The irony of anatomy

Basquiat's poetics of black positionality

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FOR TANZEEN DOHA

Isabelle Graw Should I come to New York before I write the article on you?
Jean-Michel Basquiat What would you do if the artist you were writing about were dead?
Graw I would do as much research as possible, get together all the available information…
Basquiat Then just do it like that. Pretend I'm dead…

There are two versions of Jean-Michel Basquiat's 1981 painting *Irony of a Negro Policeman,* very similar but with several notable differences. The first version (FIG. 1), with a red background, includes an object resembling a sceptre rising above the left arm. The policeman's genitals are represented by a triangle and three circles in the mid-section. Two of Basquiat's signature crowns are featured in the upper left-hand corner. In the final version (FIG. 2) the background has been whitewashed and the genitals painted over, leaving the figure castrated by a white gap running through the centre of the body. The sceptre-like object has been erased but for a few remaining black streaks, and the crowns have been eliminated. The additions to the final canvas are also notable. A foot has been labelled 'PAW (LEFT)'. An abbreviated version of the title has been written in: 'IRONY OF NEGRO PLCEMN'. Above that is a further condensation of the title's significance: the word IRONY, circled in the white space of the upper right corner.

I am interested in reading the relation between additions to this canvas (a quasi-anatomical label, below; the word 'irony', above) and its subtraction of icons of empowerment (genitals, crowns, a sceptre) as crucial to Basquiat's pictorial treatment of blackness.[1] His way of representing blackness, I will argue, is centrally concerned with the relationship between irony, the body and the body's social determination. Basquiat's representations of blackness, his way of writing its historical inscription, is driven by a very particular problem: the problem of how the relation between the interiority and exteriority of the body (between its structure and its form) is conditioned by 'race' as a form of social determination. It is through the relation between irony and anatomy that this problem gets figured in his work, within the complex nexus of visual and linguistic meaning that constitutes his compositional field. I want to give an account of exactly what people mean when they vaguely refer to 'racial issues' or 'problems of race' in Basquiat's work: an account that focuses upon irony as the medium of his artistic production, and upon anatomy as a key part of its historically fraught content. That is, I want to give an analytically precise account of the role of blackness in his pictorial poetics.

Let me first step back for a moment, in order to approach a certain relation between irony, anatomy and blackness from the perspective of a different kind of poetics. Consider Kenneth Goldsmith's now infamous performance, in March 2015, of a text he titled 'The Body of Michael Brown', his reading of a modified version of the federal autopsy report written subsequent to Brown's murder by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Goldsmith is the co-editor of *Against Expression*, an anthology of conceptual writing. For Goldsmith, this text was a specimen of 'conceptual writing', which he thinks of as a non-expressive or indeed anti-expressive poetics based on the reproduction, reconfiguration and performance or publishing of already existing texts gleaned from a variety of media.[2] A document like Brown's autopsy report, he claims, 'speaks for itself in ways that an interpretation cannot', and he thus insists that, in preparing the piece for performance, he 'didn't add or alter a single word or sentiment that did not preexist in the original text, for to do so would be to go against my nearly three decades' practice of conceptual writing'.[3] Goldsmith did, however, rearrange the text, altering the order of the report so that his performance concluded with the autopsy's description of Michael Brown's genitals.

FIG. 1

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Irony of a Negro Policeman* (first version) (1981)
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FIG. 2

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Irony of a Negro Policeman* (1981)
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Goldsmith's appropriation and performance have been widely criticized for their complicity with the unchecked dominance of black people's bodies within the persistent framework of white supremacy. In grappling with this critique, I find it useful to refer to Saidiya Hartman's book *Scenes of Subjection*, in which she analyses racist forms of entertainment, traversing both chattel slavery and post-emancipation American culture, in which the fungible black body is made to perform, alive or dead, as a hyper-material extension of the white master's ideas, feelings and values. In Hartman's lucid account of these supposedly 'Innocent Amusements',

> The fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master's body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. Thus, while the beaten and mutilated body presumably establishes the brute materiality of existence, the materiality of suffering regularly eludes (re)cognition by virtue of the body's being replaced by other signs of value, as well as other bodies.[4]

In 'The Body of Michael Brown', the material facticity of Michael Brown's dead body, anatomically labelled and described by the state, is made to perform through Goldsmith's mouth, and thereby converted into a fungible commodity through artistic appropriation, replaced and possessed by the body, indeed the corpus, of a white man. Goldsmith claims that his anti-expressive poetics evades the 'projection of feelings, ideas, desire, and values' – the expression of these – onto the texts he appropriates and reframes. But his performance of 'The Body of Michael Brown' made it clear that this is not the case. It was the relation between Kenneth Goldsmith's body and Michael Brown's body that made the modification and performance of this particular text an expression of white power, articulated in careless dominance over black death.

I want to specify the *irony* of Goldsmith's performance. Namely: he found himself in a position in which the primary effect of his anti-expressive poetics was to express the political power of whiteness. This irony was due not only to 'race', but, more specifically, to a complex conjunction of blackness, whiteness and anatomy. One listener felt as though Goldsmith 'physically took Michael Brown's body, chewed it up, and spat it out'.[5] Anatomy – an apparently neutral

language – was the content of Goldsmith's text; but its form, the total context of its performance, rendered the expression of that content not only powerful, but violent in a manner that seems to have exceeded Goldsmith's stated, anti-expressive intentions. The putative neutrality of anti-expressive poetics, like the putative neutrality of anatomy, was belied by its relation to racial positionality. 'From the incoherence of black death', Frank Wilderson III writes, 'America generates the coherence of white life.'[6] If one is to interrogate rather than merely express this logic, one has to adopt a critically reflexive position upon the parasitic relation of white life to black social death, addressing the dialectical entanglements and unexpected reversals that afflict relations between intention and determination in any discourse on race. In a word, one has to grapple with irony. That will be my effort here. It was also the difficult effort driving the historical materialism of Basquiat's poetics.

