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Most Kings: Jean-Michel Basquiat and the Hip-Hop Tradition

In his 2010 track “Most Kingz,” Jay-Z raps: “Inspired by Basquiat, my chariot’s on fire/Everybody took shots, hit my body up, I’m tired.”¹ The allusion to Jean-Michel Basquiat, a black neo-expressionist painter who gained notoriety in the 1970s and ‘80s Manhattan art scene, is fitting: Basquiat’s meteoric rise to fame was cut short by his premature death, at 27, from heroin overdose. The song itself was inspired by Basquiat’s 1982 painting, *Charles the First* (Figure 1), a tribute to jazz musician Charlie Parker. Writing in the bottom corner of the canvas reads: “MOST YOUNG KINGS GET THEIR HEADS CUT OFF.” In fact, Jay-Z is far from the only hip-hop artist to reference Basquiat: Kanye West, Lil Wayne, Nas, and Rick Ross, among others, have all paid lyrical homage to the artist.

But while Basquiat’s importance in contemporary hip-hop is evident, his role in the emergent hip-hop culture of his own time is less clear. As a teenager, Basquiat got his start in the 1970s New York City street art scene. As part of the graffiti duo “SAMO,” an acronym for “same old shit,” Basquiat tagged the walls of lower Manhattan buildings with sardonic maxims like “SAMO© AS AN END TO THE BOOSH-WAH-ZEE FANTASIES.”² Later, Basquiat shared a studio space with hip-hop icon Fab 5 Freddy

¹ “Jay Z (Ft. Chris Martin) – Most Kingz.” Genius. Accessed February 23, 2016. <http://genius.com/Jay-z-most-kingz-lyrics>.

² Franklin Sirmans, “In the Cipher: Basquiat and Hip-Hop Culture,” in *Basquiat*, ed. Marc Mayer (New York: Merrell, 2010), 94.

and produced the hip-hop single “Beat Bop” (1983).³ Despite these associations, many critics resist situating Basquiat within the hip-hop tradition, emphasizing instead his affinity for jazz or his unique position as a black fine artist in the exclusionary white art world. As Jordana Moore Saggese explains, this is in part in order to circumvent elitist and racist biases against hip-hop and to justify Basquiat’s place in art historical discourse.⁴

In contrast, I maintain that locating Basquiat’s career within the emergent hip-hop culture of the 1970s and ‘80s is crucial to understanding his work and, later, his legacy among contemporary hip-hop artists. I argue that Basquiat’s style—in particular, his sampling of various materials and artistic traditions—and his content—the history and politics of racism and colonialism—exemplify what Tricia Rose has termed the “hidden transcripts” of hip hop culture. This paper will examine what Franklin Sirmans means when he writes, “Nod your head to this: no artist has ever so profoundly embodied a cultural movement as Jean-Michel Basquiat personified hip-hop in its brilliant infancy.”⁵

Indeed, Basquiat made his transition from the street to the gallery just as the hip-hop movement was taking hold in New York City. In 1978, he and his SAMO partner, Al Diaz, parted ways, covering the walls of Manhattan with the epitaph, “SAMO IS DEAD.”⁶ Basquiat began appearing in the East Village gallery scene soon thereafter. By 1982, he had secured exhibitions in Italy, Los Angeles, and Germany, garnering

³ Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁵ Sirmans, “In the Cipher,” 91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

immediate attention and acclaim.⁷ By this time, graffiti artists like SEEN, LADY PINK, and FUTURA 2000 had marked the city trains and streets,⁸ and even some gallery walls, with their elaborate tags, and rap music had begun to achieve commercial success, with tracks like The Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" (1979) and Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "The Message" (1982) making radio airwaves.

