

ARTICLE

Precarious Life:

Disability Aesthetics in the Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat

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Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960-1988) est salué dans le monde entier pour ses peintures viscérales, ses hommages aux figures de la culture noire et son utilisation de matériaux récupérés. Si la toxicomanie de Basquiat et sa mort prématurée font l'objet de nombreuses spéculations, la précarité dans la forme et le contenu de ses œuvres a reçu moins d'attention. J'avance qu'un examen critique de cette précarité révèle les préoccupations constantes de Basquiat aux intersections de la race, de la classe sociale et du handicap. Comme l'ont souligné Christopher M. Bell et Jasbir K. Puar, les études sur le handicap n'abordent souvent pas de manière adéquate les questions de race et de classe, bien que les inégalités structurelles influencent profondément le développement du handicap. En apportant des nuances à l'esthétique du handicap théorisée par Tobin Siebers avec les études noires et les écrits de Puar sur la débilité, j'avance que l'œuvre de Basquiat conteste les effets débilitants de l'antinégritude, du classisme et du colonialisme, tout en incarnant une vitalité résistante.

INTRODUCTION

Ascending to fame in the early 1980s, Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) continues to garner international acclaim for his distinctive and visceral artwork, typified by rapid brushstrokes, vivid colours, dripping paint, and fragmented, often skeletal figures. Born in a middle-class Brooklyn family¹ to a Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother,² Basquiat has been described as “the first black American artist to achieve international fame.”³ In his twenty-seven-year life, he is estimated to have created approximately 1,500 drawing, 600 paintings, and numerous notebooks and sculptures.⁴

This paper will focus on Basquiat's paintings, though in the context of his work, the designation “painting” is to be taken with a grain of salt; as Basquiat scholar Jordana Moore Saggese writes, most of the artworks incorporate a combination of “paper, acrylic paint, oil paintstick, crayon, charcoal, graphite, and even found objects.”⁵ Such objects include, but are not limited to: fraying twine, broken doors, salvaged windows, discarded lumber, and household items such as refrigerators.⁶ Polyphonic and frenetic, Basquiat's oeuvre combines written words with figuration, with linguistic and visual themes leaping across art history, medicine, mythology, cartoons, sports, and music, often referencing Black male athletes and musicians. Canvases pulsate with crossed-out words, seemingly unfinished human figures, and thick, overlapping layers of paint, producing a palimpsestic impression often likened to graffiti, though Basquiat explicitly rejected this label.⁷ It is not uncommon for paintings to appear torn, stained, scribbled on, spattered, or trampled by footprints.⁸ Describing these jagged, dynamic compositions teeming with both excitement and unease, Greg Tate writes that “Basquiat's art evokes...an overloaded sensorium counterattacking the world,”⁹ while Anthony B. Pinn claims that Basquiat's paintings are political not only in their subject matter, but in embodying “the mandatory rhythm of life in a black body in a racialized and racist society.”¹⁰

This paper asserts that the precarity explored in Basquiat's paintings—including through the vulnerability of the figures depicted, stylistic techniques underscoring the artist's bodily involvement in the creation process, and the conspicuous fragility of the canvases—is vital to his oeuvre's aesthetic power and political depth. Much has been written about Basquiat's foreshortened life and history of addiction, to the degree that his biographic myth frequently overshadows his technical skill, political concerns, and extensive knowledge of art traditions.¹¹ In this essay, I argue that the aesthetic of precarity embodied in the form and content of the paintings themselves has been crucially overlooked. Examining how disability intersects with other forms of marginalization in Basquiat's paintings, I assert that his interrogation of relationships between race, class, and disablement constitute a vital dimension of his oeuvre's political focus.

As Jasbir K. Puar writes, “disability is everywhere and yet, for all sorts of important reasons, not claimed as such.”¹² Crip scholar Alison

Kafer notes that most people with chronic impairments or illnesses do not claim the term disability, despite the persistent role structural ableism plays in their lives.¹³ Such disidentification is not solely a matter of internalized ableism, emphasizes Puar, who elaborates upon how the meanings and repercussions of claiming disability vary widely between populations. A wealthy, white subject injured in an accident may be drawn to pride movements emphasizing disability as “a valuable, empowering difference,”¹⁴ while an impoverished and/or racialized subject for whom disability would be “perceived as the result of aberrant or destructive individual lifestyle ‘choices’”¹⁵ may wish to distance themselves from the label. Yet one’s relationships to disability identity cannot be placed within a clear-cut binary; nor do binaries of ability versus disability hold in contexts where populations are gradually worn down by chronic stress, exposure to danger, and deprivation of resources. Puar uses the term “debility” to describe this weathering process and to disrupt and triangulate the able/disabled binary, arguing that, while an individual may not identify or be hailed as disabled, they do not necessarily reap the benefits of able-body/minded privilege. Recognizing how structural oppression constructs some “populations [as] available for statistically likely injury,”¹⁶ debility brings critical nuance to disability studies, where the impacts of “racism, colonialism, exploitative industrial growth, and environmental toxicities,”¹⁷ despite accounting for most of the world’s disablement, have been massively underaddressed. Disability scholars including Christopher M. Bell have long remarked on the need to consider race in disability studies, an oversight so pronounced Bell has acerbically called the field “white disability studies.”¹⁸ These scholarly lacunae and politics of identity are pertinent in considering Basquiat’s paintings, which, while saturated with imagery of accidents, injuries, and medical diagrams, have rarely been considered through the lens of disability.