Let's turn to Basquiat's 1982 canvas *Obnoxious Liberals* (FIG. 3), which one might read as a commentary upon the structural situation Goldsmith's performance enacts. The painting is sometimes understood as a rendering of Basquiat's conflicted relation to the art market. But what sort of rendering? Given the title, it makes little sense to read the central figure as a stand-in for Basquiat himself – especially since that figure is dressed in the manner of a trader at a slave auction. The scene of the slave auction (FIG. 4) offers some structural and historical context for Basquiat's composition. Here we see the black slave bound one side of the image, while prospective buyers are assembled on the other. In the centre the trader takes bids, selling the slave as a commodity. In Basquiat's piece these structural positions are replicated by the black figure of Samson (on the left), the figure marked by a cowboy hat and dollar signs (on the right), and the central figure in his top hat and suit. In this case, however, his body is overwritten with the words 'NOT FOR SALE'.

Here is how the Austrian critic and curator Dieter Buchhart handles the apparent ambiguity of this configuration in his introductory essay to the most recently published retrospective catalogue of Basquiat's work:

> The role of this figure in the centre is not clear, as it is placed over a red square and labelled 'OBNOXIOUS LIBERALS©', a term of abuse used by conservatives. Does it represent a slave trader (as the clothing seems to indicate) fulminating against liberals, or a critic of the scene, the artist making it clear he is not for sale?

Basquiat's demand for freedom and equality – which he saw as threatened by capitalist consumer society – is quite clearly present here.[7]

Buchhart poses questions, but he cannot answer them. Ultimately he throws up his hands and appeals to 'Basquiat's demand for freedom and equality' to escape his interpretive impasse. But why is the role of the central figure unclear to Buchhart? First, because he does not grasp that 'obnoxious liberals' is a term of abuse that can be hurled from the left as well as from the right, from a radical political position against a reformist position, or from the structural position of blackness towards that of white privilege. Second, Buchhart cannot read the image because he fails to analyse the *irony* of the phrase 'NOT FOR SALE' in its compositional context. The conjunction of these two oversights is revealing, because it links Basquiat's radical politics (rather than liberal politics) directly to his use of irony. The irony of Basquiat's painting – which Buchhart cannot see, though it is hidden in plain sight in the relation of the painting's central figure to the double inscription of 'OBNOXIOUS LIBERALS' and 'NOT FOR SALE' – is that the obnoxious liberal occupies the structural position of the slave trader himself.

As a contemporary example of this structural position, consider the NGO Not For Sale, a 'global anti-slavery organization' with the stated goal of ending human trafficking. No doubt this is an admirable goal, but it is ironized by the political framework in which it is articulated. The president of Not for Sale is also co-founder and managing partner of Just Business, 'an international investment group that incubates social enterprises'. On the organization's website, the finance manager states that she is 'passionate about developing strategic initiatives to connect the untapped potential of isolated economies to the demand of the global market'.[8] A slogan like 'Not For Sale' articulates an ideal: that human beings, or human life, or human values are not commodities on the market. But this slogan belies the structural determinations of global capitalism that prop up both human trafficking and the activities of NGOs run by investment bankers attempting to 'use the economic muscle of corporations to foster social impact and economic development'.[9] The liberal's declaration – Not For Sale! – is obnoxious because it enunciates an ideal that disavows the contradictory material situation upon which the conditions of the enunciation depend. In the case of the example I've offered, this may merely express the economic and political opportunism of corporate NGOs. But, more

broadly, it is also the constitutive gesture of any liberal reformist politics.

Thus we can identify the double irony of Buchhart's reading. Unable to read Basquiat's irony, he earnestly places the painter in the structural position the painting satirizes. In doing so, Buchhart projects Basquiat into the position which is in fact his own: that of the obnoxious liberal. 'Despite all his difficulties and frustrations', Buchhart claims, 'Basquiat maintained a profoundly humanist view of the world.'[10] Thus we are assured that Basquiat is not just another angry black man, while the structural objectivity of black positionality is reduced to certain 'difficulties and frustrations'. The 'profoundly humanist view of the world' attributed to Basquiat is precisely that of the obnoxious liberal for whom his irony sets an interpretive trap – a trap that Buchhart walks right into. Avoiding this trap involves thinking through the manner in which Basquiat's art ironizes the figure of the human, ironizes what Frank Wilderson calls 'the imposition of Humanism's assumptive logic'.[11] This involves moving beyond the good intentions of liberal ideals, or the well-meaning imposition of those ideals upon Basquiat's art, and recognizing Basquiat's radical interrogations of black positionality.

In a 1985 interview, Basquiat famously remarks that if he were to make films, they would be 'ones in which black people are portrayed as being people of the human race. And not aliens and not all negative not all thieves and drug dealers and the whole bit. Just real stories.'[12] This is not, however, the representational strategy of Basquiat's paintings and drawings. In the works he actually made, he does indeed depict black people as aliens, as stereotypes, and as figures reduced to the schematic attribute of blackness (FIG. 5). That is to say, he does not only depict black life as it is or as we would like it to be; he depicts black positionality as social fact and as figural determination.

Consider Basquiat's 1983 self-portrait (FIG. 6), in which the figure is reduced to a black silhouette. The simplicity of the image belies the complex psychological, historical and ideological accretions its composition materializes. It would be easy to read this as a portrait of double consciousness, and it is partly that: the objectifying force of the white gaze reflected back upon, as if from within and looking out, the self-representation of the black subject. But the very readiness of that familiar framework renders it inadequate to the estranging force of the image. Not only the shadow-like black form, but also the narrowed eyes, the vertical braids, the set jaw, the angular posture of the figure suggest an attitude or style, a certain oblique query. But the question posed by the figural form cannot be answered in abstraction from the viewer's own subjectivity, from his or her own social or cultural positionality in relation