As Saggese notes, throughout Basquiat's time on the gallery scene (from about 1981 to 1988), he was read by critics and art dealers as a "primitive," untrained nonwhite artist, "caught between the street and the studio."⁹ Likely to counter this image, Basquiat attempted to separate himself from his early graffiti work.¹⁰ In a 1983 interview with Henry Geldzahler, for instance, he insisted, "SAMO wasn't supposed to be art, really"—just a way "to build up a name for myself."¹¹ Years later he told another interviewer, "My work has nothing to do with graffiti. It's painting, it always has been."¹²

But, importantly, Basquiat's paintings are deeply connected, in both style and content, to the culture of hip-hop that had taken hold in New York. As bell hooks notes, although Basquiat's work drew on many Western artistic traditions and was welcomed into the established white art world, it also preserved "the codes of that street culture he loved so much."¹³ Thus, his art "confronts different eyes in different ways": these codes are not necessarily obvious to all viewers. They function, in Tricia Rose's terms, as

⁷ Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 4.

⁸ Gregory J. Snyder, *Graffiti Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 25.

⁹ Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ Henry Geldzahler, "Art: From Subways to SoHo," in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Rudy Chiappini (Milan: Museo d'Arte Moderna, 2005), 33.

¹² Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Jean-Michel Basquiat," interview by Demosthenes Davvetas, reprinted in *Basquiat*, ed. Marenzi et al. (Milano: Charta, 1999), lxiii.

¹³ bell hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice: Re-memorizing Basquiat," in *Race-ing Art History*, ed. Kimberley N. Pinder (New York: Routledge, 2002), 342.

“resistive hidden transcripts.” These transcripts enact “ideological insubordination” by challenging the dominant transcripts, creating alternative codes “that invert stigmas, direct our attention to offstage cultures of the class or group within which they originated, and validate the perceptions of the less powerful.”¹⁴ Basquiat participated simultaneously in the world of commercial fine art and the world of hip-hop. By keeping with the codes of both worlds, his paintings served as hidden transcripts that told powerful stories of the black artistic tradition and the politics of racism and colonialism.

In some cases, Basquiat’s art refers explicitly to hip-hop culture. His 1984 painting, *P-Z* (Figure 2), for instance, astutely captures the style of 1980s hip-hop: its subjects are two black men, one with dreadlocks, a bomber jacket, and hiking boots, the other a half-formed torso in a kufi hat. In his 1983 work *Hollywood Africans* (Figure 3), Basquiat critiques the portrayal of black artists and rappers in mainstream media, situating side-by-side portraits of himself and rappers Toxic and Rammellzee (labeled “REMLZ”) amongst phrases like “SUGER CANE INC©,” “WHAT IS BWANA?” (crossed out), and “GANGSTERISM.” As Laurie Rodrigues explains, here Basquiat alludes to the limiting roles to which African Americans have historically been consigned in Hollywood—laborers and gangsters. Moreover, he locates himself and other hip-hop artists as “inevitable heirs to the delimiting narrow-mindedness of American mainstream media.”¹⁵

More often, however, Basquiat’s art evoked the hip-hop aesthetic less explicitly—through its cut-and-mix style of sampling and its subject matter. As Franklin Sirmans

¹⁴ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 100.

¹⁵ Laurie A. Rodrigues, “‘SAMO© as an Escape Clause’: Jean-Michel Basquiat’s Engagement with a Commodified American Africanism,” *Journal of American Studies* (February 2016): 7.

argues, Basquiat assumed the role of a DJ in his approach to art, creatively sampling and combining different materials and artistic traditions.¹⁶ In other words, “Basquiat’s art—like the best hip-hop—takes apart and reassembles the work that came before it.”¹⁷ In any given painting Basquiat layered acrylic paint (a nod, as hooks explains, to white Western artistic traditions¹⁸) with doodles in oil paintstick, marker, crayon, and spray paint, and with paper collage. His subject matter was similarly eclectic. In his 1983 piece *Jesse* (Figure 4), for instance, Basquiat mixes racial science (the canvas is mostly covered in anatomical diagrams, with labels like “FAMOUS NEGRO ATHLETES” and “JESSE OWENS” positioned next to swastikas) and historical and musical references. While the names “ALONZO LEWIS” and “CRISPUS ATTUCKS” refer to two famous eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionists, the words “KOKO,” “CHEROKEE,” and “LOVER MAN” refer to Charlie Parker songs.¹⁹

Indeed, music—in particular, the African American traditions of jazz and zydeco, which had become popular in the New York City dance scene²⁰—features heavily in his artwork. For instance, his 1983 painting *Horn Players* (Figure 5) depicts both Charlie Parker (on the left with a saxophone) and Dizzy Gillespie (on the right with a trumpet), surrounded by musical notes and scat sounds (“OOH SHOO DE OBEE”). Similarly, in *Zydeco* (Figure 6), a black accordion player floats in a sea of words and images: “DON’T LOOK IN THE CAMERA©,” “EARLY SOUND FILM,” “PICK AX WOOD,” a microphone, an icebox, and box camera. As Rodriguez explains, while these paintings are

¹⁶ Sirmans, “In the Cipher,” 94.

¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

¹⁸ hooks, “Altars of Sacrifice,” 342.

¹⁹ Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 8.

²⁰ Rodriguez, “SAMO© as an Escape Clause,” 7.

celebrations of the black musical tradition, they are also biting critiques of commercial consumption of black art: “the black artist is stripped of any complexity and packaged for consumption by the masses.”²¹ In each case, Basquiat samples African American musical traditions to create complex narratives of black artistry and racist commercial consumption.

While his method of sampling, taking apart and reassembling the art of others, evokes the work of DJs, his use of language speaks to the art of rapping.²² Nearly all of Basquiat’s paintings contain words, scribbled and often repeated in lists. In his sweeping 1983 *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta* (Figure 7), for instance, phrases scrawled in black, white, and red-brown offset the broad, gestural strokes of bright yellow and blue paint. They tell a story, in visual verse, of racial and economic exploitation in the American South. Across the top of the canvas reads, “IN THE DEEP SOUTH 1912-1936-1951©.” Scattered below are lists and phrases: “MISSISSIPPI VII/MISSISSIPPI VIII/MISSISSIPPI IX/MISSISSIPPI X,” “MARK TWAIN/MARK TWAIN/MARK TWAIN,” “~~A DIET RICH IN PORK PRODUCTS~~,” “COTTON ORIGIN OF P.4,” “NEGROES/NEGROES/NEGROES.” A notation next to the head of a cow declares, “THE ‘COW’ IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK®.” As Sirmans explains, Basquiat’s lists of words are “spat in paint, visually stuttered, repeated and often crossed out, to be read as incantations with pause for thought and breath: in other words, beats that control the flow of composition.”²³ They read not just as poems, but as lyrics commanding a beat in their statement, repetition, and erasure.

²¹ Ibid., 8.

²² Sirmans, “In the Cipher,” 94.

²³ Sirmans, “In the Cipher,” 93.

And, like the hidden transcripts in the rap music of his contemporaries, Basquiat's lyrics offer a powerful social critique of systems of power and racism.²⁴ For instance, the text of his 1982 *A Panel of Experts* (Figure 8) elaborates a complex narrative that connects slavery, capitalism, and racism. Drawn arrows, suggesting the flow of money and goods, connect the phrases "SUGAR©," "SUGAR-COATED CORN PUFFS© TM," "SATURDAY ~~MON~~ MORNING CARTOON©." Alongside doodles of guns, volcanoes, and lightning, this text tells a story of black slavery and subjugation and white consumption. A later painting, *Light Blue Movers* (Figure 9), depicts the toll of this subjugation on the black body. Two black movers, one hunched and grunting under the weight, carry a red armchair. Underneath their feet is a passage recycled from SAMO graffiti a decade prior²⁵: "THE WHOLE LIVERY LINE BOW ~~LIKE~~ THIS WITH THE BIG MONEY ALL CRUSHED INTO THESE FEET."

Like his contemporary hip-hop artists, Basquiat used the codes of hip-hop culture—artistic sampling, lyrics, beat, and subversive content—to develop hidden transcripts. These transcripts wove an extended narrative of black liberation, centering the experiences and perceptions of the disempowered and the dispossessed. And their legacy in hip-hop is profound: for rappers like Jay-Z, Basquiat remains an icon of black artistic genius, success, and, ultimately, tragedy. In his notorious life and death, Basquiat embodied his own prophecy: "MOST ~~YOUNG~~ KINGS GET THEIR HEADS CUT OFF."

²⁴ Ibid., 95; hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice," 342-343.

²⁵ Sirmans, "In the Cipher," 102.

