disassociated from the markings—the words are not clear; they are not fully expressive in a traditional sense. Rather, the chaotic interaction is expressive—with aggressive and “free” lines.

Basquiat paints and draws skulls that have a hint of the African mask. But whereas advocates of primitivism capturing an African aesthetic for the sake of a revitalized West seek to pacify the African mask, Basquiat invests these skulls with 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-thing in order to make them tame is reinscribed by Basquiat through his presentation of skull-things. He, and this is also reflected in the urgency of his painting, assumed the tragicomic nature of life, as did characters such as Cross Damon and Bigger Thomas from the work of writer Richard Wright.⁴⁰ Basquiat, then, was to the visual arts what Richard Wright was to literature—both maintained a sense of realism, if not absurdist moralism. Both worked from an understanding of the consequences involved in claiming time and space, while recognizing that racial dynamics always inform and shape these decisions made 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 naming-thing holding it.⁴¹ There was an effort to remove the tragic to the extent that 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 passion, angst, and discomfort that is the *Untitled* (1982) skull.⁴²

Interplay.

As wild as he sought to be in thought and action, there are still ways in which Basquiat reflected 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 embodiment as naming-things. Still, as a racialized naming-thing, he projected them through the turmoil and pleasures of blackened embodiment and folded them upon themselves through a rhythm he associated with the irreverent creativity of jazz.

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

HENRY GELDZAHLER

I like the drawing 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.”⁴³

He consumed this culture (its dread and possibilities), signified it, and produced an alternate perception of the bodied naming-thing made black. In this regard, he is both scapegoat and conjurer, with the signified and signifier revolving around the category of race as antimeaning. He is both naming-thing involved in a process of naming but, because he consumes the culture, through his art he is also transformed. Others promoted the ordinariness of life but in ways that rendered them extraordinary, markers of something more significant and penetrating behind, underneath, and through the thing—the yearning for grandeur. Basquiat breaks through this, allowing the ordinary to shift locations but remain simply mundane. Take, for example, his *Boxer Rebellion* (1982–1983). While it is much too layered and complex for sufficient discussion here, brief comments give some sense of his naming and use of cultural moments and codes. Framing two boxers, one throwing a punch, is an intense arrangement of words, some crossed out, or with some of the letters blackened. The words “name” boxers (“SUGAR RAY ROBINSON”), body parts (e.g., “ELBOW”), another form of “boxing” (the “CHINESE BOXER REBELLION”), scientific exchanges (i.e., “TECHNOLOGY”), the language of capitalism (“PER CAPITA”), a segment of the creation account from the Hebrew Bible’s book of Genesis, beginning with “And the earth was formless . . .”⁴⁴ Not all of these markings are in English, as there are words drawn using what appears to be Mandarin in connection to the Chinese Boxer Rebellion. There is also Japanese employed, although the word *Japan* is crossed out (but still visible). These words, drawn from a range of cultural contexts, are distinguished and distinctive to some degree, but mindful of Richard Marshall’s observation, there are ways in which Basquiat pulls words from their traditional meanings and makes them speak a different social sensibility. That is to say, the words as things are positioned to interact differently—to suggest a different range of concerns and possibilities by means of which he exposes the conditions of collective life. Cultures collapse onto each other as they collide vis-à-vis language. On some level they are bounded languages—couched within a larger pattern of cultural coded systems meant to keep them intact and “uncontaminated,” yet such efforts at safeguarding things are futile. Basquiat, as a naming-thing, claims use of these linguistic codes for his own purposes; they express and explain alternate realities. This is not restricted to codes understood as expressing more secular modes of interaction; the biblical text becomes a thing penetrated, a different set of concerns that grants those theological-religious linguistic sensibilities no more space than their secular rivals. The anti-Christian intent of the Chinese Boxer Rebellion is

read with and against the biblical text—one thing (one worldview) is brought into exchange with another (Judeo-Christian sensibilities).

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. In light of the way power functions even within the realm of cultural aesthetics, Basquiat was consumed in spite of his best efforts to signify and deconstruct.