FIG. 3

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Obnoxious Liberals* (1982)
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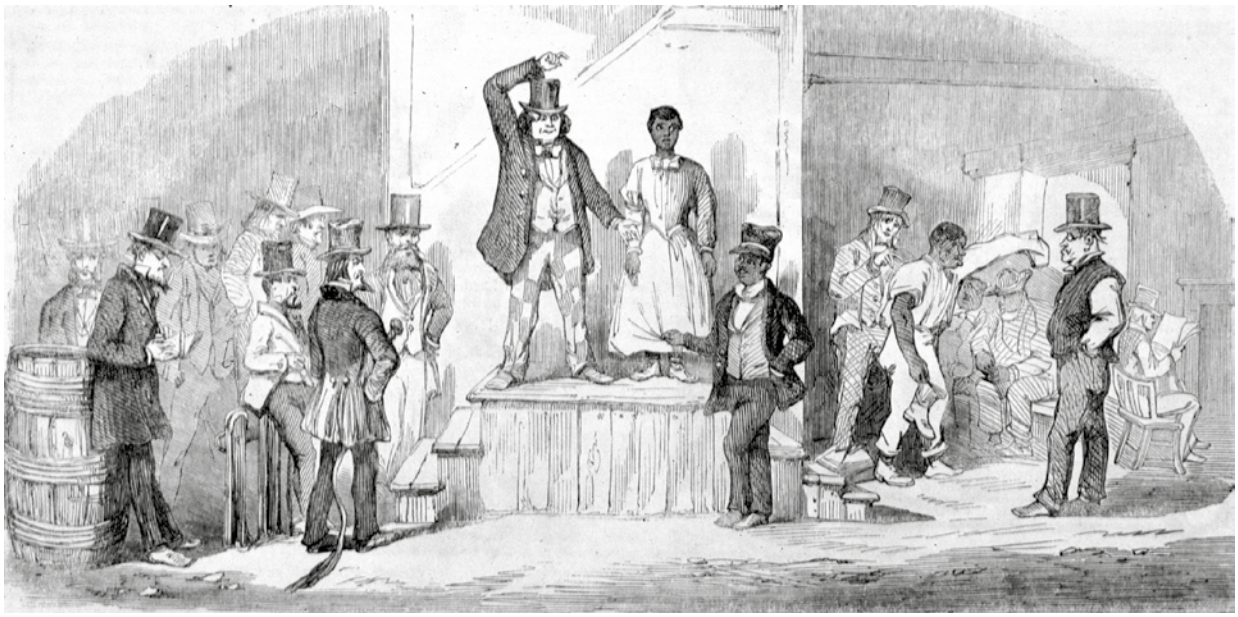
FIG. 4



Slave Auction

to the image. That is to say: the image *positions* the viewer precisely by being a certain image of black positionality, an image at once *generic* and nevertheless *specific*: a certain *style* of blackness, which one might identify with 'Basquiat', but to which one will also find oneself responding in a way that marks the particular psychology of one's gaze as ideologically, historically entangled. What one sees in the image is the question posed by the figure's sightless eyes. The black pupils through which it might participate in the world of light, the world of recognition, are removed, leaving only a white space through which one looks at the background of figuration, or an empty surface at which one stares. Are 'black people', here, 'portrayed as being people of the human race'? This may be a question the painting carefully and slyly poses, but it is not one it answers in the affirmative.

A similar style of figuration is at issue in Basquiat's elegiac 1984 piece *The Death of Michael Stewart* (FIG. 7). Here the young graffiti artist, beaten to death by the NYPD, is depicted as a narrow black silhouette walking into the background of the composition, framed on either side by pink-faced cops, fanged, wielding billy clubs, and marked by symbols of authority. The central figure is haloed, as though already otherworldly. He seems already free of the scene of social determination that also kills him – 'Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil' – while the police at once fade into absence and hem in his path. Over the heads of the figures looms the partially erased word 'DEFACEMENT?', questioning the attribution of this term to the putative crime rather than the deadly punishment, while caustically answering its own

FIG. 5

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Six Crimes* (1982)
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FIG. 6

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Self-Portrait* (1983)
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question with a copyright symbol. Power protects the order of property, determining graffiti as criminal and police murder as legal. According to the order of law, one counts as defacement and the other does not. But again, while the image is powerfully critical, polemical, it is not only that. It is also redemptive and honorific: Stewart canonized as black saint, holy spook, revenant of civil society. Perhaps the painting depicts a relation between spiritual freedom and social determination, but *what is* the relation? Black social death (the legal murder of a black man) comes into contact with the beatification of the soul; the form of the bureaucratic gold star detaches from the policeman's cap and floats onto a heavenly horizon which is also the tagged wall of social contestation. None of these spaces – these planes of being, existence, and history – is clear of the others. If heaven touches upon earth and if angels walk among us, then the hell of social power also contaminates their heavenly transcendence. The horizon of that transcendence is defaced, and the immateriality of the soul is rendered by a smudge of black acrylic; yet, just so, the form of defacement that is the material work of art, or the insistence of the tag, also makes manifest the struggle of spirit against its oppressive negation.

There is an important relation – upon which I now want to focus – between the figuration of the black outline in such works as these and Basquiat's disintegration of the body into anatomical components in many of his works. Basquiat's interest in anatomy is frequently remarked upon in critical commentaries, and it is always noted that he studied *Gray's Antomy*, a gift from his mother, while in the hospital after being hit by a car at the age of 7. Similarly, Basquiat's interest in and references to Leonardo's notebooks are often cited. But the role of the anatomical diagram in his work has not been seriously interpreted or theorized.[13]

Olivier Berggruen puts us on the right track when he comments that Basquiat's dissection of the body through anatomical representation 'articulates a notion of the body as damaged, scarred, fragmented, incomplete or torn apart – once the organic whole has disappeared'. 'Humanity is reduced to a mere idea, a ghostly presence', he argues. 'Eerie zombie-like creatures that appear to be coming back from the dead with remnants of fading and furiously scrawled writing mark Basquiat's attempt to bridge the abyss between life and its disappearance.'[14] The foregrounding of the body's physicality by the anatomical diagram draws our attention to the threshold between life and death, between organic unity and physical objectivity, and Berrgruen emphasizes the defamiliarizing pressure such attention places upon the idea of the human, reducing its self-evidence to a 'ghostly presence'.

We note that in Basquiat's eighteen-part series *Anatomy* (FIG. 8), white bones on a black background are presented as *generic*: as in a textbook like *Gray's Anatomy*, we encounter drawings of the right humerus, presented from front, back, outer, and inner perspectives. But we do not encounter any *particular* humerus. It is the generic structure of these body parts, and of the skeleton they compose, that is represented, but it is never the individual body, which lies outside the representational generalizations of the science of anatomy. Moreover, at least in these diagrams, anatomy operates within a regime of representation removed from any reference to race. It is the *interior* of the body that offers this apparent reprieve. Though we are shown a female pelvis and a male pelvis, we do not find a pelvis labelled as 'black' or 'white'. While Basquiat's self-portrait, or his homage to Michael Stewart, foreground the raced form of the black body – blackness as such – anatomy shifts the scene from exterior form to interior structure, where the physical objectivity of the body's discrete parts might seem to evade social determination.