Strongly inspired by the textbook *Gray’s Anatomy*, which he began to study following a childhood car accident, Basquiat’s paintings persistently return to imagery of bones and organs, scattered with “bodies turned inside out.”¹⁹ Limbs, skulls, and spleens abound; delicate innards, often labelled, float to the surfaces of fragmented forms. In imagery suggestive of X-Rays, wounds, and medical diagrams, the figures depicted—almost always Black men—are, often literally, falling to pieces. Yet such paintings are rarely read in terms of illness, injury, disability, or even pain. bell hooks writes, “It is amazing that so few critics discuss configurations of pain in Basquiat’s work.”²⁰ This critical failure, hooks implies, reflects larger white supremacist failures to empathize with, or even to recognize, Black pain more generally. Simultaneously, there is danger in reductive

- 1 Jordana Moore Saggese, *Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2014), 18.
- 2 Emily Sowa and Toby Herskowitz, “Jean-Michel Basquiat’s Sisters Talk Growing Up with the Brooklyn-born Art Icon,” *Eyewitness News*, February 27, 2019, <http://abc7ny.com/black-history-month-african-americans-african-american-abc7ny/5145785>.
- 3 Louis Armand, “Jean-Michel Basquiat and ‘The Art of (Dis) Empowerment’ (2000),” *American Suburb X*, October 30, 2013, <https://americansuburbx.com/2013/10/jean-michel-basquiat-art-disempowerment-2000.html>.
- 4 Alice Gregory, “New Art,” *Harper’s Magazine* (August 2015), <http://harpers.org/archive/2015/08/new-art-2>.
- 5 Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 6.
- 6 Personal visit to Basquiat: *King Pleasure*. Curated by Lisane and Jeanine Basquiat, New York, Starrett-Lehigh Building, 2022.
- 7 Armand, “Jean-Michel Basquiat and ‘The Art of (Dis) Empowerment’ (2000).”
- 8 *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Radiant Child*, directed by Tamra Davis, Arthouse Films, 2010, 23:30.
- 9 Greg Tate, “Black Like B.,” in *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Richard Marshall (New York: Whitney Museum of Art), 57.
- 10 Anthony B. Pinn, “‘Why Can’t I Be Both?’ Jean-Michel Basquiat and Aesthetics of Black Bodies Reconstituted,” *Journal of Africana Religions* 1, no. 1 (2013): 119.
- 11 Laurie A. Rodrigues, “SAMO© as an Escape Clause: Jean-Michel Basquiat’s Engagement with a Commodified American Africanism,” *Journal of American Studies* 45, no. 2 (2011): 229.
- 12 Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), xx.
- 13 Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 14.
- 14 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 89.
- 15 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 65.
- 16 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xvii.
- 17 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, xx.
- 18 Christopher M. Bell, *Blackness and Disability: Critical Examinations and Cultural Interventions* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2012).
- 19 Pinn, “‘Why Can’t I Be Both,’” 122.
- 20 bell hooks, “Altars of Sacrifice: Re-Membering Basquiat,” *Art in America*, June 1, 1993, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/from-the-archives-altars-of-sacrifice-re-membering-basquiat-63242/>.

interpretations that construe Black and disabled lives solely in terms of suffering. As Laurie A. Rodrigues writes, Basquiat's paintings are polyvocal assemblages, "economies of accumulation" layering myriad and at times conflicting signs, affects, and association.²¹ Rather than a static, essentialized subject, they embody, in Greg Tate's words, "an art of presences and resonances, acts and allusions."²² As hooks asserts, the affective and political power of Basquiat's art lies in its capacity to embody injury while also gesturing beyond it: in its "testimony that declares with a vengeance: We are more than our pain."²³

This paper builds on hooks' claims about the centrality of pain, precarity, and vulnerability in Basquiat's paintings, extending her argument to explicitly consider disability and debility. Basquiat, writes hooks, interrogates the "politics of dehumanization" that subject Black bodies and minds to "the anguish of abandonment, estrangement, dismemberment, and death,"²⁴ a connection between politics and violence echoed in Puar's assertion that colonial regimes maintain power by asserting their "right to maim."²⁵ hooks describes Basquiat's concerns with violence, "mutilated" bodies, and the "terror...of being torn apart."²⁶ Unlike Puar, however, she never directly connects such injuries with disability. While disability remain beyond the purview of hooks' essay, I argue that Basquiat positions debility as a direct result of structural injustice. Following Puar's view that respecting the value of disability can coexist in "productive tension"²⁷ with critiquing inequalities that unevenly produce disablement, I explore how Basquiat exposes embodied legacies of violence while also defying stereotypes that equate Blackness, poverty, and disability solely with lack.

I consider Nirmala Erevelles' call for disability studies to address how "be-coming disabled is produced within the actual material violence of transnational capitalism."²⁸ As Tate writes, "The consequences of America's war on the black and poor are everywhere in evidence in Basquiat."²⁹ Bodies are fragmented, almost always alone; bones glare through skin, and toxins like "ASBESTOS" flash capital letters. A 2010 gallery catalogue goes so far as to claim that some of Basquiat's artworks were painted with blood,³⁰ and while this claim is unconfirmed, the dripping red splotches undoubtedly conjure woundedness. Yet even in pain, the paintings exert agency. Dick Hebdige writes that Basquiat's art evokes

the feeling that we are being watched by the object, that the crowd of skulls, cartoon characters, masks, and disembodied eyes that stare and peek out from the picture plane are all looking back directly at us...from a place that is not our place but in which we are nonetheless thoroughly enmeshed and implicated...³¹

I consider how these paintings might prompt us to consider our enmeshment and implication in relations of unevenly distributed risk. Basquiat's canvases overflow with ambivalence: eyes that watch us as we watch them back; bodies and bones that can be equally read as coming apart and as attempting to "dance back together;"³² canvases that appear at once in a state of damage and of ongoing creation; medicalized bodies that suggest illness and injury as

21 Rodrigues, "SAMO© as an Escape Clause," 227.

22 Tate, "Black Like B.," 58.

23 hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice."