Significance is not found in the transformation of the ordinary into something else; rather, it is lodged in the ordinary as it is—defiant, boundary questioning, and also docile and proscriptive. In a word, things have significance, impactfulness, as things. From my perspective, this is particularly true with respect to Basquiat’s first phase—pieces not easily divested of their intensity are not easily rendered neutral and accessible. The question is this: How are you prepared to view the work of art with respect to the impact of aesthetics on the picture and content of bodied and thought life?⁴⁵ What are the ways in which things collide, inform, and shift each other? Art and the viewer are in relationship.

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.” Again like others after him, he 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.”⁴⁶ The sealant of race is ever present, and not even his acceptance in the art world could prevent the impact of racism on his sense of open self as a naming-thing and his sense of belonging to the process of interplay. This, at least in part, accounts for the intensity of his images—the energy of the skulls and the bodies drawn inside out.

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. Regarding this, Basquiat, according to Robert Farris Thompson, forced an aesthetic confrontation with the felt nature of urban life. “His,” Thompson writes, “is a quest for a sharper, ecumenical assessment of the troubling—yet promising—configurations of our urban destiny and predicament.”⁴⁷ There is a thickness to this process: Basquiat’s work added to the 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 the nature of interplay between things through the unmasking of blackness as subtext—bodied things inside out, things 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 fed off this voyeuristic desire, and the effort to mold his life accordingly was deadly. Perhaps he sought, as 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—if quarantining off blackened naming-things for isolated engagement and use could not be managed.⁴⁸

He pulls the bodied naming-thing apart to uncover and discover anew its openness, and in this way he seeks to speak differently the nature of the culturally arranged naming-thing as unfixed and unfinished. In the process, Basquiat does not discount the significance of the “degraded” naming-thing as grotesque in that deconstruction of his own body as naming-thing (e.g., through drug use) has direct impact on what can be captured artistically. All this work, this wildness, entails contradiction—an effort to deny (and in the process reinforce through the romanticizing of the “streets”) his middle-class roots. It is both the framework for the artist and the makeup of the artist in some instances. His 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’s meaning from within overlapping realms of interaction and exchange. Blackness as a container for a particular aesthetic many in the Western world considered salvific was presented as a complex signifier—both negative and positive, needed and feared. Basquiat signifies this framework, and rather than examining blackness—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.”⁴⁹ By so doing, he also speaks to the fractured and overlapping nature of identity—unfixed, fluid, troubled, thick. “A frequent motif in Basquiat’s work—the ‘see-through’ man—not only responded metaphorically to this period’s fascination with expose 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.”⁵⁰ That is to say, Basquiat repositions blackened naming-things in a way that pushes against stereotypical discourses by speaking them differently in an energetic and dismissive manner—what some have called Neo-Expressionism.

Created in both his personal and aesthetic choices, “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.”⁵¹ At times Basquiat approached the Western art world and its “sacred” spaces (e.g., museums) in ways that pull at the diasporic threads of life in the Americas, and in the process shaved away the integrity of these spaces—redirecting their energy and signifying their meaning through what he as a naming-thing 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.”⁵² 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 himself as a blackened naming-thing 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.”⁵³ His action in MoMA tames 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, there is 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 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.”⁵⁴ 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 to new meanings. This involves the forcing of a different set of questions and presuppositions: What is the place of this blackness? What is the reconfiguration of meaning present? What is the materiality of identity over against efforts to fix form and solidify boundaries?

Basquiat calls on the plastic nature of interplay as alternate aesthetic and uses this to tell an existential and ontological story. He signifies the signifier and exposes the complexity (and open nature) of blackened naming-things, a thickness denied by an early appropriation by the likes of Man Ray. As many interpreters have noted, there are ways in which Basquiat seeks to critique Modernist art. The language of colonialism and otherness—with a vocabulary functioning like glue to close off and fix—is signified, shifted, and transformed through a new ownership and use against its use. Yet this process is never complete. Discourse on blackness and power accommodates the change and restores balance through embrace.