Yet, precisely in so far as it is racially unmarked, anatomy is marked by race. This is the irony of

anatomy. Consider once again the scene of Goldsmith's performance: Michael Brown's graduation photo – a portrait of his exterior form, marked by symbols of human accomplishment – serves as a background for Goldsmith's reading through the labelled parts of Brown's dehumanized body. The living human being named 'Michael Brown' is now split between exterior form and interior structure, which also marks a split between subject and object (proud graduate and degraded dead body). This split has already happened, it has already been represented in the media, in police reports, and now it is rendered as 'art' or 'poetry' in the mode of blank commentary. Yet the blankness of the commentary itself is what not only performs but actually replicates the violence of the initial division. Michael Brown's body is divided between exterior form and interior structure, dead subject and categorized object, and the 'anti-expressive' expression of Goldsmith's living subjectivity inhabits this rift.

But, prior to death, what is the status of the black subject in the context of American white supremacy? The stringent argument of afro-pessimist theory is that to inhabit black positionality, is already to be an object rather than a subject, to live as socially dead, to be the profane residue of white civil society. 'Who is the slave', Mbembe asks,

> if not the person who, everywhere and always, possesses life, property, and body as if they were alien things? Possessing life and body as alien things presupposes that they are like external matter to the person who bears them, who serves as their scaffolding. In such a case, the slave's body, life, and work may be attacked. … Thus 'slave' is therefore the forename we must give to a man or woman whose body can be degraded, whose life can be mutilated, and whose work and resources can be squandered – with impunity.[15]

As ongoing police murders make clear, this is still the position reserved for black men and women by American civil society. Frank Wilderson defines the Black as 'a subject who is always already positioned as Slave', and therefore puts the term 'Black subject' under erasure. 'A Black is the very anti-thesis of the human subject', he argues, 'an anti-Human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity.'[16] Saidiya Harman argues that

FIG. 7

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Death of Michael Stewart* (1983)
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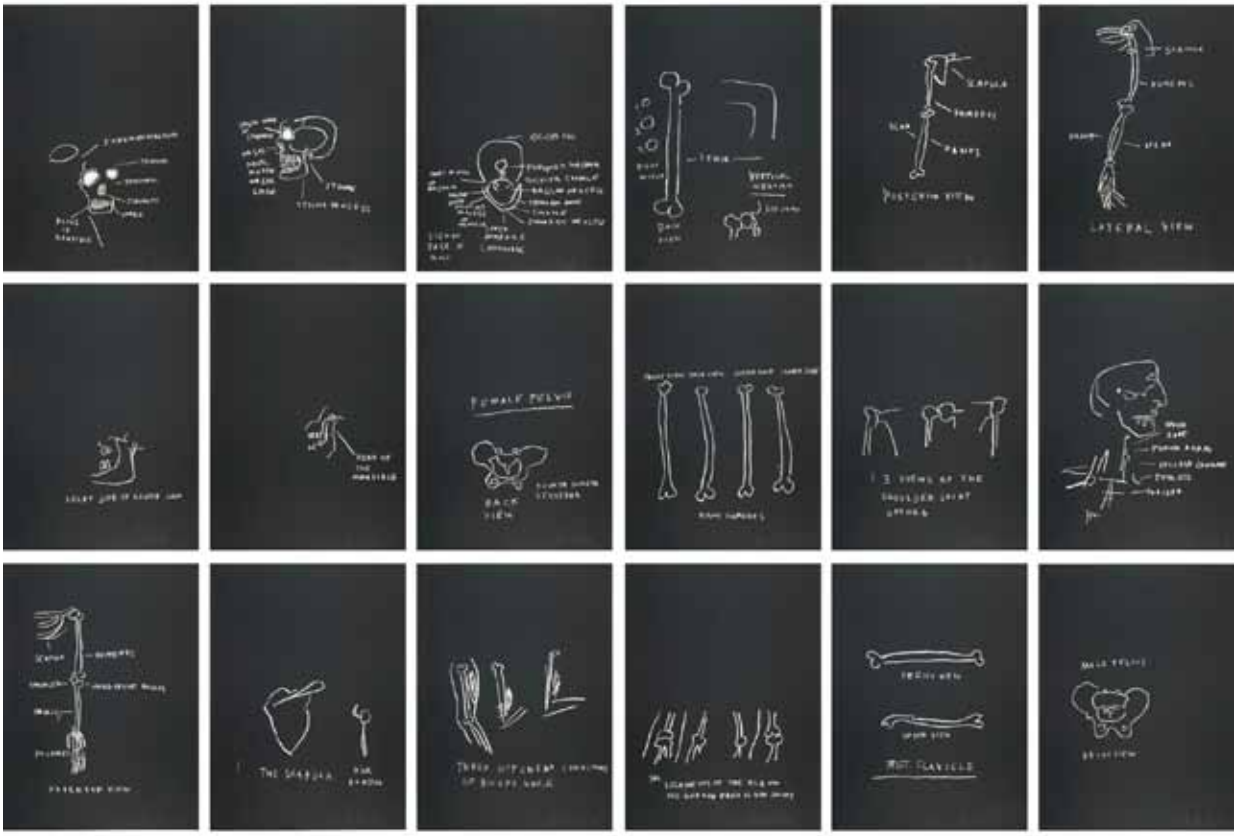

FIG. 8

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Anatomy (in 18 parts)* (1982)
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/SODRAC (2015)

> The 'givenness' of blackness results from the brutal corporealization of the body and the fixation of its constituent parts as indexes of truth and racial meaning. The construction of black bodies as phobogenic objects estranged in corporeal malediction and the apparent biological certainty of this malediction attest to the power of the performative to produce the very subject it appears to express.[17]

Crucially, Hartman notes that this obstinacy or 'givenness' of 'blackness' is not at all some determinate biological property or essence; but nor are the performative occasions that produce it 'merely' performative, since these result in the determination of a concrete social position. 'Irony riddled the event of emancipation',[18] Hartman argues:

> As a consequence of emancipation, blacks were incorporated into the narrative of the rights of man and citizen; by virtue of the gift of freedom and wage labor, the formerly enslaved were granted entry into the hallowed halls of humanity, and, at the same time, the unyielding and implacable fabrication of blackness as subordination continued under the aegis of formal equality.[19]