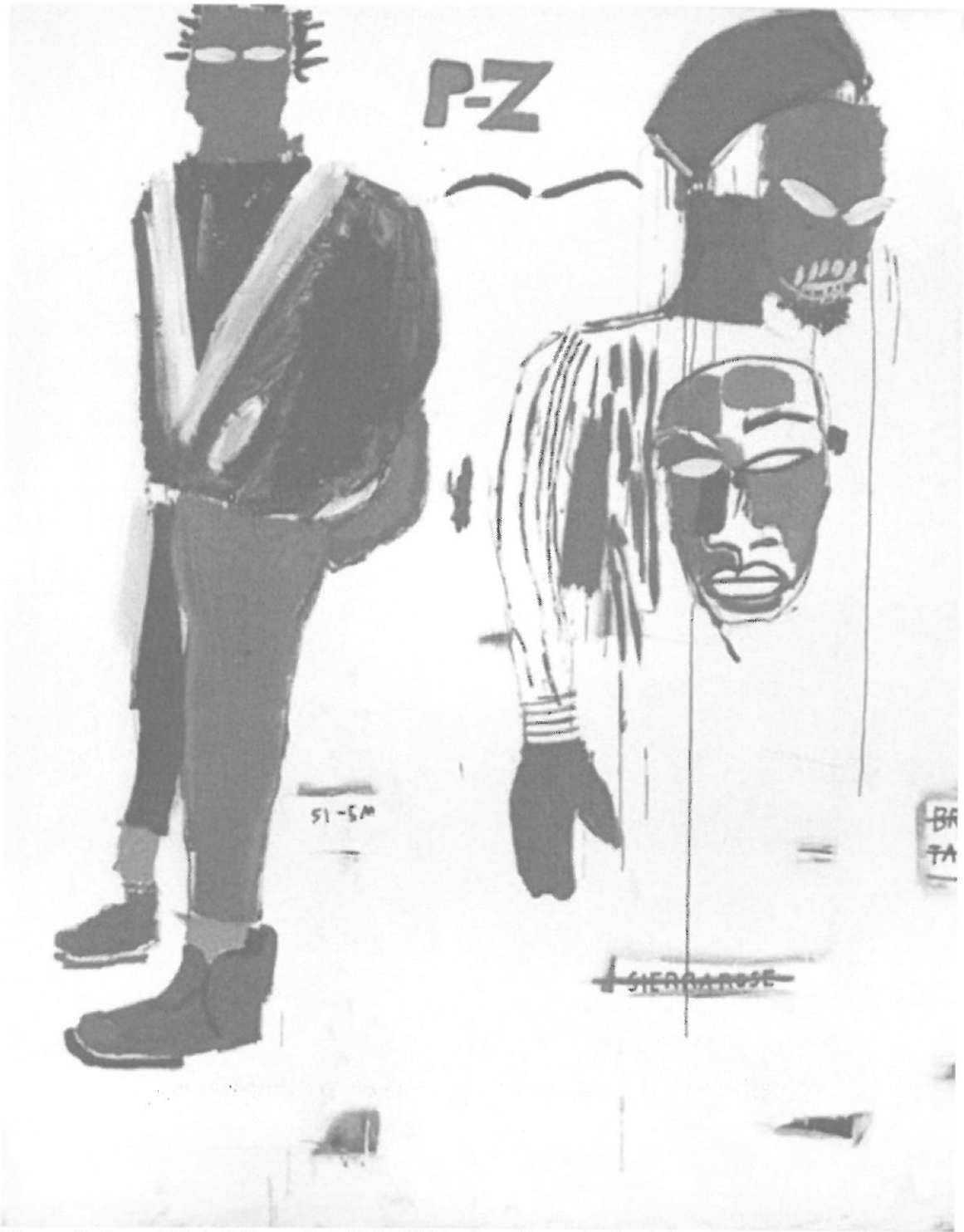


Figure 2. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *P-Z*, 1984. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas.
<https://www.kunstforumwien.at/tools/imager/imager.php?file=%2Fmedia%2Fimage%2Foriginal%2F576.jpg&width=900&height=700>.



Figure 3. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Hollywood Africans*, 1983. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas. <http://collection.whitney.org/object/453>.