24 Ibid.

25 Puar, *The Right to Maim*.

26 hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice."

27 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 70.

28 Nirmala Erevelles, *Disability and Difference in Global Contexts: Enabling a Transformative Body Politic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 38.

29 Tate, "Black Like B.," 58.

30 *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, ed. Glenn O'Brien (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag 2010), 10–11.

31 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 Art), 61.

32 Aisha Sabatini Sloan, "On Basquiat, the Black Body, and the Strange Sensation in my Neck," *The Paris Review*, October 26, 2017, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/26/basquiat-black-body-strange-sensation-neck/>.

well as the possibility (or at least hope) of care; street-salvaged materials that underscore both the precarity of unhoused lives and these lives' ingenuity, creativity, and persistence.

As a white scholar, it is not my intention to centre myself as an authority on racialized experience. Rather, I aim to respond to lacunae discussed by scholars such as Puar, Bell, and hooks, to explore how the association of disability with whiteness has led to 1) an underconsideration of the role of racialization in disability aesthetics, and 2) a failure to recognize disability in work by racialized artists. Because racism plays a significant role in disability development and outcomes yet remains neglected in disability studies, this paper represents one small attempt to unsettle such tendencies.

DISABILITY AESTHETICS

Tobin Siebers, drawing upon a definition proposed by Alexander Baumgarten, defines aesthetics as the study of emotions and sensations some bodies feel in response to other bodies.³³ Both Siebers' and Baumgarten's definition of "bodies" extends beyond living beings to include any material entity perceived to possess a sense of lively presence. Under this definition, both representational and nonrepresentational artworks qualify as bodies, vitalized by the "aura" Western cultures attribute to art objects. A figure depicted in a painting is a body, but so too might be the canvas itself, occupying a social position (at least in certain cultures) as a quasi-living being. Affective and sensory responses to such bodies vary significantly, depending not only on the material qualities of the object but on webworks of social relations in which both object and viewer are entangled.

Two tenets of disability aesthetics here become significant. Firstly, as Siebers writes, responses to visual art can serve as a barometer for political relations.

The study of oppression requires an understanding of aesthetics—not only because oppression uses aesthetic judgements for its violence but also because the signposts of how oppression works are visible in the history of art, where aesthetic judgements about the creation and appreciation of bodies are openly discussed.³⁴

Alignments and prejudices that may go otherwise unnoticed can rear their heads in aesthetic responses, both in formal criticism and in viewers' affective reactions—or lack thereof. As hooks writes of many white critics' numbness towards Basquiat's art, "it is a difficult task to determine the worth or value of a painter's life and/or work if one cannot get close enough to feel anything, if indeed one can only stand at a distance."³⁵ Such feelings of closeness or distance are, by Siebers' and Baumgarten's definition, aesthetic responses, and carry social and political consequences.

A second tenet of disability aesthetics here becomes relevant: Siebers emphasizes that art objects not only mirror social relations but hold the potential to alter those relations. In particular, he asserts that recognizing the value of disability in art can lead to greater appreciation for the bodies, minds, and lives of disabled people. According to Siebers, the artworks perceived as most imbued with vitality resonate with the vulnerability and variation of human forms. He argues that signs which suggest disability—such as asymmetrical faces, missing limbs, or expressions of overwhelming affect—generate a potent sense of presence by resonating with viewers' own condition as varied, mortal beings. In contrast, homogenous artwork of healthy, idealized bodies and minds is felt to be lifeless. "Modern art," Siebers writes, "continues

33 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 1.

34 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 20.
35 hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice."

to move us because of its refusal of harmony, bodily integrity, and perfect health.”³⁶ Applying Siebers’ theories can become risky, however; while alternatives to “harmony, bodily integrity, and perfect health” may be sensorially exciting and affectively moving, focusing on the aesthetic value of disability, if not carefully handled, risks papering over realities of pain and systemic debilitation. Siebers connects disability to shared human vulnerability to illness and injury; but, as Puar stresses, such risks are highly unevenly distributed.

Expanding upon Foucault’s concept of biopolitics, which describes how governing powers regulate bodies by asserting power over life, historian Achille Mbembe uses the term necropolitics to designate how these powers control the distribution of death, including through war, poverty, slavery, and state violence. Following Frantz Fanon, Mbembe writes that anti-Black racism reduces the racialized Other to bare life, the dominant society construing this Other as at once inordinately embodied and as detached from bodily sensation: “a natural body, a body of needs, a physiological body... [that] does not suffer in the manner of an expressive human body.”³⁷ While Siebers praises the evocative power of injured art, Mbembe describes how, faced with the pain of the Other, one often defensively retreats into numbness, similar to the responses hooks describes. Importantly, however, Mbembe does not frame apathy and dehumanization as inevitable; building on Fanon, he claims that the “common content” of humanity “is vulnerability,”³⁸ the recognition of which can enable the possibility of care. Similar to Siebers’ assertions of the importance of recognizing our shared mortal embodiment, Mbembe asks whether we might “found a relation with others based on the reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude?”³⁹ To do so, however, necessitate a shift from the current racializing order.