Through the discrepant techniques of domination particular to slavery *and* emancipation, 'blackness is a historical, constitutive "fixing" of the body by terror and dominance.'[20]

We know that the science of anatomy itself is a historically racist discourse, which contributes to this fixing of the body by terror and dominance. 'In distinguishing between the races', one reads in the nineteenth-century *Chambers American Encyclopedia*, 'what strikes the ordinary observer chiefly is, of course, the difference of complexion; but the anatomist is fully as much interested in the shape of the skull.'[21] There is thus a diachronic, racist *history* of anatomy, which participates in the synchronic *irony* of anatomy. And even if anatomical representations are racially unmarked, anatomy's reduction of the body to object status is not, because this reduction bears a different relation to white and black bodies unmarked as subjects or marked as objects. Thus, through the tension between Basquiat's deployment of racially unmarked anatomical representations and his racially marked representations of black silhouettes, the objectifying force of anatomy is tied in tenuous, complex, uneven, yet harrowing ways to the anti-human positionality of blackness.

To put it clearly, my argument is that the quasi-objectivity of anatomy, considered within the relational space of Basquiat's oeuvre, bears a dense representational burden of racial positionality: it is expressive of black social death, of the inhuman ontological status of blackness, of the brutal persistence

of the black slave's position as the rejectamenta of contemporary civil society. Thus, a drawing of teeth is not only a drawing of teeth, but of the morbid trinkets collected and worn as jewellery by colonizers or plantation masters (FIG. 9). A femur is not only a femur, but the 'being-a-thing' of the colonized. A skull is not necessarily or unproblematically a human skull but, perhaps, the 'negro' skull of modernity's encyclopedia. To be black is always, as the title of Basquiat's late canvas has it, to be *Riding With Death* (FIG. 10) – thus split, without unity, between exterior form and interior skeleton. The irony of the negro policeman – to be at once excluded from and representative of civil society – is rendered by the irony of anatomy: a black foot, showing through the uniform, labelled as 'PAW'. For Hegel, 'the negro is an example of animal man in all his savagery and lawlessness.'[22] In Basquiat's composition, the figure of the negro policeman ironizes the distinctions between animal and man, savagery and civilization, lawlessness and law, upon which civil society and its taxonomic orders are founded.

I quote Hegel at this point because I think that Basquiat's treatment of the relationship between anatomy and blackness might suggest a shift in our attention to the foundational analysis of slavery in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Rather than directing our attention to Hegel's discussion of mastery and bondage, we might consider the relation between slavery and blackness in terms of Hegel's discussion of anatomy and physiognomy in the chapter on 'Observing Reason'. Hegel's master/slave dialectic

FIG. 9

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled (from Leonardo)* (1983)
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/SODRAC (2015)

FIG. 10

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Riding with Death* (1988)
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analyses the thwarted structure of intersubjective recognition in terms of forced labour, and he situates *work* as the means by which 'the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is'.[23] But in *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson is at pains to distinguish his analysis from Hegel's on the basis that work is not constitutive of the relational structure of slavery. Rather, he argues, the constitutive elements of slavery are gratuitously violent domination, natal alienation and general dishonour.[24] Frank Wilderson constructs his account of the slave's 'grammar of suffering' on this basis, focusing upon the Black 'as an accumulated and fungible object, rather than an exploited and alienated subject'[25] and resisting the incorporation of black suffering back into humanism's assumptive logic of self-recognition. Wilderson calls for an account of the political ontology of black positionality addressed to the slave's objecthood, to accumulation and fungibility, to the 'unbridgeable gap between Black being and Human life'[26] – rather than addressed to the relational overcoming, through labour, of alienation.

Hegel's chapter on 'Observing Reason' offers interesting, if oblique, resources for such an account. Here Hegel analyses the relation between Spirit and corporeality, culminating in the infinite judgement of Reason: 'that *the being of Spirit is a bone*'.[27] His discussion of corporeality returns to the opposition between philosophy and anatomy with which he opens the *Phenomenology*, having distinguished on the first page of the Preface between the truth of philosophical Science and the mere 'aggregate of information' presented by the vulgar empiricism of anatomy – 'the knowledge of the parts of the body regarded as inanimate'.[28] As a form of knowledge, anatomy operates through *accumulation* rather than

the synthetic power of reason. Thus, the chapter on 'Observing Reason' might be viewed as the apex of the *Phenomenology*, in so far as it is here that this opposition between rational truth and mere empiricism, idealism and materialism, are reconciled in the infinite judgement: Reason grasps the manner in which it is not reduced to, but rather encompasses and subsumes, material being. 'The *being of Spirit is a bone*' is an infinite judgement in so far as it expresses the unity of substance and subject, of physical matter and living movement, of objective reality and rational truth. Left to its own devices, separated from this sublation, anatomy is the other of philosophy: it accumulates information about the negative, finite object that resists Spirit's claim upon subjective infinitude.

Transposed into history, anatomy thus occupies the place of blackness, of the slave. It shares the position of intractability that Hegel assigns to 'the negro': 'intractability is the distinguishing feature of the negro character', he writes; 'the condition in which they live is incapable of any development or culture, and their presence is as it has always been.'[29] Thus Hegel's account implies that slavery and emancipation – but emancipation grasped as predicated upon and thus requiring slavery – are necessary for the historical redemption of the ahistorical negro. For Hegel, 'Africa proper is that unhistorical and undeveloped land which is still enmeshed in the natural spirit, and which had to be mentioned here before we cross the threshold of world history itself.'[30] It is only through colonialism and slavery, through the transubstantiating incorporation of the negro into *white* history, that Africa crosses the threshold of *world* history. The crossing of this threshold is the constitution of blackness, as the barred substance of whiteness, and as the position of social death through which white life attains its world historical apotheosis: modernity. Hegel's negro occupies precisely the position of the negative bone which must be subsumed by infinite spirit; the negro is the object that is only in-itself, not for-itself, in separation from the soul of European Reason. In the synchronic medium of his art, through his engagement with the apparently ahistorical objectivity of anatomy – which ironically betrays the objectifying force of history itself – Basquiat paints the contradiction of black positionality: to be alive, yet socially dead; to be

FIG. 11

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled* (1982)
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FIG. 12

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Profit 1* (1982)
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the split substance, without unity, of the totalized exterior form of the black body and the physical objectivity of its fragmented interior structure.