Figure 5. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Horn Players*, 1983. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas panels. <http://www.thebroad.org/art/jean-michel-basquiat/horn-players>.

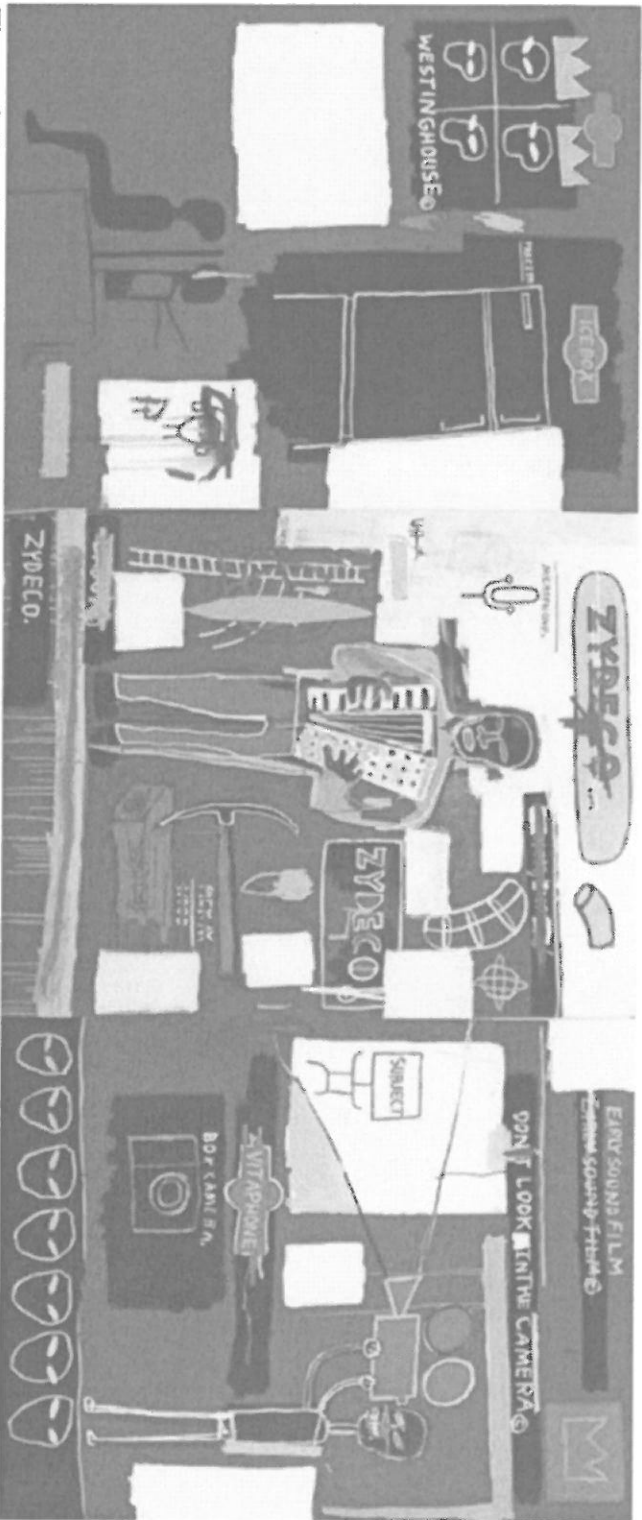


Figure 6. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Zydeco*, 1984. Acrylic and oil stick on canvas panels.
<http://www.potomitan.info/ayiti/basquiat2.php>.



Figure 7. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Undiscovered Genius of the Mississippi Delta*, 1983. Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas panels. <http://www.wikiart.org/en/jean-michel-basquiat/undiscovered-genius-of-the-mississippi-delta>.



Figure 8. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *A Panel of Experts*, 1982. Acrylic, oil stick, and paper collage on canvas with exposed wood supporters. <http://hyperallergic.com/205586/jean-michel-basquiat-and-the-immortal-black-life/>.



Figure 9. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Light Blue Movers*, 1987. Acrylic, oil, and oil stick on canvas. <http://www.thegroundmag.com/jean-michel-basquiat-1960-1988/light-blue-movers-basquiat-1987-the-ground/>.

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