An unwillingness to engage with racialized pain could account in part for persistent misreadings of Basquiat’s oeuvre, which remains frequently described as “graffiti” and “primitivism” despite the artist’s explicit rejection of these labels, which he considered both inaccurate and racist.⁴⁰ Although drawing some stylistic influences from graffiti, Basquiat’s voracious study acquainted him with a variety of movements from American, European, and African art, and he references numerous traditions in his work.⁴¹ While influenced by myriad sources, Basquiat appeared to associate most closely with the neo-expressionist movement, which included artists such as Julian Schnabel and David Salle and prioritized figuration and expressiveness, evoking comparisons to early 1900s expressionism.⁴² In contrast to the aura of control and impersonality associated with minimalism, conceptualism, and pop art, neo-expressionism combined vibrant and sometimes clashing colours, an impression of spontaneity, and associative imagery, evoking subjectivity and ambivalent emotion.⁴³ Yet, this ambiguous tone often goes unacknowledged in Basquiat’s reception. Critics, writes hooks – or at least, the wealthy white critics composing the vocal majority of the art world – emphasize instead the work’s “playfulness, its celebratory qualities,” overlooking painful affects as well as biting critiques of colonialism, classism, and racism.⁴⁴

Nonetheless, vulnerability in both form and content remains central to Basquiat’s paintings. Amongst depictions of bones and organs, dripping brushstrokes emphasize the physicality of creation, while “errors” such as crossed-out words and uneven letters reject the illusion of infallible artistry. The canvases themselves embody precarity, often torn, crumpled, stained, or

36 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 5–9.

37 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 134.

38 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 175.

39 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 3.

40 Armand, “Jean-Michel Basquiat and ‘The Art of (Dis) Empowerment’ (2000).”

41 Alison Pearlman, *Unpacking Art of the 1980s* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 70.

42 Hilton Kramer, “Expressionism Returns to Painting,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 1981, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/12/arts/art-view-expressionism-returns-to-painting.html>.

43 Pearlman, *Unpacking Art of the 1980s*, 11.

44 hooks, “Altars of Sacrifice.”

painted on salvaged materials such as plywood or broken doors. Resonating with Siebers' descriptions of vulnerability as vitality, Basquiat's paintings are infused with palpable – and political – immediacy.

ACCIDENTS AND X-RAYS

In 1968 in Flatbush, Brooklyn, Jean-Michel Basquiat, then “seven or eight”⁴⁵ was playing stickball in the street when he was struck by a car. Rushed to the hospital, he was treated for a broken arm and severe internal injuries, undergoing emergency surgery to remove his damaged spleen. During his recovery, his mother gifted him a copy of *Gray's Anatomy*. His younger sister, Lisane, described this gift: “She wanted him to see his own body, as it related to the way it had to be reconstructed.”⁴⁶ Art critic and Basquiat's friend Robert Farris Thompson writes that he wondered if Basquiat's mother “had with affection commanded her son to study his body back together.”⁴⁷ Basquiat had already drawn prolifically since the age of four. Following the accident, anatomized organs and skeletal fragments began to coalesce in his art, where they would resurface for the rest of his life.⁴⁸

Though Basquiat did not necessarily claim disability, he engaged extensively with medicalization, exemplified in pieces such as the 1982 silk-screen series *The Complete Anatomy Set*. Consisting of eighteen stark white diagrams on black backgrounds, panels feature X-ray-like depictions of isolated body parts including a throat, arm, skull, and pelvis. Repossessing both language and imagery from medical texts, the minimalist outlines are paired with blocky letters demarcating features including the hyoid bone, thyroid, and humerus. In her poetic biography, *Widow Basquiat*, Jennifer Clement refers to Basquiat as “know[ing] his skeleton,”⁴⁹ a reference both to the injuries, violence, and hunger he survived and to his technical knowledge of anatomy. hooks compares Basquiat's figures' visible bones and organs to Australian Aboriginal “X-ray” bark paintings, which superposition internal structures with the external forms of the organisms depicted. She quotes anthropologist Robert Edwards, who describes Australian Aboriginal X-rays as a method to honour the liveliness and interiority of the subject, to insist “there is more to a living thing than external appearances.”⁵⁰ But X-rays, in a Western context, are medical images – and as Siebers writes, “no person in a medical photograph is a picture of health.”⁵¹ Basquiat's X-ray imagery is thus profoundly ambivalent, suggesting at once injury and potential for healing, inner richness and vulnerability to external harm.

Siebers writes that Andy Warhol's 1963 silkscreens of car crashes exemplify disability aesthetics, “represent[ing] the fragility of the human body with an explicitness rarely found in the history of art.”⁵² Car accidents likewise feature extensively in Basquiat's paintings. In a series created ca. 1980, vehicles simplified to cartoonish blocks and ovals evoke associations with childhood drawings, an effect furthered by stick-figure drivers, wobbly linework, and disjointed lettering, most of which does not appear to render into legible words – though the word “CATALYST,” underlined, dangles in spidery lines in *Untitled (Car Crash)* (1980).⁵³ A surface-level reading easily projects mental and physical trauma into these artworks, and even into Basquiat's entire career: repeated returns to a distressing event – the catalyst – combine

45 Jean-Michel Basquiat: *Radiant Child*, 53:40.

46 Liz Fields, “5 Interesting Facts About Jean-Michel Basquiat,” *PBS: American Masters (Basquiat: Rage to Riches)*, February 25, 2021, pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/5-interesting-facts-about-jean-michel-basquiat.