It is the sheer *force* of this asynthetic being (blackness) that shines forth in Basquiat's most triumphant paintings, in which he portrays not only black positionality, but the relation between black positionality and black power. In *Untitled*, 1982 (FIG. 11), the halo intersects the skull bone directly, and what we are looking at is not the redemptive portrayal of black people as human beings with real stories – that is, the narrative logic of humanism – but rather a power whose asynthetic energy seems to expel the human altogether: empty eyes, no face, gloved fists rather than the expressive pathos of articulated hands, an inhuman skull, a horn that turns into a halo.

In Basquiat's great painting *Profit 1* (FIG. 12), the right hand is a skeletal form, while the head is outlined in white, as if to suggest a black skull. The separated, bared teeth and hollow eyes are those of a voodoo doll, also suggested by the striking red garb that sets off the figure from the black background, while the letters of the grid to the left associate the figure with a West African griot – praise singer, historian, oral poet, communal elder. The gold halo, which also suggests a crown of thorns, shines over and behind the figure's head, drawing the gaze and marking the griot's fraught beatitude. The composition is violently expressive and powerfully energetic, at once triumphant and bleak, charged with a riven dynamism. And indeed the figure is also powerfully consonant with contemporary struggles against anti-black racism, in which the gesture of raised hands, 'Hands Up Don't Shoot', expresses a conversion of black positionality – the position of the putative criminal confronted by the cops – into black power: the assertive action of resistance against the persistence of white supremacy in civil society. This conversion of position into power expresses a scathing political irony directed against the physical imperatives of oppression, the bodily postures and submissive attitudes it demands thrown back with avenging anger. The skeletal spectre of black suffering rises from the grave, summoned by the displaced terms of prayer, from 'Rest In Peace' to 'Rest In Power.' It is not that power entirely overcomes positionality in this painting; rather, it as as though the two collide, mingle or perhaps transpire through one another in the medium of an irony that *insists*, that holds, while staging the affective and cultural entanglement of oppression and resistance.[31] With the dramatic entrance of the West African griot onto the centre stage of American painting, the canvas resonates, shudders with the force of the return of the repressed. A clock on the left points to 12: good morning, midnight; let me introduce you to the high noon of history.

I have been describing and analysing some of the pictorial strategies, political implications and conceptual contradictions drawn into Basquiat's oeuvre by the irony of the negro policeman, the irony of the obnoxious liberal, the irony of Basquiat's stated intention but actual refusal to portray black people as 'people of the human race' with 'real stories' – a refusal that breeds, on the contrary, representations of aliens, stereotypes and voodoo dolls, that splits

the black subject between exterior form and interior structure and then from this split, this rupture, produces imposing figures of inhuman power. The irony of Basquiat's remarks about humanistic representation may bear partly upon the disjunction between the diachronic narrative capacities of cinema and synchronic format of the painting or drawing. When he alludes to the humanist vocation of his cinematic ambitions, should we conclude that while Basquiat paints predominantly anti-humanist positions and powers on canvas, he may indeed have portrayed human stories on celluloid? Or was he merely toying with his interlocutor, as he was wont to do? That is a question we cannot answer, but it suggests another that we can. How does Basquiat portray the temporal movement of history through the static media of painting and drawing?

We can approach this question through the relation between anatomical and historical reference in the interlinking series of thirty-two drawings produced in 1982–83, known as the Daros Suite. In *Peptic Ulcer*,[32] for example, the surface is occupied by anatomical and quasi-mechanical drawings, labelled diagrammatically and intersecting with networked geometrical designs. What we could call anatomical style disarticulates and distributes the coherence of the body, the organic relation among its parts, across the compositional field. In *Dog Leg Study*,[33] wherein the word 'ANATOMY' is framed beneath the title of the piece, anatomical drawings of bones, joints and feet are combined with jotted historical references. 'US TROUPS PULL / OUT OF HAITI / 1936 – SEE OCCUPATION / NAZI, PARIS WWII' links Caribbean and European history just before and during the Second World War in order to suggest the hypocrisy of American foreign policy. On the left a schematic drawing of a body is labelled 'NEGROS AS / PORTRAYED IN / THE THIRTIES / AND FORTIES'. Drawings of American coins are linked to anatomical representation through the 'ALL-SEEING EYE OF TROOF' at the bottom of the canvas, and by the profile portrait on the coin itself. It seems that the anatomical label provides a model for textual reference that carries over into Basquiat's historical allusions, through which words mark the taking place of events or historical figures, rather than parts of the body.

In the crowded pictorial and referential space of *50 Cent Piece* (FIG. 13) this relation between anatomy and history takes on its most complicated articulation. The title refers to the Jamaican 50 cent note, and later coin, which feature the profile of Marcus Garvey, commemorating his role in the achievement