Basquiat's aesthetic, as critical as he wanted it to be, promoted a critique of Modernism, but one that the art establishment embraced: the signifier was signified. 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 [Michel Basquiat] 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.'"⁵⁵ What is even more telling, however, is the lament Basquiat offered on several occasions: "I wanted to be a star, not a gallery mascot."⁵⁶ "Some," says Marc Miller in a 1982 interview with the artist, "saw Basquiat as some sort of primal expressionist." Basquiat responded, "Like an ape? . . . A primate?"⁵⁷

Blackness was consumed, the masked thing—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. Basquiat 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 Michel Foucault is correct that 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 Basquiat's paintings speak to the inevitability of discourse and its ability to shape time and space. One sees a graphic example of this in *Pegasus* (1987). From military might as represented in the British airborne forces' use of the winged horse image during World War II to popular culture references, Pegasus has marked a certain mode of

might and creativity—for example, a blending of things such as a human and another animal, science and cultural codes, and desire and shortcoming. Basquiat applies the name and its cultural connotations—with perhaps a nod in the direction of the programming system bearing the name that takes in human language and produces code—to a large work consisting of an overwhelming arrangement of words, phrases, and images that provide a geography of expressed meaning. Words and symbols compete for space. They are meaningful to a degree in that they represent something if one isolates them, but they also overlap in significance to the degree that they bleed into each other, sharing space and changing meanings. Some of the words and symbols are crossed out, and in this way they are both present and absent—and they stand out because of the dark and energetic strokes used to subdue them. Yet the black paint in the right corner of the large canvas poses a challenge of space and time. Are the words consuming and thereby changing space, or is the “blank” space of black paint slowly wiping out the cultural codes? In either case, there is contact between expression and a type of silence, between presence and absence, between “something” and “nothing” (both express “things”). Even during this last phase of his life, Basquiat was aware of racial-cultural dynamics related to symbolic forms. There is also something about this painting that speaks to the instability of symbols and codes of the West—their inability to fully capture and contain, to fully inscribe what they encounter.

Gold Griot (1984) is marked by interplay of materials—slabs of wood upon which is painted (using acrylic paint and oil stick) a figure with a large and expressive head that is more than skeletal in part because of its aggressive markings. The head is confined within a white outline, but something about the look on its face suggests the confinement is not complete. One thin arm points up and the other down, situating the figure between spaces—or better yet holding together two spaces by occupying a middle location. This being knows something viewers do not and has contact with things that transform. There is gleefulness in the expression—a wide smile full of teeth, a nose with nostrils wide like a deeply satisfying breath is being taken, and almond-shaped eyes (one red and the other white), suggesting a devious contentment. It has only a torso holding it up, with a spine shown inside a dark box, which speaks to the harnessing of language so as to express particular codes. The figure is a bridge of sorts, something along the lines of Eshu, the African god who opens and controls lines of communication between humans and the gods, or the griot, as the title of the work announces, whose stories connect the past and the present.

Basquiat would have certainly encountered cultural codes and stories about such figures during his early years in Brooklyn, and these African ancestral figures that made the trip from Africa to the Americas, and from the Caribbean to North America, would have found the trip from Brooklyn to Manhattan of little challenge. And so Basquiat's awareness of this alternate world would not have faded in Manhattan, where even hip-hop would have encouraged a similar blending of things. But this is a matter of manipulation, not fundamental control. It might be the recognition of this dilemma that marks for him the significance of jazz and the blues, and 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 toward, in Foucault's language, the fostering of spaces for the practice of freedom—or at least spaces of exposure and interplay. Ultimately, artistic expression exposes issues of depth. It provides a means by which to struggle both with and for bodied naming-things and things occupying time and space as well as the sociopolitical, economic, and cultural ramifications of that occupation. It might just be the case that some of art's appeal and terrifying ramifications are played out on the geography of belonging that is, in this case, the blackened naming-thing.