47 Robert Farris Thompson, “Royalty, Heroism, and the Streets: The Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat,” *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, ed. Graham Lock and David Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 253–81; 256.

48 Jean-Michel Basquiat: *Radiant Child*, 54:05.

49 Jennifer Clement, *Widow Basquiat* (New York: Broadway Books, 2014), 27.

50 hooks, “Altars of Sacrifice.” Quoting from Robert Edward, *Aboriginal Bark Painting* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1969), n.p.

51 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 45.

52 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 2.

53 Christies, “Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988),” May 13, 2018, <https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5074081>.

with imagery congruent with Basquiat's age during the scene, as if suspended in a post-traumatic flashback. Likewise, the seemingly clumsy brushstrokes may lead one to envision the artist psychosomatically borne back, struggling to paint with his broken arm.

Such readings assume Basquiat's naivete; as monikers like "The Radiant Child" suggest, he has often been read as operating by childlike instinct. Many rightly critique the racism behind such assumptions—as an avid reader and savvy participant in the art world, Basquiat's use of a "rough, seemingly untrained"⁵⁴ style was undoubtedly a deliberate strategy. While (*Car Crash*) resonates with disability, it is better read not as an unconscious re-enactment of trauma but as an iteration of the artist's longstanding interest in precarity. In (*Car Crash*), vulnerability is not merely depicted through imagery but evoked by underscoring the artist's physical involvement in creation. The seemingly laborious lettering, underscored by two patchily painted cars colliding, paint streaming off their unfinished outlines, explodes any association of childhood with safety—as well as that of adulthood with control. As the drivers collide, (*Car Crash*) serves as unnerving reminder of everyday proximity to injury, trauma, and mortality. These themes are then furthered in the construction of the canvas itself.

Siebers writes that vandalized art evokes potent responses by resonating with viewers' vulnerable embodiment. Once a painting or sculpture has been slashed or torn, it sheds the impression of immortality. Such art objects, claims Siebers, resonate with viewers because, like our own bodies, they fall apart.⁵⁵ Basquiat expressed similar interest in damaged art; in a 1982 interview with Mark Miller, he named his favourite artist as Leonardo da Vinci, asserting that da Vinci's canvases had been improved over time by water damage.⁵⁶ The power of art objects, Siebers suggests—and Basquiat appears to concur—lies not in their timelessness, but their ephemerality. One may argue that Basquiat's canvases appear pre-vandalized, not only in their uneven brushstrokes or words dashed-off like spraypaint, but in their conspicuous materiality. To stand in front of a Basquiat painting is to be acutely aware that one is sharing space with something *made*—and something at risk of being unmade. Canvases are wrinkled, some outright torn. Not only do the figures depicted go to pieces, but so does the very fabric that holds them.

In (*Car Crash*), a green car, seemingly a Volkswagen Beetle, collides with a white truck labelled MLK⁵⁷ driven by a stick figure. The scene is painted with acrylic and oilstick on a raggedly cut scrap of burlap. Loose threads drip from the fabric's frayed edges, and visible staples bind the plywood backing. Wood extends far beyond the canvas, jutting asymmetrically into the air. Tangled black lines congregate on the protrusions, as though the artist tested the oilstick there. The painting's impression of speed lies not only in the motion lines blurred behind the green Beetle, nor in the burst of white that could be spilled milk, but in the impression of rapid assembly. Al Diaz, a graffiti artist and friend with whom Basquiat collaborated, connects Basquiat's concern with speed to the artist's awareness of mortality: "Jean was [painting rapidly] because he felt—and probably knew—that he only had a limited amount of time in that urgent moment of his life. [...] [L]ife and art is very fleeting and he was very much afraid of [that]."⁵⁸

Yet it would be wrong to read this immediacy as careless rushing; many of Basquiat's most time-consuming pieces incorporate similar techniques of irregular assembly. In the elaborate *Untitled (Ernok)* (1982), the painting is

54 Rodrigues, "SAMO© as an Escape Clause," 228.

55 Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 99.

56 "Interview by Marc H. Miller," *The Jean-Michel Basquiat Reader: Writings, Interviews, and Critical Responses*, ed. Jordana Moore Saggese (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2021), 25.

57 This image is often interpreted as a milk truck, but the polysemy of possible readings—Martin Luther King?—is typical of Basquiat's work.

58 *Boom for Real: The Late Teenage Years of Jean-Michel Basquiat*, directed by Sara Driver, Magnolia Pictures, 2017, 58:40.

tied down with paint-splattered twine, and the bottom of the frame extends more than a foot beyond the canvas. Pierced and pulled by string across emptiness, the bright red canvas visibly strains.⁵⁹ Much like the X-rays, Basquiat's unusual material construction is both highly charged and highly ambivalent: the art tears itself apart; the art pulls itself together. Siebers might claim it is this very tension which charges the paintings with liveliness: living things are mortal things. If art objects exist on the same material plane as viewers' bodies, both the object and its viewers share a material reality of embodied risk. But as Basquiat's work goes on to remind us, such risks are not distributed equally.