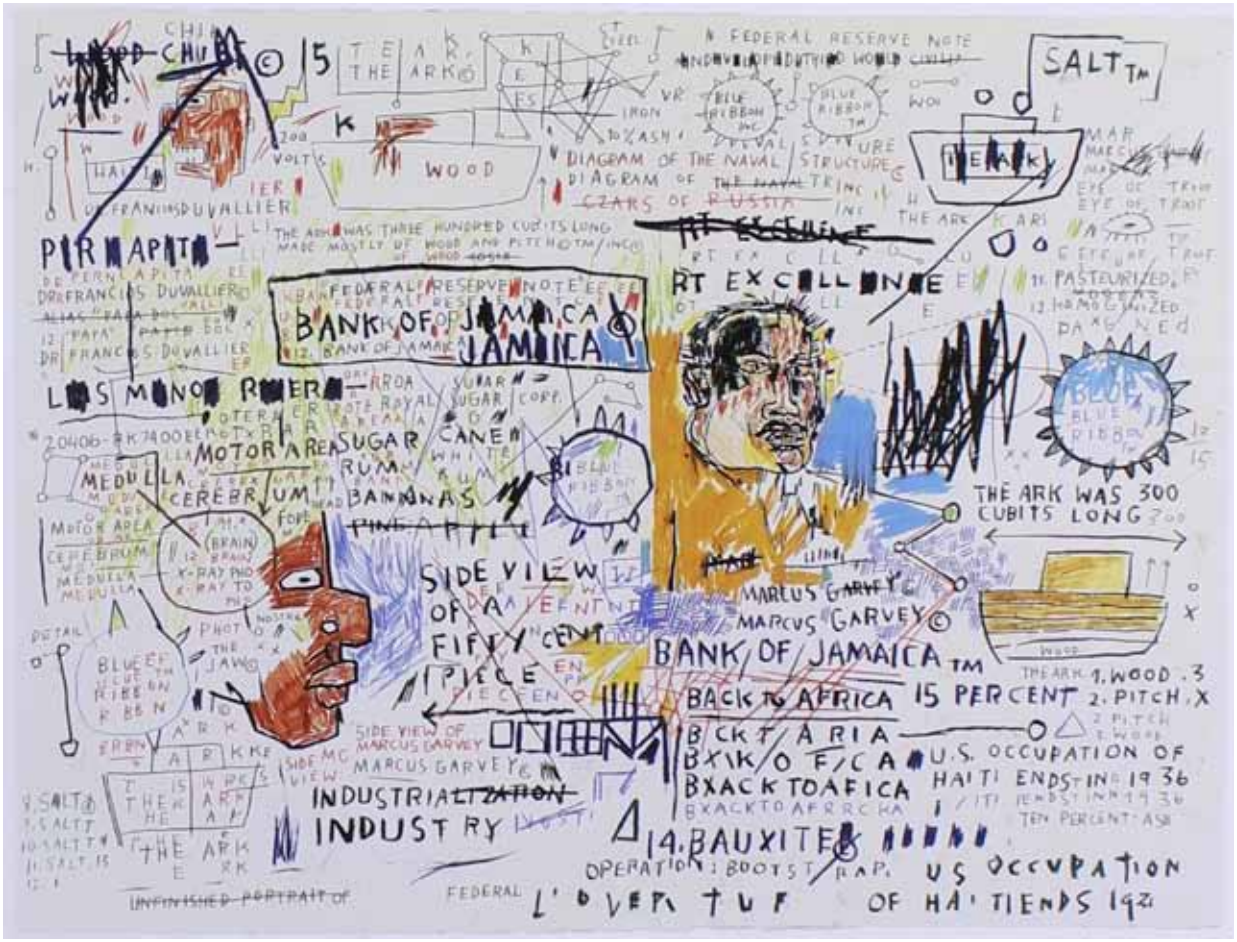

FIG. 13

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *50 Cent Piece*, from *Daros Suite* (1982–3)
© Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat/SODRAC (2015)

of Jamaican independence. Garvey was a pan-Africanist leader, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and a key figure in the Back-to-Africa movement. In 1919 he founded the Black Star Line, a shipping company devoted to enhancing trade between black businesses in Africa and the Americas and to facilitating passage back across the Atlantic. Thus the Black Star Line might be viewed as a kind of historical reversal of the slave ship, a reversal called to mind by diagrammatic drawings of the Ark surrounding the image of Garvey. The relation between the Black Star Line and the slave ship *splits* the figure of the Ark and implies through this splitting the retrospective irony of its double function as redemptive vessel and a hold for inhuman cargo.

In the bottom left corner of the composition we find an 'X-ray photo' of Garvey's head with anatomical labels marking the medulla, the motor area, the cerebrum, the jaw, the nostril, the forehead. Just to the right of that we find a list of Jamaican exports and agricultural industries: Royal Sugar Corp, sugar cane, white rum, bananas, pineapple. In other corners of the piece we find, again, references to the American occupation of Haiti, to the dictatorship of François 'Papa Doc' Duvalier in the 1960s, to Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution in the late eighteenth century. There is also a reference to Operation Bootstrap, an American intervention into the Puerto Rican economy in 1948, industrializing the country through economic incentives in order to bolster US trade.

Thus the field of political, historical and economic reference in *50 Cent Piece* ranges between revolution and reaction in Haiti, American political and economic imperialism in the Caribbean, Garvey's leadership of the pan-Africanist movement in the USA and decolonization struggles in Jamaica. The tensions between these references are crystallized in the central section of the composition, where 'BANK OF JAMAICA' hovers over the phrase 'BACK TO AFRICA', the letters of which are shifted and erased until transformed into the word 'BAUXITE', the primary mineral source of aluminium – which is the material from which Jamaican coins are minted. From Back-to-Africa to Bauxite, Basquiat's word game performs a dour historical materialist poetics, indexing the bitter irony of the fact that Jamaica's movement from colonialism to independence will also become a movement from industrialization to eventual structural adjustment and deepening class inequality, coinciding with the release of the first aluminium coins in 1976 – a movement whose context in the global economy is suggested by the reference to Operation Bootstrap just below the word 'Bauxite'. The painful lapsing of pan-Africanist aspirations into neoliberal incorporation is presided over by Garvey's image, stamped upon the very substance extracted from Jamaican soil and circulated by an institution symbolic both of Jamaican independence, the Bank of Jamaica, and of the dystopian, tendential predominance of economic structures over political victories. Working again at the intersection of black power and black positionality, where the dynamism of Garvey's political life and thought meets the stasis of his mineral, monetized image, Basquiat immerses his art in the medium of historical irony.

I have been arguing that such historical irony is linked in Basquiat's work with the irony of anatomy – the specification of the apparently generic body as the body of blackness – a link that is suggested by the close resemblance of his black-and-white anatomical series to perhaps his greatest catalogue of historical reference, *Tuxedo*.[34] My claim is that anatomical representation offers a pictorial and linguistic model for the representation of history in Basquiat's work, a history that *appears* as a 'mere aggregate of information', a jumble of incongruous reference, but is in fact drawn together in his oeuvre by the ironic relation between black positionality and black power. The contradiction between these is depicted in a central panel of *Tuxedo*, where the name of Al Jolson, the early-twentieth-century blackface performer, appears below that of Malcolm X. Jolson's name is written at the static centre of coordinate axes, while Malcolm X's is written beside a circular arc, not quite closed in upon itself, as if to turn the coordinates below. The tension between positionality and power hovers over *Tuxedo*, as it does over so many canvases, in the resonant form of Basquiat's iconic crown, symbol of a power at once craved and detested, like the vexed mark of property, of market value, knowingly inscribed across Basquiat's works in the form of a copyright symbol.