“SHARING A LIFE IN HOMELESSNESS”

In interviews, Basquiat recounts a middle-class but unstable home life, describing the use of corporal punishment and characterizing his mother, who spent much of her time in psychiatric institutions, as “frail.”⁶⁰ At fifteen, Basquiat ran away following a fight with his father, taking refuge in Washington Square Park.⁶¹ According to *The New York Times*, he lived in the park for eight months,⁶² an area Phoebe Hoban describes as a hotspot for drug dealers and users, middle-class hippies, gay men cruising, unhoused youth, and multiple competing graffiti communities.⁶³ Basquiat describes sleeping on benches or walking all night, “panhandling” and subsisting on Cheese Doodles.⁶⁴

Saggese rightfully cautions against oversimplified and inaccurate portrayals of Basquiat as “homeless or a runaway,”⁶⁵ which have been used to erase his middle-class upbringing and extensive study of art and its history. While Basquiat's childhood involved instability, it also included frequent trips to galleries and museums, listening to classical music and jazz, and sketching on his father's accounting office paper.⁶⁶ My intention is not to misrepresent his class background, nor to promote an essentializing notion of what homelessness “means.” Nor do I assume Basquiat's artistic output is necessarily autobiographical. Hebdige compares Basquiat to “a black jazz musician in the forties and fifties [who] learn[s] to master an instrument by playing it in public,”⁶⁷ drawing inspiration from other musicians as well as city life around him. Basquiat likewise described being “influenced by his New York environment,”⁶⁸ a city famous both for its artistic richness and its economic stratification. Because Basquiat spoke of unhousedness in the context of his artistic development, I believe it is relevant to attend to how these rhythms of city life include the lives of unhoused populations. Moreover, Basquiat's concerns with the intersections of racialization and precarity render themes of unhousedness in his work particularly relevant, as intertwined antiblack and anti-homeless violence was an especially salient concern during the period when Basquiat painted.

While the precise dates of Basquiat's tenure in the park are unclear, they aligned with highly charged racial tensions in the area. That same year, on September 8, 1976, a group of 50 to 100 young men descended upon the park with baseball bats. Primarily racially motivated, the attackers also united over stigmatizing views of homelessness and drug users;⁶⁹ Hoban adds that homophobia was also a likely factor.⁷⁰ Claiming their desire to “clean out” the park, the mob gathered under dusk, chanting slurs and swinging weapons. “They were chasing all of us,” later said a white student, “But the only people

59 Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 122.

60 Phoebe Hoban, *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (New York: Viking, 1998), 18. Citing from Steve Hager, *Art After Midnight* (New York: St. Martin's, 1986), 39.

61 *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Radiant Child*, 11:00.

62 Cathleen McGuigan, “New Art, New Money,” *The New York Times*, February 10, 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/02/10/magazine/new-art-new-money.html>.

63 Hoban, *Basquiat*, 22–23.

64 *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Radiant Child*, 11:50.

65 Jordana Moore Saggese, “Introduction,” in *The Jean-Michel Basquiat Reader*, 2.

66 Saggese, “Introduction,” 2–3.

67 Hebdige, “Welcome to the Terrordome,” 65.

68 “Interview by Démosthènes Davvetas, 1985–1988,” in *The Jean-Michel Basquiat Reader*, 62.

69 Andrew Meier, “The Only People They Hit Were Black: When a Race Riot Roiled New York,” *The New York Times*, December 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/10/nyregion/race-riot-washington-square-park.html>.

70 Hoban, *Basquiat*, 23.

they hit were Black.⁷¹ At least thirteen people were injured, left with wounds including broken bones and skull fractures. One lost an eye, while twenty-two-year-old student Marcus Mota died from injuries. Later investigations revealed police had been warned but failed to act.⁷²

Mbembe writes that under colonial regimes, domains of law and non-law blur, as institutional powers manufacture emergencies in which otherwise criminal behavior, such as violence, is justified as self-defence by framing the Other's existence as a threat. Violence is thus not the opposite of (neo) liberal democratic law, but rather, this law's other face. Through colonial necropower, writes Mbembe, "sovereignty consists in the power to manufacture an entire crowd of people who specifically live at the edge of life, or even on its outer edge—people for whom living means continually standing up to death."⁷³ While blunt about the harsh realities of violence, Mbembe also acknowledges the dynamism of tensions between life and death: the work that goes on, even under necropolitical regimes, to build lives and communities. Basquiat's torn canvases and anatomized figures come to mind in Mbembe's descriptions of this neverending task: "sewing up the holes, preventing the destroyed body from being completely torn apart, reconnecting the tissues..."⁷⁴

Although police returned Basquiat to his father's house, the artist dropped out of school two years later, returning to the park to sell postcards, collages, and handpainted shirts to afford food and shelter.⁷⁵ He painted on objects he found in the street, including "clothing, foam rubber, window frames, [and] typewriters."⁷⁶ The use of salvaged and damaged materials seemingly began out of necessity: "I couldn't even buy the necessary materials to finish a canvas,"⁷⁷ Basquiat told an interviewer. Yet utilizing unconventional materials remained characteristic long after Basquiat's financial success. Like the appearance of speediness in the paintings' creation, salvaged materials imbue Basquiat's artworks with urgency, creating the impression that the artist grabbed whatever was closest at hand—or made do with whatever resources he had.

Basquiat's paintings frequently reference "hobo code": glyphs supposedly used to convey information to travellers, such as places to sleep or dangerous neighborhoods to avoid. Described in Henry Dreyfuss' *Symbol Sourcebook*,⁷⁸ one must be cautious about overascribing autobiographical relevance to these symbols, which Basquiat more likely encountered in a book than on the street. Nonetheless, their evocation of precarity imbues them with unsettling power. Themes of death, risk, and violence persist in symbols accompanied by phrases like "ILL TEMPERED MAN LIVES HERE" and "NO USE GOING IN THIS DIRECTION," as appear in *Untitled* (1987),⁷⁹ or the haunting refrain of "MAN DIES" in *Eroica I* and *Eroica II* (both 1988), the claw-like glyphs lined up like tombstones.⁸⁰ One may consider the provocative implications of placing these symbols within galleries and museums. Who experiences these spaces as hostile environments in which there is, as one glyph puts it, "NOTHING TO BE GAINED HERE"?⁸¹ In raising this question, the presence of Basquiat's paintings serves as a reminder of the people and artworks that remain absent from these spaces. Mbembe writes that museums are "powerful device[s] of separation,"⁸² where different segments of humanity are subject to different, and hierarchizing, classificatory schemas. As Basquiat's misidentification with "primitivism" reveals, art museums are not exempt from these practices of division.

71 Meier, "The Only People."

72 Ibid.

73 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 37.

74 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 71.

75 Jean-Michel Basquiat: *Radiant Child*, 15:30.

76 Hoban, *Basquiat*, 34.

77 "Interview by Démosthènes Davvetas," 61.

78 Henry Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972).

79 Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 51.

80 Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 228–29.

81 Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 223.

82 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 171.

Ultimately, colonial practices of dividing humanity lead to what Mbembe terms, in contrast to life-worlds, “death-worlds”: “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the *living dead*.”⁸³ These violent “third places” or “non-places”⁸⁴ include prisons and camps; I would also add unhousedness, a condition profoundly associated with disability. Under regimes of debility, if a person without secure access to food and shelter is not already injured or ill, they soon will be. The stigma against unhousedness is on par with that of jail or institutionalization – and, like these, it bears emphasizing the disproportionate risks experienced by racialized and LGBTQ+ people. Numerous scholars have written on homelessness as a form of social death: a state in which a person is biologically alive, but socially unrecognized as human.

Some scholars in the Afropessimist movement, such as Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton, significantly draw upon this concept, positing that in a white supremacist culture, Blackness is already social death. As Fred Moten summarizes, “from the artificial, officially assumed position, blackness is nothing, that is, the relative nothingness of the impossible, pathological subject and his fellows.”⁸⁵ Identifying his views as black optimism, Moten’s response is not a takedown of Afropessimism, but rather a call to consider how pessimism and optimism sustain one another: if, under colonialism, Black lives are figured as nothing, Moten writes that one can then begin to consider and work with “*what nothing is*.”⁸⁶ While not denying the profound harm of displacement and marginalization, Moten proposes that those who occupy these positions still form communities and bear vital knowledge. By definitions imposed by mainstream culture, these may go unrecognized as communities and knowledge, but in what Moten refers to as the “undercommons,” “sharing [. . .] a life in homelessness” can “be a place from which to know.”⁸⁷ While the homelessness Moten describes is metaphorical, its literal meaning echoes in Mbembe’s caution against associating marginalization only with social death. Mbembe asserts, “African and African American history is...about the permanent generation, re-creation and resignification of life flows in the face of forces of capture, extraction, and desiccation.”⁸⁸ Such desiccation can be readily read into Basquiat’s bony, rivened paintings – but so too can creative resignification, through which seemingly discarded and broken material is transfigured into art. Consider again hobo code, which alludes to perilous conditions but also to a network of people invested in protecting one another from harm. Like Moten, Basquiat’s oeuvre critiques the assumption that to be without a stable home is to be without relations.

In Basquiat’s art, the pain inflicted by a racist culture is readily apparent: hooks writes, “black male figures stand alone and apart. They are not whole people.”⁸⁹ At the same time, Basquiat puts these figures on the same level as classical myths and European kings. Limbs float disembodied, bones and muscles taxonomized, while intricate webs of referentiality spring up in scribbles. Words are scrawled in English, Spanish, and French, while Greek heroes abut medical diagrams and organic chemistry. References to Hollywood, Egyptian mythology, Roman legionaries, Charlie Parker, Charles the First, Sugar Ray Robinson, Picasso, and the sugar trade occupy the same gallery spaces, as does hobo code.⁹⁰ Basquiat’s figures stand alone and apart, yet they are also co-composed through relationships with the world, down to the salvaged materials that hold their bodies and bones. Traversing the depths of alienation, Basquiat’s oeuvre also asks that we consider what constitutes relation, and whose relations matter.

83 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 92. Emphasis in original.

84 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 27.

85 Fred Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh),” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112, no. 4 (Fall 2013): 737–80; 741.

86 Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 741. Emphasis in original.

87 Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 756.

88 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 159.

89 hooks, “Altars of Sacrifice.”

90 Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*.