In a 1982 drawing, *Formless*, the phrase 'Birth of Earth' is tagged with a copyright sign, as if the event of the planet's genesis were retroactively claimed by linguistic and legal codes. In such minuscule but weighty inscriptions, language encounters matter in the gestural movement of an oil stick upon a page, as the bones of the artist who knows himself to be bound by the ligature of slavery and freedom move in rhythm and in tension with his form, with his skin, painting a femur, a crown, a black shadow, a halo

around a head or a circle around the letter *c* – and the movement of history, contested demarcations of property, make their mark in obscure arrangements of words cast across the surface, put under erasure and rewritten, a long time after the birth of earth, that awful collusion of matter and form, with a long time still to come.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, when I refer to 'blackness', I refer to black *positionality.* That is, blackness is not to be understood as a visible given or natural biological property. Rather, it is to be understood as what Saidiya Hartman analyses as a historical 'fixing of the body in terror and dominance'; see *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Subjection in Nineteenth Century America,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 58. Yet the production of blackness by discursive, performative, material power relations – the contingency of racial ascription – actually does result in the determination of structural positions with respect to civil society and its frameworks of political and intersubjective recognition. In this article, I take an anti-humanist approach to black positionality, reading the irony of anatomy in Basquiat's oeuvre as a dialectical engagement with the entanglements, paradoxes and historical force of racial ascription. Rather than simply suggesting the ideological status of 'race' and striving towards humanist ideals of 'freedom' and 'equality' (which, as Hartman convincingly demonstrates, are themselves integral to the *dispositif* of racial ascription and anti-black domination), I argue that Basquiat's irony, both implicit and explicit, resists the humanism presumptively ascribed to him, working within and through the very force of negation implicit in the historical determination of black positionality. My theoretical approach to the anti-humanist indications of Basquiat's art is indebted to Frank B. Wilderson III, particularly *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Duke University Press, Durham NC, 2010.
2. Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin, eds, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Northwestern University Press, Champaign IL, 2011.
3. Kenneth Goldsmith, Facebook comment on 'The Body of Michael Brown', 15 March 2015, www.facebook.com/kenneth.goldsmith.739?fref=ts.
4. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 21.
5. See Rin Johnson, 'On Hearing a White Man Co-opt the Body of Michael Brown', *Hyperallergic*, 20 March 2015, http://hyperallergic.com/192628/on-hearing-a-white-man-co-opt-the-body-of-michael-brown.
6. Frank B. Wilderson III, 'Gramci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society', *Social Identities*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2003, p. 232.
7. Dieter Buchhart, 'Against All Odds', in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*, ed. Dieter Buchart, DelMonico Books, New York, 2015, p. 17.
8. Not For Sale, http://notforsalecampaign.org/about/staff; accessed 7 July 2015.
9. Ibid.
10. Buchhart, 'Against All Odds', p. 17.
11. Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black*, p. 55.
12. Quoted in Buchhart, 'Against All Odds', p. 17.
13. The treatment of anatomical representation in Jordana Moore Saggese's recent book-length study of Basquiat's oeuvre (*Reading Basquiat: Exploring Ambivalence in American Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2014) is typical of the casual treatment of this topic by critics. During a discussion of Basquiat's series of eighteen lithographs titled *Anatomy* (1982), Saggese notes that 'Basquiat also produced a five-part series of two-color silk screens, derived mostly from the sketchbooks of Leonardo da Vinci and from *Gray's Anatomy'* (p. 4), but the representational or political significance of anatomy within Basquiat's oeuvre is never specifically addressed. The topic is frequently mentioned in discussions of Basquiat's work, but never adequately theorized.
14. Olivier Berggruen, 'The Fragmented Self', in *Jean-Michel Basquiat: Now's the Time*, p. 199.
15. Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, California University Press, Berkeley, 2001, p. 235.
16. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black,* pp. 9, 11.
17. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, p. 56.
18. Ibid., p. 126.
19. Ibid., p. 119.
20. Ibid., p. 58.
21. *Chambers American Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, Arundel, New York, 1885, p. 12.
22. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History. Introduction: Reason in World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975, p. 177; quoted in Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 176.
23. G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 118.
24. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, , Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1982, pp. 1–14.
25. Wilderson III, *Red, White, and Black*, p. 56.
26. Ibid., p. 57.
27. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 208.
28. Ibid., p. 1.
29. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, pp. 176–7; quoted in Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 178.
30. Ibid.
31. It is crucial, in grappling with this entanglement of oppression and resistance, not to assume that the assertion of black power must involve adopting or reclaiming the agency of human subjectivity. On the contrary, a politics of black power that has no truck with the ideological and political compromises of liberal reformism ruptures and displaces the conceptual primacy of the human subject attendant upon the white supremacy of modernity. The vexed, explosive double bind of positionality and power at issue in a canvas like *Profit 1* is that of a double negation irreducible to political conciliation, and it blazes with the force of a historical disruption uncontainable by conceptual recognition within the categories of capitalist modernity. Likewise, because the point is frequently overlooked or misunderstood, it is necessary to insist that 'Afro-pessimist' theory is not pessimistic about the politics of black power. On the contrary, the pessimism of this theoretical formation is directed towards the position of blackness vis-à-vis modern civil society, and thus towards the framing of black politics in terms of accommodation or compromise with the latter. The analytic of black social death does not imply the hopelessness of black politics or the total negation of political power; rather, it implies that a politics of black power will have to work outside and push beyond the relational boundaries of recognition and conciliation through which civil society brokers reformist compromise. Black social death is not an absolute but a historical condition; it is the very framework of modern civil society that must be undone to overcome it.
32. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Peptic Ulcer*, from *Daros Suite*, 1982–83, acrylic, oilstick, pastel, charcoal, graphite, coloured pencil on paper, 57 x 76.5 cm, Daros Collection, Switzerland.
33. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Dog Leg Study*, from *Daros Suite*, 1982–83, acrylic, oilstick, pastel, charcoal, graphite, coloured pencil on paper, 57 x 76.5 cm, Daros Collection, Switzerland.
34. Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Tuxedo*, 1982, silkscreen on canvas, 260 x 152 cm, Gallerie Bruno Bischofberger, Zurich.