AMBIVALENT AGENCY

There is a risk of misconstruing marginalized populations as wholly submissive, passive, and powerless. Consider this description of Basquiat's 1982 painting, *Obnoxious Liberals*, on an unofficial fan page:

...*Obnoxious Liberals* depicts a series of figures representing capitalism and its hapless, powerless victims. The exploited, corroded victim, on the one hand, is virtually held hostage by the minions of mainstream White American culture, as represented by dollar signs, cowboy hats and Uncle Sam top hats as well as a "Not For Sale" sign. The victim's dark skin also hints at the systematic oppression of African-Americans.⁹¹

Obnoxious Liberals' feverish scene consists primarily of red, white, blue, and black. Three figures divide the canvas into approximate thirds. In the upper-left section, the word "ASBESTOS" repeats three times above a figure labelled "SAMSON." Nude, Samson is painted obsidian black, alight with white lines that could be bone or sweat. Two white circles, a white smudge of nose, and bright white teeth engrave his face with skull-like features. Wrists bound in manacles, his limbs splayed at odd angles, the word "GOLD" glows white on the ground beneath him. One leg shines red as if degloved to muscle.

In the middle third, a three-pointed crown adorns the phrase "OBNOXIOUS LIBERALS" above a man in a top hat. His black-clad hands are thrust upward, eyes two white, scratched-out circles. Against a swath of blood-coloured paint, his grinning or grimacing face is translucent, the same harsh crimson. Beneath his dripping rictus, he wears a sign declaring "NOT FOR SALE." While many interpret this figure as a white man, hooks reads him as a "contemporary black figure,"⁹² a reading which suggests the man is attempting to appeal to neoliberal respectability politics by acquiring wealth, distancing himself from histories of slavery, identifying with the dominant culture, and enabling or outright participating in the exploitation of other Black subjects. To the right, a stocky man in shorts and a cowboy hat approaches. A pair of dollar signs inscribe his shirt; a strip of white skin gleams above his bandana. This constellation leads the scene to read as an auction, the white man on the right desiring to purchase Samson from the auctioneer in the centre.

Returning to the quoted description, "corroded" aptly describes Samson's painful distortion, and "systematic oppression" the antiblack legacies depicted. "Hapless" and "powerless," however, ring untrue in the context of the biblical allusion. By biblical accounts, Samson, a preternaturally strong man, was stripped of his powers when the Philistine woman Delilah betrayed him. The Philistines then captured and blinded Samson, chaining him to a pillar in their temple; however, the Philistines underestimated Samson in his debilitated state. Bowing, Samson toppled the pillar, collapsing the temple and crushing all inside. If one is to read the two rightmost men as symbolic of colonialism—including, as in hooks' view, internalized racism—it is not unreasonable to note the grave injury they have done Samson, nor to read this as representing racialized patterns of violence. Despite Black men being racially stereotyped as invulnerable, Basquiat's wounded Samson, bent with pain, hurts to behold. Yet reducing this figure to hapless powerlessness is also reductive, particularly when the other figures depicted are equally distorted.

Saggese notes that Basquiat often explores themes of commerce.⁹³ In *Obnoxious Liberals*, legacies of slavery are connected to contemporary capitalist exploitation. Samson is commodified—and debilitated—in direct

91 "Obnoxious Liberals," *Jean-Michel-Basquiat.org*, 2020, <http://jean-michel-basquiat.org/obnoxious/liberals/>. Emphasis in original.

92 hooks, "Altars of Sacrifice."
93 Saggese, *Reading Basquiat*, 33.

relation to “GOLD,” and, while seemingly free, both the figure in the dollar sign shirt and the man with a “NOT FOR SALE” sign lack all identity outside the markers of racial capitalism. While the latter two figures do not bear signs of physical injury like Samson does, their greed reduces them to hollow caricatures—they are, to use hooks’ phrase, “not whole people.” If one must wear a “NOT FOR SALE” sign to distinguish himself from those he exploits, his own rights as a subject are hardly assured. In the failure to recognize one another’s shared vulnerability, colonial commodification cheapens everyone.

While the racialized violence depicted in the painting is certainly worth noting, so too is the title. Perhaps the satire of *Obnoxious Liberals* includes taking aim at pseudo-progressives’ assumptions that racialized people—and people with disabilities, like the wounded, blinded Samson—are merely “hapless” and “powerless.” Samson’s agency is undeniably constrained, but it is not absent. Gravely injured, he tugs on his chains. He brings down the temple.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I have argued that a recognition of precarity, in both form and content, is crucial to appreciating the aesthetic and political complexity of Basquiat’s paintings. Simultaneously, one must avoid patronizing assumptions that equate precarity, pain, and marginalization with the absolute absence of agency. Recognizing the violence of debilitation while also gesturing towards interdependency, the subjects of Basquiat’s paintings are powerful but not immortal; vulnerable but not passive; lively but always at risk. Moten, describing his own theory of the *something of nothing*, compares his perspective to Buddhist koans, seeming paradoxes which induce “dual intensities of doubt and concentration.”⁹⁴ Similar duality asserts itself in Basquiat’s paintings—in their ambivalent X-rays, their isolated figures made up of relationships, their threads that at once tear and bind. Fragmented, vibrant, defiant, and polysemous, Basquiat’s canvases are as much defined by alienation as by their abundant references to culture and community, reminding us—as can disability studies—that we are all vulnerably interdependent, our survival conditional on care for one another. “[C]an we found a relation with others based on the reciprocal recognition of our common vulnerability and finitude?”⁹⁵ asks Mbembe. This question remains to be answered.

Biographer Phoebe Hoban writes of Basquiat, “Drawings, paintings, and notebooks reveal him like a Rorschach test.”⁹⁶ But a Rorschach test does not reveal its maker. It reveals the one looking in.

94 Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness,” 753.

95 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 3

96 Hoban, *Basquiat*, x.